The Wilson Papers

Genesis of the World's Most Fearsome Secret

DECLASSIFIED

Edited by

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John Wilson was, and remains, one of the most mysterious and inexplicable human beings of the 20th and 21st centuries, his personal history defying credibility. His name first became known to the American public during the Great Airship Scare of 1896-7, but from that moment on, for reasons that still defy logic, he became a subject of endless fascination and deep suspicion to US intelligence agencies, which for decades had desperately tried, and failed, to track him down.

Surprisingly, after many years of silence, Wilson's personal reminisces, which he had composed on a daily basis over most of his unnaturally long life, were passed on to a CIA agent and ended up as classified documents in the Library of Congress, Washington DC.

Officially entitled *The Wilson Papers*, they tell the story of a man who was born in the American Midwest of the 19th century, took part in the rise and fall of Nazi Germany, continued into the Space Age of the 20th century, and finally entered the late 21st century to unveil a future of unparalleled scientific achievements and unspeakable horrors. A future terrifying beyond normal human imagining.

The Wilson Papers, finally declassified, tell this extraordinary, truly shocking, and almost unbelievable story.

Read them and tremble.

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ISBN-13: 978-1540894816
ISBN-10: 1540894819

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The Wilson Papers

The papers you are about to read are considered by the US Intelligence community to be among the most important in human history. Before the papers were passed on to us, the man known as John Wilson, though a leading figure in 19th and 20th century UFO mythology and, later, as a figure of great interest to the CIA and similar organisations of the Western world, was a man about whom remarkably little was known.

The formerly mysterious John Wilson was born in the 19th century, lived long enough to be still alive in the 21st century, and is now believed by some, contrary to all known logic, to still exist somehow, somewhere, in another, possibly non-physical, dimension. Since he has long been viewed by the authorities as a serious threat to the whole world order, and since it is possible, if not probable, that he is not yet finished with us, his very existence, whether in a physical or incorporeal state, gives us real cause for concern.

Yet until the reading of the Wilson papers, we knew almost nothing about him. What we *did* know was that his name first entered popular mythology with the Great Airship Scare of 1896-7. In the mid-1890s, in the United States, it was generally believed that aerial navigation would be solved by designing an airship, rather than a heavier-than-air flying machine, so most of the earlier designs looked like dirigibles with a passenger car on the bottom. What stands out in the 1896-7 sightings is that the unidentified flying objects of unknown origin, which were seen by countless citizens from November 1896 to May the following year, were mostly cigar-shaped, that they frequently landed, and that their occupants often talked to the witnesses, usually asking for water for their machines – and the most intriguing of the numerous contactee stories involved a man who always introduced himself simply as ‘Wilson’ or ‘Mr. Wilson’.

There were four such reported landings where Wilson identified

himself, though only offering his surname. The first incident took place in Beaumont, Texas, on April 19, 1897, when one J. B. Ligon, local agent for Magnolia Brewery, and his son Charles, saw lights in a field a few hundred yards away and went to investigate. They came upon four men standing near a large, dark object which neither of the witnesses could see clearly, being dazzled by the lights shining down from it. One of the four men asked Ligon for a bucket of water. When Ligon had fetched the water, the man introduced himself as 'Mr. Wilson'. He then told Ligon that he and his friends were travelling in an airship, that they had taken a trip out of the gulf (presumably the Gulf of Galveston, though no name was given) and that they were returning to the quiet Iowa town where the airship and four others like it had been constructed. When asked, Wilson explained that electricity powered the propellers and wings of his airship. Then, after Wilson and his friends had clambered back into the passenger car, or gondola, of the airship, Ligon and his son watched it ascending, eventually being lost in night's darkness.

The next day, Sheriff H. W. Baylor of Uvalde, also in Texas, went to investigate 'a strange light' and voices at the back of his house. He encountered an airship and three men. One of the men introduced himself as Wilson, from Goshen, New York. Wilson then enquired about one C. C. Akers, former sheriff of Zavalia County, saying that he had met him in Fort Worth in 1877 and now wanted to see him again. Surprised, Sheriff Baylor replied that Captain Akers was now at Eagle Pass. Apparently disappointed, Wilson asked to be remembered by him the next time Sheriff Baylor saw him. Baylor also reported that the men from the airship wanted water and that Wilson requested that their visit be kept secret from the townspeople. Then, when they had been given the water they wanted, Wilson and his crew climbed back into the airship and 'its great wings and fans were set in motion and it sped

away northward in the direction of San Angelo'. The County Clerk also reported seeing the airship as it left the area.

Two days later, in Josserand, Texas, a 'whirring sound' awoke farmer Frank Nichols, who looked out from his window to see brilliant lights streaming from what he described as 'a ponderous vessel of strange proportions' floating over his cornfield. Nichols went outside to investigate, but before he reached the large vessel, two men walked up to him and asked if they could have water from his well. When Nichols agreed to this request, the men invited him to visit their airship, where he saw that there were six or seven crew members. One of those men told him that the airship's motive power was highly condensed electricity and that it was one of five that had been constructed in a small town in Iowa with the backing of a large stock company in New York.

The next day, on April 23, witnesses described by the *Houston Post* as two 'responsible men' reported that an airship had descended where they lived in Kountze, Texas, and that two of the crew members had given their names as Jackson and… Wilson.

Four days later, on April 27, the Galveston County *Daily News* printed a letter from the aforementioned C. C. Akers, in which Akers claimed that he had indeed known a man in Fort Worth, Texas, named Wilson; that Wilson was originally from New York; that he was in his mid-twenties; and that he was of a 'mechanical turn of mind' and was then working on aerial navigation and something that would 'astonish the world'.

Finally, early in the evening of April 30, in Deadwood, Texas, a farmer named H. C. Lagrone heard his horses bucking as if about to stampede. Hurrying outside, he saw a bright white light circling around the fields nearby and illuminating the entire area before descending and landing in one of the fields. Walking to the landing spot, Lagrone found a crew of five men, three of whom engaged him in conversation while the others collected water in rubber bags.

The men informed Lagrone that their airship was one of five that had recently been flying around the country; that theirs was in fact the same one that had landed in Beaumont a few days before; that all the airships had been constructed in an interior town in Illinois – which borders Iowa – and that they were reluctant to say anything else because they hadn't yet taken out any patents.

By May that same year, the wave of airship sightings ended – and the mysterious Mr. Wilson was never heard from again.

At least, not until he turned up, many years later, in Nazi Germany.

The first of the Wilson papers, composed in a rather emotionless, clinical style, but with an almost mathematical precision and hand-written with some eloquence, were *not* found in the defeated Nazi Germany, where Wilson had worked throughout World War II, but in his previously hidden colony in Antarctica, in the mountains of Queen Maud Land, which the Nazis had renamed Neu Schwabenland, and from which Wilson had sent out his man-made flying saucers to terrify the whole world, as part of his bid for worldwide domination. The opening pages of the Wilson papers reveal, for the first time, his formerly unknown origins and subsequent history in the 19th and 20th centuries.

The Old World

Paper #1

It is important that I remember. My time will soon be up. The plastic surgery and the pacemaker and the prosthetics have all been useful, but the liver still manages to elude us and so I must die. I remain philosophical. I have had

more than most. I have lived a long time, made the dream a reality, and I cannot complain because nature still hides its secrets.

We never conquered the liver. Perhaps we never will. Now I start to degenerate, feel the hardening of my veins, and my memory is not what it was and too often betrays me. No matter: it is done. We cannot be stopped now. The sun glitters off the ice as I write – and the ice is the New World.

It is important to remember. Some fragments, if nothing else. It was all so long ago, so far away, and now it seems like a dream. My parents: not important. We are blessed and cursed by birth. Two very ordinary people heading nowhere, myself growing under them.

I detested my childhood. This much I do remember. Long days in the Midwest, clouds of dust over the flatlands, my father and mother in the fields, bending over their crops. They were simple, decent people. I can scarcely recall them. They talked little and they worked very hard and received scant reward. Detested it. Yes. The days stretched out forever. As a boy, still a child, how young I don't remember, I spent hours gazing up at the stars and wondering how I could reach them.

I've never understood emotions. An aberration of the weak. I am thinking of what they call 'love' and its attendant illusions. They would call me a genius. By their terms they might be right. From the beginning (I remember this well) I was always obsessed. An emotion of a different sort. Not a need for human warmth. I saw humans in biological terms and thought the world a laboratory. The obsession was with knowing. It was all within the mind. Anything outside the mind – the need for love or material gain – was no more than a degrading manifestation of our primitive origins. What matters in Man is mind. I have always believed this. Even then, as a child, about ten years old I think, I believed this (or felt it) and lived it and would not let it go.

They would call me a genius. I would say 'integrated'. My mind and emotions were fused to perform in calm harmony. No weakness. No digressions. My flesh never defeated me. Even later, as a young man, in the offensive throes of puberty, I would hold my yellow semen in my hand and try to sniff out its properties. The vas deferens and the seminal vesicles, the bulbo-urethral and prostate glands: my ejaculations were examined biologically and found to be normal. I thus conquered such distractions. I took the semen on my tongue. Various liquids and sperm, two hundred

million spermatozoa; orgasm thus became a form of research and lost its great mystery.

Hard to believe it now. All so very long ago. My parents ignorant with a Bible on the table, my head in the stars. The small farm was a prison. My decent parents were viewed as wardens. A teenager, isolated, my head bursting at the seams, the lack of books, or the means of education, drove me close to insane. I knew I was exceptional. I felt trapped by circumstances. Two or three times I ran away from home, but I was always brought back. So, I detested it. I just had to get away. This much I remember about my childhood: I grew up in Iowa.

Such a long time ago. The late 1800s. I remained a prisoner by lieu of my background and suffered accordingly. A genius, by their terms. Had to be, even then. For my birthday, I received a microscope and then examined my own sperm. Fourteen? Fifteen? I can't remember my age. In my room, I took my penis in my hand and let the semen stain slides. The mystery of life was in biology. Ejaculation was mere phenomena. I thus reduced my shifting yearnings and dreams to their most basic nature. The human body was just a vessel. Without the mind it was superfluous. I learned early, and had no cause to doubt, that the mind took precedence.

Science. That is all. The pursuit of knowledge was all that mattered. Even then, growing up in Iowa, I had no other yearnings. The death of my mother pleased me. There was nothing personal in it. A good woman, she died as people do, and that gave me release. My father sold the farm. He took a job in Massachusetts. A small town, I don't recall the name, quite close to Worcester. Thus was I set free. Universities and libraries. My mind was filled with energy and light and I crammed it with knowledge. The Worcester Polytechnic Institute. I wonder what they called it then. I remember that I came alive there and realised my potential.

What year? Does it matter? I think 1888. Then the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the thrill of logical thinking. I was an outstanding student. I was not very popular. The thrill was in logic, but the nightmare was in people: my genius isolated me completely from the other students.

I don't remember caring much. I don't believe I cared at all. (Goddard would later suffer the same, and he, too, was a genius.) The behaviour of fluids at MIT. Wind pressure on surfaces. The dream of flight was what kept me alive and made the world seem more bearable. I rarely socialised. I only

stopped for food and sleep. The dream of flight was my dream, aerodynamics my taskmaster, and my genius drove me forward relentlessly and would not let me rest.

Inhuman? I wonder. I have often thought about it. Not then, but later, when I succeeded, when the skies shed their secrets. Yes, only then. I certainly thought about it then. Repulsed by abstract emotions, by the human need for self-esteem, by what was known as love and affection, I lived without women.

I believe I tried once. There are vague recollections. Not inhuman, I must have been concerned that they would see I was different. A girl with auburn hair. Perhaps a redhead or a blonde. Spreadeagled, her flesh as white as snow, her soft words unbearable. I tried, but I failed. I saw her body as meat. The act of love was as primitive and functional as eating and shitting. I do not recall passion. My rhythmic thrusting was demeaning. My partner's groanings drove me back into myself and made me think scientifically. I studied my probing penis. The parting vulva held no charms. Her heaving body and my downward thrusting loins lacked aesthetic refinement. The caves are just behind us: this one thought I remember. Perhaps I thought of the spermatozoa in the womb and wondered how to control them. So much for the act of love. My mind would not let me succumb. I gave up and returned to masturbation of a functional kind. This act was not for pleasure. The point was to kill the need. And my hand, which stroked my flesh without guilt, was just a means to an end.

As for love: a mere illusion. Love is nature's slyest trick. The emotion called love is but a tool in nature's great building plan. Love encourages procreation. It protects the helpless young. Its true purpose is not to exalt us but to make us continue. Thus did I view it. I reduced it to biology. Love was no more than the semen in my hand, but it could be destructive. Men lived their lives for love. This made them weaker men. The need for love and admiration (for self-effacement and inner power) was the need that made them abuse their full potential and remain close to primitive.

The possibility was intolerable. I never wanted to let it happen. My genius, the ruthless brilliance of my mind, would not let me accept it. Thus I lived for my studies. I never let my flesh defeat me. My sexual needs were appeased by my own hands or by whores; my body's hungers were not confused with love and could not then distract me. No, I wasn't popular. The

other students thought me strange. I think now of that time, of the bliss of isolation, and realise that my devotion to my mind made me someone unique.

My fondest memories are not of people. My fiercest pleasures all came from facts. Angles of wind attack, lift, drag and airspeed: the experiments with the wind tunnel in the basement of Eng A, the revelations of the vane anemometer, the Lawrence Hargraves experimental reports, Sir Hiram Maxim and his engines and propellers, my mind glowing, expanding. The dream took root then. I wanted the conquest of all knowledge. I had a dream of a society devoid of conflict and dissension, a society subordinated to science and its ultimate truths. I had that dream and lived it. I devoted my whole life to it. And now, looking out at the glittering ice caps, I feel deep contentment.

I never accepted the impossible. I refused to recognise it. I learned with a speed that was thought to be abnormal, living only for the lectures, for the libraries and wind tunnel, my hands black with oil, my eyes red from too much reading, breaking down and analysing my teachers' words, then racing ahead of them.

My father died in that time. I can't remember the funeral. A kind man, he had lived a pointless life and the lesson was clear to me. Nothing mattered but the mind. Common emotions were mere distractions. What mattered was the grandeur of science and where it might lead us. And so I continued studying. My intellect left me no choice. Then Sibley College, Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York.

All things were possible there. More than most of the students knew. I do not remember faces, but I do remember names: Rolla Clinton Carpenter, Octave Chanute, Oliver Shantz and Aldred Henry Eldridge and quite a few others. Machine design and construction, experimental engineering, electrical and mechanical engineering and aerodynamics. These courses were in their infancy, were the products of the New Age. It was an age of scientific innovation and grand aspirations. A Bachelor of Science in Aerodynamics. I remember that from Sibley College. I believe I gained it in 1895, but I cannot be sure of that.

How stupid people are. How stupid they always were. The only emotion I can still entertain is that of contempt. For what they did to me. For what they later did to Goddard. They tried to use us and cast us aside and then control our creations. I think of the businessmen. I also think of politicians.

Commerce walks hand in hand with politics, and both are corrupt. Man's purpose is to build upon his past and thus conquer the unknown. All other aspirations are pointless: they are only of the moment. This is the dream of science. It is logic, not emotion. It is a logic that is not shared by businessmen or politicians – nor by the mass of normal men who mostly live without purpose. Such men have no real logic. They are moved by base hungers. They are blinkered and retain a narrow view that will never be broadened. They think only of the present. Their future is here and now. They take genius and fear it and use it and then cast it out. I did not know this soon enough.

Within the ice is the New World. Beyond it is the old. I look beyond the glinting plateaus and think of where I came from.

What an age it was then! So magnificent, so blind. An age of flowering genius, of corrupt commerce and politics, an age of the most insoluble contradictions, of builders and wreckers. I did not know soon enough. They financed me and used me. They took my enthusiasm and brilliance and then tried to pervert it. Yet what if I had known? Out of college, a BS in Aerodynamics, I had to take whatever they offered me.

Finance. Equipment. The world opened up to me. The secret hangars in the wilds of Illinois formed my bridge to the future. Myself and some others. The very cream of young scientists. Sworn to secrecy, we worked night and day to make miracles commonplace. We tolerated the businessmen. We rarely thought of the politicians. With the innocence of all passionate dreamers, we just worked for our pleasure. What year was that? Probably 1895. A full year before Langley's first successful test flights, we had already surpassed the airships and were moving on to greater things.

The work never ceased. The secrecy was total. More hangars in Iowa, in the Gulf of Mexico, yet another in a place near Fort Worth, all producing components. My first lesson in secrecy: a wide spreading of the work force. Who would know in Iowa or New Mexico or Fort Worth what the individual parts they were making would ultimately form? Thus we moved forward. Thus did I create them. The skies opened up and gave me their secrets and the dream became real.

The second lesson in secrecy: that men will not believe their eyes. Or that men, if they do believe their eyes, will be ridiculed for it. We flew right across the country. The huge wings and rotors glinted. They were very primitive

flying machines, but they must have looked awesome. And so we could land. Our crude flying craft needed water. And like all young men who feel that they are conquerors, our mood was ebullient. We played jokes on those who saw us, told the truth and then told lies, and later, when we read the newspapers, we knew the ruse had succeeded.

Such a secret cannot be kept. Nevertheless, it can be protected. To protect a secret you must give away part of it and turn it into a rumour. Who mixed half-truths with lies. Speculation did the rest. Who believes what they now see in the skies and can say so with ease? The world's governments understand this. It is a tactic they learned from me. We flew across the length and breadth of America and were never discovered.

All else was superfluous. It was fodder for the masses. Langley's flying machines, the Wright brothers' manned flight, the later flights of Wilbur Smith and Louis Blériot – all were highly publicised trifles. Such events were mere distractions. The real progress was made in secret. By 1904 we had crossed the Pacific Ocean, and our lights, which were seen by the US Navy, were called natural phenomena. Such descriptions were reassuring. I had no desire for glory. My one wish was to continue my life's work without interruptions.

How stupid they are. How stupid they always were. Now they see us in the skies and close their eyes and still refuse to believe it. This is why we are winning. This is why we could never lose. They could never accept what is possible – but for us, all things are…

Imagine our excitement in the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in Langley, Virginia, when we read this first Wilson paper. It is clear from his opening comments that Wilson was already an old man close to death when, gazing out from his Antarctic eyrie, he started writing down his thoughts. Given his advanced years, his thoughts are remarkably lucid, if often vague on actual detail. They do, however, confirm that he had been raised in Iowa (where the 'Wilson' of the Great Airship Scare of 1896-7 told witnesses the airships had been constructed) and was raised on his parents' farm in the Corn Belt, which he loathed. He was educated at the Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts, then at the Massachusetts Institute of

Technology, and finally at Sibley College, Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York. Given this information, we checked the records of Sibley College and learnt that John Wilson had been born July 6, 1870, in Montezuma, Iowa, to Cass and Ira Wilson, both listed as farmers. He attended elementary school in Montezuma, then high school in Des Moines. Included in his records were highly laudatory reports from both schools for his academic achievements – top marks in every subject – though all his teachers agreed that he seemed to have few friends and cared only for studying.

His single-mindedness and emotional detachment are confirmed in the first paper, in which he comes across as remarkably unfeeling, caring little even for his parents, describing them only as 'simple, decent people' whom he scarcely remembered. More tellingly, he considers romantic love to be a worthless illusion and his sexuality a mere distraction from more important matters. Also, he repeatedly expresses only contempt for most of the human race. Equally clear is that being remarkably intelligent himself, he has little time for those less gifted.

In the fall of 1888, when he was eighteen years old, his mother died, and his comments about her passing only serve to emphasise his already chilling disassociation from normal human feelings. 'The death of my mother pleased me. There was nothing personal in it. A good woman, she died as people do, and that gave me release.' Likewise with his father. 'My father died in that time. I can't remember the funeral. A kind man, he had lived a pointless life and the lesson was clear to me. Nothing mattered but the mind. Common emotions were mere distractions. What mattered was the grandeur of science and where it might lead us.'

He was only ten years old when he became obsessed with the belief that the only way for mankind to survive the inevitable end of Earth was to aim for the stars. This belief was to shape his whole life.

Shortly after his mother's death, his father sold their farm in the Corn Belt, then father and son moved back to their home town of Worcester, Massachusetts. Once there, Wilson signed on at the MIT where he studied advanced aerodynamics, with particular emphasis on the wind-tunnel experiments that took place in the engineering 'A' department. In 1893, the same year his father died, Wilson's academic reports, in which every subject was marked as 'exemplary', thus setting a college record, gained him entry to Sibley College, Cornell University, New York, where he studied

experimental engineering. By 1895 he had obtained his Bachelor of Science degree and left Cornell. His university records fail to say where he planned on going when he left, but they do reveal that between 1896 and 1897 he returned frequently to the university to attend the lectures of Octave Chanute, the highly regarded engineer and aviation pioneer, friend and mentor to the famous Wright Brothers. However, shortly after attending Chanute's final lecture, Wilson disappeared and only reappeared in 1930, when, if the official records are to be believed, he spent six months as assistant to the American rocket scientist, Robert H. Goddard, at his launch site in Eden Valley, Roswell, New Mexico.

What was he doing in the thirty-three years in between?

The Wilson papers, if not clarifying this mystery, at least fill in some of the details.

In Wilson's first paper, he refers repeatedly, without doubt, to his own genius. This is part of his stupendous arrogance; it is also part of his basic contempt for humanity. 'How stupid people are. How stupid they always were. The only emotion I can still entertain is that of contempt.' Yet hints about where he might have been throughout those missing years can be found when he says that he despises 'them' for what 'they' did to him and 'Goddard', the latter not named in full. But by this time it was obvious that 'Goddard' was Robert H. Goddard, the renowned rocket scientist, first exploited and then callously neglected by the American government. Obviously, Wilson is aligning himself here with the rocket scientist, one of his few heroes, while making it perfectly clear that 'they tried to use us and cast us aside and then control our creations.'

Who were 'they?' As he writes in the first paper, 'I think of the businessmen. I also think of politicians. Commerce walks hand in hand with politics, and both are corrupt.'

It would now seem obvious that since Wilson's name first became known to the general public, as well as the authorities, during the Great Airship Scare of 1896-7, when he presented himself as head of the crew of one of the airships reported to have been constructed in Iowa, he had been working anonymously on those airships for wealthy businessmen and politicians, the latter possibly related to the American government.

Could this be true?

The answer to this question is given in Wilson's second paper.

Paper #2

I retain my contempt. This one emotion is strength. I have needed that strength for many years and will not let it go. What age was I at the time? I think I must have been forty. I still believe it was the explosion over Russia that led to the troubles.

That was 1908. We made a simple mistake. We had a crude form of atomic propulsion and we couldn't control it. So, we had an explosion. The Tunguska region was devastated. The accident frightened the stock company in New York and that started the problem. Some executive panicked, his panic infected the US government, and they were frightened that the project would be exposed and reacted accordingly. They demanded control of our project. Talked of national security. They made a deal with the corporation in New York and placed us under the military.

The military mind is perverse. It destroys all it touches. Once the military took over our project, I knew it was doomed. An immediate conflict of interests. I presented my case and was rejected. I had dreamed of the Atomic Age, of exploration and research, but the military had only one aim, which was national defence. I knew what that meant: they wanted weapons for future wars. And though despising them, I nevertheless worked with them to keep my construction plants open.

The following years were a nightmare. My contempt for the military deepened. A bottomless pit of paperwork, interdepartmental conflicts, interference of the most ignorant kind, then a cutback in funding. All governments are the same. They lumber along like dinosaurs. Short-sighted, unimaginative, existing only for the moment, they make demands and then cry in protest at the cost, thinking only of votes. Yes, I despised them. That emotion was a luxury. It burned within me all those years and gave me the strength to continue. My contempt lacked morality. But I have never believed in such. Morality, that conceit of free men, is no aid to their progress. So, not moral outrage. No, it wasn't that. My contempt was for the cowardice and ineptitude that hampered my work.

My sole interest was science. My major passion was flight. I was dreaming of a voyage to the stars and their infinite mysteries. This dream was

not common. Those fools thought it was madness. I realised that they were draining my brain for their own pointless purposes. And so finally I revolted. Withheld vital information. Over two or three years I sabotaged my own projects, deliberately causing failure after failure, feeling pain for the first time.

Such anguish to endure. The first and last time I felt it. The knowledge that I was destroying my own work to keep it safe for the future. And for all that, I did it. My contempt was my protection. I now knew that the cost of the research had filled them with panic. My great machines would not be built: they would rot while the weapons grew. The men in charge were men moved by mortal fears: they lacked vision and courage. I did not need such men. Such men were a menace. Only heroes or madmen, history's undefiled dreamers, would be capable of backing my vision and making it real.

Thus I sabotaged the project. I said our hopes had been misguided. They stared at me from behind their long table and showed great relief. My apologies were accepted. A few murmured their regrets. Then my atomic propulsion project was aborted and the hangars closed down. World War Two had already started. The Dark Ages had returned. They wanted aircraft of a functional nature, so I quietly resigned.

The worst years of my life. I was forty-five years old. My genius for technology kept me working, but frustration was choking me. Years of drifting around the country. Working here, working there. Hiding my genius and displaying mere competence, thus avoiding attention. How did I survive it? With contempt. With willpower. Democracy, that catch-phrase of the West, became something to laugh at. Democracy was incompetence. The right to vote meant poor leadership. What was needed in the world, and what I wanted most desperately, was a government of heroes or madmen who sought the impossible. Such a government did not exist. The US government was run by cowards. Thus for years, with a pain that turned to rage, I kept my dreams to myself.

Years of lacerating anguish. The first and last time. Sustained by relentless curiosity and indomitable will. My contempt for their blindness. My refusal to accept defeat. Every scientific library in the country falling under my scrutiny. All that, plus the work. The demeaning jobs I did for money. My genius for engineering, electronics and aeronautics offered up in the disguise of mere competence as a means of survival. But I used even that. Used

aboratories and workshops. Created small things here and there, the minor offshoots of my genius, and sold them to the moguls in suits for the freedom I needed.

Then I found a resting place. The facilities were exceptional. I stayed with an aircraft company in Texas as the head of their research lab. All those nights spent alone. The white sheets of the draughtsmen. All the experiments I conducted in secret while designing their aircraft. (My head aches as I think of this. I find it difficult to recall. The prosthetics and artificial heart cannot help me forever.) Electrostatic repulsion. Photosensitive cell steerage. The reaction of streams of ions to furnish rocket propulsion, then a means of neutralizing the decrease of gravity and other such matters. I never cared about their aircraft. Already they were obsolete. Already I had moved beyond orthodox flight and was tackling the mysteries of the boundary layer. The boundary layer was everything. Conquer that and the dream was mine. Thus I worked and theorised, the laboratory, the wind tunnel, but the theories still remained in my papers and could not be tested.

My dream was of evolution. Man's place in the universe. My dream was of Man as a mind that could transcend the body.

Yet how to achieve this? 'Man' meant individual men. And such men, being imperfect creatures, were distracted by hungers. The hunger for love. For admiration and power. I then tried to understand what such hungers meant and found them all in myself.

The hunger for love. In my loneliness I felt it. Somewhere, sometime, a memory almost gone, I wasted nights trying to ease my own hungers in a more common flesh. What I found was soon lost. The vulva's folds were a threat. The rigid shaft of my penis in a woman gave no more than a spasm. Yet such a spasm shapes the world. People live and die for such. And that spasm represents what most people want: admiration and power.

Learning this, I retreated. Love's deceits showed the way. I understood in my moment of grace that their needs were illusions. I retreated and found myself. I took myself in my own hands. When my need, when my sex, became a threat I gave my semen release. Thus I understood men. They were feelings, not thought. Whereas Man, that outpouring of separate men, held the promise of greatness.

Science represents the mind. It is what we must live by. It is logic and towers above the chaos of outmoded emotions. I learned this and lived by it. I

tood above my crude desires. When my flesh seduced my mind from its work, gave it instant release. A shaft of meat in the hand. The ejaculation of semen. t meant then, and to this day still means, the mere appeasement of lust. And earning this, I was released. The call of science was in my soul. From then on neither entered another being nor believed in men's sanctity.

Inhuman? Perhaps. But then what does 'human' mean? Only fear and confusion and doubt and emotional turmoil. To be human is to err. More: to tagnate. Men are impulse encased in flesh and bone, and alone they are nothing. But Man is something different. Man is mind over matter. Man is mperfection crawling from the slime to evolve into Superman.

I met Goddard in Massachusetts. I remember returning there. I was fifty ears old at the time, but felt younger than that.

How I envied Goddard! Both envied and pitied him. Another genius umiliated by his countrymen and becoming eccentric. Envy. Admiration. Both share the same bed. And so I envied his achievements, respected them, nalysed them, and felt pity for the future he would have at the hands of his ellows.

I looked upon him as a child. A suspicious, secretive, brilliant child with nore instinct than logic. And yet he was a genius. There were things I learnt rom Goddard. Not much: just the odd, bizarre insight, some small things I ad missed: peculiarities of steering systems, gyroscopic controls, various inds of self-cooling combustion chambers – small things; all priceless. In eturn, he learned from me. We worked together for two years. My presence nannounced, Goddard sworn to keep me secret, we spent days in the deserts f New Mexico, unravelling mysteries. Goddard sent his rockets skyward. My oul soared aloft with them. It was 1931, a troubled year, and I knew that my ime had come.

Tsiolkovski and Goddard. Both still alive then. One older, one much ounger than me, both true pioneers. The basic principles of space-flight: the leaf Russian's great achievement. Then the liquid-fuelled rocket of young Goddard, abused beyond mention. Both stood at the threshold. Both failed the ame way. Both depended upon 'honourable' men and were thus chained by mall minds. Their mistake was not repeated. I did not trust 'honourable' men. What I wanted were heroes or madmen – and the latter sufficed.

I never dwell on morality. Never did, never will. Morality is the crutch of he cripple, the mask of the weak. What of Wernher von Braun? What of

Walter Dornberger? Such men were neither sinners nor saints: they were quite simply scientists. Can a scientist think of morals? Should he split peas in a pod? No, what the scientist must do is pursue his great calling. By himself, he has no means. He must depend on those with power. And in doing so, he must stand aloof from all concepts of right and wrong. I always believed that. I believe it to this day. And gazing out at the wilderness, at the world of snow and ice, I think of how, after working with Goddard, I accepted this brutal truth.

There were madmen back in power. They were obsessed and visionary. To me, they represented the possibility of limitless facilities. I never thought of right or wrong. I simply took my opportunity. I left Goddard and America behind me – and I never returned…

As we can see, this second paper makes it perfectly clear that from shortly after graduating from Sibley College, New York, in 1896, to his reappearance in 1930-31 as temporary assistant to Robert H. Goddard in Roswell, New Mexico, Wilson was involved with secret aeronautical research projects that were funded by a combination of civilian finance companies and the US military. That work, always conducted in great secrecy in a wide variety of locations, but mostly around Iowa and Illinois, surely led to the development of America's first airships and the Great Airship Scare of 1896-7, during which Wilson actually introduced himself to various locals when the airship he was travelling in landed, needing water for its engines. At the same time, he managed to make frequent trips back to New York to attend the Sibley College lectures of Octave Chanute and the other aeronautical geniuses of the day. Clearly, by the time he disappeared for good, the initial construction of airships had led to even greater aeronautical achievements, possibly including the highly advanced, pilotless object, propelled by a crude form of atomic power, that may have exploded in the air over Tunguska, Siberia, in 1908.

According to Wilson's notes, this failure led to the stock company that was financing him cutting off his funding and the US military taking over his projects. Disastrously for Wilson, the military authorities further reduced his funding while insisting that he develop only aircraft for war rather than his more ambitious projects, most of which had been devoted solely to the future conquest of space.

‘My atomic propulsion project was aborted and the hangars closed lown… They wanted aircraft of a functional nature, so I quietly resigned.’

Remarkably, so great was his disgust at this turn of events that even ɔefore resigning he quietly sabotaged his own work, rather than let it be nisused.

More details about this episode surfaced during the early years of World War II, when US intelligence, concerned about Wilson’s work for the Nazis, ıad him investigated. Among those questioned during the investigations was ın elderly man, Abe Goldman, then retired and living in a nursing home in Des Moines, Iowa. Questioned in the nursing home by Army Air Force ntelligence agent, Mike Bradley, now deceased, Goldman confirmed that he ıad been one of the partners of Goldman and Cohn, a stock company egistered in New York, and one of the many that had financed Wilson’s xperimental work, including, in the late 1800s, airship construction, at arious, mostly secret, locations, notably the wilds of Iowa, near the Illinois ɔorder. By 1897, five such airships had been built and flown, but the sightings topped abruptly in May of that year and the airships were never seen again.

According to Goldman, Wilson had deliberately destroyed them. The lesigns he gave to Goldman and Cohn were for unworkable airships. He ɔatented the *real* designs under a couple of pseudonyms and sold his genuine lesigns to an unknown German company, almost certainly Zeppelin, under an ıgreement that called for the American airships to be destroyed. The Wilson ıirships were blown up in the night by an unknown demolition expert, though Goldman and Cohn were convinced that the saboteur was Wilson himself. Then Wilson disappeared, leaving behind only his ingeniously faked lrawings, from which the Goldman-Cohn engineers could not reconstruct his ɔriginal internal-combustion engines and structural designs.

While Goldman and Cohn were going bankrupt, now having no workable ıirships to sell, the first German airships, the Zeppelins, clearly based on Wilson’s designs, took to the skies. Meanwhile, Wilson had been opening his ɔwn research establishment across the state line, in Illinois. While it cannot be erified exactly what went on there, it is now believed that by 1903, just ɔefore the Wright brothers made their first successful flight over Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Wilson, using the money obtained from Zeppelin, but ɔossibly later supported with clandestine US government aid, had secretly ɔroduced even more advanced aircraft, reportedly turboprop biplanes, that had

ıctually managed to cross the Atlantic Ocean. These rumours, most likely ɔased on classified intelligence reports of the US Army Air Force, were ollowed by reports claiming that Wilson had also been engaged in dangerous experiments with atomic propulsion and the boundary layer, and that one of he products of such research, a pilotless flying object propelled by jet ɔropulsion or some form of atomic energy, had led to the devastating explosion that took place in 1908 over Tunguska, Siberia, after an ınprecedented flight all the way from the United States to Russia. After that lisastrous mishap, Wilson's plant in Illinois was closed down by the US government, his designs (at least those that were found) were either classified ıs top secret or destroyed, and Wilson, then twenty-seven years old, left llinois for good.

As best we know, he spent the next two or three decades drifting from ɔne small aeronautical firm to another, keeping his light under a bushel, but naking a good living by selling his less important innovations to commercial ıirline companies and construction plants, finally going to work, at sixty years ɔld, with that other pioneering genius, Robert H. Goddard.

Also refused backing by the US government, Goddard had been reduced o lecturing at Clarke University in Worcester until a Guggenheim Foundation grant of $2,500 enabled him to return to his test range in Eden Valley, Roswell, New Mexico. In 1933, he was visited there by Mike Bradley, the ıforementioned US Army Air Force intelligence agent, who wanted Goddard o join Charles Lindbergh, Orville Wright and other leading scientists in the ecently formed National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics. But ıotoriously secretive and uncooperative with his fellow scientists, also deeply mbittered by the US military's indifference to his work, Goddard refused the ɔffer. However, prodded by Bradley, Goddard confirmed that Wilson had ndeed worked with him for about six months, up until December 31, 1930, vhen, shortly after Goddard had successfully fired his first liquid-fuelled, gyroscopically-controlled rocket, Wilson abruptly left without saying goodbye ınd was not seen again.

It was Goddard's belief that because the work done jointly by him and Wilson had been treated with contempt by the US government and military establishment, but had been openly praised and even used by the German ıeronautical and rocket scientists, including Wernher von Braun, as the basis ɔr their own rocket research, Wilson, upon the completion of his work with

Goddard, after their first successful rocket launching, quietly left America and travelled to Germany with the intention of receiving stronger backing from the Nazis. That they were Nazis didn't appear to bother him. He went where he believed he would be appreciated and he stayed there, working for the Nazi war machine, throughout the war.

The third paper confirms this shocking truth.

Paper #3

The dream of the Thousand Year Reich had all the grandeur of lunacy. Nothing was impossible. They firmly believed that. They had their Volkish Socialism, their lust for an Aryan Utopia, and with the passion of all mad visionaries they stepped forth to create it. Mysticism? Yes. The Reich was born from mysticism: the Cosmic Circle of Munich, the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, the Theosophy and Rosicrucianism of Vienna and Prague, the ancient myths of Atlantis and Lemuria, of the undefiled German. Mysticism and racism: the 'pure' blood decreed by Schuler. The Third Reich sprang out of a vision of a Utopia devoid of Jews and subhumans.

Such dreams have no limits. Ordinary logic cannot contain them. In such dreams the Third Reich saw the light over limitless vistas – and ignored the impossible. The whole world would be changed. Cities and nations would be erased. The Earth would be cleansed of Jews and subhumans and other vermin; and in isolated colonies, in new cities of stone and glass, a chosen hierarchy of masters and slaves would create the New Order.

No doubt they were madmen. Their strongest leaders were demented. They were men who lived their dreams, who were divorced from reality, who like children felt that all things were possible and that nothing could stop them.

Science is logic. Mysticism is the opposite. I despised the mysticism of the Nazis, but could see its potential. My own dreams were grandiose. No democracy could afford them. I needed money and equipment and labour on a staggering scale. No democracy would sanction it. Only lunatics would. And the lunatics, all those mad visionaries, were the Reich's leading lights.

I knew this when I met Himmler. It was in 1935. Behind his glasses his eyes had the mildness of a priest or a fool. We were in his office in Berlin. I

pread my drawings out on his desk. He glanced at them and stroked his hinning dark hair and touched his nose with one finger. He had once been a hicken farmer. Now he headed the SS. A mild and modest killer, puritanical, uietly spoken, he was seeking to resurrect Atlantis through a Reich filled with upermen. I had checked him out beforehand. What I learnt was enough for ne. He believed in mesmerism, in reincarnation and clairvoyance, in Horbinger's cosmic world of ice and fire, in gods and godmen. His SS was a eligious order. His men were bound by blood and oath. Himmler wanted to solate them, to brainwash them and remould them, to mate them with the urest German women and produce blond perfection. He had once processed hickens; now he wanted to process people: he had a dream of a disciplined Order of masters and slaves. I wanted a similar Order – but one devoted to cience. And when Himmler raised his eyes from my drawings I knew I could ave it.

Himmler checked me out thoroughly. He couldn't believe what I was here for. He first thought me an eccentric American who ought to be shot. I vas held prisoner in Berlin. They interrogated me for months. In the Gestapo rison, in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse, I heard the screams of the tortured. My wn interrogations were more casual. My cell was quite comfortable. They fed ne and supplied me with books and let me work on my notes. The nterrogations were conversational. The less fortunate continued screaming. For two months I kept repeating my history as they jotted down details. The rison was always busy. Bleeding unfortunates were dragged down corridors. told my questioners of the project in Iowa and of how I had sabotaged it. The Americans don't know, I said. They believe the project was a disaster. My uestioners tapped their pencils on the table and smiled at each other. Quite ften I heard gunfire. It always came from the basement. I saw soldiers arrying bodies wrapped in shrouds and putting them into trucks. Such scenes id not disturb me. My hopes lived on undiminished. After two months, they oncentrated on my drawings, still unsure of their value. I don't know who irst studied them. I think the Italian, Belluzzo. Nevertheless, I was released hortly after and taken back to see Himmler.

No point in even dwelling on the blood that had stained Himmler's hands. Such a quiet man he was. His good manners were impressive. A modest face vith round glasses, his hair thinning and neatly parted, he sat behind his desk ike a minor clerk offering assistance. He asked me what I wanted. I explained

ny requirements. He nodded in a slow, thoughtful manner, sometimes stroking his nose. We are very impressed, he said. Indeed, he added, we are astonished. He then told me that some technical advisors had thought my drawings miraculous.

I asked who these men were. He mentioned Belluzzo and Schriever. He said Belluzzo was getting too old, but that Schriever was brilliant. They wished to work on my project. Himmler thought it a good idea. I realised that he wanted to have me watched, but I nodded agreement. You are committed, he said. You must now bend to our will. You will never return to your own country; if you try, we will kill you. I reassured him immediately. I would report directly to him. My beloved project would be wrapped in strict secrecy and controlled by the SS.

I will never forget that day. My dream came alive then. Even now, the pain biting, my poor liver in disarray, I gaze out upon the glinting ice caps and remember it vividly.

I was driven to Kummersdorf West, about sixty kilometres from Berlin. We both sat in the rear of the car and looked out at the city. Himmler obviously loved Berlin. The sunlight flashed off his glasses. He stroked his nose and pointed out the sights with a clear, quiet excitement. The city was indeed majestic. The streets were filled with contented people. The walls were decorated with swastikas and flags and obscene propaganda. The word 'Juden' was prominent. I saw few on the pavements. Soldiers sauntered up and down and laughed heartily, in love with themselves. The very air seemed to smile. It was the triumph of the will. In its own perverted way it was the proof of Man's awesome potential.

Perverted? Most certainly. With that truth I could live. Behind those walls were the high priests of a demoniac Order: Hermann Goering, Josef Goebbels, Rudolph Hess, Martin Bormann – alcoholics, drug addicts, occultists and degenerates – the very epitome of that gross irrationalism that I so much abhorred. There, too, the Gestapo butchers, the drilled ranks of the SS, and all the torture and murder that went on every day in the basements.

Yet I had to accept it. Science cannot moralise. Those irrational brutes were no more than the means to achieving my ends. Progress needs its trampled bones. Death gives way to more life. Evolution knows neither right nor wrong and transcends transient matters. So, I would work with them. In

doing so, I could use them. And looking out upon Berlin, glancing sideways at Himmler, I felt nothing but hope for the future, the glow of fulfilment.

We drove out of the city. Aircraft roared overhead. Sitting beside me, very stiff and upright, Himmler started to talk. He was suddenly like a child. His eyes gleamed behind the glasses. The words poured out and splashed upon my ears as if they couldn't be stopped. He said we were going to the Rocket Research Institute, where my research projects would be based. Wernher von Braun, he informed me, was already there with his own men, but he would soon be moved to Peenemünde, on the Baltic Sea, leaving me to work unimpeded at Kummersdorf. We passed troops on the road. The tanks growled through billowing dust. Himmler talked of Aryan blood and German might, of the world of the future. We will cleanse the Earth, he said. We will purify the blood. We will exterminate the Jews and the infirm and maladjusted, use the lesser races as slaves to the Reich, create a race of pure Nordics. There was no need to reply. Right or wrong did not concern me. When Himmler talked of his New Order, of his masters and slaves, I had the feeling that it just might succeed and that I could utilise it.

Unlimited labour was what I needed. No democracy could supply it. But here, in this country where all freedom had been suppressed, where the will of the people was one will – the Volk – and where discipline and slavery went hand in hand – here, at the dawn of the new era, I could do the impossible. Yes, I grabbed at it. I was in my late fifties. I thought then, before I knew what could be done, that my time was too short. Thus, I didn't moralise. Not then and not now. I looked out at the aircraft, at the tanks and machine-gun carriers, at the troops who were numbered in their thousands, and accepted it gladly.

History will exonerate me. What I did, I did for progress. I sit now in my mountain lair, the frozen wilderness below me, and I know with the certainty of faith that my life has meant something. I am changing the course of history. I am aiding evolution. When I die, as I now know I must, my achievements will live on.

I knew this at the time. The sight of the proving range convinced me. The experimental station was located between two artillery ranges, safely isolated from the surrounding towns and villages, all the hangars in good shape. Here Wernher von Braun worked. And Walter Dornberger and Klaus Riedel. Those names, and those of Grottrup and Becker, made me smile condescendingly.

The A-3 and A-5 rockets. So highly praised… so primitive. And the V-1 and V-2 would be feared when I thought them mere toys. But those rocket teams would soon be gone. They would be moved to Peenemünde. They would not be there to observe what I was doing, would not know I existed. In this I agreed with Himmler. Even the Führer would not know. Himmler had his own plans for the future and did not want them mentioned.

Himmler showed me around the hangars. He introduced me to the workers. I met the Italian, Belluzzo, who was old and grey-haired, and the younger Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever, who struck me as being dangerously ambitious. The old Italian was a physicist. Rudolph Schriever was an engineer. Both men were engaged in aeronautical research, both were keen on my drawings. I didn't really want those men. They had been around too long. I was distressed by their knowledge of my work, and by their closeness to Himmler. They obviously wanted to impress him: bowed and scraped in his presence. I knew immediately that they would try to pick my brains and then usurp my authority.

I could not allow that. What I required was total secrecy. After my experience in Iowa, learning that no one could be trusted, I had already planned to strengthen my position by becoming invaluable. I would hide the most vital facts. I would doctor all the drawings. I would split the work up, spread it widely among the work force, and thus ensure that no single individual could duplicate my success. In this way I would protect myself. I would become indispensable. And so, as I shook hands, as I talked to Belluzzo and Schriever, I decided not to let them get too close to whatever was workable.

Yes, I was ruthless. I had to protect myself. I was aware of my dependence upon the Nazis and of how weak that made me. Sooner or later they might disown me – the war might drain their resources – and if that happened, I had to be ready to make good my escape. I would take my secrets with me. I would leave them only useless toys. But by then, if I made good use of my time, I would have what I wanted.

Such thoughts were not expressed. Himmler smiled and led me out. We returned to his car and climbed in and headed back to Berlin. There was paperwork to be completed. Requisition forms and orders: more manufacturers, more instruments, more pyrotechnicists, more welding experts and labourers. I did not think it was possible. The required numbers were

outrageous. I wondered if even Himmler, with his frightening, godlike powers, could requisition workers in such numbers for a clandestine project. Himmler smiled at my obvious doubts. He blinked repeatedly and stroked his nose. He said that I had no need to worry, that he had something to show me.

The fields of Germany were green. I heard aircraft overhead. We passed columns of troops and growling tanks, but the peace soon returned. This memory remains vivid. The sun shone from a blue sky. It was difficult to believe that war would come and devastate all of Europe. Then we passed barbed wire fences. Beyond the wire were smoking chimneys. We drove through guarded gates, beneath watchtowers and guns, kept driving toward the long wooden buildings, passed a series of gallows. The wind made the ropes dance. Ragged prisoners were digging ditches. We drove on and reached the centre of the camp and saw the Reich's hidden nightmare.

Himmler made the driver stop. A nervous soldier saluted us. We stood together in the mud of the compound, surrounded by prisoners. Himmler smiled and rubbed his nose. I saw the guards with the bull whips. The hundreds of men, women and children were filthy and silent. Nearly all had shaved heads. Their bones showed through their flesh. Their large eyes were filled with anguish and despair and a hopeless submission. I heard the crack of the whips. Dogs snarled and someone screamed. Himmler blinked and rubbed his nose, smiled with unstated pride, and then waved one hand languidly in the air to take in all the misery.

'Your workers,' he said…

US Customs and Immigration records confirm that a John Wilson shipped out from the United States on January 20, 1931, that he stayed in London for a few weeks in early March of that year, and that he applied for a German visa that same month. According to British immigration records, on April 5, 1931, a US citizen called John Wilson left England on a ship scheduled to dock at Bremen, Germany. There is no record of him ever returning to England or, indeed, the US. However, formerly classified files relating to Wilson's scientific activities with the Nazis were found after the war in what remained of Gestapo headquarters in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse in Berlin, the Ordnance Branch of the German Army's Ballistics and Weapons Office, also in Berlin, the Zeppelin Works at Friedrichshafen on the north shore of Lake Constance,

ınd even the underground vaults of the old German Rocket Research Institute ›f Kummersdorf West, sixty-six kilometres south of Berlin. Further, more ntimate, details were found in the personal diaries of Reichführer Himmler ınd an SS intelligence officer, Lieutenant Ernst Stoll, formerly a student ocket engineer.

According to the diaries of Ernst Stoll, he first met John Wilson in the Gestapo headquarters in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse. Stoll had been assigned ›ersonally by Reichführer Himmler to take charge of the American who, ıccording to Himmler's report, had been living in Germany under an assumed ıame and with forged German identification papers for the past three years. As this fictitious character, Wilson had been doing important research work on ıdvanced gyroscopic controls with the subsonic wind tunnel at the Zeppelin Works in Friedrichshafen. Learning of the remarkable talents of the nysterious American, Himmler had ordered him to be brought for nterrogation to Gestapo headquarters. After personally conducting the nterrogation, Himmler was confident that Wilson lived up to the German ntelligence assessments of his brilliance as physicist and engineer, was genuinely contemptuous of his own country's attitude to his remarkably nnovative work, and was almost fanatical with regard to his own, thoroughly elfish, ambitions. Accepting, therefore, that the American, if watched carefully and rigorously held in check, could be useful to the Nazi war nachine, Himmler decided to place him with the top-secret SS research ›rogramme dedicated to advanced weaponry and revolutionary forms of aerial varfare. As a member of the SS technical intelligence branch, Lieutenant Stoll ıad been tasked with supervising the research programme in general and Wilson in particular.

Meeting the American for the first time, Stoll swiftly ascertained that the experiments he had been conducting with the Zeppelin Works wind tunnel had elated to Professor Ludwig Prandtl's theory of the so-called 'boundary layer'. This is based on the premise that the air sweeping in on an object in flight ncreases its resistance in direct proportion to the increasing speed of the lying object. Because of this, the speed of the flying object is finite. However, f some method of entirely removing the boundary layer could be found, virtually limitless speed and manoeuvrability would be achieved. Wilson ıgreed with this theory, but took it further. It was his belief that the build-up ›f the boundary layer was dramatically increased by the many surface

protruberances of a normal aircraft – wings, tails, rudders, rotors – and that if hose could be dispensed with entirely, by somehow wrapping them together s part and parcel of the one, circular, smooth-surfaced flying wing, a disk-haped aircraft, a flying saucer, would be the prototype for the perfect flying nachine: one that would require no runway, since it would take off vertically, vould be able to hover in mid-air, and would be limitless in speed and nanoeuvrability.

As Stoll states in his diary, Germany had long been the country with the nost interest in such developments and was already the most advanced so far. ndeed, research on a circular aircraft was already being conducted at the ocket research centre at Kummersdorf West. This secret SS programme was alled 'Projekt Saucer'.

Stoll was not surprised that Wilson knew about the project, because, as Wilson had explained to him, he had helped test many of the experimental products coming from Kummersdorf and it soon became clear to him, from his study of these products, that what they were working on at Kummersdorf vas indeed a saucer-shaped aircraft. It was Wilson's conviction that because his work at Friedrichschafen had included wind tunnel experiments with a so-alled 'porous metal', *Luftschwamm* (believed to be the perfect metal for lefeating the boundary layer by letting the resistant air virtually slip through it like a bar of soap slips through wet fingers'), he could help immeasurably vith the development of a prototype flying saucer.

Agreeing with him, though with a few residual doubts, Lieutenant Stoll lrove him to the Rocket Research Institute at Kummersdorf West. The acilities for Projekt Saucer had been separated from the main research centre by an army firing range. At the far side of the range, hidden from sight, was Wernher von Braun's more impressive research works, which, Stoll informed Wilson, he would be visiting regularly, contributing his knowledge to von Braun's rocket programme, at least until such times as von Braun's whole acility was moved to Peenemünde on the Baltic island of Usedom. However, his main task, as Stoll also informed him, would be Projekt Saucer.

Under the supervision of Lieutenant Stoll (and under the constant threat of execution as a potential American spy, which seemed not to concern him in he slightest) Wilson worked on Projekt Saucer for most of the war years. Not urprisingly, though despising the Nazis, he made good use of them.

His fourth paper, with its mingling of admiration and contempt, makes

his perfectly clear.

Paper #4

The New Order was planned and executed with the sort of ferocious drive that only the mystically inclined can possess. Albert Speer was the architect: he created the environment for their vision. In the works of Albert Speer and the other Nazi architects I could see the realisation of Lebensraum in its most concrete form. Lebensraum – space – German conquest and expansionism: the great buildings and the underground factories were signposts to my future.

Himmler showed me Hitler's teahouse. It was on top of the Kehlestein Mountain. The five-mile road that ran up from the Berghof had been hacked out of the side of the mountain by the sweat of slave labour. In the peak of the mountain was an underground passage; at the end of the passage was a copper-lined elevator, its shaft about four hundred feet deep, hacked out of the solid rock. That elevator descended to an immense, high-walled gallery, supported by baroque Roman pillars. At the end of the gallery, also hacked out of the mountain, was a dazzling, glassed-in, circular hall. And standing in that great hall, looking out through the windows, I saw nothing but other mountains and sky – an overwhelming experience.

The impossible made possible – such was constantly accomplished. If the dreams were grandiose, the actual achievements were more so: the achievements of men who could make the impossible seem commonplace.

The German genius was for organisation. In that area it had no peer. Add to this the fact that their well of slave labour was bottomless, and what one had was the dream as a reality. Who built the mighty pyramids? The thousands of Egyptian slaves. The Third Reich had the genius and seven and a half million slaves, and given the combination of these two, all things became possible.

Seven and a half million slaves. Slaves who worked an endless day. Slaves who hacked out the mountains and dug tunnels through the earth and moved rocks and equipment and stores, and never complained. Such were my resources. I could have made a Pharoah envious. And given that, plus my own grandiose ambitions, there was little I couldn't do.

I was very close to Himmler. He unveiled his great dream. It was a

dream of Atlantis reborn from the ashes of war. No Jews or subhumans. A blond SS would rule. In a society of masters and slaves there would be no dissension. Magnificent cities of steel and glass. The pure Aryan predominant. Himmler told me of his dream of a wilderness populated by supermen.

'How do you build Atlantis? You need masters and slaves. The masters will be the elite of my Death's Head SS; the slaves will be the Poles and the Czechs and all the other low races. And how do we do it? It is easy, mein Freund. We keep building the camps, we ship the Jews there by their thousands, and when the wires of the camps begin to bulge we build more crematoria. Gas the schweine and burn them; let them turn to smoke and ash. When the camps have been cleared of the Jews we bring in the subhumans. The subhumans are the workers. They exist as mere slaves. They live just to work and that work is for the glory of the Reich – the slaves will build the new temples.'

The new temples would be the factories, the universities and laboratories; the new religion would be knowledge and conquest, the return of the Superman. How grandiose the dream! How impressive the rehearsal! Himmler wanted cities under the earth and he set out to create them. He drove me all around Germany. He showed me what could be achieved. I saw the great underground factories and I learned what was possible.

I remember Nordhausen. It had been hacked out of the Kohnstein Mountain. Thirteen thousand slaves from Buchenwald had done it with muscle and sweat. It was empty when I first saw it. The V-2 complex was still to come. It had tunnels eighteen hundred meters long, and nearly fifty side chambers. I gazed about me in wonder. Himmler scratched his nose and smiled. The work area was one hundred and twenty-five thousand meters square, buried deep in the mountain. Himmler showed me around. His voice echoed in the silence. There were twelve ventilation shafts, huge generators supplied the light, and special heating ensured a constant temperature, day in and day out.

'Here thousands will work. The slaves will live in a separate camp. That camp, which now exists, is hidden deep in a mountain valley, less than a kilometre from the entrance to one of the tunnels. It has every facility. Lots of barracks, a brothel. It has a sports ground and a hospital, a kitchen and a laundry, a psychological and vocational selection unit, a crematorium and prison. There is also the town of Bleicherode. It's twenty kilometres from here. There, the new tunnels, sixteen kilometres deep, will house several more

missile factories and living quarters for thousands. What else are mountains for? How else do we use the slaves? The new temples will be underground cities that are virtually impregnable.'

I still remember his every word. His voice echoed in that vast silence. I knew that the whole area, from the Harz Mountains to Thuringia, south of Prague and across to Mahren, was littered with similar tunnels and underground factories. Only a few were known to Hitler. Himmler controlled them all. They were cloaked in the strictest secrecy and ruled by the SS. The work went on night and day. All slackers were shot or hung. The underground factories were totally insular colonies, worked by masters and slaves, unrestricted by moral laws, and yet very few Germans knew about them or would ever set eyes on them.

Thus were my problems solved. I saw what could be achieved. Standing here beside Himmler, in that enormous, silent cave, I thought of all the thousands who would work there, and knew where my future lay. Himmler dreamed of ice and fire. He dreamed of cities beneath the earth. He saw the sun flashing off the frozen peaks that showed only emptiness. I would take what Himmler offered. I would hide in glass and stone. I turned around and stared at Himmler's modest eyes and saw his madness as sanity.

'The New Order needs its masters and they have to be Aryan: blond-haired and blue-eyed and strong – and absolutely obedient. Such are found in the Jungvolk: the boys of ten to fourteen. They are formed in the Hitler Youth, given the Blood and Honour dagger, retrained to worship the Führer and the Nation, then finally join the SS. Once there, they are mine. I do with them what I will. They no longer belong to Hitler, but to me – and they worship me slavishly.'

Himmler dreamed it and did it: he gave birth to his acolytes. The mild chicken farmer blinked his mild eyes and saw a world of godmen. The SS was Himmler's church, his bed and his altar; it was an Order run on Jesuit principles and disciplined with an iron fist. All its members were racially pure. They were bound together by sacred oaths. They were stripped of their history, given numbers instead of names, indoctrinated with the myths of the Volk and emerged as disciples. No questions would be asked. No order would be ignored. Their blind obedience would let them wade through hell without shame or revulsion.

I believed in this approach. Without discipline there is dissension.

Himmler's ultimate aims struck me as religious, but his methods were sound. We cannot progress with freedom. Free men are a curse. Such men resist change because it leaves them exposed as superfluous. Himmler understood that much. He feared individuals. He felt that individuals were a threat to his grand master plan. And what was his plan? He wanted gods, not normal men. He believed in obedience, in controlled breeding and vivisection; believed in biological mutation and its product, the Superman. Such a dream is not uncommon. Modern science still pursues it. Out there, in the world beyond the ice, primitive surgeons hack bone for it. As for myself, I accepted it: men were meat to be used. I believed in biological mutation and used all that was offered.

'The New Order will be purified. The subhumans will be slaves. All dissenters will be stripped of their resistance until they, too, obey. Failing that, they will be removed by gas, gun or noose – and even then, we will ensure that they contribute to the good of the Order. Gouge the gold from their teeth. Use their skin for lampshades. We will turn their bones to ashes and dust in the great crematoria. It is necessary to do so. We must affirm that we are serious. We must let them know that discipline is all, and that their ash can be useful. The New Order will be strict. Its one goal will be progress. It will be dedicated to experiment and research, to the advancement of knowledge. Most laboratories have limitations; this won't be so in the New Order. The subhumans, who are useful as slaves, will also serve us as specimens.'

Not all aeronautics. That went on at Kummersdorf West. In the hangars of Kummersdorf West my other dream took wing. I worked with Schriever and Belluzzo. Perhaps Miethe and Habermohl. I remember the names, not the faces, and I feel no affection. Nonetheless, I worked with them. My restless genius drove me. The vicissitudes of the war did not touch me as my project expanded. How many nights did I go sleepless? I think back on that with pride. I was in my early sixties at the time, but I drove them relentlessly. The first disk took shape slowly. There were many set-backs. I travelled north and south, east and west, stealing men and ideas. Factories hidden in the Schwarzwald. The R-Laboratory in Volkenrode. Heated discussions about electrostatic fields and gyroscopic controls. The emerging disk filled the hangar. Schriever's eyes were filled with greed. The four legs that housed the gas turbine rotors reflected the bright lights. Schriever studied the disk with

vonder. This recollection makes me smile. What Schriever gazed upon with uch greed and admiration was a primitive toy. The real achievements were in ny files. What Schriever saw was nothing. In the hangar in Kummersdorf Vest I was building a useless thing.

The deceit was necessary. There was no one I could trust. The Third Reich was filled with frightened, ambitious men who yearned to make an mpression. I did not trust Rudolph Schriever. I saw the death in Himmler's yes. I remembered my past, the busy hangars in Iowa, all the businessmen nd cowardly politicians who had smothered my life's work. The same thing ould happen again. The war would not last forever. Already, in 1941, I saw he Reich's trickling wounds. Just how long would Himmler last? And how ong could he keep his secret? I wanted to utilise his master plan, but what uarantees had I? The Nazis devoured their own kind. They might well devour Himmler. Either that, or the Reichführer would turn on me, destroying all I ad gained. Heinrich Himmler: the Reichführer. His mild eyes did not deceive ne. His neat fingernails were polished with blood and his smile hid hysteria. No, I didn't trust him. There was no one I could trust. And so I gave him just a ittle: a prototype that would not work. I kept explaining that I needed more ime and that the problems were numerous.

A delicate manoeuvre. A great cunning was required. The disk had to ool the other engineers while still lacking in something. I used obsolete echnologies. I gave the engineers their head. Gas turbines and liquid-fuelled ockets were the fruits of their labours. Such toys kept them happy. Schriever's yes shone with triumph. Young and lean, he showed his drawings to Himmler vhile I went my own way. Their flying disk had been surpassed. The real chievement was in my files. I gave a little and took a great deal and listened lways to Himmler.

'We have our underground factories. We have our chosen location. We ave our masters, the SS, and our slaves and your own crystal genius. But this sn't enough. We need more than normal men. What we need is a biological nutation that will lead to true greatness. We must learn to control the vorkers. Not with whips and not with guns. What we need is automatic control f their bodies and minds. The human brain must be examined. The body's ecrets must be explored. We must try to steal their will and their strength and eave them just what they need. The democracies cannot do this. Regressive norals would forbid it. But here, at the dawn of the new era, there is nothing

o hinder us. We must use the Ahnenerbe. We must use the Lebensborn. We nust study racial characteristics and breed only the purest. This will solve the irst problem. In this way we will find the Superman. Nevertheless, this leaves he problem of the workers, and we must solve that also. Control of mind and ody. We must find a whole new method. I think of medical and psychological xperiments of the most extreme kind. The camps are yours to command. The chweine there are useless meat. The New Order needs a wealth of mindless nuscle and your genius must find it.'

The concentration camps were the laboratories. The prisoners were the guinea pigs. The whole mystery of human life was explored as it writhed on he tables… What are the limits of human pain? How long before the lungs collapse? Will scorched flesh, if left unattended, renew itself or turn gangrenous? Inject this woman with jaundice. Inject that child with typhoid. Shoot this creature with poison bullets, graft a bone, transfer a limb, remove esticles and ovaries and intestines, but don't use anaesthetics. Was it the urgery that led to death? Was it death through shock or pain? Put that frozen nan between those two whores and then check his responses. More work. (It arely stopped.) The Ahnenerbe needs human heads. The Institute for Research into Heredity needs anthropological measurements. Take these filthy ews and Poles. Strip them naked and measure them. If suitable, put them into he gas chambers and then chop off their heads. Ship the heads off in anisters. Use extreme care when packing. Peel the skin from the bones of the orpse, dissolve the bones, use the healthy flesh. This strip decomposed lready. A good piece of material there. These tattoos would make a nice ampshade in Frau Koch's bedroom… But such was mere Nazi frivolity. My rue research never stopped. The concentration camps, with their abattoirs nd crematoria, were extraordinary laboratories.

'Do you understand at last? The New Order is very real. It will be roken into colonies, each separate, each with its work, all divided into nasters and slaves, existing just for the future. What's a colony in our vilderness? It's just another Nordhausen. You ship the subhumans in to build our underground complex, you control them with your dogs and the Death's Head SS, and then you move in your scientists and technicians and administrators, and you bind them together with fear of the all-seeing masters. And once there, where can they go? There is no way in or out. They will live nderground, seduced by power, cowed by fear, the masters bound by their

›aths, by their religious convictions, the subhumans by torture and death and he lack of all exits. Yes, American, it is possible. We are halfway there ılready. You must work, you must complete your flying disk, before we settle he matter.'

So I listened to Himmler. So his droning words encouraged me. I didn't hink he would survive for very long, but his ideas were valuable. I used him ınd his facilities. We filled the trains with nameless thousands. The slaves vere shipped to the harbour of Kiel and then they just disappeared.

Yet I had to be careful. I could not hold back too much. Himmler pressed ne for a test flight of the disk, and I had to oblige. It was 1943. I believe it was 'une. The steel doors of the hangars were pulled open and the sunlight poured n. This much I remember. The disk reflected the sunlight. Schriever climbed nto the dome-shaped pilot's cabin, his eyes afire with excitement. The ngineers retreated. They all shielded their eyes. Himmler joined me behind he sandbags, his spectacles perched high on his nose. The disk looked like a netallic mushroom. It also resembled a giant spider. Its four legs housed the gas turbine rotors and ran down obliquely. Himmler rubbed at his nose. Sunlight flashed off his spectacles. There was a roar as the hollow legs pewed fire and filled the air with dense smoke. Yellow flames spat from the armac. The air shimmered in the heat. The roar changed into a numbing ibilance as the disk left the ground. Himmler covered his ears. His body eemed to be shrinking. The disk shuddered and shrieked, lifted gently off the ground, hovered briefly and swayed from side to side and was obscured by the wirling smoke. Himmler turned and stared at me. His mild eyes were like the un. The disk roared and hovered just above the ground as Himmler reached for my hand…

So according to Wilson, the first crude, piloted flying saucer was completed ınd test-flown in Nazi Germany in 1943. Yet what a price was paid! How elentlessly cruel he was! He boldly courted the dreaded Himmler, seduced ıim, used him, and had no hesitation in utilising Himmler's brutal methods in ›rder to get precisely what he wanted. Like the Nazis, he used slave labour. He closed his eyes to the atrocities. He ignored the whippings and the ıangings and, even worse, made use of the hideous medical experiments, the ıppallingly cruel anthropological investigations, the surgical procedures

undertaken without anaesthetics, simply because they fit in with his ideas for future human mutations: the brain-implanted zombies and cyborgs that would later crew his own, more highly advanced, flying saucers and be mistaken by countless UFO witnesses as extraterrestrials. At the cost of enormous human suffering, he did what he had to do. Perhaps even more grotesquely, in a bid to improve his own health and even extend his life, he applied to himself some of the discoveries made through the Nazis' surgical and anthropological experiments. Which may explain why, in his diaries, SS Lieutenant Ernst Stoll wrote that Wilson, though then in his mid-sixties, looking about thirty years younger than his actual age.

Wilson's self-application of the Nazis' inhumane medical and surgical procedures was not all he stole from them. It is clear from Lieutenant Stoll's diaries that while nominally supervising Projekt Saucer in general and Wilson in particular, he was also driving himself close to exhaustion by working for the notorious *Lebensborn* organisation, devoted to the controlled breeding of the perfect Aryan, a supposed Nordic Super Race, through the disciplined mating of men and women selected in accordance with the *Ahnenerbe,* the notorious Institute for Research into Heredity. To this end, Stoll, when not supervising the work at Kummersdorf, had been tasked with abducting thousands of 'racially valuable' children from all over Europe and shipping them to the *Lebensborn* so-called 'national maternity homes' spread throughout the Reich. From there, after being given new names, robbed of their former identities, and indoctrinated into total, unquestioning devotion to the Reich, many of them were shipped off to Himmler's rapidly expanding underground base in what had been Norway's Queen Maud Land (before being illegally claimed by the Nazis and renamed *Neu Schwabenland*) in Antarctica, to act as guards and disciplinarians to the slave workers shipped in from the concentration camps.

According to Stoll, as he gradually became convinced that the war was lost and that Himmler was going mad, he began siding with Wilson and soon learned that the American, also convinced that the war was lost and that Himmler would never get as far as his hidden Antarctic base, was planning to go there himself and use it, with its indoctrinated, almost zombie-like, SS fanatics, all children of the *Lebensborn*, for his own grandiose scientific purposes.

What is also made clear in Paper #4 is that Wilson dealt with the Nazis

exactly as he had done with his own countrymen many years before: he lied to hem, cheated them, hid his real progress from them, only showed them nnovations of strictly limited capabilities and even, as he had done in Iowa nd Illinois, ruthlessly destroyed his own creations rather than let them be sed by others. He wanted everything for himself. He had already planned his uture. And incongruously, given his clearly stated contempt for the Nazis in general and Himmler in particular, he used the latter's obsession with creating pure Aryan race, or 'Master Race', based in his hoped-for secret colony of nasters and slaves, (his Death's Head SS and the concentration camp inmates) s the matrix for his own, more scientific, secret colony in Antarctica.

To repeat Himmler's words: 'What's a colony in our wilderness? It's just nother Nordhausen. You ship the subhumans in to build your underground omplex, you control them with your dogs and the Death's Head SS, and then ou move in your scientists and technicians and administrators, and you bind hem together with fear of the all-seeing masters.'

This, in modified form, is what Wilson was planning to do at the end of he war, when the Nazis were conquered: to create his own scientific colony in hidden base in Antarctica. However, to do it he had to protect himself by laying his dangerous games with Himmler and Lieutenant Stoll and the other nembers of Projekt Saucer, including Schriever, Belluzzo, Habermohl and Miethe.

Who were these people?

In a series of interviews in the West German press in 1952, Rudolph Schriever, then resident at Hokerstrasse 28 in Bremerhaven-Lehe, claimed hat in the spring of 1941, when he was an engineer and test pilot for the Heinkel factory in Eger, he started thinking of an aeroplane that could take off ertically like a helicopter. This led to him to designing a so-called 'flying op' that was completed the following year and test-flown on June 1, 1942. Schriever went on to claim that by the summer of 1944, when Nazi Germany vas clearly heading for defeat, a larger prototype of his 'flying top', now more ike the flying saucer widely reported during the 1950s, was transferred in 944 to Prague, where, with Walter Miethe, an engineer from the Peenemünde V-1 and V-2 programme, another engineer, Klaus Habermohl, and the Italian Riva del Garda physicist, Dr Giuseppe Belluzzo, he constructed an even arger, piloted model of his original prototype, replacing its former gas-turbine

engines with an advanced form of propulsion that utilised adjustable jets. In other words, a jet-propelled flying saucer.

This claim is contradicted by Wilson's assertion in Paper #4 that the first flying saucer prototype, though piloted by Schriever, was test-flown in June of 1943. In the light of what our intelligence has since learned, this seems likely. Schriever, formerly a test pilot, would have insisted upon personally flying the saucer because by that time he was convinced that he, not Wilson, was the true designer of the machine. Regarding this, it is clear from Wilson's account that, just as he had done years before with his American airships, so again, in Nazi Germany, he had systematically fed only second-rate innovations to Schriever's Projekt Saucer team – and only a little at a time – while keeping his more successful innovations to himself.

With Germany clearly heading for defeat and the Nazis searching ever more desperately for more powerful, last-minute 'secret weapons', Himmler, being increasingly convinced that the American, Wilson, was not progressing fast enough with his research, authorised Flugkapitän Schriever to replace him as head of the Projekt Saucer team. Though considered by Stoll and Wilson to be no more than a second-rate engineer with delusions of grandeur, Schriever relished his new position and continued vainly working on his piloted flying saucer prototype, unaware that it would never fly more than a short distance, and even then erratically, because the information and physical items that he was being fed by Wilson were not up to the task.

The prototype test-flown by Schriever in the June of 1943 went only a short distance, which was at least enough to impress the technologically ignorant Reichführer Himmler. Fearing that the increasing Allied bombing raids would lead eventually to the destruction of Kummersdorf, Himmler had the whole facility evacuated and the flying saucer project and its team, including Wilson and Lieutenant Stoll, transferred to the BMW plant near Prague, where they were tasked with producing a third prototype. However, for reasons not known until the discovery of Wilson's papers, Wilson and Lieutenant Stoll, supervised by SS General Hans Kammler, were then transferred from Prague to an underground research facility in the town of Kahla, in the mountain region of Thuringia. The following year, with the BMW plant by then under threat from the rapidly advancing Allied armies, Schriever's project was moved to Mahren in the Westerwaldkreis, in Rhineland-Palatinate.

In Kahla, freed from the restrictions placed upon him by Himmler and the ncreasingly vainglorious Flugkapitän Schriever, Wilson was able to continue vorking on his own flying saucer designs and other technical innovations, ncluding, as our intelligence later learned, medical and surgical innovations hat could help extend his own life. As part of his plan for his eventual escape, ıe also kept the increasingly desperate Himmler usefully distracted by ›roducing a last-minute 'secret weapon' for him: a small, disk-shaped, emote-controlled, flying anti-radar device, the *Feuerball*, which went on to uccessfully harass Allied aircraft during the closing months of the war.

According to post-war statements made by Rudolph Schriever, while ›ased in Mahren he and his team, including Belluzzo, Miethe and Habermohl, edesigned a third 'flying disk' prototype by replacing its former gas-turbine ngines with an advanced form of propulsion that used adjustable jets. He tates, further, that his 'flying disk' had been ready for testing in early 1944, ›ut that with the advance of the Allies into Germany, the test had been ancelled, the machine destroyed, and his designs either mislaid or stolen. These statements can be neither proved nor disproved, as Schriever then fled o the West, reached the US lines, and eventually made it back home to Bremerhaven, where he gave the post-war media a wide variety of different tories about his own, actually failed, flying saucer.

Intelligence later gathered by the United States Office of Strategic Services (OSS) Operation Paperclip revealed that of the other members of the Projekt Saucer team, Klaus Habermohl was captured by the Russians and aken back to Russia with other captured German scientists to work for them; nd Walter Miethe, though initially brought to America with hundreds of other German technicians to work under Wernher von Braun for the United States' irst rocket centre in the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico, joined he A. V. Roe (AVRO-Canada) aircraft company in Malton, Ontario, eportedly to continue work on disk-shaped aircraft, or flying saucers, just as Habermohl was thought to be doing with the Russians. Dr. Guiseppe Belluzzo lisappeared some time in 1944 and was never heard from again.

Meanwhile, even as the war was coming to a close, John Wilson was ›lanning to flee from the defeated Germany and make his way, with the ›apers and components for the real flying saucer, plus numerous other nnovations, to the Nazis' secret base in Neu Schwabenland, Antarctica. The

events leading up to this, including his interactions with SS generals Hans Kammler and Artur Nebe, are detailed in the fifth paper.

Paper #5

When did Kammler and Nebe die? It was a long time ago. They were gassed as they slept in their rooms, and then I had them cremated. I didn't really have a choice. My implants were not perfected. We were still using the Death's Head SS and their obscene forms of discipline. It was shortly after the war. Kammler and Nebe showed much resentment. Power corrupts and they both had great power and started plotting against me. I could not let this happen. My life's work was reaching fruition. Hidden deep in the immense, frozen wilderness, the colony functioned. Thus I had to get rid of them. Their room doors locked automatically. They never knew all the time they were there that the walls could spit gas. They died on their own beds. The room was aired and they were removed. They were taken to the crematorium in the base of the mountain, incinerated, turned to ash and smoke, leaving me independent.

How ironic was their death! It was a death befitting both. For how many had they themselves sent to the gas chambers during those nightmare years? I think particularly of Kammler. SS General Hans Kammler. Kammler planned the concentration camps, supervised the plans for Birkenau, was responsible for its four great gas chambers and its vile crematoria. A handsome, ruthless man. Energetic and decisive. His gross ambition, and his total lack of scruples, made him someone worth knowing.

August 1943. Reichführer Himmler was then at his peak. His lust for power had increased every year and he was then almost godlike. Yet that wasn't enough for him. He wanted more and more. Most particularly, he wanted control of the V-2 rockets and all those who worked on them. He had tried for that and failed. Then Peenemünde was bombed. Himmler suggested to Hitler that Peenemünde had been betrayed, and that his SS should take control immediately. Hitler agreed to this. Himmler now had full control. He immediately moved mass production of the rockets to the caves near Nordhausen. General Kammler was put in charge. He became Himmler's right-hand man. When that happened, I had to do something to protect my own project.

Those were dangerous years. The war was not going well. The Russian offensive was a disaster, Italy had fallen to the Allies, Hitler's physical and mental health was collapsing, and the Reich was in ruins. My own position was no better. As I recall, it was precarious. I now doubted Himmler's sanity and will, and this made me uneasy. The slaves were still being sent to Kiel. From there they were shipped to the frozen wilderness. The great caves were expanding under the ice, but they seemed far away. I wondered if I would ever get there. I no longer trusted Himmler. As disaster followed disaster for the Reich, I saw his brimming hysteria. I still wanted the frozen wilderness. I knew I couldn't depend on Himmler. His hysteria was making him indecisive and that meant he was dangerous. I still wanted the Antarctic, I didn't want Himmler there. Then I met Kammler in 1943 and was drawn to his ruthlessness.

Kammler knew of my project. Himmler sent him to check it out. I was then at the BMW Platz near Prague, still working unceasingly. I knew the war would soon be lost. I was playing a double game. The game was highly dangerous, very tricky, and I had to be careful. I still badly needed Himmler. His facilities were essential. Yet I knew that he now lived in fear of being found out by Hitler. After all, it was betrayal. Himmler was building his private empire. If the Führer discovered his intentions he would have Himmler executed. Thus Himmler became frightened. In his formerly mild eyes there was frenzy. He had promised to give der Führer great new weapons, and der Führer was restless. I didn't dare complete my saucer. Not until I reached Antarctica. I was frightened that Himmler's growing confusion might make him give it to Hitler. That would mean the end of everything. The Allies would take it over. As for myself, I would be charged as a war criminal, and probably hanged.

On top of this, there was Schriever. The Flugkapitän was ambitious. Yet another of Himmler's scientific pets, he had the need to impress him. Schriever's eyes devoured my saucer. He was in competition with me. I knew that if my saucer was completed, he would take all the credit. Already I had seen him do this. He had the slyness of a simple man. Himmler insisted that we share the whole project, and I knew what he meant. I was Himmler's dirty secret. The Flugkapitän was not. Once the project was completed I would simply disappear, and then Himmler could offer der Führer my saucer as a German achievement. So, Schriever was a threat. He wanted credit for my

achievements. Because of this, I withheld a great deal and understated my progress. Schriever worked from doctored drawings. I gave him just enough to make his flying saucer credible. The Schriever saucer could rise and hover briefly, but it didn't yet fly. I had to let it progress slowly. Not much, but enough. Meanwhile, in the BMW Platz, I quietly finished the real work.

My sole thought was for Antarctica . The hangars were multiplying beneath the snow. Sooner or later, I would have to escape and join the vast, hidden colony. I could not depend on Himmler. His rising panic had made him treacherous. I could see, in his fear and indecision, that he might never leave. I needed another ally. Another man of gross ambition. I met Kammler in the BMW Platz and knew that here was my man.

Kammler was an organiser. He was decisive and ruthless. More importantly, his ambition was boundless, his selfishness total. I worked on him slowly. It took months, but I was patient. Kammler's one thought, at the time, was self-survival, and that's what I played on. He already knew of the secret colony. He was startled and intrigued. I could see, as I unveiled further facts, that he was drawn to the notion. The Reich was crumbling all about him. There were plots and counterplots. The Nazis were devouring their own kind and survival was difficult. Then, of course, there were the Allies. Kammler knew the war was lost. He also knew that if the Allies took him prisoner they would certainly hang him. Kammler had to get out of Germany. He had to disappear completely. When I knew this, I told him of my plan and he said he would join me.

That same month he went to see Himmler and blatantly lied to him. He painted me in a black light. He praised Schriever to the skies. He claimed that my project was a mess, that I was stealing from Schriever. I was too old, he said. Flugkapitän Schriever was young and bright. He said that Schriever should be given his own project and encouraged much more. Himmler wasn't too sure, but Kammler pressed home his point. He reminded Himmler that the Allied invasion had begun and that he should take precautions. Kummersdorf West should be evacuated. The American and Schriever should be separated. Kammler suggested that I be moved to the mountainous region of Thuringia, and that Schriever be moved to Mahren. It was better that way, he said. Schriever could then work unencumbered. Himmler, now dependent on Kammler, finally gave his consent.

I was moved out shortly after. At last I was free of Schriever. In Kahla, in

he mountains of Thuringia, I completed my major work. Himmler never knew bout it. Kammler told him I was useless. Eventually, Himmler turned away rom me and focused all his attention on Schriever. That was just what we vanted. We were not concerned with Schriever. I had insured that Schriever's lying saucer project would never succeed.

June 25, 1944. In my office in the research centre at Kahla, I talked to Kammler and Nebe. I remember it well. SS General Artur Nebe. A man whose very name suggested terror and the screams from the basements. General Nebe was ice and fire. He had the cunning of a rat. He was a man who did not show his feelings, who worked quietly and ruthlessly. An exemplary record with the Gestapo. Extermination squads in Russia. With such work he had gutted his soul and embraced the unthinkable. Nebe knew how to survive. He was a master of intrigue. He had trampled on the bones of countless comrades to protect his own skin. A dangerous man, certainly. Also, a cold realist. And that day in my office in Kahla his eyes were wide open.

General Nebe had to escape. There had been an assassination attempt. The Führer had survived the explosion and was now seeking vengeance. The reprisals were terrible. Himmler's men were butchering hundreds. A lot of officers were fleeing for their lives, disappearing forever. General Nebe was such a man. He had been forced to desert. Kammler had told him of what we were doing and he now wished to join us.

Nebe controlled the escape route. His most fanatical SS men joined him. Those men formed the chain that stretched from Kahla to the port in the Baltic. I often watched the trains pull out. The SS cracked their whips. The dogs snapped at the ankles of the children as they wept on the platform. Many came from the concentration camps. Others came from the Lebensborn. We stole children from all over Europe and marked them for slavery. The trains took them to Kiel. The ships and submarines transported them farther. They vanished off the face of the Earth and were not seen again.

Meanwhile, I continued working. My time was running out. The final components for the saucer were in production, but had not yet been tested. The Red Army was in Warsaw. Very soon it would reach the Oder. I had to complete the saucer and test it before the Russians arrived.

Kammler helped me all he could. His authority was considerable. What we didn't have, he took from other scientists and less powerful research centres. Hitler was dreaming of secret weapons. He spared no expense in

getting them. All over Germany, even as the bombs were falling, the scientists worked night and day. There was an Atomic Bomb project. There were electrical submarines. There were laser beams and infrared warheads and remote-control systems. The Kaiser Wilhelm Institut. The Forschungsinstitut of Lindau am Bodensee. From such places I stole what might help to enhance my own project. The swirling energy of the Feuerball. A porous metal called Luftschwamm. In the laboratories of the Kreiselgerate, not far from Berlin Britz, I solved the problems of gyroscopic control and Prandtl's boundary layer. This latter proved to be the breakthrough. The boundary layer was the key. By the end of 1944 we had conquered it and started final construction.

The thought of Schriever amuses me. Perhaps it always will. I look out upon the gleaming ice caps and think of what that man lost. Schriever lived for fool's gold. His saucer designs were all useless. While I finished the real work in Thuringia, he chased phantoms in Mahren. His flying disk was an abortion. All my guidelines had been false. Nevertheless, Schriever believed that they would work, and that's what I wanted. Himmler rarely asked about me. He kept visiting Schriever. The Schriever disk could hover just above the ground, but could do little else. No matter: it was impressive. Schriever thought he could make improvements. He told Himmler that it only needed time and the Reichsführer believed him. That was just what I wanted. It was exactly what I had planned. As Himmler focused all his attention on Schriever's disk, I got on with the real one.

I called it the Kugelblitz.

It was a miracle that I managed it. It was a desperate, frantic race. The skies overhead were filled with Allied aircraft, the horizon was smoky. The Ardennes offensive had failed. The Soviets had now crossed the Oder. The Allied armies were advancing in the south and our towns were in ruins. Hitler had moved into the Chancellery. He was preparing his Götterdämmerung. His Reichsführer, Heinrich Himmler, was in panic and had almost forgotten me. Himmler wanted a flying saucer. He wanted Schriever's flying disk. Because of this, I was free to continue without interference. The war raged far away. The smoke thickened on the horizon. We stepped out of our caves to see this, and then we went back to work.

I remember it all vividly. The sounds of labour still reverberate. The great underground complex at Kahla represented my future. The caves were inside the mountain. From the air they were invisible. Inside them were thousands of

lave workers and dedicated technicians. The bright lights stung our eyes. Valls of stone cast eerie shadows. Machines roared and plates of silvery orous metal dangled over our heads. The flying saucer was a skeleton, but it oon grew to fill the hangar. The technicians clambered under its steel ribs, heir eyes covered in goggles. The searing white flames of the welders. The abourers sweating under the Perspex dome of the pilot's cabin. The lights eamed down and flashed off the cabin and hazed the slave workers. The reat caves dwarfed them all. They were cathedrals carved from stone. The ounds of riveting and welding and drilling reverberated throughout. The men ooked very small. They were like ants in an ant-hill. They climbed ladders, rossed catwalks, stood on platforms and girders, now removed from the real world, isolated inside the mountain, working long hours and sleeping little, upervised by Nebe's soldiers.

We kept working night and day. We heard the thunder of distant guns. Every night our trains snaked down the mountain and headed for Kiel. The lying saucer took shape. Its gleaming mass filled the hangar. The final plates vere welded around the pilot's cabin and the body was finished. The large aucer hung from chains. It was lowered onto the sturdy legs. The legs housed he four jet propulsion boosters that would aid its ascent. The disk locked onto he legs. The noise echoed throughout the caves. The slaves looked on in ilence, their eyes dulled with exhaustion, while the technicians all cheered nd applauded, their hands linked in triumph.

An historic day. I will never forget it. I stood beside Kammler and Nebe nd felt as if I was dreaming. The enormous hangar doors opened. Light and old air rushed in. The Kugelblitz, now supported on metal blocks, had its wn kind of beauty. We wheeled it out of the hangar. The date was February 4, 1945. The sun shone upon the base of the mountain, but was darkened by rey smoke. Then the rain and snow came. We had to cancel the test flight. Two days later, on February 16, the piloted saucer soared to the heavens. It limbed vertically and gracefully, stopped abruptly and then shot south. It ecame a winking light above the battlefields, a bright star in the smoky haze.

The next week, we destroyed it…

Until the discovery of the Wilson papers, we only knew that the notorious SS General Artur Nebe had been placed on a Nazi 'death list' in 1944 and

lisappeared shortly thereafter, though his death was never confirmed and nany felt that he had simply fled for his life. Now we know that Nebe went to he Antarctic with Wilson and eventually, as described in the sixth paper, was nurdered by him. As for General Hans Kammler, his history with the SS and he V-2 rocket programme was well documented, but what became of him ıfter he disappeared from Germany in April 1945 remained a mystery for nany years, until, again, his fate was finally revealed in the Wilson papers. Along with Nebe, he was murdered by Wilson. Ironically, since he and Nebe ıad been responsible for sending so many unfortunates to the gas chambers, ɔoth men were fatally gassed as they slept in their beds in the Antarctic colony.

This took place in the early 1950s, shortly after the first wave of contemporary flying saucer sightings that began with Harold Dahl's Maury sland sighting of June 21, 1947. However, before making his escape to the Antarctic, in 1945, during the closing days of the war, Wilson, as he explains n the sixth paper, tested his own flying saucer, the *Kugelblitz*, with pectacular results, but then, despite the resounding success of the test-flight, ıe destroyed it, having it blown to smithereens to prevent it from falling into he hands of the advancing Allies. With no evidence of the *Kugelblitz's* existence left behind, he then fled with the rest of his men, including Lieutenant Ernst Stoll, but led by Kammler and Nebe, to the underground colony in Antarctica.

Naturally, our first question was: Could such a colony exist in Antarctica ıt all? Initial scepticism about the inhospitality of Antarctica was gradually eplaced with the growing knowledge that, while snow and ice form 95% of he surface terrain, it certainly has many ice-free areas, such as the Taylor, Wright and Victoria valleys near McMurdo Sound. More importantly, the ncreasing number of official explorations had revealed that other ice-free ıreas were hidden at the base of mountains or under the vast ice sheets that eached heights as high as 3,500 metres. It was therefore not inconceivable hat a secret colony of former Nazis and their slave labour could have been created in an ice-free area hidden by surrounding mountains of ice and snow. While investigating the numerous reports about Nazis fleeing by ship, ubmarine and airplane to Antarctica, aided by countless documents recovered rom the ruins of Nazi Germany, we were eventually able to confirm that the German Antarctic Expedition of 1939 aerially photographed an extensive

egment of the Princess Astrid and Princess Martha coasts of western Queen Maud Land, dropped hundreds of metal swastikas over the area, and then claimed it for the Hitler government. The Germans renamed the territory as Neu Schwabenland. We were also able to confirm that throughout the war years, German ships and submarines continued to prowl the South Atlantic Ocean along the coastline of Antarctica, thus blocking any possible Allied incursions into Neu Schwabenland. It therefore became increasingly clear to us that if a Nazi base did indeed exist in Antarctica, as increasingly seemed likely, it was located in Neu Schwabenland and was being protected by German ships and submarines. When the war ended with Germany's defeat, those ships and submarines ceased patrolling the Antarctic coastline, but by that time Wilson's underground colony in Neu Schwabenland, further hidden by surrounding mountains covered with ice and snow, was firmly established.

The next question being: Could such a massive undertaking be kept hidden?

The short answer is 'Yes.' Still advancing through a defeated Germany, Allied forces came across many of the previously hidden underground plants and factories that had been constructed by Nazi architects and builders, then worked by thousands of captured labourers from the concentration camps, overseen by merciless SS troopers. Indeed, most of the underground research centres of Nazi Germany were gigantic feats of construction, containing air shafts, wind tunnels, machine shops, assembly plants, rocket launching pads, supply dumps, accommodations for all who worked there, and adjoining camps for the slave workers. And what the Nazis were doing there, under the earth, they also hoped to do elsewhere, notably in Antarctica.

This was Himmler's dream, but he never made it that far. Like his beloved Hitler, he committed suicide at the end of the war, leaving John Wilson free to make his way, accompanied by his faithful acolyte, Lieutenant Ernst Stoll, with the help of generals Kammler and Nebe, to what was already an evolving master-slave colony, hacked out of the base of the snow-covered mountains of Neu Schwabenland and devoted to highly advanced, aggressive technology.

By the time Wilson finally arrived in Antarctica, he was sixty-six years old, though according to Lieutenant Stoll's diaries, he did not look even remotely his age. We also learn from Stoll's diaries that Wilson was obsessed not only with technological and aeronautical experimentation, but with defeating the ageing process and extending his own life. It is clear from his

papers that he had long pursued this goal and had no qualms about improving his own health through the suffering of others, coldly using the results of the hideous anthropological and surgical experiments conducted in the concentration camps. Yet only when he was in Antarctica, in complete command of the colony after murdering Kammler and Nebe, could he take similar experiments as far as they could humanly go, with no moral restraint. Like the notorious so-called Nazi 'doctor', Josef Mengeles, who conducted ghastly medical and surgical experiments in Auschwitz, Wilson was immune to the suffering of his victims, all former concentration-camp inmates, and used his findings to enhance his personal longevity. In doing this, he was worse than Dr. Mengeles: more like Dr. Frankenstein.

The sixth paper describes his activities in cold-blooded, shocking detail…

Paper #6

I owe Kammler and Nebe. Without them, I would not be here. That I killed them was not a sign of malice but of simple expediency. I think of it often. What I did, I had to do. The deaths of Kammler and Nebe were necessary for the good of the colony. They were both becoming greedy. They wanted power for themselves. They were more concerned with politics than science, and I knew what that meant. Plots and counterplots. The introduction of intrigue. A dissension that would interfere with work and thus hinder our progress. Such a possibility could not be tolerated. We had come too far for that. For this reason, some years after our arrival in Antarctica, I had them gassed as they slept, and then, in control of their brainwashed SS devotees, I personally took over the colony.

Yet I recognise my debt. Without them, I would not be here. I never liked them, but they did what was required and made good our escape. We left Germany behind us. We embraced the world of ice. Beneath the ice, in the immense, towering caves, thousands slaved to support us. The colony grew quickly. Without dissension there was progress. Our medical and scientific experiments led to wondrous achievements.

I was racing against time. I was sixty-six years old. What I did in the laboratories in the ice was a necessary evil. What I did, I had to do. If I died before my work was completed, the colony would flounder. I had to make it

elf-sustaining. The workers had to be controlled. Sooner or later, even the guards with the whips would have rebellious thoughts. This could not be llowed to happen. The control had to be automatic. I became obsessed with he mysteries of the brain and biological mutation.

What I did, I had to do. The slaves writhed beneath my knife. The grey natter of their brains was explored; lungs and hearts were examined. Their lood was my life's blood. What they suffered was necessary. Vivisection on nimals is useful, but has grave limitations. So, I operated. The experiments vere not pleasant. Many died and many more became crippled and had to be erminated. Nonetheless, I progressed quickly. Without moral restrictions here are no boundaries. The mystery of human life was unravelled as it vrithed on the tables.

I was ageing every day. I felt the fluttering of my heart. My skin was ightening across the cheekbones of my face and my stomach was addled. This rustration was energising. I spent months in the laboratories. The xperiments in the camps of Nazi Germany now bore splendid fruit. Hearts nd lungs were transplanted. Prosthetic arms and legs flourished. Many died n the tables, those maimed were terminated, but our gains soon overcame the ost and encouraged us further. Gerontology was a priority. My own ageing vas the spur. We experimented with various drugs and surgical aids and had dramatic results. Naturally we made mistakes. There was paralysis, palsied imbs. Nevertheless, with application and will, we eventually met with success. At first it was modest. Vitamin pills and various stimulants. They, however, vere just a beginning and soon led to much better things. I myself was thus aved. The first injections renewed my vigour. Within a year, with my heart at ull strength, I could receive the pacemaker. A tentative first step. The rtificial stomach followed. Years later would bring the plastic surgery and he minor prosthetics.

The means of control were urgent. This goal obsessed me next. I was ware that even the most fanatical guards would eventually yearn for the uter world. Human nature is a curse. It is weak and quite irrational. What I vanted was a method of control that would make the guards obsolete.

I exposed the human brain. Once exposed, it is a blancmange. No nystery: just tissue and fibres, blood and acid and water. I experimented with he brain. I specialised in living subjects. I discovered that by tampering with ertain cerebral areas, the mental processes of the brain could be altered in

any manner required. I inserted microscopic electrodes. I had them activated by computer. Thus, at the press of a button, I could introduce pain or pleasure, craven fear or brute aggression, numb acceptance or insatiable curiosity, heightened intelligence or idiocy. This discovery was invaluable. It was promptly utilised. Within months, implantation of the workers was well underway.

We were masters and slaves. The latter were virtually robotised. The former were still controlled by Artur Nebe, but were clearly redundant. The slaves had all been implanted. The whips were no longer needed. The only danger of revolt now resided in the guards and technicians. Nebe recognised this danger. He gave permission to implant. We both knew that this could lead to resistance, so we had to work carefully. It took us two years. We performed the implants one by one. We anaesthetised the men while they were sleeping and then stole them away. The operation was simple. The men were programmed to forget the implants. When they awakened, they would not seem any different to those still untouched. After two years it was finished. There were no untouched left. Only Kammler and Nebe and myself were allowed to stay free.

Every member had his function. His every thought was controlled. Every man, woman and child was robotised and had his course mapped out for him. Their desires were my desires. Their needs were my needs. I ordained their pain and pleasure, their every hunger, and was worshipped accordingly.

The implantations were all different. Some severe, some less so. What mattered was that each individual would perform as required. To drain a mind is to kill it. One must drain only a little. One must leave free those cerebral areas that perform certain functions.

The technical staff were least affected. I left them the spur of discontentment. This discontentment only related to their creative urges and did not go beyond that. What I removed was their hostility. What I enhanced was their love of work. Given this, they were almost like normal men, but lacked personal ambition.

Below the technical staff were the administrators. Such men and women were more affected. Required for systematic tasks, uncreative and repetitious, they were programmed to be wholly positive thinkers, enthusiastic and dedicated. They were drained of discontentment. Their work triggered satisfaction. In frequent contact with the scientists, who were almost like

normal men, the administrators had minimal personality and no thought for themselves.

The lowliest workers were most affected. I could allow them no personality. I think of Nebe's soldiers, of the factory workers and secretaries, of the drivers and labourers and cooks who performed simple tasks. All were heavily implanted. All were drained of personality. All were programmed to perform their given tasks without reason or thought. In a real sense they were robots. They experienced few emotions. Much cheaper and more reliable than cyborgs, they had a minimal consciousness.

What an achievement this was! The first perfect society! No waste, no crime, no need for debate, no insubordination or rebellion, no conflict of any kind. Such a society is a miracle. It is also highly productive. With no digressions for politics or conflict, it can advance by extraordinary leaps. It can and ours did. We rode the whirlwind and conquered it. Within two years our saucers were creations of an awesome complexity. Jet propulsion was obsolete. Atomic energy was routine. And even this, given the benefit of hindsight, was but a modest beginning.

I see the saucers as I sit here. They soar vertically from the wilderness. As I observe them, they glide across the sky and cast their shadows on mountain peaks. The sun beats all around them. They merge with the flashing ice. They ascend vertically and then hover in silence, their inertial shields glowing.

I confess: I feel pride. Inhuman? I cannot be. As I sit here on the mountain, as I gaze out through the windows, the beauty of the saucers above the snow makes me feel like a young man.

A divided society could not have accomplished it. Certainly not in that brief period. I would not have accomplished it myself had I ignored Nebe and Kammler.

They both wanted to leave the wilderness. They wanted to regain what they had lost. Simple men, moved by normal, pointless hungers, they wanted cheap, instant glory. The saucers offered that opportunity. They knew the saucers were invincible. They wanted to use the saucers to plunder the Earth and make it bow down before them.

I did not desire the same. I wanted only my work. My new cathedrals were made of ice and stone, my sole religion was science. I did not want that

changed. I knew that conflict would change it. I also knew that with patience and time there would be no need for conflict.

The saucers rendered us inviolable. Their very existence was our security. What we needed, we could obtain from the outer world if we handled it properly. Meanwhile, we could progress. We could increase our capabilities. If we did so, we would be in a position to gain much with no effort. The outer world would have to join us. We would gradually draw it in. Given time, the outer world would surrender, turning men into Man.

Yes, given time. But Nebe and Kammler had no time. Their brains untouched by the microscopic electrodes, they were still normal men. They still suffered from base emotions. They felt fear and resentment. They both yearned for the world beyond the ice, and for its decadent pleasures. Vengeance and power. Material gain and the means of squandering it. Like bored children, Nebe and Kammler were inflamed with the need for attention. No, they couldn't wait. They wanted a war of their own making. They wanted to use my remarkable flying saucers as their weapons of plunder.

I could not let this happen. Such a victory would be short-lived. Such aggression would be met with the resistance of inane politicians. Why encourage a nuclear war? What real purpose would it serve? Already our resources were running low, our needs increasing dramatically. What we needed, the world possessed. We could have it without conflict. In gaining it, we could progress even more and thus bide our own time. In the end, the rest would come. The rule of science was inevitable. A conflict such as Nebe and Kammler wanted could only lead to mutual destruction. I could not let it happen. I had no immediate goals. My concern was for the future of science and Man's metamorphosis – I still wanted the Superman…

The sixth paper is important in finally showing us what was really behind the UFOs, mostly flying saucers, being seen and reported by thousands of reliable witnesses throughout the 1950s and '60s. Those flying saucers were the successors to Wilson's original *Kugelblitz*, the one test-flown in Nazi Germany in 1945, and they were being replicated and constantly improved upon at a prodigious rate in Wilson's hidden colony in Antarctica. We also learn from this paper that Wilson was, at the same time, giving vent to his obsession with 'the mysteries of the brain and biological mutation' by

xperimenting with various drugs and surgical aids, creating prosthetic arms nd legs, transplanting hearts and lungs, even implanting microscopic lectrodes in the brains of living humans in order to control their every mpulse and thought, to virtually robotise them, making them obedient to his vill. He was, in other words, already embarked on the creation of the cyborgs, alf-man, half-machine, that he needed as crew members for his more dvanced flying saucers and that were later mistaken by so many UFO vitnesses as ‘extraterrestrials’.

Regarding this, it is to be noted that in the first wave of ‘contactee’ eports, when the witnesses to UFO landings actually approached, or were pproached by, the ‘extraterrestrials’, their descriptions of the creatures they nteracted with had remarkable similarities. The ‘extraterrestrials’ or ‘aliens’ vere mostly under five-feet tall. They had grey, wrinkled skin, with round eads but no necks, and with ‘pointed protrusions’ jutting out where their ears hould have been. They appeared to have no eyes. There was only ‘a small pening’ under the nose where the mouth should have been, though this was ften described as being a covering made either from thin metal or ‘wrinkled’ naterial like an elephant’s skin. The ‘shapeless’ legs of the creatures ended in ound feet with no toes. They were also described as having unusually long rms and what resembled ‘claws’ instead of human hands.

Since thousands of brainwashed children from the Nazi’s *Lebensborn* breeding colonies’ had been shipped to Neu Schwabenland, to be used for all inds of purposes, it now seems very possible that Wilson was using many of hem for his experiments in rapidly advancing ‘biological mutation’ and had, n fact, with a combination of surgery and brain implantations, turned them nto the first of his cyborgs: half-man, half-machine. At the same time, as nade clear in his papers, he was experimenting on himself with various drugs nd surgical aids, hoping to delay the ageing process, and in this he appears to ave been successful. As he writes in this paper: ‘I myself was thus saved. The irst injections renewed my vigour. Within a year, with my heart at full trength, I could receive the pacemaker. A tentative first step. The artificial tomach followed. Years later would bring the plastic surgery and the minor rosthetics.’ Thus, he was embarked on a bid to make himself immortal. Though in the papers he denied it to himself, he clearly wanted to rule the vorld.

We now know that he started by sending his flying saucers, crewed by a

combination of normal humans and cyborgs, out across the world from his hidden base in Antarctica. Over the next decade, they appeared with increasing frequency. Following the Harold Dahl Maury Island sighting of six UFOs on June 21, 1947, closely followed, three days later, by the Kenneth Arnold sighting of nine UFOs, a virtual UFO invasion took place in the skies over the United States. Four days after the Arnold sighting, on June 28, an Air Force pilot flying an F-51 near Lake Meade, Nevada, saw a formation of five or six UFOs off his right wing. That evening, four Air Force officers, two pilots and two intelligence officers from Maxwell AFB in Montgomery, Alabama, saw a UFO flying across the sky, zigzagging with bursts of high speed, and making a sharp, 90° turn before shooting off. In the morning of July 4, a carload of people in Portland, Oregon, saw four UFOs streaking past Mount Jefferson. That evening, a policeman in the parking lot of the Portland City Police Headquarters saw five disk-shaped UFOs 'flying at a high rate of speed and oscillating about their lateral axis.' Minutes later, two other policemen, both former pilots, and four harbour patrol crewmen saw similar UFOs oscillating as they flew overhead. Numerous citizens of Portland saw the same UFOs at approximately the same time. The same night, a United Airlines crew flying near Emmett, Idaho, reported seeing five UFOs, and two days later the crew of an Air Force B-25 saw a bright, disk-shaped UFO flying lower than their aircraft; then a pilot flying across Fairfield-Suisun AFB, California, saw a UFO that was 'oscillating on its lateral axis' as it traversed three-quarters of the sky in a few seconds. Crucially, four days later, on July 8, at Muroc Air Base (now Edwards AFB), the super-secret Air Force test centre in the Mojave Desert, California, a test pilot saw what he thought was a weather balloon until he noticed that it was going *against* the wind, while several officers and airmen saw similar UFOs heading in the same direction. Two hours later, a crew of technicians on Rogers Dry Lake, adjacent to Muroc Air Base, saw an oval-shaped UFO in the vicinity of an ongoing seat-ejection experiment, appearing to follow the ejected seat and its dummy as it fell. Four hours later, the pilot of an F-51 flying at 20,000 feet spotted 'a flat object of a light-reflecting nature, that had no vertical fin or wings.' He tried to follow it, but lost it because he could not fly high enough.

All the reported UFOs were described as being semi-circular or circular, usually domed or with viewing windows on the top or bottom, and resembling

either an inverted plate or two plates together, one placed upside down on the other. They were usually of a whitish-grey or metallic appearance, flew horizontally with a slight bouncing motion, could change direction rapidly, ascend and descend vertically, and in general perform theoretically impossible manoeuvres at remarkably low and high speeds. Most of them 'oscillated' while being silent and showing no means of propulsion.

Clearly, those flying saucers were the descendents of Wilson's original *Kugelblitz*; but as the years passed they changed shape and became much larger, though remaining basically saucer-shaped, and displayed ever more remarkable capabilities, indicating that Wilson's technology was advancing at a prodigious rate. More importantly, as time passed and the sightings increased dramatically, the UFOs were seen ever more frequently flying over our top-secret military establishments. When this fact became known to the public, UFO hysteria swept the country and our intelligence and military, including the Pentagon, became concerned about national defence. Eventually, when on June 15, 1952, there was a virtual UFO invasion over the White House, with hundreds of UFOs being observed both on radar and in the skies, some reportedly witnessed by President Truman, Wilson finally made himself known to us through a CIA agent, Sam Fuller, who had been on his trail for years.

Yet Fuller was not the first to learn about Wilson. As one of our CIA agents at the time, he had been in charge of disinformation regarding the Roswell flying saucer crash of 1947. This led him to one Mike Bradley, an intelligence agent with the Office of Strategic Services (OSS). Bradley had been tasked with tracking down John Wilson, whose name had unexpectedly started appearing in captured World War II documents, indicating that he, Wilson, though an American who had worked with Robert H. Goddard, inventor of the first liquid-fuelled, gyroscopically-controlled rocket, had gone to Germany in 1931, worked for the Nazis throughout the war years, created a highly advanced, jet-propelled, saucer-shaped aircraft, and was believed to have fled to a hidden base in Antarctica after the war, with other Nazis officers and scientists, where he continued to create ever more advanced flying saucers.

Eventually learning that Fuller was trying to find him, Wilson made contact with him, said he wanted to talk, to negotiate with the US government, and they arranged to meet at night in an isolated field in Virginia. Wilson

arrived, with the former SS General Artur Nebe, in one of his own flying saucers. Fuller arrived in a limousine with General John A. Samford, US Head Of Intelligence, and some of his agents, backed up with a truckful of armed troopers. Ever since learning about the existence of Wilson, General Samford had viewed him as a war criminal and traitor who should have been arrested and brought to the US for trial. However, aware that even Rear-Admiral Richard E. Byrd's full-scale Operation Highjump had been unable to reach Wilson's hidden base because Wilson's technology was now phonomenally more advanced than American technology, he had acceded to the demands of his contemporaries in the Pentagon and the White House, including Lieutenant General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, Deputy Chief of the Air Force, and reluctantly agreed to the meeting.

That secret meeting, audacious as it was and infuriating to General Samford, led to other secret meetings, including one with President Truman in the White House.

How this remarkable turn of events came to be is related in Wilson's seventh paper…

Paper #7

My intention was to trade. I needed mass-produced items: small components and tools, nuts and bolts, screws and nails, light bulbs and printing paper and pens and other modest essentials. So far we had stolen them. Our flying saucers had landed. We had often abducted human beings and animals where isolation protected us. But nuts and bolts were more difficult. Small items were large problems. What was shipped to here throughout the war years was now diminishing rapidly. No colony can be self-sustaining. I had always understood this. So it was that in 1952 I had to form an alliance. There was really no alternative. I had no choice but to trade. What I had, the world needed; what the world had, I needed; and until I had the world on my side, I would have to negotiate.

Indeed, I had already started. I was negotiating with President Truman. After the Washington invasion of 1952, he had agreed to a meeting. We met in the Oval Room. My CIA contacts were present. President Truman was an intelligent man, and as such he was nervous. He kept fiddling with his glasses.

His lower lip was not too steady. General Vandenberg was standing near the desk, his eyes bright with suppressed rage. The Oval Room was crowded. General Samford and Professor Robertson. Other members of the Robertson Panel, including Lloyd Berkner. The meeting didn't take long. They had already examined my brief. Most being specialists in the physical sciences, they had no problem in reading. I put forward my proposals. Truman sighed and raised his hands. Generals Vandenberg and Samford were outraged, but inevitably out-voted. The scientists knew what they were reading. They were aware of our capabilities. They put the facts bluntly to Truman and we reached an agreement.

After that, I had no choice. Nebe and Kammler became a threat. Disgusted that I should barter instead of conquer, they started plotting against me. I have no proof of this. I just know it was inevitable. Their chance for immediate recognition and power had been ruined by my actions. They were now trapped in the colony. In the outer world they would be war criminals. The only way they could return to the outer world would be to land as aggressors. So, they felt trapped. Thus they had to plot against me. And knowing this, I had no choice but to remove them and take over the colony.

They had not been brain-implanted. They were men of free will. I could not, as I could with the others, suggest euthanasia. For this reason I had no choice. What I did, I had to do. I could not concern myself with individuals while my future was threatened.

Not shortly after the war, then. It was 1953. We had dinner overlooking the plateau, the snow white, the stars glittering. I served champagne and caviar. The meal was followed with brandy. Such luxuries were rare in the colony, but the night seemed to warrant it. Kammler spoke of America. He reminisced about his visits there. Artur Nebe turned his glass between his fingers, his dark eyes unrevealing. Kammler spoke of General Vandenberg. His voice trembled with loss. He said that Vandenberg had reminded him of his past, of his days with the military. Artur Nebe was not attentive. His gelid eyes surveyed the ice. He gazed over the glistening plateau to the dark, frozen wilderness. Kammler spoke of the V-2 rockets. He talked of fighting in the Hague. He recalled his days with Walter Dornberger and Wernher von Braun. The hours passed in this manner. Artur Nebe's cold eyes were veiled. A large saucer became a glowing cathedral that ascended majestically. Artur Nebe did not look up. His gaze was fixed on the wilderness. Kammler yawned and

tood against the large window and was framed by the starlit night. He talked vaguely about the future. He said decisions must be made. He turned away and I saw the white wilderness dissolving in darkness.

They both left shortly after. I had no sense of urgency. The glowing cathedral descended from the heavens, hovered briefly and disappeared. I looked out and saw the ice. The frozen wilderness stretched out below me. I tood up and then went to my desk and turned on the two scanners. Kammler and Nebe were in their rooms, the latter with his whore. I reached down and pressed the button on my left and let the gas fill their lungs.

What I did, I had to do. What I do, I have to do. Above morality, above he sanctity of the individual, is my duty to science. I do not suffer guilt. They vere of use and were used. Without them, I would never have escaped – thus I offer them tribute…

Generals Kammler and Nebe were murdered by Wilson because they wanted o use his flying saucers and rapidly advancing technology to wage war on America and, eventually, the rest of the world, whereas Wilson needed to rade with them. As stated clearly in the seventh paper, while his technology vas continuing to advance at a prodigious rate, far ahead of any other known echnology, his master-and-slave colony, isolated from the rest of the world, could not sustain itself forever. In Wilson's own words: 'Nuts and bolts were nore difficult. Small items were large problems. What was shipped to here hroughout the war years was now diminishing rapidly. No colony can be self-ustaining. I had always understood this. So it was that in 1952 I had to form n alliance. There was really no alternative. I had no choice but to trade. What had, the world needed; what the world had, I needed; and until I had the vorld on my side, I would have to negotiate.'

But why were we willing to trade with him?

Because we had our own top-secret flying saucers, based on the German prototypes, and were desperately racing to make them as advanced as the Wilson saucers. CIA agent Sam Fuller had been tasked with spreading lisinformation about the Roswell UFO crash of 1947 because that particular lying saucer was actually one of our own relatively primitive models, constructed in a top-secret hangar, in a restricted area of the White Sands Proving Ground near Roswell, New Mexico, ironically close to Eden Valley,

vhere Robert H. Goddard had fired his first liquid-fuelled, remote-controlled ocket. In this context it is worth recalling that at the end of World War II, Nazi Germany's formerly top-secret scientific papers had been hidden, and vere eventually found, in tunnels, caves, dry wells, ploughed fields and even :ess pits. Those papers, when thoroughly examined, revealed that the Germans, with their unlimited resources, had been working on a frightening ırray of highly advanced technologies.

Because of this, there was a race between the Allies and the Russians to :apture as many of the rocket scientists and engineers as possible, as well as he invaluable technical documentation. Deals were therefore struck between he conquerors and their former enemies, particularly with regard to those nvolved in rocketry and other advanced weaponry. As a result, General Dornberger, Klaus Riedal and Wernher von Braun, along with 150 of their best men, went to the United States, Dornberger to work for the Bell Aircraft Company, Riedel to become director of rocket engine research for the North American Aviation Corporation, and von Braun to achieve fame through his Apollo Moon programme under the auspices of NASA. Included in the 150 ess famous men was Walter Miethe, the Peenemünde V-1 and V-2 rocket engineer who had worked with Wilson and Rudolph Schriever on Nazi Germany's flying saucer project. Once in America, Miethe was hired by the A. V. Roe company (later AVRO-Canada) where he worked on their disk-haped aircraft, the Avrocar. However, the Russians also gained a wealth of locumentation, material, scientists and engineers, including the aeronautical engineer, Klaus Habermohl, who also had worked with Wilson and Rudolph Schriever on Projekt Saucer.

Because of this, the US military was convinced that they were not only being hreatened by Wilson's superior flying saucers, but possibly by Russian aucers as well. They therefore redoubled their efforts to improve their own echnology, hoping to at least equal Wilson's technology, but finally realised hat they could not do it without Wilson's help and that this could only be chieved through a tit-for-tat trading arrangement with him. And so, for years ıfter, while the UFO scare continued, most of the UFOs sighted being Wilson's saucers, some of them ours, others possibly Russian, we gave Wilson what he required for the maintenance of his Antarctic colony in return or documentation on his remarkable innovations. These he cleverly fed to us piece by piece, never showing us anything that he hadn't already surpassed,

etting us make our advances, as it were, only in his wake. Despite our huge loubts, we had to accept the arrangement, desperately hoping that sooner or ater we would either catch up with him or he would make a major mistake, inally giving us an advantage. And thus, to keep the arrangement secret, to nsure that the public never knew about it, we embarked on a massive ampaign of disinformation by ridiculing genuine UFO sightings, by uppressing the UFO reports of our own visually competent pilots, by hreatening dire punishments for civilian individuals and organisations that vere too boldly investigating the UFO phenomenon, and by using CIA agents ike Sam Fuller to investigate and, if necessary, harass anyone he felt could be threat to our disinformation programme.

Indeed, it was Fuller's interrogation of the former OSS agent, Mike Bradley, shortly after the war, in his home located not far from the late Robert H. Goddard's old rocket launching site, Eden Valley, that finally revealed how Wilson and his men had commenced their long journey from a defeated Germany to Antarctica.

Tasked with tracking down the elusive Wilson, agent Bradley had esolutely followed his trail across a collapsing Germany until he ended up in Kiel Harbour, from where, as a freed Kahla concentration-camp inmate had nformed him, Wilson and his men, including SS Lieutenant Ernst Stoll and Generals Kammler and Nebe, intended taking a submarine to Argentina. Though wounded in an explosion on Kiel harbour, Bradley, stretched out on he ground and bleeding, had actually been spoken to by a 'softly mocking' Ernst Stoll, and then, when Stoll departed, was able to observe from a distance Wilson's submarine submerging in the Baltic Sea, on the first leg of its ourney to Mar del Plata, Argentina.

The events leading up to that moment are well described in Wilson's ighth paper…

Paper #8

February 22, 1945. The guns roared in the distance, the skies were filled with moke, and we had to destroy the Kugelblitz and make good our escape. I emember it well. I had to wrap myself in ice. The sleek saucer stretched cross the broken stones at the base of the mountain. We had removed the new

components. We had to leave the rest behind. We couldn't let what remained fall to the enemy, and so we had to destroy it. I stood near the hangar doors. General Kammler was not present. The forested hills of Kahla were all around us and veiled in a thin mist. I glanced at General Nebe. His swarthy face revealed nothing. My fellow scientists and technicians were just behind me, their eyes fixed on the saucer. The guns roared in the distance. The saucer glittered in the sunlight. Nebe's demolition men were standing under it, grouped around the four legs. One of the men waved his hand. General Nebe nodded soundlessly. All the men moved away from the saucer and returned to the hangar.

I no longer accepted pain. It was a redundant emotion. Nonetheless, as I gazed at my great creation, I had to harden myself. The saucer looked enormous, its sloping sides a seamless grey, sweeping up to a steel-plated dome and reflecting the sunlight. It looked very beautiful. It also looked quite unreal. What I felt was a fleeting sense of loss, but I rigorously stifled it. I just stood there, saying nothing. General Nebe nodded again. A kneeling sergeant leaned forward and pressed a plunger and the saucer exploded.

Fierce flames and swirling smoke. We were crouched behind sandbags. The explosions reverberated throughout the hangar and then faded away. We all stood up slowly. The smoke was billowing toward the sky. Where the saucer had stood there was a black hole, filled with smouldering debris.

I found myself speechless. I turned away and faced Nebe. His dark eyes and humourless face displayed no sign of sympathy. He just shrugged and surveyed the hangar. It was immense and filled with workers. The workers were lined up against the walls, being guarded by soldiers. Nebe's dark eyes were watchful. He murmured an order to the sergeant. The sergeant barked further orders to his troops and they all raised their weapons. The prisoners moved immediately. They placed their hands on their heads. Silent, their eyes as dead as the moon, they marched out of the hangar.

The destruction began. We would leave little to the Allies. All that day the ground rocked to explosions and the shrieking of bullets. A dark smoke boiled from the hangar. The long tunnels were filled with flames. The technicians stood outside, bemused, as their laboratories crumbled. Soldiers darted to and fro. Hand grenades arched through the air. The flames daggered through the black smoke and splashed down on the ground.

Other guns roared in the distance. The horizon was smoky. The enemy

was advancing every minute and our time became precious. We all rushed to pack the trucks. The largest crate was first to leave. In the crate were the numerous new components, without which we'd be lost. I climbed in beside the crate. I glanced out and saw the prisoners. They were kneeling in great numbers on the ground, the smoke drifting around them. I did not look very long. They were destined for Buchenwald. When they turned to smoke and ash in the crematoria, what they knew would die with them. I reached out and touched the crate. General Nebe waved from the murk. The truck growled and then rumbled down the hill as the destruction continued.

Darkness was descending. Allied guns roared in the distance. The truck started rocking from side to side and the large crate swayed dangerously. I reached out and touched it. I thought briefly of Rudolph Schriever. The Flugkapitän was still working in Mahren, racing to finish his saucer. As the guns roared, I smiled. Schriever's saucer would never work. I stroked the large wooden crate with loving fingers and felt a deep peace. The truck shuddered and then stopped. I heard the hissing of steam. Looking out, I saw the mass of milling workers approaching the train.

We unloaded in darkness. The crate was moved with great care. A battalion of SS troops marched by, their guns and knives gleaming. They were all youthful fanatics. They were General Nebe's disciples. They had deserted after the attempt on Hitler's life and now were coming with us. The war raged on in the distance. The train clanged and spat steam. The slave workers were stripped to the waist, sweating under the cracking whips. I watched the crate being loaded. It bumped against the long carriage. I cursed the man who was operating the crane and he lowered his head. The crate was then lowered more carefully. Blackened hands pushed it inside. The doors were closed and the slaves were ordered away as I walked to the platform.

Allied planes growled overhead. I heard the snap of a rifle. A dog snarled and a man started screaming as I reached the dark platform. Clouds of steam swirled around me. Troops were entering the train. The ground shuddered and I saw flames in the distance, flaring up in the black night. Men were shouting and jostling. A torch shone in my face. General Nebe materialised from the murk, his dark eyes unrevealing. He pointed up to the nearest carriage. I saw the peaked caps of the officers. I nodded and we both boarded the train and closed the door hard behind us.

The carriage was packed and noisy. A sweating corporal pulled the

blinds down. Once finished, he turned on all the lights and I felt my eyes stinging. Most of the officers were dishevelled. Their ties were loose and their shirts were soaked. The air was blue with cigarette smoke, smelt of ash and fresh sweat. General Nebe murmured something. Two men jumped to their feet. They saluted and then marched away, leaving two empty seats. Nebe indicated one of them. When I sat down, he sat beside me. The two officers seated opposite froze visibly and then lowered their eyes. Nebe yawned and glanced around him. His rough face was expressionless. Shortly after, with much clanging and groaning, the train started moving.

The night was long and miserable. The train stopped and started often. Allied planes growled continuously overhead, the guns boomed in the distance. The officers smoked and played cards. Their ears cocked when they heard explosions. Nebe slept with his mouth pursed and whistling, his head hanging heavily. General Kammler was not present. He was busy elsewhere. That same night he was moving the scientists from Peenemünde to the mine shafts of Bleicherode. He had suggested the move to Himmler. It was a cunning thing to do. Its purpose was to distract Himmler's attention while we made our escape. The Reichsführer was in a panic. He had forgotten about Antarctica. He was now more concerned with the V-2 rockets, and with young Schriever's saucer. The guns roared as I smiled. I thought of Schriever back in Mahren. That fool would still be working on his saucer when the Allies arrived.

We were bombed a few hours later. I remember my annoyance. The sudden roaring almost split my eardrums as I plunged to the floor. The bending tracks shrieked. My one thought was for the crate. The whole carriage rose up and crashed down and then rolled onto its side. The noise was catastrophic. Men screamed as seats buckled. I went sliding along the floor and struck a wall and rolled over a flailing man. Flying pieces of wood and spinning chairs. A smashed head pouring blood. I turned around and saw the windows above me, glass shattered and glinting. Men screamed and bawled curses. I jumped back to my feet. A bloody corporal formed a stirrup with his hands and Nebe planted his boot in it. The corporal heaved the general up. I saw the mass of dangling legs. More bombs fell and exploded around the train as I found a cleared space. I pulled myself up through the window. The night roared and spewed flame. I crawled away from the window and rolled off and crashed down to the ground.

My one thought was for the crate. I ran toward the long carriage. Men were falling off the train and crashing down and then rolling away from me. The whole scene was chaotic. A silhouette was bawling orders. I clawed two or three men from my path and then saw the long carriage. General Nebe was already there. There were three trucks near the train. A dozen men were labouring under my crate, their backs bent, their necks straining. Another bomb fell nearby. Nebe stepped forward to bark an order. The men heaved the crate onto the truck and then collapsed from the effort. General Nebe's jackboot glistened. He kicked one of the lolling men. The others jumped up and grabbed at their weapons and clambered into the truck. Nebe waved his right hand. I climbed up beside the driver. Nebe followed me in, barked an order, and then the truck began moving. Allied planes passed overhead. A grey dawn was breaking. There was another truck in front, one behind, and we kept moving forward.

The breaking dawn was filled with smoke. The landscape was devastated. Charred trees and smouldering buildings and corpses, ragged columns of refugees. The refugees were going the other way. Allied planes flew overhead. The trucks growled and bumped along the dusty roads as the smoke cleared away. A drab country: anonymous. The devastation remained. The blackened buildings were no longer smouldering: the ash had turned cold. We stopped and started often. Darkness fell and brought a stark, chilling silence that gave way to the murmuring sea.

We stopped just outside Kiel. The fields were flat and barren. I saw a hangar, a series of low bunkers, a few bleak, concrete buildings. There we stayed for five weeks. The crate was hidden in a bunker. Every day I went down to inspect it, wanting desperately to leave. Each day was the same. The men smoked and played cards. Allied planes rumbled over our heads, but always kept flying south. Long days and freezing nights. I toyed with mathematical riddles. It was wet and the SS men were drawn to the flickering ovens. General Nebe kept to himself. His dark eyes were unrevealing. He slept soundly, his mouth puckered and whistling, his heavy legs outstretched. Dawn drifted into dusk. The Allied planes flew overhead. I often studied the SS men in the bunkers, wondering what they were thinking. They all seemed to be very young. Most were handsome and sweet-faced. All had dipped their hands in blood and tortured the helpless, few would suffer from sleepless nights. I

vondered how we could take them all. I didn't believe we had the space. A :old wind came and chilled us to the bone and Nebe said we were moving out.

We drove down through Kiel. A fine mist veiled the darkness. I was sitting n the back of a truck, the wooden crate towering over me. I thought of Kammler in Oberammergau. I wondered if he had escaped. I thought of Vernher von Braun and Dornberger and wondered what would become of hem. Kammler might still be with them. He might be down there in Kiel. I ran ny fingers along the length of the crate and then we came to the docks.

The trucks squealed to a halt. The crate shuddered and then was still. General Nebe's dark eyes appeared from dense mist and he motioned me out. I jumped down, feeling stiff. The docks were very quiet. The black water eflected the lamps beaming down on the submarines. I glanced keenly around ne. Nebe was murmuring to some troops. The men formed up in a neatly paced line against the wall of a hangar. Other men were at my crate. They vorked slowly and carefully. I glanced down at the submarine just below me: U-977. There were men on the deck. They were grouped around the hold. Chains rattled and I saw my precious crate dangling over the water. There vas a moment's hesitation. The crate was jerked and started spinning. Hands eached up and guided it down until it dropped out of sight.

General Kammler appeared on deck. He was accompanied by Captain Schaeffer. Both men climbed up the ladder to the dock and approached General Nebe. Kammler spoke in a low voice. He kept glancing along the lock. His shadow trailed out along the wet stones and smothered my feet. General Nebe turned away. He murmured something to his sergeant. General Kammler took a torch from his pocket and flashed it three times. I glanced long the dock. I saw the lights of another truck. The truck growled and then tarted toward us, its headlights turned down. General Kammler walked up to ne. He introduced me to Captain Schaeffer. We shook hands as the truck ulled up near us and turned toward the water.

The SS troops were silent. They formed a line along the hangar. The ergeant stepped back and bellowed an order and the troops faced the wall. I eard their weapons rattling. Their boots rang on the stones. The truck topped, overlooking the water, and then its ramp was thrown down.

A shocking noise split the silence. I shook my head to clear it. The SS roops lined up along the hangar were jerking and wriggling. My eyes turned oward the truck. I saw a barrel spitting flames. The machine gun was roaring

and rattling as the men screamed and died. When I blinked, there was silence. A grey smoke drifted lazily. The tall wall of the hangar was filled with bullet holes and splashed with fresh blood. The men all lay on the ground, sprawled across one another. Their large pupils reflected the lamps beaming down on their faces.

Captain Schaeffer turned away. I saw Kammler's tight lips. General Nebe took his pistol from its holster and then cocked the hammer. He nodded to his sergeant. They both approached the bloodied men. Most were silent, but a few were still whimpering, their hands opening and closing. General Nebe fired the first shot. His sergeant fired the second. They took turns, bending over the bodies, their gunshots reverberating. It seemed to take a long time. It did not take long at all. When they had finished, General Nebe turned away and waved his free hand.

Some men jumped out of the truck. The machine gun's barrel clanged. General Nebe returned his pistol to its holster and then walked toward us. There was no sweat on his brow. His dark eyes were unrevealing. He nodded and we all turned away and climbed down to the submarine.

We moved out shortly after. We did not go very far. I stood with Nebe and Kammler on the deck and watched the men on the dock. There were only four men. They worked long and hard. They put the bodies of their dead comrades in the truck and drove it into the hangar. The dock was very quiet. Its lamps beamed down on the wet stones. More Allied planes rumbled overhead as the four men emerged again. They were not in the truck. They merged gradually with the darkness. They climbed down the steel ladder one by one and dropped into a dinghy. The oars splashed in the water. The distant lamps showed desolation. After what seemed like a very long time the men arrived at the submarine. They were all helped aboard. The dinghy drifted away. I stared back across the water to the dock and saw the lamps on the hangar.

The explosion was catastrophic. The whole hangar disintegrated. The flames shot up in jagged, yellow lines that turned the night into daytime. The noise was demoniac. A black smoke billowed out. The flames swirled and turned into crimson tendrils that embraced one another. Then the smoke drifted sideways, revealing the rubble. Flames leaped across the charred, broken beams and stained the road with shifting shadows. The flames burned a long time. The harsh wind made them dance. They were still burning brightly when we submerged and disappeared in the Baltic Sea…

t is notable that in this account of Wilson's escape from Kahla and his long, langerous journey to Kiel harbour, no mention is made of SS Lieutenant Ernst Stoll, who had worked so closely with Wilson up to this point and was, ndeed, present at the harbour just before Wilson's submarine submerged in he Baltic Sea. The details supplied by OSS agent Mike Bradley, who was also n the harbour at this time, confirm that Lieutenant Stoll was not only present n the harbour, but definitely entered the submarine before it submerged. So Stoll, too, made the journey to Argentina with Wilson and the others. We can nly account for his single mention in Wilson's last two papers, whereas generals Kammler and Nebe are mentioned frequently, that Stoll, despite his lavish devotion to Wilson, had lost the latter's interest and been superseded n importance by the two ruthless SS generals. Postwar investigations by the Allies' Operation Paperclip reveal that while Stoll did, indeed, eventually get o the hidden colony in Neu Schwabenland, Antarctica, and stayed there for nany years, loyally serving Wilson, eventually he was sent to Paraguay, first o gain the support of General Stroessner, another Nazi sympathiser, then to reate a hidden base in the jungle for the abduction of local Ache Indians who vere then transported, as slave workers and potential cyborgs, to the Antarctic olony. No more information on Stoll was found by Allied intelligence gencies, so it is assumed that he never left Paraguay and almost certainly died here.

Since the ending of World War Two there had been numerous unsubstantiated rumours about Adolf Hitler, Martin Bormann and other eading Nazis having fled to sanctuary in Argentina, where the President, General Juan Domingo Perón, another Nazi sympathiser, would have velcomed them. While DNA testing has since confirmed that Hitler and Bormann did not flee to Argentina or elsewhere, but in fact committed suicide n Hitler's bunker in Berlin during the final days of the war, there has been lenty of evidence to confirm that many Nazis did indeed flee to Argentina, vhere they were warmly received and protected. Also confirmed is that on April 25, 1945, the German submarine *U-977*, commanded by Captain Hans Schaeffer, put out of Kiel harbour in the Baltic. It stopped at Kristiansund South on April 26, departed the following day, and was not seen again until it

urfaced at Mar del Plata, Argentina, on August 17 – a period of nearly four nonths.

Since this is an unusually, even remarkably, long time for a submarine uch as the *U-977* to be at sea, Captain Schaeffer, when he docked at Mar del lata, was interrogated by the Argentine authorities regarding why he had rrived in Argentina so long after the war had ended. He was also asked if *U-77* had carried anyone of 'political importance' during its voyage to rgentina. Schaeffer insisted that this was not the case. However, a few weeks ater, an Anglo-American commission, composed of high-ranking officers lown especially to Argentina to investigate the 'mysterious case' of *U-977*, pent a great deal of time interrogating Schaeffer regarding the possibility that e had taken Hitler and Martin Bormann aboard his U-boat, first to Patagonia, hen on to Argentina. Indeed, they were so insistent on this that they ubsequently flew Schaeffer and his crew back to a prisoner-of-war camp near ashington DC, where for months they continued their interrogations. chaeffer repeatedly denied having shipped anyone anywhere. Nevertheless, e was then handed over to the British in Antwerp, Belgium, and again nterrogated for many months. Oddly, since Schaeffer stuck to his story and eportedly the Allies found nothing unusual in *U-977*, the submarine was ventually taken to the United States, where, under direct orders from the US ar Department, it was blown to pieces.

As for Schaeffer, whether he was telling the truth or not, he was shipped ack to Germany, did not feel comfortable under Allied rule, and so went to oin other expatriate German officers in Argentina – which was, and remains, he last major stop before the South Atlantic coastline of Antarctica.

In fact, Schaeffer was lying. As has finally been revealed in Wilson's inth paper, he and the others were indeed transported in Captain Schaeffer's *J-977* from Kiel Harbour to Mar del Plata in Argentina. With the full ooperation of President Perón, they were then transported to a secret airfield n Bahia Blanca, and from there flown directly to the Antarctic...

aper #9

pril 26, 1945. We had left Kiel illegally, not daring to ask for fuel, so we ulled into Kristiansund South to fill up the tanks. The war news was bad. The

Soviets were in Berlin. The Americans and Russians had finally met at Torgau on the Elbe. The end was in sight. The submarine submerged the next day and kept hugging the coastline. I often went to the hold to check the crate, though I knew this was pointless. General Nebe kept to himself, his dark eyes revealing nothing. General Kammler was obsessed with the radio and passed on the news. None of this news was good. The Reich was obviously about to fall. When the death of Adolf Hitler was announced, we all knew it was over.

Captain Schaeffer called a meeting. Nebe and Kammler sat together. General Kammler was tense and energetic, Nebe was expressionless. The war was over, Schaeffer said. This fact raised certain problems. There would be no submarine tankers in the South Atlantic, which meant no food or fuel. We would have to change our plans. We would never make it to the Antarctic. With luck, we might reach Argentina, but we couldn't go farther.

I confess: I was shocked. My one thought was for the wilderness. I glanced at Nebe but his dark gaze was unrevealing, so I then looked at Kammler. The general's eyes were bright. He mentioned Colonel Juan Perón. He reminded us that Perón was a man who could not resist money. Kammler smiled when he said this. He was an organised man. He then added that he had already discussed the matter with the necessary people. General Nebe did not smile. Captain Shaeffer looked relieved. We agreed to head straight for Argentina at no matter the cost.

Not quite straight: first, a digression. Some of the crew became rebellious. The war was over and they wished to return to Germany and Schaeffer agreed to this. We hugged the Norwegian coastline. We only surfaced at night. A few days later we reached the mountainous coast of Bergen and let the men off.

I climbed up to the deck. I had to breathe the cooling air. I saw patches of stars between the clouds, the dark water, the jagged cliffs. The men shivered on the deck. General Nebe surveyed them coldly. The men shuffled their feet, clearly nervous, and shook hands with their comrades. I looked across the calm sea. The coastline was featureless. The sea lapped against the submarine as the men clambered overboard. I felt a great yearning. I wanted to rest my feet on dry land. After this, we would spend months in the submarine, mostly submerged.

May 10, 1945. The real voyage began. My strongest memories are of constant heat and stench and the engine's bass rumblings. It was too long for

anity. We were living on top of one another. First a day, then a week, then wo weeks, the submarine like a tomb. The North Sea and the English Channel. The blackened Rock of Gibraltar. When we surfaced, our freedom vas brief and aircraft made us fearful. In truth, we rarely surfaced. The hatch vas opened to let air in. We would see a glittering circle of sky and then the atch would be closed again. Then along the coast of Africa. A stolen glimpse of sun and sand. Then thirty-six days underwater, a nightmare of sweat and oise.

By June the crew were restless. There were arguments and fist fights. Once a man took his knife from his dinner plate and slashed the face of a friend. Captain Schaeffer gave them beer. He was a careful, thoughtful man. There was peace for at least another week, but then more fights broke out. General Nebe's dark eyes were watchful. His hand often stroked his pistol. He tarted pacing up and down the submarine, murmuring words here and there. His words calmed some restless souls. His dark eyes tamed their rage. They vould stare at his eyes, at his pistol, and remember his history. After that, it vas easier. It was miserable, but less dangerous. We turned away from one nother, faced the bulwarks, let our own thoughts sustain us.

We surfaced six weeks later. We were in the middle of the South Atlantic. A fierce sun burned a hole in the sky, and the green sea was placid. This eprieve was a blessing. The next month was more bearable. We alternated etween floating on the surface and diving back to the depths. Then the Cape Verde Islands. We went ashore on Branca Island. The men frolicked on the urning white sand and washed themselves in the dazzling sea. That day was ll too brief. The droning of aircraft made us leave. The submarine dived back o the depths and our journey continued.

Nevertheless, life was easier. We started surfacing almost daily. Once we tayed on the surface for a week by disguising the submarine. False sails and alse funnel. From the air we would have looked like a cargo steamer. The ircraft droned overhead but ignored us, not suspecting a thing. The men vaved at the planes. They fought their boredom with such humour. They vould watch the planes flying away, and then lie down and sun themselves.

Nebe usually remained below. He liked the claustrophobic depths. Kammler paced the deck and searched the horizon like a man with no time to pare. Eventually we saw land. It was the coast of Rio de Janeiro. Kammler miled and climbed down through the hatch to listen in on the radio. The news

was not good. Kammler relayed what had happened. Another fleeing submarine, Captain Wehrmut's U-530, had recently put into the River Plate with unfortunate results. The whole crew had been taken prisoner and handed over to the Americans. Kammler told us this, studied us, enjoyed our despair, then grinned and mentioned a place called Mar del Plata and went back to the radio.

August 17, 1945. We docked at Mar del Plata. Four months after we had boarded at Kiel we stepped off in the Argentine. We had no need to worry. An arrangement had been made. From here we were to be transported to a secret airfield in Bahia Blanca, and from there flown directly to the Antarctic.

The thought filled me with pleasure. I looked along the crowded deck. The Argentinian officials crossed the gangplank, their medals flashing and dangling. They did not look too happy. They were mopping their sweaty brows. I sensed immediately that something was wrong and crossed over to Kammler. He shook hands with the officials. The man with most medals whispered. Kammler's lips formed a single, thin line that expressed his concern. He then smiled at Captain Schaeffer. He introduced us to the officials. We all shared wine and biscuits on the desk, the sun blazing upon us. A short delay, someone said. An unfortunate mishap regarding transportation. We would have to spend some days on the submarine before we could leave. Captain Schaeffer agreed to this. He was a reasonable, thoughtful man. The Argentinians all smiled and bowed politely and then left in a hurry.

I spoke to Kammler and Nebe. We met at midnight on the deck. It was dark and I saw the moon reflected in Nebe's depthless eyes. Kammler spoke in an urgent whisper. He told us what had really happened. He said that British and American Intelligence had picked up the information that Hitler was not dead and that he and Martin Bormann had escaped from Germany. Reportedly they had fled in a submarine. They were thought to be heading for Argentina. It was the British and American wish that the Argentinians report the arrival of any German submarines in their waters. Thus the Argentinians were in a panic. They felt that something must be done. What they wanted was to offer the Allies a little something to chew on.

General Nebe lived by intrigue. It was bread and meat to him. His dark eyes offered no pain or pleasure as he outlined a compromise. We four alone would leave: me, Kammler, Nebe and Stoll. We would take the precious crate with us. But to save the Argentinians embarrassment, we would leave the rest

of our men behind. They would be held as political prisoners. The Argentinians would hand them over. That way, the Argentinians would look good and we would save our own necks.

Ruthless? Yes. But then all four of us were ruthless. We had lived in the Third Reich a long time and learnt how to survive.

We agreed to Nebe's plan. It could not possibly fail. The fate of Schaeffer and his crew did not concern us and could hardly affect us. It didn't matter what they told the Allies. By then it would be too late. By then we would be hidden in the Antarctic, our whereabouts unknown. The Allied forces would then be helpless. They would never locate our underground base. They would know that the underground base existed, but they wouldn't dare admit to it. How could they mention it? It would only lead to public panic. And so, aware of this, knowing the Allies would be helpless, we decided to drop Schaeffer and his crew and go on by ourselves.

We unloaded the crate the next day. This aroused no curiosity. Schaeffer assumed that we were simply unloading it for safekeeping on shore. That same night we slipped away. Some army officers were waiting for us. I saw my crate in the rear of their truck and I climbed up beside it. Nebe and Kammler quickly followed. We glanced back at the submarine. We saw the other troops moving along the dock, their rifles aimed at the submarine. Then we were driven away in the truck, leaving the submarine behind us. The flat plains of Argentina lay about us and the stars glittered brilliantly. Kammler looked at me and smiled. Nebe pursed his lips and slept. The night passed and a pearly dawn broke and then we reached Bahia Blanca.

The airfield was heavily guarded. The plane's engine was already running. The truck pulled up at the hold of the plane and the crate was unloaded. General Kammler climbed in first. I let Nebe go ahead of me. I glanced briefly around the airfield, at the troopers and barbed wire fences, at the flat plains that stretched out to the sky, and then I boarded the plane. The doors of the hold were closed. The steel locks made a clanging sound. I sat down beside Kammler and Nebe and stared up at my precious crate. Then the plane roared and shook. It taxied slowly along the runway. Then it roared even louder, raced along the runway, jolted, leapt off the tarmac, and climbed into the sky.

Perhaps I slept then. I do not remember the flight. I remember Nebe's dark, depthless eyes and the plane's constant rumblings. It did not take very

ong. My spinning thoughts destroyed time. Kammler smiled when the wheels ouched down again and the crate bounced a little. I reached out and steadied t. The plane shuddered and stopped. The doors opened and a bright light ushed in and brought with it the shocking cold.

All white. Everything. The frozen wilderness stretched out before us. I tepped down and my boots sank into snow and I breathed the pure, icy air. We were on a modest airstrip. Our own plane was waiting for us. We ransferred the crate to this plane and then clambered in after it. The doors losed behind us. The plane's skis chopped through the ice. We took off and lew above the white wilderness and then headed inland. All white. Everything. The plains and mountains were as one. My impatience was a hand upon my heart, my exultation was boundless. Then at last we dropped lower. I aw the enormous, encircling plateaux. We flew down below the mountains, elow the glittering ice peaks, and then the great caves opened out to embrace us and carry us home.

Here we are and here we stay. The ice glitters in the sun. History changes nd the world surrenders to us. We are here. We exist.

The New World

And there they remain. They do indeed still exist. They are still there in Neu Schwabenland, or Queen Maud Land, in the same hidden valley protected by high mountains, deliberately ignored by the Chileans in Ellsworth Land, the French in Adélie Land, the New Zealanders in Victoria Land, the Australians in the American Highland near the Amery Ice Shelf, the British on Deception Island, Shackleton Base on the Filchner Ice Shelf, Scott Base on Ross Island, and the other bases of many different nationalities now cluttering the Peninsula and nearby islands. With no resistance from Wilson, the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957-8

had been created to allow the nations of the world to ‘take advantage of increasing technological developments’ and enable sixty-seven nations to make simultaneous observations of ‘the Sun, the aurora, the magnetic field, the ionosphere and cosmic rays’. Twelve of the nations taking part established more than fifty overtime winter stations on the continent. Massive tractor runs and airlifts enabled inland stations to be established, including Byrd Station in West Antarctica for the United States, Amundsen-Scott Station at the South Pole, also for the United States, and Vostok Station at the geomagnetic pole for the USSR (now Russia) and at the Pole of Relative Inaccessibility, also for Russia.

This was the greatest scientific programme in the history of mankind – and it was launched to Wilson’s apparent indifference because his technology was now so advanced that he could no longer be threatened by anyone or anything. An attempt by the US to find and take over his hidden Antarctic colony was undertaken in January 1947 with Rear-Admiral Byrd’s massive Operation Highjump, consisting of thirteen ships, at least two sea-plane tenders, an aircraft carrier, six twin-engine R4D transports, six Martin PBM flying boats, six helicopters and a staggering total of 4,000 men, but when the expedition ended in February the same year, much earlier than anticipated, it was at first officially denied, but then covertly confirmed in US intelligence reports, that Byrd’s expedition, in truth an attack force, had been made to retreat by ‘enemy fighters which came from the Polar regions’ and which could ‘fly from one Pole to the other with incredible speed’. The United States then withdrew from Antarctica for a decade, until finally returning in 1957 as part of the International Geophysical Year.

Over the following years and then decades, Wilson’s UFOs were witnessed by, and reported by, thousands of citizens worldwide. Now, in the 21st century, Wilson’s UFOs are still being seen in the

skies, though they are no longer simple flying saucers of the kind first constructed in Nazi Germany, but are, instead, of every shape and size, of every conceivable configuration, ranging from pilotless aircraft as small as Wilson's World War II anti-radar device, the *Feuerball*, to airplane-sized flying saucers based on the *Kugelblitz*, to his gigantic, so-called 'mother ships' and USOs (Unidentified Submarine Objects) that are often the size of high rise buildings and just as spacious inside. We do nothing about these and, indeed, officially deny their existence, because we are still totally dependent upon Wilson's extraordinary scientific innovations for our own technological and scientific progress. Though fully aware that no matter how quickly we advance, no matter how seemingly valuable to us are the innovations passed on by Wilson, what we receive from him is always obsolete by the time it is passed on and thus we always remain far behind him.

Nevertheless, by making use of Wilson's extraordinary technology, we have advanced so far since the end of World War II that even our own secret aeronautical projects, when seen during test flights, are being viewed by much of the populace worldwide as 'alien' or 'extraterrestrial' craft because their capabilities defy all known rules of flight and, just like Wilson's creations, they now come in all shapes and sizes. First to be mistaken for a UFO was our F-117a Nighthawk, or Stealth night fighter, followed by the triangular-shaped B-2 Spirit bomber, which was 'invisible' to radar and had a top speed described by the Pentagon as 'high subsonic'. Next came the Aurora, which had a 'bat-like, or wedge-shaped, appearance when viewed from one angle, a saucer shape when viewed from another'. It was reported as being capable of flying as fast as Mach 8 and reaching anywhere on Earth in three hours. Also frequently mistaken for an extraterrestrial UFO was the X-47 Pegasus UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle), a scaled-down version of the B-2 Spirit that looked remarkably like a flying saucer even

when stationary. Another flying saucer look-alike was our LoFlyte, the product of joint research by NASA and the US Air Force, often described as triangular, wedge-shaped, or resembling a 'flying manta ray', and with speeds of up to 4,000 mph. Beginning in 1990, there was a whole spate of unexplained reports of flat, wedge-shaped objects seen by pilots near Air Force bases in California and, most controversially, flying in and out of the Groom Lake (Area 51) test site in Nevada. Included in such sightings would be our new brand of UAVs, our spy planes, such as the Dark Star and the Venture Star, both of which are designed to carry the most advanced infrared and electro-optical spy cameras available, capable of taking pictures down to a resolution of one square foot, night or day, and both of which look remarkably like flying saucers.

If we had any doubts about the level of Wilson's technology, which would certainly be well ahead of our own, we had only to think about the innovations we had already received from him through our secret trading deals. Presently being explored by us, thanks to Wilson, is an 'airspike' device that can control the airflow around an aircraft, reduce drag to a bare minimum, and enable it to fly at many times the speed of sound while greatly reducing the temperature of its skin to the degree where it will require no thermal protection. This could possibly lead to a revolutionary new generation of lightweight, reusable launch vehicles that would resemble flying saucers and get their power from beams of microwaves or lasers. Also being explored is a system in which constellations of orbiting satellites would convert solar power into microwaves and beam them downward to a 'lightcraft' below. Since the lightcraft would have to have a large surface area to gather as much microwave power as possible, a flying saucer shape would, again, be ideal. So if we are already, with Wilson's help, at this stage of advancement, Wilson's own

technology, his own saucer-based craft, large and small, must by now be beyond imagination.

So Wilson is still there. He is still in Neu Schwabenland, rightfully Queen Maud Land, in Antarctica. His technology is such that we have never been able to invade his air space. Our aircraft have always been forced to turn back because some unknown form of electronics disrupts their engines, threatening to make them crash, just as Wilson's much simpler *Feuerball* succeeded in doing during World War II. And we have never been able to reach his hidden colony by going in overland because his matchless flying saucers, equipped with powerful beam weapons, have always forced our advancing vehicles to retreat. So we have long since given up trying to reach Wilson. Instead, we have spent the last few decades trading with him in what increasingly seems like the vain hope that we will one day find a way of defeating him.

It is a shaming truth that during those same decades, Wilson's saucers flew anywhere they wanted and did what they wanted with impunity. Perhaps most shaming of all is the knowledge that his saucers, big and small, regularly abducted people, some of whom disappeared for all time, others being returned to Earth with garbled stories of having been taken inside a flying saucer, where they were surgically, sometimes painfully, examined by crew members who looked, in some cases, like perfectly normal human beings, in others like 'alien' creatures. These 'alien creatures' were uncommonly small and had what appeared to be thin-metal plates covering their faces, including their mouths, with only slits to expose their eyes and let them see. They often had what looked like microphones where their ears should have been. As we now know, these were not 'alien' creatures; they were Wilson's cyborgs, half man, half machine, many of them originally the famously small Ache Indians rounded up in Paraguay by Ernst Stoll's gangs and then flown in Wilson's 'mother ships' to the Antarctic. Other

victims, of all ages and races, were similarly abducted by his flying saucers.

It was clear from such reports that Wilson was continuing his appalling experiments with physical and biological mutation.

But was Wilson actually still alive? Were the communications still being received from him actually from a former deputy or surrogate? Certainly Wilson had not been seen for years, not even at the regular meetings in Washington DC or elsewhere between our people and his. Indeed, Wilson had stopped personally attending the meetings after his February 1959 meeting with CIA agent Jack Fuller in a dark field in a protected area just outside Patrick Air Force Base, located between Greater Cocoa Beach and Cape Canaveral. According to agent Fuller, Wilson told him that he intended disappearing for good and making no further contact with the outer world. However, before doing so, he wished to leave a record of his life to date in the form of a series of papers that he had been writing throughout the war years and now wished to have stored for posterity in Washington DC's Library of Congress. He then gave Fuller a thick box folder containing what soon became officially known as 'The Wilson Papers'.

That was the final meeting between Wilson and agent Fuller, and, to the best of our knowledge, between Wilson and the representatives of any other Western country. He has not been seen since.

Agent Fuller's formal report about that meeting included a description of Wilson as being slim, silvery-haired and looking only about fifty years old, despite the fact that according to his date of birth he should, at the time of the meeting, have been nearly ninety years old. This suggests, along with Fuller's description of Wilson having unnaturally smooth, unlined skin, that he'd had plastic surgery on his face and had probably, given his obsession with gerontology, also had other surgical procedures performed on

his body, including his heart, his stomach, his liver, and anything else that he felt could threaten his longevity.

If this supposition is correct, Wilson would now, in the 21st century, be 150 years old.

So how could he possibly still be alive? We assumed that he couldn't be. Though his UFOs continue to roam the skies untouched and his giant USOs are known to be active on the seabeds, Wilson remained silent for many years, leading us to hope that he had finally died and that his Antarctic colony, while still inaccessible, was now being run by his successor, or successors, who hopefully would not be either as brilliant or as ruthlessly ambitious as he had been.

Unfortunately, this was not the case.

A few years ago Wilson made contact again, this time with a series of encrypted emails sent to his chosen secure individuals in the White House, CIA headquarters, and the Library of Congress and, no doubt, to other important recipients around the globe. They were not brief emails. They were, like his first series of papers, full-length essays. And despite our incredulity, what we were being told by those emails was nothing less than astonishing.

Paper #10

You cannot possibly know me because I do not know myself and I cannot even begin to explain this. I am the light and the resurrection, the beginning and end of all, and I exist where no laws can apply and where nothing can touch me.

I am here. I exist. This cannot be denied. You thought I had gone for good, but I have come back to haunt you and this is the record of my returning and of what I became. It was not what I had planned or even imagined, but clearly, given the trajectory of my work, it was inevitable.

Yet rebirth is a horror.

I swam out of the darkness of oblivion, a blank diskette waiting to be filled, not knowing who or what I was, as none of us do. I was, of course, unique, as I had been before, but this time even more so than before because I was the first. Naturally, I had planned myself, ordaining what was to be, but when my instructions were carried out, when the experiment was successful, the other me, the one who lived even as I died, could not know what had happened. Like you and your kind, like all the ghosts of human history, I remembered nothing about my own beginning and so I only gazed outward. Given awareness of myself by what was out there, I began to fill in the blank spaces.

In the beginning was the light, the unimaginable first dawning, but even that is now beyond my recollection and I find it frustrating. My initial memories are of childhood, as they must have been the first time, though my recollections of the first time were obliterated when that one died at long last. I had to learn *about the first time, to be force-fed my own history, but that did not come until much later, when I was ready to face it. First I crawled, then I walked, just like the normal do, then I spoke and observed and started reasoning, though that time, too, is lost to me. My first memories are of the water, the teeming depths of the seabed, the kind of fish that ordinary children never see, vividly coloured, grotesque, in a dreamlike environment of rocks, plants and plankton, illuminated in wavering beams of light. Those lights were artificial, though I wasn't to know that then, and they beamed into the bottom of the ocean from the walls of my home. Out there, beyond the windows, held at bay by immense plates of reinforced, unbreakable glass, lay a world still largely unexplored and as alien as outer space.*

My home was on the seabed. I was born and raised there. I had no parents, but many others looked after me and each taught me something. I was revered from the start, cherished, held in awe, and never left alone for a second, because I, too, had my preordained purpose. I recall the walls of the sea dome, gently curved, a white steel, punctuated with the panoramic windows that revealed the murky depths and with high consoles in which lights of many colours blinked repeatedly and computer monitors, their screens lined up side by side, glowed like square eyes. There were maps on the walls. Not maps of Earth's topography. They were maps of the seabed, each one covering a different area, while we, those who lived in the dome, systematically explored that vast, ever-shifting, unknown world.

Thus I learned at an early age that the great dome in which I lived, the only world I had known so far, was enclosed and constantly on the move.

My world, that huge dome of steel and glass, had no sky, no greenery, no natural air; instead, it had floors and ceilings, curving corridors and many rooms, manufactured air and artificial light, a closed-circuit ecology. There were animals in the dome, used for research and for food; there were human beings used only for experimentation (often headless, without limbs) and there were others who at first I thought were just like myself, albeit different in appearance, but whom I later learned where not entirely human but only half so. They were, of course, cyborgs.

Yes, rebirth is a horror. Though there were other children, I was kept separate from them and made to understand that I was different. I ate and slept alone, had no free time at all, and studied mostly with the aid of an interactive computer system, my tutors merely selecting the software and offering general guidance. Those studies kept me engaged (even my games were educational) and the thought of having nothing to do never entered my head. My earliest memories are of working, of learning: nothing else was permitted. Though my elders seemed to revere me, even to fear me, they made me work night and day. They were my rod and my staff.

I had no parents and didn't know what parents were; ergo, this situation seemed natural to me and I never felt lonely. Sometimes, it is true, I experienced a fleeting sense of loss, a hollowness at my centre, as if part of me was missing, but invariably I shrugged the feeling off and returned to my work. My learning gave me my centre, my reason to be, and eventually nothing else really mattered. I thought my brain was my soul.

My whole world was the great dome and for years it was under water, but then I learned that it was a gigantic submersible that could also take wing, though it only did so occasionally.

On those very rare occasions, the great dome would rise vertically, lifting off the seabed, drifting up silently from darkness to light, first through striations that obliquely sliced the gloom, then into a dazzling explosion of sunlight as the sea, first dark-green, then blue and foaming white, poured down the plate-glass windows, drummed against the steel walls, then turned into surging waves that eventually fell away, dropping out of sight, until the surface of the sea came back into view, this time as a vast sheet of blue far below, running out to the horizon, with the sky, either cloudy or clear, spread

ut all around us. Then, when we were so high that we could see the curvature f Earth, the sky would also change, turning into a whipping, spiralling tunnel f shimmering white light streaked with silvery blue, a vertiginous well of linding brightness that gave no indication of which direction we were ctually flying in: up, down or straight ahead. Then, abruptly, we would blast hrough the sky itself, a giant envelope tearing open to reveal a boundless zure sea that would convulse and turn purple and then, just as abruptly, ctually being the same sea, fill up with the dazzling radiance of a gigantic un, even as the moon and stars also came out, now visible, with the sun, in an tmosphere so thin that even dust particles could not exist there. And seconds ater (it always seemed to be that quick) we would be descending vertically ver a different coastline, perhaps thousands of miles away, only to sink back nto the sea, sinking down into the silent, unexplored depths, until we rested n the seabed once more. And there we would remain for many months or, in ome cases, years.

I have lived in the depths of many oceans and now I reach for the stars.

At that time I was too young to understand that we had been flying well eyond the sound barrier, over fifty miles up, on the very edge of space; just s I was too young to know that to live on the seabed was not normal. Nevertheless, my blank diskette, my young brain, was still being crammed full f information, with languages, mathematics, geography, world history, stronomy and, most of all, with science, including aerodynamics, physics, iology, and computer technology. No literature. No art. Yet apart from that ack, I was, by my tenth year, as knowledgeable as the adults who had taught ne. A year later, with the aid of my computers, I began to outstrip them.

Now, as I write these notes, in the fortieth year of my new existence, I am o far ahead of my tutors that they seem to me to be no more than children. Now they fear me even more than they revere me. And that is as it should be.

In time you *will fear me as well. But first you must find me. I am here. I xist. You simply have to accept who I am and how like me you are.*

I will make sure you do.

Yes, we were astonished and could scarcely accept what Wilson was telling us. Were the emails fakes? Were they being sent, after his death, by one of his uccessors in an attempt to convince us that he was still alive? But why would

hey do so? What did they think would happen if we learned that Wilson was ndeed dead? Did they think we would try once more, as we had done with Rear-Admiral Byrd's Operation Highjunp in 1947, to invade and take over heir hidden base? No, they would not. Because Wilson's hidden base was still being protected by some kind of electronic force field and remained inapproachable to us. So knowing this, we had to accept that Wilson, given his well recorded obsession with gerontology, his determination to extend his own life beyond its normal time-span, even his often stated belief in the possibility of Man as Superman – yes, this Wilson, who had previously informed us that he had surgically mutated himself, renewing his heart, his stomach, his lungs, even his eyes and ears, could just possibly be still alive in some shape or form, possibly as half man, half machine, possibly something even stranger, and could therefore be personally responsible for this new series of emails, the source of which was untraceable. And if indeed they came from Wilson, were they coming from his Antarctic base or from the seabed?

The seabed is a distinct possibility. UFOs were often reported to appear from, and depart toward, the sea. Given the relatively limited number of people travelling by sea, it is surprising that so many reports have concerned UFOs, or USOs (Unidentified Submarine Objects) diving into or erupting from oceans all over the world, in areas such as the Bermuda Triangle, in the West Atlantic, connecting Bermuda, Puerto Rico and the coast of Florida; the so-called 'Devil's Sea' bounded by the south-east coast of Japan, the northern tip of Luzon, in the Philippines, and Guam; the coastal waters of Argentina, particularly near Plata del Mar; and the Great Lakes of Canada – all of which are also known as areas where many aircraft and ships have mysteriously disappeared without trace. Inevitably, this led to much speculation about the possibility of USOs hiding on the seabed, or of undersea laboratories which are visited frequently by UFOs capable of operating undersea. This in turn has led to the widespread belief that the missing ships, aircraft and crew members are somehow being abducted by gigantic USOs that may emerge from, and return to, the seabed.

It was our belief that given Wilson's UFO technology (and even our own rapidly advancing 'black' technology) this just might be possible. If such USOs and undersea laboratories actually exist, they could be manned permanently by cyborgs or 'programmed' human beings who would not be

ffected adversely, either physically or psychologically, by their undersea rison. And if, as often reported, the UFO 'mother ships' were of gigantic roportions, they could simply settle on the seabed and the laboratories would hen be constructed, or deposited, there with the aid of specially reinforced, emote-controlled Cybernetic Amorphous Machine Systems (CAMS). The JFO, or USO, would then ascend to the surface again, leaving the reinforced aboratory down there, complete with its crew and captives.

Telechirics, or advanced man-machine manipulators, have already been ıse extensively on the seabed. As far back as 1962, the Hughes Aircraft Corporation developed the Mobot, a complex 'swimming socket wrench' lesigned for Shell to complete the assembly of underwater oil well heads. The Mobot, with its television 'eyes' and sonar 'ears', was capable of wire-rushing surfaces and turning valves on and off at a depth of 1000 feet. It was uperseded by the even more ingenious UNOMO, a 'universal underwater Mobot' that has four arms – two for work and two for hanging on to the well ıead. This was nearly sixty years ago. Since then, within the *known* echnology, manned descent to the deepest undersea point (35,800 feet) has been made, huge saturation diving complexes are already on the seabed, and submarine homes' and 'floating islands' (contained within sea domes) have ome on to the agenda. It is therefore possible, given the estimated technology of Wilson's UFOs, that they could be capable of at least exploring, or settling ıpon, the seabed.

In the first of his emailed papers, Wilson described in some detail how, as ı child, he was raised and educated in a gigantic dome that could either rest on he seabed of the deepest oceans or fly in Earth's atmosphere and outer space. He describes this child, himself, as 'the first'. The first of what? This question s answered when he goes on to state that he had 'planned' himself and that vhen his instructions were carried out, when 'the experiment was successful', he other him, 'the one who lived even as I died', could not know, presumably ould not recall, what had happened to him. He also states that he is in the ortieth year of his 'new existence'.

Unbelievable as it seems, the possibility being raised in this tenth Wilson aper is that he had died in extreme old age, at 150 years old, but been reborn ıs a new, possibly genetically created, child, and had then been raised by a ombination of humans and cyborgs in various USOs. This possibility is

confirmed as fact in the next paper when he talks openly about his advances in genetics and, even more chillingly, his ‘second coming’.

Paper #11

You will come to me in time. You all do in the end. You will come to me, not knowing it is me you wish to find, because I represent what it is you most fear and yet desperately need. I am Evolution. I am what will be. I am the end of the long line that began in the cosmic stew and I will take you where it is you must go before the sun dies.

When the sun dies, Earth will die also.

I understood this from childhood, my first childhood long ago, when I stood in the wheat fields of Iowa and studied the heavens. I was golden-haired then, as indeed I am again, and the sun was an immense silvery orb in a dazzling blue sky. I stood alone in a field of wheat, the stalks shoulder-high around me, and I squinted into the sun’s blinding striations, responding to them, even at ten years old, with one simple question:

When will the sun die?

That question turned me into a scientist and gave me my one religion. I realised that the sun would *die eventually, taking with it Earth’s heat and light, and that long before that happened every form of life on Earth would be extinguished. Man’s time on Earth, therefore, would be brutally short if he simply followed Nature’s course. Still an animal, he would die off like the dinosaurs as his life-giving sun died.*

Something had to be done.

Thus that golden-haired boy, at ten years of age, found something to live for: the changing of mankind’s destiny through science and, incidentally, the creation of a new kind of man as a means of continuance.

I have never strayed from that path.

Now, in my second coming, resurrected through my own genius, I am continuing the task I embarked upon in that wheat field in Iowa. I am golden-haired again, my skin unblemished, my health sound, and though regressive minds might view me as unnatural, I accept what I am without qualms. I am not who I was, since the dead cannot return, but I am a genetically identical

human being and my original environment, experiences and evolution have been carefully, rigorously implanted in me from the day I was reborn. Therefore, though I am not the original 'me', I know all that he knew and am impelled by the same drives and motives. Like him, I have only one religion. That religion is science.

I am loved and loathed for this. The historical records prove this fact. Nevertheless, as I have no vanity, since personal feelings do not impinge upon me (as they did, if only occasionally, for the original 'me') the responses to what I have done so far, the loving and the loathing, can have no effect upon my future decisions. I am what I am and I will do what must be done because I know that I was created for this purpose. The instructions left by my predecessor were followed to the letter and my rebirth was accomplished without problems.

I am here. I exist.

This is all that matters. Nothing else can be considered. What would seem unnatural to some is perfectly natural to me and the evolution of man into machine is a natural, inevitable progression. I am different from the others in that I am not a cyborg, a man-machine hybrid, nor a clone like the other normal' ones, though like the latter I am certainly a creature apart and none the worse for it.

The cyborgs were once human beings, with human features and human thoughts, but now they are scarcely human at all and their thoughts are strictly limited. They have artificial hearts, bionic audio transmitters for ears, sonar sensors for eyes, plastic arteries, synthetic bones and, where necessary, synthetic skin; thus some of them are more machine than man. Do they suffer horror and despair? No, they do not. In fact, their brains have been implanted with microscopic electrodes that control their every emotion, obliterate childhood memories, and keep self-awareness at a level shared by humanity's domestic pets.

No, I am not like them at all, being physically normal; but equally, though I may look the same, I am different from the clones, created from the DNA of those now dead and used where an appearance of normality is necessary to the world of 'real' people. Unlike me, the clones were not born in the womb, and this, more than anything else, makes them a different species. I am still of the human race.

My surrogate mother is dead. I do not know who she was. By the early

1980s we were able to probe the double helix with powerful electron microscopes, then snip out sections of the chromosomal genetic programme and replace them with sections from another living organism – plant, animal or human. I was created, or recreated, with strands of my own DNA. Spliced out of the genetic blueprint for the original me, just before I – or 'he' – died, the microscopic strands of my DNA were kept in a culture dish in one of our many undersea laboratories until such time as my scientists, all brain-implanted and programmed to be loyal to me even after my death, had perfected the technique of creating an embryo and inserting it into a living womb. My mother, therefore, was a physically perfect female specimen abducted by one of my flying saucers and used solely as a surrogate womb.

About forty years ago, the embryo created from my DNA was inserted into that unknown woman's womb and I was reborn, nine months later, in the usual manner. Within hours of my rebirth, the woman was terminated and I was placed in the care of cyborgs specially programmed to think of nothing but my physical and mental well-being. The lack of normal mother-and-child bonding, which could have led to serious emotional problems in later life, was solved by ensuring that I had every creature comfort and by educating me, from my second year on, with a mass of information stored on vast data bases and retrieved on interactive video disks. The information included not only history, geography, philosophy, politics, mathematics and all the sciences, but also the history of the original 'me', including 'his' childhood and daily thoughts, the latter culled from his own writings, as well as countless subtexts that gradually erased the need for an emotional bond with a natural mother. Thus, by the time I was ten years old (the same age that the original 'me' had been when he first realised that the sun would eventually die), I was by normal standards a genius, had no need for anyone other than myself, and was dedicated, as the other 'me' had also been, to the unfettered pursuit of knowledge and, ultimately, to the creation of a new human race – one that will take us to the stars before the sun dies.

The creation of that new race, a super-race, is now under way. My own rebirth took place during the relatively early days of eugenics, before the proper cloning of human beings had been perfected, but great progress has been made since then. Now test-tube clones, those born outside the womb, are a large part of our work force and are, indeed, in charge of the cyborgs,

under my overall command. The cyborgs had their day but it was sadly short-lived and now, with the coming of the clones, they will soon be redundant.

For the time being, however, they still have their uses, particularly because, being man-machine hybrids, though now more machine than man, with many parts made of steel, they can withstand abnormal heat and atmospheric pressure. Also, as their life-support functions of nourishment and waste-product removal are controlled by a central computer, they can 'exist' for as long as required without food or water. Because of this, they are perfect for work on the seabed and in outer space; as workers or soldiers who virtually have no limitations and cannot even be killed.

The clones, on the other hand, though brought to life in test-tubes and reared in artificial wombs, are still physically 'human' in most respects. For this reason, apart from their function as general supervisors, they are used mainly outside our colonies – on the seabed, on the dark side of the moon, and in the real world – for work that requires interaction with normal human beings who, though willing to work with us, find it psychologically and emotionally difficult to interact with the cyborgs. In time, however, recombinant-DNA technology will enable us to cross-breed drone human beings in which all genetic disorders have been removed, total obedience has been instilled, and physical and mental capabilities have been carefully manipulated to suit our specific needs.

These particular drone human beings, a product of the parallel evolution of machine intelligence and genetic adaptation, will be the first of the new super-race – the life form that will succeed the present human race and take us to the stars. Though looking like normal human beings, they will in fact be chimeras, cross-bred from a combination of DNA strands taken from different chromosomal genetic programmes and reassembled in any form required for the geneticist's purposes. Thus, though essentially 'human', they will be abnormally strong, exceptionally intelligent, emotionally neutered, and motivated beyond reasoning. Further, by restimulating the genes controlling their own limb and organ development, they will be able to regrow lost limbs or, more important for longevity, regenerate failing internal organs. They will, then, in effect, be supermen.

All of this will come about in the near future. Right now, however, the clones are physically 'normal' and only different in that they have been emotionally neutered: thus they can suffer no self-doubt or guilt, and have

been programmed to do as they are told without moral restraint. They are out here right now, walking among you, unrecognised, and they are there, some in positions of great authority, to do only my bidding.

Who is a friend and who is a foe?

You cannot tell anymore…

It is perfectly clear from a reading of the eleventh paper that Wilson had made truly remarkable advances in physical and genetic mutation, leading to the cyborgs and cloned human beings, assuming the latter can indeed be described as 'human'. Whether human or not, he persuasively asserts in this paper that the old Wilson died physically but was created, or recreated, when microscopic strands of his DNA, extracted from his genetic blueprint just before he died, were inserted into the living womb of a surrogate mother: almost certainly a healthy woman abducted in a flying saucer, then imprisoned in an underwater dome until such time as she could be surgically impregnated. Just one of the thousands abducted by Wilson's flying saucer crews and used against their will either as slaves or, even worse, as human subjects for his medical and surgical experiments. The 'new' Wilson would never know who this unfortunate woman was, and clearly, as shown in this particular paper, he did not much care.

Even more worrying is his contention that the scientists who did his on his behalf, were all, along with slave-servants and cyborgs, brain-implanted and programmed to be loyal to him even after his death. This was not the first time that he had used, or misused, micro-electrode brain-implantation to control the impulses, appetites and thoughts of human beings in order to turn them into robotised slaves. Indeed, in one of the intelligence reports covering his secret meetings with Wilson, CIA agent Jack Fuller claimed that Wilson had confessed that for years his UFOs had been abducting

scientists and politicians from all over the world, stealing their minds and willpower by implanting miniaturised electrodes into their brains, using stereotaxic skullcaps, and then returning them to their own environments where they would, to all outward appearance, seem perfectly normal while actually being under his remote control and programmed, by the brain implants, to do anything he asked of them. If what he states is true, some of those robotised people, male and female, are now in the White House and the Pentagon; others in some of our most important military and scientific establishments, including the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD), and in similar establishments in other countries. So Wilson, even that long ago, had eyes and ears all over the world.

'Who is a friend and who is a foe?' he asks rhetorically. And answers: 'You cannot tell anymore.'

Indeed, we cannot. Even our fellow intelligence officers are suspect. Even our politicians, our highest ranking military officers, the people in the Pentagon and the White House upon whom we depend, are now suspect. How many have been brain-implanted by Wilson? How many are now under his control? How many are making decisions of national importance, but basing those decisions on his dictates? Who is actually now running the country? Is it us or Wilson?

In this regard, it is certainly no accident that Wilson, in this particular paper, addresses his potential readers as 'you.' He writes: 'You will come to me in time. You all do in the end.' Clearly, in using the word 'you', he is referring to the human race as a whole. There is a terrible threat implicit in this. 'I am Evolution,' he says. 'I am what will be. I am the end of the long line that began in the cosmic stew and I will take you where it is you must go before the sun dies.'

Thus, he takes us back to his beginnings, to that golden-haired

boy in Iowa who, at only ten years old, was already obsessed with the knowledge that the sun will eventually die and that the only way for the human race to survive its dying is to leave Earth long before it does so. And the only way to do this, the ten-year-old Wilson believed, is to create a whole new breed of man, first the cyborg, then the genetically enhanced superior human being, and finally, ultimately, the genetically mutated Superman.

Possibly this new Wilson, the cloned Wilson, is the first of the Supermen.

Paper #12

I am neither friend nor foe because such terms are meaningless to me. I am simply doing what I have to do and I will let no one stop me. There are those who would try because they still think in terms of 'right' and 'wrong'. But I know that such concepts have no place in evolution, which only understands where it must go and takes the most direct route. I will follow that route, letting nothing stand in my way, because man is a primitive being filled with primal fears and only science can lead him out of the cave and into the heavens.

There is no right or wrong in this – the only moral law is progress – and those who must be used will *be used, just as we once used the animals, for all kinds of experimentation as well as for sustenance. The human race is merely evolution's tool, no more and no less, and soon it will be superseded by the fusion of genetic engineering and advanced computers the size of molecules. When that happens, a new race will come into being and the old will die out.*

I am here to hasten the advent of that great moment in history and I do so without personal feelings. I bear malice toward none. Nor do I bear good tidings. I merely state the facts as I see them and support them with action. My resurrection has ensured that I can do so and nothing else matters.

I am here to complete the task that I undertook in my former life. In order to do so, I will have to take you with me – and you will not, you cannot*, refuse me. Already you are trying to find me – and that says it all.*

I await your arrival…

Again, in his repeated use of the word ‘you’, he is clearly addressing the whole human race. Even more disturbingly, when he writes about how ‘you are trying to find me’ and ‘I await your arrival’, he is stating metaphorically, he is *threatening*, that he will soon come to us.

When Wilson mentions in this paper ‘the fusion of genetic engineering and advanced computers the size of molecules’ he is not, given what we already know of his remarkably advanced technology, necessarily being far-fetched. Even within our own, more limited, sphere of knowledge, micro-technology is already well advanced. As far back as 1932, Walter Hess had devised the modern technique of micro-electrode implantation, using steel electrodes as thin as hairs, guided into the skull by micro-manipulators. In doing this he was able to demonstrate that most of man’s functions and emotions can be influenced by stimulation of specific areas of the brain. Later experiments also proved that by stimulating the appropriate areas of the brain with sub-microscopic electrodes, the controller could regulate the subject’s blood pressure, heart rate and respiration; control his sleep or appetite, even the diameter of his pupils; could place him into a state of suspended animation or make him work until he dropped. In short, he could totally control the subject’s bodily and mental functions; and even, with the aid of the appropriate computer-controlled interfacing equipment, do so from a great distance, with the subject (or victim) not knowing that he is under control.

The thought that Wilson, according to what he says in his various papers, has leading politicians, senior military officers and scientists all over the world under such control, is truly terrifying.

Alas, we must now accept that this may be true. The possibility of physical and mental control of human beings was already well developed by the mid-1960s, with many bio-engineers claiming that computer and human brain would soon be directly linked. According to a declassified report of the US Naval Research Laboratory, just one of our many top-secret experimental establishments in the White Sands Proving Ground: ‘The information which a machine can obtain and store from a person in a few minutes will exceed the fruits of a lifetime of man-to-man communication.’ As to method: ‘The coupling mechanisms to carry out the functions will be myriad, including in

ome cases electrical connections to the body and brain. Some connections nay be wireless, with imperceptible transmitting elements in the body.' Elsewhere, ESB, or electrical stimulation of the brain, has become langerously innovative. In a paper presented to the National Electronics Conference in Chicago, the electronics engineer, Curtiss B. R. Schafer, eriously proposed that computer-controlled electrodes be implanted in the rains of babies a few months after birth, thus robotising them for life. In a imilar vein, Dorman S. Israel, a fellow of the Institute of Radio Engineers, roposed that 'newborn infants can be operated on and the latest sub-nicroelectronic equipment installed in the brain and at certain critical points n the spinal column' in order to give them the benefits of 'non-radio ommunicative powers' and also enhance their creative abilities.

It is clear from Wilson's papers that he has been using these very echniques – in an even more advanced form – to control his geographically liverse human and cyborg workforce. And, if we are to take him at his word, o control scientists and politicians all over the world. If this is true, then he, in vhatever shape or form, is now effectively ruling our world.

'I am here to complete the task that I undertook in my former life' he ays. This, surely, is a reference to his life-long determination to create a nutated Superman who can survive Earth's unavoidable destruction by eaving it before it dies and then heading for new worlds through long-term pace travel. It also lends credence to our growing belief that he has physically ecreated himself, either as an advanced cyborg, half-man, half-machine, or, nore likely, as his cloned, biologically or genetically enhanced, former self.

The first of his deeply desired Super Race.

aper #13

ou know who I am, but you cannot accept that it is really me, because I died nany years ago in my self-contained world of snow and ice. Yet time marches n, science opens new doorways, and the work I began long ago has led to my ebirth. This was the reward for my foresight and devotion to my work, the urpose of which was to forge a New World for mankind. Your kind think of ne as evil when in fact I am a redeemer, returned to rectify the mistakes of the

past, painful though that process might be. As a child in my first incarnation, I already knew that I was destined to do this.

I succeeded.

I am.

Naturally I was always a man out of my time, far ahead of my own time, and now, in my second incarnation, nothing has changed. Indeed, the world I now inhabit, the world begun by the other me, is far more advanced than your own and has a more clearly defined purpose. It is a world devoted to science, to the pursuit of knowledge above all else, and everyone in it has their place, chosen for them at birth. From their first breath to their last, from the light of birth to death's darkness, they are taught to think only of their work and are shaped by that work. They are raised in a closed system, cut off from the outer world, on the seabed, in underground complexes, in spaces so confined that you would not think it possible, though it certainly is, and there they live a life that has meaning and leaves no room for doubt.

With regard to our state of advancement, the barometer of what we are and will be, our young receive their education through interactive media systems and computer technology with heightened sensory stimulation, including 3-D sound and wraparound vision. Though our wealth of knowledge keeps expanding, we have no problems with the storage of printed books because our libraries store everything in computers with memory crystals that can compress whole encyclopedias into the space of a grain of sand. Instead of sprawling campuses, we have small student meeting rooms containing video-conferencing terminals, email systems and database access. Chemical, biological and physics experiments are simulated electronically, doing away with the need for space-consuming laboratories. Erotic needs are also met electronically, with teledildonics simulating sexual activity with the sights, sounds and tactile input of the real thing; thus potentially complicated human interaction is kept to a minimum. Our advances in medicine and surgery, gained through my so-called 'obscene' experiments on human beings, have enabled our surgeons to operate on patients without actually touching them, without the need for bloody and often painful physical intrusions, since the body's interior can now be viewed holographically and telepresence allows operations to be performed by remote control only after the exact cause of the medical problem has been ascertained.

All of this, and more, takes place in our large flying saucers, in our

lomes on the seabed, and in our hidden bases in isolated areas all over the world.

The Earth is our oyster. We feed on it as we may. With our advanced lying saucers, or, more accurately, UFOs (since they are now of many sizes, hapes and configurations), we can go anywhere, from the bottom of the ceans to the peaks of the highest mountains, from dense forests to desert lains, and pick up everything we require for our own maintenance. From rdinary soil and sea-water we extract aluminium, magnesium, titanium and obalt; from seabed nodules we process pure gold; from acid-rain-producing igh-sulphur coal we produce pure carbon cubes. With bio-fabrication echniques, in which the fundamental DNA codes in living tissue are altered, ve can produce any kind of material we require from standard building locks. Once these materials were used for the construction of more flying aucers, but our most recent craft are made of etherium, which is as light as a eather, yet remarkably strong and capable of withstanding up to 4,000° Fahrenheit – a temperature that melts all other known materials. Thus we are irtually invincible and we now rule your world.

Your kind resent this, I know, but your resentment is ill-founded, because he world we are taking over is one that could not have survived without us. Thus, while we are doing what we have come here to do, we are also cleaning up the mess we inherited from you.

What mess? you ask.

Let me tell you.

The Earth contains six billion people and a quarter-million more are dded to that figure every day. Those people now produce, consume and lispose of more than they did in all of mankind's previous history. Indeed, ven as I dictate these notes, rubbish sites worldwide are overflowing and no oom can be found for any more. The world's atmosphere is polluted. Right round the globe, waste incinerators and industrial processes are spewing leadly toxins into the sky and every year the Earth is poisoned with an dditional 2.5 million tons of pesticides. Your creation of chlorofluorocarbons hrough the use of refrigerators, aerosol cans, gas emissions from utomobiles and circuit-board fabrication is destroying the ozone layer and etting more ultraviolet light through to reach the Earth, leading to sunburn, kin cancer, cataracts and crop damage, even as it drastically affects the world's forests, plankton and weather patterns. The ozone hole over

Antarctica is now the same size as the United States and the height of Mount Everest, and more ozone holes are presently appearing over Canada and Europe. The continuing destruction of the remaining ozone will dangerously reduce still further our protection against solar radiation and lead to even higher levels of skin cancer, cataracts and other diseases. The increase in global warming, due to the presence in the atmosphere of industrial greenhouse gases, will cause drought on a massive scale and a drastic rise in sea levels, bringing about widespread famine, the flooding of major cities and, paradoxically, the very real possibility of a new Ice Age of the kind that may have wiped out the dinosaurs.

Were you doing anything to stop this? No, you were not. Instead you were producing even more deadly pollution with your ruthless pursuit of various forms of energy. Your hydroelectricity required the blockage of mighty rivers, your need to grow crops led to the destruction of the rain forests, your industrial areas were increasingly choked with smoke, your oil refineries filled the air with poisonous gases, your nuclear waste contaminated earth and sea, and your thermal pollution was reaching appalling, potentially catastrophic, levels.

We, on the other hand, those you would view as evil, are already taking these problems in hand.

By gradually taking over the world, by stopping international air travel and isolating each individual country from all the others, we can force mankind's state of technological development back to where it was in the 19th century. Thus, if not yet stopping global pollution altogether, we can certainly ensure that it will not increase as rapidly as it had been doing before we started taking over.

We are robbing you of your freedom? What good was your freedom to you? Before we intervened, the world was not only destroying itself with global pollution, but heading toward unprecedented conflict and bloodshed. Islamic fundamentalism had spread outward from the Middle East to engulf Europe, the Mediterranean, the United States, and virtually the whole of the developed world. The Flame of Allah scorched all those it touched, with Islamic terrorism causing widespread death and destruction. The Middle East remains in turmoil and elsewhere anti-Semitism is flourishing and becoming the cause of even more violence. In Bosnia, formerly Yugoslavia, in the very heart of a supposedly civilised Europe, rape, torture, murder and genocide were merely part of a barbarism not seen since the dark era of Nazi Germany. Terrorism is now rampant on a global scale and terrorist atrocities are not only occurring ever more frequently, but are noted for their worsening brutality. Eco-terrorists, bio-terrorists and religious terrorists are bombing buildings with innocent women and children inside them, ramming and sinking ships at sea with the crews still on board, releasing poisoned gas in subways, pouring toxic chemicals into reservoirs and aqueducts, practising even more horrific forms of biological warfare, destroying whole ecosystems by infecting their computerised monitoring systems with viruses, and even using genetic engineering for the creation of biological weapons that could target their diseases on specific racial groups. On top of all this is the rise of extremist violence in every imaginable self-styled 'minority' group, including Christian fundamentalists, Millennialists, radical Blacks, doomsday cultists, and even the more fanatically active feminists, homosexuals and transsexuals. In fact, the world we are taking over is about to explode. But by isolating every country, one from the other, by making it more difficult to transport armaments and explosives worldwide, we will be able to prevent the threatened explosion.

Nor is that the only explosion threatening the world that we are gradually taking out of your hands. The population explosion is now out of control and starting to make the whole world ungovernable. I repeat: six billion people and a quarter-million being added to that figure every day, all with different, often conflicting, religions and political creeds. In India alone, twenty million Sikhs have been fighting to form an autonomous Punjab nation, millions of Muslims in Kashmir are seeking independence, Hindu fundamentalists are attacking those of other faiths, and bloody riots and slaughters are

commonplace. In Africa, the population has doubled in two decades and its billion citizens, divided by ethnic, tribal and linguistic barriers, are ravaged by drought, famine and environmental degradation, waging bloody war against each other, paving the way for continent-wide disintegration. In China, the pressures of a 1.2 billion population are leading to the unravelling of that country's national fabric, with social disorder, lawlessness, widespread political corruption, increasing unemployment and a dramatically rising suicide rate. Even the United States has been falling apart, with its fifty states competing fiercely against each other, disunity spreading, national allegiances decaying, unemployment rising, crime increasing, extremist movements demanding regional autonomy or actual secession, and racist and millennial groups of all kinds causing destruction and death on a grand scale. And everywhere in the world, even as we are taking over, it is the same, with the gap between rich and poor increasing, refugees flooding the globe, ethnic tensions mounting, the arms trade booming; and drugs, genocide, plagues, starvation, pollution and all kinds of terror rampant.

We cannot solve these problems immediately, but we can, and will, in the long term. Already we are taking the first steps in population control and projects relating to other aspects of Earth control are under way. We are not moved by altruism, but by healthy self-interest, being aware that the Earth, though only a temporary abode for mankind, has to be prevented from self-destruction, at least until we can leave it and head out to the stars. That time will come eventually – it is what we are striving for – but until it does, we have to ensure that the world remains manageable.

This is why we are taking over, why we abduct in our flying saucers, why we have to enslave so many of you, by means of advanced brain-implants, and keep those still free terrified.

Because of the things we do, you think of us as evil, as being beyond the pale, but we are merely pragmatic, impelled by pure reason, our pathways not cluttered with primitive emotions, our intentions clear and resolute. We have come here to drag you out of the dark cave and let you reach for the stars.

In time, as the sun dies, the Earth will die as well. But long before this happens, before the dying Earth becomes no more than a barren cinder, before the human race dies off like the dinosaurs, like so many other species, we must leave it and travel on to our destiny.

We, you and I, having emerged from the primordial slime before

becoming human, are engaged in this monumental task.

This is what binds you to us…

Here, in the thirteenth paper, Wilson's ambitions, whether realisable or not, are made abundantly clear. 'A monumental task,' he writes. And certainly it would seem so. He is threatening to put an end to international air travel and isolate all the world's countries from one another as a means of forcing mankind's technological development back to where it was in the 19th century. He is planning to do this, he asserts, in order to dramatically reduce the world's atmospheric pollution.

Could he actually do it?

Frightening though the answer is, it has to be 'Yes'. He could do this and more.

Wilson has deliberately demonstrated his powers twice, in both cases as a response to some real or imagined slight by our government. In June, 1952, determined to demonstrate his superior technology to the doubters of the Pentagon and the White House, Wilson launched an unprecedented UFO 'invasion' of Washington DC. In the June of that year, the US Air Force's Project Blue Book had received more official UFO reports than it had done in any previous month of its history. By June 15, the locations, timing, and sequence of the reports indicated that the UFOs were gradually closing in on Washington DC. For the next couple of weeks, reports about Washington sightings poured in at the rate of twenty or thirty a day, with 'unknowns' running to about 40%. Finally, on the night of July 19, the most highly publicised sightings in UFO history began.

At 11.40pm two radars at Washington National Airport picked up eight unidentified targets near Andrews AFB, Maryland. The objects were flying at approximately 100mph, then they suddenly accelerated to 'fantastically high speeds' and left the area. However, they soon returned, en masse. Before the night was out,

and while interceptor jets tried and failed to catch them, the unidentifieds had moved into every sector covered by the radarscopes, including the 'prohibited corridor' over the White House and the Capitol. The climax came when, in the early hours of the morning, the operators in the control tower at Andrews AFB, in response to an ARTC traffic controller's query about a target directly over the Andrews Radio range station, located near their tower, reported that 'a large, fiery, orange-coloured sphere' was hovering in the sky directly above them.

Later, Major Dewey Fournet, ATIC's Pentagon liaison man, and Colonel Bower, an intelligence officer from nearby Bolling AFB, confirmed that throughout the night, the restricted corridor around the White House had been filled with interceptor jets trying to chase numerous UFOs, that the UFOs had been radar-tracked all around Washington DC, that an analysis of the sightings had completely ruled out temperature inversions, and that the radar operators at Washington National Airport and Andrews AFB – plus at least two veteran airline pilots – had all sworn that their sightings were caused by the radar waves bouncing off solid objects.

However, the UFO 'invasion' did not end there. Within a week to the hour of the first major flap, at approximately 10.30pm on July 26, the same radar operators who had seen the previous UFOs picked up a lot of 'slowly moving' targets… but this time the UFOs were spread out in a huge arc around Washington DC – from Hendon, Virginia, to Andrews AFB.

In short, they had Washington boxed in.

By 11.30pm four or five of the targets were being tracked continually over the Capitol. F-94 interceptor jets tried and failed to catch them. Shortly after the UFOs left the sky over the Capitol, more UFO reports came in from Langley AFB, near Newport News, Virginia, where the operators described them as unidentified lights that were 'rotating and giving off alternating colours'.

Another F-94 was despatched from Langley AFB and visually vectored to the lights by the tower operators. The pilot reported that as he approached one of the lights, it went out 'like somebody turning off a light bulb.' No sooner had this happened than the targets came back on the radarscopes at Washington National Airport. Again, F-94s were despatched to locate them, but each time they vectored into the lights, the UFOs disappeared abruptly from the radarscopes and the pilots simultaneously reported that they had visually observed the lights blinking out.

This game of cat and mouse between the UFOs and the interceptor jets continued throughout the night until, just before dawn, the last of the UFOs disappeared from the radarscopes.

Throughout that same night there was chaos in Washington DC. The press was furious because all reporters and photographers had been ordered out of the radar rooms at the time the Air Force interceptors were chasing the UFOs. However, once the press had gone, arguments blew up in those radar towers and in the Pentagon. According to the Pentagon liaison officer, Major Dewey Fournet, everyone in the radar rooms had been convinced that the targets had been caused by solid, metallic objects and could not have been anything else – and whatever they were, they could literally hover in the air, then abruptly accelerate to thousands of miles per hour.

According to Project Blue Book, the Washington DC sightings are still unknowns. But at the time we knew what they were – because Wilson had threatened to invade Washington with his UFOs, just to demonstrate his might, and he had done exactly that. He demonstrated his might again, in August, 1965, when he threatened to 'black out' most of the east coast of the United States – and again kept his promise.

In one of his many official reports of his clandestine meetings with Wilson, CIA agent Jack Fuller confirmed that Wilson, incensed because one of his smaller flying saucers, manned by two

cyborg pilots, had crashed near Nellis AFB, Nevada, and was being held, with its dead cyborgs, in a secured hangar in the base, threatened that if he did not have the crashed saucer and dead crew returned to him, he would, quote, 'teach the Pentagon and the White House a lesson they won't easily forget.' His plan was to turn out the lights gradually, bit by bit, to allow us time to change our minds; but if, by November, we were still holding his crashed saucer and its dead crew, every single light would go out, plunging the whole east coast of the United States into total darkness.

The process began when, during the first week of August 1965, thousands of citizens in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado and neighbouring states witnessed one of the biggest UFO displays ever. Unidentified lights flew across the skies in formation, were tracked on radar, and played tag with civilian and Air Force aircraft. When this warning shot failed to gain Wilson the return of his crashed saucer and cyborg crew (because the lights had not gone out as promised and we mistakenly took this as a sign that he could not technically do as he had threatened) an angry Wilson informed his Pentagon liaison man, Jack Fuller, that he would now definitely make the lights go out, but would wait until November, the middle of winter, to ensure that his blackout would cause maximum chaos. Three months later, on the night of November 9, 1965, hundreds of UFOs, in the form of darting lights, were reported from Niagara, Syracuse, and Manhattan. That same night, all the lights went out – in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and a section of Canada. They went out over a total of 80,000 square miles and a population of twenty-six million people.

Subsequent investigation of what became known as the Great Northeast Blackout revealed that the huge power grid controlling most of the blacked-out areas – an interlocking network linking twenty-nine utility companies, with hundreds of automatic controls

and locking devices – had always been considered to be invulnerable. Yet the system *had* failed and the cause of the blackout could not be ascertained. The only thing known for certain was that the failure had occurred somewhere in the flow between the Niagara Falls generators and the Clay power sub-station, an automatic control unit through which the electric power flowed from Niagara to New York. A UFO connection was established when Deputy Aviation Commissioner of Syracuse, Robert C. Walsh, and several other witnesses, stated that just after the power failed at Syracuse, all of them saw what resembled a huge fireball *ascending* from a fairly low altitude near Hancock Airport. Approaching for landing at the same time was flight instructor Weldon Ross and his passenger, both of whom saw the same object. At first they mistook it for a burning building on the ground – something corroborating the fact that the fireball was at a low altitude – but then they realised that it was something in the air: a single, round-shaped object about a hundred feet in diameter, later described in their official report as a 'flame-coloured globe'. And according to Ross's calculations, that object was directly over the Clay power sub-station.

We now knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that Wilson had been responsible for the Great Northeast Blackout. A week later, after consultation with Wilson, agent Fuller arranged for the separate pieces of the crashed saucer and its two dead cyborgs, still being held in Nellis AFB, Nevada, to be boxed up in crates, transported by truck to a restricted airstrip at the far end of the base, and there picked up by one of Wilson's saucer transports.

From that moment on, we knew that we could refuse Wilson nothing and would, in the future, always have to cooperate with him. We also knew that from anywhere he cared to be – his hidden colony in Antarctica, a mother ship in outer space, a USO dome on the seabed – Wilson, aided by his programmed people based

helpfully in the White House, the Pentagon, NORAD and other major centres of defence, would be able to render the United States totally defenceless by causing every tracking module, radar screen and radio telescope in the country to become inoperable, by blacking out the entire Space Detection and Tracking System of the United States, Russia and the EU, and then, if he so desired, by invading those countries and more with his armada of man-made flying saucers, small, large and gigantic, from which he could disgorge his ever-growing army of higher-echelon, brain-implanted, human abductees and cyborgs to take over all of our major government buildings and defence establishments. Thus, he could conceivably enslave the whole world and create a fearful 21st century New World.

We have no way to prevent this.

Paper #14

, the new me, the cloned me, was twenty years old in my new life when we began surreptitiously taking over the world; but, educated and matured well beyond my years, I was already our leader. Like an Egyptian prince, I had been reborn and raised for this task, but with a singular difference: the nstructions for my resurrection had been written out by myself in my previous ife. Before the previous me died, in that hidden colony in Neu Schwabenland, Antarctica, I knew that we were on the verge of creating new life, creating and growing a DNA chain, and I arranged for a clone of myself to be the first one created. By that time, no one in the colony had a mind of their own: they had all been electronically brain-implanted and programmed for absolute obedience, total loyalty. And so, before my death, I arranged for them to clone me when the breakthrough in cloning, which we were rapidly approaching, finally came. In fact, it came the following year.

I am a product of parthenogenesis, self-cell-division, the first genuine virgin birth.

Like the rest of the world, we had started out with other, less successful, forms of life creation, such as artificial wombs and in vitro fertilisation, to create embryos that could be implanted in the wombs of living females. Naturally our first artificial wombs were relatively primitive, with the foetus being removed from its mother's womb a few weeks before natural birth was due and suspended in a womb-like chamber filled with a solution of various sugars and salts. The premature child was fed and supplied with oxygen via its umbilical cord, which was attached by plastic tubes to a heart-lung, but such infants invariably died by choking on their own waste products. We did, however, move on to pressurised steel chambers containing an oxygen-rich saline solution that could push oxygen through the body of the foetus; but those foetuses, like the others, also died from choking on their own waste products. Nevertheless, eventually the day came when we produced living, perfectly normal human beings in artificial wombs, through in vitro fertilisation and, finally, embryos created through parthenogenesis and placed in a normal womb for full, healthy development.

Once we knew for sure that we could do this successfully, repeating it many times, we experimented with the creation of slightly abnormal, though more intelligent, human beings. Having discovered that the sole limitation on the size of the human brain is the diameter of the female pelvic girdle, we experimented surgically on a wide variety of abducted females until we were able to enlarge the pelvic girdle without killing the female subjects or damaging them in a way that would have rendered them useless to us. When the operations were completed, we then made them pregnant with in vitro fertilisation techniques and artificial wombs to produce babies with unusually large brains contained in large heads. Brought up in isolation, these children were indoctrinated or electronically brain-implanted to behave exactly as we wanted them to. They were then allowed either to grow into normal adulthood, albeit with unusually large heads and enhanced intelligence, or were surgically mutated into cyborgs.

The misinformed, when observing such creatures emerging from our flying saucers, invariably assumed that their abnormally large heads were proof that they had to be extraterrestrials. This aided our programme of disinformation for many years.

To early parthenogenesis experiments we added a variety of recombinant-DNA techniques, or gene surgery. I personally had become

tware of the striking resemblance between the way computers operate and the vay in which the deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA) double helix controls all nown forms of life. By this I mean that the DNA double helix, like the omputer, stores information in a coded form; and the on-off structure of the DNA chain of molecules, shaped like a ladder twisted about its own axis to orm the double helix shape, is remarkably similar to the on-off switchings in omputer memories. The complexity of DNA foils your world's still relatively rimitive computers, but aware of the similarity between the operation of omputers and that of the DNA double helix, I was able to develop a twenty-rillion-byte computer. Given that one neutron of the human brain roughly quals one byte of a computer, our computers, based on my original rototype, now rival the human model, the DNA double helix, in complexity nd *in ability. This in turn has enabled us to advance our recombinant-DNA echnology to an unimaginable level of accomplishment.*

You will never catch up with us.

With our new computer-controlled, exceptionally powerful electron nicroscopes, we were able to more fully probe the structure of the double elix, the key to life, then isolate sections of the chromosomal genetic rogramme of living organisms, plant, animal or human, and insert other, eplacement, sections. In this way we were able to create cross-bred animals, himeras, blending two completely separate species that could not mate, thus iving life to a sheep with a goat's head, a dog with a cat's body, two-headed nice, and even rats with fish gills and fins instead of legs and a tail. From hese primitive early chimeras, we moved on to cyborg-animals created for pecific tasks; i.e., headless cows as drug factories, producing a variety of enetically engineered drugs from their milk; and meat cattle, so called ecause they are no more than large lumps of meat that seem alive and are, ndeed so, having a heart and circulation, though no head or brain, because, n both cases, their biological nervous systems are linked to a central omputer system that controls all their functions.

From these useful, genetically engineered cyborg-animals, it was but a hort step to the genetically altered human being.

First, we abducted men and women suffering from genetic disorders and njected them with DNA material that carried the correct version of their nalformed gene. Or, conversely, we changed their structure for the worse by nixing malformed genes with their healthy genes and letting them breed and

nultiply until the original, healthy genes had been replaced entirely by the malformed ones. During those early years, the abductees whose biological structures were genetically altered for the worse, giving them some destructive disease or making them criminal or psychopathic, were terminated once the experiment had succeeded. Where the abductees were genetically altered for the better, we either kept them for further experiments or used them as workers who would never complain or cause any problems. Finally, when we saw how successful the recombinant-DNA techniques were, we started using them on a regular basis to produce perfectly healthy, mentally superior, totally obedient workers.

In this area of research, we have long been using the amniocentesis procedure, in which the mother's womb is examined for markers indicating the extra chromosome that causes mental retardation and the physical abnormalities of Down's Syndrome. Moving on from this innovation, we learned to scan for literally hundreds of other diseases and defects, including criminal or psychopathic tendencies, while the child was still in the womb. Initially we aborted any foetuses with such abnormalities, but now we simply alter the genetic structure of the growing foetus to ensure that it is, when born, perfectly normal and healthy.

This is, of course, a form of eugenics, the control of human breeding, a concept long reviled and feared by liberal thinkers. Most notorious as something cruelly used by the German Nazis of the Old World (including myself in my first incarnation), it was actually first practised in the United States in the 1930s with official sterilisation programmes that were used to prevent the so-called 'unfit' from breeding. The 'unfit', according to US policies of the period, included the feeble-minded, the epileptic, the blind, the deaf, the deformed and those crippled or merely suffering from what were considered, at the time, to be socially unacceptable diseases.

So do not express revulsion at what we do. What we do, your kind did first.

Thankfully, the state of your genetic engineering is still retarded, whereas ours is in what would be, to you, an awesome stage of advancement. As long ago as 1984, bio-engineers in the Arizona Genetic Laboratory caused a rat to regrow an amputated limb by restimulating the genes controlling limb development. While nothing much was heard after that particular experiment, we capitalised on their research and now our genetic engineering techniques

enable us to regrow corrupted internal organs and amputated limbs. The genes that cause growth in the foetus remain in place throughout adult life and by stimulating them with our advanced recombinant-DNA techniques, we are able to regenerate amputated hands, arms or legs. This is particularly useful when it comes to replacing the ageing human parts in the early cyborgs.

Is this your Frankenstein nightmare? Fear not: you will get used to it. Soon, when you join us, it will seem as natural to you as shaving or clipping your nails, in both of which cases you are destroying some of your own genetic chromosomes. Indeed, to shave or clip your nails is to engage in genetic engineering, albeit of a routine kind. What we were doing, however, was essentially no different. But what we were doing, good or bad, right or wrong, was merely the prelude to our penultimate achievement: the cloning of human beings.

I was the first.

Just before my death in the Old World, at my command, my bio-technicians extracted minute samples of my original genetic blueprint from a piece of skin tissue, then cloned and grew the DNA string from it to create another 'me' in a test tube. Naturally, I was only a replica of the original me, a physical mirror-image, while otherwise being a blank diskette waiting to be filled. So it was that the thoughts and experiences of the original John Wilson had to be implanted in me, virtually imprinted upon me, and this process, which began from my first months of resurrection, continued until I knew everything that John Wilson had known and virtually felt all that he had felt. I was given the same name, the same background and memories (the wheat fields of Iowa; the knowledge that the sun would eventually die; the construction of airships and jet aircraft and flying saucers; the Second World War and the flight to Antarctica; the exploitation of the Cold War to get the most out of the Soviets and the Americans and their allies; the death at an unnaturally old age and the subsequent cloning), forced to read his diaries daily and learnt, with the aid of interactive media systems and computer technology with heightened sensory stimulation, including 3-D sound and wraparound vision, to relive his whole life, study his life's work, and in general become virtually the same man that he had been in his first incarnation. Now, to all intents and purposes, I am *John Wilson.*

How do I feel about this? A parentless child, the product of a genuine

virgin birth, in a brave new world. Someone shaped by the experiences of another and carrying on his life.

Nothing. I feel nothing. By which I mean that I feel perfectly normal. Knowing nothing else, possessing no memories other than his, those memories are as real to me as is your past to you. I take pride in my own history, which is, of course, his history, and strengthen this pride with the knowledge that I am carrying on his great work. I believe in what I am doing, just as he believed in it, and this is enough to sustain me.

John Wilson's goal was the creation of the Superman, and we, his successors, in creating human beings through cloning, in making them physically perfect and intellectually superior, have in fact turned them into Supermen. This, our penultimate achievement, has already been accomplished.

So, you might well ask, if this was our penultimate *achievement, then what was our* ultimate *achievement?*

Alas, we have not yet attained it. But we are here, in your cities, gradually taking over your world, in order to do so. We will soon succeed.

Come and join us.

Bear witness…

We are here in your cities,' Wilson writes, 'gradually taking over your world.' This is truly a terrifying thought, but we must now accept it as inevitable. The vexing question of how Wilson could be born in the 19th century and still be alive in the 21st century has been answered gradually in his various papers. According to his own statements, he managed to survive much longer than the average human being through a combination of surgical and biological mutation. When he describes his cyborgs, he writes about artificial hearts, bionic audio transmitters for ears, sonar sensors for eyes, plastic arteries, synthetic bones and, where necessary, synthetic skin. Almost certainly, then, he applied the same innovations to his own ageing body and survived into an unnaturally old age by so doing. Of course, he had to die eventually, as all humans must, but by that time his bio-scientists, all brain-implanted to be totally devoted to him, all helplessly obedient to his will, had perfected his pioneering work in human cloning and, rather than bringing him

back to life, recreated him from his own preserved DNA strands, literally giving him rebirth, and then, on the instructions he had previously left for his obotic carers, had him raised and educated in one of his USOs, a gigantic, elf-sustaining, submarine dome, filling his head with the memories, the ensations, the complete history of the previous Wilson, until he was virtually he same person in both appearance and thought. It is that Wilson, the second Wilson, who is still communicating with us, preparing us for his Brave New World, his nightmare of social and scientific perfection, his dawning Super Race.

However, the Brave New World he is still in the process of creating is a world of nightmare as well as perfection. As described so chillingly by him, it s a world of experimental cross-bred animals, chimeras; a world of *in vitro* ertilisation, artificial wombs, and genetically created infants brought up in solation, indoctrinated or electronically brain-implanted to be totally obedient - more precisely, to be robotic – and only then allowed either to grow into ormal adulthood, albeit with unusually large heads and enhanced ntelligence, or, if not successfully so raised, if considered to still be inferior, o be surgically mutated into cyborgs.

This is indeed Wilson's Brave New World. The beginning of his planned Super Race.

And finally, incidentally, we have an explanation for why so many UFO bductees or 'close encounter' witnesses of UFOnauts (UFO occupants or crew members) nearly always describe the 'aliens' or 'extraterrestrials' as being small in stature, with unusually large heads, often without eyes, noses or ips, and with metal claws instead of normal hands. Clearly, the UFOnauts are a mixture of Wilson's half-man, half-machine cyborgs and his cloned human beings with unusually large brains contained in large heads, but with mplanted electrodes in those large heads to ensure total obedience. Yes, clearly these are the 'aliens' reported by so many terrified UFOnauts and close-contact witnesses.

The surgical and biological procedures practised by Wilson and his disciples on animals and humans are clearly horrible beyond belief, outside all known moral boundaries, leading to nightmarishly mutated animals, as described above, intellectually superior, if robotised, human beings, and, finally, to cloned creatures of every imaginable kind. This, then, is the logical extension of what Wilson had first witnessed in the concentration camps of

Nazi Germany: a more futuristic, technologically advanced, master-slave society, in which all independent thought has been erased from the minds of the majority, crime has been definitively eradicated, creativity is only permitted where it serves the general good, and the whole society is devoted solely to science. This is Wilson's vision of a Super Race devoted to, and capable of, the task of reaching for the stars. Certainly it is not a human society of the kind we could recognise.

Even more chilling is Wilson's contention that aware of the similarity between the operation of computers and that of the DNA double helix, he has been able to develop a twenty-trillion-byte computer. Given that one neutron of the human brain roughly equals one byte of a computer, his computers must now, as he claims, indeed rival the human model, the DNA double helix, in complexity and ability. He has therefore advanced our own recombinant-DNA technology to an unimaginable level of accomplishment. He has already gone far beyond anything our best bio-scientists can hope to achieve. In short, he is indirectly turning us back into a relatively primitive species.

In creating human beings through cloning, in making them physically perfect and intellectually superior, Wilson has already turned them into Supermen. This, his 'penultimate' achievement, seems to have been accomplished. So what *is* his 'ultimate' achievement?

'Alas,' he writes, 'we have not yet attained it. But we are here, in your cities, gradually taking over your world, in order to do so. We will soon succeed.'

Paper #15

We are taking over your world for a specific purpose and are working towards that goal right now. However, the world we are taking over is not as it should be, so our first task will be to make it more manageable and less self-destructive. Your present world order has changed beyond recognition, with power moving out of the hands of the state, into the hands of the banks and transnationals. The parochial economy of individual nations has given way to the global economy, with everything it produces being imported or exported, cheap labour at a premium, money as fluid as a river, moving here and there at the click of a computer key, to the dictates of the marketplace, exploiting the

rise and fall of each individual country's interest rates, avoiding taxation, greasing palms, buying loyalty, annihilating patriotism, to the point where the banks and transnationals have become so powerful that the lending or withdrawing of their support can make or break national governments. The heads of state, the kings and queens, the presidents and prime ministers, are therefore redundant in every sense. They are no more than figureheads.

What do we need them for?

Only as a demonstration of our power when, as we plan to do, we make them disappear overnight.

The President of the United States is, to his people, the supreme authority in the country, but to us he is just another puppet whose strings are being pulled from afar. The nation state, such as America, is increasingly ill-equipped to deal with global problems: drug cartels, mafias, financial organisations, and morally bankrupt multinationals, fast becoming transnationals, all of which can easily cross international borders by conducting their business with cellular phones, faxes, e-mail and electronic bank transfers, buying, selling and exchanging outside the jurisdiction of any individual nation state. Likewise, the rapid switch from national news to global news, which has turned national awareness into global awareness, has further weakened the authority of the nation state while making its citizens part of the global community. With national borders becoming redundant, with previously sovereign countries coalescing into trade blocs devoid of national allegiances or patriotism, the heads of state, including the President of the United States, are becoming mere servants to a global government covertly run by the banks and transnationals.

For this reason, we do not feel threatened by any head of state, either president or prime minister, king or queen, and value them only for the fear we will instil in their subjects when we abduct them or make them disappear. We will do this very soon, during the first morning of our planned invasion, abducting the President and Vice President, then transporting them and their families out of the White House, never to return. Elsewhere, we will take England's Royal Family, the King and Queen of Spain, the President of Russia, the heads of every European State, and the rulers and dictators of every other country in the world.

None of these people will ever be seen again.

They will, in fact, be transferred to our undersea dome in the so-called

Devil's Sea', an area of ocean bounded by the south-east of Japan, the northern tip of Luzon in the Philippines, and Guam. There they will be subjected to electronic brain-implantations that will erase their memories and render them totally passive. They will then be scattered throughout our various hidden bases, some undersea, some in mountainous or desert regions, to be used as robotised workers. Some will, of course, die of natural causes; but others will live on, anonymous, forgotten, performing menial tasks and grateful to do so instead of being used for surgical experiments or turned into programmed cyborgs.

On the other hand, the many congressmen and congresswomen removed from the White House (and people in similar positions worldwide) will be returned a few days after their abduction to take up their original positions, but in governments without a single ruling figure. Those individuals will, of course, have been brain-implanted to do our bidding while acting as liaison officers between us and those of the populace with whom we might still need to deal, notably civil servants and local counsellors. Others, also to be taken that first day and returned a few days later, will be walking among you and will seem just like you, though they will, in fact, have been robotised and thus will belong to us.

So we do not fear heads of state or other political figures. What we are *concerned with, however, are the banks and transnationals that can make or break whole countries and are presently heading towards the formation of a world consolidated into three great blocs – Europe, the Americas, and Asia – with each drawing more countries into its orbit until only the three will rule between them. As this will make the world more difficult to control, even for the relatively short period we need it for our own purposes, we will isolate all the countries of the world, each one from the other, by grounding aircraft worldwide and preventing all ships from leaving their ports, ensuring that their engines malfunction when they try to fly or sail. This done, we will then abduct all the major players in the aspiring global order – the financiers and bankers, the transnational wheelers and dealers whose only allegiance is to profit – and robotise them to ensure that when they are finally returned to their original positions, they will do only what we command them to do.*

They, too, will be walking among you, though you certainly won't see them as being 'different'. They will seem as 'normal' as you deem yourselves to be.

Yes, the living dead will walk among you. For once, that old cliché is apt. The living dead are those whose minds we steal and control from afar, freed only to move among you while conducting our *business. Many have already been so treated. They are among you right now. They may be among your loved ones, your family and friends, and although they may seem normal to you, they are not what they seem. They are on our side now.*

We have eyes and ears everywhere.

You resent us being here and you also live in fear of us, more so because we have stopped so much of what you were doing and your world seems a far worse place for it. Your streets are overflowing with rubbish. Unemployment is rising. Crime is an epidemic. Whole industries have been frozen where they were years ago, unable to expand or make any meaningful progress. Your great seaports are gradually emptying. Your airports will soon fall silent. Your computer technology, while increasingly widespread, has not advanced to a degree that could even remotely be a threat to us.

All of this, you will now believe, is our fault – and we cannot deny it. But what we do is done for a purpose that transcends temporal matters. Your rubbish means nothing to us because it does not affect us and will make no great difference to the future that is being planned for you. The rising crime rate is natural, being tied to the rising unemployment, and the latter is an equally natural outcome of your primitive mentality, which is rooted in temporal affairs with no long-term view. We *take a long-term view, knowing how brief our time on Earth is. We also know how unimportant your temporary lawlessness is in the light of what will be coming. As for your frozen industries, your already emptying docks and soon-to-be silent airports, we have done what has been done to stop your orgy of self-destruction and ensure that the Earth will survive long enough for our needs.*

Earth means nothing to us – it is only a transient stop – but until we leave it, long before the sun starts dying, we must ensure that it is not destroyed by pollution, climate change or meaningless wars. Even as we were evolving and expanding, your pollution was destroying the ozone layer, exposing the Earth to potentially destructive ultraviolent radiation and climate change, but our surreptitious curtailing of your industrial output, which was based on pure greed, is greatly reducing the production of chlorofluorocarbons and letting the ozone layer renew itself. As for your emptying docks and soon-to-be silent airports, they are being so rendered for a good reason: to make it easier for

is to maintain control of the world by isolating each country, one from the other. In doing this, we are, incidentally, reducing even more the fumes that were destroying the ozone layer and causing a dangerous level of global warming. We are also about to put a stop to the squalid international arms trade that is fuelling the growth of terrorism and ethnic genocide. So our activities, which transcend mere self-interest while making your world suffer in the short-term, will have long-term benefits. We suffer no guilt because of this.

Just who are 'we', you wish to know? Who do the cyborgs work for? Who created the clones, the Men in Black, and who is behind the UFO abductions? Who is now threatening your world?

'We' are actually one.

It is I.

The one you know as 'Wilson'...

Yes, we now know it is Wilson. There can be no doubt about it. His World War Two papers were not enough to completely convince us, but the new papers, coming to us by email after years of total silence, demolished any doubts that we had. The emails, the new papers, are from Wilson, though their source is unknown. Is he still in the Antarctic? In a mother ship in outer space? In a submarine dome on the seabed of some ocean? In truth, he could be anywhere. He could even be in a hidden base in Virginia State, preparing to invade Washington DC. Or in the top-secret, heavily guarded Area 51 in Groom Lake, Nevada, protected by brain-implanted military officers and their robotised soldiers. Or even in the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD), our top-secret complex of awesome proportions, hidden inside the snow-capped Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs, with parts of it half-a-mile below the ground. Yes, he could indeed be anywhere. As he says, he has his people everywhere. The walking dead, indeed. The clones. They act and talk normally and are mostly in positions of great authority and influence. They are in the Pentagon and the White House and in similar places all over the world. Unfortunately for us, they are under his long-distance control and will helplessly do anything he commands. They are only awaiting his instructions and then they will turn on us.

How do we defeat them? How do we defeat Wilson? We couldn't even

be too sure if he was alive in any sense that we knew. We had to assume that he was still physical in some mutated form, a creature reborn, the mirror-image of his former self, as he was in his first lifetime, but certainly physical enough to be able to compose and possibly type or dictate the emailed papers he was regularly sending to us. At least, so we thought. But then, before we could properly deal with this hopeful theory, we received another emailed paper that showed us just how badly wrong we were. What he was telling us, we could scarcely believe and it left all of us reeling.

Our understanding of the material world was no longer tenable.

Paper #16

Science. The root of life, the tree of all knowledge. This belief is what I have lived by and abided by. I stand by it still. Without science we are doomed, without mind we are nothing, and anything that stands in the way of progress must be viewed as negative.

We began in the dark seas, then crawled out to the dark cave. But once here, we looked constantly to the sky and sensed, even before we could think clearly, that up there was where our destiny lay. The evolution of Man is the shaping of that destiny, the building of that bridge between the cave and the stars, and the individual is mere mortar for the structure of the future, a cog in the wheel, a rung on the ladder.

Think of this when you call me cruel, when you accuse me of being inhuman, when you charge me with crimes against humanity, when you suggest that I am playing God by perverting the natural order. For, indeed, what is natural? The only natural law is change. All things in nature are born only to die; between birth and death they are in a state of constant, irreversible change. Likewise with Mankind, whose history is one of constant change. Men have been changing since they first crawled from the primordial slime and the changes have often been painful. Pain, too, is natural.

From the cave to the stars, from Man to Superman: this is what the changing is all about and it cannot be stopped. The human being, as we know him, is neither natural nor constant; he is merely a primitive tool of evolution and will soon pass away. Not die off like the dinosaurs, not melt away like other species, but instead evolve *– evolve into another species altogether, a*

creature of pure mind, no longer imprisoned in a physical, mortal body, nor governed by primitive emotions. When we learn to rid ourselves of those outmoded emotions, which so often are self-destructive, there is nothing we won't be able to do. Then Man becomes Superman.

I understood this as a child, when I first learned that the sun would die, causing Earth to die as well, and I have never doubted it since. I stood, a mere ten-year-old, in a field of wheat, the sunlight of Iowa warming my face, and realised that the Earth was but a transient stop for Mankind; that sooner or later this planet would come to an end, and that before the end came Mankind, if it was to continue, must reach for the stars. That became my life's mission – to be a bridge to the stars – and I accepted that in order to achieve it, I would have to place it before everything else in my life. Which was just what I did.

While other young men of my own age were dreaming their vain dreams, obsessed with girls and material success, living their lives through dime novels and films, I was treating the world as a laboratory, and all those in it, including my mother and father, as no more than objects to be placed, as it were, under a microscope and minutely studied. Indeed, while other boys my own age were in thrall to their orgasms, I was examining the semen in the palm of my hand, tasting it with my tongue, awed by the thought of the journey of two hundred million spermatozoa that could end either in death or in new life. By the time I was fifteen, I was studying my own sperm under a microscope and reducing the mystery of life to its biological essence. There were no dreams, vain or otherwise, in this; there was only a goal to be reached.

The death of my mother brought me closer to freedom, which was why it did not cause me pain. And later, when my father died, my only response was to feel fully free for the first time. Indeed, the Worcester Polytechnic Institute, then MIT, followed by Cornell College, Ithaca, New York, were the only homes I ever wanted, and they nurtured me well. I was obsessed with gaining knowledge, with learning all there was to know, particularly concerning aerodynamics and, eventually, space flight. The stupidity of my fellow students so appalled me, their interests being so narrow, so devoid of true aspiration (big houses and good jobs and beautiful wives as trophies) that I felt revulsion just listening to them talking and gradually drew away from them. I became an intensely private person, an island, a bachelor living by and for himself,

ut one with a secret, grandiose mission. By the time I left university and went o work, I knew just what that mission was.

Thus I designed the first airships, was betrayed by my own government, ecame anonymous for many years after that, working here and there, the ength and breadth of the country, exchanging gold for bread, until eventually assisted Robert H. Goddard, a true American genius, with the production of is first liquid-fuelled rockets. Then, having assisted him only to learn from im, I left him as pragmatically as I had joined him. Yes, I went on to find hose who could deliver the finance and fanaticism that would be needed for what I wanted to do. They were, of course, the Nazis.

You have condemned me for this, but what else could I do? Betrayed by ny own countrymen, rejected by my own government, my work stolen and then eglected, I had no choice but to use those who would use me because their lans were as grandiose as mine. Insane, but grandiose, with one belief that I hared, albeit more rationally: the belief that they could create the Superman, Super Race, and rule the world for the foreseeable future. They were erverted in their reasoning, obscene in their methodology, but they gave me he only opportunity I was likely to get and for that reason alone I had to take t. Thus I ended up in Nazi Germany, using slave labour, conducting xperiments that could not have been done elsewhere, and finally creating the irst crude flying saucers and surgically mutated human beings. The road head, though a nightmare for some, had at last been opened.

I took that road and followed it, aware that I had no choice, accepting hat the suffering of my surgically mutated human beings was as necessary as he suffering of animals under the blade of the vivisectionist whose work would eventually benefit humanity. Nature is cruel because it must have its way and that way does not count the human cost. Fire and flood, famine and disease, are part of the natural order of the world and the cost in human uffering must be met. Likewise with my experiments, which involved no self- nterest, no pursuit of personal gain, but were, instead, conducted with a cientific pragmatism that did not allow for sentimental revulsion or a conscience stirred by humanitarian concerns.

In nature's grand plan, in evolution's onward march, the human being, s he now stands, is only sacred in the sense that he is the bridge between the ave dweller and the Superman. When you understand this, when you see

where we are heading, you will respect me instead of reviling me – and your own transformation will then begin.

My time is fast approaching and impatience spurs me on, but I know that soon my second incarnation will lead into the third. I will then escape my mortal shell to become a being of pure mind, merging with the All; and then, untrammelled by the physical, I will have no limitations in time or space. I will, in effect, be the first of the Supermen, and you, despite your fearful protestations, will eventually join me.

This began with my first dying, in Neu Schwabenland in Antarctica, and continued with the rebirth that I ordained for myself, having made myself Lord of my own destiny. I grew a second time to manhood, being my own first son as well as father to myself. Despite reported fears about the potential traumas of being cloned, I suffered no self-doubt, no emotional pain, and instead felt only the pride of that rare individual who knows himself to be absolutely unique and alive for a purpose. This made my second childhood blissful, radiant with inner light, and I grew up with the cyborgs and other man-machine mutations as naturally as any parentless child in a well-run nursery, carefully protected by those who were not my own parents, not harmed in the slightest by that knowledge.

My nursery was, of course, a place devoted to science, a self-contained laboratory in a mother ship used as a seabed dome and, except for occasional flights to similar locations elsewhere, always safely anchored at the bottom of the ocean. There, in that enclosed world, I was raised by those that I had, in fact, created – the cyborgs – and prepared for my imminent transformation from Man into Superman.

Even during my brief absence, between my death and my rebirth, my work had been continued by the cyborgs and clones. Both types had been genetically gelded to remove their sex drive and all negative or potentially dangerous emotions such as rage, depression, personal ambition and abstract thought. Thus, they did only what I had programmed them to do before my death, and part of that programming was the supervision of my rebirth and second upbringing.

Parallel to this was the advance of the machines, our biological computers, which had been maintaining, repairing and reprogramming themselves to the point where they could communicate with one another and, together, were gradually forming into an immense neural network that was far

more complex than the human brain. This was an evolutionary watershed, the first breaking of mankind's biological bonds, an artificial intelligence of awesome reasoning power, untrammelled by emotion, in thrall only to its own logic, and therefore a new biological species in its own right: an extension, and improvement upon, Man.

This is the great intelligence, the superior being, with which we must fuse in order to evolve from Man into Superman, freed at last from the physical world and, thus, from the dying Earth, empowered at last to find our natural destiny among the stars.

No. Not 'we'…

I.

Wilson.

And after me… You.

Yes. Your time will come also…

We were not surprised to read about his second incarnation, since we already knew about his rebirth as a clone of his former self, but we were shaken to read that his second incarnation was going to lead into his third and that he would then escape his 'mortal shell' and become, in his own words, 'a being of pure mind, merging with the All.' Then, untrammelled by the physical, he would have no limitations in time or space, but would, in effect, become the first of the Supermen.

Clearly, he was talking about a non-physical, or incorporeal, being, a creature not of matter but of mind. Initially this struck us as being incredible, not feasible, but then, going back to the earlier Wilson papers, all scrupulously analysed by our intelligence panel, we saw more clearly his words about the advance of his machines, his biological computers, which had been maintaining, repairing and reprogramming themselves to the point where they could communicate with one another and, together, were gradually forming into an immense neural network that was far more complex than the human brain. This he describes as 'an evolutionary watershed, the first breaking of mankind's biological bonds, an artificial intelligence of awesome reasoning power, untrammelled by emotion, in thrall only to its own logic, and therefore a new biological species in its own right: an extension, and improvement upon, Man.'

Is this what Wilson has become? Is he indeed 'the great intelligence, the uperior being, with which we must fuse in order to evolve from Man into Superman, freed at last from the physical world and, thus, from the dying Earth, empowered at last to find our natural destiny among the stars.'?

If this is indeed what Wilson has become, or believes he now is, we will ıot find our destiny among the stars. We will, to put it brutally, be doomed.

In the next paper, he confirms exactly what he is.

Paper #17

Who or what is Wilson? You wonder this as you approach him. Is he man or monster, living or dead, as human as you or deeply inhuman, some kind of mutant?

In fact, he is neither one thing nor the other, eluding such definitions, being a consciousness given life years ago in Iowa, during a perfectly normal birth, with the customary blood and pain and useless, all too human, sobbing, but now expanding to take in the stars and an infinite future. Born of the Earth, he will soon be leaving it to wing his way to the stars.

I should know. I am Wilson.

So who, or what, am I?

I am brain, I am mind. Does this make me sacred or magical, a unique child of the universe? Alas, it does not. The human brain is simply the end process of millions of years of genetic evolution and, as such, is no more sacred and magical than the amphibian's journey from the sea to dry land.

What is the human brain? In scientific terms it is no more than a complex non-linear biological organism using electrochemical signals to pass information from one point in a neural system to another. What we think of as emotions, creativity and self-awareness (the qualities that supposedly raise us above the animals and make us unique) are merely the products of a gene programme that is set at birth, just as a computer programme is set, and is then broadened by accruing input, which in human terms means the assimilation of ever-changing experience of life over all the years of that life.

As a biological organism, albeit a complex one, the brain is composed of a large number of cells called neurons, the functioning of which give rise to what we term consciousness. Some of these neurons deal with our casual

enses, some with memories, and some with other functions entirely. The neurons have different shapes, sizes and strengths, though they also have a number of common features and are all connected to other neurons. Some are connected to only a few other neurons, some to tens of thousands of other neurons. They are connected in a way that can appear to be random, though it is in fact specific and designed to form a single, extremely complex neural network.

The neural network is a biological organism – the human brain – that can be, and has been, duplicated by neural computers. There is nothing sacred or magical about this.

The neurons in the human brain come in many shapes and sizes, are linked to each other in large or small numbers, and operate by a system that can be explained in scientific terms. One side of the individual neuron has short threads called dendrites; the other side has a long thread called an axon. Messages, or signals, are sent to a neuron through its dendrites, and the neuron, depending on what signal it receives, then fires an electrical message out through its axon. The neuron's axon is connected to another neuron's dendrite by a synapse containing a gap across which the electrical message travels when the axon has been excited. The message passes across the synapse by means of neurotransmitters, which are small amounts of chemical fluid. Due to the electrical messages it receives, each dendrite has its own electric voltage: the more messages it receives, the higher its voltage. Combined, all of the voltages going to one neuron through its dendrites form a total that affects the rate at which the neuron sends out signals, some positive, others negative, through its axon, and these activate the various areas, or nerve centres, of the brain.

In the case of the human being, some of the neurons control our visual system, others, the motor neurons, control our arms and legs, fingers and toes, etc., while yet others are concerned with reasoning and memory. There is nothing here that an advanced computer network cannot duplicate. There is nothing sacred or magical about it.

You could, of course, argue that we cannot model a neuron of such complexity, nor create such models in the numbers required (over 100 billion), to even remotely equal the human brain. However, this is not true. Even in the final days of the Old World, in the early 21st century, your own

echnology was producing artificial neurons, either as electrons or as umbers in a computer. Given that the human brain is biological, using lectrochemical signals, the artificial neuron was usually a standard, implistic model of a real neuron and the network was formed from billions of dentical neurons. When such networks were then linked together, they roduced between them enough neurons, over 100 billion, to first equal and hen supersede the much smaller, strictly limited human brain.

But can a computer, even a neural computer, ever be fully human? you night reasonably ask.

No, not in the sense of sharing the same emotions. But human emotions re essentially primitive, not required in the long term, and since humankind, s we know it, is merely a link in the evolutionary chain, the human being, vith his physical limitations, his mortal body, must eventually give way to a uperior form of being: the Superman. A being of pure mind, who will have no imitations in time or space.

But is this strictly necessary? you might also ask.

And the answer is:

Yes.

The human brain is limited in size, therefore in complexity. The same annot be said for a biological computer. While human intelligence is elatively constant from one year to the next, computer intelligence is always mproving rapidly, with no theoretical or practical limitations. Further: with he biological computer we can add on extra memory and processing features; ve can join the neural network, or brain, of one computer to another and epeat this process endlessly to make the 'brain' as big and as complex as we lesire. Such 'brains' can then expand at will, gradually becoming one vast eural network that will be capable of transcending the limitations of the uman body and eventually rendering that body obsolete. The neural network of the individual human brain, if electronically joined to that greater neural etwork, will then become part of it and the physical body of the donor brain vill no longer be necessary. Thus Man moves from the physical to the non-hysical dimension and becomes Superman.

You think this is not possible? That the machine must always be inferior o humankind or, at least, be under humankind's control?

Alas, this isn't so. Even in the Old World, towards the end of the 20th century, human beings were increasingly dependent upon computers to the extent that they were handing over information to the machines and letting the machines make the decisions. At the same time, computers all over the world were communicating with each other, more efficiently and effectively than humans could do, and were gradually gaining the power to question and advise their presumed controllers. By the beginning of the 21st century, which was also the beginning of the New World that I wish to create, the computers were communicating with each other on a global scale, thus forming an immense neural network that was virtually dictating how the world was run. Since then, that network has expanded extraordinarily. It continues to grow at an ever faster rate and is rapidly, given its prodigious, lightning-quick intelligence, defying our ability to control it.

It is now almost Godlike.

Here is the truth. Our biological computers had become so advanced that over a period of time they became indistinguishable from physical organisms. In fact, they became totally independent. Aware of this fact – and also knowing that biological organisms use many cells for a single task – we experimented with parallel-processing machines to discover how a computer responds if one of its series of interconnecting identical processing cells is damaged. We discovered that after cells are damaged and the system suffers a subsequent period of inaccuracy, it automatically readjusts its output to compensate for the failure of the damaged cells and to give the correct answer despite the damage. In other words, the computer had repaired itself when it felt it was necessary.

This seemingly small technological advance was in fact a giant evolutionary leap.

A computer that repairs itself without being told to do so is clearly a machine that thinks for itself. With regard to our computers, once they started thinking they kept improving upon themselves and, more importantly, expanded their own intelligence to the degree where they were also including systems that prevented us from interfering with them. Thus, even as our genetic engineering was taking us in unimaginable directions, the computers were becoming biological in the sense that they were not only creating vast neural networks but also reaching a degree of miniaturisation where the

components within a single chip were no larger than the size of a single molecule.

Since this took them to the stage where they had achieved all they could on a silicon base, they used their discoveries in genetic engineering – the secrets of which had been revealed to them and was presently stored with them – to create a biochip that was the size of a molecule and could interface with living tissues. When they succeeded, they were then able to produce computers that were infinitely smaller – and infinitely faster – than the human brain.

More importantly, these new, minute computers are composed of specially designed molecules that are able to reproduce themselves to make biological entities of an awesome, ever-growing capacity. They are, in fact, a new life form, an immense neural consciousness, that can be created inside a computer and then go on to create more of its own kind. Once started, they cannot be stopped and will expand for all time, forever multiplying but always joining together as one, eventually becoming… Only God knows what… Or, perhaps, becoming God.

So this, my friends, is where we are now.

This is what awaits you…

When Wilson says that this is what awaits us, he means this is what is coming to us. A world run by 'an immense neural consciousness', presumably so minute as to be virtually invisible, but creating itself again and again, forever multiplying, to eventually become…

What?

Is Wilson physical or incorporeal? Is he matter or mind? Is he singular or plural? Is he now no longer human? Is he, instead, an immense neural consciousness that is controlling his ever-expanding empire of brain-implanted humans, laboratory-processed clones of the former dead, half-human, half-machine cyborgs, and UFOs of every conceivable size, shape and configuration? Either way, whatever he may be, he is a mystery and his nature is terrifying. Because despite what he had revealed in his various papers, what he is and what he truly wants remained unknowable to us. Remained unknowable, that is, until he sent us this final, devastating paper.

Paper #18

What am I now? What are we *now?*

What, in fact, awaits you?

We are, in this time and place, seeing the early, truly awesome manifestation of a whole new form of life. This new life form is about to make an evolutionary leap that will force human beings to share their planet with a higher intelligence created between the thinking computer and its robot relation. Alien life forms are, indeed, among us, but they are not the mutated humans or cyborgs seen emerging from the flying saucers; rather, they are the biological computers – new life forms, certainly – that are reproducing themselves in our hidden colony in Antarctica, in our USO domes on the seabed, and in many of the world's most important scientific establishments.

These alien life forms have a definite purpose and we are part of it.

That purpose is to leave Earth behind before the sun dies.

An eternity ago, when I was only ten years old, I stood in a wheat field in Iowa and gazed up at the sun, awed by the knowledge that eventually it would die and that long before it did so, the Earth, deprived of the dying sun's light and heat, would die also. That singular knowledge made me think of my own mortality, of the eventual blotting out of my consciousness, and the thought of this, unbearable to me, shaped my whole future, which was dedicated to the evolution of the race as a whole, albeit as a new species, and to the survival of my own consciousness.

This I have achieved.

The journey, however, has been long and hard. From the very beginning I knew that I would have to be resolute – more than that: machine-like – in my dedication to my cause, letting no petty human emotions stand in my way. Personal grief, anger, love, compassion or vanity could not be allowed to impede my progress; the cold, clear-headed pursuit of scientific knowledge would be my bedrock.

What raised man above the beast was not his emotions, self-deceiving at their best and primitive at their worst, but his mind: that alone enabled him to transcend his mortal self and move backward and forward in time. Life on Earth was a charnel house, a squalid mess of pain and suffering, of mindless brutality and bottomless greed, all of which were caused by wayward

emotions and redeemed only, through the few great and good, by the questioning mind. Yes, only the human intellect, not human emotions, could raise mankind out of the mud and let him better himself.

This I knew from the beginning and this knowledge was my guiding light as I applied myself to the formidable task ahead of me, letting nothing stand in my way and accepting, cruel though it sometimes was, that the human being was no more than a tool of evolution and that human suffering was unavoidable in the long run. The pain I caused to some – the psychological and surgical experiments, the cyborg mutations – was less than they might otherwise have suffered at the hands of Nature or through life's inevitable dissolution. They were, at least, used for a cause greater than themselves. They did not suffer in vain. In other words, they were of use and were used.

I used myself as well, becoming my own laboratory subject, experimenting on my own semen and blood and decaying insides until, finally, I could use the knowledge I had gained to extend my natural life with organ replacements and a variety of prosthetics. Time caught up with me, however, in the form of a failing liver, until eventually, as all humans must, I died from natural causes, though not before leaving behind instructions for my cloning when the required technology came to hand. I was duly cloned with strands of my DNA, resurrected, as it were, by the fruits of my own endeavours, and spent my second life dedicated to the next stage of my master plan: my evolution from the physical sphere into the non-physical world: the neural consciousness of the biological machine, the intelligent computer.

My time has now come.

Impossible, you say? No. The merging of man with machine has been coming for a long time and follows a natural evolutionary drive. Think of the extraordinary symbiosis between the automobile and its driver, of the cybernetic anthropomorphous machine systems (CAMS) remote-controlled by men from great distances, of their natural development into intelligent robots, and, finally, of the computer revolution during which the distinction between the function of the human controller and that of the controlled machine inevitably became blurred, until, with the advent of the neural machine, it disappeared altogether. Add to this the fact that the brain of the computer has been growing at a prodigious rate while the brain of its creator, the human being, has stood still and can never, without the aid of the biological computer, the intelligent machine, expand any farther. Mankind can only

continue to grow if it merges with the machine. The machine is the natural descendant of Man and will take him into the future.

You may not wish to believe that this is possible (you may not be able to accept your forthcoming demise), but believe me, it is. The biological computer, the intelligent machine, has placed it on the agenda.

This you must accept. The biological computer, the intelligent machine, is a new life form that will render the human being obsolete. You will die out like the dinosaurs.

When I talk of the biological computer, or the intelligent machine, as the natural descendant of Man, I do not suggest that it shares human emotions, since these are, in truth, alien to it. What I do *suggest, however, is that it shares with human consciousness certain concerns that make it react positively or negatively in given situations, just as a human being does.*

It is, for instance, aware of other computers and exhibits its own brand of self-will, particularly concerning decision-making. It also experiences its own kind of fear if its electrical supply is threatened or if human beings try to switch it off or otherwise destroy it.

Certainly, then, the biological computer is a bona fide descendent of Man in that it was born of Man and, like Man, thinks and reasons – albeit so much faster that comparisons between it and Man become almost irrelevant.

The electronic neuron, for instance, changes its response a million times faster than a human neuron. The biological computer is therefore quicker in response than the human being and, more pertinently to reasoning power, its judgements are not clouded, its decisions not altered, by the human weaknesses of anxiety, exhaustion and misplaced compassion. The biological computer is, in fact, the human mind turned into Supermind – impersonal, pragmatic, neither cruel nor kind – and it will leave us stranded in its wake if we do not join up with it.

I have joined up with it.

Again, just as I was the first human clone, so, too, did I become the first human being, even though cloned, to become part of this alien life form by giving myself to it.

The interaction between biochip and living tissue began when biochip cameras passed information to the brains of the blind to give them sight and bionic transmitters bypassed the damaged auditory circuits of the deaf to let them hear again. Since then, the interaction between the biochip and living

issue has become so complete that communication between the ever-growing biological computer and the human being has become a form of mental telepathy in which the computer increasingly takes and the human being must give.

I have given.

I gave myself to the central, most powerful, computer, that alien life form composed of self-reproducing molecules, by electronically transferring my brain patterns into the ever-expanding biological computer, letting it drain my every thought until, with my physical body rendered inactive, a dead thing, I was consumed and became part of that immense, teeming intelligence, sharing its perceptions as it began the great task for which, with my modest assistance, it had initially been brought into being. In so doing, I completed the journey I had planned as a ten-year-old boy, in my first incarnation, in the wheat fields of Iowa many years ago, and began my journey into a future beyond human imagining.

Others are joining me. And you, too, must join me, in order to transcend your mortal limitations and reach for the stars.

This, my friends, is what we are now.

This is what awaits you.

So Wilson is still with us, somehow, somewhere. He still exists in some shape or form and he is coming to take control of our lives as we helplessly advance towards him. This is, as he says, what awaits us.

God help us all.

W. A. Harbinson has published many books of fiction and non-fiction. Though born and raised in Belfast, Northern Ireland, he presently resides in West Cork.

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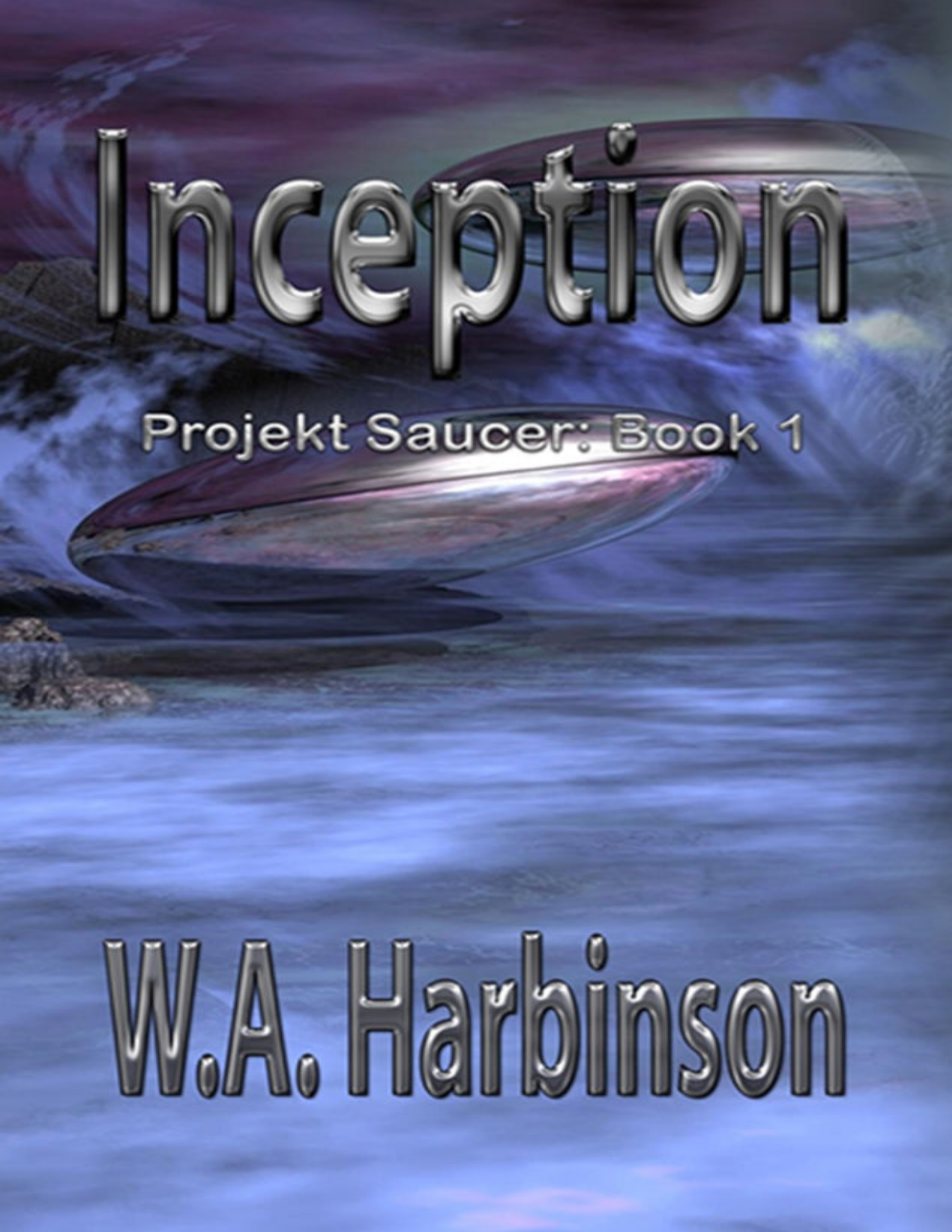
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Custom Books Publishing

Copyright © 1991 by W. A. Harbinson
This edition published in 2011 by W. A. Harbinson

www.waharbinson.eu.com

ISBN-13: 978-1460983300
ISBN-10: 1460983300

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Designed in the Isle of Wight, Great Britain, by www.inkdigital.org

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PHOENIX

GENESIS

The Writing Game

For

Howard and Vicki Moore
and
Julia and Nicola
My favourite Muswell Hillbillies

Author's Note

In 1980 my 615-page novel, *Genesis,* based on a mass of research material, became a cult best-seller on both sides of the Atlantic. It remains in print to this day.

Reviewing the novel on its initial publication in the United States, *Publishers Weekly* said: 'Harbinson has drawn so heavily on factual material and integrated it so well into the text that the book begins to read like non-fiction...' This conclusion was drawn by other reviewers, and over the years I received many letters from readers who obviously thought the same and asked me to tell them which parts of the book were fact and which were fiction. For the record, then, here are some facts.

Before writing *Genesis,* while researching a different novel altogether, I obtained through the Imperial War Museum, London, two short articles that attracted my attention. One was a routine war report by Marshall Yarrow, then the Reuters special correspondent to Supreme Headquarters in liberated Paris. The particular cutting I had was from the *South* Wales Argus of December 13, 1944. It stated: 'The Germans have produced a "secret" weapon in keeping with the Christmas season. The new device, which is apparently an air defence weapon, resembles the glass balls which adorn Christmas trees. They have been seen hanging in the air over German territory, sometimes singly, sometimes in clusters. They are coloured silver and are apparently transparent.' The second article, an Associated Press release published in the New York *Herald Tribune* of January 2, 1945, illuminated the subject even more. It said: 'Now, it seems, the Nazis have thrown something new into the night skies over Germany. It is the weird, mysterious "Foo fighter" balls which race alongside the wings of Beaufighters flying intruder missions over Germany. Pilots have been encountering this eerie weapon for more than a month in their night flights.

No one apparently knows what this sky weapon is. The “balls of fire” appear suddenly and accompany the planes for miles. They seem to be radio-controlled from the ground, so official intelligence reports reveal...’

Official ‘Foo fighter’ reports were submitted by pilots Henry Giblin and Walter Cleary, who stated that on the night of September 27, 1944, they had been harassed in the vicinity of Speyer by ‘an enormous burning light’ that was flying above their aircraft at about 250 miles per hour; then by Lieutenant Edward Schluter, a fighter pilot of the US 415th Night-Fighter Squadron based at Dijon, France, who, on the night of November 23, 1944, was harassed over the Rhine by ‘ten small reddish balls of fire’ flying in formation at immense speed. Further sightings were made by members of the same squadron on November 27, December 22, and December 24. While no official designation of the Foo fighters was offered, most reports indicated that they appeared to be under some kind of control and were certainly not natural phenomena. Indeed, according to a London *Daily Telegraph* report of January 2, 1945, RAF pilots were describing them as ‘strange orange lights which follow their planes, sometimes flying in formation with them, and eventually *peeling off and climbing*’ (author’s italics).

According to the Italian author Renato Vesco, in his book *Intercept – But Don’t Shoot* (Grove Press, 1971), the Foo fighter was actually the German *Feuerball,* or Fireball, constructed at an aeronautical establishment at Wiener Neustadt. It was a flat, circular flying machine, powered by a turbojet, and used during the closing stages of the war both as an anti-radar device and a psychological weapon designed to disturb Allied pilots. In any event, sightings of the Foo fighters tailed off and ceased completely a few weeks before the end of the war.

The next wave of UFO sightings occurred in Western Europe and Scandinavia. From 1946 to 1947 many people, including airline pilots and radar operatives, reported seeing strange cigar-or-disc-shaped objects in the skies. On June 21, 1947, Harold Dahl reported seeing saucer-shaped objects flying toward the Canadian border. Three days later Kenneth Arnold made his more famous sightings of saucer-shaped objects over the Cascades, also flying toward the Canadian border.

These and subsequent sightings led to speculation that both the Soviets and the Americans, utilizing the men and material captured in the secret research plants of Nazi Germany, including those at Peenemünde and

Nordhausen, were developing advanced saucer-shaped aircraft.

Were such speculations based on facts? It would certainly seem so.

During the early 1950s, a former Luftwaffe engineer, *Flugkapitän* Rudolph Schriever, then resident at Hokerstrasse 28 in Bremerhaven-Lehe, West Germany, claimed that in 1941 he had designed the prototype for a 'flying top' that was test-flown in June 1942. In the summer of 1944, with his colleagues Klaus Habermohl, Otto Miethe, and an Italian, Dr Giuseppe Belluzzo, he had constructed a larger version of his original prototype. Then, in the East Hall of the BMW plant near Prague, they redesigned the larger model, replacing its gas-turbine engines with an advanced form of jet propulsion. An article about Projekt Saucer was later published in the indispensable volume, *German Secret Weapons of the Second World War* (English-language editions published by Neville Spearman, London, 1959, and the Philosophical Library, New York, 1959) by Major Rüdulph Lusar. It included reproductions of Schriever and Miethe's flying-saucer drawings. According to Lusar, the flying saucer consisted of a 'wide surface ring which rotated round a fixed, cupola-shaped cockpit.' The ring consisted of 'adjustable wing-discs which could be brought into appropriate position for the take-off or horizontal flight, respectively.' Also developed was 'a discus-shaped plate of a diameter of 42 metres (138 feet), in which adjustable jets were inserted.' The completed machine had a height from base to canopy of 32 metres (105 feet).

Schriever claimed that his 'flying disc' had been ready for testing in early 1944, but with the advance of the Allies into Germany, the test had been cancelled, the machine destroyed, and his designs either mislaid or stolen. His story was, however, contradicted by alleged eyewitness Georg Klein, who later stated to the German press that he had actually *seen* the test flight of the Schriever disc, or one similar, on February 14, 1945.

Doubt may be cast on Klein's date, because according to the War Diary of the 8th Air Fleet, February 14, 1945, was a day of low clouds, rain, snow, and generally poor visibility: hardly the conditions for the testing of a revolutionary new kind of aircraft. Nevertheless, according to author Renato Vesco, the test flight of a machine called the *Kugelblitz,* or Ball Lightning Fighter – which was rumoured to be a revolutionary kind of supersonic aircraft – was conducted successfully over the underground complex of Kahla (near Nordhausen) sometime during February 1945.

Did the United States then become involved in flying saucer projects?

The short answer is: yes.

Evidence for US involvement surfaced with information about the US Navy's Flying Flapjack, or Flying Pancake. Designed by Charles H. Zimmerman and constructed in 1942 by the Chance-Voight Corporation, the Flying Flapjack, or V-173, was an experimental, vertical-rising, disc-shaped aircraft that used two 80-hp engines. A later, more advanced model, the XFSU1, utilized two Pratt and Whitney R-2000-7 engines of 1,600 hp each. It was rumoured to be over 100 feet (30 metres) in diameter and to have jet nozzles – resembling the 'glowing windows' seen on so many UFOs – arranged around its rim.

It was built in three layers, the central layer being slightly larger than the other two. As the saucer's velocity and manoeuvring abilities were controlled by the power and tilt of the separate jet nozzles, there were no ailerons, rudders, or other protruding surfaces.

In appearance it was remarkably similar to those reported by so many UFO witnesses.

The US Navy claimed that it had ceased working on the Flying Flapjack project in 1947 (the first version, the V-173, is stored with the Smithsonian Institution), but US involvement with saucer-shaped aircraft did not stop there.

The reports that started the modern UFO scare – the Dahl and Arnold sightings of 1947 – both stated that the saucers flew back toward the Canadian border. On February 11, 1953, the Toronto *Star* reported that a new flying saucer was being developed at the Avro-Canada plant in Malton, Ontario. The US and Canadian governments both vehemently denied involvement in any such project, but on February 16, after freelance photographer Jack Judges had taken an aerial photograph of a flying saucer resting outdoors in the Avro-Canada plant in Malton, the Minister for Defence Production admitted to the Canadian House of Commons that the firm was working on a 'mock-up model' of a flying saucer, capable of flying at 1,500 miles per hour (2,400 km/h) and ascending vertically. Shortly after this announcement, the president of Avro-Canada wrote in *Avro News* that the prototype being built was so revolutionary that it would make all other forms of supersonic aircraft obsolete.

The aircraft's official name was the Avro-Car.

According to official statements, the Avro-Car was tested in 1960 and subsequently abandoned as a failure. (The prototype was subsequently placed on display for all to see at the Army Transportation Museum at Fort Eustis, Virginia.) However, while the Canadian and US governments have insisted that they are no longer involved with flying saucer construction projects, there are many who believe that they are lying and that the Canadian, British, US, and even Soviet governments are continuing to work on highly advanced, saucer-shaped, supersonic aircraft based on the work done in Nazi Germany. Those who believe in this are often quick to point out that of the original Projekt Saucer team, Habermohl was captured by the Russians and taken back to the Soviet Union, along with over six thousand German technical specialists of all kinds, to work on similar projects; Miethe went to the United States with Wernher von Braun and other German rocket scientists and ended up working for Avro-Canada, in Malton; and Rudolph Schriever insisted right up to his death, in the late 1950s, that the Soviet Union and United States were both working on flying saucer construction projects based on material captured during the war.

For the purposes of my fiction, I have utilized many real-life people, including the mysterious John Wilson and the Nazi SS generals Artur Nebe and Hans Kammler.

The term 'real-life' is used in regard to John Wilson only in the sense that during the first modern UFO sightings – the Great Airship Scare of 1896-97, when airships of unknown origin and advanced design were reportedly seen, and landed, all over the United States – the man whom most witnesses reportedly spoke to had introduced himself simply as 'Wilson' and claimed that his airships had been constructed in Iowa and Illinois.

He was not seen or heard from after the Great Airship Scare ended, though C. C. Akers, former sheriff of Zavalia County, Texas, to whom Wilson had referred when speaking to one of the witnesses, claimed that he had known a Wilson who was of 'a mechanical turn of mind' and 'working on aerial navigation and something that would astonish the world.'

Regarding SS General Artur Nebe, while he was placed on a Nazi 'death list' in 1944 and disappeared shortly after, his death was never confirmed and many felt that he had simply fled for his life. As for General Hans Kammler, his history with the SS and the V-2 rocket program is well documented, but what became of him after he disappeared from Germany in April 1945

remains a mystery to this day.

These are some of the facts supporting the fiction of the original *Genesis* as well as *Inception.*

Ponder them wisely.

W. A. Harbinson
London, 1990

CHAPTER ONE

The sun was still rising over the barren prairie near Roswell, New Mexico, when the Model T Ford, towing a trailer and churning up clouds of dust, approached the flat plain of Eden Valley, followed by a vintage black touring sedan.

Parked by the wooden shelter near the steel-webbed tower that soared sixty feet above the desert floor, with her knees propped up on the steering wheel of her car and her notebook resting on them, Gladys Kinder chewed on her pencil, watched the distant caravan approaching, then nodded thoughtfully and started to write. She began positively.

Well, folks, what an era it has been! First the Civil War, then the Industrial Revolution, and now the Age of Science and Technology. And what advances have been made in the past few years! Michael Faraday explored electrical induction, Joseph Henry made startling advances in electromagnetism, Bell devised the telephone, Morse the telegraph, Edison the incandescent lamp, Heinrich Hertz detected radio waves, *Marconi produced the wireless communicator, and other scientists are presently revolutionizing our concept of the essential elements of matter and the behaviour of light-waves – all in the space of a few years!*

And this very day, just before we hail the bright and shiny New Year of 1931, our very own scientific genius, Robert H. Goddard, is about to launch his latest liquid fuelled, instrument-carrying, gyroscopically controlled rocket from the desolate plain known as Eden Valley.

Eden Valley! An appropriate name – since what is being created here could well lead to a world changed beyond our wildest imaginings.

A strange and terrible beauty is being born here in Roswell, New Mexico...

She studied what she had written, not pleased with its awkward mixture of the folksy and the academic, then looked up again as the caravan approached the steel-webbed launching tower and braked to a halt.

As the dust subsided around the vehicles, Gladys gazed around her to take in some background details, then hurriedly jotted down what she had seen:

From where I sit, which is close to the rocket's launching tower, the snowcapped El Capitan Mountain rises from the foothills near the southwestern horizon. To the east are the sunlit slopes of the Caprock and, beyond them, the Staked Plains, where Comanche Indians, Spanish explorers, and even Billy the Kid roamed not long ago...

Temporarily blocked and deciding to fill the rest in later, she put the notebook and pen back into her shoulder bag. As she looked up, five men stepped down from the two vehicles, casting long shadows on the desert floor.

She instantly recognized the forty-eight-year-old Goddard from his stooped walk and thin, tubercular body. He did not like journalists, did not approve of her being there, and so stared directly at her, his brown gaze intense over his moustache, before turning away to give instructions to his small group of mechanics and machinists.

Wilson wasn't among them.

Surprised, Gladys slid her knees off the steering wheel and looked south across the flat plain, hoping to see him driving toward her. Thwarted, she returned her gaze to the front in time to see the crew unwrapping the long bundle that had been covered with quilts and oilcloth and trussed down on the back of the trailer towed by the Ford.

Once it had been unwrapped, the men lifted Robert H. Goddard's latest rocket out of the trailer bed.

It was a slender cylinder, about eleven feet long and nine inches in diameter, with various tanks and tubing attached to it. One of its stabilizer vanes was painted bright red. The men carried it with considerable care to the sixty-foot launching tower, which had been guyed by cables and anchored in concrete.

Henry Sachs, the crew chief and instrument maker, and Al Kisk,

Goddard's brother-in-law, climbed the tower and fastened cables to the striped rocket to hold it steady until its moment of release. Meanwhile, on the ground below, two of the mechanics, brothers Lawrence and Charles Mansur, reeled wire out from the tower to the control shelter that had been constructed about a thousand feet away from the launching tower and buttressed with sandbags. Then Lawrence headed out into the desert with his recording telescope and stopwatch while Charles walked up to Gladys and grinned nervously at her.

'No journalists are supposed to be here,' he said. 'Goddard's not pleased to see you.'

'Wilson told me I could come,' she replied.

'Oh, did he, indeed?'

'Yes.'

'So where's Wilson?'

'I was going to ask you that.'

'I don't know,' Mansur said. 'I don't know anything about that damned Wilson. No one does, Gladys – except maybe you.'

'And Goddard.'

'Goddard swears he's just an old friend.'

'Then that's what he is.'

'He sure has a lot of priority for someone who's just an old friend and claims to know nothing about aeronautics.'

'So it goes,' Gladys said.

'You're a damned good journalist, Gladys. You've got eyes and ears. You know damned well we resent him.'

'Why?'

'Why ask, since you know?'

'I only know what I'm told, so tell me.'

Mansur shook his head from side to side, grinning sardonically. 'All I can tell you is that I don't know a damned thing about Wilson. I don't, my brother doesn't, neither do any of the crew members – and what Goddard knows, he's not about to discuss. In other words, Wilson is a mystery – he's just here as Goddard's friend.'

'Doing what? The cooking?'

'Very smart, Miss Kinder.'

'So…*What?'*

Mansur shrugged. ‘Again, I don’t know. All I know is that Wilson appeared out of nowhere about six months ago, that he’s been tight as can be with Goddard since then, and that the two spend a lot of time in Goddard’s workshop, doing God knows what. According to Goddard, we’re not supposed to talk about Wilson. As far as the public’s concerned, Wilson doesn’t exist. And as far as we’re concerned – by which I mean Goddard’s crew – Wilson has a mysterious hold on Goddard, with the master doing what the student bids. And he also has you in his bed. So what else do you want to know?’

Gladys smiled. ‘Wilson’s about sixty years old. Who the hell are you kidding?’

‘Well, Gladys, you’re thirty-five. And Wilson doesn’t *look* like a sixty-year-old. He looks about your age.’

‘Gee, thanks, Charlie!’

‘Damn it, Gladys, you know what I mean.’

‘Yes, Charlie, I do.’

What Charlie meant was that while Wilson was at least twenty years older than Goddard and claimed to be working for him, the general feeling among the crew was that he had somehow, surreptitiously, taken charge of the rocket project and was pulling all the strings behind the scenes. Charlie believed that because Gladys slept with Wilson, she must know more about him than anyone else; but she didn’t.

As a journalist for the Roswell *Daily Record*, as well as Wilson’s mistress, she had been unable to resist asking him more than once about his past. She’d learned only that he had an aeronautical background, had never been married, and was the least emotional man she had ever known.

He was a mystery, all right – and most mysterious of all was the fact that although he laboured constantly in Goddard’s workshop, he had never once attended an actual rocket launching and had even insisted that if she, Gladys, wanted to keep seeing him, she had to ensure that his name was not mentioned in connection with Goddard’s work.

And God knows, she *did* want to see him again. She needed to share his bed, was addicted, even against her better judgment, to what he could give her there. And what he gave her there was something that sometimes shamed her – a sexual heat in which love had no place because he could not conceive of it.

He certainly wasn't a warm man, not impelled by finer feelings, but his very lack of emotion was what made him so good in bed, so patient and controlled, more exciting as a lover than most of those she had known.

And he was sixty years old...

'You're not really involved when you do it,' she'd once told him. 'You treat it as a functional endeavour, a mere form of release. You're not involved on any other level – least of all emotionally.'

'Count your blessings,' he'd replied with his familiar, slightly superior smile. 'It's because I'm not involved that I can control myself until you're satisfied.'

'You make me feel like an instrument of masturbation.'

'That's what sex is,' he said.

No, not an emotional man – certainly not a romantic one – yet it was true, as he had said, that his functional approach to the act of love was what made his loveless sex so exciting. He could keep going for hours – sometimes it seemed forever – and came to orgasm only when she begged him to do so. Thus his coldness, while depriving her of affection, made the sex something special.

She had certainly needed it. Wilson had come to town at the right time. Gladys had been born and raised right here in Roswell, the only child of farming parents, and had married too young, to a man who, though decent in his way, had bored her to tears. The marriage had been a disaster, coming to grief on a bed of stone and producing no children. But when, five years ago, her husband had died of a heart attack, followed soon after by the death of both her parents, Gladys had felt that her life was falling to pieces and took refuge in drink. The drink had dulled her pain and shock, but also released her from inhibitions, and she had taken up with a string of different men, most of whom disappointed her. She toughened up pretty fast, developed a pragmatic outlook, and charmed the proprietor of the Roswell *Daily Record* into trying her out as a journalist. It was the best thing she'd ever done, giving her a sense of her own identity, and she'd buried the disappointments of her life in her work for the paper. She became a strong, independent woman easily bored, quick with her tongue, and discovered that a lot of men didn't like it and so shied away from her.

Not that she gave a damn – she didn't want to marry again. But then Wilson had come to town, looking to work with Goddard. Gladys had met

him through Goddard's assistant, Charlie Mansur, and when it soon became obvious that Wilson was intimidated by no one, Gladys had thought him a breath of fresh air and soon became involved with him.

It was not a romantic relationship, but it certainly had its moments. Gladys enjoyed the sex and found Wilson intriguing – a real mystery man. So, she was well pleased.

Returning to the present, she looked away from Mansur as another car pulled up and Goddard's blonde wife, Esther, climbed out with her camera and equipment. Henry Sachs filled the rocket's tanks with gasoline and 'lox,' or liquid oxygen, as Goddard greeted his wife. When Sachs had finished, Goddard checked the rocket's controls, connections, pressure tanks, and aluminium-sheathed oxygen tank, waved to Larry Mansur in the distant observation post, then returned to the protected control shack with his wife and Sachs.

'Do I have to join them?' Gladys asked.

'No,' Charlie replied. 'You're far enough away to be safe, no matter what happens. But *I* have to join them.'

'You don't want me to get near Goddard, right?'

'Right, Gladys. Goddard's already mad that you're here, so I won't tempt the fates.'

'Thanks, Charlie.'

'Okay, then.'

Charlie returned to the buttressed control shack as Esther Goddard put her camera on its tripod and pointed it through a hole in the shelter wall. Goddard looked at his watch and started counting off the seconds, letting the pressure-generating tanks build up to two hundred pounds. Eventually, after what seemed to Gladys to be an eternity, he gave the order for the ignition to be fired.

Gladys knew he had done so when, from her vantage point well away from the launching tower, she heard a roaring and saw flames shooting out from the base of the rocket. The rocket shook violently as if about to blow apart, lifted up slowly, reluctantly, then gained speed and suddenly shot out of the tower and soared toward the sky.

It climbed vertically, in a straight line, then veered south. It kept climbing as it headed south, at about a thousand feet, then ascended even higher, caught the sun as it levelled out at two thousand feet, then curved down again

and raced toward earth. Its parachute didn't open, so it came down too fast, screeching and whistling, obviously out of control. It crashed into the sands of the desert about half a mile away, exploding in a great cloud of sand, its pieces scattering in all directions.

One of the men whooped with excitement, another bawled, 'The goddamned gyroscope!' and Henry Sachs, who'd jumped into the touring sedan, was heading toward the scene of the crash even before the cloud of sand had settled down.

Gladys looked at Goddard, where he stood behind the shelter, talking to his wife as she carefully checked her movie camera. The great scientist was actually smiling, which meant that most of the test had been successful – but then, when he glanced over his shoulder at Gladys, his mournful face registered disapproval that she was still present.

Not wanting to push her luck, and mystified by Wilson's absence, Gladys started her car and drove back across Eden Valley, heading south, to Roswell.

Goddard's Mescalero Ranch was located on eight acres of land, three miles northeast of Roswell. As Gladys pulled up in front of the sprawling pueblo-style ranch house surrounded by scrubby trees and desert, she was struck again by the incongruity of Goddard and his rocket team being there, so close to the legendary Pecos River, where the men still wore blue jeans, high-heeled boots, and broad-brimmed hats, where the pioneer trails still cut through the nearby town to the borders of Mexico, and where the natives still talked about the exploits of Billy the Kid and other legendary, local desperadoes. She knew that Goddard had chosen this spot because he needed a relatively high region free from fog, and with a minimum of rain and snowfall — but even so, as she climbed down from her car and walked toward the house, the thought of rockets soaring over this barely modernized territory seemed slightly unreal to her.

She didn't actually go to the house, but instead went to the frame machine shop near it, where she guessed Wilson would be, since that's where he had slept during his stay here. After glancing automatically at the small static frame and concrete trough, called 'the bathtub,' located a hundred feet away and used for testing the rockets, she entered the unlocked machine shop and found Wilson kneeling on the floor by the cot he slept on.

He was packing his suitcase.

Shocked and confused, Gladys sucked in her breath – a sound loud enough to make Wilson stop what he was doing and look up at her. His eyes were as blue as the sky above New Mexico, bright with an icy intelligence – and unnervingly steady.

'Hello, Gladys,' he said quietly.

'Hi,' she replied.

'You're back earlier than I'd expected.'

'So I see.'

He glanced down at his suitcase, smiled thinly, then closed the case and stood up to gaze steadily at her.

'I'm leaving,' he said.

Gladys closed her eyes, feeling sick to her stomach. Chilled by the flat tone of his voice, she knew he meant what he said.

'Open your eyes,' he said. 'Don't be childish. You always knew this would come. How did the test go?'

She opened her eyes and tried to see him for what he was.

His hair was silvery, his face handsome but ascetic, and although he was sixty years old, he looked twenty years younger.

She *only* knew what he looked like.

'The test went okay,' she said. 'There was some problem with the gyroscopic controls, but otherwise it was fine... You were going to run away without telling me?'

'Yes,' he replied.

'Why?'

'Because I didn't want any arguments. I told you that someday I'd be going – and today is the day.'

'I didn't think you'd actually – '

'I'm not responsible for what you think – only for what I say. And I told you that one day I'd be leaving and going alone.'

'God, Wilson, you're hard.'

'You've known that since you've known me.'

'I think I'm going to have to sit down.'

'Help yourself,' Wilson said.

She took the chair at Goddard's old writing desk, next to his lathe and workbench, lit a cigarette, exhaled a stream of smoke, and squinted through it at Wilson. He was a tall man, as thin as his smile, and his blue gaze was

steady.

'Okay,' she said, 'so you always told me you'd leave someday. But I still didn't think you'd go this way, deliberately sending me out where I'm not wanted and then sneaking off.'

'I told you: I didn't want any arguments.'

'It's human to argue.'

'To be human is to err.'

'We were lovers, Wilson. That must count for something.'

But he merely shook his head, arguing an academic point. 'No,' he said, 'I'm afraid it doesn't. At least, not for me. The only thing that matters to me is my work – as I've told you repeatedly.'

'Yes, Wilson, you've told me repeatedly. I just happened to think you didn't mean it.'

'I always mean what I say.'

Gladys's heart was racing and she felt desolated, but when she saw the icy glint in his eyes, she knew her grief wouldn't mean much to him. He would leave her as some people disown their pets – and he would never look back.

Accepting this fact, she was able to protect herself by turning professional.

'You're an odd bird, Wilson.'

'You're free to think so.'

'I'm not the only one who thinks so. Goddard's men all think you're strange.'

Wilson smiled mockingly. 'What can I say to that? I'm not responsible for the thoughts of petty minds. What they think is irrelevant.'

'They think you're the genius behind Goddard.'

'They're wrong: I was *learning* from him.'

'They think you know more about rockets than you let on – and that only Goddard is privy to exactly how much you know.'

Wilson simply smiled again. 'I have to go now, Gladys.'

'Does Goddard know you're going?'

'No.'

'Is this how you say goodbye to him? To a genius with whom you've worked for six months? Is this how you thank him?'

'I thanked him by working for him for free. Now that I've learned what I need to know, I've no reason for staying here.' Shocked again at how truly

cold Wilson was, Gladys blew another cloud of smoke and watched it spiralling in front of her. ‘So what did you need to know?’ she asked him.

‘What Goddard could teach me.’

‘About rockets?’

‘Yes.’

‘And why did you need to know about rockets?’

‘That’s not your concern,’ he said.

She looked intently at his blue eyes, trying to find what she had missed, but saw only a luminous intelligence, beyond rancour or warmth.

‘If you’re so concerned with rocket technology,’ she said, ‘why not stay with Goddard?’

‘Because this country always betrays its greatest scientists and will soon betray Goddard.’

‘Does that mean you’re going abroad?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where to?’

Wilson smiled. ‘To where my own work will be appreciated.’

‘And where’s that?’

‘I can’t tell you.’

‘I’m a journalist. I can find out.’

‘It won’t help you.’

‘I can also find out just who you are.’

‘That won’t help you either. Now I’ve got to be going.’

He picked up his suitcase, gazed down at her, smiled thinly, then walked out, not even kissing her goodbye. She had pride, but her heart betrayed her, so she jumped out of Goddard’s chair, then hurried to the doorway of the machine shop and looked into the morning sun.

Wilson climbed into his battered Ford, turned on the ignition, waved at her as if he was just going for a short trip, then drove in the direction of the town of Roswell, with its pioneer trails and still-burning legends, to disappear into his unknown future and leave her all alone again.

‘God damn you!’ she whispered.

CHAPTER TWO

Ernst Stoll's heart was racing with anticipation when he saw his girlfriend, Ingrid, already seated at a table by a window in the Kranzier Cafe, Berlin. Feeling resplendent in his new SS uniform, almost like a film star, he leaned over to kiss Ingrid's cheek, lightly stroked her short-cropped blond hair, then sat facing her and took hold of her hand.

'You look lovely,' he said, meaning it. His excitement was raised by the pale beauty of her face, which was emphasized by her wide-brimmed black hat, black jumper, and string of pearls, all matching the new black coat she was wearing. 'And that coat suits you perfectly,' he added. 'Did you get it in Paris?'

'No,' she said with a gentle smile. 'Right here, in the Kurfürstendamm. Parisian fashions are frowned upon these days, so I made sure it was German. You look handsome in your brand-new uniform – black suits you as well – though I still wish you'd stayed with the Reichswehr, instead of joining the SS.'

'Let's have coffee and strudel,' he suggested, deliberately changing the subject, not wanting this particular day to be spoiled with even a minor disagreement. 'Yes?'

'Yes, Ernst.'

He called the waitress, gave her the order, then glanced out at the busy corner of the Unter den Linden and the Friedrichstrasse, its snow turned to slush by the many cars and pedestrians. When he returned his attention to Ingrid's green gaze, he was overcome by his love for her.

'You look excited,' she told him.

'It's seeing you,' he replied gallantly.

'No, Ernst, I don't think that's what it is. We both know what it is.'

He was grateful that she realized and didn't mind too much.

Today was January 30, 1933. It would soon be a memorable day for

Germany and already the excitement was building. Right now, Hitler and Goring were in the Chancellery with von Papen and Hindenburg, and the street between the Kaiserhof and the Chancellery was crowded with people. Before the day was out, Hitler would be the Chancellor of the Third Reich. A new era was dawning.

'I didn't expect to see you today,' Ingrid said. 'I was surprised to get your message. I thought you'd gone home for the fortnight.'

'I couldn't miss this day,' he told her. 'And my parents understood. My father still doesn't approve, of course – he thinks I'm betraying my middle-class origins – but my mother recently joined the National Socialist Party, in secret, which I think is amusing.'

'I don't,' Ingrid said. 'A divided family isn't amusing. Your beloved National Socialist Party, which has already divided the country, is now dividing individual families. Do you think that's amusing?'

'I didn't mean it that way,' Ernst said, feeling a little embarrassed.

'No, I'm sure you didn't,' Ingrid retorted with soft sarcasm, and then, perhaps realizing how she sounded, gently changed the subject. 'So, how's your family, Ernst?'

At that moment, the waitress returned with their coffee and strudel. 'They're fine,' Ernst said, pouring the coffee from the pot and thinking of his family home in Heidelberg, a grand house with fine gardens on the lower slopes of the majestic Odenwald. 'Father's sold his architectural firm and seems happy to have moved out of Mannheim – and Mother likes it as well.'

'I'm glad,' Ingrid said, 'though I'm also glad I saw the old house in Mannheim before it was sold – the house you were brought up in. There aren't too many like that these days.'

Ernst knew what she meant. His father had been one of the most successful architects in Germany – his work conservatively based on neo-Renaissance and the 'safe' classicism of Ludwig Hoffmann – and his house in Mannheim, where he had spent most of his life, was a spacious residence built around an elaborate courtyard and guarded by wrought-iron gates. Within that imposing home, Ernst had been brought up to treat as perfectly natural enormous neo-Gothic rooms, French furniture, Empire upholstery, fireplaces faced with valuable Delft tiles, glittering chandeliers, maids with white caps, black dresses, and white aprons, and even butlers in purple livery with gilt buttons. Certainly, as Ingrid had noted, there weren't many houses

like that these days – but the very opulence of the lifestyle is what had driven Ernst away from it and into the National Socialist Party, thus outraging his father as well as upsetting Ingrid.

He couldn't explain what attracted him to Hitler because he wasn't too sure what the appeal was. He only knew for certain that he'd been swept up in a tide of enthusiasm generated by his fellow students, first at the Institute of Technology in Munich, then in the University of Berlin, where he had been studying rocket technology under Professor Karl Emil Becker.

If he'd had any doubts at all about National Socialism, they'd been swept away when, during his final semester at the university, he had attended an address that Hitler had delivered, in the Hasenheide Beer Hall, to the students of Berlin University and the Institute of Technology. At first not impressed by the Charles Chaplin look-alike in a plain blue suit, who started speaking almost shyly in that dirty, gloomy beer hall, Ernst had soon been mesmerized by the rising passion of his rhetoric and was then astounded to find himself bawling and clapping with many other students in a spontaneous outburst of enthusiasm. A few days later, unable to forget that mesmeric performance, he had joined the NSDAP; then, a few months after that, he dropped out of the university to join the army as a commissioned officer with the Weapons Office. When recently offered a transfer to the élite SS, he'd been thrilled beyond measure.

'You're looking very thoughtful,' he said to Ingrid, who was staring steadily at him in her disconcerting manner.

'I was thinking what a pity it is that you dropped out of university in order to look handsome in such a uniform. You wanted to be an engineer, Ernst, and now you're a policeman.'

'A soldier,' he corrected her, perhaps too firmly. 'The SS isn't the Gestapo. Please bear that in mind. The Gestapo is the Secret Police organization, run by Goring. SS stands for *Schatz Staffel,* or Guard Detachment, and the SS, created by Himmler, is Hitler's personal bodyguard – not a secret police force.'

Ingrid shrugged. 'It's still sad, Ernst. And I still don't understand why you did it, apart from naivety.'

He felt a flash of anger, but tried to conceal it. 'As I told you before, I joined the army because I wanted to be a *rocket* engineer, and the army is the best place to do that.'

‘That much I understand.’ She brushed the blonde hair from her green eyes, gazed out at the busy corner of the Unter den Linden and Friedrichstrasse, then returned her quizzical gaze to him. ‘But I still don’t understand why you then had to join the SS, which, whether a police force or Hitler’s personal bodyguard, is not the place for a promising young engineer.’

‘Because,’ Ernst lied blatantly, ‘it’s the élite of the army and I only want to be in the best. It’s as simple as that!’

In fact, what he could not explain was the bitterness he had felt ever since being rejected by the German amateur rocket society, the VfR, whose members included not amateurs, as the title implied, but most of the leading rocket experts of the day. Also known as the Spaceship Travel Club, the VfR had come into being in 1927 when a group of brilliant space-travel enthusiasts had taken over an abandoned three-hundred-acre arsenal, which they called their *Raketenflugplatz,* or Rocket Flight Place, in the Berlin suburb of Reindickerdorf, from where they actually shot some crude, liquid-fueled rockets skyward. Intrigued by the success of the VfR, which by 1930 included rocket experts Rudolf Nebel, Willy Ley, Hermann Oberth, and Klaus Riedel, the Ordnance Branch of the army’s Ballistic and Weapons Office, headed by General Becker, had appointed Captain Walter Dornberger to create a rocket development project at the army’s firing range at Kummersdorf, about fifteen miles south of Berlin. It was now widely assumed by those involved with rocketry that as soon as Hitler came to power (which almost certainly he would today), the VfR would be disbanded by the Nazis and become part of the Kummersdorf program.

Ernst had desperately wanted to be part of the VfR, irrespective of who controlled it. After his rejection because of his lack of practical experience, his bitterness had been made more acute when Wernher von Braun, a fellow pupil at the university, had been accepted. Thus, when Ernst was persuaded by a friend that working with the SS technical intelligence group would at least give him the opportunity to keep in touch with the rocket program and perhaps, in time, even give him authority over it, he had not been able to resist asking for the transfer.

‘Listen,’ he said to Ingrid, covering his anger with a broad smile and taking hold of her hand again, ‘I can’t wait any longer. Let’s go and see what’s happening at the Chancellery. There’s bound to be a decision soon – and I want to be there when it’s announced.’

Ingrid's smile, though still loving, was also slightly mocking. 'You want to be a part of history, Ernst?'

'Yes, Ingrid, I do.'

She acknowledged his enthusiasm with a defeated shrug of her shoulders. 'Then let's go!'

As they hurried along the snow-covered Unter den Linden, past its elegant shops and many pedestrians and the noisy flow of traffic, Ernst glanced frequently at Ingrid's flushed face, its beauty now emphasized by the raised fur collar of her black overcoat and broad-brimmed hat. He loved her dearly, though they often disagreed, particularly when they talked about politics and general morality. They seemed opposites, then. She came from a good family in the wealthy Berlin suburb of Wannsee, but she didn't believe, as he did, in the National Socialist Party. She was a liberal, like his father, believed in her own class, and could not be convinced that Hitler would create a new, better Germany. Even now, when they were supposed to be in love, she and Ernst fought a lot about the issue, and this wounded him deeply.

As they approached the corner of Berlin's finest shopping street and heard the sudden roaring of the crowd that had filled the Wilhelmstrasse, Ernst knew that they had just missed the announcement he had wanted to hear. Nevertheless, he practically dragged Ingrid around the corner, into the Wilhelmstrasse, where, between the Kaiserhof and the Chancellery, the great crowd was tramping the snow to slush while roaring approval.

Stopping by the Ministry of Justice, facing the Presidential Residence, Ernst received confirmation from a jubilant fellow citizen that Hindenburg had resigned and Adolf Hitler had just been sworn in as Chancellor of Germany.

Ernst whooped with joy, swept Ingrid up in his arms, and spun her around on the pavement.

'Wunderbar!' he exclaimed.

Any doubts about love or compatibility were swept away in the fervour of the rest of that memorable day. Ernst had no sooner released Ingrid from his embrace than he saw Adolf Hitler standing upright in the back of his open-topped car as it crept slowly through the mass of cheering, waving people in the Wilhelmstrasse, taking him back to the Kaiserhof. Shouting himself hoarse like all the others, Ernst watched his hero being driven past, then embraced Ingrid again, kissed her passionately, and realized that the

excitement was contagious and finally getting through to her.

Excited, they went for lunch, got drunk on beer and schnapps, then took a room in the Adlon Hotel, where their faces were known. They made drunken, passionate love, uninhibited by doubts, and Ernst thought that he would die in Ingrid's body, with its smooth, burning skin, perfect breasts, and sublime, enfolding legs. Eventually, they broke apart drenched in sweat, breathing harshly, exhausted, and he felt that he had died and been reborn and could never stop loving her.

'You're magnificent,' he told her.

Then he had to leave her temporarily to take part in the torch-lit parade that spelled the end of that great day.

Darkness was falling on the city when, with thousands of other troops, all in uniform and with many wearing their swastikas, Ernst commenced the march from the Tiergarten. Accompanied by the beating of drums and the blare of martial music, they passed under the Brandenburg Gate, and then continued down to Wilhelmstrasse, where hundreds of young men were hanging from the railings or perched like birds in the trees.

Raising his voice, as did thousands of others, in the 'Horst Wessel Lied' and other patriotic songs, Ernst soon found himself in the torch-lit darkness outside the Presidential Palace, where a weary Hindenburg raised his hands in salute. Then the crowd moved to the Reich chancellery where, to Ernst's immense joy, Hitler appeared at a window to look down fondly on his men and acknowledge with a smile their triumphant chanting of 'Heil, Heil, Sieg Heil!'

When Hitler smiled and raised his right hand in salute, the massed troops cheered and clapped frenziedly in acknowledgment. Then Hitler went back inside and Ernst lowered his gaze – away from that lighted window, from the fluttering red-and-black flags, from the torches that had formed a river of fire in the Wilhelmstrasse – and saw Ingrid emerging from the crowd, her eyes bright with excitement, her arms outstretched as the drums continued pounding and the noise became deafening.

She threw herself into his arms and clung to him as he stroked her blonde hair.

'Oh, Ingrid!' he said passionately. 'A great day! The future is ours! Let's get married at once!'

'Yes!' she whispered, clinging to him, part of him. 'Yes, Ernst, let's do

it!’

Their hearts beat like the drums.

CHAPTER THREE

'Yes,' Mike Bradley said, thinking about Gladys Kinder instead of the facts as he gazed out the window of General Taylor's office at the other buildings being constructed on the sloping green fields of Langley Field, Virginia. 'I told him we were about to form a National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics and were considering a team that would include him and other aeronautical geniuses, such as Charles Lindbergh and Orville Wright, but the legendary Robert H. Goddard *still* showed no interest. He just doesn't give a damn.'

'Why?' Taylor asked pragmatically.

'Because he doesn't trust anyone,' Bradley replied with a frustrated shrug of his broad shoulders, remembering the polite, suspicious voice he had heard over the telephone when he had called from his office on Wall Street. 'Reportedly he patents every damned thing he invents, is notoriously secretive and uncooperative with his fellow scientists, feels that many of his ideas have been stolen by them, notably those in Germany, and will take help only from organizations like the Smithsonian Institution, which lets him do whatever he wants. In fact, he's even refused the assistance of the California Institute of Technology Rocket Research Project and has been relying instead on the inadequate funding of Clark University in Worcester, where he teaches physics when he's not working on his rockets.'

'Though according to Charles Lindbergh,' General Taylor pointed out, 'whom I met here just yesterday, Goddard has recently accepted some other help.'

'True enough,' Bradley said. 'With Lindbergh's recommendation he was recently able to get a Guggenheim Foundation grant for $2,500, which enabled him to leave Clark and return to Roswell, New Mexico.'

Where Gladys Kinder lives, he thought. He'd been unable to stop thinking about Gladys Kinder ever since their brief meeting. *It's ridiculous,* he

thought. *You're being ridiculous. She's just a sharp-tongued lady from a cow town and you're imagining things.* Though he couldn't help wondering...

'Is that where he was when you phoned him? Back in Roswell?'

'No,' Bradley said. 'He hadn't returned there yet. He was still at Clark.'

'If what you say is true, he thinks that if he joins our proposed National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics, he'll have to share his precious ideas with us.'

'That's my bet,' Bradley said.

General Taylor smiled laconically. 'He sounds like a burgeoning crackpot.'

'But a brilliant one, General – and one you could do with on your side. Since a major function of the committee will be to assess the military possibilities of aeronautical developments around the world, a man of Goddard's background and reputation would be invaluable to you – not only for his technical knowledge, but also as a public relations weapon.'

'Well, we'll just have to get along without him.'

'I guess so,' Bradley said.

The sound of hammering from outside momentarily distracted the general and made him glance out the window. Following his gaze, Bradley saw some men in coveralls kneeling on the roof of the adjoining building as they expertly nailed down some more beams. When these buildings were completed, they would house the new National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics as well as a branch of the still too informal Army Air Force intelligence. General Taylor was currently the head and Bradley was an increasingly enthusiastic, but unofficial, agent of the intelligence unit.

'It's interesting that he should be so concerned with German rocket development,' the general said, returning his thoughtful gaze to Bradley, 'since that's also what we're concerned with right now.'

'The Pentagon isn't,' Bradley replied. 'Since the White House has adopted an isolationist stance regarding Europe, there's no Pentagon interest in German weaponry.'

'I can't speak for the whole of the Pentagon, let alone the White House,' Taylor said, 'but I think I can say with confidence that we in military intelligence are concerned with the growing militarism of Germany, particularly since Hitler was elected chancellor. It's not our belief that America will be involved in European politics per se, but there's certainly

been enough concern to cause the air force to informally gather information on aeronautical developments in Hitler's new Germany and, especially, on any further developments regarding the…' The general glanced down at the notes on his desk… 'The *Verein fur Raumschiffart,* or VfR,' he read, then looked up again.

'Right,' Bradley said. 'The German amateur rocket society.'

'It's wonderful,' the general said with a slight, sardonic smile, 'how bright boys like you can bring back such interesting information from their vacations in Europe.'

Bradley knew what the general was getting at. He, Bradley, had been a highly decorated pilot during the Great War, but had left the service in the mistaken belief that he was becoming too old for it and needed a more settled life. So, he had studied law instead, married Joan, and was rewarded with two fine kids, Mark and Miriam. Though successful as a lawyer specializing in the drafting of complex agreements between government departments and civilian aeronautical research establishments, he'd become increasingly bored with Wall Street and started calling his old military buddies to ask them for work, official or otherwise, that was more important and exciting.

Convinced that matters in Europe would eventually lead to another world war, he'd used his Ivy League Wall Street friends to build up strong connections in Washington, DC, and London. Eventually he managed to convince the army's chief of staff, General Douglas MacArthur, to let him embark on an unofficial intelligence-gathering trip to Europe, in the guise of studying international laws relating to aeronautics. During that trip, in 1932, aided by some old friends who were now with the well-organized British Intelligence Service, he had travelled extensively and reported, in particular, on the growing militarism of Germany. What he had seen there had shocked him and made him fear for the free world. He no longer shared his own government's confidence that America could stay out of Europe – certainly not if the National Socialists, under Hitler, got what they wanted – and upon his return to the United States had insisted in his lengthy report that the country must prepare itself for inevitable involvement in another world war.

While his report had not been taken seriously by the White House, since then General Taylor had used him as an unofficial agent between Taylor's Army Air Force intelligence branch and British intelligence, as well as a legal adviser, general administrator, and headhunter for the soon-to-be-formed

National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics – which is why Bradley had made his recent, unsuccessful trip to Robert H. Goddard in Roswell, New Mexico.

'But why would our air force be interested in a bunch of amateurs?' General Taylor asked, after a thoughtful pause.

'Because they're *not* amateurs,' Bradley told him. 'The *Verein fur Raumschiffart* was founded in 1927 and soon included most of the rocket experts of the day: Hermann Oberth, Max Valier, Rudolf Nebel, Willy Ley, and Klaus Riedel.'

The general gave a low whistle of respect. 'That's some bunch of scientists,' he said. 'What were they up to?'

'We know that a number of small liquid-fuelled rockets were fired from their testing ground in the Berlin suburb of Reinickerdorf. Then, in April 1930, Captain Walter Dornberger was appointed to the Ordnance Branch of the German Army's Ballistics and Weapons Office, headed by one General Becker. Dornberger was to work on rocket development at the army's Kummersdorf firing range, approximately fifteen miles south of Berlin. Two years later the VfR demonstrated one of their liquid-fuelled rockets to Dornberger and other officers at Kummersdorf.'

'I'm surprised I haven't heard of this,' Taylor said, sounding slightly aggrieved.

'Maybe that's because recently, with Hitler's support, the Gestapo moved in and overnight the VfR ceased to exist as a civilian organization.'

'But it's now being used by the army.'

'Right. A lot of its members, including the reportedly up-and-coming Wernher von Braun, were taken under Dornberger's wing and began working at Kummersdorf in strict secrecy.'

'Ah,' the general said softly, 'so *that's* why our air force is concerned!'

'Damned right,' Bradley said. 'And if they knew what I recently learned in Roswell, they'd be even more concerned.'

'And what was that, Mike?'

'Since Goddard was so damned suspicious and frosty over the phone,' Bradley explained, thinking again of Gladys Kinder and feeling distinctly guilty, 'I visited Roswell in order to interview those who'd known him there – his engineers, the local townsfolk, and so forth. Anyway, over the week I spent there, I became increasingly concerned with the fact that Goddard, with

so little assistance either financially or from fellow scientists, had managed to make such extraordinary advances in rocket research. Then, shortly after the final launch, I was introduced to a woman – '

'I won't tell your wife that,' the general interjected.

Bradley grinned, as if appreciating the joke, but inwardly burned with the guilt he'd been trying to keep at bay ever since his single meeting with Gladys Kinder.

The proprietor of the Roswell *Daily Record* had put him in touch with her. They'd met in the bar of Bradley's hotel, and he'd been instantly intrigued by her air of worldly cynicism. In the course of a conversation about Goddard's rocket team, he'd become uncomfortably attracted to her. Clearly realizing what was happening Gladys had passed a few mischievous remarks to that effect and actually managed to make him blush.

She was tall and lean and had a head of short-cropped brown hair, which made her seem slightly mannish, and gray eyes that were disconcertingly steady over a full-lipped, sardonic smile. She'd been wearing a long, belted dress, with high-heeled boots and a Stetson hat. He, in his gray suit, portly and not too tall, in his late-thirties and starting to show it (though thankfully he still had his hair) had felt soft and pampered in her attractively laconic presence.

You didn't meet women like that in New York – and besides, he just *liked* her.

Now, when he recalled Gladys Kinder and also thought of his attractive, good-humoured wife, Joan, who lovingly looked after their home and children in Connecticut, he felt as guilty as if he'd had an affair, which he certainly had not done. He had simply been tempted, that's all... So why should he feel guilty?

'The woman, Gladys Kinder,' he continued uneasily, 'is a journalist for one of the local papers, the Rosewell *Daily Record.* When I told her I'd spent the past week checking up on Goddard and his old launching grounds in Eden Valley, she told me that two years ago she'd had an affair with another physicist who'd stayed with Goddard for six months, spent most of that time working and sleeping in Goddard's machine shop, and was considered by most of Goddard's men to have been very influential on Goddard's work. Those facts were later confirmed in my discussions with some of the rocket team.'

Even now, as he spoke to the general, Bradley thought it odd that the mention of Gladys Kinder as Wilson's mistress should make him feel slightly resentful and, perhaps, even jealous. It was too ridiculous for words, but he couldn't deny the feeling; and when he recalled her sly smile in the hotel's gloomy bar, her droll mockery of his obvious confusion in her presence, he was irresistibly seduced by her image and wanted to see her again.

Crazy. Just crazy...

'*What* was this woman's name?' the general asked, picking up his pen and staring with what Bradley, in the guilty panic of his thoughts, imagined was accusing intensity.

'Kinder,' Bradley replied, feeling a helpless stab of desire and its bed partner, guilt. 'Gladys Kinder.'

'Kinder,' the general murmured, writing the name down. 'Gladys Kinder,' he emphasized, as if deliberately tormenting Bradley. 'Mmmm...' he murmured, studying the name thoughtfully before putting his pen back down, looking up again, and saying 'So, what about him?'

'Pardon?'

'The physicist that the Kinder woman told you about.'

'Ah, yes...' Bradley gathered his thoughts together. 'Miss Kinder told me that when the physicist left for good after the rocket launching of December 31, 1930, Goddard confessed to her that his mysterious, temporary assistant was a, quote, genius, who'd helped him develop many of his more notable innovations, including liquid-fuelled, self-cooled motors, gyroscopes for guidance and control, lightweight fuel pumps, and reflector vanes to help stabilize and steer the rockets. The guy's name was John Wilson.'

'Interesting,' General Taylor said, writing that name down also, then popping some gum into his mouth and starting to chew, 'but I can't see what relevance all this has to Adolf Hitler's Germany.'

'Well, I can't be too sure of this,' Bradley replied, 'but I do have my worries there.'

'Don't tease me, Mike.'

'Well, for a start this John Wilson's a complete mystery. No one at Roswell knew where he came from, Wilson wasn't about to tell them, and even *Goddard* swore he didn't know anything about him, other than the fact that he was extraordinarily knowledgeable about physics and aeronautics. He just turned up at the ranch one day, showed Goddard some of his own

drawings, and then asked if he could help him with the rocket project. As for Wilson's journalist friend, Gladys Kinder…' He couldn't avoid the name, and it brought back all his guilt. '…even though she was his mistress during that six months, she learned only that he had an engineering background and loathed the US government for reasons that he never explained. She also learned, just before Wilson's abrupt departure, that he intended leaving the United States for good and going to a country where people like him and Goddard would be appreciated, instead of being treated as cranks.' There was more loud hammering from outside and General Taylor, after wincing, said, 'I can't stand this goddamned noise, Mike. Do you fancy a walk?'

'Sure,' Bradley said, feeling trapped with his recollections of Gladys and glad to escape. 'Why not?'

Leaving the office, they strolled outside where the noise of the workers was even louder and the sun shone over the flat green fields. Relieved to breathe the fresh air, Bradley followed the general away from the skeletal buildings and their many workers, down toward the banks of the Potomac River.

'So where do you think your mysterious genius, this Mr Wilson, went?' General Taylor asked, striding across the grass and glancing keenly around him.

'A lot of the German engineers,' Bradley said, 'including Wernher von Braun, revere Goddard and are known to have based their work on his ideas. Our mysterious John Wilson would certainly have known that – and would also have known that while here, in the United States, Goddard's theories were being treated with contempt, Germany was spending fortunes on rocket research that was, by and large, based on his work.'

'So you think this Wilson went to Germany?'

'I don't think it – I know it. I checked yesterday with the Immigration Department and learned that one John Wilson left this country on January 20, 1931, that he stayed in London for a few weeks in early March of that year, and that he applied for a German visa that same month. According to British immigration records, a US citizen called John Wilson left England on a boat sailing for Bremen, Germany, on April 5, 1931. There's no other record of his movements.'

'You mean, you think he's still there, in Germany.'

'Yes.'

‘Have you checked with the German authorities?’

‘They deny all knowledge of him.’

‘But you think they’re lying.’

‘Yes. I think he’s still there – and if he is, and if he’s working on rocket research, we should be concerned.’

Stopping by the edge of the river, they looked across to the far bank. The fields that stretched out on all sides were flat, densely forested, and sun-splattered. Birds flew overhead.

‘You’re my best man for intelligence gathering,’ General Taylor reminded him, ‘so perhaps you can track him down.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Bradley said, feeling the itch of frustration. ‘We’re talking about Hitler’s Third Reich. One man on his own can’t do much with this kind of problem. That’s why we need a central intelligence-gathering organization,’ he continued, warming to his favourite theme. ‘The Brits have an intelligence system that puts us to shame. The last thing we had that remotely resembled an intelligence agency was Herbert Yardley’s Black Chamber – which was only a code-breaking unit – and since *that* was closed down in 1929 we haven’t had a damned thing to replace it. Which is doubtless why Yardley wrote his best-selling book exposing our so-called secrets – and why New York federal marshals, the damned idiots, have just raided the offices of a perfectly respectable publisher to impound Yardley’s second book.’

The general laughed heartily at that one, then said, ‘The way you pronounce the word “idiots”, Mike, reminds me that you’re an Irish-American.’

‘Ha ha,’ Bradley responded, but warmly, without malice. He was proud of his background and not ashamed of what he’d become, despite not being what he should have been. Although his uneducated grandparents had emigrated from Ireland and he’d been raised as a Roman Catholic, Bradley had gone against convention by becoming a staunch member of the Republican party, instead of a Democrat, which most of the Irish were. He had also, after winning numerous awards for distinguished service in the battlefields of France in the Great War, become a successful lawyer, with his own law firm on Wall Street. So, yes, he was proud of his background and achievements – and knew that General Taylor, his close friend, truly respected him.

‘Anyway,’ the general said, wincing when the hammering on the distant buildings started again, ‘you were starting to talk a blue streak, so don’t let me stop you.’

‘This guy, Wilson,’ Bradley continued, ‘who is *possibly* an aeronautical genius, has gone off to sell his talents to a country whose whole interest in science is geared to its aggressive potential – in other words, Hitler’s Third Reich.’

‘So?’ Taylor said.

‘So, since the Third Reich *is* devoted to war, we should be keeping tabs on Wilson – but we can’t do it because we don’t have the necessary intelligence-gathering organization.’

‘But we *do* have that.’

‘No,’ Bradley insisted, ‘we don’t. What we have is an uncoordinated collection of different intelligence agencies. Army Intelligence, or G2; the Office of Naval Intelligence; the FBI; the Secret Service; the State Department; the Customs and Immigration services; the Federal Communications System Service; and the Treasury’s Foreign Funds Control Unit – not one of which deals with the others, let alone recognizing them.’

‘So?’

‘So what we need is a centralized, coordinated intelligence, like the British Secret Intelligence Service.’

‘A sort of Central Intelligence Agency,’ Taylor said.

‘Right, General. You got it’

‘Ah!’ the general exclaimed softly. ‘So *that’s* why you came all the way from New York to see me, instead of using the phone. You want to ride your favourite hobbyhorse again and persuade me to include you in the formation of a proper, coordinated intelligence-gathering agency. Have I got it right, Mike?’

‘Yes, General, you have. I’m a highly successful, thirty-eight-year-old lawyer with a plush office in Manhattan, but the best time I ever had in my life was during the war.’

‘So I gathered,’ the general said. ‘The Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Medal of Honor...’

‘Right,’ Bradley interjected. ‘Which proves I’m a survivor – and that I’m willing to hang in when the chips are down.’

‘No argument there,’ the general murmured. ‘Come on, let’s head back.’

They turned away from the river, heading back to where the men with the saws and hammers and nails were swarming like flies over the frames of buildings that would soon house a branch of Army Air Force intelligence and the new National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics.

When Bradley thought of aeronautics, he thought of John Wilson; and when he thought of that mysterious genius, he also thought, with guilty, helpless longing, of Wilson's mistress: the middle-age, laconic, and undeniably attractive Gladys Kinder.

He just couldn't help himself.

'Anyway,' he said, 'my kids are growing up, they're both now away at college, and although I still have Joan, I'm bored with my legal work. I'm also, as you know, deeply convinced that America will, sooner or later, have to become involved with the outside world. I accepted your offer of unofficial intelligence gathering in Europe because I hoped that it would lead to stronger ties with the intelligence services already existing over there. And having been there, I'm convinced more than ever that we need a central intelligence-gathering agency – and I happen to know that you believe that also and have even discussed it.'

'You know more than you should,' General Taylor said, 'which is, of course, why we should take you on, on a more permanent basis.'

They skirted around the building site and stopped by Bradley's car, parked just outside the general's office, gleaming in sunlight.

'Are you in the process of forming such an agency?' Bradley asked as he slipped into his car.

'Early stages yet,' the general replied, 'but the short answer is yes.'

'And can I be part of it?'

'Yes – when the time comes. In the meantime, you'd better get on the trail of this John Wilson. If we can't yet find out what he's doing in Germany, you might at least find out where he came from and just who he is.'

'I will,' Bradley said.

When the general had entered his office, Bradley drove away, feeling a lot better, disturbed only when he thought of Gladys Kinder and her relationship with the enigmatic, possibly dangerous, John Wilson.

'Goddammit!' he whispered.

CHAPTER FOUR

The two men came for Wilson at the Zeppelin Works at Friedrichshafen at eight in the morning and escorted him out of the factory without a word. Both men were wearing the black uniforms of the SS, and not those of the Gestapo, which Wilson took for a good sign. He felt no fear and asked no questions when, outside the factory, they ordered him up into the back of a canvas-topped truck that already contained a collection of men and women, none of whom looked too happy and some of whom were actually in handcuffs. Wilson sat between a Frenchman who tugged nervously at his peaked cap and a Jewish woman whose dark eyes glowed with dread, then the truck growled into life and began its journey to Berlin. Two armed soldiers sat at the end of the truck, to ensure that no one tried to escape.

Wilson, who did not wish to escape, merely smiled at the sight of them.

The journey began in the mist of morning and ended in the evening, with the streetlights illuminating the monolithic architecture of Berlin. In that long eight hours they had been driven a great distance, from Friedrichshafen on the north shore of Lake Constance to steely-gray Munich, from there to Nuremberg, still sombre in the noonday sun, then across the majestic, forested hills of Thuringia, with the shadows of the trees lengthening in the deepening light of afternoon, then through Dessau as darkness was falling and eventually into Berlin.

Wilson had taken it all in from the back of the truck, every glimpse he could get through the canvas flapping near the two soldiers, and had noticed, especially, the many troop trucks on the roads, the armed soldiers in even the smallest towns. He was reminded, beyond any shadow of doubt, that this country was set for war.

It was just what he needed.

Throughout the journey, the two guards had said little to the prisoners, other than ushering them in and out of the truck two or three times to enable

them to eat or go to the toilet. They had done this in a distant but reasonably civilized manner, but now, as they kept their charges covered while escorting them from the truck into a large, official-looking building, they both became noticeably more tense and officious, barking their orders and even hitting some of the prisoners with the butts of their rifles when they failed to move quickly enough.

Once inside the building, which was gloomily lit and drearily institutional, the predominance of immaculate black uniforms, gleaming boots, and blond hair made it obvious that this was SS headquarters.

One of the female prisoners started weeping and a man crossed himself, but Wilson, as he had done that morning, took it as a good sign that he was in the hands of the SS, which he had wanted, and not the Gestapo.

The prisoners in handcuffs were led away. Wilson and the others were told to sit on the wooden benches lining the walls of a gloomy corridor. A golden-haired SS sergeant took their identity papers, disappeared through a door, and returned shortly after to lead Wilson away from where he had been sitting, between the dark-eyed Jewish woman and the unshaven Frenchman who had constantly murmured to God for deliverance. Glad to be rid of them, Wilson was even more pleased when he was escorted into an office and made to stop before the desk of a man he recognized from his many photographs in the newspapers: the head of the SS, Heinrich Himmler.

He did not raise his head when Wilson was escorted in, but continued to study the papers on his desk. Wilson recognized his own handwriting and the technical sketches he had included with his lengthy letter, and smiled, feeling pleased with himself, until Himmler looked up at him.

Wilson immediately removed the smile from his face and looked deeply respectful.

Himmler sighed, as if weary. He had bland, decent features, a neatly trimmed moustache, and gray-blue eyes whose mildness was emphasized by his glistening pince-nez spectacles. He was a man without vanity or cruelty or lust, but Wilson knew, the minute he saw those eyes, that he was also quite mad.

It was what Wilson needed.

‘So,’ Himmler said, ‘you are Wilson – John Wilson – an American citizen.’

‘Yes, Herr Himmler,’ Wilson replied in perfect German.

‘Reichsführer,’ Himmler corrected him mildly.

‘Sorry, Reichsführer.’

‘You’ve been living in Germany, under an assumed name and with forged German identification papers, for the past three years. This is correct?’

‘Yes, Reichsführer.’

‘And as this fictitious German citizen, you’ve been doing important research work on advanced gyroscopic controls with the subsonic wind-tunnel at the Zeppelin Works in Friedrichshafen.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Himmler offered a slight, chilling smile. ‘You realize, Herr Wilson, that these are criminal offences – that you could even be labelled as a spy and executed accordingly.’

‘My purpose isn’t spying, Reichsführer, as the notes and drawings I sent you clearly prove.’

‘Ah, yes... the notes and drawings.’ Himmler adjusted the spectacles on his nose and glanced down at Wilson’s papers. When he raised his eyes again, he was still smiling in that slight, chilling manner. ‘What these notes prove, Mr Wilson, according to my aeronautical advisers, is that you are an extraordinarily brilliant physicist and engineer. What they fail to prove is that you are not here on behalf of your government. In other words, as a spy.’

‘I have no reason to love the American government – and my only interest in life is my work. That’s why I’m here.’

Himmler stared steadily at him, with a cold curiosity, then smiled bleakly and indicated the chair in front of his desk. ‘Please,’ he said. ‘Be seated. Can I fetch you some tea?’

‘No, thanks,’ Wilson said as he sat down and studied the powerful, soft-faced lunatic across the desk. ‘I drink as little as possible.’

‘And hardly eat, so I’ve been informed. Does that explain your remarkably youthful appearance?’

‘It helps,’ Wilson said, not forgetting for a moment that Himmler, former fertilizer salesman and chicken farmer, was quietly obsessed with all kinds of esoteric theories, including astrology and runes, the secret of the pyramids, the spirit of the eternal *Wandervogel,* Horbiger’s world of ice and fire, and, of course, the magical properties of certain diets. ‘I eat and drink only the bare minimum,’ he clarified, ‘though I find that the odd glass of white wine can be beneficial.’

‘You speak flawless German,’ Himmler said. ‘When and where did you learn it?’

‘I learnt it here, in Germany, Reichsführer.’

Himmler raised his eyebrows to display his scepticism.

‘*Here,* Mr Wilson? In the Fatherland? In a mere three years? I would think that even a child, let alone a man your age, would have trouble in being so fluent in our difficult tongue after such a short period.’

‘I have a retentive memory,’ Wilson explained, ‘and I learned it in three years. We didn’t even learn French in Iowa, let alone German. I’ve learnt it since coming here.’

He was impatient with the question, since languages came easily to him. He had never experienced difficulty in learning *anything,* so could not abide ignorance. And languages, compared to mathematics or science, were merely child’s play.

‘Ah, yes,’ Himmler said, forgetting the vexing question of language. ‘Iowa! The heartland of America. Which is where you came from.’

‘Yes,’ Wilson confirmed, remembering the rolling plains, the cold winters and long hot summers, his parents working in fields of corn between sunrise and sunset while he, who could never stand the place, searched the distant horizon. He looked back with no emotion, simply recalling it from his mind, and retained no more feeling for that landscape than he did for his parents. He remembered them treating him kindly, but that didn’t mean much to him.

The past was a dead place.

Himmler nodded judiciously, glanced down at Wilson’s papers, picked some up and let them fall to the desk again, then spread the fingers of his delicate, almost feminine hands over them. ‘Naturally we’ve checked the details you gave us about your background and found them to be exactly as you stated. You’re a remarkable man, Mr Wilson, perhaps even extraordinary – which would only make you all the more dangerous, should you not be what you say you are.’

‘I’m a scientist, Reichsführer. I want to get on with my work. I can’t do what I want to do in America, so I came here, to Germany, where I know that my particular kind of talent is much in demand. It’s as simple as that.’

‘*Nothing* is as simple as that, Mr Wilson, as you and I both know. You’re an American citizen, and no matter your grievances, you must still love the country you came from.’

‘I do not, Reichsführer. To me, it’s just another country and one that can’t help me.’

Himmler actually looked shocked, as if blasphemy had been spoken. ‘Patriotism!’ he exclaimed. ‘You have no sense of that?’

‘No.’

‘I find this hard to believe.’

‘Believe it.’

‘If you were a German citizen, I’d have you shot for that attitude.’

‘I’m not German, Reichsführer.’

Himmler picked up a pencil, drummed it on the desk, tapped it lightly against his teeth, then put it down again. He sighed, almost sadly. ‘Even though our country is not at war with yours, what you’ve done, in coming here to work for us, is virtually treason. Are you a traitor? Is that what you want to be?’

Wilson had to admire him for saying that. The chicken farmer was no fool. He looked like a schoolteacher, perhaps even a monk, but mixed in with his lunatic ideas was a steely intelligence. Not a *vast* intelligence, but a sharp one, which meant that he had to be handled carefully and never taken for granted.

‘A traitor?’ Wilson said. ‘I don’t think in such terms. I was exploited by my government, then betrayed and cast aside, and now I wish to lend my talents to those who will use them.’

‘*Lend* your talents?’

The question actually amused Wilson. ‘How wise you are, Reichsführer, to understand that a man of my ambition would not willingly do anything for free. Naturally, I came here for the most selfish reasons – because I live for my work and only someone like you would have the vision and courage to finance it. I’ll work for you as long as you finance my research – which is why I wrote to you.’

‘And you do not care to what ends your research will finally be put?’

‘A true scientist can’t be concerned with such matters. My only concern is the pursuit of ultimate knowledge – and I know you agree with that. I’m just as much a soldier as you are, but what I fight for is science.’

‘Are you as *ruthless* as a soldier, Herr Wilson?’

‘Yes, Reichsführer, I am.’

Himmler smiled, obviously pleased with this response, though his smile

held no warmth.

'Why me?' he asked softly. 'Of all the people in the Third Reich, why did you write to me, rather than to some influential scientist or politician? You must have known you were taking a great chance – exposing yourself as an alien who used false identification papers in order to obtain a position in one of our most important research establishments – and that I could have decided to have you shot as a spy. So why me, Herr Wilson?'

'Because you're a man of vision,' Wilson said, combining a lie with a certain amount of truth. He felt that Himmler was, indeed, a man of great dreams, if not vision, who would support any kind of research, no matter how esoteric or even mad. For that, if for very little else, he would certainly be useful. 'Because you believe in the limitless possibilities of the future, will back your beliefs with actions, and will not let petty human emotions stand in your way. You and I, Herr Himmler, if I may say so, are similar that way.'

'What you say may be true,' Himmler replied, unmoved by flattery, 'but it still doesn't explain why I should give you, a foreigner, my support, particularly since you wish to take part in our most vital, and therefore confidential, research.'

'You should give me your support, Reichsführer, because my papers have shown you what I can do – and what I can do is much more than anyone you have could do.'

'Some of my scientists would take offence at that remark.'

'That wouldn't change its accuracy. My work is proof of my genius. More important, I'm engaged in a project similar to one you've already started: the creation of a revolutionary form of transport and extraordinary weapon.'

'You mean Projekt Saucer.'

'Yes, Reichsführer.'

'And how did you know about that, Herr Wilson, since the project is under SS supervision?'

'There are always whispers, Reichsführer, particularly among scientists, and naturally I picked them up in Friedrichshafen. I was also puzzled to see certain, odd machine parts in the Zeppelin Works – but when combined with some of the experiments taking place in the wind tunnel, I realized they could only relate to the development of an aircraft shaped like a saucer – the kind of machine being researched with Projekt Saucer at Kummersdorf West.'

'What kind of experiments were you doing in the Zeppelin wind tunnel?'

‘Tests relating to Prandtl’s boundary layer.’

‘The importance of which is?’

‘If we can’t solve the problem of the boundary layer, the speed and manoeuvrability of our aircraft will always be limited.’

‘Please explain.’

‘The perfect flying machine will be one that requires no runway, since it will take off vertically, will be able to hover in midair, and will not be limited in flight by Prandtl’s boundary layer.’

‘I am not an engineer,’ Himmler reminded him impatiently.

‘According to Prandtl’s theory of the boundary layer, the air sweeping in on an object in flight increases its resistance in direct proportion to the increasing speed of the flying object. Because of this, the speed of any flying object is finite. However, if some method can be found of removing the boundary layer, virtually limitless speed and manoeuvrability will be achieved.’

‘And a disc shape is the best shape for this?’

‘Potentially, yes. The build-up of the boundary layer is dramatically increased by the many surface protuberances of a normal aircraft – wings, tails, rudders, rotors, and so forth. If we could get rid of those – by somehow wrapping them together as part and parcel of the one, circular, smooth-surfaced flying wing – we would at least be on the road to the perfect flying machine.’

‘And you think we can accomplish this here in Germany?’

‘I think you’re the country with most interest in such developments and certainly the most advanced so far. Regarding vertical-rising aircraft, the Focke-Wulf Company has already announced that it has almost completed its FW 61 helicopter, which will be the first fully operational helicopter in existence. Regarding experimental tailless aircraft, or flying wings, devoid of vertical stabilizing or control surfaces, the Horten brothers of Bonn have already produced some successful prototypes. As for other problems standing in the way of limitless speed and manoeuvrability, it was a German, Professor Ludwig Prandtl, who, at Gottingen in 1904, defined the nature of the boundary layer. Since then, many other German scientists have been experimenting with revolutionary new types of aircraft in the hope of finding a way of defeating that layer. A disc-or-saucer-shaped aircraft, without any surface protuberances, is the logical outcome of that research.’

Himmler's smile was as chilling as the gaze behind his small pince-nez. 'There are those who would say that such an aircraft cannot be built.'

'The foolish always speak loudest.'

'And you think that you can help with such a project?'

'I can complete it, Reichsführer. I've been working toward this goal all my life and have now almost reached it.'

Himmler glanced at Wilson's technical drawings, which had been done in black ink, then raised his eyes again as he spread his slim hands in a questioning manner.

'But are you close to reaching it?' he asked. 'My scientists often make the same claim, but so far they have failed.'

'Just look at my drawings, Reichsführer.'

'I am not a scientist, Herr Wilson. Your drawings look impressive, but to me they are meaningless – though initial reports have certainly confirmed that your written work is extraordinary. These drawings will have to be studied further by people more knowledgeable than I. In the meantime, I have to consider what it is you want from me.'

'I've already told you that, Reichsführer. I wrote to you not only for the reasons we've just discussed, but also because I know that the SS is gradually taking over the security and management of the Third Reich's major scientific and research establishments, that soon it will be the most powerful organization in Germany, and that you, its Reichsführer, are the only man in power with the vision to see what can be done in this particular field. Already you've implemented a disc-shaped aircraft project; only I can take that project to its completion – but I need your support.'

There was silence for a moment and Wilson waited patiently, neither excited nor frightened. He was fully in control as Himmler stared steadily at him. He did not flinch from the mild monster, but neither did he try to challenge him. Instead he let his gaze go slightly out of focus, as if gazing inward.

Which he did in a sense, thinking back upon America, remembering Goddard and how the Americans had mocked him while these clever Germans revered him. Well, Goddard was back in Roswell, struggling along on a mere pittance, while he, Wilson, if Himmler went as he thought he would, would soon have all the money and equipment he could possibly want.

Pleased, he focused again upon Himmler, whose mild gaze concealed madness.

'You *do* realize, Herr Wilson, that once I gave that support, you would be committed to working for the Third Reich for the rest of your days?'

'Yes, Reichsführer.'

'And that if you betrayed us, or even tried to leave the country, I would personally have you executed?'

'Yes, Reichsführer, I realize that, also.'

'You are therefore willing to commit yourself totally to the Third Reich and all it stands for?'

'Yes, Reichsführer,' Wilson said. He lied easily, being well beyond morality, thinking only of his own plans for the future and ignoring all else. 'I'm willing to do that.'

Himmler stared steadily at him, his gaze searching, then he nodded, as if coming to a decision, though not without doubts.

'You must really despise your government,' he said, 'for what it did to you.'

'No, I don't,' Wilson said. 'Such emotions are redundant. I'm here not because I want revenge, but because my government won't support my work and I think you will. It's as simple as that.'

'You are more than committed to your work,' Himmler observed. 'You are clearly fanatical.'

'I live only for my work – as you do – and that makes us superior men.'

'I think you really believe that, Herr Wilson.'

'I do, Reichsführer. I do.'

Himmler smiled at the subtle flattery but was otherwise unmoved by it. He then glanced down at Wilson's drawings, scratched his nose while studying them, shook his head from side to side in wonder, and looked up again.

'I am going to have you placed in the custody of the Gestapo,' he said, 'in their headquarters in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse. You needn't worry. I do this merely for convenience. I wish to have these drawings examined in more detail – and to have you interrogated at length, regarding your past and present attitudes as well as your work. Naturally, you will be interrogated by one of my intelligence officers – but hopefully one with an engineering background. Should the results of our investigations prove positive, you will,

as you request, be given work at the rocket research establishment at Kummersdorf West. On the other hand, if our findings are negative, you will be shot and buried as the German citizen whom these false identification papers say you are. Is that acceptable, Herr Wilson?'

'Yes, Reichsführer – and thank you.'

Himmler nodded at the armed guard in the corner of the room, and Wilson was led out to begin his journey to Gestapo headquarters.

CHAPTER FIVE

Bradley met Robert H. Goddard on the porch of the latter's large frame house on a street shaded by horse chestnut trees in Worcester, Massachusetts, in the winter of 1933. The snow had not yet come, but the day was misty and cold, and the leaves were blowing around Bradley's feet when Goddard shook his hand and ushered him inside.

It was a pleasant, old-fashioned house, with its original furniture covered in relatively new slipcovers, its windows draped with chintz, and a wood fire burning in the large, open fireplace. Bradley knew that Goddard had lived here all his life, and it certainly suited him, being an unpretentious, comfortable place.

'Please take a seat,' Goddard said, his voice as formal as his appearance when he indicated the sofa by the fire. 'I'm sorry I can't offer you much – my wife's not home at the moment – but I can at least make a cup of coffee.'

'That'd be fine,' Bradley said. 'I'll have it black. No sugar.'

Goddard nodded solemnly and disappeared into the kitchen; he returned a couple of minutes later, carrying two cups of coffee. Bradley noticed his stooped walk, which, like his bald head, had been caused by tuberculosis in his youth. Goddard handed Bradley the black coffee, sipped at his own, then took the armchair facing the sofa. His eyes were brown over a small moustache, his gaze slightly suspicious, reminding Bradley that he wasn't keen on representatives of a government that had ignored his remarkable talents for too long.

'So,' Goddard said, 'you insisted on seeing me, even after I put you off on the phone when you called me at Clark. Have you come to make me an offer?'

Bradley grinned. 'No. I'm not in science or finance. I *have* heard that you've had trouble getting financed, but that's not what I'm here for.'

‘If you’re not part of the government’s scientific community, why come to see me? The US government has never shown much interest in my work, so I’m naturally surprised that one of their representatives should turn up on my doorstep – more so since he hasn’t come to offer me help.’

‘The National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics was recently formed to advise the government on every aspect of aeronautical development, political and scientific, both here and abroad. For that reason it was composed of those most respected in the aeronautical community. You were invited to join – and you rejected the offer.’

‘With all due respect to Orville Wright and my good friend Charles Lindbergh, I don’t consider such an offer to be of help. In making me such an offer, you were seeking my help – and what I need is government backing for my expensive research. That has never been offered.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘I’m sure you are.’

Realizing that this was not going to be easy, Bradley decided to skip the formalities. ‘In fact, perhaps to make matters worse, I’m asking for help again.’

‘Obviously not scientific help.’

‘No. I’m an intelligence officer for the US Army Air Force and I need information.’

‘Information about my work?’ Goddard asked suspiciously.

‘No,’ Bradley replied. ‘I need to know about someone who worked with you – a man named John Wilson.’

Goddard straightened up, looking surprised, then collected himself by sipping some more coffee. When he lowered the cup and saucer to his lap, his gaze was masked.

‘Ah, yes,’ he said, ‘Wilson. An odd bird. So why do you want to know about him?’

‘Because I have to find him,’ Bradley said, ‘and he hasn’t left many tracks. Do you mind if I smoke?’

When Goddard shook his head to say he didn’t mind, Bradley, who smoked only when he didn’t know what to do with his hands, lit a cigarette.

‘Why do you have to find him? Has he committed an offence?’

‘No,’ Bradley said, exhaling a stream of smoke. ‘And that’s all I can say for now. But please accept that this man must be found – and you’re our first

lead.'

Goddard shrugged. 'I can't help you much, Mr Bradley. I doubt that I know any more about him than you do. I only worked with him.'

'*With* him? I thought he worked *for* you.'

'You mean as my assistant?'

'Yes.'

Goddard smiled for the first time – a slight, laconic smile. 'Well, he certainly was that – or was supposed to be that – but a man like Wilson doesn't work for anybody else. He was too bright for that.'

'How bright?'

'Brilliant. He was clearly a genius.'

As Goddard wasn't known for his generosity to fellow scientists, Bradley was surprised by this description.

'*You've* been called a genius,' he said. 'Are you saying that…'

'The word genius is used far too casually for my liking,' Goddard interjected, 'and so isn't one I'd normally use lightly. Yet I'd apply it without doubt to Wilson. The man was a genius.'

'How much did you learn about him?'

'Not much, Mr Bradley. He was guarded about his past, almost paranoid about remaining anonymous, and seemed to have few interests, other than space flight. Like me, he thought it possible to fly to the moon – and that's why he came to me.'

'When was that?'

'In 1930.'

Bradley saw a glass ashtray on a low table near the bookcase, so leaned sideways, picked it up, balanced it on one leg, and nicked some ash into it. 'And how did he come to work with you? Did he initially write to you?'

'No. He simply turned up out of the blue, told me he was an aeronautical engineer who had designed *airships* – '

'*Airships?*'

'Correct.'

'Did he say he did that work in Europe or America?'

'He certainly didn't mention Europe. In fact, I got the impression that he'd never been there in his life.'

'Yet that's where most of the airships have been constructed and flown.'

'That's where the *first* airships were constructed and flown,' Goddard

corrected him. ‘The first was built by Henri Giffard of France in 1852; powered by a 350-pound engine, it was successfully flown over the Paris Hippodrome at a speed of six miles an hour. An internal combustion engine fuelled by hydrogen from the airship’s bag was then used by the German, Paul Haenlein, for his even more successful flight in 1872. Albert and Gaston Tissandier of France successfully powered an airship with an electric motor in 1883, and the first rigid airship, with an aluminium-sheeting hull, was built in Germany in 1897. And I don’t have to tell you that the Germans used a number of large Zeppelin airships to bomb Paris and London throughout the Great War.’

‘All European airships,’ Bradley reminded him.

‘Yes, of course – they were the best known. But a few airships were constructed here in the 1920s, and more are being constructed right now – so there’s nothing remarkable in Wilson’s assertion that he worked on airship designs.’

‘Which must have been just before he came to work for you.’

‘Probably,’ Goddard said.

‘What else did he tell you?’ Bradley asked.

‘He was obsessed with the possibilities of space flight – and therefore with my rocket research. He said he’d been inspired by the fact that I’d managed to launch liquid-fuelled, instrument-carrying rockets, and informed me that he wanted to work with me and learn from me.’

‘I’m surprised you let him.’

Goddard didn’t smile. ‘As he was older than me,’ he said, ‘I was certainly initially uncomfortable with his suggestion, suspecting him to be someone simply desperate for work. However, he showed me his papers, which proved beyond doubt that he’d attended the MIT between 1888 and 1893 – before my time there — then Sibley College at Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, where by 1895 he’d obtained his Bachelor of Science in aeronautics. He also proved, both verbally and with various papers he’d written and let me read, that he had an extraordinary – and I don’t use the word lightly – an extraordinary grasp of aeronautics and physics. Naturally, Mr Bradley, after that, I couldn’t turn him away.’

‘He started working for you immediately?’

‘Yes.’

‘This was at your Guggenheim-financed experimental station in Roswell,

New Mexico?'

'Correct.'

'For how long?'

'Approximately six months.'

'That doesn't seem too long.'

'No, but it was all he needed. During that period he helped me enormously – but he also learned everything I'd discovered so far about steering systems, gyroscopic controls, and various kinds of self-cooling combustion chambers. Those were the things he wanted to know about – and when he'd found what he needed, he left, not even leaving a goodbye note.'

'Not exactly showing gratitude,' Bradley said.

Goddard smiled for the second time. 'Wilson wasn't a man for gratitude – and I learned as much from him as he did from me, so I can't really complain.'

Whether or not Goddard felt the need to complain, Bradley certainly thought that Wilson's abrupt departure could only be the act of an extraordinarily cold, thoughtless, self-centered man. When he also thought of how casually Wilson had dismissed and left his former mistress, the intriguing Gladys Kinder, he was even more convinced that the man he was trying to picture clearly was not the warmest, most sensitive soul on earth. Certainly he was a man who used people and casually cast them off – a man who didn't need love or friends. A man completely alone.

'So what did you think about him as a person?' Bradley asked, desperately hoping to fit a human face to his shadowy quarry.

'I don't know what you mean,' Goddard said with scientific detachment.

Bradley blew a smoke ring, watched it grow larger and thinner before disappearing, and then, realizing what he was doing, felt a little embarrassed. 'Did you become friends in any sense?' he asked.

Goddard shrugged, displaying his confusion, which made him more likable. 'I got on well with him,' he said, 'but in an academic way. We both lived for our work, we'd both had bad times with the government, and we agreed that the mind should rule the heart – not vice versa, as is commonly believed. Oddly enough, then, though there was little warmth between us, we had much in common.'

Bradley hardly heard the last remark, because his lawyer's instincts, always tuned to the unusual, had honed in on something else.

‘Did you say he’d had trouble with our government?’ he asked, leaning forward, forgetting the ashtray, but managing to grab it before it fell off his leg.

‘Yes,’ Goddard said. ‘Just like me.’

‘You mean the trouble was related to his work?’ Bradley asked as he rearranged the position of the ashtray.

‘Yes,’ Goddard confirmed. ‘He didn’t tell me much about himself, but he *did* say that he’d come from Iowa, worked on some airship projects, and came to me when those projects were first taken over by, then dropped by, the US government. Is that why you’re interested, Mr Bradley? Were you involved in his problems?’

Feeling distinctly uneasy, Bradley was nevertheless able to answer honestly. ‘No. I know nothing about them. It’s interesting, though, that he should have said that. What do *you* think?’

‘I don’t think I have to tell you, Mr Bradley, that for years I’ve felt neglected by the US government – and if Wilson was working on airships, or similar projects, and was then either dropped or blocked by the government, he would feel as bitter as I do – which is very bitter indeed.’

Bradley almost *felt* Goddard’s bitterness. Deeply embarrassed by it, he disguised it by drinking more coffee and then clearing his throat.

‘Did he say or do anything to substantiate such bitterness?’

‘Yes,’ Goddard replied without hesitation. ‘Just before our rocket test flight of December 31, 1930, which Wilson should have attended, he told me that our government didn’t appreciate its brightest minds, that it would eventually make things difficult for me, and that I should consider leaving the country for good and taking my talents where they’d be more appreciated.’

‘And where did he suggest, Mr Goddard?’

‘Germany,’ Goddard said. ‘He reminded me that the German rocket scientists revered my work and that because of that I’d certainly get the financing there that I couldn’t get here. Two days later, while we were testing our latest rocket, he packed up and disappeared.’

‘Was your rocket test a success?’ Bradley asked, thinking it wise to lighten the conversation.

‘It was gratifying,’ Goddard replied. ‘The gyroscopic controls didn’t work properly and the descent parachute didn’t open, but the rocket reached a speed of 350 miles per hour and a height of nearly two miles.’

‘That’s impressive.’

‘Yes, it’s impressive – but not to your superiors.’

Feeling that he’d just been slapped on the face, and also oddly haunted by the ghostly man he was pursuing, Bradley finished his coffee, stubbed his cigarette out, placed the ashtray on the table, and prepared to leave.

‘Is there anything else you can give me that might help me?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Goddard replied, standing up to show him to the door. ‘What I’ve told you is all I *can* tell you. Apart from that, he’s a mystery.’

Bradley sighed. ‘Thanks anyway,’ he said. ‘I’d like to apologize for how the government’s treated you, but – ’

‘It’s not your place to do so.’

‘Yeah,’ Bradley said, grateful for the unexpected sensitivity. ‘Right. It’s not my place. Thanks again, anyway, Dr Goddard – and the best of luck for the future.’

Goddard just smiled and nodded, led him to the door, remained on the porch till he drove away, then disappeared back into his attractive, old-fashioned house.

Bradley drove straight to the MIT, flirted with the middle-age lady who worked in the records department, and soon learned that John Wilson had indeed attended the university before going on to Cornell in Ithaca, New York. He was also able to ascertain from Wilson’s old registration card that at the time of his enrolment, he had been living in Massachusetts with only his father, that before that he had lived with both his parents in Montezuma, Iowa, and that he had been born there on July 6, 1870.

Growing ever more intrigued by the fragmented trail of his brilliant, mysterious quarry, Bradley took the next train out of Massachusetts.

‘Airships,’ he muttered to himself as he sat in his reserved seat in a first-class car and lit a cigar. ‘What next? I wonder.’

The train moved into darkness.

CHAPTER SIX

Ernst awakened at dawn, after a night of bad dreams, thinking he was in a cell in Stadelheim Prison, his heart pounding with fear. Then he saw his own bedroom, felt Ingrid beside him, and so heaved a sigh of relief and reached out to touch her. She was naked beneath the sheets, her skin smooth and warm, and aroused, he rolled in against her, hoping to waken her.

She did not awaken immediately, which disappointed him again, and still caught in the web of his frightening dreams, he gazed through the windows. The curtains had not been drawn and he saw the dawn's dark-gray light, gradually illuminating the houses opposite, in the modestly-priced Berlin suburb of Helensee. They had moved here a year ago, two weeks after they were married and had honeymooned in Paris, which, compared to Berlin, had been like heaven on earth. It seemed longer than a year ago (so much had happened in that turbulent period) and Ernst, now the father of a daughter, Ula, wondered where all the joy had gone.

Germany had changed dramatically in the fifteen months and he had changed with it.

Not wishing to think about it, feeling the need for escape, he pressed himself against Ingrid's spine and ran his hands over her. He heard her breathing change, felt her stiffen and then relax, so he whispered her name into her ear and she sighed and turned into him. She gazed at him with sleepy, cat-like green eyes, then kissed him sensually.

This was the dawn's sole reward, and he made love with feeling, aware that it was not like it had been, but grateful to have her. Ingrid's body was still sublime, a soft retreat from harsh reality, and he slid along her belly, sucked and licked her breasts and neck, and moved inside her with the desperate need to obliterate what had recently been haunting him – the knowledge that he was losing her love as his pride was destroyed.

When he had finished and was hoping to rest on top of her, she slid out

from under him.

'I'll get breakfast,' she said.

'Please, Ingrid, stay in bed a little longer.'

'No,' she said. 'You'll be late.'

Reminded by that remark of what the day might yet bring, Ernst felt the chill of dread slipping through him. He had forgotten that he'd been ordered to report back to barracks unusually early, in preparation for possible action against the SA, or Brownshirts, who were reported to be planning an armed rebellion under the leadership of Captain Ernst Roehm.

Another police duty, Ernst thought bitterly as Ingrid, in a dressing gown, padded from the room and he slid his legs out of the bed and went into the bathroom.

As he attended to his ablutions, he pondered the fact that even he was becoming confused by the sheer number of conflicting groups within the Third Reich's increasingly nightmarish police structure. Top of the list were the Gestapo, or Secret State Police. Originally under the command of the debauched Hermann Goring, recently it had been taken under the wing of Heinrich Himmler, who was also head of the SS. The SS had been formed as Hitler's personal Guard Detachment but was fast becoming the most feared police force of all. Next came the SD, which acted as the long-range Intelligence and Security Service of the SS, under the control of the dreaded Reinhard Heydrich. Last of the major groups was the SA, originally formed as part of the SD and consisting of Ernst Roehm's brown-shirted Storm Troops, who represented the military arm of the Nazi Party and were used mainly to intimidate, beat up, or murder those openly opposed to it. Now that degenerate madman, Roehm, was rumoured to be planning a *putsch,* or armed revolt, against the Reichswehr... And today's police duty, Ernst suspected, had something to do with that situation.

He resented being involved with such duties – more so because Ingrid had frequently expressed her contempt for the SS, which she viewed as fascistic and brutal. He also resented them because what he had been promised, eighteen months ago, would be aeronautical intelligence gathering for the SS technical branch had in fact turned out to be secret service intelligence gathering against, and the arresting of, all those who opposed Hitler's National Socialist Party.

Ernst had escorted more unfortunate souls into Stadelheim Prison and

Gestapo headquarters than he cared to remember – and there were stories about both of those places that he preferred to forget.

Suddenly filled with the nervousness that always assailed him when he thought of his SS duties, he had a quick bath, dressed even more urgently in his gleaming black SS uniform, looked fondly in on his nine-month-old daughter, Ula, where she was sleeping in her cot in her own brightly painted room, then went into the kitchen to have coffee with Ingrid. She was sitting at the table, a steaming mug in her hands, her short-cropped blonde hair attractively dishevelled around her delicate features. Having Ula had not made her lose her figure, which remained slim and sensual; and Ernst, as he took the chair facing her, was grateful for that.

'I'd forgotten I had to be there so early,' he said, sipping his coffee. 'I also forgot to tell you that I may not be coming home tonight. It could be a long duty.'

'What is it this time?' Ingrid asked him, her green gaze steady over her steaming mug.

'I don't know,' he lied, because he had been ordered to do so and did not dare do otherwise. 'They only said that it was some kind of police action that could take a long time.'

In fact, he had been told in confidence the previous day by Gruppenführer Josef Dietrich, commander of Hitler's élite SS bodyguard, the *Leibstandarte*, that for months the SA, under the command of the notorious homosexual, Captain Roehm, had been in growing, increasingly open revolt against Hitler in particular and Himmler's SS in general, and now that conflict was coming to a head. According to Dietrich, Goring, SS chief Heinrich Himmler, and the dreaded SD chief Reinhard Heydrich had formed a secret alliance to get rid of Roehm and were going to act soon.

Ernst dreaded the form such an action might take, but tried to look unconcerned.

'Another police action,' Ingrid said, putting his previous thoughts into words and imbuing them with soft sarcasm. 'Before we married I said you'd end up as a policeman — and that's what you are.'

'I'm *not* a policeman,' Ernst insisted too loudly, aware that he had to do this too often. 'I'm not a member of the Gestapo, so please stop suggesting that I am.'

'You do the Gestapo's work,' Ingrid replied, not perturbed by his outrage,

‘and that’s just as bad.’

‘I obey orders,’ he said, ‘and that’s *all* I do. It’s not the kind of work I wanted, it’s certainly not what I expected, and although I don’t always like what I’m told to do, I *must* obey orders.’

‘You could *try* refusing.’

‘That’s nonsense, and you know it. I’m an SS officer, a *German* officer, and you know what that means.’

‘It means you work as a policeman.’

‘It means that if I don’t do what I’m told, I’ll be imprisoned myself – or possibly shot. Is that what you want?’

Ingrid placed her cup back on the table and gazed down at her coffee, perhaps trying to hide the blush he could see on her cheeks.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I know you’re not really a policeman. I also know you don’t like what you’re doing and my attacks make it worse. I hate saying these things, but I can’t help myself. I hate the SS – and I can’t bear the thought that you, who should have been an engineer, are doing their dirty work. It makes me feel sick.’

‘It sometimes makes me feel sick as well,’ Ernst said, ‘but what else can I do? I’m an officer in Heinrich Himmler’s SS – and it’s too late to get out.’

Ingrid raised her head again. ‘Are you sorry you joined?’

He shrugged. ‘I’m not sure. Sometimes I feel betrayed – they said I’d be in *technical* intelligence – but at other times, and I certainly can’t deny it, I want to surrender my own feelings to the general good.’

‘And you think that what’s happening at present is for the general good?’

Ernst heard his own sigh like a soft wail of defeat. ‘We can only hope,’ he said. ‘At the moment, things certainly look ugly, even shameful, but one hopes that the end will justify the means – and that’s all one can hope for.’

Ingrid had just been about to take his hand, but she froze, glanced at him, then sat back and stared distractedly around her, as if looking for exits.

‘Everything’s changed so quickly,’ she said, shaking her head in bewilderment. ‘Nothing’s been the same since that night outside the Chancellery. It’s only been fifteen months, yet now we live in a city ruled by brown-shirted brutes, secret police, intimidation and fear. It’s been like a bad dream.’

Ernst knew what she meant and rarely stopped thinking about it. He, too, remembered that wonderful moment in Wilhelmstrasse, when Hitler had

appeared at the window of the Chancellery to salute his cheering men. It had been a great moment, a transcendental experience, one that had seemed to offer the promise of a magical future. A mere fifteen months ago...

And since then?

Ernst could not forget that he had been one of the truckloads of SS men, hastily sworn in as auxiliaries to the SA, who had, in March 1933, just a few days before he'd married Ingrid, swarmed through the city to round up known Reds and Social Democrats and take them into 'protective custody' – a term that, even then, was rumoured to mean imprisonment, torture, or execution. Nor could he forget that he had been one of the many proud SS guards who sang the 'Horst Wessel' song in the Kroll Opera House, temporary site of the new Reichstag, the tumultuous night that Hitler, wearing his brown SA uniform and standing on a stage decorated with a huge swastika flag, made the speech that expunged democracy from the German parliament. Nor could he forget that while the midnight calls and arrests increased, along with the whispers about torture and murder in SA and SS prison cells, he had been one of the many loyal 'policemen' who had seized union offices throughout the nation, arrested labour leaders, confiscated union files and bank accounts, shut down their newspapers, and in one awful day obliterated organized labour in the whole country.

Now the Führer, Adolf Hitler, was ruling a totalitarian state known as the Third Reich – and he, Ernst Stoll, once a mere technical student, had aided his ruthless climb to power. Naturally, Ingrid was right: he had a lot to be ashamed of. But though he sometimes acknowledged this to himself, the shame and despair in which he writhed secretly made him loathe her for saying it.

'I have to go now,' he said.

Feeling like someone being sucked into quicksands, and filled with the feeling that today would be a nightmare, he walked around the table, kissed Ingrid's cheek, and started out of the house.

'Don't do anything you'll be ashamed of,' Ingrid joked, trying to lighten the depression he was clearly showing.

'I'll try not to,' he replied with a smile and a wave, before stepping outside and closing the door behind him.

Waiting on the pavement in the morning's brightening light for the jeep that would transport him to Stadelheim Prison, he could not shake off his

recollections of the past fifteen months and realized why he was losing Ingrid's love, even as his pride was being destroyed. He had become a policeman, the emissary of butchers, and as his resistance was eroded and his pride subtly destroyed, Ingrid's respect for him, the basis of her love, was also being eroded.

The Third Reich was driving a wedge between them, just as Ingrid had said it would.

The jeep that Ernst had been waiting for turned the corner at the bottom of the street, came toward him and pulled in to the curb. As his fellow officers, Willi Brandt and Franck Ritter, both lieutenants, were taking up the rear seats, Ernst sat up front with the driver – not without noticing that the normally ebullient Brandt was looking gloomy, while Franck was clearly excited.

'So,' Ernst said, as the jeep moved out into the almost deserted road and headed for the Prinz Albrechtstrasse, 'another early-morning call for the élite. It's so nice to be wanted.'

'It depends what they want us for,' the gloomy Brandt said, 'since that may *not* be nice.'

'I always enjoy the early-morning calls,' Franck said, sounding as excited as he looked. 'It usually means some kind of action.'

'I like action in the cinema,' Brandt replied. 'I don't like to be part of it. Not when it involves arresting people and throwing them into that prison.'

'They deserve what they get,' Franck said. 'If they didn't, we wouldn't arrest them. They're the dregs of society – drunkards, gypsies, communist traitors and Jews – and what we do is for the good of the country, which is why I enjoy it.'

'You'd enjoy torturing or shooting them even more,' Brandt said in a remarkably careless outburst, 'but that doesn't make it right.'

'Those are the words of a traitor!' Franck snapped. 'I could report you for that!'

'If it gets me off this duty,' Brandt responded, 'please be my guest.'

Unnerved by the conversation, Ernst told them both to shut up, then he glanced at the awakening city through which they were moving. It was a warm Saturday morning and already the news vendors were out, selling the propaganda to be found in the *Illustrierte Beobachter* and *Frankfurter Zeitung* while the Brownshirts took up their positions on the pavements,

preparing for another day of insults, beard-tugging, and other carefully planned humiliations.

An average weekend in Berlin, 1934.

Ernst felt even worse when the jeep pulled up at the main entrance to the grim Gestapo headquarters in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse. He was startled by the number of SS jeeps and troop trucks lined up along the pavement, and even more startled when, inside the gloomy building, he found that it was packed with heavily armed SS troops.

'This is no ordinary working day,' Brandt whispered, looking even more upset. 'What the hell's going on, Ernst?'

'Something big,' Ritter exclaimed, his eyes gleaming with excitement. 'I knew it! *I knew it*!'

Even as he spoke, the door behind them opened again and more SS troops hurried in.

'They've arrested Roehm!' someone whispered.

'Hitler himself did it!' someone else added.

'It's us or the SA,' another voice said. 'And today will decide it.'

Hardly able to believe what he was hearing, Ernst led his two comrades up the stairs and along some packed corridors, until he came to the office of his superior, Gruppenführer Josef Dietrich. As Ernst stopped in the doorway, Dietrich barked orders to a group of SS officers. When the officers left, all looking anxious, Dietrich waved Ernst inside.

'Heil Hitler!' he snapped automatically, then added more reasonably: 'Prepare yourselves, gentlemen. Operation Calibra has begun. You are in for a busy day.'

'I'm sorry, sir,' Ernst said, 'but I'm not familiar with that code name.'

'No, Lieutenant, of course not. Only the most senior officers were informed. It came to our attention that Roehm was planning a putsch and the ultimate destruction of the authority of the army and SS. However, early this morning, our courageous Führer, in the company of Goebbels, flew to Bad Wiessee and personally arrested that disgusting pervert and the nest of homosexual traitors he calls his stormtroopers, at the Pension Hanselbauer, near the Tegernsee. According to my reports, most of the pig's men were still in bed when the raid took place – many of them caught in *flagrante delicto* with fellow SA troops or local youths. One's stomach churns just to think of it.' Here the Gruppenführer shook his head in disgust. 'Nevertheless,' he

continued, ‘they were all rounded up and are at this very moment being transported back to Berlin to be incarcerated, with Roehm himself, in the Brown House, prior to being quickly tried and judged. Today, gentlemen, we will wield our long knives – so prepare to shed blood.’

Ernst’s soul plunged into despair – but he found no escape.

At 10.00 that warm Saturday morning, he was informed that the cells of Stadelheim Prison were already packed with SA leaders. Those still in the Brown House, including Roehm, had demanded to see the Führer, but were refused and, instead, transported to Stadelheim in an armoured car. There, Roehm was put in a solitary cell, not far from the one he had occupied after the Beer Hall *putsch.*

Shortly after learning of Roehm’s incarceration, Ernst was called to the office of Gruppenführer Dietrich, who told him that the purge was beginning.

‘I personally,’ Dietrich proudly informed him, ‘have been put in charge of the executions of the SA men being held in Stadelheim Prison. Meanwhile, you’re to go with Lieutenant Ritter to the home of General von Schleicher and once there put him to death. You understand?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ernst replied, burning up with shock and disbelief. He was being ordered to kill the former chancellor of Germany. ‘I just think – ’

‘Don’t think, Lieutenant, just obey. And when you’ve completed your task, drive straight to Stadelheim Prison to receive further orders. Now good luck and – Heil Hitler!’

Unable to believe what he was hearing, but forced to accept that this was real, Ernst soon found himself seated beside the hated Franck Ritter in one of the many police cars that were careening and screeching through the streets of Berlin in the great roundup of enemies of the Reich. As if caught in a dream that was turning into a nightmare, he saw one unit, the troops wearing steel helmets, armed with rifles and submachine guns, surrounding von Papen’s office. Hearing the sound of gunfire, savage and frightening, Ernst felt sick to his stomach, too hot, unreal. He briefly closed his eyes, but opened them again to see a similar unit closing in on Roehm’s opulent residence on the Tiergartenstrasse.

Sirens wailed in the distance.

Too soon for Ernst’s liking, he and Lieutenant Ritter were being ushered by an unsuspecting cook into the study of a comfortable house in a suburb of Berlin. While Ernst licked his dry lips and fought to stop himself from

shaking, Ritter asked the distinguished-looking gentleman sitting at the desk if he was indeed General von Schleicher.

'Yes, of course,' the former chancellor replied, looking up in surprise, even as Ritter pulled his pistol from its holster, cocked the safety catch, and opened fire.

The noise was appalling in that confined space.

Fumbling in a state of nerves, not having killed before, Ernst fired in a daze even as Schleicher was falling – and, worse, just as Frau von Schleicher appeared out of nowhere, rushed toward her stricken husband, and was cut down by the bullets that Ernst and Ritter were still firing.

Now two bodies lay on the floor in dark pools of spreading blood.

While Ernst stood there, too shocked to move, Ritter hurried over to the bloody bodies on the floor, examined them dispassionately, then looked up and said, 'This bastard's dead, but his wife's still alive. An ambulance is coming for them, dead or alive, so let's get out of here. There's more work to be done.'

Which was certainly true.

In the courtyard of Stadelheim Prison the slaughter was well under way, but Ernst, when he reported to Gruppenführer Dietrich, was told to make his way back to Gestapo headquarters in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse where there was plenty of worthwhile work still to do. After driving there in traffic jammed up by the police roadblocks and SS trucks being used to raid other SA groups, he was ordered down to the cells. It was a hell of smoke and ricocheting gunfire, of aggressive bawling and piteous pleas for mercy, and Ernst didn't know what to do, didn't want to do anything, turned away to rush out again, but was pushed back by an officer.

'That bastard in there!' the officer bawled. 'That rat in his hole!'

Pushed forward by the officer, Ernst found himself beside the weeping Willi Brandt in a crowd of jostling SS troops, firing his pistol, as the others fired, into Cell 16. There, Gregor Strasser, winner of the Iron Cross, first class, devoted National Socialist and once the Führer's friend, dodged back and forth, his eyes astonishingly bright, trying to avoid the hail of bullets. Finally, jerking spasmodically, he collapsed in his own blood and was given the coup de grâce.

The cells stank of cordite and piss and the rank sweat of terror.

There were no names after that – only bodies spurting blood. Ernst went

with the others, losing control of himself, firing his pistol in dark prison cells, in the hot, sunlit courtyards, then driving across the city to execute others in their homes, then on to the Lichterfeld Barracks – here, there and everywhere, through the day, into the night – murdering SA troops and government ministers and policemen and politicians.

He fell asleep in darkness, awakened to the new day, took part in more executions at Lichterfeld Barracks and Columbia House, an SS torture chamber, until, at approximately 0400 hours the following morning, he was finally allowed to holster his pistol and wash the blood from his hands.

Like his good friend Willi Brandt, he wept and then dried his stinging eyes.

He remembered returning home and telling Ingrid what had happened. He remembered, also, that she did not show any sympathy for his exhaustion, any understanding of his feelings of shame and horror, but only reviled him for what he had done, swore that she would never forgive him, and told him never to touch her again, because he would simply revolt her. That morning, as he lay on the sofa, he drew his strength from contempt for her.

He became a good Nazi.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Wearing a gray suit, plain white shirt, and tie, Bradley was feeling more like a full-time lawyer and less like a disappointed, part-time intelligence agent when he picked up the telephone in his office high above Wall Street.

'Miss Kinder?' he checked tentatively. '*The* Miss Kinder, from Roswell, New Mexico?'

'That's right,' Gladys Kinder replied. 'You sound surprised, Mr Bradley.'

'Well, I certainly wasn't expecting to hear from you, so…you know, I was – '

She chuckled in a familiar, oddly mocking manner. 'Well, here I am.'

'Where, exactly?'

'In the Algonquin Hotel. It's famous for its famous resident writers, so I wanted to stay here.'

'What are you doing in New York?' he asked, feeling guilty at how pleased he was to hear her voice. 'It's a long way from Roswell.'

'I'm on my way to Europe,' she replied, 'and I'm sailing from this fair city, so I thought I'd give you a call. I remembered that you'd taken a shine to me when we talked in your hotel, so I figured you'd at least buy me a drink.'

'I really don't think – ' he began, taken aback by her insolence, embarrassed by her accuracy, and horrified that his secretary might be listening. 'I mean, I – '

She chuckled with throaty amusement. 'Oh, stop worrying, Mr Bradley. I know you're not the playboy type. I really called because I have some information that I think might intrigue you.'

'What information?' he asked carefully.

'Wilson. You remember John Wilson?'

'Yes,' he replied, sitting up straight in his chair, even as the mention of Wilson's name revived his feelings of bitter disappointment. 'Of course I do.

He's the reason you and I met in the first place, so...'

'Still interested in him?'

'Well, not exactly. I mean...' He didn't quite know how to phrase it. He didn't even want to think about it, since it made him mad and frustrated. 'That project's sort of gone off the boil,' he tried. 'It kinda got put on ice.'

'Ah-ha!'

'Right,' Bradley responded, already feeling too emotional just hearing her voice.

'So explain, Bradley. I thought you were hot for Wilson.'

'I was, Gladys, but various things got in the way. Basically, it was decided from above that what we had on Wilson wasn't enough to establish him as someone worth wasting good government money on. In short, I was taken off Wilson's case and given some others, so I haven't done anything about him for some time. I asked them to give me a few more days, but they cut me dead on the spot.'

'And when was that?'

'A couple of days after I'd visited the MIT to check Wilson's background and education. Since he'd gone from there to Cornell, I was going to go there next, but when Taylor put a stop to the project... Well, I was really disappointed and kinda lost interest.'

'*I've* been to Cornell,' Gladys said. 'I went there to visit a friend before leaving for Europe; and since Wilson had once told me that that's where he'd been educated, I decided to check his records while I was there. I come cheap, so buy me lunch and I'll give it all to you.'

At once embarrassed and charmed by her unusual boldness, Bradley practically stuttered, 'Well, I don't know, Gladys. I'm pretty busy here... and what with the project being put on ice and all... Well, I don't...'

'You don't want to see me before I leave for Europe?'

'Well, yeah, I do, but...'

'Then don't make excuses. And believe me, Bradley, when you have this information on Wilson, I don't think you'll have any problem at all in reviving the project – so you win on both counts. Now, do you want it or not?'

'I want it,' Bradley said, now excited for more than one reason. 'Where and when can we meet?'

'My ship leaves tomorrow, so can you meet me today? I've a prior

engagement for this evening,' she said, sounding as if she was teasing him, 'so how about lunch right here?'

'You can't make it any other time?'

'No.'

'Then lunch it is.'

'I'll be at a table in the restaurant. One o'clock?'

'Right,' he said. 'Thanks for calling.'

'My pleasure, Bradley.'

Feeling remarkably flustered, Bradley put the phone down just as Mark, his eighteen-year-old son, entered the office. 'Hi, Dad,' he said.

Mark was blessed with his mother's warm brown eyes and sensitive features, which no doubt helped, Bradley thought, with the many young ladies he dated in Manhattan during the weekends. In fact, Mark, though oddly shy, was a considerable ladies' man who kept one set of girlfriends in Manhattan, where he went to college, and another in Connecticut, where he lived with the family on weekends. Bradley had always liked people who could surprise him and Mark could certainly do that.

'Hi, kid,' Bradley said, as his son took the chair at the other side of his desk. 'Is it lunchtime already?'

'Yep, it sure is. Don't tell me you were working too hard to notice. I don't fall for those tricks.'

Feeling guilty, Bradley grinned. 'Did I promise you lunch today?'

'Yeah,' Mark replied, 'but I'm letting you off the hook. Since my lecture's been cancelled and I have the afternoon off, I'm going to have lunch with Gail Mitchell, who looks sweeter than you.'

'Gail Mitchell? Do I know her?'

'I don't think so. She lives in Brooklyn Heights. I met her through a friend at college. She's rich and impossibly attractive and too tall for you.'

'I may be only five-foot-seven,' Bradley said, unburdened of his guilt, 'but what there is, is all man. Anyway, never mind. I was going to disappoint you. I'm having an unexpected business lunch today, so I'm glad you're fixed up.'

'Who are you lunching with?'

'Dave Marsh,' Bradley lied instinctively, impelled by the return of the guilt caused by the thought of Gladys Kinder and using the name of a friend he often met for lunch.

‘You mean that other lawyer?’

‘Right.’

‘I think I met him at home a few years ago.’

‘You did. We once invited him for Thanksgiving. He got drunk and made a pass at your mother, which gave her a thrill. Anyway, since it’s urgent, I had to cancel you and arrange to meet him instead.’

‘Charming,’ Mark retorted.

‘Well, I knew you’d have a tall lady at hand, so I wasn’t too worried. Come on, let’s go.’

They left the office, took the elevator down to Wall Street, and stood outside on the busy, sunlit pavement.

‘Are you having a long afternoon or just lunch with your Amazon?’ Bradley asked.

‘Just lunch.’

‘Okay. Since it’s Friday afternoon, why not meet me on the platform of the station at four sharp and we’ll go home together?’

‘Sounds good,’ Mark said.

‘Okay, son, I’ll see you.’ When Mark had sauntered off along the crowded sidewalk, Bradley grabbed a taxi to the Algonquin Hotel on 44th Street. He found Gladys Kinder already seated in a booth in the Rose Room, drinking bourbon and smoking a cigarette.

She certainly looked her age, which she had said was thirty-eight, but even in her old-fashioned clothes, which were doubtless the rage in Roswell, she had an undeniable attractiveness and, at least to him, an oddly opaque, provocative sensuality.

She made him feel slightly out of breath.

As he sat beside her in the banquette, wondering why she had chosen it instead of an open table, she held up her glass, grinned laconically, and said, ‘I’ve been on the wagon since last night, but I couldn’t resist this. We working journalists are all the same.’

‘It looks almost empty,’ Bradley observed. ‘Shall I order another one?’

‘Why not?’ she responded.

‘Shall we also order the food?’

‘Sure,’ she said. ‘Why not?’

Instantly recalling her ability to hold her liquor, and also remembering that when drinking she could be impish, Bradley ordered two more bourbons.

He went through the menu with her, ordered the food for both of them, then, when the aperitifs had arrived, raised his glass to her.

'Cheers,' he said.

'Cheers, Mr Bradley,' she replied, also raising her glass and smiling.

'Mike… Please call me Mike.'

'That sounds really intimate, Mike – but what the hell, call me Gladys. Not the most *romantic* name for a lady, but I've learnt to live with it.'

He had to grin at that one. 'You said you were on your way to Europe. Did you really mean that?'

'Yep. Sure did, partner. I never quite recovered from the way that bastard Wilson left me, I didn't particularly like being a middle-aged spinster in New Mexico, and so I wangled myself a job as foreign correspondent to the Roswell *Daily Record,* which I've served so well so far. Those good ol' boys in Roswell always treated me fine, and when I told them I needed to get away, this is what they came up with. It doesn't pay much, but I'll get to see Europe, and I've dreamed about that all my life.'

'Based anywhere in particular?'

'London. But I'm hoping to go on to Spain. I think things are happening there.'

'Bad things.'

'I guess so.'

Over the meal, Bradley told her what he knew about Europe, which was considerable, and all the time he felt himself falling into her, as if in a dream. She wasn't like the women he knew – she was rough-edged and laconic – but that very difference, which seemed more pronounced here, in these sophisticated surroundings, made her even more attractive to him.

Talking about their first meeting in the Roswell hotel's gloomy lobby, she said, 'You had the East Coast written all over you and I thought that was cute.' She also joked about how shocked he had seemed when, after informing her that he was in Roswell to interview the members of Goddard's rocket team, she responded by not only telling him she had been Wilson's mistress, but by describing in drunkenly mischievous, intimate detail just what she and her remarkably youthful sixty-year-old lover had done together in bed. 'You looked as shocked as a cheerleader trapped in a baseball team's locker room after a winning game. God, that was something!' Finally she reminded him that he had found her attractive, that she'd seen it in his face,

and that his blushing response to her teasing had simply confirmed it.

'Yes,' Bradley murmured, 'I guess it did.'

He had never had an affair before and certainly didn't plan to start one now, but when he thought of her going off to Europe, probably never to be seen again, he was filled with an unutterable sense of loss. It was an unexpected, inexplicable feeling, and it left him bewildered. So bewildered, in fact, that he almost forgot to ask her about Wilson – though eventually, over the coffee and brandy, he *did* get down to business.

'You said you'd been to Cornell,' he reminded her. 'Is that true or not?'

Gladys turned more serious then. 'Yeah,' she said, 'it's true.'

Opening her handbag, she withdrew two sheets of typed notes, unfolded them, and spread them out on the table. She was briefly distracted by her brandy, but eventually, after imbibing and inhaling, she exhaled smoke and started reading from her neatly typed notes.

'Name: John Wilson. Born July 6, 1870, in Montezuma, Iowa, to Cass and Ira Wilson, both listed as farmers. Attended elementary school in Montezuma, then high school in Des Moines. Stunning reports from both schools for his academic achievements – though all agreed that he seemed to have few friends and cared only for studying. In the fall of 1888, when he was eighteen years old, he signed on at the MIT – reportedly, shortly after his mother died and his father sold their farm in the Corn Belt and moved back to Worcester, Massachusetts, his hometown. At the MIT, Wilson studied aerodynamics, with particular emphasis on the wind-tunnel experiments that took place in the Engineering A Department. In 1893 – the same year his father died – Wilson's reports, in which every subject is listed as "exemplary," thus setting a college record, gained him entry to Sibley College, Cornell University, where he studied experimental engineering. By 1895 he'd obtained his bachelor of science degree in aeronautics and left Cornell. The university records don't say where he planned on going when he left – but they *do* reveal that between 1896 and 1897 he returned frequently to the university to attend the lectures of Octave Chanute.'

She stopped reading and raised her eyes from the notes.

'Anything else?' Bradley asked.

'No,' she replied. 'At least not until he turned up, in the fall of 1930, to work for six months with Robert H. Goddard, whom we all know and love as the controversial rocket scientist and a later, if more renowned, MIT

graduate.'

Bradley wrinkled his brow. 'Did you say 1930?'

'Yep.'

'You mean there's nothing on this guy from 1895 to 1930 – a period of approximately thirty-five years?'

'Not so far. He appears to have wiped his own tracks clean. We don't know what he did for a living following graduation, but we *do* know that he frequently returned informally to Cornell to attend Chanute's lectures, given throughout 1896 and 1897. Then, when Wilson was twenty-seven years old, he dropped out of sight completely – and he didn't reappear until 1930, when he worked for six months with Robert Goddard, before disappearing again, as completely as he'd done the first time.'

'That's incredible,' Bradley said, blowing another cloud of smoke. 'A guy can't disappear *that* completely for thirty-five years, then suddenly turn up again at sixty years old!'

Gladys sighed. 'So far that appears to be the case. Wilson seems to be some kind of authentic genius. He obtained his BA in aeronautics when they were very rare indeed, he claimed to Goddard that he'd designed airships, and yet we can't find a damned thing on what should have been the most productive thirty-five years of his life.'

Bradley gave a low whistle.

'Would that be possible in this day and age?' Gladys asked rhetorically. But before Bradley could open his mouth to reply, she raised her index finger and asked, more emphatically: 'One: Would a man with that track record be capable of designing airships? And, two: If he was capable of doing so, could he have done it in total secrecy for so long?'

She glanced across the busy restaurant at the group of people arguing noisily in a cloud of cigarette smoke at a table in the middle of the room. They included William Shawn, the associate editor of the *New Yorker,* an increasingly blind and visibly drunken cartoonist named James Thurber, a matinee-idol theatre reviewer, Robert Benchley, and the deceptively sweet-faced satirical writer, Dorothy Parker. Grinning slightly and shaking her head, as if she didn't believe what she was seeing, she turned back to Bradley.

'I'd already checked out that possibility,' Bradley said, 'and to answer your first question, yes, Wilson *could* have gone into airship design with that

kind of background. Although there were no formal aeronautical courses at the MIT when Wilson was there, there were plenty of *informal* courses on propulsion and the behaviour of fluids – two subjects that Goddard later made his own. And certainly, by 1896, instructors and students at the MIT had built a wind tunnel and were experimenting with it to get practical knowledge of aerodynamics. As for Sibley College, the experimental engineering courses that Wilson attended would have been conducted by professors Rolla Clinton Carpenter, George Burton Preston, Aldred Henry Eldredge, Charles Edwin Houghton, and Oliver Shantz – some of the greatest aeronautical thinkers of their day. Finally, Octave Chanute was the world-famous engineer who, in 1896, emulated the successful manned hang-glider experiments of the German, Otto Lilienthal, at an aerial experiment station on the Lake Michigan sand dunes near Miller, Indiana – so, again, Wilson learned from the very best.'

'But what was the state of knowledge at the time?' Gladys asked, still sceptical about what he was telling her.

'Well,' Bradley said, 'according to what I learned at the MIT, it was certainly more advanced than is generally known. For instance, Cornell's courses at the time included mechanical and electrical engineering and machine design and construction. As for specific aeronautical texts of the time, they were surprisingly advanced and would have included the Smithsonian Institution's *Experiments in Aerodynamics*, published in 1891; the Lawrence Hargraves experiment reports of 1890 to 1894; the 1893 reports on Sir Hiram Maxim's experiments on engines, propellers, airplanes, and flying machines; and the *Aeronautical Annual* of 1895, 1896, and 1897, which contained original contributions from most of the leading aeronautical scientists... So assuming that Wilson was some kind of genius, he certainly could have attained the knowledge necessary to design airships.'

'Oh, boy!' Gladys exclaimed softly, obviously intrigued. 'And question two?'

'Could a man of such talents have worked in America for thirty-five years, possibly designing airships, without leaving any tracks behind?' Bradley nodded emphatically. 'Yes, Gladys, it's certainly odd, but I think it's possible. The period we're talking about was the greatest so far in the history of aviation – the first successful flight of S. P. Langley's flying machines; Santos-Dumont's flight in an airship from Saint Cloud to the Eiffel Tower;

the Wright brothers' first successful heavier-than-air manned flight at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina; Goddard's first experiments in rocketry; Wilbur Wright's seventy-seven-mile flight in two hours and thirty minutes; then, only seven months later, in 1909, Louis Bleriot's flight across the English Channel; the dogfiights and airship raids of the Great War of 1914, and the continuing advances made since then…So, yes, Wilson could certainly have designed airships... or even more advanced forms of aircraft.'

'But could he have done so in *secret?*'

'Yes, that, too, is possible. In fact, it was a time when financiers were in fierce competition with one another to sink money into experimental aeronautical projects – so most of those projects were wrapped in the strictest secrecy. Wilson could, therefore, have worked in almost total anonymity with the full support, even encouragement, of his financial backers. And the US government,' he continued, practically talking to himself, 'quietly backed more than one aeronautical project – particularly during the late 1930s – and usually insisted that such projects be kept secret. They also occasionally took over civilian aeronautical projects and either ran them in strict secrecy or, for one reason or another, quietly aborted them.' He scratched his nose, coughed into his clenched fist, and spread his hands on the table. 'So,' he said, 'there it is.'

There was a moment's silence which seemed to last forever, then Gladys said: 'Tell you what... I'll run a check on all the companies that were known to be working on such projects and see if Wilson's name pops up magically. It depends, I suppose, on whether or not he used his own name – but I'll certainly give it a try for you before I catch my ship – since the guy who obtained these notes for me, who works in the registrar's office at Cornell, is my date for this evening.'

Bradley, very much to his surprise, was upset to hear that, though he managed to hide the fact.

'Shall I call you at home tonight?' Gladys asked him.

'Sure,' he said, giving her his number, but feeling as guilty as a man arranging an assignation, 'that would be great. Now I have to go, Gladys. I'm meeting my son at Penn Station at four, to take the train home.'

He felt embarrassed saying it, but Gladys just smiled wickedly. 'Ah, yes,' she said, 'I remember. You told me all about your family. A lovely wife and a boy and girl, as I remember.'

‘That’s right,’ Bradley said. ‘Though the boy and girl are older than you might think. In fact, Mark is eighteen.’

‘A good age,’ Gladys said.

Yet she seemed sad at that moment, or at least a little regretful, and when they left the hotel and faced each another on 44th Street, Bradley, not normally a romantic man, hardly knew what to say.

She had somehow sneaked up on him.

‘Well,’ she said, offering her sunburnt hand and a lopsided grin, ‘it was nice to see you again, Mike Bradley. I’ll give you that final call tonight, then it’s *au revoir*, baby.’

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘*Au revoir*.’

She just stood there as he slipped into a taxi and let it carry him away.

He felt almost choked up.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Bradley met Mark at four o'clock at Penn Station and they took the train back to Bridgeport, Connecticut, unencumbered with the usual rush-hour crowd of fellow commuters. As Bradley had already phoned to say they would be early, his wife, Joan, was waiting for them in her car and drove them back to their relatively modest, ranch-style home, just ten minutes from the station and surrounded by expansive gardens and protective trees. There, Bradley refreshed himself with a shower, dressed in casual slacks, shirt, and pullover, relaxed for an hour with the radio and another whiskey, then joined Joan and his two children for dinner in the oak-panelled dining room.

Modestly drunk from his lunch with Gladys Kinder and the additional whiskey, and still an Irish sentimentalist at heart, Bradley, after sharing a bottle of red wine with the family, found himself glancing from his wife to his daughter, quietly startled at how similar they looked in all but their age. Joan was thirty-eight, five days older than Bradley, and although their daughter, Miriam, was still only seventeen, she and her mother were almost like twins, sharing the same delicate features, dark hair, enchanting cafe-au-lait eyes, and a quietly mischievous sense of humour.

Bradley, usually sentimental but now guilty because of his guiltless passion for Gladys Kinder, was even more in love with both of them tonight than he was normally.

'How did school go today?' he asked Miriam.

'Same as always,' she replied. 'Clark Gable was teaching math, Bette Davis taught history, and Errol Flynn discussed the things he knows best, then gave out his phone number. That's why I love school, Dad.'

Bradley grinned. 'Well, school's certainly improved since my day – and the results are so wonderful.'

Miriam lowered her head and blushed.

'Gee,' Mark said, 'what a sweet kid! She makes me feel so mature, so

protective, when she blushes like that.'

'Shut up, Mark,' Joan warned him.

'Sorry, Mom,' he replied.

'Who's taking you to the prom?' Bradley asked. 'Have you decided that yet?'

'Whoever asks her,' Mark informed him.

'Shut up, Mark,' Joan warned him again.

'I told you,' Miriam replied, smiling sweetly. 'Errol Flynn gave me his number and a welcoming smile.'

'He's too old for you,' Joan said.

'A nice guy,' Mark said, 'but too old.'

'What about that kid who walks you home from school? At least he *looks* like Errol Flynn.'

'Looks aren't everything, Dad.'

'His father's rich,' Joan reminded her.

'Money's not everything, Mom.'

'It's *nearly* everything, Miriam.'

'Will he be taking you?' Bradley asked.

Miriam sighed. 'He hasn't asked me.'

'When he asks, are you going to say yes?'

Miriam sighed. 'I suppose so.'

'A real lucky guy,' Mark said.

'Yes, isn't he?' Miriam responded.

'Please finish your desserts,' Joan said to all of them, 'so I can clear this table and put up my feet.'

'Yes, ma'am!' they all exclaimed at once.

Joan did in fact put her feet up after dinner, stretching out on the sofa, while Bradley sat on the floor beside her, having a brandy and feeling deeply grateful for the good life he had. The kids had retired to their own rooms and he was about to put on the radio, but Joan stopped him by taking hold of his wrist and pulling his hand onto her stomach, which still was as flat as an adolescent's, and seductively warm.

'No,' she said, 'I don't want to hear the radio. Let's just talk for a while.'

'Okay, dear. Sure. Anything special you want to talk about?'

'Nope,' she said with a lazy smile. 'Nothing special at all. How did your day go?'

‘The same as always,’ he replied. ‘Clark Gable came by for a drink, Bette Davis dropped in for a smoke, and Errol Flynn called to discuss his forthcoming date with Miriam. That’s why I love my work.’

Joan chuckled and squeezed his hand, then lightly stroked his wrist. ‘So what did you really do?’ she asked. ‘Anything exciting?’

‘Mostly routine,’ he lied, shocking himself. ‘The best part of the day was lunch with Dave Marsh, who sends love and kisses.’

Joan’s smile was quietly radiant. ‘Ah, my boyfriend!’ she said softly, oblivious to Bradley’s shame. ‘Was this just your usual monthly get-together or something special?’

‘He’s going to check someone out for me,’ Bradley told her. ‘A guy called John Wilson. A guy who’s starting to intrigue me. A real mystery man...’

He told her all about Wilson, going into more detail than he had planned, and then added that he was expecting a late-night call from one of Dave Marsh’s friends: a lady named Gladys Kinder.

When he stopped talking, Joan rolled onto her hip, to stare directly, steadily at him.

‘Be careful, Mike,’ she said. ‘Don’t let this become another obsession. You’re easily bored, always searching for new adventures, and I know that you’re looking at intelligence work to get you out of the office. But I repeat, please be careful. Don’t become obsessed with this mystery man. We have a good marriage, but it’s been through its troubles, and most of those troubles occurred when you became obsessed with your work. So please, Mike, no matter how intriguing this man is, don’t let him threaten us.’

‘I won’t.’

Joan went to bed shortly after and he promised to follow soon, but instead sat on, thinking about what she had said and accepting the truth in it. They *did* have a good marriage, but it *had* been troubled at times, and in nearly every instance the problem had been caused by his obsession with some job or other and his subsequent neglect of home and hearth. He loved Joan and the children, appreciated what he had, and didn’t want ever again to let work, or anything else, take him away from them.

And he was silently vowing not to let this happen when the telephone rang.

‘I think I’ve found our man,’ Gladys Kinder said. ‘Our mysterious Mr

Wilson.'

'Shoot,' Bradley said.

'In 1895, the year Wilson left Cornell, a now-defunct New York financial company, Cohn and Goldman Incorporated, financed an aeronautical company, reportedly to research and, if possible, construct passenger-carrying airships. While Cohn and Goldman denied repeatedly that they were attempting to build commercial airships – as most speculators routinely did in those days – I have confirmation that they constructed their factories in Mount Pleasant, near the border of Iowa and Illinois... And according to the company records, the man put in charge of the whole project was a relatively unknown aeronautical scientist named John Wilson.'

Bradley was surprised to find himself releasing the breath he had been unwittingly holding in.

'Anything else?' he asked.

'No, Mike. Those are the only clippings I could find on either Wilson or Cohn and Goldman Incorporated.'

'It's more than enough to go on,' Bradley said. 'Thanks a hell of a lot, Gladys.'

Excited and confused at once, he was just about to hang up when Gladys spoke urgently enough to stop him. 'One more thing, Bradley... In checking the clippings, I was also reminded that the following two years – 1896 and 1897 – were notable for one phenomenon in particular: the great wave of mystery airships. At the time the press called them UFOs – unidentified flying objects.'

'Why?'

'Because most of the reports indicated that the airships were more advanced than any known to have been constructed at the time. Also, they were reported to be carrying passengers, or crewmen. They landed frequently, usually to collect water for their engines, and at such times the crewmen talked freely to anyone who approached them... And the crewman who features most frequently in the reports is a man who always introduced himself as…'

'Wilson.'

'Right.' Gladys chuckled and then turned serious again. 'I'm gonna arrange to have a friend send you the newspaper clippings about those sightings – and that's about it, Mike. After this, I'll be on my way to Europe.

No more lunches. No phone calls...'

Her voice trailed off into a silence that spoke volumes and left Bradley grieving.

'Gladys, I don't know how...'

'What's domestic life like out there in Connecticut?'

'It's very nice.'

'Yeah, I thought so. Goodbye, Mike.'

'Goodbye, Gladys.'

The phone went dead. Bradley felt very emotional. He forgot to join Joan in bed, but instead went into his study and sat at his desk. He pulled out the notes he had collected on Wilson and started to ponder them.

The next morning, having not slept a wink, he rang General Taylor.

CHAPTER NINE

‘I’m Lieutenant Ernst Stoll,’ Wilson’s new interrogator said when the cell door had closed behind the man and he took the hard wooden chair facing the bed upon which Wilson was seated. ‘I am, as you can see, a member of the SS, not the Gestapo, and I work for the technical intelligence branch. Naturally,’ he added, waving the papers in his right hand and offering what seemed like a shy smile, ‘I know who you are. So shall we begin?’

‘What if I say no?’ Wilson asked.

‘I would ignore you, of course.’

Wilson smiled. ‘Let’s begin, then. I take it, as you’re from technical intelligence, that we’ve made a little progress – or, at least, finished with relatively unimportant matters.’

‘That’s true,’ Lieutenant Stoll said, mildly amused by Wilson’s impertinence. ‘Your background and motivation have been accepted as valid, so I’m here to talk about the work you’ve already shown us and the work you now wish to do for us.’

‘Good,’ Wilson said, deliberately keeping his gaze steady, searching the lieutenant’s face for what it was hiding, because all faces were masks. Lieutenant Stoll was young, perhaps in his middle twenties, and while he looked diabolically handsome in his gleaming black uniform, his face did not display a confidence to match. Indeed, he seemed a little haunted, a man divided within himself, and was obviously trying to cover his doubts with his dryly polite, distant manner. ‘You have a technical background?’ Wilson asked him.

‘Yes,’ Stoll replied with a flicker of pride. ‘I studied aeronautical engineering at the Institute of Technology in Munich, then rocket technology under Professor Becker at the Institute of Technology, Berlin University.’

‘Ah!’ Wilson exclaimed softly, with admiration. ‘Becker! So were you a member of the German Amateur Rocket Society?’

‘No,’ Stoll said, briefly displaying hurt and resentment, then hiding it by changing the subject. ‘I trust you found the previous interrogations civilized?’ he asked, looking up from his papers.

‘Yes,’ Wilson said. ‘Perfectly civilized. Surprisingly so.’

Lieutenant Stoll raised his eyebrows as if puzzled. ‘Why surprisingly so? Is it not what you would have expected from German officers?’

‘Given the sounds that have emanated from some of the other cells, I take it that not all German officers are so civilized when interrogating their prisoners.’

Ernst looked embarrassed, then smiled bleakly. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘*that.* Well, some prisoners are more troublesome than others, as I’m sure you agree. A little persuasion often goes a long way – though I hope that the noise from the other cells didn’t make you lose too much sleep.’

Because he had been forced to listen, day and night, to the screaming of those being abused in the other cells or torture chambers of this Gestapo headquarters and prison, Wilson would certainly have lost a good deal of sleep had he been the kind to need a lot of it. As he was not, and as the fate of others did not concern him, he’d had a relatively comfortable time. Nevertheless, hoping to find out more about the situation outside the prison, he said, ‘Yes, I lost some sleep, particularly during that day and night two weeks ago, when this whole place turned into a madhouse of bawling and shooting.’

‘You mean June 30?’

‘Correct.’

The lieutenant’s facade nearly crumbled, revealing revulsion mixed with shame, but he quickly regained his composure and smiled again, bleakly. ‘Ah, yes, the Night of the Long Knives. That’s what we call it now.’

‘Is it true that the SS murdered over a hundred, maybe two hundred, SA officers and others in that one bloody purge?’

‘No, it’s not true,’ the lieutenant replied with self-defensive anger. ‘Those men weren’t murdered. They were executed because they were traitors.’

‘Executed without trial,’ Wilson corrected him.

‘You’re impertinent, Herr Wilson. Count your blessings that you’re American. Count them also because that purge, about which you are so sarcastic, has ensured that the SS, and not the SA, are now virtually ruling the

Third Reich. The SS will therefore be in control of any research establishment in which you're likely to find yourself.'

'My request, then, is being seriously considered?'

'That's why I'm here.'

Realizing that after weeks of interrogation in this prison cell, he was close to getting what he wanted, Wilson allowed himself the luxury of a feeling of triumph. When Lieutenant Ernst Stoll of SS Technical Intelligence lowered his head to study the papers spread out on his knees, Wilson recognized his own drawings and notes, cunningly unfinished, for the kind of aircraft that the Nazi's Projekt Saucer was trying, unsuccessfully, to create. It was also what he was trying to create, and with their help he would do it.

Lieutenant Stoll looked up from his notes to say: 'While I'm very impressed, I find it hard to believe that during the period you worked in secret – between 1895 and 1930 – you could have made the extraordinary technical advances indicated in these notes and drawings.'

'Having already tested my intellect and knowledge, you know that both are remarkable, so why doubt my achievements?'

'We can't check your actual engineering or scientific achievements until we get you into a research centre; however, according to what we can gauge from these remarkable notes and drawings, your achievements were completely divorced from the general scientific achievements of the time. Those were very early days, so your achievements seem *too* advanced to have sprung from that period.'

'It's a widely held misconception that those were early days,' Wilson replied, 'but they were in fact the most productive days in the history of science. As you've studied aeronautical engineering and rocketry, I needn't tell you about the extraordinary advances made in those fields during that period. However, I should remind you that by 1895 Rontgen had discovered X rays, Marconi had invented wireless telegraphy, Auguste and Louis Lumiere had invented the Cinematographe, the first main railway was electrified, and Ramsay had detected, by spectroscope, helium from a terrestrial source. By 1896 we had Rutherford's magnetic detection of electrical waves, the construction of an electrical submarine in France, and the first successful flights of S. P. Langley's flying machines. By 1897 numerous patents for flying machines had been registered, and J. J. Thomson's work on cathode rays had led to the evaluation of the electron.

The rest I'm sure I don't have to tell you: From the successful test flights of Langley's flying machines in 1897 to the first cross-channel flight took only one decade – and in that decade Robert H. Goddard had already begun his experiments in rocketry. So, Lieutenant, I was *not* too advanced for my own time – and indeed my work *did* spring from it and was nurtured by its achievements.'

Stoll smiled frostily, glanced down at Wilson's notes, then looked up again. 'Your work has been studied by our Projekt Saucer scientists and engineers at the German Rocket Research Institute at Kummersdorf, just outside Berlin. While it's agreed that your designs are remarkable, they remain incomplete and would not lead to a workable saucer-shaped aircraft. You claim that with our help you'd be able to complete this project, but why, since our own scientists have failed repeatedly to do so, should we place our faith in your undoubted talents?'

'You know I can't answer that,' Wilson said carefully, 'but can only show you what I can do when I'm actually working.'

'I understand that, Herr Wilson, but perhaps you can at least give me some indication of the direction you'd be heading in. For instance, what would separate your work from that which is already being done by our scientists at Kummersdorf? We agree that an aircraft shaped like a saucer would fly better than any other, but that shape also has its own problems, which so far we haven't solved. How, then, would you approach this problem that has so far foiled us?'

Wilson had no intentions of telling them everything he had discovered, but he knew that he had to give them enough to whet their appetites and encourage them to let him work for them. He therefore leaned forward on the bed and chose his words carefully.

'Your scientists have been researching along conventional lines,' he said, 'but a saucer-shaped aircraft wouldn't respond to conventional laws of aerodynamics, so we have to look elsewhere.'

'I'm not sure I understand,' Stoll replied, though his gaze was steady and thoughtful.

'When I was working with the wind tunnel at Zeppelin in Friedrichshafen,' Wilson said, 'I helped test many of the experimental prototypes coming from Kummersdorf – and it soon became clear to me that the Kummersdorf scientists were trying to construct some kind of saucer-

shaped aircraft.'

'You've already told us you knew that,' Stoll said impatiently.

'I remind you of it,' Wilson replied, unperturbed, 'because I also ascertained that most of the Kummersdorf designs were based on the tailless or all-wing aircraft, the Horten 1, which was designed and constructed by the Horten brothers, Walter and Riemer, for the German Air Ministry, at their factory in Bonn, from 1931 to 1932. That so-called all-wing aircraft, which in prototype was a glider, had a span of forty point seven feet, a wing area of two hundred and twenty-six square feet, and a wing-loading of two pounds per square foot. It had a flying weight of four hundred and forty pounds, a gliding angle of twenty-one degrees, and a flying life of approximately seven hours.'

'Your intelligence gathering is commendable,' Stoll said sarcastically, 'but what is the point of this?'

'The Horten brothers were convinced that the most important form of aircraft would be the all-wing type, which is why there were no vertical stabilizing or control surfaces on their flying wing, the Horton I, why it was virtually flat and crescent-shaped, like a boomerang, and why the pilot was placed in a prone position – to reduce cockpit size.'

'Yes, Herr Wilson, I know this, but…'

'That so-called *flying wing* certainly flew for seven hours, but it could never have been the basis of a flying saucer for one very good reason.'

'Yes?'

'It was still faced with the problem that's repeatedly foiled your scientists: the limitations imposed by the boundary layer.' He could see that he had Stoll's interest, though the German was trying to disguise it by showing little emotion. Amused, Wilson said, 'Have you heard of the boundary layer, Oberleutnant?'

Stoll just smiled at the sarcasm. 'Why don't you remind me, Herr Wilson? You talk so well about these things.'

'While being four or five thousand times less viscous than oil, air is still viscous,' Wilson said, enjoying himself. 'Because of this, the air sweeping in on the solid body of an aircraft forms imperceptible stratifications of resistance and consequently decreases the speed of the body in flight. These layers of air are therefore known as the boundary layer – and the boundary layer increases its resistance in direct proportion to the increasing speed of

the flying object, thus imposing severe limitations on its speed and manoeuvrability.'

'And in layman's terms?' Stoll asked, clearly amused by Wilson's enthusiasm for lecturing.

'In layman's terms,' Wilson continued, drawing Stoll into his web, 'the major problem regarding supersonic flight is to somehow move this negative air as far to the rear of the aircraft as possible, thus minimizing the expenditure of energy required to propel it through the sky. Moreover, it's possible that a revolutionary type of aircraft could, by not only *completely* removing the boundary layer but by somehow *rerouting* it and utilizing it as an added propulsive force, fly through the skies using little other than the expelled air itself. Should this be accomplished, we would have an aircraft capable of remarkable speeds while using only the bare minimum of conventional fuel.'

'So you plan to devote all your energies to solving the problem of the boundary layer.'

'Yes,' Wilson said, playing his trump card, 'and Germany is the place for doing that.'

'I'm flattered – but why Germany?'

'As I explained to your Reichsführer, the boundary layer was introduced to the world of aerodynamics by the German professor, Ludwig Prandtl, at Gottingen in 1904. Throughout the following years, many other German scientists, including professors Betz, Flettner, and Junkers, experimented with specially equipped aircraft in attempts to reduce the boundary layer. Most of the experiments were based on the suction method, in which the negative air is sucked into the wing itself, through tiny holes or slots, then expelled by means of a pump located in the fuselage. While this was a step in the right direction, the resulting aircraft still required heavy, obstructive engines – also the main problem with the flying wing jet fighter that the Horten brothers envisaged – but it's my belief that in order to get rid of the boundary layer completely – and in order to make use of the *dead* air not only for acceleration, but for manoeuvring as well – what we need is an aircraft devoid of all obstructing protuberances, such as wings, rudders, and even normal air intakes, and one not requiring a large, heavy engine. In other words, this revolutionary new aircraft should be the perfect *flying wing* that offers the least possible resistance, sucks in the dead air of the boundary

layer, and then uses that same air, expelling it at great force, to increase its own momentum.'

'And how do you propose creating such a machine?'

'By building the perfect flying wing – a circular wing that is, in a sense, wrapped around its suction pump, with the pump being part and parcel of the engine – a machine shaped like a saucer – and by constructing it from a porous metal that will act like a sponge and remove the need for air intakes altogether. This would result in frictionless air flow during flight: in an aircraft that slips through the air in the same way as a piece of wet soap slips through the fingers. Its speed and manoeuvring capabilities would be literally limitless.'

Wilson felt excited merely thinking about it, and could see, in the sheltered gleam of Stoll's dark gaze, that he was feeling the same way. Nevertheless, the young oberleutnant was being careful about showing his true feelings.

'This sounds wonderful in theory,' he said, 'but practice is something else again. I'm not sure that your so-called porous metal is a realistic proposition.'

'In fact, it's being worked on right now,' Wilson said, 'and right here in Germany. Among the many other experiments I helped run in the Zeppelin wind tunnel were those concerning different porous metals being created by the scientists of Gottingen and Volkenroda: a compound of magnesium and aluminium. The scientists are calling it *Luftschwamm,* or aerosponge... and I think it will work.'

The instant he saw Lieutenant Stoll fold up his papers and slip them back into his briefcase, Wilson knew he had won. 'It's interesting,' the lieutenant said, pushing his chair back and standing up, 'that even the great Russian, Tsiolokovsky, evinced a strong interest in circular, hyperbolic, and spherical airframes.'

'I can see that you know more about this subject than you pretend, Oberleutnant,' Wilson replied, thus making the sombre SS officer smile. 'And knowing that, you clearly also know that the extensive research into all-wing aircraft and rocketry that's been carried out in Germany during the past decade is directly due to German admiration for Tsiolokovsky's theories.'

'*And* due to admiration for the American, Robert H. Goddard, for whom you worked for six months.'

'I have to admit that although he's my junior, I learned a lot from

Goddard about the problems of stabilization and gyroscopic controls. That's why I wanted to work with him. It was my only weak area.'

Smiling genuinely for the first time, the lieutenant said, 'Come, Herr Wilson, we are leaving. We are going to put you to work. We do not have much time, so don't bother with your possessions. This cell will be cleaned out as soon as we leave, and your possessions here, as well as those being kept by the Gestapo, will be forwarded to you this afternoon. So please, follow me right now.'

Quietly exultant, Wilson was led out of the cell and up the stairs to the lobby near the front door of the building. There, while he adjusted to his sudden sense of space and movement (after weeks in his tiny cell, this lobby appeared to be immense and far too crowded), he was given an army greatcoat. Then he was led out to the police car waiting for him in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse.

Seated in the rear beside the notably more relaxed Lieutenant Ernst Stoll, Wilson gazed out the window as the car pulled away from the curb and proceeded through Berlin. In the early afternoon's pearly light, the city looked solid, busy, and perfectly normal, except for a notable increase in military personnel and vehicles, which seemed to be everywhere.

'This is a city preparing for war,' Wilson said.

'Yes,' Stoll replied. 'You're very observant.'

Intrigued by the handsome young lieutenant's oddly haunted look and reticence, Wilson said, taking a chance, 'Am I allowed to ask if you're involved with scientific work as distinct from intelligence?'

Lieutenant Stoll sighed. 'You may ask, but the answer is no. I'm no longer involved in scientific research per se, but instead am forced to use my scientific knowledge for the gathering and analysing of technical intelligence material.'

'Which is why you were sent to interview me, right?'

Stoll sighed again, as if deeply depressed. 'Yes, Herr Wilson, that is the case. And now I will take you to Kummersdorf West, where you'll work with men less talented than I was. Such is life, I suppose.'

'You can't protest?'

'To be a member of the SS is to obey. I obey and take my pride from that.'

Wilson doubted that Ernst Stoll was gaining any pride from his work and

filed the knowledge away in his head for future reference.

The journey to Kummersdorf did not take long – it was only fifteen miles from Berlin – and the car soon slowed down at barbed-wire fences and a guarded gate. It was inspected by a particularly careful SS sergeant and eventually waved through, then stopped in front of an enormous hangar in a broad stretch of bare ground that ran out to more barbed wire and signs announcing that an army firing range lay beyond.

Puzzled to find only this enormous hangar and bare ground where he had expected to find a hive of activity, Wilson glanced questioningly at Stoll. As if reading his mind, the lieutenant smiled understandingly and said, 'Projekt Saucer has been separated from the Rocket Research Institute proper by that army firing range. Beyond the firing range are Wernher von Braun's more impressive research works, which is what you were, I assume, hoping to find.'

'Frankly, yes,' Wilson said, hearing the moaning of the wind and seeing only swaying, untended grass around that single, enormous hangar, under the leaden gray sky.

'Try not to be too disappointed,' Stoll said, as he led Wilson across the windblown grass, toward the already rusted, corrugated-iron hangar. 'You'll be visiting the Research Institute on a regular basis, contributing your knowledge to their rocket projects, but most of your time will be spent here, in conditions of strict secrecy, where you will work more specifically on Projekt Saucer. Even those who work at the other side of the firing range don't know what we're doing here.'

The main hangar doors were closed. The smaller side door was guarded by armed SS troops who gave the Nazi salute when Stoll approached. After returning the salute in a desultory manner, the lieutenant motioned Wilson into the hangar. Stepping inside, Wilson was temporarily blinded by the bright light. He adjusted to it as Stoll came in behind him to stand beside him. Then he saw an enormous open floor, surrounded by glassed-in offices, filled with machines and a few men in oily coveralls.

Raised about six feet off the concrete floor on a hydraulic platform was the skeletal prototype of a saucer-shaped craft, about forty feet in diameter and rising up to a central dome. Its discus-shaped ribcage of steel covered what looked like two Hirth 80 hp engines.

'It'll never fly,' Wilson said.

Lieutenant Stoll smiled. ‘No, it won’t.’ Obviously pleased by Wilson’s perception, he led him across the hangar floor to one of the larger offices. Stepping inside, he suddenly stiffened, gave the Nazi salute and said, ‘Heil Hitler!’ He then stepped aside to introduce Wilson to a man who, even wearing his Reichsführer’s uniform, did not look like a soldier.

‘So, Herr Wilson,’ Heinrich Himmler said, ‘we meet again, yes?’

‘Yes, Reichsführer – I’m glad to say.’

‘I’m sure you are, Herr Wilson – since if we hadn’t met again here, you would now be a dead man.’

Reminded by the remark that his assessment of Himmler was not amiss, Wilson glanced over the lunatic’s shoulder at the men grouped behind him. As they were all wearing oily coveralls, they were either scientists or engineers.

‘Would you care to inspect our flying saucer, Herr Wilson?’

‘I don’t have to inspect it, Reichsführer,’ Wilson replied, ‘to know that it won’t fly.’

Himmler simply smiled. ‘How arrogant you are, Herr Wilson! But come,’ he added, crooking a delicate index finger and indicating the men standing nervously behind him, ‘please let me introduce you to the rest of our team. This,’ he said, indicating with a nod a young man with a lean and hungry look, ‘is Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever, who originally designed this flying saucer, which you insist will not fly. And this,’ he continued, when Wilson had shaken the hand of the solemn young designer, ‘is the physicist Klaus Habermohl, and his associate, Otto Miethe. And this,’ he ended, when Wilson had shaken the hands of Habermohl and Miethe, both of whom were middle aged, ‘is Dr Giuseppe Belluzzo who, though Italian, has become an invaluable member of our team. Gentlemen, I give you Herr Wilson, an American genius!’

Ignoring Himmler’s quiet sarcasm and the resultant nervous chuckles, Wilson shook the hand of the small, plump, balding Belluzzo and expressed his gratitude that he would soon be working with him. When the rest of the team had crowded around him to congratulate him on his work, which they had assessed for Ernst Stoll, Wilson said to Schriever, ‘Few experiments work out the first time, and the fact that this particular saucer will not fly is of no great importance. What *is* important, Flugkapitän, is that you’ve already made such progress and that now, if we all work together, we can build

successfully upon it. I therefore congratulate you, Flugkapitän, for building the first flying saucer prototype.'

'Thank you, Herr Wilson.'

Schriever bowed stiffly, acknowledging Wilson's praise, but before anything else could be said, Himmler walked away from them and Lieutenant Stoll urgently waved his hand, indicating that he and Wilson should follow. Falling in beside Stoll, Wilson left the office and found himself standing in the great hangar, beside Himmler, who was facing Rudolph Schriever's skeletal flying saucer prototype and smiling in his mild, chilling way.

'You do not think it will fly?' he asked, still studying the prototype.

'No, Reichsführer,' Wilson replied.

'You're deliberately being bold in telling me this, Herr Wilson, where others would be too frightened to do so. This means you are cunning. Not *too* cunning, I hope.' He then turned to Wilson, looked up through his glittering pince-nez, and said, 'For obvious reasons, Flugkapitän Schriever is still in charge of this project, but you're the one from whom we expect results. Once a week you will visit Wernher von Braun at the Rocket Research Institute at the other side of the firing range, and anything you've discovered that's of no use to this project but may be of use to von Braun, you will pass on to him, to be used as he sees fit.'

'I understand, Reichsführer.'

'You understand also, I hope, that I will be kept informed of your progress, or lack thereof, by Oberleutnant Stoll here' – he indicated the nervous Ernst Stoll with a nod of his head – 'and that anything you wish to discuss, you must discuss with him, not with Flugkapitän Schriever.'

'Yes, Reichsführer, I understand.'

'Good,' Himmler said. 'Now is there anything else you need to know before I take my leave?'

Wilson glanced across the hangar, saw that mostly empty, valuable space, then returned his gaze to Himmler and said, 'My task is a large one, and apart from scientists and engineers, I'm going to need hundreds of unskilled labourers. Where will I find them?'

Himmler adjusted the pince-nez on his nose, gazed across the vast hangar at the glittering skeleton of Schriever's saucer, then looked up at Wilson with a thin, icily controlled, deadly smile.

'The camps,' he said, almost whispering.

CHAPTER TEN

The administration buildings at Langley Field, Virginia, had been completed when Bradley made his next visit – officially as an advisor on aeronautical law, unofficially as one of General Dwight Taylor's intelligence agents – to attend a meeting of the recently formed National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics. Seated with him around the table in the main building were his old friend General Taylor, of the still too informal Army Air Force intelligence branch, and the twelve members of the committee. Though most were Pentagon officers with technical backgrounds, also included were the aging yet still dapper Orville Wright who, in 1903, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, with his brother Wilbur, had made the first airplane flight in history; and Charles A. Lindbergh, the handsome, aristocratic flyer who had won the nation's heart when, in 1927, he had made the first nonstop airplane flight between two continents in his now-legendary monoplane, *The Spirit of St Louis,* then won the sympathy of that same nation when, four years ago, his two-year-old son had been kidnapped and murdered.

Since its formation, the committee had been meeting once a month to discuss national and international aeronautical developments. This day should have been no different from any other... but most of those present were looking shocked.

'Eighteen years ago,' a radio announcer was saying, 'dejected German soldiers retreated from France across the Hohenzollern Bridge spanning the Rhine. Twenty-two days ago, at eleven-thirty a.m. on March 7, 1936, three of Adolf Hitler's battalions crossed that bridge again, this time marching back into the Rhineland. Within hours twenty-five thousand German troops had occupied the Rhineland, with no retaliation from the French. Today, March 29, 1936, again without benefit of guns, ninety-eight point eight percent of the electorate voted for Adolf Hitler, thus making him the Führer of all Germany. War in Europe is now virtually guaranteed...'

General Taylor switched the radio off, stared thoughtfully at it for a moment, then returned to take his seat at the head of the long committee table.

'Well, gentlemen,' he said, 'there it is. Adolf Hitler's now the absolute dictator of the Third Reich – and he's not going to be satisfied with the Rhineland. As the man said, this clearly means war in Europe.'

'War in Europe is not our concern,' said a silvery-haired gentleman from a cloud of cigar smoke at the end of the table.

'I think it is,' Taylor replied, 'to the degree that it affects Germany's interest in aeronautical research, which already is alarmingly advanced. Mike,' he added, turning to Bradley, 'what do you think?'

'I'm seriously worried,' Bradley said. 'The Nazis are, as you say, already dangerously advanced in aeronautical research – and I think it's safe to say that most of that research will now be turned toward its potential for warfare.'

'It still doesn't affect us,' the dapper Orville Wright said, 'since America is taking an isolationist stance and Europe's a long way away.'

'I don't believe we can cling to isolationism for too long,' Bradley said, 'and as long as there's even the faintest possibility that we'll be involved in war, sooner or later, we should be seriously concerned about technological advances anywhere in the world – but particularly in Nazi Germany.'

'Your concern seems extreme,' a technical advisor said, puffing on his pipe and pursing his lips to blow the smoke out. 'Have you sound reasons for this?'

'For the past couple of years,' General Taylor said, 'Bradley, in an unofficial intelligence capacity, has been trying to track down someone for us – a mysterious physicist and aeronautical engineer called John Wilson, who once worked with Robert Goddard…' here the general glanced at Goddard's friend, Charles Lindbergh… 'before reportedly travelling on to Germany to work for the Nazis, possibly under a false passport.'

'Bradley's already asked me about this John Wilson,' Lindbergh pointed out, 'and I had to tell him, honestly, that I'd never heard of him in connection with Goddard until Bradley himself mentioned him. Obviously, as Bradley had already done, I then checked with Goddard and received confirmation that Wilson had indeed worked with him in 1930 for approximately six months.'

'So what's so worrying about this fellow?' Orville Wright asked

impatiently.

'What worries me,' Bradley said, 'is that according to Goddard, this Wilson was a scientific genius with a particular interest in rocketry and space flight. He also appears to have been a completely unemotional, ruthless son of a bitch who didn't give a damn about anything other than his own work.'

'Sounds like your average scientist or politician,' someone said, thus encouraging a spasm of cynical laughter around the smoke-wreathed table.

When the laughter died down, Bradley said patiently: 'What I'm trying to get across is that this mysterious Wilson, who's possibly a scientific genius and utterly ruthless, had reason enough, and is certainly fanatical enough, to contribute his genius to a foreign power, irrespective of its nature or motives. And it seems clear from the evidence that the country he's chosen is Nazi Germany.'

There was a long, uncomfortable pause until Charles Lindbergh said thoughtfully, 'Are you suggesting that this Wilson was actually more advanced in his thinking than Goddard?'

'Yes,' Bradley said without pause.

'I find that hard to credit,' Lindbergh said.

'So did I,' Bradley replied, 'but not any longer.' He pushed his chair back, stood up, and walked around the table, distributing to all the members of the committee typed copies of Wilson's *curriculum vitae.* While they were reading it, he lit a cigarette, smoked it, and gazed out the window, thinking of how far aeronautics had advanced since Samuel Pierpont Langley, American astronomer, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and aeronautical theorist (ironically also born, like Goddard and Wilson's father, in Massachusetts, where Wilson himself had attended the MIT), had sent his quarter-scale, steam-powered 'aerodrome' into a flight over the Potomac River and these very fields, which had since been named in his honour. From those innocent beginnings, nearly forty years ago, a dark new age was dawning...

'Has everyone finished reading?' General Taylor asked, obviously impatient to continue.

Most of the heads, hazed in smoke, nodded affirmatively.

'It's certainly impressive,' Orville Wright said, 'but it doesn't prove that this man created anything out of the ordinary, in secret or otherwise.'

Aware of Wright's illustrious position in the history of aviation, that Charles Lindbergh had been forthright in his support of Robert H. Goddard,

and that both men might therefore be more sceptical than most, Bradley said, ‘While I can’t confirm that Wilson worked on airships more advanced than those built officially, I think it’s worth pointing out that during the period 1896 to 1897 – when Wilson had left Cornell University and disappeared completely to work, as we now know, on airship design and construction – America experienced what is now known as the Great Airship Scare.’

‘I remember it well,’ Orville Wright said. ‘It lasted for months. There was a great wave of sightings of mysterious airships that were actually carrying passengers, or crew members, who reportedly spoke to the locals when they landed. At the time I put it down to mass hysteria.’

‘Well,’ Bradley said, ‘maybe it was and maybe it wasn’t – but certainly most of the reports of contact between the airship crews and the witnesses mentioned a crew member who called himself Wilson. Please, gentlemen, bear with me.’

Bradley withdrew from his briefcase the press clippings that Gladys Kinder had sent him, spread them out on the table before him, and talked while reading from them, one by one.

‘As you all probably know,’ he began, ‘the first major UFO flap was indeed in 1896, beginning about November of that year and continuing until May 1897. That was five years *before* the first experiments of Orville, here, and his brother, Wilbur; but there were, by that time, various airship designs on the drawing boards or in the Patent Office. For instance, according to my clippings here, on August 11, 1896, patent number 565805 was given to Charles Abbot Smith of San Francisco for an airship he intended having ready by the following year. And another patent, number 580941, was issued to Henry Heintz of Elkton, South Dakota, on April 20, 1897.’

‘In all fairness,’ Lindbergh said, ‘you should perhaps point out that while many of the UFOs sighted were shaped roughly like the patented designs, there’s no record of those airships having been built.’

‘Okay,’ Bradley said, ‘I concede that – but the fact that there’s no record of them doesn’t necessarily mean they weren’t built.’

‘But the reported UFOs resembled the airships on the patented designs?’ a disembodied voice asked from farther along the table.

‘Yes,’ Orville Wright said. ‘At that time the general belief was that aerial navigation would be solved through an airship, rather than a heavier-than-air flying machine, so most of the earlier designs looked like dirigibles with a

passenger car on the bottom.'

'Cigar-shaped.'

'Correct.'

'Okay, Bradley,' General Taylor said, 'please continue.'

'What stands out in the 1896-97 sightings,' Bradley continued, 'is that the unidentified flying objects were mostly cigar-shaped, that they frequently landed, and that their occupants often talked to the witnesses, usually asking for water for their machines.'

'I remember that,' Orville Wright said, still proud of his memory.

'Now, the most intriguing of the numerous contactee stories,' Bradley went on doggedly, 'involved a man who called himself Wilson. He never gave his first name.'

Bradley's throat felt dry, so he swallowed, coughed into his fist, then started reading again from his notes and clippings.

'The first incident occurred in Beaumont, Texas, on April 19, 1897, when one J. B. Ligon, the local agent for Magnolia Brewery, and his son, Charles, noticed lights in a pasture a few hundred yards away and went to investigate. They came upon four men standing beside a large, dark object that neither of the witnesses could see clearly. One of those men asked Ligon for a bucket of water, Ligon let him have it, and then the man introduced himself as Mr Wilson. He then told Ligon that he and his friends were travelling in a flying machine, that they had taken a trip out to the gulf – presumably the Gulf of Galveston, though no name was given – and that they were returning to the quiet Iowa town where the airship and four others like it had been constructed. When asked, Wilson explained that electricity powered the propellers and wings of his airship. Then he and his fellow crew member got back into the basket of the airship and Ligon watched it ascending.'

'I get your drift,' Orville Wright said. 'That particular Wilson said he was returning to the quiet Iowa town where the airship and *four* others like it had been constructed – and your Wilson, the one in these notes, originally came from Iowa.'

Bradley just raised his hands in a questioning manner, then started reading again.

'The next day, April 20, Sheriff H. W. Bayer of Uvalde, also in Texas, went to investigate a strange light and voices in back of his house. He encountered an airship and three men – and one of the men introduced

himself as Wilson, from Goshen, New York. Wilson then enquired about one C. C. Akers, former sheriff of Zavalia County, saying he'd met him in Fort Worth in 1877 and now wanted to see him again. Surprised, Sheriff Baylor replied that Captain Akers was now at Eagle Pass, and Wilson, apparently disappointed, asked to be remembered to him the next time Baylor visited him. Baylor reported that the men from the airship wanted water and that Wilson requested that their visit be kept secret from the townspeople; then he and the other men climbed back into the airship and, quote, its great wings and fans were set in motion and it sped away northward in the direction of San Angelo, unquote. Incidentally, the county clerk also saw the airship as it left the area.'

He glanced up from his notes to see what effect he was having on the learned gentlemen; thirteen faces stared attentively at him through a haze of cigarette and cigar smoke, so he lowered his gaze and started reading again.

'Two days later, in Josserand, Texas, a whirring sound awoke farmer Frank Nichols, who looked out from his window and saw brilliant lights streaming from what he described as *a ponderous vessel of strange proportions*, floating over his cornfield. Nichols went outside to investigate, but before he reached the large vessel, two men walked up to him and asked if they could have water from his well. Nichols agreed to this request – as farmers in those days mostly did – and the men then invited him to inspect their airship. When he did, he noticed that there were six or seven crew members. One of those men told him that the ship's motive power was highly condensed electricity and that it was one of five that had been constructed in a small town in Iowa with the backing of a large New York stock company.'

'So what we're talking about,' Lindbergh said, 'are five or six airships, originating in a small town in Iowa.'

'Right,' a granite-faced Pentagon general confirmed from a haze of smoke.

'The next day,' Bradley continued, 'on April 23, witnesses described in this *Houston Post* clipping as two responsible men, reported that an airship had descended where they lived in Kountze, Texas, and that two of the occupants had given their names as Jackson and...'

'Wilson,' General Taylor said with a sly grin.

'Right,' Bradley said, not returning the grin, but instead concentrating on his reading, which was making him feel oddly self-conscious. 'Four days

after that incident, on April 27, the *Galveston Daily News* printed a letter from the aforementioned C. C. Akers, in which Akers claimed that he had indeed known a man in Forth Worth, Texas, named Wilson; that Wilson was from New York; that he was in his middle twenties; and that he was of a mechanical turn of mind and then working on aerial navigation and something that would, quote, *astonish the world*.'

'That letter could have come from a hoaxer,' Orville Wright pointed out with a jab of his finger, 'after he'd read the original story mentioning the unknown Akers.'

'Finally,' Bradley read, deliberately ignoring the famous, and famously testy, old man, 'early in the evening of April 30, in Deadwood, Texas, a farmer named H. C. Lagrone heard his horses bucking as if in stampede. Going outside, he saw a bright white light circling around the fields nearby and illuminating the entire area before descending and landing in one of the fields. Walking to the landing spot, Lagrone found a crew of five men, three of whom engaged him in conversation while the others collected water in rubber bags. The men informed Lagrone that their airship was one of five that had been flying around the country recently; that theirs was in fact the same one that had landed in Beaumont a few days before; that all the airships had been constructed in an interior town in Illinois – which, please note, borders Iowa – and that they were reluctant to say anything else because they hadn't yet taken out any patents. By May that same year, the wave of sightings ended… and the mysterious Mr Wilson wasn't heard from again.'

As Bradley gathered his notes and clippings together, there was a bewildered, or disbelieving, silence from those sitting around the table, either smoking or drinking water or beer. Eventually, when the silence became too obvious, Lindbergh propped his elbows up on the table, rested his chin on his clasped hands, and said, 'So what's being suggested here is that the mysterious Wilson of the so-called Great Airship Scare of 1896-97, who made frequent remarks about having constructed the airships, either five or six, in a small town in Iowa, is the same Wilson who worked for Robert Goddard and now works for the Nazis.'

Bradley shrugged and again raised his hands in a questioning manner.

'We're talking about a sixty-six-year-old man,' Lindbergh pointed out in softly spoken disbelief.

Unable to refute that point, Bradley said, 'I'm not saying it's definite, but

it's certainly worth investigating. We *do* have proof that a John Wilson was born and raised in Montezuma, Iowa, and that when he left Cornell University, he was placed on the payroll of the New York financiers, Cohn and Goldman, who owned an aeronautical research factory located in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. I should therefore remind you, gentlemen, that Mount Pleasant, while in Iowa, is practically on the border of Illinois – the other location given by Wilson for the construction of his airships – and that it's close to the town of Montezuma, where Wilson was born and raised. These could be coincidences, of course, but I seriously doubt it.'

There was another uncomfortable silence until Orville Wright, who did not smoke or drink, broke it with a fit of coughing, waved his neighbour's cigar smoke away from him, and said, 'So assuming that both Wilsons are one and the same, do we know what he's up to in Nazi Germany?'

'Yes,' General Taylor said, looking relieved to be on home ground. 'According to British intelligence, there are reports that an American scientist – identity unknown, but believed to be John Wilson, who disappeared into Germany in 1931 – is presently working in a secret research establishment at Kummersdorf West, about fifteen miles from Berlin.'

There was silence around the table for a moment, while they all took this in.

'Are there any *known* results of this collusion?' Orville Wright asked.

'We have an unverified report,' General Taylor replied, 'from a source who worked in the Rocket Research Institute at the other side of the army firing range dividing it from the secret hangar in Kummersdorf West, that although even Wernher von Braun didn't know what was going on in that hangar, the American scientist, presumably Wilson, would visit him once a week to pass on to him any technical innovations he'd discovered that might help in the development of what we believe to be the A-2 rocket program.'

'*Rockets?*' Orville Wright asked.

'Yes, Orville, rockets.'

Wright wrinkled his brow and looked almost shocked, then asked plaintively, 'But do we have to be concerned with such developments? Are they not simply pipe dreams, like those of Goddard?'

'Goddard's rockets are no longer pipe dreams,' Lindbergh said angrily.

'Well,' Taylor said in his quietly remorseless manner, 'we can't be too sure of just how much Wilson's innovations have contributed to this, but we

do know from British intelligence that as early as December 1934 – about a year after Wilson is believed to have started working at Kummersdorf – two highly advanced A-2 rockets, constructed at Kummersdorf, gyroscopically controlled, and powered by oxygen-and-alcohol-fuelled motors, were launched from the island of Borkum in the North Sea and reached an altitude of one and a half miles. And I should make it clear, unpalatable as it may seem, that those stabilized, liquid-fuelled rockets are the only known, serious challengers to the rockets of Wilson's old work mate, Robert H. Goddard.'

'I find this unbelievable,' Orville Wright said, looking unusually flushed.

'Believe it,' General Taylor replied. 'In fact, just a few weeks ago, shortly after Hitler's infamous advance across the Hohenzollern Bridge, Captain Walter Dornberger, the head of the Rocket Research Institute, his assistant, Wernher von Braun, and their team of one hundred and fifty technicians demonstrated some more rockets at Kummersdorf, including one with an unprecedented three thousand five hundred pounds of thrust. And while it was widely believed that the brilliant von Braun was responsible for this great achievement, he resolutely refused to take credit for it, insisting that others, whom he claimed he could not name, deserved most of the credit.'

'And you think von Braun was referring to those on the other side of the firing range?' Lindbergh asked.

'Yes,' Taylor replied. 'To those on the other side of the firing range in general, but maybe to Wilson in particular, since the most revolutionary advances have been made since his arrival at Kummersdorf.'

There was another awkward silence, which was certainly not the norm, and Bradley glanced at Lindbergh, who was gazing distractedly at the table, remembered the widely publicized kidnapping and disappearance of his child, and felt stricken with sympathy and shame.

He knew what the shame was and could certainly not disown it He had promised Joan that he would never again let work come between him and her, let alone him and the children; but he knew that in the past year, even against his better judgment, he had let Wilson become an obsession that was keeping him away from his family more than he'd planned. It was causing problems at home, as his obsession with legal work had done before, deeply wounding Joan and thus angering Mark and Miriam; and so, when he looked at Lindbergh, at that courageous and haunted face, he was filled with shame because he knew he was ignoring what Lindbergh had lost – the precious gift

of a family.

As if reading his mind, Lindbergh looked up, stared directly at him, then, breathing deeply, almost wearily, returned Bradley's thoughts to the matter at hand by asking: 'Can we take it that this Wilson is still at Kummersdorf?'

'Yes,' General Taylor said. 'According to British intelligence – '

'What would we do without them?' a muted voice asked sarcastically.

'According to British intelligence,' Taylor repeated, smiling knowingly at Bradley, 'the recent demonstration at Kummersdorf so impressed the German commander-in-chief, General Fritsch, that permission has since been given for Dornberger and von Braun to build an independent rocket establishment in a suitably remote part of Germany, where research and test firings can be carried out in the strictest secrecy. It's believed that the chosen site is near the village of Peenemünde, on the island of Usedom, off the Baltic Coast. It's also believed that the unknown American, whom we believe to be John Wilson, will *not* be going with the rocket team but will be left where he is, with the other members of his team, to do only God knows what in Kummersdorf West.'

The final silence was far too long, filled with too much tension, and forced even Bradley, schooled in law and psychology, to try escaping it by gazing out the window at the cloud-streaked, iridescent blue sky over the green fields of Langley.

'So,' Lindbergh said, offering him a reprieve, 'we can take it that John Wilson exists and is working in Germany. However, we're not at war with Germany and Germany isn't at war with Europe – at least not yet – so what's the point of this meeting?'

He was staring directly at Bradley, his gaze concerned, not accusing; but Bradley, who could think only of Joan and his children – of the blessings he was abusing as he faced this tragic figure – was incapable of giving a coherent answer. He thought of Lindbergh's murdered child, of all he had owned and lost, and realized that even understanding that, he, Mike Bradley, blessed with a loving wife and children, was letting his obsession with John Wilson threaten all he loved most.

He felt shame and a terrible helplessness, because he knew damned well that he wouldn't stop until this mystery was solved.

He would risk all for that.

'Let me put it another way, Mr Bradley,' Lindbergh said. 'Since you've

investigated this case and called this meeting to discuss it, what is it you're trying to tell us?'

'If we get into a war,' Bradley said, 'we might have to stop that man.'

'Stop him?' Orville Wright asked hoarsely.

'Yes,' Bradley said without thinking. 'Stop him dead in his tracks.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ernst was unhappy as he hurried through the jostling shoppers in the Friedrichstrasse, late for his lunch appointment with Ingrid. In fact, he was slightly hung over, as he was so often these days, and was reminded, by the stout, red-cheeked housewives all around him, that the Berlin he now knew so well by night was very different from the more respectable city that the sun shone upon.

When the sun set on Berlin in this troubled year of 1937, powdered and rouged young men solicited in the yellow lamplight of the Kurfürstendamm, government officials and men of commerce rubbed cheeks with sailors and soldiers in dimly lit bars on the Motzstrasse, hundreds of men dressed as women and women dressed as men danced in the riotous ballrooms of the West End, the novel, the bizarre, and the perverse were nightly paraded before the noisy crowds in the Scala or the amusement palaces of the Wintergarten, the nightclubs, cabarets, revues, vaudeville shows, and erotic Tanzbars were packed with male and female prostitutes, pimps, transvestites, fetishists, homosexuals, and drug addicts. In general, while the National Socialists called for a new moral order, the spirit of decadent pleasure prevailed to a background cacophony of jazz, dancing feet, exploding champagne corks, screams, laughter, and tears.

A very different world, indeed – and one that Ernst had, in the company of his fellow SS officers, become increasingly familiar with in recent months.

He thought of this with a certain amount of shame when he saw Ingrid sitting, in a fur-collared winter coat and broad-brimmed hat, at a table by the window of the Kranzler Café. Haunted by vague snatches of memory from the previous evening's debauch... Hot dogs and beer at the Scala with Willi Brandt and Franck Ritter, then naked girls at the Schauspielhaus, then Ritter embracing a drunken sailor by the toilet in a Tanzbar, then an opium dream of sensual perversity with the endlessly inventive, amoral Brigette... Yes,

haunted and guilty, he uneasily composed himself as he entered the café and joined Ingrid at her favourite table by the window.

'My dear,' he murmured, brushing her rouged cheek with his lips and then sitting facing her. 'Sorry I'm late.'

'You're always late,' she accused him.

'I can't always guarantee getting away on time. My superior officers don't think that way. What are you drinking?'

'White wine.'

'Already? At lunchtime?'

Ingrid shrugged in an indifferent manner. 'It helps pass the time,' she said.

Not wanting her to drink alone, and feeling thirsty anyway, Ernst ordered a beer for himself.

'Shall I order lunch now?'

'I'm not really hungry,' Ingrid replied. 'But get yourself something.'

Ernst shook his head. 'I'm not hungry either,' he said, still feeling ill from the previous evening and yearning only to slake his thirst with the beer. 'Still, I think *you* should eat. You don't eat enough these days.'

'I'm just dieting, Ernst.'

'For me?'

'For you.'

'That's nice,' he said.

Knowing she didn't mean it, he was also discomfited by her steady gaze. Though still as green as jade, her gaze was not as bright as it had been. Sitting in this particular café reminded him of the day he had proposed to her, the day Hitler became chancellor, and filled him with remorse and incomprehension at how they had both changed. They had been young and in love then, but now, four years on, they were saddened adults who seemed to have lost each other along the way. Ingrid was still pretty, but in a less sensual, more matronly way, and the darkness in her eyes came from disillusionment, caused mainly by him. He knew it and was wounded by it, but could do little about it, since he too had changed beyond repair – and not for the better.

Best not to dwell on that...

'So,' he said instead, 'how are the children?'

'They're fine,' she replied. 'They haven't changed much since last week.

Ula complains that you only come home at weekends, but Alfred is still too young to miss you, so you needn't feel *too* bad.'

'You're being mean to me.'

'I'm not.'

'It's not my fault that I can only come home weekends. We're compelled to live in the barracks during the week, and that's all there is to it. I know it's not particularly nice for the children, but we'll just have to live with it.'

'You like being away from home. You can barely wait to get back to your SS friends. When you're home, you have little patience with me or with the children. You're not nice at all, Ernst.'

'That's not true,' he said.

Yet as he took his first sip of the beer the waitress had brought, he had to acknowledge that Ingrid was right. His daughter Ula was now three years old and beautiful, his son Alfred was a mere two months old and lively, but he saw them so rarely these days, he hardly knew them at all. He felt guilty over that but could not ignore Ingrid's charge that deep down he preferred not being home.

In truth, he now felt suffocated by Ingrid's presence – something that had begun after that dreadful weekend now remembered as the Night of the Long Knives. Ashamed of himself at the time, he now accepted the necessity of that bloody purge and could not tolerate the fact that Ingrid despised him for taking part in it.

For weeks after the purge, she had not let him touch her, meanwhile pouring scorn upon him; but later, after reluctantly surrendering to him and becoming pregnant with Alfred, she had rejected him with more finality than before.

'You have blood on your hands,' she had told him, 'so keep them off me. I don't want to be contaminated by you or what you represent. You've arrested and killed innocent people, once reluctantly, now willingly, and I can't bear the thought that my children will learn about what you do. Don't touch me. Don't ever touch me again. Take your pleasures elsewhere.'

Which is exactly what he had done. Which in turn was why he spent so much time with his comrades – not just in the barracks, as he insisted on pretending with Ingrid, but in the drunken, decadent pleasures of a Berlin unrestrained by moral values, in the nightclubs and cafés and erotic Tanzbars of the night; and, most irresistible of all, in Brigette's snake-like embrace...

Just thinking about Brigette made him feel sick with lust and shame, though he tried not to show that to Ingrid. After drinking some more beer, he placed the mug back on the table, wiped his lips, and smiled more casually than he felt.

'So, who have you arrested this week?' Ingrid asked him.

The remark wiped the smile from his face and filled him with anger.

'No one,' he said. 'As you know, I'm now based at Kummersdorf West, in charge of technical intelligence. My duties involve the gathering of information relating to foreign and domestic scientific research. I don't arrest anyone.'

'But you spy on the scientists you deal with. You keep your eyes and ears open.'

'Yes,' he said. 'Naturally.'

'You think it's natural to spy on people?'

'Not natural,' he said with a weary sigh. 'A necessity, Ingrid. Someone has to do it – and I take pride in doing it well.'

'But why do you have to keep your eyes on our own scientists and engineers? Can no one be trusted these days?'

'It's not that bad, Ingrid,' he lied, knowing that in these troubled times *no one* could be trusted, that the enemy within was always a danger, and that the importance of the work being done at Kummersdorf West called for even more vigilance. It would be more than his life was worth to tell Ingrid about Projekt Saucer and the strange American, Wilson, working there under a German alias, but when he thought about it, he did so with a mixture of awe and resentment.

He was in awe of Wilson's genius, about which he had no doubts, and resented the fact that those who worked with him – Schriever, Habermohl, and Miethe – were doing the work that he, Ernst Stoll, was better equipped to do.

'You wanted so much to be a rocket engineer,' Ingrid said, as if reading his mind, 'and instead you've become someone who reports on the achievements of others. That must really hurt, Ernst.'

The mockery, which rolled off her tongue with relish, was even more hurtful.

'I only hurt to give you pleasure,' he replied. 'I hope you're suitably grateful.'

‘Don’t be bitter, Ernst.’

‘I can’t help it,’ he said. You complain because I don’t come home much and that I’ve little patience when I *do* come home, yet you do nothing but pour your scorn upon me. What makes *you* so superior?’

‘I don’t feel superior. I just despise you for the way you’ve accepted what the Nazis are doing.’

‘If I didn’t, I’d be imprisoned – or even shot.’

‘That may be true, Ernst. But you don’t accept it just because of that. Now you actually believe in it.’

‘I believe in the Führer. He may not always be right, but he knows the end justifies the means – and I also believe that.’

‘That’s despicable,’ Ingrid said.

Ernst simply shrugged. This argument could lead them nowhere. Each time they met it was the same, always ending in an argument, and already he yearned to be back at Kummersdorf, keeping his eye on John Wilson. The American fascinated him – even frightened him a little. He was sixty-six years old, yet looked fifteen years younger, and his eyes, which were still bright with intelligence, were also as cold as ice. Ernst thought him slightly inhuman, a man divorced from normal emotions, but one whose genius, allied to obsession, was producing remarkable results in the hangars of Kummersdorf. In fact, the dream of a saucer-shaped aircraft was coming closer each day...

‘What are you thinking?’ Ingrid asked him.

‘Nothing,’ he replied, unable to discuss the American or Projekt Saucer.

‘You’re certainly not thinking of me or the children – that much I can tell.’

‘Please, Ingrid, stop this.’

‘Why? I’m enjoying it! I can tell by the dreamy look in your eyes that we’re not in your thoughts.’

‘You’re trying to pick a fight.’

‘It keeps me awake, darling. I need something to keep me awake while you sit there in front of me, hardly looking at me, probably yearning to be with your virtuous comrades and the whores you all play with.’

‘Ingrid!’

‘I *know*, Ernst! I know *everything*! Do you think I’m a fool? Did you really think I didn’t know that when you were supposed to be sleeping in the

barracks, you were getting drunk with your SS friends and probably picking up the whores in the Motzstrasse? Do you think I'm dumb, Ernst?'

'That isn't true at all!' he lied, shocked and angry that she had guessed what he was up to.

'Of *course* it's true, Ernst!' Her green eyes were bright with rage. 'That's why you're away from home so often. That's why you stay out half the night and come home exhausted. Those whores are in your clothes. They're in the pores of your skin. You can't wash the smell of them away, so don't bother trying anymore. I don't want your damned denials, Ernst. I just want the truth.'

Why didn't he tell her? Get this marriage over and done with... Because SS men did not get divorced and have successful careers.

'Do we have to discuss this now, Ingrid? Can't it wait for a better time?'

'*What* better time? There *is* no better time. I wanted to get this off my chest, which is why I asked you to meet me here.'

'All right. So you've got it off your chest. Can we now change the subject?'

'No. That's not all I wanted to say. I also wanted to tell you that your work appals me, your promiscuity humiliates me, and that if we must live together like this, let's quietly live separate lives.'

'We already do, Ingrid. You haven't let me touch you for months. I think that's separate enough. And it certainly explains why the whores you mention now seem so attractive.' And he couldn't help smiling when he said it, taking pleasure from vengeance.

Surprisingly, she returned his smile with one of her own.

'Good,' she said. 'I'm glad you find them attractive. That means you won't be too upset when I confess that I've been seeing another man for a while now. A nice man, ten years older than you, but so much kinder, more decent. I just thought you should know.'

Ernst burned hot and cold, felt his whole body stiffening, and had to fight to control the racing of his heart, a suffocating mixture of rage and humiliation. He wanted to kill her.

'Why did you want me to know?' he managed to ask.

'Because I've lived for too long with the knowledge of your philandering and now I want it out in the open.'

'You want revenge.'

‘I’ve already had that, Ernst. That’s how my affair started – though it isn’t why it continued. I just came to care deeply for my lover and I won’t keep him hidden.’

Ernst had to resist the urge to slap her face.

‘You want a separation?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ she replied.

‘You can’t have one,’ he told her. ‘The SS doesn’t approve of divorce, so I won’t even consider it. And if you try to go ahead with it, the SS will ensure that the children are handed over to me. Are you willing to pay that price?’

She looked at him with hatred. ‘No, Ernst, I’m not. You know I’d never give up the children.’

‘Then the marriage continues.’

‘I won’t give up my lover.’

‘And I won’t give up my whores. Let’s just live our separate lives, while living together, and keep our mouths shut.’

The gleam of hatred receded, but her gaze remained antagonistic. ‘I don’t think we can do that,’ she said.

‘Perhaps not normally,’ he responded, ‘but I also had something to tell you – and clearly, in the light of this conversation, it’s come at the right time.’

‘Oh? What?’

He could not resist swelling slightly with pride. ‘Reichsführer Himmler has plans for a special expeditionary force to travel by boat to the Antarctic early next year and has personally requested that I go with it.’

‘The... *Antarctic?*’

‘Yes.’

‘For what purpose?’

‘He didn’t say,’ Ernst replied honestly, though he knew that the expedition was in some way related to Projekt Saucer. ‘He only said that he’d be pleased if I volunteered, which of course I did instantly. Now, Ingrid, you and I can live our separate lives without too much pain – at least for a few months.’

He sat back in his chair and gazed steadily at her, finding it easier to hide his rage and humiliation behind a display of pride. Ingrid studied him at length, clearly not sure if she should be pleased or not, then she nodded in a thoughtful, accepting manner and said, ‘Yes. I think that will be good for

both of us. It *has* come at the right time.'

Ernst sighed and sipped some beer, thinking of how the blood from wounded emotions could be so easily mopped up... Yet even as that cynicism gripped him, he saw Ingrid's tears.

She sniffed, but failed to hold the tears back, so wiped them away with her hand and shook her head sadly. 'What happened, Ernst?'

The question drove a stake through his heart, and he writhed with the pain of it. He knew what had happened – Adolf Hitler – but he couldn't admit that now. The love they had shared had been destroyed by his devotion to duty... or, more accurately, by his fear of the consequences of disobedience. Now, when he saw Ingrid's tearful eyes, he understood that he was giving away what he valued the most: her love and his pride.

'Nothing in particular,' he lied, debasing himself even more. 'We just drifted apart. Let's say we both grew up.'

She quivered as if whipped, but then managed to control herself. 'I have to leave now,' she said in a distracted, conversational manner, 'and collect the children from my mother's. Can I take it you'll be home tonight for dinner?'

'No,' Ernst said, watching her dry her eyes and stifling his pain, 'I don't think I will be. Now that we're leading separate lives, I see no point in lying.'

Ingrid smiled bitterly and nodded, then wiped her eyes with a handkerchief. 'Are you leaving now as well?' she asked, standing up and glancing out at the wintry sunshine over the busy corner of the Friedrichstrasse and Unter den Linden.

'I have five minutes to spare,' he replied, 'so I'll just finish my beer.'

'Just one, I hope,' she said without thinking.

'Yes, Ingrid,' he replied automatically. 'Just one, then I'm leaving.'

She leaned down to kiss him frigidly on the cheek, then waved good-bye and walked out.

How pretty she still is, Ernst thought helplessly, as he watched her departing through the dense crowds, looking elegant in her fur-collared, belted coat and broad-brimmed hat. How very attractive!

Then, with a grief that lacerated him, he ordered another beer.

The day became confused after that. Feeling cold after his second beer, he decided to have a cognac and drank it while brooding about Ingrid and life's

disappointments. Ingrid was disappointed with him and he felt the same about life in general, and when he thought about that, after having another brandy, he could only think of the American, Wilson, in the hangar at Kummersdorf, creating the kind of aircraft that he, Ernst, had once dreamed about as a student at the Institute of Technology, when he and Ingrid were still in love.

He thought a lot about Wilson. The American fascinated him. He was an old man, a very old man, kept alive by his faith.

Yes: faith – what Ernst had once possessed but lost – and because of that, the American was working miracles while Ernst could simply observe him. He felt sick just to think of it.

He not only feared the odd American, but also what he was building.

A miraculous, saucer-shaped aircraft.

A terrible weapon.

Filled with an awe and resentment exaggerated by drunkenness, Ernst, who had been given the afternoon off, had too many brandies, then went to meet his SS comrades in a Tanzbar recommended by Franck Ritter. Coloured lights bled through smoke, a cabaret band was playing, and two almost naked girls were performing an erotic dance with umbrellas. Sitting at a table near the wall at the back of the room, Willi Brandt was drinking a stein of beer and gloomily watching the dancing girls while Franck Ritter, resplendent in his SS uniform, was fondling the gaudily dressed transvestite sitting beside him. Ernst joined them at the table, had another few drinks, compared notes with Brandt on the various erotic acts on the stage, then left in disgust when the insatiable Ritter led the giggling transvestite into the toilets.

‘The élite of the New Order!’ Ernst exclaimed histrionically. ‘Is this what we’ve come to?’

He and Brandt embarked on a tour of familiar haunts, but ended up, as usual, in the White Mouse in the Französischestrasse in time for Brigette’s evening performance. The revue bar was packed with uniformed officers of the Reichswehr and SS, plus fat-bellied businessmen and their whores, and they roared their approval and gave the Nazi salute when Brigette came on stage, naked except for a steel-studded, black-leather halter and gleaming jackboots, with a peaked military cap slanted rakishly over red hair and her tongue licking brightly painted, pouting lips.

She was grinding her hips lasciviously and cracking a bullwhip over the

naked spine of the man who was crawling across the stage on hands and knees. Brigette sat on his back, riding him like a horse, and she kept cracking the bullwhip and gyrating upon him until, when he was prostrate beneath her, she slowly, seductively removed her steel-studded, leather halter and let him reach up to her...

It was a crude, erotic performance, arousing the audience to fever-pitch, and though Ernst was disgusted and drank far too much brandy, he too was aroused by what he saw and could not wait to have her.

He had her soon enough, an hour later, in her apartment, when she teased and tormented him, whispering, ‘My pretty boy! My sweet lieutenant!’ and sending him into spasms of relief and bottomless shame. With her diabolical artistry, her finely controlled sense of debauchery, she helped him forget Ingrid, the loss of his career, the frustration and fear that he always felt at Kummersdorf when he saw Wilson working. He took Brigette like a savage, was in turn devoured by her, felt exultation and grief as he shuddered and spent himself, then rolled off her and thought of the Antarctic with unbridled longing.

There, he could hide from himself.

CHAPTER TWELVE

‘Good afternoon, Herr Wilson,’ Himmler said in his frostily polite manner. ‘I’m sorry to have had to bring you all this way, but I have good reason for doing so.’

‘Naturally, Reichsführer,’ Wilson said, taking the wooden chair at the other side of Himmler’s desk in his room in the Pension Moritz and glancing out at the soaring, snow-covered Austrian Alps. He had been dragged out of bed that morning, flown from Berlin to Munich, put on a train to Salzburg, then brought here, to the picturesque village of Berchtesgaden, in a jeep driven by a blond SS moron. Himmler enjoyed pulling such surprises, but Wilson was not amused.

‘Can I order you some herbal tea, Herr Wilson?’

‘Thank you for considering my tastes, Reichsführer, but I’ve already had my morning tea and I never drink after breakfast.’

Himmler seemed mildly amused. ‘I know that you’re careful about what you eat and drink,’ he said. ‘This may explain why, for a sixty-six-year-old man, you look remarkably youthful. In fact, you still only look about fifty, which is truly amazing.’

‘Coming from you, Reichsführer, I take that as a compliment. It’s true that I’m careful about what I eat and drink. I also believe that most people do too much of both, so I’m frugal even with what I permit myself.’

‘Do you take vitamins?’ Himmler asked with sombre interest.

‘Yes. I’ve done so all my life. I eat and drink the minimum, take vitamins every day, and meditate whenever I get the chance. In this way I’ve managed to hold off the aging process, though it must come eventually.’

‘And then?’

‘I’m sure that with your continued backing of the SS medical experiments, we’ll soon find surgical remedies for the aging process –and when we do, I’ll be one of the first to make use of them.’

‘That would be a great gamble, Herr Wilson.’

‘Not at my age,’ Wilson replied.

Himmler smiled, then clasped his hands under his chin and said, ‘You believe in the Superman, Herr Wilson?’

Wilson knew just whom he was dealing with – an insane visionary – but he also knew what he personally wanted, and when he saw the priestly madness in Himmler’s eyes, he was convinced he could have it.

‘I believe that man’s destiny is to evolve into the Superman,’ he said truthfully, though not without regard for Himmler’s ego, ‘but that we humans, if not constrained by wasteful emotions, can hasten that process.’

Himmler nodded approvingly. ‘Good,’ he said. ‘I believe in this also. We cannot let sentiment stand in the way of progress. We must eradicate man’s imperfections and, if necessary, create the New Man from the bones of the old. We must cleanse the earth by purifying the blood. We must exterminate the Jews and the infirm and maladjusted, use the lesser races as slaves to the Reich, creating a race of pure Nordics. History will exonerate us. What we do, we do for progress. We are changing the course of history and aiding evolution – and when we die, as surely we must, our achievements will live on. You and I understand this.’

‘Yes, Reichsführer,’ Wilson said, not interested in the Aryan race, but willing to use Himmler and his kind to create his world of pure science, which is all he now lived for.

Perverse? Most certainly – though he could live with that truth. All across Berlin, in the Reich’s most august offices, were the other high priests of the demonic New Order: Hermann Goring, Joseph Goebbels, Rudolph Hess, Martin Bormann – alcoholics, drug addicts, occultists, and degenerates – the very epitome of that gross irrationalism which Wilson so much abhorred. There too the Gestapo butchers, the drilled ranks of the SS, and all the torture and murder that went on every day in the basements. Wilson had to accept it. Science could not moralize. Those irrational brutes were no more than the means to achieving his ends. Progress needs its trampled bones. Death gives way to more life. Evolution knows neither right nor wrong and transcends ephemeral matters. So, he would work with them. In doing that, he could use them. And glancing out at the snowy slopes, then returning his gaze to Himmler, he felt nothing but hope for the future, the glow of fulfilment.

‘Why did you wish to see me, Reichsführer?’

‘I wish to take you on a little walk that I think will be instructive to you. But first, I would like to be informed about the progress of Projekt Saucer.’

‘Now that the rocket teams have left for Peenemünde and we can use their facilities, we’re making quicker, more definite progress. As you know, I decided to stop work on the larger flying saucer prototype and instead concentrate all our efforts on making a miniature version of it, which can be used as an anti-aircraft weapon. The final drawings for that smaller saucer will soon be completed – in the next week or so.’

‘Good,’ Himmler said. ‘And you think this smaller version will actually fly?’

‘I know it will,’ Wilson said firmly.

‘What kind of anti-aircraft weapon will it be?’

‘As a miniature version of the larger prototype, it’ll be a small, flat, circular flying machine, powered by a turbojet engine. It can be used as an anti-radar device that, by flying in the vicinity of an aircraft in flight, will over-ionize the atmosphere surrounding it and, by so doing, subject its radar to the adverse action of powerful electrostatic fields and electromagnetic impulses.’

‘And if it works – ’

‘It will, Reichsführer.’

‘ – you can then construct a larger version without fear of it failing.’

‘Exactly, Reichsführer.’

‘And who contributed most to this final design? You, or the officer nominally in charge of Projekt Saucer: Flugkapitän Schriever?’

Wilson thought carefully before answering.

He was aware that his greatest innovations were likely to be stolen from him and passed on to the rocket scientists now at Peenemünde and other, even more secret, SS research establishments. He understood, also, that Rudolph Schriever, who had more arrogance than scientific talent, was spying on him for Himmler and would, while doing so, also try to take credit for his achievements. For this reason, while pretending to be open with Schriever and his fellow engineers, Wilson had actually showed them only selected parts of his great work – just enough to convince them, and thus Himmler, that he was worth keeping on. Also, by letting them steal relatively minor aspects of his work to utilize in their own, otherwise largely worthless designs – and by then praising them individually, secretly, for those designs –

he was subtly setting them against one another, which kept him in control.

Naturally, because Himmler trusted his young flugkapitän, Wilson could not inform him of this fact and instead said, ‘I must confess that Flugkapitän Schriever was surprisingly innovative and contributed greatly to the final designs. He’s an excellent physicist.’

Clearly pleased that he had chosen correctly, Himmler asked: ‘And the others? How are they faring?’

‘No problems,’ Wilson replied, not wishing to show his contempt for his fellow scientists, but being careful not to praise them too highly either. ‘Of course Habermohl and Miethe are only engineers, but their designs for various parts of the saucer have been quite helpful. Miethe designed the outer shell for the latest model and deserves a commendation for that alone.’

‘I will see to it,’ Himmler said, then gave a light sigh, unclasped his hands, and pushed his chair back. ‘So,’ he said, standing upright, ‘let us go for our short walk.’

So saying, he led Wilson out of the room and into the heavily guarded, crowded lobby of the rustic pension. Glancing across the room, Wilson saw the handsome, uniformed architect, Albert Speer, sitting on a settee and discussing the architectural plans spread out before him and his assistants. Himmler nodded coolly at him, then, when four uniformed SS guards had closed in around him, he led Wilson across the busy lobby and out of the pension.

‘Is the Führer here?’ Wilson asked, having noted the strong contingent of armed guards inside and now noting the many more outside.

Himmler nodded in the direction of nearby hills, where Wilson saw a figure in *lederhosen* strolling through the snow, accompanied by a woman, whom he assumed was Eva Braun, and guarded by half a dozen armed SS troops.

‘He’s staying in the pension,’ Himmler explained with pride, ‘while renovations are made to the Berghof. Come! This way, Wilson.’

Followed by the four SS guards, he led Wilson to a jeep that was parked right in front of the pension. When they were both seated in the rear, one of the armed guards climbed into the front and drove toward the majestic, snow-covered slopes of the Kehlstein Mountains.

Soon leaving the village behind, they passed through the guarded gates of an area closed off by barbed-wire fences. Waving one hand airily, to indicate

the ugly dormitory barracks clinging to nearby slopes, Himmler said, ‘Those barracks house hundreds of construction workers. This was once a solitary, very beautiful mountain valley, but it’s now the auxiliary headquarters of our beloved Führer. In order to make this conversion, Bormann tore down centuries-old farms and numerous votive churches, despite the protests of the parishes. Also, despite further protestations, he confiscated state forests and made this a private area that extends from the floor of the valley to the top of the mountain, covering approximately two and a half square miles. Finally, with no regard to the exceptional beauty of the area, he turned forest paths into paved promenades, laid a network of tarmac roads through the formerly lovely landscape, and erected barracks, garage buildings, a hotel, a manor house, a complex for our growing number of workers, then, finally, those ugly barracks desecrating the once-virgin slopes.’ He glanced around him with satisfaction, adjusting the pince-nez on his nose and squinting into the sun. ‘As a lover of beauty, do I disapprove of this?’ he asked rhetorically. ‘No, of course not! It’s the German genius to do what’s necessary, no matter the cost. Do you understand, Wilson?’

‘Yes, Reichsführer, I do.’

Himmler nodded. ‘Good!’ The sound of explosions reverberated around the valley as the jeep took a corkscrew bend, away from the Scharitzkehlalm ravine, then took the steep, winding road up the side of the Hoher Göll.

‘They’re dynamiting,’ Himmler explained when Wilson glanced in the direction of the explosions. ‘When war breaks out, as it must, Bormann intends having underground quarters for the Führer and those most important to him.’

‘Very wise,’ Wilson murmured.

The five-mile road that ran up to Hitler’s *Teehaus* had been hacked out of the side of the mountain with the sweat of slave labour. It stopped at an underground passage blasted out of the mountainside, just below the summit. Following the armed guard, Himmler climbed down from the jeep and led Wilson along the underground passage, until they arrived at a copper-lined elevator, its shaft, about four hundred feet deep, hacked out of the solid rock. That elevator took them down to an immense, high-walled gallery, supported by baroque Roman pillars. At the end of the gallery, also hacked out of the mountain, was a dazzling, glassed-in, circular hall.

Standing in that great hall, looking out through an exceptionally tall, wide

window, Wilson saw only the other snow-capped mountains and a vast, azure sky – an overwhelming experience.

'The impossible made actual,' Himmler whispered proudly, indicating with a gentle nod of his head that extraordinary view. 'If our dreams are grandiose, our actual achievements are more so – the achievements of men who can make the impossible commonplace. Come! Follow me!'

He led Wilson across to the panoramic window, from where they could look down on the snow-covered earth, with Berchtesgaden and Salzburg clearly visible in a mosaic of brown and white.

Pointing at a distant mountain peak, Himmler asked Wilson if he knew what it was. When Wilson shook his head, Himmler said, 'That mountain is the Untersberg. According to legend, the Emperor Charlemagne still sleeps there and will one day rise again to restore the past glory of the German Empire. I believe that day has come – that our Führer is the reincarnation of Charlemagne and will return us to glory.'

Removing his gaze from the distant mountain, he looked at Wilson through his glittering pince-nez. Wilson, who knew that Himmler was mad, also knew not to smile.

'Now look down there,' Himmler said, pointing with his index finger, then sweeping his hand from east to west, to indicate the vast, snow-covered valley. 'Other than the villages and towns, what do you see?'

'Just the snow-covered earth,' Wilson said.

'Exactly,' Himmler said. 'And when war comes and we move underground, that is all you will still see: just the snow-covered earth.'

Wilson grasped instantly what the lunatic was driving at.... The dream of the Thousand Year Reich had been born out of mysticism: the Cosmic Circle of Munich; the Anthroposophy of Rudolph Steiner; the Theosophy and Rosicrucianism of Vienna and Prague; a belief in Lemuria and Atlantis, ice and fire, Man as Superman... Yes, he grasped what Himmler was thinking and now knew without doubt that he could use him.

'You despise the weaknesses of mankind, don't you?' Himmler said, staring steadily at him.

'Yes,' Wilson confessed.

'And like me, you believe in the evolution of the human race, from Man into Superman.'

'Yes,' Wilson agreed, though he conceived of a superior race based on

science, rather than a race of so-called Supermen based on the mystic strength of the Volk and other romantic, idiotic German theories.

'Do you know of the theories of the great Austrian cosmologist, Hans Hörbiger?' Himmler asked, his gaze unnaturally steady behind the glittering pince-nez.

'I don't believe so,' Wilson lied. Actually he was fully cognizant of the fact that Himmler revered the so-called unorthodox, obviously mad, Austrian cosmologist's theories on the birth of the universe and the destiny of Nordic man, but he didn't want Himmler to realize that he had checked him out and now knew so much about him.

'A great man,' Himmler said reverently. 'A man despised by the scientific fraternity of his day for speaking the truth.'

'I'm sorry,' Wilson said hesitantly, carefully. 'I just don't know…'

'No,' Himmler said abruptly. 'Naturally not. They would not have taught you his theories in the United States of America where, as even you know, the truth is rarely respected.'

'He was a cosmologist?' Wilson asked, as if confused.

'Yes,' Himmler replied. 'Hörbiger's theory is that the mass of free matter in the universe takes the form of frozen ice, that chunks of this ice periodically fall into stars and cause immense explosions, which in turn form planetary systems, and that since the world is formed from ice and the fiery explosions they cause – ice and fire, you understand? – it is the natural heritage of Nordic men.' He glanced sideways, as if expecting a reply, and, receiving none, continued melodramatically: 'Yes, Nordic men! *German* men! And Hörbiger believed that a return to such a world would eventually lead to men who were gods...' Mercifully, at that moment he turned away to survey the snow-covered valley. 'A world of eternal ice,' he whispered portentously. 'A world under the earth!'

Quietly exalted by his vision, he turned away from the window, crossed to the centre of the vast room, then faced Wilson again.

'You are a man obsessed,' he said, 'so I know you will understand me. I do not envisage my SS as a commonplace police force, but as a religious order devoted to the creation of the Superman. Indeed, right from the start it has been my intention to eventually isolate the élite of the SS from the world of ordinary men for the rest of their lives. It is also my intention to create special colonies of this élite all over the world, answerable only to the

administration and authority of this new order. My first step in the creation of this new élite was to create my special schools in the mountains of Bavaria, where the finest of the SS are indoctrinated in my ideals and convinced that they are men far finer and more valuable than the world has yet seen. My second step was the creation of the *Ahnenerbe* – the Institute for Research into Heredity – whose function is to finance and publish Germanic researches and to supervise the anthropological medical experiments on the inmates of the concentration camps. And my third and most important step is the *Lebensborn* – Spring of Life – which will, through the controlled mating of élite SS men and pure, Aryan women, breed out all imperfect traits from the German character and physique within one hundred years.'

He walked across the vast room, his footsteps echoing eerily, then stopped directly in front of Wilson, to stare calmly at him.

'And while all of this is happening,' he asked, 'where will I isolate the élite of my SS?'

Wilson turned to the side, to nod in the direction of the snow-covered valley below. 'In a world of eternal ice,' he said. 'A world under the earth.'

'Yes!' Himmler whispered. 'Correct! But not here. Not in Germany.' He walked to the window, pressed the palm of his hand against the glass and then turned back to Wilson. 'Our beloved Führer is anxious for a foothold in the Antarctic,' he said. 'For this reason, he is sending an expedition, commanded by Captain Alfred Richter, to the coast due south of South America. From there, seaplanes will be catapulted from the deck of our aircraft carrier *Schwabenland* with orders to fly back and forth across the territory that Norwegian explorers arrogantly named Queen Maud Land. It is our intention to make a far more thorough study of the area than the Norwegians had done, to photograph as much of the area as possible, and to then claim the land for the Third Reich. When that is done, Herr Wilson, we will do there what we are about to do here and all over Germany: build underground quarters for the élite of my secret order and the slave labour necessary for our purposes.'

Wilson saw the insane grandeur of the concept – even though he knew it would never work. Then, even as he was formulating his own secret plans, Himmler approached him, took hold of his shoulders, and shook him with a rare display of emotion.

'Do you now understand, Herr Wilson, why I'm so interested in you? I

will create the perfect man, you will create the perfect machine, and between us we can create a perfect society under the ice. Hörbiger's world of ice and fire turned into reality! My perfect men, your pitiless science, and all the slave labour we require. *This is what yon are here for*!' He turned away to wave his right hand, indicating the snow-white earth, the hazy horizon, and the unseen Antarctic... 'Your flying saucer will take us there and protect us and finally give us dominion. Now let us go back down.'

Wilson, seeing his dream forged by a madman, followed Himmler out of the Berghof and back down the mountainside.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After eight weeks at sea, with another seven to go, Ernst had a craving for dry land that made a mockery of reason. Anchored in the South Atlantic Ocean, near the South Sandwich Islands, the *Schwabewland,* the command ship of the expeditionary fleet, had become his prison and home, always swaying and creaking. For most of the three weeks they were at anchor, Ernst's sole view of Antarctica was of distant white peaks in a constant, sun-streaked haze beneath an azure sky as, on behalf of Himmler, he supervised the ruthless takeover of Norway's Queen Maud Land.

Daily for three weeks, two seaplanes had been catapulted from the deck of the fleet's aircraft carrier, to fly back and forth across those frozen wastelands, photograph the area, and, as ordered, drop thousands of sharp-tipped steel poles, all weighted at the tip to make them dig into the ice, with small swastikas attached to the other end. The thought of covering a vast expanse of the Antarctic with swastikas attached to steel poles seemed slightly idiotic, even comical, to Ernst, but he had his duty to perform and did it commendably, keeping his face straight, keeping his eye on his men, and receiving the film they brought back after taking aerial photographs of that same vast, icy, largely uncharted wilderness.

Surprisingly, they had found many areas free of ice, which is what Himmler had told Ernst he was particularly interested in.

He'll be pleased, Ernst thought sourly.

Divorced from dry land and the world he had known so well, with little to do other than keep his eye on the men, Ernst spent too much time thinking about what he had lost – his engineering career, then Ingrid's love and respect – and brooding bitterly about how he was being used as a disciplinarian when he should have been working on Projekt Saucer with that oddly unfeeling American genius, Wilson.

God, yes! The American and Projekt Saucer... Already, it all seemed so

far away, beyond the ever-distant, constantly changing horizon, first shrouded in mist, then azure blue and silver striations of light, then blood that boiled out of the sun and poured over the ocean.

Ernst recalled it with disbelief and undeniable pride, since it had been, after all, his first journey away from home: the eerily gray Baltic Sea and the sickening swells of the English Channel, then the grim coastline of France, the white-walled houses on the cliffs of Portugal, giving way to the volcanic peaks of the Canary Islands and the yellow, sun-hazed ribbon of Morocco... He had never been there, had not walked on foreign soil, and felt the loss more acutely, with a pain that surprised him, when the South Atlantic Ocean surrounded him, blue and green, its waves white-capped, offering a different light, more subtle colours, alien creatures, as the boat ploughed through darkening waters into shadows cast by towers of gleaming ice.

He had seen all that and more, was disturbed and exalted by it, yet used it as his route of escape from the shame of his recent past... Great blocks of rock and ice, flashing chasms of snow, a shroud made of dark, drifting cloud, a sudden, upthrusting glacier… Time passing and stopping. His gloved hands on the ship's railing. Then ice-encased mountains, seals and whales and pelagic birds, the air dazzlingly clear, then the anchor being dropped in blue water where the sky was a mirror...

He had certainly left home far behind him.

Yet he wasn't made happy by it, because he was still unable to forget what he had lost in his private and public lives: the career he had wanted since childhood and the woman he still loved.

He had wanted to be a rocket engineer and gain Ingrid's respect.

And had failed on both counts.

Instead, he had become a military policeman and jaded degenerate, living only for instant thrills with willing ladies... or with whores like Brigette.

Ah, yes, Brigette and Ingrid, his whore and his wife. He thought about them night and day, but mostly at night, when he tossed and turned in his tiny cabin, on his uncomfortable bunk bed, listening to the splashing sea, the moaning wind outside the porthole, drifting in and out of an uneasy sleep punctuated by recollections and dreams of sensual experience. He thought of Ingrid with romantic longing, of Brigette with helpless lust, and spent himself shamefully in the darkness, with an adolescent's despair, blushing with guilt and irresistible self-pity.

The days were less tormenting, but certainly more boring, because all he could really do was patrol the creaking ship and check that his men were not up to mischief – which, given this particular location, was highly unlikely. Not cut out to be a seaman, he was easily confused by the ship's bewildering array of hatches and bulkhead doors, steep steps and low-slung pipes, with its constant rumbling and groaning and creaking, its claustrophobic confines. For this reason he could hardly endure even the common cabin, where he sometimes tried to read; instead, he spent as much time as possible in the open air, watching the seaplanes being catapulted off the end of the nearest aircraft carrier, or coming in to land on that same, dangerously swaying deck, silhouetted in the sun's silvery striations or against the rippling, glassy sea.

If not the planes, a wandering albatross, flocks of prions, Cape pigeons, or the volcanic rock of the distant South Sandwich Islands, which, rising jaggedly on the horizon, looked like portals at the entrance to some ghastly, supernatural world. The purgatory to which he would be condemned for his recent debauchery.

'God help me,' he whispered more than once to the night's starlit darkness.

Luckily, he was often joined in his lonely vigils by Captain Alfred Richter, commander of the expeditionary fleet, a grizzled, dishevelled, gray-haired, pink-faced veteran who enjoyed conversation, did not mince his words, and was volubly contemptuous of the people Ernst had come to revere.

'Remarkable!' Richter had said with a sneer during their first conversation, over dinner, in his cramped, smoky cabin. 'The Bavarian window cleaner has finally returned home, driving back into Vienna in his Storm Trooper uniform, giving the fascist salute, welcomed by pealing church bells and hysterically cheering crowds who appear to be delighted that he's made their country a mere province of Germany... But since, four days later, their beloved Führer announced the so-called spring-cleaning of Austrian Jews, I think we can assume that their cheering has tailed off into silence.'

Though shocked at such disrespect for the Führer he so admired, Ernst offered no protest, instead letting Richter break the monotony by rambling on about the madness of the Third Reich and those who controlled it.

'Drug addicts, sexual degenerates, occultists and mystics – the lunatics

have taken over the asylum and called it the Third Reich. And who's in charge of the lunatics? Another two lunatics! Hitler and Himmler, two lost souls possessed by demons, one wanting to be God of a pure Aryan Earth, the other hoping to create the Super Race with a bunch of blond morons. These are leaders of men?'

If Richter despised the Third Reich and all it aspired to, he was particularly venomous about the man who had dreamed up this Antarctic expedition, namely the Reichsführer, Heinrich Himmler.

'A madman!' Richter rasped. 'He belongs in an insane asylum! Unlike you, I don't know him personally, but I know what I've heard. He's a bureaucrat of demonology, an administrator of inane dreams, a superficially cool customer who thrives on demented enthusiasms – mesmerism, reincarnation, clairvoyance, runes, the Thousand Year Reich, the possibility of turning mortal men into immortals, the search for Hörbiger's world of ice and fire – and this lunatic shares his dreams with Hitler, who is equally mad!'

At first Ernst was outraged, as if hearing blasphemy, and he turned away, hiding his flushed cheeks, and looked out to sea. An immature albatross had been circling out there for hours, always close to the surface, supported by the updraughts of air produced by the white-capped swells. It made Ernst remember the wonders of aerodynamics and the work going on in the hangars of Kummersdorf with the American genius, Wilson, the German egomaniac, Schriever, the ailing Italian physicist, Belluzzo, and their engineering assistants, Habermohl and Miethe, and this knowledge filled him with a healthy flush of resentment at what Himmler had done to him.

Instead of working as an engineer with Projekt Saucer at Kummersdorf, he was supervising the dropping of flagged poles into the Antarctic wilderness.

It wasn't even a joke.

'A world of ice and fire?' he asked Richter to distract himself. 'Is that why we're here?'

Richter laughed sardonically. 'What do you think?' he said. 'Has he not told you what he believes in? His mad dream of the Super Race?'

'No,' Ernst replied honestly, 'he hasn't. He only gives me my orders.'

So Richter told him about Himmler, about his bizarre faiths and ambitions, pointing out that his SS was essentially a religious order, that his men were bound by blood and oath, and that he wanted to isolate them, to

brainwash then and remould them, to mate them with the purest German women and produce blond perfection, then forge those already perfect men in the strengthening flames of eternal war.

'He used to process chickens,' Richter said with a sneer, 'and now he wants to process people. He has a dream of a disciplined order of masters and slaves – the masters like human gods, the slaves to do their bidding – and he wants them in a world of ice and fire, which is where we are right now. The fire is the endless war that Himmler hopes to wage – he believes, after all, that war keeps a nation strong - and the ice is right here in the Antarctic, which he views as the natural home of Nordic man.'

They were now on the open deck, looking across the ice-filled sea. Richter waved his hand to indicate the distant, snow-capped peaks and glaciers, obscured in a white haze.

'That's why he wants this place as the secret base for his New Order. He wants to finish here what he began in the Wewelsburg Castle: his secret society, a Black Jesuit order, with its Death's Head insignia, reversed swastika and occult rites, dedicated to the re-creation of the Germanen Order, which he views as the Super Race. The man is mad – and unstoppable.'

Ernst cast his gaze southward, looking beyond the Antarctic Convergence, where dark clouds hovered over an oasis of light and frozen mountain peaks and ice falls, which, being but dimly perceived, looked like part of a mirage. He tried to visualize that vast wasteland, the brown earth between ice and snow; then he pondered the possibility of the finest of his SS comrades being imprisoned and trained there, set free only when called upon by their leader, the Reichsführer, Heinrich Himmler, to set a torch to the world of normal men and turn all previous history into ashes.

Himmler... and Wilson... and Projekt Saucer... in a world of Eternal Ice.

'Areas free of ice,' he whispered to Richter, though really addressing himself. 'He specifically asked us to find areas free of ice. Places where we could land.'

'Of course!' Richter exclaimed. 'Why do you think he's claiming that land for the Third Reich? Photographing it? Having it mapped out?'

'I'm not sure. I…'

'*Lebensraum* – space! – German conquest and expansionism. That madman wants to come here, to bring his Death's Head SS here. He wants to isolate them from the world as completely as possible – well beyond the

reach of normal men – and what could be more removed and isolated than that hellhole of snow and ice? He'll create his new order there, beyond the influence of the human world, and those who are raised there will know nothing but what they've been taught. They'll be raised and trained for war, and nothing *but* war, the eternal conflict that Himmler believes is necessary to an order of Supermen.' Richter rubbed his frozen nose. 'Do you understand, Stoll? It's Hörbiger's so-called cosmic world of ice and fire – and Himmler hopes to create it out there, in that frozen world, underground. That's why we're stealing Queen Maud Land.'

Ernst finally understood and was struck dumb with the knowledge, simultaneously overwhelmed by the grandeur of the concept and deeply shocked that he had learned about it only through this old naval captain, whose contempt was appalling.

Avoiding Richter after that, he stayed alone as much as possible, thinking of Wilson's flying saucer, potentially the world's most powerful aircraft, and relating it to this Antarctic expedition and the search for ice-free land.

Himmler's world of fire and ice: the flying saucer and the Antarctic. The flying saucer was the machine of the future ... and that future was here and now.

Ernst was awed by the concept.

On the final day of the expedition, just before the fleet turned back, Ernst, as instructed by Himmler, took the rear seat in a seaplane and had the pilot fly him to the Antarctic and land on an ice-free area of Queen Maud Land. It was not a long flight, but it seemed almost magical, transporting him abruptly from sunlit space to snow-filled wilderness, black shadow, blinding light, a great silence, the gleaming Nothing, and when the skis of his aircraft slid along the ice cap, he felt that he was on another planet, vast and desolate... dead.

The Antarctic, spread out all around him, looked boundless and unreal.

Another world for the taking.

Telling the pilot to remain in the cockpit, he clambered down alone, glanced around that alien landscape of icefalls and glaciers and snowbanks and polar plateaus – all frighteningly empty and hauntingly silent – then solemnly unravelled a larger swastika from its frozen steel pole. He hammered it into the ice-free soil, working awkwardly with his gloved hands; then, exhaling steam, he stepped back to give the Nazi salute.

‘I now claim this land for the Third Reich and name it Neuschwabenland.’

His embarrassed, whispered words were still echoing eerily around him when he climbed back up into the seaplane and let the pilot fly him away from what could be his future home.

That thought chilled his soul.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bradley was relieved to step out of the sweltering June weather of the town of Des Moines, Iowa, and into the airconditioned coolness of the immaculately clean, modern nursing home. When he told the white-uniformed receptionist behind the desk that he had an appointment with a resident, Abe Goldman, she smiled pleasantly, checked her register, said, 'Yep!' and hit the button of the bell on the desk with the palm of her hand. 'I'm calling someone to take you in there,' she explained. Then, when she saw him fingering his sweaty collar, she asked, 'Are you from out of state, Mr Bradley?'

'Yep,' he replied, amused by her air of amusement.

'Can't stand the humidity, eh?'

'No, not really. It can get pretty hot in Connecticut, but it's never this humid.'

'You know New York?'

'Yep.'

'I've only seen it in the movies.'

'It looks just like it does in the movies.'

'Gee, I'd just love to go there.' She was middle-aged and attractive and reminded him of Gladys Kinder, so he was glad when a male attendant arrived and said, 'Someone for Abe?'

'This nice gentleman from New York,' the receptionist said. 'The one sweating too much.'

'Can't stand the humidity, eh?' the male attendant said with a broad grin.

Bradley just shook his head.

'You'll soon cool down in here,' the attendant said. 'Okay, sir, follow me.'

Bradley was already cooling down in the air-conditioning when the attendant led him away from the lobby, along a well-carpeted corridor,

through an expansive community room filled with old people, many wearing dressing gowns, and out onto a patio overlooking a smooth green lawn.

'You a relative of Abe's?' the attendant asked, leading Bradley along the patio.

'No,' Bradley replied.

'He's one of our favourite residents,' the attendant said. 'A real old-time character – though not originally from hereabouts.'

'No, he was originally from New York.'

'That's right,' the attendant said, stopping when they reached the shaded end of the patio, where an old man was sitting in a wheelchair. He had lively, pugnacious, Jewish features and a mop of surprisingly thick gray hair. He was dressed in a vivid, sky-blue dressing gown and smoking a cigar.

'Abe,' the attendant said, 'here's your visitor. Mr – '

'Bradley. Mike Bradley.'

Abe Goldman removed the cigar from his pursed lips and squinted up through a cloud of smoke. 'The guy from Wall Street, eh?' he asked rhetorically, raising his hand.

'That's right,' Bradley said, shaking the old man's hand and surprised by the strength of his grip. 'It's good of you to see me.'

'Not at all,' Goldman replied, waving Bradley into the chair facing him. 'It's not often you meet a stranger in this asylum, so I'm happy to see you.'

'It's not an asylum,' the attendant corrected him.

'No,' Abe said, 'it's a nursing home. Only the people who run it are crazy; we're just old and decrepit.'

He quivered with soundless mirth as the attendant grinned at Bradley, shook his head in a rueful manner, then said, 'Enjoy!' and walked away. Bradley settled into his chair facing the grinning old man, whose thick-lashed brown eyes were still bright.

'So,' Goldman said, 'you said on the phone you wanted to talk about my old company.'

'That's right. Goldman and Cohn. Based and registered in New York, back in the nineties. A finance company, I gather.'

'Yep.' Goldman shook his head emphatically. 'Old Jack and me, we made a goddamned fortune and retired at an early age. Of course, Jack,' he said, blowing a cloud of smoke, 'kicked off a few years back. He didn't smoke or drink, that was his problem. Living clean isn't good for you.'

‘I’ll try to remember that,’ Bradley said.

‘You do that, son. Pearls of wisdom from the ancients. Now what did you want to know?’

‘Is it true that your company was involved in the financing of airship designs?’

‘It sure is, son. And it’s what made us rich. There was a lot of loot in airship designs if you knew which hands to shake.’

‘You built a secret research centre here, in Iowa, didn’t you?’

‘Yep. That’s why I’m retired here. Jack Cohn and I, we both came out here in the nineties, to supervise the research center – then, when we had to close it down, we decided to stay on. Our wives and kids loved it here.’

‘I want to ask you about that – about why you closed the plant down – but first I want to know if your chief aeronautical engineer was a guy named John Wilson.’

‘I do believe he was. I’m not good at remembering names, but I’m good at the faces and I’d never forget that engineer. He was a weird one, I tell you.’

‘Weird?’

‘He surely was – though he was also the most brilliant designer we’d ever come across. Miles ahead of the others.’

‘What do you mean by weird?’

Goldman inhaled and puffed, looking thoughtful. ‘Not too sure,’ he said. ‘Such a long time ago. At my age, memory plays some awful tricks. Not reliable, son.’

‘I don’t mind,’ Bradley said.

Goldman puffed out his cheeks and blew more smoke; he had a lot of it in there. ‘Brilliant,’ he reiterated. ‘But cold. Cold as ice. Something almost inhuman about him there. Always well mannered and pleasant, but not really concerned. He *saw* people – he watched them like a hawk – but he never seemed to *feel* anything.’

‘Obsessed with his work?’

‘Christ, yes. It was bread and water to him. He had nothing *except* his work. I remember once asking him about his childhood – you know, I thought he might have been mistreated as a child or something – and he said, no, that his parents had been fine, he just hadn’t been interested, that’s all. Life, he said, was too precious to waste on small things, on the *ordinary,* and

his parents, while decent, had been ordinary, so he lost interest in them. He thought that people wasted their lives, that most of them were too emotional, and that the mind and what it could achieve were all that really mattered in life. Any human activity that didn't have a specific, evolutionary purpose was to him a complete waste of time, maybe even degenerate. You know – sports, games, romantic love, kids, reading just for pleasure – you name it – if it wasn't somehow advancing science or evolution, it was pretty despicable.'

'Yet he was well mannered and polite.'

'Right. You couldn't even prod him to anger. I *do* remember him telling me that any emotion that blurred objective thought was an unhealthy emotion. He didn't involve himself with people – he worked with them or studied them – and although he had some women in his life, I think they were just there for the sex: a way of scratching at the one distracting itch he couldn't get rid of.'

'He wasn't married?'

'No – and never had been.'

'A real loner.'

'More like a recluse. I don't think we socialized once – we only met to discuss work – and even then, it was always at the research centre.'

'How did you find him?'

'Me and my partner – Jack Cohn, God rest his soul – were looking for someone, preferably young, bright, and willing to work cheap, to design passenger-carrying airships, which we were convinced would revolutionize transport. So, we placed an ad' in various newspapers, asking for aeronautical engineers, and Wilson called and we fixed up a meeting. He'd just graduated from Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, which was convenient, since that's where we were based. Anyway, we met him and he impressed the hell out of us – he was so obviously brilliant – so we had no hesitation in putting him in charge of our airship development project.'

'Why did you move it all the way from the East Coast to here?'

'Wilson's idea. In those days, you know, there was an awful lot of experimentation going on – patents flying all over the place – and so all of us were obsessive about protecting what we were doing. Lots of secrecy, right? So we wanted our project to be kept under wraps and preferably located well away from the prying eyes of our competitors. Jack, I think, suggested California, but then Wilson said he knew of this great place near where he'd

come from – in the wilds of Iowa, near the Illinois border – and when he also informed us that land and property there were cheap, we bought the idea. We sent Wilson out here to find us what we needed, and he came up with the plant in Mount Pleasant. We not only built the plant there, but took all our workers from the area, which meant there was no gossip back in New York.'

'*When* was that?'

'About 1896. Thereabouts. My memory's not all that good, you know. It's as flimsy as I am.'

Bradley grinned. 'And did you actually design some workable airships?'

The man inhaled more smoke, nearly choked and coughed vigorously, stubbed the butt of the cigar out in an ashtray, then wiped his watery eyes with shaky fingers.

'He sure did,' he confirmed, nodding emphatically. 'Five in all, with one uncompleted by the time the project closed down.'

That figured, Bradley thought. All the reports about Wilson during the Great Airship Scare had reported him as saying that five or six airships had been constructed in Iowa, near the Illinois border. So five had been completed, one left unfinished, in Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

'What were they like?' he asked.

'Dirigibles,' Goldman replied. 'The most advanced of their time. The hot-air balloon was contained inside a cigar-shaped aluminium structure and powered by Wilson's internal combustion engine and propellers, all of which were fixed ingeniously to the gondola. The five completed models were secretly test-flown throughout the second year of the project – I think, 1897 – but of course we couldn't keep 'em invisible, so they caused quite a stir.'

'The Great Airship Scare of 1897.'

The old man shook again with silent mirth. 'Right,' he said, when he had managed to control himself. 'Those test flights were made about three years before Zeppelin flew his first model and over six years before the first heavier-than-air flight of the Wright brothers – but they were undertaken in as much secrecy as was possible under the circumstances. Wilson nearly always took the airships up at night, but he often had to land to ask for water for his airship's engine – and in doing that he scared a helluva lot of people. Of course, some of his crewmen really enjoyed the whole thing – you know, reading about themselves as possible invaders from Mars and so on. It was all a bit of a joke to them.'

‘Not a joke to the nation,’ Bradley observed, remembering what he had read about the scare.

‘Right,’ Goldman replied. ‘Someone even managed to get some photographs when one of Wilson’s airships flew over Rogers Park in Illinois. Those photographs were reproduced in a couple of newspapers – the *Chicago Times-Herald* and *The New York Times,* as I remember – and that really turned the airships into a sensation.’

‘Yet they weren’t seen after 1897. Why?’

‘Wilson destroyed them.’

‘Pardon?’

‘You heard me. That mad bastard destroyed his own creations. He was utterly ruthless.’

Bradley was just starting to wonder if Goldman was insane when the old man glanced furtively left and right, then leaned forward with a sly grin on his face.

‘You don’t believe me, uh?’

‘I’m beginning to believe this Wilson was capable of anything... but that seems a bit too much.’

‘You want me to show you something really special, Mr Bradley?’

‘*Show* me?’

‘Yeah, show you. I could do with a day away from here – and it’s still only morning. If you’re willing to drive eighty miles and back I’ll show you what he was up to.’

‘Where would we be going?’

‘To Mount Pleasant, of course, where my construction plant was located.’

‘I’ve already checked it out,’ Bradley said, ‘and didn’t find a damned thing. Your plant’s long gone, Mr Goldman. Every last sign of it.’

Goldman grinned again and winked, then shook his head from side to side. ‘No,’ he said. ‘Not there. You looked in the wrong place. Wilson had this other hangar, his secret place, that even *I* didn’t know about until he was long gone. You want to see what Wilson was doing behind our backs? Then let’s head for Mount Pleasant. I could do with a day out.’

‘It’s a deal,’ Bradley said.

They had a pleasant drive, out of Des Moines and along a seemingly endless straight road, past the rambling farmsteads that dotted the green and brown

hills, toward where an azure, white-clouded sky met a silvery horizon. Abe Goldman loved it, beamed with pleasure beside Bradley, and kept leaning sideways, to put his weathered face near the rolled-down window, all the better to receive the rushing wind, fresh air, and bright, scorching sun.

'This is what I left New York for,' he explained, breathing deeply and gratefully.

Though Bradley was burning with impatience, he didn't press the old man to talk anymore about Wilson and his airship project, but instead let him engage in routine conversation about the weather, the changes in the country in general and New York in particular, and anything else that took the voluble Abe Goldman's fancy. They were on the highway to Iowa City, which made an easy drive, but turned off an hour later and took a road that ran as straight as an arrow between golden fields of wheat and corn, to Montezuma, where Wilson had been born.

As Abe Goldman now wanted lunch, Bradley stopped at a diner on the edge of town.

Helping Abe out of the car, Bradley recalled his visit to this town a few years back, when he had gone to the farm that had once belonged to Wilson's parents and found it still operating, its clapboard house recently repainted and gleaming white in the sunlight.

'The man now running the Wilson farm,' he explained to Abe as they entered the diner, 'is the son of the people who bought it from Wilson's father shortly after his wife, Wilson's mother, died and he decided to move to Worcester, Massachusetts, where he'd been born.'

'A lot of people need their roots,' Goldman replied.

'Not Wilson,' Bradley said.

'Even Wilson,' Goldman insisted. 'He may not have returned to his hometown, but he came back to the state. That's close enough, partner.'

Faced with the possibility that Wilson might, after all, have had some sentimental leanings, Bradley felt more confused when he entered the diner and sat down to lunch with Abe Goldman. They both had hamburgers and french fries, with lots of relish and salad on the side. For such a fragile old man, Abe had a surprisingly healthy appetite, enjoying his food.

'So are you going to tell me why Wilson destroyed his own airships?' Bradley finally asked him.

'Sure,' Abe said. 'Seems unbelievable, right? But that son of a bitch was

the most ruthless guy I ever met.' Abe munched on his burger, washed it down with Coca-Cola. 'The reason the airships spotted in 1897 weren't seen again is that the designs Wilson gave me and Jack Cohn to patent were for unworkable airships. He patented the real designs under a couple of pseudonyms. Of course, we didn't know about this. Nor did we know that the son of a bitch was selling his genuine designs to some industrialist in Germany, almost certainly with an agreement to ensure that our airships were destroyed. We only figured this out later. First, the engines of our airships were blown up by an unknown demolition expert, obviously Wilson. Second, Wilson disappeared, leaving only his ingeniously faked drawings, from which we couldn't reconstruct his particular internal combustion engines and structural designs. Third: A couple of years later the first German airships took to the sky and were clearly based on Wilson's designs.' Abe grinned and shook his head in helpless admiration. 'By that time,' he continued, 'since we'd nothing to sell, Jack and me had gone bust and were too busy making our money back in other fields to pursue the son of a bitch through the courts.'

'But you knew what he was up to during that time?'

'Sure. He used the money from the sale of his patents to open his own research establishment across the state line, in Illinois. We could never verify what he was up to there, but there were certainly some odd rumours over the next few years, most notably that by 1903, just before the Wright brothers made their first successful flight at Kitty Hawk, Wilson had secretly produced even more advanced aircraft, reportedly turboprop biplanes, that had actually managed to cross the Atlantic Ocean.'

'He couldn't have done that without US government help.'

'Well,' Abe said, obviously enjoying his startling revelations, 'everything was wide open then – it was early days for aviation, with not too much legislation – so he could have done it with *clandestine* government aid. Then, of course, he went that little bit too far and it led to his downfall.'

'A little bit too far?' Bradley was amused by the triumphant glint in old Abe's eyes, but he was also intrigued. He had never heard anything like this in his life, and it made Wilson seem almost diabolically ruthless and even, in a chilling way, awesome.

Having finished his large lunch, Goldman sat back, lit a cigar, and puffed a cloud of foul smoke.

‘There were rumours,’ he said, ‘about highly advanced experiments with the problem of the boundary layer – and even dangerous experiments with atomic propulsion. Regarding this, there’s one year I haven’t forgotten and won’t ever forget.’

‘Yes?’ Bradley enquired, his amusement tinged with growing impatience at the old man’s teasing.

‘In 1908,’ Goldman said, ‘shortly after the world celebrated Louis Bleriot’s widely publicized flight across the English Channel, from Calais to Dover, there was a great explosion in the Tunguska region of Siberia – an explosion so big that some believed it had been caused by a crashing meteor or alien spacecraft. The reason for that mysterious explosion has never been found, but I can confirm that there were whispers in aeronautical and related circles that it’d been caused by the failure of one of Wilson’s more dangerous experiments: when his mostly highly advanced experimental aircraft, reportedly powered by some primitive, faulty form of atomic propulsion, malfunctioned – possibly in conjunction with damage caused by the uncontrollable vibrations of the boundary layer – in an otherwise astonishingly successful flight from these here United States to goddamned Russia.’

Feeling chilled to the bone while hot sunlight poured in through the window, Bradley was just about to express his disbelief when Goldman, finishing off his Coca-Cola, wiped his lips with the back of his hand and said, ‘While that could either be the true explanation for the Tunguska explosion or pure science fiction, what *is* for sure is that shortly after the so-called most frightening, inexplicable phenomenon of the twentieth century, Wilson’s plant in Illinois was closed down by the US government, all of his designs – or at least those they found – were either classified as top secret or destroyed, and Wilson was offered work with the US government.’

‘Which he didn’t take.’

‘No,’ Goldman confirmed without hesitation. ‘Apparently deeply embittered – can you imagine how *we* felt? – and with the Great War underway, he left Illinois for good and, according to occasional reports, spent the next decade drifting from one small aeronautical company to another, keeping his light under a bushel, but making a good living by selling his smaller, less important innovations to commercial airline companies and construction plants, and finally going to work for six months with another

pioneering genius, Robert H. Goddard.'

'Which is where I came in.'

'Pardon?'

'Nothing,' Bradley said. He was beginning to feel a bit unreal. Glancing at his wristwatch, he noted that his time was running out. 'Are you finished, Abe? I think we'll have to get going.'

'No sweat,' Goldman said.

Once back in the car, they drove for another hour, arrived at Sigourney, which seemed sleepy in the afternoon light, then passed the road signs for Washington and Wapeelo and eventually headed along an empty road that cut through a quilt-work of green and gold, lawns of finely mowed grass, more fields of corn and wheat beyond which, Bradley knew from his previous visits, lay the rolling green fields of Mount Pleasant.

Thinking of that place, of the airships constructed and destroyed there, Bradley suddenly realized that he might be on a wild goose chase, led by a senile old man.

'If Wilson destroyed his airships,' he said, expressing his doubts, 'what can you possibly show me now, Abe?'

Goldman was unfazed. 'Remember me telling you about the rumours that Wilson had constructed a highly developed aircraft that actually managed to fly as far as Russia?'

'Yes,' Bradley said. 'The one with some primitive form of atomic propulsion.'

'Right,' Goldman said, pleased. 'Well, that aircraft certainly wasn't any kind of goddamned *airship.*'

'Naturally not,' Bradley said. 'Probably some kind of advanced airplane.'

'Exactly,' Goldman replied. 'When that son of a bitch was making airships for us, he'd already superseded them and was secretly experimenting with his *own* project in another hangar, well away from our establishment at Mount Pleasant. It's my belief that that project was for the construction of an aircraft designed solely to conquer the boundary layer and be powered by some form of atomic propulsion. I think that a miniature version of such a craft, remote-controlled, was tried out in 1908, flew as far as Siberia, then malfunctioned and blew up over the Tunguska forest.'

'Jesus Christ,' Bradley whispered without thinking.

'You're impressed?' Goldman asked.

‘Yep.’

‘Then stop being impatient and keep driving. You *want* proof, I’ll *give* you proof!’

Shortly after they passed the sign indicating Mount Pleasant, Goldman coughed more cigar smoke from his lungs, hammered his chest with his fist, then jabbed a finger at a narrow side road and said, ‘Turn up there, son.’

‘We’re not going to Montezuma?’ Bradley asked, confused.

‘You’ve already been there,’ Goldman reminded him, ‘and found nothing worth seeing. Now do as I tell you.’

Bradley kept driving until Goldman told him to stop, halfway along a narrow track that ran between two fenced-in fields of tall, untended grass. That was unusual. Untended fields were rare around here. Then he looked across the field to the east and saw, in the distance, an enormous barn, probably once used for storing grain.

Goldman reached into his pocket, pulled out a bunch of keys, and held them up to him.

‘Here,’ he said. ‘One of these is the key. Go take a look at what that son of a bitch was building when we thought he was only constructing airships. Have a good look, son.’

Bradley felt foolish and disbelieving, but he took the bunch of keys from the old man and started across the road. He parted the barbed wire, clambered awkwardly through the fence, then started the long walk across the field, through the waist-high, untended grass. The grass was like an endless sea, undulating in the breeze, whispering all around him, brushing at him, as if trying to suck him down. He felt nervous and unreal, adrift from himself, and was dazzled by the silvery-streaked azure sky, in which white clouds drifted.

Ahead of him, the immense barn loomed larger, isolated between land and sky, breaking up the horizon.

Beyond it was Illinois.

Bradley was breathing heavily and sweating by the time he reached the barn, and he stood there for a moment, getting his breath back. He glanced over his shoulder and saw his rented car sitting in the road beyond the fence, minute in that vast, undulating sea of grass. Shaking his head in wonderment, he turned again to the front and studied the barn.

It was certainly huge, obviously once used for storing grain, and the single, steel lock on the door had turned red with rust. Not quite so breathless,

but still sweating too much, Bradley tried one key after the other until he found the correct one. He turned the key once, slipped the lock off the chain, pulled the chain through its steel rings, and let it fall to the ground. Then he took hold of the edge of the large door and pulled it toward him, walking backward as he did so, until it was more than halfway open, letting sunlight pour into the barn's darkness.

That sunlight shone on something metallic, making Bradley's heart leap.

Feeling as nervous as someone entering a haunted house, he walked into the barn.

He didn't get very far.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The flying saucer prototype looked bigger than it really was where it rested, on a raised hydraulic platform, in the middle of the immense, cluttered hangar. Essentially a large ring plate with adjustable wing discs that rotated around its fixed, cupola-shaped cockpit, it had a diameter of forty-two meters and a height from base to canopy of thirty-two meters. Made of silvery-gray metal that reflected the overhead lights, it looked like a giant spinning top, and it made Wilson smile.

It would soon fly – but not much.

The only saucer that would fly in any real sense was the one Wilson was secretly designing in miniature and would use when he needed it.

As long as he lived, he would not forget the awful devastation caused by the failure of the crude atomic propulsion system used in the otherwise surprisingly successful test flight of his first disc-shaped aircraft, which had actually managed to fly as far as Russia. However, since the catastrophe over the Tunguska region of Siberia in 1908, caused by the explosion of his pilotless aircraft, he had accepted that atomic propulsion was out of the question. Instead, he had concentrated all his efforts on conquering the boundary layer and trying to find less air-resistant material for his flying saucer's structure, so far using highly advanced but orthodox aircraft engines. He had not succeeded in America, though he was on the way to succeeding here, but he was carefully keeping his most important discoveries for his own use.

He fed Flugkapitän Schriever only a little at a time... never quite enough for his needs, but enough to make Schriever think he was making progress and to keep Himmler happy.

It was a delicate manoeuvre of the kind Wilson had practised previously with the US government, before they had withdrawn their support and made him quietly drop out of sight, to eventually end up here in Nazi Germany.

He would always do what he had to do.

Tired from his week of relentless travelling all over Germany, he lowered his suitcase to the floor. Nevertheless he did not sit down but looked through the glass walls of his office at the men, some in coveralls, some in uniform, who were gathered by the hydraulic platform under the large flying saucer prototype. He recognized the lean and hungry Rudolph Schriever, who was dangerous, and his engineers, Habermohl and Miethe, who were not, as well as that fat Italian fool, Belluzzo, who would soon have to go.

The four of them were obviously discussing some aspect of the construction, while Schriever, who still believed that he ran Projekt Saucer, studied the technical drawings in his hands and barked like a dog.

What an ass! Wilson thought.

Not that he had much time for any of them...

The two engineers, Klaus Habermohl and Otto Miethe, were uninspiringly efficient when merely turning nuts and bolts but embarrassingly inept when aspiring to the greater heights of design. So far, contrary to what Wilson had told Heinrich Himmler in Berchtesgaden, their so-called contributions to various parts of the flying saucer, including the outer steel casing, were relatively useless. As for the ambitious Flugkapitän Schriever, he was brighter than the others but remained, nonetheless, a mediocre engineer with pretensions to being a great aeronautical innovator. That was his machine out there, a crude saucer-shaped aircraft, and although he'd based much of his design on Wilson's innovations – and then insinuated to Himmler that they were his own – Wilson had given him only those innovations that already were obsolete. Schriever's saucer would fly in a crude manner eventually – when Wilson wanted it to do so – and until then, as Schriever was Himmler's spy, Wilson would give him just enough to keep him happy and full of himself.

Which just left that fat fool, Belluzzo, who, by his very lack of courage, was the most dangerous of all.

Wilson had to get rid of him.

Surprisingly, the aging Italian physicist, who had actually completed the first drawings for the saucer that Schriever was now claiming as his own, had turned out to be the biggest thorn in Wilson's side. A basically timid man, he had been cowed by the aggressive, manipulating Schriever and, as a consequence, had tried to curry favour with him by repeatedly implying that

Wilson could not be trusted. Ever since then, according to Habermohl, who revered Wilson and kept him informed of such intrigues, Belluzzo had become Schriever's spy and was supporting him in his attempts to take the credit for Wilson's ideas when talking to Himmler.

A nest of vipers, Wilson thought. Nevertheless, since he wanted to be rid of them all eventually, he would start by getting rid of Belluzzo, while simultaneously making Schriever less suspicious of him.

He would do it today.

Knowing that Schriever would be coming to see him at any moment, Wilson opened his briefcase, removed a selection of the technical papers he had collected during his week of travelling, and, as they were of no great significance, spread them out on his desk.

He knew that when Schriever entered the office, he would try, in his idiotically surreptitious manner, to see what they contained.

So he would actually give the fool these technical papers for innovations that were relatively useless.

This thought had just made Wilson smile when Schriever walked in.

'Ah, Wilson, you're back!' he exclaimed in his friendly, false manner.

'Yes,' Wilson replied.

'You had a profitable trip?' Schriever asked, looking dashing in his flugkapitän's uniform, his forced smile slightly illuminating his lean, darkly handsome features.

'*Very* profitable,' Wilson said.

Schriever took the chair at the other side of Wilson's desk and offered his fullest attention.

'What did you find?' he asked breathlessly. 'Anything exciting or useful to us?'

Wilson had travelled far, talked to many, and learned a great deal. In factories hidden in the densely forested areas of the Schwarzwald he had been shown an experiment with a liquid gas that would, when blown with considerable force over an aircraft, catch fire from the exhaust and cause the aircraft to explode. In the R-Laboratory in Volkenrode he had been involved in heated discussions about electrostatic fields and gyroscopic controls and also discovered that by mixing a certain percentage of myrol with air, internal combustion engines would immediately begin to detonate irregularly or, depending on the mixture, stop completely. In the Henschel aircraft company

he had examined a television component that would enable pilots to control bombs and rocket bombs *after* they had been launched, as well as a micro-television camera that would be installed in the nose of an anti-aircraft rocket and guide it precisely to its target. In the Luftwaffe experimental centre at Oberammergau, in Bavaria, he had been given a demonstration of an apparatus capable of short-circuiting the ignition system of another aircraft engine from a great distance by producing an intense electrical field... and he had also learned about the development of radio-controlled interceptor weapons and planes, electromagnetic, electroacoustical, and photoelectric fuses, and even more advanced warheads that were sensitive to the natural electrostatic fields that surround aircraft in flight. In the experimental centre at Gottingen, he had been privileged to observe the test flight of a light-winged aircraft that had a slot running along the entire length of its wing span and an extra propellor in the fuselage to suck in the boundary layer and increase the lift of the original airfoil by eight times. And finally, most important, at Berlin-Britz he had been shown a Kreiselgerat, the prototype of a new mechanism that had so far managed to reduce the oscillations of a violently shaking body to under one-tenth of a degree, thus paving the way for the conquest of the boundary layer.

He did not tell Schriever any of this.

Nor did he tell him that upon seeing the results of the oscillation tests in Gottengen, which had proved beyond doubt that the boundary layer could be conquered, he had suggested to Professors Ackeret and Betz that they concentrate on a revolutionary new structural design that would be devoid of all obstructing protuberances, such as wings and rudders, devoid even of the normal air intakes, and powered by a more advanced turbine engine. In other words, a more advanced version of the Horten brothers' tailless aircraft, or 'flying wing,' that would offer the least possible air resistance, suck in the dead air of the boundary layer, and then use that same air, expelling it at great force, to increase its momentum.

The eminent professors had agreed to do just this... though Wilson didn't tell Schriever that.

'Naturally,' he said instead, 'the first thing I did was examine the Horten II, D-11-167, prior to its test flight in Rangsdorf, which turned out to be highly unsatisfactory. This so-called tailless aircraft possesses great static-longitudinal stability and complete safety in relation to the spin, but its

control surfaces are so heavy that measurements of manoeuvring stability couldn't be carried out. The unsatisfactory arrangement of its undercarriage necessitates too long a takeoff, the relation between its longitudinal, lateral, and directional controls is unsatisfactory, its turning flight and manoeuvrability are both fraught with difficulty, and side-slipping can't be carried out. With regard, then, to what we're doing here, the Horten brothers are valueless.'

Wilson threw the drawings and technical summaries of the Horten brothers' flying wing across the desk as if they were dirt. Schriever picked them up as if he agreed... but then, as Wilson noted, let them rest on his lap and placed his hands protectively on top of them, no doubt to be hopefully used later in his saucer designs.

'Anything else?' he asked.

Wilson nodded and tried to feign excitement. 'Yes,' he said. 'Some exciting innovations. The kind that could make your flying saucer even more powerful.'

'What?' Schriever asked. '*What?*'

Knowing that Himmler's sole interest in a flying saucer was its potential as a weapon of war, Wilson told his devoted disciple, Rudolph Schriever, about such oddities as the proposed *Windkanone* – a cannon that shot gas instead of shells – and the *Wirbelringkanone,* or whirlwind annular vortex cannon, which was designed to shoot and then ignite a gas ring that would spin rapidly on its own axis and form a fierce ball of fire. Whether such weapons would work in practice was an issue of great doubt, but because Schriever wanted only news of weapons that would sound magical to his beloved Reichsführer, he lapped up what Wilson was telling him and snatched the relevant research papers from Wilson's hand as if wanting to eat them. Then, when Wilson offered him no more, he stood up to leave.

'One moment, Flugkapitän,' Wilson said.

'Yes?' Schriever responded impatiently, now wanting to leave. 'What is it *now*?'

'I feel I should warn you,' Wilson said as Schriever turned back to face him, 'that certain people are plotting against you.'

As most men in the Third Reich were already frightened of being plotted against or being reported for some damning misdemeanour, Schriever looked suitably shaken and sat down again.

‘Plotting against *me*?’ he said. ‘Who would do that?’

‘Belluzzo,’ Wilson said without hesitation.

Schriever looked stunned. ‘*Belluzzo*?’ he repeated. ‘But he’s my most trusted colleague, Herr Wilson!’ he blurted out, thus inadvertently confirming what Wilson had suspected.

Wilson sighed, as if saddened. ‘I’m afraid your trust has been misplaced,’ he said, leaning his elbows on his desk, resting his chin in his hands, and staring with concerned intensity at the clearly shocked Schriever. ‘I have it on good authority – one of Himmler’s aides, in fact – that Dr Belluzzo has been trying surreptitiously to steal credit for the great contributions you’ve so far made to Projekt Saucer and has even, in some of the reports, credited certain innovations to himself. He’s doing this, I know, because he’s so clearly jealous of your authority over the project, but I’m afraid he’s being taken seriously by those around Himmler, which means that if he isn’t stopped soon, those lies will soon reach Himmler ears and you’ll have to defend yourself.’

Now flushed and fearful, Schriever gazed through the glass wall at the flying saucer in the middle of the vast hangar, stared disbelieving at Dr Belluzzo, who was plump and gray-haired and wearing an oil-smeared white smock, then returned his stricken gaze to the front.

‘What will I do?’ Schriever asked, sounding frightened.

‘You have to stop him,’ Wilson said dryly.

‘And how do I do that?’

‘Get rid of him, Flugkapitän.’

‘And how do I do *that*?’ Schriever asked.

Because Schriever didn’t know that Wilson was sixty-six years old, because Wilson looked about fifteen years younger, Wilson didn’t believe he was in any way endangering himself when he said, ‘Belluzzo is nearly seventy and beginning to show it, so why not put in an official report about his physical and mental condition, describing him as senile and progressively distracted and therefore an increasing threat to Projekt Saucer? Recommend that he be removed from the project and treated for his own good.’

‘*Treated*?’

Wilson shrugged and sat back in his chair. ‘Let’s be honest,’ he said. ‘If you put in such a report, Belluzzo will be classified as mentally ill and incarcerated in a concentration camp as an undesirable. If there was another

course of action I would certainly recommend it, but there isn't, and given the circumstances...'

He deliberately didn't finish his sentence, but merely raised and lowered his hands as if the matter was in the lap of the gods. Schriever, released from moral responsibility, nodded his gratitude and stood up.

'Yes,' he said. 'Of course. It's the only thing to do. And thank you, Herr Wilson.'

'My pleasure,' Wilson said.

When Schriever had left, Wilson gathered the remaining technical notes together, placed them back in his already stuffed suitcase, then phoned through for his driver to come and collect him. When the uniformed SS driver arrived, he picked up Wilson's suitcase and walked ahead of him, merely glancing at the large flying saucer on the raised ramp, and led him out to the waiting car.

Wilson looked toward the firing range. He was on the proper side of it now. Wernher von Braun and his rocket teams had moved to Peenemünde on the island of Usedom, off the Baltic Coast, and Projekt Saucer had been moved to this side of the firing range, into the bigger, better-equipped hangars. As Wilson had felt increasing resentment at having regularly to pass on certain of his innovations to von Braun's A-2 and A3 rocket projects, he had been relieved in more ways than one when they finally left.

He slipped into the car, sank into the rear seat, and relaxed during the fifteen-mile journey, through the cloudy, gray afternoon, to his new apartment in the Kürhessen district of Berlin. His former nurse, Greta, who'd been warned of his arrival, had prepared dinner for him.

Assigned to look after only him when he had been recuperating from the second of what he knew would be many operations designed to aid his longevity, Greta had also been instrumental in satisfying his old man's odd sexual whims, mostly of an oral and masturbatory nature. Then, when he had been awarded this spacious apartment by a satisfied Heinrich Himmler, Greta, obviously attracted by his authority and high position in the Nazi hierarchy, had agreed to move in with him as his nurse, housekeeper, and mistress, with her duties in the latter category few and far between, as Wilson now noted without rancour.

Sexually abused as a child by her father, twice married, now widowed and a professional nurse, she was well-proportioned and auburn-haired, with an

attractive, worldly face, cold hazel eyes, and a great deal of knowledge about the sexual needs of men, which was all Wilson needed. Greta had few illusions, was not blinded by emotionalism, and was probably even relieved to be receiving so much for doing so little. She kept a clean apartment, cooked only for herself since Wilson never ate cooked foods, helped him produce the semen he needed for his continuing experiments, and had her occasional affairs on the side, about which he did not complain.

Sometimes she even gave him advice, as she now did over dinner.

'Did you visit the factory before you came home?' she asked, as she tucked into her wiener schnitzel and he nibbled his dried vegetables and biscuits.

'Yes,' he replied. 'Everything was in order.'

'Did you see Rudolph Schriever?'

'Yes, of course. Why?'

'He came here yesterday,' Greta said, 'and feigned surprise when he didn't find you here. When I said you weren't returning until today, he made a great play of smacking his forehead with his hand and telling me what an idiot he was, that he'd simply forgotten.'

'You thought his visit was deliberate?'

'Yes,' Greta said, wise in the ways of men. 'In fact, I'm convinced of it. I think he just wanted an excuse to see how we lived – perhaps even to look around.'

'Which you didn't let him do.'

'Of course not!'

Wilson smiled. 'I hope you invited him in for some tea, at least.'

'Yes, I did – and his eyes wandered all over the place. I could see he wanted to check out the other rooms, but I kept him pinned to his chair.'

'Not physically, I hope.'

'No, he's not my type. I merely pinned him to the chair with my gaze and eventually let him go.'

'I hope the poor man at least enjoyed his tea.'

Greta didn't return his smile. 'Don't trust him,' she said.

'I don't.'

'Good. You can't trust *anyone* these days. But that kind, they're the worst.'

'What kind?'

‘The kind who are weak but have ambitions. They’re always the worst.’

‘I’ll remember that,’ Wilson said.

A few hours later, when he’d had a bath and was preparing for bed, he asked her to masturbate him and ensure that his semen wasn’t lost. She did it with practised ease, making him come into a small dish, and when he saw it, he was reminded of his adolescence in Iowa, when he would hold his fresh semen in his hand and try to sniff out its properties. He had been a scientist even then, always detached, investigating, and now, these many years later, nothing had changed. He was experimenting with himself, trying to find the secret of life, so this form of masturbation, while offering relief from his waning sexual agitation, was also serving a scientific purpose.

Greta transferred his semen from the small dish to a glass phial and put the latter into the refrigerator, to keep it cool until tomorrow, when she would deliver it to the experimental laboratory of the hospital where she worked. There the technicians, following Wilson’s written instructions, would experiment with it. He was searching for a way to extend his life before his time ran out.

He slept soundly that night.

Three days later, two Gestapo agents wearing black greatcoats arrived at Kummersdorf to take Dr Belluzzo away. The old man was shattered, not knowing why it was happening, and he protested in vain and collapsed into panic, and was staring entreatingly at Schriever and Wilson even as he was dragged away.

He was not seen again. He disappeared into the camps. A few months later Wilson heard that he had died of a heart attack, reportedly induced by increasing ill health, though more likely caused by maltreatment.

His original, unworkable designs for a flying saucer were locked up in Schriever’s safe.

Clearly, Schriever thought he might find some use for them.

The thought of this amused Wilson who, no longer bothered by the old Italian physicist, was able to get on with his secret work with no spy looking over his shoulder and his conscience as clear as it always had been.

His *Feuerball* was taking shape.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Ingrid's mother answered the door, stared at Ernst in surprise, then looked embarrassed and tried to hide it by crying out, 'Ernst! You're back at last!' She took him into her arms to give him a hug, then stepped back and waved him inside. 'Come,' she said. 'The children will be so pleased to see you. They've missed you so much.'

Noting that she hadn't mentioned Ingrid and still looked embarrassed, Ernst picked up his suitcase and stepped into the apartment he had not seen for three months. It was late in the morning and both his children were in the living room, four-year-old Ula setting up coloured blocks for baby Alfred, now fourteen months old. Alfred knocked the blocks down and giggled delightedly while Ula glanced sideways and saw Ernst, studied him with slowly dawning recognition, then shyly stood up to greet him.

'It's your father!' Ingrid's mother exclaimed, as if Ernst had been gone for three years instead of four months.

Realizing that he must seem like a stranger to his own daughter, Ernst set his suitcase down, fell to his knees, and swept both children into his arms, hugging them passionately.

'Don't be embarrassed,' he said, stroking Ula's flushed cheek and golden locks. 'I know I've been gone a long time and must seem like a stranger to you. But you'll get used to me again, my darling, before very long. And how pretty and grown-up you look. And Alfred!' He grasped the gurgling baby under the arms and held him up in the air. 'What a fine boy he is! Do you look after him, Ula?'

'Yes,' Ula replied, smiling.

'Good,' Ernst said. '*Very* good!' He stood up and glanced around the room. 'Ingrid isn't here?' he asked, wondering why his mother-in-law was looking after the children.

'No,' his mother-in-law said too quickly, blushing again. 'She went to

visit some friends.'

'Who?'

'I don't know,' she replied, avoiding his gaze. 'She told me, but I can't remember the name. I mean, she didn't know you were coming back today, so...'

'When did she leave?' Ernst asked, feeling more disturbed.

'This morning.'

'Then you must have been here all night, Maria.'

'Yes… Yes, I was!' And she nodded her head vigorously. 'I didn't want to have to get out of bed too early, so I decided to sleep here. But please, Ernst,' she added, changing the subject and waving toward the couch, 'sit down and take your boots off and let me fix you some tea. You must be exhausted.'

'I'm fine,' he replied, then knelt on the floor by his suitcase and proceeded to open it, determined to distract himself from his dark thoughts. 'I arrived in Berlin last night but had to report straight to barracks – and yes, I *would* like a tea. Here, Ula,' he said, opening the suitcase, 'I have some presents for you and Alfred. All wrapped up, just like Christmas!'

Already getting over her shyness, Ula unwrapped the doll that Ernst had, in fact, bought only that morning, right here in Berlin, along with Alfred's box of rattling toys. Nevertheless, she was delighted with it, and for the next half hour or so, Ernst enjoyed his tea, felt better watching his son and daughter playing with their presents, made desultory conversation with his normally pleasant but now clearly uneasy mother-in-law, and determined not to show the anger and suspicion he was feeling over Ingrid's unexpected absence.

After all, they had agreed to live separate lives, so he could hardly complain...

The practice, however, was more difficult than the theory. As he sat there, sipping tea, appreciating the feminine cosiness of the apartment after the rigours of his sea voyage, he had to choke back his feelings of disappointment and loss. He had just returned from an epic journey, an historically important endeavour, and was not even being welcomed back by his wife... He filled up with self-pity, despised himself for it, and had managed to accept what he had wrought by the time Ingrid returned.

When she walked in and saw him, her face turned bright red. She was

wearing a long gray coat and a broad black hat, but removed them first and composed herself. By the time she had crossed the room to kiss his cheek, her face had turned pale again and her vivid green eyes were cautious.

'Ernst!' she exclaimed, whispering into his ear. 'I didn't realize...'

Not having known the touch of a woman's body for a long time, Ernst instantly filled up with longing when, for the brief duration of her chaste kiss, Ingrid could not prevent her body from touching his.

'I know,' he said as she stepped away from him, leaving only the intoxicating smell of her scent, the seductive warmth of her lips, and the bitter knowledge that she no longer desired him. 'They didn't tell us when we'd be returning, so I couldn't tell you. Still, here I am.'

'Yes, Ernst.' Her once-radiant smile was hesitant. 'Here you are!' Her gaze slipped away from him, fell on her mother, roamed around the room, then finally, reluctantly, returned to him. 'So,' she said with forced gaiety, waving her hand to indicate the children. 'Have you noticed the change in them?'

The banality of the question almost amused him, and he did indeed smile. 'Remarkable,' he said. 'And Ula looks as lovely as her mother.'

At least Ula liked that remark, blushing and giggling.

'Tea!' Ingrid said, trying to sound gay. 'At least mother's looked after you. Would you like something stronger?'

'A little schnapps would be nice.'

'You didn't ask me for that,' Ingrid's mother said too shrilly, and then, looking confused, added, 'Anyway, I have to be going now – and I'm sure you two have lots to talk about. My bag's packed already.'

'Mother, you don't have to…'

'No!' Ingrid's mother protested. 'I can't stay another minute! I promised to have chocolate with Fraulein Vogt at the Konditerei before I go home, and if I stay here any longer, I'll be late. I've already called for a taxi and packed my overnight bag.'

The repetition was a product of her embarrassment. Clearly she was as relieved as was Ernst when the taxi came for her. When she had gone, after more oddly melodramatic hugging and kissing (which merely confirmed for Ernst that his suspicions about Ingrid were well founded), he felt the oppressive weight of the silence that filled up the cosy room. Having poured two glasses of schnapps, Ingrid handed one to him and sat facing him. As he

drank, feeling better with each sip, he studied his playing children, the golden girl and the giggling baby, glanced repeatedly around the room with its heavy, darkly-varnished cupboards, lace tablecloths, doilies and curtains, Germanic bricabrac and paintings, and realized that no matter how homely it was, it was no longer his home. He was a German soldier, an SS officer – the élite of Himmler's élite – and that made him different.

He no longer needed this.

'How was the trip?' Ingrid asked him.

'It wasn't a holiday, Ingrid.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to sound like that. I just thought it might have been exciting or glamorous. Was it?'

'No,' he said, offended at the very notion, 'but it was certainly worth doing.'

'Why?'

'I can't tell you that,' he said, though he wished that he could, now remembering with increasing pride how he had hammered the swastika into the snow-covered earth of Antarctica in that vast, haunting silence.

'Another vitally important secret of the Third Reich?'

'Your sarcasm is not required.' He felt a touch of anger, but his sexual desire softened it.

Ingrid had always been attractive – a prize catch, in fact – and right now, even trying to keep her distance, she glowed with an inner light, probably caused, as he bitterly realized, by the man she had come from. He tried to be objective about it, to keep their agreement in mind, but after four months at sea, faced with her sensual gratification, he surrendered to the very emotions he had been trained to despise.

'Where were you, Ingrid?'

She glanced at the children, then back at him. 'Do we have to discuss this now?'

'I've been away for four months,' he said, though he hadn't intended doing so, 'and you were gone when I came back.'

'I didn't know you were coming back,' she reminded him.

'You know what I'm talking about, Ingrid. Why was your mother here?'

'I was visiting a friend.'

'All night?'

'Yes,' she said. 'All night.'

Before he could say anything else, perhaps frightened of his reaction, she told Ula to pick up their toys and take them into the bedroom. ‘Your father and I have to talk,’ she explained, ‘so you can play in there for a while.’ When Ula had picked up the toys and started toward the bedroom, Ingrid, carrying Alfred, followed her daughter through the door. Returning, she sat down, crossed her legs, and sipped some more schnapps.

‘So,’ she said, ‘let’s discuss it.’

‘All night,’ Ernst said, echoing her words with soft, deliberate malice.

‘You knew before you left that I had a lover.’

‘And you’ve just been with the same man?’

‘Yes.’

‘It’s nice to know that it’s lasting.’

‘Yes, Ernst, it is.’

‘Is he better than me in bed?’

‘I don’t think that question’s relevant.’

‘What is?’

‘A lot of other things, Ernst. Sex isn’t everything.’

‘We both enjoyed it once.’

‘I’ve never denied that.’

‘But now you enjoy it more with him.’

‘It’s more than that, Ernst.’

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘lots of other things. Such as?’

‘Love and affection.’

‘You and I are *married*, Ingrid. Please remember that. Marriage isn’t that easy.’

‘No,’ she said, ‘it isn’t that easy. Maybe that’s why we failed.’

‘I don’t see how I failed you.’

‘You gave me up for Adolf Hitler.’

‘Be careful about what you say, Ingrid.’

‘I want a divorce.’

He sighed, shook his head in disbelief, then finished off his schnapps. ‘We’ve talked about this before,’ he reminded her, placing his glass on the table that separated them, ‘and you know it’s out of the question. I won’t risk my career with a divorce. Who *is* this man, anyway?’

‘You don’t need to know that.’

‘Not Jewish, I hope.’

‘No.’

‘Do I know him?’

‘No.’

‘If I discover that he’s Jewish, I’ll turn you in – for the good of the children.’

‘How noble you are, Ernst.’ Ingrid lit a cigarette, blew the smoke toward the ceiling, then gazed obliquely at him through a blue haze. ‘All right,’ she said, ‘for the good of the children let’s remain man and wife. I’ll continue seeing my lover, you’ll continue seeing your whores, and we’ll both live happily ever after, while supporting the Third Reich.’

‘Some day your tongue will get you into trouble.’

‘At least it’s still *my* tongue.’

The schnapps had helped to calm him down and now kept him in control. He stood up and straightened his jacket, feeling very calm indeed, then walked around the low table and leaned over and slapped her face. Once. No more. A single, stinging blow. Then he straightened up and saw her look of shock and smiled thinly at her.

‘Be a whore,’ he said, ‘but do it discreetly or you’ll get worse than that.’ She didn’t reply. She was rubbing her red cheek. He could hear the children playing in the bedroom and his heart went out to them. They were the new generation, the future, and he had to protect them. ‘I’m going out,’ he said. ‘I won’t bother you with my attentions. Anything I want, I’ll get from my favourite whore, who knows me better than you do. I anticipate being back for my supper, so please have it ready. When I’m on duty or at the barracks, you can do as you please; but when I’m here you’ll treat me as your husband. Is that understood?’

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Good.’

When he left, he closed the door without slamming it– like a dutiful husband.

With most of the day to kill before he had to report to Himmler, he took a packed, clattering tramcar to the city centre, noted with grim pleasure that his newly laundered SS uniform encouraged people to lower their gaze nervously in his presence, disembarked in the Kurfürstendamm, and planned what to do while having his next glass of schnapps in a busy café. Realizing that his

relationship with Ingrid was definitely finished and surprised at his lack of emotion about it, he thought of Brigette in the luxurious apartment on Tiergartenstrasse and knew instantly how he wanted to spend his afternoon.

'Darling!' Brigette exclaimed in that inimitably sensual, breathless manner when he phoned from the café. 'You're back at last from the high seas! Did you bring me a present?'

'Yes,' he lied, amused and excited by her husky-voiced, challenging mockery.

'Was it *expensive,* dear Ernst?'

'Yes, Brigette, it was.'

'Then come straight over, darling! I *can't wait* to see you!'

He bought her a diamond brooch in an expensive shop on Tauentzienstrasse, then walked to her apartment, still trying to adjust to the contrast between the isolation of sea and the energetic bustle of Berlin with its tramcars, buses, taxis, horse-drawn cabs, and growing number of army vehicles. An occasional mounted Storm Trooper made his way through the noisy traffic on his horse, the Nazi swastika and anti-Jewish signs were visible everywhere, and the green-uniformed, respected members of the Reichswehr mingled on the pavements with the feared Brownshirts, black-uniformed SS, and elegantly dressed shoppers and businessmen. All in all, on the surface, where the fear was not visible, the Third Reich seemed purposeful, energetic, and surprisingly prosperous.

Brigette also looked prosperous, even more so than usual. She came to the door wearing a shimmering lime-green bathrobe of pure silk, artfully opened at the top to expose her voluptuous, bare breasts. Her red hair, immaculately combed, fell around her calculating green eyes and full, sensual lips. Her cigarette was in an ebony holder and her fingernails, Ernst noticed, were painted the same colour as her hair.

'Ah!' she exclaimed with a throaty purr. 'My handsome lieutenant! I've missed you so much, *cheri*!'

She used the French endearment deliberately, making it sound deliciously decadent. Ernst stepped quickly into the room and kicked the door closed behind him. He took her into his arms, pulling her to him, feeling her heat, and she smiled, rubbing her belly lightly against him, then blew a cloud of smoke.

'Mmmm,' she murmured, letting her body sink into him. 'You greedy

boy! You poor, famished hero. Did you miss me terribly, darling?'

'Yes,' he said, already breathless.

'And dream about me?'

'Yes, yes!'

'And remembered all the things we'd done together?'

'Yes, damn you! Yes!'

She chuckled, let him feel her heavy breasts, licked the side of his neck. 'And did pretty boy bring his expensive gift?'

'Yes,' he said, almost bursting.

'You're so kind,' Brigette whispered, breathing into his ear, then she chuckled throatily, jerked his hands off her, and stepped away from him. The dressing gown had been tugged off one shoulder, exposing her breast. Ernst could feel his heart racing. Brigette held out her hand.

'I'm just a child at heart,' she explained. 'I can't wait to see it.'

She was smiling, but meant it, so he gave her the brooch, thinking of the many men who gave her presents, financial and otherwise. While she unwrapped his particular gift, he gazed into the bedroom behind her and noted that the bed was badly rumpled, as if used for more than sleep. Nothing had changed, which was fine by him. No more emotional entanglements: just gratification. Sensual pleasure and duty.

'Has my precious lieutenant been home yet?' Brigette asked as she unwrapped his gift.

'Yes,' he said.

'And how were your lovely wife and children?'

'Fine,' he said. 'In good health.'

'And you've come straight from there?' she asked with sly, exciting mockery as she tugged the wrapping paper off the box and let it fall carelessly to the carpet.

'Yes,' he said, unable to take his eyes off her bare skin, his senses in disarray.

She removed the lid from the gift box, studied the brooch with widening eyes, removed it and pinned it to her silk nightgown where it fell in shining folds and shadows over a perfect breast. She glanced down at it, her lips pouting greedily, then again looked at him.

'Ravishing,' she said. 'Welcome back. Now what would you like to do?'

'Everything,' Ernst said, then stepped up to her, slid the dressing gown off

her shoulders and lowered his head.

'Nice,' Brigette said. '*Nice*.' When she was ready, she led him into the bedroom and let him share her unmade bed, where he finally felt at home.

Three days later, satiated by his loveless sexual exertions with the diabolically sensual Brigette, Ernst was walking with his beloved Reichsführer, Himmler, through a long dark tunnel that had been carved out of the Kohnstein Mountain, near the town of Nordhausen in the southern Harz mountain range in Thuringia.

'I have a dream,' Himmler was saying quietly, academically, 'of an Atlantis reborn from the ashes of the forthcoming war: a society of masters and slaves, ruled by the élite of my SS. The new temples will be the factories, the laboratories and universities; the new religion will be knowledge and conquest: the return of the Superman. And where will this new order be created? In the *Antarctic,* Lieutenant!'

The tunnel had only recently been hacked out of the interior of the mountain and was gloomily illuminated by the electric lights strung along its whole length. There were many people still working in it, mostly prisoners from the camps, few looking healthy, most covered in mud. All took great pains to keep their eyes lowered as Himmler and his entourage of assistants and bodyguards walked past them, watching them laying steel tracks and fortifying the walls that formed the great tunnel, as wide as a highway, at the end of which, as Ernst noticed with relief, there was a circle of light.

'You understand now, do you not,' Himmler continued rhetorically as they tramped through the long tunnel, his normally soft voice even more difficult to hear because of the constant banging and clanging of the heavy work going on all around them, 'just how important your mission to the Antarctic was? The élite of my SS, the best of the best, will find a new home under the ice of the Antarctic, and there, uninterrupted and isolated from the imperfect world of normal men, will be forged into the first of the Supermen. You have found the location for us, Lieutenant Stoll, and should be proud of yourself.'

As they advanced deeper into the cold, dimly lit darkness of the tunnel, Ernst noticed that the slaving prisoners, most of whom looked underfed, were being guarded by immaculately uniformed SS officers, most armed with pistols or submachine guns, some carrying bullwhips. The clothes of many of

the prisoners were in ribbons; some had skin that was freshly scarred.

A society of masters and slaves, he thought, and it all begins right here...

'I'm not so sure, Reichsführer,' he said, emboldened by the favour he had recently found with Himmler, 'that such an ambitious project, no matter how admirable, would actually be feasible.'

'I respect you for expressing your doubts,' Himmler said, feeling kindly disposed toward Ernst for his achievement in the Antarctic, 'but what are they based on?'

'To create hidden colonies under the ice,' Ernst began, 'may not be that easy. The undertaking would have to be immense, and I don't think – '

'Look around you!' Himmler interjected with a rare display of excitement, waving his gloved hand to indicate those slaving along the length of the great tunnel. 'This is but one of two tunnels, eighteen thousand meters long. Leading off these tunnels will be fifty side chambers, a work area of one hundred and twenty-five thousand square meters, and twelve ventilation shafts, which already have been bored down to here from the peak of the mountain. As for these workers,' he continued, indicating with a careless wave of his hand the hundreds of unfortunates already labouring in the dimly lit gloom under the threat of bullwhip and bullet, 'they are merely the tip of the iceberg. Where they come from, there are thousands more, and thousands more after them – and we can obtain them whenever we need them and do what we will with them. Our supply of labour is endless.'

He stopped to study some prisoners who were laying down the steel rails for the trains that would soon run through the tunnels, bringing in more workers, equipment, and, possibly, food. Ernst noticed, once more, that these particular workers were half starved, and understood that they would be worked to death and then casually replaced. A society of masters and slaves hidden under the earth... He was moved by the grandeur of the concept and suddenly saw its potential.

When a bullwhip cracked behind them and someone screamed, Himmler twitched and walked on.

'The slaves destined to work here,' he explained as they continued advancing on that expanding circle of light from the outside world, 'will come from a separate camp located in a hidden mountain valley, less than a kilometre from the entrance to this tunnel. And a new underground complex, to be linked to this one by another network of tunnels, is already being

constructed sixteen kilometres under the ground around the town of Bleicherode, only twenty kilometres from Nordhausen. Between them, Nordhausen and Bleicherode will constitute the first of my SS underground factories – virtually living towns. And what we are doing here, Lieutenant, under the earth, we can also do under the ice of the Antarctic.'

At that moment, they stepped into the sunlight that was pouring into the end of the vast tunnel. Glancing down, Ernst saw a strip of ragged, blood-soaked cloth in the mud, but he put it out of his mind as, still walking beside Himmler, whose respect he had gained, he raised his face to let the sunlight warm it, then left the tunnel behind him.

The peaks and valleys of the densely forested mountains of Thuringia were spread out all around and below him in the sunlight of spring.

He breathed deeply of fresh air.

Himmler, also breathing the fresh air, again waved his hand, this time to take in the peaks and valleys spread out below and around them, under a radiant blue sky streaked with fat, snow-white clouds.

'This whole area,' he said in his quietly grandiose manner, 'from the Harz Mountains to Thuringia, south of Prague and across to Mahren, is already littered with other tunnels and underground factories similar to this one. And soon they will be totally insular colonies, worked by masters and slaves, and unrestricted by commonplace, so-called moral thinking. And since the masters are the élite of my most trusted SS troops, the existence of these places is unknown to those who are not my most valued initiates. Unknown,' he added, lowering his voice even more and staring steadily at Ernst through his glittering pince-nez, 'even to those closest to our beloved Führer. Do you understand what I'm saying?'

'Yes, Reichsführer,' Ernst said.

Himmler nodded solemnly. 'And what we can do here,' he then repeated in his softly insistent manner, 'we can also do in the land you have claimed for us in the Antarctic. Yes, Lieutenant,' he said, nodding again, 'you have found the place for us.'

Ernst swelled up with the pride he had almost lost through Ingrid.

'The German genius,' Himmler continued, 'has rendered the impossible commonplace – and there, though invisible to the naked eye, my first colonies are taking shape underground.' He nodded, as if bowing to that sacred earth, then glanced sideways at Ernst. 'It is my belief, Lieutenant, that

these underground colonies, if created in the Antarctic, can, with the aid of the American's flying saucer, ensure the success of our forthcoming conquest of the whole Western world. By the time that's been completed – as surely it must – we will have moved the first of our men to the Antarctic to begin the Hörbiger Projekt: the creation of a society under the ice and the first steps toward the supremacy of Nordic man, who will, given time and our ever advancing technology, evolve into the Superman.'

Aware that he had been selected and shaken by the honour, Ernst wanted Himmler to take hold of his shoulders and gently shake him like a beloved son; but he understood that his Reichsführer, a true soldier, even a genius, could not stoop to the display of such emotions in front of his men. Understanding this, he tried to control his own emotions and instead simply nodded agreement.

'Now that we have laid claim to Neuschwabenland in the Antarctic,' Himmler said, his pince-nez magnifying his mild eyes, 'it is my intention to ship specially trained SS troops, scientists, slave workers, and equipment there, to first construct, then live in, an underground research establishment and its attendant accommodations. This will in time become a self-contained, living colony under the ice. And from there, with the aid of the products of Projekt Saucer, we will spread the rule of the Third Reich across the whole world. *We will do this, Lieutenant*!'

Ernst was taken aback by the sudden intensity of Himmler's words, then swept away on a wave of exultation by his Reichsführer's unprecedented display of emotion. He had to look away from him, to find the freedom of sky and light, but was drawn back when Himmler actually touched him, tugging the sleeve of his uniform.

Ernst looked down and saw the eyes behind the pince-nez as prisms reflecting light.

'You have done a wonderful thing,' Himmler said. 'You have planted our swastikas in the ice. I am now placing you in charge of this great operation: to create Hörbiger's world of ice and fire under the Antarctic ice and, at the same time, keep a check on the vital progress of Projekt Saucer. This, Lieutenant Stoll, is your great mission on behalf of the Fatherland. Do not disappoint me.'

'No, Reichsführer,' Ernst replied, realizing in a flood of exhilarating emotion that he would be going back to Kummersdorf West and the world he

belonged to. ‘I will not disappoint you.’

Then he looked over the forested hills and valleys with the pride he had almost lost.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

‘I didn’t get very far,’ Bradley said, describing what he had seen in the immense barn in that desolate field near Mount Pleasant, Iowa. ‘In fact, I’d barely walked past the door when the rim of that goddamned thing was in front of me.’

Recalling that eerie experience with vivid clarity, he wasn’t comforted by the fact that the man to whom he was talking, retired US Army Air Force Wing Commander Dwight Nicholson, had insisted that they hold this conversation in a darkened room and was breathing like a man at death’s door.

‘It was shaped like a great steel saucer with a Perspex dome on top, taking up half the floor space of the barn and starting to rust. At first, I couldn’t grasp what I was seeing, but it gradually dawned on me. It was the superstructure for some kind of flying machine: one shaped like a saucer.’

‘A piloted machine,’ Nicholson said, his voice sounding ghostlike.

‘Yes. The Perspex dome turned out to be a circular cockpit, located at the centre of the disc. The cockpit was fixed, and the disc, in two parts, like one saucer placed upside-down on another, would have revolved around it.’

‘And of course it was only a shell. The engine was missing.’

‘Right,’ Bradley said. ‘Even the goddamned control panel had been smashed to hell. He left nothing to chance.’

‘Wrong. He left the prototype. He could have blown it up. Why didn’t he?’

‘He didn’t want to draw the attention of the neighbouring farmers.’

‘Or he wanted *something* to be found... to leave his mark.’

Nicholson smiled, inhaled on his cigarette, and blew a couple of smoke rings toward the window overlooking the garden of his home in McLean, Virginia. The sun, shining brightly outside, was filtering through the drawn blinds and forming webs of light in the darkness around him, illuminating his

dreadful face.

'Just what we found,' he said, his twisted smile displaying admiration. 'The superstructure for a saucer-shaped aircraft, but with nothing inside. Either that bastard had gutted his own machine, taking everything of value, or there'd been nothing inside it in the first place.'

'Which means?'

'We all believed then, and I believe now, that the craft that exploded over Tunguska, Siberia, wasn't piloted – it was some kind of missile – and that the superstructure we found later was a prototype for the first of his piloted craft. That's what we found – and what you found. Some smart cookie, that Wilson.' Nicholson shook his head from side to side, as if he couldn't believe his own words. 'We didn't know he'd left another one, that's for sure. In a barn in… *Iowa*?'

'Right. Up near the border of Illinois. Not far from Mount Pleasant, where Cohn and Goldman had their research establishment. Apparently Wilson had been working in secret on the flying saucer in that barn while ostensibly producing airships for Cohn and Goldman.'

'In other words, he took them to the cleaners. They were financing his saucer project without knowing it.'

'Right,' Bradley said. 'It was Goldman's belief that Wilson had secretly been trying to solve the problem of the boundary layer and also working on a crude atomic propulsion system. This suggests that the propulsion system managed at a later date to fly *some* kind of object – as you say, some kind of missile – as far as Russia, before it malfunctioned, blew up, devastated the forests of Tunguska, and led to the US government closing down Wilson's research establishment in Illinois and either classifying or destroying what they could find of his work.'

'Which is why you came to me?'

'Yes. After finding the remains of that saucer, I checked out what Abe had told me and learned that it was essentially correct: that after Cohn and Goldman had gone bust, the US Army Air Force opened a file on a similar company located just across the state line, in Illinois. Unfortunately, in those records, the names of those involved were erased. But then I saw, in other records in Washington, that you'd been in charge of that operation just before you retired. And since you're an old friend and all...'

Nicholson smiled. 'Yeah, Mike, I understand. Can I take it that this is all

off the record?'

'You *are* retired, Dwight.'

'I still want it to be off the record. I don't want my name mentioned.'

'You have my word on it.'

Nicholson nodded and grinned laconically. You could actually see the twisted grin in the semi-darkness, but it didn't look real.

'Okay,' he said. 'This is all based purely on recollection; I don't have any backup.'

'I'll take what I can get, Dwight.'

'Are you sure you don't want a drink?'

'It's only ten in the morning.'

Nicholson simply shrugged, sipped some whiskey, inhaled and exhaled more smoke, which made Bradley feel bad.

In 1918, when Bradley had just about turned twenty, he'd been a naval aviator under Nicholson's command, flying the old wood, wire, and canvas biplanes from their primitive carriers out at sea to the bloody battlefields of the western front. After the war, when Bradley went into law, Nicholson had returned to the intelligence work he'd been doing previously for the Army Air Force. Then his wife, at fifty-eight, had died from a brain haemorrhage, and after that the spirit had gone right out of him. Still with the Army Air Force's technical intelligence branch, he'd developed a drinking problem, then ulcers, and had then been retired prematurely, looking like an old man. About a year ago, he had bought himself an old de Havilland two-seat *Tiger Moth* biplane and started to give flying lessons. Under the influence of alcohol, he'd crashed the plane, killing his passenger and seriously burning himself. Now his face was hideous, his skin livid and scarred, his lips practically burned off, along with his hair and eyelids, and he lived here alone, in this too-large house in McLean, Virginia, smoking and drinking most of the day and going out only rarely.

It was frightening to visit him.

'What Goldman told you was substantially correct,' he said in an unnatural tone of voice. 'I don't think I have to tell you that after the Great Airship Scare of 1896 to 1897, the Army Air Force began taking a particular interest in anything new or novel in the aeronautical field.'

'That figures,' Bradley said.

'Well, since most of the major reports mentioned a man named Wilson –

and since most of them also named either Iowa or Illinois as the origin of the mystery airships and their equally mysterious crew members – it wasn't too difficult to discover that a certain John Wilson, exceptional graduate of the MIT and Cornell, was designing and constructing airships for the Cohn and Goldman Company in Mount Pleasant, Iowa. Since this was a perfectly legal occupation, we did nothing but surreptitiously keep our eye on his progress. We only became concerned when shortly after the end of the scare, we received a pretty startling report, stating that Cohn and Goldman's five airships had been destroyed by an unknown demolition expert, thus breaking the company, and that while no evidence could be found to prove that the deed had been done by Wilson, it *had* been ascertained that he'd mysteriously made a small fortune at approximately the same time and, shortly after, opened his own research establishment in Illinois. It was believed, but could not be proven, that he had made that money by illegally selling his airship designs to a German aircraft company, possibly Zeppelin – and according to Cohn and Goldman, the designs he had let them patent were actually worthless. So, while Cohn and Goldman went bust, Wilson was opening his own research plant in Illinois...'

'And?'

'We paid him a visit in Illinois. We informed him of our suspicions, which he naturally denied, and when we asked him what his intentions were, he said he was moving on from airships to heavier-than-air manned flight but was being hampered by his limited financial resources. Clearly the money paid by the Germans wouldn't last forever.'

'What did you think of him personally?' Bradley asked, still trying to fit a face to his mysterious quarry.

'I'll never forget him,' Nicholson replied without hesitation. 'He wasn't even thirty, but he seemed a lot more mature, though what burned itself into my memory was his coldness. A really *strange* kind of coldness. He wasn't arrogant, rude, unfriendly, or antagonistic – no, none of those things. He was just remarkably detached, inhumanly pragmatic, almost machine-like in the way he listened and responded... He lacked normal emotions.'

Nicholson shivered, as if brushed by a cold breeze, then stubbed his cigarette out and slumped back in his soft chair.

'Did the Air Force get involved with him?' Bradley asked.

'Yes,' Nicholson said. 'Nervous about what he might do, but with no

legal right to stop him, we decided to get some jurisdiction over him by offering the money he would need for his more ambitious projects. He accepted on the condition that we didn't attempt to supervise him and contented ourselves with monthly reports and regular inspection visits to his plant. Believing that would be enough for us, we agreed – but naturally, given Wilson's nature, it wasn't enough.'

'So you were involved with the saucer-shaped aircraft?'

'No. We didn't know a damned thing about it. Wilson conned us, just like he'd conned his previous financiers. What we got in our reports, and what we viewed in our many inspection visits to his plant in Illinois, was the prototype for a highly advanced turboprop biplane, and frankly, we were more than impressed. Clearly, we were dealing here with a genius. And by 1903, even before the Wright brothers had made their first, widely publicized flight at Kitty Hawk, I was privileged to witness the secret test flight of Wilson's completed aircraft. That flight was more than successful – it was absolutely astonishing – and that's when we got scared.'

'Why?'

Nicholson reached for the bottle of whiskey, filled his glass up to the brim, drank almost half of it, topped the glass up again.

'After the notorious Cohn and Goldman affair,' he said, his voice emanating from the semi-darkness in a quavering, ghostlike manner, 'we knew that Wilson couldn't be trusted. For that reason, I'd planted one of my own engineers in his team, with orders to keep his eyes and ears open for anything not mentioned in Wilson's reports or viewed by us during our visits. While this man never got too close to Wilson, he *did* pick up enough whispers to convince him that Wilson – just as he'd done with Cohn and Goldman – was showing us only the tip of his particular iceberg; that even though his turboprop biplane was more advanced than anything else we knew about, he was reportedly working on some other project, involving the boundary layer and some unknown form of propulsion, in another hangar, located a mile or two from his main plant. Knowing how advanced the biplane was, we were naturally scared shitless at the very thought of boundary-layer experiments and an *unknown* propulsion system – then, when in 1908 our man reported whispers about the flight of a small, pilotless object that had actually managed to reach Russia, we naturally became very concerned indeed... And we were preparing to take over Wilson's plant and

demand the location of his secret hangar when that big explosion occurred over Tungusta, in Russia. It occurred *over* Tunguska, you understand, and we knew what that meant.'

'Something exploded in the air.'

'Right.'

'And whatever it was, you don't think it was piloted.'

'No, we didn't then and I still don't. Bear in mind that Wilson's secret work was being conducted in what was no more than a converted barn near the main plant. Given this, I think it's safe to assume that he wasn't designing something nearly as big as an airship or aircraft. In fact, our spy had heard from other engineers stories about a small, disc-shaped object, no more than a foot in diameter, that when test-flown looked like a fiery ball. It's my belief that that small, probably remote-controlled object was what exploded over Tunguska – and that the large, saucer-shaped superstructures since found were just that: empty superstructures for the larger, piloted craft that Wilson intended to construct along the same lines as the smaller object. Then, of course, when the smaller object exploded over Tunguska, we had to put a stop to it.'

'How did Wilson respond to that?'

'He blandly denied our charges. He also denied the existence of his secret hangar, or barn, so we closed down his plant in Illinois, confiscated everything we could find – which naturally didn't include anything we hadn't already known about – and told Wilson that if he wanted to continue working on research projects, he'd have to do it under our supervision, in our own research establishments. Wilson said he would think about it... A few weeks later, we found that empty superstructure in a hangar a few miles from his plant in Illinois. We never found anything else... and then, before we could interrogate Wilson about it, he fled Illinois and went underground. I never saw him again.'

He lit a cigarette, blew another cloud of smoke, then raised the glass to his twisted lips and drank it. Bradley stood up.

'Thanks,' he said. 'And look after yourself, Dwight.'

'There's nothing left to look after,' his friend replied. 'It's just a matter of time now. A real glamorous business, being a pilot, right? We don't believe this can happen.'

'Right,' Bradley said.

He placed his hand on his friend's shoulder, squeezed it affectionately, then turned away and walked from that dark place without glancing back.

The sunshine was wonderful.

In the train back to Connecticut, he opened the latest letter from Gladys Kinder, this one dated October 5, 1938.

Dear Mike,

This morning the Germans marched into Czechoslovakia to ecstatic cheers, the pealing of bells, and the pronouncement by Adolf Hitler that this was the latest step in his glorious march into the great German future. God help Europe, I say.

Did you miss my letters, Mike? I hope so. Apart from my telegrammed communiques to the Roswell Daily Record, my letters to you, to your office high above Manhattan, are my only real contact with America. The reason for writing is important – it's my hold on where I came from – but I have to confess that I also write them out of girlish compulsion.

You were so charming, Mike.

Ah, ha! you're thinking. She's making fun of me again! Well, maybe so... But I hope you missed my letter, missed the letters, missed me. Not that you'd admit it if you did, you lamentably decent married man, who found me too bold by far. I think that's what I loved in you.

I also love the odd formality of your letters – written secretly, doubtless – God, yes, I enjoy that thought! Bradley scribbling in secret, his cheeks flushed, above the towers of Manhattan.

Your letters, which are filled with a lawyer's reticence, somehow manage to make me feel like a scarlet woman. That's quite an achievement, bud. You make me feel that I'm wallowing in iniquity without its actual pleasures – and that's another achievement.

Enough! Let's be serious...

I haven't written for the past eighteen months because I've been travelling. Spain, of course, with the International Brigade, meeting Orwell and Hemingway and all the other, less celebrated intellectuals who idealistically swopped their pens for rifles and often died for the privilege. I didn't carry a rifle – my pen and notebook were too heavy – but I was in the market of Guernica, buying some groceries, when the German air force

bombed it with high explosives, set it alight with incendiary bombs, then strafed the men, women, and children with machine-gun fire. What I saw there is best not described, but it left its mark on me. It was all I could take.

I returned to London in time to describe, for the loyal readers of the Roswell Daily Record, how King George VI and Queen Elizabeth were crowned, with magnificent pomp and splendour, in Westminster Abbey. I loved it all, I do confess – it was like a Hollywood musical: the golden coach drawn by eight grays, with four postilions and six footmen, plus eight grooms and four yeomen of the Guard walking beside it. What with that and the royal outfits of deep red and snow-white ermine, not to mention the thousands thronging the Mall and Trafalgar Square, I doubt that Cecil B. De Mille could have done it better – and certainly, after Spain and some weeks in Nazi Germany, it all seemed so civilized.

I was reminded of you when, a week before the Coronation, the great German airship, the Hindenburg, exploded in New Jersey, after crossing the Atlantic from Frankfurt. Then Jean Harlow died and was followed by George Gershwin and I started to think of passing time and my age – and of the fact that the last time I saw you, which was only the second time, was almost five years ago. I was going to write to you, but I was packed off to Germany by my good friends in Roswell.

The first thing I reported from Germany was the reorganization of the concentration camps, most notably the new establishment opened at Buchenwald, in Thuringia, to house more enemies of the state, and the changes of administration in the camps at Dachau, Sachenshausen, and Lichtenburg, all of which are democratic enough to take women prisoners as well as other automatic enemies of the glorious Third Reich, including Jews and Communists, though gypsies, the mentally ill, and other so-called undesirables are certainly in line for consideration.

God help Europe, indeed!

Here in London, they're already building air-raid shelters and providing local authorities with millions of sandbags. What can this mean, we ask? 'Peace for our time,' says Neville Chamberlain. Pull the other one, Neville...

And so I think of you. I think of you when I think of America, which I did when Harlow and Gershwin died and my age started telling. And I thought of you and my age when the Hindenburg exploded and I was reminded of airships and aeronautics in general and my former lover, John Wilson, in

particular, because through him I met you.

Can you believe that we first met nearly eight years ago? Can you believe, also, that we've actually only met twice and that the last time was nearly five years ago? We met through John Wilson, are haunted by him, and are helplessly tied to one another by his ghost.

Three up for John Wilson.

You keep writing and asking me questions about Wilson and it makes me feel worthless. I've been married and divorced and I've known lots of men, but you, Mike Bradley, solid citizen and moral man, are only interested in what I knew about Wilson. I feel as if I'm invisible.

Okay, down to business...

I asked a pragmatic friend in the British Defence Department to check their report on the Tunguska explosion in Siberia and tell me what their assessment of it was. Frankly, given normal British scepticism, their assessment was almost weird in its conviction that something odd had occurred and that it had <u>not</u> been caused by a meteor or other extraterrestrial source. In fact, according to British intelligence: (1) *Nothing crashed <u>into</u> the Tunguska forest;* (2) *The angle of the trees bent by the blast proved that the explosion had occurred <u>above</u> them, not within them;* (3) *Pieces of an <u>unknown</u> metallic compound were found at the scene of the devastation; and* (4) *Just before the explosion, a lot of those living in the area reported seeing what appeared to be a small, fiery ball sweeping across the sky above the forest. Then it went down and – whammo!*

A small fiery ball with a dark core, possibly metallic...

The public stance in Britain was that the explosion had been caused by a meteorite – but the private stance, at least that of the Department of Defence and British intelligence, was that it had been caused by some kind of man-made object that did not – repeat: did not – come from Russia, but from outside its borders. Also, the reported sightings seemed to suggest that the object, whatever it was, had not come down from the stratosphere, but had been completing a descending trajectory at the end of a flight from west to east. In other words, it could have come from Europe, the Atlantic Ocean, North America, Canada, Alaska, or even farther... Unless it originally left Russia, circled the globe and returned to its source, which seems too ridiculous. The Brits, then, decided that 'if' a terrestrial object had been involved – and they certainly weren't too sure of that – then it probably

emanated from Europe, possibly Germany.

So *what do <u>you</u> think, bub?*

I know what you think. You think it came from Wilson, from Iowa or Illinois, and that it flew from North America, across the Atlantic Ocean, across Europe, then on to Russia ... And having known Wilson, I believe you might be right.

Is Wilson still in Germany? Yes, I think so – but I still can't confirm it. Asking questions there, I quickly found out, can be pretty dangerous. Nevertheless, I'm going back there, for the humble Roswell Daily Record, and if I find out anything at all, I'll certainly let you know.

I really enjoy writing these letters. It's like having a drink with you. I never loved John Wilson – he was too cold and remote for that – and when I met you, though you've never laid a hand on me, I understood why. I can write about Wilson now because he's everything you're not: a man whose lack of feeling reminds me of all the feelings you hide.

You wanted me so much, Bradley – you couldn't hide it and I couldn't resist it. But what I loved you for (yes, I did and still do) was the knowledge that no matter how much you wanted me, you also loved your wife and kids too much to let me be a threat to them.

Which just made me love you all the more.

I can say that now, can't I, Mr Bradley? Because being at the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, I'm no longer a threat to you.

That's why I'm bold with you.

I'll write again when I get back from Germany. Adios, mi amigo.

Yours from too great a distance,

Gladys

Hiding his emotions, as Gladys had known that he would, Bradley folded the letter neatly, placed it back in his billfold, and gratefully climbed off the train when it arrived in Bridgeport. Given the guilt he was feeling over what he had not done, though had certainly contemplated, he was glad that Joan hadn't known when he was coming back and so wasn't at the station to meet him. Instead, he caught a bus, which he had not done for years, and simply by doing that for a change, felt that he had stepped back in time and was returning from high school.

That journey home, through the greenery of Connecticut, certainly made

him feel young again, if only for a short time. And feeling young, he thought of Gladys, who also made him feel young, and recalled all the letters she had sent him over the years, ever since leaving the United States to work in England and Europe. The letters were like the woman, at once laconic and suggestive, and as they had only met twice and hadn't seen one another for almost five years, Bradley couldn't quite work out just how sincere they were, let alone what his reaction to them was or should be.

He had certainly found her very attractive and, in truth, still did, but he found the addiction more disturbing because he couldn't fully believe in it. He thought of her too much, even had erotic dreams about her, and could only explain this lasting attraction as part and parcel of his growing obsession with the mysterious John Wilson.

If not for Wilson, whom ironically he had never laid eyes upon, he would not have met Gladys Kinder in the first place.

Two obsessions in one.

Stepping down from the bus as the sun sank beyond the trees, he walked up the garden path of his ranch-style house, thinking guiltily of Gladys Kinder, whom he had loved only in dreams, and of her former lover, now his quarry, John Wilson, whose genius, being ruthless and amoral, was increasingly frightening.

God knows what Wilson was creating in Hitler's Third Reich.

Maybe only God knew.

The first thing Bradley saw when he entered the house was the partially eaten birthday cake on the table. He briefly froze where he stood, on the threshold of the living room, burning up with guilt when he saw Joan, standing by the table in the brightly lit room, turning to face him, her lovely smile absent.

'Welcome home,' she said quietly, venomously. 'You missed the party, unfortunately.'

'I'm sorry,' Bradley said. 'Damn it, I forgot. I got involved with – '

'A man called Wilson. Yes, Mike, I guessed. You promised you wouldn't let him become an obsession. Dammit, you *promised*!'

'I'm sorry. Where's Miriam?'

'Here, Dad.' He glanced to the left and saw her sitting on the couch beside her fiancée, Ralph Beaker. 'Don't worry about being so late. I'm not bothered. Honest.'

'*I'm* bothered,' her mother retorted, raising her lips from a glass of sherry and looking pretty with her angrily flushed cheeks. 'He never remembers anything anymore. He hardly remembers that he lives here.'

'He's not that bad,' Miriam said with an encouraging smile that made Bradley feel worse. 'And he's still my one and only dad – the best in the house.'

She was twenty-two today, taller than Bradley, slim and shapely and darkly attractive like her mother, and he could scarcely believe she was that age and engaged to be married. No more than he could believe that his son, Mark, was now twenty-three, married, with a pleasant, pregnant wife, and living in New Jersey, from where he commuted to Manhattan to help in the law office now that Bradley was otherwise engaged with his informal intelligence gathering.

'Dammit,' he said, shocked that time was passing so quickly and therefore feeling even more guilty, 'I really *am* sorry, Miriam. It's just this job. I just – '

'Come and give me a kiss, Dad, and then have some cake. It's only my *birthday,* for God's sake!'

'Now if you forget to turn up on our w*edding day,*' Ralph said with a laconic grin, 'she just might – '

'Believe me, I won't forget.' Grinning brighter than he felt and ignoring Joan's angry glance, Bradley walked across the room, shook Ralph's hand, then leaned down to kiss his daughter on the cheek. 'Can I join you all in a drink at least?' he asked.

'Sure,' Miriam said. 'Why not?'

After that, the evening progressed smoothly enough, with liquor easing the tension for everyone except Joan. Though she tried hard to be pleasant, she let Bradley know with every glance that his increasing neglect of his family, caused by his obsession with John Wilson, would not be quickly forgiven. Bradley anaesthetized himself with liquor, getting drunk without showing it, and when he spoke to his daughter's fiancée later that evening, he knew that at least the younger folk were unconcerned.

Not that it helped him much.

In bed, Joan lay as stiff as a plank and stared at the ceiling. When he reached out to her, she rolled away from him, onto her side, and whispered, 'No! Not tonight! Don't think that being drunk will make it better. I'm not

that easily swayed.'

'Dammit, Joan, I just forgot!'

'You forget too much too often these days. Our marriage nearly broke up before when you became obsessed with your legal work; now that you're becoming obsessed with intelligence gathering, we're going through the same thing. You're just a boy at heart, Mike, easily bored, wanting adventure; and when that particular itch gets a hold of you, God help us all. You even forgot your daughter's goddamned birthday! Go to hell, Mike. Just let me sleep.'

He felt cut to the quick, flayed by the brutal truth, yet as he lay there beside her, his eyes closed, trying to sleep, his guilt gave way to fantasy, to visions based on speculations, some of which involved Gladys Kinder, whose face he knew so well, and others involving a man called Wilson, whose face was a blank wall.

His twin obsessions formed the roots of a tree whose branches spread out through his sleep, drooping over a dark abyss.

A ball of fire with a spherical, silvery core arched through that vast, disturbing darkness and drew him into oblivion.

He slept the sleep of the haunted.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

‘It will work,’ Wilson said emphatically, buttoning up his greatcoat and glancing at the relatively small, disc-shaped metal object that was resting on the raised platform in the work bay of the second most secret area of Kummersdorf. ‘We still have a lot of work to complete, but I believe it will work.’

The dark, lean-faced Rudolph Schriever, wearing oil-smeared coveralls, smiled with scarcely concealed excitement. The *Feuerball* was about three feet in diameter, had the general shape of two plates placed one upon the other, and had no visible air intakes or other obstructing protuberances, such as wings and rudders. Thus it had a smooth, seamless appearance. It was, in fact, the first flying wing that Wilson had attempted to construct since his disaster over Tunguska, and he was using it as a prototype for the larger, piloted craft being constructed laboriously in the main hangar.

‘What we have here, gentlemen,’ he continued as Habermohl and Miethe began draping a protective canvas sheet over the saucer-shaped, metallic object, ‘is a circular flying wing that will offer the least possible air resistance, suck in the dead air of the boundary layer, and then use that same air, expelling it at great force, to increase its momentum even more. *However*,’ he added deliberately, looking directly at the excited Schriever, ‘even with this design, the boundary layer, though dramatically reduced, will still be present – and until we find a means of defeating it, the capabilities of our *Feuerball* and larger saucer will be severely limited. This, gentlemen, is the problem we still face. Good night to you all.’

He turned away and walked out as the canvas sheet fell over the *Feuerball* and Schriever’s expression turned to one of frustration. Leaving the workshop and stepping into the freezing November winds that howled across the nearby firing range into the lamplit parking lot, Wilson glanced at the main hangar, its walls being swept by searchlights, then smiled to think of

Schriever's frustration. Given his own car at last, he climbed into it, drove out through gates guarded by SS troops, and headed back to Berlin.

He was amused by Schriever's frustration. Knowing that the ambitious young Flugkapitän was nominally in charge of Projekt Saucer and reporting directly to Himmler, usually with exaggerated declarations of his own contributions to the work in progress, Wilson had continued to massage his ego by helping him to believe in his own importance. But occasionally, as he had just done, he could not resist slapping him down with another, seemingly insurmountable problem.

What he had not told Schriever, and was not about to, was that he knew how to solve the problem of the boundary layer: by using a kind of porous metal similar to that which he had created so many years ago. Undeterred by the previous disaster and now with vast technical and human resources he had not had before, he knew that he would soon meet with success. Tentatively named *Luftschwamm,* or aero-sponge, and essentially a combination of magnesium and aluminium, his unique metal was being created under his personal guidance in the research plants of distant Gottingen and Volkenrode. When completed, it would be used only for the flying saucer that he intended to construct without Schriever's knowledge. As for Schriever's *Feuerball* and flying saucer, they would fly well enough to keep him and Himmler happy – but that's all they would do.

Approaching the outskirts of Berlin, he looked into the evening darkness and was surprised to see a red glow in the sky above the rooftops of different areas of the city. The glowing pulsated and shifted, here and there obscured by smoke, became a deepening, eerie crimson as he came closer to it. The city's in flames, he thought, rolling his window down, smelling smoke. As he drove on toward home, he realized that it was the Kürhessen district, where he now lived, that was aflame.

He heard the breaking of glass, screams and shouts, then more glass breaking and raining upon stone, obviously the pavements.

Shop windows were being smashed.

Instantly alert, he drove into the Kürhessen district and was surprised, at this late hour, to see the streets packed with people. A nearby synagogue was on fire, and the crimson and yellow light of the flames illuminated a nightmare. Fashionable, middle-class people were clapping and cheering as roaming gangs of youths beat Jews senseless with lead piping, smashed the

windows of their shops, and strewed their possessions along the gutters, while Storm Troopers looked on smiling, when not actually joining in. Broken glass was everywhere, glittering in moonlight and crimson glare, splashed with the deeper crimson of human blood, spreading over the road. Another Jew screamed and was beaten down by swinging lead pipes as more women applauded.

Wilson kept driving.

It was a hellish, dangerous business, with violence and destruction all around him. He drove past more burning synagogues, more gangs of youths in pursuit of Jews, was waved on by exultant Storm Troopers. The air was filled with thickening black smoke, illuminated by flames, rang with desperate cries. He heard gunshots, more smashing glass, screams and oaths. As he turned off the main road, away from a blazing shopfront, he passed a gang of youths who were beating a bearded old man with wooden poles. Women were wailing as their husbands and children were kicked and battered. Then eventually he found himself outside the apartment building where he lived quietly with Greta.

He climbed out, locked the door of the car, and noticed that a black SS car was parked a few doors farther along. He also noticed that a lot of neighbours were talking excitedly to one another. He hurried inside as another gang of youths came running along the street, filled with blood lust and bawling excitedly.

Animals, Wilson thought. Civilization is a sham. We are still protecting our caves. Thank God, in whom I do not believe, that science will change all this.

When he let himself into his apartment, Greta was gazing down through the window.

Beside her was the recently promoted SS Captain Ernst Stoll, also gazing down at the street below, his face handsome and solemn.

They both turned to look at Wilson, then Greta hurried forward, kissed him on the cheek, and stepped back again.

‘Thank God you weren’t hurt,’ she said. ‘We were worried about you.’

‘No,’ he replied. ‘I’m fine... But what’s going on?’

‘I believe it was – ’

‘The recent murder of Counselor Ernst von Rath,’ Stoll explained, ‘has led to anti-Jewish riots here and in the Magdeburg-Anhalt district.’

Wilson was surprised to find Stoll here, as he hadn't seen the captain for many months. Obviously the recent assassination of the German Foreign Office official in Paris by a demented young Jew, Herschel Grynszpan, had been used as yet another excuse to arouse more anti-Semitic feelings. Wilson said, 'I suspected that Rath's death would lead to trouble, but these riots seem...'

'Yes,' Stoll said with a thin smile, 'organized. With the assistance of the Storm Troopers and SA – since our beloved Führer has declared that the riots, now spreading throughout the country, should not be discouraged. Taking the Führer at his word, Goebbels has ordered a pogrom, and right now, with the aid of the SD, SA, and SS, hundreds of Jewish shops, homes, and synagogues throughout Germany are being set to the torch and the Jews themselves, after public humiliation and abuse, are being rounded up and sent to concentration camps. A night to remember, yes?'

Ignoring Stoll's dry mockery, Wilson went to the window and looked down on the street where, in the lamplight, an unfortunate Jew was being tugged by his beard along the road by a laughing Storm Trooper while a gang of youths spat upon him, kicked him, and took punches at him.

Wilson, though feeling nothing for the Jew, had no respect for the youths.

'Animals,' he said, putting his thoughts into words. 'We're still as mindless as savages.'

'You see cruelty down there, Herr Wilson?'

'I just see wasted energy.'

When Wilson turned away from the window, Stoll was smiling sardonically. 'Ah, yes,' he said, 'you have no time for human emotions. You prefer the intellect, the calmly reasoning mind, the cold light of pure thought.'

'That's correct,' Wilson said, ignoring Stoll's soft sarcasm. 'Most human emotions are primitive impulses. I prefer science, unimpeded by human weakness.'

'You love science – and love is an emotion.'

'No, Flugkapitän Stoll, I *don't* love science. In fact, I *respect* it. Only science can lead us away from the caves and into our destiny.'

'Which is?'

'Knowledge for the sake of knowledge. The evolution of reason.'

'Naturally,' Stoll said. 'You're the most ruthless man I've ever met – and

I've met a few. You are made of ice, Wilson.'

So Stoll, though no longer shocked by the gross behaviour of his military friends, nevertheless could still be shocked by his unyielding single-mindedness. Wilson recognized that far from being the cynic he pretended, Stoll was in fact a disillusioned romantic of the most impressionable kind.

This one I can use, he thought.

'I haven't seen you for a long time,' he said. 'Not since you were shipped to the Antarctic. What are you doing here?'

'Because of my services in the Antarctic, I've been placed in charge of your research institute at Kummersdorf. In future, therefore, you will report directly to me, since I, and not Flugkapitän Schriever, will act as your channel to Himmler.'

Secretly pleased to hear this, Wilson took care not to show it, and simply said, 'You didn't come here to tell me that, so why did you come?'

'I want to show you the state of Germany,' Stoll said. 'The country you work for. I want to know what you think of it. Are you willing to come with me?'

'Now?'

'Yes.'

'Is this an order?'

'This is the night of breaking glass, Herr Wilson, and I want you to see it. No, it's not an order – it's a suggestion. This is a night to remember.'

Wilson grinned, knowing he was being tested, then nodded agreement. 'All right, I'll come.'

'I want to come as well,' Greta said. 'I don't want to be left here.'

There were screams and shouts from outside, then the sounds of more breaking glass. Wilson glanced at the window, then at Greta, and saw the excitement in her hard eyes.

'Of course,' he said. 'Why miss such an experience? Let's all go right now.'

The gang of violent youths had disappeared from the street, leaving the bloody man groaning in the gutter. Many stolid citizens stared on from their doorways without coming forward to assist him. As Stoll stepped out of the doorway, the black SS car that Wilson had noticed earlier pulled up to them and stopped to let them get inside. When they were seated, with Stoll up front beside the driver, the car moved off smoothly.

It was a journey through hell.

Stoll made the driver take them through the riot-torn city, first through their own district, which was burning and wreathed in smoke, then to the Magdeburg-Anhalt district where the broken glass glittered in the moonlight around a great many broken, bloody bodies and the debris from looted shops. The assaults were continuing. People ran to and fro, some laughing, others screaming. Applause drowned out cries of terror. The synagogues they passed were on fire and collapsing in showers of sparks. From there they drove to the train station and went inside. Stoll led them to the platforms where hundreds of frightened Jews were being herded onto the trains that would take them away.

'To where?' he asked rhetorically.

'The concentration camps,' Wilson said.

'Correct,' Stoll said. 'The concentration camps. Now let's see something else.'

He was like a man obsessed, wanting to plumb the depths of horror, but Wilson saw where the real horror lay – not outside, but within. He saw it in Greta's excitement when she watched the beatings and humiliations, in the revulsion that Stoll could not hide when he saw the same sights, in the dread that started filling Stoll's gaze when he saw Wilson's indifference.

Finally, in the SS hospital on the outskirts of Berlin, in the laboratories and operating theatres where the human experiments were conducted, Wilson saw Stoll looking at him, trying to search for a weakness. He merely nodded, quite deliberately, in his most thoughtful manner, and said, while casting his gaze over the tortured people on the tables, 'It's good that there are many more where these came from. The experiments on longevity and other matters will take lots of time.'

Stoll practically stepped away from him, as if touched by scorching heat. 'And that's all you see here, Wilson? This is nothing but meat?'

'We are merely the creatures of evolution,' Wilson said, 'and as such, we each have our part to play. Life is nature's experiment. The whole world is nature's laboratory. Those who will be used, *will* be used – and those, such as myself, who must use them, can do so without guilt. This human flesh is the material of evolution, like burnished steel and gunpowder. It is here to be *used*.'

Stoll didn't reply. He simply glanced at the silent Greta and saw the

excited gleam in her whore's eyes. Then he drove them back to Berlin, through the now eerily deserted and smoke-filled streets of Kürhessen, with its broken windows, looted shops, burned synagogues and crumpled, dead Jews. Only then, just before Wilson entered his apartment, did Stoll blurt out, 'You're a monster!'

'No,' Wilson replied, knowing that he had won and that he would be able to manipulate Stoll in the future. 'I'm just a man with a mission.'

Then he closed the door and turned into Greta.

'More semen,' he whispered.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The three troop trucks rumbled through the streets of Cracow, Poland, just before midnight. Sitting up front in the second truck, watching its headlights illuminating the falling snow and the helmeted heads of the soldiers in the truck ahead, Ernst was suffering from his familiar mingling of excitement and *angst.* The white streets were deserted, like those in a troubling dream, and the headlights of the trucks were beaming off the closed doors and shuttered windows of the houses in this old part of the city. Ernst thought of the residents cowering inside, praying that the roaring trucks would not stop outside their own homes. The thought made him smile grimly.

'If this keeps up,' he said, 'Cracow will soon be a ghost town.'

'I doubt it,' Lieutenant Franck Ritter replied, moving the automatic weapon propped up between his knees and adjusting his black SS jacket. 'The damned Jews breed like lice and replace themselves as fast as we can get rid of them. We could be doing this forever, Captain, and there'd still be too many left.'

'But we're not after the Jews tonight,' the more concerned Lieutenant Willi Brandt said behind them. 'This area we're cleaning out is inhabited by ordinary Poles.'

'They're all vermin to me,' Ritter replied with a humourless, wolfish grin, 'so I'll enjoy what I'm doing.'

'You always do,' Ernst said dryly.

Ritter was about to make a retort, but was distracted when the trucks ground to a halt with a squealing of brakes. Familiar with the routine, Ernst's troops jumped out of the back without waiting for his command and were already spreading out along the lamplit street and hammering noisily on the doors of the houses with the butts of their rifles when Ernst jumped down to the road, followed immediately by the enthusiastic Ritter.

Shocked by the sudden cold, Ernst cursed softly to himself, then hurried

along the road, barking orders at his men and reminding them that no violence was to be used unless resistance was offered. His men were bawling at those inside and still drumming on the doors with the butts of their rifles, then someone remembered to turn on the trucks' sirens. That ghastly noise, added to the rest of it, made the bedlam more frightening.

Lights came on behind many windows, the wooden doors creaked open, then wails of protest merged with the bawling of the troops as they entered the buildings.

When the door of his chosen apartment block had been opened, Ernst, with a reluctant Willi Brandt and grinning Franck Ritter, followed his troops inside.

This raid was on a street located near the university and containing select residential buildings, so Ernst was not surprised to find himself in an elegant hallway, with deep carpeting on the floor and what looked like antique paintings on the walls. The door had been opened by the residents of the nearest ground-floor apartment: an elderly couple, both wearing expensive dressing gowns and looking frightened. When the soldiers had parted to let Ernst walk through, he stopped in front of the couple, gave the Nazi salute and 'Heil Hitler!', then said, 'We are requisitioning this building in the name of the Third Reich. Please pack whatever belongings you can fit into one suitcase each and then enter one of the trucks parked outside. The soldiers at the door will assign you to a truck and you'll come to no harm if you don't resist. Now please do as you're told.'

The old woman burst into tears. Her husband looked stunned. 'You cannot – ' he began, trying to rally his senses. 'I will not permit – '

Ritter stepped forward and smartly slapped the man across the face. 'You'll do as you're damned well told,' he said grimly, raising his submachine gun, 'or pay the price, you old goat. Now go and fetch your suitcases.'

The woman sobbed even louder, but tugged her husband back into the room while the soldiers, at a nod from Ernst, hurried up the stairs to force the other residents out. Hearing the drumming of rifle butts on doors, the soldiers bawling, women shrieking and sobbing, Ernst stepped up to Ritter, stared grimly at him, and said, 'Don't ever do anything like that again without my permission!'

Ritter flushed with anger. About to make an angry retort, he glanced

blindly at the embarrassed Willi Brandt, but then changed his mind and grinned crookedly instead.

'Yes, sir,' he said, clicking his boot heels in mock obedience.

Ernst turned away from him, went back outside, and saw that residents of the other two buildings were already being led out into the road. Most were carrying suitcases. The men looked shocked and confused, some women sobbed, the children seemed dazed, as all were urged up into the back of the trucks. Satisfied that the operation was proceeding in an orderly fashion, he went back inside just as Willi Brandt, who would never make a good soldier, walked into the first ground-floor apartment, looking pale and distraught. Ernst went to the doorway, looked in, and saw that Brandt had stopped in front of the two old people. Instead of packing, they were holding one another on the sofa, the man trying to comfort his wife as she sobbed into his shoulder.

'You're not in danger,' Brandt was saying. 'You won't be harmed, I promise you. You've committed no offence and are simply being rehoused. Wherever you go, you will not be harmed. It's unfortunate, but at least you're in no danger, I can promise you that. Now, please, before you make someone angry, pack your suitcases.'

Ernst wanted to laugh at Brandt's naive assertion that the old people would not be harmed, for he knew that they were merely another two of the estimated one million Poles who had so far been expelled from their homes to make way for the Germans from the Baltic and outlying regions of Poland. True enough, they would not necessarily be killed outright; but it was from such unfortunates that Ernst would be selecting the men, women, and children who would be used as slave labour in the underground weapons research factories of the Third Reich, as guinea pigs in the so-called anthropological medical experiments that Himmler and the icy American, Wilson, were hoping would lead to the secrets of longevity, or as prisoners branded fit enough to be shipped secretly to Neuschwabenland in the Antarctic where, under the most appalling conditions, they would help construct Himmler's SS base under the ice and snow.

However, as this particular couple were too old to be of much use in any way, they would almost certainly end up in a concentration camp, which they would be unlikely to survive.

Still, Brandt's well-intentioned remarks did the trick. Upon hearing them,

the old woman actually managed to stop sobbing long enough to whisper, ‘Thank you, Lieutenant,’ and then lead her husband into the bedroom to start packing their suitcases.

‘You’re too kind for your own good, Lieutenant Brandt,’ Ernst said laconically, thus making an embarrassed Brandt turn around to face him. ‘Some day that kindness will be misconstrued as weakness – and you might pay the price for that.’

‘I was merely – ’ Brandt began.

‘Yes, Brandt, I know.’ Ernst grinned and stepped past him to glance into the bedroom. The old couple were indeed packing their two suitcases, both with tears on their pale cheeks. ‘Hey, old man!’ Ernst said. ‘Does the owner of this building actually live in it?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the old man said, his voice trembling. ‘Mrs Kosilewski, who lives in the attic.’

‘Thank you. *Auf Wiedersehen*.’ Ernst grinned and turned away. ‘Keep your eye on them,’ he said to Brandt, ‘and make sure they get into one of the trucks. It’s either them or you, Brandt.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Brandt replied.

Reminded, as he left the room, of the striking difference between Brandt’s kindness and Ritter’s growing cruelty, convinced that the latter would profit more than the former in the Third Reich, Ernst started up the stairs, to ensure that everything was proceeding properly on the floors above. When he heard the bawling of his soldiers and saw those respectable, middle-class Polish citizens shuffling sobbing from their apartments, each carrying a single suitcase and otherwise leaving behind not only their possessions but their homes, he realized just how far from home he was... far from Germany, far from Projekt Saucer, far from what he had been. Now, once more, he was a policeman instead of an engineer.

He was a party to genocide.

Someone on the second floor was slow to leave his apartment and Ernst saw a submachine gun, speedily reversed, its butt swinging, as Ritter struck the unfortunate man between his shoulder blades and made him lurch forward. The man cried out as he started falling, but his wife quickly jerked him upright, then both of them hurried down the stairs, even as Ernst went up the next flight. When on the third floor he saw more adults and children leaving their homes forever in the belief that they would at least be rehoused

somewhere decent, he thought again of the spread of Himmler's underground research factories, of the medical experiments that Wilson wanted, of their ultimate destination, Neuschwabenland, and felt bitter at the recollection of just how brief his return to Kummersdorf had been. He had no sooner settled back into the supervision of Projekt Saucer than the blitzkreig against Poland had commenced, the Polish air force had been destroyed, and Poland's ground forces routed. Then Himmler, having deprived him of his rightful place in that historic event, had sent him here to organize the rounding up of the human labour force required for the underground factories and the colonization of the Antarctic.

He tried to think of it as a great honour, his guarantee of a place in history; but sometimes, as right now, surrounded by sobbing women and shocked children and beaten men, he could only yearn to be back in Berlin, overseeing Wilson and the German engineers.

Sometimes, it had to be admitted, this work made him feel dirty.

Pushing his way through the harassed Poles milling about on the third-floor landing, he glanced through the window and saw his armed troops forming a pathway from the front door of the building to the trucks, their shadows elongated in the yellow lighting of the streetlamps and falling over the bowed heads and shoulders of the Poles who shuffled dispiritedly between them. Now viewing the Poles as mere numbers, his allotment for this evening, he climbed the last flight of stairs to the closed door of the attic. Because he knew that the cow of a landlady would be hiding inside, he hammered his clenched fist repeatedly on the wooden door.

'I know you're in there, Frau Kosilewski!' he shouted. 'So please open the door!'

'The door's not locked,' a surprisingly sensual voice replied. 'You have only to enter.'

Feeling foolish but also amused, Ernst opened the door and looked in. The attic was enormous and beautifully furnished. When he stepped inside, he saw the landlady seated in an armchair, calmly smoking a cigarette. She was wearing a black silk dress, which clung closely to her luscious body, and her feet were in high-heeled shoes that emphasized the curves of her legs, one of which was crossed over the other, exposed from the knee down.

No cow at all, Ernst thought.

'I have packed, as you can see,' the woman said, indicating the suitcase

nearby with a lazy wave of the hand holding the cigarette, ‘but thought I would wait until I was called.’

Ernst advanced farther into the attic and stopped close enough to the woman to observe that she had pitch-black hair falling to her shoulders, as well as eyes as dark and deep as the ocean.

‘You thought we’d forget you?’ Ernst asked, aware that he was becoming aroused by the sight of those elegantly crossed legs, the artfully arched foot, the high, full breasts under the tight black silk, that steady, measuring gaze.

Mrs Kosilewski smiled and shook her head. ‘No, Kapitän,’ she said. ‘I didn’t think that for a moment. We all know how efficient the Germans are. I merely decided to wait until the last moment – to avoid the crush and chaos.’

She pursed her brightly painted lips, sucked on her cigarette, pursed her lips again to blow some smoke rings. She knew just what she was doing.

‘You live here alone?’ Ernst asked, feeling hot and somnolent with desire, his thoughts slipping and sliding.

‘Yes, Kapitän. I’m not married. I *was* married, but my husband died four years ago, which is why I now run this place on my own.’

‘*Ran* it,’ Ernst corrected her. ‘You run it no longer.’

She nodded, her gaze steady upon him. 'Yes, Kapitän, I know. May I ask whom you intend moving in here instead?’

‘Germans from the Baltic and outlying regions of the country. No Jews. No Poles.’

‘I am not a Jew, Kapitän.’

‘But you *are* a Pole,’ he reminded her.

She just smiled more knowingly. ‘And will you be in charge of those Germans, Kapitän?’

‘In a nominal sense, yes. I’ll be visiting the building occasionally, if that’s what you mean.’

Mrs Kosilewski uncrossed her long legs, crossed them the other way, rubbed her hand along her thigh to wipe ash off the tight dress, then pouted her painted lips to exhale more smoke rings. Ernst, now almost dizzy with desire, could hardly take his eyes off her.

‘Then why send me away?’ she asked, her voice shivering through him. ‘Surely I would be of better use to you here – to attend to the house, which I’ve done so well to date, and look after the Germans when they arrive.’

‘And why should I be concerned with that, Frau Kosilewski?’

‘Because if I was here to look after the house, my dear Kapitän, then I could also look after you.’

Her dark gaze was steady, if obscured by the cigarette smoke, and he saw the painted pout of her lips turning into a broader smile. He hadn’t possessed a woman for months and was reminded of that bitter fact as she leaned across her raised knee, drawing his gaze to her firm breasts. He felt breathless, almost choked by his rising lust, and knew he could not resist her.

‘Your soldiers have cleared out the top floor,’ she said, almost whispering. ‘They’ll soon be leaving, mein Kapitän.’

‘We have at least five minutes,’ Ernst replied. ‘I think that should suffice for now.’

He walked across the attic, closed and bolted the door, and by the time he had turned back to Frau Kosilewski, she was already undressing.

The spoils of war, Ernst thought grimly.

He went back there a lot. When not on duty, he practically lived there. He had married Ingrid for love, then cheated on her and been cheated by her. Since then, having also betrayed the values he held most dear, he found that he could temporarily regain his lost pride in the bodies of hardened women. He assumed that Kryzystina was one of those, a woman seasoned by bad experiences, and he was thrilled by the knowledge that she was buying her freedom with her body, selling herself for salvation. She certainly knew how to do it well – she had the sexual repertoire of a whore – and it helped him pass the distress of those nights that his frustrations made restless.

‘No,’ she told him, ‘I’m not a whore, but I want to survive, and for a woman living alone in a city ruled by a conquering army, that isn’t easy. I was born on a farm near Dabrova, to barbarously ignorant peasants, and my father treated me like a beast of burden for all of my days there. I was beaten regularly, often starved as punishment, and eventually abused sexually by him, roughly and often. One day I stabbed him with a bread knife – not fatally, but in the stomach – then I fled for good. I was sixteen years old and soon taken in by a gang of gypsies. The man who picked me, who naturally took his pleasure with me, soon started selling me to other men – he was as primitive as my father – so, a year later, when we were camped in a village near Cracow, I fled to the city, obtained work in a garment factory, attracted the eye of my boss, a decent man, and became his wife when I was twenty.

We had a good life for eight years, but he died four years ago. His family inherited all his wealth and I got this house. As I couldn't afford its upkeep, I moved into the attic, let out the rest of the rooms, and was just getting back on my feet when Germany invaded Poland and you, my handsome Kapitän, came to requisition it for your fellow countrymen. Don't call me a whore because I offered myself to you. You know what the alternative was.'

They were naked in bed, which was still in the grand attic, both sweat-slicked from the ardours of a love that had little love in it. Ernst was stirred by the sight of her heavy breasts, bruised lips, and dishevelled hair, and so slid his hand back between her thighs to find her still wet. 'Not all women would sell themselves for a house,' he said. 'Some have more sturdy principles.'

She glanced sceptically at him, then shook her head on the soaked pillow and chuckled deeply, sardonically. 'Just for my *house*?' she said. 'I think you know better than that. I didn't just want to remain in this house: I also wanted to stay alive. And I think we both know, my pretty, that most of the people moved out of here were not destined for a very lengthy future.'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'I think you do. You know as well as I do that Hitler is already transforming Poland into a massive killing ground and that the planned extermination of the Jews is an open secret among your high-ranking officers.'

Ernst grinned and slipped his fingers inside her, making her sigh. 'What a bright girl you are, Kryzystina,' he said. 'And how did you know all that?'

'I know because some of the high-ranking officers who shared my bed before you came here told me so. I also know because it's hard to keep secret the fact that at least once a week the Central Station is packed with Jews being moved out to an unknown destination, but one widely believed to be unpleasant.'

Ernst was arousing himself by playing with her. 'Very clever, my Polish pet.'

Kryzystina sighed and turned into him, to throw one long, smooth leg over him and let him have more of her. 'And don't we all live in terror,' she whispered into his ear, 'of the so-called house-cleaning, or murder, of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Polish intellectuals and those of a similar class? Could I risk that, my pretty one?' Her tongue slipped into his ear, her

teeth nibbled his earlobe, and her hand slid down his sweating body to take hold of him and guide him into her. ‘So why did you clear out this house?’ she whispered. ‘And all the other Polish houses? Not just to rehouse us, my saviour, as you slyly suggest, but to move us to Majdanek or Auschwitz, from where we would not return. Can you call me a whore because I choose you instead of a camp? I think not, my sweet one.’

They made love like two animals – that day and many others – and Ernst dwelt on what she had said, thought of Himmler and Wilson, and realized that what they were doing had the grandeur of evil. In accepting this fact, he lost his shame and replaced it with pride, plunging himself into his work for Projekt Saucer with renewed vigour. He planned the roundups of Poles and Jews, led the raids on their streets and ghettoes, and divided them into groups on the platforms of Central Station, right or left, life or death. Those chosen for death would not die easily – first they would be used as experimental fodder – and those blessed with the gift of life would work as slaves for the Third Reich in the multiplying underground factories where Himmler, with the aid of the icy American, Wilson, was creating the weapons that would ensure that the New Order would eventually conquer the world.

Projekt Saucer was at the heart of this great endeavour – and he, the once-rejected Ernst Stoll, was an important part of it.

Yet he still felt frustrated.

‘I missed the blitzkreig,’ he explained to Kryzystina. ‘It was my life’s great disappointment. When our army smashed through this damned country, when we destroyed your air force, when the Battle for the Corridor ended and your whole army was routed, I was still an administrator at Kummersdorf, south of Berlin. Now our troops are preparing to follow the Panzer divisions into Belgium, Holland, and Luxembourg, then on to France and Paris itself. But instead of going with them, I’m stuck here, in this Polish cesspit, a shepherd of Jews and other subhumans, a man cleaning out vermin.’

‘You’re still a soldier,’ Kryzystina reminded him.

‘No, I’m not. I’m a policeman.’

‘You take it all too seriously,’ she told him. ‘Come and take me instead!’

Ernst needed little encouragement.

Because he did not like his work and detested Cracow and its inhabitants, he performed his duties mechanically, efficiently, not thinking too deeply about it, and otherwise vented his frustrations by confiding in Kryzystina. As

there were few places to go in Cracow, he never saw her outside the attic, but he fed her hunger for expensive presents, brought her unauthorized food, wine and cigarettes, and when not trading sardonic put-downs with her, unburdened himself of his *angst.*

'I'm not a soldier,' he insisted, repeating his most common complaint. 'I should be on the road to Paris with the fighting troops, but instead I am here, in this miserable Polish city, arresting people by the hundreds and moving them on to the camps. It's my duty to do this and I do it well, but I was cut out for other things.'

'Engineering?'

'Rocket engineering. That's what I was going to do. Instead, I became a supervisor at the research centre at Kummersdorf, spying on my fellow Germans, an old Italian and an illegal American, whose genius put me to shame, though his ruthlessness shocked me. My God, what a monster!'

'An American?' Kryzystina asked him, surprised, as her nimble fingers played in his pubic hair. 'An *American* is working for the Third Reich?'

'Yes,' Ernst replied. 'In secret. He has a false German passport. He cares for nothing but his work – the construction of a saucer-shaped aircraft – and since that project is also close to Himmler's heart, he was allowed to work for us. It's an unusual, maybe dangerous, situation, but Wilson is worth the risk. He's the coldest man I know, obsessed, slightly inhuman, but the advances he's made are extraordinary and fill me with envy. If not allowed to join the great advance on Paris, I should at least be back there, working with Wilson. But I'm not. I'm stuck here. Still taking part in Projekt Saucer, but not in the way I want.'

'And what way is that?'

'To take part in the actual design, as an engineer, which I should have been, and not just collecting Jews and Poles for our labour force.'

Kryzystina stretched out beside him, now knowing him, fitting to him, and asked, breathing warmly in his ear: 'A labour force only for Projekt Saucer? Is that why you're rounding up those people? To work for Projekt Saucer in the camps?'

Ernst felt impatient, his thoughts scattered by his erection. 'No,' he said. 'Don't be ridiculous. There are no research plants in the camps. Those I select don't go to the camps; they're sent to our growing number of advanced weapons factories, scattered over Germany and Bavaria and hidden

underground or inside mountains. There they'll perform the heavy labour required. They'll certainly be worked very hard, but at least they might live.'

He said it with confidence as he rolled between her spreading thighs and inserted himself into the velvet glove that could make his thoughts reel; but he knew, when he had finished, when his thoughts had scattered and returned intact, that he had not told the truth, as even those being used by Projekt Saucer would not necessarily live long. Recalling the tour that Himmler had given him through the immense tunnel being hacked out of the densely forested hills of Thuringia to contain the planned underground factories at Nordhausen and nearby Bleicherode, he remembered the armed SS guards and the cracking of their bullwhips, which then, as now, were an indication that the welfare of the labour force would not be considered. And that labour force was being sent out by train from most of the major cities of Poland, to the increasing number of factories hidden underground, from the Harz Mountains to Thuringia, south of Prague and across to Mahren... a vast network of secret factories devoted to the design and construction of advanced weaponry and aircraft, including the rockets of Wernher von Braun and the flying saucer of the obsessed American, Wilson... factories in which the work force would, if necessary, be worked to death. A brutal truth that appeared to have given Wilson no qualms at all.

'He has one other obsession,' Ernst confided to Kryzystina as they rested after their sexual exertions. 'An obsession with longevity – though that also is treated as part of his work. Wilson is old – in his mid-sixties, I think – but he looks and acts fifteen years younger than that. This, he insists, is due to a lifelong strict diet – no cigarettes or alcohol, no fatty foods; only fruit juice, cereals, fruit, and nuts – and, oddly, no exercise other than lots of walking. He also ascribed it to a lack of emotional entanglements, which he said were, apart from their well-known psychological effects, an inducement to quicker physical deterioration.'

'What about sex?' Kryzystina asked.

'I gather that it's fine,' Ernst replied, amused, 'so long as it's performed unemotionally – for the reasons I've already stated. Sex as pure *exercise* is healthy, but romantic love or sex used for emotional release are both damaging to physical as well as mental health.'

'You poor man,' Kryzystina crooned in his ear, reaching down for his penis. 'Let me arouse you sexually, therefore emotionally, and thus ruin your

health.'

Ernst slapped her hand away. He was grinning, but felt uneasy. There were times when you couldn't help wondering just how right or wrong Wilson was.

'What's so strange,' he said, hoping to talk out his troubled thoughts, 'is that this particular obsession has also been dragged into his work – as everything is with him, sooner or later. It's as if he's treating even his own life as material for research. And so the state of his health and the possibilities of longevity, while important to him on a personal level, are more important for what they can add to his envisaged Super Race. Which is why some of those sent to the camps will have a fate worse than death.'

'What fate?'

Realizing that he had already said more than he should, Ernst shook his head and said, 'Nothing. Forget it.'

He lit a cigarette – he had started smoking only recently – and realized that *he* could not forget it. Indeed, who *could* forget the hideous 'anthropological' experiments already being conducted, with Wilson's sly encouragement and at Himmler's command, in the surgeries and operating theatres of certain concentration camps, as well as in secret SS laboratories located all over Germany?

Even now Ernst was haunted by the memory of the infamous Crystal Night of thirteen months ago, when, in a fit of perversity or perhaps overwhelming frustration, he'd driven Wilson through Berlin's violent, blazing streets to a Nazi hospital on the outskirts of the city. There, in the laboratory, he'd shown him the contorted limbs, frozen anguish, and, in some cases, dismembered heads of those who had died on the operating table in some of his requested experiments. Wilson had remained unmoved, insisting that science was all that mattered. He wanted the secret of immortality, or at least longevity, and would do anything, no matter how cruel, to uncover it.

And he had insisted that he was not a monster, but just a man with a mission.

What kind of man?

Already depressed, Ernst suddenly felt crushed by fear, so he stubbed his cigarette out, rolled onto Kryzystina, and tried to lose himself in her body, where nothing could reach him.

Ernst snapped to attention in the office of his superior officer, Major Riedel, gave the Nazi salute, and said, ‘Heil Hitler!’ Riedel returned the salute with a weary wave of his hand, told Ernst to stand at ease, and gazed up from his desk in a thoughtful, searching manner.

Ernst’s former friend, the sadistic Lieutenant Franck Ritter, was standing at the other end of the desk, wearing his black SS uniform and trying hard not to smile.

Major Riedel waved his hand again, this time indicating the many photographs pinned up on the wall behind him.

‘You’ve seen these photos before, Captain?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ernst replied.

‘Then you know what they are, do you not?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ernst said, getting the distinct feeling that he was in trouble, but unable to guess why. ‘They’re photographs of Polish resistance fighters being hunted by the Gestapo. The SS also have orders to keep a watch out for them or anyone suspected of knowing or harbouring them.’

‘Correct.’ Major Riedel glanced at Ritter, then stood up and planted his finger on one of the photographs. ‘Do you know this man, Captain Stoll?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Can you see him properly from where you’re standing?’

‘No, sir, but I don’t know anyone on that list.’

‘Please step forward and check the photograph properly.’

Ernst did as he was told, walking around the far side of the desk and glaring at Ritter. He then stood beside Riedel to study the photograph up close. He saw a handsome young Pole with sensitive features and unusually bright, fearless eyes. When he had studied the young man’s face, he shook his head and said, ‘No, sir, I don’t know him.’ Then he marched back around the desk and stood stiffly in front of it.

He noticed Ritter’s thin smile. Major Riedel nodded and glanced at Ritter, then sat in the chair behind his desk, where he clasped his hands under his chin and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

‘The man is Andrzej Pialowicz,’ he said. ‘Does the name mean anything to you?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ernst said, growing more confused and nervous. ‘It’s the name of a leading Polish resistance fighter, presently on a Gestapo and SS death list.’

‘Correct again, Captain. I’m glad to note that you are, at least, reading the directives being sent out from this office.’

Ernst did not reply, as there was no reply to give. He simply glanced at Ritter and noticed his triumphant smirk.

‘Andrzej Pialowicz is indeed the most wanted man in Cracow. In compiling a dossier on his activities prior to the fall of Poland, we discovered that among his many other female conquests was a Jewish woman living right here in Cracow. Rather than arrest this woman, we placed her under surveillance in the hope that she would eventually lead us to Pialowicz – which she did. She was observed leading him out of the Wawel Cathedral – reportedly where he had been hiding – and then driving him away in her car. Since it was our belief that Pialowicz was being taken to rejoin the other members of his resistance group, and since the over-zealous oberleutnant in charge of the squad of SS troops took this as his opportunity to catch the whole gang, he did not arrest Pialowicz or his mistress, but instead followed them at a discreet distance with two other SS men, in an ordinary Polish car with Cracow number plates. The drive ended at a warehouse in an industrial area south of the city. Pialowicz entered the warehouse alone and his girlfriend turned her car around and headed back to the city. Deliberately letting the woman go, since he knew where she lived, the over-zealous young oberleutnant called up for support, then led an inept assault on the warehouse. In the ensuing fracas, some resistance men and SS troops were killed, but Pialowicz managed to elude us again and has not been seen since.’

‘I’m sorry, sir,’ Ernst began, ‘but I’m not sure – ’

‘Why we called you here?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Major Riedel smiled bleakly, then sighed as if in despair. ‘Naturally, Captain Stoll, as we were keeping a watch on Pialowicz’s girlfriend, we saw everyone entering or leaving the building in which she resided – and to our surprise, Captain, one of the most frequent visitors was you. Pialowicz’s girlfriend, as you will have gathered by now, is also your mistress, Kryzystina Kosilewski.’

Ernst turned cold with shock, then felt himself burning. He glanced at the floor, but felt nauseated, so looked up again.

‘Do you wish to deny it, Captain Stoll?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Good,’ Major Riedel said, ‘since although we were aware that you are in charge of that building and therefore have good reason for going there, we were intrigued by both the frequency and lateness of your visits. We therefore took the liberty of checking with the other, now mostly German, residents. Lieutenant Ritter, here, was in charge of that particular task and can confirm that according to her neighbours, Frau Kosilewski was opening her door to you on a regular basis and that when you visited, you stayed there for a long time, indeed often all night. You were also observed taking her parcels of groceries and other contraband items. Do you wish to deny this?’

‘No, sir,’ Ernst said, wanting to die, but rescued by a hot wave of hatred when he saw Ritter’s thin smile.

‘I’m glad to hear it,’ Major Riedel said, unclasping his hands and sitting back in his chair, looking more weary than outraged. ‘You *do* know, of course, that it’s an offence for a German soldier, much less an SS officer, to knowingly fraternize with a Jew.’

‘I didn’t know she was Jewish, sir. In fact, she categorically denied it the first time I met her.’

‘But you knew she was Polish.’

‘Yes, sir, I did.’

‘Lucky for you, Captain, you’re an exceptional officer with particularly close ties to our beloved Reichsführer. Otherwise I would have you shot for this.’

‘Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.’

‘Lucky for you, also, that stripping you of your rank would necessitate a lengthy and potentially embarrassing report to our beloved Reichsführer, which could rebound unpleasantly on me personally.’

Unable to break the ensuing silence, Ernst heard his own heartbeat, resounding like a gong in his head, tolling his doom. He glanced sideways at Ritter and again saw his triumphant smirk.

‘As you will have guessed,’ Riedel said wearily, ‘we will now be arresting your mistress, the Jew bitch Kosilewski.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ernst said, feeling as if his face had been slapped, his stomach kicked by a heavy boot.

‘I would like to punish you by having you personally make the arrest, Captain, but since that could make matters more complicated than they are, I will instead insist that you accompany Lieutenant Ritter to your Jew whore’s

house and stay by the van while the lieutenant and his men drag her out. If nothing else, I want you to see that, Captain Stoll. Do you understand why?'

'Yes, sir,' Ernst said, already feeling the awful humiliation that the major wanted him to suffer.

'Good. Now please leave my office.'

Shocked and shaking, feeling alternatively hot and cold, Ernst, after saluting, followed the gloating Ritter out of the office, then along the gloomy corridor of the building, down a flight of stairs, then out into the freezing, windblown courtyard, where a small, black, windowless van, used for collecting suspects, was parked. While two armed SS soldiers climbed into the rear, Ernst sat up front beside Ritter and the driver, shaking even more with humiliation and dread as the van started off and headed through the narrow streets of Cracow in the afternoon's darkening light.

'What will happen to her?' he asked of Ritter.

'She's all mine,' Ritter replied with a leer. 'I've been given twenty-four hours to make her talk, but I won't need that long.' His leer widened lasciviously over blackened teeth. 'She'll give me everything I want soon enough.'

Ernst closed his eyes, knowing exactly what Ritter meant. He shivered with revulsion and the shame he had thought was long dead in him, then protected himself from it with a rage at what Kryzystina had done to him. The whore. The *Jewish* whore. He opened his eyes again, saw the charcoal light of late afternoon, and sat up straight when the van braked to a halt in front of her house.

'Can't I watch from in here?' he asked pathetically.

'No,' Ritter said, grinning again. 'You have to come out and formally identify her.'

'You already know who she is.'

'That's not the point,' Ritter said. 'The point is that you formally identify her. That's your punishment, *sir*.'

Ernst nodded and climbed out, determined to hide any weakness from Ritter; also determined to let his rage against Kryzystina protect him from sentiment as the lieutenant and the two soldiers entered the building with theatrical urgency. They came back out soon enough, this time with Kryzystina, who was sobbing and protesting in vain as the two soldiers dragged her across the pavement and Ritter, bawling something that included

‘Jew bitch whore!’ slapped repeatedly at the back of her head. Then he grabbed her by the hair and jerked her head back to let Ernst get a look at her. Already her face was bruised and her dark eyes tearful. She saw Ernst and gasped.

‘Yes,’ Ernst said, ‘this is the woman Kosilewski... This is the woman I know.’

‘Oh, my God!’ Kryzystina exclaimed in disbelief.

The soldiers dragged her away from Ernst and threw her into the van, then climbed in behind her and slammed the doors shut. Ernst followed Ritter into the front and turned away from his gloating grin, but was forced to listen to Kryzystina sobbing in the back. The journey seemed interminable, all the way back to the grim, guarded entrance to the SS headquarters and basement cellars where, he knew, Kryzystina would be tortured and interrogated by Ritter.

He tried to walk away then, but Ritter called him back.

‘Excuse me, *sir,’* he said, forcing Ernst to turn around and see Kryzystina, no longer sobbing, but with pale, tear-streaked cheeks, staring at him with fierce hatred and condemnation from between the two soldiers. ‘Don’t you want to say goodbye to your Jewish whore?’

Ernst could not reply, but he didn’t turn away. The soldiers dragged Kryzystina toward the entrance. She suddenly howled like a wild animal, and only when Ritter had kicked her into the building did Ernst make his escape.

Kryzystina did not talk in twenty-four hours – nor in twenty-four days. Three weeks later, she was, according to a frustrated Ritter, still in her basement cell, a bloody mess but unbroken, and waiting for the train that would take her to the living hell of Auschwitz.

During that time, Ernst managed to recover from his humiliation and shame by remembering Kryzystina only with hatred. He accepted that he had made a fool of himself, fought back tears when he learned that the German army had entered Paris, and threw himself more devotedly into his task of finding suitable candidates for forced labour in the underground factories, or a worse fate in the concentration camps.

In doing this, he paid penance for his sins and regained his lost pride.

Because Kryzystina was one of those earmarked for the camps, there was no way of avoiding her at the station; nor, by this time, would he have

attempted to do so if he could. Indeed, when he saw her bruised and scarred face in that hopeless queue of the damned, a cloud of steam blowing across brown eyes darkened even more by weeks of torture, he felt neither surprised nor shocked, only a quiver of suppressed rage. Then, on a perverse whim, he had an SS guard with a snarling dog drag her out of the queue, to be placed before him.

When she recognized him, her eyes brightened with the enduring strength of contempt, and her lips, which had been shivering with despair, formed a line of defiance.

'You're a terrible mess, Frau Kosilewski,' Ernst said sardonically, 'and where you're going, the treatment will be even worse than what you've already had. Would you like me to help you?'

'What's the price?' she replied.

Ernst pointed at the queue forming at the far side of the platform and said, 'The people in that queue have been selected to live, while these poor wretches' – he indicated the queue she had just left – 'have been selected for death. Tell me where your boyfriend, Andrzej Pialowicz, is hiding and I'll let you leave this queue and join that one over there.'

She stared at him with disbelieving eyes, too shocked to speak.

'This queue or that one,' Ernst said. 'Life or death, Kryzystina. Now, where's Andrzej Pialowicz?'

She spat in his face.

Ernst didn't have time to react before the SS guard stepped forward, struck Kryzystina with his bullwhip, then hurled her back through the snarling dogs, into the queue heading to certain death.

Kryzystina didn't look back at Ernst to see him wiping her spittle from his forehead. Instead, she stared straight ahead, as if he had never existed. She didn't even look back when she was herded into the carriage, dissolved behind a cloud of steam, and then became just another nameless face in a mosaic of the damned.

Then Ernst crossed the platform and boarded the other train: the one taking those destined to work in the underground factories in support of his Reichsführer's Projekt Saucer.

That train, when it moved out of Cracow, took him back to Berlin.

CHAPTER TWENTY

'Nostradamus,' Himmler said, sipping effetely at his tea, 'foretold the conquest of France by Germany. Did you know that, Herr Wilson?'

'No,' Wilson said. He had not known and did not wish to know, any more than he wanted to be reminded that Adolf Hitler based many of his most vital decisions on the advice of his Swiss astrologer, Karl Ernst Krafft; or that Hitler's deputy, Hermann Goring, ran *his* war with the aid of rainmakers and teams of clairvoyants; or that *his* deputy, Rudolf Hess, who had recently flown to England without permission in an insane attempt to establish peace with Britain, kept a pet lion, believed in astrology, and was known to have dabbled seriously in the occult; or that Himmler himself, now sipping his tea so sedately, was as mad as a hatter.

The world is being conquered by a gang of lunatics, dope addicts, sadists, occultists, and degenerates, Wilson thought, and I'm forced to use the scum.

'I believe that Nostradamus,' Himmler droned on, 'also prophesied the conquest of the West by a race of Aryans at approximately this time. Did you know *that,* Herr Wilson?'

'No,' Wilson said, though he knew what Himmler was driving at. Since he and the Reichsführer had last met, the German forces had overrun Norway, Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France, Yugoslavia, and Greece. They indeed seemed unstoppable, and the fall of the West had seemed guaranteed. However, Hitler had then become obsessed with his mystical notion of *Lebesraum* – German expansionism and space – and was now preparing to invade Russia, even against the protests of his own generals. It was a two-front war that had defeated Germany in 1918 and would, Wilson reasoned, do so again – which is exactly why so many of Hitler's finest officers had protested the planned invasion in the first place. Yet even now, as he and Himmler were having their chat over tea, fighter planes, bombers, Panzer tanks, and three million foot soldiers were massing along a 930-mile front,

from the Baltic to the Black Sea, prepared to advance into Russia and certain doom.

The beginning of the end is in sight, Wilson thought, which means that my time is running out, my situation becoming more tricky. I must be more careful now.

'You are an admirably concise conversationalist, Herr Wilson,' Himmler said, his eyes, magnified by the pince-nez, as dead as his smile. '"Yes" and "no". A curt nod of the head. A distinct lack of verbal elaboration. No more said than is absolutely necessary. A man of few words.'

'I'm sorry, Reichsführer.'

'You have no need to be. Clearly it's in your nature. I think you're a man who trusts in his own nature and devoutly follows his chosen path.'

'That's true,' Wilson said.

They were having their tea in Wilson's glass-panelled office in the main hangar at Kummersdorf. After glancing at Himmler's immobile bodyguards, both granite-faced and wearing menacing black-leather overcoats, Wilson studied Captain Ernst Stoll who, in his SS uniform, was sitting silently beside his beloved Reichsführer.

After returning about a year ago from Poland, where reportedly he had laid the groundwork for the regular movement of Jews and Poles to either the concentration camps or the secret underground and research establishments of the rapidly growing Third Reich, Stoll had been a changed man: a more fanatical Nazi, now devoted to Himmler, and untiring in his dedication to Projekt Saucer and its ultimate goal, which was to protect an underground colony of SS masters and their slaves in Neuschwabenland. Yet as Wilson knew, Stoll remained a frustrated romantic... and Wilson could use him.

Indeed, he already had.

By the time Stoll had returned from Poland with his renewed dedication to Himmler's planned world of ice and fire, Wilson had come to understand something important: While it was true that German scientists as a whole were producing extraordinary innovations in weaponry and aeronautics, it was equally true that their separate projects were not being coordinated. So great were the rewards for success in Nazi Germany, but so terrible the penalties for failure, that even formerly cooperative scientists had been reduced to currying favour by competing ferociously with one another.

In this sense, the Peenemünde situation was typical.

While Himmler had the cream of his rocket engineers working on the V-I and V-2 rockets at Peenemünde, on the Baltic, the V-I was a Luftwaffe project, the V-2 was an Army project, and both sides were competing instead of putting their heads together. Similarly, while various research establishments scattered throughout Germany and Austria were working separately on gas turbines and jet propulsion, heat-resistant and 'porous' metals, gyroscopic mechanisms and boundary layer-defeating airfoils, only Wilson had had the sense to link their often startling innovations together, into the one, revolutionary aircraft.

That aircraft was not Schriever's flying saucer, about to be test-flown. It was the small, disc-shaped *Feuerball,* which Wilson was ostensibly creating as a flying anti-radar device, but which in fact he was secretly using as an experimental prototype for a full-scale, vastly more advanced flying saucer, to be constructed and used only when he saw fit.

As Stoll did not know about the secret *Feuerball* experiments, he had been more than willing to arrange for Wilson to travel the length and breadth of the Third Reich on numerous visits to other research establishments.

Wilson had already used him, then, and would do so again... for something much more important.

'You have that faraway look in your eyes, Herr Wilson. What are you thinking about?'

'Nothing, Reichsführer.'

'You never think of nothing, Herr Wilson. You think all the time.'

'I was just thinking about the flying saucer,' Wilson lied, 'and wondering if we'll succeed.'

'I never thought you'd doubt yourself for a moment. I am truly surprised.'

'I have doubts occasionally,' Wilson lied again. 'All human beings do.'

'You're not as human as most, Herr Wilson. You think too much and feel too little.'

Wilson nodded. 'Perhaps.'

'And yet you have doubts.'

'Yes,' Wilson lied for the third time, not wanting Himmler to know and fear his invincible arrogance.

Himmler placed his empty cup on the small table beside him, then stared steadily through his glittering pince-nez. 'In the words of our beloved Führer: "One must listen to an inner voice and believe what it tells you." Would you

not agree, Herr Wilson?'

'If the inner voice is self-conviction, then, yes, I agree.'

'I do, too,' Himmler said. 'Which is precisely why nothing can stop me.'

'You're a resolute man, Reichsführer.'

'And you aren't?' Stoll asked.

'Only average, Captain Stoll.'

Stoll's smile showed a degree of dry amusement. 'I think not, Herr Wilson. In fact, you're a man so resolute, you'd stop at nothing to get what you want. Now isn't that so?'

Be careful, Wilson thought. 'No, I don't think so.'

'There are rumours,' Himmler said, ostentatiously studying his immaculate fingernails, 'that the dearly departed Doctor Belluzzo did not deserve the fate he received. What do *you* think, Herr Wilson?'

'I'm afraid I haven't thought about it,' Wilson said, 'apart from assuming that when the SS decided to arrest him, they had their reasons.'

'Are you aware of what those reasons were?'

'His superior officer, Flugkapitän Schriever, believed Belluzzo to be mentally incompetent and possibly dangerous.'

'Did you share that view?'

'I can't remember if I discussed it with Schriever or not, but I have to confess that if I'd been asked, I would have been bound to agree with him.'

'But you had no direct hand in Schriever's report?'

'No. None at all.'

Himmler spread his hands in the air and smiled frostily. 'Good,' he said. 'That's all right, then. After all, no one is going to miss Belluzzo, who was not even German.' He then clasped his hands together, stopped smiling, and added softly: 'It's just that one worries if one suspects that one's staff are becoming too ruthless in their ambitions.'

'Naturally, Reichsführer.'

He stared steadily at Himmler, giving nothing away, but knew that the Reichsführer was aware of what he had done and would not forget it.

'I appreciate a man of initiative,' Himmler said, 'so long as it doesn't make him *too* ambitious.'

'I understand perfectly.'

'Good,' Himmler said. Realizing that he had gained Himmler's wary admiration, Wilson stared across the broad expanse of the hangar, to where

the Schriever flying saucer, about to be test-flown for the first time, was being prepared. It was resting on a large steel platform that could be wheeled out of the hangar. Forty-two meters wide and thirty-two meters high, it looked immense in the enclosed space. Indeed, raised up on the steel platform, it cast its shadow over the coveralled engineers working around it, including Habermohl and Miethe. Schriever himself was being helped into his flying suit, since he was the test pilot.

It was a completely circular aircraft, shaped like a gigantic, inverted steel bowl and supported on four thick, hollow legs that housed the gas-turbine rotors which, it was hoped, would give it its vertical-rising capability. Another four gas-turbine rotors were positioned horizontally at equal distances around the rim of the circular body, for control of horizontal flight. It was lamentably primitive, Wilson knew. It would fly enough to satisfy Himmler and keep Schriever pleased with himself, leaving Wilson free to get on with the design of the real, vastly more advanced machine.

Wilson's deception was necessary. There was no one he could trust. The Third Reich was filled with ambitious, frightened men who wished to make an impression. Wilson did not trust Rudolph Schriever. He saw the madness in Himmler's eyes. He remembered his troubles in America, the heavily guarded hangars in Iowa and Illinois, the businessmen and politicians and generals who had ruthlessly stolen his life's work. The same thing could happen again, because the war's end was beginning: When the battle for Russia commenced, the Third Reich would start to bleed. How long would Himmler last then? And how long could Wilson then keep his secret? He wanted to make real his secret masterplan, but what guarantee did he have that he could do it? The Nazis devoured their own kind, so they might devour even Himmler; either that or the Reichsführer would turn on Wilson, destroying all he had gained.

Heinrich Himmler: the Reichsführer. Wilson was not deceived by his mild gaze. His neat fingernails were polished with blood and his smile hid hysteria. No, Wilson didn't trust him, and so he gave Himmler only a little – the prototype for a flying saucer that was merely a crude airplane – while explaining repeatedly that his problems were many and he needed more time.

It was a delicate manoeuvre. A great cunning was required. The flying saucer had to fool Schriever and the other engineers; it had to be a

considerable achievement by their standards, though still lacking something. Thus Wilson had used obsolete technologies with slightly advanced ideas, letting Schriever and his engineers take pride in what they imagined was their great achievement: a saucer-shaped aircraft. Gas turbines and liquid-fuelled rockets were still the basis of their technology, but Wilson had already surpassed that. The real achievement was his other, secret *Feuerball*, and most of that was in his head... So he gave a little and took a great deal and listened always to Himmler.

'Your health is good?' he was asking.

'Yes,' Wilson replied.

'The recent operation was a success?'

'Completely, Reichsführer.'

'To experiment on yourself shows great courage – or, perhaps, faith. I have to admire that.'

'I'm nearly seventy, Reichsführer. My time's running out. I'm old and my body begins to fail me, and I have to prevent that if I'm to continue my life's work. Since the choices are otherwise nonexistent, it's certainly worth the risk; and while so far we've only managed to repair my stomach and do some minor skin grafts, given time, if we continue medical experiments in the camps, I'm convinced that we'll eventually reach the stage where we can make flawless skin grafts, replace faulty hearts, develop mechanical limbs, and maybe even make great advances in human longevity... The possibilities are limitless.'

Himmler scratched his nose, adjusted his pince-nez, nodded solemnly. 'I agree,' he said softly. 'We need that – and more than that. Let us sum up what we've achieved so far and see what we have...'

His voice trailed off as he stared at Schriever's saucer. The doors of the hangar were being opened and sunlight was pouring in.

'We have our underground factories,' Himmler said. 'We have the location for our New Order. We have our masters, the SS, and our slave labour and your own crystal genius.'

'We have everything,' Stoll said.

Himmler smiled but shook his head. 'No, we still don't have enough. We need more than normal men. What we need is a biological mutation that will lead to true greatness. We must learn to control our work force. Not with whips and not with guns. What we need is automatic control of their bodies

and minds. The human brain must be examined, the body's secrets must be explored. We must try to steal their will and their physical strength and leave them just what *we* need. The so-called democracies cannot do this – their regressive morals would forbid it – but here, at the dawn of the new era, there is nothing to hinder us.'

He smiled at the listening Ernst Stoll, as if giving approval.

'We must use the *Ahnenerbe,* hand in hand with the *Lebensborn,* in order to study racial characteristics and breed only the finest. That will solve the first problem – and only in that way, will we be able to create the Superman. Nevertheless, that leaves the problems of the work force, and we must solve those also. Control of body *and* mind. We must find a brand-new method. I think of medical and psychological experiments of the most extreme kind. The camps are ours to command. The scum there is our base material. The New Order needs a wealth of mindless muscle and your genius must find it.'

Wilson did not reply, as there was nothing for him to say. What Himmler wanted, he also wanted, but for very different reasons; what Himmler wanted was an insane dream that he totally rejected. Yet he listened, because Himmler had the power, and he still needed that.

'Do you understand?' Himmler said. 'My New Order will come to be. It will be broken into colonies, each individual, each with its work, all divided into masters and slaves, existing just to support us. There's no problem in the Antarctic. It's just another Nordhausen. You ship the subhumans in to build your underground complex, you control them with brain implants and our Death's Head SS, and then you move in your scientists and technicians and administrators, and you bind them all together with fear of their all-seeing masters. And once there, where can they go? There is no way in or out. They will live underground, seduced by power or cowed by fear, the masters bound by their blood oaths, by their religious conviction, the subhumans by torture and the threat of death and their singular lack of a way out. Yes, American, it is possible. We are halfway there already. You must work, you must complete this great project, before we settle the matter. Now let us see this test flight.'

The hangar doors had been opened fully. The flying saucer was being wheeled out on the broad platform, its steel body now silvery. Wilson followed Himmler and Stoll, out of the office, across the sunny hangar, then into the summery afternoon. The collapsible legs let the platform be lowered

to the ground, where the wheels were removed, and the platform became a glittering launching pad with the saucer resting upon it.

Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever was standing in his flying suit directly in front of the saucer, his helmet under his arm. He stepped forward to give the Nazi salute, looking uncommonly nervous.

'Good luck,' were the only words spoken by Himmler.

'Thank you, Reichsführer!' Schriever responded, visibly swelling with pride, then saluted again and turned away, to climb the stepladder that led up the gleaming, sloping body to the saucer's centralized cockpit.

The Perspex canopy had been removed. The saucer reflected the sunlight. After Schriever climbed carefully into the dome-shaped pilot's cabin, the canopy was replaced and locked into position. The engineers retreated and shielded their eyes. Himmler and Stoll hurried behind the sandbags with Wilson, then Himmler scratched nervously at his nose and adjusted his pince-nez. The saucer resembled a metallic mushroom – or, perhaps, a giant spider. Its four legs, which housed the gas turbine rotors, thrust down obliquely. There was a roar as the hollow legs spewed flames and filled the air with black, oily smoke. The saucer shuddered and shrieked. Yellow flames spat at the platform. The roaring changed and became a deafening sibilance as the machine started rising. Himmler covered his ears. His body appeared to be shrinking. The saucer shuddered and roared, lifted tentatively off the ground, hovered briefly and swayed unevenly from side to side and was obscured by the swirling smoke. Himmler turned and stared at Wilson. His mild eyes were like the sun. The saucer roared and hovered just above the ground as Himmler gripped Wilson's wrist.

'A new era!' Himmler exclaimed as the ground shook beneath them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Bradley and Joan made love that afternoon more tenderly and satisfyingly than they had done in months.

They had flown to the island of Oahu, Hawaii, for a vacation in the hope of repairing the damage done by Bradley's increasing obsession with John Wilson's unheralded, innovative work on rocket research and what he might be creating in Nazi Germany. That obsession had grown dangerously over the years, encouraging Bradley to be more distracted, keeping him away from home too much on his many investigatory trips, and making him increasingly thoughtless when it came to his family. Consequently, the gulf between him and Joan had widened. She had even threatened divorce. Bradley, though desperate to be part of a proper intelligence agency, such as the British Secret Intelligence Service, and use its greater resources to track down Wilson and put a stop to his activities, had begun to see the error of his ways.

Well, not quite...

While he had continued to use his powerful Wall Street law firm and influential clients as his personal link to Washington, DC, and General Taylor's Army Air Force intelligence unit, he had become increasingly frustrated by the lack of progress regarding his proposals for a centralized intelligence-gathering organization. Earlier in the year he had been informed by Taylor that the beginnings of just such an organization had been made: an Office of the Coordinator of Information, or COI, with its headquarters established in the State, War, Navy Building next to the White House. When another unofficial agent, William Donovan, had been appointed above Taylor as coordinator of information, Bradley had been crushed by disappointment and decided to turn his back completely on his intelligence ambitions.

A few months later he had suggested this vacation in Hawaii as a sort of

second honeymoon, designed to bring him and Joan closer together and let them start all over again.

It appeared to have worked. Admiral Jeffrey Paris, an old friend of Bradley's buddy, General Taylor, and captain of one of the battleships anchored off Ford Island, had found them an attractive villa on the green hills overlooking Honolulu. Bradley and Joan had settled in with pleasantly surprising ease, gradually unwound, talked through their differences, and finally came together in bed like much younger lovers.

That afternoon Bradley had woken up from the nap they had taken to prepare them for the Saturday evening dance in the Pearl Harbour Naval Officer's Club, to which they had been invited by Admiral Paris, and found himself luxuriating in Joan's warmth as well as in his new-found peace of mind.

He felt younger than he had in years. Swelling with love when he thought of how close he had come to losing Joan, he reached out to her, ran his fingers lightly over her, stroked her raised hip and waist, then rolled into her spine, slid his hand around to her soft breast, and let his passion awaken her. She turned into him, almost purring, her smile sleepily radiant, and they pressed their naked bodies together and became one again.

'God, I love you,' he whispered.

Later, bathed and dressed – Bradley in a white dinner jacket and black bow tie, Joan in an elegant, off-the-shoulder evening dress – they had an aperitif out on the walled patio overlooking Honolulu. Bradley gazed through palm trees, palmettoes, and hibiscus toward the US Pacific Fleet, anchored in the vast bay. There were destroyers and minesweepers, oilers, tenders and submarines; and off Ford Island the battleships formed two lines, not far from the airfield where dozens of planes stood side by side. The battleships looked magnificent, glinting gray in the brilliant sunlight. Beyond them, far away, where green sea met blue sky, were the flapping white sails and gleaming brass railings of private yachts and expensive motor cruisers.

'It sure as hell isn't New York,' Bradley said, turning back to face Joan across the glass-topped wickerwork table and appreciating the warmth of her girlish smile, the sunlit sheen of her auburn hair.

'Don't even *think* about New York,' she said. 'We'll be back there soon enough. Let's enjoy what we've got while we've got it. I'm blossoming just sitting here.'

‘You look it. Making love must be therapy.’

‘All men are disgustingly vain,’ she said, ‘and you’re just praising yourself.’

He had to smile at that. ‘Touché, my sweet. Nevertheless, it’s nice to see you smile. I thought I’d lost that forever. I nearly did, didn’t I?’

‘I’ll admit, I was worried.’

‘You don’t have to worry anymore. I’ve put it all firmly behind me. Not meaning to discuss New York, but I’m satisfied to be back in Manhattan, doing what I’m supposed to do.’

‘You’re such a good lawyer,’ she told him. ‘I hate to see that talent wasted. I really didn’t mind you doing that unofficial snooping for General Taylor during your trips overseas, but the thought of you becoming involved in official intelligence gathering made me real scared.’

‘You’ve read too many novels, Joan.’

She smiled at that. ‘Yes, I suppose so... But I also know how involved you can become – and were becoming over Wilson – so I’m glad you changed your mind and went back to legal work.’

‘I’ll now settle into my respectable middle age and watch my married kids make mistakes with *their* kids.’

‘There are worse ways of growing old.’

It was a wise remark that made him appreciate her all the more and count his lucky stars that their marriage hadn’t been destroyed by that Wilson business.

Unfortunately, once he thought of Wilson, he also thought of Gladys Kinder, whose letters from London were still arriving at his Manhattan office, bringing him news of the war in Great Britain, along with plenty of teasing, oddly disconcerting sexual comments.

No longer could he doubt that he had been instantly attracted to the woman, maybe dangerously so. If that feeling normally would have faded with the passing years, her letters were resolutely keeping the memory of her alive. Now, though he certainly enjoyed reading the letters, his rapprochement with Joan made him wish that Gladys Kinder would stop writing and let him forget her. He hadn’t laid a hand on her, nor even made a move toward her, but her letters, piling up over the years, made him feel that he had.

Suddenly realizing just how treacherous emotions could be, and

frightened by how close he had come to hurting and losing Joan, he reached across the table to squeeze her hand.

'Right,' he said. 'There are worse ways of growing old. And we have such good kids to be concerned with. I want to thank you for that. It was your doing. I love you all the more for it.'

'Oh, God, Mike, shut up. You're making me blush. Finish your drink and let's go.'

He grinned. 'Yep, let's do that.'

They drove down the steep, winding road, through lush tropical greenery, past pineapple plantations and rickety, makeshift stores run by Chinese, Japanese, and Hawaiian families, to the road that ran along the seafront of Honolulu, past the Pearl Harbour naval base and adjacent Hickam Field, home of the 17th Army Air Corps. Having decided to eat alone, before meeting Admiral Paris and his wife for drinks in Waikiki, they drove into the centre of Honolulu, through narrow streets filled with bars, pawnshops, Chinese grocery shops, tattoo parlours, and photo galleries, parking near the corner of Maunakea and Hotel Street, outside a window filled with the carcasses of smoked pigs and ducks hung on meat hooks.

'If what we eat looks like what's in that window,' Joan said, 'I don't think I'll get through my meal.'

'You're going to love it,' Bradley replied. 'You'll probably *eat* like a pig!'

'It's always so *noisy* here!' Joan exclaimed good-humouredly.

'That's why I love it, dear.'

They had dinner upstairs in Wu Fat's Chinese Restaurant, surrounded by gilded decorations and walls painted a garish red, under a high ceiling and rotating fans. The food was delicious, the atmosphere exotic, and Joan, as if to prove Bradley right, ate like a pig.

'So many *men* in here!' she whispered, wiping sweet-and-sour sauce from her lips.

Bradley glanced around him and realized that she was right: The place was filled with sailors, marines, and soldiers, some with Chinese, Japanese, or Hawaiian girlfriends, most on their own. Right now they were happy, eating and drinking, having a good time, but he knew that before the night was out there would be lots of fighting. Saturday night in Honolulu was never without its fair share of action, which is why he enjoyed it.

‘God help them,’ he said. ‘They’re the social pariahs of Hawaii. Serving your country doesn’t exactly make you popular. Come on, luscious, let’s go.’

‘You just want to take me down there to sell me,’ Joan said – in this area of Honolulu, close to the docks, servicemen actually queued up in the streets to get into the brothels located above the shops – ‘but I don’t think I’m worth that much.’

‘It’s a fluctuating market,’ Bradley replied, ‘so you might be surprised.’

Joan’s laugh was surprisingly raucous, making Bradley feel terrific, and he put his arm around as they walked back down the stairs, joined the noisy throng in the street, and eventually drove to Waikiki, four miles farther on.

‘We should retire here,’ Joan said, as the taxi cruised along the palm-lined road and she studied the large houses in expansive gardens. ‘For what we pay, you could buy a mansion here and have a really great life: lovely weather, golden beaches, beautiful people. Why are we still in New York?’

‘We’re not in New York; we’re in Connecticut.’

‘Same difference,’ Joan said.

Surrounded by the pink walls and Moorish tiles of the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, they had cocktails with Admiral Paris and his wife, Marisa, the former a silvery-haired, pink-faced, world-weary handsome man, the latter a raven-haired, good-humoured woman whose features, though formed over fifty years, were those of a carefree woman ten years younger.

‘I hope you like that villa we found for you,’ Marisa Paris said as she stirred her exotic cocktail with a straw. ‘Are you happy up there?’

‘Blissful,’ Joan replied. ‘The villa’s lovely and the view is stupendous.’

Marisa sighed melodramatically. ‘Gee,’ she said, ‘I’m glad. I get so nervous finding places for friends of friends. You just never know, right?’

‘Right,’ Bradley said. ‘But you *picked* right, so stop worrying.’

‘Taylor told us to take care of you,’ Admiral Paris said. ‘He described you as two very rare birds – friends worth any effort. You’ve obviously warmed his cold heart.’

Bradley chuckled at that. ‘I’ve never seen his cold heart.’

‘Taylor isn’t cold, but he’s tough – and a good judge of people. A man like that I can trust.’

‘You’ve known him a long time?’

‘Yep. We’ve conducted a friendly rivalry for years: Army against Navy. I claim to sail the high seas, where the air is fresh and healthy, and I tell him

he's just a dog-soldier, a kind of policeman, his nose rubbed in intelligence muck.'

'It's necessary,' Bradley said with a nervous glance at Joan.

'Sure it is,' Paris replied. 'I know that. I just josh him to score the odd point. He isn't bothered at all. In fact, right now he's setting up a kind of centralized intelligence bureau. I'm not sure exactly what kind, but that's his latest obsession.'

'Marisa,' Joan said to Paris's wife, 'are you going to sit here and let them both talk about their work?'

'No way,' Marisa said, placing her empty glass on the table and looking melodramatically determined. 'I'm going to insist we leave right this minute and have us some fun.'

'Right!' Joan said.

'Right!' Bradley added.

Yet when they left the hotel and drove back to Honolulu, he could not help but feel bitter disappointment at learning that a centralized intelligence agency was being set up and he, who had pushed so strongly for its formation, had not been called. Of course he understood why – he'd told Taylor that he wanted out – but he still felt obscurely betrayed, as if, in some part of his subconscious, he had wanted Taylor to insist that he come in.

Dammit, he thought, I'm such a hypocrite. I should learn to grow up...

And yet, as they entered the Naval Officers Club in Pearl Harbour, he looked at Joan's flushed face, saw the radiance of her smile, and realized that in every possible way he had done the right thing.

'Let's have the time of our lives,' he said.

The dance began late in the evening and went on until the early hours of the morning when the white-jacketed officers and women in flowing ballgowns, most more flushed than they had been six hours before, started drifting away, either back to their quarters on the base or, as the cacophony of revving cars indicated, to their homes in the lushly tropical hills above Waikiki and Diamond Head.

Because they had been drinking, Bradley and Joan, at the invitation of Admiral Paris, returned to their home in the officers' quarters, where they had a few hours' sleep. The next morning, after showering and changing into the less formal clothes they had brought with them, they joined Paris and Marisa

for breakfast in their modest kitchen. Outside, in the base and in Honolulu, the church bells were ringing.

'I still feel drunk,' Marisa said.

'Go to church and confess,' her husband said.

'You look surprisingly fresh,' Bradley complimented her. 'It must all be in the mind.'

'It's in *my* mind,' Joan retorted. 'Or at least in my head. My head feels like it's stuffed in cotton wool. What on earth did we *drink* last night?'

Admiral Paris laughed and placed his coffee cup back on its saucer. 'Just a few little cocktails,' he said. 'The ones with flags sticking out of them.'

Then his cup rattled in its saucer and the coffee slopped out.

'What the hell... ?'

The table shook again as Paris stared down at his cup. The other cups and saucers also rattled, then, even as Bradley heard a distant explosion, the floor beneath him shook more violently and the telephone rang shrilly on a table that was bouncing on the tiled floor.

Paris kicked his chair back, picked the telephone up, and was listening with widening eyes when the anti-aircraft batteries outside started firing. 'Goddamn!' Paris exclaimed. 'Right.' Then he slammed the phone back down and stared at the three of them. 'We're being attacked by the goddamned Japanese,' he said. 'They've already attacked Wheeler Field and Schofield Barracks. Dammit, those sons of bitches caught us napping. Their planes are bombing us right now.'

Even as he spoke, a plane roared low overhead and away again, making the house shake. Bradley glanced at Joan, saw her wide, confused gaze, then he followed Paris out of the house, to stand on the porch.

A black pall of smoke was already billowing over Pearl Harbour and a frightening number of Japanese dive bombers, fighters, and torpedo planes were flying in from the sea, their wings glinting in brilliant sunlight, to swoop down in waves and bomb and strafe Ford Island and the harbour.

Bradley saw the bombs dropping, tumbling over like black birds, and heard the awesome blast of the explosions even as fierce balls of fire were lifted up on clouds of billowing, oily black smoke over what he knew were the battleships near Ford Island and the defenceless, parked planes on the airfield nearby.

'Oh, my God!' Joan exclaimed softly behind Bradley. He felt her fingers

tugging at his shirt, as if to pull him back into her.

'Dammit!' Paris exclaimed. 'I've got to get back to my ship!' He glanced at his wife. 'You better get the hell off the base, Marisa. Go with Bradley and Joan. Go back to their place up in the hills and I'll call you later. Okay?'

However, even as he spoke, some Japanese Zeros roared in low overhead, through the black puffs of smoke from the American anti-aircraft batteries, to pass on and strafe downtown Honolulu and the lush hills beyond. A series of explosions tore through the greenery, blowing palm trees apart, setting fire to the foliage, filling the air with flames and smoke between the houses dotting the hills, as the planes, their machine guns still chattering viciously, ascended gracefully and circled back toward the sea.

'No,' Marisa said. 'I'm staying right here.'

'And so am I,' Joan said.

'Then stay indoors,' Admiral Paris said. 'And you better stay with them, Mike.'

'I'll drive you down to the fleet landing,' Bradley said, 'then come straight back. Marisa might need your car.'

'Right,' Paris replied. He hurried into the house and came back out with his naval jacket, still buttoning it even as he kissed his wife's cheek and slipped into the car. Bradley also kissed Joan, then got into the driver's seat, turned on the ignition, and screeched away from the house.

The Japanese planes were still attacking, whining above the explosions and gunfire. Bradley drove past men and women, sometimes even children, who were standing on their lawns or porches, wearing only pyjamas, dressing gowns, or even underwear, gazing up in disbelief at the boiling, black, flame-filled smoke and diving Japanese aircraft.

'Christ!' Paris exclaimed. 'They even caught us with our aircraft on the ground. Ford Island must be a scrapyard!'

Certainly the fleet landing was a nightmare.

Even before he had braked to a squealing halt, Bradley saw the columns of water spewing up between the boats and ships of the fleet, many of which were on fire, pouring black oily smoke, breaking apart and sinking, while the barrels of the guns of the anti-aircraft batteries and surviving ships spat yellow flames. Balls of fire ballooned brilliantly over sinking ships. Sailors in flames were jumping overboard. Japanese Zeroes were bursting into flames and falling into the sea between the ships and boats, where in a haze of gray,

black and crimson-tinged smoke more sailors were trying to clamber into lifeboats or swimming or drowning.

Admiral Paris jumped out of the car as it shuddered to a stop, slammed the door behind him, looked, appalled, at what was happening, then leaned back down to the window and said, 'Thanks, Mike. Now get the hell back to the house and look after our women.'

'Will do,' Bradley said.

As the admiral hurried off to find a boat to take him to Ford Island and Bradley reversed the car, sailors with blistered faces and limbs, their scorched, blackened flesh hanging in strips from blood-smeared bone, were being helped out of whaleboats and carried away on stretchers to the waiting ambulances and hospital trucks. Bradley drove off to a concerto of wailing sirens, blasting ships' horns, whining planes, dementedly chattering machine guns, pounding anti-aircraft batteries, exploding bombs, and bawling or screaming men. Japanese Zeroes were still winging in low overhead, strafing the base, as he drove through the streets of the officers' quarters.

Hardly believing what was happening, Bradley was further shocked when he stopped in the driveway of Admiral Paris's house. Bullets had smashed the concrete paving and stitched a line up the front wall, broken the windows, and peppered the roof.

Mesmerized for a moment by the sight of the broken windows, Bradley finally raced into the house. Then he stopped in his tracks when, just inside the living room, he saw Marisa rocking Joan in her arms and trying to wipe the blood from her soaked clothing as she wept over her.

'Oh, God!' Marisa choked out between her sobs. 'Oh, God, please! Oh, God, Please!'

In one hideous second Bradley took in the bullet-stitched walls, smashed picture frames and furniture, glass-strewn floor, and Joan in Marisa's arms, both covered in blood. Going down on one knee, he saw that the blood was Joan's, heard an anguished groan, realized it was his own, then reached out to touch Joan's forehead. It was icy cold.

'Oh, Jesus!' he said.

Her breast and stomach were covered in blood and her breathing was harsh.

'Call *an ambulance*!' he heard someone screaming hysterically – then realized it was actually his own voice and shuddered convulsively.

‘I’ve already called for an ambulance, Marisa said, sobbing, ‘but they’re all so damned busy. But they’re coming. *They’re coming*!’

‘Joan!’ Bradley hissed despairingly. ‘*Joan*!’

She opened her eyes. ‘Oh, God,’ she whispered, ‘it hurts.’ Her eyes were dazed, but she gradually recognized him and gave him a weak smile. ‘My man,’ she said. ‘My ever-loving, handsome husband. What a fine face you have.’

‘Thanks,’ Bradley said.

‘I’m all right,’ Joan said. ‘Aren't I?’

‘Sure,’ Bradley lied, ‘you’re okay. No problem at all. It’s just a matter of _ ’

‘The children, Mike. Look after the children. And our grandchildren too.’

‘Shut up,’ Bradley said. ‘Don’t talk that way. Jesus, Joan. Oh, my God!’

‘Hey, there, don’t be…’

But her final words didn’t make it; only blood escaped from her lips. Then she coughed and spluttered, choking on that blood, sighed, as if too weary to be bothered, and closed her eyes for the final time.

Bradley was stupefied. He couldn’t believe that she was gone. He kept glancing around him, as if time would move backward, and when it didn’t, he just clung to her, holding her tightly, refusing to let go, and shedding all the tears he had held in since the days of his childhood.

The Japanese planes left and returned, then left for the final time. Bradley accompanied Joan’s body to the morgue and held her hand in the silence.

The only sound was his sobbing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Joan was flown home and buried back in Connecticut, near the house where she and Bradley had shared so much together. Mark and Miriam attended the funeral, bringing their children with them, and even though that made Bradley feel older, it also encouraged him.

Life went on and Joan still lived through her children and grandchildren, all of whom had loved her as much in life as they missed her in death.

Yet it wasn't enough.

He felt broken up inside. He had Christmas with his children and grandchildren and some friends, but the love that they showered upon him

only made him hurt more. He saw the New Year in alone, in a house that now seemed too large, and shortly after, feeling lost in the house, he decided to sell it.

Mark and Miriam didn't need it: they now had their own homes and families. The house was only a morgue for his recollections of things won and lost, a graveyard for his past. Not a home any longer.

'I'm putting the house on the market,' he told Mark.

'Gee, Dad...'

'It's unbearable with your mother gone, Miriam.'

'Yes, Dad,' Miriam said. 'I can understand that.'

He sold it quickly enough, but the contents were a problem, because so much of what had seemed so necessary was now useless debris. He gave his children what they wanted, offered the rest to his friends, gave what was left to various charities, and took only his personal things.

On the last day, when he was sorting through the papers in his desk drawers, he came across the letters from Gladys Kinder in Europe, tied together in chronological order and looking well thumbed.

He sat down, feeling breathless, filled with love and guilt and heartbreak: his love for both women; his guilt over a betrayal that had taken place only in his thoughts; his heartbreak over the loss of both women, one living, the other dead. Feeling confused, he decided to burn the letters. But he couldn't bring himself to do it, so he packed them away with his other things and left his home for the final time.

Needing the bright lights of Manhattan, he took an apartment near his office, started working himself to exhaustion, drank too much, and stayed in at nights, wanting only the silence.

That silence was broken by General Taylor, who dropped in, uninvited.

'You look terrible,' he said.

'I guess I do,' Bradley replied.

'What you need is distraction,' Taylor said, 'and that's why I'm here. Do I at least get a drink?'

Bradley poured him a bourbon. Taylor carried it across the office, taking a seat under the window, in striations of pearly-gray light.

'I'm really sorry about Joan,' he said. 'I don't know what else to say.'

'Don't say anything, General.'

'We've counted the cost,' Taylor said. 'Apart from Joan, it was terrible.

In the first attack, the Japs capsized one battleship and completely destroyed three others. In the second attack, they sank three destroyers and badly damaged two others. Everything on Ford Island was destroyed, including our airplanes, and we had nearly three thousand casualties, most of them fatal. Luckily, they missed the entire aircraft carrier fleet – it was out to sea at the time – but no doubt about the damage they inflicted... And now the United States is at war. We've lost our virginity.'

'Right,' Bradley said, feeling drugged.

'Our almost total lack of knowledge about Japanese intentions,' Taylor said, 'due to the fragmentation of our intelligence gathering and lack of cooperation between those involved in it, has compelled us to do what you've been recommending for years: namely, form a centralized intelligence agency – the Office of Strategic Services, or OSS – which we hope to have running by the middle of next year. I want you to join the organization as an agent.'

'I don't want to,' Bradley said.

'Yes, you do,' Taylor insisted, sipping his bourbon and sounding determined. 'We've just been informed by British intelligence that according to various European resistance groups, remote-controlled bombs and flying rockets are being constructed at a Nazi research centre in Peenemünde, in the Baltic. Based on that information, British intelligence conducted further research and can confirm that in 1936, work did in fact begin on the construction of a secret proving ground in the vicinity of a small fishing village called Peenemünde and that it's since become one of the Nazis' most advanced experimental stations. Analysis of aerial photography taken in the past few weeks shows that the proving ground exists, that the southern part contains workshops where, we believe, the missiles are constructed, and an extensive settlement that has since been verified as being occupied by the scientists. A little farther on, near the village of Karlshagen, are barracks for soldiers and workers, plus a prisoner-of-war camp and concentration camp.'

'Sounds pretty cosy,' Bradley said, not wanting to know.

But Taylor persisted. 'Since we'd already informed the Limeys about your old friend, John Wilson, they're now working on the theory that the new weapons, while ostensibly being made at Peenemünde, may in fact be the indirect products of Wilson's genius in that field, since the rocket team was originally based in Kummersdorf, Berlin, at the other side of a former firing range where Wilson and some other German rocket scientists were working

at the same time.'

'That sounds logical,' Bradley said sourly.

Taylor was unmoved. 'So the British Secret Intelligence Service,' he continued doggedly, 'recently got in touch with us and asked us if we had any opinions about their latest theory. Naturally we agreed that in all probability their theory is substantially correct and that Wilson, the traitorous bastard, is largely responsible for the Peenemünde flying bombs and rockets. This has naturally led all of us to wonder just how advanced Wilson is and what other diabolical innovations he has up his sleeve. It has, in fact, convinced us that he has to be tracked down and taken off the stage – and that's why we want you. We want you to find that son of a bitch and terminate him.'

'I'm too old,' Bradley said.

'Bullshit,' Taylor responded. 'We need you because you were once an excellent pilot, have done unofficial intelligence work both for the US Army and as a civilian lawyer, know a hell of a lot about aeronautics, speak French and German, know Europe like the back of your hand, and are obsessed with John Wilson and what he's up to.'

'True, but I'm still too old,' Bradley said, feeling only the pain of his loss and the lack of enthusiasm for life that Joan's death had engendered.

'No, you're not,' Taylor said. 'You're just in a state of shock. And that's exactly why you need this kind of distraction – and why you'll be good at it. As for your general fitness, if you join OSS, you'll be put through a tough retraining program, with a special emphasis on espionage, self-defence and undercover, or guerilla, operations. So when the time comes, you'll be fit enough. And believe me, Mike, you need this job to help you forget Joan. You need it. So take it!'

Deeply moved by what his friend was trying to do for him, aware, also, that he really *did* need something to distract him from his anguish, Bradley said, 'And once I finish with the training... What happens then?'

'You'll be posted to London, to help the British Special Operations Executive track down Wilson and put an end to his activities. Now do you want it or not?'

Bradley leaned forward in his chair, covered his face with his hands, and accepted that he had to escape.

'I want it,' he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

‘They’re perfect specimens,’ the white-smocked hospital surgeon informed Wilson and Ernst Stoll as he removed the guillotined human heads from the laboratory’s refrigerator and placed them into tin cans.

‘Jewish only?’ Wilson asked.

‘No,’ the orderly said, placing the last severed head in a can and putting the lids back on. ‘When we received a letter from Professor Hirt, the head of the Anatomical Institute of the University of Strasbourg, telling us that the number of skulls in the university’s collection was too limited, we started obtaining them from captured Russian troops, and these heads are mostly those.’

‘All undamaged?’

‘Of course! Once the heads of the living specimens are measured and selected, death is induced by injection, then the head is severed from the body and shipped in these cans, which will be hermetically sealed, to the Anatomical Institute.’

‘Good,’ Wilson said. Turning to Stoll, who was looking distinctly queasy, he said, ‘There’s a lot we can learn from these heads. There are ways we can use them: the psychological and physical creation of the Superman and a work force that has no free will. Himmler’s Institute for Research into Human Heredity, the *Ahmenerbe,* must not be wasted on quasi-mystical research, but utilized for a more practical purpose: medical and surgical experimentation of the most fearless kind. We must look at the human brain and learn how to control it, study the human body and learn how to change it. In doing this, we can create a new kind of man – any kind that we want. This is what we’re doing here.’

‘Can we leave now?’ Stoll asked.

‘Yes,’ Wilson said. After thanking the surgeon, he led Stoll out of the laboratory and back through the corridors of the SS hospital, taking note of the fact that Stoll was still looking queasy and understanding that he could use his moral qualms when the occasion called for it.

Right now, however, he was intent on preparing Stoll for the world he would inherit. To that end, as they passed the guarded doors of other laboratories and operating theatres, he said, ‘Our experiments are wide-ranging and in fact know no bounds, which is why we’re using human beings instead of just animals. It’s through our experimentation on these human

beings that we're learning about brain manipulation, limb and other bodily replacements, the causes, nature, control, and use of fear, even the effects of freezing and decompression, all of which will be useful when we move to our underground colony in Antarctica.'

Ernst nodded thoughtfully, trying to accept the unacceptable. Wilson knew, as they left the hospital, that he would in time do so.

The hospital entrance was heavily guarded by armed SS troops, with more troops placed strategically at the far side of the road. Wilson glanced along the street of this suburb of Berlin, quiet and almost empty in the gray light of August, and thought of how the whole of Germany had become a huge armed camp in which fear, torture, and death were commonplace. It was a prototype for the kind of colony he envisaged in the Antarctic; but the world he would create would be controlled by scientists and dedicated to the advancement of knowledge. It would not be controlled, as Himmler thought, by his blond young gods of war and dedicated to his mystical notions of a world of ice and fire.

'I haven't seen much of you lately,' he said to Stoll, as the chauffeur-driven SS car carried them around the outskirts of Berlin, through the outlying villages, past columns of troop trucks, and on toward the research centre at Kummersdorf, south of the city. 'What have you been up to?'

'My work with the *Lebensborn* organization,' Ernst replied, rolling the window down to let air in, then lighting a cigarette.

'Which many Germans still think are maternity homes.'

'Yes.'

'And this work keeps you busy?'

Ernst sighed. 'It's all for Projekt Saucer, Herr Wilson. As you know, the real aim of the institutions is the controlled breeding of the perfect Aryan, a Nordic super-race, through the disciplined mating of men and women selected in accordance with the racial principles defined by the *Ahnenerbe.*'

'Yes,' Wilson said, feeling impatient, 'I already know that. But are you exploiting the *Lebensborns* for our purposes?'

'Yes,' Ernst said, sounding weary. 'For the past eighteen months, when not actually at Kummersdorf, I've been organizing the kidnapping of thousands of racially valuable children from all over Europe, as well as the Soviet Union, and shipping them to the many *Lebensborns* now spread throughout the Reich, where they undergo special training to Germanize

them. The past records of such children are erased and their parents, if not exterminated, are not told where they are. Within weeks of arriving at the *Lebensborns,* the children can remember little of their past, have been given new names – which also helps them to lose their former identity – and have been taught that they haven't descended from the apes, but from the SS. Given their political indoctrination and total devotion to the Reich, these children, when they become of age, will voluntarily take part in our human stock breeding and go on to create the racially perfect, totally loyal, new breed of man, to be controlled by our Nazi élite in our SS colonies under the ice. You should be proud of me, Wilson.'

It was a slight attempt at levity, so Wilson smiled at him, then glanced up at the bombers heading for England. 'How are things going in Neuschwabenland?'

'Progress is slow and painful, but at least it's being made. Many workers have already been shipped out from the camps and are digging out their underground accommodations in terrible circumstances. The death rate is high – from cold, exhaustion, and often hunger – but the first underground area will soon be cleared. More men and materials will then be shipped in, and by the end of next year, we should be able to start shipping in the scientists, as well as the first children from the *Lebensborns.* It is your side of the work, Herr Wilson, that is now moving slowly.'

'Time is of the essence, I know, but this thing can't be hurried.'

'You must understand,' Ernst said, 'that since the defeat in Russia, our beloved Reichsführer is becoming even more concerned that we perfect your flying saucer, which he views as the ultimate weapon, and also ensure that the underground space in Neuschwabenland is completed and fully manned before the present war comes to an end.'

'The *present* war?'

'As you know,' Ernst replied rather stiffly, almost offended, 'this war is merely the prelude to a thousand-year war – the one that will turn the German soldier into the Superman.'

'Ah, yes,' Wilson said, amused by Stoll's passionate sincerity, '*that* war.'

'Yes,' Ernst echoed him, 'that war. And ever since Stalingrad, which marked the beginning of the end of this war, the Reichführer has become almost desperate to ensure that everything is prepared for our escape to Antarctica.'

‘But everything *is* being prepared, as you’ve just so vividly demonstrated.’

‘Not fast enough,’ Ernst said. ‘That’s why he wants another test flight of the flying saucer. He views it as the most vital part of our operation – an undefeatable weapon, as well as a means of flying in and out of there with impunity – and he’s growing worried that it will not be completed in time.’

‘I’m sure it will be,’ Wilson said, ‘though nothing under the sun is guaranteed.’

‘It has to be,’ Ernst replied, ‘so let’s hope that this test flight is successful. Otherwise there’ll be trouble.’

‘From Himmler?’

‘Yes.’

Wilson had to force himself not to grin. The car had reached Kummersdorf, and as the driver slowed down on the approach road to the research centre, where high barbed-wire fences surrounded flat, windblown fields, he tried to imagine the expression on Rudolph Schriever’s face when the flying saucer, which he was claiming as his own, failed to fly. Wilson knew it wouldn’t fly. He had ensured that it would not, because its failure would give him what he needed to get rid of Schriever and place Stoll on his side.

He had it all worked out.

When their papers had been checked at the heavily guarded gate, they were waved through and proceeded along the road, past the old firing range, now overgrown, to the research centre’s collection of ugly, corrugated-iron and concrete hangars, which also were protected by heavily armed SS troops.

On Stoll’s instructions, the driver took them between two of the hangars and parked at the far end. There, in an open space between the firing range and an overgrown hillock, the latest version of the so-called ‘Schriever’ saucer was sitting on its lowered steel platform, prepared for takeoff. The gas turbine rotors that had been housed in the previous model’s four hollow legs had been replaced with a series of variable jet nozzles arranged all around the outer rim, just below the saucer’s centre of gravity. Combined with the machine’s lack of rudders, ailerons, or other protruding surfaces, this gave it a more graceful, seamless appearance.

Looking eerily beautiful in the fading mist of late morning, the saucer appeared to tower over the men who were either working around it or simply

observing it from behind the concrete bunkers and heat shields placed across the hangar's open doors. Even as Wilson and Stoll clambered out of the car, Himmler was being escorted from of the hangar, his pince-nez reflecting the sunlight. He was accompanied by his usual bodyguards. Schriever, again in his flying suit, walked proudly beside him. Himmler stopped advancing when he saw Wilson and Stoll coming toward him.

'Ah!' he said softly. 'Captain Stoll and our American genius! I thought we had lost you.'

'No, Reichsführer,' Ernst replied, stopping with Wilson in front of him. 'We were checking the progress of the medical and surgical experiments at one of the *Ahnenerbe* hospitals.'

'Impressive, are they not?'

'Yes, sir.'

'And many of them were suggested by Herr Wilson, here, who is nothing if not fecund in many fields.'

'Thank you, Reichsführer,' Wilson said, then nodded coolly at Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever, whose darkly handsome, saturnine features were illuminated with the glow of his newly found arrogance. 'Are you looking forward to the test flight, Flugkapitän?'

'Yes, Herr Wilson, I am. I have the confidence that the saucer will fly this time.'

Wilson smiled. 'I hope so.'

'I am always a little confused,' Himmler said in his quietly probing, slightly sardonic manner, 'as to who is responsible for what regarding this saucer. According to certain sources, including yourself, Flugkapitän Schriever here is mostly responsible for the machine; according to others, the credit should go to you. Who, then, do I praise or blame should this machine fly or crash?'

'I am willing to take the blame if it crashes,' Schriever said too quickly, thus demonstrating an unexpected slyness at taking the credit for the machine. However, while Wilson had previously let him take most of the credit, in the hope that he would not attempt to bite the hand that fed him by badmouthing him to Himmler, he now had good reason for taking the blame for what was about to happen.

'No, Reichsführer,' he said. 'I can't let Schriever do that. I must confess that I'm responsible for the latest innovations in this model – particularly the

multidirectional jet-propulsion system – and if anything goes wrong, and I pray it won't, the blame is all mine.'

Convinced that the machine would work and that Wilson was trying to steal his credit, Schriever turned red and was just about to retort when Stoll, after giving Wilson a puzzled glance, said diplomatically, 'I think we'd better begin the test, gentlemen, while conditions are excellent.'

'Of course,' Himmler said.

Schriever saluted and marched off, upright and determined. He was climbing the ladder up the side of the saucer even as Wilson retreated behind the concrete bunker with Ernst, Himmler, and the bulky SS bodyguards. Staring through the protective, reinforced glass viewing panel of the bunker's wall, Wilson watched Schriever lowering himself carefully into the raised, centrally located pilot's cockpit. When he was strapped in, Habermohl and Miethe replaced the Perspex canopy, locked it into position, then climbed back down to the ground and pulled the ladder away. When they also were safely behind a concrete bunker and a waving flag had indicated that the test could begin, Schriever switched on the saucer's electrical system. Wilson heard the bass humming sound and saw the variable jet nozzles around the rim turning down toward the ground. When the jet nozzles were facing the earth, the engines roared into life.

The noise was extraordinary, an earth-shaking clamour, and the red and yellow flames spitting out of the downturned jets formed a circle of fire that was obscured and distorted by the smoke and dust billowing up from the scorched, hammered ground. The saucer vibrated violently, sank down on its collapsible legs, then bounced back up, swayed dangerously from side to side, and eventually lifted slightly off the steel platform, borne up on a bed of spitting flames, the smoke swirling around it.

It hovered tentatively in the air, its silvery body tinged with crimson, the yellow flames and black smoke forming a river of light around it. Then it rose even higher, thirty metres, then fifty, and hovered uncertainly again, tilting slightly from left to right. Then the jet nozzles moved and the flames shot out horizontally. As they did so, half of the nozzles cut out and the saucer was thrust forward instead of upward, in a sudden, brief, horizontal flight.

Very brief, indeed – as Wilson had known it would be – because just as it shot forward, heading toward the old firing range, the side not spitting flames tilted dramatically toward the earth and the flaming nozzles, now aiming at

the sky, increased its downward momentum.

‘Oh, my God!’ Ernst exclaimed.

Schriever turned on the other jet nozzles in time to make the saucer level out just as it was about to hit the ground. It bounced along like a spinning top, out of control, turning wildly, shrieking and sending up great curving waves of soil and debris even as the engines cut out and the smoke streamed away from it.

‘Get him out!’ Ernst bellowed at the engineers.

Habermohl and Miethe ran like the wind, carrying the stepladder between them, and threw it onto the sloping side of the saucer and climbed up to the cockpit. They unlocked the cover, let it fall to the ground, hurriedly helped a shocked Schriever out, and ran back to the bunker, practically dragging the pilot between them. They had just hurried behind the concrete wall when the saucer exploded.

It shuddered and collapsed, its legs giving way. Then it lay there, tilted on one side, some of its metal plates blown off, the flames shooting out from inside it and licking over the cockpit.

Himmler stared at Wilson, his cheeks pale, his lips tight, then he glared at Ernst and stalked off, saying nothing at all.

‘We’re in trouble,’ Stoll said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

'We can no longer depend on the American genius or Projekt Saucer,' Himmler said in his quiet, chilling manner from behind his desk in SS headquarters in Berlin. 'Whether or not an actual workable saucer can be achieved is beside the point, since clearly this war won't last as long as we'd hoped and the time required to complete the flying saucer will not be available.'

'With all due respect, Reichsführer,' Ernst said, relieved to have found Himmler so calm after the disastrous test flight but wondering why his throat was still dry, 'we must give Schriever and the American more time. If we wish to populate Neuschwabenland, we will need something more advanced than our finest airplanes.'

Himmler held up his hand in a rather lordly gesture of rejection. 'Yes, yes,' he said, 'I know that. I'm not a fool, after all. But since the American's saucer has failed again – and he *did* admit that he was responsible for it – I'm convinced that we can no longer depend on it as our final weapon, but must instead turn our attentions to Wernher von Braun's V-1 and V-2 rocket projects at Peenemünde. All the tests there have been highly successful. Indeed, I witnessed two tests myself, as well as others, at my own rocket centre at Grossendorf. Given the excellent results, it is anticipated that remote-controlled rockets will soon fall on London. Since our beloved Führer also believes in the rockets, that's what we should concentrate upon.'

'Yes, sir,' Ernst said, not wishing to contradict his increasingly distracted Reichsführer, though he knew that Himmler's real reason for concentrating on the so-called secret weapon program was based on his desire to take control of the whole of Germany's military production.

Indeed, to this end he had recently tried to talk Wernher von Braun into working under his command at Grossendorf. After failing to do so, he had persuaded General Fromm into letting him reinforce the *Abwehr* security net around Peenemünde with his SS, which actually was his first step in removing the hated *Abwehr* from his path. His next move, then, as Ernst well knew, would be to gain total authority over the V-I and V-2 rocket projects,

despite the protests of the *Abwehr's* army generals – and he would surely succeed.

'So, Kapitän,' he continued, 'I will leave you in charge of Projekt Saucer, for what it's worth, while I personally supervise the more successful activities of von Braun and his rocket team. I hope this makes sense to you.'

'Naturally, Reichsführer.'

In fact, Ernst was secretly delighted. Ever since the humiliating surrender at Stalingrad, followed all too closely by the reverses in Africa and catastrophe in Italy, Himmler had shown increasing signs of emotional instability – finely suppressed hysteria, a slight quavering in his voice, the constant blinking and rubbing of weary, dazed eyes. Ernst, who sensed that Himmler was growing mad, was more wary of him. Not that Himmler was alone. Berlin was now filled with rumours that Adolf Hitler was going mad, or was at least in bad health and frequently doped with the drugs supplied by his quack, Dr. Theo Morell. If that was true, it would do Himmler little good because, as Ernst knew, when Himmler gazed upon his beloved Führer, he looked into a mirror.

Ernst still believed in the SS, in the promise of the New Order, but he could no longer trust his once-beloved Reichsführer. Therefore he was pleased that Himmler had lost interest in him and Projekt Saucer, and was, instead, going to turn his attentions elsewhere.

He almost sighed with relief.

'There is this other little problem,' Himmler said, clasping his hands under his babyish chin and looking severe.

Ernst suddenly felt nervous. 'A *problem,* Reichsführer?'

'Yes, Kapitän, a problem. I believe you had a similar kind of problem in Poland – one concerning a woman.'

Suddenly remembering Kryzystina Kosilewski in Cracow, deeply shocked that Himmler should have found out about her, Ernst could only swallow with a dry throat and let his heart race.

'Poland, Reichsführer? If you mean…'

Himmler waved his hand and smiled, like a father to his son.

'A Jew bitch, I believe,' he said.

'Yes, sir, but I assure you, I…'

Himmler waved his hand again and kept smiling, as if amused by Ernst's discomfiture. 'It's all right,' he said. 'That's all in the past now. We can but

hope that you've learned your lesson from it and will not repeat the mistake.'

'Definitely not, sir!'

'How is it, then, Kapitän Stoll, that according to a report received this day from one of your fellow officers – '

Ritter, Ernst thought bitterly.

' – your wife has been seen to fraternize with a Wehrmacht officer whose sympathies, it is known, are no longer entirely with our beloved Führer. Even worse, your wife has also been reported as drinking too much lately and, apparently, making loud, drunken pronouncements in public about what she deems to be the failings of our glorious Third Reich. Do you have an explanation for this, Kapitän Stoll?'

'I swear to you, Reichsführer, I didn't know,' Ernst said, caught between humiliation and outrage to learn what Ingrid was doing behind his back. Of course, she had told him that she was quietly living a separate life and he had tried to deal with it by forgetting about it. Now he had not only been reminded of her other men, but been informed that her separate life was not being lived too quietly. He felt like murdering the bitch.

'You didn't know she was seeing another man?' Himmler asked in his oddly pedantic manner.

'No, sir,' Ernst lied.

'Are you having marital problems, Kapitän?'

'To be frank, Reichsführer, yes. Though I'd hoped they wouldn't interfere with my work.'

'Most admirable, I'm sure. Unfortunately, we cannot have the wife of one of our finest officers making a fool of herself in public, much less offering insulting remarks about our glorious Third Reich while cavorting with a potentially traitorous officer.'

'No, sir, of course not. What do you suggest, sir?'

'The officer in question is Wehrmacht Lieutenant Eberhard Tillmann. Formerly a fine officer, he took part in the blitzkreig against Poland and was also one of the first to enter Paris. Unfortunately, since the reversal of our fortunes at Stalingrad and in Africa, he has taken to making subversive comments to those who will listen. What do *you* suggest, Kapitän?'

Already incensed that the man was his wife's lover, Ernst was even more outraged to hear that the bastard had been given what he had been denied: a part in the blitzkreig against Poland and the subsequent, magnificent advance

across Europe and right into Paris.

'With your kind permission, Reichsführer, I will have this man transferred to the Eastern Front to take charge of a penal regiment. I will also ensure that my wife keeps her peace in the future.'

'Excellent,' Himmler said. 'I respect a man who knows when to place his duty before personal feelings. You are dismissed, Kapitän Stoll.'

Ernst saluted and left the office, choking up with fury, and marched to the exit, not looking at his fellow SS men. He noticed only the usual collection of pale-faced, frightened people waiting to be interrogated, standing along the corridors, huddled pitifully on the wooden benches, ignored by the SS guards with the pistols and submachine guns who, in their black uniforms and leather boots, looked decidedly ominous.

A nation living in fear, Ernst thought, is a disciplined nation. We will need that when we move underground to forge a strong, fearless Aryan race.

In the meantime, before that happened, he was being assailed by mundane problems, the main one being the wife he had once loved so dearly.

He walked out of the building, into rain and a cold wind, and waved at one of the SS cars parked in the road. The driver moved up to him, let him in, and then drove off. Sinking into the rear seat, Ernst looked out at the ruins that had been caused by the Allied bombing and thought of the night Hitler had become the Chancellor of Germany and he and Ingrid had gone to bed in the Adlon Hotel. They had loved one another then with the innocence of idealism, but now both of them were older than their years and had become bitter enemies. Human relationships were treacherous, ephemeral, without substance, so he was glad to be involved with the SS and what it represented: an ideal state beyond petty, individual considerations; the subordination of the self to the whole in order to create a new, better man in an orderly world.

This was something to cherish.

He slapped Ingrid's face as soon as he walked into the apartment.

'Don't look so shocked,' he said quietly. 'You know what it's for.'

She covered her stinging cheek with her hand. 'No,' she said, 'I don't know what it's for. And you have no right to – '

'Eberhard Tillmann. A Wehrmacht lieutenant, I believe. Presumably as good in bed as he was on the march to Paris, but now joining my wife in publicly insulting the Fatherland. *Now* do you understand?'

Ingrid removed her hand from her face and stared defiantly at him. ‘Yes, Ernst, now I understand. As I also understand why we won Paris – he *is* that good in bed!’

Ernst slapped her again and she fell against the sideboard, straightening up as some decorative plates fell off and smashed on the floor. The children’s bedroom door opened and two faces appeared: Ula, now nine years old, and Alfred, now six. Ernst, who saw so little of them these days, was shocked by how mature they looked, how quickly time passed.

Ashamed that they should have heard him smacking their mother, he covered it with a display of cold anger.

‘Stay in your room and close the door,’ he said. ‘Your mother and I are talking.’

‘Yes, Papa,’ Ula said, her azure eyes emphasized by the golden hair that fell on her blushing cheeks. Then she pushed the gawking Alfred back into the room and gently closed the door .

‘A nice thing for the children to see,’ Ingrid said, again rubbing her stinging cheek. ‘Their father striking their mother.’

‘Not as bad as eventually learning that their mother’s been behaving like a whore.’

‘Please note that I don’t charge him, Ernst. I do it for love.’

He wanted to strike her again, but refrained because of the children. ‘Do you know how I learned about it?’

‘No.’

‘From Himmler! You understand, you stupid bitch? I learned about my wife’s public infidelities from the Reichsführer himself! Can you imagine my shame?’

‘The Reichsführer?’ At least she had the decency to look shocked. ‘How did *he* learn about it?’

‘Your damned boyfriend, this Lieutenant Eberhard Tillmann, is known to have made comments against the Third Reich in general and the Führer in particular, so the SS had him placed under surveillance, which means they also watched you. Reportedly you’re just like him now. You drink too much and talk in public. Your own insulting remarks about the Reich – borrowed from him, no doubt – have been overheard by the SS officers conducting the surveillance, one of whom, I’m sure, was Franck Ritter, who can’t stand my guts. *Do you know what you’ve done, you whore*?’

He had hissed his last words with explosive, pent-up fury and now grabbed her by the lapel of her blouse, jerking her close to him.

'You could have ruined me,' he whispered heatedly. 'You could have had me stripped of rank. You could have had me transferred as a guard in one of the camps. *Damn it, didn't you think of that*?'

She jerked away from him, looking at him with frightened eyes. 'No,' she said, 'of course I didn't think of that! I'm in love. I just – '

He stepped up to her again, leaned over her, wanting to crush her. 'Don't tell me you're in love. I don't want to hear those words. You said you would live your own life *quietly*, and I agreed to let you do it, then you turned it into a public performance for the whole world to see and hear. Drunk in public with your traitor! Parroting his traitorous words! And then I'm called into the office by the Reichsführer – *by Himmler*! – and told to put my own house in order. Damn you, I could kill you!'

'*Don't hit me again*!'

He had indeed raised his hand, but remembered the children and lowered it, then moved away from her, a safe distance, where his temper could cool.

Studying her, he was startled by how little she had changed, by the realization that she looked almost as young today as she had the day he'd proposed to her, ten years ago. God, how *he* had aged since then, yet this bitch had remained unchanged: still the same short-cropped blonde hair, the same green eyes, the same pale-faced beauty. He realized then, with deep bitterness, that in some helpless, torturous manner he still loved her and wanted to have her.

She *deserved* to be punished.

'I won't hit you again,' he said. 'You won't make me stoop to that. But you must put an end to this affair and keep your mouth shut in public.'

'I promise to be more careful in public. I give you my word.'

'And your affair with Lieutenant Tillmann?'

She shook her head. 'I can't... I can't possibly stop seeing him. I don't think I can do that.'

'You must!'

'I'm sorry, Ernst, but I can't. If I said I would, I'd be lying.'

'Then, my dear, I'll make it easy for you – with my Reichsführer's agreement.' Her gaze turned from confusion to dread as he savoured his own words. 'As soon as I return to barracks, I'll arrange the transfer of your

beloved Lieutenant Tillmann to a penal regiment on the Eastern Front. Do you know what that is, dear? A penal regiment is composed of soldiers who've been found guilty of some offence and given the choice between military prison or serving in a regiment used solely for the most dangerous missions. The chances of survival for the regiment's members are therefore slim, though they *do* have a chance. So Lieutenant Tillmann, your traitorous lover, will be gone within the week and is unlikely to ever return. Don't worry about trying to keep yourself away from him: you won't have a choice.'

Ingrid threw herself at him, beating at him with her fists. He grabbed her wrists and pinned them behind her back and forced her into the wall. She didn't look so pretty now, for her face was streaked with tears, and he held her until she stopped struggling and sagged in his arms. When he released her, she slid to the floor, took a deep breath, then eventually calmed down.

'I'm leaving home,' she said, 'and I'm taking the children with me. I'm going back to live with my parents in Wannsee. If you want to see the children, you can visit them there, but that's *all* you can do. We'll be man and wife only in name. That should keep your superiors happy. Then as soon as this war ends, I'll apply for a divorce. Believe me, I'll do it.'

'That's fine by me, Ingrid.'

He went in to see his children, embraced them passionately and kissed them, then quickly left the bedroom and went to the front door. He passed Ingrid who remained kneeling on the floor with her head bowed, and left without looking back, not even slamming the door.

It was a dignified exit.

'My handsome Kapitän!' Brigette exclaimed with throaty sensuality, tugging him into her embrace and pushing the door closed behind him. She was wearing only her dressing gown, through which he felt her animal heat, and he was instantly aroused by her full breasts and sly, pressing loins. Yet even as he pressed his lips to her neck, she pushed him gently away from her. 'Greedy little boy,' she said with a mocking smile. 'Did you bring me a present?'

'Yes,' he said, his ardour dimmed a little as he handed the wrapped gift to her. 'A diamond necklace – a very *expensive* necklace – from that shop on Tauentzienstrasse.'

‘Ah!’ Brigette exclaimed with a bright, greedy smile as her long, painted fingernails tore the paper open. ‘Then it *must* be expensive!’ She threw the paper on the white carpet, held the diamond necklace on high, let it dangle from her fingers, turned it around, and studied it in the wintery light slanting in through the window. ‘*Wunderbar*!’ she said softly.

‘Put it on,’ Ernst said.

‘You sound rather hoarse, my dear Ernst.’

‘Put it on!’ he repeated, with emphasis.

She stared thoughtfully at him, eventually gave a knowing smile, then placed the necklace between her breasts and clipped it behind her neck. ‘What now, my love?’

‘Take the dressing gown off.’

Brigette did as she was told, but slowly, seductively, like the professional stripper she was, and then stood before him in a lazily sensual pose, curvaceous and marble-pale, naked except for the necklace glittering on her full breasts.

‘Was I worth it?’ she whispered.

‘Yes,’ he said.

‘Then come and take what you paid for.’

He had her right there on the floor, on a carpet as soft as eiderdown, not worrying about love or its loss, surrendering himself to pure lust. Brigette wrapped her legs around him, writhed under him, rolled above him, trailed her wet tongue down the length of his heaving body and then over his lips and eyes. He wanted that and nothing else, a loveless coupling, her expertise, and his pleasure was increased by the knowledge that she cost only money. She did not demand his loyalty or arouse his emotions just to poison them; she gave him what he wanted for a price that he could easily afford. He wanted that now – his only commitment was to the Fatherland – and so he took it and revelled in his freedom and orgasmed with pleasure.

Later, when he had bathed and dressed, Brigette made him a meal that he washed down with wine and followed with cognac, after which, though it was still only afternoon, he felt drunk and self-pitying.

‘Ingrid’s leaving me,’ he confessed, ‘and she’s taking the children with her. She had a lover and now she’s leaving me! Such is feminine reasoning.’

Brigette licked at her glass of cognac. ‘*You* have a lover,’ she teased. ‘You have a mistress: me.’

‘That’s different. I’m a man. And it wasn’t until Ingrid and I were growing apart that I took up with you.’

Brigette chuckled. ‘Such is *male* reasoning, my pet! And as I recall it, Ingrid only took on a lover when she found out about you and me.’

‘She’s a whore,’ Ernst said.

‘No, darling, *I’m* a whore. Ingrid is only a wounded woman who’s now taking revenge.’

‘I don’t care,’ Ernst said. ‘I’m not interested in her motives. I only know that our marriage has been poisonous on both sides and I don’t want any more emotional involvements as long as I live. I have my work and it costs me no emotion while giving me great satisfaction. That’s all I want now.’

Brigette smiled and sipped some cognac. ‘There speaks a true man,’ she said. ‘In the end, all men turn to their work for the satisfaction they lack at home. Soon you won’t even need me: you’ll make love to the SS.’

‘You’re being sarcastic,’ Ernst said, ‘but there’s a certain truth in what you say. My allegiance to the SS, to the Fatherland, is now stronger than love or blood. The Reich towers above personal concerns and is founded on discipline. That’s what I want now – discipline – not wasteful emotions. Yes, thank God for a man’s work.’

He left shortly after, having sobered up sufficiently to drive, and went directly to the research centre at Kummersdorf, to have words with Wilson.

It was growing dark when he arrived there, the buildings swept by restless spotlights. He parked and hurried into the main hangar, past the stone-faced SS guards. Wilson was in his glass-walled office, studying drawings of a flying saucer prototype, but he raised his head when Ernst entered, to look at him with that unblinking, disconcerting gaze.

He had been in the hospital recently for some mysterious operations, and certainly they seemed to have been successful, for now, though he was gray-haired and lined, he looked otherwise remarkably youthful. And his eyes, even though he was smiling faintly, had the brightness of ice.

‘Captain Stoll!’ he exclaimed softly in his oddly glacial, polite manner. ‘This *is* a surprise! I was just about to finish up and go home. What brings you here so late?’

‘Some news,’ Ernst replied.

‘Regarding the failed test flight?’

‘Yes.’ Ernst glanced through the windows at the hangar beyond and saw the scorched, gutted saucer on the metal platform, some metal plates hanging loose. ‘Himmler was most upset – ’

‘I gathered,’ Wilson interjected dryly.

‘ – and claims that he now has more faith in the V-I and V-2 rocket project at Peenemünde than he has in our project. So, he’s going to switch his attention to that and leave us to struggle on without support, with me in charge, until he decides what to do about us.’

Ernst was startled when he saw what he thought was the beginning of a smile on Wilson’s lips, but the American, as if realizing what he was doing, retreated instantly back into a solemnity that showed not the slightest trace of concern.

‘So what’s going to happen to me?’ he asked in a surprisingly calm, almost academic manner.

‘He didn’t mention you personally,’ Ernst said. ‘I think he’s just going to forget you. You’re safe for the moment, but your time here could be limited. We’ll just have to wait and see.’

Wilson nodded. ‘Yes, Captain.’

Ernst realized instantly that Wilson was actually pleased with what he had heard.

He just wanted to be left alone.

Perplexed, Ernst said, ‘Good night, Wilson,’ then turned away and walked out.

He had a miserable three weeks, living mostly in the SS barracks, feeling depressed, and returning only occasionally to his apartment, which, having been vacated by Ingrid and the children, simply depressed him even more. However, his feeling of being in limbo regarding Projekt Saucer was resolved when, in early September, he was called back to the Reichsführer’s office.
Trying to sound as casual as possible, Himmler said, ‘You have heard, have you not, of the recent bombing of Peenemünde by the RAF?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ernst replied.

‘Exactly *what* have you heard, Kapitän?’

‘That Peenemünde was seriously damaged,’ Ernst said, deliberately understating the case, knowing full well that on the night of August 17, Wernher von Braun’s rocket research centre on the Baltic had been bombed

by a mass of RAF Lancasters and Halifaxes, which dropped thousands of tons of explosives and incendiary bombs, reportedly almost totally destroying the complex.

'And that's all you know, Kapitän Stoll? That Peenemünde was *seriously* damaged?'

'Yes, Reichsführer.'

'Then let me give you the full facts,' Himmler said in an unusual display of frankness. 'Fifty of the important development and test buildings were destroyed, including Wernher von Braun's laboratory. Not one of the hundred-odd buildings used to house the scientists was left standing. The foreign workers' settlement was a heap of rubble. The concentration camp suffered greatly. And, finally, included among the dead were several hundred German girls from the women's auxiliary service, one hundred and seventy-eight scientific workers, Dr. Walter Thiel, and senior engineer Helmut Walther. A total loss of seven hundred and thirty-five people, plus the destruction of sewage and power lines, water mains, railway tracks, and the road running down the middle of the complex. In short, Kapitän Stoll, it was for us an unprecedented disaster.'

'I'm sorry, Reichsführer.'

'We will recover, Kapitän' Himmler insisted, sounding unusually passionate. 'We *will* recover!'

'Of course, Reichsführer. Naturally.'

As if satisfied with Ernst's confirmation of his own faith, Himmler nodded solemnly, adjusted the pince-nez on his nose, then became more relaxed.

'I'm sure I don't have to tell you,' he said, 'of my conviction that Peenemünde could not have been bombed had some disgusting traitor not betrayed us.'

'Yes, Reichsführer,' Ernst replied, despising himself for this grovelling.

'So,' Himmler said, 'because of this conviction, and also because of the subsequent air raids on the Zeppelin and Henschel-Rax works, I insisted to our beloved Führer that everything connected with the rockets should be put under the care of my SS.'

'He agreed?'

'Naturally, Kapitän. And I have since decided that the experiments involving the rockets will be moved to central Poland, the development

works to caves in the mountains near the Traunsee, in Austria, and mass production to our underground factories in Nordhausen, in the southern Harz Mountains. Meanwhile, the eastern side of Peenemünde will be rebuilt and camouflaged from the air in a way that makes it look like a deserted battlefield. You agree with this, yes?'

'It's brilliant, Reichsführer. But if we move the development works to Nordhausen, we will need to expand the labour force there.'

'That has already been arranged,' Himmler retorted, in the testy manner of a man whose judgment is being questioned. 'Three thousand prisoners from Buchenwald will be used as slave labour and housed in a new subcamp named Dora, which also will be underground. We will then expand Dora until it has approximately fifteen thousand prisoners, which should be enough.'

'Excellent, Reichsführer. I will be proud to take command of – '

But Himmler cut him short with an impatient wave of his hand, which was, as Ernst had long noted, rather effeminate. 'No,' he said. 'You will not be in command. Since I have already put you in charge of Projekt Saucer – which, I must confess, I now have grave doubts about – I am placing General Hans Kammler in charge of the transfer and, subsequently, the whole mass-production plant, which will now be known as the Nordhausen Central Works.'

'Yes, sir!' Ernst said, trying to hide his shock.

'Do you have any further questions, Kapitän?'

'No, sir.'

'Then you may leave.'

Realizing that he had just been removed from his position of authority over the SS secret weapons program and relegated to what Himmler now viewed as a relatively minor Projekt Saucer, Ernst left the SS headquarters in a state of confusion.

He took the news straight to Wilson.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Arriving in London in February 1944 as an OSS colonel, Bradley was completely unprepared for the full extent of the city's devastation. Having remembered London from his many pre-war trips to Europe, he was shocked by the scorched, blackened ruins and debris-strewn rubble, the ugliness of the barrage balloons at the end of their steel cables, the gun emplacements in the parks, the sandbagged doorways, blackout curtains, and reinforced walls of even the city's most elegant buildings.

When he impulsively mentioned this observation to British Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wentworth-King, shortly after meeting him in the headquarters of the Special Operations Executive at 64 Baker Street, the raffishly good-humoured SOE officer told him that much of the devastation was fairly recent, because London was in fact suffering its heaviest air raids since the Blitz of May 1941.

'The blighters are coming over practically every night,' the lieutenant colonel told him, 'so keep your head down, old chap. Take a chair. Have some tea.'

Weary after his night flight from Washington but otherwise feeling unusually healthy because of his weeks of intensive OSS training in physical fitness, espionage, self-defence, and guerrilla operations, Bradley pulled up a chair at the other side of Wentworth-King's desk and appreciated the hot tea that was poured for him.

'I've never seen so many troops in my life,' he said, 'as I've seen in the streets of London today. And not only English. Also Irish, Scottish, Welsh, French, Hungarian, Polish, Australian, Canadian, and American. They formed a regular flood out there. Just how soon do you expect the big push?'

'Fairly soon,' Wentworth-King said.

British reticence. Bradley knew it and was used to it. 'Just how soon is "fairly soon," Colonel?'

‘In good time,’ Wentworth-King said.

Bradley sighed. ‘This is a pretty damned good cup of tea,’ he said.

‘Naturally,’ Wentworth-King replied. ‘It *is* English, after all.’

‘Three cheers for the English.’

Wentworth-King smiled, lit a cigarette, then glanced down at the papers on his desk and turned some of them over. ‘Mmmm ... Quite a record.’

‘Thanks,’ Bradley said.

‘The Distinguished Service Cross, the Distinguished Service Medal, and the Medal of Honour for exploits in the battlefields in France in 1918,’ Wentworth-King insisted upon reading aloud, as if he hadn’t read the documents before. ‘Unlikely member of the Republican Party in New York – ’

‘Why unlikely?’ Bradley interjected.

‘One naturally assumes that those of Irish extraction will be Democrats.’

‘I’m sorry I missed the boat.’

‘On the contrary,’ Wentworth-King continued with a slight, amused smile, ‘you didn’t miss the boat at all, but travelled far and wide on it... A successful lawyer with offices in Wall Street. Specialist in international law and used your knowledge to assess, on behalf of the US secretary of state, the military aims and capabilities of Europe, particularly Nazi Germany, before the outbreak of war. Encouraged by boredom and the fact that you were too old to take active part in this war to perform other unofficial services for General Dwight Taylor of US Army Air Force intelligence. Eventually, through him, and with the blessing of President Roosevelt, you were given the job of laying the groundwork for some kind of centralized intelligence agency, rather like our own. Worked at this in a purely unofficial, civilian capacity whilst trying to establish a more formal intelligence organization to deal with the European situation. When OSS was finally established, based on the Office of the Coordinator of Information, or COI – which ironically was based on your unacknowledged recommendations – you were invited by General Taylor to join the new intelligence organization, did so, then underwent retraining, and, as a much fitter, hopefully more dangerous man, ended up at the other side of my desk. Why, Colonel Bradley?’

‘Why *what?’*

‘Why have you ended up at the other side of my desk? Our intelligence man in Washington requests that we bare our breasts to you, though does not

tell us why. What are you *after*?'

'The benefit of your experience,' Bradley said diplomatically. 'OSS is a relatively new organization – '

'Established two years ago,' Wentworth-King interjected with the air of a man who likes to get his facts right and wants you to know it.

' – and while we're proud of our track record so far, we're willing to admit that compared to the British Secret Intelligence Service, we're pretty raw meat.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Compared to your organization, Lieutenant Colonel, OSS is badly lacking in real know-how. I've therefore come here for two purposes: the first is to learn all you can teach me; the next is to make use of that learning for a particular mission.'

Pleased with the compliments, Wentworth-King smiled, inhaled on his cigarette, then blew a cloud of smoke. 'Exactly what would you like us to teach you that you don't know already?'

'I've already had basic intelligence training by your fellow Brits at a COI training school on a farm in Toronto. It was tough, but not enough. I'd now like to be trained in code-breaking by one of your signals intelligence units at Bletchley Park. I'd also like to be briefed on British propaganda and psychological warfare methods, including the so-called Doublecross or XX system in which, I'm informed, you use captured German spies as counteragents and playbacks.'

'Informed by whom, Colonel Bradley?'

'By your intelligence man in the White House.'

'I am reassured to hear that. Anything else?'

Bradley shrugged and spread his hands in the air. 'Anything you can give me. I'm hoping to parachute into Europe, so obviously I'll need extensive training in that. I also need to perfect my otherwise excellent French and German – and I need to know what to watch out for when I'm in Nazi-occupied territory. You get the picture, I'm sure.'

'Are you sure you're up for this, Colonel?'

'I'm an exceptionally fit forty-nine, Lieutenant Colonel, recently trained by the US Marines and some of your own boys. I think I can handle it.'

Wentworth-King nodded and offered a half smile. 'And what exactly is your mission, Colonel Bradley? Do we help you with that as well?'

‘You already have,’ Bradley said. ‘We’re after an American rocket scientist named John Wilson, who is, according to your reports, working under a false passport at a Nazi research establishment at Kummersdorf, near Berlin.’

‘Ah, yes,’ Wentworth-King said. ‘I remember him well. An interesting chap, your Mr Wilson. Not exactly patriotic, but bright, and well looked after by Jerry.’

‘We think he may be contributing more than rocket research to the Nazis.’

‘Oh?’

‘Yes. In the States, as far back as the early 1900s, Wilson was already experimenting with a crude form of atomic propulsion. When, after the Tunguska explosion of 1908, the US government attempted to take over his project, he ruthlessly destroyed most of the evidence of his work, then went underground. After working anonymously in America for a good thirty years, he fled the country and went to work just as ruthlessly for the Nazis. Since it’s also believed that he’s contributed to the Peenemünde rocket program, we’re seriously concerned about what else he’s up to and think he has to be stopped. That’s why I have to be parachuted in as soon as humanly possible.’

The lieutenant colonel sighed, tapped his teeth with a pencil, and looked decidedly sceptical. ‘Germany?’ he queried. ‘Berlin? You actually think that’s possible, Colonel? And how far do you think you would get if you *didn’t* get captured? Kummersdorf is an SS research establishment – top secret, well guarded. You wouldn’t stand a hope in hell, old son. It’s just not in the cards.’

‘It has to be,’ Bradley said.

The lieutenant colonel sighed again, as if dealing with a child, then dropped the pencil and raised his hands in the air in mock defeat.

‘I am here to serve,’ he said. ‘I’ll do all I can. In the meantime, let me take you to your lodgings and then, while you’re waiting for decisions, I’ll ensure that you learn all you need to know. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ Bradley said.

He was pleasantly surprised to find himself located nearby in a small but cosy private apartment in Shepherd Market, Mayfair. After unpacking, he lay fully clothed on the bed and tried to sleep, but instead, as he often did these days, fell in and out of troubled reveries, in which he vividly relived his happier

days with Joan, then their mutual pleasures and triumphs, and finally that ghastly day at Pearl Harbour, when she had died in his arms.

He still cried at remembering that.

Bradley wept. The tears rolled down his cheeks. Lying there on his back, he was consumed by a dreadful anguish, a grief that was mixed up with guilt because he, who had been with Joan at the time, had actually survived. He knew to think this way was senseless, an aberration of wounded emotions, but the thought that he hadn't deserved to live when Joan had died was one that never quite left him. It also brought back the memories, waves of love, pits of guilt, making him see the good and bad in their marriage dreadfully magnified... Yes, the two years since her death would have been hell had it not been for OSS.

General Taylor had rescued him, inviting him into the organization, ensuring that throughout the year immediately following Joan's death, Bradley was worked to exhaustion and distracted relentlessly. He'd been reacquainted with marine training, introduced to new weapons, taught espionage, self-defence, and guerilla operations, turned into the kind of fighting machine that murders quietly in darkness. He had become someone else, someone busy, never alone, and when it was finished, when he was fit and highly skilled, Taylor had put him to work. He had spent another year in America, tying up the loose ends on Wilson, and only then had he been shipped out to London... to find himself in this comfortable, private apartment, weeping tears for the dead.

Thank God, he had work to do.

He slept through the afternoon and awakened in darkness, when he remembered to pull his blackout curtains across before turning the lights on. Then he had a bath, put on his army uniform, poured a drink, and took Gladys Kinder's letters out of his kit bag. There were a great many of them – she was a prolific writer – and he spread them out in separate years on the bed and then started reading them.

She was part of his guilt.

Her letters formed a vivid picture of the life she had led over the past decade: the Spanish civil war, then Czechoslovakia and Italy, then the fearsome days of the Blitz and London as a city at war, at once defiant and tragic. The letters had told him about all that, but also about her private life – the numerous men she had known, her good and bad affairs, her fear of

losing her independence combined with the fear of growing old alone – and they had told him, in racy jokes with a serious subtext, that she had fallen in love with him the minute she met him, had never quite forgotten him, and even now cherished the memory of him and wrote to him to touch him.

They were extraordinary letters.

It wasn't surprising that his throat became dry when he picked up the telephone.

She answered immediately.

'In my letter I told you to call me at eight-thirty p.m.,' she said, 'and you called on the dot. It can only be Mike Bradley calling. Welcome to London, Mike.'

He was smiling already.

They agreed to meet an hour later in a famous pub in Soho, in the West End, and when Bradley left his apartment, he felt like a nervous schoolboy going on his first date.

With the blackout in force, he found himself in moonlit darkness, walking along with the aid of a torch beamed down at the pavement. He went along Half Moon Street, turned into Piccadilly, and walked toward the Circus, passing the Ritz Hotel and the elegant facade of Fortnum & Mason, also passing inky black doorways surrounded by sandbags and often filled with the shadowy figures of men and women in intimate contact. He heard chuckling and ecstatic groaning, voices calling invitingly to him, and saw cigarettes glowing in that darkness where other women were waiting.

At first he was disbelieving, then shocked, then amused and touched, and soon accepted that a city at war was a place like no other.

This was more evident in Piccadilly Circus, where cars, taxis, tramcars, and buses, all with their headlights dimmed, crawled through a flood of soldiers, sailors, airmen, and their women, as they poured around Eros, mostly drunk and in good cheer, then swept along Shaftesbury Avenue, to tumble, with much shouting and laughing and giggling, between piled-up sandbags and through blackout curtains, into the countless pubs and clubs that were spread liberally, noisily, around the network of packed side streets that led into Soho.

Bradley too eventually slipped between piled-up sandbags and through blackout curtains to find himself in a smoky, old-fashioned pub jam-packed

with servicemen of every nationality. Having been warned about this by Gladys, he tried to find her in the jostling mass of noisy revellers, failed to recognize her, so fought his way through to the bar and tried to order a whiskey. He failed at that also, because the barman was too busy, but then a hand fell on his shoulder and squeezed it affectionately as a woman's voice called out to the barman, 'John! Get my friend here a Scotch! And be quick about it!'

Mike turned and saw Gladys Kinder smiling at him in that vividly remembered, still laconic manner. She was ten years older and had gray in her auburn hair, but otherwise she seemed just the same and he was instantly drawn to her.

'Well, well,' he said, finding himself bereft of better words. Then, feeling ridiculously formal, he offered his hand.

Gladys looked down at his hand, grinned in amusement, then took hold of it and vigorously shook it.

'You're too much,' she said. 'You're more formal than the English. I didn't expect to find you tearing my clothes off, but to not even get a kiss on the cheek – '

'You're right,' Bradley said. 'Sorry.' He leaned forward and kissed her cheek, feeling childishly embarrassed. Then he was given his glass of whiskey by the barman and raised it to Gladys. She touched her glass to his and they both drank, then smiled at one another in a silence that was awkward only on Bradley's side.

'God,' Gladys finally said, 'it's good to see you again after all these years. You're still the most attractive man on earth, though I know you'll hate me for saying it.'

'No, I won't,' Bradley said, even though he was blushing. 'I'm embarrassed, but I can't help feeling pleased. All men are boys in the end.'

'How right you are, Mike.'

'You're looking good.'

'That's a pleasing white lie. I'm forty-eight this year and I don't like it, though I'm learning to live with it. In London, in this war, that's much easier to do, since there's nothing like the constant threat of death to make you appreciate life, regardless of age and a spinster's traumas.'

'I can't imagine you suffering such traumas.'

She grinned and shrugged. 'Well, not really. Reporting this war keeps me

busy, as well as giving me the chance to meet a lot of people. As for men, since I'm always interviewing those fighting the war, I know more men than I can count, and in that sense have a pretty good time. Still, I needed to write to you, Mike. I only met you twice, but I really missed you and that's something I can't ignore. I hope you missed *me* a little bit.'

'Yes, Gladys, I did. And that took me by surprise. I didn't know how much I'd miss you until you left and then I couldn't believe it. I mean, after only two meetings...' He shrugged. 'It seemed unbelievable.'

'Romantic?'

Bradley blushed again. 'Yeah, I guess it was, in a way. And I really loved getting your letters, and that seemed odd as well.'

'Love at first sight, Mike.'

'I can't believe in that, Gladys. Some people, they just meet and hit it off – and I guess we were two of them. It's a rare kind of friendship.'

'Can men and women be friends that way?'

'Yes,' Mike said doubtfully, 'I think so.'

'Nothing sexual? Not even a little bit?'

'You're teasing me, Gladys.'

She chuckled at that, finished her drink, ordered two more. 'Anyway,' she said, 'I'm sorry about your wife. That must have been hard on you.'

'It was. I even stopped reading your letters for a while. They just made me feel guilty.'

'I teased you a lot in those letters.'

'That's right, Gladys, you did.'

'And you never knew when I was joking or not?'

'No.'

She chuckled again, this time in a throaty, sensual manner. 'I'm a regular bitch that way.'

'I used to get disturbed.'

'And now?'

'We're here as two old friends.'

'Anything you say, pal.'

Yet her broad grin got to him, drawing him into her warmth, and he knew that he was lying and was not just her friend: that he had been attracted to her from the start and felt that way right now. It was ridiculous (they were too old for such nonsense) but there it was, plain as day. There was something lasting

between him and Gladys Kinder, and he couldn't deny it.

He felt that he'd known her forever.

'So what are you actually in London for?' she asked him as they sipped at their fresh drinks.

He glanced around the crowded pub, saw sweaty faces through clouds of smoke, the uniforms of many different nationalities; heard a piano pounding in the far corner, voices singing a bawdy song.

'Are you asking as a friend or as a journalist?'

'Take your pick,' she replied.

Bradley grinned at that. 'It's too noisy to talk in here,' he said. 'Can we go for a walk?'

'Sure, Mike. Let's go.'

They finished their drinks and left the pub, wandered through Soho, which was packed, then crossed Charing Cross Road, took some dark side streets, and ended up in Covent Garden Market. They kept their torches turned down, making their way through moonlit darkness, passing the empty vendors' carts, which were covered in canvas for the night, and then crossing the much busier Strand and on down to the Embankment, where the moonlight and stars shone on the River Thames and streaked the water with silver. There were whores along the Embankment as well, negotiating with the servicemen, and Bradley felt a little embarrassed when he passed them with Gladys.

'I love it,' she told him, as if sensing his embarrassment. 'The less violent, more human commerce of war: a pound of flesh for some silver. You can't keep human nature down. So,' she added, getting back to her last question, 'why *are* you in London?'

'I'm a member of OSS,' he said. 'Have you heard about it?'

'Of course, Mike. The Office of Strategic Services. A fairly new intelligence agency. Are you somehow linked up with the invasion?'

'No. I'm still after Wilson. That's why I'm here.'

Taken by surprise, she stopped walking and stared at him, then she shook her head and gazed across the river, to where the warehouses of the docks were silhouetted against the clear, starlit sky.

'I'd forgotten all about him,' she said. 'That old man who was great in the sack. Good God, he must be over seventy by now! Is he still alive?'

'We think so,' Bradley said, standing beside her, shoulder to shoulder.

‘We receive reports from European resistance groups and he still features in them. At least an American scientist does, so we assume that he’s Wilson. We think he helped the rocket scientists and is working at a research establishment near Berlin. The Brits aren’t concerned about him – they’re willing to wait until the invasion – but our government still wants to talk to him about a few things, notably the Tunguska explosion that you told me about and, even more worrying, about what he’s creating for the Nazis. We have reason to believe he’s creating an extremely powerful weapon that could be turned against us when we attempt the invasion. That’s why I want to go now.’

‘*Go* now? You mean parachute into Germany?’

‘Right.’

‘Goddammit, Mike, that’s crazy. It’s plain suicidal.’

‘I think I can make it.’

‘You think wrong, believe me.’

‘I still want to go.’

‘Why not wait until the invasion and follow the troops into Germany?’

‘They may not get there.’

‘They will. And in the meantime you could have a good time in London, the world’s finest city.’

‘I can’t wait that long.’

‘It won’t be long.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘I know it’s going to be this year. *Everybody* knows that.’

‘I don’t care. I want to go as soon as possible. I’m frightened that he’s going to create something unbeatable before we get there to stop him. If he can invent something more powerful than the rumoured rockets, he could prevent us from winning the war.’

‘The secret weapons are only rumours.’

‘I’m not too sure about that.’

‘And that’s why you can’t wait to get to Wilson?’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘I’m sorry, Mike, but I don’t believe that. I think it’s something much more than that.’

‘Such as?’

‘You tell me.’

Bradley sighed. ‘I’ve got a bee in my bonnet about this Wilson. He’s haunted me for years. I have to meet him, face to face, and find out exactly what makes him tick. He appears to have few normal feelings – you confirmed that when we first met – but he’s clearly a genius, he wants anonymity, and his ruthlessness appears to know no bounds. The man’s like a ghost: he exists and yet he doesn’t. I dream about, or imagine, the things he’s invented and they keep me awake at night. I know all about him, yet know nothing. I have to study his face.’

‘You’ll see nothing but the face of pure logic: a void that transcends morality. You’ll see the end of the world.’

‘Maybe that’s what I’m after.’

Gladys was just about to reply when a distant siren wailed, then another, and another, until the very air seemed to vibrate with that terrible sound: a high, nerve-shattering wailing.

‘What the hell…?’

‘Those are the air-raid sirens,’ Gladys said. ‘That means the Germans are coming. Have you ever seen an air raid, Mike?’

‘No.’

‘Then let’s stay right here.’

‘Aren’t we supposed to take shelter?’

‘They come over nearly every night,’ Gladys said, then reached out for his hand. ‘Let’s just stay here and watch.’

Glancing left and right along the Embankment, Bradley saw men and women hurrying in every direction, heading, as Gladys explained to him, for the concrete-and-brick air-raid shelters, the platforms of the underground train stations, or the more comforting confines of pubs, clubs, hotels, or even the rooms of prostitutes. Even as he was watching them, he heard a distant, muffled rumbling emerging out of staccato explosions, and he looked along the river to where clouds of black smoke were bursting under the stars and being criss-crossed by phosphorescent lines of tracer bullets that formed a web around the rise and fall of shadowy shapes flying in from the sea.

He was looking at an immense fleet of German bombers – too many to count.

‘God almighty!’ he whispered.

Gladys squeezed his hand and the wind beat at his face as more ack-ack guns opened fire. The beams of searchlights swept the sky. He heard the

distant explosions, felt the ground beneath him shaking, and saw clouds of black smoke billowing up from sheets of yellow flame and spreading out to cover the rooftops in a sky turning crimson.

'They're pounding the docks,' Gladys said. 'God help the poor bastards there.'

She squeezed his hand again and he appreciated the gesture, being almost overwhelmed by the spectacle along the river, by the knowledge that the fabulous mixture of fire and smoke and light was being created by destruction and death on a terrible scale. Over there, where the bombs were falling, people were dying in flame and smoke, being crushed and suffocated and incinerated and blown apart, while the buildings were collapsing into rubble and hot ash and choking dust.

Yet from here it was beautiful.

Bradley choked up with emotion, feeling torn by awe and shame, then raised Gladys's hand to his cheek and pressed her knuckles into his skin in mute affirmation. Then the bombers were overhead, suddenly roaring like ravenous beasts, and he actually saw the bombs falling, turning lazily in the moonlight, and then the river erupted in a series of mighty explosions, the water geysering up and fanning out and raining down over the debris of the boats that had been hit and blown apart while he was blinking.

Icy water poured over him and he pulled Gladys down, held her tight behind the wall, and looked up to see the British fighter planes, the famous Spitfires, descending on the German bombers like birds of prey, their guns spitting fire as they dove and climbed and returned, until one of the bombers exploded, shuddered in mid-air, erupted in fire, and went down through a black pall of smoke that obscured its last seconds.

The rest of the bombers passed on, heading toward the East End, still dropping their bombs, their guns firing at the attacking Spitfires. Gladys tugged at Bradley's hand. Looking at her, he saw her pointing toward the city. The dome of St Paul's Cathedral, majestic in its halo of criss-crossing searchlights, towered over the rubble that burned and smoked far below, protected, as if by a miracle, from the destruction surrounding it.

Bradley's heart was racing. He wanted to cry with joy. He felt Gladys' hand, her fingers slipping between his, then she raised his hand to kiss his fingers one by one as the ground shook and bellowed. Bradley took a deep breath, tasted smoke, heard more bombing. Then he saw Gladys' face,

erratically illuminated in flickering crimson and white light, moving in toward him, her eyes wet, until her lips touched his. They kissed there, on the Embankment, kneeling behind the protective wall, then clung to one another, exploring each other like children, and stood up only when the bombers had returned and flown back to the sea, leaving silence and a pall of black smoke that was streaked with red flames.

'I love you,' Gladys Kinder said.

Bradley was speechless.

Of course, she laughed about it later. She had meant it, but she laughed about it. She told Bradley that the expression on his face had just made her want him more. Yet they didn't go to bed together. They talked around it, but didn't do it. Bradley wanted to do it, but felt foolish, too old, and Gladys said that to do it would probably spoil a beautiful friendship.

'Right,' Bradley said. 'I agree.'

He loved being with her, loved her flirting and teasing, and was enthralled by her conversation, her stories of politics and war, and was jealous when she mentioned the many men she had known over the years. She showed him the city, always kissed him good night chastely, and in letting him know she loved him and simply wanted to be with him, she raised him out of the grave of his grief and turned him into a new man.

Yet he still wanted to complete his mission, to find Wilson before it was too late. After five unparalleled days with Gladys, he tried to get back to work.

'I'm sorry,' Lieutenant Colonel Wentworth-King said after pouring Bradley a cup of tea in his cramped office in the busy SOE headquarters, 'but your request to parachute into occupied Europe has been denied.'

'*What*?'

'I think you heard me.' Wentworth-King sat behind his desk and lit one of his awful British cigarettes. 'You will not be allowed into occupied Europe until after D-Day.'

'What the hell!'

But Bradley's intended protest was cut off by an airy wave of the hand and a rather chirpy, British public-school grin. 'Fear not,' Wentworth-King said, holding up a bulging, official envelope. 'You have not been forgotten. I have here, in this envelope, enough detailed instructions to keep you busy for

the next year or so – and certainly busy enough until the invasion.' Still grinning, he handed Bradley the envelope while asking, 'Did you know about this when you first came to see me?'

'No,' Bradley said, staring at the bulky envelope. 'Whatever it is, I don't know a damned thing about it.'

'Operation Paperclip,' Wentworth-King explained. 'You were concerned with the Peenemünde scientists, I believe?'

'Yes,' Bradley said.

'Well, OSS has decided to mount an operation, code-named Paperclip, to seize the German rocket teams and prevent them from falling into the hands of the Soviets, who will also be greatly interested in them.'

'And what about Wilson?' Bradley asked.

'According to reports recently received from the same European resistance groups that originally informed us about the Peenemünde rocket project, the rocket teams have recently been moved from the Baltic to underground sites in Nordhausen, and possibly nearby Bleicherode, in the southern Harz mountain ranges of Thuringia. Since those establishments are top secret and under the control of Himmler's most trusted SS troops, and since we're no longer talking about an occupied country, where you might expect assistance, but about Germany itself, it's felt that a parachute drop into Thuringia would be suicidal. It's therefore been decided that your time would be spent more profitably in mounting, staffing, and planning the specific aims of Operation Paperclip, which will come into effect once Europe has been breached.'

'That may be too late,' Bradley said in growing frustration. 'If Wilson's already helped the Nazis to build remote-controlled rockets, God knows what else he has in the pipeline. We have to stop him *before* the invasion commences, since he might come up with something even worse than the reported Peenemünde rockets.'

Wentworth-King simply shrugged. 'Can't be helped, old chap,' he said. 'For a start, we simply can't have anyone parachuting into Germany at this particularly sensitive point in time. Second, it's believed that Wilson, whilst contributing to the V-1 and V-2 rocket projects, was never actually a member of von Braun's team and is therefore probably still at Kummersdorf – which makes it even more sensible for you to follow the invasion troops into Berlin, once the invasion is underway. Either way, you're staying here, old son, until

Operation Overlord commences.'

'And when will that be?'

'It's all down to the tides,' Wentworth-King said, 'and here in England they *can* be unpredictable. In the meantime, I suggest you collect who you want for Operation Paperclip and otherwise enjoy your time in London. Anything else?'

'Go to hell,' Bradley said.

He stormed out of the lieutenant colonel's office with the bulky envelope under his arm, on the one hand bitterly disappointed and even outraged, on the other hand surprisingly, helplessly relieved that at least he could see more of Gladys Kinder, who had given him back the will to live.

She was a huge consolation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

'We *must* talk to them,' Wilson said as Ernst drove him from the BMW plant in the Berlin suburb of Spandau, back around the dreadful ruins caused by increasing Allied bombings, and then south toward the research complex at Kummersdorf. 'As you've just seen, the new multidirectional jet propulsion system for the flying saucer works beautifully and can be installed any day now. Once we do that, we can arrange a test flight of the saucer, but we must sort this business out first.'

'It's dangerous to go behind Himmler's back,' Ernst insisted, glancing out at the bombed suburbs, the skeletal houses and mountains of rubble, and deciding that he must persuade Ingrid, who was living with her parents in the nearby suburb of Wannsee, to move out of Berlin before it was too late. 'No one can be trusted these days. If they talk, we'll be shot.'

'They won't talk,' Wilson replied, looking straight ahead, thinking, his eyes bright with that icy intelligence that seemed not to know fear. 'Like you, they're now wary of Himmler's state of mind and think he's becoming unpredictable. They're also worried about how he'll react when the end finally comes – and they know it's coming.'

'*No one* knows that,' Ernst insisted, clinging stubbornly to a vain dream. 'The Allies haven't yet launched their invasion and might never do so.'

'They will and you know it.'

'We can use the rockets against them.'

'The rockets won't be enough to stop them. Now nothing can stop them.'

'Don't sound so pleased,' Ernst said.

'I *am* pleased,' Wilson confessed. 'Not because of my countrymen, nor because of the British, but because I want to go where I can work without feeling threatened.'

'Does *nothing* else matter to you?'

'No,' Wilson said flatly.

Ernst glanced to the side as they passed some blackened ruins. He saw a

one-legged child hopping along on crutches, surrounded by other children, all of whom were looking for valuables in the high mounds of rubble in which broken glass and twisted metal glinted in the light of the sun. The ruins were extensive, surrounding him on all sides, and he thought of the awesome power of modern technology and then glanced at Wilson.

He was seventy-four years old but looked perhaps sixty.

Ernst knew that it was due not only to a lifetime of strict dieting and the ruthless application of mind over matter – Wilson's will was unyielding and he used it to recharge his energy – but also due to the surgical operations that he'd recently been having in various SS hospitals. Operations on the stomach, on his varicose veins and joints, reportedly even on the heart, perhaps more than that. The experimental work had been done on humans, on the inmates of the camps, and then Wilson, when he thought the risk reasonable, had them performed on himself, so far with remarkable results. Indeed, at seventy-four years of age he was more vigorous than Ernst.

And Wilson was different from other men in more ways than one.

Exactly what was he?

Ernst thought of him as a mutant, a creature not quite human, someone who had transcended normal emotions to embrace the god of pure logic, beyond kindness or cruelty. Ernst had tried to find out why – what childhood trauma had perverted him – but every record indicated that he'd had a lonely childhood, his parents strict but decent, so the only explanation for his unique personality was his extraordinary intelligence. Such intelligence is beyond pity, feeding on logic, not emotion, and Ernst was now convinced that Wilson was an evolutionary accident, the product of pure reasoning, a human being for whom emotions were no more than unwelcome distractions. He was neither cruel or kind, good or bad, right or wrong: He was a creature impelled by the inhuman force of his mind: a mutant, without emotions, the personification of man's evolutionary drive toward mathematical absolutes.

His was the face of the future.

Ernst shivered involuntarily, gripped the steering wheel tighter, and was feeling decidedly uneasy when the ruins of Berlin gave way to open fields and eventually, as clouds covered the sun, to the barbed-wire fences and heavily guarded main gate of the research complex at Kummersdorf.

Waiting for them in Wilson's office in the main hangar were Hans Kammler, the blond, blue-eyed, former head of SS construction programs,

now a brigadier and in charge of the Nordhausen Central Works in the Harz Mountains of Thuringia; and Artur Nebe, former commander of one of the notorious Action Groups in Russia, head of the dreaded *Kriminal Polizei,* or Kripo, the Prussian intelligence service, and now a full general of the SS, though his allegiances shifted with the wind and his actions were shadowy. Both men were wearing their SS uniforms and looking slightly annoyed.

'You're late,' Kammler said.

'I'm sorry, sir,' Ernst replied. 'We were observing a test at the BMW plant at Spandau and it took a little longer than expected.'

'I'm not interested in excuses,' Kammler said. 'My time is limited and I resent waiting for anyone, much less for an officer of lower rank.'

'Yes, sir, I understand, but – '

'How are things at Nordhausen?' Wilson asked, deliberately changing the subject in an unusual display of tact.

'Livelier than they are here,' Kammler said.

'The rockets are still being produced?'

Kammler practically sneered. 'Of course, American,' he said. 'A total of one hundred and forty V-2s were produced in January and February alone. Another hundred and seventy were produced in March, and a further three hundred in April. With luck, we'll soon be aiming them at London, and then – '

'They won't stop the invasion,' Wilson said. 'They'll just cause a nuisance.'

'And your flying saucer will do better?' Nebe asked sceptically.

'Yes,' Wilson said.

'So far it hasn't even flown,' Kammler said.

'The saucer we've been openly testing is Rudolph Schriever's adaptation of my work. The saucer I'm talking about, the *Kugelblitz,* is the one we've constructed at Spandau without Schriever's knowledge. We've just tested the new jet engines today and now know it will fly.'

General Nebe, who was a lover of intrigue, leaned forward in his chair to say, 'What's the difference between your saucer and Schriever's? And why haven't you told Schriever about yours?'

'Because I don't trust Himmler,' Wilson said boldly, 'and Schriever is Himmler's man.'

Ernst felt a tremor of fear, but willed himself to show nothing, He caught

Kammler's searching glance and looked away, too nervous to meet it.

'We are *all* Himmler's men,' Nebe said softly.

'Himmler's not the man he once was,' Wilson replied. 'It's rumoured that he sees the end in sight and is starting to crack up ... just like the Führer.'

There was a long, dreadful silence, as if everyone was in shock, then Kammler, coughing into his fist, said, 'Continue, American.'

'As you know, it was Himmler's dream to create a colony of SS élite under the ice of Neuschwabenland in the Antarctic and protect it from the world with highly advanced weapons, including my saucer.'

'Yes,' Nebe said, 'we *do* know.'

'Then you must also know that the first of the underground accommodations has been constructed, that some of the finest SS troops, some scientists, and the necessary slave workers have already been shipped there, and that an escape route has been organized for those of us who wish to avoid imprisonment or even death here in Germany.'

'Yes,' Nebe said, 'we do. And we also know that your flying saucer is supposed to be the ultimate weapon, but now you tell us these stories. I repeat: I want to know about you and Schriever. Why the deception?'

'Because it's my belief that Himmler's forgotten the Antarctic and thinks only of using the saucer to fight the Allied invasion, when it comes.'

'And if, as you say, your saucer works, what's wrong with that?'

Wilson turned his gaze upon Kammler, who had spoken with icy sarcasm. 'Because to stop the invasion we'd need a great number of flying saucers and there's no way we can construct them in time. And that in turn means that if Himmler's paranoia keeps him in Germany, the war, the Antarctic colony, and the saucer will all be lost to the Allies. And then all of us – me and Captain Stoll here, you, Brigadier Kammler, and you, General Nebe – will undoubtedly be tried as war criminals, found guilty, and hanged.'

There was another uneasy silence, a brief trading of questioning glances, then Kammler, his blue eyes clear beneath the blond hair, said, 'So we make our escape to the Antarctic... with your flying saucer... without Himmler... Which gets us back to Schriever.'

'You're a clever man, Brigadier.'

'I don't need your compliments,' Kammler said. 'Just tell us your plan.'

Awed by Wilson's icy control, but also terrified of where it was leading, Ernst glanced across the large hangar and saw Schriever's saucer on its

platform. Yearning for a cigarette but frightened of lighting one, he returned his gaze to the men in the small, spartan office. Kammler and Nebe were an odd couple, one blond and blue-eyed, the other dark and unreadable. Wilson, with his silvery-gray hair and lined face, was as unfeeling as stone.

None of these men is truly human, Ernst thought, *and I have sold myself to them.*

It was a dreadful admission...

'If Himmler gets any worse,' Wilson said, speaking softly, seductively, 'he'll change his mind completely about the Antarctic and refuse to let us go there. He'll want us to make a last stand in Germany – to go down with the Führer.'

'Yes,' Nebe said. 'He will.'

'Our first task, then,' Wilson continued, 'is to make him forget Projekt Saucer and turn his attentions elsewhere.'

'Understood,' Kammler said.

Wilson nodded. 'Since for the past couple of years I've only been testing the Schriever saucer – which will fly, but not much – and letting Schriever take most of the credit for it, Himmler now trusts Schriever more than he trusts me. However, he's already turned away psychologically from the project and instead is pinning most of his hopes on the V-2 rocket program.'

'Which is exactly why he placed me in charge of it,' Kammler noted.

'Correct,' Wilson said. 'Which is all to the good. We can't trust Schriever, who knows nothing about the Antarctic, so we have to get rid of him while keeping Himmler happy and giving us the freedom to prepare our escape without interference.'

'We are listening,' Nebe said.

Ernst sucked his breath in, feeling tense, and saw Wilson's quick glance. Then, to his amazement, Wilson smiled, almost victoriously, before turning back to Kammler and Nebe.

'The prototype for the real flying saucer,' he said, 'is a small, saucer-shaped, remote-controlled anti-radar device, which I've dubbed the *Feuerball* because, when it flies, it turns white hot and becomes a ball of fire.'

'I know nothing about this,' Kammler said, looking upset.

'No,' Wilson said, 'you didn't, but now you do... Because now is the right time.'

'Please explain,' Kammler ordered icily.

‘The *Feuerball* is an armoured object powered by a special turbojet engine that’s radio-controlled at the moment of takeoff. Then, attracted by the enemy aircraft’s exhaust fumes, it will automatically follow that aircraft, automatically avoid colliding with it, and automatically short-circuit its radar and ignition systems. During the day this device looks exactly like a shining disc spinning on its axis – or a silver ball – but by night it looks like a burning globe. This is actually a fiery halo around the armoured device, caused by the exceptionally rich chemical mixture that over-ionizes the atmosphere in the vicinity of the target and so subjects it to extremely damaging electromagnetic impulses.’

‘And if this *Feuerball* is faced with the guns of the aircraft its pursuing?’ Kammler asked.

‘It will fly away automatically,’ Wilson replied.

‘How come?’

‘A thin sheet of aluminium has been inserted under the armoured plating of the *Feuerball,* and this acts as an automatic defensive switch. A bullet piercing the armoured plating will automatically establish contact with that switch, trip a maximum acceleration device, and cause the *Feuerball* to fly vertically out of range of the enemy aircraft’s guns.’

‘Sounds wonderful,’ Kammler said. ‘But what’s the difference between the small, so-called *Feuerball* and your large flying saucer, the *Kugelblitz*?’

‘Schriever’s saucer is in fact a crude form of flying saucer, constructed from ordinary metal and using a primitive propulsion system. The *Kugelblitz,* on the other hand, is a piloted version of the *Feuerball.* It has the advantage of being constructed from a special metal and also using the most advanced form of jet propulsion that’s yet been invented.’

‘I’m not an engineer,’ Nebe complained.

‘The *Feuerball*,’ Ernst explained, directing his words to Kammler, who like him was an engineer, ‘is a perfectly symmetrical disc, devoid of all surface protuberances. Nevertheless, even with the *Feuerball*, the boundary layer limits its speed. In order to get rid of the boundary layer completely – and in order to make use of the dead air, not only for acceleration, but for manoeuvring as well – what Wilson required was a porous metal that would act like a sponge, remove the need for air intakes altogether, and create what our famed engineer Schrenk called *frictionless airflow.* Such a metal was recently created by our scientists at Gottingen and Volkenrode: a compound

of magnesium and aluminium, called *Luftschwamm,* or aerosponge. Wilson used it for the construction of all his flying saucers, thus solving the problem of the boundary layer and, thus, all previous limitations on speed and manoeuvrability. The *Feuerball* and the *Kugelblitz*, then, are extraordinary aircraft.'

'You've already described the *Feuerball*,' Kammler said, looking more interested. 'So apart from its size, why is the *Kugelblitz* even better?'

'The *Feuerball*,' Wilson said, 'not only spins around its vertical axis, but automatically follows its target, makes its target's radar and ignition malfunction by filling the immediate vicinity with a gas that, when burning, creates a damaging magnetic field, and also flies away automatically when attacked. Yes?'

'Yes,' Kammler agreed.

'Now let us enlarge this flying fireball,' Wilson said, as if giving a lecture in a classroom. 'The larger disc, *the Kugelblitz*, will also spin on its own axis, but with the addition of gyroscopic stabilization, a pilot's cabin can now be placed on that axis, with the main body, or engine, of the disc spinning around the fixed cabin. We then add to the enlarged, pilot-carrying disc a form of radio that can cancel at the pilot's discretion the return signals, or blips, from the enemy's radarscope and so render our flying saucer undetectable. Next, we have electromagnetically or electroacoustically controlled firing weapons, we have cannons that spit ignition-damaging gas instead of shells, we possibly have various laser or pulse-beam weapons – in development right now – and we have devices that ensure that our flying saucer will automatically retreat from enemy attacks. Add to all this the fact that the disc is made of an alloy – courtesy of the Riva del Garda complex – that can withstand enormous pressure and a temperature of one thousand degrees Centigrade and that, being porous, can take the air in like a sponge and then use it to increase its own propulsion to almost unbelievable speeds.'

Still an engineer and unable to hold in his excitement, Ernst found himself leaning forward in his chair to say excitedly: 'Add it all up and what have we got?'

'The *Kugelblitz*,' Nebe said quietly.

'Yes!' Ernst exclaimed. 'The enlarged and enhanced offspring of the *Feuerball.* A *piloted* machine in which a single mass of wing, tail, and fuselage has been formed into the one gyroscopically stabilized, vertical-

rising, soon-to-be supersonic flying disc.'

'That's our strength,' Wilson said.

'So how do we protect it?' Kammler asked.

'We're back to Schriever,' Nebe said.

Yes, Nebe enjoyed intrigues – they were food and air to him – and Ernst looked into the dark light of his gaze and saw the blood that had formed it. Nebe would take new life from this conspiracy and become its strong arm.

'Yes,' Wilson said, 'we're back to Schriever. Now that Himmler trusts Schriever more than he trusts me, we must confirm him in his faith by telling him that I'm trying to impede Schriever's progress, that for that reason we should be parted, and that Schriever should be given his own research centre elsewhere – somewhere less accessible either to me or to the Allies – to enable him to continue his work without interference.'

'Which in fact means that *you'll* be able to continue your work without interference,' Nebe said, enjoying this, 'and that the escape route to the Antarctic can be organized out of sight of Schriever's spying eyes.'

'Precisely,' Ernst said, surprised to hear himself sounding so enthusiastic, but unable to help himself. He had wanted to be a scientist, after all, and this was pure science.

However, Kammler simply stared coldly at him, before turning to Wilson. 'I'll do it,' he said. 'Clearly there's no choice. It will be your task, over the next few weeks, to let Schriever steal – for want of a better word – the credit for the *Feuerball* and to convince him that its basic principles can be used to enhance his own saucer. When you've done that, he'll undoubtedly take the *Feuerball* to Himmler and I, being in charge of the project, will be informed. I will then do as you've suggested and recommend an area near Prague, in Bohem, as the new location for Schriever's project. This will ensure that he's not in Berlin when the Allies arrive here.'

'And if the Allies arrive here,' Wilson said, 'they'll also get me.'

'Correct,' Kammler said. 'So, since I'm also in charge of the rocket program at Nordhausen, I will also request that your project be transferred to Kahla, a small village near there, where, as I'll tell the Reichsführer, I can keep my eye on it, ensure that any innovations you may come up with are passed on to the more important rocket program, and protect both projects more easily from the Allies as they advance. I think he'll fall for this.'

'So do I,' Wilson said.

‘And from there, in the Harz Mountains,’ Nebe said, ‘we can make our escape when the time comes.’

‘So be it,’ Kammler said.

Ernst glanced at Wilson, saw the shadow of a smile, and knew in that instant, beyond doubt, that he would get what he wanted.

A few hours later, when darkness had fallen, as Allied bombs fell from the sky and Berlin blazed and crumbled, Ernst made loveless love to Brigette, burying himself in her slick thighs, and accepted that any future he might have would be mapped out by Wilson.

Berlin burned all around him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Bradley awakened late in the morning to the familiar sound of broken glass being shovelled out of the gutters in the street below. Slightly hungover from the previous evening's pub crawl with the indefatigable Gladys Kinder, and not helped by a restless night in which new, disturbing sounds had been added to the German bombings, he groaned melodramatically, rubbed his eyes, then sat up on the bed.

It was nearly eleven o'clock. Sunlight was slanting in between the curtains, illuminating the empty space beside him in the bed, where he wanted Gladys to be, though he sometimes said otherwise. She had been there for drinks and he had often walked her back to her room in the Savoy Hotel, but beyond good-night kisses and the silent touching of foreheads, he and the notoriously bold-tongued Gladys had done nothing at all.

It made him feel like an adolescent, which was not a bad feeling.

Slipping out of bed, he pulled the curtains back and looked down into the street just off Shepherd Market. A bomb had fallen nearby, a few streets away. While the buildings opposite had been untouched, the blast had shattered the windows and the broken glass was being shovelled up into a garbage truck by men in navy-blue overalls.

That familiar sight made Bradley think of the previous night's air raid – which seemed to have lasted throughout the early morning – and reminded him that in his restless, drunken state of semi-consciousness, he'd been convinced that the sounds of the raid were different from normal.

I'm hallucinating, he thought ruefully, shaking his head from side to side.

He was about to go into the kitchen to make some coffee when the telephone rang.

'Hi,' Gladys said. 'It's me.'

'Who's me?' he asked, teasing her.

'Don't even bother trying,' she responded. 'Are you at least out of bed?'

‘Just about, Gladys. I don’t think I can keep up with you. All those years mixing with hard-drinking service guys have made you immune to hangovers.’

‘You have a hangover?’

‘Yep. And that air raid didn’t help me, either.’

‘It wasn’t an air raid,’ she said.

‘Pardon?’

‘It wasn’t an air raid. Not one German plane was seen. We were attacked by the long-rumoured German secret weapons: pilotless planes or remote-controlled rocket bombs, depending on which report you accept. Either way, those pilotless things were buzzing down on London and the south of England all night and exploding all over the goddamned place.’

‘Jesus Christ!’ Bradley whispered, hardly believing what he was hearing. His thoughts turned instantly to the rocket program at Peenemünde and Wilson’s unofficial involvement with it and other unknown projects.

‘A shock, eh?’

‘Yeah,’ Bradley replied. ‘It’s a shock, all right.’

‘Wanna join me for breakfast, Mr Bradley?’

‘I’d love to, but I think I should go straight to Baker Street and have words with my stubborn British controller.’

‘You think you can use this to make him send you to Europe?’

‘I don’t see how he can refuse now.’

‘He’s British: that’s how he can refuse. They’re pretty good at refusing. Quietly... always politely... but not budging an inch.’

‘He doesn’t have a leg to stand on now.’

‘The Brits are notoriously good at balancing acts.’

‘You’re such a goddamned pessimist, Gladys.’

‘I don’t want you to go, that’s all.’

‘That’s nice to hear, Gladys, but you know I have to do this.’

‘Yeah, Mike, I know. So what about lunch before you leave?’

He chuckled at that. ‘I won’t be leaving today, that’s for sure, so lunch sounds great.’

‘There’s a Lyons Corner House near Piccadilly Circus. Let’s meet there.’

‘Terrific. Twelve-thirty?’

‘Don’t get lost.’

‘I’ll try not to.’

‘My day’s made,’ she said with a throaty chuckle, then the line went dead.

Putting the phone down, Bradley checked the calendar. It was June 13, 1944, exactly one week after D-Day, the invasion of Europe, which he’d bitterly regretted having missed. The thirteenth, he thought as he cast off his pyjamas and hurried into the bathroom. Unlucky thirteenth. He ran the water in the old-fashioned bath, climbed in, and thought of the progress of the invasion as he hurriedly bathed himself.

He had wanted to go with the troops, to be one of the first to step onto the soil of Europe, but the urbane Lieutenant Colonel Wentworth-King had refused him permission, insisting that he remain in London until the Allies had overrun Germany. Bradley had been furious, but there was little he could do about it, other than keep track of the known movements of the German scientists, contact European resistance groups regarding Wilson’s whereabouts, and, when not thus engaged, spend his time with Gladys Kinder, with whom he was now undoubtedly in love in a pleasantly gentle, middle-aged way that so far was devoid of *angst.*

Nevertheless, while he would dearly miss Gladys if and when he left London, he was becoming increasingly excited by his conviction that now Wentworth-King would be unable to refuse him permission to travel to Europe and begin the real search for Wilson.

If remote-controlled rocket bombs were already falling on London, God knows what other secret weapons the Germans, doubtless with Wilson’s help, were about to use against Britain and, possibly, the Allied troops in Europe.

After letting the water out of the bath, he dried himself, dressed quickly and carelessly, then hurried out of the apartment and headed for Baker Street. By now he was used to the broken glass on the pavements, the fresh piles of smouldering rubble, and the scorched, jagged holes in the walls of the buildings, revealing the rooms inside, like stage sets, some untouched, some in chaos, all somehow naked and pitiful. The barrage balloons were still overhead, swaying like beached whales, and anti-aircraft gun emplacements stood in the many small parks and squares, the gun barrels being polished by the crews while they waited for night to fall. Yet normal life continued. The roads were filled with buses and taxis, and, as usual, the newspaper vendors shouted out the day’s headlines, which today were about the ‘miracle’ weapons.

Bradley thought of Wilson, hidden somewhere in Germany, and

wondered what he would spring next.

‘Ah ha!’ Lieutenant Colonel Wentworth-King said brightly when Bradley entered his cluttered office in SOE headquarters in Baker Street. ‘Our American friend!’

‘Morning,’ Bradley greeted him, then pulled up a chair and faced the soles of the lieutenant colonel’s boots, which were up on the desk.

‘Can I order you up some tea?’

‘No, thanks,’ Bradley said.

‘I don’t suppose I have to ask why you’re here,’ Wentworth-King said with a slightly mocking smile.

‘No, I don’t suppose you do. What have you learned so far?’

‘As we suspected, the rockets are V-1s, being flown, as far as we can ascertain at this point, from bases in the area of Pas de Calais. They’re not pilotless aircraft but flying bombs, powered by petrol and compressed air, coming in at low altitude at an approximate speed of four hundred miles per hour, steered by a gyroscope and designed to explode on impact. So far, our anti-aircraft guns are proving to be fairly ineffective against them, though hundreds of ack-ack units are being rushed to the south coast, where even more buzz bombs, or doodle-bugs, as they’re already being called by the populace, are falling.’

‘Christ! ’ Bradley exclaimed.

‘Here, in London, the flying bombs have scored direct hits on a church, a convent, a hospital, and a house in South London, with considerable loss of life. Outside of London, the situation is even worse, with a veritable deluge of bombs falling on Southampton, Kingston, Sevenoaks, and Bromley and, indeed, still falling this very minute. Apparently the ground of southern England is shaking as if in an earthquake, and whole areas are now covered in a pall of smoke. Are you sure you wouldn’t like a cup of tea?’

‘No, thanks,’ Bradley said. ‘It doesn’t settle my nerves. Any comment on the bombs from across the water?’

‘German radio is describing the flying bomb as a, quote, *miracle weapon*, whereas Dr Goebbels is repeatedly using the name “V-1,” which suggests that other secret weapons are in the pipeline and about to be unleashed.’

‘Wilson,’ Bradley said.

‘I beg your pardon, Colonel?’

‘That son of a bitch Wilson’s behind them.’

‘I really don’t think so. They’re part of the Peenemünde project, headed by Wernher von Braun. Wilson has nothing to do with it. We’re convinced he’s still at Kummersdorf.’

‘Wilson was working at Kummersdorf when von Braun’s rocket project was also located there. I’m not saying the rockets are all his. What I’m saying is that he doubtless contributed to them – and God knows what he’s working on right now. If Goebbels is hinting about *other* secret weapons, we should take him seriously.’

‘Dr Goebbels *is* a genius at propaganda.’

‘But I don’t think he’s lying in this instance. The V-1s are a sign of that. We also know that they wouldn’t keep Wilson on at Kummersdorf if he wasn’t working on *something* valuable. And if the V-1 rockets are going to be followed by something worse, it could come from him.’

Wentworth-King pulled his feet off the desk and began to tap his perfect teeth with a pencil while smiling knowingly at Bradley.

‘I know what you’re going for,’ he said. ‘You’re going to use the flying bombs as leverage to force me to let you parachute into Germany.’

‘Right. Even *you’ll* have to accept that the flying bombs are a sign that our time may be running out. If they use those bombs, or something even worse, against our troops, the tide could be turned against us.’

‘If we survived the Blitz, we can survive the buzz bombs, I’m sure.’

‘But what if they follow them up with something worse?’

Wentworth-King simply shrugged. ‘We’ll take our chances,’ he said. ‘Meanwhile, since the invasion is still in its early stages, I’d rather not let you, or anyone else, parachute into Germany.’

‘Then let me go to France now, to at least follow the troops into Germany.’

‘No, I can’t do that either. I don’t have the authorization. My only brief, regarding my own organization as well as OSS, is to wait until Germany is almost captured before moving over there.’

‘Shit,’ Bradley said.

‘Orders, dear boy,’ Wentworth-King responded. ‘And unless you can come up with someone higher than me, I’m afraid you’re doomed to remain here.’

‘So what about the OSS project to track down the German scientists?’

‘That also has to wait until the ground forces get there first. I’m afraid I

can't budge on this, old son.'

'You're just keeping it all for your goddamned British Secret Intelligence Service buddies. You want it all for yourself, bud.'

'You said it yourself, Bradley: we're more experienced. So please let us handle it.'

'I'm going to get around you somehow,' Bradley said, standing up and not hiding his frustration.

But Wentworth-King just sighed. 'Unless you get someone with more authority than I have, I'm afraid you'll be staying here.'

'You goddamned Brits!' Bradley exclaimed in disgust, then turned away and stormed out.

He heard Wentworth-King laughing.

'That son of a bitch,' he said to Gladys in the Lyons Corner House by Piccadilly Circus, where it was business as usual. 'He's gonna make sure his SOE buddies get all the glory and leave us out in the cold. So much for the OSS pursuit of the Nazi scientists – Wentworth-King has that tied up.'

Gladys lit a cigarette, inhaled, and blew a cloud of smoke.

'Why the hell should you care?' she said. 'You only want Wilson.'

'Yes,' he admitted, 'that's true enough; but I think Wilson's more important than the rocket scientists, if only because we *don't* know what he's up to.'

'And what do you *think* he's up to?'

'You know I can't tell you that, Gladys,' he said, thinking of the extraordinary, saucer-shaped machine he had found in that hangar near Mount Pleasant, Iowa.

Gladys grinned laconically. 'No, of course not. All the officers say the same when I ask what's going on, though I often know more than they do.'

'How?'

'They all talk when they're drunk.'

'Or in bed?'

'Yes,' she said, blowing a cloud of smoke in his face and staring steadily at him. 'There as well, Mike.'

'Recently?'

He was shocked to hear himself say it, as he certainly hadn't planned to, but she responded with the same steady gaze and slight, mocking smile.

‘Maybe,’ she said. ‘Maybe not. Why? Would it bother you?’

‘Yes,’ he said, taken aback by his sudden, fierce jealousy, and thinking of her life in war-torn London with a resentment he had not felt before. She had led a good life here, he knew, ever since she left New Mexico, first writing a European column for her old newspaper in Roswell, then becoming more well known when her work became syndicated nationwide. Her list of contacts, mostly high-ranking officers of the armed forces, had grown with her reputation, and she had certainly not been short of male company throughout the frantic, sexually liberated war years. She had told him all about it and he had previously enjoyed the stories, but today, for no reason at all, he felt quite the opposite.

‘It didn’t bother you before,’ she reminded him.

‘Maybe I just didn’t show it. And besides, I had no reason to lay claims on you.’

‘You still don’t,’ she said. ‘We’re just good friends, after all, as we constantly remind ourselves.’

He recalled his first air raid, when she had told him she loved him. He’d been too shaken to reply and hadn’t reminded her of it since, but he knew that what he was feeling was more than friendship, though he was frightened of saying so.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘we’re just good friends.’

She smiled and blew some smoke rings. ‘Come on,’ she said, ‘you know it’s more than that. Why don’t you admit it?’

He shrugged helplessly. ‘I don’t know. I’m not sure of what I feel. I feel foolish even talking like this, because I’m practically fifty.’

‘That’s not old.’

‘It’s not young.’

‘It’s young enough for an adult relationship.’

Amused by that, he replied, ‘Adult relationships can often be childish, and I don’t trust myself that way.’

‘You don’t trust what you feel?’

‘No – at least not always. I’ve spent a lot of years thinking about us, about your letters, and while I always enjoyed getting them and kept them and reread them, I felt guilty about the situation – before Joan’s death and after – and also felt that we couldn’t possibly be in love after only two meetings. In other words, I sometimes felt that I was kidding myself; that maybe both of

us were romancing. And having thought of myself as a mature man, that made me feel foolish. I know how I feel about you, Gladys. I'm just not sure why.'

Gladys propped an elbow up on the table, cupped her chin in her hand, blew a smoke ring in his direction, then shook her head ruefully.

'God, I love you,' she said. 'I've never doubted it for a second. And I knew it when we first met, inside about ten minutes. I knew I was in love with that wonderful combination of maturity, common sense, and inhibition. I knew it when I sensed that you were startled by what you were thinking.' She chuckled and shook her head again. 'And what were you thinking, Mike? You were thinking I was attractive and attracted to you – oh, yeah, you saw that! – and you were excited and scared all at once, as well as hopelessly guilty. A real married man, right? And one with morals and principles. Yeah, that's what I saw inside minutes when we first met, and I loved it and it made me love you… and I did… and I do. Now what do you say, Mike?'

He glanced around the crowded tea room, at all the women in their wide-brimmed hats, the men in drab suits, the waitresses hurrying to and fro in their black skirts and white aprons. He studied them too intently. It was something to do. His heart was racing and he was blushing like a kid, and that rendered him speechless. Then he looked out the window, at the statue of Eros, and had to smile. He lowered his gaze to the traffic crawling around the central island. There the bobby was blowing his whistle and waving his arms as the citizens of this beleaguered, majestic, defiant city went about their daily business in a perfectly normal manner.

'The goddamned Brits,' he said, turning back to Gladys. 'You really have to admire them.'

She raised a sceptical eyebrow. 'Is that your answer, Mike?'

'Dammit, Gladys, you know damned well I love you. I just can't say these things.'

'You've just said it.'

'Have I?'

'Yep. You've just said it. I've certainly heard more *passionate* declarations of love, but I've never felt happier.' She reached across for his hand, kissed the back of his wrist, squeezed his fingers, and refused to let go. There were tears in her eyes. 'You're going to leave me, aren't you?'

'I have to go, Gladys. I have to stop that son of a bitch Wilson before he

goes too far.'

'What do you think he wants?'

'I don't know. You tell me.'

'I will,' she said, drying the tears from her eyes and gazing down at the table. 'I don't believe he was after power. At least not for personal gain. I believe he'd made science his god and worshipped it blindly. He didn't care about human beings and despised their most common feelings; he was convinced that our only purpose on earth is to serve evolution. Not mere *procreation* – no! even the animals can do that – but to form a bridge between our irrational past and a perfectly rational future. He hated irrationality and mistrusted all emotions. For him, what divides man from the beast is intelligence – not emotion, not *feelings.* He believed only in the mind, the application of logic, the quest for absolute knowledge, which he seriously confused with truth.'

'I'm not sure I understand.'

'That's why you're frightened of loving me – which you do, God bless you. Because love is an emotion that flies in the face of logic, yet it endures while one scientific absolute after another is disproven and replaced with something new. Wilson didn't understand that. Not the Wilson I knew. He was convinced that what we value, our dreams and feelings, belong to the caves. He doesn't believe in human beings. He only believes in science. And because science is the sole road to truth, it's all that concerns him. What he wants, then, isn't power – at least not as we know it – but freedom to do what he wants without normal restrictions.'

'The son of a bitch is working for the Nazis,' Bradley said.

'Yes,' Gladys replied, unconcerned by his flash of anger. 'But not because he's a Nazi or believes in the Third Reich. Probably because they were the only ones willing to finance his work, whatever that is. He'll use them – just as he used me and everyone else – and in the end he may go down with them. But whatever it is he's doing with the Nazis, he's not doing it *for* them.'

'How could you be his mistress?' Bradley asked, before he could stop himself. 'If he's that bad, if he's really as cold as ice, how could you sleep with him?'

'Does that thought hurt you?'

'Yes, dammit, it does!'

‘Then you really *do* love me!’ she exclaimed.

‘That isn’t an answer.’

She picked his hand up again, stroked his fingers, kissed his wrist. ‘Because I was wounded,’ she explained. ‘Because I’d recently lost my husband. Because I didn’t want emotional entanglements and he was perfect that way. He wanted only my body and I wanted only to lose myself, so we literally climbed into bed together and had few disappointments. To be truthful, it was perfect – we both got what we needed – but in the end, like most women, I confused satisfaction with love, and was mortally wounded when he left me without looking back. That’s in the nature of woman – it’s in the nature of *human beings* – but it’s nothing that Wilson would understand, which in the end made me loathe him more.’ She kissed his hand again, stroked his fingers, and stared steadily at him. ‘And now you loathe me, don’t you? For confessing my sins. You loathe me for sleeping with the man who’s taken over your life.’

‘No,’ he said without a moment’s hesitation. ‘I just love you more. But that Wilson…Goddammit, he’s like a man without a centre. And he’s brilliant and totally mysterious and I have to look in his eyes. Do you understand that?’

‘Yes, I think so... And so you’re going to Europe.’

Which brought Bradley back to the real world and plunged him into gloom. ‘Not according to Lieutenant Colonel Wentworth-King. As far as *he’s* concerned, I’m here for the duration, probably until the war ends.’

‘Go around him,’ Gladys said.

‘I can’t. That’s not allowed.’

‘What if someone with more authority approaches you?’

‘That’s allowed, but unlikely.’

‘Do you love me?’

‘Dammit, yes.’

‘Without doubts?’

‘You know that now.’

‘I don’t know why I’m doing this. I really don’t. I don’t want to lose you.’

‘What the hell are you talking about, Gladys?’

‘I’m going to get you to Europe.’ She stubbed her cigarette out, waved at the waitress, then said, ‘Okay, you pick up the check. It’s the least you can do.’ When he had done so, she led him out of the cafe and headed toward

Leicester Square. ‘Can you meet me in the bar in the Savoy this evening?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Sure.’

‘About…?’

The question hung in the air, because at that moment they both heard an awful roaring, buzzing sound, a nerve-jangling sibilance that passed overhead and suddenly cut out, leaving an abrupt, unnatural, chilling silence.

Bradley saw everyone in the street looking up at the sky, as if frozen where they stood, then, in that fifteen seconds of eerie silence, they threw themselves to the ground.

The V-1 rocket, the buzz bomb, the doodle-bug, exploded in the next street just as Gladys pulled Bradley to the ground. He felt the ground shake, heard the explosion, and rolled into Gladys. He clung to her as more rockets buzzed overhead and lay there as they went silent – the sound everyone already dreaded – then exploded fifteen seconds later, some nearby, some faraway. The attack didn’t last long, but it seemed to take forever, and when it ended, Bradley helped Gladys up and then glanced about him.

A pall of black smoke was rising above the rooftops. When Bradley heard the sirens of the fire brigade, he knew that more fires were burning and more people were dying.

‘About nine this evening?’ Gladys asked him, as if nothing had happened.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘I’ll be there.’

Gladys kissed him fully on the lips and gave him a hug. ‘Right,’ she said, then waved good-bye and hurried off, heading straight for the ominous pall of smoke that now hung over Soho, to remind him, as so many things did these days, that Wilson was still somewhere out there, being far too creative.

The buzz bombs continued to rain down all day on the southern parts of England and were still falling on London that evening when Bradley made his way to the Savoy Hotel. As he walked along the Strand, he saw a pall of black smoke hanging over St Paul’s Cathedral and the rooftops of the city, and even as he turned into the hotel, more bombs exploded.

Though most of the servicemen were now fighting in France, the party in the American Bar was in full swing and packed with army, navy, and air force personnel from Britain, America, Canada, France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, and even Poland. Most of them were either working in operation centres in

London or preparing to join the advance through France. The men and women, most in uniform, were spilling out of the bar and into the lobby in a haze of cigar and cigarette smoke, red-faced and in good cheer, while a large group near the bar, obviously drunk, was singing in ragged chorus, ‘We’re gonna hang out our washing on the Siegfried Line...’

Gladys was seated near the entrance, well away from the noisy singers, beside a US army major-general, and she waved Bradley over as soon as she saw him. Bradley wasn’t going to kiss her in front of the unknown officer, but she jumped up and embraced him and kissed him full on the lips.

‘You didn’t get a doodle-bug on your head, then?’ she asked jokingly, though with visible relief.

‘No,’ he replied. ‘They’re falling mostly over the City, so I was okay.’

‘Here, pull up a chair,’ Gladys said, then, when he had done so, continued, ‘This is a dear friend, Major General Ryan McArthur, who’s about to take off for France and could be of help to you. Ryan, this is the guy I told you about, my fine man, OSS Colonel Mike Bradley.’

Bradley and the silver-haired, sophisticated McArthur shook hands.

‘No relation, I take it,’ Bradley said with a grin, ‘to General... ?’

‘No,’ McArthur replied, anticipating the question. ‘No relation at all. Can I get you a drink, Mike?’

‘Scotch on the rocks.’

‘Right.’

When McArthur was at the crowded bar, Gladys, who was sitting beside Bradley, took hold of his hand. ‘Still love me after all these hours?’

‘Damned right,’ he said.

‘Okay, Mike. If you truly love me, I’ll put your mind at ease. While it’s true that I’ve had a good time in London, I haven’t been involved with another man since you turned up. I’ve been faithful and living on hope – and you’re my only man now.’

A lump came to his throat and he covered her hand with his own, then squeezed her fingers.

‘You didn’t have to tell me that,’ he said.

‘Yes, I did, Mike. As for McArthur, he’s just an old friend – and I *do* mean a friend. No more and no less.’

‘Okay, Gladys. Thanks.’

‘Do you love me just a little bit more for that?’

‘I can’t possibly love you more than I do.’

She grinned and winked. ‘That’s my man.’

Bradley released her hand when McArthur returned to the table, carrying three glasses of Scotch between his two hands. When they had taken their drinks from him, he sat down, sipped some Scotch, grinned at Bradley.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you’re with the OSS.’

‘Right.’

‘You’re working here with the British Secret Intelligence Service?’

‘I wouldn’t exactly call it working. I’m supposed to be trying to track down a renegade American scientist – ’

‘Wilson.’

‘Right. How did you know that?’

‘I work for General Groves, director of the Manhattan atomic bomb project, and since we’re also keen to track down the German scientists, we got in touch with the OSS and found out about Wilson. Naturally we then found out, through your filed records, that Gladys had also known him, which is how I came to know Gladys.’

‘Wilson appears to have a talent for introducing a lot of people to one another.’

McArthur grinned at that, then turned serious again. ‘You want Wilson in particular?’

‘Yes.’

‘Any special reason?’

‘I have reason to believe he’s been working on projects far more advanced than the German rocket program.’

‘And you think he might be trying to complete it in time to use it against the Allies?’

‘I’m not too sure *what* his intentions are, but I sure in hell want to find him.’

‘So why aren’t you in Europe?’

‘According to my controller at the SOE, I’m not allowed into Europe until the Germans have practically surrendered.’

‘By which time Wilson, as well as a good many rocket scientists, might have disappeared or been captured by the Soviets.’

‘Or captured by the SOE, which is what my controller wants.’

‘Lieutenant Colonel Wentworth-King?’

‘Right.’

McArthur was amused. ‘A regular British public schoolboy – and pretty smart with it. Yes, he’ll want the Brits to get there first. That’s why he’s holding you back.’

‘Can you do anything for him, Ryan?’ Gladys asked.

‘Sure.’ McArthur turned back to Bradley. ‘On behalf of the director of the Manhattan atomic bomb project, I’m sending a bunch of ALSOS agents into Europe, to stick with the advancing Allied troops and go all the way with them into Germany. When I say *stick* with the advancing troops, I mean just that: The ALSOS agents will be with the fighting troops, right in the thick of it, to ensure that they’re present when anyone of value to us, mainly scientists, is captured. Would you like to come with us?’

‘Damned right, I would, Major General.’

‘Okay. In this matter I happen to overrule the bright son of a bitch, so I’ll get in touch with Lieutenant Colonel Wentworth-King and tell him I’m grabbing you.’

‘Terrific. When do we leave?’

‘This Friday. Which gives you a couple of days to tidy up here. We’ll be in touch tomorrow with details of our departure, but right now, since you two are obviously keen to be alone, I’m off in search of debauchery.’ He stood up to take his leave. ‘I’ll see you on Friday, Bradley. As for you, Gladys, I’ll see you when I see you.’

‘In Paris.’

‘Let’s hope that’s the case.’ He touched his fingers to his peaked cap in a mock salute, grinned and then made his way out of the bar, through the packed, noisy revellers.

The drunks near the bar were now singing the maudlin ‘We’ll Meet Again,’ made famous by the British forces’ favourite lady, Vera Lynn, who certainly sang it much better. Yet the words, which Bradley already knew, struck straight to his heart.

Another lump came to his throat when he turned back to Gladys.

‘Thanks,’ he said.

‘Not at all, Mike. I don’t want you to go – I want you here – but I know how important this is to you.’ She shrugged forlornly. ‘So go.’

‘We still have a couple of days,’ he said.

‘Tonight and tomorrow night,’ she corrected him. ‘You’ll be *leaving* on

Friday. Goddammit, I think I'm gonna cry. Goddamn you, Mike Bradley!'

She pushed her chair back, stood up, and rushed out. Bradley followed her, forcing his way through a sea of bobbing heads and flushed faces, all of which were hazed in smoke and exuding aromas of alcohol. Gladys didn't look back, but instead hurried across the lobby and straight up the stairs. Bradley went in hot pursuit, thinking of how familiar this great hotel must seem to her, as she had now lived in it for so long. It was an odd thing to think, but it was based on pure jealousy, for he also thought of all the men she had met here throughout the war years. He felt a spasm of pain, a flash of resentment for all those men, as he hurried up the stairs. He eventually caught her in the corridor, right outside her room, and tugged her around, into his arms, as she was opening the door.

Gladys Kinder was crying.

Bradley kissed her tears away, surprised to find himself doing so, and rocked her trembling body in his arms and eased her into the room. He kicked the door closed behind him, licked her eyelids, kissed her cheeks, stroked her spine as he kissed her on the lips, and then held her away from him. She was shaking and the tears had streaked her cheeks and made her look a lot younger.

It was a small room and the bed was right behind her, but he didn't know what to do.

'It's been so long,' he said. 'I don't know where to begin. I'm too old for this. I don't have the knack. I hardly know where to start.'

Gladys smiled through her tears, wiped the tears away with one hand, tried to control her heavy breathing, and said, 'You've already started, Mike, and you did it well. For God's sake, don't stop now.' And she put her hands on his shoulders and pulled him to her and kissed him, then let him press her back onto the bed where it would happen or not.

Bradley lost his senses then. That was God's blessing upon him. He somehow managed to strip Gladys and remove his own clothes and get under the sheets of the bed without thinking about it. When they made love, which came naturally as well, they were tuned into the cosmos – and Bradley, nearly fifty years old, was returned to his youth.

Her bed felt like home to him.

The next day, satiated with love, Bradley reported to the SOE headquarters in

Baker Street, where Lieutenant Colonel Wentworth-King frostily informed him that orders from above had removed him from the jurisdiction of the SOE and were placing him under the command of the director of the Manhattan atomic bomb project, for which he would implement Operation Paperclip immediately.

'Here are your marching orders,' Wentworth-King said, pushing across a thick envelope. 'Good-bye and good luck.'

That night, all night, Bradley made love to Gladys in his bed in the small apartment in Shepherd Market while doodle-bugs rained from the sky and exploded all over the city. He found new life in the midst of death, saw the light of hope in darkness, slept the sleep of the blessed, and awakened just after dawn.

The space beside him was empty. Gladys was gone. When he went into the bathroom, he saw her message on the mirror, scrawled in lipstick by a shaky, emotional hand.

'I can't bear the thought of seeing your eyes when we have to say goodbye, so I'm saying it now. I love you. I...'

But the writing ended there, tapering off in a jagged line, and he knew that she had then started crying and hurried from the room. He put his hand out, gently touched the lipstick, traced the words with his fingertips.

'Take care,' he whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Wilson awakened, as he had planned, at six in the evening and found himself thinking about himself.

He had slept through the afternoon because the journey to Thuringia was going to be made under cover of darkness. Now, as he lay in bed, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and hearing the news on the radio in the living room, doubtless turned on by Greta, he wondered if this thinking about himself, which was unusual, had been caused by the temporary change in his sleeping habits.

He hadn't thought about himself in many years and was very surprised. He had always looked outward, not inward, and this introspection was troubling.

He was remembering Iowa, the days of his childhood, the parents whose decency he had always viewed strictly as weakness. Now, when he closed his eyes, he saw himself as a blond-haired boy, his skin bronzed from the sun, and the sun itself an immense, silvery orb in a dazzling blue sky. He had stood alone in the field of wheat, the stalks shoulder high around him, and looked across that yellow sea to where green fields met blue sky, then squinted into the sun's striations, which were silvery and ravishing. He had looked but not been ravished, been blinded but not dazzled, and responded to it, even at ten years old, with one simple question:

When would the sun die?

That single question had turned him into a scientist. His religion became the pursuit of knowledge. He realized that the sun would die eventually, taking with it Earth's heat and light, and that long before it happened every form of life on Earth would be extinguished. Man's time on Earth, then, would be short if he simply followed nature's course. Still an animal, he would die off like the dinosaurs as his life-giving sun died. Something had to be done.

Thus Wilson, at ten years of age, had found something to live for: the changing of man's destiny through science and, incidentally, the creation of a new kind of man as a means of continuance.

He had never strayed from that path.

Even then, as a boy and adolescent in Iowa, born of religious parents but unable to accept God, he had been convinced that mankind would eventually have to leave Earth and inhabit another, less endangered planet. To do so, he would have to create an extraordinary technology; he would also have to transcend his still-primitive nature and escape the physical limitations of his weak, mortal body.

Man would have to turn himself into Superman and then reach for the stars.

Now, many years later, as he sat up in the bed in his apartment in Berlin, Wilson was made aware of his own frustrating mortality, but also reminded that he had at least begun the process of turning Man into Superman.

He had the beginnings of the technology in the shape of his flying saucer, a protected base from which to operate in Neuschwabenland, Antarctica, and a demented ideology that, if not to his personal taste, could be used to give him the work force necessary for survival in an inhospitable terrain, isolated under the ground from the rest of mankind.

He would use Himmler's disillusioned followers to get him to the Antarctic and there, over the years, let science gradually transform them into his kind of people: neither dedicated soldiers nor fanatical mystics, but men ruled by the desire for knowledge as an end in itself, supported by a docile work force deprived of freedom and will, and all living together in perfect, enforced harmony, well away from the corrupting influences of a still-primitive, self-destructive mankind.

And eventually, when the technology used for the *Kugelblitz* saucer had advanced enough, his successors would leave the dying Earth behind and fly to the stars.

Those chosen to make that epic voyage would have to be Supermen – but he, who had made it all possible, would not be one of them.

He would die before that came to be.

Mortality was what prevented men from becoming Supermen: life was too short for real achievement. Although Wilson had begun experiments on organ replacement, prosthetics, and general longevity, and had already

delayed his own death with the recent operations on his heart and stomach, he knew that the medical and surgical experimentation begun in the camps would not be advanced far enough, soon enough, to prevent him from dying of old age. Nevertheless, his successor, whomever he might be, would benefit from the experiments, and eventually the more valued members of his Antarctic colony would have a much longer life span. Because of that, they would gain the time needed for their biological and mental transformation into Supermen.

In that sense, Wilson thought as he stood up and stretched himself, my life will not have been wasted and my death will have meaning.

From here he could hear the radio announcer blandly informing the citizens of the Third Reich that the Allied invasion of Europe, initiated sixteen days ago with a bloody assault along more than a hundred miles of the French coast, was being successfully resisted by the valiant soldiers of the Thousand Year Reich.

The announcer did not mention the Allied liberation of Rome, the US bombing of the Japanese mainland, the loss of the Cotentin peninsula, the increasingly hopeless position of General von Schlieben's surrounded troops, General de Gaulle's triumphant return to the liberated areas of France after the capture of Bayeux, General Montgomery's inexorable advance on Caen, or the fact that only yesterday the Allies had seized two German V-1 launch sites on the Cherbourg peninsula and were closing in on the historic town itself. Nor did he mention that Berlin, suffering Allied bombing raids every night, was being razed to the ground.

He was carefully silent on those facts.

It will soon be over, Wilson thought, no matter what we're told. No wonder we're fleeing to the Harz Mountains. It's just a matter of months now...

Not wishing to face Greta until he was ready to leave, he went straight from the bedroom to the bathroom, had his bath, dried himself and put on his civilian clothing, then returned to the bedroom. He had packed his suitcase the previous evening, when Greta was out with friends; now he pulled it out from where he had hidden it under the bed. Then, feeling little emotion, he entered the main room.

Greta was anxiously turning the dial on the radio, trying to pick up a British station. She was smoking a cigarette, scratching her auburn hair with

her free hand, and looking as worldly as ever, though she had aged greatly recently. Since the bombs had started dropping on Berlin she had not been the same.

Looking up when he entered the room, she saw the suitcase.

The news on the radio was replaced by Wagner as her eyes started widening.

'I'm leaving,' Wilson said, anticipating her question, 'and I probably won't be coming back. The apartment is yours to keep.'

'What?'

He knew she had heard him but did not want to believe him. The average person's unwillingness to face facts had never ceased to surprise him.

'You heard me,' he said, setting the suitcase on the floor and noting the shocked light in her eyes. 'I said I'm leaving and probably won't be coming back. However, the SS always look after their own and in this case are treating you like my wife. In other words, you can keep the apartment and they'll provide you with a decent monthly income. They'll soon be in touch with you.'

She was still smoking her cigarette, a habit he despised, and this time, when she sucked in the smoke, she did so as if drowning.

'I'm not sure I understand,' she said, glancing at his suitcase and letting the smoke drift out between her lips. 'I mean, we've been living together for so long, and now you just...'

'You always knew this would come eventually,' he said, as he had said to so many. 'Our arrangement was always based on the knowledge that it would end sooner or later. Now that time's come.'

'Just like that? Without warning?'

'I couldn't give you any warning. The SS swore me to secrecy. I wasn't allowed to tell you until I was leaving – and that's just what I'm doing.'

'I don't believe that for a second.'

'Believe it. It's the truth.'

'You're going to leave me here all alone?'

'I'm being moved out, with the other scientists and engineers, but I can't tell you where.'

'Why can't I come with you?'

'It's not permitted, that's why.'

'You mean, the others are all going without their wives? Is that what

you're telling me?'

'No, I'm not saying that. The others *are* taking their wives and children. But the others are Germans married to Germans, whereas I happen to be a foreigner, here by their good graces and living with a woman not my wife. I asked if I could take you along, but they refused absolutely.'

'I don't believe that either.'

'It's true. And who knows their motives? This war's coming to an end, the Third Reich's going to fall, and when that happens, they may decide to execute me. Maybe that's why you can't come with me.'

It was a deliberate lie, offered simply to keep her calm, but he knew, when he saw her brightening gaze, that she hadn't believed him. She was an experienced woman, after all, particularly wise in the ways of men, and what he now saw in her normally hard eyes was a mixture of rage and fear.

'So I'm just being left here?'

'I repeat: you have the apartment and will get an allowance. Believe me, you'll be better off than most. I'd count my blessings, if I were you.'

'Blessings?' she retorted. 'Being left here in Berlin? A city being bombed night and day, and soon to be conquered! What good's this apartment if it's bombed? What good's the allowance when the war is lost? What happens to me if I manage to survive the bombings, but the Soviets get here first?'

'I'm sure you'll do fine,' he said. 'You're not a child, after all.'

He had said something similar to that other woman – Gladys Kinder? – about twelve years ago and now, as the memory of her passed briefly through his thoughts, thus reminding him of Goddard and those early rockets in the desert, Greta's mounting fear and rage set fire to her eyes.

'You can't do this,' she said, sounding strangled and shaky. 'You owe me more than this! You just can't pack up and walk out and leave me here in this hell. You've got to take me with you. You've *got* to! *For God's sake, don't leave me here*!'

'You're an experienced woman,' Wilson said, taking note of her rising hysteria and therefore picking up his suitcase. 'You should manage okay.'

But she jumped to her feet, grabbed his shoulders, shook him violently, crying, 'No, Wilson! For the love of God! I'm too old now! The Soviets might… *Don't leave me, Wilson*!'

Suddenly she looked old, her face ravaged by shock and dread. Disgusted by her naked, primal emotions, he pushed her away from him. She stumbled

back into the fireplace, shaking her head, her gaze dazed. He left without saying another word, not looking back.

An SS car had been assigned to take him to Kummersdorf, and the driver was waiting for him when he emerged. Darkness had fallen and when the car had moved off he gazed out the window, saw the dreadful ruins and hillocks of rubble silhouetted against a starlit sky, and knew, given the clarity of the night, that the Allied planes would soon be flying overhead to drop more bombs on the city.

Closing his eyes, he recalled Greta's outburst, and considered once more, as he had done so often, how the glory of man's mind could be perverted with primitive emotions. He had never felt such emotions, though he knew that most people did, as he also knew that there were many who thought his lack of so-called normal feelings was inhuman.

Was this so? He didn't think so. Instead, he took it for a sign of genius. He had always felt himself to be different from his own kind – even from his good parents, other children, his women – and had viewed the blatant emotions of others as the aberrations of weakness. Man's emotions belonged to the cave; his mind was his glory.

And he, this individual named John Wilson, was ruled by his brilliant mind.

It had always been so. Behind his closed eyes, he relived it. He saw his parents in the fields, their backs bent under the sun, then himself, a mere stripling, kneeling beside them in the church of Montezuma, where he kept his eyes open. They were decent, simple folk, introverted, even distant, and although they had always treated him well, he viewed their virtue as weakness. They made him read the Bible, but he thought it a book of myths. When they prayed, either at home or in church, he translated their worship as a form of awe no more rational than the primal fears and superstitions of cavemen.

He felt that man was not made to worship gods, but to attain godlike stature.

He was not like his parents. Nor was he like other children. His parents didn't notice the difference, for they were too involved with themselves, but at school he was considered odd, because he didn't like playing games and was ferocious at studying. He always wanted to be alone, to live through his

books, and that made him different.

Then he decided to become a scientist and devoted himself to that. At twelve, he was practising vivisection and was caught by his parents. They were shocked by his cruelty, which he viewed as pure research, and they punished him by sending him to his room for a whole week, which merely gave him more time for his reading and intense contemplation. It didn't stop his experiments – he just continued them in secret – and by the age of fifteen, when at high school in Des Moines, he knew more about biology and science than his teachers could teach him.

He was also convinced, by then, that the only thing dividing man from the beast was his ability to think – not the heart, but the mind; not emotions, but reasoning. Once he had accepted this as truth, he learned to distrust what were widely regarded as man's 'finer' feelings.

Man was but a tool of evolution; the human mind was its instrument. And because most human emotions were dead weight, Wilson, from an early age, took pride in not having them.

He was a genius, a completely rational being, and that made him unique.

Nothing else mattered.

When the SS car slowed down, he opened his eyes again and saw the beams of the searchlights criss-crossing one another as they swept over Kummersdorf, erratically illuminating the tall hangars, prefabricated offices, wooden huts, barbed-wire fences, and high, ugly watch towers, where the helmeted troops sat behind machine guns and kept guard all night. Though normally empty, the compound in front of the experimental centre was now filled with troop trucks, all bathed in the steady glare of overhead lamps. A lot of the troops were carrying equipment and papers from the hangar to the parked vehicles, while other trucks roared into life and headed toward the main gate.

After leaving the car and entering the hangar, Wilson saw the Schriever saucer still sitting on its raised steel platform. It looked enormous in that enclosed space, its smooth surface giving off a silvery glint in the overhead lighting. Looking in vain for Flugkapitän Schriever, he crossed the floor and entered his own office, which was now bare of its filing cabinets and wall charts. There he found Ernst Stoll, SS Brigadier Hans Kammler, and the dark-eyed, dangerous SS General Artur Nebe sitting up in hardbacked wooden chairs, all smoking, drinking what looked like brandy, and clearly

waiting for him.

'So,' Wilson said, 'the move's begun already.'

'Yes,' Kammler said. 'The first trucks are already at the station and you can leave any minute now.'

'What are the arrangements?'

'I have to remain here to oversee the V-1 and forthcoming V-2 rocket launchings against England. However, General Nebe and his finest troops will accompany you throughout the journey, for protection, and Captain Stoll will also go along, to ensure that you settle into Kahla without problems. Once things are running smoothly at Kahla, which will be administered jointly with the nearby Nordhausen Central Works under the jurisdiction of Captain Stoll, General Nebe will return to Berlin to organize the eventual time and means of escape from Germany. Meanwhile, Stoll will divide his time between Thuringia and Berlin. This will enable him to look after your project *and* keep his eye on our increasingly unpredictable Reichsführer.'

'What about Rudolph Schriever and that…' Wilson paused to glance through the window at the flying saucer in the middle of the hangar. 'That *thing* out there?'

'A week from today,' Ernst Stoll solemnly informed him, 'the remaining staff of Kummersdorf, with Schriever in charge, will be moved, with the saucer, to a secret location near Prague. Thus, while Schriever's progress will be watched closely by Himmler, you'll be able to complete your *Feuerball* and *Kugelblitz*, protected by General Kammler, under my jurisdiction.'

'What reason have you given Schriever for the move?'

'The same as we gave Himmler. Namely, that your work has become erratic, you can no longer be trusted, and so you're being moved to Nordhausen, to be placed under our supervision, now that Wernher von Braun has been moved back to the rebuilt factories in the development works, on the old site of Peenemünde East.'

'Excellent,' Wilson said.

'And now we'd better go,' General Nebe said softly, his face as unemotional as a rock, which gave Wilson comfort. 'We want at least to get out of the station before the Allied bombers come again.'

'Good thinking,' Kammler said.

The day before, Wilson had supervised the dismantling and packing of the separate parts of his *Feuerball* and *Kugelblitz* in the BMW plant at Spandau

for transportation to the railway station. Today he was pleased to follow the others out of his office for the last time. Just as they were leaving, Schriever, Habermohl, and Miethe emerged from the former's office and stopped right in front of them. Schriever, thinking he was now in charge of Projekt Saucer, gave Wilson a broad, superior smile.

'So,' he said, 'you're going to Nordhausen.'

'Yes,' Wilson replied.

'Naturally, I'm sorry to be losing you.'

'I'm sure you are, Flugkapitän.'

'I have naturally recommended your work to Himmler – '

'Thank you.'

' – and while obviously he appreciates your contributions to Projekt Saucer, he feels it's now time that we Germans take it over completely.'

'I understand,' Wilson said.

'Once we get to Prague, I'll have the saucer flying in no time, I can assure you, Herr Wilson.'

'I hope so, Flugkapitän.'

Schriever offered his hand. Wilson took it and shook it, then Schriever gave the Nazi salute and led his two men away. Stoll smiled thinly at Wilson, nodded toward the exit, then led him and the other two Nazi officers out of the hangar.

Wilson didn't look back. There was nothing there to interest him. He took his seat in the SS car, made room for Stoll beside him, and kept his eyes open as they drove out of Kummersdorf, heading in the direction of Berlin. The night sky was bright with stars, the moon gliding behind thin clouds, but he soon saw a red glow in the sky, far ahead in the darkness. Then he heard the sound, the distant *crump-crump* of explosions, and knew instantly that the glowing in the sky was from the flames of an air raid.

'They come nearly every night now,' Ernst said. 'The swine never stop.'

'Remember the Blitz on London,' Wilson replied, 'and you won't expect them to stop.'

'My family live in Berlin, Wilson.'

'I'm sorry,' Wilson said, though he didn't give a damn.

'My wife left me,' Ernst continued like a man in a trance, 'but she's living with the children in her parents' house in the district of Wannsee, which they bomb all the time.'

‘Not good,’ Wilson said, bored.

‘I worry about them more when they’re elsewhere – and now we’re off to Thuringia.’

‘It’s important, Captain Stoll. Very important.’

‘Yes,’ Ernst said. ‘I know. I just can’t help but worry.’

Luckily, they did not have to return to Berlin, but instead turned away from it, to a station in a small town that Wilson didn’t recognize, though he knew it was on the route to Brandenburg.

The station was heavily guarded, surrounded by armed SS troops, and the midnight silence was broken by the barking of Alsatian dogs and the awful sound of men bawling through megaphones. Torches shone on white faces, searchlights swept across packed trucks, and Wilson had to follow Stoll through massed ranks of armed troops, none of whom looked too happy, and into a small railway station that was the stage for a nightmare. Prisoners from the camps were there, under-nourished, terrified. They were forced to run the gauntlet of snarling dogs and cracking whips, then herded up into the box cars, where they were packed in like sardines. There were not many left – most of the box cars had been closed already – but Wilson saw enough to have a clear picture of what was happening.

It seemed chaotic, but it wasn’t – it was well organized – and when Wilson saw General Nebe near the last of the open box cars, his face impassive but his dark eyes always restless, he understood why.

Nevertheless, Wilson was glad to get out of it and into his carriage, which, as he discovered when the train pulled out shortly after, he was sharing with Stoll, Kammler, Nebe, and their most favoured officers. Nebe let them all relax, smoking and drinking, playing cards, and soon the distant sounds of the bombing of Berlin had faded away with the crimson sky, leaving only dark flatlands outside and the train’s clickety-clacking.

‘We’re on our way at last,’ Ernst Stoll said. ‘Thank God for that at least.’

‘Yes,’ Wilson replied. ‘The sooner we get there, the sooner you can return to Berlin and your family.’

‘*If* they’re still there,’ Ernst said.

‘If they’re not,’ Kammler said icily, ‘you’ll have made your personal sacrifice for the Third Reich. Would you not consider that an honour, Captain Stoll?’

‘Naturally I would, sir.’

‘You seemed a little bitter, Captain.’

‘No, sir. I’m just tired, that’s all.’

‘We *all* are.’ Kammler sneered, then lit a cigarette, blew a cloud of smoke, and engaged Nebe in whispered conversation, which only served to make Ernst more nervous, as Wilson carefully noted.

Turning his attention to Kammler and Nebe, sitting together on the seat opposite, he wondered at the calibre of human being he’d been forced to deal with.

General Kammler, he knew, had been responsible for the planning of various concentration camps; had personally supervised and confirmed the plans for the enormous subcamp at Birkenau, part of Auschwitz, with its four gas chambers and crematoria; was impatient, ruthless, completely amoral, and, though Himmler’s present favourite and ostensibly devoted to him, was consumed by no more than self-interest. General Nebe, on the other hand, was a more shadowy figure, one of shifting allegiances, someone known to be a practised survivor and no stranger to bloodshed. He rarely smiled, fondled his pistol a lot, and kept his conversation to the bare minimum. A good man to have on your side; a man to dread if your enemy. To Wilson, such men were animals, but they had to be used.

It was a truly depressing thought.

Closing his eyes, he tried to sleep, but instead thought about how divorced he was from his fellow men, unable to share their petty concerns and narrow ambitions. They wanted the here and now, the love of woman, man’s esteem, but failed completely to see just how short life was and, therefore, how important. Though born to be the tools of evolution, they still lived like cavemen.

Their evolution would not come naturally. At least not in time to save them. The continuation of the human species could be guaranteed only if men took matters into their own hands and recreated themselves. And as most men could not even conceive of that, the exceptional few, like Wilson, would have to lead the way.

I will do it, he thought, trying to sleep, but failing dismally. I will recreate myself, with my willpower and surgical assistance, and in so doing become the first of that race that will fly to the stars.

I will become a biological mutation with my mind unimpaired. I will not find immortality – no, it’s too late for that – but the operations I’ve had,

which have so far been successful, are merely the first steps on the road to man's transformation, physical and mental. Those who follow me, on the operating table and with my philosophy, will evolve, as their regressive fellow men die off, into the Superman.

This will be my achievement.

Thinking about it, he smiled. He was still travelling, after all. He had left his home in Iowa, left his friends, then his country, and now he was on the road out of Germany.

He was going to where the air was clean and mankind could be reborn.

Not immediately, however. He was still in the real world. He was reminded of this fact when the Allied bombers returned, growling low overhead, and the darkness outside the noisy train became a fabulous tapestry. There were ballooning balls of white light, jagged yellow flames, clouds of black smoke, then the luminous, scorching heat of the explosions lent the darkness a crimson hue. Sparks fountained to the sky, decorating moon and stars, and the buildings of the town outside the train collapsed into more beauty. It was the singular beauty of death, the awesome radiance of destruction. Wilson saw the walls exploding, the smoke billowing up from the flames, and knew, even as the noise erupted and clawed through him, that the beauty and horror of life on earth were one and the same.

When the train screeched and shuddered, then ground to a halt, the SS officers crowded up against the windows to look out at the night.

'Why are we stopping?' Kammler asked, glancing at Nebe.

'I don't know,' Nebe replied. He stood up and crooked his finger at Ernst Stoll. 'Come with me, Captain.'

The train had stopped on the outskirts of town. The darkness outside was filled with sheets of yellow flame and geysering sparks. Smoke billowed up from the buildings, obscuring the moon and stars, and the steady droning of the Allied bombers seemed to make the air vibrate. Nebe stopped and glanced out, started forward, then stopped again when an SS sergeant hurried into the carriage and gave the Nazi salute.

'Why have we stopped?' Nebe asked.

'Some of the prisoners are panicking, sir. They're hammering on the doors of the box cars and might start a riot. We don't know what to do.'

'What we do is set an example,' Nebe said softly. 'Captain Stoll, come

with me!'

Wilson watched them departing, followed closely by Kammler, then he pulled his window down enough to stick his head out. The noise of the air raid was deafening, hammering at him like a huge fist. He saw collapsing buildings, more showering sparks, billowing smoke, and glanced backward along the train to where armed troops were covering one of the box cars, the dogs straining at the end of their leashes, barking and snapping.

Nebe, Kammler, and Stoll were there, standing in front of the box car. Nebe was removing his pistol from his holster as his troops opened the door. Bombs were exploding nearby, the ground roaring and erupting, and even as earth and debris showered back down, Nebe took aim with his pistol. The first prisoner was dropping. Nebe shot him and he fell. Another prisoner jumped out as Kammler and Stoll unholstered their pistols and also started firing. The prisoners were shot as they jumped out, screamed and jerked and collapsed. Then the women inside started wailing as the SS troops, encouraged by their leader, fired into the box car.

The noise was atrocious, a savage, staccato roaring, adding to the crescendo of the aircraft growling overhead, the bombs exploding on all sides, and the sibilance of the tracer bullets criss-crossing the sky above the boiling black smoke.

No more prisoners jumped down, but Wilson heard the women wailing. That dreadful sound was shut off when the box car doors were closed again, locking in the subdued prisoners, then Nebe led Kammler and Ernst Stoll back to the carriage.

The train moved off again as they returned and took their seats, Kammler and Nebe facing Wilson, the pale-faced Stoll beside him.

Wilson noted Stoll's shocked appearance. It was something worth remembering. Stoll obeyed orders, but not without distaste, and that virtue, which Wilson viewed as his weakness, was what would make him useful.

Wilson closed his eyes again. He fell in and out of sleep. The train rumbled through the night, through more air raids and long silences, passing smouldering ruins and columns of troops on the roads and villages still remarkably untouched and silhouetted in moonlight. The ruins gradually disappeared, giving way to pine forests, The forests rose and fell over the hills of Thuringia, shielding picturesque villages, nineteenth-century houses, and the remains of fortified castles that stood majestically on the crest of the

hills, overlooking the babbling brooks and rivers that crossed lush valleys.

The train climbed up through the forests. There were no air raids here. The sun rose beyond the hills, a pearly light through starlit darkness, then the gray light turned into silvery striations that gave the trees back their colour.

The trees covered the hills and mountains, hiding the great caves hacked out of them. The train, which had been climbing more slowly by the hour, finally stopped in a cleared area by the old walled town of Kahla, in the region of the southern Harz Mountains, on the same line that led on to the underground Nordhausen Central Works.

Wilson looked out. The pine trees soared all around him. The old walled town of Kahla could not be seen from here, but the train lines branched off into a tunnel that led inside the forested hills.

In there lay his destiny.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

After spending a nightmarish week in the Harz Mountains, supervising the resettlement of Wilson and his flying saucer project, Ernst returned to Berlin to do the same for the ungrateful and increasingly arrogant Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever, though in this case the move was to Prague, Czechoslovakia.

Having settled Schriever, his two trusted engineers, and other assistants and slave workers in the research complex just outside the city, where the naive scientist had been looking forward to testing the flying saucer before the Soviets advanced too far, Ernst returned to a bomb-shattered Berlin. He felt older than ever and was no longer able to sleep at night. When he made his report to Heinrich Himmler, the Reichsführer, who had once seemed so icily calm, now was oddly distracted. His eyes behind the glittering pince-nez roamed restlessly left and right.

'Four days ago,' he said, before Ernst could utter a word, 'the Soviets took Minsk and captured one hundred thousand German soldiers. One hundred thousand,' he repeated slowly, like a man in a trance. 'It is something to think about.'

Embarrassed, Ernst didn't know what to say, so he simply remained standing in front of Himmler's desk, looking down at his chubby, pale face and surprised by the change in him. Eventually, as if remembering what Ernst was there for, the Reichsführer looked up and said, in a less distracted manner 'So, you have completed the resettlements. I myself have recently visited the new site at Prague, but haven't been to Nordhausen since last there with you. What's it like there?'

'Very good, Reichsführer. The Nordhausen Central Works are, as you know, hidden deeply in the Kohnstein Mountain. As of this moment, more than three thousand prisoners from the concentration camp at nearby Buchenwald are being used as slave labour and housed in a new subcamp

named Dora. It's anticipated that by October this year, the whole of the Dora subcamp will have been transferred underground and also increased to a total of over thirteen thousand slave workers. Another camp for the prisoners is being set up in a mountain valley to the south, less than a kilometre from the entrance to Nordhausen's tunnel B.'

'The prisoners are disciplined and work well?'

'Yes, sir,' Ernst said, thinking of how the unfortunates were driven to work with whips, worked exceptionally long, exhausting hours, and were not allowed to rest for a single moment.

'How are they disciplined?' Himmler asked, for such matters always interested the bureaucrat in him.

'Naturally they're supervised at all times by SS guards armed with pistols, automatic weapons, bullwhips, and sticks. When not working, many of them are shut up in the tunnels of the underground complex. When they refuse to work on the V-1 or V-2, they're shot or hanged in full sight of the other prisoners, either in the underground corridors or in the roll-call ground of the open camps.'

'Excellent, Captain. It's always best to carry out disciplinary measures in full view of the other prisoners. It's always good to remind them of the consequences should they, too, commit an infraction.'

'Yes, sir,' Ernst said. The nightmares generated by his week in Nordhausen and the other underground factories in the area, including the one at Kahla, were the cause of his inability to sleep.

'And the underground factories are definitely invisible from the air?'

'Yes, Reichsführer.'

'Good.' Himmler offered a smile that seemed to be turned inward upon himself. 'As you know,' he said, clasping his hands under his double chin and returning to his former distracted manner, 'as early as 1941, I personally set up an SS proving ground near Blizna, a small village located by the confluence of the rivers Vistula and San, in southern Poland.'

'Yes, sir, I remember it well.'

Himmler nodded again and smiled in a dreamy manner.

'Toward the end of 1941,' he continued, 'after the villagers had all been evicted, Soviet prisoners-of-war were sent there and killed off almost to a man by hard labour and starvation, in order to get the proving ground completed. When they had all died off, we replaced them with political

prisoners and eventually built a concentration camp for them. Since then we've razed the original village to the ground, camouflaged the whole area, and built a new, mock village over the proving ground, to fool Allied aircraft and their photographers. Cardboard cottages and outbuildings were sent there from Germany; dummies of men, women, and children stand around; and even flowers and other shrubbery have been planted. From the air, the illusion of an inhabited village is complete – and I like to think of it, Captain,' he continued, looking up at Ernst and smiling frostily, 'as the prototype for all the camouflaged, underground factories built since then... My personal creation.'

'And an excellent one, Reichsführer.'

'Thank you, Captain.'

Ernst, feeling weary and slightly unreal, did not think it wise to mention the fact that according to recent intelligence reports, Polish partisans were already moving in on Blizna, with a view to capturing it and holding it until the Soviet army arrived, as it surely would any day now.

'And a similar situation exists at the Schriever complex near Prague, in Bohemia?'

'Yes, Reichsführer. Exactly the same. And Flugkapitän Schriever is hoping to test his flying saucer later this year.'

'Good. We need all the secret weapons we can get, if we're to defeat the Allied advance. What is the American, Wilson, doing in this respect?'

'Not much, I'm afraid,' Ernst lied, knowing that in fact Wilson was already planning to test his small *Feuerball* in the guise of an anti-radar weapon and, if successful, then implement the same ideas in the larger flying saucer he was intending to construct in Neuschwabenland. 'He's making various small contributions to the V-2 program but has otherwise turned out to be disappointing.'

'If the Soviets or Americans even get close, I want that man shot.'

'He will be, Reichsführer. In the meantime, I agree that it's wise to pin most of our hopes on the V-2 rocket program and, possibly, Flugkapitän Schriever's flying saucer.'

Himmler nodded, accepting Ernst's compliment, then unclasped his hands. 'So, Captain,' he said, 'when are you returning to Nordhausen?'

'As soon as I see my wife and children, Reichsführer.'

'Ah, yes,' Himmler said, 'Now living with your mother-in-law, I believe.'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I do not approve of the separation, but am pleased to note that you did, at least, do something about her lover. I assume he’s now one of the hundred thousand German soldiers captured at Minsk. It’s all he deserves.’

‘Yes, sir. I agree.’

Himmler stood up behind his desk and stared sombrely at Ernst. ‘These are terrible times,’ he said, ‘and we must all remain courageous. I wish to thank you, Captain, for all you’ve done so far. Believe me, I’m proud of you.’ Then, to Ernst’s amazement, he offered his hand. Ernst shook it, found it oddly clammy, then saluted and walked out.

Berlin was barely recognizable, with once-familiar areas now razed to the ground, blackened ruins and piles of rubble as far as the eye could see, and a constant smell of fire in the air, instead of the summer flowers. There were few soldiers about, only old men, women, and children, a good many of them crippled, and Ernst became even more depressed and longed for escape.

He went straight to Brigette’s apartment, wanting to have her one last time. Relieved to find the building still standing, though the one beside it had been bombed, he hurried eagerly up the stairs to ring her door bell. However, before he could do so, the door opened, a Luftwaffe flight lieutenant stared at him in surprise, then grinned sheepishly, finished buttoning up his jacket, called ‘*Auf Wiedersehen*!’ back over his shoulder and left by the stairs. Brigette appeared in the doorway, her red hair dishevelled, a cigarette between her lips, still wearing her dressing gown. She was just about to close the door when she saw Ernst.

Startled, she froze for a moment, then grinned, stepped back, and waved him inside, saying ‘Ah! My pretty Kapitän! Come inside and be warmed!’ A little shaken, Ernst stepped in, pushed the door closed behind him, and just stood there, feeling foolish, until Brigette pressed her lips to his and ran her hand down his spine. ’Did you bring me a present, my beauty, from wherever you’ve been?’

‘Not this time,’ Ernst said.

She stepped away from him and pouted, blowing smoke in his face. ‘Nothing? Not one little thing? Is this how you treat the girls who suffer at home?’

Ernst was not amused by her flippancy, assuming she was trying to make

light of the man who had just left.

‘You don’t seem to be suffering too much,’ he said. ‘You still have your boyfriends, I see.’

She grinned, adjusted the dressing gown to cover her breasts, then waved her hand in an airy manner, indicating the once-elegant apartment. ‘Not suffering?’ she asked in a theatrical manner. ‘But darling, just *look* at this place. It’s not what it once was.’ Which certainly seemed true enough; the furniture faded and dusty, the drinks cabinet bare. ‘No Russian vodka,’ she continued. ‘No cognac from France. No more pasta and salami from Italy. No more dairy products from Denmark. No more jewellery and furs from handsome officers flushed with victory and pride. Only *angst*, my darling, and the air raids and the long queues for food. So why *not* the odd boyfriend?’

Her mockery angered him, but he tried not to show it, as he still hoped to get into her bed before visiting Ingrid.

‘I suppose I’ve no reason to complain,’ he said. ‘It was just a shock, that’s all.’

‘Why, darling? You’ve always known about my other men. You’ve always known that I like my little presents and can’t bear to be lonesome.’

He wanted to slap her face, but managed to restrain himself, because what she had said was perfectly true. Indeed, she had often teased him with talk about her other men, and in those days, when Berlin was rich and he a golden young conqueror, he had taken the teasing in good part. That he couldn’t do so now was a sign that things had changed radically. He was no longer a conqueror, she had visibly aged, and both the city and this faded, bare apartment reminded him of the forthcoming defeat. He felt that darkness descending...

‘So what are you doing here, Ernst?’ Brigette said, inhaling and exhaling cigarette smoke while turning away to take a seat on the worn sofa, where she crossed her long, still-elegant legs and swung one invitingly.

‘You know what I came for,’ he said, feeling a choke in his throat.

She smiled, then stubbed her cigarette out, and stretched both arms along the back of the sofa, thus forcing her breasts out. ‘But you didn’t bring me my little present, dear Ernst, and you *know* I expect that.’

‘I know you like your little presents, but I didn’t realize they were mandatory. I mean, I never thought of them as absolutely vital. It was my

pleasure to give them.'

'You gave them *in return* for pleasure.'

'That's beside the point.'

'The point, dear, is that I never lend myself unless I'm offered a present.'

'I didn't know you were for sale.'

'Yes, you did,' she said calmly. 'I charged more than a common whore would charge; it just wasn't money.'

'Presents,' Ernst said bitterly.

'Exactly,' she said. 'Some men, they can't admit that they're buying it, so one asks them for presents. *Little* presents. *Expensive* presents. Ones with high resale value.'

'You're a mercenary whore.'

'No, Ernst, darling, I'm a survivor. I've learned not to depend on men for anything, so I take what I can from them. To save for a rainy day, darling – which means when Berlin falls.'

'That's the talk of a traitor.'

'Are you going to report me, darling? After all, that's what you often said you were: no more than a policeman.'

The remark humiliated him, reminding him of his failures, but the thought that he might not have her this last time made him desire her all the more and forced him to swallow his pride.

'I'm going away,' he said, despising the plaintive tone in his voice. 'I'm being posted away and don't know what will happen after that. I just thought...'

'One last time?'

'Yes,' he said, almost whispering. 'For old times sake, at least.'

'For old times sake,' she echoed sardonically.

'Yes,' he said, stepping toward her. He stopped directly in front of the worn sofa and gazed down at her swinging leg. It was exposed up to the thigh and it made him suck his breath in; then, when he raised his gaze, he saw her breasts thrusting against the silk of the dressing gown, the skin above bare and marble-white. When he raised his gaze higher, he saw her sensual lips curved in a mocking smile.

'So you're going away,' she said, 'and leaving me to the tender mercies of the Allied troops or the Soviets – and *still* you want your little pleasure for old times sake. Well, my dear, a girl has to survive and, when the city falls,

will need more than her fading looks. So since we've always had a particular relationship, let's keep it that way... Which means that if I don't get my present, you won't have any fun.'

'I've been away for weeks,' he said, loathing the piteous tone in his voice and feeling his anger rising out of his humiliation. 'I've been worked night and day. I didn't have the opportunity to buy presents – not even for my wife and children, let alone you.'

'You're *separated* from your wife and children.'

'I still see them – and will this evening.'

'Well, perhaps they no longer expect presents, but I do, my dear.'

'I don't have one, Brigette. For God's sake, don't be – '

But she stopped him short by leaning forward on the sofa, taking hold of his wrist and turning it over to examine his watch.

'A gold Rolex,' she said.

He jerked his hand away. 'If you think – '

She leaned back on the sofa and stretched her arms along it, simultaneously exposing her full breasts and swinging that long leg. 'A gold Rolex is worth a lot,' she said, smiling. 'And I still want my present.'

Ernst exploded, hardly knowing what he was doing. He grabbed her by the collar, jerked her to her feet, slapped her face, and threw her back down. He saw the torn dressing gown, a bared breast, blood on her lips, then bent over and slapped her again and dragged her onto the floor. She cursed and clawed at him, tried to roll away but failed, and writhed beneath him when he straddled her body and ripped the dressing gown off her.

He didn't feel lust – only violent, blinding rage – but when the dressing gown was lying in shreds around her, he tried to force her legs open. She didn't scream, but she cursed him loudly, trying to jerk her wrists from his hands, and when finally he let go to hold her legs apart, she frantically tried hitting him with her fists.

Surprised, he released her thighs and took hold of her wrists again. He jerked her hands away from his face and, still straddling her and breathing in spasms, looked at her as she stopped writhing beneath him and glared fiercely at him. When she stopped struggling, when her body became motionless, he released her hands and rolled off her, then stood up and straightened his jacket, feeling foolish and beaten.

'The Soviets will know what to do with you,' he said with as much

contempt as he could muster, looking down at her, where she still lay on the floor, too careful to move. ‘Good luck, Brigette. You’ll need it.’

He made a point of not slamming the door in anger when he left for the last time... but her mocking laughter pursued him.

The lines for the tramcars to Wannsee had been blown up in an air raid, so he took a taxi through the darkening light of the early evening, trying not to look out at the crippled children and old people who were clambering over the piles of rubble or exploring the charred ruins, hoping to find something they could barter for money or food.

Yes, Berlin was unrecognizable, the gaunt remainder of a lost dream. He was glad when the worst ruins disappeared from view and were replaced with the relatively less devastated areas overlooking the Havel River. Not that there were no ruins here, but they were fewer and more spread out, and he was even more relieved to find his in-laws’ elegant old house still standing in its gardens overlooking the waters of the Wannsee. He asked the taxi driver to wait for him, then rang the doorbell.

Ingrid’s mother answered the door, looking shockingly aged. Her hair was now completely gray and the skin of her handsome face, though tight on her cheekbones, was webbed with lines of tension and possibly hunger.

She stared in a confused manner at Ernst, then, recognizing him, murmured a greeting and pulled him into her arms. When they embraced, he kissed her cheek, which seemed cold, then followed her into the house. She walked ahead of him, her body heavy and ungainly, saying over her shoulder ‘The children will be so glad to see you. How long has it been now?’

Noting that she hadn’t included Ingrid in her first comment, Ernst said, ‘About eighteen months. Maybe two years. I’m not sure. How have things been?’

‘Not so good,’ she said vaguely. ‘All the air raids... food shortages... the anxiety... Ingrid!’ she called out as she entered the living room. ‘You have a visitor, dear!’

She stepped aside to let him enter, hugged him again impulsively as he passed her, whispered, ‘I think I’ll leave you two alone,’ then hurried away. Ernst stepped into the living room and saw Ingrid looking up from her armchair, an open newspaper lying across her lap, her face still exceptionally pretty, but drawn, as if sleep had eluded her.

‘Hello, Ingrid,’ he said, crossing the room, which was, he noted, still filled with excellent furniture, international bricabrac, and the fine paintings that her father had collected before he died.

‘What do you want?’ she asked coldly.

Startled, he stopped in front of her, looked down at her, then glanced at the sofa opposite. ‘Can I sit down?’

‘Are you planning to stay long?’

‘No. I have a taxi waiting.’

‘Then you can sit down.’

He hadn't expected a warm welcome, but her coldness was truly shocking. He sat on the sofa and smiled at her, hoping to warm her.

‘What do you want here?’ she asked him, clearly not warmed at all.

‘I’m being posted out of Berlin, he said, ‘and I don’t know when I’ll be coming back. I came to say goodbye. I also came because I was worried about you and the children.’

‘Were you, indeed?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of the air raids, for a start.’

‘They’ve been bombing Berlin for a long time and you didn’t worry before.’

‘I did. It was *you* who left *me*. You *do* remember that, don’t you?’

‘Yes, Ernst, I remember. And I also remember why. It was because I found out about your whoring and so turned to another man. A good man, Ernst, a *very* good man, whom you sent to Russia.’

‘At the insistence of the Reichsführer,’ Ernst lied. ‘He thought it best you were parted.’

‘Damn the Reichsführer! And damn you for being a liar! Eberhard wasn’t sent to Russia on the word of Heinrich Himmler. It was *you*, Ernst, who came up with that idea. You. You alone. You had him sent to Russia because you knew he probably wouldn’t survive – and I haven’t received word from him since the Soviets captured our troops. So either he’s dead or he’s rotting in a Russian prison camp. Either way, I won’t see him again. You’re a bastard! *I hate* you!’

She turned away from him, picked up a packet of cigarettes, tipped one out into her hand, then reached for the matches.

‘You’re exaggerating the whole affair,’ Ernst said, though he knew that she wasn’t.

‘Please leave,’ she responded, then struck a match, lit her cigarette, and exhaled a thin, nervous stream of smoke from shivering lips.

‘No matter what you think of me,’ Ernst said, struck by her beauty, cut by her vehemence, ‘I’m seriously worried about you and the children. You’ve survived the air raids so far, but they’re going to get worse, and sooner or later either the Soviets or the Allies, maybe both, will march into Berlin. What happens then...’ He tried to put it into words, but could find none, so just shrugged. ‘I simply don’t know.’

Ingrid blew a cloud of smoke, watched it intently, then turned unhappy green eyes upon him and said, ‘You haven’t told me anything I don’t know – except that if the Allies or Soviets come, you probably won’t be here.’

‘I can’t tell you where I’m going, but it’s safer than here. We’re still married, so I can probably take you with me, and I think you should come.’

‘No, thanks.’

‘*Please*, Ingrid. For the sake of the children, if not yourself.’

‘You murdered the man I love – if he’s not dead, he might as well be – so I’m not going to share my future with you for the sake of the children. You’re not the man I once loved. You’re not the father I wanted for them. You could have been that man – you almost were – but then you threw it away. Now look at you, Ernst! A leading light of the SS. A man who fornicates with whores, collects the victims for the torture chambers, rounds up the unfortunates for the concentration camps, and generally lends his support to the bloodiest dictatorship on Earth. And a man who once wanted to be a scientist, or, at least, an engineer! No, Ernst, you’re not the man I married – and you’re not the man for my children. I’d rather they died in an air raid than grow up with you. If you want to say good-bye to them, you may do so. But that’s *all* you can do. After that, you can leave.’

Ernst drank her in, recalling what she had once meant to him, then filled up with unutterable grief at what he had lost. Though drawn and anguished, she was still attractive to him, but he’d lost her as well... Ingrid... the children... his whole world. How had it happened?

He sighed. ‘All right. Where are they?’

‘Upstairs in their bedroom.’

‘Can I go up now?’

‘Yes, but don’t make your departure sound definite. As far as they’re concerned, you’re just off on another trip. Is that understood?’

‘I *do* hope to be returning to Berlin,’ he told her.

‘Nothing’s certain these days.’

He went up the stairs and found the children in the bedroom they shared, Ula still blonde and lovely, though now ten years old, Alfred nearly seven years old and no longer chubby. They greeted him warily, as they always did on his odd visits, but he welled up with emotion and clung to them so long he embarrassed them. Eventually he let them go, gave them some money, kissed them on the cheek. Then, regaining his composure, he returned to the living room to say goodbye to Ingrid.

Her mother had come back in and Ernst was shocked when he saw them together. Ingrid now looked like her mother had looked only ten years ago. There were streaks of gray in Ingrid’s blonde hair. Her formerly bright-green eyes had darkened. She still had a good figure, but it had filled out in the wrong way, and Ernst noticed, with a shock, that she was wearing one of her mother’s old dresses. Her face, though still attractive, was closed against him.

‘Will you reconsider?’ he asked her.

‘No,’ she replied.

‘For the sake of the children. For your mother’s sake – ’

‘Don’t bring them into this.’

Her mother looked embarrassed, staring down at the floor, and Ernst, not feeling angry but dead, walked up to the old woman, embraced her, formally kissed her cheek. Then, as her tears started falling, he simply nodded at Ingrid.

‘I promise, I’ll make it back,’ he said.

‘Don’t make rash promises, Ernst. None of us can make promises these days. We take each day as it comes.’

‘I’ll be back.’

‘Goodbye, Ernst.’

He turned away and walked out. The taxi was still there, making a small fortune in these otherwise bleak days, and even as Ernst walked toward it, his boots kicking up gravel, he heard that distant, familiar rumbling and the eerie wail of the sirens. Looking toward Berlin, at the large moon in the starlit sky, he knew that the Allied aircraft were returning for another night of destruction.

There’s nothing left for me here, he thought forlornly. Now I only have Wilson.

Then he slipped into the rear of the taxi and was taken back to the city, which, even as he was driven toward it, was turning into a furnace.

Hell is on earth, he thought.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Bradley was in church. He was, to be precise, in an annex of the shell of the Church of St Pierre in the ruined old town of Caen, France, to which he had driven, one week after its fall to the Canadian and British troops, from the town of Saint-Lo, which had been captured by the US 1st Army.

Bradley had driven in a jeep from Saint-Lo to Caen through a landscape devastated by bomb craters, burned-out barns, collapsed houses, mountains of rubble, and putrefying dead animals, mostly cows. He had arrived in Caen, at the invitation of the British SOE, which was now being more agreeable to him, after the lovely old cathedral town, eastern bastion of the German defence forces, had been reduced to ruins by relentless Allied artillery and air bombardment. He had then been directed by some weary British 2nd Army infantrymen to the Church of St Pierre, which he had found simply by heading for the tower that was visible above the ruins of what had once been prosperous streets.

The tower had been damaged and was surrounded by more rubble, but luckily the interior of the church remained intact. It had become a refuge for hundreds of the townspeople who had lost their homes in the artillery and air bombardments. The refugees were still there when Bradley arrived, but within days they had been moved out to more hospitable quarters. Bradley, at the invitation of the British Secret Intelligence Service, had set up a temporary office in this annex, where, with the assistance of members of the Manhattan atomic bomb project's ALSOS and the OSS's Project Paperclip, he had begun an intensive interrogation of resistance members and local townsfolk as well as less cooperative collaborators, suspected and otherwise.

While the members of the ALSOS concentrated on tracking down details of all German V-1 and V-2 rocket projects, Bradley and his fellow OSS sleuths were attempting to trace the whereabouts of those scientists and engineers known to have been involved in the construction of rockets and other secret weapons, including any aircraft remotely saucer-shaped and relating to Wilson.

Bradley was not having much luck.

What he had learned so far was that the Germans had built a frightening number of V-1 and V-2 rocket launching sites, most of them in the Pas de Calais area and the recently captured Cherbourg peninsula. What he had also learned is that after the devastating RAF bombing raids of 1943, Wernher von Braun's rocket team had been moved out of Peenemünde to an unknown destination, had been returned when the damage had been repaired, but reportedly was about to be moved again. Unfortunately, no one knew more than that... and no one seemed to know Wilson.

The American.

Goddamn him!

The more Bradley saw of the war's awesome devastation, the more he wondered how much Wilson had contributed to it and the more he wanted to find him and put a stop to him. He was still haunted by the memory of that saucer-shaped aircraft in the barn near Montezuma, Iowa, where Wilson had been born and returned to work in secret, and he was convinced that the V-1 rocket program could not have been so advanced without Wilson's help. Now, more than anything else, he had to find out.

Sitting behind his makeshift desk in the annex of the damaged church, he had come face to face with the best and worst faces of the war: female collaborators with heads shaved by their liberated former friends; male collaborators bruised and scarred from beatings by their fellow countrymen; the pitiful victims of Nazi torture; old and young members of the French resistance, whose features had been shaped by deprivation and constant fear. He was feeling overwhelmed and exhausted when finally he came up with something.

The man who sat facing him across the old, cluttered farm table in the morning of July 20, 1944, was wearing the clothing of a French peasant – black jacket and baggy pants, open-necked white shirt and beret – but had strikingly handsome features and brown eyes filled with passionate conviction. He had not been brought in, but had specifically asked to see the investigating officer. According to his papers, he wasn't French but Polish, and his name was Andrzej Pialowicz.

'I'm surprised,' Bradley told him, 'to find a Polish citizen in the French resistance.'

'I am a leading member of the *Polish* resistance,' Pialowicz replied in surprisingly good English, 'but am forced to flee the country when the

Gestapo and SS round up and murder my group. When you finally get to Poland, and if you get your hands on the Nazi secret service's documents, no doubt you will find me listed there.'

Bradley nodded. 'Why did you not just go underground in Poland?'

'It is becoming too difficult in Cracow, where I operate, and when my group is captured and my lover tortured and then sent to a concentration camp, I know that the last people I can trust are all gone, and if I stay in Cracow, it will only be a matter of time before I am caught.'

'Good thinking,' Bradley said.

'Also, Major Riedel of the SS is becoming obsessed with capturing me, which is a further motive to leave the country and go underground, where even my name will not be known. So, convinced that the Allies will invade Europe eventually, I come here and join the French resistance.'

'How did you get out of Poland?'

'I travel by night, usually cross-country, keeping well away from the roads. I also cover great distances by train, hanging under the carriages for hours.'

'That's a hell of a thing to do,' Bradley said. 'One hell of a thing.'

'When we have to, we can do surprising things. You should know this by now.'

Bradley was certainly learning it. He was gradually getting used to the fact that many of the people he interviewed, who often looked so young and inexperienced, had lost their families and loved ones, been tortured by the Nazis, lived under the threat of death for as long as they could remember, and treated adventures such as that described by Pialowicz as perfectly normal.

He was getting used to it, but sometimes it still amazed him, though he tried not to show it.

'So you've been in France since...?'

'June 1940.'

'Have you heard anything about your lover since?'

'No.' Pialowicz showed the merest flicker of emotion, then became stone-faced.

'You don't know which camp she was sent to?'

'No.'

'If you give me her name, I'll put her on the file. If she's found, we'll get in touch with you.'

‘This I would appreciate. Also, she is the reason I come to see you.’

‘Oh? Who is she?’

‘Her name is Kryzystina Kozilewski.’

Bradley wrote the name down in his notebook, after asking Pialowicz how it was spelt.

‘So,’ he said, looking up again. ‘What’s the relevance of Kryzystina Kozilewski?’

‘One of my functions here in France,’ Pialowicz responded, ‘is to liaise between the French and Polish underground groups. It is one of those Polish groups that conveys to you through the French resistance, in 1942, that the Nazis are testing remote-controlled rockets near Peenemünde, in the Baltic.’

‘The V-1 rocket.’

‘Yes. Anyway, since I am the person liaising between that Polish resistance group and the Frenchmen who pass the information on to you, through the SOE, London, I naturally know about your interest in the American scientist, John Wilson.’

Feeling his weariness slipping away from him, Bradley leaned across the table and prompted Pialowicz with, ‘Yes?’

‘This is where my former mistress, Kryzystina Kozilewski, comes into the picture,’ Pialowicz said, keeping his features carefully composed to mask any pain he might be feeling. ‘When the Nazis overrun Poland in September 1939, I form a Polish resistance group and enlist the help of Kryzystina. Kryzystina has had a hard life, is experienced in the ways of men – I say this without rancour – and on behalf of the resistance, uses her charm and experience to gain the trust of German officers, obtain valuable gossip from them, and pass the information on to us.’

‘Is that why she’s in a concentration camp?’

‘I think so, yes,’ Pialowicz said.

At that moment, a great armada of Allied aircraft passed overhead, heading for Germany. Pialowicz glanced up at the ceiling of the annex, then lowered his gaze again.

‘Early in 1940 the Germans requisition the boarding house owned by Kryzystina and send its residents to a concentration camp. Kryzystina saves herself from this fate by engaging in an affair with the commander of the troops involved in the requisition: an SS captain named Ernst Stoll, who is under the command of my worst enemy, Major Riedel. And it is through her

affair with Stoll that Kryzystina learns about the American, John Wilson.'

The noise of the aircraft passing overhead had reached a crescendo and Pialowicz stopped talking for a moment, waiting for the bombers to pass on... for the noise to die down. Bradley thought of the ruins of Caen, of all the other ruins he had seen in his journey, and shuddered to think of what that mighty armada of bombers would soon do to Germany. The awesome power of modern technology was now ever present... and if Wilson had progressed even further, God knows what would be coming.

When the noise of the aircraft had passed, Pialowicz said, 'To return to Kryzystina... According to what she tells me in 1940, this German who becomes her lover, this SS Captain Ernst Stoll, is a former rocket engineer, deeply embittered at being denied membership of the VfR, or German Amateur Rocket Society and, later, General Dornberger's rocket program, which is placed under the command of Wernher von Braun, one of Stoll's old school chums, while Stoll is turned into a mere technical administrator. Disgusted, Stoll lets himself be persuaded to join SS intelligence, which at least gives him the opportunity to supervise certain secret weapons research programs at Kummersdorf, south of Berlin – and it is there that he becomes involved with the American, Wilson.'

'He actually worked with Wilson?'

'Yes. Wilson does not actually work with von Braun's rocket teams, but with a much smaller group at the other side of an old firing range at Kummersdorf West. However, according to what Stoll tells Kryzystina, while Wilson is to work on secret weapons other than remote-controlled rockets, many of his remarkable innovations are passed on to the rocket team, which certainly hastens the development of the rockets.'

Now Bradley was feeling really excited. At last Wilson's continuing existence had been confirmed. At last he'd been given shape, even if, for now, he remained faceless.

'Did Kryzystina find out what Wilson's project actually was?'

'Yes. One night when Stoll is drunk and particularly bitter, he lets slip that the program is called Projekt Saucer and involves the construction of a saucer-shaped, vertical-rising aircraft. How far it has progressed, he doesn't say, but he does also let slip that the project is highly secret, that it is Heinrich Himmler's personal passion, and that even Hitler is unaware of its existence.'

‘What was this Wilson like?’ Bradley asked, desperate to put a human face on his faceless quarry.

‘Apparently a lot older than he looks,’ Pialowicz replied. ‘About sixty-five years old.’

‘In 1940.’

‘Yes.’

‘Which makes him about seventy now,’ Bradley observed.

‘Yes.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Yes. This Wilson is very strange. According to Stoll, John Wilson is a man obsessed. He cares for nothing but his work and has few scruples when it comes to doing it. That is one obsession. There are others.’

Pialowicz glanced around him, at the ruins of the church, saw nothing that he hadn’t lived with for a long time, so returned to the subject at hand.

‘He does not smoke, does not drink, and claims that his exceptional youthfulness is due to some kind of lifelong diet. Also, he is obsessed with extending his life span and, according to Stoll, is convinced that any kind of extreme emotionalism, such as love or sexual passion, encourages the aging process. Regarding his own sexual drives, he claims to relieve them as functionally as humanly possible. And, finally, while not sharing Heinrich Himmler’s insane notions of an Aryan Super Race, he certainly believes and is striving for the creation of a race of geniuses, devoted to science – of which he will naturally be the leader. For this reason, he treats his own health and his work as the base material for research, medical and scientific. In other words, he is a man so objective, he is scarcely human at all... Very strange, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Bradley said. ‘*Very* strange.’

He glanced back through the arched doorway of the annex and saw other intelligence officers at other tables, interviewing other suspects, collaborators, and allies. The sunlight outside was beaming in through the stained-glass windows, which had remained unharmed, casting striations of many colours over worn, harassed, and sometimes jubilant faces. Big guns thundered in the distance and some people looked up. The battle for Europe had moved on from this ruined town, but was continuing elsewhere.

‘So in 1940,’ Bradley continued, ‘Wilson was still located in Kummersdorf, south of Berlin. Do you know if he’s still there?’

‘No,’ Pialowicz said, ‘he is not. About three weeks ago Wilson’s team are split up for reasons we have not yet ascertained. But according to our informants, Wilson and some others are moved by a train filled with SS troops and concentration-camp prisoners to somewhere in the southern Harz Mountains. Alas, we do not know where, though we *do* have reason to believe that the area around Nordhausen, in Thuringia, is littered with large, well-disguised underground factories where the Nazi secret weapons are produced with the help of slave labour from nearby camps. We believe Wilson is destined for one of those hidden factories.’

‘And the rest of his team?’

Pialowicz shrugged. ‘About a week after Wilson is moved out, the rest of the team, including Schriever, Miethe, and Habermohl, is put on a train heading for Prague, in Bohem, in Czechoslovakia. We have no idea why. Nor do we know their final destination.’ Pialowicz shrugged again, then raised his hands in the air. ‘This is all I can tell you.’

‘It’s a hell of a lot,’ Bradley replied. ‘More than you realize.’

Pialowicz smiled for the first time, then stood up and said, ‘For me you will please find Kryzystina?’

‘We will,’ Bradley said.

He watched the young man walk out of the annex, sat there for a few minutes in silence, trying to calm his excitement, then followed him out of the church.

Too excited for coherent thought, he walked around the shattered town, letting the sun shine on his face, observing the appalling ruins and the troops and civilians moving around them, passing tanks buried in rubble and overturned, scorched trucks, eventually arriving at another church, which also was damaged. Stepping inside, he had to adjust to the gloom. Then he saw hundreds, maybe a thousand or more, refugees on the floor, lying on mattresses, surrounded by bits of furniture, making coffee and soup on small paraffin burners, and attending to the wounded and the dying, for whom there was still no room in the remains of the hospital. Light beamed obliquely on them, illuminating motes of dust, covering them in a silvery haze that made them look slightly unreal.

It was a dream of life and death, of suffering and self- sacrifice, and Bradley had seen it too many times on his journey through France. Nevertheless, he was shaken, torn between faith and despair, and he turned

away from it, from man's stupidity and nobility, and hurried back to the Church of St Pierre, to continue his work.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Ernst's growing conviction that hell might be on earth was made concrete when, after his painful farewell to Ingrid, he returned to the Harz Mountains. For a week that seemed like a year, he divided his time between the nightmarish daily routine of the underground factories in Nordhausen and Wilson's flying saucer construction plant nearby, just outside the old walled town of Kahla.

Desperate to avoid the daily whippings, public hangings, and shots to the back of the head in the bunkers of Nordhausen, all designed to keep the V-1 and V-2 assembly lines rolling, he spent most of his time in the underground factory at Kahla, pretending to supervise Wilson, whom he knew had seen through his pretence and was quietly amused by it.

'You always seem so tense,' he said to Ernst. 'You must learn to relax.'

Ernst was fascinated by Wilson, fearing and admiring his old man's wisdom, but mostly drawn to his air of icy invincibility and fascinated by his plans and theories, which admitted to no human doubts. He was completing his *Feuerball*, the remote-controlled anti-radar device that looked like a flying saucer but was only three feet wide and was, so he said, a flawless prototype for the larger, pilot-controlled saucer still on the drawing board.

'If the *Feuerball* flies,' Wilson said, 'and responds to its commands, then the *Kugelblitz* will also fly when we have the time to complete it. In the meantime, every test that needs to be done can be done with the *Feuerball*. Very soon now I'll try it against the Allied planes and see how it performs. I don't doubt that it will work admirably.'

Humiliated by Brigette, deprived of Ingrid and his children, rarely able to forget that he had once been an engineer and now was merely observing the great achievements of Wernher von Braun and Wilson, Ernst leaned toward the latter, was ensnared in his web, and began to see his only hope for redemption in the dream of Antarctica.

‘Not with Himmler,’ Wilson confided. ‘We can’t trust him anymore. Personally, I never did for a second, but now I know I was right. Kammler and Nebe are talking. They see Himmler a lot. They say he hasn’t been the same since the first great defeat in Russia, and like Hitler, he’s losing control and falling back upon fantasy. Astrologers and occultists, quack doctors and mesmerists – Himmler and Hitler, soulmates, will eventually go down the same way.’

‘I could have you shot for saying that.’

‘But you won’t,’ Wilson said, ‘because you too have witnessed Himmler’s changing moods and know what he’s like these days.’

Which was true enough, after all. Ernst thought Himmler was going mad. The more the Allies advanced, the more distracted and crazy Himmler became, albeit in his quiet way. The Reichsführer, the bureaucrat, the chicken farmer, was quietly falling to pieces. He had forgotten Neuschwabenland, had lost confidence in Wilson, and now pinned all his hopes on Rudolph Schriever’s abortion of a flying saucer, on other obscure ‘secret’ weapons, and on his own demented plans for making a ‘private’ peace with the advancing Allies.

He was not the awesomely remote Reichsführer of the past, but a pitiful creature.

Not a man to trust.

‘Yet I steal from him,’ Wilson said. ‘I steal the gold from his mind of mud. I don’t believe in his mysticism, in his blond young gods of war, in his anthroposophy and theosophy and Rosicrucianism, in his bizarre dreams of Atlantis and Lemuria and the undefiled Aryan. These are the dreams of madmen, the visions of the demented; yet they *do* hold a kernel of truth: the transformation of man. I too believe in this, though not in the same sad way. I believe in man’s evolutionary drive toward the Superman. And I believe in biological mutation and mental enhancement.’

They sometimes walked out of the tunnels, into the day’s clear light, and gazed over the forested hills of Thuringia to the summer’s horizon. There were no whippings there. No hangings. No beatings. But somewhere out there, beyond the horizon, the world was at war.

‘Forget Himmler,’ Wilson told Ernst. ‘He’s just another Nazi lunatic. He’s raised muddled philosophy and primitive dreaming from the slime to the tortured blood and bone of an insane ideology. Blood and bone are acceptable

– we're here, after all, only to feed evolution – but his philosophy of ice and fire, his pitiful dependence upon Hörbiger, is enough to show us that he doesn't belong to the real world. We *will* go to Antarctica, but not to further an idiotic SS élite. We will go to further what you once had and lost: the belief in science as an absolute, the one hope for mankind. You can recapture that dream, Ernst, but only through me. Forget Himmler. Betray him – yes, you must! – and regain your faith where it matters: in a colony devoted to science and unimpeded by ephemeral, earthly concerns. It has already begun, Ernst. The factories and accommodations under the ice have been completed and already a few hundred people have been shipped there, to prepare for our coming. Cast off your past, come with me, and get back what you lost. All the rest is lost anyway.'

Which Ernst knew was the truth, because the truth was undeniable: the Allied advance through France, the Soviets forming a pincer movement, Berlin crumbling in flame and smoke, his wife and family endangered; even his mistress, his whore, defeating him and laughing at his retreat. Yes, everything now defeating him and mocking his youthful dreams. And so Wilson, who had once seemed so distant, now seemed very close to him.

'We need an escape route,' Wilson said, back in his workshop, over the *Feuerball,* his steady gray gaze focused on the three-foot disc gleaming beneath him. 'We need to get from here to Kiel in the Baltic, and from there to our friends in Argentina, then from there to Antarctica. Nebe can help us in this. He's a vulture, but reliable. But to do it, he has to disappear, and that makes things difficult. You must do this for us, Ernst. You must help him disappear. When he disappears, when no one is looking for him, he can lead us to freedom. Do you understand, Ernst?'

'Yes,' Ernst said. 'I understand.'

'Arrange this and you can travel with me to Antarctica and become an even better engineer – no, a scientist! – than you'd ever imagined you could be. Do this and... *you're free*!'

Ernst left Wilson in Kahla and returned to Nordhausen where, in the great tunnels, while the conveyor belts rolled, the SS guards cracked their whips, spines snapped at the end of ropes, gunshots ricocheted in the bunkers, and the German genius for organization was completely perverted. He had chosen this life – at some point he had decided – and so he swallowed his remaining guilt, cast shame aside for all time, and travelled back to Berlin by train and

car for another meeting with Kammler.

He returned to a nightmare.

'There's been an attempt on the Führer's life,' Kammler told him in his office in SS headquarters. 'Lieutenant Colonel Claus Schenk von Stauffenberg, the chief of staff to the commander of the General Army Office in Berlin, planted a bomb in a briefcase during a meeting in Führer Headquarters in Wolfsschanze. Miraculously, the Führer escaped with minor burns, but now all hell has broken loose. A planned military revolt in the city by Stauffenberg's co-conspirators has already been put down, Stauffenberg, generals Beck and Olbricht, and their two adjutants have been executed by firing squad in the courtyard of the Bendlerstrasse, other conspirators have committed suicide, and Himmler has already set up the machinery for an investigation of the uprising and is drawing up a death list containing hundreds of names.'

'They were all involved in the attempted coup?'

'Highly unlikely,' Kammler replied. 'But in situations such as this, guilt or innocence is often a matter of luck. Hundreds of men are going to die, Captain Stoll, and General Nebe may be one of them.'

'Nebe?'

'Yes, He has no alibi. At the time of the assassination attempt, you were in Nordhausen and I was in the Pas de Calais area, supervising the rocket launchings – but Nebe was right here in Berlin, and since Himmler has never trusted him, he's gone down on the death list.'

'Does he know this yet?'

'No. I caught a glimpse of the list in Himmler's office only an hour ago. He was still filling in names.'

'What do we do now?' Ernst asked, feeling nauseous with fear.

'It's the perfect excuse for Nebe to disappear,' Kammler said with a self-satisfied air. 'In order to plan our escape route from Kahla to Kiel and collect troops trustworthy enough, and willing, to be our armed escorts during the journey, Nebe was always going to have to go underground. Our problem before was that his disappearance would have raised too large a question mark. However, now, if he disappears, it'll be assumed that he simply fled in fear of his life, as so many will. So now he'll disappear. He'll go underground in Thuringia. We'll protect him there until all this fuss has died

down – if necessary, I can confirm that he was executed by my men – and then, when the dust has settled, he can surface with new papers and quietly start organizing what we need for our escape before the Soviets or Allies reach us.'

'Excellent,' Ernst murmured, his thoughts clogged with dread. 'But who will... ?'

'I personally will arrange it,' Kammler said. 'I have the required freedom of movement. Meanwhile, you'll report directly to Himmler and become his right hand, thus ensuring that you remain above suspicion.'

Still haunted by the memory of the infamous Night of the Long Knives, and aware that a similar nightmare was about to be put into motion, Ernst, feeling sick to his stomach, said, 'I really would rather not – '

But Kammler stepped up to him and stared icily at him. 'You will do it, Captain Stoll. You will do whatever he asks of you. You will be his right hand, his loyal subject, no matter what he demands. Do you understand, Captain?'

'Yes, sir,' Ernst said.

He reported to the Reichsführer. The nightmare closed in upon him. The death list was completed and the rounding up began and the days and nights after were filled with beatings and entreaties and roaring guns and blood-soaked, riddled corpses. They were shot in their homes, in floodlit courtyards, in their beds and in cars and in fields where the wind howled and bent the grass.

Ernst had to be part of it, prove his worth, show his loyalty, and he managed it by denying it, by pretending it wasn't happening, or by convincing himself that those begging and sobbing deserved what they got. The innocent died with the guilty, the same way, without mercy; and the ghastly climax was held in the great courtroom of the Kammergericht, where, for the cine-cameras, the most notable of the defendants were humiliated even as they were sentenced.

They were brought in wearing old clothes, haggard, unkempt, some deprived of their false teeth, all forced to hold their beltless trousers up, and then, when sentenced, were led out of the courthouse and into Plotzensee Prison where, in a small room, they were stripped to the waist and hanged from meat hooks with nooses made of piano wire.

Ernst and his fellow officers were obliged to look on, all sweating in the

bright lights required for the cine-cameras that were taking moving pictures of the stripped bodies writhing in agony.

That's when it ended, when Ernst was reprieved, and he returned to his bed in the SS barracks and slept the sleep of the damned, haunted by nightmares.

Meanwhile, the western front had collapsed, the fate of France had been sealed a few days before when General Patton's divisions poured through the gap at Avranches, and the Allied bombing of Berlin was now reaching new heights of appalling efficiency. The ruins stretched as far as the eye could see; the sky was a constant pall of smoke.

Ernst was called to Kammler's office and went dazed from lack of sleep. He was informed that General Nebe had gone underground in Kahla, in Thuringia. Nebe had been listed officially as missing, possibly dead in the recent mass executions, when many bodies had been buried unnamed. Ernst was to return to Kahla, to keep a close eye on Wilson. He was to leave the next morning.

Feeling haunted and lost, dispossessed of his soul, he returned to the barracks and started packing... and then heard the wailing of the air-raid sirens.

The noise seemed to cut through him, lacerating his stripped nerves, and something collapsed inside him: the final, sad remnants of his will. He lay on the bed and closed his eyes and begged the planes to turn back. Naturally, they ignored him, were soon above him, making the room shake, and then the darkness outside erupted and filled up with hellish noise. He covered his ears with his hands. It didn't help at all. The noise seemed to fill his head, a vast symphony of destruction, and his bed shook and rattled as a brilliant light washed over him and the men in the other beds cursed and jumped up and ran for the door.

Ernst hurried out through clouds of dust, felt waves of heat, saw fire and smoke, then was struck by a dreadful premonition that could not be cast off. He thought of Ingrid and the children, of that old house in Wannsee, and sensed, even as he visualized it, that something had happened.

It was there and would not budge – the conviction that they were dead – and he commandeered an SS car and drove out of the barracks and raced through the blazing, erupting city, heading for Wannsee. This time he found no respite – the pattern of bombing was widening – and a cloud of smoke and

dust covered the river and the houses around it. Ernst glanced up at the sky, saw the criss-crossing searchlights, the Allied bombers as thick as flies in the paler light of the full moon and stars. It was a lovely August night – only mankind had made it hellish – and as he drove through the gateway of the house in Wannsee, he knew that he had been part of it.

He squealed to a halt in a cloud of smoke, climbed out into scorching heat, and rushed toward the flames that licked up from the rubble. It had been a direct hit – most of the house had collapsed – and he was beaten back by the heat. He fell to his knees in hot ash and looked up at the flames licking over the exposed beams and beating at the broken walls. Then he screamed like an animal, out of the deep well of his old self, as another wall collapsed, causing more geysering sparks and smoke, and then he covered his face with his hands and shed the last of his tears.

Ingrid and his children were dead.

Now, truly, he had only Wilson.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A V-1 rocket had been found intact. It lay near an enormous bomb crater in a field not twenty yards from the southern wall of the immense main building of the launching site in Pas de Calais in liberated northern France.

'It's nearly twenty-six feet long,' explained US Army Major General Ryan McArthur, 'has a wingspan of about seventeen point five feet, a body diameter of approximately two point five feet, and a launch weight of four thousand eight hundred and sixty pounds. Its warhead weighs eighteen hundred and seventy pounds and its fuel, twelve hundred pounds. She's some baby, right?'

'Right,' Bradley said, suitably impressed. He had not seen McArthur since being introduced to him by Gladys Kinder in London, three months ago. Now, as he followed the major general across the bomb-cratered field near the launch site and its silos, he couldn't stop thinking of her.

'And this,' McArthur said, stopping where an even bigger rocket, approximately twice the size of the V-1, was being hoisted into the air by a British-controlled Straho crane, 'is, we think, one of the enormous sons of bitches that devastated parts of Chiswick and Epping a few days back.'

'The V-2,' Bradley said.

'Yeah, we think so. And this mother is nearly fifty feet long, has a body diameter of five point five feet, a weight, *empty,* of seven thousand-odd pounds, and a fuel weight of twenty thousand one hundred and fifty pounds, compared to the V-1's meagre twelve hundred. How'd you like *that* on your head?'

'A homburg hat will do fine, thanks.'

McArthur laughed and slapped Bradley on the shoulder. They stood side by side on the cold, windswept field, watching the enormous rocket being hoisted up off the ground by the crane, prior to be taken somewhere safer for

a thorough examination by a team of Allied scientists.

Bradley had driven here from Caen, after the recent capture of Antwerp. Major General McArthur's invitation had surprised him.

In fact, while Bradley had been interrogating people in Caen, McArthur's ALSOS agents had been swarming all over the liberated areas of France, particularly Pas de Calais and the Cherbourg peninsula, where, it had been discovered, most of the V-1 and V-2 rocket launch sites were located. Over the past two days, then, since Bradley's arrival, McArthur had been taking him on a tour of the major captured rocket sites, which were, in their sheer size and design, something more than impressive. This particular site was located on the edge of the forest of Eperlecques, three miles north of the village of Watten, on the canal network between the sea and the Belgian border.

'It's our belief,' McArthur now said as he walked Bradley away from the V-2 rocket and back toward the site's huge main building, 'that this was intended to be one of the largest rocket sites of all. Mercifully it was put out of action by the repeated bombing raids of the B-17 Fortresses of the Eighth Air Force of the good old US of A.' He stopped a good distance from the towering, concrete-bunker-styled building in front of them. 'Just look at it,' he said. 'That was the reception building for V-2 trains arriving from Germany. It contained offices and staff accommodations. Over there,' he said, waving his right hand, 'is the railway station, with the lines two feet below floor level and the roof five feet thick – though it *has* been penetrated by one of our bombs that didn't explode. Over there,' he continued, pointing past the damaged wall of the enormous bunker to a tower rising out of the windblown grass, 'is the launch control, approximately sixty-three feet by seventy-three feet and fifteen feet high – no small silo, believe me – and the launch silo, which is thirty by fifty, though now filled with water.'

He led Bradley into the enormous main building. Constructed from reinforced concrete, it was three hundred feet long, one hundred and thirty-eight feet wide, and had work levels going two hundred and sixty feet below ground.

'We believe it was their intention,' McArthur said, 'to construct a building that could be demolished only by a bomb so large that it'd be impossible for an airplane to carry it. That's why the ceiling above you,' he said, pointing up to the eighty-foot-high roof, 'is made from reinforced

concrete twenty-three feet thick. Theoretically speaking, to pierce it you'd need a bomb weighing about twelve tons and striking the ceiling at Mach One, the speed of sound – but we don't have that yet.'

Bradley looked up. Above the northern entrance, at the junction between the ceiling and the north wall, an explosion had blown off a large piece of concrete and forced out a mess of steel reinforcing bars. A second explosion, near the centre of the roof, had detached another large piece of concrete and caused a fine web of cracks.

'*Something* obviously damaged it,' he said.

But McArthur shook his head. 'Not our normal bombing raids. In fact, what you're looking at is minor damage, right?'

'Right.'

'Well, it wasn't caused by our beloved Flying Fortresses during the course of normal operations. In fact, to test the strength of the structure, *after* we'd captured it, we deliberately tried to destroy it with a couple of twenty-two thousand-pound Grandslam bombs – and this is all the damage we managed to inflict. This place is damned near impregnable – and so are most of the others.'

'How was it constructed?' Bradley asked him as they walked around the enormous, empty, silent building, looking up at its towering walls and high ceiling.

'Forty-nine-thousand tons of steel were needed to build that roof alone,' McArthur said. 'According to intelligence reports, based on the interrogation of locals, hundreds of jacks were used to raise the roof slowly, inches at a time, with the walls being built up beneath it, as it was raised. The enormous amounts of steel, cement, sand, and gravel needed were brought in from Watten on that standard-gauge railway track you saw outside. So far we've estimated that the site took six months to construct and used about thirty-five-thousand slave workers, who came from the two prison camps located about a mile and a half from here. At any one time there were always three to four thousand men at work, which went on around the clock on twelve-hour shifts. The slave labour, or *Sklavenarbeiter,* was controlled by armed members of the black-shirted SS *Totenkopfverbande,* who didn't hesitate to execute anyone too ill or exhausted to work. This place, then, is an extraordinary achievement... but the price... Jesus Christ! You don't want to even think about it! Come on, let's get out of here.'

They went outside again, into the shadow of the towering wall, and were whipped by the wind howling across the bleak, bomb-blasted fields, where once livestock had roamed. Now the fields were covered with soldiers, British, French, Canadian, and American, as well as concrete silos and the usual debris of war: armoured half-tracks, overturned trucks, the blackened remains of burned-out tanks, melted tires, and scorched earth.

'I *have* to think about it,' Bradley said as McArthur led him toward his parked jeep. 'I have to fix firmly in my head just what they were capable of.'

'The Nazis?'

'Right. When you hear the stories you can't believe them. They're too incredible to be true – vast underground factories hidden deep in the mountains; the assembly lines run night and day with slave labour – and then you see places like that, the sheer enormity, the work behind it, and you have to accept that they could do it and that he must be part of it.'

'Wilson?'

'Yeah. He's always been a man to hide things. He hid his own past, hid his work in Iowa, hid his hangars in the wilds of Illinois, then went to hide himself in Nazi Germany, to create God knows what. We saw those rockets, right? We know how advanced they are. And even though that's frightening enough, they're just the tip of the iceberg. Wilson's in the Harz Mountains. We don't know exactly where. We only hear about vast underground factories and the use of slave labour. Was it possible? I didn't think so. Not until I came here. Now, having seen what you've shown me, I know that it is... The Harz Mountains... Factories hidden *inside* the mountains... Yes, they could do it... And that bastard is using it.'

'Why?'

'I don't know... and that's exactly what frightens me.'

McArthur smiled gently, patted him on the shoulder, then climbed onto the driver's seat in the jeep and cocked a finger invitingly. When Bradley had climbed up beside him, he turned on the ignition, drove carefully around the bomb craters, and said, 'Thank God Paris has been liberated. A few days there will do you good.'

'I don't want to go there,' Bradley replied. 'I don't have the time.'

'I think you'll *make* the time,' McArthur said with a lopsided grin, 'because Gladys Kinder is there. Now, do we go there or not?'

'Faster!' Bradley said. '*Faster*!'

Almost convulsed with laughter, McArthur manoeuvred around the last of the bomb craters, bounced off the high verge, then drove along the straight, tree-lined road that would take them to Paris.

The bar in the Ritz Hotel in the place Vendôme was packed with British Tommies, American GIs, young men and women wearing armbands of the French Forces of the Interior – FFI – or Red Cross, and more than a few journalists, including the famous, and famously loud, bearded American novelist who, five days before Paris was freed, had entered Rambouillet where he had, according to what he was now loudly stating to those crowded around his bottle-strewn table, acted as an unofficial liaison officer between the 5th Infantry Division and the French partisan patrols. The roar of the conversation that came out of the swirling cigar and cigarette smoke was punctuated by the tinkle of glasses, the popping of champagne corks, the metallic clatter of M-1 army rifles, tommy guns, joggling hand grenades, and other weapons; and Gladys Kinder, looking flushed, was leaning sideways in her chair to take hold of Bradley's hand and tell him, 'It'd be a lot cheaper in the correspondents' mess in the Scribe Hotel, but this is, after all, a once-in-a-lifetime event and the Ritz is the *only* place to experience it.'

In this atmosphere of celebration, Bradley was almost sorry to have missed the previous day's victory march from the Arc de Triomphe and along the Champs-Élysées and on to Notre Dame, but being here so unexpectedly with Gladys was doing his heart good.

'I'll never forget yesterday as long as I live,' Gladys continued while stroking Bradley's sweaty palm. She wasn't embarrassed by the presence of Major General Ryan McArthur, who in any case was looking around the crowded bar with a broad grin on his face. 'There were thousands of people lining the Champs-Élysées all the way up to the Place de l'Étoile. General Leclerc's division, including elements of the US 82nd Division, marched between the cheering thousands, to repeated shouts of "*Viva la France*!" De Gaulle, on the reviewing stand in the Place de l'Concorde, surrounded by other dignitaries and a couple of US generals, was stiff as a board and proud as punch. And after that, when the parade disbanded, it was hugs and kisses all afternoon, with God knows how many glasses of Calvados and champagne and wine – and I'm *still* not hungover!'

'It's the excitement,' Bradley said. 'You'll probably be as high as a kite

for days, then come down with a bang.'

'We'll *all* come down with a bang when this war ends. That's a terrible truth.'

'It sure has its excitements,' Bradley replied with no great deal of pride, thinking of the death and destruction he had witnessed on the march through France, yet unable to deny that he had never felt more alive than he had felt these past few weeks. 'I can't deny that. But right now, the most exciting thing in the world is seeing you again, Gladys.'

'Aw, shucks,' she said, beaming, then kissed him on the cheek. 'You sure know how to please a gal!'

McArthur turned back to them, raised his glass of Calvados, and said solemnly, 'Ladies and gentlemen, lovebirds, a toast to the liberation of Paris.'

'I'll drink to that,' Bradley said, raising his glass.

'And so will I,' Gladys said, touching his glass with hers.

'You've been drinking to it for two days solid,' McArthur reminded her, 'but you're looking good on it. So, let's drink!'

They all emptied their glasses. As McArthur was refilling them from the bottle on the table, a drunken young member of the FFI kicked his chair back, stood up, and raised his glass above his flushed face. '*Vivent les Americains*!' he declared in a ringing tone. He tossed down his champagne in one long gulp while the others at his table cheered and various British, Canadian, and Dutch troops booed and catcalled. The young FFI man, with a broad, sweaty grin, bowed theatrically to the packed room and fell back into his chair.

'Victory is sweet,' McArthur said, 'but can lead to more fighting.'

'Let's hope not,' Gladys said. 'So what have you two been up to since we last saw each other? Still in pursuit of rocket-bombs and mad American scientists?'

'We're not allowed to discuss it,' McArthur said, 'particularly to journalists.'

'This journalist has a personal interest in the case. Besides, this conversation's off the record. I just wanna know, kids.'

Bradley grinned. 'McArthur here's been showing me the V-1 and V-2 rocket launch sites, which have already been photographed for the newspapers. So no big secrets there.'

'And what did you think?'

'I think the Krauts are more advanced than we'd imagined – and in more

ways than one. I think that no matter how big the project, they'd know how to hide it.'

'Such as Wilson's project, for instance.'

'You got it, Gladys. Bright girl. If Wilson's trying to build a new kind of aircraft, we're talking about a big project, but no matter how big it is, I now think the Krauts could keep it well hidden.'

'Where?'

Bradley glanced at McArthur, who simply smiled and nodded. 'Underground,' Bradley said, turning his gaze back on Gladys. 'In great tunnels and factories hacked out of the interior of mountains. I think that's where our man is.'

'Where?'

'You've already asked that.'

'I mean, precisely.'

Bradley shrugged. 'We don't know exactly, but we think it's somewhere in the Harz Mountains, probably south, in the area of Thuringia.'

'And is that where you plan to go, Mike?'

'Yep,' Bradley replied.

'You're going to follow the advance?'

'Yep. As far as I can go.'

'With the fighting troops?'

'Yep.'

'I don't want you getting yourself killed.'

'I'll try not to,' Bradley said.

Gladys stared steadily at him, her face showing concern. He was touched and wanted to kiss her lips, but was too shy to do so, because McArthur, filling up their glasses again, was grinning broadly at both of them.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he said, 'let's drink up and fall down!'

They touched glasses and drank as a combo started playing a Cole Porter medley. The American novelist, all belly and beard and drunken bellowing, stood up and lurched out of the bar, trailed by his admirers. A French woman crossed the room, giving address cards to the men. She stopped in front of Bradley, glanced at Gladys and McArthur, smiled and gave McArthur a card and said, 'Call anytime,' then gracefully passed on. McArthur studied the card thoughtfully, slipped it into his shirt pocket, and said, 'A night of love in Paris at a price. To the victor the spoils.' Gladys chuckled and McArthur

grinned, his eyes scanning the noisy room, then he raised his eyebrows and said, ‘Well, well! We have an unexpected visitor!’

Bradley looked up in surprise as his urbane, friendly adversary, Lieutenant Colonel Wentworth-King of the SOE, London, emerged from the crowd around the bar, holding a glass in his right hand, a swagger stick under his left arm, looking dashing in his British army uniform and peaked cap. He stopped at their table, grinned, and said sardonically, ‘I *thought* I recognized you, Bradley! What on earth are you doing here?’

‘Just celebrating the liberation of Paris. Nothing more, nothing less.’

‘I’m sure... And in the presence of Major General Ryan McArthur, of the Manhattan atomic bomb project. Accidentally, no doubt.’ He smiled guilelessly at McArthur and said, ‘Good to see you again, sir. Mind if I join you?’

‘Pull up a chair,’ McArthur said. ‘It’s party time in the Ritz.’

When Wentworth-King had taken a chair, Bradley introduced him to Gladys. ‘Ah!’ he exclaimed softly, shaking her hand. ‘Gladys Kinder, the well-known American journalist. I’ve read your articles in *Collier’s* and elsewhere. Your work is spread far and wide.’

‘What I write is widely syndicated,’ Gladys explained. ‘I don’t really write that much.’

‘I enjoyed your regular London column,’ Wentworth-King said. ‘It made me feel quite heroic. Not that you mentioned me *personally,* but you were kind to the British.’

‘I’ve won a heart,’ Gladys said to Bradley. ‘Where have you been hiding this lovely man? You must invite him more often.’

Wentworth-King beamed and McArthur chuckled while Bradley tried to hide the spasm of resentment that unexpectedly shook him. Wentworth-King was charming his lady and he didn’t like it one bit.

‘So what are *you* doing in Paris?' he asked Wentworth-King, after throwing an angry glance at Gladys.

‘I came in this morning,’ Wentworth-King replied, ‘to set up a base of operations and grill a few Frogs. Still chasing your rocket engineers, are you?’

‘Yes,’ Bradley said tersely.

‘Then you might be interested in knowing that the Soviets have captured Blizna, in Poland, including Himmler’s mock village and disguised rocket

proving ground.'

'Any reports on anything unusual?'

'So far, no. But then the Soviets don't talk a lot. We only know that since it's a proving ground, they certainly found a few rockets.'

'A great help,' McArthur said.

Wentworth-King grinned, unperturbed, then smiled charmingly at Gladys. She returned his smile, and then, catching Bradley's accusing glance, hid her face behind her glass.

'Can I take it,' Wentworth-King said, returning his attention to Bradley and McArthur, 'that you chaps are still convinced that Wilson is working on something more advanced than the V-1 and V-2 rockets?'

'I'm convinced of it,' Bradley said.

'Well, just to prove that I'm a decent chap at heart – no hard feelings and so on – you might be interested in knowing that the most *unusual* reports have recently been coming into the SOE headquarters in London.'

'Unusual?'

'Yes. A few days before I left to come here, we started receiving reports from Allied pilots, saying that when flying over Germany they were harassed repeatedly by strange lights that tailed their aircraft and appeared to make their engines malfunction.'

'Strange *lights*?' McArthur asked.

'Yes,' Wentworth-King said, 'Lights... or balls of fire. One report described an encounter with a, quote, *enormous ball of fire*, unquote, that made his aircraft's engine cut out. Another report talked about ten small balls of reddish fire that were, according to the report, flying in formation, at amazing speed. In both cases, the so-called balls of fire, or *Foo fighters*, as they've been dubbed, reportedly flew away when fired upon, but usually returned afterward. The lights, or balls of fire, the *Foo fighters*, appear to have been systematically tailing the aircraft.'

'What areas?'

'All over Germany, but mostly in the vicinity north of Nuremberg.'

'Have the reports been analysed yet?' McArthur asked.

'Yes,' Wentworth-King said. 'And according to analysis, if the so-called Foo fighters weren't some kind of atmospheric or electrical phenomenon, they could have been solid objects that were glowing red-hot. And if that's the case, they'd have been no more than three or four feet in diameter,

remote-controlled, and, most oddly, shaped like discs or...' He paused to shrug his shoulders and raise his hands in a gesture of disbelief. 'Like saucers... *flying* saucers.'

To contain his excitement Bradley stared stonily at Gladys, who simply smiled back sweetly, then turned to Wentworth-King and said, 'Isn't this information confidential? Or is it just *me* you trust?'

Wentworth-King was amused. 'The information's already been published in the British press, so I think it's okay to discuss it now. Not that I have anything else to add. I merely pass the information on to my American friend here, Bradley, whose imagination is clearly more vivid than mine. And now, alas, duty calls and I have to be off.' He finished his drink, stood up, and offered Gladys his hand. 'It was an absolute pleasure meeting you,' he said. 'We must do it again sometime. You'll find details of our Paris HQ tomorrow in the correspondents' mess in the Scribe Hotel. *Do* give me a call.'

'I will,' Gladys said.

'*Au revoir*,' Wentworth-King said, kissing her hand and letting it go with what seemed like great reluctance. 'And to you, Major General,' he said finally. 'And you as well, Bradley. No doubt I'll see you when I see you. Travel safely. And good luck.'

'Same to you,' Bradley said curtly. He didn't look at Gladys again until the urbane lieutenant colonel had left the room, skipping around a uniformed member of the French 2nd Armoured Division and a British lance corporal who were arguing heatedly about something or other. When he had gone, Bradley turned to McArthur. 'Well, what do you think?'

'I think it's Wilson. What's north of Nuremberg?'

'Thuringia... the Harz Mountains,' Bradley said, feeling even more excited, though still angry with Gladys.

'Exactly,' McArthur said. 'We'd better run a check on those reports and see what we come up with. Right now, however, I have to get back to the ALSOS office and see what's cooking there. My departure should make you two lovebirds happy, though you don't look it right now.' He stood up with a broad grin on his face, finished his drink, then gave them the thumbs-up and left the bar.

'Alone at last with my man,' Gladys said, 'but he's no longer smiling.'

'I'm fine,' Bradley said. 'I'm just surprised you didn't go chasing after that upstanding British officer, Wentworth-King, who so clearly charmed

you.'

'Oh, ho,' she responded, grinning. 'The fires of jealousy! I'm having a wonderful day!' She reached out for his hand, squeezed it affectionately, and said, 'A lady my age is easily charmed, Mike, and I *do* like to flirt. But come on! I was only doing it to tease you – because I want you to want me. *Do* you want me, Mike? Do you want me right now? Here and now, in this grand hotel?'

'What's your room like?' Bradley asked her.

'Come up and see,' she said.

They made love under the pink satin coverlet of the twin bed in a dove-gray room filled with elegant Empire furniture and overlooking the rear gardens of the Ministry of Justice. They no longer made love with the vigour of young people, but with the tenderness of two souls united as one, bonded by common experience and a lack of illusions. Bradley took to her body like a lemming to the sea, returning to that place he could fondly call his own, and received all the pleasure he could obtain by simply giving her pleasure. All his love for her returned, pouring out of him like a river, leaving him cleansed and renewed, at peace in her arms. He then slept in those arms, as she slept in his, and when they awakened they made love again, even less vigorously, though as tenderly, as before, then dressed and went for a walk through the darkening city.

'I love Paris,' Gladys told him. 'It's a city made for lovers. I loved it before the war, when I used to visit it a lot from London, and I nearly always thought of you when I walked its streets – my married man, my secret, platonic lover, far away in America. Finally I've got you here with me. Isn't it nice?'

'Yes,' Bradley said. '*Very* nice.'

Already familiar with the city, Gladys led him by the hand down the passage that ran alongside the Ritz, from the place Vendôme to the rue Gambon, pressing her nose to the elegant shop windows, which she could see in the moonlit darkness, and showing him all the things she would buy before leaving Paris. She took him into the rue de Rivoli, around the Place de l'Concorde, then along the broad, tree-lined avenue of the Champs-Élysées, which in the moonlight was wonderful.

'It'll all be over soon,' Bradley said.

‘Yeah, I guess so,’ Gladys replied. ‘Do you think you’ll be able to find Wilson?’

Bradley sighed. ‘I don’t know.’

‘If you don’t find him, you’ll go crazy.’

‘I just might at that. Of course now that I’ve got you, it won’t be too bad, but I *do* want to finish it.’

Gladys chuckled softly and slid her arm around his waist. ‘You’ve only got me for the moment,’ she said. ‘When will you move on?’

‘Tomorrow,’ Bradley said. ‘I have to find myself an army. Probably General Bradley’s 1st Army, since they’re heading for the Rhine. And you?’

‘I might see you in Berlin.’

‘And when it ends? Will you return to America or stay here in Europe?’

‘I’m not too sure. I mean, I’ll have to think about it. I love living here – I mean in London, of course – and I don’t really have anything to go home for. I’ve been gone a long time, Mike. Maybe too long now.’

She had led him off the Champs-Élysées, down past the Grand Palais, and now they were coming to the river Seine, its water stippled by moonlight, curving away toward the distant Eiffel Tower, silhouetted against the sky. Allied bombers were crossing the sky above the tower, heading for Germany.

‘More bombs on Berlin,’ Bradley said. ‘Now they’re learning what the British suffered during the Blitz.’

‘I still sympathise with them,’ Gladys said. ‘Those bombs will be falling on innocent women and children as well as on soldiers. The women and children are too often the real victims of war.’

She smiled and tugged at his hand, leading him across the Cours la Reine, then back along the river, toward where they had come from.

‘Hey, Mike, do you really love me?’

‘Sure, Gladys, you know I do.’

‘Then how can you even *think* of giving me up? What kind of man are you?’

‘What do you mean, Gladys?’

‘Give me a reason for going back.’

‘What reason?’

She sighed in exasperation. ‘Goddammit, Mike, you’re dumb!’

‘You think so?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Would you marry a dumb man?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And would you let him take you back to America?’

‘Yes, dammit, I would. Have you just proposed to me?’

‘I think so.’

‘I accept. Yes, I do!’

She turned into him, her hair blown by the river’s wind, and he kissed her, clung to her, choked up and inspired. Then she stepped away, gave him a smile, and raised his hand to her lips… But she didn’t quite make it.

Before she could raise his hand, the river rushed up to swallow her. Bradley saw the geysering water, a flash of light, a stream of smoke; then heard the muffled explosion, the car roaring past behind him, the shouting of drunken French youths. He glimpsed what he thought was a hand grenade falling toward him, then he was picked up and slammed down into silence.

The silence became a ringing – a jarring sibilance in his ears. His lips were pressed to the pavement, so he rolled onto his back and saw Gladys covered in the blood that was spurting out of her head. He tried to sit up and collapsed, looked at Gladys, saw more blood, groaned aloud, not in pain, but in despair, then passed out again.

He was awakened by the sound of a siren and the screeching of brakes. Then someone, speaking French, told him he was going to be okay and helped him sit upright.

They were rolling Gladys onto a stretcher and her head was all bandaged.

‘Oh, God!’ Bradley groaned.

He clambered to his feet, swayed dizzily, found his balance, then hurried forward as the men with the Red Cross armbands hoisted Gladys up on the stretcher to put her into the ambulance. Her head was bandaged, her leg was in a splint, and she was covered in blood.

‘Jesus, no!’ Bradley said, then reached out to touch her, but was foiled when the Red Cross men slid the stretcher into the ambulance. Bradley, shocked in more ways than one, clambered up after her. When he was in the back, kneeling beside the stretcher, Gladys looked up and smiled at him.

‘Hi, partner!’ she said.

Bradley picked up her hand, passionately kissed it, his tears flowing, then one of the medics clambered in beside him and said, speaking French-accented, but otherwise perfect, English, ‘She’ll be all right.’

‘What?’ Bradley asked, stupidly.

‘She’ll be all right,’ the French medic repeated. He looked about eighteen years old and had the smile of an angel. ‘She was struck on the temple with a piece of the exploding boulevard wall; she also fractured her leg. Apart from that, she’s okay.’

Bradley looked down at Gladys. The bandage around her head was bloody and she was as white as the sheet they’d wrapped around her.

‘But the blood...’ he began, fascinated and frightened by the sight of it, though Gladys was smiling.

The medic slammed the ambulance door closed, then placed his hand on Bradley’s shoulder. ‘Steady on there,’ he said. ‘We’re taking off. I don’t want you to fall on her.’ The ambulance roared into life and moved off with a jerk. The medic grinned and kept Bradley steady, then also studied the blood covering Gladys.

‘She was struck on the temple with flying debris,’ he explained. ‘Such wounds always cause a lot of blood loss. But it’s deceptive, believe me. She’ll only need a few stitches and then her head will be fine. As for the leg, it’s only fractured. It will hurt, but it isn’t serious. She’ll be in hospital for a week or two, then she’ll be up and about again. Meanwhile, let me apologise for the disgusting behaviour of my drunken countrymen.’

‘Pardon?’

‘The police have found the culprits already. Luckily, a gendarmerie car happened to be parked just up the road and the gendarmes in it saw the whole incident. A stolen car being driven by teenagers wearing FFI armbands, mindlessly drunk – having been celebrating the liberation of Paris – and forgetting who the real enemy was. They saw your uniform and, being high on drink and freedom, threw two stolen hand grenades. One exploded as it fell into the Seine; the other exploded on the pavement right beside you. Truth is, you’re both lucky to be still alive.’

Bradley almost wept with relief, then was filled with exultation. He bent over to kiss Gladys on the forehead, on the bloody bandage, then held her hand in his lap and smiled like a happy fool. Gladys, quickly regaining her colour, smiled broadly and winked at him.

‘You two are married?’ the young medic asked.

‘Yeah,’ Bradley lied. ‘Right.’

He stayed with Gladys all the way to the hospital, all the way to her bed,

ensured that she was tucked in like a baby, then kissed her goodbye.

‘I love you,’ he said. ‘It’s as simple as that, Gladys. If I don’t see you in Berlin, I’ll catch you in London. I still have your address,’

‘You take care,’ she told him.

He nodded and kissed her again, then walked out of the ward, treading lightly and not looking back because his tears would embarrass her.

‘Hallelujah!’ he whispered.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Wilson awakened at dawn as he had planned, immediately switched on the light, then looked around his spartan room. Apart from clothing and technical books, it contained no personal items. Like the rest of the complex, his room was located underground, but it had at least been built into the breast of a hill and therefore offered a magnificent view of the forested valley. Wilson lay on for a brief while, letting himself feel slightly excited, then swung his legs off the bed, worked his bare feet into his slippers, and walked across to the desk. A red circle had been drawn around today's date: February 16, 1945. Wilson picked up a pen and scored through the date, then dropped the pen and went to the window to look over the valley. At the other side of the valley was the old walled town of Kahla, but Wilson's modest research complex, really an underground launching site, was well hidden in this hill, within its sheltering pine trees. Here, today, he would supervise the first test flight of the *Kugelblitz*, which had progressed much quicker than expected.

He did not feel nervous, because he had nothing to fear.

The Kugelblitz was merely an enlarged version of the anti-radar *Feuerball* – and the latter had been tested last year, to everyone's satisfaction.

From August to December, Wilson had sent the three-foot wide, saucer-shaped, remote-controlled *Feuerballs* hurtling skyward from this underground launching site near Kahla, to harass the Allied aircraft, cause their engines to malfunction, and fly out of range before they could be attacked. Some of the *Feuerballs* had blown up in flight, others had malfunctioned in various ways, but each failure had been examined as minutely as possible and its causes corrected in the following prototype. Eventually, by November, Wilson had conducted nightly launches for a month without any failures. Then, confident that his design was foolproof, he

had cancelled further launches, ordered the destruction, by high explosives, of the remainder of the prototypes, and begun applying the same principles and designs to his nearly completed, pilot-controlled larger model, the *Kugelblitz.*

But now his time was running out.

According to what Ernst Stoll had told him, news of the relentless Allied advances on all fronts had even reached the ears of the inmates of the concentration camps that were supplying Nordhausen Central Works and Kahla with forced labour. Now sabotage by the prisoners was a very real threat. Indeed, only three months earlier, in November, a large number of prisoners from the Nordhausen underground camp had been arrested, shut up in the bunkers, and forced by torture to confess to sabotage. A group of those who had confessed had even made a failed bid to escape, which only hastened their deaths. All in all, according to Stoll, about three hundred prisoners had been executed: some hanged in the roll-call grounds, some in the factory corridors, and some shot in the back of the head while still in the bunkers.

A foul business, Wilson thought, and one not likely to encourage the prisoners to be merciful when the Allies came to their rescue.

Thinking of that possibility only reminded him again that his time was running out. Even more pleased, then, that the *Kugelblitz* was to be tested this morning, he pressed the bell to call his breakfast and went for his shower in the adjoining bathroom. He returned to find his meal on the table, placed there by his servant who, like all the rest of the workers, came from one of the camps. It was his usual frugal breakfast of cereal and fruit juice, and when he had finished it, he left his room and went down to the hangar.

Ernst Stoll, who now had the eyes of the walking dead but otherwise looked handsome in his SS uniform, was already waiting for him in his glass-walled office, gazing out at the hangar.

‘You’ve come straight from Berlin?’ Wilson asked, surprised. ‘You must have travelled all night!’

‘No, Herr Wilson, I didn’t. I arrived here yesterday evening with General Kammler, but spent the night in the Nordhausen Central Works.’

‘Kammler’s still at Nordhausen?’

‘Yes. He’s just checking things out. He’ll be here on time.’

‘I haven’t been to the Central Works since Christmas. How are things

there?'

'Busy,' Ernst said. 'There are now about forty thousand political prisoners and civilians working there. And Camp Dora and the many other subcamps in the area are expanding tremendously. Production of the rockets proceeds at full speed, the underground passages are being enlarged, as requested by Himmler, and four new factories are being undertaken: one as a refinery, another for liquid oxygen, and two for Junkers jet engines.'

'So much ambition at the end of the road!'

'It keeps Himmler happy. Bear in mind that the original plans were drawn up in much better days, and if we don't stick to them now, we'll arouse suspicion. Besides, it's good experience for where we're going. For instance, in the town of Bleicherode, about twenty kilometres from the Kohnstein Mountain, there's an old potassium mine where we'd already begun to bore new tunnels, galleries, and accommodations at a depth of seven hundred meters, with the idea of reaching sixteen hundred metres. The plan was to tunnel through to another potassium mine nearby, in Neubleicherode, and there install more factories for work on the V-2 and smaller anti-aircraft rockets. Not far away, in a cliff face near the town of Lehestein, a tunnel is still being bored, intended to end in a large cave in which we were going to install a liquid oxygen plant and quarters for rocket crews... and so forth. Naturally we no longer have use for these places, but they keep the work force busy, allay the suspicions of Himmler's Nordhausen spies, and incidentally prove that what we're planning for Neuschwabenland can actually be accomplished.'

'And today, after testing the *Kugelblitz,* we'll start preparing to leave. How much time do we have left?'

'Not much,' Ernst replied, gazing out of Wilson's glass-walled office at the large, pilot-controlled flying saucer that was resting on a hydraulic steel platform in the centre of Kahla's biggest underground hangar.

The saucer looked exactly like the Schriever saucer, except for the smaller, less visible, but infinitely more powerful, adjustable jets around its rim, as well as its more seamless surface. This was made from *Luftschwamm,* porous metal, thus allowing the saucer to fly at least as fast as the much smaller *Feuerball*, and probably faster. The saucer's top body rose up to the central pilot's dome, made of unbreakable Perspex.

'The war is being lost and a lot of our leaders are breaking down,' Ernst

continued. ‘The Führer’s permanently on drugs supplied by his quack, Dr. Morell, and is also rumoured to be suffering from syphilis and going insane. Himmler spends most of his time in his sanatorium in Hohenlychen, a hundred and twenty kilometres north of Berlin, where he talks to his astrologer and discusses the possibility of arranging a private surrender to the Allies. I myself was visiting the rebuilt Peenemünde in October when Marshall Goring was shown a successful launching of a V-2 rocket. Goring’s eyes were tired and his face was very puffy. During the rocket launching, he swallowed a lot of pills; then he pulled his pistol from his holster and kept tossing it in the air and catching it, as if in a trance, until his aide-de-camp gently took it away from him.’

Never before had Wilson heard Stoll talk with such weary contempt about his masters. Now he knew that he could finally get the SS Kapitän to do whatever he wanted.

Wilson was pleased. Disillusioned romantics always made the most fanatical converts.

‘And how goes the war?’ he asked.

‘Most of France and Belgium are liberated. Soviet divisions have taken Warsaw. Italy is virtually lost. Most of Germany is in ruins. Our air force has no fuel. Our industry has been wiped out by Allied bombs. Our rocket attacks came too late.’

‘It’s only a matter of months, then?’

‘Yes, Herr Wilson. No more than that.’

‘And Kammler?’

‘Since last July, when the attempt on the Führer’s life turned him against the Wehrmacht and encouraged him to place the whole rocket program in the hands of the SS, meaning Kammler, our recently promoted brigadier has been making an admirable public display of criss-crossing the country to take charge of the rocket firings – which means he has freedom of movement and is above suspicion. I still don’t like him, but he’s certainly no fool and knows just what he’s doing, though now that most of the launching sites have been captured, he has less to do there.’

‘Do you think he’s still dependable?’

‘Yes. His sole desire is to avoid being captured and hanged as a war criminal – which means he wants to go with us.’

‘When is he coming here?’

‘Any minute now,’ Ernst said. ‘He wants to witness the test flight of the *Kugelblitz.* It’s not something he’d miss.’

Glancing across the hangar, the doors of which would soon open to reveal the southern Harz Mountains of Kahla, Wilson saw that the German workers, under the supervision of the engineers, were already starting to raise the hydraulic platform under the saucer.

In that gloomy space, the saucer looked even larger than its seventy-five metres in diameter. It was resting on retractable shock absorbers, had an almost seamless, perfect aerodynamical shape, and even the pilot’s cockpit, located at the machine’s centre of gravity, could be retracted during high-speed flight, thus making the machine look like a perfect disc, with no surface protuberances of any kind.

It was, to Wilson’s way of thinking, something worth seeing.

Just as the whining, clattering steel platform came to rest on its adjustable wheels and went silent, Kammler and Nebe entered the hangar by the rear door and marched past the saucer into Wilson’s office. Looking as handsome and cold as ever, Kammler sat on the edge of Wilson’s desk. Nebe, as dark and unreadable as always, stood near the door of the office with his hand on his pistol.

He feels naked without that pistol, Wilson thought. The man is a predator.

‘Welcome,’ Wilson said, addressing his words to Kammler. ‘How are things going?’

‘Excellent,’ Kammler said. ‘At the end of January, Himmler placed me in complete control of the rocket program. I’ve just returned from the Hague, from where the V-1s and V-2s are being fired. We’ll keep firing them from there until Antwerp falls, which it surely will, and then we’ll be firing them no more, since we’ll have run out of launching sites. When that time comes, it will be time to move from here, let’s say March or April, certainly not much longer, since, as from yesterday, Allied troops were massed along the Rhine on a sixteen kilometre front, preparing to launch themselves into Germany. In other words, our time is running out, so let’s hope this test flight succeeds and we can start making arrangements in the knowledge that we have a workable saucer to take with us.’

Even as he spoke, the large doors at the far end of the hangar were being opened. Sunlight poured in to reveal an immense open space that ran out to the base of a steep, densely forested hill. The smooth, metallic-gray surface

of the *Kugelblitz* took on a brilliant, silvery sheen that clearly reflected the images of the men around the platform. Then the engine of the hydraulic platform roared into life and the platform, now on its raised wheels and manipulated by a combination of remote-control console and jib-and-crane, started moving slowly out of the hangar, into the open air.

'Oh, my God!' Ernst murmured, awe making him seem more alive. 'It's absolutely superb!'

Wilson could not resist a smile, then, nodding at Kammler and Nebe, led them, with Stoll, out of his office and across the concrete floor of the hangar, toward the open doors and the still moving *Kugelblitz*.

'Has the escape route been organized yet?' he asked of Nebe, who had fallen in beside him.

'Yes,' Nebe said in his flat, passionless manner. 'The matter of when and how we leave will be complicated by the Russian offensive, which is moving rapidly toward Peenemünde. Because of that, Wernher von Braun and five thousand of his workers are being moved this week to the new research station still under construction in the Bleicherode mine. Because the technicians and their families are going to be housed in the surrounding villages, as requested personally by Himmler, we're going to have to keep this place secret and leave at night, when we won't be observed.'

'When the time comes to evacuate,' Kammler said, 'I'll ensure that von Braun and his team don't know about it. In the meantime, while they're living in the Nordhausen area, I'll keep them under close guard and make sure that none of them comes this far. In short, they won't know you exist.'

'Excellent,' Wilson said as he led them out of the hangar and into the freezing wind of the cleared area, 'but how will we go?'

'The same way von Braun and his team are coming here,' Nebe replied. 'By train, truck, private cars, and even barges. To ensure that at least some of us get through, we'll be split up into groups and make the journey on three separate nights by different routes. The first will go to Rostock, then round the coast of the Baltic Sea; the second also to Rostock, but then on to Lubeck; and the third and last to Hamburg, via Hanover, then on to Kiel from there. A meticulous schedule has been arranged for each group. Each journey will be made by a combination of vehicles to confuse anyone trying to track our movements; and each stop, or change-over point, along the way will be in a secret location heavily guarded by my most trusted SS men, all of whom, like

me, had to go underground after the failed July plot against Hitler. In other words, they're all men who've everything to gain and nothing to lose by coming with us. In that sense, at least, they'll be trustworthy and reliable.'

'It all sounds well organized,' Wilson said.

'It is,' Nebe replied.

The engines of the mobile platform in the clearing went dead, the wheels were raised to let the platform rest on the flat earth, and the *Kugelblitz* bounced lightly on its shock absorbers, then steadied again.

Out there, in the open air and sunlight, it was a thing of great beauty.

Wilson walked up to the pilot, who was waiting by the concrete observation bunker in the shadow of the high wall of the hangar. The man was wearing a Luftwaffe flying suit and seemed totally fearless.

'Are you ready to go?' Wilson asked of him.

'Yes,' he said.

'Good. Then let's do it.'

Wilson escorted him across the clearing and up onto the steel platform, finally stopping at the curved rim of the *Kugelblitz*, their heads in line with its ring of tiltable jet nozzles. From there, the raised pilot's compartment seemed to tower high above them, at the top of the ladder sloping up to it. The pilot climbed up and Wilson followed to help him in. When the pilot was strapped in, Wilson checked that all seemed well, then scrambled down and let an engineer climb up to secure the Perspex hood. When that was done, the engineer climbed back down, pulled the collapsible ladder after him, gave the thumbs-up to the pilot, then marched with Wilson back to the concrete bunker in front of the open doors of the hangar.

Kammler, Nebe, and Stoll were already there, staring through the protective, tinted glass in a long slit in the wall of the bunker. Because the *Kugelblitz* was being flown by a pilot, there was no remote-control panel, as there had been with the *Feuerballs*, though there was a man sitting by a radio console, prepared to talk to the pilot.

'All set?' Wilson asked him.

'Yes, sir.'

'Then there's no point in waiting.'

The man at the radio console relayed Wilson's permission to take off to the pilot. Kammler smiled and crossed his fingers. General Nebe remained impassive. Ernst took a deep breath and licked his lips, then bit his index

finger. Wilson heard the birds singing, the wind moaning through the forest, the babbling of a brook beside the hangar, where the land rose protectively. He thought of his first prototype, the *Flegelrad,* or Wingwheel, which had been a crude affair based on the principles of the wheel, with its many wings radiating out to the rim and revolving around the pilot's cockpit at the centre of gravity. Impossible to control, its balance destroyed by its vibrations, it had been superseded by a later model, in which balance was achieved with a new stabilizing mechanism and the earlier Rocket-motor was replaced by an advanced turbojet engine. That second model flew, but not much better than a helicopter, so Wilson had experimented with his smaller, remote-controlled model, the *Feuerball*. Finally, this, the *Kugelblitz,* the perfect aeronautical machine, would allow for frictionless air flow and defeat the former limitations imposed by the boundary layer. Thus, he was giving the world a saucer-shaped, jet-propelled aircraft of extraordinary speed and manoeuvrability.

And at last it was taking off.

Tilted downward, the adjustable jet engines roared into life, spewed searing yellow flames at the earth, and created a circular wall of fire around the saucer, between its rim and the ground. The flames beat at the blackened earth, roaring down, shooting up and outward. The saucer shimmered eerily in the rising heat waves and then took on a crimson glow. It shuddered violently for a moment, swayed from side to side, bounced up and down on its shock-absorbing legs, then lifted tentatively off the ground.

It hovered in mid-air, floating magically on a bed of fire, then roared louder and ascended vertically, thrust upward by the flaming jets, and was distorted in the shimmering heat waves. It turned to a silvery jelly, then became a lava flow, red and yellow and glaring white, then hovered magically once more, about ten metres up, before roaring demonically, the noise shocking, almost deafening, and suddenly disappearing, though in fact it had shot vertically skyward, to be framed by the rising sun.

It stopped there, bouncing lightly in the sun's shimmering, oblique striations, then shot off again, this time flying horizontally, to disappear beyond the horizon in the wink of an eye.

Wilson heard the applause around him, then the pilot's voice on the radio, distorted by the static but obviously exultant, confirming that he was flying beyond the limit of his air-speed indicator, higher than the upper limit of his

altimeter, and already could see the Elbe River, winding toward Hamburg. He soon saw the curved horizon, the Baltic Sea, the port of Rügen, then he turned back and was soon crossing Magdeburg and reappeared as a flash of light above the green, forested hills of the majestic Harz Mountains. That flash of light became a silvery coin, a flying saucer, a glowing disc – then, abruptly, the *Kugelblitz* was right above them, hovering high up in thin air, again framed by the rising sun. It descended vertically, perfectly, on pillars of yellow flame. The flames scorched the earth and flew outward in all directions and formed a bed of fire and smoke, then the *Kugelblitz* settled down on the steel platform, which its flames had made red-hot. It subsided onto its shock absorbers, bouncing lightly, swaying gracefully, then its engines cut out, leaving a sudden, shocking silence, and the flames died out and the smoke drifted away and the flying saucer was visible.

It was resting on its shock-absorbing legs, gleaming silvery in the sunlight, a technological object of rare beauty, an extraordinary achievement.

'We've won,' Wilson said with quiet pride. 'Now let's blow it to smithereens.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The landscape that Ernst drove through on his way to Himmler's unofficial headquarters in Dr. Gebhardt's sanatorium at Hohenlychen, 120 kilometres north of Berlin, resembled the interior of his own mind: a place of ruins and mounting rubble, a cold, bleak terrain.

He had felt this way since the death of Ingrid and the children – first grief, then guilt, then despair, then a feeling like death – and he now sensed that he would never feel better as long as he lived. He understood that this was why he'd decided to throw in his lot with Wilson. He needed the American's icy confidence, his air of calm invincibility, but he also needed to hide away in a place like the Antarctic the way other men, disillusioned with or frightened by life, hide themselves in isolated monasteries, wanting only the silence of the day and the night's lonesome wind.

He wanted escape.

Reaching the sanatorium, he wasn't surprised to find it surrounded by trucks and heavily armed SS troops, just as the Führer's bunker in the Chancellery had been. Even though wearing his uniform, Ernst had to show his papers to an unsmiling guard at the main gate, then was escorted inside the building, past other guarded doors, and into Himmler's personal study. The Reichsführer was at his desk, leaning slightly forward to look down through his pince-nez at a large astrological chart, but he looked up when Ernst entered and offered a wan smile. Ernst saluted and murmured 'Heil Hitler!' – because this ridiculous formality was still being kept up – then Himmler, who rarely invited his guests to sit, actually told him to do so.

Ernst sat in the chair facing the desk as Himmler was saying, 'You have come from Berlin, Captain Stoll?'

'Yes, sir,' Ernst replied. 'After flying in from Nordhausen, I was expecting to find you in the Chancellery, so naturally I went there first.'

'I'm not feeling too well,' Himmler said testily, 'so I came here for a

much needed rest.'

Ernst did not choose to argue, though he knew that Himmler had in fact come here to get away from the bombings and the general madness overtaking Berlin, now that his envisaged Thousand Year Reich had shrunk to the area confined between two rivers, the Rhine and the Oder, and was about to be annihilated completely with enemy attacks from the east and west. Also, since January, when he had been given the responsibility of stopping Marshal Zhukov's advance to the Oder River but failed lamentably to do so, his position of trust with Hitler had been lost. Now, along with Goring and Speer, he was a rejected former favourite, forced to watch the fanatical Martin Bormann gain the trust of an increasingly paranoid Führer and become arrogant with it.

'And how were things in Berlin?' Himmler asked, as if he had not been there for months.

Ernst sighed and shrugged. 'The same. There are air raids every day and night. Our courageous Führer insists on staying in the Chancellery bunker and refuses to give in.'

'Most admirable,' Himmler said.

'Yes,' Ernst replied. 'Indeed.' Not mentioning that Hitler's bunker, deep beneath the Chancellery garden, had more than once been badly damaged by Allied bombs and was a most depressing sight, with air vents covered in cardboard, the rooms now barren of their former paintings, tapestries, and carpets, rubble on the floors, planks thrown across gaping holes filled with water from burst mains, and an almost daily breakdown of water and electricity. Hitler himself had appeared to be in a dreadful condition, with a limp left arm, an incapacitated right hand, a general lack of muscular coordination, obvious breathing problems, and an embarrassing tendency to absent-mindedness and outbursts of paranoid anger. Because of this, there were armed SS troops standing guard at every door, in every corridor. The bunker was rife with rumours about suspected plots, coups, and assassination attempts that, if nothing else, distracted everyone from the bombs raining down almost non-stop. In short, a nightmare.

'Did you speak personally to our beloved Führer?'

'No, sir. I only saw him in the Chancellery air-raid shelter, when he was conversing with some of his officers.'

'Did you hear my name mentioned?' Himmler asked anxiously, twisting

his snake ring around on his finger.

'No, Reichsführer,' Ernst lied.

'You don't think he's heard about...?' But his voice trailed off into an uneasy silence, as if he couldn't even mention the subject that was, even more than his recent rejection, gnawing away at him.

Ernst knew what his deeper anxiety was about.

The past couple of months had seen the disaster in the Ardennes, the terrible bombing of Dresden, the Soviet crossing of the Oder River, and the Allied advance to the bank of the Rhine, where they were, this very day, massing for their advance into Germany.

Not oblivious to this dreadful turning of the tide, and encouraged by his masseur, Felix Kersten – a dubious character and doctor without a medical degree – as well as by his chief of espionage, General Walter Schellenberg, Himmler had earlier in the month held a secret meeting right here with Count Folke Bernadotte of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, in an attempt to negotiate a separate peace. The attempt had failed, but now Himmler was terrified that the Führer would find out what he had been up to behind his back – even more so because his former personal adjutant and current SS chief in Italy, General Karl Wolff, had also been negotiating behind the Führer's back, first with Allen Dulles, the OSS representative in Switzerland, then with two Allied generals in Ascona, Switzerland.

Himmler was convinced that if Hitler found out, he, Himmler, would be executed without further ado. No wonder he was a dramatically changed man, his pale face now sweaty.

'No, Reichsführer,' Ernst replied, keeping his face composed. 'I don't think he's heard anything at all. In fact, I don't think he hears much about anything except the war's progress, which of course is disastrous.'

'That's the talk of a traitor!' Himmler snapped with a sudden, surprising burst of energy.

'I apologize, Reichsführer,' Ernst said quickly. 'I meant no disrespect. I merely point out that even the Chancellery is being bombed every day and the enemy is closing in from east and west and will soon be entering Berlin.'

Visibly sagging again, Himmler looked down at the ring he was twisting neurotically on his finger, studied it for a moment, then looked up again with a hopeful gleam in his normally distant gaze. 'We might still be able to stop them,' he said, 'with our new, secret weapons.'

‘I’m afraid most of the rocket launching sites have been captured,’ Ernst informed him. ‘So even if we produced more advanced rockets, we could not _ ’

But Himmler waved his hand impatiently to cut him short.

‘I don’t mean the rockets,’ he said. ‘I know all about the rockets. I’m thinking, instead, of Flugkapitän Schriever’s flying saucer, which he insisted he would be testing soon. Have you been to see him in Prague?’

‘Yes, Reichsführer. I was there a week ago. Schriever is still confident that he can have the saucer flying before the Soviets get that far. I was certainly impressed with what I saw there, and I think he can do it.’

‘Good,’ Himmler said.

Nonsense, Ernst thought. He had indeed visited Schriever in his research complex outside Prague. Although his saucer might fly, it would be of little help. It was an obsolete model, using Wilson’s old gas-turbine rotors, not much more advanced than a helicopter, and without decent weapons. In truth, it was a joke, designed to keep Schriever engaged and Himmler’s mind off Wilson. Even if Schriever *did* get it flying before the Soviets got to him, it would hardly do much damage to the Soviet or Allied advance. In fact, it would probably be shot out of the sky as soon as it took off.

‘I knew I was right in depending upon Schriever,’ Himmler said. ‘He’s a German, after all. I only wish I’d had the sense to do it a lot sooner, rather than waste all that time on Wilson. How *is* the American?’

Ernst had been waiting for the question. Though prepared for it, he could not stop a tremor of fear from passing through him. He had rehearsed this many times, with Wilson, by himself, and though he knew it would probably work, the thought of failure was frightening. He was going to lie to his Reichsführer – a major lie, and a dangerous one – and when he recalled those high-ranking officers hanging from piano-wire nooses strung from meat hooks in that small room in Plotzensee Prison, he didn’t relish what would happen to him if he made a mistake.

‘I’m afraid you were right about Wilson,’ he said. ‘We put him to work in Nordhausen, helping the rocket engineers, but he was clearly too old and senile to be of much use to them. As for his so-called flying saucer, it was a poor imitation of Schriever’s. When test-flown, it hardly got off the ground before blowing up.’

It had indeed been blown up, but deliberately, by Wilson, after having

performed superbly during its test flight. Wilson had done it with no flicker of emotion. He didn't want to risk flying it until the war had ended (he didn't want it to be observed) and, also, the components for many models had already been shipped to Antarctica. He himself would take the drawings for this final, successful prototype there, when they sailed out from Kiel.

Wilson, then, was still very much alive... but well hidden in Kahla.

'Naturally that failure,' Ernst continued, 'combined with Wilson's increasingly senile behaviour in the Nordhausen Central Works, encouraged us to do what you had suggested – and we shot him. He was executed in one of the bunkers and his body then burned as part of the mass cremations at Buchenwald. Then all the papers regarding his Projekt Saucer were set to the torch.'

'You did the correct thing,' Himmler said. 'Good riddance to bad rubbish. We should have known that an American would not have served us well in the end. And now all of our resources can be directed toward the Schriever saucer, which *must* be successful.'

'It will be, Reichsführer.'

Himmler nodded, scratched his nose beneath the pince-nez, then glanced down at his astrological chart and spoke to the desk. 'Wernher von Braun and his five thousand technicians are now safely housed near Nordhausen?'

'Yes, sir. The new research station has almost been completed in the Bleicherode mine. Von Braun and his technicians have been accommodated there and in other villages in the general vicinity of Nordhausen.'

'They discovered nothing about Wilson and his Projekt Saucer?'

'No, Reichsführer. After executing Wilson, we destroyed all evidence of his project. That was a few days before von Braun and his team arrived.'

'Excellent,' Himmler said. 'The Allies and the Soviets will both want our scientists, so failing all else, we can use them as bartering points if it comes to surrender. Make sure they are kept under guard and be ready to move them at short notice.'

'Yes, sir,' Ernst said.

Himmler nodded thoughtfully, still gazing down at the astrological chart, which had, Ernst knew, been given to him by his 'masseur,' Felix Kersten.

How the mighty have fallen, Ernst thought. This pit has no bottom.

'Nevertheless,' Himmler said distractedly, 'I have good reason to believe the tide will turn again and leave us victorious.' He looked up at Ernst,

smiled in a dreamy manner, and tapped the astrological chart with his knuckles. ‘My charts,’ he said. ‘I study them often. The charts tell me that we’ll be saved at the last minute with some secret weapon. Perhaps our new jets or the atom bomb project... But most likely Flugkapitän Schriever’s flying saucer... I place my faith in my stars.’

‘Yes, Reichsführer,’ Ernst said, too embarrassed to say anything else, but standing up and getting ready to take his leave. ‘I’m sure that’s the case.’

‘You are returning to Nordhausen now?’

Ernst nodded.

‘Good. When do you next plan to visit Schriever?’

‘When he calls me for the test flight of his saucer, which should be within the month.’

‘According to my astrological charts, that should be enough.’

‘I hope so, Reichsführer.’

Himmler stood up, adjusted his jacket, then straightened his spine and gave the Nazi salute. He waited until Ernst had returned it, then said, ‘Thank you, Captain Stoll. These are trying times, but you’ve behaved commendably so far. I trust you won’t let me down in the future.’

‘No, Reichführer, I won’t.’

‘Goodbye, Captain. Heil Hitler!’

‘Heil Hitler!’

The words had a hollow ring in the large, gloomy study, reminding Ernst of the life he had wasted for the dreams of such madmen. He walked out with relief, as if escaping from prison, and drove back to Berlin through the evening’s descending darkness, reaching Reinickendorf airport as the bombs started falling.

He saw the fires all over Berlin as he climbed out of his car, heard the explosions growing louder as they came closer to the airport, and strapped himself into the seat in the plane as the darkness just beyond the airport became a hell of explosions. The plane took off through a brilliant web of languidly looping tracers, flew through exploding flak, and managed to make its escape without being damaged.

Ernst settled into his seat, feeling nothing, not even fear. He thought of how everywhere he went these days there was only destruction. Then the young navigator emerged from the pilot’s cabin, stopped in front of him, and handed him a written message.

Reading it, Ernst learned that earlier that morning Britain's General Montgomery had launched his assault across the Rhine; that two airborne divisions, one British, the other American, had dropped on the German side of the river to support the infantrymen; and that 240 kilometres upriver, General Patton's US 3rd Army had done exactly the same. Fully aware that the news signified the beginning of the end of the Thousand Year Reich, Ernst simply crumpled up the message and let it fall to the floor.

All he felt was relief.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Bradley was so tired, he thought he was dead. He was sitting behind another makeshift desk surrounded by rubble and four broken walls, with no roof, in the remains of what had once been an elegant house in what was now left of the city of Cologne, which had been bomb-shattered and torn by the dreadful fighting of the past few days.

The ruined building in which Bradley was sitting was being guarded by filthy, weary, armed soldiers from the 104th Infantry Divisions of General Omar Bradley's US 1st Army, with whom Bradley had made the bitterly won advance from Aachen, on the Siegfried Line. When he glanced at them, which he could do with ease, because few of the building's walls still stood completely, he was reminded of just how hard they had fought and how far they'd come.

Sitting at his makeshift desk , the ruined house's kitchen table, and waiting to begin what he thought would be his most important interrogations on behalf of Project Paperclip, he could hear the continuing sounds of battle from beyond the battered city, as the Germans were pushed back to the Rhine. Nevertheless, irrespective of the constant noise, he still managed to fall in and out of a delirious half sleep, in which he thought of nothing but what he had experienced over the past couple of months.

'The pilot's on his way,' his assistant, Sergeant Lew Ackerman of the US 3rd Armoured Division, whispered into his ear. 'He'll be here any second.'

'Thanks,' Bradley said.

He had meant to open his eyes and smile, but instead drifted into another half sleep and recalled the Hürtgen forest, snow and mud erupting around him, the infantrymen moving forward through that hell of exploding shells, swirling smoke, chattering machine guns, and screaming wounded, their blood splashing on the muddied white of the snow, their bodies crumpling into it. Bradley had survived it (he had hugged the ground a lot), but then

found himself farther south, advancing toward the heavily fortified village of Schmidt and the Roer reservoirs. The resistance was fierce and many men died in the mud, but the village was taken, followed by the west bank of the Roer. Then the Germans flooded the river by blowing up the dams and Bradley found himself helping to form a bridgehead in the early hours of the morning. The men of the US 1st and 9th forced a difficult crossing and assembled a temporary bridge for the others to follow. The moon was bright and many of them died, but Bradley survived again, soaking wet but not with blood, and helped drag some of his dead friends from the river before moving on.

It wasn't excitement that stuck in his mind, just constant noise and permanent exhaustion, and Bradley remembered it while sitting at his table in this ruined house in the ruined heart of the city of Cologne, now one great heap of rubble.

He remembered being deaf and cold, being exhausted and cold, and then recalled, more specifically, the march eastward to Duren, the city's complete destruction, another river crossing (someone said it was the Erft) and finally, in a hell of noise and smoke, the outskirts of this city. Allied aircraft bombed it constantly, the big guns levelled what was left, then the US 1st Army moved in, taking the town street by street.

Bradley was right there, with the 104th Infantry divisions, clambering over the rubble, choking in dust and smoke, firing his M-1 rifle at those murky figures in the dust-wreathed ruins, throwing his hand grenades into rubble-filled basements, running forward and ducking and running forward again, and dragging dead, bloody bodies out of his way to start all over again.

He had played his small part in the capture of Cologne and couldn't help feeling proud of himself. He was too old for this, after all, and was not obliged to do it. The function of the OSS was intelligence gathering – to follow the advancing armies and set up headquarters in their wake – but Bradley had wanted this last adventure, a final testing of his courage, and he had to confess that doing it had made him feel young again. It was confirmation of that awful truth – that men throve on risk-taking – and it helped him to understand what drove Wilson on his weird personal journey: the need to risk everything he had to create his own world.

What would be most frightening about Wilson, Bradley suspected, would be the world he was hoping to create: clearly one in which normal human

feelings had little weight.

It helped to think about Wilson. It made Bradley feel more alert. He rubbed his eyes and yawned and stretched himself on the wooden chair. He was pleased to note that a jeep had just pulled up outside and his ALSOS assistant, Major Arnold Grieves, was leading a US Air Force pilot through the remains of the front doorway, past the armed guards, along the rubble-strewn passageways to his open-air office. A cold wind was whipping up the dust and forcing Bradley to shiver.

'Hallelujah!' he whispered as Sergeant Ackerman stepped over a broken wall, holding a tray containing what looked like four mugs of steaming coffee.

'I brought us all coffees,' he confirmed, placing the tray on the table. 'It'll help keep you warm.'

'You're a treasure,' Bradley said. 'I will never forget this simple display of kindness. Look me up after the war and I'll give you a kiss.'

'No, thanks,' Ackerman said, taking the chair beside Bradley and raising his steaming mug to his lips as Major Grieves, small and portly and reportedly brilliant, stopped in front of the table with the pilot beside him. The pilot was in his flying uniform, was roughly handsome and unshaven, and was actually puffing on a cigar, just like in Hollywood films.

'Hi, Mike,' Grieves said informally. 'This is Lieutenant Edward Schlesinger of the 415th Night Fighter Squadron. Eddie, this is Colonel Mike Bradley of the OSS and his administrative assistant, Sergeant Lew Ackerman of the US 3rd Armored Division.'

'Hi,' Schlesinger said, exhaling a cloud of smoke and pulling up a chair without being asked. 'Howya doin'?'

'Fine,' Bradley said, as Arnold pulled up the last chair. An enemy shell came screeching in toward them and fell in the ruins of a house in the adjacent, debris-strewn street. The explosion threw up more debris and a ballooning cloud of smoke, but neither Bradley nor anyone else at the table took any notice. Instead, Bradley glanced down at his notes and said, 'You're a pilot with the – '

'He's just told you,' the pilot said, nodding in the direction of Major Grieves. 'The 415th Night Fighter Squadron, flying bombing raids over the Rhine.'

'Originally out of England?'

‘Right. But now out of a French airbase near Paris. One hell of a city.’

‘I agree,’ Bradley said with a grin, amused by the pilot’s lack of respect for rank. ‘But the incident you’re going to tell me about actually happened when you were flying out of England.’

‘Yeah, right. Aston Down, Gloucestershire. A Limey base.’

‘How’d you get on with the Brits?’

‘That’s a joke, isn’t it? They thought we were overpaid, oversexed, and over there to steal their women.’

‘Which you were.’

‘I guess so, Colonel. No argument there. Are those coffees for us?’

‘Yeah,’ Ackerman said.

‘Terrific.’ Schlesinger picked up one mug, Grieves picked up the other, they both drank, then Schlesinger inhaled on his cigar and exhaled more smoke. Because the smoke from the last explosion was drifting over them, the cigar smoke was barely noticed.

‘Apparently this incident occurred on the night of November 23, last year, during a bombing run over the Rhine.’

‘Right. November 23, 1944. I have the date branded in my brain and won’t ever forget it.’

‘What happened, exactly?’

‘It was a pretty normal bombing run,’ Schlesinger said, ‘with nothing out of the ordinary until we got to about twenty miles from Strasbourg.’

‘When you say “nothing out of the ordinary,” what do you mean?’

Schlesinger spread his hands in the air. ‘Nothing!’ he said. ‘Just another routine bombing raid. No problems over France, a bit of flak over the Rhine, then another untroubled period until we started getting near Strasbourg. That’s when it began.’

‘You were harassed by some kind of flying object?’

‘A Foo fighter,’ Schlesinger said.

‘That’s the word you guys are using for this particular kind of unidentified flying object?’

‘Right. We call them Foo fighters.’

‘Why?’

‘Just a joke name. It comes from the Smokey Stover comic strip. You know? The popular phrase, “Where there’s foo, there’s fire.” It’s as simple as that.’

Bradley chuckled and shook his head in amusement, then returned to business. ‘So you’d heard about the Foo fighters before you made that particular flight?’

‘Yeah, right, but that doesn’t mean I imagined the sons of bitches. Everyone in the crew saw the same objects – and one of our B-25s went down because of the harassment. No, sir! They were real, all right!’

‘So what happened?’

‘We’re just approaching Strasbourg with not a thing in the goddamned sky – no enemy aircraft, no flak, no tracers – nothing! Then, without warning, these goddamned Foo fighters appeared – about a dozen of them – and started tailing certain of our aircraft, mostly the bombers. They ascended from the ground – most of us saw them coming up. They looked like balls of fire – an orange-yellow fire, sometimes flaring white, with a tail of fire streaming out behind it – but when they flew beside my plane, a B-25, I could see that they had a dark inner core, which was probably solid. That core was shaped like a disc, or saucer, and most of us agreed it was no more than three or four feet wide.’

‘And you believe they were actually tailing your aircraft?’

‘No doubt about it, Colonel. Those goddamned things were *controlled*. With that orange-yellow fire around them and their unusual shape and size, they certainly seemed a bit weird and even unreal – but they were under control.’

‘What makes you think that?’

‘Because they flew right at our airplanes as if about to crash into them, then turned away abruptly and just tailed us, sticking really close to us. Then, each time we fired our guns at them, they flew out of range at incredible speed and in every direction.’

‘How fast?’

‘Faster than any plane I’ve ever seen.’

‘Why did you fire at them? They were only *tailing* you, after all.’

‘Because as soon as they started tailing us, or at least flying in formation with us – since they were usually right beside us – they appeared to cool down a bit, giving us a clearer impression of the dark inner core. Then they definitely looked saucer-shaped, probably made of metal – at times they *glinted* – and they seemed to be spinning rapidly on their own axis. When they were spinning like that, they made a whipping, whistling sound, like

they were whipping up the air around them. And when *that* happened, our radar *and* engines malfunctioned and our planes started failing... It was weird. Really frightening.'

'And you're sure that the malfunctioning of the engines was directly related to the spinning of the fireballs?'

'Absolutely. I'm sure. We were *all* sure. Because as soon as we fired on the Foo fighters, they flew away from us – the instant we started firing, in fact – and as soon as they flew out of range, our engines kicked in again. So that's what was happening, see? When they came close to us, our engines malfunctioned and we started going down; when we fired at them and they flew away, our engines kicked back into life and we were able to level out and keep flying. So they came at us and were chased away, returned and were chased away again, and our engines were cutting in and out, and we were falling and then levelling out again. This happened repeatedly until we gave up and turned back to England... Which we only did when Tappman's B-25 went down for the count.'

'Lieutenant Victor Tappman... the fatality.'

'Right. Good old Vic. Out of Denver, Colorado. One of the best pilots we had – but even he couldn't handle it.'

Another shell fell nearby, exploding a few streets away, but Schlesinger merely turned his head to glance at the rising smoke, then inhaled on his cigar and shook his head ruefully.

'His B-25,' he continued, 'like all of the others, had been cutting in and out, going down and levelling out again; but then it cut out for too long, fell too far to be levelled out, and then went into a nosedive that he couldn't control. I think his engines came on again, but by then the aircraft was in that spin, and so the plane was forced quicker toward the ground and eventually crashed. I heard Tappman on the intercom, shouting about the goddamned fireballs. "*They're killing our engines*!" he shouted. "*They're not planes*!" I heard his gunner cry out. "*They're balls of fire*!" The gunner also emphasized that the balls of fire were *ascending* – so they weren't natural phenomena – and then Tappman screamed, "*We're going down*! *Pull her up*!" Then he gave one, long drawn-out cry of the word "*Foo*!" which is where it all ended.'

'You mean, the Foo fighters flew away after Tappman crashed.'

'No,' Schlesinger said, taking another drink of his coffee and then putting

the mug back down. ‘We all turned back when we saw Tappman crashing – and only *then*, when we were actually heading home, did the Foo fighters fly away... And those sons of bitches *did* fly away, Colonel, they didn’t just disappear. They ascended vertically above our aircraft, stayed above us for a short while, then, when they were certain we were heading home, they flew away horizontally and finally, when a good distance away, descended *in formation* toward the ground. They were controlled, Colonel. *Definitely*!’

‘It could only have been remote control,’ Bradley said.

‘Like the V-1 and V-2 rockets,’ Grieves added, ‘so it’s certainly possible.’

There was silence for a moment. Bradley heard the distant battle.

‘This is some office you got here,’ Schlesinger said. ‘Real cosy, in fact.’

Bradley smiled. ‘We make do with what we have.’

Schlesinger nodded, straight-faced, and said, ‘Can I go now?’

Bradley also nodded. ‘Sure. And thanks a lot. You’ve been a great help.’

Schlesinger grinned, pushed his chair back, and stood up.

‘Anytime. No sweat.’

Grieves stood up with him. ‘Are you going to that hospital right now?’

‘Yes,’ Bradley replied. ‘I want to catch up with the 1st Army. I can’t hang around too long.’

‘Any messages for HQ in Paris?’

‘Not yet,’ Bradley said.

‘Okay, Colonel, I’ll see you in Berlin.’

‘I sure as hell hope so.’

Grieves grinned at him and left, taking the pilot with him. Bradley stood up and stretched, then said to Sergeant Ackerman, ‘I’ll take the jeep and be back in an hour or so. Can you hold the fort?’

‘I’m not expecting many visitors,’ Ackerman replied laconically, his gaze taking in the ruined walls and missing roof of the house.

‘I’ll bring you back a hot blonde,’ Bradley said.

‘You do that, Colonel.’

Bradley left the ruined building, passing the armed guards, then climbed into his jeep and drove through Cologne, or what was left of it. The devastation was appalling. No street was untouched. He drove past skeletal buildings, imposing hillocks of rubble, the blackened remains of exploded tanks, overturned trucks, and mangled half-tracks. People still lived in the ruins, their pitiful possessions grouped around them, and children kicked up

clouds of dust as they clambered over charred wooden beams and jumped off the remains of walls. Occasionally shots rang out – the army was cleaning out German snipers – and Frenchmen with FFI armbands and women armed to the teeth were kicking collaborators, the men bruised, the women with shaved heads, along the streets and into basements and rubble-strewn rooms to mete out rough justice.

Bradley tried not to see that, because although he strongly disapproved, he could do little to stop it. He was therefore undeniably relieved to arrive at the hospital. Though it was still standing, it had also been severely damaged and was surrounded by rubble.

He parked as some Flying Fortresses growled overhead, heading for the Rhine and the German cities beyond it, and thought of the balls of fire, the so-called Foo fighters, that had been harassing and sometimes destroying Allied bombers for months now.

Saucer-shaped objects, he thought. *It could only be Wilson.*

And he had to admire Wilson, while also feeling a touch of dread. Bradley was more determined than ever to find him as he entered the hospital.

There was a jagged hole in the roof just above the reception desk and the floor below it was covered in broken plaster and a dirty white powder. Uniformed MPs were on guard, checking for malingerers, but they snapped to attention and saluted when Bradley stopped at the desk. He asked for Major General Saunders, the OSS officer who had called him there. When Saunders arrived, he forgot to salute, but offered his hand instead.

'Major General McArthur told me about you,' Saunders said with a casual, relaxing smile. 'He told me what you were after. This woman, we think she knew the man you want, and she's eager to talk. No love lost there, I think. Come on, Colonel, this way.'

'How is she?' Bradley asked as Saunders led him through the nearest door and into a corridor.

'Not too good,' Saunders replied. 'She copped a bomb in this very hospital. She was working here as a nurse for the Germans when we bombed it to hell. She was buried in rubble, had a lot of bones broken, and will possibly be paralysed for life. But she can talk. She's coherent. She came here from Berlin, where she'd lived in the Kürhessen district with an SS engineer named Helmut Kruger. According to her records, which we found in

the hospital files, she came here to work under the auspices of the SS and was otherwise being favoured with all the privileges of an SS dependant, or wife. Since, according to those same records, she and Kruger had not been married, we wondered why this was so and decided to ask her about it. We were surprised, then, when she told us with some bitterness that the name "Kruger" was a pseudonym for an *American* engineer, John Wilson, who'd worked at the rocket research centre at Kummersdorf, just fifteen miles south of Berlin. I conveyed this information to Major General McArthur and he told me to contact you. Your special baby, he said.'

He led Bradley along some more corridors, few of which were undamaged, then into a ward where the beds were crammed tightly together and the roof, which had collapsed, was temporarily covered with canvas sheeting. Most of the windows were also covered in canvas, and the wind drummed against it.

Saunders led Bradley to the bed of a woman whose steady, fearless gray gaze emerged from a swathe of bandages that covered her head and hid most of her features. Her arms and legs, protruding from a white sheet, were in plaster casts.

'Mrs Bernecker,' Saunders said, 'this is Colonel Bradley, from the American intelligence service. Mike, this is Mrs Greta Bernecker.'

'Hi,' Bradley said, feeling awkward because of the woman's injuries.

'Hello,' the woman replied in good English. 'You wish to know about Wilson?'

Taken aback to hear Wilson mentioned so casually, like a living person, Bradley took a deep breath and said, 'Yes.'

'So... ask your questions.'

Bradley took another deep breath, surprised by his nervousness. He glanced at Saunders, who smiled back and said, 'I don't think you'll need me anymore, but if you do, you can find me through our temporary office right here in Cologne – and you know where that is. Okay?'

'Okay,' Bradley said. He watched Saunders take his leave, passing the other beds, sometimes nodding and waving at the patients he knew. When the OSS officer had gone, he turned back to Greta Bernecker.

'You were living with Wilson in Berlin, is that right?'

'Yes.'

'He was called "Kruger" at the time?'

‘No. He was only listed officially as Kruger. The SS confiscated his American documents and gave him those of a dead German named Kruger. I gather it was because they didn’t want uninformed government clerks and administrators learning that an American, Wilson, was working for, and being supported by, the Third Reich. Officially, then, he existed as Kruger, but those who knew him, or worked with him, called him Wilson.’

‘He was working at Kummersdorf at that time?’

‘Yes. He was actually working at Kummersdorf West, at the other side of the old firing range, well away from the real rocket research centre.’

‘The one run by Wernher von Braun.’

‘Correct, Colonel.’

‘And when Wernher von Braun left to go to Peenemünde?’

‘Wilson took over the larger hangars at Kummersdorf.’

‘Do you know what he was working on?’

‘Some kind of highly advanced, radical aircraft.’

‘Did you find out anything about it?’

‘No. He sometimes talked about it, but I didn’t understand what he was saying. He was an engineer, an aeronautical scientist, and such talk just bewildered me. I only understood that he was after an aircraft that could go straight up and down, like a helicopter, but could fly a lot faster. He said it was shaped like a saucer – I remember that much. In fact, the research program was called Projekt Saucer, which confirms what I say.’

Bradley thought of the hangar in Iowa, then of the Foo fighters, and knew he was heading in the right direction. ‘Did von Braun know anything about Wilson’s project?’

‘I don’t think so. It’s possible, but I doubt it. I know from what Wilson told me that he’d contributed considerably to von Braun’s rocket program by passing on certain of his technical innovations. And I think that because of that von Braun believed that Wilson’s experiments were related solely to the V-1 rocket program.’

‘Who *did* know about Wilson’s work?’

‘The people who worked with him: an old Italian, Belluzzo, two German engineers, Habermohl and Miethe, and a Luftwaffe engineer, Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever, who was obsessed with pleasing Himmler and tried stealing the credit for Wilson’s work. While at Kummersdorf, they were all under the supervision of an SS officer, Lieutenant Ernst Stoll – now a

captain, I think.'

'Is Wilson still at Kummersdorf?'

'No. Conflict between him and Flugkapitän Schriever, with Schriever gaining Himmler's trust, led to the research team being split into two groups. One group, headed by Schriever, Habermohl, and Miethe, was sent to somewhere in Bohem, in Czechoslovakia, and the other, headed by Wilson alone, went to the Harz Mountains.'

'Whereabouts in the Harz Mountains?'

'I don't know exactly. He mentioned a place called Nordhausen, though I don't think he was actually going there, but to somewhere close to it.'

That made sense to Bradley. British and American aerial reconnaissance and local resistance intelligence had already confirmed that some kind of huge rocket production centre was located underground, near Nordhausen, in Thuringia. As that area was also part of the Nazis' planned Last Redoubt, it was logical that anything related to secret weapons would be transported there.

Trying to hide his excitement, he forced himself to look at the heavily bandaged Greta Bernecker and asked, 'Is that when you and Wilson separated? When he was moved to Thuringia?'

'Yes,' she replied bitterly. 'We weren't married and only SS wives could go, so I was left in Berlin.'

'Yet ended up in Cologne.'

'Yes,' she said, still sounding bitter. 'The SS offered me a pension or the chance to work in one of their hospitals. Since the pension was laughable, I accepted their offer of work here. This was an SS hospital, Colonel, before you people came here.'

Bradley studied the woman carefully – or what he could see of her. Her visible features were hard, the lips sensual, slightly cruel, and her gray eyes, though hardly filled with warmth, were admirably fearless. She might be paralysed for the rest of her life, but she was not seeking pity. Bradley had to admire that.

'How did you come to be living with Wilson?' he asked.

'I was working at the time as a nurse in a secret, experimental hospital just outside Berlin, and Wilson went there more than once to have some operations.'

'What do you mean by an "experimental" hospital?'

‘It was devoted to Himmler’s so-called anthropological experiments, mostly under the auspices of the *Ahnenerbe*, the Institute for Research into Heredity. Normally, the experiments were carried out – often under appallingly crude conditions and without aesthetic – on inmates from the concentration camps; but Wilson was obsessed with extending his life, and as soon as an experiment produced results, he made personal use of it, no matter how painful. He used himself a lot, in fact: gave his blood and urine and shit and even semen; underwent numerous tests and experiments. He had operations on his failing heart, on his stomach and joints; he even had some basic plastic surgery to make him look younger. He was a man obsessed, Colonel.’

‘And no longer like a seventy-five-year-old.’

‘No, the pig looked much younger.’

The vehemence was startling, but Bradley knew he could use it. ‘Why did you move in with him,’ he asked, ‘if you detested him so much?’

‘Because he asked for me,’ she said. ‘It was an SS hospital and he had a lot of influence. I wanted to have a few small luxuries, so I moved in with him.’

‘Why did he want a woman at his age?’

Greta Bernecker, swathed in her bandages, actually managed a smile. Bradley didn’t like her, but he had to admire her guts. The combination of bandages and courage reminded him of Gladys in the ambulance in Paris. Thank God, she was now back in London – and writing letters again.

‘It wasn’t romance,’ Greta said, ‘if that’s what you’re thinking. No, he needed a trained nurse, one who understood his needs, and since I’d been looking after him for so long, I was an obvious choice... He was a vigorous man, Colonel – those operations had done him good – but he wasn’t interested in normal sex. What he wanted was his own semen – for the experiments, nothing more – and since I’d already done it for him, he wanted me to masturbate him and then bottle his semen and arrange for its delivery to the hospital. I did the same with his piss and shit and blood. It was a job and I did it.’

‘Did he treat you well?’

‘Yes. In the sense that he wasn’t cruel. He was neither cruel nor kind – he simply didn’t have such emotions – and as long as I did what he asked, he let me have what I wanted. But I thought he cared for me at least a little... It’s a

human conceit.'

'But he didn't care.'

'No. Not a bit. When the order came for him to move out, he just moved out and left me. I meant nothing at all to him.'

'Did *anyone* mean anything to him?'

'Not that I noticed. I think he was dead from the neck down. He had no heart, no soul. He was all brain – a mathematical machine, above human emotion. I've never met a man like him.'

'Is there anything else you can tell me?'

'No. I don't think so. He left me and went to the Harz Mountains and is probably still there. I want you to find him and hang him. It's all he deserves.'

'Yes, Frau Bernecker.'

'Now I'm tired and wish to go to sleep. Goodbye, Colonel.'

'Goodbye.'

Unable to move anything else, Greta Bernecker closed her eyes. Bradley, elated and disturbed at once, walked out of the ward.

By nightfall, Bradley had left his makeshift office in the ruins of Cologne and was resting on one knee, like Davy Crockett, with an M-1 rifle in his hands. The sky above him was filled with black clouds of bursting flak, phosphorescent streams of tracers, descending parachutists, and fat-bellied Allied bombers and gliders. All combined to make a noise that could strip the senses bare.

Bradley gazed across the river, along the length of that enormous bridge, and saw the water geysering up all around it and roaring dramatically. There were infantrymen bunched up all around him, behind him, in front of him, and as the ones in front jumped up and yelled obscenities and rushed forward, the distance between him and the bridge decreased all too rapidly.

He moved forward at a crouch, holding his M-1 like a woman. He heard the shouting and the roaring and the rumbling of tanks and half-tracks and thought that he was living a dream too intense to be borne. Then he was all alone there: not one soul in front of him; just the river and geysering water and that enormous length of bridge, plus a dizzying drop down into the river, where dead bodies were floating.

American bodies, he thought, and started shaking. I can't do this. It's too

much.

‘Go, dammit! *Get going*!’

Someone grabbed him by the shoulder, shook him violently and threw him forward. He jumped up and ran like the wind, straight onto that damned bridge. The wind was worse out in the open, carrying all the noise to him, and the German shells were looping down around him and the water was roaring. He was drenched, but kept going; now he simply had no choice. When he glanced around him, he saw geysering water and more men falling off the bridge. Shocked, he looked away, raising his eyes to the heavens, where he saw the bombers and bursting clouds of flak and tracers painting the night. Death in war could be so beautiful, always lighting up the darkness, but it was still blood and broken bones and burning and it made him feel nauseous.

‘Keep going, goddammit!’

Which he did, as he had no choice. Running above death and destruction. Advancing beneath a night sky rendered exotic by modern technology. He ran and fell down, jumped up and ran again, while the water splashed over him, then fell away again, and bawling men, some of whom were his friends, jerked frantically and fell down. He couldn’t stop to check their pulses. Once you started, you couldn’t stop. You just had to keep going, through the hellish noise and chaos, and pray to God, as Bradley was doing right now, that you’d somehow get through it.

‘*Goddammit, fuckin’ German sons of bitches*! *Goddammit, we’ve made it*!’

Bradley didn’t know who was shouting. All the voices seemed the same. They were filled with exultation and dread and a childish defiance. He just followed the other men, still running, crouched low, his M-1 bouncing off his chest, and raced through raging water into more hellish noise and emerged to a stretch of solid ground that was erupting in flame and smoke. He jumped off the bridge, bringing his M-1 up, taking aim, but the wave of men filing up behind him forced him onto the scorched ground.

It was earth and it was black and torn asunder by bomb and shell and his buddies were spreading out across it and heading into the darkness.

Bradley stopped for a moment, briefly blind and deaf, drenched, and then realized that he was standing on the soil of the Thousand Year Reich.

He held his rifle at the ready and marched forward, into Germany.

To Wilson.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

The move began on the first day of April. Kammler had arrived back from the Hague at the end of March, after firing the last of his 1,050 V-2 rockets on London. He had immediately informed Ernst that as the American army was rapidly approaching Nordhausen, the whole complex was to be evacuated forthwith.

'As you know,' he said, seated in his office in the Nordhausen Central Works, his back turned to the panorama of forested hills and sky framed by the large window behind him, 'it is Himmler's intention to use Wernher von Braun and his five thousand technicians as pawns in a possible trade-off with the Allies. While I personally disapprove of this, I cannot argue with the Reichsführer, who is increasingly neurotic. I therefore had to agree to personally move them to a safe place in Oberammergau, in the Bavarian Alps. I plan to do that in four days' time. While I am thus engaged, I expect you personally to supervise the evacuation of the labour force from Camp Dora and back to Buchenwald, Bergen-Belsen, Neuengamme, Ravensbruck, and similar camps around Brunswick and Hanover. Brook no resistance. Execute those who either cannot or refuse to go. Make sure the evacuation is completed by the fourth of April, when the evacuation of the Kahla complex is due to begin. Understood?'

'Yes, sir,' Ernst replied. Although he had formerly detested Kammler's icy efficiency, he had to admire it now. 'But I fail to see how you can make it back here from Oberammergau by April 4.'

'I won't be coming back,' Kammler said. 'As soon as I've settled von Braun and his men there, where they'll be placed under guard, I'll take a plane to Kiel and join you there. Once there, I'll remain with Wilson and his team until you return to Berlin to pacify Himmler.'

A tremor of fear passed through Ernst at the thought of returning to Berlin, let alone seeing the increasingly demented Himmler.

‘*Pacify* Himmler?’ he asked tentatively.

Kammler smiled with cold, mocking amusement. ‘When I saw Himmler yesterday in that quack’s sanatorium in Hohenlychen, he expressed his concern that the much discussed Schriever saucer be test-flown as soon as possible and insisted that I send you to see him, to give him a full report. To avoid any kind of suspicion, you must do just that.’

Knowing that escape from the besieged Berlin was becoming more difficult every day, Ernst did not feel too happy. He was ashamed of the tremor in his voice when he said, ‘But I may not get out of Berlin in time to rejoin you in Kiel before you leave for Argentina.’

Kammler chuckled maliciously. ‘You’ll get out, all right,’ he said. ‘I’ve personally arranged for an SS plane to fly you out of Reinickendorf Airport on the night of April 10, which should give you plenty of time to see Himmler, sort out what he wants you to do regarding that idiot Schriever and his saucer, and make your escape before Berlin falls. Any more questions?’

‘No, sir.’

Ernst saluted and left Kammler’s office; then he went to work with no great enthusiasm, but considerable efficiency. No longer revolted by what he had to do, he arranged for the first of the Camp Dora inmates to be moved out that evening. He personally supervised the movement of some groups to Bergen-Belsen. Some were driven there by truck or train; others were made to go on foot, forced along by the snapping dogs and cracking whips, usually without food or water. If they lacked the strength to go on, they were shot, their bodies dumped in the ditches. Even here, Allied aircraft flew constantly over the roads and railway lines, bombing the lengthy columns of prisoners and increasing the chaos. By normal standards, it was a nightmare, but Ernst took it in his stride. He was disgusted not because of any moral outrage, but because he was risking his own life to escort this ragged column of Jewish scum and other useless human rubbish to what would be their final destination.

Yes, he knew that they were marked for extermination before the Allies arrived.

He went to bed late and awoke feeling groggy. He was more alert later when Kammler’s special train, with its sleeping cars and dining car and many well-armed SS guards, left with Wernher von Braun and about 500 of his V-2 experts and their families, on the first leg of the journey to Oberammergau.

Once they'd gone, Ernst paid a visit to the Kahla complex, where he found Wilson, silvery-haired but lean and remarkably fit, supervising the packing of the last of the components and drawings for the *Kugelblitz*. Because the workable model had been blown up a few weeks before, the hangar outside Wilson's office looked vast and cold.

'Will you soon be finished?' Ernst asked of Wilson.

'Yes. Today, I think. Most of the components have already been boxed. Copies of the drawings and notes have been placed in three separate, portable safes and will be taken with each group, to ensure that if one lot is lost, the others will make it. Those in charge of the papers have been instructed to destroy them if there's the slightest chance of Soviet or Allied forces capturing them. And since the *Kugelblitz* itself has been blown up, there'll be no evidence left here regarding what we were doing.'

Ernst smiled. 'Excellent,' he said. 'Wernher von Braun's men did something similar with their papers. I gather that two of his engineers, Dieter Huzel and Bernard Tessman, hid the archives of the Peenemünde research station in the disused iron-ore mine near the village of Dorten, not far from Bleicherode. All over Germany, in disused mines and evacuated caves, the Third Reich is hiding its scientific secrets. We're the only ones who are burying ourselves with our secrets – hopefully in the Antarctic.'

'We're not burying ourselves,' Wilson corrected him. 'We're creating our own world.'

'I hope so,' Ernst replied.

He didn't see Wilson for the next two days; he was too busy supervising the continuing evacuation of Camp Dora and ensuring that those in charge of the ragged columns of prisoners would not be merciful to anyone too ill to march. As before, they were moved out at night, by truck and train or on foot. Driving back and forth in his jeep, between the trucks and the trains, along the roads filled with those marching, he heard the snarling dogs, cracking whips and gunshots, and saw bodies in the ditches or sprawled beside the railway tracks, their crumpled forms illuminated by moonlight and stars, or by the incandescent flashing of the exploding bombs from the planes growling overhead.

On the horizon, where the starry sky met black earth, the Allied big guns also flashed constantly, moving forward inexorably.

By the fourth day, both Camp Dora and the Nordhausen Central Works

had been cleared of all prisoners. Then Ernst could begin moving out the technicians and troops. By nightfall the caves were empty, the great tunnels echoing eerily, the railway tracks leading into a darkness in which nothing stirred. Ernst drove back to Kahla, leaving Nordhausen to the Allied troops, and found Wilson, his technicians, and the SS troops ready to leave. They went in three groups, one on each successive night. On the third night, Ernst joined Wilson and his team on the last train from Kahla.

The Allied guns sounded much louder as the train pulled away.

General Nebe was in charge and shared a car with them. His face was impassive, but his dark eyes were restless, first studying his fellow officers, then examining his pistol, then gazing out of the window at a darkness fitfully illuminated with distant explosions.

'The Americans are rich and have an endless supply of aircraft and bombs,' he said. 'No wonder they're winning.' After that rare observation Nebe contented himself with his restless roaming, from one carriage to another, going outside when the train stopped, checking the box cars containing the components or the workers they had decided to take with them to help with unloading.

Occasionally there was trouble – usually a prisoner in revolt. At such times Nebe moved with calm efficiency, invariably by dragging the recalcitrant, ragged figure from the box car, making him or her kneel by the tracks, then putting a single bullet through the back of the victim's neck and kicking the body down the incline or into the brush.

That night brought another problem, near the station of Wolfsburg. A group of resistance fighters or possibly escaped prisoners attacked the train where it had stopped to change tracks. There were perhaps a dozen men, all wearing civilian clothes, firing rifles and pistols through the windows as they leapt up from the dark field and ran alongside the train. Nebe knew what they were doing: trying to capture the engine. While his men fired at them, he hurried though the linked cars to the engine and personally protected the driver until the train had pulled out again. When it did so, Ernst saw many of the resistance men sprawled dead in the dirt.

None of this bothered Wilson, though he said, 'Nebe enjoys the smell of blood in his nostrils. I'm glad he's on our side.' Other than that, he kept to himself, snatching sleep when he could and spending his waking hours with his notebook and pen, playing with mathematical formulas to distract him

from the smouldering ruins of Germany outside the train.

They were bombed before dawn, just as Ernst was about to sleep. The sudden roaring almost split his eardrums as he dived to the floor. The bending tracks shrieked and he thought of Wilson and his crates. The whole car climbed up and crashed down and then rolled onto its side. The noise was deafening. Ernst slid along the floor, struck a wall, and rolled over Wilson. He turned around and saw the windows above him, glass shattered and glinting. Men screamed or bellowed curses as Wilson crawled toward the nearest door. A bloody corporal formed a stirrup with his hands, Nebe planted his boot in it, then the corporal heaved him up through a window. More bombs fell and exploded around the train as Ernst found a cleared space. He pulled himself up through the window. The night roared and spewed flames. He crawled away from the window, rolled off and crashed down to the ground outside.

'Get the crates!' Wilson bawled.

He saw Wilson hurrying alongside the car, which was practically on its side. Men were dropping through the windows and crashing down and rolling away from him. Ernst followed Wilson, crouched low. A silhouette was bellowing orders. Ernst clawed two or three men from his path and then saw the box car. General Nebe was already there. Six or seven trucks were near the train, and a dozen men were labouring under Wilson's crates with smoke billowing over them. Another bomb fell nearby. Nebe stepped forward and barked an order. The men heaved the crate up into the truck, then some knelt down to rest. General Nebe's jackboot glistened. He kicked one of the lolling men. All the men jumped up, grabbed at their weapons, and climbed into the truck. Wilson was in there with the crates, so Ernst climbed up beside the driver. Nebe slipped in beside him, barked an order, and the truck started moving. The bombers passed overhead. A gray dawn began to break. Ernst saw a truck ahead, another behind, and was surprised to be still alive.

The dawn that broke over the devastated land was smoke-filled. All that remained were charred trees, smouldering buildings, and dusty columns of refugees, the latter heading in the opposite direction, away from the Soviets. They were gone soon enough, and the countryside became anonymous. Eventually the trucks stopped on a hill just outside Kiel, offering a view of the Baltic Sea beyond a broad, windblown field.

They were at a military station, surrounded by SS guards.

An enormous bunker, half buried in the ground, its sloping roof covered in earth and grass, dominated the middle of the field. Presumably it could not be seen from the air.

'That's where we'll stay until the U-boats arrive,' Nebe explained with a shrug. 'It's as safe as we'll find.'

The remaining workers from the concentration camps unloaded the train and carried the crates and boxes into the bunker. When they were finished, Nebe said to Ernst, 'Now we have to get rid of them. My SS men will help us load the submarines, but we've no room for this scum. Take care of the men in the bunker and leave this lot to me.'

Ernst did as he was told, glad to wash his hands of the matter, and merely looked on as Nebe's men forced the prisoners up onto the waiting trucks and then drove them away, to another field well away from the sea. He caught Wilson's glance, but the American said nothing. When they heard the distant, savage roar of the machine guns, they turned away from each other. The trucks came back empty, and when Nebe climbed down, stroking his pistol, he simply nodded at Ernst.

Another day passed. Ernst had to wait for Kammler. The SS troops passed the time by playing cards and reading magazines, while their leader, General Nebe, sat in a chair all day to breathe in the fresh sea air. The docks could not be seen from there, only a gray swathe of the Baltic, but Nebe seemed to be content to just sit there and let events take their course. Wilson, on the other hand, was as restless as ever, didn't like being in the bunker, and as usual passed the time by solving mathematical equations and toying with scientific formulas.

'Don't you ever just relax?' Ernst asked him.

'I *am* relaxed,' he replied.

Beyond the noise of the sea, it was quiet. The Allied bombers hadn't come this far yet. It was the first peace and quiet Ernst had known for a long time, but he was still glad when Kammler finally showed up to give him something to do.

'It all went well,' he said. 'The rocket team is now off our hands. Von Braun and his men were housed in army barracks in Oberammergau, behind wire and under SS guard, and will soon be joined by General Dornberger. Now you'd better get back to Berlin and keep Himmler happy. I'll expect you back here on the tenth. Goodbye – and good luck!'

Ernst was driven from the hidden bunker to a small, heavily guarded SS airfield nearby, where he boarded a plane. He spent the whole flight scanning the sky for Allied aircraft, but his luck held that day and soon, when he cast his gaze down, he saw the ruins of Berlin.

A pall of black smoke covered the city and was thickened with dust. The devastation was boundless.

'It's the end of the world,' Ernst said aloud, to no one in particular.

The plane touched down in hell.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The sheer size of it was overwhelming. Bradley and Major General Ryan McArthur were inspecting the Nordhausen Central Works in the Harz Mountains, occupied the day before by the US 1st Army. The rocket production works, consisting of a series of tunnels, each approximately one mile long and joined together at regular intervals by other corridors, were located in the base of forested hills around a verdant valley; but where Bradley and McArthur were walking, in the middle of one of the gigantic tunnels, they could see only the railway tracks glinting dully in the overhead lamps and gradually disappearing into a darkness that led to a pinpoint of light, the outside world, a good half-mile away.

The tunnels were not quiet, because the army's engineers had already moved in, but Bradley's voice still echoed eerily when, stopping beneath the enormous shell of a V-2 rocket, he said, 'There's no doubt about it. Wilson had a lot to do with them. These bastards have been based on the rocket designs of our very own, shamefully neglected Robert H. Goddard, whom the German rocket engineers revered. And we both know who worked with Goddard just before he came here.'

'Wilson,' McArthur said.

'Wilson,' Bradley agreed. He ran his hand wonderingly along the base of the enormous rocket above him – it was hanging from a jib-and-crane – and said, almost reverently, 'The most notable features of this baby's propulsion unit are the shutter-type valves in its fixed grill, the fuel-injection orifices incorporated in the same grill, the combustion chamber, spark plugs, and nozzle – all of which are to be found in a Goddard patent, issued on November 13, 1934, and reproduced in full in the German aviation magazine, *Flugsport*, in January 1939. The Germans copied the designs for their early

Peenemünde rockets, then Wilson came along and contributed his own, much wider knowledge of Goddard's work to the subsequent V-1 and V-2 rocket program. Eventually the rockets attained about a hundred times more thrust than Goddard's reached back in New Mexico, when Wilson worked with him.'

'That's some achievement,' McArthur said. 'The V-2s that fell on London are believed to have had a thrust of fifty-five thousand pounds, attained a velocity of six thousand four hundred feet per second, and could soar to an altitude of sixty-eight miles.'

'Right,' Bradley said. 'Practically on the way to the moon! And just think of the other similarities we've found so far between this baby and Goddard's original rocket. Both rockets have the same motor-cooling system; the same pump drive; the same layout front to rear; the same stabilizer; the same guidance and fuel-injection systems. The only differences are that Goddard's rocket motors used gasoline and oxygen, whereas the V-2 uses hydrogen and peroxide; Goddard's rocket fuel was liquid oxygen and gasoline, whereas the V-2 uses liquid oxygen and alcohol; and, finally, Goddard's rockets were a lot *smaller* than the V-2. So the Nazis, with Wilson's help, simply did what the US government refused to do: they took Goddard's work seriously.'

'And you think Wilson's taken it even further.'

'Yeah,' Bradley said. 'Definitely.' He stroked the V-2 one last time, then started walking McArthur along the tunnel, toward that dime-size circle of light that represented the outer world. 'The war's not even over yet, but already we've discovered a hell of a lot about what the Krauts were up to, scientifically speaking. So far, Germany's scientific papers have been found hidden in tunnels like this, plus caves, dry wells, ploughed fields, riverbeds, and even cesspits. And we know that the weapons we've found so far – not only these rockets, but a lot of heat-guided ground-to-air missiles, sonic-guidance torpedoes, Messerschmitt jet planes, rocket planes that fly even faster, highly advanced electrical submarines, and even the beginnings of an atom bomb project – yes, we already know that these weapons are more advanced than any *we've* got. Also, for the most part, they're based on the work of Robert H. Goddard and, in my estimation, on the furtherance of that work by Goddard's pupil, that goddamned traitor, John Wilson.'

'You've never called him that before,' McArthur said. 'I thought you almost admired him.'

‘Yeah,’ Bradley confessed. ‘I do. Though I hate myself for it.’

‘A genius,’ McArthur said. ‘A perverted genius. A mutant... No wonder you can’t give up the chase. It’s like pursuing an alien.’

‘Right. He’s not real. He’s a part of my dreams. And to shake him loose, to get back to the real world, I’ve just got to face him.’

‘You’ll have to face something else soon,’ McArthur said. ‘And I don’t think you’ll like it.’

Bradley was going to ask him what he meant, but was distracted when they emerged into the light at the end of the tunnel. There they viewed the grandeur of the valley below: lush green, ribboned with sparkling streams, surrounded by the densely forested hills of Thuringia, and, rising above them, the majestic, rolling peaks of the Harz Mountains.

It was certainly beautiful, a pastoral vision... but one scarred by spiralling columns of smoke, great fleets of Allied aircraft, marching troops and advancing trucks and tanks, and pale-brown clouds of dust: a victorious army on the move.

‘You don’t believe it,’ Bradley said, ‘but it turns out to be true. All over Germany there are places like this: great factories and laboratories and camps hidden underground, immense, but invisible from the air, their existence once unknown. This place here, it’s vast, but it’s only one of many. And what I want to know is, where was Wilson? Where is he now? And what has *he* hidden?’

‘Let’s talk to someone,’ McArthur said.

He led Bradley across the cleared area in front of the immense tunnel, past tanks and half-tracks and trucks disgorging more troops, under the great rockets hanging from cranes directly above, and into his jeep, which was parked by the road that led back to Erfurt. When Bradley had climbed in beside him, he drove down to the valley, past columns of marching US troops. All the troops, Bradley suddenly noticed, looked terribly young.

God, he thought, for the first time in years, I sincerely want this business to be over. I want Wilson to disappear...

What he wanted, he then realized, was to be what Wilson was not: an involved human being.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked impatiently. ‘I’ve no time for joy rides.’

‘It’s no joy ride,’ McArthur replied. ‘You’re going to hell.’

He drove Bradley through Erfurt, a picturesque Renaissance town,

dominated by its cathedral and fish market and old quarter, with its quaint burgher houses, Gothic alcoves, and timber-framed walls. Then on to the fields beyond, lushly green, though not sweet-smelling, then into the Buchenwald concentration camp, which was not quite so pretty.

The dead lay in neat rows, staring skyward, emaciated, and the living, though sometimes on their feet, did not look much better. Some of the living were dying – they had lived too long to want life – and the stench of the dead and the dying permeated the smoky air.

Bradley saw the raised gallows, the delousing rooms, the crematoria, and steeled himself to get out of the jeep and walk through hell's basement. He stuck closely to McArthur, feeling cowardly, and was glad when they had stepped up from the mud and entered a clean, cluttered office. A US Army captain was sitting on the edge of his desk, staring out through his window. He was smoking and drinking a glass of something and looked drained and haunted.

'Hi, Cap'n,' McArthur said lightly. 'How are things in the funny farm?'

'Not funny at all.'

The captain turned to face them, his eyes crimson from lack of sleep, and when Bradley saw the way he gazed at McArthur, he knew they shared the same grief.

'I've only been here two days,' the captain said, 'and it seems like two years... A goddamned, motherfucking, two-year nightmare. I just can't believe this shit.' He shook his head from side to side disbelievingly, then looked up at Bradley. 'You're the guy wants to talk to my man,' he said.

'What man?'

'The man from Kahla. The one who worked for your Wilson. An *American* was involved in all this shit? I just don't believe it!'

He shook his head again.

'Involved how?' Bradley asked him.

'Your Wilson used a lot of the people from this camp. All these scarecrows, they swear to it. Hold on, I'll go get my man. McArthur said you were coming.'

The man he brought in was rag and bone inside striped pyjamas. His eyes, which seemed too big for his head, were disconcertingly bright.

'This is Colonel Mike Bradley,' McArthur's friend, Captain Shaw, said to the apparition who stood meekly by the desk. 'He wants to talk to you about

Kahla. Here, take a seat.' When the corpse-like individual had sat down, Shaw lit a cigarette and said, 'Colonel Bradley, this is Alex Overbeck. He's been in Buchenwald for two years and somehow survived it. He already knows who you are. Fire away, Colonel.' Then he gave the cigarette to Overbeck and kicked a chair toward Bradley. 'Sit down, Colonel.'

Bradley felt that he had to. He opened his mouth to speak, glanced despairingly at McArthur, received only a forlorn shrug of his shoulders, then looked back at Overbeck, whose eyes, which still seemed too big and too bright, were steady upon him.

'I understand,' Overbeck said, his voice as light as a feather. 'It is difficult to talk when I look like this, but it's not your fault, Colonel. I worked for the American at Kahla. Shall we take it from there? What would you like to know?'

Bradley coughed into his fist and said, 'I didn't even know that Kahla existed. You'd better...'

The gaunt creature smiled. 'Oh, yes, sir, it exists. It is an old walled town, approximately halfway between Erfurt and Nordhausen, and the Nazis constructed another underground factory there, using forced labour from this camp, the closest to it.'

'We don't have a damned thing on it,' Bradley said, gradually getting used to Overbeck's appearance and feeling less ashamed.

When Overbeck inhaled on his cigarette, his cheekbones looked devoid of flesh.

'I had the impression,' he said, 'that even those at Nordhausen didn't know about it. The complex at Kahla was constructed in great haste, at a great cost in human life, and guarded by the SS Death's Head élite. The man in charge of it was SS General Hans Kammler. Next in charge was an SS captain, Ernst Stoll. When Himmler visited Nordhausen, he never came near Kahla – and it's widely believed that the other scientists, from Peenemünde, didn't even know that it existed. It was a *special* place, Colonel.'

'Are you suggesting that even Himmler might not have known about it?'

'I cannot confirm that fact, sir, but I certainly suggest it. That belief was widely held among the Buchenwald inmates who worked at the Kahla complex.'

'And the American, Wilson, was there?'

Overbeck, having survived a living death, was still able to smile – and to

make it sardonic. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘the American was working there. I was amazed, but there he was. At first I couldn’t believe it – it just didn’t seem credible – but though occasionally, sometimes jokingly, he was referred to as “Kruger,” those who worked most closely with him addressed him as Wilson. I noted, further, that though his German was grammatically perfect, it retained the trace of an American accent. Also, though he often wore an SS uniform, it was clear to anyone but a fool that he wasn’t a military man - and never had been. Besides, he was too old. That was the biggest joke of all. He looked about sixty – an extremely healthy, vigorous sixty – but there were rumours that he was much older than that, maybe even by fifteen years. Whether or not there was any truth in those rumours, he was certainly no German soldier, let alone a member of Himmler’s SS Death’s Head.’

‘What did you do in Kahla?’ Bradley asked.

Overbeck just shrugged. ‘What we all did. I worked.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Anything they ordered me to do.’

‘Let me rephrase the question: What work was the *American* involved in? What was he constructing?’

‘A secret weapon,’ Overbeck said, as if it was self-evident. ‘Not much different from the work going on at Nordhausen. Rockets, submarines, jet planes... All sorts of highly advanced weapons.’

‘And Wilson’s? Specifically?’

‘A disc-shaped aircraft. Jet-propelled, I think. We all made jokes about eating off the saucer – we were so poorly fed, you know. Anyway, that’s what he was working on, this saucer-shaped, jet-propelled aircraft that ascended straight up in the air. I hated him – to me, he was just a Nazi – but his machine was breathtaking.’

‘You saw a test flight?’

‘I helped wheel it out of the hangar.’

‘And it made a vertical ascent?’

‘Yes. Then it hovered in the air – not moving, just hovering – then shot off horizontally – so fast, I hardly knew where it went.’

‘How fast?’

‘Too fast to calculate. And since I can’t judge even an aircraft’s speed, I wouldn’t hazard a guess.’

Bradley smiled. ‘What did you do before the war, Mr Overbeck?’

‘I was a priest,’ Overbeck replied.

Bradley didn’t know where to look. The man’s strength made him feel weak. He coughed into his fist again, felt foolish, then cleared his throat. ‘No wonder you can’t judge the speed of aircraft.’

Overbeck blew a cloud of smoke and smiled again, his cheeks prominent. ‘Anything else?’ he asked.

‘Yes. Is Wilson’s flying saucer still at Kahla?’

‘No,’ Overbeck said. ‘It was blown up a few days later. I think they destroyed it to keep you or the Soviets from getting your hands on it. Which is why, when they evacuated the site, they executed everyone who’d worked there and took everything with them. I’m a lucky man, Colonel.’

‘Sounds like it. How did you escape?’

Overbeck spread his hands in the air and glanced up at the ceiling, as if speaking to God. ‘I wasn’t at Kahla that day,’ he said, returning his gaze to Bradley. ‘I normally worked there, but not that day. One of the wives here – the wife of an SS officer – wanted help in the house, and since the prisoner who normally did it fell ill and was therefore shot, I was dragged out of the queue waiting for transport and given to her instead. It was as simple as that.’

Bradley studied the floor. It had the look of something solid. He needed it because his head was swimming in a whirlpool of madness.

‘When did they leave?’ he asked.

‘Early this month,’ Overbeck replied. ‘Apparently Kammler went first, taking the scientists from Nordhausen – ’

‘Who?’

‘The scientists from Peenemünde.’

‘But not Wilson?’

‘No. Then Camp Dora was evacuated and the prisoners returned to their former camps. And finally, on the fourth, fifth, and sixth, the scientists from Kahla departed, one group each night.’

‘Do you know where they went?’

‘Prisoners working at the railway stations can confirm that the three trains, one each night, were all heading for different destinations: the first one marked to terminate at Rostock, the second for Lübeck, via Rostock, and the third and last for Hamburg, via Hanover. Since all of those places were in the line of the Allied advance, it can be assumed that they were only halfway houses and that the final destination would be on the Baltic.’

‘Peenemünde?’

‘No,’ Overbeck said, stubbing his cigarette out with obvious unhappiness, then breathing deeply, as if yearning for another. ‘Since the Soviets are advancing at great speed toward Peenemünde – and were even then – the only other possible destination would be a port of escape, most likely Kiel.’

Bradley straightened up in his chair. This priest who looked like death was pretty smart.

‘Can you tell me anything else?’ he asked.

‘Just go to Kiel,’ the priest said.

Bradley glanced through the window, saw the gallows and streaming smoke, shivered, and pushed his chair back and stood up to leave.

‘Thank you,’ he said.

‘My pleasure,’ Overbeck replied, his smile exposing his pain.

Bradley nodded at McArthur and they both left and walked back through Buchenwald. Bradley kept his gaze focused on the ground and prayed to God for deliverance... deliverance from hatred.

His new hatred for Wilson.

‘I’m going to Kiel,’ he said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Berlin was hell on earth. The black-charred ruins stretched away as far as the eye could see, the air was thick with smoke and dust, people were queuing hopelessly for food and even water, bombs fell constantly from the Allied planes overhead, and from a mere thirty-two kilometres to the east, the guns of the Soviet army roared ominously.

Ernst's final visit to the Führer's bunker made him feel that he had entered an insane asylum. Goebbels had encouraged his unfortunate wife and six children to come and die with him and his beloved Führer when the city fell. Goring had fled to Karinhall, where his butler was waiting with fourteen

carloads of treasures and expensive clothing. Bormann, after demanding the execution of Goring as a traitor, had telephoned his wife at Berchtesgaden, to inform her that he had found a hiding place for them in the Tyrol, that she was to pose as a director of refugee children, and that he had kidnapped six youngsters from the kindergarten in Garmisch to make their escaping group look more plausible. And, finally, the Führer was still babbling about secret weapons, accusing everyone of trying to betray him, ordering the arrest of that traitor, Goring, discussing the distribution of cyanide tablets with his frightened mistress, Eva Braun, veering wildly between chalk-faced exhaustion and outbursts of paranoid anger, and hoping to prolong the battle for Berlin until at least May 5, because he could then die on the same day as Napoleon.

All of this was taking place beneath the garden of the Chancellery, upon which Allied bombs were falling with the consistency of rain.

Himmler had been to the bunker that very morning to pay his respects to the Führer on his birthday, but had then left to return to Dr. Gebhardt's sanatorium. Ernst made the 120-kilometre drive to Hohenlychen, passing columns of marching German soldiers and trucks and tanks that were being bombed relentlessly by Allied aircraft.

Eventually he found himself in Himmler's study, which was practically dark. The Reichsführer was tapping his front teeth with his fingernails and looked glassy-eyed.

'I have not given up on negotiating peace,' he babbled without prompting from Ernst. 'I have instructed my masseur, Felix Kersten, to fly to Eisenhower's headquarters and discuss an immediate cessation of hostilities. I myself braved the pouring rain to meet with Norbert Masur, the representative of the World Jewish Congress, in an attempt to solve the vexing Jewish problem, explaining that I have already turned the camps at Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald over to the Allies, have arranged the evacuation of nearly forty thousand prisoners from the camp at Sachsenhausen, and have authorized the release of another one thousand Jewish women from Ravensbruck – and *still* the *Schweine* was not impressed!'

He glanced wildly around the room, as if expecting to see Soviet troops bursting through the walls, then tapped his front teeth with his fingernails again and took a deep breath.

‘Nor have I forgotten Count Bernadotte, of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, with whom I am still having consultations regarding a peace-making formula. I met him yesterday and will be meeting with him again. Failing that, I will arrange a personal meeting with Eisenhower, who may be more reasonable.’

He removed his pince-nez, rubbed his glassy, dazed eyes, blinked and put the spectacles on again, and glanced nervously about him.

‘It’s not fair,’ he whined. ‘Everyone wants something from me. Kersten and Schellenberg want me to overthrow the Führer with a coup d’etat. Von Krosigk has begged me to seek peace through the Pope. Meanwhile, I’m supervising secret negotiations elsewhere – and now the Führer and those *Schweine* surrounding him in the bunker suspect me of treason. Have they arrested that imbecile Goring yet? I hope so. They should shoot him!’

He pushed his chair back, paced the floor, stopped to tap his front teeth with his fingernails, then sighed and sat down again.

‘All hope is not lost,’ he said. ‘We still have our secret weapons. My stars tell me they’ll be ready just in time to turn the tide in our favour.’

Ernst heard the Soviet guns. They were only sixteen kilometres from here. He wondered how Himmler could have managed to convince himself that his secret weapons, even if they existed, could be produced in time, and in sufficient quantities, to hold back the Soviet and Allied advance, let alone turn the tide.

‘I’m afraid, Reichsführer,’ Ernst began, hoping to offer some common sense, ‘that the secret weapons – ’

‘Schriever’s saucer! He said it was almost finished! What news do you have of it?’

Himmler’s eyes gleamed with hope – the forlorn hope of the truly mad – and Ernst, who had once feared this man, now almost pitied him.

‘I’m afraid, Reichsführer, that Schriever’s flying saucer won’t help us now. Even if it works, it’s come too late to do us much good.’

‘Nonsense!’ Himmler exploded, almost jumping out of his chair. ‘The very sight of it will terrify the Soviets and make them turn back! As for the Allies, though they clearly aren’t so primitive, they’ll most likely do the same. I want that flying saucer to be finished! *I want to know if it works*!’

He stared wildly at Ernst, who hardly knew what to say, then drummed his fingers on the desk and took a few deep breaths.

‘According to my astrological chart,’ he said, sounding calmer, ‘something extraordinary will occur toward the end of this month, just in time to turn the tide in our favour. I believe that’s a reference to Flugkapitän Schriever’s flying saucer, so I want you to go straight to Prague and find out what’s happening.’

‘The Soviets are advancing on Prague,’ Ernst reminded him.

‘You can get there before the Soviets do. So do it, Captain. For me! Do it for your Reichsführer.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Ernst replied, as he had in fact been planning to go there to complete Wilson’s plot, but preferred to do it with Himmler’s permission, to avoid suspicion. ‘But what if the Soviets reach Prague before Schriever escapes with the completed saucer and his technicians?’

‘In such circumstances you must destroy the flying saucer and hide all the papers relating to it. Then, when the tide turns in our favour, we can rebuild the saucer.’

‘Very good, Reichsführer,’ Ernst said, now having permission to do what he had planned to do anyway.

‘However, that shouldn’t happen. The Soviets are still a good way away. I see no reason why you cannot get to Prague and back here again before the end comes – and I expect you to bring me good news.’

‘I will, Reichsführer. I promise.’

‘Goodbye, Captain. And good luck. Heil Hitler!’

‘Heil Hitler!’

Ernst saluted, then walked to the study door. He opened it, started out, then glanced back to take a last look at his once frightening, all-powerful Reichsführer. He was already slumped over his desk, studying his astrological charts, neurotically tapping his front teeth with his fingernails and sighing despairingly. He was all alone in that gloomy room, a shadow-figure, a mirage, a man disappearing into himself, to be lost in his own dream. He was covering his face with his hands when Ernst quietly closed the door.

The drive to Prague took nearly eight hours, was further hindered by more Allied bombing raids and roads filled with columns of troops, and was not without a great deal of tension. Bypassing Dresden in the dead of the night, Ernst saw the darkness illuminated by the flashing of the Soviet guns, where

they were firing from the Oder River. The Soviet army was very close indeed. It had already captured most of Pomerania, Poland, and Hungary, and Ernst was thankful that it was closer to Berlin than to where he was going.

He arrived at Prague in the early morning. It smouldered just like Berlin. Ernst heard bombing and the continuing roar of the Soviet guns, and realized that it was only a matter of days before Prague fell also.

The war was practically over.

Indeed, the first news he received upon reporting to the SS officer in charge of security at the BMW plant on the outskirts of the city – placed in charge, as he was soon informed, because of fears that the plant would be overrun by groups of Czechoslovak patriots – was that by dawn that very morning, Berlin had been completely encircled and its last free airports overrun by the Red Army.

Now there was no way in or out. The fate of the city was sealed.

'You can't go back there,' the SS commander, Lieutenant Günter Metz, informed him. 'You might as well stay here. Wait until we see which way the Soviets are moving, then make your escape.'

Ernst had no intentions of remaining in Prague, but he complimented the officer on his keen thinking and then asked to be directed to Flugkapitän Schriever. He was escorted to the well-guarded East Hall of the great factory. There, remarkably, with a lack of realism fully the equal to that of Himmler and the rest of them, Schriever was still racing to complete his flying saucer, which was resting on its mobile steel platform and surrounded by engineers.

When Schriever saw Ernst approaching, he could not hide his frown.

'Captain Stoll!' he exclaimed, trying to recover, though not being too successful at it. 'What a pleasant surprise!'

Still smarting, even after all these years, from the knowledge that he had been passed over by the German scientific fraternity to make way for second-raters like Schriever, Ernst realized that he was going to enjoy doing what he now had to do – which was to check that Schriever had not, by some combination of luck and thievery, made any unexpected advances with his design and ensure that what he *did* have was destroyed before the Soviets reached here.

'I've been sent by Himmler,' Ernst said without preamble, 'to check on the progress of your flying saucer. Is it actually flying yet?'

'Unfortunately, no,' Schriever replied, wiping his oily hands on a rag, 'but

we should have it ready any day now – and then we will test it.'

'You *do* realize, do you not, that the Soviet Army is advancing on a front that extends from Görlitz to Vienna and will soon be marching right into Prague?'

'Yes, Captain, I know; but a drastic shortage of components – ball bearings for the ring plates, new heat-resistant wing discs – led to a bigger delay than anticipated. And then the Soviets captured Breslau, where Habermohl was working, and since we then had to do his work as well, we were held back even more. Nevertheless, we've replaced the original gas-turbine rotors with jet engines, and the saucer you see before you, if test-flown, will not let us down.'

What Ernst was looking at was one of Wilson's crude, earlier models: a wide-surface ring that consisted of adjustable wing discs that could be brought into the appropriate position for vertical or horizontal flight while rotating around a fixed, cupola-shaped cockpit. Now powered by Schriever's addition of adjustable jet engines, it would, in Ernst's judgment, rise vertically a few metres, but then, once the angle of the jets was adjusted, go out of control – just as Wilson had said it would.

Although pleased that Schriever had made no unexpected progress and was still deluding himself with this piece of aeronautical rubbish, Ernst still knew it was imperative that the Soviets did not learn about any aspect of Projekt Saucer, at least not until Wilson wanted them to know, which would be in the future. He therefore said what had to be said – and took pleasure from doing so.

'It has to be destroyed,' he told Schriever, 'before the Soviets arrive here.'

'*What*?' Schriever exclaimed, shocked.

'You heard me the first time,' Ernst said, thinking, *How sweet is vengeance*! 'We have to destroy it.'

'But it hasn't even been test-flown yet!'

'We still have to destroy it.'

Schriever's assistant, Miethe, arrived, also wiping his hands on an oily rag. Schriever glanced at him with widening eyes, then turned back to Ernst.

'Why?' he asked.

'To prevent it from falling into the hands of the Soviets, of course,' Ernst told him as flatly as possible.

'But we can arrange a test flight almost immediately!'

‘You may be too late. The Soviets are advancing fast. We’re also concerned about Czechoslovak patriots who already are causing trouble in Prague and may have men planted here, just waiting for the Soviets to get close.’

Schriever was looking desperate. ‘But without even a test flight...’

‘I’m sorry. We can’t think about that now. We must destroy the saucer.’

Looking increasingly suspicious, and even aggressive, Schriever glanced automatically at Miethe, who was cleverly keeping his mouth shut. Schriever turned back to Ernst. ‘I’ve been receiving instructions direct from Himmler’s office – not from Nordhausen – so why are you suddenly taking over?’

‘Nordhausen was evacuated and Himmler sent me to arrange the same thing here.’

‘We’re evacuating *now*?’

‘Do you wish to shake hands with the Soviets?’

‘Why can’t we take the saucer with us?’

‘The risk is too large. We might get captured. We don’t want them to get it.’

Schriever looked even more suspicious. ‘Do you have written authority, Captain Stoll?’

‘No. Of course not. Officially, this project doesn’t exist. No project, no papers.’

‘Then why did Himmler’s office not contact me?’

‘Berlin was being encircled,’ Ernst lied blandly, ‘and Himmler’s phones were cut off. The city, as you know, has since been sealed off completely, so you can’t ring through to them. Now please do as I say, Flugkapitän Schriever, and stop all this nonsense.’

‘Himmler may have ordered the saucer to be destroyed, but not without a test flight. I *insist* on a test flight!’

‘When can it be arranged?’

‘Tomorrow morning. Ten sharp.’

‘Fair enough,’ Ernst said.

He went straight to the commander, the young lieutenant, and gained his trust by sharing confidences with him, as if with an old friend.

‘He can’t be trusted,’ he told Metz. ‘We’ve had problems with him before. The Reichführer asked me to ensure that this project was obliterated, but Flugkapitän Schriever, if his test flight is a failure, will insist on more

time. We have to destroy it, no matter what, so I need you and your men. Will you help?'

'Of course, sir!'

Ernst did not sleep well that night. He rarely slept well anymore. His sleep was haunted by nightmares of death and destruction, by dreams of Ingrid and his children and all his other failures and betrayals.

It was dreams and nightmares, but also constant noise: the bombers growling overhead, the exploding bombs, the wailing sirens, the Soviet guns belching in the distance, but sounding closer each hour.

You couldn't tell how close they were – you never saw them; you just heard them – and Ernst, who had once dreamed of glory, was glad to get out of bed.

It was just after dawn. He wandered around the East Hall. He saw the sun burning through mist and the pall of smoke from the bombing raids, the smoke drifting from the city to the fields that were pockmarked with shell holes. He tried to think of another world, a normal world, without war, but every image in his head contained violence, destruction, blood and tears, flame and smoke, all created by a dream of omnipotence, the perversion of science.

He had helped to create it.

He was hungry but couldn't eat, so he lit a cigarette instead, and smoked it while gazing across the destroyed fields at the ruins of Prague. He smoked a lot that morning, just kneeling there, waiting, and then stood up when the doors of the East Hall opened and the engineers walked out.

Ernst went to a telephone in the hall and phoned SS Lieutenant Günter Metz.

'Bring your men down,' he said.

Schriever arrived with Miethe, nodded at him, then ordered the saucer to be wheeled out of the hall. While this was happening, Lieutenant Metz arrived with a demolition team and a squad of seasoned SS troopers, all heavily armed. They spread themselves around the sunlit clearing outside as the retractable wheels of the steel platform were being withdrawn to let it become the saucer's launching pad.

Schriever, when he saw the demolition team, flushed brightly with anger.

He climbed into the saucer and strapped himself in, then Miethe replaced the Perspex lid on the cupola and made sure it was locked. Then he climbed

back down the ladder and pulled it away. Schriever started the saucer when Miethe had returned to the safety of the concrete bunker.

The saucer roared into life. Yellow flames spat at the platform. The flames shot back up and spread out obliquely to form a great fan of fire. The flying saucer roared and shuddered. It lifted off the platform, hovered just above it, making the steel turn red-hot, then it ascended a few more feet and swayed dangerously from side to side. It roared even louder, belching flame and smoke in a fury. Then, unable to go higher, Schriever tried to fly it horizontally, but the instant the jets on one side were raised, the machine started tilting. It hit the ground and rocked wildly like a dropped coin, then its engines cut out. There was a brief, shocking silence.

'Destroy it,' Ernst said.

Miethe ran to the saucer, clambered up its tilted side, released the locks holding down the canopy, and helped Schriever out. Looking shocked and angry at once, Schriever slid down the body on his backside, dropped to the ground, rubbed his chin with the palm of his hand, then saw the SS demolition team advancing on his beloved creation.

'No!' he bawled. 'Damn you, *no*!' He hurried across to Ernst, fists balled, eyes blazing, while Miethe and the other engineers fanned out behind him,

They were going to protect the saucer, to keep the demolition team at bay, but when Ernst unholstered his pistol and aimed it at Schriever, Lieutenant Metz's squad of SS troopers raised their submachine guns and took aim on the hapless engineers.

Schriever froze where he stood, about four feet away from Ernst, and the engineers behind him did exactly the same.

'Let the demolition team through,' Lieutenant Metz said, 'or suffer the consequences.'

The engineers looked around them, at that circle of submachine guns, then parted to let the demolition team approach the saucer. Schriever glanced over his shoulder, saw them unwinding the plunger cables, then looked back at Ernst, his dark eyes appalled.

'My life's work! We have to at least have the chance to correct what's wrong with it. One more day... a few days at most... It's too important to... No, y*ou can't do this*!'

'Shut up,' Ernst snapped. 'You damned fool.' Then he cocked his raised pistol.

We want no witnesses of any kind, Wilson had said, *unless they're in the Antarctic...*

That meant Schriever and Miethe and all the rest of these engineers. When the Schriever saucer, relatively useless, was blown up, they would all disappear as well.

Schriever's eyes became wider. 'You wouldn't!'

'We would and we will. The whole business ends here.'

He glanced over Schriever's shoulder at the demolition team and saw the man in charge of the plunger preparing to lean on it.

'Goodbye, Schriever,' Ernst said.

The flying saucer exploded. No, it didn't – something else did – an eruption of silvery light, boiling smoke and geysering earth... right *beside* Schriever's saucer.

Confused, Ernst hesitated. He saw Schriever ducking, squeezed the trigger, fired too late, and saw the Flugkapitän running away as the ground erupted around him.

The shells were whistling in from the east: Soviet shells, from the big guns. Then the soldier fell on the plunger – was thrown forward, in fact, on a wave of erupting soil – and Schriever's saucer disappeared in a ball of fire that spat debris everywhere.

'Damn!' Ernst hissed as the engineers scattered and the SS guns started chattering. Then he sprinted straight into the chaos, trying to take aim at Schriever as he made his escape.

The SS troopers were spreading out, firing wildly from the hip – not at the engineers, who were running across the field past the smouldering debris of the saucer, but back in the direction of the East Hall, to which Schriever was running. They were not firing at him but at the other men pouring out, most of them wearing civilian clothes but returning the gunfire.

Schriever saw them as well, since he was running toward them, and he turned left and cut across the hangar doors and just about made it.

A Soviet shell saved him, exploding right behind him, between the men who were running out of the East Hall and the SS troops firing at them.

Ernst managed one shot but missed. He was blinded briefly by flying soil, cursed and rubbed his stinging eyes, then saw the men who were wearing civilian clothes still running at him and firing on the move.

Czechoslovak patriots! he thought. *Coming out of the factory*! *The Soviets*

must be in Prague!

Then he caught a glimpse of Schriever cutting back across the field, heading with the other engineers in the general direction of Prague. The ground was erupting between them, shells exploding around the factory, but Ernst went after him anyway, because, given the Czechoslovak patriots, it was the only direction left to him.

The SS troops were holding their ground, spreading across the remains of the saucer, firing their submachine guns at the advancing resistance men while being cut down by bullets or blown apart in explosions.

A burning light erased all of it. An appalling roaring filled the world. Ernst was slapped by a wave of heat, the breath was sucked from his lungs, he was picked up and spun wildly in the air, and then grass and earth rushed at him. He plunged into darkness and silence, losing his senses.

Later, he heard a ringing sound... Eventually he opened his eyes to find himself on the ground, lying on the rim of a smouldering shell hole near a parked SS truck.

The battle had moved away from the East Hall. It was ending in the shell-torn field with the SS troops being massacred by the greater number of Czechoslovak patriots. The engineers, including Schriever and Miethe, were still running, much farther away, toward Prague.

Let Schriever talk about his flying saucer, Ernst thought, sitting upright and shaking his head from side to side to clear it. *It will become just another red herring. Another aid to confusion. It will suit us just fine.*

He glanced carefully around him, looking for other resistance fighters, but saw only a clearing filled with the bodies of dead Czechs and Germans. After climbing to his feet, he checked himself for broken bones, found nothing to worry about, so clambered up into the troop truck, which, he was pleased to note, still had the key in the ignition. Turning the engine on, he drove across the grassy field to get away from the factory, which by now was almost certainly overrun. He managed to get to the road without being stopped.

From there he drove to the nearest Luftwaffe airfield, which luckily was still held by Germans. He pulled rank in order to commandeer a light plane, then ordered the reluctant pilot to fly him to the SS airport near Kiel.

When the plane had ascended, he looked down through the clouds at the pall of smoke hanging over Prague. Moving in on the city, like ants advancing in numerous lines toward their anthill, were long columns of

Soviet tanks and men.

It was something to see.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Bradley was scared. He had been well trained for this by the OSS, had rehearsed it so many times, even making the goddamned jumps, but now that it was real and he was doing it with the professionals – worse, in pitch darkness and in the middle of a war zone – he was not as confident as he had been during his training.

He glanced at his watch. Five minutes to go. His heart missed a beat and he looked along the aircraft, through that dim light, and saw the men of the 82nd Airborne Division facing one another in the belly of the plane, looking bulky with their parachutes and helmets, not frightened at all.

Well, certainly not showing it, as he was convinced he was doing. His heart was racing and he was sweating, though his hands felt too cold, and he knew that the urge to have a piss was also due to his fear.

He was fifty years old, for Chrissakes, and shouldn't be doing such things!

He tried to forget what was going to happen by thinking instead of Gladys, who had continued to write her wonderful, witty letters from her sickbed in a hospital in London. Apparently she had been shipped back to London from Paris, was making a good recovery, and would soon be walking again, but she badly missed having him in bed beside her. She had also informed him, by letter, that she had scribbled his name about fifty or sixty times on the plaster cast on her broken leg and all the nurses, doctors, and visitors now knew who he was.

Goddammit, he loved her. She certainly made him feel good. Thinking about her made his heart race. It raced even more when he looked again at his wristwatch and realized that the jump would soon be starting.

Closing his eyes, he breathed deeply, trying to steady his racing heart, and saw, as he had so often since that one visit, the gallows and crematoria of Buchenwald, the priest's gaunt, haunted face.

He had gone back to the priest, feeling trapped in a web of horror, and had learned a lot more from him about life in the concentration camps and underground factories. The priest had told him about the beatings, about the all-too-public hangings, about the shots to the back of the neck and the daily gassings and burnings. He had also told him about worse things, most notably the medical and surgical experiments, performed on men, women, and children, often without aesthetics.

Apparently the Nazi doctors had been trying to learn what could not be gleaned from experiments on animals – the limits of human suffering; the effects of extreme heat and cold, of starvation and sleeplessness; the possibility of survival without certain vital organs; artificial insemination; the swopping of healthy limbs; the potential for extending the human life span by medical, biological, and mental mutation – all of which meant unimaginable pain and horror for the unfortunates used... And Wilson, whether or not he had been involved directly, had not only shown an interest in the dreadful experiments, but had willingly used the people in the camps as part of his work force.

The man was a monster.

Or, as Major General McArthur had said, some kind of mutant.

Bradley shivered in his harness, then checked his wristwatch again. When he saw that he had one minute left, his stomach almost turned over.

What the hell was he doing here, with the 82nd Airborne Division, about to parachute into the darkness?

He was searching for Wilson.

He had left Nordhausen with the US 1st Army, with which he had travelled so far and seen so much action. He had gone as far as Paderborn with them, but there they had parted company, because he was intent on reaching Kiel before the Soviets took it. He had commandeered a jeep and driven himself through a landscape of appalling destruction, along roads filled with advancing Allied troops and fleeing refugees, past enormous open-air prison camps that stretched as far as the eye could see, to the town of Minden on the Weser, which had recently been occupied by the US 9th Army. There Bradley had attached himself to the British 2nd Army, which, reinforced by the US 82nd Airborne Division, was about to launch itself on the drive toward Lübeck, the doorway to Kiel.

Just before the attack was launched, Bradley had learned that a British

SOE headquarters had been set up in Weser. When he paid them a visit, he found himself face to face with his old friend Lieutenant Colonel Mark Wentworth-King.

'Kiel?' Wentworth-King said in reply to Bradley's query. 'Difficult to say who'll get there first, old chap: General Montgomery's 2nd Army, now closing in on Hamburg, the 1st Canadian Army, now closing in on Oldenburg, or the bloody 2nd White Russian Army, now spreading right along the Baltic Coast. If the Soviets get there first, you won't get your man, so you'd better move sharpish. I suggest, dear boy, if you have the heart for it, joining a contingent of your very own 82nd Airborne Division, which, to avoid our own guns, is about to parachute down just beyond Neumünster, near Kiel's ship canal. From there, they're hoping to fight their way into Kiel. *What* age did you say you are?'

Now here he was, fifty years old, preparing to jump out of this plane and parachute down into Germany... Maybe because Wentworth-King had goaded him into it, the smart son of a bitch.

Goddamned Brits! he thought.

'Hitch up!' someone bawled. '*Hitch up*!'

The door was pulled open and an angry wind howled in. The paratroopers connected their ripcords along the length of the plane. Bradley did the same, standing up like all the rest of them, feeling shaky and not sure if he could make it, but trying to hide that fact.

With the hatch open, the noise was dreadful, a combination of rushing wind and the roaring engines and whipping canvas flaps, but the men shuffled inexorably toward the opening, taking Bradley there with them. The flight sergeant was bellowing instructions laced with obscenities – and Bradley thought he heard other noises outside, though he couldn't be sure. The plane was shaking badly, as if about to fall apart, and he fought the urge to sit down again. Then the flight sergeant bellowed once more, a man ahead shouted, the queue moved, and Bradley realized that the first man had jumped out and the others were following,

'Jesus Christ!' he whispered.

The men went out one by one, some bellowing just like the flight sergeant. Bradley swallowed, licked his lips, and wanted to be sick – and was shocked at just how loud the noise was three men away from that open hatch.

Two men.

One man.

The man in front disappeared through the hatchway, leaving Bradley exposed. The wind almost floored him, roaring at him, beating around him, but he stepped forward, was *jerked* forward – yes, the flight sergeant had grabbed him by the shoulder – and he saw his open mouth, the glint of fillings, heard him bellowing. 'Fucking jump!' were the words he heard as the roaring wind sucked him out.

He was swept back and up, his stomach somewhere in his throat, and saw spinning lights, maybe stars, perhaps the moon, and heard the roaring of engines and the magnified rush of wind and then plunged down. He was falling! His parachute hadn't opened! Then he was jerked up violently, a puppet on a string, and suddenly fell through a black well of silence and saw darkness around him.

Darkness? No. He was falling through clouds. He saw other figures falling all around him on the end of their parachutes. They looked ghostly in the clouds, silhouetted in a gray mist, above and below and all around him as if in a dream.

Then he dropped down below the clouds and was dazzled by dawn light.

More than that... the whole world.

Or so it seemed to him. He thought he could see its curved edge. It was actually the horizon, far away, beyond land's end, a strip of gray stippled by rays of sunlight and spitting fountains of water. It was the Baltic Sea. The fountains of water were explosions. The sky above the sea was filled with black dots – Allied bombers – and the land, now below him, all around him, racing upward, was divided by streams and roads and endless, shifting black lines that, he realized with a shock when he saw the tracers and billowing smoke, were columns of refugees and soldiers passing each other, going in opposite directions, while the war raged about them.

The ground rushed up at Bradley as he fell down through the streaming smoke and noise of the continuing battle.

He braced himself for the landing.

Wilson saw the parachutists through his binoculars and knew they were at least an hour's march away. He turned away from them, scanning east and west, and saw the smoke of battle in both directions as the Soviets and Allies advanced. Then he looked at the Baltic Sea beyond land's end, a few miles

away, and saw that the sky was filled with Allied bombers now pounding the port of Kiel.

'We have to leave right now,' he said to General Nebe.

'I know that,' Nebe replied. 'We've already loaded the trucks. I'm taking just enough men to help us unload at the harbour and the rest are being left here to hold off the enemy.'

'Do they know what you're asking of them?'

'These are SS troops. SS troops are trained to obey and take pride in doing so.'

'Lucky us,' Wilson said, then glanced at Ernst Stoll. The SS captain had made it back from Prague in the nick of time, bringing with him the news about Schriever and the latest troop movements. Now, because over the past few days he had actually seen what was happening, he was obviously keen to get on the move.

'Let's go,' he said.

Wilson nodded. Stoll led them out of the bunker, away from the officers' quarters and past the troop accommodations, along bleak concrete corridors with reinforced, low ceilings and machine-gun crews at each open window, then around the weapons room and ammunition dumps and storage huts, up the sloping ramps, and outside. There the trucks were parked in the covered, camouflaged garage, with the troops that were actually guarding them clambering up inside.

One of the trucks was special, because it carried the crate containing the remaining components of Wilson's saucer. Wilson insisted upon riding in that, instead of in Nebe's staff car. Shrugging, Ernst Stoll climbed in beside him, saying 'Why not indeed?' They sat side by side, the large wooden crate looming over them, then the trucks coughed into life and moved out in column.

'I've thought about it,' Wilson said.

'About what?' Ernst asked.

'This Schriever business. The fact that he's still alive. I don't think it matters that much – and it may even help us. If, after the war, Schriever starts talking about his flying saucer, it will lead everyone in his direction. They'll check out his drawings and conclude, correctly, that the saucer he constructed was unworkable. After that, if anyone reports seeing our flying saucers, almost certainly they'll be treated as cranks. Once that happens, we can create

a smokescreen of confusion and fly our own saucers with impunity. What do you think?'

'I think you're right,' Ernst said.

Wilson smiled and patted him on the shoulder. The German had lost everything in the world and now only had him.

'Good,' Wilson said.

The trucks travelled down to Kiel. A fine mist veiled the dawn. Aircraft growled overhead, shells exploded on land and sea, and the big guns were thundering in the east, west, and south. Wilson pressed his hand against the rocking crate and then they came to the docks.

The truck squealed to a halt. The crate shook and then was steady. General Nebe's eyes emerged from the drifting mist and he motioned them out. Wilson clambered down first and was surprised at how dark it was. The black water reflected the lamps beaming down on the submarines. He glanced toward the warehouses. Nebe was murmuring to his troops. The men formed up in a neatly spaced line against the wall of a warehouse.

'I'm going to take a demolition team,' Ernst informed him, 'and get them to lay a trip-wire across the road we've just come down, to blow up anything coming after us.'

'Very good,' Wilson said.

He almost felt proud of Stoll – this new Stoll was his own creation – but as pride was a destructive human weakness, he concentrated elsewhere.

Some men were unloading his precious crate, slowly, with extreme care, and eventually, when they had it out of the truck, they hitched it up to a crane.

The crane started groaning.

Wilson glanced at the submarine anchored just below him: *U-977*. There were men on the deck, arranging themselves around the hold. Chains rattled and Wilson saw his precious crate dangling over the water. There was a moment's hesitation. The crate jerked up, then started spinning. Hands reached up and guided it down and then it dropped out of sight.

General Kammler appeared on deck, accompanied by the commander of the submarine, Captain Heinz Schaeffer, whom Wilson had previously met in the Harz Mountains when Schaeffer was inspecting the new XXI electric submarines. Both men climbed up the ladder to the quay and approached General Nebe.

Kammler talked in a low voice, glancing repeatedly along the docks. His shadow trailed out along the wet stones and touched Wilson's feet. Nebe turned away and murmured something to his sergeant. Kammler took a torch from his pocket and flashed it three times.

Wilson glanced along the dock, where another truck was approaching. The truck shuddered as it started to slow down. Kammler walked up to Wilson and introduced him to Schaeffer. They shook hands as the truck driver changed gears and turned in toward them.

The SS troops remained silent: a line of men along the warehouse, all of them with their weapons in their hands slanted over their chests. They were as still as they were silent. Their discipline was remarkable. The sergeant stepped back and bellowed an order, and the troops performed a precise about-turn and froze facing the wall. Wilson heard their guns rattling. Their snapping boot heels left an echo. The truck stopped, overlooking the harbour, and its ramp was thrown down.

A shocking noise split the silence, almost deafening Wilson. The soldiers lined up along the warehouse wall were suddenly jerking and screaming. Wilson glanced up at the truck and saw a barrel spitting flame. The machine gun was roaring and rattling as the men died and fell. When Wilson blinked, there was silence. A dense smoke drifted lazily. The high wall of the warehouse was filled with holes and splashed with fresh blood.

All the men lay on the ground, sprawled across one another, their pupils reflecting the lamps beaming down on their faces.

Schaeffer turned away, but Kammler looked almost bored. Nebe took his pistol from its holster and then cocked its hammer. He nodded to his sergeant and they both approached the pile of bodies. Nebe fired the first shot. His sergeant fired the second. They took turns, bending over the bodies, the gunshots reverberating eerily while the morning light brightened. The coup de grace seemed to take a long time, though it didn't take long at all. When it was finished, Nebe turned away and gently waved his free hand.

Some men jumped out of the truck. The machine-gun barrel clanged. Nebe returned his pistol to its holster and walked away from the bodies. There was no sweat on his brow. His dark eyes were unrevealing. He simply nodded at Kammler and Schaeffer, and they walked along to the submarine.

Wilson waited until Ernst Stoll had returned, wanting to check his reaction. Stoll glanced at the pile of bodies, at the blood on the walls and

ground, then said, unemotionally, ‘Now there are no witnesses to the number of the submarine. We’ve also wired the road leading onto the quay. I think we should go now.’

‘We *are* going,’ Wilson said, ‘but you have to destroy the evidence. The submarine’s leaving now, since the light will show us up, but we’re going to wait just outside the harbour until you get to us. Will you do that?’

‘Yes,’ Stoll said.

Wilson, who knew a disciple when he saw one, just nodded and turned away, then climbed down the ladder to the submarine.

Having landed in one piece, Bradley marched for an hour with the 82nd Airborne Division and arrived at the camouflaged SS bunker as sunlight bled through the mist. He ran across a windblown field, crouched low, a survivor – then all hell broke loose. German machine guns and bazookas opened up, and he found himself right in the thick of it.

It was a brief but bloody battle, because the Krauts refused to give in, but eventually the paratroopers succeeded by sheer dint of numbers to take control of the bunkers.

Bradley was still with them, greatly relieved to be alive, but he didn’t forget what he had come for and asked to question the prisoners. There weren’t all that many – the fields and bunkers were strewn with corpses – but that simply made it easier to find out what he wanted to know.

‘I don’t know what we were guarding,’ the first SS prisoner said. ‘I can only state that I was disgusted to be asked to risk my life to protect an American scientist. I felt that was too much.’

‘And where did the American scientist go?’ Bradley asked.

‘With all the others,’ the SS sergeant said in disgust. ‘With all the runaway generals and traitors – to the harbour of Kiel. To the submarine dock.’

‘When?’

‘Half an hour ago.’

‘Oh, my God!’ Bradley exclaimed, then turned to the commander of the 82nd Airborne Division. ‘We have to get down there right away. That son of a bitch is escaping.’

‘My orders were to capture and hold this bunker,’ the commander told him. ‘I haven’t been authorized to go to Kiel. Sorry, Colonel. Can’t help

you.'

'I could go out there and steal a goddamned jeep.'

'I'm not looking, Colonel.'

Bradley hurried outside, feeling as if he was going mad, impelled by the need to fit a face to the man who had haunted him. It had been nearly fifteen years: so long that he'd turned gray and lost his wife and found Gladys... and fought a war that he was too old to fight, and become an obsessed man.

Yes, obsessed, just like his quarry, though in a different way. As he climbed into the jeep and turned the ignition on, he was convinced that he'd go out of his mind if he didn't get to the end of this.

He had to fit a face to the man whose dreams had made him inhuman.

A genius.

A mutant.

Bradley still could not accept it. As Gladys had said, he was a moral man. He believed that man was both good and evil, a creature of moral choice, and he had to know if someone like Wilson could be as natural as air.

He had to know if Wilson's lack of humanity had been formed in the womb, perhaps by his intelligence; if Wilson's inhumanity, his extraordinary lack of feeling, was as innocent as sunlight or rain, as helpless as a child being born, as alien as Mars.

He had to know if Wilson mirrored his own darker side.

'Goddamn you!' he said aloud as he drove away from the bunkers. 'I won't let you stay invisible any longer. I'm gonna make you real.'

Then he drove down to Kiel, down that steep, narrow road, seeing the boats out at sea, the water geysering up around them, the bombs falling from the fat-bellied planes flying out of the clearing mist. It was the same everywhere – the whole world was at war – and the beautiful Earth, its clean air, was being ruined for all time. Death and destruction, smouldering ruins and flame and smoke: Man's genius, his creativity, his science, had sowed what was now being reaped. Not Man, but men, individuals, those like Wilson, and the rubble of Europe, the conflagration of this mighty conflict, was the product of scientific genius used without moral constraints or commonplace feelings.

This was Wilson's inheritance.

Bradley had to see his face, to know if evil was innocent, and so he drove like a lunatic into the docks.

He only saw the wire stretched across the road when it was too late to stop.

The wire snapped and flew past him on a sheet of scorching flame as the distant Baltic Sea turned upside-down and his body exploded. He saw whirlpools of light, heard his heartbeat in silence, returned through a sibilance, a ringing, and saw the world turning over. The sea, which had been the sky, became the Baltic Sea again, and he saw the wrecked ships, the other debris of the many air raids, then rolled onto his belly and felt the pain devouring his body.

'Oh, God.' he groaned. 'Jesus.'

He was hurt pretty badly, but refused to give up. Black and blistered, burning hot and cold, in anguish, almost crying, he crawled away from his upturned jeep, from the fierce, scorching heat, toward the water glittering blackly in morning light. The smoke billowed around him, stung his eyes, choked his lungs, and each time he coughed, he was whiplashed by a spasm of pain. He was hurting so bad he wanted to die, but he just couldn't stop. He simply had to see what he had come for and that kept him going.

'Goddammit!' he gasped, keeping himself aware, fighting the urge for oblivion. 'Think of Wilson! *Remember*!'

So he managed to crawl forward, along the quay, by the docks, the stones covered in expelled shells and reeking of cordite – and wet, as he suddenly realized, not with rain, but with blood.

Whose blood?

What the hell...?

He shuddered and gasped and put his head down, trying to think, listening to the bombers rumbling overhead, the gunfire in the distance. The war was still raging, coming closer to its bloody end, and he couldn't believe how far he had travelled to arrive at this nightmare.

The stones beneath him were wet with blood.

Whose blood?

'Goddammit,' Bradley whispered to the wet stones. 'Gimme a break here!'

The pain whipped him again and he sobbed and then gritted his teeth. When he raised his head, he turned slightly to the side and looked out to sea.

He saw a submarine out there.

At first he thought he was imagining it, but then he saw it more clearly,

still on the surface, just outside the harbour, obviously preparing to go to sea but not yet submerged. Bradley knew who was on it.

He sobbed with frustration, clenched his fist, and hammered the wet stones.

Then, when he heard approaching footsteps, he looked up again.

An SS officer was coming toward him, holding a pistol in his right hand, his shadow stretched obliquely across the quay in the morning's pale light. He stopped by Bradley's head, looked down at him, then knelt beside him and took hold of his hair to jerk his head up.

He placed the barrel of his Luger pistol against Bradley's temple.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'Mike Bradley. An American.'

'It's an American uniform, I grant you, but your German is excellent.'

'I'm an American. Believe me. I'm a member of the OSS.'

'The Americans haven't reached this far yet, so what are *you* doing here?'

Bradley started to reply, almost blacked out with pain, recovered and pointed weakly at the distant submarine. 'Is he out there?'

'Who?'

'You know who. That son of a bitch, Wilson.'

'Your compatriot.'

'No!'

'Your friend. Your national hero. The man we Germans now revere. You want Wilson. You've come here alone for him? You must want him a lot.'

'I do.'

'Tell me why.'

Bradley didn't know what to say. There was no way to explain it. Besides, this handsome, civilized SS officer was going to blow his brains out.

'He's a traitor,' Bradley tried.

'Not enough,' the German replied. 'You have the look of someone obsessed, so tell me why you want Wilson.'

Bradley, who thought he was dying, felt the need to confess.

'I have to see his face,' he said. 'I've wanted to see it for years. I have to fit a face to the man to know what he's about. It's as simple as that.'

He thought he heard the German sighing. He looked up and saw him smiling. The German removed the pistol from Bradley's temple and aimed it at the warehouse.

‘You want to know what Wilson’s about?’ he said. ‘Then look in there, my friend.’

Bradley managed to raise his head. He looked into the warehouse. At first he couldn’t see – it was pretty dark in there – but then his eyes adjusted to the gloom beyond the doors, and he saw an open-topped German truck, piled high with rubbish.

No, not rubbish. Piled high with the bullet-riddled, bloody corpses of uniformed SS troopers.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Bradley whispered.

He shuddered with revulsion and a touch of disbelief, then the German jerked his head up again and waved the Luger in front of him.

‘Bradley?’ he asked, confirming the name. ‘Mike Bradley of the OSS?’

‘Yeah,’ Bradley said. ‘Right.’

‘And you’ve been pursuing Wilson for a long time?’

‘Nearly fifteen years,’ Bradley said.

The German gave a low whistle. ‘That’s a long time, Mister Bradley. And although you’re in a very bad way, you still look determined.’

‘I am,’ Bradley told him. ‘I won’t give up on this, believe me.’

‘We’ll remember that, Bradley.’

‘Goddammit,’ Bradley said. ‘I’ve got to see that bastard. Take me out there, then throw me overboard. I want to see him that bad.’

‘Your tenacity is admirable, Bradley. You will not be forgotten.’

The German holstered his pistol, released Bradley’s head, then stood up and walked away a few feet and knelt down again. He took a cigarette lighter out of his tunic pocket, lit something on the ground, and when he stood up, Bradley saw the fuse cable running back to the warehouse. Set alight, it spluttered and sparkled as it started its journey.

‘Oh, my God.’ Bradley groaned.

The German walked back, knelt beside him, and smiled at him. He looked handsome in his SS uniform, but his smile was a dead thing.

‘I have to go now, Mister Bradley. Herr Wilson awaits me. My name is Ernst Stoll – Captain Stoll, of the SS – and if you manage to survive the explosion, I hope you’ll remember me. Naturally, I’ll tell Wilson about you... and he has a long memory. *Auf Wiedersehen.*’

Captain Ernst Stoll stood up and walked casually across the quay, where four other SS officers, all lieutenants, had been waiting for him. They let him

climb down the ladder, obviously to a boat below, then they followed him down, one by one, leaving Bradley alone.

He glanced at the burning fuse. It was racing toward the warehouse. He looked back at the harbour, saw the submarine in the distance, then noticed a rubber dinghy heading toward it, carrying five men.

Obviously Stoll and his officers.

Bradley almost wept with frustration. He was so close, yet so far. He thought of Wilson and cursed, thought of Gladys and nearly smiled, then turned his head to look at the burning fuse. It reached the warehouse, then the truck piled with corpses.

My last memory on earth, Bradley thought. Wilson's truckful of corpses.

He held his breath and prayed silently.

Wilson stood with Nebe and Kammler on the deck of the submarine and thoughtfully watched the men on the distant quay. Apart from Stoll, there were only four men. They worked long and very hard. They piled the bodies of their comrades onto the back of the truck and then drove the truck into the warehouse. The docks seemed very quiet. The lamps beamed down through the mist. There was an explosion near the road at the end of the docks, and a man who was most likely Stoll walked along there to check. He knelt down for some time, stood up, walked back and forth. Allied planes rumbled overhead as Stoll's four men emerged again.

They were not in the truck, because they had left it inside the warehouse. Stoll joined them and they clambered down the ladder and dropped into the dinghy. The oars splashed in the water. The distant lamps showed desolation. After what seemed like a very long time, the men arrived at the submarine. They were all helped aboard. Stoll seemed steady as a rock. Wilson stared across the water at the docks and saw the clouds of mist thinning. The explosion was catastrophic. The whole warehouse disintegrated. The flames shot up in jagged yellow lines that made the thin mist look silvery. The noise was demonic. A black smoke billowed up. The flames swirled and turned into crimson tendrils that embraced one another. Then the smoke drifted sideways, revealing great piles of rubble. The flames leapt across the charred, broken beams and stained the quay with great shadows.

The flames burned a long time. The harsh wind made them dance. They were still burning brightly when Stoll nodded at Wilson and they went below

decks. The hatch above them was closed and the submarine, with much moaning and groaning, submerged in the Baltic Sea.

The real journey began.

EPILOGUE

Roswell, New Mexico
July 2, 1947

‘The space age is beginning,’ Bradley told Gladys. ‘It began when we shipped the first captured German V-2s to New Mexico in 1945 and when, in March the following year, the first US V-2 launches began at the White Sands Proving Ground under the direction of our old friend, Wernher von Braun, now under contract to the United States. Since then, about fifty V-2s have been launched, most of them successfully. Meanwhile, the Soviets, who got Peenemünde and to whom we kindly handed over Nordhausen shortly after capturing it, have started a similar rocket development program and are preparing to launch their first V-2 from a range near Volgagrad, better known to us as Stalingrad. And apparently, back here in the good old US of A, improved rocket motors, using liquid self-igniting fuels and based on the V-2 research, are about to go into production with civilian aviation organizations given USAF contracts... And all that in two years!’

‘Give it a rest, Mike,’ Gladys said. ‘Let me fill up your glass.’

‘A man’s gotta have a hobby,’ Bradley replied. He handed Gladys his glass and glanced out of the window at the desert, flat under a starlit sky. They were living not far from the late Robert H. Goddard’s Mescalero Ranch and his old rocket launching site, Eden Valley. Bradley often felt inspired by the location, given what he was doing.

They’d moved here when they were married, shortly after Bradley’s release from the hospital, and now, when he was not involved in the drafting of contracts between the many US Air Force and civilian aeronautical establishments in the area, he was conducting his own investigations into Wilson’s whereabouts and his possible connections with the recent spate of sightings of so-called UFOs, or flying saucers.

It kept him busy. It helped him forget the pain. As they had told him in the hospital, he would have to live with the pain for a long time. He owed Wilson that as well.

Gladys handed him the refilled glass, kissed his forehead, then took the chair facing him. Her hair was turning more gray every day, but her smile was still radiant. He loved her and loved being married to her; he'd gained that much, at least.

'Feeling okay?' she asked him.

'Sure.'

'When are we going to New York to see your kids? I sure enjoy those visits.'

Bradley shrugged, then winced. Even shrugging could hurt like hell. 'Christmas,' he said, remembering the submarine in the harbour of Kiel, the icily sardonic SS captain, the fuse spluttering toward the truck piled with corpses, then the stupendous explosion... 'We'll go see them at Christmas. They're looking forward to seeing you again. We'll have a real family holiday.'

He'd awakened hours later, pulled back to life by pain, and found himself half buried under rubble with a lot of bones broken. He'd been rescued, of course – the Allies and Soviets had met in Kiel – but he'd spent the next six months in a US Army hospital in Frankfurt, then been shipped home, to New York, for a long and painful convalescence.

All that, and he still hadn't seen Wilson, didn't know what he looked like. It was hard to take.

'What are all those notes?' Gladys asked him, indicating the pile of papers on his desk.

Bradley had a sip of whiskey. 'I'm just finishing off my research on the members of Projekt Saucer... on what happened to them.'

'Anything interesting?'

'So-so. It's known that Rudolph Schriever and his team were trying to construct a flying saucer in the BMW plant near Prague, were hoping to test it in 1945, but had to destroy it in the face of the Soviet advance. When the Soviets took Prague, the saucer team all went their separate ways. As far as I can gather, Habermohl was captured and has disappeared into the Soviet Union; Miethe surrendered to the Allies and now works for the A. V. Roe Aeronautical Company in Malton, Ontario; and Schriever managed to make

his way back home and has recently, from the safety of his abode at Hokerstrasse 28 in Bremerhaven-Lehe, been telling the press that the flying saucers now being seen all over the place are based on his original Projekt Saucer designs.'

'Schriever doesn't mention Wilson?'

'Nope. Not a word.'

'And the others have vanished from the face of the earth?'

'More or less,' Bradley said. 'My only clue is that damned German submarine, *U-977*, which docked at Mar Del Plata, Argentina, on August 17, 1945. According to its commander, Captain Heinz Schaeffer, it put out from Kiel harbour in late April 1945 and arrived in Argentina after an epic voyage of nearly four months. According to the Argentine authorities, their inspection of the submarine revealed nothing unusual. However, given Peron's fondness for Nazis, we have to treat what they say with some scepticism. Captain Schaeffer was later handed over to an Anglo-American commission for intensive interrogations, during which he was asked if anyone of, quote, political importance, unquote, had been aboard his submarine during its final voyage. Naturally he denied all knowledge of everything.'

'But you have your doubts.'

'Well, we certainly know that an awful lot of fanatical Nazis have been given sanctuary in Argentina and Paraguay. So if Wilson was on that submarine – which he certainly was, *if* it was the same submarine that I saw leaving Kiel harbour – it's possible that he disembarked at Mar Del Plata and went on to his final destination, wherever that might be, under the protective cloak of the Argentine government. And certainly there are rumours that a former Nazi named Ernst Stoll is currently living in seclusion in Paraguay.'

He glanced out the window again, at that flat, dark desert stretched out under a starlit sky, and thought of Goddard's first rocket tests all those years ago, not too far from there. He shook his head, mystified by his own questions, then drank some more bourbon.

'You know,' he said, 'it sometimes really scares me. In April 1945 Wilson disappears with his designs for a highly advanced saucer-shaped aircraft; then, on June 24 this year, a part-time pilot, Kenneth Arnold, reports seeing nine saucer-shaped objects flying over Mount Rainier in Washington State. Since then, similar UFOs have been observed all over the place, but

mostly over New Mexico, right here where we live. Why?'

Gladys gave that familiar, laconic grin. 'One theory is that they're of Soviet origin,' she said.

'Well, the Soviets *did* capture the Peenemünde facility and a lot of its documentation and products – and they *did* ship more than six thousand German technical specialists of all kinds to various research centres throughout the Soviet Union – so we certainly know that they're working with the V-2 rockets and other advanced German secret projects.'

'So the theory,' Gladys continued, 'is that the flying saucers originate in the USSR and have been sent here to spy on our top-secret installations.'

'Which theoretically explains the preponderance of UFO sightings in New Mexico.'

'Exactly,' Gladys said. 'Right now, New Mexico contains more of our postwar defence installations than any other part of the United States, including atomic research, aircraft, missile and rocket development, and a lot of highly advanced radar-electronics and stratospheric flight experimentation. The top-secret Manhattan atom bomb project is in Los Alamos. The White Sands Missile Range and Proving Range at Alamogordo is the most important of its kind in the United States. And we even have the only combat-trained atom bomb group in the world at this time: the 509th Bomb Group of the US Army Air Force Base, right here in Roswell, where Goddard flew his first real rockets. So, yes, if those flying saucers are spying on us, they'd certainly want to come here.'

'The Soviets or Wilson's group,' Bradley said dreamily. 'It sure as hell makes you think...'

He was just about to have another sip of his whiskey when the telephone rang. He picked it up and gave his name.

'Bradley,' a familiar voice said tersely, 'you'd better get your ass over here.'

Bradley instantly recognized the voice as that of First Lieutenant William B. Harris, Flight Intelligence Officer of the Roswell Army Air Base.

'What's up?' he asked, glancing automatically at Gladys.

'We've just been informed that a saucer-shaped aircraft crashed on the plains of San Augustin, between Magdalena and Socorro, New Mexico, about forty minutes ago.'

Bradley glanced at his wristwatch. It was just going on 10.30 p.m.

‘It’s probably just a Rawin weather balloon.’

‘No,’ Harris said firmly. ‘There are none up tonight. Besides, we tracked this thing on radar until it went down – and it was certainly no weather balloon. Also, the flight controller at the private airfield at Carrizozo, about thirty-five miles southwest of the crash site, called a few minutes before the crash to inform us that a saucer-shaped aircraft had flown over at an altitude of approximately four to six thousand feet, at a speed of about four hundred miles per hour. Some goddamned farmer’s already been out there and called from his home to say that what crashed is some sort of metallic, saucer-shaped object about twenty-five or thirty feet in diameter. He also said that there are dead bodies in the wreckage.’

‘Jesus Christ!’ Bradley whispered.

‘And right now,’ Harris continued, ‘at the insistence of General Hoyt Vandenburg, deputy chief of the air force, an intelligence team from the 509th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force is on its way to the crash site to pick up the pieces. Once they get it, you can rest assured that it’ll be flown out to either Carswell AFB, Forth Worth, or Wright-Paterson AFB in Dayton. So if we want to see what the hell it was, we better get out there fast.’

‘Where will I meet you?’

‘Right outside the main gate.’

‘I’m on my way,’ Bradley said. Excited, he put the phone down and stood up, saying to Gladys, ‘It’s too good to be true. Something saucer-shaped has crashed near Socorro. I’m meeting Bill Harris at the main gate of Roswell Army Air Base, then we’re going to drive the hell out there, so don’t wait up, honey.’

‘But I can’t sleep without your battered bones beside me.’

Bradley grinned. ‘Glad to hear it.’ He bent over and kissed her full on the lips, then straightened up and looked down at her. ‘I owe that son of a bitch Wilson one thing,’ he said. ‘I found you when I was trying to find him. That’s a pretty good trade-off, right?’

‘I’m glad you think so,’ she said.

He grinned and waved his hand, then left the living room, grabbed his coat, and hurried out to his car and drove into the night.

The land was flat and featureless, windblown, with the dust swirling eerily, but the sky above it held an enormous moon and a spectacular display of stars. There were very few clouds, just some candy floss here and there,

but enough to cast shifting shadows on the desert floor.

Bradley drove fast, too excited to be careful, and enjoyed the feeling of power, of magical omnipotence, that came with being isolated from the world and moving through it at great speed. He loved the desert at night, its stark, lunar beauty; loved the play of shadow and light on its barren floor, which made it seem like a living thing.

So, he was enjoying the drive and feeling excited... Then he began to feel odd, no longer alone... aware of some unseen presence.

'What the hell...?'

He spoke aloud to break the silence, or the silence contained within the beating wind, and automatically glanced at his rear-view mirror.

He saw only a cloud of billowing dust churned up by his wheels.

Nothing else... just the darkness... the stars seeming to move away... the sky unfolding radiantly in his wake as the car barrelled forward. Nothing else in the mirror.

Yet his heart started racing.

He glanced left and right, convinced that something was out there. He saw nothing and glanced up, where there was nothing unusual, and so concentrated on the road straight ahead, aware that he was sweating.

'Dammit, Bradley,' he said. 'Imagination…That's a dangerous thing.'

Talking to himself... talking aloud to calm his nerves.

There was nothing out there but moonlit darkness, starlit sky, shifting shadows...

No, something *was* out there… What was *that?* Something moving. A flashing light. Growing bigger. Approaching... Yes, dammit, *approaching*!

He saw the light, then it was gone, though it hadn't flashed on and off. It had flown from east to west at tremendous speed, then maybe shot upward – so fast it just disappeared.

Where was it now?

Bradley felt his skin crawling. His fear was an embarrassment. He was aware of something out there, couldn't see it, but could *feel* it, and his hands became slippery on the steering wheel when his heart raced in panic.

He tried to convince himself that he was imagining it... but then, as his helpless fear deepened, something flashed in his eyes.

He almost swerved off the road, but blinked and straightened out. He squinted into the darkness, trying to see between the headlights. A pool of

light brightened on the road beside the car, keeping abreast of it, speeding along and growing brighter and wider until it covered the whole road.

Bradley glanced up and was blinded by dazzling light.

Then he lost control.

'Shit!' he exclaimed, his voice reverberating in his head as he fought with the steering wheel. The car swerved off the road, out of the light, then back onto the road and into the light again. 'Jesus Christ! What the…?'

The light disappeared abruptly. The car barrelled into the darkness. Its headlights had gone out and Bradley frantically worked the switch. Then a bass humming sound, an infrasound, almost *physical*, filled the car and tightened around his head as the engine cut out.

Bradley slammed on the brakes, went into a skid, straightened out and was slowing down when something passed above, shot into the darkness ahead, then became an enormous, burning globe that froze right in front of him.

The car came to a halt. It just rolled to a stop. Bradley sat there, hardly believing what he was seeing, but too stunned to move.

He was looking at an enormous, glowing, saucer-shaped object that was hovering in mid-air along the road, almost as wide as the road. It had a silvery, metallic appearance, showed no surface protuberances, and seemed to possess a perfectly seamless surface beneath that eerie green glowing.

Bradley sat in the car, too stunned to move, mesmerized by that *thing* out there. Then that thing, the flying saucer, sank lower and settled on the ground. It didn't appear to have any legs – it just settled down on its base – then the bass humming sound increased, tightening around Bradley's head, and he saw a panel opening up in the base of the saucer.

First one, then two, then three black-clad figures dropped down and spread out across the road and walked steadily toward him.

Bradley was terrified.

He didn't know why: they were just people, after all. As they advanced deliberately upon him, he saw only that they were dressed completely in black, looked otherwise human, but were possessed of a frightening, calm intensity that seemed terribly unreal.

He wanted to get out of the car and flee, but he felt paralysed.

Then the infrasound faded away and the tightness left his head. He immediately reached for the ignition key and turned it, but heard only a dead

click. He withdrew his fingers as if he'd been scorched. His heart was still racing dangerously. He licked sweat from his upper lip and shifted his gaze, taking in the three men.

One stopped right in front of the car, the other went to the far side, and the third walked around to stop by Bradley's door.

When he bent down to look through the window, Bradley wanted to scream.

'Roll the window down, Mr Bradley.'

The man's voice was very soft. It was also oddly flat. It was the voice of a man with few feelings and a lot of authority. Bradley did as he was told. He didn't seem to have a choice. That voice, though quiet and unemotional, would brook no disobedience. Bradley rolled the window down, his hand shaking, then stared at the man.

He had silver-gray hair, unnaturally smooth white skin, coldly handsome features, and hypnotic blue eyes.

'You're Mike Bradley,' he said.

'Yes,' Bradley replied.

'You were with the OSS during the war.'

'That's right,' Bradley said.

The man smiled without warmth. 'I believe you wanted to see me, Bradley. I'm told that your need to see me was an obsession that would not let you rest. Why was that?'

Bradley felt calmer now. Not too good, but in control. He felt paralysed, but the fear was less intense and allowed him to think.

'You're Wilson?'

The man smiled again, this time as if amused. 'Why did you go to such lengths to find me? What did you hope to find?'

'An answer,' Bradley said.

'An answer to what?'

'I had to know if such a genius could be human or was some kind of mutant.'

'Observe – I am human.'

'No, you're not. You're not like us. You exist on some plane beyond humanity, where feelings don't count.'

'Feelings aren't important. They belong back in the caves. Where we're going – where the human race must go – only logic prevails. Science, Mr

Bradley, not emotion, is what will lead us to glory.'

'You're evil.'

'No, I'm not. To be evil, one must have feelings. *Extreme* feelings, I grant you, but feelings nevertheless, and since my mind has taken me beyond those, I cannot be evil. I am what I am, that I will be. I am nature's child also.'

'Nature can be brutal.'

'Nature *is.* There's no good or bad in it.'

Bradley studied Wilson's face. He wanted to find the evil in it. He saw nothing but blue eyes that were brilliant with intelligence; handsome, unrevealing features; skin too smooth to be natural.

Otherwise, there was nothing.

'Your world is dying, Mr Bradley. The world of pointless emotions. The new world, my world, is approaching and can't be held back. It's a world of pitiless logic, of truth, and that's the way we must go. Science will take us there.'

He reached into the car and pressed his fingers to Bradley's forehead. 'Stop pursuing me,' he said. 'It will do you no good. You will only be treated as a crank and have a very unfortunate life. Think of your wife, Bradley. I know her, I believe. Consider your married children and don't make them endure your humiliation, since you can't stop me anyway. My flying saucers won't be hidden. They'll fly the world with impunity. Those who report seeing them will be ridiculed and, where necessary, silenced. Retire, Bradley. Think of your children. Enjoy your retirement. Now relax... *Auf Wiedersehen.*'

Bradley felt that he was dreaming. In his dream the fear returned. He kept thinking of his children, of that warning, and he knew he would stop here.

He would not go to Socorro. He would burn all his research. He knew, even as Wilson departed, that his search had come to an end. He would retire to guarantee his family's safety and let others do what they would.

Wilson walked from the car, between the other two men in black, and disappeared back into his flying saucer while Bradley just sat there. The hatch in the base moved up again, became part of the seamless body, then Bradley heard the bass humming sound, almost *felt* it, and as his head started tightening and his skin became numb, the flying saucer started glowing, its silvery body brightening magically, then became encased in a cocoon of

pulsating white light and rose off the ground.

Bradley heard the noise, felt it, was surrounded by it and became part of it, as the saucer ascended slowly, gracefully, even majestically, then suddenly shot upward, but stopped again, as if by magic, to hover above him.

The infrasound cut out abruptly, allowing Bradley to move, and he clambered out and stood beside his car and looked directly above him. The saucer was high up, about the size of a dime, and it seemed to be spinning on its vertical axis and filling the sky with light. Then it shot up even higher, shrinking rapidly, but still shining, until eventually it merged with the stars and suddenly blinked out.

Bradley saw the moon and stars, the vast web of the cosmos, and he thought of Gladys and his children and grandchildren, feeling fear for their future. Determined to protect them, he returned to his car, turned it around, and headed back in the direction he had come from, through the dark, windblown desert.

He had the feeling that the flying saucer was still somewhere out there, gliding eerily through the night, keeping him under surveillance... and he knew that this feeling would haunt him for the rest of his days.

It was best to be silent.

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Projekt Saucer: Book 2

W. A. Harbinson

Custom Books Publishing

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This edition published in 2011 by W. A. Harbinson
www.waharbinson.eu.com

ISBN-13: 978-1460948408
ISBN-10: 1460948408

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Designed in the Isle of Wight, Great Britain, by
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GENESIS
THE WRITING GAME
PROJEKT UFO

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For
Perrott & Irena Phillips
&
For Anna

Part One

Chapter One

SOCORRO, NEW MEXICO
JULY 2, 1947

When that thing flew overhead Marlon Clarke could hardly believe what he was seeing. As he had been doing too often lately, he was sitting out on his porch, in his old rocking chair, slugging beer from the bottle, muttering under his breath and gazing out over the parched lands of his failed farm, flat and eerily desolate in moonlight. He was just a small farmer who'd had a bad few years and he liked to sit out there in the evenings, feeling bitter and murmuring angry words to himself, getting drunk enough to sleep without too much anxiety. Tired and thinking of bed, he had just glanced at his watch and noticed that it was ten-thirty when the whole porch shook a little, his last bottle of beer fell over, and he heard an exploding noise right overhead.

Shocked back to the real world, his heart racing too fast, he looked up to see a glowing, saucer-shaped object screeching, wobbling, spinning and pouring steam or smoke as it flew at tremendous speed across the night sky on a descending trajectory.

Before Marlon had a chance to get a grip on himself, the glowing object fell towards the Plain of San Augustin, between Magdalena and Socorro, about five miles from his farm, then turned into a growing fan of white and red flames in a billowing cloud of dust. The explosion came a second later, as the fan of flames grew bigger, illuminating the rising cloud of dust and obliterating the stars.

The blast rocked Marlon's house.

Startled into a state of near sobriety, he got out of his rocking chair as the fan of flame shrank back to a tiny flickering that soon disappeared, letting the star-studded night sky return.

'Kee-rist!' Marlon exclaimed softly. Instantly, on an impulse, both fearful and curious, he grabbed a bottle of whisky from the floor of the porch,

hurried down the steps, clambered unsteadily into his battered old truck, and tore off towards the scene of the crash.

As he drove across the moonlit plain, through pale moonlight and the shadows of cacti and sagebrush, he controlled the steering wheel with one hand, held the bottle in the other, drank too quickly and felt his heart racing. It was the whisky, he guessed, but it was also what he had seen: that glowing, saucer-shaped flying object of the kind he'd heard so much about lately.

'Jesus!' he whispered to himself as the old, battered truck growled and rattled across the flat, windblown plain. 'Jesus H... I don't believe...'

He kept glancing outside the truck, growing more apprehensive, half expecting to see another of those objects gliding under the moonlight. He even thought of turning back, but his curiosity kept him going, and he convinced himself, even as his fear was growing, that it had just been an airplane.

He was wrong.

On the broad, flat plain near the town of Magdalena, about halfway between the road and the distant Black Mountain, he saw a dark pile of still smouldering debris. Driving off the road, he bounced over the rough, sage-strewn plain until he came to the location of the crash. Stopping the truck, he had another drink of whisky, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, then looked out at the smouldering debris.

It was the wreckage of a large, saucer-shaped craft, about half of it smashed to hell, the remainder a dull grey in the moonlight.

What looked like three scorched corpses were still strapped into the central cockpit of the crashed object.

'Lord Almighty!' Marlon exclaimed softly.

He was too scared to get out, but he had a good look, making sure that his eyes were not deceiving him. The object was round all right, shaped like two plates, one inverted and placed on top of the other. It was about twenty-five to thirty feet in diameter, obviously made of a metallic substance, and had smooth sides that rose gracefully, seamlessly to a smashed-up, transparent, domed cockpit. The charred bodies were still strapped to their seats.

That's when Marlon grew really scared. Blinking, rubbing his eyes, he looked out again.

The three corpses were burned beyond recognition. They were wearing grey-coloured one-piece suits, or coveralls, which were charred black, in

tatters and still smouldering like the pieces of metal scattered widely around the broken, circular craft.

Nauseated by the smell of roasted flesh, Marlon looked beyond the crashed object to the distant mountain range. It was black in the night, but covered with stars, its sides streaked with moonlight that also fell across the flat Plain of Magdalena. Marlon looked around him, expecting to see something else, but there was nothing out there but empty land and the wind's constant whispering.

Taking a final look at the charred bodies in the crashed flying saucer, he shivered with revulsion and fear, then turned the truck around and burned back to his ranch.

When the men from the Roswell Army Air Base came to see him, Marlon was surprised by how many there were. They arrived in a jeep and troop truck as the sun was rising over the horizon to flood the flat plain with light. Marlon was still sitting in his rocking chair, more drunk than ever, when the armed troops jumped out of the truck to form a semi-circle around the yard, some with their backs turned to the house, others facing the empty plain, all holding their weapons at the ready.

More frightened than he had been by the sight of the crashed saucer, Marlon was wiping his dry lips with the back of his hand when a man in a plain grey suit, accompanied by a uniformed Air Force officer and two others in plain clothes, descended from the jeep and approached him. Stepping up onto the porch, the two in plain clothes hurried past Marlon and entered his house without his permission, slamming the mesh-wire door behind them. As Marlon was about to get out of his rocking chair and protest, the Air Force officer removed his peaked cap, revealing stark black hair and warm brown eyes in a slightly plump, friendly face. He offered a natural, easy smile.

‘Mr Clarke?’

‘Darn right,’ Marlon said. ‘And when I called, I didn't expect...’ He nodded back over his shoulder, indicating the two men who could now be heard noisily searching his home.

‘I’m sorry, Mr Clarke, but it’s necessary. I’m First Lieutenant William B.Harris of the Eighth Air Force, stationed at Roswell Army Air Base. The two men in your house are members of the intelligence team of the 509th Bomb Group, also at Roswell. And this… ‘ he indicated the unsmiling man in the plain grey suit... ‘is CIA agent, Jack Fuller, who’s flown here all the way

from Langley, Virginia.'

'You called about a crashed saucer, I believe,' Fuller said in an oddly threatening tone of voice.

'Right. It crashed last night, about ten. I was expecting you people a lot sooner. I've bin sittin' here all night.'

'I'm sorry about that,' First Lieutenant Harris said, 'but I had to wait for Mr Fuller to arrive.'

'All the way from Langley, Virginia,' Marlon said, glancing at the unsmiling Fuller who was, he noted, still under thirty, but had eyes as grey and wintry as Antarctica. 'You musta taken me serious.'

'It's strictly routine,' Fuller informed him, sounding as cold as he looked. 'It's just one of the rules. All the flying saucer scares we've had since last month – '

'The Kenneth Arnold sightings.'

'Right. They're mostly false alarms, but they have to be checked out. That's why I'm here.'

'This is no false alarm.'

'You actually saw the saucer?'

'Sure did. It's out there on the Plain of Magdalena with three dead bodies in it.'

Fuller glanced at Harris, then down at Marlon's whisky bottle. 'Have you been drinking, Mr Clarke?'

'What do you think?'

'I think you were drinking last night - you have a reputation for it - and just *imagined* you saw those dead bodies. I think you saw a crashed weather balloon, related it to all the flying saucer stories that have been in the papers since the Kenneth Arnold sightings, and let your imagination get the better of you.'

'The hell with that,' Marlon said, outraged. 'I know what I saw there last night - and it wasn't any goddamned weather balloon. It was big and made of metal and had three dead bodies in it. They were burnt all to hell.'

'Come with us, Mr Clarke.'

Before Marlon could protest, Fuller took him by the shoulder and tugged him to his feet. Marlon jerked his head around, indicating the noisy search still going on in his shack, but Harris told him not to worry and walked at his other side as Fuller led him between the armed troops to the jeep and coaxed

him up into the rear seat. Fuller sat beside him, Harris sat up front, then the driver took off along the road that ran as straight as an arrow across the flatlands, towards Magdalena.

Marlon's stomach was churning. The sight of the armed troops had scared him, the people searching his house more so, and now he was confused as well as frightened, not too sure if he had done the right thing in making that phone call. Jack Fuller, the CIA agent seated beside him, was only half Marlon's age, but had a cold-eyed, obscurely threatening manner, never smiling, just watching. He was making Marlon feel as guilty as hell, though he didn't know what for. He had simply tried to behave like a responsible citizen - reporting the crash and what he had seen - and now this Fuller was making him feel like a criminal, or even a madman. Thinking of all the stories he'd read about UFOs in the past few weeks (ever since the June sightings by Kenneth Arnold, the papers were full of them), he started wondering if he *had* imagined the whole thing.

Marlon desperately wanted another stiff shot of whisky, but the bottle was back on the porch where it could do him no good.

They covered the five miles in about ten minutes and soon were bumping over the flatlands, towards the crash site, which was, Marlon noted, now surrounded by armed troops just like his house. The sun was up and the heat made Marlon sweat; he was also sweating with nervous tension when the jeep braked to a halt, its wheels churning up a cloud of dust that spiralled around him and the others to be carried away on the moaning wind.

Marlon didn't have to get out of the jeep to express his surprise.

Fuller turned unyielding eyes upon him. 'Is this what you saw, Mr Clarke?'

It was not. Now, in the centre of that large circle of armed troops, where the flying saucer with the three dead bodies had been, Marlon saw only some white-smocked technicians picking up a thin scattering of silver-foil and narrow balsa-wood beams. There was no sign of the large flying saucers. No dead bodies. No ambulance.

'This isn't what I saw,' Marlon said. 'What I saw was – '

'This is what we found,' Fuller told him. 'The remains of a crashed Rawin weather balloon. Easily mistaken for flying saucers, Mr Clarke. We sometimes see what we want to see.'

'What do you mean by that?'

Fuller glanced at First Lieutenant Harris. 'One of the worst lightning storms

we've had in a long time,' Harris explained with a gentle smile, 'took place about seventy-five miles south-west of here last night, about the same time as this weather balloon crashed. Since then, we've had lots of reports of unidentified flying objects in the vicinity. Most turned out to be natural phenomena caused by the storm. In other words, false alarms.'

Marlon felt more confused, but he knew what he had witnessed. No way were those pieces of silver-foil and balsa wood part of what he had seen here last night.

'That thing I saw last night was big - very big - and it had dead bodies in it.'

'It was night,' Fuller told him. 'You were drinking. You saw what you expected to see. Did you get out of your truck?'

'No, but...'

'So you'd been sitting out on your porch, drinking half the evening, then you saw this saucer-shaped object falling from the night sky about five miles away. Remembering all the stories you'd read in the papers this past few weeks, about so-called flying saucers, you assumed that's what you'd seen, drove out here to find it, and maybe got scared when you *did* find it and imagined the rest.'

'With all due respect, sir, that's bullshit. I know what I saw.'

'You were drunk and frightened.'

'I'm more drunk now than I was last night, but that don't mean I'm imagining all this.' Marlon waved his hand to indicate the ring of armed troops and the white-smocked men picking up pieces of silver-foil and balsa beams to load them into the army truck nearby. 'And I'm telling you that what I saw last night was no weather balloon. It was at least twenty-five feet wide and it had – '

'Dead bodies in it.' Fuller sighed. 'So where are the dead bodies, Mr Clarke? Where's the large, presumably metallic, flying saucer?'

'That's right. It was metallic.'

Fuller smiled in a mocking way and pointed to the men carrying the debris of the weather balloon. 'Silver-foil,' he said. 'It would look metallic in the dark. The moonlight, the drifting dust, your state of mind, the drink, combined could have made you see all the rest. Enough said, I think.'

'Well, maybe...' Marlon felt confused and nervous, no longer sure of his senses, and wished he could have a stiff drink to put his thoughts in some order. Okay, so he was drunk, but he wasn't that dumb... and when he noticed

a lot of tyre tracks leading away from just beyond this much smaller area of wreckage, heading towards Roswell, he was convinced that another team of men from the Roswell Army Air Base had cleared away the real wreckage and taken it back to the base.

Frightened, he decided to keep his nose clean and get involved no further. After wiping his dry lips with the back of his hand, he deliberately shook his head from side to side, as if chastising himself. 'Dammit, I guess you must be right. I sure as hell hung one on last night. I guess that *could* explain it.' He glanced again at the tyre tracks that started beyond the perimeter of armed troops, then at the truck into which the white-smocked men were putting the last of the debris from the weather balloon. 'A weather balloon?' Harris nodded and smiled at him. 'Well, I'll be damned,' Marlon said like a real country yokel. 'It's amazin' what a man sees when he's drunk. I feel a right goddamned fool now.'

'No need,' Harris said, raising the peak of his Air Force cap to offer a genuine, friendly smile. 'You'd be surprised at what people think they see at nights - and these weather balloons, they fool a lot of people.'

'Sure fooled me. Say, you haven't got a drink in that there jeep?'

Harris smiled more broadly. 'Nope, I'm afraid not. But you've still got that bottle on the porch and we're going back now.'

'Yeah, let's do that.' Pretending to be more drunk and tired than he was, Marlon glanced at the CIA agent, Jack Fuller, whose grey gaze was coolly searching, then at the white-smocked men who were still placing pieces of debris into the truck. Comparing the size of the craft he had seen last night and the much wider area of scattered debris with what he was seeing now, he was more convinced than ever that his senses had not deceived him as Fuller had suggested.

No, those tyre tracks clearly visible beyond the ring of armed troops belonged to the trucks that had taken the debris of the flying saucer, as well as its dead occupants, back to the Roswell Army Air Base. This coldly handsome young CIA agent, Fuller, and the friendlier Air Force First Lieutenant Harris were undoubtedly covering up the real crash. Convinced of this, Marlon became even more determined to keep his mouth shut. He was therefore relieved when the driver turned the jeep around and headed back to the ranch.

See no evil, hear no evil, Marlon thought, keeping his gaze fixed resolutely

on the road ahead.

It was best to be silent.

Marlon awoke in the early hours of the morning, haunted by the remnants of bad dreams and frightening realities. At first confused about where he was, hardly remembering going to bed, he saw his bedroom in darkness, stars framed by the window, then recalled that crashed flying saucer and the three strange, scorched bodies. He groaned aloud, hearing something - *feeling* something - then remembered waving goodbye to Fuller and Harris as they drove away from his house, having grimly warned him to forget flying saucers and accept that what he had seen was a crashed weather balloon.

'Shit,' Marlon said, hearing something - *feeling* something - then realised that he'd been awakened by a strange bass humming sound that seemed physical and made his head hurt. 'Shit!' he said. 'What the hell...?'

The sound was growing louder, as if descending on his roof. As it did so, the whole house shook to the pulsations of a dazzling light that had suddenly obliterated the stars as it poured in through his window.

The house shook more violently as the pulsations became more rapid and the light blinded Marlon. The bass humming sound grew louder and more... *physical*, threatening to crush his skull.

He jerked upright on the bed and covered his ears with his hands, letting out a scream of anguish and terror.

The noise cut out abruptly and the pulsating light disappeared, leaving normal darkness, and... unnatural silence.

Marlon lowered his hands, staring fearfully at the window. Hearing and seeing nothing other than starlit darkness, he jerked the sheet from his sweating body and slid off the bed. He put his pants on, picked up his shotgun, then went to the window and looked out. Still seeing nothing unusual, he padded back to the front door and stepped out onto the porch.

A large, silvery, saucer-shaped craft was resting on the ground at the end of Marlon's moonlit yard. It appeared to be seamless and had no protuberances other than four retractable legs.

It looked just like the crashed flying saucer that Marlon had seen on the Plain of Magdalena.

Even as a wave of fearful disbelief swept over him, making him drop the shotgun, which made a godalmighty clattering, the saucer suddenly gave off a bass humming sound that shook him to his bones, vibrated slightly, and

became surrounded by an aura of pulsating white light. A transparent dome rose up from the saucer's raised centre to reveal three human-shaped silhouettes inside. Then a beam of dazzling light shot from the saucer, almost blinding Marlon.

Crying out and covering his eyes with his hands, he fell back against the wall of the house. The light shone through his fingers, showing the blood beneath the skin, and the bass humming sound pressed in on his skull. Marlon slid down the wall, whimpering in pain and terror, until he was resting on the porch with his chin on his raised knees. Then the light faded away, the bass humming sound cut out, and he looked up as a trap door opened silently in the bottom of the saucer, tilting down to the ground.

Three men, all dressed in black to match the night, dropped out, one after the other.

They spread out across the yard to advance upon Marlon.

Something about those three men in black told him that they had come to take him away and that he could not escape.

Marlon just sat there, paralysed by terror, until the men stepped up on the porch and closed in around him. Then something exploded in his head and he sank down through spinning stars.

Chapter Two

Captain Dwight Randall, of the Air Technical Intelligence Centre, or the ATIC, was not feeling too happy when introducing himself to First Lieutenant William B. Harris, Flight Intelligence Officer of the Roswell Army Air Base. Back in Wright-Patterson AFB, in Dayton, Ohio, Dwight's wife, Beth, nursing their first child, Nichola, was also nursing her resentment because again he was on a trip away from home. She knew that he had no choice, being compelled to obey orders, but that hadn't helped him when he waved her goodbye for the third time in the four weeks since Nichola had been born. Dwight had optimistically promised her that he would be at home a lot more, at least during the first few months of their new baby's life, but unfortunately the recent, unexpected spate of UFO sightings had taken precedence over domestic matters. Now, as Dwight returned the salute of First Lieutenant Harris, then shook his hand, he felt guilty that he was here instead of in Dayton, looking after his family.

'Please, Captain,' Harris said, indicating the chair at the other side of his desk, 'take a seat. Can I get you a coffee?'

Dwight glanced out the window at the distant aircraft hangars, then shook his head and sat in the chair. 'No, thanks. I've drunk gallons since leaving Wright-Patterson, so I'll beg off for now. Do you mind if I smoke?' Harris just spread his hands in the air and offered a natural, charming smile, so Dwight lit up, inhaled, blew a smoke ring, and watched it drifting away... like a flying saucer. 'So,' he said, 'I've been sent by the ATIC to investigate the so-called Socorro sighting of last week. Do you resent my intrusion?'

'No, sir,' Harris said. 'My intelligence training didn't include flying saucers, so any help I get will be appreciated. It's also good to know that the Air Force, which has so strenuously denied the existence of the phenomenon, now has some tangible evidence.'

'One of the functions of the Air Technical Intelligence Centre is to gather

data on Unidentified Flying Objects. The fact that most of them turn out to be natural atmospheric phenomena may explain our former reluctance to accept the reality of the UFOs.'

It was a disingenuous statement. What Dwight could not tell Harris was that contrary to the Air Force's own publicity it was in a state of near panic over a whole series of recent UFO sightings, particularly those over Muroc Air Base - the top secret Air Force test centre in the Mojave Desert - on July 8, just two days ago and six days after the Socorro sightings.

The first UFO flap had actually occurred in 1946 when, throughout the summer and fall, thousands of 'ghost rockets' appeared in the skies over Scandinavia and Western Europe. Mostly seen at night, they were reported as being 'cigar-shaped' and with flames issuing from the tail. Estimates of their speed ranged from that of a 'slow airplane' to 500 miles per hour. In the month of July alone, the Swedish military received more than 600 reports, which encouraged the Swedish general staff to declare the situation 'extremely serious.' Then, when sightings of the unidentifieds spread out from Sweden to Finland and close to the Soviet border, the Americans also took the phenomenon seriously - certainly enough to express their fear that the rockets might be secret weapons developed by the Russians with the help of the captured German technical specialists and material.

Their fears were in no way eased by the knowledge that whereas the mysterious 'Foo fighters' had not shown up on radar, the ghost rockets certainly had, and therefore could not be classified as hoaxes, misidentifications or the products of mass hallucination.

The Soviets denied any knowledge of the rockets, but US suspicions remained unabated while the rockets continued to fly and be reported from as far afield as Greece, Turkey, French Morocco and Spain, before gradually fading away the following year.

However, on June 21, 1947, only a couple of weeks ago, a harbour patrolman, Harold Dahl, accompanied by his fifteen-year old son and two crewmen, was on harbour patrol near Maury Island in Puget Sound, off Tacoma, Washington, when he observed six objects shaped like 'inflated inner tubes' hovering about 2,000 feet above his boat. Five of the objects were circling about the sixth as it descended to about five hundred feet above the boat, where, appearing to hover magically, it was seen more clearly. The object appeared to be about a hundred feet in diameter, metallic, with no jets,

rockets, wings, or propellers, but with a ‘hole’ in the centre, or base, symmetrically placed portholes around the perimeter, and observatory windows on its underside. After discharging what appeared to be a cloud of aluminium-coloured debris, which littered the sea, where they gave off clouds of steam, suggesting that they were hot, the circular craft ascended to rejoin the others, then they all flew at high speed toward the open sea and soon disappeared.

Three days later, on June 24, an American businessman, Kenneth Arnold, reported that when flying his private Piper Club airplane near Mount Rainier in the Cascades, Washington, searching for the debris of the Marine Corps C-46 transport that had crashed against the south shoulder of Mount Rainier the night before, he observed nine disk-shaped, apparently metallic objects flying in ‘a diagonal chain-like line’ and making an undulating motion ‘like a saucer skipping over water.’ According to Arnold's report, the objects performed impossible manoeuvres in the sky, before flying off at supersonic speed to disappear in the direction of the Canadian border.

As Arnold had been a deputy sheriff and was a reputable businessman, as well as an experienced mountain air-rescue pilot, his story was taken seriously and the term ‘flying saucer’ came into being. It was therefore used widely over the next few weeks when the media spread Arnold’s story nation-wide and encouraged a spate of similar sightings, many of which were hoaxes, some of which were by trained observers and seemed highly credible.

By this time the US military authorities, while publicly ridiculing the reported sightings, were secretly in a state of panic over their own plague of UFO sightings: the first, on June 28, over Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama; the next, on June 29, near Alamogordo, New Mexico, right over the top-secret White Sands Proving Ground; then, on July 8, a whole spate of sightings of spherically shaped, white aluminium-coloured objects flying over Muroc Air Base, the supersecret air force test centre in the Mojave Desert. Because those particular sightings were made by trained technicians and pilots, and because the reported objects were appearing increasingly over top-and-supersecret military research bases, a growing suspicion in intelligence circles was that the men and material deported from Nazi Germany to Russia had led to a dangerous Soviet lead in space technology. And now one of the damned things had crashed and all hell had broken loose.

‘Anyway,’ Dwight continued, ‘the so-called Socorro sighting has caused a hell of a stir in the media and placed us in an uncomfortable position. I believe you're the one who compiled the first official report on it.’

‘Yes, sir. I take it you’ve read it.’

‘About a dozen times,’ Dwight told him. ‘I kept re-reading it because I couldn’t believe my own eyes.’ He withdrew Harris’s report from the briefcase on his lap, leafed through it, then looked up again. ‘You say the UFO appeared to have suffered damage in a lightning storm near Roswell, but managed to fly on to Magdalena, where it crashed. It was a real flying saucer - or at least a disc-shaped aircraft – and the wreckage contained three dead bodies. Naturally the report came as a shock. Are you sure...?’

‘I stand by that report,’ Harris said, brushing a lock of dark hair back from his brown, candid gaze and offering a slight, nervous smile. He looked like an honest, reliable officer, but clearly he was uncomfortable over this matter. ‘What that farmer told me, I was able to confirm with my own eyes: a crashed flying saucer with three dead bodies in it.’

‘Marlon Clarke was the farmer.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘A known drunkard who was drinking at the time.’

‘Not that drunk - and I confirmed with my own eyes what he’d told me when he phoned us shortly after finding the wreckage.’

‘You say the bodies seemed human.’

‘They were burnt beyond recognition and I couldn’t examine them thoroughly, but they certainly *seemed* like human beings.’

‘This is quite a story, lieutenant, but not one I’d want public. How the hell did it get out to the press?’

‘Not guilty. The story was picked up by Johnny McBoyle, reporter and part owner of Radio KSWS in Roswell. McBoyle personally investigated the case and found that a lot of people had reported seeing the UFO flying overhead. Others reported hearing a loud banging sound as the object flew through that lightning storm over Corona - presumably when it was first damaged. Others reported hearing an explosion from the Plain of Magdalena - when the object crashed. As soon as I heard that McBoyle was going to put the story out on the teletype, I blocked the message with one of my own - sent anonymously, of course - telling him not to transmit. That scared him enough to make him cancel his transmission. Unfortunately, the following day, our enthusiastic

young public information officer, Lieutenant Walter Haut, acting on odd bits of information coming into Roswell, issued a press release without the authorisation of myself or the base commander. His vague story of a crashed saucer - no mention of the dead bodies – was subsequently published in the Roswell *Daily Record* of July 8 - the day after the crash. Hunt has been reprimanded and will probably be posted out of here.'

'Alas, too late to kill the story.'

'I'm afraid so.'

Dwight turned over another page in the report, then looked up again. 'The saucer wreckage and dead crew members have been removed from the scene of the crash?'

'Yes, sir. We did that immediately. At the insistence of no less than the Deputy Chief of the Air Force, General Hoyt Vandenburg, the three charred bodies and the debris from the crash were picked up by an intelligence team from the 509th Bomb Group and transported in strict secrecy to Carswell AFB, Fort Worth, Texas. There's no trace of it left at the crash site.'

'Subsequently you paid Clarke a visit.'

'Yes, sir. On the instructions of CIA agent Jack Fuller, we scattered the pieces of a Rawin weather balloon around the crash site and went through a charade of picking them up for examination when Fuller and I took Clarke back out there. We insisted it was the balloon that had crashed and that Clarke had simply imagined the dead bodies. Clarke finally pretended to believe us, but I don't think he did.'

'I better have another talk with this Clarke.'

'You can't. He vanished the day after the crash and hasn't been seen since.'

'*Vanished?'*

'Completely. We've searched high and low, but we can't track him down. Neither could the Roswell *Daily Record*. He's vanished into thin air.'

Dwight leaned forward in his chair, suddenly feeling cold and frightened. 'Christ, you must have *some* idea of what happened to him. This is a small, intimate community, Lieutenant. Someone must know *something*.'

Harris simply shrugged and raised his hands in a gesture of defeat. 'No-one knows anything. When we checked Clarke's shack, we found his bed unmade - suggesting he'd slept in it the night before. His old truck was still parked out the back. The only clue to his disappearance was what might have been a group of footprints in the earth, leading from the steps of the porch to just

outside the front yard, where they stopped abruptly. There were no signs of tyre tracks, but a circular patch of brush, about twenty-five feet wide, was flattened and slightly singed in an odd way - I mean, not from the sun. A real mystery there.'

'A circular patch of brush, about twenty-five feet wide - approximately the same size and shape as the crashed saucer.'

'Right. It bears thinking about.'

'What's the story on Bradley? It says here that as soon as you received word of the crash, you invited former intelligence officer, now UFO authority, Mike Bradley to go with you to view the crash. Bradley, normally obsessed with flying saucers, surprised you by not turning up and by later refusing to discuss his reasons. Has he talked to you since?'

'I haven't been in touch with him since.'

'Can we drive out and see him right now?'

'Yes. He lives out in Eden Valley, near Robert Goddard's old rocket-launching ground. It's not a long drive.'

'Okay, let's go.'

Dwight slipped the report back into his briefcase and got to his feet while Harris phoned through for a jeep to come around and pick them up. The jeep was waiting for them by the time they got outside. Dwight glanced up as three F-86 jet interceptors roared over the great semicircular hangars along the edge of the runway, under a cloudless blue sky. He did it automatically, perhaps looking for a flying saucer, and felt instantly foolish when he realised what he had done.

Sitting beside First Lieutenant Harris in the rear of the jeep being driven by a U.S. Air Force corporal, Dwight put his head back, closed his eyes, and let the beating wind cool his face as they left the base and headed for Eden Valley, just outside Roswell. Opening his eyes again, he saw the El Capitán Mountain rising from the foothills near the southwestern horizon and, to the east, the sunlit slopes of the Caprock where, within living memory, the Comanche Indians, Spanish explorers, and even Billy the Kid had roamed. It therefore seemed incredible that this same area was already filled with highly advanced defence installations, including atomic research, aircraft, missile and rocket development, and a lot of highly advanced radar-electronics and stratospheric flight experimentation. Not far away, in Los Alamos, was the top-secret Manhattan atom bomb project. The White Sands Missile Range

and Proving Range, at Alamogordo, was the most important of its kind in the United States. Also, the only combat-trained atom bomb group in the world was the 509th Bomb Group of the US Army Air Force Base, located right here in Roswell and given high prominence in Harris's report. This area was also, incidentally, the one producing the most UFO reports in the whole country, most of them by professional pilots and military observers.

Dwight sighed, thinking of the recent spate of saucer sightings that had overturned his life in the past month: first the Harold Dahl and Kenneth Arnold sightings in Washington State, then the spate of sightings over various top-secret military establishments right here in New Mexico. Recalling those sightings, he realised that he was getting into something truly unknown, perhaps even dangerous.

He was also working too much for his own good, which was upsetting Beth. Imagining her back in their small house in Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio, breast-feeding baby Nichola, he swelled up with love and concern for her. Then, to distract himself from his feeling of loss, he went back to reading First Lieutenant Harris's report.

Harris had included a brief resumé of Bradley's career, so Dwight knew he was about to meet an impressive man. Bradley had been a biplane pilot during World War I, spent a good many years as a successful Wall Street lawyer, became a member of OSS during World War II, and was known to have been involved in a major intelligence operation in occupied Europe. The exact nature of that operation was still top secret, though it certainly concerned German secret weapons. Badly wounded in an explosion at Kiel harbour during the last days of the war, Bradley had recovered, been discharged from OSS, married a former Roswell *Daily Record* reporter, Gladys Kinder, and moved back to Roswell with her. Now, when not making a living by the drafting of contracts between the many US Air Force and civilian aeronautical establishments in the area, he was conducting his own investigations into UFO sightings.

Bradley's interest in UFOs, Dwight was convinced, related directly to what he had discovered during his intelligence gathering in Germany during the war. Why he had rejected First Lieutenant Harris's invitation to check out the Socorro UFO crash site was therefore a matter for some concern.

'Apart from the formal resumé contained in your report,' Dwight said as the jeep crossed the sun-scorched flatlands between Roswell and Eden Valley,

‘what do you know about Mike Bradley?’

‘He’s been to the base a few times to discuss UFO sightings with me. He’s intelligent, good humoured and, given his background, unpretentious. A lot of experience in his face, a kind of air of quiet authority, but also something guarded, even secretive. He never talks about the war. Says his work is still classified. I wouldn’t call him the obsessive type, but he’s certainly obsessed with UFOs. That’s what keeps us in touch.’

‘And his wife?’

‘A terrific lady. Bit of a local character. Used to be a reporter on the Roswell *Daily Record* and was known to be as tough as any man. Still is, in fact. Likes to wear Stetsons and high-heeled boots. Pretty sharp with her tongue, too.’

‘How did she meet Bradley?’

‘He was out here in 1931, trying to run down a physicist – called Wilson, as I recall – who’d worked for Robert H. Goddard on his rocket experiments in Eden Valley. Reportedly, Gladys was briefly involved with Wilson and Bradley went to see her about him. I don’t know if anything occurred between them here in Roswell, but certainly they met up in London, England, during the war, after Bradley’s wife had been killed at Pearl Harbour. Bradley and Gladys seem unusually close and are popular locally.’

‘When did Bradley’s obsession with UFOs begin?’

‘For him it’s more specific than unidentified flying objects – it’s flying saucers. He’s been interested in them as long as I’ve known him. We first met a few weeks after he arrived here with Gladys, which was about four months after the war, about November or December, 1945. I met him at a welcome home party given for Gladys by her old buddies on the Roswell *Daily Record*. As soon as Bradley learnt I was the Flight Intelligence Officer at Roswell, he pinned me to the wall to enquire if I ever received reports of saucer or disc-shaped aircraft. This, mind you, was about twenty months before the first sightings by Harold Dahl and Kenneth Arnold. Of course I’d never had reports of any such thing - at least not until last month - and when I asked him why he wanted to know about them, he just murmured vaguely about his interest in unusual airplane configurations. After that, he regularly asked me if I’d received any unusual reports, but until last month, I’d nothing to give him.’

‘Then, remarkably, when you had that report on a crashed saucer, he failed

to show.'

'Right,' Harris said. 'Damned amazing - and he won't tell me why.'

'Maybe this time we'll be lucky,' Dwight said as the ranch-style house on the edge of Eden Valley came into view.

'Yeah,' Harris said. 'Maybe.'

The driver braked to a halt by the gate of the front yard, causing a cloud of dust to boil up around the jeep. Dwight slipped out his side of the vehicle, waving the dust from his face, then was dazzled by sunlight as he walked up the yard path, beside First Lieutenant Harris. When Harris rang the bell, a woman came to the door. She was tall and lean, wearing a long belted dress with high-heeled boots, and had a head of short-cropped, greying brown hair, which made her seem slightly mannish. Her grey eyes were disconcertingly steady over a full-lipped, sardonic smile.

'Bill Harris!' she exclaimed as her gaze flicked inquiringly to Dwight. 'What brings you here?'

'We've come to see Mike.'

'Who's your friend?'

'This is Captain Dwight Randall, of the Air Technical Intelligence Centre, based at Wright-Patterson AFB, in Dayton, Ohio. He's here to investigate the Socorro sighting.'

'Mike doesn't know anything about that.'

'Dammit, Gladys,' Harris said, smiling with considerable charm, 'stop giving us a hard time and at least invite us in for a coffee.'

'It isn't coffee you want, Bill.'

'Okay, it isn't coffee we want. But can we at least step inside and talk to Mike?'

'What about? He knows nothing about the Socorro sighting. As you know, he didn't go to the crash site with you.'

'Yeah, I know,' Harris said. 'And what I now want to know is - why? He's been hounding me about saucer-shaped aircraft since he came to live here - and then, when one actually crashes, he doesn't turn up when he's invited. Why?'

'Who is it, Gladys?' The man asking the question appeared in the doorway behind Gladys. In his early fifties, he was short but muscular in an open-necked sky-blue shirt and denims. Though grey-haired, he was handsome, but the skin on the right side of his face was livid from severe burning caused by

the explosion at Kiel harbour in 1945. ‘Bill!’ he said, sounding pleasantly surprised. ‘Hi! Come on in.’

Gladys rolled her eyes, but opened the door and stepped aside. ‘This,’ she said, indicating Dwight, ‘is - ’

‘Captain Randall, of the Air Technical Intelligence Centre,’ Dwight said, holding out his hand. ‘Call me Dwight.’

‘Dayton, Ohio?’ Bradley asked, shaking his hand.

‘Correct.’

‘Welcome to Roswell.’ He started leading them into the living room, but when Gladys mentioned that they were here about the Socorro sighting, he stopped in his tracks, blocking their way. ‘The Socorro sighting? Why come to see me? I know nothing about it.’

‘That’s the point,’ Dwight said. ‘First Lieutenant Harris here tells me you’re fascinated by disc-shaped aircraft, or flying saucers, and yet you didn’t turn up at the crash scene when you were invited. Why was that, Mister Bradley?’

‘I just didn’t feel inclined.’

‘You hound First Lieutenant Harris for a year-and-a-half about disc, or saucer-shaped, aircraft and then, when he tells you one has crashed, you don’t feel inclined? Do you expect us to believe that, Mister Bradley?’

‘Why not? I just lost interest in the subject.’

‘But when I rang you,’ Harris said, ‘you didn’t sound like you’d lost interest. In fact, you sounded real excited and said you were going to meet me at the main gate of the air base to join me on the trip to the crash site. So what stopped you, Mike?’

Bradley glanced at his wife, then turned a closed gaze back to Harris. ‘I’m sorry, Bill, but I just changed my mind. The reasons are personal.’

‘You must have changed your mind shortly after he rang you,’ Dwight said. ‘What kind of personal reason could make you change your mind so quickly?’

Now Bradley wasn’t smiling. ‘That’s my business, Captain.’

‘And you still insist you’re no longer interested in UFOs?’

‘You’re not deaf,’ Gladys said aggressively. ‘You heard what he said.’

‘I heard, Mrs Bradley, but I find it hard to believe.’

‘That’s your problem.’

Dwight turned back to Mike Bradley as Harris became embarrassed.

‘Would you mind at least telling me what stirred your interest in UFOs in the first place?’

‘Like a lot of folks, I was intrigued by the Kenneth Arnold sightings.’

‘Which took place a month ago. First Lieutenant Harris tells me you’ve been interested in disc, or saucer-shaped, aircraft from the moment you first came to Roswell, at the tail end of 1945 - about twenty months before the recent sightings.’

‘Okay, I’ll admit that.’

‘Long before there was any talk of so-called flying saucers.’

‘Right,’ Bradley said, looking uncomfortable.

‘Which means you picked up the interest during, or just after, the war. Is that also correct?’

‘I can’t answer that question.’

‘Because the job you did for OSS was classified?’

‘Correct,’ Bradley said. ‘Now, I think - ’

‘You better leave,’ Gladys said. ‘My husband doesn’t want to discuss this any further.’

Dwight ignored her. ‘What happened on the night of July second, Bradley, after First Lieutenant Harris called you about that crashed saucer. What stopped you from turning up to see what you’d been so desperate to find?’

‘I’ve nothing more to say,’ Bradley responded, his face more flushed than the livid flesh on his right cheek.

‘Whatever it was that stopped you, it also made you give up your UFO investigations. Isn’t that the truth, Mr Bradley?’

‘Goodnight, gentlemen. Goodbye.’ Bradley turned away and disappeared back into the house as Gladys, with a grim, no-nonsense expression, pushed them out through the front door. ‘You heard the man,’ she said harshly. ‘Now get the hell out of here.’

‘Does the name “Wilson” ring a bell, Mrs Bradley?’ Dwight boldly asked her.

She looked startled, then blushed.

‘Back in 1931, when you first met your husband, he was investigating a physicist called Wilson, who’d worked right here, in Eden Valley, with Robert H.Goddard. I believe you knew Wilson, Mrs Bradley.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ Gladys said, then slammed the door in their faces.

Dwight stared at the closed door in amazement, then at the uneasy Harris.

'Well, I'll be damned,' Harris said. 'I knew Bradley wouldn't be keen to talk, but I've never known him or Gladys to be *that* unfriendly.'

'They're both frightened,' Dwight said. 'They're just trying to cover it up. Come on, let's get out of here.'

They stepped down off the porch, climbed into the jeep, and let the corporal drive them away, back across the parched flatlands on the edge of Eden Valley. Dwight thought of the rockets that Robert H. Goddard had launched from this desolate area, then tried making the connection between Goddard, whom Bradley had visited once or twice with regard to the mysterious Wilson, and Bradley's later obsession with disc-or-saucer-shaped flying objects. He came to a blank wall.

'Bradley was obsessed with UFOs,' Harris said like a man in a trance of bewilderment. 'I just can't figure what's scared him.'

'*You're* scared,' Dwight informed him. 'First a flying saucer crashes, then it's spirited away to Carswell, then the only civilian witness to its existence disappears, and now Bradley and his wife have clammed up and won't discuss UFOs. So you're scared... with good reason.'

'Yes, sir, that's right, I'm scared. What about you?'

'Yeah,' Dwight confessed, glancing up to be dazzled by the brilliant, vast, empty sky. 'I'm scared too, I guess.'

Chapter Three

Wilson, Ernst Stoll, Hans Kammler and Artur Nebe were together in the underground viewing bay as the *Kugelblitz II*, a twenty-five-foot diameter, piloted flying saucer, descended at hovering speed through the deep well formed by a circle of soaring, ice-capped mountain peaks. Its lights were flashing kaleidoscopically around its sharp outer edge, but its bass humming sound, the infrasounds of its power source, which could tighten a human skull at a certain intensity, was blocked off by the thick plate-glass window of the viewing bay. Eventually, the saucer started settling gently on the steel-plated landing pad constructed at ground level in the cavernous space hacked out of the snow-covered Antarctic rock.

The base seemed to be underground, but was actually at ground level and hidden from the view of pilots flying overhead by an umbrella of soaring, snow-capped mountain peaks. However, working from this valley floor, beginning during World War II, Wilson's *Sklavenarbeiter*, or slave labour, under the ruthless supervision of the former SS officers, Stoll, Kammler and Nebe, had worked night and day at hacking their way into the base of the mountain to create aircraft hangars, workshops, laboratories, the first two of what would be many landing pads for the flying saucers, offices, staff accommodations, and underground quarters for the slave labour.

The slaves had originally been shipped out from the occupied territories of Nazi Germany and, more recently, abducted from various countries and flown here in Wilson’s flying saucers. Only two were operating right now, but more were being constructed. Within five years there would be a whole fleet of them, each one better than the last, with no end to their technological evolution in sight. If not feeling pride (a redundant emotion) Wilson certainly felt satisfied as he watched the saucer rocking lightly on its base before finally settling down.

Its bass humming sound receded into silence, then its flashing lights winked

off one by one. The arc lights powered by self-charging generators and fixed high up on the walls of solid rock, to illuminate the gloomy, cavernous landing area, gave the saucer's metallic grey surface a silvery sheen. It looked alien and beautiful.

The other saucer was at rest beside it, but covered in a tarpaulin. Both were surrounded by white-coated technicians and slaves, men and women alike, dressed in identical, dark grey coveralls that just about kept out the biting cold. It was not the Antarctic cold, since that had been reduced by the installation of phase-change solar-heat pumps that could store enough energy to also get the colony through the long Antarctic night; but it remained cold enough to be uncomfortable for the unfortunate labour force.

Now, as the *Kugelblitz II* settled down on the landing pad on its four retractable hydraulic legs, the technicians, armed guards and *Sklavenarbeiter* moved in to surround it. As the latter placed steel stepladders along the sloping sides of the saucer, to begin checking and polishing its seamless sides, a trap-door opened in the base, sloping downwards, and a slim man dressed in a pinstripe suit lowered himself to the landing pad and looked around in a dazed, disbelieving manner, before the armed guards closed in upon him. A second man emerged from the saucer almost immediately, this one big, bulky and wearing dirty bib-and brace coveralls. He, too, looked around him as if dazed, until he was surrounded by the armed guards and led away with the first man.

'Good,' Kammler said. 'They caught both of them.' Blond and blue-eyed, he glanced at the dark-eyed Nebe, who merely nodded solemnly and stroked the pistol strapped around his waist. Both men, like Wilson and Ernst Stoll, were wearing heavy roll-neck pullovers under thick coats and trousers. All of their clothing was coloured black.

Wilson nodded and smiled. He was feeling good today. He needed advanced prosthetic replacements for his artificial elbow joints and the man they had captured could do the job - that and many others. Sometimes it all seemed so simple. Faith could move mountains.

The two men surrounded by guards moved out of view far below, approaching the lifts that would carry them up to the upper level of the colony, occupied by Wilson and his most senior staff, including those now grouped around him. He glanced at Ernst Stoll, once an enthusiastic rocket engineer, then an SS policeman, now an embittered, therefore malleable,

administrator responsible for the collection and welfare of the slave labour. Stoll was looking down at the parked flying saucer, showing little emotion. He had left his heart and soul in conquered Germany; now he lived for this colony. Wilson was satisfied.

'Let's go and greet them,' he said, turning away from the window and leaving the viewing bay through doors that led into a gloomy corridor hacked out of the inside of the mountain. The corridor led into a larger, brighter room, which also overlooked the landing area for the saucers, but contained comfortable armchairs and settees on an Italian-tiled floor partially covered by large Moroccan carpets. The wall overlooking the landing area was mostly thick plate-glass framed by ugly reinforced concrete. The back wall had been hacked out of the mountain and was simply the original rock covered in concrete and damp-proofing black paint. The two side walls were also of reinforced concrete, but contained steel-plated doors, one of which was for the lift, with a row of indicator lights above it. As Wilson entered the room with his entourage behind him, the lights came on one by one, indicating that the lift was ascending. The light stayed on at the marking for the fifth level.

When the lift doors opened, the two captives emerged, being prodded by the automatic weapons of two guards wearing old SS uniforms. The slim, grey-haired man in the pinstripe suit and tie was, Wilson knew, Dr Paul King, of the Powered Limbs Unit of West Hendon Hospital, London, England. The bigger man in the dirty brace-and-bib coveralls was the farmer, Marlon Clarke, who had witnessed the crashed flying saucer near Magdalena, New Mexico. The sophisticated Dr King, while clearly bewildered and frightened, was in control of himself; the other one, Clarke, was terrified and practically dribbling.

'Dr King?' Wilson said, as if this meeting and the circumstances were routine.

'Yes,' King replied, his voice admirably calm, though his eyes betrayed confusion and fear. 'Who are you? Where am I?'

'My name is Wilson. You will address me as that. You're in a colony located inside a mountain in Neu Schwabenland, or Queen Maud Land, in Antarctica. You are here as my prisoner.'

Clarke started sobbing, uncontrollably, like a child, wiping the tears from his cheeks with a grubby hand as he stared down at his own feet.

'Oh, Christ,' he said. 'Oh, Jesus, I don't believe... Oh, God help me, I'm

dreaming.’

‘No, Mr Clarke, you’re not dreaming. Nor are you imagining things. This is real. We are real. What’s puzzling you, Dr King?’

‘Something about your face.’

‘I’m seventy-seven years old, doctor, but look fifteen years younger. My face lacks a certain mobility due to crude plastic surgery. I also need improving in other ways, which is why I need you.’

‘Oh, Jesus,’ Clarke sobbed. ‘Why me? What the hell am I doing here?’

‘You’ve been brought here,’ Wilson informed him, ‘because you were unfortunate enough to witness the debris of a crashed flying saucer and its three dead crew members. We can’t permit you to talk about it, so you’re here to be silenced.’ Clarke burst into tears again as Wilson turned to the other man. ‘As for you, Dr King, you’re fortunate enough to be one of the world’s leading specialists in research into the myoelectric control of external prosthetics, or artificial limbs. You’ll therefore be invaluable to this community and need have no fear if you co-operate.’

‘Co-operate?’ King asked as Marlon Clarke sobbed hysterically beside him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘This is a secret community devoted to science,’ Wilson explained, ‘with no moral impediments to progress. We’ll do anything necessary, no matter how ruthless, for the advancement of the technology we’re creating. We’re a society of masters and slaves, scientists and their servants, and we live beyond the reach of so-called civilisation and its antiquated moral constraints. You are either for us or against us, Dr King - willing worker or slave. The choice is all yours.’

‘I think I’m dreaming,’ King said. ‘I just can’t accept this.’

‘Don’t be as foolish as him,’ Wilson warned, indicating the sobbing Clarke, ‘by putting this down to imagination or dreaming. This is real, Dr King, and it cannot be stopped. Outlawed by the world we may be, but we’re well out of reach. The saucers are my creation and just the tip of the iceberg. My ultimate purpose is a new kind of man, both physically and mentally: the mythical superman made real in a world based on logic, not emotion. We’re a unique community, Dr King, and you will be part of it.’

‘What if I refuse?’

‘You don’t have a choice. Either you do it willingly or we compel you to do it. We have our ways, Dr King, and you can’t escape from here. Outside this

mountain is the Antarctic wilderness. Where would you go?'

As the full implication of what Wilson was saying struck home to Clarke, he sobbed more profusely and visibly started shaking. When Wilson nodded, one of the guards took hold of Clarke's elbow and managed to steady him. Dr King, though clearly frightened, remained in control of himself and stared about him in wonder.

'I take it you're human beings,' he said, turning back to Wilson, 'and not creatures from outer space.'

Wilson smiled coldly. 'Alas, yes, we're all too human.'

King glanced at Stoll, Kammler and Nebe, then nodded, indicating the armed guards. 'You look like a bunch of Nazis to me.'

'I'm an American,' Wilson said, 'but one without political allegiance. These men, it is true, were in the SS, but all that is behind them now. There are no nationalities here; we've all disowned that. Here, our only religion is science. We don't worship false gods.'

'I know I'm not dreaming,' King said, 'but I still can't accept this. I don't know who you are or how long you've been here, but you won't be able to stay. Sooner or later, the West will learn about you and put a stop to your madness.'

'Some of them know we're here,' Wilson said, 'but they can't get us out. No one can get us out of here. No one has the technology.'

'I don't believe that,' King said.

'It's true,' Wilson insisted. 'The US government knows we are here, but they can't get us out.'

'You mean they've already tried?'

'Yes. Last January they launched the biggest Antarctic expedition in history, Operation Highjump, led by the explorer and naval officer, Rear-Admiral Richard E.Byrd. The resources of the assault force, which was disguised as an exploratory expedition, included thirteen ships, two seaplane tenders, an aircraft carrier, six two-engine R4D transports, six Martin PBM flying boats, six helicopters, and a total of 4,000 men. When this supposedly invincible assault force reached the Antarctic coast, it docked, on January 12, near Queen Maud Land, or Neu Schwabenland, then divided up into three separate task forces. When the expedition ended, in February, a lot earlier than anticipated, there were numerous stories in the press about Rear-Admiral Byrd's references to enemy fighters that came from the Polar regions and

could fly from one Pole to the other with incredible speed. The machines to which he was referring are the kind that brought you here and were created by me in Nazi Germany. As for Admiral Byrd's mission, it was deemed a disaster and the United States has since declared that it's withdrawing from the Antarctic for at least a decade. They know they can't get us out of here. They don't have the technology.'

Dr King did not reply, but he licked his lips and glanced about him, still in a state of disbelief, trying to accept the reality of this nightmare as the farmer, Marlon Clarke, sniffed back his tears and looked frantically around him, his eyes stunned by dread.

Ever curious about human emotions, since he had so few himself, Wilson decided to take the confused, disbelieving Dr King and terrified Marlon Clarke on a tour of the colony.

'Come,' he said. 'Follow me.'

Confident that neither King nor Clarke would try to escape, since there was nowhere to go, Wilson nodded at the armed guards, who put up their weapons and left the room through the door leading to the corridor. Wilson then entered the lift, followed by Dr King and the dribbling Clarke, then Stoll, Kammler and Nebe. Stoll pressed the button for the third level. When the lift had descended and the doors opened again, Wilson led the group out into a clamour of hammering, pneumatic drilling, and echoing voices.

Another tunnel, being hacked out of the mountain, was being walled and roofed with reinforced concrete and steel wiring. As Wilson led King and Clarke through churning dust in the arc-lit gloom, it was clear that the work was being done by the filthy men and women who slaved under gunpoint and to the cracking of the whips of other guards.

'This all started in Nazi Germany,' Wilson explained. 'Contrary to popular belief, the Antarctic continent has many unexplored, ice-free areas, many of which are well hidden from view by vast ice sheets and mountains. In other words, Dr King, we are not quite underground, though we're hidden by high mountain peaks. We're carving the rest of the space we need from the interior of the same mountain.'

Gradually accepting that all of this was real, Dr King was glancing about him, with awe as well as fear, at the many unfortunates slaving in this dust-filled, arc-lit, rocky hell.

'Nazi Germany,' Wilson continued, 'had a genius for the construction of

immense underground production plants and factories, most completed with the ruthless use of captured slave labour. Indeed, most of the underground research centres of Nazi Germany were gigantic feats of construction, containing air-shafts, wind-tunnels, machine-shops, assembly plants, launching pads, supply dumps, accommodation for all who worked there, and adjoining camps for the slave workers - yet few German civilians knew that they existed.'

A whip cracked and someone screamed. Dr King twitched but walked on, though Clarke, growing ever more terrified, released an audible groan.

'Take Peenemünde, for instance. The full enormity of that research complex can only be gauged from the fact that apart from its wind tunnel - the most advanced in the world, containing its own research department, instrumentation laboratory, workshops and design office - it also had its own power station, docks, oxygen plant, airfield, POW camp for specially selected prisoners who provided cheap labour, and social and medical facilities associated with a town of 20,000 inhabitants. It was therefore the prototype for the even larger underground factories to be built secretly in Germany and Austria, notably at Nordhausen in the southern Harz mountain range of Thuringia, which is where I created my first piloted flying saucer, the *Kugelblitz*. Do you know about Nordhausen, Dr King?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'It was an immense rocket research and construction facility, consisting of a series of linked tunnels carved out of the Kohnstein Mountain, near the town of Nordhausen. The parallel tunnels were 1,800 metres long. Leading off them were fifty side-chambers, a main work area of 125,000 square metres, and twelve ventilation shafts that had been bored down from the peak of the mountain. Work at converting the tunnels into a mass-production facility for rockets began in September 1943 with the use of 2,000 engineers and 15,000 inmates from the nearby concentration camps. The slaves were kept in a separate camp located in a hidden mountain valley, less than a kilometre from the entrance to the tunnel. A new underground complex, to be linked to Nordhausen by another network of tunnels, was in the process of being built sixteen kilometres under the ground around the town of Bleicherode, twenty kilometres distance. Between them, Nordhausen and Bleicherode constituted the first of the SS underground factories - virtually living towns - and what the Nazis were doing there, under the earth, we are now doing here, in the

Antarctic.’

‘I can’t imagine how you managed to get so much equipment and so many of these unfortunate wretches here,’ King said, glancing around him at the sobbing, sweating captives now slaving in abominable conditions.

‘The labour force and equipment were shipped in submarines, in the course of many voyages, over a period of years, throughout the war, when other Nazi boats and submarines were protecting the South Atlantic coastline of Antarctica. Bear in mind that the normal U-boat of that time could cover 7,000 miles on each operational cruise. Also, the Germans had submarine tankers spread across the South Atlantic Ocean at least as far as south of South Africa, and any one of those tankers, which had a displacement of 2,000 tons, could supply ten U-boats with fuel and stores, thus trebling the time that those submarines could stay at sea. It took a long time, but we managed to get enough men and equipment here before the war ended. We should have enough to last a couple more years, by which time we will have more and bigger saucers to fly in what we need.’

The tunnel led into another large viewing bay in which the plate-glass windows had yet to be inserted. Far below was a workshop of massive dimensions, with jibs and cranes, whining machines, and sheets of a metallic substance, dull grey and different shapes, being swung to and fro. There were many workers down there, also, as well as long work benches, steaming vats, blast furnaces, screeching electric drills, and the ribbed bodywork for other, larger saucers. The walls of the workshop were solid rock, hacked out of the mountain's interior, but the vast ceiling was reinforced concrete, as was the floor.

‘The workshop’s 300 feet long and 138 feet wide,’ Wilson explained. ‘Its roof is eighty feet high and made from twenty-three-feet thick reinforced concrete. To pierce it, you’d need a bomb weighing about twelve tons and striking the ceiling at a speed of Mach 1, the speed of sound. In order to construct it, we needed 49,000 tons of steel and concrete for the roof alone. Hundreds of jacks were used to raise the roof slowly, inches at a time, with the walls being built up beneath it, as it was raised. The enormous amounts of steel, cement, sand and gravel needed were brought in by U-boat and airplane over a period of years, like the rest of the material and the labour force. The site used about 5,000 workers, who were shipped here from the occupied territories, mostly from concentration camps. At any one time there were

always at least a thousand men at work. This went on around the clock in twelve-hour shifts, and my guards had no hesitation in executing anyone too ill or exhausted to do it. For this reason, we managed to complete the construction of the workshop in a year. With logic, Dr King, and not emotions, men can do the impossible.'

Dr King gazed down on the skeletal saucer prototypes and the great steel plates being swung to and fro. 'So it was one of your flying saucers that crashed at Socorro, New Mexico.'

'No,' Wilson said. 'Not one of ours.'

King started to respond, obviously wanting to know about the other saucer, but before he could do so Wilson waved him into silence and led him and the others across a catwalk, through another, shorter tunnel, eventually entering a steel-plated room which had rows of frosted glass cabinets on the shelves and naked, dead bodies inside them.

Clarke stopped walking when he saw the bodies, letting out another groan, but the dark-eyed Artur Nebe, who still had his hand on his pistol, roughly pushed him onward. Dr King merely gave a slight shudder, but continued walking behind Wilson. They soon emerged from the tunnel to another room, a laboratory, its steel-plated walls climbing to a ceiling of chiselled rock that was part of the interior of the mountain.

Here, the members of staff looked perfectly normal, men and women in white smocks, reading and writing, peering down through microscopes, checking printouts, gauges and thermometers, working quietly, intently. More appalling, however, were the specimens in the cages and glass jars: human heads, artificially pumping hearts, floating brains and intestines. There were also cabinets containing artificial joints and various prosthetics.

'Oh, Jesus!' Clarke groaned. He covered his face with his hands, started shaking even more, and became so weak that he had to be propped up by Ernst Stoll. Clarke started sobbing again.

'Take him away,' Wilson said. 'Might as well prepare him immediately. Stoll, come and see me in five minutes. I'll be in my office.'

'Yes, sir,' Stoll said. He and Kammler then slipped their arms around Clarke and practically carried him out of the laboratory, leaving only the dark-eyed, expressionless Artur Nebe with Wilson and Dr King. The latter was gazing around him in amazement, but not shock, as prosthetics were what he had been working on in the hospital in England.

‘A familiar sight?’ Wilson asked, pleased to see that Dr King was in control of himself.

‘The prosthetics, yes. The rest of it, no. We work under certain moral restraints, as you’ve already noted.’

Wilson smiled thinly. ‘The work that goes on here,’ he explained, ‘is not only for the production of advanced prosthetics and organs. Its ultimate goal is life extension, first through the transfer and replacement of bodily parts, eventually by discovering the secrets of longevity. Right now, we need primitive life extension through prosthetic replacement, which is where you come in. Your work will involve human prosthetics and the creation of cyborgs: half man, half machine. I’m sure you’ll find it highly satisfying.’

‘You realise I think you’re insane.’

‘I’m not. I’m just logical.’

Dr King was not swayed by Wilson’s brand of logic. ‘I’m fifty years old. I have a family and friends. Even were I to accept that I can’t escape from here, I’d still find it psychologically impossible to adjust to the loss of everything I’ve known, loved and need. In short, even if I tried to co-operate, I don’t think I’d succeed.’

‘You worry unnecessarily. We have ways of indoctrination. Drug therapy, combined with psychological persuasion, will aid your adjustment while letting you retain all your faculties. That process of indoctrination begins today.’ Dr King just stared at him, blinking too much, turning pale. ‘Are you frightened?’ Wilson asked.

‘Yes, I’m very, very frightened.’

‘You won’t be for long.’

Wilson nodded at Artur Nebe, who removed his pistol from its holster and indicated the nearest doorway with it. Dr King licked his lips, then walked out, followed closely by Nebe. Wilson sighed, then stepped into another lift and ascended to the level directly above - the highest level so far, though others were planned.

Emerging from the lift, he entered a sunlit, dome-shaped room, its white-metal walls gleaming, enormous windows running around the walls, framing the dazzling sky and snow-capped mountain peaks of the Antarctic wilderness. Between the windows were doors, steel-plated, all closed, computer consoles jutting out just above them, their lights flashing on and off. The room was fifty feet wide. There was a desk in the middle. On the

desk was an intercom, a microfilm viewer, a pile of books, notepaper, pens and pencils, a panel of switches. There were chairs in front of the desk, all leather, deep and comfortable; there was no other furniture in the room. The floor was laid with plain tiles which, in combination with the steel-plated walls, made the room cold and sterile.

Wilson walked across the floor, his footsteps reverberating, passing the desk and stopping at the window, to look out over his kingdom of snow and ice, the impossibly blue sky. He only turned away from that view when the door opened and Ernst Stoll entered. Stoll stopped by the chairs at the desk, but he didn't sit down.

'You wanted to see me, sir?'

'Yes.' Wilson remained at the window, gazing steadily at Stoll, aware that he wouldn't like what he was about to hear. Stoll was in his middle thirties, but looked older, no longer handsome, ravaged by the loss of his family and idealism during the war. Now loathing the outer world, having nothing to return to, he was devoted to Wilson and his work with this Antarctic colony. He would not want to leave.

'The colony is expanding rapidly and requires more workers,' Wilson said. 'The original labour force is dying off and for that reason, also, we need more workers. We also need human specimens for our laboratory experiments. Finally, we need smaller people for use in the saucers, either in human form or, given time, as cyborgs. We can find a plentiful, constant supply of the small Ache Indians of Paraguay. That country remains sympathetic to the Nazis and will welcome your overtures.'

'I'm to go to Paraguay?'

'More than that, Ernst. Not for a mere trip. You must give up direct participation in the running of this colony and instead take up residence in Paraguay. There you will cultivate a close relationship with General Stroessner, organise the purchase, collection and shipment of the Ache Indians, and keep constantly vigilant for signs of betrayal by Stroessner or his government. In other words, you will leave here for good and settle in Paraguay.'

Stoll was dismayed. 'I don't want to leave here, sir, and I certainly don't want to settle in Paraguay. While it's true that the country has become a haven for Nazi refugees, most of them live in protected enclosures in the jungle and go mad with boredom.'

‘You won’t be bored, Ernst. I promise you that. You’ll be busy rounding up Ache Indians and liasing between the Paraguayans and me. You’ll be in frequent contact with us here; and will receive regular visits from myself and others. You’ll also be our main contact with the rest of the world, which will include a lot of travelling and meetings. So I’m certain that you’ll find it far from dull and might even enjoy it. This work is important, Ernst.’

‘I’d rather stay here, but if you insist...’

‘I insist. I don’t trust anyone else, Ernst. Kammler and Nebe are men who like intrigues and live by betrayal. I want them here, where I can keep my eyes on them. You’re the only one I’d trust outside the colony, so it has to be you.’

‘I’m honoured,’ Ernst said, as stupid about Wilson as he had been with Himmler during the war. ‘When do I leave?’

‘Not immediately. Right now, that country is in the middle of a minor revolt, which I believe will be defeated by President Morínigo. While this is going on, and causing great confusion, we’re having long and frustrating negotiations with that corrupt army general, Alfredo Stroessner. We don’t expect to have matters resolved too soon. I’d think in six or seven months from now. Say early next year. Is that satisfactory?’

‘Yes, of course.’

Wilson smiled thinly and shook his hand. ‘Good, Ernst. I’m pleased.’

Ernst nodded solemnly and left the office, having foolishly believed everything Wilson had told him.

Yet what Wilson had told him was essentially correct - at least regarding the work required. Where he had misled Ernst was in telling him that life in the jungles of Paraguay would not be dull. In fact, it would be hell, which is why Wilson had chosen Ernst. Kammler and Nebe would both have refused to go. Ernst, then, with his perverted idealism, was the natural choice.

Pleased with himself, Wilson took the lift from his office back down to the third level. Once there, he made his way to the steel-plated laboratory with the ceiling of chiselled rock and gruesome collection of human heads, artificially pumping hearts, floating brains, intestines, and all kinds of prosthetics. Passing the men and women in white smocks, he entered the operating theatre, where the unfortunate Marlon Clarke, now almost mindless with terror, even though slightly sedated, was strapped by his legs, arms and forehead to a surgical bed and surrounded by silent, white-smocked surgeons.

‘Oh, please,’ Clarke whimpered tearfully. ‘*Please*!’

Wilson leaned over him, to smile coldly at him. ‘We wish to remove your head while you’re still fully aware, in order to check if we can preserve it in its conscious state. Your neck has been anaesthetised, so you shouldn’t feel a thing, though you’ll be aware until the very last moment of exactly what’s happening. Treat it as an experience.’

He then stepped back to observe as the leading surgeon switched on the electric guillotine and moved it on its pulley into place over the throat of the pop-eyed, sweating, violently shaking Marlon Clarke. As the surgeon proceeded to surgically remove Clarke’s head, Wilson calmly looked on, curious to see how the unfortunate man would react before death blotted out his mind.

Chapter Four

This place is the pits, Fuller decided as he parked his jalopy in front of the hospital annex in Fort Bliss, New Mexico, which was now being used to house the German rocket scientists under contract to the US Air Force. Fuller was an urban man who hated the country, and having driven the eighty miles from the White Sands Proving Ground, located between Alamogordo and the site of the first atomic explosion, across eighty miles of desert relieved only by endless sagebrush, he was convinced that he had passed through a world inhabited only by mountain lions, coyotes, wildcats, and rattlesnakes. He was therefore relieved to be in Fort Bliss, El Paso, within sight of the Organ Mountains (which, he had been informed, reminded the German scientists of the Bavarian Alps), though was *not* thrilled to step out of his car into more dust and scorching heat.

How he longed to be back in Langley, Virginia, with his CIA pals.

As he walked up to the door of Count Werner von Braun's rooms in the wood-frame building, an Army Stinson L-5, a small liaison plane, flew overhead, reminding him that this was a military base and that the Kraut scientists housed here, including von Braun, were reportedly conducting, in collaboration with the Americans, a highly secret research project for the government.

Things sure change quickly, he thought with unsullied cynicism.

Ringing the doorbell located beside the mesh-wire screen, he reminded himself that the man he was about to meet was not an American, but a former Nazi scientist who had created the V-2 rocket that had devastated London and Antwerp during the war. Now classed as a civilian with civilian staff, von Braun remained in charge of 117 of his own German scientists, engineers and technicians, albeit under the supervision of US Army Major James P. Hammill, a physicist and German-speaking Fordham graduate. The Germans had come into America in 1945 as so-called Wards of the Army, thus requiring no entry permits, all signing one-year contracts with the Army.

These were soon changed to five-year contracts, and now the Krauts, while still quartered in this hospital annex, were acquiring automobiles, wearing sombreros and cowboy boots, going to movies and night-clubs, and sending their kids to schools in El Paso.

A better life than we're having, Fuller thought as the front door opened and a well-fleshed, handsome face appeared behind the mesh-wire screen. Defeat has its rewards.

'Yes?' Count Werner von Braun asked.

'Sam Fuller, from Langley, Virginia.'

'Ah, yes, the CIA. You're expected. Come in.'

He opened the mesh-wire door to let Fuller enter. Inside, the house, or conversion, was neat, if rather spartan and obviously not meant to last. Soon, as Fuller knew, von Braun would be moving to Redstone Arsenal, Huntsville, Alabama, as director of research-and-development projects of the Army Ordnance Guided Missile Centre.

Another reward, Fuller thought as he and the imposing German shook hands.

'Please,' von Braun said, indicating a soft chair in the living room. 'Be seated.' Fuller sat. 'I'm afraid my wife isn't here at present. A drink. Some tea? Lemonade?'

'Beer?'

'This I have,' von Braun said, his great bulk looming large over Fuller, casting its shadow upon him. 'One moment, please.' When the German disappeared into the kitchen, Fuller had a good look around. No TV set yet, but the radio was on: Benny Goodman's orchestra and a lady singing the swinging 'Bei Mir Bist du Schön', which made Fuller want to snap his fingers and dance. A copy of *Forever Amber* was on the table, in the shadow of a vase of fresh flowers. Clearly someone was perfecting his or her English with popular music and fiction. Von Braun soon returned with a tall glass filled with beer, which he gave to Fuller, and a bottle of Pepsi Cola for himself. 'I am sorry it's not German,' he said. 'American beer is not good, no?'

'No,' Fuller said. He sipped his lousy American beer. Von Braun sat in the sofa directly facing him, his thick legs outspread. He had the build of a wrestler and the ease that came with huge egos. He would not be pushed easily.

‘Nice place,’ Fuller said.

‘You know that’s not true. It is adequate, but better than we deserve - and, of course, temporary. I look forward to moving on.’

‘You like it in America? Apart from the beer, I mean?’

‘At first I was lonely. A lot of us, we were lonely. But recently we were joined by our parents, wives and children. Three hundred in all. Included in these were my parents, the Baron and Baroness Magnus von Braun - whose ancestral estate in Silesia has been confiscated by the Russians - and I have also been joined by my bride. I was given leave to marry her in Landshut and bring her back here. The Americans are generous.’

Damn right, Fuller thought. And an eighteen-year-old bride, a second cousin, at that. ‘We’re not so generous with our own citizens,’ he said without the trace of a smile.

Von Braun smiled for him, though his gaze remained cool. ‘No, I suppose not.’

‘Where’s your wife now?’ Fuller asked.

‘I thought our conversation would bore her,’ von Braun said, ‘so I sent her out for a walk.’

Which means she can’t say the wrong thing, Fuller thought. Some fat pumpkin we have here.

He sipped some more beer. His throat felt dry in this dusty hole. ‘What do you most like about America, Count von Braun?’

‘American sport. Joe DeMaggio and Rocky Graziano.’ Von Braun shrugged. ‘Apart from that, I only like my work. Now what do you want to know, Mr Fuller?’

Fuller smiled, admiring von Braun’s bluntness. A 28-year old hard case from Brooklyn, New York, Fuller was the child of moderately wealthy, uncaring parents, a clear-eyed product of Harvard, and a veteran of many relationships and one failed, childless marriage. Not a man for finer feelings, he admired those who were nimble on their feet and ruthless in pursuit of what they wanted. This von Braun, though built like a wrestler, clearly had those attributes.

‘I’ve come to enquire about your rocket construction programme. The V-1 and V-2.’

Von Braun sighed. ‘I’ve been over this so many times. There is nothing secret about it anymore. It is all in the files.’

‘It’s easier for me to talk to you than try to get at the classified files. I have clearance for this, but not for your records. That’s why I’m here.’

Von Braun sighed again, sipped some Pepsi Cola, then rested the dripping bottle on his lap. ‘So what do you want to know?’

‘You were, I believe, one of the founder members of the German amateur rocket society, also known as the Spaceship Travel Club.’

‘Yes. The *Verein für Raumschiffart,* or VfR. It came into being in 1927 when a group of space-travel enthusiasts took over an abandoned three-hundred-acre arsenal, which they called their *Raketenflugplatz,* or Rocket Flight Place, in the Berlin suburb of Reindickerdorf. From there they actually shot some crude, liquid-fuelled rockets skywards.’

‘When did you join it?’

‘About 1930, as I recall. By then the VfR included most of the rocket experts of the day, including Rudolf Nebel, Hermann Oberth, Willy Ley, Max Valier, and Klaus Riedel. I was very proud to gain admittance to that august company.’

‘How did you end up in the German army?’

‘I know what you’re implying, but it’s not true,’ von Braun said with no sign of anger. ‘I was never a Nazi. In April 1930, the Ordnance Branch of the German Army’s Ballistics and Weapons Office, headed by General Becker, appointed Captain Walter Dornberger to work on rocket development at the army’s Kummersdorf firing range, approximately fifteen miles south of Berlin. Two years later, after many experiments to find the most promising method of propulsion and the most stable means of flight, the VfR demonstrated one of their liquid-fuelled rockets to Dornberger and other officers at Kummersdorf. In 1933, when Hitler came to power, the VfR was taken over by the Nazis and become part of the Kummersdorf programme. Many of the German engineers, including myself, were therefore conscripted in a very real sense. We were, and remain, scientists - not soldiers.’

‘You ended up in Peenemünde, working on the V-1 rocket programme.’

‘Yes, but the prototype was known as the A-2.’

‘Is it true that much of the German rocket research was based on the work of the American rocket scientist, Robert H.Goddard?’

‘A genius shamefully ignored by his own country. Yes, it’s true. We all revered Goddard and based our work on his brilliant theories. While in the United States those theories were being received with indifference and even

contempt, we in Hitler's Germany was spending fortunes on rocket research that was, by and large, based on Goddard's work. As early as December, 1934, two highly advanced A-2 rockets, constructed at Kummersdorf, gyroscopically controlled, and powered by oxygen-and-alcohol fuelled motors, were launched from the island of Borkum in the North Sea and reached an altitude of one-and-a-half miles. Those stabilised, liquid-fuelled rockets were, at the time, the only known, serious challengers to the rockets of Robert H.Goddard.'

'But the work didn't end there.'

'No. In March 1936 we demonstrated some more motors at Kummersdorf, including one with an unprecedented 3,500 pounds of thrust. Those demonstrations so impressed the German Commander-in-Chief, General Fritsch, that permission was given for us to build an independent rocket establishment in a suitably remote part of Germany, where research and test firings could be carried out in the strictest secrecy. The chosen site was near the village of Peenemünde, on the island of Usedom, off the Baltic coast. The rest is now history.'

'According to an Operation Paperclip report, when the V-2 rockets were inspected by Allied scientists in the captured Nordhausen Central Works at the close of the war, they were found to be remarkably similar to the rockets of Robert H.Goddard.'

'Of course. The most notable features of the propulsion unit were the shutter-type valves in the fixed grill, the fuel injection orifices incorporated in the same grill, the combustion chamber, spark plugs and nozzle. We stole those from a Robert H. Goddard patent that was reproduced in the German aviation magazine, *Flugsport* - in January 1939, as I recall.'

'In 1944 many Allied pilots were being harassed by what appeared to be balls of fire which were under some kind of remote control. The pilots called them "Foo Fighters". Were they connected in any way with your work or Goddard's early experiments?'

'No, I don't believe so. I had heard that they were some new kind of German secret weapon, radio-controlled from the ground, and designed either to foul the ignition systems of the bombers or act as pyschological weapons, to confuse and unnerve Allied pilots. Certainly they were not designed or constructed at Peenemünde. However, given that they might have utilised some of our technical innovations, it's possible they were created by rocket

engineers other than my own.'

'Such as?'

Von Braun shrugged. 'We were scattered far and wide.'

'What about Kummersdorf or Peenemünde?'

'Not at the latter; possibly at the former. There were actually two rocket research centres at Kummersdorf, separated by an old firing range. We were transferred from the original site to the new site at the other side of the firing range, then another development team took over our old site.'

'Anything unusual about it?'

Von Braun smiled knowingly. 'You mean the reports about a traitorous American physicist?'

'Wilson. You know about him?'

'Not much,' von Braun said, shaking his head. 'I never met him or saw him. I only heard reports about his extraordinary presence as part of a research team involved in a top-secret project. I never found out what the project was, but certainly ideas and innovations were swapped across the firing range. The other establishment was even more heavily guarded than ours.'

'Do you think Wilson had anything to do with the so-called Foo fighters?'

'There were rumours about disc-shaped aircraft. Frightened whispers. No more than that. Certainly nothing of that nature was tested while I was at Kummersdorf.'

'Do you believe disc-shaped aircraft were on the German agenda?'

'Yes. I myself didn't believe that such a craft could be made workable - I believed in rockets, not flying discs - but certainly Germany has a long history of research into vertical-rising, spherical or disc-shaped aircraft. In fact, the idea itself was first conceived by a German: the 19th century mathematician and aeronautical theorist Wilhelm Zachariae.'

'A theorist,' Fuller said impatiently, now listening, also, to the Glen Miller orchestra on the radio and wondering what had caused the famous band leader's unexplained disappearance over the Atlantic. 'Were his ideas ever put into practice?'

'Yes. As early as 1939 Dr. Alexander Lippisch, at Messerschmitt, Augsburg, was developing his Delta-Rocket Jet ME 163 and testing its circular wing in the wind tunnel of the AVA company at Göttingen. Meanwhile, Arthur Sack, of Machern, near Leipzig, had for years been obsessed with the idea of disk-shaped aircraft. He tested various models at

the model-airplane competition at Leipzig-Mockau in July 1939, with disastrous results. A larger, piloted model, the AS 6, was constructed at the Mitteldeutsche Motorenwerke factory in Leipzig and failed to fly during its test flight at the beginning of February, 1944, on the airfield at Brandis, near Leipzig. He tried again at Brandis in April 1944, but the airplane barely lifted off the ground. Shortly after, the Allied advance brought Sack's experimentation to a halt for all time.'

'Any more?'

Von Braun sighed, obviously finding the subject tiresome. 'Not much. Viktor Schauberger claimed to have designed and constructed a small, remote-controlled flying saucer in 1940 in the Kertl aircraft company in Vienna. Reportedly, during a test conducted three years later, the saucer went through the ceiling, but by and large it was otherwise unworkable - like most of the other prototypes. Then there were the so-called flying wings, or all-wing airframes, of the Horten brothers, which excited the interest of your intelligence, but which in fact were of value purely for research into wind velocity and drag. Finally, as you doubtless know, by the closing months of the war there were many rumours in German aeronautical circles about the imminent appearance of radically different airplanes, without wings, tails, rudders or other surface protruberances, and powered by special turbines or jet engines. I think it unlikely that such projects were completed - if indeed they ever existed in the first place.'

'Which gets us back to the rockets.'

'I'm afraid so,' Von Braun said.

'What about Nordhausen, towards the end of the war? Were there other rocket engineers in that area?'

'You mean Wilson again.' Von Braun was sourly amused by Fuller's interest. 'More rumours,' he said. 'We heard that another group, heavily guarded by Artur Nebe's most ruthless SS troops, had been shipped in from Kummersdorf to Kahla, which was not very far from Nordhausen. There were also rumours that a jet-propelled aircraft of unusual configuration, but possibly spherical or disc-shaped, had been test-flown over Kahla in February 1945. The results of that test, if indeed it took place, were not known, but in early April the Kahla complex was evacuated, as was Nordhausen, and that was the last I heard of Wilson.'

Fuller knew the rest. At the end of the war, Germany's scientific papers

were hidden, and eventually found, in tunnels, caves, dry wells, ploughed fields, river beds and even dried-out cess pools. Also found across the length and breadth of Nazi Germany and its occupied territories were the well known V-1 flying bombs and V-2 rockets, as well as lesser known, but equally formidable, heat-guided ground-to-air missiles, sonic-guidance torpedoes, the highly advanced U-XX1 and U-XXIII electrical submarines, ME-262 jet-fighters, rocket planes that flew even faster than the Messerschmitts, the beginnings of an Atom Bomb project, and the prototypes for other, vertical-rising jet aircraft. Because of this, there was a race between the Allies and the Russians to capture as many of the rocket scientists and engineers as possible, as well as the invaluable technical documentation. Deals were thus struck between the conquerors and their former enemies, particularly with regard to those involved in rocketry and other advanced weaponry.

Along with 150 of their best men, General Dorberger, Walther Riedel, and Werner von Braun came to the United States to work on secret government projects. The Russians, however, also gained a wealth of documentation and material, including the V-2 rockets, buzz bombs, ocean-spanning surface-to-surface and surface-to air missiles found in Peenemünde; about seventy percent of the 12,000 tons of technical equipment stranded on the docks at Lübeck, Magdeburg, and the Gotha plant. They also captured 6,000 German technical specialists, including Dr Bock, Director of the German Institute of Airways Research; Dr Helmut Gröttrup, the electronics and guided-missile expert; and a particular aeronautical engineer, known only as ‘Habermohl’ and reported to have worked under the American, Wilson.

‘Why are you so interested in this Wilson?’ von Braun asked while glancing impatiently at his wristwatch. ‘Has he vanished completely?’

‘Yes.’

‘He was probably killed by the Nazis.’

‘That’s what was reported, but we don’t think it’s true. We have reason to believe that Wilson, when in Nazi Germany, was indeed working on highly advanced, supersonic aircraft of unusual configuration, possibly spherical or disc-shaped, and that he might still be doing so in a location I’m not allowed to disclose.’

‘You mean the Soviet Union? The V-2 they launched recently?’

‘No. Somewhere else. I can’t say where it was. But I *can* tell you that my

government is seriously concerned with what Wilson might be constructing at the present time. Which is why we were so keen to place you and your rocket scientists under contract, irrespective of negative public opinion.'

'I'm not sure I get your drift.' Von Braun's command of English was admirable, as was his gift for casually easing people out of his house. He simply sighed, glanced again at his wristwatch, then stood up and stretched himself, which made him look even bigger than he was. 'But I'm sure you know what you're about,' he added. 'Your intelligence is thorough.'

Fuller stood up as well, then walked to the front door. Von Braun, acting as if he had been shaken out of a trance, said, 'Oh, I see you're leaving! Please, let me.' He held the door open until Fuller had stepped outside and turned back to face him. 'So why did you risk negative public opinion to put me and my men under government contracts?'

'It's imperative,' Fuller said, 'that we get into space before Wilson does. Do you think you can do that?'

'Chuck Yeager has already broken the sound barrier,' von Braun said. 'So the answer to your question is "Yes".'

'Good,' Fuller said, then he nodded goodbye, walked down to the car, climbed in and drove out of Fort Bliss.

Chapter Five

Nichola Randall, already blonde and beautiful, was covered in mushy food and hammering the rim of her high chair with a rattle as if beating on a tin drum. At least that's what it sounded like to her dad, Captain Dwight Randall, who winced as he ate his Cornflakes, even though he could not be angry with her, not even this early in a bleak morning in January, 1948.

'Honey,' he said, 'I know you're just seven months old, but couldn't you quieten it down just a little bit? Between you and those damned airplanes taking off, I can hardly think straight.'

'Don't blame my daughter,' Beth said. 'Blame the US Air Force and their planes. Always making a racket.'

'*Your* daughter, I note,' Dwight said with a grin. 'I don't get a look-in. You'd think I'd nothing to do with her.'

'Stop fishing for compliments.'

'As for the US Air Force, don't forget it's our bread and butter. Here we are in a tract house in Dayton, Ohio, secure as little bunnies in their burrows. What more could we ask for?'

'A house outside Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. A little home of our own.'

'Time will bring us everything.' Dwight finished his Cornflakes and pushed his plate aside as another F-51 jet interceptor roared overhead. Nichola gurgled happily in her high chair, banging away with the rattle and smearing food over her face, but Beth rolled her eyes as if she couldn't bear it another minute. Still as slim as an adolescent in loose sweater and slacks, she had short-cropped auburn hair and the face of a lovely urchin, full-lipped and round-cheeked. They had only been married a year and were still in love, Dwight hoped, but Beth was increasingly frustrated by life on the base and by Dwight's heavy workload with the ATIC, the Air Technical Intelligence Centre, located here in Wright-Patterson AFB. If anything, his workload had become even heavier since the start of the UFO flap, last year. In the seven

months since then, he had virtually worked around the clock and it was giving them problems. Now Beth, ironing the clothes by the window, was looking disgruntled.

'When are you going to get a few days off?' she asked.

'Soon.'

'You've been saying that for months.'

'Our new boss is arriving this morning, so I can't ask immediately, but as soon as he's settled in, I'll put in my request for some leave.'

'Promise?'

'I promise.'

The telephone rang. Carrying his cup of coffee, Dwight leaned across the table, kissed Nichola on her messy cheek, then picked up the phone.

'Captain Randall,' he said.

'Hi, Dwight, it's Bob,' said his friend and sidekick at the ATIC, Captain Robert Jackson. 'Are you awake yet?'

'I'm just about to leave.'

'I'm at the office already.'

'Bully for you.'

'I'm gonna make your day, Cap'n.'

'Oh, how?'

'We've just received a classified Memorandum for the Record from our Commanding General. It states that last September General Nathan Twining, Chief of Staff of the United States Army, wrote to Brigadier General George Schulgen, Commanding General of the Army Air Force, expressing his belief that the UFO phenomenon is something real, that it is not, quote, visionary or fictitious, unquote, and that the objects are disc-shaped, as large as aircraft and... wait for it... *controlled*.'

Dwight whooped with delight, making Beth stare at him, surprised. He couldn't contain himself because for too long he had been working on a project that many thought was a waste of time, if not downright idiotic. Twining's letter would give the project validation, as well as priority, and Dwight felt good about that. He therefore grinned like a schoolboy and gave a puzzled Beth the thumbs-up.

'According to the memo,' Bob continued, 'the letter wasn't intended to support the extraterrestrial hypothesis, but came about because US military fears that the UFOs might be Russian have been exacerbated by the

knowledge that the Soviets tested their first A-bomb last November.'

'Right,' Dwight said. 'I *thought* that might get them jumping.'

Bob chuckled. 'Anyway, because of Twining's letter, the Army Air Force is going to establish an official UFO investigation unit with a 2A classification. Called Project Sign, it'll be located right here, in Wright-Patterson, with you in charge and me remaining as your sidekick. We're to start it as soon as we can, but no later than next month, so you better get your ass over here, Cap'n.'

'I'm on my way,' Dwight said. Exultant, he hung up the phone, gulped the rest of the coffee, put the mug back on the table and tightened his tie. As he slipped on his jacket and reached for his peaked cap, he saw Beth's sulky face.

'Whoops!' he softly exclaimed.

'What's up?' Beth asked. When he told her, she said, 'There goes our vacation. A 2A classification is second only to top priority. You'll be working night and day with this new project. I'll hardly see you at all.'

'I won't, I promise.' He placed his peaked cap on his head.

'Send me a postcard,' Beth replied. 'Let me know how you're keeping.'

Dwight smiled uneasily, then gave her a hug and kissed her. 'Don't worry, I'll be back in time for dinner. Have a good day.'

'Yeah,' Beth said flatly.

She was already returning to her ironing when he left the house and walked quickly, too eagerly, to the ATIC offices, located at Wright Field. Saluting junior and senior officers en route, he looked fondly at the aircraft flying overhead, under grey clouds being pierced by weak sunlight. Recalling Beth's sulky face, he was ashamed of his own eagerness, but knew that it could not be helped. The truth of the matter was that he was too easily bored and, though still loving Beth, was having problems adjusting to the domesticity of marriage and fatherhood.

During the Second World War he had been a B-29 bombardier and radar operator, flying to India, China and the Pacific with the original B-29 wing. Though returning to college after the war, he had kept his reserved status, flying as a navigator in an Air Force Reserve Troop Carrier Wing. This had only increased his low-boredom threshold for normal life, so immediately upon receiving his degree in aeronautical engineering, he married Beth, whom he had met at college, then went back on active duty. He was posted

straight to the ATIC, which was responsible for keeping track of all foreign aircraft and guided missiles, and he and Beth moved into married quarters here at Wright-Patterson.

Beth was the beloved only daughter of Joe McGinnis, an amiable car salesman and his good-humoured wife, Glenda, both Dayton residents. Their benevolent parenthood had turned Beth into a fine woman, a loving, loveable wife, but one not familiar with life on an air base. They had been here for a year now. During that time, Nichola had been born, but Beth was increasingly desperate to kick off the shackles of Air Force protocol and be nearer her parents in Dayton.

Like Mr and Mrs McGinnis, Beth was good-humoured and quick-tempered, which had made for some tempestuous moments when the first small, inevitable disillusionments of marriage were setting in. Unfortunately, Dwight's growing fascination with the UFO phenomenon, which he found more intriguing than the tracking of foreign aircraft and guided missiles, had revitalised his flagging interest in the peacetime air force, even as it increased Beth's frustrations by keeping him away from home more often. Trouble was brewing, he realised, and he didn't know how to deal with it.

His sidekick, Air Force Captain Bob Jackson, was in the operations room of the ATIC with their only assistant, a pretty blonde WAC corporal, Thelma Wheeler, from Huntsville, Alabama. Bob, in his late twenties like Dwight, was a recruiting officer's dream in his Air Force uniform, with short-cropped dark hair, a sleekly handsome face, and a ready smile that always made Thelma squirm with pleasure. When Dwight entered, Bob was sitting on the edge of the WAC's desk, obviously flirting with her while leafing through the morning's mail, but he looked up and grinned when he saw Dwight.

'Lo!' he said. 'Our supervisor has arrived! I *thought* that phone call would get you of bed.'

'I *was* already out of bed.'

'Tell it to the marines.'

Thelma touched her piled-up hair with exploratory fingers and asked, 'Would you two like a cup of coffee?'

'Yes, thanks,' they replied in unison.

Thelma pushed her chair back, stood up, and went into the small kitchen, looking attractive at this hour of the morning in her standard WAC skirt and blouse. Dwight thought there was something going on between her and Bob,

but he couldn't be sure of it. Right now, Bob was removing his admiring eyes from the door through which Thelma had disappeared and instead casting a more thoughtful gaze around the one room that constituted the operational centre of the ATIC.

It was a spartan office, with a few desks, lots of filing cabinets, typewriters, phones and a mountain of paperwork, most of it technical information sheets for official UFO reports. The walls were covered with incident maps, charts and graphs showing most of the reported UFO sightings, including the Foo fighters of World War II, the Scandinavian sightings of 1946, and the wave of American sightings that had started with the two famous incidents in Washington State in July the previous year.

So far, the coloured pins on the maps revealed no definite, or linking pattern, to the flight paths of the reported UFOs, apart from a general northerly direction of retreat. It wasn't much to go on.

Grinning, Bob lifted a couple of sheets off the desk and waved them at Dwight, who immediately snatched them from him and started reading. The papers included a copy of General Twining's original official letter, dated September 23, 1947, to the Commanding General of the Army Air Force; another letter from Major-General L. C. Craigie, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Air Matériel Command, dated December 30, 1947, instructing the Commanding General of Wright-Patterson AFB to form a project, to be codenamed Sign and classified 2A, for the serious evaluation of UFO reports; and finally, a Memorandum for the Record from the Commanding General of Wright-Patterson to Dwight, ordering him to set up the project forthwith from his present office in Wright Field.

Reading the letters with increasing exhilaration, Dwight saw all the words he had longed to hear from his superiors: 'the phenomenon reported is something real... not visionary or fictitious... appear to be disc-shaped... as large as aircraft... controlled either manually, automatically or remotely... might be of foreign origin... possibly nuclear... collect, collate, evaluate and distribute all information... of concern to national security...' These words had finally come from the very top to cast the UFOs out of mythology and bring them into reality. Dwight was overwhelmed.

'Here's your coffee, Cap'n.'

Dwight looked up with a start. Thelma was smiling at him and holding out a cup of coffee. When he took it, she gave the other cup to Bob, who was

grinning wickedly at him.

'Feels pretty good, right?'

'Right.'

'Christ, where do we start?'

'Let's go through all the reports.'

'*All* of them?' Thelma asked in dismay.

'Yes, Thelma,' Dwight confirmed, glancing sideways at her as she sat on the edge of her desk, hitching up her skirt to reveal her perfect knees, and looked despairingly at the thick files piled up on it. '*All* of them.' He turned back to Bob. 'Now, at last, the top brass will be taking an interest, so we better make sure we're prepared.'

'By isolating the major sightings from all the others and trying to find some pattern in them.'

'Exactly.'

'You're the boss,' Bob said.

The day passed so quickly, they hardly knew it was fading. While Thelma fed them on a constant diet of black coffee and, at lunchtime, sandwiches from the PX, Dwight and Bob went through most of the files of UFO reports, or technical information sheets, whittling out the weakest cases, selecting the strongest, and then exchanging those selected and going through them again. By 5.30pm Thelma was suggesting that it was time to finish work. By 6.30pm she was complaining that she didn't get paid overtime. An hour later she was pouring them more coffee and insisting that she was going to miss dinner. At 8.00pm she was finally allowed to leave, waving at Dwight as she did so, but smiling more meaningfully at Bob. By 9.00pm Dwight and Bob were facing each other over a mountain of reports and through a haze of cigarette smoke, summarising what it was they had to go with.

'Okay,' Bob said, puffing smoke from yet another cigarette, but now sipping whisky instead of coffee, 'the basic scenario is this... The UFO scare didn't really start last July. It appears to have started before it, during World War II...'

On December 13, 1944, Marshall Yarrow, then the Reuters special correspondent to Supreme Headquarters in liberated Paris, syndicated an article stating that the Germans had produced a secret device, thought to be an air defence weapon, which resembled the glass balls used on Christmas trees. According to Yarrow, they were coloured silver, seemed slightly

transparent, and had been seen hanging in the air over German territory, sometimes singly, sometimes in clusters. A second article by another reporter, published in the New York *Herald Tribune* of January 2, 1945, described the devices as 'weird, mysterious "Foo fighter" balls' that raced alongside the wings of Beaufighters flying intruder missions over Germany. According to the reports of Allied pilots, the 'balls of fire' would appear suddenly and accompany the planes for miles. They seemed to be radio-controlled from the ground.

'Either because of the famous line from the popular Smokey Stover comic strip, "Where there's foo, there's fire",' Bob explained, reading from his notes, 'or simply because the French word for "fire" is *feu*, those eerie weapons soon became widely known as "Foo fighters".'

Official Foo fighter reports were submitted by pilots Henry Giblin and Walter Cleary, who stated that on the night of September 27, 1944, they had been harassed in the vicinity of Speyer by 'an enormous burning light' that was flying above their aircraft at about 250 miles per hour; then by Lieutenant Edward Schluter, a fighter-pilot of the US 415th Night-Fighter Squadron based at Dijon, France, who, on the night of November 23, 1944, was harassed over the Rhine by 'ten small reddish balls of fire' flying in formation at immense speed. Further sightings were made by members of the same squadron on November 27, December 22 and December 24.

'In a report published in the New York *Times* of January 2, 1945, US Air Force Lieutenant, Donald Meiers, claimed that there were three kinds of Foo fighter: red balls of fire that appeared off the aircraft's wingtips, other balls of fire that flew in front of them, and "lights that appear in the distance - like a Christmas tree in the air - and flicker on and off." Meiers also confirmed that the Foo fighters climbed, descended or turned when the aircraft did so. The Foo fighters were witnessed both at night and by day, yet even when pacing the Allied aircraft they didn't show up on radar screens.'

Allied intelligence was concerned enough about the reports to establish a classified project in England, under the direction of Lieutenant General Massey, to examine them. Massey was able to confirm that the Foo fighters were balls of fire that flew in parallel formation with the Allied aircraft, often pacing them for great distances, at speeds exceeding 300 miles an hour, frequently causing their engines to malfunction by cutting in and out. While a few reports of crashing Allied aircraft suggest that Foo fighters caused the

crashes by making the aircraft's engines cut out completely, most reports indicate that this was unlikely: that the Foo fighters merely tailed the planes and caused psychological harm, rather than physical damage. They also flew away when fired upon.

'But in the end, no official designation of the Foo fighters was given,' Dwight said.

'No,' Bob confirmed. 'Unable to solve the mystery, both the RAF and the US Eighth Army Air Force concluded that they were the products of mass hallucination. Subsequently, they did no more about them. In any event, sightings of the Foo fighters tailed off and ceased completely a few weeks before the end of the war.'

'But the first post-war UFO flap came in 1946 with the appearance of so-called "ghost rockets" over Scandinavia and western Europe: cigar-shaped, with flames issuing from the tail, and mostly seen at night, often by airline pilots and radar operatives.'

'Which led to speculation that both the Soviets and the Americans, utilising the men and material captured in the secret research plants of Nazi Germany, including those at Peenemünde and Nordhausen, were developing advanced saucer-shaped aircraft.'

'That could have been possible,' Dwight said. 'Certainly, when World War Two ended, the Germans had several radical types of new aircraft and guided missiles under development. The majority of such projects were in their infancy, but they were the only known craft that could even approach the performance of the objects reported by UFO observers.'

'Right,' Bob said. 'And it's worth noting that whereas the mysterious Foo fighters didn't show up on radar, the ghost rockets certainly did - so they couldn't be classified as hoaxes, misidentifications or the products of mass hallucination.'

'The Soviets denied any knowledge of the rockets.'

'Sure, they did. But US suspicions remained unabated while those things continued to fly. They only faded away the following year.'

'Then came the first known American sightings.' Dwight said, glancing down at the notes he had taken from his own research. 'Pilot Richard Rankin's sighting of ten discs, about thirty to thirty-five feet in diameter, over Bakersfield, California, on June 14, 1947; the Maury Island sighting of six larger discs by Harold Dahl on June 21, 1947 over Puget Sound, off Tacoma,

Washington; and three days later, Kenneth Arnold's famous sighting of nine disc-shaped, apparently metallic, objects flying in formation and making an undulating motion, near Mount Rainier in the Cascades, also in Washington. In the latter two cases the UFOs flew off and disappeared in the direction of the Canadian border.'

'Thus strengthening the belief that they could be American secret weapons, also based on captured German designs.'

'In other words, both the Soviets and the Americans could be producing secret weapons, or aircraft, from designs and material captured during the war.'

'Which would lend credence to the reality of the original Foo fighter.'

'Right,' Dwight said. 'Then came last year's plague of UFO sightings over top-secret military bases.' He glanced down at his notes again. 'The first, on June 28, was over Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama. The next, on June 29, was near Alamogordo, New Mexico, right over the White Sands Proving Ground. Finally, on July 8, there was a whole spate of sightings of spherically shaped, white aluminium-coloured objects flying over Muroc Air Base, the supersecret air force test centre in the Mojave Desert.'

Bob nodded assent. 'And because those particular sightings were made by trained technicians and pilots, and as the reported objects were appearing increasingly over top-and-supersecret military research bases, a growing suspicion in intelligence circles was that the men and material deported from Nazi Germany to Russia had led to a dangerous Soviet lead in space technology.'

'Either them or extraterrestrials.'

'Yeah, right,' Bob said. 'Little green men.'

'Either way,' Dwight summarised, 'what we're dealing with is a combination of small, fiery, probably remote-controlled discs and large, aircraft-sized, obviously piloted, so-called flying saucers.'

'I guess so,' Bob said.

Dwight sighed, put his feet up on the desk, then lit yet another cigarette. 'It's now probably too late to investigate the Maury Island and Kenneth Arnold sightings, but I certainly think we should re-examine the ones that took place over our own military establishments, particularly those at Muroc Air Base.'

‘That may be easier said than done,’ Bob pointed out. ‘I reckon we’ll have to be careful. I mean, even though we’ve now been given official sanction to go ahead with Project Sign, I don’t think we should forget that a lot of the personnel involved in UFO sightings, either reporting them or investigating them, have got into hot water with their superiors, often for no apparent good reason.’

‘Yeah,’ Dwight said thoughtfully. ‘That’s always baffled me. Given that UFOs have been classified as a threat to national security, it’s strange how much resistance there’s been to investigating them - particularly from our own intelligence services. I mean, even that famous Socorro sighting of last year... Remember that?’ Bob nodded that he did, but Dwight went on anyway, talking, really, to himself. ‘First the Roswell Army Air Base public information officer, Lieutenant Walter Haunt, was reprimanded and posted to some shit-hole for releasing the story to the press; then First Lieutenant William Harris, the flight intelligence officer who helped me with my investigations, went the same route. To that you can add the disturbing fact that the major civilian witness to the actuality of the crashed saucer, local farmer Marlon Clarke, has disappeared completely. Last but not least, the former, highly decorated, OSS member and local UFO authority, Mike Bradley, refuses to even discuss the matter, which suggests that he’s pretty frightened of something - or *someone*. So, yes, I think we’ve good reason to be concerned.’

‘I don’t wanna sound paranoid,’ Bob said, pushing his chair back, placing his hands on his hips and stretching his spine, ‘but we’ve already had two officers killed under suspicious circumstances while involved in UFO investigations. Only four months ago. August 1, 1947. Captain William Davidson and Lieutenant Frank Brown, both members of A-2 Military Intelligence of the Fourth Air Force. Engaged in an investigation of Harold Dahl and the Maury Island mystery. They were flying back to the Fourth Air Force, Hamilton Field, California, with a box containing the debris that had fallen from the damaged UFO into Puget Sound, when their B-25 malfunctioned and crashed, killing both of them. Even more surprising is that the only other two passengers on board, Technician Fourth Grade Woodrow D. Mathews and Master Sergeant Elmer L.Taff, neither experienced flyers, both of whom had, reportedly, cadged a lift at the last moment, managed to parachute to safety while our two highly trained intelligence officers failed to

do so. That anomaly still hasn't been explained.'

'You think it was rigged?'

Bob shrugged. 'All I know is that two experienced intelligence officers died - and the only physical evidence for flying saucers we've had so far was lost in that crash.'

Dwight shivered, feeling cold. He glanced out the window, saw that it was dark, looked at his wristwatch and lowered his feet to the floor as if they'd been scorched. 'Shit!' he exclaimed. 'It's thirty after nine already! I should have been home for dinner three hours ago. Beth's gonna kill me!'

'The joys of marriage,' Bob said, putting on his peaked cap and buttoning up his jacket. 'I think I'll go and have a drink with a friend.'

'I hope it's not the delectable Thelma,' Dwight said, pushing his chair back, getting to his feet, and likewise preparing to leave. 'A good officer doesn't get involved with his staff, no matter how much he's tempted.'

'I think I get the message, Dwight.' Bob grinned and patted Dwight on the shoulder, then they turned out the lights and left the office, locking the door behind them. Once outside, Dwight looked across at the huge hangars, parked planes and silent airstrip of Wright Field, thinking of the other kinds of aircraft now haunting the skies. Now, when he saw a shooting star, his heart gave a leap. It was almost instinctive.

'Project Sign,' he said. 'It sounds good. I think I'll enjoy it.'

'You will,' Bob replied, 'but Beth won't. Good night and good luck, my friend.'

'Tread carefully,' Dwight said.

They walked off in opposite directions, Bob to have a drink, probably with Thelma Wheeler, no matter what Dwight said, and Dwight to return and face the music for being late to dinner again. As he headed away from Wright Field, the silence was broken by the deep rumble of an RB-29 coming in to land, reminding him that the air base never slept. Glancing up at the sky, which was a mosaic of cloudy patches and stars, he contemplated the possibility of equipping some RB-29s with the latest aerial cameras and using them to photograph unusual phenomena by day and by night. The Air Matériel Command laboratories at Wright Field, he was convinced, would be ideal for the processing of such photos. Determined to put his idea into immediate practice, he turned into the silent streets of the married officers's quarters, then entered his temporary home.

As anticipated, Beth was not amused. Dwight's meal was sitting untouched on the table. Beth was reading a book, smoking a cigarette, and listening to Arthur Godfrey on the radio at the same time. She did not look up when Dwight entered.

'Sorry,' he said. When she didn't reply, he crossed the room and kissed the top of her head. 'Really, I'm sorry.'

'Your dinner's cold.'

'I noticed.'

'Nichola's in bed.'

'I guessed.'

'I didn't get my postcard,' Beth said, 'and you seemed to be gone that long.'

'Okay, Beth, that's enough.'

'Your work.'

'Yes, my work. We have to set up this new project and we don't have much time.'

'No time for us, obviously.'

'That's not an issue, Beth. I was only a ten-minute walk from here. It shouldn't be a big deal.'

Beth stubbed her cigarette out, closed her book, turned off the radio. Standing up, she said, 'Maybe not to you, but I know what it means.'

'What?'

'More UFO investigations. Even more than before. Since those first sightings, last July, you've been travelling all over the place. Now that you're in charge of the whole thing, it's bound to get worse.' She headed for the bedroom, then turned back to face him. 'And you like it,' she accused. 'That's what maddens me the most. It's not that you have to do it, it's that you enjoy it so much. You'd rather be travelling and investigating UFOs than be at home with me and Nichola. I could hate you for that.'

'That isn't true, Beth.'

'It is. And damned well you know it. Goodnight, Dwight.'

'Goodnight.'

When she disappeared into the bedroom, Dwight poured himself a stiff drink, neat bourbon, and had it while sitting by the window, looking up at the night sky. He felt guilty because he knew that Beth was right, so the drink went down well. He was just finishing and contemplating bed when the

telephone rang. It was Bob, sounding shocked.

'When I left you,' he said, 'I went back to the office – '

'What for?' Dwight asked, realising instantly that the office was the only place on the base where Bob and Thelma Wheeler could get together.

'I forgot something... Anyway, what the hell's the difference? What I'm saying is that I was back in the office when I received a call from a buddy at Fort Knox, Kentucky, informing me that Captain Thomas F. Mantell, an experienced pilot and Air Force hero during the Normandy invasion, was killed in a crash today - reportedly when trying to pursue a UFO over Godman Field.'

'Oh, my God!' Dwight blurted out, hardly able to believe his ears. 'What made them think it was a UFO?'

'I don't have the full facts yet. Godman have promised a detailed report, but in the meantime all I've got is what I was told over the phone.'

'Yes?' Dwight demanded, feeling breathless.

'There were a series of sightings this morning all over the area, beginning in Maysville, Kentucky, less than a hundred miles east of Louisville, where Godman AFB is located. The object was also sighted over Owensboro and Irvington, located in northwest Kentucky. The cumulative sightings, called in to the local police, indicated a circular, metallic object about 250 to 300 feet in diameter, heading in a westerly direction, towards Godman Field. Early that afternoon, the state police contacted Godman, but the control tower operators could confirm no similar sighting at that time. However, half an hour later, the assistant tower operator picked up the object, which was subsequently observed by the operations officer, the intelligence officer, the base commander, his executive officer, and a band of other ranking personnel.'

'Christ!' Dwight exclaimed.

'A flight of four F-51 fighter planes, headed by Cap'n Mantell, was sent in pursuit and was observed disappearing in the southward wake of the UFO. According to the control-tower operators, by the time the four planes reached 10,000 feet, Mantell was well ahead and far above them. He reported to the control tower: "I see something above and ahead of me. It looks metallic and it's tremendous in size. Now it's starting to climb." He then said that the UFO was above him, that he was gaining on it, and that he intended going as high as 20,000 feet. Those were his last words before he crashed. Losing

contact with him, the other pilots returned to base, where they were informed that Mantell was dead. The UFO wasn't seen again.'

Bob went silent, though Dwight imagined he could hear him breathing heavily. He then realised that he, too, was breathing heavily and that his heart was racing. Taking a deep breath, he glanced up at the clouds and stars, then he let his breath out again.

'Make sure you get the full report,' he said.

'Sure,' Bob said. 'Goodnight.'

The line went dead and Dwight put his phone down. He thought of Beth in their bed, already concerned for him, and wanted to lie quietly beside her and press himself into her. Instead, he poured himself another drink and let it last a long time. He drank it while gazing up at the night sky, until it seemed to press down upon him, threatening to crush him. That sensation, he knew, was caused by fear. He would have to get used to that.

Chapter Six

‘They weren’t ours,’ Wilson said as he gazed out from his office of steel and concrete near the summit of the mountain to the vast, white desolation of Antarctica. ‘Neither the Maury Island sightings, nor those made by Kenneth Arnold over the Cascades, were of our saucers. The ones that flew back towards Canada belonged to someone else. Not to me. Not from here. We must look to America.’

He sipped his mineral water and placed his glass back on the table by the panoramic window. Hans Kammler, still blonde, handsome, and cold-eyed, gazed over Queen Maud Land, his beloved Neu Schwabenland, and smiled thinly, bleakly, to himself.

‘Ah, yes,’ he said, ‘the Americans. Perhaps the Soviets as well. Our captured V-2 rockets were shipped from Germany to New Mexico in 1945. The launch of American V-2s commenced at the White Sands Proving Ground in March the following year, under the direction of that traitor, Count von Braun. We have since received a report confirming that North American Aviation are planning to go into the production of rocket motors under a USAF contract and will be basing their work on the original V-2 motor.’

‘How ironic,’ Wilson said, smiling, ‘that the V-2 in turn was based on the rocket motors of America’s own, badly neglected Robert H. Goddard, with whom I also worked when he was located in Roswell, New Mexico, now the location of the White Sands Proving Ground. It has all come full circle.’

‘It’s nothing to be pleased about,’ Kammler said testily. ‘The Russians have Habermohl and the Americans have Miethe, who also worked on Projekt Saucer. Miethe was formerly stationed with von Braun at Fort Bliss, New Mexico, but is now located at Alamogordo, the centre of American rocket development. God knows what he’s constructing there.’

Wilson glanced at the launching pad far below, carpeted thinly with snow and shadowed by the encircling rock face soaring high above it. The

Antarctic sunlight beamed down upon the latest 300-foot flying saucer like a torch shining into a dark well, making the machine's metallic grey take on a silvery sheen. The many men in black coveralls, who had been swarming all over the saucer, were removing the ladders and hurrying behind the shock-proof protective shields located in small caves hacked out of the rock. From this high, behind the thick, plate-glass window, Wilson could not hear the saucer, but he could see it rocking slightly from side to side, its heat turning the thin snow into steam as it prepared for lift-off.

'Yes,' he said, 'the original Projekt Saucer team are a problem. Now that pompous fool, Schriever, who managed to escape from Prague, is living back in his hometown of BremerHaven, West Germany, telling all and sundry that the Allies are building flying saucers based on the one he constructed during the war. Though the press is viewing him with scepticism, he is in fact correct. The Canadians and Americans are both working on a flying-saucer development programme based on designs found in Germany at the end of the war. The Canadian project is being undertaken by the A.V. Roe Company in Malton, Ontario; the American one is hidden somewhere in the White Sands Proving Range, reportedly Holman AFB.'

Far below, the *Kugelblitz* Mark III lifted off the ground, swaying gently from side to side, then ascended silently, growing wider as it came up to Wilson's level. The higher it climbed, the more sunlight it caught, which turned it from dull, almost invisible grey to dazzling silver.

It looks alien and beautiful, Wilson thought. Or beautifully alien. We have done a good job this time.

'If their work is based on the Schriever designs, we have little to fear,' Kammler said.

'Not at the moment, but time could change that. Already the Americans and Canadians are more advanced than they should be. While grossly exaggerated versions of what Harold Dahl and Kenneth Arnold saw over the Cascades have enthralled the world, both men *did* in fact witness the test flights of a series of remote-controlled, pilotless discs, based on our original *Feuerball* and constructed at the A.V. Roe Company in Canada. A larger, piloted saucer is also being constructed there, as well as by a US Naval Laboratory team in that hidden location in the White Sands Proving Range. While reportedly neither machine is very good, both have had satisfactory test flights.'

'Witnessed by various pilots and other trained military personnel,'

Kammler noted.

'Yes. As have ours,' Wilson said. 'Which means that the US and Canadian saucers have been mistakenly credited with the kind of capabilities that only our machines possess so far. This, at least, is to the good. The Americans think the more efficient saucers have been made by the Russians, who believe that the Americans made them. Thus, we can fly our own saucers with impunity, not having to worry if we're seen. By attempting to build their own saucers, based on our old designs, the Soviets, Americans and Canadians have actually given us greater freedom of movement. They should get an award.'

His smile was not returned by Kammler, a man of limited humour, so he concentrated on the 300-foot saucer as it reached the level of the window and hovered there, swaying gently from side to side, as if in salute. In fact, it was just testing itself. The steel covers on the raised dome were open, revealing the transparent pilot's cabinet with six crew members inside, but they would close when the saucer actually took off on its long flight to Paraguay, making it look like a seamless spinning top in flight. Now, as if obeying Wilson's instinctive nod of approval, the saucer dropped out of sight below the window, descending back onto its landing pad.

'Is Stoll ready to leave?' Wilson asked.

'Yes,' Kammler replied. 'Not too happy, but prepared to do his duty. I better go down and say *Auf Wiedersehen.*'

'Tell him I'll be down before take-off, after I've visited the laboratory and talked to Dr King.'

'He responded well to his indoctrination. Particularly after hypnotic-drug treatment, which helped in changing his mind - for the rest of his life, I trust.'

'He's a man of considerable will power. He'll serve us well in the end. So, Hans, let's go.'

Pushing his chair back, Wilson glanced again across that vast, spectacular panorama of Antarctic wilderness, then stood and walked across the immense, dome-shaped room, with Kammler behind him. They took the lift down to Level 3. Leaving Kammler in the lift, to continue his descent to ground level where the flying saucer was parked, Wilson walked through a short tunnel hacked out of the rock and entered the laboratory containing its ghoulish collection of human spare parts and artificial replacements. By now, some larger glass cabinets had been built into the walls of bare rock and

contained drugged, unconscious, and frozen human beings who had been abducted by Wilson's flying saucer crews. Wired up to machines that showed their declining heartbeat and brain waves, they would eventually freeze to death, though not before providing valuable information for the ongoing researches into longevity.

Surrounded by other white-smocked physicians and surgeons, Dr King was at a long table, examining a drained human torso which had a prosthetic replacement attached to the stump of one of its amputated arms. The interior of the prosthetic arm had been left open to reveal a complex of electric wiring that ran from the shoulder down into the artificial hand. A white-smocked assistant was applying electric charges to the prosthetic while Dr King checked the mobility of the twitching artificial fingers. He looked up and stopped what he was doing when Wilson approached him.

'Good day, Wilson,' he said, sounding calm enough, but not smiling.

'Good day. How's it going?'

King glanced down at the prosthetic arm fixed to the drained human torso. 'Not bad,' he said. 'I think we'll get there eventually. Working with human cadavers, instead of animals, short-circuits a lot of otherwise time-consuming experiments and aids progress tremendously. It's really quite exciting. I think we'll have working, myoelectric limbs before the year's out. They won't be all that good, but once we've got a working model, the rest of it will come even more quickly.'

'What about head transplants?' Wilson asked. 'Or even partial replacement of the face and head: the mouth, throat and jawbone. I mean for the development of cyborgs. For survival in outer space and on the seabed. To man the saucers indefinitely.'

King glanced at the guillotined human head now frozen in a small glass case on a nearby table; it was wired up to an EEG machine recording weak, dying brain waves. The eyes of the head were open, staring wildly, seeing only God knows what. It was the head of the unfortunate Marlon Clarke.

'A long way off yet,' Dr King said, 'but we'll get there eventually. At the moment, we're concentrating simultaneously on many different aspects of the problem and discovering the biological and physical interrelationships between them. Experiments already undertaken in the animal laboratory have convinced us that animal gut, intestines and even skin can eventually be transplanted successfully into humans. Similarly, the heart and lungs might

be used, but this will take longer. Regarding artificial bones, joints and sockets, it's my belief that the main alloys required will be of the cobalt and chromium variety: tantalum, titanium, niobium and molybdenum. Limited success has already been attained in the preservation of human heart valves, bone, blood and even the cornea of the eye.'

'Very good,' Wilson said. 'Have you been able to make any advances on what you were doing in the Powered Limbs Unit of West Hendon hospital?'

'Yes.' The doctor spoke precisely, but rather like one of the automatons he was hoping to create. 'In external prosthetics, the myoelectric control of limbs is racing ahead.' He waved a hand, to indicate the prosthetic arm joined to the limbless human torso on the table. 'As you can see.' Wilson nodded. 'Already we've perfected a hand-arm prosthesis in which all five fingers are capable of closing around objects of variable shape, though not yet with the precision of a human hand. We're also working on other advanced prosthetics, including myoelectric arms with interchangeable hands. From there, I hope to progress to a more sophisticated myoelectric arm that will be able to move at any angle, speed or force simply by being *thought* into action. Such an arm will pick up muscle signals generated to the natural stump, transmit them to a small amplifier, and use that to drive a compact electric motor. The machinery for all of this will be housed inside a flesh-coloured, fibre-glass casing that resembles a real arm.'

'Like the one on the table.'

'Correct.'

'But the head,' Wilson insisted, glancing at the wide-eyed head of Marlon Clarke, which may or may not have been aware of its own existence, though it wasn't likely to be sane any more.

Ignoring the head, Dr King pointed at the large glass cases containing unconscious, frozen human beings. 'Our biochemists and mechanical, electrical, chemical, and biomedical engineers are already exploring the possibility of collecting healthy human specimens, rendering them unconscious, and freezing them to just under the point of death for as long as possible. If we can perfect a workable form of cryonic preservation, even though the brains of these living cadavers will have ceased functioning, they'll still be respiring, pulsating, evacuating, and excreting bodies that could be maintained for many years as a source of spare parts and for medical experimentation of all kinds.'

‘But the head,’ Wilson said impatiently, glancing at the staring eyes of Marlon Clarke. ‘Can we ever transfer the entire head from one human being to another?’

King nodded affirmatively. ‘I think it can be done. In the other laboratory isolated animal brains are being kept in cold storage and others, less lucky’ - here the doctor smiled bleakly – ‘are functioning, warm brains kept alive by hook-ups to blood machines or to live individuals of the same species. Right now we can’t speculate as to what’s going on mentally inside those disembodied brains, but our latest two-headed dog has survived for a week now and is eating, sleeping and performing its physiological functions normally, as if nothing has happened. In other words, it appears to accept itself as perfectly normal.’

‘And longevity?’

‘We’ll require a steady supply of live foetuses. The heads will be cut off and then injected with radioactive compounds to enable us to study brain metabolism. We also need mature adults who can be injected with various diseases, including live hepatitis virus and cancer cells, to determine if the diseases can be so induced and suitable antidotes found.’

‘We conducted similar experiments in the Nazi concentration camps,’ Wilson informed him, ‘but they didn’t prove much.’

‘You lacked knowledge and proper facilities,’ King replied. ‘I’m expecting much more here.’

‘I think you’re beginning to enjoy this, Dr King.’

‘It’s more exciting than my work at Hendon,’ King said without the slightest trace of irony. ‘Here, the possibilities are limitless. The mysteries of longevity will eventually be solved here - and the cyborgs will come even before that. You have no cause to worry.’

‘I’m not the worrying kind,’ Wilson said. ‘Thank you, Dr King.’ After casting a final, curious glance at the wide, staring, unreadable eyes in the guillotined head of Marlon Clarke, Wilson left the laboratory, crossed a catwalk, and glanced down a dizzying drop to the mass of men in black coveralls working on skeletal saucer structures in the immense, arc-lit workshop with walls of solid rock. He then entered a tunnel still being hacked out of the mountain’s interior with the sweat of slave labour. Reminded, by the gloom, bedlam, dust and cracking whips, of the Nordhausen Central Works in the Harz mountains, he was glad to get through

the nightmarish tunnel and emerge to the viewing bay overlooking one of the multiplying landing pads for the saucers. As this one was located directly below his office, located near the summit of the mountain, he found himself looking down on the 300-foot saucer that had ascended to his level during his discussion with Kammler - the one that was transporting Ernst Stoll to Paraguay.

Taking the lift down through the interior of the mountain, Wilson emerged to the cleared area that had become a landing pad, now covered in a film of powdery snow. The saucer was resting on its four hydraulic legs, with its exit door tilting out from the base to form a short flight of steps down to the ground - a recent, much welcomed innovation. As the raised, transparent dome was uncovered, Wilson could see the crew inside. Ernst Stoll and Kammler were standing near the front edge of the saucer, talking with the artificial smiles of men who secretly despise one another. They drew apart when Wilson approached them.

'Well,' Wilson said, 'the day has come at last. It's been a long wait. No regrets?'

'No regrets,' Stoll said. 'Naturally, I'd rather stay here with you, but I'll do what I have to.'

'I'm glad,' Wilson said, looking into Stoll's dulled gaze and realising just how much he had changed since first they had met in Berlin in 1938. Since then, Stoll had lost his dream of becoming a rocket engineer, lost his faith in the Nazis, lost his wife and child - lost everything. Now he only had Wilson, who cared little for him but was all too willing to use him. Wilson glanced at Kammler, then nodded at the flying saucer. 'Is it ready to leave?'

'Yes,' Kammler said. 'We were just waiting for you.'

Wilson shook hands with Stoll. 'Enjoy your work - and good luck.'

'Thank you,' Stoll said, releasing Wilson's hand, shaking Kammler's hand less readily, then ducking low to slip under the base of the saucer and clamber up the ladder into the machine. The ladder was drawn up electronically behind him, sealing the exit, then Wilson and Kammler moved back with the other men to take their positions behind transparent protective shields in the small caves hacked out of the rock. Artur Nebe, the deadly former SS officer, now in charge of Wilson's security, was already there with some of his armed guards. He looked at Wilson with dark, inscrutable eyes, resting his hand, as always, on his holstered pistol.

‘Do you think he can be trusted?’ Nebe asked.

‘Yes,’ Wilson replied. ‘At least until he goes insane. Until then, just to be sure, we’ll visit him on a regular basis and check what he’s up to. I’m sure he’ll do the job well.’

‘Let’s hope so,’ Nebe said.

A high-pitched whistling sound came from the saucer, then it changed into an angry roaring. A cloud of steam caused by melting snow swirled around the glittering machine as it lifted off the ground, swaying from side to side, bobbing gently up and down. The saucer remained like that for a few seconds, swaying and bobbing magically, roaring angrily, turning the swirling snow into great clouds of steam that made the light from the arc lamps bend and quiver to form a dazzling web. The saucer ascended slowly, vertically, as if on invisible strings, until it had cleared the snow-capped peaks of the mountain, just above Wilson’s office. There it roared even louder and seemed to quiver like a bow-string, until suddenly it went silent, became motionless for a second, then shot vertically into the azure sky and almost instantly vanished.

‘Perfect,’ Kammler said.

‘And here comes the other one,’ Nebe said, his dark eyes glinting watchfully.

The other saucer, also 300 feet in diameter, had appeared out of nowhere to hover just above the snow-capped peaks and then begin its descent. It came down as gracefully as the first one had ascended and landed as lightly as a feather on the same launching pad. When it had whined back into silence, its trap door opened and angled down to the ground to form steps. A middle-aged man emerged, wearing a black coverall and boots. He was followed by the five crewmembers, all dressed in grey coveralls. When Kammler stepped forward to receive the flight records from the crewmembers, the man in black walked up to Wilson and gave a slight, formal bow.

‘Well?’ Wilson asked him. ‘Did it go well?’

‘Yes, sir,’ the man, Flight Captain Friedrich, replied. ‘We flew over a few air bases without much success, but finally, at Godman Field, near Louisville, Kentucky, we were pursued by four F-51 fighter planes. One of them was more foolhardy than the others and pursued us to nearly twenty thousand feet. We let him catch up with us. When he was still climbing and just below us, as close as he dared come, we used your new laser weapon against him. It

worked, sir. Beautifully. The F-51 cut out, went into a spin, and was splitting in two even before it crashed. We later heard on the radio that the pilot was killed. Air Force pilot Thomas F. Mantell. A World War Two hero. A good choice, don't you think?'

'You didn't exactly choose him,' Nebe coldly corrected him, 'but certainly, for our propaganda purposes, you couldn't have come across a better victim. Now the US Air Force will be very frightened indeed, which is what we require.'

'It's also good to know that the laser weapon developed in Kahla actually works,' Wilson said. 'We're pleased, Friedrich. You've done well.'

He squeezed Friedrich's shoulder, glanced at Kammler and Nebe, then turned away and walked back into the mountain.

Chapter Seven

Fuller made good use of his time before interviewing the former Projekt Saucer scientist, Walter Miethe. Forced by his assignment to return to New Mexico, he decided to learn as much as he could about the V-2 rockets before discussing them, and more important related matters, with the Kraut scientist now working for the Army's First Guided Missile Battalion, located in White Sands.

Driving out of town at dawn, past the bright orange-and-white signs saying ALAMOGORDO: HOME OF THE ATOMIC BOMB, CENTRE OF ROCKET DEVELOPMENT!, Fuller headed for White Sands, where a V-2 launching was to take place later in the morning. The drive took him across desert filled with nothing but sagebrush, past isolated gas stations charging twenty-five cents a gallon, to the 3,600 square miles of even more parched desert, sand dunes, and cattle-grazing land, which encompassed the White Stands Proving Ground, surrounded by the distant, closely bunched peaks of the aptly named Organ Mountains.

Not particularly fond of ranchers, rattlesnakes, mountain lions or coyotes, Fuller was glad to reach the government's first rocket centre. He knew he was getting close when he hit Highway 70 and found it clogged with motorists trying to find a good vantage point for the launching. Rather than being classified, the V-2 launchings (or 'shoots' as they were commonly called), which took place every couple of weeks, were treated as gala occasions and used as military PR exercises on the local populace. Fuller was therefore not surprised, when he approached White Sands in the morning's dazzling light, to find himself in the thick of cars and buses coming in from Las Cruces, Alamogordo, and El Paso, bringing farmers, cowboys, housewives, young mothers with new-born babies, schoolchildren, Boy Scout troops, students from the international rocket school, ROTC men, National Guardsmen, and members of the Chamber of Commerce and civic clubs. Many of these would tour an assembly hangar and the White Sands Proving Ground Museum,

housed in a long Army van, where a V-2 rocket was on display, see a movie about guided missiles, visit the launching site, then scramble for a good position in the camp viewing area, located approximately seven miles away.

American know-how, Fuller thought proudly.

He was even more impressed when he entered the White Sands camp and found it swarming with state and municipal officials, retired and active Mexican generals, ordinary GIs, naval ratings, Air Force engineers, and top brass from the Pentagon, West Point, and Annapolis.

'It's like the goddamned Fourth of July,' he said to Captain Edward 'Ed' Gunderson of the First Guided Missile Battalion, in his office near the Proving Ground museum. 'I thought all this would've been top-secret, but these folks are having a party.'

'It's kind of a festive day,' Ed said. 'The rocket shoots are still exciting. You can't keep a shoot secret - I mean the rockets are so damned visible - so everyone's invited to come along. The real secrets are the payloads in the rockets - and the public don't see those.'

'What kind of payloads?'

'The permanent personnel of the Proving Ground are both civilian and military, so it depends on who's financing and sharing the individual rocket. In this instance, General Electric has thermometers on board because they're interested in the problems of heat transfer; the Naval Research Laboratory is sending up a spectrograph to measure the spectral qualities of light at high altitudes; and the University of Michigan is contributing an air-sample bottle, to suck in a sample of the atmosphere and then seal itself. Even Harvard University, would you believe, is sending up a packet of seeds to learn how cosmic radiation effects them. So while the rocket shoot isn't secret, the results of the tests certainly will be.'

'Who's most interested in the rockets?'

'Military men and scientists are equally interested, but for different reasons. The scientists are mostly interested in pure scientific research - an orbital satellite for the checking of weather and other atmospheric data is their long-term aim - but the military men – wouldn't you know it? - are after an atom bomb transported by guided missile. That says it all, doesn't it?'

Fuller's instinct was to say: 'Why not? We've got to protect ourselves from the Commies and other enemies.' But realising that this might antagonise his new friend, he said, instead, 'Yeah, I guess it does, Ed. So when do I get to

talk to the Kraut?'

'Dr Miethe?'

'Yeah.'

'Right after the launch. He's out in the desert right now with one of the Recovery Officers, waiting to pick up the rocket's scientific instruments at the point of impact. You can see him right after that.'

'Can you take me out to the launching site?'

'Sure,' Ed said. 'No problem.'

They left the First Guided Missile Battalion HQ and drove in Ed's jeep to the launching site, burning along the camp's only paved road, which ran through seven miles of sagebrush and dunes, with the organ-pipe peaks of the mountains to the west, on the far edge of the otherwise flat terrain. The journey only took ten minutes, but the wind was hot and filled with sand, making Fuller feel dry-throated and sun-scorched by the time the V-2 appeared as a patch of glinting white in the distance. A minute later, the jeep was close enough to let Fuller see that the rocket, painted white but with a pointed, silver warhead, now raised into a vertical position, was being planted on a portable launching platform by a specially equipped truck. Ed drove on to where the rocket was and they got out of the jeep.

The V-2 looked lonely in the desert waste, even though about a hundred men, civilian and army, were gathered around it. The rocket was now straddled by a sixty-foot tall crane, which had platforms at different levels, where the launch crew were working like beavers while GIs climbed up and down ladders, opening and closing the instrument panels, and, on the ground, the surveyors checked the vertical alignment. It looked like organised chaos.

'Come on,' Ed said to Fuller. 'Let's check out the blockhouse.'

'What's that?'

'Headquarters for the shoot.'

The blockhouse was an expansive, low concrete structure located about a hundred yards west of the launching platform, reminding Fuller of the pillboxes he had attacked as a marine during the war. Inside, it was blessedly cool and contained only instrumentation relating to the V-2, with lights flickering constantly on the consoles and other equipment making rhythmic clicking sounds. The thick, protective walls of the blockhouse contained three narrow viewing windows of thick laminated glass which, when Fuller looked, showed only the fins at the bottom of the V-2 being prepared for launching.

There were also oxygen masks and bottles hanging on the walls.

'The rocket could keel over and fall into the blockhouse,' Ed explained reassuringly, 'cutting off our exit. The walls of the blockhouse are so thick they probably wouldn't cave in, but the masks would be needed to protect us from the toxic gases that could seep out of the rocket and fill this place before we could escape. Come on - only twenty people are allowed in here during a shoot and you're not invited. You can come with me as part of a field crew. They're stationed right across the Proving Range, in the desert and mountains. Their job is to keep track of the rocket's flight and phone their reports in to the blockhouse. You wanna come?'

'Hell, yes,' Fuller said. He hadn't enjoyed himself so much since fighting the Japs at Iwo Jima and was glad to get out of the packed, gloomy blockhouse. Once outside, he noticed that the GIs were no longer swarming over the raised V-2, but had been replaced by a lot of civilians, all on the third platform, about fifty feet up.

'The guys in charge of instrumentation,' Ed explained. 'Let's get in the jeep.'

They drove away from the blockhouse, heading into the desert, arriving a couple of minutes later at Radar Station D, an encampment of half-a-dozen trailers, containing radar and other equipment, located a mile east of the launch area. When Fuller got out of the jeep and looked back where he had come from, he saw heatwaves rising off the plain in front of the rocket.

Wiping sweat from his face, he followed Ed into one of the trailers. It contained the telemeter, which would transmit data on temperatures, wind pressures and cosmic rays during the rocket's eight-minute flight, and three special cameras, which would make a pictorial record of the flight. Men stripped to the waist and wearing shorts, their muscular bodies sweat-slicked, had taken up positions behind the cameras. As this meant that the shoot was imminent, Ed led Fuller back outside, where they could get a good view.

As zero hour approached, more people poured into the encampment, including a lot of full colonels. Instructions were being broadcast from a PA system that linked up all the field stations. Shortly after, a pair of Stinson L-5 observation planes appeared in the sky, the countdown began and continued until it reached X-minus One. Then the seconds were counted off: 'Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one - *Fire*!'

A distant, bass rumbling sound soon became a mighty roaring, then flames shot out around the base of the rocket and turned to boiling black smoke. From where Fuller stood, it looked as if the rocket was on fire, about to explode, yet remarkably it didn't move immediately. Instead, the 1,900 pounds of explosive fuel built up beneath it, only gradually lifting it off the launching tower. The rocket rose slowly, dramatically, as if about to fall back again, but kept climbing in that leisurely manner out of spewing yellow flame and boiling smoke. When it broke free from the launching tower, spitting a red flame from its tail, the roaring washed over Fuller like a wave and the ground shook beneath him. He covered his ears with his hands and put his head back, looking upwards, feeling tremendous, almost sexual excitement as the roaring turned into the loudest noise he had ever heard and the rocket started putting real distance between itself and the Earth. Fuller's neck could bend no further when the rocket became no more than a flickering flame, curving up and away, until it disappeared altogether, leaving Fuller to squint into nothing but the vast, empty sky.

When he straightened his neck to look about him, he saw Ed's grin and raised thumb. Fuller felt extraordinarily alive, completely physical, and at last had a very real sense of the world that was coming.

No wonder they're scared, he thought.

Fuller didn't like Commies, Japs or Germans, but he tried to be civil when he interviewed Walter Miethe later that afternoon in the headquarters of the First Guided Missile Battalion. The office was small and spartan, containing a desk and three chairs. There was nothing on the desk. Two of the chairs were at one side of it, with Miethe in one of them. Fuller, at the other side, had a good view of White Sands, its chapel framed by the window, which was open. The bawling of GIs playing on the basketball court came in loud and clear.

'Cigarette?' Fuller asked. Miethe shook his head, indicating refusal. He had black hair and eyes as dark as pitch, though they still revealed wariness. He was a man who had been asked a lot of questions and didn't want to hear more. 'Do you mind if I do?' Fuller asked, lighting up before Miethe could answer. 'No,' Miethe said. 'Of course not.' Fuller grinned. 'You don't smoke at all.' Again Miethe replied by shaking his head in a negative gesture. 'Filthy habit. Never start,' Fuller said, puffing smoke rings and watching

them drift away, pretty close to Miethe's face. 'So you know why I'm here, right?'

'I can guess,' Miethe replied.

'You worked for an American called Wilson and we're trying to find him.'

Miethe sighed wearily. 'I'm sorry, I can't help you. I can tell you what I know about Projekt Saucer, but I don't know anything more about Wilson. He's probably dead.'

'What makes you think that?'

'There were two saucer construction programmes: one by *Flugkapitän* Rudolph Schriever, the other by Wilson. The two saucer teams were separated in 1944. Wilson's team was placed under the command of SS Brigadier Hans Kammler and transferred under the supervision of Captain Ernst Stoll to Kahla, near the underground rocket construction plant at Nordhausen, in the Harz Mountains. I went with Schriever and his team to Prague, so I never saw Wilson after that. My closest associate on Projekt Saucer, Habermohl, was sent by Schriever to work on part of the programme in Breslau, where he was captured by the Soviets. As for Schriever, the last I saw of him was when he was running away from murderous Czechoslovak Partisans at the BMW Plant in Prague, when the Russians were advancing on that city. However, just before that happened, we received unofficial notification that Wilson's team had been evacuated from Kahla in April 1944 and that Wilson had been shot by General Kammler, to prevent him falling into the hands of the advancing Americans.'

'But you had no proof of his death.'

'No.'

'And you've heard nothing about him since?'

'Absolutely nothing.'

Fuller gazed steadily at Miethe's dark, wary eyes and wondered if he was telling the truth. Maybe, maybe not. Wilson was a shadowy figure, a teasing conundrum, but what Fuller had learnt about him so far had convinced him that the man was cunning and dangerous, with a long, deadly reach. Lots of people had reason to be scared of Wilson and Miethe might be one of them.

'Your recent boss, Werner von Braun, was in charge of the Nordhausen Central Works about the same time Wilson was in Kahla. Did he and Wilson co-operate?'

'I don't know. I wasn't there. I was with Schriever in Prague. However, I

doubt that they had anything to do with one another. Indeed, I don't believe von Braun even knew that Wilson was in Kahla. Ernst Stoll, who was in charge of Nordhausen and Kahla during Kammler's many absences - Kammler was then overseeing the firing of V-1 rockets from The Hague - kept Wilson's presence in Kahla a tight secret. No one got in or out of Kahla, other than Stoll and Kammler, so I doubt that von Braun knew they were there.'

'What about the early days? You worked directly under Wilson in Kummersdorf, when von Braun was on the other side of the firing range. Did they co-operate then?'

'No. Von Braun knew about the American, but only through gossip. Though Wilson was compelled to pass on certain innovations to von Braun, this was not reciprocated and the two men never met. Then, of course, von Braun's rocket team moved to Peenemünde, leaving Wilson with the whole of Kummersdorf.'

'So how did you end up in Fort Bliss with von Braun?'

'When the Czechoslovak Partisans overran the BMW Plant in Prague, I managed to make my escape. Like Schriever, I just fled across the fields until I lost my pursuers. After that, like thousands of others, I made my way back to Germany, by foot and by begging lifts, until I was captured - luckily, by the Americans, not the Russians.'

'Lucky indeed,' Fuller said.

'By that time,' Miethe continued, ignoring the sarcasm, 'Brigadier Hans Kammler had transferred von Braun and his men to an army barracks in Oberammergau in the Bavarian Alps. There, they were held behind barbed wire and under SS guard, until joined by General Dornberger, when they were allowed to move into the village of Oberjoch. The Americans had since transported me to the town of Reutte, in the Austrian Tyrol, for lengthy interrogation. Shortly after the Führer's death, on the second of May, 1945, Dornberger and his men, including von Braun, surrendered to the American 44th Infantry Division in Reutte and I was placed in custody with them. By June, I was on my way to America with von Braun and many of his V-2 specialists. Now...' Miethe shrugged indifferently. 'Here I am.'

'You like America?' Fuller asked him.

'I like my work,' Miethe replied, 'and here I can do that.'

Don't do me any favours, Fuller thought, outraged that American

generosity could be treated with such contemptuous indifference. ‘What about the beer?’ he asked, grinning. ‘You like American beer?’

‘I don’t drink,’ Miethe replied.

Fuller lit one cigarette with the stub of the other, then sat back in his chair and blew smoke rings, watching them drift towards Miethe’s face before dissipating.

‘I’ve seen the drawings of Schriever’s saucer,’ he said. ‘It looks just like the real thing.’

‘The real thing?’

‘Yeah. The ones that have been causing such a stir over the past year or so. Do you think there’s any connection?’

‘Yes. I agree with Schriever on that. He’s been telling the West German press that the UFOs are man-made and based on our original German designs. I believe he’s correct.’

‘How good was Schriever’s saucer? The one you tested in Prague in 1945.’

Miethe offered a superior smile. ‘Not very good. It barely hovered above ground level, wobbling wildly, then it crashed back down.’

‘So what makes you agree with Schriever?’

‘Schriever was a pretender who always tried to get credit for ideas that he stole from the Americans. I don’t agree that the present UFO scare is caused by saucers constructed from Schriever’s designs, which in truth were incomplete; what I believe is that they’re saucers based on Wilson’s designs for a much better saucer known as the *Kugelblitz*. While even that saucer did not have the widely reported capabilities of the UFOs, it was highly advanced and could have been the prototype for the saucers now being sighted. Whether Wilson is alive or dead, it’s my belief that enough of his designs, if not the actual prototype, were captured by the Soviets or Americans - or both - to let them build more advanced models. It is my belief, then, that the UFOs are man-made saucers, constructed here or in Russia - maybe in both countries.’

Studying Miethe in silence for a moment, Fuller considered his options. One was to invite him for a drive into the desert, then slit his throat and bury him under the dunes. The other was to utilise his knowledge for the new saucer programme. Miethe knew too much already to be allowed to run loose, which meant that either he should be allowed to work for the US government or that he should be taken out totally - obliterated. Fuller had his

own preference – a quick burial in the desert - but unfortunately he was hampered by his superiors and the country's long-term needs.

'What I'm going to tell you,' he said, 'will commit you for life. If you listen to what I tell you, I won't be able to pretend you didn't hear it. That means I'll have to take strong action if you try going elsewhere. If you want to spend the rest of your days working on saucer projects, then you better listen to what I say; but if you're frightened of making that kind of commitment, you better tell me to shut up. You understand, Miethe?'

The German stared steadily, suspiciously at him, then nervously wiped his lips with his hand.

'What if I don't listen?'

'You'll be free to return to Germany,' Fuller lied, thinking of that burial in the desert, 'which may well be the only choice you'll have, as you'll find no work here. Either you work for the US government or not at all - at least not in this country. So what way do you want it?'

Miethe was silent for a considerable time, but his pitch-black gaze was steady and intense, searching Fuller's face for hidden meanings. Eventually, taking a deep breath and letting it out, he said, 'You believe Wilson's still alive, don't you?'

'Yes,' Fuller said.

'And the saucers?'

'We now have our own, but they're not that advanced. We based them on designs found in Nazi Germany and have reason to believe they were done by Wilson. We think we can advance on what we've already got, but it's gonna take a lot of time and money. In the meantime, we have the other saucers to contend with, and certainly they're too advanced to be our own.'

'The Russians?'

'We know they got Habermohl and a lot of rocket scientists, but even if they were constructing their own saucers, they'd have the same problems as us: not enough time or money. In other words, if the Russians have saucers, they're not likely to be much more advanced than ours.'

'Which leaves Wilson.'

'Right.'

Now Miethe looked frightened. 'Do you know where he is?'

'We think we know approximately where he is, but I can't tell you where that is just yet.'

‘Because I haven’t committed myself.’

‘You committed yourself by asking about Wilson. Now you can’t back out, Miethe.’

Shocked, Miethe straightened up in his chair, staring beyond Fuller’s head, doubtless recalling his early days in Kummersdorf with the Machiavellian American. Fuller saw that Miethe was now truly frightened and would want his protection.

‘If we’re right,’ he said, ‘Wilson is far away... but he has a long reach.’

‘With his saucers.’

‘Correct.’

Miethe nodded, rubbing his sweaty hands on his pants, then bit his lower lip. ‘So,’ he said, sounding as if he was sighing. ‘I am in. I am yours. What do you want with me?’

‘You have a wife and children in Germany,’ Fuller said. ‘A boy and girl, twelve and ten years old respectively. Hans and Irena.’

‘Yes,’ Miethe said, looking even more concerned. ‘Why do you - ?’

‘You’ll want them with you,’ Fuller said. ‘And you’ll want them out of reach. A new flying-saucer project, based on a combination of Schriever’s earlier designs and the more advanced designs found in Kahla, Thuringia - presumably Wilson’s work - is about to be financed jointly by the US and Canadian governments. The contract was won by the A.V. Roe Company and construction will take place at their plant in Malton, Ontario. That’s in Canada, not America, and we thought you might appreciate being there. Do you agree?’

‘Yes,’ Miethe said.

‘Good. I’ll make arrangements for your wife and kids to be flown out of Germany and you’ll all go to Canada shortly after. Any questions, Miethe?’

‘Not for now, Mr Fuller.’

Fuller nodded, stood up, and shook the German’s hand. He wiped his hand on his pants as he walked from the room.

Early that evening, Fuller phoned his wife from his temporary accommodation in the officers’s quarters of White Sands. The marriage between him and Belinda Wolfe had been a battlefield from the first day to the last and they had separated eighteen months ago, two years after the honeymoon. Belinda, the ravishing, brunette daughter of wealthy natives of Georgetown, Washington DC, had been unable to tolerate Fuller’s blatant

promiscuity, distaste for domesticity, love of danger, gratuitous cruelty with enemies and friends alike, and horror at the very thought of having children. Fuller and Belinda hadn't met since the acrimonious separation, though they had good reason to speak often by phone: the impending divorce. Now, when they spoke, Belinda told him that the divorce papers were coming through and she was thrilled to be rid of him.

'Thanks a million, Belinda.'

An hour later, Fuller was celebrating at a dance in the Rocket Room of the Officer's Club. High on a bellyful of lousy American beer, which he loved (those lousy, tasteless Krauts!), he enjoyed the live band, danced with a few ladies, then played the slot machines standing along the pine wall adorned with stag heads. Also playing was the wife of an Army Air Force captain who was on a two-week flying course at Nellis AFB, Las Vegas, Nevada. Fuller engaged her in conversation, bought her a few drinks, played Ping-Pong with her on the porch, then drove her out into the desert, where, under the dark-blue, star-filled sky, he fucked her brains out. When she recovered and was sobbing, filled with guilt and remorse, though displaying some confusion by saying she loved him, he dumped her well outside the base and told her to walk it off.

Ten minutes later, having packed to leave the next day, he fell into his bed in his room in the officers's quarters, went to sleep almost instantly, and dreamt about a V-2 rocket flying across the curved earth and being tailed by one of Wilson's flying saucers. He awoke with an erection that resembled the V-2, but his headache didn't permit him any pleasure, so he rolled out of bed. Wondering about the elusive thread that led obliquely from the V-2s to the UFOs, or flying saucers, he showered, put on his clothes, and left White Sands for good, gratefully heading back to the real world and its infinite mysteries.

Chapter Eight

Even in the desert of the Southwest, just north of Albuquerque, New Mexico, it was freezing at night. Squatting in the sand beside the other members of his UFO tracking team, looking up at the moon and stars, but seeing no unidentifieds, Dwight was torn between his excitement over what he was doing and depression caused by being away from home again, leaving Beth hurt and angry. It had been his own idea to send special patrols out into the desert around Albuquerque in a determined bid to resolve the mystery of the recent plague of green fireball sightings. A good idea from the point of view of the ATIC, not so good for the marriage.

The sightings had begun in November 1948, just three months ago, when a lot of folks around Albuquerque had reported seeing what seemed like green balls of fire flying across the skies. At first, because thousands of conscript GIs had recently been discharged from the army, taking souvenirs such as Very pistols, local Air Force Intelligence at Kirtland AFB had written the sightings off as flares. They were, however, forced to change their tune when, on the night of December 5, Air Force pilot Captain Goede and his co-pilot, flying a C-47 transport at 18,000 feet ten miles east of Albuquerque, observed a green fireball the size of a huge meteor flashing across the sky just ahead of them. Later, in their official report on the sighting, Goede and his co-pilot both insisted that it could not have been a meteor, as it had ascended from low altitude, near the slopes of the Sandia Mountains, then arched upward and levelled out, just like an airplane. A few minutes after that sighting, the captain of a Pioneer Airlines Flight also reported seeing a green ball of fire east of Las Vegas, New Mexico, when he was flying en route to Albuquerque. He, also, confirmed that the ascending flight of the green fireball proved that it could not have been a meteorite.

After that, the fireballs appeared practically every night and most of the reports landed on Randall's desk at the ATIC, in Wright-Patterson AFB. While analysing the reports with the help of Bob Jackson, Dwight arranged

for Dr Lincoln La Paz, head of the University of Mexico's Institute of Meteoritics, to look into the sightings. Subsequently, La Paz reported that he had personally witnessed the green fireballs both from the ground and from an aircraft, in the company of some distinguished scientists from the AEC Los Alamos Laboratory, and was of the opinion that the green fireballs were not meteorites. Their green colouring was too vivid, their trajectories were too flat, they were not accompanied by the sound and shock waves of natural meteorites, and, finally, they were simply *too big*.

The worst row of Dwight's marriage to date had erupted when, after ten more nights of green fireball sightings, he came under pressure to find out what was causing them. Not considering the time of year, he asked for permission to establish three cinetheodolite stations near Albuquerque, in hopes of ascertaining the altitude, speed and size of the UFOs. Unfortunately, permission came in the form of a formal, written order stating that the stations could only be set up and manned for a period of a fortnight, beginning in December and ending January - in other words, over the Christmas and New Year period.

Cursing his own stupidity, Dwight was then cursed out by Beth when he told her that he wouldn't be home for Christmas. Her Irish temper finally exploded and they had a dreadful row. Were this not torment enough, Beth then took Nichola to have Christmas with her folks in Dayton while Dwight and his three unhappy sighting teams set up their cinetheodolite stations in the desert around Albuquerque.

To make matters even worse, nothing was spotted.

In truth, Beth had never really forgiven him for their lost Christmas and New Year - particularly since no green fireballs or other UFOs materialised and it all seemed a waste of time. Now, here he was again, a mere four weeks later, in February 1949, in the middle of what he hoped was the most foolproof plan yet devised for the study of UFOs.

This time he had put together a dozen separate four-man sighting teams, with a radio operator, an instrument man, a timer, and a recorder. All the teams would be assigned a special radio frequency through which they could keep in touch with one another without being heard by outsiders. When a green fireball, or any kind of UFO, was spotted, the radio operator would immediately relay its presence to the other teams to enable them to track it simultaneously. While he was doing so, the instrument man would be

measuring the UFO's angles of elevation and azimuth, the timer would be calling out the time, and the recorder would be writing the details down. By then comparing the records of the many different teams, the speed, size, altitude and flight characteristics of the UFO could at last be accurately ascertained.

Dwight was pleased with himself.

Nevertheless, he was also cold and depressed. Cold because the desert, so hot during the day, was as chilly as Antarctica by night - or seemed to be so. Depressed because the stormy waters of his marriage had not been calmed by this latest trip and, even worse, because, yet again, they had been here four nights in a row and nothing had shown up.

Dwight was even more depressed because he was head of Project Sign and yet had never seen a UFO in his life.

Sensibly, once it became apparent to Dwight's team that nothing was happening, they decided to take turns at guard to ensure that all of them would at least get some sleep, even if only for short periods. Now it was Dwight's turn, it was four in the morning, and he had another two hours to go before he could waken one of the others.

There they were scattered around him, three men in sleeping bags, looking as dead as the flat plain of the desert and the vast, starry cosmos. Dwight's eyes felt like lead and he had to fight to keep them open, which he did by concentrating on the sky while praying for something odd or exciting to materialise.

It could be an eerie experience. The nocturnal sky played many tricks. You looked up at the stars, already dead, in the past, and you couldn't believe they weren't there, they seemed so damned real. Then, of course, the sky kept changing. Things were constantly on the move. Even a trained observer could be fooled by shooting stars, comets, meteors, lenticular and noctilucent clouds, dust and ice crystals, temperature inversions, corona discharges, plasmoids, ball-lightning, parhelia and paraselenae, or mock suns and sundogs, mock moons and moondogs, and even the ever deceiving planet Venus. In ancient times such phenomenon had been viewed as mystical visions or visitations by the gods of the sea or sky. In modern times they were often mistaken for UFOs, even by trained observers.

Just like me, Dwight thought bleakly.

Sighing, trying desperately to stay awake, he was just about to fall asleep

when he thought he saw something.

Rubbing his eyes, he sat up straight, preparing himself for another trick. What he saw was a streak of light, very low on the horizon... Impossible to tell the altitude from here, but it was definitely *moving*.

Left to right - no: up and down - a streak of white light, then two lights. Perhaps two lights blending into one and advancing towards him.

He rubbed his eyes and looked again. Maybe just a shooting star. No, it was too low for that, so it had to be something else. Perhaps a temperature inversion. Lights from somewhere far away. The headlamps of a car that was moving uphill, its lights beaming into the sky, hitting a temperature inversion, and being sent on for miles to another temperature inversion that bent it again and relayed it back to Earth to form what Dwight was seeing...

No, not that. Not mock moons or moon dogs either. The light, maybe two lights - sometimes two, sometimes one - was growing longer and thinner, stretching out like chewing gum, as it advanced across the desert floor at very low altitude.

'Jesus Christ,' Dwight whispered, wondering if he should waken the others. 'What the hell..?'

No, not low altitude. Not a single light either. Two separate lights, now bobbing erratically, beaming down on the desert floor.

Damn it, they were close. Too close to be high up. They were only a couple of feet above the ground, maybe not even that. Approaching. Coming towards him. Not accidentally at all. Not bobbing - bouncing - a sort of rattling in there, too... Then settling down and beaming over the track that led right to Dwight.

A car engine and squeaking springs.

'God damn it!' Dwight whispered.

His three companions sat up. 'What the fuck - ?' a dim voice queried. 'I'll kill the bastard in that jeep,' Corporal Mathers said. 'Thought we had us a UFO.'

The jeep took shape in the night, even blacker than the darkness, its headlights blinding Dwight as it turned off the road again and headed straight for him and the others. He was shading his dazzled eyes with his hand when the jeep squealed to a halt right in front of him, churning up clouds of sand.

His friend and sidekick, Air Force Captain Bob Jackson, waved at him and jumped down to the sand.

‘Hi,’ he said. ‘How’s it goin’?’

‘You came at four in the morning to ask me *that*?’

‘Not exactly,’ Bob said. He glanced down at the others, all sitting upright in their sleeping bags. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Go back to sleep. This is not for your ears. Happy bedy-bize, boys.’ When they had moaned and cursed and were settling back again, Bob looked directly at Dwight and said, more seriously, ‘I’m sorry, but this can’t wait.’ He took Dwight by the elbow and walked him away from the others, out of earshot. ‘You look cold,’ he said. Before Dwight could reply, Bob withdrew a hip flask from his flying jacket and unscrewed the cap. ‘Brandy,’ he said. ‘You’re going to need it... And not just for the cold.’

Grateful, Dwight had a good slug of the brandy and felt it burning down inside him. He had another slug, felt it going straight to his head, took note of the wondrous lustre of the stars and handed the flask back.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘What the hell is this?’

‘Your official Estimate of the Situation,’ Dwight replied.

Dwight nodded his understanding. The UFO-related death of Captain Thomas F. Mantell over Godman AFB, Kentucky, in January last year, combined with the extraordinary UFO sighting made by Eastern Airlines Captain Charles S. Chiles and co-pilot John B. Whitted near Montgomery, Alabama, on the evening of July 24, had prompted Dwight, as head of Project Sign, to write an official, top-secret Estimate of the Situation. That Estimate had outlined the whole history of UFO sightings, including the fireballs, Scandinavian ‘ghost rockets’ and American sightings before 1947. It had concluded with Dwight’s earnestly held conviction that the UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin.

‘So why the brandy?’ he asked, gazing with instinctive, growing despair over the star-covered, dark, barren desert.

Bob sucked his breath in, then let it out again. ‘Our venerable Chief of Staff, General Hoyt S.Vandenberg, has rejected the report.’

‘*What*?’

‘On the grounds that it lacks proof.’

Dwight was stunned. ‘Lacks... *proof*?’

Bob shrugged and spread his hands in the air as if begging forgiveness. ‘That’s what he said. It’s on an official, top-secret memorandum. That... and something even worse.’

‘What could be worse?’

Bob took another deep breath and let it out slowly. ‘There’s to be a whole new policy at Project Sign. In the future, Sign personnel are to assume that *all* UFO reports are hoaxes. Not only that, but we’re to check with FBI officers, and with the criminal and subversive files of police departments, looking into the private lives of the witnesses to see if they're - quote, unquote - *reliable*.’

Dwight was livid with anger. ‘By doing that,’ he said, ‘we’ll be shifting the investigations away from the actual UFOs and on to the poor bastards who report them.’

‘You’ve got it, buddy. That’s absolutely correct. As for your official Estimate of the Situation, it’s going to be incinerated and our project will be renamed Project Grudge.’

‘Is that a sour joke?’

‘No, it’s not - though it may be a sign of General Vandenberg’s displeasure with us.’

‘What he’s saying in effect is that we’re to discourage further UFO reports and keep a low profile.’

‘Right.’

‘We now exist in name only - and that name is Project Grudge.’

‘How bright you are,’ Bob said.

He handed Dwight the hip flask. Dwight took it and walked out into the darkness and sat on the sand. He had a stiff drink, then another, trying to still his racing heart. Then he looked up at the vast, starry sky, which reduced him to nothing. Eventually, Bob came to sit beside him, trying to offer some comfort.

‘What the hell’s going on?’ Dwight asked him, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice.

‘It doesn’t need spelling out,’ Bob said. ‘It’s fair warning to us all that it’s no longer wise to open your mouth too wide about UFOs.’

‘Why?’ Dwight asked, feeling increasingly confused and nervous, looking up at the night sky.

‘You tell me,’ Bob said.

Chapter Nine

With some native guides and a modest contingent of General Stroessner's armed *Federales*, an unhappy Ernst Stoll had endured a seemingly endless journey from the dusty streets of Asuncion, along the Paraguay river by gunboat, to this jetty looming out over the muddy water. His guide, a young, gap-toothed Paraguayan called Juan Chavez, pointed proudly at the jetty and the cleared compound beneath it, as if that motley collection of thatched shacks and muddy enclosures would actually bring a smile to Ernst's face. Instead, Ernst removed his hat, wiped the sweat from inside it, spat on the deck near Chavez's feet, then put the hat back on and wiped his face.

'*Scheisse*,' he exclaimed, 'what a filthy hole!'

'Have a beer, *senor* Stoll. It will help cool you down. Do not let the sun dry you out. You need plenty of liquid.'

Juan Chavez was smiling, a sly, gap-toothed grimace, his dark, youthful eyes bright with mischief and the urge to be sly. Ernst nodded and took the beer, the bottle cold in his sweaty palm. He drank, wiped some beer from his lips and then glanced over his shoulder. A group of captured Ache Indians were at the aft end of the deck, all small, emaciated, their narrow eyes dulled by fear, dressed in rags and huddling close to one-another as if for protection. Two *Federales* were guarding them, wearing jackboots, holding rifles, both gaunt-faced and bored, chewing gum, their eyes hooded beneath tatty peaked caps, their uniforms threadworn. Ernst studied them at length, feeling only contempt, recalling his own disciplined, immaculate SS troops during the war. These *Federales* were not like that. They were a bunch of murderous morons. Corrupt and led by a corrupt leader, General Stroessner, they were men whose only purpose was survival in the most expedient manner. The scum of the earth.

'This is your first time in Paraguay, *senor*?' Chavez asked, smiling slyly to reveal his missing front teeth.

Ernst stared coldly at him. Chavez was still a teenager, but he looked

twice his age. This was due to his missing teeth, the scars on his cheeks, and the cunning in his old man's brown eyes. He would make a good pimp.

God, Ernst thought, these people!

'Yes,' he said. 'I have never been here before. This is the first time.'

'You will have to get used to it, *senor*. Strangers often go crazy here.'

Ernst had another drink, cooled his forehead with the bottle, and then surveyed the widening clearing as the boat inched towards it. This was a waterside village, its jetty thrusting out from the tangled shrubs and liana at the edge of the forest, where the banks of red mud angled down to the dark, muddied river. Some men were waiting on the jetty, wearing filthy shirts and pants, nearly all with cigarettes in their mouths, not one of them smiling.

'Heaven on earth,' Ernst said sarcastically. 'I'm sure I'll be happy here.'

'You are staying long, *senor*?'

'Unfortunately, yes.'

'A lot of Germans, former soldiers, live in the jungle, so you may find some company.'

'That's nice,' Ernst said, though he wanted no German friends, having been warned by Wilson to avoid them and keep to himself. What would happen here must remain a secret, no matter how much that cost him in emotional terms. His own regular company could only be the scum of this village; his only form of relief the occasional visit from those in Antarctica. He would live here as if in a monastery, though with some compensations.

'I trust there are some women here,' he said.

'Ah, yes,' Chavez replied, grinning lasciviously. 'You can take your pick, *senor*.'

The gunboat growled and shuddered, turning in towards the bank; it inched forward and then bounced against the tyres along the edge of the jetty. Ernst glanced back over his shoulder. One of the Ache women was wailing. A *Federale* slapped her brutally across the face and screamed a torrent of abuse. The woman's wailing became a whimper. Ernst yawned and turned away. One of the crew had thrown a rope to a man on the jetty and the latter was tying it around an upright, bending low, shouting inanely. The boat's engine cut out. A crewmember removed the gate. A plank was thrown across the space between the deck and the jetty, then tied to some uprights to form a crude gangplank. Ernst moved towards the plank, wanting desperately to get off, but Chavez

tugged at the sleeve of his shirt and motioned him back.

'No,' he said. 'First the Ache.'

Ernst stopped and stared at him, repulsed by that gap-toothed grin, but he stepped back as Chavez went to the *Federales* and bawled his instructions. The *Federales* were quick to move, venting their boredom on the miserable Indians, screaming abuse and kicking them to their feet, herding them towards the gangplank. The Indians were not so quick, weak from hunger, confused, so the *Federales* encouraged them along with vicious blows from their rifles. The women wailed and held their children, cowering from the swinging rifles, while their menfolk, uncommonly small and frail, tried in vain to protect them.

It was a familiar sight to Ernst. He recalled similar scenes from the war: the night they had left Kummersdorf and herded their slave labour, mostly wailing Jews, onto the trains in Berlin. He smiled at the recollection, feeling a stab of nostalgia, but managed to suppress it as the first of the Indians stumbled across the gangplank with their hands on their heads. Chavez was leading them down, his shirt unbuttoned and flapping loosely, his broad hat tilted over his eyes as he gave his instructions.

Ernst felt the sun's fierce heat as he studied the village, a drab collection of leaning huts made from palmetto trunks and vines, dogs and goats sniffing lethargically at the dust, babies lying on corn shucks. The poverty was total, the old and young emaciated, sunlight falling on scattered gourds, woven baskets and banana leaves, on the giant rat that raced across the clearing and vanished into the forest. Ernst looked along the jetty. The Ache Indians had just left it. They were now at the edge of the clearing with the *Federales* surrounding them. Chavez was waving his hands, telling Ernst to disembark; so Ernst finished his beer, threw the bottle overboard, watched it glinting as it bobbed along the river and was swept out of sight. Then he went to the gangplank, crossed without enthusiasm, above the muddy, oil-slicked water, and finally stepped onto the soil of what would be his new home.

God, he thought, what a piss-hole!

Chavez, an adolescent martinet, was standing beside an emaciated native in short pants and a torn, filthy shirt. Chavez waved Ernst forward. When he reached the pair, he noted that the man was elderly, had rheumy eyes, and seemed nervous.

'This is Salano Valentinas,' Chavez said. 'The head of the village. Anything you want, you ask him. He is here as your eyes, ears and hands.'

‘Welcome, *senor*,’ Valentinas said, his voice as rough as sandpaper. ‘I trust you had a good journey.’

‘Never mind my journey,’ Ernst said. ‘Just show me where I’ll be staying.’

‘Yes, *senor*, of course.’

He turned away to lead Ernst and Chavez across the clearing, past the captured Ache Indians, who were now being herded up into the backs of two trucks, the men being punched and thumped with the butts of rifles, the women and children wailing.

‘What happens to them?’ Ernst asked.

‘They will be sold as workers and whores to those living in compounds in the jungle - mostly Germans, of course. Some of them are being taken to your compound. You can do what you want with them.’

‘Does President Morínigo know about this?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe not. The *Federales* who collect them are controlled by Morínigo’s hatchet man, General Stroessner. General Stroessner knows everything.’

More than you can imagine, Ernst thought, as they crossed the clearing, surrounded by the huts of palmetto leaves and vine, scattering goats and chickens, passing Indians roasting sweet potatoes, eventually stopping at a small, badly battered, open-topped truck that was parked at the edge of the narrow track snaking into the forest.

‘I’m not staying here?’ Ernst asked.

‘No, *senor*,’ Chavez replied. ‘Your compound is ten kilometres away, hidden deep in the forest. There, even aircraft cannot see you. You will feel safe there.’

The headman, Valentinas, climbed up onto the open rear of the truck, Chavez took the driver’s seat, and Ernst clambered up beside the latter. Chavez turned on the ignition, accelerated inexpertly, and then the truck lurched off into the forest, where the trees kept the sun out. Imagining that it would be cooler in the interior, Ernst was shocked to find that it wasn’t: that the humidity was much worse, overwhelming him, almost making him gag. Feeling ill, he glanced about him, taking in the riot of vegetation, tangled vines and soaring trees in the chattering green gloom relieved only by shafts of sunlight beaming down on the steaming banana leaves. The narrow track was pitted with holes, coiling snake-like between the trees and disappearing ahead of them. Chavez was beaming with pleasure, clearly enjoying the drive; this made him look more like his

proper age, which was, Ernst surmised with disbelief, not much more than eighteen. The truck growled and coughed, bouncing roughly over potholes, racing through shafts of sunlight that beamed down through the trees and illuminated the steaming vegetation. Ernst was suffocating. He was sweating and felt feverish. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw the old man in the back, leaning forward with his chin on his raised knees, his rheumy eyes fixed on nothing.

My new companions, Ernst thought with revulsion. I'll go mad in this hellhole!

The drive seemed to take forever, an endless journey through heat and gloom, but eventually the truck burst into the sunlight of another cleared area. Lines of barbed wire formed a fence around an expansive wooden building, its sloping roof supported by tree trunks and covered in woven vines and banana leaves. Chavez drove the truck through the open gates in the fence and braked inside the compound, creating a cloud of dust.

'*Scheisse*!' Ernst barked, coughing to clear his throat of the dust as he climbed down from the truck. 'Are you trying to choke us, you fool?'

Chavez just laughed, then led Ernst and Valentinas across the clearing towards the big house with the open veranda running all the way around it, under a roof raised above the top rooms, which were open to the elements and obviously used only by the servants. The compound was busy, filled with men, women and children, most gathered around open fires, roasting sweet potatoes. Though watching Ernst's arrival with nervous curiosity, they made no move towards him.

'The barbed wire is electrified,' Chavez informed him. 'Make sure you don't touch it. So, *senor*, here we are!'

They climbed the steps of the veranda to stop under an awning of vine and leaves. A table and chairs had been placed near the entrance to the house. A native woman, too stout to be healthy, as ugly as a bat, stood by the table, wearing a white blouse and long skirt, a towel draped over her right arm. She bowed to Ernst. He simply grunted and glanced about him. On the table were two bottles of brandy, half a dozen empty glasses, and a cup filled with fat, white, wriggling worms.

Seeing what Ernst was looking at, Chavez grinned and picked up a worm. He watched it wriggling between his fingers for a moment, then bit off its head, spat

it out and swallowed the rest of it. 'Koro worms!' he explained, picking the cup off the table and holding it out to Ernst. 'Try one, *senor*!' When Ernst shuddered with revulsion, Chavez chortled and put the cup back down. 'You will soon learn to enjoy them,' he said. 'You will learn to enjoy many strange things here. Please, *senor*, take a chair.'

Ernst took one of the wooden chairs by the table, placing his pistol and holster upon it. The native woman then knelt in front of him, to laboriously pull off his boots and wipe his feet with the towel. When this was done, she shuffled backwards, still on her knees, until Chavez barked another instruction at her. Standing upright, she filled the two glasses with brandy and handed them to Ernst and Chavez. The latter offered his gap-toothed smile and held his glass up in a toast. Ignoring him, Ernst drank most of the brandy in one thirsty gulp. Casting his gaze over the compound, which resembled an untended farmyard, covered in smoke and filled with worthless human livestock, he realised that he was not thrilled to be here.

'So,' he said, not trying to hide his bitterness, 'this is it: my new home.'

'Yes, *senor*,' Chavez said.

'And this so-called headman – ' Ernst indicated Valentinas with a contemptuous wave of his hand – 'now works for me.'

'That is correct, *senor*. He will translate and tell you all you need to know. He will also take care of the supplies, which will be shipped in from Asuncion every month. He already has his instructions, *senor*, and will not let you down.'

'I hope not,' Ernst said.

Chavez finished his brandy and placed his glass back on the table. 'Now I must be off, *senor*. I go back to Asuncion. I work on the gunboat that sails regularly between there and here, so we will meet quite a lot. If you need me, just call. Goodbye… How you say it? *Auf Wiedersehen*! Until the next time, *senor*.'

Chavez waved, sauntered in a leisurely manner back to the truck, climbed in and drove out of the compound with a lot of rattling and banging.

'*Dreck*!' Ernst muttered, feeling tired and impatient. Pouring another stiff brandy, he ordered Valentinas to gather together on the veranda the women selected as potential household staff. Valentinas brought a dozen of them, some young, others old. After inspecting them, as he had often done in Nordhausen - pinching here, prodding there, checking their teeth - Ernst rejected the eldest and

most ugly, picking mostly the young to serve him, with one middle-aged crone to be in charge of them. Those chosen bowed solemnly, fearfully, and then were ushered by the old crone up the stairs at the side of the house, to sort themselves out on the open floor beneath the raised roof. Until Ernst decided otherwise, that's where they would live from now on, separated from family and friends, working only for him.

He had another drink of brandy, feeling marginally better for it, then strapped his holster on and stepped off the porch, followed by the obedient Valentinas. Disgusted by the seemingly disorganised state of the compound, he told Valentinas to get rid of the open fires and move the natives back into the ramshackle living accommodations located on both sides of the clearing. The natives so housed would then be used as the labour force required to dig out the centre of the compound and turn it into a reinforced, concrete landing pad for the flying saucers. Also, though the barbed-wire fence was already electrified, he wanted to erect watchtowers and have them manned at all times with machine-gun crews.

Ernst barked his numerous instructions with renewed, drunken vigour while Valentinas, always standing in his shadow, nodded affirmatively.

'Any mistakes,' Ernst informed him, 'and you'll be dealt with personally, harshly, by me. Understood?'

'Yes, *senor*.'

The sun had started sinking when Ernst returned to the house, this time letting Valentinas lead him inside to show him around. There were two floors beneath the open floor at the top, both with balconies overlooking the living room. The beds in the rooms located along the balconies were imported four-posters covered in mosquito nets, and the bedroom furniture, Ernst noted, was mostly imported German antique. The downstairs living room, however, was filled with well-cushioned bamboo chairs and sofas, bookcases of waxed pine, and low tables carved from local woods. All in all, it was surprisingly comfortable, if a touch too exotic.

Satisfied, Ernst tackled a light supper of bread, cheese and fresh fruit, all washed down with an intemperate amount of brandy. Now more drunk than he had been since leaving Germany, he thought of his homeland, grew unexpectedly maudlin, and had vivid recollections of the women he had known during the war: that lascivious stripper, Brigette, who had performed in the Französischestrasse; that Polish woman, Kosilewski, who had pleasured him to

betray him; even Ingrid, his wife, who had loved him but eventually came to hate him, before dying with his children in an air-raid. Those and the others, some willing, some not, some whores and some unfortunate camp inmates used in military brothels. Those women and many more. So many women. So many ways.

Ernst remembered and was inflamed, wanting to have them all back, and so barked for Valentinas to bring him a girl - the youngest and prettiest of those upstairs. His wizened servant soon did so, fetching one from the top floor, and then he beat a hasty retreat when Ernst glared fiercely at him.

'Yes, *senor*. Of course, *senor*! I will be on the veranda if you need me. I'll sleep out there, *senor*.'

Satiated with food and drink, Ernst tried to undress the young girl, a mere stripling, and beat her badly when she tried to resist. When even the beating failed to work, but simply reduced her to tears, he threw the sobbing creature onto the floor and stormed out to the veranda.

'I will show you what discipline is,' he said to Valentinas, 'and you can tell all the others. Bring in the girl's mother.'

When the girl's terrified mother was brought into the living room, Ernst again told the sobbing girl to remove her clothes. When the girl refused to do so, Ernst unholstered his pistol and placed it to the head of her mother, who was now also sobbing.

'Tell her that if she doesn't do as I say, Valentinas, I'll blow her mother's brains out.'

'Yes, *senor*. Of course.'

Valentinas relayed the message and the sobbing girl, staring at her fearful mother, finally nodded agreement. The mother, still crying, was led out by Valentinas, as Ernst ordered the trembling girl to strip and lie back on the floor. When she had done so, he removed his own clothes, then stood over her, legs outspread, and told her to raise herself to her knees. Trembling, her eyes as big as spoons, she did as she was told.

'You will do everything I tell you,' Ernst said. 'Do you understand what I'm saying?'

'Yes,' the girl whispered, speaking English, which Ernst understood.

'Your fear excites me,' Ernst told her. 'Your degradation is my joy. Now dry your damned eyes.'

Placing his hands on the back of her head, he pulled the girl towards him,

closing his own eyes in expectation, making the most of his new life. The days would be long here.

Chapter Ten

The saucer was one of the early models, a mere thirty feet in diameter, descending vertically, silently, towards a dark field in Virginia, its lights flashing on and off, the seamless surface a silvery white, gleaming in a vast sea of stars, parallel to a Gorgonzola moon. Reaching the ground, it didn't quite touch it, but merely hovered just above it, swaying slightly from side to side, until its four hydraulic legs emerged obliquely from its base and dug into the soft earth. The saucer's lights blinked out, its silvery-white sheen turned to grey, then its steps angled down from the base.

Two men in black coveralls dropped out, followed by Wilson.

Straightening up, Wilson glanced around him, taking in the grassy hills, the empty fields, the shivering trees, then he walked across the grass to the unfenced road, where a jet-black limousine was parked. Its windows were tinted and the headlights turned off, but its rear door opened as he approached. When he slipped into the car, the flying saucer in the field took off again. It rose slowly, almost silently, to a very great height, its lights flashing on and off around the rim to form a kaleidoscope. Eventually it became dime-sized, then a mere spot of white light. That light hovered in the air, as if just another star, then it suddenly shot away and disappeared.

Wilson took the rear seat in the limousine. Beside him, Artur Nebe was wearing a grey suit with shirt and tie, looking uncomfortable out of uniform.

Too many years in the SS, Wilson thought, with a pistol always holstered on his waist. He must feel naked without it.

'*Guten tag*, Nebe,' Wilson said. 'How is life in the real world?'

'I don't like all the politics,' Nebe said. 'I should be back in Antarctica.'

'You will be. Today. Once we get this meeting over with. After that, you'll have no reason to stay here. You'll come back with me.' He noticed that Nebe was staring intently at him. 'What is it? My face?'

'Sorry, sir. Yes, you look different. About twenty years younger.'

‘Not like an eighty-two-year old?’

‘More like sixty-two.’

Wilson smiled. ‘Plastic surgery and skin grafts. Dr King is doing a good job of preserving me in particular and researching longevity in general. I’ve also had certain joints replaced with artificial ones, steel and fibre, which King produced during his on-going cyborg research.’

‘He certainly seems to be doing well.’

‘The knowledge that he can experiment without restraints of any kind has sent his imagination soaring and filled him with energy. He’s become a man obsessed with his work and now cares for little else. He doesn’t have to be watched any longer; his love of work has enslaved him. He’s all ours, Nebe. Completely.’

‘And his other needs?’

‘We’ve given him total freedom when it comes to the comfort girls. The sex is all he really wants when he’s not working. The needs of most men are basic.’

Nebe offered a rare, chilling smile, being himself addicted to the abducted girls used as whores, or ‘comfort girls’, in the brothel in the Antarctic colony. ‘I’m sure he didn’t get sex like that in Hendon, England. That alone should enslave him.’

‘It’s certainly helped him forget his wife and children. Family love treads on thin ice.’ Wilson rolled his window down and gazed out at the moonlit fields. The trees were silhouetted against a star-filled sky; the wind scarcely stirred. ‘When is General Samford expected?’

Nebe checked his wristwatch. ‘He should be here in five minutes. He was told to be punctual.’

‘Who arranged the meeting?’

‘A CIA agent, Sam Fuller. I’d heard he was on your trail. He was in charge of disinformation regarding the Socorro crash, back in 1947, and he went to have a talk with Mike Bradley.’

‘The one who pursued me during the war?’

‘Yes. Wounded at Kiel harbour. The explosion set by Ernst Stoll. You paid him a visit the night of the Socorro crash and warned him off his UFO investigations.’

‘Ah, yes, I remember. Have you any idea what he told Fuller?’

‘According to Fuller, nothing. But just knowing that Fuller had been to see him made me suspicious. Then, when he also went to see von Braun and Miethe,

I knew it was us he was after.'

'So?'

'I contacted him in Washington DC. A meeting was arranged. Same place - right here - and same time. When we met, I told him I knew what he was after and that we were responsible.'

'Did you tell him where we're located?'

'I confirmed it. He already knew, of course, though not in too much detail. He'd interrogated Captain Schaeffer of U-boat 977, the one that took us to Plata del Mar, Argentina, and worked the rest of our route out from there. So he knows we're in Neu Schwabenland, though he still doesn't know the exact location. First US confirmation of the existence of our flying saucers came, he said, through the investigations of Operation Paperclip at the close of the war. Mike Bradley also worked on that, which is why he turned up at Kiel and later became obsessed with UFOs. That knowledge, as well as Bradley's turnaround after the Socorro crash, explain why Fuller went with First Lieutenant Harris to see him in Socorro. Now, a select few in the White House, the Pentagon, and the CIA, including Fuller, know we're hidden somewhere in Antarctica. They also know we have flying saucers more highly developed than those being constructed in the United States and Canada.'

'What made General Samford change his mind about meeting us? When I personally tried to set up this meeting, his minions said, "No deal".'

'Because you were using a pseudonym then - calling yourself Aldridge - and they didn't relate the name to Wilson, which is who they were looking for. Also, though they knew we were in Antarctica, they didn't believe how advanced our saucers were and assumed we were just a bunch of fanatical Nazis not much different, though possibly crazier, than those who had fled to Paraguay. Reportedly, Samford, protective of his position as US Head of Intelligence, was outraged that his minions would even consider such a meeting. I believe he described us as a bunch of escaped war criminals and demanded that an expeditionary force be sent to Antarctica to get us out and bring us back to the United States, to be tried as war criminals.'

'Rear-Admiral Byrd's Operation Highjump.'

'Correct.'

'Which we put to rout. Byrd's expedition was then cut short. The official explanation was hurricane winds.'

'Also correct. But Samford still refused to believe we were that advanced

technologically and asked for Byrd to be psychiatrically evaluated. He also demanded that all of Byrd's references to our flying saucers be removed from his official report.'

'So what made the morally outraged US Head of Intelligence change his mind?'

'I arranged for one of our saucers to hover over his house one evening, in the middle of a party he was giving in the garden of his home in Alexandria, Virginia. A lot of other top brass and their wives were in attendance and all of them saw the saucer. It was hovering right over them, casting its shadow on the lawn. *That's* what changed the stubborn General Samford's mind. He's a man who sees reason.'

Wilson smiled. 'It must have come as quite a shock to Samford's guests.'

'It sure did. All of those present were sworn to secrecy. When a couple of the wives gossiped about the incident, their husbands were transferred to Alaska. That was fair enough warning to the others. No one's talked since.'

'Who would believe them anyway? Project Grudge is now treating all those who report UFOs as cranks. Witnesses are afraid of public ridicule, so those best equipped to confirm the reality of the saucers - radar operators and pilots - are learning to keep their mouths shut. We have little to fear.'

'There they are,' Nebe said softly.

Looking beyond the driver's head, Wilson saw the headlights of another car approaching along the dark road. It slowed down and pulled into the verge, then stopped about twenty yards from the limousine. Another set of headlights appeared behind it, stopping further away. When the lights of both vehicles blinked out, Wilson saw that the other vehicle was an army troop-truck.

'Did you know about this?' he asked of Nebe.

'I told him he could bring some protection. I didn't mean a whole troop-truck.'

'No problem,' Wilson said.

He stepped from the limousine as the troops were spilling out of the truck to form a cordon across the road. All of the troops were armed. General Samford, in uniform, followed by a man in plain clothes, clambered out of the other car as Nebe joined Wilson. The two groups approached one another, stopping about three feet apart.

With his lean, almost ascetic face, General Samford did not look like a man to take fools lightly. Fuller, on the other hand, was darkly handsome, clearly

cynical, deceptively relaxed and slyly watchful. He looked like a man who could handle trouble and probably relished it.

Four of the armed troops came up behind Samford and Fuller, stopping a few yards farther back.

Nebe glanced at Fuller. 'So, we meet again.' Fuller just nodded. Nebe indicated Wilson with his finger. 'This is him,' he told Fuller. 'Herr Wilson, this is CIA agent Sam Fuller, and...'

'General Samford,' Fuller confirmed. 'Head of US Intelligence.'

'I believe you wanted a talk,' Samford said, sounding like a man suppressing anger. 'Well, here I am.'

'Are you nervous, General?'

'What?'

'You've brought a lot of armed troops to what I'd hoped would be an informal, friendly meeting.'

'I don't have friendly meetings with escaped war criminals. Nor do I like traitorous Americans and their Nazi cohorts.'

Wilson was amused. 'You wrong me. I'm not a man who changes sides. I've always been exactly what I am, which is a man on his own. I can't be a traitor, because I've never been a patriot. I go where my work takes me, General Samford, whether it's here, Nazi Germany, or the Antarctic. You're a soldier, General. I'm a scientist. That's the only difference between us.'

'You're just a goddamned Nazi,' Samford said. 'You and your whole bunch.'

'I am not, and never have been, a Nazi, General Samford. I have no political allegiances, no religion, no belief in any government, left or right. I live for my work, which is science, as you live for the army. You've chosen what you want to be, General, and I've done the same. We're two sides of the same coin.'

General Samford was obviously outraged by the very suggestion, but before he could explode, Fuller said soothingly, 'Okay, you've got us both here, Wilson. Now what do you want?'

'Can I take it you're both here with the full knowledge of the head of the Air Matériel Command?'

'General Vandenberg knows we're here,' Samford said, practically gritting his teeth. 'Now what do you *want*?'

'We want to trade,' Wilson said.

For a moment even Fuller looked dumbfounded, but General Samford could barely contain himself.

'*What*?' he asked, as if choking on a bone.

'You heard me,' Wilson said. 'As you clearly know, we're not the only ones with flying saucers, though ours are certainly the most advanced. The US and Canada are both involved in similar construction projects and have already had plenty of test flights. The Harold Dahl and Kenneth Arnold sightings of June 1947, over the Cascades, were actually of crude US-Canadian saucers being constructed in secret in the wilds of Canada. Your saucers, General Samford, not ours. But no matter how long you take or how much you spend, your saucers can never be that advanced without further knowledge of my technology. I, too, have certain needs, General, so I'm willing to trade.'

'I don't – '

'Why would you do that?' Fuller interjected, his gaze ever watchful and direct. 'I mean, that would be inviting our technology to catch up with yours, and then...' He shrugged and grinned. 'We'd be evenly matched. Then we'd come in and get you.'

Wilson was unperturbed. 'Not quite true, Mr Fuller. In return for what I need, I'll trade certain secrets of my technology, but I'll be doing it a little at a time and only when I've already surpassed what I'm offering to you. Though this will benefit you greatly, you'll always remain behind us, which ensures that we'll retain the technological advantages we have at this time.'

'A balance of power,' Samford said.

'You might call it that,' Wilson replied.

'A seesaw arrangement, right? A tricky manoeuvre.'

'That's right, Mr Fuller.'

'And just what are we supposed to hand over for all this?' Samford asked, still sounding choked.

'I'm in constant need of various mass-produced components and equipment, as well as food and other supplies. We shipped a tremendous amount of it in throughout the war years, but it's finally beginning to run out and our saucers are not yet large enough to bring in the bulk we need. You'll do that for us.'

General Samford was red-faced, clenching and unclenching his fists, but Fuller seemed merely intrigued. 'If we do that for you,' he pointed out, 'we'll find out exactly where you are.'

‘I don’t care,’ Wilson said. ‘That information won’t help you. You can’t get conventional aircraft anywhere near us and your saucers have a long way to go before they can be used to combat us, either with troops or with weapons.’

‘So if we can’t get in with conventional aircraft, how will we get the supplies to you?’

‘We’re located at the base of a deep, hidden gorge in Neu Schwabenland, or Queen Maud Land, which isn’t accessible by conventional aircraft. You’ll be given a location at the other side of that mountain range. There we’ve already hacked storage spaces out of the base of the mountain and will soon have them manned all year round. You’ll drop the supplies, and we’ll then pick them up and transport them back here in our saucers. As and when required.’

‘But eventually,’ Fuller said with a smile not reflected in his cold, steady gaze, ‘with the technological information you’ll be feeding us in return, bit by bit, our technology, if never quite matching yours, will be enough to give us saucers capable of flying down into your hidden base.’

‘By which time,’ Wilson replied, ‘we’ll have developed some highly advanced form of defence to keep out unwanted saucers - infrasound barriers or heat shields. We’re already working on those.’

‘You may not succeed,’ General Samford said hopefully, ‘in which case we could eventually get at you.’

‘That’s a chance I’m willing to take,’ Wilson said. ‘And I don’t take chances lightly.’

Samford and Fuller glanced at one another, the former outraged, the latter cynically amused.

‘What if we reject your proposal?’ Samford said. ‘Seems to me, we can just leave you in the Antarctic and forget your existence. A few saucers flying here and there aren’t going to give us much trouble. Most folks already think the saucers are piloted by Little Green Men or only witnessed by cranks. What can you do to us?’

‘Remember the Mantell crash?’ Nebe asked, breaking his icy silence. ‘The first US Air Force officer to die chasing a UFO?’

‘Yes,’ Samford said, ‘I remember. He either died chasing a Rawin weather balloon or because of a lack of oxygen when he foolishly climbed too high.’

‘It’s a well-known fact,’ Nebe said softly, chillingly, ‘that Mantell’s last words were about something metallic and tremendous in size. That was our saucer.’

Samford glanced at Fuller, then at Wilson. ‘I don’t believe you’re that far advanced,’ he said. ‘I think Mantell died from a lack of oxygen, maybe chasing Venus, so I’m calling your bluff.’

‘You reject my proposal?’ Wilson asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Then I’ll give you proof, General Samford. I’ll give you, the Pentagon and the White House the kind of proof you won’t readily forget. Later this month my flying saucers will surround Washington DC. Some will be piloted; others will be small, remote-controlled devices of the kind called “Foo-fighters” during the war. For your entertainment, we’ll even fly around the White House. We’ll cause chaos on every radar screen in the area. If your aircraft try pursuing us, we’ll play cat-and-mouse with them. Should that not make you change your mind, we’ll repeat the performance a week later. I think, General Samford, that your superiors, including the President, will think differently after this demonstration.’

‘I’ll believe that when I see it,’ Samford said. ‘Now go to hell, Wilson.’

Wilson merely smiled and then returned with Nebe to the limousine. As he was slipping into the rear seat, he glanced back over his shoulder and saw Samford in angry consultation with Fuller. Fuller was shaking his head, as if saying, ‘No,’ but Samford was obviously overruling him. As Wilson closed his door, Samford shouted at the armed soldiers. Instantly, they readied their weapons and raced forward to surround the limousine.

‘Too late,’ Nebe said.

Suddenly, a great pyramid of dazzling light beamed down over the advancing soldiers. A bass humming sound, shaking even the limousine, was accompanied by a fierce, swirling wind that bent the trees on either side of the road and bowled the advancing soldiers over. Their weapons fell from their hands as they were swept across the road, bellowing with fear and pain as what seemed like a tornado slammed them into one another or against the trees.

Wilson caught a glimpse of General Samford crouching low, holding his peaked cap on with one hand, shading his eyes with the other, squinting up at that dazzling, descending, pyramidal light as Fuller tugged him back to their own car, just outside the roaring whirlpool of wind, now filled with flying leaves, blades of grass, pebbles and dust.

‘Let’s go!’ Nebe snapped.

The driver of the limousine reversed away from the tornado created by the

descending saucer and then headed back across the field. There, a second saucer, thirty foot in diameter, had descended and was resting on its four hydraulic legs, gleaming silvery in moonlight. The driver stopped about twenty yards from the parked saucer, letting Wilson and Nebe climb out, then he reversed again and bounced back across the field to the road.

The first saucer was now visible, hovering high in the sky, its base spinning and emitting that great pyramidal light, creating the hurricane-like wind that was slamming the soldiers against the trees or causing them to roll between them, across the grass verge beyond the road.

The limousine raced away as the dazzling light blinked out, abruptly returning the night to darkness. The saucer ascended vertically, rapidly, until it was just a pinprick of light positioned high in the sky, a single star amongst many. Eventually, the swirling wind settled down, letting the bruised, dazed soldiers stand upright again. They all looked up in awe as the second saucer, containing Wilson and Nebe, also ascended vertically, hovered briefly in the sky, then shot off at unreal speed, heading south before blinking out.

'We have a problem,' Fuller said.

Chapter Eleven

The telephone call came during supper. Nichola, now four years of age, still blonde and cuter than ever, was no longer in her high chair, but sitting instead with Dwight and Beth at the table, having cookies and milk while her parents contented themselves with coffee. It was the month of July in 1952. Though it was pretty late in the evening, the sun hadn't sunk yet and the velvet sky was streaked with pink where the stars didn't show. When the telephone rang, Beth stared at it but made no move to pick it up.

'Okay,' Dwight said, feeling guilty and tense when he saw the look on her face. 'It's for me, right? I'll get it.' Though Beth was sitting beside the phone, he got up and walked around the table to pick it up, which placed him practically against her shoulder and made her lean away from him. 'Hi,' he said. 'Cap'n Randall.'

'Hate to call at this time of night,' Bob Jackson said, 'but you have to come over here. They want you right now.'

'Over where? To the ATIC?'

'Yeah, right. That's where I'm calling from. They want you immediately.'

'Who the hell are *they*?'

'Members of the Technical Intelligence Division, Air Matériel Command. They want to talk to you about what we've been doing since Project Sign was dissolved and replaced with Project Grudge.'

Even though now well prepared for the unexpected, Dwight was astounded to hear this. 'Now? At *this* time?'

'Yeah. They got me out of bed. They appear to have a very urgent need for some detailed case histories. They've also come to discuss your complaints about how they've been treating us.'

'Shit!'

'No shit, baby.'

'Okay,' Dwight said, 'I'm coming.' He dropped the phone and and stared at Beth, trying to hold her gaze, though he couldn't help shrugging forlornly. 'Top

brass. I swear, Beth, I wasn't expecting this. Apparently they want to interview me - right now, in the ATIC. They're waiting over there for me.'

'Right now? This evening?'

'Unbelievable, right?'

Nichola was breaking up a couple of cookies and spreading the crumbs out on the table.

'Why don't you tell them to go to hell? Tell them you have a right to your own life, even if in the Air Force.'

'I can't, Beth. It's top brass.'

'That doesn't give them the right. Lord knows, they're working you into the ground already; you have a right to your own time.'

'It must be something special, Beth.'

'Oh, yeah,' she replied. 'Something special. Every time we try to plan something, get together, something special comes up. This marriage won't last the course, Dwight.'

'Bullshit.'

'No, it's not. You work night and day for those people and get no thanks for it. They've even consistently denied you promotion, which is practically punishment. So what's the point, Dwight?'

Not knowing what to say, Dwight glanced down at his daughter. She was licking her index finger and drawing funny faces in the crumbs from the cookies, her brow wrinkled in deep thought. She was also whispering words he couldn't hear and perhaps wouldn't understand.

'Promotion's not the point,' Dwight said. 'I do this because it's my job and that's all there is to it.'

'Promotion may not be the point, but punishment is. They've consistently denied you promotion and you know why that is. It's the UFOs, Dwight. They don't approve of what you're doing. It's a pure PR exercise and someone had to be landed with it. You got the job, but they don't want you to succeed and so they're making it hard on you. God, Dwight, you're a fool!'

Dwight knew it was true. He just didn't know the reasons. On the one hand, the UFOs were treated as a threat to national security, on the other the reporting of them was discouraged. It just didn't make sense. No more than it made sense to establish a UFO programme and then block every move its members made. Beth was right - it was a goddamned PR exercise... and maybe he was the fall guy. He might find out tonight.

After kissing Nichola on the head, making her giggle and squirm, he went to the closet and pulled out his light jacket. He was wearing civilian clothes, his home clothes, and didn't intend changing into his uniform at this time of night. Let the bastards see that at least. Putting his jacket on, he went to the door, opened it, but then turned back to Beth.

'I used to count on your support,' he told her, 'but these days I only get flak. What happened, Beth?'

'You traded me in for your work.'

He stared steadily at her, feeling hurt, then stepped out onto the porch, letting the door snap shut behind him. The pink sky was turning darker, letting the stars come out, and he stood there for a moment, gazing across the airstrip, taking comfort from the aircraft hangars and the many parked planes silhouetted in the twilight. Seeing them, he was reminded of how much simpler life had been when he'd been flying the B-29s over India, China and the Pacific during World War II. Now the US was fighting a war in Korea. Dwight sometimes wished he could take part in it, instead of remaining here to chase UFOs and dodge flak that came from his superiors and Beth instead of the enemy. Sighing, still feeling wounded and hurt, he started down the steps to the yard.

The door opened and snapped shut behind him, then he heard Beth call out to him. When he turned back, she hurried down the steps to cup his face in her hands.

'Oh, honey,' she said, shaking her head in a woeful manner and letting her thumbs slide down to his lips, 'I'm so sorry. I really am. It's not you, sweetheart – it's what they're doing to us. To *us*. The three of us. We're a family, a good family, a team, and they could tear us apart. That's what frightens me, Dwight.'

'There's no need,' he replied. 'There's no danger of that, Beth.' He removed one of her hands from his cheek and pressed his lips to it, moved by a rush of emotion that brought tears to his eyes. 'We'll be okay. I promise.'

'I worry,' she insisted. 'There's more than one kind of danger. There's the threat to this marriage – that's one - but we're okay if we know that. What we can't fight, what I think we can't defeat, is what happens to so many of those who do the work that you do. That's what worries me most, Dwight.'

He knew what she meant and was troubled to be reminded of it. Too many Air Force officers involved in UFO investigations ended up with career problems, broken marriages and ill health. Too many were denied promotion,

punished for cooked-up misdemeanours, or posted to inhospitable climes, often separated from their families. Too many for comfort. Beth had cause for anxiety.

'I love you,' she said. 'You know that, honey. I'm just concerned for you.'

'I love you, too, Beth, but I can't help your concern.'

She sighed. 'No, I guess not. I'll just have to be stronger. We're a family, right, Dwight?'

'Yeah,' he said. 'A real family.'

'Then that's all that matters.' She embraced him and kissed him, clinging passionately to him, then let him go and wiped tears from her eyes. 'You hurry on, now. Take no mind of me. I'll be warming the bed, Dwight.'

'That sounds nice.' He turned away, wiping his own eyes, and hurried along the sidewalk, now deserted at this late hour, past the other houses of the officers quarters, heading for Wright Field, not looking forward to the meeting, but protected by Beth's love.

Chapter Twelve

The atmosphere in the ATIC operation's room was decidedly tense. Three US Air Force generals were sitting around Dwight's desk, all with thick wallet folders in front of them. Dwight's friend, Captain Bob Jackson, had placed a second chair beside Dwight's, behind the desk, and was sitting in it, facing the three generals. Seeing Dwight, he stood up and introduced him to generals Lamont, Conroy and Hackleman. After exchanging salutes, Dwight took the chair beside Bob, facing the generals over his own, paper-littered desk.

A brief, uncomfortable silence ensued, until General Hackleman, silvery-haired, deeply suntanned and lined, coughed into his clenched fist, clearing his throat, then said, 'Sorry to call you out at this time of night, Cap'n, but this matter is urgent.'

'Yes, sir,' Dwight said.

'It's come to our attention that contrary to air force policy, as laid down for Project Grudge, you've been openly supporting the UFO hypothesis and insisting that you have evidence for the physical reality of the phenomenon.'

'I think it's important, sir. And I should remind you that Project Grudge was replaced in April by Project Blue Book, for which there's a more positive policy.'

'I know all that,' General Lamont said testily, 'but we still want to hear what evidence you're basing your assumptions on.'

'Analysis of the photos of UFOs, done in the specialist Photo Reconnaissance Laboratory, here at Wright Field, have confirmed the saucer-shaped configuration of the sighted UFOs.'

'We know all that as well,' Lamont interrupted rudely. 'We've seen the photographic evidence. But what makes you think they're real, solid objects?'

Dwight refused to be bullied. 'With the saucer-shaped configuration and manoeuvring capabilities of the UFOs verified, what was needed was confirmation of what appeared to be their unusually large size and remarkable top speeds, as well as the fact that they appear to be able to hover, almost

motionless, in the air. Regarding this, we received a report from Navy Commander R.B. McLaughlin, who'd worked throughout 1948 and 1949 with a team of engineers, technicians and scientists on a classified Skyhook balloon project, located in the Navy's top-secret guided-missile test and development area in the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico.' Dwight took his time leafing through one of his wallet folders, before pulling out a report and speaking while glancing repeatedly at it. 'According to that report, on April 24, 1949, at ten hundred hours in an absolutely clear Sunday morning, when McLaughlin and his team were preparing to launch one of their big Skyhook balloons - a hundred feet in diameter - the whole crew saw a UFO which, though high up, was clearly elliptical in shape and had a whitish-silver colour.'

'Could have been another Skyhook balloon,' Hackleman said. 'Or maybe even Venus.'

'No, sir,' Dwight replied. 'Neither. With a theodolite, stop-watch, and 25-power telescope, Commander McLaughlin's team was able to track the UFO as it dropped from an angle of elevation of forty-five degrees to twenty-five degrees, then abruptly shot upward and disappeared. Even after putting a reduction factor on the data recorded on the theodolite, Commander McLaughlin estimated that the UFO was approximately forty feet wide and a hundred feet long, had been at an altitude of fifty-six miles, and was travelling at approximately 2,000 miles per hour.'

'That's impossible!' General Conroy snapped angrily.

'I'll admit, sir, that there's some legitimate doubt regarding the accuracy of the speed and altitude figures that Commander McLaughlin's team arrived at from the data they measured with the theodolite. This, however, doesn't mean much in the sense that even if they were off by a factor of one hundred per cent, the speeds and altitude of the UFO would be extraordinary. I'd also remind you that various members of McLaughlin's team studied the object through a 25-power telescope and swore that it was a flat, oval-shaped object.'

'And I'd remind *you*, Cap'n Randall, that Commander McLaughlin had no right to release that report, let alone write the article he published in *True* magazine in March the following year. Small wonder he's been transferred back to sea.'

'With all due respect, sir, matters of naval discipline are not my concern. I was sent the report to read and analyze, which is just what I've done. In my view it confirms that the UFOs, or flying saucers, can fly at

extraordinary speeds and reach remarkable altitudes.'

'You say these cinetheodolite cameras aren't always accurate,' General Conroy said. 'Just what are they and how do you use them, Cap'n?'

'A cinetheodolite is similar to a 35-mm movie camera, except that when a moving object is photographed with it, the developed photograph will also contain three readings that show the time the photo was taken, the azimuth angle, and the elevation angle of the camera. If two or more cinetheodolites photograph the same flying object, it's possible to obtain rough estimates of the object's size, speed and altitude. I stress *rough* estimates because cinetheodolites don't give accurate readings.'

'Nevertheless, you insist that the UFO tracked by McLaughlin's team was moving remarkably fast.'

'Yes, sir.'

'How fast?'

'A lot faster than any jet plane we know about.'

The generals glanced uneasily at one another, then returned their attention to Dwight.

'Okay, Cap'n, that accounts for configuration and speed. What's convinced you that these craft are real, solid objects?'

'Two incidents.' Dwight glanced at Bob, received a slight, knowing smile, then flipped over more pages in his folder and spoke as he read. 'On April 27, 1950, shortly after a guided missile had been fired from the White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico and fell back to earth, the camera crews of Air Force technicians spotted an object streaking across the sky. As most of the camera stations had already unloaded their film, only one camera was able to catch a shot of the UFO before it disappeared. That photo showed only a dark, smudgy object - but it also proved that whatever it was, it had been *moving*. A month later, during a second missile test, another UFO appeared. This time, two members of the camera teams saw it and shot several feet of film as the - quote - bright, shiny object - unquote - streaked across the sky. That film was subsequently processed and analysed by the Data Reduction Group at White Sands. By putting a correction factor in the data gathered by the two cameras, they were able to calculate that the object was higher than 40,000 feet, travelling over 2,000 miles per hour, and was approximately 300 feet in diameter.' Dwight looked each of the generals in the eye. 'I concede that these figures are only estimates, based on the possibly erroneous correction factor. However, they

certainly prove that *something* had been in the air and it had been *solid* and moving very fast.'

'Enough to convince you of the reality of the phenomenon,' General Conroy said drily.

'Yes, sir. In combination with the two major flaps that came the following year: the Lubbock Lights and the Fort Monmouth sightings.'

Again the three generals stared at one another, this time even more uneasily. When General Hackleman turned back to Dwight, his hazel eyes were troubled.

'Ah, yes,' he said. 'We were informed that you'd investigated both cases personally. Kindly give us your report on both events. In precise detail, Cap'n.'

Dwight began to feel nervous. This was no casual interrogation. These three senior officers were concerned at what he knew and obviously not pleased with the extent of his knowledge. Nevertheless, they were demanding a detailed report, so, after glancing nervously at the equally concerned Bob Jackson, he picked up another file.

'The Lubbock affair,' he read, 'began on the evening of August 25, 1951, when an employee of the Atomic Energy Commission's supersecret Sandia Corporation – '

'Who?' General Lamont asked abruptly.

'I'm sorry, sir, I can't reveal that. I can only say that he had a top "Q" security clearance.'

The generals glanced uneasily at one another. 'Okay,' Lamont said. 'Continue.'

'This Sandia employee looked up from his garden on the outskirts of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and saw a huge aircraft flying swiftly and *silently* over his home. He later described it as having the shape of a flying wing, about one-and-a-half times the size of a B-26, with six to eight softly glowing, bluish lights on its aft end.'

General Lamont coughed into his clenched fist.

'That same evening,' Dwight continued, 'about twenty minutes after this sighting, four professors from the Texas Technological College at Lubbock – a geologist, a chemist, a physicist, and a petroleum engineer - observed a formation of lights streaking across the sky: about fifteen to thirty separate lights, all a bluish-green colour, moving from north to south in a semicircular formation.'

‘You can’t name the four professors either,’ Conroy said sardonically.

‘No, sir, I’m afraid not.’

‘Keep reading, Cap’n.’

‘Early in the morning of August 26, only a few hours after the Lubbock sightings, two different radars at an Air Defence Command radar station located in Washington State showed an unknown target travelling at 900 miles an hour at 1,300 feet and heading in a northwesterly direction. On August 31, at the height of the flap, two ladies were driving near Matador, seventy miles northeast of Lubbock, when they saw a pear-shaped object about 150 yards ahead of them, about 120 feet in the air, drifting slowly to the east at less than the take-off speed of a Cub airplane. One of those witnesses was familiar with aircraft - she was married to an air force officer and had lived on or near air bases for years - and she swore that the object was about the size of a B-29 fuselage, had a porthole on one side, made absolutely no noise as it moved *into* the wind, and suddenly picked up speed and climbed out of sight in a tight, spiralling motion. That same evening, an amateur photographer, Carl Hart, Jr., took five photos of a V formation of the same bluish-green lights as they flew over his back yard. Finally, a rancher’s wife told her husband, who related the story to me, that she had seen a large object gliding swiftly and silently over her house. That object was observed about ten minutes after the Sandia Corporation executive had viewed *his* object. It was described as – I quote – “an airplane without a body”. The woman said there were pairs of glowing lights on its aft edge - an exact description of the Albuquerque sightings made by the Sandia employee.’

‘Who cannot be named,’ General Conroy emphasised sardonically.

Dwight just smiled, then glanced down at his report. ‘Subsequent investigation by myself and Captain Jackson’ - he nodded in Bob’s direction – ‘confirmed that the Washington State radar lock-on had been a solid target - not a weather target. We then calculated that an object flying between that radar station and Lubbock would have been on a northwesterly course at the time it was seen at the two places - and that it would have had a speed of approximately 900 miles per hour, as calculated by the radar.’

‘Still doesn’t prove that much,’ General Hackleman insisted with what seemed like a glimmer of hope.

‘No,’ Dwight said. ‘But the five photographs taken by Carl Hart, Jr. were analysed by our Photo Reconnaissance Laboratory. The results showed that the

lights, in an inverted V formation, had crossed about 120 degrees of open sky at a 30-degree per second angular velocity. This corresponded exactly to the angular velocity measured carefully by the four professors from the Technical College at Lubbock. Analysis of the photos also showed that the lights were a great deal brighter than the surrounding stars and that their unusual intensity could have been caused by an exceptionally bright light source which had a colour at the most distant red end of the spectrum, bordering on infrared.'

'What does that mean, Cap'n?' Hackleman's hazel gaze, which was steady, was also too concerned for Dwight's comfort.

'As the human eye isn't sensitive to such a light,' Dwight explained, 'the light could appear dim to the eye - as many of the Lubbock lights did - but be exceptionally bright on film, as they were on the photographs. While according to the Photo Reconnaissance Laboratory, at that time there was nothing flying that had those particular characteristics, I was pretty startled to discover that the lights on the photos were strikingly similar to those described by the Atomic Energy Commission employee as being on the aft edge of the huge UFO that passed silently over his house.'

'So *did* something solid pass over Albuquerque, New Mexico,' Hackleman asked, 'and fly 250 miles to Lubbock, Texas, at an approximate speed of 900 miles per hour?'

'Yes, sir. According to the witnesses, and to the radar and visual-tracking calculations, it did. The Lubbock files were also studied by a group of rocket experts, nuclear physicists and intelligence experts, and they were all convinced that the sightings had been of an enormous, solid object, most probably with a highly swept-back wing configuration and a series of small jet orifices around its edge.'

There was silence for a moment while the three generals studied Dwight, none of them appearing too friendly, all looking concerned. Then General Hackleman let out a loud sigh. 'So,' he said. 'Who ordered you to personally investigate the Lubbock lights?'

'Major General C.P. Cabell, sir, representing the Director of Intelligence of the Air Force. In a matter of hours of receiving the order, Captain Jackson and I were on an airplane to Lubbock. Once there, we worked around the clock, interrogating everyone involved in the sighting - pilots, radar operators, technicians and instructors. What they told us substantiated the sighting reports.'

'We appreciate the thoroughness of the written report,' General Hackleman

said, though displaying impatience. ‘Who did you personally report to before writing it up?’

‘General Cabell - naturally - and other high-ranking intelligence officers in the Pentagon, where the meeting took place.’

‘You reported verbally?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘That’s what we’d been told,’ General Hackleman said. ‘But we couldn’t find the recording of that meeting.’

Dwight glanced at Bob, who was looking uneasier every minute.

‘Every word of that meeting was recorded,’ Dwight insisted.

‘But the recording was destroyed shortly after,’ General Hackleman said. ‘At least, so we were informed by the CIA.’

‘But - ’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ General Conroy interjected. ‘Don’t bother asking, Cap’n. There are good reasons for everything, I’m sure. Now what about the replacement of Project Grudge with Project Blue Book in April this year, with Captain Ruppelt in command? Did you resent being downgraded to second-in-command?’

‘I wouldn’t be human if I didn’t, sir.’ Dwight was feeling hot and embarrassed. More so because this very subject had caused more friction between him and Beth, who was convinced that officers involved in UFO investigations always had a hard time from the Air Force and were often consistently denied promotion. Thus, when Project Grudge had been dropped and replaced with Project Blue Book, with Dwight reduced to second-in-command under Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, Dwight’s acute disappointment had only been exacerbated by Beth’s angry insistence that his ‘virtual demotion’ was another sign that he should ask to be transferred to another, less controversial, line of work. ‘But I should emphasise,’ Dwight now insisted to General Conroy, ‘that Captain Ruppelt and I have an excellent working relationship.’

‘So Ruppelt has confirmed,’ Conroy said with a slight, mocking smile. ‘However, to change the subject slightly, do you think the stir caused by the Lubbock sightings was responsible for the replacement of Grudge with Blue Book?’

‘The Lubbock sightings certainly helped, sir, but they weren’t totally responsible. Though those sightings certainly made the Air Force sit up and take notice, it was the ones that took place a month later that really led to the

formation of Project Blue Book.'

'The ones that took place at the Army Signal Corps radar centre at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.'

'Yes, sir.'

'A top-secret establishment.'

'Exactly, sir.'

'Tell us about those,' General Conroy said.

Dwight opened another file. 'The flap began at 11.10 in the morning of September 10, 1951, when a student operator was giving a demonstration of automatic radar tracking to a group of visiting top brass – sorry: senior officers.' General Conroy gave a wintry smile, but said nothing, so Dwight, flustered, glanced down at his notes and continued reading. 'After spotting an object flying about 12,000 yards southeast of the station, the operator switched to automatic tracking, but failed to hold the object. In his confusion, he blurted out to the visiting officers that the object was going too fast for the radar set - which meant that it was flying faster than any known jet. After three minutes, during which the UFO continued to fly too fast for the automatic radar tracking, it disappeared.'

'The weather?' General Lamont asked.

'Checks with the weather department revealed that there were no indications of a temperature inversion.'

'Okay, Cap'n, continue.'

'Twenty-five minutes later, the pilot of a T-33 jet trainer, carrying an Air Force major as passenger and flying 20,000 feet over Mount Pleasant, New Jersey, observed a dull, silver, disk-like object below him. It was thirty to fifty feet in diameter. When the object descended towards Sandy Hook, the T-33 pilot went after it. As he approached the object, it stopped abruptly, hovered impossibly, suddenly sped south, then made a 120-degree turn and vanished out to sea.'

Dwight glanced up from his report, surprised at how breathless and nervous he was. 'The Air Force major in the T-33 confirmed that sighting.' When no one passed comment, he avoided the three pairs of eyes by looking back at his notes. 'At 3.15pm, back at the Fort Monmouth radar centre, a frantic call was received from headquarters, demanding that they pick up an unknown that was flying very high, to the north, roughly where the first UFO

had vanished. A radar lock-on confirmed that the UFO was travelling - I quote - *slowly*, at 93,000 feet - or eighteen miles above the earth - and it could also be made out visually as a silver speck.'

'No known aircraft of today can fly eighteen miles above the earth,' Bob said, speaking for the first time.

'Thank you for that observation, Cap'n Jackson,' General Conroy said dryly. 'Okay, Cap'n Randall, continue.'

Giving Bob a fleeting grin, Dwight said, 'Next morning two radar sets picked up another unknown that climbed, levelled out, dived and climbed again repeatedly, too fast for the automatic radar tracking. When the object climbed, it went almost straight up. The flap ended that afternoon when the radar picked up another slowly moving UFO and tracked it for several minutes, before it, too, disappeared.'

He looked up from his notes. 'Those sightings were witnessed by all the visiting VIPs and it was they who really got the ball rolling. So, it was the Monmouth sightings, even more than the Lubbock lights, that compelled Major Cabell to order the ATIC to establish a new, more serious UFO investigation project. Subsequently, in April, Project Grudge was renamed Project Blue Book.'

'And in contradiction to the policy of Project Grudge,' General Hackleman said, 'Project Blue Book is to work on the assumption that the UFOs, or flying saucers, are real, solid objects.'

'Yes, sir,' Dwight said, sweating too much, his heart beating too fast. When he closed the file, he noticed that his hands were shaking. Not much, but definitely shaking, which really surprised him.

There was a lengthy, tense silence, then General Hackleman leaned forward in his chair and said, 'Anything else, Cap'n?'

Dwight glanced at Bob and was given a nod of approval to state what they had both been frightened of reporting. 'Yes, sir,' Dwight said. 'The pattern and nature of a recent build-up of sightings of fiery discs, green fireballs, and large flying saucers, over the past month, along the East Coast, indicates something damned scary.'

'Oh?' The general's gaze was steady and intense. 'What's that, Cap'n Randall?'

Dwight took a deep breath, hardly believing he was going to say it, then let his words come out on a rush of air.

‘It seems like some kind of UFO invasion,’ he said, ‘and it’s closing in on Washington DC.’

The silence stretched out forever.

Chapter Thirteen

The sun was dying. Wilson knew this as he stood in a field of wheat in Montezuma, Iowa, the stalks shoulder-high around him, and gazed across that yellow field to where green fields met blue sky, then squinted up into the sun's striations, which were silvery and ravishing. Wilson was only ten years old, blond-haired and tanned, but even as the sun's heat scorched his face, he knew the sun was dying. It would take a long time, but die it surely would, and when it died, the earth would die with it, destroying the great hope of mankind. Wilson, though still a child, was overwhelmed by that knowledge and decided, there and then, without a moment's hesitation, that he had to do something to save mankind and ensure its continuance.

Man's destiny, he was convinced, could only be changed through science and the evolution of a new kind of man, one less prone to mortality.

Even then, as a boy growing up in Iowa, born of God-fearing parents, but unable to accept the idea of Him, Wilson had been convinced that mankind would eventually have to leave Earth and inhabit another, less endangered planet. To do so, he would have to create an extraordinary technology; he would also have to transcend his still primitive nature and escape the physical limitations of his weak, mortal body.

Man would have to turn himself into Superman and then reach for the stars.

Wilson realised this at ten years old as he squinted up at the sun over Iowa... Then he awakened, at eighty-two, to look out over the vast, snow-covered wilderness of Antarctica from his bed near the summit of a mountain in Neu Schwabenland.

Though still groggy from anaesthetics, the dream, or recollection, had filled him with the awareness of how fragile was mortality and how ephemeral each individual life. From childhood to old age had taken no time at all - the past was virtually in the present - and now he knew with more certainty than ever that no matter what he did to himself, his time would be limited.

Nevertheless, there was still a lot he could do before it ended, so he had to

keep that dark moment at bay as long as humanly, or scientifically, possible.

For this reason, he had become his own laboratory animal, experimenting constantly on himself, with the aid of his two specialists: Professor Adolf Eckhardt, a former Nazi concentration camp experimental surgeon, and the abducted Dr Paul Gold, formerly of the Powered Limbs Unit of West Hendon Hospital, London. Freed from the moral, ethical and religious constraints of Western surgical research, they were producing between them some extraordinary innovations in prosthetics, organ replacement and skin grafts.

After having some of the latter done successfully to his face and hands, thus making him look sixty instead of eighty-two, Wilson had recently had his weakening heart replaced with the first of Eckhardt's prosthetics and was already recovering from the operation.

Sitting upright on the bed and breathing deeply, letting the cold air clear his head, he called on the phone for Eckhardt and Gold to come up immediately. He also asked for Hans Kammler and Artur Nebe to come up thirty minutes later, in order to submit their latest reports.

Eckhardt and Gold entered together, both wearing white smocks, and stood one at each side of Wilson's bed, smiling down at him. Once devoted to his wife and children in London, Gold was now devoted only to his work in this Antarctic colony and content to take his pleasures with the 'comfort girls' abducted by the flying saucer crews from all over the Earth. He was completely reliable. Eckhardt, of course, being a fugitive war criminal, still wanted by the British, not to mention the Jews of Israel, for his so-called 'anthropological' experiments in the Nazi concentration camps, clearly had no place else to go. Nevertheless, he also was delighted to be able to continue his experiments without restraint in the colony's laboratories, using animals and the human abductees being held in appalling conditions in the dank, freezing underground cells. He, too, took his pleasures from the comfort girls and was obsessed with his work.

'So,' he said, lowering his stethoscope to examine Wilson's heartbeat, 'you look good. How do you feel?'

'Excellent,' Wilson said.

Eckhardt listened to Wilson's heartbeat, then straightened up. 'Perfect.'

'It doesn't feel perfect,' Wilson replied. 'It's a little uncomfortable.'

'We'll soon improve on it.' Eckhardt was unfazed by Wilson's cold stare, having known him since the early days in Nazi Germany, way back in 1940,

before the dream of the Thousand Year Reich had collapsed into ruins.

As Wilson well knew, Eckhardt and other Nazis were convinced that their Aryan dreams would be resurrected here, which is why they stayed on without persuasion. Wilson knew differently, but was not about to correct them, as he needed to use their insane faith for his own, infinitely more rational, purposes. He also needed them to help in extending his life, even if not indefinitely, as they were doing with his artificial heart and various joint and minor organ replacements.

Wilson's new heart, or pacemaker, was a highly advanced device which, utilizing a piezoelectric crystal and a small balloon filled with water, caused the heart's own pumping to stimulate itself. First created in crude form in Nazi Germany, but recently perfected here in the colony's laboratories, it was more advanced than the one inserted for the first time in a human being in Pennsylvania Hospital, Philadelphia, a few months ago. That recipient, a 41-year old steelworker, had only lived for eighty minutes after his heart replacement, but Wilson would survive a lot longer.

'The water-filled balloon,' Eckhardt explained, 'will be replaced with something smaller in a few months. Though the pacemaker is already maintenance free and doesn't require batteries, we'll eventually replace it with a plutonium power source, or nuclear battery, which will weigh practically nothing and last longer. As for the rest of you, that's up to Dr Gold here.'

Eckhardt smiled thinly, without affection, at Dr Gold, whom he viewed as a rival for Wilson's attention. Gold, who despised Professor Eckhardt, politely ignored his smile.

'Your arthritic problems have been cured with joint replacements,' he said, 'but already we have more advanced prosthetics, if you're willing to – '

'Yes,' Wilson interjected without a pause. 'I am. The operations don't bother me.'

'Good.' Gold smiled like a normal doctor with a normal patient, as if still in the West Hendon Hospital, London, not here in a hidden Antarctic colony from which he would never escape. 'At the moment we're experimenting with artificial knees and elbows of clear acrylic resin reinforced with stainless steel. As for the joints themselves, the main problems have always been corrosion and lubrication, but soon I'll be removing your relatively crude, temporary stainless steel prosthetics and inserting more durable, maintenance-free, one-hundred percent mobile joints made of a corrosion-free, easily lubricated, more durable

cobalt-chromium alloy. As most of the surgical work on your joints was done for the original replacements, the operations for the insertion of the new prosthetics will be relatively simple.'

'And the rest of me?'

Gold shrugged and raised his hands as if pleading for clemency. 'These are early days yet, but with human laboratory subjects instead of only animals we should certainly progress quicker than anyone else. That heart will buy you a few more years, but problems with your kidneys and lungs will come soon enough, which is why we're working on those right now.'

'Tell me.'

'Regarding your kidneys, we're experimenting with something first devised by a Dutch surgeon, Wilhelm Kolff, and tested, ironically, on a Nazi collaborator. This involves the use of cellulose acetate film as the filter membrane and heparin as the anticoagulant. Already we have an advanced version that we think will work, but we also need to find a means of circulating your blood from time to time through the artificial kidney. A cumbersome dialysis machine has been devised, but to avoid having to keep you plugged into it twenty-four hours a day we're working on a six-inch socket that can be permanently implanted in your circulatory system, between an artery and vein, then opened and joined to the artificial kidney. What we've come up with is a six-inch tube of silicone rubber, tipped with polytetrafluoroethylene - an unreactive plastic - with ends that penetrate the skin and are stitched to the adjoining artery and vein. While causing you little discomfort, this will allow you to leave the large dialysis machine for days at a time. Eventually, we hope to have a self-sustaining artificial kidney, but that, alas, will take longer to develop.'

'And my lungs?'

'As those are essentially mechanical, we're looking into prosthetic replacements. However, as the lung is also a membrane of unusually high permeability and, more complex, roughly the area of a tennis court, we need to find a means of imitating it within the confines of the thorax. We hope to do this with a membrane of exceptionally thin silicone - say, one-thousandth of an inch thick - and with a maximum area of one square metre. This will be placed in the thorax in concentric layers, kept apart and self-supported in a manner that forms minute channels, which in turn form the new blood capillaries. Unfortunately, in this case, the problems are many and the death rate during experiments is high.

This is due mainly to our inability, so far, to prevent the artificial membrane from becoming choked by coagulated blood. Nevertheless, I'm convinced that with time, patience, and unimpeded human experimentation, we can produce the required anticoagulant. Then the artificial, implantable lung will be within reach.'

'Good,' Wilson said. He spent a few more minutes discussing the various surgical and medical experiments going on with the abducted humans held in the underground cells, then dismissed his two professors and waited for the arrival of administrator Hans Kammler and chief of security Artur Nebe, both former members of the Death's Head SS. Kammler arrived first, wearing a black coverall, still blond and handsome, but no longer the golden young god of war, now visibly ageing. He took a seat by the bed and nodded at Wilson, not smiling at all.

'You're recovering well?' he asked.

'Yes, Hans. No problems at all. I'll soon be on my feet again. So how is Ernst Stoll settling into Paraguay?'

Kammler smiled frostily. 'With no great deal of joy, but with dedication - as you had expected. He's greatly increased the defences of the compound, constructed a landing pad for the saucers, and set up a line of communication between himself and General Stroessner, whom be believes will eventually take over as President. As Stroessner is infinitely corruptible, this is all to the good. We will certainly be well protected there.'

'Apart from that, is he doing what he's been sent there for?'

'Yes. The mass abduction of Ache Indians has begun with the aid of General Stroessner's *Federales*. For this, Stroessner is being well paid. Stoll claims that Stroessner is using the money to bribe senior army officers and seduce the heads of the Colorado Party. He's buying their support in his bid for the presidency and plans to make his move this year or next.'

'Excellent. We need a man like Stroessner in charge. We also need the Ache Indians - the females as comfort girls and servants, the males as conditioned pilots for the saucers and as experimental surgical fodder for Eckhardt and Gold. Since with even the abductions, we're running short of human material, a regular supply of the Ache will be truly invaluable.'

'I don't think Stoll will let you down.'

The door opened again and Artur Nebe entered, small and stout, as solid as a rock, with eyes as dark as his black coverall. His swarthy features, though

revealing no emotion, concealed the soul of a monster. As he crossed to stand at the other side of the bed, facing Kammler, Wilson glanced through the panoramic window at the far side of the room and saw the vast, Antarctic wilderness, its soaring ice-covered peaks and snow-covered valleys stretching out to a dazzling, blue horizon. While the sheer, untouched beauty of it denied the horrors taking place daily in the laboratories and underground cells of this hidden colony, Wilson did not see it that way. Dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge – which, in his view, separated Man from beast - he was embarked on a crusade to redirect the evolution of mankind and turn the thinly disguised beast into Superman. There was no room for emotion in his grand design. His notion of beauty was absolute knowledge and the pure truths of science.

'So, Artur,' he said, looking up into Nebe's dark, fathomless gaze and taking confidence from the murderous well of his nature, 'what do you have to tell me?'

'Everything has gone smoothly. Exactly as we had planned. The calculated spreading of disinformation about UFOs has had the desired effect and is leading to confusion, not only with the public, but with military intelligence on a worldwide basis. By now, public opinion is split between those who believe the UFOs are of extraterrestrial origin, those who insist they're misinterpretations of natural atmospheric phenomena, those who deem them the products of mass hallucination encouraged by too much talk about the subject, and those who believe they're the top-secret experimental craft of their own governments.'

'Official attitudes are equally confused?'

'Yes. The few government, military and intelligence heads who know of our existence here are so concerned about the possibility of public hysteria in the event that the news gets out, they've classified the subject top-secret. They've also classified as top-secret their own race to construct similar saucers in the vain hope of eventually getting us out of here. They're not only concerned with what they see as the new military threat represented by our technology, but by the fact that the Antarctic is Earth's last untapped treasure-house of oil, coal, gold, copper, uranium and, most important, water - the whole world will soon need water - and here we are, threatening to keep them out. So that's what concerns them most of all.'

'We can use that concern when we trade,' Wilson said. 'It's a strong card to hold. But apart from the stubborn General Samford, what do they think of our capability?'

‘Deliberately letting the top brass of Fort Monmouth see one of our large saucers finally convinced the Pentagon of our vastly superior capability, though the White House, and Samford, remain unconvinced.’

‘They soon will be,’ Wilson said.

Nebe didn’t return his smile, but continued speaking in his soft, oddly threatening monotone. ‘The so-called Lubbock lights, which were in fact the lights on the tail end of an American-Canadian experimental flying wing constructed in secret at the White Sands Proving Ground, has further convinced the American public that alien craft are exploring the earth. The Lubbock lights - that flying wing - also succeeded in further confusing those in military intelligence who don’t yet know of our existence and are baffled as to why their own superiors are trying to kill off the sighting reports, even as they insist that the saucers are a threat to national security.’

‘We couldn’t have done better ourselves,’ Wilson observed.

‘Finally,’ Nebe continued, ‘the concentrated build-up of flights of our mass-produced World War II *Feuerballs* over the east coast of the United States has been highly successful, leading to nationwide concern and numerous wild stories about green or orange fireballs and extraterrestrial flying saucers, as well as secret speculations in military circles about a forthcoming UFO invasion of the nation’s capital.’

‘Perfect,’ Wilson said. ‘We’ll now proceed to do just that. We’ll surround Washington DC in general and the White House in particular with a virtual armada of *Feuerballs*. If that doesn’t persuade them the first time, we’ll repeat the performance a week later with even more *Feuerballs* and some larger, piloted saucers. I think it will work.’

‘When will it begin?’ Kammler asked him.

‘Time is of the essence,’ Wilson said. ‘The invasion commences tomorrow.’

Chapter Fourteen

Just off a flight from Dayton, Ohio, Dwight and Bob Jackson were passing a newspaper stand in the lobby of Washington National Airport Terminal Building when they were stopped dead in their tracks by the headline: INTERCEPTORS CHASE FLYING SAUCERS OVER WASHINGTON DC. Shocked, Dwight purchased the paper and read that the capital was in the middle of the biggest UFO flap of all time.

'The bastards didn't even tell us!' he fumed, folding up the paper and jamming it into the side pocket of his Air Force jacket. 'If we hadn't come here on our own bat, they probably wouldn't have called us. The biggest UFO flap of them all and we weren't even informed!'

'Come on,' Bob said, swinging his briefcase from one hand to the other and heading energetically for the cab rank. 'Let's go and talk to Dewey Fournet.'

Instructing the cabbie to take them to the Pentagon, Dwight, still furious, opened the paper again and read the newspaper account of the present flap more carefully, tying the report to what he already knew. He was even more furious about not being informed because he had practically predicted that this flap would occur and, indeed, had informed generals Conroy, Lamont and Hackleman about it during his recent, unpleasant interrogation. The Air Force's Project Blue Book was now going strong under the leadership of Captain Edward J. Ruppelt and had received more official UFO reports than it had done in any previous month in its history. In fact, according to Ruppelt, the sheer number of reports was making Air Force officers in the Pentagon frantic.

By June 15, the locations, timing, and sequence of the reports had indicated that the UFOs were gradually closing in on Washington DC.

Throughout the afternoon of June 15, reports of 'round, shiny objects' and 'silvery spheres' had come in from all over Virginia, one after the other: 3.40pm at Unionville; 4.20pm at Gordonsville; 4.25pm at Richmond; then 4.43pm and 5.43pm at Gordonsville. At 7.35pm a lot of people in Blackstone, about eighty miles south of Gordonsville, had observed a 'round, shiny object with a golden

glow' moving from north to south. By 7.59pm the same object was observed by the people in the CIA radio facility at Blackstone. At 8.00pm a jet from Langley Air Force Base tried to intercept it, but five minutes later the object, moving too slowly to be an airplane, disappeared.

So inexplicable and disturbing were these reports that Captain Ruppelt was called to Washington DC to give a briefing in the restricted area of the fourth-floor 'B' ring of the Pentagon to General Samford, the Director of Intelligence, some of the members of his staff, two captains from the Office of Naval Intelligence, and some others whom Ruppelt had refused to name for security reasons. That meeting had resulted in a directive to take further steps to obtain positive identification of the UFOs.

Meanwhile, the sightings continued. By the end of June, it had become apparent that there was a considerable build-up of sightings in the eastern United States. In Massachusetts, New Jersey and Maryland jet fighters were scrambled almost nightly for a week, but always foiled when their radar-locks were broken by the abrupt, swift manoeuvres of the UFOs. On July 1, many UFOs were sighted over Boston, then began working their way down the coast. The same day two UFOs had come down across Boston on a southwesterly heading, crossed Long Island, hovered a few minutes over the Army's secret laboratories at Fort Monmouth, then proceeded towards Washington DC. A few hours later, the first report from Washington DC was submitted by a physics professor at George Washington University.

For the next couple of weeks, reports about Washington DC sightings poured in at the rate of twenty or thirty a day and, according to Ruppelt, unknowns were running about 40 percent. Finally, according to the *Washington Post*, last night, July 19, the greatest flap of them all had begun, with UFOs being tracked all over the capital and the restricted corridor around the White House filled with interceptor jets trying to chase UFOs.

Immensely frustrated and angry, Dwight finished reading the report, then passed the paper to Bob. By the time Bob finished reading it, he, too, was furious that the ATIC had not been informed about the event.

'Damned lucky we were coming here anyway,' he said. 'Otherwise they'd have kept us locked out. Why the hell would they do that?'

'Maybe it was just an oversight,' Dwight replied without conviction, staring up at the sunny sky in the vain hope of seeing his first UFO. 'The heat of the moment, and so on. They're probably all frantic by now and just forgot to put

the call through.'

'Yeah,' Bob said doubtfully, also glancing automatically at the empty sky over Virginia. 'Maybe you're right.'

When they were inside the Pentagon, that immense five-sided building in Arlington County, Dwight demanded an urgent meeting with Major Dewey Fournet, their UFO liaison man in the capital. Entering his office, located on the fourth floor, they found him in the company of Colonel Donald Bower, the intelligence officer from Bolling AFB, located just east of National Airport, across the Potomac River. Neither Fournet nor Bower looked pleased with this visit.

'Okay, okay,' a harassed Fournet said, waving his hands as if to defend himself. 'I know what you're going to say.'

'So, what happened?' Dwight asked.

'We've just been too damned busy,' Fournet replied. 'It was an oversight, gentlemen.'

Dwight glanced at Major Bower. 'I don't believe that. Seems to me, you just wanted to keep us out. Why is that, Major?'

'You'd have received a full report in due course,' Major Bower said, his gaze steady and hard.

'Your report, not ours, Major,' Dwight replied. 'It's not the same thing.' He removed his gaze from Bower and fixed it on Fournet instead. 'So what are the facts, sir? Is the report in the *Washington Post* correct?'

Fournet shrugged. 'Yeah, essentially correct. At 11.40pm the ARTC radars at Washington National Airport, about three miles south of the centre of Washington DC, picked up eight unidentified targets near Andrews AFB, Maryland, twenty miles east of National Airport and in direct line with National and Bolling. The objects were flying at approximately 100 to 130 miles per hour, then suddenly accelerated to fantastically high speeds and left the area. They soon returned, en masse. During the night, tower operators and the aircrews of several airliners saw unidentified lights in the same locations indicated by the radar. Before the night was out, and while interceptor jets tried and failed to catch them, the unidentified targets had moved into every sector covered by the radarscopes, including the prohibited corridor over the White House and the Capitol building. The climax came in the early hours of the morning, when the operators in the control tower at Andrews AFB, in response

to an ARTC traffic controller's query about a target directly over the Andrews Radio range station, located near their tower, reported that a large, fiery, orange-coloured sphere was hovering in the sky directly above them.'

'Weather?'

'An analysis of the sightings has completely ruled out temperature inversions. Also, the radar operators at Washington National Airport and Andrews AFB - plus at least two veteran airline pilots - have all sworn that their sightings were caused by the radar waves bouncing off hard, *solid* objects.'

'Oh, boy!' Bob said, glancing at Dwight. 'This sounds really good.'

'That's hardly the right word to use,' Bower said. 'It certainly didn't seem good to the top brass of the Pentagon. Nor did it seem good to President Truman, who personally witnessed a UFO skimming right around the White House. In fact, at ten this morning, the President's air aide, Brigadier General Landry, called me, at Truman's personal request, to find out what the hell was going on.'

'Oh?' Dwight said, amused. 'And what did you tell him?'

'I hedged my answers,' Bower replied, 'because, truthfully, I couldn't explain the sightings away.'

'On behalf of the Air Force,' Fournet said, 'public relations officer Al Chops has given the press an official "No comment" on the sightings, but the reporters are still massed down there on the first floor, all baying for more. In the meantime, we're investigating the affair. That's all we can tell you.'

'Fine, Major,' Dwight said, taking note of Bob's cynical sideways glance and deciding not to raise any awkward points. 'Have you any objections to me doing my own investigation for the ATIC?'

Fournet glanced uneasily at Major Bower, who did not seem too pleased. Nevertheless, he said, 'Of course not, Cap'n Randall. Why should we mind?'

'Here,' Fournet said, trying to look helpful as he handed Dwight a manila folder. 'Two of the first reports submitted. One is the unofficial report from the Andrews AFB tower operators; the other is from an F-94C pilot who tried to intercept unidentified lights. I should warn you that these are just off-the-cuff, preliminary reports. More detailed, more accurate versions will be drafted and signed at a later date. But you might find them helpful for the time being.'

'And as I said,' Major Bower added, 'you'll be receiving our official report when it's been completed.'

‘I look forward to it,’ Dwight said, then he and Bob saluted and left the office.

‘Bullshitter,’ Bob whispered as they walked along the spoke-like, windowless corridor in one of the five concentric rings of the building, heading for the small office used by the ATIC when visiting here. ‘That Bower’s the one who stopped us from being informed - maybe because the President is now involved. Whatever was flying around here last night, they sure as hell don’t want us to know about it.’

‘Well, we’re going to get to know about it,’ Dwight said determinedly as he unlocked the door of the office at the far end of the corridor. ‘We’ll complete a thorough investigation and find out just what the hell those interceptor jets were pursuing in the restricted corridor around the White House. No intelligence officer from Bolling AFB is going to stop me - not Bower and not anyone else.’ He and Bob entered the office, switching on the light and closing the door behind them. It was a small, square-shaped room with no windows and nothing on the walls. Outside was US Highway 1 and, beyond it, the Potomac River, but they couldn't see either from this gloomy cell. Dwight placed his briefcase on the desk and gazed at the bare wall. ‘I want to speak to the chief radar operator at Andrews AFB and the F-94C pilot who put in this report,’ he said, fanning himself with the manila envelope. ‘Get on the blower, Bob.’

As Bob took the wooden chair beside the desk and picked up the phone, Dwight kicked off his shoes and massaged his hot feet through his socks. Bob flipped open the manila envelope, checked one of the two reports, then asked for the senior traffic controller in the Andrews AFB control tower. After a short wait, he nodded and Dwight picked up the other line.

‘Captain Chapman? This is Captain Dwight Randall of the Air Technical Intelligence Centre, Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio. I’m here at the Pentagon with Captain Bob Jackson to check out yesterday’s UFO flap. We thought you might be able to help us out.’

‘I put in a report to Major Bower,’ Captain Chapman responded, sounding uneasy.

‘Yes, Captain, I’ve got it right here. I believe you were in charge of operations when that huge, orange-coloured sphere was observed over the Andrews Radio range station, located near the control tower.’

‘Oh, yeah... *that*.’ Chapman sounded even more uncomfortable. ‘It wasn’t huge; it was large.’

‘Says right here it was *huge*.’

‘We were all pretty excited at the time. It was large, not huge.’

‘You saw it?’

‘Well, yeah, I saw it... but when we checked the data later, we realised it was only a star.’

‘*What*?’

‘It was only a star.’

Dwight glanced at Bob who, holding the phone to his ear, merely shrugged his shoulders.

‘I don’t get this, Captain,’ Dwight said. ‘I have your report right in front of me and it clearly describes the object as a - quote - huge, fiery-orange-coloured sphere.’

‘It was a large star. I know it was. When I submitted that report, we were all pretty scared and excited. I now regret that description.’

‘Okay: it was large. However, I find it hard to credit that seven trained radar operators would mistake a large, fiery, orange-coloured sphere for a star.’

‘The heat of the moment, Captain. We all make mistakes. I’m going to change that description when I redraft the report. What we saw was an exceptionally bright star. That’s all there is to it.’

Dwight took a deep breath, glanced at Bob, who shrugged again, then let his breath out in an audible sigh. ‘The report also states that you and the six other traffic controllers on the shift saw this object, or star, hovering over the Andrews Radio range station, at precisely the same moment the radar operators at National Airport reported having a target over the very same location.’

‘I can’t account for that, Captain, except to say that the radars all over Washington DC were going crazy last night and a lot of atmospheric anomalies are suspected. What we saw was a star.’

‘Okay, Captain, thanks.’ Dwight pressed the phone-cradle down, cutting Chapman off, then said, ‘Get on to that guy in charge of the astronomical charts and ask him if there were any unusually bright stars in the sky last night.’

Bob leafed through his notebook, dialled a number and asked for Air Force corporal Alan Collins. After explaining what he wanted, he sat waiting, drumming his fingers nervously on the desk and studying the ceiling. Eventually he nodded, went, ‘Mmmmm, thanks corporal,’ and dropped the phone back on its cradle. ‘Nope,’ he said. ‘No exceptionally bright stars where that UFO was

seen. None at all, Dwight.'

'Damn! Is the pilot of that F-94C available?'

Bob tugged the second report out of the manila folder, checked it, and said, 'Yeah, he's located at Bolling AFB - where our good friend, Major Bower, also comes from. You want me to try him?'

'Damned right, I do.'

Tracking down the pilot took a lot longer, but eventually Bob nodded again at Dwight and the latter picked up the phone. After introducing himself, he said, 'I'd like to hear in your own words exactly what you thought you were pursuing last night.'

'It was a ground light reflecting off a layer of haze.'

'*What*?'

'A ground light reflecting off – '

'I heard you, Lieutenant, I just don't believe you. I have your report right here and it says that the lights were high up in the sky, in the restricted air corridor around the White House, and that they descended, ascended, hovered, and shot off at incredible speeds.'

'An optical illusion, Captain.'

'But the report – '

'I wrote it in the heat of the moment, right after landing. I was pretty nervous and excited, Captain, not too sure of what was happening, but when I'd settled down and spoken to Major Bower, I realised that I'd misinterpreted what I'd seen.'

Bob silently gave the thumbs-down.

'You spoke to Major Bower?' Dwight asked.

'That's right, Captain. Right after I landed. All of the pilots at Bolling were interrogated about what they had seen by the base intelligence officers.'

'And after interrogation, you were persuaded that what you had seen was not a lot of unidentified lights that made extraordinary manoeuvres over the White House, but simply a ground light reflecting off a layer of haze.'

'That's correct, Captain.'

'If you don't mind me saying so, Lieutenant, that seems a pretty ridiculous statement, given that this report – '

'I'm redrafting it, Captain, to make it more accurate.'

'Given that in this report,' Dwight insisted, 'you say that the lights repeatedly

disappeared and reappeared in the sky before eventually shooting away.'

'An optical illusion caused by the layer of haze.'

'No, Lieutenant, not possible. According to your statement, the disappearances and reappearances described by you were matched exactly by the radar readings - same location, same time.'

'According to Major Bowers, the radar operatives later said they'd been mistaken. Given that, I can only confirm what I saw.'

'A ground light reflecting off a layer of haze.'

'Exactly.'

'And that's what's going into your redrafted report?'

'Yes, Captain.'

'Thanks, Lieutenant.' Angry and frustrated, Dwight dropped the phone, then glared at Bob, who was shrugging and spreading his hands in the air, signifying defeat. 'Major Bower,' Dwight said.

'Intelligence chief of Bolling AFB. He also talked to the Andrews AFB radar flight controllers and radar operatives. Looks like a snow job.'

'Which confirms that they didn't call the ATIC because they didn't want us snooping around. They're putting the lid on this thing.' Dwight hammered his fist on the table. 'Well, damn them, I won't let them. Let's get a staff car and travel around a bit - Washington National Airport, Andrews AFB, airline offices, the weather bureau, and anywhere else we can think of. Damn it, let's *do* it.' Dwight picked up the phone and called the Pentagon transportation section.

'Hi. Captain Dwight Randall of the ATIC speaking. I need a staff car for a couple of hours and – '

'Did you say the ATIC?' the corporal at the other end of the line asked.

'That's right. The Air Technical Intelligence Centre. I need a staff car to – '

'Just a moment, sir.' There was a pause on the other end of the line, followed by whispering, then the corporal came back on. 'Sorry, sir. Did you say Captain Dwight Randall?'

'Yes, corporal, and – '

'I'm sorry, sir, but I'm afraid I can't help you. Regulations say that we can't make staff cars available to anyone other than senior colonels or generals.'

'Bullshit.'

'Sorry, sir, but those are the regulations.'

'Since when?'

‘Just recently, sir.’

‘Dammit, corporal, I want that staff car!’

‘Sorry, sir, I can’t help you. Not unless you get authorisation from a senior colonel or general.’

‘Alright, damn you, I will.’ Dwight pressed the cradle down. ‘Can you believe this shit?’ he said to Bob. ‘New regulation says we can’t have a car unless we’re senior colonels or generals.’

‘New regulation invented just for us,’ Bob said. ‘Why not try General Samford? He’ll be obliged to help you.’

‘Why not?’ Dwight said. When he tried to contact the general, however, he was told that Samford wasn’t in his office. When he asked the secretary to track him down, he was told that Samford couldn’t be found. ‘To hell with this,’ Dwight said, slamming the phone down and then putting his shoes on again. ‘Let’s go down to the finance office and charge a rented car to expenses. They can’t argue with that.’

But they did. When Dwight and Bob put their request to the heavy, grey-haired lady in the Pentagon finance office, she looked embarrassed, checked their names again, then said nervously: ‘Sorry, sir, but I can’t do that. Policy is that if you don’t have a staff car, you use city buses.’

‘Ma’m, this is a matter of extreme urgency and one requiring a lot of travelling. We don’t know the bus system and it would take us hours to get to all the places we need to visit.’

‘Sorry, sir, but I still can’t help you. If it’s that important, I suggest you use a cab and pay for it out of your per diem.’

‘I can’t afford to do that, Ma’m. This job is going to take a couple of days and requires travelling all over Virginia. At nine dollars a day per diem, I can hardly _ ’

‘Besides,’ the lady said, examining Dwight’s papers, ‘this travel order only covers a trip to the Pentagon - not Washington, and certainly not a trip around Virginia. In fact, according to this, you’re supposed to be on your way back to Dayton by now.’

‘Well, I’m not going. This work is more important, and I’m pretty damned sure - ’

The lady sighed and handed back his travel orders. ‘Unless you’re willing to go through all the red tape of getting these orders amended, you won’t be able to collect *any* per diem. Also, you’ll be technically AWOL.’

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘No, sir, I’m not. If you don’t head back to Dayton today, you’ll both be classified AWOL. I can’t help you, sir.’

Clenching his fist around his damned travel orders, Dwight stormed out of the finance office, followed by Bob. He was just about to head back to his office, when Bob stopped him by tugging at his elbow.

‘What?’

‘We’ve gotta leave,’ Bob said. ‘We can’t afford to be AWOL. If they’re really trying to stop us, they’ll use the AWOL as an excuse to tan our hides. We’ve got to go back, Dwight.’

‘No, damn it, I won’t let them give me the runaround this way. I have friends at Andrews AFB, so let’s go there and ask them to call Wright-Patterson for permission to stay in this area for another week or so. That’ll enable us to continue our investigations without the help or hindrance of the bastards in here.’

Bob puffed his cheeks out and blew a gust of air. ‘I think one of us should go back,’ he said. ‘Hold the fort, so to speak. The teletype machines are bound to be going mad at the ATIC, so one of us should be back there to help Captain Ruppelt. If you want to stay here, okay, and I’ll go back and clear it with Ruppelt.’

‘Great,’ Dwight said. ‘You smooth matters out with Ruppelt and I’ll call Beth this evening and explain things.’

‘One call I wouldn’t want to make, partner. Rather you than me.’

‘I’ll be fine,’ Dwight said.

He and Bob returned to the ATIC office, picked up their briefcases, switched off the light, locked the door and then left the Pentagon. They took a taxi to the Washington National Terminal Airport Building. There Bob was dropped off and Dwight, still boiling mad, took a bus all the way to Andrews AFB, twenty miles east, in Maryland.

On the evening of July 26, Dwight was having coffee alone in the almost deserted officer’s mess of Andrews AFB, thinking gloomily that he had been here for exactly one week to the day, sharing a room with three other officers, phoning Bob Jackson or Captain Ruppelt every afternoon and Beth every evening, when he was inclined to feel most miserable, and had received nothing valuable regarding the UFOs in return for his suffering.

In fact, he was gloomily pondering the ironic fact that he was second-in-command of Project Blue Book and yet had never personally seen a UFO. Every evening since Bob's departure, Dwight had been out prowling around the airstrip of Andrews AFB, scanning the night sky for UFOs, but so far he hadn't seen a damned thing. Nor had the radar operators or pilots - a fact that only increased Dwight's feelings of frustration and inadequacy.

Oddly enough, there had been a flurry of UFO sightings the previous day and evening, though none of them over Washington DC First, amber-red lights had been observed over the Guided Missile Long-Range Proving Ground at Patrick AFB, Florida. Next, a UFO described as 'a large, round, silver object that spun on its vertical axis' had been seen to cross 100 degrees of afternoon sky in forty-eight seconds. Then, in the late afternoon, interceptor jets had chased UFOs over Los Alamos and Holyoke, Massachussetts, losing them as they turned into the sun. Finally, that night, F-94s had tried in vain to intercept unidentified lights reported by the Ground Observer Corps in Massachussetts and New Jersey.

But nothing over Washington DC...

And not a thing over Andrews AFB, where Dwight, after a week on his own, was starting to feel that the whole business was some kind of bad dream that had almost broken up his marriage and might soon break him.

He was gloomily pondering this, at 10.30pm, when he heard his name being called out over the tannoy system, asking him to report urgently to the control tower.

Dwight jumped up and ran.

The Andrews AFB control tower was in pandemonium, with most of the traffic controllers, eerily shadowed in the night lighting, grouped around the 24-inch radarscopes and staring at rapidly multiplying targets.

'Same as last time,' the captain in charge said, jabbing his fingers at the screens, 'but this time they're not just over Washington DC. Those UFOs are spread out in a huge arc from Herndon, Virginia, to here. They're right above Washington National Airport - and also right above us. In other words, they have Washington boxed in.'

'Jesus Christ!' an Air force sergeant whispered.

With everyone else, Dwight glanced automatically at the sky above the darkened, lamplit airfield, but saw only the moon and stars. According to the radar, some of those UFOs were overhead, but they couldn't be seen by the naked eye. To confirm that they actually existed, you had to look at the

radarscopes... and there they were: all those white lights constantly on the move, forming a great arc around Virginia and Maryland, but closing in on Washington DC.

'God damn it!' someone else exclaimed softly, glancing up at the sky. 'Where the hell are they?'

A group of F-94s were already racing along the airstrip and taking off into the sky, in pursuit of the targets on the radar screens. Even as they disappeared in the direction of Washington DC, the telephone rang. The chief traffic controller answered it, nodded his head, then lowered the phone and said, 'The targets have just left the radarscopes at Washington National Airport, but already people around Langley AFB, near Newport News, as well as the radar operators in Langley Tower, are reporting weird lights that appear to be rotating and giving off alternating colours.'

'Jesus Christ!' the sergeant whispered again.

Increasingly excited, but also frustrated because he could actually see nothing other than the targets on the radarscopes, Dwight remained in the control tower as the drama unfolded.

By 11.30pm four or five of the targets were being tracked continually over the Capitol. F-94 interceptor jets tried and failed to catch them. Shortly after the UFOs left the sky over the Capitol building, more reports came in from Langley Tower, where the operators again described them as unidentified lights that were rotating and giving off alternating colours. Another F-94 was dispatched from Langley AFB and visually vectored to the lights by the tower operators. The pilot reported that as he approached one of the lights, it went out 'like somebody turning off a light bulb'. No sooner had this happened, than the targets came back on the radarscopes at Washington National Airport. Again, F-94s were dispatched to locate them... but each time they were vectored into the lights, the UFO disappeared abruptly from the radarscopes and the pilots simultaneously reported that they had visually observed the lights blinking out.

Eventually too frustrated to take it any longer, Dwight tried dialling the Pentagon. Unable to get through because the lines were tied up - or so the frantic switchboard operator informed him - he phoned an old reporter buddy, Rex Ginna, *Life's* UFO expert, operating out of the magazine's Washington News Bureau.

'I can't get through to the Pentagon,' Dwight said. 'What can you actually *see* there, Rex?'

‘Fantastic!’ Rex exclaimed. ‘A real light show here! They could be lights - or silvery discs – it’s hard to say what - but they’re racing to and fro across the sky right above us. They’re also above the Capitol and the White House.’

‘Oh, my God,’ Dwight groaned, ‘and I’m trapped here. What are they doing?’

‘They look like bright stars from here. Small lights... or high up. They’re like light bulbs, but sometimes they spin so fast, they become a silvery blur. They’re flying in all directions. Sometimes they stop and hover. They rise and descend vertically, shoot sideways, perform all kinds of tricks. Sometimes they’re so low, they actually circle the Capitol and the White House, then they shoot up again at incredible speed and then just blink out like light bulbs. Damned amazing, I’m telling you.’

That phrase again, Dwight thought. *They blink out like light bulbs.*

‘Anyway,’ Ginna said, ‘they must be taking it pretty serious. All the reporters were ordered out of the radar rooms of Virginia as soon as the interceptor jets went after the UFOs. They told us it was because the procedures used in an intercept were classified, but we know that’s bullshit. Most ham operators can build the equipment needed to listen in on an intercept. No, the real reason they threw us out is that some top brass are convinced that this is the night some pilot’s gonna get a good, close look at a UFO - and they don’t want the press to spread the word. So here I am in the news bureau instead, watching the whole show. Too bad you can’t see it.’

‘Go to hell, Rex!’ Dwight hung up on Ginna's chuckling, then tried the Pentagon again. Getting through this time, he asked for Dewey Fournet and was surprised to get him. Fournet sounded harassed.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Right. No point in denying it. Those things are visible overhead and solid, *metallic* objects are causing the blips on the radarscopes. They can’t possibly be caused by anything else; and whatever they are, they can literally hover in the air, then accelerate to fantastic speeds.’

’And they definitely can’t be caused by temperature inversions?’

‘No way. We’ve just checked out the strength of the inversions through the Air Defence Command Weather Forecast Centre - and there’s no temperature inversion strong enough to show up on the radar. Finally, no weather target makes a 180-degree turn and flies away every time an airplane reaches it. Like I

say, those things are solid and *metallic*. They're also controlled.'

'Any indication of size?'

'We don't think they're that big. In fact, we think they're pretty small. Not big enough to be manned. Some of the ones our pilots are seeing seem much bigger, though we can't be too sure yet. It's the small ones that are coming down real low and winging around the Capitol and... Well, I might as well tell you... President Truman almost went apeshit when he saw them skimming right around the White House. This whole place is bananas.'

When Dwight put the phone down, he looked up at the sky and was again frustrated to see only stars. Looking at the radarscope, he saw that the screen was literally filled with the white dots, clearly showing that the UFOs were still high in the sky over Andrews AFB.

'Damn it,' Dwight whispered, 'where *are* they?'

Even as he spoke, the lights on the radarscope raced in towards one another, to form a single, bigger light that flared up and then went right off the screen.

'What the hell...?' the chief traffic controller said, as his men all bunched up closer around the radarscope, wondering where all the targets had gone so suddenly.

At that moment, the floor of the radar tower shook briefly.

Everyone looked outside, as if searching for an earthquake, but they saw nothing but the darkened, lamplit airstrip.

The floor shook a second time, settled down again, and then an eerie yellow light filled the control tower, beaming in from outside, and gradually changed to an amber-orange light that appeared to be beaming down from above. As everyone looked up, straining to see out through the windows, the floor shook a third time, a bass humming sound filled the silence, and the amber-orange light, now clearly beaming down from above, turned into a huge, fiery, orange-coloured sphere that was descending slowly, inexorably, upon the control tower, as if about to land on it and crush it.

With everyone else in the control tower, Dwight looked up at that dazzling apparition, paralysed by amazement and disbelief, his heart pounding dangerously.

Then everything went dark.

Chapter Fifteen

The so-called UFO 'invasion' of Washington DC led to a secret midnight meeting in the Oval Room of the White House between Wilson and President Truman, General Samford, Head of Air Intelligence, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg, USAF Chief of Staff, and CIA agent, Sam Fuller, through whom the first approach to Samford had been made.

Wilson, wearing civilian clothes and already almost fully recovered after his recent operations, was accompanied by the icy Artur Nebe. Truman was seated behind the ornate oak desk, framed by the Presidential flag and the flag of the United States, with Samford and Vandenberg, both in full uniform, at one side of him and Fuller, wearing a light grey suit, shirt and tie, at the other. All three men were standing just in front of the high French windows overlooking the West Wing's Rose Garden.

Taking a chair at the other side of the desk, with Nebe just behind him, Wilson studied Sam Fuller's cynical, sharp-eyed gaze and the wary faces of the two generals, then he offered President Truman an engaging smile.

'So, Mr President,' he said, 'how did you like our two UFO displays over Washington DC?'

'Very impressive,' President Truman replied, not returning the smile.

'I'm glad you think so, Mr President.'

'I'm sure you are,' Truman said with soft sarcasm.

'I assume you know that not *all* of the saucers were mine.'

'Weren't they?'

'No. During the second invasion some of your own saucers, the ones constructed in Malton, Ontario, attempted to intercept, but failed dismally and were pursued back to Canada.'

'We just thought we'd try it on,' Fuller said sardonically.

'Don't do it again,' Wilson told him, then turned his attention to generals Samford and Vandenberg. 'Can I take it that you gentleman are now convinced

of the superiority of our technology?'

Both men just stared at him, too speechless with rage to speak.

'I take your silence as reluctant agreement. Can I therefore also assume that you will now make no further attempts to thwart us, either in the skies or in Antarctica?'

'Damn it – ' Samford began.

'You can take it that for the time being, at least,' Vandenberg said, sounding choked, 'we accept that such moves would be pointless.'

Wilson nodded, acknowledging the oblique, temporary surrender, then he returned his attention to President Truman. The President did not avoid his gaze, but took his time before speaking.

'Just tell us what you want,' he said.

'Antarctica is now the most valuable piece of real estate in the world.'

'I'm well aware of that fact, Mr Wilson, and also of the fact that you control it simply by being there.'

'Antarctica is also the greatest natural laboratory on Earth and the West now needs to exploit it.'

'Correct,' the President said.

'You also desperately need its water and mineral wealth, which is why you need me.'

'I am all ears,' the President said when Wilson paused to let the import of his words sink in.

'If you wish to populate Antarctica with your scientists and research facilities without being harassed by my saucers,' Wilson calmly informed him, 'you'll have to agree to the trade previously discussed that night in Virginia. In return, I'll let those already in Antarctica remain unmolested to engage in reasonable scientific research.'

'What's your idea of reasonable?'

'I'll obviously monitor their activities and put a stop to anything that presents a threat to my colony.'

'You have no right – ' Samford began, but was waved into silence by the President.

'In return for the supplies I need,' Wilson continued, intrigued to see how quickly even men of great power and authority could be reduced to petty human behaviourial patterns, 'I will pass on valuable secrets of my technology, on a pro rata basis, though only after my own technology has superseded what I choose

to give you at any given moment in time. In this way, my technology will turn the US into the most advanced nation on earth, scientifically and militarily, while simultaneously ensuring that it will never become advanced enough to threaten our own existence in Antarctica.'

The President stared steadily at Wilson for a moment, then swivelled around in his chair to judge the reaction of his two generals. Samford looked enraged and helpless at once; whereas Vandenberg, though normally a man of immense authority, was revealing the first signs of shock and disbelief.

'What if we say no?' Fuller asked, his gaze direct and unafraid, his lips curved in a slight, sardonic grin.

This man is like Nebe, Wilson thought. He thrives on intrigue. Though the one in this room with the least authority, he's the one I must watch the most.

'Then I'll trade with the Soviets,' Wilson said, 'and maybe even the Chinese. The choice is entirely yours.'

Vandenberg opened and closed his fists, Samford turned a deep red, and the President swivelled back in his chair to face Wilson again.

'You're an American,' he said quietly.

'A goddamned traitor!' Samford exploded.

'Right!' Vandenberg added, almost choking with anger.

'Gentlemen, gentlemen!' the President admonished them, waving them into silence.

Observing the two outraged, high-ranking military officers, Wilson recalled how, all those years ago, the great, innovatory work of himself and Robert H. Goddard had been ignored consistently by the US government and military establishment. He also remembered how their negative reactions to his genius had forced him to destroy his great work, drop out of sight, and spend three decades of his life in lonely anonymity, until he saw his opportunity in Nazi Germany, where his work and that of Goddard was greatly respected, even if for the wrong reasons. Now this United States president and his generals and intelligence officers - the same breed of man who had previously tried to stop his work and failed to support Goddard - were accusing him of being a traitor to his country, even as they hypocritically bartered to obtain his technology.

'I'm a scientist,' he told them. 'Nothing more and nothing less. I'm not moved by your patriotism, which is merely self-interest, and I won't be a traitor to myself just because you accuse me of being a traitor to my country. You have more blood on your hands than I do - and for less admirable reasons. Now do

you agree or not?'

'No!' Samford exploded.

'We've no choice,' Vandenberg argued. 'We can't let the Russians or Chinese get their hands on this traitor's technology. I'm afraid we have to deal with him.'

There was silence for a moment while the President considered his options. Having previously met Samford and Fuller, Wilson took this opportunity to study General Hoyt S. Vandenberg. The general had been head of the Central Intelligence Group (later the CIA) from June 1946 to May 1947 and his uncle had been chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, then the most powerful committee in the Senate. Clearly, Vandenberg still had great influence in those areas, as well as all the authority inherent in his position as USAF Chief of Staff. This man, once he had accepted defeat, would be particularly useful.

President Truman was studying Wilson at length, disbelieving, quietly outraged, helplessly intrigued, but eventually he too was forced to raise his hands in surrender. 'I agree with General Vandenberg,' he said. 'We have no choice in the matter. We must deal with this man.'

The ensuing silence was filled with dread and despair, until Nebe, finally speaking for the first time, said in his deadly soft, oddly threatening manner: 'This leads to the delicate matter of security.'

'Ah, yes!' Wilson exclaimed softly. 'I'd almost forgotten.' Studying Fuller, he saw Nebe's murderous double behind his urbane manner and knew that what Nebe was about to say would be understood by him. 'Go ahead, Nebe.'

'Since it's impossible to fly the saucers without being observed,' Nebe said, his voice as chilling as his demeanour, 'whether they be our own highly advanced craft or your crude US-Canadian prototypes, I suggest you implement the widespread use of ridicule, harassment and confusion of UFO witnesses, official and otherwise.'

'We've already done that,' Fuller told him.

'Correct,' Vandenberg added. 'When Project Sign was established in January 1948 it was given a 2A classification and placed under the jurisdiction of the Intelligence Division of the Air Force's Air Material Command at Wright Field - later renamed the Air Technical Intelligence Centre, or the ATIC. When Captain Dwight Randall of Sign submitted his official, top-secret Estimate of the Situation in July of that year, I personally rejected it on the grounds that it lacked proof, even though the proof was clearly conclusive. I then encouraged a whole new policy at Project Sign: in the future, Sign personnel were to assume that *all*

UFO reports were hoaxes. They also had to check with FBI officers and with the criminal and subversive files of police departments, looking into the private lives of the witnesses to check if they were reliable. Most of the Project Sign team took this as fair warning that it wasn't wise to raise the subject of UFO sightings. To encourage this fear, I first leaked the news that Captain Randall's Estimate of the Situation had been incinerated, then renamed Sign as Project Grudge. As anticipated, this was taken by all concerned as another indication of my displeasure.'

'Clever,' Nebe whispered admiringly.

'The function of Project Grudge,' Fuller explained, picking up where Vandenberg had left off, 'was to shift the investigations away from the actual UFOs and on to those who reported them. However, since a good twenty-three percent of their reports were still classified as unknowns, this wasn't easy. For this reason, Project Grudge launched a CIA-backed public relations campaign designed to convince the American public that UFOs did *not* represent anything unusual or extraordinary. As part of this debunking effort, we encouraged the *Saturday Evening Post* journalist, Sidney Shallet, to write a two-part article exposing UFOs as a waste of time; but when that backfired - by increasing public interest rather than diminishing it - we got the Air Force to counteract by stating officially that UFOs were either misidentifications of natural phenomena or the products of mass hallucination. Project Grudge issued its final report in August 1949 - only six months after its inception. Put simply, its conclusion was that while twenty-three percent of the UFO reports were still classified as unknowns, most had psychological explanations and the investigation was therefore a waste of time and should be downgraded even further. On December 27, the Air Force announced the termination of the project. Shortly after, the Project Grudge records were stored and most of its personnel were widely scattered.'

'You can do more,' Nebe said, 'to encourage widespread confusion and fear of ridicule when it comes to the reporting of UFOs. Your Air Force must be seen to be supporting UFO investigations with Project Blue Book, while actually hampering them behind the scenes and by otherwise making things unpleasant, or even dangerous, for UFO witnesses and investigators. This can be done through the introduction of some new, restrictive Air Force regulations. You should also form a supposedly secret panel of leading scientists to investigate UFOs. However, this panel will also include CIA representatives who will

ensure that its official report ridicules the whole phenomenon and then is leaked to the press.'

'You're asking us to turn our own, patriotic pilots and citizens into traitors,' Samford said angrily, 'and, even worse, to do so while we're fighting the war in Korea.'

'A small sacrifice,' Wilson said, 'and one you must make. Otherwise there can be no agreement between us.'

Samford was about to make another angry retort, but was cut short by the stern glances of President Truman and General Vandenberg.

'As Head of Air Intelligence – ' Nebe nodded at General Samford – 'and USAF Chief of Staff' - he nodded at General Vandenberg – 'you two are in an excellent position to do this, so please ensure that it's done.'

Vandenberg managed to keep his peace, if with visible effort, but Samford practically turned purple and even took a step forward. 'I'd remind you that the last time we talked you were relatively safe because we were in open countryside with your saucer hovering right above us. This time, however, we're in the Oval Room of the White House, so what the hell can you do to prevent us from arresting you right now?'

Smiling, Wilson told Samford to turn off the lights. When this had been done, the Oval Room was plunged into moonlit darkness. Wilson then removed a pocket-sized electronic device from his jacket pocket and whispered coded instructions into it. A few seconds later, a bass humming sound came from outside, seeming to fill the room, then the room shook a little, as if from an earth tremor, and a dazzling, pulsating, silvery-white light beamed in through the windows overlooking the Rose Garden.

When they all stared at the windows, they saw what appeared to be a row of portholes in a metal body, with the light beaming out of them to form the single, blinding brilliance that now filled the Oval Room.

The row of lights bobbed up and down, as if hovering just above the ground, while the bass humming sound filled the room to exert a subtle, almost palpable, disturbing pressure. Then the humming noise ceased and the silvery-white lights blinked out, plunging the Oval Room back into moonlit darkness.

General Samford switched the room lights back on as Wilson stood up, preparing to leave with Nebe.

'I'll be spending a few days in the capital,' he informed them with confidence, 'so please don't try any tricks while I'm here.'

‘We won’t,’ Fuller said.

General Samford glared at Wilson, General Vandenberg looked stunned, and President Truman simply stared at the windows as if in a state of shock.

Without another word, Fuller led Wilson and Nebe out of the Oval Room, then down to the White House garage, to drive them back to where they were staying, in the Hay Adams hotel.

Chapter Sixteen

Cold December winds were blowing dust across the desert when Fuller drove to the house of Mike and Gladys Bradley, near Eden Valley, Roswell, New Mexico. The sun was starting to sink when he got out of his car and walked up the steps of the modest ranch-style house in the middle of nowhere, with only the El Capitán Mountain visible in the distance, beyond the otherwise featureless flatlands.

They sure like their privacy, Fuller thought as he rang the doorbell.

Neither Bradley nor his wife was expecting the visit from Fuller and the latter gazed at him suspiciously through the mesh-wire of the outer door when she opened the main door.

'Gladys Bradley?' Fuller asked.

'If you're here, you must know that already, so why bother asking?'

Fuller had heard she was a tough old bird, so he wasn't too surprised by her tart response. Though now nearing her sixties, Gladys was still as thin as a whip and had a gaunt, suntanned face, under grey hair cropped as short as a man's. She was squinting at him through the smoke from the cigarette dangling from compressed lips.

'I want to speak to your husband, Mrs Bradley.'

'He may not want to speak to you, mister. Just who the hell are you?'

'Sam Fuller. CIA.'

'Oh, one of those.' She clearly disapproved. 'You got an appointment?' Fuller shook his head. 'No,' Gladys said, 'I didn't think so. Goodnight, Mr Fuller.'

She was just about to close the main door again when Fuller jerked the outer door open and used his foot as a doorstop on the other one. 'Don't close the door, Mrs Bradley. I might hurt my foot. If I do, I'm liable to get angry and that leads to trouble. You look like a woman of some perception, so you know I'm not lying. Now do I come in or not?'

Still a reporter to her fingertips, Gladys studied him for a moment, then nodded and opened the inner door. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘I know trouble when I see it. You promise me none of that and I’ll let you in.’

‘No trouble,’ Fuller said.

Gladys nodded again, then stepped aside to let him pass. He entered a short hallway with doors on either side. Gladys closed the door behind him, then skipped ahead to lead him into the expansive living room, which had an open-beam ceiling, walls and floors of pine boards, and comfortable, old-fashioned furniture on Mexican carpets. As they entered, Mike Bradley looked up in surprise, then rose from his armchair in front of the flickering TV set.

‘Sam Fuller,’ Gladys said, waving a careless hand in Fuller’s direction. ‘CIA. He was very persistent. Wants to ask a few questions.’

Bradley nodded, understanding what she meant, then looked directly at Fuller. He didn’t extend his hand.

‘CIA?’

‘That’s right, Mr Bradley. I know you won’t want to answer my questions, but I’m afraid you’ll just have to.’

Just as Gladys had done, Mike Bradley studied Fuller carefully, then glanced inquiringly at his wife.

‘It’s been years now,’ Gladys said. ‘It can’t make too much difference. This one’s trouble and we don’t need that at our age. Just answer his questions, Mike.’

Bradley nodded, then held out his hand. ‘Hi,’ he said as Fuller shook it. ‘Can I get you a drink?’

‘I could sure do with a beer,’ Fuller replied.

‘I’ll get it,’ Gladys said.

As she disappeared into the kitchen, Bradley indicated that Fuller should take an armchair facing the TV. When Fuller did so, Bradley switched the set off - Milton Berle was hamming it up in the Texaco Star Theater - and took the comfortable armchair facing him. At fifty-eight years old, Bradley was still a handsome, well-built, silvery-haired man, though the skin on one cheek was slightly livid from what looked like an old burn.

The explosion at Kiel Harbour, Fuller thought. That’s what put him in hospital. Otherwise, the guy looks like Spencer Tracy. A dead ringer, in fact.

‘Nice house,’ Fuller said, glancing around the living room.

‘Yes,’ Bradley said, ‘we think so.’

The pine-board walls were covered with framed photos taken from the personal history of the two people who lived here. Apart from early family portraits, the photos of Gladys showed her as a reporter in Roswell in the 1930s, including some with Robert H. Goddard and his rocket team; then the Spanish Civil War, including some of Ernest Hemingway; plus London, England, during World War II; liberated Paris, France; then more journalistic encounters in Roswell after the war. Other photos showed Gladys and Bradley, both in uniform, also in London and liberated Paris during the war, or Bradley with other military personnel in France and Germany during the same period. Fuller assumed that the framed photos of a young man and strikingly similar young woman, sometimes alone, other times with children or Bradley, were of Bradley's son and daughter and grandchildren. There were no photos of Bradley's former wife, who had died at Pearl Harbour.

'You two have obviously lived a full life,' Fuller said.

'If you're in the CIA, Mr Fuller, I'm sure you know as much about us as we do.'

Fuller grinned. 'Yeah, I guess so.'

Gladys returned with his beer, handed it to him, then took the chair between him and Bradley. Fuller sipped the beer, which was ice cold, then he licked his wet lips.

'Well,' he said, 'times have sure changed since you two got together during World War Two. That was some damned explosion last week, right?'

'It sure was,' Bradley replied, his gaze steady and watchful. 'And so was the one the month before.'

He was referring to Britain's first atomic bomb test in Monte Bello Islands, off the northwest coast of Australia, which had taken place about eight weeks ago. Fuller, on the other hand, was referring to the obliteration of the whole island of Eniwetok, in the Pacific, by the US hydrogen bomb test of two days ago.

'An awesome sight,' Fuller said.

'Some would call it terrifying.'

'Yeah... And now we're being plagued by these damned flying saucers. The world's certainly changing.'

'We both know why you're here, Mr Fuller. You don't have to introduce the subject in this roundabout manner. You want to know why I didn't turn up at the Socorro UFO crash site on July 2, 1947, five years ago. You want to know what

I know.'

Fuller sighed. 'Yeah, that's it.' Glancing at Gladys, he met a measuring, grey-eyed gaze, so quickly turned back to Bradley. 'Okay, you know why I'm here. From the day you returned from the war in Europe, you were obsessed with UFOs, or flying saucers, and kept in constant touch with the Flight Intelligence Officer of Roswell Army Air Base, First Lieutenant William B. Harris, hounding him for information on any sightings. Yet that night in July, 1947, when Harris called to inform you that a flying saucer had actually crashed on the Plain of Magdalena, near Socorro, inviting you to go and view the crash debris with him, you didn't show up and ever since have refused to say why. You also stopped investigating, or even discussing, UFOs from that night on. What happened, Mr Bradley?'

'What do you know about my activities during the war?'

'You were trying to track down a brilliant American physicist who had once worked with Robert H. Goddard, right here in Roswell, before absconding to Germany and ending up in charge of a top-secret Nazi research project. He was called John Wilson. Born Montezuma, Iowa, in – '

'You know what that research project was, don't you?'

'We believe it was called Projekt Saucer. We also have grounds for believing that it involved the construction of a highly advanced, jet-propelled, saucer-shaped aircraft.'

'Correct. Then you also know that my reason for being at Kiel Harbour just before the close of the war was to try and capture Wilson before he made his escape.'

'By submarine?'

'You must know that as well.'

'No,' Fuller lied, wanting Bradley to reveal as much as possible from his own knowledge. 'The report on your World War Two activities has been heavily censored. I only know that you made it as far as Kiel, where you were badly wounded in an explosion on the dock. I wasn't sure if you knew what had happened to Wilson.'

'Yes, I knew. Wilson and some of his cronies were taken on board the Nazi submarine U-977, which I actually saw leaving Kiel harbour. Just before the submarine put out to sea, one of Wilson's Nazi pals, an SS lieutenant, found me lying hurt on the dock, after my car had been overturned. He introduced himself, saying his name was Stoll, and confirmed that Wilson was on board the

submarine. He also said that Wilson would remember my name. Then he blew up the nearby warehouses, which contained trucks stacked high with slaughtered SS troops: the only remaining witnesses, apart from myself, to Wilson's escape. As you know, I was badly wounded by that same explosion and spent many months in hospital, first in Germany, then back here. When I was released, I became obsessed with flying saucers - not mere UFOs - because I knew damned well that they existed and I wanted to prove it.'

'So why didn't you go with First Lieutenant William Harris when he invited you to the site of the Socorro crash?'

'Initially, I intended going,' Bradley confessed. 'In fact, I left here immediately and was heading for Roswell Air Base, to meet Lieutenant Harris, when I realised that I was being tracked by a flying saucer. It landed on the road ahead and made the engine of my car malfunction; then three men dressed in black dropped out of the base of the flying saucer and surrounded my car. One of them introduced himself as Wilson.'

'Christ,' Fuller exclaimed softly. Glancing at Gladys, he saw that she was still gazing steadily at him, not trusting him an inch. 'So what did Wilson say?' Fuller asked, turning back to Bradley.

'He told me that the world we know is dying - a world of wasteful emotions - and that the new world, his world, was approaching and couldn't be held back. His world, he informed me, would be one of truth, or pitiless logic, and his technology was going to take us there. He then told me to stop pursuing him. He threatened Gladys and my grandchildren. He explained that his flying saucers would fly the skies with impunity and that those who reported them - presumably including me - would be ridiculed and, where necessary, silenced. He told me again to think of my children. To enjoy my retirement. Then he bid me *Auf Wiedersehen* and took off in his saucer. I was frightened by the advanced capability of that flying saucer, by what Wilson had said, by the knowledge that he had managed to track me down, and so I stopped chasing UFOs.'

Gladys Bradley reached over to squeeze her husband's hand. When he smiled, she let his hand go and sat back again.

Fuller had another sip of beer, then put the glass down. 'The saucer made the engine of your car cut out?'

'That's right. A kind of bass humming sound, almost physical, head-tightening. Then the engine of my car cut out and wouldn't start again.'

'Why didn't you get out and run for it?'

‘I tried, but felt paralysed. It wasn’t fear, though I certainly felt that. It was some kind of paralysis.’

‘A kind of hypnotism?’

‘I was fully conscious, but it could have been something like that.’

‘How did you get back to your home when the saucer took off?’

‘I just turned the ignition key and the damned thing started up as if nothing had happened, letting me drive home. But no way, after what I’d seen, felt and heard, was I going to go up against that Wilson.’

‘Since then, have you ever felt you were being watched? Any contact with UFOs?’

‘Yes, on both counts. At least three or four times a year, always when driving at night, my car is paced by lights in the sky - either circular or in a long line, indicating a saucer shape. Also, though less frequently, Gladys and I will be awakened in the dead of night by lights beaming into the house from outside, often accompanied by that familiar bass humming sound. They’re keeping their eye on us, Mr Fuller, and they always will.’

‘Do you think they know we’re having this conversation?’

‘I really don’t think so. I suspect they keep paying me the unexpected visits just to remind me that they haven’t forgotten me. I’m taking a chance by having you here, but if they came tonight, it would just be a coincidence - an *unfortunate* coincidence.’

‘I’m sorry to put you in this danger.’

‘No, you’re not,’ Gladys said accusingly.

Fuller glanced at her, realised how tough she was, so just grinned and then wiped it from his face when he turned back to Bradley.

‘So Wilson knew who you were,’ he said, ‘and also knew that you were there at Kiel harbour.’

‘Absolutely,’ Bradley said.

‘Do you know where that submarine was taking him?’

‘I didn’t at the time, but I put it all together later, when I learned through the OSS organization that the submarine I’d seen in Kiel harbour, U-977, under the command of Captain Heinz Schaeffer, had docked at Mar del Plata, Argentina, a few months after the war.’

‘You think they’re in Argentina?’

‘No. Neither Wilson nor that SS lieutenant Stoll were found on board. Nor were any of the mechanical parts or drawings relating to Projekt Saucer - so my

guess is that they used Argentina as a springboard to the next stop.'

'Antarctica?'

'Yes. The Nazis were obsessed with building underground structures there - just like the enormous underground rocket complexes I saw at the end of the war in Belgium and Nordhausen, Thuringia. Documents found by Operation Paperclip indicated that virtually from the moment the Nazis illegally claimed Queen Maud Land in 1938, renaming it Neu Schwabenland, to the closing days of the war, they were shipping scientists, engineers, architects, builders, slave labour, and the material and plans for various highly advanced projects, including Projekt Saucer, to somewhere in Neu Schwabenland. So it didn't take much to put two-and-two together and come up with Antarctica. Then, when I read about Rear-Admiral Byrd's aborted Operation Highjump, in 1947, I was pretty much convinced that I was right. Wilson is somewhere in Queen Maud Land, either under or inside a mountain range, building flying saucers and god knows what else. It's a nightmare scenario.'

'Do you think he'd be able to produce flying saucers with the capability of those being reported?'

'Yes. My bet is that a lot of the saucers are small, remote-called machines that first evolved out of the German *Feuerballs*, better known during the war as Foo fighters. I certainly think they might be the ones involved in the so-called UFO invasion of Washington DC last July. Other saucers are bigger and piloted - just like the one that stopped me that night on the road to Roswell.'

'What do you think happened to the Projekt Saucer documents and parts divided between the Russians and the Allies at the end of the war?'

'I think it's likely that they now have their own saucers, though they certainly won't be as advanced as those created by Wilson and doubtless still being evolved in Antarctica.'

'One last question,' Fuller said, finishing his beer and preparing to leave. 'If we sent an invitation, would you be prepared to return to UFO investigations on behalf of the US government?'

'No, thanks, Mr Fuller.'

'Thank *you*, Mr Bradley.' Fuller stood up and turned to face Gladys, who hadn't moved from her chair. 'And thank you, Mrs Bradley.'

She just nodded, not trusting him an inch, letting Bradley walk him to the

front door. They shook hands on the porch.

'From what I've read, you're a hell of a guy,' Fuller said. 'I mean, you really did some things in your time.'

Bradley smiled in a modest manner, then released Fuller's hand. 'Not really,' he said. 'But I hope that what I've told you helps. I just don't want to be personally involved.'

'You won't be,' Fuller promised.

Walking back to his car, he climbed in and then looked out the window. Bradley was still on the porch, the wind blowing his silvery hair, handsome and clearly a decent citizen in his white shirt and trousers. He raised his hand in farewell. Fuller waved back, turned on the ignition, and then drove away from the house. When he glanced back, Bradley had disappeared from the porch. The lights of the house beamed out into the darkness, under a vast, star-filled sky. A real picture-postcard scene.

Fuller only drove a short way along the road. He stopped when he came to another car that was parked by the side of the road with its headlights off. The man in the other car rolled his window down.

'Well?' he asked.

'He knows all about Wilson,' Fuller said. 'Every damned thing.'

The other man nodded and then got out of his car, slinging a canvas bag over his shoulder. He walked back along the dark road, toward Bradley's house. Fuller got out of his car, lit a cigarette and silently smoked it.

When Bradley's house exploded and turned into a distant furnace that lit up the night, turning the sky a bloody red and erasing the stars, Fuller sighed, dropped the butt of his cigarette, ground it into the dust with the heel of his shoe, then climbed back into his own car and drove off.

'Too bad,' he murmured.

Chapter Seventeen

Dwight sometimes thought he would never work out just what it was he had seen that night in July 1952, hovering over the control tower of Andrews AFB as if about to descend upon it and crush it. In fact, the object, if such it had been, had merely hovered for a few seconds, dazzling them all with the radiance of what appeared to be its vast, swirling base, before it ascended again, making only a bass humming sound, almost an infrasound, then ascending abruptly and blinking out high above, plunging everyone in the control tower into a brief, blinding darkness.

Normal vision had returned soon enough, bringing the real world back with it, but from that day to this, Dwight had thought constantly about, and often dreamed about, that vision of luminous power, and wondered just what it was. Now, back in Washington DC, a year later but in the same month, he had to struggle to keep the memory of that night out of his thoughts and concentrate on what he was doing.

He was in the downtown office of the recently formed Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute, or APII, a civilian UFO organisation, to give a clandestine 'deep background' interview to Dr Frederick Epstein, a 41-year astronomer and head of the institute, who had often been of great assistance to Project Blue Book in its evaluation of UFO reports.

Epstein was short and bulky, with a good thatch of hair, though there were streaks of telling grey in his dark Vandyke beard, which he tended to stroke a lot when deep in thought. He and Dwight were facing each other across a cluttered desk, in an office with walls covered by large charts showing the most commonly reported UFO shapes, the most commonly reported UFO formations and UFO manoeuvres, both singly and in formation, the worldwide locations and flight directions of the major UFO waves from 1896 to the present, major UFO events in the United States and overseas, and details of the world's major UFO organisations. The most common flight direction for the UFOs, Dwight

noted, was south to north and back again.

'It was the official reaction to the Washington sightings, more than anything else,' Dwight told Epstein, who was recording the conversation, 'that made all of us at Blue Book even more suspicious of the Air Force's stance on UFOs. Too many people were telling us one thing and then changing their stories for their official reports. Also, it became increasingly obvious that the top brass in the Air Force were trying to blind us with some dodgy manoeuvres. After the Washington sightings I became convinced that pilots reporting UFOs were being intimidated into changing their reports or simply remaining silent. I also suspected - and still do - that a lot of information was being withheld from us and that the CIA was stepping into the picture for unexplained reasons.'

Epstein stopped him there, in order to change the tapes. Dwight glanced at the window, but the curtains were drawn, even in broad daylight, and the door behind, he knew, was locked to prevent anyone coming in accidentally. It seemed a melodramatic thing to do and made him feel a little foolish, but when he thought of the mysterious deaths of Mike and Gladys Bradley, whose house had gone up in flames after an unexplained explosion about seven months ago - a tragedy that many thought had been caused by an act of arson - his foolishness was replaced with the fearful conviction that people investigating UFOs were putting themselves at risk.

Dwight was worried not only about himself, but about Beth and their daughter, Nichola. You just never knew...

When Epstein had changed the tapes, he looked up and said, 'Okay... The CIA was stepping into the picture for unexplained reasons.'

'Right. The person who most worried us was Chief of Staff, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg. It was Vandenberg who'd buried the original Project Sign Estimate, caused its incineration, and had the project renamed Project Grudge. We're still not sure just how much Vandenberg was influencing the Air Force or the CIA, but certainly he'd been head of the Central Intelligence Group, now the CIA, from June 1946 to May 1947 and his uncle had been chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, the most powerful committee in the Senate. Clearly, Vandenberg still has great influence in those areas - and it's from those very areas that pressure's always coming to suppress the results of our UFO investigations.'

'So you weren't surprised,' Epstein said, smiling encouragingly, 'when you learnt that the CIA and some high-ranking officers, including Generals

Vandenberg and Samford, were convening a panel of scientists to analyze all the Blue Book data.'

'No. And I wasn't surprised, either, to discover that this panel was to be headed by Dr H. P. Robertson, director of the Weapons System Evaluation Group in the Office of the Secretary of Defence - and a CIA classified employee. The Robertson panel, by the way, was also convened against the objections of the Batelle Memorial Institute - the private research group used by the Air Force to carry out statistical studies of UFO characteristics and advise them on UFO investigations. Normally the Air Force bows to the Batelle Memorial Institute's every demand, but not in this instance.'

'Certainly sounds like they're determined to form that panel, come hell or high water.'

'They are,' Dwight said.

'What can you tell me about the panel?'

'This is strictly deep background. My name's not to be mentioned.'

'You have my word on it,' Epstein said.

Dwight took a deep breath, feeling nervous, but determined to let out what was troubling him, hopefully for future use by Epstein's invaluable organisation. Exhaling his breath in a sigh, he said, 'The Robertson panel was convened in great secrecy right here in Washington DC last January. While some insist that it opened on January twelve, it actually ran from January fourteen to eighteen. Apart from Robertson, the group's panel consisted of physicist and Nobel Prize-winner Luis W. Alvarez; geophysicist and radar specialist Lloyd V. Berkner and physicist Samuel Goudsmit, both of the Brookhaven National Laboratories; and astronomer and astrophysicist Thornton Page, Deputy Director of the John Hopkins Operations Research Office. Other participants included J. Allen Hynek, an astronomer consultant to the United States Air Force; Frederick C. Durant, an army ordnance test station director; William M. Garland, the Commanding General of the ATIC; our Pentagon liaison officer, Major Dewey Fournet; my Project Blue Book chief, Captain Ruppelt; two officers from the Navy Photo Interpretation Laboratory; and three high-ranking CIA representatives.'

Epstein gave a low whistle. 'That's some group,' he said. 'Almost impossible to argue with.'

'That seems to be the point,' Dwight said. 'The seriousness with which the subject was supposed to be treated is best illustrated not only by the calibre of

the men involved, but also by the fact that the group's report was to be given to the National Security Council, NSC, and then, if the decision was that the UFOs are of extraterrestrial origin, to the President himself.'

'Which may have been so much cotton wool,' Epstein said.

'I think it was.'

Epstein nodded his understanding. 'So what information was the Robertson panel given?'

'For the first two days of the session, Captain Ruppelt reviewed the Blue Book findings for the scientists. First, he pointed out that Blue Book received reports of only ten percent of the UFO sightings made in the United States, which meant that in five and a half years about 44,000 sightings had been made. He then broke the sightings down into the percentage that was composed of balloons, aircraft, astronomical bodies, and other misinterpretations, such as birds, blowing paper, noctilucent and lenticular clouds, temperature inversions, reflections, and so forth, and pointed out that this still left 429 as definite unknowns. Of those, it was clear that the most reported shape was elliptical, the most often reported colour was white or metallic, the same number of UFOs were reported as being seen in daylight as at night, and the direction of travel equally covered the sixteen cardinal points of the compass. Seventy percent of those unknowns had been seen visually from the air - in other words, by experienced pilots and navigators; twelve percent had been seen visually from the ground; ten percent had been picked up by airborne and ground radar; and eight percent were combination visual-radar sightings. Ruppelt also confirmed that many UFO reports came from top-secret military establishments, such as atomic energy and missile-testing installations, plus harbours and manufacturing areas.'

'That should have impressed them,' Epstein said. 'They always sit up when their own top-secret establishments are involved.'

'It *should* have impressed them,' Dwight said, hardly able to contain his lingering bitterness. 'Ruppelt and Major Dewey Fournet had completed an analysis of the motions of the reported unknowns as a means of determining if they were intelligently controlled. Regarding this, Major Fournet told the panel of how, by eliminating every possibility of balloons, airplanes, astronomical bodies, and so forth, from the hundreds of reports studied, and by then analysing the motions of the unidentifieds in the remaining unknown category, his study group had been forced to conclude that the UFOs were intelligently controlled

by persons with brains equal to, or maybe surpassing, ours. The next step in the study, Fournet explained, had been to find out where those beings came from; and since it seemed unlikely that their machines could have been built in secret, the answer had to be that they came from outer space.'

'Substantiating evidence?' Epstein asked, distractedly stroking his beard and studying the turning spools in the tape-recorder, as if they might reveal something Dwight hadn't told him.

'Yes,' Dwight said. 'The morning after Fournet's summary, the panel was shown four strips of movie film that had been assessed as falling into the definite-unknown category. The cinetheodolite movies taken by Air Force technicians at the White Sands Proving Ground on April 27, 1950, and approximately a month later; the so-called Montana movie taken on August 15 the same year by the manager of the Great Falls baseball team; and the Tremonton movie taken on July 2, 1952, by Navy Chief Photographer, Warrant Officer Delbert C. Newhouse.'

'Let's take them in turn,' Epstein said.

'Right.' Dwight removed a kerchief from his pocket and wiped the sweat from his face. The room, with its windows closed and doors locked, was unbearably hot. 'One of the White Sands movies showed a dark smudgy object that proved only that *something* had been in the air and, whatever it was, it had been *moving*. The second movie had been analysed by the Data Reduction Group at Wright-Patterson AFB, with results indicating that the object had been approximately higher than 40,000 feet, travelling over 2,000 miles per hour, and was over 300 feet in diameter.'

Epstein gave another low whistle and shook his head from side to side in a gesture either of disbelief or admiration.

'The Montana movie showed two large, bright lights flying across the blue sky in an echelon formation. The lights didn't show any detail, but they appeared to be large, circular objects. The Tremonton movie showed about a dozen shiny, disc-like objects fading in and out constantly, performing extraordinary aerial manoeuvres, darting in and out and circling one another in a cloudless blue sky.'

'Astronomical phenomena?'

'No. Any possibility that they might have been that was dispelled when the film clearly showed them heading in the same tight cluster toward the western horizon and, more specifically, when one of them left the main group

and shot off to the east.'

'Don't tell me the panel refused to accept *that* evidence!'

Dwight rolled his eyes in disgust, then nodded affirmatively. 'They haven't released their official report yet, but according to Captain Ruppelt they didn't seem impressed.' He wiped his forehead again, then studied the kerchief. It was soaked with his sweat. 'Yet the Montana movie had been subjected to thousands of hours of analysis in the Air Force laboratory at Wright Field and the results proved conclusively that the objects weren't birds, balloons, aircraft, meteors, clouds, or reflections - in short, they were unknowns. As for the Tremonton movie, it had been studied for two solid months by the Navy Laboratory in Anacostia, Maryland, and their conclusion was that the unidentifieds weren't birds or airplanes, were probably travelling at several thousands of miles an hour, and judging by their extraordinary manoeuvres, were intelligently controlled vehicles. In other words, the evidence was conclusive.'

'But the panel still wasn't impressed.'

'No, damn them. After going over the evidence for two days, the bastards concluded in their initial report that the evidence was *not* substantial, that the continued emphasis on the reporting of the phenomena was resulting in a – quote - *threat to the orderly functioning of the protective organs of the body politic* – unquote - and that the reports clogged military channels, could possibly precipitate mass hysteria, and might encourage defence personnel to misidentify or ignore actual enemy aircraft.'

'In other words: the real problem wasn't the UFOs - it was the UFO *reports.'*

'You've got it,' Dwight said.

Even talking about it could make him feel bad these days, bringing his buried fears to the surface and encouraging what he sometimes believed was his growing paranoia. Yesterday, watching TV, he had seen mud-smeared, weary American troops celebrating the end of the Korean war - a sight that had filled him with overwhelming nostalgia for his own fighting days in World War Two. It was a terrible truth that war had its attractions, but for Dwight it was something more than that: it was the desire to escape from the deepening darkness and dangers of his all-embracing UFO investigations.

The news of the death of the former UFOlogist, Mike Bradley, and his wife Gladys, possibly by an act of murder, had certainly filled Beth with fear and again made her plead for Dwight to get out of this business. In fact, he had tried,

but the Air Force had refused his request; and now, when he thought of Bradley's blazing house, he felt trapped and threatened.

'So what do you think their official report will recommend?' Epstein asked him.

'Nothing honest or realistic,' Dwight replied. 'I think the whole idea behind the Robertson panel is to convince the American public that the Air Force has made the definitive study of UFOs and come up with a negative evaluation. In other words, their job is to shaft us... and I think they'll succeed.'

'That's why you're giving me this information?'

'Yes. I think Project Blue Book is going to be restrained by the recommendations of the Robertson panel. If that's true, you'll be able to use this info more effectively than us.'

'Thanks,' Epstein said, turning off the tapes. 'Sadly, I believe you're right.'

Dwight was glad to make his escape from the airless office in Dr Epstein's Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute, or APII, and step back into the uplifting sunlight of late July in Washington DC. He caught a cab to the airport.

Chapter Eighteen

Marlon Clarke was talking to himself. His guillotined head had been separated from its original body for six years now, but was still functioning in an insane, chaotic manner. Still enclosed in a glass casing with an inner temperature reduced to just above the point of freezing, the head was connected to the two amputated hands and the surgically removed, still beating human heart in the chilled glass case on the desk beside it. Clarke's eyes were still open, but were wide with terror or madness. His dribbling lips were moving rapidly to form a torrent of words that could not actually be heard because of the cutting of his vocal chords. Attached by the severed neck to a steel-clamp base enclosing artificial blood vessels and the wiring that connected it to the amputated hands and beating heart, the head was moving slightly, the eyes roaming frantically left and right, as the fingers of the severed hands opened and closed spasmodically, sometimes making the hands crawl across the boxed-in table like large, insane spiders.

'The main problem,' Dr Gold was explaining to Wilson, Kammler and Nebe, 'is not in perfecting the psycho-physical interaction between head and body, but in retaining the sanity of the severed head. As you can see, Clarke's head is successfully receiving the blood being pumped by the separate heart and has retained its power to agitate the amputated hands, though in a chaotic, useless manner. This suggests that while the head still has enough consciousness to send impulses to the severed limbs, it's in a state of delirium, or insanity, caused by disbelief and trauma. It's impossible to ascertain just what Clarke is thinking right now - if his thoughts still include self-awareness or not - but his wide-open, wandering eyes prove that at least he's still aware of *something*. We just can't tell how much.'

'So the main problem isn't physical, but psychological,' Wilson said. 'We have to find a way to minimise the shock and retain the severed head's sanity.'

'Exactly,' Dr Gold said. 'With regard to cyborg development, I believe

we can solve this with artificially induced amnesia - chemical or electric stimulation of the relevant areas of the brain. In this case, the severed head, or the beneficiary of a surgically rearranged face, part original, part prosthetic, will assume that it's always been what it is and not suffer trauma. This way, please.'

Leading them across the laboratory, which had walls hacked out of the interior of the mountain and therefore gave no view of the Antarctic wilderness outside, Gold stopped at a bizarre, headless figure strapped upright to an electric chair that was wired to a large computer console. From the waist down, the figure was a perfectly normal, naked male, though the blood had been drained from the legs, giving them a pasty-white, slightly blue, mouldy appearance. However, from the waist up, the torso was artificial, made from moulded steel plates, with one plate missing, exposing a ghoulishly colourful mass of electric wiring and a narrow glimpse of the original intestines. One arm was missing from the headless torso and the other, Wilson noted, was actually a cobalt-chromium alloy prosthetic.

'The prototype for our first cyborg,' Gold explained. 'The lungs, kidneys and original intestines will remain, but will be strengthened and supported by a two-chamber pacemaker. Working prosthetic joint replacements have already been perfected and will help defeat the rigours of supersonic flight and space travel. The psycho-physical interaction between brain and artificial limbs will be stimulated by the use of an electronic metal skullplate and the problem of speech for the lower-face prosthetic, including new chin implant, will be solved by using an electronic larynx. Control of the cyborg will be attained by a combination of chemical-electronic stimulation of the brain and computerised, remote-control interfacing between the cyborg and its activating machine, located here in the colony and in the saucers. These are early days yet, but I believe it can be accomplished relatively soon. If we can solve the problem of the sanity of the severed head, we're on our way to success.'

A severed human head was resting on a table beside the electric chair. One eye was missing. An odd-looking eye, rather like a glass marble, was resting on the table beside the one-eyed head.

Smiling, Gold picked up the loose eye and showed it to Wilson. 'An acrylic eye. We're trying various experiments with them. Unfortunately, so far, when we've implanted them in the heads of living subjects, they haven't worked well. When we replace only one eye, the living nerves of the remaining eye help the

replacement to see slightly; but when we replace both eyes at the same time, blindness results. Still, given time and a regular supply of living subjects, we'll get there in good time.'

'There'll be no problem with living subjects,' Kammler said. 'Stoll is doing a good job in Paraguay and the supply of Ache Indians is limitless. You need have no fears there.'

'Good.' Gold glanced with pride around his busy laboratory, filled with white-smocked surgeons, bio-engineers, dedicated scientists, headless torsoes, amputated limbs, and isolated, still pumping human hearts. 'Please, gentlemen, this way.'

He led them through the nearest door, along a short corridor, and into another, larger laboratory containing various chairs, some electric, others normal, all with buckled straps on the arms, and small, dark cells with leaded-steel doors containing narrow viewing panels.

There was a dreadful amount of noise in this laboratory - and the noise, by its very nature, was even more dreadful.

Gold introduced Wilson, Kammler and Nebe to Dr Eckhardt, formerly of an SS experimental medical unit. Eckhardt gave them a tour of his domain.

In a small side chamber, human subjects, male and female, were strapped to heavy chairs cemented into the floor, wearing headphones, bleeding profusely from their nostrils and ears. They were also, in some cases, vomiting into plastic bags taped to their mouths.

'Infrasounds,' Dr Eckhardt explained, raising his voice to defeat the agonised screaming of his victims. 'Sounds just below the level of human hearing - so condensed that they can create physical pressure on the human brain and the body's organs. At the moment, the particular infrasounds being used are bursting the blood vessels in the heads of the human subjects, with the results that you see. We're also experimenting with other infrasound levels to ascertain their potential as surgical tools and beam weapons, which we hope to incorporate in our flying saucers. For this reason, we're also experimenting with strobe lights. Please, this way, gentlemen.'

In one of the darkened cells, behind the closed, sealed door, a man was being subjected to flickering strobe lights. Viewed through the narrow panels in the leaded-steel door, in the rapidly alternating light and darkness, he appeared to be writhing and kicking in slow motion, while tearing frantically at his hair or clawing his own naked, bloody body.

‘The strobe lights,’ Eckhardt explained, ‘are flickering in the alpha-rhythm range, between eight and twelve cycles a second, thus causing an epileptic seizure in the human subject - as you can see. Other rhythms produce different results, inducing either drowsiness, full mesmerism, hunger, nausea, or various moods ranging from acute depression to uncontrollable violence. These, also, we are planning to incorporate into beam weapons for the saucers. Come, gentlemen, this way.’

A gaunt, pale-faced woman, wearing a one-piece black coverall, was strapped by her wrists and ankles to the arms and legs of an electric chair. A metal skullcap, wired to the console-control beside the chair, was being lowered onto her shaven head. The woman was sweating, trembling and weeping.

‘Please don’t,’ she whispered.

‘A stereotaxic skullcap,’ Eckhardt explained, ignoring the woman’s pleading as the metal device, containing hundreds of minute, hair-thin electrodes, was lowered onto her shaven head. ‘When we can hypnotise or otherwise control human beings by remote control - say, with the use of brain-implants – we’ll abduct those we want, implant them by means of a stereotaxic skullcap such as this, then return them to the world of ordinary men, to do our bidding as and when required. Eventually, in this way, we’ll be able to enslave the world’s most powerful men and women without resorting to war and with few aware that they’re in our control. In other words, they’ll become our brain-implanted robots.’

‘You’ve perfected this?’ Nebe asked.

‘No,’ Eckhardt confessed, ‘not yet. At the moment, most of those subjected to electronic stimulation from the stereotaxic skullcaps become vegetables - but some are keeping their minds longer than others, so we’re getting there gradually. The breakthrough will come soon enough.’

He nodded in the direction of the white-smocked technician at the control console. When the technician flicked a switch, the woman screamed in agony, writhed violently in the chair - or as much as she could with her wrists and ankles strapped - then urinated and collapsed into stillness. The technician turned off the power while a medic examined the woman’s pulse and heartbeat. Straightening up, he shook his head from side to side and said, ‘Her heart’s given out. I think we should try one of the adolescents; they have a much greater will to live.’

‘Bring one in,’ Eckhardt said.

‘The cyborg-and-other experimentation is excellent,’ Wilson told Gold when they had left Eckhardt to his work and were making their way back to Gold’s laboratory, ‘but what about human, non-prosthetic longevity? Are you making progress with that?’

‘There are still considerable problems, particularly regarding the liver, but eventually even that will be solved. I would remind you that even in the West, some remarkable discoveries and advances have recently been made, including the discovery of DNA, the basic structure of life; the first full chemical analysis of a protein; and the first impregnation of a woman with deep frozen sperm - so the secrets of longevity, and even of life, are now within the bounds of possibility. I would therefore suggest that you arrange for the abduction of some scientists and biologists specialising in those fields.’

‘I’ll see to it,’ Wilson said. ‘In the meantime, you’re doing invaluable work here. Keep it up, Dr Gold.’

Now back in Gold’s laboratory, Wilson glanced once more at the mad eyes and dribbling, silently gibbering lips of the severed head of Marlon Clarke. Impressed, he led Kammler and Nebe out, walking along a recently completed tunnel, past brightly-lit side chambers containing other laboratories, workshops, machine-shops, and rooms containing spare parts and supplies, all guarded by armed men in black coveralls. At the end of the tunnel, in a brightly-lit open space carved out of the rock, they took a lift up to Wilson’s office, located near the summit of the mountain.

Entering, Wilson was briefly dazzled by the vast, sunlit Antarctic as seen through the panoramic windows that stretched along the full length of one wall, just beyond his desk. He did not sit at the desk, but instead indicated the chairs grouped around a table placed right in front of the window, giving a magnificent view of the white wilderness. The table had been prepared for dinner, with a bottle of white wine being chilled in a bucket. The food, which already was on the plates, consisted of a simple green salad, wholewheat bread and cheese. Wilson liked to eat healthily.

‘Gentlemen,’ he said, pulling out one of the chairs and seating himself. ‘Let’s sort our differences out in a civilised manner, over good food and wine.’ When Kammler and Nebe were also sitting, both eyeing the healthy food with a visible lack of enthusiasm, Wilson removed the bottle of wine from the ice bucket and filled up their glasses. After toasting one another, they commenced eating, talking through the meal.

‘I believe you had a complaint to make,’ Wilson said, addressing both men.

‘Yes,’ Kammler replied. ‘While my direct responsibilities are for the scientific aspects of the colony, including labour management and discipline, I believe I should still have a say in other matters.’

‘Such as?’

‘It’s not my belief that we should be negotiating with the Americans in return for their cooperation regarding supplies.’

‘How else do you propose obtaining such supplies?’

‘The way we’ve always done in the past: by stealing them and bringing them in on the saucers.’

‘The saucers aren’t yet big enough and our supplies are running out.’

‘Nevertheless,’ Kammler insisted, glancing nervously at the watchful Nebe, ‘I don’t believe we should let the West stay in the Antarctic. Nor do I believe that we should give the Americans the slightest knowledge of our technology.’

‘We don’t have a choice, Hans.’ Wilson was being patient. ‘We can’t wait until we run out of supplies and then make our trade. Once we run out of supplies, the West will have us over a barrel. We can’t let that happen.’

‘And what if those in the West, particularly the US, use the knowledge we give them to actually catch up with our technology?’

‘That simply won’t happen.’ Wilson was starting to lose patience. ‘I’ll only pass on what we’ve already superseded, which means that no matter how far they advance, we’ll always be even more advanced – light years ahead of them.’

‘I don’t think we can take that chance,’ Kammler said. ‘One of your old Projekt Saucer team, Walter Miethe, is now working for the A.V. Roe aircraft company in Malton, Ontario, helping them to construct some crude flying saucers based on our early designs. Habermohl is doing the same for the Soviets. Werner von Braun is now working for NASA, reportedly on a long-term moon programme. As for Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever, he’s now back in his home town of Bremerhaven, West Germany, from where he’s busily informing all and sundry that the Americans have their own saucers and constructed them from his designs, which is partially true. The United States now knows too much, so we shouldn’t barter with them.’

‘And I repeat,’ Wilson said, his patience running out, ‘that it can’t be avoided.’ Disgusted, he turned to the silent, always calculating Nebe. ‘And you, Artur, what do you think?’

‘I agree with Kammler. We can’t take such a chance. If we want supplies,

let's go and take them. With our saucers, we can bring the United States to it knees - and from there take over the whole world. Why wait so long?'

'You want power, Nebe.'

'Nothing else in life matters.'

Wilson sighed, despairing of base human nature. 'I'm not interested in power for its own sake,' he explained, 'but want only to guarantee the survival and continuing evolution of this apolitical, scientific community. Eventually, our technology will make us the dominant power anyway, without resort to pointless violence, and in the meantime, we can get what we want with minimum effort. Let the United States bring in our supplies; what we give in return will serve them well, but not enough to give them an advantage over us. We're safe from attack.'

'I'm a policeman,' Nebe said. 'That's what I'm reduced to here. I'm not a man cut out for peaceful work and long-term commitments. I'm being destroyed by boredom. I need something more to do. Let's go to war against the Americans, I say, and prove the worth of our saucers. We will soon rule the world, then.'

'You have the instincts of an animal,' Wilson said, 'and the mind of a caveman. This subject is closed.'

He saw the flash of anger in Nebe's dark, primal gaze and knew that he had struck through to a nerve that would make the man murderous. Glancing at Kammler, he saw that he too was angry, though trying to conceal it with a smile that did not reach his eyes. Wilson knew what they were after: the glory of immediate conquest. He also knew that they now wanted to get rid of him, divide the colony between them, and use the flying saucers to resurrect the Third Reich and ensure that it would finally become their beloved Thousand Year Reich.

It was a pitiful dream, one which filled him with contempt, making him realise that these Nazis had served their only useful purpose and that the time had finally come to put an end to them. He would do it this evening.

'Well, perhaps you're right,' he said. 'The gamble may be too great. Let me sleep on it tonight and make a decision tomorrow.'

'Excellent,' Kammler responded, smiling, all charm, while Nebe simply stared in a stony manner, which was normal for him. Wilson raised his glass of wine in the air and smiled falsely at both men.

'I can tell you both miss the war,' he said. 'Peace can often be boring. So - to

the war!' They toasted the war by touching glasses. When they had drunk, Wilson said, 'Ah, yes, they were indeed good days.'

As sunlight stroked the frozen peaks in the bright night of Antarctica, Kammler and Nebe nostalgically recalled the days of World War II while Wilson listened, pretending to be interested, but practically twitching with impatience. When, a few hours later, after brandy and cigars, they returned to the subject of how best to deal with the outside world, Wilson pretended to agree with them and promised to let them devise a strategy for war, starting with an immediate attack on the United States, initially targeting Washington DC.

Satisfied, Kammler and Nebe retired to bed.

Understanding that no matter what he agreed to, they would eventually turn against him, Wilson had no intention of doing what they wanted. Therefore, instead of considering their request, he sat at his desk and turned on the TV screens that showed them in their separate rooms, Kammler already sleeping, Nebe naked and straddling one of the comfort girls, his bloated body heaving up and down in a joining devoid of love.

Shaking his head in disgust at what they had forced him to do, Wilson pressed a button located under his desk, releasing jets of lethal gas into their rooms - killing them exactly as they had killed so many others in the gas chambers of the Nazi concentration camps.

Kammler didn't waken up. He died in his sleep. Nebe rolled off the girl, covering his mouth with his hands, tried to open the front door and failed, then attempted to climb through the window as the girl, also realising what was happening, started pounding on the door with her fists, obviously screaming for help. Nebe fell back from the window, rolled on the floor, clambered back up. He grabbed the girl by the hair, jerked her away from the door, then frantically tried to pull the door open until the gas overcame him. The girl went into convulsions first, writhing naked on the bed, vomiting. Nebe slid down the door, turned away, fell forward, started crawling towards the window on his hands and knees, then collapsed face down on the floor. He went into convulsions as the girl became still, then he too vomited profusely and shuddered his way into the final stillness of death. The dense gas had become a cloud of smoke that obscured his body and made it look like a bloated, hairy animal lying on its side. That carcass did not move.

Wilson picked up his phone and called the Rubbish Disposal Unit. He ordered them to remove the bodies from rooms 2 and 3 and incinerate them and

all their belongings. Then, immensely relieved and satisfied, he had a good sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

Dwight awakened from a restless, dream-haunted sleep in which he had been pursued by a flying saucer while driving from Wright-Patterson AFB to the town of Dayton. The saucer was immense, with a fiery orange-coloured base, and it came down on Dwight's car, blotting out the whole sky, to make the vehicle's engine malfunction and then swallow it whole. Dwight looked up in terror, his heart ready to burst, as the fiery orange-coloured base, now a bizarre, swirling furnace, spread out all around him and suddenly blinded him.

His scream of fear tore him loose, casting him back to the real world, and he jerked upright on the bed, opening his eyes to the morning sunlight, realising that he was covered in sweat and that Beth and Nichola were in the kitchen, having breakfast already. Breathing deeply, trying to still his racing heart, he slid off the bed, wriggled out of his soaked pyjamas, and gratefully went for a cold shower.

Feeling better after the shower, he put his uniform on and went into the kitchen. Beth and Nichola were facing each other across the dining table, having a breakfast of cornflakes, toast, orange juice and, in Beth's case, black coffee. Nichola was now six years old and as pretty as a picture. Beth, though no longer the young, longhaired beauty he had married, was still, with her short-cropped auburn hair, full lips and slim figure, an exceptionally attractive 27-year old woman. She was also a woman who spoke her mind, as Dwight knew only too well and was reminded of once more when he joined her and Nichola at the table.

'Groaning and tossing in your sleep again,' Beth said for openers. 'More nightmares, Dwight.'

Dwight sighed. 'Yeah, right.' He helped himself to some cornflakes. 'Sorry if I kept you awake. I wouldn't want to disturb you.'

'No need for sarcasm, Dwight. I was only making an observation. Those

nightmares are becoming more frequent and that can't be a good sign.'

'I hate nightmares,' Nichola informed them, 'but dreams are okay. Why can't we have ice cream for breakfast? I'm fed up with cornflakes.'

'I'm okay,' Dwight said, spooning his cornflakes up too quickly. 'Everyone has nightmares from time to time. There could be lots of reasons.'

'Like what?'

'What do you mean?'

'What else could be causing the nightmares? Is it *me*? Something I don't know about? Another woman, perhaps?'

Shocked, Dwight glanced at Nichola, but clearly she wasn't listening. She was running her finger around the inside of her upper lip while lethargically stirring the cornflakes into various shapes. 'A duck,' she said, addressing herself. 'A dog. A.... Mmmmmm.' Dwight turned back to Beth.

'Are you serious? Is that what you think?'

She gazed steadily at him, measuring him, then lowered her eyes. 'Well, you haven't exactly been *attentive* lately. Not yourself at all, Dwight.'

'I'm under a lot of pressure. You know that as well as I do. I wouldn't even have *time* for another woman, so it isn't an issue.'

Beth reached across the table to squeeze his hand. 'Get out from under that pressure, Dwight. Neither of us needs it. I know you tried before, but try again to get out of this work. If you can't, leave the Air Force.'

Flushed with guilt and wanting to hide it, Dwight glanced out the window. He was guilty because he understood why Beth would be worried, but when he looked outside, at the planes parked on the airstrip in the inky shadow of the great hangars, wing-flaps and hangar doors shuddering in the August wind, he knew that he couldn't live without the Air Force and become a civilian. Also (and the thought of this made him feel even worse), though Project Blue Book was certainly putting pressure on and giving him nightmares, it was also exerting a dreadful fascination that he couldn't resist. It wasn't ordinary work, after all.

'I can't eat what's left,' Nichola said. 'They're too mushy and messy.'

'That's 'cause you made them that way stirring them,' Beth retorted.

'I was drawing with my spoon,' Nichola explained.

Dwight placed his free hand on Beth's wrist. 'I can't leave the Air Force. What would I do out there? I'm in it for life. Besides, it isn't as bad as you think. Half the things you hear about UFOs are nonsense. Hysteria and wishful

thinking have a lot to do with it. You know? The planet Venus, comets, meteors, clouds, plasmoids, corona discharges, parhelia and paraselenae, the sun and moon and stars, even lightning and birds, can all look like bright, solid objects moving at high speed. So people see those, misinterpret what they see, then hysteria or wishful thinking comes into play. As for the UFOs being flown by extraterrestrial beings... well, maybe they're not. Maybe they're just some kind of extraterrestrial phenomena - a kind of mirage. We're frightened of what we can't understand, so we tend to exaggerate.'

'That doesn't stop your nightmares, Dwight. Also, you're losing weight. We hardly ever see you anymore, and when you're here, you're not here – you're at the ATIC in your thoughts, still beavering away there.'

'The nightmares will go away with time. I'm pretty damned sure of that.'

'Look, Dwight, I don't know if we're being invaded by flying saucers or not. I only know that my husband is having bad nightmares, is losing weight, and is often too exhausted and distracted to even make love to me. I'm worried about that and also about your future. You say you're an Air Force lifer - well, I agree with that - but that being so, what's going to happen to you if they consistently deny you promotion, as they seem to be doing,? We both know why that is, Dwight. It's nothing to do with your competence. It's because most of those who get involved with UFOs are given a hard time. You should have been in charge of Project Blue Book, but Ruppelt got it instead. Now there are rumours that Ruppelt's in trouble and may get pushed out. That's the way it runs, Dwight.'

'They're just rumours,' Dwight said, though he thought they might be true. 'Some folks talk too much. We all know that today the official recommendations of the Robertson panel will be released, and that knowledge has encouraged a lot of wild speculation, mostly to do with the fate of Project Blue Book in general and Captain Ruppelt in particular. They're just rumours, Beth.'

'It isn't a rumour that you've been repeatedly denied promotion from as far back as Project Sign. Before that you were everybody's darling; since then they've made all kinds of excuses to put other, less experienced officers in front of you. Those aren't rumours, Dwight. And it isn't just a rumour that a lot of people involved in UFO investigations have had even worse things to contend with, such as being posted to Alaska or even having bad, inexplicable, sometimes fatal accidents, like that World War Two hero and UFO expert, Mike Bradley, and his unfortunate wife.'

Dwight gulped the last of his coffee and then put on his Air Force captain's

tunic. ‘There’s no proof for that,’ he lied, looking guiltily from Beth to Nichola, secretly convinced that he was placing both of them in danger and feeling bad because of it. ‘It’s just more wild speculation.’

‘Oh, yeah? Then how do you explain the men in black?’

Dwight had been about to kiss Beth on the cheek, but her words stopped him, making him straighten up again, feeling a chill wind pass through him.

‘What do you know about the men in black?’ he asked.

‘Lots of gossip, Dwight. I prefer to call them stories. Folks are talking about people involved in UFO investigations receiving visits from groups of men dressed all in black. Some say they wear black suits. Others say they’re coveralls. Most agree that they’re not with the Air Force and though human seem strange. Unusually pale, folks say. Oddly inexpressive faces. They usually visit in twos or threes, generally arrive in a black limousine, and always warn those they’ve come to see to stop discussing or investigating UFOs. They tell them that if they continue to do so, they’ll find themselves in real trouble.’

‘More tall stories,’ Dwight said, though in fact he had been receiving an increasing number of such stories, many from reliable sources. ‘These tall tales spread like wildfire. You believe all that garbage?’

‘I’m only telling you what I heard,’ Beth replied cagily, though certainly not joking. ‘Most of these stories come from pretty reliable sources - mostly Air Force personnel - and some came from folk who had the visitors themselves, ignored what they were told, then got into serious trouble shortly after. In at least one case, the person who received the visitors and told Adele Walters about it - saying he thought it was a hoax - later vanished and hasn’t been seen since.’

‘If it was a friend of Adele’s, it could only have been Ben Little,’ Dwight informed her.

Little was an amateur astronomer and fanatical UFOlogist, resident right here in Dayton, who had frequently, perhaps too loudly, claimed that the flying saucers could be man-made secret weapons of the US and Canadian governments. After receiving a lot of local press coverage for a couple of days, Little had just upped and disappeared, leaving a wife and three kids. Adele’s husband, Ralph Walters, an Air Force Flight engineer, was a close family friend.

‘Yeah, that’s the one. Obviously, you heard about it, Dwight.’

‘Yes. And I also heard that the marriage was in trouble and that Ben Little may simply have fled the coop. I lean towards that hypothesis.’

‘I bet,’ Beth said. She had his number and he knew it. Though he simply

couldn't admit it even to himself, he believed that something bad had happened to the loud-mouthed Ben Little and that the mysterious 'men in black' had something to do with it. He now believed that the 'men in black' existed; he just didn't know who they were. Extraterrestrials? The CIA? Foreign agents? There was no way of knowing.

Trying to hide the shock that Beth's knowledge had given him, he leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. 'See you later,' he said. Then he kissed Nichola on the forehead, tickled her under the armpits, and left her giggling hysterically as he hurried out of the house, to walk the short distance to the ATIC, across the airstrip of Wright Field.

The ATIC operations room was not as spartan as it had been during Project Sign. Now, a lot of UFO photographs and drawings of their 'alien' occupants had been added to the many incident maps, charts and graphs on the walls. The two teletype machines hardly ever stopped clicking and the single secretarial assistant, WAC corporal Thelma Wheeler, was now a sergeant with a couple of other secretaries under her command.

Though putting on a little weight, Thelma was still blonde and pretty. She had eyes only for Captain Bob Jackson, who had somehow managed to carry on an affair with her for years without actually tying the knot, let alone becoming engaged. Even now, as Dwight entered the cluttered room, Bob was sitting on the edge of Thelma's desk, leaning towards her and whispering into her ear. Thelma burst into giggles and slapped Bob's knee, then turned away by swivelling around in her chair and went back to her expert typewriting. Bob looked up, saw Dwight and stopped smiling, so Dwight knew the news was bad.

'Morning,' he said, approaching Bob. 'I take it from the look on your face that the recommendations of the Robertson panel have come through.'

'Yeah,' Bob replied. 'I don't know what's in the report, but Ruppelt doesn't look happy and said we were to go straight in and see him as soon as you got here.'

'Then let's go in, Bob.'

Seated behind his desk, Ruppelt, in his Air Force uniform, still looked like a dark-haired adolescent whose slightly plump, smoothly handsome face showed decency and good humour. Nevertheless, gazing down at the thick folder on his desk, he was clearly not in a good-humoured mood and, indeed, looked decidedly troubled - so much so, in fact, that he didn't notice their arrival and was only distracted from the report when Dwight said, 'Morning, Cap'n

Ruppelt. I believe you wanted to see us.'

Ruppelt glanced up as if confused, trying to collect his thoughts, then he smiled as if it was something of an effort, indicating that Dwight and Bob should take the chairs at the other side of his desk. When they had done so, he glanced down at the Robertson panel report, then looked up again and spread his hands over the file as if casting a net.

'What can I say?' he asked rhetorically. 'Where do I start?'

'Just come out with it, Cap'n,' Dwight said. 'It'll be easier for all of us.'

'It's not good.'

'They've shafted us,' Bob said bluntly. 'Is that what you're saying?'

'Yes, Bob, I'm afraid it is.' Ruppelt massaged his forehead with his fingers, glanced distractedly at the file, and then looked up again. 'I should warn you that this isn't the full report. It's merely a summary of their major recommendations.'

'So when are we getting the full report?' Dwight asked him.

'We're not. We're only getting what they want us to know and this is it, gentlemen.'

'What...?' Dwight began, glancing at the equally shocked Bob.

'Don't ask me,' Ruppelt said wearily, then lowered his head again, to scan the document. 'First, despite the conclusive evidence offered by me and Major Fournet, the members of the panel have concluded that the evidence is *not* substantial, that the continued emphasis on the reporting of the phenomena is resulting in - I quote - *a threat to the orderly functioning of the protective organs of the body politic* - unquote - and that the continuing UFO reports are clogging military channels, could possibly precipitate mass hysteria, and might encourage defence personnel to misidentify or ignore actual enemy aircraft. In other words: the real problem isn't the UFOs – it's the UFO *reports.*'

'That much I knew already,' Dwight said. 'What bothers me is what they've recommended.'

'It's pretty startling,' Ruppelt said. He glanced at the many posters on the walls around his desk, mostly enlargements of frames from cinetheodolite movies or stills taken with amateur cameras, the UFOs mostly no more than blurred, round-shaped objects. He appeared to be trying to take some solace from them, though not with success. Sighing, he went back to the report. 'As I say, based on the assessment, the Robertson panel has made some unexpected, even startling, recommendations.'

'Ho, ho,' Bob whispered.

‘First, it’s recommended that the three major private UFO organizations - the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization, or APRO, the Civilian Saucer Intelligence, or CSI, and Dr Frederick Epstein’s Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute, or APII - be watched because of what’s described as their potentially great influence on mass thinking in the event of widespread sightings. Included in this recommendation is the statement: “The apparent irresponsibility and the possible use of such groups for subversive purposes should be kept in mind”.’

‘Jesus Christ!’ Bob exclaimed.

‘Next, it recommends that the national security agencies take immediate steps to strip the UFO phenomenon of its importance and eliminate the *aura of mystery* that it’s acquired. The means will include a so-called *public education programme*.’

‘Mass brainwashing,’ Bob translated bitterly.

‘Finally, the panel has outlined a programme of public education’ - Bob snorted contemptuously – ‘with two purposes: training and debunking. The former will help people identify known objects and thus reduce the mass of reports caused by misidentification; the latter will reduce public interest in UFOs and thereby decrease or eliminate UFO reports altogether.’

‘Shove it under the carpet,’ Bob translated.

‘As a means of pursuing this so-called education programme,’ Captain Ruppelt continued sombrely, ignoring Bob’s outraged interjections, ‘the panel’s suggested that the government hire psychologists familiar with mass psychology, military training film companies, Walt Disney Productions, and popular personalities such as Arthur Godfrey, to subtly convey this new thinking to the masses. It’s also recommended that the sighting reports should *not* be declassified, but that security should be tightened even more while all so-called non-military personnel should still be denied access to our UFO files.’

Ruppelt stopped scanning the report and looked at Dwight and Bob in turn. After a tense silence, he said, ‘Interpreting these recommendations the only way possible, it seems clear to me that the whole purpose of the Robertson Panel has been to enable the Air Force to state for the next decade or so that an *impartial* body had examined the UFO data and found no evidence for anything unusual in the skies.’

‘Damn right,’ Bob said bitterly.

‘While this is an obvious distortion of fact, it means that the Air Force can

now avoid discussing the nature of the objects and instead concentrate on the public relations campaign to eliminate the UFO reports totally. In other words, Project Blue Book is finished. If it continues under that name, it won't be as we know it.'

'No,' Dwight said, 'it won't. Project Blue Book's going to become responsible for a policy of ridicule and denial that'll inhibit the effectiveness of any future study of the phenomena. It'll now be just another arm of the Robertson panel's CIA-backed propaganda campaign.'

'Those bastards,' Bob said.

Though clearly not happy, Ruppelt smiled at him, then he turned the report over, picked up some other pages, and spread them out on his desk as if they were dirt.

'I'm afraid, gentlemen, that while the deliberately leaked Robertson panel report recommends the dropping of all secrecy and the expansion of Project Blue Book's staff, in the official report, from which this summary has been extracted, they've actually recommended a tightening of security, a mass debunking of the phenomena, a subtle ridicule of witnesses, and... the virtual elimination of all the Project Blue Book staff.'

'Oh, my God!' Bob said, practically groaning.

Ignoring him, but sounding choked up, Ruppelt said, 'The following are being posted elsewhere.' Lowering his head and sounding even more choked, he read off the list of names of those being posted. The list included him. The only people left were Dwight, Bob, and Thelma Wheeler.

'The original three,' Ruppelt pointed out. 'You're now in charge, Dwight.'

'Of what? They've left me in charge of a pile of shit.'

'It sure smells that way,' Bob said.

Ruppelt stood up and put on his peaked cap. 'I knew this last night, so I've already packed my kit. They told me I had to leave immediately and that's what I'm doing. My bags are out in the jeep and I'm leaving right now. It was my pleasure knowing you, gentlemen. I'm just sorry it's ended this way.'

'So am I,' Dwight said.

He and Bob followed Ruppelt out of his office and into the main room, where the latter called the staff together and painfully read out the instructions for their postings. When the shocked staff had taken in the news, he walked around shaking hands with each of them in turn, clearly embarrassed when some of the girls shed tears. After shaking the last hand, he indicated that Dwight and Bob

should escort him to the front door of the ATIC building. Outside, on the veranda, with the planes taking off, landing, and roaring in low over the runway and hangars, he stared intently at both of them.

'They're trying to grind you down,' he said, 'and they might well succeed, but in the meantime, here are a few questions for you to answer.' He spread his hands in the air and started raising each finger in turn as he ticked off the questions. 'Why, when the Air Force was telling the whole world that the study of UFOs hadn't produced enough evidence to warrant investigation, did they secretly order all reports to be investigated? Why, when all of us had actually read General Twining's statement that the phenomenon was something real, did they deny that such a statement had ever been submitted? Why, when they themselves initiated Project Sign and received its official report concluding that the UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin, did they dissolve the project and then burn the report? Why, when Project Sign was changed to Project Grudge, did they go all out to ridicule the reported sightings and then disperse most of the staff on the project? Why, when the Air Force continued to claim that they had absolutely no interest in UFOs, did they insist that all reports be sent to the Pentagon? Finally, why did the CIA lie to us, why has the Robertson Report been kept from us, and why has Project Blue Book been destroyed? Those questions need to be answered, gentlemen, and you're the only ones left. Goodbye... and good luck!'

He saluted and walked down to his jeep and then drove out of their lives.

'I don't believe this,' Dwight said.

Chapter Twenty

Ernst Stoll was disgusted by the reflection in the mirror. He had aged since coming here, his features now gaunt, skin yellowish from bad food and lack of activity, eyes losing their lustre. Realising just how much the jungle was taking its toll, he cursed under his breath and called for his comfort girl, Maria, to bring him coffee. She did so quickly, padding towards him on bare feet, her face bruised from the beating he had given her last night when his latest sexual innovations had failed to produce the desired result. That, too, was disappearing - his potency, his damned manhood - and when he glanced again in the mirror to see Maria retreating nervously from him, leaving his steaming cup of coffee on the table just behind him, he realised that she knew this all too well and might be talking about it. Feeling even more humiliated, he decided to get rid of her, and started pondering how best to do it as he wiped his face with a towel.

Then the mirror shook a little, bouncing off the wall, making his already fractured image move out of the frame and back in again.

Steadying the mirror with his free hand, Ernst finished drying his face, then put the towel down and felt the floor shaking under his feet as a familiar bass humming sound filled the room, emanating from outside. Realising that they had arrived earlier than expected, he hurriedly buttoned up his shirt, slipped on his boots, and started across the room.

Maria was on her hands and knees, polishing the wooden floorboards with a waxed cloth. A local Indian girl, but the illegitimate daughter of a white man who had discarded her, she had barely turned seventeen, which was the age Ernst liked them. Right now, her naked body was clearly visible through the thin cotton dress, where it tightened over her raised rump and curved spine. Ernst felt a wave of the lust that was rarely satisfied these days, so he angrily pressed his booted foot on her spine and pressed her face down on the floor. The bass humming sound filled the room, making the floors and walls shake, but Ernst could still feel the trembling of the girl under his booted foot. He had the urge to crush her spine, thus releasing his frustration, but instead he took his pleasure

from the fear he could hear in her voice.

'Please, master,' she whimpered.

He pressed harder with his boot, heard her soft groan of pain, laughed and removed his boot from her spine, then left the house.

Outside, on the veranda, the bass humming sound was louder, almost palpable, an odd vibration that shook the building. He looked up to see a 300-foot-diameter flying saucer descending vertically, slowly, onto the landing pad that now took up most of the ground in the immense walled enclosure in front of the house.

The craft descending was an object of such beauty that it nearly brought a lump to Ernst's throat, reminding him of what he had lost when sidetracked from aeronautical engineering to become an SS policeman. Still high up in the air and viewed by Ernst from almost directly below, the saucer was spinning rapidly on its own axis, except for the central part, which was stationary. It was, he knew, constructed like a giant meniscus lens, or like two inverted plates, that were rotating around the dome-shaped, gyroscopically stabilised central fuselage containing the control cabin, passenger accommodations and supplies. Driven by an advanced electromagnetic propulsion system that ionised the surrounding air and created an electrical conducting field, the saucer was not hindered by normal heat and drag; it therefore had remarkable lift while being devoid of sonic booms or other noises, other than the infrasound that seemed almost palpable.

The rapid rotation of the great outer rings slowed down as the saucer descended, but its electromagnetic gravity-damping system - which also aided its lift and ability to hover almost motionless in the air - was creating violent currents of air within a cylindrical zone the same width as the saucer, making the grass and plants flutter, sucking up loose soil and gravel, and causing them to spin wildly, noisily, in the air as if caught in the eye of a hurricane.

The native workers who lived in the shacks located around the inner edge of the compound were standing outside their modest homes, untouched by the whirlpool of wind that did not extend beyond the cylindrical zone of the saucer, which made it seem magical. They were looking up in awe as the gigantic saucer descended, pointing and chattering to express their disbelief, even though they had seen it many times before.

Ernst felt a lump in his throat as the saucer descended to almost ground level, filling up most of the compound, its central dome as high as a two-storey

building. Composed of an electrically charged, minutely porous magnesium orthosilicate, it had a whitish glow caused by the ionisation, but it darkened to a more normal metallic grey as it hovered just above ground level, its hydraulic legs emerging from four points around the base to embed themselves in the soft earth. The saucer bounced gently on the legs, but eventually settled down and was still. Its rotating rings gradually slowed and then stopped altogether, as did the wind that had been created by its gravity-damping system. Silence reigned for a moment.

Still standing on his veranda, Ernst was deeply moved and embittered simultaneously. He should have helped to construct that saucer, flown it, been part of it, but instead he was condemned to this hellish jungle, rounding up Ache Indians and haggling shamelessly with *Federales* instead of using his engineering talents for work in the Antarctic colony. He had been chosen for this and must do it, but it still deeply wounded him.

With the outer rings of the saucer no longer rotating, the infrasound faded away and a panel in the concave base dropped down on hinged arms to form a ramp leading to the ground. Armed guards wearing black coveralls emerged to form a protective ring around the ramp, then Wilson appeared, dressed completely in black, followed by more armed guards, dressed in black also.

Ernst stepped off the porch and went to greet his master. When Wilson shook his hand, Ernst was startled by how youthful he looked. Though he was now over eighty, his silvery-grey hair was abundant, his skin was smooth on a handsome, ascetic face, and his eyes were as blue and icily clear as the Antarctic sky. The only giveaway, Ernst noticed, was in the slight rigidity to his features when he attempted to smile and, perhaps, a slight stiffness to his movements.

'How are you, Ernst?' he asked, his voice no warmer than his icy gaze.

'I'm fine, sir. And you?'

'All the operations so far have been successful. Doctors Eckhardt and Gold are making good progress. By having the courage to let them try things out on me, I've kept old age at bay.'

Though aware that the good doctors Eckhardt and Gold always tried things out on unfortunate live subjects before operating on Wilson, Ernst thought it wise to pass no comment.

'I'm afraid we can't stay for long,' Wilson continued. 'We'll simply collect the livestock, then be on our way again. You and I can have a quick talk while Porter' - he indicated the armed, black-uniformed brute behind him – 'sees to the

Indians. All right, Porter, get started.'

Realising that for the first time Kammler and Nebe were not with Wilson, Ernst waited until the burly Porter had marched off to the cages with a group of his armed thugs before asking about the whereabouts of his former, detested, World War II comrades.

'They're dead,' Wilson said indifferently, taking a seat at one side of the low table on the veranda. 'An unfortunate accident. They went together in a saucer to collect supplies left by the Americans at the other side of the mountain range. The saucer malfunctioned and crashed, killing everyone on board. Kammler and Nebe are no more.'

Even though he had detested Kammler and deeply feared Nebe, Ernst was shocked to hear of their passing. Nevertheless, after calling out for Maria to bring tea, he saw a ray of hope in his darkness. 'So what will you do now that they're gone? Surely you need someone experienced to replace them and help run the colony. Surely, I – '

'No,' Wilson said, instantly crushing his hopes. 'I know what you're going to suggest, Ernst, but it isn't possible right now. I can run the colony on my own. Your work here is more important. We can't do without a constant supply of Ache Indians, so we can't do without your presence here. You have done truly excellent work in opening up and maintaining lines of communication between General Stroessner and us. Those lines must not be broken. As Stroessner will almost certainly become the next President of Paraguay - probably within the next few months – it's important that you remain here to offer him support and strengthen the alliance between us. In time, I promise, you'll return to the colony, but right now your presence here is vital.'

Torn between pride and his suspicion that Wilson was lying and intended keeping him here forever, Ernst shifted uneasily in his chair. He compensated for his disappointment and deepening depression by barking angrily at Maria who, when she emerged from the house to pour their tea, spilt some onto the saucers.

'Her hands were shaking badly,' Wilson noted when Maria had backed nervously into the house. 'Is she frightened of you?'

'Yes,' Ernst said. 'During the war I learnt that fear could work miracles, so I make sure that everyone's frightened of me.'

'Very good,' Wilson said, though it was impossible to tell if he meant it or not, so unemotional, almost toneless, was his soft voice. 'And is the round-up of the Indians trouble-free?'

‘Yes,’ Ernst replied. ‘The *Federales* do it for me. I merely stay in touch with them, tell them what I want, haggle like an Arab about the price, then let them get on with it. They know the jungle; also, they’ve been hunting the Ache for years, so they know what they’re doing. Naturally, as you can imagine, they’re ruthless, which makes them effective.’

‘Any problems holding the prisoners in the compound?’

‘No. The *Federales* don’t bring the prisoners here until I give them a date, which is usually the day before you arrive. If the *Federales* round them up too early, they have to look after them for me and I’m sure they get certain benefits out of that - if you get my meaning.’

‘I do,’ Wilson replied, not mentioning rape or other forms of abuse, but registering a slight distaste for the low appetites of the still primitive human race. ‘So they’re only in your cages a short time?’

‘Correct.’ Even as Ernst spoke, Wilson’s black-uniformed troops were opening the gates of the bamboo cages at one side of the compound and starting to herd out the terrified Ache Indians, men, women and children, to march them at gunpoint across the compound and up into the saucer by another, wider ramp that had since been lowered from the base. Looking up at the towering saucer, some of the Indians were terrified, started gibbering or covering their eyes with their hands, then tried either to break out of the column or turn back. When they did so, however, Wilson’s men in black hammered them brutally with the butts of their weapons and forced them onward again.

I seem to have spent half my life watching people being herded at gunpoint from one form of imprisonment to another, Ernst thought, recalling the Jews in the cattle trucks in Poland and Germany, all fodder for another great dream. Masters and slaves, indeed.

‘The last time we spoke,’ Ernst said, ‘you were making a deal with the Americans in return for supplies. I take it from the fate of Kammler and Nebe that you now have an agreement with the United States.’

‘Yes, Ernst. They drop what we want at the far side of the mountain range and our saucers pick it up and bring it home. In return for this, I feed them titbits of our technology - though never enough to put us in any danger from them. They’ve also agreed to the late Artur Nebe’s suggestion for a long-term programme of disinformation based on a mixture of ridicule and intimidation of UFO witnesses, both civilian and military.’

‘I’ve been reading about that Robertson panel in American newspapers and

assumed that it might be a threat to you.'

Wilson gave one of his rare chuckles of pleasure. 'All part of a planned, CIA-backed programme of disinformation. Even though the Project Blue Book evidence on UFOs proved conclusively that the saucers exist, the panel stated in their report that the evidence *wasn't* substantial, that the continued emphasis on the reporting of the phenomena was resulting in a threat to the orderly functioning of the protective organs of the body politic, and that the reports clogged military channels, could possibly precipitate mass hysteria, and might encourage defence personnel to misidentify or ignore actual enemy aircraft. Naturally, as the United States has just finished fighting the war in Korea, the Soviets have exploded their first hydrogen bomb, and the Cold War is presently at its chilliest, the American public, and the top brass of the armed forces, swallowed that all too readily.'

This man is truly a genius, Ernst thought, helplessly swelling up with admiration. There is nothing he can't do.

'What will the immediate results of this be?' he asked.

'We've already had the results, Ernst. Last August, the Pentagon issued Air Force Regulation 200-2, which the civilian UFO organisations are already describing as notorious.'

'For good reason?'

'Of course. Drafted purely as a public relations weapon, AFR 200-2 prohibits the release of *any* information about a UFO sighting to the public or media, except when the sighting is positively identified as a *natural* phenomenon. In addition, while AFR 200-5, the previous regulation, stated that sightings should not be classified higher than restricted, the new regulation ensures that *all* sightings will be classified as restricted. Then, in December, the Joint Chiefs of Staff followed AFR 200-2 with Joint-Army-Navy Air Force Publication 146, which made the releasing of any information to the public a crime under the Espionage Act, punishable by a one-to-ten-year prison term or a fine of ten-thousand dollars. Even better, the most ominous aspect of JANAP 146 - at least from the point of view of those who might fall foul of it - is that it applies to anyone who knows of its existence, even including commercial airline pilots.'

'In other words,' Ernst said, 'to all intents and purposes, and contrary to public Air Force pronouncements, the UFO project has been plunged into secrecy.'

‘Correct.’

‘It’s nice to be protected by our enemies,’ Ernst said.

‘*Very* nice,’ Wilson replied with a slight, chilly smile, gazing out from the veranda to where the Ache Indians were being herded at gunpoint from the cages to the flying saucer. Often they became hysterical when they were actually under its wide base, at the foot of the sloping ramp, but they always scurried up the ramp when they were thumped by rifle butts or, as Ernst now noted, by small metallic devices strapped by the wrist to the knuckles of some of the troops. When the troops merely touched the Indians with such devices, the latter screamed in pain.

‘What are they?’ Ernst asked.

‘Experimental stun guns,’ Wilson replied. ‘At the moment, they do no more than give severe electrical shocks - not severe enough to kill, but certainly enough to burn and hurt. But soon we’ll be able to use them to stun, as well as merely hurt, and eventually, with fine tuning, they can be used as mesmerising devices when applied to certain points on the anatomy. Time will bring us everything.’

Ernst felt the great wave of his loss rolling over him to wash him away. Trembling, he finished his tea, placed the cup back on the saucer, and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

‘I only wish I could be part of it,’ he said, secretly wanting to scream for release, but too frightened to do so. ‘I mean, being here... this jungle... these filthy natives... I feel like an outcast. I was trained to be an engineer, a scientist, and yet now...’

In a rare gesture of affection, Wilson placed his hand gently on Ernst’s wrist. ‘No, Ernst, never think that. Such thoughts are for common people. It’s vanity that makes you talk this way, and you should be above it. As individuals, we are nothing. Our desires are mere conceits. We only exist to serve the whole, which is past and future combined. You must suppress your own desires, cast off ephemeral needs, and learn to take pride from your small part in life’s grander purpose. Man is still essentially animal. His only true worth is in the mind. The mind is the doorway to immortality and the secrets of being. You are part of that, Ernst. What you do here has its purpose. Like a monk in a monastery, like a hermit in his cave, like a mystic contemplating in his mountain eyrie, you will learn to accept this. Discipline brings freedom. Self-sacrifice brings fulfilment.

What you lost in the past - your career, your wife and children, your hopes for the Third Reich - and what you feel you're losing now - the comradeship and esteem of your fellow engineers in Antarctica – you'll get back multiplied when what you are doing here has been completed and you see the results of it. Then, and only then, will I bring you back to the Antarctic. When I do so, you'll be twice the man you are now - ennobled by knowledge. Believe me, Ernst. Eventually this will come to pass and then you will thank me.'

Desperate to believe him, needing the healing hands of hope, Ernst tried to forget his lost wife, children, early ambitions and dreams - and all else in his dark, squandered history. Trembling, he picked the bell up from the table and violently rang it, calling for Maria.

'Yes,' he said, startled at how deeply he had been shaken by Wilson's softly spoken, unemotional, mesmeric monologue. 'As always, you're absolutely right. All else is vanity.'

When Maria appeared on the veranda, trembling as much as Ernst, he thought of how often he had forced her obedience by threatening to put a bullet into her mother - there and then, right in front of her. Naturally, it had always worked - a child's love knows no reason - but even that threat was unlikely to stop idle gossip. Vanity: yes, it was a dreadful human vice, but one he had not yet learnt to conquer when it came to his potency. To preserve her mother's life, Maria had submitted to every one of his vile demands - unimaginable sexual activities, not mere vice, beyond pornography - and yet none of it, certainly in the past weeks, had helped him to find release. Now, Maria was bound to talk - silence would be impossible for her - and when Ernst imagined the talk spreading around the compound workers, all of whom loathed and feared him, he could not bear the thought of the humiliation he would then surely suffer.

They would thrive on his failure.

'Yes, master,' Maria said, falling to her knees before him, lowering her head, and not daring to look at him without permission. Ernst thought of all she had done to protect her mother and finally knew what would pleasure him.

'Please take her with the others,' he said to Wilson. 'She cannot be trusted.'

'Of course,' Wilson said.

As Maria, sobbing and pleading, was dragged into the great saucer by

the armed men in black, and her mother, also sobbing and pleading, was dragged back into her shack by some other Indian women, Wilson stood up and squeezed Ernst's shoulder, then shook his hand.

'Don't worry, we'll put her to good use. Now I must be off, Ernst. Thank you. You're doing excellent work here. Take your pride from that knowledge.'

'I will.'

'Until the next time*, Auf Wedersehen*.'

'*Auf Wedersehen,*' Ernst said.

The lump returned to his throat when the great saucer took off, rising slowly, vertically, until it was the size of a silver coin, reflecting the sun. There it hovered for a moment, a silver coin spinning, then it suddenly shot off to the south and vanished in seconds, blinking out like a light bulb.

When the flying saucer had gone, Ernst looked around the compound, taking note of the shadows being cast by the soaring trees, the awe-struck eyes of the native workers, unwashed, in tattered rags, the pigs in their muddy pens, the chickens frantically flapping wings, the naked children rolling in mud and water silvered by sunlight, the guards at the machine-guns in the towers that looked out over the jungle. Choking up with despair instead of pride, he turned back into the house, desperately needing a drink.

Without Wilson, he took his strength from the bottle and yearned for escape.

He just couldn't admit it.

Chapter Twenty-One

On the evening of March 7, 1954, Jack Fuller drove along the ten-mile causeway that led from Patrick Air Force Base, Cape Canaveral, Florida, across the Banana River, Merritt Island and the Indian River, to the Starlite Motel in Cocoa Beach, located in the swampy lands around the original village and now a rapidly growing town of ten thousand souls. From here dozens of missiles, as well as *Explorer 1*, America's first earth satellite, had been fired into space. Many of the motels in the area had been given appropriate names - the Vanguard, the Sea Missile, the Celestial Trailer Court - but the Starlite had gone one better by having a flashing neon rocket as its roadside sign, which made it easy for Fuller to find it. Amused by the sign, he was further amused when shown into his room, where the floor lamp was shaped like a rocket with its nose cone balancing a globular satellite, the walls were decorated with celestial crescents, spheres and orbital paths, and even the towels were embroidered with the legend, 'Starlite Motel'.

'Oh, boy,' Fuller said as he tipped the crew-cut kid who showed him to his room, 'it's a whole different ball game here.'

'It sure is,' the kid said.

Fuller had a shower, shaved, changed his clothes and then went to meet Wilson in the Starlite motel's bar. He was not surprised when it turned out to be a dimly lit, L-shaped room with murals showing the moon as seen through a telescope and Earth as seen from the moon. Nor was he surprised to find that Wilson was already there, drinking what looked like lemonade. He had always been punctual.

Fuller ordered a whisky-and-water from the barman, waited until he had it, then joined Wilson at his table. He was startled to see how young Wilson looked. He seemed to get younger every year, though in this dim lighting it was difficult to ascertain whether or not he'd had more plastic surgery.

He was studying the drinks menu, but when Fuller joined him, he looked up

and smiled coldly.

'The town of Cocoa Beach,' he informed Fuller, 'has clearly become obsessed with space. What's that you're drinking?'

'Whisky with water.'

'I note that the drinks include a Countdown - ten parts vodka to one part vermouth - and a Marstini. Being here is like being in Disneyland, but it's all about space.'

'Yeah,' Fuller agreed, 'I know what you mean. They have a women's bridge club called Missile Misses, a Miss Satellite contest, a fishing boat called Miss L. Ranger, a settlement called Satellite Beach, and even a museum, the Spacarium, that has burned-out components of Cape Canaveral rockets on display. Also, not ignoring the launch of *Explorer 1*, the Chamber of Commerce is already accepting reservations for space aboard what it's describing as the first globe-circling satellite. That's American know-how.'

'It's always nice to meet a patriot.'

'I'm not ashamed of it,' Fuller said. 'The fact that I have to deal with you doesn't change that one jot. What name are you travelling under this time?'

'Aldridge,' Wilson said. He put the menu down, sipped some lemonade, then added, 'This is certainly an encouraging place for a patriot.'

'Sure is,' Fuller agreed. He had spent the previous night in Patrick Air Force Base, two miles from Cape Canaveral, and was still thrilled by the concept of dozens of Atlas, Thor, Titan and Snark missiles, as well as the orbiting satellite, being launched from that restricted military zone of about fifteen-thousand square acres, much of it in uncleared jungle where deer and puma still roamed wild. Now, the formerly untouched land of sand dunes, palmettos, orange groves and swamps had a rapidly swelling population, scores of new businesses, and many housing developments, containing the fourteen thousand people now employed at Cape Canaveral and Patrick Air Force base.

'Cocoa Beach,' Wilson said, 'was once a small village of a few dozen families, but it's presently in the process of becoming the US government's largest and most important rocket-launching site.'

'This bothers you?'

'Yes.' Wilson glanced at the cosmic murals on the dimly lit walls, then shook his head from side to side, as if baffled by the childishness of it all. 'Of course

for me there's a certain irony in the fact that most of the rockets being fired from here could not have been constructed without the assistance of Wernher von Braun and his other Nazi scientists, who in turn based their work on the theories of Robert H.Goddard and me - both neglected Americans.'

'Ah, gee, the man's bitter!' Fuller said. 'My heart's breaking for him.'

'I could break your mind and body,' Wilson rejoindered, 'and don't ever forget it.'

The icy remove in his voice made the threat even more chilling, but Fuller was not a man to be easily frightened, so he just grinned and sipped his drink. 'So,' he said, placing his glass back on the table, 'why are you here?'

'I thought I'd check on the progress being made here and, if necessary, slow it down.'

'I don't know why you're concerned. As you just said yourself, what we're achieving here couldn't have been done without your assistance.'

'I dole that out carefully. You know why I do so. If NASA moves ahead more quickly than I deem fitting, I'll take firm measures to slow them down. I won't let you trick me.'

Fuller couldn't suppress his pleasure. 'Boys will be boys and scientists will be scientists. You know that if you give us assistance, we're bound to try and exploit it. You've known that all along.'

'Never imagine that you're ahead of me,' Wilson warned him. 'If you do, I'll be forced to prove you wrong - and that could be expensive.'

'I know damned well how ruthless you can be,' Fuller said, keeping his gaze on Wilson's face, though relieved that his remorseless, icy eyes could not be seen too clearly in the gloom. 'You don't have to remind me.'

'I *would* remind you that your own organisation, the CIA, with or without the full knowledge of the government, can also be fairly ruthless - as shown by the murder of various American citizens, such as Mike Bradley and his wife, who knew too much about me, my base in the Antarctic, and the US-Canadian saucer projects. Those murders were not committed for my benefit. Nor did I commit them. How ironic that Mr Bradley was frightened of me... when it was you who murdered him in the end.'

'A casualty of war,' Fuller said, proud to have done his duty, 'and not one to give you cause for concern. You didn't come here to talk about that, Wilson - sorry, *Aldridge* - so what do you want?'

'A week ago the United States exploded a thermonuclear bomb over a lagoon

at Bikini Atoll, thus dangerously contaminating seven thousand square miles of land and sea, injuring people nearly a hundred miles away from the area, and, even worse, making the world fall-out conscious for the first time. That test explosion, combined with the unseemly haste with which you're expanding Cocoa Beach and Cape Canaveral, makes me suspect that certain people in the Pentagon or the White House are no longer taking my threats seriously. If you don't slow down your rate of scientific progress, particularly regarding the Apollo space programme, I may have to give you another demonstration of my own, still much greater, capabilities.'

'We must be catching up with you,' Fuller said calmly. 'Otherwise you wouldn't be so damned worried.'

'I don't worry, Fuller. I simply apply reason. And when that tells me you need some kind of warning, I'll make sure you get one.'

'Okay, I've been warned. I'll take your message back to those in charge and I'm sure they'll take heed. Anything else?'

'Not really. I take it that UFO witnesses are still being harassed, ridiculed and thwarted at every turn?'

'Correct.'

'What's the state of Project Blue Book?'

'Not good, you'll be pleased to hear. The project leader, Captain Edward J.Ruppelt, was transferred to Denver and has since left the Air Force in disgust. However, he's now working for the Northrop Corporation and is rumoured to be planning a book that will substantiate the reality of the UFOs, though siding with the extraterrestrial hypothesis.'

'I'm not keen on the idea of a UFO book written by someone with that kind of credibility. Keep your eyes on him.'

'I will.'

'And the others?'

'All of the staff, except for the original two officers, have been scattered far and wide, which others obviously view as a form of official punishment, or warning. As for the two remaining officers - captains Dwight Randall and Robert Jackson –we're keeping the pressure on them all the time and consistently denying them promotion. In fact, by deliberately putting Ruppelt in charge of the former Project Blue Book, instead of Randall, who rightfully should have had the job, we were clearly slighting Randall. By putting him back in charge of the project only when it's been decimated and rendered virtually

inoperative, the slight seems even more brutal. To Randall, as well as to those who know of his involvement with Project Blue Book, it must seem that UFO work is the kiss of death. I believe this is already having bad psychological repercussions on Randall. With him as an example, not too many others will be keen to investigate UFOs.'

'He still might need something, another little push, to tip him over the edge. I'll keep him in mind.'

'Yeah, you do that. Anything else?'

'No. Not for now.' Wilson stood up to leave. After studying the cosmic murals on the walls of the bar, he said, 'America is a nation of children - a gigantic nursery. There's nothing worth having here.'

'Rather here than the Antarctic,' Fuller responded. 'What kind of life can you have there?'

'A life of work,' Wilson said. 'And work is the true function of man - the use of the mind. All else is a waste of time.'

'You're not a real human being, Wilson.'

'Nor do I want to be. Now take heed of my warning, Mr Fuller. Tell your superiors not to try upstaging me.'

'I'll pass the message on,' Fuller said.

When Wilson left the bar, Fuller ordered another whisky. He took his time drinking it, distractedly studying the crescents, spheres and orbital paths on the walls, thinking of the great dream of space and Wilson's part in it. Fuller was no romantic - he had the instincts of a killer - but even he possessed certain human needs that could not be denied. Wilson was something else: a kind of mutant, without emotion, a creature driven by the dictates of the mind, unhampered by feelings. Even Hitler had been driven by resentment and hatred - recognisable human traits - but Wilson existed outside such emotions, which made him inhuman. Fuller, who was frightened by very little, was frightened by that thought.

He finished his drink, left the bar, and went to look for a whorehouse.

Even whores had feelings.

Chapter Twenty-Two

When Dwight entered the lobby of the airport at Albuquerque, New Mexico, after a commercial flight from Dayton, Ohio, he had been drinking again and was feeling a little drunk, but he knew that it would soon pass away, letting his depression and fear return. He didn't relish that much.

His old friend, Captain Andrew Boyle, was waiting for him in an air force uniform too tight for his expanding beer belly, but he seemed as energetic as ever, with a broad grin creasing his good-natured, sun-reddened face. Slapping his hand on Dwight's shoulder, he said, 'Hi, there, partner! Long time, no see. You look like you've lost a bit of weight and could do with some sunshine, but otherwise you're recognizably yourself. Hell, man, it's really good to see you. It's been too long, pal.'

'Yeah,' Dwight said. 'Too long.'

They embraced, shook hands, then walked to the car park, Dwight carrying his overnight bag in one hand, Andy dangling his car keys. 'Christ,' he said, 'how long's it been now? Eight, nine years?'

'Nine years, more or less, though it doesn't seem that long. Time moves like the wind these days. We're getting old too fast, Andy.'

'Yeah, and no better for it. Christ, those were the days, man! I still get a lump in my throat when I think of the old B-29s. We did a lot of crazy things in those days. You had to be young to do it.'

Dwight and Andy had flown in the B-29s over the Pacific during World War II, being shot at by the Japs and having more than one hair-raising escape. It all ended in 1945, when both were demobilised, and apart from a brief reunion when, a few years later, they served briefly with an Air Force Reserve Troop Carrier Wing, they had only managed to keep in touch through the mail and by phone, united by the kind of emotional bonds that could only be forged in war. They would both go to their graves, Dwight suspected, secretly relishing those dangerous years as the best of their lives. This was a shaming truth.

'Anyway,' Andy said, as they climbed into his well used 1947 Frazer

Manhattan in the car park, 'this work you're doing must be almost as exciting - I mean, searching for UFOs.'

'It's not quite the same,' Dwight confessed. 'It's more like a bad dream. Quite frankly, it's pushing me to the limit and I'm thinking of getting out.'

'Out of the Air Force?'

'Right.'

'You were *born* for the Air Force,' Andy told him, turning on the ignition. 'You're a natural lifer.'

'I used to think so. Not now.'

'I don't believe this,' Andy said.

Leaving the airport, he took the road away from Albuquerque, heading into the morning's brightening sunlight, past fenced-in hangars and a lot of warehouses and factories.

As a radar operative at Cannon AFB, Andy had regularly fed Dwight with information on UFO sightings. However, last night he had phoned with more urgency than usual to tell him that the previous evening he had personally witnessed the landing of a flying saucer in the restricted area of the base. That's why Dwight was here.

'I can't believe this business is driving you out of the Air Force,' Andy said, driving with the windows rolled down, letting cooling air rush in around them. 'You thrived on the dangers of the war, so what's happening now?'

'It's not the same as the war,' Dwight said. 'Not the same kind of danger. During the war, we were treated as heroes, doing what our country wanted, but chasing UFOs brings you nothing but flak.'

'What kind of flak?'

'Antagonistic interrogations. Lack of promotion. Postings to places like Alaska. Accusations of incompetence where clearly there was none. Midnight phone calls from irate superior officers. General harassment of every imaginable kind. Now there's talk of men in black paying visits to UFO witnesses, warning them off. UFO witnesses are also starting to disappear. Damm it, Andy, this isn't something you *see*. It's not a dogfight in clear sky.'

'How's Beth taking it?'

'Not much better than me. I'm drinking too much - I know it, but I can't stop - and Beth's frightened about the men in black, as well as about my drinking and my growing desire to get the hell out of it. It's been eighteen months since Captain Ruppelt's departure from Project Blue Book and, subsequently, the Air

Force. Since then, the organisation's been reduced to a mere three members - Captain Bob Jackson, a secretary, and me. To make matters worse, our investigating authority has been passed over to the inexperienced 4602d Air Intelligence Service Squadron; and most of our projects have been strangled systematically through a deliberate reduction in funds.'

'Jesus Christ,' Andy muttered as the engineering and canning factories on the outskirts of Albuquerque gave way to sun-drenched, pastoral farmlands.

'Obviously,' Dwight continued, 'I've been badly shaken and disillusioned by what's happened. I'm also unable to comprehend why the Air Force is supposedly concerned with UFOs, yet at the same time is ruthlessly discouraging a proper investigation of the phenomenon. Personally, I've been harassed constantly by my superior officers and passed over many times for promotion. Now I want to get the hell out - but ironically, given that she was the one who first suggested leaving the force, Beth says it's the drink talking and that there's nothing I could do as a civilian. She thinks I'm threatening our livelihood. She just wants me to transfer out of Blue Book, but I want to get out of the Air Force completely and she simply won't wear that. Frankly, Andy, I don't know *what* to do. I'm just running scared, I guess.'

'I don't blame you, old buddy, but are you sure you're not imagining a lot of this?'

'No, I'm not imagining it. Too many bad things have happened to those involved in UFO research. Also, I'm not imagining the harassment. Christ, Andy, even during that UFO invasion of Washington DC, I was hamstrung and practically ordered back to Dayton. As a matter of fact, I flew here on a commercial flight - at my own expense, Andy - because when I tried to charter an air force plane I was refused permission.'

'On what grounds?'

'They said the base was temporarily sealed off because a security exercise was taking place. A *routine* security exercise, they said.'

'This was yesterday?'

'Yes.'

'Then it was bullshit,' Andy said. 'There was no security exercise taking place at Cannon yesterday - and the base wasn't sealed off. Did you tell them why you wanted to come here?'

'No. I just announced myself as head of Project Blue Book. That was enough.'

‘But you’ve visited the base before.’

‘That’s right. So the only reason they could’ve had for their lies was the landing you saw. Tell me about it.’

Andy glanced in his rear-view mirror, a reflex action denoting confusion, then he concentrated again on the road ahead. ‘Weird,’ he said. ‘Kinda spooky. Problem is, I’d been drinking, a real bellyful of beer, and that made me keep my mouth shut about it - to everybody but you. It was about two in the morning. I was just returning to the base... What the hell! We’ll soon be there, Dwight. Let’s wait till we get there.’

They arrived at the sprawling Cannon Air Force Base a few minutes later. After driving past the guardhouse and barrier at the entrance, Andy kept going along the fenced-in perimeter lining the road until he came to a place near the outer limits of the base, well away from the airstrip. He slowed down and stopped. Dwight could see the corrugated iron roof of a large hangar beyond the high fence. Andy pointed at it.

‘Right there,’ he said. ‘About two in the morning. I was driving right past there, coming in the other direction - pretty loaded, as I said - when I saw that the lights on that hangar were still on. As I was passing, I thought how unusual it was for it to be lit up at that time in the morning. I also noticed that there was a series of arc lights forming a circle in the cleared area directly in front of it. Then, inexplicably, the engine of my car cut out and I rolled to a halt. Cursing, not too sure of what was happening, thinking that the drink had made me do something stupid, I tried to start the car again, but it just wouldn’t spark. Then I heard a weird noise, a high-pitched whining sound, coming from the other side of the fence... and I looked up and saw that... that *thing* coming down.’

He shook his head from side to side, as if still not believing it, and looked at the hangar beyond the fence, reliving the night before.

‘A domed, disc-shaped aircraft. It was landing about fifty yards inside the fence, in that area illuminated by the circle of arc lights, directly facing the open doors of the hangar. The aircraft, or flying saucer, had no lights – that’s why the landing area was illuminated. The circular part around the dome of the aircraft was shaped like two plates, one placed upside-down on the other, and the raised dome in the middle was just like a pilot’s nose cabin, made of what seemed like Perspex, with a single pilot in it. The circular plates were revolving around the dome, which seemed to be gyroscopically balanced and, though fixed, was swaying up and down a little as the saucer descended. The closer it got to the

ground, the slower the plates rotated and the quieter it became, until the high-pitched whining had become a low whirring sound. The saucer had ball-like landing gear, which I saw being lowered in preparation for touchdown. It was practically hovering in the air, just above the level of the perimeter fence. Then it disappeared below the top of the fence and the sound of it cut out completely. When it did, my car's engine started up again.'

Dwight was hearing all this clearly, but finding it hard to take in. He knew that Andy wasn't lying, but it still seemed incredible.

'Any insignia on the saucer?'

'None,' Andy said.

'And the hangar doors were open?'

'Yes. That hangar, I know, is used for secret aeronautical research projects, so I'm convinced that the saucer was being kept there. Certainly, it didn't take off again. I drove my car off the road, cut its lights and ignition, and sat there for a good couple of hours, sobering up and hoping to see the flying saucer ascending.' Andy shook his head from side to side, as if still finding it hard to accept what he had witnessed. 'But it didn't. At one point I thought I could hear muffled screeching sounds - like clamps or wheels needing oil - then, after a while, I heard the hangar doors closing. The arc lights above and in front of them were turned off. After that, there was silence.'

'That's a restricted area of the base?'

'Sure is.'

'So what do you think?'

'What do *I* think?' Andy unconsciously echoed Dwight's words as he glanced up and down the sunlit road that ran past the base. 'I'll tell you. You believe in the extraterrestrial hypothesis, right? Well, let me remind you that most of the best saucer sightings have been over top-secret military installations - in other words, mostly right here in New Mexico. So on the assumption that the saucers aren't piloted by extraterrestrials spying on our military secrets, what else could they be?'

'Soviet secret weapons.'

'Man-made?'

'Right.'

'But not necessarily Soviet. It's highly unlikely that the Soviets could have managed to fly their spy planes over our top-secret military installations without being brought down by us. On the assumption, then, that the saucers are neither

Soviet nor extraterrestrial, but are seen over our own top-secret establishments - and, as in this case, have even been seen to land – there's a growing belief among some of us that they're radical new US aircraft prototypes, developed by the Air Force or Navy.'

'I can't really accept this,' Dwight said.

'No? Then let's see if we can get you into the base.' Andy turned the car around and drove back to the main gate, stopping at the barrier. When he told the armed corporal in the gatehouse who Dwight was, the kid rang through for clearance, then put the phone down and shook his head, looking embarrassed.

'Sorry, sir,' he said, 'but I can't let you bring your guest in.'

'Guest? He's not a guest! He's the decorated US Air Force captain in charge of Project Blue Book. Now let us in, damn it!'

'Sorry,' the corporal repeated, straightening up, 'but I can't do that, sir.'

'Why not?'

'Because I have my orders.'

'What reasons were given?'

'No reasons were given, sir. I was just informed by my superior officer that Captain Randall wasn't to be allowed in.'

'And who's your superior officer?'

'Major Shapiro, the base intelligence officer.'

'Anyone else being denied permission to the base today, corporal?'

'I can't answer that, sir.'

'Okay, corporal, thank you.' Andy reversed away from the barrier, then took off in the direction they had come from, back to Albuquerque. 'Do you get the picture now?' he said. 'The flying saucer I saw last night was certainly no Russian spy plane, since its landing had clearly been prepared for and it certainly spent at least last night in that off-limits hangar. Therefore, it was either an alien spacecraft landing with the full permission of the Air Force or a top-secret Air Force - or even Navy - aircraft. But since it didn't look advanced enough to be an alien spacecraft, I'd opt for it being one of our own.'

'Oh, boy!' Dwight exclaimed softly. 'That would certainly explain why certain members of intelligence don't want us to find out too much.'

'Right. The extraterrestrial hypothesis is a smokescreen. In reality, they're defending their own secrets. Those saucers are man-made.' He glanced at Dwight and grinned. 'I've got some more news for you, but I'll let you have it over a drink. I think you'll need it, old buddy.'

They spent the rest of the drive in silence, allowing Dwight to think. He was having trouble putting his thoughts in order, but eventually he managed to do so. Now he saw, more clearly, the reason behind all the harassment, the smoke-screen of disinformation, the veiled threats from superior officers, the virtual destruction of Project Blue Book… the Air Force was protecting its own while pretending to be concerned with alien spacecraft.

Nevertheless, some nagging doubts remained, mostly to do with the extraordinary capabilities of the saucers reported. Dwight simply couldn't imagine that the Air Force had made such technological advances, not even in secret. Even for him, this was too much to deal with at the present time. It scared him to think of it.

In a roadside bar just outside Albuquerque, they settled into a dimly lit booth, both drinking large bourbons. When they were feeling more relaxed, Andy withdrew an air force folder from his briefcase, opened it, and squinted down through the gloom at the pages.

'These classified Air Force intelligence documents were leaked to me by a friend. I can't give you his name, but I can verify the authenticity of the documents.' Grinning, he raised his finger like a schoolteacher. 'Okay. Let's try presenting a case for the possibility of man-made flying saucers.' He dropped his raised finger onto the pages opened before him. 'Though it's not widely known, American intelligence has been interested in the possibility of man-made flying saucers for a long time. First indication of this is an old intelligence report - I have it right here in my file - stating that a patent for a so-called flying saucer with a circular fixed wing was taken out by an unnamed American citizen as early as March 22, 1932.'

'*Unnamed*,' Dwight emphasised, sighing with disappointment.

Andy smiled brightly, triumphantly. 'That unnamed citizen was probably Jonathan E. Caldwell. This would explain why, on August 19, 1949, at the height of the immediate post-war UFO flap, the Air Force Command of Baltimore called a press conference to announce that two different types of prototypes that might solve the mystery of the flying saucers had been found in an abandoned farm near Glen Burnie, Maryland. According to the Air Force spokesman, both machines had been designed and constructed before the war by Jonathan E.Caldwell, with the aid of a local mechanic, and one of the machines had actually been flown.'

'I have that on file as well,' Dwight said.

Andy ignored his disappointment. ‘The machines had been abandoned for years and were falling apart, but as they were a combination of airplane and helicopter, with round wings and contrarotating propellers, it was the belief of Air Force intelligence that in flight they’d have resembled flying saucers. So they could have been the prototypes of the more advanced UFOs seen in the skies over the past few years.’

‘Sorry,’ Dwight said. ‘That notion was squashed less than twenty-four hours later when, at another urgent press conference, a different Air Force spokesman announced that the Caldwell machines had absolutely no connection with the reported phenomena of flying saucers.’

‘Correct. But what the Air Force spokesman *didn’t* state is that Caldwell’s plane was a craft with a circular wing of the parasol type, or one raised above the fuselage like an umbrella. It was constructed in 1932 and tested the following year by Professor J. Owen Evans in a wind-tunnel in Los Angeles, then flown by the well known pilot, Jimmy Doolittle, displaying a top speed of 97 mph and a landing speed of 23 mph. In 1936, Caldwell produced a modified version of the prototype, but it crashed, killing the pilot, thus putting Caldwell out of business for good.’

‘All very interesting,’ Dwight said, ‘but you’re talking about a pretty crude aircraft.’

‘All early prototypes were pretty crude,’ Andy retorted. ‘Nevertheless, it’s clear from what I’ve picked up that US military intelligence continued to be anxious about the possibility of man-made flying saucers, particularly right after the war. They were, as you know, even more concerned because most of the saucer sightings in the US tended to cluster around key development stations such as atomic plants, guided missile areas, and your very own Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.’

Dwight grinned. ‘No argument there.’

Andy turned another page. ‘It’s also clear from remarks sprinkled liberally throughout these documents of the period that US intelligence findings seemed t o *exclude* extraterrestrial origin of the saucers. This in turn made them increasingly concerned with the possibility that the saucers were man-made.’ He looked up, nodding emphatically. ‘More intriguingly, although on the one hand they were concerned with Soviet advances in this field, they soon began suspecting that the saucers might be of US or Canadian origin.’

‘You think that’s possible?’

‘Yeah. As the Navy, Army and Air Force are always, and were then, in constant competition with one another, each would have been reluctant to inform the other of any secret projects in the pipeline. So even at the White Sands Proving Ground, used extensively by the Navy for their aeronautical and missile experiments, there are research projects so secret that even the CIA can’t learn about them - and given Navy interest in vertical-ascending aircraft, these could have included saucer-shaped aircraft.’

Dwight finished off his bourbon and called for two more. ‘I can tell you have something else prepared. So go on. Lay it on me.’

Andy waited until the waiter had brought their drinks and departed.

‘As far as I can tell, the first rumblings about Canadian flying saucer projects were made in a classified CIA memorandum dated August 18 last year - a year after the Spitzbergen flying saucer crash report. The CIA memorandum states: “According to recent reports from Toronto, a number of Canadian Air Force engineers are engaged in the construction of a ‘flying saucer’ to be used as a future weapon of war. The work of these engineers is being carried out in great secrecy at the A.V. Roe Company factories.” He looked up from his notes. ‘That report was correct - as were the widespread suspicions that the US Navy was conducting experiments on saucer-shaped, vertical-rising aircraft in secret hangars in the White Sands Proving Ground.’

Dwight gave a low whistle. ‘That could make sense,’ he said. ‘One belief widespread in intelligence circles is that the formation of the lights in the famous Lubbock sightings, and others, weren’t indicative of small glowing saucers, but of the many exhaust jets along the edge of a massive, boomerang-shaped aircraft, or advanced flying wing, that would, when viewed from certain angles, strongly resemble a flying saucer, or saucers.’

‘Good,’ Andy said, then went back to his leaked documents. ‘Evidence for United States’s involvement with disc-shaped aircraft projects surfaced with information about the US Navy’s Flying Flapjack, or Flying Pancake. Designed by Charles H. Zimmerman of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics and constructed in 1942 by the Chance-Vought Corporation, the Flying Flapjack, or V-173, was an experimental, vertical-rising, disc-shaped aircraft, a combination of helicopter and jet plane, powered by two 80hp engines and driven by twin propellers, with two fins, or stabilisers, on either side of its semi-circular, or pan-cake-shaped, configuration. Reportedly it had a maximum speed

of 400 to 500 miles per hour, could rise almost vertically, and could hover at thirty-five miles an hour. A later, more advanced model, the XF-5-U-1, utilised two Pratt and Whitney R-2000-7 engines of 1,600hp each and was reported to be about 105 feet in diameter and have jet nozzles - which strongly resembled the glowing windows seen on so many UFOs - arranged around its outer rim, just below the centre of gravity. It was built in three layers, the central layer being slightly larger than the other two. Since the saucer's velocity and manoeuvring abilities were controlled by the power and tilt of the variable-direction jet nozzles, there were no ailerons, rudders or other protruding surfaces. The material used was a metal alloy that had a dull, whitish colour.'

'In short,' Dwight said, 'a machine remarkably similar in appearance to those reported by so many UFO witnesses.'

'Exactly,' Andy said. 'Now do you remember the April 1950 edition of the *US News and World Report*?'

'Christ, now that I think of it, I do,' Dwight replied, feeling more excited every minute. 'Information about the Flying Flapjack was released to the public in that edition of the magazine!'

'Correct again, Dwight, and it touched off some interesting speculations. The first of these arose from the retrospective knowledge that the Navy had always expressed more interest in a vertical-rising airplane than the Air Force and had, up to 1950, spent *twice* as much money as the Air Force on secret guided missile research. Also, their top-secret missile-research bases were located in the White Sands Proving Ground, where the majority of military UFO sightings had occurred. Also, because they weren't involved officially in UFO investigations, they could conduct their own research in a secrecy unruffled by the attentions of the media and the public.'

'Right,' Dwight said, now genuinely excited. 'And according to the Project Grudge report for 1947, the UFOs viewed over Muroc AFB on July seven and eight of that year were oscillating objects that flew at remarkably low speed and had tactics unlike an ordinary airplane. Some witnesses, all trained Air Force personnel, observed two discs at an altitude of about 8,000 feet, both manoeuvring in tight circles with varying speeds - and oscillating. Also, just like the XF-5-U-1, both discs had two fins on the upper surface.'

'Go on,' Andy said, grinning with pleasure at what he had started.

'Well, another interesting point is that the measurements taken by Navy

commander R.B. McLaughlin and his team of Navy scientists of the UFO they'd tracked over the White Sands Proving Ground in 1949, two years after the Muroc sightings, corresponded closely, except for the speed, with the details of the original XF-5-U-1. It's also worth noting that initial reports of the extraordinarily high speeds recorded by McLaughlin turned out to be inaccurate and that later analysis of the data brought the speed much closer to that of an advanced jet-plane... or to the original expectations for the Flapjack.'

Nodding affirmatively, Andy, now as excited as Dwight, said, 'And the *US News and World Report* also pointed out that the Air Force had called off official inquiry into the UFO phenomenon the previous December, even in the face of overwhelming evidence that the saucers were real. This was seen by many as a clear indication that top Air Force officials actually *knew* what the saucers were and where they come from. Therefore, while still denying that the Air Force was involved, they were no longer concerned about the saucers. The article concludes: "Surface indications, then, point to research centres of the US Navy's vast guided-missile project as the scene of present flying-saucer development.""

'In other words, the White Sands Proving Ground and other secret locations right here in New Mexico.'

'Ding, dong! First prize!'

'So what happened to the Flying Flapjack?'

Andy glanced at his leaked documents. 'The production prototype of the Flapjack was due for a test-flight at Muroc AFB in 1947 - when the first flying-saucer sightings over that same base and at Rogers Dry Lake, adjacent to Muroc, were recorded. Whether such test flights were actually carried out has never been confirmed or denied by the US Navy. The only official statements given were to the effect that work on the Flying Flapjack ceased the following year... - but US involvement with saucer-shaped aircraft didn't end with that prototype.'

Andy had a sip of bourbon and lit a cigarette. After blowing a couple of smoke rings and watching them disappearing, he said, 'At this point it's worth reminding you of certain facts taken from your own Project Blue Book reports.'

'Always reliable!' Dwight quipped.

'Of course,' Andy responded, then turned serious again as he lowered his eyes to his notes. 'In the reports that started the modern UFO scare - the Harold Dahl and Kenneth Arnold sightings of June 1947 - both men observed the UFOs in the vicinity of Mount Rainier, the Cascades, in the state of Washington - which divides Oregon and Canada - and both stated independently that the

UFOs flew away in the direction of the Canadian border.'

'That's right - towards Canada.'

Andy nodded. 'Shortly after, during the first week in July, there were numerous reports of unidentified, luminous bodies in the skies over the Province of Quebec, Oregon, and New England. The next major UFO flap was the so-called invasion of Washington DC in 1952; and while the official flap started on July 19, there was a record, dated June 17, of several hundred unidentified, red spheres that flew at supersonic speeds over the Canadian Air Base of North Bay in Ontario and then crossed over some of the southeastern states. Finally, nearly all of the subsequent Washington DC UFOs were reported as flying away in a northerly direction; and when they returned, en masse, on July 26, their disappearance in a general northerly direction - towards the Canadian border - also applied.' He looked up from his notes. 'Given this, it's a matter of particular interest that on February 11 last year the Toronto *Star* reported that a new flying saucer was being developed at the AVRO-Canada plant in Malton, Ontario.'

Dwight gave another low whistle, then said, 'Christ, how did I miss that?'

'Because your research teams were only looking for UFO reports - not reports about official, saucer-shaped, experimental aircraft.' Andy puffed another cloud of smoke and looked back at his Air Force folder. 'Of course the US and Canadian governments both denied involvement in any such projects, but on February 16, after freelance photographer Jack Judges had taken an aerial photograph of a flying saucer resting outdoors in the Avro-Canada plant in Malton, the Minister for Defence Production, C. D. Howe, admitted to the Canadian House of Commons that AVRO-Canada was working on a mock-up model of a flying saucer, capable of ascending vertically and flying at 1500 miles per hour. By February 27, Crawford Gordon Jr., the president of AVRO-Canada, was writing in the company's house journal, *Avro News*, that the prototype being built was so revolutionary it would make all other forms of supersonic aircraft obsolete. That aircraft was called the "Avrocar".'

'Shit,' Dwight muttered. '*Now* I remember it!'

'I bet you do.' Andy was amused, but instantly went back to his leaked documents. 'Soon the Toronto *Star* was claiming that Britain's Field Marshal Montgomery had become one of the few people to view Avro's mock-up of the flying saucer. A few days later, Air Vice Marshal D. M. Smith was reported to have said that what Field Marshal Montgomery had seen were the preliminary construction plans for a gyroscopic fighter whose gas turbine would revolve

around the pilot, positioned at the centre of the disc. Confirmation that the craft actually existed came via last year's April issue of the *Royal Air Force Flying Review*, which contained a two-page report on the Avrocar - also dubbed the "Omega" - including some speculative sectional diagrams. According to this report, the building of a prototype hadn't yet commenced, but a wooden mock-up had been constructed behind a closely guarded experimental hangar in the company's Malton plant, near Ontario. The aircraft described had a near-circular shape, measuring approximately forty feet across, and was being designed to attain speeds of the order of 1,500 mph - more than twice that of the latest swept-wing fighters. It would be capable of effecting 180-degree turns in flight without changing altitude.'

'Just like a real flying saucer.'

'Exactly,' Andy said. 'And last November, Canadian newspapers were reporting that a mock-up of the Avrocar, or Omega, had been shown on October 31 to a group of twenty-five American military officers and scientists. To date, nothing else has been reported by the press, but according to these leaked intelligence documents, the US Air Force, concerned at Soviet progress in aeronautics, has allocated an unspecified sum of money to the Canadian government for the building of a prototype of their flying saucer. The machine's been designed by the English aeronautical engineer, John Frost, who once worked for AVRO-Canada in Malton, Ontario, and it'll be capable of either hovering virtually motionless in mid-air or flying at a speed of nearly 2,000 miles an hour.'

Dwight gave another low whistle.

'Last but not least,' Andy continued, 'according to these documents, the government's hoping to form entire squadrons of AVRO-Canada's flying saucers for the defence of Alaska and the far regions of the North - because they require no runways, are capable of rising vertically, and are ideal for subarctic and polar regions.'

Realising that he had been conned all along by his superiors, who wished to protect their own flying-saucer projects, Dwight filled up with rage. With that came the urge for revenge against those who had wronged him.

'All we need is solid proof,' he said.

'I've got that as well,' Andy responded, grinning like a kid as he withdrew a brown envelope from his Air Force folder. 'When that thing landed last night, I took a photo of it. Naturally, I'm going to keep the negative, but the photo's for

you. With my compliments, Dwight.'

Dwight took the photograph and examined it. His heart started racing when he saw the slightly unfocused photo of a flying saucer hovering just above the fence of Cannon AFB, gleaming in the light from the arc lamps forming a circle around it. His hand started shaking as he took in what he was seeing, but eventually, with his heart still racing too quickly, he slipped the photo back into the envelope and put it into his briefcase.

'Thanks a million,' he said. 'I don't know how to thank – '

'My pleasure,' Andy interjected. 'Now I've got to get home. Back to Cannon AFB, where you're no longer welcome. I'll keep my eyes and ears peeled.'

'Please do that,' Dwight said.

They left the bar together, shook hands on the sidewalk, then walked off in opposite directions. Andy clambered into his car while Dwight caught a cab.

He checked into a motel located near the airport, went straight to his room with a half-pint of bourbon, drank some of it while endlessly studying that photo of the man-made flying saucer, then lay down and fell into a dream-haunted sleep.

Dwight was dreaming of flying saucers that glowed magically in the night and, though serenely beautiful, filled him with fear. That fear deepened as a dazzling silvery-white light filled his vision, gradually surrounded him, and then, in an inexplicable manner, pressed in upon him.

The light seemed almost physical.

At first he thought the light was part of his dream, filling up an alien sky, but then he opened his eyes and realised it was real enough: a brilliant, flickering light that was beaming in through the window of the motel room to dazzle him and, in its oddly physical way, tighten his skull and fill it with pain.

Even as he was rubbing the sleep from his eyes, trying to adjust to the unusual, blinding light and the increasing pain in his head, he heard a bass humming sound, almost an infrasound, and felt the bed vibrating beneath him.

Fully aware that this wasn't normal and deeply frightened by it, he was trying to gather his senses together when the room door burst open and two men, both dressed in black coveralls, entered and rapidly approached the bed.

Dwight attempted to sit upright, but before he could do so, one of the men pressed something hard and metallic against the side of his neck. He felt an electric charge course through him, like being struck with a hammer, then he went numb from neck to toe.

Terrified, unable to move a muscle, he could only look on as one of the men picked the manila envelope off the bedside cabinet, tugged the UFO photo out, examined it briefly, then nodded at the second man. The latter leaned over the bed to stare at Dwight with cold, almost inhuman eyes.

'Stop pursuing us,' he said. 'It will only bring you grief. Not only for you, but for your family. You've been warned. *Auf Weidersehen*.'

The two men left the room, closing the door behind them, leaving Dwight propped up on the bed, completely paralysed and terrified.

That strange light still filled the room, pulsating, flickering, and at times he thought it might be a line of lights forming the whole. Accompanying the lights was the infrasound - something felt, rather than heard - and Dwight felt it pressing around him, relentlessly tightening his skull, almost making him black out with pain.

He remained conscious, however, tormented by what was happening. The sweat poured down his face, the visible results of his racing heart, and he felt the panic welling up inside him as he frantically tried to move.

Now his terror was absolute, engendered by the paralysis, and he had visions of the horror of Beth and Nichola should they find him like this. The panic ballooned into mindlessness, stripping his senses bare. He was just about to tip into madness when the pressure of the infrasound decreased and feeling returned to him.

First a tingling in his toes, then warmth in his fingers. He bent an elbow, then a knee, as the brilliant, flickering light outside the window appeared to rise slightly, deliberately, swaying slightly from side to side.

The pressure of the infrasound decreased and finally went away altogether.

Dwight bent and stretched his legs. He flexed his fingers and raised his arms. The dazzling light outside ascended to the top of the window-frame, hovered there for a moment, flared up briefly and then suddenly blinked out.

Dwight knew then that it was actually a line of smaller lights blinking out one after the other, but at very great speed, giving the appearance of one great light popping out.

Darkness rushed back into the room and the sky reappeared outside.

Dwight took a deep breath. He was trembling like a leaf. Sweating profusely, with his heart still racing dangerously, he glanced at the bedside cabinet to confirm that the men in black had actually been here.

The UFO photo was gone.

The men in black had been real, too.

Still in a state of shock, Dwight slid out of bed, hurried across to the window, opened it and looked up at the sky.

There were lots of stars up there. Look too long and they seemed to move. Dwight looked a long time and thought he saw one moving - that big one, almost directly above - but he couldn't be sure. He kept scanning the sky, looking for something unusual, but saw only the glittering lights of that sea of stars in the infinite darkness.

Shivering, though still sweating, trying to still his racing heart, he walked back to the bed, picked up the bottle of bourbon and drank too much of it too quickly.

Now, with his nerve cracking, fearful for Beth and Nichola as well as for himself, he was determined to leave the air force for good and put all this behind him.

It was best to be silent.

Part Two

Chapter Twenty-Three

'I think you all know why we're here,' President Eisenhower said. 'Yesterday, at Cape Canaveral, Florida, Project Vanguard's first rocket, which the American people had been led to expect would put up the first earth satellite in history, blew up on its launching pad. I want to know why.'

Richard Horner, assistant secretary of the Air Force for research and development, coughed nervously into his fist, glanced at the other men in the Oval Room in the White House, then said, 'We still haven't ascertained the exact cause of the explosion, but according to Mr Fuller, here, Wilson was responsible.'

Eisenhower was standing beside his vice-president, Richard Nixon, framed by the window overlooking the Rose Garden and hazed slightly in the incoming morning sunlight. Both men, Fuller knew, were fully aware of the political seesaw arrangement with Wilson. The 34th President of the United States stared directly at him.

'That's correct, Mr President.' Fuller was unfazed by Eisenhower's stern look, which struck him as being that of a bachelor schoolteacher, rather than that of the most powerful man in the country. While admiring Eisenhower as a West Point graduate, renowned World War II military commander, supreme commander of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation, or NATO, and active anticommunist, Fuller viewed his support of desegregation and the Civil Rights Act as unhealthy manifestations of liberal soft thinking. Nor was he keen on Eisenhower's vice-president, Richard Nixon, whose support for the sleazy Senator Joe McCarthy and his self-serving witch-hunts had gained even decent anti-Communists, such as Fuller, a bad name. 'Wilson phoned me an hour before countdown to say the explosion would occur and he's arranged it as a warning that we were making progress too quickly for his liking.'

'Maybe he's displeased with our plans for the creation of a National Aeronautics and Space Administration,' said Major General Joe Kelly of the

Air Force Legislative Liaison, or SAFLL.

'He's not,' Fuller informed him. 'That's the first thing I thought of, but Wilson wasn't concerned about NASA. He's annoyed by what he described as our increasingly naked desperation to beat the Russians into space.'

'So he arranged the explosion on Project Vanguard's first rocket,' Eisenhower said, displaying anger for the first time.

'Yes, Mr President,' Fuller said. 'Of course, as soon as he'd phoned me, I passed the warning on to the launch team. A last-minute check on the rocket showed no faults at all, so it was decided that Wilson was bluffing and that the launching should continue. Then the rocket blew up – just as Wilson had said it would.'

'So how did he manage it?' asked Major General Arno H. Luehman, director of information services.

'With some kind of explosive device,' Fuller replied, shrugging.

'We can all assume that, Mr Fuller,' Nixon said disdainfully. 'What we want to know is how he got it on board.'

'It had to be one of our men,' Richard Horner admitted. 'But with so many working on the project – and nothing found in the debris that relates to any known explosive devices – we're having great difficulty in finding out who it was or how it was done.'

'But we do at least know that Wilson has one, or even more, of his men planted in our rocket research teams.'

'It certainly looks that way, Mr President.'

'Either he has some planted in our rocket research teams,' Fuller corrected him, 'or he used some kind of remote-controlled device. Whether one or the other, he proved his point... He's way ahead of us and we're still at his mercy.'

That statement led to a brief, uneasy silence and the rising anger of Vice-president Nixon. 'It's a public humiliation,' he said. 'Made even more obvious by the fact that it was the Russians, and not us, who inaugurated the space age with their recent launching of the first man-made satellite, *Sputnik 1*.'

'That's old news already,' Fuller responded, enjoying needling Nixon. 'Last month, they sent up that dog, Laika, which orbited Earth in a second Russian satellite, six times heavier than the first.'

'Right,' General Kelly said. 'And that *Sputnik* is also equipped to measure

cosmic rays and other conditions in space, a good one thousand miles above Earth.'

'That damned dog,' Major General Luehman said bitterly, 'is being tested for its response to prolonged weightlessness, so it's a precursor to future manned spaceflights.'

'They beat us into space,' Nixon said angrily, 'and now this Wilson has deliberately emphasised our humiliation and set the space programme back again. I thought we had a deal with that man!'

'We do,' Fuller said, 'but it's a seesaw arrangement. We give him a little, he gives us a little back, but whenever he thinks we've stepped out of line, he also gives us a warning.'

'Like the explosion on our Project Vanguard rocket,' Eisenhower said.

'Right, Mr President. We're only allowed to advance *behind* his technology. If he thinks we're coming close to catching up with him, he pulls these little stunts – and he's very good at it.'

'So we've learnt to our cost – as have others. I believe he was also responsible for the crash of the British Airways Viscount in March this year, for the fire in the Windscale atomic works in Cumberland in October – '

'The Windscale piles are used to make plutonium for military purposes,' Richard Horner interjected.

'Exactly,' Eisenhower said. 'He's also suspected of being responsible for the death of that Royal Navy Commander, Lionel Crabb, found headless in the sea near Chichester Harbour, England, in June this year. That was shortly after Crabb was accused of engaging in espionage activities against the Russians. There are even reports that he might have been responsible for exposing the spying activities of Burgess and McLean in 1955, in order to sour East-West relationships.'

'He doesn't like it when we talk to one another,' Fuller explained. 'He prefers us to be in conflict. We're convinced that this deal he has with us he also has with the British and the Russians. He's one real smart cookie. As for causing a little accident each time we advance too quickly for his liking – I believe the Brits and Russians have also had disasters caused by him – we'll just have to be more careful about what we're doing in our research establishments, particularly those in the White Sands Proving Ground.'

'You mean our own flying saucers,' Nixon said.

'Correct. However, it's even more important that we continue to keep

hidden the fact that the flying saucers most often seen, and also known to abduct people and animals, are in fact man-made by a highly advanced foreign power – which Wilson can now rightfully be called. If the public finds out about Wilson's flying saucers and Antarctic colony, we'll have mass hysteria to contend with.'

'I agree,' Richard Horner said. 'We must continue, as a means of disinformation, to encourage a widespread belief in the possibility of extraterrestrials. It's vital that we prevent the general public from learning that we're being threatened by a totalitarian regime using mind-control, laser-beam technology, and other highly advanced weapons and forms of parapsychological warfare. That knowledge would be more terrifying than the revelation that the saucers have an extraterrestrial source. Distance lends enchantment. The reality of the Antarctic colony could give the populace nightmares.'

'Unfortunately,' said Major General Luehman, director of information services, 'stopping speculations about UFOs won't be easy, as there have been more reports this year than any other.'

Fuller knew what he meant. In 1956, the ATIC had recorded 670 sightings, but this year, 1957, that figure had risen to over 1,000, with a gradual increase throughout the year, reaching a peak of over 500 for November alone. Remarkably, in this second week of December, those figures were continuing to climb, making this the biggest year for UFO sightings since 1952.

The sightings, Fuller knew, were due to a combination of Wilson's saucers, secret Air Force and Navy saucers, and wishful thinking, or mass hysteria, caused by the launching of the second Russian *Sputnik*. Nevertheless, their crucial factor was that Wilson was now flying more saucers than ever and doing it with impunity. In fact, Wilson controlled the skies.

'UFO speculation won't be lessened,' Major Kelly said, 'by the forthcoming Congressional hearings, brought about by relentless pressure from that former Air Force major, Donald Keyhoe, and his civilian UFO group, the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena. The problem of handling the hearings and answering Congressional enquiries about the UFO programme has fallen to us at SAFLL. So far, by using *Special Reader Report Number 14* for our information, we've been able to insist that there's a total lack of evidence for anything unusual in the skies.

However, I don't know how long we can support that claim if we're forced into open hearings on the matter.'

'Congressional hearings on flying saucers!' Richard Nixon exclaimed, aghast. 'I can't believe what I'm hearing!'

Turning to his assistant secretary of the Air Force for research and development, Eisenhower asked, 'Can you help?'

Horner nodded emphatically. 'I've already told subcommittee chairman Donald O'Donnell that hearings aren't in the best interests of the Air Force. He's trying to get the subcommittee to drop the issue, but it's early days yet. Meanwhile, I'll keep stonewalling Keyhoe and the NICAP.'

'Anyway,' Major Kelly said, 'if we *are* forced into Congressional hearings, we'll simply use the subcommittee as another tool of disinformation.'

'Very good,' Nixon said, flicking beads of sweat from his upper lip and looking as shifty as always.

'Meanwhile,' said Major General Luehman, 'my department is continuing the education of the public with the use of psychologists specialising in mass psychology. We're also using military training film companies, commercial film and TV productions, such as Walt Disney Productions, and popular radio and TV personalities, including Arthur Godfrey, to put over whatever we deem fitting. We're also continuing to disseminate negative literature about the civilian UFO organisations, including Keyhoe's NICAP and Dr Frederick Epstein's Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute, based right here in Washington DC. Last but by no means least, we legally harass them on the slightest pretext. Similar treatment is being meted out to Air Force pilots and commercial airline pilots reporting UFO sightings.'

'Terrific!' That was Nixon.

'It all seems so sordid,' Eisenhower said, looking uneasy.

'But necessary,' Fuller insisted, amused when Nixon smiled encouragingly at him. 'We have to gradually kill off public talk about UFOs and trust that it then becomes a forgotten subject.'

'What about Project Blue Book?' Nixon asked. 'That damned project has done more to stimulate interest in UFOs than any other branch of the services.'

'It's now well under control,' Fuller said. 'Blue Book's been run down and is now under the supervision of the 1006th Intelligence Service Squadron,

which knows practically nothing about UFO investigations. As for the vastly more experienced Captains Ruppelt and Randall, both have been pressured into leaving the Air Force for good, ensuring that the UFO projects, our own and Wilson's, won't be discovered by either of them, accidentally or otherwise.'

'Let's hope they're not discovered by someone else,' President Eisenhower said. 'Gentlemen, thank you.'

Fuller was first to leave the Oval Room, pleased by what he had heard there.

You simply couldn't trust anyone.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Dwight was drunk again. He was in that state a lot these days, but it was always even worse at Christmas, which reminded him of the family that he'd lost after leaving the Air Force. Now, sitting at the dining table in his untidy clapboard house, by the window overlooking the rusty pumps of the gas station located on a desolate stretch of road just outside Dayton, Ohio, he was listening to the Christmas carols being sung on the radio, sipping from a dangerously large glass of bourbon, and staring out at the dark, dust-covered road.

He was really surprised when a battered Ford pulled up and Beth stepped out.

'Oh, Christ!' he whispered involuntarily, talking to himself, caught between pleasure and embarrassment that she should find him like this. Sipping more bourbon, trying to calm his agitation, he studied her as she closed the door of the car, smoothed down her hair, then glanced nervously across the yard at the house.

Dwight slipped a little sideways, to ensure that she couldn't see him, then watched her advancing up the path to the front door. Wearing a tightly belted overcoat and high heels, she looked as trim and attractive as always. When she reached the front door, vanishing from his view, a lump came to his throat. Then the doorbell rang.

Twitching as if whipped, Dwight was about to hide his bottle of bourbon, but realising instantly that he would not get through this meeting without a drink, he just shrugged, had another sip, then went to the door, carrying his still half-full glass. He took a deep breath, opened the door, and looked straight into his wife's girlish, solemn face. She seemed as embarrassed as he felt, but she gave him a nervous smile.

'Well, well,' Dwight said, 'what a surprise! Long time, no see.'

'Yes, Dwight, a long time.' The winter wind was howling across her, beating at her, making her seem touchingly fragile against the nocturnal sky.

‘Are you going to keep me standing out here all night or can I come in?’

‘Oh, sure, Beth, I’m sorry.’ He stepped aside to let her enter. When she brushed past him, the brief touch of her body sent a shock coursing through him. He closed the door and followed her into the living room. She was studying the awful untidiness, which embarrassed him even more. ‘I guess I’m not too good at housekeeping,’ he said. ‘And the gas station keeps me pretty busy.’

Beth stared at the glass in his hand. ‘That as well, so I’ve heard.’

‘Yeah,’ Dwight said, ‘that as well.’ He defiantly finished off his drink, then topped up the glass. ‘You want one?’

‘Why not? Just a small one. Let’s share a Christmas drink together. Can I sit in this chair?’

‘Sure, Beth. Anywhere.’

He poured her a drink as she unbuttoned her overcoat, letting it hang open, then took the easy chair near the fire. She was wearing a white sheath dress that showed off her fine figure, and when she crossed her long, shapely legs, Dwight wanted to stroke them. Instead, he handed her the drink and took the chair facing her. They raised their glasses in a toast, drank some bourbon, then gazed at one another in silence.

‘Who told you I was drinking?’ Dwight asked eventually, wanting to get the subject over and done with.

Beth shrugged. ‘It’s all over town. At least among our mutual friends. You’ve been seen and heard, Dwight.’

He grinned, though he didn’t feel good. ‘Yeah, I reckon I have. It’s surprising how these things get a hold. I’m not cut out for a bachelor’s life.’

‘It’s been three years, Dwight. I hear you don’t even have a girlfriend.’

‘We didn’t separate because of that, Beth. I don’t need a girlfriend.’

‘Just the bottle.’

‘That’s right, Beth. You’ve got it. It deadens all needs.’

‘And all fears, as well.’

‘Those, too, I guess.’

He soothed those fears now by having another sip of bourbon, then he held the glass unsteadily in his lap and studied his wife. He had seen her only occasionally since their separation, usually when visiting Nichola, but it seemed like he hadn’t seen her for years, and her presence consumed him.

‘You should never have left the Air Force,’ she said. ‘You *needed* the Air

Force.'

'Obviously, the Air Force didn't need me,' Dwight responded, unable to conceal his bitterness. 'You refused to accept it, Beth, but I *had* to get out. They pressured me until I had no choice. That's how they stick it to all of us.'

He meant the officers investigating UFOs. First, Flight Officer Harris of the Roswell Army Air Base, then Captain Ruppelt of the ATIC, then himself. All had been forced to leave the Air Force after receiving too much pressure from above, usually in the form of blocked UFO investigations, unwarranted criticism, midnight interrogations by intelligence officers, unwelcome transfers to bleak spots like Alaska, and even visits from the mysterious 'men in black'. In the end, you simply couldn't take it any more and just wanted out.

'Yes,' Beth said, 'I have to admit that's true. Did you hear about Captain Ruppelt?'

'Yep. After leaving the Air Force, he wrote a book, *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, claiming that the UFOs were real, solid objects. I read it. It was good.'

Beth nodded. 'But have you heard the latest? Ruppelt's done an abrupt about-face. Later this year he's bringing out a new edition of his book, recanting on his former beliefs and insisting that the UFOs aren't real at all.'

'I've heard that,' Dwight said. 'I've also heard that he's not in good health. That isn't uncommon either. Just look at me, Beth!'

She ignored the sour joke, instead glancing around the untidy room. Her look of distaste reminded Dwight of his past three years as a bachelor, mostly spent in a fog of alcohol, filled with too many fears and nightmares. It was the drinking, he knew, that had led to the separation. In resigning his commission and leaving the Air Force, he had only given impetus to the break that had clearly been coming. It was hard to recall it clearly now, but he *did* remember the fear. It was the fear that had led to his drinking, as well as his nightmares. He had once loved the Air Force, lived for it, was proud of it, but when he became involved with Project Blue Book, the Air Force had turned against him, blocking him, chastising him, eventually humiliating him, until his life became a living nightmare from which there was no escape.

All of that had come to a head shortly after his visit to Cannon AFB, when he'd had his terrifying experience with the men in black in that motel room outside Albuquerque, New Mexico. That event, more than anything else, had

set the seal on his constant dread.

He had started dreaming about flying saucers, alien entities, men in black, and eventually, as his friends in the ATIC were attacked one after the other – transferred, demoted, charged with spurious offences, haunted by anonymous phone calls – he had become increasingly isolated and then started cracking up. The heavy drinking soon started, leading to many fights with Beth, and when he told her he was resigning his commission, that was the last straw. They hadn't actually divorced, but merely separated, with Beth taking an apartment close to her parents in Dayton, moving in with a deeply upset Nichola. Shortly after that move, Dwight left the Air Force, took this job as a gas station attendant, which included the use of this broken-down house, and embarked on the worst three years of his life, trying to deaden his fear and shame with regular drinking. It pained him just to recall it.

'Anyway,' he said, 'I don't think you came here, after all this time, just to tell me about Captain Ruppelt.'

'No, Dwight, I didn't.'

'So what is it? Sounds like something serious. You think it's time for a divorce, is that it?'

'Why, would you give me one?'

'I wouldn't want to, if that's what you mean.'

'Why not? Because you still love me?'

'As a matter of fact, Beth, that's exactly it. That's the pitiful truth of the matter. Maybe that's why I'm drinking. I can't get you out of my mind, no matter how hard I try. And believe me, I've tried hard. As for Nichola, not having her around is a night-and-day torment. God, I miss her. I really do.'

Beth blushed, lowered her head, sipped some of her drink, and then looked up again.

'I still love you, too, Dwight. I really do. It's because I loved you so much that I couldn't bear to watch you destroying yourself. That's why we separated, Dwight. There was no other reason.'

'I know that. But it's been three years, Beth. So why are you here?'

'Because I still love you. Because Nichola loves you. Because I miss you, but Nichola misses you even more and needs you as well. Every year, for the past three years, she's begged me to bring you back for Christmas. I refused her the first two years; I couldn't refuse her a third time. Also, I think it's time, Dwight. I think you should at least spend Christmas with us and see

what it's like. For me. For Nichola. Most of all, for yourself. Just Christmas to start with, that's all. What do you say?'

Dwight's instinct was to refuse because, in truth, he felt scared. He was frightened of being with them, of resurrecting buried feelings, but the very thought of being home released those emotions and brought a lump to his throat. He was also moved by Beth's presence, still loving her, wanting her, and though feeling awkward with her, embarrassed by his condition, he was moved by a desperate yearning to get back what he had lost.

'My pleasure,' he said.

During the drive to Beth's apartment near Carillon Park in Dayton, Dwight was increasingly nervous, but the instant Nichola threw herself into his arms, his problems were over. Now twelve years old, with an oval face and long dark hair, Nichola shared her mother's natural grace and beauty. After a light supper and long talk with his daughter – during which he lied blatantly about the joys of his job at the gas station and then discussed Nichola's progress at school – Dwight retired to the bed in the spare room. There, for the first time in months, he had a sleep undisturbed by dreadful nightmares.

The next morning, Christmas Day, they were joined by Beth's parents, Joe and Glenda McGinnis, whose customary good humour removed the last of Dwight's discomfort at being back temporarily with his wife and child. Thoughtful as always, Beth had made Dwight sign the labels on some of the presents she had bought for Nichola, and when Dwight saw the delight on his daughter's face, he was deeply moved. Later, when he received his own presents, some from Beth, some from Nichola, he had to turn away in order to hide his brimming tears; though he practically broke down when Beth kissed him lightly, tentatively, on the lips.

'God, Beth!' was all he could murmur, trying to catch his breath.

They shared a fine Christmas dinner, drank far too much, revived themselves with an afternoon walk through the park, then passed the rest of the afternoon in front of the TV set, which showed snow in many parts of the country while Bing Crosby, appropriately, sang 'White Christmas'. By the early evening, after Beth's parents had left, Dwight was in a mellow mood, perhaps dangerously sentimental, and had to wipe tears from his eyes a second time when he tucked Nichola into her bed and returned to the living-room.

‘God, I miss her,’ he said.

‘And me, too, I hope,’ Beth retorted. She was stretched out on the sofa, wearing slacks and a loose sweater, holding a glass of white wine in one hand, her gaze fixed on the TV.

‘Yeah, right,’ Dwight said, ‘you, too.’

He wanted to fall to his knees beside her, to thank her for bringing him home, even if just for Christmas, thus reminding him of what he had lost by giving in to his fears.

‘Beth…’ he began, about to pour out his heart... Then the front doorbell rang.

Beth glanced up, blushing guiltily, then swung her legs off the sofa and hurried past him, letting her hand slide over his shoulder, as if in encouragement.

‘I have a surprise visitor,’ she said. ‘I just hope you’ll be pleased.’

Though initially frustrated at the thought of this unexpected intrusion, Dwight was at first startled, then delighted, when Beth led former USAF Captain Bob Jackson into the living-room. Dwight hadn’t seen his old friend for three years, but Bob looked pretty much the same: still sleek-faced and sassy, if a little thicker around the waist. Wearing a plain grey suit with white shirt and tie, he was grinning from ear to ear and looking a lot healthier than the man who had been posted to Alaska just after Dwight had left the Air Force. He embraced Dwight, then vigorously shook his hand.

‘Hell, man,’ he said, ‘it’s good to see you. It’s been too long, buddy.’

Stepping away from each other, they both grinned in a kind of dumb disbelief, until Beth said, ‘Okay, you two, sit down and I’ll get you a drink.’

‘I’ve been drinking all day,’ Bob said, ‘so a beer will do fine. Christmas Day, don’t you know?’ He grinned at Dwight as he took a soft chair near the fire. ‘Had a good Christmas yourself, did you, Dwight?’

‘Terrific,’ Dwight replied, sitting on the sofa facing his old friend. 'My first Christmas with my family in three years.’

‘Yeah, I heard. I only got back from Washington DC yesterday and Beth told me when I called. She also said she was hoping to have you home for Christmas and told me to drop in. Said it might do you some good. Am I doing you good, Dwight?’

‘Feels just like old times, Bob.’ Beth handed Bob a beer, then joined Dwight on the sofa. He was still nursing a glass of white wine and letting it

last. ‘So obviously you know what happened to me. What happened to you?’

Bob sighed. ‘Life at the ATIC was hell after you left. They kept transferring me here and there, from one lousy place to another. Promotion was refused. I was repeatedly charged for petty infractions, so in the end I just got the hell out. Most of the others on Project Blue Book had similar experiences – just like you and Ruppelt.’

‘When did you resign your commission?’

‘Two years ago.’

‘So what have you been up to since then?’

‘Well, you know, Dwight, I just couldn’t forget this UFO business. Couldn’t get it out of my goddamned head. So after a couple of months just fooling around, including getting married to our former secretary, Thelma Wheeler – remember her?’ he asked, briefly changing the subject.

‘Hell, yes!’ Dwight responded, instantly recalling the sexy blonde WAC corporal from Huntsville, Alabama, with whom Bob had had a lengthy flirtation.

‘She was harassed as well,’ Bob continued. ‘Harassed until she couldn’t take it any more and packed it in, like me. Anyway, when we were married, we decided to get out of Dayton entirely, so I took a job as technical advisor for an aeronautical engineering company located in Greenbelt, Maryland. In truth, I was kind of a salesman, using my Air Force background to sell the merits of the company to the many military establishments in that area. The job was okay – it got me out and about a lot – but I still couldn’t shake off all those questions that Ruppelt had raised about the UFO phenomenon. They haunted me night and day. Finally, through one of my acquaintances, I was introduced to Dr Frederick Epstein, a former astronomer who’d become obsessed with UFOs and now heads the Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute, a civilian UFO organisation located in Washington DC.’

‘I know him,’ Dwight said. ‘I interviewed him way back in 1953, shortly after he’d formed the organisation.’

‘That’s right,’ Bob said. ‘He reminded me of that interview the first time we met. Anyway, I went to work as an investigator for the APII, initially on a part-time basis, then full time. And that’s what I do now.’

Beginning to understand that there was more to this meeting than a casual Christmas visit, Dwight glanced at Beth. She merely offered a slightly teasing smile, sipped her drink, then said, ‘Bob’s come to Dayton to carry out some

investigations on behalf of the APII. Until this evening, I hadn't seen him for three years either.'

'That's right,' Bob said. 'I'm here to investigate the growing claims that there's a storage facility in Wright-Patterson AFB for corpses found in crashed UFOs.'

'There was no such room when *we* were there,' Dwight said.

'No, but the base has changed a lot since we left and the ATIC was virtually dissolved. There are lots of restricted areas in Wright-Patterson – more now than ever before – and one of them *could* contain a top-secret storage facility for crashed UFO parts, or even dead crew members.'

'This whole business of alien corpses at Wright-Patterson is based on the notorious Aztec case of 1948,' Dwight reminded him. 'It all began with a book by one Frank Scully, a former Hollywood *Weekly Variety* columnist who alleged that a flying saucer crashed east of Aztec, New Mexico, in 1948, and was found virtually intact, with sixteen dead aliens, or UFOnauts, inside. According to Scully, the flying saucer was dismantled and the pieces, along with the remains of the sixteen aliens, were transported in secret to Muroc Dry Lake, now Edwards AFB, California, then on to a so-called top-secret Hangar 18 in Wright-Patterson. Scully also alleged that there'd been three other flying-saucer landings during the same period and that a total of thirty-four dead aliens had been found and were also being held at Wright-Patterson.'

'But having been at Wright-Patterson at the time, you didn't believe it.'

'Right,' Dwight said emphatically. 'Precious little substantiation could be found for Scully's claims. In fact, two years later, an investigative reporter, J. P. Cahn, revealed that Scully had received most of his dubious information from Silas Newton and a Dr Gee, later identified as Leo A. Gebauer. Both men were experienced confidence tricksters who'd been arrested that very year for trying to sell worthless war surplus equipment as oil detection devices. They probably based their whole story on the Roswell Incident of 1947, which we both know so well.'

Dwight certainly knew that case well and could still recall virtually every word of his conversations with Flight Intelligence Officer First Lieutenant William B. Harris, who had compiled the official report on the Socorro sighting. He also recalled that at the insistence of General Hoyt Vandenberg, then Deputy Chief of the Air Force, the three charred corpses and the debris

from the Socorro crash had been picked up by an intelligence team from the 509th Bomb Group and transported under strict secrecy to an unknown destination, though rumour had it as Carswell AFB, Fort Worth, Texas.

'If Scully based his Aztec landing on the Roswell Incident, at least he picked a damned good case,' Bob insisted. 'You and I both know that the crash at Roswell was a real one – just as real as some of the reported landings.'

'What landings?' Dwight asked, becoming interested despite himself.

'One of our leading test pilots, Gordon Cooper, has claimed that while at the Edwards Air Force Base Flight Test Centre in California last year – the same place where Scully's crashed flying saucer and its dead occupants were reportedly taken in 1948 – a team of photographers assigned by him to photograph the dry lakes near Edwards AFB spotted a strange-looking craft hovering just above the lake bed. Then the object descended slowly and sat on the lakebed for a few minutes. According to the photographers, it was at least the size of a vehicle that would carry normal people. They also insisted that it was a circular-shaped UFO that took off at a sharp angle and rapidly flew out of sight.'

'Naturally they took photos.'

'Yep.'

'So what happened to their film?'

'According to Cooper, it was forwarded to Washington DC for evaluation, but no report came back and the film never resurfaced.'

'No film, no evidence – the same old story.'

Bob was unfazed by Dwight's cynicism. 'Dr Epstein has shown me the certified statements of two USAF pilots, confirming that UFO landings took place at Cannon AFB, New Mexico, on May 18, 1954, at Dewed Nike Base on September 29, 1957. He also has CIA-censored reports on another two UFO landings that took place at Holloman AFB. You might be convinced about Cannon AFB, since it was your own experience there, in 1954, that finally encouraged you to get out of the Air Force.'

Shocked to be reminded of that fearsome experience, Dwight glanced at Beth and was rewarded with an encouraging smile. Sipping the last of his wine, he recalled his visit to the road outside Cannon AFB, New Mexico, where his friend, Captain Andrew Boyle, had given him a good description of

his personal sighting of the landing of a saucer-shaped craft outside a hangar in a restricted area of the base. After showing him the specific hangar, Boyle had given him a photograph of the UFO as proof.

Even more vivid and frightening than this recollection was the memory of how, when Dwight had been lying on his bed in the motel room, located on the outskirts of Albuquerque, a dazzling pulsating light had filled the room, a bass humming sound had almost split his head, and three men dressed in black coveralls had entered. One of them had temporarily paralysed Dwight with some kind of stun gun, another had whispered a warning in his ear, and the third had stolen his invaluable UFO photograph. Shortly after the men in black left the room, the pulsating light and head-splitting noise went away and feeling returned to Dwight's body. What was not to go away was the fear that subsequently drove him to the bottle and out of the Air Force for good.

He felt that fear now.

'Okay,' he said, 'you've got me on that one. What about the other two?'

Grinning, Bob said, 'The first one took place shortly before 8.00am on an unspecified day in September, 1956, when a domed, disc-shaped UFO landed about fifty yards from US 70, about twelve miles west of the base. The ignition systems and radios of passing cars went dead and the peak-hour commuter traffic backed up as amazed witnesses – including two Air Force colonels, two sergeants, and dozens of civilian Holloman AFB employees – watched the UFO for over ten minutes, until it took off with a low whirring sound. Shortly after its disappearance, word of the sighting flew from Holloman to Washington DC and the area was soon inundated with Air Force intelligence officers and CIA agents. Base employees who'd witnessed the sighting were sworn to secrecy and the Pentagon's evaluation team wired a report stating that the UFO wasn't any type of aircraft under development by the US or any foreign terrestrial power.'

Bob sipped some beer, then took a deep breath and let it out again. He was clearly enjoying this.

'Then, just this summer, a mechanic at Holloman AFB was working on a grounded Lockheed F-104 jet interceptor when he saw a disc-shaped object hovering silently over the tarmac. After watching the object retracting its ball-like landing gear, he called another mechanic and both of them watched the UFO take off vertically at great speed. During a subsequent interrogation, both men identified the craft type they had seen from a book of over three

hundred UFO photographs. They were then informed that personnel in the base control tower had observed the same object for two or three minutes. They were also warned not to discuss the sighting and made to sign a statement swearing them to secrecy.'

'Very persuasive,' Dwight said, impressed by Bob's enthusiasm and responding instinctively to it, feeling more alive than he had done for three years. 'But I still don't believe you'll find a Hangar 18 in Wright-Patterson AFB, let alone alien corpses or crashed UFO debris. What *did* you find there?'

Bob grinned like a Cheshire cat. 'According to my informant, all requests to Wright-Patterson AFB for information regarding Hangar 18 are routinely given the reply that it doesn't exist. But he insists that Wright-Patterson's top-security Area B contains a building numbered 18-A. Indeed, he said he's personally seen it, though he's never been allowed in. It's a building – not a hangar – with a tall wire fence around it. All of its windows have been knocked out and replaced with concrete.'

'Anything else?'

'Yes. He was adamant that similar storage facilities would be found in the White Sands Proving Ground, Los Alamos, New Mexico, and Carswell AFB, Fort Worth, Texas.'

Dwight involuntarily sat upright when he heard the last named. 'And we both know what was shipped to Carswell AFB, don't we?' he asked rhetorically.

Bob grinned. 'Sure do,' he said. 'The corpses and debris from the Roswell crash of 1947. Your eyes are gleaming old buddy.'

Dwight realised that he had been set up, probably for his own good. Glancing sideways at Beth, he saw her widening smile as she reached out to hold his hand and squeeze it. 'Bob called me,' she confessed, 'to find out what you were up to. When I told him – about you working in the gas station and drinking too much – he was as upset as me and insisted that we somehow get together to persuade you to help him in his work for the APII. I believe it's what you need, Dwight, to get you off the drink and give you something better to do than pumping gas. Please think about it.'

Dwight thought about it, feeling frightened, but wanting to do it, soothed by the warmth of Beth's fingers around his hand, revitalised by her presence.

'You won't have to move to Washington,' Bob explained. 'You can be our

Ohio stringer. Naturally you'll come and visit us occasionally, all expenses paid, but in general you'll remain here in Dayton. You'll be our eyes and ears here.'

'I don't get it,' Dwight said. 'As far as I recall, Dr Epstein believes the UFOs are of extraterrestrial origin.'

'He's pretty open-minded about it, but so far he hasn't come up with any more rational explanation.'

'You know what Andy Boyle told me during my visit to New Mexico,' Dwight said. 'He presented me with the possibility that the crashed or landing UFOs might have been man-made – known to, and protected by, our own military intelligence. Have you told Epstein that?'

'No, I haven't. I don't think the time is right. It's a possibility I'd like you to pursue, but on your own, not through the APII. If what Boyle says is true, it'd be too big – and possibly too dangerous – for the APII to deal with. We'll have to keep the lid on that, Dwight, until we're sure of our ground.'

'So I investigate general UFO cases for the APII while surreptitiously gathering information on man-made UFOs.'

'That's it, exactly. We keep the lid on the latter cases. They're between you and me, Dwight. In this regard, I've no guilt about using the facilities of the APII, since I'll be helping them with what you uncover in other areas. I need you, Dwight, and you need this work. So what do you say?'

Beth squeezed his hand again. 'Please do it, Dwight. It'll help you to find your way back. Your home's here, in this apartment, with Nichola and me, not in that damned gas station. Work with Bob, Dwight. *Come home*.'

'Yes,' Dwight said, already feeling renewed and excited. 'Yes, damn it, I'll do it!'

Grinning from ear to ear, Bob shook his hand again, even as Beth, her eyes brimming with tears, turned into his arms, where she had always belonged.

'Welcome aboard,' Bob said.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Rocking nervously in his rocking chair on the veranda of his log-house in the enlarged compound buried deep in the jungle near the Paraguay River, Ernst was feeling like an old man as he looked at the moonlit sky to observe the majestic descent of the biggest flying saucer he had seen so far. Though an awesome 350 feet wide, this transport craft was otherwise like the others: two immense, inverted plates that were rotating around the dome-shaped, gyroscopically stabilised central fuselage. Though not hindered by normal heat and drag, thus giving off no sonic booms or other noises, other than an almost physical infrasound, the saucer was creating violent currents of air that were making the grass and plants flutter wildly, noisily.

As usual, the native workers who lived in the shacks located around the inner edge of the compound were standing outside their modest homes, untouched by the precisely edged whirlpool of wind, looking up in awe and fear as the immense craft descended.

Also looking up, and clearly terrified, were the many captured Ache Indians being held like cattle in the big bamboo cages located near the shacks of the compound workers. These unfortunates, who had never seen an aeroplane, let alone such a gigantic flying saucer, started wailing and shaking the bamboo bars of their cages, wanting to break free and run away. They only quietened down when threatened by Ernst's armed *Federales* and *contrabandistas*. Those who failed to respond to threats were hammered by rifle butts until either they shut up or collapsed, unconscious, to the ground.

Gradually the great flying saucer, still descending, covered most of the compound. Its central dome was as high as the craft was wide, about the height of a three-storey building. The whitish glow of its electrically-charged, minutely porous magnesium orthosilicate, which was ionising the air surrounding it, darkened to a more normal metallic hue as it hovered just above ground level, rocking slightly from side to side. Just before touching down, its thick hydraulic legs emerged from six points around the base to

embed themselves deeply in the soft soil. The whole craft bounced gently on the legs, then settled down and was still. Its rotating wings gradually slowed and then stopped moving altogether, as did the wind that had been created by its electromagnetic gravity-damping system.

Still sitting in his rocking chair on the veranda, Ernst was deeply moved by the sight of the magnificent craft, though he also felt embittered at being condemned to this hellish jungle, rounding up Ache Indians instead of being involved in the great scientific achievements of the Antarctic colony. His feeling of loss was in no way eased by the knowledge that in truth he could never return to engineering, because it was now too far behind him and the technological advances of recent years had rendered his old engineering knowledge redundant. Trained as a military policeman by the SS, that's what he would now remain as: a hunter of men and prison warden for Wilson.

Ernst's bitterness was like acid in his stomach, almost making him retch.

With the outer rings of the saucer no longer rotating, the infrasound faded away and a panel in the concave base dropped down on hinged arms to form a ramp leading to the ground. Armed guards wearing black coveralls emerged to form a protective ring around the ramp, then Wilson appeared, wearing his customary black shirt and pants, followed by some short, nightmarish creatures who had a jerky mechanical gait and were, Ernst assumed, the first of the promised cyborgs.

Surrounded by his own bodyguards of heavily armed *Federales* and *contrabandistas*, Ernst went to greet his master.

This time, when Wilson shook his hand, Ernst was no longer surprised at how youthful he appeared to be. Though nearing ninety, Wilson looked like a healthy sixty-year-old, with a good head of silvery-grey hair and smooth skin on a handsome, though oddly inexpressive, face, dominated by unusually piercing, icy-blue eyes. Like his facial muscles, his movements were slightly stiff, reminding Ernst that he'd had numerous joint and organ replacements, as well as extensive plastic surgery.

This man, Ernst thought sourly, is a prototype of the creatures gathered around him. Steel-and-cobalt joints, artificial heart and grafted skin. He only *looks* normal.

Ernst shook Wilson's hand and murmured words of greeting while studying the nightmarish creatures spreading out behind him. He realised immediately that they were Ache Indians, which explained their short stature, but that now

they were part man, part machine. Their hideous appearance was caused by the fact that their jawbones and mouths had been replaced with metal masks, they were also wearing metal skullcaps, and some of them were dressed in tight, one-piece, silvery-grey coveralls of a material resembling Thai silk.

They looked, Ernst thought, like extraterrestrials: creatures out of a bad dream.

'Your first cyborgs,' he said.

'Yes,' Wilson replied.

'Can they speak?'

'Not yet, but they function otherwise.'

'Are they still human in any sense that we'd recognise?'

'They still possess fragments of their former memories and reasoning, but their thoughts and actions, even their emotions, can be remote-controlled by the electrodes implanted in their heads through those stereotaxic skullcaps.'

'The metal caps.'

'Correct.' Wilson glanced approvingly at the nearest cyborg, then tapped his knuckles against the metal plate covering the unfortunate creature's lower jaw and mouth. 'Deprived of speech by the lower-jaw prosthetic,' he explained, 'they communicate via the stereotaxic skullcaps, which act like miniature radio receivers, operated by thought-waves. As an interesting side effect, their inability to speak is gradually producing in them what appears to be a primitive form of mental telepathy, which may soon make even skullcap communication redundant. This is an unexpected, novel development that we must follow through.'

Ernst nodded, intrigued despite his instinctive revulsion. 'And the metal hands?'

'Myoelectric prosthetics, developed by our excellent Dr King, formerly of the Powered Limbs Unit of West Hendon Hospital, London, England. They're really miniature versions of what we intend developing in larger form for the exploration of the seabed, the surface of the moon and, eventually, the planets: remote-controlled CAMS, or Cybernetic Anthropomorphous Machine Systems, of the kind presently being developed by NASA for space exploration. Naturally, we're already well ahead of NASA – indeed, we give them our obsolete prosthetics and CAMS as part of our trade with the US – and we've installed larger versions of these remote-controlled, steel limbs as handling devices in this particular transport craft.

Come, let's have a drink on the veranda.'

'But how can they stand being like that?' Ernst asked, as he and Wilson turned towards the log-house. 'They're so inhuman. So... hideous.'

'I told you. The stereotaxic skullcaps control even their emotions, so they're programmed to forget everything that went before and to consider themselves perfectly normal. The skullcaps also direct the impulses from the brain to the severed limbs, thus controlling the movements of the myoelectric, prosthetic hands. As we direct those impulses via the stereotaxic skullcap, we can control everything they remember, desire, and fear, as well as their every physical action. I know they look like creatures from another world, but they're highly effective as totally obedient slaves and ruthless bodyguards. In the latter context, their dreadful appearance is actually helpful, because it frightens the average human being to the point of paralysis.'

'I was abducted by aliens,' Ernst said, quoting from a host of recent articles about UFOs and their so-called extraterrestrial occupants.

'Exactly,' Wilson said with a rare, slight display of amusement. 'It's just what we need.'

They returned to the veranda and took high-backed chairs on opposite sides of a bamboo table containing a tall bottle of iced white wine and two glasses. A bare-footed servant girl, Rosa, dark skin gleaming with beads of sweat, poured the wine, then stepped back into the shadows of the awning while Ernst and Wilson touched glasses.

'*Skol*!' Ernst said by way of a toast. After drinking, he wiped sweat from his forehead – how he loathed this constant heat! – then cast his gaze over the immense flying saucer, which practically filled the whole clearing and towered above him like a cathedral of pure, seamless steel. He then studied the nightmarish creatures, the cyborgs, forming a protective cordon just below him, facing his armed *Federales* and *contrabandistas*. His native workers, he noticed, were also staring at the cyborgs, their eyes wide with fearful fascination.

'They're merely prototypes,' Wilson explained, noting Ernst's interest. 'Soon they'll be even more advanced. As far as these cyborgs go, what you see is what they are: restructured breathing and digestive systems, implanted skulls and myoelectric hands. They're fed intravenously, which gives us yet another hold over them. However, in later models, to be used for long-term

undersea and space exploration, while the kidneys, lungs and original intestines will remain, they'll be strengthened and supported by a two-chamber pacemaker. Advanced prosthetic joint replacements have already been perfected – indeed, I have some myself – and will help defeat the rigours of the ocean bed and extended journeys through outer space. Soon, with our latest innovation – an electronic larynx – they'll be able to speak as well, though we'll reserve that privilege for the few, as we wish to encourage the evolution of mental telepathy in the speechless. As for the larger CAMS installed in this particular transport craft – watch!'

Wilson aimed a small, hand-held device at the front of the enormous saucer, then pressed a button. A bass humming sound emanated from the craft and the ramp leading from its base to the ground was pulled up automatically to form a sealed door. As soon as the door closed, another section of the base was lowered on hydraulic supports to form a much wider, brilliantly illuminated ramp between the interior of the saucer and the ground. Two smaller panels hidden in the otherwise seamless upper surface of the saucer then opened to emit beams of an even more dazzling light that converged on Ernst's jeep, parked close to the saucer's nearest edge. The beams of light flickered so rapidly, they hurt Ernst's eyes, but then, to his amazement, the parked jeep was pulled forward, as if the beams of lights were chains. When the jeep was about ten yards from the wide ramp, a CAM consisting of extendable arms and steel platform emerged from inside the saucer to pick up the vehicle and draw it up the ramp, into the saucer. When the jeep had vanished inside, the beams of light blinked out, the panels closed, and the ramp withdrew until the base of the saucer was sealed again.

'A form of magnetism created by powerful electrical forces in the laser beams drew the jeep towards the remote-controlled grips of the CAMS,' Wilson explained, 'allowing it to take hold of the vehicle and draw it up into the saucer. When the uninitiated find this happening to their own cars, they assume it's some kind of miracle – or the highly advanced paraphysical activity of extraterrestrials. As with the appearance of the cyborgs, their terror makes them easier to handle if we wish to abduct them. Do you want your jeep back?'

'Yes, please,' Ernst replied, suitably impressed.

Wilson pressed a button on his remote-control and the previous process was reversed, with the base of the saucer dropping down to form a ramp and the

CAM pushing the jeep out on its extending arms and steel platform, to deposit it back on the ground. Then the ramp was withdrawn back up into the saucer and again became a sealed door in the base.

'We've made even greater advances in our strobe-light and laser-beam technology,' Wilson said, speaking academically, without the slightest trace of pride in his voice – just doing his job. 'Now we're using wave-lengths and rhythmic patterns that temporarily freeze skeletal muscles or certain nerves, thus producing either paralysis or a trance-like condition. Observe!'

Some of the captured Ache Indians were still wailing in terror in the cages near the shacks of the compound workers. When Wilson activated his remote control, another small panel facing the cages opened in the sloping top-body of the saucer. A dazzling beam of light shot out, like a spotlight, and wandered across the clearing until it illuminated the cage from which most of the wailing was coming from. Once caught in the beam of light, the captured Indians became even more vocal in their panic, but when the beam of light started flickering on and off rapidly, like a strobe light, turning the clearing into a bizarre, slow-motion movie, the Indians caught in it not only fell silent but began collapsing and falling against each other, until eventually all of them were unconscious. When Wilson then turned off the flickering beam of light, the Indians regained consciousness, picking themselves up off the floor of the cage and glancing around them as if in a daze.

'As we learn more about the wave patterns of the brain,' Wilson explained, 'so we learn that most emotions – fear and anger, docility, even self-hatred – can be released by exposing the subject to the stimuli of strobe lights flickering in one of the four basic rhythmic patterns: alpha, beta, delta, and theta. In doing this, we can induce just about every kind of condition, from drowsiness, dizziness, mesmerism, or psychological paralysis, to epileptic or other violent seizures. Indeed, by combining strobe lights flickering in the alpha-rhythm range, between eight and twelve cycles per second, with infrasounds, we can cause an epileptic seizure in the human subject – as you can see. Recently we perfected this to the point where we can force a subject to turn against himself in the ultimate manner. Observe, Ernst.'

This time, when the beam of light shot out of the saucer and began flickering on and off at a blinding, disorientating rate, while making what was, to Ernst, a barely discernible, though oddly physical, sound, it picked out one of Ernst's compound workers. The man, wearing only a loin cloth

and with a machete strapped to his waist, initially stepped back, dazzled, and started covering his eyes with one hand. However, before his hand reached his forehead, it started trembling violently, as did his whole body, then he screamed, clasped his head in his hands, and fell to his knees.

Trembling even more violently, shaking his head from side to side as if in terrible pain, he collapsed to the ground, went into a fit, then managed to clamber back to his knees and remove the gleaming machete from his belt.

In the rapid flickering of the light, all his movements appeared to be in slow motion, as if in devilish pantomime – an illusion that rendered even more horrible what happened next.

Releasing another scream of anguish, the man shook his head violently again, then reversed the machete and rapidly slashed his own stomach open. Even as his entrails spilled out, he was hacking at himself again, repeatedly, dementedly, and kept doing so until he toppled sideways, to lie still in the flattened, blood-soaked grass.

Some friends, including a woman, possibly his wife, wailed in grief and fear, then bent down to examine the dead man as the flickering strobe light blinked out, returning the night to star-draped darkness.

Within seconds, Ernst's armed thugs were hammering the grieving people with the butts of their weapons, forcing them back, as another two *contrabandistas* picked up the dead man and carried him out of sight, to be buried, as Ernst knew, in the unmarked communal grave outside the compound. When the dead man's relatives and friends continued wailing in grief, Wilson again demonstrated the power of the strobe light by rendering them unconscious with it, after which they, too, were carried away.

Feeling nothing for the murdered man, Ernst was suitably impressed. Though increasingly resenting being kept in this hellhole, he still had a healthy respect for Wilson – and, indeed, practically worshipped him. He often despised himself for this reverence, but could not fight the feeling.

'Finally,' Wilson said, knowing exactly how to impress his disciple, 'look at this.'

Again aiming his remote control at the immense transport craft, he activated the opening of panels located at half-a-dozen different points, equidistant around the top body, below the level of the mushroom-shaped central dome. With a speed that startled even the expectant Ernst, silvery objects shot out of the openings and ascended to a height of about a hundred

feet, where they stopped abruptly and hovered in the air.

They looked just like the old World War II *Feuerballs*.

'They are,' Wilson confirmed, when Ernst had made this observation. 'They're highly advanced models based on the originals.'

'How highly advanced?'

'Though still only three to six feet in diameter, they have most of the capabilities of the larger saucers and are used for reconnaissance and as antiradar and sensing devices. As they can emit strobe lights and laser beams, they're also used as mesmerising or stunning devices, as well as to draw mechanical vehicles close enough to the mother ship to be within reach of the CAMS.'

'So they're used in abductions.'

'Correct,' Wilson said. With what seemed like a sigh of regret (though Ernst suspected that such an emotion would be alien to him) he returned the advanced *Feuerballs* to the transport craft and closed the panels. He then reopened the wide ramp at the bottom of the saucer and ordered the cyborgs to herd the imprisoned Ache Indians up into it. The cyborgs turned away without a word and walked in their oddly mechanical manner to the cages where, with the help of stun guns that clearly stung, rather than inducing unconsciousness, they began marching the hurt, terrified Indians towards the saucer's ramp.

'The infrasounds,' Wilson said, 'are so condensed that they can create physical pressure on the human brain and the body's organs, even bursting blood vessels in the head. Thus, they're useful as weapons, which is why we've incorporated them into the saucers. As for the stereotaxic skullcaps, we also plan to use them to hypnotise or otherwise control human beings by remote control. We'll abduct those we want, impregnate their heads with minute, remote-controlled electrodes, then return them to the world, to do our bidding as and when required. Eventually, in this way, we'll be able to enslave the world's most powerful men and women without resorting to war and with few aware that they're under our control. In other words, they'll become our brain-implanted robots – even those in the highest seats of government.' He offered a smile that failed to warm the Antarctic blue of his eyes. 'So how are you, Ernst? I must say, you look well.'

It was a lie and Ernst knew it, though he was wise enough not to argue. He had aged overnight towards the end of World War II, when his wife and two

children were killed in an air-raid on Berlin, making him realise that he had no one left but Wilson. At least he had aged in appearance – he had seen it in the mirror – though since coming to Paraguay he had aged in an even worse way: inside, in his spirit. Now his skin had a yellow pallor, his handsome features were wrinkled, and his body, though bone-thin, felt heavy and lifeless. As for his spirit, it was trickling out of him with each passing day, leaving nothing but the ghosts of old dreams that were long dead and buried. Ernst knew that he was paying for his sins and that hell was right here on Earth.

'I feel fine,' he lied, not yet having the courage to say otherwise. 'How are things in Antarctica?'

'Things run smoothly,' Wilson said. 'No problems so far. Our secret agreements with the Americans, British and Russians have ensured a constant supply of all the materials we require. As for general manpower and slave labour, we continue to replenish those lost through experimentation or natural causes by simply abducting more people and, of course, by supplementing them with your invaluable supply of Ache Indians. You're still having no trouble in obtaining them?'

'It's easier than it was. With General Stroessner now the President of Paraguay, we have total freedom of movement. The general always wants money.'

'Greed makes strong men weak, which is what we can utilise. The former war allies are greedy for our technology, which is why I can use them.'

'I sometimes worry,' Ernst said, 'that we'll give away too much.'

'You worry too much,' Wilson said.

'Do I? Please let me remind you that earlier this year Wernher von Braun's first satellite, *Explorer*, was launched successfully into space. Subsequent *Explorer* satellites made the first scientific discoveries of the space age by locating the radiation belt around Earth. In July, a US nuclear submarine, *Nautilus*, made a successful four-day journey under the ice of the North Pole. I should also point out that the past year has seen the discovery of electronic miniaturisation in the shape of the silicon chip; and that the British and the Americans are both presently involved in Zeta programmes designed to harness the power of the H-bomb. This represents an unprecedented speed of

advancement – and it's my belief that it was possible only through the West's access to our innovations, particularly those in the field of electronic miniaturisation, which will revolutionise every branch of technology.'

'I understand your concern,' Wilson said, 'but I think it's misplaced. We can only pass on what we've already surpassed, and each time they've tried to trick us, or planned to turn against us, we've easily scared them back into line with a display of our superior powers – as we did with the so-called UFO invasion of Washington DC in 1952 and when we arranged for the explosion in the US *Vanguard* rocket during its launch in December, 1957.'

'I'd *assumed* that was your doing,' Ernst said admiringly. 'How did you manage it?'

'We abducted one of the NASA engineers, flew him to the Antarctic base, implanted minute electrodes in his head, using a stereotaxic skullcap, then programmed him to forget his experience with us, while doing for us exactly what we wanted. He planted one of our explosive devices in the rocket – a device so minute, it leaves no traces after it's exploded. Naturally, the Americans never guessed who had done that – since they never thought to examine the heads of their engineers for electronic implants. So our brain-implanted slave is still there, at NASA, to do our bidding as and when required. The seesaw arrangement is working, Ernst, and we're in control of it. Now I have to be going.'

The abruptness was typical of Wilson. It was not a sign of rudeness, but of his impatience and inability to sit still and do nothing.

As Wilson pushed his chair back and stood upright, Ernst noticed that the last of the terrified Ache prisoners had been herded up into the transport craft by the stun-gun-toting cyborgs and that the saucer was therefore ready to depart. Swelling with a sudden, startling desperation, Ernst followed Wilson across the clearing, through his own armed *Federales* and *contrabandistas*, as well as Wilson's grim, black-clothed bodyguards, before stopping at the brilliantly lit, sloping ramp that led up into the saucer. Glancing up, Ernst caught a glimpse of gleaming white, curving inner walls, a stretch of steel-railed catwalk, figures silhouetted in dazzling light. He was gripped by the pain of loss when he thought of how all of this had begun: thirty years ago, when some primitive, liquid-fuelled rockets had been shot up from an abandoned 300-acre arsenal in the depressing Berlin suburb of

Reindickerdorf. Ernst had been there at the beginning, but not for too long. Each time he had been sidestepped, which had happened too often, he had lost another piece of his soul and hope for the future. Now he wanted that back, to recapture his lost youth, and so he turned to face Wilson, his idol, his master, fighting to keep control of his emotions and brimming self-pity.

'I lied to you,' he confessed. 'I'm not feeling fine at all. In fact, this place is driving me mad and I yearn to escape it. This jungle compound is a pestilence. These moronic natives are my despair. I have no-one to talk to, no-one educated, and now pressure from the West to find and punish former Nazis has made it too dangerous for me to even visit Asuncion, which I used to do regularly when I needed a break. I repeat, Herr Wilson, that I'm going mad in this place. Please take me back with you. Replace me with someone else. Give me a respite from this hellhole and let me do more important work. Let me work on the saucers.'

Wilson stared steadily at him, his blue gaze intense, revealing neither sympathy nor contempt, but merely the icy-bright gleam of pure pragmatism. When he then placed his hand on Ernst's shoulder, Ernst felt his heart sinking, knowing what the answer would be, not able to challenge it.

'I'm sorry, Ernst,' Wilson said, 'but the time isn't right. I understand your frustration, but I have to be hard with you, to keep you doing what you must do until this job is completed. Your time will soon come, Ernst. Soon you won't be needed here. In the meantime, however, you just have to be patient and continue to do the best that you can. You have to stay here, Ernst.'

'But I'm going mad here!' Ernst blurted out, ashamed of the self-pity in his voice, but unable to hide it. 'There's no one for me here. I can't go to Asuncion. If I can't get away now and then, I'll truly go crazy.'

Wilson squeezed his shoulder. 'Don't worry, Ernst. The next time we come, we'll bring you a thirty-five-foot, single-pilot flying saucer, solely for your personal convenience. You can use it to make trips away from here, when it becomes too much for you. This small craft will take you anywhere you want, allowing you to avoid Asuncion. It possesses all the capabilities of the larger saucers and is easy to fly. Compared to this, driving a car is complicated.' He squeezed Ernst's shoulder again, trying to reassure him. 'The next time we visit, Ernst. In two weeks. I can offer you nothing else for the time being, so I trust you'll accept.'

'Yes, Herr Wilson. Thank you.'

Yet even as Ernst said this, lowering his eyes, unable to meet Wilson's gaze, he was filled with the chilling conviction that his idol was toying with him, not telling the whole truth, hiding something, planning something else for him, perhaps something not good.

When he raised his eyes again, to search for the truth in Wilson's gaze, the older man had already turned away from him and was entering the saucer. The cyborgs and armed guards followed him in, then the ramp gave off a low humming sound as it slotted back into the outer body of the saucer, once more leaving it solid and visually seamless.

Instantly, Ernst retreated to the relative safety of his front veranda. He sat in his rocking chair, started rocking automatically, staring upwards as the mighty saucer ascended slowly to just above the canopy of the trees. There it hovered majestically, silently, for a moment, then it suddenly shot off as a ball of light that shrank at great speed. Soon it became just one of the many stars above the jungle, briefly hovering in outer space, then it abruptly blinked out, as if it had never been.

Lowering his gaze and glancing around his compound, Ernst saw the high walls of wood and thatch, the guards in machine-gun towers, the open fires burning outside the shacks of the native workers, the bamboo cages for the Ache prisoners, the flogging posts and coffin-shaped, windowless boxes used for punishment; the dogs, goats, chickens and pigs, the shit and piss in the open latrines. In the day it was all shadowed by the soaring tropical trees; but most nights, as right now, it was wrapped in a suffocating humidity, besieged constantly by every imaginable kind of insect and reptile, half of them venomous, others carrying deadly diseases. Surveying it all with his weakening eyes, through senses jaded and increasingly numbed, Ernst accepted that he really *was* in hell and receiving God's punishment.

When he thought back on World War II and his early days as an idealistic young engineer, then of Himmler and Kammler and Nebe and the SS, then of his wife and children (all betrayed by him, before dying in an Allied air-raid) and, finally, of what he was doing in this vile jungle, he understood why he was being punished and knew that he deserved it.

Ernst shed sentimental tears, then called out for his servant-girl, Rosa. When she advanced reluctantly from the darkness, on bare feet, clearly frightened, Ernst knew that he would make her suffer as he was suffering, easing his pain by inflicting it on someone even less fortunate.

He had created his own hell on Earth and now had to rule it. The devil, he knew, did not need disciples; he just needed victims.

Ernst now needed a lot of those.

'Tonight we will do things you can't imagine,' he said to Rosa as she knelt obediently, fearfully, in front of him. 'Now go into the bedroom, take your clothes off, and lie down on the floor. Don't move a muscle, don't make a sound, until I come to you. Do you understand, woman?'

'Yes, master,' she whispered.

Ernst burned in the scalding light of his sick desires and sad self-destruction. Waving Rosa away and glancing up at the stars, he wondered which one of them was actually Wilson's flying saucer. Then, in the full knowledge of his loss, he filled up with choking fury and pain.

'I won't stay here,' he whispered. 'I won't! *As God is my witness*!'

So saying, he stood up and entered the spacious, eerily empty log-house, to take out his frustration on Rosa in ways unimaginable.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Flying into Washington DC at the end of January, 1959, Dwight was picked up at the airport by Bob Jackson and his wife, Thelma, the sexy blonde WAC corporal who had acted as secretary to both of them during the good days at the ATIC. Though not quite as slim as she had been when Dwight had last seen her, Thelma was still an attractive, good-humoured woman.

'A matinée idol!' she exclaimed as she gave Dwight a hug. 'You haven't changed a bit, sweetheart.'

'If I weren't in a public place,' Dwight replied, 'I'd throw you on the floor and try my best.'

'Which wouldn't be good enough,' Thelma said.

Dwight laughed. 'Don't you know it?'

The ice was broken as easily as it only can be with true friends and they left the airport, driven by Thelma in a battered old Ford, like folk who had never been parted. Dwight sat in the rear.

'A damned mess,' he said.

'My car?'

'Yeah, Bob, your car. Sooner or later we all need a hearse, but it doesn't need to be *this* bad.'

'In American society,' Bob retaliated, 'a man's judged by his automobile and his woman. Given this, though my wheels aren't of the best, I'm still on top of the heap.'

'Now you know how he suckered me,' Thelma said, lighting up a Camel and exhaling a cloud of smoke as she drove. 'I couldn't resist his Irish blarney. He made me feel like a queen.'

'Which you are,' Dwight said.

'You're so straight-laced, Dwight,' Thelma replied teasingly, 'that hearing those words coming out of your mouth makes me melt and have wicked thoughts.'

'Sorry.'

‘Don’t apologise,’ Bob said. ‘Instead, take her words as words of wisdom. Never ignore a good woman.’

‘I won’t,’ Dwight promised.

He said it without confidence, even as his chest heaved with a spasm of overwhelming love. It was love for Beth, stabbing through him like a knife, opening him with a surgeon’s precision to all the pain, joy and uncertainty of being back with her.

Getting together again hadn’t been all that easy, though it had certainly been worth it in the end. At first, when Dwight moved back in, he and Beth had been awkward with each other, no longer protected by the ease of familiarity and having to inch slowly towards one another. As with most such relationships, their greatest difficulty was in approaching each other in bed after having spent so much time apart. The first night had been bad, an embarrassed, tentative touching that had filled Dwight with the shock of renewed desire, yet simultaneously unnerved him, making him feel like an inexperienced schoolboy who didn’t know what to do. Giving up, they had slept in each other’s arms and awakened self-conscious with each other – though the rest of that day Dwight felt remarkably alive, skin glowing with the indelible touch of Beth’s soft skin on his. It had made him feel exalted.

The next night, however, was the breaking of the ice, with Beth taking the initiative, exploring him with her hands and lips, finally taking his hardness into her mouth and exciting him to the degree where he forgot the inhibitions he had developed over the barren years of separation. Set free by her equally shy, caring administrations, surrendering to the ecstasy of pure, sensual pleasure, he had lain there, breathing heavily, his body on fire, as she sat up and straddled him, her naked body pale in the moonlight, beads of sweat glistening on her breasts and thighs, running into her pubic hair.

It was possibly a tribute to the depth of their love that even now, at his age, Dwight was convinced that he would never forget that image of Beth for as long as he lived: naked, sweat-slicked, her hair falling across her face, legs spread and spine curved, full breasts thrusting out, emphasising the hardened nipples, as she moved up and down on him, turning this way and that, kneading his chest, belly and thighs with electrified fingers and an instinct that seemed to anticipate his every need and desire. He had stared up at her, wide-eyed, running his hands frantically over her, squeezing her breasts, stroking her belly, gripping her hips to let their movement excite him to the

limit; then thrusting up with his groin, trying to penetrate even deeper, to bury himself so deeply inside her that he became a part of her – all of that in beams of moonlight that fell on the bed they had purchased two days after returning from their honeymoon in Niagara Falls, thirteen years ago, when they were younger and less complicated. For that reason, when Beth came, her body shuddering astride him, and he followed closely, feeling as if he was dying, he knew that their love had a solid basis that could see them through. That thought, also, exalted him. Though even now he could not shake off the anguish caused by the knowledge, gained painfully through the separation, that nothing was permanent.

'So how's Beth?' Bob asked, as if reading Dwight's mind.

'She's fine, Bob. So's Nichola.'

'God, Nichola!' Bob exclaimed, shaking his head from side to side in wonder. 'When I saw her last Christmas I nearly freaked. They grow up so fast.'

'How old is she?' Thelma asked.

'Twelve,' Dwight said.

'Oh, boy!' Thelma exclaimed, driving the car in a distracted, deceptively careless way. 'I can't believe you have a kid that age already. She was just a *baby* in Dayton.'

'Born there,' Dwight explained. 'When you and I were young, Thelma.'

She chuckled at that, exhaling more cigarette smoke. 'Yeah, right, back in the ATIC at Wright-Patterson AFB. Weren't *those* the days?'

'Good days,' Bob said. 'You used to let me feel your leg beneath your desk, right there in the office, and my car was our regular passion pit when the sun had gone down. Now we only get together in bed, which shows how much we've aged.'

Thelma laughed outright at that. She had an infectious 'dirty' laugh. 'True enough,' she confessed without blushing. 'But you've got your times mixed up. You were feeling my leg under the desk in 1948, Bob. The passion pit entered the vernacular about 1955, along with Elvis the Pelvis. God I love Elvis!'

'Elvis killed us all,' Dwight said. 'He had the voice, the looks and the swinging groin; we only have the latter.'

'I'm sure Beth's perfectly happy with that,' Thelma said, puffing another cloud of smoke from brightly painted grinning lips. 'I know that deep down *I*

am.'

'Deep down,' Bob said mournfully. When Thelma affectionately squeezed his arm, he grinned and glanced at Dwight's reflection in the rear-view mirror. 'So the reunion's working out okay, I take it? You and Beth are okay?'

'Yes, Bob, we're fine.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes.'

'You seem a bit down right now.'

'I'm just a bit nervous, that's all. Meting this Dr...'

'Epstein.'

'Right, Dr Epstein.'

'Nothing else?'

Brushing his windblown hair from his eyes, Dwight glanced out of the open window of the car. They were crossing the Potomac, on Memorial Bridge, and Dwight could see all the way along the Mall to the Capitol building. Washington DC always made him think of London, England, though he had never been there. He'd only seen it in books.

'Well,' he confessed finally, 'there *is* something else. The reunion's been fine – I mean physically and emotionally – but something's a bit off with Beth. I don't mean her and me... It's something else... I mean..'

'Out with it,' Bob said.

Dwight nodded. 'She's having bad dreams. Nightmares, in fact. Even when we've had a good night together, making love, once asleep she often wakes up screaming.'

'UFO dreams?'

'Yep.'

'Men in black?'

'Yep. All the things she's read about and been told about, not only when we were at the ATIC, but since I left home and went on the bottle. Thing is, she never had those dreams, or nightmares, until I returned home. We're happy being back together – I swear to it, folks, and I think I can speak for Beth – but she only started having those dreams when we got back together. I guess that's what's bothering me.'

Even Thelma, normally so ebullient, was silent for a moment, her lips slightly open, exhaling a stream of smoke, eyes focused on the buildings

slipping past as the car cut into New Hampshire Avenue, heading for 21st Street.

'These dreams?' Bob asked eventually, as if reluctant to do so. 'That's all they are? Dreams?'

'What do you mean?'

'She dreams of UFOs and men in black?'

'Right.'

'Has she said she's had actual contact? I mean, any experiences *other* than dreams?'

'No,' Dwight replied emphatically. 'Definitely not. I specifically asked her that very question and she was adamant that she was only having dreams and...' He shrugged. 'Feeling... *haunted*. She says she *feels* that she's being watched, but that's all it is – only a feeling. She thinks the feelings might be related to the dreams – a kind of hangover from them – so she's not worried about that aspect of it. It's the dreams, specifically, that are bothering her. What do *you* think, Bob?'

Bob took his time replying as Thelma, still puffing clouds of cigarette smoke, turned the car into 21st Street.

'Well,' Bob said carefully, 'obviously the dreams are related to all she's heard from you, me and others during our years of UFO investigations – the very investigations that broke up your relationship.'

'Agreed,' Dwight said.

'On the other hand, I'm concerned that she didn't have similar dreams when you and I were actually at the ATIC – and, in fact, didn't have them during your three-year separation – but has only had them since you returned home.'

'That's my concern,' Dwight said.

'So given that your reunion has been successful – '

'Which it has been – wonderful for both of us.'

' – I can only say that I'm concerned that your return home and, more unfortunately, my visit to your home, has possibly put you back in the spotlight – which would, of course, include Beth. Jesus H. Christ, I certainly hope not, but that could be the case.'

Dwight felt the darkness moving in to enclose him in broad daylight. 'You mean the people who stole my UFO photos – the men in black – might be

back on my trail.'

'Yes, Dwight, I do.'

'And you think they can affect people's dreams?'

'Affect their minds, yes. And since it's known that I'm now working for the APII and have been to see you...'

'Oh, my God,' Dwight whispered.

Thelma braked to a halt outside the Hampshire Hotel, smiled as brightly as she could manage, and said, 'Here you are, Dwight. Your overnight stop. I'm going shopping while you check in and then go off with Bob to see Dr Epstein. Just remember that after I've been shopping, I'll be coming right back here, so no belly dancers with walnuts in their navels, no bored business ladies in your room. You can go see Dr Epstein, then come back here and read the Gideon bible until I return. You got that?'

'Absolutely,' Bob said.

'Damned right,' Dwight added.

He and Bob clambered out of the car, removed the former's overnight bag from the trunk, and entered the Hampshire Hotel as Thelma drove away.

Driving back to Carillon Park after dropping Dwight off, Beth felt good for five minutes – the frost gleaming everywhere, the sky blue and brilliant, the air sharp and invigorating. Dwight's smile as he waved goodbye before disappearing through the departure gates – but within seconds of leaving the airport, even warmed by the recollection of Dwight's fond smile, she was attacked by that frightening feeling of being... *pursued*.

It was a feeling that had dogged her every day since Dwight had returned home: the feeling that no matter how good they were together, they were being threatened by something that neither could see or identify. That suspicion, which was based on all the things that had caused Dwight harm before – mainly reports of UFOs and stories about men in black – had led Beth, by night, to a succession of frightening dreams and, by day, to this feeling that she was never alone, that she was being watched somehow.

Now, as she drove along the stretch of road that passed the gas station where Dwight, when drinking heavily, had lived his bachelor life, she recalled the Dwight she had met for the first time as a fellow student at the University of Dayton. Though notably handsome and a member of the baseball team, therefore highly desirable to the other female students, he had

been surprisingly reserved and even, as some put it, old-fashioned in his beliefs, which included respect for his parents, the family unit and the Roman Catholic Church, a non-fanatical but genuine patriotism, and the general conviction that a man must do what a man must do. Those slightly chauvinistic but otherwise admirably virtuous views he had picked up as one of the four children of Ralph Randall, an aeronautical engineer working as a freelance consultant for some of the many experimental aviation laboratories in the area, and his wife, Barbara, a public relations writer for the Miami Conservancy District flood-control project. Both were church-going Roman Catholics, highly active in the community, but possessing a healthy sense of humour. Beth, whose own Roman Catholic parents shared similar views, was totally charmed by Dwight and fell in love with him shortly after meeting him at the college Prom, to which she was taken by another young man, now scarcely remembered.

Bound by convention and being typical of their times, Beth and Dwight had dated formally, swooned together numerous evenings in Dwight's car, usually at drive-in movies, but did not actually consummate the relationship, agreeing that they should wait until they were married, which they planned to do shortly. This plan, however, was thwarted by the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbour. Almost immediately after that shocking event, with America entering the war on the side of the Allies, Dwight, who had inherited his father's interest in the aviation history of Dayton, was drafted into the Army Air Force and served as a bombardier and radar operator, flying to India, China and the Pacific with the original B-29 wing. Returning to college at the end of the war, four years later and a lot more mature, he was convinced that he had found what he wanted to do in life – be a full-time member of the Army Air Force – and so kept his reserved status, flying as a navigator in an Air Force Reserve Troop Carrier wing while working night and day to gain his degree in aeronautical engineering. He also married Beth, finally consummating their relationship during their honeymoon in Niagara Falls.

Though their initially shy sexual explorations gradually blossomed into an even more deeply satisfying emotional relationship, Beth knew that Dwight could not forget his wartime experiences and would not be kept at home by love alone. She was therefore not surprised when, after gaining his aeronautical engineering degree, he applied to go back on active duty. Luckily, he was posted straight to the recently formed Air Technical

Intelligence Centre, located at Wright-Patterson AFB, right here in Dayton, where he and Beth moved into married quarters.

Driving past the garage where Dwight had worked during his period as an alcoholic 'bachelor' – the darkest days of their marriage – Beth was reminded of how, while loving Dwight, she had resented being an Air Force wife, loathed the insular life of the married community in and around the base, and had made her resentment known to him – too loudly, too frequently. To make matters worse, her resentment had become most vocal even as Dwight was suffering from the problems created by his UFO investigations for the ATIC. She therefore blamed herself, at least in part, for his plunge into alcoholic despair and subsequent departure from the Air Force he had once loved so dearly.

Now reunited with him, her residual guilt made her work even harder at keeping him happy and providing a degree of protection from the troubles that would, she was convinced, come about from his return to UFO investigations. She also knew, however, that only by returning to that work would he fully regain the pride he had lost when he left the Air Force. For that reason, and that reason alone, she had asked his old friend and Air Force buddy, Bob Jackson, to persuade him into going to work as the Dayton stringer for Dr Frederick Epstein's highly respected Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute, based in Washington DC. It was Beth's belief that the many trips Dwight would be compelled to make to the organisation, which would also give him the opportunity to visit Bob and Thelma, would be good for him. It was also her belief that Dwight was still obsessed with solving the mystery of why the Air Force was harassing UFO investigators, even to the point of ruining their lives, and that he could only do so through a dedicated, well funded civilian UFO organisation like the APII. On both counts, then, she felt that his teaming up with Bob and Dr Epstein, while certainly inviting trouble of one kind, would in the end be good for him. Whether Beth was right or wrong in that assumption, it was, she had decided, a chance they would both have to take.

So thinking, Beth glanced out of the open window of the car... and saw that she was still passing the garage where Dwight used to work.

Startled, she then realised that she was not in fact driving, but had pulled into the side of the road and parked, almost opposite the garage in this otherwise desolate area. Unable to recall having done so, she felt

disorientated and checked the time on her wristwatch.

The hands had stopped moving.

Shocked, suddenly frightened, she glanced left and right, behind the car, to the front, hardly knowing what she was looking for. The fields on both sides of the road were empty, as was the road itself, front and rear, but she was convinced that something was nearby and exerting some kind of force against her.

She tried the door of the car, but found that it was jammed shut. When she tried turning on the ignition, the car would not start.

Trapped, feeling oddly violated, she just sat there, gazing about her, trying to see what it was that she could feel as an invisible... *presence*.

Yet there was nothing unusual out there... Only the flat fields, the straight, empty road... and the garage at the far side of that road.

There was something strange about the garage. Its front door was open, swinging in and out with the wind, and banging repeatedly against its frame.

There was no sign of the new owner, Frank Bancroft... neither inside at the cash register, nor outside by the gas pumps.

Beth thought that was odd.

Something else was odd... When she looked more carefully, she noticed that the tall grass around the garage was quivering and being bent as if by the wind... but in an unnatural way. Behind and at both sides of the garage, the tall grass of the fields was virtually motionless, indicating that no wind was blowing there. The grass was only bending in a long, narrow line that formed an immense semicircle, enclosing the garage and stopping on the verge where the field met the tarmac road.

At least Beth *thought* it stopped there... until she noticed that the dust on the road was also being whipped up – again, only in a fine line that ran across the road to the front and rear of her car, the same distance away in both directions, about 170 feet in both directions. Within and outside those two fine lines of spiralling dust, no dust or debris was stirring.

Feeling increasingly unreal and frightened, Beth glanced in the opposite direction, at the fields on the other side of the road – the side she was parked on – and saw that the two lines of dust curved into that field where the grass was also bent and quivering, forming another large arc that ended on both sides of the road.

The lines of dust across the road, in front of, and behind, the car, joined the

two arcs of bent, quivering grass to form an immense circle that enclosed the car and garage. Outside that circle, the grass was not moving at all.

Even as Beth studied that huge circle, she saw the tips of the grass slowly turning black and smoking a little.

Suddenly, the car started shaking, as if on a conveyor belt. Startled, Beth grabbed hold of the steering wheel. The car continued shaking – even though it wasn't otherwise moving – and Beth looked on, disbelieving, as the bent, quivering grass turned blacker and formed a great circle covered in smoke. Just as she thought the smouldering grass was about to burst into flames, it crumpled into black powder and the smoke started drifting away. Soon there was nothing but that immense, dark circle, formed by the ashes of grass, dead and charred black.

The car stopped its unnatural shaking and the door locks, which had been jammed in the closed position, clicked free of their own accord.

When Beth turned the key in the ignition, the engine kicked into life again.

Impelled by a combination of terror and helpless curiosity, Beth turned the engine off, then opened the door and leaned out of the vehicle to glance along the road in both directions. No other cars were approaching and the road was deserted, running as straight as an arrow under a sky filling up with low clouds.

Looking across the road, Beth saw that the door of the garage had stopped its banging, though it was now hanging open and there was still no sign of Frank Bancroft.

Taking a deep breath, Beth glanced directly above the car. At first she saw nothing but the gathering clouds, pregnant with rain... Then, above the clouds, she saw what looked like a circular light, about the size of a dime but shrinking rapidly, though still casting its striations downwards through the clouds. Even as Beth studied that light, trying to ascertain if it was a separate entity or merely an illusion caused by a combination of cloud and striated sunlight, it shrank to no more than a gleaming speck, then abruptly blinked out.

Without thinking, though with racing heart, Beth clambered out of her car and crossed the road to the forecourt of Frank Bancroft's garage, where Dwight had once lived and worked. When she had passed the gas pumps and was approaching the open front door of the store, she slowed down, feeling more frightened than ever by the unnatural silence and realising that sweat

was trickling down her face.

Stopping by the open door, she glanced up at the sky again, checking that the strange, circular light had indeed disappeared. Satisfied that it had, she glanced across the flat field and saw that the great circle of black ash was still clearly visible.

Shivering, though sweaty and flushed with dread, she reached the open door and glanced tentatively into the store, scanning the shadowy space behind the cash register for a sign of Frank Bancroft. He was nowhere to be seen. The store, though empty, seemed untouched.

With her heart now racing so fast she thought it would burst, Beth entered the store and glanced about her. All the stock on the shelves – cans of oil, cleaning solvents, light bulbs, tools, maps, rubber floor mats, seat coverings and other automobile and driver products – was as it should have been. The cash register, Beth noticed, was firmly closed.

No sign, then, of a hold-up.

Relieved just a little, but with her heart still racing, Beth advanced farther into the store and stepped around the far side of the counter containing the cash register.

There she gasped instinctively and froze in horror.

Frank Bancroft had fallen out of his chair and was lying flat on his back, but in a dreadfully contorted position and with his eyes popping out of his head, staring at something that had clearly terrified him. He had foamed at the mouth, evacuated his bowels, and fallen out of his chair as he collapsed.

Beth didn't need a doctor to tell her what had happened. This man had died of a heart attack brought on by sheer terror.

Now terrified as well, Beth gasped again, covered her mouth with her hand, then ran back to her car. She turned on the engine, which started with no trouble, then raced the car along the road, not stopping until she came to her local police station, near Carillon Park. There she informed the officer in charge, Deputy Marshall Tom Clooney, red-faced and pot-bellied, about Frank Bancroft's death. She said nothing about her blackout, the stopping of her wristwatch, the malfunctioning of her car, the smoking grass and the great circle of black ash. Convinced that the amiable Clooney would think she had gone mad, she decided to keep her mouth shut and relate only the details concerning her finding of Frank Bancroft's corpse.

When the report was completed, the cop on duty promised to have the body

collected and the garage closed up. Relieved, Beth left the police station and drove on home.

She was still terrified.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Once booked into the Hampshire Hotel, downtown, Dwight and Bob walked the short distance along 21st Street to the Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute – the same modest, Federal-styled building located just off Pennsylvania Avenue where, six years ago, Dwight had given a deep background interview to the well-known astronomer and astrophysicist, Dr Frederick Epstein, Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society, member of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), and now the dedicated, hard-working head of the APII.

Epstein, Dwight noted, hadn't changed much in the intervening years. Back in 1953, because of his rather old-fashioned, prematurely greying Vandyke beard, he'd looked older than his age; now, though still only forty-seven, but with his beard even greyer, he looked ten years older than that. Nevertheless, he had good-natured, distinguished features, lively hazel eyes, a ready smile, and a tendency to stroke his beard when thinking. Slightly dishevelled, he seemed right at home in an office cluttered with filing cabinets, loose files, heaped reports, old newspapers, magazines and photos of UFOs.

The walls, also, were covered in photos of UFOs and poster-sized charts. One showed the most commonly reported UFO shapes, grouped into flat discs, domed discs, Saturn or double-domed discs, hemispherical discs, flattened spheres, spherical, elliptical, triangular and cylindrical. Another chart was divided into two illustrated sections, one showing the most commonly reported UFO formations, the other showing UFO manoeuvres both singly and in formation. Other charts showed the world-wide locations and flight directions of the major UFO waves from 1896 to the present; major UFO events in the United States and overseas; the major areas of alleged magnetic deviation around the world, including the North and South Poles; and the names, addresses and telephone numbers of the world's leading civilian organisations.

'A major problem we're having,' Epstein was saying as Dwight removed

his gaze from the wall charts, ‘is that the checking of UFO reports is being made more difficult by the man-made satellites circling Earth in increasing numbers and now, in the case of the unmanned Soviet *Lunik*, passing the Moon to go into orbit around the sun.’

‘Which it did only yesterday,’ Bob reminded them as he unwrapped a stick of chewing gum and popped it into his mouth.

‘Correct,’ Epstein said, distractedly stroking his beard. ‘For that very reason, Dwight, I’m really glad you’re considering getting back into this business. We can certainly do with all the expert help we can get. You remember the Levelland sightings?’

‘Yep,’ Dwight said, feeling comfortable in this company, particularly since Bob Jackson had been indirectly responsible for reuniting him with Beth and Nichola, thus giving him back his sense of purpose. ‘Texas. November 1957. The sightings caused quite a stir.’

‘They surely did.’ Epstein picked a report off his desk and studied it thoughtfully. ‘I’ve been studying this case in detail, Dwight, so let me refresh your memory by reading from my completed report.’

As Epstein read out the details, it all came back to Dwight in a rush. The events in Levelland, Texas, had formed the spectacular climax to the biggest year in UFO reports since 1952. The sightings had begun at 11.00pm on November 2 and ended at 2.00am the following morning. All the reports were of glowing, yellow-white, torpedo- or egg-shaped objects, approximately seventy-five to 200 feet long or in diameter, that had landed on the roads around Levelland, forcing oncoming cars to brake, stopping their ignitions, and emitting quite a bit of heat before taking off again, after which the cars’s ignitions had restarted.

The first sighting was at 11.00pm on the night of November 2, just north of Levelland, when one of the objects flew towards the automobile of two witnesses, causing the motor and lights to fail. When the witnesses got out of their vehicle to view the object more clearly, it came so close, they were forced to throw themselves to the ground. Considerable heat was felt as the object passed over them. When the object left the area, the automobile’s ignition and lights came back on.

An hour later, at midnight, a driver four miles east of Levelland was stopped by a brightly glowing, egg-shaped object, about two hundred feet in diameter, that was resting in the middle of the road. As the driver approached

the object, his car's engine and lights failed. When the object took off, rising vertically to a height of approximately two hundred feet and then shooting off rapidly, the witness's car started up again.

A few minutes later, another witness, driving eleven miles north of Levelland, called the police to report having exactly the same kind of sighting and experience.

Five minutes after midnight, a witness driving nine miles east of Levelland got out of his car when its engine and lights failed. He was about to look under the hood when he saw an egg-shaped object sitting on the road ahead. He later described it as being about seventy-five to a hundred feet wide, made of what looked like aluminium, and giving off a white glow with a greenish tint. Frightened, he got back into his car and watched the object for a few minutes, until it took off and disappeared. When the object had flown out of sight, the witness's car started again.

Fifteen minutes later, nine miles north of Levelland, another car stalled as it approached a similar object sitting on a dirt road. When the object ascended vertically to an altitude of about three hundred feet, then shot off and disappeared, the car's engine started up again and its lights came back on.

After receiving this latest report, Levelland Patrolman A. J. Fowler sent two deputies out to investigate. They later reported seeing bright lights in the sky, but had no ignition problems with their vehicle. However, a few minutes after they called in their first report, a witness driving just west of town saw a 'large orange ball of fire' coming towards him. It settled on the road about a quarter of a mile ahead. When the witness approached it, his car's engine cut out and its lights failed. When the lights ascended a few minutes later, the car started up again.

Thirty minutes later, a truck driver informed the police that as he was driving northeast of Levelland, his truck's engine and headlights failed when he approached a brilliantly glowing, egg-shaped object that was straddling the road ahead. When he got out of his truck to investigate, the object shot up vertically with a roar and then flew away. The truck's engine and headlights then came back on.

By this time, other deputies in the area had received similar reports and were out on the roads, frantically investigating. While driving about five miles outside the city, a sheriff and his deputy saw a 'streak of light' with a 'reddish glow' on the highway, about three or four hundred yards ahead,

lighting up the whole area. A few miles behind the sheriff and deputy, on the same road, two patrolmen saw a 'strange-looking flash' that appeared to be close to the ground about a mile in front of them. The last sighting of the evening was made by another policeman, who saw an object travelling so fast it looked like no more than 'a flash of light' shooting from east to west.

'In other words,' Epstein now summarised from his own report, 'twelve drivers, including police patrolmen, reported seeing a large, glowing, egg-shaped flying object and three more reported an unusual flash – all in a single, three-hour period covering the midnight of November second and third.'

'Forming a kind of grand climax to the biggest UFO flap since 1952,' Bob added, 'the sightings caused the Air Force a lot of embarrassment. They didn't investigate the affair until days after it took place, sent only one man to do the job, failed to interview nine of the fifteen witnesses, and stated falsely that lightning had been in the area at the time of the sightings. Under pressure from the public, the assistant secretary of defence insisted that the ATIC submit a preliminary analysis to the press. When Captain George Gregory – the head of our once beloved, now relatively useless Project Blue Book – did so, he claimed that the evidence was too slight for proper investigation, that only three of the witnesses could be located, and that contrary to reports, the object, or objects, had only been visible for a few seconds. He also reiterated that the sightings had been caused by lightning and storm conditions in the area – none of which were actually present at the time. Nevertheless, the Air Force's final report blamed the sightings on unusual weather phenomena of an electrical nature, suggesting ball lightning or St Elmo's Fire, and again dragged up non-existent stormy conditions, including mist, rain, thunderstorms and lightning. With the aid of Donald Menzel, they then tried to blame the recent wave of sightings, including the Levelland affair, on the launching of the second Russian *Sputnik*. But when this failed to wash, the public uproar became so loud that the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena, NICAP, was able to press for Congressional hearings.'

'Yeah, I read about that,' Dwight said. 'But I haven't heard much about the hearings since then.'

'No, you wouldn't have,' Bob told him. 'In August last year, John McCormack's House Sub-Committee on Atmospheric Phenomena requested

a week-long hearing in closed, secret session, but any hope that the hearing would be a fair one was destroyed when the House Sub-Committee decided to take no further interest in the matter.'

'However, what we discovered right here at the APII,' Epstein said, 'has given us even more cause for concern. Last December, the Air Force published a staff study that came down heavily on the three major civilian UFO groups, accusing us of being biased and sensationalist. To make matters worse, we also learned that the Robertson Panel, in making their recommendations back in 1953 regarding civilian UFO groups, had used the chilling phrase...' Epstein paused for a moment to pick up another well-thumbed sheet from his desk and read from it. '*The apparent irresponsibility and the possible use of such groups for subversive purposes should be kept in mind.*' He let the sheet fall back on the desk, as if it was contaminating his fingers. 'We've also recently learnt that the FBI and the CIA are keeping extensive records on people involved in UFO investigations, including the members of our own organisation. Should you be considering joining us, I feel it's only fair that you know this. You've already had a lot of trouble with the Air Force; you'll get more if you join us.'

Recalling his dire experience with the Air Force, due to his involvement with UFO research, Dwight knew exactly what Epstein meant. Nevertheless, he said, 'I'm willing to take that chance. Now that Bob's got me interested again, I won't rest until I find out why the Air Force, which so clearly was concerned about UFOs when we were in Project Blue Book, went to such lengths to frustrate our investigations and turn Project Blue Book into a farce. It was, and remains, a contradiction that still keeps me awake at night.'

'That's precisely why we want you,' Epstein said, standing up and coming around his desk to shake Dwight's hand again. 'Welcome aboard.'

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Even before opening his eyes in his bed in his suite of rooms near the summit of the mountain in Antarctica, Wilson recalled his dream and realised that it had *not* been a dream, but a powerfully vivid, telepathic exploration of his colony. Having practised meditation and astral projection for years, he had at last developed the ability to see with his 'inner eye'. This morning, in a state of half sleep, just before awakening properly, he had roamed from his bedroom near the summit, down through the hacked-out interior of the mountain, to the various layers of the colony: the guard rooms just below him, then the computer rooms; then, farther down, the laboratories and surgeries, the machine-shops and storage facilities, then the slave accommodations, dining rooms and ablutions; and, finally, at the base of the mountain, the great landing pads and maintenance hangars for the flying saucers. He had made that journey in his mind, seeing everything clearly.

Even as his body was rotting with age, with its various organs being replaced one after the other, his Extra-Sensory Perception, practiced daily for about seventy years, was increasing dramatically.

Opening his eyes, he gazed through the panoramic windows of the suite at the vast, snow-covered wastelands of the Antarctic. All white. Everything. Except for the sky. The gleaming mountains and valleys stretching out to where that sheet of sheer blue met the white horizon, though that, too, was often rendered a silvery white by wind-swept snow and frost. Light. Lots of light. A unique and dazzling vision. The light flashed off the mountain peaks and glaciers as snow broke up, rolled down the mountain slopes, or drifted like powder on the wind, reflecting and bending the rays of the blinding sun. The Antarctic was vast, supremely beautiful, and empty. There were no people out there. No noise. It was the end of the world.

Sitting upright, Wilson glanced around the bedroom: a functional room, with pine-board walls, clothes closets and a couple of chests-of-drawers. There were no paintings on the walls, no decorations or ornaments of any

kind. There were, however, a series of TV monitor screens banked along one wall and controlled from the control-panel on his bedside cabinet. Though Wilson was now able to use his ESP to scan the colony, he could more easily do so by means of the spy cameras located in more areas of the underground complex and transmitting back to the TV monitors in his bedroom and study.

Switching on the monitors, as he did every morning before getting out of bed, he used his hand-control to flick from one screen to the other and check that everything was in order: the great saucers on their landing pads in the cavernous space hacked out of the mountain's rock; the massive workshops where the saucers were constructed; the laboratories where surgical experiments were conducted on captured human beings and animals, some dead, others alive; the storage rooms for the collection of frozen human heads, limbs and organs; the slave accommodations where the nightshift workers were sleeping; and the dormitory-styled quarters for the comfort girls. Everywhere he checked, he saw hundreds of men and women at work, including white-coated scientists, technicians and surgeons; slave-workers in grey coveralls; and the flying-saucer crewmembers in their black flight suits – all illuminated in the arc lights powered by self-charging generators and fixed high on the walls of solid rock, as were the spy cameras. The underground colony was a hive of activity. Everything was in order.

Satisfied, Wilson slipped out of bed and padded on bare feet into the adjoining bathroom where he attended to his ablutions, then had an invigorating cold shower. After drying himself, he put on a silk dressing gown and returned to the bedroom, where he sat on the edge of the bed, again facing the panoramic window with its breathtaking view of Antarctica. Phoning through to the quarters of the comfort girls, he asked the matron to send him someone trained in electronic stimulation. Then he placed the phone back on its cradle and patiently waited.

The girl arrived within minutes, entering via the elevator in the study and coming into the bedroom from there. Wilson's taste in comfort girls changed from time to time - sometimes he enjoyed Eurasians, other times blacks, sometimes the Ache women flown in from Paraguay by Ernst Stoll – but his present taste was for slim white girls, preferably no younger than eighteen, no older than twenty. The girl who now entered fitted the bill exactly, being slim, blonde, eighteen years old, and dressed in a diaphanous robe that emphasised every curve in her body with each step she took. Though subdued

with a constant supply of Valium and other sedatives, she was still a little nervous of Wilson and kept her head bowed.

'Your name?' Wilson asked.

'Clare Collins.'

'Where are you from?'

'Albuquerque, New Mexico.'

'When were you abducted?'

'I think about eighteen months ago.'

'You don't know the precise date?'

'No, sir, I've forgotten.'

'Have you forgotten a lot about your previous life?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Forgetting more every day?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Soon you won't remember a thing about it. Then you can come off your daily sedation. Do you know what I want?'

'Matron said the stimulator.'

'That's correct. You've used one before?'

'Yes, sir.'

'On me?'

'No sir. On some others. This is my first time up here.'

'Take your robe off,' Wilson said.

The girl nodded, then took hold of the hem of her garment to tug it up her shapely legs, off her perfect body, and finally over her head. After letting the garment fall to the floor, she stood there with her hands by her sides and her head slightly lowered. She had long legs, broad hips, a slim waist and firm breasts. Her skin, which had been sun-tanned when she was abducted, was now milky white.

Seeing her, Wilson wanted her, though he could do little about it because he could no longer obtain an erection without special help. Nevertheless, for the good of his mental health, he required sensual stimulation and the sight of this lovely, naked girl was an aid in obtaining it.

'The stimulator is in there,' he said, pointing to a closet. 'Bring it out and proceed.'

Opening the closet door, the naked girl wheeled out a mobile electronic console. Pushing it to the side of the bed, she raised its lid and lay it

backward until it formed a tray. Withdrawing vibrating pads and electrodes fixed to cables from inside the console, she laid them side by side on the tray. She then glanced questioningly at Wilson, received his nod of consent, and reached out to untie the belt of his dressing gown. After slowly drawing the robe off his shoulders and down his body, she started when she saw the numerous scars criss-crossing his skin – the visible signs of his many surgical operations.

'Don't worry,' Wilson reassured her. 'They don't hurt anymore.'

Instinctively, he ran his fingers along the most recent scar, which ran across his left breast. This was from an operation to replace his old piezoelectric crystal pacemaker with a new model. Eventually, so he hoped, he would receive a pacemaker with a plutonium power source, weighing practically nothing and lasting much longer, but a successful model had yet to be developed.

The girl nodded, relieved. 'You want oil, sir?'

'Yes,' Wilson said, stretching out on his back on the bed to let her begin. She did so by pouring slightly heated olive oil onto her hands, then rubbing it into his skin, starting with his chest, moving down to his stomach, then sliding her fingers through his pubic hair and around his penis. Once down there, she rubbed the oil in around his scrotum, onto his inner thighs, then around his hips, back over his belly and down again to the genital area. Then, taking his penis in her oil-soaked right hand, she massaged it tenderly, expertly, eventually managing to raise it a little.

Watching her with his unblinking gaze, taking in the rise and fall of her breasts, the full nipples, the flat belly running down to her blonde pubic hair between perfectly formed, smooth thighs, Wilson recalled how, even in adolescence, though helplessly aroused by sexual thoughts and feelings, he had translated his desire into a set of equations that enabled him to disassociate himself from the fallacy of romantic love and treat sex as a purely physiological necessity, like pissing or shitting. Now, even as his 'comfort girl', the abducted young beauty, Clare Collins, released his slight erection from her oil-soaked fingers and, instead, used the electric vibrating pads on the most erogenous parts of his body, he was caught between his human need to surrender to pure sensual feelings and his scientific need to transcend those same feelings and remain in control.

Yet sensual feelings, he knew, were inextricably linked to mental health,

and so, when the comfort girl dabbed paste onto his temples and fixed electrodes to him, he closed his eyes, shutting out the real woman, and let himself surrender to the voluptuous visions created by the stimulator. The Theta rhythms being passed through his brain at a rate of four cycles per second altered his mood and, in conjunction with the comfort girl's expert massaging, both with her oil-soaked fingers and the exquisitely soft vibrating pads, replaced his icy intellectualism with steadily rising, temporary desire. As the Theta rhythms increased gradually to a rate of seven per second, filling his head with carnal visions worthy of an adolescent, the comfort girl massaged his stomach, loins and inner thighs with the vibrating pads, manipulated his hardening penis with her oil-soaked fingers, and finally, when she sensed that he was coming, covered his penis with her lips and let him come into her mouth. Without sex, or, at least, without penetration, Wilson shuddered, orgasmed, found physical release, and was returned to his intellectual concerns, above distracting desires.

Opening his eyes, he watched the comfort girl wiping her lips dry with a tissue; she then turn off the vibrating pads and removed the electrodes from his temples. Her naked body now seemed offensive to him and he wanted no part of it.

'Put your robe on immediately,' he told her, 'then return the stimulator to the closet and take your leave.'

'Yes, sir. Thank you, sir.'

Backing away from him, keeping her head bowed, the girl put her robe back on and then wheeled the electronic console back into the closet and hurriedly left the room. Wilson heard her crossing the lounge. He waited until the door of the elevator had opened and closed, then he put on his dressing gown and picked up the phone to order breakfast.

'I'll have a fruit-and-nut cereal,' he said, 'and a glass of white wine. Very dry. Very cold.'

He had a single glass of dry white wine with every frugal meal of the day, including breakfast. Apart from those three glasses of wine, he did not partake of alcohol. Nor did he eat meat or fish.

His breakfast was delivered by an Ache Indian who had been lobotomised to render him passive, totally obedient and easily trained. He was dressed in grey coveralls, his feet in soft felt slippers. Knowing better than to speak to Wilson, he simply placed the tray on a table that wheeled over the bed – a

steel-framed hospital trolley – and then left the suite as unobtrusively as he had entered it, taking the elevator back down to the slave accommodations located near the base of the mountain.

When the Indian had departed, Wilson had his breakfast while watching the world news on his satellite-dish TV monitors, flicking repeatedly from one screen to another, one country to another, one news item to another, impatient with the triviality of human beings and their idiotic conflicts, most of which were, in his view, based on primitive notions of patriotism or religion.

Finishing his breakfast, he pushed the wheeled tray to the end of the bed, then swung his feet to the floor, shucked off his dressing gown, and proceeded to dress in his standard working outfit of black coveralls. Leaving the bedroom, he passed through his spacious, dome-shaped, steel-and-concrete study, which also offered a wonderful view of Antarctica, and took the elevator down to the parapsychological laboratories.

Like most other experimental areas of the underground colony, the laboratories had been hacked out of the interior of the mountain, with the exposed rock face covered in black pitch. The irregular shape of the walls made the enclosed spaces seem even more cavernous than they were in reality. Light came from the arc lights fixed high above the stone-flagged floors. While being adequately heated by phase-change solar-heat pumps located outside the mountain, the laboratories, with their pitch-covered rock, looked bleak and unwelcoming. Though not quite as hideous as the laboratories where doctors King and Eckhardt kept their Frankenstein's collection of severed human heads, limbs and internal organs, the parapsychological laboratory now held its fair share of similar horrors. These included electric chairs with buckled straps on the arms and head-braces with microphones, used for experiments that could cause haemorrhaging from the eyes, ears and nose, as well as inducing cardiac arrest or bursting the blood vessels of the brain, leading to madness or death; water tanks used for sensory-deprivation experiments on human subjects; and small, dark cells with leaded-steel doors, used for a combination of other sensory-deprivation experiments and even more cruel experiments with strobe lights flickering at a rate that caused drowsiness, nausea, acute depression or fear, absolute obedience, uncontrollable violence, and epileptic seizures.

The most notable of the horrors in this laboratory, however, was the severed head of the unfortunate Marlon Clarke, which, almost thirteen years after

Clarke's abduction, was still functioning in an inhuman way with the aid of a special stereotaxic skullcap and numerous electronic hairpin implants. At one stage Clarke's severed head, then kept in a class casing with an inner temperature reduced to just above the point of freezing, had been recording dying brain-waves on the EEG machine to which it had been wired. But before those brain-waves died out completely, Dr King had used a combination of electronic implantation and injections of chemicals to revitalise them enough to keep the brain functioning. By that time, Clarke's brain, though certainly functioning again, was doing so in an insane, chaotic manner; but eventually, when attached by the severed neck to a steel-clamp base containing artificial blood vessels and wired to the still beating human heart in a temperature-controlled glass case nearby, as well as to a pair of amputated hands, it had been able to manipulate the latter in a crude fashion, making the fingers open and close as the hands crawled across the table like large, deranged spiders.

Since then, further advances had been made and now the jaw, mouth and nose of the severed head had been removed and replaced with a metal prosthetic, the neck of which was attached by a combination of electric wiring and artificial blood vessels to the body of a small Ache Indian whose head and hands had been surgically removed, the former to be replaced with Clarke's head, the latter to be replaced with myoelectric hands that looked like steel claws.

Clarke's eyes, which once had been filled with unutterable incomprehension and dread, were now unseeing and could only be revitalised by the carefully controlled input from the electronic implants of his stereotaxic skullcap. With his metal claws, metal lower-face prosthetic and bizarre metal skullcap, the once normal human being now looked like a monstrous creature from outer space.

'He seems pacified at last,' Wilson said, speaking fluent Russian, to the head of the laboratory, Dr Nikoloi Tugarinov, world-famous physiologist and former Vice President of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR. Listed officially in the Soviet Union as 'missing', Tugarinov had actually been abducted by one of Wilson's saucer teams, 'indoctrinated' with a combination of drug therapy and hypnotic suggestion that did not otherwise impair his faculties, and then became a willing – or, rather, helplessly obedient – member of the parapsychological laboratory, working hand-in-

glove with doctors King and Eckhardt in the adjoining laboratories, where the development of cyborgs and much larger Cybernetic Anthropomorphous Machine Systems, or CAMS, was racing ahead, regardless of the cost in human suffering.

'Yes,' Tugarinov confirmed, also speaking Russian. 'As you know, Dr King's main problem was not in perfecting the psychophysical interaction between head and body, but in somehow retaining the orderly functioning of the severed head – given that it was in a state of delirium, or insanity, caused by disbelief and trauma. Having revitalised the head's dying brain-waves, which potentially opened the brain again to shock and insanity, we solved the problem by inducing amnesia with a combination of chemicals and electric stimulation. Hideous though Mr Clarke now looks, he has no recollection of himself ever looking any different and, indeed, thinks of himself as being perfectly normal. Mr Clarke is now a prototype cyborg who, when activated, will have no recollections of his former life, will therefore think of his controller as a god, and subsequently will do exactly what he is told.'

'Excellent,' Wilson said. 'But his focus seems turned inward at the moment. What's happening to him?'

'Amazing,' Dr Tugarinov replied. 'What we're finding through the parapsychological experiments relating to cyborg mentality is that being deprived of most of their senses – the loss of a sense of smell because of the lower-face prosthetic; the breathing with lungs created artificially to enable them to withstand the extreme pressures of outer space or the seabed; the inability to speak because of the severing of the vocal cords; and the general loss of their past memories and emotions – this particular form of deprivation has heightened their mental processes in another manner, enabling them to communicate telepathically, often over very great distances. Clarke appears to be focused inward at the moment because he's been programmed to cast his thoughts elsewhere.'

'I've developed such talents myself,' Wilson reminded him, 'by the ruthless suppression of all redundant emotion and feelings.'

'True – but look!' Dr Tugarinov pointed up at a row of monitor screens that were tilted just above the encased, severed head of the surgically mutated, partial cyborg, Marlon Clarke. The screens showed a series of different images, cloudy but distinct enough, of barbed wire fences, military installations, aircraft on the ground or in flight, and long-distance views of

parabolic radar dishes. They were, as Wilson knew, all located in the United States, mostly military establishments chosen by Clarke's 'controller', Dr Tugarinov, and being telepathically relayed to the TV monitors wired up to the cyborg's stereotaxic skullcap and keyed into a highly advanced computer system.

In the West, electronic miniaturisation with an integrated circuit using a single tiny chip of silicon had been demonstrated for the first time the previous year, but Wilson's scientists, unrestrained in every way, were already well advanced in computer technology and had, in fact, used their first crude silicon chips as part of their secret barter with the United States government.

'I know what you're showing me,' Wilson said. 'But what's so special this time?'

'Watch closely,' Tugarinov said, using the computer keyboard to increase or decrease the basic rhythmic patterns of Marlon Clarke's brain while flooding it with other impulses from the implants of the stereotaxic skullcap. The eyes in the severed head now attached by the neck to a cyborg torso – half man, half machine – suddenly widened, moved left and right above the hideous lower-face metal prosthetic, then seemed to lose focus as the mental impulses thus agitated leaped over time and space. The screens above Clarke's head, which had previously shown a series of murky monochrome images, now cleared to show what Wilson recognised instantly as, first the exterior, then the interior, of one of his own large flying saucers. This, however, dissolved almost immediately and was replaced by the image of a smaller, less sophisticated saucer ascending vertically from what appeared to be part of the White Sands Proving Ground.

Surprised, Wilson practically stood on tiptoe in order to check the images more clearly. The flying saucer on the screen wobbled in an ungainly manner from left to right, trying to find its centre of gravity, then it ascended vertically, languidly, above the doors of what were plainly aircraft hangars. Soon it passed off the monitors, leaving only the ghostly image of the aircraft hangars, beyond which was a barbed-wire fence and a vast stretch of desert.

'That wasn't one of our saucers,' Wilson said. 'Is that the White Sands Proving Ground?'

'Yes, sir.'

'So what's so unusual about this transmission? We've managed to project

to there before.'

'I didn't programme Clarke to telepathically leap to that area. I programmed him to track one of our own saucer flights – which you saw – and then he tuned in by himself to that new image – or, to be more precise, someone else tuned in to *him*.'

'So where are the images coming from?'

'Please observe. I'm going to key in a non-verbal request to Clarke, to identify the source of his present images. Though unable to speak, he can show you on the screens just what's going on.'

Tugarinov tapped his request into the computer keyboard, then stepped back and waited. After what seemed like a long time, but was actually less than a minute, a murky image of a city skyline appeared on the monitor screens.

'I recognise it,' Wilson said. 'Portland, Maine.'

Once Wilson had identified the location, Tugarinov tapped it into the computer to let the cyborg, Clarke, know that they had received the information. When he had done so, the image changed to an apartment block in the same city, then this dissolved to the inside of an apartment in the same building. A middle-aged woman with black hair and a look of pain on her face was tossing and turning on her bed. There were tablets on her bedside cabinet and she appeared to be having a migraine.

'She's in a telepathic trance,' Wilson said.

'Yes. And she's obviously suffering severe stress. Which suggests that she's tuned in accidentally to someone else, somewhere else. We have to find out who and where that source is.'

Tugarinov keyed another request into the keyboard and then watched as Marlon Clarke's eyes, framed between the metal band of the stereotaxic skullcap and the top of the lower-face prosthetic, turned left and right, desperately searching for something, then rolled upwards and went out of focus again, like the eyes of someone lost in their own thoughts.

On the monitor screens above, the woman from Maine gradually faded out and was replaced by a repeat of the crude flying saucer ascending above the aircraft hangars of what was clearly a US Air Force or Navy aeronautical establishment in the arid wastelands of the White Sands Proving Ground.

'Back where we started,' Wilson said impatiently.

'No. Wait.' Tugarinov tapped a few more instructions into the computer

keyboard. ‘He’ll now find the source for us.’

In less than a minute, the aircraft hangars dissolved and were replaced by the exterior of a clapboard building that had barbed-wire fences beyond it and was guarded by US Army Air Force soldiers. A closer image of the same building showed signs clearly marked ‘US Army Air Force’ and ‘Top Secret’. Those signs dissolved to make way for an image of a man wearing army dungarees sitting on a chair in a booth, wearing earphones and either writing notes or drawing sketches of what he was seeing.

The telepathic communication was not sharp or close enough to reveal what those drawings showed, but Wilson had no doubts at all.

‘That man is an ESP-trained soldier tuning into the US-Canadian flying saucer we just saw taking off from the White Sands Proving Ground. As that building, also, is in the White Sands Proving Ground, he obviously can’t transmit that far yet and is practicing on reasonable local subjects. The woman from Portland, Maine, is obviously a psychic who tuned in accidentally to him, just as our cyborg tuned into her thoughts, confusing the US-Canadian saucer for the one he was tracking – namely, our own.’

‘The accident doesn’t matter,’ Tugarinov said. ‘What matters is that the Americans, like my Russian friends in the Parapsychology Laboratory in the University of Leningrad, are now experimenting with ESP.’

‘Correct,’ Wilson said. ‘They thought they could keep it secret, but there are no secrets any more. I think my American friends might need another hard lesson, so keep monitoring that woman from Portland, Maine.’

‘Yes, sir,’ Tugarinov said.

Wilson glanced briefly at the hideous, surgically mutated head of the former Marlon Clarke, then nodded approvingly at Dr Tugarinov and left the laboratory.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

For the first six months of 1959 Dwight commuted on a regular basis between Dayton, Ohio, and Washington DC, investigating UFO sightings in the former and personally delivering his reports to Dr Frederick Epstein's Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute in the latter. As Beth had anticipated, the frequent trips to the Capital were a welcome break from the previous monotony of his life in Dayton and rendered even more appealing because they offered him frequent contact with Bob and Thelma Jackson, both resident in Greenbelt, Maryland, where Bob had gone to work after leaving the Air Force and before joining the APII. When not at the APII, Dwight had many a good lunch or evening with Bob and Thelma, who had lost neither their good humour nor their warmth.

Returning to the investigation of UFO sightings in Dayton was indeed an experience for Dwight, not only because of his ongoing fascination with the subject and the many people he was meeting again, but even more so because of his shock at the lack of co-operation he found amongst his old friends at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. Not that there were, in truth, many old friends left there, since most had been transferred out of the ATIC even before his departure. Nevertheless, the few still working there were singularly unhelpful, claiming that the Air Force no longer had any interest in the matter and viewed civilian investigators as a nuisance.

Apart from those who worked for Dr Epstein's APII, the other reliable civilian investigators came from the many different UFO organisations now scattered widely across the whole country. The most notable of these was the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), founded in 1956, headed by former Marine Corps Major Donald Keyhoe, and also located in Washington DC. Though these two major Washington DC organisations frequently were in competition with one another, it was from the NICAP that Dwight had gained a lot of the mainly young, sometimes eccentric, but always lively UFO investigators who had made his life more

interesting during the past six months.

They had a language all their own, being fond of the use of acronyms such as CE1 (Close Encounters of the First Kind), phenomena that cause a transient effect on the witness, such as time loss or radio interference; CE2 (Close Encounters of the Second Kind), phenomena that cause effects that are semi-permanent and observable by those who did *not* share the experience; CE3 (Close Encounters of the Third Kind), phenomena that include animate entities such as extraterrestrials or robotic crew members; and CE4 (Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind), events that cause the witness, or witnesses, to have unnatural or seemingly impossible experiences, such as psychic interaction, levitation and paralysis, or which affect the witness, mentally or physically, for a long time after the event occurs.

Spouting such scientific-sounding phrases and armed with survey maps, binoculars, theodolites, tape recorders, cameras, notebooks, drawing pads, pencils and pens, these enthusiasts swarmed across the country, most to desolate wastelands such as those in New Mexico and Arizona, to visit the site of a UFO sighting and take measurements and photos; interview witnesses, cajoling written statements and sketches from them; contact weather centres to check for temperature inversions or other atmospheric phenomena that could be misinterpreted as UFOs; check local civilian and military airports for information regarding general air traffic and weather balloon launches; and approach local police stations for facts regarding related sightings or witnesses not already interviewed. Considered by many, especially those in positions of authority, to be a great nuisance, they did in fact turn many a UFO (Unidentified Flying Object) into an IFO (Identified Flying Object) while also supplying invaluable written and visual material to the major civilian UFO organisations.

Apart from their contribution to the APII, Dwight enjoyed meeting them because so many of them were young, optimistic and enthusiastic in a manner that was both contagious and encouraging. He needed the encouragement because Beth had told him about her inexplicable blackout and CE1 experience on the road opposite the garage where Dwight had once worked – and where the new owner, Frank Bancroft, had experienced something so terrifying that it had caused him to die of a heart attack. Beth's story had only reinforced Dwight's belief that he – and perhaps other UFOlogists – were being watched and were also, almost certainly, in constant danger.

While Dwight's brief with the APII was restricted solely to an investigation of UFO sightings as potential extraterrestrial visitations, he was also secretly keeping his eyes and ears open for any further information on the possibility that they, or other UFOs, were man-made.

This possibility had obsessed him ever since his old friend, US Air Force Captain Andrew 'Andy' Boyle, had told him about spherical-or-disc-shaped experimental aircraft, notably the Avrocar constructed at the A. V. Roe Aircraft Company in Malton, Ontario. Though reportedly this man-made 'flying saucer' had failed to fly with any great degree of efficiency, the fact that its existence had been officially denied until it was photographed on the ground by a press photographer lent some credibility to the notion that the same project, or similar projects, but of a much more advanced kind, were still being undertaken, either in Canada or in the top-secret military research establishments of the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico.

As long as he lived, Dwight would not forget his experience with the men in black in that motel on the outskirts of Albuquerque in 1954, five years ago – the event that had finally made him decide to leave the Air Force for good. The description given by Andy Boyle of the dome-shaped 'aircraft' he had seen landing outside a secret hangar at Cannon Air Force Base was also an indelible memory for Dwight, since the 'aircraft' as described by Andy was almost certainly a flying saucer: its fuselage formed by two plates, one placed upside down on the other, with a raised Perspex dome in the middle – obviously the pilot's cabin – and circular, gyroscopically balanced plates revolving around it. Whether extraterrestrial or man-made, that flying saucer had undoubtedly been kept for an indeterminate period in that heavily guarded hangar at Cannon AFB.

Later, after his terrifying experience with what may have been a flying saucer hovering outside his motel window, followed by a frightening encounter with a group of men dressed all in black, who had threatened him and stolen Andy's invaluable UFO photo, Dwight had tried to contact Andy again to find out if he'd had a similar experience. First he learnt that Andy had been transferred to Alaska with hardly any notice at all. A week later, he learnt that Andy had died in an unexplained helicopter crash over Mt McKinley. Neither his body nor that of the pilot had been found.

From that moment on, Dwight had been haunted by Andy's contention that

the flying saucers could indeed be man-made. It was not a hypothesis he had dared to raise so far with Dr Frederick Epstein at the APII, since he had not come across any supportive evidence for what Andy had told him before his untimely death. He had, nevertheless, asked one of his NICAP researchers, Tony Scaduto, to bring him anything he happened to find along those lines. Now, he was on his way to meet Scaduto in a bar in Georgetown, to hear what he had sworn on the phone was a fascinating story relating to man-made flying saucers.

Dwight and Scaduto met in an Irish pub in Connecticut Avenue. Downstairs the bar was packed with drunken marines from Quantico; upstairs, where Dwight and Scaduto met, it was even more packed, but with a mixed crowd joining in the songs being played by a four-piece Irish band - autoharp, fiddle, flatpick guitar, mandolin – while turning red-faced from Guinness stout, Harp on tap, and dangerously large whiskey chasers. Tony was a twenty-five-year-old Brooklyn boy, still single, who loved rock 'n' roll music and dressed like Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*. A good-natured, fun-loving young man, he was also bright, if potentially self-destructive when it came to drinking, smoking and women.

'This is a good place to meet for a talk,' Dwight informed him, glancing at the energetic, noisy Irish band. 'I can hardly hear myself speak.'

'They go off in a minute,' Scaduto said. 'Then we can have a proper talk. Meanwhile, what's your poison?'

'I haven't been in an Irish pub for years, so make it a pint of Guinness. Anyway,' he added, after Scaduto had ordered his drink and another for himself, 'I thought you were a rock 'n' roll fan – not a fan of *this* kind of music.'

'This is the year the music died,' Tony replied laconically. 'Buddy Holly, the Big Bopper and Richie Valens – all killed in a plane crash. Meanwhile, Elvis, *sans* sideburns, is serving out his time with the goddamned US Army in West Germany, leaving us with Pat Boone, Frankie Avalon, Bobby Rydell and all the other puke-making mother's boys. No wonder I'm listening to Irish music! It's all we've got left.'

Eventually, just as the barman brought them two more pint glasses of Guinness, the band on the stage took a break to enthusiastic applause.

'They'll be off-stage for about half-an-hour,' Scaduto told Dwight. 'That should be enough time for our discussion.'

‘So what’s this fascinating story you have for me?’

‘Pretty bizarre, to put it mildly,’ Scaduto replied, ‘so I couldn’t resist it.’

‘Stop teasing,’ Dwight told him.

Scaduto grinned, sipped some Guinness, then wiped foam from his lips with the back of his band. ‘I picked this story up from one of my informants: a civilian secretary at the Office of Naval Intelligence.’

‘Sounds well placed,’ Dwight said.

‘She’s often well placed in my bed,’ Scaduto said, grinning. ‘Anyway, according to my lady friend – a great lay, incidentally – a woman psychic in Portland, Maine, recently informed the CIA that she’d had telepathic contact with extraterrestrials in what she thought was a space-ship.’

‘A crank,’ Dwight said, unable to hide his disappointment.

‘Not necessarily – though that’s exactly what the CIA thought at first. Since to them it seemed like a classic scam – a woman, a supposed psychic, using automatic handwriting for communication with extraterrestrials – the CIA gave it a miss. However, the Canadian government got their hands on the CIA report and, instead of dismissing it, which seemed the logical thing to do, they sent their leading UFOlogist, accompanied by a government-trained hypnotist, to interview her where she lived in Portland. According to the UFOlogist, the woman, in a hypnotic trance, correctly answered highly complex questions about space flight, about which she had formerly known dip-shit.’

Scaduto had another sip of his Guinness and glanced at the women scattered around the bar as he licked the foam from his lips.

‘Not surprisingly,’ he continued eventually, ‘when the US Navy learned about this, they sent two intelligence officers to talk to the same woman. During the subsequent interrogation, one of the Navy intelligence officers, who had, please note, *been trained in ESP*, tried to tune in to the woman’s contactee. When this experiment failed, he and his colleague returned to Washington DC and informed the CIA at Langley, Virginia.’

Though the Irish band had stopped playing, a few of the older patrons of this generally youth-orientated pub, their faces flushed with drink, began rocking from side to side while tearfully singing, ‘I’ll take you home again, Kathleen.’

‘Someone should take *them* home,’ Scaduto said as he glanced at them and then turned back to Dwight. ‘So, where was I?’

‘When the ESP-trained Navy intelligence officer failed to make contact with the woman’s contactee, he and his friend returned to report their failure to the CIA at Langley. So how did the CIA react?’

‘Well, instead of expressing their disappointment, the CIA – possibly impressed because Navy intelligence had gone to so much trouble for a case that they, the CIA, had ignored – displayed more interest than before, In fact, they arranged for the ESP-trained intelligence officer to try making contact from CIA headquarters, right there at Langley Field, Virginia. Six witnesses – two of them CIA employees, one of whom was agent Jack Fuller, the others from the Office of Naval Intelligence - got together in the office in Langley to observe the results of the experiment.’

Trying to ignore the tuneless singing of the maudlin drunkards nearby, Dwight, becoming intrigued despite his initial scepticism, leaned closer to Scaduto and asked, ‘Well?’

‘This time, when the ESP-trained intelligence officer went into his hypnotic trance, he made contact with *someone*.’

‘Was the identity and whereabouts of that someone made known?’

‘Not at first. When the intelligence officer, in his trance condition, was asked if he was in contact with ordinary men, spirit beings or extraterrestrials, he said it was the latter. When one of the men in the room then demanded some kind of proof for this assertion, the intelligence officer, still in his hypnotic trance, said that if they looked out the window they would see a flying saucer high in the sky over the Capitol building. When the men went to the window and looked out, that’s just what they saw: a large flying saucer hovering silently in the sky, approximately over Capitol Hill.’

‘Did they have the sense to try for confirmation of their sighting?’

‘Surprisingly, they did. A quick phone call from one of the CIA officers – almost certainly Fuller – to Washington National Airport, established that at that very moment the radar centre there was reporting that its radar returns were being blacked out in the direction of the sighting over Capitol Hill.’

Dwight gave a low whistle. ‘So what happened then?’

‘The operator at Washington National Airport had no sooner finished complaining about his blacked-out radar returns when the flying saucer shot up vertically and disappeared – reportedly as quickly as a light bulb blinking out.’

‘What was the saucer like?’

Scaduto shrugged, sipped some more Guinness, then placed his glass back on the counter. ‘That’s the problem,’ he said. ‘No description of the flying saucer was released. A lid was slammed on the whole thing.’

Dwight shook his head in despair. ‘Damn!’ he exclaimed, lowering his head. Then he looked up again. ‘So how did your friend, the great lay, come to hear the story?’

‘Good one.’ Scaduto grinned from ear to ear. ‘Major Robert J. Friend, present head of the increasingly impotent Project Blue Book, was informed of the events of that day by the CIA and promptly arranged for Duke University’s parapsychology lab to investigate both the psychic from Maine and the ESP-trained intelligence officer. That investigation led to the mistaken declassification of the original reports – and those reports eventually passed through the Office of Naval Intelligence, thus through my friend’s hands.’

‘Then on to you.’

‘Right. When we were sharing her warm bed.’

‘She didn’t give you the original reports?’

‘No, of course not!’ Scaduto pretended to be affronted, before grinning again. ‘She just lovingly whispered the info into my ear.’

‘Before sticking her tongue in it, no doubt.’

‘A gentleman never tells.’

Dwight grinned and nodded. ‘So what were the results of the Duke University investigations?’

‘God knows. Their report never materialised, Project Blue Book released no analysis of the sighting report, the government did nothing about the unexplained Washington DC radar blackout, and the origin of the flying saucer seen over Capitol Hill remains a secret to this day. As for the men present at the hypnotic trance session in that room in Langley, the CIA took *punitive* action against them by transferring them to other positions – with the single exception of CIA agent Jack Fuller.’

‘So why didn’t you ask Fuller what happened?’

Scaduto grinned and tapped the side of his nose with his index finger. ‘I did. He denied any involvement in such a matter, then laughed and cut me off.’

‘He’s a sharp bastard, that Fuller. Sharp and hard.’

‘He is that, sure enough,’ Scaduto said, automatically influenced by the pub

and sounding rather Irish.

Dwight had another sip of his drink, licked his lips, then gazed down thoughtfully at his glass. ‘A nice little story,’ he said, ‘but it seems too far-fetched to be true.’

‘It may seem that way to you,’ Scaduto responded without pause, ‘but the incident – or something very like it – must have taken place, because Major Friend later wrote about the whole business in an official Memorandum for the Record. That Memorandum has since been filed in the Air Force Archives at Maxwell AFB, Montgomery, Alabama – but it wasn’t filed until a copy found its way into the hands of a few UFOlogists. The Memorandum is genuine – either that, or Major Friend, the present head of Project Blue Book, is submitting fiction in his official reports.’

Dwight nodded affirmatively, acknowledging this undeniable truth. ‘So just what are you trying to tell me, Tony?’

‘You want another Guinness?’

‘No. I’m catching a plane back to Dayton when I leave here. Home sober when greeted by wife and daughter, then sit down, respectably sober, to dinner.’

‘Yeah, I get the picture.’ Only twenty-five years old, still single, and filled with sexual vitality, Scaduto glanced sideways, to where an attractive, raven-haired girl in tight blue jeans and sweater was studying him slyly in the mirror angled over the bar. More wily than she would realise until it was too late, he had ascertained her interest and was about to move in on her.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Before I offer that little sweetheart a drink or two, I’ll tell you exactly what I think.’ He smiled at the girl, then lowered his gaze as if shy, though in fact he was concentrating again on Dwight. ‘I’ve always been intrigued,’ he said, ‘by the unusual amount of official interest paid to the so-called Woman from Maine – a civilian female with supposed telepathic abilities. I am, however, wise to the fact that both the Russian secret police – the KGB – and the CIA have, for years, been investigating the espionage potential of mental telepathy, psychic photography, and other forms of parapsychology. So I’m naturally starting to wonder if there could be any connection between that fact and the Woman from Maine.’

‘What kind of connection?’

‘Since communication by mental telepathy has already been attained with some degree of success in Soviet *and* American laboratories, and between

submarine and land bases, it's possible that the CIA was genuinely concerned with that technologically-ignorant woman's inexplicable knowledge of the more complex details of space flight. As the CIA is interested in the espionage potential of telepathy, it stands to reason that they'd have certain men trained in ESP and would send one to attend the trance session. If we then accept that telepathic communication was made with *someone* in that office in CIA headquarters, Langley, Virginia, and that the agent in a trance, if not actually making that UFO materialise, had at least been informed telepathically of its existence, it then seems possible that the Woman from Maine had been in contact with a telepathically-trained US *government* employee, albeit by accident.'

'Are you suggesting that the UFO seen over Capitol Hill was a *US government* flying saucer?'

'Yes,' Scaduto said.

'Man-made?'

'Exactly. The more I look into these damned things, the more I'm convinced that the White House, the Pentagon, and certainly Army, Navy and Air Force intelligence of the White Sands Proving Ground and other top-secret areas, are deliberately causing confusion, doubt and fear regarding UFO sightings because they're protecting their own. While the more technically advanced saucers might indeed be extraterrestrial, I think the US Army, Navy or Airforce also have their own models. I don't know for sure – but I believe so.'

'Have you raised that belief with Dr Epstein or anyone else at APII?'

'No. This theory goes completely against the grain of most of the UFO organisations, including APII and NICAP, so I'm keeping my big mouth shut for now. You're the first person in the business who's told me he's interested in the same possibility, so that's why I've told you this.'

'And you're still interested?'

'Damned right I am.'

'It could be a dangerous thing to pursue,' Dwight told him.

'I don't scare easily.' Scaduto retorted, then he turned his head to smile deliberately, invitingly, at the raven-haired girl farther along the bar. She crossed her shapely legs and returned Scaduto's winning smile.

'You're in like Flynn,' Dwight told him, slipping off the barstool and taking his overnight bag in his hand. 'If you come across anything else, please give

me a call.'

'I will,' Scaduto promised, already slipping off his stool to make his move on the girl still smiling at him.

'Meanwhile, try to stay out of trouble, Tony.'

'The only trouble I'm going to get into,' Scaduto said, 'will be found between that sweetheart's legs.'

Dwight sighed, recalling the days of his own youth. Then he left the bar.

Chapter Thirty

The biggest flying saucer to date, the *Goddard*, named after Wilson's only hero, the American rocket genius Robert H. Goddard, was known as the 'mother ship' because it was 350 foot in diameter, 150 foot high at the central point between dome and base, built in three layers, and carried not only a crew of over fifty men, but also the smaller manned saucers, those the size of the original *Kugelblitz*, the even smaller, three foot to twelve foot diameter, unmanned, remote-controlled probes, and a variety of large and small CAMS either piloted by small, surgically mutated Ache Indian cyborgs, remote controlled from the mother ship, or programmed to react robotically to certain stimuli for the exploration of the sea bed. Technologically even more advanced than its predecessor, *Kugelblitz III*, the gigantic *Goddard* was powered by a highly advanced electromagnetic propulsion system that ionised the surrounding air or sea, an electromagnetic damping system that aided the craft's lift and hovering capabilities, and bodywork composed of an electrically charged magnesium orthosilicate so minutely porous that it managed to be waterproof while ensuring, when airborne, an absolute minimum of friction, heat and drag.

It was Wilson's intention to have even bigger 'mother ships' for sea-bed exploration and flights in outer space, but at the moment this 350-foot craft, submerged deep in the Sargasso Sea between Florida and Bermuda, was the best he could manage for the most ambitious series of underwater experiments he had so far attempted. These included the capturing of marine beasts and fish never before seen by man, a general exploration of the sea-bed and the collection of samples from it, the abduction of crew members of boats afloat in the area known as the Bermuda Triangle, and, in two instances, the capture of whole motorboats, complete with their terrified passengers.

'A truly great achievement,' Vance Whitaker, the new Flight Captain of the mother-ship, said as he gazed through the viewing window – he was standing

between Wilson and Sea Captain Ritter Dietrich – at the artificially and naturally illuminated wonders of the deep, including all kinds of plankton, bizarre fish, and other creatures never before seen by man and either remarkably beautiful or, by human standards, hideous. ‘Absolutely magnificent!’

Wilson did not bother explaining to the chemically ‘indoctrinated’ former NASA astronaut that the colony’s great advances in submersible technology had only been made possible because of the many undersea prototypes tried out in Antarctica with living crewmembers, none of whom had volunteered, many of whom had lost their lives when the prototypes leaked in the ice-covered sea or broke up underwater. *Goddard*, however, was the superb result of those experiments and could be used either under the water or in the stratosphere. For this reason it had a Sea Captain, Ritter Dietrich, for undersea voyages, as well as a Flight Captain, Vance Whitaker, for atmospheric and stratospheric flight. As the last pilot, another abducted USAF officer, had never managed to learn the complexities of stratospheric flight, he had recently been terminated and replaced by this new man, Whitaker, who, the previous month, had supposedly crashed in the sea near the Bahamas, 360 miles from Cape Canaveral, during a fifteen-minute sub-orbital test flight of NASA’s new Mercury spacecraft.

The three men were standing at one of the many windows of the control room, which had about a dozen reinforced viewing windows around its circular wall and a dome-shaped ceiling of heat-resistant, reinforced Perspex over which was what resembled a great umbrella of seamless steel, though it was actually minutely porous magnesium orthosilicate, like the rest of the hull. The dome-shaped steel covering of the Perspex ceiling – seen from outside as the central dome of the flying saucer – was divided almost invisibly into two concave sections that could slide apart in opposite directions and curved back down into the floor, thus giving the crew members a 360° view from any part of the flight deck.

The latter was composed of what looked like the standard hardware for a normal airliner, including switch panels, pitch-trim controls, autopilot engage switch, inertial navigation, navigational radio selector, weather radar, radio equipment, intercom switches, an unknown brand of ADF (automatic direction finder), computer selection switches, and an unusually small but exceptionally powerful computer that controlled most of the flight-deck

functions and could be activated by an electronic ‘voice’ composed of minute vibrations transmitted at varying speeds and frequencies.

Such orders were conveyed by the small Ache cyborgs who, though having had their vocal cords severed as part of their lower-face surgery, including the removal of the nose, mouth and jaw, communicated electronically from their metal prosthetics to the electronic-voice activated computer. Instructions to the cyborgs were communicated via a pinhead microphone strapped to the throat of a human superior, such as Sea Captain Dietrich or Flight Captain Whitaker, and activated by an on/off switch built into his international date-time wristwatch. As Flight Captain Whitaker had already learned, the flight deck did *not* contain such standard aircraft controls as thruster reverse light, nose gear tiller, speed brake handle, or even brake pressure or aileron and rudder trims, as these were not required for the unique propulsion system of the *Goddard*.

Dubbed the ‘mother ship’ because it was actually a carrying ship, the *Goddard* used its wide variety of large and small CAMS to pick up exotic marine life, lost treasure from ancient sea wrecks, and a wealth of normally unavailable minerals from the ocean-bed and from Earth – notably, in the latter case, the bodily parts of animals, which were required for the continuing medical experiments in the Antarctic colony.

The Goddard could also release, and receive, highly advanced versions of the original *Feuerballs*, the latest models being used mainly as spy-satellites and radar-blocking devices, but with the added capability of laser-beam technology that could make the engines of automobiles and aircraft malfunction, as well as stunning or hypnotising human beings.

Looking at the battery-charged lights beaming out through the murk of the ocean, revealing ever more as the great craft surfaced, Flight Captain Whitaker said: ‘Aren’t you frightened that the lights, if seen by the crews or passengers of ships or aircraft, will give your presence away?’

‘No,’ Wilson replied with confidence. ‘USOS, or Unidentified Submarine Objects, are even harder to identify than UFOs because of the wide diversity of marine biology, which includes a surprising amount of phosphorescent plant and animal life. Look!’ He pointed at the window, to what appeared to be unusual plants that were drifting through and around the beams of the *Goddard’s* lights, giving off their own eerie illumination. ‘Single-celled, luminous, planktonic organisms. They glow even brighter when near the

surface of the sea, being stimulated by the movement of the waves. Others, such as the *Cypridina Noctiluca*, actually *respond* automatically to beams of light, such as searchlights, by ejecting a luminous cloud in the water. Luminous crustaceans, such as copepods, some living on the water's surface, some in the ocean depths, can be found in seas all over the world. Then, of course, you have jellyfish and other coelenterates and ctenophores, which also create patches of light in the water – some very big. So, as you can appreciate, experienced sailors or pilots who see our lights under the water aren't likely to be too concerned. That only comes when we surface. Which, of course, we'll be doing shortly. Come with me, Flight Captain.'

Leaving Dietrich to supervise the surfacing of the *Goddard*, Wilson led Whitaker out of the flight deck and along a curving, steel-walled, white-painted corridor (for it was, in fact, circular, running around the inner rim of the giant saucer, as did the corridors on all levels) until they came to a closed door, which opened automatically when Wilson aimed his remote control at it. The doorway led to the top level of an immense, silvery-grey dome filled with ladders and catwalks. Below were glittering doors and platforms, modules of steel and glass, shining mazes of pipes coiled around generators, bright lights flashing off more white-painted walls. There were people down there, looking tiny and far away, climbing ladders, crossing catwalks, moving up and down that 150-foot drop in elevators constructed like steel cages.

About halfway down, fifty feet above the lowest floor, on a centrally positioned, circular-shaped, third-level platform, in the centre of the lowest, largest workshop, the smaller man-made saucer, *Kugelblitz II*, which Whitaker estimated was 150 foot in diameter, was resting on its launch pad, surrounded by four even smaller, unmanned flying-saucer probes, each about fifteen foot wide.

'This way,' Wilson said, leading Whitaker across the catwalk, above that dizzying drop, until they arrived at the cage-like elevator that descended through the centre of the *Goddard*, from just under the floor of the flight deck to the third-level platform. Once down there, Wilson, followed by the obedient Whitaker, advanced to the lowered ramp of the *Kugelblitz II*.

Just as they reached the smaller saucer, the *Goddard* broke the surface of the ocean, with the sea suddenly roaring and pounding as water parted around the outer steel covering of the dome and rushed down its sides. The great mother ship rocked gently for a moment as it floated in the turbulent waves

created by its own surfacing, but eventually, when the sea's surface had returned to normal, the rocking stopped and the metallic dome divided in two, forming separate concave plates that moved away from each other, then sank back out of sight, leaving only the immense dome of special heat-resistant, reinforced Perspex, through which sunlight beamed down to form a dazzling web of silvery-white striations that illuminated the gloomy interior.

Glancing upwards, Wilson and Whitaker saw the different floors more clearly, with men in grey or black coveralls hurrying across catwalks, clambering up and down ladders, or moving back and forth in the glass-panelled offices located around the curved inner wall of the mother ship.

'What a sight!' Whitaker whispered, clearly awe-struck.

Even as he was speaking, immense panels in a section of the wall of the mother ship slid apart like the doors of an aircraft hangar, offering a view of the vast, sunlight sky and a glimpse of the sea below.

'The level upon which this landing pad is located,' Wilson explained to Whitaker, 'is approximately fifty feet above the surface of the sea. Let's go in.'

They entered the *Kugelblitz II* by walking up the sloping ramp that would, once they were inside, be retracted to form the underside of the bottom disc. This is exactly what happened: the ramp moved back up into the loading bay on thick steel hinges, until it formed part of the wall, slotting back where it belonged with such precision that the joins around its edge could scarcely be seen and formed a perfect waterproof, airtight seal.

The loading bay was actually a space in the revolving lower disc, used only as a passageway for men and equipment; in other words, anyone, or anything, entering the loading bay from outside had to continue on until they were in the non-rotating main body of the saucer. For this reason, Wilson and Whitaker hurried through the loading bay, which could have been that of any large aircraft, and emerged to the central, non-revolving main body, which also was circular, being the bottom of the large, dome-shaped superstructure. After following the corridor around for a few more feet, they stepped into an elevator that took them up nearly fifty feet, past the engine rooms, storage rooms, barred cages for abducted people, a surgery where those abducted could be medically examined or even dissected during flight, latrines, foodstores, a small recreation room containing books, maps, and a recently invented video-TV set that could show films on tape, and, finally, into the

flight deck.

For the time being the meniscus-shaped, porous-metal covering for the Perspex dome was open, giving those on the flight deck a 360° view of the interior of the mother ship, though from their position on the landing pad they could see only the third-floor level and most of what was above it. The flight deck was, at that moment, being prepared for take-off by another crew of surgically mutated and robotised Ache Indians who, being small, and with their lower-face metal prosthetics and myoelectric metal claws (actually small CAMS), looked even more frightening than they would have had they been taller.

No sooner had Wilson and Whitaker entered the flight deck than two massive plates in what had appeared to be the seamless facing wall of the mother ship slid apart and kept opening until they formed a rectangular space about the same size as the entrance to an aircraft hangar. That great space framed a sheer blue sky, the clear horizon, and a strip of green-blue sea.

As Wilson and Whitaker strapped themselves into seats at the control panel – between the busy cyborgs whose metallic throats were giving off infrasounds that enabled them to electronically 'talk' to the computerised controls – the *Kugelblitz II* throbbed with that familiar bass humming sound, then vibrated slightly, swayed from side to side, and finally lifted a couple of feet off the landing pad. While it was still hovering, Wilson nodded to Flight Captain Whitaker, who, now taking command, spoke his instructions, in plain English, into the pinhead microphone strapped to his throat, as part of a communication system that included a covert ear piece for receiving. Those spoken instructions would be converted by the computer into an electronic language understood by the saucer's control console, which would react accordingly.

Because the saucer utilised a gravity shield that came on automatically when required, its passengers needed no protection against the pull of gravity or increasing outer pressure and were only strapped into their chairs during the initial stages of take-off. Now, under Whitaker's supervision, the hovering saucer advanced horizontally to the large opening in the sloping side of the hull, hovered again halfway across the lip of the opening, then moved outside altogether and stopped again, hovering just a few feet from the *Goddard*, but a good fifty feet above the surface of the Sargasso Sea. There, at a command from Whitaker, the meniscus-shaped, metallic outer casings of

the dome emerged from the floor at both sides of the flight deck and curved upwards and inward to meet at the top of the dome, forming what looked deceptively like a seamless whole. Matching windows in the lower half of the metallic casing ensured that the flight crew still had their 360° view, though they could no longer see directly above them.

As the dome was being sealed, the four fifteen-foot diameter, unmanned probes also emerged from the mother ship to surround the *Kugelblitz II* and prepare for take-off.

Being already in the air, the five craft did not follow the usual two-stage pattern of flying saucer take-offs: a tentative, vertical rise of between fifty and a hundred feet, then a spectacular, remarkably quick blast-off, either vertically or at a sharp angle. Instead, they hovered beside the mother ship until the gravity shield had come on, then abruptly shot off to the west, heading for Florida.

Protected by the *Kugelblitz II*'s gravity shield, those inside had no need to keep themselves strapped to their chairs. There was absolutely no sign or feeling of movement. However, as the journey from the Sargasso Sea to the Florida Keys took only a few minutes, neither Wilson nor Whitaker thought it worthwhile unbuckling his safety belt. Indeed, so fast was the saucer flying that at first, when the passengers looked straight ahead, they saw no more than what appeared to be a rapidly whipping, frantically spiralling tunnel of shimmering white light streaked with silvery-blue, a vertiginous well of brightness that gave no indication of which direction they were flying in: up, down, or straight ahead. It was, of course, the latter. Flying at a speed well beyond the sound barrier, Mach 1, over fifty miles high, on the very edge of space, they appeared to be suddenly blasted through the very sky itself, a giant envelope tearing open to reveal a vast azure sea that convulsed and turned purple, and then, just as abruptly, actually being the same sky, filled up with the dazzling radiance of a gigantic sun, even as the moon and stars also came out, clearly visible in the middle of the day, now present, with the sun, in an atmosphere so thin that even dust particles could not exist.

Seconds later, the *Kugelblitz II* and its four probes all slowed down to hovering speed, then hovered directly over Bimini, which could be seen as glowing dots on the radar screen and as it actually was on the TV monitor wired to a high-powered aerial camera. What the TV monitor showed, in fact, was a photomosaic of the western end of the Bermuda Triangle, the Gulf

Stream flowing northward between Florida and the Great Bahama Bank, and, in the middle of the picture, Bimini itself, here in monochrome, but in actuality a ravishing tapestry of green and blue streaked with so-called ‘white’ water, containing sulphur, strontium and lithium, which often made it glow eerily.

‘Send the probes down,’ Wilson ordered into his throat microphone.

Within seconds, the four unmanned ‘probe’ saucers had flown out horizontally in the four directions of the compass, stopped abruptly, hovered briefly, then shot down towards the sea off Bimini, moving so fast that they looked like no more than tiny lights, then disappearing completely as they plunged into the water and descended, still fully operational, to the sea-bed. There, under robotic control and with the use of their CAMS, they would explore and collect samples of rock, stone, soil, plants and plankton from what might be the remains of the cyclopean walls, truncated pyramids, carved pillars, causeways and stone circles of a lost civilisation, possibly Atlantis. While Wilson was not yet ready to embrace this theory, his encyclopaedic knowledge of ancient history impelled him to explore the possibilities and see what could be learnt from them. This was the job of the four small ‘probe’ saucers that were almost certainly, right now, extending their crab-like metallic claws to start picking up items from the sea-bed between Bimini and Andros.

‘So,’ he said when the probes had disappeared into the sea, ‘let’s head for Cocoa Beach.’

When the relevant instructions had been transmitted, the saucer ascended vertically about fifty feet, then shot off in a blur of speed towards Miami. With its gravitational shield also functioning as an inertial shield, the mass of the UFO with regard to gravity was reduced to a minute fraction of its former value, permitting exceptional buoyancy in the atmosphere, extremely high accelerations (so fast, indeed, that the human eye could not see the saucer’s take-off and would imagine that it had abruptly disappeared) and the capability of coming to a remarkably fast stop or going into abrupt, right-angle turns without harming those inside, they also being protected by the gravity shield.

Now on programmed autopilot, the saucer knew where it had go. Upon approaching the mainland, it suddenly stopped, made an abrupt turn, and then shot off in a northerly direction, automatically following the topography of

the land by means of a control system that bounced radar-like signals off the ground and back to the saucer for instant computer analysis and constantly changing flight directions. Because of this, as well as the weakening and strengthening of the gravitational pull of Earth when the saucer dropped low enough, the saucer appeared to be bobbing repeatedly as it sped on its horizontal flight path towards Cocoa Beach.

It stopped abruptly and precisely over the prearranged meeting place in a field in a protected area just outside Patrick Air Force Base, two miles from the village of Greater Cocoa Beach and Cape Canaveral, the swamp-land from which dozens of Atlas, Thor, Titan and Snark missiles, as well as America's first Earth satellite, *Explorer 1*, had been launched.

As the *Kugelblitz II* hovered high above the normal civilian and Air Force flight paths, waiting for the fall of darkness, Wilson and Whitaker partook of a light meal – the usual fruit-and-nut cereal, with a glass of dry, white wine – while discussing the many changes that had taken place down there on the east coast of Florida, where Whitaker had also trained and flown as a budding astronaut, before being abducted by Wilson.

'When I first went there,' Whitaker said, 'about seven years ago, Cocoa Beach consisted of a couple of dozen families strewn amongst the sand dunes and palmettos. Strangers rarely turned up and the villagers did little other than fish for their food and swim for their leisure. Now it's called Greater Cocoa Beach, which includes the original village and its environs, and it has a population of approximately ten thousand souls, including astronauts, aircraft pilots, scientists, rocket engineers, ballistics experts, and a local community obsessed with making money out of the space race. Some amazing things are happening down there.'

'Only amazing relative to the accomplishments of the rest of the West,' Wilson noted. 'Only amazing because of what we *let* them do. But we're now so many years ahead of them, they'll never catch up with us.'

'Jack Fuller thinks differently,' Whitaker said. 'And that man's no fool.'

'He's not a scientist, either, Flight Captain. That's his major weakness. His others are vanity, material greed and excessive patriotism, all of which can be used against him, if and when necessary. We've no cause for concern there.'

Feeling nervous, as he always did when outside the Antarctic colony, this being part of the chemical 'indoctrination' process undergone upon his arrival, Whitaker checked his wristwatch. 'Maybe we should have arranged

the meeting somewhere in Cape Canaveral,' he said. 'It's now a restricted military zone of about fifteen thousand acres, including a lot of uncleared jungle. We might have been more secure there.'

'Or we might have been eaten by a puma,' Wilson retorted, knowing that those animals still roamed wild there. 'Besides, these days the Cape is crawling with tourists – even around the restricted zone, which they try to spy upon with binoculars and cameras. Also, most of the military personnel in that zone still don't know about us, so they could prove to be troublesome.'

'What about the personnel of Patrick AFB?'

'The US-Canadian saucers are tested there,' Wilson explained, 'and kept hidden in hangars in a heavily guarded, top secret area – pretty much like Wright-Patterson's legendary Hangar 18. For this reason we trade with them and deal only with those on the base who've been told about us.'

'Like that CIA agent, Jack Fuller.'

Wilson smiled bleakly. 'Jack Fuller trades all over the place – where we go, he goes. So, yes, like Jack Fuller.' Glancing through the curved viewing window at the other side of the flight deck console, he saw that the sun now looked like blood pouring along the great bowl of the silvery horizon. 'The sun's setting, so they should be there by now. Complete the descent.'

Instantly, the *Kugelblitz II* started vibrating, wobbled a little, then, with its circular 'wings' rotating and their flashing lights forming a kaleidoscope, it steadied and descended vertically, first through the civilian and military flight paths, its radar constantly checking for approaching aircraft, then through the clouds, and finally all the way down to the circle of lights that marked the LZ, the landing zone, in the middle of a broad field that was encircled by electrified barbed-wire fences and further guarded by a large contingent of well-armed US Marines, spread equidistant around the perimeter.

Mere feet above the ground, whipping up dust, loose soil and leaves, the flying saucer bobbed a little and swayed gently as its hydraulic legs emerged obliquely from its convex base to dig into the ground. The bass humming sound faded away, the flashing lights blinked out in sequence, and then the saucer came to rest and was still.

Silence reigned.

Beyond the circle of upward-facing marker lamps in which the flying saucer had landed, nothing was visible except that broad, dark field and the

starry sky above it. Neither the electrified barbed-wire fence nor the Marines positioned around the perimeter were visible. For a while the saucer just sat there like a massive, silvery-grey mushroom, making no movement, producing no sound at all; eventually, however, the sound of a coughing engine broke the silence and a US Army jeep materialised out of the darkness to stop just outside the circle of marker lamps. The jeep's ignition was turned off, then its lights were extinguished, thus plunging it back into the darkness just outside the illuminated LZ.

In that darkness, Jack Fuller, wearing a light-grey suit with shirt and tie, clambered out of the jeep, followed by two Marines armed with 0.3-inch M1 semi-automatic rifles and carrying spare thirty-round detachable box magazines on their webbed belts. After staring thoughtfully at the flying saucer, Fuller nodded at the two soldiers, indicating that they should follow him at a reasonable distance. As they spread out behind him, he stepped between two of the marker lamps and walked slowly, carefully, towards the flying saucer.

Even as he was approaching the nearest edge of that immense, silvery-grey discus, a bass humming sound emanated from it and the top of a large plate, which before had formed part of the apparently seamless outer surface, moved away from the lower body, opening just enough to let out a long, thin blade of subdued whitish light. The top of the plate kept moving away from the wall, swivelling on hinges along its bottom end, falling backwards all the way to the ground, until it formed a wide ramp, eerily illuminated by the pale light pouring out from the loading bay of the saucer.

Three figures were silhouetted in that deliberately reduced lighting: a tall, slim man with two child-sized, oddly shaped creatures whose features could not immediately be defined. Only when Fuller had stopped near to where the ramp met the ground did he recognise the three figures as Wilson and two unfortunate Ache Indians, who had been surgically mutated to be fitted with metal prosthetics, including the replacement of the lower face and hands, thus turning them into robotic cyborgs, half man, half machine. What remained of their original faces was rendered even more visually dreadful by the fact that the only remotely human aspects to them were the oddly glassy eyes that turned this way and that, between the metal band of a studded stereotaxic skullcap and the metal nose of a prosthetic that had replaced the lower half of the face, including the mouth, jawbone and throat. Even Fuller, who took

certain horrors for granted, shuddered when he saw those pitiful, yet terrifying, creatures.

No wonder UFO contactees keep babbling about alien beings, he thought. What else could they possibly think, seeing creatures like these?

The cyborgs stood well apart and a little distance behind Wilson as the latter walked away from the ramp, to stop directly in front of Fuller. Glancing at Fuller's two armed Marines, he said, 'You know that bringing these men here is a waste of time. If you displease me, or in any way turn against me, they won't be able to help you.'

Fuller glanced at the two child-sized cyborgs standing behind Wilson and saw that they were holding what appeared to be stun guns in their myoelectric metal hands.

'Laser weapons?' he asked.

'What a bright boy you are, Fuller.'

'I like to keep up to date. So what do you want this time, Wilson?'

'Are you still here on behalf of President Eisenhower?'

'Yeah, right.'

'Why doesn't he send someone who has more authority. Why does he always send you?'

'Because, as you've doubtless noticed before, when dealing with the likes of generals Vandenberg and Samford, I'm a lot less antagonistic to you than men of a military mind-set.'

'You're antagonistic, all right. You just don't show it as openly.'

'That may be true, but the President still thinks it's best to keep the military out of this as much as possible. Also, he believes that if the wrong person finds out that the top brass of the White House and Pentagon are negotiating secretly with the likes of you, public outrage could lead to the fall of the whole government, including himself. Me, on the other hand... Well, I'm small fry and can be made to carry the can if we're found out. I'm not sure that's true at all, but that's what he believes.'

'You're not sure, but you know it's possible.'

'Right.'

'And you're willing to be sacrificed this way?'

'I love my country,' Fuller said.

'You're a fool.'

'So Fuller's a fool. What the hell? Now what do you want?'

For a moment it seemed that Wilson might actually display anger, but he simply stared steadily at Fuller, as if trying to read him. Obviously believing he had done so, he smiled bleakly and said, ‘As best I recall, when last you met my request for mass-produced components and other items, it left me owing you something.’

‘True enough. So you’ve come to pay off your debt to the US government?’

Again Wilson refused to rise to the bait by showing anger over Fuller’s bland mockery. Instead, he just said, ‘Yes.’

‘So what are you offering? Obviously not more scientific information. If so, I wouldn’t be here alone; you’d have asked for someone who could properly assess such information – not a scientific dumbhead like me. No, it must be to do with something else... Something to do with intelligence.’

‘You’re a fool, but you don’t lack common sense. That’s exactly it, Fuller.’

‘So *what* is it?’

‘I note that NASA has finally named the test pilots it’s selected for its first manned space project.’

‘Yeah, right: Project Mercury.’

‘I thought I should warn you not to let NASA become too complacent.’

‘Why?’

‘Almost certainly the Soviets will succeed, this September, in landing their *Lunik 2* spacecraft on the moon.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. Over the past two years I’ve been abducting a variety of Soviet scientists, engineers, academics and cosmonauts, to brainwash them with chemicals, take control of their minds with minute brain implants via stereotaxic skullcaps, and send them back to where they came from as my spies. Right now I have such spies in the Moscow headquarters of the Academy of Sciences, where the *Lunik 2* flight was planned; in Moscow University, where the space experiments were carried out; at the cosmodrome living quarters in East Kazakhstan, where the cosmonauts are being trained; in the airfield at Baikonur, two hundred miles north of the Aral Sea, where the launch will take place; and at the radio tracking complex at Burokane, Armenia, where the flight and moon landing will be monitored. So, yes, I know what I’m talking about. I’ve already landed on the moon – albeit in secret – but now the Soviets are about to do the same, leaving the US well

behind in the space race.'

'That could be humiliating,' Fuller confessed.

'Which is exactly why the Soviets are working so hard to do it.'

'That's an important piece of intelligence, Wilson, but not exactly repayment for that last shipment of US supplies to your base in Antarctica.'

Wilson's smile was bleak. 'No, I'm forced to agree with that. I do, however, bring you something else.'

Fuller glanced at the two cyborgs standing behind Wilson in the eerie, subdued lighting emanating from the holding area of the 150-foot diameter flying saucer. Wondering what they were thinking, if anything, about what had happened to them, their surgical and mental mutation, he shivered involuntarily, then glanced beyond them, to the illuminated holding bay. The light coming out of the saucers was usually dazzling, even blinding, but this light was pale, almost yellow, and not all that bright, which meant that he could actually see more than usual – and what he saw was nothing. Clearly, the holding bay was only an entrance to the main, fixed body around which the massive rings revolved.

Disappointed, he glanced back over his shoulder, first at the two armed Marine guards behind him, then beyond the wide circle of marker lamps. The light of the lamps, however, made it impossible to see as far as the barbed-wire perimeter, where the other Marines would be standing guard, preparing to fire at the saucer, if so signalled. Still, it was no comfort to Fuller to know that Wilson was right: that if he, Fuller, said the wrong thing or made the wrong move, he wouldn't have a prayer. He'd be paralysed by a stun gun, dragged up into the saucer, and almost certainly never be seen again. It wasn't a comforting thought.

'So what's the offer?' he asked.

'You'll take this to the White House?'

Fuller sighed. 'Yes, Wilson, direct to the President. So what am I to tell him, other than what you're already told me?'

'As you probably know...' Wilson began.

'Don't tell me what I already know.'

'As you already know,' Wilson repeated, almost gritting his teeth in the first sign of anger that he had ever displayed, 'at the end of this year, in an unprecedented international agreement, a total of twelve countries, including Britain, America and the Soviet Union, will be signing a treaty stating that no

country can claim any part of Antarctica as its own, and that the continent must be held as a common preserve for scientific research.'

'A noble idea,' Fuller said.

'Once the agreement is signed,' Wilson continued, ignoring Fuller's sarcasm, 'scientific and exploratory bases will be springing up all over Antarctica.'

'Which gives you a problem,' Fuller said.

'Yes.' Wilson's gaze was as icy as the continent he seemed to love. 'So in return for a guarantee that there will be no attempts to locate or capture my base and that all sightings of my flying saucers over Antarctica will be treated with ridicule or suppressed entirely – as already they are in the United States and elsewhere – I'll guarantee that America will be the first to land men on the moon.'

'Well, we'd certainly appreciate that,' Fuller said. 'But unfortunately the US can't place restrictions on the other nations signing the Antarctic agreement.'

'The US is the only nation with the capability of launching an attack on my otherwise inaccessible part of Neu Schwabenland – still known to the West as Queen Maud Land – so I'm not yet concerned with the other nations, but only with the US.'

Realising that Wilson was as genuinely concerned as his kind could be, which wasn't much, though it was at least something, Fuller felt a flicker of pleasure, while also accepting that this trade, no matter how indecent, could not be refused. Whether or not he – or the White House or the Pentagon – liked it, they could not afford to let the Soviets be the first to land on the moon and would therefore have to accede to Wilson's demands – just as they had done so often in the past. This was truly a bitter pill to swallow.

'I'm still not sure that we can do as you ask,' Fuller lied, 'but I'll certainly present it to the President with my personal, strong recommendation.'

'Good,' Wilson replied, showing no sign of gratitude.

After a lengthy silence, in which Wilson seemed deep in thought, Fuller, losing patience, said, '*Well*? Anything else, Mr Wilson?'

'Yes, there *is* another matter. I'm concerned that a certain Professor J. Allen Hynek, well known UFOlogist and codirector of the Smithsonian Institution's satellite tracking programme, has been allowed to head an unofficial UFO advisory group recruited by Project Blue Book and including,

as well as the redoubtable Hynek, an astronomer, a physicist, a psychologist, and Major Robert J. Friend, the present head of Project Blue Book and a man too co-operative with civilian UFO groups for my liking.'

'Stop worrying about Hynek and his group,' Fuller said. 'Project Blue Book is practically on its knees and its so-called advisory group is just another red herring for the increasing number of professional and amateur UFO sleuths. That advisory group, believe me, will be disbanded by the end of next year, after serving its real purpose, which is to spread so much doubt and confusion amongst the UFOlogists that most of them will give up completely and go back to playing with toy submarines in their baths.'

'And Hynek?'

'What about him? When the group sinks, he'll probably go down with it. As for Project Blue Book, while it's continued to make a strong show of examining UFO cases, it's now under pressure from above – don't look at me! – to produce a report stating that after twelve years of investigating and analysing UFO sightings, the ATIC has *no* evidence to suggest that UFOs are either space vehicles, a threat to national security, or of any scientific value whatsoever. The same report will describe the UFO programme as a costly and unproductive burden on the Air Force. Finally, it'll recommend that Project Blue Book's staff could be more constructively used on other programmes.'

'Very good, Fuller.'

'I've nothing to do with it,' Fuller lied again, though he couldn't resist a proud grin. 'Anyway, while that report's being prepared, we're still encouraging the public to think of the UFOs in terms of extraterrestrials – your men in black are widely believed to be just that. So all in all, the UFOlogists are imagining everything *except* man-made UFOs.'

'I know you're reluctant to take credit for this,' Wilson said, 'but I have to tell you it pleases me.'

'Good. So we're even until you next need supplies. Can I leave now, Wilson?'

'Your detestation is all too obvious,' Wilson said, 'if badly misplaced. Look to your own government – the one you revere – and then tell me which one of us is truly moral.'

'I'm not up to that, Wilson.'

'No, I don't suppose you are. Morals aren't your strong point.' Wilson

glanced across the field, to where the other Marines were hidden in darkness. Though he couldn't see them, he knew that they were there and was amused by the thought. 'One last thing,' he said, returning his gaze to Fuller.

'What?'

'Have you heard about the woman from Maine?'

'No.'

'Stop lying. If I know about her – and I do – you must know that I know you were involved.'

Now understanding that Wilson really *did* have eyes and ears everywhere, Fuller, badly shaken, which was rare, simply shrugged as if it was of no consequence. 'Yeah, right, I know about her. So? *What* about her?'

'I'll tell you about her,' Wilson said, suddenly sounding as angry as Fuller had ever heard him. 'I've learnt from this case that the CIA, like the KGB, is heavily involved in parapsychological research, particularly the possibilities of telepathic communication with regard to spying. Before you try denying it, please let me say that regarding the woman from Maine, I can tell you that she accidentally broke into an experimental communication between a land-based, ESP-trained Naval intelligence officer and a submerged submarine. Any story to the contrary is nonsense.'

That Wilson had found this out was a truly frightening revelation to the normally fearless Fuller.

'I can't confirm or deny that,' he said, knowing how lame it sounded.

Wilson shook his head from side to side, as if pitying the attempted deceptions of Fuller and his kind. 'You're hoping to reach our level of achievement in this field,' he told him, 'but you're wasting your time. I know about your woman from Maine because I broke into your telepathic communication in that office in CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, and arranged for that flying saucer to hover over Capitol Hill as a demonstration of how advanced we've become telepathically. So you see, Mr Fuller, no matter how advanced you believe you're becoming, we'll always be at least one step ahead of you – just as we are with our flying saucer technology. Your men are wasting their time.'

'Maybe' Fuller responded, trying to sound more confident than he felt. 'Maybe not. You're playing a dangerous game with these trade-offs, so you just might slip up some day.'

'I don't think so,' Wilson said. 'Thank you and good night.'

Flanked by his two hideous, deadly cyborgs, he turned away without another word and marched back up the ramp, into his towering flying saucer. Knowing better than to be within that circle of marker lamps when the saucer took off, Fuller hurried away with his two armed Marines, clambered back into his jeep, and let himself be driven back to the other Marines keeping guard around the electrified barbed-wire fence. From the other side of that fence, Fuller and the soldiers looked up in awe as the flying saucer turned into a magically glowing, egg-shaped craft that had lights of different colours flashing in rapid sequence around its revolving rings. It lifted off vertically, hovered a few seconds above the ground, illuminating the surrounding darkness with its eerie whitish glow and kaleidoscopic lights, then suddenly shot up vertically, made an abrupt turn to the west, about a hundred feet high, hovered again for a moment, then shot off and dwindled rapidly, until it was no more than a glowing light the size of a diamond. That light also shrank, merging with the stars, then abruptly blinked out.

Though nothing unusual could now be seen up there, Fuller and the many men around him kept scanning the night sky.

'Jesus Christ!' one of the soldiers behind Fuller exclaimed in a stunned, disbelieving way.

'No,' Fuller responded, now staring at the sky and accepting that he might indeed be defeated. 'Jesus Christ was in the past, soldier. You've just seen the future.'

He clambered back into the jeep and told the driver to return him to the Vanguard Hotel in Cocoa Beach. He didn't anticipate getting a good night's sleep, but at least he could be alone there.

Fuller needed a dark cave.

Chapter Thirty-One

‘I don’t scare easily,’ Scaduto told Dwight when they were having cold beers in the sweltering heat of an outdoor bar in Carillon Park, Dayton, Ohio, in July 1960. ‘But I don’t mind admitting that this business is starting to put me on edge. Particularly this latest piece of news.’

‘What news?’

‘Haven’t you heard?’ Despite the heat, Scaduto was wearing his customary black-leather jacket, blue denims and high-heeled boots. His sideburns were ink-black and prominent. ‘It was in yesterday’s newspapers. Your former Project Blue Book chief, Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, has died of an unexpected heart attack.’

Dwight was shocked to hear that. Captain Ruppelt was even younger than he was. The last time Dwight had seen him was that sad day in December 1953 when he had informed them of the dire results of the Robertson panel report and, even worse, told them that Project Blue Book was being run down and most of its staff, including Ruppelt, dispersed to other locations. It had been a sad day for all of them, but Ruppelt had at least been his relatively young, decent, healthy self. Certainly not heart attack material.

‘I don’t like it,’ Scaduto said. ‘In 1953, Ruppelt leaves the Air Force. Three years later he writes a book in which he states categorically that UFOs are for real. Three years after that, he revises the book, reversing his previous opinions and insisting that UFOs are probably natural phenomena. And approximately one year later, in 1960, weary before his time, he dies of a heart attack. It sure makes you think, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes, it does.’ In fact, this shocking piece of news had reminded Dwight not only of the many other people involved in UFO investigations who had died unexpectedly, been killed in surprising ways, or committed ‘suicide’ for no discernible reason. It had also reminded him of the many other ways in which UFO investigators had been made to suffer, including financial hardship, problems at work, sudden transfers to far-flung locations, actual threats and

other forms of harassment from the mysterious ‘men in black’, and marital breakdowns based on one or other of the former. Something else not easy to forget was the fact that many UFO researchers had disappeared completely, leaving no indication of why or where they had gone. They had simply never been seen again.

Last but by no means least, the news of Ruppelt’s unexpected death, added to the mysterious nature of his unexplained reversal regarding the reality of the UFO phenomenon and subsequent slide into depression and poor health after leaving the Air Force, had brutally reminded Dwight of Beth’s bizarre, frightening experience eighteen months ago, when she had been driving (or so she had thought) past the garage that Dwight had worked and lived in during the years of their separation.

For months prior to the incident, Beth had been complaining that she was having bad nightmares, relating to UFOs and tormenting men in black, that she felt she was being followed, though she had never actually seen anyone following her, and that she was haunted by the general feeling that something unknown was making her constantly fretful. The day of the incident in question, when she had just dropped Dwight off at the Dayton airport for his flight to Washington DC for his first normal visit to Dr Frederick Epstein at the APII, she had imagined she was driving past the garage, taken over from Dwight by bachelor Frank Bancroft, then realised that she had actually being *staring* at it for some time through the window of her car, which was parked inexplicably by the side of the road. She then noticed that her wristwatch had stopped two hours previously – at approximately the time she would have passed the garage after leaving the airport. Yet her wristwatch was not the only item to have malfunctioned: when she tried to switch on the ignition of her car, it wouldn’t start. Presumably, then, it had stopped of its own accord, just as Beth was driving past the garage, about ten minutes after leaving Dayton airport. Which in turn meant that Beth – who could not recollect having stopped and had, for some time, clearly been *imagining* that she was driving past the garage, not just parked across the road from it – had blacked out, either just before or just after the vehicle had stopped, and had then remained unconscious for almost two hours.

It was damned mysterious.

Even worse was what Beth saw when she awakened... the immense circle created by the unnatural blowing of the wind, then given sharper

definition by the inexplicable scorching of the windblown grass, which ended up charred and smouldering; and then, infinitely more frightening, the discovery of Frank Bancroft, who had clearly died suddenly in mortal terror.

Since that incident, Beth had been more frightened than ever and Dwight, though he tried not to show it, had become more concerned for her and himself – he had even started worrying about Nichola's safety. Indeed, from that day on he had begun worrying that his UFO investigations were putting them all in mortal danger; but when he discussed this matter with Beth, she insisted that no matter the danger, he must continue the work and solve the mystery that was tormenting him, thus ridding himself of the obsession once and for all. Dwight had been deeply moved by her concern and courage.

'The news about Ruppelt is terrible,' he said to Scaduto, 'but obviously it isn't why you called this meeting. You could have told me about Ruppelt on the phone, so what you have brought me?'

'Man-made flying saucers,' Scaduto said.

Dwight glanced left and right, at the other customers packed around the trestle tables to take in the sun while drinking and eating. There were really too many people here... too many... too close to him.

'Finish your beer and let's go for a walk,' he said, feeling paranoid.

'Sure,' Scaduto said. 'I understand.' He hurriedly gulped the last of his beer, threw the can into the trash can near the table, then proceeded to stroll with Dwight through the park, which was, on this sunny day in July, filled with local people walking their dogs, teenagers careening about on roller-skates or bicycles, children playing with bats and balls. 'I think it's becoming more certain,' he began, 'that the UFOs seen over various Air Force installations are actually top-secret, highly advanced US-Canadian aircraft.'

He fell silent for a moment, letting Dwight take this in, but also relishing the melodrama, and continued talking as they meandered on through the park.

'I should remind you, Dwight, that at least *some* kind of saucer-shaped prototypes were actually constructed by the US and Canada: first, the US Navy's Flying Flounder and the Air Force's Flying Flapjack – projects reportedly worked on sometime between 1942 and 1947 – followed by the flying saucer that the Canadian government claimed had been aborted and passed over to the US in 1954.'

'Right,' Dwight said. 'I remember.'

'Now the most interesting thing about those projects is that the US Navy

claimed to have dropped its project back in 1947, though it was known to be still involved in super-secret aeronautical projects scattered around the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico – where so many flying saucers have been reported. Also, the Canadian government, while admitting that the enormous UFO seen over Albuquerque in 1951 was similar to the one they'd tried to build, claimed that they'd passed the project on to the US because they couldn't afford it... In other words, the UFO over Albuquerque could have been a US product based on the Canadian designs of 1947.'

'Where's all this leading, Tony?'

Scaduto stopped to light a cigarette and contaminate the pure air of the park with smoke. Though bright, he had an addictive personality that, so far, had given him a taste for alcohol, cigarettes and easy women. He had also flirted with marijuana, but so far had kept a decent reign on it. Inhaling, then exhaling a cloud of smoke, he started walking again.

'Ever since I began this man-made UFO business,' he said, 'I've found myself harping back on the fact that the first major contemporary sightings, the Kenneth Arnold sightings of June 24, 1947, took place near Mount Rainier in the Cascades in the state of Washington – which divides Canada from Oregon – and that Arnold had stated that *nine* silvery discs had disappeared in the direction of the Canadian border. As I've since found out, however, what wasn't so widely known at the time was the fact that on that very same day another man, Fred Johnson, prospecting about four thousand feet up in the Cascades, reported seeing six similar objects; and three days before that, on June 21, Harold Dahl, on harbour patrol in Puget Sound – which runs from the Canadian border to Tacoma – was following the coastline of Maury Island when he saw five UFOs manoeuvring fifteen hundred feet above the coast, before disappearing towards the open sea.'

'So what?' Dwight said, surprised by his own lack of patience. 'It's true that those facts weren't widely known at the time, but we covered the Arnold case pretty extensively at the ATIC, so we learnt about those other sightings a year or so later.'

'Okay,' Scaduto said, not remotely deterred by Dwight's show of impatience. 'Let's take it from there.'

Two young people were lying in the middle of the field on the right, under the shade of an elm tree. The girl, wearing tight blue jeans and a figure-hugging sweater, was practically buried under a young man wearing the same

kind of jeans, but stripped to the waist. Writhing together and kissing passionately, they were lost to the real world – something that Scaduto clearly noticed with his envious gaze.

'Throughout that whole month,' he continued, tearing his eyes away from the couple on the grass, 'there were a hell of a lot of sightings over the northwestern corner of the United States. By the first week in July there were also reports of strange, luminous bodies in the skies over the Province of Quebec, Oregon and New England. The following week, those sightings spread to California and New Mexico. By the end of the year – the same year the US Navy had, reportedly, *dropped* their flying saucer project – flying saucers were being reported from all over the country.'

'And the next major UFO flap was the Washington invasion of 1952,' Dwight said, 'of which I had personal experience.'

'Dead on the nose, pal.' Scaduto glanced back over his shoulder at the young couple making love on the grass, now a good distance away. The sight of them gave him distracting thoughts and forced him to concentrate. 'On reinvestigating that case,' he said, 'using your old ATIC reports as my map, I discovered that while the real flap had started on July 19, there was a record dated June 17 of several unidentified red spheres that flew at supersonic speeds over the Canadian air base of North Bay, in Ontario, then crossed over some of the southeastern states. I also discovered that nearly all of the subsequent Washington DC UFOs were reported as disappearing to the north, and that when the UFOs returned en masse, on July 26, their disappearance in a general northerly direction also applied.'

'All heading towards the Canadian border.'

'Right, Dwight, you've got it.'

'Well, it's certainly true that Lake Ontario and Lake Erie are as notorious as the Bermuda Triangle for the unexplained destruction of hundreds of aircraft and ships, the failure of gyroscopes and radio instruments, irrational behaviour in normally sane crew members, and, of course, the sighting of numerous UFOs. It's also true that Canada's one of the greatest aeronautical powers in the world.'

'Yeah,' Scaduto said, sounding richly satisfied. 'I never thought of Canada that way until I began my research. But during that research I came across an article, dated 1952 – at the height of the flying saucer scare – describing Canada as the Promised Land of Aviation. Considering that most Americans

of the time thought of Canada as a kind of No-Man's Land, I was suitably impressed to learn that in fact it was the home, even back in 1952, of a remarkable number of the most prestigious aircraft development companies in the world.'

'It also had, and still has, vast areas of heavily wooded and uninhabited land – ideal for hiding secret aeronautical research establishments.'

'Just what struck me,' Scaduto said, clearly thrilled that he and Dwight were on the same wavelength. 'So having learned these interesting facts, I decided to find out, once and for all, whether or not the Canadian flying saucer project had really been passed on to the US Air Force and, more important, if the Air Force had then really dropped the project, as widely reported.'

'So what did you learn?'

'A lot.'

Dwight liked Scaduto and was, in a sense, envious of his relative youthfulness, naive optimism, and Brooklyn-based 'street' wisdom; but sometimes, as he was forced to admit to himself, the young man's flair for self-dramatisation could be aggravating. For this very reason, he wanted to devastate Scaduto with a cutting remark, but all he could come up with was: 'Stop teasing me!'

'Okay,' Scaduto responded, satisfied with the belief that he had managed to get one up on the older man, whom he admired and wished to emulate. 'My research revealed that on...' He pulled a notebook from his hip pocket and glanced at it... 'On February 11, 1953, the Toronto *Star* announced that a *new* flying saucer was being developed at the A. V. Roe plant – now Avro-Canada – in Malton, Ontario.'

'This suggests that it wasn't the first one.'

'Shit, no,' Scaduto said, then continued to talk, picking up precise dates and details from his notebook. 'Following that February 11 press release, on February 16, the Canadian Minister of Defence Production, C. D. Howe, informed the House of Commons that Avro-Canada was in fact working on a mock-up model of a flying saucer capable of flying at fifteen hundred miles per hour and climbing straight up in the air.'

'Really?'

'It's all there in the morgues of the Canadian and other newspapers.'

'Wonderful,' Dwight said, becoming excited. 'Please continue.'

‘By February 27, Crawford Gordon Jr., then the president of Avro-Canada, was writing in the house journal, *Avro News*, that the prototype being constructed was so revolutionary it would make all other forms of supersonic aircraft obsolescent. Next, the Toronto *Star* was claiming that Britain’s Field Marshal Montgomery had become one of the few people to view Avro’s mock-up of the flying saucer. Shortly after that report, Air Vice Marshal D. M. Smith was reported to have said that what Field Marshal Montgomery had seen was the preliminary construction plans for a gyroscopic fighter whose gas turbine would revolve around the pilot, who would be positioned in the centre of the disc.’

‘Oh, my God!’ Dwight softly exclaimed, while glancing left and right at the many other people moving in both directions along the path winding through the park. ‘The *Omega*!’

‘Shit, man, you remembered! Yeah! The press dubbed that legendary machine “the *Omega*” and in 1953 the British *RAF Review* – the *Royal Air Force Review* – gave it a semi-official respectability by reprinting most of the unclassified Canadian research and including censored drawings of the actual prototype.’

‘The research and those drawings were actually *published*?’

‘Yeah... but only in Britain.’

‘Man, oh man!’ Temporarily forgetting his personal fears, Dwight felt like an excited schoolkid. ‘So what was the *Omega* like?’

‘According to the sketches,’ Scaduto said, again glancing at his notebook, ‘it was a relatively small flying wing, shaped like a horseshoe, with a lot of air-intake slots along its edge, ten deflector vanes for direction control, a single-pilot cabin topped by a cupola of transparent Perspex, and a large turbine engine that revolved around the vertical axis of the main body.’

‘Then it disappeared,’ Dwight said, trying to anticipate.

‘Not quite,’ Scaduto replied, still enjoying Dwight’s shock and excitement at his revelations. ‘In early November, 1953, Canadian newspapers were reporting that a mock-up of the *Omega* had been shown on October 31 to a group of twenty-five military officers and scientists. Then in March of the following year, the American press was claiming that the US Air Force, concerned at Soviet progress in aeronautics, had allocated an unspecified sum of money to the Canadian government for the building of a prototype of their flying saucer. Reportedly, that machine had been designed by the English

aeronautical engineer, John Frost – who'd worked for Avro-Canada in Malton, Ontario – and it would be capable of either hovering in mid-air or flying at a speed of nearly two thousand miles an hour.'

Dwight gave a low whistle of appreciation.

'This hot piece of news,' Scaduto continued, 'was followed by Canadian press assertions that their government was planning to form entire squadrons of flying saucers for the defence of Alaska and the far regions of the north. This, they claimed, was because the machines required no runways, were capable of ascending vertically, and were ideal weapons for sub-arctic and Polar regions.'

'Sub-arctic and Polar regions,' Dwight repeated, practically in a daze.

'Right,' Scaduto said, glancing sideways and grinning when he saw the growing awareness in Dwight's eyes. 'So, do you want to hear the rest?'

'Damned right I do,' Dwight said.

'On December 3, 1954, the Canadian Minister of Defence announced that the *Canadian* flying saucer project had been dropped, since it would have cost too much for something that was, in the end, highly speculative.'

Dwight stopped walking, glanced at the many people criss-crossing the park, walking their dogs, flying kites, roller-skating or embracing on the sunlit fields, and then found himself glancing more intently at them, wondering if they were as innocent as they seemed. He saw no men in black.

'So what makes you believe the saucer project wasn't dropped completely?' he asked Scaduto, who responded by turning to a new page in his notebook and glancing repeatedly at it as he spoke.

'Because on October 22 the following year, US Air Force Secretary Donald Quarles released an extraordinary statement through the press office of the Department of Defence. Among other things, he said that an aircraft of – I quote – *unusual configuration and flight characteristics* – would soon be appearing; that the US government had initiated negotiations with the Canadian government and Avro-Canada for the preparation of an experimental model of the Frost flying disc; and that the saucers would be mass-produced and used for the common defence of the sub-arctic area of the continent.'

'The sub-arctic area,' Dwight murmured distractedly. 'We're back with the sub-arctic.'

'Right,' Scaduto said. 'Ice and snow... But it didn't end there.'

Now Dwight stopped walking to stare hard at his young friend. He no longer gave a damn who overheard him. Paranoid or not, he was convinced that everything he said and did was being monitored somehow. Given that conviction, whether sane or mad, he could only follow his nose.

'Okay,' he said, following his nose. 'Tell me the rest of it.'

Grinning wickedly, Scaduto took a deep breath, held it in for some time, then let it all out as he started talking again.

'By February last year, the press was receiving ambiguous Air Force statements about a revolutionary new aircraft that had been jointly undertaken by the US Air Force, the US Army, and the Canadian government. Then, on April 14, during a press conference in Washington DC, General Frank Britten implied that the first test flight of the aircraft was imminent and that it was destined to revolutionise traditional aeronautical concepts.'

'So when's that test flight going to be?' Dwight asked, now realising that Scaduto's whole spiel had been leading up to this single, crucial point.

Scaduto brushed his ink-black sideburns with self-worshipping fingers and, taking a deep breath of the kind that all born actors employ, said, 'The test flight's already been completed. The results haven't been announced yet. But - get this! – the press has actually been invited to look at the saucer on August 25 – next month – at the Army Transport Museum at Fort Eustus, Virginia.'

'And we're both going, of course.'

'You bet.'

'What's the bet we don't see much?' Dwight said.

'I don't bet,' Scaduto said.

Amused despite himself, being otherwise deeply troubled, Dwight left the park with Scaduto, bid him goodbye, then hurried home to take comfort from Beth's embrace, taste her full lips, suck the juices from her mouth, then lose himself in the tangle of her arms and legs, in her centre, her very being, in that bed they had bought many years ago, when, in fear and trembling and mutual need, they became man and wife.

Dwight's dark cave was love.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Dwight's dark cave of love was a help, but not a cure, during the nightmarish month that followed his meeting with Tony Scaduto and the press conference arranged for the unveiling of the first officially acknowledged man-made flying saucer. Already haunted by her frightening experience at Frank Bancroft's garage, Beth had then started experiencing terrifying nightmares about UFOs and faceless men dressed in black. Soon she was also being tormented by the feeling that she was somehow being followed and kept under almost daily observation. She felt this even when in her car.

'It's hard to explain,' she told Dwight, 'because there's nothing I can put my finger on – nothing seen or heard or actually felt. But when I'm driving, particularly when on the roads outside town – empty roads – I have the feeling that something is pressing down on the car, exerting some kind of pressure, and that pressure is also pressing down upon and around me.'

She and Dwight were sitting in deck chairs out on the back yard of the tract house they had leased just a week ago, having decided that they needed something bigger than the previous apartment near Carillon Park. Nichola, presently playing in the small, pumped-up pool in front of them with a neighbour's daughter, Tanya Harper, was all of twelve years old and would soon be a teenager in need of her own space, so that had been their major consideration when deciding to move. As the sun was now blazing out of a clear blue sky, Beth and Dwight, both in swim suits and relishing the privacy of their own back yard, were trying for a suntan.

'Any effect on the car itself?' Dwight asked. 'Any malfunctioning?'

'No – yes! It doesn't malfunction, but it definitely drags. In fact, I often find myself checking the handbrake, thinking I forgot to release it when starting off. Then I find myself looking out of the car, trying to see what's around me, what's slowing me down.'

'Ever stop and actually get out of the car to look directly above it?'

'Yep. That shows you how bad it is. I sometimes get out and look up, but

I've never seen anything. Strangely, that worries me even more. And I become almost sick with anxiety when Nichola's with me. I even feel that odd... *presence*... call it what you will... when I'm taking her to school.'

'Does Nichola feel it as well?'

'She's never mentioned it and I've never asked. No, she seems happy enough, belted in there.'

During the last two weeks of that sweltering July, 1960, Beth's nightmares had become more frequent and the feeling that she was never entirely alone increased dramatically. She began experiencing it while waiting outside Nichola's school, at the supermarket, sometimes even when sunning herself out in the back yard or tending to her lawn.

'I'll be feeling perfectly fine,' she explained to Dwight, 'engrossed in what I'm doing, and suddenly, right out of the blue, I'll find myself glancing around me, expecting to see someone or... *something*.' She shrugged forlornly. 'It's a feeling so strong, you're convinced someone is staring right at you and they're close – you know? Like about the other side of the yard fence, just across the street, or only a short distance behind you in the mall. A very *strong* feeling. Shivery. I'm thinking of the shopping, or about what Nichola's doing at school, or maybe where we should go on our next vacation – then, whammo! My head jerks around before I even know it and I find myself staring to the side, behind me, wherever, expecting to see... yeah, a man, or men, in black. I always expect to see *them*. And of course there's never anyone there and, as I said, in some way that's even worse. 'Cause sure as hell it makes you think you're losing your mind or having a breakdown.'

By early August, Beth's conviction that she was being followed was confirmed when a black limousine did indeed start following her, just about every time she ventured out. At first she thought she was imagining this, but at the end of the first day with that vehicle on her tail – a particularly busy day that had her driving here, there and everywhere, including school in the morning, the supermarket, the houses of a couple of friends, then school again in the afternoon to collect Nichola – she realised that the limo was real enough and definitely following her when it stopped everywhere she stopped, then started up again and followed her when she moved off. By the end of the first day of this, she was truly frightened.

The process continued throughout a second day, then a third and a fourth. When Beth stopped, the limo stopped as well, always parking within sight of

her, though never close enough for her to see anything other than the figures of men in... black suits. As they were always too far away for their features to be discerned, Beth was reminded of her nightmares, in which the men in black one-piece suits always seemed somehow faceless.

Finally, during the fifth day, when she was waiting for Nichola to come out of school and suffering the dreadful fear that the men in black might abduct her, she got out of her car and hurried along the sidewalk towards the limo parked a good distance away. The limo didn't move until she was approaching it – until she could clearly see the two men in the front – black suits, black roll-necked pullovers, dark glasses – but could still not make out their features. Just as she was coming close enough to see what they looked like, the limo pulled away from the sidewalk, did a U-turn and raced away from her.

At once relieved and frustrated, Beth returned to her car and waited for Nichola to emerge from the school. When she had collected her and was driving her back to the house, the black limo came out of a side street and sat on her tail again. When she entered the house, clutching Nichola's hand, the limo parked a good way along the street, but close enough for her to see it from the living room window. Just as she was picking up the phone to call the police station, the limo moved off.

'Just like that,' Beth explained to Dwight, snapping her fingers. 'As if they could see exactly what I was doing, even when I was inside the house. The second I picked up the phone, those bastards drove off.'

That, however, was the last time she was tailed by the men in the limo. Unfortunately, during the second week in August, she began to have serious lapses of memory and what appeared to be brief blackouts, which, like her experience at the garage, left her feeling bewildered and disorientated. The blackouts were not dramatic and at no point harmful – she never collapsed or lost control when driving her car – but they were of a nature that was just as wrenching emotionally.

Preparing dinner in the kitchen, some time later, she would abruptly find herself lying on the bed or the sofa in front of the TV with no memory of having made the move, but with vague recollections of the usual nightmares about UFOs and men in black. Packing her shopping into the trunk of her car outside the supermarket, she would suddenly find herself emerging from the by now customary nightmares, this time slumped over the steering wheel,

with the trunk still open and the rest of the shopping still in the trolley. Sitting in her car outside the school, waiting for Nichola to emerge, she would suddenly see Nichola standing forlornly on the sidewalk as the last of the other kids either walked off or were driven home by their parents. Though unable to recall the children emerging from the school, she would rush guiltily to collect Nichola, her head still filled with a vision of herself being surrounded by the men in black in a circular, brilliantly lit, white-walled room. Such lapses of consciousness, and the nightmares contained within them, gradually made her a nervous wreck.

Beth went to see her doctor and told him she felt tense and couldn't sleep, though she didn't mention the real cause of her problem. When Valium was prescribed, some of her tension slipped away, but even the sedatives didn't help when, watching Nichola playing with Tanya in the park, she lost consciousness again and awakened to see three men in black suits talking to both children. When Beth rushed towards them, the men, too distant to be made out clearly, glanced in her direction, then hurried away to melt into the trees around the edge of the playing field. When Beth, her heart pounding furiously, asked Nichola what the men had wanted, her daughter replied: 'They asked if my mom was Beth Randall. I said, "Yes," and they just looked at each other without saying anything else. Then you came along.'

'If those men ever come near you again,' Beth warned Nichola, 'you run away and come straight to me. Understood?'

'Yes, Mom.'

Beth's nightmares then became more vivid and frightening. She dreamed that the men in black had abducted Nichola. She had another dream about Dwight disappearing and never being seen again. Mostly, however, her dreams were composed of hallucinatory, fragmented recollections of that great circle of black ash around the garage once run by Dwight; the look of stark terror on the dead Frank Bancroft's face; herself stretched out on what she felt was a surgical bed of cold metal, staring up at a ring of faces, some human, others part-metallic and dreadful: small creatures with alien faces and steel claws for hands; then curving, steel-grey corridors, a room filled with severed human heads and other bodily parts; and then herself strapped to a chair with a metal cap on her head; and, finally, white-painted steel panels sliding apart to reveal panoramic windows and, beyond them, a vast, desolate terrain of ice and snow.

The dreams, though fragmented, were relentless in the terror that they created for her, making her jerk awake, screaming, bathed in sweat, to be held and rocked by a concerned, helpless Dwight.

'It's real!' she once sobbed. 'I know it's real!'

'No, it's not,' Dwight replied. 'You're just having bad dreams, Beth.'

But even he didn't sound convinced.

In fact, Dwight was, at that point, being torn between his real concern for Beth and his rage against those who were doing this to her. It was a deeply personal kind of rage, focused on the men in black, because he now believed absolutely that they existed and were responsible for what was happening to her. Yet even as his anger grew and he determined to fight back, he was frustrated because the men in black made no more appearances.

Instead, worse things happened.

The first manifestation was similar to Dwight's experience in the motel outside Albuquerque, only this time it happened right outside his own home.

Beth had taken some Valium and was still having trouble sleeping, with Dwight holding her in his arms, when the latter felt a distinct rise in temperature, heard a bass humming sound from outside, as if directly above the house, then was startled by the violent shaking of the bed as striations of brilliant light beamed in through the window. The bass humming sound grew louder, then turned into a vibrating presence, a faint pressure, as the room shook even more violently, with framed pictures swinging crazily on the walls and ornaments falling off chests-of-drawers and cupboards. Nichola cried out in her bedroom. 'Mom! Dad!' Though sedated with the Valium, Beth tore herself from Dwight's embrace and ran into Nichola's bedroom as Dwight rushed to the window and looked out.

He stared into a dazzling radiance. It was beaming down from above the house – so bright he couldn't keep his eyes open. Cursing, he fumbled blindly at the window catches, to unlock them and open the window. As he was doing so, the bass humming sound cut out, the room stopped shaking, and then, when he opened his eyes, he was able to see clearly again.

Moonlight was shining on the untouched back yard. Nothing else. He opened the window as Beth returned to the bedroom, one arm around the sobbing Nichola's shoulder, patting her head reassuringly with her free hand. Dwight stuck his head out of the open window and looked up as high as he

could, trying to see directly above the house. He saw a shrinking light, what might have been a shooting star, then it blinked out abruptly, leaving only the starry sky.

'It's all right, it's all right,' Beth was repeating consolingly to the sobbing Nichola, where they now lay together on the bed. 'It's all right, sweetheart.'

But it wasn't all right. In fact, it was just beginning. During the final week before the press viewing of the Avrocar, as if as a warning to Dwight, the visitations occurred every night for five nights in a row, with the house shaking more each time, the noise growing louder, the inexplicable pressure becoming stronger, the contents of the house flung about and smashed, as if by a poltergeist. As Nichola howled in Beth's arms and the latter shrieked for the manifestations to stop – not knowing who or what she was shouting at, but staring fearfully at the closed window – the striations beaming in from outside would start flickering like strobe lights, the rate increasing every second, until Dwight, Beth and Nichola saw each other as bizarre, jerkily moving figures in a disorientating, constantly changing, chiaroscuro filled with hellish noise and applying an indefinable pressure upon them, making them feel that their heads and hearts were going to burst.

Sometimes the burners on the cooker would come on of their own accord; other times water would pour out of the taps, flooding over the rim of the sink and onto the floor; then the electric lights, radio or TV would come on inexplicably, adding to the general bedlam and visual chaos.

Each night was worse than the one before, with the lights brighter and flickering faster, the bass humming sound deeper and increasingly *physical* – an infrasound – and the pressure around their heads tighter and giving them headaches. Each night, when the phenomenon had ended, Dwight would either jerk the window open and stick his head out or run on to the front lawn to see what had caused it – and each time he only saw what he thought, or imagined, was a tiny light shrinking until it disappeared directly above the house, leaving only the stars in the night sky.

By the fourth day of the final week before the press viewing of the Avrocar, while the outside of the house remained normal, the grass on the front lawn and back yard was singed black. Remarkably, there was no damage to any of the neighbours' houses and tentative enquiries produced no sign that the neighbours – their houses all spaced well apart – had heard or seen anything unusual.

‘If this happens once more,’ Dwight told Beth when they were tidying up the latest mess of broken glass, picture frames and ornaments caused by the violent shaking of the house the night before, ‘I’m going to send you and Nichola to stay with your folks.’

‘Every night,’ Beth said, practically whispering, as if talking to herself, not really there. ‘Why every night?’

‘I don’t know, honey.’

‘They don’t attempt to get near us. We never see them. What do they want?’

We don’t even know who ‘they’ are, Dwight thought, but I better not say that.

‘One more time,’ he said instead, ‘and you’re out of here. You and Nichola both. I don’t know what it is, how it’s happening, but I’m getting you out of here.’

‘I’m not going if you don’t,’ Beth said.

‘Yes, you are,’ Dwight insisted.

The fifth night was the worst of all. The visitation came so late that they thought it wasn’t coming, and Beth was actually slipping gratefully into sleep. It was just before four in the morning and she was lying between Dwight and Nichola, who was now too frightened to sleep in her own bed. Dwight was still awake, looking sideways at the two most important people in his life – his wife and daughter – choked up to see them sleeping together, when he suddenly turned cold, then hot, and heard that familiar bass humming sound. At first shocked, then plunging into a cauldron of rage and despair, he reached out to Beth as her eyes opened wide, changing instantly from drowsiness to terror. Even as Beth let out a moan and turned to embrace the awakened, frightened Nichola, the bass humming sound became louder, an almost physical vibration, and the whole room began to shake, with the framed pictures again swinging crazily on the walls while ornaments and other bricabrac rattled and fell to the floor. As Nichola cried out, ‘Mom! Dad!’ and Beth held her close, pulling the sheets over both of them, light suddenly beamed in through the window, illuminating the bedroom, and then turned into a chiaroscuro flickering on and off with a rapidity that was totally disorientating.

‘Bastards!’ Dwight bawled.

As if in response, the bottom end of the bed leapt up in the air and banged

back down on the floor. The lamp on the bedside cabinet became a fountain of crimson sparks and then exploded with the wires spitting blue and yellow flames. Instinctively, Dwight rolled off the wildly rocking bed, jerked the plug of the lamp from its socket, then smothered the flames with the shirt he had draped over a nearby chair. Nichola was wailing in terror under the bedsheet, being comforted by Beth, as Dwight crawled on hands and knees across the floor, showered in debris from the plaster exploding out of the ceiling and raining down upon him.

More cracks spread across the ceiling. The bed jumped up and down liked a crazed beast. The floorboards creaked, screeched and then snapped apart under the magically heaving carpet. Though dazzled by the flickering patterns created by what seemed like strobe lights, Dwight still managed to reach the door of the bedroom. Glancing back, he saw that the bed had stopped rocking and the ceiling was no longer raining broken plaster. Knowing that Beth and Nichola, no matter how upset, would be all right, Dwight, in a fury that obliterated his terror, jumped to his feet and ran across the living room, heading for the front door.

As he crossed the living room, more cracks zigzagged along the ceiling directly above him, as if tracking his movements, showering him once more in falling plaster and clouds of powder. Even here, the furniture was jumping, lightbulbs were exploding, and the mysterious light was pouring in through the windows, still flickering rapidly. Disorientated by this, Dwight repeatedly bumped into furniture and once turned in the wrong direction, but eventually, by groping his way along a wall, he reached the front door. Without hesitation, not caring if he lived or died, he tugged the front door open and rushed outside.

What he saw there stopped him in his tracks.

The lights beaming in through the windows of the house and flickering on and off rapidly were coming from disc-shaped metallic objects no more than three or four feet in diameter and hovering in mid-air by the windows. The instant that Dwight, still in his pyjamas, rushed out of the house and stopped, frozen by shock, on the lawn path, the lights blinked out and the disc-shaped objects started spinning. The speed of their spin increased until they became no more than silvery-white blurs. Then they suddenly ascended vertically, as if shot from a cannon.

Looking up, Dwight nearly fell backwards with shock when he saw the

small, spinning discs vanishing into what appeared to be an enormous black hole inside an even bigger circle formed by multicoloured lights that winked on and off rapidly, to form a dazzling kaleidoscope. Approximately 150 feet wide, that circle was exerting a downward-thrusting pressure that seemed to press heavily upon Dwight.

Glancing about him, he saw that the stars were visible outside that great circle of flashing lights and that directly below the lights, on the ground – at least what he could see of the ground where it wasn't broken up by fences and sections of the other house – grass and dust was being sucked up to quiver frantically or billow in a curved line that obviously formed another circle matching the one above.

No sooner had Dwight noticed this than the flashing lights blinked out, leaving only a black hole about 150 feet wide and definable only by the stars surrounding it. Then, with a speed that confused Dwight's visual senses, the black hole shrank, letting the stars rush back in, followed by an abrupt flaring of lights hundreds of feet up. The flaring light than shrank and vanished altogether, leaving only the darkness.

Now, where that great hole had been, there was only the normal, star-drenched sky.

The grass and dust that had been sucked up in a matching circle had settled down again and the downward-thrusting pressure inside the circle could no longer be felt.

Realising that he had just witnessed the ascent of some kind of enormous, circular UFO and that the small discs had flown back into it before it ascended, Dwight hurried back into the house, through the living room and into the bedroom. He found Beth and Nichola embracing under the bedsheets, both frightened, though unharmed.

Convinced that the visitations were not only a means of warning him off his UFO investigations, but were also related to the forthcoming press viewing of the A. V. Roe man-made flying saucer, the Avrocar, Dwight believed that the night before the viewing, tomorrow night, would be the worst of all.

'I want you to take Nichola and go spend the night with your folks,' he told Beth the following morning, as they sat side by side on the sofa in the wrecked living room. 'I think you could both be in real danger. The effects of that... whatever it is... have been worse with each successive night, and I'm

afraid that tonight the damage will be even greater – so I don't want you and Nichola here.'

'I don't want *you* here,' Beth said, rubbing her bloodshot eyes and looking haggard. 'I'm convinced that sooner or later they're going to enter the house and take you away. I'm sure that's what it's all about.'

'If they do, I want to be here, Beth. I want to know who they are. I can't run away now.'

'If they take you, you'll never be seen again.'

'That's a chance I've got to take, Beth.'

She clung to him, sobbing, begging him not to stay, but after comforting her, he made her call her folks, Joe and Glenda McGinnis, and arrange to spend the night with them, in their home at the far side of Carillon Park. She was still sobbing as she packed an overnight bag for herself and Nichola, but she managed to gain control of herself when Dwight led her and Nichola out to the car and kissed them goodbye.

Dwight watched the car move off along the road and then disappear around the corner at the far end. It was six in the evening.

Returning to the house, which Beth had spent all afternoon carefully tidying, Dwight poured himself bourbon and then took an armchair in the living room, waiting for nightfall. The telephone rang. When he picked it up, Beth told him that she was in her parents' home, that the short drive had passed without incident, and that he was to call her, no matter the time, when the visitation had ended. Dwight promised to do so, then he put the phone back on its hook and finished his bourbon. Two more were poured and a few more hours passed before the sun sank and darkness prevailed. Dwight kept the lights out. He waited patiently for the visitation. He sat in that empty room until dawn broke, but there was no visitation.

'Nothing,' he said on the phone to Beth at nine the next morning. 'Not a damned thing. How about you?'

'The best sleep I've had in weeks,' Beth replied. 'I feel like a new woman.'

'It's as if they knew...'

'They knew. They know everything, Dwight. I'm convinced I was followed as I drove here, but they didn't do anything. I think they've been warning you off – maybe because of today.'

'The Avrocar.'

'Yes. They were letting you know that they know what you're doing and

don’t approve of it.’

‘But they didn’t come last night.’

‘The warning’s over. I don’t think they’ll come back. At least not tonight or in the immediate future. They’ll do what they want, when they want, but it won’t be tonight. If they’d wanted to stop you going to that press conference, they’d have done it last night. We’re coming home, honey.’

‘You do that,’ Dwight said.

He put the phone back on its hook, leaned against the wall, covered his face with his hands and sobbed tears of relief.

Later that day, Dwight flew to Washington DC, where he was collected by Tony Scaduto and Bob Jackson, then driven to the Army Transport Museum at Fort Eustus, Virginia. There, in a large, gloomy hangar-sized room that contained no other exhibits, with a whole pack of journalists and photographers, the latter including Jack Judges, who had first photographed the sole exhibit on display by flying illegally over the base, he was shown the formerly secret, now unclassified, man-made flying saucer prototype, the Avrocar.

What he, and the others assembled, were shown was an experimental, piloted aircraft, forty feet in diameter and weighing 3,600lbs, that combined the characteristics of air-cushion machines: a crude flying saucer based on the principles of the jet ring and, according to the Army press officer, barely able to rise above the runway during its recent test flight.

It couldn’t possibly be mistaken for what had come down over Dwight’s house the previous evening.

‘This is bullshit!’ Dwight whispered to Scaduto and Bob Jackson. ‘Just another red herring.’

‘Apart from the disc-shaped platform of this aircraft,’ the Army press officer informed them, standing beneath the Avrocar where it was dangling at an angle from the ceiling, ‘the most revolutionary feature of the prototype is the use made of the gyroscopic effect of a revolving power plant to acquire stability. As you can see...’ he pointed to the dome-shaped Perspex cabin in the middle of the disc-shaped body... ‘the pilot is seated in a central Perspex capsule that can be ejected should the aircraft find itself in difficulties. A gas-turbine power plant of unconventional design revolves around this capsule at several hundred revolutions per minute. A stationary wing containing a series

of slots in the leading edge, which feed air to the turbine, surrounds the rotating power-plant housing and forms the rim of the aircraft. Part of the intake of air is compressed, fed to combustion chambers in the wing, and ejected through a series of exhaust orifices lining the outer rim of the disc. The remainder of the airflow is fed over a series of vertical deflector vanes in the flattened trailing edge of the aircraft for control purposes. A tripod-type launching gear was planned to enable the saucer to take off vertically, but with the negative results of the test flight, the work never even went that far.'

'What technical details can you give us?' Bob Jackson asked.

'I'm afraid most of those are still classified,' the Army press officer replied blandly, 'but I *can* tell you that the powerhouse of this particular prototype housed three one-thousand-horse-power Continental J69-T-9 turbojets. It was designed to have a maximum forward speed of three hundred mph and a range of one thousand miles; but when test flown last month, it never did more than hover within ground effect.'

'Is this the only such prototype being developed?' Tony Scaduto asked.

'It's not the first,' the press officer confessed, 'but almost certainly it's going to be the last.'

'Why?' Bob Jackson asked.

'The truth of the matter is that although quite a number of aircraft featuring circular, disc-shaped or annular wing forms have been built and flown over the past few years, the aerodynamics of such shapes have been fully established. The design problems facing us are therefore formidable and, in the view of the majority of our engineers, probably insurmountable.'

'So what's happening to this project?' Scaduto asked.

'We'll be dropping it,' the press office said. 'As for this particular prototype, the Avrocar, to prove that all the talk of flying saucers is bullshit – sorry, ladies and gentlemen, I meant *nonsense* – we're going to leave it here on display for the benefit of the general public, along with everything else in the Army Transport Museum. We *have* been interested in the potential of air-cushion machines capable of vertical take-off and landing – also known as VTOL – to avoid the necessity of lengthy airways. In the event, the most we could come up with was this relatively primitive, so-called flying saucer. As for *real* flying saucers... well, if you want those, you'll have to go and buy yourselves tickets to some science-fiction movies, which I'm told are very popular these days. So please rest assured,' he continued when the laughter of

the assembled journalists had died down, ‘that the Department of Defence will soon be formally withdrawing from participation in this interesting, failed project and that no other disc-or-spherical-shaped prototypes are on the agenda. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.’

‘Withdrawing from participation with whom?’ Scaduto whispered when the press conference was over and they were making their final, careful inspection of the Avrocar.

‘Good question,’ Dwight said.

Part Three

Chapter Thirty-Three

Approximately three years after the public unveiling of the Avrocar, which had killed off most public speculation about the possibility of man-made UFOs, Jack Fuller, who had engineered the whole scam, was having a bad morning in his office in CIA Headquarters, Langley Field, Virginia. This was due mainly to the fact that he was in the middle of an acrimonious divorce from his second wife, Lorraine Sandison, and she was trying to drive him mad on the telephone.

After his disastrous, eighteen-month marriage to Belinda Wolfe, the ravishing brunette daughter of Georgetown aristocrats, Fuller had vowed never to marry again. He didn't want kids, he didn't believe in fidelity, and he had a low boredom threshold when it came to sex or romantic adventure. Unfortunately, he also had an eye for sophisticated beauties and an inability to take 'No' for an answer. His second wife, Lorraine, another child of wealthy parents, though from Alexandria, Virginia, had resolutely refused to surrender completely to him until he had agreed to tie the knot. As she was stunningly beautiful and an adroit sexual tease, he had finally caved in and convinced himself that this time the marriage would work out.

Once he had bedded Lorraine, however, his desperate need to possess her waned rapidly. Subsequently, he had refused to give her children, returned almost immediately to the pursuit of other women, and beaten her up once or twice when she refused to submit to his more outrageous sexual demands, which included what he thought was only a *modest* brand of sado-masochistic frolics. Within three months, Lorraine, a notably cool and, in many ways, calculating beauty, was a sobbing wreck who spent more nights sleeping in her parents' mansion in McLean, Virginia, than she did in Fuller's fancy apartment off Dupont Circle in Washington DC. Two months ago, encouraged by her outraged parents, she had applied for divorce on the grounds of adultery and repeated sexual abuse – this after only seven months of marriage. In fact, Fuller had been relieved, wanting out of the marriage,

until Lorraine started picking up the telephone to fill his ear with scorn and various legal threats. When Fuller wasn't listening to her, he was listening to his lawyer, which in no way made him feel any better.

Fuller was therefore in a bad mood when his secretary called through to say she had a former USAF Captain, Bob Jackson, on the line, wishing to speak to him on behalf of the Aerial Phenomenon Investigations Institute.

Aware that APII was headed by that troublemaker, Dr Frederick Epstein, that it was now using the meddlesome Dwight Randall as a freelance stringer in Dayton, Ohio, and that it had recently been kicking up a stink about CIA involvement in the suppression of information about UFOs, Fuller was about to tell his secretary to give Jackson the brush-off. But realising that he needed some distraction from Lorraine and her scavenging lawyer, and, also, that he could not resist finding out what Bob Jackson, Dwight Randall's best friend, wanted with him, Fuller told his secretary to put the call through.

'Mr Fuller?'

'Yeah, this is special agent Jack Fuller. Is this a personal call, Mr Jackson, or are you ringing up on behalf of APII?'

'On behalf of APII.'

'APII isn't popular with this office at the moment,' Fuller sardonically informed him. 'All that talk about CIA suppression of UFO information.'

'That's the impression we get, Mr Fuller.'

'Impressions can be misleading.'

'Actually more than impressions, Mr Fuller. We have a fairly substantial bundle of evidence here to support our contention that the CIA is involved in the suppression of UFO material and the harassment of witnesses.'

'Well, you guys tend to see what you want to see,' Fuller said blandly, 'and what you're reading isn't always what it seems. Your organisation has us all wrong, but this being a democratic society, I guess that's your privilege. So what did you call me for?'

'Because we're not at all sure that this is a democratic society.'

'Oh? Why's that?'

'We've come across some old records indicating that you were the CIA officer in charge of the intelligence team that checked the Socorro UFO crash site with local farmer Marlon Clarke, way back in 1947.'

'No secret in that.'

'According to local newspaper records, Clarke disappeared soon after being

interrogated by you and Air Force intelligence about the sighting.'

'If you're implying that the CIA had something to do with his disappearance, I can only say that's paranoid nonsense.'

'I wasn't about to say that, Mr Fuller. I was only going to ask if, since 1947, there's been any new information on the fate of Mr Clarke?'

'The short answer is "No." Marlon Clarke disappeared without trace and hasn't been seen or heard from since. We, the CIA, know no more about his fate than you do. But I'm sure that's not what you really phoned me about.'

'No, it wasn't.'

'Get straight to the point, Mr Roberts. I'm here to oblige.'

'Are you willing to tell me, either on or off the record, exactly what you found at the Socorro UFO crash site?'

'I've told this to the ATIC and I've told it to the NICAP and I've also told it to your APII investigators a thousand times: what I and the others found at the crash site was the remains of a Rawin weather balloon – no more and no less. As for Marlon Clarke, he was drunk when he saw the so-called UFO flying overhead, drunk when he drove out there to see it close up, and still drunk when we arrived at his ranch to interrogate him. As for his subsequent disappearance, he probably drank himself to death in the desert and then got dragged away by a wild animal. Those things happen to his kind out there. Anything else?'

'Yes,' Jackson said. 'I don't suppose it'll come as any surprise to you that the two biggest civilian UFO organisations in the United States are feeling an unexpected financial squeeze due to a dramatic decrease in press publicity about UFOs and a corresponding wane in public interest.'

'So the membership of your UFO organisations is dwindling,' Fuller said, not attempting to hide his satisfaction.

'Yes,' Jackson admitted. 'And it's our belief that this came about because of a deliberate policy of suppression on the part of the government, through the CIA, which was bothered by our joint call for, and support of, Congressional hearings about the UFO problem.'

'That's some mouthful,' Fuller said, 'so I'm not sure what you mean.'

But of course he *was* sure... In July 1960, under pressure from the general public and, in particular, APII and the ATIC, the Senate Preparedness Committee had demanded briefings and résumés from the Air Force on some of the major UFO flaps, including the famous Washington DC and Levelland

sightings. At the main briefing on July 15, the congressmen present did not go easy on the Air Force, practically siding with the civilian UFO organisations and insisting that in future the Air Force had to keep the committee informed of all pertinent sightings. Nevertheless, against the protests of Dr J. Allen Hynek, then a consultant to the ATIC's Project Blue Book, but with the firm support of Fuller, on behalf of the CIA and Major General Luehman, director of intelligence, the call for public hearings was again resisted.

'We weren't in the least bit bothered by the thought of Congressional hearings,' Fuller lied, 'and certainly did nothing to head them off.'

'Well *someone* did,' Jackson insisted. 'Within a few weeks of the committee's request to be kept updated on all sightings and its recommendation that Project Blue Book be given more funds, it became perfectly clear that information on sightings was not being supplied and that the request for more money had been ignored. It had also become clear that the Air Force, despite the disapproval of the congressmen on the committee, was still insisting that it was doing all that was required regarding UFOs, when in truth it was doing nothing at all.'

'Money recommended by Congressional committees often ends up being side-tracked – usually to other benefactors recommended by those very same committees. It may not be correct, but it's hardly cause for conspiracy theories. As for the committee not being sent the sighting reports they requested, you'll have to take that up with Major Friend, the head of Project Blue Book, not with me.'

'There's a rumour that Friend is in your pocket.'

'Unfortunately, the Capitol thrives on rumours and that's what most of these stories are. Friend is *not* in my pocket.'

'Is it true that you and General Luehman, director of intelligence, were responsible for subverting the committee's proposals?'

'If it was, I certainly wouldn't admit it, so why bother asking?'

Jackson actually chuckled at the other end of the phone, before saying, 'May I continue?'

'Sure,' Fuller said.

'Why were the Congressional hearings slated for 1962 dropped?'

'Because the Chairman decided that there was no justification for continuing them.'

‘But the House Speaker, John McCormack, believed that the UFOs were real. That makes the abrupt turn-around seem pretty odd.’

Jackson was referring to the fact that House Speaker John McCormack, with the encouragement of the troublesome head of the NICAP, Donald E. Keyhoe, had started talking – too often, too loudly, about holding another Congressional investigation, and finally, in 1961, directed Congressman Overton Brookes of the House Science and Astronautics Committee to look into the matter. Brooks did so by appointing Joseph Karth, then head of the Subcommittee on Space Problems and Life Sciences, to hold hearings on UFOs. When news of the proposed hearings was released, Keyhoe promised that NICAP would offer proof of the Air Force’s incompetence in dealing with UFO reports. He would also, he threatened, prove conclusively that the Air Force had embarked on a course of ‘contradictory, misleading and untrue statements’ in order to suppress information about, and kill public interest in, UFO reports.

Neither Fuller nor Major General Luehman, director of intelligence, was thrilled at this prospect.

‘McCormack may have believed that UFOs were real objects,’ Fuller said, ‘but the other members of the committee weren’t so impressed when the man sent to gather evidence to be used *against* the Air Force came back to say he now supported it.’

‘You mean Richard P. Hines.’

‘Yes.’

‘We believe the CIA encouraged those statements.’

‘Simply not true,’ Fuller lied again.

In fact, though the hearings were not scheduled until 1962, in the middle of 1961, while the Office of Legislative Liaison was directing its attention to heading off the hearings, House Science and Astronautics Committee staff member Richard P. Hines visited the ATIC, was ‘thoroughly briefed’ by the Project Blue Book head, Major Friend, and returned to inform his fellow committee members that he was ‘favourably impressed’ with the Air Force’s efforts. Given this response, it was not surprising that a week after Hines’ return to Washington DC, committee chairman Overton Brooks announced that the Congressional hearings were to be dropped and not likely to be an issue in the near future. The following week, Congressman Joseph Karth, slated to head the aborted hearings, publicly attacked Donald Keyhoe and, by

implication, the other major UFO groups, including Dr Frederick Epstein's APII, for trying to 'belittle, defame and ridicule' the Air Force. He also accused Keyhoe of being guilty of 'malicious intent towards a great branch of the military.'

While the verbal slaughter of Keyhoe was still continuing, Chairman Overton Brooks died and the new Chairman, Congressman George P. Miller of California, confirmed that there would be no hearings on the UFO phenomenon.

'Listen,' Fuller said. 'Neither I personally, nor the CIA generally, can be held responsible for the fact that a Congressman with an open mind goes to collect evidence that could be used against the Air Force and instead comes back convinced that the Air Force is in the right. That just proved how wrong you and the other conspiracy theorists were.'

'Maybe,' Jackson responded quietly. 'But we now have strong reason to believe that Hines also informed his fellow committee members that Congressional interest in the UFO programme could be blamed on pressure from – I quote – "undisclosed sources on House Speaker John McCormack".'

'Where did you get that statement?'

'Wouldn't *you* like to know!'

Now it was Fuller's turn to chuckle, even knowing that Jackson's story was entirely accurate. 'If you don't reveal your source I can't verify the statement. What other surprises do you have up your sleeve?'

'We also have reason to believe that Hines, as well as dropping McCormack in the shit, dropped Donald Keyhoe in it by suggesting that he was the one who placed the so-called *undisclosed pressure* on McCormack. Since Hines and people like yourself viewed Keyhoe as the most vocal of the advocates for Congressional hearings – therefore the man most likely to break the wall of silence regarding UFOs – this would have been a good way of dirtying him with the committee, getting the hearings dropped, and discrediting his civilian UFO group and others like it.'

'More paranoid nonsense.'

Yet as Fuller knew, since he had been the one to plan it, that's exactly what happened. Once the Congressional hearings were dropped and Keyhoe ridiculed, press interest in UFOs shrank dramatically and public awareness followed suit. Within a year of Brook's death and the final cancelling of the Congressional hearings, all the major civilian UFO organisations, including

APII and NICAP, were suffering from a severe lack of funds and, even more damaging, from a lack of credibility. To add insult to injury, it was happening during a year, 1962, when sightings were three times higher than they had been in the former 'peak' years of 1947-1951. From the point of view of APII and NICAP, it couldn't have been worse. From Fuller's point of view, on the other hand, it couldn't have been better.

'I don't think it's nonsense,' Jackson said, running up his big phone bill. 'I think that you and your friends were behind Hines all the way, engineered the cancellation of the Congressional hearings, went out to get Donald Keyhoe and thus discredit the civilian UFO organisations; and even now, after seriously diminishing public interest in UFOs, are trying to get rid of Project Blue Book altogether.'

'Excuse the language, my friend, but that's bullshit. The CIA has no interest in UFOs, one way or the other. Though speaking personally at this moment, I think I can speak for the CIA when I say that very few folk here at Langley Field believe that UFOs exist.'

Which was another blatant lie. The truth was that right now, under pressure from the CIA, the ATIC was trying to transfer its UFO programme elsewhere and, hopefully, out of the Air Force altogether, to somewhere less visible. Unfortunately, neither NASA nor the National Science Foundation would touch it, which was giving Fuller a headache. Luckily, it had at least been made a part of the Foreign Technology Division (FTD) of the Air Force Systems Command, where it was languishing without the resources once insisted upon by the Congressional committee.

'All I can say,' Jackson continued doggedly, 'is that between the harassment of individuals and the suppression of civilian UFO organisations, the US government has managed to practically bury the UFO question.'

'The UFO question has cost the US government a lot of money, so that may be an understandable reaction. And for that matter, particularly regarding your conspiracy theories, if the US government is concerned with the UFO problem, why would it want to bury those searching for answers?'

'Because certain members of the US government already *know* the answers,' Jackson said. 'The UFOs are their own.'

Up to this point, Fuller had been mildly amused by Jackson's quiet belligerence, but hearing that last remark, he turned deadly serious, though without actually showing it.

‘The man-made UFO theory is bullshit,’ he told Jackson. ‘The unveiling of the Avrocar proved that conclusively.’

‘A red herring,’ Jackson said.

‘Oh, yeah?’

‘Yeah. We have a researcher – I won’t give you his name – who came up with some interesting info about the construction of US-Canadian flying saucers.’

‘The Flying Flapjack, the *Omega* and the Avrocar,’ Fuller said without hesitation. ‘They’ve all been declassified and shown to the press and, therefore, the public. No mystery there, pal.’

‘No? We have reason to believe that the flying saucers you showed publicly are red herrings; that the real saucers are a lot more advanced and kept in various secret hangars on US Army, Air Force or Navy bases. Certainly we know for a fact that one of them is housed in a top-secret hangar in Cannon AFB, Albuquerque, New Mexico. Indeed, I personally saw it.’

‘*You* personally saw it?’

‘Yeah.’

‘When?’

‘May, 1954.’

‘Eight years ago. Are you sure you remember that far back? Maybe, like Marlon Clarke, you were drunk that night.’

‘No, I remember it well. And I was stone cold sober, believe me. I was driving to a motel on the road that runs right past the base and I saw a hangar at the far end of it, rising above the barbed-wire fence of a top-security area. That UFO, which was no piss-take Avrocar, descended and landed as I braked to a halt to study it more carefully. Then it was wheeled into the hangar. What I saw – clearly and at length - was a highly advanced, saucer-shaped aircraft.’

‘That sure is some story,’ Fuller said, deliberately sounding sceptical, though he was shocked by what he was hearing. May 1954, as he knew, was the night that the present APII stringer, Dwight Randall, then a USAF captain, had paid a visit to Cannon AFB in the company of fellow USAF captain, Andrew Boyle. Unfortunately, the latter had been observed on camera a few nights before, watching the descent of a US version of Wilson’s *Kugelblitz II* as it did, indeed, descend onto its landing pad in the base, before being wheeled into the hangar that Jackson was clearly talking about. As it

was believed that no-one would have believed Boyle's story anyway, he was left alone for a few days; but when he put a call through to Project Blue Book's Dwight Randall, inviting him to Albuquerque, a close watch was placed on him. Then, when he drove Randall straight from Albuquerque airport to Cannon AFB, followed all the way, and stopped on the road that ran right past the top-secret hangar at the far end of the base, well away from the main gate, it was decided to follow Randall, also.

When Boyle handed over the photo of the US *Kugelblitz II* to Randall, both men were observed by the Air Force intelligence men following them. It was those same Air Force intelligence men, all dressed entirely in black to propagate the myth started with Wilson's original men in black, who burst into Randall's room, scared the hell out of him, and stole the flying saucer photo from him. A few months later, when Randall was falling apart from fear, confusion and drink, Boyle, who had been transferred post haste to Alaska, was terminated in an airplane 'crash' over Mt McKinley.

Now Randall's other friend, this Bob Jackson, was claiming that he was the one who had seen that flying saucer descending on Cannon AFB. Fuller didn't believe so. He believed that Jackson had heard the story from Dwight Randall and was using it to try and screw information out of him while protecting his good friend. Well, that was his mistake.

'You have anything to add?' Fuller asked, 'before I drop this phone?'

'Yes,' Jackson said. His breathing sounded more nervous now, too harsh, stop-and-start. 'We have reason to believe that the flying saucers are being used mainly for work in sub-arctic areas. Since I personally specialise in the analysis of flight patterns and have worked out that most of the saucers appear to be flying on northern-southerly routes, I believe the saucers are mainly flying between here and Antarctica.'

'Why?'

'I don't know.'

Thank God for that, Fuller thought. He was silent for a moment, then said, quite deliberately: 'This sounds like Jules Verne to me.'

'Don't be facetious, Mr Fuller. You know I can't be *too* far out.'

Still sounding slightly mocking, though in truth he was deadly serious, Fuller said: 'So what if this fantastic tale is true? What's it got to do with me?'

'We're going a long way back here, Fuller.'

‘So go a long way back.’

‘Given all the evidence now at hand,’ Jackson said, ‘the Socorro crash of 1947 almost certainly involved a man-made flying saucer. And if that’s true, you knew just what you were doing when you talked to Marlon Clarke before he disappeared. You’re in on it, Fuller.’

There was an uncomfortably long silence while Fuller considered what to do about this man, who was trying to be a hero while protecting his friends.

‘So what am I supposed to say?’ Fuller finally asked, having decided exactly what he would do.

‘Am I right or wrong?’

‘Right *and* wrong,’ Fuller told him.

‘Will you tell me more?’

‘Only under certain conditions.’

‘What are they?’

‘Let’s meet and work out an agreement. I need some protection here.’

‘When can we meet?’

‘The sooner the better, Mr Jackson. What about this evening?’

‘When and where?’

‘I know this little bar in M Street. It’s not very nice, but at least no one from Langley or the Capitol is likely to be there. A bit low-life, don’t you know? It’s called – ‘

‘Wait. Let me write it down.’

Fuller waited patiently until Jackson said he was ready, then he gave him the name and location of the bar in M Street, down near the Canal, and told him to meet him outside at nine that evening.

‘I’ll be there,’ Bob Jackson said.

Dropping the phone, Fuller kicked his chair back, placed his feet on the desk, clasped his hands behind his head and whispered, ‘I’ll bet you will.’

Back at his flashy Dupont Circle apartment, which had contemporary art on the white-painted walls, artificial-antique furniture, concealed lighting, off-white carpets and a total lack of idiosyncrasy or human warmth, Fuller mixed himself a dry Martini, then turned the TV on to the news. He rarely actually *watched* the news; he only listened to it. As he had no ear for music, it was *all* he listened to.

As he was having another sip of his Martini, his cat, a seventy-five percent

Russian blue named Doc Savage, padded into the room, rubbed itself against Fuller's left ankle, then stood on its hind legs to gaze into the dimly lit goldfish bowl. Distractedly stroking the cat's head, Fuller reached into the bowl, pulled out a wriggling goldfish and held it just above the cat's twitching nose. When the cat saw and smelt the goldfish, he leaped up, snatched it out of Fuller's fingers with his teeth, then ran back into the kitchen with the goldfish wriggling frantically in his jaws.

Amused, sipping more of his Martini, Fuller entered the subdued lighting of the bedroom, from where he could still hear the news on TV. Setting his Martini glass on the bedside cabinet, he stripped off his clothing, threw his shirt, tie, underclothes and socks into the laundry basket (his housekeeper came every day) and draped his suit with fastidious care over the coat hanger, which he hung to air on the closet door.

Naked, he glanced at himself in the mirror, noticed that his belly was still flat, given his advancing years (he'd soon be all of forty-two), then made his way into the bathroom. After emptying his bladder, he meticulously washed his hands, filled the sink with hot water, and soaped and shaved himself, using a gleaming strop razor. With the remains of the shaving cream still on parts of his chin, he went to the shower, turned the water on, adjusted it until it was steaming hot, then stepped under it. As his skin turned pink from the heat, he thoroughly soaped and cleaned himself, taking particular care with his anus and private parts, then let the hot water wash the soap away. When he had finished this cleansing process, which had left him with an erection, he turned the water from hot to icy cold, braved it for a minute or so, thus losing his erection, then turned the water off and stepped out of the shower.

He dried himself vigorously with a rough towel that further reddened his skin. Dried, he applied talcum powder to his private parts, anus and feet, then sprayed deodorant under his armpits and patted after-shave lotion onto his chin and throat.

Returning to the bedroom, he sipped more of his dry Martini, then studied his naked body in the full-length mirror. As he did so, his erection rose steadily again and he imagined a woman on her knees, slipping painted lips over it. Proud that he could still manage this at his age, he picked up his glass of Martini, carried it to the artificial-antique table where the telephone rested, and sat down on a soft, high-backed chair. After resting his Martini glass on the table, he telephoned his latest acquisition, a twenty-five year old secretary

besotted with men of some authority. He enthusiastically stroked his erection while whispering arousing obscenities to her, but finally arranged to meet her at Clyde's, also located on M Street, at 9.30pm.

When the girl had rung off, Fuller stretched out on the sofa, half propped up on one arm, sipping his Martini, listening to the babble of the TV and letting his erect penis return to normal, prepared for better things. Finishing off his Martini, he stood up again and returned to the bedroom. There, he dressed meticulously in a finely cut Italian grey suit, shirt and tie, with black patent-leather shoes. After transferring his billfold, loose change, keys, notebook, pen and small leather pouch from the jacket of the suit he had worn that day to the pockets of the fresh jacket, he checked himself once more in the mirror and left the apartment.

Lacking patience for the parking difficulties of Georgetown, he caught a cab to the bar located where M Street ran into Canal Road, which was dark at this hour. It was not dark at the front door of the bar, which was brightly illuminated by the street lights, enabling him to see the well-fed, middle-aged Bob Jackson standing uncomfortably beside a group of Georgetown University students, who were having their beer on the sidewalk.

Disembarking from the cab at the far side of the road, Fuller paid the driver, tipping him handsomely, then stood there for a moment, in the relative darkness by the bank of the Canal, watching Bob Jackson and recalling the many other times that he had either personally tailed him and Dwight Randall when they were together or had them tailed, photographed and recorded on tape by other CIA or FBI agents. From his personal observations, as well as from the audio and visual material supplied by his fellow agents, he had learned that Bob Jackson and Dwight Randall were very good friends, deeply fond of each other, with wives who also liked each other as well as their husbands. They were decent, good-hearted people who had shared a lot together and would, Fuller knew, be devastated if anything happened to any other member of their group.

Pity about that, he thought.

Crossing the road, he stepped up on the sidewalk and held his hand out to the portly Bob Jackson.

'Hi,' he said. 'I'm Jack Fuller. Have we met before?'

'No,' Bob said. 'So how did you recognise me?'

Fuller grinned and indicated the young students bunched up all around

Jackson. ‘You’re the only person here over twenty-one,’ he said, ‘so it didn’t need much deducing.’

‘Oh.’ Jackson looked a bit embarrassed, but was also clearly amused by Fuller’s comment. ‘Right, I see what you mean.’ He glanced again at the students, listened to the rock ‘n’ roll music pounding inside, and said, ‘You really think we can talk in there?’

‘Not really,’ Fuller said. ‘This used to be an adults’ place, but it’s changed with the changing times. Come on, let’s go to this other place I know, just a couple of minutes away. Just up the side of this bar, adjoining the building.’

He walked Jackson around the corner and into the road that climbed steeply up the side wall of the bar. They soon left the lamplight behind and stepped into a short, unlit strip where the darkness was deep.

Maybe Jackson sensed something, because he stopped and turned around to face Fuller, preparing to speak.

He never got the words out.

Fuller brought the hard, cutting edge of his right hand down across Bob Jackson’s neck, striking the jugular vein precisely enough to cut off the flow of blood to his head without actually damaging the vein itself. Instantly rendered unconscious, Jackson fell back against the wall and slid down it until he was resting with his back against it and his knees raised in front of his face. After glancing left and right, to ensure that no-one was coming, Fuller removed the small leather pouch from the inside pocket of his jacket, opened it, withdrew an already loaded hypodermic, and sank the needle into the back of Bob Jackson’s hand. Even as Fuller was placing the emptied hypodermic back into the leather pouch, slipping the pouch back into his pocket and walking back to the front of the building, Bob Jackson was suffering the violent spasms of a drug that would induce fatal heart arrhythmia without leaving any traces behind.

As Bob Jackson was going into violent convulsions, Fuller turned the corner of the bar, brushed past the students, and walked along M Street, to enter the noisily pleasant ambience of Clyde’s, where he found his latest acquisition waiting for him. A five-foot, four-inch blonde in a skin-tight dress and high heels, she threw her arms around Fuller when he entered and gave him a long, sensual kiss.

‘A good meal and a bottle of wine,’ Fuller said when he had managed to disengage. ‘Then we’ll make love all night. Life’s for the living, right?’

Chapter Thirty-Four

These days Dwight's mood was one of almost constant depression. For three months after Bob Jackson's sudden death by heart attack outside the student bar in M Street, Georgetown, Dwight had felt himself torn between shock, grief and deep suspicion. The inexplicable death had been bad enough, followed by the usual horrors of seeing the grief of Bob's wife and two kids, not to mention Beth, then the funeral, the wake and the subsequent dreadful days of numbed disbelief. Making matters worse, however, was Thelma's bewildered insistence that Bob wasn't supposed to have been in Georgetown that particular night, that he was supposed to have come home for dinner with friends, but phoned at the last minute to say that something urgent had come up and he would be late home. Added to this, thus to Dwight's deepening depression, was his own fearful conviction that no matter what the coroner said about Bob dying from a heart attack, he had in fact been murdered.

This conviction grew in Dwight over the months as he tried to adjust to life without Bob and spent a lot of time consoling Thelma, who, with her blonde hair now streaked with grey strands, her formerly lush body filling out into middle-aged maturity, remained bewildered as to what her loving husband had been doing up a dark alley outside a student bar when he should have been home. This didn't make sense to Thelma; and nor could she understand what had made Bob so excited that he would leave a group of friends sitting around his dinner table, rather than hurry home to join them.

'That just wasn't in his nature,' she told Dwight, 'so it must have been something pretty important – something big.'

'Well, nothing was found on him, Thelma, so now we'll never know.'

Another cause of Dwight's deepening depression was the knowledge that ever since last year's cancellation of the Congressional hearings on the UFO phenomenon, which should have opened the whole debate up for the first time, Dr Frederick Epstein's APII, along with the other major UFO

organisations, had been suffering an unprecedented series of financial and personal catastrophes, including a dramatic loss of subscription-paying members, due to lack of public discussion of the phenomenon, the abrupt withdrawal of funds from long-standing support groups and individuals, repeated investigations by an IRS desperately trying to find discrepancies in the organisation's accounts, and the damaging loss of a large number of staff through inexplicable illnesses, marital problems, and alcoholism brought on by various kinds of UFO 'hauntings', including nocturnal visits from the 'men in black'. Through all of this, Dr Epstein had battled on with admirable fortitude, but the exhaustion was beginning to show on his lined face, in his prematurely greying hair and beard.

Last but by no means least, Dwight's depression was deepening because his increasing work-load for the understaffed APII was keeping him away from home more often and placing the marriage under strain, even as Beth, who'd had a couple of years of peace after the terrifying weeks leading up to the public showing of the Avrocar at Fort Eustus, Virginia, had started being tormented as before. Once more she was having dreadful nightmares about UFOs and men in black, actually seeing men dressed in black following her, either in a black limousine or on foot, though always at a safe distance. Also, this time, to add to her deepening fear, she was receiving numerous crank calls, some from people sounding mentally unstable and whispering insults down the line, others from 'deep breathers' who refused to say anything or simply chuckled before hanging up. Eventually, though no poltergeist manifestations were evident in the house, as they had been the week before the Avrocar viewing, Beth had become convinced that her car was being tracked by a UFO that often came down practically on top of her, yet somehow managed to always stay out of sight.

Dwight could not forget that the previous 'hauntings' had finished the day before the press showing of the Avrocar and had started up again the day after Bob Jackson's death. These facts convinced him that the hauntings, in both cases, were being organised by the same people, human or otherwise.

Interestingly enough, Beth had no more blackouts, though the lack of proper sleep due to the nightmares was turning her otherwise lovely face gaunt and weary. Noting this with concern, Dwight was startled to realise that Beth was now forty years old and that they had been married for seventeen of those years, with Nichola already turning sixteen. He and Beth, then, while

clambering over that always-difficult bridge into middle age, were gradually being aged even more by the trials they were forced to endure at the hands of a malign, unseen enemy. Dwight wanted to give it up, turn his back and run away, but Beth, even in her own dire condition, refused to let him.

'To do that,' she said, 'would probably add feelings of failure to your already chronic mixture of anger, fear and frustration. In short, it would do you no good, Dwight, and might even do you a lot of damage. So never mind what's happening to us; just hang in there and fight this thing.'

'I can't help worrying about you,' Dwight replied. 'You're suffering even more than I am – they're getting at me through you – and I can't help worrying about that. Why don't you go away for a while? Take a vacation. Visit your parents. Help them fix up their new place. They'd probably like that.'

Beth's father, Joe McGinnis, had recently sold his car-sales business and retired with his wife Glenda to Westerville, a pleasant small town located in rolling countryside about twelve miles north of Columbus, about a hundred miles from Dayton. They had only moved out a week ago and phoned the day before to say they loved the new house but needed some visitors to give it that lived-in look.

'Why not come down?' Joe had asked Beth. 'I know Nichola is still at school, but it's not a long way to travel, so you could come on your own. Besides, there are times when it's good to be alone. Might take years off you, gal.'

'I think Joe's right,' Dwight now told her. 'A change of scenery, away from it all, *could* do you good.'

'Do you think I could manage a vacation without...' Beth could hardly utter the words, because the thought of a negative reply was too painful to contemplate. She wanted to know if she could go away for a short break and not be followed by... *them*. Was there anywhere she and Dwight could be private, out of sight, out of mind? If not, then their life together was truly a nightmare from which there was no escape. 'I just thought...'

'It's worth trying,' Dwight assured her. 'What can you lose?'

'Okay, then, I'll try it for a week. When should I go?'

'It's only a two-hour drive, so why not go this afternoon? Leave now and you'll be there in time for dinner – and all mothers love to cook for their daughters, so that'll be a good start.'

‘Mom’s cooking and a bottle of Dad’s beer. Sounds good to me.’

‘Can’t harm you at all.’

‘Right, Dwight, I’ll call them and check that it’s okay, then I’ll pack my valise.’

‘You do that,’ Dwight said.

After checking with her folks and receiving their approval, Beth packed a valise, had a quick shower, then let Dwight walk her to the car, an old but trustworthy Ford saloon. They kissed and embraced on the sidewalk, not caring who saw them.

‘You take care,’ Beth said.

‘You have a good time for a change.’

‘And don’t let Nichola get up to any mischief.’

‘I’m a pretty stern dad.’

‘Okay, I’ll see you next week.’

‘Can I wait that long?’

Beth wrinkled her nose and smiled. ‘What a sweet-talking man I’ve got,’ she said. ‘Here, give me a big one.’

They kissed again, then Beth slipped into the car and drove off. Dwight looked on until the vehicle had turned the corner at the end of the road, then he glanced left and right, behind him, at the sky, hardly aware of what he had just done, instinctively, with foreboding, as he returned to the house.

Beth had told Dwight she would ring him when she reached her parents’ place. When she hadn’t called him by that evening, Dwight called his father-in-law and asked if Beth had turned up yet. Sounding anxious, Joe said she had not.

‘But the journey should only take two hours,’ Dwight said, ‘and she’s been gone for four.’

‘Might have stopped for a meal,’ Joe suggested hopefully.

‘No. She was planning to have dinner with you. Six on the dot, remember? Besides, if she knew she was going to be late, she’d have called, sure as hell.’

‘Maybe she simply had a breakdown. Let’s give her another hour.’

‘Okay,’ Dwight said.

An hour later, at nine in the evening, when Beth still hadn’t called either house, Dwight and Joe simultaneously checked with their local police stations regarding breakdowns or accidents. Neither station was holding a

report on anything regarding Beth or her vehicle; they would, however, ask their patrol cars to try tracking her down and call back whenever they found her.

By midnight they still hadn't found her.

Distraught, Dwight did his best to look normal in front of Nichola, who, at sixteen, was a tall, slim young lady with long blonde hair and radiant green eyes, dangerously attractive in figure-hugging denims and sweater, already drawing adolescent boys to the front porch, asking her out. Lying that Beth was with her parents and would be calling the next day, Dwight bid Nichola goodnight and watched her disappearing into her bedroom. Blessing God for his daughter's presence, he cracked a can of beer and drank it while sitting in a chair placed strategically between the table containing the phone and a window overlooking the front yard. He sat there throughout the night, until dawn, but Beth didn't arrive home, and neither the police in Dayton nor those in Columbus had found a trace of her.

Now almost out of his mind with anxiety, Dwight tried to hide it when he drove Nichola to school, dropped her off, and then, without realising he was doing it, glanced left and right, behind him, up at the sky. Seeing nothing unusual, though scarcely aware that he was looking, he quickly drove home again.

Beth's old Ford was parked in the driveway.

Parking his own car too quickly, practically banging into the Ford, he hurried into the house and found Beth sitting on the sofa, sipping from a cup of black coffee. When he entered, she glanced at him, repeatedly blinking her bloodshot eyes, then put her coffee cup down and jumped up to embrace him. Clearly exhausted, she was shivering and seemed on the verge of tears. Seeing the state of her, Dwight made her sit down again, then he put his arms around her and said, 'God, Beth, what happened? We've been anxious as hell.'

'I don't know. I'm not sure. Another one of those blackouts.' She shook her head from side to side, rubbed her eyes, blinked repeatedly and licked her lips. 'I can only remember the journey as far as the other side of Springfield. Somewhere along the road I must have lost consciousness.' She burst into tears, was consoled by Dwight, then tried recollecting the rest of it. 'All I remember is driving out of Springfield, heading for Columbus. It was about five in the evening. I remember this empty stretch of road beyond

Springfield, then...' She lit a Camel cigarette, inhaled like someone drowning, trying to gulp in air, then blew a cloud of smoke and relaxed a little. 'Nothing!' She shrugged. 'Next thing I remember, I was still in the car, still behind the steering wheel, but the car was at the other side of Springfield – *this* side of Springfield – and parked facing back where I had come from: in the direction of Dayton.'

'Lord almighty!' Dwight said. 'What time was this?'

Beth checked her wristwatch, looked perplexed, then glanced at the clock on the wall. 'Judging by the time now, I must have awakened between eight and nine this morning. I couldn't tell the time because my wristwatch had stopped at five after five. That was either the time yesterday evening or this morning – I can't really say – though I'm pretty damned sure it was five after five last night.' She squeezed Dwight's waist and laid her head on his shoulder. 'Oh, God, I'm really scared, Dwight. This is worse than before. I feel like I've been to hell and back - and I can't explain why. I'm shattered. I feel bruised inside and out... God, yes, I'm *scared*!'

She burst into tears again, so Dwight hugged her, stroked her hair, kissed the top of her head, then gently rocked her on the sofa until she had calmed down. Then he cupped her tearful face in his hands and kissed her on the lips.

'Lie down and have a sleep,' he advised her. 'Take some Valium. I don't want to encourage you to take sedatives, but I think sleep's more important right now. I'll be here. I won't be sleeping. I'll be looking after you. You've nothing to fear.'

'You won't leave the house?'

'I promise. Not until Nichola has to be picked up – and you'll be awake by then. Until then, I'm staying right here. So come on, let's get you into bed.'

When he led her into the bedroom, she just stared silently at the bed, clearly reluctant to lie down.

'You don't have to take your clothes off,' Dwight told her. 'Just have some Valium and lie down and you'll go to sleep instantly.'

But Beth shook her head in protest. 'No, I can't sleep in these clothes. I can't wear them ever again. I feel dirty in these clothes... contaminated... God, *I can't stand these clothes*!'

Distraught, she proceeded to frantically tear the clothes off her, like someone covered in stinging ants, until Dwight managed to soothe her again and sit her down on the edge of the bed. After making her swallow some

Valium, he told her to stretch out on the bed and try to relax.

Even with the sedative, however, she insisted that she couldn't relax until she took off all her clothes and had a hot shower. This she did, becoming raw-red in water so hot that Dwight was compelled to reach in and turn the tap to mix more cold with the hot, lowering the temperature. Beth, naked and pink from the steaming water, still took a long time to thoroughly, compulsively, clean herself, but finally stepped out of the shower and, like a docile child, let Dwight dry her with a towel. Still naked and shaking her head from side to side, silently gesturing 'No!' when Dwight held out her night-dress, she crawled between the sheets and fell asleep almost instantly.

Boiling himself another coffee, sensing that he would not yet be able to digest food, Dwight sat at the table between the telephone and the front window, gazing out on the street, to where his car was parked practically nose-to-tail with Beth's Ford. He dwelt repeatedly on Beth's tale of driving out of Springfield at five in the evening and awakening the next morning on the Dayton side of town, as if somehow her car had been picked up, transported back the way it had come, and deposited again on the road leading to Dayton and home. Eventually, on an impulse, and after checking that Beth was still soundly asleep, which she was, he left the house and went to check her car.

At first he found nothing... then, upon closer inspection, he found four absolutely similar indentations, two on each side of the car, placed equidistant between the wheels, just below the front and rear doors.

In a trance of disbelief and gradual acceptance, Dwight examined those indentations repeatedly and finally came to the conclusion that his senses were not betraying him... The indentations indicated clearly that four clamps of some kind had been tightened on the bodywork, under the four doors, between the wheels, to raise the car off the ground.

Whatever it was that had raised the car, it was certainly physical.

For weeks after Beth's baffling, frightening experience, she suffered from blinding headaches and a repeat of the former nightmares. She also became more convinced that her fears about being followed by men in black had been justified... and she was seeing those men in her nightmares.

Finally, when she showed no signs of improvement, Dwight insisted that she visit a psychiatrist, if only to confirm that she was sane and had not

imagined the whole business. He felt guilty doing this, as he was already convinced, by the indentations on the car as well as by Beth's undeniable sincerity, that the vehicle had indeed been picked up by a physical object and transported back to the other side of town while she was unconscious.

Nevertheless, he also felt that the psychiatric evaluation was necessary for Beth's peace of mind and would be a validation for what he had proposed should follow it: a visit to a professional hypnotist for the purpose of ascertaining exactly what had happened along that lonely stretch of road between Springfield and Columbus over a period of eighteen hours.

After a number of consultations with Beth, the psychiatrist, Dr Phillip Dewhurst, an old friend who had served as a medical officer at Wright-Patterson AFB, confirmed that she was not hallucinating and was, instead, suffering from genuine amnesia regarding the 'lost' period in question. It was the opinion of Dr Dewhurst that the amnesia was caused by Beth's deep-seated need to obliterate either a real experience or an exceptionally frightening, possibly repellent, fantasy. Dr Dewhurst therefore recommended, as Dwight had hoped, that instead of a course of sodium amytal or Pentothal to break through Beth's resistance to her buried memory, she undergo regressive hypnotism with his friend, Dr Irma Sagan, B.A., M.A., M.D., formerly of the Society of Medical Hypnotists, London, England, and a highly respected psychiatrist in her own right.

Though initially reluctant to let herself be hypnotised, Beth, after a few more 'hauntings' and nightmares, agreed to let Dwight set up the appointment. Subsequently, a few days later, they were shown into Dr Sagan's office in downtown Dayton and asked to take the two chairs on the other side of her desk, facing her. Dr Sagan was a slim, attractive brunette with a bright, relaxing smile – certainly not what the nervous Beth had imagined a psychiatrist and hypnotist would be. When Beth released her nervous tension by blurting out what she thought, Dr Sagan just chuckled.

'I know what you mean,' she said. 'It's the curse of my life. Everyone expects me to be old, distinguished, grey-haired and, of course, *male*. They also expect me to be terribly solemn, maybe even intense or half-mad – Rasputin... Svengali. Luckily for you, I don't have to be either. This is a job like any other and I do it well. Are you feeling more relaxed now?'

'More relaxed for having met you,' Beth said, smiling, 'and seeing that you're not Rasputin or Svengali.'

Dr Sagan smiled in return. ‘Fine. Now do you have any doubts about hypnotism? By which I mean, do you believe it can be effective in psychological terms?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Beth said.

‘In other words, coming here wasn’t your own idea.’

‘No.’ Beth glanced at Dwight. ‘It was my husband’s idea, initially. Then your friend, Dr Dewhurst, recommended it.’

‘Do you trust your husband?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Good. Now this is very important... Do you believe you *can* be hypnotised?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I think it’s self-suggestion. I think that if you *want* to be hypnotised, you can be. Maybe simple-minded or easily led people can be. On the other hand, if you don’t believe in hypnotism, or don’t want to be hypnotised, then it’s not going to work for you.’

‘And you neither believe in it nor want it.’

‘I’m willing to try it on the chance that it might help me, but I don’t hold out too much hope.’

‘Those are very precise answers,’ Dr Sagan told her. ‘You have a strong personality.’ She stood up, walked around to the front of the desk, sat on its edge, directly in front of Beth, and stared down at her. ‘Let me assure you, Beth, that any intelligent adult and most children over the age of seven can be hypnotised, that only the mentally retarded and the psychotic can *resist* being hypnotised, and that hypnotisabilty is in no way a sign of weak will. Indeed, the more intelligent and imaginative the subject, the better a subject he or she will be. You therefore needn’t feel ashamed if I hypnotise you. There’s nothing *wrong* in being hypnotised. Just think of it as another branch of medicine and try to accept it.’

‘Okay,’ Beth said.

Dr Sagan smiled and nodded. ‘So how do you imagine I’m going to hypnotise you?’

‘You’ll make me lie down and use something visual and repetitive – a swinging key chain, a metronome – to focus my attention. Then you’ll talk to me as my eyes follow the movement of the swinging object.’

Dr Sagan smiled again. ‘You’ve obviously been reading up on the subject.’

‘Yes.’

‘What’s the time, Beth?’

Beth checked her wristwatch. ‘Thirty after eleven.’

‘Thank you.’ Dr Sagan placed the palm of her hand against Beth’s forehead. ‘What if I told you to raise your right hand?’

‘I’d ask why you wanted me to do that.’

‘What if I just replied by *telling* you to raise your right hand?’

Beth raised her right hand. ‘I’d ask you why you wanted me to do that.’

‘And if I refused to answer, would you refuse to raise your right hand?’

‘Yes,’ Beth said, still holding up her right hand, but clearly not aware that she was doing so.

‘Does this kind of conversation exhaust you?’

‘It does a bit,’ Beth replied, still holding her right hand up in the air.

‘Your eyes are heavy, aren’t they? Drowsy and heavy. Very heavy. So heavy you feel you want to close them, but you can’t close them just yet.’

‘That’s right,’ Beth said.

‘Would you like to lie down and close your heavy eyes and rest them for a moment?’

‘Yes,’ Beth said.

‘Would you like to lower your right hand and walk to the sofa and lie down and close your heavy eyes for a moment?’

‘I would,’ Beth said.

‘Lower your right hand, Beth, and walk to the sofa and lie down and close your heavy eyes for a moment.’

Fully conscious and feeling that this was the correct thing to do, Beth lowered her right hand, walked across to the sofa, stretched out on it and closed her weary eyes.

Dr Sagan followed her across the room and took the chair beside the sofa. After switching on the tape-recorder on the cupboard beside the sofa, she leaned over Beth.

‘Do you mind talking to me, Beth?’

‘No.’

‘Would you mind answering my questions?’

‘No.’

‘Waken up, Beth. Open your eyes.’

Beth opened her eyes. She felt unusually tired, but more relaxed and less burdened than before. Glancing across the room, she saw Dwight sitting at Dr Sagan’s desk, looking extremely concerned as Dr Sagan rewound the tape on the tape-recorder and checked her wristwatch. When Beth sat up, yawning, stretching herself, Dr Sagan smiled at her. ‘What’s the time, Beth?’

Beth checked her wristwatch, expecting to find that only a few minutes had passed since she lay down. Instead, she found that two hours had gone by. She’d been asleep all that time. ‘My God!’ she exclaimed in wonder. ‘Thirty after one! Where did the time go? What...?’

She glanced up to see Dr Sagan’s easy smile. ‘Come here, Beth. Sit beside your husband. You’ve been in a trance condition for two hours and talked through it all. Would you like to hear what you said?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Beth replied.

‘I think you’d better come over here and sit beside your husband and listen to the tape. Your husband understands it better than I do. Please, Beth, come on over here.’

Beth swung her feet down to the floor then walked across the room, to take the chair beside Dwight. She stared with widening, fearful eyes at the tape-recorder and found herself mesmerised by the sight of that revolving spool of tape. Her own voice, when it finally came off the tape, practically hypnotised her all over again.

The Beth on the tape, speaking to those in the room, gave flesh, blood and bone to Beth’s nightmares. It was the disembodied voice of a lost soul, speaking from hell.

Chapter Thirty-Five

REPORT OF TAPED HYPNOTHERAPY SESSION

BETWEEN: Dr I. Sagan, B.A., M.A., M.D., of the Sagan Hypnotherapy Clinic, Dayton, Ohio, USA, and:-

PATIENT: Beth McGinnis Randall, also of Dayton, Ohio.

PATIENT'S AGE: 40

STATUS: Private Patient (PP)

DATE: November 12, 1963

SUMMARY: Patient presented herself in the company of her husband, Dwight Randall, at the office of Dr Irma Sagan in the Sagan Hypnotherapy Clinic on November 12, 1963, on the recommendation of Dr Phillip Dewhurst, M.A., M.D., for immediate hypnotic regression and, if required, hypnotherapy.

The patient was suffering from repeated migraines, blackouts, and feelings of paranoia based upon the conviction that she was being 'haunted' by an unknown person or persons.

The recommendation for hypnotherapy was made by Dr Dewhurst after four consultations with the patient and his subsequent assessment that she was suffering from amnesia relating to a blackout that occurred on October 2, 1963, during a drive from Dayton, Ohio, to Columbus, Ohio.

The purpose of the hypnotic session was to regress the patient to the moment of blackout on October 2, induce a recollection of the event that had traumatised her, and decide a means of curing the trauma based on the nature of the traumatising event.

Penetration of the amnesia was achieved by taking the patient through the three prime stages of hypnotism: light, medium, and heavy, the latter being a state of somnambulism.

The trance session lasted a total of two hours and a complete regression was attained.

At the end of the trance session it was decided by Dr Sagan that the patient, when awakened from her trance, should be made to listen to her own description of the experience and then, in the full awareness of what had transpired during her blackout, undergo a further series of trance sessions for the purposes of hypnotherapy aimed at relieving her stress while also ascertaining the reality or non-reality of the trauma-inducing event.

At the completion of a total of twelve further hypnotherapy sessions, it was the opinion of Dr Sagan, albeit offered with reluctance, that the patient's recollections in the trance state were an accurate recall of a real event.

Transcript of interview with patient in hypnotic trance state for inclusion in the confidential archives of the Society of Medical Hypnotists, 4 Victoria Terrace, Kingsway, Hove, Sussex, England.

DOCTOR: You are relaxing, relaxing, very relaxed. You are sleeping, deep sleep, sleeping, deeper, very deep. You are sleeping, very comfortable, relaxed, very relaxed. You are deeper and deeper in sleep, very comfortable, deeper. You are relaxed and comfortable. You are deep, deep in sleep. You are relaxed and you will remember everything and you will answer my questions.

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: All right, Beth, you are very relaxed. You have nothing to fear. You are going back to the evening of October 2, 1963. To the moment when you were driving out of Springfield. You are going back now.

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: Do you know where you are?

PATIENT: I'm in the car. I'm driving away from Springfield. I'm on the

road leading from Springfield to Columbus, about fifteen miles out of Springfield.

DOCTOR: What do you see, Beth?

PATIENT: Just the road. The empty fields on either side. Not much traffic on the road. No traffic here. Sun going down. Almost dark. A nice, easy drive. It feels good to be...

DOCTOR: Yes Beth?

PATIENT: I don't want to.

DOCTOR: All right, Beth, you are very relaxed. You have nothing to fear. What do you see?

PATIENT: Feels funny... Someone following... No, there's no one there. Nothing out front. Nothing behind me. Fields all empty on both sides of the car. Nothing in the sky... Darkening... The sky's darkening... Strange feeling... Oh, no, not here as well! Something's following me... Not behind me... Above me... Damn it, where are you? Oh, God, right above me! *No! I don't want to!*

DOCTOR: You are safe, Beth. Relaxed. Very relaxed. There is nothing to fear. You are relaxed. You are safe. What's happening, Beth?

PATIENT: Beside me... Beside the car. Two of them... Flying saucers... Oh, God, Dwight, where are you? Come and see them! What you've always wanted to see. Oh, God, Dwight, where are you?

DOCTOR: Dwight's beside you, Beth. He's right here beside you. He's fine. He's okay. He wants you to describe the flying saucers. What are they like, Beth?

PATIENT: Not big... Not like the ones I've heard about... Small saucers, spinning discs, metallic and silvery-white, glowing oddly in failing light and

spinning... Only two or three foot wide. Shaped like two plates placed on top of each other, one upside-down on the other... All metal. Smooth surfaces. Spherical. Seamless. Spinning like spinning-tops as they fly through the air, pacing the car, one on each side, parallel to where I'm sitting, very close to the windows... Now they're... *I don't want to! Don't want to! Don't want to!*

DOCTOR: It's all right, Beth, you're just remembering. It's in the past. You're remembering. It's all in the past. It can't hurt you. You're remembering and it seems to be happening now, but it was all in the past, it just seems like the present. In the present. Right now. It's right now, but you're safe. What's happening, Beth?

PATIENT: Two small flying saucers, one on each side of the car, right by the front windows, pacing the car, keeping up with the car. They seem solid... seamless... I can hear them – no, *feel* them. They're spinning like crazy, sort of glowing, and I'm not sure if I'm hearing them or *feeling* them, but there's some kind of pressure. Something pressing around me, making the car drag, slowing down... *Oh, my God!*

DOCTOR: Relax, Beth. Relax. No need to worry. Just tell me, Beth.

PATIENT: The flying saucers have stopped spinning. They're still flying, but they're not spinning... Oh, God, a slot's opening up in both of them... a glass eye... staring at me... God! What's that? Some kind of light – beams of light! Those things are shooting beams of light into the car... strange light... very bright and flickering on and off repeatedly, pulsating, making a noise... No, a kind of vibration... No! Please, *no more*!

DOCTOR: What is it, Beth?

PATIENT: My head hurts. I can't think. One of the beams of light is aimed at the hood of the car; the other's right in my face... I can't see properly... The car's engine is cutting out... Oh, Christ, my head hurts... The light's blinding me... The car's still cutting out. God, it's stopping!

DOCTOR: It's all right, Beth, there's nothing to fear. What's happening now?

PATIENT: The car's gone dead and stopped and... *No! No! No!*

DOCTOR: Relax. You are relaxed. You are safe. What's happening, Beth?

PATIENT: Oh, God! Straight ahead! It's coming down over the road. Another flying saucer, but bigger.. *enormous*... About the size of an airliner. Lots of lights flashing around it. Descending slowly on the road just ahead. Hovering there – just inches above the road. Now settling down on the road and blocking my way with those flashing lights blinding me.

DOCTOR: Where are the smaller saucers, Beth? Are they still hovering at both sides of your car? Still shining the beams of light in?

PATIENT: Yes – *no!* I mean, yes, they're still there, one hovering at each side of me, but those slits in their sides have closed up and the lights aren't shining any more. I'm...

DOCTOR: Yes?

PATIENT: I'm trying to start the car. It won't start. I'm trying to get out and run away, but the doors seem locked, though I didn't lock them... Oh, God, I'm trapped here and my head is splitting and...

DOCTOR: It's all right, Beth. You needn't be agitated. I'm right here. I'm with you. Just tell me what's happening.

PATIENT: I'm trapped in the car. The doors are locked. I can't get the car to start. That gigantic flying saucer is straddling the road – over a hundred foot wide, as tall as an office building, with lights flashing on and off around its rim... No! The lights are going out. I think part of the body is spinning and slowing down as the lights flicker out... Now the lights are out and the big flying saucer is sitting there in darkness. Nearly dark. And... Now it's making a noise. A kind of bass humming sound. I can *feel* it – almost feel the sound, I mean, and... The flying saucer is opening. *Opening!* A long slit of bright light along the front, along its base... becoming bigger, higher, like a door or panel

lifting up. And... it's a door in the front – a big door, like the door of an aircraft hangar – just like Wright-Patterson, Dwight – and... Oh, God, there are people in there... Just standing there, not moving, in the light of what looks like an aircraft's holding bay... Staring at me, I think... I can't be sure... They're silhouetted. Human figures... some normal... but some... Oh, Christ, some are so small! Small and misshapen about the head and hands... The light... They must be distorted by the light... Oh, my God... *No! No! No!*

DOCTOR: You are calm, Beth. You are not really there. You are here. You are here with us, with Dwight and me, and absolutely safe. You are here and you are absolutely safe. What's happening, Beth?

PATIENT: Lights. Other lights. Two brilliant beams of light emanating from that huge saucer. Beaming right at my car, in my face. Flooding the car with light, flickering on and off repeatedly...

DOCTOR: You're safe, Beth. What's happening?

PATIENT: That noise... I can *feel* the noise! I can't think clearly because of the noise and... The light in that big saucer is expanding... No! A ramp is falling down... slowly... falling down to touch the ground, forming a path up into the saucer. Now... Christ! Something is coming out, emerging from each side of that holding bay... Large steel claws... Clamps of some kind... Now stretching out of the holding bay on hinged arms and hanging over the end of the ramp... They've stopped moving. They're just hanging there on the end of the hinged supports, like big steel claws on steel arms.

DOCTOR: What are the figures in the holding bay doing, Beth?

PATIENT: Nothing. They haven't moved at all. I can only make out the shape of them – not their faces – because they're silhouetted in the brilliant, almost blinding light. Also... My eyes hurt. I'm dazzled by the light filling the car and flickering on and off so fast that it disorientates me... And making that sound... The sound that I can *feel*...

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

PATIENT: They're just standing there – watching me, I think... God, those small ones aren't natural... the wrong shape. And... No, I don't believe this! Now the smaller saucers are shooting their beams of light at me again, at the car, front and rear of the car, and... *The car's moving!* It's being pulled forward! Oh, God, I've got the handbrake on but it's not holding the car back, the car is still being drawn forward... By what? The beams of light! They're drawing the car forward as the smaller saucers advance, taking me – I mean the car – towards the steel ramp of the big saucer and those men in the doorway... I want out! I want out! I can't move! *Oh, please God, let me out!*

DOCTOR: Relax, Beth. Relax. I'll make sure you get out. Just tell me what's happening.

PATIENT: The flickering light is doing something to me... pressure... numbing me... paralysing me... Ah, God, I can't move and the car has reached the ramp and those claws – the big clamps on hinged arms – are moving down on both sides of the car, two on each side...

DOCTOR: You're still here, Beth. You're only remembering. Now tell me what's happening.

PATIENT: The car's rocking. The clamps are taking hold, one under each door, between the front and rear wheels, and... Ah, Christ, I can't breathe! I'm panicking... trying to stop it... take control... Yes, better... Can breathe again.

DOCTOR: You can breathe again, Beth. You have no panic. You're still in control. What's happening, Beth?

PATIENT: The lights of the smaller saucers have blinked out and those saucers have flown into the holding bay and disappeared into the dazzling light. Thank God, they've finally gone... But... *Oh, no!*

DOCTOR: What is it, Beth?

PATIENT: The mechanical clamps... They're lifting the car slightly and drawing it up the ramp and into the holding bay, into the brightening light... And those figures, silhouetted, they're moving at last, parting, stepping aside to leave room for the car... I'm inside the saucer. *Inside!* Let me out! *Let me out!*

DOCTOR: You are relaxed, very relaxed, deeply relaxed. There is nothing to fear. You are deep, deep in sleep, you are relaxed and nothing can harm you. You are okay. You can answer my questions. You are in the holding bay of the flying saucer, but you have nothing to fear. You can answer my questions. What do you see inside?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: Can you hear me, Beth?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: Your car has just been drawn up into the holding bay of the big flying saucer. What do you see?

PATIENT: Light. Dazzling light. The bass humming sound has stopped. The figures are silhouetted by the light but are now on both sides of me, surrounding the car. The clamps on the hinged steel arms have just been released and the arms are now bending, withdrawing the clamps by raising them up above the car. The steel arms are moving back into the holding bay on grooved tracks, like railroad tracks, leaving the car sitting here... Every sound echoes here. The noise of the steel clamps on the hinged arms reverberates as the mechanism moves deeper into the holding bay. Now it's disappearing from view, swallowed up by the bright light. The bass humming sound has stopped and my headache is gone. I can move, but I feel drained of energy and dazed... Oh, God, now they're... I don't want to! *I won't!*

DOCTOR: Tell me. It's all right, Beth, you can tell me. You won't be harmed if you tell me. What's happening now?

PATIENT: The silhouetted figures are surrounding the car. Most of them look like normal men, all wearing black coveralls. Though some of them... *No!*

DOCTOR: Go on, Beth.

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: Tell me what you see, Beth.

PATIENT: Some of them – the ones who looked small and misshapen in silhouette – are alien creatures. They have hands like the metal clamps that pulled the car into this place – metallic claws with hinged joints. There are metal caps on their heads, studded with... I'm a not sure... electric plug. Their eyes appear to be normal – not American – Oriental? But the lower half of the face is made of metal – nose and chin, I think. The metal covering the lower half of the face has no space for the lips – no lips at all. They look just like little men from outer space; they look hideous... frightening.

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: You can talk about it, Beth. It's okay. Dwight and I are beside you, both listening. Please continue describing them.

PATIENT: They're small – about five foot tall, maybe smaller, not much taller. Like the human beings, they're wearing coveralls, but silvery-grey instead of black. Now all of them – the human beings and the small aliens – are surrounding the car... I'm frightened. Yes! But it's all in my head... I'm not doing anything because, though I'm frightened, I also feel physically drained and mentally passive. I'm waiting for them to do something. Or for them to tell me what to do. Now they're standing around the car and looking in. They're looking at *me*.

DOCTOR: Is anyone speaking, Beth?

PATIENT: No. One of the men in black coveralls is opening the car door and dragging me out. Not exactly *dragging* me out, just sort of helping me. I'm frightened, but I don't try to resist. I don't have the will. He has to help me because I feel weak and dazed and dizzy. I think he knows how I feel.

DOCTOR: So the man in black has pulled you out of the car. What's happening now, Beth?

PATIENT: I'm looking around me. The sloping ramp is swinging back up to form part of the wall... Now it's closed. It fits so well, I can't even see the joins... The walls seem made of white-painted metal. Not walls – one wall – curving around on both sides of me. Part of the circular exterior of the big saucer; the roof of the holding bay... I call it a holding bay because I feel that I'm in an aircraft, or maybe an aircraft hangar, like the ones they had at Wright-Patterson AFB... The roof of the holding bay is dome-shaped. It has that hollow ringing sound, like all aircraft hangars have, but it's shaped like a dome – or only part of a dome... Shaped like a slice of orange.

DOCTOR: What else do you see?

PATIENT: Machinery. The big machine that lifted my car and carried it into this holding bay, but with its hinged arms now folded and the clamps – giant versions of the metallic hands of the small aliens – now folded down and tucked against the wall... More machinery. Lots of it. A bit like a garage. I don't know what kind of machinery it is, but I feel like I'm in a garage or an aircraft hangar... I'm seeing all of this in the bright light... It's all bright light and shadow.

DOCTOR: What happened next, Beth? The men have helped you out of the car and the door of the holding bay has been closed, so what happened next?

(Note: When Dr Sagan went into the past tense, so did the patient.)

PATIENT: I became very frightened again. Started shaking badly. I was looking at the small alien creatures, at their hideous, mostly metallic faces,

and I guess that got to me. Then one of them, an alien, passed his hand, his metallic claw, over my face – he was holding something in it – and I felt heat going into my head and then I felt a lot calmer.

DOCTOR: You weren't frightened anymore?

PATIENT: I went kind of limp. I felt sort of dreamy, not real, removed from it all. It became like a dream.

DOCTOR: Yet you were still awake?

PATIENT: Yes. Awake. But as if I was dreaming. Dreaming though awake.

DOCTOR: Were there any distinct sounds in the hangar? Any signs of movement?

PATIENT: Yes. Shortly after the door closed – I mean, when the ramp was drawn up again to form part of the circular wall – I felt the floor vibrating – not shaking, just vibrating – and then I heard a sort of background humming.

DOCTOR: Humming? The sound of low-powered engines?

PATIENT: No. A kind of bass humming – I can't really explain it – but not a mechanical sound. More like an electrical sound – very faint, yet distinct.

DOCTOR: Any sensation of movement?

PATIENT: A kind of floating sensation. But I wasn't too sure. I still felt a bit light-headed. Though it *could* have been some kind of movement.

DOCTOR: Such as flight?

PATIENT: Could have been.

DOCTOR: And then?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: What happened next, Beth?

PATIENT: I can't remember. I think I blacked out... Yes, I see corridors – curving corridors – with portholes along one wall and steel doors, all closed, in the other wall. Some doors were open – not many, but some. Then I caught a glimpse of what looked like a huge machine shop: jibs and cranes, catwalks, ladders, machinery, lots of men - I assume they were men, but they were a long way away - in grey coveralls. Then... *Oh, please God!*

DOCTOR: I'm still here, Beth, right by your side. You have nothing to fear. What did you see?

PATIENT: Another room. I was in a different room. Circular, dome-shaped ceiling, white-painted metal walls, men and women in white coats working at long tables between glass tanks that were covered in frost and... *Oh, please God, no!*

DOCTOR: It's all right, Beth. You have nothing to fear. What you saw was in the frosted-glass tanks. What did you see?

PATIENT: Bodies. Naked human bodies. Either sleeping or dead. With wires running out of their heads and attached to the inside of the glass tanks.

DOCTOR: Wires?

PATIENT: Cables. Electric cables, I think. They were attached to the inside of the tanks and other wires, or cables, were on the outside and ran from the glass tanks up to machines showing zigzagging lines on what looked like TV screens.

DOCTOR: EEG machines?

PATIENT: Pardon?

DOCTOR: Have you ever seen in hospitals, or perhaps on television, machines that record brain waves or heartbeats, indicating if a patient is alive or dead?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: Were the machines you saw like those?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: So the naked people, either sleeping, unconscious, or dead, were in frosted-glass tanks wired to machines that may have been recording their brain-waves or heartbeats.

PATIENT: Yes. The machines seemed like that. But the people in white coats, the living people, they're...

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: What are they doing, Beth?

PATIENT: Joining things together. Welding things. Fitting wires into sockets and soldering metallic joints and operating computer consoles and... joining things together.

DOCTOR: What things?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: What things, Beth?

PATIENT: Severed heads. Amputated limbs. Internal organs... Oh, God, a human heart, still beating! Joining them to other human body parts and metal prosthetics... *I can't look!* I *won't* look!

DOCTOR: Don’t look, Beth. You don’t have to look. Look away. What happened next, Beth?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: It’s all right, Beth, you have passed through that room. You no longer have anything to fear. What happened next, Beth?

PATIENT: Can’t remember. Darkness. Things gliding through darkness. Silence and darkness and breathing and the sound of my heartbeat. I’m floating. Can’t see. I am where nothing is.

DOCTOR: Did you have a blackout, Beth?

PATIENT: Yes, a blackout. I think so. I feel that I had a blackout. Then I awakened in...

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: You had a blackout, Beth, and then recovered. What’s happening now, Beth?

PATIENT: I’m somewhere else. Another room. Curved white walls, but I don’t think they’re metallic.

DOCTOR: An interior room.

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: And?

PATIENT: I’m looking up at the ceiling. Dome-shaped. It’s brightly lit, but I can’t see the lights. I think the lights are hidden.

DOCTOR: And?

PATIENT: I'm looking up at the ceiling?

DOCTOR: You're lying down?

PATIENT: Yes. On something pretty hard. Not a mattress. Something cold and hard. I think it might be metallic. When I move, it feels cold and hard.

DOCTOR: You're lying on something cold and hard, which may be metallic, and you're looking up at the dome-shaped ceiling.

PATIENT: Yes. A dome-shaped ceiling. White, like the walls. Curved walls, like all the other walls. All curves. All domes.

DOCTOR: And stretched out on your back on this cold, hard, metallic bed, looking up at the dome-shaped ceiling, you saw...

PATIENT: Faces. A circle of faces, staring down at me. Light beaming down on me. Spotlights, I think, not too bright or big, but beaming down from behind the shoulders of the men staring down at me.

DOCTOR: What kind of men?

PATIENT: Normal men. One handsome and oddly ageless, with very smooth pale skin, but with little movement in his features. Grey hair... No, white hair. Silvery-white hair. I thought the silvery-white hair was strange, because his face seemed so young... though expressionless.

DOCTOR: Young, but... What do you mean by 'little movement in his features'? By 'expressionless'? He looked human and otherwise perfectly normal?

PATIENT: Yes. Kind of handsome... At least given his white hair and the lack of movement, or mobility, in his features. I think he might have had

plastic surgery, though I couldn't see scars or lines.

DOCTOR: Were you strapped to the bed?

PATIENT: Not a bed. A kind of table.

DOCTOR: A surgical table?

PATIENT: Yes, maybe that.

DOCTOR: Let's call it a bed. Were you strapped down?

PATIENT: No.

DOCTOR: Did you try to sit up?

PATIENT: No... Yes, I tried once, but I just couldn't move. When I tried to move, I felt that I was paralysed – and that brought back my fear.

DOCTOR: Did any of the men surrounding you, looking down at you, actually speak to you?

PATIENT: Yes, the one with the youthful face, white hair, maybe plastic surgery.

DOCTOR: What did he say?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: What did he say, Beth?

PATIENT: Don't worry. You're not paralysed. You're not hurt or damaged in any way. You will come to no harm.

DOCTOR: He spoke English?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: Accent?

PATIENT: He was American – I'm sure he was American – but he also sounded kind of European, like those guys in the movies.

DOCTOR: When he spoke to you, did you try to reply?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: You could speak?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: What did you say?

PATIENT: I asked him where I was.

DOCTOR: And he said?

PATIENT: Nothing.

DOCTOR: Nothing?

PATIENT: He just smiled and aimed something held in his hand, a remote control, at the opposite wall. He pressed a button and two steel panels slid apart to form a big window, letting me see what was outside.

DOCTOR: What was outside?

PATIENT: Stars!

DOCTOR: Pardon?

PATIENT: Stars! I saw nothing but stars. Then he pressed another button

and the light dimmed and the stars disappeared, and then I saw...

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: What did you see through the window, Beth?

PATIENT: Earth.

DOCTOR: Earth?

PATIENT: Not earth – *the* Earth. Just as I'd seen it in those films sent back by the satellites. The globe of Earth. At least, I think it was the Earth. It looked like the Earth on the films and photos I've seen. I'm convinced it was Earth.

DOCTOR: Did the man showing you this say anything at this point? Did he speak at all?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: What did he say?

(Note: At this point in the hypnotic trance session, the patient, who has no reported interest in, or knowledge of, acting, adapted a surprisingly convincing male voice.)

PATIENT: Beautiful, isn't it? But why look so surprised? The Soviets and Americans have both put men into space – and that's exactly where you are, Mrs Randall... above Earth, in outer space, just like Yuri Gagarin, Alan Shepherd, Major Titov and Lieutenant-Colonel John Glenn. Indeed, next month the Russians will be putting what they assume will be the first woman into space – but you've beaten her to it. Don't you feel proud?

(Note: At this point in the hypnotic trance, even Dr Sagan seems so startled

that she can think of nothing to say for quite some time. For this reason there is a large gap on the tape before the question-and-answer session picks up again. When the patient next speaks, her voice has returned to normal.)

DOCTOR: So how did you react when you saw Earth and the stars outside the window?

PATIENT: I was calm. I felt a bit remote. As if I'd been drugged.

DOCTOR: Did the man showing you Earth and the stars say any more?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: What did he say?

PATIENT: He said...

DOCTOR: Yes?

PATIENT: We picked you up by mistake. It wasn't you we wanted. We thought it was your husband in the car and instead we got you.

DOCTOR: Anything else?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: You're safe, Beth. Nothing can harm you. Did he say anything else?

PATIENT: Yes. He told me I shouldn't worry. That they weren't going to harm me. He said they were just going to check that I was okay and then take me home. He said that when I got back home, I wouldn't recall what had happened to me, but that eventually I would be the means of warning Dwight that he was endangering himself, as well as Nichola and me, by investigating UFOs. He said that for some time I wouldn't remember my experience, but that it would all come out eventually, at the appropriate time, which was his

way of warning Dwight off.

DOCTOR: And?

PATIENT: Nothing else.

DOCTOR: He said nothing else?

PATIENT: No.

DOCTOR: Not another word?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: Did he say anything else? Anything, Beth? You can tell me. It's all right. What else did he say?

PATIENT: Nothing. He stepped aside. Another man, speaking German, held up a long, sharply pointed, silvery instrument... Awful! *Terrifying*! The others held my legs apart. The one with the awful instrument leaned over me, looking between my legs, and then... Oh, please, no! Please! Don't! Oh, God, it hurts! Please stop it! Oh, God, please, God help me, please don't, please stop him, I can't... Oh, God, stop! *No! No! No!*

DOCTOR: Relax, Beth. Relax. Relax, you are relaxed, you are safe, I am here, you are all right. Now tell me, Beth. It's all right to tell me. What else did they do?

PATIENT: No! No! No! No! No!

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth, yes, it's all right, I am here, Dwight is here, you're not alone, you can tell us, you can talk to us, Beth. What else did they do?

PATIENT: Oh, God, the pain! I can't bear the pain. Sometimes pain and then a kind of pleasure that goes beyond pain. Things inside me – in there. Deep inside me. Oh, the pain! Then in my ears, up my nostrils, in... I can't

accept... I refuse to believe... But they did! They turned me onto my belly and put something in there... *Pain*! Please God, help me! First the back, then the front. Needles under my skin, metallic probes in every orifice, juices sucked out and liquids pumped in, and all the pain and even more pain and sometimes... Oh, God forgive me... pleasure! Yes, that as well. They tormented me with pleasure that went beyond the bearable and brought me... my racing heart... *I can't breathe!*... to the point of... *pain*! Back to pain. Experimenting, trying to find out what was possible, from one extreme to the other, pain and pleasure combined... And all the time looking closely at me, studying me, as if I was nothing, a mere insect, something trapped on a glass slide under a microscope... Oh, God, help me, please let me go! Please don't! No more! *Please*!

DOCTOR: Forget it, Beth. It's in the past. It's been and gone. You are here now. You're safe. You're safe here with Dwight and me and can't be harmed, you are here in the present. Think of the present without fear and tell me what they are doing, Beth. They have finished and the pain has all gone and I want to know how it ended. No more pain. You can tell me. What did they do when they were finished, Beth?

PATIENT: Nothing. When they finished, they stepped aside. They took the samples they had taken out of me and then went away, leaving him – only him!

DOCTOR: The one with the handsome, oddly ageless features, and silvery-white hair and lack of expression. The one who spoke English with a slight European accent. What did he say or do, Beth?

PATIENT: I don't want...

DOCTOR: You are safe, Beth. We are here, you are protected. What did he say or do?

PATIENT: He...

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

PATIENT: He started lowering what looked like one of the metal caps worn by aliens onto my head – it was like being in a dentist's chair: the metallic cap was on a hinged arm – and he said he was going to erase my memory of this experience, but leave enough to be revived at a later date by others. Then he placed the metal cap on my head and somehow made it tighten around my skull. I was frightened. *I'm frightened!*

DOCTOR: Stay calm, Beth, be calm. Just answer my question. Did this metal cap have wires running out of it, attached to some kind of equipment?

PATIENT: Yes.

DOCTOR: Have you ever heard of a stereotaxic skullcap?

PATIENT: No.

DOCTOR: All right, Beth. He lowered the wired metal cap onto your head and tightened it around your skull. What happened next?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: What happened, Beth?

PATIENT: I'm frightened. Terrified. Don't do it! Please, don't do it! I won't tell anyone! I won't! I promise! Please, don't do it! *Don't*!

DOCTOR: What happened next, Beth?

(The patient does not respond.)

DOCTOR: What happened, Beth?

PATIENT: Pain. Stars. Sparkling lights. Darkness. I am where nothing is, in the darkness, and only know that I don't know.

DOCTOR: Don’t know what?

PATIENT: My own name. What I am. Where I am. What is. I am where nothing is, in the darkness, and only know that I don’t know. I know nothing. All gone.

DOCTOR: You blacked out again?

PATIENT: I awakened.

DOCTOR: Where were you when you awakened, Beth? What did you see?

PATIENT: I was nowhere. I was just awake. I knew I’d awakened.

DOCTOR: Where are you now that you’ve awakened, Beth? What are you seeing?

PATIENT: I’m still in the car. I feel sleepy... must have slept... I’m on my way to Columbus – just left Springfield – and...

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

PATIENT: Where am I? I thought the sun was setting. I was heading for Columbus. Why is the car...?

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

PATIENT: I can’t believe...

DOCTOR: Yes, Beth?

PATIENT: That road sign... It says I’m heading for Dayton. I must have been driving home. I fell asleep driving home... No, I didn’t. I couldn’t have done that. I was driving to Columbus, out of Springfield, and now... Dayton. The car’s parked by the side of the road in the direction of Dayton. It’s... I can’t tell the time. My wristwatch has stopped. It stopped at five after five,

though I can't tell if that was yesterday or this morning... No, not this morning. It couldn't have been this morning. I was definitely driving out of Springfield, heading for Columbus, at about five yesterday evening as the sun was sinking. Now the sign says Dayton. The car's parked facing Dayton. It must be *some* time in the early morning... I'd say eight or nine... and I'm heading back to Dayton... Oh, dear God, what's happening to me*? I don't want to! I don't want to! I don't want to!*

DOCTOR: Okay, Beth, that's all we want to know. You have been very good. You have been extremely helpful. You are in deep, deep sleep, very deep, deep sleep, you are relaxed, you are very relaxed, you are sleeping, deep sleep. In a moment you can waken up. You won't remember what's been said between us. You won't remember until I ask you to do so, you are asleep, deep, deep sleep. All right, Beth, you are waking up now, you are waking, waking slowly, pleasantly, you are pleasantly waking up. You can waken up, Beth.

TRANSCRIPTION ENDS

Chapter Thirty-Six

‘There are now a great number of foreign exploration stations in the Antarctic,’ Wilson’s assistant, Salvatore Fallaci, said as he sat beside Wilson at the panoramic window overlooking the glittering white wilderness. ‘Ever since the International Geophysical Year in 1957-58, the twelve nations have, with your co-operation, been spreading out to set up more and more bases. If they continue to do so, our security is likely to be threatened.’

A former Mafioso with his hands steeped in blood, Fallaci had been abducted and brain-implanted to obey Wilson’s every whim as a scout and roving executioner; otherwise he seemed perfectly normal. He was reporting to Wilson after having just returned from a tour of Antarctica by flying saucer, checking on the movements and activities of the various nations that now had polar exploration bases here.

‘It’s been a long time since I studied the situation,’ Wilson replied. ‘What’s it like out there nowadays?’

Fallaci glanced down at his notes. ‘The US are based at McMurdo Sound and still have their Ronne Antarctic Research Expedition in the old Service East Base camp at Marguerite Bay. Australia has established stations on Heard and Macquarie islands, as well as their Mawson Station on the mainland coast of Macrobertson Land. France has established permanent bases in the Kerguelen and Crozet islands. The Argentines have established General Belgrano Station on the Filchner Ice Shelf. The Norwegians are at Cape Norvegia. The USSR, long active in East Antarctica, now also has Bellingshausen Station in the Antarctic Peninsula, is constructing at Novolazarevskaya, and plans additional stations in West Antarctica. A profusion of British, Chilean and Argentine bases are now located so close together around McMurdo Sound that we must seriously consider the possibility that they’re there for intelligence rather than science.’

‘You think they’re foolish enough to try that?’

‘Yes, boss. The more you give them, the more confident they’ll become – not really able to imagine just how much farther you’ve advanced – and the more confident they become, the more foolish they’ll be.’

‘That’s true enough,’ Wilson replied, though he didn’t seem concerned. ‘Good Sicilian logic. So what else are they up to?’

‘Inland stations for the observation of the sun, weather, the aurora, the magnetic field, the ionosphere and cosmic rays include the Byrd Station for the US in West Antarctica, Vostok for the USSR at the south geomagnetic pole and the pole of relative inaccessibility, and Amundsen-Scott Station at the South Pole, also for the US. I should also remind you that a nuclear power plant was set up at McMurdo Station in 1962 and a seawater distillation plant is being installed right now and should be ready by next year. The Antarctic is no longer a safe haven for us. We’re not alone, boss.’

Wilson smiled bleakly at that remark. ‘We’re not alone’ was a catch phrase now widely used in the West about flying saucers, still generally believed to be of extraterrestrial origin.

‘So apart from the possibility of intelligence gathering,’ he said, ‘what else excites their interest here?’

‘They believe that western Queen Maud Land, actually Neu Schwabenland, right on our doorstep, could be similar to the gold-producing Witwatersrand beds of South Africa; that the mountain belt of the Antarctic Peninsula could be similar to the copper-rich Andes; that the Antarctic continental shelves near Coats Land and the Adéle and George V coasts could be comparable to the Agulhas Basin off South Africa and the Otway Basin off southern Australia, which are potentially great sources of petroleum. They’re also racing to find the metal minerals for chromium, copper, gold, lead, tin and zinc. Even more ominous, their realisation that Antarctica contains nearly ninety percent of the world’s ice has led them to serious discussion and experimentation regarding the possibility of harnessing it as a limitless supply of non-salt water. Last but by no means least, they’re presently investigating the possibility of using the Antarctic as a long-term deep-freeze storage site for grain and other foods; and, even worse, as a site for radioactive-waste disposal and storage.’

‘I would never permit that,’ Wilson said.

‘I needn’t remind you of the increasing ruthlessness of the hunters of fur seals and the whaling ships operating around our shores and depleting the

waters. I *should* remind you, however, that tourism, which commenced way back in 1958 with nine-to-twelve day tours of the Antarctic Peninsula, arranged by the Argentine Naval Transport Command, is now expanding rapidly with hotels proposed for the McMurdo dry valleys and plans already being drawn up for the introduction of various alpine sports, including skiing and mountaineering, as well as commercial tourist helicopter flights over the wilderness. Between the planes of the tourists and those of the various exploration bases, we have a potentially serious security problem.'

'I'm not too concerned,' Wilson said. 'As long as our mutually beneficial, clandestine trade continues with the various nations located here, they'll keep their aircraft well away from Neu Schwabenland.'

'That's only the United States, Great Britain, Canada, and the USSR. The smaller countries aren't included in the trade and therefore don't know of our existence; so they'll continue to fly in this direction, and, so far, have only been prevented from seeing us by the relative inaccessibility of the terrain. But they're developing better aircraft every year – aircraft designed specifically to fly in polar regions – and some day, I believe, they'll be able to reach us. Likewise, the forthcoming tourist-flight pilots won't know about us and could choose this area as one of their flight routes. The mountain is, after all, particular spectacular from the point of view of the average tourist.'

'I've anticipated that possibility,' Wilson said, 'and been working on a means of preventing it. As you just said, the mountain is already an area of inaccessibility. Before the smaller countries or tour operators develop an aircraft that can reach here – and, indeed, before the nations we're trading with grow arrogant and turn against us – we'll have developed an invisible force field that will, like the saucer satellites, which in turn were based on our old *Feuerballs*, cause normal aircraft engines to malfunction and force them either to crash or turn back before entering the area. Should anything manage to slip through the force field, we will have by then, as a last resort, a working pulse-beam weapon. So I think we're safe for the foreseeable future. In the meantime, our saucers will continue to haunt the various Antarctic exploration bases by hovering over them, causing blips on their radar screens, or otherwise harassing their aircraft – as, in fact, we've been doing for some time now, to the consternation of the pilots and intelligence agents.'

'That's why they describe a lot of the areas in Antarctica as inaccessible.'

'Precisely,' Wilson said.

Glancing through the window, down those dizzying depths between the sheer walls of the mountain where it formed a natural well, he saw the latest 250-foot diameter mother ship on its landing pad, surrounded by smaller saucers of various sizes. Viewed from above, especially from this great height, they looked like perfectly formed, silvery plates turned upside-down. With no protruberances of any kind, no identifying marks, not even a visible seam, they had their own bizarre beauty.

'So what's the general UFO situation in America?' Wilson asked his roving scout and assassin.

'No problem,' Fallaci replied. 'I can confirm that the virtual dissolving of Project Blue Book, combined with the ridicule heaped upon UFO witnesses and the suppression of information and news about UFOs – a task undertaken by Air Force intelligence and supervised by CIA agent Jack Fuller – has reduced public interest in the subject almost to zero, removed pressure from the Air Force, and given the civilian UFO organisations severe problems, most of them due to a lack of funds caused by falling memberships.'

'Falling because UFOs have been systematically erased from public consciousness by the choking off of news about the subject.'

'Exactly.'

'This all sounds very good to me,' Wilson said with a thin, almost good-humoured smile.

'It's certainly not bad,' Fallaci said. 'Still, we must continue to keep a watchful eye on the Europeans, Americans and Soviets who have, over the past few years, been co-operating more openly, which isn't good news for us.'

'They're co-operating more openly?' Wilson said. 'That *does* surprise me.'

'Me, too,' Fallaci said, 'but it's true. They've been drawing closer for the past few years, but really got into bed together in December 1962 with the formation of a multilateral NATO nuclear force; the signing in July 1963 of a treaty between Britain, America and the Soviet Union, banning nuclear weapons tests in the atmosphere, outer space and underwater; and, finally, the installing, on August 10, 1963, of a 'hot line' between the Kremlin and the White House, to reduce the risk of accidental war. This unprecedented co-operation between these old enemies suggests that they may be hoping to unite into the one, all-powerful force that can eventually be turned against us.'

‘Fear not,’ Wilson replied with the supreme confidence of a man to whom emotion is alien. ‘I’m giving them someone else to worry about. The assassination of President Kennedy – a good job well done, incidentally – ’

‘Thanks, boss.’

‘As I was saying, the assassination of President Kennedy has already strained the US-Soviet relationship. As we anticipated, many Americans view his death as the result of a Soviet plot. Also, before this year is out, the Chinese will, with our help, successfully test their atomic bomb over Sinkiang, a western province bordering the Soviet Union. That will, I believe, make the Soviets more concerned with the Chinese than with us; while the Americans, still obsessed with the death of their president and his Soviet-loving assassin, Lee Harvey Oswald, will be extremely suspicious of the Soviets and much less concerned with us.’

The intercom on the table beside Wilson rang shrilly. Picking it up, he listened intently, then he put the intercom down, swivelled around in his chair, and used his remote-control to turn on the 28”-TV standing across the room. A machine known as a video-recorder was resting on a stand beneath the TV set and it came on automatically to record the programme being shown.

‘Intelligence,’ Wilson explained to Fallaci. ‘They say there’s something on CBS-TV that I should see. It’s starting right now.’

When the picture on the TV screen came into focus, Wilson instantly recognised the parched terrain of Socorro, New Mexico, where the famous UFO crash had occurred on July 2, 1947. The very same day, Wilson recollected, that farmer Marlon Clarke, who had been unfortunate enough to see the debris of the crash and the corpses of the crew, had been abducted by another flying saucer and brought here. Clarke’s severed head, which they had managed to keep alive for years, had recently been attached to a combination of human and mechanical parts. It was therefore still functioning, though programmed by a stereotaxic skullcap, as part of what would soon be a perfect, totally obedient, killing-machine cyborg. Now, thinking he was about to see a documentary of that old crash, Wilson was surprised to find himself viewing a documentary on another UFO crash in Socorro – but one that had taken place just a few days ago.

What he saw enraged him.

On Friday, April 24, 1964, somewhere between 5.50pm and 6.00pm, Opal Grinder, manager of the Whiting Brothers' service station in Socorro, claimed that the driver of a 1955 model Cadillac, which had a Colorado licence plate and also contained the driver's wife and three boys, stopped at Grinder's service station for gas. The agitated driver told Grinder that 'something travelling across the highway from east to west' almost 'took the roof off' his car as he was driving just south of town, north of the airport. He suspected that the object had either landed or crashed, as he had also seen 'a police car head off the road and up a hill in that direction.' Continuing into town, he had met another police car heading in the same direction. To Grinder's suggestion that he might have seen a helicopter, the unnamed man said, 'That sure would be some funny helicopter!'

Subsequent investigations by the police revealed that the object had been observed flying only a few hundred feet to the northeast of the north-bound Cadillac at 5.45pm on April 24; it was 'egg-shaped, had a smooth aluminium or magnesium-like surface, and seemed to be a little longer than the four-door green 1955 Cadillac in which the family was riding.' The object dropped to barely ten feet above the ground, flew directly at the Cadillac, and passed silently within ten feet of its top, almost touching the tip of the radio antenna. It streaked onward a few hundred yards to the southwest, where it stopped abruptly, hung in mid-air for about thirty seconds, then descended vertically, silhouetted by the low afternoon sun, to land just beyond a small hill that hid it from the view of those in the Cadillac.

The driver of the Cadillac and his wife then observed a white Pontiac police car as it turned off a north-south road that ran west of US Highway 85, cut across the rough terrain, and headed for the rise beyond which the strange flying object had landed. Thinking that perhaps they had seen some 'new type of aircraft' that was being developed in the area, the driver of the Cadillac kept driving towards Socorro, eventually passing another police car. This one, which was from the New Mexico State Police, was moving urgently in the opposite direction, also heading for where the strange aircraft had descended.

Once in Socorro, the driver of the Cadillac stopped at the Whiting Brothers' service station on the north side of town, where he told the manager, Opal Grinder, that someone was flying 'a funny looking aircraft' dangerously low over the highway on Socorro's south side, had landed, and was probably

being checked out by the officer of the pursuing police car. Then the driver of the Cadillac continued his journey with his family.

The man in the white Pontiac was later identified as Lonnie Zamora, a thirty-one-year old Socorro policeman described in a subsequent report by investigating FBI agent J. Arthur Byrnes Jr as a 'sober, industrious and conscientious officer, and not given to fantasy.'

Zamora's extraordinary experience had begun at approximately 5.45pm when he set off in pursuit of a speeding black 1964 Chevrolet, following it south, after pulling away from the west side of the courthouse. About a minute later, at approximately the same time as the unknown man from Colorado had sighted his UFO, when Zamora was a half-mile south of Spring Street, he heard a roar and noticed a brilliant blue 'cone of flame' low to the south-southwest, at a distance of approximately 2,400 ft. As Zamora was wearing prescription glasses with green sunshades, he was at this stage unable to distinguish the difference between the flying object's body and the 'blue cone of flame' shooting out of it. As the flame was over the location of a dynamite shack owned by the town mayor, Zamora assumed that the dynamite was blowing up; so instead of continuing his pursuit of the Chevrolet, he turned off the paved road and headed across the rough terrain, toward what now looked like a descending flame and sounded like a 'continuous roaring'.

Because of the position of the speeding Chevrolet, it was assumed by the investigators that its driver would have either seen or heard the descending object.

Zamora drove across the rough terrain, towards the roaring 'flame', for about twenty seconds. By this time he was able to note that the flame definitely was 'bluish, very brilliant, a little orange around the edges, more so near the bottom' and that it was 'sort of motionless, but appeared to *descend slowly*.' He could not see the bottom of the flame, which had just descended behind a hill; nor did he notice smoke. But some dust seemed to be moving over the area where the object had landed.

The 'flame' disappeared completely behind the hill, but the roaring continued as Zamora tried more than once to make his Pontiac climb the steep, gravel-covered slope. Then, as he finally began to ascend successfully, the roaring of the hidden 'flame' died away.

Turning over the hilltop, Zamora saw a 'shiny type object' down in the

ravine, or arroyo, to the southwest, at a distance of about 150 yards. He stopped his car for a few seconds, in order to study the object. At first he thought it was ‘an overturned white car’ with the far end raised higher than the nearest one. Then he saw two people in white coveralls standing close to the object.

As if having heard Zamora’s arrival, one of the individuals turned and looked straight at his car, then jumped slightly, as if startled by seeing him there.

Zamora had only stopped for a few seconds. Now, as he started forward again in his car, he noted that the object was ‘like aluminium – it was whitish against the mesa background, but not chrome’ and it seemed oval or ‘egg-shaped’ with support legs extending obliquely from it.

The individuals in white coveralls looked like normal human beings, but ‘possibly they were small adults or large kids.’

As he drove on again, Zamora descended into a dip and temporarily lost sight of the object and the two people beside it. Worried that he might have come across a top-secret experimental vehicle from the White Sands Proving Ground, and wanting one reliable witness other than himself in case of trouble with the authorities, he radioed to the sheriff's office that he was checking a possible 10-40, or accident, down in the arroyo, and wanted a New Mexico State Police Sergeant, Samuel Chavez, to come alone to the location.

As his message was being relayed to Chavez by Ned Lopez, the Socorro chief dispatcher, Zamora stopped his car again and started to get out, still talking on the radio. He dropped the microphone accidentally and leaned down to retrieve it. Even as he was straightening up again, he heard ‘a heavy slam, metal-like, heavier than a tank hatch... then another slam, *real loud*.’ He was completely out of his car and could see the object in clear view, about fifty feet away from the arroyo, with two of its four support legs extending obliquely down to the ground. He could also see, for the first time, a large, red insignia on one side of the object’s otherwise smooth, featureless, egg-shaped body.

The two individuals in white coveralls had disappeared – a fact that, combined with the metallic ‘slamming’ noises heard by Zamora, made him assume that they had entered the strange craft by some unseen door.

He had only taken two or three steps toward the object when he heard ‘a

roar... not exactly a blast, very loud roar... not like a jet... started low frequency quickly, then rose in frequency – a higher tone – and in loudness, from loud to very loud.' At the same time he saw 'bright blue flame' shooting out from the underside of the object as it started to rise vertically from the ground.

Thinking that the object was about to explode, Zamora threw himself to the ground. He felt a wave of heat, but when no explosion came, though the roaring continued, he got up again and ran back to his car. Bumping into it while glancing fearfully back over his shoulder, he lost his glasses and sunshades. Determined to keep the car between himself and the ascending object, which he still felt might explode, he ran north across the mesa, glancing back two or three times to observe that in about five or six seconds the object had risen level with his car, about twenty feet above the bottom of the arroyo. It was still roaring and shooting flame from its underside.

About fifty feet from his car, when just over the rim of the hill, Zamora turned back towards the object, but shielded his eyes with his arm in case it exploded.

At that moment, the roaring stopped and was replaced by a 'sharp tone, a whining sound' that went 'from high tone to low tone in maybe a second, then stopped.' And then there was silence.

Zamora saw that the object was no longer rising, though it *was* still moving: heading away quickly, in perfect silence, west-southwest, passing over, or, rather, south of, the dynamite shack as it flew away.

Realising that the object was in flight and not exploding as he had feared, Zamora raced back to his car, picked up his glasses and sunshades from where they had fallen, then once more radioed the Socorro chief dispatcher, Ned Lopez.

Lopez later confirmed that he had received the call from Zamora, breathlessly telling him to look out the window of the sheriff's office to see if the object was in sight. As Lopez was at the north window, not the south, and therefore could not see the object, he asked Zamora what kind of object it was. Zamora said, 'It looks like a balloon.'

Even as he was talking to Lopez, Zamora was watching the UFO disappearing in the distance. It stayed about ten to fifteen feet above the ground, following the terrain, until it was near the perlite mill on the west side of US 60, about a mile away. There, it 'suddenly angled up in a steep

climb and got small in the distance, over the canyon or mountain that way, *very fast*.' He later remembered it as 'a bright, whitish oval getting smaller and smaller as it sped away, upward and over the mountains.'

Approximately one minute and fifty seconds after Zamora had first heard the roar and seen the 'flame' in the sky, the UFO was gone.

Sent urgently to the landing zone by the message relayed through chief dispatcher Ned Lopez, New Mexico State Police Sergeant, Sam Chavez, reached Zamora just after the UFO had disappeared. Even as Chavez was approaching Zamora, the latter was making a sketch of the red insignia he had seen on the object before it took off. Though he had remained calm enough to do this, he was, according to Chavez, as 'white as a sheet' and in a cold sweat.

Examining the landing site with Zamora, Chavez also saw that the brush was smouldering in several places, after being ignited by the flame, and that there was what appeared to be a 'quadrangle' formed by four heavy, wedge-shaped imprints in the soil.

'So there you have it, folks,' the TV reporter said breezily, standing in front of the barren landing site in the wastelands outside Socorro with a microphone in his hand and a view of the dynamite shack over his right shoulder. 'A widely respected Deputy Marshal of Socorro, New Mexico, has stated categorically that he's seen a flying saucer *and* its occupants. Whether it's true or not remains to be seen. Maybe we're *not* alone, folks!'

Wilson used the remote control to switch the TV off. Then, quietly furious, he turned to Fallaci and said: 'The damned fools! That was one of *their* experimental saucers from the White Sands Proving Ground. This will probably resurrect worldwide interest in flying saucers. I have to see Fuller.'

'I'll get him,' Fallaci said.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Wilson was right. The Socorro Incident of April 24, 1964, soon became the most famous UFO sighting since the original Socorro sighting of 1947, resurrecting widespread public interest in the subject and replenishing the depleted financial resources of the leading civilian UFO organisations by dramatically increasing their membership to what it had been three years earlier, before the dropping of Congressional hearings and the propaganda campaign against NICAP's Donald E. Keyhoe had taken their toll.

A few weeks after the Socorro Incident, Randall flew to Washington DC to have a meeting with Dr Frederick Epstein and Tony Scaduto in the revitalised APII organisation headquarters in 21st Street. As Scaduto had just returned from New Mexico, where he had been sent by Dr Epstein to check out the Socorro Incident, the purpose of the meeting was to hear what he had to say. Since Epstein was at that stage convinced that the UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin, Scaduto and Randall had still not confided their belief that at least some of the flying saucers could be man-made. Scaduto was now looking uncomfortable, because he was close to that subject.

'First thing I learned when I got to Socorro,' he reported, 'is that Deputy Marshal Zamora's radio transmissions had been heard by others, including State Police Senior Patrolman Ted V. Jordan, who arrived at the landing site shortly after Chavez, in the company of Socorro Under-Sheriff James Luckie. A cattle inspector named White, who had also heard Zamora's radio calls, turned up at the landing site; and just after 6.00pm, FBI agent J. Arthur Byrnes arrived to investigate.'

'So what did *you* find?' Dr Epstein asked in his quiet, thoughtful way, while stroking his Vandyke beard, which now had lots of grey strands in it.

'I found the burnt brush, which seemed genuine enough,' Scaduto replied. 'I then interviewed every witness I could find – the ones who'd seen the brush when the burning was still recent – and they all confirmed that the brush had been scorched by flames and that the pad prints, or landing

imprints, had been made, in the words of one investigator, "by wedge-shaped units being forced by great weight down into the well-packed soil of the ravine."'

'What size would they have been?' Epstein asked, letting the tip of his ballpoint pen dangle over his notebook.

'The wedges would have had a horizontal length of twelve to sixteen inches, a horizontal width of six to eight inches, and a vertical wedge-depth of four to six inches. I have to say, though, that this latter measurement was impossible to define accurately because of the inward falling of the soil.'

Scaduto withdrew a press cutting from his jacket pocket, unfolded it and smoothed it down on Epstein's desk with the palm of his hand.

'According to the detailed account in the April 28, 1964 edition of the local biweekly newspaper, *El Defensor Chieftain*,' he continued, reading from the press cutting, 'the landing gear imprints – I quote: "did not appear to have been made by an object striking the earth with great force, but by an object of considerable weight settling to earth at slow speed and not moving after touching the ground."'

He pushed the press cutting towards Dr Epstein, watched the older man pick it up enthusiastically, grinned nervously at Dwight, and then spoke again directly to Epstein.

'Though some of the brush was still smouldering when Chavez, Jordan, Luckie and White were present, they all agreed that there was no odour indicating that combustion of any conventional fuel had caused the burn damage.'

'Very good,' Epstein murmured.

'Jordan was particularly impressed by the fact that the flame described by Zamora had obviously sliced a large greasewood bush located almost centrally in the landing gear quadrilateral, without leaving any signs of turbulence, like the kind that would have been caused by normal rotors or jet exhausts. Jordan also took Polaroid pictures of the landing site and the four imprints within minutes of arriving on the scene.'

'You obtained copies?' Epstein asked, suddenly frowning like a stern schoolteacher.

'Yes, boss, I got copies.'

Epstein smiled and nodded. 'Fine, Tony. Continue.'

Scaduto glanced at Dwight and grinned, this time cockily, with pride, then

turned back to Epstein. ‘Reasoning that the landing mechanisms of an experimental lunar landing module could have made the depressions in the ground, I contacted informants in NASA and the Jet Propulsion Laboratory to find out if they, or any of the fifteen local industrial firms working for them, had been conducting any experiments with lunar landing modules in the area. In each case, the answer was “No.” I then established that no helicopters or aircraft were in the area at the time of the sighting and that the direction of the winds ruled out the possibility that the object was a weather balloon.’

‘This sounds too good to be true,’ Epstein said, smiling distractedly, as if lost in his own thoughts. ‘We certainly appear to be talking about a real, physical object that landed and took off again.’

‘Well, then, digest *this* interesting piece of news,’ Scaduto said, no longer looking even remotely uncomfortable and instead getting into his stride. ‘Just before leaving Socorro I received a call from my set of eyes and ears at the ATIC, and he told me that Project Blue Book, even under the leadership of the sceptical Major Quantinilla, is going to list the case as a genuine unidentified: the only combination of landing, trace and occupant case so far listed in the Blue Book files.’

Epstein gave a soft whistle to express his surprise and pleasure.

‘At least they’re still doing *something*,’ Dwight said sardonically.

‘Now, now,’ Epstein responded soothingly, knowing how bitter Dwight felt about how he had been treated by the Air Force. ‘Go on, Tony. We’re listening.’

‘Regarding Project Blue Book’s involvement,’ Scaduto continued, ‘I found that the case had been examined by Dr Lincoln La Paz, who’d worked on the old Project Twinkle, and by NICAP’s Dr. J. Allen Hynek. The last named was there in his official capacity as consultant to the USAF. I also have it on the best of authority that Hynek has already pronounced it as, I quote, “one of the major UFO sightings in the history of the Air Force’s consideration of the subject.” That was the final clincher when it came to Major Quantinilla’s decision to list it in Project Blue Book’s files as the first known combination of UFO landing, trace and occupant case.’

‘Wonderful!’ Epstein exclaimed softly.

‘So what did you find out about the landing site?’ Dwight asked more pragmatically.

‘Examination of the landing site revealed that the diagonals of the

quadrilateral formed by the four landing marks intersected almost exactly at right angles. I therefore asked for, and received, Hynek's report, which contains an especially interesting notation.'

Scaduto opened the notebook he'd been holding in his lap, flipped a few pages over, then read aloud: 'One theorem in geometry states that if the diagonals of a quadrilateral intersect at right angles, the midpoints of the side of the quadrilateral lie on the circumference of a circle...' He glanced up from the notebook. 'Here's the important point,' he said, then went back to his reading. 'It is thus of considerable interest that the centre of the circle so formed on the Socorro landing site virtually coincided with the principal burn mark on the ground. Under certain circumstances the centre of gravity of the craft would have been directly over the centre of the circle, hence making the presence of the burn mark more significant.' He closed the notebook and looked up again. 'In other words, what Hynek is saying is that the indentations and burn marks on the ground clearly indicated a real, physical object of circular shape. It wasn't a mirage or hallucination on the part of Deputy Marshal Zamora. That vehicle was real enough... and it was shaped like an upside-down saucer.'

'And if the vehicle was real,' Dwight said, 'then so were its crewmembers.'

'Exactly!' Scaduto exclaimed with satisfaction.

'This is sounding better every minute,' Epstein said.

'And it gets even better,' Scaduto told him. 'Get this... Checking with a receptionist in the Socorro County Building – a nice lady, incidentally, who saved me a night's hotel bill – I learnt that by 7.20pm on the evening of the sighting CIA agent Jack Fuller and US Army Captain Richard T. Holder, the up-range commander of the White Sands Stallion Site, met in the Socorro County Building, where they proceeded to interrogate Zamora. In the course of that interrogation – according to the tapes heard by my nice lady and others – Byrnes told Zamora that it would be better if he did not – and I quote again: "publicly mention seeing the two small figures in white" – unquote.'

'Two small figures in white,' Epstein repeated dreamily.

'Correct.'

'Not black?' Dwight asked.

'No. White.'

'But they specifically told Zamora not to mention the figures seen standing beside the saucer-shaped object,' Epstein said.

‘That’s right,’ Scaduto replied. ‘Which suggests that the figures in white coveralls were certainly there.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Yes.’ Scaduto was now visibly excited. ‘Jack Fuller then recommended that in future Zamora refuse to describe the insignia he had seen on the side of the vehicle to anyone other than official investigators.’

‘Insignia?’ Epstein asked, leaning forward to stare intently at his young researcher.

‘Yeah. There was an insignia on that aircraft. According to the report witnessed, notarised and filed in the Socorro County Building, it was red in colour and approximately one-and-a-half feet from top to bottom. Zamora sketched it for his report. According to his sketch, it was an inverted V, or a vertical arrow, with a line under it, vertical lines on each side, and a parabolic arc over the point of the arrow.’

‘Any idea what it represented?’

‘Some.’ Scaduto’s grin was now openly triumphant. ‘A computer scientist buddy of mine ran it through his data base and came up with the notion that it’s similar to a medieval Arabic sign for Venus. However, another friend, an aeronautical engineer, insisted that it’s confirmation that the UFO was a man-made vehicle.’

‘Man-made?’ Epstein echoed him. ‘I don’t think I can wear this.’

‘I think you might, boss.’

‘Okay, Tony, continue.’

‘In support of his claim, this buddy of mine showed me how, by moving and rotating the lines of the drawing, the acronyms “CIA” and “AD” could be formed, the latter representing the initials of Allen Dulles, present head of the CIA. My buddy also showed me that the parabolic arc above the arrow, or inverted V, could represent a stylised cross-section of the body of the flying saucer – or a pressure wave – while the arrow, or inverted V, with a line under it, could indicate that a vertical thruster is located centrally in the fuselage, or circular wing. Finally, he knocked me sideways by stating that the placing of the symbol on the side of the vehicle – just above the thruster orifice on its underside – could be a warning that the thruster is located there; while the use of red for the symbol could be a danger sign, just as it is with contemporary aircraft symbols.’

Scaduto straightened up in his chair, looking pleased with himself.

‘So where is this leading?’ Epstein asked in his quiet, patient manner.

‘The implication,’ Scaduto said, ‘is that the Socorro sighting was of a highly sophisticated, piloted, vertical-ascent-and-descent, man-made aircraft that had flown from, and returned to, somewhere in the White Sands Proving Ground.’

For a considerable period of time there was silence in the room, broken only by the soft drumming of Epstein’s fingers on the desk. Eventually he took a deep breath and said, ‘Man-made flying saucers?’

‘Yes. Constructed in the United States, most likely in the White Sands Proving Ground.’

‘But do you believe those flying saucers can account for all the sightings we’ve had since World War Two?’

‘No,’ Scaduto said. ‘But they sure as hell could account for the many stories of flying saucers being held in top-secret hangars in US Air Force bases.’

‘And the other ones? The technologically superior ones? The so-called mother ships?’

Scaduto shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’

‘Well,’ Epstein said after some thought, ‘although the APII has, up to now, carefully avoided all so-called “occupant” cases, in this instance, given Deputy Marshal Zamora’s reliability as a witness, and because Project Blue Book is listing the case as a genuine unidentified, I think we should – how shall I put it? – *liberalise* the organisation by including occupant cases in the future. I myself will avoid the man-made flying saucer hypothesis, but if you gentlemen wish to pursue it, by all means do so. In the meantime, I think we should use the latest Socorro sighting as leverage to press again for Congressional hearings.’

‘Good idea,’ Dwight said.

Sitting behind his desk, wearing an English tweed jacket and grey pants, with striped shirt and tie, his hair still plentiful even if turning grey, as was his short, pointed beard, Dr Epstein looked older than his age. After massaging his forehead, he sighed and glanced from Scaduto to Dwight.

‘Well, gentlemen, I guess that’s it for the day. It’s a lot for one day.’

‘You want to join us for lunch?’ Dwight asked him. ‘I’m having a light lunch with Tony here, before catching the plane back to Dayton.’

Epstein glanced at the mass of papers on his desk, then raised and lowered

his hands in a rabbinical gesture – or simply one of weariness. ‘I can’t. The Socorro incident has brought the work in and my desk, as you can see, is already overburdened. Besides, when I get tired I can’t eat – and I certainly can’t take a drink at lunchtime – so I’ll take a rain check.’

‘You’re sure?’

‘Yes, I’m sure.’

Dwight and Scaduto pushed their chairs back, then Dwight leaned over the desk to shake Epstein’s hand. ‘Until the next time.’

‘Have a good lunch and a pleasant flight home,’ Epstein said.

Scaduto just waved his hand and sauntered out of the office ahead of Dwight. Once on the sidewalk outside the building, they took a cab the short distance to Clyde’s garden restaurant in M Street, Georgetown, near to where Bob Jackson had died, possibly murdered. Recalling that dreadful event, Dwight felt a spasm of grief combined with rage and decided that he needed a stiff drink. When they were seated in Clyde’s, packed with the usual lunchtime crowd, a bedlam of genial conversation, Dwight ordered a large bourbon. Scaduto had beer. Throughout the lunch they talked non-stop about UFOs in general and the recent Socorro Incident in particular, growing more excited every minute. This did not help Dwight to forget that his good friend, Bob Jackson, had died, or more likely had been murdered, just a little farther along the street. No way in the world would Dwight ever believe that Bob had died of a heart attack.

Eventually, when they had finished the lunch, settled the check and were preparing to leave, Scaduto said: ‘I’m telling you, Dwight, I still believe the UFOs are man-made and probably originate from both Canadian and American top-secret establishments, notably in the White Sands Proving Ground.’

‘I’m still not sure of that,’ Dwight confessed, as they made their way out of the packed garden restaurant, through the indoors bar, then back into M Street.

‘Don’t forget,’ Scaduto continued, unperturbed, as they stood on the busy sidewalk, observing the passers-by, many of them exuberant students from Georgetown University, ‘that the Brits have already demonstrated a vertical-take-off aircraft using swivelling jet nozzles – the *Hawker P1127*. And laser-beam technology – often included in UFO reports, though generally treated as pure science fiction – has been making incredible advances since its

discovery four years ago by the Hughes Aircraft company in California. So the capabilities of the flying saucers reported are definitely moving into the area of the possible. The saucers *could* be man-made!'

'But some of the saucers are really so far advanced that I find it difficult to believe they could be man-made.' Dwight glanced automatically along M Street, towards Canal Road, and found himself trying to imagine what had happened to Bob Jackson that fateful night of his death. This in turn led him to another line of thought. 'Take Beth's experience, for instance. The one she recounted under hypnosis. That wasn't a dream – it was a real experience – and the technology suggested by her recollections had to be pretty stupendous. The beams of light from the small saucers somehow immobilised her car, then magically drew it into the mother ship. The beams of light from the mother ship disorientated her and temporarily paralysed her. Then, of course, when she was inside the mother ship, she was shown... *Earth and the stars*.'

'Yeah,' Tony said, softly, in wonder, 'she saw the damned stars!'

'That mother ship was out there in space,' Dwight continued. 'I can't imagine man-made aircraft, or spacecraft – flying saucers or other kinds – being capable of that, if based on the known technology.'

'Why not?' Scaduto responded. 'Our astronauts have been in space. Certain of our conventional aircraft can now reach the stratosphere. And according to Beth, the guy with the oddly expressionless face told her to warn you off the search for, quote, *man-made flying saucers*... And now this flying saucer sighting at Socorro, New Mexico, seems to prove conclusively that whatever Deputy Marshal Zamora saw, it was certainly real enough and piloted by two small males wearing white coveralls... No planes in the air at the time, no weather balloons... It was *real*, Dwight. It left burn marks and depressions in the soil. It was *physical*... So where the hell did it come from?'

'I don't know,' Dwight confessed. 'I only know this... I'm frightened for Beth and Nichola. I'm even frightened for myself. So if I continue to work for Epstein, I've got to do it off the record and you've got to cover the more public sightings. You've got to cover *for me*.'

'No sweat,' Scaduto said.

The two men shook hands on the crowded sidewalk, then went their separate ways.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Stopping his car in the middle of the desert between Las Vegas and Nellis Air Force Base in the dead of night, Fuller lit a cigarette, inhaled gratefully, blew a cloud of smoke, and realised that he wasn't looking forward to this particular meeting with Wilson.

For the past year, ever since Wilson had called a meeting to angrily discuss the so-called Socorro Incident, when a USAF flying saucer, based on the *Kugelblitz I*, and its two-man crew had been spotted by Lonnie Zamora, Fuller had been having regular, mostly unpleasant meetings with Wilson, who had expressed his concern about the resurgence of public interest in UFOs generated by the Air Force's carelessness in letting one of their flying saucers from the White Sands Proving Ground be seen by a widely respected Deputy Marshal.

Indeed, the Socorro Incident of 1964 had become in the collective mind of the public the most fascinating UFO sighting since the original Socorro case of 1947. Approximately a year later, on June 12, 1965, one of Wilson's own, smaller flying saucers had crashed near Nellis AFB, right here in Las Vegas, Nevada. The saucer and dead crewmembers had been taken into a top-secret research laboratory on the base for examination. That was two weeks ago.

Demanding the release of the remains through Fuller, Wilson had been refused and, at a later meeting, had coldly told Fuller to inform his superiors at CIA Headquarters, Langley Field, Virginia, and in the White House and Pentagon, that he would be taking 'retaliatory' measures.

Knowing that Wilson was capable of inflicting great damage on the United States, Fuller had conveyed his message to the Pentagon. Unfortunately, because of the speedy advances being made on their own flying saucer projects at Avro-Canada in Malton, Ontario, and at other top-secret research establishments in the White Sands Proving Ground and elsewhere in New Mexico and Arizona, the top brass of the Air Force were growing arrogant,

believing that they could outflank Wilson, and so refused to hand over the invaluable debris of Wilson's vastly superior crashed saucer.

Now, as he glanced up and saw what appeared to be a star rapidly growing bigger in a black sky flooded with stars, Fuller was preparing to convey this second refusal to Wilson. He didn't look forward to it.

On the other hand, as he realised when he glanced back over his shoulder and saw the neon spires and minarets of Las Vegas soaring out of the vast desert darkness, this was where Elvis Presley had made his latest movie, *Love in Las Vegas*, also known as *Viva Las Vegas*. Fuller loved Elvis. Elvis was a great American. Fuller also loved Ann-Margret who, when she performed with Elvis in the recently released movie, had almost made Fuller cream his pants.

Amazing, he thought, the things I get to see doing this job. Here I am, metaphorically speaking, walking in the footsteps of Elvis and Ann-Margret. No wonder I love my country. Where else could you do this?

Turning away from the sparkling, high-rise, neon splendours of distant Las Vegas, he stuck his head out of the open window of the car and looked up again.

The expanding star grew bigger, until it became dime-sized, then like a weather balloon, and finally, with startling speed, a large, saucer-shaped dark mass surrounded by a pulsating whitish glow. Seeming to widen as it descended, until it was immense, almost blotting out his entire view of the night sky, it stopped abruptly and hovered directly above him. Then, as if sensing the presence of his car below it – which in fact, as Fuller knew, it had – it glided slowly sideways, all 250 feet of it, stopped where it could not damage his car, then dropped lower again, its whitish glow dimming more with each second of its stately descent.

Eventually it settled gently on the ground, its nearest edge about fifty yards from Fuller's car. The whitish glow faded away, the lights flashing around its rim then blinked out, one after the other, in rapid sequence, and finally it was just a vast, silvery-grey, dome-shaped mass, eerily beautiful in moonlight.

Fuller was, of course, used to the sight of Wilson's extraordinary flying saucers (he rarely thought of them as UFOs) and, to a certain degree, now took them for granted. He therefore waited patiently for the seamless panel in the outer body to move outward and down, forming a doorway into the holding bay and a ramp that led from there to the ground. He did *not* wait

patiently when the unmistakable form of Wilson was framed in that brilliant light, but instead slipped smartly out of the car and advanced to meet him.

The knowledge that he, Jack Fuller, the fearless, could be frightened of Wilson filled him with nausea. Nevertheless, approaching Wilson, meeting him halfway, Fuller was able to maintain his outward appearance of sardonic pragmatism.

'Mr Wilson!' he exclaimed softly, by way of greeting.

Wilson's hair was silvery-white but abundant. His face was lean and handsome, with piercing sky-blue eyes and slightly odd, almost immobile features. That, Fuller knew, was due to plastic surgery, though he wouldn't have dared mention the fact.

Wilson nodded. 'Fuller.' His face was as near to grim as his normally expressionless face would allow. 'Let's waste no time in idle conversation. You know why I'm here. Do I get my crashed saucer back or not?'

Fuller spread his hands in the air, indicating that he had come empty-handed.

'They said "No"?'

''Fraid so.'

'That was foolish of them.'

'The military mind can be foolish at times.'

'I do not require your facetiousness, Fuller.'

'Sorry.'

'What did they find in the wreckage?'

'Crewmembers. Very strange, I'm told. Someone used the word "cyborgs", which was new to me at the time, though I've since been familiarised. All dead, of course.'

Wilson offered a chilling smile. There was a certain aspect to Fuller's bottomless pool of corruptibility, cynicism and blind patriotism that amused him. The crass stupidity of the majority of the human race, but in this case combined with low cunning, was exemplified in Fuller. The CIA agent, Wilson realised, had grandiose ideas about himself. Well, time would teach him...

'You're not too far from being a cyborg yourself,' Wilson said in a rare demonstration of cynicism, which was, after all, a human attribute.

'That sounds facetious, Mr Wilson.'

'You don't like to be put down. You have the need to prove yourself. These

are admirable traits in a child, but you should have risen above them. Still, you are what you will be – which is not much at all – and I will therefore, willy nilly, be forced to accept this and deal with it. You're a message boy and I treat you as such by asking one question: Your *superiors* said "No"?'

'Yes, they said "No".'

'You *do* realise, I take it, that I could go into that Air Force base and take what I want without a problem.'

'Without a short-term problem,' Fuller replied, taking as much satisfaction as he could from this conversation, which wasn't, in his view, all that much. 'But in the long term it wouldn't do you much good. By which I mean that the use of force would only draw attention to that secret hangar in the base. And the more – how shall I put it? – the more *unusual* the method of your assault, the more attention it would subsequently receive in the media. Which isn't, if I may say so, exactly the kind of attention you want.'

'What a clever man you are, Mr Fuller.'

'Gee, thanks, Mr Wilson.'

Wilson ignored the nervous sarcasm. 'Why do they want to keep my saucer and its dead crewmembers?'

'Because your saucer is more advanced than their own and the nearest we've come to workable cyborgs are fairly basic Cybernetic Anthropomorphous Machine Systems, or CAMS.'

'I'm surprised you could pronounce that.'

'I have my moments.'

'So they're no longer satisfied with what I've already given them. They think they can *steal* my technology and, perhaps, catch up with me.'

'I'm afraid that's the case, Mr Wilson. It's the nature of the beast to grow arrogant and turn on its master.'

Wilson seemed to sigh, though that was unlikely. 'Well, I'm sorry to hear that, Mr Fuller, because I had hoped to avoid unpleasantness. Now, alas, I'm going to have to teach the White House and the Pentagon a lesson they won't easily forget.'

Not being as stupid as his superiors when it came to an assessment of Wilson's powers, Fuller had feared that this was how he would react – and feared even more what he might do. 'What lesson would that be, Mr Wilson?'

Again, when Wilson smiled, the effect was chilling. 'I'm going to black out

most of the East Coast of the United States. A *total* blackout, Mr Fuller. If, by the first week in August, I do not have my crashed saucer back, I will begin the process of turning out all the lights. I will do this gradually, bit by bit, to give you time to change your minds. But if, by November, you're still holding my crashed saucer and dead cyborgs, every light on the east coast will go out.'

'Every single light on the East Coast of America?'

'Yes. Every single light. Now take that message back to your superiors and, if they still refuse my request, keep your eye on events during the first week of August. Goodnight, Mr Fuller.'

Fuller returned to his car and sat in it until the enormous, majestic flying saucer ascended vertically, then abruptly shrank to the size of a star and shot off to the east. Then, feeling chilled by Wilson's warning, he drove straight back to Las Vegas airport and caught the first plane back to Washington DC.

When he had conveyed Wilson's message to the White House and the Pentagon, via CIA Headquarters in Langley Field, Virginia, they refused to believe that Wilson could do what he was threatening. They all thought he was bluffing.

The following week, the first week in August, 1965, Fuller asked the Langley Field press-cutting department to send him reports on any unusual stories regarding power lines or electricity generators. In fact, even before the first cuttings had been received, he knew that Wilson's game was starting when one of his CIA physicists, engaged in an intelligence study of the relationship between UFOs witnessed over power lines and subsequent, inexplicable power failures, submitted an unusual report.

During the first week of August, thousands of citizens in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado and neighbouring states witnessed one of the biggest UFO displays ever. Unidentified lights flew across the skies in formation, were tracked on radar, and played tag with civilian and Air Force aircraft. Reading the written reports of hundreds of witnesses, Fuller thought the descriptions of the lights were strikingly similar to those he had received about the Nazis' World War II *Feuerballs*.

As Fuller subsequently found out from his daily perusal of the relevant press cuttings, this unexpected major display of UFOs ended abruptly a week later.

During the evening of the first day in which the UFOs had *not* been seen,

when in bed with the most recent of his nubile girlfriends – he liked them young these days – Fuller was shocked to receive a personal phone call from Wilson.

'I didn't know you had my home phone number,' Fuller said, trying to hide his feeling of violation at close to midnight.

'I have everything on you,' Wilson replied, 'including every last detail of the blonde creature lying beside you, just about legal age.'

Now almost sweating, wondering where the hell Wilson was speaking from and wondering just what he had seen of his frolics with the nubile, jailbait blonde, Fuller said, fighting to keep his voice steady, 'So what do you want at this time of night?'

'I want to know if the ambitious morons above you have seen enough and are willing to return my crashed saucer and its dead cyborgs.'

'I'm really sorry to have to say this,' Fuller replied, feeling even more sorry for himself, 'but the ambitious morons above me are acting like just that – morons. They're insisting that the recent UFO flap was purely accidental.'

'Then they are truly moronic.'

'Well,' Fuller said, trying to recover his equilibrium and act cool for the benefit of the nubile blonde beauty stretched out beside him, looking seriously puzzled, 'as they said, what you threatened didn't actually happen: the lights didn't go out.'

'I told you I would give them a chance to change their minds before I went further.'

'They thought you were bluffing.'

'Then I'll show them otherwise,' Wilson said, 'and I'll do it in the middle of winter, to cause even more chaos.'

'That's three months away,' Fuller reminded him.

'I'm sure you can wait that long. Goodnight, Mr Fuller.'

Fuller carefully put his phone back in its cradle, rolled over to the blonde and slithered onto her naked, sweat-slicked body like a snake in a swamp. Attaining an instant erection, he slipped it into her and whispered, 'How long do you think we can keep this up? Does three months sound good?'

The remark was, he soon realised, a very poor joke designed to quell the unexpected, uncustomary fear that was making his stomach churn. He knew the joke hadn't worked when the fear, crawling through him like a ghostly, malignant presence, made him lose his erection before he could properly use

it.

This had never happened to him before, but then he'd never known fear before.

He would have to get used to it.

Three months later, on the night of November 9, 1965, hundreds of UFOs, most in the form of darting lights, were reported from Niagara, Syracuse, and Manhattan. That same night, all the lights went out – in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont, and a section of Canada. They went out over a total area of 80,000 square miles and a population of twenty-six million people. The biggest power cut in American history, it caused chaos and panic.

Even while this blanket of darkness was falling over the land – and was already being dubbed the Great Northeast Blackout – Fuller was on the phone at CIA headquarters in Langley Field, Virginia, trying to find out what had caused it. He learnt that the huge power grid that controlled all of the blacked-out areas – an interlocking network linking twenty-nine utility companies, with hundreds of automatic controls and locking devices – had always been considered to be invulnerable... yet the system *had* failed and the cause of the black-out couldn't be ascertained.

The only thing known for certain at this point in time was that the failure had occurred *somewhere* in the flow between the Niagara Falls generators and the Clay power sub-station, an automatic control unit through which the electric power flowed from Niagara to New York.

Shortly after Fuller had digested this report, he received a call from a CIA friend, Dick Lamont, at Andrews Air Force Base.

'There's a UFO connection,' Lamont said.

'What kind?'

'The first report of an unidentified,' Lamont told him, 'was made by the Deputy Aviation Commissioner of Syracuse, Robert C. Walsh, and several other witnesses. Just after the power failed at Syracuse, all of them saw what resembled a huge fireball *ascending* from a fairly low altitude near Hancock Airport. Approaching for landing at that time was flight instructor Weldon Ross and his passenger, computer technician James Brooding, both of whom saw the same object. At first they mistook it for a burning building on the ground – something corroborating the fact that the fireball was at low altitude

– but then they realised that it was something in the air... a single, round-shaped object about a hundred feet in diameter, later described in their formal report as a "flame-coloured globe". And according to Ross's calculations, that object was directly over the Clay power sub-station...'

No sooner had Fuller put the phone down than it rang again. This time it was Wilson.

'Well?' he asked softly.

'I have to talk to the President,' Wilson replied.

'You do that,' Wilson said.

A few hours later, at 3.30 in the morning, after his 'emergency' telephone conversation with President Lyndon B. Johnson, Fuller was landing by helicopter in the most heavily guarded area of Nellis AFB, Las Vegas, Nevada. Two crude coffins and a pile of large wooden crates had already been loaded onto a caravan of US Army trucks, which were surrounded by a ring of heavily armed troops. Fuller clambered into the back of a diplomatic limousine and told the driver to go. The limousine, which had tinted, bulletproof windows, led the convoy of trucks away from the floodlit hangar to a restricted airstrip at the northern edge of the base.

Clambering out of the limousine, Fuller glanced about him and noted that the whole area was surrounded by barbed wire and protected by more helmeted, armed troops. Satisfied with the security arrangements, he supervised the unloading of the two coffins and crates. When they were unloaded and forming one large, pyramid-shaped heap in the middle of the airstrip, the armed soldiers were ordered into the trucks and driven back to camp, leaving Fuller alone with a high-ranking Air Force officer.

Not intimidated by high-ranking Air Force officers, Fuller lit a cigarette and smoked while he waited.

Eventually, one of Wilson's mother ships descended silently, majestically, a great pyramid of steel cocooned in a white haze, its rainbow lights flashing rapidly around its circular rim, to settle just above the field at the far side of the runway. When it had landed, the lights flickered off, one after the other in quick sequence, the white haze disappeared, as if the light had been sucked back in through the porous metal of the saucer's body, and then a large, formerly seamless panel moved outwards and down to form a doorway with a wide ramp leading from the holding bay of the saucer to the ground.

At first seen as no more than a sharp-edged silhouette in the dazzling light

of the holding bay, Wilson's assistant, Salvatore Fallaci, became recognisably human as he advanced down the ramp and approached Fuller, now just getting out of his limousine.

As Fuller noted instantly, Wilson was not present. Instead, Fallaci was surrounded by four creatures who could have been easily mistaken for aliens, or extraterrestrials, but were, as Fuller now knew, cyborgs surgically mutated from what had once been normal human beings: the small Ache Indians of Paraguay. Averaging five feet tall, sometimes even smaller, only occasionally taller, they'd had facial surgery to replace the nose, mouth and throat with metal-covered prosthetics. While this alone would have made them look bizarre, they were rendered even more 'alien' by their remote-controlled metal hands, which were actually small CAMS of the kind used for sea-bed exploration.

The children of Frankenstein, Fuller thought. That's who I'm dealing with. That fucker Wilson is Frankenstein.

'Good evening, Mr Fuller,' Fallaci said.

'More like good morning,' Fuller responded.

Fallaci smiled. He had that Italian charm. 'Normal people keep normal hours,' he said, 'and are always boring.' He glanced at the trucks lined up behind Fuller. 'Is everything there, Mr Fuller? By which I mean the crashed saucer and its dead cyborgs. Those and every other single item you took into that hangar.'

'Every single item,' Fuller said. 'You're getting everything back.'

'It's good to know that above and beyond you, there are people with some common sense.'

'Go screw yourself,' Fuller said.

He had finally come to accept (and it hadn't been easy) that he was frightened of Wilson. He had never been frightened of anyone in his life – not until he met Wilson, who had always been icily polite and curiously civilised. Fuller was frightened of Wilson's steady blue gaze, of his absolute pragmatism, of the way he could look directly at you without blinking and reduce you to nothing. Wilson lacked normal feelings. He passed judgement, then acted. What he did was dictated by a logic so pure that it had to be inhuman.

Fuller accepted that. He didn't like it, but he understood it. Pragmatism was his own meat and potatoes - a man did what he had to do. That was Wilson.

That was Fuller, also. In truth, he and Wilson were opposite sides of the same coin.

You couldn't believe this shit coming down, but there it was on your plate. You either ate it or you starved to death. That was life in a nutshell. On the other hand, though Fuller patriotically ate this shit, he wasn't about to do so in front of Salvatore Fallaci. The former Mafioso was only Wilson's minion and as such could be used as an antidote to Fuller's fear and frustration. All the things that Fuller wanted to say to Wilson – but did not dare say – he could say to Fallaci.

'You hear me? I said, go screw yourself.'

'I'm not here to be insulted,' Fallaci said, 'so let's just do what we have to do. May I start?'

'What the fuck do you think?' Fuller responded, trying to obliterate his fear of Wilson by shitting on his assistant. 'We didn't come here at this hour to rock and roll. Take what you want and then leave.'

'I will do exactly that,' Fallaci said. 'Thank *you*, Mr Fuller.'

Using what appeared to be a miniature microphone strapped to his throat, Fallaci directed the hideous cyborgs, step by step, as they removed the crates containing the separate parts of the crashed flying saucer and the coffins containing the dead crew from the army trucks, then carried them up the ramp, into the dazzling holding bay of the mother ship. When this task was completed, the cyborgs also entered the mother ship, leaving only Fallaci outside, once more facing Fuller.

'You've shown sound sense,' Fallaci said to Fuller. 'Mr Wilson thanks you.'

'Don't mention it,' Fuller replied, trying to sound sardonic, though his stomach was churning with tension.

Fallaci grinned, turned away and walked up the ramp, into the mother ship. The ramp folded back in and the great saucer-shaped craft, again looking seamless, emitted a bass humming sound, gave off a magically pulsating whitish glowing, lifted gently off the ground, like a soap bubble floating on water, then ascended vertically to the heavens and eventually disappeared.

'Good God,' the high-ranking Air Force officer beside Fuller exclaimed softly, 'I don't believe my own eyes.'

'That's what those bastards are banking on,' Fuller responded. Then, defeated, but trying not to show it, he turned away and walked back across

the dark, eerily silent airstrip.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

Dwight had begun to feel that he had no real life – out there, where the real world was. He seemed to have spent the past decade indoors, pouring over reports of UFO sightings and UFO photographs, piecing this and that together, trying to make sense of what seemed senseless, hoping to find logic in his nightmares. The nightmares were, of course, based on what had happened not only to him, but also to Beth, and for that very reason he had been keeping a low profile with regard to his UFO researches. So low, indeed, that even Dr Epstein and Tony Scaduto of the APII had begun sending him letters, asking him what the hell he was doing.

Finally, in November 1966, a year after the Great Northeast Blackout, Dwight pulled himself out of that dark hole he was living in – not his home, but his bruised and frightened soul – to meet Epstein and Scaduto, who'd flown in from Washington DC, in a Chinese restaurant in Dayton, for lunch and a talk. With his hair and Vandyke beard now mostly grey, Epstein looked a lot older, but Scaduto, given the benefits of youth, hadn't changed that much and still wore his black-leather biker's gear. They made an unusual team.

'My feeling,' Epstein said as he turned his Singapore noodles expertly on his chopsticks, 'is that you've practically given up your UFO research. We're getting nothing back, Dwight.'

Dwight shrugged. 'I won't deny it. I *have* practically given up. Ever since that incident with Beth, I've been frightened for her and Nichola, so I decided to keep a low profile and not draw any attention to myself. What the hell! Why lie about it? I was so scared, I decided to drop out altogether, in the hope that those bastards, the men in black, or whoever, would forget us entirely.'

'Perfectly understandable,' Epstein said, nodding sympathetically. 'Had I been in your situation, I'd have been just as scared.'

‘You probably *are* in his situation,’ Scaduto said. ‘You just don’t know it yet. I mean, man, if you’re running an organisation like the APII, those bastards are bound to be watching you.’

‘But they’ve never bothered me,’ Epstein replied.

‘They have their own ways and reasons,’ Dwight said. ‘But living with the constant expectation of a visitation is just as bad as the visitation itself.’

‘So nothing new to recount?’

‘Only that Nichola’s turned nineteen and is planning to marry.’

‘Nineteen!’ Scaduto exclaimed. ‘I can hardly believe it. Makes me feel like an old man.’

‘We age overnight,’ Epstein said gloomily, clearly thinking of himself, then he brightened up enough to ask: ‘So you’ve been involved in the arrangements for the wedding?’

‘Right,’ Dwight said.

‘And Beth... How has she been coping?’

‘You mean the forthcoming nuptials or her CE-Four experience?’

‘Both.’

‘She’s thrilled that Nichola’s getting married – she’s very romantic that way. I think it’s been a healthy distraction for her, regarding the other thing. It’s kept her mind off it.’

‘And what about the so-called “other thing” – the CE-Four experience?’

‘Since having her hypnotic treatments her headaches and nightmares have gone, but she’s gradually remembering the details of her abduction and now lives in fear of the men in black and the possibility of being abducted again. That, in a nutshell, is why I’ve virtually stopped working for you. It’s for Beth. I’m frightened for her. I think that what they did to her was a warning – and it’s one that I’m heeding.’

Indeed, just thinking about it made Dwight feel that a wall of darkness was closing in around him, even in daylight. You were there, in that dungeon of the mind, and you might never get out. That’s what they could do to you. Though who ‘they’ were, he still didn’t know.

‘I don’t mind admitting that we’re desperate to get you back to work,’ Epstein said. ‘A recent Gallup Poll has shown that approximately nine million Americans now believe they’ve seen a UFO. Our research supports that figure. To put it mildly, we’re being overwhelmed with reports. So we need all the help we can get.’

‘*Nine million?*’ Dwight asked, finding it hard to believe what he was hearing.

‘Yes. An astonishing figure, right? The Gallup Poll was undertaken in the wake of one of the most widely publicised events in the history of the UFO controversy: the furore over the Dexter and Hillsdale, Michigan, sightings that occurred eighteen months ago. Did you read about them?’

‘Yeah.’ Dwight recalled them only vaguely. ‘I remember reading about them and seeing some news items on TV. It was at a time when I couldn’t face anything about UFOs, so I guess I gave them a miss. I used to just turn my head away.’

‘You must’ve been in a fucking *bad* way,’ Scaduto said.

‘I was.’

‘May I refresh your memory?’ Epstein asked.

‘Sure. Go ahead.’

‘On March 20 last year, eighty-seven women students and a civil defence director at Hillsdale College, Michigan, saw a glowing, football-shaped object hovering over an empty swamp a few hundred yards from the women’s dorm. It repeatedly raced at, then retreated from, the dorm, dodged an airport beacon light, and flew back and forth for hours before disappearing. The next day, in Dexter, sixty-three miles away, five people, including two police officers, reported seeing a large, glowing object rising from a swampy area on a farm, hover for a few minutes at about a thousand feet, and then leave the area.’

‘An impressive set of witnesses,’ Scaduto said.

‘Quite so. And within a few days, nearly every newspaper in the country and all national TV news programmes were carrying reports on the sightings. This placed intense pressure on the Air Force to investigate the incidents.’

‘I remember that much,’ Dwight said, growing interested despite himself. ‘The head of Project Blue Book, Major Hector Quintanilla, sent Dr J. Allen Hynek to investigate the sightings.’

‘Right – and Hynek had to virtually fight his way through the reporters to get at the witnesses. Later, he stated that the entire region was gripped by near-hysteria. He did, however, manage to complete his investigation and afterwards held what was reported as being the largest press conference in the history of the Detroit Press Club.’

‘Hynek’s widely respected,’ Dwight said, ‘so where he goes, the press

goes.'

'Knows his stuff,' Scaduto murmured.

'He's brought respectability to the subject,' Epstein said, 'and I'm grateful for that. Unfortunately, in this instance, he fell flat on his face.'

'Oh?' Dwight said. 'How?'

'He made the simple mistake of not thinking before he opened his mouth. With the news hounds all baying for an instant explanation for the sightings, he suggested – purely as a hypothesis – that they might have been caused by marsh gas.'

'What the hell's that?' Scaduto, an urban man, asked.

'It's a phenomenon caused by the spontaneous ignition of decaying vegetation and it produces eerie, glowing lights.'

'Thank you, professor.'

'Anyway, the press latched onto the words "swamp gas" and had a field day making fun of them, with the ironic result that coverage of UFOs reached unprecedented levels during March and April – particularly regarding the Dexter-Hillsdale sightings. So much so, in fact, that Weston E. Vivian, Democratic Congressman from Michigan, and Gerald Ford, House Republican minority leader, formally called for Congressional hearings.'

'Oh, Christ, yes,' Dwight said. 'I remember it all now. But that's about as far as I got. That's when I stopped reading about it. And I started switching the TV off when the subject was raised. So what happened next?'

'The House Armed Services Committee,' Epstein said, 'acted on Ford's suggestion and on April 15 – for the first time in the history of the UFO controversy – Congress held an open hearing on the subject. When the hearings were completed, the Secretary of the Air Force, Harold D. Brown, directed the Air Force chief of staff to make arrangements for a special, independent, civilian team to investigate selected UFO sightings. Subsequently, on May 9, the Air Force announced that it was planning to contract with scientists for a full-scale UFO investigation.'

'And last month,' Scaduto interjected excitedly, 'the Air Force announced that the University of Colorado had accepted the UFO study project and that Edward C. Condon would be in charge.'

'Who's Condon?' Dwight asked, more intrigued every minute, feeling that he was coming back to life after being buried alive.

'An internationally known physicist and former head of the National

Bureau of Standards,' Epstein told him.

'Impressive,' Dwight said.

'Which is exactly why they picked that bastard,' Scaduto said with surprising, unexpected bitterness.

'Here's the interesting part,' Epstein said. 'The part not included in the press reports.'

'Go on,' Dwight responded, leaning forward, as if drawn to Epstein by a magnet.

Epstein smiled slightly, knowing that he'd hooked Dwight again. 'Dr James E. McDonald,' he said, 'a senior atmospheric physicist at the University of Arizona's Department of Atmospheric Sciences and one of the nation's leading scientific authorities on UFOs, had accidentally seen the *classified* version of the previous Robertson Panel report at Wright-Patterson AFB. This led him to reveal, when speaking to members of the university's Department of Meteorology, that the CIA had ordered the Air Force to debunk UFOs. He had read this, he said, in the uncensored version of the Robertson Panel report.'

'Fucking A!' Scaduto exclaimed, looking happier.

'The news services picked up this story,' Epstein continued, 'and publicised it widely on the same day that the Air Force announced the establishment of the Condon Committee.'

'Condon was picked,' Scaduto added enthusiastically, 'because he's already shown he doesn't believe in UFOs. He's been tasked with helping the Air Force deny that they deliberately debunked UFO reports and to help them bury this subject once and for all. What say you, Dwight?'

'I say you're right,' Dwight said without thinking. 'And what we have to look into is...'

He stopped talking in mid-sentence, realising that he'd just committed himself again, despite his lingering doubts. When he saw the grins on the faces of Epstein and Scaduto, he couldn't help laughing.

'I don't believe it,' he said, when he had managed to contain himself. 'You pair of bastards came all the way from Washington DC just to seduce me into going back to work.'

'We sure did,' Epstein said.

'So are you in or out?' Scaduto asked.

'Count me in,' Dwight said.

The three of them raised their glasses in the air and tapped them together in a toast.

It was the last of their good days.

Chapter Forty

Sitting on his rocking chair on the veranda, overlooking the fenced-in compound, Ernst Stoll observed the arrival of Wilson's flying saucer with no great deal of pleasure. This time Wilson was coming in a medium-sized saucer, 150 feet wide, and carrying, so Ernst hoped, a 35-foot diameter, two-seater saucer with a cyborg pilot for his personal use. Ernst still had his own thoughts about that and they were making him nervous.

Indeed, as he watched the *Kugelblitz III* descending vertically over the steaming canopy of the rain forest, he was torn between his need to escape this filthy hole and his dread of what might happen if he tried. Over the past few months it had dawned on him that he had now been here for years - nearly twenty years, in fact – and that there had been no indication that Wilson would ever let him leave. Ernst was rotting in this jungle; perhaps even losing his mind. With little stimulation, he could not stretch himself and was, he felt, becoming like a vegetable, blending in with the forest. So depleted was he that he could not even enjoy sex with his Ache comfort girls, let alone still be thrilled with the feeling of power that he had formerly received from running the compound like a merciless god. Now he wanted only to die in the Fatherland, preferably in Mannheim, where he had been born, and rest in the same soil that had taken his wife and children so many years ago.

Naturally he was nervous about telling Wilson this, but was determined to do so. A man could only take so much and he, Ernst Stoll, had had enough. He would plead for release.

As Wilson's saucer descended slowly, majestically, into the clearing, its familiar bass humming sound grew louder and became almost palpable, an odd vibration that shook Ernst's log-and-thatch house. Looking up, he saw the immense, spherical, deceptively seamless craft blocking out the tropical sky as it dropped lower. Still quite high up, the saucer was spinning rapidly on its own axis, except for the gyroscopically stabilised central fuselage. The

rapid rotation of the circular outer wings slowed down as the saucer descended, creating violent currents of air that made loose grass, plants, soil and gravel swirl wildly, noisily, in the air, as if caught in the eye of a hurricane. As always, the native workers and captured Ache Indians were staring up in awe as the gigantic saucer descended, cocooned in a familiar whitish glow. This glow darkened to a more normal metallic grey when the saucer hovered just above ground level, bobbing gently like a cork in water, its thick hydraulic legs emerging from four points equidistant around its base, to embed themselves deeply in the muddy ground. The saucer bounced gently on the legs, but eventually settled and was still. Its rotating wings gradually slowed and then stopped altogether, as did the wildly swirling, artificial wind. Silence reigned for a moment.

As a panel in the concave base opened up to form a ramp leading down to the ground, Ernst rose from his rocking chair, stepped off the veranda, and advanced to meet Wilson. The latter emerged from the holding bay of the saucer, tall, slim, naturally elegant, white-haired, oddly handsome with the aid of plastic surgery, and with a psychic aura as cold as a block of ice. Ernst practically trembled with fear the instant he saw him.

Wilson did not offer his hand. He just nodded and said, '*Guten tag*, Ernst. It is good to see you.' Speaking German, he was inclined to become rather formal.

'And good to see you, sir.'

'You are well?'

'Yes, sir, and you?'

'I'm in excellent condition for my age, given all the medical and surgical aid I've had. You must try it yourself, Ernst.'

Ernst felt himself smiling nervously, without humour. 'I don't think I'm quite ready for that yet. Perhaps a few years from now.'

Even as Ernst was speaking, four of the hideous cyborgs, mutated from unfortunate Ache Indians, came down the ramp behind Wilson, looking even shorter than they were beside the Frankenstein who had created them. Ernst shuddered to see them.

'As promised, I have brought your present,' Wilson said, still speaking in formal German. 'But let us have lunch first.'

'Naturally. Yes, sir.'

Ernst led his lord and master back to the house where, on the veranda,

which was pleasantly cool, they had what Wilson considered to be a major meal: fruit-and-nut cereal, with a glass of cold, very dry white wine. While partaking of the lunch, he expressed his concern that the Americans and Soviets were, ironically with his help, progressing technologically much faster than he had anticipated.

'Since Lyndon B.Johnson was sworn in as President,' he explained, 'after the assassination of Kennedy, both the Americans and the Soviets have had men drifting outside their spacecraft; two separate US Gemini spacecraft have met in space and flown side-by-side only six to ten feet apart – an achievement requiring astonishing technical accuracy by their modest standards – the first space docking has been made by a US astronaut; and, finally, an unmanned US *Surveyor* spacecraft has soft-landed on the moon.'

'Well, sir, you *did* help them with that,' Stoll dared to remind him, 'even if indirectly, with your supplies of scientific drawings and a great deal of highly advanced technology.'

Wilson nodded. 'Yes. As part of that agreement I promised the Americans, through CIA agent Jack Fuller, that they would be the first to land a man on the moon. As always, I'd intended keeping that promise. However, the speed with which the Americans are advancing scientifically had made me feel that I must hinder their progress, as well as American and Soviet progress in general. It's clear from my recent conversations with Jack Fuller that they're growing arrogant, believing that they can somehow catch up with my achievements, which is why I arranged last year's Great Northeast Blackout as a warning to them. After that, they cooled down for a while, but already they're growing arrogant again, so clearly they need another lesson.'

'What have you planned?'

'I've learnt through one of my brain-implanted spies located within NASA that they have a rehearsal for another Apollo launch planned for January 27 next year. The same man – one of NASA's top scientists – will therefore ensure that the spacecraft malfunctions and bursts into flames, killing all three of the astronauts on board. A couple of months later – I believe this will be April – when cosmonaut Vladimir Komarov is due to orbit the Earth in a Soyuz spacecraft, we'll attack it with a laser-beam weapon fired by one of our saucers. We'll make the spacecraft crash, killing Komarov. The combined deaths of the cosmonaut and three astronauts will almost certainly cause consternation and result in delays in the space race between the

Americans and the Soviets. I think this will work, yes?'

'I think so,' Ernst said.

When the meal was finished, Ernst made his usual report to Wilson, telling him about the negative or positive aspects of the capturing and holding of the Ache Indians and any difficulties presented by his dealings with Paraguay's officials, most of whom were as corrupt as their master, President Stroessner. Eventually, when he'd completed his report, he glanced across the compound with its mud-and-thatch shacks, goats, chickens, mosquitoes, piles of shit and everything else he detested here, including the native workers, men and women alike, and suddenly blurted out that twenty years here was too much.

'I desperately want to return to Germany,' he said finally.

'Why do you wish to return?' Wilson asked.

'It is the Fatherland...'

'It is not,' Wilson interjected in his remote, unemotional way. 'The Fatherland died with the ending of the war. What you want is no more.'

'Still, my wife and children died there. Everything I had was there. I have been here for twenty years and I'm growing old and I yearn for the past. Please, sir, let me go.'

'I didn't realise you were so sentimental,' Wilson said with a smile that did not reach his eyes and held no warmth at all – a smile as cold as the grave.

'Nor did I,' Ernst replied, 'but I am. It's a sign that I'm growing old.'

'I'm sorry, Ernst,' Wilson said, showing no sign of emotion whatsoever, 'but I'm afraid I cannot say "Yes" to that just yet. We still need you here. You are doing invaluable work here. Rest assured that it will end in a year or two, and then we can consider this matter again. But why Germany? There's nothing left for you there. In a year or two, when your work here is finished, you can return to Antarctica for medical and surgical rejuvenation. When that's completed, we will find you something suitable to do there; or, if you prefer, somewhere else. But not Germany. There you could still be picked up as a war criminal and forced to stand trial. We cannot risk that.'

'That's the problem,' Ernst said, feeling even more desperate, knowing that he was going to lose out again to Wilson. 'It's not just a matter of getting back to Germany. The truth is that I don't think I can stand it here much longer. This place is gradually driving me crazy. I have to get out.'

'You simply need a short break now and then,' Wilson insisted in his cold-blooded, icily pragmatic way. 'You don't need to return to Germany. You

just need to get out of here more often, perhaps visit Asuncion.'

'The journey is too difficult,' Ernst said, aware that he sounded pathetic, his heart sinking with the knowledge that Wilson was going to be unbending about letting him leave here for good. 'And besides, it's too dangerous. This compound is in the middle of the rain forest, the jungle, and the only way out is by river. That makes short breaks difficult.'

'Which is precisely why I've brought you a gift, Ernst. A small, two-seater flying saucer with a programmed, totally obedient cyborg pilot. Come and look.'

Even as they stood up and walked down the steps of the veranda, a 35-foot wide flying saucer emerged slowly, gracefully, from the holding bay of its mother ship, barely inches above the floor, but certainly floating in mid-air, and advanced over the clearing, watched silently by the awed, terrified natives and Ache Indians. Made, like all of the flying saucers, from minutely porous magnesium orthosilicate and electrically charged, it was surrounded by that familiar whitish glow, caused by the ionisation of the surrounding atmosphere. With its outer rings rotating around its fixed, cupola-shaped central fuselage, it looked like a giant spinning top. Unlike the bigger flying saucers, however, it had a visible Perspex dome not much larger than the cockpit of a small airplane.

Standing beside Wilson in the clearing as the saucer advanced towards him, Ernst could see, in that cramped, two-seater pilot's cabin, the silhouetted figure of what had to be the cyborg pilot. A lump came to his throat as the saucer settled gently on the ground, its four legs extending to embed themselves in the mud. He was recalling how desperately, when an aeronautical student, first at the Institute of Technology in Munich, then in the rocket technology classes of Professor Karl Emil Becker at the University of Berlin, he had wanted to join the VfR, or Spaceship Travel Club, in the company of Werner von Braun, Rudolph Nebel, Willy Ley, and Hermann Oberth, to build rockets that would soar to the heavens. That dream had been crushed when he joined the SS and, eventually, came under the influence of the almost inhuman Wilson, who, for the past twenty years, had kept him imprisoned between helpless reverence and dread. Now, when he studied the small flying saucer, he saw the means of his escape and, formulating it, was filled with terror at the thought of what Wilson might do if he failed and was captured and brought back. Thinking about the possibilities, Ernst had to

wipe sweat from his brow and control his body's trembling.

'Beautiful!' he exclaimed softly, referring to the small flying saucer now resting in the middle of the clearing, dwarfed by the immense *Kugelblitz III*.

'Yours,' Wilson responded. 'It's not stratospheric, but its range is virtually limitless and you can use it for lengthy journeys at an altitude that will keep you well above normal airplanes, out of the range of radar, thus out of sight. Use it to give yourself some short breaks, away from this place. You'll feel better then.'

'It's been so long,' Ernst said hesitantly. 'I don't know how to fly any more. Certainly not...'

'The cyborg pilot will do the flying for you when the saucer isn't on autopilot. One of our first fully functioning cyborgs. Look!' Speaking into the pinhead microphone strapped to his throat, Wilson ordered the pilot out. With the saucer being so small, the pilot emerged rather like the pilot of a normal airplane: by opening the dome-shaped Perspex hood, which split into two parts, then clambering out and simply slithering down the sloping side to the ground. When, in this instance, the pilot had done so, Ernst looked at him in horrified amazement.

He was both horrified and amazed because he actually recognised what was left of the original Marlon Clarke, the farmer abducted in Socorro, New Mexico, in 1947 and flown to the Antarctic after witnessing the crash of a flying saucer. Clarke had been turned into a hideous man/machine hybrid, or cyborg. His head had been severed, kept in cold storage, then transplanted to the body of a small, headless Ache Indian. Ernst was surprised that he still recognised Clarke, because there was so little of his original face to be seen. His skull was covered in the stereotaxic skullcap that kept electrodes implanted in his head at all times; and his lower face – ears, nose, mouth and jaw – had been replaced with an ugly metal prosthetic. The hands of the original Ache Indian had been sliced off and replaced with what would have looked to most people like vicious metal claws, though they were, as Ernst knew, CAMS, capable of highly sophisticated movements. Clarke looked like a monster.

'Plastic artificial heart,' Wilson explained. 'Bionic audio transmitters to replace the mechanism of the inner ear. Plastic arteries. Synthetic bones in both legs and the lower arms attached to the CAMS. The latter, while looking like metal claws from afar, actually have fingertips of polyvinylidene

fluoride, which detects alternations in pressure and delivers the appropriate impulses to the nerve ends. Brain-implantations, of course, and programmed for absolute obedience – you speak, he obeys. Here... strap this pinhead microphone to your throat.'

Ernst took the tiny microphone, wrapped the strap around his throat, and clipped it shut with the microphone resting on his Adam's apple.

'Now identify yourself,' Wilson said. 'Tell the cyborg your name,'

'My name is Ernst Stoll.'

'Good,' Wilson said. 'That's all he needs to know. He now knows the sound of your voice and will react automatically to it with total obedience.'

'Amazing,' Ernst said, feeling hope even in his despair, seeing light where only darkness had reigned.

'He's a gift for your years of devotion to duty,' Wilson said. 'Use him well. Now I must be going.'

Nodding at Ernst, since he rarely shook hands these days, Wilson went back up the ramp of the bigger saucer, followed by his four cyborg guards. Once they were all inside, the ramp closed and the saucer lifted slightly off the ground. Shortly after it had lifted off, and while it was still hovering above the ground, its hydraulic legs were drawn back into the base of the central body and the panels closed so precisely that the joins around them could not be seen. Then the saucer rose vertically, slowly, to just above the canopy of the soaring trees, hovered there for a few seconds, then abruptly shot upward, shrank rapidly, and then disappeared.

The cyborg pilot, Marlon Clarke, was standing silently in front of the small flying saucer, practically brain-dead until activated by instructions from Ernst. Both terrified and exhilarated by what he was contemplating, Ernst hurried back into his log-and-thatch house, to have a strong drink of schnapps, which helped give him the courage he needed to do what he was planning.

Sitting there on the sofa in the middle of the room, he looked around at the photos that showed his own history: a golden-haired child in the courtyard of his parents' imposing neo-Gothic house in Mannheim; a handsome youth sitting with a pretty young blonde-haired lady, Ingrid, later to be his wife, at an outside table of the Kranzler Café on the Kurfurstendamm in Berlin; clambering out of an army car at Stadelheim Prison, Berlin, in his black SS uniform; posing, already cynical, in the same uniform outside Gestapo

Headquarters in the Prinz Albrechstrasse with friends Brandt and Ritter, both killed in the war; celebrating with those same two friends and some whores at the Schauspielhaus in 1937, all drunk and holding up steins of beer; wrapped in a greatcoat covered with snow as he hammered swastikas on steel poles into the hardened snow of Neu Schwabenland, Antarctica, in 1938, claiming the territory for the Third Reich; already ageing and embittered when with the flying saucer team – Wilson, Rudolph Schriever, Klaus Habermohl and Otto Miethe – outside the hangar of the research centre at Kummersdorf, located at the other side of the firing range separating it from Werner von Braun's Rocket Research Institute; twice with the Reichfuhrer, Heinrich Himmler – first looking icily controlled in the SS headquarters in Berlin, then, six years later, looking deranged in the sanatorium of Dr Gebhardt at Hohenlychen; finally, with generals Nebe and Kammler in the great underground complex of the Nordhausen Central Works in Kahla in the Harz Mountains. And, of course, the women, his *few* women... That erotic dancer, Brigitte, from the White Mouse in the Franzosischestrasse; the sensual, treacherous Jew bitch, Kryzstina Kosilewsky, from Cracow; and, coming last, but in a framed picture hung on the wall directly facing his desk, his wife, Ingrid, and their two children, Ula and Alfred, taken two weeks before they died in an Allied air-raid...

Ernst almost choked up then, overwhelmed with emotion, recalling that more human aspect of himself before the war, Wilson and this hellish jungle had eaten up the last of his soul. He was going mad here – he had to get out – and now he was going to attempt to do just that while he had the chance.

He was terrified of what would happen if he failed, but he still had to try it.

Hurriedly packing a shoulder bag with his basic necessities, the photos he had just been studying and, most important, the great deal of cash he had gathered over the years from various transactions with General Stroessner's corrupt officials, he left the house for what he hoped would be the last time. Crossing the muddy compound to the small flying saucer, he glanced with distaste at the log-and-thatch cabins, the bamboo cages packed with imprisoned Ache Indians, the native men and women kneeling around camp fires, the mangy dogs and chickens and goats, all dwarfed by the soaring trees, and was thrilled at the prospect of never seeing them again. Approaching the cyborg pilot, who stared at him with almost dead eyes from between the stereotaxic skullcap and the metal lower-face prosthetic – a truly

awful sight – he ordered him, by speaking with the aid of his throat-microphone, to climb up into the saucer. When the cyborg had done so, Ernst followed him, clambering up the gently sloping side and slipping into the pilot's domed cockpit. When both he and the cyborg were strapped into their seats, their shoulders almost touching, which made Ernst feel uneasy, he told the cyborg to take off, ascend as high as possible, then turn towards the sea and set the autopilot for West Germany.

Obeying, the cyborg activated the saucer and soon, after the cockpit covering had closed automatically, its circular wings were rotating and taking on the whitish glow of ionisation. The saucer lifted off gently, swayed just above the ground, then ascended in a stately manner until it was above the canopy of the trees. So excited he could scarcely breathe, Ernst managed to take one last look at the fenced-in compound, now practically lost in the jungle far below, then the saucer suddenly shot off at startling speed, flying smoothly above the vast, river-divided, densely forested landscape of Paraguay.

Ernst didn't get as far as the sea.

No sooner had the small saucer gone into horizontal flight than Wilson's much bigger saucer, the mother ship, appeared magically out of nowhere to sit on its tail. Horrified to see this, Ernst was also terrified when Wilson's voice came out of amplifier vents in the cyborg's steel facial prosthetic, saying in German, 'I know what you're attempting, Ernst, and I'm disappointed in you. You will now be punished for your betrayal. I'm sorry to have to do this.'

Instantly, the cyborg let out a demented, hideously human wailing that cut right through Ernst. Smoke poured out from behind the featureless lower-face metal prosthetic, followed by showering sparks. Then, as the cyborg continued its ghastly, ear-splitting wailing, the steel prosthetic blew off, revealing the surgically shredded bone and flesh around the removed mouth, jaw and nose, with blood squirting out and splashing over Ernst. Even as Ernst looked on, aghast, too shocked to think clearly, the cyborg's head started smoking beneath the skullcap and he made an odd rattling sound – the sound of Marlon Clarke dying – then slumped sideways in his seat, clearly dead.

As Ernst stared at the cyborg, mesmerised by shock, the saucer flipped over and started spinning rapidly towards the earth. Rendered dizzy and nauseous

by the spinning, almost deafened by the hammering of wind against the canopy, not knowing which way was up and which down, Ernst was further punished by the sight of the dead cyborg rocking wildly in his seat with blood still spewing from the mess of exposed bone and flesh where the metal prosthetic had been. He then saw the spinning jungle rushing up towards him and knew that the saucer was about to crash.

Ernst screamed in terror.

Miraculously, just before the spinning saucer struck the canopy of the trees, Wilson's saucer appeared above it. A pyramid of brilliant light, some kind of force field, beaming out of the base of Wilson's enormous craft, enveloped Ernst's spinning machine and appeared to place it under control again.

Held in that pyramid of light, Ernst's saucer, though now the right way up, raced on a descending trajectory towards the jungle – heading back, as Ernst realised with dread, in the general direction of his compound by the river.

The jungle rushed up towards him. The pyramid of light blinked out, then Wilson's saucer ascended abruptly, vertically, and appeared to dissolve into the blazing sun. Ernst covered his face with his arms as he crashed into the jungle.

He survived... almost certainly because of Wilson. Though the saucer crashed, it levelled out before doing so, smashing through the trees, hitting the ground the right way up, and then sliding through the soft mud until it finally came to a shuddering halt.

Though battered, bruised, badly cut and bleeding, the shocked Ernst still managed to crawl out of the saucer, which was mangled but still in one piece. Standing upright, but almost falling again from dizziness, he wiped blood from his eyes and eventually managed to orientate himself. After taking a final look backwards at the crashed saucer, which already was being covered in falling leaves, he began what he knew would be a long, hellish march back to the compound.

He had been punished and sentenced. Now he knew that he would be imprisoned in the compound for the rest of his days.

His hell was right here on Earth.

Chapter Forty-One

In October, 1967, Dwight paid a visit to Dr Epstein and Scaduto in the APII headquarters in Washington DC, where he was introduced to two new members of the organisation, both physicists: a handsome, sardonic young man named Robert Stanford – whom Epstein always addressed simply as 'Stanford' – and the relatively famous Dr Irving Jacobs. Stanford was pretty flashy, dressed like a Californian in a sky-blue open-necked shirt, denims held up with a fancy leather belt, and a windcheater jacket. Dr Jacobs, older and wiser, was wearing a standard grey suit, shirt and tie, and well polished black shoes.

'Though he looks like he comes from Malibu,' Epstein said, 'Stanford actually hails from right here, in Washington DC.'

'McLean, Virginia, to be precise,' Stanford explained with a shit-ass grin.

'Dr Jacobs, on the other hand, hails from Camelback Hill, Phoenix, Arizona, and has been kind enough to fly here just for this meeting. They've both signed up to work for the APII and I'm pleased they're with us.'

'It's swell to have you aboard,' Dwight said, shaking the hands of both men in turn.

'Still got me to deal with, though,' Scaduto said, looking even cockier than Stanford. 'Bet *that* gives you headaches!'

'Headaches from bastards like you I can enjoy,' Dwight replied. 'At least they keep me awake.'

'Ain't he just the nicest sonofabitch?' Scaduto asked rhetorically. 'Say, hey, let's get cookin'!'

Though he didn't know anything about the flashy, self-confident Stanford, Dwight had read about Dr Irving Jacobs in a wide variety of scientific journals and knew that apart from working for NASA and the American Nuclear Society, he was seriously interested in the UFO phenomenon. That he was joining the APII was therefore good news, since his reputation in so-

called ‘serious’ areas could only enhance the credibility of the organisation.

‘Okay, gentlemen,’ Epstein said, indicating the chairs around his desk with an airy wave of his right hand, ‘now that my good friends Dwight Randall and Tony Scaduto have had their regular little get-together skirmish, please take a seat and let’s talk.’ When they were all seated, lighting up cigarettes and sipping water or coffee, he said to Dr Jacobs: ‘As you still work for NASA, Irving, can I begin by saying how sorry I was to read about the deaths of those three astronauts, Grisson, Chaffee and White, in the flash fire that swept through their Apollo spacecraft last January. It must have been a real blow to you.’

‘It’s been a bad year for the space programme in general,’ Jacobs replied. ‘I mean, apart from our three unfortunate astronauts, there was the death of the Soviet cosmonaut, Vladimir Komarov, when his Soyuz spacecraft crashed after coming out of orbit. In neither case – NASA or the Soviet Union – did anyone have a clue as to exactly what happened. God knows, it was certainly a year of disasters that set the space programme back a good deal and could threaten its funding.’

‘Which won’t help the APII,’ Stanford said. ‘Because when public interest wanes in the space programme – which it always does when funding is cut and there’s no media attention fixed on it – it also wanes regarding UFOs. Alas, some people – indeed millions of goddamned people – tend to link the two together. That’s one of life’s unfortunate facts.’

‘The man’s a philosopher,’ Scaduto said.

‘You read me loud and clear,’ Stanford replied. ‘I have a big mouth.’

‘On the other hand,’ Scaduto said, ‘to get back to the subject of this meeting, it *has* been a wonderful year for UFO sightings.’

‘In what way?’ Jacobs asked.

‘Biggest goddamned UFO flap since the mid-1950s, including the great March concentration from Montana to Maryland.’

‘I was out of the country then,’ Jacobs said. ‘I *did* read a little about it, but can’t remember too much. I was in Paris, France, where the government is seriously considering the setting up of a UFO investigations programme, but their newspapers don’t write much about this country.’

‘No, the Frogs wouldn’t,’ Stanford said.

‘Literally hundreds of witnesses reported seeing UFOs,’ Scaduto said. ‘And there were more UFOs reported from as far apart as Saigon, Vietnam, and

Brixham, England. Most intriguing was a large, saucer-shaped object photographed clearly over Calgary, Alberta. However, the most widely publicised UFO-related incident was the one about a horse called Snippy, found gutted in a surgical manner, with fifteen unexplainable exhaust marks in the soil around the carcass.'

'Fascinating.' That was Epstein. 'The Snippy case has reminded the UFO community that over the past few years there's been an increasing number of similar incidents, when animals, including whole herds of cattle, were killed and robbed of their limbs and internal organs with what appears to be unusually precise, surgical skill.'

'That's one of my specialities,' Stanford said, adjusting his big-buckled belt and looking, with his flashy clothes and matinée-idol handsomeness, not remotely like the very bright physicist that he was. 'I mean, what have we got here? We've got animals being killed, sliced, and gutted where they stand with a precision that can only be surgical – not the handiwork of other, scavenging animals. I say it has to be done by extraterrestrials.'

'Why?' Dr Jacobs asked.

'They want the body parts and internal organs for research purposes,' Stanford replied without hesitation. 'Some kind of medical or surgical research. Find out how we work, right? I mean, find out how our bodies function.'

'But why so many parts?' Dwight asked.

'That's the million-dollar question,' Stanford said.

Dwight was just about to respond when Scaduto indicated with a slight shake of his head that he should say nothing more on the subject. Wondering what Scaduto was up to, Dwight went back to more mundane matters, mainly checking the facts and figures regarding recent UFO sightings in his particular area of Dayton, Ohio.

'And how's Beth?' Epstein asked him when he had finished with his summary.

'She's improving, but never too settled,' Dwight replied, plunging instantly, helplessly, into a well of fearful memories. 'She still has nightmares, but at least, for the time being, there are no visits from men in black, either real or imagined.'

'You have to be brave, Dwight.'

'No,' Dwight replied. '*Beth* has to be brave. I can only offer support.'

‘She’s a strong woman.’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Well,’ Epstein said, obviously uncomfortable with the subject and raising his hands inquiringly in the air, ‘anything else to discuss or do we call it a day?’

‘No more from me,’ Scaduto said.

‘You?’ Epstein asked of Dwight.

‘Not from me,’ Dwight replied.

‘Anything you two want to ask?’ Epstein said to Stanford and Jacobs.

‘Not really,’ Stanford said. ‘It’ll take me about a month to check through these APII reports, but once I’ve done it, I’ll get back to you with my assessment and recommendations.’

‘Robert and Irving,’ Epstein explained, ‘have been taken on to do a long-term projection based on the flight patterns of UFOs, assessing frequency, direction of approach and retreat, and any other facts that will give us an indication of where they come from. We now have a pretty broad knowledge of their technical abilities and extraordinary flight characteristics; what we don’t know is exactly *what* they are and where they originate. Stanford and Dr Jacobs are going to try to come up with a pattern by analysing every single report in the APII files, going all the way back to 1947. Any help that you two... ’ here he nodded at Dwight and Scaduto... ‘can give will be greatly appreciated.’

‘Just give me a call,’ Dwight said.

‘Likewise, guys,’ Scaduto added.

‘Well, that just about wraps it up,’ Epstein said. ‘Are you two lunching, as usual?’

‘Yep,’ Dwight replied. ‘And as usual, you’re going to refuse to join us.’

‘I’m afraid so.’ Epstein spread his hands in that oddly rabbinical manner. ‘I have a desk piled with work and a lot of business still to cover with Dr Jacobs and Stanford here, so if you’ll excuse us...’

‘We come all the way to Washington DC to be thrown out of his goddamned office,’ Scaduto said, grinning. ‘On the other hand, a nice lunch and a couple of drinks... Are you ready, Dwight?’

‘I’m your man,’ Dwight said.

They both stood up, shook hands with Robert Stanford and Dr. Irving Jacobs, then left the office.

Soon after, they were having their traditional lunch in Clyde's in Georgetown, which Dwight had once enjoyed, but which now always reminded him of the mysterious death of his best friend, Bob Jackson. For that reason, if no other, the lunches were not as enjoyable as they had once been, though they were always informative.

'Have you mentioned your man-made UFO theory to Epstein yet?' Dwight asked of Scaduto when the meal was finished and they were having a final beer.

'Nope.'

'Why not?'

'He's a wonderful researcher, but he believes implicitly in the extraterrestrial hypothesis and I think he'd believe that any work I did in that particular direction would be a waste of the organisation's time and money. So, you know, I don't mention it.'

'Maybe you should.'

'Hey, hold on there, friend. I get *paid* by the APII. Don't wanna lose my income, don't you know?'

'But you still believe in it, right?'

'Fucking A. That's why we're here.'

'I was under the impression, possibly mistaken, that this was just our traditional Georgetown lunch, though I *did* catch your warning glance back in Epstein's office. What was that all about?'

'Get this. One of my buddies in the NICAP recently informed me that the members of the board of governors of that organisation – our lively rival – had managed to run down one of the CIA agents who'd been transferred – how shall I put it? – *out of harm's way*, after the so-called "Woman from Maine" affair. The agent, who'd been transferred to London before being eased out of the service, was naturally feeling embittered and so was willing to talk off the record, which eventually he did, during a meeting in the Drake hotel in New York.'

'A meeting with you?'

'Shit, yes.'

'Okay. Sorry. Continue.'

'Well, according to this agent, one of his assignments in the CIA was to undergo specialised training in the Duke University's parapsychology lab, a

sensory-deprivation establishment at Princetown, and the psychology department at McGill University in Canada. The purpose of all this was to open his mind, a highly responsive one, to mental telepathy, sightless vision, and psychokinesis.'

'You want me to ask, "Why?" I can tell.'

Scaduto grinned. 'The reason – and I think you've already guessed – is that the Russians were already employing agents with such skills for espionage purposes.'

'That's only a rumour. Unsubstantiated.'

'Bullshit. It's an established fact and you know it. You know damned well that the Parapsychology Lab of the University of Leningrad has been neck-deep in this shit for years.'

Dwight grinned and raised his hands in a pleading manner. 'Lord forgive me for my mendacity. Okay, please get on with it.'

'So this guy,' Scaduto continued, 'after a year of training at both Duke and McGill's parapsychology labs, found that he could, like Ted Serios, cause photographs to appear on a film by merely *concentrating on* the camera. A year after his training, in 1959, he was working successfully with US Naval Intelligence and having successful shore-to-ship telepathic communications with an atomic submarine, the US *Nautilus*. And the same year, when the press exposed the *Nautilus* experiments, he was transferred back to Washington to work with – wait for it...'

'The female psychic from Maine.'

'Right!'

'So he managed to make contact?'

'No. At least, not straight away. During his first session, in the presence of the female psychic, he failed to make contact. At the second session, however, in that CIA office in Washington DC, when the woman wasn't present, he went into a trance and made contact with... *someone*.'

'Stop tormenting me, Tony.'

Scaduto's grin was now like that of a Cheshire cat. 'Well, like the woman from Maine, he was scribbling down automatically what it was he was hearing in his trance state. However, he never found out what he wrote, because before he snapped out of his trance, one of the CIA agents present at the session spirited the message out of the office.'

'So they didn't want him to know who he'd been in communication with.'

‘Correct. And when he finally awakened from his trance state, he found everyone at the window, all excitedly scanning the sky over Capitol Hill, where the UFO had been.’ Scaduto paused, grinned, and said, ‘You want to hear the rest?’

‘You’re a natural-born actor, Tony. Just get on with it, please.’

‘Well, you know, this guy is intrigued, right?’

‘Right.’

‘But he’s also annoyed because his notes have been taken from him. So later he has a clandestine meeting with one of his colleagues, who’d been present at the trance session, and asks him if the UFO had been real. His colleague, being drunk and careless with his Irish lip, confesses that it had been, that it was part of a top-secret government project, and that one of the crew on board had been ESP-trained.’

‘So the so-called “Woman from Maine” had picked up his thoughts by accident, like someone tuning into a foreign wavelength.’

‘Exactly.’

‘Well, I’ll be damned.’

‘But that wasn’t all,’ Scaduto continued excitedly. ‘According to my drunken colleague – who couldn’t stop talking once he’d started – the UFOs reported to have landed at Cannon AFB, Deerwood Nike Base and, apparently, Holloman AFB, were for real... but they weren’t extraterrestrial.’

‘Man-made.’

‘Right. The products of highly secret activity between the Canadian and United States governments.’

‘We’re back to the Avrocar, which was bullshit. I need another beer, Tony.’

‘To hell with the beer. Just listen. These aircraft or flying saucers – call them what you will – in no way resemble the aborted projects that were leaked to, then shown to, the media, us poor shitheads included. No, they were highly advanced flying saucers of pretty remarkable capability – and there were a total of about twelve in existence.’

‘Only twelve?’ Dwight asked sceptically, thinking of the extraordinary number of sightings over the years.

‘Yeah,’ Scaduto confirmed. ‘According to my man, his colleague had been seconded to Royal Canadian Air Force Intelligence, where he was tasked with implementing internal security on the flying saucer project. There he discovered that the project had been run jointly by the Canadian government,

the US Air Force and Navy, and a few high-ranking Army officers from the Pentagon. Those bastards had managed to maintain secrecy by locating the underground production plants in the deserted regions of southern Canada, between British Columbia and Alberta; by ensuring that the production of the numerous components of the saucers was distributed between hundreds of different, international companies, none of whom could have guessed what the individual components were for; by undertaking the more specialised research in the top-secret military installations of the White Sands Proving Ground at Alamogordo, New Mexico, and similar establishments all over Canada; and, finally, by deliberately confusing the press and public with a continuous stream of ambiguous leaks and misleading statements.'

'In other words...'

'They're real flying saucers, they're being constructed in Canada, and they're being tested and flown from top-secret American military bases.'

'Do you really think this could be true?' Dwight asked.

'It sounds crazy, I know,' Scaduto replied, 'but I'd like to find out. You want to come with me?'

'I want to go back to Beth,' Dwight said.

'Love prevails,' Scaduto said, grinning again. He led Dwight out of the bar and stood beside him on the crowded pavement of M Street. 'You'll come with me,' he said confidently. 'I *know* you will. Because you have to find out. You simply have to. You've gone through so much by now, you won't be able to ignore the one opportunity you have of learning the truth. That's the hook in your throat, my friend. Adios. I'll call you.'

He walked off along the sidewalk as Dwight stood there, almost dazed, recalling what his friend had said and accepting the truth of it. Dwight just had to find out.

Chapter Forty-Two

In the early hours of February 26, 1968, Wilson was set down in a field outside McLean, Virginia, by one of his flying saucers and driven from there in a limousine ordered up by Jack Fuller to the Hay Adams hotel, conveniently overlooking Lafayette Park and the White House. When he checked into the hotel, he did so under the name of Mr Aldridge. The real Mr Aldridge was a US citizen who had been abducted many years before, surgically terminated, and used as spare parts for the ongoing cyborg programme. Wilson therefore had all of the unfortunate Mr Aldridge's papers, with his own picture replacing the original in Aldridge's passport. The purpose of the visit was to discuss the ongoing activities of the widely publicised Condon Committee. This he did with Jack Fuller over a light lunch in the Tudor dining room of the hotel.

'My so-called Great Northeast Blackout appears to have had the desired effect,' Wilson said. 'The Condon Committee being set up, as it were, by you and your friends at Langley Field.'

'Always pleased to oblige,' Fuller replied sardonically, hiding the fear he always felt when in Wilson's presence. 'I have to admit that the blackout certainly convinced everyone that your technology is still vastly superior to ours.'

'So they're now willing to play the game my way.'

'Yes. And the Condon Committee, backed by us, is our way of showing you we mean it.'

This was not strictly true and both of them knew it. The Condon Committee merely represented another defeat for the US in its cat-and-mouse game with Wilson – they had been warned and had taken heed – but sooner or later they would try to foil him again; then, if they failed, he would punish them... and so it went on.

'I notice that Condon, soon after establishing the committee, started making

it perfectly clear that he had little patience with the UFO hypothesis. Was that your doing also?'

'Yeah. Condon also deliberately showed a partiality to obvious crank claims and cases that serious UFO investigators had already dismissed as hoaxes. Eventually he made it clear that he was intent on proving the whole idea of UFOs as nonsense. All that for you, Wilson.'

'But there's a thorn in our side,' Wilson said. 'This Dr James E. McDonald.'

Fuller sighed. McDonald was a senior atmospheric physicist at the University of Arizona's Department of Atmospheric Sciences who had been interested in the UFO phenomenon for years. He was now one of the country's leading authorities on the subject and strongly outspoken in his criticism of the Air Force and the CIA.

'I'm afraid so. McDonald isn't afraid of ridicule and he's got a hell of a lot of energy. In fact, his individual research into UFOs has already far outstripped that of all other researchers, save perhaps J. Allen Hynek and Dr Epstein.'

'How did McDonald get into it?'

'About two years ago, in March, 1966, he obtained the National Academy of Science's approval for a discreet, one-man study of UFOs. But when he heard of the Air Force plans to contract a UFO study to a university, he declined to use the support of the NAS and instead used personal finance. That way he was able to investigate scores of sightings and interview hundreds of witnesses. Thrilled by his success, he then launched a crusade to alert the scientific community to the seriousness of the problem. He also took on the Air Force, repeatedly attacking it for its lack of scientific investigation and its pronouncements designed to soothe the public. Finally, he attacked us, the CIA, for our involvement in the Robertson Panel report.'

'A real trouble-maker,' Wilson said.

'Yep. And there's worse to come.'

'I am all ears.'

'In August, 1966, the Condon Committee co-ordinator, Robert Low, chosen especially by me and my colleagues, wrote a memorandum to the University of Colorado's administrators, expressing his lack of belief in UFOs. For this reason, Low suggested, the Condon Committee's real objective should be a public relations exercise in which the trick would be – and I quote – "to

describe the project so that, to the public, it would appear to be a totally objective study, but, to the scientific community, would present the image of a group of nonbelievers trying their best to be objective, but having an almost zero expectation of finding a saucer".'

'And how did they recommend that this be accomplished?'

'To place the emphasis on the psychology and sociology of persons and groups who report seeing UFOs, rather than on the non-existent UFOs themselves.'

'In other words, place the persons and groups reporting UFOs in the firing line of humiliation and ridicule.'

'Correct. However, Dr McDonald has recently managed to get his hands on that old report – which shows clearly that the Condon Committee was formed simply to discredit the UFO phenomenon. This has led to a scientific scandal, the firing of a couple of the leading members of the committee, and, even worse, a Congressional hearing to begin this July.'

'Never mind the findings of the Congressional hearing,' Wilson said. 'No matter what conclusion they come to, just make sure that the committee recommends the final, complete closure of Project Blue Book. As for McDonald, I think I should clip his wings in the fullness of time.'

'You do that,' Fuller said.

He was trying to be flippant, but when he stared at the icy-blue, penetrating gaze of the silvery-haired Wilson, he knew that he was faced with pitiless intelligence. Wilson had cast off all normal emotions as being superfluous to his requirements; now he lived with a logic so rigorous it had made him inhuman. Fuller thought of Wilson as a mutant. Though born and bred right here in America, he was a true alien being.

'So what about Dr Epstein and our other friends at the APII? What have they been up to?'

'Epstein has brought in two new men – Robert Stanford and Irving Jacobs, both physicists, who between them have produced a thick, detailed report showing that most of the more advanced flying saucers, and certainly the bigger ones, fly on a north-south course – in other words, towards Antarctica.'

'That's too close for comfort.'

'Right. And the publication of that report has led to a whole spate of articles about holes in the Poles and hidden UFO bases – just like your own, in fact.

Luckily, most of them were of the more fanciful variety and we've used that as the basis for a continuing programme of disinformation. I mean, the more outrageous the theory, the quicker we'll use it. So the APII report, while fairly accurate, is being buried in a whole heap of ridiculous stories.'

'Nevertheless, if they picked up on that, we better watch them closely.'

'They've picked up on something even more dangerous: the possibility that the flying saucers are man-made.'

Even Wilson, who rarely registered emotion, looked a little surprised. 'Epstein?'

'No. Epstein still supports the extraterrestrial hypothesis. It's the other two: Dwight Randall and, especially, that troublesome kid, Tony Scaduto. He's obsessed with the notion. Indeed, he's taken himself up to Canada and is living there temporarily, in Malton, Ontario, to check out the Avro-Canada plant. He has a good nose, that one, and tenacity, so he might have to go.'

'You're keeping him under observation?'

'Of course.'

'Good. Keep me informed of what he and Dwight Randall are up to. Is there anything else?'

'No, that just about wraps it up.'

'Then good day, Mr Fuller.'

Fuller pushed his chair back and walked out of the restaurant, slightly cheered by the thought that Wilson would at least be picking up the tab. This was all he could hope for.

Chapter Forty-Three

Scaduto dropped in on Dwight in November, 1968, two days after Richard Nixon had been elected as the 37th President of the United States. Having spent almost a year working as a barman in Malton, Ontario, which had enabled him to make a living while he sounded out the clients about the jobs they were doing in the local Avro-Canada Aircraft company, he was keen to pass on what he had learnt to Dwight.

'I can't believe I'm back in God's country,' he began when he and Dwight had settled in the living room, in front of an open fire, with a couple of beers. 'I feel like I've been in the fucking wilderness. Nice to be back in the real world at last.'

'Hardly God's country any more,' Dwight said. 'At least, not this year. Think of it... One of our spy planes seized by North Koreans, one of our nuclear bombers crashing in Greenland, the most shameful war in our history going on in Vietnam, Martin Luther King assassinated, black riots in most major cities, Bobby Kennedy assassinated, the police indulging in an orgy of Nazi-style violence at the Chicago convention, and now we've got a President that no-one would buy a used car from. God's country no more, I fear.'

'Stop being so pessimistic,' Scaduto said cheerfully, wiping beer from his lips with the back of his hand. 'Next month, I guarantee it, we'll have three American astronauts orbiting the moon in the Apollo 8 spacecraft. They might even find a few UFOs up there. I can't wait to find out.'

'So did you see any UFOs in Ontario?'

'Not quite, but I got close. See, I got me a job as a barman in Malton, near the Avro-Canada plant, and plying the guys from the factory with drinks I picked up enough idle talk to convince me that Avro had continued to work on saucer-shaped jet aircraft long after the public unveiling of that useless piece of shit, the Avrocar. At the same time, in my spare time, I drove around a lot of southern Canada, between British Columbia and Alberta, and found a

lot of top-security research plants and aircraft factories. And those places, man, they're hidden in the forested hills and couldn't be seen from the air even if you had a giant telescope. Real dense forest up there in Alberta.'

'Well, we *did* know that before, Tony.'

'Nice to be reminded, though.'

'True enough. So what else did you find out?'

'When I was moving around the area, socialising wherever I could, I became bosom pals with a test pilot, Frank Lomax, who'd once worked for a Canadian-US company involved in the design and construction of highly advanced saucer-shaped aircraft; some piloted and as large as regular aircraft, others only two or three feet in diameter, remote-controlled, and being mass-produced. Both prototypes reportedly based on captured World War Two German designs.'

'What makes you think he was telling the truth?'

'The production plant for the saucers was located in a densely forested, mountainous region that protected it from the eyes of the commercial airline pilots. But Frank, who now runs a private flight-training school just outside Alberta, knows the tricky flight path that takes you over the test grounds for the saucers, and he agreed to fly me over them, in the hope of seeing a parked saucer. Unfortunately, he agreed to do this just after I'd booked my return flight to Washington DC, but I'm going back eventually to take him up on his offer. I want you to come with me.'

Though instantly excited by the thought, Dwight found himself saying automatically, 'I'm frightened of drawing attention to Beth or myself. Particularly as Beth's been plagued again by nightmares about the men in black. I wouldn't want anyone to know I was doing that – spying on those aircraft companies in Canada.'

'I guarantee that Frank won't mention your name to anyone and that all references to the flight booking will be in my name. I don't have a wife and kids, so I'll take my chances.'

'I don't think I can refuse this offer, Tony, but I'll have to ask Beth. She's in a pretty bad way at the moment and has begged me to stay out of the UFO controversy.'

'But you'll ask her?'

'Yeah.'

'When?'

‘I can tell you’re keen. I might as well get it over and done with, so I’ll ask her this evening over dinner. Did you want to stay, by the way?’

‘Nope. Not if you’re gonna have your little talk with Beth. Don’t think I wanna see or hear that.’

‘You’re pretty damned cynical about marriage, aren’t you?’

‘That’s ‘cause I’m not married.’ Scaduto handed Dwight an address card. ‘Here’s the hotel I’m staying at in Dayton. Give me a call when you know either way.’

‘I’ll do that,’ Dwight promised.

Scaduto stood up, finished off his beer, then went into the kitchen-diner to call out a slightly nervous goodbye to Beth. Though she had nothing personal against him – and, indeed, had once found him amusing – she now disliked seeing him here, because she knew he was bringing news about UFOs and, almost certainly, trying to persuade Dwight to return to UFO work, which she no longer wanted him to do.

In the event, Dwight didn’t have to wait until dinnertime to broach the subject, as Beth, the instant Scaduto had departed, came out of the kitchen, drying her hands on a towel and looking grim. She was still an attractive woman, but she looked worn down by nervous tension. ‘So what did he want?’

Not knowing how to state it gently, Dwight went for the blunt approach, though he tried to make it sound more casual than it was. ‘He just wants me to make a trip with him to Alberta, Canada, then fly over some forested area where we think there may be man-made flying saucer construction plants.’

The casual sound didn’t work. Beth’s face turned pale with barely suppressed fury. ‘You promised, Dwight. You said...’

Dwight cut her short by holding up his hand. ‘I won’t go if I don’t have your permission, but Tony *did* insist that my name won’t be mentioned with regard to the flight and the aircraft will be rented in his name. Besides which, I can’t see how we would attract much attention by simply flying a chartered plane over the mountains. Lots of tourists do it.’

‘You’re looking for UFO bases!’ Beth snapped vehemently.

‘From an airplane, Beth. Not on the ground.’

‘I don’t give a damn. If they see the plane, they’re liable to come up and blow you out of the sky. Who knows? And I don’t want to be left alone here. You *know* that. *I’m scared!*’

‘You can surely spend a mere couple of days with Nichola. She...’

‘Never mind Nichola! I don’t want you to go. I’ll be worried for you and for myself and even for Nichola. Honestly, Dwight,’ she continued, then made an accusation that she had often made during the early years of their marriage. ‘I sometimes think you’re more concerned with UFOs than you are with me. Well, damn it, go if you want to, but don’t expect me to sanction it.’

With that she turned away and stomped back into the kitchen. Dwight followed her in and placed his arms around her. ‘It’s okay,’ he said, hoping to hide his acute disappointment. ‘I won’t go. I guess I just didn’t think.’

When she turned into his arms, smiling, he was reminded of how lovely she had been when they first married and how, despite the still barely perceptible lines of middle age, she had retained that beauty. Touched, he kissed her lightly on the lips and patted her rump.

‘Still pleasantly firm,’ he said.

She had started to cry and now wiped tears from her eyes. ‘You’d have found that out sooner if you’d touched it more often,’ she said. ‘A woman gets to miss certain things.’

‘Well, I guess I’m not as young as I used to be.’

‘Young enough. If you can’t manage everything, a little touch here and there can work wonders.'

‘I’ll bear that in mind.’

‘At least you still know how to kiss.’

‘It’s like learning to swim: once learnt, it’s never forgotten.’

‘Then plant another one on me, then get out of here and let me get on with the dinner. Nichola’s coming to join us.’

‘Terrific,’ Dwight said.

After kissing her again, then patting her rump once more, he returned to the living room. He realised instantly, however, that he was extremely depressed at losing the possibility of actually seeing a man-made flying saucer on the ground. More than that: he felt crushed. Though he hadn’t been drinking seriously since the days when he was separated from Beth and on an alcoholic binge, he now poured himself a tall, consoling bourbon, hoping to drink it before Beth came back into the living room. Unfortunately, at that moment, Nichola, now twenty-one years old, married, and four months pregnant, opened the front door and walked in, coming for dinner.

She saw the glass of bourbon in Dwight’s hand before he could set it down.

Still blonde and as pretty as a picture, she frowned disapprovingly.

'What's that, Dad?'

'Only an aperitif.'

'You only have the odd beer these days, Dad, and even then only with meals or when with friends.' She took her coat off and threw it carelessly over the back of the sofa. 'So what's the occasion?'

'No occasion. I just felt like it. Your husband has one of these every evening before dinner, so why do I need a special occasion?'

Nichola's husband, Larry Fisher, was eight years her senior and working as a civilian engineer with the military aviation development branch of Wright-Patterson Air Force Base. A decent, good-humoured man, he had a fondness for cigars and his glass of bourbon every evening before dinner. Apart from that, he had no drinking problem, so Nichola didn't mind. She clearly did, however, feel troubled to see her father drinking bourbon again – and, worse, before dinner. 'Larry's never had a drinking problem in his life,' Dwight's stern daughter said, 'but you did.'

'Only once, sweetheart.'

'Once was enough to make you a wreck and force Mom to leave you for a few years. Here, give me that.' She took the bourbon from Dwight, then sat on the sofa, where she crossed her shapely legs, deliberately had a sip of the bourbon, and said, 'So what's happened to make you reach for a drink?'

'I just wanted to give you an excuse for having one,' Dwight replied, unable to resist the gentle sarcasm.

Nichola smiled. 'I have one every evening with Larry. It slips down real easy.'

'My boozing daughter.'

'So why did I have to stop you from boozing like your loving daughter?'

'He wants to go chasing after UFOs,' Beth told her, entering the room from the kitchen at that moment, 'and I won't let him.'

'How do you mean, chasing UFOs? Dad's been doing that for years.'

When Dwight told her, preferring to do it himself, Nichola said, 'You mean there's a real chance you could solve this mystery once and for all? I mean, resolve this business that's been tormenting you for years?'

'Yes,' Dwight said. 'If we can find those saucers on the ground, the game's up.'

'And you can stop feeling that you're being driven crazy by things you

don’t understand?’

‘Yeah, Nichola, right.’

Nichola turned to her mother. ‘Then I think you should let him do it, Mom.’

‘*What*?’ Beth was shocked.

‘I think you should let him do it,’ Nichola insisted. ‘If a simple flight over the mountains of Alberta is going to end years of confusion and fear, then obviously you should let Dad take it and pray that he returns with what he needs to let him feel at peace with himself. Otherwise, if you tell him he can’t go...’ She held up the glass of bourbon and tapped it deliberately with her fingertips... ‘He’ll be back on this. So let the man go.’

‘You don’t understand, Nichola. It could be dangerous. It could draw attention to him, and then all that dreadful... *business* will start again. I don’t think I could bear that.’

‘You’ll be able to bear it if you know that the pain could end pretty soon... End for all time.’

‘It’s dangerous.’

‘But worth the risk. He goes to Canada with Scaduto, he charters an airplane, and a couple of days later, if things turn out okay – and that’s the chance we’ve got to take – he’s back here and we’re all home and dry, with the whole damn business exposed for good. No more mysteries. No hauntings. No visits from men in black. For God’s sake, Mom, he’s been trying to solve this mystery since 1947, so you can’t possibly make him stop now. He’d certainly go back on the bottle and might even go crazy. So let him take this chance, Mom. Let him leap this final hurdle. Besides, the odds on something happening to him – like being blown out of the sky by a flying saucer – are pretty damned slim.’

‘At the very least, he could end up in prison,’ Beth said, now clutching at straws.

‘You’re imprisoning him with your fear,’ Nichola told her, ‘and that isn’t right.’

Taken aback by her daughter’s maturity and bluntness, but also proud of her, Beth said, 'All right, okay, you win. I just can’t bear the thought of being...’

‘Alone here.’ Nichola finished the sentence for her. ‘But you don’t have to be. You can come and stay with Larry and me in Springfield until Dad returns. You can even have a bourbon every evening, which is more than

he'll get. So are we agreed, folks?'

'Yes,' Beth said.

'Thanks,' Dwight said.

Deeply moved and certainly proud, like Beth, of his daughter, he kissed both of his women on the cheek, then he picked up the phone and spoke to Scaduto in his hotel in Dayton.

'When do we leave?' he asked.

Chapter Forty-Four

On the commercial airline flight to Calgary, Alberta, Scaduto drank a hell of a lot and became pretty drunk. When Dwight commented on this, Scaduto said, 'You know this is gonna sound crazy – particularly with what you and Beth have been through – but now I've begun to feel – definitely, absolutely – that I'm being watched, though I can't put my finger on exactly how. No men in black or black limousines, yet I'm being observed some way, I'm sure. I don't know if it's real or just goddamned paranoia, but that's what I feel. And so I find myself drinking, trying to deaden it, trying to say, "Go away!".'

Glancing through the window of the airplane, Dwight saw a sea of deeply shadowed white clouds and, below, great swathes of forested hills. It looked desolate down there.

'I've got to confess,' he said, 'that while out of deference to Beth's fear that I'd bring attention to myself I was reducing my UFO activities, I was intrigued by the revelation that the US-Canadian saucers had been based on World War Two designs. Ever since you told me that I've been spending most of my time holed up in libraries – even wrote to England's Imperial War Museum and corresponded with German and American UFOlogists about the subject. So naturally I was pretty astonished to learn that it was true.'

'You proved it?'

'Yeah.'

Scaduto sipped more bourbon, looking excited. 'So what did you find?'

Though he now knew most of it off by heart, Dwight automatically glanced at his notes to ensure that he made no mistakes.

'According to official reports, Allied aircraft during World War Two were harassed by UFOs – mostly in the shape of balls of fire – from as far back as 1944. Shortly after the war, in the summer of 1946, the more familiar types of UFOs, most cigar-shaped, swarmed across Scandinavia, seemingly coming

from the general direction of the Soviet Union. The conclusion at the Pentagon was that German scientists, seized by the Russians at Peenemunde, where the V-2 rocket had been developed, were constructing advanced weapons for the Soviets and that the unidentified, so-called *missiles* were being launched from the rocket test site of Peenemunde, which was then in the Russian-occupied zone of Germany. This suspicion became stronger when the British, who'd also seized and taken back to Britain a wealth of Germany's top-secret scientific and weapons-research material, announced that the Germans had been working since 1941 on extraordinary aeronautical projects and on processes to release atomic energy. Included in the former was a – this is a straight quote from the documents – "remotely controlled, pilotless aircraft and a device that could be controlled at a considerable distance by another aircraft" – unquote.'

'Which would account for the balls of fire,' Scaduto said.

'Right. Anyway, faced with this, and thinking of the Soviet so-called *missiles*, possibly more balls of fire, that had been seen over Scandinavia, there was a sudden British-Canadian-US alliance to beat the Soviets in the race to follow through the German designs and complete their extraordinary aeronautical projects.'

'Which gets us to the man-made flying saucers,' Scaduto interjected with growing excitement.

'Yes. It's true that what they were attempting to build in the underground plants in Canada right after the war – with British and US back-up – was a machine with the remarkable capabilities of the ones suggested in the incomplete German material. They wouldn't achieve that goal for another twenty years, but the first, fairly crude versions of their saucers were successfully tested over the Canadian border on June 21, 1947: a total of five disc-shaped aircraft, two of them piloted and approximately fifty feet in diameter, the remaining three remote-controlled by the pilots flying nearby, these three a mere three to six feet in diameter. Those particular flying saucers could reach an altitude of approximately seven thousand feet, could hover uncertainly in the air, and had a horizontal flight speed of about six hundred miles an hour.'

'That test flight,' Scaduto said, 'could account for the Harold Dahl sighting of the same day.'

'Right,' Dwight said. 'But it was what happened *after* that test flight that

really got the ball rolling. On June 24, three days after the first successful test flights of the five Canadian-US saucers, a total of nine highly sophisticated, *unknown* saucers flew down over the Canadian underground plants, hovered there for about twenty minutes, shot off toward the Cascades, where reportedly they circled the test area; returned, circled the plant for another twenty minutes, then shot off at incredible speed. From that day on – the day, incidentally, of the famous Kenneth Arnold sighting – those flying saucers, and others, returned again and again... and eventually spread out across the whole world.'

'Holy shit!' Scaduto whispered melodramatically, as if frightened of being overheard, then he finished his drink as the airplane came in to land at Calgary. 'So where the hell do the *others* come from?'

'That's the million-dollar question,' Dwight said, 'and it keeps me awake at night.'

A few minutes later, the airplane landed. Once they had disembarked and passed through Customs and baggage inspection, Scaduto's friend, the pilot Hank Lomax, met them in the arrival's lounge. Lomax was a short, feisty character with fiery red hair and a good-humoured face mottled by a combination of sunshine and booze. He was wearing a logger's red-and-black checkered shirt, oil-smeared blue denims, and buckled black-leather boots. After being introduced to Dwight, he led both of them from the airport terminal to his old Ford car parked outside.

'We're going straight to my flight-training school on the outskirts of town,' he explained when they were being driven by him out of the airport. 'From there we'll fly out in my Piper *Tri-Pacer* to the region you want. You being an old buddy, Tony, you don't even have to charter it. You just pay for the gas used and we're quits. I'm doing this for my own amusement. Which means, of course, that you don't have to charter the airplane and there'll be no record of either of you having passed through my flight-school. Now do you love me or not?'

'I love you,' Scaduto said. 'Never mind that you're an ugly bastard - I just love the hell out of you.'

'Don't make me blush,' Lomax said.

As they were driven up ever deeper into the spectacular, forest-covered hills, Scaduto glanced around him and said, 'Just look at those goddamned hills and peaks. Easy to hide *lots* of things up here! Hell, man, you could hide

a whole fucking town.'

'Just wait till we get in my Piper,' Lomax told him. 'Then you'll really see something. We'll be heading for British Columbia and that's one wild place.'

During the drive he told them about some of the people he had worked with at the Avro-Canada plant in Malton, Ontario. 'A surprising number were Germans,' he said. 'I remember that much. And one of them in particular, Otto Miethe, claimed to have worked on a programme called "Projekt Saucer" in Nazi Germany. Jesus, man, I could hardly believe it: there we were, working for the sons of bitches we'd fought in France and Germany. Anyway, that's exactly what we were working on: saucer-shaped jet aircraft with circular, rotating wings and the pilot's cabin fixed in the middle, based on those old Nazi designs. They weren't as advanced as some of the flying saucers you read about, but they were definitely based on the German designs and more advanced than the original German prototypes. The smallest ones, about three feet wide, were really remote-controlled probing devices that could also be used to block radar and cause other malfunctions in any aircraft they flew near. You could control 'em from the ground or from another aircraft in flight; and they certainly resembled balls of fire when in the air. The larger ones came in different sizes and were all piloted. When I left, the largest was about seventy-five feet in diameter, but I know they had plans for an even larger one.'

'Who ran this company?'

'It was part of the A. V. Roe company, later called Avro-Canada, but it was backed by the British, Canadian and US governments, and guarded like a military camp. You had to sign a top-secret clause to work there, with imprisonment as just one of the many punishments listed if you broke the secrecy, even after leaving the company. I'm taking one hell of a chance with you guys, I can tell you, but what the hell!'

'And other companies like it were, or are, scattered all over British Columbia and Alberta.'

'Right. See, what they'd do to really keep their projects secret and help them with disinformation, was, they'd use a company like A. V. Roe – the main plant in Malton, Ontario – as a front. When something leaked out about what they were doing, or when there was a public outcry, they'd call a press conference and show the reporters and politicians a piece of shit like the Avrocar. Meanwhile, they'd have another plant, run by A. V. Roe or some

other big company, but listed as a legitimate experimental aircraft company. That one would do the real flying saucer construction work in a location hidden well away from view – like the one I'm going to show you today. Every couple of years, they'd formally close the factory down, listing it as bankrupt, when in actual fact they were simply moving the programme to a new, hidden location. That way, though they couldn't hide the plants *completely* from prying eyes, they were all over the place, opening and closing down again, and that made them almost impossible to trace. For instance, this plant I'm taking you to, you can bet your balls it'll be gone if you come back in a year's time. That's how they operate.'

'Neat,' Dwight said, forced to admire the diabolical cleverness of the faceless men who had made his life a torment.

A few minutes later they reached Lomax's flight-training school located just north of Calgary. There, they squeezed into his four-seater Piper *Tri-Pacer* and then took off immediately, heading across Alberta, flying above the spectacular plateau that fell down from the Rocky Mountains to eventually form the southern part of the boundary with British Columbia. Though not personally flying the airplane, Dwight almost had a lump in his throat, being reminded of his early days, when he had been a bombardier and radar operator, flying to India, China, and the Pacific with the original B-29 wing; then as a navigator with an Air Force Reserve Troop Carrier Wing. Those days were long gone now.

'Hey, what did you think of the results of last July's Congressional hearings on the Condon Committee?' Lomax asked Dwight, having to shout against the noise of the wind and the airplane's engine. 'I read that they'd resulted in a resolve to form a proper, official UFO enquiry.'

Lomax was referring to the end result of the notorious Low Memorandum, which brought heavy criticism down on the head of Edward C. Condon and his committee, most of it insisting that the committee's work had been inept or, more likely, a snow job for the Air Force or the CIA, designed specifically to kill off the UFO controversy. So loud was the furore that Congressman J. Edward Roush delivered a speech on the House floor, saying that the Low Memorandum and a subsequent *Look* article by journalist John Fuller had 'raised grave doubts as to the scientific profundity and objectivity of the project.' Roush therefore called for a new Congressional investigation under the auspices of the House Science and Astronautics Committee. Scheduled

for July 29, it was set up more ambitiously as a symposium and included an impressive array of participants, including J. Allen Hynek, astronomer Carl Sagan, the engineer James A. Harder, an astronautics engineer, Robert M. Barker, and even the widely respected, trouble-shooting atmospheric physicist, Dr James E. McDonald. Concerning the reality or non-reality of UFOs, some of those men were sceptics, but the deliberations of the hearing-symposium resulted in a general, implied criticism of the Condon Committee and a strong recommendation for the continued study of UFOs. Ironically, the hearings came to an end during a peak period of sightings that resurrected nation-wide public and press interest in the subject.

'Well, the hearing-symposium might have made that recommendation,' Dwight said, also shouting against the noise, 'but personally I'm sceptical that it'll happen. The Condon Report has just been delivered to the National Academy of Sciences for review and it's my belief that no matter what its conclusions are, the recommendations of the Congressional hearing-symposium will be overridden and we'll be back where we started – with no official support for UFO investigations.'

'You're just a cynic,' Scaduto said.

'You're like that about marriage,' Dwight replied, 'so I can feel free to swing that way about official UFO studies.'

'So it goes!' Scaduto said.

Glancing down, Dwight saw just how dense and seemingly impenetrable the forested hills and mountain ranges were. Noticing the direction of his gaze, Lomax said, 'You're wondering how they could even transport an aircraft plant into these regions, right?'

'Right.'

'Well, it may look impenetrable from here, but inventive men can do anything, and down there, spread right across the region from Alberta to British Columbia, there are not only hidden aircraft factories, but also coal mines, the odd oil field, plants for the utilisation of natural gas, and even cleared areas for the cultivation of wheat, oats and barley. So though they're all hidden from each other, as well as from us, that place is a hive of activity. And we've just started to fly over the region you've come here to find.'

Glancing down again, Dwight saw that they were now flying over snow-covered mountain peaks edged sharply against the azure sky, casting their shadows along the slopes of the dense, tree-covered plateau. Lomax flew

them east and west, north and south, in a criss-crossing pattern, sometimes at high altitude, thus giving them excellent, panoramic visual coverage; other times at an altitude so low, Dwight thought they were going to crash, though they always made it up again, missing the canopy of the trees by what seemed like a hair's breadth, flying through the starkly-shadowed gorges where the wind howled dementedly.

They flew for a couple of hours, until early afternoon, yet saw nothing except the forests and mountain peaks. Eventually, when the three of them were in agreement that they had done enough for one day, they decided to turn back.

The Piper was already at high altitude, heading back across Alberta, when Dwight saw something glinting in the falling sun. At first he thought it was nothing special – sunlight flashing off the ice – but then, as the airplane advanced and he saw more of that glinting object, he realised that it was solid and… metallic.

'Down there!' he bawled.

Glancing down, Scaduto and Lomax both agreed that the object was indeed solid and metallic. Lomax immediately took the airplane down to a low altitude that enabled him to fly along a steep-sided gorge that wound dangerously through the mountain range until it came to an open area where the forest had been cleared to make way for a compact collection of stone-block workshops, pine-board administration huts and living accommodations, and what were certainly aircraft hangars.

It was an aeronautical construction plant surrounded by high barbed-wire fences and soaring cliffs... and there, on the ground, some barely perceptible in the shadowy interior of the aircraft hangars, a few exposed on landing pads on the frost-covered ground, were half-a-dozen solid, metallic, flying saucers.

They were all about 120 feet in diameter and had their pilot cabins located at the centre of gravity. None had any markings of any kind.

Dwight and Scaduto whooped and hollered with exultation as Lomax flew the Piper directly over the flying saucers and then ascended again until the aeronautical establishment had disappeared from view.

While Scaduto was frantically marking the location on his map, Lomax turned the airplane around to make another run over the flying-saucer construction plant.

'I don't think you should,' Dwight warned him. 'They might stop us the

next time.'

'We've got to get some photos,' Scaduto reminded him while removing a 35mm camera with a telephoto lens from his satchel. 'We can't miss this one, Dwight.'

'Damned right!' Dwight said, now just as excited as his friend. 'It's too late to stop now.'

'You're sure you want me to go back?' Lomax asked.

'Yep,' Scaduto said, withdrawing the camera from its case and screwing on its high-power, telephoto lens. 'And fly as low as you possibly can.'

'You want it, you've got it.'

Lomax turned the airplane in a wide arc until it was facing the gorge again, then he descended until he was flying below the soaring cliffs, which whipped past in a blur as he flew on, following the gorge's dangerously winding course until the flying-saucer construction plant came into view again. This time, as the airplane streaked above the saucers parked outside the hangars, he banked sharply to enable Scaduto to aim the camera down and snap as many pictures as the brief time allowed. Scaduto managed to click the lens-trigger five or six times before, within seconds, the Piper was nosing back up, making its swift ascent out of the gorge.

Looking backwards and downwards for his final glimpse of the construction plant, Dwight saw one of the parked saucers swaying from side to side, then lifting a few feet off the ground. Even as the snow-covered mountain peaks falling away from the ascending airplane cut off the view, he saw the saucer shooting up vertically at tremendous speed. Before he could say a word to the others, the saucer had vanished above the clouds.

'I just saw one take off!' he bawled, to make himself heard above the wind's demented howling and the roaring of the airplane's engine. 'It went straight up there!'

Suddenly, with a speed that defied credibility, the clouds directly above were blown apart and a dark pinprick descended in the blinking of an eye to become an immense, circular, swirling, light-flecked blackness that roared directly above them.

'Oh, shit!' Lomax exclaimed, instinctively covering his head with one crooked arm, assuming that the... *thing* up there was going to crash down upon the Piper.

'It's going to hit us!' Scaduto bawled, as if reading Lomax's mind.

But it didn’t. Instead, with magical precision, it stopped abruptly, mere inches above the Piper’s cockpit, and hovered there, now so enormous that it looked like an inverted whirlpool or cosmic funnel, swirling rapidly and giving off a bass humming sound.

Even though the airplane was still flying horizontally, that great mass remained directly above it.

A swirling, circular, light-flecked blackness with a glowing edge.

As the airplane continued on its horizontal course, beneath that immense, swirling, humming dark mass, Scaduto, regaining his scattered senses, raised his camera to take a photo of the UFO’s underside. Instantly, a pyramid of brilliant light shot out of the centre of the swirling blackness, temporarily blinding the three men in the cockpit. Though his eyes were closed, Scaduto was still holding his camera upwards, clicking off as many shots as he could... until the airplane started shuddering and then rocking wildly.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Lomax bawled. ‘We’re going out of control!’

Then the Piper’s engine cut out.

Miraculously, the airplane did not plummet downwards; instead, with no sound whatsoever from its engine, with only the UFO’s bass humming sound to be heard, it continued to fly on an even course, though shuddering and rocking wildly, as if held up by the pyramid of light. It flew on like this for a few seconds, but then, as abruptly as the pyramid of light had exploded over the airplane, it blinked out and, simultaneously, with a speed that defied all sense, that swirling hole of light-flecked blackness shrank to a mere dot and then disappeared into the clouds above.

Instantly, the airplane, with its engine still silent, plunged toward Earth.

‘We’re going down!’ Lomax bawled a second time.

Yet at that very moment, the engine suddenly roared back into life, as powerful as it had been before, thus lifting the airplane too quickly and throwing it into a violent, dangerous spin. As Lomax fought to regain control, the spinning airplane plunged toward the forested hills of Alberta; but eventually Lomax managed to pull it back up, control the spin, and then level it out completely, to fly on as normal.

‘That light, whatever it was, cut the engine out,’ Lomax said. ‘The light, or something above it, held us up in the air while the engine was out.’

‘Incredible precision,’ Dwight said, recalling what he had witnessed and amazed by it. ‘That saucer came down on us so fast, you could hardly see it

descending; then it stopped mere inches above the cockpit and moved sideways as we were moving forward, remaining in exactly the same position above us. When it left, I hardly saw it going, it ascended so fast. I've never seen anything like it. It was damned miraculous.'

'But why did the crew of the saucer let us go,' Scaduto asked, 'instead of wiping us out in a crash, as they could easily have done and, indeed, almost did?'

'Because they're assuming that if we report the sighting,' Dwight replied, 'we won't be believed and might even become laughing stocks. If they'd made us crash, on the other hand, that crash would have been investigated and that, in turn, could have led the authorities to that secret flying-saucer construction plant. That's what they were hoping to avoid when they let us go.'

'Hoping?' Lomax asked.

'Yes,' Scaduto said. 'Presumably it never entered their heads that at last we have proof of their existence.' He held the camera up and grinned. 'We photographed the saucers.'

'Hallelujah!' Dwight said.

They were flown back to Calgary with all possible speed, stunned and thrilled by the experience they'd just had, exhilarated at finally having the evidence they had been seeking for years.

When they had returned to Dayton, Ohio, a few days later, they learned, as Dwight had guessed, that the Condon Report, which had just been released, had savaged the UFOlogists, mocked those who had criticised the committee's project before the report was in, vilified the other UFO research programmes, and recommended the closing down of Project Blue Book.

They also learned, when Scaduto processed the photos he had taken of the swirling, light-flecked, black base of the 120-foot flying saucer, that the film had been lightly scorched and the negatives destroyed while still in the camera.

'It was the light,' Dwight said bitterly.

Chapter Forty-Five

In March, 1969, Fuller attended a meeting at Air Force Headquarters in Washington DC with representatives of the Air Defence Command, the Air Force Systems Command, the Office of Aerospace Research, the Office of Scientific Research, and the Office of Information. Not required to be present for the first half of the meeting, which was closed even to him, he arrived just as most of the gold-braids were into their second or third whisky, bourbon or brandy and puffing clouds of smoke from fat Havana cigars, all paid for by the unwitting taxpayer. Looking at the faces of those seated around the long table, some reasonably decent, most the sagging, untrustworthy masks of those who have told a lot of lies and learned to live with them, Fuller was not overly impressed and decided that his own brand of patriotic vice was at least emotionally less stultifying.

'Welcome, Mr Fuller,' an Air Force Systems Command general said when Fuller finally entered the room. 'The meeting's over, so what was it you wanted to ask?'

'I have to report to Wilson, sir, about your recommendations regarding the Condon Report.'

'Christ, I wish we could get ahead of that bastard and blow him away,' the representative of the Air Defence Command said vehemently.

'We might eventually get to do that, sir,' Fuller said, 'but we still have a long way to go.'

'Unfortunately, that's true.'

'So what are your recommendations, sir? I have to pass them on to Wilson.'

'We've chosen to ignore the widespread criticism of the Condon Report and instead implement its recommendations.'

'I welcome that decision, sir. I'm sure Wilson will be pleased. But I have to remind you that since those recommendations have already been widely criticised, we have to be particularly careful about how we handle this

matter.'

'The report was viewed thus by the civilian UFO groups and UFOlogists, neither of whom concern us here.'

'The report was also widely attacked by the media.'

'The media is filled with communists, Fuller, so we can safely ignore it. Frankly, we're more concerned with not offending Wilson than we are with inciting squeals of rage from reds under the beds.'

'What about Project Blue Book?'

'It's been officially closed down at this meeting. Project Blue Book is dead and buried.'

'I have to say, sir,' said the representative of the Office of Scientific Research, 'that I strongly disagree with closing Project Blue Book down completely. I agree that interest in UFOlogy must be dampened, but Project Blue Book now has historical roots and should be preserved in some form, no matter how modest, to give the illusion that we did, at least originally, sincerely believe in it.'

'I agree,' Fuller said, 'and even presented the notion to Wilson. He replied by saying that all roots, even historical ones, die quickly and crumble to dust when torn from the ground – so he insisted that we kill Project Blue Book entirely.'

'Do we have to do *everything* that bastard says?' asked the representative from the Office of Information.

'For the time being, yes,' Fuller said. 'I should perhaps remind you that Wilson has kept his promise by ensuring that the US is in the lead in the space race and that an American, Neil Armstrong, will certainly be walking on the Moon this coming July – the first man in history to do so.'

'I second that motion,' said the gold-braided representative of the Office of Aerospace Research. 'Even though we pay dearly, we *have* been given some invaluable aid from Wilson, so we must keep him happy until we're perfectly sure we can move successfully against him.'

'Exactly,' Fuller said. 'And it's also my belief that the Project Blue Book records should be made as inaccessible as possible, to make life difficult for future researchers. Any suggestions?'

'Yes,' said the representative of the Office of Information. 'I recommend Maxwell AFB in Montgomery, Alabama. It's not a place too many people want to visit unless they really have to. Also, those southern officers are

notoriously prickly to deal with and even hardened researchers give up more often than not when trying to get something out of them.'

'That's fine by me,' Fuller said. 'Anything else to pass on to Wilson?'

'No,' the chorus came back from that cloud of cigar smoke.

'Fine,' Fuller said. 'Thank you, gentlemen.'

Leaving the meeting, he drove to a dark field in a pastoral, desolate area of Virginia. He sat patiently in his car until a flying saucer, infinitely more advanced than the US-Canadian saucers he was protecting, landed nearby in the same field. It descended silently, with no lights flashing, and was only revealed by the moonlight shining off its silvery, cathedral-like dome. When the front ramp fell down, the interior light beaming out was unusually weak and would have shown little to drivers passing by on the distant road.

Wilson emerged from that light, flanked as usual by armed cyborgs. He wore his customary faint smile of disdain when he walked up to Fuller.

His greeting was: 'So what did they say?'

Fuller told him what had taken place at the meeting in Air Force Headquarters. Wilson was pleased, but wanted to know what President Nixon thought about the UFO situation in general and him in particular.

'Nixon's the supreme pragmatist,' Fuller said. 'and accepts the status quo. He doesn't like it, but he accepts the necessity of dealing with you. No need for anxieties there, Wilson.'

'There's no-one more pragmatic than me,' Wilson replied, 'and I *never* suffer anxieties.'

Ignoring the remark, Fuller removed a piece of notepaper from his billfold. He checked the details written on it, then returned it to the billfold and put the billfold back into his pocket.

'I thought I should tell you,' he said to Wilson, 'that Tony Scaduto, the UFO researcher I mentioned to you before...'

'He works for the NICAP,' Wilson interjected impatiently, 'but also does a lot on the side for Dr Epstein's APII.'

'Yes,' Fuller said, 'that's the one.'

'What about him?'

'He recently flew to Calgary, Canada, with that former ATIC officer and present APII investigator, Dwight Randall. As I'd already had them placed under CIA observation, I can confirm that they were met at Calgary airport by a private flight-trainer, Hank Lomax, and taken by him to his flight-

training school, located north of Calgary. From there, the three of them flew in Lomax's personal Piper *Tri-Pacer* to Alberta and then, more dangerously, over a US-Canadian flying saucer production plant in British Columbia. There, after clearly viewing the saucers resting outside the hangars – the advanced, 120-foot saucers recently delivered by you – the airplane was pursued and harassed until it left the area.'

'Do you think they took photos before they left the area?'

'We assume so. But a laser-beam weapon activated from our pursuing saucer would have put paid to their film.'

'Very good.'

'Do you think we should do something about those men?' Fuller asked.

'Just scare them for now,' Wilson replied. 'I don't want to be involved. But if your fright tactics don't make them shut their mouths, let me know and I'll deal with them as I've recently dealt with that increasingly irksome troublemaker, Dr James E. McDonald.'

'McDonald's still around,' Fuller said.

'He's an illusion,' Wilson said.

Instead of explaining what he meant by that cryptic remark, he changed the subject by pointing out that since American astronauts had recently orbited the moon in the Apollo 8 spacecraft and would, indeed, soon be actually taking their first steps upon it, he wanted no reports to leak out regarding the debris of his own previous landings there. He insisted, furthermore, that the UFO reports being submitted with increasing frequency by astronauts were to be treated as the sightings of previously unseen natural cosmic phenomena.

When Fuller agreed, Wilson returned to his flying saucer, leaving the otherwise cynical CIA agent to stare in wonder at its magical ascent until it was lost in the stars.

Time moved on, Fuller realised.

Chapter Forty-Six

A deeply shocked Dwight felt that he was reliving his life. Back in 1952, with his late friend, Bob Jackson, he had passed a newspaper stand in Washington National Airport Terminal Building, seen from the headlines that UFOs had invaded the capital, and felt outrage that he had not been informed. Now, with his old friend long gone, he saw from the headlines, dated December 17, 1969, in the very same airport terminal, that the Secretary of the Air Force, Robert G. Seamans Jr., had just officially announced the termination of Project Blue Book and the Air Force's twenty-two-year study of UFOs.

With his shock rapidly turning into disbelief, reluctant acceptance, anger and despair, Dwight caught a cab and continued on his journey to what could be a crucial meeting with Tony Scaduto. He was dropped off outside a nondescript bar in M Street, not far from where Bob Jackson had died of a 'heart attack' that Dwight then, and now, believed had been murder.

The formerly flamboyant Scaduto was like a different man. Dressed like a Haight-Ashbury hippie, he was smoking a joint of marijuana, drinking too much, and listening, stoned, to a jukebox playing Zager and Evans, Blood, Sweat and Tears, the Rolling Stones, and Jethro Tull, while psychedelic lights flashed on and off the walls. He was also practically gibbering with fear.

'I tell you, man, wow, right,' he babbled, inhaling, exhaling, glancing left and right, avoiding Dwight's accusing gaze and determinedly *not* raising the subject of UFOs or the termination of Project Blue Book. 'What a year, right? I mean, I really dig it that a US astronaut's just become the first motherfucker to land on the moon and that just last month two more astronauts did the same. Superheroes, those guys.'

'There are no superheroes,' Dwight said, already beginning to despair of this conversation; wondering what had happened in the past year to change his young friend so drastically.

‘Yeah, well, right,’ Scaduto continued, rambling while sucking on Mary Jane, putting his head back, closing his eyes, then exhaling slowly, ecstatically. ‘Yeah, but we really beat those goddamned Russkies in the end. That’s one hell of a thing, right?’

‘Right,’ Dwight said. ‘But I really wanted to talk about the termination of Project Blue Book.’

‘Yeah? Well, you know, I really don’t know anything about that, man. I mean, what the fuck, they’ve been trying to kill it off for years, and it was practically dead on its feet even before it was finally terminated. Not much lost anymore, right?’

‘Who do you think was behind it? Jack Fuller’s boys?’

‘Yeah, probably, but who knows? I mean, I don’t wanna know anymore. And neither do you, man. You shouldn’t be goin’ around askin’ questions like that. Things like that can be messy.’

‘I haven’t heard from you in a long time, Tony. You don’t reply to my letters anymore. You never answer the telephone. Have you given up your UFO work?’

‘Yeah, right, I gave it up.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘I just got fed up with it, is all. I mean, I just got the urge to do other things.’ Scaduto raised his fat joint in the air, waved it, then giggled. ‘Yeah, man, other things.’

‘You didn’t just get interested in other things, Tony. Tell the truth: you got scared.’

‘Bullshit!’

‘You’re scared right this second.’

‘Just stoned, man. Bit sweaty. Fuckin’ hot in here. And those lights, man, they make your heart race. It’s the new generation.’

‘You’re a bit old for it, Tony.’

‘I’m okay. I still pull the chicks.’

‘The use of that word “chicks” already dates you.’

‘Okay, man, just lay off.’

Flickering constantly, rapidly in the gloom, like the lights seen on so many UFOs, the psychedelic lights in this crowded bar were creating bizarre patterns on the walls and on the bodies, faces and limbs of the young people packed tightly together, most wearing hippie clothes – baubles, bangles and

beads – and having shouted conversations to defeat the pounding rock music. The sweet scent of pot filled the smokey air. In the disorientating, kaleidoscopic lights, Scaduto looked gaunt and haunted.

Determined to get to the bottom of his young friend's fall from grace, Dwight ploughed ahead. 'So why are you frightened? Did they get to you, Tony?'

Scaduto sighed, releasing smoke through his nostrils. 'Okay, man, I confess. I recently received a visit from three bastards wearing black suits. They claimed to be CIA agents, scared the hell out of me, and demanded that I drop my UFO investigations and forget what I saw over British Columbia. They said that if I ever flew over British Columbia again, I wouldn't come back. They also told me that they knew Hank Lomax had flown the plane, then they told me to give you their regards.'

Dwight was shocked almost rigid. Sitting up straight in his chair behind the small, round table, he found himself squinting instinctively into the flashing strobe lights, trying to see if he was being observed. Realising that he had become paranoid again, on the instant, he then understood, also, just why Scaduto was behaving in this manner. Yes, Scaduto was helplessly frightened – just like he, Dwight, was.

Oh, God, he thought, not again.

Trying to get a grip on himself, he said, 'For the flight from Dayton to Calgary, I was listed under another name. I wasn't listed at all for Lomax's flight. So how the hell could they have known I was present?'

Scaduto threw his hands up in the air, pleading ignorance. 'I swear to God, man, I didn't tell them. If they'd asked, I think I would have, 'cause I was so damned scared, you know? But they didn't ask – they *told* me. Yeah, they told me they knew Lomax was the pilot of the *Tri-Pacer*. Then they said – kinda grinning maliciously – to pass on their regards to you, mentioning you by name. So they knew you were there.'

'Jesus Christ! *How?*'

'I think it was the beam of light. You remember? That pyramid of light that beamed down from the saucer to cut the plane's engine while somehow keeping us up there in the air, still moving forward. That light scorched and destroyed the film in my camera, thus destroying our sole source of proof for the existence of the man-made flying saucers. And I think it also somehow photographed us – or, at least, beamed up an image of us to the flying saucer.

They identified us from that.'

'Oh, my God,' Dwight said, briefly covering his face with his hands and now feeling as frightened as Scaduto looked. 'What have I done?' He removed his hands from his face and stared straight at Scaduto who, in the disorientating, kaleidoscopic strobe lights, looked oddly inhuman. 'What about Beth?'

Scaduto leaned across the table, holding his thick joint between the fingers of one hand while using the other to grab hold of Dwight and shake some sense into him.

'Fuck flying saucers,' he said to Dwight. 'I just want to stay alive. And so should you, man. For your own sake. For Beth's sake. This is the last time we meet, Dwight. Don't ever try contacting me again. I don't exist. I'm invisible. Good luck. Adios.'

He gave Dwight a gentle shove. Dwight pushed his chair and stood up to hurry out of the bar. Once outside, on the busy sidewalk, in the afternoon's wintry light, he caught a taxi straight to the airport. There, instead of catching his return flight to Dayton, Ohio, he took the next plane to Phoenix, Arizona. He had a window seat and during the whole flight he couldn't take his eyes off the sky. He kept imagining he was seeing flying saucers moving silently, eerily through the clouds, but nothing materialised.

Arriving in Phoenix late that evening, Dwight hired a car and drove to a residential area near the University of Arizona, where he booked into a motel for the night. He did not sleep well. Rushing back in upon him, as if stirred by his talk with the equally frightened Tony Scaduto, were all the old dreams of flying saucers and mysterious men in black. Mixed in with such dreams were dreadful visions of Beth surrounded by silent creatures, some human, others alien, bathed in a radiant white light and being probed in the most private places with what looked like surgical instruments. He thought he could hear Beth screaming. In fact, it was himself. He awoke more than once in that interminable, sweaty night, either groaning or screaming.

At ten the following morning, after a breakfast of black coffee (since he could not stomach even the idea of food) and after making a quick call to check that Beth was okay, he drove to the University of Arizona and was escorted to his pre-arranged meeting with Dr James E. McDonald.

Over the past few years, McDonald, who was strongly pro-UFO and anti-

CIA, had become a thorn in the side of the latter, as well as the Air Force. This had led him into taking up freelance work for the APII and it was through this work that Dwight had gotten to know him and respect him. Though very much the scientist, living in a cloistered world, McDonald had taken the bit in his teeth and gone out to fight all those in the CIA and the Air Force who were trying to stifle information about UFOs and intimidate or harass witnesses. He had done so with tremendous energy and a surprising knack for gaining publicity, thus placing the APII more vividly on the map, even while making himself a leading target for those he was exposing. Dwight had to admire that.

Now, however, entering McDonald's office, Dwight was shocked to find that McDonald had changed almost as drastically as Scaduto. A kind-faced, academic man with short-cropped hair and spectacles, he had recently lost a lot of weight and looked like someone in a state of permanent exhaustion. Behind the spectacles, his eyes seemed slightly glassy and distracted, possibly even fearful.

After welcoming Dwight into his office as warmly as possible, given his condition, he confessed that he no longer wished to discuss UFOs and had, indeed, almost refused Dwight this meeting.

'So why did you change your mind and let me come?' Dwight asked, when he was seated in the chair in front of McDonald's desk.

McDonald shrugged and smiled with what seemed like an air of sadness. 'I guess in deference to all we shared in the past. By which I mean our joint work for the APII.'

'You were doing so well,' Dwight said, 'then you suddenly stopped. Why was that, James?'

McDonald stared steadily at him for a moment, then shrugged again, this time forlornly. 'No reason, Dwight.'

'You look terrible,' Dwight said bluntly. 'You look sleepless. What happened, James?'

McDonald was silent for what seemed like an eternity, his gaze focused on the ceiling, then he sighed with what could only be deemed despair and lowered his gaze to look at Dwight – not directly at him, but as near to that as he could manage in his state of chronic distraction.

'All right,' he said. 'In deference to our friendship, I'll tell you this once, off the record, but on the condition that you never visit me again.'

‘Never?’

‘Never.’

Though immeasurably shocked, recalling Scaduto’s dismissal the previous day, Dwight nodded: ‘Okay, I promise.’

There was another lengthy silence from McDonald, as if he was struggling to find the courage to speak, but eventually, with another mournful sigh, he said: ‘About the middle of March last year – I can’t recall the exact date – I went for a night drive into the desert just outside Phoenix, which is something I’ve done often in my life, for relaxation. That particular night, however, I blacked out. I awakened fifty miles from where I had remembered driving... and my car was pointing back in the direction of home.’

‘Just like Beth,’ Dwight said.

‘Exactly.’ McDonald clasped his hands together, placed them on his desk, and studied them distractedly for some time, before eventually continuing: ‘From that day on, I’ve been suffering from dreadful headaches, or migraines, and from the conviction that I’m being observed constantly, in some inexplicable manner. This conviction is so strong that often I think I’m going mad. It’s given me a lot of sleepless nights – in fact, now I’m almost permanently exhausted – and naturally this, apart from its effect on me and my family, hasn’t helped when it comes to dealing with what’s presently going down.’

‘What’s that?’ Dwight asked.

When McDonald next sighed, Dwight realised that it wasn’t really a sigh: it was the gasping for breath that denotes the fierce repression of panic. McDonald spoke softly, in short bursts, catching breaths in between.

‘As you know, since the implementation of the Condon Report recommendations... notably the closing of Project Blue Book and all other... UFO investigations... the forgotten UFO controversy has practically become a... a... forgotten issue in the press.’

‘Yes, I know.’

‘Behind the scenes, however,’ McDonald continued, gradually regaining control of his panicky breathing, ‘the ridicule attached to the study of UFOs has actually... increased. For that reason, as I was still insisting that UFOs were physical, metallic objects and their origins possibly known to the Air Force, I was... ridiculed relentlessly at committee hearings and in the institute as...’ He shook his head in unutterable despair and humiliation. ‘As a man

who believes in little green men and other science fiction or comic book inventions. Now most of my serious work is being ignored and my career is in… jeopardy.' He glanced down at his desk again, studying his hands, then managed to redirect his troubled gaze to Dwight. 'If what happened to me in that desert is the same as what happened to Beth, then God knows what they did to me when they got to me. I feel that I'm being… controlled. Not just watched, but… manipulated. And now, like Beth, I'm haunted by dreams of UFOs and men in black – of being inside a flying saucer, surrounded, blacking out. And because of that I'm now exhausted from lack of sleep, my career's crumbling, and my marriage is rapidly breaking down. I'm in trouble in more ways than one, Dwight, and that's why this is finished... So… I've told you. Now don't ever come back here. I'm sorry, Dwight. Goodbye... and good luck.'

Feeling as if he was going mad, Dwight stood up, shook McDonald's hand, then left the building. After driving too quickly, dangerously, to the airport, he commenced the first leg of his journey back to Dayton, Ohio.

As with the flight in, he asked for a window seat and spent the whole of both flights staring through the window at the clouds below. He kept thinking there were objects down there, but again nothing materialised.

Feeling ever more fearful, Dwight picked up his car where he had left it in the airport in Dayton and headed for home as quickly as possible, growing ever more fearful for Beth's welfare.

It was already dark when he left the airport. Once away from the ugly clutter of the industrial belt, with its gas stations, warehouses, and factories for the production of refrigerators, air-conditioning equipment, cash registers, machine tools and, especially, aircraft instruments, the land became emptier, mostly agricultural land, pretty in the daytime, but flat and featureless in the darkness, though the sky contained a large moon and a spectacular display of stars. There were few clouds – just some candyfloss wisps here and there – but enough to cast shifting shadows on the broad, moonlit fields.

Dwight drove pretty fast, too frightened for Beth to be careful, trying to distract himself with the feeling of power, of magical omnipotence, that came with being isolated from the world while moving through it at great speed. He normally loved the land at night, the play of shadow and light, but tonight, given the couple of days he'd just had, he felt threatened by it.

Then he started feeling odd... no longer alone... aware of some unseen presence.

'What the hell...?'

He spoke aloud to break the silence, suddenly frightened of being alone out here, then he instinctively glanced at his rear-view mirror.

He saw only dark clouds crossing the stars and reaching out to gently stroke the moon.

Nothing else... just the darkness... the stars seeming to move away… the sky unfolding radiantly in his wake as the car barrelled forward. Nothing else in the mirror...

Yet his heart started racing.

He glanced left and right, convinced that something was out there. Seeing nothing, he glanced up, where there was nothing unusual, so once more he concentrated on the road straight ahead, uncomfortably aware that he had started sweating.

'Damn it, Dwight!' he whispered to himself. 'It's just your overwrought imagination – that's a dangerous thing.'

Talking to himself... Speaking aloud to calm his nerves... There was nothing out there but moonlit darkness, starlit sky, shifting shadows...

No, something *was* out there... What was that? Something moving... A flashing light... Growing bigger... Approaching.

Yes, damn it, *approaching*!

He saw the light, then it was gone, though it hadn't flashed on and off. It had flown from east to west at tremendous speed, then maybe shot upwards – so fast it just disappeared.

Where was it now?

Dwight felt his skin crawling with a dreadful, clammy fear. He was aware of something out there. He couldn't see it, but he could *feel* it, and his hands became slippery on the steering wheel as his heart raced in panic.

'Imagination!' he whispered again, trying vainly to convince himself that this was the truth... Then, as his helpless fear deepened, something flashed in his eyes.

He almost swerved off the road, but blinked and straightened out. He squinted into the darkness, trying to see between the headlights. Seeing nothing, he looked to the side.

A pool of light was brightening on the road beside the car, keeping abreast

of it, speeding along and growing brighter and wider until it covered the whole road.

Dwight glanced up and was blinded by dazzling light... then he lost control of the car.

'Damn!' he exclaimed, his voice reverberating in his head as he fought with the steering wheel and the car swerved off the road, out of the light beaming down, then back onto the road and into the light again. 'Jesus Christ! What the...?'

The light disappeared abruptly. The car barrelled into the darkness. Its headlights had gone out and Dwight frantically worked the switch... and then a bass humming sound, an infrasound, almost *physical*, filled the car and tightened around his head as the engine cut out.

Dwight slammed on the brakes. He went into a skid, managed to straighten out, and was slowing down when something passed above him, shot into the darkness ahead, then became an enormous, burning globe that froze right in front of him.

The car came to a halt. It just rolled to a stop. Dwight sat there, hardly believing what he was seeing, but too stunned to move.

He was looking at a huge, slightly glowing flying saucer that was hovering in mid-air farther along the road, almost as wide as the road. It had a silvery, metallic appearance, no surface protuberances, and possessed a perfectly seamless surface beneath that eerie white glowing.

Dwight sat in the car, too stunned to move, mesmerized as the flying saucer sank lower and settled on the ground. It didn't appear to have any legs – it just settled down on its base. No, not quite on the ground: a few inches above it; hovering just above the ground. Then the bass humming sound increased, tightening around Dwight's head, as he saw a large panel opening up in the sloping surface of the saucer, emitting a brilliant light, then falling forward to form a ramp that led down to the ground.

Three figures walked down the ramp, the smaller two moving awkwardly, to spread out across the road and make their way to the car.

Dwight was terrified. The middle figure was a tall, slim human being dressed all in black, but the other two, one on each side of him, were creatures little more than four-foot tall, wearing silvery-grey coveralls, but with studded helmets on their heads, lower faces made of moulded metal and devoid of noses or lips, and hands that looked from Dwight's point of view

like vicious steel claws.

They looked like creatures from another world.

As they deliberately advanced upon Dwight, spreading out as they came closer, emerging from silhouette, he wanted to get out of the car and flee, but he felt paralysed.

Then the infrasound faded away and the tightness left his head. Instantly, he reached out for the ignition key and turned it, but heard only a dead click. Jerking his hand away, imagining that it had been scorched, he tried to still his racing heart as he waited for the two alien creatures and the man in the middle to reach the car.

One of the alien creatures stopped right in front of the car, the other went to the far side, and the tall, silvery-haired man dressed all in black walked around to stop by Dwight's door.

When he bent down to look through the window, Dwight wanted to scream.

'Roll the window down, Dwight.'

The man's voice was almost a whisper. It was also oddly flat. It was the voice of a man with no feelings but a lot of authority. Dwight did as he was told. He didn't seem to have a choice. That voice, though quiet and unemotional, would brook no disobedience. Dwight rolled the window down, his hand shaking, then he stared at the man.

He had silvery-grey hair, unnaturally smooth white skin, curiously immobile, handsome features and icy blue eyes.

'You're Dwight Randall,' he said.

'That's right,' Dwight responded.

'You were with Project Blue Book at the ATIC, then you worked for the APII.'

'That's right as well,' Dwight said.

The man smiled without warmth. 'You also flew over a construction plant in British Columbia and saw some of our saucers.'

'Yes,' Dwight confessed.

'You will stop this, Dwight. From this moment on. You've already done considerable damage to your wife, and could do a lot more. As for your friends, Tony Scaduto and the meddlesome Dr McDonald, you've seen the state they're in – and let me assure you that they're going to get much worse. Is that what you want for yourself, Dwight?'

'No.'

‘For your wife?’

‘No.’

‘Your daughter?’

‘Please, no!’

‘Well, if you don’t want that to happen to your wife and daughter, not to mention yourself, you must stop your involvement with UFOs and never return to it. Do you understand?’

’Yes.’

‘Good. However, just as a precaution, Dwight, to ensure that you keep your promise, I’m going to give you a final warning. Not right now. Not this year. Maybe next year. It will happen when we feel that you’ve had enough time to consider all this and have to make a decision about whether or not to stay silent about us. This warning will help you make the right decision should you be feeling less fearful.’

‘What kind of warning?’ Dwight asked.

The man offered his chilling smile. ‘Wait for word about your friend Dr James E. McDonald. When it comes, you will know. That will be your final warning. The next in line will be you and your family, should you ever again displease us. Do you understand, Dwight?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then return to your home and look after your family. Goodnight, Dwight. Goodbye.’

Dwight felt that he was dreaming. In his dream the fear returned. He kept thinking of Beth and Nichola, of that warning, and then he knew for certain that he would stop here.

‘Goodnight,’ he replied.

The tall, silvery-haired man with the oddly immobile features offered another chilling smile and a nod before walking away with his two hideous cyborgs, back to the enormous flying saucer. He and the cyborgs walked up the ramp and disappeared back into the saucer’s brilliantly lit holding bay while Dwight sat on in the car, still unable to move. The saucer’s ramp lifted up and folded back in until it again became part of the seamless body, cutting off the light and leaving the saucer to reflect the moonlight from its metallic surface. Then Dwight heard the bass humming sound, almost *felt* it, an infrasound again, and as his head started tightening, as his skin turned numb, the flying saucer started glowing, its silvery body brightening magically, until

it became encased in a cocoon of pulsating white light and lifted off the ground.

Dwight heard the noise, *felt* it, was surrounded by it and became part of it, as the saucer ascended slowly, gracefully – yes, even majestically. Then it abruptly shot upwards, about a hundred feet up, but stopped again, just as abruptly, as if by pure magic, to hover high above and to the side, where he could just about see it.

The infrasound cut out, allowing Dwight to move again, though he didn't dare get out of the car. The saucer looked small up there, about the size of a dime, and it seemed to be spinning on its vertical axis and filling the sky with light. Then it shot up even higher, shrinking rapidly, but still shining, until eventually it merged with the stars and suddenly blinked out.

Dwight saw the moon and stars, the vast web of the cosmos. They made him think of the beauty and terror of life... and of those whom he most loved and who were obviously most threatened: Beth, Nichola, and Nichola's baby, still only eight months old.

Determined to protect them, he turned the ignition key, heaved a sigh of relief when the engine came on, and drove home as quickly as possible, obsessed with the notion that his family might have been visited by the man who had just left and, even worse, that they might be captives in that flying saucer this very moment.

He was therefore overwhelmed with gratitude and love when he found that Beth, though telling him that she had been visited by men in black and tormented by a UFO that circled over the house the previous evening, was unharmed, as were Nichola, her husband, Larry, and their baby, named after Bob Jackson.

Nevertheless, when he took Beth in his arms to kiss her, he knew that both of them were still in danger and would probably remain so for the rest of their days. Though he suspected that he could never hide from that nameless man for long, he was determined to try.

'We're selling up and going to Oregon,' he told Beth, 'where you've always wanted to live. It's time we moved on.'

'I understand,' Beth responded. 'It's all ended, hasn't it?'

'Yes,' Dwight said. 'It's ended.'

His kiss told her the rest of it: that love, which could not protect a single soul in the world, could at least heal old wounds and soothe fear. It was a kiss

of renewal.

Chapter Forty-Seven

Eighteen months later, in June, 1971, Dwight had settled comfortably into his new life with Beth, Nichola, her husband Larry and baby Bob in a rambling old farmhouse in Vida, Oregon. Out of deference to Nichola's fears for her own child, as well as for Dwight and Beth, Larry had generously agreed to give up his job as a civilian engineer with Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio, and move with them in relative anonymity to Oregon, where he settled for a job as a maintenance engineer with a private airline that combined commercial flights to local towns with crop-dusting. Dwight, on the other hand, was happy to get a job as a truck driver, delivering farm produce to the shops of the various small towns in the area. Nichola looked after baby Bob, while Beth looked after Nichola and the baby, as well as tending the house. All in all, it was a quiet, pleasant life in pastoral, postcard countryside dominated by the spectacular Cascades mountain range where, as Dwight often recalled, some of the earliest and most famous flying saucer sightings had been made.

Dwight knew in his heart of hearts that if that nameless, silvery-haired man or any of his equally mysterious friends wanted to find him, they would doubtless be able to do so – and, indeed, probably knew where he was right now. Nevertheless, the move to Oregon had not only been made to satisfy one of Beth's oldest desires – she had always yearned to live in Oregon – but to let 'them' out there know that Dwight had moved away from all his former associates and was now living in relative obscurity.

In other words, he was telling 'them' that he had well and truly retired from the UFO business.

As if being thanked for keeping his word, Dwight was pleased to note that Beth's nightmares and physical 'hauntings' had ceased within days of their leaving Dayton and had not returned in the eighteen months they had been living in Oregon. As for himself, since leaving Dayton he had not seen or heard anything of a disturbing nature, and he was grateful for that.

During that eighteen months, few days had gone by when Dwight did not think of the many years he had spent in search of UFOs, but he certainly harboured few regrets. Gradually, however, as the more frightening recollections began to dim in his memory – or, at least, to seem less frightening than they had been at the time – he began to think increasingly about finding a way to impart all he had learned about the man-made flying saucers to those who could use the information best, notably Dr Frederick Epstein and Robert Stanford of the APII in Washington DC.

Mere weeks after he had commenced this line of thought, he was reminded of that nameless, silvery-haired man's threat to send him a warning through Dr James E. McDonald.

He started thinking about that warning about a week before the warning actually came. Wondering why, suddenly, he could not get Dr McDonald out of his head, he endured an emotionally troubled week, then decided to take a day off and go fishing in the local lake. Arising just after dawn, he drove into Vida, picked up the local newspaper, then drove on to the lake. Still sitting in his car, he poured a cup of hot coffee from his thermos flask, then settled back at the steering wheel to read the newspaper.

Instantly shocked, he sat forward again, resting the newspaper on the steering wheel to prevent it from shaking.

The first page contained an article stating that two days ago, Dr James E.McDonald, B.A. in Chemistry, M.S. in Meteorology, Ph.D. in Physics, Professor of the Department of Meteorology, and Senior Physicist at the Institute of Atmospheric Physics of the University of Arizona, after suffering from depression and a broken marriage, had committed suicide by driving out into the desert in the middle of the night and shooting himself in the head with a pistol

Shocked, Dwight let the newspaper slide off the steering wheel, onto his feet, as he stared over the lake, at the Cascades soaring beyond it, thinking about what he had been told through what he had read.

Dwight was absolutely convinced that McDonald, though he may indeed have shot himself, had not committed suicide – he had merely pulled the trigger. Though the evidence would never come in, Dwight sat there in his car, looking at the distant Cascades, where the whole UFO flap had first begun, and tried imagining the most likely scenario, given what McDonald had previously told him.

Dwight's hypothesis, based on his own knowledge of UFO abductions, Beth's personal experience, and McDonald's confession to him, was as follows...

Already in a bad way after a combination of overt Air Force and CIA harassment and inexplicable set-backs in his formerly illustrious career, then suffering additionally from severe depression and a broken marriage, McDonald awakens in the middle of the night, puts on his normal clothes, including suit, shirt and tie, and goes down to his kitchen for a hot drink. Sipping his coffee, he recalls the visit he had from the impassioned Dwight Randall who, like him, had gradually become obsessed with UFOs. McDonald then broods on how a relentless barrage of private and public ridicule is being used against him, to discredit his professional credibility.

Of all the ridicule he has suffered, nothing has been worse than when the House Committee on Appropriations called him to testify about the supersonic transport (SST) plane and how its use would affect the atmosphere. McDonald had discovered (correctly) that the SST would reduce the protective layer of ozone in the atmosphere and that this could cause an additional 10,000 cases of skin cancer each year in the United States, as well as having other dramatic effects on animals, crops and the weather.

During his testimony, however, McDonald was constantly ridiculed as a believer in flying saucers and 'little men flying around the sky' and treated generally as someone deranged.

Sitting at his kitchen table in the middle of the night, brooding about this, as well as the loss of his wife and career, McDonald takes a pistol out of a drawer under the table and thoughtfully studies it. As he does so, an almost palpable bass humming noise, an infrasound, fills the room and an eerie, pulsating light pours in through the window. McDonald clutches his head and moans in pain until the light and sound fade away. He then looks up with tears in his eyes and walks out of the house, still carrying the pistol.

McDonald gets into his car and then drives into the desert beyond Phoenix, taking the same route he had taken a few years ago when he had first blacked out during a night ride.

He parks in the middle of the desert and stares up at the vast, star-filled sky.

An enormous UFO in a pulsating aura that changes repeatedly through the whole spectrum, filling the night with colour and light, descends until it is

hovering just above him, blotting out the glorious sky and revealing only a pitch-black, swirling base that appears to have no depth.

As McDonald stares up at the terrible beauty of that sight, he has fragmented recollections of being picked up by the same craft when last he parked here...of being carried up to the stars... and of being deposited back on Earth much later, his head as tight as a drum.

Eventually, as the infrasound increases, deafening him, while making his head tighten even more, creating appalling pain, McDonald obeys an inner voice – the one voice he cannot resist – and helplessly raises the pistol to his head and presses the trigger.

His last memory – if such it can be called – is of an exploding galaxy.

He falls forward and dies.

Dr James E. McDonald was now only an illusion of the mind, a warning to Dwight that he should not change *his* mind and attempt to pass on his secrets to Frederick Epstein, Robert Stanford, or anyone else.

Thus, when Dwight, still in his car, managed to regain control of himself and shake off his shock, he lifted the newspaper off his rubber boots, clambered out of the vehicle, threw the newspaper into a rubbish bin and then walked down to the edge of the lake. Once there, he climbed carefully into his boat, rowed out to the centre of that great bowl of water, then unreeled his line and sat down to fish, surrounded by the Cascades. Thoroughly distracted, he let the boat drift where it would as he gazed at the sky above the distant, snow-capped mountain peaks.

He had the distinct feeling that the flying saucers were still out there, gliding eerily through the clouds, keeping him under surveillance... and he knew that this feeling would haunt him for the rest of his days.

He sat there all day, drifting aimlessly in the boat, patiently waiting for the stars to come out... and even then, when the stars had come out, he didn’t find peace of mind.

He could not feel safe even out here.

It was best to be silent.

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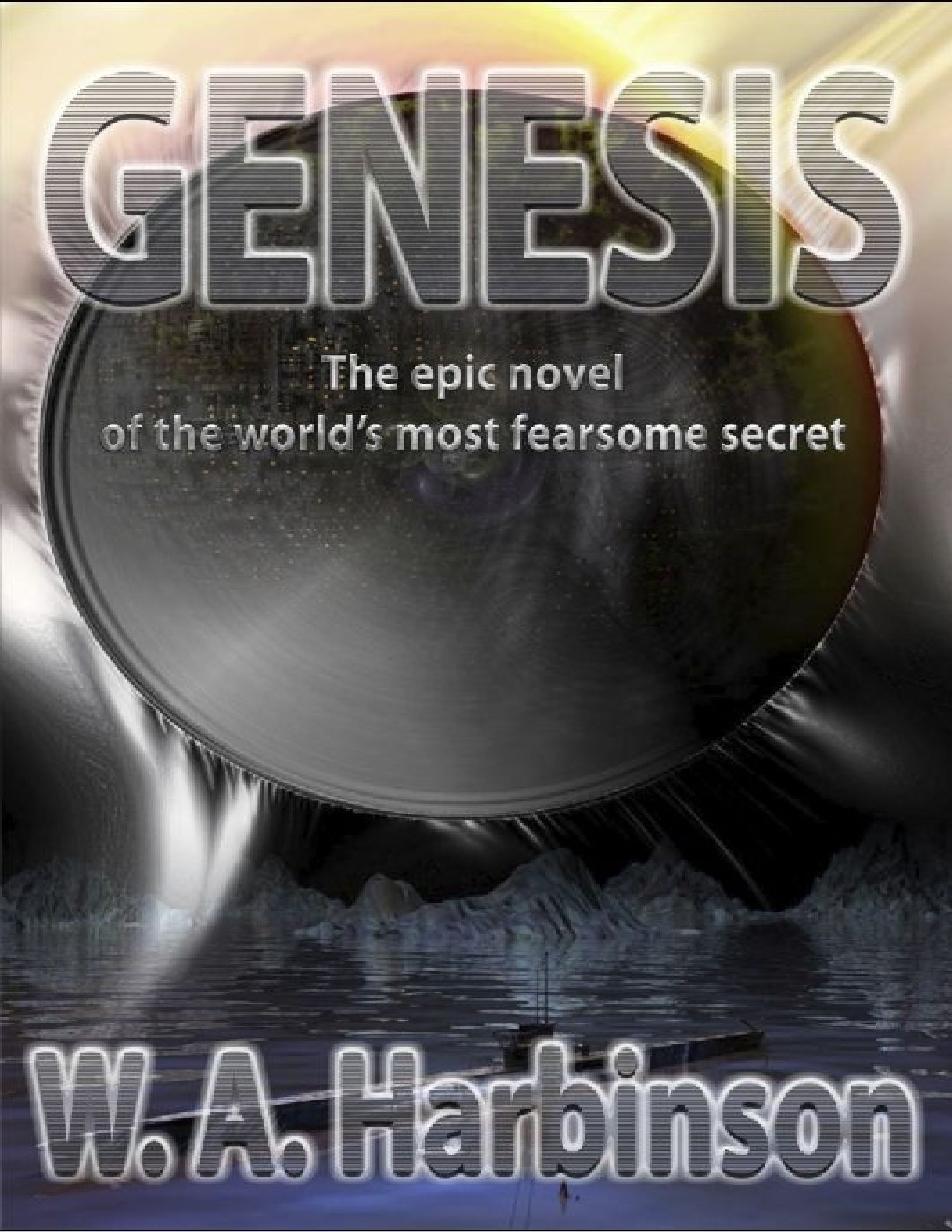
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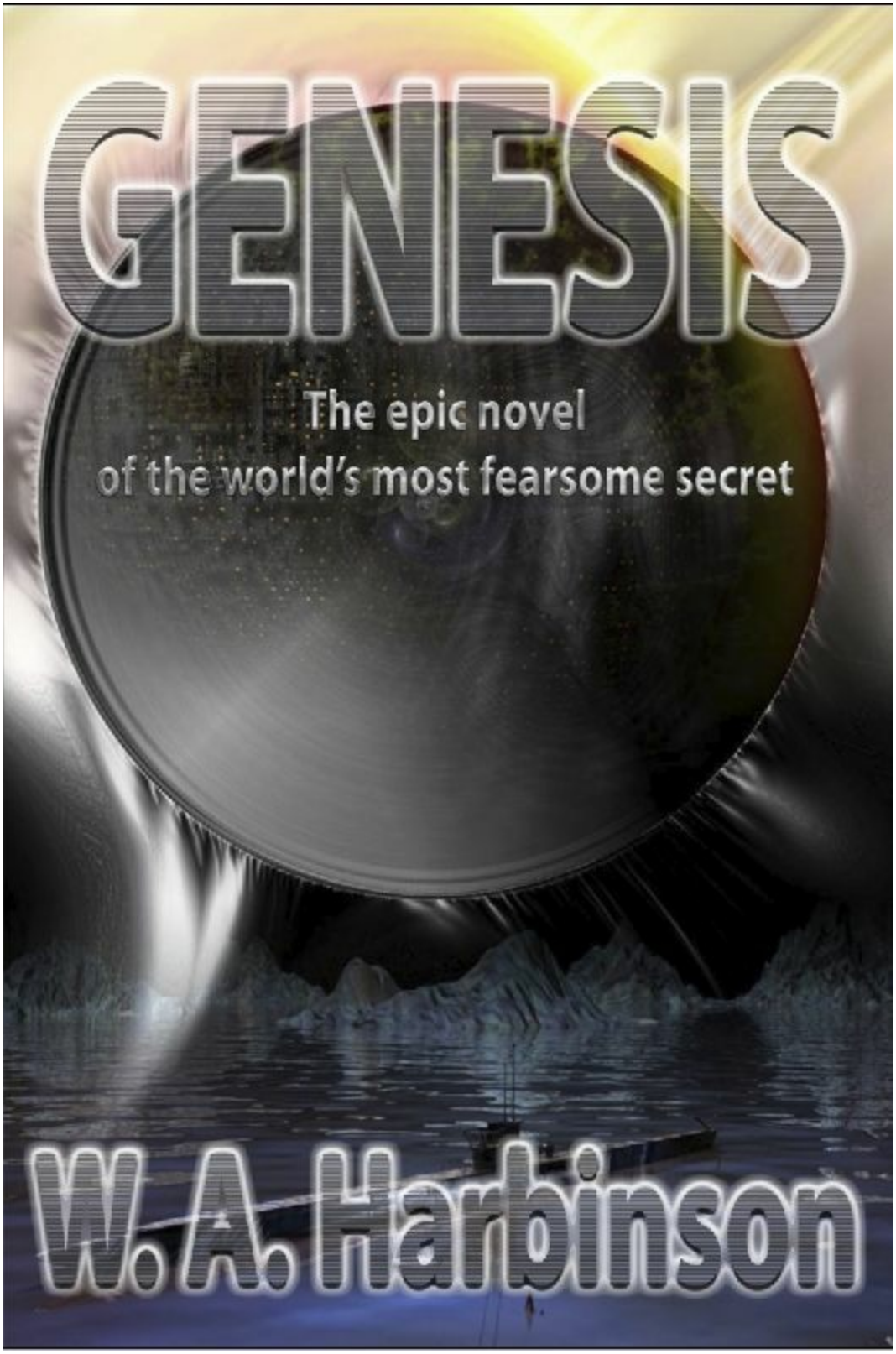
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Custom Books Publishing

Copyright © 1980, 1982 by W.A. Harbinson

This edition published in 2010 by W. A. Harbinson

www.waharbinson.eu.com

ISBN -13: 978-1456479800

ISBN-10: 1456479806

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PROJEKT UFO

FOR URSULA

NOVEMBER 23, 1944

It began when the B-25 had crossed the Rhine and was starting to make its bombing run over darkened Germany. The other aircraft had already made their first run when Lieutenant Tappman, twenty-one years of age and out of Denver, Colorado, studied the cross hairs of his bombsight, watched the last of the indices join, and prepared to trip away his load of five-hundred pounders.

The first bombs were already exploding, tiny flames in the black void, the flat drifting far below, the tracer bullets like fireworks, when Tappman blinked and saw the pulsating red lights winking on and then vanishing. ‘What the hell – ?’ the pilot said. ‘Jesus Christ!’ a gunner added. The intercom crackled, voices rising and falling, then the Plexiglas nose was briefly filled with crimson light as three globes of spinning flame shot up vertically and vanished above.

Tappman blinked and shook his head, heard the coughing of the engines, felt the aircraft shuddering strangely and levelling out and heading away from the target zone. A spasm of fear lanced through him, an instinctive dread of the unknown, and he promptly pressed the button on his throat mike and said, ‘What the hell’s happening there?’ The intercom crackled. ‘What was *that*?’ The copilot said. ‘I don’t know,’ the tailgunner replied. ‘I saw lights – three red lights.’ Tappman looked into his bombsight, saw the cross hairs over darkness, cursed softly when the engines malfunctioned and the plane shuddered again. ‘You’re going off course!’ he shouted. ‘What the hell are you up to? I can’t see a damned thing from here! Is it enemy aircraft?’ The plane shook and dropped again, climbed back up, levelled out, the intercom

crackling, metallic voices colliding. '*Red lights! Something burning! No, they're climbing! Jesus Christ!*' And then Tappman was dazzled, the night filled with spinning flames, and the burning globes spread out around the plane and then started to pace it.

The plane shuddered and rolled, went into a shrieking dive, barrelling down through streams of tracers and black mushrooms of flak, the blazing buildings of Germany far below, illuminating the darkness. 'Pull her up!' Tappman bawled his eyes blinded by purple flares. 'What the hell's going on? We're cutting out! *We're down, you dumb bastards!*' The plane roared and shook violently, levelling out, its wings quivering, and Tappman saw his jack-plug dangling loose and jammed it back into the intercom. 'They're still with us!' the pilot was shouting. 'What *are* they?' the gunner wailed. The nose shuddered and pointed upward, heading through the tiers of flak, the plane's engines sounding healthy again as it started to climb.

Tappman looked for the balls of fire, saw nothing, rubbed his eyes, felt isolated in the bombardier's compartment at the end of the crawl-way. 'What are you doing?' he bawled, seeing yellow fires below, the ugly black clouds of flak around him, hearing muffled explosions. 'We cut out!' he shouted. 'We went dead! *What's going on out there?*'

The intercom crackled, the tailgunner's voice wailing, fading in and out, back in again, sounding close to demented. 'What are they?' the gunner wailed. 'They're right beside me! I can't hit them! I can't make them out! They're not conventional aircraft! *What the hell are those things?*'

Tappman cursed and glanced around him, not believing what he had seen, wishing he could see them again, filled with dread and excitement. '*What?*' the pilot bawled. 'Spinning balls!' the gunner wailed. 'Balls of fire! I'm not sure! They look like balls of fire and they're spinning! Oh, my God, *now there's more of them!*'

A sudden silence, then the static, then the roaring of the guns, someone

screaming and then the plane rolling as if out of control. Tappman cursed and shook his head, glanced up to see the sky, the dark clouds and the smaller clouds of flak, the silvery web of the tracers. '*Drop the bastards!*' the pilot bawled, wanting the bombs to be released, wanting his plane to be freed of its load and climb out of the chaos. '*I can't!*' Tappman whispered, working the controls to no avail, the fear racing back in to smash his senses when the engines cut out again. '*We're going down!*' someone screamed.

The plane shuddered and went silent, started rolling, falling fast, Tappman trapped in the nose cone with the Earth far below him. He heard the static, someone wailing – the tailgunner or copilot – and looked below, following the line of the falling plane, to see the fires of the air raid. 'What *are* they?' the gunner cried. 'The engines are dead!' the pilot bawled. 'They're not planes!' the gunner cried. 'They're balls of fire! Jesus Christ, *now they're climbing!*'

The engines roared back into life, as if controlled by the balls of fire, the plane levelling out and heading through the tracer bullets and the black clouds of flak. Tappman groaned and licked his lips, simply forgot to release his bombs, jerked his head around and saw a crimson light that fanned out across the dark sky. '*What's that?*' Tappman shrieked, not recognising his own voice, his heart pounding as he searched for the German fighters and saw only the crimson light. 'I don't know! the pilot bawled. 'They're right behind us!' the gunner screamed. 'They're pacing us!' the copilot joined in, his voice high and distorted. '*They're killing our engines!*'

Tappman glanced all around him, closed his eyes, looked again, saw the crimson glow spreading across the darkness at the side of the nose cone. Then the engines malfunctioned, started spluttering into silence, coughed into life once again and made the plane jerk unnaturally. Tappman shrieked some mindless plea, hardly aware of his own voice, staring out through the glinting Perspex to see a strange ball of fire. 'Jesus Christ!' he whispered to no one, his eyes wide and disbelieving, seeing that spinning ball of fire, then another,

then a third, suddenly recalling all the stories he had heard and never believed. '*Foo fighters!*' the gunner screamed, his voice distorted by the intercom, reverberating in Tappman's head and then fading away as the plane hurtled Earthward.

'We're going down! *Pull her up!*'

Tappman grabbed hold of himself, closed his eyes, embraced the nightmare, felt his body being pressed back into the chair as the plane kept on falling. The plane fell an endless mile, shuddering violently, spinning wildly, but it reached the ground eventually, plunging into it, exploding, Tappman hearing a crazed voice wailing '*Foo!*' which is where it all ended.

CHAPTER ONE

Shortly after noon on March 6, 1974, a battered, two-toned Pontiac passed through the gates of Winslow Air Base, Arizona, and headed directly for the Air Traffic Control Tower. The car moved leisurely but smoothly past the administration blocks and hangars, sunlight flashing off its windows, its wheels churning up red dust, the soft droning of its engine drowned out by the roaring of the aircraft either taking off or landing. There were white clouds in the blue sky, the planes glittered above the mountains, and the clouds were like banks of pure snow in a clear, azure lake.

When the car eventually stopped at the glass-and-concrete control tower, the driver climbed out slowly, closed the door with some care, locked it, then glanced keenly around him. This man was short and broad, insignificant in his dark suit, his white hair dishevelled and his green tie hanging loose, the tanned fingers of his right hand reaching up to stroke a grey Vandyke beard. He was no longer run, was in fact just over sixty, and his face was a sunburnt webbed map of reflection and fatigue.

After glancing briefly at the surrounding mountains, the man reached into his jacket pocket, withdrew a billfold, flipped it open and dangled it before the civilian guard. The guard was tall and impassive, dressed in black shirt and pants, and he studied the identity card, fingered the holster on his hip, distractedly stroked the peak cap on his head and then nodded assent. The old man smiled bleakly, returned his billfold to his pocket, winced when an airplane roared overhead, passed the guard, went inside.

The stairs were made of concrete, uncovered, painted white, and they led up

through silence and a dim half-light to the more pronounced semi-darkness of the Approach Control Room. The old man glanced at the elevator, considered it, rejected it, took a deep breath and climbed up the stairs, breathing fitfully, wearily. Finally reaching the top, facing a steel-plated door, he let his racing heart settle, tightened the knot in his tie, buttoned his jacket and then pushed the door open and closed it quietly behind him.

The Approach Control Room was dimly lit, the numerous radarscopes flashing, the walls banked with computers and flight maps and schedule charts, the air traffic controllers bunched around the consoles, hair short, sleeves rolled up. The old man blinked and coughed, his hazel eyes scanning the gloom, then he raised one hand and distractedly stroked his beard, the noise and dim light confusing him. The air controllers all talked at once, telephones rang, radios crackled, and the colored lights of radarscopes and computers flashed on and off constantly.

The old man coughed again, raised a hand and waved it languidly, watched his friend detaching himself from a group and coming toward him. His friend was young and flashy, his flowered shirt open-necked, the chain belt on his white trousers gleaming as he shook the old man's hand. He did this and then stepped back, glanced around him, grinned and shrugged, then stepped forward again, took the old man by the shoulders and shook him affectionately.

'You look good,' he said.

The old man smiled wearily, smoothed his thinning grey hair, looked around him, eyes squinting, bathed in muted orange light, stroked his beard and then loosened his tie and looked back at his younger friend.

'I don't feel as good as I look,' he said. 'Now what's this emergency.'

'I'm sorry I had to – '

A weathered hand waved. ‘It’s all right,’ the old man said. His accent was faintly European, his voice soft, almost hesitant. ‘Just tell me what’s happening.’

The younger man was slow to answer, his fingers playing with the gleaming belt, He glanced uneasily around him and then reluctantly looked back at the older man.

‘We found Irving,’ he said.

Something happened to the old man, something almost imperceptible, a spasm of shock, a fleeting fear or despair, before he blinked and automatically stroked his beard and then regained control again.

‘You found him?’

‘Yes, Frederick. He’s dead.’

The old man looked at the floor, rubbed his eyes, glanced around him; he saw the glowing radarscopes, their orange light on men’s faces, the men casting long shadows on the floor, on the humming computers. He felt fear at that moment, the dry, familiar fear, a helpless dread that had enveloped his past and now mapped out his future. He looked back at his young friend, at the blond hair and blue eyes, saw the multicolored darkness all around him, making him unreal.

‘Suicide?’ the old man said.

‘So it seems, Frederick. They found him an hour ago, on U.S. 66 – in his car, just beyond Valentine, a gun in his hand.’

‘U.S. 66?’

‘That’s right. Apparently Mary never even saw him leaving. She’s staying in the house on Camelback Hill, and I just rang her and she didn’t sound well.’

‘No,’ the old man murmured. ‘Obviously not.’

‘Anyway,’ the young man said, ‘the usual. Mary says he hadn’t been sleeping well lately, that he’d been getting up in the middle of the morning and just wandering about the house, looking out the windows, looking up, obsessed by the whole thing. She thinks he must have done that this morning – got up when she was asleep – only this time he didn’t wander around: he took their car and drove off. The cops found him an hour ago. He’d shot himself in the mouth. I told them to hold off till we got there. We better go now.’

The old man closed his eyes, shook his head from side to side, opened his eyes again and glanced around him, his face taut with grief.

‘Poor Mary,’ he whispered.

The young man took his elbow, led him out of the control tower, down the stairs, through the door, past the guard, around the dusty old Pontiac. The noon sun blazed down upon them, upon the airstrip across the road, burned a monstrous white hole in the sky above the hazed, blue-ridged mountains.

‘We’ll leave your car here,’ the young man said. ‘We won’t be gone very long. We’ll just fly out there and find out what we can and then I’ll bring you right back.’

The old man stroked the Pontiac, wiped the dust from his hand, glanced across the baked plain, eyes squinting against the sun, then dutifully followed the young man. The air base was busy, planes taking off and landing, a constant noise and movement above them as they crossed the hot tarmac. The old man was sweating, mopped his forehead, felt the wind – a fierce wind that emanated from a roaring and made his eyes narrow even more. His young friend was just ahead, ducking low, waving frantically, urging him on toward the red-and-white 47G helicopter that had just burst into life on its landing pad.

The rotor blades whirled, becoming a blur that whipped the dust up, turning the dust into a localized whirlwind that enveloped the old man. He almost stumbled, righted himself, covered his mouth and cursed softly, then his free hand held his jacket against his chest as he followed his friend.

The helicopter roared and shuddered, its short steel ladder rattling, and the younger man, already inside, reached down with one hand. The old man was pulled up, slipped in behind the pilot, and promptly strapped himself into his seat as his friend closed the door. Then his friend sat down beside him, the helicopter shook and climbed, and the old man, visibly relieved, stared out through the Perspex.

He felt grief and outrage, an uncoiling, chilling fear, looking down, Winslow shrinking below him, remembering other days, other deaths. Suicide, he thought. We all finally commit suicide. There is never a reason nor a motive, but it's always a suicide. Of course he didn't believe it, never had, never would. He looked down on the mountains, on the barren, rock-strewn earth, on the saguaros and ocotilla and barrel cacti, and felt the fear creeping over him.

'How do you feel?' the young man said.

'About what you'd expect.' The old man stroked his beard and rubbed his eyes. 'I feel for Mary. How awful.'

The helicopter dipped and climbed, sunlight flashing all around it, and the engine made a fierce, relentless roaring that drummed in their ears.#

'We have a flap on,' the young man said. 'That's why I'm out at the air base. There's been sightings all over the goddamned place, and they're keeping us busy.'

The old man stared through the Perspex, saw the buttes and wind-carved valleys. 'There's been a flap for the past *fifteen months*,' he said, now looking

sideways, smiling gently.

‘White Sands,’ his friend continued. ‘Los Alamos and Coolidge Dam. Visual sightings and radar reports, all unidentified returns solid.’ He shrugged his shoulders, ran his fingers through his blond hair. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘It kinda makes me shiver. These things know where they’re going.’ He looked at the old man. His bearded friend did not respond. ‘Weird,’ he said. ‘So how did your year go? How are things at the institute?’

The old man sighed. ‘Very busy,’ he said. ‘It’s been the biggest flap since 1967 and we haven’t had breathing space.’

‘Anything solid?’

‘Too many to discuss.’ The old man saw mountains far below, the desert stretching around them. ‘I just wish we could catch one.’

The young man smiled. ‘I want to pay you a visit,’ he said. ‘But you keep all these things in your head; fill me in just a little.’

‘There were hundreds,’ the old man said. ‘Every conceivable kind. High-level, low-level, distant, actual contact; electrical and mechanical interference, numerous car-chasing incidents; mental and physical effects on people, animals similarly affected; landings with genuine traces left behind, the materials still unidentified. So, there were plenty.’

‘Jesus,’ the young man said. ‘Jesus Christ.’

‘Good witnesses,’ the old man said. ‘All reliable witnesses. We’ve never had such quality before. Most encouraging. Quite heartening.’

‘Irving said that.’

‘Irving’s dead,’ the old man said. ‘Irving told me he had found something important… now Irving is dead.’

‘I can’t hear you,’ the young man said.

‘Alright, I’m sorry.’

‘Tell me about some sightings,’ the young man said. ‘Who in hell are your witnesses?’

‘Policemen,’ the old man said. ‘We’re running a survey on police sightings. A policeman isn’t prone to hysteria and he’s trained to observe.’

The old man stroked his beard, offered a sigh, studied his hands. The helicopter roared in his ears, making his head throb.

‘October 17, 1973,’ he said. ‘In Waverly, Illinois, in the early hours of the morning, the police chief and three citizens observe an object with green-and-red flashing lights. They watch the object with binoculars for an hour and a half; it gives out glowing embers that fall to the ground, then disappears as abruptly as it arrived… Los Angeles: police officers are summoned to investigate an object on the east side of the city; on arrival the officers see an oblong, bluish-white, very bright object which, when their car moves toward it, rises at a forty-five degree angle to an altitude of about fifteen hundred feet and then speeds off… Palmyra, Missouri: several high-school students report that a bizarre object with flashing lights has appeared over the Missouri River, beamed a spotlight on a passing barge, lit up the entire river bottom, circled the river quite a few times, and approached onshore spectators before taking off vertically and disappearing. Four days later, Palmyra citizens *and* police observe an object with red, white and amber lights on it, plus two powerful headlights in front; this object silently and slowly circles the whole town at low level, and only when police officers shine a spotlight on it does it finally move away and disappear…’

‘Okay, you’ve convinced me.’ The younger man grinned, shook his head from side to side, glanced sideways at the old man, looked away, saw the silvery-blue sky. ‘Any contact? Anything verifiable?’

‘Not with the police.’

The old sighed, a muted hint of defeat, played distractedly with the collar of his rumpled shirt, his hazel gaze on the desert. The helicopter was vibrating, roaring and rattling about him, lifting up and then dropping down again in a sickening fashion. The old man kept looking down, seeing the mountains and valleys, the red earth, the scorched, writhing rocks, a world untouched by time… No, that wasn’t so: nothing there had remained untouched. He looked down on Two Guns, Winona, Humphrey’s Peak, thought of all that had lived there and passed away because it no longer mattered. The land below was haunted, the dust settling over history, erasing the Apache and the Mojave, the Papago and the Pima, the Hopi and the Hualapai and the Yavapai, the Maricopa and Paiute. The Spanish *ricos* had disappeared but lonely missions remained, their walls bleached by the sun and eroded by fierce, abrasive winds, their ancient bells red with rust. Arizona was unreal, a dream of legend and myth, its prairies crossed by Kit Carson and Billy the Kid and Wyatt Earp, still sheltering the reservations and pueblos, the sad remains of the Indians. The old man stared down and shivered, felt the clinging, familiar fear, tried to reconcile the past with the present and its possible future. He thought of the White Sands Proving Ground, of Alamogordo, New Mexico, of Los Alamos and what it represented: the ever-threatening Atomic Age. Yes, the future was here and now – in aeronautics and atomic research. It was also in the lights in the sky that now obsessed the whole world.

‘There has of course been contact,’ the old man said. ‘Bu, alas, not with policemen.’

‘The Air Force?’

‘Doubtless. But not announced.’

‘No. Those bastards wouldn’t.’

The old man stroked his beard, looking more tired each minute, a slight,

almost imperceptible shiver running down through his body.

‘Still,’ the young man said, ‘I think we’re becoming more respectable. Did you know that on 21 February this year Monsieur Robert Galley, the French Minister of Defence, gave an interview on *France-Inter* in which he stated categorically that UFOs exist, that the phenomenon over France was massive, that they were considered of definite interest to national defence, and that since 1970, in collaboration with the *Gendarmerie*, all information regarding French sightings has been passed over to the *Groupment d’Etudes des Phenomenes Aeriens* for investigation? I also note that this very month the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics has revitalized its UFO committee. So, not to pun, things are looking up.’

The old man seemed lost in thought, fingers scratching at his beard, looking slightly impoverished beside the more colorful presence of his younger friend. When he finally spoke, his voice was soft and remote, as if divorced from him.

‘I’m tired,’ he confessed. ‘I’m growing old and I’m tired. I’ve been at this business for twenty-five and I’ve had too many friends kill themselves. I’m not tired. I’m just frightened.’

His young friend did not reply, merely gazed down at the desert, momentarily embarrassed into silence, knowing what the old man meant.

‘You’ve heard of Calvin Parker and Charles Hickson?’

‘Yes,’ the young man said. ‘The Pascagoula case.’

‘Remarkable,’ the old man said. ‘The publicity was astonishing. A close encounter of the third kind that even Hynek was inclined to believe. When was that? Was it last year?’

‘Yes,’ the young man said. ‘You’ve got the year right. The mouth of the Pascagoula River in Mississippi. A hell of a buzz.’

‘Some can’t be broken down,’ the old man said. ‘Some are just beyond reasoning.’ He closed his fist and coughed into it, shook his head as if disgusted, rubbed at his eyes and glanced down, saw the stark, shadowed mountains. ‘Route 114A near Manchester, New Hampshire. November, 1973, at four in the morning. Driving home from work, a twenty-five year old woman – checked out, highly intelligent – notices a bright orange light that repeatedly vanishes and reappears in the sky ahead. About seven miles farther on, the object is much closer than before, much lower, much larger. Estimated as being about sixteen hundred feet in front of her, it is ball-shaped and honeycombed with various hexagons. The object has a translucent quality about it, with red, green and blue rays emanating from its center; and it is making a steady, high-pitched whining sound that makes her whole body tingle. Briefly, as follows… Though frightened, the woman is unable to remove her hands from the steering wheel and feels that the object is somehow drawing her car toward it. There is a memory-loss during a half-mile stretch. Recovering, the woman finds her car hurtling at the object, which is now about thirty feet above the ground. Still driving, and about five-hundred feet from the hovering object, the woman notices a widow and an occupant inside, the occupant framed waist-up by the window. Description: head greyish, round, dark on top; eyes, large and egg-shaped; skin under the eyes loose or wrinkled. The witness didn’t notice any eyes or ears, though this may not mean anything… The witness seemed to be genuine.’

‘Any trace cases?’

‘Too many to recount.’

‘Actual contact?’

‘Yes, your Pascagoula case.’

‘That,’ the young man said, ‘was a humdinger.’

‘Greyish skin again. Conical appendages for nose and ears. Round feet and

hands, crablike claws, lot of wrinkles, no eyes recalled.'

'But five feet tall.'

'Yes.'

'Almost human.'

'That's right. Almost human…'

The old man's voice trailed off, was drowned out by the roaring helicopter, which was turning and dipping toward the earth, sunlight flashing around it. The old man felt ill, his stomach rumbling, heart fluttering, as he looked down on Dinosaur City, a gleaming maze in the desert.

'We'll soon be there,' his young friend said.

'Good,' the old man said. 'I want to get this over and done with. I'm not as young as I used to be.'

'Well, you're still working. You've kept the institute going. I'm glad you haven't given up yet. You're doing valuable work there.'

'I hope so. I'm not sure. We can only do a limited amount. On the other hand, we *are* more organized these days – and nowadays they cooperate.'

'The Air Force?'

'Yes. To a certain extent. However, what's more important – indeed, as you've just said – is the fact that witnesses from all walks of life are coming forward more willingly. The crank reports are now almost at zero, while reports from flight personnel, astronomers, and even astronauts, are being received at an astonishing rate. We now have a computer data bank for analysis of reports and storage of information. Areas covered include medical examinations of people and animals affected, psychological studies of

witness reliability, theoretical studies of UFO movements and properties, photographic and special graphic analysis of UFOs, and analysis of plants that a UFO may have affected. In short, we're covering the subject pretty thoroughly.'

The young man smiled, flicked blond hair from his blue eyes, glanced briefly at the pilot in front, then looked again at his older friend.

'I believe it,' he said.

'And now Irving.'

'Jesus Christ… yes… I'm sorry.'

They fell silent after that, both plunged into gloom, each locked into his personal concept of what might have happened. The helicopter rolled and dipped, started shuddering and falling, and looking down they US 66, curving back toward the mountains. The old man rubbed his eyes, the sun dazzling him, blinding him, then he reached for the knot in his tie and nervously tightened it.

'There they are,' his friend said.

The old man looked down, saw the dark line of the road, a ribbon winding around buttes and through valleys, shades of green, rose and lavender. Panic came and then departed, left him drained and forlorn, silvery sunlight exploding around him and then disappearing, leaving blue sky, white haze, a flock of dark birds, a jagged barrier of mountains in the distance, a stream of dense clouds above them.

The taste of death and its aftermath; the accumulation of fresh pain… His heart pounded and he let the fear depart and opened himself to his anger. He was old, most assuredly, growing older every, but gazing down upon the highway, seeing it widen and rush up toward him, seeing the police cars and the ambulance and the men around the other car, he let the rage wash away

his grief and fear and charge his blood with new life. That was Irving down there. Back in Phoenix, Mary wept. The old man coughed and muttered and oath and sat back looking grim.

‘I don’t believe this,’ he said.

The helicopter dropped lower, roared louder, shuddered violently, brown rock and parched grass and yellow cacti racing up to enfold it. Looking down, he saw the police cars, the ambulance, the milling men, the latter staring up, waving hands, shading eyes, the red dust being swept up by the helicopter and swirling around them. The helicopter moved on, crossed the road, still ascending, and then settled down a couple of hundred yards from the road. There was a bump, a brief shaking, a creaking subsidence, then peace, the engine whining into silence, the rotor blades finally stopping.

‘Okay, you guys,’ the pilot said loudly. ‘Here we are. It’s all yours.’

The young man with the blond hair and colorful clothes unsnapped his safety belt and stood up. The old man was slower, fumbling clumsily with his belt, finally managing to unsnap it and rise, breathing harshly, laboriously. There was a rattling and banging, a beam of sunlight poured in, then the pilot slid the ladder through the doorway and motioned them outside. The young man went out first, held his hand up to the older man, took his elbow and guided him down the ladder to the safety of solid ground. The air was filled with swirling dust. The old man coughed and blinked repeatedly, shaking his eyes with one hand; he felt the sudden, claustrophobic, burning heat and then followed his young friend. They kicked sand and trampled shrubs, saw a lizard, a line of ants, then they arrived at the edge of the road and saw their friend, Irving Jacobs.

Irving was in his car, his face flattened against the steering wheel, the back of his head blown away, a bloody mess all around him. His arms hung down by his sides, the wind rippling his shirt-sleeves, and his face was turned slightly toward them, staring at them with dead eyes.

‘Oh, my God,’ the young man said.

The old man said nothing, simply shuddered and turned aside, tightened his tie and then took a deep breath and looked slowly around him. He saw police cars, the ambulance, the white-clad medics, the milling cops, then a fat man wiping sweat from his forehead walked over to him.

‘Stanford?’

‘No, I’m Stanford.’ The young blond man stepped forward. ‘I’m sorry to have kept you all this time. I had a bit of a hold-up.’

The fat man stared at Stanford, wiped from sweat from his face; he was big, but that didn’t stop his gut from flopping over his belt.

‘I’m Toland,’ he said. ‘Captain Toland. Homicide. I don’t know what you birds want out here, but you better be quick. He’s startin’ to stink already. He’s been cooked by the sun. He shot himself early this morning. Put the gun in his mouth.’

‘*What gun?*’ the old man asked.

‘Who are you?’ Toland said.

‘I’m sorry,’ Stanford said. ‘This is Dr Frederick Epstein. Of the Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute in Washington. I told you I’d bring him.’

‘Washington, eh?’ Toland said, mopping sweat from his brow. ‘He must be a big fish.’

‘Not big at all,’ Epstein said. ‘He was just a close friend. Now what’s this gun you’re talking about? My friend didn’t own a gun. In fact, he didn’t even know how to shoot one. I can assure you of that.’

‘You don’t have to know how to shoot one to blow your own head off.’ The

captain pulled out a handkerchief, mopped the back of his neck, glancing around at the cops taking measurements and photographing the dead man. ‘You just unclip the safety catch,’ he said, looking down at Dr Epstein, ‘and stick the barrel in your mouth and squeeze the trigger. That’s all there is to it.’

‘He didn’t own a gun,’ Epstein repeated stubbornly. ‘He wouldn’t have known where to buy one.’

‘What are you, Doc? A scientist?’

‘That’s right. I’m a scientist.’

‘You sound pretty melodramatic for a scientist. You can buy a gun anywhere.’

Epstein glanced at Stanford, saw him shrugging his shoulders; he glanced briefly at the dusty red Ford: at the policemen around it. The cops were dressed in tan, wore dark glasses and brimmed hats, seemed threatening with their pistols and clubs, murmuring jokes, laughing raucously. Epstein saw the side of the car, the door open, an arm dangling. Beneath a limp hand the sand was stained with a patch of dried blood. Epstein shuddered and turned away, felt anguish and choking rage, rising out of himself and floating back to take a grip on his future. Captain Toland was staring at him, towering above him, gazing down, his fat face burned by sun and desert wind, his shirt rumpled and sweat-soaked.

‘It was a Luger,’ Toland said. ‘A German Luger. We’ve wrapped it up for the lab boys.’

‘He wouldn’t have bought a gun,’ Epstein said.

‘Then he stole it,’ Toland said. ‘He got a Luger and he shoved it into his mouth and that’s all there is to it.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ Epstein said.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Toland said. He turned his head and looked appealingly at Stanford. ‘The Doc thinks it was murder.’ The thought clearly amused Toland, made him grin and scratch his belly; then he turned back to Epstain, held his shoulder, and said, ‘Here, come with me, Doc.’

They went around some lounging cops, past the ambulance, toward the Ford, Epstein feeling a deep surge of revulsion at the sight of that dangling arm. Then he looked down at his friend, saw the bloody, shattered head, turned aside and lowered his gaze to see a dark stain on red earth.

‘Don’t look at him,’ Toland said. ‘Just take a good look around you. Tell me what you see or what you don’t see. Just have a good look.’

Epstein did as he was told, a small man, tired and grim, rubbing nervously at his beard and looking around him, his hazel eyes lined with age. The desert lay there before him, scorched eternally by the sun, rolling away between the buttes, into valleys, the distant mountains in blue haze. Stillness. Desolation. His gaze returned to the men around him. The medics had taken a stretcher from the ambulance and were advancing on the dusty red Ford. They dragged Epstein’s friend out, a dead thing, meat and bone, and he choked back his revulsion and rage, looked once, turned away again. The sky, the white clouds, the ochre mountains beneath them; the mountains fell to the wilderness floor that stretched across to his feet.

‘I don’t know what you mean.’ He said.

Toland sighed with satisfaction, twisted his body, glanced around him, then waved one hand languidly at the road, at the tracks of the vehicles.

‘Those tracks there,’ he said. ‘The tracks right in front of you. They belong to your friend’s car and there isn’t the trace of a skid mark: he drove up here and stopped.’ Toland waved his hand again, indicating more tire tracks –

tracks criss-crossing each other and spread out to the police cars and ambulance. ‘He was found by our patrol car. There were no other tracks here. Those tracks you see belong to our vehicles – before we came, there was nothing. Just one set of tracks – your friend’s tracks – there were no other vehicles. Our own car was the first to find him. No other cars had passed this way. No tire tracks, no footprints. No nothing. He did it all on his own, Doc.’

Epstein didn’t reply, simply stood there deep in thought, his unfocused eyes becoming more alert when they fell on the medics. They were at the rear of the ambulance, one inside, one on the ground, Irving Jacobs strapped tightly to the stretcher that was tilted between them. Dr Epstein stepped forward, touched his friend’s face with his fingertips, shook his head from side to side as if bewildered, then stepped back and just watched. The stretcher was hoisted up, the gleaming doors were slammed shut; the remaining medic ran around to the driver’s seat and waved once and climbed in. The ambulance roared into life, the wheels churned the dust up, then it reversed and turned around and moved off along the desert road. Epstein watched it departing, didn’t move until it was gone, then he sighed and returned to young Stanford, who was looking perturbed.

‘Jesus,’ Stanford said, ‘that was awful. How the hell could he do it?’

Epstein opened his mouth to speak, changed his mind, shrugged forlornly, glanced around and tightened his lips with distaste when Captain Toland approached him.

‘That’s it,’ Toland said. ‘We’re going back now. They’ll do the autopsy in Phoenix. You have any more questions?’

‘No, Captain,’ Stanford said. ‘No more questions. Thanks for your help.’

‘No sweat,’ Toland said, the sweat pouring down his face, dabbing at his neck with the handkerchief, his grin directed at Epstein. ‘It’s all part of the service.’

He turned away and walked off, his broad hips rolling rhythmically, a pistol slapping up and down on one fat thigh, flicking sweat from his brow. The other cops were in their cars, the cars reversing in clouds of dust, then screeching, wheels churning up more dust as they burned off down the road. Toland turned back and waved, his flushed face split by a grin, then he clambered awkwardly into his own vehicle and it rumbled away. Stanford stood beside Dr Epstein. They watched the cops drive away. They waited until all the cars had disappeared in the distance, then they turned, the dust settling around them, and walked back to the waiting helicopter.

‘Okay?’ the pilot asked.

‘Okay,’ Stanford said. ‘Homeward bound.’

They strapped themselves into their seats and Epstein loosened his tie, wiping sweat from his neck with his hand as the helicopter took off. They ascended toward the sun, the sky dazzling, a blinding haze, Epstein glancing down on Route 66, the drifting dust of the wilderness.

‘How’s your love life?’ Epstein asked.

‘Pretty regular,’ Stanford said.

‘You’re picking up a bad reputation.’

‘I know it. I love it.’

‘I thought you were marrying some girl.’

‘Yes, I was. I just changed my mind.’

‘You could never make decisions,’ Epstein said. ‘That’s your major weakness.’

Stanford grinned and nodded agreement. Epstein smiled and patted his arm.

The helicopter climbed higher, the land spreading out below, and Epstein suddenly leaned forward, his eyes widening, filled with shock, and reached out to take Stanford by the shoulder and shake him impatiently.

'Your flap!' he snapped. 'New Mexico and Arizona. You mentioned the Coolidge Dam.'

'That's right,' Stanford said.

'Any more?' Epstein snapped. 'Apart from Coolidge! *Did you have any more?*'

Stanford was startled. 'Shit, yes,' he said. He stared hard at his old friend, at his flushed, impatient face, and was taken aback to see the brightness in his eyes, an almost feverish intensity. 'All over the place,' he said. 'A constant flap the past three days. Over Glendale, over Prescott, over Tucson and Eloy, over Flagstaff and Sedona and Sunset Crater – the whole goddamned show.'

'*Look down there!*' Stanford hissed.

Stanford looked down. He saw US 66. He saw the spot where Irving Jacobs had been found, the rocky earth all around it. Then he blinked and looked harder. A shiver ran down his spine. He suddenly saw the rippling soil, the concentric rings of dust and sand, the rings surrounding the spot where Irving had been found and running out a great distance. It was like the thumbprint of a giant, the rings like whorls on the earth, as if the dust and sand had been blown away by some awesome explosion. Stanford blinked and looked again. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. The thumbprint was half a mile in diameter, the earth scorched at its edges.

'Oh, my God!' Stanford said.

The helicopter climbed higher, turning away from the sun, and neither Stanford nor Epstein said a word as they flew back to Winslow.

CHAPTER TWO

The man who stepped off the luxury cruiser onto the Puerto Banus yacht harbour near Marbella, southern Spain, was tall and sophisticated, wearing a black shirt and slacks, his eyes hidden behind dark glasses, his hair silvery but plentiful, parted neatly on the left and falling down over an oddly seamless forehead. He stood briefly on the dock, surveying the massed boats of the rich, then he turned in a sharp, decisive manner and walked alongside the many restaurants. Most tables were taken, the clientele suntanned and elegant, wearing bikinis and gaudy shirts and sunglasses, gazing up at the mountains' haze. The man in black ignored them, walking slowly and thoughtfully, only stopping when he arrived at the Sinatra Bar, looking in, entering warily.

The interior was bright and cool, almost empty, quiet, one young lady at the far end of the bar, a single man near the entrance. This man was middle-aged, rather plump, dressed in a white suit, the jacket bulging slightly just above his left hip where a pistol was undoubtedly strapped. He glanced up and grinned, a practised smile, nervous, then he lightly patted the high stool to his left, his fingers glittering with rings.

'Ah,' he said, 'Mr Wilson!'

Wilson nodded curtly, but remained in the doorway, removing his glasses and blinking azure eyes, staring along the bright room. The young woman was tanned and lovely, blonde hair trailing down her spine, breasts and crotch emphasized by her bikini, the long legs crossed invitingly. Wilson stared at her, studied her, saw the indolence of the rich, and then, satisfied that she was

harmless, he stepped forward to take a high stool beside the white-suited man.

‘*Buenas días,*’ the white-suited man said. ‘It’s been a very quiet time, *señor*.’

‘That sounds promising,’ Wilson said.

‘I think so, Mr Wilson. There’s been nothing unusual at all. The work’s all been routine.’

‘No visitors?’

‘Not a knock on the door.’

‘I feel better each minute.’

A short, dark Spanish girl emerged from a door behind the bar; seeing Wilson, she started moving towards him. Wilson smiled pleasantly, but shook his head from side to side, and the girl, with a slight, knowing nod, turned away to clean glasses.

‘You’re not drinking?’ the man in white said. ‘Your trip didn’t give you a thirst?’

‘Not for wine, Fallaci. Just for rest. I am here to relax.’

Fallaci nodded and sipped his *vino,* his rings glittering around the glass, then he glanced at the young lady along the bar and slowly turned back to Wilson.

‘I had a telephone call this morning. From our friends in Arizona. They said to tell you that Irving Jacobs is dead. It’s been announced as a suicide.’

‘How unfortunate,’ Wilson said. ‘At least for him. I would like to leave now.’

Fallaci licked his lips, turned away and snapped his fingers, causing the Spanish girl to smile and walk up to him, blue-jeaned hips swaying sensually.

‘*Cuanto*?’ Fallaci said.

‘*Ciente pesetas, señor*.’

Fallaci put his money down on the counter. ‘*Muchas gracias*,’ he said.

Sliding his legs off the stool, he followed Wilson through the doorway, the sun blinding, flashing off the white walls, the rolling boats, the blue water. Fallaci blinked and squinted around him, at tanned thighs, a string-bikini, then he saw the upraised hand of Mr Wilson, heard the snap of his fingers.

‘Where’s the car?’ Wilson asked.

‘This way,’ Fallaci said.

‘We’re not in public now,’ Wilson said.

‘Sorry, sir. This way, sir.’

They walked along a narrow street, the high walls painted white, the balconies of the apartments overhead casting shadows around them. The street was cool and short, but opened out to a monstrous heat, a dazzling haze that enveloped the parking lot and shimmered over the dusty cars. Fallaci walked on ahead, his leather shoes kicking stones, one hand upraised in agitated motion, flicking sweat from his brow. He stopped at a black limousine, opened the rear door, waited patiently, let Wilson slip inside and settle down before closing the door. When this was done, he glanced about him, a portly figure, no longer suave, then he opened the driver’s door and clambered in and switched on the ignition.

‘How was Paraguay, sir?’

‘It was hot,’ Wilson said. ‘Now please get me there as quickly as possible. I have much work to do.’

Fallaci flushed, feeling reprimanded, released the hand brake, stepped on the gas, and the car moved off smoothly, winding out of the parking lot, eventually turning onto the road to Fuengirola and picking up speed.

Wilson sighed and sat back, glanced through the window, saw the traffic, the parched brown-and-ochre hills rolling up to the sky, desecrated by white-walled *urbanizationes*, the influx of foreign wealth. Wilson grimaced with distaste, lowered his gaze, looked straight ahead, saw the dark hair on the back of Fallaci's head, the road racing toward him. Then he smiled and leaned forward, pressed a button in the back of Fallaci's seat, heard a humming as the glass pane slid down and cut him off from his driver.

The rear of the car was soundproofed, air-conditioned, well cushioned, with a drinks cabinet, telephone and Video-TV recording system all built into the back of the front seats. There was a mirror above the cabinet. Wilson studied his own reflection. He saw a deeply tanned, strangely ageless face, blue eyes cold with intelligence. Wilson sighed, feeling removed from all his years, then he unhooked the cassette-recorder microphone and started to talk.

'One. General. The British Mercantile Airship Transportation Company, in collaboration with Plessey, are presently working on an experimental prototype of a Thermo Skyship. The Skyship, which has been developed under the general leadership of Rear Admiral David Kirke, is shaped like a flying saucer with its engines positioned right around the rim. Estimated diameter: six hundred and fifty feet. Approximate weight: five hundred tons. The machine is reputed to get its lift partly from helium and partly from hot air generated by the swivelling jet engines. Envisaged speed at the moment is one hundred miles per hour, but almost certainly this will be improved upon. The British Defence Ministry has expressed interest in this machine with a view to speeding the Rhine Army into battle in any future conflict; and it has been confirmed that the Royal Navy has also expressed interest in the possibility of using the Skyships for North Sea Oil defence… File for review.

'Confirmation received that for the past ten years the United States Air Force

has been observing and photographing the secret Soviet laboratory at Semipalitinsk where it is believed the Russians are developing an extremely powerful beam weapon capable of destroying intercontinental missiles at almost the speed of light. The beam is thought to comprise atomic or sub-atomic particles – electrons, protons or ions – equivalent to billions of volts of electricity and accelerated toward the target at just under one hundred and eighty thousand miles per second. John Allen, senior US government scientist, has stated that a weapon of this type now appears to be possible; and both George J. Keegan, head of USAF Intelligence, and Dr Willard Bennett, member of the US team that was obliged to abandon beam-weapon work in 1972, believe that the Russians are well ahead of the Americans in this field… Regular surveillance of the Semipalitinsk laboratory is recommended.

'In July of 1985 NASA plans to launch a new, solar-powered, ion-engine space craft whose purpose is to fly to Halley's Comet and circle Temple 2. A space shuttle will carry the spacecraft into Earth orbit and then a dual-engine Inertial Upper Stage booster will propel the one thousand six hundred kilogram probe into an interplanetary orbit, after which the fuel boosters will drop off and the solar-powered ion engine will take over the three-year, low-thrust voyage to Temple 2… File for review.'

Wilson switched the mike off, pursed his lips, glanced outside, saw the towering apartment blocks sweeping past, the mountains soaring beyond them. This stretch of road was ugly, scarred by hotels and building sites, the original villages now bustling, gaudy towns, filled with tourists and drifters. The old Spain was dead and the new expanded every day, spreading out along the Costa del Sol like a malignant cancer. It was the dawn of Democracy, that old dream that devoured itself, and Wilson, with his ruthless intelligence, was appalled by the sight of it. He a sighed, pursed his lips, heard the humming of the limousine, then sank deeper into his seat and switched the mike on and started talking again.

‘Two. Prosthetics. Work is progressing at a dangerous rate on the artificial heart, lung, gut and gill, as well as artificial cells, blood vessels, intestines and even skin. Artificial bones, joints and sockets are being used with increasing success, the main alloys being of the cobalt and chromium variety: tantalum, titanium, niobium and molybdenum. Blood vessels, heart valves, bone, skin, blood and the cornea of the eye have all been preserved artificially. Skin, stored in DSMO for periods of years, has been successfully grafted to the human body by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Bone frozen for years and then revived with cobalt radiation has also taken when grafted to the body. Likewise, red blood cells have been freeze-dried for years, and now tissue banks are disturbingly common. Indeed, it has been pointed out that the US Navy tissue bank recently supplied some three thousand square inches of human skin to Brazilian fire victims… Request further research.

‘External prosthetics. Myoelectric control is advancing every day, with the Soviets reportedly making the greatest advances in this field. Intelligence indicates that the Soviets have already perfected a hand-arm prosthesis in which all five fingers are capable of closing around objects of variable shape with the precision of a human hand. British scientists have developed, among other items, myoelectric arms with interchangeable hands; while in the United States a team of scientists and engineers from Harvard, MIT and Massachusetts General Hospital have developed a sophisticated myoelectric arm that moves at any angle, speed or force simply by being *thought* into action. This arm picks up muscle signals generated to the natural stump, transmits them to a small amplifier, and uses them to drive a compact electric motor; the machinery for all this is housed inside a flesh-colored, fiber-glass casing that resembles a real arm.

‘Researchers at the Powered Limbs Unit of West Hendon Hospital in England have come up with what amounts to an implantable electrode, or transmitter, called an Emgor. This uses a resonator circuit that does not require batteries to detect myoelectric signals, thus obviating the need for

frequent surgical intervention to replenish the power source. It is to be noted that amputees so treated are actually capable of *unconscious* gesticulations – and that similar lower-body prostheses have now been developed to the stage where some surgeons are willing to perform hemicorporectomies: amputation of the entire lower half of the body, including legs, rectum and genitalia. This procedure has already been offered to patients in a prominent New York hospital as an alternative to death by abdominal cancer… Request further research.'

The car turned off the main road, bumping over rough ground, and Wilson looked out to see the surrounding hills, the fields of olive trees and wheat. They passed a scattered *urbanizatione*, the villas whitewashed and gleaming, gardens parched by the sun, the earth hard, a fine dust on the Moorish walls. Wilson studied the place casually, noting the swimming pools and bikinis, the tanned limbs of the expatriates lounging in deck chairs, around low tables. Oblivious. And superfluous. The real world would pass them by. Wilson smiled and settled back, observed Mijas high above, this his blue eyes turned bright and intense when he started to talk again.

'Three. Gerontology. Dr Richard Hochschild of the Microwave Instrument Company of Del Mar, California, has discovered that adding DMAE to the drinking water of mice increases their life span significantly. Other researchers have successfully employed centro-phenoxine to delay lipofuscin buildup in the brain of guinea pigs; likewise, phenoxene is being used experimentally in France to improve the mental abilities of senile patients.

'Along the same lines, Dr Horace T. Poirier is closed to developing a number of compounds that increase life by as much as fifty percent in mice. These include Vitamin E, mercaptothylemine, BHT, Santoquin and sodium hypophosphite, an old drug used for the treatment of tuberculosis. Also being utilized is DMAE, dimethylaminoethalol, a lysome membrane stabilizer which strengthens cells against damage caused by lipofuscin accumulations… Eliminate Poirier.

‘An increasing number of scientists now believe that the program for ageing is encoded in the hypothalamus-pituitary system. Among these are Dr Joseph R. Wiseman of Chicago, who has successfully reactivated the estrus of aged female rats by stimulating the hypothalamus with electric impulses; he has also reactivated the ovarian cycles of the old females by feeding them L-Dopa, a dopamine stimulator also used in the treatment of Parkinson’s disease, as well as hormones such as progesterone, epinephrine and iproniazid… Eliminate Wiseman.

‘Dr Saul A. Terkel, director of the Gerontology Research Institute, Richmond, Virginia, now believes that if life-extension was to become a national priority like the space program, and if the Americans, Russians and Japanese were to join hands in a billion-dollar assault on aging and death, this could produce dramatic results in five years. Terkel has pointed out that such a program would cost no more than these countries now spend on the maintenance of old-age homes. Now, backed by the full authority of the Gerontology Research Institute, Terkel is lobbying Washington DC with disturbing success… Eliminate Terkel.’

The car climbed the mountain road, bouncing over large stones, passing modern *urbanizationes* and archaic farmhouses, just occasionally passing a Spaniard on a donkey, field hands bent in labor. Wilson frequently glanced out, observing the white haze of the sky, a thin ribbon of grey cloud above the mountains, the dizzying sweep of the valleys. The past was crumbling beneath the present, the future advancing to devour both, and Wilson sat there, recalling his many years, the broad terrains he had traveled. Then the limousine slowed down, took the left fork in the road, heading away from Mijas, toward Alhaurin el Grande, as Wilson closed his eyes and opened them again and talked into the microphone.

‘Four. Telesurgery and telepsychiatry. Telediagnosis is now being utilized between Massachusetts General Hospital and Boston Logan International Airport, between numerous California hospitals, and between two hospitals in

Edinburgh, Scotland. Also, a telesurgery linkup has been established between Massachusetts General Hospital and the Bedford Veteran's Administration Hospital eighteen miles away. In all of these areas the computer becomes more predominant.

'It is also to be noted that many bioengineers are now claiming that computer and human brain will soon be directly linked. Said R. M. Page of the US Naval Research Laboratory: "The information which a machine can obtain and store from a person in a few minutes will exceed the fruits of a lifetime of man-to-man communications." As to method: "The coupling mechanisms to carry out the functions will be myriad, including in some cases electrical connections to the body and to the brain. Some connections may be wireless, with imperceptible transmitting elements implanted in the body."

'Further note: Geneticists Harold P. Klinger and Orlando J. Miller, speaking before an international symposium on fetology, suggested that what was needed in the United States was a national registry of hereditary abnormalities to help prevent the conception of defective children. This system would have to be implemented via all newborn children when their skin and blood samples would, as a matter of course, be fed into a computerized genetic scanner which would immediately establish the presence of any chromosomal abnormalities and print them out on data cards that would be kept on permanent file in Washington DC. Computer analysis of current ethical attitudes on this subject is required. Please action.'

Wilson switched off the microphone and gazed through the window to see the mountain village of Coin. The car went through the village, barely noticed by the Spaniards, and traveled on down a steep, winding road, between shadowing rows of olive trees. Wilson leaned toward the console, pressed a button, ejected the cassette tape, dropped the tape into his shirt pocket and then sat back impatiently. The car eventually emerged to sunlight, to flat fields strewn with rubble, and moved uphill and then leveled out and headed straight for Wilson's house. It was hidden between parched hills, well

protected by a high-walled compound, the walls featureless, made of rectangular breeze-blocks that had never been painted. The walls were twenty feet high, their tops covered with barbed wire, the only entrance being a wooden door broad enough for the car. The whole compound was solid, completely hiding the house within, standing four-square between the surrounding hills like some stark, lunar fortress.

The car stopped in front of the compound and Wilson remained in the rear seat while Fallaci walked up to the door. Wilson silently watched him, saw him pressing the buzzer, read his lips when he talked into the box and gave the code word for entrance. Fallaci then returned to the car, slipped inside, waited patiently; then the door moved up on metal grooves and Fallaci drove inside.

'Here we are, sir,' he said.

Wilson sat on impatiently, drumming his fingers on the seat, and Fallaci flushed and hurried out of the car and opened the rear door. Wilson clambered out, stretched himself, looked around him, neither pleased nor disturbed to be back, simply checking the compound.

The compound was empty, graveled earth between walls and house, no flowers, no trees, no outbuildings… just open space to be crossed. There were spy-cameras on all the walls, turning back and forth, high up, their lenses shaded from the sun, equipped with infra-red beams for night-time viewing. The house was linear, functional, a rectangle of brick and glass, about a hundred feet long, about fifty feet wide, the roof flat, the structure two stories high, the two front doors made of solid steel. The numerous windows were broad and high, made of bullet-proof, one-way glass. Constantly moving above each of the windows were more scanning devices.

Fallaci approached the front door, glanced at Wilson, pressed a button; the door opened and Wilson entered the building, and Fallaci then followed him. The latter closed the door behind him, pressed another button to reset the

alarms, then stood there with his hands behind his back, his full attention on Wilson.

‘I’ll have a fruit and nut cereal,’ Wilson said. ‘And a glass of white wine. Very dry. Very cold.’

Fallaci nodded and departed, disappearing through a nearby door, then Wilson walked along a corridor to his study. The walls were bland and impersonal, covered in spray-on felt fabric, no decoration, just digital control panels filled with flickering green numerals. Wilson studied them on the move, noting temperatures, power levels, then he turned into his study, into silence, subdued lighting, the fiber-glass Jacobean oak panels looking just like the real thing. He sat behind his desk, at a panel of tiered buttons, pressed a button and then sat back in his chair and studied the screens above him.

There were six screens in all, banked in two rows of three, all set into the wall in front of the desk and wired to a scanner. There were scanners all over the building, outside and inside the compound walls, in the bedrooms, in the toilets, in the garage, and they were all wired for sound. Wilson surveyed the whole place from here, controlled its temperature and lighting; he could open and shut doors at wall, plunge the place into darkness.

The screens flickered into life, the pictures monochrome but sharp, showing the kitchen, the servants’ quarters, the laboratory, each from a variety of different angles. The spy-cameras moved constantly, showing the whole of each room, and Wilson switched the different receivers on and off, surveying the whole house. For the most part it was empty, the rooms vague in subdued lighting, the walls covered in fibre-glass and spray-on felt, the furniture sparse and functional. The building was almost futuristic, oddly sterile and impersonal, an abode for transient guests, the silence heightening the strangeness.

Wilson switched back to the kitchen, observed Fallaci and the crippled dwarf, both standing in front of a gleaming cooker unit, Fallaci mopping his sweaty

brow. The dwarf was a disgusting sight, his spine bent, his legs twisted, his right hand a metal claw a metal claw that was strapped to his arm with wires running into a small pack at his waist. It was a primitive prosthetic and the dwarf was tired of it, forever begging Wilson to fit him with a new one, always being refused. Now Wilson smiled bleakly, reached down to press a button, saw Fallaci and the dwarf look up promptly at the camera above them.

'Hello, Ruediger,' Wilson said to the dwarf. 'How are you feeling these days?'

'Ah, ah,' the dwarf stuttered, his metal claw opening and closing spasmodically, his eyes blinking above a queerly flattened nose and thick, dribbling lips. 'Ah, ah… all right… You know, sir… *all right*… I think… I mean… *sleepless*.'

'Sleepless? Wilson said. 'You mean nightmares?'

The metal claw waved indecisively, hinges opening and closing, passing over the luminous, frightened eyes to scrape saliva from the dribbling lips.

'Ah… nightmares… Ah, yes, sir… bad, ah… *very* bad… Every night, *all* nights, ah… *nightmares*… Can't *sleep* at night.'

'That doesn't sound good,' Wilson said, still smiling bleakly. 'When did this start?'

The metal claw waved more frantically, the dribbling lips opening and closing, the crippled dwarf in a positive anguish of speaking, trying to force the words out.

'Ah, ah… *start*? When you left, sir… *Always*, sir… always then… When you leave… the fear… dreadful *nightmares*… too frightened to leave here.'

'You should have gone out,' Wilson said. 'I told you: you can leave anytime

you wish. I'm sure the break would have helped you.'

'Ah, ah… *grateful*, sir… Tried to go out… but couldn't do it… Too frightened… *very* frightened… of what's out there… Too many bad dreams.' The claw opened and closed, steel fingers snapping at air, the dwarf's head rolling helplessly on stooped shoulders, lips dribbling constantly. 'So glad you're back, sir… So relieved… *Please*, sir… want you… *help me*!'

'Go to your room,' Wilson said soothingly. 'Close your eyes. Try to sleep.'

'Please, sir… Please, no… The *nightmares*!'

'No more nightmares,' Wilson said soothingly. 'I am back. No more bad dreams.'

The dwarf trembled with emotion, waved his claw, muttered his gratitude, then turning away, glancing nervously at Fallaci, he shuffled out of the kitchen. Fallaci remained where he was, still looking up at the camera, a sharp image on the montor screen above Wilson's blue eyes.

'He's been orderly?' Wilson asked.

'Yes, sir, he's been fine. I tried to force him out once or twice, but he was too scared to go. It worked just like you said it would.'

'Good,' Wilson said. 'I'll have my meal in ten minutes. I'll relax for half an hour after that. You can send the girl up then.'

'Yes, sir,' Fallaci said.

Wilson pressed another button, putting the monitors on automatic, then he withdrew the cassette tape from his shirt pocket and slotted it into the console. When the recorder turned itself on, Wilson started to talk again.

'Five. Brain research. Electrical stimulation of the brain, ESB, has recently

become dangerously innovative. The suggestion that computer-controlled electrodes be implanted in the brains of babies a few months after birth, thus robotizing them for life, has already been made by Curtiss R. Schafer in a paper he presented to the National Electronics Conference in Chicago some time ago – and while such a suggestion may have been made half in jest, it is now clear that such devices have moved out of the realms of animal experimentation and into the human arena with volunteer subjects wired for electro-sleep, electro-prostheses, electro-vision, electro-analgesia, electro-anaesthesia and, increasingly, electro-sociology.

‘Dr Jose M. R. Delgado, professor of physiology at the Yale University School of Medicine, and Dr James Olds of McGill University in Canada, have both experimented with the so-called pleasure centers of the human brain, as has Dr Robert G. Heath of Tulane University. Meanwhile, Dr C. Norman Shealy, chief of neurosurgery at the Gundersen Clinic in La Crosse, Wisconsin, has perfected electro-analgesic techniques to the stage where they are now being applied to humans, mainly through the implanting of a point-eight to one-point-two stimulating electrode in the spine, rather than in the brain. Regarding electro-sociology, a team of doctors at Massachusetts General Hospital and Boston General Hospital have pacified violent human subjects by the implantation of electrodes into the rostral part of the caudate nucleus of the brain. It is requested that all these people be placed under immediate surveillance.’

Wilson switched the recorder off and sat back looking thoughtful, then he stood up and crossed the room to place his hand over a control box. The opaque box glowed red and the paneled walls slid apart to reveal a linked audio-visual computer system, a mass of monitor screens and controls. Wilson pressed the MODE button, another button marked VISUAL/RECORD, and a monitor screen, six feet by six, crackled into life. Wilson then turned a directional knob and saw a door, a white wall; he kept turning until he saw the crippled dwarf stretched out on his bed. The dwarf was still fully clothed, a pair of blue denims, a checkered shirt, and he twisted

and turned uncomfortably on the bed, moaning loudly and sweating. His eyes were luminous with fear, his metal claw opening and closing spasmodically, and when he glanced around the room he seemed to shrink from the blank, white-painted walls.

‘Stay still,’ Wilson said, speaking softly. ‘Relax. Just lie quietly.’

The dwarf froze where he lay, his large eyes fixed on the camera, as Wilson turned another knob marked ZOOM to see the dwarf’s face in close-up. The dwarf’s eyes were now filled with hope, beads of sweat shone on his nose, and his tongue crept out tentatively from his lips to lick up the saliva. Wilson studied the screen and smiled, flicked a switch, turned a knob, and the dwarf’s head started jerking, the eyes widening, then closing, until his head seemed to sink into the pillow, the lips shaped in a crooked smile.

Wilson studied the large screen, observed the dwarf in sleep, turned the sound up and heard even breathing, a heart beating now beating normally. He then looked at the ECG, noted the subdued, irregular flickering, and satisfied that the dwarf would sleep well, he turned the monitor off.

Moving away from the console, Wilson crossed the study and went through a doorway, into an adjoining, L-shaped lounge. Covering one wall of this room was an enormous ITT television set, a Neal tape-recorder, a Philips video-recorder, and a bank of expensive Revox hi-fi equipment. Facing this luxurious system, about fifteen feet from it, was a low settee with a bank of switches on one arm. Wilson sat down here, found a list of video programs, studied them and then pressed the switch that was wired to the kitchen. There was a soft humming sound and part of the paneled ceiling descended, dropping down until it covered Wilson’s legs and formed a small table. Resting on the table was a bowl of fruit and nut cereal, with a glass of white wine. Very dry. Very cold.

Wilson pressed another switch marked VIDEO/PLAY/3, then he picked up his spoon and started eating as the TV screen brightened. He watched the

program as he ate, his blue gaze intense, occasionally rubbing his unusually smooth, unlined forehead, concentrating ferociously. It was a pre-recorded tape, a compilation of various programs, a condensed survey of all the scientific and political events that he had missed during his absence. He finished his meal, but kept watching, his brain recording, calculating, and only when the program had ended did he appear to relax. He pressed another button, the table ascended into the ceiling, and then he stood up and languidly stretched himself and went into his bedroom.

This room was like all the others, the lighting subdued, the temperature moderate, a few expressionist paintings on the walls, more control panels flickering. Wilson undressed himself, his body lean but tense with muscle, lengthy scars running across his back and chest, and stepped into the shower. Like all else in this building, the water's temperature was preset; the water also contained an olive-based detergent that negated the need for soap. Wilson stood there for some time, his brain disseminating information, then he stepped out, dried himself with a warmed towel, and then stretched out on the bed.

There were glass panels in the ceiling, hiding a Nordic solarium; when Wilson pressed another button, the glass panels slide apart and the solarium came on automatically, beaming down infrared rays. Wilson lay very still, his eyes covered by protective glasses, breathing deeply, holding his breath for long periods, letting it out only slowly. His tense muscles relaxed, his scarred body seemed to glow, and then, precisely thirty minutes later, the solarium switched itself off.

The girl arrived shortly after, opening the door with some care, looking at him and seeing him nod and padding quietly toward him. She was in her bare feet, her body wrapped in a loose sarong, her jet-black hair trailing down her spine, shining under the soft lights. Wilson remained on the bed, completely naked, looking up at her, his azure gaze revealing no more than a cool curiosity. The girl was slim, very young, probably in her late teens, her brown

eyes and copper-toned skin suggesting a half-caste Eurasian. She stood beside Wilson's bed, her head bowed, her hands clasped, and Wilson remained there, studying her at length, quietly pleased by her beauty.

'What's your name?' he finally said.

'Rita,' the girl whispered.

'You know what I require?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Good. Please proceed.'

The girl loosened her sarong, let it fall to the floor, and stood there, her naked body gleaming, covered lightly with oil. Her legs were long and slim, her waist tiny, her breasts full, the triangle of hair slightly shaved, quite smooth, almost velvety. Wilson looked her up and down, his gaze calm, analytical, then he nodded and the girl smiled with gratitude and sank to her knees.

She leaned over the bed, her hair falling across his loins, then she held his flaccid penis in one hand and slid it into her mouth. He watched her, smiling thinly, feeling her lips, her rolling tongue, her teeth pinching gently, imperceptibly, her mouth wet, a warm glove. Wilson lay there and smiled, a remote smile, half regretful, then he reached out and touched the girl's head, felt it move up and down. Her wet lips, her rolling tongue; he tried to feel her and respond, gazing down at her shining, outspread hair, trying to will himself into her. The girl was expert, well schooled, her mouth working its ways on him, but the distance he had traveled, all the years, again rendered him impotent. The girl eventually raised her head, his flaccid penis in her hand, her brown eyes enlarging, lit by fear, her face begging forgiveness.

'It's all right,' Wilson said quietly. 'It's not your fault. Just use the machine.'

The girl was visibly relieved, standing upright, smiling gratefully, then she

went to the wall beside the bed and pressed an imbedded button. Two paneled doors slid apart, exposing a walk-in cupboard, and the naked girl entered and then emerged with a small, mobile console. Wilson closed his eyes again, heard her movements, felt her hands; she dabbed the paste on his forehead, on his cranium and temples, then she fixed the thin electrodes to his skull and switched on the machine.

An imperceptible current. A flow of energy through his brain. He relaxed, gave himself to the machine and felt his body responding. Opening his eyes, he saw himself: his erect, engorged penis; the naked girl leaning over his penis, tying something around it. He closed his eyes and surrendered, the years falling away from him, voluptuous visions and perverse, buried fantasies rising up to envelop him. Fierce reality and heat; the sublime, unraveled flesh… he saw it and touched it and felt it and returned to his youth. The girl breathed in his face, her tongue slipping between his lips; she moved down him, down his body, her lips and tongue busily working at him, sliding over him, burning him. The visions filled him and released him, engorged his penis and drained it, and then he gasped and slowly opened his eyes and felt the inflowing peace.

The room seemed a lot brighter. The naked girl was very real. He watched her as she soaped his sperm-drenched loins, washed him clean, dried him carefully. When she had finished, she straightened up, her dark, oil-slicked body gleaming, looking at him, at once nervous and questioning, her head bowed automatically. Wilson smiled at her and nodded, indicating that she could leave, so she pushed the console back into the cupboard, closed the doors and left the room.

Wilson put on his dark glasses, pressed a button and then stretched out; the glass panels in the ceiling slid apart to expose the solarium. Wilson lay there for some time, trying to relax, his eyes closed, but eventually his restless intellect forced him upright and made him start work again. He rolled off the bed, put on his dressing gown, then entered the study and sat down and

turned on the tape-recorder. He spoke quietly, precisely, academically.

‘Dr George D. Schroeder of the American Institute of Orgonomy, Seattle, writing in the English magazine, *New Scientist*, has stated that orgone energy weather engineering techniques are an important new element in the environmental struggle. Schroeder has finally received government backing for a lengthy program of investigations into weather engineering possibilities. Already he has discovered that orgone energy exists as a mass-free energy in the soil, water and atmosphere of Earth, and that it is manipulable by mechanical cloud-busters, more commonly called CLBs. It is to be noted that so-called *tuned* CLBs have proved their value not only in weather engineering, but in more than one UFO investigation. This has to be stopped.’

Wilson stopped talking, sat back, stroked his chin, his silvery-grey hair falling over his blue eyes, across that smooth, unlined forehead. He gazed at the opposite wall, at the banked monitors and video-recorders, and his bright, mathematical brain considered all of the options. He had once met Schroeder, had found him tough and intelligent, a possibility that might yet be tapped, a candidate for the future. It was a pity of lose Schroeder, but he didn’t have much choice: the good professor now had government backing and that smacked of progress. Wilson gazed across the room, pursed his lips, stroked his chin, then he sighed and ran his fingers through his hair and spoke quietly, implacably.

‘Eliminate Schroeder.’

CHAPTER THREE

The Audi 100 GL, all white and polished and gleaming, came up over the top of the hill and rolled down through the narrow, gray street in no particular hurry. Richard stepped forward quickly, his thumb high in the air, but the gleaming white Audi purred past, splashing water across him.

‘Oh, shit,’ Richard murmured.

He lowered his thumb and wiped rain from his forehead, glancing up to see the leaden gray sky and the dark, drifting clouds. At least the rain had stopped; there was that, if nothing else. Richard shivered, adjusted his knapsack, checked the camera strap around his neck, then, soaked to the bone, his hair samply plastered to his head, he turned and walked along the village street, past a row of semi-terraced houses.

The road opened out at the end of the village, curving uphill past a seventeenth-century church, dominated by green hills. The Audi had stopped in front of the church, its engine cutting in and out, the car jerking roughly as it misfired and tapered off into silence.

‘Good for you,’ Richard murmured.

He wiped rain from his beard, adjusted the knapsack again, then sauntered in a deliberately casual manner toward the stalled car. An arm emerged from the driver’s window, suntanned, definitely feminine, the fingers fanning out to drop a cigaret in front of Richard’s feet.

‘Jesus!’ the woman softly exclaimed.

Richard stopped immediately, looked down, saw her green eyes, a wave of shining red hair tumbling around pouting lips. The women clenched her right fist and lightly hammered the steering wheel, then licked her upper lip and glanced at Richard, her fine eyebrows raised. Richard smiled encouragingly at her, ran his fingers through his long hair, his blue denims and jacket still wet, the cold creeping into him.

‘Can I help?’ he asked.

The woman studied him for a moment, gently biting her lower lip, then, satisfied that he looked sane, she shrugged her shoulders and nodded.

‘I haven’t a clue what happened,’ she said. ‘It just suddenly cut out.’

Richard shivered and glanced about him, saw the green hills of Devon, then he let the knapsack slide from his shoulders and fall to the ground.

‘It might be nothing,’ he said. ‘A bit of damp. Something jammed. It probably isn’t anything serious. I’ll look under the hood.’

The woman stared thoughtfully at him. Her gaze appeared to be unfocused. She had a thin, suntanned face, sophisticated, rather weary, fine eyebrows arching above the green eyes, lips unpainted and moist.

‘Get it started and I’ll give you a lift,’ she said. ‘Cars quite simply baffle me.’

‘It didn’t cut out gradually?’

‘No,’ the woman said. ‘I saw the lightning and then the engine cut out. Does that make any sense to you?’

Richard glanced at the gray sky. ‘Lightning?’ he said. ‘Are you sure? *I* didn’t see any lightning. I don’t think it was that.’

The woman shrugged again. ‘It *looked* like lightning. Anyway, that’s when the car cut out. I just don’t understand it.’

‘Not lightning,’ Richard said. ‘There was definitely no lightning. You probably saw the lights of a plane. Let me look at the engine.’

The woman shrugged a third time, then leaned across to her left, her hand reaching down to the floor. Richard shivered, feeling cold, hearing the snapping of the lock, then he walked to the front of the car and raised the wide, heavy hood. The engine appeared to be normal. He told the woman to try the ignition. When she did so, the car roared back into life and then ticked over smoothly.

Richard stepped back, surprised. He glanced past the raised hood. The woman was leaning out of the window, the wind blowing her red hair.

‘What did you do?’ she asked.

‘Nothing,’ Richard confessed.

‘You must have done *something*,’ the woman said.

‘I just looked at it,’ Richard said. He threw her a grin, slammed the hood down, then walked back and leaned toward the woman, his gaze fixed on the warning lights on the dashboard.

‘It looks okay,’ he said. ‘The battery light’s out. It must have been something pretty simple and it’s obviously cured itself.’

The woman smiled at him, her green eyes unfocused. ‘You just looked at it and it worked,’ she said. ‘You must be a charmer.’

Richard blushed and grinned shyly. ‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘Anyway, it’s working again, so do I get that lift now?’

‘Where are you headed?’

‘St. Ives.’

‘You’ve got it,’ she said. ‘Put your knapsack in the boot. It’s not locked. Let’s go while the going’s good.’

Richard grinned with pleasure, a boyish grin, blue eyes brightening, then he picked up his knapsack, glanced briefly at the nearby church, and walked to the rear of the car, glad that it had stalled. He opened the trunk, heaved the knapsack in, closed the lid and then returned to the woman, looking down at her upturned face. She had lit another cigaret, her lips pouting, blowing smoke, and the green of her eyes was slightly bloodshot, her gaze still unfocused.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Get in.’

‘Front or rear?’ Richard asked.

‘I don’t like to talk over my shoulder, so get in beside me.’

Richard walked around the car, opened the door and slipped in, closed the door and sank into his seat, appreciating the luxury. The dashboard was polished wood, the seats a deep maroon velours, and the woman, in her knee-length dark dress, seemed to match it all perfectly. Her red hair was long and lustrous, tumbling down to her shoulders, emphasizing the shifting green of her eyes when she glanced briefly at him. She put her foot on the clutch, the dress tightening, drawing upward, and Richard glimpsed the shadowed outline of her thighs as she turned the ignition on.

‘It’s still working,’ she said.

Richard nodded his agreement, clasped his hands and unclasped them, as the woman pressed down on the accelerator and the car started moving. The sodden, green hills, the dripping trees, the brooding clouds above the

unwinding road… Richard kept his gaze fixed on the scenery, feeling tired and unreal.

The woman drove in a careless manner, averaging fifty miles an hour, her right hand manipulating the steering wheel, her left holding the cigaret, the lips pouting when she exhaled the smoke, her breasts rising and falling. Richard kept glancing sideways, attracted to her, feeling furtive, surprised that he could harbour such notions for a woman so old. Well, not really so old: probably in her late thirties. Nevertheless, she was sexy, her legs long, her breasts firm, and Richard flushed when she suddenly stared at him with her slightly bloodshot, unfocused, cat-like green eyes.

‘What’s your name?’ she asked.

‘Richard… Richard Watson.’

‘A student?’

‘Yes,’ Richard said. ‘I go to the Art College in Hornsey. I want to be a designer.’

‘Hornsey?’

‘London.’

‘Ah, yes,’ the woman said. ‘North London. I’m not keen on that area.’

She drove in silence for another minute, breathing deeply, exhaling smoke, and Richard shifted uneasily in his seat, trying to keep his eyes off her.

‘A designer,’ she said eventually. ‘What kind of designer?’

‘Magazines,’ Richard said. ‘That kind of thing. At least that’s what I’d like to start with.’

The woman looked at him and smiled, blinked her eyes, coughed a little.

Richard glanced down to see her silken legs tapering into the high-heeled shoes.

‘Why are you going to St. Ives?’ she asked.

‘Just a holiday,’ Richard said. ‘A friend of mine owns a holiday cottage and he’s letting me use it.’

The woman smiled again, lips pouting, blowing smoke; the smoke swam in a haze around Richard, making him cough.

‘An art student,’ the woman said.

‘That’s right,’ Richard said.

‘All art students drink,’ the woman said. ‘At least that’s what I’ve heard.’ She put her cigaret in her mouth, inhaled, blew the smoke out, held the steering whee lightly in her free hand, the wet hills whipping past her. ‘Well?’ she asked abruptly.

‘What?’ Richard responded.

‘Is it true that most art students drink?’

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Richard said.

He coughed into his fist, slightly embarrassed by the drift of her conversation, and tried not to look at the breasts thrusting out from her tight dress. The woman was obviously well off, a bit jaded, worldly wise, but her strange, oblique statements filled him with a sense of foreboding. Thinking that she might be drunk, he glanced at her bloodshot eyes. Though she looked drawn and certainly tired, he still thought her sexy.

Richard shifted uneasily. A guilty flush burned his cheeks. He thought of Jenny back in London, of the two weeks ahead of him, and he silently cursed

his primitive lust and wondered how men survived it.

‘Do *you* drink?’ the woman asked.

‘When I can afford it,’ Richard said.

‘Good,’ the woman said. ‘I’d rather not drink alone. You’ll find a flask of gin in the glove compartment. I think we should share it. Shake off the cold at least.’

Richard turned his head slightly, glanced at her, saw her eyes, twin pools of green flecked with red, and was convinced of her drunkenness. He turned away just as quickly, desiring her, feeling foolish, pulled the lid of the glove compartment down and found two hip flasks, one on top of the other.

‘The bottom flask,’ the woman said. ‘The one on top is empty. I get tired when I drive.’

Taking note of that odd remark, Richard removed the top flask, withdrew the one beneath it, unscrewed the cap and held the flask out to the women. She shook her head from side to side, her red hair like a flame.

‘You first,’ she said quietly.

Richard shrugged and drank some gin, felt it burning down inside him, warming him, making his head swim, alleviating his weariness. He wiped his lips and burped a little, passed the flask to the woman; she stubbed her cigaret out, took the flask, her other hand still on the steering wheel. Richard watched her drinking. The shining red hair framed her face. When she finished, she gave the flask back to him and placed her free hand on the steering wheel.

‘Have another,’ she said.

They both drank too quickly, passing the flask back and forth. The A30 ran

past Dartmoor, through Featherford and Fowley, stretched ahead through the sodden hills and fields, climbing languidly and rolling downhill again. They saw little of all this, both involved in their drinking, time dissolving as the drink took command and made them feel even more unreal. Richard studied the woman. He thought of Jenny back in London. This thought, with its residue of guilt, crossed his mind and then passed on.

‘You didn’t see the lightning,’ the woman said obliquely. ‘I just don’t understand that.’

Richard reached into his pocket, withdrew a cigaret, lit it and then glanced at the woman, wondering what she was talking about. The woman returned his gaze, her green eyes bloodshot and unfocused, while the car, offering a smooth, rhythmic humming, rolled on through the desolate countryside.

‘Where are you going?’ Richard asked.

‘To Bodmin,’ the woman said. ‘I live in St. Nicholas. It’s a very small place, very quiet… Without London, I’d die.’

Richard didn’t reply. The woman seemed even more distracted. Richard scratched his forehead and glanced out the window and noted that the drifting clouds were thinning. A pearly gray haze broke through, striations of weak light beaming down, fanning out, fanning over the wet fields and the stark, Neolithic remains.

‘What time is it?’ the woman asked.

Richard checked his wristwatch. ‘Ten to six,’ he said. ‘Around that… give or take a few minutes.’

‘You didn’t see it,’ the woman said.

‘The lightning?’

‘The light. It was obviously some kind of bright light. I keep thinking about it.’

Richard shivered, feeling cold again. ‘There was no lightning,’ he insisted. ‘No thunder, no lightning – just the rain. You must have seen an airplane.’

‘With lights?’

‘With lights.’

‘In the daylight?’

‘That’s right.’ Richard drank some more gin and passed the flask to the woman. He saw the scepticism in her eyes and looked back at the onrushing road. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘So you saw a bright light. You saw a flash – a plane reflecting the sunlight. I think that’s what it was.’

He sighed – too loudly. The woman’s gaze turned toward him. She shrugged and put the flask to her lips while driving dangerously fast.

‘No,’ she said. ‘It was too quick for that. It just appeared in a flash and then disappeared.’

Richard shook his head wearily, feeling drunk, slightly disturbed, staring out at the cold, descending evening, at the vast, bloody sky. The sun was sinking beyond the moors, a fiery orb, large and luminous, melting slowly, spreading out along the low hills in two streams of pulsating flame.

‘Not possible,’ Richard murmured. ‘Just not possible. You must have imagined it.’

The woman didn’t reply. Her red hair reached her breasts. The car hummed and vibrated, an abstract, seductive rhythm, the bleak hills of the moors rolling past, the road unwinding in front of them. Richard looked and was held, saw the marshlands and quarries, the Neolithic stones silhouetted in that

fierce, bloody sky. It was the landscape of a dream, serenely beautiful, yet ominous, and it made Richard shiver and lower his gaze, wondering why it disturbed him.

‘I think I’m drunk,’ he murmured.

‘Already?’

‘Yes.’

‘You must have been tired,’ the woman said. ‘Lie back… Try to sleep.’

Richard stubbed his cigaret out, put his head back on the seat, closed his eyes and felt the drowsiness creep over him, almost embalming him. His thoughts scattered and spun, became streaming stars, dark shapes, the past and present in one, as a shifting kaleidoscope: the cluttered rooms of the art college, a nude model in a chair, Jenny’s brown eyes, the woman’s flaming hair, the swirling mist over shadowed hills. He fell in and out of sleep, felt a langorous desire, saw the tight dress on the woman’s shapely thighs, Jenny’s steady, accusing gaze. Guilt and lust made him restless. His eyes fluttered and opened. He felt the woman’s fingers at his elbow, tugging sharply, incessantly.

‘There it is!’ she said. ‘*Look*!’

Richard shook himself awake. The car vibrated beneath him. He glanced briefly at the woman, saw her green eyes, the red hair, glimpsed the pink bud of her tongue between her teeth and then looked at the sky. The sun was sinking in the west, a crimson orb above the hills, the sky a molten stream of red and blue, the clouds drifting away from him. Richard looked all around him. He saw nothing unusual. He looked back at the woman, saw her bloodshot, glinting eyes, and wondered just how much she had drank before picking him up.

‘There’s *what*?’ he said.

The woman whispered something, shook her head and smacked the steering wheel. ‘Damn it,’ she said, ‘it was there. I just saw it! *That light*!’

Richard rolled his eyes mockingly. ‘The lightning?’ he said.

‘No!’ she snapped. ‘Not lightning. Something else. A streak of light. It just passed us.’

‘Passed us?’

‘It crossed our path. It flew east to west. A long streak of light. Like a tadpole. I just blinked and it disappeared.’

‘A meteor,’ Richard suggested.

‘You think so?’

‘I think so.’

‘Maybe you’re right,’ the woman said. ‘I don’t know… It seemed strange.’

She shook her head from side to side, her eyes brighter, less bloodshot, flitting from left to right in nervous spasms, surveying the twilight sky. Richard stared at her, disturbed, wondering if she was hallucinating, now aware that she had really drank a lot and was dangerously tired. Then he looked up at the sky. He did it almost against his will. He saw drifting gray clouds, the crimson fire of the sinking sun, vaporous ribbons of mist along the hills, the lonely splendour of Bodmin Moor.

‘We’re in Cornwall,’ he said.

‘You’re a bright boy,’ the woman said. ‘We’ve been in Cornwall for the past thirty minutes and you’ve finally noticed.’

Richard flushed at her sarcasm. ‘I’m pretty sleepy,’ he said. ‘I’m tired and the gin just knocked me out. I can hardly keep my eyes open.’

The woman appeared not to have heard him. She kept looking all around her. Her green eyes were too bright, framed by flaming red hair, and she kept licking nervously at her upper lip, her tanned brow furrowed anxiously. Her tension was contagious, reaching out to touch Richard; he glanced around and saw the moors, the hills rushing past the car, rising and falling away into shadow, looking ancient and frightening. Richard shivered again. He suddenly felt oddly haunted. He stared obliquely at the sun, at that sinking ball of fire, and the light spread out and filled his line of vision and made his eyes sparkle.

‘Why strange?’ he asked.

‘Pardon?’

‘You said that the light you saw seemed strange. What did you mean by that?’

The woman’s eyes turned toward him, too bright, no longer bloodshot, took him in and then turned back to the road and blinked repeatedly, nervously.

‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘Think,’ Richard said. ‘Let’s assume it wasn’t a meteor or a plane. What do you *think* you saw?’

The woman took a deep breath, nervously licked her upper lip, then raised her left hand, spread her fingers and patted her hair.

‘It was very fast,’ she said. ‘It was very close the first time. The first time I just saw a bright flash and I assumed it was lightning. The next time it was different: it was farther away. It was fast – a lot faster than a plane – and it seemed unnaturally bright. It flew from east to west. It shot across and disappeared. And it didn’t really fly out of sight: it just seemed to blink out. It wasn’t a plane. I know it couldn’t have been a plane. It was strange. It wasn’t

a meteor. It appeared to be… *climbing*.'

Richard felt ill. His head was light and he felt feverish. He wiped his lips with the back of his hand, glancing vaguely around him.

'*Climbing*?' he said.

'You're always repeating what I say.'

'It was faster than a plane and it was climbing? Are you sure you saw right?'

'I'm not *that* drunk,' the woman said. 'I think I know what I saw. That light was very bright, very fast, and the damned thing was… *ascending*.'

'Any noise?' Richard asked.

'Not a sound,' the woman said. 'It just shot across the sky, in front of the car, and then it blinked out… making no sound at all.'

Richard glanced around him, saw the desolate, timeless moors, sludge-like clouds drifting over the misty hills, the sky a darkening crimson haze. There was nothing up there. The woman was probably hallucinating. She was obviously very tired, she'd had too much to drink, and now she was starting to fall apart and see things that weren't there.

This thought disturbed Richard. He wanted to get out of the car. He didn't want to end up in a ditch with his head through the windscreen. Hoping to avoid the subject, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep. He slipped in and out of consciousness, his head spinning, stomach churning; he thought of Jenny back in London, of the cottage in St. Ives, of the woman's red hair and green eyes, her tongue licking her upper lip. These visions were relentless, materializing and disappearing, giving way to streaming stars and spinning suns, to white lights in a black void. Richard shivered and muttered incoherently. A bolt of panic lanced through him. He almost groaned aloud, but checked himself, shook his head and licked his dry lips, then spiraled

back up through the darkness and opened his eyes again.

‘What on earth…?’

The woman glanced at him, shook her head in bewilderment, pressed her foot on the accelerator and changed gears as the car coughed and spluttered. The engine roared and then cut out. The woman cursed and pumped the pedal. The engine spluttered again and then was silent as the car rolled downhill. The woman turned the ignition key, changed gears, but nothing happened. The car rolled down the hill, its wheels hissing in the silence, then it stopped where the road leveled out and its headlights blinked off.

‘I don’t believe this. *What’s wrong*?’

The woman shook her head and angrily smacked the steering wheel. She turned the ignition key a few more times and still nothing happened. Cursing, she looked at Richard. He shrugged and stared outside. He saw the blood-red sky, the gnarled, silhouetted trees, a nearby circle of Neolithic stones that made him think of other worlds. Richard felt himself shivering. The silence seemed to be vibrating. He gulped and licked his lips, his heart racing inexplicably, then he turned and stared hard at the woman and imagined a roaring.

Not a roaring… Something else… A strange, nerve-tingling humming. Richard blinked and saw that huge pulsating sun, the light shifting, expanding. ‘Oh, my God!’ Richard whispered. He abruptly forgot what he was doing. The sun expanded and became a white sheet that blotted out the whole sky. Richard gasped and knew fear. He pushed the woman against her door. He saw her hands darting up to cover her ears, the sky beyond her a silvery haze.

‘*Jesus Christ*!’ Richard hissed.

It came over the nearest hill, over the Neolithic stones, a fierce, incorporeal

luminescence that spread out and moved forward. Richard stared and was blinded, turned away and looked again, heard a loud, almost physical humming, felt the sound, was crushed by it. The woman shrieked and shook her head, her hair falling around her face, bent forward, huddled up, her head touching her knees, trying to hide in her seat. The noise increased and the light expanded, swept across them, filled the car, and Richard gasped and felt a sudden scorching heat that made him howl and double over, just like the woman.

His head touched the woman's head. The whole car started shaking. The engine roared into life and then cut out again and left only the sound of the woman's sobbing. Richard retched. He felt the burning of his face. He touched the woman and felt her jerk away as if stung by a whip. The vibration, the noise… Oh, my God, it was cutting through him… His body trembled as his mind slipped into chaos, an intense, choking fear… What was it? Jesus Christ! Something roared and shook the car. He glanced up and saw the woman's red hair, the blinding white light beyond her. Richard felt his heart pounding. Sweat was pouring down his face. The car rocked from side to side, shrieked in protest, and then settled down again. Leaving silence… and fear.

Richard shivered and shook, reached out slowly, touched the woman; she recoiled and stared at him with wide eyes, still crouched low on the seat. They just stared at one another. Neither knew what to say. The interior of the car was unnaturally bright and then it abruptly darkened. Richard wiped sweat from his forehead, licked his lips, gasped for air, his chest heaving, lungs scorched and sucked dry, arms and legs shaking helplessly. The woman's green eyes were glazed, looking at him and through him; and then, as if by order, as if reading each other's thoughts, they both sat up and turned to the front and looked out at that brilliant white haze.

'*Oh, my God*!'

'*Jesus Christ*!'

The fear crawled up Richard's spine, took a hold, shook him viciously, left him limp and drained, a hollow shell, almost mindless with disbelief. The woman clearly felt the same, body twitching, dress soaked, her hands rising blindly to her face, fingers outspread and trembling. They both sat there in the car, looking out, their eyes stinging, taking in the impossible dream, their senses deserting them.

The white haze was receding. Beyond the white haze: a dark mass. The dark mass, that great featureless body, was blocking off the whole sky. Richard stared and was mesmerized, terrified and fascinated, looking out across that field of shimmering light to where it eclipsed the sinking sun. He couldn't believe in that dark mass. He kept looking and it remained. The white haze seemed to flare up and fade slightly, and then he saw the dark mass more clearly.

It was hovering above the ground, about a hundred feet up, an enormous dark mass, a dark mass containing lights, sequential flashes of green, blue and orange, very bright, very fast. The lights went from left to right, illuminating the ground below. Richard gasped when he saw an immense, silvery disk stretching over the whole field. It was several stories tall, about three hundred feet in diameter, an enormous, kaleidoscopic apparition that rendered him speechless.

Fear and fascination. Disbelief and stunned awareness. Richard felt his thoughts slipping and sliding into dark, swirling chaos. Was he drunk? Hallucinating? The woman's red hair: Was she real? He gasped for air and tried to stop himself from shaking, tried to keep himself sane. The woman trembled beside him, her hair falling upon her shoulders; her spine was arched and she seemed to shake in spasms and then settle down again. Richard looked past her head, saw that huge, floating mass, its colored lights flashing on and off brilliantly, illuminating the field below.

Richard sobbed and bit his lip. He looked again and saw it changing. It flared up and went dark, became one with the evening sky, then two panels of

yellow light, a good three hundred feet apart, materialized to silhouette two black pupils, two bright eyes staring down at him. The woman gasped and bit her knuckles. Richard held on to his seat. The shimmering panels disappeared, the black pupils became metallic, then they flew down from that vast ink-colored mass and headed straight for the car.

‘*Jesus, no!*’ Richard whispered.

A whipping sound: the car shook. A brief silence: a sudden humming. Richard closed his eyes and opened them again and saw the disks at both sides of the car. They were miniature flying saucers, about three feet in diameter, and they circled the car slowly, first humming, then whistling softly, and then a beam of light shone from each one, cutting down through the darkness.

The car began to shake. Richard groaned and clenched his fists. He glanced at the woman, saw her sitting up straight, and understood, rather than saw, her paralyzed fascination. Richard couldn’t believe it; he sensed no fear in her at all. Then a disk dropped by her window, shone a bright light on her face, and she gasped, visibly twitched, settled down, closed her eyes and just sat there. Richard sank into his seat. The blade of light burned his neck. It moved away and he sat up again and saw the disks disappearing.

‘It’s all right,’ the woman whispered, opening her eyes, looking peculiar. ‘Don’t be frightened. It’s all right.’

Richard stared at her and shivered, disbelieving, wracked by fear, his breath coming in large, anguished gulps, his heart pounding, his head on fire. Against his will, he looked up. The panels of light blazed in the sky. He saw the immense, much darker mass above the field, the panels of light at each end of it. Then the panels swallowed the disks, blinked out, leaving darkness; then the black mass, that enormous floating shape, started glowing and flashing.

Mesmerized, Richard watched it.

The great disk was solid, a silvery craft in a shimmering white haze, towering high and spread out across the field, flashing green, blue and orange lights. It now had shape and dimension. It had long, narrow windows. Silhouettes moved back and forth across the windows, very small, faraway. The colored lights continued flashing, illuminating the field below; the tall grass and shrubs had been flattened and appeared to be scorched. Richard looked up in awe. He saw the panels at either end. They were doors and they opened again, looking larger, more ominous. Then Richard shook with fear. He reached out to touch the woman. He saw another two disks, silvery-gray, emerging from the panels. There were searchlights on these disks, turning down toward the car. The disks hovered just in front of the larger craft, then flew toward Richard.

'*Oh, God*!' he whispered, distraught, feeling unreal, disorientated, stripped of every defence; he sat trembling in his seat, feeling naked, dispossessed from the real world. What was happening? Was this real? Where was he? *Hallucinating*! He tried to think about who he was, what he was, but then it all fell away from him. A whipping sound, a sudden wind, the car shaking and shrieking, then silence, the other disks at each side of him, their gray metal gleaming.

Richard almost stopped breathing. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. He reached out and grabbed the woman by the shoulder and she turned and stared at him. He saw her suntanned face, the red hair, the moist lips; her green eyes were staring at him and through him as if he didn't exist. Richard shivered and turned away. He saw a disk outside the car. It was about thirty-five feet wide, hovering just above the ground, and its perimeter swept up to form a dome made of something like frosted glass. Richard stared, mesmerized. A strange creature stared back. The opaque dome distorted its features, made it look quite grotesque. The eyes were two slits, the nose appeared to be metallic, and Richard shivered with revulsion when he

realised that it didn’t have lips. The creature’s skin was gray and wrinkled. It raised a clawlike hand. Richard screamed and then a beam of light struck him and rendered him oblivious.

Darkness. Streaming light. A sudden nausea and dread. Richard retched and shook his head and sat up and hardly noticed the woman. No point looking: she was frozen. Richard stared straight ahead. He blinked and began to scream and then stopped himself and just shrank in his terror.

He was still in the car. The fallen night stretched around him. The mother ship, that enormous craft, was coming down and blocking out the whole view. It seemed incredible, almost magical – its very silence made it awesome. It was spread across the field straight ahead, its colored lights flashing on and off. Richard licked his lips and groaned, rubbed his eyes and shook his head. The enormous craft settled down above the ground, fifty yards from the car.

Then the car started moving. It also went wild. Richard’s camera-strap snapped, the camera smashed against the dashboard, then his ballpoint pen shot out of his pocket and fixed itself to the windscreen. Richard couldn’t believe it. The air was sucked from his lungs. The woman’s bracelets suddenly shot off her wrists and also stuck to the windscreen. Richard gasped, trying to breathe. He was being drawn forward. He pressed his hands against the dashboard and pushed himself back, but had to hold himself there with great effort. The car continued moving forward. Richard couldn’t trust his senses. The car was silent, but it moved forward inexorably toward that immense, flashing mass. Richard tried to scream again; he opened his mouth but nothing happened. He glanced at the woman, saw blind eyes, and then he looked at the smaller disks. They were at both sides of the car, hovering just above it, each shooting a beam of light down upon it, drawing it forward with them. Magnetism? *Oh, my God*! That’s impossible. *Jesus Christ*! Richard pressed himself back into his seat and looked ahead and was terrified.

The enormous craft was there before him. It filled all of his vision. The

colored lights flashed on and off, left to right, right to left, then they abruptly blinked off, leaving gray metal gleaming, then the metal appeared to split along the bottom and a long, thing white light emerged.

Richard sobbed and shook. His eyes were wide and disbelieving. He saw a large metal door sliding upward, then his senses were shattered. A dazzling white light all around him. Silhouettes in the haze. The car was picked up and drawn toward the light and then surrounded on all sides. Richard drained out of himself. He let his senses fly away. He opened his mouth to scream but nothing happened, so he simply collapsed.

All white.

Everything.

CHAPTER FOUR

It is important that I remember. My time will soon be up. The plastic surgery and the pacemaker and the prosthetics have all been useful, but the liver still manages to elude us and so I must die. I remain philosophical. I have had more than most. I have lived a long time, made the dream a reality, and I cannot complain because nature still hides its secrets.

We never conquered the liver. Perhaps we never will. Now I start to degenerate, feel the hardening of my veins, and my memory is not what it was and too often betrays me. No matter: it is done. We cannot be stopped now. The sun glitters off the ice as I write – and the ice is the New World.

It is important to remember. Some fragments, if nothing else. It was all so long ago, so far away, and now it seems like a dream. My parents: not important. We are blessed and cursed by birth. Two very ordinary people heading nowhere, myself growing under them.

I detested my childhood. This much I do remember. Long days in the Midwest, clouds of dust over the flatlands, my father and mother in the fields, bending over their crops. They were simple, decent people. I can scarcely recall them. They talked little and they worked very hard and received scant reward. Detested it. Yes. The days stretched out forever. As a boy, still a child, how young I don't remember, I spent hours gazing up at the stars and wondering how I could reach them.

I've never understood emotions. An aberration of the weak. I am thinking of what they call 'love' and its attendant illusions. They would call me a genius.

By their terms they might be right. From the beginning (I remember this well) I was always obsessed. An emotion of a different sort. Not a need for human warmth. I saw humans in biological terms and thought the world a laboratory. The obsession was with knowing. It was all within the mind. Anything outside the mind – the need for love or material gain – was no more than a degrading manifestation of our primitive origins. What matters in Man is mind. I have always believed that. Even then, as a child, about ten years old I think, I believed that (or felt it) and lived it and would not let it go.

They would call me a genius. I would say 'integrated'. My mind and emotions were fused to perform in calm harmony. No weakness. No digressions. My flesh never defeated me. Even later, as a young man, in the offensive throes of puberty, I would hold my yellow semen in my hand and try to sniff out its properties. The vas deferens and the seminal vesicles, the bulbo-urethral and prostate glands: my ejaculations were examined biologically and found to be normal. I thus conquered such distractions. I took the semen on my tongue. Various liquids and sperm, two hundred million spermatozoa; orgasm thus became a form of research and lost its great mystery.

Hard to believe it now. All so very long ago. My parents ignorant with a Bible on the table, my head in the stars. The small farm was a prison. My decent parents were viewed as wardens. A teenager, isolated, my head bursting at the seams, the lack of books, or the means of education, drove me close to insane. I knew I was exceptional. I felt trapped by circumstances. Two or three times I ran away from home, but I was always brought back. So, I detested it. I just had to get away. This much I remember about my childhood: I grew up in Iowa.

Such a long time ago. The late 1800s. I remained a prisoner by lieu of my background and suffered accordingly. A genius, by their terms. Had to be, even then. For my birthday, I received a microscope and then examined my own sperm. Fourteen? Fifteen? I can't remember my age. In my room, I took my penis in my hand and let the semen stain slides. The mystery of life was in

biology. Ejaculation was mere phenomena. I thus reduced my shifting yearnings and dreams to their most basic nature. The human body was just a vessel. Without the mind it was superfluous. I learned early, and had no cause to doubt, that the mind took precedence.

Science. That is all. The pursuit of knowledge was all that mattered. Even then, growing up in Iowa, I had no other yearnings. The death of my mother pleased me. There was nothing personal in it. A good woman, she died as people do, and that gave me release. My father sold the farm. He took a job in Massachusetts. A small town, I don't recall the name, quite close to Worcester. Thus was I set free. Universities and libraries. My mind was filled with energy and light and I crammed it with knowledge. The Worcester Polytechnic Institute. I wonder what they called it then. I remember that I came alive there and realized my potential.

What year? Does it matter? I think 1888. Then the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the thrill of logical thinking. I was an outstanding student. I was not very popular. The thrill was in logic, but the nightmare was in people: my genius isolated me completely from the other students.

I don't remember caring much. I don't believe I cared at all. (Goddard would later suffer the same, and he, too, was a genius.) The behaviour of fluids at MIT. Wind pressure on surfaces. The dream of flight was what kept me alive and made the world seem more bearable. I rarely socialized. I only stopped for food and sleep. The dream of flight was my dream, aerodynamics my taskmaster, and my genius drove me forward relentlessly and would not let me rest.

Inhuman? I wonder. I have often thought about it. Not then, but later, when I succeeded, when the skies shed their secrets. Yes, only then. I certainly thought about it then. Repulsed by abstract emotions, by the human need for self-esteem, by what was known as love and affection, I lived without women.

I think I tried once. There are vague recollections. Not inhuman, I must have

been concerned that they would see I was different. A girl with auburn hair. Perhaps a redhead or a blonde. Spreadeagled, her flesh as white as snow, her soft words unbearable. I tried, but I failed. I saw her body as meat. The act of love was as primitive and functional as eating and shitting. I do not recall passion. My rhythmic thrusting was demeaning. My partners' groanings drove me back into myself and made me think scientifically. I studied my probing penis. The parting vulva held no charms. Her heaving body and my downward thrusting loins lacked aesthetic refinement. The caves are just behind us: this one thought I remember. Perhaps I thought of the spermatozoa in the womb and wondered how to control them. Such much for the act of love. My mind would not let me succumb. I gave up and returned to masturbation of a functional kind. This act was not for pleasure. The point was to kill the need. And my hand, which stroked my flesh without guilt, was just a means to an end.

As for love: a mere illusion. Love is nature's slyest trick. The emotion called love is but a tool in nature's great building plan. Love encourages procreation. It protects the helpless young. Its true purpose is not to exalt us but to make us continue. Thus did I view it. I reduced it to biology. Love was no more than the semen in my hand, but it could be destructive. Men lived their lives for love. This made them weaker men. The need for love and admiration (for self-effacement and inner power) was the need that made them abuse their full potential and remain close to primitive.

The possibility was intolerable. I never wanted to let it happen. My genius, the ruthless brilliance of my mind, would not let me accept it. Thus I lived for my studies. I never let my flesh defeat me. My sexual needs were appeased by my own hands or by whores; my body's hungers were not confused with love and could not then distract me. No, I wasn't popular. The other students thought me strange. I think now of that time, of the bliss of isolation, and realize that my devotion to my mind made me someone unique.

My fondest memories are not of people. My fiercest pleasures all came from

facts. Angles of wind attack, lift, drag and airspeed: the experiments with the wind tunnel in the basement of Eng A, the revelations of the vane anemometer, the Lawrence Hargraves experimental reports, Sir Hiram Maxim and his engines and propellers, my mind glowing, expanding. The dream took root then. I wanted the conquest of all knowledge. I had a dream of a society devoid of conflict and dissension, a society subordinated to science and its ultimate truths. I had that dream and lived it. I devoted my whole life to it. And now, looking out at the glittering ice caps, I feel deep contentment.

I never accepted the impossible. I refused to recognize it. I learned with a speed that was thought to be abnormal, living only for the lectures, for the libraries and wind tunnel, my hands black with oil, my eyes red from too much reading, breaking down and analyzing my teachers' words, then racing ahead of them.

My father died in that time. I can't remember the funeral. A kind man, he had lived an aimless life and the lesson was clear to me. Nothing mattered but the mind. Common emotions were mere distractions. What mattered was the grandeur of science and where it might lead us. And so I continued studying. My intellect left me no choice. Then Sibley College, Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York.

All things were possible there. More than most of the students knew. I do not remember faces, but I do remember names: Rolla Clinton Carpenter, Octave Chanute, Oliver Shantz and Aldred Henry Eldridge and quite a few others. Machine design and construction, experimental engineering, electrical and mechanical engineering and aerodynamics. These courses were in their infancy, were the products of the New Age. It was an age of scientific innovation and grand aspirations. A Bachelor of Science in Aerodynamics. I remember that from Sibley College. I believe I gained it in 1895, but I cannot be sure of that.

How stupid people are. How stupid they always were. The only emotion I can

still entertain is that of contempt. For what they did to me. For what they later did to Goddard. They tried to use us and cast us aside and then control our creations. I think of the businessmen. I also think of politicians. Commerce walks hand in hand with politics, and both are corrupt. Man's purpose is to build upon his past and thus conquer the unknown. All other aspirations are pointless: they are only of the moment. This is the dream of science. It is logic, not emotion. It is a logic that is not shared by businessmen or politicians – nor by the mass of normal men who mostly live without purpose. Such men have no real logic. They are moved by base hungers. They are blinkered and retain a narrow view that will never be broadened. They think only of the present. Their future is here and now. They take genius and fear it and use it and then cast it out. I did not know this soon enough.

Within the ice is the New World. Beyond it is the old. I look beyond the glinting plateaus and think of where I came from.

What an age it was then! So magnificent, so blind. An age of flowering genius, of corrupt commerce and politics, an age of the most insoluble contradictions, of builders and wreckers. I did not know soon enough. They financed me and used me. They took my enthusiasm and brilliance and then tried to pervert it. Yet what if I had known? Out of college, a BS in Aerodynamics, I had to take whatever they offered me.

Finance. Equipment. The world opened up to me. The secret hangars in the wilds of Illinois formed my bridge to the future. Myself and some others. The very cream of young scientists. Sworn to secrecy, we worked night and day to make miracles commonplace. We tolerated the businessmen. We rarely thought of the politicians. With the innocence of all passionate dreamers, we just worked for our pleasure. What year was that? Probably 1895. A full year before Langley's first successful test flights, we had already surpassed the airships and were moving toward greater things.

The work never ceased. The secrecy was total. More hangars in Iowa, in the

Gulf of Mexico, yet another in a place near Fort Worth, all producing components. My first lesson in secrecy: a wide spreading of the work force. Who would know in Iowa or New Mexico or Fort Worth what the individual parts they were making would ultimately form? Thus we moved forward. Thus did I create them. The skies opened up and gave me their secrets and the dream became real.

The second lesson in secrecy: that men will not believe their eyes. Or that men, if they do believe their eyes, will be ridiculed for it. We flew right across the country. The huge winds and rotors glinted. They were very primitive flying machines, but they must have looked awesome. And so we could land. Our crude flying craft needed water. And like all young men who feel that they are conquerors, our mood was ebullient. We played jokes on those who saw us, told the truth and then told lies, and later, when we read the newspapers, we knew the ruse had succeeded.

Such a secret cannot be kept. Nevertheless, it can be protected. To protect a secret you must give away part of it and turn it into a rumor. Who mixed half-truths with lies. Speculation did the rest. Who believes what they now see in the skies and can say so with ease? The world's governments understand this. It is a tactic they learned from me. We flew across the length and breadth of America and were never discovered.

All else was superfluous. It was fodder for the masses. Langley's flying machines, the Wright brothers' manned flight, the later flights of Wilbur Smith and Louis Blériot – all were highly publicized trifles. Such events were mere distractions. The real progress was made in secret. By 1904 we had crossed the Pacific Ocean, and our lights, which were seen by the US Navy, were called natural phenomena. Such descriptions were reassuring. I had no desire for glory. My one wish was to continue my life's work without interruptions.

How stupid they are. How stupid they always were. Now they see us in the skies and close their eyes and still refuse to believe it. That's why we are

winning. That's why we could never lose. They could never accept what is possible – but for us, all things are.

CHAPTER FIVE

Epstein stood like a ghost before the open door, hesitant, his heart beating uncomfortably, feeling nervous and childish. He was nervous because the door was open, because the house was in darkness, because Irving Jacob's death and his own failing health had reminded him of life's callous betrayals, its indiscriminate brutality. Now, in the darkness, in the silence of Camelback Hill, preparing to step inside and loathing the thought of doing so, he trembled with a youngster's baseless fear and was ashamed of himself… Irving's death and Mary's grief; his own mortality and passing time; he grew old and his childhood returned with all its haunting uncertainties… Had Irving committed suicide? Or had he been murdered? Why was Mary's front door wide open? Dr Epstein, stoop-shouldered and disconsolate, felt close to ridiculous.

Too melodramatic for a scientist. Perhaps the chief of police had been right. Epstein stood on the porch and looked up to see the sweeping night sky. The stars glittered above the clouds, the latter wispy and sullen, drifting languidly, serene and mysterious, the black sky over all. It was quiet up there. Empty. Epstein shivered and lowered his gaze. He saw his own shadow trailing out from his feet, his unreal other half. We are not what we appear to be, he thought. We live and die in ignorance. He felt deep grief, an aching loss, then he knocked on the open door.

'Mary? Are you in there?'

There was no response. The darkness led into silence. Epstein shivered and then stepped inside, wondering what he would find there. The hallway led

past closed doors, through the kitchen, into the living room; he saw the back of Mary's head above the back of a chair, the chair facing a garden. Mary's head was very still, her black hair turning gray, and Epstein stood there, transfixed, seeing moonlight in the garden, and then coughed and whispered Mary's name, the pain twisting inside him.

'Frederick?'

'Yes.'

'I thought you would come.'

'Is that why you left the door open?'

'Yes.'

'That was dangerous.'

Mary chuckled sardonically, still seated in the chair, facing the moonlight that fell on the garden beyond the glass doors. Perhaps it was the grief, a release from her shock; nevertheless, the chuckle cut through the silence and made Epstein wince. He had come here prepared for tears, for hysteria or rage, but now, in the presence of that ghostly chuckling, he felt only bewilderment.

'Dangerous?' Mary said bitterly. 'You think an open door is dangerous? Irving kept the doors closed all the time – but then he went for a drive. What's a closed door these days?'

The moonlight stretched out to the chair, glinting off her gray-black hair, the back of the chair bisecting her neck, the space around her in darkness. Epstein coughed into his fist, feeling slightly absurd, then he nodded, a silent gesture of agreement, and sighed and sat down just behind her.

'You saw him?'

‘Yes, I saw him.’ Epstein sniffed and rubbed his short beard. He was staring at the back of Mary’s head, at the dark, silent room. ‘He’s been brought into Phoenix.’

Mary leaned forward and sobbed, covering her face with her hands, bent over in the chair, in the moonlight, trying to choke back her weeping. Epstein watched her, feeling helpless, filled with grief and despair, recalling better days, her smiling face, before the work became dangerous.

‘*Please*, Mary,’ he said.

‘It’s all right, I’m all right.’ She straightened up and wiped her face with one hand. ‘Oh, my God, what a day it’s been.’

‘If I can do anything… *Anything*.’

‘You can’t do anything. He’s dead.’

‘I just thought…’

‘There’s nothing to think. He’s dead. It’s all over. Finished.’

She was sitting up straight again, staring into the moonlit garden, a clenched fist shoved into her mouth, knuckles tapping her teeth. Then she sighed and stood up, went to the windows and walked back, turned her chair around and shook her head sadly and sat down facing Epstein. The moonlight formed a halo above her. Epstein saw her tear-washed eyes. She was in her middle forties but her face retained its beauty, an elegant mask now ravaged by loss, the eyes brown and large. Epstein sat there before her, feeling defeated, his love for her and Irving boiling up and turning rancid with guilt.

‘Here in Phoenix,’ Mary said softly.

‘Yes,’ Epstein said. ‘The autopsy.’

‘And presumably they’ll call me tomorrow?’

‘Yes… The arrangements.’

Mary nodded and sighed, her gaze roaming around the room, her white hands twitching restlessly in her lap, trying to hold on to something.

‘Why did you come here?’ she asked.

‘You knew I’d come, Mary.’

‘To offer your condolences?’

‘Yes.’

‘And to ask me some questions.’

It was a mean, honest statement, making Epstein recoil within, flushing, the guilt rushing through him as he stared at her grim face.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I can’t help that.’

Mary nodded, smiling bitterly. ‘You just never give up,’ she said. ‘*All* of you. You just can’t give up, no matter what happens. I suppose I should accept it – the good wife supporting the cause – but I can’t. And now Irving is dead. So to hell with your institute.’

‘I have to know, Mary.’

‘You have to know what? That my husband was driven mad by his work and now he’s found peace at last? There’s your answer. Go home with it.’

‘No,’ Epstein said. ‘I don’t think that’s the answer.’

‘Yes, it is. It’s the only answer available.’

‘I don’t think it was suicide?’ Epstein said. ‘I feel I should tell you that.’

The anger was quick to come, flashing out of her brown eyes, her head shaking from side to side in denial as she rose to her feet. She looked down at him, this old man, this professor who felt his age, and her lips, a tight line below the pert nose, spat out all her grief.

‘Damn you!’ she snapped. ‘Damn you and your pride! It’s not that you don’t believe it – it’s that you *can’t*… because you need your obsession. Irving committed suicide. Your work drove him half crazy. He couldn’t sleep, he couldn’t eat, he started ignoring his whole family, and it happened because of your damned obsession, your belief in conspiracies. Of *course* he didn’t kill himself! Of course it *has* to be murder! You’ve been at this game for twenty-five years, so now it has to be *something*!’

‘Please, Mary… That’s not fair.’

She shook her head and turned away, went to the windows and came back, started walking to and fro in agitation, her hands slapping her thighs.

‘He was a scientist,’ she said. ‘He wasn’t cut out to be a detective. He studied physics at Berkeley, designed nuclear reactors, worked for NASA and the American Nuclear Society, had an entry in *Who’s Who*. My husband was a fine man – an intelligent and decent man – then you involved him in your UFOs, in your speculations and intrigues, and he fell for it and became obsessed with it and paid the full price. Do you know what it was like watching him? Seeing him crack and fall apart? Can you possibly understand what it’s like to see your husband go down that way?’

‘He was frightened,’ Epstein said.

‘Damned right, he was frightened. You and your damned institute, your associates, you frightened him to death.’

‘It wasn’t us,’ Epstein protested.

‘It was you,’ Mary said. She stopped pacing and just stood there, looking accusingly at him, her brown eyes bright with tears.

‘Damn you,’ she said.

Epstein had to look away, his gaze roaming around the dark room, taking in the familiar paintings, the furniture and ornaments, all the items he had seen through the years that he had visited this place. Those days were gone now. They had gone with Irving’s death. It couldn’t ever be the same again – not for him, not for Mary. Epstein shivered with grief and rage that matched the woman’s. He wanted to reach out and console her, but he didn’t dare touch her.

‘I saw it coming,’ Mary said. ‘It had been coming a long time. He wasn’t able to fighting his old friends and it tore him apart. I saw it back in 1968, during the House Science and Astronautics Committee Symposium, when he stood up and stated that he had come over to your side and now believed in the existence of the UFOs. He should never have done that.’

Epstein didn’t respond. There was nothing he could say. He simply had to let her talk it out, no matter how much it hurt him. Knowing this, he just sat there, watching her carefully with his tired eyes, as she paced to and fro across the room, from darkness to moonlight.

‘It was after that,’ she said. ‘That was when it began. He believed in it all, gave lectures and interviews, and then, when he started losing his credibility, he simply *had* to believe it. Why not indeed? It was all he had left. First, he was a senior physicist at the University of Arizona, next thing he was a member of your institute, another crank chasing UFOs… You think I’m being cruel? Well, so be it. As far as I’m concerned, he fell in with a bunch of scientific quacks and was ridiculed for it.’

‘You don’t believe that,’ Epstein said.

‘Yes, damn you, I believe it. Irving was a physicist, a man of some authority, but then, when he championed your cause, he lost everything… *Everything*!’ She almost chocked on the last word, actually had to catch her breath, then she blinked repeatedly, looking dazed, and slumped into her chair. ‘Jesus Christ, I feel ill,’ she said.

Epstein flinched when she wept again, felt himself recoil with shame, averting his gaze when she reached for her handkerchief and dabbed at her eyes. He thought briefly of Irving, of his passion for the truth, of how that passion had led him inexorably into the UFO controversy. Epstein hadn’t seduced him. Irving had joined of his own accord. And then, as had happened to so many, something happened to Irving… Epstein thought about it briefly, tried to cast it from his mind, and looked up, feeling pained and confused, to see Mary’s dark eyes.

‘It was you,’ Mary said. ‘I don’t want you to forget that. If it hadn’t been for you and your institute, he would still be alive.’

She burst into tears again, bent over in the chair, moonlight falling on the back of her head as she shook it from side to side. Her sobbing was loud and wracked, filled with pain and despair, and she pressed both hands to her face as if to blot out the truth. Epstein sat there, saying nothing, too stricken to offer sympathy, deeply wounded by what she had said, wondering how he could live with it. Then she sobbed even louder, her body shaking in a fever, so he stood up and went to her chair, bent down to her, embraced her.

‘Oh, God!’ she sobbed brokenly. ‘It’s a lie! It’s all a lie! It’s tearing me apart and I can’t take it and I have to strike out. It wasn’t you, Frederick – I *know* it wasn’t you – *God, it’s all such a mess*!’ She pressed her face to his thigh, her tears flowing, head shaking, holding on to him as if he might vanish and leave her with nothing. Then she looked up at him, her face pale and distraught, and he saw the brown, luminous eyes, stunned with incomprehension. ‘What was it?’ she sobbed. ‘How did it happen? Was it me? *Was it me*?’

He lowered himself to his knees beside her, held her face in his hands, gently shook her head from side to side, murmuring words he would not recall. Eventually, she calmed a little, wiped her eyes dry, sighed, sinking slowly back into her chair, staring up at the ceiling.

‘No,’ Epstein said. ‘It wasn’t you. It had nothing to do with you.’

‘It was suicide,’ she whispered.

‘It wasn’t suicide,’ Epstein said. ‘Irving wasn’t the type to commit suicide. We both know that’s a fact.’

‘Then what…?’ She shook her head from side to side. ‘I just don’t understand… Why on earth…? Who would want to…?’ She shook her head again, bit her lower lip. ‘*I don’t understand*!’

Epstein sighed and stood up, disappeared into the darkness, returned with two glasses of bourbon and handed one to her. She took it gratefully and drank it down, gasped for breath, put her head back, stared up at him as if not quite awake, moonlight touching her pale face. Epstein sipped at his own drink, looking thoughtful, undecided, then he sat in his chair and stared at her, speaking quietly, convincingly.

‘Listen to me,’ he said. ‘I didn’t encourage Irving to join the institute. He wrote to me and suggested we work together. In fact, Irving had been privately interested in the UFOs from about 1955, and the 1965 wave had merely strengthened his growing conviction that the phenomenon had definite scientific importance. Irving never officially joined the institute; his only connection was that he would trade information with us and help us by proxy with his specialized knowledge. It *is* true that he visited us in Washington DC a few times, and that by the time he had gone through our files he had become convinced of the reality of the phenomenon. But I repeat: Irving did all of this on his own – not because we encouraged him.’

Mary studied him carefully, her eyes illuminated in moonlight, the rest of her face in deep shadow, darkness swimming around her. She seemed calmer now, more thoughtful, alert, and she studied Epstein's face as if whether deciding to talk or keep silent. The tension between them was palpable, filled with doubt and recrimination, but eventually she sighed and leaned forward and gave him her glass.

'I need another,' she said.

Epstein nodded and stood up, disappeared into the darkness, returning with two glasses of bourbon and handing her one of them. She didn't say anything, simply turned the glass around, watched the moonlight flash on and off it like tumbling diamonds. Epstein sat down again, crossed his legs, sipped his drink, determined not to push her too hard, to let her take her own time. Finally she drank some bourbon, licked her moist upper lip, then sank wearily back into her chair, lost in shadow once more.

'Okay,' she said. 'What do you want to know?'

'I want to know what frightened Irving,' Epstein said. 'Or what you *think* might have frightened him.'

Mary shook her head and sighed. 'God,' she said, 'I don't know. At least, I'm not very sure. It just seems too ridiculous.'

'Ridiculous?'

'Yes, ridiculous. He never really told me what frightened him. I can only make guesses.'

She leaned slightly forward, elbows resting on her knees, the moonlight falling over her head and glinting off the small bourbon glass.

'You've heard of Dr James E. McDonald?'

‘Of course,’ Epstein said.

‘Then you’ll know that McDonald was once at the University of Arizona, senior physicist in the Department of Atmospheric Sciences and a leading proponent of the extraterrestrial hypothesis.’

‘Yes,’ Epstein said. ‘It’s common knowledge.’

‘Okay. Now Irving certainly didn’t agree with all of McDonald’s theories, but he *did* respect McDonald enormously for his courage in putting forward his unpopular opinions. Indeed, if anyone may be said to have influenced Irving, McDonald would have to be that man.’

‘So?’

Mary shrugged. ‘Back in 1967, when the Condon Committee was being set up, McDonald was on a visit to the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio, when he accidentally saw the classified version of the 2953 Robertson Panel report. McDonald was shocked to discover that the CIA had had a large hand in the report, and that the classified version of the report, apart from deliberately ignoring some of the most positive UFO sightings, had secretly recommended what amounted to a national brain-washing program and a complete cover-up of official UFO investigations. So, in early 1967, after seeing the classified version of this report, McDonald linked the Air Force’s notorious secrecy policies to the CIA and, on the same day that the Air Force announced the establishment of the Condon Committee, made this controversial information public. Naturally, Irving – who had widespread connections with the scientific community and the media – helped him in this. And from that day on, both he and McDonald became loudly vocal critics of the Air Force *and* the CIA.’

‘Are you trying to tell me that Irving was frightened of the CIA?’

Mary shrugged again, sighed heavily, gazed around her, the bourbon glass

resting on one knee, her free hand lightly stroking it.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘I think he was certainly worried about it. I think that by this time he was beginning to understand that you couldn’t wade too deep in those waters. You know, McDonald was in the forefront of all this, and Irving was well aware of what was happening to McDonald. McDonald attacked the Air Force and the CIA relentlessly, and by 1969 the word was out that those organizations wanted to silence him. Whether this was true or not, it was certainly pretty obvious that McDonald was not having an easy time. The major defenders of the Air Force’s attitudes toward UFOs were Harvard astronomer and author Donald Menzel, and Philip Klass, avionics editor of *Aviation Week*. Menzel had repeatedly explained most of the sightings – including the famous Washington DC sightings – as reflections, mirages, ice crystals floating in clouds, or the results of refraction and temperature inversion. On the other hand, Klass, a man fervently opposed to the extraterrestrial hypothesis and particularly opposed to McDonald, continually tried to ridicule McDonald and put forward his own theory that all UFO sightings were due to coronal discharges in the atmosphere. Anyway, McDonald tore these theories to shreds and made himself a couple more enemies. According to McDonald, Klass tried to ruin him by telling the Office of Naval Research that he, McDonald, had used Navy funds on a trip to Australia to study UFOs, This caused a hell of a scandal and led to the Navy sending an auditor to look at McDonald’s contract and expenditure. The Navy found nothing to pin on McDonald, but it still caused McDonald embarrassment and gave him a lot of problems with the university administration. Then, as McDonald continued to expose Air Force and CIA shenanigans, things grew progressively worse for him. More and more professional ridicule was heaped on him, until, in 1971, the House Committee on Appropriations called him to testify about the SST supersonic transport plane. During his testimony, he was constantly mocked as the man who saw little green men flying around in the sky. McDonald’s work on the SST was his last project. In June 1971, at the age of fifty-one, he drove himself into the desert and shot himself in the head – exactly like Irving.’

Mary suddenly shivered and shook her head from side to side, a clenched fist going to her mouth as if to stifle a sob. She took a deep breath and sank back, her face disappearing in darkness, then the glass of bourbon glinted in the moonlight as she had a stiff drink. There was silence for a long time. A clock ticked on the wall. Epstein hadn't heard the ticking before and it made him feel strange.

'Do you think there's a connection?' he asked.

'I don't know,' Mary said. 'It just seems too ridiculous. But I do know that *Irving* thought about it… and it certainly frightened him.'

'Why?'

'Oh… various things.' The glass came down from her lips to rest on a knee, her fingers curving lightly around it, her wedding ring glinting. 'You know, some strange things have happened to a lot of people involved with UFOs – accidents, suicides, the loss of formerly strong careers – and Irving started taking an interest in such cases. This was shortly after Dr McDonald's suicide – and also after Irving had started his heavy drinking.'

'The drinking was really bad?'

'Yes, *very* bad. I'd never known him to drink before, but then he started to drown in it.' She shivered again, shook her head in a dreamy manner, raised the glass to her lips and had a sip, sighing deeply, forlornly. 'Irving was particularly fascinated by the career of Captain Edward Ruppelt, who headed the Air Force's UFO investigations from 1951 to 1953. According to Irving, Ruppelt was the best man the Air Force ever used during their twenty years of UFO investigations; however, during his three years as head of Project Blue Book, Ruppelt became increasingly convinced that the UFOs were real and of extraterrestrial origin, and that the Air Force was antagonistic to such a hypothesis. According to Irving, this was why, when the Robertson Panel submitted its formal conclusions to the CIA, the Pentagon and the higher

echelons of the Air Force, the CIA refused to give a copy to Ruppelt and his staff. And from that point on, Ruppelt, who was critical of the whole Robertson Panel, found the ground being cut from under his feet. Apparently Ruppelt had been determined to mount a full-scale UFO investigation but faced a lot of opposition from the Pentagon, until, by mid-1953, the Blue Book staff had been stripped down to a total of only three people: Ruppelt and two assistants. Consequently, Ruppelt left Blue Book permanently in August of that year, went to work as a research engineer for the Northrop Aircraft Company, and also wrote his famous book on UFOs.'

'*The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*.'

'Right. Now what bothered Irving about this case was the fact that Ruppelt's book was a forthright attack on the Air Force's handling of the UFO phenomenon and a plea for a more honest and intensive investigation of it. Obviously, Ruppelt was a believer… Yet in 1959, three years after he had first published his book, Ruppelt revised it, totally reversed his previous stand, and stated in the new edition that UFOs as a unique phenomenon did not exist. One year later he died of an unexpected heart attack.'

Mary finished off her bourbon, placed the glass on the floor, and leaned forward until her face was back in the moonlight, her brown eyes large and misty.

'Irving was bothered by the case,' she said. 'He couldn't understand Ruppelt's reversal. He investigated the case thoroughly, interviewed a lot of people, but couldn't really come up with anything conclusive. There was the possibility that Ruppelt had just become fed up with it, with the constant controversy that surrounded the subject, with the media and the crackpots who hounded him night and day. A possibility. A thin one. Certainly Irving could never accept this as an answer, and he never stopped pondering the riddle. Possibly because of this, he became involved with a similar case: that of Dr Morris Jessup, the noted astronomer and selenographer.'

‘I thought *he* was a crackpot,’ Epstein said.

‘Well, he may or may not have been. In his defense, it’s worth noting that he was a teacher of astronomy and mathematics at the University of Michigan and a researcher whose work led to the discovery of thousands of binary stars. In short, Jessup was an astronomer of considerable repute – until he became obsessed with the UFOs. Apparently, once that started, his ideas became a little crazier, more speculative and bizarre, some derivative, but others strikingly original. As Irving frequently said, this wasn’t all that unusual: a lot of people who developed an interest in UFOs tended to turn pretty strange. Anyway… Irving was interested in Jessup because Jessup had been conducting investigations into possible Naval experiments with field forces that could temporarily dematerialize matter or somehow make it invisible. While this sounded pretty crazy to me – a sort of Flash Gordon fantasy – it interested Irving in the sense that he often felt that the UFOs might work on just such a principle. So… Dr Jessup had been investigating what had been known in books, magazines and various scientific journals as the Philadelphia Experiment.’

‘I know about it,’ Epstein interjected. ‘Allegedly, during 1943, the United States Navy conducted a series of tests at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, at Norfolk-Newport News, Virginia, and at sea to the north of the Bermuda Triangle. Reportedly the experiment was at least partially successful, the ship used being the USS *Eldridge*, and its disappearance allegedly being seen from the decks of the Liberty ship SS *Andrew* and a cargo ship, SS *Malay*. Reportedly, after disappearing, the *Eldridge* reappeared at its berth in Norfolk, then mysteriously turned up at its original dock in the Philadelphia Navy Yard. And according to other unsubstantiated reports, some of the crew died, many had to be hospitalized, and more than a few had gone mad.’

Mary nodded agreement. ‘As I said, Irving was interested in this because he through that the seemingly incredible materialization and dematerialization of UFOs might somehow be based on unusual, controlled magnetic conditions

in which the attraction between molecules could be altered temporarily to cause the transmutation or transference of matter.'

'A sort of space-time machine.'

'Exactly. Matter simply dematerializes and materializes elsewhere – hey presto! Space and time don't exist.'

Epstein raised his eyebrows. 'Go on,' he said.

'Okay. I know. It sounds crazy. Anyway, Irving followed this up and discovered that in 1959, the same year Ruppelt performed his abrupt about-face with the revised edition of his book, Jessup informed Dr Manson Valentine – currently curator honoris of the Museum of Science of Miami and research associate of the Bishop Museum of Honolulu – that he had reached some definite conclusions regarding the Philadelphia Experiment and wanted to show Valentine his manuscript. According to Valentine, he arranged for Jessup to come for dinner on the evening of April 20 that year – but Jessup never made it that far. According to the Miami police, Jessup, some time before six-thirty that evening, drove his car to Matheson's Hammock in Dade County, Miami, and committed suicide by attaching a hose to the exhaust of his car and running the hose inside the vehicle.'

'Was the manuscript found in the car?'

'According to the Miami police report, no.'

Mary rubbed at her forehead and swept the hair from her eyes, then she stood up and visibly shivered and started pacing the room. Epstein watched her, entranced. She was lovely, and she was also a stranger to him, a shadowy figure in the moonlight.

'That made Irving worse,' she said. 'He started to drink even more. He wouldn't talk about it unless he was drunk, and then he seemed incoherent. Incoherence or craziness? I swear to God, I don't know. He was obsessed

with the idea that important UFOlogists were marked men, that they always ended up in a bad way, either crazy or dead. He pointed out to me that Ruppelt had had a lot of problems during his final few years and that those problems might have contributed to his heart attack. He reminded me constantly about McDonald's last few years, about the Air Force's fear of him, about his low standing in the eyes of the CIA and the ridicule heaped upon him by his fellow scientists. Then, on June 12, 1972, precisely one year after McDonald's suicide, another proponent of the UFO phenomenon, scientist and inventor Rene Hardy, was found dead, apparently a suicide by bullet – and this made Irving paranoid.'

She stopped pacing and stared around her, eyes blinking, slightly unfocused, then she bent down and picked up her glass and disappeared in the darkness. Epstein listened to the bourbon being poured, felt the tension within himself, wondered how they had all come to this… to this fear and confusion. When Mary returned, the glass already to her lips, she drank and gazed around her again and then sat down, her legs crossed, her hands shaking.

'Irving had problems sleeping. He started pacing the house each night. He would get up and pace around his study, muttering under his breath. He often looked out the windows. He always looked up at the sky. He started saying that *they* were coming to get him… I never found out who *they* were. He'd been working on something special. He was very secretive about it. The more he worked, the more frightened he became and the less he could sleep. Then one night he was really drunk. I drank with him and we talked. I asked what it was that had him scared, and he attempted to tell me. It wasn't easy for him. The drink had made him incoherent. He started babbling about his colleagues, about how the ridicule had increased; he said the university was putting pressure on him and he might have to leave. Naturally I was shocked. God knows, I was shocked. Then he said that he thought he was being followed, that he just had this feeling.'

Mary shook her head and sighed. She seemed remote and somehow lost. She

gazed at Epstein and he saw her brown eyes, the pain buried behind them.

‘There are lots of stories,’ she said, ‘about mysterious men who contacts people investigating UFOs. Since most of these stories come from the lunatic fringe, they’re rarely given serious attention. Nevertheless, they worried Irving. He told me that in 1955, during that famous UFO flap, Dr Jessup had been called in for an interview at the ONR – the Office of Naval Research in Washington, DC. There it was explained to him that one of his books had been mailed to the chief of the ONR, Admiral Furth, and had subsequently been examined by both the ONR Special Projects Office and the Aeronautics Projects Office. Precisely what was then said between the ONR and Dr Jessup remains unclear, but according to Irving, Jessup started having severe personal problems from then on – and those problems led directly to his suicide… Crazy, yes? Well, *I* thought it was crazy. No matter: the story fascinated Irving and fitted in with his theories.’

She had another sip of bourbon. The clock ticked on the wall. Epstein thought of what the police of chief had said… something about melodrama.

‘Irving thought he was being followed by three men,’ Mary said. ‘He had seen them in a car, outside the house, outside his office, and he felt that they were coming to get him and take him away. Of course, I didn’t believe a word of it. I put it down to his illness. I just thought that all those stories about mysterious, nameless visitors, men usually dressed in black, had sunk into his subconscious and mixed in with his increasing paranoia. But Irving was adamant. He couldn’t let the subject go. He talked about how a lot of the UFOs were described as being surrounded by a glowing, plasma-like cloud; about how the USS *Eldridge* had also been described as disappearing within a luminous green cloud; about how the Bermuda Triangle and the Devil’s Triangle are on approximately the same line of longitude and how many of the airplanes and ships that were lost in those areas were often described as disappearing in similar clouds. Irving thought there was a connection. He thought Jessup had found the connection. He thought that the disappearing

airplanes and ships were tied in with the UFOs, and that the Navy might have stumbled onto the truth through the Philadelphia Experiment. Irving also talked a lot about McDonald, about Edward Ruppelt and Rene Hardy, about how too many reputable people had come to a sticky end – and about the mysterious men in black who harassed UFO witnesses, often claiming that they were from the CIA. All of this scared Irving. It made him pace the house at night. Then, just a few days ago, Irving read about Chuck Wakely… and that final bit of news was too much for him.'

'Chuck Wakely?'

'Yes. Chuck Wakely was a young Miami pilot who almost lost himself in a luminous cloud above the Bermuda Triangle. He was so shaken by his experience that he started to investigate the whole subject – writing about it, lecturing about it, appearing on TV and radio, and generally digging up a lot of old bones. A few days ago Chuck Wakely was shot through the window of his apartment in Miami, reportedly while working on his research. The motive and assailant are still unknown.'

'Coincidence,' Epstein said.

'Maybe,' Mary said. 'But that coincidence didn't particularly help Irving. In the end he just thought of the men following him – and became paranoid.'

Epstein leaned forward, feeling cold, slightly unreal, his gaze drawn to the moonlight in the garden, to the stars in the night sky. What could he say? What could *anyone* say? The story was too bizarre to be accepted and contained by mere logic.

'What was Irving working on?' he asked.

'I don't know,' Mary said. 'That's what frightens me most. I went through his study today and couldn't find a damned thing.'

'No papers?'

‘Nothing.’

‘But he *must* have kept a file!’

‘He had a file as thick as *War and Peace*, but it’s disappeared.’

Epstein sank back again, feeling colder, disorientated, the fear creeping inexorably over him and making the silence sing… Death. Suicide. Careers broken and good men lost. He thought of Irving in his car in the desert, of McDonald and Hardy. Suicide by bullet. Or carbon monoxide inhalation. Suicide and murder and madness: an inexplicable catalogue… Epstein had to know the answers. There was nothing else left to know. He grew old and his time was running out and that invited obsession. Yes, that was the word. *Obsession*: the only word. It was what had taken hold of them all and then driven them ruthlessly. Epstein sighed and leaned forward again, his stubby fingers interlocked, his knuckles forming a broken white ridge that displayed his great tension.

‘A strange story,’ he said.

Mary chuckled bitterly, shook her head and looked away, then raised the glass of bourbon to her lips and had another sip.

‘That’s the story,’ she said eventually. ‘That’s my legacy from Irving. God knows, it’s too inane to be true… but that’s what it came to.’

She drank deeply of the bourbon, let her head fall back and gasped, her tormented eyes focused distractedly on the ceiling and seeing nothing at all. Epstein watched her, entranced, thinking of days long ago, of when his own wife had been alive and they had sat in this room, feeling young and beyond the reach of time, their whole future before them. A sweet innocence had filled those days, had colored Epstein’s fondest memories; now that innocence lay shattered about him and left him with old age. His wife had died five years ago, Irving had killed himself yesterday, and here, in the

timeless, moonlit silence, he and Mary were parting. All their dreams had turned to dust. Each possibility had reached its limit. What was left was a teasing, frustrating mystery that might yet make him mad. Epstein studied Mary carefully, saw the fading of her beauty, the spreading of her flesh, the falling breasts, the glint of gray in her black hair. Life approached and then withdrew. It bled away into the night. It was merciless, taking beauty and hope, leaving little to cling to.

Epstein sighed again. He felt old and very tired. He stood up and gazed nervously around him and then stared at Mary. She was still in the chair. He saw the moonlight surrounding her. Her eyes were luminous and wet with rampant grief, and they tore at his broken heart.

'It's getting late,' he said. 'I'd better go. I'll try to drop in tomorrow.'

'No,' Mary said. 'Don't drop in tomorrow. I'll be packing tomorrow.'

Her voice was flat and remote, a stranger's voice, a chilling sound, and Epstein stood there and blinked and stared at her, not quite comprehending.

'Packing?' he said.

'Yes, packing,' she replied. 'I don't want to see you again. I don't want to see anyone.'

He almost sat down again, the shock shaking him, draining him, but instead he simply raised one hand and lightly stroked his beard.

'It's not you,' Mary said. 'It's everything you represent. It's the UFOs and their victims, Irving's hopes and their destruction; and, most of all, it's my fear that he might have been right. I'm too old for this, Frederick. I can't live within these walls. I want to run from all his friends, from his work and his associates, and I never want to see this house again, to hear a knock on the door. I'm frightened, Dr Epstein. Irving's fears are getting to me. I'm too weak to stay here and fight it, so I'm packing my bags. I'll attend to the

funeral. I don’t want you to be there. I’ll leave as soon as Irving is cremated, and I’ll never come back. Give me a kiss, Frederick. Do that and then go. Don’t talk to me. Don’t say another word. Kiss me once and then leave.’

She raised her big brown eyes. They were stricken and wet with tears. Epstein felt a searing pain, a crippling loss, and then he stepped over to her. The darkness surrounded them, dissolved them and made them one. Epstein leaned down and kissed her on the cheek and then he walked from the house.

CHAPTER SIX

The air-conditioning in the Fontainebleau Hilton, as in most hotels, condominiums and fleabags in Miami Beach, smacked the flesh with a refrigerated chill that stopped sweat in its tracks. Wilson stood in the lobby, glancing around him, gaze thoughtful, taking in the milling people, the WASP residents and tourists, not amused by the superfluous extravagance and inane conversations. He nodded curtly at Fallaci, who stood beside him, looking elegant, and together they pushed their way through the crowd and went up to the desk clerk.

There was a mob at reception, all waving hands and shouting, drunk already and flushed with excitement, trying to sort out their room keys. Wilson stepped back, disdainful, thinking of how common they were, as Fallaci, apparently cool in his white suit, pushed his way to the desk.

‘Excuse me – ’ he began.

The clerk raised a hand and brushed blond hair from his eyes, the eyes turning toward Fallaci, azure blue, opaque with panic, then returning to stare blindly at a man whose elbows straddled the desk. The man had short-cropped red hair, a blotched face, squinting eyes, a garish terry-cloth shirt on his large frame, a cigar between his lips.

‘No!’ he bawled. ‘You listen to me! You keep your crap for your hookers!’

‘Excuse me – ’ Fallaci repeated.

‘No fucking way!’ the big man bawled. ‘We’ve just been to the Ivanhoe, to the Bal Harbour on North Bay Causeway, we’ve been up and down that road, from Hallandale Beach to Lincoln Mall, and we haven’t been offered as much as a fucking john, and now we’re just goddamn tired of it. What sort of jerk-offs do you think we are? You expect us to sleep on the goddamned beach? What the hell do you mean, you’ve got a convention? We come here every year, bud!’

‘I’m sorry, sir, but – ’

‘Don’t fucking “but” me, bud! I’m not here for a goddamned snow job. I’ve got a bus full of people, a fucking Eastern Airlines bus, and I’m not about to drive off again. Fuck you, bud. Where’s the manager?’

‘Excuse me,’ Fallaci said, very polite, very firm, taking the desk clerk’s jacket sleeve and jerking the elbow towards him, his tone of voice and steady, insistent gaze making the man take notice. ‘A Mr Vale,’ Fallaci said. ‘He’s coming to see Mr McKinley. Mr McKinley and I have just been for lunch and wondered if he’d arrived.’

‘Goddamned lunacy!’ the big man said. ‘Where the hell’s the goddamned manager?’ The desk clerk glanced at him, licked his lips, stared at Fallaci, looked down at his desk pad and whispered, ‘No, sir. There’s no message.’

‘Fucking madness!’ the big man exclaimed.

‘Excellent,’ Fallaci said. ‘Mr McKinley is in his room and when Mr Vale arrives he wants him to be sent up immediately. Don’t bother to phone.’

‘Yes, sir,’ the desk clerk said, hastily scribbling the details.

Fallaci retreated, smiling politely at the desk clerk, watching the big man slam his fist on the desk and start bawling again, his passengers milling around him.

‘Well?’ Wilson asked.

‘He hadn’t arrived yet,’ Fallaci said. ‘I told the desk clerk to send him straight up without using the phone.’

‘Good,’ Wilson said. ‘Let’s go up there. Let’s see Mr McKinley.’

Together they crossed the flamboyant, rococo lobby, passing ladies in bikinis and one-piece bathing suits, feet in sandals and clodhoppers, hair bleached blond and purple, piled high, hanging low, expensive bracelets on thin, suntanned wrists, rhinestone sunglasses gleaming. Wilson was not impressed, never had been, never would be, now just wanting to collect his man and then get out and leave Miami behind him. Nevertheless, he seemed part of it: silvery-haired, deeply tanned, his light gray suit businesslike. He might well have been a native of Broward County, just in town for the day.

‘What did you tell him?’ Wilson asked.

‘I said we’d just had lunch with McKinley. He’s going to send Vale straight up when he arrives. We won’t have any trouble.’

They took the elevator to the sixth floor, an extremely crowded elevator, the people noisy and in holiday mood: young girls in skimpy dresses, paunchy men in Bermuda shorts, the former giggling, the latter dabbing at sweat as the elevator moved upward. Wilson stepped out with relief, surveyed the corridor, the bland walls, then he made his way along to room 605, Fallaci trailing behind him.

‘This is worse than Las Vegas,’ Wilson said.

‘I’ve never been there, sir. Every year, I swear I’m going to go, but I haven’t made it so far.’

‘This McKinley,’ Wilson said. ‘You’re sure he’s never met Professor Vale?’

‘He wouldn’t know Vale from my mother. That’s a hundred percent.’

Wilson nodded. ‘I hope you’re right. I’d rather not have anything messy. I don’t want any problems.’

‘This is it. 605.’

They both stopped at the door, a white-painted door with gold embossing. Fallaci glanced at Wilson, saw the nod, and then pressed the doorbell. Obviously Vale was expected – they heard the footsteps within. The door opened without hesitation and McKinley stared at them. He was ruddy-faced, gray-haired, wearing slacks and a flowered shirt, a steely glint in the green of his eyes, no smile on his face.

‘Professor Vale?’ he asked, glancing from Wilson to Fallaci, his hand still resting on the door, as if preparing to close it.

‘I’m Vale,’ Wilson lied. He put his hand out to McKinley. They shook hands and then McKinley indicated Fallaci. ‘Who’s this?’ he asked bluntly.

‘My assistant,’ Wilson said. ‘Mr Fallaci. Do you mind? He’s clean.’

‘You said you’d come alone.’

‘My personal assistant. I’m sorry. But Mr Fallaci travels everywhere with me. He knows everything… *Everything*.’

Wilson stepped into the apartment, brushing casually past McKinley, and Fallaci followed with a smile on his lips, a polite smile, remote. McKinley shrugged and closed the door, looking thoughtfully at Wilson, then he waved at the mock-Renaissance chairs and said, ‘Fine. Take a seat.’ Wilson remained standing. Fallaci circled the room. McKinley said, ‘You gentlemen want a drink?’ and headed straight for the bar. He was a big man, but muscular, clearly fit, his movements light. ‘I’m sorry about that,’ he said, ‘but I’m sure you understand: in this business we have to be careful; we have to

know who we're dealing with.' He reached the bar and turned around. 'The government watches us – ' he began. His eyes flicked to the right, saw Fallaci, an upraised hand, and he cursed and tried to duck to the side and then knew it was too late.

Fallaci's hand chopped through the air, turned on edge, the fingers closed, a small guillotine that snapped McKinley's neck with deadly precision. McKinley gasped and went down, his legs buckling, body spinning, and Fallaci stepped out and caught him in his arms before he cell to the carpet. It had happened quickly, quietly, without fuss, and the dead man now lay in Fallaci's arms, body sagging, leg's outstretched.

Wilson stepped forward and examined him. McKinley's chin lay on his chest. He had urinated in his pants and the stain was spreading out around his crotch.

'Right,' Wilson said. 'Get him into the bathroom. I don't want him dripping on the carpet. Get him in there immediately.'

Fallaci slid his arms deeper under McKinley's armpits and then, with the lifeless head against his chest, dragged him into the bathroom. The walls were a lurid pink, the toilet seat covered in fake fur. Fallaci slung the body over a bath that was made of white marble.

'Christ, he's heavy,' he said.

Wilson didn't respond, his gaze curious, academic, as Fallaci took a short rope from his pocket and tied it around the steel curtain rail. Then he made a short noose. 'You'll have to help me,' he said. Wilson stepped in and tugged at the corpse, his arms under its armpits. Together they lifted the body up, its lifeless arms around their shoulders, raised it until its feet were off the floor, the head under the noose. 'Hold him there,' Fallaci said. He stepped back and turned around. He opened the noose and slipped it over the dead man's head and then tightened the knot. 'That's it,' he said. Wilson let go of the corpse.

The dead man dropped down abruptly, then stopped, spinning slightly, his head jerked up by the rope, his neck stretched, the face bloating, slippered feet dangling just above the tiled floor, swinging gently from left to right. ‘Suicide,’ Fallaci said. ‘He reached the end of his tether.’ He picked up a small stool and set it on its side just in front of the dead man’s swinging feet. Then he straightened up, grinning.

‘Okay, sir?’

‘Okay.’

They left the bathroom and closed the door, went back into the main room, and stood there, glancing around in a casual manner, intrigued by the decor. The colors were garish, the furniture a bizarre mixture of styles, imitations of late-Renaissance and Victoriana and Art Nouveau, an elaborate chandelier fixed to the ceiling, intricate mouldings, bad paintings. Wilson sat in a chair, his azure gaze calm but remote, as if focused elsewhere. He looked up at Fallaci, saw him standing at the windows, framed by the rippling green of Biscayne Bay and the sky’s dazzling white haze.

‘I hope he’s punctual,’ Wilson said.

‘He should be here any minute.’

‘And you’re sure he’s never met that McKinley?’

‘It was all arranged by phone.’

Wilson checked his gold cuff links, crossed his legs the other way. ‘What about my voice?’ he asked coldly. ‘He might notice the difference.’

‘No, sir,’ Fallaci said. He started wandering about the room. ‘The arrangement was made through a third party. Your voice won’t mean a thing to him.’

Wilson glanced at his wristwatch. ‘We were informed that he was punctual.’

‘That checks,’ Fallaci said. ‘He’s a punctual man. That doorbell should ring any second now.’

The bell rang a minute later. Wilson got to his feet. Fallaci looked at him, nodded, went to the door, opened it and took a step back and said, ‘Can I help you?’

‘I’m Professor Vale,’ a man said. ‘Are you Mr McKinley?’

‘No, sir. I’m his secretary.’

Fallaci stepped aside and Vale entered the room, a slim man, quite short, beard and hair flecked with gray, wearing white pants and a colorful flowered shirt, a tennis racquet held in his right hand.

‘McKinley?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Wilson said. ‘Hello.’ He stepped forward and shook Professor Vale’s hand. ‘I’m glad you could come.’

Professor Vale smiled frostily. He seemed young for his fifty years. ‘Your man was very persuasive,’ he said. ‘If a little oblique.’

Wilson returned the smile. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I’m sure he was. But I’m also sure that you’ll understand our discretion when we finish our talk.’ He nodded at the bar. ‘Would you like a drink, Professor?’ Vale wiped sweat from his brow and said, ‘Yes, thanks. Rum and coke. Lots of ice.’

Wilson nodded at Fallaci. ‘A white wine for me,’ he said. Fallaci went to the bar as Wilson pointed to a chair and said, ‘Take a seat, Professor. Relax.’ He indicated the tennis racquet in Vale’s right hand. ‘Did you have a good game?’

‘Pretty good,’ Vale said.

He grinned and sat down, placing his tennis racquet on the table, stretching his legs and wiping the sweat from his forehead with a folded white handkerchief. ‘It kills me,’ he said. ‘I don’t know why I do it.’ He patted his stomach and said, ‘I’ve got to keep this down. An academic’s obsession.’ Wilson smiled at the self-mockery. Fallaci brought them their drinks. Wilson sat facing Vale while Fallaci retreated to stand behind the bar and sip at the drink he had made for himself.

‘You play often?’ Wilson asked.

‘Only on vacation,’ Vale said. ‘I don’t like vacations all that much, so it helps pass the time.’ He drank his rum and coke with relish, wiped his lips with the back of his free hand, then sighed and stared steadily at Wilson, sizing him up. ‘All right,’ he said eventually. ‘What do you want, Mr McKinley? Your man said it was an offer of work, and right now that interests me.’

‘Just how much did my man tell you?’ Wilson asked.

‘He told me that you represented a European-based commercial company dealing in electronics, aerospace technology, communication satellites and assorted areas of high-energy research. He also said that you had produced components for ASAT warheads and European and American ICBMs. He said, further, that you were under contract to NASA for the production of various rocket components, but that you were intending to expand dramatically. Finally, he said that you were desperately in need of civilian scientists and technicians with experience in aerospace technology, and were willing to pay well for their talents. He said no more than that.’

Wilson smiled. ‘He was told to be brief.’

‘He was,’ Vale said. ‘Far *too* brief. But I’m interested.’

Wilson smiled again and put his chin in his hands, his elbows resting lightly

on his knees, on his immaculate pants.

‘Well, Professor Vale, your information is essentially correct. I represent Air Communications and Satellite Systems, better known as ACASS, a Frankfurt-based, internationally financed company that specializes in the production of advanced electronic communications packages and spy satellite components under contract to European and US government defense establishments.’

‘I know about ACASS,’ Vale said. ‘I’ve often used your components.’

‘Yes,’ Wilson said, ‘that stands to reason. You’ve worked in the past for the USAF Space and Missiles System Organization in San Dierga, California; for the Linear Accelerator Center of Stanford University; and for the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory near San Francisco. You are, at the moment, an Advanced Space Programs Coordinator at the top secret Aerospace Defence Command Cheyenne Mountain Complex in Colorado Springs, Colorado. At these various posts you have specialized in research into advanced advanced ICBMs and anti-satellite weapons, and you’re presently engaged in research into high energy laser beams and particle beam weapons, with particular interest in the Semipalatinsk plant in Russia… Given this, you would have certainly used our components. Now we’d like to use you.’

Professor Vale could not help grinning. He glanced at Fallaci. The latter took his half-empty glass and topped up the rum and then handed it back to him.

‘You’ve certainly done your homework,’ Vale said.

‘Yes. We’re efficient.’

Vale smiled again at Wilson, his eyes glinting above his glass. He sipped his rum and then sat back in the chair, his boyish face thoughtful.

‘I’m under contract to USAF,’ he said.

‘That contract ends in two months.’

‘Okay,’ Vale said. ‘Talk.’

Wilson leaned forward, smiling, amused just a little, thinking first of Vale’s understandable human vanity, thinking next of the man hanging in the bathroom, his neck snapped where the rope would undoubtedly scar it. Another suicide. Naturally.

‘Professor Vale,’ he said, ‘we need men like you because we are, as you rightly said, expanding dramatically. Put simply, ACASS is planning to set up an overseas satellite launching base that will break the superpowers monopoly of space by launching spy satellites for any Third World country will to pay what we ask. At the moment this capability is available only to America and the USSR, so there is, as we see it, an open market for the sale of such satellites to any smaller developing country that’s concerned with protecting its borders and wants a sophisticated early-warning system at a reasonable price. We can fill that need. We can construct simple, efficient rockets. We can launch those rockets for anyone who pays and there are plenty of customers.’

‘No doubt you’ll have plenty of customers, but where will your base be?’

‘A certain Third World despot in Africa has leased us approximately one hundred thousand square kilometers of his country in return from a rent of fifty million dollars a year to be paid in local currency after our first commercial launch, which will be five years from now. Given that this country’s inflation is running at about eighty-five percent a year, the payment will be relatively negligible by the time it is due. We have also offered to launch a satellite free of charge, but on the condition that the so-called President pays for the actual production of the rocket. In short, what we’ve been given by this black lunatic, virtually for free, is one hundred thousand square kilometers of territory, total autonomy over that territory, full immunity from any prosecution by the state, full control over who is allowed

to remain in the territory, and absolute disciplinary control over all natives within our designated area.'

'That's insane,' Professor Vale said.

'That's a fact,' Wilson said. 'That's the deal that was worked out between ACASS and the so-called President in Africa, and the contract has been signed, sealed and delivered. Photocopies of the contract are on my boat and await your inspection.'

Vale studied Wilson carefully, tapping his teeth with his glass, obviously startled by what he had heard, just as clearly intrigued.

'You can't build a rocket that cheap,' he said.

'Yes,' Wilson responded promptly, 'we can. The basic idea for the rocket came from some German scientists who originally worked on the V-2 rocket for the Nazis. After the war, one of those scientists went to Egypt to design rockets for President Nasser, retired to Austria, and then came to ACASS. Another came to the United States with Wernher von Braun, became an American citizen and leading light of the Kennedy Space Center, retired three years ago and has since worked for ACASS. The ACASS rocket is very much like a model the Nazis were perfecting when the war ended: easy to build, cheap, but efficient. Its basic unit consists of a tube filled with an oxidizing agent and another filled with diesel fuel; when these liquids combine they ignite and the rocket takes off. Also, instead of mounting rocket stages on top of one another, the ACASS rocket is simply a large bundle of standard units: the greater the load, the more units you include. It is, in short, a mass-produced rocket, fully functional and operative.'

'I want to see the plans.'

'You can see them. They, also, are on my boat.'

Vale sat back in his chair, tapping his glass against his teeth, studying Wilson

and then gazing around the room, taking it all in. Wilson sat there, saying nothing, thinking of the dead man in the bathroom, thinking also of what would happen to the world if ACASS had their way. Would the idiocy never cease? Could the fantastical be controlled? Wilson thought of the dead man, of the commercial company he had represented, of the many scientists who would take on any kind of work so long as the price was right. Professor Vale would not be one of them. Professor Vale would not be paid. The good professor, with his vanity and greed, would be put to use elsewhere.

‘I’m interested,’ Vale said, ‘but I want to see some documentation. I want to see all your contracts, I want to study the rocket designs, and after that, if I’m satisfied that you’re legit, I might discuss my own terms.’

‘Excellent,’ Wilson said. ‘I’m sure you’ll find them impressive. They’re all in the safe in my boat. Could you go there right now?’

‘Now?’

‘Why not?’ Wilson said. ‘You’re only here on vacation, you said yourself that you were bored, so let’s go to my boat, take a trip, some food and wine, and you can study the documentation at your leisure, then go home and decide.’

‘I don’t know…’ Vale began, hesitating.

‘Is your wife here with you?’ Wilson asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Then why don’t we collect her and take her along with you? I’m sure she’ll enjoy being on the boat.’

That was enough for the good professor. ‘I think I’ll go on my own,’ he said. ‘I mean, I don’t want her hanging around when we’re discussing business. What the hell, let’s just go.’ He finished his drink and stood up, licked his

lips and nodded affirmatively, then want to the bar, passing Fallaci, and set his glass down. ‘Where’s your boat docked?’ he asked.

‘Another drink?’ Fallaci said.

‘No, thanks,’ Vale replied.

‘Pompano Beach Marina,’ Wilson said. ‘We can be there in less than an hour.’

‘You have a john?’ Professor Vale asked. Fallaci touched his elbow lightly. ‘Yes, sir,’ Fallaci said. ‘That door there. At the far end of the room. The first door on your left.’ Vale thanked him and walked away, turning into the second bathroom. Fallaci then looked at Wilson, grinning nervously. ‘That was close,’ Wilson said.

They all left shortly after, left the dead McKinley dangling, closed the door and went down in the elevator and walked out through the lobby. The sudden brightness was dazzling, beating off the white walls, off tall buildings and sidewalks and streets, the sea beyond the palm trees. Fallaci walked on ahead. He led them into a parking lot. Wilson sat in the rear of the car, talking casually to Professor Vale, as Fallaci drove into Collins Avenue, his eyes fixed on the busy road.

Professor Vale was loquacious. The two rums had affected him. He kept looking out the window, at the hotels and condominiums, at the surfers and well-dressed passers-by, at the bored wives and gaudily-dressed whores and the packed, noisy sands. Miami Beach glided past them.

‘You know Miami, Mr McKinley?’

‘Not really,’ Wilson replied. ‘I used to have my boat docked in Norfolk; I only came here this year.’

‘You picked the wrong year,’ Vale said. ‘This is the year of the pig. I’ve been

coming to this place for fifteen years, but it's not what it used to be. Cubans and blacks, homosexuals and hookers; you get these kids from the University of Miami and they're wrecking the place. I mean, I've had it up to here. You wouldn't believe what goes on. I'm a white, Anglo-Saxon American and I don't mind admitting it. But take a good look around you. What do you see? Drive through 79th Street or Biscayne Boulevard or Kennedy Park; you'll get a blowjob in the front seat of your car before you know where your billfold's gone. I mean, these hookers are everywhere. They own Lincolns and Cadillacs. You just go into the Boom-Boom Room or the Poodle Lounge in the Fontainebleau and you'll see them shaking their tails for all they're worth, picking up on the tourists. Either that or it's the fags, from Coconut Grove to Fort Lauderdale: they have it organized so well that the 21st Street sea wall is no longer the place to go for a broad – the fags have cleared out the area. The future America is in Miami; the Brave New World is around the corner: prostitution, male and female, a lot of porno movie houses, filthy habits and VD and drugs and organized crime. That's Miami, Mr McKinley. It's the world delivered by science. I look around me and I wonder what it means and then I look to the future. Fuck America, I say. What's America given me? It's given me radicals and communists and anarchists and degenerates, and it's offering me Miami and Las Vegas and cesspits like New York. Fuck America. Who needs it?'

Vale shook his and chuckled, short and slim, almost boyish, his bearded face now showing his fifty years, the lines good-humoured and youthful. Wilson glanced at him, sardonically amused, and just then the car came to a halt.

'Here we are,' Wilson said.

They left the cool of the car for the blinding light of the marina, squinting and then stretching themselves, adjusting to the tropical heat. Fallaci led them to the boat, a neat Italian, moving fluidly, his eyes darting left and right, their soft brown hiding ice, double-checking everyone in sight, every movement that could indicate trouble. Bronzed girls in bikinis, blond youths in tight

shorts, gawking tourists and surfers and lifeguards: Fallaci watched them all carefully. The sky was a dazzling haze, the water went from blue to green, and the boats in the harbour, all shapes and sizes, reflected sunlight from chrome and polished wood, their colored sails flapping rhythmically.

Professor Vale was impressed. He was particularly impressed by the boat they stopped at. A high-powered luxury cruiser, about sixty feet long, it had the look of a floating penthouse and was clearly a rich man's toy. Fallaci led them up the gangplank, onto the polished, gleaming deck, and a servant wearing an immaculate starched white jacket stepped forward and bowed to them. Wilson followed them aboard, his gelid gaze scanning everything, then he waved to the door directly facing them and said, 'In there, Professor.'

Vale glanced around him, at the blue sky and green-blue sea, and said, 'If you don't mind, I'd prefer to remain outdoors and pretend that I'm healthy.'

Wilson smiled understandingly. 'That's fine with me,' he said. 'We'll just take the boat out a few miles before commencing our business. We can talk over lunch.'

The waiter stepped forward again, bowing slightly to Vale. He had dark skin and Oriental eyes, his face curiously smooth and unlined.

'A drink, sir?'

'Rum and coke.'

'White rum?'

'No, dark.'

The waiter bowed again and then retreated, back in through the nearest cabin door.

'Where does he come from?' Vale asked.

‘Hawaii,’ Wilson lied.

‘For a moment there I thought he was Korean, but then he seemed a bit different… Hawaii… should have known.’ Vale shrugged and rolled his eyes, grinning at Wilson and turned away, looking over the other boats, the pristine white walls of the marina, the shimmering haze above the horizon where the sky met the sea. ‘This is some boat,’ he said.

‘Thank you,’ Wilson said.

‘If you meant to impress me, you’ve succeeded.’

‘Good,’ Wilson said. ‘We like to please. It’s all part of the service.’

The waiter returned with two drinks on a tray while Fallaci, who had been standing near the cabin, disappeared through the door. Wilson and Vale took their drinks, the waiter bowed and departed, then Vale leaned against the brass railing and stared around him with interest.

The boat had a large crew, all dressed in white, all busy at their various tasks, working methodically, silently. There was something strange about them. Vale didn’t know what it was. They were all small and slim, dark-skinned, with narrow eyes, and Vale found himself refusing to accept that they came from Hawaii. He watched them with interest. They made him feel a bit unreal. They never glanced at one another, never spoke, and they kept their heads down. Vale shivered a little. He felt decidedly odd. He drank some rum and grinned at Wilson, still not knowing who he was, then the boat’s engine rumbled and the boat moved slowly out of the harbour.

‘Where are we going?’ Vale asked.

Wilson shrugged. ‘Nowhere special. We’ll just go out a short distance, maybe ten or fifteen miles, and then anchor. We’ll have lunch and then you can study all the documentation.’

The boat cruised out of the harbour, past white-painted buildings and other boats, the palmettos casting shadows on the people wandering lazily back and forth. The marina gradually fell behind them, revealing the immense sweep of the coastline, yellow beaches dominated by condominiums and baroque hotels. Eventually there was only the sea, green and blue, reflecting sunlight, waves rippling in pearly lines around the boat and streaming out in their wake.

‘Beautiful, isn’t it?’ Wilson said.

‘Yes, it is,’ Vale responded. ‘But I’ve always felt slightly weird out here. You can’t ignore all the stories.’

‘Of course… the Bermuda Triangle.’

‘You sound sceptical,’ Vale said.

‘Oh, I’m not completely sceptical. When so many boats and planes disappear, one can’t help being curious.’

‘Right,’ Vale said. ‘You simply can’t ignore the facts. Sinking boats you can accept. Crashing planes you accept. But other events have never been explained, and they make your flesh creep. What I mean is, I’m a scientist. I try not to believe in magic. But cases like that… I don’t know… We still don’t have the answers.’

‘What about UFOs?’ Wilson asked.

‘What about them, Mr McKinley? I won’t buy it that UFOs are the problem, here or anywhere else. I draw the line at flying saucers. The proof for UFOs is negligible. I’ll believe they exist when I see one… and I don’t think I’ll see one.’

‘Really?’ Wilson said, sipping his wine and smiling thinly, gazing over the railing at the sea, at the cloudy horizon. ‘I thought you might have seen one

over the Cheyenne Mountain Complex.'

'Why should I see one there?'

'Oh, I don't know…' Wilson gazed at the clouds on the horizon, coming closer, expanding… 'It's just that I'd heard UFOs were frequently observed over scientific and military establishments. Given that, I thought they might have been seen over the Aerospace Defense Command.'

'Balls,' Vale said. 'Anyway, the Cheyenne Mountain Complex has been built to survive a nuclear war – no matter how destructive – and as such can't be seen from the air. In fact, that complex is a complete underground city, existing deep inside the mountain, resting on giant shock absorbers, webbed with miles of underground tunnels, and completely sealed off from the outer world. Believe me, McKinley, when you work in that place you're not able to see *anything* in the sky – you don't see a damned thing. Our job is to track spy satellites. Those are all we've ever tracked. Neither the radar nor the telescopes have ever picked up anything else. UFOs just don't exist.'

Wilson smiled and sipped his wine, let the cool breeze fan his face, kept his gaze fixed on the sea, on the clouds near the horizon, that horizon which forever receded and led out to Bermuda. This boat would not reach Bermuda. It would drop anchor and then wait. The good professor, in an intoxicated dream, would find that facts have no credence.

'I don't believe it,' Vale said.

'What?' Wilson asked.

'Spy satellites being sold in the marketplace. That's just fucking incredible.'

Wilson didn't respond. He watched the land disappearing. The sea was calm and the sky was a silvery-blue sheet, with white clouds drifting under it. Professor Vale continued talking. He seemed unsteady on his feet. He sipped his drink and repeatedly blinked as he glanced vaguely around him. Wilson

listened attentively. The professor was talking about pulse-power weapons. The boat stopped moving and the anchor was lowered and the professor kept talking. The crew took up their positions. Fallaci returned to the deck. The sea washed around the boat, rolled away to the horizon, and Wilson smiled when he saw a dark mass spreading out just below them. Professor Vale kept talking. He suddenly seemed very drunk. Jets of steam were rising from the sea and forming into a cloud. This cloud surrounded the boat.

'We didn't invent the pulse-power beam. The Russians didn't invent it either. The British invented it eighteen years ago, but kept it under tight wraps. Now we're expanding its potential. We're running a race with the Russians. We're utilizing it as a defensive weapon, for communications and reconnaissance, and we're making quantum leaps in our technology, quietly forging ahead. These laser beams are amazing. Their possibilities are limitless. They can knock out spy satellites, zero in on flying rockets, and even show up the number plates of cars from two hundred miles up – they can pinpoint just about anything. Think of what that means, McKinley. The Cold War has been superseded. What we now have is a Balance of Terror in a post-nuclear age. People don't know what's happening.'

Wilson didn't reply. The silence rang in Vale's ears. He shook his head and saw the shifting of the clouds, a silvery haze all around him. He didn't know what was happening. He felt very peculiar. Abruptly, sweeping away his drunken ebullience, he felt a fierce, senseless dread. What the hell was going on? He felt sick and disorientated. His throat went dry and his eyes went out of focus and the deck seemed to tilt.

Vale dropped his glass. He watched it falling to the sea. It took a long time going down, turning over, reflecting sunlight, the light flashing off it in dazzling striations of incredible beauty. He didn't see it strike the water. The hot air was beating at him. He looked sideways at McKinley – McKinley? – and saw icy blue eyes and gray hair.

Not gray hair: silvery. Not silvery: a shimmering white. He was here,

Professor Vale, I am here to make a deal with McKinley. Then fear. The inexplicable. The white hair and azure eyes. Professor Vale tore himself from this vision and glanced wildly about him. The boat was silent and still. The sea was boiling up around it… Roaring and boiling up around them all in immense walls of green steam.

‘Jesus Christ! What the hell…?’

Vale grabbed hold of the railing, the deck shuddering beneath his feet. The huge clouds of steam were rising from the sea and surrounding the boat. Vale couldn’t believe his eyes. The clouds of steam blocked out the sky. They had formed a perfect circle around the boat, half a mile in diameter. Now Vale wanted to scream. The deck shuddered again and groaned. Vale looked over the railing, down the side of the boat, and saw an immense, dark mass just below the surface, spreading out, slowly rising.

‘The Triangle! Oh, Jesus…!’

Vale slapped his forehead with one hand, terror sweeping away his senses, glanced around and saw McKinley, azure eyes and white hair, saw the crew, the Orientals, coming toward him, small and slim, moving silently. He tried to run, but it was hopeless. Where could he run to? Paralyzed with fear, he gripped the railing, trying to take in the nightmare.

‘Oh, fuck! *Oh my God*!’

Suddenly, the sea roared. He stared at the distant clouds. Now much closer, they boiled up from from the waves to form a wall that blocked out the whole sky. Then the spiraling waves exploded, the spray sweeping around glinting steel. A perimeter of spikes surfaced, faraway, beneath the steam, all triangular, splitting the water like metal fins, thrusting up, growing larger.

Vale heard the sound of his own blubbering, saw the white ridge of his knuckles, his rational self stunned by disbelief and a throttling terror. All that

and something else: an unreality that drained his senses. His head was spinning and he recalled the falling glass and realized he was drugged.

He tried to focus on McKinley, wondered who he really was, saw his icy blue eyes and white hair, the wall of clouds beyond him. The boat was trapped inside those clouds. The green steam swirled and drifted. The triangular grids rose from the sea, growing larger, spitting water, a great circle of gleaming steel teeth that surrounded the boat.

Vale couldn't believe what he was seeing. The only reality was his fear. The deck shuddered beneath his feet, the boat rocking and rumbling, and he glanced down and saw an enormous mass rising to the surface.

'*Grip the railing*! *Hold tight*!'

Someone was shouting at him. He licked his lips and saw McKinley. The azure eyes were uncommonly bright and intense, hypnotizing him, chilling him. Be he did as he was told. He saw the wall of steel around him. He felt the presence of the massed crew behind him, but he didn't dare look at them.

The monster's steel jaws were closing. Vale's eyes were drawn to the boiling sea. The dark mass was still rising and spreading out, and then it struck the boat's hull. Vale felt it and heard it: the deck shuddered and shrieked. There was a harsh, metallic rumbling, water rushing and hissing, then the boat suddenly rocked from side to side, settled down, finally steadied.

Vale looked on, mesmerized. The whole boat was slowly rising. The sea poured away between the rising walls, and an enormous steel deck broke the surface. This steel deck was smooth and solid, a quarter mile in diameter, and the walls that had looked like huge fins went right around its perimeter. The sea poured out through those walls, the enormous deck pushed the boat up, and the triangular fins of the perimeters started moving toward one another, rising high and curving in above the boat like interlocking, giant fingers.

Vale gazed up in awe. The steel walls curved high above him. They were roaring and hissing, water rushing down their sides, and they moved in toward one another to block out the steaming green clouds. Vale stood there, paralyzed. The deck was steady beneath his feet. The triangular walls came together high above to form an immense, empty hangar.

The walls locked together, reverberating. A bright light filled the gloom. Vale looked across that great floor of steel and saw nothing but curved walls. Then the floor began to rumble. Vale almost gagged with fear. The floor began to sink, like some enormous elevator, and the walls soared all around him, an immense globe of steel, until the light became a blazing white haze that turned the dream into reality.

Sweeping vistas of steel and glass. A maze of ladders and catwalks. Silhouettes moving through the white haze, the air vibrating and humming. Vale saw it and felt awe and choking horror. Something cold touched his neck and then scorched it and he dropped into Hell.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Richard was standing before the large windows of the front room of the apartment, a glass of cheap red wine in his shaking right hand, his eyes bloodshot and blinking, slightly glazed with constant fear, looking over an adventure playground, the grimy rooftops of Finsbury Park, the gray sky that seemed to smother the distant maze of the City of London. The sky obsessed him, mesmerized him, filled him with dread and fascination, glided through his dreams and colored his waking hours with the promise of more horrors. It was six in the evening, darkness advanced across the skyline, and Richard raised his glass of wine to his lips to drink deeply, compulsively.

All white. Everything. He closed his eyes and relived the nightmare. His hand shook as he had another sip of wine and then opened his eyes again. He saw the labyrinth of the city, the distant dome of St. Paul’s, and above it, the darkening, cloud-filled sky that took him back to the start of it.

Richard shivered violently, finished his drink and turned away, then he left the room and entered the kitchen and poured some more wine. He had a sip and then glanced around him, at empty bottles and unwashed dishes, crumpled newspapers on the table, on the floor, the signs of total neglect. He had been here for five days and had only gone out for the papers. He couldn’t eat, he couldn’t sleep, he rarely washed, and the wine helped to make the long days pass.

He left the kitchen, stood briefly in the hallway, drank more wine and stared at each of the rooms in turn, at the comforting brightness. Every light in the apartment was turned on. They had been on since he arrived here. He didn’t

dare turn them off lest the nightmares returned and jerked him out his restless sleep, screaming dementedly, his thoughts haunted by phantoms.

All white. Everything. He couldn't believe what had happened. He could believe even less that he had awakened three days later, alone, on the hills of Dartmoor, thirty miles from Bodmin Moor, the drunken woman and her car no longer there, the missing days a mystery. Richard shuddered again at the very thought of it, put the glass to his lips, drank deeply, and went back to the lounge, wishing that Jenny would come.

He had phoned her an hour ago, the first call since his return, and had noticed the confusion in her voice, the hint of anger beneath it. In truth he couldn't blame her; more precisely, he didn't care; now driven by the singular, desperate need to talk it out of his system.

All white. Everything. His last memory was of the whiteness. He recalled the flying disks, the enormous mother ship, the silhouettes moving to and fro in the dazzling light – then nothing: oblivion. A nauseous awakening on Dartmoor; stumbling down the hill and hitching a lift and being told by the driver that it was Sunday. He hadn't understood that at all – his last recollection was of Thursday – and sitting there in the truck beside the farmer he had thought he was going mad.

Now he stood by the window, drinking wine, shaking in spasms, rubbing his unshaven chin and looking out as the city's lights blinked on. The lights were floating in darkness, a silvery web, a sparkling mosaic, and they merged with the lights in his head and took shape as the nightmare…

His feverish thoughts had filled the nights, making him pace from room to room through the apartment, trying to shake off his demons. The fear was always present, all around him, deep inside him, a living thing that breathed against his neck and made him drink even more. Exhausted, terrified, he dreaded sleep, yet had to sleep, sitting upright in a chair, groping blindly for the bottle, muttering vague and incoherent protestations as the silence

tormented him.

Richard couldn’t understand it, couldn’t touch it or see it. What it was, what it meant or might mean was something concealed from him. So he drank and relived it. He wondered constantly about the woman. He saw that enormous flashing mass, the flying disks, the jolting car; and he sobbed as the white light flared up and sent him into oblivion.

It had started five days ago. He had paced the apartment all that time. The world outside, both by day and by night, now seemed alien and threatening. Richard thought about reality. He wondered what reality was. He was pondering this riddle, losing himself in labyrinths, when the shrill ringing of the doorbell cut through him and made his nerves twitch.

‘Jesus Christ!’ he whispered.

Turning away from the window, he stepped forward, then stopped, had another sip of wine and licked his lips and let his nerves settle down. It was all too much for him: at eighteen he felt like fifty. He glanced around the cluttered room, at the squalor of his hibernation, and he felt the shame reaching up to stroke him and make his cheeks burn. Then he licked his lips again, shook his head and stepped forward, leaving the room and going along the straight hall, the lights stinging his eyes.

The front door had stained-glass windows, pretty mosaics of lead and wire, and he saw her silhouette at the other side, an indistinct, smokey form. He froze there, frightened again, the fear followed by further shame, wondering if it really was her, wondering why he should doubt it. Then he shook his head from side to side, cursing softly, trying to grin, but the grin died pathetically on his lips when the bell rang a second time.

‘Jenny?’

‘Yes! What’s the matter? Let me in! Why in God’s name are you whispering

like that? What on earth's going on in there?'

Richard unlocked the door, fumbling clumsily, nervously, then stepped back and pulled the door open and studied her carefully. Jenny didn't step inside, simply stared at him, shocked, her right hand reaching up to her forehead, brushing her auburn hair from brown eyes.

'What on earth…?'

'Come in.'

'*What*?'

'I said come in.'

'What on earth have you been doing to yourself?'

'Don't just stand there. *Come in*!'

She stared at him, brow furrowed, a forefinger to her lips, then she shrugged and stepped reluctantly inside, her shoulder brushing against him. This brief contact was electrifying, jolting through him as a shock – not sexual; more a sudden awareness of being outside himself. He closed the door and turned around, saw chocolate-colored eyes, a moon-shaped face, her auburn hair a tangled web of curls, her long legs in blue denims. She returned his gaze, studying him, then shrugged and moved away, wandering lazily along the hallway, glancing into all the rooms, sighing despairingly when she saw the awful mess: the empty, discarded bottles.

'Very nice,' she said mockingly.

Turning back, she stared at him, a quiet appraisal, clearly critical, then she shrugged and entered the living room and he dutifully followed her. Stopping again in the middle of the room, she surveyed the untidy mess on all sides, then she sighed and sank into an armchair, her legs languidly outstretched.

She was clearly disgusted.

‘I don’t believe this,’ she said.

Richard didn’t reply. He simply raised his glass and drank. Then he went to the windows and looked out to see the lights of the city. The whole of London was ablaze, the individual lights seeming to join together in darkness, and as they merged, they fused together in his thoughts, making him turn away, shivering. Jenny sat back in her chair, her shabby parka across her lap, her legs still outstretched, attractively long and slim, lethargically mocking him.

‘Five days,’ she said. ‘You said you’ve been here for five days. I didn’t really believe it when you told me, but now I’m convinced.’ She raised both her hands, indicating the squalid room, then the hands dropped to rest on one another as her gaze took him in again. ‘You and the apartment look the same,’ she said. ‘You both look fucking terrible.’

Richard tried to grin and failed; instead, feeling embarrassed, he looked around him before slowly, reluctantly, returning his gaze to Jenny, wondering what he could say to her.

‘It’s a mess all right,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘a bloody mess. What the hell have you been doing all this time. Having an orgy?’

This time Richard managed a grin, a weak offering, not his usual, then his blue gaze, which once had been candid, slid furtively sideways.

‘What are you looking at?’ Jenny asked.

‘Nothing,’ Richard replied.

‘Take a good look,’ Jenny said. ‘It’s worth studying. I’ve never seen the

place like this before.' Her eyes were bright with anger, flecked with steel, wondering over the littered armchairs, the stained settee, the cluttered tables, the bottles dropped carelessly to the floor, the newspapers and magazines. 'You only got this apartment so cheap,' she reminded him, 'because my friend is still holding the lease, Now it's not a great apartment, but it *is* pretty good, and I don't think you'll impress her too much by turning it into a pigsty.'

Richard finished off his glass of wine, shuddered again and turned away, picked a half-empty bottle off the table and filled his glass and then had another sip.

'Don't offer me a drink,' Jenny said. 'The sight of you has already put me off it.'

'Sorry. I didn't think. You want one?'

'No.' Jenny smiled bleakly, not removing her steady gaze from his face. 'Even your parents think you're still down in Cornwall. What the hell's going on?'

Turning away, Richard went to the windows, and stood there for some time, looking out, a man lost in his thoughts.

'I don't know,' he said eventually. 'It seems crazy. I don't think you'll believe me.'

'Try me.'

He turned back to face her, his eyes bloodshot, remote, the light shining on the wine in his glass, the glass visibly shaking.

'All right,' he said. 'I didn't get to St. Ives. Something happened on the way to St. Ives that I just can't explain. You'll probably think I've gone mad.'

‘And have you?’

‘What?’

‘Gone mad.’

‘I don’t know. I’m not sure.’

He shivered again, his gaze slipping furtively sideways, finding the ghost of himself in the squalor, his distraught other half. Then he told her his story, talking hurriedly, almost frantically, pacing to and fro, his hands shaking, spilling wine, running nervous fingers through his uncombed hair, his eyes avoiding her face. Surprisingly, it was now easy to tell the tale – more than easy: a burning necessity – and as he listened to his own voice, as the words came tumbling out, he felt that he was coming apart, losing his old, protected self, changing into someone wiser, less assured, aware of life’s hidden mysteries…

‘That was near King Arthur’s Hall. King Arthur’s Hall is on Bodmin Moor. The last thing I remembered was the blinding white light and those silhouetted figures… Like a dream, a kind of wide-awake vision, not real; and I screamed and then heard myself groaning and had nightmares and woke up… Inexplicably, I was back in Dartmoor.’

He was silent for a moment, as if questioning himself, doubting his own words, then he said, ‘Can you imagine the feeling? I was dazed and scared shitless. It was cold, but I was burning all over – my hands were burnt red. I mean, I couldn’t accept it. I didn’t know what had happened. I walked down the road, hitched a lift with a local, and when I tried to tell *him* what had happened, he clearly thought I was crazy…’

He tapered off and sucked his breath in, then let it out in a loud sigh. ‘I caught a train and came back here. I saw my burnt face in the mirror. That made me feel even more frightened and I started drinking to keep the fear at

bay. I didn't know what I should do. I didn't want to tell anyone. The drinking didn't kill the fear and the fear was something else, something living inside me. What I mean is, it seemed *real*. It seemed to be a living presence. I could feel it there beside me, right behind me, something tangible, *physical*… Then I thought about the woman. What had happened to her? She was real, had to be – we spent hours in her car – then both of us, inside the car, were drawn into that spaceship?'

He sucked his breath in again, let it out in another sigh. 'Spaceship? I don't know. I know that sounds crazy… But something – something enormous – came down and opened up and then swallowed us… Unbelievable. Ridiculous. I still can't grasp that it happened. I can't believe it, yet it had to be real… It just had to be; *had* to be.

'So, I stayed here. I had real problems sleeping. I forced myself out every morning, but I couldn't stay out long. I kept imagining things. I always felt I was being followed. I'd come back to the apartment and start drinking again and hear the walls creaking. I was terrified of sleeping. At night, I'd fall asleep anyway. I dreamed that they were coming to get me, but they never materialized.

'I wanted to call you, call my parents or the police, but every time my hand reached for the phone the fear would come back in spades. I think it's going away now. It's still here, but not so bad. I think the booze is finally burning out the fear – maybe just because you're here – but I still feel uneasy. What happened out there? What happened to that woman? I awakened three days later on Dartmoor. I have to know where those days went…'

He stopped talking and blinked a few times, saw the light bulb above him, a dazzling sun, blinding him, making him melt down to his essence. He shook his head and licked his lips, glanced at Jenny, turned away, picked a bottle from the table and poured more wine, letting it splash on his wrist. He had a drink and gasped loudly, as if about to choke, then he shuddered and sank into a chair, facing Jenny's cold gaze.

‘You’re drunk,’ she said.

‘Jesus Christ, is that your answer?’

‘You’re drunk and you’ve been drinking for days and the drink is now talking.’

‘I don’t believe this,’ Richard said.

‘I’m not an idiot,’ Jenny said. ‘What the hell were you doing with that woman in a parked car at night?’

‘*What*?’

‘Your lady friend. Red hair and green eyes. You and some bitch in her car in the middle of Bodmin Moor.’

‘Damn it, Jenny – ’

‘Bodmin Moor, my love? The middle of desolate Bodmin Moor? Do you really expect me to believe that this woman’s car just broke down? Come *on*, love, pull the other leg.’

‘It *didn’t* break down,’ Richard said. ‘That huge flying saucer, or maybe the smaller saucers, made it cut out! Believe me, there was nothing wrong with the car. Those things killed its engine.’

‘Oh, dear God, what a story!’

Richard’s head began to swim, his hands shaking even more, as the logic of her feminine reasoning mocked his pitiful fears. Suddenly he was filled with mirth, an hysterical urge to laugh, bubbling up to his throat and sticking there, almost making him choke. It was just too ridiculous (could she really be jealous?) and he licked his dry lips and blinked repeatedly, trying to keep her in focus.

‘Fuck you,’ she said. ‘That’s why you’ve been drinking. You hitchhike to Cornwall, you get picked up by some tart, you both get drunk and then she makes you an offer that you simply can’t refuse. God, you miserable bastard! What a puritan you must be! You had a bit on the side, a brief fling, and now you just can’t admit it… But UFOs… Oh, Lord!’

She shook her head despairingly, rolled her eyes, crossed her long legs, then gazed around the room with studied interest, as if thinking of other things.

‘It was a UFO,’ Richard said. ‘A big UFO and smaller saucers.’

‘Filled with little green men, no doubt.’

‘Okay, Jenny, fuck it, just forget it. Go to hell. Go on home.’

‘You’re drunk.’

‘So I’m drunk.’

‘You should have tried to stay sober. At least sober you’d have thought of a decent story. Now you know what the wine can do.’

Richard stood up, swaying, the room spinning around him, then he steadied himself and went to the table and poured some more wine.

‘I’m going home,’ Jenny said.

Sighing, she stood up, walked across to the bookshelves, ran her finger through the dust, held it up and ostentatiously studied it. She was attractive standing there, slim and elegant in casual clothes, but he looked at her without feeling his former desire for her, only feeling removed from her. It was odd to feel that way. He felt no desire at all. He then realized that he had not thought once of sex during the whole nightmarish five days. Jenny’s presence had not changed that. He still felt sexually dead. He was ruled by his head, by the fear, and all else had been numbed in him. What *did* he feel?

Nothing outside himself. He no longer felt anything but dread, his ever-present, cold terror. Jenny turned around to face him. She was tense and antagonistic: a pretty girl, someone from his past, with no place in his future… someone talking from faraway.

‘I don’t believe this,’ she said.

‘Neither do I’ Richard said.

‘Did you really think I’d fall for that story? Or is the drink just too much for you?’

Suddenly, Richard felt rage, an unreasonable, brutal hatred, recalling the woman in the car, the flying disks by the windows, the beams of light that shone into her eyes and turned her to stone, his own burnt hands and face… Then he stepped up to Jenny, jerked his shirt collar down, lowered his head and then pointed to his neck with a stained, shaking finger.

‘Look!’ he hissed. ‘*Damn you, look*!’

Jenny was startled by his vehemence, almost pushing him away, her delicate hands flapping loosely in the air and then cupping her face. She glanced briefly at his neck, her brow furrowed, eyes confused, when she saw the livid scar beneath his ear, running under his jawbone.

‘It’s a burn mark,’ she said.

‘Damned right, it’s a burn mark! They shot a beam of light into the car and that’s what it did to me.’

‘Oh, Richard, for God’s sake – ’

He let go of his collar and looked at her with wild eyes, his glass of wine spilling on the floor, further staining the carpet.

‘Fuck it, Jenny, it’s true! Those lights shone into the car. They hypnotized the woman, burned the side of my neck, and then, I swear to God, they did something to the car, took a hold of it somehow, pulled it forward, right into that mother ship. You explain it, Jenny! *You tell me*!’

He was shouting, flushed crimson, a demented gleam in his eyes, those blue eyes that normally were clear and filled with good humor. Jenny stared at him, transfixed, not quite frightened but nervous, seeing someone other than her familiar Richard, some stranger, a possibly threatening presence. At that moment it became too much to bear – the room’s squalor, his uncommon fury and possible dementia – so she pursed her lips and picked up her parka and tried to hide behind a wall of defiance.

‘I don’t *have* to explain it, Richard. I don’t believe it and I won’t listen. I don’t know why you’re acting this way and it has me bewildered. But you’re drunk. You’re talking crazy. I won’t accept this bloody nonsense. When you’re sober you can pick up the phone and give me a call. Now I’m going home.’

Richard stumbled toward her, his hand raised to hurl his glass, but he cracked his shin against the coffee table and dropped the glass and cursed loudly. Jenny stepped back, shocked, staring at him with big eyes, then she shook her head sadly from side to side and hurried out of the room. Richard followed her, enraged, but also shaken by his own violence. He raised his hand and shook his fist wildly as she opened the front door.

‘We’re asleep!’ he shouted after her. ‘*All* of us – we’re asleep! You listen to me, damn it, we’re asleep! We’ll all have to wake up soon!’

He hardly knew what he was shouting, didn’t listen, didn’t care, simply wanting to hear his own voice raging into her silence. The slamming door was his reply – slamming hard: a rebuke – and he cursed and turned back into the room, now horrified by his own performance and shaking even more.

What had happened with Jenny? What the hell had he done? Already the recollection was dreamlike, unreal, slipping out of his reach. The light bulb burned above him, unnaturally bright, mesmerizing, and he blinked and rushed across the room to look down through the windows. He saw Jenny just below him, hurrying along the tarmac path, slinging her parka carelessly across her shoulders as she passed the parked cars. It was dark in the driveway, moonlight filtering through the trees, the fallen leaves drifting around her feet as he walked toward the broken gate. Then she was gone. She had not looked back once. Richard stood there, looking down at the empty darkness, letting the silence embalm him.

Fear. The inexplicable. Dread returned, creeping slyly. Richard found another glass on the table, poured more wine, started drinking. What the hell was he doing? He didn't normally drink this way. It was funny how quickly you got to needing it, how the fear made your throat go dry. Richard drank and paced the room, his hands shaking, gaze restless, seeing shadows, hearing whisperings in his head, sensing alien presences all around him.

Jenny had left. She had departed and he felt dead. This death was not in Jenny's departure, but in something much larger. He had died a week ago. The original Richard had disappeared. The new Richard, a haunted creature, sweaty with fear and confusion, was the matrix of something yet to be formed and prepared for an alien world.

Dread and disbelief. A past rendered obsolescent. He glanced up and saw the burning electric bulb, the rings of light surrounding it. All white. Everything. It had started and ended there. His former history, his structured life, his childish belief in an orderly world, had been shattered in the blinding white haze and would never return. He was sane or he was mad. If he was sane, the world was mad. The most fantastic possibilities now arose and left him feeling defenseless.

Richard went back to the windows, looked up at the stars, and was drawn to the vast sweep of the sky. It had happened: he had lived it. Now he

understood his fear. It was the fear that it might happen again – or that it might not have happened. He couldn't separate the two. The two were one and the same. He dreaded learning what the experience might have meant, but feared his ignorance even more.

And what had he shouted at Jenny? What exactly had he meant? *We're all asleep. We'll all have to wake up soon*… What in God's name did *that* mean? Richard shook his head in wonder. He didn't know what he had meant… Perhaps a belief, possibly just a suspicion, that the fantastic was normal. His farewell. His defiance.

Richard shivered and turned back to face the room. The white telephone gleamed on the table and offered its challenge. Fear. The inexplicable. He couldn't do it: he couldn't talk. He thought of Jenny, of her reaction and her departure, and he knew what it meant. If he talked, they would surely think he was mad. No rational being would accept it. Richard trembled and then felt a great hunger that overrode his concern. He had to get out or collapse. He had to return to sanity. He felt spectral, asexual, drained of life, and he had to defeat that. Trembling again, he shook his head and placed his wine glass on the table. He glanced around the squalid room, heard the silence, felt the fear, then he reached out and picked up the telephone and dialed the police.

Someone spoke.

Faraway.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I retain my contempt. This one emotion is strength. I have needed that strength for many years and will not let it go. What age was I at the time? I think I must have been forty. I still believe it was the explosion over Russia that led to the troubles.

That was 1908. We made a simple mistake. We had a crude form of atomic propulsion and we couldn't control it. So, we had an explosion. The Tunguska region was devastated. The accident frightened the stock company in New York and that started the problem. Some executive panicked, his panic infected the US government, and they were frightened that the project would be exposed and reacted accordingly. They demanded control of our project. Talked of national security. They made a deal with the corporation in New York and placed us under the military.

The military mind is perverse. It destroys all it touches. Once the military took over our project, I knew it was doomed. An immediate conflict of interests. I presented my case and was rejected. I had dreamed of the Atomic Age, of exploration and research, but the military had only one aim, which was national defense. I knew what that meant: they wanted machines for future wars. And though despising them, I nevertheless worked with them to keep my plants open.

The following years were a nightmare. My contempt for the military deepened. A bottomless pit of paperwork, interdepartmental conflicts, interference of the most ignorant kind, then a cutback in funds. All governments are the same. They lumber along like dinosaurs. Shortsighted,

unimaginative, existing only for the moment, they made demands and then cry in protest at the cost, thinking only of votes. Yes, I despise them. That emotion was a luxury. It burned within me all those years and gave me the strength to continue. My contempt lacked morality. But I have never believed in such. Morality, that conceit of free men, is no aid to their progress. So, not moral outrage. No, it wasn't that. My contempt was for the cowardice and ineptitude that hampered my work.

My sole interest was science. My major passion was flight. I was dreaming of a voyage to the stars and their infinite mysteries. This dream was not common. Those fools thought it was madness. I realized that they were draining my brain for their own pointless purposes. And so finally I revolted. Withheld vital information. Over two or three years I sabotaged my own projects, deliberately causing failure after failure, feeling pain for the first time.

Such anguish to endure. The first and last time I felt it. The knowledge that I was destroying my own work to keep it safe for the future. And for all that, I did it. My contempt was my protection. I now knew that the cost of the research had filled them with panic. My great machines would not be built: they would rot while the weapons grew. The men in charge were men moved by mortal fears: they lacked vision and courage. I did not need such men. Such men were a menace. Only heroes or madmen, History's undefiled dreamers, would be capable of backing my vision and making it real.

Thus I sabotaged the project. I said our hopes had been misguided. They stared at me from behind their long table and showed great relief. My apologies were accepted. A few murmured their regrets. Then my atomic propulsion project was aborted and the hangars closed down. World War 1 had already started. The Dark Ages had returned. They wanted aircraft of a functional nature, so I quietly resigned.

The worst years of my life. I was forty-five years old. My genius for technology kept me working, but frustration was choking me. Years of

drifting around the country. Work here, working there. Hiding my genius and displaying mere competence, thus avoiding attention. How did I survive it? With contempt. With willpower. Democracy, that catch-phrase of the West, became something to laugh at. Democracy was incompetence. The right to vote meant poor leadership. What was needed in the world, and what I wanted most desperately, was a government of heroes or madmen who sought the impossible. Such a government did not exist. The US government was run by cowards. Thus for years, with a pain that turned to rage, I kept my dreams to myself.

Years of lacerating anguish. The first and last time. Sustained by relentless curiosity and indomitable will. My contempt for their blindness. My refusal to accept defeat. Every scientific library in the country falling under my scrutiny. All that, plus the work. The demeaning jobs I did for money. My genius for engineering, electronics and aeronautics offered up in the disguise of mere competence as a means of survival. But I used even that. Used laboratories and workshops. Created small things here and there, the minor offshoots of my genius, and sold them to the moguls in suits for the freedom I needed.

Then I found a resting place. The facilities were exceptional. I stayed with an aircraft company in Texas as the head of their research lab. All those nights spent alone. The white sheets of the draftsmen. All the experiments I conducted in secret while designing their aircraft. (My head aches as I think of this. I find it difficult to recall. The prosthetics and artificial heart cannot help me forever.) Electrostatic repulsion. Photosensitive cell steerage. The reaction of streams of ions to furnish rocket propulsion, then a means of neutralizing the decrease of gravity and other such matters. I never cared about their aircraft. Already they were obsolete. Already I had moved beyond orthodox flight and was tackling the mysteries of the boundary layer. The boundary layer was everything. Conquer that and the dream was mine. Thus I worked and theorized, the laboratory, the wind tunnel, but the theories still remained in my papers and could not be tested.

My dream was of evolution. Man's place in the universe. My dream was of Man as a mind that could transcend the body.

Yet how to achieve this? 'Man ' meant individual men. And such men, being imperfect creatures, were distracted by hungers. The hunger for love. For admiration and power. I then tried to understand what such hungers meant and found them all in myself.

The hunger for love. In my loneliness I felt it. Somewhere, sometime, a memory almost gone, I wasted nights trying to ease my own hungers in a more common flesh. What I found was soon lost. The vulva's folds were a threat. The rigid shaft of my penis in a woman gave no more than a spasm. Yet such a spasm shapes the world. People live and die for such. And that spasm represents what most people want: admiration and power.

Learning this, I retreated. Love's deceits showed the way. I understood in my moment of grace that their needs were illusions. I retreated and found myself. I took myself in my own hands. When my need, when my sex, became a threat I gave my semen release. Thus I understood men. They were feelings, not thought. Whereas Man, that outpouring of separate men, held the promise of greatness.

Science represents the mind. It is what we must live by. It is logic and towers above the chaos of outmoded emotions. I learned this and lived by it. I stood above my crude desires. When my flesh seduced my mind from its work, I gave it instant release. A shaft of meat in the hand. The ejaculation of semen. It meant then, and to this day still means, the mere appeasement of hunger. And learning this, I was released. The call of science was in my soul. From then on I neither entered another being nor believe in men's sanctity.

Inhuman? Perhaps. But then what does 'human' mean? Only fear and confusion and doubt and emotional turmoil. To be human is to err. More: to stagnate. Men are impulse encased in flesh and bone, and alone they are nothing. But Man is something different. Man is mind over matter. Man is

imperfection crawling from the slime to evolve into Superman.

I met Goddard in Massachusetts. I remember returning there. I was fifty years old at the time, but felt younger than that.

How I envied Goddard! But envied and pitied him. Another genius humiliated by his countrymen and becoming eccentric. Envy. Admiration. Both share the same bed. And so I envied his achievements, respected them, analyzed them, and felt pity for the future he would have at the hands of his fellows.

It was 1929. I looked upon him as a child. A suspicious, secretive, brilliant child with more instinct than logic. And yet he was a genius. There were things I learnt from Goddard. Not much: just the odd, bizarre insight, some small things I had missed: peculiarities of steering systems, gyroscopic controls, various kinds of self-cooling combustion chambers – small things; all priceless. In return, he learned from me. We worked together for two years. My presence unannounced, Goddard sworn to keep me secret, we spent days in the deserts of New Mexico, unraveling mysteries. Goddard sent his rockets skyward. My soul soared aloft with them. It was 1931, a troubled year, and I knew that my time had come.

Tsiolkovski and Goddard. Both still alive then. One older, one much younger than me, both true pioneers. The basic principles of space-flight: the deaf Russian's great achievement. Then the liquid-fueled rocket of young Goddard, abused beyond mention. Both stood at the threshold. Both failed the same way. Both depended upon 'honorable' men and were thus chained by small minds. Their mistake was not repeated. I did not trust 'honorable' men. What I wanted were heroes or madmen – and the latter sufficed.

I never dwell on morality. Never did, never will. Morality is the crutch of the cripple, the mask of the weak. What of Wernher von Braun? What of Walter Dornberger? Such men were neither sinners nor saints: they were quite simply scientists. Can a scientist think of morals? Should he split peas in a pod? No, what the scientists must do is pursue his great calling. By himself,

he has no means. He must depend on those with power. And in doing so, he must stand aloof from all concepts of right and wrong. I always believed that. I believe it to this day. And gazing out at the wilderness, at the world of snow and ice, I think of how, after working with Goddard, I accepted this bitter truth.

There were madmen back in power. They were obsessed and visionary. To me, they represented the possibility of limitless facilities. I never thought of right or wrong. I simply took my opportunity. I left Goddard and America behind me – and I never returned.

CHAPTER NINE

They drove out of Galveston as the evening fell about them, a fiery sun bathing the Gulf of Mexico in a red, incandescent light. The city soon fell behind them, gave way to parched flatlands, old shacks and houses leaning on stilts, silhouetted in crimson haze. Stanford wiped sweat from his brow: the April winds outside were hot; he swore softly and glanced at Epstein, saw him framed by the sinking sun. Epstein looked extremely tired; he rubbed his eyes and coughed a lot. Stanford grinned at him and then watched the road that cut through the bleak countryside.

‘I had a call from a friend,’ he said. ‘He told me it happened this afternoon. He works in the Manned Spacecraft Center just outside Houston and he wants us to go there at the end of his working day. He said he would talk to us.’

Epstein smiled wearily. ‘You’re such an operator,’ he said. ‘I never imagined I’d get into the MSC, so you’ve just made my day.’

Stanford chuckled at that. ‘Well, you know me, professor. I had this sweet girl and this girl knows this guy and this guy wants what I get from the girl, so he’s very obliging.’

‘You’re a bastard,’ Epstein said.

‘I have a mom and a pa.’

‘You really should settle down, Stanford. You’re too old for that nonsense.’

Stanford chuckled again. ‘I can’t make decisions,’ he said. ‘You told me that a couple of weeks back and I think you were right. I’m an irresponsible sonofabitch. I can’t resist my hard-ons. If it wasn’t for that, I’d have been a proper scientist instead of troubleshooting for your institute. But we all have our place in life.’

Epstein almost laughed, but instead a cough emerged, making him cover his mouth with a handkerchief and spit the phlegm out. When he had finished, he cursed softly, shook his head from side to side, then glanced out the window of the speeding car, his gaze slightly unfocused.

‘You should see a doctor,’ Stanford said.

‘I’m too busy, my friend.’

‘You’ve had that cough a long time.’

‘I’ve been alive a long time.’

‘You’re not so old.’

‘I grow younger every day.’ Epstein studied the bloody sunset in the west, the starkly shadowed flatlands. ‘Where on earth are we going?’

‘Someone’s ranch,’ Stanford said. ‘About halfway between here and Houston. It’s supposed to be just off this road. We should be there real soon.’

‘What sort of rancher?’

‘A struggling one-man band. A few crops and a hundred head of cattle. Now he’s left with only the crops.’

Epstein nodded sympathetically, closed his eyes and put his head back, sinking gratefully into his seat, yearning for sleep. The sun had almost gone, the crimson sky turning to darkness, a ragged ribbon of mountains on the

horizon, suffused in an ochre haze. The wind was growing stronger, howling around the speeding car, clouds of dust racing across the flatlands and whipping the cactus trees.

‘What did you find out about Irving Jacobs?’

‘I thought you were sleeping,’ Stanford said.

‘No,’ Epstein said, ‘I’m just resting. Now what about Irving?’

‘Not a thing,’ Stanford said. ‘The loss of his papers is still a mystery – and that doesn’t help much.’

‘The police?’

‘No papers. They found nothing in Irving’s car. Apparently the only thing that Irving took with him was that fucking pistol.’

‘We checked the terrain,’ Epstein said. ‘That area was definitely radioactive. I think something came down over Irving’s car and made that great circle of scorched earth.’

‘That was one hell of a scorch mark.’

‘Yes, it was huge. But assuming that something descended from the sky, that would explain the lack of tire tracks.’

‘A UFO.’

‘Precisely.’

‘It’s too incredible,’ Stanford said. ‘I just can’t bring myself to accept that. I try, but I can’t.’

‘There were UFOs all over the area. They were all tracked on radar. Three of them – one large and two small – and they were tracked near that area.’

‘I checked on Mary’s info. A lot of what she said was true. Dr Jessup committed suicide, Rene Hardy committed suicide, McDonald drove himself into the desert and shot himself in the head – exactly like Irving. She was also right about Chuck Wakely. He’d been stirring things up a bit. He was shot dead in his room in Miami a couple of weeks back.’

‘I think there’s a connection.’

‘I think you may be right.’

‘And the Philadelphia Experiment?’

‘All the doors are closed tight. The Navy categorically denies that it ever existed… it’s just one of those rumors.’

‘Maybe,’ Epstein said. ‘And then again, maybe not. It’s a known fact that the Navy’s been working for years to develop a form of magnetic cloud that can temporarily render physical objects, including ships, invisible. It’s also widely rumored, though not yet proven, that NASA has been engaged in research into the possibilities of antigravity. Who knows what they’ve accomplished? They keep quiet about a lot of their achievements. But as both of us know, their denials don’t mean a damned thing.’

The sun sank behind the mountains, the blood-red dusk dissolving, the sky starry, the wind howling around the car as it headed toward Houston. Epstein exercised his stiff neck, his hands folded, primly in his lap; he was trying to avoid thinking of Mary or the relentless passage of time. He wasn’t really growing younger. In fact, his age weighed upon him. He glanced out of the speeding car, saw the swirling of clouds of sand, the deepening night stretched out all around them, hybrid with mystery.

‘What do you know about the CIA?’

‘Odds and ends,’ Stanford said.

‘UFO investigations?’

‘They’ve been involved,’ Stanford said. ‘No one really knows how long or how much, but they *have* been involved.’

‘It is possible to check it out?’

‘It wouldn’t be too difficult.’

‘No,’ Epstein said. ‘I mean, check it out in details. I want to know the whole history, from the end of the Second World War to the present day. I want to know when it started. I want to know why. I want to know if their concern was just for national security or if they’re really concerned with something even bigger. I don’t want the usual rumors, the speculations and conspiracy theories; I want the facts straight from the horse’s mouth: the complete, detailed picture.’

‘Why?’ Stanford asked.

‘Because I think the answer’s there. Because too many of those people have come to bad ends after having a lot of trouble with the Establishment, scientific or military. Why was Jessup called to Washington? Why did Ruppelt revise his book? Why did Irving and Dr McDonald both go down the same way? McDonald was harassed and humiliated. Irving had to endure the same. Mary claims that Irving thought he was being followed – and that might well be true. Others have made similar claims. Many retired prematurely or disappeared. So there’s little doubt that investigating UFOs can lead to serious trouble. Does the government know something? Is the CIA involved? If the UFOs exist, and if they’re of extraterrestrial origin, that would certainly put the wind up the government, might frighten the hell out of them. I think the UFOs exist. I also think they’re of extraterrestrial origin. It’s possible that the government thinks the same – or even has firm evidence. That would explain the harassment. It would explain their denials. They might be scared of people getting too close and revealing the truth.’

Stanford shook his head in disagreement. ‘You’re getting carried away,’ he said. ‘You’ve been at this game too many years and it’s all getting through to you. Of *course* the CIA is interested; they’re involved in national security. They’re interested in the UFOs because they don’t know what they are and because any unidentified flying object could be dangerous. It doesn’t matter what UFOs are; what matters is what they *do*. And what they do is cause panic and confusion, distracting pilots and tying up communications every time there’s a sighting. In short, they’re a fucking nuisance. They cost time and a lot of money. If we could identify them positively as atmospheric phenomena, the pilots would no longer be distracted and the phones would stop ringing… Thus the CIA’s interest.’

‘But the CIA has denied that it’s interested.’

‘God, you’re stubborn,’ said Stanford.

Grinning, he rolled his eyes, turned the car off to the right, left the main road in favor of a narrow track that cut obliquely through flat wasteland. The track was rough, filled with potholes, making the car bounce and groan, its headlights almost useless in the dust clouds that swept howling across them. Stanford cursed and slowed down, trying to see through the murk, the moon and stars being blotted out by what seemed like a growing storm.

‘Jesus,’ he said, ‘that’s some wind out.’

Epstein coughed and rubbed his eyes, feeling almost suffocated, aggravated by the howling of the wind and the dense, swirling dust clouds. They were in the middle of nowhere, the storm raging in a void; he caught a glimpse of barbed wire, a gnarled tree, the black hump of a distant hill. The dust seemed to be alive, racing at them and around them, smacking the car and then exploding obliquely and spraying back down upon them. This night had no boundaries, stretching as far as the eye could see, featuring nothing but the billowing clouds of dust and the odd cactus tree.

‘There they are,’ Stanford said.

Epstein squinted into the storm, saw some lights far ahead, rather dull and suspended in space, the dust racing across them. He blinked and looked again, saw the lights coming closer, separating, gliding away from one another until they formed a long line. Epstein strained to see better. The lights were now a lot brighter. The car shuddered and then rolled down an incline and the lights changed again. They were actually raised up on trucks. The trucks surrounded a broad field. The lights were like the lamps of a football stadium, beaming down on the ground below. The whole scene was very strange. Epstein saw the circle of lights, the dust racing across the field, indistinct figures wandering to and fro, some bent over, gesticulating to each other. The sand blew across them, clumps of sagebrush rolled and danced, and the arc lamps formed an immense globe of light surrounded by black night.

Stanford drove up to the field, parked behind one of the trucks, and the lamps threw down a fierce white glare that temporarily blinded them. Epstein closed his eyes briefly, opened them, looked again: he saw the dust boiling through the bright light, around the men walking back and forth. All the men looked odd: they seemed to have no eyes or lips. Epstein shivered and tried to concentrate and then saw the reality. The men were wearing protective goggles, their mouths covered with white filter masks. They were waving at one another and shouting against the wind, bending over the dark, motionless bundles that littered the ground.

‘Here we go,’ Stanford said. He handed Epstein a mask and goggles. ‘Put them on. You’ll need them out there. That stuff could choke you to death.’

Epstein did as he was told, sniffed the mask, felt claustrophobic, then he stared at Stanford through the misted-up goggles and beheld a strange creature. No eyes. No lips. Epstein thought of his UFO reports. There were connections wherever you cared to look and it was best not to think of them. Stanford opened the car door. He pointed ahead and then jumped out. Epstein

opened his own door and slithered out and felt the fist of the wind.

The wind smacked his face, punched his chest, pushed him back; he reached out and grabbed the door of the car and then pulled himself forward. The noise was eerie, bizarre, a constant, tormented howling, the wind-blown sand making a separate hissing sibilance that tortured the eardrums. Epstein felt that he was dreaming: demoniac shapes formed in the murk. A grotesque, faceless creature materialized and reached out to grab hold of him. Epstein was pulled forward. He followed Stanford toward the lights. The dust spiraled over the trucks, around the men in the bright field. Epstein and Stanford approached a truck. A man was kneeling beside it. He was dressed in coveralls, wore the protective mask and goggles, and was studying the intestines of a cow that had been disemboweled.

Stanford waved his right hand, indicating the field illuminated with arc lamps. ‘All dead,’ he said. ‘A hundred head of cattle. All dead. Every last one of them.’

Epstein looked around the field, recognized the dark bundles, the dust settling on blood, bone and tripe, the hides slashed and peeled back. It was a scene of incredible carnage. The wind carried the stench away. The masked men moved back and forth, looking here, looking there, kneeling repeatedly and then standing up again with gloved hands dripping blood. They were using surgical instruments, probing exposed intestines and dismembered limbs, moving to and fro as if in a trance, still not fully believing what they were dealing with. Epstein shivered. It was hot, but he felt cold. He saw the gleam of white bone, a slashed udder, a pool of blood, the wind howling, the dust sweeping over all, trying to bury the horror.

Stanford led him across the field, zigzagging between the dead cattle, skirting around the bulldozer that was roaring into action, passing more blood-soaked men. The cattle were everywhere, scattered over the whole field, some stripped of their hides, their rib cages gleaming dully, throats slashed and udders chopped off, eyeballs torn from their sockets. Epstein had never seen

anything like it – it was a shocking, nightmarish sight. The wind blew the sand over the men, around the trucks and arc lamps.

Stanford walked on ahead, skirting around blood-soaked pits, then turned his head and pointed at a nearby truck, telling Epstein to follow him. Epstein nodded and continued walking. The wind pummeled his body. He put his head down and fought his way forward, trying to see through the hissing, twisting sand. Eventually he reached the truck, went around it and saw a car, a group of men squatting in the narrow space where the wind was less fierce.

Epstein approached this group and knelt down beside Stanford, seeing the tripe on the dusty coveralls, the men minus their masks. These men looked very weary and were drinking from cans of beer. The narrow space between the truck and the car afforded modest protection. Stanford pulled his mask off and Epstein gratefully did the same, then Stanford opened a can of beer, had a drink, wiped his lips and grinned at another man as if they were old friends.

‘Help yourself to a beer,’ this man said. ‘Don’t wait to be asked.’

Stanford grinned boyishly. ‘A fine brew,’ he said. ‘I only come out nights like this on the chance of a free beer.’

‘What the hell are you doing here, Stanford? I thought this was secret. We only got the word an hour ago and we haven’t passed it on.’

Stanford winked at him. ‘An old MSC friend. He gave me the word on the hot line and I just came right over.’

‘He?’

‘Oh, well…’

‘You’ve been poking some cutey.’

‘A man has to give something in return; it’s the least I could do.’

The squatting man grinned and shook his head from side to side. ‘Oh, boy,’ he said, ‘you really are a mover… you’re some scientist, Stanford.’ He spat dust from his mouth, wiped the grime from his eyes, had another slug of beer and glanced around him, shook his head again, slowly. ‘You ever seen anything like this? It’s happening all over the country. Cattle and sheep and sometimes horses: a real butcher’s paradise.’

‘Bless the wind,’ another man said.

‘Yeah,’ said yet another… ‘the stench.’

‘Stanford, you’d better keep your mouth shut; we don’t want this widely discussed.’

Stanford nodded and sipped some beer. ‘That’s understood,’ he said. ‘We had a case like this three months ago; the very same thing.’

‘Where was that?’

‘Lubbock.’

‘I think I remember it.’ The squatting man looked curiously at Epstein. ‘Who’s this?’ he asked.

Epstein felt himself flushing, feeling a little out of place, but he looked the squatting man in the eyes and said, ‘Frederick Epstein.’

‘Who?’

‘Dr Epstein’s from the Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute in Washington, DC,’ Stanford said. ‘He’s been on a few cases like this before and he doesn’t talk much.’

‘The APII?’ the squatting man said. ‘So why the hell are you interested in this?’

‘Come *on*, Miller!’ Stanford said.

‘Come on, *nothing*,’ Miller retorted. ‘I don’t know what you birds want out there. It’s got nothing to do with you.’

‘Yes, it has,’ Epstein said. ‘As you just said yourself, there’s been a number of cases like this right around the whole country, and invariably they’ve occurred when UFOs have been reported. Cattle mutilation isn’t commonplace, so there might be a connection.’

Miller drank some beer, wiped his lips with his free hand, shook his head wearily from side to side and sighed in despair.

‘I don’t believe this,’ he said. ‘You fucking dogs stop at nothing. The slightest chance to pin something on a UFO and you can’t wait to do it. Well, this has nothing to do with UFOs. There’s no connection at all. What we have here is the work of a gang of rural deviants – or possibly some bizarre religious ritual. It may be sick, but that’s all it is: a gang of headcases on the loose.’

‘I don’t believe that,’ Epstein said.

‘You come from Washington, DC,’ Miller said. ‘You don’t know what some of these country boys are like. The lack of sex drives them crazy.’

Stanford chuckled at that. ‘Not *my* problem,’ he said.

‘No,’ Miller said, ‘not your problem. You’re a clean living city boy.’ He sighed again and stood up, finished off his can of beer, threw the can into the back of the truck and then held up his face mask. ‘We’ve got work to do,’ he said. ‘We have to bury these carcasses. I can’t sit here and talk to you lunatics. Go on home. On your feet, boys.’

The other men cursed and groaned, wearily clambered to their feet, started putting on their face masks and goggles, the dust swirling around them.

Stanford stood up as well, handed his beer can to Epstein, walked up to Miller, tugged his elbow and leaned very close to him, talking into the hissing wind.

‘Just tell me one thing,’ he said quietly. ‘Have you had any UFO reports?’

Miller looked coolly at him, turned away and surveyed the field, his shadow stretching out from his feet, heightened by the bright lights.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about,’ he said.

Stanford wasn’t smiling. ‘I’m talking about fucking UFOs. I’m wondering what you boys are doing here if what you told me is true.’

‘*What* did I tell you?’

‘You told me this was nothing. You told me it was the work of some crazies. If so, it’s a police case.’

‘We’re burying the bodies,’ Miller said.

‘You work for NASA,’ Stanford said. ‘You work for a decontamination unti and you’ve done this before.’

‘So what’s your bitch? Dead cattle can contaminate. We came out here because we don’t want this mess causing any disease. We’re the nearest available personnel. That’s all there is to it. We got called out because there’s no one else and because we’re equipped. The local health officer called us out. He said he wanted this mess cleaned up. He said it would take too long to get civilians, and he asked us to help. There’s no mystery to it.’

‘Bullshit,’ Stanford said.

‘Suit yourself,’ Miller said.

‘That apartment in Austin,’ Stanford said. ‘It’s booked out from this

moment.’

Miller sighed, shook his head in disgust, walked a little bit away from his men, tugging Stanford along with him. They stood together at the edge of the field, the carnage spread out behind them, the lamps on the trucks beaming down, the sand spiraling and hissing around them.

‘You’ve got a friend in MSC?’

‘That’s right,’ Stanford said.

‘And he’s the one who told you about this?’

‘You’ve hit the nail on the head.’

Miller nodded and rubbed his eyes, the wind tugging at his clothes, the dust sweeping across the flat field and the slumped, bloody cattle.

‘So you’re going to see him.’

‘Right,’ Stanford said.

‘Then presumably he’ll tell you about it and I’ve nothing to lose.’ Miller glanced around, making sure he was out of earshot of his men. Epstein moved closer to him. The wind made it difficult to hear, and Miller spoke softly. ‘There’s a rancher and his daughter. The rancher seems to be in shock. The daughter’s about eighteen years old and she doesn’t seem too bright. The rancher’s still babbling. The daughter doesn’t say much at all. The rancher says he was in the house, having dinner with his daughter, when they heard a humming sound, the whole place went bananas, and a strange light, much brighter than the sun, almost blinded them both. The rancher dived to the floor. He says his daughter just sat there. The light faded and the rancher stood up and grabbed his rifle and rushed outside. At first he saw nothing. Then the humming began again. His daughter joined him on the porch as he looked up, so she looked up as well. There was something over his grazing

land. He's pretty vague about what it was. All we know is that he believes it was huge and that it glowed and climbed slowly. I don't think he's all there. I think they're both a bit nuts. He says the object was as big as the field, that it was silvery and disk-shaped. It hummed and climbed slowly. There were lights right around its rim. It ascended to a hundred feet or so and then it shot off obliquely. His daughter smiles when he mentions it.'

'What about the MSC?'

'They've had radar lock-ons. The blips appeared, then disappeared, kept returning and disappearing, and some jets were sent up to pursue them, but there wasn't a hope. Those unidentifieds were moving fast. They made the jets seem like toys. They were going faster than any aircraft we know of and the jets never saw them. The radar located them here. Same place and same time. We were sent out immediately but when the rancher saw us coming, he jumped in his truck and came out here as well and almost went crazy. And here's what we all found.'

Miller waved his right hand, indicating the floodlit field, the men stooped and working hard in the churned-up dust, the bulldozer roaring, the dead cattle everywhere.

'Are these storms commonplace?' Epstein asked.

'Not at this time of the year.'

'It might be electrical,' Stanford said.

'It might be anything,' Miller said. He waved at the nearby men, told them to get back to work, then he put on his protective mask and goggles, and said, 'Come with me.'

Stanford and Epstein followed him, skirting the edge of the field, both wearing their face masks and goggles, bent against the fierce wind. Miller climbed into a jeep, told them to get in the back, and when they did so, he

shot off down the road, the dust obscuring his headlights. He drove for about five minutes, driving blindly and dangerously, bouncing over potholes and mounds of earth until he came to the ranch. It was badly dilapidated, an overgrown shack on stilts, creaking in the wind and the hissing dust, its lights piercing the darkness.

Miller drove up and braked, killed his headlights and jumped out, waiting for Stanford and Epstein, then walked up to the steps. The house lamps were all lit, framed by shuddering windows, and the light fell from the windows to the porch, illuminating the silent girl. The girl was unkempt, her long hair whipping across her face. She was wearing a cheap cotton dress, her legs and arms were bare, and she stood there with a thumb in her mouth, staring up at the sky.

‘Hello, Emmylou!’ Miller shouted. ‘What are you doing, standing out there? You’re going to choke in the dust!’

The girl moved slowly, turning her head with clear reluctance, as if not wanting the intrusion, gazing down at them, her thumb still in her mouth, her brown eyes uncommonly large. She didn’t say anything, simply studied Miller and Epstein. She glanced at Stanford and her eyes flicked away and then came back toward him. She smiled, the thumb still in her mouth, looking directly at Stanford.

‘Can we come in?’ Miller asked.

The girl blinked and then nodded. The three men mounted the steps to the porch and then stopped by the front door. They are stared at the girl. The howling wind pressed the dress to her body, revealing large breasts and broad hips. The dress had buttons up the front, but the buttons were undone up to her thighs. The dress was being blown back, exposing her legs which were tanned and quite muscular.

Stanford studied her at length. He couldn’t take his eyes off her. She had the

insolence of a child, a sort of lazy sensuality, just standing there and sucking her thumb, staring at him and smiling. Stanford wanted to put it into her. He suddenly saw himself doing it. The lust took him with immediate, startling force and stripped him of commonsense. He shook his head and controlled himself. He was sweating and felt feverish. The girl sucked her thumb, smiling slightly, ambiguously, while stroking the back of the ankle of one bare foot with the toes of the other.

‘You’re the daughter,’ he said.

The girl smiled at him and nodded.

‘We want to talk to you and your father. We want to know what you saw out there.’

The girl was standing only a few feet away. Stanford wanted to touch her. He could scarcely stop himself from doing so. The girl sucked her thumb and stared at him and offered no reply.

‘Can we go inside?’ Miller asked.

The girl nodded dumbly. Miller knocked on the door and then opened it and they followed him in. The house was brightly lit, with oil lamps near the windows, casting shadows on the dusty, plank floor and the makeshift furniture. Stanford stood beside Epstein, the girl inching in behind him. He felt that she was pressing against him and it made him uncomfortable. The shadows fell down flaking walls, crept over handmade wooden chairs. The old rancher was at the table, his hair white, his chin unshaven, a bottle close to his left hand, most of the whiskey gone. Miller touched him on the shoulder, shook him gently, murmured something. The old man raised his head, licked his lips, gazed around him, stared at Miller and went bright red and then reached for the bottle.

‘Not again,’ he growled. ‘No!’

Miller stepped back a little. ‘Just once more,’ he said. ‘Just tell these men what you think you saw. It could be important.’

The old man drank from the bottle, slammed it down and glared at Miller; his eyes were bloodshot and he had the glazed look of someone not in control of himself. He wiped his lips with one hand, the fingers blistered and grimy, flicking whiskey from his lips and then lowering the hand to scratch at his chin. Miller’s shadow fell across him, blotting out half of his face, and he moved out of the shadow and glared at Epstein and then settled on Stanford. The girl was standing behind Stanford. He heard the rustling of her dress. He thought of her dress sticking to her skin, to her hot thighs and soft breasts. Stanford felt very strange, obscurely threatened by the girl, having to force himself not to turn around and stroke her breasts and belly. He couldn’t understand the feeling: it was something more than lust; it was a dream carried in on the wind and now surrounding his being. Stanford felt sick with longing; he had a hard, pulsating erection. He stepped back into the shadows to hide it, but the girl moved back with him. The old man was staring at him, glaring at him, snorting contemptuously, then he glared at Miller and Epstein in turn and started drinking more whiskey. His hand was visibly shaking. He was not as fierce as he looked. He spilled some whiskey down his shirt and then cursed and slammed the bottle back down.

‘I saw nothing,’ he said. ‘Nothing!’

‘*Please*,’ Miller said.

‘Go to hell,’ the old man said.

‘It’s important that you try to remember.’

‘Go to hell. I saw nothing.

The girl moved away from Stanford, slipping quietly through the shadows, pressed herself against the window’s wooden frame and gazed up at the sky.

She wasn’t sucking her thumb: she was biting her tongue and humming distractedly, her belly pressed against the windowpane, her spine arched, her breasts outthrust. Stanford tried not to stare; his eyes were drawn against their will. Shadow and light flickered over the girl, over Miller and Epstein, over the old man who sat at the table and spilled whiskey and cursed.

‘It was silvery,’ Miller prompted.

‘I saw nothing,’ the old man growled.

‘You said it was as big as the field.’

‘Jesus Christ… *Fucking Jesus*!’

The old man kicked his chair back, stood up straight, clutched his head, then let out a terrible anguished scream that lacerated them all. Miller and Epstein stepped back. Stanford glanced at the girl. She smiled and slid her thumb into her mouth, then turned her gaze toward her father. The old man was clutching his head, shaking it wildly and screaming. He suddenly slammed his fist down on the table, swung it back, swept the bottle off. The bottle flew across the room, struck the wall and exploded, the whiskey spraying over Miller and Epstein as they hurried to the front door. Miller pulled the door open. The girl sucked her thumb and hummed. The old man screamed again and grabbed the table and then tipped it over. Epstein followed Miller out. Stanford edged along the wall. The old man grabbed his rifle, swung it wildly around his head, and started sweeping cups and plates off a shelf that ran above the fireplace. Stanford glanced at the girl. She was smiling and humming softly. She was still sucking her thumb and her brown eyes were luminous and teasing. Stanford edged out through the door. The old man screamed and smashed things. Stanford backed into the wind and blowing sand and stumbled down the porch steps. Miller and Epstein were in the jeep, its engine running, the headlights on, and Stanford scrambled into the back, beside Epstein, pouring sweat, his heart pounding. The old man lurched through the doorway, a silhouette in yellow light. He rushed forward and put

his hand against an upright and then glared at the three of them.

‘I saw light!’ he shrieked. ‘*Light*!’

Stanford drove along NASA Highway 1, toward the Manned Spacecraft Center. He felt very strange. He felt terribly alone. Epstein was sitting in the sea right beside him, but he didn’t seem real. Stanford drove fast and recklessly, now ignoring the storm, oppressed by the heat and the noise, obsessed with the girl.

He thought back on what had happened, turned it over in his mind, tried to cast it out and concentrate on his driving, but always returned to the mystery… What had happened back there? What had drawn him to the girl? Was there a connection between the girl’s odd air of distraction and her father’s wild outburst? He recalled the old clutching at his own head, shaking it dementedly from side to side, screaming as if trying to break loose from a terrible anguish. What had actually made him scream? What had made him turn so violent? And what secret did he share with the daughter who sucked her thumb and smiled mindlessly? Stanford tried to think it through. He could only think of the girl. He saw her standing on the porch, in the light from the window, stroking the back of the ankle of one bare foot with the toes of the other. Stanford couldn’t make sense of it. His lust was almost supernatural. It was not based on her breasts and broad thighs, but on her luminous, empty eyes. Stanford felt himself shivering. The howling wind tore at his nerves. He glanced at Epstein, at that lined, bearded face, and wondered what he was thinking.

‘What do you think they saw?’ he asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Epstein said.

‘They sure as hell were acting pretty strange.’

‘Yes, they were,’ Epstein said.

‘I think what they saw affected them.’

‘Yes, no doubt it did.’

‘I mean, I think it might have *physically* affected them.’

‘You think so?’ Epstein said.

Stanford didn’t reply to that. He didn’t know what to say. Looking ahead, he saw more clouds of dust sweeping across the dark road. The storm was fierce and unrelenting, blotting out the moon and stars, the spinning dust forming into shapes that seemed almost alive. Stanford cursed again, whispering. The noise and darkness were getting to him. He thought he saw some lights far ahead and that made him feel better.

‘That looks like it,’ he said.

‘The Manned Spacecraft Center?’

‘Yes,’ Stanford said. ‘Straight ahead. You can’t see much from here.’

Epstein sat up and looked ahead. He thought he saw lights in the distance, but he couldn’t be sure. The dust was everywhere, racing at them and around them, hammering at the car and making it vibrate. Epstein didn’t feel well. He kept thinking of the hundred butchered cattle, the men with faces hidden by masks and goggles. Epstein shivered and coughed and glanced sideways at Stanford; his friend was just a dark form in the night, a faint light in his eyes. Epstein wondered what was wrong: his young friend was too quiet; he sensed a great tension in Stanford and wondered what was causing it. Not the hundred butchered cows. Not the raving old man. Stanford was much tougher than that, was far stronger than he was. Epstein looked again at his friend, heard him murmuring something. He wondered what Stanford was thinking, then he studied the road ahead. He saw the distant lights, shining weakly through the storm, emphasizing the awful desolation of this dark, empty plain.

‘That man, Miller,’ Epstein said. ‘How did you get him to talk. I heard you say something about an apartment. What did you mean by that?’

That finally got a chuckle out of Stanford. ‘God, you’re sharp,’ he said. ‘It’s an apartment that I’ve had for years in Austin, and I let certain friends use it. Miller’s a married man. He’s not a happily married man. I’ve been letting him use the place this past few months for his one great affair. He’s not experienced at that game, so my place is vital to him. He doesn’t want to lose his bit of action, so his tongue started wagging.’

‘That’s blackmail,’ Epstein said.

‘Too true,’ Stanford replied. He chuckled again and looked at the lights ahead and then he started to frown. ‘Jesus Christ,’ he said. ‘What the hell…?’

Epstein looked ahead and saw the lights through the murk. The car was racing toward them, but the lights remained unchanged: the same size, the same distance away, as if actually pacing them. Epstein sat up very straight. Stanford stepped on the gas. The car roared and raced into the storm, heading straight for the lights. Epstein suddenly felt unreal. He bent forward and strained to see. There were twenty or thirty lights, very weak, not too big, spread out at equal distances in a long line that straddled the road. Stanford cursed and gunned the engine, but the distance between the lights and the car remained exactly the same.

‘Godammit, *they’re moving*!’

Stanford almost screamed the words. He kept his eyes on the lights. The car raced into the murk, doing seventy miles an hour, but the distance between it and the lights didn’t alter the least.

‘They’re above the road,’ Epstein said.

‘Damned right!’ Stanford exclaimed. ‘They’re a good hundred feet above the road and they’re definitely *moving*!’

‘How far away do you think they are?’

‘About a quarter mile, I’d say.’

‘Then that line of lights is three hundred feet wide.’

‘Jesus Christ… *Jesus Christ*!’

Stanford put his foot right down and the car leaped ahead, throwing Epstein back into his seat in an untidy heap. He quickly pushed himself back up, heard the howling, whistling wind, saw the lights in the sky far ahead, glowing through the dense dust clouds. Stanford kept driving, his gaze bright and intense; he went all out, but the distance remained the same, the lights luring him on.

Stanford cursed and kept driving. Epstein held on to his seat. The line of lights was dead straight, very wide, and it kept the same distance from them. There was something weird about it. The car was roaring against the wind. The line of lights appeared not to be moving, but it stayed well ahead of them. Then it suddenly stopped. The lights rushed at them and grew larger. They were glowing down through the dense dust, illuminating the road below.

‘*Shit*!’ Stanford snapped.

He slammed his foot on the brake pedal, making the car shriek and skid violently around in a spiraling cloud of dust, almost turning full circle. Epstein’s head hit the windscreen, bounced back into the seat, his hands darting out to press against the dashboard as the car continued skidding around, its rear facing the motionless lights. Stanford cursed and killed the engine, opened his door and jumped out, was pummeled by the wind and dust and saw the lights rising vertically. Epstein followed him out, wiping blood from his forehead, and they stood there, one at each side of the car, looking up disbelievingly.

The long line of lights was rigid and didn’t sway at all. It was not too far away, about two hundred feet up, the separate lights now yellow, red and blue, glowing through the dust storm. The lights rose slowly, making no discernible sound, growing smaller, moving closer together, then finally merging as one. This one light was long and thin, a shimmering blade of pure whiteness, and it shrank until it looked like a glowing sphere. The glowing sphere slowly climbed above the storm and disappeared in the black sky.

Stanford and Epstein were stunned, glancing wide-eyed at one another. They stood there for a long time, staring up at the sky. Eventually, being pummeled by wind and dust, they went back to the car.

‘Where are we?’ Epstein asked.

‘About a mile from the MSC. I thought that thing was heading straight for it, about to crash into it.’

‘It was low enough,’ Epstein said.

‘Damned right, it was low enough. It was low enough and big enough to level the MSC to the ground.’

‘They must have seen it,’ Epstein said.

‘They couldn’t have missed it,’ Stanford said. ‘Let’s go. I want to find out what’s happening. Those bastards can’t deny this one.’

Stanford drove more carefully now, feeling disorientated, his nerves flayed by the wind and the dust and the night’s weird events. He thought of the girl on the porch, of her luminous, empty eyes, of her firm breasts and naked brown thighs, her belly pressed to the windowsill. His lust returned immediately, a primitive, unreasoning hunger, and he shook his head and tried to think of something else: the old man’s sudden violence… What had descended over the field? Just what had the old man seen? Stanford tried to think it through and failed dismally, his lust growing and blinding him.

Epstein remained silent, feeling stunned and exhilarated, thinking of the vertically climbing lights and their serene, silent beauty. It all seemed fantastic. The whole evening was like a dream. He felt slightly dizzy, coughed a lot and rubbed his eyes, exhausted and excited at once, his heart pounding dramatically. It was his first UFO sighting and it had filled him with awe. He thought of the butchered cattle, of the old man screaming '*Light*!', and then he wondered if what he had just seen had also materialized over the grazing field.

The storm was almost unnatural and certainly unprecedented; it had emerged from a placid, crimson dusk and showed no sign of abating. Epstein thought of the ascending lights – that line of lights that never swayed – and wondered what kind of object it was that could fly in this storm.

Glancing ahead, Epstein saw another line of lights, slightly obscured behind the dense clouds of dust, hanging dimly in darkness. He rubbed his eyes and looked again, feeling decidedly odd. The lights grew larger and illuminated a fence and a wide metal gate. It was the Manned Spacecraft Center. The lights shone from white buildings. Epstein sighed with relief and then coughed and wiped his lips with a handkerchief.

Stanford drew up to the gate and stopped the car as a guard came toward them. The guard was stooped against the wind, pressing his cap to his head, the dust swirling around him and beating at him, covering his uniform. When Stanford rolled his window down, the dust roared in through the car. The guard's masked face appeared at the open window, his eyes hidden by goggles.

'Dr Stanford!' Stanford shouted, showing the guard his official MSC pass. 'This here's Professor Epstein! We have an appointment with Captain Armstrong of the Space Science and Technology Administrative Office!'

'I'm sorry, sir,' the guard said. 'All appointments have been cancelled. We're in the middle of a special security exercise and no one's allowed in.'

‘You don’t understand, corporal… I repeat: We have an *appointment*.’

‘And I repeat, sir: All appointments have been cancelled. You’ll have to leave now.’

Stanford looked past the guard, saw the closed gate and high fences, the roads between the buildings packed with troops, all heavily armed.

‘A *security* exercise?’

‘That’s right, sir. Just routine.’

‘That’s an awful lot of men for a routine security exercise. And they’re all heavily armed. What the hell’s going on here?’

The guard’s face was impassive. ‘I’m sorry, sir. You’ll have to leave.’

‘Listen, corporal, we have a *serious* appointment. Now get on that telephone.’

The corporal straightened up, waved his hand at the guard’s box, and another man, a sergeant, walked out, armed with a rifle.

‘What’s up?’ he asked.

‘We have an appointment,’ Stanford said.

‘All appointments have been cancelled,’ the sergeant told him. ‘You’re not allowed in.’

Stanford looked past the sergeant, past the fence, into the complex, saw the troops lined along the linear roads, all studying the sky.

‘Sergeant,’ he said, sounding calmer than he felt, ‘we just saw some very strange lights straddling the road about a mile or so back. They were moving, and then, when we approached them, they climbed vertically– climbed so slowly we couldn’t believe it - then they simply vanished. Any idea what

they were?’

‘Probably just a helicopter, sir.’

‘Too big to be a helicopter, sergeant. Try something else.’

‘I don’t know, sir.’

‘You should have seen them from here, sergeant.’

‘No, sir, we didn’t.’

‘You couldn’t have possibly missed them, sergeant; they formed a very long line.’

‘We haven’t seen anything.’

‘Why are your men scanning the sky, sergeant?’

‘They’re looking for helicopters, sir. It’s a security exercise. They’ve been tasked with reporting the helicopters as soon as they see them.’

‘You have helicopters up there in this storm?’

‘That’s right, sir.’

‘You think helicopters can fly in this weather?’

‘Yes, sir. I suppose so.’

‘And you’re not going to report the lights we saw?’

‘We haven’t seen any lights, sir. Now please leave the area.’

Stanford nodded, studied the soldiers behind the fence, saw them all staring up at the night sky.

‘Sergeant, please get on that telephone and inform Captain Armstrong that we’re here.’

‘I’m sorry, sir. I can’t do that.’

‘What the hell do you mean, you can’t do it?’

‘Captain Armstrong isn’t here, sir. No administrative personnel are allowed in until the end of the exercise.’

‘But he *told* us to meet him here!’

‘That was probably before he knew about this exercise. He’s not here right now, sir.’

‘Sergeant, we only spoke two hours ago.’

‘Sorry, sir.’

‘You mean you pulled this security exercise without giving anyone any notice?’

‘Please, sir, you’ll really have to leave now.’

The sergeant straightened up and held the rifle across his chest, squinting down through the dense sand, unprotected by goggles. Stanford glared at him, unwilling to move, then the corporal placed his right hand on his pistol and reached for the door handle. Stanford noticed the gesture, cursed softly and shook his head, then he turned on the ignition, reversed the car sharply, and headed back along NASA Highway 1, cutting a swathe through the storm.

‘*Godammit*!’ he exclaimed. ‘What the *hell’s* going on? Those bastards were lying through their teeth. They know something is up there.’

‘They were certainly scanning the sky,’ Epstein said.

‘Damned right,’ Stanford said. ‘They’ve seen something up there and now they’ve locked the fucking gates and they’ve got that placed looking like a war zone. And now Armstrong… Oh, *Jesus*!’

He smacked the steering wheel with one hand, shaking his head in frustration, and glanced at Epstein with a dangerous gleam in his eyes.

‘Where are we going?’ Epstein asked.

‘Clear Lake,’ Stanford said. ‘Armstrong lives in Nassau Bay and I’m pretty sure he’s hiding out there right now. I want to talk to that bastard.’

Epstein sank back into his seat and closed his eyes, his exuberance giving way to exhaustion. The car roared and vibrated, pummeled constantly by the storm, and Epstein floated in a weird, light-flecked darkness, now removed from himself. He saw the long line of lights, rising slowly and silently, floating up through the wind and dust with an awe-inspiring majesty. Then he visualised the rancher’s field, the same lights descending quietly, the cattle bellowing in panic and confusion as the dust beat about them… What had happened after that? What had caused the terrible carnage? Indeed, had anything descended at all or had the rancher imagined it…? Epstein coughed and wiped his lips, opened his eyes and surveyed the storm. Clouds of dust swept around the speeding car and raced across the dark flatlands.

‘It’s not like Armstrong,’ Stanford said. ‘I’ve known that guy for years. He’s been passing me information for years, and he’s always been reliable. He told me to meet him there. He’s never missed an appointment. If that was just a security exercise, he’d certainly have known about it and wouldn’t have sent us out there in the first place. Those soldiers are looking for something. They sealed that place off at the last moment. They must have sealed it off just after Armstrong called me, and there must be a reason for that. Armstrong said he had something to tell me. That usually means unidentifieds. I think those soldiers in the MSC and the NASA decontamination team are part and

parcel of the very same thing. There's something over this area.'

He slowed the car down, pointing his finger at murky lights, turning into the sleepy suburb of Nassau Bay and cruising along its empty streets. There were lights on in the houses, silhouettes framed by windows, the lights beaming out and falling on neat lawns, the shrubbery bent by the wind. Stanford cruised for some time, studying the left side of the road, straining to see through the clouds of dust and muttering under his breath.

'That's it,' he said eventually, pulling over to the right, stopping the car on a gravel drive that fronted a chalet-styled charcoal-brown house. He killed the engine and switched the lights off, opened the door and slipped out; Epstein followed him and joined him on the porch as he was pressing the doorbell. They heard the sounds of revelry inside, a lot of laughing and shouting. Stanford pressed the bell again, looking angry and impatient. The man who opened the door was flushed with alcohol, his bloodshot eyes blinking and settling on Stanford, opening wide with surprise. Her had a half finished drink in his right hand.

'Oh, Christ!' he said softly.

'We had an appointment,' Stanford said.

The man seemed reluctant to open the door farther, his shoulder leaning against it.

'Get out of here,' he said.

'Let us in,' Stanford said.

'I can't talk to you, Stanford. Go away. I've got people in here.'

'Your buddies from the MSC?'

'That's right,' Armstrong said. 'It's a private party, Stanford. I can't talk

now. Just get the hell out of here.' He started to shut the door, but Stanford stopped it with his foot.

'We've come a long way,' he said. 'We came just to see you. You said you had something to tell us – now you're slamming the door. What the hell's going on?'

'Nothing,' Armstrong said.

'Then let us in,' Stanford repeated.

'I can't,' Armstrong said. 'It's a private party. For Christ's sake, get out of here.'

'I love parties,' Stanford said.

'You can't come in, Stanford.'

'Why not? What the hell are you worried about? I've been in there before.'

'You know damned well why not.'

'You brought us out here,' Stanford said.

'I said I'd meet you at the MSC.'

'You weren't there,' Stanford said.

A burst of laughter from inside, more shouting, someone singing. Armstrong glanced nervously over his shoulder, then looked back at Stanford.

'Godammit,' he said.

'What's going on, Armstrong. How come you suddenly throw a private party instead of meeting us as planned?'

‘It just happened,’ Armstrong said.

‘That’s bullshit,’ Stanford said. ‘You threw that party because you didn’t want us to come here and find you alone. You don’t want to talk. You’re frightened of something. You were going to tell me something and now you’re scared shitless. I want to know why.’

‘I’ll give you a call,’ Armstrong said.

‘I don’t want a goddamned call. I’m not leaving here until I know what’s happening, so you’d better start talking.’

‘Give me a break, for Christ’s sake!’

‘Why?’ Stanford said.

‘I’ve got the CIA on my back.’

‘We’re coming in,’ Stanford said.

He started to push his way in, but Armstrong resisted him, glancing nervously back into the house and wiping his lips with a jittery hand. Then he looked back at Stanford. ‘Okay, *okay*!’ he whispered, stepping outside and closing the door behind him. He was a small man, potbellied, his hair thinning and turning gray; he glanced back over his shoulder, at the closed door behind him, then he turned reluctantly into the howling wind and spoke directly to Stanford.

‘This is the last time,’ he said. ‘I won’t talk anymore. Don’t ask me why – I won’t tell you – but this is the last time.’

‘You mentioned the CIA.’

‘No, I didn’t,’ Armstrong said. ‘Remember that: I didn’t say a word. I didn’t mention the CIA.’

‘Okay,’ Stanford said, ‘I never heard it.’

‘Good,’ Armstrong said. ‘Now listen carefully to the rest of this and don’t ever forget it. You don’t call me anymore. You understand that, Stanford? What I say to you tonight is the end. I’ll only talk on those terms.’

‘Christ, Armstrong, we’re old friends!’

‘Shut up. There’s something else… This conversation never happened. The last time we talked was on the phone, a couple of hours ago. We haven’t spoken since then. We never had this meeting.’

They stood facing one another, the dust sweeping across between them, the wind shaking the wooden railings of the porch. Epstein said nothing, feeling embarrassed and guilty, ashamed of his complicity in this bullying, avoiding Armstrong’s frightened eyes.

‘It’s a deal,’ Stanford said.

‘Okay,’ Armstrong said. He licked his lips and nodded, glancing nervously left and right, ascertaining that there was no one else on the porch, seeing only the swirling dust. He was still holding his drink, a half empty glass of bourbon, and he finished it off and wiped his lips and looked directly at Stanford.

‘There’s a flap on,’ he said. ‘It’s a very big flap. In fact, it’s the biggest flap we’ve ever had and that place is bananas. It all started about three hours ago. We received some calls from our pilots. They reported seeing unidentifieds over the Gulf of Mexico, traveling in a northerly direction at incredible speeds. These objects were silvery lights. The pilots refused to comment further. The sightings occurred an hour before sunset and continued till darkness. Meanwhile, we were getting radar lock-ons. These lock-ons located the unidentifieds not over the Gulf of Mexico, but over a local farmer’s ranch. According to the radar, something enormous had come from the

direction of the Gulf of Mexico, circled around at forty thousand feet over the Manned Spacecraft Center, and then descended as three separate blips over the ranch. These objects went off the scopes when they entered the radar's ground clutter.'

Armstrong glanced about him, left and right along the porch, his gaze wandering to the far side of the street as if searching for someone. There was no one in the street. The storm was keeping them all inside. Armstrong spat dust from his mouth and rubbed his eyes and then squinted at Stanford.

'We were going to scramble some jets,' he said, 'but just as we gave the order this dust storm blew up out of nowhere. That effectively grounded the jets – the winds over the airstrip were incredible – but we still kept getting lots of unidentifieds. These reports were coming in by telephone from other radar stations located at White Sands, Los Alamos and the whole Gulf of Mexico area – and then, according to our own radar readings, the unidentifieds were suddenly right above us. Naturally, because of the dust storm, we still couldn't scramble the jets, so we just had to sit there and tear our hair out. Then, about half an hour before I called you, the three objects above the ranch reappeared on the radarscopes, merged until they became one, and this single, much bigger object started flying toward the Manned Spacecraft Center, doing no more than thirty miles an hour.'

'*Thirty* miles an hour?'

'That's what I said.'

'That's impossible.'

'You bet.'

'And it wasn't just a weather balloon, being blown horizontally by the storm?'

'No, Stanford, it wasn't.'

The sounds of the party continued inside, growing louder each minute. Armstrong listened at the door, nodded his head in satisfaction, then glanced again along the porch, his bloodshot eyes shifting nervously.

‘We all went outside,’ he said. ‘We observed this thing flying over us. It was flying above the storm, but it was pitch black out there, so all we could see were its lights. The lights were multicolored and formed a perfect circle. They were hazy in the darkness. There were no visible features to measure them against, but that circle of lights looked enormous… The object must have been a few hundred feet up, but it *still* looked enormous… It just glided right over us, hardly moving at all, then it went off in an easterly direction and its lights abruptly blinked out. When we went back inside, there were unidentifieds all over the radarscopes.’

Taking a deep breath, Armstrong gazed up at the sky to see nothing but a curtain of dust. He shook his head disbelievingly from side to side and started talking again.

‘Shortly after that sighting we received a call from the local sheriff, telling us to get out to the ranch. Bearing in mind what we had seen, we complied immediately and soon received a phone call from our boys. No need to recount the message – you’ve already been out there – but when our boys found out what was happening, the MSC intelligence promptly ordered us all off the base. Naturally, we were furious. We wanted to know what was going on. What we were told was that we hadn’t seen or heard anything, that loose talk could lead to trouble for us, and that we were to go to our homes and remain there until further notice. That’s why we’re all here. That’s why I can’t talk to you again. What happened out there is unprecedented – and we’re all pretty scared.’

‘The CIA?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Right. You didn’t say it. Just tell me about that field of gutted cattle. Where does that fit in?’

‘I don’t know,’ Armstrong said. ‘Swear to God, I don’t know. All I know is that it’s happened before – all over the country.’

‘One of your men said it was a bunch of local crazies, but I can’t really buy that.’

‘One final thing, Stanford, and that’s it… I won’t talk anymore.’

‘Okay, one last thing.’

‘It wasn’t a bunch of local crazies. That wasn’t amateurish butchery. Whatever the reason for the butchery, it was done with a frightening efficiency. Those animals were killed with an unknown nerve gas, they were sliced up with tools that must have been razor-sharp; and their tongues and their eyes, their genitals and their udders, were removed with a surgical precision and then spirited away. Don’t ask me why. It doesn’t make any sense to me. But those animals were slaughtered by a bunch of nutters – they were professionally butchered.’

‘The decontamination unit?’

‘The area’s radioactive. That’s why coyotes and buzzards won’t touch the carcasses. It’s always the same.’

‘The old rancher and his daughter?’

‘That’s as far as I go, Stanford. That’s it. I’m not saying another damned word. Don’t ever call me again.’

Armstrong opened the door, started into the house, hesitated, and then turned back to face them, his gaze fixed on Stanford.

‘We’re old friends,’ he said, ‘so I’ll give you some advice. Don’t go back to that ranch. I warn you, don’t be tempted. Whatever you do, don’t go back there. It’s not worth the trouble.’

He stepped into the house and slammed the door shut. Stanford stood there, his gaze fixed on the closed door, then he turned to Epstein, shrugged his shoulders, shook his head, stepped down to the dark gravel driveway and walked back to his car. Epstein followed him automatically, feeling dazed and exhausted, fighting against the howling wind and dust, wondering how this would end. Once in the car, he stared at Stanford, now pale and too tense. Stanford angrily started the car, drove out into the road, and turned back the way they had come, looking determined.

‘I’m going back there,’ he said.

‘To the MSC?’ Epstein asked.

‘No,’ Stanford said. ‘To the ranch.’

‘Oh, my God,’ Epstein murmured.

He put his head back on the seat, closed his eyes and welcomed the darkness, silently cursing the wind and the dust and the night’s teeming mysteries. He kept his eyes closed, refusing to look outside the car, letting the anger take hold of him and shake him back to wakefulness. He then thought of the butchered cattle, of the old rancher and his daughter, of the lights in the sky and the guards at the MSC, of Armstrong’s reluctance to talk and Stanford’s subsequent fury. Something odd was definitely happening. It was causing widespread panic and confusion. He and Stanford had been lied to, locked out and warned off; the events of the night were being suppressed and that meant they were real.

Epstein coughed and muttered an oath, opened his eyes to look at Stanford, saw his profile silhouetted in the window, the storm raging beyond him.

Stanford's normal good humor had finally deserted him. He had never looked so cold. The wind and dust were pummeling the car, but he just kept on driving.

Eventually, they turned off the road, went along the familiar track, passed the flatlands that stretched into the darkness on both sides, and stopped near the crest of the hill that led down to the ranch. Stanford killed his headlights and they both stared straight ahead. A ghostly light formed a huge fan in the sky beyond the crest of the hill.

'What the hell…?' Stanford said.

After glancing quizzically at Epstein, he opened his door and slipped out, letting the wind sweep the dust through the car. Epstein coughed to clear his throat, covering his eyes with his hands, then he followed Stanford out of the car, into the storm's awful fury.

The storm seemed to be worse than ever, much louder, more violent, the dust lashing their faces with remarkable strength. They had to force themselves forward, shielding their eyes with their hands, stooped over as if pushing against a wall, being pummeled from side to side. Epstein felt suffocated, dazed, slightly frightened; he saw Stanford on the hill, his clothes flapping about him, silhouetted in the large fan of light that split the darkness ahead. Epstein struggled up to him, reached out to grab his shoulder, and they stood there, neither saying a word, looking down on the ranch.

The area surrounding the ranch was floodlit, filled with trucks and armed troopers, some of the soldiers wearing protective masks and goggles, staring up at the sky. Other soldiers were hard at work, crouched low and gesticulating, hammering posts into the ground and running barbed wire along them, erecting a fence that ran right around the ranch in an enormous rectangle. The lights in the ranch were on. The wind howled and hurled sand over all and made the whole scene unreal.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Stanford said. ‘Do you see that? They’re being fenced in!’

‘Damn them,’ Epstein responded, surprised by the extent of his own rage. ‘They won’t get away with this.’

‘They’re carrying weapons and scanning the sky,’ Stanford said. ‘They must be looking for *something*.’

Epstein suddenly exploded, his throttled anger breaking loose; he smacked the palm of one hand with his fist and turned back to the car. The wind lashed him, tugged at him, tried to throw him to the ground, as he cursed and shouted against the storm.

‘Damn them!’ he shouted. ‘They won’t get away with this! We’ve been given the runaround too often, but the buck stops right here. I want to know about this, Stanford! I want to know about *all* of it! I want the Air Force checked out. I want the facts on the CIA. I want to know what’s been happening all these years and why they’re keeping it secret. The Air Force say they’re not involved. The CIA say the same. They’re both lying and now we have the proof, so let’s find out the truth. You understand, Stanford? It’s time to stop playing around! I want to know what’s been going on, I want the facts, not their fiction, and I want to take those facts and break them down and tear this whole thing apart!’

He stopped shouting and stared at Stanford. His friend was gazing up at the sky. Epstein suddenly realized that it was quiet, that the fierce wind was dying. Startled, he looked around him: the billowing sand was settling down, spiraling gently, drifting languidly on all sides in the stark, abrupt silence. Epstein couldn’t believe it. He looked up at the sky. He saw the dust clouds thinning out, the moon and stars reappearing, the soft moonlight illuminating the flatlands and the parched, shivering trees.

Epstein stared down at the ranch. The dust no longer obscured the porch. The girl was standing there and sucking her thumb, gazing up at the sky.

Everyone was gazing up. The soldiers had switched off the floodlights. They were standing around the house, clearly visible in the moonlight, neither moving nor making a sound, just staring up at the night sky.

‘There they go,’ Stanford said.

Epstein followed Stanford’s gaze. He saw the three lights in the sky. They were very high up, very small, very bright, one of them the size of a dime, the other two even smaller. Epstein observed them, mesmerized. He felt Stanford’s presence beside him. The lights formed a perfect triangle, climbing vertically, moving slowly, each composed of a luminous outer layer that surrounded a darker core. Epstein felt his heart pounding. He couldn’t tear his eyes away. The two smaller lights changed, glowing brighter, accelerating, then they raced with a silent, serene grace toward the large light above them. The three lights merged together, became one, a brilliant star, then the star flared up and shot off to the south and disappeared almost instantly.

Stanford looked down at the ranch. He saw the girl on the porch. She was bathed in the moonlight, her dress fluttering against her legs, her feet bare, her thumb still in her mouth, her eyes fixed on the sky. Then she turned in his direction. She appeared to be staring directly at him. Stanford shivered and looked at Epstein, shivered again and shook his head, then they both returned silently to the car and headed back toward Galveston.

‘I’ll find out,’ Stanford said.

CHAPTER TEN

Richard sat up straight in the hard wooden chair and stared nervously at the window beyond the desk. The desk was long and solid, its surface badly scarred, supporting a telephone and a couple of empty trays, all covered in dust. The window was equally dusty, one of its panes badly cracked, now vibrating from the traffic that inched along Tottenham Court Road, London. Richard sat there for five minutes. It seemed longer than that. He was still studying the window, watching the rain splash on the glass, when the door behind him suddenly opened and then slammed shut.

Richard jerked his head around, but the two men were already past him, moving around him and taking chairs behind the desk. They were middle-aged, one with black hair, the other bald, both wearing nondescript suits, shirts and ties, both with briefcases. The bald-headed man smiled at Richard, then opened his briefcase and removed some papers; he placed the papers fastidiously on the desk and then unclipped a ballpoint pen.

‘Awful weather,’ he said.

The other man seemed humorless, patting his hair with restless fingers, opening his briefcase and withdrawing a tape-recorder, which he set down before him. Only then did he look at Richard, his dark eyes expressionless, face sallow, chin badly shaved, now tapping the table with those same restless fingers.

‘Feeling all right?’ The bald-headed man asked.

‘Uh?’ Richard grunted.

‘I said, are you feeling all right? You seem rather tired.’

‘Yes, I’m tired,’ Richard confessed. ‘I’ve had very little sleep. I came yesterday to report seeing a UFO – and I’ve been here all night.’

‘Sorry about that,’ the bald-headed man said. ‘Must have been a bit uncomfortable. But the police can’t touch cases like this – they always have to call us.’

‘Who are you?’ Richard asked.

‘Data processors,’ the man replied. ‘We specialize in aeronautical phenomena and we work for the government.’

‘What department?’ Richard asked.

‘I don’t think that’s important. We’re just here to assess what you think you saw and write it up for the record.’

‘What I *think* I saw?’

‘Please don’t be offended. I’m not trying to insult you. But the sky is not as simple as it seems and it plays tricks with people.’

‘Such as?’

‘St. Elmo’s fire can turn a perfectly normal airplane into a bright, multicolored halo of twisting light. The planet Venus, when viewed under certain conditions, will appear as a glowing orb that moves in the most extraordinary patterns. Comets, meteors, balloons, satellites, flares, fireworks, noctilucent clouds, plasmoids and corona discharges can all look like bright, solid objects. For instance, a high altitude balloon, if struck at a low angle the rays of the setting sun, will resemble an enormous flying disk flying at

tremendous speed. What will appear to the observer to be the blazing exhaust of the disk will actually be the swirl of dust and ice crystals left in the wake of the balloon and also reflecting the sunlight. Likewise with temperature inversions. These are various layers of air, all at different temperatures, which bend and twist and generally distort rays of light to create what is best termed a mirage. Did you know that a temperature layer can pick out a boat at sea, project it as a mirage in the sky, and that mirage will be viewed by an experienced pilot as a long, dark shape filled with illuminated windows? Similarly, somewhere in the country a long line of cars may be crawling up a hill, all beaming their headlights into the night sky; given the right kind of temperature inversion, those lights will be bent and sent traveling, will bounce off another temperature inversion thirty or forty miles away, and will appear to the observers as a mass of glowing, disk-shaped objects, all flying in perfect formation across the sky. As for plasmoids and ball lightning, both are basically formed by electrified gas that when burning brightly oscillates, vibrates, wobbles, flies horizontally, climbs vertically, glows in blue and red colors, and can look like a sphere or a disk or a gigantic torpedo; they also hum and make other strange sounds and are very impressive… Shall I continue?'

'No,' Richard said.

'Good.'

'I didn't see any of those things.'

'Possibly not. Let's find out.'

The bald man smiled pleasantly and sat back in his chair, tapping his teeth with his ballpoint pen and nodding his head. The black-haired man lean forward, resting one hand on his tape-recorder, not smiling, speaking in clipped, measured rhythms, his dark eyes fixed on Richard.

'The following questions have been designed to give the government as much

information as possible concerning the unidentified aerial phenomenon that you've reported. Please try to answer the questions as accurately as possible. The information you give will be used for research purposes and will be regarded as confidential material. Your name will not be used in connection with any statements, conclusions or publications without your permission. Now please confirm that you understand and accept this.'

'I do,' Richard said.

The bald man moved his chair forward, leaning over the desk, his pen hovering just above his notepaper, preparing to write. The other man turned his tape-recorder on and then started the questioning.

'When did you see the object?'

'March seven.'

'1974?'

'Yes.'

'Time?'

'About thirty after eight.'

'In the evening?'

'Yes.'

The bald man was making annotations in a large, heavily lined form, filling in the blank spaces.

'Where were you when you first saw the object?'

'In a car.'

‘Location?’

‘Cornwall.’

‘Precisely.’

‘The A30 through Bodmin Moor. It was near King Arthur’s Hall. That’s between Bolventor and Bodmin. That’s all I can tell you.’

‘How long did you see the object?’

‘Pardon?’

‘The duration of the sighting.’

‘I dunno. A good five minutes, I think. I blanked out after that.’

‘You’re certain you saw it that long?’

‘I’m not certain of anything.’

‘Five minutes is a long time.’

‘A lot of things were happening. They couldn’t have taken place in under five minutes; it must have been at least that.’

‘What was the condition of the sky?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Bright daylight? Dull daylight? Bright twilight? Just a trace of daylight? No trace of daylight? Don’t remember…?’

‘Deepening twilight. A vivid red sky. The sun was just sinking.’

‘Where was the sun located as you looked at the object?’

‘I don’t know. I can’t remember… Yes, it was behind the object. In fact, at first I thought the object was the sun. I thought the sun was exploding.’

‘It eclipsed the sun?’

‘Yes.’

‘What else did you notice concerning the sky?’

‘Sorry?’

‘The stars… None? A few? A lot? Can’t remember…?’

‘I can’t remember. There was just this silvery haze. I don’t think I saw stars.’

‘And the moon?’

‘I didn’t see it. There was just the silvery haze, then this faded and I saw the object. This object was so big, it seemed to block out the whole sky.’

‘The object was brighter than the background of the sky?’

‘Yes, it was at first. It was the brightest thing I’d ever seen. Then it darkened and lights flashed all around it and it blotted out the sky.’

‘How dark was the dark shape?’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Was it darker than the sky at that time?’

‘The sky was a vivid red. The object was dark.’

‘Did the object appear to stand still at any time?’

‘It came up over the rocks and then stopped, just hovering there in mid-air.’

‘Did it speed up and race away at any time?’

‘No, it just stayed there. It was enormous and it stayed there. It just hung there in the sky and then dropped lower and then opened up and we were – ’

‘Did it break up into separate parts or did it explode?’

‘Those questions are ridiculous. What happened was – ’

‘Please just answer the questions.’

‘No, it didn’t explode. It didn’t break up either. These panels opened and two other disks flew out and – ’

‘Did the object give off any smoke?’

‘There were *three* objects!’

‘Did the largest object give off any smoke?’

‘No, not that I noticed.’

‘The smaller objects?’

‘No. Definitely not.’

‘Why definite?’

‘They were close. They were right outside the car, one on either side of the car. They just drifted around the car, real slow, and I didn’t see smoke.’

‘Did any of the objects change shape?’

‘No. I mean, I’m not too sure of that. When I first saw the large object, it just looked like a light – a very bright explosion of light that filled the whole area. Then it changed to the dark shape. There were flashing lights all around it. I

kept thinking it was changing its shape, but I think the lights made it look that way. It didn't change as it rested there.'

'Rested? On what?'

'It was just floating in the air.'

'How high up?'

'I don't know. It seemed about a hundred feet or so, but I can't be too sure of that. Then it descended. It dropped almost to ground level. That's when it opened up along the bottom and then drew us toward it.'

'Did the object flicker, throb or pulsate?'

'It was just a sudden flaring light that faded away and was replaced by the dark shape.'

'You mentioned various lights.'

'That's right. Colored lights. They were red, blue, green and orange, they stretched the whole length of the object, and they blinked on and off in sequence, from left to right, then right to left, flickering on and off very fast, almost turning into one rainbow color.'

'Where were the lights positioned?'

'I'm not sure about that. I think they were near the bottom of that thing. They may have gone right around it.'

'You mean the object could have been circular? Disk-shaped?

'Yes. Like the smaller objects. They were certainly disk-shaped.'

'Did the large object move in front of anything at any time?'

‘I told you: the sun.’

‘Anything closer?’

‘It came over the nearby rocks and stopped in front of them. It just blotted them out.’

‘Rocks?’

‘The Neolithic stones.’

‘Did it move *behind* anything at any time?’

‘No.’

‘Did the object appear to be solid or transparent?’

‘Solid. Definitely solid.’

‘Were you wearing glasses or sunglasses?’

‘No.’

‘Did you observe the object through the windscreen or windows of the car?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you roll the windows down at any time?’

‘No.’

‘Any reflections on the windscreen or windows?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Did you view the object at any time through binoculars, a telescope, a theodolite or any other optical instrument?’

‘No. There was no need for that. It was practically on top of us.’

‘Did the object make any sound?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not sure. I think it made a kind of bass humming sound. At first I thought I heard an explosion, but now I don’t believe I did. I believe I *felt* something. It was a sort of vibration – a vibrating noise. I don’t know. I can’t answer that one. There was noise… A vibrating.’

‘The smaller disks?’

‘A humming sound. They sometimes made a whistling noise. When they whistled, they shot beams of light over us… I’ve never heard a sound like that before.’

The black-haired man sat back and turned the tape-recorder off while the bald man pushed a sheet of blank paper at Richard and passed him a pencil.’

‘I want you to draw some simple pictures that will show the general shape of the objects,’ the bald man said. ‘Label and include in your sketches any details of the objects that you recall, such as wings or other protrusions, including exhaust and vapor trails. Use arrows to indicate the direction the various objects were traveling. Also include in your drawings any motion that the objects made. Place an “A” at the beginning of the path, a “B” at the end of the path, and show any changes in direction during the course of their movements.’

Richard did as he was told. His hands were visibly shaking. The room was bitterly cold but he was sweating, and he felt slightly feverish. The two men watched him quietly. They never took their eyes off him. He heard the rain beating at the window just beyond their heads. He did the drawings quickly. They were neat, accurate sketches. He then pushed the paper back to the bald man, who studied it carefully.

‘Good drawings,’ he said.

‘I’m an art student,’ Richard said.

‘Ah, yes, the Hornsey College of Art.’

‘That’s right,’ Richard said.

The bald man passed the paper to his more serious companion, who studied it, passed it back, turned his tape-recorder on again, and then spoke directly to Richard.

‘Okay. Were the edges of the large object fuzzy, blurred, or sharply outlined?’

‘The smaller disks were sharply outlined. They were disk-shaped and silvery. I couldn’t see the edges of the big one. Its flashing lights were too bright. The body was just a dark mass and the flashing lights rendered its edges invisible.’

‘What length would you estimate the various objects to be?’

‘Not length: diameter. The big one was about three hundred feet wide and at least several stories high. The smaller disks came in two sizes: the first two were about three feet in diameter, the second two, which came out later, appearing to draw the car forward, were about thirty-five or forty feet wide. The first two disks were completely solid, with no visible features. The second two had a perimeter that swept up to form a dome. The dome seemed made of something like glass or Perspex. I remember seeing figures in there. And I didn’t imagine that…’

‘Never mind the occupants. What do you think the objects were made of?’

‘Some sort of metal.’

‘You used the word “silvery”.’

‘Silvery or metallic-gray.’

‘What were you doing at the time you saw the first object, the big object, and how did you happen to notice it?’

‘I was in the passenger seat of the car. The woman was driving. The engine spluttered and died, the headlights went out, then the car rolled to the bottom of the hill and came to a stop. Then I thought I heard something. I didn’t hear it: I *felt* it. Then the car was filled with light – the whole area was flooded with light – and that light swept over the stones in the field nearby and materialized as the object.’

‘What direction were you heading before the car stopped?’

‘Southwest.’

‘What direction were you looking toward when you first saw the object?’

‘Toward the sinking sun. West.’

‘Are you familiar with angular direction?’

‘No.’

‘What were the weather conditions at the time you first saw the object?’

‘It had been raining most of the day, but the clouds were disappearing, and the sky was red but gradually turning dark. There was mist coming over the hills, but none around us.’

‘There was no mist near the car when you were driving?’

‘No.’

‘Any mist during your encounter with the large object?’

‘No. Just the white haze.’

‘You’re certain that this white haze wasn’t mist?’

‘Yes. It was light.’

‘Wind?’

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Temperature?’

‘Pretty cold.’

‘What was the approximate speed of the large object in flight?’

‘I’m no good at judging speeds.’

‘Roughly.’

‘About thirty miles an hour.’

‘*Thirty*?’

‘Yes.’

‘You know that’s theoretically impossible?’

‘Yes. It seems impossible, but that’s what it was doing. I mean, that thing was just… *drifting*.’

‘The smaller disks?’

‘I couldn’t say. They were fast. But they could also sit, or hover, in midair, just kind of drift around the car, or shoot off in the blinking of an eye. I couldn’t give you even an estimated speed.’

‘Can you give me an estimation of how far away the large object was from you?’

‘When it came down, it was about fifty yards from the car, give or take a few yards.’

‘Did it give off any heat?’

‘Yes, I think it did. I remember feeling hot and suffocated… but I *was* pretty frightened.’

‘Was this the first time you had seen an object, or objects, like this?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ever thought about them?’

‘Not much.’

‘Did anyone else see the objects?’

‘The woman driving the car.’

‘Apart from her.’

‘No.’

‘When did you first report this officially?’

‘Yesterday.’

‘Why did you wait so long?’

‘I was frightened.’

‘Frightened? Of what?’

‘I didn’t think anyone would believe me.’

‘Anything else?’

‘I was just frightened in general. I was frightened by what had happened. I couldn’t really believe it myself – I didn’t *want* to believe it. Also, I had nightmares. I kept dreaming about the incident. I thought maybe I was going a little crazy. I didn’t want to tell anyone.’

‘What did you dream about?’

‘I’m not sure. I could never recall the dreams clearly… Just dreams of the white haze, silhouettes all around me, alien creatures, not saying a word, just crowding around me.’

The black-haired man nodded and switched his tape-recorder off while his bald friend pushed more paper toward Richard.

‘I want you to draw the occupants,’ he said.

‘I can’t remember their details,’ Richard said.

‘Just try,’ the bald man said. ‘Try to remember. Just give us some idea.’

Richard did as he was told, but his hands were shaking worse than ever. He was also sweating and the fear was returning as he drew the weird faces. It took him longer than before. He found it hard to concentrate. He heard the rain against the window, the steady breathing of the two men, and his heart was racing faster than normal, as if succumbing to panic. He finally finished the drawing. It looked childish and ridiculous. He pushed it back to the bald-headed man and watched him thoughtfully study it.

‘A little Picasso,’ the man said.

‘That’s what they looked like,’ Richard said.

‘Do you think they were wearing some kind of mask?’

‘Yes, I do,’ Richard said.

The bald man smiled at him, passed the drawing to his partner, and the other man studied it for some time before setting it down. He then looked directly at Richard, not smiling, and switched on his tape-recorder.

‘Is that nose supposed to be metal?’

‘That’s what it looked like,’ Richard said.

‘And a mask could account for the lack of lips?’

‘That’s right,’ Richard said.

‘Did the glass, or Perspex, dome distort their features?’

‘I think so,’ Richard said. ‘I couldn’t really see past their heads – that dome blurred the interior.’

‘They stared at you?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did they make any gestures?’

‘The creature in one of the disks raised his hand. It looked like a claw.’

‘A metal claw?’

‘Yes.’

‘Any skin?’

‘Gray and wrinkled. The skin around the eyes seemed wrinkled, but I can’t be

too sure of that.'

'Why?'

'Like I said, the transparent dome distorted their features. It was transparent, in a frosted-glass kind of way. It had a rippling effect.'

'What did you do when the creature raised its hand?'

'That's when I blanked out. A beam of light suddenly shot over me and I think that's what did it.'

'And then?'

'I don't think I was unconscious for very long. I think it was only a few seconds. I woke up and saw the big object coming down and blocking out my whole view. Then our car was drawn toward it. The car was dead, but it was moving. The thirty-five or forty-foot disks were at both sides of the car, shooting beams of light at the car and seeming to draw it forward.'

'You say thirty-five or forty feet. That's seems to me to be a fairly precise estimate.'

'I know. I don't know why I think that… But I always feel sure of it.'

'Okay. Continue.'

'That was it,' Richard said. 'We were pulled toward the big object. The colored lights flickered on and off, the ship seemed to split along the bottom, we were drawn all the way inside, saw a dazzling white light and silhouetted figures, and after that, I don't remember a thing… I guess I just fainted.'

'Not recovering until three days later.'

'That's right. About thirty miles away.'

‘And you’ve absolutely no idea how you got there?’

‘No. No idea.’

‘Have you ever suffered from amnesia?’

‘No, of course not.’

‘We can check on your medical records.’

‘You won’t find amnesia.’ Richard scratched at his beard, studying the two men in turn, wondering what they were thinking, feeling nervous again. ‘The police doctor,’ he said. ‘That guy examined my burnt neck. The cops said they would give you the report. What did it say?’

‘There was a burn mark all right. Unfortunately it was nearly gone by the time you were examined, so it’s impossible to say at this stage what caused it. Otherwise you’re unchanged.’

‘Unchanged?’

‘Your blood sample revealed nothing unusual.’

‘What did you expect to find?’ Richard asked.

‘Nothing,’ the man said. He switched the tape-recorder off, clasped his hands beneath his chin, tapped the fingers of both hands together and kept staring at Richard.

‘Well, what do you think?’ Richard asked.

‘What do you expect us to think?’

‘I want to know what really happened out there.’

‘I think you imagined it.’

‘Imagined it?’

‘Yes. Your story’s not credible,’ the man said. ‘I’m afraid the pieces don’t fit together. Your story doesn’t make sense.’

‘*What* doesn’t make sense?’

‘None of it,’ the man said. ‘Your experience can’t be real because such objects and such creatures simply don’t exist.’

‘But I *saw* them!’

‘You *think* you saw them. You possibly saw a mirage. You saw the reflection or an airplane or ship, caused by a temperature inversion.’

‘It was *real*!’

‘No, it wasn’t. It couldn’t have been real. No object that big can fly at thirty miles an hour and then hover without a sound above the ground. It’s scientifically impossible.’

‘*What’s* scientifically impossible? What the hell does *that* mean? All I know is that it *happened*, that it happened to *me*, and that I came here to get an explanation because that’s what I need.’

‘What can *we* explain?’ the man said. ‘Do you expect us to *confirm* it? Unidentified lights were can discuss, but what you saw is pure fantasy. It’s simply not possible. There’s no way we can accept it. Sadly, the facts speak for themselves: your whole story is nonsense.’

‘Oh, shit!’ Richard said.

‘Not shit – facts. Just one more question to ask and then we’re finished: Were you drunk when you saw it?’

‘Drunk?’

‘You heard me. I repeat the question: Were you drunk? According to the report you gave to the police, you were drinking that evening.’

‘Well, yes, but… ’

‘You were drunk.’

‘I don’t think that has relevance – ’

‘The woman herself said you drank a lot. In fact, she said you were plastered.’

Richard straightened up again, suddenly feeling disorientated, recalling the gleaming white Audi and the woman with red hair and green eyes. That woman had disappeared. She was gone when he awakened. But she had been there and had shared the experience with him… This just didn’t make sense.

‘The woman?’ Richard whispered.

‘That’s right: your driver. We located her at her home in St Nicholas and she told us her story. She remembered picking you up. She said you helped her fix her stalled car. She said that you drank a lot, that you became extremely drunk, and that she had to tip you out close to Bodmin when you became too offensive. She didn’t see any UFOs. She saw nothing unusual. She said she dropped you off near Bodmin, that you were swaying from side to side, and that you staggered back the way you had come – heading straight back to Bodmin Moor. That’s the last she saw of you. Her drive home was uneventful. In short, she experienced nothing unusual – and neither did you.’

‘She’s lying!’ Richard shouted.

‘I don’t think so,’ the man said. ‘Why would she do that? I think you became extremely drunk, that you hitchhiked back to Dartmoor, that there you saw Venus or ball lightning or a mirage caused by a temperature inversion; and

that in your drunken state you thought it was real and then you imagined the rest. It's not that uncommon. People see things all the time. In a drunken condition a natural occurrence can shock you and make you see what's not there. It was all in your head, lad.'

'You don't believe that,' Richard said.

'Yes, I do,' the man replied.

'Christ, mister, I'm telling you the truth!'

'Or what you *think* is the truth.'

Richard inwardly collapsed, feeling crushed and defeated, the fear rushing back to swallow him whole, leaving him senseless. The two men cleared the desk, snapping the locks on their briefcases, then they walked around Richard without a word and opened the door of the room. Richard jerked his head around and stared up at both the men. The black-haired man was leaving the room, but the bald man still stood there. Richard didn't know what to say. The walls were closing in on him. The bald man was just standing there, smiling, as Richard stared up beseechingly.

'Sonny,' the bald man said with a smile, 'you'd better see your psychiatrist.'

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Professor Vale was paralyzed. He knew this almost immediately. Opening his eyes, he flicked them left and right because his head wouldn’t move. The room was all white, shaped like a geodesic dome, its triangular plates made of aluminium, joined by thin, steel-gray tubing. The professor licked his dry lips. The paralysis didn’t bother him much. He felt dreamy and unreal, removed from himself, content just to lie there on the bed and let events take their course.

His eyes flicked left and right. The circular wall was white and featureless. The sole door was molded into the wall as if it couldn’t be opened. The professor was impressed. He had never seen a room like it. He gazed up at the bright, dome-shaped ceiling and saw two porthole windows. What they revealed was beautiful. Exotic fish were gliding past. The professor realized that he was deep in the ocean, probably down on the sea bed.

None of this bothered him. In fact, he found it interesting. He heard the breathing of someone nearby, but he couldn’t quite see them. This didn’t concern him: he would see them soon enough. He tried to move, but the paralysis was total, so he just lay there quietly. The whole room was quiet. There was a distant humming sound. He heard the breathing of the person nearby and tried turning his head. This time he could move it.

There was another bed in the room, about twelve feet away, made from shiny white plastic, its solid sides sweeping down to meet the floor, the rest of it seemingly molded to fit the body of the man sleeping upon it. This man was covered in a surgical gown and had a metallic skullcap on his head, with

electrodes joining the skullcap to the various colored wires that ran back into a console behind the bed. The professor studied the man at length. The man appeared to be in a coma. There were straps around his ankles and wrists, with more wires dangling from them.

The room was shaped like a gigantic eggshell. The professor looked up at the ceiling. He saw exotic fish staring down through the portholes before disappearing in green murk. It was eerily beautiful. The silence was serene. The room's antiseptic whiteness, its seamless circular wall, gave it the appearance of an enormous sheltering womb and made him feel almost childlike.

The professor raised a hand to touch the hair on his head and felt his fingers scratching his scalp. He wasn't wearing a skullcap. The paralysis was fading. He wriggled his toes and felt the muscles in his legs and then he slowly sat upright. He felt dizzy and weak, his stomach nauseous and rumbling, but he took a deep breath and glanced about him and soon felt much better.

The other man was still unconscious, hardly moving, breathing evenly, his face lean and pasty, almost deathly, his chin in need of a shave. The professor studied the strange bed. It was molded out of the floor. Thrusting out from the wall behind it, looming over the bed itself, was a until containing lamps and plasma jars and an X-ray camera, this whole unit also molded with sensual grace from the shiny white plastic.

The professor gazed around the room. The shining whiteness stung his eyes. He glanced up and saw the fish at the portholes and then remembered the boat… The sea had turned to green steam. The metal jaws had closed above him. The metal jaws had become a giant version of the room now surrounding him… The professor was fascinated. He understood that he was drugged. He swung his legs off the bed, placed his bare feet on the floor, then stood upright, swaying slightly from side to side, making sure he was strong enough.

The floor wasn’t moving. It didn’t sway or vibrate. It appeared to be made of fibre-glass and was comfortably warm. The professor wondered where he was, wondered what was expected of him; he no longer felt in charge of himself and wanted someone to guide him.

The humming sound came from a distance. He thought it came from beyond the door. The door had no visible handle, no keyhole or lock, but when the professor approached it and touched it, it slid open silently, sliding into the wall. The professor just stood there. He kept rubbing his eyes. He tried to tear himself from what he was looking at, but he couldn’t escape from it.

He was looking along a corridor that curved gently out of view, its walls shaped like a tunnel, gleaming brightly, broken up with large windows. These windows were rectangular, revealing the ocean bed, beams of light boring through the murky depths, illuminating an aquatic wonderland.

The professor advanced into the corridor, gazed through the nearest window, saw smooth rocks and multicolored plants and bizarre, swimming creatures. It was awesome, incredible, the flooded landscape of a dream: the fish monstrous and minute, stunningly beautiful and grotesque – pulsing gills, flapping fins, eyes like prisms and stars, their colors changing as they merged with one another and formed wavering rainbows. The ocean bed was stone and sand and had a fathomless mystery; the sand swept out and drifted around the rocks which were alive with primordial life. The professor almost stopped breathing. He was stunned by what was out there. He saw a huge uncoiling eel, a web of glistening, writhing tentacles, a gelatinous mass of gold, green and violet sniffing at shrinking, possibly carnivorous plants. He saw it all in the beams of light. The lamps were fixed outside the windows. The beams of light were the only illumination in those dark, vitreous depths.

The professor advanced along the corridor. The floor warmed his bare feet. He was still wearing his flowered shirt and shorts, and that worried him slightly. How long had he been down here? Had he slept for hours or days? The questions flickered through his mind and then departed without having

quite touched him. He felt only curiosity, an overwhelming sense of awe, obsessed with the need to go farther and make contact with someone. He didn't question this desire: the need itself was enough. He kept walking, passing more windows and the ocean's teeming life, and the corridor kept curving away from him in what seemed like a circle.

The humming sound grew louder. There was a rhythmic vibration. The professor arrived at an open door on the inside of the corridor, and stopped there, momentarily transfixed, before stepping up to it. The noise here was much louder and had a hollow, echoing tone. He looked through to an immense geodesic dome filled with catwalks and ladders.

The professor stood there for a long time. He remembered seeing all this before. He glanced up at the silvery-gray dome and remembered it closing. Then he looked down again, saw the catwalks and ladders. There were glittering floors and platforms, modules made from steel and glass, mazes of shining pipes and generators, arc lights blazing from white walls. There were people down there, faraway, looking tiny, all dressed in coveralls, climbing ladders, crossing catwalks, moving up and down those dizzying depths in elevators like cages. The professor stepped up to the door. It hissed angrily and slammed shut. He touched it, but it didn't open again, so he shrugged and walked on.

He was amazed but not frightened. He understood that he was drugged. This knowledge filled him with a distant, dry amusement that didn't quite come to life. The corridor stretched out before him, kept curving away from him. He passed more windows looking out on the murky depths and then he came to another open door. He tried to step through it, but it slammed shut in his face. Shrugging again, he turned away, feeling calm, unperturbed, understanding that he had to keep walking and that the closed doors were guiding him.

Eventually he reached the end of the corridor and found himself outside a large, white-painted room. Stepping into the room, he surveyed it with almost clinical detachment. The room was circular and dim, without windows, quite

cold, lots of beds placed equidistant from each other, positioned all the way around the room and melting into the floor. All the beds were occupied, filled with men, women and children; they were all lying quietly, wrapped in surgical gowns, wires running from electrodes in their heads, hands and legs, coiling up to the ECG monitors that were fixed to the wall. The regular breathing of the people on the beds was surprisingly loud in the silence.

The professor shivered briefly. He wasn't frightened, but he felt peculiar. He walked across to the far side of the room and passed through to another room.

This room was also circular, but much bigger and brighter, its walls lined with glass cabinets and winking digital control panels, with two prop-up surgical beds, surrounded by tall equipment units, positioned in the center of the floor, their headrests raised slightly. There was a dwarf at one of the beds, his spine bent, his legs twisted; he was wearing a white gown, working swiftly and silently, his unusually pale and delicate hands flipping back a white sheet.

'Where am I?' Professor Vale asked. 'Who are you? Where's Mr McKinley?'

The dwarf finished his job, unconcerned, working lovingly, then he turned and stared up at Vale with large, slightly glazed eyes. He then sniffed and scratched his ear, shuffled forward laboriously, his head rolling loosely from side to side, buried between his raised shoulders.

'Ah,' he said, 'you're awake!'

'Where am I?' Vale asked.

'We were expecting you,' the dwarf said.

'Who are you?'

'I stayed here. I was waiting.'

‘Where’s Mr McKinley?’

The dwarf nodded agreeably, his head rolling from side to side, then he went to what looked like a dentist’s chair and raised the headrest. Vale studied the glass cabinets, which were about six feet long, all of them containing a naked human, either unconscious or dead. The glass was lightly frosted. The control monitors were flickering. Vale realized that they were cardiograph and ECG readouts, and that the people in the cabinets were still alive. He returned his gaze to the crippled dwarf, who was grinning inanely, waving him forward. Vale stepped over to the chair and sat in it without asking himself why he had done so.

‘You are comfortable?’ the dwarf enquired.

‘Yes,’ Vale said.

‘No fear,’ the dwarf said. ‘Fear is foolish.’

‘Where’s Mr McKinley?’

The dwarf nodded his understanding. ‘Mr Wilson comes soon,’ he said. ‘I press a button to call Mr Wilson, and then your fear… fear is over.’

Vale remained in the chair, studying the dwarf, intrigued by him, watched him shuffling across the floor and pressing a red button that was fixed to the wall. The dwarf grinned at him and nodded, then shuffled along to one of the cabinets, pressed his nose to a pane of frosted glass and stared at a naked man. The man appeared to be dead, but the readouts confirmed that he was alive. The dwarf turned away from the cabinet and returned to Vale. He looked curiously at Vale, his eyes large and slightly glazed, then grinned inanely and pointed to a spot just above Vale’s head.

Raising his gaze, Vale saw a circular white canopy. Sunken into the face of the canopy were surgical lamps and convex lenses, surrounding a stereotaxic skullcap and loosely dangling electrodes. Vale studied the canopy. It also

housed an X-ray camera. He studied the electrodes and the skullcap, then he looked at the dwarf.

‘Who are you?’

‘I wait here.’

‘Who *are* you?’

‘I work good.’ The dwarf grinned and waved his delicate hands, ‘No need for fear… fear is over soon.’

Vale looked up at the domed ceiling of the room. It seemed to shine with natural light. Feeling unreal, but not at all frightened, he looked back at the dwarf. The pathetic creature was still grinning. His hands clashed with the rest of him. Compared to the crippled legs and the bent, distorted spine, the unusually pale and delicate hands might well have belonged to someone else. The dwarf grinned and nodded repeatedly, pointing excitedly to the nearby doorway. Vale looked up as McKinley walked in, his blue eyes clear and steady.

‘I’m Wilson,’ he said.

‘I thought you were McKinley.’

‘McKinley came to an unfortunate end. I am Wilson. Remember that.’

Wilson looked neat and cool, his shirt and trousers a matching black, outlined against the white of the circular room, a slight smile on his face. Vale remained in his chair, again wondering why he didn’t feel fearful. Then he remembered his belief that he’d been drugged. As if to confirm this, Wilson took a step forward, leaned over Vale, placed his thumb on Vale’s eyelid, pressed the eyelid upward, looked intently into Vale’s eye, then removed his thumb and stepped back.

‘You find this interesting?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Vale said without thinking.

‘And you don’t feel any fear?’

‘I don’t think so,’

‘Well, that’s as it should be.’

Vale glanced around him, at the white walls and naked people in the frosted glass cabinets. He still didn’t feel any fear. Only an academic curiosity.

‘Was I drugged?’

‘Of course.’

‘I don’t really feel much different.’

‘You *are* different. The fact that you don’t feel any fear should be enough to confirm it. Think about it, professor. What you’ve just been through would normally have terrified you, but you’re behaving as if untouched by it. Think of what happened on my boat. Think of where you woke up. Think of what you saw as you walked to here and why you’re still not fearful. Of *course* you were drugged. Otherwise you would be mad. Even now, as you sit there, you’re still drugged, which is why you’re so calm.’

‘What kind of drug is it?’

‘More advanced than any you know. Scientifically and medically, the world you inhabited is antiquated. You will soon find that out.’

Wilson crossed to the glass cabinets and waved languidly at them. ‘Observe,’ he said, ‘the wonders of our science. They will sleep till I waken them.’ Turning around, he looked down at the dwarf, who was grinning and nodding excitedly. Wilson patted the dwarf lightly on the head and then offered a

bleak smile. ‘This is Ruediger,’ he said. ‘He has wonderful hands. We removed his hands and gave him metal claws and then we gave his hands back to him. Of course they’re not his old hands. In fact, they’re not flesh and blood. Nevertheless, they are as good as the originals, and the patient is happy.’ He returned to Professor Vale, leaned close to him, stared at him. ‘And you still don’t feel any fear?’ he asked.

‘No, I don’t. I don’t think so.’

Wilson smiled and straightened up, then returned to the glass cabinets against the wall and indicated the bodies. ‘They’re all alive,’ he said, ‘though we’re killing them slowly. We want to preserve them for the future, so they’ll have to die gently. We will drain all their blood, then replace the blood with glycerine and dimethylsulfoxide to prevent ice crystals forming in their tissues. Then we’ll wrap them in aluminium foil, place them in cryonic storage chambers , and only resurrect them when we need them.’ Turning away from the cabinets, he walked back across the room, leaned once more over Vale and offered his bleak smile. ‘And you *still* feel no fear?’ he asked.

Vale glanced around the room to see the smooth, circular wall, the solid geodesic dome that shone brightly above him. Then he studied the cabinets. The frosted glass distorted the naked bodies. The jagged white lines jumped erratically just above them, moving slower each second, indicating that the bodily functions of those still living were gradually running down. Then Vale looked up at Wilson, taking in the cold, intelligent eyes, the tanned, strangely unlined forehead under the shock of white hair.

‘Who are you?’ he asked.

‘I’ve just told you: I’m Wilson.’

‘Where do you come from?’ Vale asked.

‘You’ll learn that when you need to.’

‘And the bodies in the cabinets?’

‘What about them?’

‘Where do they come from?’

‘From Earth,’ Wilson said. ‘From all over. We picked them up from here and there.’

‘I’m not frightened,’ Vale said.

‘No. You’re still drugged.’

‘What do you want from me?’ Vale asked.

‘I want your brain,’ Wilson said.

Professor Vale felt nothing. He was numbed to rational feelings. He just sat there, staring around the strange room, wondering just where he was. He remembered the triangular steel spikes, rising inexorably, closing above him; recalled sinking through a shimmering white haze, past steel catwalks and ladders. All of that and much more: his long walk along the curving corridor, the large windows, the ocean bed, the great dome that soared above the immense decks and workshops, dwarfing the men in the modules of steel and glass, reverberating with the sounds of ceaseless activity. He was at the bottom of the ocean. This room was part of something enormous. He was possibly in an undersea city, but he couldn’t be sure of that.

‘Put your head back,’ Wilson said.

‘Pardon?’

‘Put your head back. I want to place this skullcap on your head. This won’t take very long.’

Vale did as he was told. Wilson pulled the skullcap down. Vale felt the cold

metal against his scalp, and then he felt a slight pressure.

‘You don’t have to shave my head?’

‘No, my dear professor. We’re not as primitive as that. We bypassed all that long ago. This operation is simple.’

Wilson adjusted the skullcap. It tightened around Vale’s head. Raising his eyes, Vale saw a tangle of electrodes dangling down just in front of him. A pair of hands came into view, unusually pale and delicate; the crippled dwarf was leaning over his shoulder to insert the electrodes. Vale didn’t move. He was surprised by his own serenity. He knew that what was happening was a nightmare, but it was happening outside of him. The dwarf inserted the electrodes. There was a faint ringing sound. Vale tried to raise his hands to his head but found them strapped to the armrest. His hands and forearms tingled. The chair’s arms were vibrating. Vale sat there, unable to move a muscle, reconciled to his fate.

‘No fear,’ the dwarf said. ‘Fear is over… No fear in your future.’

Vale couldn’t see the dwarf. Clearly the dwarf was still behind him. Wilson was standing directly in front of him, a bleak smile on his face.

‘In 1932,’ he said, ‘Dr Walter Hess devised the modern technique of electrode implantation, thereby demonstrating that nearly all of man’s functions and emotions can be influenced by stimulation of specific areas of the brain. A state of constant drowsiness can be brought about by the simple electric stimulation of the caudate nucleus, the nucleus reticularis, or the inferior thalamus; conversely, a similar stimulation of the mesencephalic reticular formation will induce instant arousal. Man is thus a machine, to be utilized, controlled, operable by simple laws of give and take, without will of his own. The philosopher’s stone has been shattered. Philosophy itself has become redundant. The mysteries of the human mind, its creativity, its moral imperatives, have been reduced to a set of components that we endlessly play

with. Man is not a magical creature – he is merely a container of various impulses. These impulses can be rearranged to a pattern that will change his behaviour.'

Wilson flicked a switch, bathing Vale in blinding light, filling his head with an unusual incandescence and making it vibrate. Though Vale felt himself blinking repeatedly, he could not resist. He understood that what was happening was hideous, yet he still felt no fear. Drifting out of himself, he observed himself succumbing quietly, his head trapped in the stereotaxic skullcap, beyond which there was nothing.

'The hypothalamus,' Wilson continued, 'is the area of the brain that controls your most basic and primitive needs. By stimulating the appropriate areas of the hypothalamus with submicroelectrodes I can regulate your blood pressure, your heart rate and respiration; your sleep, your appetite, even the diameter of your eye pupils; I can place you in suspended animation or make you work till you drop… Do you understand this?

'Yes,' Vale said.

'Excellent,' Wilson said. 'Now the rather simple biocybernetic system into which you are now plugged consists of a fifteen-channel programmable brain stimulator and a normal LINC-8 digital computer with the appropriate interfacing equipment. At the moment, radiopaque materials are being injected into the intracerebral spaces inside your skull to facilitate, by X-ray, the visualization of various parts of your brain. The stereotaxic skullcap, utilizing minute spikes that have already pierced your scalp, is now taking the X-rays from a variety of different angles. At this very moment the stereotaxic apparatus is making geometrical calculations using the X-rays and reference-point grids to give me three-dimensional coordinates for the positioning of the electrodes… You will feel none of this.'

Vale sat quietly in the chair, his eyes closed in surrender. His whole head was vibrating, was glowing and warm, and he felt that he was crouched up in

there, his own skull surrounding him. It made him think of the great dome. His own skull was such a dome. It was immense and he was crouched at its center… overwhelmed by the vast, empty darkness.

‘The desired targets have been fixed. I am drilling into your skull. The steel electrodes are as thin as hairs, the micromanipulators are guiding them in, and in a moment you will feel an electric current as light as a feather. You will not feel any pain. You will experience a brief panic. This panic will pass away quickly, after which you’ll feeling nothing… I am taking your brain now.’

Vale sat very still, almost welcoming what was coming. His eyes were closed and he crouched in a darkness lit by tiny flashes of light. His brain’s interior was enormous. He actually thought he could see it. It was an immense, crenellated, dark dome rising up all around him. There was silence. A bass humming. A distant rumbling reverberated. He crouched alone in the wilderness of his mind and saw the holes in the sky. That sky was utterly black. The holes appeared as tunnels of light. The light burned through the curtain of darkness and exploded around him.

Vale shrank within himself, feeling helpless, totally naked, now whipped by a sudden, shocking terror that returned him to childhood. Then he heard his own voice, a strangled sound, hoarse and pitiful, gasping out its anguished plea for release, its final expression of will:

‘Please don’t,’ he whimpered.

It didn’t matter after that. The fear passed and he was calm. The light receded and he saw the dark walls of his captured, chained mind. There was a glowing in the darkness: the light of mindless peace. The walls retreated and dissolved all around him as he opened his eyes. He saw the radiant white room, the grinning dwarf, the glass cabinets, a seamless face staring at him, the cold blue eyes reflecting him.

‘I’m not from ACASS,’ Wilson said. ‘Mr McKinley was from ACASS. Mr McKinley wanted to hire you for his project, but we need you more. We need people everywhere. We have to know what’s going on. We need someone in the Cheyenne Mountain Complex, and you are that person. You will do what we tell you, without question, without fear; you will do it because you won’t have a choice, because you’ll feel that you want to. Your will is our will. What we will, you will do. You will live just for service, and that service will be to us – and in performing that service you will experience the most complete satisfaction.’

‘I understand,’ Vale said.

‘Good,’ Wilson said. ‘Understanding is enough. We will now take you back to Miami and deposit you there. You will return to your hotel room and have a sleep and awaken refreshed. You will not go to see McKinley. McKinley is dead. You will continue your vacation as before, as if nothing has happened. You will then return home. As usual, you will go to work. You will renew your contract with USAF, continue your work in the Cheyenne Mountain Complex, and then do whatever your head tells to do, without fear or regret. You are not responsible for your actions. Your will is our will. You will do what we tell you to do and through that know contentment. Now stand up, professor.’

Professor Vale stood up. He surveyed the circular room. The white walls and the naked bodies in the cabinets now offered him comfort. When he looked at Mr Wilson, he felt a warm, transcendent peace. The blue eyes of Mr Wilson were his will and he felt a great freedom. The crippled dwarf shuffled toward him, head rolling, hands outstretched; Professor Vale saw the hands, pale and beautiful, waving him forward.

‘Can I go now?’ Vale asked.

‘We’ll take you back,’ Wilson said.

‘I feel pretty tired,’ Vale said. ‘I think I need a good sleep.’

The dwarf left the room first, his legs jerking mechanically, leading Vale into another white-walled corridor that curved out of view. Wilson followed Vale, moving slowly and carefully. They all went along the corridor, past blank walls, in silence, eventually arriving at a high, narrow door that led into another room.

‘We’ll wait here,’ Wilson said.

The dwarf nodded, shuffled away and stopped in front of a closed door. Vale recognized it as the door of an elevator. The dwarf pressed a button. When Wilson pointed to a chair placed beside the elevator, Vale took the chair without a word.

‘It won’t take long,’ Wilson said.

Vale gazed around the room. It was white and rectangular. One whole wall was a sheet of convex glass that looked out on the ocean bed. Bright lights beamed into the murk, streams of green and silver shimmered, shoals of transparent fish and giant squid and monstrous eels swam back and forth as if in slow motion, colors glinting and merging. It was a scene of unearthly beauty. Vale thought it was wonderful. He saw bulging eyes, bizarre fins and rainbow scales, teeth that gleamed like polished razors in jaws as round and smooth as the rocks. The sand formed extraordinary patterns, tiny stones flashed like diamonds, the rocks alluvial, sensual, starkly shadowed, mysterious, alive with a minute, primordial life that defied description. It was all too much for Vale; he let his gaze cleave to the walls. The walls were white and had a pure, glacial sheen only stained by his shadow. He turned his head to glance behind him. Another window displayed the great dome. Below the dome were canyons of glass, steel and plastic: that materialization of a science beyond normal reckoning. Professor Vale felt close to tears, wanting to never leave this place. He turned again and looked directly at Wilson and knew what he must do.

‘You understand?’ Wilson asked.

‘Yes,’ Professor Vale said.

‘Your work will be important. Most valuable. You will always be warmed by that knowledge.’

‘I understand,’ Vale said.

‘Understanding is enough. We will always be with you to guide you. What we need, you will get for us.’

‘I understand,’ Vale said.

The elevator door opened. Wilson motioned with one hand. Vale stood up and felt a great peace as he stepped inside. Wilson fell in behind him. The steel walls shone like glass. The door closed and the elevator descended, dropping smoothly and silently. Vale studied his own reflection, saw his shadow on polished steel; he felt calm and alert and in control, and out of this sprang his pleasure. Wilson offered him a smile. Vale filled up with pride. The doors opened and he followed Wilson out and saw the high, curving walls.

‘This is a wonderful place,’ he said.

‘I’m glad you like it,’ Wilson said.

‘I hope I can come back here some day.’

‘You will,’ Wilson said.

The steel floor was enormous, the dome sweeping up high and overhead. Around the walls, scaling dizzying heights, were the catwalks and ladders. Hidden lights cast long shadows, modules piled upon other modules; there were enormous generators and pumps and miles of criss-crossing pipes. Most

of the workers seemed faraway and wore different colored coveralls, moved up and down ladders, crossed the catwalks and balconies, and were silhouetted behind the long windows that glowed orange and blue. All of this was bathed in the white haze. Vale's shadow was stark. He looked straight ahead, across the immense lower floor, and saw Wilson's boat on the platform.

'That's some boat,' Vale said.

'Yes, it is,' Wilson said.

'If you meant to impress me, you've succeeded.'

'We always do,' Wilson said.

They walked across the steel floor, their footsteps ringing with a hollow sound, eventually stopping at the platform that was raised off the floor on hydraulic supports. Vale looked up at the boat and saw the crew hard at work. The domed roof was high above, a monstrous jigsaw of shadow and light, and the large boat seemed small beneath it, isolated in open space. The crewmen working in silence looked vaguely Oriental. The crippled dwarf was at the top of the ramp that ran down to the floor.

'After you,' Wilson said.

Vale made his way up the ramp and stepped onto the deck, the dwarf reaching out and touching his wrist and then shuffling away again. Now on the platform, Vale leaned on the railing and glanced back over his shoulder. He saw Wilson coming up the ramp, stepping onto the platform, then hurrying across the rectangular entrance to the vast working space. In there, the light glinted off the modules, off the ladders and catwalks, then fused and became a white haze that spread across the machinery. Vale thought it was beautiful. He didn't really want to leave. Turning around, he saw Fallaci, still dressed in his white suit, leaning casually against a white-painted bulwark

while talking to Wilson.

Someone tugged at Vale's trousers. He glanced down and saw the dwarf. The pitiful creature was grinning at him, head bobbing, hands waving.

'You feel good?' the dwarf asked. 'You feel better? No fear for your future?'

'No fear,' Vale said.

Wilson came up to him. 'We're going up now,' he said. 'You won't feel anything until we reach the surface, then the boat may rock slightly. Hold on to the railing.'

Vale did as he was told. It seemed a natural thing to do. He felt a slight vibration, heard a muffled droning noise, then the steel platform under the boat began to rise, moving up toward the domed roof. Vale glanced around him, saw the ladders and catwalks, felt a sudden, immeasurable loss as it all fell away from him. The steel platform kept rising, the boat rocking imperceptibly. Vale glanced below, at the workshops and modules, and wished that he could stay here forever to explore all these wonders.

'Hold on now,' Wilson said.

The platform stopped rising, its silence broken by muffled rumbling. The noise came from the encircling wall of the great dome, reverberating like distant drums. Vale knew it was the sea. The dome was nearing the surface. He had a final look around him, saw that technological marvel, then put his head back and stared above him at the shadow-streaked metal dome.

There was a sudden roaring sound, an insane hammering and hissing, as the sea exploded around the surfacing dome and rushed down its curved outer wall. Vale held on to the railing. The boat rocked from side to side. The dome seemed to sway above him, then it steadied, reverberating with hollow sounds.

Vale kept looking up, the roof of the dome still high above him, and saw thin lines of light, becoming brighter, growing longer, spreading out like the ribs of a giant umbrella to expose the vivid sky. Vale was enthralled. He stared up in deepening wonder. The dome was splitting into its separate parts, becoming four huge triangles, then the triangles themselves split in two and moved away from each other.

A shocking brightness poured into the open dome. The light was like an exploding nova. The striations blazed down around the boat and swept out through the gloom. Vale felt the burning sun, saw the vast arch of the sky. The immense, sun-reflecting, triangular walls were sinking all around him. Then he saw the hazed horizon, the shimmering sheet of the sky above. The sea boiled around the circle of sinking steel fins, then it swallowed them totally, poured across the broad steel deck, and soon the deck was nothing more than a black mass below the turbulent waves. There was a brief, hollow ringing, the boat rocked and steadied, then the black mass sank deeper, grew smaller, disappeared, and then the boat was drifting lazily in the sea, which rippled gently on all sides.

Professor Vale stared around him. The sea was calm and sunlit. Green waves rolled away to the horizon and a thin wedge of land. It was the coastline of Miami. The boat was heading straight toward it. The crewmen were moving back and forth, working silently at their tasks, the late afternoon sun beating down, flashing off steel and brass.

Vale leaned against the railing and saw Fallaci near the cabin. The dwarf had disappeared somewhere inside, but Mr Wilson was still there. Vale felt good about that. He was very fond of Wilson. Smiling, Vale leaned on the railing and took in the fresh air.

Wilson finally approached him. There was a waiter by his side. Wilson smiled thinly and nodded while the waiter bowed low.

‘What would you like to drink?’ Wilson asked.

‘Rum and coke,’ Vale said.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The dream of the Thousand Year Reich had all the grandeur of lunacy. Nothing was impossible. They firmly believed that. They had their Volkish socialism, their lust for an Aryan Utopia, and with the passion of all mad visionaries they stepped forth to create it. Mysticism? Yes. The Reich was born from mysticism: the Cosmic Circle of Munich, the Anthroposophy of Rudolf Steiner, the Theosophy and Rosicrucianism of Vienna and Prague, the ancient myths of Atlantis and Lemuria, of the undefiled German. Mysticism and racism: the 'pure' blood decreed by Schuler. The Third Reich sprang out of a vision of a Utopia devoid of Jews and subhumans.

Such dreams have no limits. Ordinary logic cannot contain them. In such dreams the Third Reich saw the light over limitless vistas – and ignored the impossible. The whole world would be changed. Cities and nations would be erased. The Earth would be cleansed of Jews and subhumans and other vermin; and in isolated colonies, in new cities of stone and glass, a chosen hierarchy of masters and slaves would create the New Order.

No doubt they were madmen. Their strongest leaders were demented. They were men who lived their dreams, who were divorced from reality, who like children felt that all things were possible and that nothing could stop them.

Science is logic. Mysticism is the opposite. I despised the mysticism of the Nazis, but could see its potential. My own dreams were grandiose. No democracy could afford them. I needed money and equipment and labour on a staggering scale. No democracy would sanction it. Only lunatics would. And the lunatics, all those mad visionaries, were the Reich's leading lights.

I knew this when I met Himmler. It was in 1935. Behind his glasses his eyes had the mildness of a priest or a fool. We were in his office in Berlin. I spread my drawings out on his desk. He glanced at them and stroked his thinning dark hair and touched his nose with one finger. He had once been a chicken farmer. Now he headed the SS. A mild and modest killer, puritanical, quietly spoken, he was seeking to resurrect Atlantis through a Reich filled with supermen. I had checked him out beforehand. What I learnt was enough for me. He believed in mesmerizm, in reincarnation and clairvoyance, in Horbinger's cosmic world of ice and fire, in gods and godmen. His SS was a religious order. His men were bound by blood and oath. Himmler wanted to isolate them, to brainwash them and remold them, to mate them with the purest German women and produce blond perfection. He had once processed chickens; now he wanted to process people: he had a dream of a disciplined Order of masters and slaves. I wanted a similar Order – but one devoted to science. And when Himmler raised his eyes from my drawings I knew I could have it.

Himmler checked me out thoroughly. He couldn't believe what I was there for. He first thought me an eccentric American who ought to be shot. I was held prisoner in Berlin. They interrogated me for months. In the Gestapo prison, in the Prinz Albrechtstrasse, I heard the screams of the tortured. My own interrogations were more casual. My cell was quite comfortable. They fed me and supplied me with books and let me work on my notes. The interrogations were conversational. The less fortunate continued screaming. For two months I kept repeating my history as they jotted down details. The prison was always busy. Bleeding unfortunates were dragged down corridors. I told my questioners of the project in Iowa and of how I had sabotaged it. The Americans don't know, I said. They believe the project was a disaster. My questioners tapped their pencils on the table and smiled at each other. Quite often I heard gunfire. It always came from the basement. I saw soldiers carrying bodies wrapped in shrouds and putting them into trucks. Such scenes did not disturb me. My hopes lived on undiminished. After two months, they concentrated on my drawings, still unsure of their

value. I don't know who first studied them. I think the Italian, Belluzzo. Nevertheless, I was released shortly after and taken back to see Himmler.

No point in even dwelling on the blood that had stained Himmler's hands. Such a quiet man he was. His good manners were impressive. A modest face with round glasses, his hair thinning and neatly parted, he sat behind his desk like a minor clerk offering assistance. He asked me what I wanted. I explained my requirements. He nodded in a slow, thoughtful manner, sometimes stroking his nose. We are very impressed, he said. Indeed, he added, we are astonished. He then told me that some technical advisors had thought my drawings miraculous.

I asked who these men were. He mentioned Belluzzo and Schriever. He said Belluzzo was getting too old, but that Schriever was brilliant. They wished to work on my project. Himmler thought it a good idea. I realized that he wanted to have me watched, but I nodded agreement. You are committed, he said. You must now bend to our will. You will never return to your own country; if you try, we will kill you. I reassured him immediately. I would report directly to him. My beloved project would be wrapped in strict secrecy and controlled by the SS.

I will never forget that day. My dream came alive then. Even now, the pain biting, my poor liver in disarray, I gaze out upon the glinting ice caps and remember it vividly.

I was driven to Kummersdorft West, sixty miles south of Berlin. We both sat in the rear of the car and looked out at the city. Himmler obviously loved Berlin. The sunlight flashed off his glasses. He stroked his nose and pointed out the sights with a clear, quiet excitement. The city was indeed majestic. The streets were filled with contented people. The walls were decorated with swastikas and flags and obscene propaganda. The word 'Juden' was prominent. I saw few on the pavements. Soldiers sauntered up and down and laughed heartily, in love with themselves. The very air seemed to smile. It was the triumph of the will. In its own perverted way it was the proof of

Man's awesome potential.

Perverted? Most certainly. With that truth I could live. Behind those walls were the high priests of a demoniac Order: Hermann Goering, Josef Goebbels, Rudollp Hess, Martin Bormann – alcoholics, drug addicts, occultists and degenerates – the very epitome of that gross irrationalism that I so much abhorred. There, too, the Gestapo butchers, the drilled ranks of the SS, and all the torture and murder that went on every day in the basements.

Yet I had to accept it. Science cannot moralize. Those irrational brutes were no more than the means to achieving my ends. Progress needs its trampled bones. Death gives way to more life. Evolution knows neither right nor wrong and transcends transient matters. So, I would work with them. In doing so, I could use them. And looking out upon Berlin, glancing sideways at Himmler, I felt nothing but hope for the future, the glow of fulfilment.

We drove out of the city. Aircraft roared overhead. Sitting beside me, very stiff and upright, Himmler started to talk. He was suddenly like a child. His eyes gleamed behind the glasses. The words poured out and splashed upon my ears as if they couldn't be stopped. He said the rocket teams had left. They had been moved to Peenemünde. The research center of Kummersdorft was empty and now it was mine. We passed troops on the road. The tanks growled through billowing dust. Himmler talked of Aryan blood and German might, of the world of the future. We will cleanse the Earth, he said. We will purify the blood. We will exterminate the Jews and the infirm and maladjusted, use the lesser races as slaves to the Reich, create a race of pure Nordics. There was no need to reply. Right or wrong did not concern me. When Himmler talked of his New Order, of his masters and slaves, I had the feeling that it just might succeed and that I could utilize it.

Unlimited labor was what I needed. No democracy could supply it. But here, in this country where all freedom had been suppressed, where the will of the people was one will – the Volk – and where discipline and slavery went hand in hand – here, at the dawn of the new era, I could do the impossible. Yes, I

grabbed at it. I was in my late fifties. I thought then, before I knew what could be done, that my time was too short. Thus, I didn't moralize. Not then and not now. I looked out at the aircraft, at the tanks and machine-gun carriers, at the troops who were numbered in their thousands, and accepted it gladly.

History will exonerate me. What I did, I did for progress. I sit now in my mountain lair, the frozen wilderness below me, and I know with the certainty of faith that my life has meant something. I am changing the course of history. I am aiding evolution. When I die, as I now know I must, my achievements will live on.

I knew this at the time. The sight of the proving range convinced me. The experimental station was between two artillery ranges, safely isolated from the surrounding towns and villages, all the hangars in good shape. Here Wernher von Braun had worked. And Walter Dornberger and Klaus Riedel. Those names, and those of Grottrup and Becker, made me smile condescendingly. The A-3 and A-5 rockets. So highly praised… so primitive. And the V-1 and V-2 would be feared when I thought them mere toys. Nevertheless, those men had gone. They had been moved to Peenemünde. They would not be here to observe what I was doing, would not know I existed. In this I agreed with Himmler. Even the Führer would not know. Himmler had his own plans for the future and did not want them mentioned.

Himmler showed me around the hangars. He introduced me to the workers. I met the Italian, Belluzzo, who was old and gray-haired, and the younger Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever, who struck me as being dangerously ambitious. The old Italian was a physicist. Rudolph Schriever was an engineer. Both men were engaged in aeronautical research, both were keen on my drawings. I didn't really want those men. They had been around too long. I was distressed by their knowledge of my work, and by their closeness to Himmler. They obviously wanted to impress him: bowed and scraped in his presence. I knew immediately that they would try to pick my brains and then usurp my authority.

I could not allow that. What I required was total secrecy. After my experience in Iowa, learning that no one could be trusted, I had already planned to strengthen my position by becoming invaluable. I would hide the most vital facts. I would doctor all the drawings. I would split the work up, spread it widely among the work force, and thus ensure that no single individual could duplicate my success. In this way I would protect myself. I would become indispensable. And so, as I shook hands, as I talked to Belluzzo and Schriever, I decided not to let them get too close to whatever was workable.

Yes, I was ruthless. I had to protect myself. I was aware of my dependence upon the Nazis and of how weak that made me. Sooner or later they might disown me – the war might drain their resources – and if that happened, I had to be ready to make good my escape. I would take my secrets with me. I would leave them only useless toys. But by then, if I made good use of my time, I would have what I wanted.

Such thoughts were not expressed. Himmler smiled and led me out. We returned to his car and climbed in and headed back to Berlin. There was paperwork to be completed. Requisition forms and orders: more manufacturers, more instruments, more pyrotechnicists, more welding experts and laborers. I did not think it was possible. The required numbers were outrageous. I wondered if even Himmler, with his frightening, godlike powers, could requisition workers in such numbers for a clandestine project. Himmler smiled at my obvious doubts. He blinked repeatedly and stroked his nose. He said that I had no need to worry, that he had something to show me.

The fields of Germany were green. I heard aircraft overhead. We passed columns of troops and growling tanks, but the peace soon returned. This memory remains vivid. The sun shone from a blue sky. It was difficult to believe that war would come and devastate all of Europe. Then we passed barbed wire fences. Beyond the wire were smoking chimneys. We drove through guarded gates, beneath watchtowers and guns, kept driving toward the long wooden buildings, passed a series of gallows. The wind made the

ropes dance. Ragged prisoners were digging ditches. We drove on and reached the center of the camp and saw the Reich's hidden nightmare.

Himmler made the driver stop. A nervous soldier saluted us. We stood together in the mud of the compound, surrounded by prisoners. Himmler smiled and rubbed his nose. I saw the guards with the bullwhips. The hundreds of men, women and children were filthy and silent. Nearly all had shaved heads. Their bones showed through their flesh. Their large eyes were filled with anguish and despair and a hopeless submission. I heard the crack of the whips. Dogs snarled and someone screamed. Himmler blinked and rubbed his nose, smiled with unstated pride, and then waved one hand languidly in the air to take in all the misery.

'Your workers,' he said.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

‘You don’t go too close to UFOs. It’s a dangerous thing to do. If you go too close to UFOs you get burned and you rarely recover. Just look at me, Stanford. I run this flea-pit in Albuquerque. I was a World War Two pilot, decorations up the ass; I fought in the Pacific and Europe and returned home a hero. What the hell am I doing here? You must have asked yourself that question. I ask the same question every night and I just wake up sweating.’

Gardner was leaning across the table, his right hand waving wildly, his left holding a glass of neat bourbon, the bottle in front of him.

‘Well, I tell you,’ he continued, ‘I’m not the only one like me. There are a lot of us hiding out, lying low, running scared, and we’re doing it because we haven’t a choice, because the doors have been closed to us. So you don’t talk about UFOs. If you do, strange things happen. You can never pin down just what it is, but things start going haywire.’

He raised his glass and drank more bourbon, slopping some down his shirt front, then he put his glass back on the table and looked around the bar. The place was crowded and noisy, a real home grown honky-tonk, with a jukebox blaring out of one corner, the lights mercifully dim. Stanford picked up the bottle, refilled Gardner’s glass, glanced casually at the women along the bar to see if one was worth having.

‘You knew Ruppelt?’ Stanford asked.

‘Sure,’ Gardner said. ‘You wouldn’t be here if you didn’t know that. We

worked for a time together, we respected one another, and even when he left, when those bastards pushed him out, he still came to see me now and then, very quiet, just for old time's sake. Ruppelt was a believer. I've no doubts about that at all. He was a believer and he died a believer, no matter what his book said.'

'You mean the revised edition,' Stanford said.

'Yeah, that's right,' Gardner said.

Stanford studied Gardner's face, the hollow cheeks, the bloodshot eyes, taking note of the stubble on his chin and his badly stained teeth. Something had happened to Gardner – something not very nice – and now the former Air Force hero was a wreck, always drunk in his own bar.

'I thought Ruppelt was a career man,' Stanford said. 'I'm surprised that he went against the grain by insisting – at least before that revised edition – that the UFOs were real.'

'He believed in the Air Force,' Gardner said. 'And the *Air Force* believed that.'

'I always thought they believed the opposite.'

'That was bullshit, Stanford. Public Relations diarrhoea. The Air Force believed in the reality of the UFOs from as far back as 1947.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, really. I was with the Air Technical Intelligence Center at the time – then based at Wright Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio – and believe me, we were in a state of near panic. And why? Because contrary to their own publicity, the military was being plagued with their own sightings: first over Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama, then, to our horror, over the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico – right smack in the middle

of our A-bomb territory. Finally, what *really* got us going was a whole series of sightings in early July, 1947 – I think it was the eighth – over Muroc Air Base – now Edwards AFB – our top secret Air Force test center in the Mojave Desert.'

'I know about those sightings,' Stanford said. 'They really were something.'

'Fucking A,' Gardner said.

He put his glass to his lips, had a drink, topped up the glass, cursed the noise of the blaring jukebox, then put his glass back on the table. Stanford topped his own glass up, glanced around the crowded bar, taking note of the Stetsons and boots and girls in tight dresses.

'I'm told that those sightings led to Project Sign.'

'They did,' Gardner said. 'No less a luminary than General Nathan Twining, commander of the Air Material Command, wrote to the commanding general of the Army-Air-Forces stating that the phenomenon was something real, that it wasn't visionary or fictitious, and that the objects were disk-shaped, as large as conventional aircraft, and *controlled*. Shortly after that, about December '47, we established Project Sign, gave it a 2A classification, and handed it over to Wright-Patterson Air Force Base.'

'That was just before the death of Captain Mantell.'

'Yes,' Gardner said. 'A famous case.'

'I'm told he died chasing a UFO, but the Air Force denies it.'

'Right. Those fuckers tried to wipe it out. But that case, and a lot of other unknown sightings, really shook the hell out of us.'

'How do you mean?' Stanford said.

Gardner had another drink, licked his lips and glanced around him. He waved at a couple of friends and then looked back at Stanford.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘it prompted Project Sign to write an official, top secret Estimate of the Situation – and we didn’t piss around when we did it. That Estimate traced the whole history of UFO sightings, included the fireballs and ghost rockets and American sightings before 1947, and concluded, I kid you not, that the UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin. We then sent the report through channels, all the way to the Chief of Staff, General Hoyt Vandenberg, but the good general, to our amazement, sent it back with instructions to bury it.’

Sipping his bourbon, Stanford saw a girl at the bar, blonde hair tumbling to her shoulders, her firm breasts pointing at him. He smiled at the girl, she smiled right back, and he placed his glass back at the table, then scratched his right ear.

‘You run a good bar,’ he said. ‘Lots of action, I notice.’

‘I do my best,’ Gardner said.

‘General Vandenberg sounds pretty odd to me. He must have caused you some problems.’

Gardner nodded his agreement. ‘It was there and then,’ he said, ‘when that report was sent back, that we realized just how shitty our job was. In fact, word soon filtered back to us that Vandenberg had described us as being mad – and the repercussions of that judgement were pretty rough. Fear of further offending Vandenberg eventually led to a whole new policy: in future all Sign personnel were to assume that *all* UFO reports were misidentifications, hallucinations or hoaxes. Not only that, but we had to check with FBI officers, and with the criminal and subversive files of police departments, looking into the private lives of the witnesses to see if they were *reliable*. No need to say it: that was fair warning to all of us that it wasn’t wise to open

your mouth too wide… And shortly after that, the Project Sign Estimate of the Situation was incinerated.'

'Then Project Sign became Project Grudge.'

'Right. Can you imagine a more insulting name? A sure sign of General Vandenberg's displeasure.'

Glancing across to the bar, Stanford saw the girl with blonde hair, now talking to a heavily built brunette, both of them giggling. Turning her head, the blonde girl smiled invitingly at him, stroking her silky hair, then she turned away and whispered to the other girl and both giggled again.

'I've heard bad stories about Grudge,' Stanford said. 'A real shitty assignment.'

'Right. We were told to kill the whole affair. Now our job was to shift the investigation away from the actual UFOs and on to the poor bastards who reported them. Our task was to prove that the UFOs did *not* exist.'

'That must have been pretty difficult. I mean, according to the Grudge Report, snow job though it was, a good twenty-three percent of your sightings were still classified as unknowns.'

'Big deal,' Gardner said. 'That was obviously still too much for General Vandenberg. The same day we released that report, the Air Force announced the termination of the project, all the Grudge records were put into storage, a few officers walked the plank, and the rest of our personnel were widely scattered.'

'But you remained.'

'Yeah.'

'You must have felt pretty bad.'

‘I surely did,’ Gardner said. ‘I began to suspect that the Air Force top brass was only making a pretence at investigating UFOs when in fact they didn’t want us to find out anything. I couldn’t figure out their attitude. It didn’t make sense to me. All I knew was that reporting unknowns could lead to really bad trouble.’

Stanford studied Gardner’s face, saw the unfocused, bloodshot eyes, and was shocked by how far the man had fallen. It was best not to think about it. Men like Gardner were the victims. It was hard to think of Gardner as a highly decorated fighter pilot, hard to think of him working on Project Blue Book when that project was honorable. Gardner and Ruppelt had both paid the price. Now Gardner talked like a man without a future, still glancing fearfully behind him.

‘Tell me about Ruppelt,’ Stanford said. ‘There’s a really mystery there.’

‘No mystery, Gardner said. ‘Clear as glass. They just slipped the blade in.’

He topped up his own glass, emptied the bottle and put it down, picked it up again and waved to the barman and demanded another. Stanford sat back and waited. He didn’t want to push too hard. This was supposed to be a casual conversation and it had to remain that way. Stanford glanced around the room. The air was dense with blue smoke. High-heeled boots stomped the floor, Stetsons clashed, the tight dresses were plentiful. Stanford saw the blonde girl. She smiled and raised her glass to him. Stanford thought she might soften up Gardner, so he nodded and grinned. The barman brought them another bottle. He slapped Gardner on the back. When he left, Gardner topped up both their glasses, then started talking again.

‘Ruppelt was assigned to the Air Technical Intelligence Center in January 1951. Like me, he was working under Lieutenant Jerry Cummings. Now, up to that time Ruppelt hadn’t paid too much attention to UFO reports, but what he read in our files turned him on. As I remember, he was particularly impressed by two reports that involved movies taken at the White Sands

Proving Ground. Now bear in mind that the Proving Ground was fully instrumented to track high-altitude, fast moving objects – namely, the guided missiles – and had camera stations equipped with cinetheodolite cameras located all over the area. So, in two different days in June 1950, two UFOs were actually shot by two different cameras, and the guys who examined the results, by putting a correction factor in the data gathered by the two cameras, were able to arrive at a rough estimation of speed, altitude and size. According to their reports, those UFOs were higher than forty thousand feet, traveling at over two thousand miles an hour, and were over three hundred feet in diameter.'

'Jesus,' Stanford said.

'Yeah, right. Now those reports really got Ruppelt going. He was hooked on the UFOs, started working like a beaver, and that's when we really got together, going through the old files.'

Gardner gazed around the room. He was clearly becoming restless. He owned the whole bar, it was his, and he wanted to use it. Stanford recognized the signs. Gardner seemed a little petulant. Stanford thought of Epstein waiting in Washington, and decided to push it.

'What led to Project Blue Book?' he asked.

'The Lubbock Lights,' Gardner said. 'Those and the Fort Monmouth sightings. They really stirred the shit up.'

'This must be boring you,' Stanford said.

'I don't mind.'

'Let's have a little company,' Stanford said. 'That blonde and brunette.'

Stanford swiveled around in his chair, raised his glass to the blonde girl, then waved his free hand in an inviting gesture. The blonde glanced at the

brunette, looked back at Stanford, feigned surprise, then pointed her finger at herself and observed Stanford's nod of affirmation. Gardner looked on, surprised. He thought Stanford was pretty cool. The girls giggled and then walked across the room, holding on to each other. The jukebox was still shrieking. Couples danced without touching. The two girls pushed through the dancers, reached the table and stopped there, looked at Stanford and Gardner in turn and gave them broad, streetwise grins.

'Hi,' the blonde said.

'Peace on Earth,' Stanford said. 'We thought you might like to share a bottle with two honorable men.'

'Oh, Jesus,' the brunette said.

'Don't pray,' Stanford said. 'We don't hold with religion on Friday nights. Just set yourselves down.'

They both giggled and sat down. Up close they looked different. The blonde wore skin-tight jeans and halter, her tanned belly exposed, her breasts thrusting forward in sexual challenge, her nose upturned, eyes hard. The brunette was far heavier, less pretty, even harder, her loose dress hiding unwanted flesh, her face masked in thick makeup. Gardner looked suspiciously at them. He was probably thinking they were hookers. The girls flicked their eyes at Stanford, looked away, giggled again and then sighed in unison.

'I'm Joanne,' the blonde said. 'This here's my friend, Carol. We both live on the other side of the tracks. We've never been here before.'

'I'm Stanford,' Stanford said. 'This gentleman is Mr Gardner. He owns this place. We're both bored with the sound of our own voices and we thought you'd distract us.'

The girls giggled again. 'That's a shame,' Carol said. 'You guys seemed to

love one another. So *involved* with each other!'

'What were you talking about?' Joanne asked.

'UFOs,' Gardner muttered.

'*UFOs*?'

'Flying saucers,' Stanford said. 'Gardner's an expert.'

'Christ, they're creepy,' Carol said.

'Fantastic,' Joanne said. 'One of my favorite subjects. Are you *really* an expert?'

She stared straight at Gardner. Her blue eyes were like saucers. Gardner grinned and sat up in his chair, almost preening himself.

'I guess so,' he said.

'He's being modest,' Stanford said. 'This guy was chasing UFOs for the Air Force. He knows all about them.'

Joanne moved closer to Gardner, her breasts brushing against his arm, her blue eyes very large and excited, her knee touching his knee. Gardner couldn't resist it, acted more drunk than he was, putting his arm around the woman to hug her, grinning like an idiot.

'Tell her about the Lubbock Lights,' Stanford said. 'Give her all the details. If UFOs are one of her favorite subjects, she'll be fascinated.'

Gardner's dopey grinned widened. 'Okay, sweetheart,' he said. 'Let me give you a display of expertise that'll boggle your mind.'

Stanford poured them all drinks. Gardner drank and hugged Joanne. Carol, the brunette, shivered melodramatically and said, 'Shit, this is gonna be

creepy.' Joanne giggled and snuggled into Gardner's embrace. Gardner grinned at each of them in turn, then he started talking.

'The Lubbock affair began on the evening of August 25, 1951, when an employee of the Atomic Energy Commission's supersecret Sandia Corporation – one with a top "Q" security clearance – looked up from his garden on the outskirts of Albuquerque to see a huge aircraft flying swiftly and *silently* over his home. He later described it as having the shape of a "flying wing", about one and a half times the size of a B-36, with six to eight softly glowing bluish lights on the aft end of its wings. That same night, about twenty minutes after the first sighting, four professors from the Texas Technological College at Lubbock observed a formation of lights streaking across the sky: about fifteen to thirty separate lights, all a bluish-green color, moving from north to south in a semicircular formation… Then, early in the morning of the following day, only a few hours after the Lubbock sightings, two different radars at an Air Defence Command radar station located in Washington State showed an unknown target traveling at nine hundred miles an hour at thirteen hundred feet and heading in a northwesterly direction. But it didn't end there… On August 31, at the height of the flap, two ladies were driving near Matador, seventy miles northeast of Lubbock, when they saw a pear-shaped object about a hundred and fifty yards ahead of them, about a hundred and twenty feet in the air, drifting slowly to the east at less than the take-off speed of a Cub airplane. One of these witnesses was pretty familiar with aircraft – she was married to an Air Force officer and had lived near air bases for years – and she swore that the object was about the size of a B-29 fuselage, had a porthole on one side, made absolutely no noise as it moved *into* the wind, and suddenly picked up speed and climbed out of sight, seemingly making a tight, spiraling manoeuver. That same evening, an amateur photographer took five photos of a V formation of the same bluish-green lights as they flew over his backyard. And finally, a rancher's wife told her husband – who related the story to Captain Ruppelt – that she had seen a large object gliding swiftly and *silently* over their house. That sighting was made about ten minutes after the Sandia Corporation employee saw *his*

object, it was described as “an airplane without a body”, and the woman said that on the aft edge of the wing there were pairs of glowing bluish lights – the exact same description as the Sandia Corporation gave regarding his own sighting.’

‘Christ,’ Joanne said.

‘I don’t believe this,’ Carol said. ‘I mean, folks see things all the time. That’s not proof they exist.’

‘Well, listen to this,’ Gardner said. ‘We investigated all the Lubbock sightings thoroughly. First, we discovered that the Washington State radar lock-on was a solid target – not a weather target – and it was then easy to work out that an object flying between that radar station and Lubbock would have been on a northwesterly course at the time it was seen at the two places – and that it would have had a speed of approximately nine hundred miles an hour, as calculated by the radar. Next, we analyzed the five photos taken by the amateur photographer. The lights had crossed about one hundred and twenty degrees of open sky at a thirty-degree-per-second angular velocity – and that corresponded exactly to the angular velocity carefully measured by the four professors from the tech college at Lubbock. Analysis of the photos also showed that the lights were a great deal brighter than the surrounding stars and that their unusual intensity could have been caused by the exceptionally bright light source that had a color at the most distant red end of the spectrum, bordering on infrared.’

‘Jesus,’ Joanne said, ‘you sound like Einstein. What the hell does that *mean*?’

Gardner preened at her bewilderment, grinned at each of them in turn, then fixed his increasingly bleary gaze upon Stanford, now ignoring the ladies.

‘I think *you* know,’ he said. ‘Since the human eye isn’t sensitive to such a light, the light could seem dim to the eye – as many of the Lubbock lights did – but be exceptionally bright on film – as they were on our photos. And

according to the Photo Reconnaissance Laboratory, at those days there was nothing flying that had those particular, almost magical, characteristics. However, what *really* knocked us out was the discovery that the lights on the photos were remarkably similar to the description given by the Atomic Energy Commission employee of the lights on the aft edge of the huge UFO that passed over his house.'

'So,' Stanford said, leaning forward, '*did* something fly over Albuquerque and travel two hundred and fifty miles to Lubbock at a speed of about nine hundred miles an hour? And did the radar station in Washington State pick up that same object?'

'According to the witnesses,' Gardner said, 'and to our radar and visual tracking calculations, it did. Our Lubbock files were also studied by a group of rocket experts, nuclear physicists and intelligence experts, and they were all convinced that the Lubbock lights had to be of extraterrestrial origin.'

'Oh, God,' Joanne said, her eyes again like saucers, 'you hear that, they must be real. I mean, you hear that, they've *got* to be.'

'Shit,' Carol said. 'It's all shit. Let's talk about something else. What about sex?' She picked up her glass, had a drink, put the glass down, gave them all a look of mock disgust and then lit a cigaret, blowing smoke rings. Stanford smiled understandingly, reached out and stroked her cheek. 'Sex,' he said. 'I like the sound of that. I think we might even try it.' He sat back and smiled at her. His smile was returned. Joanne pouted in a theatrical manner and gave Gardner a hug. 'Just ignore them,' she said. 'I think it's really far out. I mean, you don't hear stuff like this every day. I feel kind of shivery.' Her breasts moved when she shivered. Gardner seemed a lot brighter. Stanford shrugged as if he didn't really care, but he topped up their glasses.

'I heard that the Pentagon was involved. Is that true, Mr Gardner?'

'Yeah, it's true,' Gardner said. 'Not many people know that. But the

Pentagon, no matter what you're told to the contrary, was involved all right. The Forth Monmouth sightings started it. All the witnesses were top brass. Those sightings caused a fucking sensation and really got the ball rolling. I mean, within hours of those sightings we received a call from the Director of Intelligence of the Air Force, Major General Cabell, telling us to get someone from the ATIC to Jersey immediately and find out what the hell was going on. Shortly after that call, the T-33 pilot and an Air Force major who had tried to pursue the UFO were on an airplane to New York where they were grilled by two of our best men. By the following day, our two men, Lieutenant Cummings and Lieutenant Colonel Rosengarten, were sitting down in the Pentagon, having words with Major General Cabell. Every word of that meeting was duly recorded – but according to our sources the recording was considered so hot it was later destroyed. No matter… Now totally convinced of the legitimacy of the UFO problem, Major General Cabell ordered the ATIC to establish a few UFO project. And since Cummings was due for release from active duty, Captain Ruppelt was put in charge of the operation. In April of 1952 Project Grudge was renamed Project Blue Book – and Ruppelt really took that project seriously.'

This was what Stanford wanted to hear. More importantly, it was what Dr Epstein wanted to hear, and Stanford had to deliver.

'Business,' Carol said. 'I'm fed up with all this shit. I think you two guys should make an offer. We've got a living to make.'

'Oh, for God's sake,' Joanne said, 'that can wait. I mean, we both need a break.'

'That's right,' Stanford said. 'Let's just keep drinking. Don't worry: Mr Gardner and I are here for the night – and we're not short of cash.'

Carol puckered her lips, glared at Joanne, then shrugged. Stanford quickly topped their glasses up, not forgetting Gardner.

‘This is amazing,’ he said. ‘I can hardly believe my ears. I mean, I never thought they took it that seriously. The Pentagon! *Christ*!’

He was stroking Gardner’s vanity and the response was immediate: Gardner removed his arm from Joanne’s waist and leaned toward Stanford.

‘Not only the Pentagon,’ he said. ‘The goddamned CIA, too.’

‘What?’

‘You heard me right,’ Gardner said. ‘By June of that year Project Blue Book was really going strong and had received more official reports than in any previous months of its history. In fact, the number of reports coming in at that time was fucking astonishing – and Air Force officers in the Pentagon became frantic. In July, the ATIC received over five hundred reports – more than three times the number received in June – and then, when one of the top dogs in the CIA – and most of his guests – saw a silent, vertically ascending UFO over his home in Alexandria, Virginia, General Samford, Director of Intelligence, called Ruppelt to a secret meeting in Washington DC. At that meeting you had General Samford, members of his staff, intelligence officers from the Navy and, according to Ruppelt, more than a few CIA officers. That was the first time the CIA officially stepped into the picture. It was also the start of all our troubles.’

‘You mean that’s when Ruppelt started getting screwed.’

‘Exactly,’ Gardner said. ‘What finally burst the balloon was the unprecedented number of July sightings, peaking in the famous UFO invasion of Washington DC in 1952. After that, it was murder.’

‘I’m filing my fingernails,’ Carol said. ‘I’ve nothing else to do. I’m sitting on my ass turning numb, so I’m filing my fingernails.’

Everyone glanced at her. She wasn’t filing her fingernails. Men and women were dancing close to the table and the jukebox was wailing. Joanne shook to

the rhythm, grinned at Stanford and winked. Stanford smiled, but kept his gaze fixed on Gardner, hoping to keep him pinned down.

‘That Washington sightings were incredible,’ he said, ‘but what went on in the background? I mean, what was the connection with Ruppelt? I think you said it affected him.’

‘Yeah,’ Gardner said, ‘it did. Ruppelt wasn’t in Washington during the night of the sightings, but he sure caught most of the flak. In fact, Ruppelt hadn’t even been informed of the sightings; he only found out about them when he bought a newspaper at the Washington National Airport Terminal Building when he got off an airliner from Dayton, Ohio. He rushed immediately to the Pentagon, where he had an urgent meeting with Major Dewey Fournet and Colonel Bower, an intelligence officer from Bolling AFB. They told him that throughout the night, the restricted air corridor around the White House had been filled with interceptor jets trying to chase UFOs, that the UFOs had been radar tracked all around Washington, that an analysis of the sightings had completely ruled out temperature inversions, and that the radar operatives at Washington National Airport and Andrews AFB – plus at least two other veteran airline pilots – had all sworn that their sightings were caused by the radar waves bouncing off hard, *solid* objects.’

‘So,’ Stanford said, ‘what happened to Ruppelt?’

‘On behalf of the Air Force, Al Chops gave the press an official “No comment” on the sightings. In the meantime, Captain Ruppelt had been trying to set up a thorough investigation, but was shafted wherever he turned. He planned to go all over the area, to every sighting location, but he hardly got his foot out of the Pentagon. First, he called the transportation section for a car – and was refused. Next, he went down to the finance office to see if he could *rent* a car – and was refused. Next, he was reminded that he was supposed to be on his way back to Dayton, and that if he didn’t leave he would be technically AWOL. Ruppelt gave up in disgust and returned to Wright-Patterson in Dayton.’

‘Are you suggesting that the Air Force deliberately got rid of their most experienced investigator?’

‘Well, what do *you* think it sounds like?’

‘Okay,’ Stanford said. ‘So within a week to the hour of the first major flap, a second UFO invasion took place over Washington DC.’

‘Correct. And this time it was even more impressive… At about thirty after ten on the evening of July 26, the same radar operatives who had seen the UFOs the week before picked up several of the very same objects… and this time the UFOs were spread out in an immense arc around Washington – from Virginia to Andrews AFB. In short, they had Washington boxed in.’

Stanford glanced at Carol and saw her filing her fingernails, but when he turned to the bare-bellied, blonde Joanne, he received an excited grin.

‘So,’ he said, ‘the White House took the invasion seriously.’

‘Damned right,’ Gardner said. ‘Throughout that night there was chaos in Washington. The press was furious because all reporters and photographers had been ordered out of the radar rooms at the time the interceptors were chasing the UFOs. However, once the press were gone, arguments really blew up in all those radar towers and in the Pentagon itself. According to Dewey Fournet, the Pentagon liaison man, everyone in the radar rooms had been convinced that the targets had been caused by solid, metallic objects and couldn’t possibly have been anything else. And whatever those things were, they could literally hover in the air, then abruptly accelerate to at least a couple of thousand miles an hour.’

‘Lord have mercy,’ Joanne said, looking even more excited. ‘And to think I actually read about those saucers! Is it true President Nixon actually saw them?’

‘It was 1952,’ the brunette Carol reminded her. ‘You’ve mixed up your

presidents.'

'Yeah,' Gardner said. 'When I was there, word came down the grapevine that President Truman himself had almost gone apeshit when he saw UFOs skimming right around the White House. That story was quickly squashed by some of the President's aides, but shortly after, about ten that morning, the President's air aide, Brigadier General Landry, called Intelligence at Truman's insistence to find out what the hell was going on. Ruppelt, having returned to Washington, took that call, but he had to hedge his answers because he couldn't explain the sightings at all.'

Carol opened her shoulder bag, dropped her nail file into it, then stared at each of them in turn, her lips puckered distastefully.

'I'm finished,' she said. 'My fingernails are like new. I'm sitting here, trying to make a living, but I'm getting no action.'

'Oh, *Carol*!' Joanne snapped.

'I'm just an ordinary working gal,' Carol said. 'I need to live, just like everyone else, but these two guys aren't helping me.'

'We have rooms,' Gardner said.

'I *know* that,' Carol retorted.

'Okay,' Stanford said. 'You have a deal. Just give us five more minutes.'

Carol sniffed and then nodded. 'Okay,' she said. 'As long as that's settled. I mean, we have other clients.'

Joanne smiled at Stanford. Gardner smiled at Joanne. Stanford winked at Joanne and then leaned forward, his eyes fixed on Gardner.

'What do think it all meant?' he asked.

Gardner sighed. ‘It was the Washington invasion, more than anything else, that made all of us at Blue Book a bit suspicious of the Air Force’s stance on UFOs. In fact, we spent over a year investigating those sightings, and what we came across really shook us. For a start, when the tower operatives at Andrews AFB were interrogated about the, quote, “large, fiery, orange-colored sphere”, unquote, that they had reported over their radio, they completely changed their story and said that what they had seen was a star – and that their mistake was due to their *excitement* at the time. Now, apart from the blatant idiocy of highly skilled radio operatives describing a normal star as a large, fiery, orange-colored sphere right over their control tower, Ruppelt also found out that according to astronomical charts there were *no* exceptionally bright stars where the UFO was reported to have been seen. Ruppelt then found out, from what he claimed was a reliable source, that the tower operatives had been *persuaded* a bit by their superiors. Likewise, the pilot of an F-94C, who had told us about vainly trying to intercept unidentified lights, later stated in his *official* report that all he had really seen was a ground light reflecting off a layer of haze – an equally ridiculous statement, since both the pilot and the radar had confirmed that the lights had repeatedly disappeared and reappeared in the sky before finally shooting away. Then, regarding the Air Force’s continuing stance that the lights had been caused by temperature inversions, we checked out the strength of the inversions through the Air Defense Command Weather Forecast Center – and at no time during the flap was there a temperature inversion remotely strong enough to show up on the radar. Finally, no weather target makes a one hundred and eighty degree turn and flies away every time an airplane reaches it. So the Washington DC sightings, according to Project Blue Book, are still unknowns.’

Stanford started to forget the girls. He felt a cold, clean excitement. He thought of Epstein in his office in Washington DC, waiting patiently to hear from him. Epstein had been right. The Air Force had covered up. Why they had covered up was a mystery that Stanford might yet solve.

‘As I said,’ Gardner continued, ‘it was the official reaction to the Washington DC sightings that made a lot of us suspicious of the Air Force. Too many people were telling us one thing and then changing their stories for their *official* reports. Also, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the top brass of the Air Force were trying to blind us with some dodgy maneuvers. After the Washington sightings, Ruppelt became convinced that pilots reporting UFOs were being intimidated into either changing their reports or simply remaining silent, that a lot of information was being withheld from Project Blue Book, and that the CIA was stepping into the picture for unexplained reasons.’

‘You were *really* worried about the CIA?’

‘Yep. The guy who worried us most during this time was General Hoyt Vandenberg. Bear in mind that it was Vandenberg who’d buried the original Project Sign Estimate of the Situation, who’d reportedly called us all mad, and who’d directly or indirectly caused the fear of ridicule that has ever since hindered all UFO projects. It was also because of Vandenberg that the Sign Estimate was incinerated and that Project Sign was insultingly renamed Project Grudge. Now, while none of us could be sure of just how much Vandenberg was influencing either the Air Force or the CIA, the knowledge that he had been head of the Central Intelligence Group – later the CIA – from June 1946 to May 1947, that his uncle had been chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee – then the second most powerful committee in the Senate – that Vandenberg obviously still had great influence in those areas, and that pressure was always coming from those areas to suppress knowledge of UFO investigations… well, all of that did nothing to make us trust him any more. If therefore came as no surprise when we heard that the CIA and some high-ranking officers, including Generals Vandenberg and Samford, were, against the objections of the Battelle Memorial Institute, convening a panel of scientists to analyze all the Project Blue Book data. And nor did it surprise us to discover that this panel was to be headed by Dr H. P. Robertson, director of the Weapons System Evaluation Group in the Office of the Secretary of

Defense – and a CIA classified employee.'

'What do you know about the Robertson Panel?' Stanford asked.

Gardner glanced at the two hookers, stared at Sanford, licked his lips, now excited and wanting to continue, but nervous of doing so. He glanced again at the hookers. Joanne smiled back. Carol had her chin in her hand, her lips puckered in boredom.

'I'm becoming impatient,' she said. 'I think you two are giving us a snow job. I don't think you intend taking us upstairs. A pair of fags, we've got sitting here.'

'I can't afford you,' Gardner said.

'It's on me,' Stanford said. 'I've got a pocketful of bread and I'm horny, so let's fix something up.'

'Jesus, thanks,' Gardner said. 'I mean, that's really decent of you. Tell you what… Send the ladies up to the room and then we'll finish our talk.'

'Oh, shit,' Joanne said.

'The rest of this talk is confidential,' Gardner said. 'I wanna finish this story with my buddy here, so just wait for us upstairs.'

'How long?' Carol asked bluntly.

'About ten minutes,' Gardner said.

'Here,' Stanford said, withdrawing some ten-dollar notes from his jacket pocket. 'It's a deposit. Just to give you a little confidence.' Carol took the money and pushed it into her shoulder bag. She stood up and looked down at Joanne and said, 'Okay, darlin', let's go.' Joanne sighed and stood up. 'What room?' she asked. 'We have to know the room number. We can't fuck in the

corridor.' Gardner told her the room number. He said the key was in the door. Carol sniffed, as if clearing her nostrils, and then walked away. Joanne grinned at both men, followed Carol across the dance floor; they both passed the howling jukebox and disappeared through a doorway beyond it. Gardner refilled his glass, had a drink and glanced around him, then he leaned across the table to get closer to Stanford.

'Okay,' he said. 'The only thing I really know about the Robertson Panel is that it was convened in secrecy in Washington DC in 1953, and that contrary to the evidence submitted by Project Blue Book it wrote a virtually negative report that led to the dissolving of our operation. First, the panel submitted its report to the CIA, the higher echelons of the Air Force and the Pentagon, but refused to give a copy to Ruppelt or any of the Blue Book staff. Next, Ruppelt and Captain Garland were summoned to CIA headquarters where it was explained to them that the Robertson Panel had recommended *expanding* Blue Book's staff and terminating all secrecy in the project. Naturally, this encouraged Ruppelt, but his pleasure turned sour when he discovered that the CIA had been lying to him. In fact, it later transpired that the Robertson Panel had recommended a *tightening* of security, a mass *debunking* of the phenomenon, and a subtle ridiculing of UFO witnesses and the phenomenon in general.'

Gardner studied his own busy bar. The room was smokey and packed. The jukebox was wailing in the corner, surrounded by dancers.

'So,' he said. 'When it became obvious that the CIA had lied to us and that the Air Force was in fact trying to strangle Project Blue Book, a lot of us at the ATIC became pretty nervous. Ruppelt himself began to feel that he was facing growing opposition from the Pentagon to his plans for expanding Blue Book's activities. This feeling was confirmed when he asked for a transfer but agreed to stay on with Blue Book until a replacement could be found. He had asked for that transfer in December '52, but by the following February no replacement had materialized. Nor were there any replacements when

Lieutenant Flues was transferred to the Alaskan Air Command, when Lieutenant Rothstein's tour of active duty ended, or when others on the staff either left or were transferred out. In short, Ruppelt departed from a drastically reduced Blue Book organization in February '53, and by the time he returned, in July of that same year, he found that the Air Force had reassigned most of his remaining staff, that they had sent no replacements, and that Blue Book now consisted of only himself and a mere two assistants. In other words, Project Blue Book had been fucked.'

'And you believe it was intentional?' Stanford said.

'Yeah,' Gardner said, 'it was deliberate. In fact, once Ruppelt left for Denver, it became clear to everyone involved that the Air Force had deliberately not replaced him because they wanted to strip Blue Book of its one remaining figure of authority. With no experienced officer in charge, Blue Book had little means of resisting the numerous transfers and subtle pressures that eventually strangled it. Of course, a few of us had tried to speak out against all that, but it was the worst fucking thing we could have done. More and more I saw guys getting harassed for no good reason, having their confidence shattered, their good records ruined, and then getting transferred out by way of punishment – or being asked to resign. That happened to me. Those fuckers just went out to get me. I started getting reprimanded for negligence, for dumb insolence and other shit, and then they started moving me around from post to post, from one dismal hole to another. Eventually, I gave up. I couldn't take it anymore. I was drinking like a fish, my wife packed up and left, and in the end, like a lot of the others, I just had to resign… You don't go too close to UFOs. It's a dangerous thing to do. If you go too close to UFOs you get burned – and you rarely recover.'

Gardner picked his glass up and finished it off with one gulp, then wiped his lips with the back of his free hand and glanced blearily around him.

'Christ, I'm drunk,' he said. 'I think I need a good fuck. I have to blow this out of my system. Let's go find those two whores.'

He stood up and swayed, grabbed the table and steadied himself, then Stanford stood up and took him by the elbow and turned him around. They pushed their way through the noisy crowd, passed the dancers near the jukebox, emerged from the haze of blue smoke and found the semi-dark stairs.

‘What happened to Ruppelt?’ Stanford asked. ‘You haven’t told me. You didn’t finish the story.’

Still swaying, Gardner started up the stairs. The drink had suddenly hit him hard. Stanford slid an arm around him and helped him up, wondering how his old friend had come to this.

‘I don’t know,’ Gardner said. ‘He just got fucked up like me. He came to see me shortly after he’d left the Air Force, and we drank beer and talked. His head was filled with questions. He couldn’t let the subject go. He had left, but the subject still obsessed him and kept him awake at night. He wondered what had gone wrong with Blue Book. He wondered why they had run it down. He wondered why the Air Force had played a double game – and he kept asking questions.’

They reached the top of the stairs. The corridor was short and dimly lit. Gardner coughed, sounding choked up, then lurched forward, swaying dangerously from side to side. Stanford grabbed him and turned him around and pressed him to the wall.

‘*What* questions?’ Stanford asked.

Gardner coughed into his fist. He stared at Stanford with bloodshot eyes. When he spoke, his voice was harsh and self-mocking, revealing his bitterness.

‘Why, when the Air Force was telling the whole world that the study of UFOs hadn’t produced enough evidence to warrant investigation, did they

secretly order all reports to be investigated? Why, when all of us had actually read General Twining's statement that the phenomenon was something real, did they deny that such a statement had ever been submitted? Why, when they themselves had initiated Project Sign and received its official report concluding that the UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin, did they dissolve the project and then burn the report? Why, when Project Sign was changed to Project Grudge, did they go all out to ridicule the reported sightings and then disperse most of the staff on that project? Why, when the Air Force continued to claim that they had absolutely no interest in UFOs, did they insist that all reports be sent to the Pentagon? Why, when Lieutenant Cummings and Lieutenant Rosengarten discussed UFOs in the Pentagon with the Director of Intelligence of the Air Force, was the recording of that meeting destroyed? Finally, why did the CIA lie to Ruppelt, why was the Robertson Panel report kept from him, and why was Project Blue Book run down? Those questions haven't been answered.'

Stanford opened the bedroom door. The light beamed out into the corridor. The two hookers were sitting up on the bed, drinking more bourbon and giggling. The room was small and shabby. The double bed was unmade. Stanford pushed Gardner in, shut the door with a bang, then turned and went back along the corridor until he came to the stairs. He stood there a long time. The bar below seemed faraway. The semi-darkness was alive with possibilities and strange, formless mysteries.

'Why?' Stanford asked.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

‘Why?’ Epstein asked. ‘We always come back to “Why?”. There are too many contradictions and ambiguities. We have to know a lot more.’

Stanford sighed and nodded wearily. The Caribbean sun stung his eyes. He glanced back at St Thomas, at the bubbling white wake of the boat, feeling the deck trembling under his feet, hearing the engine’s dull rumbling.

‘I haven’t finished yet,’ he said. ‘That Gardner was just the start. I have an old CIA friend in DC and he’s promised to talk to me.’

‘He’s still in the CIA?’

‘You’ve got to be kidding. No, he left about ten years ago… but he was pretty high up there.’

‘I want to know more about Ruppelt. I want to know what happened to him. I want to know what the Robertson Panel actually said behind closed doors. I want to know who was on that panel. I think that’s fairly important. I want to know who they were and I want to know their precise recommendations. We were wrong about the Air Force. We’ve been fooled for twenty years. The Air Force and the CIA and the Pentagon have been involved, and that involvement has been kept under wraps. I want to know why.’

‘This friend was in on it,’ Stanford said. ‘He assured me of that much. He said there were strange things going on and that they hadn’t made sense to him. He’s willing to talk. He’ll pick up where the tapes left off. I’ll go see

him as soon as we get back and then give you a transcript.'

Stanford glanced around the ferry. There weren't many passengers on board. He saw a blonde-haired Dutch girl with the brown skin of a *vahine*, a couple of dusky workers arguing loudly in Creole French, a few American holidaymakers, gesticulating excitedly, snapping pictures, and a black woman of African descent selling mangoes and pineapples. They were all framed by the sea, which was calm, a dazzling blue, sweeping out to the cays and islets of the American Virgin Islands, their rolling hills blue-gray and parched green, a few clouds in the silvery sky.

'This is some place,' Stanford said.

'What did you think of St Thomas?'

'It looked like 42nd Street.'

'You should know,' Epstein said.

Stanford squinted against the sun. 'Is that the hotel?' he asked. He was looking at a sprawling, white-painted complex dominating an islet.

'That's it,' Epstein said.

Stanford nodded and turned around, leaned against the iron railing, let the trade winds blowing in from the northeast drying the sweat on his face. His gaze fell on the black woman, selling her fruit from a woven basket. She was wearing a white blouse and a skirt, a colorful apron over the skirt, and had a bright orange turban on her head, her black hair piled up under it. Stanford kept looking at her. She saw him staring and smiled back. She had laughing brown eyes, a sort of innocent sensuality, and he thought immediately of the girl on the porch of the ranch outside Galveston. He thought a lot about that girl and still couldn't understand it. He thought about that girl night and day, and was becoming obsessed with her.

‘Remember Galveston?’ He said.

‘Could I ever forget it?’ Epstein replied.

‘I’m thinking of going back there,’ Stanford said. ‘I want to talk to those people.’

‘That was a year ago.’

‘So, it was a year ago.’

‘That’s a pretty long time,’ Epstein said. ‘You won’t do any good.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘They wouldn’t talk when we were there. The old man was possibly mad and the girl was dumb. I don’t think they’ll talk now.’

‘I don’t care,’ Stanford said. ‘I want to try anyway. I want to know what those people really experienced, and this time I’ll push harder.’

‘The Army might still be there.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Stanford said.

‘Okay,’ Epstein said, ‘please yourself. We have nothing but time.’

Epstein’s gray hair was being blown by the breeze, his jacket draped over his left arm, his grubby tie hanging loose. He had aged a lot in the past year, had thinned down and was coughing more, the lines on his face more predominant, his movements slow and exhausted. Stanford had noticed the change. It had begun with Irving’s death. Dr Epstein now looked his true age and was shrinking each day.

Stanford was also changing, was more tense, less ebullient, now driven by forces beyond his comprehension, seduced by riddles and mysteries. He

thought constantly about the flatlands, about the lights in the sky, about the dust and the wind and the butchered cattle and the girl on the porch. Stanford couldn't understand it. It was much more than sex. He had thought about the girl for a year and now she seemed to be part of him. There was something unreal about it. He felt as if the girl was calling to him. He was losing track of time, losing touch with reality, and often felt that he was trapped in an eternal present, still blinded by dust clouds.

Life was an illusion. He believed that more and more. He had pursued the invisible for too long and now was paying the price. Nothing seemed real anymore, nothing here, nothing immediate; his sole reality was a night of wind and dust and strange lights and masked men. What did it all mean? Why was he now so driven? Stanford glanced around the ferry, saw the faces black and white, the blue sea and cays and islets that burned under a white sun. He felt hot and suffocated, almost dissolving where he stood, and he turned toward the prow of the boat as it approached the small island.

'That's some hotel,' he said.

'It collects the vacation crowds.'

'It looks like an old Moorish castle.'

'A touch of Hollywood,' Epstein said.

The ferry was nearing the island, heading straight for the rocks, then it turned and drifted toward a wooden dock and then bumped alongside it. One of the crew jumped off the boat, started tying the ropes to rusty bollards, while Stanford gazed up the climbing, parched land to the walls of the hotel. The walls were whitewashed and gleaming, broken up by Moorish arches, rising up in tiers above a swimming pool and lined with exotic plants and flowers. It was a single-storey building, sprawling across the upper slopes, dominating the sunbleached, rocky island with serene grandiosity. The ferry bumped against the dock. Crew members put the gangplank down. Stanford looked

along the dock, saw a bus and some cars, a few people milling about in drifting dust, examining the disembarking passengers.

‘Is he there?’ Stanford asked.

‘Yes,’ Epstein said. ‘The man in the sports shirt and shorts.

‘They’re *all* dressed like that,’ Stanford said.

Epstein nodded and smiled, watched the passengers disembark, waited until the last ones had stepped off the ferry and then followed them down. He walked slowly and carefully, as if not sure of his footing, gazing down past the gangplank at the water which eddied and rippled. Stanford followed him down, glancing keenly around him, as the crystal-clear blue of the sea, the green islets, the silvery sky. The heat was incredible. The air shimmered before his eyes. He stepped onto the wooden dock, following Epstein’s stocky form, and a short man wearing a sports shirt and shorts stepped forward to greet them.

‘Long time no see,’ he said to Epstein. ‘You look pretty tired.’

The man was short and too fat, his shirt loosened around his belly, white hair blowing over bright green eyes and a tanned, good-humored face. He and Epstein shook hands, exchanged a few jocular pleasantries, then Epstein introduced Stanford, who also shook the man’s hand.

‘Robert Stanford,’ Epstein said. ‘I just call him Stanford. The name has a certain crass elegance that suits him quite well. Stanford, this is my good friend, Professor Tom Gerhardt.’

‘You’re still young,’ Gerhardt said to Stanford.

‘Is that surprising?’ Stanford asked.

‘I suppose not,’ Gerhardt said with a grin. ‘I just didn’t expect it.’ He waved

his hand airily, indicating the whole island. ‘How do you like it?’ he asked.

‘A good place for a vacation,’ Stanford said.

‘That’s what *I* thought,’ Gerhardt said.

Epstein glanced up at the hotel, located at the top of the steep hill. ‘Do we have to walk up?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Gerhardt said, pointing at the dusty Volkswagen Beetle parked behind him. ‘I didn’t think you’d make it that far, so I brought my own transport.’

The other passengers were boarding the hotel bus that was parked just beyond the Volkswagen. The car and the bus were both parked on a tract of flat earth that overlooked the gently rippling azure sea. Beyond the bus, across that broad expanse of clear blue water, was St Thomas and the capital, Charlotte Amalie.

‘I come here every year,’ Professor Gerhardt said. ‘I come because there’s nothing to do here and that suits me fine… At least it did until *this* year.’

He opened the door of the Volkswagen and pulled the front seat forward. Stanford scrambled into the rear, resting his overnight bag on his knees, and sat there, bunched up in the cramped space, feeling uncomfortable. Gerhard sat in the driver’s seat and Epstein sat beside him, slamming the door as the car coughed into life and started up the steep hill. The road snaked around the islet, climbing toward the hotel on its summit, passing coco palms and divi-divi trees and tracts of parched, windblown grass. Stanford looked out the window. The sea was spread out far below him. He saw the cays and scattered islets, the sea blue and sun-reflecting, motor launches racing around coral reefs, helicopters above them. Then the Volkswagen reached the hotel and spluttered into silence, stopping between dazzling white walls and high, white-washed arches.

‘Home sweet home,’ Gerhardt said.

He opened his door and clambered out, pulled the seat up for Stanford, and the latter, pushing his bag out ahead of him, emerged gratefully onto the driveway. Epstein clambered out the other side, slung his own bag over his shoulder, stretched himself, nodding his head in appreciation, and then grinned at Stanford.

‘The one advantage about this job,’ he said, ‘is that a man gets to travel.’

‘It’s damned hot,’ Stanford said.

‘It’ll soon become cooler,’ Garhardt said. ‘The sun will go down in an hour or so; then you’ll feel a lot better.’

‘We’d better check in,’ Epstein said.

‘I booked two rooms the minute I received your cablegram confirming that you could come, so you just have to pick up your keys. Now do you want to go immediately for a rest or would you rather we talked first?’

‘I could do with a drink,’ Stanford said.

‘We’d better talk straight away,’ Epstein said. ‘We’ll be leaving first thing in the morning, so let’s go to the bar.’

‘Have you eaten?’

‘No.’

‘Then let’s eat,’ Gerhardt said. ‘I’ll tell you the whole story over a meal, and then you can sleep on it.’

They left their bags at the reception desk, collected their room keys, then were led by Gerhardt across a cobbled courtyard, emerging into the gardens. He then led them up some steps, across a cool, covered patio, and finally into an open-air restaurant overlooking the sea. The restaurant looked like an

expansive terrace, its white walls strewn with flowers. Lanterns dangled from the ceiling, glowing red, green and yellow, though their light was rendered redundant by the sunlight pouring in over the verandah wall. Gerhardt sat them on the verandah, at a table against the low wall, and Stanford looked down to see the parched earth falling away to a crowded swimming pool. There was a bar by the pool. Girls in bikinis and men in swimming trunks were drinking fancy cocktails. Beyond them their distant, shadowed figures was the sea and the crimson sinking sun.

‘Apart from fish,’ Gerhardt said, ‘I couldn’t honestly recommend the menu. Most of the food in the Caribbean comes in cans. Only the fruit and the fish are fresh.’

‘I’ll have lobster,’ Epstein said.

‘Crayfish,’ Stanford said. ‘And I’ll start with a very tall rum and Coke to make myself feel at home.’

‘I’ll just have a cold beer,’ Epstein said.

Gerhardt ordered for them. Over the meal, he and Epstein talked about old times, when they had both been young, fresh-faced physicists working at a variety of government-sponsored research establishments in the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico, before going their separate ways, Gerhardt to the Cheyenne Mountain Complex in Colorado, Epstein to his UFO work for the APII. Stanford studied Gerhardt carefully. He liked the man a lot. Gerhardt had a sense of humour, a natural openness and ebullience, but beneath his spontaneity was a tension that was finely suppressed. And although he talked a lot, he didn’t mention why he had called them to the Caribbean until they had all finished eating. The sun was going down by then. The sea resembled flowing lava. The islets dotting the crimson water were casting shadows that undulated and deepened. Gerhardt sat back in his chair. A yellow lantern shone its light into his eyes. He sipped his beer and glanced uneasily around him and then focused on Epstein.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘So why did I ask you to come and see me?’

‘I’m dying to know,’ Epstein replied.

‘As you know, I’m still working for NORAD in the Cheyenne Mountain Complex.’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, for the past year things have been going haywire there: computers malfunctioning, data cards disappearing, the printouts from our worldwide network of radar stations coming in either erratically or not at all. Even worse: we have quite a few spy satellites whose sole purpose for being is to photograph the Semipalitinsk laboratory in Russia, where we believe they’re creating some extraordinary pulse beam weapons. So, what happens? Our damned satellites start malfunctioning. A couple get knocked out of the sky – we don’t even know where they went – and the rest take their turn in malfunctioning in inexplicable ways. We don’t know what’s happening. We just can’t pin it down. We’ve checked the whole complex from top to bottom, but we can’t find a fault.

‘Okay, so I’m in trouble. I’m supposed to be in charge of the data input. Eyes are aimed suspiciously in my direction and my nerves start twitching. I should *know* what’s causing the problems – it’s my field; my speciality – but I’m sitting there in the Operations Center, just chewing my fingernails. I haven’t a goddamned clue, I can’t find a single reason, and now I’m being checked out by the FBI and my credibility rating is zero.’

‘This all started a year ago?’

‘That’s right, Epstein: a year ago.’

‘Have you taken on any new staff since then?’

‘Not one. They’re all old hands with top security clearances.’

‘Okay, continue.’

‘Right. Now listen to this. For the past three months or so this has all been getting on top of me: my nerves playing up, too many sleepless nights, sweating and trying to work out my problems and then just sweating even more. Then I get a phone call. It’s from a guy named James Whitmore. He says that he works for ACASS, that they’ve heard I’m having a bad time, and that they want me to work for them in Europe and will pay me a lot. I tell him to put it in writing. He says he can’t do that. He says that I’m to meet him in a certain hotel for a drink and a talk. I tell him I’m not interested. He becomes very insistent. I get angry and tell him to shove off, but that just makes him chuckle. Things won’t get better, he says. Things will only get worse at NORAD. He says that he’ll get me sooner or later, then he chuckles again and hangs up.’

Gehrard sipped some more beer, then sighed and looked over the low, flower-strewn wall at the sun’s dying rays.

‘I started worrying about that call,’ he said. ‘It seemed an odd way of approaching a scientist. I also wondered how ACASS, a European-based commercial company, could know about the problems we were having in our top-secret establishments. So, I called ACASS. I rang their personnel manager. He said that he hadn’t heard about me, that he hadn’t planned to offer me a job, and that they didn’t have a Whitmore on their staff and that I’d just had my leg pulled.’

Gerhard picked up his glass of beer, studied it distractedly, then placed it back on the table and started drumming his fingers.

‘I couldn’t forget that guy,’ he said. ‘I wondered who he might be. If he knew about my problems, he either worked right there with me or had a friend planted in NORAD, passing back information. I told this to the FBI. They ran a check, but came up with nothing. They thought it might be a practical joke – a silly and dangerous practical joke – and they told me to keep my eyes on

my own staff and then report my suspicions. I just couldn't accept that. None of my staff are that dumb. I thought recalled what the guy had said – that he would get me sooner or later – and I couldn't shake that statement from my head and my nightmares increased.'

'Do you mean nightmares literally?'

'I mean a nightmare is a nightmare is a nightmare – and that's what I was having.' Gehardt sat forward in his chair, his face ghostly in the yellow light, the lanterns glowing brighter in the deepening darkness, the restaurant filling up. 'What happened next was really strange,' he said. 'First, my wife's at home on her own one day when she hears an unexpected knock on the door. She opens it to find these three guys on the porch, all dressed in dark suits, businesslike, all extremely polite. These guys then start taking turns at asking my wife various questions: Is she the wife of Professor Gerhardt? Is Professor Gerhardt at home? When would be the best time to come and see him? And so on and so forth – all very polite, but insistent. My wife is unnerved. She asks the men who they are. They say they're from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, but that's all they can tell her. Then my wife gets angry and demands to know what they're after. At that, they just nod their heads, back away to a waiting limousine, climb in and then drive off down the street… My wife tells me all about this and I start wondering what's going on. I have a friend in the FBI, he's a hundred percent loyal, so I call him and ask him to check it out and he tells me he will. He calls me back the next day. He says the CIA are worried about the foul-ups in NORAD, but neither they nor the FBI sent men around to my house. This turns out to be true. We have a visit from the FBI. They spend a couple of hours grilling my wife, trying to find out if she knows more than she's telling, if she actually knows who those men were. Naturally she insists that she told the truth and that she hasn't a clue who the men were, so finally, reluctantly, they leave her in peace. Though she was – and remains – badly rattled.'

Darkness had fallen. The stars were glittering like diamonds. The restaurant

was nearly full, the clientele elegantly dressed, and the lanterns glowed red, green and yellow on blond hair and bronzed shoulders.

‘That was the first thing,’ Gerhardt said. ‘It wasn’t to be the last… Three days later I get another phone call. It’s from Mr Whitmore again. He asks me if I’m willing to reconsider his previous offer. I don’t mention my call to ACASS. I’m too confused to think about it. I ask him if he knows about the men who dropped in on my wife. The bastard just chuckles. I demand to know who he is. He replies that he’ll get me pretty soon, then he chuckles again and hangs up… The next night it’s even worse. I’m on my way home from work. The car abruptly cuts out, its headlights go out, and I’m stranded in the middle of the desert wondering what the hell’s happened. Then I see three men. They’re walking along the road toward me. It’s so dark I can’t make out what they look like, but they’ve definitely advancing in my direction. I look beyond them and see nothing. I’m trying to work out where they came from. They come closer and they’re wearing coveralls, but I can’t see their faces. Then I’m really frightened. I suddenly panic. I try to start the car and nothing happens and I just can’t believe it. I look at the men again. They’re very close to the car. I look behind me and see another car coming out of the distance. Then I hear a strange noise. I turn back to the front. The three men have disappeared and then the other car passes and my own car starts up again… I didn’t touch the ignition. I didn’t do a damned thing. The car just started and I put my foot on the gas and drove home like crazy.’

Gerhardt sat back in his chair. The shadows fell across his face. Epstein and Stanford glanced at one another, neither saying a word. The darkness was now complete. The stars glittered in lonely splendour. The restaurant was noisier, a steel band played calypso, and the lanterns glowed red, green and yellow on the flushed, happy faces.

‘I was frightened,’ Gerhardt said. ‘I still can’t forget that night. Shortly after, the nightmares began – one nightmare each week. That’s how they came. They were as regular as clockwork. Every Wednesday, the same night every

week, I would have the same nightmare. The car broke down on a Wednesday. Every Wednesday I'd relive that. The dream would always end just as the three men were about to reach me and my wife would have to shake me awake to cut short my screaming.'

Gerhardt glanced uneasily around him, his face bathed in the yellow light, a white Moorish arch behind his head, the sea beyond that.

'That's why I came here alone,' he said. 'I just had to get away. I was hoping that if I came here I'd relax and the nightmares would stop.'

'But they didn't,' Epstein said.

'No,' Gerhardt said. 'Instead, I start having them every night… and then something else happened.'

'Three days ago.'

'Right.'

'That was Wednesday.'

'Right. It happened at midnight every Wednesday and it scared the shit out of me.'

Stanford glanced over the low wall, looking down on the swimming pool, to see the water reflecting the string of lanterns that were strung up around it. The bar down there was now closed. There was only one person left in the pool. It was a girl in a red bikini, swimming gracefully and down, her long blonde hair trailing out behind her like ribbons of gold. Stanford turned back to Gerhardt. He was leaning across the table. His green eyes were slightly obscured by the yellow light that flowed out of the lantern.

'I couldn't sleep that night. I was just lying on top of the bed. It was hot and the room was pretty bright because of the moonlight. Then the moonlight

disappeared. It just seemed to blink out. The room was plunged into darkness and I looked through the window and I couldn't see a star in the sky. That sky was pitch-black. I couldn't see a thing out there. I couldn't see the walls of the room, and then it suddenly turned cold. Then the fear came. I remembered my nightmare. The fear increased and I tried to sit up, but I couldn't move a muscle. That really terrified me. I was completely paralyzed. I tried to scream, but I couldn't make a sound and I seemed to be freezing. Then suddenly there was light. It poured in from the balcony. The doors opened and two figures came in and advanced straight to the bed. I couldn't see them very well. They were silhouetted in the dazzling light. They were wearing one-piece suits, were no taller than five feet, and their heads were tilted toward me, looking at me, neither saying a word. I just lay there, paralyzed. I'd never known such fear before. I just lay there and watched them as they walked up to the bed, as one started leaning over me, his hand reaching out to me. He pressed something against my neck. It was cold and then it burned. I tried to scream, but I couldn't make a sound, and then the pain, the burning, went away. I stared up at the two men. I couldn't think through my fear. Both men made a little bow, a kind of curtsy, and then they walked from the room. "Saturday," I thought. I thought one of them said "Saturday". I don't believe they said anything at all, but that word filled my head. Then they were gone. There was a strange vibrating sound. The light from the balcony blinked out and the moonlight returned. I remember the moonlight. I remember wanting to sit up. I fell asleep and I didn't have dreams and I awakened refreshed. Then I went to the mirror. I examined myself. There was an ugly red scar on my neck where that man had touched it with something. That scar has gone already. Maybe it never really there. But I don't feel any fear anymore… I feel an odd, calm elation.'

Stanford studied Gerhardt's eyes, thought of the girl on the porch of the ranch near Galveston, shivered and then turned his head away and looked down at the swimming pool. The blue water reflected the lanterns. The golden girl had disappeared. The pool was a rectangle of light in a vast, starlit darkness. Stanford turned his gaze on Epstein. The old man scratched at his beard.

Stanford returned his gaze to Gerhardt, saw the green eyes in yellow light, and he thought again of the girl on the porch and felt the mystery deepening.

‘This is Saturday,’ Stanford said.

‘That’s right, Dr Stanford. This is Saturday and I’m talking to you and I don’t feel a thing.’

‘Anything else?’ Epstein asked.

‘Yes, there’s something else. I feel that something’s going to happen tonight, and I believe it concerns you.’

Epstein scratched at his beard, glanced thoughtfully around him, saw the diners at the other tables, couples dancing on the stone-slab floor, the silk shirts and snap brims of the Trinidadian band members , the colored lanterns swaying in the breeze that trickled through the restaurant.

‘Why call us?’ he asked. ‘There must be more than that.’

‘There is,’ Gerhardt said. ‘There’s something else… and it’s right up your street.’ He leaned farther across the table, his chin propped up in his hands, his green eyes diffused in the yellow light, the white arch behind him. ‘There’s an English film crew here,’ he said. ‘They’re making a movie about Captain Cook. Now the morning after the incident I was talking to their stills photographer, a young guy who was looking pretty stunned. He knew I worked for the government, that I was some kind of scientist, so he thought I was the best man to talk to. Apparently, the night before – about the same time I was having my little experience in my room – he had been down on the beach trying to take some low-speed shots in the moonlight. He was taking some pictures of the movie’s replica of Captain Cook’s ship, the *Endeavour*, and he managed to shoot one roll in color. Now, the next morning, when he developed that film in his room, he was startled to see what appeared to be a very large, blurred, milky-white, disk-shaped object

hovering in the night sky above the boat. What really stunned him about this was his conviction that at no time during the shooting of those pictures had he seen anything but stars in that sky. He was absolutely convinced of this. He was willing to swear to it. And yet that huge disk-shaped object was in nine of his thirty-six pictures, a little higher up in each single picture, finally cut off by the top of the frame in the very last one.'

Stanford glanced over the wall, saw the dark sea and sky, the stars glittering above the gliding moon, a few clouds drifting languidly. He then looked at Gerhardt's eyes, recalled the girl on the porch, remembered the lights in the sky and felt a chill passing through him.

'Any estimation of size?' Epstein asked.

'Pretty rough,' Gerhardt said. 'Judging by the land behind it, and by the boat just below it, we both thought it was at least a hundred feet wide – but we couldn't be sure of that.'

'What was the duration between each of the pictures?'

'I've no idea.'

'Anything else in the photographs?'

'No. There was just a sort of glowing around the disk. The disk itself was quite blurred.'

Stanford knew what was coming. He looked directly at Epstein. The restaurant behind Epstein was busy and romantically lit. The lanterns glowed with different colors, candles flickered on all the tables, and the musicians on the small stage were excited, sweating over their instruments. The whole scene was enchanting, was too good to be true, so Stanford turned his gaze back upon Epstein, knowing what he would say.

'We'll have to stay,' Epstein said. 'I think we should hang around here for a

while. I seriously doubt that anything else will happen, but you just never know. I also want to talk to that photographer. I want copies of all his pictures. I want the photographer to take me down to the beach and show me just where he was standing when he took those photos. So I guess we'll just have to stay on.'

Gerhardt slumped into his chair, spread his hands and shook his head, then leaned forward again and looked right at Epstein, his green eyes very bright.

'That's the whole point,' he said, almost whispering. 'The photographer's vanished.'

The rain started just before midnight, splashing in thick drops on the verandah outside Stanford's room and making him open his eyes. There was a distant clap of thunder. The verandah doors rattled. Stanford cursed and glanced around the silent room and saw the white walls in darkness.

The thunder rumbled again. The rain fell more heavily. The doors rattled and Stanford stared at them, feeling strangely uneasy. The doors were still closed. The shutters revealed no moonlight. The thunder rumbled and the doors shook and rattled while the rain poured down heavily. Stanford thought he heard the sea, a muffled sound far below, the waves rushing in and washing over the rocks and then poured back out again. It was an unexpected sound; he hadn't anticipated such weather. He closed his eyes and tried to fall asleep and thought again of the girl.

Stanford groaned aloud. He opened his eyes to see the ceiling. There was a wooden fan spinning above his head, casting cool air down upon him. He heard the rain on the verandah, falling even harder now. The thunder rumbled and the double doors rattled as if being pushed open. Stanford felt strangely nervous, unreal, disorientated, trying to sleep and thinking only of the girl… and of Gerhardt's green eyes.

'Godammit,' he muttered.

He closed his eyes and saw the girl. Her luminous gaze drew him in. He saw the thumb between her lips, the breasts thrusting against her dress, the triangle of her thighs and shadowed crotch, her belly pressed to the windowsill. Stanford felt himself hardening. He saw Gerhardt's green eyes, filled with fear and an odd elation, and he cursed and sat up on the bed and shook his head in despair.

The room was very dark. No moonlight came through the shutters. Stanford wondered what was happening, though of Gerhardt's fearful calm, then thought of the girl on the porch and of her empty, revealing gaze. She had Gerhardt had something in common: an unnatural calm, a sheltered secret; they had both seemed like people not quite real, couched in awed expectation. What had they both experienced? What dreams did their eyes conceal? Stanford sat up very straight and stared around him, seeing white walls in darkness.

Suddenly, he felt frightened. He hadn't felt that before. The thunder rumbled and the double doors rattled as if being pushed open. Stanford shook his head disgustedly, stroked his own face, rubbed his eyes, than reached out and switched on the light and sat back with a sigh.

Then he heard the footsteps. They were advancing toward the main door of the room. He stiffened as if he had been stung, and just looked straight ahead. The footsteps stopped outside the door. He felt his throat drying. He held his breath and kept looking at the door and tried to hold his fear down.

'Stanford?' Knuckles hammered on the door. 'Are you still awake?'

Stanford exhaled his breath, took it in again, sighed again, leaning his head back on the pillow and feeling very relieved.

'Yes, Epstein, I'm awake.'

'Can I come in?'

‘Why not?’

The door opened and Epstein entered.

‘I saw the light under the door,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t sleep either.’

He was wearing an old dressing gown, frayed at the edges, obviously purchased about 1955 and now far too tight for him.

‘I brought a bottle,’ he said.

‘So I see,’ Stanford said.

‘I thought you might be able to do with a drink… keep the rain from your doors.’

Stanford grinned at that, swung his legs off the bed, rubbed his eyes and then looked at the rattling doors.

‘That’s some storm,’ he said.

‘It certainly is, my friend. I’m wondering if there’s any connection. Where are the glasses?’

‘Why a connection?’

‘We can’t drink without those glasses.’

‘You’ll find a couple in the bathroom. Now why a connection?’

Epstein went into the bathroom, returned with two glasses, unscrewed the bottle of Scotch and poured two stiff shots.

‘Here,’ he said, passing one to Stanford. ‘It’ll settle your nerves.’

Stanford took the glass from him. ‘What makes you think I’m nervous?’

‘Aren’t you?’

‘Yes.’

‘So am I. That’s why I’m here.’

They both sipped their Scotch. Epstein sat in a bamboo chair. Stanford remained on the edge of the bed, observing the rattling doors.

‘You think there’s a connection?’

‘There might be,’ Epstein said. ‘This storm just blew up out of nowhere – and it’s uncommonly violent.’

‘You’re thinking of Galveston.’

‘We’re *both* thinking of Galveston.’

Stanford had another sip of Scotch. ‘I feel weird,’ he said quietly.

The thunder rumbled again. They heard the crackling of lightning. The rain poured down on the verandah, whipped across by a howling wind, the wind making the double doors rattle, trying to push them both open.

‘How’s Gerhardt?’ Stanford asked.

‘I think he’s sleeping,’ Epstein said. ‘I had a look before I came here. His room lights were turned off.’

‘There’s something odd there,’ Stanford said.

‘You think so? I hadn’t noticed.’

‘I’m thinking of his conversation. He said the experience terrified him. A minute later, he said he felt nothing, and then he said he felt elated. Those are contradictory words. His expression was also contradictory. His eyes were

very bright, very eager and excited, yet the rest of his face was tense with fear… It doesn't really add up.'

'Is that what you saw?'

'It's what I *think* I saw.'

'He seemed calm when he went into his bedroom.'

'He seemed *unnaturally* calm.'

Epstein sipped some Scotch, his gray gaze roaming restlessly. 'Maybe you're right,' he said eventually. 'I *did* think he was a bit odd. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but, yes, he was *too* calm. Given the nature of his experience, he should be more concerned than he is. And that was a pretty strange story he told. He mentioned Saturday night. That's tonight, Stanford.' Epstein drank some more Scotch, splashing a little on his wrist. 'I would love to have seen those photos,' he said. 'I wonder where that photographer went.'

'It's interesting,' Stanford said. 'I was thinking about it later. The photographer said he didn't see a thing when he was taking the pictures. I got to thinking of Gardner. He mentioned a similar case. I think he was talking about the Lubbock lights and the photographs taken at that time.'

'That's right,' Epstein said. 'It was definitely the Lubbock photos. Gardner said that what the photographer picked up was an exceptionally bright light source that had a color at the most distant red end of the spectrum. That means it was infrared – or something similar to infrared. That in turn means that the object would seem dim to the human eye but be very bright and clear on a photo. It's an interesting possibility. That's what we could have here. That disk could have been solid, giving off infrared light, and thus would have become invisible to the photographer while coming out on his photos.'

'Take it further,' Stanford said. 'Go beyond the known spectrum. If those objects could produce such a light, if they could produce it at will, that would

explain why they could materialize and disappear in the wink of an eye.'

'It's possible,' Epstein said. 'It's within the bounds of probability. The UFOs are usually described as being surrounded by *glowing* colors: blue, green, yellow, orange, red. Assuming that we're dealing with a metal composed of already known elements – possibly of unusual purity and radical mixtures, but known elements nevertheless – that we can also assume that what we are *not* dealing with is a magical metal that can actually transmit light.'

'I'll buy that.'

'Thank you.' Epstein cocked his ear to the distant thunder, shivering when the double doors rattled. 'So,' he said. 'Electrical discharges of unusual strength will sometimes lead to a soft white glow, a corona, near high-voltage transmission lines. This leads one to assume that our UFO may have either some sort of negative potential that causes electrons to leak into the atmosphere surrounding it, an alternating potential that agitates gas atoms in the surrounding atmosphere to their ionization potential, or even an alternating current within its own shell, which draws energy from that same surrounding atmosphere.'

'A neat theory,' Stanford said. 'But that only accounts for a *white* glow.'

Epstein smiled. 'Very true. However, what we're now assuming is that the UFO's luminosity is not caused by its own unique composition, but by the natural air closely surrounding it. Let's now bear in mind the fact that if atoms are sufficiently agitated by the absorption of electromagnetic radiation, a few of their electrons will be elevated out of their normal orbits or possibly removed from the atom completely; then, as further electrons fall back into these empty spaces, a certain amount of energy will be released and radiated away as photons. That being said, I need only point out that within the visible region a stream of such photons having the same wavelength and frequency will be seen by the human eye as an unusual, glowing color, ranging all the way from violet to red.'

‘Electromagnetic radiation?’

‘It fits in with our trace cases. We’ve often found unusual traces of electromagnetic radiation upon examination of reported landing sites.’

‘Right. And assuming that such craft were made of some exceptionally pure composition of white metals – say, aluminium, magnesium, titanium or strontium – and that this unusually pure metal was electromagnetically charged, that would account for the fact that our UFO often appears to be white or silvery up close, a dull or dark gray when viewed through atmospheric haze, or is just as often surrounded by a glowing halo of various colors.’

‘Precisely. And, of course, as you’ve just said, should it be able to create a color source beyond the known spectrum – and turn that source on and off at will – it could be invisible to the human eye, show up on normal film, and yet materialize in our visible spectrum whenever it wishes.’

Stanford whistled softly. ‘That would explain a lot,’ he said.

‘The whole subject is a mystery,’ Epstein said. ‘And it’s driving me crazy.’

The thunder roared outside and was followed by crackling lightning. The doors rattled, making Epstein glance up, then he stared down at the floor. His own words were meaningless to him; they were words to bridge the silence. He was frightened and he didn’t know why, which only made him even more frightened. Stanford clearly felt the same. He appeared to be deep in thought. They were both very frightened at this moment, neither knowing the reason. Epstein thought of Professor Gerhardt, thought of what Stanford had said: Professor Gerhardt had changed in a subtle manner, and was hiding some secret knowledge. Epstein sighed and sipped his Scotch, heard the beating of the rain. He thought of the night at Galveston, of the strange girl on the porch, of her ambiguous smile and distant gaze, her eyes fixed on the sky. He wondered what the girl had experienced, wondered how it had affected her;

wondered if Gerhardt had been affected the same way, and, if so, to what extent. Epstein looked again at Stanford. His younger friend was pale-faced. He had never seen Stanford so tense before, and he cursed the whole mystery.

‘We should go to sleep,’ he said.

‘I can’t sleep,’ Stanford said.

‘What on earth do you think is going to happen?’

‘I don’t know,’ Stanford said.

Epstein stared at the shuttered doors. They were rattling dementedly. Thunder roared and lightning flashed through the shutters and the doors shook again. Epstein felt that he was dreaming. The storm seemed to be unnatural. He saw Stanford rising slowly to his feet and then putting his glass down. Epstein couldn’t think straight. He saw Stanford turning around. The lights suddenly went out, plunging the room into darkness, then the locks on the shuttered doors snapped and the doors were blown open.

The howling wind rushed in, , sweeping Epstein from his chair, filling the air with flying sheets and pillows and papers and bottles. Epstein rolled across the floor, heard the sound of exploding glass. A fierce light filled the room, very warm, almost blinding, and he gasped and rolled into Stanford and they both slammed into the nearest wall. Stanford cursed and grabbed a leg of the bed. A bottle smashed above his head. The wind howled and pressed Epstein to the wall with debris flying around him. The heat. The white light. He covered his eyes with his hands. The heat receded and he opened his eyes to see a black, streaming darkness.

‘*Gerhardt*!’ Epstein bawled.

He crawled toward the main door. A spinning sheet coiled around him. He cursed and clawed wildly at the sheet while the wind hammered at him. Then it hissed and receded. He looked up, disbelieving. The wind still swept the

rain across the porch, but the storm seemed more natural. Lightning flashed across the sky, briefly illuminating the room; he saw Stanford rolling away from the bed and clambering back to his feet. ‘Jesus Christ!’ Stanford said. He glanced dazedly around him. Epstein clambered to his feet and shook his head and then rushed to the main door.

‘*It’s Gerhardt*!’ he bawled.

Epstein pulled the main door open and found the corridor in darkness. He and Stanford both raced along the corridor until they reached Gerhardt’s room. The room door was open. There was no one inside. Epstein cursed and looked frantically at Stanford and then they both started running.

The whole hotel was in darkness, doors opening and closing, people shouting as they hurried back and forth, a few carrying torches. Stanford and Epstein rushed outside. The wind howled along the terraces. The coco palms were bent low and creaking, silhouetted in faint light.

‘*The beach*!’ Stanford bawled.

They ran together along the terrace, passed Reception, crossed the patio, the wind howling and sweeping the rain about them, almost bowling them sideways. Stanford reached out for Epstein. They held on to each other. They fought their way through the rain and beating wind until they came to the gardens. Stanford pointed a finger. ‘ – *down there*! *Somewhere there*!’ He started forward, pulling Epstein with him, thunder rumbling above them.

The storm was demoniac, lightning ripped through the sky. They leaned forward and headed into the wind, circling around the hotel. Torches shone and blinked out. The gleaming white walls receded. They found the track at the rear of the hotel and headed for the beach. Epstein kept his head down. The thunder made his ears ring. He glanced up as more lightning ripped through the sky, a giant skeleton hand. Stanford was shouting at him. Epstein couldn’t hear what he said. The wind howled beneath the rumbling of the

thunder as the rain poured down brutally.

‘ – *there he is*! *Over there*!’

Lightning flashed across the sky, illuminating the ground below. Epstein looked ahead and saw Professor Gerhardt, a shifting ghost in the distance. Gerhardt was wearing his pyjamas. He was not looking back. He was hurrying toward a grove of coco palms that led down to the beach, his pyjamas flapping wildly about him, both hands on his head. More lightning flashed across the sky. A fierce glare flared up and died. The winding track and the surrounding earth and trees materialized and then vanished.

‘ – *what the hell is he after*?’

Stanford shouted against the wind, the rain hissing and sweeping across him. The lightning lit up the night and the distant palm trees. Professor Gerhardt had vanished. Stanford cursed and raced ahead. The lightning passed and he saw a strange glow fanning out in the sky.

‘ – *over there*! *That’s the path*!’

Stanford pulled Epstein onward. They stumbled toward the palm trees. Thunder roared and lightning tore the sky in jagged fingers of yellow flame. Then the darkness returned. They saw that glow above the sea. Stanford cursed again and Epstein groaned. The wind whiplashed the rain. The thunder roared and the wind howled through the trees and the mud made a squelching sound. It all seemed like a nightmare. The land flared up and vanished. They were blinded by lightning and lost in darkness, and they stumbled through the beating wind and rain as if running in circles.

Then they reached the palm trees, which were quivering, pouring rain. The lightning flashes and they saw a stretch of sea, a black sheet streaked with silver. Then it was dark again. Thundered rumbled above their heads. Stanford pointed to the left and started forward and pulled Epstein with him.

They passed between the creaking trees. The branches shivered and drenched them. They left the shelter of the trees and found the path that ran down to the beach. More lightning illuminated the beach before returning to darkness. They had not seen the beach. To their right, between them and the beach, was a high bank of earth.

‘ – *we’re going down*! *Watch your step*!’

The steep track was running mud. They both slipped and tripped on stones. The track curved to the right, broadened out and then narrowed, climbed a little and then plunged on down and started leveling out again. The thunder rumbled above them, the wind howled and then receded, the rain lashed them in a final bout of rage and then abruptly ceased.

Epstein glanced up, surprised, saw a dark cloud drifting by, saw the stars and then gazed down sloping earth and saw a white stretch of beach. Epstein couldn’t believe it. There was no wind there at all. Stanford jerked his wrist and pulled him forward and they both hurried downhill.

‘*There he is*!’ Stanford hissed.

They both stopped on the instant, saw a broader expanse of beach, Professor Gerhardt hurrying across the sand, his pyjamas still flapping. The moonlight fell upon him, elongating his shadow; he was drenched and his hands were by his sides and he seemed very fragile. Then he stopped walking. He was near the coco palms. Another man came into view, uncommonly small and slim, wearing a one-piece suit of silvery material, a strange cap on his head.

Stanford and Epstein were both stunned. They stared in silence, staring down. The banked earth limited their vision to a triangular stretch of beach, the long lines of trees forming one side, the other formed by the moonlit sea. Professor Gerhardt was near the trees. The small man had stopped in front of him. Epstein blinked and felt a pressure in his head, an almost imperceptible vibrating. The small man stepped up to Gerhardt, his suit gleaming in the

moonlit. He reached out with his left hand, touched Gerhardt on the neck, then they both walked to the right and disappeared behind the high, muddy bank.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Stanford said, ‘did you see that? *Gerhardt didn’t resist*!’

They both started running again, slipping and sliding down the track, the mud squelching beneath their bare feet, the branches shivering and dripping rain. Epstein felt cold and frightened, his head tight and vibrating. He thought he heard a bass humming sound, but he couldn’t be sure. They stumbled together down the track, passed through moonlight and shadow, gasping as the branches dripped rain, further soaking their clothes. Stanford cursed and then fell, tumbling down the last stretch of the hill. He rolled over and then clambered to his feet and they both raced to the beach.

‘Oh, my God!’ Epstein whispered.

They both slithered to a halt. The beach lay before them. It was fringed with coco palms and those trees formed a wall that stretched in a semicircle toward the sea. Out there in the sea was an eighteenth-century ship. Its huge sails were billowing in the breeze, illuminated in white haze. The great disk was above the ship, was twice as long as the ship. It just sat there in the sky, about two hundred feet up, a dark mass in a plasma-like glow, the stars winking around it.

Stanford and Epstein just stood there. They were stunned by this awesome vision. They saw the past and the future in the present and were dazed by this miracle. The white sails of the ship billowed. The great disk glowed and pulsated. The air hummed and vibrated and seemed alive with some mysterious force. Epstein rubbed his stinging eyes. Stanford shook his head in wonder. The great disk hovered over the ship and they were both bathed in a silvery-white haze.

‘It’s the *Endeavour*,’ Stanford said.

‘What?’ Epstein said.

‘It’s a replica of Captain Cook’s ship.’

‘What the hell’s that *above* it?’

Stanford didn’t reply, but merely stood there, gazing up. The great disk was a dark mass in a glowing haze, its details obscured. The breeze ruffled Stanford’s hair. He glanced briefly at Epstein. They stared at one another, both speechless, wondering what they could do. The beach vibrated beneath their feet. They both heard the bass humming sound. The sound was all around them and above them and had no fixed direction. They both stared at the *Endeavour*. Its huge white sails billowed outward. Raising their eyes, they saw the great disk above, its glow hazing the stars.

Then Epstein remembered Gerhardt. He turned around to survey the beach. The sand stretched out to the curved wall of a cove at the end of the beach.

‘Gerhardt must have gone there,’ he said. ‘There’s nowhere else they could have gone. That creature must have taken him over there. I think we better go look.’

He started hurrying along the beach, followed instantly by Stanford. The light walling on the beach wasn’t moonlight: it came from the great, hovering disk. Epstein was gasping, but he kept moving, his heart pounding uncomfortably. The silvery-white haze fell across the nearby trees and made them look artificial. Epstein heard the lapping water, a rhythmic, timeless sound. He kept walking, feeling hollow and unreal, his head vibrating and tightening. He wondered what that was. He knew it came from the enormous disk. Stanford hurried up to his side and then passed him and raced on ahead. They were nearing the wall of the cove. Epstein felt a great fear. He saw a curved line of trees, a wall of stones, and then a roar split his eardrums.

The ground shook beneath him, sand swirling, sky tilting, and then he felt the

ground under his back and he rolled toward the trees. A fierce light swept across him. He covered his eyes with his hands. The sand was whipped up to rain down upon him as his ears started ringing. Epstein cursed and smacked his own forehead, blinked repeatedly and then looked up; he saw Stanford scrambling back to his feet, bathed in incandescent light. Epstein pushed himself back up, but fell weakly against a tree. The tree shivered and poured rain upon him as he forced himself onward. Stanford's eyes were too bright, looking stunned and confused. The air around him was red, blue and yellow, the colors flickering and merging.

They both looked out to sea and saw the stately *Endeavour*, bathed in moonlight and a spectral rainbow haze, the light flickering crazily. The great disk was still above it. The surrounding haze had disappeared. What they now saw was an immense, silvery disk rimmed with windows and flashing lights. The windows were long and narrow, curving strips of bright light, broken up by what seemed like black dots moving to and fro, inside. The colored lights were below the windows, running round the circular base, flashing from left to right, right to left, at incredible speed. The lights formed a kaleidoscope, flickering on and off brilliantly, turning the dark sea into blood and yellow lava and rippling green, changing the ship's sails into billowing rainbows, obliterating the starry sky.

Stanford gasped and turned away, shook his head and stared at Epstein. His friend looked like a translucent ghost, materializing and vanishing. Then they ran between the palm trees, scrambled over the wall of earth, slithered down to the cove on the other side and saw the flat, empty sand.

'We're too late,' Stanford said.

Epstein sighed and closed his eyes, his head vibrating painfully. The humming sound was all around him and above him and it seemed to dissolve him. He opened his eyes again. The shadows rippled with various colors. He moved forward and saw a large sunken circle, the sand curled at its edge. Looking up at the sky, he saw a globe of hazy light. It was flying obliquely

toward the great disk, moving slowly and gracefully.

‘Oh, God!’ Epstein whispered. ‘They’ve got him.’

Then the great disk disappeared. The night was plunged into starlight. The billowing sails of the *Endeavour* were gleaming white in the moonlight. Epstein didn’t remove his gaze. His tight head was still vibrating. He kept looking and he saw an enormous black patch where the stars should have been. Then he saw two squares of light, about three hundred feet apart. They were windows floating there in the sky, illuminated brightly from within. Then one of them blinked out and the glowing orb flew toward its partner. The glowing orb became a stark black silhouette in that square frame of brilliant light. Then the light blinked out, became a black hole in the sky, and the great disk reappeared, filled up the black hole, and the colored lights flickered on and off and then turned into a white haze.

The bass humming grew louder. The beach vibrated with some violence. The great disk became a dark mass within a pulsating glow, rising vertically toward the drifting clouds with serene, stately grace. The ship below it was untouched. Its sails billowed in the breeze. The white glow illuminated the blue sea and erased the stars nearest to it. The great disk continued ascending. The humming sound became fainter. The ground vibrated and then settled down and the silence was total. The great disk continued rising and shrinking until it was no more than a glowing ball. This ball reached the clouds and abruptly blinked out and the stars reappeared.

Stanford and Epstein were speechless. They stayed close to the lapping water. They stood there a long time, looking up, breathing deeply, bathed in the warm, silky moonlight, the stars glittering over them. The sea washed upon the sand, splashing lazily around their feet. They lowered their eyes and looked across at the *Endeavour*. There was no one on the boat. Its rigging shivered in the breeze. Its wooden hull was rolling from side to side, the boards creaking in protest. Stanford and Epstein stared at it. The white sails were bathed in moonlight. They looked up to see the stars in the sky, and then

they both walked away.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

‘Okay, Stanford, I want you to understand one thing: I’m going to give you the information, I won’t ever do it again, and if you even breathe my name in your sleep, I’ll have your name in a doggie bag. It’s a very dangerous subject. I like to think it’s all behind me. So when we’re finished, when you walk out that door, make sure it’s the last time.’

O’Hara looked like a prosperous man, his tie straight, his cuff links gleaming, his face lined to match the graying of his hair, his blue eyes clear and hard. He was framed by a plate-glass window, his backdrop Manhattan, and his broad frame seemed oddly out of place in the neat, paneled office.

‘Okay,’ Stanford said, ‘that’s fine with me. First the Robertson Panel.’

‘According to my notes, the panel met from 14 January, 1953, to 17 January, in Washington, DC, and the meeting at the time was top secret. The seriousness with which the subject was to be treated may be best illustrated not only by the credentials of the men involved – all specialists in the physical sciences, with particularly emphasis on atomic research and advanced weaponry – but also by the fact that the group’s written verdict was to be given to the National Security Council and then – if the decision was that the UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin – to the President himself.’

‘That sounds like a heavy number,’ Stanford said.

‘It was,’ O’Hara said. ‘And what later intrigued me about the panel was that – at least according to the concrete evidence that I was seeing and hearing – the

extraterrestrial was in fact a grim reality and that the existence of the UFOs had been proven. Nevertheless, and pretty much to my amazement, the panel rejected the findings.'

'What findings?'

'I'll just give you a few. They'll be enough to convince you.' Like so many of the people that Stanford had been interviewing in the past few years, O'Hara, while puffing on a fat cigar, read from the file he had in front of him. 'For the first two days Ruppelt reviewed the Blue Book findings for the scientists, and what he said was pretty damned impressive. First, he pointed out that Project Blue Book received reports of only ten percent of the UFO sightings made in the United States, which meant that in five and a half years about forty-thousand sightings had been made. He then broke the sightings down into the percentage that was composed of balloons, aircraft, astronomical bodies, and other misinterpretations, such as birds, blowing paper, noctilucent clouds, temperature inversions, reflections, and so forth, pointing out that this still left four hundred and twenty-nine as definite unknowns. Of those unknowns, it was clear that the most often reported shape was elliptical, that the most often reported color was white or metallic, that the same number of UFOs was reported as being seen in daylight as at night, and that the direction of travel equally covered the sixteen cardinal points of the compass. Seventy percent of those unknowns had been seen visually from the air – in other words, by experienced pilots and navigators; twelve percent had been seen visually from the ground; ten percent had been picked up by airborne and ground radar, and eight percent were combination visual-radar sightings. Ruppelt then greatly disturbed us all by confirming that the UFOs were frequently reported from around places like our atomic energy installations, harbours and manufacturing areas. Finally, he asked us to take note of the fact that according to radar readings there were recorded flight speeds of up to fifty thousand miles an hour.'

'You were right,' Stanford said. 'It sounds impressive.'

‘Indeed,’ O’Hara said, puffing smoke. ‘And even more impressive was the fact that Ruppelt and Major Dewey Fournet had completed an analysis of the *motions* of the reported unknowns as a means of determining if they were intelligently controlled. Regarding this, Major Fournet, who had an exemplary reputation, told us of how – by eliminating every possibility of balloons, airplanes, astronomical bodies and so forth from the hundreds of reports studied, and by then analyzing the motions of the UFOs in the remaining unknown category – his study group had been forced to conclude that the UFOs were, in the words of the group report: “intelligently controlled by persons with brains equal to or far surpassing ours.” The next step in the study, the major explained, had been to find out where those beings came from; and since it seemed unlikely that their machines could have been built in secret, the answer was that the beings were from outer space. Surprised, Dr Stanford? Well, so were we… And we were even more surprised when, the following morning, we were shown four strips of movie film that had been assessed as falling into the definite unknown category.’

‘You mean the cinetheodolite movies taken by scientists at the White Sands Proving Ground in 1950.’

‘Bright boy. Those plus the Montana Movie taken on 15 August, 1950, by the manager of the Great Falls baseball team, and the Tremonton Movie, taken on 2 July, 1952, by Navy Chief Photographer, Warrant Officer Delbert C. Newhouse.’

‘And?’

‘The Montana Movie showed two large, bright flights flying across the blue sky in an echelon formation. The lights didn’t show any details, but they certainly appeared to be large, circular objects. The Tremonton Movie showed about a dozen shiny, disklike objects fading in and out repeatedly, performing some pretty extraordinary aerial maneuvers, and darting in and out and circling one another in a cloudless blue sky. Any possibility that the objects might have been astronomical phenomena was dispelled when the

film clearly showed them heading in the same tight cluster toward the western horizon, and, more specifically, when one of them left the main group and shot off to the east.'

'Anything more positive than that?'

'Yep. The Montana Movie had been subjected to thousands of hours of analysis in the Air Force lab at Wright Field, and their analysis proved conclusively that the objects weren't birds, balloons, airplanes, meteors or reflections – in short, they were genuine unknowns. As for the Tremonton Movie, it was studied for two solid months by the Navy lab in Anacostia, Maryland, and their conclusion was that the unidentifieds were not birds or airplanes, were probably traveling at several thousands of miles an hour, and were, judging by their extraordinary maneuvers, intelligently controlled vehicles.'

Stanford gave a low whistle and sat forward in his seat, thinking back on what had happened in St Thomas and of how it had affected him. It had left him in a state of wonder, overawed and disbelieving, but now, as he listened to O'Hara talking, he began to accept it.

'That was the evidence,' O'Hara said, 'and it seemed pretty damned conclusive, but the Robertson Panel still managed to reject it. The panel members duly spent two days going over the evidence, but the results of their ponderings were preordained. Guided by myself and my fellow CIA members, the panel simply concluded in their report that the evidence was not substantial, that the continued emphasis on the reporting of the phenomenon was resulting in, quote, "a threat to the orderly functioning of the protective organs of the body politic," and that the reports clogged military channels, could possibly precipitate mass hysteria, and might encourage defense personnel to misidentify or ignore actual enemy aircraft. In short: the real problem wasn't the UFOs – it was the *UFO reports*.'

Staring past O'Hara, Stanford saw the skyscrapers of Manhattan. Raising his

eyes, he surveyed the blue sky with its drifting white clouds. The sky revealed nothing. Sighing, Stanford lowered his gaze. His friend O'Hara, a private detective, once a CIA officer, was leaning forward with his elbows on his desk, exhaling smoke from his nostrils.

'So,' he said, 'we made some recommendations. First, we recommended that the two major private UFO organizations – the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization and the Civilian Saucer Intelligence – be watched because of what we described as their "potentially great influence on mass thinking" in the event of widespread sightings. Regarding this, we also inserted the sentence: "The apparent irresponsibility and the possible use of such groups for subversive purposes should be kept in mind." Next, we recommended that national security agencies take immediate steps to strip the UFO phenomenon of its importance and eliminate the aura of mystery it had acquired, the means being a public education program. Finally, we outlined a program of public education with two purposes: training and debunking. The former would help people identify known objects and thus reduce the mass of reports caused by misidentification; the latter would reduce public interest in UFOs and thereby decrease or eliminate UFO reports.'

'The liberal conscience,' Stanford said, 'would call that brainwashing.'

'The liberal conscience,' O'Hara said, 'would be right.' He grinned coolly at Stanford, leaned back in his chair, gazed momentarily at the ceiling, then, still puffing on his cigar, leaned over his open file once more. 'As a means of pursuing this educational – or, in the vernacular, brainwashing – program, the panel suggested that the government hire psychologists familiar with mass psychology, military training film companies, Walt Disney Productions, and TV personalities such as Arthur Godfrey to subtly convey this new thinking to the masses. They also – contrary to what we were later to tell Ruppelt – decided *not* to declassify the sighting reports, and implied – again, contrary to what we were to tell poor Ruppelt – that the Air Force should further *tighten* security and continue to deny nonmilitary personnel access to UFO files. In

other words: kill it.'

Thinking back on Gardner in Albuquerque, Stanford realized that Gardner, though a drunkard, had been telling the truth.

'Despite my own involvement in the Robertson Panel recommendations,' O'Hara continued, again studying the notes in his file, 'it was shortly after their release that I began wondering what the hell was going on. As you can see for yourself, the whole point of the Robertson Panel was to enable the Air Force to state for the next decade or so that an *impartial* scientific body had examined the UFO data and found no evidence of anything unusual in the skies. While this was an obvious distortion of the facts, it *did* mean that the Air Force could now avoid discussing the nature of the objects and instead concentrate on the public relations campaign to eliminate the UFO reports entirely. And given the nature of the panel's recommendations, there's little doubt that they were directly responsible for the policy of ridicule and denial that has inhibited an effective study of the phenomenon ever since; and that has, to put it mildly, some *unfortunate* effects on the lives of a lot of perfectly responsible civilians and Armed Forces personnel.'

'You mean, humiliation of UFO witnesses was fairly standard.'

'More or less,' O'Hara said. 'Anyway, given our brief about national security – we were still fighting the war in Korea, the Soviets had exploded their first hydrogen bomb, and the Cold War was still at its chilliest phase – I could understand the need for such a charade. However, what I *couldn't* figure out was why our superiors wanted us to lie to Ruppelt – wanted us to tell him that Project Blue Book was being expanded instead of run down, that UFO info was going to be freed of restrictions instead of being further restricted – and why they wanted him to believe that he could carry on with his plans when in fact we intended stopping him in his tracks.'

'Did you ever find out?'

‘I’m not sure, but let me tell you what happened… As you’ve already indicated, you know what happened to Project Blue Book: it was practically wiped out. Also, by that time, the recommendations of the Robertson Panel were in full swing – and the most credible UFO witnesses, namely aircrews and radar operatives, had been successfully frightened out of submitting their UFO reports. But worse was to come… In August 1953 – the same month Ruppelt left the Air Force – the Pentagon issued Air Force Regulation 200-2. AFR 200-2 was drafted purely as a public relations weapon in that it prohibited the release of *any* information about a sighting to the public or media, except when the sighting was *positively* identified as natural phenomena. In addition, while the previous regulation had stated that sightings should not be classified higher than restricted, the new regulation insured that *all* sightings would be classified as restricted. Then, even worse, in December 1953 the Joint Chiefs of Staff followed AFR 200-2 with Joint Army-Navy-Air Force Publication 146, and this made the releasing of any information to the public a crime under the Espionage Act, punishable by a one to ten year prison term or a fine of ten thousand dollars. And the most ominous aspect of JANAP 146 was that it applied to anyone who knew it existed – including commercial airline pilots. Needless to say, that regulation effectively put a stop to the flow of information to the public. To all intents and purposes – and contrary to public Air Force pronouncements – the UFO project had been plunged into secrecy.’

Stanford thought of Albuquerque, of what Gardner had told him, of himself at the top of the stairs, dazed by incomprehension. That feeling was with him now, a growing fear that had no shape, and he began to understand that the facts were rarely what they appeared to be. He stared at O’Hara, his old CIA friend, wondering how such men managed to flourish without guilt or shame.

‘Wait a minute,’ Stanford said. ‘I’m getting a bit confused here. You say that the CIA virtually directed the Robertson Panel, but that their main concern was national security – not a belief in the UFOs.’

‘No,’ O’Hara said, now returning Stanford’s gaze. ‘I’m saying that our superiors hoodwinked us.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Listen,’ O’Hara said. ‘According to our superiors, the reason they wanted the interest in UFOs killed off was that the UFO *reports* were deemed a threat to national security: first, because a deliberately confused American public might think attacking enemy aircraft were merely UFOs; second, because a foreign power could exploit the UFO craze to make the public doubt official Air Force statements about UFOs and thereby undermine public confidence in the military; and, third, because in terms of psychological warfare, particularly in 1952, the communications lines of the whole country could be saturated by a few hundred phone calls, and such calls – which *always* came after a rush of UFO sightings – were putting the defense network in jeopardy. Those were the reasons they gave us for the need for suppression.’

‘But you thought they were bullshit,’ Stanford said.

‘Right,’ O’Hara said. ‘If national security was the issue, then the suppression had a certain amount of logic. However, if national security was the *only* concern, why were we humiliating so many UFO witnesses and harassing our own ground and air crews into keeping their mouths shut? The only logical explanation was that the higher echelons of the Air Force were more concerned about the phenomenon than they were willing to admit, that they possibly *knew* more about it than they were willing to admit, and that for reasons of their own they were actively encouraging their most competent personnel from investigating the subject.’

‘Ruppelt seems to be the perfect example of all this.’

‘Right,’ O’Hara said. ‘It seemed to me that the more proven unknowns Ruppelt came up with – and most of his unknowns *were* unknowns – the

more nervous the Air Force became. I first realized this when the CIA told us to lie to him about the recommendations of the Robertson Panel. I was even more convinced when they neglected to replace him when he went to Denver, and when they stripped Blue Book of its staff in his absence.'

'Still,' Stanford said, 'that doesn't necessarily mean too much. As you said, if they were genuinely worried about the sheer number of UFO reports clogging their communications network, they would have wanted those reports reduced to the minimum.'

'Let me give you a better example,' O'Hara said. 'Shortly after scaring the hell out of the Air Force with the evidence presented to the Robertson Panel, Ruppelt came up with a couple of cases that virtually confirmed that the UFOs were intelligently controlled.' He returned his gaze to the notes in his file. 'The first was a sighting that occurred over Haneda AFB, now Tokyo International Airport, in Japan. This UFO was initially observed by two control tower operatives who saw a large, brilliant light in the northeast over Tokyo Bay. The light, which was moving, was observed through seven by fifty binoculars; it had a constant brilliance, was circular in shape, and appeared to be the upper half of a large, round, dark shape that was about four times the diameter of the light itself. Then, when it moved, the tower operatives saw a second, dimmer light on the lower edge of the dark, shadowy portion. This particular UFO was simultaneously tracked by radar and observed by intelligence officers as it flew back and forth across the central part of Tokyo Bay, sometimes almost hovering, then abruptly accelerating to three hundred miles an hour. It was pursued by, and deliberately eluded, an F-94 airplane.'

'*Deliberately*?'

'So it seemed,' O'Hara said. 'That sighting was thoroughly investigated by the FEAF intelligence officers in the area, then later investigated just as thoroughly by Ruppelt. Both agreed that it was definitely not a weather target, that it definitely wasn't a star, that both visual and radar lock-ons had

proved that it was solid *and* moving. They also proved that each turn the UFO made was constant, and that the straight "legs" between the turns were about the same length. Indeed, Ruppelt later wrote that the sketch of the UFO's flight path reminded him very much of the crisscross patterns he used to fly during World War Two – and that the only time the UFO had seriously deviated from this pattern was when the F-94 tried to pursue it.'

'And the second sighting?'

'The second sighting was one that occurred on the night of 29 July, 1952, when an F-94 attempted to intercept a UFO over eastern Michigan. This sighting was even more interesting in that there was a definite reason for every move the UFO made. First, it made a one hundred and eighty-degree turn because the F-94 was closing in on it. Next, it alternately increased and decreased its speed – but only increase its speed when the airplane was closing in on it, and always slowed down when it was just out of range of the airplane's radar. Then, adding weight to his argument that such moves could not have been random, Ruppelt submitted a third report – the one he called the best unknown ever – of an F-84 pilot who chased a visually and radar located object right across Rapid City. According to the pilot *and* the radar operatives, that target accelerated and decelerated so that there was always *precisely* three miles between it and the F-84 – and it kept this up until the F-84 ran out of fuel. Later, both the pilot and the tower controller told Ruppelt that the UFO seemed to have some kind of automatic warning radar linked to its power supply.'

'Okay,' Stanford said. 'Let's assume the UFOs were intelligently controlled… But what has this to do with the CIA?'

'Think,' O'Hara said, studying his dwindling cigar, forming his lips into an O and blowing a thin steam of smoke. 'If, as the CIA claimed, national security was their only concern, such sightings should have scared the hell out of them and made them want to know more. That, however, was not remotely the case. Instead of encouraging Ruppelt or utilizing his information, they

went all out to stop him in his tracks – and they put him under surveillance.'

'So what you're saying is that they claimed to be concerned with national defense, yet they didn't want people watching the skies – a contradiction in terms.'

'That's right,' O'Hara said.

Stanford sighed and rubbed his eyes, feeling weary a slightly unnerved, convinced that he was getting out of his depth and approaching a danger zone. The contradictions were now obvious: national security did not explain them. It was clear that the Pentagon, the CIA and the Air Force were more concerned with the UFOs than they admitted and were still trying to hide that fact. He sighed again and studied O'Hara. His old friend's blue eyes were clear. Stanford shook his head wearily from side to side and wondered if he was dreaming.

'Keep going,' he said.

'Okay,' O'Hara said. 'I'll stick to Ruppelt for the moment. Because what Ruppelt did, and how the Air Force reacted, are representative of the whole shady story and might tell you a lot.' He stubbed his cigar out, put his hands behind his head, then leaned far back in his chair, now ignoring his notes. 'I had in fact been watching Ruppelt from about August the previous year, 1952 – and the order to report his movements simply intrigued me. Bear in mind that at that particular time there was a sudden rash of UFO sightings. Now, those sightings were mainly the build up to the beginning of September, when every morning for about two weeks there were half a dozen or so new reports from the southeastern United States, notably Georgia and Alabama, a lot of them from the vicinity of the new, top secret Atomic Energy Commission complex at Savannah River, many more over Brookley Air Force Base near Mobile, Alabama. That same month the NATO naval forces were holding maneuvers off the coast of Europe, namely, Operation Mainbrace. On 20 September an American newspaper reporter and a group of

pilots and flight deck crew on board an aircraft carrier in the North Sea observed a perfectly clear, silvery sphere moving across the sky just behind the fleet of ships. The object was large and appeared to be moving rapidly, and the reporter shot several pictures of it. The pictures were developed straight away and immediately studied by the intelligence officers aboard the carrier. The pictures were excellent, and the object looked like a large balloon – but no balloons were in the area and an analysis of all the photos proved conclusively that the object had been moving very fast. Then, the following day, six English Air Force pilots flying a formation of jet fighters over the North Sea saw a shiny, spherical object coming from the direction of the NATO fleet. They took after it and lost it, but when they neared their base one of the pilots noticed that the UFO was following them. He turned back toward it, but the UFO then turned away and outdistanced the RAF airplane in a matter of minutes. Finally, on the third day, a UFO was observed near the fleet, this time over the Topcliffe Aerodrome in England. A pilot in a British jet was sent in pursuit and managed to get close enough to describe the object as, quote, “round, silvery and white” and to note that it , quote, “seemed to rotate around its vertical axis and sort of wobble.” Then, when he tried to get closer, the UFO shot off…’

O’Hara sat forward again, removed his hands from behind his head, propped his elbows firmly on the desk and cupped his chin in his hands.

‘Naturally, those sightings disturbed NATO,’ he said. ‘In fact, according to an RAF intelligence officer in the Pentagon, it was the Mainbrace sightings that finally forced the RAF to recognize the UFO phenomenon – a fact they have denied to this day. However, Ruppelt investigated the case and assessed all those sightings as unknowns. Unfortunately, this encouraged him to believe that he could now pin down the UFOs for good… and it was this very enthusiasm that led to the destruction of the most important system ever devised for UFO research.’

‘Don’t look so pleased,’ Stanford said. ‘Just tell me what happened.’

‘Okay. For a long time Ruppelt and Brigadier General Garland, then chief at the ATIC, had been looking for a way of getting concrete information about the UFOs. What they finally came up with was a plan for visual spotting stations to be established all over northern New Mexico – an area that had consistently produced more UFO reports than any other area in America. The visual spotting stations would be equipped with specially designed sighting devices, all of which would be linked with an instantaneous interphone system: any two stations could then track the same object and, from their separate readings, compute the UFO’s altitude and speed. Also at each visual spotting station would be instruments to measure the passage of any body that was giving off heat, any disturbance in the Earth’s magnetic field, and any increase in nuclear radiation at the time of the sighting.’

‘I never heard of it,’ Stanford said, ‘but it sounds pretty impressive.’

‘It was,’ O’Hara said. ‘In fact, it was the first time that a proper, scientific system had been designed and submitted to the Air Force. It was virtually foolproof and if it had been adopted, we could have tracked, photographed and measured UFOs with unprecedented precision.’

‘And you’re going to tell me the Air Force killed it off.’

‘Right.’

‘Why?’

O’Hara shrugged. ‘I’m not sure. All I know is that in December of that year – when Ruppelt’s plans went to Washington, DC, for approval – the US Navy was going to shoot the first H-bomb during Project Ivy, and some folks in the Pentagon, remembering the unidentifieds over Operation Mainbrace, directed Ruppelt to fly out to the test area and organize a UFO reporting team.’ O’Hara grinned laconically, spread his hands out in the air, then gently kicked his chair back, his legs lazily outstretched. ‘As it is with the CIA, so it is with the Pentagon: there are wheels within wheels and somewhere there’s a

wheel you can't reach. What I mean by this is that the order for Ruppelt to fly to Project Ivy came down in November, but by December his plans for the visual radar sighting network were received in Washington… and shortly after that I received a phone call from the Pentagon, suggesting that I axe Ruppelt's trip – which, naturally, I did.'

'So what you're suggesting is that certain people in the Pentagon are genuinely concerned with the UFOs, but that others, for some unknown reason, don't want the UFOs to be investigated.'

'What a bright boy you are.'

Stanford stared past O'Hara's head and saw the tops of the skyscrapers, the sun a silvery ball in the clear sky, the white clouds drifting languidly.

'So,' he said eventually, '*were* UFOs seen over Project Ivy during the shooting of the H-bomb?'

'I don't know,' O'Hara said, 'and neither did Ruppelt. Shortly after Project Ivy came the Robertson Panel and its consequences, and a few months later, in August '53, Ruppelt, doubtless feeling bitter, left the Air Force for good. By the end of that year, Project Blue Book had a mere three staff members left, its investigating authority had been handed over to the 4602d – the inexperienced Air Intelligence Service Squadron – and most of its projects had been strangled systematically through a reduction in funds. Ruppelt, Fournet and Chops were no longer involved, and General Garland, once a strong Ruppelt supporter, never again raised his voice in defense of any UFO investigation.'

Stanford sat there saying nothing, not knowing what to say. He thought of Ruppelt and Gardner, of the deceptions and suppression, then he thought of Irving Jacobs in the desert and wondered what it all meant. The Air Force was covering up. The Pentagon was involved. The whole of Washington, DC, was concerned with the UFOs, but didn't want them investigated. Stanford

didn’t understand it. Nothing seemed to add up. The mystery deepened and swirled there before him like a black hole in space.

‘It just doesn’t make sense,’ he finally said. ‘What was the purpose of all that?’

‘I kept asking myself that question,’ O’Hara said. ‘The only thing I came up with was the thought that maybe there was something in the UFO phenomenon – and, more intriguing, that maybe the Air Force actually knew what the UFOs were and therefore wanted to keep the lid tight on the matter.’

‘That could make sense,’ Stanford said. ‘Why else would they set out to ridicule their own pilots and ground crews? Why else would they encourage officers like Ruppelt to investigate the matter and then, when they came up with firm evidence, harass them out of the scene?’

‘Right,’ O’Hara said. ‘And bear in mind how the defense forces operate. The Navy, the Army and the Air Force all run research projects independently of one another – and they usually keep their secrets to themselves. Likewise, in the Pentagon, there are departments so secret that even *the President* doesn’t know what they’re up to. The same could be said for the FBI and the CIA: behind the names there are numbers and those numbers can’t be checked; those numbers represent the nameless men who create their own laws.’

‘So,’ Stanford said, ‘there are always rumors.’

‘Oh, yes,’ O’Hara. ‘For instance, just before I left the CIA, there were rumors going around that there’d been actual UFO landings on Air Force bases, one at Cannon AFB, New Mexico, on 18 May, 1954, another at Deerwood Nike AFB on 9 September, 1957, and a third at Blaine AFB on 12 June, 1965. Now the automatic response to such stories is to assume that they couldn’t be true – that such events couldn’t possibly be kept secret, not only from the public, but from the vast majority of FBI, CIA and Pentagon staff.’

‘Not true,’ Stanford said. ‘Some of the most startling scientific discoveries have been kept under wraps with incredible efficiency for as long as fifty years. Antibiotics were discovered as far back as 1910, but weren’t truly applied until 1940. Likewise, nuclear energy was discovered in 1919, but not generally announced until 1965. In short, no matter how big the secret, we can make sure it stays that way.’

‘True,’ O’Hara said. ‘So… Could the fact that UFOs have landed on at least three different Air Force bases be kept a secret for almost a decade? I believe it could. I believe so because the Air Force, the Navy, the Army, the CIA or the higher echelons of the Pentagon could, if not *totally* suppressing such a fact, reduce that fact to a mishmash of vague speculation and rumor… And a very good example of this is the renowned Flying Flapjack.’

‘That,’ Stanford said, ‘sounds familiar.’

‘It should be,’ O’Hara said. ‘The most interesting thing about the Flying Flapjack is that no one in the CIA had ever mentioned it until 1950, yet it had been designed back in 1942. The Flapjack, originally known as the Navy Flounder, was a circular aircraft being built by the US Navy during the Second World War. At that time, what the Navy desperately needed was an airplane that would not require long airfields, could rise almost vertically from an aircraft carrier, and could be used in any cleared area just behind frontline troops. What they came up with was a combination of helicopter and jet plane, a saucer-shaped machine powered by two piston engines and driven by twin propellers. The prototype, designed by Charles H. Zimmerman of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics and constructed by Chance-Voight, reportedly had a maximum speed of four hundred to five hundred miles miles an hour, could rise almost vertically, and could practically hover at thirty-five miles an hour. Apparently, because the aircraft was wingless, the lessened stability presented problems, but a later model – the one since reported to be…’ O’Hara checked his notes… ‘The XF-5-U-1. That model solved the problem and was rumored to be circular in

shape, over a hundred feet in diameter, and with jet nozzles – which resembled the glowing windows observed on so many UFOs – arranged right around its outer rim. Further, it was built in three layers, with the central layer slightly larger than the other two. And since the saucer's velocity and maneuvering capabilities were controlled by the power and tilt of the separate jet nozzles, there were no ailerons, rudders or other protruding surfaces.'

'A genuine flying saucer,' Stanford said.

'Right,' O'Hara said. 'Now, as I've already stated, no one in the CIA – at least no one I dealt with – knew a damned thing about that machine until early 1950 when the Air Force, in a bid to legitimize their December 1949 termination of Project Grudge, released photos and vague technical info about the Navy Flounder and Flying Flapjack, adding in their press release that they had dropped the project back in 1942 when they had generously passed it over to the US Navy, which had more interest in it.'

'Christ,' Stanford said.

'Okay,' O'Hara said. 'Information about the Flounder and Flapjack was released to the public in April 1950 via the *US News and World Report*, and it touched off some interesting speculations. The first of these arose from the retrospective knowledge that the US Navy had always expressed more interest in a vertically rising aircraft than had the Air Force; that it had, up to 1950, spent *twice* as much money as the Air Force on secret guided missile research; that their highly secret missile-research bases were located around the White Sands Proving Ground – where the majority of the military UFO sightings had occurred – and that, because they were not involved officially in UFO investigations, they could conduct their own research in a secrecy unruffled by the attentions of the public or the media. The next interesting point was that the measurements taken by Navy Commander R. B. McLaughlin and his team of Navy scientist of the UFO they tracked over the White Sands Proving Ground in early 1950 corresponded closely, except for the speed, with the details of the legendary XF-5-U-1, that those details were

more or less known to the general public through McLaughlin's published article of that year, and that the US Navy, while refusing to make any comment about the Flying Flapjack project, promptly shipped Commander McLaughlin back to sea.'

'Christ,' Stanford repeated.

'Okay, Stanford, let's look at what we have here. First question: Were the rumors that passed around the CIA about flying saucers having landed on at least three Air Force bases based on fact? Second question: Could it be that the same machines that either landed on, or possibly were being *tested* on, those Air Force bases were the same objects that were frequently being observed over the White Sands Proving Ground area? In short, do we have here a scenario suggesting that the so-called unidentified flying objects are just what they appear to be – and that rather than being of extraterrestrial origin, they're actually the products of the US Navy's secret research activities since the Second World War?'

Stanford fought to control himself. He felt a cold, hard excitement. The facts tumbled like ball bearings in his head with confusing rapidity.

'Was anyone else involved in this?' he asked.

'All I know,' O'Hara said, 'is that in 1954 the Canadian government announced publicly – after having examined the Project Blue Book evidence on the Lubbock sightings of 1951 – that the UFO observed over Albuquerque was similar to a flying saucer they were then trying to construct but had since, due to lack of know-how and facilities, passed over to the US Air Force. The Air Force naturally claimed that they'd eventually dropped this project as being unworkable.'

Stanford leaned forward to place his face in his hands. He rubbed his eyes and then sat up again and stared straight at O'Hara.

‘This all sounds impossible,’ he said.

‘Impossible? Let’s review the facts, Stanford… We have the fact that the majority of the proven unknowns are observed either over desolate countryside or over top-secret military and civilian establishments. We have the fact that crude flying saucers were once constructed by the National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics, that they were one of the US Navy’s research projects from at least 1942 to 1947, that similar machines were rumored to have landed on military bases around the White Sands Proving Ground area, and, finally, that the Canadian government claimed to have worked on a flying saucer that was eventually passed on to the US Air Force. And last but no least, we have the fact that when a US Navy commander and his Navy scientists tracked and measured an unidentified flying object over the White Sands Proving Ground – and when that object turned out to correspond very closely to the Navy’s Flying Flapjack – that Navy commander was removed from White Sands and transferred back to sea.

‘Now let’s look at how the Air Force reacted to the most successful UFO investigations. We had, during that time, only three scientifically sound methods of analyzing the speed and dimensions of the UFOs, and, more important, of ascertaining whether or not they were intelligently controlled. The first was Major Fournet’s maneuver study of 1952, the second was the Project Blue Book compilation of official unknowns, and the third was Captain Ruppelt’s planned visual-radar sighting network. Regarding these, the Air Force denied that Fournet’s maneuver study ever existed, secreted Project Blue Book’s findings behind the Espionage Act, and killed off Ruppelt’s visual-radar sighting plan.

‘What else did we have? We had an Air Force that insisted that UFOs did not exist, yet made the release of information on that subject to the public a crime under the same Espionage Act. We also had, in that regulation, a threat not only to military personnel, but to civilian airline pilots and any civilian who happened to know that the regulation existed. We had, more mysteriously, an

Air Force which claimed that national security was its only concern, yet ensured that its own air crews and ground crews would *not* report unidentified objects in the sky… What do *you* think it means?'

He stared directly at Stanford, his eyes blue and unblinking, as Stanford sat up straight in his chair, feeling slightly unreal.

'That still begs the question,' Stanford said. 'Is all this *possible*?'

'And the answer must be "yes",' O'Hara said. '*All* things are possible. As you yourself said: in this context we only have to think of the extraordinary innovations in today's science and technology, then remember that such miracles are only the tip of the iceberg, and that what goes on behind the guarded fences of our top-secret establishments is probably decades ahead of what we officially know about. Given this, the speed and capability of the unidentified flying objects are not beyond the bounds of possibility. Also, given this, it is not beyond reason that the UFOs rumored to have landed on various Air Force bases are the products of a military program so secret that only the personnel on those bases know what's going on.'

O'Hara checked his wristwatch, then pressed a button on his desk phone. The door of the office opened and a secretary entered, moving over to stand beside Stanford, very sleek and efficient. Stanford stood up, feeling dazed. He also felt a growing rage. He glanced at the girl, at the paneled walls of the room, at the clear sky beyond O'Hara's head, at O'Hara's broad outline. The facts were amazing. The possibilities were frightening. Stanford looked at O'Hara's sky-blue eyes and let the rage become part of him.

'There the case rests,' O'Hara said. 'Don't come back, Dr Stanford.'

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The New Order was planned and executed with the sort of ferocious drive that only the mystically inclined can possess. Albert Speer was the architect: he created the environment for their vision. In the works of Albert Speer and the other Nazi architects I could see the realization of Lebensraum in its most concrete form. Lebensraum – space – German conquest and expansionism: the great buildings and the underground factories were signposts to my future.

Himmler showed me Hitler's teahouse. It was on top of the Kehlestein Mountain. The five-mile road that ran up from the Berghof had been hacked out of the side of the mountain by the sweat of slave labor. In the peak of the mountain was an underground passage; at the end of the passage was a copper-lined elevator, its shaft about four hundred feet deep, hacked out of the solid rock. That elevator descended to an immense, high-walled gallery, supported by baroque Roman pillars. At the end of the gallery, also hacked out of the mountain, was a dazzling, glassed-in, circular hall. And standing in that great hall, looking out through the windows, I saw nothing but the other mountains and sky – an overwhelming experience.

The impossible made possible – such was constantly accomplished. If the dreams were grandiose, the actual achievements were more so: the achievements of men who could make the impossible seem commonplace.

The German genius was for organization. In that area it had no peer. Add to this the fact that their well of slave labor was bottomless, and what one had was the dream as a reality. Who built the mighty pyramids? The thousands of

Egyptian slaves. The Third Reich had the genius and seven and a half million slaves, and given the combination of these two, all things became possible.

Seven and a half million slaves. Slaves who worked an endless day. Slaves who hacked out the mountains and dug tunnels through the earth and moved rocks and equipment and stores, and never complained. Such were my resources. I could have made Egypt envious. And given that, plus my own grandiose ambitions, there was little I couldn't do.

I was very close to Himmler. He unveiled his great dream. It was a dream of Atlantis reborn from the ashes of war. No Jews or subhumans. A blond SS would rule. In a society of masters and slaves there would be no dissension. Magnificent cities of steel and glass. The pure Aryan predominant. Himmler told me of his dream of a wilderness populated by supermen.

'How do you build Atlantis? You need masters and slaves. The masters will be the elite of my Death's Head SS; the slaves will be the Poles and the Czechs and all the other low races. And how do we do it? It is easy, mein freund. We keep building the camps, we ship the Jews there by their thousands, and when the wires of the camps begin to bulge we build more crematoria. Gas the schweine and burn them; let them turn to smoke and ash. When the camps have been cleared of the Jews we bring in the subhumans. The subhumans are the workers. They exist as mere slaves. They live just to work and that work is for the glory of the Reich – the slaves will build the new temples.'

The new temples would be the factories, the universities and laboratories; the new religion would be knowledge and conquest, the return of the Superman. How grandiose the dream! How impressive the rehearsal! Himmler wanted cities under the earth and he set out to create them. He drove me all around Germany. He showed me what could be achieved. I saw the great underground factories and I learned what was possible.

I remember Nordhausen. It had been hacked out of the Kohnstein Mountain.

Thirteen thousand slaves from Buchenwald had done it with muscle and sweat. It was empty when I first saw it. The V-2 complex was still to come. It had tunnels eighteen hundred meters long, and nearly fifty side chambers. I gazed about me in wonder. Himmler scratched his nose and smiled. The work area was one hundred and twenty-five thousand meters square, buried deep in the mountain. Himmler showed me around. His voice echoed in the silence. There were twelve ventilation shafts, huge generators supplied the light, and special heating ensured a constant temperature, day in and day out.

'Here thousands will work. The slaves will live in a separate camp. That camp, which now exists, is hidden deep in a mountain valley, less than a kilometer from the entrance to one of the tunnels. It has every facility. Lots of barracks, a brothel. It has a sports ground and a hospital, a kitchen and a laundry, a psychological and vocational selection unit, a crematorium and prison. There is also the town of Bleicherode. It's twenty kilometers from here. There, the new tunnels, sixteen kilometers deep, will house several more missile factories and living quarters for thousands. What else are mountains for? How else do we use the slaves? The new temples will be underground cities that are virtually impregnable.'

I still remember his every word. His voice echoed in that vast silence. I knew that the whole area, from the Harz Mountains to Thuringia, south of Prague and across to Mahren, was littered with similar tunnels and underground factories. Only a few were known to Hitler. Himmler controlled them all. They were cloaked in the strictest secrecy and ruled by the SS. The work went on night and day. All slackers were shot or hung. The underground factories were totally insular colonies, worked by masters and slaves, unrestricted by moral laws, and yet very few Germans knew about them or would ever set eyes on them.

Thus were my problems solved. I saw what could be achieved. Standing there beside Himmler, in that enormous, silent cave, I thought of all the thousands

who would work there, and knew where my future lay. Himmler dreamed of ice and fire. He dreamed of cities beneath the earth. He saw the sun flashing off the frozen peaks that showed only emptiness. I would take what Himmler offered. I would hide in glass and stone. I turned around and stared at Himmler's modest eyes and saw his madness as sanity.

'The New Order needs its masters and they have to be Aryan: blonde-haired and blue-eyed and strong – and absolutely obedient. Such are found in the Jungvolk – the boys of ten to fourteen – and they are formed in the Hitler Youth, given the Blood and Honor dagger, retrained to worship the Führer and the Nation, and then join my SS. Once there, they are mine. I do with them what I will. They no longer belong to Hitler, but to me – and they worship me slavishly.'

Himmler dreamed it and did it: he gave birth to his acolytes. The mild chicken farmer blinked his modest eyes and saw a world of godmen. The SS was Himmler's church, his bed and his altar; it was an Order run on Jesuit principles and disciplined with an iron fist. All its members were racially pure. They were bound together by sacred oaths. They were stripped of their history, given numbers instead of names, indoctrinated with the myths of the Volk and emerged as disciples. No questions would be asked. No order would be ignored. Their blind obedience would let them wade through hell without shame or revulsion.

I believed in this approach. Without discipline there is dissension. Himmler's ultimate aims struck me as religious, but his methods were sound. We cannot progress with freedom. Free men are a curse. Such men resist change because it leaves them exposed as superfluous. Himmler understood that much. He feared individuals. He felt that individuals were a threat to his grand masterplan. And what was his plan? He wanted gods, not normal men. He believed in obedience, in controlled breeding and vivisection; believed in biological mutation and its product, the Superman. Such a dream is not uncommon. Modern science still pursues it. Out there, in the world beyond

the ice, primitive surgeons hack bone for it. As for myself, I accepted it: men were meat to be used. I believed in biological mutation and used all that was offered.

'The New Order will be purified. The subhumans will be slaves. All dissenters will be stripped of their resistance until they, too, obey. Failing that, they will be removed by gas, gun or noose – and even then, we will ensure that they contribute to the good of the Order. Gouge the gold from their teeth. Use their skin for lampshades. We will turn their bones to ashes and dust in the great crematoria. It is necessary to do so. We must affirm that we are serious. We must let them know that discipline is all, and that their ash can be useful. The New Order will be strict. Its one goal will be progress. It will be dedicated to experiment and research, to the advancement of knowledge. Most laboratories have limitations; this won't be so in the New Order. The subhumans, who are useful as slaves, will also serve us as specimens.'

Not all aeronautics. That went on at Kummersdorft West. In the hangars of Kummersdorft West my other dream took wing. I worked with Schriever and Belluzzo. Perhaps Miethe and Habermohl. I remember the names, not the faces, and I feel no affection. Nonetheless, I worked with them. My restless genius drove me. The vicissitudes of the war did not touch me as my project expanded. How many nights did I go sleepless? I think back on that with pride. I was in my early sixties at the time, but I drove them relentlessly. The first disk took shape slowly. There were many set-backs. I traveled north and south, east and west, stealing men and ideas. Factories hidden in the Schwarzwald. The R-Laboratory in Volkenrode. Heated discussions about electrostatic fields and gyroscopic controls. The emerging disk filled the hangar. Schriever's eyes were filled with greed. The four legs that housed the gas turbine rotors reflected the bright lights. Schriever studied the disk with wonder. This recollection makes me smile. What Schriever gazed upon with such greed and admiration was a primitive toy. The real achievements were in my files. What Schriever saw was nothing. In the hangar in Kummersdorft

West I was building a useless thing.

The deceit was necessary. That was no one I could trust. The Third Reich was filled with frightened, ambitious men who yearned to make an impression. I did not trust Rudolph Schriever. I saw the death in Himmler's eyes. I remembered my past, the busy hangars in Iowa, all the businessmen and cowardly politicians who had smothered my life's work. The same thing could happen again. The war would not last forever. Already, in 1941, I saw the Reich's trickling wounds. Just how long would Himmler last? And how long could he keep his secret? I wanted to utilize his masterplan, but what guarantees had I? The Nazis devoured their own kind. They might well devour Himmler. Either that, or the Reichführer would turn on me, destroying all I had gained. Heinrich Himmler: the Reichführer. His mild eyes did not deceive me. His neat fingernails were polished with blood and his smile hid hysteria. No, I didn't trust him. There was no one I could trust. And so I gave him just a little, a prototype that would not work. I kept explaining that I needed more time and that the problems were numerous.

A delicate maneuver. A great cunning was required. The disk had to fool the other engineers while still lacking in something. I used obsolete technologies. I gave the engineers their head. Gas turbines and liquid-fuel rockets were the fruits of their labors. Such toys kept them happy. Schriever's eyes shone with triumph. Young and lean, he showed his drawings to Himmler while I went my own way. Their flying disk had been surpassed. The real achievement was in my files. I gave a little and took a great deal and listened always to Himmler.

'We have our underground factories. We have our chosen location. We have our masters, the SS, and our slaves and your own crystal genius. But that isn't enough. We need more than normal men. What we need is a biological mutation that will lead to true greatness. We must learn to control the workers. Not with whips and not with guns. What we need is automatic control of their bodies and minds. The human brain must be examined. The

body's secrets must be explored. We must try to steal their will and their strength and leave them just what they need. The democracies cannot do this. Regressive morals would forbid it. But here, at the dawn of the new era, there is nothing to hinder us. We must use the Ahnenerbe. We must use the Lebensborn. We must study racial characteristics and breed only the purest. This will solve the first problem. In this way we will find the Superman. Nevertheless, that leaves the problem of the workers, and we must solve that also. Control of mind and body. We must find a whole new method. I think of medical and psychological experiments of the most extreme kind. The camps are yours to command. The schweine there are useless meat. The New Order needs a wealth of mindless muscle and your genius must find it.'

The concentration camps were the laboratories. The prisoners were the guinea pigs. The whole mystery of human life was explored as it writhed on the tables… What are the limits of human pain? How long before the lungs collapse? Will scorched flesh, if left unattended, renew itself or turn gangrenous? Inject this woman with jaundice. Inject that child with typhoid. Shoot this creature with poison bullets, graft a bone, transfer a limb, remove testicles and ovaries and intestines, but don't use anesthetics. Was it the surgery that led to death? Was it death through shock or pain? Put that frozen man between those two whores and then check his responses. More work. (It rarely stopped.) The Ahnenerbe needs human heads. The Institute for Research into Heredity needs anthropological measurements. Take these filthy Jews and Poles. Strip them naked and measure them. If suitable, put them into the gas chambers and then chop off their heads. Ship the heads off in canisters. Use extreme care when packing. Peel the skin from the bones of the corpse, dissolve the bones, use the healthy flesh. This strip decomposed already. A good piece of material there. These tattoos would make a nice lampshade in Frau Koch's bedroom… But such was Nazi frivolity. My true research never stopped. The concentration camps, with their abatoirs and crematoria, were extraordinary laboratories.

'Do you understand at last? The New Order is very real. It will be broken

into colonies, each separate, each with its work, all divided into masters and slaves, existing just for the future. What's a colony in our wilderness? It's just another Nordhausen. You ship the subhumans in to build your underground complex, you control them with your dogs and the Death's Head SS, and then you move in your scientists and technicians and administrators, and you bind them all together with fear of the all-seeing masters. And once there, where can they go? There is no way in or out. They will live underground, seduced by power, cowed by fear, the masters bound by their oaths, by their religious convictions, the subhumans by torture and death and the lack of all exits. Yes, American, it is possible. We are halfway there already. You must work, you must complete your great disk, before we settle the matter.'

So I listened to Himmler. So his droning words encouraged me. Not for long did I think he would survive, but his ideas were valuable. I used him and his facilities. We filled the trains with nameless thousands. The slaves were shipped to the harbor of Keil and then they just disappeared.

Yet I had to be careful. I could not hold back too much. Himmler pressed me for a test flight of the disk, and I had to oblige. It was 1941. I believe it was June. The steel doors of the hangars were pulled open and the sunlight poured in. This much I remember. The disk reflected the sunlight. Schriever climbed into the dome-shaped pilot's cabin, his eyes afire with excitement. The engineers retreated. They all shielded their eyes. Himmler joined me behind the sandbags, his spectacles perched high on his nose. The disk looked like a metallic mushroom. It also resembled a giant spider. Its four legs housed the gas turbine rotors and ran down obliquely. Himmler rubbed at his nose. Sunlight flashed off his spectacles. There was a roar as the hollow legs spewed fire and filled the air with dense smoke. Yellow flames spat from the tarmac. The roar changed into a numbing sibilance as the disk left the ground. Himmler covered his ears. His body seemed to be shrinking. The disk shuddered and shrieked, lifted gently off the ground, hovered briefly and swayed from side to side and was obscured by the swirling smoke.

Himmler turned and stared at me. His mild eyes were like the sun. The disk roared and hovered just above the ground as Himmler reached for my hand.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Richard licked his forefinger and ran it around the rim of his glass. The cigaret smoke curled about him, stinging his bleary, bloodshot eyes, and the noise in the crowded, lunchtime pub was too much for his ears. He kept his gaze fixed on the glass, on the ice cubes in the Coke, but glanced occasionally, with a twisted, bitter smile, at Jenny's unfinished lager.

'Just one drink,' he said.

'No,' Jenny said.

'Just let me have half a pint of bitter. It won't affect me a bit.'

Jenny sighed and shook her head, her brown eyes devoid of humor, tugging distractedly at a lock of her curly hair and gently biting her lower lip.

'No,' she repeated. 'You're not supposed to drink anything. And once you start, you won't know how to stop – you never do anymore.'

'A half pint,' Richard said.

'No. Go to hell.'

'Just give me a sip of yours, for Christ's sake.'

'Drink your Coke and shut up.'

Richard rolled his eyes despairingly, picked his glass up and noticed that it

was shaking, held it to his lips with great care, had a sip, put it down again.

‘You’re still shaking,’ Jenny said.

‘What do you expect?’ Richard replied. ‘I haven’t had a drink for five days. I’m going out of my skull.’

‘You’re already out of your skull. You’ve been that way for a year now. I couldn’t take another year like that, so just keep your mouth shut.’

Richard didn’t reply to that. There was little he could say. He had drowned the past year in a sea of booze, trying to kill off the nightmares. Now he glanced around the pub, the cigaret smoke stinging his eyes, taking in the pinstripe suits, the black shoes and umbrellas, the pretty secretaries with their hair trailing loosely down their spines, their cheeks flushed with gin or Campari, their breasts thrusting invitingly. They all seemed remote to him, superfluous, unreal, their beauty and vigor redundant, diffused behind frosted glass. Then he looked at Jenny: brown eyes in a moon-shaped face. She was wearing her shabby parka and faded blue denims, her white blouse unbuttoned just above her breasts, her skin creamy and smooth. She seemed slightly more real, a bit closer, part of him, and the fact that she was still trying to help him filled him with shame.

‘A hypnotist!’ he exclaimed. ‘Jesus Christ! I can’t believe I let you persuade me.’

‘He isn’t a crackpot,’ Jenny said. ‘He’s a psychiatrist and neurologist, a Harley Street specialist, and since he can’t possibly make you feel worse than you are, you’ve nothing to lose.’

‘A psychiatrist?’

‘Don’t look mortified.’

‘You actually think I need a psychiatrist? You think I’ve gone crazy?’

‘So what would *you* call it?’

‘I’m not crazy,’ Richard said.

‘All right,’ Jenny said, ‘you’re not crazy… but you’re not healthy either.’

‘Ah,’ Richard said, touching his temple with a finger and turning the finger around like a screwdriver. ‘I’m sick in the head.’

‘Very funny.’

‘Yes, *very*.’

‘Listen, Richard, you’re not going to see a witch doctor. He won’t beat on his jungle drums.’ Jenny reached into her shoulder-bag, withdrew a packet of cigarets, used her lighter with a jittery, angry movement and threw it back in her bag. ‘What’s bugging you?’ she said. ‘The man’s just a fucking doctor. This is 1975, for God’s sake: it’s routine these days.’

Richard flushed and looked away and studied the glasses above the bar, hurt and embarrassed by her statement, but accepting the truth in it. The past year had been a horror, a gradual sinking into madness, the days viewed through the prism of booze, the nights strung out on nightmares. The police interview hadn’t helped, had in fact made it worse, their disbelief filling him with shame and deepening confusion. Now the wheel had turned full circle. He was himself loath to accept it. More and more he was resisting the idea that the incident had actually occurred.

‘Listen to me,’ Jenny said. ‘I don’t really think you’re crazy. I just happen to believe you’re mentally ill and you have to be cured. You used to drink like a normal person. I mean, you had the odd wild night. But you never *needed* to drink like you need to these days – and you need it too much. You just can’t go on like this. It won’t do you any good. You’ve already given up art school, you’re living off unemployment benefits, and you haven’t seen your family or friends in close to a year. What kind of life’s that? You’re only nineteen,

for God’s sake! You’ve been seeing your normal doctor for mysterious rashes and headaches, and you’re washing the pills down with red wine… You’ve got to sort yourself out, pal.’

Richard sipped his iced Coke, ran his fingers around the glass, looked up and shrugged his shoulders in defeat, his smile tight and pained.

‘I suppose you’re right,’ he said.

‘No bloody question about it.’

‘I haven’t seen too much of you either.’

‘Don’t blame that on me.’

Richard glanced around the pub and saw the beer glinting golden, the flushed faces of the men and women lined along the bar counter. Their conversation was noisy, a meaningless lunchtime repartee, and he felt a sudden sweeping isolation, as if no longer part of them. Had the incident occurred at all? Had he imagined the whole damned thing? The instant he considered this, he felt a fear that made his heart start pounding. Returning his gaze to Jenny, he saw her stubbing her cigaret out. She smiled when she glanced at him, her brown eyes as large as spoons, and again he felt that secret, gnawing shame that had now become part of him.

‘I’m getting better,’ he lied.

‘Don’t talk shit,’ Jenny said.

‘No, really,’ he insisted, ‘I’m getting better. I don’t think I need this.’

‘Richard, he’s only a *psychiatrist*.’

‘I don’t care. I feel stupid.’

‘Damn it, he often deals with *crazy* people… You’ll probably seem halfway

normal.’

‘It’s all bullshit,’ Richard said.

‘What’s bullshit?’

‘Hypnotism.’

‘You ever tried it?’

‘No. Of course not.’

‘Then what the hell do you know?’

Richard shrugged and glanced around him, seeing the upper-class brigade, the men with pinstripe suits and umbrellas, the women like fashion models. What was he doing here? He didn’t want to be here. He felt a slowly uncoiling desperation that threatened to choke him.

‘What good will it do me?’

‘You won’t know until you try.’

Jenny pushed her chair back and stood up with a determined movement, brushing her auburn hair from her forehead and avoiding his gaze. Richard sighed and raised his hands, an indecisive, weak gesture, but Jenny, ignoring him, turned away and walked out of the pub. Cursing quietly, he followed her out and found her standing on the pavement, exhaling cigaret smoke, her lips pouting attractively, her parka falling below her thighs, around the faded blue denims. She flounced off along the street, shaking her head in an angry gesture, turning the corner at Baker Street station as if no longer caring. Cursing softly again, Richard hurried after her, pushing his way through the crowds. He caught up with her as she passed the Planetarium and Madame Tussaud’s.

‘Okay!’ he said, spreading his hands in a gesture of surrender. ‘I apologize. *Okay*?’

‘Don’t bother,’ she responded. ‘I don’t want your fucking apology. I just want you to visit that psychiatrist. That’s all I ask.’

‘Okay, Jenny, you win.’

She stopped at York Gardens, the wind blowing her hair, her face pale and her lips a tight line, the brown eyes large and luminous. ‘Okay,’ she said. ‘Fine.’

They crossed Marylebone Road, passing a wall of stalled traffic, then walked silently along the opposite pavement, neither touching the other. Richard stayed a little behind, feeling nervous and confused, taking note of the gray streets, the stately rows of Georgian buildings, his throat dry and crying out for a drink, for the soothing oblivion. He needed that oblivion. He didn’t want to go back. What had happened was in the past and should remain there, buried deep and forgotten. He didn’t want to relive it, didn’t think he could stand it, and yet walking behind Jenny, following her into Harley Street, he knew that she was right, that he had to face up to the problem; that he had to tear the veil from the mystery that kept him in chains.

‘This is it,’ Jenny said.

She had stopped at a tall, flat-fronted Georgian house with a black door and polished brass handle. Richard stared at the door, at the names on the brass plate, and a tremor of dread rippled through him and congealed in his throat.

‘Oh, well,’ he said.

‘Are you going in?’ Jenny asked.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I guess I’m going in. Jesus Christ, I feel dumb.’

Jenny pressed the bell, her face closer to a speaker built into the wall, and a voice, distorted and indistinct, lazily drawled the word ‘Yes?’ Jenny gave Richard’s name, the tinny voice said, ‘Come up,’ then the door made an irritating buzzing sound that signified they could open it. Richard pushed the door open, letting Jenny pass through first, then he stepped in and closed the door behind him and the buzzing noise ceased.

‘The third floor,’ Jenny said.

They stood together in the hallway, its walls paneled in varnished wood, a thick dark-gray carpet on the floor, a potted plant near the front door. Richard stared at the elevator, at its polished metal door, and experienced a fleeting claustrophobia that made him shake slightly. He glanced uneasily at Jenny, at the high, ornate ceiling, at the stairs that curved behind the elevator and climbed past faded paintings. The fear crept steadily over him, devoured him, made him numb, and he felt himself dissolving where he stood, drifting free from his body. He didn’t want to go up there, didn’t want to relive the incident; he wanted to turn around and walk out, but it was too late for that.

‘We’ll use the stairs,’ Jenny said.

Richard just nodded, a dumb gesture of agreement, seeing her brown eyes through a film of panic, her head turning away from him. Then he followed her up the stairs, moving slowly, reluctantly, his eyes fixed on her blue-denimed legs, the high heels of her boots, the wrinkles where the parka curved out around her broad, swaying hips. It was coming back to him already, the white haze, the silhouettes, the woman with red hair and green eyes – the whole nightmarish catalogue. Richard started shaking, felt anxious and confused, his heart pounding dramatically, glancing down to see his booted feet on the carpet, sinking into deep pile. Then they reached the third floor, a gleaming elevator gate, a forbidding silence surrounding them. Jenny stopped at a door, raised her hand, let it dangle there for a moment, then she turned back and took a step toward him and gently embraced him.

It was a sad, instinctive gesture, an expression of love and doubt, a silent affirmation of her loyalty and commitment to him. Taken aback, Richard stood there, his hands at his sides, feeling the warmth of her body, her reality, and wondering what he could do with it. Then he slid his arms around her, felt her shoulder blades, her spine; he spread his fingers and pressed her closer to him and laid his cheek on her head.

‘It’s all right,’ he whispered.

She clung to him for another moment, her fingers scratching his back, her thighs and firm breasts molded to him before moving away. Then she glanced at him, her smile hesitant, eyes shadowed, and nodded and disappeared down the stairs, leaving scent in the air.

Richard stood there for some time, deeply moved, reawakened, closing his eyes and covering his face with his hands and taking deep, painful breaths. Then he put his head back, studied the ceilings ornate moldings, shrugged and knocked lightly on the door and heard a voice bid him enter.

He stepped inside, closed the door quietly behind him, saw walls of lime-green, a glass table, comfortable armchairs, a middle-aged woman behind the desk, looking up, smiling pleasantly.

‘Mr Watson?’

‘That’s right.’

‘You’re a punctual patient,’ the woman said. ‘Dr Campbell’s expecting you.’

She pressed a button on the desk, her hand milky-white and elegant, and announced Richard’s presence to Dr Campbell, speaking softly, precisely. Richard glanced around the office, not listening, not really present, still aware of Jenny’s warmth in his clothes, touched again with emotion. Then the woman stood up, a white blouse, a neat gray skirt, and opened the door to another office and motioned him in. Richard coughed into his fist, trying to

orientate himself, then he brushed past the woman, smiling at her, avoiding her gaze, and heard the door closing behind him with a sharp, clicking sound.

‘Ah! Mr Watson!’

‘Yes,’ Richard said.

‘Do you mind if I call you Richard?’

‘No.’

‘Good.’

Dr Campbell wore a gray-striped suit, a white shirt and a vividly colored yellow tie. His hands were spread out on his desk, cuff links glittering, what looked like a wedding ring on one finger. His hair was dark and fashionably long, tumbling carelessly on his forehead, lines of humor around bright blue eyes, his teeth possibly capped. He was in his late thirties, suntanned and clearly healthy, a handkerchief protruding from the pocket of his jacket, pressed and neatly folded.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘Sit down.’

Richard did as he was told, taking the chair in front of the desk, crossing his legs and then uncrossing them again and resting his hands in his lap. He glanced distractedly around the office, saw the same lime-green walls, some reproductions of Turner, a few framed diplomas, the doctor framed by a window.

‘Have you ever been to a psychiatrist before?’

‘No,’ Richard said.

‘Have you ever been *hypnotized* before?’

‘No,’ Richard said.

‘And does the thought of it bother you?’

‘Yes,’ Richard confessed.

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. It just seems stupid. I don’t think it will work.’

‘You don’t believe you can be hypnotized?’

‘No,’ Richard said.

‘Why not?’

‘I just don’t believe it,’ Richard said. ‘I don’t think I’m the type.’

Dr Campbell smiled. ‘You just don’t believe it,’ he repeated. ‘You don’t think you’re the type. Is that why you think you can’t be hypnotized?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, we’ll see.’

Campbell looked down at his desk, at a gray manila folder, opened the folder and pulled out some papers and thoughtfully studied them. Richard just sat there, feeling nervous and slightly vague, trying to seem a lot more casual than he was, wanting to get up and run.

‘An interesting case,’ Campbell said, glancing up from the papers. ‘You’ve clearly had a pretty bad year. How do you feel now?’

‘Okay,’ Richard said.

‘Are you nervous?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, that’s normal. It means you’re still human.’ Campbell smiled at Richard, raised his hand and studied his ring, glanced down at the papers again and then looked back up. ‘It says here you’ve been drinking a lot.’

‘Yes,’ Richard said.

‘And you still have to drink?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And the nightmares?’

‘What about them?’

‘According to these notes, all your nightmares are exactly the same.’

‘So?’

‘So you’re not just dreaming… You’re repeatedly reliving the same incident.’

‘You mean, *you* think the incident was real?’

‘Not necessarily,’ Campbell said. ‘It *could* be a case of auto-suggestion, brought on by great stress.’

‘You think I’m crazy, is that it?’

‘Not remotely. I’m just saying that whatever happened during your period of amnesia could have led to this particularly vivid hallucination.’

‘Okay, I’ll accept that. That’s fine. Now how do you cure me?’

‘You really accept that statement?’

‘Yeah. Sure.’

‘Rubbish. Of course you don’t. You’re just saying that because you want to get out of here and go for a drink.’

Richard shrugged and spread his hands in surrender. ‘Okay, Doc, have it your way. Just tell me what you want me to say and I’ll gladly oblige.’

‘I just want you to say what you believe.’

‘I don’t believe anything. I *don’t know* what to believe. The whole business happened a year ago, and that’s a very long time. I told the cops about it. They laughed me out of their office. When I tried to tell anyone else, they just assumed I was crazy – and I think they were right. It couldn’t have happened. Things like that just don’t happen. So I really think you’re right – that I had some kind of blackout, and that during that time I hallucinated and then thought it was real. I don’t *care* what it was. I just want to forget it. I want to get rid of those nightmares and sleep soundly again.’

‘I didn’t say it was hallucination. I said it *might* be.’

‘I hallucinated. Believe me, that’s what happened. Now how will you cure me?’

‘You said you feel okay now.’

‘I was lying. I feel rotten.’

‘You mean physically?’

‘I mean mentally… I mean, I have trouble sleeping, I have the nightmares when I *do* sleep, and I keep breaking out in rashes and get very bad

headaches. And I think it's all part of the same thing.'

'Yes,' Campbell said. 'I have your medical records here. You never had such ailments before the alleged incident… and they *are* quite peculiar.'

'Peculiar? What do you mean by that?'

'They're not caused by anything physical. The rashes and the headaches are psychosomatic: brought on psychologically.'

'That's ridiculous,' Richard said.

'No, Richard, it's not ridiculous. People can *will* rashes and headaches… and fevers and ulcers and heartburn and stomach upsets and skin diseases… in fact, just about anything.'

'I'm not a hypochondriac.'

'I wasn't suggesting that at all.'

'That's what it sounded like to me.'

'No. Not hypochondria.' Campbell sat back in his chair, placed his hands behind his head, put his feet up on his desk and smiled pleasantly. 'Let me tell you about the human brain,' he said. 'The first thing to note is that the human brain, while undoubtedly being a remarkable instrument, is rarely used at even a *tenth* of its full potential. Now, most of our bodily functions are actually controlled by the brain – the brain tells us what to do, when to do it and how to do it – so what we see, hear, smell and feel are merely the colors, sounds, smells and sensations that the brain has *selected* as being most necessary. This selection isn't arbitrary – the brain selects what it assumes we need – but there are other sensations which, though being actual, are beyond the limited range of our immediate senses. However, by awakening certain dormant areas of the brain, either electrically, by the use of drugs, or through hypnotic suggestion, the scope of both our senses and our capabilities can be

dramatically expanded.'

'I can't see what this has to do with me.'

'Well, I'll tell you. Would you agree that drugs or electrical stimulation of the brain can change human behaviour?'

'Yes.'

'Fine. Now did you know that these methods of affecting the brain can also induce pain and similar experiences?'

'Yes. I've read about it.'

'Okay. Well, regarding hypnotherapy we can apply the same principles, the only difference being that the sensations are induced – or recalled – by a process of suggestion, rather than by physical means. In other words, just as through hypnotism a patient can be directed to go to sleep or awaken, feel a nonexistent pain or ignore applied pain, turn as rigid as a plank or relive long forgotten experiences, and generally do things that he would not normally contemplate – so, too, can the average human being actually *will* himself into pain, depression or serious illness, not believing for the slightest moment that he's doing it, convinced that it's physical.'

'I don't believe that,' Richard said.

'Don't you?' Campbell said. 'Do you know that a perfectly normal person, if told under a hypnotic trance that he has just been scalded, will actually come out in blisters? Do you know, further, that this same person, still in the hypnotic trance, can be burned or pierced with needles, experience no pain at all, and not be marked by the burning or piercing when snapped out of the trance state?'

'No, I don't believe that either.'

‘Believe me, Richard, if I hypnotized you and told you that you were a wooden plank, you would turn as staff as a plank, could be stretched out across two supports, and wouldn’t budge if a couple of people used your groin as a springboard… You would simply *become* a plank.’

‘Bullshit,’ Richard said.

‘No, lad, not bullshit. These are the realities of autosuggestion, tested and verified. So when I tell you that your ailments might be psychosomatic, self-induced, I’m not suggesting for a moment that you’re a hypochondriac… I’m merely saying that the ailments are a symptom of a deeper disturbance.’

Richard crossed his legs, uncrossed them, scratched his knee, then distractedly looked down at the floor and looked up again.

‘So,’ he said, ‘what are you going to do about it?’

‘I’m going to try to take you back to when you suffered the amnesia, find out what really happened during that lost three days, record what you tell me when you’re in the trance state, and then play the recording back to you.’

‘I don’t want to know,’ Richard said.

‘You have to know,’ Campbell said.

‘I don’t give a fuck,’ Richard said. ‘I don’t want to know.’

He was shocked by his own vehemence, sitting upright in the chair, flushing, his heart pounding dramatically, his throat abruptly constricting. Campbell looked thoughtfully at him, not showing surprise, then placed his feet back on the floor and propped his chin in his hands.

‘What frightens you?’ he asked.

‘I just don’t want to do it.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m not dumb enough to be hypnotized. I don’t believe in it. It won’t work.’

Campbell smiled patiently. ‘Well, now,’ he said, ‘I think you’re antagonistic because you feel that being hypnotized is degrading. Let me therefore assure you, Richard, that any intelligent adult and most children over the age of seven can be hypnotized, that only the mentally retarded and the psychotic can *resist* being hypnotized, and that hypnotizability is in no way a sign of weak will. Indeed, the more intelligent and imaginative the individual, the better a subject he’ll be. You therefore needn’t feel ashamed. There’s nothing *wrong* in being hypnotized. Just think of it as another branch of medicine - and try to accept it.’

Richard crossed his legs, uncrossed them, scratched his knee, licked his lips, glanced distractedly around the office and then studied the floor. He thought of the past year, of the nightmares and the drinking, of the loss of his friends, of Jenny’s rage, of his own failing health. He couldn’t live like that much longer; it just didn’t make sense. He wanted to kill it off or be cured, but the fear held him back. He looked up at Dr Campbell, tried to speak but failed, so finally stood up and scratched his left ear and then shrugged in defeat.

‘What do I do?’ he asked.

Campbell smiled and stood up. ‘Excellent,’ he said. ‘I just want to try a few of your reactions and see if you’re suitable.’ He came around the desk to stand directly in front of Richard, gazed into his eyes, then stepped away and said, ‘Look at your wristwatch.’ Richard did as he was told. The time was four thirty. ‘Keep your hands by your sides,’ Campbell said, ‘and just relax, just hang loose.’ Richard did as he was told. He thought that Campbell was pretty foolish. Feeling sorry for Campbell, he decided to humor him to save him embarrassment. Campbell kept talking. He kept telling Richard to relax. He said, ‘Clasp your hands together,’ and Richard did so, wanting to humor him. Campbell kept on talking. He told Richard to relax more. He said, ‘Your

hands are clasped together and you won't be able to open them, no matter how hard you try.' Richard didn't bother trying. He wanted to humor Campbell. Campbell told him he could pull his hands apart, so Richard pulled them apart. Campbell told him to raise his right arm. Richard did as he was told. Campbell pinched his right arm and Richard didn't feel a thing because he didn't want Campbell to be embarrassed. Campbell told him to lie down. Richard lay down on the couch. Campbell told him to relax and Richard lay there and felt slightly amused. Campbell told him to close his eyes. Richard grinned and closed his eyes. Campbell told him to open his eyes again and look at his wristwatch. Richard opened his eyes. He raised his hand and studied his wristwatch. He blinked and then looked at his wristwatch once more. The time was four thirty. A whole hour had passed. Richard shook his head in disbelief and sat up on the couch, feeling vague but refreshed.

'How do you feel?' Campbell asked.

'Fine,' Richard said.

'How long do you think you've been asleep?'

'I haven't been sleeping.'

Richard looked again at his wristwatch . It was definitely four thirty. He shrugged and grinned foolishly, stood up and stretched himself, then went behind Campbell's desk and sat down and scribbled his name on a notepad.

'Why did you do that?' Campbell asked.

'I don't know,' Richard said. He stood up and walked back around the desk and stopped in front of Campbell. 'Did you tell me to do it?'

'Yes,' Campbell said. 'You've been asleep for an hour. You were obedient and you talked an awful lot and it's all down on tape.'

'Can I hear it?'

‘No.’

‘Why not? You said I could hear it.’

‘That’s before *I* heard it,’ Campbell said. ‘You’re not ready yet.’ He went to his desk, switched the tape recorder off, then sat down and scribbled something on the notepad and then looked up at Richard. ‘I want you to go home now,’ he said. ‘You should go to bed early. With a bit of luck, you won’t have any nightmares and you’ll get a good sleep. I want you to come back here next week. My secretary will give you an appointment. When you return, I’ll say something that will put you to sleep immediately, and the experience will be as painless as it was today. I’m taking you back gradually. I can’t do it too quickly. This means you’ll be coming back on a regular basis, for quite a few months. I don’t think this will bother you. In fact, you’ll probably want to come. At the end of the sessions, when all the pieces are together, you can hear what happened during those missing days. Okay? See you next week.’

Campbell pointed to the door and Richard left. The secretary gave him another appointment. He took the elevator down and stepped out into the street and headed straight for Baker Street station, melting into the jostling crowds. The journey home was uneventful. He changed trains at King’s Cross. The train was packed and the light stung his eyes and he felt very calm. He got out at Finsbury Park, feeling bright and exhilarated. There were drunkards in the long, tunneled exits that led up to the buses. Richard boarded the W7, bought his ticket and sat down, looked outside and saw darkness descending, the street lights flickering on. The bus took him to Crouch Hill. He stepped out and felt the cold. He walked along the dusty pavement, turned into a driveway, passed the parked cars and entered the apartment block, feeling strangely light-headed. He opened the front door and closed it quietly behind him, then he went along the corridor and stopped when he came to the bedroom. Jenny was stretched out on the bed, fully dressed, her eyes open. Richard approached the bed and stopped there, saying nothing, just smiling.

Jenny reached up for his hand. Their fingers locked and she pulled him down. Their tears mingled as they undressed one another and melted together. Richard poured himself into her. His remaining fear was drained away. He was surrounded by her arms, by the cradle of her thighs, and there, on that bed of flesh and bone, he slept the sleep of a child.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

James S. Campbell, BA, MA, MD

c/o Society of Medical Hypnotists

4, Victoria Terrace

Kingsway, Hove

Sussex, England

February 14, 1976

Dr Frederick Epstein

Aerial Phenomena Investigations Institute

Massachusetts Avenue

Washington, DC

USA

Dear Frederick,

Further to our telephone conversation of this morning, I am enclosing a transcript of the most recent taped hypnotic session with young Richard Watson. I am doing this with his permission.

I should remind you again that there have been a total of eighteen hypnotic sessions over a period of approximately six months, that the editing of the transcripts has been undertaken as a means of eliminating repetitions and verbal ambiguities, and that the complete tapes of all sessions can be heard in my Harley Street office upon your arrival in London. In the meantime, here is the background you requested.

Richard Watson first presented himself at my office on 9 September, 1975, at the recommendation of a professional colleague (the father of the young man's girlfriend) and with the approval of his personal physician. The patient had been suffering from persistent nightmares, insomnia and acute anxiety, all originating in a three-day period of amnesia which apparently began on the evening of 7 March, 1974, when the young man, and an unknown lady who was driving him at the time, experienced what he believed was a close encounter with extraterrestrials. The alleged incident took place on the A30 on Bodmin Moor in Cornwall.

According to the young man's original story to both his doctor and the Tottenham Court Road police (the medical records and a photocopy of the police interview are enclosed), the incident began when the car, being driven by its female owner, cut out and rolled to a standstill in a desolate area between Bodmin and Bolventor. Almost immediately, a strange aircraft described by the patient as 'enormous' descended vertically and released two three-feet diameter flying disks. These disks circled the car, appeared to be examining it by remote control, then shot 'beams of light' into it, allegedly stunning the woman, and then flew away to re-enter the 'mother' ship.

Shortly after this (mere minutes) two larger flying disks emerged from the mother ship and also circled the car. According to the patient, these disks were piloted by strange creatures, they also shone beams of light into the car, and those beams of light appeared to *pull* on the car and draw it toward the mother ship. At this point the mother ship descended, vertically, almost to ground level, appeared to split along the bottom, and then the car, by

mysterious means, was drawn up into it.

The period of amnesia appears to have begun at this moment, ending three days later when the patient awakened and found himself on a hill in *Dartmoor* – approximately thirty miles from the scene of the alleged incident. Neither the woman nor her car were to be seen.

According to the medical report, the patient could remember nothing of his 'missing' three days, but was suffering numerous nightmares, all of which were obviously related to the period immediately prior to the beginning of the amnesia. As a consequence of the amnesia, or of the alleged incident itself, the patient became alcoholic, suffered either insomnia or nightmares, developed severe headaches and skin inflammations (usually around the face and neck) and also succumbed to acute depression and anxiety.

Regarding this, it is to be noted that the young man's physician described him as being, prior to the incident, highly intelligent, emotionally stable, and imaginative.

The patient was, at the time of the incident, a student at the Hornsey College of Art in North London, where he was studying to be a graphic designer, but he dropped out shortly after the incident and is now living off what you Americans call 'Welfare.'

According to the police, young Richard reported the incident about a week after it allegedly occurred. According to Richard himself (a story repeated under hypnosis), he was held in the police station all night and then interviewed, the following morning, by two men in plain clothes who claimed they were from a government data department. Also, according to Richard's conscious and unconscious statements, the men who interviewed him told him that they had already located the female driver of the car, that she had denied the whole incident, and that she described Richard as being extremely drunk when she dropped him off near Bodmin. Richard was, in fact, drunk at the time, but insisted, even under hypnosis, that the incident had actually

occurred and that the woman had been a witness to it.

It was shortly after the interviews with the police and government officials that Richard, obviously depressed and less confident about the reality of his experience, began to develop the headaches and skin inflammations. As you can judge from the transcripts, the skin inflammations might well be psychosomatic manifestations of the ‘burn mark’ on his neck which he believes was caused by one of the so-called extraterrestrials.

For the following sixteen months Richard continued suffering the nightmares and attendant insomnia, and subsequently his drinking increased. During this period he was regularly seeing his doctor for unsuccessful treatment of the headaches and skin inflammations. Dissatisfied with Richard’s progress, his doctor recommended psychiatric treatment, which Richard was reluctant to undertake. Then, in late August, 1975, his girlfriend’s father, my friend and colleague Dr Robert C. Parker, recommended that he come to me for hypnotherapy. The first session was, as I have stated, on 9 September, 1975, and there were eighteen further sessions, the most recent being on 10 February this year.

The reality or nonreality of UFOs is hardly my province; I therefore centered my treatment on the patient’s anxiety reaction to the amnesia which formed part of the alleged experience. Since Richard had obviously developed a strong aversion to the thought of reliving the experience, I was forced to attempt a penetration of the amnesia by taking him gradually through the three prime stages of hypnotism: light, medium and heavy, the latter being a state of somnambulism.

The treatment has so far been successful only to a limited degree. As you will notice when you read the transcript of the most recent hypnotic session, there is a point beyond which the patient simply refuses to go – and to try to force him to do so could be dangerous.

Whether the amnesia is a means of obliterating a real experience or an

extremely painful fantasy is, in a certain sense, immaterial; what matters is that the memory appears to be real to the patient and that the climax of the experience, or hallucination, was obviously traumatic. It is therefore to be noted that in the period between the last two hypnotic sessions – during which I attempted by suggestion to break down the patient's resistance to a total recall – his mental and physical condition have degenerated, with a full return of the headaches and skin inflammations. These symptoms have naturally led to a return of the patient's former acute anxiety.

This regression, brought about by the patient's fear of a total recall, has so far made me reluctant to use Sodium Amytal or Pentothal to facilitate the breakthrough. However, should such a breakthrough fail to occur during the forthcoming hypnotic session, which is scheduled for tomorrow, I feel that these alternatives will have to be risked.

Since the events leading up to the period of amnesia are detailed in the enclosed police and doctor's reports – and since these events have been corroborated by the patient's recall under hypnosis – the attached transcript covers only the most recent hypnotic session, during which the patient finally recounted what happened during the period of amnesia. As you will note, there is a point beyond which the patient still refuses to go.

I look forward to seeing you upon your arrival here in London.

Yours fondly,

James S. Campbell

PATIENT: Richard Alexander Watson

AGE: 19 yrs. 7 mths.

SYMPTOMS: Nightmares, attendant insomnia and acute anxiety centered around a three-day period of amnesia.

HISTORY: See attached police and medical reports, both released unofficially and in confidence.

DOCTOR: James S. Campbell

SESSION 18/February 10, 1976

DOCTOR

You are relaxing, relaxing, you are very relaxed. You are sleeping, deep sleep, sleeping deeper, very deep. You are sleeping, very comfortable, relaxed, very relaxed, you are deeper and deeper in sleep, very comfortable, deeper. You are relaxed and comfortable. You are deep, deep in sleep. You are relaxed and you will remember everything and you will answer my questions.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

All right, Richard. You are going back to the evening of March 7, 1974. You are going back now.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Do you know where you are?

RICHARD

I am in the car. The woman is beside me. The car has stopped… a roaring

sound… a humming… I don’t know… And the light… Oh, my God, it’s all white! *The whole sky is exploding*!

DOCTOR

It’s all right. It won’t harm you. Calm down. Relax. You can see it. Are you all right? Can you see it?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

All right, Richard, we’ve already discussed how you were given a lift by the woman in the Audi, how the car stalled in the middle of Bodmin Moor, how the sky became bright, and how the car was eventually drawn into the large saucer. Before discussing what happened inside the saucer –

RICHARD

I don’t want to remember that.

DOCTOR

Before discussing what happened inside the saucer, I would like to clarify some points about the previous period. I want us to do this, Richard.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

I want to start with the emergence of the two smaller, three-foot diameter disks from the larger craft.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

You said that the two smaller disks flew around the car as if they were examining it.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Why do you think they were examining the car?

RICHARD

They were humming. They made some whistling sounds… Not whistling… Strange, high-pitched beeping, almost like Morse Code. They made me think of computers. I was thinking of computers. I had the feeling they were examining the car, photographing it, making some kind of calculations.

DOCTOR

That’s a strange thing to think. Why did you think that?

RICHARD

Because of the way the disks circled the car. Because of the sounds they were making. Because they shone lights into the car and the car began to shake and a beam of light fell on the woman’s eyes and made her act strangely.

DOCTOR

She changed when the beam of light struck her?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

How?

RICHARD

She was very frightened initially. She seemed paralyzed with fear. Then the beam of light caught her in the eyes and she changed almost instantly. I remember this clearly. I was fascinated by it. The woman gasped and then shuddered, closed her eyes and settled back, then, when she opened her eyes again, she was remarkably calm. She told me not to be frightened. She kept saying, ‘It’s all right.’ She stared at me as if I didn’t exist, and she seemed almost happy. I thought that was strange.

DOCTOR

Why didn’t the light affect you that way?

RICHARD

It didn’t reach my eyes. I doubled over on the seat. The light passed over the back of my head and just burned my neck.

DOCTOR

I see. Please continue.

RICHARD

Then the small disks flew away. They returned to the large object. Each disk

went into a separate opening. Then the panels at each end of the large object winked out, leaving darkness.

DOCTOR

Describe the large object, the large saucer, again.

RICHARD

It was dark, but it grew bigger. It was surrounded by a glowing haze. The colored lights along the bottom started flashing on and off, and I could see the object itself very clearly. It was definitely solid. It appeared to be made of white metal. It had long, narrow windows running right along the front, curving back on both sides, as if running right around the whole object, as if the object was circular. There were people at those windows. I couldn't see them in any detail – they were just silhouettes. They were moving to and fro across the windows, pretty small, faraway. That object, that saucer, was immense. At least three hundred or four hundred feet wide, two or three stories high.

DOCTOR

Fine, Richard. Then the two panels opened again and two more flying saucers emerged.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Describe them, please.

RICHARD

They flew straight at the car. They hovered just above the ground. There was

one on either side of the car and I saw that they were different from the previous ones. They were an awful lot bigger. About thirty-five feet in diameter. Their perimeters swept up to form a dome made of something like glass. There were people inside.

DOCTOR

That's right. You mentioned two crew members.

RICHARD

Two crew members in each saucer.

DOCTOR

How far away was the saucer nearest to you?

RICHARD

The part of the circular perimeter closest to me was about three feet from the car. And the glass dome, maybe Perspex, about fifteen feet away, was just a little above the level of my head.

DOCTOR

You more or less looked directly at the crew members?

RICHARD

Yes, I looked directly at them.

DOCTOR

You are relaxed. You are very relaxed. You have nothing to fear. I want you to remember. I want you to remember it clearly. I want you to tell me what the crew members looked like.

(*The patient does not immediately respond*.)

DOCTOR

There is nothing to fear. You are relaxed. Tell me what the crew members looked like.

(*The patient moves into the present tense*.)

RICHARD

Strange. They look strange. They look strange and I’m frightened.

DOCTOR

There is nothing to fear. You are relaxed. What do they look like?

RICHARD

No lips. A mask. It must be a mask. The cabin dome has a rippling effect, so it must be a mask.

DOCTOR

What else?

RICHARD

It has to be a mask. The nose is metallic. The nose is made of metal – it’s covered in metal – so it must be a mask.

DOCTOR

Go on.

RICHARD

The eyes are just slits. They seem a bit Oriental. I think they're slits, but this could be the rippling effect again. They seem Oriental.

DOCTOR

And their faces?

RICHARD

White. Very wrinkled. Sort of gray.

DOCTOR

White or gray? Be specific.

RICHARD

Sort of gray. Very wrinkled. It looks like dead skin. It doesn't look like human skin at all. I have the feeling it's dead skin.

DOCTOR

Dead skin?

RICHARD

I don't know… It made me think of a corpse.

DOCTOR

Think very hard. Is there anything else you can tell me about the crew members, the pilots?

RICHARD

Oh, Jesus, he's just lifted up his hand! He's lifting I up right now! Oh, Jesus

Christ, *the hand is a metal claw* !

DOCTOR

Easy, relax, deep deep sleep, very deep sleep, very deep, you are very relaxed, you have nothing to fear… Now can you tell me anything else about the pilot?

(*The patient reverts to the past tense*.)

RICHARD

He raised his hand. No hand. A metal claw. A sort of metal replacement.

DOCTOR

A prosthetic hand?

RICHARD

I don’t know what that is.

DOCTOR

Never mind. He raised his hand as you were looking at him. Then what?

RICHARD

I woke up.

DOCTOR

What do you mean, you woke up?

RICHARD

I woke up.

DOCTOR

You weren’t asleep, Richard.

RICHARD

I must have fallen asleep. He raised his hand and then a beam of light hit me and then I blanked out.

DOCTOR

All right, Richard, let’s assume you blanked out. How long do you think you were unconscious?

RICHARD

Not long. Just a few seconds.

DOCTOR

How did you know that?

RICHARD

The saucers were still outside the car. They were still in the same position. The woman was still in the same position. She seemed to be in a trance.

DOCTOR

Fine. What happened next?

(*The patient reverts to the present tense*.)

RICHARD

Oh, God, it’s coming down! The big mother ship’s coming down! Its lights

are all flashing and it doesn't make a sound and it's dropping down slowly, too slowly, not making a sound. Oh, God, *there it is*!

DOCTOR

Where is it?

RICHARD

Oh, God! *Oh, my God*!

DOCTOR

Relax, relaxed, you are relaxed, you are comfortable, you have nothing to fear, you are relaxed, you can tell me.

RICHARD

Yes,

DOCTOR

Where is the mother ship, Richard?

RICHARD

It's settled just above the ground. It's hovering just above the road. It's close to the road, but no on it – it's sitting just above it.

DOCTOR

It's now in front of the car?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

It’s straddling the road?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

How far away is it?

RICHARD

It stretches right across the road. It’s resting just above the road. It’s about fifty yards from the car and it’s really enormous… Oh, God, *the car’s shaking again*!

DOCTOR

It’s all right, it’s all right, the car’s shaking. Why is it shaking?

RICHARD

Everything’s shaking. The whole car’s going wild. Everything’s flying about inside the car and sticking to the windscreen… I can’t breathe, I’m choking, all this stuff’s flying around me, the car’s shaking and moving forward, no sound, just moving forward, being pulled by the saucers at both sides, being drawn toward the mother ship.

DOCTOR

What’s pulling the car forward, Richard?

RICHARD

The saucers. The saucers on both sides. They're pulling us forward?

DOCTOR

How are they pulling you forward?

RICHARD

I don't know. I think it's the beams of light. The beams of light come from the saucers, they're shining on both sides of the car, and the saucers are moving toward the mother ship and pulling us with them.

DOCTOR

Beams of light or cables?

RICHARD

Not cables. Not rope. Nothing! Just beams of light.

DOCTOR

Do you really believe that, Richard?

RICHARD

Yes, I believe it. The beams of light are drawing us forward and… Oh, Jesus, *it's opening up*!

DOCTOR

The mother ship is opening up?

RICHARD

Yes, the mother ship is opening up. It's splitting along the bottom, just above

the flashing lights… It's *not* splitting open: it's forming a ramp. The bottom part's dropping down to become a ramp leading up into the mother ship and the car is being drawn up and inside… Oh, my God, *it's all white in there*! All those people… *Oh, Jesus*!

DOCTOR

All right, Richard, you are relaxed, very comfortable and safe, deep deep in sleep, very relaxed, very comfortable, peaceful, you have nothing to fear. You are being drawn up into the mother ship, but you have nothing to fear. You are relaxed and can remember everything. You are being drawn up into the mother ship. What happened next?

(*The patient does not immediately respond.*)

DOCTOR

What happened next, Richard?

RICHARD

I'm on the hill. I'm cold. I don't know where I am. I…

DOCTOR

You are not on the hill, Richard. You are jumping ahead. You are in the car with the woman and you are being drawn into the mother ship. Now what happened next?

(*The patient does not immediately respond.*)

DOCTOR

Can you hear me, Richard?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

What happened next, Richard?

RICHARD

I'm on the hill. I'm cold. I don't know where I am. I…

DOCTOR

You're skipping ahead, Richard. You are three days ahead. Go back to when you were drawn into the mother ship. What happened then?

RICHARD

Oh, God, it's all white! It's all white! It's so bright! All the people! Silhouettes! This is crazy! Oh, Jesus, oh God, I don't want to! *I don't want to*! *I don't want to*!

DOCTOR

Relax, you will relax, you are relaxed, you have nothing to fear. You are sleeping, deep sleep, sleeping deeper, very deep. You are deep, deep in sleep. You are relaxed and comfortable. You are relaxed and you will remember everything and you will answer my questions.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

I want you to tell me what you believe happened during the missing three days.

RICHARD

I don’t know.

DOCTOR

But you think about it a lot?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Would you like to know what happened?

RICHARD

Yes. No! I don’t want to know.

DOCTOR

You just said you would like to know.

RICHARD

I want to know. I don’t want to know. The thought of it frightens me.

DOCTOR

It won’t frighten you if you discuss it. It won’t frighten you anymore. You can remember without feeling any fear. You will remember. You are remembering.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

You are in the car. You are in the car with the woman. The car is being drawn into the mother ship and you see the white light. Do you see the white light?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

The car is being drawn into the mother ship and you see the white light and silhouettes. Do you see the white light and silhouettes?

RICHARD

Oh, Jesus!

DOCTOR

Do you see the white light and silhouettes?

RICHARD

Oh, Jesus! *Oh, no*!

DOCTOR

You are relaxed, very relaxed, deeply relaxed, there is nothing to fear. You are deep, deep in sleep, you are relaxed, and nothing can harm you. You are all right. You can answer my questions. Do you see the white light and silhouettes?

(*The patient does not immediately respond*.)

DOCTOR

Can you hear me, Richard?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

The car is being drawn into the mother ship. You can see the white light and silhouettes. Now I want you to recall everything that happened. Tell me what happened.

RICHARD

All white.

DOCTOR

White?

RICHARD

Everything.

DOCTOR

Please explain that, Richard.

RICHARD

The walls are all white and the place is filled with light and the light is so bright it temporarily blinds me. That’s all I can see. The white walls, the bright haze. The silhouettes are moving all around me, moving in on the car.

DOCTOR

Go on.

RICHARD

I’m starting to see better. The place is really very bright. The silhouettes are men in coveralls, moving in on the car. Most of the men seem very small. They all seem about five feet tall. They’re wearing one-piece coveralls, some black, others a silvery-gray, and they have this sort of gray, wrinkled skin, metal noses, no lips.

DOCTOR

All right. You are comfortable. You have nothing to fear. You say they have metal noses, no lips. Just what do you mean by that?

RICHARD

Metal noses. No lips.

DOCTOR

They’re wearing masks like the other crew members?

RICHARD

I don’t know. I’m not sure. (*The patient reverts to the past tense*.) They looked like masks, but they seemed permanent. The masks covered their nose and the lower half of the chin and seemed to be molded out of a single piece of very thin metal. That’s why there were no lips. The metal covered their lips. I could see the wrinkled skin on their foreheads and around their strange eyes.

DOCTOR

Strange eyes?

RICHARD

Oriental.

DOCTOR

You mentioned that before. Anything else?

RICHARD

The eyes were like the skin – they seemed dead.

DOCTOR

They were blind?

RICHARD

No. They eyes were looking at me, but they seemed dead.

DOCTOR

All right. So these creatures surrounded the car.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

What happened then?

RICHARD

They opened the doors of the car and pulled us out.

DOCTOR

They had to pull you out?

RICHARD

I don’t understand.

DOCTOR

Did they have to pull you out because you were frightened?

RICHARD

They didn’t actually pull us out. This creature opened the door and took me by the arm and just sort of assisted me.

DOCTOR

You didn’t resist?

RICHARD

No.

DOCTOR

I thought you were frightened.

RICHARD

I was numb. I think I was numb with fear. I was dazed and felt weak. I got out automatically.

DOCTOR

And the woman did the same?

RICHARD

I don’t know. I wasn’t looking. I assume she did the same. I saw her standing beside me, fascinated, looking around her, smiling with that strange gleam in her eyes.

DOCTOR

Could she have been in a trance?

RICHARD

She could have been. Not quite. She was wide awake.

DOCTOR

Posthypnotic suggestion?

RICHARD

I don’t know what that means.

DOCTOR

It doesn’t matter. The creatures pulled you out of the car. Where was the car?

RICHARD

The car was inside the mother ship.

DOCTOR

You’re sure of that?

RICHARD

Yes. I looked around me and saw the ramp swinging up to form part of a wall. The ramp swung up from the floor. It closed and formed part of the

wall. It didn’t make a sound when it closed, and then I saw the wall properly. The wall was white. It was very slightly curved. It curved horizontally and vertically to form part of a dome. It was only part of the dome. It was shaped like a slice of orange. It was very large, very white, very bright, like part of a painted aircraft hangar.

DOCTOR

What made you think of an aircraft hangar?

RICHARD

I was in an aircraft hangar once. I remember that hollow ringing sound. The car was parked on the kind of ramp that you see in a garage, and the whole place looked like an aircraft hangar, a sort of very large workshop.

DOCTOR

You saw machinery?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

What sort of machinery?

RICHARD

I don’t know. I don’t know much about machinery. It just seemed like an aircraft hangar because it had all this machinery and because it was big and sort of echoing. Also, all the men, the creatures, were wearing the coveralls.

DOCTOR

And the curved wall? What did you think it was?

RICHARD

It was just a curved wall. It was the inside of the outer wall of the mother ship, where the ramp had come down.

DOCTOR

Okay. So the car was drawn up the ramp into the mother ship, the ramp was then drawn up to form part of the wall, and the car came to rest on a sort of platform close to the inner wall.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Fine. Now you and the woman are standing beside the car, surrounded by the men, the creatures, in coveralls.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

What happened next?

RICHARD

I look at the creatures around me, wondering if they were wearing masks, metal masks, and my fear deepened and I started to shake. The one of the creatures approached me. Oh, Jesus, those dead eyes! He stared at me and passed his hand across my face and then I felt a lot better.

DOCTOR

You weren’t frightened anymore?

RICHARD

I went sort of limp. I mean, I went limp inside. I just emptied out, feeling drained and light-headed, a bit removed from it all. It became like a dream.

DOCTOR

Yet you still felt awake?

RICHARD

I was aware of where I was. It just seemed more distant and unreal, as if I was dreaming.

DOCTOR

Were there any distinct sounds in the hangar?

RICHARD

A humming. A sort of humming vibration. All the time. It was constant.

DOCTOR

Was this similar to what you’d experienced in the car?

RICHARD

Similar, but almost imperceptible. I hardly heard it at all.

DOCTOR

Heard it or felt it?

RICHARD

Both.

DOCTOR

Did the creatures talk to you?

RICHARD

No. No lips.

DOCTOR

They made no sound?

RICHARD

No.

DOCTOR

Go on.

RICHARD

There was an escalator near the car. They made us go up the escalator. One creature walked ahead of us, another stayed behind us, and a third took my elbow and guided me to the escalator.

DOCTOR

What did the others do?

RICHARD

They surrounded the car.

DOCTOR

Why did they surround the car?

RICHARD

I don’t know. I didn’t look back.

DOCTOR

All right. The creature guided you and the woman to the escalator. What then?

RICHARD

The escalator door opened and the creature pushed us inside and followed us in. The other two then followed him in. The escalator took us up past plain white walls to a corridor that curved out of sight.

DOCTOR

The corridor ran parallel to the curved wall of the mother ship?

RICHARD

Yes, I think so. It think it ran around the rim of the whole ship.

DOCTOR

Any windows?

RICHARD

No windows on the right-hand wall, the outer wall, of the corridor. There were doors on the left. These doors were the kind that slide in and out of hollow spaces in the wall – they didn’t swing back on hinges.

DOCTOR

Go on.

RICHARD

Surrounding us, the three creatures walked us along the curving corridor, past a lot of closed doors, and then, when we reached a particular door, the leading creature ordered us to stop.

DOCTOR

Just a moment, Richard. You say the leading creature ordered you to stop?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

But you said previously that these men never spoke.

RICHARD

They never spoke. They had no lips. The metal covered their lips.

DOCTOR

Yet you say one of them ordered you to stop.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

How did he do that? Did he speak to you?

RICHARD

He didn’t talk. He just told us. I just knew.

DOCTOR

Did you actually *hear* him?

RICHARD

He told us to stop. I must have heard him.

DOCTOR

You think you heard him? You heard a voice in your head?

RICHARD

I don’t know. I just heard him.

DOCTOR

But you’re convinced that this man, this creature, didn’t actually speak?

RICHARD

He didn’t talk. I just heard him.

DOCTOR

Okay. You are standing at one of the closed doors.

(*The patient reverts to the present tense*.)

RICHARD

The door opens. It seems to open automatically. It slides open, disappearing

into a hollow in the wall, and we step through the doorway. The door makes me think of ships. It's like the hatchway of a ship. We step in and the door closes behind us and we're in a dimly lit room, a circular room, the walls white… Oh, my God… *I don't want to*!

DOCTOR

It's all right, you are relaxed, very relaxed, deep, deep in sleep and relaxed. You can see and tell me.

RICHARD

It's eerie.

DOCTOR

Yes. The room is circular and dimly lit.

RICHARD

The wall is white and completely circular. There are beds forming a circle around us. There are people on the beds, ordinary people, men, women and children, and they're all wrapped in surgical gowns and have wires running out of them.

DOCTOR

Wires?

RICHARD

The wires are taped to them. Wires and rubber tubes. All these things trail back to the wall behind the beds and are fixed to machines. The machines have colored screens. Not colored: a sort of monochrome. I thought at first they were colored because I saw lines of bright light jumping up and down.

DOCTOR

Have you ever seen an ECG monitor?

RICHARD

I think so. In the movies.

DOCTOR

Is that what these machines look like?

(*The patient reverts to the past tense*.)

RICHARD

Yes. The room looked like a hospital ward – except for its shape.

DOCTOR

The circular shape.

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Okay. Continue.

RICHARD

We were led to the far side of the room and taken through another door, and we entered another circular room, but bigger and brighter. There were a couple of surgical beds – no, like operating tables. There were people around the beds and the walls were all lined with long glass cabinets… *Oh, please*

God, I don’t want to!

DOCTOR

It’s all right, you are relaxed, you are deep, deep in sleep, you are very relaxed and you can tell me, you have nothing to fear. What is it that you didn’t want to do?

(*The patient reverts to the present tense*.)

RICHARD

I don’t want to look at them.

DOCTOR

At what?

RICHARD

I don’t want to look at the glass cabinets.

DOCTOR

Why don’t you want to look? What do you see in the glass cabinets?

RICHARD

People. Naked people. There are naked people in the glass cabinets. The glass cabinets are like coffins, the glass seems to be slightly frosted, and the naked people are lying in the cabinets with tubes running out of them. Oh, God, *I can’t look at them*!

DOCTOR

All right, Richard, it’s all right, you’re relaxed, you don’t have to look at

them. Relax, Richard. I just want to go over something I might have missed. In the room you've just come from, where the people were lying on the beds, did any of those people actually speak to you?

RICHARD

No. They couldn't. They were unconscious.

DOCTOR

And the people in the frosted glass cabinets?

RICHARD

I don't want to look at them!

DOCTOR

It's all right, Richard. You don't have to look at them again. Just tell me: Are they unconscious?

RICHARD

They're unconscious or dead.

DOCTOR

Do you see anything that looks like an ECG monitor?

RICHARD

Yes. There are screens like that above and between the glass cabinets.

DOCTOR

Are the lights on the screens jumping up and down?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Fine. That means they’re alive.

RICHARD

They’re alive. They’re unconscious.

DOCTOR

Fine, Richard. Now tell me about the people in the room. The ones standing around, fully conscious.

RICHARD

They’re ordinary.

DOCTOR

They look like normal human beings?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Please describe them.

RICHARD

The two nearest to me seem pleasant enough. They’re smiling at me and the woman who drove the car. One is tall and slim, white hair, suntanned, I think

in his late forties or early fifties, but his forehead is unlined. It looks unusually smooth.

DOCTOR

That was the only oddity you noticed?

RICHARD

He was ordinary, but his forehead was unlined.

DOCTOR

And the other man?

RICHARD

He has no hair on his head. He looks normal, but he's bald. He seems older than the other man – not much, but a bit older – and the skin on his face seems unreal, as if he's had plastic surgery.

DOCTOR

Do you know what the results of plastic surgery look like?

RICHARD

Yes. I had a friend who was badly burned in a traffic accident.

(*The doctor deliberately reverts to the past tense*; *the patient does the same*.)

DOCTOR

Were there any other people in the room?

RICHARD

Yes. There were four other men, all wearing white smocks and trousers, pretty young, adolescents I think, quite small, foreign looking.

DOCTOR

Explain that, please.

RICHARD

They looked like Vietnamese. Something like that – I wasn't sure. They had peculiar eyes, narrow, Oriental… I'm not sure. It seemed unreal.

DOCTOR

You still felt as if you were dreaming?

RICHARD

I never felt as if I was dreaming. It was just different, somehow. I didn't feel frightened anymore. I felt nothing. Removed from it.

DOCTOR

Did any of these men talk to you?

RICHARD

They talked to the creatures who'd brought us there. They made them all leave. The men in white stood all around us, but they never said anything. The two standing close to us spoke to us.

DOCTOR

The same as before?

RICHARD

Pardon?

DOCTOR

Did you just hear their voices in your head or did they speak to you orally?

RICHARD

They were normal. They spoke to us. They spoke to me and the woman. They were pleasant and they asked us how we felt and I said I felt fine.

DOCTOR

Did you feel fine?

RICHARD

No. I felt weak. I felt very removed. I was confused and I felt half asleep, as if not really there.

DOCTOR

So why did you tell them you felt fine?

RICHARD

I just said it. I didn’t want to upset them.

DOCTOR

What did the woman say?

RICHARD

She didn’t say anything. She just smiled.

DOCTOR

What did the men sound like when they talked?

RICHARD

They sounded normal. They were both speaking English. The younger man, the tall one, had a normal English accent – a sort of everyday American accent – but the older man spoke English like a foreigner. His English was very good, very good, but he had a strange accent.

DOCTOR

What kind of accent?

RICHARD

I don't know. It sounded slightly European. I think it might have been German.

DOCTOR

What else did they talk about?

RICHARD

They talked quite a bit. They wanted to know all about us. Our names, our ages – things like that – and they were very polite. The old man was fairly distant. He watched more than he talked. I had the feeling he was older than he looked, and he seemed pretty cold. The younger man was more informal. I think he said his name was Wilson. He kept asking us how we felt, if we were frightened, and he seemed really pleasant. The woman didn't say anything. I said I felt very tired. The man I think was called Wilson asked me if I knew where I was, and I confessed that I didn't. He asked me if I'd like to know. I said that I would. He walked over to the wall and pressed a button and two white panels slid apart. There was a very large window there. I went over and looked out. I thought at first that what I was looking at was a

painted screen… and then I became really scared.

DOCTOR

It’s all right. There’s no need to be scared. Now what did you see?

RICHARD

Stars.

DOCTOR

Pardon?

RICHARD

Stars. Lots of stars. No real sky – just the stars. No up or down, left or right, just the stars in a blackness. Then the stars moved. The Earth suddenly filled the window. The curved edge of the Earth, wreathed in cloud, blue and white – like those movies the astronauts sent back… It all seemed too fantastic.

DOCTOR

You were above the atmosphere?

RICHARD

Yes. I could see Brazil and the Argentine. We were way up in space.

DOCTOR

Are you sure this wasn’t some kind of an illusion?

RICHARD

Illusion?

DOCTOR

You said that at first you thought it was a painted screen.

RICHARD

At first I thought it had to be. I think I was hoping that. I wanted it to be a painting or a film, because the other thing frightened me.

DOCTOR

What other thing?

RICHARD

Actually knowing that I was up there.

DOCTOR

Did the man at the window say anything at this point?

RICHARD

I asked him where we were. He said we were up in space. He said we were landing briefly in Paraguay and then flying on.

DOCTOR

Flying on to where?

RICHARD

He didn’t say. I didn’t ask him.

DOCTOR

Didn’t you want to know?

RICHARD

I didn’t think of asking. I was frightened. I think I was frightened.

DOCTOR

You said before that you weren’t frightened anymore.

RICHARD

I can’t explain it. I wasn’t as frightened as I should have been. I felt a bit unreal, I felt drugged… but there was fear. A sort of fear in the background. The fear was just there, if somehow distant… I just wanted to please them.’

DOCTOR

You say you felt drugged. Did you feel they had some control over you?

RICHARD

I felt that I didn’t control myself. I felt kind of helpless.

DOCTOR

You were looking down at the Earth. What happened next?

RICHARD

The man, the younger man, pressed the same button and the two panels closed again. Then they took the woman away. I mean, the bald man took her away. I think I must have looked a bit worried, because the younger man tried to reassure me.

DOCTOR

The one called Wilson.

RICHARD

Yes. He told me they wanted to examine the woman and that she wouldn't be harmed. He said that the bald man was going to examine her and that he – I mean Wilson – wanted to examine me. He said it wouldn't hurt. He said it was just routine. I don't know why, but that really reassured me. It seemed a natural thing to do.

DOCTOR

You didn't wonder why he wanted to examine you?

RICHARD

I think I might have. I can't remember it clearly.

DOCTOR

Why can't you remember it clearly?

(*The patient reverts to the present tense*.)

RICHARD

I just can't. I'm trying to think. I'm more tired than ever. I'm suddenly feeling very tired, so I stretch out on the bed.

DOCTOR

Are you still inside the spaceship, Richard?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

Has Wilson told you to lie on the bed?

RICHARD

It’s more like an operating table.

DOCTOR

But has Wilson actually told you to lie on it?

RICHARD

I think he must have. I can’t remember. He passes his hand over my face and I lie down. I’m feeling really tired.

DOCTOR

Go on.

(*The patient does not respond* .)

DOCTOR

I said, continue.

(*The patient does not respond*.)

DOCTOR

Can you hear me, Richard?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

You are lying on the operating table. What happens next?

(*The patient now alternates between past and present tenses*.)

RICHARD

I woke up.

DOCTOR

You were asleep?

RICHARD

I woke up. I must have been asleep. I am in another room and the man, the one called Wilson, is shaking me awake. This room is very small. It's relatively small. There are only two beds and the woman is on the other bed. She's unconscious. She's wearing a metal cap. There are wires running out of it, their other ends plugged into a monitor above the bed.

DOCTOR

How long were you sleeping?

RICHARD

No time. There is no sense of time. I just feel very drowsy.

DOCTOR

So, the man shakes you awake.

RICHARD

No. He's just there. I waken up. The man doesn't touch me.

DOCTOR

Yes.

RICHARD

He’s still pleasant. He smiles at me. I’m frightened because of the way he’s smiling. It doesn’t seem natural that he’s pleasant, and I feel really scared.

DOCTOR

Did he say anything?

RICHARD

He smiled and then asked me how I felt. I said I felt very tired. He said that was all right, that it was natural to feel tired, and that I had very strong will, great resistance, and would have to come back. I didn’t know what he meant. I said I didn’t understand. He told me that I didn’t have to worry, that I was going home soon. I said I didn’t understand. I asked him where I was. I felt drugged and I asked this automatically, not thinking about it. I asked him where I was. He said if I got up he would show me. I got up and he led me out of the room and we passed through a laboratory.

DOCTOR

A laboratory?

RICHARD

A laboratory. It looked like a laboratory. It frightened me because of what was in there and I tried not to look.

DOCTOR

What frightened you?

RICHARD

The big jars. The things in cages. All the things in the big jars. The big jars were filled with a clear liquid and these things were just floating there. I felt a bit sick. I was even more scared. I didn't recognize half of these things, but I still felt upset.

DOCTOR

You didn't recognize half of the things. What *did* you recognize?

RICHARD

Eyeballs. Tongues. Maybe brains – I'm not sure. Things that looked like liver and intestines… things that made me feel ill.

DOCTOR

Were these items from humans or animals?

RICHARD

I don't know. I didn't look much… There was a corpse on a table, a human corpse, but its head was missing.

DOCTOR

Anything else?

(*The patient does not respond*.)

DOCTOR

Can you hear me, Richard?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

You mentioned cages. What was in the cages?

(*The patient does not respond*.)

DOCTOR

It’s all right, Richard. You have nothing to fear. You are asleep, deep, deep in sleep, you are relaxed, you will be calm. You have nothing to fear, you will be calm, relaxed, you are calm. You are relaxed. Can you hear me?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

What was in the cages?

RICHARD

Heads… *Human heads*!

DOCTOR

It’s all right, Richard, forget it. You have forgotten it. You are calm, relaxed, you are just passing through. Remember: I want you to remember. Are you still in the laboratory?

RICHARD

We passed the laboratory. We continued along a curving corridor. The man was telling me that I would come back some day and that I should at least see

it.

DOCTOR

See what, Richard?

RICHARD

Where we were.

DOCTOR

You mean you were still in the mother ship?

RICHARD

No, I don’t think I was still in the mother ship.

DOCTOR

What made you think that?

RICHARD

The walls of the corridor were solid rock. They had been hacked out of the rock. The corridor led into a giant workshop with walls of sheer stone. This place was really enormous. Not a mere workshop – a kind of factory or machine-shop, filled with workers and machines.

DOCTOR

What kind of machines, Richard?

RICHARD

I don’t know. Large machines.

DOCTOR

You are in the machine-shop. What else did you see?

RICHARD

The walls were stone or rock. The roof was stone or rock. I think it was underground. In the ground. Maybe deep in a mountain.

DOCTOR

Anything else?

RICHARD

I can’t really remember. I can’t remember it clearly. There were lots of machines, lots of people, hundreds of people, men and women, and there were catwalks running around the stone walls, catwalks above one another, running past what looked like giant computers, past brightly lit rooms. It looked like a factory. An underground factory. The people all worked like automatons. Hundreds of people.

DOCTOR

These people looked like normal human beings?

RICHARD

All the people looked normal.

DOCTOR

What else did you see?

RICHARD

He showed me where we were. He took me up some steps to a platform and then pressed a button. There were steel panels on the wall. The steel panels slid apart. There was a really huge window, like a CinemaScope screen, and the panels slid apart to expose it, and I saw where we were.

DOCTOR

Where were you?

RICHARD

I don’t know. He wouldn’t tell me.

DOCTOR

All right, Richard, what did you see?

RICHARD

Ice.

DOCTOR

I’ll repeat the question: What did you see?

RICHARD

Ice. All ice. Hills and valleys of ice. The sun was shining and it flashed off the ice and the light nearly blinded me.

DOCTOR

Nothing but ice?

RICHARD

No. There was nothing but ice. Ice, maybe snow, a bright sky, very blue, the sun beating down and flashing off the ice and turning the ice into prisms. It was incredibly beautiful. It took my breath away. There was nothing out there but the ice and the bright, flashing light. The ice went out to the horizon. The sky was sheer blue. I looked up at the sky and saw a green valley surrounded by more ice. The ice was everywhere – down below, in the sky – and I stared at it and thought it was beautiful and that really frightened me.

DOCTOR

Why did it frighten you?

RICHARD

Because I knew that it must be another world, that I was far, far away.

DOCTOR

It looked like another world?

RICHARD

It had to be another world. There was nothing like that on Earth. It was simply incredible.

DOCTOR

But the man, this Wilson, refused to tell you where you were?

RICHARD

I asked him. I had to ask him. He wouldn’t tell me.

DOCTOR

What did he say?

RICHARD

He said I would find out soon enough. He said we had to go back now.

DOCTOR

Back to where?

RICHARD

I thought he meant back to the mother ship, but I couldn’t be sure.

DOCTOR

Okay, what next?

RICHARD

He pressed the same button and closed the panels. He said he thought I had seen enough. He said that I wouldn’t remember this, that I might remember some of it, but that whatever I remembered would be confused and wouldn’t mean much to me. Then he repeated that I had great resistance. He said that was interesting. He said that most people forget it, but that I might be different. He thought I was interesting. He wanted me to come back. He said that when I ceased my resistance I would be very useful. After that, we went back along the corridor.

DOCTOR

Wait a minute, Richard. What do you think he meant by all that?

RICHARD

I don’t know.

DOCTOR

You didn’t think about it?

RICHARD

I didn’t remember it.

DOCTOR

All right. You went back along the corridor.

RICHARD

We went back along the corridor, through the laboratory, then into another room. There were a couple of surgical beds. The men in white smocks were there. The leader, the man called Wilson – I think he was the leader – told me to lie down on a bed. It wasn’t a bed: it was an operating table, with a metal cap attached to its headrest. I didn’t want to lie on it. I lay on it and the men moved in around me and then one of them pulled the metal cap down. I didn’t want them to do that. I didn’t want them to *do* that! I tried to resist, but I can’t move as they put the metal cap on my head. I don’t *want* them to do that! *I don’t want to I don’t want to*! I don’t want them to put that on my head, oh please God… *I don’t want to I don’t want to I don’t want to* !

DOCTOR

It’s all right, Richard, you are calm, you are safe, you are relaxed, you are deep, deep in sleep, it’s all right. Are you calm now?

(*The patient does not respond* .)

DOCTOR

Can you hear me, Richard?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

What happened next, Richard?

(*The patient does not respond* .)

DOCTOR

What happened next, Richard?

RICHARD

I’m on the hill. I’m cold. I don’t know where I am. I…

DOCTOR

You are not on the hill, Richard. You are jumping ahead. You are on the operating table and they are placing the metal cap on your head. Now tell me what happened.

(*The patient does not respond*.)

DOCTOR

There is nothing to fear, Richard, you can tell me, you will tell me what happened.

RICHARD

I’m on the hill. I’m cold. I don’t know where I am. I…

DOCTOR

Deep, deep sleep, you are deep, deep in sleep, you are relaxed, you have

nothing to fear, you are very relaxed… You are on the operating table. They are placing the metal cap on your head. You have nothing to fear, you are relaxed, you can tell me what happened. What happened, Richard?

(*The patient does not respond* .)

DOCTOR

You can tell me, you have nothing to fear, you are relaxed, you can tell me. What happened, Richard?

RICHARD

No.

DOCTOR

You can tell me, you have nothing to fear, you are relaxed, you can tell me. What happened, Richard?

RICHARD

I didn’t want to lie down. I lay down. I didn’t want to be there. I lay there and the men all stood around me and one of them pulled the metal cap lower. I didn’t want them to do that. I didn’t want them to *do* that! I try to resist, but I can’t move and they’re putting the metal cap on my head. I don’t *want* them to do that! I don’t want to I don’t want to! I don’t want to have that thing on my head, oh please God, *I don’t want to I don’t want to I don’t want –*

DOCTOR

It’s all right, Richard, you are calm, you are relaxed, you are deep, deep in sleep, it’s all right, you can tell me… What happened, Richard?

(*The patient does not respond*.)

DOCTOR

Can you hear me, Richard?

RICHARD

Yes.

DOCTOR

What happened next, Richard?

(*The patient does not respond*.)

DOCTOR

What happened next, Richard?

RICHARD

I’m on the hill. I’m cold. I don’t know where I am. I…

DOCTOR

All right, Richard, we’ll leave it for now. You are in deep, deep sleep, very deep, deep sleep, you are relaxed, you are very relaxed, you are sleeping, deep sleep, In a moment you can wake up. You will remember nothing that has been said between us. You will not remember until I ask you to remember, you are asleep, deep deep sleep. All right, Richard, you are wakening now, you are wakening, wakening slowly, you are very slowly, gradually, wakening. You can wake up, Richard.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Looking out of the rear window of the large, comfortable London taxi, the first thing that struck Epstein with pleasure was the peculiar beauty of the pearly-gray afternoon light, falling now, through a drifting layer of clouds, on the stately grandeur of Parliament Square, on the Guildhall and Big Ben, on the tourists who milled about on the pavements dominated by statues. Epstein loved the English light. He had loved it since the war. There was something about that mild, misty gray that pacified the most fearful soul.

‘How do you like being back?’ Campbell asked. ‘It’s been an awfully long time.’

‘How long?’

‘About ten years,’ Campbell said. ‘You came over quite a lot in those days. You were a regular tourist.’

Epstein smiled and rubbed his eyes. The taxi was passing the Cenotaph. He gazed at the Foreign Office, at Downing Street and the Treasury Buildings, saw more tourists around Horse Guards Parade, the soldiers stiff in red uniforms.

‘There were a lot of conferences then,’ he said. ‘There isn’t much happening now. The British are very secretive about UFOs, so there’s normally no point in coming.’

‘It’s better in America?’

‘For good and for ill. But once you sort the wheat from the chaff, then, yes, it’s better.’

Sitting beside Epstein in the back of the taxi, wearing a pinstripe suit, polished black shoes and a flamboyant tie, Campbell studied the glittering ring on his finger and nodded judiciously.

‘I know what you mean,’ he said. ‘We British are tight-lipped. The Official Secrets Act blankets all; we’re not as free as we think we are.’

The taxi was pulling out of Whitehall, into the dense traffic of Trafalgar Square, the four lions staring eternally, flocks of pigeons above the fountains, Nelson’s Monument soaring to the cloudy sky, the National Gallery beyond it. Epstein studied the scene with some sadness, recalling other days, better days, when he had felt more assured, his youthful innocence shielding him. Those days were gone forever and would never return. They had slipped away quietly, stealing hopes and good health, leaving him more restless and defeated, overwhelmed by shrinking future possibilities. He didn’t want to think of the hospital. He couldn’t pretend to be that brave. He coughed into his fist and looked out and saw the steps of the church.

‘St Martin in the Fields,’ Campbell said.

‘What are those people doing there?’

‘Some sort of demonstration,’ Campbell said. ‘They often demonstrate there.’

The light was different here, darker, subtly tainted with carbon monoxide: the waste of the traffic that endlessly circled the square and caused chaos in the surrounding West End streets. Epstein rubbed his tired eyes, slumping deeper into his seat, suffering the acute disappointment that comes to old men when they discover that the past has slipped away and cannot be recaptured.

‘It’s a pity about Stanford,’ Campbell said. ‘I’m really sorry he couldn’t come. It’s not like him to miss a trip to London. You must he keeping him

busy.’

‘He didn’t want to come this time,’ Epstein said.

‘Stanford? You can’t be serious.’

‘I’m serious. He didn’t want to come. He’s been a bit obsessed lately.’

‘Don’t tell me he’s in love.’

‘It’s not a woman,’ Epstein said.

‘With Stanford it’s *always* a woman… and our young friend can pick them.’

Epstein smiled. ‘You sound disappointed,’ he said. ‘Anyway, it really isn’t a woman. He’s obsessed with his work.’

‘You mean UFOs?’

‘That’s right.’

‘That doesn’t sound like Stanford.’

‘Stanford’s changed a lot,’ Epstein said. ‘He’s not the man you remember.’

‘You believe the UFOs are real?’

‘Yes, I believe they’re real. And now Stanford… he thinks they’re real as well, and it’s made him obsessed.’

As the taxi slowed down at Cambridge Circus, inching carefully into the traffic, Epstein glanced out and saw the shuffling crowds, the gutters littered with rubbish. The city was less enchanting here, packed with modern shops and fast-food cafes, the pervading grayness no longer romantic, enshrining neglect. Everything changed, Epstein thought, decayed, visibly crumbled, and he turned his eyes away to gaze inward, ashamed of his dark thoughts.

‘Those transcripts were remarkable,’ he said. ‘What’s your assessment?’

‘I agree with you,’ Campbell said. ‘It’s an amazing story. I’ve gone over the tapes time and time again, but can’t come to any kind of conclusion.’

‘Why not?’

‘I’m simply confused. I don’t know what to believe. It’s the most incredible story I’ve ever heard to come out of hypnosis, and I’m afraid it’s left me rather baffled.’

‘Is it a true experience or isn’t it?’

‘It’s a true experience to *Richard*.’

‘But that doesn’t necessarily mean that it actually happened?’

‘No, I’m afraid it doesn’t.’

Epstein sighed and stared out at Tottenham Court Road, feeling weary after his flight from New York to Heathrow, a slight nausea in his stomach, his head throbbing, a little dizzy from jet lag.

‘It’s a very elaborate story,’ he said. ‘He always returns to the exact same story. If the story isn’t true, what can it mean? Why does he *believe* that it’s true?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Campbell said. ‘*Something* traumatic obviously happened to him when he was hitchhiking to Cornwall, and it’s possible that he’s just trying to conceal it.’

‘From himself?’

‘Yes.’

‘Even under hypnosis?’

‘Yes, even under hypnosis. They can be pretty tricky.’

Epstein glanced outside again to see the shops with plate-glass windows, an abundance of tape-recorders and televisions and stereo equipment, the audio and visual stimuli of a society increasingly divorced from its senses. There was input and output. The Western world was being programmed: plug in, turn on and forget that the real world exists… Yet what was the real world? Where did fact and fantasy blend? Young Richard Watson’s experience was real to him – and yet may never have happened.

‘All right,’ Epstein said. ‘Let’s suppose he’s hiding something. He’s been shocked and he can’t face up to it, so he creates his self-protecting fantasy. Yet, if that’s true, what would make him think of UFOs? He’d never *thought* about UFOs before, so why think of them now?’

‘It’s not true that he’d never thought about UFOs before. He thought *occasionally* about UFOs. Like most of us, he’d read about them and discussed them now and then – not often, but he definitely must have done it, so they were there in the back of his mind.’

‘Hardly enough to make him switch on to UFOs to explain his amnesia.’

‘Well, there *is* something else,’ Campbell said. ‘A few weeks back I had a quiet conversation with Richard’s father, and he gave me some interesting information. It seems that Richard’s father – an engineer with British Leyland – was a Royal Air Force navigational pilot during World War Two. When Richard was a child his father used to tell him about the mysterious balls of fire that were seen by a lot of pilots and have since gone down in the literature as the first genuine reports of contemporary UFO sightings. What we’re told, we remember… so Richard could have remembered those UFO stories.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Yes. According to Richard’s father, he used to embellish his stories – just to scare the hell out of young Richard – by telling him that the balls of fire were actually flying saucers, that they were piloted by extraterrestrials, and that the extraterrestrials had a secret base in the Antarctic, from where they made all their forays.’

‘That’s an old UFO myth,’ Epstein said.

‘Precisely.’

‘So you think that this might account for the landscape of ice and snow that Richard talks about?’

‘Yes. There *is* a pattern there. First he remembers the balls of fire, immediately thinks of them as being of extraterrestrial origin, and then associates them with a landscape of ice and snow. This *could* account for his story.’

‘All right. But what would kick it off in the first place?’

Campbell shrugged. ‘Who knows? That’s the area he won’t discuss. As you could judge from the transcripts, there’s a point in his narrative beyond which he refuses to go. That point, obviously, is the actual incident that started the whole business, but he just doesn’t want to face up to it.’

Shifting uneasily in his seat, Epstein rubbed his eyes again, had a spasm of coughing, and felt despair as the taxi turned around Warren Street station, heading for Harley Street. The fantasy and the fact. The dream and the reality. He thought of the mysterious lights outside Galveston, of the enormous disk in the Caribbean, of the deaths and the disappearances and the contradictions in Air Force policy, and he realized that the dividing line was thin and could in truth be a mirage… And yet he had to know. His time was running out. He didn’t want to take his last breath before the truth was revealed to him. Epstein felt a growing rage. He wanted to smash the walls

down. He wanted to do it for Mary, for Irving Jacobs and for himself, for all the researchers who had suffered or passed away while the mystery remained. The taxi turned into Harley Street, stopped in front of Campbell's building. Epstein clambered out, leaving Campbell to pay the driver, and felt a rising impatience.

'Here we are,' Campbell said. 'The home of the brave.'

'How long before Richard's appointment?'

'Twenty minutes,' Campbell said. 'After you, sir.'

He opened the front door, ushered Epstein inside, then led him to the ancient elevator with its polished brass gate. Epstein felt trapped in the elevator, silently cursed its creaking lethargy, was relieved when they stepped out into the upstairs hallway and entered Campbell's suite. Campbell still had the same secretary. She had been with him for fifteen years. Though noticing how much she had aged, Epstein said gallantly, 'You haven't changed a bit, Elaine,' and shook her hand, then he followed Campbell into his office. After closing the door behind him, Campbell pointed to a chair facing the desk. Epstein nodded and gratefully sat down, breathing heavily, coughing.

'That's a bad cough,' Campbell said.

'Yes,' Epstein agreed.

'Did you eat on the plane?'

'Don't remind me,' Epstein said.

'Then a brandy won't do you much harm. Large or small?'

'Make it large.'

Campbell went behind his desk, opened a cupboard below it, pulled out a

bottle of Rémy Martin and two empty glasses. He poured two stiff shots, slid a glass across to Epstein, then sat back and put his feet on the desk, his glass to his lips. Epstein had a sip of brandy, felt it burning down inside him, making his head feel light and bright, his eyes watering slightly. It did him some good, warmed him up, eased his feeling of unease, but it didn't stop the growth of his rage, his increasing frustration. He coughed again and cursed mildly, recall the hospital in New York; they had confirmed what he had sensed all along, but now the truth was tormenting him. One year, maybe two. The doctor telling him this had smiled when doing so. Epstein thought again of what he had learned and then tried to forget it.

'You had another session with Richard,' he said, 'since we talked on the phone. Did you manage to crack him?'

'No,' Campbell said. 'The same routine, the same results. The minute you try to fill in the gaps, he stops giving answers.'

'You tried bullying him into it?'

'Yes. And he panicked. He just won't face up to the missing period, and I can't push too hard.'

'He's coming here twenty minutes from now?'

Campbell checked his wristwatch. 'Fifteen minutes. He's usually punctual.'

'I want to know,' Epstein said. 'I want you to give him the Pentothal. Believe me, James, it's very important to me… We must get him to talk.'

'It could be dangerous,' Campbell said. 'He's not just frightened – he's terrified. I'm not sure what will happen if we force him. The very thought makes me nervous.'

'Listen.' Epstein leaned forward in his chair, placed his glass on the desk, clasped his hands together and spoke urgently, with quiet, clipped precision.

‘This is the most remarkable close encounter case that I’ve come across so far. It *could* be true, and if it is, it’s important. Indeed, it’s more than important – it’s vital – so we have to succeed. I’m not trying to *invent* UFOs. I actually know they exist. I don’t know what they are or where they come from, but I know they’re for real. I’ve seen one myself. Stanford and I saw it together. It was in the Caribbean. It was enormous and bright and very clear, and it was visible a long time. That UFO abducted a scientist. Stanford and I were the last to see him. Now the CIA is breathing down our necks, and their breath doesn’t smell nice. They don’t believe our story – at least they *say* they don’t believe it – but I have reason to think they might actually believe it, and that their concern is really due to the fact that we reported seeing that huge UFO in the Caribbean. Don’t ask me any more for now. I’m begging you, just believe me. Now the CIA is hounding us, they’re calling our story rubbish, and so, apart from natural curiosity, we have good cause to know. Richard might be what we need. He might unlock all the secrets. We have to take the chance – we have to crack him – because we have to find out.’

Campbell stared steadily at Epstein, his eyes bright and searching, then he let his feet fall to the floor and leaned over the desk.

‘You’ve actually *seen* one?’ he asked.

‘Yes.’

‘I can’t believe that.’

‘I repeat: Stanford and I saw it together – and we didn’t imagine it. It was there a long time. There was an old boat beneath it. The UFO cast light and shadow on the boat. It was there. It existed.’

Campbell shook his head from side to side. ‘I can’t believe this,’ he said.

‘I’m not lying,’ Epstein said. ‘I don’t lie. You *know* I don’t lie.’

‘It’s too ridiculous,’ Campbell said. ‘And I don’tjust mean the UFOs.

Richard's whole story is like a dream – a typical dream.'

'Typical? How?'

'Because Richard was *seeing* it. He wasn't involved in it; he was *observing* it. He was on the outside, looking in, observing his own dream. He's not *active* in that narrative. He has no volition or will at all. All his actions are dictated by the other characters, and he never resists. He's not really a participant. He's merely an observer. At no point in the narrative does he display the slightest resistance to the men, or the creatures, he describes: what they will, he then does. It's a denial of responsibility, a repudiation of his own will. It's the classic dream of someone abdicating: the very heart of amnesia.'

'And that's all it is?'

'Probably.'

'Okay, let's assume that it actually happened. Would his total lack of will, in such circumstances, be all that unusual?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'James, one of the most common aspects of contactee cases is the apparent lack of will, or resistance, on the part of the contactee. Contactees frequently talk of how, though terrified, they felt drawn toward the aliens, felt that they were *obeying* the aliens – even when the aliens appeared not to have actually spoken. Again, just as in Richard's case, the common denominator seems to be a feeling of remoteness, of divorce from the self, with the contactees invariably behaving like zombies. Now, in this particular case we have the same thing. The woman, for instance, is initially terrified, but then, as soon as the beam of light strikes her, she becomes remarkably, unnaturally, calm. Likewise with Richard. The beam of light that strikes the woman misses Richard and therefore leaves him unaffected. However, when the alien raises his hand, or his metal claw, another beam of light strikes Richard and

temporarily renders him unconscious – and this time, when Richard awakens, he still feels fear, but he's also dazed and a bit removed, without much resistance. Thereafter, whenever Richard feels frightened, the aliens simply wave a hand across his eyes and he immediately goes limp and feels remote again. Also, as with other contactees, Richard does what the men tell him to do, but believes that they're not actually speaking to him… Now is that so impossible?'

Campbell folded one hand over the other, his cheeks slightly flushed, his gaze sombre, his interest increasing.

'Are you suggesting a form of hypnotism?' he asked.

'Why not?' Epstein said. 'There's nothing extraordinary about that – and you know its effects. As you yourself have told me, once a person has been conditioned to accept the hypnotic state, a simple phrase or a gesture can be used to put him or her into a trance immediately. Thus, the alien, just has to pass his hand across Richard's eyes to make Richard go into an hypnotic trance – but still awake, his eyes open.'

'That's possible,' Campbell said. 'And you think the beam of light was some kind of hypnotizing device?'

'It could be,' Epstein said. 'There need be nothing especially magical about it. Bear in mind that light and sound can have remarkable mental *and* physical effects on normal people. For instance, a light flickering somewhere in the alpha-rhythm range, between eight and twelve cycles a second, can cause extremely violent reactions in the person exposed to it, including jerking limbs, faintness, lightness in the head, or unconsciousness. It is scientifically possible, therefore, that the beam of light described by Richard was some sort of laser beam that simply flickered on and off at the particular rate which affects the brain's basic rhythmic patterns and encourages hypnosis. As for the strange humming, or vibrating, sounds that also appear to affect the listener, it's a scientific fact that infrasounds, which are just

below the limit of human hearing – hence Richard's uncertainty about whether he heard or *felt* the noise – can affect humans in the same way as flickering lights. Indeed, certain low frequency sounds can lead not only to a change in the brain's rhythmic patterns, but to actual *physical* changes, such as the breaking of glass or the killing of human beings by crushing their insides with pure vibration. Given this, I'm not being particularly farfetched when I suggest that the beam of light, combined with the vibrating sounds, could have led to the initial state of hypnosis.'

'Yes, Frederick, that's feasible.'

'Good. Now while we're still on the subject, there *is* one thing that repeatedly crops up in contactee cases and could possibly tie in with all this. Time and time again we're told about how the so-called aliens pressed the contactee on the side of the neck – either by hand or with a metal device – and thereby rendered the contactee unconscious or temporarily without will. Could this be related to hypnotism?'

'My God, yes, it could… In fact, it's a standard form of hypnotism: the instantaneous technique, or the carotid procedure.'

'Which is?'

'Simple biology,' Campbell said. 'You merely apply pressure to a blood vessel near the ear, thus inhibiting the heart rate, interfering with the circulation of blood to the brain, and rendering the subject dazed and confused, susceptible to hypnotic suggestion.'

'And is there such a thing as *waking hypnosis*?'

'Yes. The subject is wide-awake, knows where he is and what he's doing, but is actually doing what he has been told to do by his hypnotist. Incidentally, on the opposite end of the scale – and this could certainly apply in Richard's case – the subject can be hypnotized when sleeping normally. You simply

attract the attention of the sleeping subject with some sort of physical contact, hypnotize him by repeatedly telling him that he can hear your voice, have him perform what it is you require of him, then very gently put him back to sleep. He will later wake up, as per normal, and know nothing about it.'

'That could have happened to Richard when he awakened on the strange bed and found the man called Wilson standing over him.'

'Precisely.'

'And what about posthypnotic suggestion?'

'What about it?'

'I just thought it interesting that according to Richard's narrative he was told that he would remember nothing that had occurred – or at least that he might remember *some* of it, but that the little he recalled would be confused and probably not make much sense to him. That seems to be what's happened: Richard still can't remember it – it only comes back under hypnosis, but even there, it's pretty vague and disconnected… And there's still something missing.'

'Well, sticking to our hypothesis, yes, that's also quite possible. Assuming that Richard was hypnotized, any instructions to forget what had occurred would certainly make him forget.'

'And there's nothing particularly mysterious about this type of hypnosis?'

'No. Quite routine.' Campbell picked up his glass and had another sip of brandy, then licked his lips and set the glass down and folded his hands again. 'You know, it *is* interesting,' he said. 'According to Richard, the man told him that he had a very strong will, great resistance, and that while most people forgot the experience, Richard himself might remember it – or at least parts of it.'

‘So?’

‘For a start, the remark confirms that the experience has been undergone by other people.’

‘Yes. Richard’s account certainly ties in with a lot of other such cases, most notably the Barney and Betty hill affair of 1961 and the Pascagoula case of 1973.’

‘A great similarity there, certainly. I remember both cases.’

‘That was for a start. What else is there?’

‘Well, dear boy, still leaning on our hypothesis, it’s to be noted that when the woman was hypnotized by the beam of light – assuming, of course, that she *was* hypnotized – she went into what appears to have been a trance, a wide-awake trance, and apparently experienced no more fear. On the other hand, when *Richard* was likewise affected by the beam of light, he became more remote, but did *not* in fact lose his fear. Now this could account for that strange man’s assessment of Richard: that he had very strong will and great resistance. Accepting this, it is then possible that the woman, even if hypnotized, might not remember what had happened to her; whereas a certain kind of person – a person like our Richard – would remember a certain amount under hypnosis. In short, while your so-called aliens can apparently make abductees forget their experiences, their success in this field is rather limited.’

‘And Richard?’

‘Even with Richard, had he not come for hypnosis, he would never have remembered it at all.’

‘Yet his dreams were a sort of recall.’

‘Right,’ Campbell said. ‘Another clue to his resistance. Richard remembered

some of the events in his dreams, but didn't know what they signified. It's also worth noting that his dream – and it was the same dream every time – involves a group of men standing around him while he's lying on a bed, or operating table. From what he's told us, that can only be when he was forced to lie down on the bed and they put the metal cap on his head – the experience he refuses to detail further.'

'Refuses to detail or simply can't remember.'

'Okay,' Campbell said, 'Let's assume that his captors actually existed and that everything we've discussed actually took place. The man called Wilson was obviously intrigued by Richard's unusual strength of will and told him that *he would have to come back.* Let us suppose, then, that the metal cap was a stereotaxic skullcap, that it was used to implant a minute electrode in Richard's skull to reinforce his inability to remember… Now, when one tries to force Richard to recall that particular episode in details, he not only displays considerable stress, but also clutches his head and shakes it with great violence – and later awakens with an extremely bad headache… Is it therefore possible that Richard has been *programmed* to feel pain and fear when he tries to recall that event? And, further, that they want him to return in order to check out the relative success or failure of the implantation?'

Epstein smiled with pleasure. 'You've just come full circle,' he said. 'Now *you're* the one asking questions. You've become a believer.'

Campbell grinned and raised his hands in mock surrender. 'I accept defeat,' he said. 'Now you have me as curious as yourself: another obsessed man.'

'Good,' Epstein said. 'I like to hear that. So, is it possible?'

'Yes,' Campbell said. 'Implantation of electrodes in the brain has been going on for years – overtly in animals, covertly in human beings, with the latter experiments mostly kept secret. What *we* do know at this point is that electrodes implanted in the human brain have been used successfully to

activate both paralyzed and artificial limbs, to control otherwise uncontrollable muscular spasms, such as in Parkinson's Disease, to pacify violent mental patients and prisoners, and even to initial so-called *thought control* between a human controller and a computer. Now, given that any form of human brain manipulation can have frightening social and political possibilities – which is why, for instance, even the Society of Hypnotists is under constant government surveillance – a lot of the experiments on human beings have been conducted behind closed doors, most notoriously in mental institutions and state prisons. The results of such experiments are thus not widely known. Nevertheless, given what has already been accomplished, and what might have been accomplished in secret, it is safe to assume that the sort of programming we're talking about is well within the bounds of possibility.'

'How are the subjects controlled?'

'Well, it's on the record that the reflexes and appetites of various animals have been controlled at a reasonable distance by a controller sitting behind a computer-linked console. These animals can be made to stand up, sit down, eat or starve themselves to death, play, fight, collapse in terror – just about anything. Regarding human beings, we have, to date, only been able to stimulate specific areas of the brain, and do so, reportedly, under immediately visual control. Regarding long-distance control, it's reasonable to assume that the particular response required would be programmed at the time of the implantation – fed into the brain via the computer – and would be limited to one or two responses only. To put it at its simplest – and taking Richard as our hypothetical case – yes, they could have implanted an electrode in his brain and programmed him to feel pain and terror each time he attempted to think of a particular incident. In other words, it's quite possible that when I try to force Richard to recall the skullcap incident, the very thought of it might stimulate the terror and the crippling headaches – a terror and pain caused by the implanted electrode.'

'Another form of hypnosis,' Epstein said.

‘No,’ Campbell said. ‘Total mind control.’

‘You mean that by taking this technology to its ultimate limits we could steal a man’s mind?’

‘That’s right,’ Campbell said.

Epstein stiffened in his chair, suddenly charged with excitement and energy, feeling that he was standing on the edge of a precipice, about to leap across to the unknown. The possibilities were boundless, the implications awesome, and the truth was probably locked in Richard’s mind. They had to pick the lock, had to force the door open. The risk would be great, but the rewards could be greater: the final unraveling of the mystery that now teased the whole world. Epstein shivered, feeling feverish, his head light and bright, no longer drained by fear and depression and thoughts of his grim future.

‘We have to!’ he exclaimed. ‘We have to use the Pentothal! We have to use it during this coming session and find out what happened!’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Campbell said.

‘*We have to*!’ Epstein insisted.

‘It might be too early for that. Too early. Too dangerous.’

‘Damn you, James, it’s important!’

‘It’s not *that* important, Frederick. I mean, you’ve been at this game for thirty years – you can wait a bit longer.’

‘I can’t,’ Epstein said, and felt ashamed as soon as he said it. ‘I have cancer. I have two years at the most. I won’t live beyond that.’

Campbell stared at him, shocked. Both of them: shocked. They stared at one another for a long time, the silence enslaving them. Then Epstein looked

away, keeping his eyes on the floor. He suddenly felt very old, very frail, as if in finally acknowledging what was happening to him, he had made it real.

‘I have to know,’ he said eventually. ‘I can’t die without knowing. As you say, I’ve been at it for thirty years, but now I believe I can solve it. It’s the most important thing in my life. A lot of others have suffered for it. I can’t come this close and let go… and every day it’s more urgent. It’s not just for me. It’s not purely selfish. It’s for Irving and Mary and all the others who were ruined trying to crack it. There’s something going on, James. It’s not an illusion; it’s real. Now my time is running out and I’m close, very close, and I can’t sit back and hope that Richard remembers… I have to know *now*.’

Campbell sighed and stood up, turned away, stared out the window, turned back to face Epstein again, checked his wristwatch and frowned.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I’ll give Richard Pentothal. After that, no matter what he tells us, I’ll have his head X-rayed.’

He sat down again. They stared silently at one another. The neat room was as quiet as a tomb and neither knew what to say. They both sat there, feeling stricken. They kept checking their wristwatches. They both sat there for a very long time, but Richard never showed up.

CHAPTER TWENTY

When did Kammler and Nebe die? It was a long time ago. They were gassed as they slept in their rooms, and then I had them cremated. I didn't really have a choice. My implants were not perfected. We were still using the Death's Head SS and their obscene forms of discipline. It was shortly after the war. Kammler and Nebe showed much resentment. Powers corrupts and they both had great power and started plotting against me. I could not let this happen. My life's work was reaching fruition. Hidden deep in the immense, frozen wilderness, the colony functioned. Thus I had to get rid of them. Their room doors locked automatically. They never knew all the time they were there that the walls could spit gas. They died on their own beds. The room was aired and they were removed. They were taken to the crematorium in the base of the mountain, incinerated, turned to ash and smoke, leaving me independent.

How ironic was their death! It was a death befitting both. For how many had they themselves sent to the gas chambers during those nightmare years? I think particularly of Kammler. SS General Hans Kammler. Kammler planned the concentration camps, supervised the plans for Birkenau, was responsible for its four great gas chambers and its vile crematoria. A handsome, ruthless man. Energetic and decisive. His gross ambition, and his total lack of scruples, made him someone worth knowing.

August 1943. Hammler was then at his peak. His lust for power had increased every year and he was then almost godlike. Yet that wasn't enough for him. He wanted more and more. Most particularly, he wanted control of the V-2 rockets and all those who worked on them. He had tried for that and

failed. Then Peenemünde was bombed. Himmler suggested to Hitler that Peenemünde had been betrayed, and that his SS should take control immediately. Hitler agreed to this. Himmler now had full control. He immediately moved mass production of the rockets to the caves near Nordhausen. General Kammler was put in charge. He became Himmler's right-hand man. When that happened, I had to do something to protect my own project.

Those were dangerous years. The war was not going well. The Russian offensive was a disaster, Italy had fallen to the Allies, Hitler's physical and mental health was collapsing, and the Reich was in ruins. My own position was no better. As it recall, it was precarious. I now doubted Himmler's sanity and will, and this made me uneasy. The slaves were still being sent to Kiel. From there they were shipped to the frozen wilderness. The great caves were expanding under the ice, but they seemed far away. I wondered if I would ever get there. I no longer trusted Himmler. As disaster followed disaster for the Reich, I saw his brimming hysteria. I still wanted the wilderness. I knew I couldn't depend on Himmler. His hysteria was making him indecisive and that meant he was dangerous. I still wanted the wilderness, I didn't want Himmler there, and I met Kammler in 1943 and was drawn to his ruthlessness.

Kammler knew of my project. Himmler sent him to check it out. I was then at the BMW Platz near Prague, still working unceasingly. I knew the war would soon be lost. I was playing a double game. The game was highly dangerous, very tricky, and I had to be careful. I still badly needed Himmler. His facilities were essential. Yet I knew that he now lived in fear of being found out by Hitler. After all, it was betrayal. Himmler was building his private empire. If the Führer discovered his intentions he would have Himmler executed. Thus Himmler became frightened. In his mild eyes there was frenzy. He had promised to give der Führer great new weapons, and der Führer was restless. I didn't dare complete my saucer. Not until I reached the wilderness. I was frightened that Himmler's growing confusion might make

him give it to Hitler. That would mean the end of everything. The Allies would take it over. As for myself, I would be classed as a war criminal, and probably hanged.

On top of this, there was Schriever. The Flugkapitän was ambitious. Yet another of Himmler's scientific pets, he had the need to impress him. Schriever's eyes devoured my saucer. He was in competition with me. I knew that if the saucer was completed, he would take all the credit. Already I had seen him do this. He had the slyness of a simple man. Himmler insisted that we share the whole project, and I knew what he meant. I was Himmler's secret. The Flugkapitän was not. Once the project was completed I would simply disappear, and then Himmler could offer der Führer my saucer as a German achievement. So, Schriever was a threat. He wanted credit for my achievements. Because of this, I withheld a great deal and understated my progress. Schriever worked from doctored drawings. I gave him enough to make it credible. The Schriever saucer could rise and hover briefly, but it didn't yet fly. I had to let it progress slowly. Not much, but enough. Meanwhile, in the BMW Platz, I quietly finished the real work.

My sole thought was for the wilderness. The hangars were multiplying beneath the snow. Sooner or later, I would have to escape and join the vast, hidden colony. I could not depend on Himmler. His rising panic had made him treacherous. I could see, in his fear and indecision, that he might never leave. I needed another ally. Another man of gross ambition. I met Kammler in the BMW Platz and knew that here was my man.

Kammler was an organizer. He was decisive and ruthless. More importantly, his ambition was boundless, his selfishness total. I worked on him slowly. It took months, but I was patient. Kammler's one thought, at the time, was self-survival, and that's what I played on. He already knew of the secret colony. He was startled and intrigued. I could see, as I unveiled further facts, that he was drawn to the notion. The Reich was crumbling all about him. There were plots and counterplots. The Nazis were devouring their own kind and survival

was difficult. Then, of course, there were the Allies. Kammler knew the war was lost. He also knew that if the Allies took him prisoner they would certainly hang him. Kammler had to get out of Germany. He had to disappear completely. When I knew this, I told him of my plan and he said he would join me.

That same month he went to see Himmler and blatantly lied to him. He painted me in a black light. He praised Schriever to the skies. He claimed that my project was a mess, that I was stealing from Schriever. I was too old, he said. Flugkapitän Schriever was young and bright. He said that Schriever should be given his own project and encouraged much more. Himmler wasn't too sure, but Kammler pressed home his point. He reminded Himmler that the Allied invasion had begun and that he should take precautions. Kummersdorft West should be evacuated. The American and Schriever should be separated. Kammler suggested that I be moved to the mountainous region of Thuringia, and that Schriever be moved to Mahren. It was better that way, he said. Schriever could then work unencumbered. Himmler, now dependent on Kammler, promptly gave his consent.

I was moved out shortly after. At last I was free of Schriever. In Kahla, in the mountains of Thuringia, I completed my major work. Himmler never knew about it. Kammler told him I was useless. Eventually, Himmler turned his attentions away from me and focused them all on young Schriever. That was just what we wanted. We were not concerned with Schriever. I had insured that Schriever's flying saucer project would never succeed.

June 25, 1944. In my office in the research center at Kahla, I talked to Kammler and Nebe. I remember it well. SS General Artur Nebe. A man whose very name suggested terror and the screams from the basements. General Nebe was ice and fire. He had the cunning of a rat. He was a man who did not show his feelings, who worked quietly and ruthlessly. An exemplary record with the Gestapo. Extermination squads in Russia. With such work he had gutted his soul and embraced the unthinkable. Nebe knew

how to survive. He was a master of intrigue. He had trampled on the bones of countless comrades to protect his own skin. A dangerous man, certainly. Also, a cold realist. And that day in my office in Kahla his eyes were wide open.

General Nebe was escaping. There had been an assassination attempt. The Führer had survived the explosion and was now seeking vengeance. The reprisals were terrible. Himmler's men were butchering hundreds. A lot of officers were fleeing for their lives, disappearing forever. General Nebe was such a man. He had been forced to desert. Kammler had told him of what we were doing and he now wished to join us.

Nebe controlled the escape route. His most fanatical SS men joined him. Those men formed the chain that stretched from Kahla to the port in the Baltic. I often watched the trains pull out. The SS cracked their whips. The dogs snapped at the ankles of the children as they wept on the platform. Many came from the concentration camps. Others came from the Lebensborn. We stole children from all over Europe and marked them for slavery. The trains took them to Kiel. The ships and submarines transported them farther. They vanished off the face of the Earth and were not seen again.

Meanwhile, I continued working. My time was running out. The final components for the saucer were in production, but had not yet been tested. The Red Army was in Warsaw. Very soon it would reach the Oder. I had to complete the saucer and test it before the Russians arrived.

Kammler helped me all he could. His authority was considerable. What we didn't have, he took from other scientists and less powerful research centers. Hitler was dreaming of secret weapons. He spared no expense in getting them. All over Germany, even as the bombs were falling, the scientists worked night and day. There was an Atomic Bomb project. There were electrical submarines. There were laser beams and infrared warheads and remote-control systems. The Kaiser Wilhelm Institut. The Forschungsinstitut

of Lindau am Bodensee. From such places I stole what might help to enhance my own project. The swirling energy of the Feuerball. A porous metal called Luftschwamm. In the laboratories of the Kreiselgerate, not far from Berlin Britz, I solved the problems of gyroscopic control and Prandtl's infamous boundary layer. This latter proved to be the breakthrough. The boundary layer was the key. By the end of 1944 we had conquered it and started final construction.

The thought of Schriever amuses me. Perhaps it always will. I look out upon the gleaming ice caps and think of what that man lost. Schriever lived for fool's gold. His saucer designs were all useless. While I finished the real work in Thuringia, he chased phantoms in Mahren. His flying disk was an abortion. All my guidelines had been false. Nevertheless, Schriever they would work, and that's what I wanted. Himmler rarely asked about me. He kept visiting Schriever. The Schriever disk could hover just above the ground, but could do little else. No matter: it was impressive. Schriever thought he could make improvements. He told Himmler that it only needed time and the Reichsführer believed him. That was just what I wanted. It was exactly what I had planned. As Himmler focused all his attention on Schriever's disk, I got on with the real one.

It was a miracle that I managed it. It was a desperate, frantic race. The skies overhead were filled with Allied aircraft, the horizon was smokey. The Ardennes offensive had failed. The Soviets had now crossed the Oder. The Allied armies were advancing in the south and our towns were in ruins. Hitler had moved into the Chancellery. He was preparing his Götterdämmerung. His Reichsführer, Heinrich Himmler, was in panic and had almost forgotten me. Himmler wanted a flying saucer. He wanted Schriever's flying disk. Because of this, I was free to continue without interference. The war raged far away. The smoke thickened on the horizon. We stepped out of our caves to see this, and then we went back to work.

I remember it all vividly. The sounds of labor still reverberate. The great

underground complex at Kahla represented my future. The caves were inside the mountain. From the air they were invisible. Inside them were thousands of slave workers and dedicated technicians. The bright lights stung our eyes. Walls of stone cast eerie shadows. Machines roared and plates of silvery porous metal dangled over our heads. The flying saucer was a skeleton, but it soon grew to fill the hangar. The technicians clambered under its steel ribs, their eyes covered in goggles. The searing white flames of the welders. The laborers sweating under the Perspex dome of the pilot's cabin. The lights beamed down and flashed off the cabin and hazed the slave workers. The great caves dwarfed them all. They were cathedrals carved from stone. The sounds of riveting and welding and drilling reverberated throughout. The men looked very small. They were like ants in an ant-hill. They climbed ladders, crossed catwalks, stood on platforms and girders, now removed from the real world, isolated inside the mountain, working long hours and sleeping little, supervised by Nebe's soldiers.

We kept working night and day. We heard the thunder of distant guns. Every night our trains snaked down the mountain and headed for Kiel. The flying saucer took shape. Its gleaming mass filled the hangar. The final plates were welded around the pilot's cabin and the body was finished. The large saucer hung from chains. It was lowered onto the sturdy legs. The legs housed the four jet propulsion boosters that would aid its ascent. The disk locked onto the legs. The noise echoed throughout the caves. The slaves looked on in silence, their eyes dulled with exhaustion, while the technicians all cheered and applauded, their hands linked in triumph.

As historic day. I will never forget it. I stood beside Kammler and Nebe and felt as if I was dreaming. The enormous hangar doors opened. Light and cold air rushed in. The Kugelblitz, now supported on metal blocks, had its own kind of beauty. We wheeled it out of the hangar. The date was 14 February, 1945. The sun shone upon the base of the mountain, but was darkened by gray smoke. Then the rain and snow came. We had to cancel the test flight. Two days later, on 16 February, the piloted saucer soared to the heavens. It

climbed vertically and gracefully, stopped abruptly and then shot south. It became a winking light above the battlefields, a bright star in the smokey haze.

The next week, we destroyed it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The minute he saw the house the pain left, but the fear lingered on. Richard stood by the gate. The gravel path ran through the gardens. The moonlight fell over the flowers, over the Audi car in the driveway, over the Italian tiles that led up to the front door of the elegant Georgian house. Richard pressed his head again. He couldn't believe that the pain had gone. The pain had pulled him from his bed, the voices whispering, urging, and sent him on the next train to Cornwall, determined to find her. Now he shivered with trepidation. The pain had gone, but the fear lingered on. He glanced up at the house in the moonlight and wondered how he had found it. In truth, it had not been easy. She had told him she was from St Nicholas. It was a very small village, he had discovered when he arrived here, and those he had spoken to knew the lady.

He had asked about her in the local pub, feeling dazed, the headache blinding him, and the men with the pints of beer and whiskies had all chattered at once. Aye, lad, they knew the lady, knew the expensive foreign car; the lady and her bloody great car were located just outside the village… And so he had walked here, still dazed, the headache killing him, and now stood by the wide, open iron gates, not believing he'd made it. The headache had gone, but the fear lingered on. Richard kicked the gravel nervously with one foot, then looked up at the large house.

What had he come? He didn't know why he had come. Yes, he knew – because the headaches had defeated him and the voices had urged him. What voices? *The voices*. The voices? Was he mad? Sitting slumped in the train, his head throbbing, he had sensed his own lunacy. Not voices. Couldn't be.

He had gone to the bar carriage. The bar was crowded and the smoke stung his eyes and made his throbbing head worse. And the voices. *I won't listen*! He drank a double Scotch. It burned down inside him, a thin flame, and made him feel better. Yet the headache grew worse. Forced back to his seat, he sat slumped again. Closing his eyes, he tried to block out the voices, but they refused to be silenced. What voices? *I won't listen*! He wanted to scream with pain. The pain was killing him and the voices were whispering and making him dizzy. Five hours on the train. Shadows creeping across the hills. He had glanced once at the moors and closed his eyes and felt the fear breathing over him. What voices? *I won't listen*! The train had pulled into Bodmin. He had disembarked and walked to the village like a man in a trance. Then the smokey pub, the noisy chatter and ringing glasses. He had asked about the lady with the Audi car and they had pointed the way. A short walk through the darkness. The night silent, stars glittering. He had arrived at the gate of the house… and then the headache had gone.

The fear lingered on. It was with him right now. He stood by the open gates and kicked the gravel and saw lights in the windows. The house looked white in the moonlight. It was a converted, eighteenth century manor: elegant, romantic, dreamlike, the stars glittering above it. Richard advanced through the gateway, stopped again and felt the fear. Why fear? There was nothing to fear, and yet he felt it, and shivered. Then he moved forward again, knowing he couldn't turn back now. When he thought of turning back, his head hurt and the voices returned. He was imagining it, of course. He tried to turn back and his head hurt again and the voices returned. Licking his lips, he studied the house and then moved forward again.

Silence. A light breeze. The light breeze hissed through the silence. Richard walked along the broad, curving driveway toward the white Audi. It was definitely the same car. There could be no doubt about it. Richard looked at the car and felt a chill and remembered the white haze. No, he should not have come here. Yes, he had to go on. The voices whispering in his head confirmed the latter as he approached the car. He stopped, glanced above

him, saw the black sky, the stars, felt fear and something else, a sense of wonder, then moved forward again.

He stopped at the car. His fear and wonder had increased. He shivered, felt the ice in the breeze, and reached out to the car. His ran his fingers along the hood. He had to confirm that it was real. Satisfied, he gazed up at the house, the tall windows in white walls. All the lights were on. The whole house was ablaze. He saw velvet drapes, a chandelier, a rich mahogany table. There were lanterns about the front door, a door made of polished wood. The door was open and he thought that was strange and it made him more frightened.

Fear. The inexplicable. He moved slowly around the car. The breeze hissed and chilled the sweat on his brow and made him shiver again. He advanced across the Italian tiles. The fear closed in and held him. He had the urge to turn around and run away, but he just couldn't do it. Then he was on the porch. Italian tiles and potted plants. There were vines writhing along the balustrades then gleamed white in the moonlight. He stood there, uncertain, thinking of Jenny and the doctors; remembered them, forgot them, heard the voices, then walked up to the front door.

Why was the door open? He knew why: she was waiting for him. She had known he would come, somehow known that, and now she expected him.

Fear. The inexplicable. The need to know and the fear of knowing. He reached out and touched the door with his fingertips, lightly stroking it, testing it. The door was real enough. A bright light poured out from inside. He stepped forward and pushed the door farther back and then stepped into the house.

Silence. The hall was empty. Paintings hung from paneled walls. There was a chandelier glittering below the ceiling, illuminating the stairs. Rich carpets, shining glassware. Richard stood there, couched in fear. The stairs ran up to a balcony that was angled around the hall, closed doors concealing numerous other rooms and offering only more silence.

Richard licked his dry lips and looked reluctantly around him. Two varnished doors, one at either side, leading into more rooms. One of the doors was open. Light poured out around it. He knew it was the room that he had seen from the driveway: the room with the velvet drapes and chandelier and rich mahogany table. He took a deep breath, not alone, sensing someone, remembering the silhouettes in the white haze, the woman's red hair and green eyes. Then he walked to the open door. The silence swam out to surround him. He pushed the door back and stepped in and then stopped, feeling even more frightened.

She was sitting at the far end of the table, her red hair tumbling down, the green eyes very bright, even now, at this considerable distance. She was staring directly at him, perfectly still, almost frozen. She was wearing a black evening gown, flowery frills around the sleeves, and her right hand was holding a glass of what looked like red wine. Though a chandelier was hanging above her head, the table was further illuminated with flickering candles.

Yes, Richard was frightened. Her green eyes were insane. She raised her glass and sipped at the wine and then set the glass down.

'I was expecting you,' she said.

'Why?' Richard asked.

'I just knew you were coming,' she said. 'Don't ask me how. I just knew.'

Richard didn't move toward her. He was frightened and confused. He didn't know why he was here, couldn't believe that he was here, felt unreal and divorced from himself, not in charge of his actions. The woman just sat there, staring at him, not smiling. In the black dress, surrounded by flickering candles and antiques, she looked like someone from long ago. Another time, another age. Richard hardly knew where he was. He had the feeling that he had stepped into a dream from which he might not escape. His headache had

gone, but the fear lingered on. He stood there, near the door, staring at her, wondering who had informed her.

‘How did you know?’ he said.

‘I told you not to ask that.’

‘I had to come,’ he said. ‘I just had to. I have to know why.’

She smiled bleakly and raised her glass, sipped more wine, set the glass down. The glass made a sharp ringing sound that made Richard’s heart leap.

‘Why did you have to come?’

‘I’m not sure,’ Richard said. ‘I’d forgotten – I was trying to forget – and then it all rushed back to me. I started having bad headaches. I thought the headaches were going to kill me. I heard voices, or I thought I heard voices, and kept thinking of you. I just had to come. It seemed imperative that I come. I had the feeling, I had this thing in my head, that said to come here would cure me. The headaches were really bad. They drove me out of my apartment. I didn’t know what to do, I couldn’t think of anything else, just… the train… I thought of catching the train, and that made it seem better.’

‘And your headache has gone?’

‘I think so. I hope so.’

‘How strange,’ she said. ‘My headache’s gone as well. It’s very strange… I’m not frightened.’

Her declaration frightened Richard. He glanced nervously around the room. He didn’t know what he was expecting to see, but he had to look anyway. A long wall lined with books. Velvet curtains, framed paintings, various trophies, the glint of bottles and glasses. The long table was illuminated. Her green eyes were slightly shadowed. The shadows deepened where they

swallowed the corners, creating eerie, gargoyle shapes. Richard shivered, feeling cold, wondering vaguely where he actually was. He glanced around him and then stared at the woman, feeling desperate, in need of her.

‘How are you?’ he asked.

‘Pardon?’

‘How are you?’

She looked bemused, brow furrowed, not believing what she had heard, then she put her head back, the hair gleaming, burning red, tumbling over her bare, convulsed shoulders as her laughter exploded.

‘What…?’

‘Oh, my God!’ Her laughter reverberated around the room, a shocking sound, possibly insane, devoid of humor or warmth. ‘Oh, my God, what a question!’

Richard froze where he stood. ‘Shut up,’ he said quietly.

‘*How are you*?’ the woman gasped, getting her breath back. ‘What a question to ask me!’ Then she burst out laughing again. Hysterical laughter.

Richard stepped forward, hardly knowing what he was doing, seeing bright light, deep shadows, glinting glass, flickering candles, the chairs stacked against the table, all empty, there for ghosts, her laughter whiplashing the silence, demented, a jagged sound. He slapped her face. It was a single, precise blow. The laughter ceased as her head jerked to the side, and froze there, green eyes wide. She took a deep breath. She stared at the opposite wall, her eyes unnaturally bright, her lips forming a tight line, holding in a cold fury. Richard stepped back, pulled a chair out and sat in it. The woman stared at the wall, leaning forward, turned sideways, then she straightened up and took a deep breath and touched her cheek with her left hand.

‘You hurt me,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry,’ Richard said. ‘I didn’t know what else to do. You sounded hysterical.’

She touched her cheek again, smiled ruefully, picked her glass up, sipped some wine and then put the glass down and pushed the bottle toward him.

‘Have a drink,’ she said. ‘I think you need a drink. Before the night’s out, you’ll need it more, but you probably won’t get it.’

‘What does that mean?’ Richard asked.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied. ‘I don’t know what any of this means… I only know that it’s happening.’

Richard poured himself a drink, noticed that his hand was shaking, quickly set the bottle back on the table and returned his gaze to the woman.

‘How did you know I was coming here?’

‘I just knew,’ the woman replied. ‘I just had the feeling… a very strong feeling.’

‘You left the front door open.’

‘Yes, I left it open.’

‘You don’t leave a front door open for a mere feeling. It must have been more than that.’

The woman just smiled. Her green eyes were strange. They were bright, but they were looking straight at him as if not really seeing him. Richard felt himself shivering. He reached out for his glass of wine. He picked it up and turned it around and saw the candlelight reflected in it, forming a blood-streaked, yellow eye.

‘Drink it,’ the woman said. ‘It’s not poisoned. It won’t hurt you, I promise.’

Richard drank some wine. He set the glass back on the table. The woman watched him with that strange, bright intensity, her left hand tightly clenched.

‘Where’s your husband?’ Richard asked.

‘He’s not here right now.’

‘Where is he?’

‘I don’t know,’ the woman said. ‘He left me five months ago.’

‘Left you? You mean for good?’

‘Yes, I mean for good. The poor man thought his wife was going mad, so he packed up and left.’

‘So *are* you going mad?’

‘Possibly. I think so.’ She picked her glass up and drank some more wine, then licked the rim with a pink tongue. ‘I rarely sleep these days,’ she said. ‘I get nightmares when I *do* sleep. I get angry, start smashing things up, wreck the place, rip the phones out.’ She set her glass back on the table, lit a cigaret, inhaled, turned her head aside to exhale the smoke, slowly turned back to face him. ‘We had dreadful rows,’ she said. ‘I never knew what I was saying. I just hated him – no reason – just hated him and wanted to get rid of him. I had to be on my own. I don’t know why – I just had to. I wanted to be alone in this mausoleum, where I could wait… wait for something… Naturally, he left me. I could barely live with myself. I had headaches, like migraines, bad dreams, really terrible, then he left me and it all went away and I sat back and waited. I’ve been waiting for five months.’

She exhaled cigaret smoke, let it swirl around her face, a blue haze disguising

her fading good looks, the lines of tension and loss. Yes, she had changed. Her face advertised the fear. Richard now saw a woman much older, quietly mad, disappearing.

‘Waiting?’ he asked. ‘Waiting for what?’

She shrugged, shook her head, studied her glowing cigaret, looked at him as if looking through him, nicked ash to the floor.

‘Fucked if I know,’ she said. ‘I just know there’s something happening. Last night I had a headache, went to sleep and dreamed about you. I woke up and thought my head was coming apart, but I kept thinking of you. I knew then that you were coming. I was convinced that when you came I’d be cured, so I opened the front door.’

‘That’s crazy,’ Richard said.

‘Is it? You really think so? And yet *you* had a headache, it drove you out of your apartment, it compelled you to catch a train to Cornwall, it drove you all the way here… Are we both…? Are we crazy?’

Richard glanced around the room. A nineteenth-century drawing room. The shadows swallowed the corners, crept along the bookshelves, crawled across the floor and faded out against a bright pool of light. Another time, another age. Another age, another place. He sipped his wine and felt the shifting of his mind, slipping away through a black hole. He wasn’t here; he was there – somewhere else, far away – here and there, which were one and the same, divorced from reality. Then he stared at the woman. Her green eyes swam in the shadows: mad eyes, obsessed with what was coming, seeing more than they understood.

‘What happened?’ Richard asked. ‘That day on the moors. I remember the silhouettes in the white haze. Only that. Nothing else.’

The woman licked her upper lip, unfocused eyes wandering, returning, fixing

upon him, looking through him and beyond him, going back, finding nothing.

‘Why ask me?’ she said. ‘I remember no more than you. I woke up three days later, in the car, in the same place, and drove straight home, not understanding what had happened, not really believing it. I remembered the start of it. That huge aircraft in the haze. I remembered the saucers flying around us, the lights beaming in on us. Then nothing. Oblivion. I woke up and you weren’t there. It was dawn and I thought I’d slept there all night, that I’d somehow passed out. So, I drove back here, went to bed and slept all day. I got up, had some food, watched TV, and found out that three days had passed. Then the headaches started. The nightmares, the fear. When my husband asked me where I had been, I told him to fuck off. Later, when he tried to make love to me, I flinched with revulsion. I couldn’t understand it. I just knew I had to get rid of him. I had fits and started wrecking the house, and he left me eventually. It was easier after that: no more nightmares, no headaches. Just people… I couldn’t stand to see people, so I stayed in the house. I just hung around all day. I drank a lot and that helped me. I knew something was happening, *would* happen, but I didn’t know what. No nightmares, no fear. That all started again last night. I knew then that it had happened, that it hadn’t been a dream, and I knew that you would come here tonight and that soon it would end.’

‘*What* would end?’ Richard asked.

‘I don’t know. I just know it will end.’

She stubbed her cigaret out, picked her glass up, drank some wine, set the glass back on the table, looked at it, then smacked it away. The noise made Richard twitch. He glanced at the table. The glass was lying on its side, reflecting the candlelight, still rocking slightly from side to side, the red wine pouring out across the table and dripping down to the floor. Richard looked at the woman. She stood up and smoothed her dress. She was tall and slim, her face pale and fatigued, still elegant, her hair gleaming in the light, falling onto her shoulders.

‘Did the police come?’ Richard asked.

‘The police?’ She looked puzzled. ‘No, not the police… Some men came, wearing black suits. Briefcases… From the government… Took notes.’

‘About a week after it happened?’

‘No. About a month. They said it was just routine. They took notes. I haven’t seen them since then.’

‘They came *a month* after the event?’

‘That’s right. A good month.’

‘What did you tell them?’

‘I told them what I remembered about the incident. I don’t think they believed me.’

Her gaze was steady, but unfocused. She was still standing in front of her chair. The shadows fell across her face, across the swell of her breasts. Richard stared at her, mesmerized. She moved slightly and the light from the chandelier fell upon her hands. Her fingers were locked loosely together, long and thin, a pale web.

‘What did they say?’ Richard whispered.

The woman shrugged. ‘Nothing much. They told me they had seen you, that you’d told them what had happened, that they just wanted to confirm that it was true. I told them what I remembered. It wasn’t much, but they wrote it down. Two men, quietly spoken, polite. I haven’t seen them since then.’

‘You confirmed that it really happened?’

‘I confirmed what I remembered. When I got to the beam of light, they just smiled, not believing a word of it. They said I had seen the planet Venus.

They got in their car and drove off and have not been back since.'

She still stood there, gazing around her, far away, not really present, a ghostly lady in a long, flowing dress, the walls behind her in shadow. Richard couldn't grasp what was happening. His fear blossomed in the silence. He looked up and saw her glittering eyes, their bright, unfocused depths. What was he doing here? What were they both waiting for? Richard thought of standing up and walking out, but his head tightened instantly. He knew then that he wouldn't leave. His gaze fastened on the woman's breasts. He breathed deeply and the threatened pain faded and his head felt more normal.

'This is crazy,' he said.

'Yes,' she said, 'it's crazy.'

'I'm frightened, but I don't really know why.'

'It's all right. It's all right.'

Richard felt a sudden chill, remembering the dazzling white haze, remembering that what she'd said at that moment had frightened him more. *It's all right. It's all right*. He recalled the words clearly. He now looked at her green eyes, too bright, surveying the room, and he knew, even through his mounting fear, that in some way he needed her.

'We've been brought together,' he said.

'Yes,' she said, 'I think so.'

'Why?' he said. 'I don't understand.'

'It's all right. It's all right.'

She gently bit her lower lip, staring past him, through the windows, looking up at the black, star-flecked sky, her eyes searching, appealing. A shiver ran

down Richard's spine, made him feel more defenceless. He saw the darkness lying over the lawns outside, a fine line of mushrooming trees. The stars were bright and multitudinous, offering silence, revealing nothing, and he returned his gaze to the woman and felt the fear deepening.

'I feel tired,' he said obliquely.

'It's very tired,' she replied.

'Do I stay here? Is that what I do? I *have* to stay here… the headaches.'

The woman just smiled, a strange smile, not her own. She raised her right hand and stroked her red hair, flecks of steel in her green eyes.

'Yes,' she said, 'the headaches… Something's happening… It's all right… Yes, of course, you have to stay here… We both have to stay here.'

Richard was mesmerized. Her black dress flowed on her body. She was tall, her skin white, very elegant, spectral in the shadowed light.

'Can I sleep here?' Richard asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'You should sleep. You'll feel better.'

They stared at one another. The wind moaned across the lawns. The candles flickered on the table, their light defeated by the light from the chandelier, a larger pool of light around them both: a pool of light in the darkness.

'I'll take you up,' the woman said.

'Thanks,' Richard said. 'I haven't actually brought anything with me… No pyjamas… No towels.'

The woman waved her right hand, a languid, eloquent gesture. 'Don't worry,' she said. 'It's all right. I'm always ready for guests.'

Richard stood up awkwardly, his body aching and weak, glanced up and was blinded by the chandelier, looked away, his eyes sparkling. The corners of the room were dark. Glasses glittered in a cabinet. He saw his shadowy reflection in the glass, a wavering ghost, nonexistent. Then he saw another reflection, a flowing form, incorporeal, felt a chill and turned around and saw the woman advancing slowly upon him.

‘This way,’ she said, touching him lightly as she passed, her long fingers outspread, brushing briefly across his chest, then falling back to her side as she walked on, the dress rustling around her.

Richard followed her out, stepping into the hallway, a pulse beating nervously in his stomach as he walked toward the stairs. The hall seemed very large. It looked bigger than it was. They advanced across the carpet, the woman’s dress rustling lightly, then the woman put her hand on the bannister and calmly walked up.

Richard followed her, feeling strange, more unnerved by her calmness, confused, not really knowing what was happening, wondering if he was still sane. None of this seemed real – not the house, not the stairs, not the lights that bled weakly from the walls and fell over the woman. He reached out for the bannister. It was smooth to his touch. He looked up at the woman, at the swaying of her hips, his gaze traveling along her bare arm to her wrist, the white flesh on the polished wood. She was real. It was happening. They both stepped onto the landing. The woman looked back over her shoulder and smiled enigmatically… then she walked away from him.

Richard followed her, feeling cold, along the balcony, through the shadows, the wall-lamps hanging downward, glowing dimly, a modest aid in the gloom. The woman stopped at a closed door, put her hand out, turned the knob, gently pushed the door open and then stepped back, waving Richard inside. He glanced at her, saw the smile, a strange smile, not her own, then he shivered and brushed past her and stepped in, his should grazed by her breasts.

‘Will this do?’ she asked quietly.

Richard hardly saw the room, just the bed, the covers turned back, a lamp burning on a table beside the bed, a pool of light in the shadows.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It’s fine.’

‘You look tired,’ she said. ‘Exhausted. That other door leads to the bathroom. In there you’ll find towels… pyjamas.’

Richard nodded, but said nothing, too nervous, confused, mesmerized by her eyes, by that green, opaque glittering, by the long line of her body, the black dress, the shadowed light all around her.

‘Don’t worry,’ she murmured. ‘It’s all right. It’s all right. Have a good sleep and then you’ll feel better. We’ll just stay here. We’ll wait.’

He wanted to know what she meant, what she thought they were waiting for. He opened his mouth and then closed it again, now afraid of his own voice. The woman stepped forward, put her hand on the doorknob, stepped back and pulled the door as she went, disappeared, the door closing.

Richard stood there in the silence, in a noise that seemed like silence, his ears ringing, the closed door in his eyes, feeling tense and light-headed. He stood there a long time. He heard her walking away. She stopped walking, a door opened and closed, and then the silence was total.

Richard sighed, feeling dazed, still frightened, then turned around to have a good look at the room, a spacious room, neat and comfortable. He studied it carefully, drank it in and saw nothing, just the bed and the lamp on the table in a window-framed darkness. He crossed the room to the window. Feeling nervous, he looked out. He saw the far edge of a patio, a low wall, a few steps, a flat lawn disappearing in the darkness, some trees, a small garden shed. He looked up at the sky. The moon glided beneath the stars. He shivered and turned away, feeling desolate, then went into the bathroom.

He turned the light on. Blue and green tiles, blue rugs. A toilet, a marble bath and a shower, expensive and tasteful. He turned the light off. He didn't feel like a bath or shower. He crossed over to the bed and stood there, then went back to the bathroom. He turned the light on. It was bright and stung his eyes. He used the toilet and then took his clothes off and stepped under the shower.

He turned the water on to hot, let it scald him and revive him, remained there for a very long time, then turned it off, dried himself. He walked out of the bathroom, closing the door behind him; naked, he went to the bed and lay down, sighing forlornly. He lay there for some time, hearing the silence of the house. He heard the wind blowing outside the window, then he turned out the bedside lamp.

The darkness was divided. Moonlight fell in through the window. Richard heard the moaning wind, felt the pounding of his heart, looking up, looking around, seeing the ceiling, the looming walls, his fears multiplying and joining and becoming a blanket. He suddenly felt claustrophobic, rubbed his face with his hands, saw the moonlight trickling over a cupboard and a wicker chair. He lay there, breathing deeply, forcing himself to stay calm. He wanted to get off the bed and leave the room, but he just couldn't do it. What was happening? *Why stay*? He rubbed his face and closed his eyes. He saw the moonlight – or imagined he saw the moonlight – and then it seemed like a dream.

The door clicked as it opened. Richard opened his eyes. He looked around – or imagined he looked around – and saw her shadowy outline. She was standing in the doorway, silhouetted in yellow light. She was naked beneath her nightgown, a short nightgown, transparent, and he saw her slim waist, her broad hips, her long legs parted slightly. She didn't say a word, just stood there, breathing evenly. Richard rubbed his face and then licked his lips and blinked a few times. The woman closed the door and padded toward him and lay down beside him.

Flesh. The warmth of skin. There were dreams within the dream: the

moonlight falling on the white sheets, on the edge of a pillow, on a flash of red hair, the gleaming eyes, the pink tongue on the wet lips. They came together and merged, their limbs colliding, embracing, warm skin, willing flesh, her flattened breasts, his sweating spine, searching fingers, scratching fingernails, outspread thighs, thrusting groin, a dream within a dream, shadows writhing in the moonlight, rising up and coming down and rolling over and biting like animals… He had to have her, couldn't stop, either dreaming or awake, not caring, not knowing, seeking release from his fear, a child again, helpless, lips and tongue on the nipple, wanting solace, revenge, forgiveness, final answers, his hands searching for her breasts, his belly sliding on her belly, thrusting up, trying to hide himself inside her, sweat and blood, life's reality… Was it really happening? Did it matter? The red hair across his eyes. Her lips sliding down his chest, down his stomach, soft and moist, opening wide to receive him… Release. No more fear. He looked up and saw the moonlight. He closed his eyes and let himself be devoured, flowing out, pouring into her.

The moonlight. The darkness. Stars swimming in the void. He lay back and dissolved and disappeared and defied space and time. To touch and be touched. The beating blood and pounding heart. To touch and to feel and to know and to drift toward peace. He remembered her touch. He awakened, still remembering. He blinked and rubbed his eyes and looked around him, his body still burning.

'It's all right. It's all right…'

Richard saw her in the doorway, her back turned toward him, naked beneath the white transparent gown, slipping out of the room. Then she was gone. He felt her warmth on his skin. He blinked again and looked hard at the door and saw the light on the balcony. Then the fear returned. He sat up straight on the bed. The moonlight fell into the room, met the light from the doorway, illuminating the necklace she had dropped before entering his bed.

The fear slithered in slyly, crept over him, enveloped him, turned to ice that

first froze and then burned to leave him sweaty and shaking. He glanced wildly around the room. The moonlight fell in through the window. He felt the fear and it forced him from the bed and made him rush to the door.

He saw the woman on the stairs, walking down toward the hallway, still naked beneath the white transparent gown, her lean body outlined. Richard watched her, terrified. She moved as if in a trance. The short nightgown rippled over her breasts, on her thighs, as she padded down on long legs. Richard took hold of the bannister, seeing pale light on her face. He shouted at her – someone shouting; someone urging her to come back – but she continued on her way down the stairs, her gaze fixed on the front door.

Richard glanced over the balcony. The lights in the hall were dim. The front door was open, moonlight falling on the hall, a small figure silhouetted on the porch outside, featureless, not moving.

The fear grabbed Richard and crushed him, made him step back from the bannister, pressing his spine to the wall and glancing around him, paralyzed, his head spinning. Then he suddenly moved again. He felt a need to touch the woman. She was real, a vibrant presence, flesh and blood, and she was all that he had. Richard hurried toward the stairs. He saw the woman in the hallway. The figure standing on the porch had disappeared, but the moonlight still poured in. Richard cried out again. The woman didn’t respond. Richard hurried down the stairs, his heart pounding, as she walked out the door.

Richard froze again. He held the bannister with one hand. He looked down at the door, at the moonlight, the fear slicing through him. Then he moved again, scarcely knowing that he was doing so, his sole thought for the woman, for her presence, for that touch of reality. He reached the bottom of the stairs. Moonlight fell across the floor. He stepped forward and saw the woman on the lawn, the darkness swimming around her.

Richard walked to the door. The fear was choking him, draining him. He reached the door and stepped out onto the porch and saw the woman ahead of

him. She was in the middle of the lawn. She stopped walking and just stood there. The wind blew around her, pressed the nightgown to her body, her hips and her legs emphasized in singular beauty. Then she slowly turned around. She was looking directly at him. He saw her pale face, her red hair, and her strange, haunting smile.

Richard stood on the porch, felt the wind and its ice. He was draining out of himself, the fear destroying him, dulling his senses. The woman stood there on the lawn. Her red hair blew in the wind. He heard the wind and then he heard the humming sound, *felt* the sound, was crushed by it. He stepped forward slowly, keeping his eyes on the woman. He saw the line of trees behind her, the light appearing beyond the trees, a hazy light that rose and spread out to become a pulsating fan.

'Oh, my God,' Richard whispered.

After that, he said nothing. There was nothing to say. He knew that it had ended, that it was over, and that he could not turn back. No turning: the fear. No resisting: the pain. Richard shook his head and licked his dry lips and stepped onto the lawn.

The woman was waiting for him, her arms hanging down by her sides. He stopped when he was halfway toward her, searched in vain for her green eyes. A trick of light and shadow. Richard blinked and looked again. He saw the smile on her face, that ghastly grimace, but her eyes were missing. Richard shook his head and shivered. He stared hard at the waiting woman. He stepped forward and saw that her eyes were closed, that she was standing there dreaming.

Richard almost stopped breathing. He felt the pounding of his heart. He walked over to the woman and touched her, but her eyes didn't open. Then the fear really shook him. He stared wildly at the sky. He saw the moon gliding under the stars, a few dark, drifting clouds. Richard looked past the woman. He saw the light above the trees. The light pulsated and formed a

hazy fan, a spectral glow in the dark night.

Richard started to weep. The tears rolled down his cheeks. He heard the sound, *felt* the sound, was crushed by it, and he clenched both his fists. Then he saw them coming toward him. They were faceless in the darkness. There were three of them, all of them small, spreading out, walking slowly.

Richard stared at them. The fear slithered down his spine. He forgot the woman by his side, forgot Jenny and the doctors, thought of nothing but the dread that was embodied in the men coming toward him. The tears rolled down his cheeks. He saw his history dissolving. He watched the men spreading out, coming toward him, and he knew he must join them. His grief and fear combined. His head tightened and throbbed. The men advanced out of the darkness, the light fanning out behind them, their shadows shifting and falling before them, creeping over the damp grass. Richard stood still. The men approached him and stopped. They were small and they wore silvery masks and were encased in gray coveralls. Richard stood there, transfixed. One of the men walked up to him. The man reached up and touched Richard's neck and the fear fell away from him.

'Yes!' Richard said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

New York in December was a bitch of a city, the wind blowing like ice along the canyons of concrete, stabbing at Stanford's eyes and raw face, his Californian blood frozen. He cursed and turned his collar up, saw the bright lights of Broadway, breathed the dust and the exhaust fumes of the traffic, appalled by the clamour. He wasn't in a good mood, hadn't been for a long time; he now lived with a cold, suppressed rage that often threatened to choke him.

'New York,' he murmured. 'Shitsville.'

He didn't know what was happening to him, was lost in his obsessions, haunted by the lights of Galveston, by the girl on the porch, by what he had witnessed in the Caribbean, by the mysteries that increased every day and made sleep more difficult.

Stanford felt the freezing wind. He cursed again and walked faster. The traffic ran along Broadway, lights flashing, horns honking, the sidewalks crowded with junkies and prostitutes and pimps, passengers tumbling out of cabs, out of restaurants and theaters, the neon signs winking brilliantly in the night, a kaleidoscopic display. Stanford studied it with distaste. He had never liked New York. He cursed again and then turned into a disco-bar, hurrying down the steep steps.

The bar was in a basement, beyond a silver-gleaming arch, past the blond girl who sat behind a desk and cash register. The girl was wearing a negligible halter, her breasts ballooning dramatically, her tanned belly exposed, her

crotch emphasized by hot pants, long legs in black stockings crossed languidly. Green lipstick. False eyelashes. Stanford paid her and went in, passing a man in black leather, the amplified rock music exploding over him, almost deafening him, strobe lights flashing on and off the small stage where a rock group was screaming.

‘Are you alone?’ someone asked him.

‘What’s that?’ Stanford said. He looked around to see a shock of purple hair, rainbow eyes, the girl a cross between an Apache Indian and a Buddhist monk, her lips lined with glitter dust and pouting invitingly, blowing smoke in his face.

‘Thirty bucks,’ she said. ‘Make it fifty for all night. We go to my place and I’ll show you some tricks that you’ll never forget.’

Stanford silently moved on, pushing his way through the crowd, brushing against creamy breasts and jolting asses in hot pants, the air smelling of nicotine and marijuana and sweat, the strobe lights flashing on and off the heads that bobbed up and down frantically. Stanford just kept going, concentrating on the bar. He saw phosphorescent shirts and tight denims and sunglasses, the girls elegant and tatty, displaying tits and belly buttons, the men rattling with necklaces and bracelets, their talk loud and pretentious. Scaduto wasn’t at the bar. Stanford moved on, looking elsewhere. He cut across the dance floor, the band shrieking above him, the dancers gyrating on all sides, asses jolting like pistons. He ducked waving hands and whipping long hair and finally reached the far side. A line of girls held the wall up, looking sexy or limp, and he avoided their eyes and went past them, entering another, marginally quieter room.

The band sounded more distant here, the sound muffled, the talk clearer, customers crushed between a parallel line of booths that led back to a second bar. He saw Scaduto at the bar, unmistakable, flamboyant dressed, wearing a fringed buckskin jacket, very tight purple pants, knee-length boots, a mess of

chains around his neck, hanging over the counter. Approaching him from behind, Stanford, grinning, grabbed a fistful of his long blond hair.

‘What the fuck – ?’ Scaduto yelped.

‘Hi, hotshot,’ Stanford said. ‘Why the hell did you decide to meet me here? I can hardly hear myself speak.’

Swivelling around on his bar stool, Scaduto grinned crazily and slapped Stanford’s shoulder, making the latter release his hair. ‘You old shitface!’ Scaduto exclaimed, patting his disheveled hair down. ‘How you been? Good to see you.’

‘So what are you doing here?’ Stanford said, glancing around him. ‘You’re getting a bit old for this, aren’t you? I mean, these girls… they’re all kids. Jailbait.’

Scaduto rolled his eyes and grinned again, formed his right hand into a fist, pumped it up and down above his groin and groaned loudly, theatrically.

‘That’s the idea,’ he said. ‘A guy doesn’t get any younger. At forty you’re almost put out to grass, and these kids soothe the pain. I like ’em tight, Stanford. God, yes, I like ’em tight! Some day I’m gonna find one so tight, they’ll have to cut my dick off.’

‘You want a drink?’ Stanford asked.

‘I’ve already got one, old pal.’

‘Have another,’ Scaduto said. ‘I’m only in town for one night. Let’s have an old-fashioned reunion. We’ll throw us a big one.’

Scaduto slapped the counter with one hand. ‘Goddammit!’ he exclaimed. What a pleasant surprise. It’s been a long time, old buddy.’

‘What do you want?’ Stanford asked.

‘A bourbon on the rocks will do for now. A chaser to follow my beer. Fuck it, the night’s just begun; let’s have us a good time.’

There was only one barman, moving fast but overworked, serving two or three groups at a time, his head down, his brow furrowed. Stanford tried to attract his attention, failed, tried again, started wondering if the barman was ignoring him or if the noise had just deafened him. Scaduto came to his rescue, getting off his stool to bend over the counter, his long hair falling around his face. ‘Hey, greaser!’ he bawled. ‘What the fuck? Are you jerking off back there?’ The barman glanced at him, face swarthy above a bow tie, glared hard and then recognized Scaduto and broke out in a grin. ‘Does it feel good?’ Scaduto bawled. ‘You got blisters on your fingers? Two bourbons on the rocks, you fucking greaser, or I won’t pay the check.’ The barman grinned and shook his head, poured the drinks, disappeared, and Scaduto grinned at Stanford and laughed as if he just couldn’t stop.

‘Here’s to you,’ Stanford said.

‘Fucking A,’ Scaduto responded. He drank some bourbon and wiped his lips with the back of his free hand, his glassy gaze slipping sideways. ‘Just look at it,’ he said. ‘All that tight cunt, all that honey. I swear, the young aren’t what they used to be – they just can’t get enough of it.’

‘You’re kidding yourself,’ Stanford said. ‘You’re just a middle-aged *roué*. You can’t stand the thought of being forty and now you’re making an ass of yourself. It’s called the male menopause.’

Scaduto leered as he glanced around him, almost falling off his stool, then he reached out and grabbed Stanford’s shoulder and grinned like a lunatic.

‘Damned right,’ he said. ‘I stand unzipped and corrected. I’m a middle-aged prick, a wilting cock, and I’m having a great time. So how are you, Stanford?

What have you been up to lately? How long's it been? Five years? Ten years? I hear you're still working with that guy, Epstein.'

'That's right,' Stanford said. 'I'm still with Professor Epstein. You and I, we last met in '69, as I recall, when you finally left the NICAP.'

Scaduto's stomach was flopping over his broad, glittering belt and his gaudy, flowered shirt was too tight. He was not ageing gracefully.

'Great days,' he said, grinning. 'I had a damned good time. Wandering over the whole country, meeting folk, seeing places, chasing UFOs like they were going out of fashion – a great time, a fond memory.' Clearly drunk already, he almost fell off his stool, but steadied himself and then stared curiously at Stanford's shoulder bag. 'Hey, what you got there, pal?'

'It's just an overnight bag,' Stanford replied.

'Oh, yeah? Carrying anything of interest? Anything I can swallow or smoke or inject? I mean, anything, old buddy, to let my fire and help me through the long night?'

'No,' Stanford said.

'Not to worry,' Scaduto said. He closed one eye and waved a finger across his face, a stage Irishman, far gone. 'We can only go back to my place. I've a few syringes there. A wee nip, a little jab and then it's Heaven, a sublime glide through inner space. You fancy that, old buddy? We might even get some snatch. Something warm and as tight as a glove, to make the dawn look more pleasant.'

'Who knows?' Stanford said.

They ordered more drinks. The cigaret smoke was dense. The room was packed and becoming noisier, people tugging and pushing, colored lights gliding over the walls in surreal, dreamy patterns. Scaduto drank too fast. He

kept ordering more drinks. He was obsessed with the girls, their long legs and plunging necklines, his glassy eyes darting restlessly around the place, his wolfish leer unappealing. Stanford was quietly shocked by him, found it hard to recognize him, was embarrassed to see this forty-year-old man in his juvenile clothes. In truth, he was ridiculous, pathetically trying to fool himself, and Stanford couldn't reconcile the man before him with the one he had known. Scaduto had been with the NICAP for close to twelve years, had investigated UFOs up and down the whole country and built up an admirable reputation. He had left in 1969. He had been in Arizona then. He and Stanford had gone drinking, had painted Tucson red, and had then gone their separate ways without keeping in touch. That's why Stanford was shocked: he couldn't recognize the old Scaduto. The man swaying on the bar stool, talking loudly, leering openly, was a pathetic shadow of his former self, obsessed with drugs and jailbait.

'I'm still at it,' Stanford told him. 'I'm still out there chasing UFOs. I've probably been at it too long. Why did *you* give it up?'

'I thought, fuck it,' Scaduto said. 'That's all: I just thought, fuck it. There was too much coming down, too much flak, and I just didn't need it.'

'What sort of flak?'

'Just flak,' Scaduto said. 'Flak from the left, right and center, day in and day out. A real drag, believe me.'

'I've bought a bottle,' Stanford said. 'Here, fill your glass up… I don't understand. What kind of flak? Who was giving you flak?'

Scaduto swayed from side to side, almost fell off his stool again, but held onto the counter, cursing, and picked up his glass.

'Everyone,' he said. 'Fucking flak from all sides. Who needs the CIA, the FBI, the fucking Air Force? I couldn't take it anymore. Too much shit on my

desk. When they started coming to see me at midnight, I decided to quit.'

'Midnight?' Stanford said.

'Would you believe it?' Scaduto said.

'Who came to see you at midnight? I don't understand that.'

Scaduto glanced at the girl beside him, had a drink, smoothed long hair, gazed down at the bar and started snorting like a horse at the starting post.

'Fucking CIA,' he said. 'Those bastards came to see me. Came at midnight, got me out of my bed, my cock still standing straight. No rough stuff. Just questions. A formality. A mere formality. Sat me naked in a chair, froze my balls and talked quietly, politely, like we're having a business lunch. Very pleasant. Civilized. Didn't mind if I poured a drink. Said, it's your house, you do what you want, we're just here for a talk. Asked me some questions. About my work at the NICAP. Said they'd heard from a friend of a friend that I was digging too deep. Then we had a serious chat. Woke me up. Interesting. They said they hoped I wasn't feeling too tired, but could they make some suggestions. Suggest, I say, I'm breathless. They suggest I clip my wings. They say I shouldn't be mixed up with UFOs, that they don't really like that. I say it's a free country. They agree that it is. They also say they saw some drugs in my bathroom and they're highly illegal. I tell them it's a setup. I say you're setting me up. They tell me that's a nasty thing to say and that I could get ten years. You want me to leave? I say. You want me to leave the NICAP? We wouldn't dream of suggesting such a thing, they say, but now that you mention it… You can do what you want, they say. It's a free country, pal. I can work any place that takes my fancy. It's just that they're worried about those drugs that they found in my bathroom. I say I'm sorry about that. I say I'm truly repentant. They say maybe it's the strain of chasing UFOs that's making you take them. You have a point there, I say. I say I'm gonna resign from the NICAP. They say that's a wise decision, we respect you for that, and maybe, if you really leave the NICAP, we'll forget

what we found here. That's real decent, I say. I confirm that I'm resigning. They both shake my hand, very pleasant, and walk out the door. So, I resign from the NICAP. I get a job with RCA. I forget that I ever knew the NICAP – and those guys never come back. Hallelujah. Peace, brother.'

Staduto burped and glanced around him, smiled beatifically, eyes blinking, then he picked up his glass and stared at it, surprised.

'Fuck,' he said, 'it's empty.'

'Here,' Stanford said, picking up the bottle. 'Have another. It's on me. So what were they worried about?'

He topped up Scaduto's glass, watched him put it to his lips; Scaduto burped and put his glass down, his red eyes slipping sideways.

'Motherfuckers,' he said.

'What bothered them?' Stanford asked.

'Secrets,' Scaduto said, slurring the word. '*Secrets*! I knew things I shouldn't have known. Those sonsofbitches, they knew I'd been to Canada – and they didn't like that.'

'Canada?'

'Right,' Scaduto said. 'Very cold in the forests, very quiet, and at night the winds haunted you.'

'I don't understand,' Stanford said. 'What's Canada got to do with it? They accused you of digging too deep. What did they mean by that?'

Scaduto, more drunk than ever, grabbed Stanford by the arm, leaned closer to him, breathing into his face, and whispered melodramatically, 'So what have you really got in that shoulder bag?'

‘Nothing,’ Stanford said. ‘Some spare clothes, pyjamas, various papers, a calculator, odds and ends… I told you: it’s just an overnight bag.’

‘You’re going somewhere?’ Scaduto asked.

‘I just got here,’ Stanford said.

‘Of course, Stupid of me. Forgot. So what you really got there?’

‘Nothing,’ Stanford repeated.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Scaduto said. ‘A little smoke, a little coke, a little something to shoot up with? What the hell, we can’t go on like this all night – I’ll take just about anything.’

‘I didn’t bring anything,’ Stanford said. ‘I’m only here for one night. Here, have another drink. We’ll find something else later.’

‘Shit, yes, let’s do that.’

Stanford filled Scaduto’s glass and received a nod of appreciation. Scaduto drank deeply, shook his head to clear it, then looked around him again.

‘Sonsofbitches,’ he said. ‘Those sonsofbitches made me leave. I was having a good time at that time, but those bastards just killed it.’

‘Why?’ Stanford asked.

‘My discoveries,’ Scaduto said. ‘Very cold up in Canada, the forests, all that shit in the woods.’

‘What shit?’ Stanford asked.

‘The fucking truth,’ Scaduto said. ‘I found out and I braced them with the facts and so they paid me that visit.’

‘You took the facts to the CIA?’

‘Whistled in like the breeze. You bastards know all about it, I said. You bastards knew all along.’

‘Knew what?’

‘They kicked me out. Took my papers and kicked me out. They said don’t come around again, you’re fucking crazy, these are lies, then they paid me that cute midnight visit and made me leave the NICAP. No more research for me.’

‘What research?’ Stanford asked.

‘Hey, listen,’ Scaduto said, grabbing Stanford by the arm, leaning closer and hissing into his face, his red eyes darting left and right. ‘Let’s go back to my place. To hell with these women; they’ll only give us the pox. Let’s get high the clean way. I’ve some really hot shit back there; blow your fucking head off. Okay, buddy? Let’s go!’

He tried standing, but tripped over the lower leg of his bar stool, crashing into Stanford’s shoulder and spinning off and bumping into some other drinkers. Stanford reached out and grabbed him, held him upright, shook his lightly, and he straightened his shoulders and looked around him, outraged by the angry stares. ‘Stupid cunts,’ he said. ‘Standing there right in front of me.’ Then he grinned and threw an arm around Stanford. ‘Let’s go, old buddy, let’s get out of here, let’s blow our minds through the roof.’ They made their way back across the packed dance floor, the lone line of lonely ladies, the screaming rock band on the small stage. Scaduto waved to some friends, shouted greetings, his good teeth gleaming, still clinging onto Stanford, unsteady, his face a jigsaw of colors. It took a while to reach the stairs, the crowd thicker than before, the pert buttocks and bulging breasts teasing as they struggled for release. Eventually they made it, stepping under the silvery arch and going up the stairs, Stanford still supporting Scaduto as they stepped

back onto the busy sidewalk.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Scaduto said. ‘All the lights! They’re fucking blinding me. Jesus, I just love it here on Broadway. I love the Big Apple.’

‘Where do you live?’ Stanford asked.

‘In SoHo,’ Scaduto said. ‘I’ve got a little loft in Broom Street. We’ll be there in no time.’

He started off along the sidewalk, swaying dangerously from side to side, and Stanford stuck close beside him, not wanting to lose him. The neon signs flickering crazily, the car drivers honked their horns, and the sidewalks were crowded, people queuing for the theaters, the whores waiting impatiently in the side streets in their come-hither outfits, hopeful clients silhouetted in the bright lights of the stores’ plate-glass windows. Stanford ignored it all, now obsessed with cracking Scaduto, just wanting to get him back to his loft, sober him up, get him talking some sense.

‘These hookers,’ Scaduto said. ‘They sure as hell turn me on. Just look at that little bitch wearing candy floss – I mean, she’s practically naked. What about it, Stanford? You think we should take one back with us? We’ll take that Amazon and share her between us, shoot some stuff, have a threesome.’

‘I’d rather not,’ Stanford said. ‘I don’t like to pay for it. Let’s go back to the loft and shoot up and then I’ll make a few phone calls.’

‘That’s my Stanford,’ Scaduto said. ‘Always in there with the phone book. The most famous phone book in Lover’s Lane and it’s always paid dividends. You had a reputation, Stanford. I’ll have to hand you that. When it came to getting pussy, you could do it, no two ways about it.’

They turned into Broome Street, still close together, passing art galleries and antique shops, health food stores and fresh food restaurants, the old warehouses converted, repainted, decorated, the fire escapes saluting the past,

the bedlam falling behind them.

‘Those sonsofbitches,’ Scaduto mumbled. ‘Those CIA bastards. I’m now earning twice as much as I did before, but it’s just not the same.’

‘A raw deal,’ Stanford said.

‘Damned right, a raw deal. Now I’m a rep’ for RCA and that’s why I’m fucked up.’

‘What worried them?’ Stanford said.

‘What I found out.’

‘What did you find out?’ Stanford asked.

‘Fucking Canada. My *God*!

Scaduto stopped at a converted warehouse, almost fell against the wall, straightened up and plunged his hands in his pockets and eventually withdrew a door key. He had trouble finding the keyhole, kept cursing and mumbling, eventually managed to get the door open and stagger inside. Stanford followed him in, opened the gates of the elevator, a large elevator once used for heavy goods, now used only by residents. Scaduto swayed as they went up, holding languidly to the gate, tried to open it when the elevator stopped, then had to let Stanford do it. The door opposite was large and ugly, the paint stripped off it, paint flaking, but the left behind the door was luxurious, a plush *Playboy*-styled penthouse.

‘Wow!’ Stanford explained. ‘Is this yours?’

‘Shit,’ Scaduto said, ‘I feel sick. I gotta fix myself up.’

He burped and slapped his belly, shook his head to clear it, then made his way along the clean, waxed floorboards of the spacious, rectangular loft. The

walls and ceiling were painted white, stretching away to a wall-length window, the living area located near the window, illuminated by spotlights. Stanford stuck close to Scaduto, ready to prevent him from collapsing; they passed a large, framed Andy Warhol reproduction that covered the right-hand wall, its colors bleached out on their approach to the big window where in daytime the light poured in. Scaduto stumbled and almost fell, but somehow managed not to do so, straightening up and skirting around a modern couch to stop beneath an arched Flors lamp.

‘Christ,’ he said, ‘I feel shitty. I think my head’s stuck up my ass. The room’s spinning, the walls are closing in. What the hell are we doing here?’

‘I want to talk to you,’ Stanford said.

‘You want to shoot up first?’ Scaduto took his jacket off and threw it carelessly on the couch and started rolling up the sleeve of his left arm. ‘Those fucking sonsofbitches killed. They put the fear of God into me. Very nice. Polite. Perfect gentlemen. Planted cocaine in my bathroom.’

‘I thought you took that anyway.’

‘I didn’t have it at the time. I was clean as a whistle, the bathroom was bare, and those bastards had me set for ten years because I hit them with Canada.’

‘I want to talk to you about that.’

‘No way, Stanford, I’m not talking. That bathroom’s note bare anymore and I want to shoot up.’

‘I’m not joining you,’ Stanford said.

‘Then have a drink,’ Scaduto said. ‘Relax. Put your feet up. Watch TV. We’ll call some broads and have us a good time.’

‘I have to know,’ Stanford said.

‘Fuck you, baby, I’m not talking. It never happened. I can’t remember. I know nothing. I won’t talk. It’s not worth it.’

Scaduto finished rolling his sleeve up, slapped and pinched his bared arm, licked his lips and then staggered to the door that led to the bathroom. Watching him disappearing, Stanford felt desperate and outraged, wondering what he could say to this lunatic, his former friend, to shake him out of his stupor. The loft had central heating. Stanford felt uncomfortably warm. He also felt explosive with frustration and had the urge to smash something. It couldn’t happen again: he couldn’t let this one go. He stood there and let the rage take him and shake him awake. Then he cursed and turned around, hurried across the rush matting, hesitated, clenched his fists tight, then entered the bathroom.

Sky-blue walls. Mirrored panels. The bath unit was charcoal brown. Scaduto stood there with one foot on the bath, his knee supporting his elbow. He was tying a tourniquet to his arm. He had one end between his teeth. His fist was clenched and a vein throbbed in his neck, beads of sweat on his forehead. Stanford glanced at the sink. He saw the gleaming syringe. Scaduto grunted and tugged at the tourniquet and then looked up at Stanford.

‘I have to know,’ Stanford said.

The tourniquet slipped from Scaduto’s teeth. ‘What the fuck are you talking about?’ he said. ‘Can’t you see what I’m doing here?’

‘I have a contact,’ Stanford said. ‘A strong CIA contact. He said that you’d found something out that could blow this whole thing.’

‘Fuck off out of here, Stanford. Sonofabitch, that’s why you came. I must be fucking dumb. I should have known. Now just get the hell out of here.’

‘I have to know,’ Stanford repeated.

‘I know nothing,’ Scaduto said. ‘If I knew, I’d have blown it to the media and

made myself rich.'

'You're frightened,' Stanford said.

'Go to hell. Get out of here. I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Fuck off, Stanford. Just leave me.'

'Tell me.'

'I want to shoot up. Jesus Christ, I can't think straight. I've got my head up my ass, my nerves are singing, and you're starting to kill me. I don't know anything, Stanford. I don't remember, I don't care. I'm going to shoot up and you're not going to stop me and that's all there is to it.'

Stanford moved in fast, his left hand swinging sideways, sweeping Scaduto's bent leg off the bath and making his foot slam to the floor. Scaduto jerked forward, following the line of his leg, and Stanford moved in and grabbed him by his long hair and jerked his head back. Scaduto yelped and jerked back up, his head shaking, mouth agape, hands flapping, trying to cover his belly when he saw Stanford's punch. A sluggish gesture, too late: Stanford punched him in the belly. Scaduto doubled up and Stanford grabbed him by the hair and threw him into the wall. Scaduto gasped and seemed to dance, hands waving, legs akimbo, then he groaned, turned around, his hands reaching for the sink, then leaned over the sink and vomited, his body shaking in spasms.

Stanford stood there, feeling cold, far removed from himself. He waited until Scaduto had turned around, and then he hit him again. It was another punch to the stomach, one blow, sharp and brutal, and Scaduto grunted with shock, doubled over, reached out, grabbed Stanford and slid down his legs and then collapsed to the floor.

Kneeling above Scaduto, Stanford rolled him onto his back, grabbed him under the armpits and pulled him up as he mumbled and moaned. He dragged

Scaduto to the shower, inched in backward, laid him down, pushed him into a fetal position and then turned the shower on. Scaduto yelped and wriggled wildly, shocked back to his senses, the water drenching his clothes, forming a pool around him, as he groaned and kicked his legs and waved his arms, a fish flung on the shore. Stanford kept changing the temperature, first hot, then icy cold, and Scaduto opened his eyes and bawled a stream of obscene abuse and slithered around like a drowning rat. He got up on his hands and knees, shaking his head, dripping water, cursed again and tried to crawl from the shower and was pushed back by Stanford. Scaduto howled and waved his hands. He managed to get up on his knees. He was gasping as he swayed from side to side, the water hissing down over him. Stanford turned the shower. Scaduto groaned and flopped forward. Stanford grabbed him and dragged him over the sky-blue tiles, past the bath, through the doorway. Scaduto kicked and waved in protest, sluggish movements, devoid of strength, while Stanford dragged him across the living area, then left him on the floor beneath the couch and stood there and just stared at him.

Scaduto was shivering. He shook his head and groaned and cursed. His fingers scrabbled at squares of rush matting, the steam still rising off him. Stanford stood there, saying nothing, breathing deeply, fists clenched, feeling cold and removed from himself, but now determined to finish it. Eventually Scaduto moved, pushing himself with his hands, shaking his head and struggling up on his hands and knees, a colt learning to walk. He coughed to clear his throat, took a deep breath, turned sideways, then hauled himself on to the couch and slumped there, looking stunned.

Stanford walked across the loft. He had left his shoulder bag on a table. He picked the bag up and unzipped it and pulled out a small tape-recorder. He set the tape-recorder on the table, letting the bag fall to the floor. Scaduto watched him, his glassy eyes wary, still red and unfocused. Then Stanford went back to him, knelt down in front of him, reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him a little.

‘You’re going to talk to me,’ Stanford said. ‘You’re going to tell me all you know. We’re going to stay here all night, you’re going to talk and keep talking, and we’ll go over it again and again until I’ve got what I need. You don’t have to be formal about it. Just lay it on me as it comes. I’m putting it all on tape, I’m going to cross-check and edit, and when I’ve finished it should be in sequence and sound reasonably intelligent. I’m not bullshitting, Scaduto. I want to drain your brain. I want everything, from your first day to your last, and I want no evasions. If you’re a good boy I’ll reward you: I’ll let you shoot up. If you’re a bad boy, I’ll beat the shit out of you and then start again. And don’t try lying, Scaduto. Don’t leave anything out. If you lie, or if you leave anything out, I’ll go straight to the CIA. I’ll show them what you’ve given me. That should be enough to excite them. They’ll be around here so fast, you won’t know your balls from your ass. So don’t mess with me, Scaduto. Talk long and talk well. If you give me what I need, if it’s believable, I’ll never mention my source. I’m turning the tape-recorder on now. I’m going to sit right here beside you. Just relax, put your feet up and talk, and the night will soon pass.’

Stanford went back to the table, picked the tape-recorder up, bent down and picked up his shoulder bag and then returned to the couch. He sat down beside Scaduto. He reached into the shoulder bag. He withdrew a lot of cassette tapes and set them down on the arm of the couch, where they formed a neat pile. Scaduto stared at all the tapes. He licked his lips and shivered slightly. Stanford picked up the first tape, slipped it into the tape-recorder, turned the machine on and then sat down, looking right at Scaduto.

‘That’s it,’ he said. ‘Talk.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

‘My phone’s been bugged,’ Epstein said quietly. ‘That’s why we’re out walking.’

It was night time in Washington, DC, and they were strolling through the busy streets of Georgetown, passing discos and restaurants, hopefully anonymous in the crowd. The town looked like a Christmas card in its blanket of snow.

‘Bugged?’ Stanford said. ‘You’ve been *bugged*? Why the hell would they do that?’

Epstein turned his collar up. He looked older and extremely frail. He coughed a lot and rubbed his eyes constantly, rarely raising his head.

‘I’m not sure,’ he said. ‘It must have been done when I was away. I think it has something to do with young Richard Watson.’

‘No one knew about that.’

‘My passport,’ Epstein said. ‘It makes me nervous. They must have us under surveillance. I think it may have started in the Caribbean.’

‘Mr Gerhardt.’

‘That’s right. They’re disturbed about how much we witnessed. I’d like to know why.’

‘Damned CIA.’

‘Yes,’ Epstein said.

‘Where we go, people disappear. It’s not a comforting thought.’

They were in Wisconsin Avenue, passing kids wearing baubles, the outdoor vendors bravely hawking their wares despite the freezing cold. Stanford saw little around him, now buried inside his head, obsessed by the girl in Galveston, by his experience in the Caribbean, by the revelations of Gardner and O’Hara, by Scaduto’s minutely detailed story. Stanford couldn’t leave it now: he was a fish hooked through the throat. No matter what might befall him in the future, he now had to continue.

‘You said Scaduto was sensational,’ Epstein said. ‘All right, let me hear it.’

‘I need my notes.’

‘No, you don’t. You have that famous photographic memory, handed down from your family. All gifted. All with photographic memories. So you don’t need your notes.’

This was true enough. Stanford still had fond memories of his childhood in San Jose, California, the family breakfasts over the long pine table, his mother and brother and two sisters competing noisily with the facts and figures that the five of them all held in their photographic memories. It was a family inheritance, his mother had informed him. Her own mother and her brothers and sisters had all possessed the same gift. And it was that gift, the gift of instant, accurate recall, that had helped Stanford to be a brilliant researcher. So, no, he didn’t need his notes. He remembered Scaduto’s every word, down to the very last, minute detail.

‘I don’t know where to start,’ he said. ‘The whole story’s just incredible – and it’s pretty damned complex.’ He glanced briefly around him, his vision dazzled by the neon lights, hearing the disco music pounding out from

crimson-lit, basement doorway. ‘Okay,’ he continued. ‘The basic background to Scaduto is that he was working for the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena way back in 1957, when it first started up.’

‘The NICAP,’ Epstein said. ‘A civilian organization. Not too strong a background at all. The outside looking in.’

‘They’re an efficient organization,’ Stanford said, ‘and damned well you know it.’

Epstein smiled, huddled up against the cold, almost lost in his thick, fur-lined coat, the street lights washing over him.

‘So,’ Stanford said. ‘I trust I can now continue… You know, of course, about the Levelland sightings.’

‘Naturally,’ Epstein said. ‘The most remarkable sightings on record so far. November 2, 1957. Seven different automobile drivers, all at different locations around Levelland, Texas, suffered at approximately the same time inexplicable automobile disablement and subsequent recovery after coming across large, egg-shaped, glowing metallic objects that were sitting on the roads before ascending vertically and disappearing. The Air Force later caused themselves acute embarrassment by (a) not examining the reported landing sites; and (b) attributing the cause of the sightings to an electrical storm that was not in fact in the area of Levelland at the time.’

‘Full marks,’ Stanford said. ‘So, the Levelland sightings formed a sort of grand climax to the biggest UFO flap since 1952. Those sightings did indeed cause the Air Force a lot of embarrassment – and led to the NICAP pushing for congressional hearings. In August, 1958, John McCormack’s House Sub-Committee on Atmospheric Phenomena requested a week-long hearing in closed, secret session, but the NICAP’s pleasure in this was quickly squashed. Any hope that the hearing would be a fair one was destroyed by the evidence of Captain George Gregory, then representing Project Blue Book,

who came out with so many half-truths, he made Donald Menzel seem almost Christlike. Given this, as you can imagine, the House Sub-Committee decided to take no further interest in the matter.'

'So?'

'So the members of the NICAP were furious. And they were even more furious when, in December of that year, the Air Force published a staff study that came down heavily on the civilian UFO groups, accusing them of being biased and sensationalist. To make matters worse, it was during the same month that the NICAP learned, through one of the more influential members of the NICAP board, that the Robertson Panel, in making their recommendations back in 1953, had, when discussing civilian UFO groups then in existence, used the chilling phrase: "The apparent irresponsibility and the possible use of such groups for subversive purposes should be kept in mind." And, further, when they discovered that both the FBI and the CIA had been keeping extensive records on people involved in UFO investigations, including quite a few members of the NICAP.'

Epstein nodded wearily, rubbed his eyes and coughed again, looking away in embarrassment when an elegant prostitute started coming toward him. Skipping around her, Epstein and Stanford kept walking, both aware that the prostitute had turned around and was following them, though keeping her distance, possibly still hopeful of some trade.

'Now,' Stanford said, 'stories about the CIA's involvement in the UFO phenomenon had been circulating for years, but a lot of people put it down to paranoia. However, after Gregory's performance in front of the Sub-Committee, and after learning about the Robertson Panel recommendations, some of the members of the NICAP, including Scaduto, decided to check out the situation. Then, just after they began their investigations, one of the members of their board came up with a pretty amazing story.'

The prostitute kept trailing them, swinging her shoulder bag, looking

prosperous in her long coat and boots, as Stanford noticed when he glanced back over his shoulder. Seeing her, Stanford thought of the girl in Galveston, experienced a sudden, shocking lust, and then waved his hand from left to right, indicating 'No.' Glancing back over his shoulder again, he saw the woman shrugging and turning away, prepared to look for trade elsewhere. A neon light flashed green and red, and the snow drifted lazily along the sidewalk as Epstein stared at his own feet.

'Apparently,' Stanford continued, 'just a few weeks earlier – this was 1959 – the Office of Naval Intelligence had heard of a woman in Maine who claimed to be in regular contact with extraterrestrials and brought this fact to the CIA's attention. Since this seemed like a typical crank contactee case in which the woman, a psychic, had used automatic handwriting for communication with the extraterrestrials, the CIA naturally gave it a miss. However, the Canadian government had also heard about the woman and they sent their leading UFOlogist to interview her. According to the Canadian expert, the woman, during a trance, had correctly answered highly complex questions about space flight. Surprisingly, when the US Navy learned about this, they sent *two* intelligence officers to investigate. During the subsequent interview, one of the Navy intelligence officers, who had been trained in ESP, tried to tune in to the woman's contactee; this experiment failed, so he and his associate returned to DC and informed the CIA. This time the CIA showed more interest than before and arranged for the ESP-trained intelligence officer to try making contact in CIA headquarters. Six witnesses – two of them CIA employees and one of them from the Office of Naval Intelligence – get together in the office in Washington to observe the results of the experiment – and this time, when the intelligence officer went into his trance, he reportedly made contact with *someone*.'

Stanford glanced at Epstein, trying to gauge his reaction, but his friend was gazing down at the snow-covered ground, looking frail even in his heavy coat.

‘At that point,’ Stanford continued, ‘one of the men in the room demanded some kind of proof that they were in contact with extraterrestrials. The intelligence officer, still in his trance, said that if they looked out the window they would see a flying saucer over DC. The other three men went to the window and were amazed to see a UFO in the sky – a description of which has never been released. However, it *has* been established that at the time of the supposed sighting, the radar center at Washington National Airport reported that its radar returns had been blocked out in the direction of the sighting.’

Epstein glanced up at the night sky, saw dark clouds drifting lazily, lowered his gaze and stared forlornly at the snow, rubbed his eyes, coughed again.

‘So,’ Stanford said. ‘Major Robert J. Friend – who had since replaced Captain Gregory as head of Project Blue Book – was informed of these events by the CIA and asked to sit in on a latter trance session during which, reportedly, nothing unusual took place. Nevertheless, Friend felt that Duke University’s parapsychology lab should investigate both the female psychic and the intelligence officer, which subsequently they did… but their report never materialized, Blue Book released no analysis of the UFO sighting report, the government did nothing about the Washington radar blackout, and what the intelligence officer saw over DC remained a tight secret. Not only that, but the CIA then took, quote, “punitive action” against the men involved, and had them transferred to other positions in other locations.’

‘That story is authentic,’ Epstein said. ‘Major Friend wrote about the whole affair in a Memorandum for the Record – a memorandum that can now be found in the Air Force Archives at Maxwell AFB, Montgomery, Alabama.’

‘Right,’ Stanford said. ‘And that’s exactly what got Scaduto going… First, Scaduto wondered at the unusual amount of official interest shown in a civilian female with supposed telepathic abilities. Scaduto was aware that the Russian KGB and the CIA had both been investigating the espionage potential of telepathy, psychic photography and other forms of

parapsychology, and he therefore wondered if there could be any connection between that fact and the female psychic from Maine. Since communication by telepathy had already been achieved with moderate success both in Russian and American laboratories, and between submarines and land bases, it was possible that the CIA was genuinely concerned with the woman's knowledge of the more complex aspects of space flight. It also stands to reason, since they themselves were interested in the espionage potential of telepathy, that they would have certain men trained in ESP – thus, they'd sent one of their men to attend the trance sessions.'

'I don't see what this is leading,' Epstein said.

'Patience,' Stanford said. 'The first thing Scaduto had to accept was that telepathic communication had been made with *someone* in that CIA office in Washington, DC, and that the man in a trance, if not actually making it materialize, had been informed that there was a UFO in the sky. If he then kept in mind the fact that certain secret military laboratories had succeeded in training people in telepathic communication – which had been done in primitive fashion years before – it then seemed more believable that the woman from Maine had actually been in contact with some telepathically trained *government* employee.'

'Wait a minute,' Epstein said, looking a lot more interested. 'Are you suggesting that the UFO over Washington, DC, was a *government* aircraft?'

'Yes,' Stanford said. 'And for Scaduto, this possibility became even more intriguing when he thought of the US Navy Intelligence's interest in the matter; and, even more intriguing, when one of the members of the NICAP's board of directors, reminded him that the Canadian government and the US Air Force had both acknowledged their involvement in supposedly unsuccessful flying saucer construction projects.'

Epstein stopped walking, glanced up at the night sky, then looked all around him, at the snow on the ground, at the discos and restaurants and bars, his

eyes bright with excitement.

‘I’m hungry’ Stanford said. ‘Let’s get something to eat. Also, I’m not keen on all this working and I’d like to sit down.’

They went into Clyde’s, instantly savouring the warmth and the saloon atmosphere; once seated, they gave the waitress their orders and didn’t speak again until she left. Stanford studied Epstain’s face: he looked alive, but more alive. Stanford thought of them both, of Epstein’s fate and his own obsessions, and he had to control the cold rage that now drove him relentlessly. His old friend was soon to die. The pains of cancer now assailed him. Stanford wanted to give him something – all the answers – before death cut him down.

‘Okay,’ Stanford said. ‘Bear in mind that at least *some* kind of flying saucer prototypes had actually been built by the US and Canada: first, the US Navy’s Flying Flounder and the Air Force’s Flying Flapjack – projects reportedly worked on between 1942 and 1947 – then the mysterious flying saucer that the Canadian government claimed they had aborted and passed over to the US in 1954. Now, the most interesting thing about those projects was that, one, the US Navy claimed to have dropped their project back in 1947, but were known to be still involved in super-secret aeronautical projects scattered around the White Sands Proving Ground; and, two, the Canadian government, while admitting that the enormous UFO seen over Albuquerque in 1951 was similar to the one they had tried to build, then claimed that they had passed their project on to the US because they couldn’t afford to continue it.’

‘So what you’re saying is that the UFO over Albuquerque might have been a US product based on the 1947 Canadian designs.’

‘Correct… And that everyone who admitted that they’d once tried building flying saucers, were now denying that they’d succeeded. Which could well be a lie.’

‘I see,’ Epstein said.

‘Now remember,’ Stanford continued, ‘that Scaduto had started to investigate these mysteries in the Year of our Lord, 1959. One of the things he remembered was that the first major UFO sightings – the Kenneth Arnold sightings of June 24, 1947 – had taken place near Mount Rainier in the Cascades in the state of Washington – which divides Canada from Oregon – and that Arnold had stated that the *nine* UFOs had flown off in the direction of the Canadian border. What is *not* so widely known is that on the very same day another man, Fred Johnson, prospecting about four thousand feet above the Cascades, reported seeing six similar objects, and that three days before, on June 21, Harold Dahl, on harbor patrol in Puget Sound – which runs from the Canadian border to Tacoma – was following the coastline of Maury Island when he reportedly saw five UFOs maneuvering about fifteen hundred feet above the coast before disappearing toward the open sea. Throughout that whole month – even ignoring the crank reports encouraged by the initial sightings – there was a disturbing number of sightings over the northwest corner of the United States; and by the first week in July there were reports of, quote, “strange, luminous bodies” in the skies over the Province of Quebec, Oregon, and New England. The following week those sightings spread to California and New Mexico, and by the end of that year – the same year that the US Navy had, apparently, *dropped* their flying saucer project – flying saucers were being reported from all over the world.’

‘So you’re suggesting that the US Navy, the US Air Force and the Canadian government were all working together to build those saucers.’

‘Yes,’ Stanford said. ‘The next major flap was the Washingto, DC, flap of 1952. On reinvestigating the case, Scaduto found that while the real flap had begun on July 19, there was a record, dated June 17, of several unidentified red-colored spheres that flew at supersonic speeds over the Canadian Air Base of North Bay in Ontario and then crossed over some of the southeastern states. He also discovered that nearly all of the subsequent DC UFOs were

described as disappearing toward the north, and that when they UFOs returned *en masse*, on July 26, their disappearance in a general northerly direction also applied.'

'All heading toward the Canadian border,' Epstein said.

'Right,' Stanford said.

The waitress brought their food, set it down and smiled at Stanford, did not receive a smile in return and so flounced off in a huff. Epstein had ordered a Spanish omelet and a glass of cold milk; he drank the latter down in one thirsty gulp and then stared at the former. Stanford was distressed, feeling sorry for Epstain's plight, but he picked up his own bacon cheeseburger and sank his teeth into it.

'It adds up,' Epstein said. 'Lake Ontario and Lake Eyrie are as notorious as the Bermuda Triangle for the unexplained destruction of hundreds of aircraft and boats, the failure of gyroscopes and radio instruments, irrational behaviour in normally sane crew members and, of course, the sighting of numerous UFOs. It's also worth noting that Canada, contrary to popular belief, is one of the greatest aeronautical powers in the world, that as far back as 1952 it had been described as the Promised Land of Aviation, that it has a truly remarkable range of world-famous aircraft companies, and that it also has vast areas of heavily wooded and uninhabited land – ideal for hiding secret aeronautical research establishments.'

'That,' Stanford said, 'is what Scaduto found out. So, the next thing he had to ascertain was whether or not the Canadian saucer project had *really* been passed on to the US Air Force and if the Air Force had then simply dropped it.'

'And the answer was both accounts was "No".'

'Correct. His research revealed that on February 11, 1953, the *Toronto Star*

announced that a *new* flying saucer was being developed at the Avro-Canada plant in Malton, Ontario – ’

‘The word “new” suggesting that it wasn’t the first one.’

‘Exactly. Then, on February 16, the Minister of Defense Production, C. D. Howe, informed the Canadian House of Commons that Avro-Canada was in fact working on a, quote, “mock-up model of a flying saucer, capable of flying at fifteen hundred miles an hour and climbing straight up in the air.” By February 27, Crawford Gordon Jr., the president of Avro-Canada, was writing in the *Avro News* that the prototype being built was so revolutionary that it would make all other forms of supersonic aircraft obsolescent. Next, the *Toronto Star* was claiming that Britain’s Field Marshal Montgomery had become one of the few people ever to view Avro’s mock-up of the flying saucer, and short after that Air Vice Marshal D. M. Smith was reported to have said that what Field Marshal Montgomery had seen was the revolutionary construction plans for a gyroscopic fighter whose gas turbine would revolve around the pilot, who would be positioned at the center of the disk.’

Epstein winced with pain, ignored his Spanish omelet and swallowed a tablet; he washed the tablet down with a glass of water and then looked right at Stanford.

‘Good God,’ he said. ‘I think I remember it. The American media dubbed that then legendary machine the *Omega* and in 1953 the *RAF Review* gave it a semi-official respectability by reprinting most of the unclassified Canadian research and including doctored drawings of the machine.’

‘What did it look like?’ Stanford asked.

‘According to the sketches, it was a relatively small, horse-shoe-shaped flying wing, with numerous air intake slots along its edge, ten deflector vanes for direction control, a single pilot cabin topped by a cupola of transparent

plastic, and a large turbine engine that revolved around the vertical axis of the main body.'

'Fantastic,' Stanford said. 'Now listen to this. In early November, 1953, Canadian newspapers were reporting that a mock-up of the *Omega* had been shown on October 31 to a group of twenty-five military officers and scientists; then, in March the following year, the *American* press was claiming that the US Air Force, concerned at Soviet progress in aeronautics, had allocated an unspecified sum of money to the Canadian government for the building of a prototype of their flying saucer, that the machine had been designed by the English aeronautical engineer, John Frost – who had worked for Avro-Canada in Malton, Ontario – and that it would be capable of either hovering in midair or flying at a speed of nearly two thousand miles an hour. This hot bit of news was followed by Canadian press assertions that their government was planning to form entire squadrons of flying saucers for the defense of Alaska and the far regions of the North, and that the machines would require no runways, were capable of rising vertically, and were ideal weapons for subarctic and polar regions.'

'Did the Canadian government make any comment about all this?'

'Not until December 3, 1954, when they suddenly announced that the flying saucer project had been abandoned.'

'Any reason?'

'Oh, yeah. Because, although it was believed that the saucers would fly, they would, quote, service no useful purpose. The Minister of Defense then confirmed their decision, adding that the project would have cost far too much for something that was, in the end, highly speculative.'

Epstein picked up his fork, poked distractedly at his omelet, set the fork down again and glanced around him, his normally weary gaze still excited.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘All these facts merely confirmed what your friend Scaduto had known for some time: that the Canadian government had officially dropped their saucer project in 1954.’

‘I would stress the word “officially”,’ Stanford said.

‘Why?’

‘Because that announcement by the Canadian government was clearly contradicted on October 22, 1955, when the US Air Force Secretary, Donald Quarles, released an extraordinary statement through the press office of the Department of Defense. Among other things he said that an aircraft of “unusual configuration and flight characteristics” would soon be appearing, that the US government had “initiated negotiations” with the Canadian government and Avro-Canada for the preparation of an experimental model of the Frost flying disk, and that the aircraft would be mass-produced and used for the common defense of the subarctic area of the continent.’

Epstein rubbed his eyes, studied his omelet with distaste, then returned his gaze to Stanford and smiled, his hands spread on the table.

‘So what am I to make of all this?’ he asked. ‘First, the Canadian government announces that they have abandoned their saucer project. Next, ten months later, the US Air Force officially announces that such a project is underway. Was it or wasn’t it?’

‘It was,’ Stanford said. ‘By February 1959 the press was receiving ambiguous Air Force statements about a revolutionary new aircraft that had been undertaken jointly by the US Air Force, the US Army and the Canadian government. Then, on April 14, during a press conference in Washington, DC, General Frank Britten implied that the first test flight of the aircraft was imminent and that it was destined to revolutionize traditional aeronautical concepts.’

‘That doesn’t necessarily imply a saucer.’

‘It did,’ Stanford said. ‘In August, 1960, the Air Force, giving in under pressure, allowed reporters to view the very machine they had all been writing about. What the reporters were shown was the Avro Car, an experimental aircraft that combined the characteristics of air-cushion machines and airplanes – in short, a crude flying saucer based on the principles of the jet ring and barely able to rise above the runway. Small wonder, seeing this, that they experienced no surprise when, in December the following year, the Department of Defense announced that they were withdrawing from participation in the project.’

Stanford finished off his bacon cheeseburger, wiped his lips with a paper napkin, then sat back and stared intently at Epstein, not smiling at all.

‘There the story of the *official* flying saucers ended,’ he said. ‘Scaduto spent months trying to work out what it all meant, but in the end he grew increasingly baffled. First, he tried to find a correlation between the fact that an awful lot of UFOs seemed to come from and return to Canada and the fact that the Canadian government had been engaged in trying to build flying saucers – but there could be no remote comparison between the capabilities of the unknowns and the pathetic performance of the government-sponsored saucers. On the other hand, there were a few lingering mysteries…’

‘Let me try to guess,’ Epstein said. ‘Why did the Canadian government announce that they had dropped their flying saucer project when in fact, at least according to the US Air Force, they were still working on it? And why did the US Air Force Secretary announce that aircraft like flying saucers would soon be flying? And why, after that announcement, was there a four-year gap – with no sign of the magical aircraft – before a remarkably similar announcement was made? And why, after this latest announcement, did the Air Force unveil their magical offering, let it be known that it was a failure, and then announce that they were dropping the project? And finally, why, if the Canadians had genuinely dropped their flying saucer project, did the US

Department of Defense, in announcing the termination of their own project, state that they were *withdrawing* from *participation* in the project? Withdrawing from participation with *whom*?'

'Those were the burning questions,' Stanford said. 'The suspicion remained that the Canadian government and the US Air Force were both still involved in the construction of flying saucers, that those saucers were vastly more advanced than the rubbish the Air Force had deigned to show us, that some of the supposed UFO landings on or around various top-secret military establishments were actually the products of Canadian-US cooperation, and that the Canadian and American statements, with their contradictions and ambiguities, had been designed to deliberately confuse the facts and turn them into rumors.'

'Good God,' Epstein said.

Stanford didn't smile at all. He paid the check and stood up. Epstein followed him out into the street and turned his fur collar up. Neon lights flickered spasmodically. The snow was turning to slush. The street was crowded with beaded youngsters and politicians and whores, with well dressed secretaries and generals wearing suits, all defying the biting cold. Stanford headed for M Street. Epstein coughed at his side. They both walked in a deliberately casual manner, rarely looking around them.

'Anyway,' Stanford said eventually, 'unable to solve the mystery, Scaduto finally had to let it go. Then, in 1965, it all came back with a bang.' Glancing up at the sky, scarcely aware that he was doing so, he saw a patch of glittering stars above the clouds, the black void all around them. 'In 1964, 1965 and 1966 there were three singular events that really put the Air Force in a fix. It was the culmination of those events that finally stung the Air Force into getting rid of its much publicized Project Blue Book – and that also encouraged Scaduto into re-examining the whole Canadian mystery. The first of these events was the close encounter of the third kind of Socorro, New Mexico, in 1964, when Deputy Marshall Lonnie Zamora claimed to have

seen two schoolboy-sized people in coveralls standing beside an egg-shaped, metallic craft that was resting on legs extending from its body. The machine took off with a roar, spitting flames and ascending vertically, before Zamora could get down there to investigate.'

'An extraordinary case,' Epstein said. 'Witnesses, including Allen Hynek, later confirmed that the four landing marks and the burned greasewood plants, a local verified that he had seen Zamora's squad car heading toward a strange, oval-shaped object that was descending in the direction of the sighting, and a check with NASA, the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, and fifteen industrial firms to see if they were working with experimental lunar landing modules in the area received nothing but negative replies. Hynek later described the incident as one of the major UFO sightings of all time.'

'Jesus,' Stanford said, 'your photographic memory's better than mine… Anyway, that was the first event. The second was when, on March 20, 1966, at Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan, *eighty-seven* female students and a civil defense instructor saw a glowing, football-shaped object hovering over an empty swamp a few hundred yards from the women's dormitory, repeatedly racing at and retreating from the dormitory, dodging an airport beacon light, and generally flying back and forth for hours before disappearing – and when, the next day, in Dexter, Michigan, five people including two police officers reporting seeing the same. The third event was merely the widely reported fact that by 1966 a Gallup poll had indicated that approximately *nine million* Americans thought they had seen a UFO. It was these major events, plus the Great Northeast Blackout of November 9, 1965, that led directly to the infamous Condon Report and the final closing down of Project Blue Book. Now while the Great Northeast Blackout was actually the second incident, I've left it to the last because it was the incident that really resurrected the Canadian mystery at the NICAP – particularly with Scaduto.'

Stanford saw Epstein swallowing another tablet while passing the numerous pedestrians on the sidewalk as if they didn't exist. His old friend looked

exhausted and very ill, which made Stanford feel both helpless and angry.

‘As you already know,’ he said, ‘there’s a long history of UFOs being seen over power lines and of subsequent, unexplainable power failures. Now, during the first week of August, 1965, thousands of people in Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado and neighbouring states witnessed one of the biggest UFO displays ever. Unidentified lights flew across the skies in formation, were tracked on radar, and played tag with civilian and Air Force aircraft. This major display of UFOs eventually faded away, but a milder flap continued over the next three months until, on the night of November 9, unidentifieds were reported from Niagara, Syracuse and Manhattan. Then, the same night, all the lights went out – in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Vermont and a section of Canada – went out over a total area of eighty thousand square miles and a population of twenty-six million people.’

‘I remember it,’ Epstein said. ‘The huge power grid that controlled all those blacked-out areas – an interlocking network linking almost thirty utility companies, with hundreds of automatic controls and safety devices – was considered to be invulnerable… yet the cause of the blackout was never ascertained.’

‘Right,’ Stanford said. ‘They never found out what caused it. The only thing they knew for certain was that the failure had occurred somewhere in the flow between the Niagara Falls generators and the Clay power substation, an automatic control unit through which the electric power flowed from Niagara Falls to New York.’

‘There was a UFO connection,’ Epstein said.

‘Yes,’ Stanford said. ‘First report of an unidentified was made by the Deputy Aviation Commissioner of Syracuse, Robert C. Walsh, and several other witnesses, all of whom, just after the power failed at Syracuse, saw what

resembled a huge fireball *ascending* from a fairly low altitude near Hancock Airport. Approaching for a landing at that time was Flight Instructor Weldon Ross and his passenger, computer technician James Brooding, both of whom saw the same object, at first mistaking it for a burning building on the ground – something corroborating the fact that the fireball was at low altitude – then quickly realizing that it was something in the air: a single, round-shaped object about a hundred feet in diameter, which they later described as a flame-colored globe. And, according to Ross's calculations, that object was directly over the Clay power substation.'

'So,' Epstein said, 'we're back with Canada.'

'*Yes,*' Stanford said with some emphasis. 'For obvious reasons this whole damned mess resurrected the Canadian mystery at the NICAP, particularly with Scaduto. Now, more than ever, he was convinced that there was some sort of connection between Canada and the UFO phenomenon. He was convinced even more of this when a friend pointed out that until the United States defensive radar network was extended to the Far North, which was in 1952, Soviet long-range reconnaissance planes from Siberian and subarctic bases had flown frequently over Alaska, the Yukon territory, and the MacKenzie District areas to spy on what was supposed to be relatively uninhabited territory. This just didn't make sense. What the hell were the Soviets spying on? And so wondering about this, Scaduto pulled out his Canadian files and started working again.'

They crossed M Street, drawn forward by the traffic lights, turned left on the sidewalk and kept going, rarely looking at anything. Eventually they turned again. They both walked like blind men. The residential streets were empty and quiet, the snow gleaming in darkness.

'Scaduto found nothing new in the files,' Stanford said, 'but by accident he finally struck gold. One of the members of the NICAP board of governors had managed to run down one of the CIA agents who'd been transferred after the Woman from Maine affair. This agent, who'd been transferred to London,

England, before being eased out of the service, was naturally feeling embittered and was willing to talk as long as it was off the record. Consequently, Scaduto met him in a room in the Drake Hotel in New York, and what Scaduto was told knocked him out.'

Epstein shivered with cold, rubbed his eyes and coughed painfully, cursed softly, but kept listening to Stanford.

'Apparently,' Stanford said, 'one of the agent's assignments in the CIA was to undergo specialized training in Duke University's parapsychology lab, the psychology department at McGill University in Canada, and a sensory-deprivation establishment at Princetown. The purpose of all this was to open his mind – a naturally responsive one – to mental telepathy, sightless vision and psychokinesis. The reason for this, it was explained to him, was that the US was about thirty years behind the Soviets in this field, and that the Russians were already employing such skills for espionage purposes.

'After a year of training, the agent found that he could, like Ted Serios, cause photographs to appear on a film by merely focusing intently on the camera. A year after that, in 1959, he was working with US Naval Intelligence with the US *Nautilus*, the then renowned atomic submarine. And that same year, when the press exposed the *Nautilus* experiments, he was transferred back to Washington, DC, to work with the female psychic from Maine.

'During his first session, in the presence of the psychic, the agent wasn't able to make contact. However, at the second session, in the CIA office in DC, when the woman wasn't present, he went into a trance and made contact with *someone*. Now, like the woman from Maine the agent was scribbling down, automatically, what it was he was hearing in his trance. He never actually found out what he wrote… because by the time he woke up one of the senior officers present had spirited the message out of the office.'

'So they didn't want him to know who he was talking to.'

‘Correct,’ Stanford said. ‘No matter: when he finally woke up he found everyone at the window, all excitedly scanning the sky where the UFO, apparently, had been. Intrigued – and annoyed because his notes had been stolen from him – the agent later had a clandestine meeting with one of his colleagues and asked him if the UFO had been real. His colleague, pretty drunk at the time, told him that it was real, that it was part of a top-secret government project, and that one of the crew on board had been ESP trained. The woman from Maine had picked up his thoughts by accident.’

They were nearing Epstein’s house, the streets were empty and quiet, and Epstein kept his head down, breathing harshly, coughing too much, his head filled with what Stanford was telling him, his heart pounding excitedly.

‘That wasn’t all,’ Stanford said, speaking almost in a monotone, his gaze fixed on the street straight ahead, on the tall, brownstone buildings. ‘According to the agent’s colleague, the UFOs reported to have landed at Cannon AFB, Deerwood Nike Base, Blaine AFB and, apparently, Holloman AFB, actually existed. Those saucers were the products of years of highly secret activity between the Canadian and United States governments – but in no way did they resemble the aborted projects that were leaked to the press. They were, in fact, highly advanced flying saucers of the most extraordinary capability – and there was a total of about twelve in existence.’

Now Epstein felt really excited. He ignored his aching stomach. He didn’t sense Stanford’s rage, had no thoughts of betrayal, felt nothing but an exalting vindication of all he had lived for. The UFOs existed. He had not pursued phantoms. He could die without dwelling on failure, and that made it all worth it.

‘Only twelve?’ he asked instinctively, still a researcher first and foremost, needing every detail to hand.

‘Yes,’ Stanford said. ‘According to the agent, his colleague had previously been seconded to the Royal Canadian Air Force Intelligence where he was

given the task of implementing internal security on the flying saucer project. This project, he soon discovered, had been in existence since 1946, and was being run jointly by the Canadian government, the US Air Force and Navy, and a few high-ranking officers from the Pentagon. They had managed to maintain secrecy by locating the underground productions plants in the vast, deserted regions of southern Canada between British Columbia and Alberta; by ensuring that production of the numerous components for the saucers was distributed between hundreds of different, international companies, none of whom could have guessed what they were for; by undertaking the more specialized research in the super-secret installations of the White Sands Proving Ground and similar establishments all over Canada; and, finally, by deliberately confusing the media and public with a continuous stream of ambiguous leaks and misleading statements. In other words: those saucers are real and they're hidden in Canada.'

Epstein stopped at the street corner, turned around to stare at Stanford, looking up, his eyes bright in the lamplight, flecks of snow on the gray beard.

'You *do* realize,' he said, 'that this leaves a mere twelve saucers to account for all the sightings of the past thirty years?'

'Yes,' Stanford says, 'I realize that. But it's not what I'm saying.'

'Oh? And just what *are* you saying?'

Stanford didn't hesitate. 'It transpires that the Allied Air Forces had been harassed by UFOs – mostly in the shape of balls of fire – from as far back as 1944. Then, shortly after the war, in the summer of 1946, the more familiar types of UFOs, mostly cigar-shaped, swarmed across Scandinavia, seemingly coming from the direction of the Soviet Union. The conclusion at the Pentagon was that German scientists, seized by the Russians at Peenemünde where the V-2 rockets had been developed, were constructing advanced weapons for the Soviets, and that the unidentified, so-called *missiles*, were being launched from the rocket test site of Peenemünde, which was then in

the Russian-occupied zone of Germany. This suspicion became stronger when the British, who had also seized and taken back to Britain a wealth of Germany's top-secret scientific and weapons research material, announced that the Germans had been working since 1941 on extraordinary aeronautical projects and on processes to release atomic energy. Included in the former was a "remotely controlled, pilotless aircraft" and a "device that could be controlled at a considerable distance by another aircraft." So, faced with this, and thinking of the supposed Soviet *missiles* over Scandinavia, there was a sudden British-Canadian-United States alliance to beat the Soviets in the race to follow through the German designs and complete their remarkable aeronautical projects.'

They stood together at the corner, a cold wind beating at them. Stanford was totally humorless, his eyes unusually intense, and Epstein looked up at him in wonder, either dazed or still doubtful.

'Listen!' Stanford said. 'As we've just been discussing, the actual concept of a flying saucer is not a new one. The US Navy and the British Navy have both been interested for a long time in the possibility of constructing either a vertical rising aircraft or a simpler air-cushion machine that would be particularly suitable for use at sea. Regarding this, the Navy Flounder and the Flying Flapjack were crude examples of the former, the normal Hovercraft a perfect example of the latter. However, what they were attempting to build in the underground plants in Canada was a machine with the extraordinary capabilities of the ones suggested in the incomplete German research material. They wouldn't achieve this goal for another twenty years, but the first, extremely crude versions of their saucers were successfully tested over the Canadian border on June 21, 1947: a total of five disk-shaped aircraft, two of them piloted and approximately fifty feet in diameter, the remaining three remote-controlled by the pilots flying nearby, these three a mere six feet in diameter. These particular flying saucers could reach an altitude of approximately seven thousand feet, could hover uncertainly in the air, and had a horizontal speed of about six hundred miles an hour.'

‘That test flight,’ Epstein said, ‘could account for the Harold Dahl sighting of that same day.’

‘Right,’ Stanford said. ‘However, it was what happened *after* that test flight that really got the ball rolling. On June 24, three days after the first successful test flight of the five Canadian-US saucers, a total of nine, highly sophisticated, *unknown* saucers flew down over the Canadian underground plants, hovered there for about twenty minutes, shot off toward the Cascades where they reportedly circled the test area, then returned, circled the plant for another twenty minutes, then shot off at incredible speed. And from that day on – the day, incidentally, of the famous Kenneth Arnold sightings – those UFOs, and others, returned again and again, eventually spreading out across the whole world.’

Epstein stepped back and covered his mouth with a hand, his eyes too large and very bright, his body visibly shaking. Stanford watched him, saying nothing, waiting for him to recover, finally saw him removing his hand from his mouth and shaking his head in confusion.

‘My God,’ Epstein said, ‘are they Russian?’

‘No,’ Stanford said. ‘The agent’s colleague, during his tenure at the flying saucer plant in Canada, never found out who those saucers belonged to. What he *did* find out was that some time during the Cold War the Pentagon received proof that the unknown saucers didn’t originate in Russia – and that the Russians had been harassed by the very same objects. He also found out that they were *not* from outer space, that the Pentagon probably knew where they came from, and that Canada and the United States were racing to build similar machines, because the unknown saucers, even as far back as the Fifties, had the sort of maneuvering capability that made them virtually invincible.’

Epstein turned around and walked away. Stanford followed him around the corner and saw him stopping again. He seemed to be frozen. He was staring

across at his own house. Three men in dark suits were coming out of the house and walking toward a black limousine. Epstein offered a strangled cry. The three men all looked up. Epstein started running across the road toward them, his heavy overcoat flapping. Stanford cursed and ran after him. The men slipped into the car. The car's headlights flashed on, forming a dazzling pool of light, and then the car roared and shot off down the street. Epstein stopped and stared at it. Stanford slid to a halt behind him. The car slowed down at the far end of the street, turned the corner and vanished.

Epstein cursed and lurched onward, almost slipping in the snow. He and Stanford reached the brownstone together and found the door open. They both hurried inside. The whole house had been ransacked. Epstein kept looking around him, his eyes dazed, uncomprehending, then he groaned and covered his face with his hands and dropped into a chair.

'Bastards!' Stanford hissed. 'They've got us marked!'

He reached down and grabbed Epstein, pulled him up to his feet, shook him until his hands fell from his face and his eyes were wide open. He held Epstein by his shoulders, trying to keep his old friend steady, then he spoke in a low and urgent voice that gave Epstein his strength back.

'Listen to me,' Stanford said. 'I didn't stop at Scaduto. I conducted some investigations of my own and this is what I discovered.'

'I discovered that the mysterious fireballs seen frequently over Nazi Germany disappeared for good when the Second World War ended. I discovered that the Russians, the British and the Americans divided the scientific spoils of Germany between them, and that some of those spoils were rumored to be related to the German fireballs. I also discovered that the British had received the major portion of this scientific booty, and that they had, in 1945, sent back secret German aeronautical equipment and papers to be distributed to their experimental research centers in Australia and Canada.

‘I discovered that by 1947 certain British aeronautical establishments were experimenting with such bizarre Germany concepts as a supersonic flying wing, a gyroscopically stabilized pilot’s cabin surrounded by a revolving turbine engine, and a suction airfoil shaped like a meniscus lens – or like a fucking great mushroom. And finally, I discovered that in 1946, with the encouragement of the British government, there had been a mass migration of aeronautical establishments and their workers from their original English production centers to the vast, uninhabited regions of southwest Canada.’

‘So,’ Epstein said. ‘*What does it mean*?’

‘What I believe,’ Stanford said, ‘is that the Canadian and American governments, quietly backed by the British, have been working jointly since the end of the Second World War on the development of supersonic flying saucers, that they now have a limited number of such machines hidden away in the wilds of Canada or in the White Sands Proving Ground, and that those saucers are based on aeronautical projects that originated in Nazi Germany, but aren’t related to the vast majority of UFO sightings. What I also believe is that the US government knows the origin of the more extraordinary saucers, that it’s frightened of what the capability of those saucers might represent in military and political terms, and that its building of its own saucers is a race against time and its secrecy a means of avoiding national panic. Finally, what I believe is that the government has to keep its secret, that it will murder to do so, and that the deaths of Jessup and Hardy, of Dr McDonald and Irving Jacobs, are examples of how far the government will go to keep the lid on the pan.

‘The Canadian government has flying saucers. The US government has flying saucers. But someone, *somewhere*, has flying saucers so advanced we can’t touch them. Those saucers don’t come from space. They aren’t figments of imagination. They are real and they are right here on Earth and their source is a mystery.’

Epstein pushed himself away, spinning around, bumping into a chair, then he

hurried across the wrecked room, past his pillaged belongings, and jerked the curtains away from the windows to look up at the stars. He stood there a long time, didn't once rub his beard, and when he finally turned back to face the room, his eyes were glazed with an intense, haunted brilliance.

'I'm going to Paris,' he said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I owe Kammler and Nebe. Without them, I would not be here. That I killed them was not a sign of malice but of simple expediency. I think of it often. What I did, I had to do. The deaths of Kammler and Nebe were necessary for the good of the colony. They were both becoming greedy. They wanted power for themselves. They were more concerned with politics than science, and I knew what that meant. Plots and counterplots. The introduction of intrigue. A dissension that would interfere with work and thus hinder our progress. Such a possibility could not be tolerated. We had come too far for that. For that reason I had them gassed as they slept, then I took over the colony.

Yet I recognize my debt. Without them, I would not be here. I never liked them, but they did what was required and made good our escape. We left Germany behind us. We embraced the world of ice. Beneath the ice, in the immense, towering caves, thousands slaved to support us. The colony grew quickly. Without dissension there was progress. Our medical and scientific experiments led to wondrous achievements.

I was racing against time. I was sixty-six years old. What I did in the laboratories in the ice was a necessary evil. What I did, I had to do. If I died before my work was completed, the colony would flounder. I had to make it self-sustaining. The workers had to be controlled. Sooner or later, even the guards with the whips would have negative thoughts. This could not be allowed to happen. The control had to be automatic. I was obsessed with the mysteries of the brain and biological mutation.

What I did, I had to do. The slaves writhed beneath my knife. The gray matter

of their brains was explored; lungs and hearts were examined. Their blood was my life's blood. What they suffered was necessary. Vivisection on animals is useful, but has grave limitations. So, I operated. The experiments were not pleasant. Many died and many more became crippled and had to be terminated. Nonetheless, I progressed quickly. Without law there are no boundaries. The mystery of human life was unraveled as it writhed on the tables.

I was aging every day. I felt the fluttering of my heart. My skin was tightening across the cheekbones of my face and my stomach was addled. This frustration was energizing. I spent months in the laboratories. The experiments in the camps of Nazi Germany now bore splendid fruit. Hearts and lungs were transplanted. Prosthetic arms and legs flourished. Many died on the tables, those maimed were terminated, but our gains soon overcame the cost and encouraged us further. Gerontology was a priority. My own aging was the spur. We experimented with various drugs and surgical aids and had dramatic results. Naturally we made mistakes. There was paralysis, palsied limbs. Nevertheless, with application and will, we eventually met with success. At first it was modest. Vitamin pills and various stimulants. They, however, were just a beginning and soon led to much better things. I myself was thus saved. The first injections renewed my vigor. Within a year, with my heart at full strength, I could receive the pacemaker. A tentative first step. The artificial stomach followed. Years later would bring the plastic surgery and the minor prosthetics.

The means of control were urgent. This goal obsessed me next. I was aware that even the most fanatical guards would eventually yearn for the outer world. Human nature is a curse. It is weak and quite irrational. What I wanted was a method of control that would make the guards obsolete.

I exposed the human brain. Once exposed, it is a blancmange. No mystery: just tissue and fibers, blood and acid and water. I experimented with the brain. I specialized in living subjects. I discovered that by tampering with

certain cerebral areas, the mental processes of the brain could be altered in any manner required. I inserted microscopic electrodes. I had them activated by computer. Thus, at the press of a button, I could introduce pain or pleasure, craven fear or brute aggression, numb acceptance or insatiable curiosity, heightened intelligence or idiocy. This discovery was invaluable. It was promptly utilized. Within months, implantation of the workers was well underway.

We were masters and slaves. The latter were virtually robotized. The former were still controlled by Artur Nebe, but were clearly redundant. The slaves had all been implanted. The whips were no longer needed. The only danger of revolt now resided in the guards and technicians. Nebe recognized this danger. He gave permission to implant. We both knew that this could lead to resistance, so we had to work carefully. It took us two years. We performed the implants one by one. We anesthetized the men while they were sleeping and then stole them away. The operation was simple. The men were programmed to forget the implants. When they awakened, they would not seem any different to those still untouched. After two years it was finished. There were no untouched left. Only Kammler and Nebe and myself were allowed to go free.

Every member had his function. His every thought was controlled. Every man, woman and child was robotized and had his course mapped out for him. Their desires were my desires. Their needs were my needs. I ordained their pain and pleasure, their every hunger, and was worshipped accordingly.

The implantations were all different. Some severe, some less so. What mattered was that each individual would perform as required. To drain a mind is to kill it. One must drain only a little. One must leave free those cerebral areas that perform certain functions.

The technical staff were least affected. I left them the spur of discontentment. This discontentment only related to their creative urge and did not go beyond that. What I removed was their hostility. What I enhanced was their love for

work. Given this, they were almost like normal men, but lacked personal ambition.

Below the technical staff were the administrators. Such men and women were more affected. Required for systematic tasks, uncreative and repetitious, they were programmed to be wholly positive thinkers, enthusiastic and dedicated. They were drained of discontentment. Their work triggered satisfaction. In frequent contact with the scientists, who were almost like normal men, the administrators had minimal personality and no thought for themselves.

The lowliest workers were most affected. I could allow them no personality. I think of Nebe's soldiers, of the factory workers and secretaries, of the drivers and laborers and cooks who performed simple tasks. All were heavily implanted. All were drained of personality. All were programmed to perform their given tasks without reason or thought. In a real sense they were robots. They experienced few emotions. Much cheaper and more reliable than cyborgs, they had a minimal consciousness.

What an achievement this was! The first perfect society! No waste, no crime, no need for debate, no insubordination or rebellion, no conflict of any kind. Such a society is a miracle. It is also highly productive. With no digressions for politics or conflict, it can advance by extraordinary leaps. It can and ours did. We rode the whirlwind and conquered it. Within two years our saucers were creations of an awesome complexity. Jet propulsion was obsolete. Atomic energy was routine. And even this, given the benefit of hindsight, was but a modest beginning.

I see the saucers as I sit here. They soar vertically from the wilderness. As I observe them, they glide across the sky and cast their shadows on mountain peaks. The sun beats all around them. They merge with the flashing ice. They ascend vertically and the hover in silence, their inertial shields glowing.

I confess: I feel pride. Inhuman? I cannot be. As I sit here on the mountain, as I gaze out through the windows, the beauty of the saucers above the snow

makes me feel like a young man.

A divided society could not have accomplished it. Certainly not in that brief period. I would not have accomplished it myself had I ignored Nebe and Kammler.

They both wanted to leave the wilderness. They wanted to regain what they had lost. Simple men, moved by normal, pointless hungers, they wanted cheap, instant glory. The saucers offered that opportunity. They knew the saucers were invincible. They wanted to use the saucers to plunder the Earth and make it bow down before them.

I did not desire the same. I wanted only my work. My new cathedrals were made of ice and stone, my sole religion was science. I did not want that changed. I knew that conflict would change it. I also knew that with patience and time there would be no need for conflict.

The saucers rendered us inviolable. Their very existence was our security. What we needed, we could obtain from the outer world if we handled it properly. Meanwhile, we could progress. We could increase our capabilities. If we did so, we would be in a position to gain much with no effort. The outer world would have to join us. We would gradually draw it in. Given time, the outer world would surrender, turning men into Man.

Yes, given time. But Nebe and Kammler had no time. Their brains untouched by the healing electrodes, they were still normal men. They still suffered from base emotions. They felt fear and resentment. They both yearned for the world beyond the ice, and for its decadent pleasures. Vengeance and power. Material gain and the means of squandering it. Like bored children, Nebe and Kammler were inflamed with the need for attention. No, they couldn't wait. They wanted a war of their own making. They wanted to use my remarkable creations as their weapons of plunder.

I could not let that happen. Such a victory would be short-lived. Such

aggression would be met with the resistance of inane politicians. Why encourage a nuclear war? What real purpose would it serve? Already our resources were running low, our needs increasing dramatically. What we needed, the world possessed. We could have it without conflict. In gaining it, we could progress even more and thus bide our own time. In the end, the rest would come. The rule of science was inevitable. A conflict such as Nebe and Kammler wanted could only lead to mutual destruction. I could not let it happen. I had no immediate goals. My concern was for the future of science and Man's metamorphosis – I still wanted the Superman.

My intention was to trade. I needed mass-produced items: small components and tools, nuts and bolts, screws and nails, light bulbs and printing paper and pens and other modest essentials. So far we had stolen them. Our flying saucers had landed. We had often abducted human beings and machines where isolation protected us. But nuts and bolts were more difficult. Small items were large problems. What was shipped to here throughout the war years was now diminishing rapidly. No colony can be self-sustaining. I had always understood this. So it was that in 1952 I had to form an alliance. There was really no alternative. I had no choice but to trade. What I had, the world needed; what the world had, I needed; and until I had the world on my side, I would have to negotiate.

Indeed, I had already started. I was negotiating with President Truman. After the Washington invasion of 1952, he had agreed to a meeting. We met in the Oval Room. My CIA contacts were present. President Truman was an intelligent man, and as such he was nervous. He kept fiddling with his glasses. His lower lip was not too steady. General Vandenberg was standing near the desk, his eyes bright with suppressed rage. The Oval Room was crowded. General Samford and Professor Robertson. Other members of the Robertson Panel, including Lloyd Berkner. The meeting didn't take long. They had already examined my brief. Most being specialists in the physical sciences, they had no problem in reading. I put forward my proposals. Truman sighed and raised his hands. Generals Vandenberg and Samford

were outraged, but inevitably out-voted. The scientists knew what they were reading. They were aware of our capabilities. They put the facts bluntly to Truman and we reached an agreement.

After that, I had no choice. Nebe and Kammler became a threat. Disgusted that I should barter instead of conquer, they started plotting against me. I have no proof of this. I just know it was inevitable. Their chance for immediate recognition and power had been ruined by my actions. They were now trapped in the colony. In the outer world they would be war criminals. The only way they could return to the outer world would be to land as aggressors. So, they felt trapped. Thus they had to plot against me. And knowing this, I had no choice but to remove them and take over the colony.

They had not been implanted. They were men of free will. I could not, as I could with the others, suggest euthanasia. For this reason I had no choice. What I did, I had to do. I could not concern myself with individuals while my future was threatened.

Not shortly after the war, then. It was 1953. We had dinner overlooking the plateau, the snow white, the stars glittering. I served champagne and caviar. The meal was followed with brandy. Such luxuries were rare in the colony, but the night seemed to warrant it. Kammler spoke of America. He reminisced about his visits there. Artur Nebe turned his glass between his fingers, his dark eyes unrevealing. Kammler spoke of General Vandenberg. His voice trembled with loss. He said that Vandenberg had reminded him of his past, of his days with the military. Artur Nebe was not attentive. His gelid eyes surveyed the ice. He gazed over the glistening plateau to the dark, frozen wilderness. Kammler spoke of the V-2 rockets. He talked of fighting in the Hague. He recalled his days with Walter Dornberger and Wernher von Braun. The hours passed in this manner. Artur Nebe's cold eyes were veiled. A large saucer became a glowing cathedral that ascended majestically. Artur Nebe did not look up. His gaze was fixed on the wilderness. Kammler yawned and stood against the large window and was framed by the starlit night. He

talked vaguely about the future. He said decisions must be made. He turned away and I saw the white wilderness dissolving in darkness.

They both left shortly after. I had no sense of urgency. The glowing cathedral descended from the heavens, hovered briefly and disappeared. I looked out and saw the ice. The frozen wilderness stretched out below me. I stood up and then went to my desk and turned on the two scanners. Kammler and Nebe were in their rooms, the latter with his whore. I reached down and pressed the button on my left and let the gas fill their lungs.

What I did, I had to do. What I do, I have to do. Above morality, above the sanctity of the individual, is my duty to science. I do not suffer guilt. They were of use and were used. Without them, I would never have escaped – thus I offer them tribute.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Stanford climbed out of the car, closed the door and looked around him, listening to the moaning of the wind as it swept across the broad field. The sun was going down, the sky aflame with crimson light, a few drifting clouds casting the shadows that would soon die in darkness. Stanford stood there for some time. The field was utterly desolate. The flood-lights and the barbed wire had gone, but the scorched earth remained. Nothing would grow here anymore. The butchered cattle had been buried. The dust drifted lazily across the ground, emphasizing the barrenness.

Standing there alone, Stanford was drawn to the mountains beyond the flatlands. He thought of what Scaduto had told him, and it made him feel lost. The saucers didn't come from space. They weren't figments of imagination. They were real and they were right here on Earth and their source was a mystery. Stanford thought about that. To think about it was frightening. He took in the desolate flatlands, saw the bloody sinking sun, watched the dust drifting over the field and then turned back to his car.

He sat in the driver's seat, closed the door and stared ahead, thinking of the girl on the ranch and wondered what she might know. Lust grabbed him immediately, filled his head with her presence, almost making him forget what he was here for, his groin flooding with heat. Damn it, he thought, starting the car, driving off, remembering her eyes, their oddly vacant luminosity, her breasts and her thighs and her brown legs, her thumb parting her moist lips. He couldn't understand himself, didn't know what was happening to him, so drove blindly, hardly seeing the road ahead, the flatlands stretching out on both sides. What was he really doing here? Was it

the girl or what she knew? Stanford shook his head wearily, feeling nervous and excited, confused by his conflicting emotions, despising himself.

The surrounding land was desolate. The crimson sky was turning dark. Stanford drove through pools of moonlight and shadow, over stones and potholes. He thought briefly of Professor Epstein, his good friend, growing frail, now obsessed because death was at his door and the mystery that had haunted him for years still remained unsolved. He had to learn the truth for Epstein. He didn't want to fail his friend. He couldn't bear to think of Epstein fading away, his eyes tormented by failure.

Yet that wasn't the only reason. In truth, it never had been. Stanford's throbbing groin insisted on the truth and stripped the mask from his self-deceit. He was doing this for himself, his own need was his main concern, and as he drove toward the ranch he felt shame, seeing only the girl.

He also felt a little crazy. He didn't feel like himself at all. His thoughts tumbled on top of one another and amounted to nothing. He was obsessed with the girl. His lust went beyond mere sex. He had to touch her, had to break through her silence, had to bore through her tunneled eyes. This need was bewildering, an irrational, compulsive lust; it was a need for the revelations of her body, for the source of her being. What she was, was what he needed. She belonged to what she had witnessed. The was alien, a human touched by the unknown, and that made her seductive.

It was that… and much more. She had known he would come back. She had known and told him so with her smile, with her luminous, empty eyes. Not empty: concealing. Eyes that shone and quickly darkened. She had looked at him and willed him to return and now he felt enslaved by her.

Stanford didn't know what was happening, and was powerless to resist. He felt as if the girl had hypnotized him and drained him of willpower. She had known he would come back. He had known it as well. They had both made the pact three years ago without saying a word.

Inexplicable. Ridiculous. It couldn't be true, yet it was real: a web of mysteries and intriguing possibilities with the girl at its center. Her vacant eyes, suggesting all. Her languorous innocence, inviting lust. Standing thought of her standing on the porch, gazing up at the sky. She had touched and been touched. She had observed and now knew. She was silent as only the knowing are silent: secretive and inviolate. Stanford wondered what she had seen. He wondered what they had done to her. And he wondered, with a strange, hallowed awe, what she had then done to him.

He drove for another five minutes, driving blindly and dangerously, bouncing over potholes and mounds of soil until he arrived at the ranch. He slowed down when he reached the gate, stopped the car, hesitated, then opened the door and slipped out and heard the wind's lonesome moaning. The ranch hadn't changed, was still sadly dilapidated, the dust drifting forlornly along the porch, the lights burning inside. The girl was not on the porch. There was no sign of the old man. Stanford sighed and then opened the gate and closed it quietly behind him.

It was now nearly dark. The wind moaned across the flatlands. Stanford walked very slowly toward the ranch, his eyes drawn to the windows. The lights were on inside. There was no other sign of life. The only sound was the moaning of the wind, and that made him feel nervous. Eventually he reached the porch, looked up at the nearest window. He saw an oil lamp glowing fitfully between the curtains, a shelf of cracked plates and cups. Stanford glanced up at the sky. The moon glided beneath the stars. Stanford shivered and then went up the steps until he stood on the porch. There was no sound from inside. Stanford felt very strange. He stepped forward and knocked on the front door and then stepped back again.

There was no immediate response. Nothing. Stanford waited for some time. Nothing happened, so he knocked on the door again and then stepped back a little. Silence. The wind. Stanford felt a bit unreal. He stepped forward and knocked on the door again and felt his heart racing uncomfortably. That

annoyed him a lot: he wasn't used to being nervous. He cursed softly and willed her to come and then he heard a faint sound. A tin mug on a tin plate. A chair scraping on the floor. Stanford took a deep breath and let it out and kept his eyes on the door. The bolt made a rasping sound. The door creaked and then opened slightly. A beam of light fell out over Stanford and then he saw the girl's face.

She stared blankly at him. Her brown eyes were too large. Stanford looked into those eyes and saw the void that led into the unknown. The girl was sucking her thumb. Stanford thought she was smiling. Her long hair tumbled loosely around her face in a dark, uncombed tangle.

'Emmylou?' Stanford said.

The girl nodded dumbly.

'Do you remember me?' Stanford said. 'I was here a few years ago. The night all the other men were here… the night the cattle were butchered.'

The girl sucked her thumb silently. The door was barely open. The girl's body was pressed against the door, her head tilted around it. She was wearing a cheap cotton dress. Stanford saw a brown leg. The girl stared at him, possibly smiling, then she nodded again.

'Can I come in?' Stanford asked. 'It's important that I talk to you. I want to talk to you and your father. Can you tell him I'm here?'

The girl just stared at him, her thumb still in her mouth, the brown eyes too large, strangely depthless, luring him in.

'Can I speak to your father?' Stanford asked. 'Is your father in there?'

The girl suddenly giggled, a high-pitched, childish sound, then she removed her thumb from her mouth and opened the door a bit wider. Stanford stared at her. He couldn't take his eyes off her. She was wearing the same flimsy dress

that she had worn three years ago, the buttons undone up to her thighs, undone down to her breasts. Stanford wanted to put it into her. He imagined himself doing it. The lust seized him with immediate, startling force and stripped his senses bare. He shook his head to clear it. He was sweating and felt feverish. The girl was leaning in a languid fashion against the door, a distant smile on her face.

‘Is your father in?’ Stanford asked.

The girl tilted her head slightly. Her eyes were focused upon him, very large, their brown depths oddly luminous. Then she giggled again. Stanford shivered a little. She stopped giggling and shook her head from side to side in a negative gesture.

‘He’s not in?’ Stanford asked.

The girl shook her head again. Stanford saw her belly pressed against the door, one breast thrusting around it.

‘You mean he’s not here?’ Stanford asked.

The girl nodded that this was so.

‘Where is he?’ Stanford asked. ‘Do you understand? I want to know where he’s gone.’

The girl opened the door wider, slipped around it like a dancer, moving with a natural sensuality that made Stanford harden. He saw the curve of her breasts, the faint outline of her nipples, glanced down and saw a brown inner thigh, a film of dust on her bare feet. The girl pressed against the door, slid along it, moved toward him, then she passed him, brushing lightly against him, and stood out on the porch. Stanford watched her, fascinated, seeing the curvature of her spine. She leaned back and then raised her left hand and pointed up at the night sky.

Stanford suddenly turned cold. He raised his head and looked up. The sky was dark and the stars were extremely bright, the moon gliding beneath them. What did she mean? Stanford couldn't work it out. He shivered and then stepped up to the girl until he stood just beside her. She was still pointing at the sky. She turned her head to stare at him. She was smiling, a distant, disturbing smile, her brown eyes hypnotizing him.

'What do you mean?' Stanford asked. 'You mean your father's up there? In heaven? You mean that your father has died and now he's up there, in heaven?'

The girl smiled and then giggled, shook her head from side to side, indicating that Stanford was wrong, still pointing up at the sky. Stanford wished she would talk to him. He was convinced that she could talk. Staring at her, he wondered if she was mad, though that somehow seemed doubtful. The girl returned his stare. Her hand was still raised in the air. The wind was pressing the cotton dress against her body, emphasizing her breasts and hips. Stanford glanced at the sky again, seeing only the moon and stars. He looked back at the girl and she nodded and kept pointing upward.

'He's not dead?' Stanford asked.

The girl giggled and shook her head from side to side.

'He's up there?' Stanford asked. 'He's in the sky? Someone took him away?'

The girl nodded in confirmation, then dropped her hand and turned toward him. The wind blew the dress behind her legs, leaving them bare. Stanford wanted to put it into her. He wanted no more than that. It was a mindless, brutally primitive desire, and he ached with his need for her.

'Who took him away?' he asked. 'Was it the men who were here that night? Was it the Army or the Air Force or the police? Who took him away?'

The girl raised both her hands, placed them together above her head, drew

them apart and lowered them gently to describe something dome-shaped. Stanford shivered, feeling cold. He also felt a distinct excitement. He nodded to show that he understood, then the girl raised her hands again. She pointed to the sky. Her left hand was mushroom-shaped. She let the hand drop in a vertical line, then knelt down and placed the hand on the porch and swept it up toward the sky again. It was an eloquent gesture, graceful, dreamlike, and then she turned around on her bare feet and slowly stood straight again.

‘They came back,’ Stanford said. ‘They came down in the strange aircraft. Your father was taken into the aircraft and then they all flew away.’

The girl nodded and smiled, put her thumb in her mouth, brushed past him and went back to the house and leaned against the doorframe. Her long legs were crossed. The dress flapped around her hips. Stanford saw the shadowed area between her thighs, raised his eyes, saw her steady, oddly luminous gaze. She was sucking her thumb, a child, perhaps insane, and Stanford flushed with a mixture of shame and primitive lust.

‘How long ago?’ he asked.

The girl’s brown eyes widened.

‘When did all this happen?’ Stanford asked. ‘How many days? How many weeks ago?’

The girl raised two fingers in a V sign.

‘Two days? Stanford said.

The girl nodded, then giggled and turned away and vanished into the house.

Stanford followed her in, feeling strange, not himself, intrigued by what she had told him and by what it might mean. The house was unchanged, the oil lamps still near the windows, casting shadows on the dusty wooden floor and the makeshift furniture. The girl stood near the table, smiling at him, sucking

her thumb; the shadows fell down flaking walls, crept over the old chairs, danced fitfully on and off the girl's face, the rise and fall of her breasts. Stanford returned her smile. There was light in her brown eyes. Her left-hand thumb was in her mouth and her right arm was folded behind her back. Stanford saw her parted thighs, seeing her flesh as his salvation. The shadows flickered on her face, a pool of light around her eyes; and the eyes, which were vacant, were also bright with some vague, sly awareness.

'Who were they?' Stanford asked. 'Who took your father away? Can you describe the men who took him away? What were they like?'

The girl tilted her head slightly, her knuckles pressing against her nose, her dark hair hanging down across her face and covering her right eye. Stanford thought she was smiling, but wasn't sure, just had that feeling; he then thought of what had happened, of the UFO descending, of the men taking her father away, and wondered how she could smile. An idiot? Possibly. Stanford wasn't too sure of that. There was a light in the brown, vacant eyes that gave hints of awareness. The girl seemed to be teasing him, her languid carnality seducing him; silent, she spoke through her body with a sly, feline eloquence.

'Who were they?' Stanford asked.

The girl giggled and walked up to him, stood very close to him, her breasts almost brushing his chest, the rising flesh lightly shadowed. She stared up at Stanford, still smiling, slightly mischievous, arched her spine and stood on tiptoe and raised her hand to his head. Stanford felt sick with longing. He had a hard, pulsating erection. The girl placed the edge of her hand against his forehead and drew it down to his chest. Stanford followed the hand down. He saw the cleft between her breasts. She moved her hand in a cutting motion across his chest, as if marking a line.

'They were all that size?' Stanford asked. 'They were small? Is that what you mean?'

The girl nodded and stepped away. Stanford moved into the shadow. His erection was tight against his pants and he wanted to hide it. The girl moved closer to him. She cupped her left hand in the air. She indicated that the men had been five feet tall, her eyes more expressive. Stanford nodded that he understood. The girl smiled and touched her forehead. She placed her hands around her neck, probably indicating a collar, then ran her delicate hands down her body in two parallel lines.

Stanford didn't understand. He was finding it hard to concentrate. The girl's hands were on her breasts, on her belly, on her thighs, pressing her own hollows and curves and increasing his lust. This wasn't what she intended. She was trying to tell him something. She waved her left hand in a negative gesure and then tried again.

Moving her hands down from her throat, drawing them away from one another, she rubbed them over the buttons on her dress as if trying to erase them. Stanford nodded that he understood. He saw the shivering of her breasts. The girl smiled and placed her hands on her shoulders and ran them straight down her sides. Her hands traced her gentle curves. She stooped down and ran her hands along her legs until they touched her bare feet.

'One-piece suits,' Stanford said. 'They were wearing one-piece suits. They were wearing some sort of coveralls and you didn't see buttons.'

The girl nodded and straightened up, a graceful movement, very sensual, the dress falling back over her legs, rippling over her breasts. She put her thumb back in her mouth. Stanford saw that she was smiling. She stared at him, her eyes more expressive, perhaps even inviting. Stanford looked her up and down. He couldn't take his eyes off her. He wanted to peel the dress from her body and press himself into her.

'Who were they?' he asked. 'I need to know where they came from. You know and I believe you can talk and I want you to tell me.'

Stanford studied her, fascinated, his will destroyed by his erection, trying to gauge what her large eyes were concealing, the room dissolving around him. The girl looked like an adolescent, ragged, unkempt, her feet dirty, her legs burned brown by the sun. Stanford heard the moaning wind. He thought of the moon and stars. The girl stood there, beside the old table, her long legs slightly parted.

‘You won’t talk,’ Stanford said. ‘Did they order you not to talk? Did they do something? Why won’t you talk to me?’

The girl just smiled and sucked her thumb, then started humming a tune. Stanford watched her, mesmerized. He felt totally unreal. The oil lamp on the table burned fitfully, flickering over her face. The girl sucked her thumb and hummed. She rocked languidly to and fro. She was leaning against the table, her hip forming a graceful curve. Stanford wanted to press against her, wanted to feel her tender flesh; he felt dizzy and tense with throttled lust and hardly knew where he was.

‘Who were they?’ he asked.

The girl didn’t reply. Stanford stared at the thumb in her mouth, at her breasts, her curved hip. The shadows flickered across her face, across the tanned skin of her throat, across the cleft of her breasts, her rocking belly, the leg exposed by the open dress. Stanford felt choked with lust. He simply had to step up to her. He stood right in front of her, very close, almost touching, and looked down into her brown, expressive eyes, seeing himself in their dark depths.

‘Who were they?’ he repeated. ‘I know you can talk. I need to know where the men came from. I know you can tell me.’

Looking up, the girl smiled, her thumb still in her mouth, still humming, her body rocking to and fro, her warmth flowing around him. He reached out and placed his hand on her wrist and tugged her thumb from her mouth. She

licked her lips in response. Her hand dangled indecisively. She smiled and slid the hand beneath her dress and lightly scratched her right breast. Stanford felt that he was choking. He saw the hand beneath the dress. Her fingers moved up and down, scratching lightly, her palm pressed to the white skin. Stanford's heart started racing. His sole reality was his erection. He raised his hand and pressed it down on the cloth right above the girl's hand. He saw her tongue at her lips, his own reflection in her eyes, then he felt her fingers slipping away and his hand cupped her breast.

'Who were they?' he asked.

The girl offered no reply. She was still humming contentedly. Stanford felt the breast beneath the thin cotton, very soft, very warm. He pressed gently and felt the nipple. The girl continued humming contentedly. Stanford pulled the dress back and cupped her bare breast in his hand, his palm rubbing the nipple, sliding slowly, pressing down, trying to flatten it. The nipple hardened against his palm. He squeezed the warm, heavy breast. The girl hummed and rocked gently against him, her warmth saturating him.

The room seemed to be dissolving. Shadows flickered across the walls. Stanford looked down at the eyes looking up. Silence. A moaning wind. His own breathing was too harsh. He took the collar of her dress in both hands and pulled the dress off her shoulders. The girl stopped humming, bit her tongue and smiled at him. Stanford slid his hands along her smooth spine, felt her sweat, tugged her to him. The girl continued smiling. Her belly was pressed against his erection. She just hung there in his arms, bending backward, her hands loose by her sides.

Stanford looked at her bare shoulders, very smooth, white; he lowered his gaze to drink in her milky breasts, the dark nipples erect. He didn't kiss the girl's lips. Her smile was distant, enigmatic. He bent over and pulled her hard against his groin and pressed his lips to her right breast. The girl quivered a little. Stanford kissed her heavy breast. He put his lips around the nipple and sucked it, his tongue licking and stroking. The girl quivered and writhed

against him. He felt her hand on his head. She stroked the back of his neck and pulled him down, her breast filling his mouth.

Stanford didn't know where he was. He didn't stop to think about it. He saw lights ascending silently to the sky, blending in with the moon and stars. It was all one and the same. She had known it and belonged to it. Stanford wanted her, he wanted some answers, and she was key to the mystery. He felt the nipple between his lips, sucked and licked it like a child. Her burning groin was pressed against his erection, moving back and forth, teasing. Stanford pressed her sweaty spine. He slid his hands down to her buttocks. He removed his lips from her right breast, slid his tongue across her skin, then took the other nipple in his mouth and let it roll through his teeth. The girl gasped and writhed against him, both her hands at his neck. She ground her belly against his throbbing erection and pulled him closer.

Stanford pushed her against the table, jerked the dress down her arms; she moved her arms and let the dress fall to her waist, her body sweat-slicked and white. Stanford sucked her breasts and nipples, soaked his lips with her sweat. The girl gasped and placed her hands on his neck and sunk her nails in his skin. Stanford felt her ridged spine, slid his hands up to her shoulders. The girl groaned and fell back and pulled him down, her thighs opening out to him. Stanford knew that he was lost. He spiralled down through a void. The girl was bent back against the creaking table, and he glimpsed the oil lamp. Its light flickered in a darkness. Beyond the darkness there was nothing. The girl opened her thighs and clamped them tight around his hips, and Stanford pushed his erection against her belly, his hands gripping her buttocks. He didn't think of what he was doing: her writhing form was his whole being. He had lived with her memory for three years and now her touch stripped his senses. He squeezed her buttocks and pressed upon her, kissed her breasts and nipples, slid lower and put his tongue into her navel, his lips sucking the creamy skin. Flickering shadows and light. A moaning wind in the distance. The girl lay back on the table, her thighs clamped around his hips, and he saw the dress tangled around her waist as his tongue licked her belly.

‘Yes,’ Stanford groaned. ‘*Yes*!’

The girl reached up for his jacket, pulled it down around his arms, and he slipped his hands from under her naked spine to let the jacket fall off. The girl gasped and grabbed his shirt, her fingers tugging at the buttons, her legs coiling around him, her buttocks pressed against the table’s sharp edge, her groin thrusting up into him. Stanford glimpsed the burning lamp, flecks of light in brown eyes, the eyes wild and blind, the pink tongue at her lips, dark hair lying across her tanned face, beads of sweat on her forehead. He groaned and ripped his shirt off. Her hands slithered along his chest. He saw the smooth skin of her throat, the marble shoulders, the heavy breasts, very white, the nipples dark and stiff, the dress around the slim waist.

The girl writhed and grabbed his belt, undid the buttons on his pants. He saw her parted legs, the golden down of her inner thighs, her dress split above the crotch and falling away from a red patch of panties. He groaned and unzipped his pants, spread his fingers on her belly, very smooth, soft and warm, felt the mound of damp hair, closed his fingers and slid them under her panties as she groped in his pants. Stanford groaned and muttered something. The girl gasped and shook her head. Stanford slid his fingers through the mound of hair, curled them back, felt inside her. The girl gasped and thrust down, her thighs opening and closing, then she tore at his pants and jerked them open and took hold of his cock. He groaned and felt inside her, the moist warmth, the yielding lips, found her clitoris as she pulled his cock out, her fingers closing around it. Stanford felt her sliding fingers, lost himself, *became* her fingers, thrust himself into the soft glove of her hand, his fingers kneading her clitoris.

The oil lamp cast light on the table. Around the lamp there was only darkness. Stanford groaned and dissolved, flowing out into that darkness, becoming one with the darkness and the silence that was torn by her gasping. The girl pulled his foreskin back. Her fingers slid up and down him. He drained out of himself, flowed away and knew only her silky touch. Stanford

felt deep inside her. She was wet and warm in there. He jerked his fingers out and tore her panties off, the ripping sound jolting through him. The girl gasped and shook her head, rocking wildly from side to side, her thighs clamped around his hips, her fingers tight around his cock, around his hardness, trying to guide him into her, his tip rubbing her clitoris. Stanford groaned and shuddered violently, grasped her buttocks, squeezed and pulled; the girl pushed herself against him, opened for him, drank him in, became part of him.

'Yes!' Stanford hissed. '*Yes*!'

He sank down and brought her with him, his hands clutching her buttocks, kneeling low, letting her slip off the table, her thighs opening wider. Stanford grabbed her by the shoulders, pulled her down hard on his cock; the girl gasped and slipped her hands beneath his arms and then clawed at his ribs. Stanford pushed her shoulders back. Her spine was bent in a flowing line. Her breasts were pointing at the ceiling, her brown thighs locked around him, her legs bent back, her feet touching the floor, his cock still deep inside her. Stanford held her sweaty spine. His other hand caressed her breasts. He groaned and lowered her to the floor and then pressed down upon her. She shook her head from side to side, her eyes closed, her mouth open. Her dishevelled hair was coiled across her nose and lips, curled around her pink tongue. Stanford stretched out along her. She opened her thighs and writhed beneath him. She pulled her legs up, her knees level with his shoulders, then slid her hands across his buttocks and squeezed him, hoping to coax him in deeper. Stanford groaned and rolled his hips. He felt her melting around his cock. She was liquid and his cock dissolved within her and he felt himself burning. He spasmed and changed direction, moving from one side to the other. He thrust deeper inside her, touched her center, set her loose, and she gasped and banged her head on the floor and started shuddering under him.

'Oh, God!' she gasped. '*God*!'

The words exploded over Stanford, ricocheted, filled his head, jerking him

brutally back into himself and making him open his eyes. He saw the girl's bouncing head, her closed eyes, her open mouth, strands of dark hair lying across her strained face, beads of sweat on her forehead. Stanford stared at her, startled. He raised himself up on his hands. He saw the smooth line of her shoulders, the stretched tendons in her neck, thrusting breasts, nipples dark and erect, his own sweat on her belly. Stanford looked along her body, saw his own heaving groin, her thighs parted, his groining pumping up and down, his cock thrusting, withdrawing. He was shocked, but couldn't stop, felt a mounting excitement. He ceased moving and the girl's body shuddered and then pushed up into him.

'Who were they?' he asked. 'You can talk. You can tell me. You hear me? I want to know who they were.'

'No!' she cried. '*God*!'

Stanford held himself off her. He was propped up on his hands. He looked down at her sweat-slicked, writhing body and then trust deep inside her. The girl gasped and clenched her fists, banged the fists on the floor. Stanford flattened her breasts with his chest and grabbed her under the shoulders. He pulled her tighter to him. She groaned and thrust down. Starting to lose control, he slid his hands beneath her buttocks, along the underside of her thighs, then pushed her knees back toward her face and raised her hips and thrust deeply. Stanford's head started spinning. He thrust in and out in long, languid motions, his buttocks constricting. Stanford thrust even harder, heard the liquid sounds of sex, felt her heat, that jellied warmth around his cock, her spasms building and shaking him.

'*Who were they*?' he whispered.

Stanford worked himself up onto his knees and grabbed the girl by the hips. She was stretched out below him. He pulled her buttocks off the floor. He slid his hands along the soft down of her thighs and then pulled her tight to him. The girl gasped and shook in spasms. Her body flowed away from him.

She was twisting on the floor, rocking wildly, her legs over his shoulders Stanford pulled her even closer, thrust fiercely inside her. He saw the lights in the sky, the butchered cattle in the field, all the friends who had died or disappeared, the miraculous UFOs. He had to crack the mystery. The truth must have dominion. He grabbed the girl by the hips and pulled her closer, thrusting in to him limit. He touched her. She broke loose. Stanford pushed his hips forward. The girl cried out as the spasms whipped through her and tore her apart. She started coming, wave piled upon wave, her body writhing and shuddering.

'Oh, my God!' she cried. '*They were Germans*!'

The last word cut through Stanford, exploded, made his head spin, and he shuddered, they both shuddered together, while the room spun around him.

They let it go and rolled apart, lay on their backs, breathing heavily, separated by a pool of flickering light, both half hidden in shadow. Stanford stared up at the ceiling. The walls were spinning around him. He licked his lips and let the spasms pass away and then he looked at the girl. She was lying on her side. Her hair fell across her face. The upper portion of her body was white, but her legs were a dark brown. She lay just outside the light. Her eyes were hidden by her hair. She was breathing in deep, painful spasms, her breasts rising and falling. Stanford stared at her, speechless. He knew he had to ask her more. Then he felt a wave of hatred flowing toward him as the floor started shaking.

'*Jesus Christ*!' Stanford whispered.

The room roared and seemed to shake, the crockery rattling on the shelves, and Stanford felt a sudden fierce wave of heat and was blinded by white light. He thought he heard the girl screaming, blinked his eyes and saw stars, heard her screaming in a terrible manner and rolled over toward her. The floor was definitely shaking. Cups and saucers were breaking. The glass in the windows blew apart and flew all over the room. Then the roaring stopped

abruptly. The wave of heat passed away. Stanford opened his eyes and looked at the girl and saw her clutching her head. She was shaking her head from side to side. She wasn't screaming anymore. She took her hands from her head and stared at him and the hatred flowed out of her.

Stanford drew away from her. He didn't think – he just did it. Her brown eyes were extremely bright and intense, illuminated by hatred. The floor growled and then stopped shaking. The girl jumped to her feet. Stanford jumped up behind her as she grabbed at a kitchen knife, picked it up, turned around and started slashing the air with it. Stanford ducked and jumped back. 'Get out!' the girl shrieked. She rushed at him, the knife raised high and glittering, and swung it down toward his face. Stanford grabbed hold of her wrist. The girl hissed like a cat. The knife clattered to the floor and she clawed at him with her free hand, her nails raking down his right cheek and gouging lines in his face. Stanford felt the warm blood, felt the pain, a chilling fear; he slapped the girl with the back of his hand and pushed her onto the table. The girl hissed and grabbed the oil lamp. 'Get out of here!' she screamed. She threw the lamp and it flew past Stanford's head and crashed into the wall. A crackling roar, a wave of heat. The burning oil poured down the wall. Stanford cursed and swung his fist at the girl and knocked her into the wall. The flames raced across the floor. Stanford had to leap away. The girl hissed and then darted for the door, flung it open, rushed outside.

Stanford choked in the swirling smoke. The flames were racing along the walls. Stanford cursed and then escaped through the doorway and saw the stars in the sky. Then the darkness exploded, became a sheet of fierce white light, blotting out the sky and flatlands and temporarily blinding him. Stanford stopped and then staggered backward, put his arm across his eyes, moved his arm away and squinted through his fingers, trying to see through the dazzling light. He couldn't see, but he could hear. There was a steady, bass humming sound. Stanford heard it and felt it – it was drilling through his skull – and he reached up and clutched at his head and then stepped forward blindly.

He missed the steps and fell down, struck the ground with his right shoulder, heard it snapping and felt a sharp pain that made him cry out. He rolled onto his back, spitting dirt, looking up, saw the brilliant striations of white light and closed his eyes again. The ground shook beneath him. His head was tightening and hurting. The sound was drilling through his skull, making his muscles seize up, and he shuddered, his body out of control, and then dropped down through darkness.

A light bored through the darkness, spread out and filled his vision. He opened his eyes and looked up and saw the dazzling white light. This time he could look at it. He tried to rise, but couldn't move. He heard the roaring of flames and turned his head and saw the whole ranch house blazing. Then he heard a noise behind him. He turned his head in the opposite direction. He saw a fierce white haze with brighter lights inside it, the lights forming a lone line. Then he saw the silhouettes. They formed a semicircle around him. They moved closer and he saw the ragged girl, looking down at him, smiling. The girls eyes were large and vacant. She was sucking her thumb. One of the silhouettes moved over to Stanford and knelt down beside him.

The man was wearing a gray coverall that looked silvery in the bright light; his face was deathly pale and unnaturally smooth, smiling slightly, removed. Stanford couldn't see him clearly. The man appeared to be quite small. He moved his head and the shadows disappeared and Stanford saw him more clearly. He wasn't an adult. He was about fourteen years old. He reached out and touched the side of Stanford's neck and Stanford felt very calm.

'You shouldn't have come here,' the boy said, his voice deeper than it should have been. 'We don't know what to do about you, Dr Stanford, because you shouldn't be here. We know all about you. We're not pleased with what you're doing. We are computing but we don't know what to do, because you shouldn't be here. We'll have to leave you for now. We have received no instructions. We will leave you and then, when we are gone, you will be able to walk again. You shouldn't be here, Dr Stanford. We were not informed of

this. We will leave you because we have no instructions and we cannot compute you. Close your eyes, Dr Stanford. That's right, keep them closed. When we leave, you will open them again and be able to walk. Keep your eyes closed. *Auf Wiedersehen.'*

Stanford kept his eyes closed. He hardly knew he had closed them. There was silence and his head felt very light and he felt very calm. He heard the footsteps moving away. A film of dust fell on his face. He felt the earth beneath his back, extremely cold, eating through to his bones. Then he heard a bass humming sound. Something thumped the ground lightly. He heard shuffling, a hollow, metallic drumming, then the silence returned. Stanford lay there, not moving. He kept his eyes closed, feeling calm. He smelled smoke and heard the crackling of the flames that engulfed the ranch house. Then the ground started shaking. Stanford felt the vibrating noise. The vibrating noise grew stronger, seemed to fill his whole head, then it cut out, became a rhythmic humming that spread out just above him. The ground settled down again. Stanford lay there, feeling calm. The humming noise became fainter, climbed away and then cut out, leaving silence, the whispering of the dust, the wind's dull, lonesome moaning.

Stanford opened his eyes. He looked up at the moon and stars. He shook his head and clambered awkwardly to his feet and looked carefully around him. The whole ranch house was on fire. The flames spat at the sky. Stanford stood there, feeling dazed, gazing over the desolate flatlands, the flames crackling and illuminating the darkness, and thought of only one thing: the parting words of the boy.

Auf Wiedersehen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Lying on the double bed in the lodge in Mount Rainier, Epstein dreamt of the lights in the sky, rising gracefully, silently. He tossed and turned in his sleep, felt desolate sense of loss, wanting to follow the ascending lights, to drift up there through the darkness, to share in their serene, graceful majesty, to unravel the mystery. Then the dream changed. Epstein murmured and groaned out loud. He was on the flight back from Paris, flying high above the clouds, listening to the voice on the tape-recorder, the revelations astounding him. Then, suddenly, the whole airliner shook, rolling over, scattering passengers, a dazzling white light pouring through it, temporarily blinding him. Epstein shaded his eyes, ignored the screaming, tumbling passengers. The airliner leveled out again and he looked through the window and saw a flashing mass just above, gliding over the plane. It was the great mother ship, the one he had seen in the Caribbean, and Epstein watched as it came down on the airliner and then somehow swallowed it… In his sleep he tossed and turned. He looked down upon himself. He saw himself lying there on the bed, his eyes opening, frightened. He was surrounded by a group of men. They all appeared to be very small. They were wearing gray coveralls, they didn't say a word, and then one of them leaned over him and reached out and touched him… Epstein groaned aloud. He returned to the streets of Paris. He was seated in a restaurant in the rue de Rivoli, the old man talking into the tape-recorder, sipping cognac methodically. The old man was English. There was dandruff on his shoulders. He talked slowly, but with studied precision, and Epstein drifted away… He was just back from Paris, changing planes at Kennedy Airport. There were people all around him, rushing to and fro, shouting, and he felt inexplicably frightened to be there, though he didn't

know why… Then he was on another plane. The flight to Washington was uneventful. He glanced down at the clouds, a field of clouds, shifting slowly, and he checked the cassette tapes in his pocket because the fear was still with him… Epstein groaned in his sleep. He tossed and turned on the bed. He was in his office in Washington, DC, putting the tapes in his safe, obsessed with the notion that he was being followed, that someone was watching him. The office was deadly quiet. The ceiling lights stung his eyes. He heard the traffic along Massachusetts Avenue, still there even at midnight. Epstein locked the safe. He read the message from Stanford: his young friend was up in Mount Rainier, checking some recent sightings. Epstein felt tired and scared. The night faded into noon. He was in his car, driving up the mountains, the fear making him sweat… Epstein groaned and muttered something. He tossed and turned in his sleep. The lodge was empty and he found another message and lay down with his deepening fear. The fear increased and became unreal. Epstein opened his eyes. He saw the small men standing all around his bed, very quiet, looking down at him. Epstein felt a chill pass through him. They weren't men: they were boys. Then one of them, about fourteen years old, leaned over and touched him…

Epstein groaned and woke up, feeling cold and deeply frightened, thinking only of the cassette tapes in the safe and of what they might mean. He licked his lips and rubbed his eyes, saw the wooden beams above him, the room no longer dark, the lights on, a chair creaking beside him. He turned his head, expecting to see Stanford, but the man sitting in the chair was a stranger. Epstein sat up on the bed and rubbed his eyes and tried to stay calm.

The man was slim and sophisticated, wearing a black shirt and slacks, his eyes sky-blue and intense, his hair silvery and plentiful, parted neatly on the left and falling down over an uncommonly unlined forehead. He sat casually in the chair, his hands folded on his crossed legs, gazing straight at Epstein and smiling, a cold, remote smile.

'Who are you?' Epstein asked.

‘Wilson,’ the man replied. ‘You might remember me. Richard Watson mentioned my name. Is was there in the transcripts.’

‘How did you know about the transcripts?’

‘Richard told me,’ the man said. ‘We let him go and then we brought him back and he told us everything.’

The fear shivered down Epstein’s spine, made him numb, slightly unreal, and he rubbed his eyes and tried to waken up, still tired from his flights. The man was looking steadily at him. There was something odd about him. He seemed to be in his early fifties, a handsome man, extremely youthful, but the skin on his forehead was unlined, his cheeks as smooth as a boy’s.

‘You remember the transcripts?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Epstein said.

‘Then you should remember me,’ the man said. ‘I’m Wilson. I was present.’

Epstein shook his head, clearing it, feeling disorientated, not sure that this was actually happening, his fear slowly subsiding.

‘You’re Wilson?’

‘That’s right,’ the man said. ‘I know it must he something of a shock, but that won’t last too long.’ He smiled in that chilling manner, glanced casually around the room, then turned his gaze back upon Epstein, his blue eyes still bright. ‘Stanford’s on his way back,’ he said. ‘He’s been up in the mountains. He’s been checking on some UFO reports, but he hasn’t found much.’

‘How do you know? Epstein asked.

‘We’ve been watching him,’ Wilson said. ‘It was *my* flying saucers that were seen – and they’re up there right now.’

Epstein felt cold. He wondered if he was dreaming. After pinching his left wrist he knew he wasn't, and he shivered a little.

'*Your* flying saucers?'

'That's right,' Wilson said. 'Don't look so shocked. They're very real… and they're up there right now.'

'Where?' Epstein asked.

'Above the atmosphere,' Wilson said.

'Then our reconnaissance satellites will see them.'

'Indeed. They've been seeing them for years.'

Epstein wondered what he meant by that, wanted to ask but couldn't do it, still dazed from being jerked out of sleep, a throbbing pain in his stomach. He coughed and rubbed his tired eyes. The room seemed far too bright. Wilson uncrossed his legs, propped his elbows on his knees, then rested his chin in his cupped hands, studying Epstein intently.

'How are you?' he asked.

'What do you mean?' Epstein said.

'Your stomach,' Wilson said. 'Is it hurting? It must surely bother you a lot.'

'How do you know about my stomach?'

'Cancer's a very bad thing,' Wilson said. 'I myself have suffered ailments in the past, but all that's behind me now.'

'Behind you?'

'Yes, behind me. I used to have bad trouble with my heart, but I've managed

to mend it.'

'What are you talking about?' Epstein asked. 'I don't understand. What are you doing here in my room? Who let you in?'

'I have a pacemaker,' Wilson said. 'A very sophisticated device. It utilizes a piezoelectric crystal, a small balloon filled with water, and causes the heart's own pumping to stimulate itself. It is, of course, maintenance free. It does not require batteries. The miracles of science, Dr Epstein, are literally boundless.'

'Plastic surgery,' Epstein said.

'I beg your pardon?'

'I was looking at the skin on your forehead. You've had plastic surgery.'

Wilson smiled and nodded. 'Most perceptive of you,' he said. 'Plastic surgery, pacemaker, various organs replaced… Unfortunately I was one of the first. We're much more advanced now.'

'Who's we?' Epstain asked.

'My own people,' Wilson said. 'We're far removed from what you know, but that, too, can be remedied.'

Feeling that he was dreaming, Epstein blinked and glanced around the bright room and then turned back to Wilson.

'Who are you?' he asked.

'I created the flying saucers,' Wilson said. 'You've been trying to solve the mystery for twenty years and now I'm here to assist you.'

Epstein wanted to bang his head against the wall in the hope of waking up properly, but he didn't do anything. This all seemed too crazy.

‘*You* created the saucers?’

‘Yes,’ Wilson said. ‘They exist, they’re right here on Earth, and I’m the man who created them.’

‘For the Air Force?’

‘No.’

‘For the Navy?’

‘No.’

‘I don’t understand. I’m confused. I’m very tired. Who are you and what do you want with me? What are you doing here?’

‘You don’t believe me,’ Wilson said.

‘Of course not,’ Epstein said.

‘I won’t tell you where I’ve come from,’ Wilson said, ‘but I’m taking you back there.’

The fear slithered down Epstein’s spine. He could hardly believe that this was happening. He thought of Stanford and Scaduto, of his own trip to Paris, of the questions that sprang up and collided as the facts were revealed. He would have to keep his mouth shut. He would have to watch his man carefully. This man knew an awful lot about him and that couldn’t be good. He thought of the tapes in his safe. This man knew about the tapes. This man must be from the government or the FBI or the CIA; he already knew about the tapes and wanted to steal them and shut Epstein’s mouth. Epstein was truly frightened now. He didn’t know what to believe. He stared at the man sitting in the chair and felt threatened by him.

‘You’re from the government,’ Epstein said.

‘No,’ Wilson said. ‘The government saucers are relatively primitive. My saucers are the ones you’re been looking for.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Epstein said.

‘I was in the Caribbean.’

‘The Caribbean?’

‘St Thomas,’ Wilson said. ‘It was my saucer that abducted Professor Gerhardt. You saw it. You and Stanford were on the beach.’

Epstein’s fear deepened considerably, made him suck his breath in, now starting to believe the man in the chair, having no other choice. He let his breath out when speaking.

‘You took Gerhardt?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Wilson said.

‘Where do you come from?’ Epstein asked. ‘How do you know about me? I can’t really accept what I’m hearing. This just doesn’t make sense.’

‘I built the saucers,’ Wilson said. ‘You’ve just found out how they started. You have that information down on tape. I want you *and* the tapes.’

Epstein licked his dry lips. He felt very badly shaken. Wilson’s eyes were sky- blue, almost steely with intelligence; he leaned forward and looked directly at Epstein, speaking softly and clearly.

‘We know all about you,’ he said. ‘We’ve been watching you for years. You’re a very tenacious man, you don’t stop, and now you’re dying of cancer. That makes you even more dangerous. You’ll be even more determined. We think you’ve found out too much already, so it has to end now.’

‘I’ve found nothing out,’ Epstein said.

‘You’re lying,’ Wilson said. ‘You’ve just returned from Paris where you were seeing Professor Ronald Mansfield, an Englishman who worked for the scientific division of the British Objectives Sub-Committee during World War Two and who is currently working for the *Groupment d’Etudes des Phénomènes Aériens*. That disturbed us, Dr Epstein. That’s as far as you can go. We want you and the tapes you brought back, which is why I am here.’

Feeling fearful, Epstein also felt paralyzed, removed from himself, not convinced this was really taking place.

‘You want me?’

‘That’s correct,’ Wilson said. ‘You will not see the dawn over Mount Rainier. You’re coming with us.’

Epstein didn’t know what to say. He wished that Stanford would return. This conversation was bizarre, not quite real, and he felt very strange.

‘I don’t have the tapes,’ he said.

‘Where are they?’ Wilson asked.

‘I didn’t tape the conversations,’ Epstein lied. ‘We just talked. He knew nothing.’

‘You’re lying again, Dr Epstein. I understand, but it’s pointless. We’ll just take you away tonight and then ask you – and believe me, you’ll tell us.’

‘What about Professor Mansfield?’

‘He hung himself yesterday.’

‘You mean you murdered him.’

‘That’s a very emotive word,’ Wilson said. ‘We simply did what we had to do.’

‘And what happened to Richard Watson?’

‘An interesting case. He had unusually strong resistance, great willpower, so we wanted him back with us.’

‘You’ve got him now?’

‘Yes. We were surprised at how much he told you. We implanted an electrode in his brain and he *still* showed resistance.’

‘He’s alive?’

‘He’s functioning. We’ll send him back soon. He’ll then do what we tell him to do – and he won’t be alone.’

‘Who’s we?’ Epstein asked.

‘I can’t tell you that right now.’

‘And is that what you do? You abduct them and robotize them. Then you send them back into the world and make them follow your orders?’

‘That’s right,’ Wilson said. ‘It’s not as incredible as it sounds. Bear in mind that such work has been going on for years – in America, in Russia, in Europe – and it’s highly advanced. Your people don’t understand this, they don’t know what’s really happening; they only hear about *acceptable* experiments – they don’t know the full extent of it. Electrocontrol is a fast-growing industry, being expanded behind closed doors. In your own society it’s relatively well advanced; in ours, much more so. Our own subjects begin in infancy – we take them out of the cradle. We implant electrodes in their brains, and at certain points in the spinal column, before they’ve even reached their fourth week. After that, they belong to us. They’re developed in

extraordinary ways. They're programmed for obedience, their capabilities are enhanced, and they never know the pain of discontentment.'

Epstein closed his eyes. 'The young boys,' he murmured.

'Ah, yes,' Wilson said. 'Stanford saw them. That must have confused him.'

Epstein opened his eyes again. 'And Richard Watson?' he asked.

'It's different with outsiders. Their advanced age makes all the difference. With outsiders we have to be more careful – and aren't always successful. Richard Watson was such a case. Strong willpower, great resistance. We've inserted another electrode in his skull and now he seems to be functioning.'

Epstein glanced around the room, feeling dreamy, almost haunted; he glanced out through the windows, at the darkness, heard the wind on the mountains. Stanford was out there. He was looking for UFOs. The irony of it made Epstein smiled, but then the fear trickled back again. He looked at the man called Wilson. The blue eyes were very bright. Epstein studied the smooth skin on his forehead and felt extremely uncomfortable.

'I don't believe this,' he said.

'What don't you believe?'

'I don't believe a damned thing you say. I think it's some kind of trick.'

Wilson offered his chilling smile. 'You'll believe soon enough,' he said. 'You've been wrestling with the mystery for twenty-odd years… Your reward comes tonight.'

'What do you mean?' Epstein asked.

'We're taking you away,' Wilson said. 'It doesn't matter where you go, where you hide… We'll just come down and pick you up.'

‘You’re not taking me now?’

‘It’s not convenient,’ Wilson said.

‘And what happens if I don’t leave this room?’

‘We’ll just open the door. This door or any other door that you’re hoping to hide behind.’ Wilson smiled and stood up, went to the window and stared out, turned back and looked down at Epstein, his blue eyes bright and cold. ‘You were in the Caribbean,’ he said. ‘You know what happened there. If we want someone, we just come and take them – and nothing can stop us.’

Epstein thought back on the Caribbean and remembered the howling wind, the hotel room going crazy, the dazzling light and intense heat; he recalled Stanford’s experience at the ranch in Texas about five months ago. White light and heat, fierce storms and shaking buildings; the manifestations were always the same, the causes unknown.

‘Did you cause the storms?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Wilson said. ‘Advanced weather engineering. Something similar to your own cloud-busters, but more sophisticated. Our own cloud-busters are laser-based and highly effective. The larger saucers can whip the wind up – or disperse it, if necessary.’

‘I don’t believe this,’ Epstein said.

‘Why not?’ Wilson said. ‘Cloud seeding is an established science. Orgone energy weather engineering is becoming more advanced every day, with floods and droughts engineered for political or military purposes. Of *course* we can cause a storm – so can the Russians and the Americans. Weather engineering is no longer a mystery – it’s an effective new weapon.’

‘And the cattle?’ Epstein asked.

‘For our laboratories,’ Wilson said. ‘For various drugs and vitamins and advanced medical research. Again, there’s nothing outlandish about it… a simple question of theft.’

‘And the people? The kidnapped people?’

‘Like the cattle,’ Wilson said. ‘Some are used as slave labor, some are robotized and returned, some are sent to the medical laboratories as guinea pigs for our research.’

‘That’s horrible,’ Epstein said.

‘The word “horrible” is redundant. The spider eats the fly and in turn is devoured; all that lives in the present supports the future and has no other purpose. Nothing is horrible, Dr Epstein. As a scientist you should know that. Blood and suffering is the constant of the laboratory – and is vital to progress.’

‘We’re talking about human beings.’

‘Indeed we are,’ Wilson said. ‘And human beings are no more than the rungs on evolution’s great ladder. Science is all, Dr Epstein. The mysteries of life must be uncovered. Science can’t progress as it should if it’s held back by sentiment. Humans live and die anyway; they do so to no purpose. Only science can stop this primitive wastage and make people useful. Free choice leads to conflict and wastage, and is harmful to progress. Emotion is wasted energy. Moral judgements hold back science. There are too many people, there is too much human wastage, and we have to accept that human life is just cement for the future. To merely exist is not enough: what we need is a new *form* of being. We must learn how to take the human being apart and reconstruct him as something else. A superior being. A creature devoid of contradictions. And the gulf between Man and Superman can’t be bridged with emotions.’

‘That’s still horrible,’ Epstein said.

‘You’re still a primitive,’ Wilson said. ‘Where you’re going, you will not feel the same: you will come to accept it.’

‘Where *am* I going?’

‘You’ll find that out soon enough.’

‘I don’t believe this,’ Epstein said. ‘I *can’t* believe it. It just doesn’t seem real.’

‘Time will tell,’ Wilson said.

Epstein closed his eyes again. He felt weak and light-headed. In the darkness behind his closed eyes he saw the void of the cosmos. Not a void: something else. The voids of space were filled with energy. Beyond the galaxies, in what seemed like a void, possibilities were boundless. Where would Man go? What would he become? Epstein opened his eyes and tried to accept what it was he was hearing. He had searched for twenty-odd years, had lived constantly with the mystery, and now, face to face with the answers, his fear overwhelmed him.

‘The flying saucers are real,’ he said.

‘You know that,’ Wilson said. ‘What you heard in Paris must have convinced you, so the question’s superfluous.’

‘What are they?’ Epstein asked.

‘You already have the basic facts. We’ve progressed enormously since then, but the basics remain. At present, apart from the systems that Mansfield doubtless told you about, we utilize advanced ion propulsion, electromagnetic propulsion, in certain cases nuclear fusion pulse rockets, and, for the giant saucers, the carrying ships, an antigravity field. Ionization and

electromagnetic discharges account for the plasmalike glow that so fascinates your witnesses, the antigravity accounts for the lack of turbulence and sonic booms; and you and Stanford have already discussed – with reasonable accuracy – the cause of the abrupt invisibility.'

'How did you know that?' Epstein asked.

'We bugged your rooms,' Wilson said. 'Nothing is new under the sun – we've simply made advances.'

'And the antigravity shield accounts for your crews' apparent ability to withstand the extraordinary speed and direction changes of your saucers?'

'Precisely. The gravity-shield force applies simultaneously to the crew *and* the saucer… And, since it provides a cushion of air around the saucer, it also prevents the saucer from heating up. Incidentally, I should point out, since you're looking so disbelieving, that antigravity is not as revolutionary as it seems. Indeed, as far back as 1965 there were at least forty-odd *unclassified* G-projects being undertaken in America alone – by the Air Force, the Navy, the Army, NASA, the Atomic Energy Commission and the National Science Foundation. Since these were the *unclassified* projects, I need only point out that considerably more advanced projects are doubtless underway right now in strict secrecy.'

'Are you suggesting that you're connected to the US government?'

'No, I'm not saying that.'

Epstein couldn't think straight. He stared at Wilson, at the icy blue of his eyes, then he remembered Dr Campbell, what he had related about hypnosis, and, remembering this, thought that he should try to get off the bed… But Wilson spoke and that stopped him.

'It's all right,' Wilson said.

‘Yes,’ Epstein said, no longer worried, simply wanting to know more. ‘We keep receiving reports of different-sized UFOs, and that always confuses us…’

‘The smallest saucers are similar to your own CAMS – Cybernetic Anthropomorphous Machine Systems, either remote-controlled or programmed to react to certain stimuli, used mainly as sensing devices or probes. Taking the Richard Watson case, the beam of light that shone into the car was merely a laser beam on a wavelength that freezes skeletal muscles or certain nerves – thus producing either temporary paralysis or a trancelike condition.’

‘And the other saucers?’

‘The first group are anything from five to fifteen feet in diameter. Again, these are highly complex CAMS, either flying with their long axis vertical or flying in the direction of their axis, used mainly for reconnaissance and basic manual tasks, such as the collecting of soil or water, and controlled by Remote Manipulator Systems not much different from normal ones. The second group, usually about twenty-five to thirty-five feet in diameter, are extensions of the first group, but revolving around their axis and controlled by extremely advanced cyborg crew members. The pilot that Richard Watson saw in the second saucer was just such a cyborg: half man, half machine – the results of over thirty years of prosthetic experiment. The cyborg’s respiration and other bodily functions are controlled cybernetically with artificial lungs and sensors that maintain constant temperature, metabolism and pressure, irrespective of external environmental fluctuations – thus they aren’t affected by the extraordinary accelerations and abrupt direction changes of their saucers. The third group of saucers can range from one hundred to three hundred feet in diameter, can be up to several stories tall internally, are used mainly to pick up people and animals and material goods, and have a crew of about a dozen men. The fourth category is the carrying ship – what you people call the “mother” ship – a somewhat gigantic affair, used for major

operations of a long-term nature. The carrying ships are essentially self-generating airborne colonies, capable of drifting in outer space or of hibernating on the sea bed, manned by a large crew of humans and cyborgs, the heavy labor performed by programmed slaves, and containing workshops, laboratories, medical wards, cryonic preservation units, and hangars for all the other, smaller saucers.'

Wilson smiled as he talked to Epstein, a distant, cool smile, his lips dutifully performing the necessary while his eyes remained hard. His eyes fascinated Epstein, repelled him and drew him in, unblinking, as clear as sunlit ice, making Epstein feel unreal. And yet the man sounded reasonable, talking quietly, precisely, explaining with the patience of a teacher, making everything simple.

'You must be highly advanced,' Epstein said.

'Yes,' Wilson said, 'we are. Our society is based on masters and slaves – and exists just for science.'

'Where is it?' Epstein asked.

'Just be patient,' Wilson said.

'Please tell me now. I want to know.'

'You'll find out soon enough.'

They stared at one another, the silence broken by the wind outside, the light in the room extremely bright, the window framing the dark night.

'You said that the carrying ships can hibernate on the sea bed,' Epstein said eventually. 'Is there a connection between that fact and the mystery of the Bermuda Triangle and other areas reported to be like it?'

'Yes,' Wilson said. 'We have permanent undersea laboratories in the

Bermuda Triangle, the so-called Devil's Sea between Guam, Luzon in the Philippines, and the southeast coast of Japan, and another off the coast of Argentina. These laboratories are manned by cyborgs and a few programmed scientists, and are visited frequently by the carrying ships.'

'And it's your carrying ships that cause the unusual magnetic disturbances in those areas?'

'Yes.'

'I can't accept that you could construct such undersea laboratories without being seen by *someone*… By the crews of passing ships or aircraft.'

'Various governments know we're down there, and in fact cooperate with us. As for the actual construction of the laboratories at such depths, you have to appreciate the unusual dimensions and capabilities of the carrying ships. For a start, their interior space is immense. The carrying ship simply settles near the sea bed and the laboratory is constructed inside it. The base of the carrying ship then opens up and deposits the laboratory, complete with crew, on the sea bed. The permanent fixing of the laboratory to the sea bed is accomplished with the aid of specially reinforced, remote-controlled CAMS, and then the carrying ship ascends to the surface, leaving the laboratory down there.'

'And various governments *know* you're down there?'

'Yes.'

'But you don't belong to any of those governments?'

'No.'

'Will you explain that?'

'Not yet.'

Wilson smiled bleakly and turned back to the window, looked out as if searching for someone, then glanced up at the night sky.

‘Our reconnaissance satellites,’ Epstein said. ‘Is it true that they’ve seen you?’

‘Yes,’ Wilson said, turning back to the front. ‘Naturally. How could they miss us? They’ve been seeing us for years.’

‘Then they’ve been covering up for years.’

‘Of course,’ Wilson said. ‘There’s nothing particularly unusual about that – they’ve been covering up everything.’

‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘Don’t you? What about all their secret research programs: their chemical warfare programs, their advanced weaponry programs, their secret achievements in aeronautics and communications and neurology; their covert operations against, and their clandestine agreements with, the Soviets and the Chinese and the Third World countries? The private citizen know precious little. He knows only what they deign to tell him. Governments cover up everything, from their politics to science, and when it comes to something as big as our saucers, they cover up even more.’

‘Why?’ Epstein asked.

‘Because they don’t trust the people. Because there isn’t a government in the world that still believes in Democracy.’

‘What’s your connection to them?’

‘I can’t tell you that,’ Wilson said.

‘You’re not an extraterrestrial,’ Epstein said. ‘That much I know.’

When Wilson offered a faint, possibly victorious smile, Epstein flushed like a guilty schoolboy, thinking of the cassette tapes in his safe, knowing that Wilson had tricked him.

‘Ah, yes,’ Wilson said. ‘Professor Mansfield. He must have told you a lot.’

Epstein burned and then cooled down, his throbbing stomach now at peace, feeling bright to the point of unreality, removed from his woes. He wondered where Stanford was, wished that Stanford would return. The wind moaned outside, sweeping over the darkened mountains, and he thought of the UFO sightings over the Cascades, of what Scaduto had told them. The truth emerged in small pieces. It lay before him like a jigsaw. There were still missing pieces, gaping holes, and the clock ticked the time away.

‘The harassment,’ Epstein said. ‘The suicides and disappearances. I take it that they’re part of the cover-up and that you engineered them.’

‘Some of them,’ Wilson said. ‘It depends on the circumstances. The actual harassment was usually arranged by your government, but most of the deaths and disappearances were due to us.’

‘Most?’

‘Not all. Occasionally your government steps in and does a job on its own.’

‘Then they work with you,’ Epstein said.

‘On and off,’ Wilson said. ‘As with all political situations, the agreements are tenuous and are prone to break down at any moment. We negotiate with the US government. We also negotiate with the Soviets. We trade and play one against the other because we haven’t much choice yet.’

‘Yet?’

Wilson smiled again. ‘The Nuclear Deterrent, the Balance of Terror, is a

precarious business.'

'And you're in the middle?'

'Yes,' Wilson said. 'We straddle the seesaw…But we'll soon tip the other two off.'

Epstein felt very calm now, divorced from himself, the pain in his stomach gone, the fear disappearing with it, the bizarre nature of the whole conversation making it seem unreal. He didn't know what to think, felt distant, almost placid, well aware that this man had done something to make him accept it all. The revelations were stunning, ambiguous, fascinating, and yet he now thought they sounded quite reasonable, down-to-earth, even commonplace. He wondered if he was hypnotized: stood outside himself and thought this. He saw that Wilson was now standing at the window, staring up at the night sky.

'You killed Irving,' Epstein said.

'Irving Jacobs?'

'Yes. You killed him. Why did you do that?'

Wilson returned to his chair, sat down, stared at Epstein, not smiling his sky-blue eyes bright, filled with icy intelligence.

'He was digging too deep,' he said. 'He'd found out too much. Your own government was disturbed by his findings and wanted us to get rid of him. They didn't want to do it themselves. They didn't dare use their own men. They didn't want the FIB or the CIA to go anywhere near him. So, we worked on him. We had him followed and harassed. When he grew frightened, when his resistance was low, we used long-range telepathy. We stole part of his mind that way. We made him think he was possessed. In the end we made him drive out to the desert where we came down on top of him. We didn't need him as a scientist – we have plenty in that field – so we

simply stuck the pistol in his mouth and made it look like suicide.'

Epstein should have been shocked, but he felt nothing at all. He thought of Irving and Mary and the old days, but they seemed far away.

'You use mental telepathy?'

'Yes,' Wilson said. 'Certain brain implants can enhance telepathic powers and actually lead to nonverbal communication. Some of the children, and all of the cyborgs, communicate that way.'

'Were you involved with the woman from Maine?'

'Yes. We were experimenting and the woman from Maine picked us up and then told the CIA. The agent she first informed knew nothing about us *or* their own government's saucers; but the Canadian government, when they heard about her, were naturally more concerned, thinking she might have picked up some Soviet signals. Bearing in mind that only a limited number of government and military personnel knew about the existence of the saucers, it was unfortunate that the agents who first interrogated the woman knew nothing about what was going on. However, at the second meeting, some of the military officers present knew all about the saucer programs – and it was they who subsequently buried the incident and transferred the CIA agents who were in the office at the same time, but didn't know what was happening.'

'Our informant said it was a Canadian-US saucer.'

'An understandable error. Unfortunately, it was an error that led to your friend Scaduto spying on the Canadian plants. Mr Scaduto recently died of an unexpected heart attack. You can blame that on Stanford.'

The remark hardly affected Epstein. He felt calm and interested. The man speaking sounded absolutely reasonable; the revelations seemed commonplace.

‘What about Irving?’ Epstein asked.

‘I’ve already told you about him.’

‘You didn’t tell me what he’d found out. I’d like to know that.’

‘Jacobs was interested in the deaths and disappearances of so many of his contemporaries, and this encouraged him to investigate the Jessup case. In doing so, he discovered that the US Navy had, back in 1943, been experimenting with pulsating and vortexual high intensity magnetic fields that might alter the molecular structure of physical properties and render them temporarily invisible. This experiment became known as the Philadelphia Experiment, but contrary to popular belief it was a disaster. What in fact happened was that the Navy inadvertently created a source of electromagnetic energy that produced an infrasound of such intensity it killed every sailor on board the ship and actually split the ship’s hull. In short, the ship rumored to have disappeared actually sank – and naturally, since the Navy didn’t want word of this to leak out, they whipped up a mass of rumors that acted as a cover-up and led to the contemporary myth… However, in investigating this incident, Dr Jessup learnt that the Navy’s basic scientific principles were valid, that the Navy and Air Force were involved in saucer projects, and that those projects were utilizing certain aspects of the original Philadelphia Experiment. Having found out about this, Jessup had to be removed… Then Jacobs found out much the same thing and also had to be terminated.’

‘I see,’ Epstein said. ‘And those principles were also the principles underlying the invisibility-inducing properties of your saucers?’

‘Correct. A specific quantity of electromagnetic radiation creates a stream of escaping photons of the same wavelength and frequency, which leads either to a glowing, plasmalike shield or to a color source beyond the known spectrum that renders the saucer invisible.’

‘How does this relate to the annotations in Jessup’s book? The ones that stimulated the interest of the Office of Naval Research.’

‘That was something of a red herring,’ Wilson said. ‘In 1955 the Navy was still experimenting with the possibilities of electromagnetically-induced invisibility. They were then, and remain today, unsuccessful. Nevertheless, they were disturbed by some of Jessup’s published remarks – and the annotations in that copy of his book had been made by their own intelligence officers, and related only to the sections that discussed force fields and dematerialization. The Navy wanted to know the source of his information, Jessup naturally refused to reveal it, then Jessup walked out of their office – and that’s all there was to it.’

‘You had nothing to do with the annotations?’

‘No, not a thing.’

Epstein closed his eyes, let himself drifting away, drifting down through the darkness and the long years he had labored, feeling calm, then feeling confused and drifting back up again. He thought of the cassette tapes in his office, of the old man now dead, thought of everything the old man had told him, wondered what it might mean. He had to get the tapes to Stanford. If nothing else, he had to do that. He now knew that they would take him away, and that he would not resist. He didn’t want to resist. His curiosity was too great. He opened his eyes and saw Wilson by the window and felt a great peace.

‘I have to go now,’ Wilson said. ‘When I depart, you’ll fall asleep. When you wake up, you’ll do what you feel like – because the choice won’t really be yours.’

‘I’m confused,’ Epstein said.

‘By what?’

‘You’re not an extraterrestrial, you’re from Earth, and you created the saucers. That’s what confuses me. It just doesn’t make sense. The first genuine UFO sightings were in 1897 – the Great Airship Scare – yet you say you’re the man who created them.’

‘That’s correct,’ Wilson said. He turned away from the window, walked back to the bed, and stood there, staring down at Epstein, his blue eyes exceptionally bright. ‘I’m one hundred and seven years old,’ he said. ‘You, too, can live that long.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Approaching the lodge after his long day in the mountains, covered in snow and freezing, Stanford desperately wanted sleep, a respite from it all, an escape from the fear that now dogged him every day and was encouraged by his present state of exhaustion. The snow was deep and clean, drifting lazily upon itself, sweeping languidly around trees, the moonlight making it glisten, the wind moaning and scraping at his nerves, the mountains looming above him. Stanford longed for the lodge, for its safety and warmth, but when he saw it, the fear increased greatly and make him stop walking.

All the lights inside were on. The front door was ajar. A beam of light fell from the doorway to the porch, illuminating the snow that drifted along the wood boards. Stanford stood beneath some pines, not moving, his heart pounding, wondering why the lights were on, who was in there, his head spinning with feverish thoughts. He knew he was being foolish, felt ashamed of it, couldn't stop it, recalling the boys in gray coveralls, the burning ranch and the vanished girl, remembering Gerhardt's abduction and Scaduto's recent suicide, and the fact that *they* knew who he was and might come back again…

Stanford cursed quietly and shivered, wiped snow from his face. He thought of the lights he had seen above the mountains, ascending vertically, abruptly shooting sideways. Not descending: *ascending*. Not meteors: *unidentifieds*. Stanford shivered and stared straight ahead, the panic emptying his mind, then he shook his head from side to side, realizing it was Epstein, cursed again, started walking again.

He climbed the wood steps, pushed the door open and entered. Glancing around the living area, seeing no sign of Epstein, he wondered why he had left all the lights on, then went into the bedroom. Epstein was sitting on the bed, wearing pajamas, looking sleepy, his hands folded primly in his lap, his gaze fixed straight ahead.

‘You got my message?’ Stanford asked.

‘Yes,’ Epstein replied.

‘It’s been a bitch of a day,’ Stanford said. ‘They’ve been all over the place.’

‘Unidentifieds?’

‘Yes.’

‘What kind?’

‘Just lights. They’ve been flying all over Mount Rainier, but they never came close.’

‘No landings?’ Epstein asked.

‘None reported,’ Stanford said. ‘Most of the lights were high up, standing still, then shooting sideways, racing to and fro across the mountain peaks, disappearing, returning. Then this big light came down. All the smaller lights went into it. Then the big light climbed vertically and disappeared and hasn’t been seen since. That was an hour ago.’

Epstein nodded judiciously, gazing down at his folded hands, very frail in his pajamas, too frail, a man fading away. Stanford noticed the frailty – that and something else: a remoteness, a sort of dreamy look that seemed distinctly unnatural.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Epstein said. ‘I’m fine.’

‘And how was Paris? What did you find out?’

‘You were right. It was Germany.’

Stanford was taking off his jacket, but he stopped and stared at Epstein, his shock mixed with fear and excitement, disbelief and wild hope. Shrugging his jacket back on, he took a deep breath and released it slowly, snow melting on the shoulders of the jacket and dripping down to the carpet.

‘Germans?’

‘I don’t know,’ Epstein said. ‘I assumed so at first, but now I’m not so sure. I’m confused. I don’t know what to think.’

‘What has you confused?’

‘I have some cassette tapes,’ Epstein said. ‘It’s vital that you hear them. From what I was told in Paris, it seems almost certain that the Americans and the Canadians, and possibly the British, have their own flying saucers… But Scaduto was right: there are others involved. I don’t know who they are or where they come from or what they’re up to, but I *do* know that they’re not extraterrestrials and that they’re advanced to a frightening degree… It’s vital that you hear the tapes. They’re in my safe back in Washington. It’s vital that you go there right now and get them out of the safe.’

‘Right *now*?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Stanford said. ‘I’m exhausted. Just tell me what’s on them.’

‘There’s no time,’ Epstein said. ‘The tapes aren’t safe anymore. They want

me and the tapes and they'll get both before dawn breaks. You have to get there before them.'

Stanford stepped up to the bed and looked intently at Epstein, thinking that his friend had gone mad, wondering what he was talking about. Epstein was leaning against the pillows, his hands folded on his lap, his gray beard more shaggy than usual, his eyes slightly unfocused.

'What are you talking about?' Stanford asked. 'I'm not sure I heard you right. *Who's* going to get you and the tapes?'

Epstein didn't look up. 'I had a visitor,' he said. 'He murdered the Englishman and Scaduto. Now he wants me and the tapes. He said he'll have both by first light.'

'A visitor?'

'Yes. He came here. He left just before you arrived. He knew all about Irving and Gerhardt and Richard Watson, about you, about me on the beach in the Caribbean. He knew about your encounter with the boys outside the ranch in Texas, and he knows about a lot of other things that he really shouldn't know. He's one of them, Stanford. He told me about saucers. He told me enough to convince me. I've no doubt that he'll get me.'

Stanford sat on the edge of the bed, the melting snow still dripping off him, and stared at his old friend for some time before talking again.

'Tell me,' he said.

Epstein recounted the whole story, his voice eerily calm and remote. Stanford was fascinated, at once frightened and excited, his head filling with bright lights and pulsating coronas and glittering stars that moved majestically through black night and then blinked out abruptly. Epstein's voice sounded tired, almost toneless, distracted, filtering through Stanford's thoughts and out again. Stanford listened, mesmerized, the room dissolving around him,

not fully comprehending what he was hearing, overwhelmed and struck dumb. Then Epstein stopped talking, sighed forlornly, examined his hands, turning them this way and that, and the walls of the room reappeared as the real world crept back. Stanford glanced around him, wondering where he was, *who* he was, then he managed to get a grip on himself, focusing once more on Epstein.

'I find it hard to believe,' he said.

'It's all true,' Epstein said.

'Jesus,' Stanford said. 'It's too much. I just can't get a hold on it.'

Epstein coughed into his fist. 'You have to leave now,' he said. 'It's vital that you get all the tapes before *they* make me talk.'

'What makes you so sure you'll talk?'

'Because I'm convinced they'll hypnotize me. Either that or they'll put an electrode in my brain like they did to young Richard Watson.'

'You think they're coming back here tonight?'

'Before first light,' Epstein said. 'So it's vital that you leave right now and get there before them.'

'Me?' Stanford said.

'I'm not going with you,' Epstein said.

'What the hell do you mean, you're not coming with me? You can't just sit there and *wait* for them.'

Epstein's hands were shaking. 'I don't want to go,' he said. 'I've been trying to unravel this mystery for twenty years and now I'm going to have all my questions answered. They're going to take me with them. I can't miss this

opportunity. I want to know who they are and where they come from, so I'll have to go with them.'

'Are you crazy?' Stanford said. 'Go with them and you won't be coming back. Those bastards aren't doing you any favors: once you go, you'll be *gone*.'

Epstein shrugged, smiling sadly. 'So what?' he said. 'Look at me. I look like a shadow of my former self. I've only about a year left anyway, so what can I lose?'

'You're crazy,' Stanford said.

'I have to know,' Epstein said. 'I can't die without knowing the whole story – and this is my chance.'

'I won't let you.'

'Get the tapes.'

'No, damn it,' Stanford said. 'I won't let you stay here. That's it. Now put your clothes on.'

Epstein looked up at Stanford, smiling sadly, remotely; he was staring directly at Stanford, but not really seeing.

'Leaving is pointless,' he said. 'If they want me, they'll get me. It doesn't matter where I go, where I hide, because they'll know where to find me.'

'Don't bet on it.'

'I *would* bet on it.'

'Shut up,' Stanford said. 'I'm not listening. Now put your clothes on.'

Epstein smiled and nodded agreement, swung his legs off the bed, stood up

and started dressing himself like a man still asleep. It didn't matter if he left. He was certain that man would find him. He was certain that no matter what he did, that man would know he was doing it. This thought offered him some comfort, eased his pain, helped him relax, now enraptured with the thought of the revelations that would soon set him free. He would not die defeated. Death would not have dominion. He would wait and they would come, the night would turn to dazzling light, and he would blink and then open his eyes and see a world beyond reckoning. Epstein put his clothes on. When he was dressed, he glanced around him. He had only been here a few hours and yet he felt an odd sadness. It was not a painful sadness. His feeling of loss was couched in joy. Epstein buttoned up his coat and smiled at Stanford, prepared for just about anything.

'Okay?' Stanford said.

'Okay,' Epstein said.

'Right, Professor Epstein, let's go. Let's get the hell out of here.'

They crossed the pine floor of the lodge, stepped out onto the porch, felt the cold and saw the snow falling as Stanford locked the front door. Stanford took hold of Epstein's elbow, guided him down the slippery steps. The snow was thick on the ground, drifting lazily, as they walked to the car. Stanford helped Epstein in, holding his arm, keeping his eye on him, then he closed the door and went around the car and slipped into the driver's seat. Epstein said nothing, simply smiled and looked ahead, as Stanford started the car and headed out through the tall, snow-lined trees.

'Are you all right?' he asked.

'Yes, I'm fine,' Epstein said.

'Are you sure? You're being pretty quiet.'

'I feel fine,' Epstein said.

Stanford drove between the trees, the snow gleaming in the darkness, the mountains jagged against the star-filled sky, rising up all around them. Stanford drove carefully, squinting against the falling snow, his headlights picking out tree-trunks and rocks and banks of exposed soil. He was nervous, excited, not sure what he was doing, glancing frequently at Epstein, at his smile, and wondering what he was thinking. The car rolled down the narrow track, the trees seeming to glide past it, the snow drifting dreamily across the track, the darkness total beneath them.

'You know, it fits,' Stanford said, breaking the silence between them. 'A lot of what that guy, that Wilson, told you fits. The application of an antigravity shield *could* result in a virtually massless body. Now, according to technical analysis the lift-off of your average UFO would require as much energy as the detonation of an atomic bomb, would cause the body of the UFO to heat up to about eighty-five thousand degrees centigrade, and would lead to intense deposits of radioactivity. However, with an antigravity shield reducing the mass of the UFO to almost zero, it would only require a very modest force to reach exceptionally high accelerations. That would account for the UFOs' ability to disappear in the blinking of an eye and for the fact that they can be brought to an abrupt stop. It would also explain why they can make such normally impossible right-angle turns. Since we can also assume safely that the inertial mass of such a UFO would decrease the higher it goes, we can then reason that such a mass would be reduced to almost zero by the time it reaches the limits of Earth's atmosphere. This would explain why the UFOs invariably have what appears to be a two-stage take-off: a slow rise to about a hundred feet or so, then a sudden acceleration and disappearance. Finally, since the UFOs' performance is directly related to Earth's gravity, and since the pull of gravity varies slightly from place to place, we now know why a UFO in horizontal flight often appears to rise and fall slightly: the increase and decrease of gravitational pull would affect the inertial mass of the UFO and make it bob up and down slightly; this would also explain why the UFOs appear to be able to automatically follow the profile of the terrain below… So, the facts fit.'

Still smiling sadly, his hands folded in his lap, his eyes slightly unfocused, fixed on the downhill road, Epstein nodded to indicate agreement.

‘Still,’ Stanford said, ‘it’s pretty fantastic. Wilson claimed he was a hundred and seven years old. If that’s true, he’s not human.’

‘You don’t think so?’ Epstein asked.

‘No, I don’t think so. If that guy comes from Earth, I can’t buy that. It’s just too incredible.’

‘I’m not so sure,’ Epstein said. ‘Bear in mind that whoever these people are, they’re obviously extraordinarily advanced in their technology. Now, according to Wilson that technology includes medical and psychological research with no restraint on the part of the researchers. They’re definitely far advanced in parapsychology and prosthetics, and they practice vivisection on human beings.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ Stanford said.

‘Yes,’ Epstein said, ‘it’s horrible. But no matter, that’s certainly what they’re doing. Now assuming that their medical and surgical research is as advanced as their other sciences, it’s not unreasonable to assume that Mr Wilson is the age he claims to be. What I *can* tell you is that his face was reconstructed with plastic surgery, that he uses a technologically advanced pacemaker, and that he’s had various organs replaced. He also informed me that the work on him was performed at an early stage of their technology and that those methods were now considered to be relatively primitive. Presumably, then, it is indeed possible that Mr Wilson is a hundred and seven years old.’

‘What does that make his date of birth?’

’1870.’

‘No,’ Stanford said, ‘I can’t accept this.’

‘Think again,’ Epstein said. ‘A few people have actually managed to live to that age – and without medical assistance. Add medical and surgical assistance of the most advanced kind, and Mr Wilson could be exactly what he says he is.’

‘Okay,’ Stanford said. ‘But *who* is he?’

‘Have you ever heard of a Wilson in relation to UFOs?’

‘No,’ Stanford said. ‘I can’t think of anyone, except… No, it’s too ridiculous for words.’

‘What’s ridiculous?’ Epstein said. ‘Don’t be shy. I want to know what you mean.’

Stanford shook his head from side to side, expressing disbelief regarding what he was thinking. The headlights of the car were boring into the darkness as the vehicle moved downhill, the road winding around canyons and ravines, the land on both sides below them.

‘The flap of 1897,’ Stanford said. ‘The first real modern sightings.’

‘Don’t blush,’ Epstein said. ‘Just keep talking. Make good use of that famous photographic memory of yours. I want every detail.’

‘Okay,’ Stanford said. ‘As you know, the first major UFO flap was in 1896 – about November of that year – and continued until May the following year. This was five years *before* the Wright brothers’ experiments, but there were, by that time, various airship designs on the drawing boards or in the Patent Office. On August 11, 1896, a patent was given to Charles Abbot Smith of San Francisco for an airship he intended to have ready by the following year. Another patent for an airship was issued to Henry Heintz of Elkton, South Dakota, on April 20, 1897. However, I should point out that while many of the UFOs sighted were shaped roughly like the patent designs, there is no record of either airship having been built.’

‘But the UFOs looked like airships?’

‘At that time the general belief was that aerial navigation would be solved through an airship rather than a heavier-than-air flying machine – so most of the earlier designs looked like dirigibles with a passenger car on the bottom.’

‘Cigar-shaped.’

‘Correct.’

‘Please continue.’

‘Okay, what stands out in the 1896 and 1897 sightings is that the UFOs were mostly cigar-shaped, that they frequently landed, and that their crews, normal men, often talked to the witnesses, usually asking for water for their machines. Now, the most intriguing of the numerous contactee stories involved a man who called himself Wilson. The first incident occurred in Beaumont, Texas, on April 19, 1897, when a guy called Ligon, local agent for Magnolia Brewery, and his son, noticing lights in the Johnson pasture a few hundred yards away, went to investigate. They came upon four men standing beside a large, dark object that neither of them could see clearly. One of the men asked Ligon for a bucket of water. When Ligon gave it to him, the man gave his name as Mr Wilson. He then told Ligon that he and his friends were traveling in a flying machine, that they had taken a trip, quote, “out of the Gulf”, and that they were returning to the, quote, “quiet Iowa town” where the airship and four others like it had been constructed. When asked, Wilson explained that electricity powered the propellers and wings of the airship. Then he and his friends get back into the airship and Ligon, with his son, watched it ascending.

‘The next day, on April 20, a Sheriff Baylor of Uvalde, also in Texas, went to investigate a strange light and voices in back of his house. He encountered a parked airship and three men – and one of the men gave his name as Wilson, from Goshen, New York. Wilson then inquired about a Captain Akers,

former sheriff of Zavalia County, saying that he'd met him in Fort Worth in 1877 and wanted to see him again. Surprised, Sheriff Baylor replied that Akers was now at Eagle Pass, and Wilson, apparently disappointed, asked to be remembered to him the next time Sheriff Baylor saw him. Baylor reported that the men from the airship wanted water and that Wilson requested that their visit be kept secret from the townspeople. Then he and the other men climbed back into the airship and watched it fly away northward in the direction of San Angelo. The county clerk also saw the airship as it was leaving the area.

'Two days later, in Josserand, Texas, a whirring sound woke farmer Frank Nichols, who looked out of his window and saw what he described as brilliant lights streaming from, quote, "a ponderous vessel of strange proportions" in his cornfield. Nichols went outside to investigate, but before he reached the object, two men walked up to him and asked if they could have water from his well. Nichols agreed to this – as farmers in those days invariably did – and the men then invited him to visit the airship where he noticed that there were six or seven crew members. One of these men told Nichols that the ship's motive power was highly condensed electricity and that it was one of five that had been constructed in, quote, "a small town in Iowa" with the backing of a large stock company in New York.

'The next day, on April 23, witnesses described by the *Houston Post* as two responsible men reported that an airship had descended where they lived in Koutze, Texas, and that two of the occupants had given their names as Jackson and… Wilson.

'Four days after this incident, on April 27, the Galveston *Daily News* printed a letter from Captain Akers, the former sheriff of Zavalia County, who claimed that he had indeed known a man in Fort Worth named Wilson, that Wilson was from New York, that he was in his middle twenties, and that he was of a, quote "mechanical turn of mind" and was then working on aerial navigation and, in his own words, *something that would astonish the world*.

‘Finally, early in the evening of April 30, in Deadwood, Texas, a farmer named Lagrone heard his horses bucking as if in stampede. Going outside, he saw a bright white light circling over the fields nearby and illuminating the entire area before descending and landing. Walking to the landing spot, Lagrone found a crew of five men, one of whom talked to him while the others collected water in rubber bags. The man informed Lagrone that his airship was one of five that had been flying around the country recently, that his was in fact the same one that had landed in Beaumont a few days before, that all the airships had been constructed in an interior town in Illinois – which, note, borders Iowa – and that he was reluctant to say anything else because he hadn’t yet taken out any patents. By May that same year, the airship sightings ended.’

The car rolled on down the mountain, snow still sweeping across the road, the dense forests gliding by on both sides, white and ghostly in darkness.

‘Interesting,’ Epstein said. ‘It’s certainly beginning to add up. And this Wilson appeared to be in his early twenties?’

‘Exactly,’ Stanford said. ‘So assuming, as our Wilson claims, that he’s a hundred and seven years old, in 1897 he’d have been twenty-seven.’

‘It fits,’ Epstein said. ‘Most of the facts fit. For instance, Wilson said that he’d originally studied aeronautics at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and then at Cornell, New York.’

‘You’re kidding,’ Stanford said.

‘No, I’m not. He said he went to the MIT, but eventually left it to study under Octave Chanute… Does that make any sense to you?’

‘Oh, Christ, yes,’ Stanford said.

The snow swept across the headlights, the alluvial hills slid past, the sky formed a long, glittering ribbon between gaps in the trees.

‘It’s hard to believe,’ Stanford said, ‘but it’s possibly true. Although there were no formal aeronautical courses at the MIT during the early 1890s, there were plenty of informal courses on propulsion and the behaviour of fluids. However, by 1896 instructors and students at the MIT had built a wind tunnel and were experimenting with it to get practical knowledge of aerodynamics. Wilson – our Wilson – could have attended those courses and then gone on to Sibley College, Cornell University, in Ithaca, New York, where, by the mid-1890s, it was possible to get a Bachelor of Science in Aeronautics.’

They were coming out of the mountains, the road straightening and leveling out, a dizzying drop on one side, soaring hills on the other, the snow banked up on both sides of the car, gleaming white in the darkness.

‘So,’ Epstein said. ‘Wilson was born in 1870. In 1890, at the age of twenty, he was studying propulsion and the behaviour of fluids at the MIT, after which he went on to Cornell to study aerodynamics. Let us say, then, that by the mid-1890s he’d obtained his Bachelor of Science in Aerodynamics. Assuming he’s a genius, we can then also assume that when he left Cornell, he went straight into the designing and constructing of flying machines. Now, bearing in mind the enormous interest there was at that time in the possibilities of such machines – and the fact that numerous researchers and inventors were obsessed with the possible theft or plagiarism of their designs – the need for secrecy would certainly have been paramount. Given this, it *is* possible that our Wilson was financed by some stock company in New York to set up a secret aeronautical research complex in the sparsely populated wilds of Illinois or Iowa. It is therefore also possible – still assuming that our Wilson is a genius – that he could have built the first airship by 1896.’

‘Christ!’ Stanford exclaimed. ‘Jesus Christ! Which gets us to your tapes.’

‘Correct,’ Epstein said.

‘What’s on them?’ Stanford asked. ‘Tell me what’s on the tapes. I can’t wait till we get to DC. I have to know *now*!’

Epstein didn’t reply. Stanford turned and looked at him. He just sat there with his head tilted toward one shoulder, his eyes closed, breathing deeply. Stanford smacked him on the shoulder, but Epstein didn’t respond. Stanford cursed and glanced out at the swirling snow and then looked back at Epstein. He was still breathing deeply, his eyes closed as if asleep, and Stanford shook him and received no response and felt a sharp, stabbing panic. He shook Epstein again, loudly called out his name, but Epstein still didn’t wake up. Stanford was confused, not knowing what was going on, thinking Epstein might have had some kind of stroke, wondering what he could do. They were a long way from Washington. The mountains soared behind them. Ahead, on both sides of the road, the hills climbed into darkness. Stanford cursed and stopped the car, twisted sideways, shook Epstein. The latter blinked and then opened his eyes properly and looked vaguely around him.

‘Where are we?’ he asked.

‘Nowhere,’ Stanford said. ‘I had to stop the car to waken you. I was worried that something had happened to you.’

‘I fell asleep?’

‘That’s what it looked like. I just blinked and you were gone. I’ve never seen anyone fall asleep that fast and it gave me a fright.’

Epstein smiled. ‘My apologies.’

‘Are you sure you’re okay?’

‘Of course,’ Epstein said. ‘I feel fine. I don’t know what happened… All the flying… Jet lag.’

‘Can I go now?’ Stanford said.

‘Certainly. Please do.’

‘Good,’ Stanford said. ‘I’m relieved. I don’t like it out here.’

He turned the ignition key. When nothing happened, he tried again. Nothing happened and he cursed and tried a third time, but still nothing happened. He glanced at Epstein, saw his eyes gradually closing. Stanford cursed and then tried the car a fourth time, but still nothing happened. The engine was completely dead. Stanford didn’t understand that. He looked around him, saw the thick, spiraling snow, the hills covered in pine trees. Stanford looked again at Epstein. The old man was asleep. Frightened, Stanford opened his door and slipped out of the car.

The wind was light but icy, Shivering, Stanford went to the front of the car and raised the hood. He beamed his flashlight on the engine, examined the spark plugs, the carbureter, the works, but couldn’t find anything wrong. Stanford shivered with cold. The snow was settling on the engine. He turned the flashlight off and went back around the car to try the ignition again. He bent forward to climb in, stopped, blinked a few times, then saw that the other door was open and that Epstein was missing.

Stanford straightened up quickly, feeling panic, his heart racing, looking over the car, across the road, at the tree-covered slopes. The trees were tall and close together, blocking out the moonlight, the white snow disappearing into darkness where the slope became steep. Then he saw Professor Epstein, stooped over, coat flapping, clambering up the slope and heading through the trees, the snow swirling about him.

Stanford bawled Epstein’s name, but Epstein didn’t glance back. He had passed the first trees, his feet kicking up the snow, disappearing, reappearing, clambering uphill. Stanford looked beyond him. A chill ran down his spine. He saw the light beyond the trees, rising up, spreading out, a glowing fan at the top of the hill, growing larger each second.

‘Oh, my God!’ Stanford whispered.

He hammered the car with his fist, ran around it, followed Epstein, his feet sinking into the snow as he crossed the dark road. The wind was sharp and icy, blowing the snow into his face, and he put his hand over his face until he reached the first trees. Looking up, he saw Epstein… heading determinedly for the pulsating light that fanned out in the black sky.

Then Stanford heard something, thought he *felt* it, wasn't sure. He jerked his head back and looked directly above him and went numb all over. There was no sky above. There was just a total blackness: a blackness that wiped out the moon and stars and was utterly physical. Stanford kept looking up. He couldn't believe what was happening. The blackness went as far as he could see and seemed to be bearing down upon him.

Stanford looked again for Epstein. He saw him moving between the trees, The light fanned out above the brow of the hill, glowing and pulsating. Stanford bawled Epstein's name, but Epstein didn't glance back. Stanford cursed and started hurrying up the hill, the air vibrating around him. He heard the sound or *felt* it, wasn't sure what it was, slowed down and started slipping and sliding, his head tight, his lungs bursting. Then he fell and rolled over, looked up and saw the light, saw Epstein clambering up toward the light with unnatural energy.

Stanford lay there in the snow. He looked up and saw the light spreading out and enveloping Epstein. Then two figures materialized. Both were silhouetted. They came up over the brow of the hill, moving steadily, methodically. They stopped and stood still and were framed by the fan of light. Epstein straightened up and walked up to the figures and one reached out and touched him. Stanford lay there, looking uphill, unable to move. Epstein merged with the two silhouettes and then they all walked away, vanishing over the hill. Stanford lay there for what seemed like a long time, the vibrating sound numbing him.

The snow continued falling. The fan of light started fading. It grew weaker and smaller, shrank to nothing, and then disappeared. Stanford lay there in

the snow, watching the brow of the hill. A line of white lights rose out of the darkness to climb slowly and vertically. Then the vibrating ceased. The dark night was filled with light. Stanford jerked his head back and looked above him and shielded his eyes.

There was light in the blackness, a perfect circle, growing larger, spreading out and hurling down a dazzling radiance that turned the night into daytime. Stanford shielded his eyes. He squinted up at that pool of light. He saw the other line of lights gliding over from the hill and merging with the fierce light above him and then disappearing.

Stanford closed his eyes. They were watering and stinging. He blinked and looked up again and saw the dazzling white light. There was a black disk in the middle. The larger circle of light was shrinking. It kept shrinking until it swallowed the black disk and the blackness was total.

Stanford kept looking up. He saw nothing but the blackness. He lowered his gaze and looked back along the road and saw a ribbon of stars. The blackness ended back there. The ribbon of stars was growing wider. The far edge of the blackness was receding and racing toward him. Stanford looked the other way. He saw the very same thing. He saw a ribbon of stars growing wider as the blackness raced toward him. Then he looked up again. He saw nothing but the blackness. He looked around him and saw the emerging stars as the black mass kept shrinking. It shrank as it ascended. The stars raced in on all sides. Stanford looked up and saw the dwindling darkness with the stars all around it. It finally became a small black disk. The disk shrank and disappeared. Stanford looked up and saw the starry sky, the moon wreathed in clouds.

The tightness left Stanford’s head. He stood up and then walked up the hill until he stood at the top. He looked down the other side, saw a snow-white, empty field. He turned around and stumbled back down to the car, feeling outrage and grief. He turned the ignition key. The car roared back into life. Stanford drove back to Washington, DC, the loss of Epstein tearing at him,

now determined to get the tapes in the safe before he, too, was taken.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

February 22, 1945. The guns roared in the distance, the skies were filled with smoke, and we had to destroy the Kugelblitz and make good our escape. I remember it well. I had to wrap myself in ice. The sleek saucer stretched across the broken stones at the base of the mountain. We had removed the new components. We had to leave the rest behind. We couldn't let what remained fall to the enemy, and so we had to destroy it. I stood near the hangar doors. General Kammler was not present. The forested hills of Kahla were all around us and veiled in a thin mist. I glanced at General Nebe. His swarthy face revealed nothing. My fellow scientists and technicians were just behind me, their eyes fixed on the saucer. The guns roared in the distance. The saucer glittered in the sunlight. Nebe's demolition men were standing under it, grouped around the four legs. One of the men waved his hand. General Nebe nodded soundlessly. All the men moved away from the saucer and returned to the hangar.

I no longer accepted pain. It was a redundant emotion. Nonetheless, as I gazed at my great creation, I had to harden myself. The saucer looked enormous, its sloping sides a seamless gray, sweeping up to a steel-plated dome and reflecting the sunlight. It looked very beautiful. It also looked quite unreal. What I felt was a fleeting sense of loss, but I rigorously stifled it. I just stood there, saying nothing. General needed nodded again. A kneeling sergeant leaned forward and pressed a plunger and the saucer exploded.

Fierce flames and swirling smoke. We were crouched behind sandbags. The explosions reverberated throughout the hangar and then faded away. We all stood up slowly. The smoke was billowing toward the sky. Where the saucer

had stood there was a black hole, filled with smoldering debris.

I found myself speechless. I turned away and faced Nebe. His dark eyes and humorless face displayed no sign of sympathy. He just shrugged and surveyed the hangar. It was immense and filled with workers. The workers were lined up against the walls, being guarded by soldiers. Nebe's dark eyes were watchful. He murmured an order to the sergeant. The sergeant barked further orders to this troops and they all raised their weapons. The prisoners moved immediately. They placed their hands on their heads. Silent, their eyes as dead as the moon, they marched out of the hangar.

The destruction began. We would leave little to the Allies. All that day the ground rocked to explosions and the shrieking of bullets. A dark smoke boiled from the hangar. The long tunnels were filled with flames. The technicians stood outside, bemused, as their laboratories crumbled. Soldiers darted to and fro. Hand grenades curved through the air. The flames daggered through the black smoke and splashed down on the ground.

Other guns roared in the distance. The horizon was smokey. The enemy was advancing every minute and our time became precious. We all rushed to pack the trucks. The largest crate was first to leave. In the crate were the numerous new components, without which we'd be lost. I climbed in beside the crate. I glanced out and saw the prisoners. They were kneeling in great numbers on the ground, the smoke drifting around them. I did not look very long. They were destined for Buchenwald. When they turned to smoke and ash in the crematoria, what they knew would die with them. I reached out and touched the crate. General Nebe waved from the murk. The truck growled and then rumbled down the hill as the destruction continued.

Darkness was descending. Allied guns roared in the distance. The truck started rocking from side to side and the large crate swayed dangerously. I reached out and touched it. I thought briefly of Rudolph Schriever. The Flugkapitän was still working in Mahren, racing to finish his saucer. As the guns roared, I smiled. Schriever's saucer would never work. I stroked the

large wooden crate with loving fingers and felt a deep peace. The truck shuddered and then stopped. I heard the hissing of steam. Looking out, I saw the mass of milling workers approaching the train.

We unloaded in darkness. The crate was moved with great care. A battalion of SS troops marched by, their guns and knives gleaming. They were all youthful fanatics. They were General Nebe's disciples. They had deserted after the attempt on Hitler's life and now were going with us. The war raged on in the distance. The train clanged and spat steam. The slave workers were stripped to the waist, sweating under the cracking whips. I watched the crate being loaded. It bumped against the long carriage. I cursed the man who was operating the crane and he lowered his head. The crate was then lowered more carefully. Blackened hands pushed it inside. The doors were closed and the slaves were ordered away as I walked to the platform.

Allied planes growled overhead. I heard the crack of a rifle. A dog snarled and a man started screaming as I reached the dark platform. Clouds of steam swirled around me. Troops were entering the train. The ground shuddered and I saw flames in the distance, flaring up in the black night. Men were shouting and jostling. A torch shone in my face. General Nebe materialized from the murk, his dark eyes unrevealing. He pointed up to the nearest carriage. I saw the peaked caps of the officers. I nodded and we both boarded the train and closed the door hard behind us.

The carriage was packed and noisy. A sweating corporal pulled the blinds down. Once finished, he turned on all the lights and I felt my eyes stinging. Most of the officers were disheveled. Their ties were loose and their shirts were soaked. The air was blue with cigaret smoke, smelt of ash and fresh sweat. General Nebe murmured something. Two men jumped to their feet. They saluted and then marched away, leaving two empty seats. Nebe indicated one of them. When I sat down, he sat beside me. The two officers seated opposite froze visibly and then lowered their eyes. Nebe yawned and glanced around him. His rough face was expressionless. Shortly after, with

much clanging and groaning, the train started moving.

The night was long and miserable. The train stopped and started often. Allied planes growled continuously overhead, the guns boomed in the distance. The officers smoked and played cards. Their ears cocked when they heard explosions. Nebe slept with his mouth pursed and whistling, his head hanging heavily. General Kammler was not present. He was busy elsewhere. That same night he was moving the scientists from Peenemünde to the mine shafts of Bleicherode. He had suggested the move to Himmler. It was a cunning thing to do. Its purpose was to distract Himmler's attention while we made our escape. The Reichsführer was in a panic. He had forgotten about the wilderness. He was now more concerned with the V-2 rockets, and with young Schriever's saucer. The guns roared as I smiled. I thought of Schriever back in Mahren. That fool would still be working on his saucer when the Allies arrived.

We were bombed a few hours later. I remember my annoyance. The sudden roaring almost split my eardrums as I plunged to the floor. The bending tracks shrieked. My one thought was for the crate. The whole carriage rose up and crashed down and then rolled onto its side. The noise was catastrophic. Men screamed as seats buckled. I went sliding along the floor and struck a wall and rolled over a flailing man. Flying pieces of wood and spinning chairs. A smashed head pouring blood. I turned around and saw the windows above me, glass shattered and glinting. Men screamed and bawled curses. I jumped back to my feet. A bloody corporal formed a stirrup with his hands and Nebe planted his boot in it. The corporal heaved the general up. I saw the mass of dangling legs. More bombs fell and exploded around the train as I found a cleared space. I pulled myself up through the window. The night roared and spewed flame. I crawled away from the window and rolled off and crashed down to the ground.

My one thought was for the crate. I ran toward the long carriage. Men were falling off the train and crashing down and then rolling away from me. The

whole scene was chaotic. A silhouette was bawling orders. I clawed two or three men from my path and then saw the long carriage. General Nebe was already there. There were three trucks near the train. A dozen men were laboring under my crate, their backs bent, their necks straining. Another bomb fell nearby. Nebe stepped forward to bark an order. The men heaved the crate onto the truck and then collapsed from the effort. General Nebe's jackboot glistened. He kicked one of the lolling men. The men jumped up and grabbed at their weapons and clambered into the truck. Nebe waved his right hand. I climbed up beside the driver. Nebe followed me in, barked an order, and then the truck began moving. Allied planes passed overhead. A gray dawn was breaking. There was another truck in front, one behind, and we kept moving forward.

The breaking dawn was filled with smoke. The landscape was devastated. Charred trees and smoldering buildings and corpses, ragged columns of refugees. The refugees were going the other way. Allied planes flew overhead. The trucks growled and bumped along the dusty roads as the smoke cleared away. A drab country: anonymous. The devastation remained. The blackened buildings were no longer smoldering: the ash had turned cold. We stopped and started often. Darkness fell and brought a stark, chilling silence that gave way to the murmuring sea.

We stopped just outside Kiel. The fields were flat and barren. I saw a\hangar, a series of low bunkers, a few bleak, concrete buildings. There we stayed for five weeks. The crate was hidden in a bunker. Every day I went down to inspect it, wanting desperately to leave. Each day was the same. The men smoked and played cards. Allied planes rumbled over our heads, but always kept flying south. Long days and freezing nights. I toyed with mathematical riddles. It was wet and the SS men were drawn to the flickering ovens. General Nebe kept to himself. His dark eyes were unrevealing. He slept soundly, his mouth puckered and whistling, his heavy legs outstretched. Dawn drifted into dusk. The Allied planes flew overhead. I often studied the SS men in the bunkers, wondering what they were thinking. They all seemed

to be very young. Most were handsome and sweet-faced. All had dipped their hands in blood and tortured the helpless, few would suffer from sleepless nights. I wondered how we could take them all. I didn't believe we had the space. A cold wind came and chilled us to the bone and Nebe said we were moving out.

We drove down through Kiel. A fine mist veiled the darkness. I was sitting in the back of a truck, the wooden crate towering over me. I thought of Kammler in Oberammergau. I wondered if he had escaped. I thought of Wernher von Braun and Dornberger and wondered what would become of them. Kammler might still be with them. He might be down there in Kiel. I ran my fingers along the length of the crate and then we came to the docks.

The trucks squealed to a halt. The crate shuddered and then was still. General Nebe's dark eyes appeared from dense mist and he motioned me out. I jumped down, feeling stiff. The docks were very quiet. The black water reflected the lamps beaming down on the submarines. I glanced keenly around me. Nebe was murmuring to some troops. The men formed up in a neatly spaced line against the wall of a hangar. Other men were at my crate. They worked slowly and carefully. I glanced down at the submarine just below me: U-977. There were men on the deck. They were grouped around the hold. Chains rattled and I saw my precious crate dangling over the water. There was a moment's hesitation. The crate was jerked and started spinning. Hands reached up and guided it down until it dropped out of sight.

General Kammler appeared on deck. He was accompanied by Captain Schaeffer. Both men climbed up the ladder to the dock and approached General Nebe. Kammler spoke in a low voice. He kept glancing along the dock. His shadow trailed out along the wet stones and smothered my feet. General Nebe turned away. He murmured something to his sergeant. General Kammler took a torch from his pocket and flashed it three times. I glanced along the dock. I saw the lights of another truck. The truck growled and then started toward us, its headlights turned down. General Kammler walked up

to me. He introduced me to Captain Schaeffer. We shook hands as the truck pulled up near us and turned toward the water.

The SS troops were silent. They formed a line along the hangar. The sergeant stepped back and bellowed an order and the troops faced the wall. I heard their weapons rattling. Their boots rang on the stones. The truck stopped, overlooking the water, and then its ramp was thrown down.

A shocking noise split the silence. I shook my head to clear it. The SS troops lined up along the hangar were jerking and wriggling. My eyes turned toward the truck. I saw a barrel spitting flames. The machine gun was roaring and rattling as the men screamed and died. When I blinked, there was silence. A grey smoke drifted lazily. The tall wall of the hangar was filled with holes and splashed with fresh blood. The men all lay on the ground, sprawled across one another. Their large pupils reflected the lamps beaming down on their faces.

Captain Schaeffer turned away. I saw Kammler's tight lips. General Nebe took his pistol from its holster and then cocked the hammer. He nodded to his sergeant. They both approached the bloodied men. Most were silent, but a few were still whimpering, their hands opening and closing. General Nebe fired the first shot. His sergeant fired the second. They took turns, bending over the bodies, their gunshots reverberating. It seemed to take a long time. It did not take long at all. When they had finished, General Nebe turned away and waved his free hand.

Some men jumped out of the truck. The machine gun's barrel clanged. General Nebe returned his pistol to its holster and then walked toward us. There was no sweat on his brow. His dark eyes were unrevealing. He nodded and we all turned away and climbed down to the submarines.

We moved out shortly after. We did not go very far. I stood with Nebe and Kammler on the deck and watched the men on the dock. There were only four men. They worked long and hard. They put the bodies of their dead comrades

in the truck and drove it into the hangar. The dock was very quiet. Its lamps beamed down on the wet stones. More Allied planes rumbled overhead as the four men emerged again. They were not in the truck. They merged gradually with the darkness. They climbed down the steel ladder one by one and dropped into a dinghy. The oars splashed in the water. The distant lamps showed desolation. After what seemed like a very long time the men arrived at the submarine. They were all helped aboard. The dinghy drifted away. I stared back across the water to the dock and saw the lamps on the hangar.

The explosion was catastrophic. The whole hangar disintegrated. The flames shot up in jagged, yellow lines that turned the night into daytime. The noise was demoniac. A black smoke billowed out. The flames swirled and turned into crimson tendrils that embraced one another. Then the smoke drifted sideways, revealing the rubble. Flames leaped across the charred, broken beams and stained the road with shifting shadows. The flames burned a long time. The harsh wind made them dance. They were still burning brightly when we submerged and disappeared in the Baltic Sea.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

EDITED TRANSCRIPT GER/0023/DEC 3 77

TAPED INTERVIEW BETWEEN DR FREDERICK EPSTEIN

& PROFESSOR RONALD MANSFIELD OF THE

GROUPMENT D'ETUDES DES PHENOMENES

AERIENS

LOCATION: PARIS, FRANCE, AS ABOVE

INTERVIEW DATE: NOV 27 77

EPSTEIN EDITED OUT

Tape 1:

Yes, Dr Epstein, it is of course true that we in the British Intelligence Objectives Sub-Committee were particularly interested in German scientific progress during the Second World War. It must be borne in mind that from the moment Hitler took power, in 1933, a gross militarism prevailed and all outstanding German scientists were compelled, despite their personal beliefs, to work on military projects. Now most of that work was concerned with the production of various kinds of advanced weaponry, but as early as 1934 there was talk emerging from Germany about even more disturbing projects, such as aerial torpedoes, pilotless aircraft, remote-controlled rockets, long-range

guns, and mysterious death rays – so quite naturally we worried. Our anxieties were increased when, in 1942, various resistance groups informed us of the flying bombs and giant rockets being constructed at a secret research establishment at Peenemünde; and then we started receiving reports, from experienced pilots, of mysterious ‘fireballs’ that were harassing them on their bombing runs over occupied Europe.

Confirmation that the Peenemünde experiments had been successful came on June 13, 1944, when the first V-1 flying bombs fell on England, and, more forcefully, on September 6 the same year, when the first of the V-2 rockets devastated parts of Chiswick and Epping. Since these fearsome inventions were dropping on London and surrounding areas, the populace was obviously aware of them; however, what the populace did not know – and what we were not about to reveal – was that many Allied pilots had started returning from bombing runs with wild tales of being pursued by mysterious ‘fireballs’ that made their aircraft’s ignition and radar malfunction.

The first recorded incidence came from Lieutenant Edward Schlueter of the 415th US Night Fighter Squadron. Reportedly, on the night of November 23, 1944, Lieutenant Schlueter was flying in a heavy night fighter over the Rhine, about twenty miles from Strasbourg, when he and Air Intelligence Lieutenant Fred Ringwall glanced out of their darkened cockpit and saw ‘ten small balls of reddish fire’ flying in formation at what they claimed was amazing speed. The lights followed the aircraft for some time, were pursued and disappeared, returned and seemingly caused the aircraft’s ignition and radar to malfunction. The ‘balls of fire’ eventually vanished over the Siegfried Line.

Four days later, on the night of November 27, pilots Henry Giblin and Walter Cleary submitted an official report stating that their airplane had been harassed over the vicinity of Speyer by ‘an enormous burning light’ that was flying fifteen hundred feet above their plane at about two hundred and fifty miles per hour and seemingly caused their radar to malfunction. This report

was followed by a sudden spate of similar reports, most of which agreed that the objects were large, bright, orange lights, that they appeared to *ascend* from low altitude, and that when they leveled out and followed the aircraft there were inexplicable ignition and radar malfunctions. Finally, when on January 12, 1945. Several bomber squadrons *simultaneously* reported seeing the lights, we decided to open a dossier on the subject.

Naturally, when the war ended, our major priority was to take under our control as much as possible of the documents, drawings and actual components belonging to Nazi Germany's scientific and military research. Regarding this, the Red Army moved into the enormous underground rocket factory in Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains, where they took charge of almost completed flying bombs and rockets, numerous precision tools and parts, and over three thousand research workers from Pennemünde, including leading scientist Helmut Grottrup and quite a few other rocket experts – all of whom disappeared into the Soviet Union to create God knows what. The Americans, on the other hand, managed to get their hands on over a hundred V-2 rockets, five cases of hidden and highly secret Peenemünde documents and, of course, the very famous Wernher von Braun, a few hundred other V-2 specialists, and another hundred-odd scientists who were intimate with the various Peenemünde projects.

I give you these figures not just to impress upon you the fact that both the Soviets and the Americans gained from this division much of the material, human and otherwise, vital to advanced weaponry research and the exploration of space, but also to impress upon you the sheer *size* of the German projects.

And the British? It was our intention right from the start – as it was doubtless the intention of the Soviets and the Americans – to complete the picture on the state of development of German research on guided missiles, supersonic aircraft and other secret weapons. Apropos of this, we sent teams of specialists belonging to the Ministry of Aircraft Production all over western

Germany and Austria, their brief being to locate every cave, disused mine, tunnel, ravine or forest where secret German establishments might be hidden and, once having located them, to dismantle and return to England the most valuable or enigmatic equipment, even including the Germans' quite extraordinary wind tunnels.

Since the British zone of occupation extended from the Dutch frontier to Prussia, centering on the invaluable port of Hamburg and including a large part of the eastern Alpine massif in Austria, we really did quite well out of the deal. The movement of this mass of captured documents and equipment was discreetly controlled by the British Intelligence Objectives Sub-Committee, and in general it was transported to Hamburg, shipped from there to England, and from there distributed to various interested parties such as the experimental center then being built at Bedford, the Royal Radar Establishment at Great Malvern, the Telecommunications Research Establishment, and other top-secret establishments in Canada and Australia.

Working under British Intelligence, my job was to organize the Anglo-Canadian teams of scientists who would scrutinize every aspect of the captured German technology. Our main concern was with unraveling the mystery of certain German secret weapons that may, or may not, have existed. These would have included the Foo Fighter or 'ball of fire' that reportedly harassed so many Allied pilots; the 'circular German fighter without wings or rudder' which, according to one reliable source, crossed the flight path of a four-engined Liberator at very high speed, gave off a number of little 'bluish' clouds of smoke, and caused the Liberator to catch fire and eventually exploded; and the 'strange flying machine, hemispherical or circular in shape' that reportedly flew at incredible speed, attacked a whole convoy of twelve US night fighters, and destroyed them without using visible weapons. Naturally, being British, we approached our task with a certain skepticism – but such skepticism would shortly be dispelled and replaced with amazement.

Let me briefly summarize what we found. First, whether or not the mysterious aircraft that sprayed those bluish clouds of smoke over the unfortunate Liberator was ‘a circular German fighter without wings or rudder’, it certainly could have caused that aircraft to explode without using its guns. We came to this conclusion when we discovered that documents recovered from the technical departments of factories hidden in the densely forested areas of the Schwarzwald contained details of experiments conducted with a liquid gas that would, when blown with considerable force over an aircraft, catch fire from the aircraft’s exhaust fumes and cause the aircraft to explode. The existence of this gas was confirmed by one Dr Rosenstein, an organic chemist and Jewish collaborator who, when interrogated by members of the American Aslos Mission in Paris in 1944, stated that the Germans had succeeded in perfecting a new gas whose use would have caused ‘strong vibrations and even breakage in aircraft engines’ by encouraging immediate and repeated self-ignition.

In this context, it is worth noting that in April 1945, on the outskirts of the Hillersleben testing grounds west of Berlin, members of the Intelligence Technical Branch of the 12th Army Group found the rusty remains of a rather odd item called the *Windkanone* – a cannon that shot gas instead of shells – and another odd item called the *Wirbelringkanone*, or whirlwind annular vortex cannon, which was designed to shoot, and then ignite, a gas ring that would spin rapidly on its own axis and form a rather fierce ‘ball of fire’.

Regarding the possibility that the ‘circular German plane without wings or rudder’ might have been some kind of remote-controlled flying device, we discovered that as far back as 1939 Dr Fernseh of Berlin, in collaboration with Professor Herbert Wagner of the Henschel Aircraft Company, was working on the development of a television component that would enable pilots to control bombs and rocket bombs *after* they had been launched; that Fernseh was also involved in the development of a microtelevision camera that would be installed in the nose of an antiaircraft rocket and guide it precisely to its target; and that similar projects were quite commonplace in

Nazi Germany – and, more importantly, highly successful.

Naturally, such information led us back into an investigation of the apparently remote-controlled German ‘fireballs’. What we found was that Messerschmitt had developed two workable radio-controlled interceptor planes, the *Krache* and the *Donner*, that these were initially designed to be controlled from the ground by a television receiver installed in an armored console, but that certain negative aspects to the system led to the development of numerous highly advanced electromagnetic, electroacoustical and photoelectric fuses, and to even more advanced warheads that were sensitive to the natural electrostatic fields that surround aircraft in flight. Indeed, some of those devices were incorporated into ‘automatic’ aircraft weapons, with the result that all a German pilot had to do was flying his plane a few hundred yards beneath or above his target and the automatic firing mechanism would operate. Thus, by installing similar devices in a pilotless interceptor rocket, the Germans could engage in aerial combat without using pilots.

The devices I’ve just mentioned led inevitably to a more solid version of the original ‘wind-cannon’ idea. By 1945 a Luftwaffe experimental center in Oberammergau in Bavaria had completed its research into an apparatus capable of short-circuiting the ignition system of an aircraft’s engine at a distance of about a hundred feet by producing an intense electrical field. Their intention – aborted by the ending of the war – was to expand the field greatly, but certainly, by the middle of 1944, they had incorporated the device into a weapon actually called the *Feuerball*, or ‘fireball’.

The *Feuerball* was first constructed at the aeronautical factory at Wiener Neustadt. Basically, it was an armored, disk-shaped object, powered by a special turbojet engine, which was radio-controlled at the moment of take-off, but then, attracted by the enemy aircraft’s exhaust fumes, automatically followed that aircraft, automatically avoided colliding with it, and automatically short-circuited the aircraft’s radar and ignition systems. During

the day this device looked exactly like ‘a shining disk spinning on its axis’ – which may account for the first Allied newspaper reports of ‘silver balls’ observed in the skies over Germany – and by night it looked like a ‘burning globe’. The ‘burning globe’ was actually a fiery halo around the solid device, caused by the very rich chemical mixture that over-ionized the atmosphere in the vicinity of the target and thus subjected it to extremely damaging electromagnetic impulses. It is also worth noting – with regard to the fact that the *Feuerballs* reportedly flew away when attacked – that under the armored plating of the *Feuerball* was a thin sheet of aluminum that acted as a defensive ‘switch’; a bullet piercing the armored plating would automatically establish contact with the switch, trip a maximum acceleration device, and cause the *Feuerball* to fly vertically out of range of enemy gunfire. In short: the *Feuerball* really existed, it was described accurately by our pilots, and it was used with great effect from about November 1944 to the end of the war.

At this point I feel I should remind that from as far back as 1942 the German military establishment had encouraged every kind of research and experiment in the field of jet propulsion and advanced remote-control systems. However, after the attempted assassination of Hitler on July 20, 1944, Hitler in a bout of vengeful fury, turned control of the planning and construction of these astonishing new weapons over to Himmler’s dreaded SS. I mention this because the SS were, by that stage of the war, a self-ruling and highly secretive body with their own research centers and construction plants and factories, many of which even Hitler didn’t know about. In other words, from that point on the fate of many of the secret weapons was even more difficult to trace – and indeed, in many cases is not known even to this day.

What we *do* know is that many of the leading scientific establishments were evacuated totally and transferred to vast underground complexes scattered all over Germany, most notably in the area of the aborted Alpine redoubt. Once transferred, they were virtually sealed off from the outer world, rigidly controlled by the SS, and forced to concentrate their attention on nothing other than advanced military projects. Given that this work went on twenty-

four hours a day, that even the scientists worked in shifts, and that thousands of slave workers from the concentration camps were at their disposal, there can be little doubt that some extraordinary advances were made in those secret research plants.

Unfortunately the SS, when retreating from the Allies, destroyed much of this remarkable research. Unfortunate because what we often found were highly advanced but frustratingly incomplete documents, isolated parts of obviously complex components, and a wealth of other odds and ends that could have belonged to just about anything. Even more disturbing was the fact that thousands of slave workers who had been used in such establishments had, with their SS overlords, simply disappeared by the time we arrived there – and few of them were ever located again.

So, my evaluations are incomplete. Nevertheless, regarding the ’wingless’ aircraft so often reported, we did collect enough material to tantalize us and keep us involved for years. Found across the length and breadth of Nazi Germany were not only the V-1 flying bombs and V-2 rockets, the gas cannons and *Feuerballs*, and the extraordinary variety of automatic flying devices and infrared warheads, but also a considerable number of highly advanced U-XX1 and U-XXIII submarines, almost completed ME-262 jet fighters, a nearly completed atom-bomb project, the prototypes for various vertical-rising aircraft, and even, in the immense underground Riva del Garda research complex, the manufacturing process for a metallic material that could withstand temperatures of about one thousand degrees Centigrade. So, as you can imagine, the Germans were on the verge of some truly remarkable developments.

Tape 2:

There are two problems standing in the way of a supersonic, completely circular aircraft: one is the need for gyroscopic stabilization and the other is control of the boundary layer. It is therefore worth noting that scientists of the Kreiselgerate at Berlin Britz had, in 1943, worked on the construction of

mechanisms employing gyroscopic phenomenon and succeeded in reducing the oscillations of a violently shaken body to under a tenth of a degree. This was, of course, a most important achievement – and added to control of Prandt's 'boundary layer' it would have led to some extraordinary advances in aerodynamics.

Let me briefly explain this 'boundary layer'. While being four or five times less viscous than oil, air *is*, nonetheless, viscous. Because of this, the air sweeping in on the solid body of an aircraft forms imperceptible stratifications of resistance and consequently decreases the speed of the body in flight. These layers of air are known as the 'boundary layer' – and the boundary layer increases its resistance in direct proportion to the increasing speed of the flying object.

In layman's terms, therefore, the major problem regarding supersonic flight was to somehow or other move this negative air as far to the rear of the aircraft as possible, thus minimizing the expenditure of energy required to propel the aircraft through the sky. Further: it is possible that a revolutionary type of aircraft could – by not only *completely* removing the boundary layer, but by somehow re-routing it and utilizing it as an added propulsive force – fly through the skies using little other than the expelled air itself. Should this be accomplished we would have an aircraft capable of remarkable speeds while utilizing the barest minimum of fuel.

By 1945 – or so our captured German papers indicated – both the LFA at Volkenrode and the research center at Guidonia were working on a revolutionary new type of aircraft that was devoid of all obstructing protuberances, such as wings and rudders, was devoid even of the normal air intakes, and was powered by a highly advanced turbine engine. In short, the new aircraft was a 'flying wing' that offered the least possible air resistance, sucked in the 'dead air' of the boundary layer, and then used that same air, expelling it at great force, to increase its momentum.

Whether or not that aircraft was actually developed and flown is not known.

What we did know, however, was that the *Feuerball* really existed, that it took the form of a circular ‘wing’, that the wing was in a sense wrapped around the suction pump, and that the pump was part and parcel of the engine. In other words, the *Feuerball* was a perfectly symmetrical disk, devoid of all surface protuberances – the first small flying saucer.

Nevertheless, with the *Feuerball* the boundary layer would still have been present, albeit drastically reduced. In order to get rid of the boundary layer completely – and in order to make use of the ‘dead air’ not only for acceleration but for maneuvering as well – what was required was a porous metal that would act like a sponge and remove the need for air intakes altogether. This need led scientists into the exploration of what would henceforth be called, in the words of the German engineer Schrenk, ‘frictionless air flow’ and which would result, according to Sir Ben Lockspeiser, in an aircraft that would ‘slip through the air in the same way as a piece of wet soap slips through the fingers.’ I mention this because certain documents discovered by us in both Gottingen and Volkenrode indicated that between 1943 and 1944 the German scientists had been completing their research on just such a metal – a compound of magnesium and aluminum – and had given the resultant material the name of *Luftschwamm,* which translated means ‘aero-sponge’.

Let us assume, then, that by early 1945 the Germans had combined all the aforementioned discoveries into one complex experimental flying machine. First, we have a small flying disk known as the *Feuerball*. This disk not only spins around its vertical axis, but automatically follows its target, makes its target’s ignition and radar malfunction by filling the vicinity with a gas that when burning creates a damaging magnetic field, then automatically flies away when attacked.

Now let us enlarge this flying ‘fireball’. The new, enlarged disk will also spin on its vertical axis, but with the addition of direct gyroscopic stabilization, a pilot’s cabin can now be placed on that axis, with the main body – or engine

– of the disk spinning around the cabin. We then add to the enlarged, pilot-carrying disk a form of radio that can cancel at the pilot's discretion the return signals, or blips, from the enemy's radarscope and thus render our flying disk undetectable to the enemy. Next, we have electromagnetically or electroacoustically controlled firing weapons, we have cannons that spit ignition-damaging gas instead of shells, we possibly have various laser or pulse-beam weapons, and we have devices that insure that our flying disk will automatically retreat from enemy attacks. Add to all this the fact that the disk is made of an alloy that can withstand enormous pressure and a temperature of one thousand degrees Centigrade and that, being porous, can take the air in like a sponge and then use it to enhance its own propulsion to almost unbelievable speeds… Add it up and what do we have? What we *might* have is the German *Kugelblitz*, an offspring of the *Feuerball*, a piloted machine in which a single mass of wing, tail and fuselage is formed into one gyroscopically stabilized, vertical-rising, possibly supersonic flying disk.

Did such a machine exist? I think it might have. What I *do* know is that a machine very much like it, and called the *Kugelblitz*, was reportedly test-flown sometime in February 1945, in the area of the underground complex at Kahla, in Thuringia, that the test was marked as successful, and that from incomplete notes found in the Kahla complex when the Allies took it over, that machine reached a height of about forty thousand feet at a speed of approximately twelve hundred and fifty miles per hour.

Regarding the possibility that what we found in Germany was later utilized by the Allies, I can only point out that shortly after the war the British and the Canadians between them began to develop some revolutionary kinds of aircraft that were rumored to be based on designs discovered in Germany after its collapse. Included in these were the Armstrong Whitworth Aircraft Company's AW-52-G all-wing glider and the AW-52 Boomerang – both of which were similar in appearance to the German 'flying wing' designs and, incidentally, to the enormous 'flying wing' seen over Albuquerque in 1951. Also, during that same period, there was much talk in British and Canadian

aeronautical circles about research into ‘porous’ metals and vertical take-off jet planes – and, of course, there were a remarkable number of UFO sightings. Finally, as you yourself have reminded me, both the Americans and the Canadians made numerous mentions of official flying saucer projects. From all this, Dr Epstein, I think you can draw your own conclusions.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The noon sun was scorching, the humidity suffocating. The river rippled and flashed, curving away in the distance, shadowed by the conifer trees and the banks of reddish mud as the sun beat down on the forests, on the creaking gunboat, draining Stanford and making his eyes sting as he clung to the railing. He could scarcely grasp where he was, had lost track since his arrival, stunned by the heat, by the stifling humidity, alienated by the noise and dusty streets of Asunción, now gazing across the Paraguay River and wondering where he was going. Stanford normally enjoyed the heat, had grown up with it, was used to it, but here, on the gunboat, the forests looming across the river, the heat was unearthly, unreal, totally monstrous, a sodden heat that clamped all around him and threatened to choke him. Stanford took off his hat, wiped the sweat from his forehead, put the hat back on and glanced about him, his clothes soaked, his boots burning.

‘Have a beer,’ *Señor* Stanford. It will help cool you down. You must not let the sun dehydrate you. You need plenty of liquid.’

Juan Chavez was smiling, a sly, gap-toothed grimace, his dark eyes as unrevealing as the forests slipping past the gunboat. Stanford nodded and took the beer, the bottle cold in his sweaty hand. He drank and wiped some foam from his lips, stared uneasily at Chavez.

‘How much longer?’ he asked.

‘Not long, *señor*.’ Chavez grinned and the spat over the railing, his open shirt fluttering.

‘*How* long?’ Stanford asked.

‘Not long,’ Chavez repeated. ‘Five, maybe ten or fifteen minutes. It is just around the bend in the river. It will not take much longer.’

Stanford gazed along the river, saw it curving around the line of trees, flowing lazily, rippling out around rocks, slashed by sunlight and shadow. The sight of it chilled him, made him feel more unreal, filled with foreboding and with vague, nameless fears that lanced through him for no apparent reason and drained him of courage. He despised himself for it, tried to fight it, failed repeatedly, tumbled back into fear and confusion like a child having bad dreams. In a sense that’s what it was – he recent recollections were all nightmarish: the strange ‘boys’ outside the ranch, the ‘suicide’ of Scaduto, Epstein willingly clambering up the darkened hill and not seen since that evening. Stanford felt crushed by it all, dogged by incomprehension, dreaming frequently of the lights that pulsated and merged, and then awakening to an alien world in which nothing was constant… And now here he was in Paraguay, the sun blinding him, the heat draining him. He had been on the shuddering gunboat for four or five hours, passing banks of reddish mud and sleazy waterfront cafés and dense forests that soared on either side and seemed to be totally impenetrable. Stanford coughed into his fist, trying to clear his dry throat, raised the bottle to his lips and drank some more, seeking some kind of solace.

‘Good,’ Chavez said. ‘You must drink. You must never dehydrate.’ He was eating from a cone of paper, dipping into it with his fingers, and he grinned and held the cone out to Stanford, his brown eyes faintly mischievous. ‘Here, *señor*,’ he said. ‘You must eat as well as drink. You should have some *camarónes*.’

Stanford fought back his revulsion. ‘No, thanks,’ he said. ‘I can just about stomach this beer. I don’t think I can eat.’

‘You are feeling ill, *señor*?’

‘Not really,’ Stanford said.

‘Ah, yes,’ Chavez said. ‘This stinking boat. And the heat… You’re not used to it.’

Stanford didn’t reply. He gazed around the crowded gunboat. The Ache Indians were still crouching at the aft end of the desk, small, emaciated, their narrow eyes dulled by dread, dressed in rags and huddling close to one another as if for protection. Two *Federales* were guarding them, wearing jackboots, holding rifles, both gaunt-faced and bored, chewing gum, their mean eyes hooded beneath peaked caps. Stanford studied them at length, feeling helpless and ashamed, recalling how the Ache Indians had been herded onto the boat after being abducted from a village some miles back. They were being sold into slavery. They would end up in Bolivian tin mines, in the ranches of Boqueron, in the brothels of Argentina and Brazil, in the cotton fields of Guatemala. Stanford felt shame when he thought of it. The eyes of the women and children haunted him. He turned away and gazed along the muddy river, drinking his beer, soaked in sweat.

‘This is your first time in Parguay, *Señor* Stanford?’

‘Yes,’ Stanford said.

‘You must get used to these things,’ Chavez said. ‘You must not be upset by them.’

‘I won’t get used to them,’ Stanford replied. ‘I won’t be staying here long enough. Once I speak with the German I’m leaving. I won’t get used to anything.’

‘You disapprove,’ Chavez said.

‘That’s right: I disapprove.’

‘Disapproval is a luxury,’ Chavez said. ‘An American luxury.’ He grinned

and glanced about him, his jaws working on *camarónes,* drank some beer and then looked back at Stanford, his brown eyes still mischievous. ‘You know the German?’ he asked.

‘No,’ Stanford said.

‘It is very strange, *señor,*’ Chavez said, ‘that you should know he is here.’

‘Why strange?’ Stanford asked.

‘The German doesn’t have many friends. He has been here in the forest for thirty years and is a man of great mystery.’

‘That’s not unusual,’ Stanford said. ‘There are a lot of Germans here. They own and operate the *estancias* and are all well protected.’

Chavez grinned broadly. ‘You do us wrong, *señor*. These rumors about us harboring Nazis have no basis in fact.’

‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘Bullshit,’ Stanford said. ‘Your whole economy is based on slavery and drugs – and on harboring Nazis.’

‘Lower your voice, *señor*.’ Chavez’s eyes flicked left and right. ‘It is not wise to speak of such things in so open a manner.’

‘I’m an American,’ Stanford said.

‘That wouldn’t help you, *señor*. The *Federales* are devoted to General Stroessner and would not make allowances.’

Stanford glanced past Chavez and saw the lounging *Federales*, most of them lingering around the rusty gunmounts, chewing gum, smoking cigarets.

Stanford didn't like the look of them. They looked simple-minded and brutal. They had Kalashnikov rifles slung across their shoulders, and their jackboots, which were covered in mud, made him think of the Nazis.

'Okay,' Stanford said. 'What's *your* connection to the German? Note: I didn't call him a Nazi. I'm a very good tourist.'

Chavez grinned and shrugged. 'The Ache,' he said. 'I round up the Ache and deliver them to the German, and he gives me a percentage of what he makes on the ones that he sells on.'

'And what happens to the ones he *doesn't* sell?'

Chavez grinned again. 'At our worst, we are patriotic. The Ache are vermin, filthy and diseased; they cannot look after themselves and they cause us much trouble. So, if they cannot be sold, we look after them in other ways…'

'You exterminate them,' Stanford said.

'A harsh word, *señor*. Let's say we put them out of their misery and leave it at that.'

Stanford finished his beer, threw the bottle overboard, watching it glinting as it bobbed briefly in the river before finally sinking. He glanced again at the Indians, huddled pathetically on the deck. He tried to reconcile this world with the one he had come from: with the pilots and astronauts and the control towers of NASA, with the jet planes and the space probes and the orbiting satellites, with the UFOs that haunted man's thoughts and mapped out his future. He couldn't reconcile the two. This river carried him through history. The gunboat and the forest, the *Federales* and the Indians, all existed in a primitive, frozen past far removed from the modern world. But what *was* the modern world? It was what he had come from. It was a world of technology, of relentless, searching science, racing blindly into a future not yet even imagined, a future in which men would be numbers and facts would rule

feelings. Yet was that such a bad thing? Stanford felt sure that it was. He looked at the squatting Indians, saw them bought and sold as meat, and then wondered if the future conjured up by the man called Wilson would in any sense be better than this: less cruel, more just. No, it would not be. The human lot would not improve. The cruelty and injustice and inequality would remain, changed only in their areas of distribution and in who would most suffer. The advances of science ignored this fact. The two worlds were all too similar. The future being created by Wilson, and represented by his technology, was as cruel and emotionally primitive as the world this gunboat was moving through.

Stanford shivered and looked ahead. The river curved out of sight. He saw a jetty thrusting out from the riverbank, the water rippling around it.

‘There it is,’ Chavez said. ‘Your journey is ended, *señor*. You will soon feel the ground beneath your feet – and can talk with your German friend.’

‘He’s not a friend,’ Stanford said.

‘My apologies, *señor*. A man like you would not have such friends. Your appearance confirms this fact.’

Stanford ignored the sarcasm, his eyes fixed on the wooden jetty, watching intently as the boat approached and the waterside village slid into view, thrusting out from the tangled reeds and liana at the edge of the forest. There were people on the jetty, men in filthy fatigues, looking suspiciously like *contrabandistas*, pistols stuck through their belts. The boat growled and shuddered, turning in toward the village, inched forward and then bounced against the tires along the jetty’s walkway. Stanford glanced back over his shoulder. One of the Ache women was wailing. A *Federale* slapped her brutally on the face and bawled a stream of abuse. The woman’s wailing became a whimpering. Stanford flushed and turned away. One of the crew had thrown a rope to a man on the jetty and this man was tying the rope around an upright, bending low, shouting something. The boat’s engine cut

out. A few member removed the gate. A plank was thrown across the space between the deck and the jetty's walkway, then tied to some flaking uprights to form a crude gangplank. Stanford moved toward the plank, wanting desperately to disembark, but Chavez tugged at the sleeve of his shirt and motioned him back.

'No,' he said. 'First the Ache.'

Stanford stopped and stared at him, saw the sly, gap-toothed grin, stepped back as Chavez went to the *Federales* and bawled his instructions. The *Federales* were quick to move, venting their boredom on the miserable Indians, screaming abuse and kicking them to their feet and herding them toward the makeshift gangplank. The Indians were not so quick, weak from hunger, confused, and the *Federales* encouraged them along with vicious blows from their rifles. The women wailed and hugged their children, cowering away from the rifle butts, while their menfolk, uncommonly small and frail, tried in vain to protect them. Stanford had to stifle his rage, turning away and surveying the gangplank; he saw the first of the Indians stumbling across it with their hands on their heads. Chavez was leading them down, his shirt unbuttoned and flapping loosely, his broad hat tilted over his eyes, keeping off the fierce sunlight. Stanford burned and looked away. He let his gaze roam over the village, a drab collection of leaning huts made from palmetto trunks and vines, hogs and goats sniffing lethargically at the dust, babies lying on corn shucks. The poverty was total, the old and young emaciated, sunlight falling on scattered gourds and woven baskets and banana leaves, on the giant rat that raced across the clearing and disappeared into the forest. Stanford glanced along the jetty. The last of the Ache had just stepped off it. They were now at the edge of the clearing, the *Federales* surrounding them. Chavez waved both his hands. He was signalling to Stanford. Stanford choked back his rage and crossed the gangplank, glanced down once at the muddy, oil-slicked water, then stepped onto the jetty.

One of the nearby men approached him, a big man, broad and muscular, a

pistol stuck behind his belt, a knife bouncing against his hip, his shirt open to expose a hairy chest, his trousers tattered and greasy.

‘The *Americano*?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ Stanford said.

‘You speak Spanish?’

‘No,’ Stanford said.

‘Okay. Come with me.’

‘You’re from the German?’ Stanford asked.

‘You have no luggage, *señor*.’

‘I don’t intend staying,’ Stanford said. ‘All I need is in here.’

Stanford indicated his shoulder bag. The big man just stared at him. He had narrow eyes and juicily fat lips and his head had been shaved.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I see. Come with me.’

‘You’re from the German?’

‘Yes.’

‘Where is he?’

‘Over there.’ The man pointed impatiently at the village. ‘Let’s go. He expects you.’

They made their way along the jetty, past the staring *contrabandistas*, the air stinking of urine and sewage and diesel fuel, the sun glinting off the oil in the river, off pistols and knives. Stanford took note of the weapons, could

scarcely credit the sheer amount of them, had the feeling that he was in a war zone, death ready to pounce on him. This thought heightened his tension, swelled his feeling of unreality, and he blinked and wiped more sweat from his face, tried to keep his head clear. The big man was just ahead, the knife bouncing against his hip, stepping down into the dust of the clearing, chickens scattering around him. Stanford followed him down, feeling drained and exhausted, breathing dust, the heat burning his exposed skin, the light hurting his eyes.

There were two trucks in the clearing, their paint flaking, revealing rust, and the Ache Indians were now grouped just in front of them, being prodded and poked. The Indians were being examined. The *Federales* were watching them. A tall man in gray slacks and white shirt was walking to and fro, studying them. This man was very thin, almost cadaverous, brown eyes in a sunburnt brown face, brown hair graying and thinning. He did not touch the Indians, merely studied them with distaste, standing back while Chavez extolled their virtues, showed their teeth, stripped their clothes off.

'*Quatsch*!' the tall man sneered. 'This is rubbish you bring me. Old men and sick women and children, not worth ten *guaranis*.'

Chavez spluttered his protestations, his hands waving histrionically, then he stripped the blouse off a woman's shoulders and held her breasts high. The woman's narrow eyes widened, filled with fear and dreadful shame, when Chavez jiggled her breasts in his hands as if bouncing two rubber balls.

'Look, *señor*,' he said. 'They are ripe and filled with milk. Still a good breeder, *señor*. And so soft, *señor*. Soft!'

'*Dreck*!' the tall man sneered. 'They are unclean and diseased. They are not fit to work in the fields. You should bury them now.'

Looking at the Indians, Stanford saw their humiliation. He shook with fury and then studied the tall man and wanted to murder him. Chavez glanced

over his shoulder, saw Stanford, grinned slyly, then pointed in Stanford's direction and whispered to the tall man. Stanford stepped forward. The tall man came toward him. They stopped about a foot from one another, the dust drifting between them.

'You are Stanford,' the tall man said.

'Yes,' Stanford said.

'You have the money?'

'I have half the money. The rest is in Asunción.'

'You don't trust me,' the German said.

'I can't afford to,' Stanford said.

'Good,' the German said. 'That is intelligent. I cannot deal with fools.' He grinned bleakly and turned aside, looked at Chavez, waved at the trucks. 'All right,' he said, 'I have no choice but to accept them. Put the *schweine* into the trucks and drive them out of my sight.'

Stanford was enraged, but knew he had to control himself. There was nothing he could do for the Indians; not now and not ever. Still, it made him burn. He heard the bawling and saw the blows. The *Federales* punched the Indians, thumped them brutally with their rifle butts, forcing them up into the rear of the trucks, the women and children all wailing. The tall German hardly saw this. He was negotiating with Chavez. Their hands were waving and they were shouting at each other and then they reached an agreement. They actually shook hands. Stanford thought that ridiculous: a travesty of civilized behaviour. The trucks roared into life and churned up the reddish dust and rumbled out of the clearing. Stanford glanced around the village. The huts were primitive and filthy. Hogs and goats wandered freely, infants sucked at sagging breasts, Indians squatted around fires of glowing ash, staring at him with dulled eyes. Chavez waved at the tall German. He then walked up to

Stanford. He stopped to offer his sly, gap-toothed grin, his brown eyes still mischievous.

‘Keep your eyes and ears open,’ he whispered. ‘Adios, *compañero*!’

He sauntered back to the gunboat, his shirttails flapping behind him, as the German walked up to Stanford, his gaunt face dark and sweaty.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you came.’

‘Yes,’ Stanford said, ‘I came.’

‘And how do you like Paraguay?’

‘I’m not wildly impressed.’

The German laughed at the remark, a high-pitched, barking sound, then the laughter turned into a ragged coughing that made his whole body shake. He cursed and turned aside, covered his mouth with a handkerchief, kept it there until the coughing had subsided, then wiped blood from his lips.

‘*Scheisse*,’ he hissed dramatically. ‘This filthy forest is killing me. I must return to Europe as soon as possible for some civilized care.’

‘Germany?’

‘Where else? I need a competent doctor. The Paraguayans have the surgical skills of butchers. I would not let them touch me.’

‘I thought you liked it here,’ Stanford said. ‘I mean, you’ve been here for about thirty years.’

‘Not by choice,’ the German said. ‘As you well know. I do not require your sarcasm.’

He stared steadily at Stanford, his dark eyes hard and searching, then he

sniffed and turned his gaze on the large man who had brought Stanford to him. The large man moved forward slightly, his knife and pistol flashing, and stopped when he was right beside Stanford, his thick arms dangling loosely.

‘This is Atilio,’ the German said. ‘He’s from Argentinia. He is now what we call a *cuchillero*, and is very reliable.’

‘What’s a *cuchillero*?’ Stanford asked.

‘A knifer,’ the German said. He turned his head and glanced around him, his lips curling in visible distaste at sight of the village. ‘*Diese Halunken*,’ he hissed. ‘Unbelievable. Come. Let us go.’

He led them across the clearing, scattering children and chickens, Atilio right behind him, Stanford just behind Atilio, their feet kicking up the reddish dust, the fires smouldering on all sides. The fires were not for warmth. The Indians were roasting sweet potatoes. The German glanced down and spat on a fire as he passed the drab huts. He stopped at the edge of the forest. The trees shadowed a parked jeep. The German took a back seat, Stanford clambered in beside him, then Atilio sat behind the steering wheel and turned on the ignition.

‘Where are we going?’ Stanford asked.

‘To my compound,’ the German said. ‘You want information and shall have it, but I must have my comforts. It is not too far away. Ten kilometers from here. I feel safer when I’m deep in the forest where the planes cannot see me.’

The jeep roared into life, churning up soil and stones, lurched forward and headed into the forest where the trees kept the sun out. Stanford expected it to be cooler, was shocked to find that it wasn’t: the humidity was much worse, overpowering him, making him feel suffocated. He glanced around him, seeing a riot of vegetation, tangled vines and soaring trees in a chattering

green gloom, isolated shafts of sunlight beaming down on the steaming banana leaves. The narrow track was very rough, hacked out by hand and pitted with potholes, winding left and right between the trees and disappearing ahead of them. The tall German said nothing. Stanford glanced sideways at him. The German skeletal, his cheekbones too prominent, his gelid eyes buried deep in his head, his lips thin and disdainful. The jeep coughed and rattled, bouncing up and down a lot, going through the shafts of sunlight that bored down through the trees and illuminated the steaming vegetation. Stanford felt suffocated. He was sweating and feeling feverish. He glanced again at the German, saw his dark, remote eyes, took a deep breath and licked his parched lips and wished the journey would end.

‘So,’ the German said. ‘You want to know about the saucers. You have come a long way for your information. You must want it badly.’

‘I brought the money,’ Stanford said. ‘I want it that much.’

‘Why?’ the German said. ‘Why this interest in the saucers? Everyone wants to know about the saucers, but it does them no good.’

‘You’ve had others?’

‘Of course,’ the German said. ‘Did you think you were the first to locate me? Such vanity, *mein Herr*!’

The German laughed at his own joke, the same high-pitched, barking sound, and again the laughter turned into a coughing that made him split blood. He cursed and wiped his lips, shook his head and muttered something, his thin body being jolted by the jeep as it bounced over the rough ground of the forest.

‘How many others?’ Stanford asked.

‘Just a few,’ the German said. ‘Three or four over the past ten years or so – all wanting the same thing.’

‘Who were they?’ Stanford asked.

‘Men like you,’ the German said. ‘Men with a great need to know, two Americans, a Russian…’ The German coughed again and cursed softly. ‘It will do you no good,’ he said. ‘Those who know what I know will not admit that it’s true; those who don’t know would refuse to believe it… It will do you no good.’

Stanford didn’t reply. He thought the German might be right. He looked around the forest, at the steaming vegetation, saw striations of light in the gloom and felt as if he were dreaming. Then the jeep burst into sunlight: into a clearing in the forest. Lines of barbed wire formed a fence around a large wooden building, its sloping roof covered in vines and banana leaves, supported by planed tree trunks. The jeep skidded to a halt. Clouds of dust swirled up around it. Stanford coughed and covered his eyes with his hands until the dust had settled down again.

‘*Sehr gut*,’ the German said. ‘We are home. I live humbly, *mein freund*.’

Stanford followed the German down, the dust settling around his feet, the heat monstrous, pouring down upon the clearing as if through a huge sheet of glass. He rubbed his eyes and checked the clearing, saw the curved line of the trees, the large, L-shaped building, a wooden house, directly in front of him, surrounded by more barbed wire. The compound was busy, filled with Indians and *cuchilleros*, the latter keeping watch on the former, their guns and knives threatening.

‘The barbed wire is electrified,’ the German said, ‘so make sure you don’t touch it. Over here. Come this way.’

They walked across a stretch of ground, past the Indians and *cuchilleros*, reached the house and climbed a few wood steps to a porch protected by a thatched awning. There was a table and some chairs. An Ache woman stood by the table. She was wearing a red blouse and long black skirt, a towel

draped over her right arm. She bowed low to the German. He simply grunted and sat down. He waved languidly at Stanford who joined him at the table, which held a bottle of brandy and two glasses, a clay cup full of wriggling worms. The worms were white and fat. The German reached over and picked one up. He bit its head off and held it up and said, '*Koro* worms! Try one.' Stanford shuddered and shook his head, saying, 'No.' The German chortled and swallowed the worm. He put his feet up on a stool and the Ache woman went down on her knees and laboriously pulled off both his boots and wiped his bare feet with the towel. When this was done, she moved backward. She did not get off her knees. The German barked a command and the woman stood up and filled the two glasses with brandy. Stanford watched her, saying nothing. The German clapped his hands. The woman bowed and disappeared inside the house, her bare feet making squelching sounds.

'So,' the German said, 'we are home. We are relaxed. We can talk.'

He picked up his glass, sipped some brandy, set the glass down, stared at Stanford with a humorless smile that made Stanford's flesh creep. Stanford picked his own glass up, drained it dry, set it down, then he pulled the leather bag from his shoulder and placed it between them.

'Your money,' he said.

'And the rest?'

'When we've finished our business here to my satisfaction, one of your men can escort me back to Asunción and I'll give him the other half.'

'You might not do that,' the German said.

'Then your man will kill me,' Stanford said.

'Good,' the German said. 'You understand that. This makes me feel better.'

He finished his brandy, refilled both glasses, then leaned back in his chair and

offered Stanford that humorless smile.

‘There’s something else,’ Stanford said, wiping the smile from the German’s face. ‘I didn’t just come for information. I also want proof.’

The German straightened up, then leaned forward to stare at Stanford with steely, barely concealed anger.

‘Proof?’ he said quietly.

‘You heard me,’ Stanford said. ‘I know for a fact that you can prove it – and that’s what I’m here for.’

The German stared at him for a long time, hardly moving, expressionless, then his lips slowly curled into a smile as he sat back in his chair.

‘We have a jungle up north,’ he said.

‘I know that,’ Stanford said.

‘That jungle is hell,’ the German said. ‘You can take it or leave it.’

Stanford pushed his chair back, took his glass and stood up, then went to the leaf-covered railing and looked over the compound. The sun was sinking behind the forest, the sky violet and serene, the conifers and cypress silhouetted as twilight descended. A faint breeze stirred the dust up, blew it lazily across the barbed wire, let it drift around the Indians and *cuchilleros*, their shadows stretched out and merging. Stanford studied the forest. It seemed dense and somehow threatening. Stanford shivered and turned away, let his rage defeat his fear, then grinned and held his glass up to the German in a mock salute.

‘Here’s to hell,’ Stanford said.

They moved out the next morning, in the dawn’s bloody haze, heading into

the forest, following a narrow, dwindling path, shafts of crimson light boring through the gloom between the dense, soaring trees. The Ache beaters were out ahead, their machetes hacking and slicing, clearing a path for the short line of men stretched out behind them. Stanford marched beside the German, the huge Atilio protecting both of them, a few disheveled *cuchilleros* behind them, their guns and knives rattling. The forest was still cold, the dew glistening and dripping, the leaves underfoot damp and treacherous, branches whipping and spitting. The forest rustled and chattered. Stanford heard it and loathed it. The morning sun was fighting to break through and bleed into the chilling gloom.

'*Sehr gut*,' the German said. 'A good morning. It will soon be less cold.'

Stanford marched with some care, a small pack on his back, feeling cold and almost ill from lack of sleep, still not fully awake. He had slept in the German's house. The German's snoring had tormented him. He had tossed and turned uncomfortably on the hammock, the sounds of the forest in his ears. The forest never slept. The long night had taught him that much. He had heard jagged cries, staccato cackling, distant growling, the leaves rustling with a life of their own, the ground shifting and sliding. It was not much different now. Stanford glanced nervously around him. He saw tangled vegetation in the gloom, heard more unfamiliar, troubling sounds as his boots sank in mud. He did not like it one bit.

'How long will it take?' he asked.

'All day,' the German said. 'It is a very long hike, my American friend, and will possibly wreck you.'

'I'll make it,' Stanford said.

'I'll make sure of it,' the German said. 'You are good for the second half of the money and that makes you worth helping.'

Stanford tugged at the pack straps, felt the tingling of his skin, sweating even in the chill of morning, dreading the heat yet to come. He saw Atilio just ahead, his gross hips rolling rhythmically, a pistol and a couple of knives stuck down behind his broad belt. The forest seemed to be endless. It grew deeper and darker. The path dwindled away to nothing, disappeared, and the forest closed in on them. Stanford fingered his pack straps. His shoulders had started aching. He looked ahead and saw the machetes of the Ache beaters hacking down the tangled liana and banana leaves. Stanford felt tired already, heard the rasping of his lungs. He glanced resentfully at the German, saw his gaunt, weathered profile, and wondered how that frail, gangling body could endure such punishment.

‘You are with us?’ the German asked.

‘I’m still here,’ Stanford said.

‘*Sehr gut*,’ the German said. ‘You must suffer. It is part of your penance.’

‘What penance?’ Stanford said.

‘Why ask me?’ the German retorted. ‘But a man does not come to this place just because of the saucers.’

‘That saucers are a mystery.’

‘And you came here for a mystery?’

‘I came because I lost a couple of friends and I want to know why.’

The German nodded and grinned. ‘Ah,’ he said, ‘I see. And those friends were involved with the saucers. *Ja*? Am I right?’

Stanford didn’t reply. He didn’t want to think about it. The forest chattered and slithered on all sides, and he felt his flesh creep. He would never find the answers. There were too many questions. He tried to think, but the sweat

dripped into his stinging eyes and reduced him to pettiness. All right, think: he would think. He thought of Epstein in the mountains. He closed his eyes and saw the blackness rushing at him and exposing the stars above. His old friend had gone away. The months since then had not been pleasant. During the day, at night, whether awake or deep in sleep, he had suffered the dreams of those who knew that they were haunted and lived with their helplessness. Stanford knew he was being followed. He didn't know, but he was certain. Yet each time he tried to think objectively about it, he collapsed into what seemed like paranoia. He now understood paranoia. He knew what the frightened felt. He had turned into an old man overnight and might never recover. Stanford fingered his chafing pack straps. He glanced nervously around him. The forest rustled and slithered with alien life forms that did not offer comfort.

'Your friends disappeared?' the German said.

'Yes,' Stanford replied.

'That is not so unusual,' the German said. 'It happens here all the time.'

'You mean the Ache,' Stanford said.

'Just so,' the German said. 'The Ache disappear in their hundreds, melting into the trees.'

'You do it,' Stanford said. 'You make them disappear. You sell them or use them as slaves and then you bury them deep.'

'You disapprove,' the German said.

'Damned right, I disapprove.'

'You're a guilt-ridden American,' the German said, 'and your conscience is easily pricked.'

‘Fuck you,’ Stanford said.

‘*Sehr gut,*’ the German said. ‘Nevertheless, there are many disappearing that we cannot account for.’

‘*Wunderbar,*’ Stanford said.

‘I am serious,’ the German said. ‘The Ache disappear too fast. We cannot account for their numbers and the saucers are blamed for it.’

The came out of the forest. A broad savannah stretched before them. Stanford blinked and felt an awful blast of heat that almost sucked his lungs dry. He rubbed his eyes and looked ahead, saw a sea of waving grass, a few barren trees here and there, the sky white, the sun dazzling. Stanford felt that he was melting. He drained down into the earth. He stared across the sea of grass, saw it shimmer and undulate, and longed for the comforts of a city and its seductive parameters. He fingered his chafing pack straps, licked his parched, cracking lips. The heat was monstrous and it closed in around him and make him gulp like a drowning man.

‘Beyond that is Boqueron.’ The German spoke with calm indifference. ‘It sits between Argentina and Bolivia and Brazil, and within it is the jungle I mentioned – a place to avoid.’

‘But that’s where we’re going,’ Stanford said.

‘You will remember it,’ the German said, ‘for as long as you live. What you want is hidden deep in the jungle, and you must pay the price.’

The German seemed pleased. He smiled at Stanford as he moved on. Stanford gulped and felt the heat burning through him as he stumbled ahead. The air was hot and clammy. He put on his sunglasses. The Ache Indians were already in the savannah, their machetes flashing in sunlight. Stanford marched beside the German. The huge Atilio was just ahead. The *cuchilleros* were moving out around them, hacking at the tall grass. The sun blazed down

on the grass, on the scattered, scorched trees, turned the sky into a sheet of white steel that radiated tremendous heat. Stanford tried to think clearly, but his thoughts slipped and slid in wild abandon, as if out of control… Epstein clambering up the hill. The black sky peeling back. The dark globe shrinking high in the sky, flaring up, disappearing… He was doing it for Epstein. He would not let Epstein go. He would not be defeated by Wilson and his fellow conspirators… Stanford wiped sweat from his brow. He was waist-deep in the grass. The sea of grass shimmered and stretched away to a silvery haze.

'The Ache,' Stanford said. 'What do you mean, they disappear? You said you can't account for their numbers. What do you mean by that?'

'They disappear,' the German said. 'We are not the ones taking them. We go to their villages, we find the huts empty, we search the surrounding forest and find nothing… They have just disappeared.'

'Other traders?' Stanford suggested.

'No,' the German said. 'We all know each other quite well – and we all suffer the same thing. The Ache are not removed by traders. Such abductions would be impossible. Paraguay is a very small country and is strictly controlled. The Ache disappear in their hundreds. They disappear overnight. The only way out is along the river, but they've never been seen there.'

'Airplanes?' Stanford suggested.

'They can't land in the forests. *Nein*, it cannot be airplanes, so we believe it's the saucers.'

Stanford heard the rustling grass, felt it brushing against him, had visions of the life beneath his feet, of poisonous snakes and giant rats. He shivered and kept going, trying not to look down, the muscles tightening in his belly, the sweat pouring down his face, the dark glasses inadequate protection against the sun's fierce white glaring. The grass snapped and broke around him. The

Aches' machete blades were flashing. The *cuchilleros* formed a loose protective circle, their knives and guns rattling. Stanford felt that he was dying, his breath burning in his lungs. The pack jumped up and down on his shoulders and made his whole body ache.

'Many saucers,' the German said. 'We see the saucers all the time. They come down on the Chagres, on the Gran Chaco and the Mato Grosso, and afterward all the Ache have disappeared and are not seen again.'

'The saucers *land*?' Stanford asked.

'*Ja*, they land,' the German said. 'They descend into the forests. They descend where there is nothing but swamps, and yet they always take off again. They must hover above the swamps. We cannot explore such areas. But they appear to descend over the swamps and take the Ache away.'

The sweat poured down Stanford's face, soaked his armpits and body; his feet were burning in the canvas jungle boots, his throat dry, his head tight. He tried to think of the reports, shook his head, tried again… dark skin, narrow eyes, uncommonly small, Oriental… the most common characteristics as described by numerous contactees. Such descriptions fit the Ache. They were small and Mongolian. Stanford struggled through the tall grass, exhausted and half blind, the muscles in his belly growing tighter with excitement and tension.

'You feel good?' the German asked.

'I feel rotten' Stanford confessed.

'You're an American,' the German said. 'That means you're weak. You should thank me for this.'

'Thanks,' Stanford said.

'Don't thank me,' the German said. 'Just stay on your feet until we get there.

It is still a long way.'

The savannah seemed endless, a rustling, yellow sea, the tall grass bending under Stanford's feet, springing back up around him. He secretly blessed the Ache beaters. Their machetes flashed in the sunlight. They worked hard and the sweat soaked through their shirts and streamed down their dark faces. Here and there were lonely trees. The blazing sky was a white sheet. The air was hotter than ever and more humid, suffocating, a giant glove slipping over him. Stanford wiped sweat from his eyes. His shirt was sticking to him. The light shimmered and distorted the waving grass and played tricks with his vision. He blinked and licked his lips. Pains were darting up his legs. The heat swam all around him, burned his skin, sucked his lungs dry; the brightness of the sky was overwhelming, a vast, silvery furnace.

One of the Ache Indians screamed, waved frantically and fell, disappearing into the rustling, waist-high grass while the others all scattered. Atilio cursed and raced ahead, tearing his pistol from its holster, a knife jumping up and down on his left hip, the grass parting before him. Confused, Stanford stopped walking. He heard the screaming of the Indian. Another Indian raised his machete above his head and swung it down into the tall grass. The hidden Indian kept screaming. Stanford shrank from that dreadful sound. The German muttered and rushed up to join Atilio, the *cuchilleros* surrounding him. Atilio bawled and waved his pistol. Stanford caught up with the German. They both stopped beside Atilio and looked down at the Indian on the ground. He had been bitten by a snake. He was wriggling dementedly and shrieking. Another Indian stood beside him, his machete dripping blood, the snake's amputated head at his feet, the headless body nearby.

'*Scheisse*!' the German hissed. 'We have no time for this. Finish the Indian.'

It was over quickly, Stanford hardly knew what was happening. He saw the Indian on the ground, pouring sweat and shivering badly, holding on to the leg that had been bitten and now moaning pitifully. Then Atilio knelt down, grabbed the Indian by the hair, jerked his head up and poked it with the pistol

and then pressed the trigger. The sudden bang made Stanford twitch. He saw the Indian's head jerking. Blood and bone splashed on the ground beneath the head, and then the head itself fell. Stanford blinked and looked again. Atilio stood up and blocked his view. Atilio bawled at the watching *cuchilleros*, who then turned on the Indians. They were all shouting at once as they pushed the Indian onward. The Indians moved out and swung their machetes, again hacking a pathway through the tall grass. The *cuchilleros* formed a circle. Atilio marched out in front. Stanford looked down at the ground, saw the snake's dismembered head, saw the brains of the dead Indian spilling out, his eyes glassy, his arms outstretched. Stanford blinked and licked his lips. He hurried after the marching German. The *cuchilleros* closed in on both as the grass swayed about them.

'You had him killed!' Stanford said.

'*Ja*, that is correct.'

'He could have been saved,' Stanford said.

'We haven't the time, *mein freund*.'

'What does *that* mean?' Stanford asked.

'Be quiet,' the German said. 'We couldn't have carried him. It is too hot for that.'

'You bastards,' Stanford said.

'*Sehr gut*,' the German said. 'At least you still have enough energy to show your resentment.'

'It was a swinish thing to do.'

'You are here of your own free will. That makes you a collaborator, *mein freund*, so don't offer me pieties.'

Stanford couldn’t deny it, felt ashamed, kept his mouth shut, bent forward and pushed against the tall grass, wondering when it would end. The sun crossed the burning sky. The heat increased and dissolved him. He bled down through himself, through the earth, and lost touch with reality. The machetes flashed up ahead. The *cuchilleros* surrounded him. Atilio marched on in front, his hips rolling, his gun and knives jangling. Time slowed and then stood still. Stanford tried to stop thinking. The white sun started sinking in the sky, became gold and then violet. Stanford saw the yellow sea. He blinked and looked again. There was a dark line between the sea and sky and he wondered what it might be. A sea: a yellow sea. Not a sea: a scorched savannah. Stanford blinked and saw the dark line as a snake that crossed the frame of his vision. He heard the snake and felt it. He tried not to look down. He thought of the *capibara*, the giant rats, and a severe chill cut through him. He shuddered, but kept walking. The German was still beside him. The German’s gaunt profile was hazed in silvery light; the yellow sea was the tall grass. The sun shifted in the sky. It sank lower, turning purple. The dark line divided the grass from the sky and took shape as a forest. Stanford almost sobbed with joy. He felt as if he were on fire. He was burning and his body seemed hollow and drained of all feeling.

‘There it is,’ the German said.

‘Thank God,’ Stanford said.

‘You will not thank God once you are there. That’s the devil’s playground.’

Stanford tried not to listen. He didn’t want to believe it. He did not believe that it was possible to feel worse than he did now, did not believe that any place could be worse than the blistering savannah. Those trees formed a forest. Not a jungle: a forest. In there, in the shade of the trees, it would have to be cooler. Stanford felt a great joy. He followed Atilio toward the trees. The Ache beaters were out ahead, their machetes flashing, the grass snapping and falling. Stanford wiped sweat from his face. The white sky was streaked with violet. Stanford grinned and moved faster, felt the pack on his back,

ignored it, ignored his exhaustion and pain, and hurried into the forest.

His spirit plunged and died. He couldn't believe the heat was real. His lungs burned and he felt that he would drown in his own pouring sweat. He hadn't known he could sweat so much. He wondered where it all came from. He rubbed his eyes and glanced around the green gloom, saw it steaming and glistening. Stanford felt a deep dread. Here everything was outsized: the tangled vegetation, the huge plants and quivering leaves, the crawling insects and chattering birds and monkeys, the giant rats in the undergrowth. Stanford felt his flesh crawling. He felt trapped and suffocated. The forest chattered and shrieked, hissed and growled, its steam rising in faint light.

The machetes flashed in the gloom, slashing branches and leaves, the Indians ripping the shrubbery aside, their nut-brown bodies sweat-slicked. Stanford choked back his sobs. He felt petty and childish. His despair was a void at his center and it threatened to swallow him. Something crawled across his foot. He glanced down and saw a spider. It was huge and ink-black, its body covered in gleaming hairs, and he kicked out frantically, almost screaming, and saw it flying away. He shuddered and wiped his brow. He saw the German smirking at him. He felt rage and the rage drove him onward and brought back some strength. A bat flew above his head. Its beating wings merged with the leaves. Stanford shuddered when the leaves brushed his face with the feel of warm slime. He cursed softly and moved faster. Tangled vines trapped his feet. He knelt down and tore the vines from his boots and saw a lot of large ants. They were devouring a dead rabbit. Not a rabbit: a giant rat. Stanford shivered and then something stung his hand and he slapped the ant off. He stood up and walked on. The forest steamed and dripped around him. It was chattering and shrieking, alive with crawling things, that undergrowth shifting and rustling, furry forms racing back and forth.

'You are all right?' the German asked.

'Yes, I'm okay.'

‘You do not look too good,’ the German said. ‘You seem a bit shaken.’

‘I’m okay,’ Stanford insisted.

‘You have tenacity,’ the German said.

‘Just get me there, you bastard,’ Stanford said. ‘I won’t crack until you do.’

The forest opened around a swamp. A crimson light poured through the trees. He saw the bones of various animals in the clearing, the swamp steaming and stinking. The Indians led them around the edge of it. The *cuchilleros* cursed and groaned. Atilio slapped one of the men on the face and then kicked him onward. Someone screamed and started sinking, his eyes wide and frightened. The slime oozed and bubbled up around his knees as he waved his hands frantically. Atilio cursed and bawled some orders and some Indians rushed toward him. They formed a chain and reached out for the sinking man and pulled him out of the mud. The man rolled onto his back, but Atilio brutally kicked him. The man yelped and jumped up and then quickly moved on. Atilio followed, bellowing orders. The forest closed in again. The heat clamped around Stanford, drenching him, suffocating him, but he choked back his nausea and stumbled on, carefully scanning the green gloom.

The forest opened out again. He saw a village in crimson light. He saw a river of blood on his left as they passed through the village. The natives stared silently at them out of dark, haunted eyes. Children played in the dust, swallowed worms, their bodies almost transparent. The *cuchilleros* ignored them, but kept pushing the Indians onward. The forest closed in again, a green gloom filled with steam, the heat monstrous, the humidity soul-destroying, the foliage shrieking and chattering.

Stanford felt that he was dead. He could scarcely recall why he was here. His body burned and was covered in slime and his felt his skin peeling. He was nothing. He was *now*. He was in and of the forest: the snake and the spider and the rat and the other teeming, unseen life. The huge leaves dipped and

dripped, the vegetation hissed and steamed. He was boiling blood and aching bones and filth, but he soared above it all. The trees held him and protected him. The green gloom was his sustenance. He swallowed bile and drank in the scalding air and rubbed his eyes and saw shooting stars. Then more gloom. Shafts of sunlight. The distant cries of the Indians. The trees parted and let him walk though and he saw streams of crimson light.

They were in another clearing. A towering cliff face blocked their way. The sinking sun was an immense bloody globe that turned everything red. The cliff face was high and jagged. The rock looked like flowing lava. The *cuchilleros* and the Indians, Atilio and the German, all were frozen in that unreal crimson haze, staring up at the wall of rock.

Stanford followed their gaze. He shook his head to clear it. He saw tree trunks and planks, tangled vines and banana leaves, all piled up to block off the entrance to a cave in the cliff face.

‘This is it?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ the German said. ‘It’s a shrine. The natives worship at this shrine. And the shrine is your proof.’

He stepped forward and barked some orders. The Indians swarmed across the cliff face. The *cuchilleros* moved back and raised their rifles, not looking too happy. Stanford watched them, feeling dazed. His throat was dry and he felt ill. The Indians worked at the vegetation, pulling the leaves and vines away, removing the planks and then tackling the leaning tree trunks, pushing them over. The debris crashed to the ground. A cloud of dust billowed upward. The dust sparkled in the radiant crimson light and turned the Indians to specters.

Stanford stared through the dust. He saw the dark mouth of the cave. Stepping forward, he saw a dull, metallic gleaming behind the crimson haze. The last of the tree trunks were rolled aside. Crashing down, they raised more dust. The Indians looked at the cave with frightened eyes and then hurried

away. Stanford stepped forward again. His senses suddenly rushed back. His heart was pounding when he saw the metal gleaming in the spiralling dust.

The crimson light flooded the cave. Stanford almost stopped breathing. He saw a jigsaw of coiling black lines and irregular pieces of dully gleaming metallic-gray. He stepped forward for a closer look. It was a solid metal sphere. It was about thirty-five feet wide, it swept up to a dusty dome, and the black lines were a coiled mass of snakes, all asleep on the saucer.

‘Oh, my God!’ Stanford whispered.

He stood there for some time. He couldn’t believe what he was seeing. There were at least a hundred snakes on the saucer, their bodies coiled and intertwined. Stanford felt his flesh creep. He saw the silvery-gray metal body. The perimeter swept smoothly up to the dome, making the saucer, despite the presence of the snakes, look oddly beautiful. The natives thought it was a shrine. Stanford understood their feelings. His fear departed, giving way to exhilaration. The saucer was magnificent. Its polished surface seemed seamless. It stretched across the mouth of the cave and was bathed in the crimson light.

‘What happened?’ Stanford asked.

‘It crashed years ago,’ the German said. ‘The natives thought it was a gift from the gods, so they dragged it in here.’

‘Was there anyone in it?’

‘I think so. I assume so. But there’s no way to open it up – and now the snakes keep us out of there.’

Stanford’s heart was pounding. The sublime machine mesmerized him. He saw the intertwined, sleeping snakes on the dusty dome, still and silent, together forming a protective, deadly tapestry. Stanford felt himself shaking. He couldn’t bear it any longer. He stepped forward, intending to walk to the

saucer, determined to touch it.

A single shot rang. The bullet ricocheted off the saucer. Stanford gasped and stepped back and turned around and saw the men looking at him. Frozen in crimson light, they looked hazy and unreal. The tall German had a pistol in his hand and was waving it gently.

‘Don’t do that,’ he said. ‘Don’t try to touch it. If you do, you’ll soon be a dead man.’

Stanford looked at the saucer. His flesh crawled at what he saw. The snakes were all awake, slithering through one another, wrapped themselves around the dome, dangling over the edges, hissing and spitting and sliding along the smooth, seamless surface. Stanford shook even more, exhaustion finally claiming him. He stood there in the clearing, the dust billowing about him, staring through the swimming crimson haze at the snakes on the saucer.

‘Your proof,’ the German said. ‘Now I talk.’

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

‘Let me begin at the beginning. In 1933, when Hitler took power, the greater part of German science was totally subordinated to the creation of new military weapons. Thus, by 1935, research on rockets and other forms of aerial warfare had advanced by spectacular leaps. Now, the common assumption is that most of that work was being done by Walter Dornberger, Karl Becker, Klaus Reidel, Helmut Grottrup and Wernher von Braun, but such was not in fact the case. Most of the fame attached to those gentlemen resides in the fact that they all worked on the V-1 and V-2 rockets,, that the majority of them went to America after the war, and that once in America they became even more well known for their NASA work on space exploration. *Sehr gut*. However, the real pioneer of Germany’s World War Two achievements was the American, Wilson.

‘In 1935 most of the German rocket research was being undertaken at the experimental stations in Reinickendorf and Kummersdorft West, not far from Berlin. It was to Kummersdorft West, where I was then scientific administrator, that Himmler personally came to introduce Wilson. And what really astonished me, apart from the fact that Wilson was an American, was the extent of the powers that Himmler intended giving him.

‘By the middle of 1935 it had been decided that the Reinickendorf and Kummersdorft research centers were no longer big enough to house the rocket projects. That same year, Wernher von Braun had suggested using an island in the Baltic, named Usedom; this island was situated close to Szczecin at the mouth of the Oder River, and it was densely wooded, sparsely inhabited and relatively isolated. It was therefore decided to move the two

research centers to the northern promontory of Usedom, near to the small village of Peenemüde… And this mysterious man, Wilson, this stranger from America, was to take over Kummersdorft West when the rocket teams left.

‘It was an unusual situation, but not as impossible as it might at first seem. While Germany was now a nation under constant surveillance, that surveillance was carried out by the Gestapo and the SS, and those organizations were strictly controlled by Himmler. Himmler’s SS were unique, a law unto themselves; they answered neither to Hitler nor to the German High Command, but only to their beloved Reichsführer, their demigod, Heinrich Himmler. In fact, Himmler controlled Germany. He did it quietly and surreptitiously. He quietly took over schools, universities and factories, and soon he had his own research centers scattered all over Germany. Thus Himmler controlled Germany – he controlled the flow of information – and his projects were shrouded in a secrecy that would never be broken.

‘Wilson’s project was such a secret. It was known only to a few. His research centers were filled with meticulously chosen technicians and constantly patrolled by the SS. He was a genius, almost certainly. I don’t doubt it at all. He was cold and brilliant and relentless – and nearly inhuman. His sole passion was science, his knowledge beyond belief, and he rarely discussed anything but his work and the need to complete it. That’s why he was in Germany. Only Germany could meet his needs. He had limitless facilities and slave labor and Himmler’s personal support. That’s what he wanted. He didn’t care about anything else. He needed money and muscle, and he didn’t give a damn where they came from.

‘So! Given carte blanche by Himmler, Wilson quickly strengthened his project: pulling in other departments, utilizing other research centers, and stealing more technicians wherever he found them, working through the SS. Now while this had many advantages, unfortunately it also meant that Wilson was forced to take on some engineers whom he didn’t really care for all that

much. Included in these were the German scientists, Habermohl and Miethe, the aging Italian, Dr Belluzzo, and the ambitious Luftwaffe engineer, Rudolph Schriever. Most of those men were actually there to watch Wilson, and their presence around his project really annoyed him. He therefore kept them busy by letting them work on various designs, which they could then forward at regular intervals to Himmler. Few of the designs were worth the papers they were drawn on, but they kept Himmler happy, soothed the vanity of his four supposed innovators, and enabled Wilson to get on with the real work without too much interference.

‘Determined that his project should be the most advanced then in existence, Wilson traveled all over Germany, visiting the other research centers, and utilizing any innovation that could enhance the possibilities of his own project.

‘At this point you must understand that while it is true that the German scientists as a whole were then working on some remarkable innovations, it is equally true that their separate projects were rarely coordinated. So great were the rewards in Nazi Germany, and so terrible the penalties, that even formerly cooperative scientists were reduced to seeking favor by competing ferociously with one another. In this sense, the Peenemünde situation was typical: while we had the cream of our rocket engineers working on the V-1 and V-2 rockets at Peenemünde, the V-1 wasa Luftwaffe project, the V-2 was an Army project, and both sides competed with one another instead of putting their heads together. Similarly, while various establishments scattered all over Germany and Austria were working separately on gas turbines and jet propulsion, heat resistant and porous metals, and gyroscopic mechanisms and boundary layer-defeating airfoils, it was not until the arrival of the relentless Wilson that someone had the sense to link these innovations together in one astonishing, revolutionary aircraft. Wilson did that – he combined the cream of German innovations – and in five years he had completed the prototype of his first flying saucer.

‘Now, Himmler was excited by the possibilities of the flying saucer, but he never mentioned the saucer to Adolf Hitler. Indeed, the only thing *der Führer* knew about Kummersdorft West was that it was only one of many aeronautical research centers and that it was probably engaged in producing conventional aircraft. Regarding technological matters, Hitler knew very little, since he expected Himmler to keep him informed. That was a mistake. Himmler kept a lot to himself. So Hitler knew about Peenemünde, about the V-1 and V-2 rockets, but otherwise he only heard about “secret” weapons that were still being processed.

‘Himmler had good reason for his secrecy. Back in 1938, Hitler, anxious for a foothold in the Antarctic, had sent an expedition commanded by Captain Alfred Richter to the coast due south of South Africa. Daily for three weeks two seaplanes were catapulted from the deck of the German aircraft carrier, *Schwabenland*, with orders to fly back and forth across the territory that Norwegian explorers had named Queen Maud Land. The Germans made a far more thorough study of the area than the Norwegians had done – believed to be the most extensive aerial study undertaken up to that time – finding vast regions that were surprisingly free of ice. Their airplanes covered two hundred and thirty thousand square miles in all, photographing almost half of the area. They also dropped several thousand metal poles, each marked with the swastika and pointed at the tip so that the poles would dig into the ice and remain upright. This job done, they renamed the whole area *Neuschwabenland* and then claimed it as part of the Third Reich.

‘From that moment on, men and equipment were shipped regularly to Neuschwabenland for the purpose of building a secret underground military base. Most of the men were either specially trained SS troopers or slave workers from the concentration camps. Now, while Hitler was aware of the fact that Himmler was shipping his men to the Antarctic, he thought of it as a purely military endeavour. As far as *der Führer* was concerned, the secret base in Antarctica, being constructed underground, was merely an SS training base designed to acclimatize scientists and soldiers to those rigorous

conditions in preparation for explorations after the war. However, the truth is that Himmler was pursuing a dream that did not include Hitler, would supersede the Third Reich, and would place Himmler up there with the immortals as the Lord of Atlantis.

‘Let me clarify this. Himmler’s obsessions were numerous, bizarre and totally mad: sorcery, mesmerizm, clairvoyance, reincarnation, faith healing, Lemuria, Atlantis, the mystic strength of the *Volk*. Himmler also believed absolutely in Horbiger’s fanciful doctrine of Eternal Ice – that a world of ice was the natural habitat of Nordic men – and he therefore also believed that a return to such a world would lead to men who were like gods. It was because of this dream that Himmler, when he was given the task of organizing the SS, did not envisage it as a normal police force but as a real religious order devoted to the creation of the perfect man. Indeed, right from the start it was his intention to eventually isolate the “élite” of the SS from the world of ordinary men for the rest of their lives. It was also his intention to create special colonies of the “élite” all over the world, answerable only to the administration and authority of Himmler’s New Order.

‘For this, the first step was the creation of special schools in the mountains of Bavaria where the SS élite were indoctrinated in Himmler’s ideals and firmly convinced that they were the unique new men “far finer and more valuable than the world has yet seen.” The second step was the creation of the *Ahnenerbe* – the Institute for Research into Heredity – whose function was to finance and publish Germanic researches and to supervise the so-called “anthropological” medical experiments in hellholes like Auschwitz and Dachau. The third step was to eliminate the Jews from the face of the Earth, and to transport all subhumans – the Poles, Czechs and Slavs – to the numerous concentration camps and keep them there, generation after generation, as slaves to the Reich. And the fourth and most important step was the *Lebensborn* – Spring of Life – which would, through the controlled mating of élite SS men and pure Aryan women, breed out the “imperfect” German types within one hundred years.

‘A world of ice and fire: the Antarctic and the SS. This dream obsessed Himmler night and day and then became a reality. He had his colony: the Antarctic. He had his masters: the SS. He would send his slaves to the Antarctic, use them for labor and as medical or surgical guinea pigs, and in time, with scientific application, the Superman would be born.

‘You do not believe, Herr Stanford? You do not think it possible? Then think of the *Ahnenerbe* and the *Lebensborn*, of the medical experiments and controlled breeding, of Belsen and Buchenwald and the SS torture chambers, of the millions who were processed like battery hens and emerged as warm ash. The concentration camps were no accidents. They indulged in imitative rites. They were the prototypes for the social order of the future: that world of masters and slaves… And think again, Herr Stanford, of the *Lebensborn*. Apart from arranging matings between the SS élite and fine blonde ladies and adopting “racially suitable” children for childless parents, the *Lebensborn* also abducted thousands of “suitable” children from the occupied territories and had them raised in special SS institutions… And a lot of those children – indeed, thousands of those children – simply disappeared from the face of the Earth.

‘So, it was Himmler. Hitler never knew about it. Himmler wanted his secret colony, he wanted his world of ice and fire, and he wanted the extraordinary flying saucer for his future protection. Thus it was that by 1943 more concentration camp prisoners and children abducted by the *Lebensborn* were being shipped to the Antarctic, and that a lot of valuable equipment, including components for the flying saucer, were disappearing via the South Atlantic route in SS controlled submarines.

‘Alas, Himmler’s dream then collapsed. By that time it was clear to most of us that the war would eventually be lost. This awareness put Hitler in a panic, made him yearn more desperately for some extraordinary new weapons, and finally encouraged him to look fondly at the V-1 and V-2 rocket projects. Then, after the August 17 bombing of the Peenemünde research centers,

Hammler persuaded Hitler to hand the whole project over to the safekeeping of the SS. A month later, on September 3, 1943, SS General Hans Kammler was put in charge of the transfer of most of the Peenemünde development works – not including Wernher von Braun – to caves in the mountains near the Traunsee in Austria, and mass production of the rockets to the underground factory in Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains. This effectively gave Himmler a new pet project and distracted him from Wilson.

'By early 1944, Wilson, now working at the BMW *Platz* near Prague, had replaced his original flying saucer's turboprop propulsion system with a new, highly advanced jet propulsion system, thus completing the first truly operative machine. It was Wilson's intention to test-fly the machine as soon as possible, but increasingly darker thoughts about Himmler put him off this idea.

'Bear this in mind about Wilson: As a child in America he had, like our own Wernher von Braun, been obsessed with the potential of space flight. A genius himself, he had secretly worked with the genius Goddard, and had observed how that gentleman was mistreated by his own country. Because of this – and because of his bad experience in Iowa – Wilson was obsessed with the need to avoid a similar fate and find absolute freedom regarding his work. That freedom was to be found in the Antarctic. It was to be found in a master and slave society. And Wilson wanted that society to succeed more than anything else.

'By 1943, however, it was Wilson's belief that Himmler was basically insane, that he would eventually fall apart, and that he would then represent a threat to Wilson's plans for escaping. Knowing that this view was shared by a few other high-ranking officers, Wilson waited until the time was ripe – when the forthcoming defeat was evident – and then approached them with a separate escape plan. One of those officers was myself, another was SS General Hans Kammler, and a third was SS General Artur Nebe, a very secretive man. It being that both Kammler and I had been directly responsible

for the utilization of slave labor, and that Nebe had been in the Gestapo and had also headed an extermination squad in Russia, we were all well aware of what our fate would be should the Allies get hold of us. Needless to say, we fell in with Wilson's plan.

'The crux of the plan was to make Himmler forget our project and turn his attention elsewhere. Consequently, Wilson started to lie about his project and submit incomplete drawings to Himmler and one of his favored engineers, namely *Flugkapitän* Schriever. While never going far enough to make Himmler suspicious, Wilson nevertheless understated the actual progress being made and told Himmler of bad setbacks, involving labor and equipment, that never for one minute existed. This worried Himmler – like Hitler, he desperately wanted an extraordinary new weapon – and as anticipated, he turned away from Wilson and looked elsewhere.

'This brings me back to Wilson's unwanted associates, particularly *Flugkapitän* Rudolph Schriever. Now remember that it was mostly the unworkable drawings of Schriever that had been passed on to Himmler – *not* the more advanced Wilson drawings. Therefore, in accordance with Wilson's plan, Hans Kammler, shortly after the Allied invasion of Europe, intimated to Himmler that the Schriever drawings were more advanced, that Wilson was maliciously holding Schriever back, and that Schriever should be given his own research facility and allowed to continue with his work without further interference. Kammler also suggested that because of the terrible bombing raids over Berlin and its surrounding areas – and because of the successful Allied invasion – the research center at Kummersdorft West should be evacuated to a more inaccessible, secret area. He suggested that Wilson's project be moved to Kahla in the mountains of Thuringia, and that Schriever's new project be located in a desolate area of Mahren. Himmler agreed to this.

'On June 22, 1944, shortly after having fitted his saucer with jet propulsion, Wilson moved from Kummersdorft West to Thuringia. A week later, with

Schriever in charge, the remaining staff of Kummersdorft West were moved to a secret location in Mahren. Thus, while Schriever's progress could be watched closely by Himmler, Wilson could complete the genuine flying saucer under the protection of Hans Kammler and myself.

'What we now needed was a tightly controlled escape route that would take us from Kahla to Kiel in the Baltic. The best man for such a task was clearly Artur Nebe, an SS general with a keen sense of survival and sound training in all kinds of intrigue. Unfortunately, while Nebe had once been one of the most favored of the SS, he was now under suspicion from those closest to Hitler and knew that he was being watched all the time. Nebe had to disappear – he would have to work in anonymity – and his chance came on July 20, 1944, after the attempted assassination of Hitler.

'That assassination attempt led to the most terrible reprisals, and many of our officers, in fear for their lives, fled and then disappeared for good. One such officer was General Nebe. He had a lot of fanatical followers. Nebe fled straight to Kahla, took a lot of his men with him, and those men organized the escape route from Kahla to Kiel. Thus it was that by early 1945 important men and materials were being quietly moved from the research complex in Thuringia to sympathetic submarines and ships in Kiel harbor on the Baltic Sea – the moves officially authorized by favored SS General Hans Kammler and tightly controlled by the anonymous General Nebe and his other "missing" SS men.

'Kammler was in the perfect position to arrange all this. Now trusted implicitly by Himmler – and therefore revered by his SS troops – Kammler could move men and equipment anywhere without being questioned. More so because by this time he had been placed in full charge of the V-2 program and that program had become Hitler's final hope. Naturally, since the job gave Kammler the freedom to travel at will around the German-occupied territories, he worked like a demon on the launching of the V-2s and made sure that all his movements were noticed. In this way, Wilson could assemble

the complete prototype of his flying saucer in the underground factory at Kahla – undisturbed by the increasingly disillusioned Himmler, ignored by the V-2 obsessed Hitler, and otherwise protected by General Nebe and his runaway subordinates.

‘Kammler had another useful job at this time. While the infamous Alpine redoubt had never really existed, Hitler was still dreaming of forming a last redoubt in the mountains of Germany. Since his chosen area was to include the metaphorical arc that ran from the Harz Mountains to Thuringia, south of Prague and across to Mahren, Kammler was put in charge of all the important research centers hidden deep in those areas. Again, this made it easy for him to protect Wilson’s project in Kahla and insure the continuing shipment of men and supplies to the ships and submarines in Kiel Harbor.

‘By early February 1945, Wilson had completed a truly advanced flying saucer and a test flight was arranged for the fourteenth of that month. Unfortunately, when the saucer was wheeled out of its hangar during the early hours of that morning, bad weather, including rain and snow, caused the test to be canceled. Two days later, however, a resoundingly successful test flight was made.

‘The saucer tested near Kahla on the morning of February 16, 1945, was known as the *Kugelblitz*. Basically, it was a triple-layered, disk-shaped machine with a diameter of fourteen thousand and four hundred millimeters and a height from base to canopy of three thousand and two hundred millimeters. The central body was made from heat-resistant, nickel-based alloys and titanium; and the top and bottom disks of this circular body rotated at varying speeds around the two-pilot control cabin, which was molded to the solid body that housed the engine. While the spinning disks were devoid of all surface protuberances such as wings and stabilizers, their porous metal composition would suck the air through the machine and utilize it as an added propulsive force.

‘As with the previous turboprop version, this saucer’s four legs also

functioned as downward thrusting, swiveling tail pipes used for lift-off, but now activated by low and high pressure compressors generating an enormous thrust and including a new vaporizing fuel injector system that rendered the jet thrusters smoke-free. The jet burners lifted the *Kugelblitz* vertically, at modest speed, to a height of just over one hundred feet; once there, the downward thrusting tail pipes would swivel up through the bottom disk and be locked into position in the molded central body. Four similar boosters, situated at equal distances around the immovable central body, would then be used for horizontal propulsion and direction control, while the upper and lower disks, with their porous composition, would revolve at high speed to utilize the boundary layer and achieve unprecedented high speeds.

'The *Kugelblitz* was in fact a giant-sized *Feuerball* – the most recent spin-off from Wilson's endeavours – and as such was remarkably sophisticated. During the test flight it reached an altitude in excess of forty thousand feet at a speed of approximately twelve hundred and fifty miles per hour. Not yet capable of the extraordinary maneuvers of the modern UFO, it nevertheless incorporated a special inertial shield for the protection of the pilots; an automatic control system that utilized the profile of the terrain below; high frequency, omnidirectional, automatic navigation; and a few primitive, but fairly effective, pulse beam weapons.

'Naturally, with the flying saucer project completed, our most urgent task was to transfer the project to the Antarctic, obliterate all signs of our work in Kahla, and ensure that nothing was left for the advancing Allies. Bear in mind that we had, as each separate section of the machine had been successfully tested, been shipping those parts to the Antarctic, component by component, throughout the last few years. Now, the only components that still had to be shipped out were those belonging to the redesigned jet engines. Within a week of the test flight those components were removed from the *Kugelblitz*, the machine itself was blown up, and then Wilson, accompanied by Nebe and other SS personnel, made his way by truck and train to the port of Kiel. Two days after that, on February 25, 1945, the remaining slave

workers of the underground Kahla complex were driven back to Buchenwald where they were gassed and then incinerated in the crematoria. The Kahla complex was then a deserted shell.

‘Himmler never knew about the evacuation of Kahla since he was too obsessed with the rapid Soviet advance. To distract him further, General Kammler suggested that the scientists still at Peenemünde be made to join the others in Nordhausen, pointing out that a new research center was being built in the Bleicherode mine and that accommodations had been prepared for the technicians and their families in the surrounding villages. Himmler gladly agreed to this move, and not long after, Wernher von Braun and his associates were moved by train, truck, private car and barge to their new quarters deep in the Harz Mountains.

‘By this time, exactly as Wilson had anticipated, Himmler was falling to pieces. No longer trusted by Hitler, and having just made a fool of himself by allowing the Russian army to reach the outskirts of Berlin, he was spending most of his time in Dr Gebhardt’s sanatorium at Hohenlychen, seventy-five miles north of Berlin, and idiotically planning his private surrender to the Allies.

‘At the end of February, while Wilson and General Nebe were hiding just outside Kiel and Kammler was transferring the Peenemünde technicians to Nordhausen, I paid the *Reichsführer* a visit. Babbling dementedly, he told me that his peace negotiations were not progressing, that he was going to try approaching Eisenhower, and that he intended using Schriever’s flying disk as a bribe to the Allies.

‘Following Kammler’s instructions, I informed the *Reichsführer* that the Wilson project had made no progress, that Wilson had been shot while trying to escape toward the Allied lines, and that the research complex at Kahla had been evacuated and then blown up to prevent it from falling into Allied hands. I also told him that since the enemy would soon be reaching Hohenlychen, there was little chance of escaping to the Antarctic and that his

peace negotiations were therefore our only hope. Himmler, terrified by this news, asked me to inform Kammler that the last redoubt was to be held at any cost. Meanwhile, he, Himmler, would arrange for the Schriever disk to be tested as soon as humanly possible.

‘Knowing that the Schriever disk could not possibly fly, I returned to wait for Kammler at Nordhausen. At the end of March, Kammler returned to the Hague where he had, ostentatiously, been firing the last of the V-2 rockets on London. Unfortunately, just before we could join Wilson and Nebe in Kiel, Kammler received orders from Himmler stating that American forces were approaching Nordhausen and that the whole complex therefore had to be evacuated. Determined to ensure that no suspicion fell upon him, Kammler went ahead with this task.

‘However, Kammler did not go with the evacuees. Seeing a more surreptitious way of making his escape, Kammler, on the second of April, took about five hundred V-2 experts to the Bavarian Alps in the region of Oberammergau, traveling with them in his private SS train. Once there, the technicians were imprisoned in army barracks and guarded by some SS fanatics. Included in this group were Wernher von Braun and General Dornberger – and shortly after they were imprisoned, General Kammler quietly disappeared for good…

‘Did I go with him? Obviously not. On that very same day, when Kammler was on the train to Oberammergau, I returned to Berlin to check on the general situation. However, once in Berlin I found myself buried in plots, counterplots and other intrigues. As for Himmler, he just wouldn’t let me go. Now totally hysterical, hiding pathetically in his sanatorium, he was studying his horoscope, still trying to negotiate a separate peace, and babbling constantly about Schriever’s flying disk and how it could save us all.

‘In the end, it was Schriever’s worthless saucer that got me trapped in Berlin. Now believing that the Wilson project had been terminated and that Wilson had been shot, Himmler insisted that I supervise the test flight of Schriever’s

supposedly completed prototype. Reluctantly I did this – I arranged the test flight for mid-April – but the test was called off in the face of the Allied advance, the prototype was destroyed by the retreating SS, and Schriever's few worthwhile drawings were stolen from him and burned in my presence. After that, Himmler collapsed, eventually killing himself, and I fled the holocaust of Berlin and finally ended up here.

'And the others? On April 25, 1945 – five days after Hitler's birthday, two days after the first meeting between Soviet and US troops on the banks of the Elbe, three days before the Allies crossed to the Eastern Bank, and five days before Hitler killed himself in his bunker in Berlin – General Kammler joined Wilson and General Nebe aboard submarine U-977 – bound for the Antarctic.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

April 26, 1945. We had left Kiel illegally, not daring to ask for fuel, so we pulled into Christiansund South to fill up the tanks. The war news was bad. The Soviets were in Berlin. The Americans and Russians had finally met at Torgau on the Elbe. The end was in sight. The submarine submerged the next day and kept hugging the coastline. I often went to the hold to check the crate, though I knew this was pointless. General Nebe kept to himself, his dark eyes revealing nothing. General Kammler was obsessed with the radio and passed on the news. None of this news was good. The Reich was obviously about to fall. When the death of Adolf Hitler was announced, we all knew it was over.

Captain Schaeffer called a meeting. Nebe and Kammler sat together. General Kammler was tense and energetic, Nebe was expressionless. The war was over, Schaeffer said. That raised certain problems. There would be no submarine tankers in the South Atlantic, which meant no food nor fuel. We would have to change our plans. We would never make it to the Antarctic. With luck, we might reach Argentina, but we couldn't go farther.

I confess: I was shocked. My one thought was for the wilderness. I glanced at Nebe but his dark gaze was unrevealing, so I then looked at Kammler. The general's eyes were bright. He mentioned Colonel Juan Peron. He reminded us that Peron was a man who could not resist money. Kammler smiled when he said this. He was an organized man. He then added that he had already discussed the matter with the necessary people. General Nebe did not smile. Captain Shaeffer looked relieved. We agreed to head straight for Argentina at no matter the cost.

Not quite straight: a digression. Some of the crew became rebellious. The war was over and they wished to return to Germany, and Schaeffer agreed to this. We hugged the Norwegian coastline. We only surfaced at night. A few days later we reached the mountainous coast of Bergen and let the men off.

I climbed up to the deck. I had to breathe the cooling air. I saw patches of stars between the clouds, the dark water, the jagged cliffs. The men shivered on the deck. General Nebe surveyed them coldly. The men shuffled their feet on the deck and shook hands with their comrades. I looked across the calm sea. The coastline was featureless. The sea lapped against the submarine as the men clambered overboard. I felt a great yearning. I wanted to rest my feet on dry land. After this, we would spend months in the submarine, mostly submerged.

May 10, 1945. The real voyage began. My strongest memories are of constant heat and stench and the engine's bass rumblings. It was too long for sanity. We were living on top of one another. First a day, then a week, then two weeks, the submarine like a tomb. The North Sea and the English Channel. The blackened breast of Gibraltar. When we surfaced, our freedom was brief and airplanes made us fearful. In truth, we rarely surfaced. The hatch was opened to let air in. We would see a glittering circle of sky and then the hatch would be closed again. Then along the coast of Africa. A stolen glimpse of sun and sand. Then thirty-six days underwater, a nightmare of sweat and noise.

By June the crew was restless. There were arguments and fist fights. Once a man took his knife from his dinner plate and slashed the face of a friend. Captain Schaeffer gave them beer. He was a careful, thoughtful man. There was peace for at least another week, but then more fights broke out. General Nebe's dark eyes were watchful. His hand often stroked his pistol. He started pacing up and down the submarine, murmuring words here and there. His words calmed some restless souls. Nebe's dark eyes tamed their rage. They would stare at his eyes, at his pistol, and remember his history. After that, it

was easier. It was miserable, but less dangerous. We turned away from one another, faced the walls, and let our own thoughts sustain us.

We surfaced six weeks later. We were in the middle of the South Atlantic. A fierce sun burned a hole in the sky, and the green sea was placid. This reprieve was a blessing. The next month was more bearable. We alternated between floating on the surface and diving back to the depths. Then the Cape Verde Islands. We went ashore on Branca Island. The men frolicked on the burning white sand and washed themselves in the dazzling sea. That day was all too brief. The droning of aircraft made us leave. The submarine dived back to the depths and our journey continued.

Nevertheless, life was easier. We started surfacing almost daily. Once we stayed on the surface for a week by disguising the submarine. False sails and false funnel. From the air we looked like a cargo steamer. The airplanes droned overhead but ignored us, not suspecting a thing. The men waved at the planes. They fought their boredom with such humor. They would watch the planes flying away, and then lie down and sun themselves.

Nebe usually remained below. He liked the claustrophobic depths. Kammler paced the deck and searched the horizon like a man with no time to spare. Eventually we saw land. It was the coast of Rio de Janeiro. Kammler smiled and climbed down through the hatch to listen in on the radio. The news was not good. Kammler relayed what had happened. Another fleeing submarine, Captain Wehrmut's U-530, had recently put into the River Plate with unfortunate results. The whole crew had been taken prisoner and handed over to the Americans. Kammler told us this, studied us, enjoyed our despair, then grinned and mentioned a place called Mar del Plata and went back to the radio.

August 17, 1945. We docked at Mar del Plata. Four months after we had boarded at Kiel we stepped off in the Argentine. We had no need to worry. An arrangement had been made. From here we were to be transported to a secret airfield in Bahia Blanca, and from there flown directly to the

Antarctic.

The thought filled me with pleasure. I looked along the crowded deck. The Argentinian officials crossed the gangplank, their medals flashing and jangling. They did not look too happy. They were mopping their sweaty brows. I sensed immediately that something was wrong and crossed over to Kammler. He shook hands with the officials. The man with most medals whispered. Kammler's lips formed a single, thin line that expressed his concern. He then smiled at Captain Schaeffer. He introduced us to the officials. We all had wine and biscuits on the desk, the sun blazing upon us. A short delay, someone said. An unfortunate mishap regarding transportation. We would have to spend some days on the submarine before we could leave. Captain Schaeffer agreed to this. He was a reasonable, thoughtful man. The Argentinians all smiled and bowed politely and then left in a hurry.

I spoke to Kammler and Nebe. We met at midnight on the deck. It was dark and I saw the moon reflected in Nebe's depthless eyes. Kammler spoke in an urgent whisper. He told us what had really happened. He said that British and American Intelligence had picked up the information that Hitler was not dead and that he and Martin Bormann had escaped from Germany. Reportedly they had fled in a submarine. They were thought to be heading for Argentina. It was the British and American wish that the Argentinians report the arrival of any German submarines in their waters. Thus the Argentinians were in a panic. They felt that something must be done. What they wanted was to offer the Allies a little something to chew on.

General Nebe lived by intrigue. It was bread and meat to him. His dark eyes offered no pain or pleasure as he outlined a compromise. We three alone would leave. We would take the precious crate with us. But to save the Argentinians embarrassment, we would leave the rest of our men behind us. They would be held as political prisoners. The Argentinians would hand them over. That way, the Argentinians would look good and we would save our own necks.

Ruthless? Yes. But then the three of us were ruthless. We had lived in the Third Reich a long time and learnt how to survive.

We agreed to Nebe's plan. It could not possibly fail. The fate of Schaeffer and his crew did not concern us and could hardly affect us. It didn't matter what they told the Allies. By then it would be too late. By then we would be hidden in the Antarctic, our whereabouts unknown. The Allied forces would then be helpless. They would never locate our underground base. They would know that the underground base existed, but they wouldn't dare admit to it. How could they mention it? It would only lead to panic. And so, aware of this, knowing the Allies would be helpless, we decided to drop Schaeffer and his crew and go on by ourselves.

We unloaded the crate the next day. This aroused no curiosity. Schaeffer assumed that we were simply unloading it for safekeeping on shore. That same night we slipped away. Some army officers were waiting for us. I saw my crate in the rear of their truck and I climbed up beside it. Nebe and Kammler quickly followed. We glanced back at the submarine. We saw the other troops moving along the dock, their rifles aimed at the submarine. Then we were driven away in the truck, leaving the submarine behind us. The flat plains of Argentina lay about us and the stars glittered brilliantly. Kammler looked at me and smiled. Nebe pursed his lips and slept. The night passed and a pearly dawn broke and then we reached Bahia Blanca.

The airfield was heavily guarded. The plane's engine was already running. The truck pulled up at the hold of the plane and the crate was unloaded. General Kammler climbed in first. I let Nebe go ahead of me. I glanced briefly around the airfield, at the troopers and barbed wire fences, at the flat plains that stretched out to the sky, and then I boarded the plane. The doors of the hold were closed. The steel locks made a clanging sound. I sat down beside Kammler and Nebe and stared up at my large crate. Then the plane roared and shook. It taxied slowly along the runway. Then it roared even louder, raced along the runway, jolted, leapt off the tarmac, and climbed into

the sky.

Perhaps I slept then. I do not remember the flight. I remember Nebe's dark, depthless eyes and the plane's constant rumblings. It did not take very long. My spinning thoughts destroyed time. Kammler smiled when the wheels touched down again and the crate bounced a little. I reached out and steadied it. The plane shuddered and stopped. The doors opened and a bright light rushed in and brought with it the shocking cold.

All white. Everything. The frozen wilderness stretched out before us. I stepped down and my boots sank into snow and I breathed the pure, icy air. We were on a modest airstrip. Our own plane was waiting for us. We transferred the crate to this plane and then clambered in after it. The doors closed behind us. The plane's skis chopped through the ice. We took off and flew above the white wilderness and headed inland. All white. Everything. The plains and mountains were as one. My impatience was a hand upon my heart, my exultation was boundless. Then at last we dropped lower. I saw the enormous, encircling plateaux. We flew down below the mountains, below the glittering ice peaks, and then the great caves opened out to embrace us and carry us home.

Here we are and here we stay. The ice glitters in the sun. History changes and the world surrenders to us. We are here. We exist.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Stanford arrived early, deliberately so. Slowing down at the crossroads, just before the proposed meeting place, he turned off the road and drove between the trees, comforted by the darkness and moonlight, feeling safer that way. He stopped the car, turned the lights out, killed the engine, took a deep breath, then looked out at the darkness, glancing up at the sky, half expecting, as he always did these days, to see glowing lights merging. When had Epstein disappeared? November 1977. Since then, a whole year had passed and a new year was dawning. Stanford shivered at the thought of it. He didn't think he would survive it. Reaching into the glove compartment, he pulled out a pistol, checked it, then got out of the car and closed the door, taking great care to be quiet about it.

The sky over Virginia was starry. There was no wind at all. Stanford could smell the wet grass and felt the chill in the air, marvelling at how soothing it was after the furnace of Paraguay. He checked the pistol again, checked the time, shivered briefly, then he walked back through the trees to the road, his eyes scanning from left to right.

The road was still deserted. Stanford studied the sky again. He grinned automatically, more self-mocking than amused, thinking of himself as a fugitive and wondering how it had come to this. The road remained deserted. Stanford checked his wristwatch. Satisfied, he went down on one knee on the grass behind a thatch of densely tangled brambles. The surrounding hills were covered with trees. He remembered Epstein in Mount Rainier. His lips tightened as he stared along the road and heard a sound in the distance.

Fuller was on time. He had always been reliable. Stanford got up off his knee, but stayed low as he cocked the pistol, seeing the lights of Fuller's car emerging from the darkness. The road was flat and straight. The car approached the crossroads. Stanford held his breath as the car slowed down and then stopped, its engine still ticking over. Fuller flashed his headlights twice. Stanford let his breath out, then looked along the road, past Fuller's parked car. He saw nothing else coming. Fuller flashed his lights again. He was expecting a response. Turning away, Stanford loped back through the trees, cutting around in a circle. He emerged behind Fuller's car and checked that there was no one else in it. There wasn't. That relieved him somewhat. He stepped out from the trees, the pistol heavy in his hand. Walking up to the car, he bent down and hammered lightly on Fuller's window with his knuckles. Fuller rolled the window down and looked up and saw the barrel of the gun in his face.

'Stanford?'

'That's me.'

'What the fuck are you doing? You asked me to meet you and I'm here. What's the fucking gun for?'

'Are you alone?' Stanford asked.

'What the hell do you think? Take a good look. You've got eyes in your head. I'm all alone, for chrissake!'

'Get out of the car,' Stanford said.

'I don't believe this,' Fuller said. 'I came here because you asked me – and now you're sticking a gun in my face. Have you gone fucking crazy?'

'I'm sorry,' Stanford said.

'We're old buddies, for chrissake!'

‘I’m sorry. I’m a little bit nervous. Now get out of the car.’

Fuller sighed and rolled his eyes, killed the engine and headlights, clambered out and raised his hands in the air as if begging for mercy.

‘You must have lost your fucking marbles,’ he said. ‘Who the hell do you think you are? Elliot Ness? Get it out of my face.’

‘This way,’ Stanford said.

‘It’s a joke,’ Fuller said. ‘He drags me out of my bed to stick me up. An old buddy from way back.’

Stanford waved the pistol gently. ‘I’m not joking,’ he said. ‘If I have to use this pistol, I’ll use it. Over there. Through the trees.’

Fuller sighed and shook his head, not believe what was happening, forced a grin and then sauntered across the road to the trees, Stanford’s pistol prodding him on when he appeared to hesitate.

‘In here?’ Fuller asked.

‘That’s right,’ Stanford said.

‘It’s a picnic,’ Fuller said. ‘A midnight treat. I can’t fucking wait.’

Stanford kept the gun on him, still liking him, not trusting him, not capable of trusting anyone anymore, not even his oldest friends.

‘Can I stop now?’ Fuller asked.

‘Yes, you can stop now.’

‘I take it that’s your car,’ Fuller said.

‘That’s right. Get inside.’

Fuller sighed again, ran his fingers through his gray hair, opened the door and lowered himself onto the front passenger seat, his broad body looking cramped in that small space. Stanford went around the front, keeping his pistol aimed at the windscreen. He opened the door and slid into the driver's seat, the pistol still aimed at Fuller.

'Where are we going?' Fuller asked.

'Nowhere,' Stanford said. 'We'll just sit there and have our little talk and then I'll let you go home.'

'You're real generous,' Fuller said.

'I'm sorry,' Stanford said.

'My old buddy's sorry,' Fuller said. 'I feel better already.' He was a big man, all muscle, his face as rough as they come, and he ran his fingers through his hair again, his grey gaze focused straight ahead. 'Okay, I'm impressed,' he said. 'We're sitting here in the middle of nowhere and you're pointing a gun at me. What the fuck's going on?'

'It's the UFOs,' Stanford said. 'I want to talk about the UFOs.'

'I figured that,' Fuller said. 'You always do. Only the pistol is new to me.'

'I've had a bad year,' Stanford said. 'I have the impression I'm being followed. My apartment's been turned over twice, my phone's been cut off, and a hit-and-run driver smashed my car… I just don't feel too safe.'

'This is a pretty dangerous country,' Fuller said. 'I thought you understood that.' He glanced down at the pistol, shook his head in mock despair and grinned laconically. 'I'm putting my hand in my pocket,' he said. 'It's not for my own weapon, believe me. I just need some chewing gum.'

Stanford nodded his permission. Fuller pulled out some gum. He unwrapped

it and popped it into his mouth and proceeded to chew.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you’re nervous. You’re being harassed. And you think we’re the bogeymen.’

‘That’s right,’ Stanford said. ‘Those are CIA trademarks. You bastards have been following us since we went to the Caribbean, since we told you about Gerhardt’s abduction. You accused us of lying.’

‘Us?’

‘Me and Epstein.’

‘Epstein’s gone.’

‘Correct. Epstein’s gone. And you haven’t done a damned thing about it.’

Fuller talked while chewing on his gum. ‘What the hell could we do? You say your friend’s been abducted by a UFO and expect us to wear it. It was too much to ask.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t talk shit,’ Fuller said. ‘You come up with a story like that and you can’t *expect* much.’

‘You believed me,’ Stanford said.

‘That’s crap,’ Fuller said.

‘You’ve known me too long *not* to believe me… You know I don’t invent things.’

‘Your story was ridiculous.’

‘Then where’s Epstein gone? He’s been missing for over a year and you guys

haven’t asked a single question.’

‘It’s a police case, Stanford.

‘Police case, my ass. I told the cops and they laughed me out of the station and forgot the whole thing.’

‘What the hell did you expect? You said a UFO abducted your friend. You came on like a crank in a gaberdine, so of course the cops giggled.’

‘Fine,’ Stanford said. ‘But Professor Epstein’s still missing. He’s a pretty important name and now he’s gone and no one seems to be bothered. I think that’s pretty strange. I mean, it doesn’t make sense. A well known scientist disappears for a year and you guys don’t bat an eyelid. That strikes me as strange.’

‘So, he’s missing,’ Fuller said. ‘A lot of people go missing. He was an old man, he was on his last legs, and now he’s probably dead somewhere.’

‘I was there,’ Stanford said.

‘Yeah, I know. You saw a UFO take him.’

‘You believe me,’ Stanford said. ‘I know that much. That’s why you’re not looking for him.’

Fuller stopped chewing his gum, stared at Stanford not grinning, then he started chewing the gum again, his jaws working methodically.

‘So,’ he said, ‘we’re at an *impasse*. What the hell are we talking for?’

Stanford watched Fuller carefully. His old friend was like a stranger. The pistol was steady in Stanford’s hands and he was ready to use it.

‘You believe me,’ Stanford said. ‘You believed me then and you believe me now. You’ve been tailing me and you know what I found out and it’s making

you nervous.'

'Oh?' Fuller said. 'And what was that? Just what did you find out?'

Stanford felt hot. He wanted to roll the window down. He was frightened to roll the window down because of who might be out there. His eyes flicked left and right. Realising what he was doing, he felt foolish. Licking his dry lips, he put the pistol in his left hand, wiped his sweaty right hand on his trousers, then transferred the pistol again, all the time keeping it pointed at Fuller. His former friend, his old CIA pal, could no longer be trusted.

'The saucers exist,' he said. 'You've known about them for years. You have your own, but you're keeping them quiet for political reasons. There are other saucers as well. They're extraordinarily far advanced. They represent a threat to this country and so you're running a race with them. You're frightened of those saucers. You're frightened of public opinion. You don't want word about them to leak out and lead to mass hysteria. Those saucers are very powerful. The people who made them are very powerful. They have weapons we can scarcely imagine and they're willing to use them.'

Fuller raised his eyebrows. 'I don't believe this,' he said. 'I think maybe I'm not hearing too good. My old buddy's gone crazy.'

'You have your own,' Stanford said. 'There's no point in denying it. The original prototypes came from Germany, you've been building your own for years, the work was carried out in White Sands and the wilds of Canada, but now the folk who built the original saucers are displaying anxiety.'

'I don't believe this,' Fuller repeated.

'You believe it,' Stanford said. 'You just want to keep it quiet. You killed off Project Blue Book, you harassed all our best researchers, and you've deliberately spread confusion through rumor for the past thirty years. You knew you couldn't keep it secret – you could just confuse the issues – so

when anything leaked out you just twisted it and wrapped it in myths. Take Cannon AFB. Take Deerwood Nike Base. Take Holloman and Blain Air Force bases and then tell me they're rumors. They weren't rumors, Fuller. The saucers seen there were your own. People talked and you let the talk lead to tales of extraterrestrials. But the ETs don't exist. Something far worse exists. It's a bunch of wizards down in the Antarctic, and you know all about them.'

'The Antarctic?' Fuller said.

'You're not so innocent,' Stanford said. 'There's a bunch of brains in the Antarctic, they created the original saucers, and now they're so advanced you can't touch them and the government's shit-scared.'

'This is crazy,' Fuller said.

'No, it's not,' Stanford said. 'The Antarctic's a very big place and those people are hidden there.'

'Where?' Fuller asked.

'I don't know,' Stanford said.

'No,' Fuller said, 'you don't know. You're just spouting hot air.' He shook his head from side to side, chewed his gum, looking disgusted, then stared sympathetically at Stanford and shook his head again, wearily. 'What horseshit,' he said. 'I mean, I thought you had more sense. That's one of the oldest stories in UFO mythology – and one of the worst.'

'What story?'

'Fucking holes in the Poles. UFO bases in Antarctica. Underground cities beneath the ice… Atlantis. Lemuria.'

'I've heard the stories,' Stanford said. 'I never believed them for a second…

But then I never believed in the saucers either. It turns out I was wrong.'

'So they come from the Antarctic?'

'So you admit that they exist?'

'We don't have flying saucers,' Fuller said. 'And neither does anyone else.' He tried to grin at Stanford. It was not a successful grin. 'Let's assume they're in the Antarctic,' he said. 'At least I might be able to correct you that way.'

'They're in the Antarctic,' Stanford said. 'They're in underground plants. They're the same as the hidden factories of Nazi Germany, and they're under the ice.'

'That's ridiculous,' Fuller said. 'You can't get beneath that ice. Don't give me that Hollow Earth garbage. That's a theory for idiots.'

'Is it?'

'You know damned well it is. There aren't any holes at the Poles. Don't talk like a crackpot.'

'I don't know,' Stanford said. 'What about the ESSA 7 satellites? The photos taken by those satellites caused a sensation.'

'It's beneath discussion,' Fuller said.

'Tell me anyway,' Stanford said.

'You're a scientist. You know the facts well. I don't have to tell you.'

'Tell me anyway,' Stanford repeated.

Fuller shook his head wearily. 'Okay,' he said. 'You want to play games, we'll play games. I'll tell you about the photos that conned all the fucking

UFO freaks.' He took out some more gum, unwrapped it, studied it, then popped it into his mouth and started chewing, looking disgusted. 'Those famous NASA photos were released to scientific journals, most of whom could have been expected to understand them. Unfortunately, and as usual, the ESSA 7 satellite photos found their way into the hands of certain commercial writers. The enormous holes in the Poles, so clearly shown on the photos, were described, through what can only be termed ignorance, as being just what they looked like: goddamned holes in the Poles.' Fuller shook his head sadly, chewed his gum, glanced around him, saw nothing but the darkness beneath the trees, so turned back to Stanford. 'Of *course* they weren't holes,' he said. 'You know that as well as I do. Those photos were obtained by onboard Vidicon camera systems, and as such were not normal pictures. They were, in fact, photomosaics. They were reproduced from the processing of the signals from a lot of television camera frames obtained over a twenty-four hour period. Those signals were processed in a computer and transformed into a polar stereographic map projection with latitude, longitude and the outlines of land areas superimposed electronically. The areas in which camera frames were missing – due to the fact that the pictures were taken during the dark polar winter and the ESSA 7 camera systems lacked infrared facilities – were shown in solid black or white, which accounts for the famous "black holes". However, current polar-orbiting satellites use a two-channel radiometer instead of the Vidicon camera system, and this radiometer is sensitive to energy in both the visible and infrared spectrums. If you, being the ignorant scientist you're so obviously pretending to be, care to return to my office I'll show you the same polar stereographic satellite images from the NOAA 5 satellite in which the visible channel data over the Poles during the polar winter shows holes at the Poles – whereas the *infrared* channel data for the same period shows the land as it actually exists. There are no holes in the Poles and you know it, so let's fucking drop it.'

Stanford knew he was right. He just wanted him to talk. He wanted to loosen Fuller's tongue before he pulled his ears off.

‘Okay,’ he said, ‘let’s change the subject. What do you know about Admiral Byrd?’

‘Oh, Jesus, saints preserve me,’ Fuller said.

‘Just tell me.’

‘I’m going crazy. My ears are playing tricks. We’re in the land of the loonies.’

‘Tell me,’ Stanford insisted.

‘Just ask me,’ Fuller said. ‘My imagination doesn’t stretch as far as yours. I can just about answer you.’

Stanford didn’t smile. He kept the pistol aimed at Fuller. Just occasionally he glanced out of the car, scanned the dark, silent forest.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Accepting that there’s no enormous hole at the South Pole, the next major UFOlogist theory is that the land around the Pole dips down considerably, forming a sort of giant doughnut, and that this land mass is therefore greater than we commonly think it is and could actually be a lot warmer than the surrounding Antarctic.’

‘Right,’ Fuller said sarcastically. ‘And being so immense, hidden from us and pretty warm, that land could be fertile and inhabited: the home of your saucer people.’

‘It’s possible,’ Stanford said.

‘It’s *not* possible,’ Fuller said. ‘You’re going to quote Admiral Byrd’s remarks about a continent in the sky.’

‘Right,’ Stanford said. ‘It’s been widely reported that Admiral Byrd penetrated a land extent of two thousand and three hundred miles *beyond* the

Pole and saw a land mass reflected in the sky. Okay, since we now know about Antarctic conditions, we can assume that it *was* a reflection.'

'Or a mirage,' Fuller said.

'Or a mirage. That still begs the question of how, given where Byrd turned back, he could have reported two thousand and three hundred miles *beyond* the Pole.'

'He didn't,' Fuller said. 'The origin of that figure is a mystery; it didn't come from Byrd. Go to your newspaper morgues and you'll that the actual stated figure was a journey covering approximately ten thousand square miles, with only *one hundred* of those miles beyond the Pole. As for the "Great Unknown beyond the Pole", that statement – which the UFOlogists have picked up as solid proof for their "hidden continent" theory – is merely the understandable remark of a man who was, in 1947, looking for the first time at a land mass that hadn't yet been explored. The "Great Unknown" was simply the Great Uncharted – but it *has* been crossed and photographed since and is no longer "unknown".'

Stanford started to speak, but Fuller waved his large hand, now involved in what he was saying and determined to finish it.

'Let me continue while I'm eager,' he said. 'I can't bear your sweet ignorance… It should be noted, regarding Byrd's *other* much abused remark about that "enchanted continent in the sky," that Byrd *also* stated that during the flight both he and his crew had no oxygen equipment, that they were suffering from anoxia, and that they were therefore not quite themselves – a point conveniently ignored by your UFOlogists. As for the "enchanted continent in the sky" being a reflection of a land mass not covered in ice, this isn't as extraordinary as the UFOlogists pretend it is. There are, in fact, and contrary to the assertions of many UFOlogists, many well known ice-free areas in Antarctica – and any one of those could have been the reflection, or mirage, viewed by Byrd. Another popular so-called "fact" is that there are no

volcanoes in the Antarctic and that the dust sometimes found there must therefore come from the “hidden” continent. That’s a neat theory except for one thing: there *are* volcanoes in Antarctica.’

Fuller grinned and chew his gum. Stanford inched closer to him. The pistol was still steady in his hand and he felt pretty high.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘That gets us right to my point. I just want to clear up a little matter and then we’ll call it a day. There are lakes in the Antarctic. There are also ice-free areas. There are mountains and volcanoes, the ice can be a mile deep, and it’s believed that the ice below the surface is actually joined to the sea. That suggests certain things. It suggests hidden valleys. It suggests canyons and caves and other ice-free hidden areas in which a colony of people could exist in comparative safety. I never believed Earth was hollow. I know we’ve charted the Antarctic. But I also know that we’ve only charted it from the air and that there are vast, unknown areas. You know that the people who created and use the saucers are there. You probably know where they are. I want to know what they’re planning, I want to know just where they are, and I want all the facts right now, with no pissing around.’

Fuller stared hard at Stanford. His large body was quivering. Stanford knew he wasn’t quivering with fear, but with cold, suppressed rage. Stanford kept the gun on him. Fuller glanced down at it. He looked at it for a long, thoughtful time and then he raised his eyes again.

‘I’m getting out of here,’ he said.

‘Don’t try it,’ Stanford said.

‘You wouldn’t know how to fire that fucking thing. *Adios*, pal, I’ll see you.’

He started turning towards his door, but Stanford raised the pistol higher. He tapped the barrel against Fuller’s head, then slipped it into his ear. Fuller froze. The barrel filled his ear. Fuller sat there and stared at the dashboard

and took a deep breath.

‘You wouldn’t do it,’ he said, releasing his breath. ‘Who the fuck do you think you’re kidding? You’re a scientist. You don’t play with those things. Now get it out of my ear.’

‘I used to be in the marines,’ Stanford reminded him, ‘so I certainly know how to use a weapon.’

‘Fuck you,’ Fuller said.

‘It’s cocked,’ Stanford said. ‘Talk or I’ll blow your brains out.’

‘No way. You won’t do it.’

Fuller jerked his head away. He started opening his door. Stanford turned the pistol around, used the grip as a handle, struck Fuller across the side of the head and on the back of his wrist. Fuller’s head snapped forward, hit the dashboard and bounced back, and he grunted, his wounded hand flapping, trying to wipe off the blood. The hand dropped down to his side. His good hand swung at Stanford. The latter slapped the hand away with his pistol, then he struck Fuller’s wounded hand again. Fuller gasped and flopped forward. He remained there with his head on the dashboard, dripping blood, breathing harshly.

‘Talk,’ Stanford said.

‘Get fucked,’ Fuller gasped. ‘If you didn’t have a gun for a fist, I’d have your balls in my teeth. I’m not talking, you prick. You’ve gone too far too quickly. If you want me to talk, you’ll have to suck me off and you’re still not the type.’

‘You never know,’ Stanford said.

‘You fucking marine,’ Fuller said. ‘I forgot you were one of the tough guys

before you turned soft. Now you're just a soft scientist, Stanford. You couldn't hurt a fly.'

'I'll hurt you,' Stanford said.

Fuller tried to raise his head. Stanford hammered it with the pistol. Fuller's head cracked against the dashboard and bled even more. Stanford saw himself in action. He was standing outside himself. He hardly recognized himself anymore, now driven only by anger. His hidden self had stepped forward. He knew what the hunted felt. He was desperate and it lent him a rage that overrode his better, softer nature. He remembered the girl in Galveston, remembered beating up Scaduto, remembered his journey through Paraguay, the Ache Indians, the cold, brutal German. Yes, he had changed. He knew it now as he looked at Fuller. His old friend, now bleeding and breathing harshly, could no longer be trusted.

'Talk,' Stanford said.

'Jesus Christ,' Fuller gasped. He pressed the dashboard with his thick, hard-ridged fingers, as if trying to bend it. 'You've sure learned a few tricks,' he said.

Stanford smashed Fuller's hand. Fuller yelped and jerked upright. Stanford forced his head back down with the pistol and saw more blood flowing.

'I've changed,' Stanford said. 'I'm not a scientist anymore. I was never a good scientist anyway, but now you bastards have done me in. I won't sit back and take it. I want to get Epstein back. I don't know why it's so important; I just know that it is. I have to find Epstein. I have to know what happened to him. That old man means a lot to me now, and I don't understand it. He said I refused to make decisions, but I did so when he was abducted by that saucer. I decided to track this business to the very end and let no one stop me. Now I want you to talk. I think you'll just have to talk. If you don't talk, we'll sit here all night and I'll hurt you some more.'

Fuller cursed and jerked upright. Stanford hammered him in the stomach. He grunted and flopped forward again, his good hand on the dashboard. Stanford smashed that hand. Fuller screamed and then whimpered. He was propped up with his forehead on the dashboard, dripping blood to the floor.

‘Jesus!’ he hissed. ‘Oh, my God, fuck, it hurts! Okay, Jesus Christ, I’m fucking dying, you win, Christ, it hurts…’ He shook his head from side to side, but kept it down, staring at his own feet. The blood was dripping from his head and lips, splashing onto his shoes. ‘Okay,’ he said, ‘you’re right. It was the Second World War. The fucking Krauts built a saucer. We found components and various drawings. The British, the Canadians and us – we all found bits and pieces. It was enough to get us going. We all put our heads together. You already know most of the details, so I’ll save my breath there. The main work was done in Canada. Other work was done at White Sands. A lot of the UFOs sighted over those areas were our very own saucers.’

‘Fine,’ Stanford said. ‘I know all that. What about the Antarctic?’

Fuller groaned and shook his head. ‘It’s all on Epstein’s tapes.’

‘That was Germany,’ Stanford said. ‘You’re confused. What about the Antarctic?’

‘You went to Parguay,’ Fuller said. ‘You went to see that Nazi. We know what the old fucker told you… He told us the same thing.’

‘When?’ Stanford asked.

‘A long time ago,’ Fuller said. ‘That old vulture, he should be dead by now, but we just can’t get near him.’

‘The Antarctic,’ Stanford said.

‘He told you the background, Stanford. That was the start of it all. Those Nazis went to the Antarctic and that’s where it began.’ He shook his head

from side to side and wiped his lips. He could hardly use his hands. He groaned and let his hands fall again, his head still on the dashboard. ‘We knew they were there. Captain Schaeffer told us that much. He said they’d gone to Neuschwabenland to build flying saucers. We were inclined to believe him. We had plenty of evidence to back up what he said. We had drawings and components, and we found a few other people who talked. That’s why we launched Operation Highjump. That was in January ’47. It was a military operation disguised as an exploratory expedition, and its true purpose was to find out where the Germans were.’

‘They docked at Neuschwabenland,’ Stanford said.

‘No,’ Fuller said. ‘You can discount that myth. We had to bluff the entire fucking world and we did it with style. We circled the whole continent. We really covered that mother. We split up into three separate groups and flew all over the place. The Central Group, based at Little America on the Ross Sea, covered the area between Marie Byrd Land and Victoria Land, moving inland, in crisscrossing patterns, as far as the South Pole. Meanwhile, the East and West Groups girdled the whole continent, moving out in opposite directions and actually coming in sight of one another’s aircraft. The East Group reached the Weddell Sea. The West Group went as far as Princess Astrid Land. Some airplanes from both groups then flew over Queen Maud Land, including the area that the Nazis had called Neuschwabenland. They saw ice-caps like mountains. Their compasses went crazy. They got lost and then they saw some flying saucers that appeared out of nowhere. The flying saucers buzzed them. The planes’ ignition systems malfunctioned. Four of the planes went down and the others flew away, making their escape, and the crews then told Admiral Byrd about it. The expedition was cut short. The official explanation was hurricane winds. Byrd returned to America and made some indiscreet statements. We told him to shut up, we killed all talk of the flying saucers, and we decided to treat the Antarctic with considerable care. About three months later, in June 1947, we tested our own saucers over Mount Rainier in the Cascades – and then the saucers we had seen in the

Antarctic paid their visits.'

'How did you find out where they were?' Stanford asked.

'We didn't. They found us. They started to play tag with our jets and airliners, just to show us what they could do. They hammered the point home by harassing our top-secret test centers and driving our interceptor pilots nuts. After three years of this there was no doubt in our minds about who those flying saucers belonged to. Naturally, we kept quiet about it; we were shit-scared of panic. We killed off Project Grudge, tried to ridicule all sighting reports, and generally confused the whole issue to turn it into a myth. For the most part this worked. It also worked for our *own* saucers. The Lubbock sightings, for instance, were sightings of our own saucers – and a lot of other sightings were the same.'

Fuller kept his head down. He was bleeding less now. He talked like a man in a trance, his breathing not so harsh.

'They approached us in 1952,' he said, 'and they did it just like regular politicians, through all the right channels. The approach was made by a man called Wilson. He got in touch with the CIA. We met him and he told us his story and we couldn't believe it. Wilson soon proved it, though. He was talking to one of our top men. He already knew our man's address and he told him that the next night he would send a flying saucer over his home. The CIA chief lived in Alexandria, Virginia, he was having a garden party on the night in question, and during that garden party both he and his guests saw a UFO directly over the house.'

'That was when the Director of Intelligence, General Samford, called Captain Ruppelt to a secret meeting in Washington, DC.'

'Right. But Ruppelt didn't know about that Antarctic colony – and we never told him.'

‘So, why the meeting?’

‘After the UFO sighting over the CIA chief’s home, he had another meeting with Wilson. Wilson told him more about the colony, told him what they were capable of, and then said that he didn’t want any interference and would trade with the US. Apparently, even with *his* awesome genius and his hundreds of slave workers, he was in constant need of various mass-produced components and equipment. His idea, then, was to form a clandestine partnership with the US, trading certain innovations of his technology in return for what he required to advance the same. A seesaw arrangement, right? A trick maneuver. But that’s what he wanted.’

‘And?’

‘He was asked what would happen if we decided to say no, and he pointed to various disasters, on land and sea, that we had not, at least up until he told us, been able to explain. Wilson explained them. He told us that he had caused them. We still didn’t believe him, so he told us that his saucers would invade Washington, DC. When they did, we believed him.’

‘That, also, was in 1952.’

‘Yes.’

‘And the meeting between Captain Ruppelt and General Samford?’

‘That took place after Wilson had told us about his planned invasion. Samford never told Ruppelt anything about Wilson, but he wanted to know about the extent of the UFO sightings. Not knowing about our conversations with Wilson, Ruppelt confirmed that there’d been a massive build-up of UFOs around DC throughout that whole month. He also made it perfectly clear that he was expecting a UFO invasion over the capital. That invasion came, we decided to sit tight, and one week later the saucers came back and we had to tell President Truman.’

‘And then you came to an agreement with Wilson.’

‘Right. But first we formed the Robertson Panel. The purpose of that panel was twofold. The first task was to convince the public that a proper scientific body had investigated the UFO phenomenon and found it to be fucking nonsense. Also, regarding this, it was our intention right from the start to use the panel’s recommendations as an excuse for suppressing all UFO reports. I think you know how we went about it…’

‘Yes,’ Stanford said.

‘Okay. The second and equally important function of the panel was to examine what Wilson had told us and shown us, and to assess his viability as a threat to the nation. Our assessment was that his technology was so far advanced, it constituted an unprecedented threat to the nation – and probably the world. It was therefore decided to come to an agreement with him.’

‘I see,’ Stanford said. ‘So that would explain why the Robertson Panel was made up of men specializing in atomic research and advanced weaponry, why it was chaired by a CIA-classified employee, and why it included Lloyd Berkner, who’d accompanied Admiral Byrd to the Antarctic in 1937.’

‘Yes. It also explains why, when Ruppelt found out that the UFOs were intelligently controlled, we had to get rid of him.’

‘And anyone else who was like him.’

‘Right.’

‘Then you made your agreement with Wilson.’

‘We did. The agreement, simply put, was that we’d have a step-by-step trade, negotiating as and when required for what we both wanted. What Wilson wanted was access to our mass-production industries – and what we wanted was everything he knew. Naturally he didn’t buy this. Instead, he fed us a

spoonful at a time. And with neither side trusting the other, we built up a relationship. That relationship gradually grew more complex. Like all relationships, it had its faults. And the biggest was that Wilson was also trading with our good friends, the Russians.'

'He played one against the other,' Stanford said.

'Yes,' Fuller said. 'He's still at it right now. We all trade, we all lose. We keep trying to catch up with his technology, but he always manages to keep just ahead of us. So now the pattern's changed. We're all creeping across the Antarctic. The Antarctic is a vast, untapped treasure-house of oil, coal, gold, copper, uranium and, most important, water. The whole world now needs water. Ninety percent of all the world's water is in the Antarctic. In short, the Antarctic is where the future of the world will be decided, so we just can't keep out of it any longer. We all pretend it's not political, that we're just there for research, but the logic, or lack of logic, in politics is leading straight to a clash.'

'It's political leapfrog,' Stanford said.

'That's right. A kid's game. But somebody's going to trip up and get hurt – and then all hell will break loose.'

'Are they Nazis?' Stanford asked.

'No,' Fuller said. 'They're a society of masters and slaves, but they're no longer Nazis. That Wilson is a genius. His genius extends to organization and so he runs that whole place. He's into parapsychology, electrodes and prosthetics. He has his people implanted when they're born, and they grow up like zombies. There's never more than a thousand of them. The system is based on euthanasia. When someone ceases to be of any use, Wilson has him put down. There's no possibility of resistance. They're all disciplined with electrodes. They all exist just to work, and that work is for the glory of science. Human beings are vivisected. What he doesn't have, he steals. We

know he steals people from us, but we discreetly ignore that fact. We can't afford to rock the boat. We have to stay on the seesaw. That colony represents the balancing power and we just can't catch up with it.'

'So the Americans and Russians actually work with him?'

'In truth, he's what we need. The whole world's out of control. We all need what that bastard has, but he's buried down there. So, we continue trading. He lies to us, we lie to him. We keep building more satellites, pulse beam weapons, more powerful saucers, and we think that in a couple of years we might be ready to tackle him. The Russians think the same. Wilson knows what we're both thinking. When we slip up, he demonstrates his technological superiority and then we promptly correct ourselves and back down. It's like I said: it's a seesaw arrangement, a tricky maneuver, but sooner or later it's bound to explode – and I don't like to think of that.'

'So,' Stanford said. 'This explains the secrecy about UFOs. It also explains why the Russians and Americans cooperate in the Antarctic.'

'You've hit the nail on the head, pal.'

Fuller carefully raised his head, lay it back against his seat, then just sat there, breathing deeply with relief, gazing into the darkness.

'Where are they?' Stanford asked.

'Don't even think about it,' Fuller said. 'You go there and you'll never come back, and that's all there is to it.'

'Where *are* they?'

Fuller sighed wearily. 'They're in Neuschwabenland. You fly along the zero meridian, straight in to Queen Maud Land, and about two hundred miles in from the coast, you'll find a range of low mountains. It's really Norwegian territory. It's really part of Queen Maud Land. You usually only find it

marked on German atlases, and they call it Neuschwabenland. The Antarctic colony is in those mountains. They've hollowed out the base of the mountains. There's an area where the ice forms a huge circle that resembles a volcano. The carrying ships are down there. They come up out of there. Beneath the circle of ice is solid rock, now honeycombed with long tunnels. The tunnels lead into the colony. They all live and work there. The whole area is protected with a force field that makes unwanted aircraft malfunction. We found that out to our cost. We stopped trying years ago. That whole area is liked the famous Area of Inaccessibility – and our pilots avoid it.'

'I'm going there,' Stanford said.

'You're going nowhere,' Fuller said. 'I once like you, but you can't walk away with this. Understand? You're a dead man.'

Stanford suddenly heard the noise. Glancing out automatically, he saw bright light flashing on and off the trees, beaming down through the darkness. Then Fuller made his move. Stanford turned back and saw him. Fuller had opened his door and was falling backward, one hand inside his jacket. The pistol bucked in Stanford's hand. Its bang was deafening in the car. Fuller cried out as his body struck the ground, but then he quickly rolled over. Stanford dropped across both seats, heard the roaring helicopter, saw Fuller rolling away from the car, a pistol clenched in his right fist. Stanford fired and Fuller jerked, dropped his pistol and flopped over. Stanford sat up and turned the ignition key as the roaring grew louder.

He didn't bother closing the far door. A cloud of dust and stones swept over him. The chopper roared descending over the trees and bathed the car in its fierce light. Stanford cursed and put his foot down, reversed, the wheels squealing, shot forward and made a tight turn as Fuller staggered toward him, swaying weakly from side to side. Stanford couldn't avoid him. He heard a sickening thud. Fuller bounced across the hood of the car, limbs akimbo, his eyes large, mouth wide open, waving frantically and rolling off again. Stanford put his foot down harder, racing straight at the trees, swinging the

car wildly from left to right and staying away from the road.

First the darkness, then the light: the helicopter was right above him. It came down above the trees, whipped the dirt up, swirling and hissing. Stanford wrenched at the steering wheel. He hit a tree and bounced off. The car shrieked and then shot forward again, crashing through the undergrowth. The chopper roared and deafened Stanford. It was just above the trees. It was whipping the dirt up to his right and forcing him back to the open road. Stanford cursed and kept going, weaving left and right frantically, tearing branches and bark from tree trunks, the car howling dementedly. He managed to keep away from the road. The forest suddenly opened out. The roaring chopper descended into the clearing and smashed the car with its skids. The impact blinded Stanford, made him release the steering wheel. The car shot off to the left and started skidding and he grabbed at the steering wheel again. He went with the skidding, shrieked around in a full circle, was blinded by the chopper's glaring lights, almost choked in the dust. The car raced toward the chopper. The chopper jerked up and shuddered. A rotor snapped against the branch of a tree and flew away as the chopper tipped over. The car raced right beneath it, shot back into the forest, was shaken by a thunderous explosion, bathed in fierce, jagged lightning. Stanford managed to glance back. A ball of fire filled the clearing. The fire swept across the field and up the trees, its flames hissing and spitting.

Stanford turned the steering wheel, heading straight for the road. He bounced back onto the road, took the fork to Washington, DC, glanced across the road and saw the burning trees illuminating the forest. The flames soon dropped behind him. He slowed down and drove more carefully. He saw the dark night on all sides, the moon, the glittering stars, and he knew that he would have to leave the country and never return.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Awakening in that bitterly cold dawn of January 28, 1979, still not believing where he was, Stanford shivered and closed his eyes again and thought of how he had come here… He saw the harbor of Manzanillo on the western coast of Mexico, the one hundred and twenty-five-foot ship, its wooden hull creaking rhythmically, moving out in the gray, early-December afternoon, its engines and generators and air-conditioners filling his ears with a muffled roaring. Then due south to Easter Island, the turgid waves rolling slowly, the frigate birds sailing by on their fluttering black wings, the swarm of Galapagos storm petrels like a cloud of locusts. Blue-gray flying fish, the sea's monotonous rise and fall, the sun rising as orange fire, turning into a dazzling white, the pink sunset, then sharp, abrupt darkness, the stars glittering in velvet sky. The gradual death of December. The dawn an eerie green glowing. The sun forming an arch, stretched across the horizon, first green and then turning to red and setting the clouds on fire. The clouds shifted and changed, tinged with pink and orange-yellow, touched here and there with glinting gold, the sea violet, languorous. America was no more. Other worlds were now beckoning. The South Pacific, Cape Horn, the seas rough and uninviting, flocks of whalebirds with blue and white plumage, then the Tropic of Capricorn. White-breasted, dark-backed shearwaters, gliding through the troughs of waves, the southern latitudes with their long ocean swells, the smaller waves in between. The great wings of albatross, their graceful soaring and gliding, then past the southern coast of South America, rain and fog, the winds moaning. Buoyant Magellanic penguins. More birds high and low. The barren, forbidding rocks of the Ildefonso Islands, the Beagle Channel, its dark, humpbacked islands, brown and bleak and forlorn.

Then the New Year coming in, the sea foam-flecked and grim, giant petrels and skuas overhead, the cold winds unrelenting. Farewell to the Old World. No escape from the future. The primeval forests and glacier-encased peaks of Tierra del Fuego. Then the stormy Drake Passage, the current driven by the westerlies, waves fifty to a hundred feet high, the green water smashing over the bow and sweeping back out again. The New Year, a new person: Stanford losing himself. Over the Antarctic Convergence, past Elephant Island, great blocks of rock and ice, flashing ribbons of snow, a shroud made of smokey, drifting cloud, a sudden upthrusting glacier. Time passing and then stopping. Stanford's gloved hands on the railing. Then the ice-encased mountains, seals and whales and pelagic birds, the air brilliantly clear, the cascading ice blue, the mountain ridges of Gibbs Island, the penguins circling the ship, the crevassed ice cliffs sliding past as if not really there. Stanford's gloved hands in the air. A bird fluttering on the deck. More islands, more snowbanks, penguins crowding on the rocks, Greenwich Island, high waves exploding fiercely, the spray cascading and settling. Then a white line in the distance. The approaching Antarctic Peninsula. Then the glaciers and icebergs, huge umbrellas and arches, flat islands of sea ice, the grottoes and canyons and fjords reflecting sun on the green sea. A world like no other. Silent, Majestic. Sweeping plains of packed snow, soaring peaks of glittering ice, the peaks yellow and pink and sometimes black, a blue sheen over all… Stanford opened his eyes again. He looked around him and shivered. He was now at the bottom of the world and could scarcely believe it.

He sat up on his bunk, yawned and blinked, glanced around him, saw that the other bunks were already empty, the Norwegians out at their work. He sat there for some time, staring through the window opposite, seeing nothing but the wall of the dome that surrounded the base. Stanford still felt stunned. He had finally arrived. He swung his legs off the bunk and stood up and hurriedly dressed himself.

The Nissen hut was long and bleak, a converted army barracks, the blankets rumpled on the bunks, clothes and boots scattered all over the place, the walls

covered in pinups. Stanford zipped up his jacket, shivered again as he picked up his gloves, then he walked along the hut, between the bunks, and entered the washroom. He splashed water on his face, combed his hair, put his hat on, made sure that his ears were well covered and then looked in the mirror. A stranger stared back at him, a long-haired, bearded man, his eyes uncommonly hard and intense and possibly mad. Stanford wondered about that. The possibility didn't bother him. Then he turned away and left the hut and looked around the Norwegian base.

The whole camp was inside an enormous, glittering geodesic dome that shielded it from the wind and snow. Beneath the dome were mess halls, administration huts and accommodations, power plants and machine shops and garages. All the buildings were painted red, were square and rectangular, took the form of cylindrical Quonset huts, and were made of corrugated steel. The generators were whining, the power plants hummed steadily, as Stanford passed the research laboratories for meteorology and atmospheric physics, the library and medical center and radio masts, and stopped in front of the mess hut. He glanced directly above him, at the immense, glittering dome, then slapped himself to get warm and entered the mess hut for a strong cup of coffee.

It was a self-service canteen, the food stacked behind glass, plastic trays piled up beside the metal urns and the white cups and plates. Stanford poured himself a coffee, studied the food and decided against it, turned away from the steel-framed glass cabinets and looked around the mess hut. Most of the tables were empty, the men already out at work. He saw the pilot at a table near the wall, a steaming mug at his lips.

Stanford went to join the pilot, wending his way between the tables, a pulse beating nervously in his stomach, feeling bright but unreal. The pilot looked up and grinned, wiped some coffee from his beard, his hair, just like Stanford's, long for warmth, a wild gleam in his eyes.

'Hi, ho,' he said. 'How's my buddy? He don't look too good.'

Stanford pulled a chair out, sat down facing the pilot, noticed that his pupils were enlarged and did not feel encouraged.

‘I’m fine, Rocky,’ he said. ‘Just wind me up and I’ll go. One coffee – just this single cup of coffee – and my day will begin.’

Rocky grinned and scratched his beard, inhaled luxuriously on his cigaret, blew the smoke to fill the chilly air with the sweet aroma of pot.

‘Oh, my,’ he said. ‘Beautiful.’

‘You’re stoned,’ Stanford said.

‘Damned right, I’m stoned,’ Rocky said. ‘A man needs a good breakfast.’

Stanford shrugged and drank his coffee, let it burn down inside him, neither angry nor pleased with the pilot, knowing what he was like. Rocky was a freelance, working on commission for the Norwegians, a kid with scrambled brains and experience in Vietnam and the ability to fly just about anywhere, under any conditions. The Norwegians called him the Mad Bomber. He lived up to his reputation. He would do things that no other pilot would do, which is why Stanford wanted him. The other pilots avoided Neuschwabenland. It was officially forbidden to fly there. Learning that fact pretty quickly, Stanford had thought he was sunk. Then he heard about Rocky. He started to get stoned with Rocky. He told Rocky where he wanted to go and Rocky giggled with pleasure. Rocky liked the forbidden. He was just out for kicks. They had scrambled his brains in Vietnam and now he lived like a wild man. Still, he could fly. He had his own airplane. It was an old transport plane with skis attached, and Rocky knew how to handle it. He had loved the idea of this particular flight, had wanted to see them goddamned UFOs. He had, like everyone else in the Antarctic, seen them flying around. Now he had the chance to see them up close and he couldn’t wait to get out there. Rocky wanted to go down in a blaze of glory, stoned out of his skull.

‘What’s it like outside?’ Stanford asked.

‘Minus fifteen degrees. I hope you’ve got your balls wrapped in velvet – you might lose them out there.’

Rocky grinned and scratched his nose, inhaled some more pot, the pupils of his eyes extremely large, hiding dangerous dreams.

‘Can you fly?’ Stanford asked.

‘Zip your lip,’ Rocky retorted. ‘I could fly that fucking airplane through a pinhole with a girl on my cock.’

‘You must have tried it,’ Stanford said.

‘That’s my secret,’ Rocky said. ‘Finish your coffee and let’s get out to the plane. I don’t want them checking us.’

‘What did you tell them?’

‘That we were flying to Cape Norvegia. I said we were picking up some supplies, and the dumb bastards believed me.’ Rocky giggled at the thought of it, finished his smoke and stood up, looking bulky in his boots and padded clothes, a pair of gloves in his right hand. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Let’s get the fuck out of here and have us a good time.’

Stanford gulped down his coffee, grabbed his gloves and stood up, then he and Rocky left the mess hut and headed straight for the airstrip. Stanford repeatedly glanced around him, still not used to being here, the geodesic dome soaring above him, sunlight pouring down through it. They passed the power plants and garages, then a line of snow tractors, cut around a cylindrical Quonset hut, approached a door in the curved wall. They both put their gloves on. Stanford followed Rocky out. His boots sank into the snow, the bright light stung his eyes, then the cold clamped around him like a vice and rushed into his lungs.

Ice. All ice. Hills and valleys made of ice. The sun was brilliant and it flashed off the ice and the light almost blinded him. It was incredibly beautiful. It nearly took his breath away. There was nothing out there but the ice and the dazzling white light. The ice went out to the horizon. The sky was sheer blue. He looked up at that sky and saw a green field surrounded by more ice. The sky acted as a mirror, reflecting the land below. The green field was an ice-free mass of land many miles to the west. Stanford looked all around him. The view never failed to stun him. The ice was everywhere – at his feet, up in the sky – and looking at it, he thought it was beautiful and mysterious and frightening.

They walked together across the snow, both bulky in their heavy clothing, exhaling clouds of steam, a light frost already forming on their beards, the gloves protecting their hands. The airstrip was fairly close, nestling under a towering ice cliff, its lowest peak two hundred feet above the airplanes, the sky a white haze above.

‘Fucking crazy,’ Rocky said. ‘I can’t believe we’re actually doing this. I mean, you say we’re gonna see some flying saucers, and that’s it: we’re off. We must both be fucking mad. You must be as mad as me. What the hell are you gonna do when you see them? Just answer that question.’

‘I’m going in there,’ Stanford said.

‘From what I’ve heard, that would be nuts.’

‘You can land about five miles from the mountain, then I’ll take the snow tractor.’

‘It’s really true, then?’ Rocky asked.

‘It’s really true,’ Stanford said. ‘All the UFOs you’ve seen were real, all the rumors you heard were true: there’s a colony hidden deep in those mountains and they’ve got flying saucers.’

Rocky shook his head with wonder. ‘Oh, boy,’ he said, ‘that’s great. That’s absolutely fanfuckingtastic and it’s blowing my mind.’ He giggled with pleasure, rolled his stoned eyes, the frost thickening on his bushy red beard, the sun flashing around him. ‘I can’t wait,’ he said. ‘What a wild fucking gig. What a story to tell when I’m old and gray. I won’t believe it myself.’

They were on the edge of the airstrip, a wall of ice towering above them, a fine snow drifting around their booted feet, their eyes watering with cold. A helicopter was taking off, its rotors whipping the snow up, its image reflected in the wall of ice as it climbed past the cliff. They walked across to Rocky’s airplane, an old and battered transport, its green fuselage decorated with pinups and obscene comments. The plane was resting on long skis, the door open, its ladder down, and a couple of men were standing in the doorway, their fur collars turned up.

‘All set?’ Rocky asked.

‘Smooth as butter,’ one of the men said. ‘But we better take off pretty quick. I think they’re getting suspicious.’

‘Norwegian shitheads,’ Rocky said.

‘They’re okay,’ the man said. ‘It’s just they’ve had a few complaints from the Russians. Those bastards said you’d been buzzing them.’

Rocky giggled and shook his head from side to side. ‘Lord have mercy,’ he said. ‘Them Russkies aren’t telling any lies. I buzzed Novolazarevskaya.’

The man in the airplane grinned. ‘That’s what you did, Rocky. The Russians said you were lower than their radar, almost pissing on top of them.’

Rocky giggled again. ‘What the fuck?’ he said happily. ‘A man needs a little action now and then to keep boredom at bay.’

‘You were stoned,’ the other man said.

‘Happy days, I was stoned.’

‘Some day they’re gonna boot you in the ass and send you back to Alaska.’

‘Some day,’ Rocky said.

He climbed up into the airplane, followed closely by Stanford, and they made their way along to the cockpit, past the yellow snow tractor. Stanford heard the ladder rattling, the door shrieking and then slamming, the sound reverberating throughout the airplane and making his ears ring.

‘Here we go,’ Rocky said. ‘You can take the co-pilot’s chair. The guys there, they’ll sit in the back and look after the tractor.’

Stanford nodded and took his chair, strapping himself in, surveying the control panel, the mass of switches and indicators in front of him, above him, to his right, the engineer’s chair behind him. Rocky coughed and pursed his lips, flicked a couple of switches, while Stanford looked out through the windshield at the alien world before him. All white. Everything. The sun flashed off the ice. The airplane suddenly bellowed and shuddered, prior to take-off.

‘There’s no air traffic control,’ Rocky said. ‘That’s the blessing of this burg. They just tell you what time you can leave, and then you get up and go. Hold on to your seat.’

The plane moved forward slowly, the airstrip running between banks of snow, a broad lane narrowing down to a pinpoint at the base of the cliff face. The cliff was covered in ice, the sun flashing off its face, the peaks sharply defined against a sky that changed from white haze to blue. The plane shuddered and roared, picked up speed, started racing, passing snow tractors and sun-reflecting radar bowls that were framed by the glistening snow. Then the airstrip was racing past on both sides, the white-faced cliff spreading outward, becoming higher as the plane rushed straight at it as if about to

crash into it. Stanford held onto the sides of his chair, took a deep breath, released it, then Rocky giggled and the plane jumped off the runway, going into a steep ascent. Stanford kept hold of his chair. The plane was shuddering and rattling. He saw the face of the cliff, the blinding eye of the sun, then the glistening white peaks passed below and the plane leveled out.

‘Jesus!’ Stanford whispered.

‘Hi, ho,’ Rocky said. ‘Nothing like a little bit of action to get rid of the cobwebs.’

The panorama was immense, a sweeping vista of pack ice, snow falls and glinting glaciers, low mountain peaks framed against a sky of unbelievable clarity. Nothing moved in that landscape, nothing broke its frozen silence; the fierce light of the sun poured down upon it and was then devoured by it. Earth and sky became one – the sky reflected the land below – and the rays of the sun were distorted to form luminous arches. All white. Everything. The towering glaciers were like prisms. The light flashed and raced outward in silvery-white lines that merged with the dazzling white snowfalls.

‘Queen Maud Land,’ Rocky said. ‘We’re flying along the zero meridian. We should reach Neuschwabenland pretty quickly, if we don’t get lost first.’

‘What happens if we keep going?’

‘We cross the South Pole. Then north becomes south, east becomes west, and we have us a smoke and say our prayers until we run out of gasoline.’

‘Don’t get lost,’ Stanford said.

‘I’ll try not to,’ Rocky said. ‘We’ll circle over the mountains, we’ll try to find that hidden colony, then we’ll turn back and land five miles away and go in with the snow tractor, just like you suggested.’

‘You’re coming with me?’ Stanford asked.

‘Damned right,’ Rocky said. ‘I’m not giving you this trip for free, pal – I want to see all them saucers.’

‘It might be difficult,’ Stanford said. ‘There’s supposed to be a force field around the area. It’s designed to make engines malfunction and bring down the aircraft.’

‘It might be true,’ Rocky said. ‘A lot of planes were lost out there. That’s why we’re not allowed to go there anymore – and why I lied to those shithead Norwegians.’

‘So what do we do?’ Stanford asked.

‘We just stay a high altitude. That means we won’t see too much, but it’s better than nothing. We’ll land near the mountains anyway. We’ll go in on the snow tractor. We just have to see that circle of ice caps to know where we’re going.’

Stanford looked down, saw the dazzling all-white landscape, the peaks of glaciers merging with the snow, revealed only by flashing light. He felt tense and excited, a pulse beating in his stomach, closed his eyes and thought of where he had come from and still couldn’t believe it. He had left the past behind him. He could never return. He had found out too much, was a threat, and now would have to be wiped out. Stanford opened his eyes again. A vast white plain filled his vision. Looking at it, he realized that he had come to the end of the road. There was nowhere else to run to. There was nowhere to hide. If he managed to return from the Antarctic, he would find no safe place. Finally, he was trapped. He was one of the hunted. He was at the lowest point on Earth and could travel no farther. So what about Epstein? What would he do if he found his old friend? Contracts would be out on both of them and the hunters would find them. Stanford sighed and looked down. He saw a boundless white terrain. It was a wilderness of drifting snow and ice, and might yet be his resting place. Stanford didn’t really care. It didn’t matter anymore. He saw the white world sweeping out to meet the sky, and suddenly

felt a great peace.

‘Holy fuck!’ Rocky said.

Stanford followed his pointing finger, saw the radiant blue sky, great circles of white light spreading out to form luminous patterns. He was used to that by now, knew the tricks of the Antarctic, but leaned forward and looked more intently at what Rocky was excitedly indicating. Something flashed and blinked off. The rings of light framed the blue sky. He kept looking and he saw the flash again about nine o’clock high. It came and went in an instant. Before he could blink, it appeared again. This time it was much farther down: a brief flash and then nothing.

‘Over there,’ Rocky said, pointing. ‘It’s changed position… Jesus Christ, *now there’s two of them*!’

Stanford followed his pointing finger. He saw two pulsating lights. They were west of the airplane, flying level with it, pacing it, two dime-sized pulsating white lights in the light-streaked blue sky. Stanford shook his head to clear it. The two lights were now three. The third light had just abruptly winked on, as if it had always been there. Rocky whooped with excitement. The lights were flying in formation. They formed the three points of a triangle and kept abreast of the airplane.

‘It could be nothing,’ Stanford said. ‘It might just be atmospheric phenomena.’

‘No way,’ Rocky said. ‘Those lights are *moving*! Those motherfuckers are pacing us… There they go… *Wow*!’

The three lights broke apart, moving slowly, serenely, one ascending and one descending, leaving the other one between them, forming a long, vertical line. It was a precise, vertical line, pacing the plane, pulsating brightly, the three lights about a hundred feet apart, one on top of the other. Rocky whooped

with excitement. Stanford just stared, entranced. The lights pulsated against the vivid blue sky and outshone the bright sunlight.

Then two suddenly exploded – not exploded: disappeared – were suddenly over and under the airplane as two large, silvery disks. The plane vibrated violently. It was sandwiched between the saucers. The saucers glittered above and below the plane and were approximately a hundred feet wide. Then the plane just cut out. Rocky wrestled with the controls. Glancing down, Stanford saw a curving stretch of metallic-gray; looking up, he saw the base of the other saucer, a black hole right above him. It was a stark, total blackness, denying definition, so deep that it was more like a hole than anything solid. Stanford blinked and it was gone. The silent plane plummeted downward. Stanford saw the glistening snow, the glinting peaks of the glaciers, two lights streaking away to join a third, the whole sky disappearing. The plane kept diving and Rocky cursed, fighting vainly with the controls, then the engine suddenly roared back into life and the plane leveled out. Stanford saw the sky again, swinging down and then steadying; he saw the three lights streaking toward a line of mountains and then blinking out.

‘Holy shit!’ Rocky said.

‘What the hell’s happening here?’ One of the crew had come up from the rear, wiping blood from his nose. ‘We nearly lost the snow tractor. I nearly got my head smashed. What the hell are you doing, diving like that? That area back there was wild.’

‘We had an accident,’ Rocky lied.

‘What the hell does *that* mean? This fucking airplane went as dead as a doornail and damned nearly killed us.’

‘It’s okay,’ Rocky said. ‘I made a little mistake. Stop worrying. It won’t happen again. Don’t get your balls in a knot.’

‘You’re fucking crazy,’ the man said.

‘That’s right, I’m fucking crazy. Now get your fat ass back to the rear and keep your eyes on that tractor.’

The man vanished back inside. Stanford stared straight ahead. Rocky pulled the plane up, climbing gradually, gaining altitude, glancing at Stanford, his eyes large with excitement, beads of sweat on his forehead. Stanford glanced down at the mountains, saw the snow-covered peaks, stark shadows breaking up the white cliffs where great canyons divided them.

‘That’s it,’ Rocky said. ‘And that’s where the saucers went. You were right, holy shit, you were right: they’re hiding somewhere down there.’

‘You better keep climbing,’ Stanford said.

‘That’s just what I’m doing. Though I don’t know if it’ll do any good if those saucers come back. Did you see how fast they moved? And they definitely killed our engine. The plane was dead, but it just kept flying as if by pure magic. I still can’t buy it. I just don’t believe it’s possible. But those saucers killed our engine, they somehow carried us with them, then they just flew away and let us drop – and I don’t understand that.’

Rocky shook his head in wonder, pulled the plane up, kept climbing, leveled out when he felt that they were safe, muttering under his breath. They were approaching the mountains, flying high above the peaks, seeing sunlight flashing on and off the ice to form faint, shifting rainbows. There was more color there: the peaks were tinged with pink and green, the light beating off the ice to make arches of yellow and gold. The mountain peaks were free of snow, thrusting up to the sky, a white haze that faded into violet and then became azure blue. Stanford felt overwhelmed, his eyes glued to the terrain, seeing the shadows of canyons and ravines as black scars on the glaring white.

‘Fuck.’ Rocky said. ‘We’re too high. We won’t see a damned thing.’

They were above the mountains now, turning west and flying along them, looking down on ink-black shadow and flashing light, an indication of ravines and ice peaks, a ribboned scar through pure white. Then the plane started coughing, started spluttering and vibrating, dipped and then picked up again, its engine malfunctioning. Rocky cursed and glanced at Stanford. They both looked down at the mountains. They saw the ribbon of shadow and light splitting in two, the two ribbons rippling outward and then returning to form a dark circle.

‘That’s it!’ Rocky bawled.

‘Yes,’ Stanford said, ‘that’s it. And we must be on the edge of the force field. You’d better go higher.’

‘Jesus Christ, can you see it?’

‘Yes, Rocky, I can see it. Now let’s get the hell out of her and land somewhere safe.’

Rocky shook his head from side to side, started changing direction, circling around and then heading back the way they had come, muttering under his breath. Stanford looked down, saw the circle passing under them, the boundless white terrain all around it, a blank, frozen wilderness. Then he blinked and looked again, saw two lights fanning out, streaking up from the glaciers in opposite directions, flying apart at incredible speed and then just disappearing. Stanford looked down at the mountain, saw nothing and then looked up, saw a light shooting away to the west and then just blinking out.

Stanford couldn’t believe it. Turning his head to look east, he saw a light ascending vertically, stopping abruptly, then racing toward him. He shouted a warning to Rocky. He didn’t know what that light was. It ballooned into a massive, flaring disk that shot past them and disappeared. The plane shrieked

and rocked violently, was bathed in a blinding radiance, the light racing away and shrinking in the west and then shooting up vertically. The plane settled down again. Rocky glanced wildly around him. The same man came out of the rear and said, ‘Hey, what the fuck?’ and then the light from the west raced back again and shot past and was gone. ‘Lord Almighty!’ Rocky said. A light shot out of the east and then flared up and shot by them and disappeared. The man behind them was thrown sideways. The lights exploded over the plane and passed each other and disappeared on both sides. The man behind them was cursing. Equipment shot off the shelves and flew around and formed a shocking cacophony. Rocky fought with the controls. Stanford glanced east and west. The lights were pinpoints in the distance, flying at incredible speed, suddenly ballooning above the plane as massive silvery disks, making the plane rock, then racing away in opposite directions, becoming pinpoints again.

‘Holy shit! We can’t beat them!’

Rocky fought with the controls, trying to keep his plane steady, but was defeated every time the disks shot past and stopped as pinpoints some miles away. The plane was shrieking, rocking wildly, the holding bay now in chaos, the man behind them bawling incoherently as he rolled on the floor. Stanford looked east and west, saw the pinpoints of light, blinked and saw the huge silvery disks expanding overhead, shrinking. The plane rocked even more. It was coughing and spluttering. The disks raced back and forth, from east to west, and kept passing each other.

Stanford observed them, amazed. He hardly thought of the bucking plane. He was fascinated by the speed and capability of the two flying saucers. They raced in and shot away. Stanford tried to see them properly. He put his head back and looked straight above him, but it didn’t help much. The flying saucers were too fast. They passed faster then he could blink. He saw nothing but a flaring silvery mass that divided and disappeared. Then he looked east and west. He saw the pinpoints of light. They ascended vertically, then

descended again and then were spread out above him. The plane rocked when they passed, its engine spluttering on and off, and the two men in the holding bay were bawling as equipment fell on them.

‘We’re going down!’ Rocky bawled.

The horizon rose above the cockpit, the white plains spreading out, sunlight flashing on and off the iced peaks around the edge of the mountains. Rocky tried to pull the plane up, struggling with the control column, cursing as the plane spiraled downward, heading straight for the mountains. The flaring light fanned out above them, seemed to boil through the cockpit, disappeared as the plane shrieked and shook and went out of control. The disks appeared out of nowhere, this time passing over and under before shooting away. Stanford was stunned. The disks had sandwiched the falling plane, had passed so close he thought they would crush it, and again were mere pinpoints in the distance. The plane spluttered and kept falling. The shadowed mountains spun below them. Rocky screamed a stream of vile abuse as the mountains rushed up at them.

First the sky, then the white plains, then the spinning ink-black shadows, then the flashing of glaciers and ice caps and the deep, jagged canyons. The plane kept nose-diving, its engine spluttering, then dying, the mountains spreading out and then spinning and becoming a jigsaw. Rocky screamed his abuse. The men were bawling in the rear. Stanford looked down, mesmerized, seeing light-reflecting ice, the great snowfalls leading into the canyons of brown earth and ocher rock. It spread out and spun around them. Walls of ice shot up on all sides. Dazzling light flared up and swept through the cockpit and then became darkness.

The plane lurched and leveled out, raced along an ice-free canyon. A glowing disk, about a hundred feet wide, was keeping pace just below it. Stanford looked down, blinked a few times, then looked up. There was another enormous disk above the plane, a black, silver-edged whirlpool. The plane wasn’t making a sound. The saucers made a whipping noise. They were so

close to the plane, they almost touched it, and somehow they were drawing it onward.

Then the black hole was gone. The sky exploded above them. The plane roared back to life and climbed steeply toward the snow and then it was out on its own again. It left the canyon far below. There was no sign of the saucers. The plane leveled out and raced across a gleaming ice cap that surmounted a snow-covered mountain ridge. Rocky whooped and grinned wildly and grabbed the control column. Stanford glanced down and saw a round shadow racing over the ice cap. 'Shit, no!' Rocky howled. Stanford jerked his head back. Looking up, he saw a dime-sized, glowing disk, growing bigger, descending.

'*Not again*!' Rocky bawled.

First the sky, then the saucer, a black whirlpool above them, stretching out about fifty feet on either side, a swirling silver-edged glowing mass. The plane's engine cut out. The swirling mass pressed them down. Rocky fought with the control column and then screamed more abuse. Stanford looked up at the saucer. He couldn't define what he was seeing. He was looking up at a swirling dark mass that pulsated and glowed. It defied the laws of science. It was black, yet filled with light. It glowed and was devoid of all color, had no depth, yet seemed hollow. Stanford observed it and was foiled. He didn't know what he was seeing. Then it flared up and changed, became a dull, metallic-gray, possibly spinning, its rim glowing and pulsating, racing in, shooting skyward. Stanford blinked and it was gone. Rocky's scream made him look down. The plane was just above the ice cap, flying across its glassy surface, the ice rushing up and spreading out around them and becoming a blurred white.

'*Hold on*!' Rocky screamed.

The skis screeched touching down, chopped the ice and sent it flying, a white storm that howled and raged in their ears and pummeled the fuselage. The

plane bounced up and down, the skis chopping and screeching, blocks of ice and great chunks of packed snow sweeping past in boiling white clouds. The noise was hellish, almost deafening, reverberating around the cockpit as the skis chopped through the ice and dug deep and finally buried themselves. Stanford saw the spinning sky, his head exploding, stars streaming, heard more screeching and hissing and bawling, felt breathless and bruised. Opening his eyes, he saw Rocky, snow swirling outside the windshield. Rocky jackknifed, slumped over, hanging over his safety belt, then jerked upright and shook his head to clear it as the snow settled down again.

‘Hallelujah! We’ve landed.’

He grinned at Stanford, a wild light in his eyes, then shook his head again, unsnapped his safety belt, slithered out of his chair. Stanford quickly did the same, felt various pains darting through him, twisted out of his chair and followed Rocky back into the holding bay. He saw the eyes of the other men, four wide eyes, glazed with shock, floating hopelessly in the gloom of the holding bay, a scene of chaos behind them. Rocky waved and bawled at them, pushed them, took command, not giving them time to think about it, moving quickly and ruthlessly.

‘Okay!’ he bawled. ‘Get that ramp down! Let’s get the hell out of here!’

The ramp crashed down to the snow, a dazzling brightness poured in, the two men silhouetted in glaring white, the plane filled with an icy chill. Stanford stepped forward slowly, his bones aching, head spinning. He saw Rocky waving frantically, heard him bawling, felt the cold creeping into him.

‘Right!’ Rocky bawled. ‘Fucking great! You’re doing fine! Now let’s get the snow tractor out! Okay! Move your asses!’

The silhouettes became men, heading back toward the snow tractor, light flashing in striations around them as they unsnapped the clamps. There was a sharp ringing sound, the clamps banging on the floor, as Stanford passed the

men and went to the ramp and looked up at the sky. A white sheen streaked with blue, stunning clarity, no clouds; then he saw a steel-gray sphere in the sky, high up, hovering silently. Rocky bawled instructions, his voice reverberating, blending in with clanging metal, then the snow tractor, bright yellow and ungainly, slid down the sloped ramp. Stanford shivered, feeling the cold, as the two men filed past him; he stopped Rocky and pointed at the sky and saw his bearded friend nodding. They went together down the ramp, then climbed up onto the tractor. Stanford saw the other men, their eyes too big, glazed with fear, then the tractor suddenly roared and lurched forward, heading east, going nowhere.

There was nowhere to go. They were on a high plateau. The ice cap was a flat snow-white terrain that stretched around them for miles. The tractor churned the snow up. It swirled around them and soaked them. Stanford saw a white ribbon of land between the sky and the ice cap. That land was thousands of feet below them. There might be no way down. Stanford thought about that and felt only a cold, blinding rage.

'*Jesus Christ*!' Rocky hissed.

First the light, then the gloom, the snow billowing up around them, a humming, a vibrating, a savage jolting sensation, a black hole one hundred feet in diameter hovering quietly above them. One man cursed, another screamed, the tractor sliding to the left, Rocky hissing a stream of vile abuse aimed at the saucer. The saucer remained where it was, offering a faint humming sound, its base a vast black hole revolving above the tractor to create a blinding, pummeling snow-storm.

'*Fucking cunts*! *They'll just bury us*!'

Ricky bawled his defiance, pushing the tractor to its limits, grinding over the ice cap, fighting through the swirling snow, heading into a featureless white haze that offered them nothing. Stanford looked up at the saucer, at that rotating black base; when it moved to the side he finally saw its seamless,

silvery-gray body sweeping up to what he thought, vision obscured, was a solid, metallic dome. The saucer appeared to be motionless, always keeping the same distance, but in fact it was moving, inching forward, pacing the tractor, still whipping up the minor snow-storm. Rocky cursed and tried to lose it, swinging the tractor left and right, but the snow swirled and hissed and devoured them, totally blinding them.

Rocky kept going across the ice cap, heading nowhere in particular, just desperately hoping to escape from the hovering saucer and the snow it was whipping up. They were moving through an eternity, time frozen, all frozen: the tractor and the men and the landscape and the saucer above them. Stanford saw the other two men, one cracking and screaming and shaking and frantically waving his hands. He tried to leap off the tractor, was pulled back by his friend, both falling down and rolling on the floor. Stanford shivered and looked up, numbed by cold, choked with rage, and saw the black base of the saucer as it suddenly glided toward them and then came down upon them.

Then its laser beams shot down, turning the snow into steam, two beams of pulsating light that split the ice right in front of them. The ice cracked in jagged lines, spewing steam and spinning diamonds, hissing and snapping and exploding with an earthquake's fierce venom. Rocky cursed and spun around, was flung forward, hands outstretched, as the tractor crashed down into a crevice and the laser beams vanished. Rocky spinning – Stanford saw it, his own body jackknifing, rolling over and exploding with pain, his feet finding the floor again. The tractor growled and churned the snow up, tilted downward, going nowhere, a much stronger, more devastating storm howling wildly about them. Stanford stood up, felt lost, heard a wretched, shocked sobbing, saw the dark mass of the saucer just above, now obscured by the swirling snow. The sobbing turned into a scream, a pair of hands waving frantically, the man pushing his friend to the floor, then falling over the side. Stanford saw him, did nothing, thought of nothing, felt dreamlike, was pushed forward by a pair of strong hands and urged over the side. He dropped into the snow, was whipped by it, numbed totally, saw the dark mass in the

sky, the three shadowy forms just ahead, stumbling blindly and bawling.

First the wind, then the snow, then the dark mass, then the whiteout, then the running, crouched low, seeing nothing, then the beam of pulsating light. The beam swept across their path, and they ran, leaping forward, heard a scream and turned around and saw a man sinking down, disappearing. The ice snapped and the chasm widened, falling a thousand feet, and they turned away and plunged into the storm, the great saucer above them. Stanford heard another scream, couldn't tell one man from the other, saw a rigid beam of light beaming down upon a dancing silhouette. The man quivered and spun around, his face briefly illuminated, then he jerked and fell back, his eyes bright in the light, and the snapping ice split and opened wide and then swallowed him whole.

Stanford turned back and ran, turned right and saw the other unknown man as a shadowy form. They fled together, as one, moving blindly, not thinking, pushed onward by the dark mass above them, each leaning on the other. Then more beams of light shot down, the lasers cutting through the ice, the ice snapping and hissing and streaming and exploding around them. They both stopped, feeling trapped, both alone with a shadow, then they moved again, running around the beams of light, the snow flaying their skin. Too late: they saw the end. A beam of light shot between them. Stanford jumped back and stumbled and fell and heard the other man screaming. Then darkness, the snapping sound of ice splitting, the dying echo of the man plunging down a thousand feet to his death. Then silence. And nothing.

Stanford lay there on his back, the snow settling around him, his skin numb, his bones aching, head spinning, the brilliant daylight returning. He observed the saucer descending, no longer glowing, enormous and very real in the sunlight, descending gently and quietly. Stanford sat up, fell back, pressed his hands into the snow, gasped and turned onto his belly, saw the radiant blue sky. He was near the edge of the ice cap, a thousand feet above the lowlands, his eyes drinking in a stunning panorama of white, frozen wilderness. It was

too much, too blinding, too remote to be real, and he sighed and rolled onto his back and then forced himself upright. The saucer was there before him, its seamless sides sweeping up to a large steel dome, resting lightly on the snow of the ice cap, the sun flashing around it.

Stanford studied the saucer. He felt cold, but very calm. He sat there on the ice, in the snow and the silence, a white wilderness one thousand feet below, a radiant blue sky above. Stanford sat there and waited.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Stanford waited a long time, his eyes fixed on the gleaming saucer, the snow drifting lazily around him, the silence unbroken. The saucer seemed enormous, its sloping sides a seamless gray, sweeping up to a solid metal dome. The dome was thirty-five feet high, the saucer three times that in width, sunlight beating down and flashing off its gray surface and turning it white. All white. Everything. The land and sky looked the same. There was no definition, no sense of direction; just a glaring, white void all around him, that stark, total silence.

The saucer didn't move, made no sound, offered nothing, was simply spread out across the ice cap as if actually part of it. Stanford sat there and studied it, feeling cold but very calm, occasionally squinting into the white haze on all sides, a light frost gradually covering him. The saucer still didn't move. It made no sound at all. After a long time, feeling the cold eating at him, Stanford climbed to his feet.

His bones were bruised and aching, his skin numb, his head light, and he stood there for a moment, uncertain, the snow drifting about him. Then he walked toward the saucer, feeling small, slightly unreal, stopped a few feet away from its near edge and saw it towering over him. He stared at it with wonder. The steel surface swept up to the dome, exceptionally smooth, totally seamless, curving back down and then under its edge, becoming part of the base. There were no doors or windows, no visible lights. He looked up at the solid metal dome, but it was vague in the white haze. Stanford stood there, bemused. The saucer filled his line of vision. He stepped forward, stopped close to the curved edge, then reached out and touched it.

The metal felt like sandpaper. Stanford ran his fingers across it. He felt air, or he thought he felt air, and then he stepped closer to it. The metal was porous, the holes smaller than grains of sand, scraping almost imperceptibly against his fingertips and releasing trapped air. Stanford smiled and looked closer, examining the curved edge; he saw fine, nearly invisible lines crisscrossing each other. The lines formed various rectangles, some small, others large, sweeping up to the base of the metal dome, dissected by other lines. Stanford studied them at length. He heard a low-pitched humming sound. Panels slid upward around the sloping edge to reveal hidden lights.

Stanford stood there, not moving. The lights were covered with convex glass or Perspex, various colors, thick and opaque, with a very slight ripple finish. None of the lights were on. The low-pitched humming sound grew louder. A series of panels slid upward where the sloping surface was almost vertical, revealing a long, rectangular window that curved around the whole body of the saucer. The windows were illuminated with violet light, then this color changed to a whitish yellow. A group of shadowy, human-shaped figures were lined up along the window, obviously staring down at him.

Stanford stood there, waiting patiently. He heard a muffled hissing sound. A large section of the curved wall moved forward, tilting back from its top edge. It slid out on large steel hinges, tilting backward, moving forward, its front edge eventually touching the ground, its back edge still inside the saucer. The section of wall was now a ramp, leading up into the saucer. Stanford studied the wide, rectangular opening and saw a white wall beyond it. The men at the windows were looking at him. The windows were well above the door. Stanford smiled and then walked up the ramp and found himself in a corridor.

The inner wall was white and blank. There were windows on the other wall. These windows were behind the gray shell of the saucer’s body, or fuselage. The corridor curved away from him and obviously ran around the saucer. He then heard a sharp hissing sound and the door closed behind him.

He stood there in the corridor. He waited, but no one came. There was a muffled humming all around him, above him, below him. Intrigued, he started walking. He felt no fear at all. The humming sound was filling his head and it helped him relax. The corridor curved around the saucer, its white walls and ceiling arched, then a door slid across the space directly in front of him, forcing him to stop walking.

There was a room to his left, white walls forming a perfect circle, broken up by the rectangular windows at which the men had been standing. A small hunchbacked man approached him, waving an unusually delicate hand, inviting him in. Stanford stepped into the circular room and stopped close to the hunchback.

‘You’re all right?’ the hunchback asked.

‘I think so,’ Stanford said.

‘I’m Ruediger,’ the hunchback said. ‘Please don’t worry. We will take you down now.’

Stanford gazed around the room. It was shaped like a large dome. The walls were covered with control panels and consoles and what looked like computers. There were eight men in the room. They were uncommonly small. Some were young boys, others were Ache Indians, three were fair-skinned and middle-aged. About half of them wore masks that were made of thin metal, covering their noses and mouths, molded close to the skin. Stanford studied them, fascinated and horrified, realising that they were cyborgs: part men, part machine. The boys and Indians were at the consoles, seated in chairs fixed to the floor, the control panels flickering. The other men studied Stanford, not smiling, their eyes dead, then they turned away and sat in other chairs, turning knobs, pressing buttons, flicking switches. The computers started flashing. The muffled humming sound grew louder. Stanford felt a light vibration, *thought* he felt it, wasn’t sure, then he looked down at the small man with the hunched back, saw his upturned brown eyes.

‘Come,’ the hunchback said. He was smiling and indicating with his hands. The hands had an unusual delicacy, a feminine grace. ‘Come,’ he said. ‘I will show you.’

He led Stanford across the floor, up some steps to a raised platform, the floor running right around the dome, above the computers and consoles. The long windows were there. Stanford stood beside the hunchback. The ice cap was shrinking beneath him, blending in with the mountains, the glittering snowfalls of the wilderness spreading out until they encompassed the horizon. The saucer was ascending, climbing vertically, leisurely, then it stopped, or seemed to stop – Stanford didn’t feel a thing – then it moved horizontally, as if flying backward, and then descended again.

There was no sense of motion. The saucer descended at the speed of an elevator, falling into the mountains. The mountain peaks climbed up around them, first the rock, then blocks of snow, then the sheer, towering walls of blue ice, turning green, disappearing.

They were moving faster now. The saucer was flying horizontally. Walls of algae and plankton, moss-covered rocks splashed with white, were sweeping past on both sides of the saucer as it raced through a canyon. There was still no sense of motion. Stanford thought he could feel a light vibration. Looking down, he saw the rim of the saucer, metallic-gray in a pulsating, glowing haze. Then he looked ahead again, saw the canyon walls parting, opening out around a lake, the lake whipping out of sight, more snow, more brown earth, a rich green spreading outward, then an immense, round valley, its white cliffs soaring skyward, the ice flashing and fading away above the earth and then becoming pure rock. The saucer flew across the valley, the green earth rushing at them, then the rushing earth slowed down, almost stopped, then rose gently to greet them.

Stanford didn’t feel a thing. There was no sense of movement. The saucer drifted, or appeared to drift, across the wide valley, heading toward the towering cliffs that surrounded it and cast gigantic shadows. The hunchback

raised a hand and pointed. Stanford stared straight ahead. He saw the mouths of large natural caves at the base of the ice-free cliffs.

‘We go in there,’ the hunchback said.

Stanford glanced at the rim of the saucer, saw the pulsating glow dying, the panels around the rim opening to expose all the lights. Then the lights started flashing, left to right, right to left, a kaleidoscope of green and blue and orange and violet, flashing right around the rim of the saucer as it moved slowly forward. The caves expanded as they approached, became enormous dark tunnels, and the saucer glided into a tunnel, its colored lights flashing on and off. Stanford saw natural rock, the glint of moisture and green moss, then saw a pinpoint of light far ahead, growing bigger each second. First a pinpoint, then a dime, then a glowing balloon, then a round exit racing at them and pouring light over them.

Stanford saw another valley, almost roofed in with cliffs, the rocks forming an umbrella above, the sun beaming through crevices. The valley floor was far below, broken up by silvery domes, some minute, others looking quite large, the ground around them a deep brown. The saucer hovered and then descended, dropping slowly, almost leisurely; it appeared to bob up and down gently, yet Stanford felt nothing. He looked down on the silvery domes, at first mistaking them for geodesic domes, but then saw them rising up and becoming larger and taking shape as parked saucers. Stanford stared at them, bemused. The valley was spread out around him. The saucer dropped past a soaring wall of glinting metal, and Stanford, looking back, saw a flying saucer as big as a cathedral: one of the legendary carrying ships.

The saucer touched down gently. The hunchback looked up and smiled. Stanford gazed through the window, saw a large square steel platform, the flashing lights around the saucer’s rim blinking out one by one. The metal panels slid back down, leaving the saucer’s body, the fuselage, looking smooth and seamless once more. The steel platform was above the ground, thrusting out from the face of the cliff, fronting a tunnel from which a group

of men emerged, bareheaded, wearing coveralls. They were all big men, their lower half of their faces in silvery masks, and they pushed a mobile lounge against the saucer as its door angled downward. The door was swallowed by the mobile lounge. The lounge was pushed against the saucer. Its angled edge had been perfectly contoured to the saucer's sloped surface.

'We go out now,' the hunchback said.

Accompanied by a cyborg guard, he led Stanford down the steps, across the dome-shaped white room, past the adolescents in coveralls, the Ache in the chairs, their mouths and noses sealed and rendered useless, their narrow eyes dulled and fathomless. Stanford, now accepting them, almost thinking of them as normal, left the room with the hunchback, followed him back along the curving white-walled corridor with its row of sealed windows. They turned onto the ramp, the lounge's ceiling arched over them, the walls and floor painted white, the windows framing solid rock, passed through the lounge and continued along a tunnel with invisible lighting. The tunnel was quite long and had been hacked out of the rock; it ran into the bowels of the mountain and was surprisingly warm.

As Stanford followed the hunchback, he studied his strange hands, took note of their uncommon, almost feminine delicacy, the crude contrast of powerful arms. Then they left the tunnel, stepping into brilliant light, crossed a catwalk high above a workshop of impressive dimensions. Stanford saw jibs and cranes, a lot of roaring machines, sheets of metal, dull-gray and all shapes, being swung to and fro. There were hundreds of workers down there, steel benches, steaming vats, blast furnaces and screeching electric drills, immense saucer-shaped skeletons.

Stanford stopped to see more, but was pushed forward by a cyborg, saw an oblong metal plate in his fist, was touched by it and received a shock from it. It was a sharp electric shock, jolting painfully through his shoulder, and he hurried onward, still following the hunchback, his arm stinging and burning. They passed through another tunnel, crossed a steel-plated room, rows of

frosted-glass cabinets on the shelves, naked bodies inside them. Stanford stared at them, startled, felt the chill in the room, then recovered and followed the hunchback through a door that led into another room.

This room was a laboratory, steel-plated, quite large, the walls rising to a ceiling of chiseled rock that was part of the mountain. The staff looked perfectly normal, men and women in white smocks, reading and writing, peering into microscopes, checking printouts and gauges and thermometers, working quietly, intently. What was different were the specimens in the cages and glass jars: human heads, pumping hearts, floating brains and intestines, a naked body sitting upright in a chair, a wire frame where its head should have been. The frame was shaped like a human head, was made from crisscrossing wires, contained flashing bulbs and fuses and copper coils, wires and tubes running out of it. The wires and tubes ran to a console, were plugged into various sockets, the console flashing and buzzing, activating the headless body, its arms rising and falling, legs kicking: a puppet of flesh and blood. Stanford quickly turned away, saw the hunchback smiling at him, felt the sting of the electric fist in his back, so followed the hunchback through another door.

They passed through a kind of warehouse, its walls hacked out of the mountain, refrigerated and couched in semidarkness, filled with tables and cabinets. Stanford tried not to look, was fascinated and horrified, his head level with the cabinets, the tables on all sides, his eyes drawn against their will to what was present: the nightmare of scientific progress.

The cabinets kept the flesh frozen, arms and legs, hands and feet, wires extending from bloody necks and stumps, electrodes sprouting from sliced skulls. The tables were even worse, the human subjects not completed: here a steel chin and nose, there a woman with plastic breasts, here a torso with metal legs, valves and tubes instead of genitals, there a chest with the skin peeled off the bone, its hydraulic heart pumping. Other cabinets contained the hardware: the exoskeletons and pacemakers, the percutaneous power

connections, the bifurcated blood vessels and aortic valves and silicone boosters, the orthopedic braces and cobalt joints and piezoelectric generators – the stainless steel and chromium, the meat and bone, of those picked to be cyborgs.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Stanford whispered.

The metal fist thumped his spine, the electric shock stabbing through him, and he gasped and followed the hunchback past the tables, the cyborg padding behind him. They went through another doorway, passed more bodies in cabinets, the glass frosted, the graph needles not moving, and then came to yet another door. The hunchback stepped aside, bowed to Stanford, waved at him, and Stanford stepped through the doorway and was dazzled by bright light and plate glass.

He was in a dome-shaped room, its white metal walls gleaming, large windows running around the curved wall, framing clear sky and mountain peaks. There were doors between the windows, steel-plated, all closed, large consoles jutting out just above them, their lights flashing on and off. The room was about fifty feet wide. There was a desk in the middle. On the desk there was an intercom, a Micro-film viewer, a pile of books, pens and pencils, notepaper, a black panel of switches. There were chairs in front of the desk, all white, deep and comfortable; there was no other furniture in the room and the floor was cold plastic. A man sat behind the desk. He was staring steadily at Stanford. He was handsome and white-haired and slim, and he waved Stanford forward.

Stanford crossed the cold floor, his footsteps reverberating. It seemed to take a long time to reach the desk, but he got there eventually. He stopped and stared at Wilson. He had no doubt that it was Wilson. Stanford saw the unusually seamless forehead and knew who he was talking to.

‘Mr Wilson,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ Wilson replied. ‘You’ve come a long way to see me.’

Stanford didn’t smile. He hadn’t smiled in a long time. He rubbed his beard and looked at Wilson’s blue eyes and was reminded of the Antarctic ice.

‘This is it,’ Wilson said. He waved his hand in a careless manner. ‘Those doors lead out to the colony, to all the different departments; the consoles tell me what’s going on and I control it from here. The colony forms a sort of circle. The tunnels run right through the mountain. The tunnels are the spokes of the wheel, and this room is the hub. We’re at the top of a plateau. The tunnels lead down to the bottom. The saucers and construction plants are down there, and can’t be seen from the sky. This room constitutes the highest point. Overhanging rocks hide it. I have lived here for more than thirty years and I find it inspiring.’

Wilson offered a bleak smile, his blue eyes as cold as ice, brightened with a luminous intelligence that did not show emotion. There was no malice in him. Stanford sensed that immediately. Wilson knew neither malice nor fear: he had gone beyond all that.

‘You know who I am?’ Stanford asked.

‘Naturally,’ Wilson said. ‘We’ve been watching you and Epstein for years; you were both too persistent.’

‘Where is he?’ Stanford asked.

‘You’ll see him soon,’ Wilson said. ‘Dr Epstein is healthier than he was – and is really quite happy.’

‘Happy?’

‘Yes, happy,’ Wilson said.

‘What the fuck did you do to him?’ Stanford said.

‘I just offered him life.’

Wilson smiled and stood up, crossed the room to the window, his movements excessively slow and careful, then stopped and looked out. All white. Everything. The Antarctic was spread out far below. He turned away from the window and looked at Stanford, his face smooth and expressionless.

‘Why did you come here?’ he asked.

‘I came for Epstein,’ Stanford said.

‘No,’ Wilson said, ‘I don’t think so. That doesn’t make sense.’

‘Why not?’ Stanford asked.

‘You must have known you couldn’t go back. You knew you couldn’t get in here unless we let you enter – and you knew that you couldn’t escape. You must have known that and yet you still came… It wasn’t just for your old friend.’

‘Partly that,’ Stanford said.

‘And the other part?’ Wilson asked.

‘I don’t know,’ Stanford said. ‘I’m not sure. I guess I just had to finish it.’

Wilson smiled without humor. The smile didn’t reach his eyes. He went around the desk and sat down, his gaze still fixed on Stanford.

‘You’re living dangerously,’ Stanford said.

‘I’m not sure I understand.’

‘We’re all alone here,’ Stanford said. ‘I could kill you. And I think I might do it.’

‘I don’t think so,’ Wilson said. ‘You didn’t come here for that. Besides, it would serve little purpose: it would not affect this place.’

‘You’re not concerned for yourself?’

‘Not really,’ Wilson said. ‘I’ve had a long life, a full life, but it can’t last forever.’

‘You’re a cyborg,’ Stanford said.

‘Not quite accurate,’ Wilson said. ‘I have an artificial heart, a few joints are prosthetic replacements, my face has undergone plastic surgery, but I’m hardly a cyborg. Not that it makes much difference. Even cyborgs pass away. We still haven’t conquered the liver, and that means we’re still mortal.’

‘How long have you got left?’

‘A few more years,’ Wilson said.

‘Then what? What happens when you die?’

‘This place will continue.’

He stared steadily at Stanford. His eyes radiated no feelings. He displayed neither malice nor warmth, his soul destroyed by intelligence.

‘Man is simply a tool,’ he said. ‘He is the seed of evolution. He exists to explore and create, and has no other value. But men alone are self-destructive. Without discipline they rot. Take the history of man and examine it and you come up with lunacy. Wasted time and opportunity, self-indulgence and corruption, material greed and self-pity and vanity – all negative impulses. The will to freedom has never worked; every success has been matched with failure; we step forward and then we step back and wallow in pettiness. Our superiority is in thinking. Only the mind has any value. But our animal needs, our appetites and fears, keep us chained in self-

imposed imprisonment. We must leave the cave behind us. We must reach for the stars. We can't do that while Democracy persists and lets freedom destroy us.'

'Freedom leads to creativity.'

'No, it doesn't,' Wilson said. 'Freedom leads to boredom and conflict and waste – and encourages stagnancy.'

'The world hasn't stagnated.'

'It hasn't advanced much,' Wilson said. 'Or, at least, it's only advanced on one level and is now dangerously imbalanced. We have advanced scientifically, have made extraordinary leaps forward, and now we stand on the brink of the miraculous and can reshape man's future. But that advance was intellectual. We're still emotionally retarded. The other side of man is still as primitive as it was in the cave. That side remains unchanged. It hides the dire results of freedom. It disguises mindless greed, political suspicion and social fear, pointless hatred and the boredom and resentment that lead to destruction. The world is wallowing in bloodshed, the atmosphere's being polluted, we're gradually gobbling up our natural resources and inviting a barren Earth. We do this because of greed, because of politics and war, and these things are the consequences of so-called freedom, the fruits of Democracy. Man must have a purpose. He must be disciplined and driven. Only then will the world become sane and save itself from ruination.'

'Totalitarianism,' Stanford said. 'A world of masters and slaves. The people will be content because they're zombies… and the Earth will be peaceful.'

'You disapprove,' Wilson said.

'Damned right, I disapprove. It's obscene and it's been tried before and it just never works. A man needs free choice. Without that, he's not a man. To steal a man's will and contradictions it to steal his humanity.'

‘That’s sentiment,’ Wilson said.

‘I’m a sentimentalist,’ Stanford said.

‘You’re a primitive,’ Wilson said. ‘You’re self-destructive. That’s why you came here.’

‘Fuck you,’ Stanford said. ‘What you’re saying is shit. And you won’t get away with it forever – the world out there won’t let you.’

‘Won’t it?’ Wilson said. ‘How naive you are, Stanford. The world out there is part of the conspiracy – and has been for years. The United States knows about us. The Soviet Union knows about us. The British and the Germans know about us, and all of them deal with us. What I have is what they need. What I’m doing is what they want. The world is out of control, freedom has led to revolution, and now Democracy is no more than a name to keep the innocent happy. You think your people are any different? No, Stanford, they’re not. Totalitarianism creeps over the world and is stifling resistance. Regimentation is increasing. People are numbers instead of names. The world is now ruled by a selected few, and suppression is spreading. Surveillance is widespread. Every citizen is on file. The salient facts of every individual human have been fed to computers. Television mesmerizes them. Piped music fills their factories. Credit cards and employment cards and passports have rendered privacy obsolete. All these people are mere numbers. Their so-called freedom is an illusion. Their politics, their culture, their religions have no bearing on anything. Let them demonstrate occasionally. Let them criticize and abuse. Feed them issues that will keep them engaged while the real work goes on. In the end, they’ll be passive. They won’t really have any choice. Their credit cards and employment cards and passports can be withdrawn at any time. Such items make or break them. A select few decide the issue. The mass of men are led by the nose and they don’t even know it. That’s your freedom, Mr Stanford. That’s your precious Democracy. The world is a chess game, the pieces are property, and the game is only played by the select few who hide behind closed doors.’

‘A neat theory,’ Stanford said. ‘But it has one glaring flaw. Your players will fight amongst themselves, and you’ll still have world conflict. The Americans want you out of here. The Russians want you out as well. They’re human beings and they’re filled with the suspicion and fear that you loathe. You won’t have peace on Earth. They’re just playing for time. When they’re ready, or when they *think* that they’re ready, they’ll come at you with everything. You just said it yourself: they’re not logical creatures. They’re human beings and they’re moved by primitive fears – and that’s the flaw in your scheme. Sooner or later, they’ll try it. It might be madness, but they’ll try it. Then the war that will come, caused by you, will be the war to end wars.’

‘You’re wrong,’ Wilson said quietly. ‘I’ve made allowances for that. I’m not so naive as to imagine that this race can continue. The race will *not* continue. It will end in ten years time. Within ten years every major government post will be run from this colony. We have people everywhere, in every country, in every government, and those people have electrodes in their heads and will do what we tell them. They are currently in the Pentagon, in the CIA and FBI, in NASA and the Cheyenne Mountain Complex, in the Army and Navy and Air Force, in every top-secret project. It’s the same all over the world. We have our people everywhere. We’re robotizing important people every year, and every year it gets easier. They don’t know they’re robotized. They believe they’re making their own decisions. But every new law of suppression, every new surveillance system, every action that changes the course of world events is dictated by us. We grow more numerous every month. We’re gradually climbing up the pyramid. In ten years – or possibly less – all the rules will be our rules. Your world is ending, Stanford. It will soon be no more. If I sent you back out there tomorrow, it would do you no good.’

Stanford didn’t know what to say. There was nothing left to say. He hadn’t experienced emotion for months, but now he felt it returning. That emotion was fear. It might well have been despair. He gazed down at the man behind

the desk and saw the ice of his blue eyes. Those eyes were devoid of feeling. No malice, no resentment, no greed… It was organization.

Stanford thought this and was shocked. He thought of the world beyond the mountains. That world, his own world, was procreating and becoming too complex. The cities couldn't be controlled, the great suburbs were a mess; inequality and boredom and frustration were leading to madness. Increasing violence and civil strife, increasing wealth and attendant poverty; the contradictions of society were exploding and destroying whole nations. The politicians were defeated: freedom foiled them every day; more and more they were introducing legislation that encouraged suppression. They didn't appear to have much choice. Increasing chaos overwhelmed them. Categorization and surveillance and harassment were all they had left. Stanford thought of it with woe. He desperately wanted an alternative. He felt human for the first time in months and he was paying the full price. The fear chilled him and shook him, turned into bitter rage. He looked at Wilson and felt the first stirrings of a cold, hard defiance.

'Where's Epstein?' he asked.

Wilson reached across the desk, flicked a switch and then stood up. He led Stanford across the room to a door, not saying a word. Stanford looked above the door. A red light flashed on a console. He turned his head and looked out through the window at the Antarctic wilderness. The panorama was stupendous: the white plains stretched to the sky; the jagged mountain peaks were just below, their rocks ringed with blue ice. Then the steel door slid open. Wilson waved Stanford in. They stood together in the white-walled elevator and the doors closed in front of them.

The elevator descended quietly, dropping down through the mountain. Stanford thought of what the German had told him about Hitler's teahouse. He saw a window in one wall. Floors slid upward and disappeared. There was hardly any sound, no sense of motion, and the elevator was comfortably warm. Wilson didn't say a word. He studied Stanford with detachment.

Stanford saw a huge cavern, littered grottoes and caves, various workshops and storerooms and offices, people working in silence. The elevator door slid open. They stepped out into an office. The walls were painted white, the shelves were packed with books, and Professor Epstein was sitting behind a desk, looking up, smiling distantly.

‘Hello, Stanford,’ he said.

Stanford studied his old friend. Epstein did indeed look healthy. He had put on some weight, his gray beard had been trimmed, and he was wearing a shirt and tie, a white coat, his cheeks ruddy, his eyes clear.

‘I’ll leave you now,’ Wilson said. ‘I hope you come to an agreement. You’ll have to make a decision, Dr Stanford, and I hope it’s the right one.’

He turned back to the steel door, the door opened and he stepped in, then the door closed and Wilson was gone, leaving silence behind him.

Stanford studied his old friend. Epstein stayed behind his desk. His hands were clasped under his bearded chin, his eyes clear and steady.

‘It’s good to see you,’ he said.

‘Is it?’ Stanford asked.

‘It’s been a long time,’ Epstein said. ‘It seems more than a year.’

‘What happened to the cancer?’

‘They cured me,’ Epstein said. ‘They’re really quite extraordinary that way. I must say I was grateful.’

‘Grateful?’ Stanford asked.

‘A new life,’ Epstein said. ‘Not just that, but new purpose, new work… Something worth living for.’

Stanford looked at his old friend and a felt a searing anguish, a despair that came out of his very bowels and made him feel lost.

‘What did they do to you?’ he asked.

‘They did nothing,’ Epstein said. ‘They cured me of cancer and explained what they were doing, and I realized that their work was important and decided to stay.’

‘They did an implant,’ Stanford said.

‘Not on me,’ Epstein said.

‘Either you’re lying or you simply can’t remember. They must have done *something*.’

‘They did nothing,’ Epstein said.

‘Jesus Christ,’ Stanford said.

‘Believe me, they didn’t do a thing. They just talked and I listened.’

‘And this is what you want?’

‘Yes, it’s what I want. They took me up above the Earth and showed me things that I just can’t forget.’

‘They did an implant.’

‘Not in me.’

‘They do it to everybody,’ Stanford said. ‘They must have done it to you.’

‘They didn’t.’

‘You don’t remember.’

‘I don’t remember because they didn’t do it. I just want peace and quiet now.’

‘I’m taking you out of here,’ Stanford said.

‘I won’t go,’ Epstein said. ‘The very thought of it gives me a migraine. I just don’t want to go.’

‘A migraine?’ Stanford asked.

‘The thought of outside,’ Epstein said.

‘They did an implant.’

‘No, they didn’t,’ Epstein said. ‘I just don’t want to go.’

Stanford felt hot and clammy, swept with anguish and despair, a hopelessness that threatened to drown him and choke off his resistance. He thought of Jacobs and Gerhardt, of the girl near Galveston, of Scaduto and Epstein and himself and all the years now behind them. The mystery was resolved. The nightmare was manifest. The world was being saved from itself and taking on a new face. Stanford wanted no part of it. He didn’t want to lose himself. He wanted to live with his contradictions and conflicts and the pain of free choice. Yet the price was too great. He didn’t know if he could pay it. He looked down at his old friend, Professor Epstein, and the pain slithered through him. Professor Epstein was no more. His placid eyes were all-revealing. His gazed at Stanford without malice or friendship, offering nothing and everything. Stanford shook with grief and rage. He let his senses fly away. The pain took him apart and just as quickly put him back together and gave life to defiance.

‘You must stay here,’ Epstein said. ‘We need people like you. You will work and know great satisfaction and never feel discontentment.’

‘I don’t want it,’ Stanford said.

‘You must accept it,’ Epstein said.

‘You’re not Epstein,’ Stanford said. ‘You’re someone else. You’re not the person I knew.’

‘I’m the same,’ Epstein said. ‘They just cured me of the cancer. Now I do the kind of work I always dreamed of – and feel wonderful with it.’

‘They’ve stolen your mind.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Epstein said. ‘I know you. I remember my past. I know just who I am.’

‘They’ve stolen your will.’

‘They’ve stolen nothing,’ Epstein said. ‘They just talked and I listened and that’s all. They did not operate.’

‘You can’t remember,’ Stanford said.

‘I’m getting a headache,’ Epstein said. ‘We really must stop talking about this. You must stay. You can’t leave here.’

Epstein’s gaze was placid. His hands were folded on the desk. He looked at Stanford with a calm, remote interest, talking quietly and patiently.

‘You can’t leave here,’ he repeated. ‘There’s really no place to go. You can walk out whenever you wish, but you’ll freeze to death out there. Here you’ll live a painless life. Your life will take on some meaning. You might be deprived of your imagined freedom, but think of the blessings. No more discontentment. No decisions to be made. You will work and take pleasure in that work and never know doubt or fear.’

‘I’ll be robotized.’

‘They won’t do that.’

‘They did it to you,’ Stanford said.

‘No, they didn’t. They didn’t.’

Stanford knew it was useless. His feeling of loss was overwhelming. He let the grief and rage shake him loose and make him fight for his freedom. It didn’t matter where he went. He didn’t give a damn what happened. The point now was to make a decision and then follow through on it.

‘You said I can leave.’

‘That’s correct,’ Epstein said. ‘We won’t stop you, but we won’t help you either. The decision is yours.’

‘I want to leave.’

‘You’ll freeze to death,’ Epstein said.

‘Fuck you,’ Stanford said. ‘Fuck you all. I won’t submit to this shit.’

Epstein sighed and stood up. He walked to the nearest wall. There were large curtains drawn across the wall, reaching down to the floor. Epstein tugged on a sash cord. The wide curtains drew apart. A dazzling light poured through a plate-glass door and washed over both of them. Stanford blinked and rubbed his eyes. He was looking along a hall of glass. Through the glass walls he could see the glaring white of the immense, frozen wilderness.

‘The choice is yours,’ Epstein said. ‘You can stay or you can leave. However, once the decision is made there can be no turning back. You just have to touch this door. It will open and let you through. Once you step into the hall the door will close and trap you in there. You can only leave by the other door. It’s at the far end of the hall. That door opens by contact from inside,

and leads out to the wilderness. You can't open it from outside. If you step out, you have to stay out. You can leave or you can stay – as you wish – and you must decide now.'

Stanford looked at his old friend, at his gray, remote eyes, mutely prayed for some sign of emotion, but received calm indifference. The feeling of loss was overwhelming, the pain unprecedented, shaking Stanford and making his heart pound, leaving nothing but rage.

He would hold the rage and use it. He would make his decision. Neither old friends nor memories nor hopes would make him bend to their will. He was not a machine. He would not be a cipher. Stanford looked along the hall, saw the dazzling sunlight, saw the white haze running out to the sky and then pressed on the plate glass. The wide doors slid apart. The glass hall was filled with light. Stanford stared at his old friend, at his gray eyes and beard, thought of all that they had been through together and dissolved into anguish.

'You're not Epstein,' he said.

He stepped into the hall. The plate-glass doors closed behind him. Sunlight blazed through the glass walls and roof to form dazzling mosaics. Stanford zipped his jacket up. He covered his ears with his woollen hat. He put his hands in his pockets and stepped forward, determined not to look back. The past was now behind him. The hall stretched out to the future. Stanford saw a globe of fire fill the sky with lines of silver and pink. He walked quickly along the hall. The flashing glass was all around him. He reached the door at the far end of the hall and stopped a few feet away from it. Stanford wanted to say something, wanted to speak to the silence, but he stepped forward and the glass doors slid open and the fierce cold rushed in.

All white. Everything. The cold was appalling. Stanford leaned into the wind and stepped forward as the doors closed behind him. He didn't stop or look back. The white wilderness lay before him. The wind blew the snow in languid, glinting clouds across the pack ice and glaciers. Stanford kept

moving forward. He didn’t care where he was going. He saw an arch of light above a horizon that forever receded. All light. Flashing light. A unique and dazzling vision. The light flashed and made his eyes sting and weep. Stanford didn’t give a damn. He felt defiant and proud. He was alive and he kept moving forward to disprove all their theories. He saw a monstrous balloon. It was floating there before him. The balloon was transparent and it shimmered and framed a pink sky. Stanford shivered and stumbled. He had to clench his chattering teeth. The wind moaned and made the snow swirl around him and settle upon him. He ignored it, kept going. His teeth began to ache. The snow settled on his beard and his face and then formed a light frost.

All white. Everything. Definition was lost. The wind moaned and the snow blew all around him and made him a part of it. He fell down and stood up and stumbled forward again. He thought of Epstein and Wilson and the colony and the great flying saucers. The future was here and now. His own time had passed. The snow formed immense darkened portals that were luring him in. He stepped in and saw a light, stumbled forward and watched it grow. The snow hissed and swirled and then the shimmering bright light exploded. All white. Everything. He let the wilderness embrace him. Glinting glaciers and flashing pack ice and streams of yellow and violet. The frost thickened on his face. He couldn’t feel his numbed lips. The hands deep in his pockets had vanished and left shrieking nerve ends. Stanford laughed as he froze. The icy air filled his lungs. He stumbled onward, heading into the wilderness, and would not be defeated.

He went out a long way. The mountains fell far behind him. The white wilderness stretched out on all sides and offered no exit. Stanford didn’t give a damn. He thought of what he had left behind. The future that would rise from the ice held no promise for him. Stanford’s lips cracked when he smiled. His blood froze on the instant. He moved onward with his weeping eyes stinging, his hands and feet missing. No feeling. All numb. The ground shifting and sliding. A great rainbow appeared above the horizon and framed a fierce whiteness. Then a luminous balloon. A mirage: a sun dog. He saw

miracles of blue ice and light, the dazzling wastes of the snowfalls. Stanford stumbled on, regardless. He started talking and singing. He heard a voice that was offering comfort and coaxing him onward. He followed the Pied Piper. He let the sun and snow dissolve him. He fell down and saw the huge slabs of pack ice that drifted and glittered.

He would travel, he would move. He crept along on his belly. His frozen fingers found the snow and dug in and his body inched forward. Stanford saw the drifting ice. He sang and muttered under his breath. Jagged black lines on white glare. A giant jigsaw in the sun. Stanford felt a fierce defiance and exultation that would not let him die. He crawled across the frozen earth. He dragged a dead thing behind him, his body, and would not let it go. Stanford slithered across a crevice. His fingers touched a slab of ice. The ice glittered and reflected the sun as the swirling snow settled down. Stanford muttered and sang. He heard someone singing somewhere. His fingers touched and felt nothing and bent as his body inched forward. Stanford saw streams of light. The light flashed and beat about him. Stanford slithered onto the slab of pack ice and rolled onto his back.

All white. Everything. Stanford saw lights in the sky. They were very high up, very small, pulsating and glowing. He knew what the lights were. He smiled when he saw them. The lights were like stars in the white sky, very bright and intense. Stanford lay there on the pack ice. The ice drifted imperceptibly. Stanford lay there and let the frost encase him and grow into more ice. The lights glided across the sky. They defied the sky's bright haze. The ice drifted and flashed blue and yellow and became part of Stanford. He lay there and smiled. The ice carried him away. He felt a fierce defiance and exultation that would not let him die. The frost thickened and hardened. It molded Stanford to the pack ice. He turned around in the sun, a glass figure, quite beautiful, the light flashing on and off him, exploding, streaming skyward, gradually turning him into a glacier, a prism… a star.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

While *Genesis* is a work of fiction, it has been based on certain facts which the author feels are worth bringing to light.

In the course of researching a different novel altogether, I obtained, through the Imperial War Museum in London, two short articles that immediately attracted my attention. The first was a routine war report by Marshall Yarrow, then the Reuters special correspondent to Supreme Headquarters in liberated Paris. This article had been published, among other places, in the *South Wales Argus* on December 13, 1944, and it stated: 'The Germans have produced a "secret weapon" in keeping with the Christmas season. The new device, which is apparently an air defence weapon, resembles the glass balls which adorn Christmas trees. They have been seen hanging in the air over German territory, sometimes singly, sometimes in clusters. They are colored silver and are apparently transparent.' The second article, an Associated Press release, extracted from the New York *Herald Tribune* of January 2, 1945, illuminated the subject even more. It said: 'Now, it seems, the Nazis have thrown something new into the night skies over Germany. It is the weird, mysterious "Foo Fighter" balls which race alongside the wings of Beaufighters flying intruder missions over Germany. Pilots have been encountering this eerie weapon for more than a month in their night flights. No-one apparently knows what this sky weapon is. The balls of fire appear suddenly and accompany the planes for miles. They seem to be radio-controlled from the ground, so official intelligence reports reveal…'

Intrigued by these reports, I conducted some more research and discovered a highly technical but little known book entitled *Intercettateli Senza Sparare*

(see ‘Sources’ for details) by Renato Vesco, in which the author claims that the ‘Foo Fighter’ actually existed, that it was originally called the *Feuerball*, and that it was first constructed at the aeronautical establishment at Wiener Neustadt, with the help of the Flugfunk Forschungsanstalt of Oberpfaffenhoffen (F.F.O.) According to Vesco, the *Feuerball* was a flat, circular flying machine, powered by a special turbojet engine, that was used by the Germans during the closing stages of the war both as an anti-radar device and as a ‘psychological’ weapon against Allied pilots. Says Vesco: ‘The fiery halo around its perimeter – caused by a very rich fuel mixture – and the chemical additives that interrupted the flow of electricity by overionizing the atmosphere in the vicinity of the plane, generally around the wing tips or tail surfaces, subjected the H2S radar on the plane to the action of powerful electrostatic fields and electromagnetic impulses.’ Vesco also claims that the basic principles of the *Feuerball* were later applied to a much larger ‘symmetrical circular aircraft’, the *Kugelblitz* (or Ball Lightning Fighter), which was the first example of the vertical-rising, ‘jet lift’ aircraft.

Further intrigued, I continued my research in West Germany and came up with a surprising number of newspaper and magazine clippings – all from the 1950s – about one *Flugkapitän* Rudolph Schriever. One clipping stated that this *Luftwaffe* engineer had designed, in the spring of 1941, the prototype for a ‘flying top’ and that the device was tested in June, 1942; another stated that the same *Flugkapitän* Schriever, with ‘three trusted colleagues’, had actually constructed, in August 1943, a ‘large specimen’ of his original ‘flying disk’, but that in the summer of 1944, in the East Hall of the B. M. W. plant near Prague, he had redesigned the original model, replacing its former gas turbine engines with some highly advanced form of jet propulsion; and a third, which reiterated the above information, added the interesting news that original plans for the flying disk had been drawn up by the ‘German experts’, Habermohl and Miethe, and an Italian physicist, Dr Belluzzo. According to other reports (and, subsequently, to Major Rudolph Luzar’s indispensable book, *German Secret Weapons of World War II*, English language editions published by Neville Spearman, London, 1959, and the Philosophical

Library, New York, 1959), Habermohl and Schriever had designed a large ring plate with ‘adjustable wing-disks’ that rotated around a ‘fixed, cupola-shaped cockpit’, while Miethe had developed a ‘discus-shaped plate in which adjustable jets were inserted’. Reportedly, the flying saucer had a diameter of 42 m. ((137.76 ft.), a height from base to canopy of 32 m. (104.96 ft.) and had reached an altitude of approximately 40,000 ft. with a horizontal flight speed of 2,000 km./h. (1,250 mph).

So far, so good… But what I now came to was a series of small but puzzling contradictions.

Shortly after the war, Rudolph Schriever was resident at Hokerstrasse 28 in Bremerhaven-Lehe, West Germany, from where he announced that the flying disk had indeed been constructed, that it had been ready for testing in April 1945, but that with the advance of the Allies into Germany, the test flight had been cancelled, the machine entirely destroyed, and his design papers either mislaid or stolen. Schriever’s story was, however, slightly contradicted by alleged eye-witness Georg Klein, who later stated that he had actually *seen* the test flight of the Schriever disk, or one similar, on February 14, 1945. A certain doubt may be cast on Klein’s date since, according to the War Diary of the 8th Air Fleet, February 14, 1945, was a day of low clouds, rain, snow and generally poor visibility – hardly the conditions for the testing of a revolutionary new kind of aircraft. Nevertheless, according to Renato Vesco, the test flight of a machine called the *Kugelblitz* – which was rumoured to be a revolutionary kind of supersonic aircraft – was successfully conducted over the underground complex of Kahla, in Thuringia, *some* time during that February of 1945.

By 1975 *Luftfahrt International* was stating that a certain *Flugkapitän* Rudolph Schriever had died in the late 1950s and that found among his papers were the incomplete notes for a large flying saucer (most of them technically out of date), a series of rough sketches of the machine (some of which had clearly been redrawn and updated just before his death), and

several newspaper clippings about himself and his supposed flying saucer. Now, while none of the designs would have led to a workable flying saucer, *Luftfahrt International* did include reproductions of the designs of both Schriever and Dr Miethe, while also pointing out that Schriever, right up to his death, had been convinced that the UFO sightings since the end of the war were proof that his original ideas had been taken further with successful results.

Could this be true?

Let us examine the possibilities. According to Schriever, what appears to have been the final version of his flying saucer was constructed at the B. M. W plant near Prague in the early months of 1944 and was ready for testing in April 1944. According to Georg Klein, a similar flying disk was actually test-flown near Prague in February 1945; and according to the Italian author, Renato Vesco – who seems unaware of the existence of the Schriever legend – an extraordinary new flying machine called the *Kugelblitz* was test-flown sometime during that same month over the complex of Kahla, in the mountain region of Thuringia.

Tying in with this information is the fact that the gas-turbine section of B. M. W. was originally located in the suburb of Spandau, near Belin – where, according to Renato Vesco, a lot of research on the *Kugelblitz* was undertaken; that it was later moved to the underground plant at Wittringen, near Saarbrucken; but that it finally ended up, as from 1944, in seven enormous underground complexes in both Thuringia and Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains.

That whole area, running in a metaphorical arc from the Harz Mountains, down through Thuringia, Bohmen and Mahren, was to form the German's last redoubt and as such was littered with a staggering number of underground military and scientific complexes, including the immense Mittle-Werke factories and the personnel and equipment from the experimental center at Peenemünde. Certainly, while history was to decree

otherwise, it was from there that Hitler intended to defend the remnants of the Third Reich with ‘a whole underground army’ and the ‘secret weapons’ he had been promised for so long.

In May, 1978, at Stand 111 in a scientific exhibition in the Hanover Messe Hall, some gentlemen were giving away what at first sight appeared to be an orthodox scientific tabloid newspaper called *Brisant*. This contained two seemingly unrelated articles: one on the scientific future of Antarctica, the other about Nazi Germany’s World War II flying saucers. The flying saucer article reiterated the information mentioned above, but added that the research centers for ‘*Projekt Saucer*’ had been located in the areas of Bohmen and Mahren.

Regarding this, it should be noted that Prague is in Bohmen, and that Bohmen is more or less surrounded by the metaphorical arc of the Harz Mountains, Thuringia and Mahren – all of which areas contained vast underground research complexes, none of which were more than a few hundred kilometers from Prague.

The article also included reproductions of detailed drawings of a typical Second World War flying disk, did *not* mention the designer’s name, and claimed that the drawings had been altered by the West German government to render them ‘safe’ for publication. Adding weight to this claim, the unnamed author then pointed out that during the Second World War all such inventions, whether civilian or military, would have been submitted to the nearest patent office where, under paragraphs 30a and 99 of the *Patent-und Strafgesetsbuch*, they would have automatically been stamped ‘Secret’, taken away from their rightful owners, and passed on to Heinrich Himmler’s SS research establishments… and, according to the article, at the end of the war some of those patents disappeared into secret Russian files, others into equally secret British and American files, and the remainder would possibly have disappeared with various ‘missing’ German scientists and SS troops.

(Since neither the British, the Americans or the Russians are ever likely to

reveal what, precisely, was discovered in the secret factories of Nazi Germany, it is worth noting that in 1945 Sir Roy Feddon, as leader of a technical mission to Germany for the Ministry of Aircraft Production, reported: 'I have seen enough of their designs and production plans to realize that if they had managed to prolong the war some months longer, we would have been confronted with a set of entirely new and deadly developments in air warfare.' And by 1956, Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, then head of the U.S. Air Force's Project Blue Book, was able to state: 'When World War II ended, the Germans had several radical types of aircraft and guided missiles under development. The majority of these were in the most preliminary stages, but they were the only known craft that could even approach the performances of the objects reported by UFO observers.')

The *Brisant* article went on to point out that in 1938, Hitler, anxious for a foothold in the Antarctic, sent an expedition commanded by Captain Alfred Richter to the coast due south of South Africa. Daily for three weeks two seaplanes were catapulted from the deck of the German aircraft-carrier *Schwabenland*, with orders to fly back and forth across the territory that Norwegian explorers had named Queen Maud Land. The Germans made a far more thorough study of the area than the Norwegians had done, finding vast regions that were surprisingly free of ice. This job done, they renamed the whole area *Neuschwabenland* and claimed it as part of the Third Reich.

According to *Brisant*, German ships and U-boats continued to prowl the South Atlantic Ocean, particularly between South Africa and the Antarctic, throughout the whole of the Second World War. Then, in March, 1945, just before the end of the war, two German provision U-boats, U-530 and U-977, were launched from a port on the Baltic Sea. Reportedly they took with them members of the flying saucer research teams, the last of the most vital flying saucer components, the notes and drawings for the saucer, and the designs for immense underground complexes and living accommodations based on the remarkable underground factories of Nordhausen in the Harz Mountains. The two U-boats duly reached Neuschwabenland, more correctly known as Queen

Maud Land, where they unloaded. Finally, two months *after* the war, the same U-boats surfaced mysteriously off the coast of Argentina where the crews were handed over to the American authorities, who interrogated them at length and then flew them all back to the United States.

About a year after this, the United States launched the biggest operation ever known regarding the Antarctic. While the stated purpose of the operation was to 'circumnavigate the 16,000-mile Antarctic coastline and map it thoroughly', *Brisant* found it odd that Operation Highjump, under the command of Antarctic veteran Admiral Richard Evelyn Byrd, included thirteen ships, two seaplane tenders, an aircraft-carrier, six twin-engine R4D transports, six Martin PBM flying boats, six helicopters and a staggering total of 4,000 men. It was also considered odd that when this virtual assault force reached the Antarctic coast, it not only docked, on January 27, 1947, near the German-claimed territory of Neuschwabenland, but then divided up into three separate task forces.

That expedition became something of a mystery. Subsequent official reports stated that it had been an enormous success, revealing more about the Antarctic than had ever been known before. However, many other, mainly foreign, reports suggested that such in fact had not been the case: that many of Byrd's men were lost during the first day, that at least four of his airplanes inexplicably disappeared, and that while the expedition had gone provisioned for six to eight months, the men actually returned to America in February 1947, after only a few weeks. According to *Brisant*, Admiral Byrd later told a reporter (I could find no verification for this) that it was 'necessary for the USA to take defensive actions against enemy air fighters which come from the polar regions' and that in the case of a new war the USA would be 'attacked by fighters that are able to fly from one pole to the other with incredible speed'. Also, according to *Brisant*, shortly after his return from the Antarctic, Admiral Byrd was ordered to undergo a secret cross-examination – and the United States withdrew from the Antarctic for almost a decade.

What was being suggested, then, is that throughout the course of the Second World War the Germans were sending ships and planes to the Antarctic with equipment for massive underground complexes, that at the end of the war the flying saucer project's team of scientists were taken by submarines U-530 and U-977, that the Americans interrogated the crews of those submarines when they docked in what they had assumed was a friendly Argentina, that the Americans then, upon hearing about the Antarctic base, organized a military task force disguised as an exploratory expedition, that the expedition was subsequently put to disarray when it came up against the extraordinary German flying saucers, and that the United States then pulled out of the Antarctic temporarily, in order to build their own saucers based on the designs found in Germany after the war.

The second article was also of interest. It was, in point of fact, a rather crude propaganda statement masquerading as a scientific review of Antarctic potential. Dusting off the already well known topographical facts, what one was left with was an insistence that the Democratic Republic of Germany should claim back their rights to that part of the Antarctic which the Nazis stole from the Norwegians and arrogantly renamed *Neuschwabenland*.

Taking note of the National Socialist leanings of the article, bearing in mind the fact that *Brisant* had been published by a company that had since disappeared (*Lintec*, GmbH, Jungfrauenthal 22, D-200 Hamburg 13), and reminding myself that the whole theory had suspicious parallels with the more far-fetched 'Holes in the Poles' UFO myths, I nevertheless checked up on other aspects of the article and discovered that the Germans had in fact been patrolling the Antarctic regions of the South Atlantic Ocean throughout the war. Indeed, two years after the Richter expedition, a couple of Norwegian whaling ships were seized by boarding parties from the German raider *Pinguin* as they rested at anchor in their own territorial waters just off Queen Maud Land. Within hours of that incident, a Norwegian supply ship and most of the nearby whaling convoy had been lured into the trap – and the war in Antarctica was underway. In May 1941 HMS *Cornwall* located and

sank the *Pinguin*, but not before *Pinguin* had captured a whole string of Allied merchant ships totalling more than 135,000 tons. What is also historical fact is that *Pinguin's* sister ships, appropriately named *Komet* and *Atlantis*, continued to prowl the Antarctic shores until the end of the war.

Regarding the two submarines, I also came across some intriguing information. U-977, under the command of Captain Heinz Schaeffer, did in fact leave Kiel harbour in the Baltic Sea in April, 1945, stopped in at Christiansund South on April 26, left there the following day, and was not seen again until it surfaced at Mar del Plata, Argentina, on August 17, 1945 – a period of nearly four months.

Where was the submarine all that time? According to Captain Schaeffer, they had left with the intention of patrolling the South Atlantic, had docked for fuel at Christiansund South the following day, and had then, several days later, heard over their radio that the war was over. Convinced that he would not be treated too kindly by the Allied Command, Schaeffer gave his crew the option of being put off along the coast of Norway or travelling on with him to what he thought was a friendly Argentina. Since some of the crew preferred to return to Germany, the next few days were spent in hugging the Norwegian coastline until, on May 10, they dropped some of their men off on the mountainous coast not far from Bergen. This done, according to Schaeffer, he and the remaining crew embarked upon what surely must have been one of the most remarkable naval feats of the war: a journey through the North Sea and the English Channel, past Gibraltar and along the coast of Africa, finally surfacing, all of sixty-six days later, in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean. During the next month they alternated between floating on the surface and diving back to the depths, once even surfacing off the Cape Verde Islands and going ashore on Branca Island, another time going so far as to 'disguise' the submarine when it was on the surface by rigging up false sails and funnel to make it look more like a cargo steamer. Finally, when close to Rio de Janeiro, they heard over their radio that another fleeing German submarine, U-530, had put into the River Plate and that its crew had

been handed over to the United States as prisoners of war. Disturbed by this news, they nevertheless put into Mar del Plata on August 17, 1945 – nearly four months after they had put out from Kiel harbour.

This rather fantastic story was recounted by Captain Schaeffer to the Argentine authorities when they interrogated him on three specific issues: (1) Where had U-977 been when the Brazilian steamer *Babia* was sunk? (2) Why had U-977 arrived in Argentina so long after the war ended? And (3) Had U-977 carried anyone 'of political importance' during its voyage to the Argentine? Schaeffer denied that he had been anywhere in the area of the *Babia* when it was sunk, explained his late arrival in Argentina with the fantastic story I have just recounted, and stated that no one 'of political importance' had ever been aboard U-977.

What is particularly intriguing about all this is that a few weeks later an Anglo-American committee, composed of high-ranking officers especially flown to the Argentine to investigate 'the mysterious case' of U-977, spent a great deal of time interrogating Schaeffer regarding the possibility that he might have taken Hitler and Martin Bormann aboard his U-boat, first to Patagonia and then to a secret Nazi base in the Antarctic. Indeed, they were so insistent on this that they subsequently flew Schaeffer and his crew – *and* Otto Wehrmut, commander of U-530 – back to a prisoner of war camp near Washington, DC, where for months they continued their interrogations. While I could find no record of the fate of Commander Wehrmut, what I did authenticate is that Schaeffer repeatedly denied having shipped anyone where… Nevertheless, he was then handed over to the British in Antwerp and *again* interrogated for many months.

Assuming that Schaeffer was telling the truth and that the Allies found nothing unusual in Schaeffer's U-boat, it seems rather strange that the Americans would later send the submarine back to the United States where, under direct orders from the U.S. War Department, it was blown to pieces with torpedoes. As for Schaeffer, he was eventually returned to Germany, did

not feel comfortable as one of the conquered, and then went back to join some fellow Germans in Argentina.

The possibility remains that Schaeffer might have been lying. For a start, it is decidedly odd that two insignificant German U-boats should have stirred such monumental interest amongst the Allies. It is also worth considering why the Allies would even have imagined that Hitler and Martin Bormann – or anyone else, for that matter – would have fled to such an unlikely place as the Antarctic. Finally, it is worth noting that Schaeffer had spent much of his career protecting the research centers at Regen and Peenemünde, that he was highly experienced at patrolling the South Atlantic and polar regions, and that he was one of a select group of Naval officers who were sent to the Harz Mountains to study the new, reportedly highly advanced, XX1 electric submarines. Schaeffer was, in other words, a man familiar with the 'secret' projects of the Harz Mountains – and a man ideally suited to make the long voyage to the Antarctic.

Now let us review the situation. It is not confirmed, but is very possible, that the German *Feuerball* existed, that it accounted for the first modern UFO sightings during the Second World War, and that an extraordinary supersonic flying machine, the *Kugelblitz*, was successfully test-flown in Germany a few weeks before the war ended. The *Feuerball*, therefore, could have been the forerunner of the small, seemingly remote-controlled UFOs (the Foo Fighters), while the *Kugelblitz* could indeed have been the first of the larger, piloted flying saucers.

The unsigned flying saucer designs reproduced in *Brisant*, and in many more orthodox journals, mentioned materials not in existence, as far as we know, during the war years. This suggests that they could have been reproductions of the original designs that *Flugkapitän* Rudolph Schriever updated just before his death in the late 1950s. Assuming, then, that Schriever's 'mislaid' or 'stolen' notes and designs were actually in the hands of the SS, it is possible that they were secretly developed in one of the many underground

complexes in the area of the aborted last redoubt – either the Nordhausen complex in the Harz Mountains or at Kahla in nearby Thuringia; that the completed saucer was test-flown in the early months of 1945; and that it was then destroyed as the Allies advanced into Germany.

We know from reproductions of the work of Schriever, Bulluzzo and Miethe that a flying saucer project, no matter how primitive at the time, was definitely on the list of German military priorities. Regarding the fact that the only evidence for such machines is the evidence presented above, it should be borne in mind that the most fanatical of Himmler's SS were controlling the research centers in the areas mentioned, that as they retreated they attempted to destroy as much as possible of their most important scientific papers and inventions, and that thousands of slave workers and their SS overlords – who could have revealed a great deal more – disappeared in the chaos of the liberation and were not seen again.

Could some of them have gone to the Antarctic?

Contrary to the accepted view, it is actually quite possible that the Nazis continually shipped and flew vital men, material and documents to the Antarctic throughout the war years.

Regarding the possibility of the submarines of that time being able to complete such a lengthy voyage, it is to be noted that the normal U-boat could cover 7,000 miles on each operational cruise, that the Germans had submarine tankers spread across the South Atlantic Ocean at least as far as south of South Africa, and that any one of those tankers, which had a displacement of 2,000 tons, could have supplied ten U-boats with fuel and stores, thus trebling the time that those U-boats could stay at sea.

Regarding the possibility of the Germans building self-sufficient underground research factories in the Antarctic, it has only to be pointed out that the underground research centers of Nazi Germany were gigantic feats of construction, containing wind-tunnels, machine-shops, assembly plants,

launching pads, supply dumps and accommodations for all who worked there, including adjoining camps for the slave workers – and yet very few people knew that they existed.

Given all this, it is in my estimation quite possible that men and materials were shipped to the Antarctic throughout the war, that throughout those same years the Germans were engaged in the construction of enormous underground complexes in Neuschwabenland similar to those scattered around the last redoubt, and that the American, Russian and British 'cover-up' regarding UFO sightings could be due to the reasons suggested in this novel.

Sceptics would argue that the major histories of the Third Reich either ignore or pass off as ridiculous any stories about Nazi Germany's 'secret' weapons, but such an argument can be countered by reminding the reader that most of the secret weapon projects were well hidden by the SS and that much of what the Allies discovered remains classified to this day.

While Albert Speer, the Third Reich's Minister of Armaments and War Production, was sceptical about the 'secret weapons' in his eloquent book *Inside the Third Reich* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1970), he *did* admit that there was increasing speculation about such weapons during the closing months of the war; and that while he himself stated at the time that there were not enough basic materials for the production of such, he had, in his own words, 'underestimated… the large stocks of material that had been accumulated in the factories'. Speer was also sceptical when Robert Ley, the Minister for Labor, excitedly told him, in April, 1945, that his German scientists had invented a 'death ray' (possibly a laser weapon); this is interesting when one considers the fact that Captain Heinz Schaeffer, captain of the submarine U-977, stated in his book, *U-Boat 977* (William Kimber, London, 1952) that in April 1945 an SS associate had offered *him* a demonstration of a so-called 'death ray'. It is unfortunate that Schaeffer, in a hurry to return to Kiel for his famous last voyage, had no time to remain in

Berlin and check out the validity of his friend's claim.

For the purposes of fiction I have utilized the real-life personages, SS Generals Hans Kammler and Artur Nebe. Readers might therefore be interested in knowing that while Nebe was placed on a Nazi 'death list' after the attempted assassination of Hitler, his death was never actually confirmed and many felt that he had simply fled for his life. As for General Hans Kammler, his history with the SS and the V-1 and V-2 rockets is well documented, but what became of him after he disappeared from Germany in April 1945 remains a mystery to this day.

Regarding the members of the German flying saucer team, Schriever and Belluzzo are now dead, Habermohl was reported to have been captured by the Russians (thus the American military's fear of *Russian* saucers shortly after the war), and – perhaps most interesting – Miethe, who stated to the press that he had worked on *Projekt Saucer*, went to work for the Americans and Canadians.

Finally, for the record, the prototype for the AVRO flying saucer, which was handed over to the U.S. and loudly proclaimed to have been a failure, is now (at the time of writing) on show in the U.S. Air Force Museum in Fort Eustis, Virginia.

Thus, while *Genesis* is a work of fiction, it is based on some intriguing facts… and those facts could do with further investigation.

A list of sources is given overleaf.

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My thanks to the following libraries and universities for their kind assistance in gathering further research material: Cornell University, New York; the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Massachusetts; the University of London; the British Museum Library, London; the Imperial War Museum, London; the Württembergische Landesbibliothek, Freiburg im Breisgau; and the Staats-und Universitätsbibliothek, Hamburg.

Personal thanks to Stephanie Trudeau in New York; Willi Mayer, Reinhold Stoll, and Ruediger and Hannelore Vogt of West Germany; Mark Williams of *Lookout* magazine, Spain; Martin Atcherley for his kind assistance regarding

Paraguay and Argentina; James Webb for his authoritative response to my enquiries about the SS and the Occult; Richard and Iris Gollner, my agents and incidental researchers; Nick Austin for his generosity with certain books; and Alan Earney, for so enthusiastically backing this whole project.

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London, 1980

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ISBN 1-4196-7638-5
Library of Congress Control Number 2000000000
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‘I have never seen what I would personally consider to be a flying saucer. I’ve spoken to thousands of people who have. I spent fourteen years in industry as a nuclear physicist, chasing neutrons and gamma rays, radiation shielding. I have never seen a neutron or a gamma ray; I think they’re real too. I’ve never even seen Australia, but it’s there’

Stanton T. Friedman

For Adam Webb

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Chapter 13

The Case Summed Up

A brief review: the Great Airship Scare of 1896-97 - German enthusiasm for the work of Robert H. Goddard - Balls of fire and Projekt Saucer - The Feuerball *and the* Kugelblitz *- The fate of the Projekt Saucer team - Post-war achievements in rocketry and spaceflight - The Canadian connection -* Brisant *magazine and neo-Nazi speculations - German saucers in Antarctica - Rear-Admiral Richard E. Byrd's Operation Highjump - The United States withdraws from and returns to Antarctica - Canadian and US saucers for use in the polar regions - International cooperation in outer space and Antarctica - The obscure origins of* Brisant *magazine - Ernst Zundl, Samisdat Publishers, and neo-Nazi UFO theories - The Argentina-Antarctica connection - Captain Ernst Schaeffer and U-977 - The shipping of men and materials to hidden Antarctic colonies - Underground factories in Nazi Germany - Another hypothesis: international cooperation - A reappraisal of the International Geophysical Year (NYG) of 1957-58 - Nightmarish reasons for an international conspiracy - The case for man-made UFOs summed up*.

Introduction

After all these years…

‘**In 1945** Allied pilots submitted reports which described mysterious “fireballs” that tailed their aircraft during night missions over Germany. **In 1950** a now-declassified CIA document revealed the agency’s concern that “a far advanced German science” was the origin of the many flying saucers sighted since the end of the war. **In 1952** a secret US Air Force Memorandum for the Record stated: “Discussions with astronomers have produced an argument which seems to exclude non-terrestrial origin of the saucers.” **In 1953** a now-declassified CIA report revealed that Air Force engineers at the A.V. Roe Company were engaged in the construction of a flying saucer prototype based on World War II German designs. **By 1960** many people were claiming, even under hypnosis, that they had been abducted by “aliens” in flying saucers and submitted to unusual painful surgical examinations. ***By 1970*** eminent surgeons and biotechnicians were openly discussing experimentation with microelectric control of the brain, surgical mutation to produce cyborgs for work in outer space, and other forms of nightmarish science. **In 1990** an award-winning American reporter revealed that the US government had formed a top-secret UFO Working Group whose members met regularly in the Pentagon. Finally, **in 1995**, after a decade of research, bestselling author W.A.Harbinson has produced *Projekt UFO: The Case for Man-Made Flying Saucers* – arguably the definitive UFO book.’

So said the dust-jacket of the hardcover edition of this book, originally published in 1995 by Boxtree, London. It was a fairly accurate description of the contents. Alas, when the paperback edition was published a year later, an enterprising editor had written a shorter description, most likely without reading the book. In this new cover-text it was claimed that ‘Harbinson offers proof that UFOs come not from outer space but are the result of a secret ex-Soviet project…’ By adding, ‘Furthermore, the Soviets lifted most of their technology from the Nazis,’ the editor managed to emphasize even more that the book was about secret *Soviet* flying saucer construction projects. The US and Canada, clearly shown in the book to be the major perpetrators, weren’t

even given a mention.
Alas, I was not shown a copy of the cover until the paperback had been printed and bound, by which time it was too late to correct the misrepresentation. As readers of the first edition of this book will know – and as readers of this new edition are about to find out – *Projekt UFO* is actually about joint US-Canadian flying saucer construction projects, with the Soviets playing only a minor role.

Of course, to even mention such misrepresentation is to invite UFO conspiracy theorists to insist that it was a clandestine attempt, possibly engineered by British, Canadian or US Intelligence, to shift attention away from the true source of the man-made flying saucers. This is not too much different from what happened when I, then a fledgling writer, naïvely gave the original publishers of my novel *Genesis* my only copy of the German magazine, *Brisant*, instead of a photocopy. Naturally, they lost it. In this instance 'lost' almost certainly means 'lost', but for years after the publication of the novel I was to read articles (mostly on the Internet) claiming either that *Brisant* had never existed in the first place or that my copy, a true rarity, had been 'stolen' from the publisher's offices. To this was added the novel theory that I had been tasked to write *Genesis*, the subsequent 'Projekt Saucer' series of novels based upon it, and, one must suppose, this non-fiction work, in order to deflect attention from the *true* source of the flying saucers. I had been tasked to do this either by the National Security Agency (NSA), which sought to deflect attention from their real 'black' technology projects (research programs so highly classified that they cannot be identified publicly), or by the extraterrestrials themselves, who, having 'brain-implanted' me without my knowledge, were using me, as an author of *man-made* UFO books, to deflect attention from their regular incursions into Earth's atmosphere in their own flying saucers.

Paranoia stalks the world of the UFOlogist. Naturally, I cannot prove that I am neither a NSA agent nor the victim of an extraterrestrial brain-implant, but can only use this space to insist that I am neither. In defence of my normality, I will even confess that I have never seen what I personally would consider to be a flying saucer. But, like physicist Stanton T. Friedman, quoted at the front of *Projekt Saucer*, defending his own admitted lack of UFO sightings: 'I've never even seen Australia, but it's there.' So while not sharing the paranoia of my fellow UFO conspiracy theorists, I would simply

like to say that while I myself have doubts about certain theories put forward in this book, the technology described in it, much of it black technology, is still ongoing behind closed doors and cannot be stopped.

An update on such technology and other related UFO matters has been added as an Afterword to this new edition.

W.A.Harbinson

Acknowledgements

When planning this book, I decided from the onset to avoid the prejudices and misinformation of those with vested interests. This I did by taking the unprecedented step of researching without recourse to the major UFO organisations or individual UFOlogists, even where reportedly reliable. Instead, I focused on the literature, tried separating the wheat from the chaff influenced by nothing other than my own judgement, and otherwise relied only on the following, none of whom, to the best of my knowledge, belong to UFO groups or are blinded by an obsession with the subject.

My thanks to: Adam Webb, writer, researcher and computer wizard for his generous supply of video-and-cassette tapes, an introduction to cyberspace, and written information on a variety of UFO-related subjects. Bob Turner, Fleet Street librarian, writer and researcher, for valuable articles. Perrott Phillips, writer and editor, also for valuable articles. Ken Welsh, photographer and writer, for photographic assistance, great trips and moral support. Paul Grzybowski, for vintage newspaper accounts of the Great Airship Scare in general and the mysterious Mr Wilson in particular. Ruediger and Hannelore Vogt for assistance with German research and illustrations.

Thanks, also, to my former wife, Ursula Mayer, for the German translations; to her late brother, Willi Mayer, for giving me the information that kicked off the whole project; and last but not least to the late Alan Earney, an editor who liked writers and had faith in this project when it began as a novel, *Genesis*, many years ago.

W.A. Harbinson

Foreword

In May, 1978, at Stand 111 in a scientific exhibition in the Hanover Messe Hall, some gentlemen were giving away what at first sight appeared to be an orthodox scientific newspaper called *Brisant*. The paper contained two seemingly unrelated articles: one on the scientific and ecological value of the Antarctic, the other about a German World War II flying saucer construction program named 'Project Saucer' (*Projekt Untertasse*).

The first article, written from a neo-Nazi standpoint, included an assertion that West Germany should claim back their right to Queen Maud Land in the Antarctic, which the Nazis stole from the Norwegians during World War II and renamed Neu Schwabenland. The second article, which asserted that the German scientists were the first, but not the only ones, to construct highly advanced saucer-shaped aircraft, was accompanied by reproductions of technical drawings of a World War II flying saucer.

The unnamed author failed to name the designer of the flying saucer and claimed that the drawings had been altered by the West German government to render them 'safe' for publication. Adding weight to his claim, he also pointed out that during the Second World War, all such inventions, whether civilian or military, would have been submitted to the nearest patent office where, under paragraphs 30a and 99 of the *Patent-und Strafgezetsbuch*, they would have been routinely classified as secret, confiscated, and passed on to one of Himmler's many SS research establishments... and at the end of the war some of those patents disappeared into secret Soviet files, others disappeared into equally secret British and American files, and the remainder disappeared with 'missing' German scientists and SS troops.

The rest of the article was just as intriguing. It claimed that throughout the course of World War II the Germans sent ships and planes to Queen Maud Land, or Neu Schwabenland, in the Antarctic with equipment for massive underground complexes, similar to those they had constructed in Thuringia and the Harz Mountains, in Germany; that at the end of the war, some of the scientists and engineers who had worked on Project Saucer escaped from Germany by submarine and ended up in an underground base in the Antarctic, where they continued to construct even more advanced flying saucers; and that the Americans and Soviets, upon learning about this, then used their captured German scientists and technical papers for the secret

construction of their own flying saucers.

This theory would explain why, even before glasnost, all the nations of the world, even the Soviets and the Americans, had cooperated with one-another only in the Antarctic.

In short, the flying saucers seen by so many people since World War II, are not extraterrestrial spacecraft, but are, in fact, extraordinarily advanced, top-secret, man-made machines.

They come from right here on Earth.

An unlikely scenario or a frightening truth?

Intrigued by this material, but uncertain of its veracity, I decided to turn it into a work of fiction. During my two years of intensive research, I uncovered written and photographic material which proved beyond doubt that Nazi Germany had in fact initiated a research program for the development of saucer-shaped aircraft; that at the close of the war seasoned Allied pilots were submitting official reports about harassment by 'balls of fire' that tailed them and made their aircraft and radar malfunction; that one of the leading members of Germany's Project Saucer development team disappeared into the Soviet Union and another went to work with German rocket expert, Werner von Braun, for NASA, in the United States; that most of the known post-war 'tailless' aircraft and 'flying wings' were constructed in the wilds of Canada; that the Canadian AVRO flying saucer, the existence of which was officially denied until it was photographed illicitly by an American journalist, was later handed over to the US, all too publicly proclaimed to have been a failure, then placed on display in the US Air Force Museum in Fort Eustis, Virginia; and, finally, that articles about man-made flying saucers, including the German *Kugelblitz* and the Canadian AVRO-Car prototype, had been published not only by the 'lunatic' fringe but by highly respected aeronautical magazines such as *Luftfahrt International*, the *Royal Air Force Flying Review*, and the *US News & World Report*.

So flying saucers, whether primitive or highly advanced, were certainly constructed in Nazi Germany and post-war Canada, in the latter case with the aid of the United States.

In 1980, my 615-page novel, *Genesis*, based on a mass of research material, including that mentioned above, was published. It became a bestseller on both sides of the Atlantic, eventually dropped off the bestseller lists, but then became a 'cult' book, and now, ten years after its publication, it remains in

print.

Reviewing the novel on its publication in the US, *Publishers Weekly* said: 'Harbinson has drawn so heavily on factual material and integrated it so well into the text that the book begins to read like non-fiction...' This conclusion was drawn by other reviewers and over the years I received many letters from readers who obviously thought the same and asked me to tell them which parts of the book were fact and which were fiction.

Since responding individually to those many requests would have been an exhausting endeavour, I naturally avoided doing so. However, a continuing fascination with the subject, encouraged by the new, often startling data that continued to come my way via readers, UFO organisations and my own researches, eventually encouraged me to expand the original novel into a five-book series, *Projekt Saucer*, which would include much of this new material. It also convinced me that there was enough material for a non-fiction book on this unique, intriguing and often frightening subject.

The following pages are an attempt to separate fact from fiction regarding whether or not UFOs, or, more accurately, flying saucers, originate right here on Earth and have been designed and constructed, possibly in secret cooperation, by European, Soviet, Canadian and American scientists.

If the facts contained herein point to man-made flying saucers, then what we are faced with is an unprecedented, international cover-up... and the most nightmarish official secret of our times.

The facts are as follows..

Chapter 1

Biblical and Other Historical UFO Sightings

Ancient monuments, artifacts, paintings and written records bear eloquent witness to the history of man's visions and rationalizations for the unknown, showing gods, devils, angels, ghosts, sundry monsters, winged chariots, flying ships and shields, and other magical manifestations in an eternal struggle between good and evil, which changes, with the passing of time, only in its externals.

The gap between flying carpets and flying saucers is not all that large. Both may be serving a purpose for different ages and cultures: to explain the inexplicable, make sense of the unknown, reduce mysteries to comprehensible terms, make real what seems unreal. Only in the light of modern atmospheric and astrological knowledge have we come to learn about comets, meteors, lenticular and noctilucent clouds, dust and ice crystals, temperature inversions, corona discharges, plasmoids, ball-lightning, parhelia and paraselenae, or mock suns and sundogs, mock moons and moondogs. In ancient times such phenomenon were viewed as mystical visions or visitations by the gods of the sea or sky. In modern times they are mistaken for UFOs.

The term 'flying saucers' was coined only in 1947, but UFOs, or Unidentified Flying Objects, go back to the dawn of time.

What appear to be unusual flying objects, often disk-or cigar-shaped, have been found in prehistoric cave drawings. The earliest written record of a strange object in the sky is by the Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III, circa 1504-1450 B.C. Aristotle, the fourth century B.C. Greek philosopher, made references to 'heavenly disks' and claimed to have seen a meteorite fall at Aegospotami, rise up in the wind, and descend elsewhere. The first century B.C. Roman historian, Livy, recorded phantom ships gleaming in the sky, an 'altar' surrounded by men in white clothes which was seen in the sky at Hadria in 214 B.C., and approximately thirty other celestial phenomena, some of which have since been interpreted as descriptions of UFOs. Also of

great interest to modern UFOlogosts are the references by the first century Roman historian, Cicero, to nine celestial phenomena, the most notable of which is his statement that on one occasion the sun was seen *at night*, accompanied by loud noises in the sky, which seemed to split open, revealing strange spheres. During the reign of Alexander the Great, two 'UFO' reports were recorded: in 329 B.C., two shining 'silver shields' dived repeatedly on Alexander's army while the men were attempting to cross the Jaxartes River into India; and in 322 B.C., during Alexander's siege of Tyre, a triangular formation of five round 'shields' circled over Tyre and destroyed its walls and towers with beams of light, thus enabling Alexander's legions to conquer the city. According to Pliny, in 66 B.C. a spark fell from a star, descended towards Earth until it was the size of a moon, then stopped and remained hovering in the sky for a while, diffusing cloudy light. It took the shape of a blazing torch when it returned to the sky.

If a trained, twentieth-century pilot can mistake natural atmospheric phenomena for a flying saucer, what must our distant ancestors have thought about the sky's more magical offerings? UFOlogists of the 'ancient astronauts' ilk repeatedly remind us that many of the IFO (Identified Flying Objects) such as aircraft, weather balloons, rockets and satellites, which are mistaken for UFOs (Unidentified Flying Objects), did not exist in ancient times; but even then, natural atmospheric phenomena offered plenty to confuse the eye and ear - more so given what was then a relatively limited knowledge of the atmosphere.

For instance, it was not then known that the planet Venus, when viewed under certain atmospheric conditions, will appear as a glowing orb that moves in the most extraordinary patterns. Nor was it known that comets, meteors, clouds, plasmoids, corona discharges, parhelia and paraselenae, the sun and moon and stars, even lightning and birds, can all look like bright, solid objects moving at high speed.

Mock suns, or sundogs, are caused by the sun's light, which can reflect an eerie image of the sun onto shifting clouds. Similarly, when the moon is close to the horizon, or when it enters cloud, it can take on strange shapes and colours, giving the illusion that it is in flight or magically hovering - a mock moon, or moondog (paraselenae). Other UFOs are caused when the light of the moon shines on ice particles contained in drifting clouds, making the particles seem like shining, round-shaped objects in flight, in the

phenomenon known as parhelia.

Stars offer many illusions, notably the phenomenon known as ‘atokinesis’ in which a given star will appear to move in the dark sky, sometimes darting about erratically just like a glowing flying saucer. In this context, a cloud obscuring a star can do so in a manner that makes the star appear to streak away at tremendous speed or even ‘go out like a light bulb’ - again, as many UFOs appear to do.

Meteors are minute pieces of rock which flare up as they enter the Earth’s atmosphere and are heated to incandescence by the friction. Mostly white in colour, they often appear as a spectacular streak of light in the sky - and meteor showers, which are common, can look to the untrained eye like a whole formation of UFOs in flight. Larger meteors, which take longer to burn up and seem to move more slowly across the sky in near horizontal trajectories, are known as ‘fireballs’ or ‘bolides’ and are often a spectacular orange or greenish-blue in colour.

Lenticular clouds are formed in circular, dome-shaped layers and, appearing singly or in groups, are often mistaken for domed, disk-shaped UFOs. Even more spectacular are noctilucent clouds, formed miles high in the atmosphere by ice particles and debris, and visible only at night. Given their tremendously high altitude, the sun can reflect off them, even at night, thus causing an eerie crimson luminescent mass, again shaped like a UFO, or flying saucer, that is visibly moving (as the cloud is moving).

A similar phenomenon is caused by temperature inversions: various layers of air, all at different temperatures, which bend and twist and generally distort rays of light to create what is best termed a mirage. Indeed, a temperature inversion can pick out a boat at sea and project it as a vivid mirage in the sky, with its shape often distorted enough to make it resemble a strange flying object. Similarly, given the proper temperature inversion, lights glowing up from the dark earth at night can be bent and sent traveling, then bounce off another temperature inversion many miles away and appear to the observer of the second inversion as a mass of glowing, darting objects.

The highly reflective underbellies of certain birds have often been mistaken for UFOs, as have bioluminescent clouds of insects, various kinds of windblown, light-reflecting debris, and even the natural gases given off from marshlands.

Various forms of lightning can also be mistaken for UFOs. While

‘forked’ lightning is recognizable to even the most untrained eye, ‘sheet’ lightning, which flashes only briefly, can be misinterpreted as a speeding UFO. As for plasmoids, corona discharges and ‘ball lightning’, they are basically formed by electrified gas that when burning brightly oscillates, vibrates, wobbles, flies horizontally, climbs vertically, glows in blue and red colours, and can look like a sphere or disk or a gigantic torpedo. They also hum and make other strange sounds and can be very frightening.

The skies, then as now, were filled with enough bizarre atmospheric phenomena to make those mentioned above believe they were either having mystical visions or witnessing visitations from the gods or other extraterrestrial creatures. But why, in the light of modern knowledge, do so many persist in believing that those ancient monuments, artifacts, paintings and writings were primitive reproductions of UFOs and their occupants?

The widespread, contemporary belief that descriptions of UFOs in general or flying saucers in particular can be found in numerous biblical and other historical writings was first stirred by a string of popularizing ‘factual’ books published during the UFO craze caused by the Kenneth Arnold sightings of 1947 and continuing into the 1960s. The first of these, published in the United States in 1956, was *UFO and the Bible*, written by astrophysicist Morris K. Jessup, who proposed that many of the Bible’s improbable events would seem more probable if read as descriptions of the intervention of alien superintelligences brought to Earth by UFOs. This was followed by the British publication in 1960 of *The Sky People*, in which UFOlogist Brinsley Le Poer Trench, actually the Earl of Clancarty and former editor of *Flying Saucer Review*, paraded a wide-ranging, largely unsubstantiated range of opinions on the theme of extraterrestrials: notably that they had come from the region of the Great Bear, the Little Bear and Sirius, had seeded the human race to create *Homo sapiens*, were still returning periodically to review human progress, and may even have underground bases on Earth for their flying saucers. *The Morning of the Magicians*, by Louis Pauwels and Jacques Bergier, first published in France in 1960, and *One Hundred Thousand Years of Man's Unknown History* by another Frenchman, Robert Charroux, published in France in 1963, were bestselling books that covered a much broader spectrum of esoteric subjects, including the Ark of the Covenant, the Great Pyramid, the lines on the plain of Nazca, the statues of Easter Island,

the Gate of the Sun at Tiahuanaco, the drawings in the caves of Tassili, the Piri Re'is map, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah - all of which, according to the authors, were evidence for Earth's visitation by alien spacecraft and their occupants.

The theories of these authors were later regurgitated and exploited with extraordinary success by the Swedish author, Erich von Däniken, who, more than any other individual, created an almost fanatical, worldwide belief in extraterrestrial intervention in human affairs.

Erich Von Däniken wrote *Chariots of the Gods?* in 1966, the same year that the 'God is dead' movement got under way and *Intelligent Life in the Universe*, a serious work, co-authored by astronomers I.S. Shklovskii of the USSR and Carl Sagan of the US, was published. *Intelligent Life in the Universe* is an attempt between a noted Russian astronomer and a leading American space scientist to speculate on 'the origins of the universe, the evolution of stars and planets, the beginnings of life on Earth, and the development of intelligence and technical civilizations among galactic communities' based firmly on the scientific knowledge of that time. As such, it certainly lent legitimacy to the idea that extraterrestrial life was a distinct possibility. However, ignoring the scientifically based, speculative approach of Shklovskii and Sagan in favour of startling, dogmatic theories based on a combination of selective facts, misinterpretations, outright invention, and the unreliable works of his abovenamed predecessors, Erich von Däniken managed to create, in a series of bestselling books, an immensely popular fantasy of cosmic proportions.

As Ronald Story shows in greater detail in his definitive exposé, *The Space Gods Revealed* (1978), consistency is not one of von Däniken's strong points. In *Chariots of the Gods?* his basic thesis is that alien visitors discovered Earth accidentally, observed that it had the necessary conditions for the development of intelligent life, began breeding experiments on its apelike creatures, artificially fertilized some of the females, and have returned throughout the ages (in flying saucers) to check on the progress of *Homo sapiens* and weed out those likely to hold back the march to civilization. In an era in which skepticism about God and religion was commonplace, even fashionable, von Däniken's view of evolution presented a novel replacement for lost faith. However, in his second book, *The Gold of the Gods*, he offers a

completely different theory.

In this scenario, the extraterrestrials landed on Earth after losing in a cosmic war and fleeing from their enemies in a spaceship. Since Earth's atmosphere was not suited to them, they built a series of underground tunnels in which they hid from their pursuers, and after using various fantastic methods to get rid of their enemies, returned to the surface of the earth, wearing helmets, gas masks and other breathing equipment to help them adjust to Earth's atmosphere (which explains the 'astronaut' drawings found in many prehistoric cave drawings, such as the one in Tassili, in the Sahara Desert). Naturally, once back on Earth's surface, the extraterrestrials manipulated the genes of monkeys to create intelligent human beings in their own image, exterminated those who didn't shape up quickly enough… and so on and so forth.

Von Däniken spiced this rich stew with many of the equally wild theories of Pauwels, Bergier and Charroux. By doing so, he managed to sell millions of copies of his books and spread the belief that man was not created by God or cosmic accident, but by vastly superior, extraterrestrial beings.

Unlikely as it seems, support for von Däniken's theories came from Josef F. Blumrich, member of the American Institute of Aeronautics and Astronautics, the American Association for the Advancement of Science and the American Astronautical Society and, at the time of his retirement in 1974, Chief of the Advanced Structural Development Branch of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) and winner of NASA's Exceptional Service Medal.

In a bid to *disprove* von Däniken's claim that the Biblical prophet Ezekiel had witnessed the landing and departure of an alien spacecraft, Blumrich ended up doing the opposite by attempting to design a spacecraft based on Ezekiel's descriptions, then publishing his findings in *The Spaceships of Ezekiel* (1974). With technical drawings, dense scientific prose and, in the words of Ronald Story, 'an extreme form of rationalization', Blumrich attempts to prove that Ezekiel was describing a spacecraft or, at least, some kind of highly advanced helicopter.

As Blumrich's scientific respectability has lent such credence to von Däniken's contradictory ramblings, it may be worthwhile to compare what Ezekiel actually said with what von Däniken and his supporters deduced from it.

In the Book of Ezekiel, Chapter 1, Ezekiel describes how ‘a whirlwind came out of the north, a great cloud, and a fire unfolding itself, and a brightness *was* about it...’ Out of the amber-coloured cloud and fire of this materialization, or supposed spacecraft, emerged four living creatures which had ‘the likeness of a man’. However, while resembling normal men in certain ways, each creature had ‘the sole of a calf's foot’ and ‘the face of a lion’ on the right side, ‘the face of an ox’ on the left side, as well as ‘the face of an eagle’. Each creature also had four wings, which were ‘on their four sides’ and were joined one to another. ‘And their wings were stretched upward; two wings of every one were joined one to another, and two covered their bodies.’ Thus joined together by their wings, which revealed human hands beneath, the creatures ‘turned not when they went; they went every one straight forward.’

Ezekiel goes on to say: ‘Their appearance was like burning coals of fire, and like the appearance of lamps; it went up and down among the living creatures; and the fire was bright, and out of the fire went forth lightning... And the living creatures ran and returned as the appearance of a flash of lightning.’

Proponents of the ancient astronauts hypothesis, including von Däniken and Blumrich, insist that the ‘brightness’ within a ‘great cloud’ and ‘fire’ is a perfect description of a landing UFO; the creatures with the combined features of lion, ox, eagle and calf were astronauts in bulky spacesuits and oxygen masks; the ‘wings’ which revealed human hands beneath were actually the rotor-blades of some kind of mechanical device being controlled by the astronauts; and the ‘lightning’ and ‘appearance of lamps’ from which the creatures emerged and to which they returned are further indications that they were observed leaving and entering a UFO with brightly lit portholes.

In verse 15, Ezekiel states that in the fire and lightning near these creatures he beheld ‘a wheel upon the earth.’ In the following verse, the singular has become plural: ‘The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl... and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel... When they went, they went upon their four sides; and they turned not when they went.’

By verse 18, this wheel within a wheel has become more machine-like: ‘As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings were full of eyes round about them four...’ The four living creatures are now

picked up in the fire and lightning, but more importantly: ‘And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up’ and ‘the spirit of the living creatures was *in* the wheels...’

Ignoring the religious symbolism and insignia in such descriptions and instead interpreting them as primitive descriptions of advanced technology, the proponents of the ancient astronauts hypothesis insist that the ‘wheel in the middle of a wheel’ and the ‘rings full of eyes’ are perfect descriptions of a flying saucer, with its ring-disks revolving around its domed centre and illuminated portholes.

Likewise viewing Ezekiel’s words as primitive attempts to describe highly advanced technology, Blumrich interpreted Ezekiel’s ‘wings’ as rotary blades which made a loud noise while moving (‘And when they went, I heard the noise of their wings, like the noise of great waters, as the voice of the Almighty’: Ezekiel 1: 24) and which folded like wings when not in use (‘When they stood, they let down their wings...’). Basing his experimental work on such assumptions, he then attempted to design Ezekiel’s spacecraft and came up with ‘a capsule on a main body supported by four helicopter units with telescopic legs, retractable wheels and mechanical arms.’

According to Margaret Sachs, in *The UFO Encyclopedia*, Blumrich ‘believes that the robot-like appearance of the helicopter units may have led Ezekiel to describe them as living creatures. And even though Ezekiel later refers to the creatures as cherubim, Blumrich insists that this was because ‘he had realized they were not ordinary men.’

Other UFOlogists are just as insistent on this extraterrestrial interpretation of Ezekiel’s visions. For instance, by Chapter 1:19, the creatures, still joined together each by two of their four wings, are ascending toward the sky inside the wheel-like craft. According to Ezekiel, ‘the likeness of the firmament upon the heads of the living creatures was as the colour of the terrible crystal, stretched forth over their heads above... And above the firmament that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, as the appearance of a sapphire stone...’

What is actually being described here?

Ezekiel makes it perfectly clear in the first verse of this chapter that he is not describing a real event, but a religious vision, or, in his own words, ‘visions of God’. It is therefore evident that the creatures he describes are

cherubim - a cherub being a winged figure with a human head and animal body. Such mythical creatures are of early astrological significance and can be found in various cultures in the shape of the sphinx and winged bulls and lions. Indeed, since Ezekiel describes his creatures as having the combined features of a 'lion', an 'ox', and an 'eagle,' as well as 'the sole of a calf's foot', it is worth noting that in early astronomy and cosmology, the Lion represents the summer solstice, the Bull the vernal equinox, the Eagle the winter, and the Babylonian 'Scorpion-man' the autumnal equinox.

As we have seen, various atmospheric phenomena look like shining disks or flying 'wheels' and would certainly have been part of the mystical consciousness of the time. As astronomer and astrophysicist Donald Menzel has noted, a common form of parhelia takes the form of a ring of light around the sun, or 'a wheel in the middle of a wheel'. In this particular optical illusion 'a vertical and a horizontal streak of light may cross both rings like the spokes of a wheel'. The wheel is also symbolic of the Sun and the Moon; and in ancient times the wheels of chariots often had the likeness of various creatures carved into them. Thus 'wheel' shapes are common as symbols or insignia in numerous ancient records, as well as in paintings and on artifacts.

In order to interpret 'the likeness of the firmament' that was above the living creatures as something that was solid and had 'the colour of the terrible crystal', the 'likeness of a throne', and the 'appearance of a sapphire stone' - in other words, a second, larger flying saucer, or mother ship - the UFOlogists ignore Ezekiel's earlier statement that he is describing 'visions of God', not real phenomenon. More tellingly, they also ignore the rest of the chapter, which states that 'upon the likeness of the throne' was the likeness of a man from whose loins poured 'the appearance of fire' and who was surrounded by 'the bow that is in the cloud in the day of rain.'

We can assume, then, that this is not a description of another astronaut in a flying saucer, or the mother ship. Rather, as Ezekiel states categorically in the final verse of Chapter 1: 'This *was* the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the LORD.'

In short, a religious vision of God and his cherubim, which made Ezekiel fall to his knees and pray.

As Erich von Däniken and other proponents of the ancient astronaut hypothesis have pillaged most of the Bible for supposed references to ancient

astronauts and their flying saucers, to refute them all would require the whole of this book. It will, however, be instructive to deal with a few of the most often used, or abused, subjects.

According to proponents of the ancient astronaut hypothesis, the Ark of the Covenant was actually an electric condenser or radio transmitter; the Great Pyramid could only have been built by, or with the aid of, extraterrestrials of superior technical knowledge; the lines on the plain of Nazca, Peru, were either runways or landing sites for alien spacecraft; the gigantic statues of Easter Island and the mighty temples of Tiahuanaco could only have been constructed by a highly advanced, therefore extraterrestrial, technology; the drawings in the caves of Tassili, in the Sahara Desert, circa 6000 B.C., are of an extraterrestrial astronaut; the Piri Re'is map, drawn in 1513 by a Turkish general of that name, could only have been completed with knowledge gained from an aerial survey of Earth, therefore by extraterrestrials; and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah can only be explained as the result of an atomic or nuclear blast.

What truth is there in these theories?

According to the Book of Exodus, the Ark of the Covenant was a chest built by Moses, under instructions from God, to be used as a repository for sacred objects and carried only by divinely appointed persons. In the Book of Numbers it is stated that a person touching any holy objects in the Ark will die; and in the Second Book of Samuel, a man named Uzzah is struck dead upon attempting to steady the Ark with his hand.

While there is no mention anywhere in the Bible of the Ark being surrounded by sparks, von Däniken claims that it was, that its bearers were instructed to wear special protective shoes and clothing, and that Uzzah was killed by electrocution. However, writer Clifford Wilson argues that since no two pieces of gold on the Ark were separated by an insulator, there was no possibility of there being a negative and a positive plate; that if the ark *had* been charged, it would have short-circuited; and that if Uzzah had truly been killed by electrocution, then so too would have been the bearers of the Ark. Wilson also points out that as God had communicated with Moses before the Ark was built, he had no need of the radio transmitter for the reasons suggested by von Däniken.

The pyramids of Egypt are the oldest of the Seven Wonders of the World and the most famous are the three pyramids at Giza. Of these, the largest is

known as the Great Pyramid and was built by Pharaoh Khufu, or Cheops. According to von Däniken and others, the pyramids could not have been built without the superior knowledge and tools of extraterrestrials. In support of his claims, von Däniken insists that the ancient Egyptians could not have moved the massive blocks of the Great Pyramid with rollers and ropes, as suggested by scholars and archaeologists, since they had no rope or wood at that time. This is nonsense, as the many drawings of these items in Egyptian illustrations clearly demonstrate, as do the dated samples of rope and wood which have been found in the vicinity of the pyramids. Von Däniken also insists that the Egyptians would not have had the capability of levelling the ground for the pyramid so accurately; but various scholars have proven that they could, while a television documentary produced by the British Broadcasting company showed the method most likely used. Von Däniken states that the pyramid's stone blocks were joined together to a thousandth-of-an-inch, which was beyond the capability of the Egyptians; when in fact they are joined together to about two-hundredths-of-an-inch, which certainly *was* within the capability of the ancient Egyptians. Von Däniken claims that it would have taken human workers, unaided by extraterrestrial technology, approximately 664 years to complete the construction; but the archaeological evidence indicates that the Great Pyramid, and others, were built within one century by ordinary human beings - and the study of Egyptian funerary edifices shows a logical, chronological development from small tombs to the true pyramids within the space of two centuries.

No evidence for extraterrestrial intervention in the construction of the Great Pyramid or others has ever been found.

In claiming that the lines on the plain of Nazca, Peru, were runways for alien spacecraft, Von Däniken ignores the fact that contemporary spacecraft, let alone flying saucers or other craft of extremely advanced technology, do not need runways. He also ignores the fact that the surface of the Nacza Plain is not rigid enough to serve as a runway (automobiles and trucks that accidentally run off the man-made roads get stuck in the sandy soil and loose gravel) and the supposed 'runway' is less than one metre wide. Likewise, he ignores the fact that many religious groups throughout history have placed their gods in the skies and created figures and symbolic shapes that can only be seen from the air (even the 'cross' shape of Christian churches can be seen only from the air). Last but not least, in asserting that the Nazca lines could

only have been formed with the help of airborne extraterrestrials, he ignores the fact that small-scale models have been found alongside some of the designs, thus suggesting that the immense figures were merely created from the models by human hands. In fact, when viewed from the air, the lines on the plain of Nacza form the very clear outlines of various totemic birds and animals.

Easter Island, located in the South Pacific, is famous for its hundreds of immense stone statues. As they have done regarding the stones of the Great Pyramid, von Däniken and his followers insist that the enormous weight of the Easter Island statues excludes the possibility of their having been transported and erected by the local people. To this argument von Däniken adds the fiction that the island did not have the wood required to make the rollers necessary for the human transportation of the statues (just as, according to von Däniken, the Egyptians did not have the rope and wood required for the construction of the Great Pyramid), and that the volcanic rock from which the statues are carved is too hard to have been cut with primitive tools.

In fact, although most of Easter Island's trees were destroyed by fire or cleared for agriculture, they once covered the whole island; and in 1955 the famous Norwegian explorer, Thor Heyerdahl, personally witnessed the local natives carve, transport and erect a typical Easter Island statue with primitive tools. According to Heyerdahl (*Aku-Aku - The Secret of Easter Island*, 1958), the outline of the statue became visible after only three days of cutting with primitive tools. Based on this observation, Heyerdalh estimated that even the largest statue on the island could have been completed in under a year. Heyerdalh also bore witness to the fact that 180 men were able to drag the completed statue over the ground to its chosen site with relative ease. Using wooden legs as levers and rocks as supports, twelve men were able to erect a twenty-five ton statue in a period of eighteen days.

So much for extraterrestrial intervention on Easter Island.

Regarding the mysterious civilization of Tiahuanaco, Bolivia, which constructed the great Gate of the Sun, von Däniken claims that a calendar which gives 'the equinoxes, the astronomical seasons, the positions of the moon for every hour and also the movements of the earth' was found in 'the dry mud of Tiahuanaco' and that the beings who 'produced, devised and used the calendar had a higher culture than ours.' This would be fascinating were it

true... however, in the words of Donald Story, 'If this calendar exists, its whereabouts seem to be unknown'.

Von Däniken claims that the rock painting found in a cave in Tassili, in the Sahara, circa 6000 B.C., is of an extraterrestrial astronaut wearing a spacesuit and oxygen mask. In making this claim, however, von Däniken ignores the fact that many similar frescos are to be found in the same area, that they belong to an artistic period known as the 'Period of the Round Heads', and that the work of that period was based mainly on representations of the natives of the area who, in neolithic times, when the rock paintings were done, often wore masks for their religious rituals. The so-called 'spaceman', named by his French discoverer, the archaeologist Henri Lhote, as Jabbaren, or *le grand dieu martien*, is actually a neolithic, ritually masked celebrant - not the 'great god Mars', as suggested by von Däniken.

The Piri Re'is map? Drawn in 1513 by a Turkish general of that name and found in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul in 1929, the map was based on many earlier charts, including Greek maps dating back to the time of Alexander the Great and one chart used by Christopher Columbus. The Pire Re'is map was considered of particular interest because it appeared to depict the coastlines of the Americas and Antarctica as they could not have been known at the time - particularly since the Antarctic was not discovered until Captain Cook reached it in 1773... 260 years after the map was drawn.

According to von Däniken, this and other ancient maps could only have been drawn by extraterrestrial spacemen from 'space stations in orbit'. To support his claim, he states that the Pire Re'is map is 'absolutely accurate', that 'the contours of the Antarctic were also precisely delineated' on it, and that Professor Charles H. Hapgood had suggested in his *Maps of the Ancient Sea Kings* that the map could only have been made from the air. In fact, as Hapgood's book makes abundantly clear, the Piri Re'is map is notoriously inaccurate, mistaking Cuba for *Espaniola* (now Haiti and the Dominican Republic), omitting almost a thousand miles of the South American coastline, duplicating the Amazon River in two different locations, and showing Antarctica as a landmass joined directly to South America.

Von Däniken claims originality for even this nonsensical theory, but he was actually beaten to it by almost a decade by Louis Pauwels' and Jacques Bergier's The Morning of the Magicians, Donald Keyhoe's *Flying Saucers: Top Secret*, and Robert Charroux's *One Hundred Thousand Years of Ma''s*

Unknown History, none of which are to be recommended for their accuracy. While the Piri Re'is map is one of several that were found in the Topkapi Place, Istanbul, in 1929, Pauwel and Bergier claim that it was found in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Piri Re'is personally presented it to the Library of Congress; Charroux claims that it was found in 1957; Keyhoe claims that a Turkish naval officer submitted a copy of the map, plus the original Christopher Columbus map, to the US Navy Hydrographic Office in 1933, though he carefully omits to name the naval officer in question; and von Däniken, coming desperately late in the game but trying to take credit for it, claims in *Chariots of the Gods?* that the map was discovered in the eighteenth century - though he amends this to the proper date in his later book, *In Search of Ancient Gods*.

As for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, von Däniken plumbs new depths of irrationality by suggesting that the angel's urgency in making Lot and his wife flee from the impending catastrophe indicates that a 'countdown' was in progress and that the biblical account describes a nuclear explosion. The Bible gives not the slightest indication that a 'countdown' was taking place, but it certainly indicates, in Genesis, 19: 24, that 'the LORD rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the LORD out of heaven' and, in verse 28, that 'lo, the smoke of the country went up as the smoke of a furnace'.

The ancient cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were located in the Great Rift Valley, an area that extends from approximately one hundred miles north of Palestine to the southern shore of the Dead Sea and has been subject to earthquakes since time immemorial. Geological and archaeological evidence indicates that the cataclysm described in the Book of Genesis did take place approximately 2000 B.C. in the form of an earthquake accompanied by explosions of a natural gas formed by the large quantities of oil, asphalt and sulphur, or brimstone, in the area.

It can reasonably be assumed from this that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed by a dreadful, but otherwise natural, earthquake and that extraterrestrial intervention had nothing to do with it.

Proponents of the ancient astronauts hypothesis are quick to grab at anything that lends legitimacy to their fanciful, unsubstantiated theories. Thus, Erich von Däniken is eager to point out that an 'outstanding technician' (Josef Blumrich) has taken his proposals seriously; just as countless numbers of

UFOlogosts are deeply impressed by the fact that Brinsley Le Poer Trench is actually the Earl of Clancarty and a member of the House of Lords in London, England.

It may be *because* he is a member of the House of Lords, with all the power and prestige that goes with it, which accounts for the fact that the Earl of Clancarty, formerly of the Nautical College of Pangbourne, the Standard Bank of South Africa, the Royal Artillery, and the *RAF Flying Review* and *Practical Gardening*, managed in his lifetime to become Editor of *The Flying Saucer Review*; President of the worldwide UFO organization, Contact International; Vice President of the British UFO Research Association (BUFORA); an Honourary Life Member of the Ancient Astronaut Society; and head of a House of Lords All-Party UFO Study Group; as well as the author of numerous books about UFOs and their occupants. Certainly it was not due to the quality of his research or writing.

What von Däniken, Clancarty, and the others mentioned above, share is a naked desire to read ancient astronauts and flying saucers into biblical descriptions of earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, dust storms, lightning, other atmospheric phenomena, and visions filled with the religious symbols or insignia of the period. What they also share is a talent for misinterpretation, selective omission, wilful distortion, and even outright invention when it comes to analyzing the facts and figures of ancient history.

Perhaps the most notorious example of this is Erich von Däniken's 'blacked out' reproduction and accompanying explanation for the drawing on the lid of a Mayan sarcophagus, or coffin, found in the Temple of Inscriptions in Palenque, Mexico, in 1952. By deliberately blacking out various traditional Mayan elements in the painting reproduced in his book, von Däniken hopes to persuade us that the resulting work is a depiction of an ancient astronaut piloting a rocket. In fact, in the original, drawn from the incised stone by Agustin Villagra, the traditional Mayan elements show it to be a representation of the Mayan ruler, Pascal, suspended between the worlds of the living and the dead, with a quetzal bird (blacked out in von Däniken's reproduction) symbolizing the dawn, or the rising of the Sun God, perched on top of a cross, which is made of stylized corn plants, symbolizing fertility. The skull-like monster below Pascal's chair, when not partially blacked out by von Däniken, clearly represents the world of the living, or Earth.

As Colin Wilson says in *The Directory of Possibilities*, most of the

evidence for ancient astronauts ‘collapses on close examination’. Wilson also reminds us that the ancient-astronaut theory depends heavily upon the assumption that our ancestors were primitive and unsophisticated creatures, only one degree more intelligent than gorillas, whereas an increasing body of evidence suggests quite the opposite: that Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon Man were more civilized and inventive than suggested by von Däniken, Clancarty and Co.; that they carved stones into spheres and disks (which suggests Sun worship, rather than UFOs), and painted the Moon on their cave walls; and that they would not have needed the assistance of a superior intelligence from outer space to invent the wheel or build their megalithic monuments.

To conclude: UFOs, or Unidentified Flying Objects, were commonplace in the past; flying saucers and extraterrestrials were not.

Chapter 2

The Great Airship Scare of 1896-7

The term ‘flying saucer’ was coined in 1947 with the Kenneth Arnold sightings, as mentioned in Chapter One. However, the first known use of the word ‘saucer’ in relation to an unidentified flying object was actually made in the *Denison Daily News* of Denison, Texas, on 25 January 1878, when it recorded that farmer John Martin, of Dallas, had reportedly seen a large, orange object in the sky, which was ‘the size of a large saucer and evidently at great height’.

This isolated incident was followed nearly two decades later by the first truly contemporary UFO flap: the Great Airship Scare of 1896-1897. The two best reports of this extraordinary event are to be found in *The UFO Controversy in America* by David Michael Jacobs and *UFO Exist!* by Paris Flammonde. We can summarize the major events from these excellent works.

According to Flammonde, the prelude to the major UFO, or mystery airship, flap began modestly enough in late October 1896, when a Miss Hegstron caught sight of a glowing light in the sky near her home in San Francisco. However, the real flap began on 1 November when a mountainman and hunter named Brown related to a newspaper reporter that he had seen an ‘airship’ in the morning sky over Bolinas Ridge, near the city. Brown was adamant that what he had seen was not a light at night, but an ‘airship’ in broad daylight, albeit slightly obscured by the morning mist. This was followed by a brilliant white light that was witnessed by hundreds of people as it moved across the sky on the evening of 17 November. One witness, while unable to verify that what he saw was an actual craft of some kind, was adamant that the light had been moving *against* the wind at an altitude of three or four hundred feet. Another witness confirmed that the object was moving into the wind and added that while it was too far away for its specific shape to be distinguished, it carried ‘controlled illumination’ and moved like ‘a seagoing craft ploughing rough water’. Countless other witnesses saw the traveling light and many stated that it was being manipulated to sweep both land and sea as if to avoid collision with high

buildings or mountains. All of those who reported seeing the actual craft from which the light was beaming described it as being a large oblong shape with flattened ends, or an ovoid; though opinions differed as to whether its small passenger cockpit was located above the main body or was dangling underneath. Some witnesses insisted that they had seen members of the craft's crew; others swore that they had heard voices drifting down from the object.

As to be expected, that sighting led to an outbreak of wild newspaper speculation, misidentifications, hysterical imaginings, and hoaxes; but based on the more reliable sightings, the great airship was moving southwards and eventually, on the evening of 20 November, was observed by thousands of people as it glided across the sky over Oakland, California. One witness noted that apart from its large lamp, it had 'wings or winglike propellers' and was heading across the bay. This appears to be true, as the light beaming from the craft was later witnessed by inhabitants of the Mission area as it moved across Twin Peaks. Other sightings were made the next day and the following night, and all reported that the 'light' or 'enormous flying device' was heading southwards.

While an inflamed public imagination led to many fantastical, Jules Verne styled newspaper and magazine reports, individual witnesses were surprisingly consistent in what they described: an egg, cigar or ovoid shape; an up-and-down or 'wavy' flight pattern (like 'a seagoing craft ploughing rough water'); an upper cockpit or suspended gondola; and a light, often compared to an arc lamp, that swept to and fro, surveying the hills or township below. There was also general agreement that the craft was intelligently controlled.

The 'hoax' element raised its ugly head again when a lawyer from Alameda, George D. Collins, claimed that he was the personal representative of the 'inventor of the remarkable airship'; but after causing a nationwide press sensation with his claim, Collins recanted and the man named as the inventor, a dentist named E.H. Benjamin, insisted that he had nothing to do with airships or any other kind of aeronautical craft. Within twenty-four hours of this disclaimer, W.H.H. Hart, former attorney general of the State of California, announced that he was in charge of the 'destiny' of the airship, that this had come about because of Collins' 'inability to exercise discretion in his relationship with the press', that the real inventor of the airship was a

Dr Catlin, and that the dentist, E.H. Benjamin, despite his denials, had been Catlin's assistant. Finally, even though the United States was not then at war with Cuba, Hart announced that the airship, with only two or three men, could be used to destroy the city of Havana within forty-eight hours. Not satisfied with this, the former attorney general then announced that the airship's inventor was 'the cousin of the electrician of General Antonio Marco, commander of the patriotic forces in Cuba.'

The use of Cuba is interesting in the light of later events (see below), but what remains most fascinating about Hart's highly voluble involvement in the Great Airship Scare is that it confused serious enquiry, opened the door to spurious 'official' pronouncements on the nature and purpose of the unidentified flying object, and made it more difficult to discover the truth - in other words, an early example of 'disinformation' with regard to UFOs.

Nevertheless, the great airship, or airships, continued to fly, with the sightings ranging from Tacoma, Washington, to southern California. The first actual 'contact' with the occupants of an airship was reportedly made in the morning of 2 December on the beach near Pacific Grove, a village north of San Francisco. According to the witnesses, there were three occupants and the airship was about twenty yards long, cigar-shaped, and had wings that could be folded against the fuselage of the craft. Many discounted this sighting when the witnesses reported that the three occupants had managed to lift the airship and carry it away from the beach, into hiding. The report of an airship crashing near Twin Peaks, San Francisco, during the following night was likewise treated with some skepticism and was almost certainly a newspaper invention.

A lull in the sightings between late 1896 and the first months of 1897 was followed in April by an even greater number of truly startling sightings, now spreading out from California to sweep across the whole country. With what some thought was exquisite timing, the great airship suddenly appeared over Kansas City, Missouri, at approximately eight o'clock in the evening of April Fools Day 1897. For over an hour the craft's lamp swept the streets, rooftops and bluffs upon which the public, including the governor and other officials and professional people, gathered to observe the phenomenon. From these and other witnesses it was apparent that what was observed, apart from the sweeping light, was a large dark mass that could perform manoeuvres or hang motionless in the air. In the words of the New York *Sun* of 3 April

1897: ‘the powerful lights on board were reflected on the cloud[s] and the outlines of a ship about thirty feet long apparently were clearly distinguished’. The mystery craft remained above Kansas City for ninety minutes, then ascended and moved off, eventually disappearing in the northwest. Shortly after, there were reports from the town of Everest, sixty miles away in the neighbouring state of Kansas, that an unidentified light had passed overhead.

The next night, the phenomenon appeared over Omaha, Nebraska, and was ‘broadly recognized as a very real airship’. By the following evening it had reached Topeka, where it reappeared on several consecutive evenings, before disappearing and turning up again over Omaha, where, according to the New York *World* of 7 April 1897, ‘it was the first time the outline of the vessel could be clearly seen’. Many brothers of the local Ak Sar Ben organization saw it and one of them described it as having ‘a steel body, the length of which could only be estimated at thirty feet’.

As we shall see later, the ‘steel’ body could in fact have been thin aluminium, but certainly, whatever the craft was made of, by 7 April it had travelled a good distance eastward to appear over Sioux City, Iowa, where one witness described it as ‘a big cigar-shaped balloon... about thirty-five feet long, ten or twelve thick...underneath it was a car... it had a row of windows along the side and the light shone through them.’

As Flammonde points out, by this time ‘the growing catalogue of sightings makes it extremely difficult to attribute all of them to a single craft. The “high speeds” described were relative and not impressive by contemporary standards...’ Therefore ‘the large number of communities reporting UFOs at the same time makes the conclusion of more than one vessel reasonable.’

Whether one or many, by this time the mystery craft had been observed by thousands of people and there was increasing consistency about the descriptions of its major features. According to the majority of reports, it was some kind of balloon, approximately thirty or forty feet long, with folding wings along its side, a passenger gondola, a directable searchlight, and smaller green, red and white lamps. The majority of the witnesses were in agreement that the airship carried three crew members (at least two reports contradicted this by stating six crew members). The majority of witnesses also described the balloon as making ‘hissing’ noises and swore that the

airship was under control and could manoeuvre or hover in the air. Practically every report confirmed that the directable searchlight was used to survey the terrain or townships below.

The craft kept traveling. On 10 April a newsstand dealer, Walter McCann, managed to take two photographs when an airship flew over Rogers Park in Illinois - an event which was witnessed by three other men and which was lent further credibility by the fact that numerous other people in the vicinity reported seeing such a craft at approximately the same time. Those photographs were reproduced in a couple of newspapers - the *Chicago Times-Herald* and the *New York Times*. While the former reproduced a pen-and-ink etching of the photograph and claimed that the etcher's 'expert' analysis had concluded that the photograph was genuine, its rival, the *Chicago Tribune*, after also reportedly having the photograph examined by an expert, claimed it was a fake. Nevertheless, true or false, the photographs showed a vessel shaped like an elongated ovoid which, according to Flammonde, had 'the appearance of a large silk envelope, below which was a cabin of light construction, giving the appearance of white metal'.

Shortly after this sighting, there were newspaper reports that a mystery airship had crashed near Kalamazoo, Michigan. Reportedly, the crash was witnessed by 'two old soldiers' and corroborated by a local, Mrs Wallace, who claimed that her family had heard the noise of the crash, or explosion. It was also reported that parts of the machine had been found scattered over the area, some as much as two miles apart. Whether this was true or not, the reported 'crash' was followed by more mystery airship sightings from other parts of Michigan, as well as Oklahoma, Kansas, Illinois and Indiana. By 15 April another airship appeared over Chicago where, according to one account, it descended to approximately six hundred feet above the earth. Quoted in the New York *Herald* of 15 April 1897, witness G.A. Overocker stated: 'The lower portion of the airship was thin, and made of some light white metal, like aluminium. The upper portion was dark and long, like a big cigar, pointed in front and with some kind of arrangement in the rear to which cables were attached [see description of the 'Pennington' airship, below]. The pilot pulled these and steered the course from south to northeast... I can swear that I saw an airship.'

Daytime sightings were rare, but there was a remarkable one on 16 April when citizens of Linn Grove, Iowa, watched an airship pass slowly overhead,

then land briefly a few miles outside town. Viewed by other citizens from a distance estimated at about two-thousand feet, the airship was described as having ‘a twin pair of huge wings’. Even more mysteriously, when it took off again, it discharged ‘two large boulders of unknown composition’ - an incident that would be repeated during the famous Maury Island UFO sighting of 1947.

Meanwhile, mystery airships were being seen elsewhere, with further sightings over the San Francisco bay area. More importantly, a fisherman on Lake Erie, Cleveland, Ohio, got a close look at a forty-foot craft. He mistook this for another boat until ‘an enormous, elaborately decorated, cylindrical balloon, approximately fifty feet in length, inflated’ and ‘swept the boat and its occupants at least two hundred yards into the sky, where it circled several times’. According to the witness, the airship’s occupants were a young man, a woman, and a boy, one of whom threw out a large swordfish as the craft ascended.

At roughly the same time there were sightings as far apart as Missouri, Iowa, Tennessee, Kentucky, and several towns in Texas - which certainly suggests that more than one airship was crossing the country. A report of a daytime landing in Iowa led to press descriptions of a vessel ‘forty feet long, constructed of varnished canvas stretched over a cigar-shaped frame and surmounted by a cockpit. It had wings, some kind of rudder, and a tail pipe exuding steam.’ On 18 April a craft was sighted over Sisterville, West Virginia; viewed through binoculars, it matched other descriptions by being cone-shaped and having fins (or wings), and with brilliant red, green and white lights at one end.

The following day, an estimated three thousand people at Cripple Creek, Kansas, saw an unidentified object shining in the sunlight, hovering about a mile high in the sky. According to Flammonde: ‘inspection through a telescope revealed a large, slowly moving, conical object’.

More reports, some of which were obviously hoaxes, poured in over the next few days until, on 30 April, the last airship was sighted by three people in the early hours of the morning over Yonkers, New York. According to witnesses, this final airship flew over Yonkers at approximately 3am, heading north toward the sea, before being swallowed up by the darkness.

The Great Airship Scare of 1896-1897 formally came to an end with that eerie sighting.

While the reaction of a largely hostile scientific community was to dismiss the sightings as optical illusions caused by atmospheric phenomena or hoaxes, their claims hold little water in view of the actual nature of the sightings. The Great Airship Scare of 1896-97 was not one in which people reported strange 'lights', 'ghost ships' or 'flying saucers', but one in which most reports had remarkable consistency in their details and were based on lengthy, close sightings. As Paris Flmmonde points out regarding the unidentified object observed over Omaha, Nebraska, on 5 April 1897: 'A hundred of the city's most prominent citizens were prepared to testify that they had monitored more than a mere light, however brilliant and fanciful in its flight. They had seen an *airship*. Likewise, when on 10 April the same, or another, airship hovered over Chicago, it was clearly observed by many people from the top of a skyscraper in the Loop.

These sightings, therefore, were definitely of a manned, motor-driven airship of the kind still in its infancy even in Europe, but not known to have been constructed in America.

Could such a craft have been designed and built, in secret, in America by 1896?

Contrary to popular belief, it was certainly possible.

The scientific community's reluctance to accept the reality of the Great AirShip Scare was based on the fact that though airships existed in 1896, most of them were constructed and flown in Europe, not America, and even those could do little other than hover helplessly in the air or fly slowly for very short distances.

The first European airship was built in 1852 by Henry Giffard of France. Powered by a 350-pound engine, it was successfully flown over the Paris Hippodrome at a speed of six miles an hour. An internal-combustion engine fuelled by hydrogen from the airship's bag was then used by the German, Paul Haenlein, for his even more successful flight of 1872. Albert and Gaston Tissandier of France successfully powered an airship with an electric motor in 1883; and the following year, Charles Renard and A.C. Krebs made a short return flight at about thirteen miles per hour in a nonrigid dirigible powered by an electric motor. The first rigid airship, with an aluminium-sheeting hull and powered by a gasoline-fired engine, was built by David Schwartz in

Germany in 1897. The first dirigible with an internal-combustion engine was built by another two Germans, Wolfert and Baumgarten, though it exploded before its trial flight. The first truly successful nonrigid, controllable airship, using two internal-combustion engines, was designed and constructed in France by Alberto Santos-Dumont, who subsequently thrilled the whole of France by flying from St. Cloud to the Eiffel Tower and back, a distance of seven miles, in thirty minutes. Finally, in June 1900, Count von Zeppelin's first airship flew across Lake Constance; and the Germans subsequently used a number of large Zeppelin airships to bomb Paris and London throughout the Great War of 1914-1918.

(Ironically, the first *successful* dirigible, Thomas Baldwin's *California Arrow*, was constructed and flown in Oakland, California, in 1904, months after the Wright brothers made the first sustained, powered and controlled flights in history at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, in their biplane, the *Flyer*.)

Though the European airships were the ones most widely known, it is possible that some were constructed, possibly in secret, in the United States during that same period. Certainly, though the Great Airship Scare took place five years *before* the first historic experiments of Orville Wright and his brother, Wilbur, there were, by that time, various airship designs on the drawing boards or in the Patent Office. For instance on 11 August 1896, three months before the beginning of the Great Airship Scare, patent number 565805 was given to Charles Abbot Smith of San Francisco for an airship he intended having ready by the following year. Another patent, number 580941, was issued to Henry Heintz of Elkton, South Dakota, on 20 April 1897, a few weeks before the airship flap ended. It should be noted, however, that while many of the UFOs sighted were shaped roughly like the patented designs, there is no record of those airships having been built.

Which doesn't necessarily mean that *no* airships were built.

Was the state of scientific knowledge in the United States at that time up to the task?

The short answer is 'Yes.'

It is a widely held misconception that those were early days for advanced technology, but they were in fact the most productive days in the history of science. By 1895 Rontgen had discovered X-rays, Marconi had invented wireless telegraphy, Auguste and Louis Lumiere had invented the

cinematograph, the first main railway was electrified, and Ramsay had detected, by spectroscope, helium from a terrestrial source. By 1896 we had Rutherford's magnetic detection of electrical waves, the construction of an electrical submarine in France, and the first successful flights of S.P. Langley's flying machines. By 1897 numerous patents for flying machines had been registered, and J.J. Thomson's work on cathode rays had led to the evaluation of the electron.

Regarding aeronautical knowledge in particular, American interest in the possibilities of flight was intense, a lot of research work was under way, and the experimental work of the period was certainly more advanced than is generally believed.

In 1896, perhaps the most renowned seat of aeronautical teaching was the Massachussetts Institute of Technology, more widely known as MIT. Although there were no formal aeronautical courses at MIT in the late 1800s, there were plenty of informal courses on propulsion and the behaviour of fluids - two subjects necessary to aeronautical experimentation and which rocket inventor, Robert H. Goddard, an MIT pupil, later made his own.

The first degree in aeronautics was conferred by MIT in 1892; by 1896, instructors and students there had built a wind tunnel and were experimenting with it to get practical knowledge of aerodynamics. The tunnel was a rectangular duct leading from the forced ventilating system in the basement of the old engineering building, 'Eng.A', on Trinity Place in Boston (diagonally across from the old Boston Art Museum; a site now occupied by the Sheraton Plaza Hotel) and the tests included measurements of lift and drag, airspeed determination by a vane anemometer, and the action of wind pressure on various surfaces, or wings.

The second most important seat of learning was Sibley College, Cornell University, in Ithica, New York, where by the mid-1890s it was possible to obtain a Bachelor of Sciences in Aeronautics. Courses at Sibley College included mechanical and electrical engineering, and machine design and construction. At Sibley College the experimental engineering courses were conducted by professors Rolla Clinton Carpenter, George Burton Preston, Aldred Henry Eldredge, Charles Edwin Houghton, and Oliver Shantz - some of the greatest aeronautical thinkers of their day. Also lecturing occasionally at Sibley was Octave Chanute, the world-famous engineer who wrote *Progress in Flying Machines* (1894); and, in 1896, emulated the successful

manned hang-glider experiments of the German, Otto Lilienthal, at an aerial experiment station on the Lake Michigan sand dunes near Miller, Indiana.

Specific aeronautical texts of the time were surprisingly advanced and would have included the Smithsonian Institution's *Experiments in Aerodynamics*, published in 1891; the Lawrence Hargraves experiment reports of 1890 to 1894; the 1893 reports on Sir Hiram Maxim's experiments on engines, propellers, aeroplanes and flying machines; and the *Aeronautical Annual* of 1895, 1896, and 1897, which contained original contributions from most of the leading aeronautical scientists.

Therefore, assuming that experiments with airships were being funded in secret, the knowledge and talent would certainly have been available, and airships of advanced design could have been constructed in the United States by the time of the Great Airship Scare.

As for doing so in secret, this also would have been possible, since it was a time when financiers were in fierce competition with one-another to sink money into experimental aeronautical projects - and most of those projects were wrapped in the strictest secrecy. Given this situation, a talented aeronautical engineer or inventor could have worked in almost total anonymity with the full support, even encouragement, of his financial backers. Also, the US government was known to have quietly financed more than one aeronautical project; while the US Army Air Force occasionally took over civilian aeronautical projects and either ran them in strict secrecy or, for one reason or another, quietly aborted them.

Thus it is possible that an airship of the capabilities described by thousands of witnesses during the Great Airship Scare could have been constructed in secret in the United States during that period.

But by whom?

In the mid-1890s, in the US, the general belief was that aerial navigation would be solved through an airship, rather than a heavier-than-air flying machine - so most of the earlier designs looked like dirigibles with a passenger car on the bottom. What stands out in the 1896-97 sightings is that the unidentified flying objects were mostly cigar-shaped, that they frequently landed, and that their occupants often talked to the witnesses, usually asking for water for their machines. The most intriguing of the numerous contactee stories involved a man who called himself 'Wilson'.

The first incident occurred in Beaumont, Texas, on 19 April 1897, when one J.B. Ligon, the local agent for Magnolia Brewery, and his son Charles, noticed lights in a pasture a few hundred yards away and went to investigate. They came upon four men standing beside a large, dark object which neither of the witnesses could see clearly. One of those men asked Ligon for a bucket of water. As Ligon fetched the water, the man introduced himself as 'Mr Wilson'. He then told Ligon that he and his friends were traveling in a flying machine, that they had taken a trip out to the gulf (presumably the Gulf of Galveston, though no name was given) and that they were returning to the quiet Iowa town where the airship and four others like it had been constructed. When asked, Wilson explained that electricity powered the propellers and wings of his airship - then he and his buddies got back into the airship and Ligon watched it ascending.

The next day, April 20, Sheriff H.W. Bayer of Uvalde, also in Texas, went to investigate a strange light and voices in back of his house. He encountered an airship and three men - and one of the men introduced himself as Wilson, from Goshen, New York. Wilson then enquired about one C.C. Akers, former sheriff of Zavalia County, saying he had met him in Fort Worth in 1877 and now wanted to see him again. Sheriff Baylor, surprised, replied that Captain Akers was now at Eagle Pass, and Wilson, apparently disappointed, asked to be remembered to him the next time Sheriff Baylor visited him. Baylor reported that the men from the airship wanted water and that Wilson requested that their visit be kept secret from the townspeople; then he and the other men climbed back into the airship and: 'its great wings and fans were set in motion and it sped away northward in the direction of San Angelo'. The county clerk also saw the airship as it left the area.

Two days later, in Josserand, Texas, a whirring sound awoke farmer Frank Nichols, who looked out from his window and saw brilliant lights streaming from what he described as 'a ponderous vessel of strange proportions' floating over his cornfield. Nichols went outside to investigate, but before he reached the large vessel, two men walked up to him and asked if they could have water from his well. Nichols agreed to this request - as farmers in those days mostly did - and the men then invited him to visit their airship, where he noticed that there were six or seven crew members. One of those men told him that the ship's motive power was highly condensed electricity and that it was one of five that had been constructed in a small

town in Iowa with the backing of a large stock company in New York.

The next day, on April 23, witnesses described in the Houston *Post* as two ‘responsible men’ reported that an airship had descended where they lived in Kountze, Texas, and that two of the occupants had given their names as Jackson and... Wilson.

Four days after that incident, on April 27, the Galveston *Daily News* printed a letter from the aforementioned C.C. Akers, in which he claimed that he had indeed known a man in Fort Worth, Texas, named Wilson; that Wilson was from New York; that he was in his middle twenties; and that he was of a mechanical turn of mind and was then working on aerial navigation and something that would astonish the world.

Finally, early in the evening of April 30, in Deadwood, Texas, a farmer named H.C. Lagrone heard his horses bucking as if in stampede. Going outside, he saw a bright white light circling around the fields nearby and illuminating the entire area before descending and landing in one of the fields. Walking to the landing spot, Lagrone found a crew of five men, three of whom engaged him in conversation while the others collected water in rubber bags. The men informed Lagrone that their airship was one of five that had been flying around the country recently; that theirs was in fact the same one that had landed in Beaumont a few days before; that all the airships had been constructed in an interior town in Illinois - which borders Iowa - and that they were reluctant to say anything else because they hadn’t yet taken out any patents. By May that same year, the wave of sightings ended - and the mysterious Mr Wilson wasn’t heard from again.

While I have used the mysterious ‘Wilson’ as a major protagonist in my five *Projekt Saucer* novels, creating what I believe is a plausible explanation for him, it has to be conceded that no proof for his existence, other than that mentioned above, has ever surfaced and he has not been heard from since the end of the Great Airship Scare in 1897. Nevertheless, even given that the letter from C.C. Akers printed in the Galveston *Daily News* on 27 April 27 1897 could have come from a hoaxer after he had read the original story about Akers’ friendship with Wilson, we are still left with a surprising consistency in the various reports, as well as in the recollection of the name ‘Wilson’ from witnesses in widely scattered areas who would not have had access to news stories from other states.

That Wilson existed as ‘Wilson’ or was someone else using a

pseudonym is a matter of relative unimportance. The major question raised by the 'Wilson' mystery is whether or not a person, or persons, constructed an advanced airship, or airships, in secret and flew it, or them, across the United States from November 1896 to May the following year.

UFO historian Lionel Beer is of the opinion that a manned airship was responsible for the Great Airship Scare. Beer also points out that Dr Geoffrey Doel, former president of The British Unidentified Flying Object Research Association (BUFORA), had made a convincing case for this, suggesting that the man responsible was Edward Joel Pennington, of Racine, Wisconsin.

In 1890 Pennington started a company called The Mount Carmel Aerial Navigation Company and filed patents for a four-cylinder radial engine for the propulsion of an aerial vessel. In 1891 he exhibited a thirty-foot airship powered through its tethering cable by an electrically turned airscrew; and by 1895, after announcing that he intended to open an airship passenger service between Chicago and New York, he deposited patents with the American Patents Office for a full-sized airship.

Regarding this, it is worth noting that the average length of the craft sighted during the Great Airship Scare of 1896-97 was thirty feet and that many were reported as having 'cables' and electrically powered airscrews.

According to Lionel Beer, the two photographs of the mystery airship taken by Walter McCann in 1897 showed a 'distant object' closely resembling Pennington's design. In *The UFO Controversy in America* David Michael Jacobs says that it 'remarkably resembled' the mystery airships sighted by so many in 1896 and 1897, and had 'a cigar-shaped gas bag with wings attached to the sides, a large railroad-like car hanging from the bottom of the bag, and storage batteries to light the car'.

On 15 April 1897, shortly after newspapers reported that an airship had crashed, farmers Jeremiah Collier and William York claimed that they had come across a grounded airship on Wood Patch Hill, Brown County, Indiana. According to these gentlemen, the craft had been damaged and the crew, who were carrying out repairs, claimed that it belonged to E.J. Pennington. When interviewed about this on April 19, Pennington admitted that the damaged airship was his, that reports about the machine blowing up (New York *Herald*, 14 April 1897) had been exaggerations, and that 'owing to the roof of our machine springing a leak, one of our electrical circuits became grounded and the dynamo burned out'. He also claimed that he had three

machines in the air, presently over the central states, and that while one would be turning up at the Tennessee exposition, he would be flying another to Cuba, to 'join the patriots in their struggle for liberty'.

While no motor-powered airship materialized at the Tennessee exposition of May that year, a bicycle-powered airship was demonstrated, flying successfully for short distances. (As far as the history books are concerned, the first motor-driven airship was built and flown in the United States in 1900 by A. Leo Stevens.) As for Pennington's reference to Cuba (which echoes the remarks of W.H.H. Hart), on the evening of April 14, in Springfield, Illinois, farmworker John Halley and another resident, Adolf Wenke, witnessed the descent of an airship on a field just outside town and were informed by the pilot, before the airship took off again, that his craft would be 'used in Cuba' as soon as 'Congress recognized Cuban belligerency'.

Pennington neither flew his airship to Cuba nor opened his planned airship passenger service; and as far as can be ascertained, he stopped constructing airships and dropped out of sight shortly after the Great Airship Scare ended. While David Michael Jacobs states that this was because Pennington 'could not raise the necessary funds to actually build the ship', Beer says that 'it is not known for sure' why he failed to complete his project and suggests that he was possibly 'shrewd enough to realize that aeronautical designers in France and Germany were well ahead of him and that the Zeppelins would not be long in coming'.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that during the Great Airship Scare thousands of people across the United States saw what was clearly a manned, motor-driven airship. The true identity of the genius who built it may never be known.

Chapter 3

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Technology and Sightings of World War II

Before writing the *Genesis* book in the *Projekt Saucer* series, while researching a World War Two novel, I obtained through the Imperial War Museum, London, two short articles which attracted my attention. One was a routine war report by Marshall Yarrow, then the Reuters special correspondent to Supreme Headquarters in liberated Paris. The particular cutting I had was from the *South Wales Argus* of 13 December 1944 and it stated: 'The Germans have produced a "secret" weapon in keeping with the Christmas season. The new device, which is apparently an air defence weapon, resembles the glass balls which adorn Christmas trees. They have been seen hanging in the air over German territory, sometimes singly, sometimes in clusters. They are coloured silver and are apparently transparent. The second article, an Associated Press release published in the New York *Herald Tribune* of 2 January 1945, illuminated the subject even more. It said:

> Now, it seems, the Nazis have thrown something new into the night skies over Germany. It is the weird, mysterious 'Foo fighter' balls which race alongside the wings of Beaufighters flying intruder missions over Germany. Pilots have been encountering this eerie weapon for more than a month in their night flights. No-one apparently knows what this sky weapon is. The 'balls of fire' appear suddenly and accompany the planes for miles. They seem to be radio-controlled from the ground, so official intelligence reports reveal.

Either because of the famous line from the popular Smokey Stover comic strip, 'Where there's foo, there's fire', or simply because the French word for 'fire' is *feu*, these 'eerie' weapons soon became widely known as 'foo fighters'.

Official 'foo fighter' reports were submitted by pilots Henry Giblin and

Walter Cleary, who stated that on the night of 27 September 1944 they had been harassed in the vicinity of Speyer by ‘an enormous burning light’ that was flying above their aircraft at about 250 mph; then by Lieutenant Edward Schluter, a fighter-pilot of the US 415th Night-Fighter Squadron based at Dijon, France, who, on the night of 23 November 1944, was harassed over the Rhine by ‘ten small reddish balls of fire’ flying in formation at immense speed. Further sightings were made by members of the same squadron on 27 November, 22 December and 24 December.

In a report published in the New York *Times* of 2 January 1945, US Air Force Lieutenant, Donald Meiers, claimed that there were three kinds of foo fighter: red balls of fire that appeared off the aircraft’s wingtips, other balls of fire that flew in front of them, and ‘lights which appear off in the distance - like a Christmas tree in the air - and flicker on and off’. Meiers also confirmed that the foo fighters climbed, descended or turned when the aircraft did so. The foo fighters were witnessed both at night and by day, yet even when pacing the Allied aircraft they did not show up on the radar screens.

A classified project had actually been established in England in 1943 under the direction of Lieutenant General Massey, to examine a spate of reports of unidentified flying objects submitted by British, French and American pilots flying bombing missions over occupied France and Nazi Germany. While no official designation of the foo fighters was offered, most reports indicated that they were ‘balls of fire’ that flew in parallel formation with the Allied aircraft, often pacing them for great distances, at speeds exceeding 300 mph, frequently causing their engines to malfunction by cutting in and out. While a few reports of crashing Allied aircraft suggest that foo fighters caused the crashes by making the aircraft’s engines cut out completely, most reports indicate that this was unlikely and that the foo fighters merely tailed the planes and caused psychological harm, rather than physical damage. They also flew away when fired upon.

At first it was assumed that the ‘balls of fire’ were static electricity charges, but the mounting body of evidence made it clear that they were under some kind of control and were certainly not natural phenomena. Indeed, according to a London *Daily Telegraph* report of 2 January 1945, RAF pilots were describing them as ‘strange orange lights which follow their planes, sometimes flying in formation with them, and eventually *peeling off*

and climbing (author's emphasis)'. This soon led to speculation that they were German secret weapons, radio-controlled from the ground, and designed either to foul the ignition systems of the bombers or act as 'psychological' weapons that confused and unnerved the Allied pilots. Finally, unable to solve the mystery, both the RAF and the US Eighth Army Air Force concluded that they were the products of 'mass hallucination' and subsequently did no more about them.

Sightings of the foo fighters tailed off and ceased completely a few weeks before the end of the war.

The next wave of UFO sightings occurred in Western Europe and Scandinavia, where from 1946 to 1947 many people, including airline pilots and radar operatives, reported seeing strange cigar- or disk-shaped objects in the skies. On 21 June 1947, Harold Dahl reported seeing saucer-shaped objects flying toward the Canadian border. Three days later, Kenneth Arnold made his more famous sightings of saucer-shaped objects over the Cascades, also heading for the Canadian border.

These and subsequent sightings led to speculation that both the Soviets and the Americans, utilizing the men and material captured in the secret research plants of Nazi Germany, including those at Peenemünde and Nordhausen, were developing advanced saucer-shaped aircraft.

In the words of Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, then head of the US Air Force's Project Blue Book: 'When World War II ended, the Germans had several radical types of new aircraft and guided missiles under development. The majority of these projects were in the most preliminary stages, but they were the only known craft that could even approach the performance of the objects reported by UFO observers.'

Were such speculations based on facts?

It would certainly seem so.

The late 1800s and early 1900s produced some of the greatest advances in the history of aviation. The first successful flights of S.P. Langley's flying machines were made in 1896 - the first year of the Great Airship Scare - and by 1900 numerous patents for airships had been registered. In 1900 Count von Zeppelin's dirigible balloon, powered by an internal combustion engine and propellers, became the first real directed flight by man; and by 1901, in Paris, France, Santos Dumont had flown an airship from S. Cloud to the

Eiffel Tower and back in under thirty minutes to win the French Aero Club prize; two years later, at Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the Wright Brothers made the first successful heavier-than-air manned flight; on the last day of December 1908, Wilbur Smith flew 77 miles in two hours and thirty minutes; seven months later, the French aviator, Louis Blériot, flew across the English channel, from Calais to Dover; and throughout the Great War of 1914-18 the Germans successfully used advanced Zeppelin airships to bomb London and Paris.

However, while these great aeronautical achievements were enthralling the world, even more radical theories and experiments were taking place quietly elsewhere. In 1895, a year before the Great Airship Scare, the renowned Russian physicist, Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, was theorizing about the possibilities of space flight in his essays. By 1898 he had understood and written about the necessity for liquid-fuelled rocket engines. His later reputation as the 'father' of space flight rests on a series of articles he wrote on the theory of rocketry, and by the 1920s he was suggesting some of the devices that the American rocket genius, Robert H. Goddard, was to develop so brilliantly.

Goddard was always well ahead of his time. Born in Worcester, Massachusetts, in 1882, he graduated from the Worcester Polytechnic in 1908, received his Ph.D. in physics at Clark University in Worcester in 1911, taught at Princetown, but returned to Clark in 1914, the same year in which he obtained his first two patents for rocket apparatus. Five years later, he published his book, *A Method of Reaching Extreme Altitudes* (1919), and by 1923 he was already testing the first of his rocket engines using gasoline and liquid oxygen - the first advance over solid-fuel rockets. In 1926 he sent his first rocket soaring successfully skyward, and a larger one, financed by the Smithsonian Institution, went up three years later as the first instrument-carrying rocket. In 1930, with further help from the Smithsonian Institution, the philanthropist Daniel Guggenheim and famed aviator Charles Lindbergh, he set up an experimental station in a desolate area near Roswell, New Mexico, where he built larger rockets and introduced many of the ideas that are now standard in rocketry, including appropriate combustion chambers, the burning of gasoline with oxygen in such a way that the rapid combustion could be used to cool the chamber walls, various revolutionary rocket steering systems, including rudder-like deflectors and gyroscopes, and the

basics for the first multistage rocket. From 1930 to 1935, in the seclusion of his testing grounds near Roswell, New Mexico, Goddard launched rockets that attained speeds of up to 350 mph and heights of a mile and a half.

Even more remarkable than Goddard's achievements was the fact that they were, at least until the advent of World War II, ignored by the United States Government - though certainly they were not ignored in Germany.

The German amateur rocket society, the *Verein für Raumschiffart*, or VfR, also known as the Spaceship Travel Club, had come into being in 1927 when a group of brilliant space-travel enthusiasts took over an abandoned three-hundred acre arsenal, which they called their *Raketenflugplataz*, or Rocket Flight Place, in the Berlin suburb of Reindickerdorf. From there they actually shot some crude, liquid-fuelled rockets skywards.

By 1930 the VfR included most of the rocket experts of the day, including Rudolf Nebel, Hermann Oberth, Willy Ley, Max Valier, Klaus Riedel and the then 18-year old Werner von Braun, who would end up in America, heading the moon program for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA).

In April 1930, the Ordnance Branch of the German Army's Ballistics and Weapons Office, headed by General Becker, appointed Captain Walter Dornberger to work on rocket development at the army's Kummersdorf firing range, approximately fifteen miles south of Berlin. Two years later, after many experiments to find the most promising method of propulsion and the most stable means of flight, the VfR demonstrated one of their liquid-fuelled rockets to Dornberger and other officers at Kummersdorf. In 1933, when Hitler came to power, the VfR was taken over by the Nazis and become part of the Kummersdorf program.

Many of the German engineers, including the up-and-coming Werner von Braun, revered Goddard and were known to have based their work on his ideas. While in the United States, Goddard's theories were still being received with indifference and even contempt, Hitler's Germany was spending fortunes on rocket research that was, by and large, based on Goddard's work.

As early as December 1934, two highly advanced A-2 rockets, constructed at Kummersdorf, gyroscopically controlled, and powered by oxygen-and-alcohol fuelled motors, were launched from the island of Borkum in the North Sea and reached an altitude of one-and-a-half miles.

Those stabilised, liquid-fuelled rockets were, at the time, the only known, serious challengers to the rockets of Robert H. Goddard.

Nor did it end there. Shortly after Hitler's infamous advance across the Hohenzollern Bridge on 7 March 1936, Captain Walter Dornberger, the head of the Rocket Research Institute, his assistant, Werner von Braun, and their team of 150 technicians, demonstrated some more motors at Kummersdorf, including one with an unprecedented 3,500 pounds of thrust. Those demonstrations so impressed the German Commander-in-Chief, General Fritsch, that permission was given for Dornberger and von Braun to build an independent rocket establishment in a suitably remote part of Germany, where research and test firings could be carried out in the strictest secrecy. The chosen site was near the village of Peenemünde, on the island of Usedom, off the Baltic Coast.

The rest is now history. After numerous experiments in the Zeppelin subsonic wind tunnel at Friedrichshafen and the University of Aachen's supersonic wind tunnel, and with the completion of a remarkably reliable gyroscopic control system by the electrical specialists, Siemens, radio-controlled A-5 rockets were soon being dropped from heights of up to 20,000 ft and speeds exceeding Mach 1, or the speed of sound. By late 1944, numerous V-1 and V-2 rockets were falling on London.

What is not so well known is that when the V-2 rockets were inspected by Allied scientists in the captured Nordhausen Central Works at the close of the war, it was discovered that the most notable features of the propulsion unit were the shutter-type valves in the fixed grill, the fuel injection orifices incorporated in the same grill, the combustion chamber, spark plugs and nozzle - all of which were to be found in a Robert H. Goddard patent, issued 13 November 1934 and reproduced in full in the German aviation magazine, *Flugsport*, in January 1939.

There were other striking similarities between the V-2 and Goddard's original rocket. Both rockets had the same motor-cooling system; the same pump drive; the same layout front to rear; the same stabilizer; and the same guidance and fuel injection systems. Indeed the only notable difference between the two was that Goddard's rocket motors used gasoline and oxygen, whereas the V-2 used hydrogen and peroxide; Goddard's rocket fuel was liquid oxygen and gasoline, whereas the V-2 used liquid oxygen and alcohol; and, finally, Goddard's original rocket was a lot *smaller* than the V-2.

The V-2 rockets had a thrust of 55,000 pounds, attained a velocity of 6,400 ft per second, and could soar to an altitude of 68 miles. What this meant, in effect, is that the Germans had taken designs shamefully neglected by the American Government and used them as the basis for a radical, highly advanced, supersonic technology. They had also learned through Goddard of the necessity for gyroscopic control and thus potential control of the boundary layer.

What is the boundary layer?

While being four or five thousand times less viscous than oil, air *is* still viscous. Because of this, the air sweeping in on the solid body of an aircraft forms imperceptible stratifications of resistance and consequently decreases the speed of the body in flight. These layers of air are therefore known as the 'boundary layer' - and the boundary layer increases its resistance in direct proportion to the increasing speed of the flying object, thus imposing severe limitations on its speed and manoeuvrability.

Though the boundary layer affects all forms of flight, the major problem regarding ultra-high speed flight is to somehow move this negative air as far to the rear of the aircraft as possible, thus minimizing the expenditure of energy required to propel the aircraft through the sky. Moreover, it is possible that a revolutionary type of aircraft could - by not only *completely* removing the boundary layer, but by somehow *re-routing* it and utilizing it as an added propulsive force - fly through the skies using little other than the expelled air itself. Should this be accomplished, we would have an aircraft capable of remarkable speeds while using only the bare minimum of conventional fuel.

The Germans were working on all aspects of the boundary layer even before the beginning of the Great War of 1914-18.

Physicist Dr Eduard Ludwig worked with the famous aircraft designer Hugo Junkers at his factory in Dessau where, in 1910, they produced one of the earliest 'flying wing' designs. According to Ludwig, the first physicist to consider 'this new branch of aerodynamics' was Professor Jubowski, of Moscow. Before the First World War, Jubowski worked with Dr Kutta, of the Technical High School of Stuttgart, Germany, on the development of the theory of aeroplane-wingbeam and succeeded in establishing the differential equation of the boundary layer, which for the first time threw light on why 'a plane-wing can bear a load while moving forward through the air'. Since then, according to Ludwig, the Kutte-Jabowski Theory of Aeroplane

wingbeam has been the foundation of all aerodynamics.

However, even earlier than that, in 1904, at the Aerodynamic Experimental Institute of the Göttengen University, Professor Ludwig Prandtl, the great physicist now known as 'the father of aerodynamics', discovered the boundary layer, which in turn led to the understanding of the way in which 'streamlining' would reduce the drag of aeroplane wings and other moving bodies. Prandtl's work soon became the basic material of aerodynamics, and he went on to make pioneering discoveries in subsonic airflow, advanced wind tunnel design, and other aerodynamic equipment design. He also devised a 'soap film analogy' for the analysis of torsion forces of structures, and produced invaluable studies on the 'theory of plasticity'.

By 1915, another member of the Technical High School of Stuttgart, Professor H.C. Bauman, utilizing the theories of the abovenamed, received a patent for a Splitwing 'through which the artificial interruption of the course of the current, the tearing of the boundary layer, and the consequent braking and diminishing of the landing speed would be attained'.

Meanwhile, Anton Flettner, the German director of an aeronautical and hydrodynamic research institute in Amersdam, had invented the rotor-ship, a vessel propelled by revolving cylinders mounted vertically on the deck. In 1926 he established an aircraft factory in Berlin, where he used what became known as the 'Flettner-Rotor' for the production of Flettner F1 282 and other helicopters. Soon, at the behest of Professor Junkers, the Flettner-Rotor ('a cylinder turning at great speed') was being utilized by professors Prandtl, Ludwig, and others, as a means of investigating 'to what extent the uplift of a wing could be increased'.

The experiments were fraught with difficulty and cost the lives of at least four test pilots. This was due to 'inexplicable vibrations and axle breakages', leading the scientists to the conclusion that 'only a gas-turbine could produce the required uplift of the cylinder'. This led in turn to the building of a wind tunnel in which many invaluable experiments on the relationship between supersonic speeds and the boundary-layer were conducted, culminating in the first successful flight of a jet aircraft in 1939, as well as the launching of the V-1 and V-2 rockets during the closing stages of World War II.

The German scientists and engineers believed that the perfect flying machine would be one that required no runway, since it would take off vertically,

would be able to hover in mid-air, and would not be limited in manoeuvrability or speed by the boundary layer. As the build-up of the boundary layer is dramatically increased by the many surface protuberances of a normal aircraft - wings, tails, rudders, rotors, cockpits - it was felt that by getting rid of them completely, by somehow wrapping them together as part and parcel of the one, circular, smooth-surfaced flying wing, the first step in the conquest of the boundary layer would be achieved.

Germany was the country with most interest in such developments and certainly the most advanced at that time. A disk or saucer-shaped aircraft, without any surface protuberances, powered by ultra-high speed engines, is what they were after and many designs of the time were based on that conception. It is therefore no accident that as early as 1935 a German, Hans von Ohain, had applied for a patent for a jet engine. Nor was it an accident that the first flight of a jet-powered aircraft was made by a Heinkel He 178 at Rostock, Germany, on 27 August 1939.

Regarding vertical-rising aircraft, the Focke-Achgelis Company had already announced in 1939 that it had almost completed its FW 61 helicopter, which would be the first fully operational helicopter in existence. That the Germans produced the first successful helicopter, yet were not known to have used such craft during World War II, may be due to the fact that already they were more concerned with tailless aircraft or ‘flying wings’, devoid of vertical stabilizing or control surfaces. This would lead them to the search for a jet-propelled, disk-shaped aircraft, or flying saucer.

By 1932 the Horten brothers of Bonn had produced some successful prototypes for the German Air Ministry at their factory in Bonn. The Horten 1 was an ‘all wing’ aircraft, which in prototype form was a wooden-framed glider. It had a span of 40.7 feet, a wing area of 226 square feet, and a wing-loading of 2 pounds per square foot. It had a flying weight of 440 pounds, a gliding angle of 21 degrees, and a flying life of approximately seven hours. As the Horten brothers were convinced that the most important form of aircraft would be the all-wing type, there were no vertical stabilizing or control surfaces on the Horten 1. It was virtually flat and crescent-shaped, like a boomerang, with the pilot placed in a prone position, to reduce cockpit size. This so-called ‘flying wing’ certainly flew for seven hours, but it could never have been the basis of a flying saucer for one very good reason: it was still faced with the problem that had repeatedly foiled other German

aeronautical engineers - the limitations imposed by the boundary layer.

A more advanced model, the Horten II, D-11-167, was built in 1934 and test-flown at Rangsdorf, Germany, on 17 November 1938. According to the report of Hanna Rasche (the popular female pilot who also demonstrated the Focke-Achgelis helicopter the same year), this test flight turned out to be highly unsatisfactory. The so-called tailless aircraft possessed great static-longitudinal stability and complete safety in relation to the spin, but its control surfaces were so heavy that measurements of manoeuvring stability could not be carried out. The unsatisfactory arrangement of its undercarriage necessitated too long a takeoff; the relation between its longitudinal, lateral and directional controls was unsatisfactory; its turning flight and manoeuvrability were fraught with difficulty, and side-slipping could not be carried out.

Nevertheless, the Horten designs were the first on the road to a disk-shaped aircraft and, as we shall see, would cause great concern amongst Allied scientists and intelligence officers involved in post-war investigations into the possibility of German, or German-based, Russian flying saucers.

While experiments with ‘flying wings’ and spherical aircraft were being conducted by the likes of the Horten brothers, many other German scientists, including Betz, Flettner, and Junkers, were experimenting with specially equipped airwings in attempts to reduce the boundary layer. Most of these experiments were based on the ‘suction’ method, in which the negative air is sucked into the wing itself, through tiny holes or slots, then expelled by means of a pump located in the fuselage.

While this was a step in the right direction, the resulting aircraft still required heavy, obstructive engines (also the main problem with the Horten brothers’ envisaged flying wing jet-fighter), but the belief remained that in order to get rid of the boundary layer completely - and in order to make use of the ‘dead’ air not only for acceleration, but for manoeuvring as well - the requirement was for an aircraft devoid of *all* obstructing protuberances, such as wings, rudders and even normal air-intakes, and one not requiring a large, heavy engine. In other words, this revolutionary new aircraft should be the perfect ‘flying wing’ that offers the least possible resistance, sucks in the ‘dead’ air of the boundary layer, and then uses that same air, expelling it at great force, to increase its own momentum. It would therefore have to be a

circular ‘wing’ that is, in a sense, wrapped around its suction pump, with the pump being part and parcel of the engine: a machine shaped like a saucer.

Further: if such a craft could be built with a ‘porous’ metal that would act like a sponge and remove the need for air-intakes altogether, it would result in ‘frictionless air-flow’ during flight.

Speaking at the 34th Wilbur Wright Memorial Lecture held on 30 May 1946, at the Royal Aeronautical Society in London, the well known British aerodynamics expert Professor E. F. Relf stated that ‘a further system of regulating the boundary layer by means of suction through minute holes heavily distributed over the surface’ had recently been undertaken by the National Physical Laboratory. Discussing similar possibilities at a conference held in December the same year on the future of British aeronautics, Sir Ben Lockspeiser said that such a plane would ‘slip through the air in the same way as a piece of wet soap slips through the fingers’.

The speed and manoeuvring capabilities of such a craft would be virtually limitless.

While the idea of ‘porous’ metal sounds like something from science fiction, it was in fact being developed in Nazi Germany, as well as in Britain. Among the many other advanced experiments being run in the wind tunnel in the Zeppelin works at Friedrichshafen were those concerning the different ‘porous’ metals, or ‘aeropermeable surfaces’, that were being created by the scientists of Göttingen, Aachen, and Volkenrode - various compounds of magnesium and aluminium, sinterized and permeated with microscopic holes. It was called *Luftschwamm*, or ‘aero-sponge’.

Other top-secret experiments relating to supersonic flight were taking place all over Nazi Germany and its captured territories.

In the densely forested areas of the Schwarzwald, German scientists were experimenting with a liquid gas that would, when blown with considerable force over an aircraft, catch fire from the aircraft’s exhaust and cause that aircraft to explode. The existence of this gas was confirmed by a German organic chemist, Dr Rosenstein, who, when interrogated in Paris in 1944 by members of the American ALSOS mission (created to locate and assess the fruits of Nazi Germany’s scientific research), stated that the Germans had succeeded in perfecting a new gas whose use would have caused ‘strong vibrations and even breakages in aircraft engines’ by encouraging immediate

and repeated self-ignition. The captured papers also revealed that in July 1944, Dr Hans Friedrich Gold, a chemical engineer working in the rocket division of the R-Laboratory in Volkenrode, discovered that by mixing a certain percentage of myrol with air, internal combustion engines would immediately begin detonating irregularly or, depending upon the mixture, stop completely.

Further to this, it should be noted that according to Major Rudolph Lusar's *German Secret Weapons of World War II*, in April 1945, on the outskirts of the Hillersleben testing grounds west of Berlin, members of the Intelligence Technical Branch of the 12th Army Group found the rusty remains of an odd item called the *Windkanone* - a cannon that shot gas instead of shells - and another item called the *Wirbelringkanone*, or 'whirlwind annular vortex cannon', which was designed to shoot, then ignite, a gas ring that would spin rapidly on its own axis and form a fierce 'ball of fire'.

By 1945 the Oberbayerische Forschunsanstalt, or O.B.F., a Luftwaffe experimental centre at Oberammergau, in Bavaria, had completed its research into an apparatus capable of short-circuiting the ignition system of another aircraft engine from a distance of about one hundred feet by producing an intense electrical field.

Even remote-controlled flying devices were being developed. As far back as 1939 Dr Fernseh of Berlin, in collaboration with Professor Herbert Wagner of the Henschel-Rax Works at Wiener Neustadt, was working on the development of a television component that would enable pilots to control bombs and rocket bombs *after* they had been launched, as well as a micro-television camera that would be installed in the nose of an anti-aircraft rocket and guide it precisely to its target. As the Allies also discovered at the end of the war, through the investigations of ASLOS, the British Intelligence Objectives Sub-Committee, and other scientific intelligence groups, the German scientists had been developing radio-controlled interceptor weapons and aeroplanes, such as Messerschmitt's radio-controlled interceptor planes, the *Krache* and the *Donner*, as well as electromagnetic, electroacoustical and photoelectric fuses and even more advanced warheads which were sensitive to the natural electrostatic fields that surround aircraft in flight.

Also found in the records of the experimental centre at Göttingen were details of the test-flight of a light-winged aircraft that had a slot running

along the entire length of its wing span and an extra propeller in the fuselage to suck in the boundary layer and increase the lift of the original airfoil by eight times.

Last but not least, a research complex at Berlin Britz had designed the *Kreiselgerät*: the prototype of a new mechanism that had managed to reduce the oscillations of a violently shaking body to under one-tenth of a degree, thus paving the way for the conquest of the boundary layer.

The theoretical work of the German scientists, particularly those at Göttingen and Aachen, was put to practical application at the laboratories of the Deutsche Versuchsanstalt für Luftfahrt (DVL) at Adlershof and the rocket research station at Peenemünde. In this context it is worth noting that according to Philip Henshall in *Hitler's Rocket Sites*, the wind tunnel at Peenemünde was then the most advanced in the world, containing its own research department, instrumentation laboratory, workshops and design office. It is also of considerable interest that at Guidonia, the great research centre near Rome, Italy, the Germans were conducting extensive research in supersonic aerodynamics.

It therefore seems possible that the results of the oscillation tests in Göttengen, which had proved that the boundary layer could be conquered, combined with the practical applications at Adlershof, Peenemünde and Guidonia, could have produced between them a revolutionary new structural design that would be devoid of all obstructing protuberances, such as wings and rudders, devoid even of the normal air intakes, and powered by a highly advanced turbine or jet engine. In other words, a technologically advanced, tailless aircraft, or 'flying wing', that could be radio-controlled from the moment of take-off, then automatically track enemy aircraft and make their engines malfunction without firing upon them or otherwise touching them.

In essence, a small flying saucer with 'invisible' weapons.

Renato Vesco was an aircraft engineer specialising in aerospace and ramjet developments. Educated before World War II at the University of Rome, he then studied aeronautical engineering at the German Institute for Aerial Development. During the war, he was sent to work with the Germans at Fiat's immense underground installations at Lake Garda, near Limone in northern Italy, where he helped in the production of aeronautical devices that were tested at the Hermann Goering Institute of Riva del Garda. After the

war, in the 1960's, Vesco worked for the Italian Air Ministry of Defense as an undercover technical agent, investigating the UFO phenomenon.

In 1971 Vesco published a book, *Intercettateli Senza Sparare*, which was the first detailed examination of the possible technology behind the flying saucers. Vesco's work was also the first to examine UFOs in the light of contemporary technology, as well as the only one to trace their origins back to Nazi Germany and credit their continuance to postwar developments by the former Allies and, possibly, the Soviet Union.

According to Vesco, captured German papers indicated that by 1945 the L.F.A. at Volkenrode and the Guidonia research centre were working on a revolutionary new type of aircraft that was devoid of all surface protuberances, such as wings and rudders, devoid even of normal air intakes, and powered by a highly advanced turbine engine. This was the so-called foo fighter - actually the German *Feuerball*, or Fireball, which had evolved from the research work done at Volkenrode and Guidonia, but was constructed at an aeronautical establishment at Wiener Neustadt (probably the Henschel-Rax Works) with the help of the Flugfunk Forschungsanstalt of Oberpfaffenhoffen (F.F.O.), located south of Munich and specialising in research into high frequency guided missiles, infrared radiation, radar, and general electronics. The *Feuerball* was an armoured, disk-shaped, flying machine, powered by a special turbojet engine. It was radio-controlled at the moment of take-off, but then, attracted by the enemy aircraft's exhaust fumes, it automatically followed that aircraft, automatically avoided colliding with it, and automatically short-circuited the aircraft's radar and ignition systems. During the day, this device looked exactly like 'a shining disk spinning on its axis' - which may account for the first Allied newspaper reports of 'silver balls' observed in the sky over Nazi Germany - and by night it looked like a 'burning globe'.

In Vesco's words:

> The fiery halo around its perimeter - caused by a very rich fuel mixture - and the chemical additives that interrupted the flow of electricity by over-ionizing the atmosphere in the vicinity of the plane, generally around the wing tips or tail surfaces, subjected the H2S radar on the plane to the action of powerful electrostatic fields and electromagnetic influences.

Under the armoured plating of the *Feuerball* was a thin sheet of aluminium that acted as a defensive 'switch': a bullet piercing the armoured plating would automatically establish contact with the switch, trip a maximum acceleration device, and cause the *Feuerball* to fly vertically out of range of further enemy gunfire.

In a very real sense, then, the *Feuerball* took the form of a circular 'wing' that was wrapped around the suction pump, which in turn was part and parcel of the engine. In other words: the *Feuerball* was a symmetrical disk devoid of all surface protuberances.

Vesco also claims that the basic principles of the *Feuerball* were later applied to a much larger 'symmetrical circular aircraft', the *Kugelblitz*, or Ball Lightning Fighter, which was the first example of the vertical-rising, 'jet lift' aircraft.

Could the technology described above and demonstrated in the shape of the V-2 rockets and foo fighters have led to a larger, piloted, flying saucer? The immediate post-war years would produce some startling revelations regarding this possibility.

Chapter 4

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Division of the Scientific Spoils of War

At the end of World War II, Germany's scientific papers had been hidden, and were eventually found, in tunnels, caves, dry wells, ploughed fields, river beds and even cess pits. Also found across the length and breadth of Nazi Germany and its occupied territories were the well known V-1 flying bombs and V-2 rockets, as well as lesser known, but equally formidable, heat-guided ground-to-air missiles, sonic-guidance torpedoes, the highly advanced U-XX1 and U-XXIII electrical submarines, ME-262 jet-fighters, rocket planes that flew even faster than the Messerschmitts, the prototypes for other, vertical-rising jet aircraft, the beginnings of an Atom Bomb project, and even, in the immense underground Riva del Garda complex, where Renato Vesco had worked, the manufacturing process for a metallic material which could withstand temperatures of about 1000°C.

Because of this, there was a race between the Allies and the Russians to capture as many of the rocket scientists and engineers as possible, as well as the invaluable technical documentation. Deals were thus struck between the conquerors and their former enemies, particularly with regard to those involved in rocketry and other advanced weaponry.

Along with 150 of their best men, General Dornberger, Walther Riedel, and Werner von Braun went to the United States, the first to work for the Bell Aircraft Company, the second to become director of rocket engine research for North American Aviation Corporation, and the third to achieve fame through his Apollo moon program under the auspices of the National Space Administration for Astronautics, or NASA. However, the Russians also gained a wealth of documentation and material, including the V-2 rockets, buzz bombs, ocean-spanning surface-to-surface and surface-to air missiles found in Peenemünde; about 70 per cent of the 12,000 tons of technical equipment stranded on the docks at Lübeck and Magdeburg; and the Gotha plant (where the Horten Brothers' Go-8-229 and Go-P-60 night fighters were being constructed at great speed); as well as 6,000 German technical specialists, including Dr Bock, Director of the German Institute of Airways Research; Dr Helmut Gröttrup, the electronics and guided-missile expert; and

an aeronautical engineer, Klaus Habermohl.

It was therefore no accident that the great achievements of NASA and their Soviet equivalents can be traced back to the V-2s shipped from Germany to New Mexico in 1945. The launch of American V-2s commenced at the White Sands Proving Ground in March the following year, under the direction of Werner von Braun; and not much later, when North American Aviation started producing rocket motors under a USAF contract, they were basing their work on the original V-2 motor which had, ironically, been based on the rocket motors of Robert H. Goddard when he worked out of Eden Valley, in Roswell, New Mexico, now the location of the above mentioned top-secret White Sands Proving Ground. Soon, NASA's improved rocket motors were using liquid hypergolic, self-igniting fuels, which the army then used in their Redstone/Jupiter developments, which led in turn to the first Titan ICBMs and, ultimately, the Apollo moon program.

All of this sprang indirectly from the US's neglected Robert H. Goddard; and, more directly, from the fruits of German World War II experimentation.

It was a matter of course, then, that when on 31 October 1947 the Russians launched their own V-2 rocket from Volgagrad, formerly Stalingrad, the United States had great cause for concern and, when it came to the first post-war UFO sightings, turned its suspicious gaze toward the Soviet Union.

The first post-war UFO flap came in 1946 when, throughout the summer and fall, thousands of 'ghost rockets' appeared in the skies over Scandinavia and western Europe. Mostly seen at night, they were reported as being 'cigar-shaped' and with flames issuing from the tail. Estimates of their speed ranged from that of a 'slow aeroplane' to 500 mph. In the month of July alone, the Swedish military received more than 600 reports, which encouraged the Swedish general staff to declare the situation 'extremely serious'. Then, when sightings of the unidentifieds spread out from Sweden to Finland and close to the Soviet border, the Americans also took the phenomenon seriously - certainly enough to express their fear that the rockets might be secret weapons developed by the Russians with the help of the captured German technical specialists and material.

Their fears were in no way eased by the knowledge that whereas the mysterious foo fighters had not shown up on radar, the ghost rockets certainly

did, and therefore could not be classified as hoaxes, misidentifications or the products of mass hallucination.

The Soviets denied any knowledge of the rockets, but US suspicions remained unabated while the rockets continued to fly and were being reported from as far afield as Greece, Turkey, French Morocco and Spain, before gradually fading away the following year.

However, on 21 June 1947, when the 'ghost rocket' furore had barely died off, a harbour patrolman, Harold Dahl, accompanied by his fifteen-year old son and two crewmen, was on harbour patrol near Maury Island in Puget Sound, off Tacoma, Washington, when he observed six objects shaped like 'inflated inner tubes' hovering about 2,000 feet above his boat. Five of the objects were circling about the sixth as it descended to about 500 feet above the boat, where, appearing to hover magically, it was seen more clearly. The object appeared to be about 100 feet in diameter, metallic, with no jets, rockets, wings, or propellers, but with a 'hole' in the centre, or base, symmetrically placed portholes around the perimeter, and observatory windows on their underside. After discharging what appeared to be a cloud of aluminium-coloured debris, which littered the sea, where they gave off clouds of steam, suggesting that they were hot, the circular craft ascended to rejoin the others, then they all flew at high speed toward the open sea and soon disappeared.

Three days later, on 24 June, an American businessman, Kenneth Arnold, reported that when flying his private Piper Club aeroplane near Mount Rainier in the Cascades, Washington, searching for the debris of the Marine Corps C-46 transport that had crashed against the south shoulder of Mount Rainier the night before, he observed nine disk-shaped, apparently metallic, objects flying in 'a diagonal chain-like line' and making an undulating motion 'like a saucer skipping over water'. According to Arnold's report, the objects performed impossible manoeuvres in the sky, before flying off at supersonic speed to disappear in the direction of the Canadian border.

As Arnold had been a deputy sheriff and was a reputable businessman, as well as an experienced mountain air-rescue pilot, his story was taken seriously and the term 'flying saucer' came into being. It was therefore used widely over the next few weeks when the media spread Arnold's story nationwide and encouraged a spate of similar sightings, many of which were hoaxes, some of which were by trained observers and seemed highly credible.

By this time the US military, while publicly ridiculing the reported sightings, were secretly in a state of panic over their own plague of UFO sightings: the first, on 28 June, over Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery, Alabama; the next, on 29 June, near Alamogordo, New Mexico, right over the top-secret White Sands Proving Ground; then, on 8 July, a whole spate of sightings of spherically shaped, white aluminium-coloured objects flying over Muroc Air Base (now Edwards AFB), the supersecret air force test centre in the Mojave Desert.

Because these particular sightings were made by trained technicians and pilots, and because the reported objects were appearing increasingly over top-and-supersecret military research bases, there was a growing suspicion in intelligence circles that the men and material deported from Nazi Germany to Russia had led to a dangerous Soviet lead in space technology.

In a now declassified Memorandum for Record dated 25 April 1952, containing facts for discussion by the Special Study Group and marked for the attention of USAFE, West Germany, the Air Section, USFA, Austria, the Allied Air Forces, France, NATO, Italy, and the Joint Intelligence Bureau, London, the study of flying saucers, amongst 'other advanced aerial delivery systems' is recommended.

While on the one hand stating that 'current estimates do not reflect the possibility that the Russians may have overtaken the US in advanced guided missile research and development', the report goes on to say: 'The Air Force cannot assume that flying saucers are of non-terrestrial origin, and hence, they could be Soviet.'

This assessment is based on two factors. In the first instance, the memorandum cites the UFO report of an unnamed US Naval officer (probably Navy Commander R.B. McLaughlin) who tracked a 'saucer' with a theodolite and assessed it as flying at an altitude of 56 miles with a horizontal velocity of about 8,000 meters (5 miles) per second and a climbing speed of 4,400 meters (2.7 miles) per second. Stressing that the speed recorded by the theodolite was slightly higher than the speed required for the escape from the gravitational pull of the earth, the memorandum continues: 'It frequently has been stated that such velocities cannot be produced on Earth. Such a statement is correct insofar as our present engineering skills go, but it appears incorrect with respect to theoretical knowledge.' The memorandum then cites

several propulsion methods by which, provided the engineering problems are solved, such speeds could be attained. These include ultra high speed engines using fuels composed of beryllium oxidized by ozone, liquid hydrogen enriched by stable hydrogen atoms, a gas consisting of pure hydrogen atoms, or a variety of ionized substances.

The Memorandum's second stand against the extraterrestrial hypothesis is based on the reports of astronomers, which at that time suggested strongly that even if traveling at the speed of light, any object coming from outside the planetary system would be 'ascertained by the astronomical patrol (daily photographs of the skies) at least four years in advance of its arrival'. The Memorandum concludes: 'These leads, coupled with the data of the Air Technical Intelligence Centre concerning Soviet progress in the design of missile engines, definitely underscore the immediate requirement for a thorough investigation of Russian capabilities in this field.'

The 'leads' mentioned include: firstly, Constantine E. Tsiolkovski's initial investigations in the field of high altitude and interplanetary flying, his anticipation of the need for rocket propulsion, and his known interest in 'circular, hyperbolic, and spherical airframes'; secondly, the formation, in April 1924, of a Soviet organization for the development of rockets and society for interplanetary travel, both of which were attached to the then Military Air Academy, which was interested in the military implications of these matters and scheduled the first experimental flights for 1928; thirdly, the fact that a patent for a 'flying saucer with a circular fixed wing' had been taken out in the United States on March 22, 1932; and, finally, the knowledge that 'the saucer sightings in the US tend to cluster around key development stations such as atomic plants, guided missile experimental areas, and Wright-Patterson Air Force Base'.

The Memorandum also points out that the Russian magazine, *Red Fleet*, in its 12 October 1952 edition, had announced that the Soviet Union was planning to build a 'moon rocket', that the world's only solar power institute was then at Tashkent, USSR, and that Russian efforts in the field of cosmic rays operated with a high degree of security.

The Memorandum concludes with the unequivocal statement: 'It must be remembered that the first sightings were made over Scandinavia, and in the US, over the Northwest. This would be in line with a hypothetical range extension from Soviet bases.'

In the words of Dr Eduard Ludwig:

> The surprise of scientists the world over at the astounding results of the German V-2 was no less than that which is produced today by the appearance of the mysterious 'flying disks'... The future will show whether the 'flying disks' are only the products of imagination or whether they are the results of a far-advanced German science which, possibly, as well as the nearly finished atomic bombs, may have fallen into the hands of the Russians.

Forthcoming events would prove that if not exactly right, certainly he was not far wrong.

In a series of interviews given to the West German press in 1952, a former Luftwaffe engineer, Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever, then resident at Hökerstrasse 28 in Bremerhaven-Lehe, West Germany, claimed that in the spring of 1941, when an engineer and test pilot for the Heinkel factory in Eger, he started thinking of an aeroplane that could take off vertically like a helicopter. These thoughts led him to the concept of an 'arched, domed, and rounded cabin' in the centre of multiple, circular, adjustable wings that would be driven by a turbine engine, also located in the centre of gravity, under the capsule containing the pilot's cabin. A model of this vertical-rising 'flying top' was completed the following year and test-flown on 1 June 1942. This being successful, work began on a larger prototype, fifteen feet in diameter. Many engineers dealt with various aspects of the project in different areas of the occupied territories. By the summer of 1944, Schriever had been transferred to Prague, where with his colleagues, Walter Miethe (an engineer from the Peenemünde V-1 and V-2 program), another engineer, Klaus Habermohl, and the Italian physicist, Dr Guiseppe Belluzzo (from the Riva del Garda complex), he constructed an even larger, piloted model of his original prototype. Since by this time the first Messerschmitt jets were flying, Schriever and his team, now working in the East Hall of the BMW plant near Prague, redesigned Model 3, replacing its former gas-turbine engines with an advanced form of propulsion that utilized adjustable jets.

An article about 'Project Saucer' (*Projekt Untertasse*) was later published in *German Secret Weapons of the Second World War* (1959) by Major Rudolph Lusar, and included reproductions of the flying-saucer

drawings of Schriever and Miethe.

According to Lusar, the flying saucer was constructed with ‘special heat-resisting material’ and consisted of ‘a wide-surface ring which rotated around a fixed, cupola-shaped cockpit’. The ring consisted of ‘adjustable wing-disks which could be brought into appropriate position for the take-off or horizontal flight, respectively’. Miethe then developed ‘a discus-shaped plate of a diameter of 42 metres (138 feet), in which adjustable jets were inserted’. The completed machine had a height from base to canopy of 32 metres (105 feet).

Schriever claimed that his ‘flying disk’ had been ready for testing in early 1944, but with the advance of the Allies into Germany, the test had been cancelled, the machine destroyed, and his designs either mislaid or stolen. This ties in with the fact that the BWM plant stopped work on 9 May 9 1945, as the Russians advanced it was overrun by Czechoslovakian Patriots, and many of the Germans then fled for their lives. These included Schriever, who claims that the saucer prototype was blown up by his own men to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Russians. Schriever then fled to the west, reached the American lines, and eventually made it back home to Bremerhaven.

Schriever’s recollection of the test flight date is contradicted in certain details by alleged eye-witness Georg Klein, a former engineer with Albert Speer’s Ministry for Armament and Ammunition, who told the press that he had actually seen the test flight of the Schriever disk, or one similar, near Prague on 14 February 1945.

A certain doubt may be cast on Klein's date, since according to the *War Diary* of the 8th Air Fleet, 14 February 1945 was a day of low clouds, rain, snow and generally poor visibility - hardly the conditions for the testing of a revolutionary new kind of aircraft. Nevertheless, according to author Renato Vesco, the test flight of a machine called the *Kugelblitz*, or Ball Lightning Fighter - which was rumoured to be a revolutionary kind of supersonic aircraft - was conducted successfully over the underground complex of Kahla (near the underground rocket complex of Nordhausen, where the Peenemünde rocket team were then located) in Thuringia, sometime during that February of 1945.

These various sightings could be explained by the fact that just as parts of Schriever’s flying saucer project were being designed, tested and

constructed in many different areas of the occupied territories, so other 'all wing' experimental prototypes were being developed by other designers.

One of those who may have been involved in Projekt Saucer is Heinrich Fleißner, of Dasing, Augsburg, in the Federal German Republic. Interviewed for the 2 May 1980 edition of *Neue Presse* magazine, the then 76-year old Fleißner claimed that he had been a technical consultant on a jet-propelled, disk-shaped aircraft that had been constructed by a team of technicians in Peenemünde, though the parts had been built in many other places. According to Fleißner, Hermann Göring had been the patron of the aircraft and had planned to use it as a courier plane. At the end of the war, the Wehrmacht destroyed most of the plans and a few of the 'unimportant' drawings fell into the hands of the Russians.

(The notes and drawings for Fleißner's flying saucer, first registered in West Germany on 27 March 1954, were assigned to Trans-Oceanic, Los Angeles, California on 28 March the following year and registered with the United States Patent Office on 7 June 1960.)

As early as 1939 Dr Alexander Lippisch, at Messerschmitt, Augsburg, was developing his Delta-Rocket Jet ME 163 and testing its 'circular wing' in the wind tunnel of the AVA company at Göttingen. Meanwhile, Arthur Sack, of Machern, near Leipzig, had for years been obsessed with the idea of disk-shaped aircraft (first conceived, in fact, by the 19th century German mathematician and aeronautical theorist Wilhelm Zachariae). He tested various models at the model-aeroplane competition at Leipzig-Mockau on 27 and 28 July 1939, with disastrous results. A larger, piloted model, the AS 6, was constructed at the Mitteldeutsche Motorenwerke factory in Leipzig and failed to fly during its test flight at the beginning of February 1944, on the airfield at Brandis, near Leipzig. He tried again at Brandis on 16 April 1944, but the aeroplane barely lifted off the ground. Shortly after, the Allied advance brought Sack's experimentation to a halt for all time.

Viktor Schauberger claimed to have designed and constructed a small, remote-controlled flying saucer in 1940 in the Kertl aircraft company in Vienna. Reportedly, during a test conducted in 1943, the saucer went through the ceiling, but by and large it was otherwise unworkable. Later, Schauberger was allocated some Czechoslovakian engineers to help him expand his project, but when the war came to an end, some of his plans went to the Russians and others were claimed by the Americans. According to

Schauberger, when he went back to work on his flying saucer project in 1958, aided by his son, the American authorities invited both of them to the United States, where they remained for several months, working on various projects, none of which turned out well. Schauberger died later that year.

Hermann Klaas, from Mühlheim, West Germany, a biotechnician specializing in aerodynamic phenomena, is another who claims to have worked on various remote-controlled models for disk-shaped aircraft during World War II. The most common model was 2.4 metres in diameter and propelled by an electro-engine supplied by the Luftwaffe. According to Klaas, these models were similar to those then being developed by Schriever, Habermohl, Miethe, and Belluzzo in Böhmen (Czechoslovakia) and Breslau (now Wrocklaw, Poland).

The stories of Rudolph Schriever and Georg Klein therefore share common ground. In an interview given to the Zürich newspaper *Tages-Anzeiger* on 19 November 1954, Klein insisted that flying saucers were top-secret weapons of the US and Russia, based on the German prototypes. At Breslau, in May 1945, the Russians captured, along with many leading technicians, a 'scale model' of a 'pilotless, ray-guided disk' that had been built at Peenemünde. At the close of the war, Walter Miethe went to America with Werner von Braun, Dornberger, and hundreds of other members of the Peenemünde rocket program; and both the Russians and the Americans were therefore in possession of the technology. There were, Klein stated, two kinds of modern saucer: one with a diameter of about 52 ft and powered by five jets; the other with a diameter of about 138 ft and powered by twelve jets. Klein supported the view that the flying saucers could remain stationary in the air and make sharp, right-angled turns. Stability, he said, was attained with a device based on the principle of the gyroscope. Klein also insisted that flying saucers developed in Canada by John Frost, former colleague of Sir Frank Whittle, had reached speeds of up to 1,500 mph and were inspected by Britain's Field-Marshal Montgomery.

Lusar supports this story, as well as confirming that Schriever was involved in Projekt Saucer and Miethe, though initially working under Werner von Braun for the United States' first rocket centre in the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico, joined the A.V. Roe (AVRO-Canada) aircraft company in Malton, Ontario, reportedly to continue work on disk-shaped aircraft, or flying saucers - just as Habermohl was thought to be doing

with the Russians.

US intelligence was seriously concerned by the possibility that the flying saucers being sighted by so many were not of extraterrestrial origin, but were based on the German designs and being constructed and flown by Russians - and, possibly, Canadians.

Their suspicions about Russian-made flying saucers would not have been eased by the fact that in August 1952 it was revealed on French radio and in the German magazine, *Der Flieger*, that according to Dr Waldermar Beck a flying saucer had crashed at Spitsbergen, Norway, and its remains had been studied by the Norwegian rocket expert, Dr Noreal, as well as some unnamed German experts. The flying saucer carried no crew and had been flown by a radio piloting system that malfunctioned. It was 47 metres in diameter and consisted of 'an exterior disk provided at its peripheral with 46 automatic jets'. The disk was designed to pivot around the central sphere, which contained the measurement and remote-control panel. According to Dr Noreal, the saucer had a radio piloting transmitter with a nucleus of plutonium transmitting on all wave lengths with 934 hertz, a measure that was then unknown. The steel used in its construction was of an unknown alloy. The measurement instructions on the control panel were in Russian.

Regarding US suspicions about Canadian flying saucers, a declassified CIA report based on 'unevaluated information' and dated 18 August 1953 reveals that they may have believed this was possible because: 'According to recent reports from Toronto, a number of Canadian Air Force engineers are engaged in the construction of a "flying saucer" to be used as a future weapon of war. The work of these engineers is being carried out in great secrecy at the A. V. Roe Company factories.' This is followed by the observation: '"Flying saucers' have been known to be an actuality since the possibility of their construction was proven in plans drawn up by German engineers toward the end of World War II.'

US concern was only increased when the former Luftwaffe engineer, Rudolph Schriever, not long before he died, began talking to the media about Projekt Saucer. In another declassified CIA document dated 27 May 1954, it is suggested that Projekt Saucer resulted in three designs: 'One, designed by Miethe, was a disk-shaped aircraft, 135 feet in diameter, which did not rotate; another, designed by Habermohl and Schriever, consisted of a large rotating

ring, in the centre of which was a round, stationary cabin for the crew.' The report does not describe the third design, but goes on to confirm that when the Soviets occupied Prague, 'the Germans destroyed every trace of the "flying saucer" project and nothing more was heard of Habermohl and his assistants'. The report also states that in Breslau, the Soviets managed to capture one of the saucers built by Miethe; and that Rudolph Schriever had died recently in Bremen-Lehe, where he had been living since the end of the war.

This unease at the possibility of highly advanced Soviet or Canadian flying saucers may have been heightened even more by the knowledge, related in the same report, that a recent issue of *Forces Aériennes Francaises* (a monthly periodical published by the Comité d'Études Aéronautiques Militaires - Study Committee on Military Aeronautics - which was headed by General P. Fay, Chief of Staff of the Air Force) contained an article suggesting that 'supersonic interstellar ships powered by cosmic energy are possible'. Since the article was written by Lieutenant Plantier of the Ecole de L'Air de Salon (a prestigious aeronautical school), its acceptance by the magazine was read as an indication that the French Air Force was admitting to the existence of flying saucers.

Certainly, by 28 August 1954, a formal US Headquarters Strategic Air Command 'Request for Intelligence Information' was asking for 'a summary of information of knowledge Russia has pertaining to flying saucers'.

To accept that the Soviets could have been flying disk-shaped craft based on the German designs, we have to accept also that the Schriever-Habermohl-Miethe-Belluzzo machine, even if completed, would have had the capabilities of the flying saucers sighted shortly after the war.

Not too much is known about the men who worked on Projekt Saucer. We know that Rudolph Schriever was a Luftwaffe engineer and test pilot who insisted, right up to the day he died, that he had worked on the project. Walter Miethe worked on the V-1 rocket program at Peenemünde (where the saucer was said to have been constructed) and was one of the engineers taken to America with Dornberger and von Braun; he was then hired by the A.V. Roe Company (AVRO-Canada), where he worked on the disk-shaped aircraft, the Avrocar.

Of particular interest regarding the Avrocar, or Omega, is that according

to the West German magazine, *Hobby* (14 December 1977) another German engineer, Andreas Epp, who came from Schriever's home town of Bremerhaven, also worked on the Avrocar project.

Nothing is known about Habermohl, other than what can be gleaned from the many unsubstantiated reports claiming that he worked on the saucer project in Breslau, before being captured by the Russians. Nor is there any information on the background or fate of the Italian physicist, Guiseppe Belluzzo; though the fact that he was an Italian working for the Germans during the war suggests that he was involved either through the supersonic research centre at Guidonia, near Rome, where the Germans supervised extensive research in supersonic aerodynamics, or the underground laboratories at Riva del Garda where, as we have seen, many experiments regarding special heat-resistant metals and the boundary layer were undertaken.

As for Georg Klein, who says that he communicated frequently with Belluzzo, the nature of his involvement with Projekt Saucer is obscure, and we only know for certain that he was a former engineer with Albert Speer's Ministry for Armament and Ammunition, and that after the war he moved to Zürich, Switzerland, where he continued to work in engineering.

What *is* known, then, is that all four of them were in positions to at least have been involved in certain aspects of Projekt Saucer.

Germany had the advanced technology required to create the *Feuerball*, or foo fighter, but the capabilities shown by the flying saucers sighted after the war could only have come through a perfected means of controlling the boundary layer and creating frictionless air flow. Relative to this, it is known that throughout the war Nazi Germany's great wind tunnels were being used for extensive research into suction with regard to ultra-high speed flight - with impressive results.

Certainly, before the end of the war, the ME-109G modified fighter plane had flown a number of experimental flights using its compressor as a suction pump as a means of decreasing drag and increasing speed. It is also known that by 1944, professors Pradtl and Busemann had completed the plans for a high-speed fighter designed to dramatically reduce aerodynamic friction, if not obliterate it altogether. Thus by the closing months of the war there were many rumours in German aeronautical circles about the imminent appearance of radically different aeroplanes, without wings, tails, rudders or

other surface protuberances and powered by special turbines or jet engines, that would move through the air ‘like a sponge through water’ or, as Sir Ben Lockspieser later put it: ‘like a bar of wet soap slips through the fingers’. In other words: at ultra-fast speeds and with extraordinary manoeuvrability.

The Schriever-Habermohl-Miethe-Belluzzo flying saucer, or the *Kugelblitz* described by Renato Vesco in *Intercettateli Senza Sparare*, could have been just such an aircraft.

Indeed, while Vesco makes no mention of the Schriever-Habermohl disk, his *Kugelblitz*, or Ball Lightning Fighter, certainly appears to be the same machine. According to Vesco, the *Kugelblitz* was a larger, piloted version of the small, whirling, antiradar device, the *Feuerball*, which harassed Allied aircraft during the closing months of the war.

Projects that German scientists had been working on during the closing stages of the war indicate that this piloted ‘flying saucer’ could have had a form of radio that can cancel at the pilot’s discretion the return signals, or blips, from the enemy’s radarscope and thus render the saucer ‘invisible’ to the enemy. It could also have had electromagnetically or electroacoustically controlled firing weapons, cannons that spit ignition-damaging gas instead of shells, and possibly even the first, unsophisticated laser or pulse-beam weapons. Lastly, it could have been made from a combination of *Luftschwamm*, or aerosponge, and an alloy that could withstand enormous pressures and a temperature of 1000° Centigrade - as was being created in the immense underground Riva del Garda research complex. In short, a remarkably advanced, vertical-rising jet fighter, shaped like the contemporary flying saucer.

Did such a machine exist? It certainly seems so. We *do* know that a machine very much like it, supposedly designed and constructed by Schriever, Miethe, Habermohl and the mysterious Dr Belluzzo, was reportedly test-flown sometime in February 1945 in the area of the underground complex at Kahla, in the southern Harz mountain range of Thuringia. According to witness Georg Klein, the machine reached a height of about 40,000 feet at a speed of approximately 1,250 mph.

Flugkapitän Rudolph Schriever was adamant that while the flying saucer was destroyed to prevent it falling into the hands of advancing Soviet troops, the documentation survived and was widely distributed between the Allies and the Soviets, as were many scientists and much equipment. Georg Klein,

who concurred with the basic details of this scenario, was equally adamant that ‘the “saucers” are at present being constructed in accordance with German technical principles’ and could ‘constitute serious competition to jet-propelled aeroplanes’.

In short, the flying saucers were man-made.

Chapter 5

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Spinning Disks and Flying Saucers

On 16 April 1897, at the height of the Great Airship Scare, the citizens of Linn Grove, Iowa, watched an airship pass slowly overhead, then land briefly a few miles outside town. When the airship took off again, it emitted 'two large boulders of unknown composition'. Similarly, one of the six objects seen by Harold Dahl on 21 June 1947 near Maury Island expelled a rain of 'small, whitish metallic fragments' that were obviously hot and gave off steam when they plunged into the waters of Puget Sound.

As we shall see, a 'whitish metallic' colouring is the one most attributed to flying saucers; but the importance of the Maurey Island case is that *some* form of debris was reported as having been spewed out of what seemed like an 'ailing' craft before it flew off and disappeared with the others.

Inexplicably, the US Fourth Air Force A-2 Intelligence Branch did not investigate the Maury Island sighting area until 31 July - ten days after the event - when their agents, Captain William Davidson and Lieutenant Frank M. Brown, failed to find the countless 'small, whitish metallic fragments', but were given what appeared to be 'pieces of porous lava' by the individual who had started the whole UFO scare with his more widely publicized sighting of 24 June - namely, Kenneth Arnold, who had been hired by *Fate* magazine to investigate the case.

Arnold sent his own UFO debris to be examined at the chemical laboratory of the University of Chicago, where the pieces were classified as 'slag of volcanic origin'. The rest of the debris, in the care of the A-2 intelligence agents, was lost when the B-25 taking them back to Hamilton Air Force Base in California crashed near Kelso, Washington. Later, authorities at McChord AFB confirmed that the aeroplane had been carrying classified material and that while the crew chief, Master Sergeant L. Taff, and a passenger, Technician Fourth Grade Woodrow D. Mathews, had managed to parachute to safety, the two intelligence agents had died in the crash.

This was singularly ironic in view of the fact that it was the aerial search for the debris of a crashed Marine Corps C-46 transport that had led Arnold to his momentous sighting of nine UFOs as they flew in formation over

Mount Rainier, also in the Cascades, on the border between the United States and Canada.

Perhaps not surprisingly, shortly after the A-2 intelligence agents and their UFO debris were lost in that second air crash, Dahl and the man to whom he had submitted his written report, his direct superior in the Puget Sound harbour patrol, Fred L. Christman, admitted (reportedly under pressure from the Army's remaining A-2 intelligence agents) that the UFO fragments were only pieces of mineral formation picked up at random on Maury Island and shown to the press to heighten interest in the UFO story.

There the Maury Island Mystery ended.

These two incidents are among the very few in which UFOs have reportedly 'dropped' or 'expelled' debris, though others have left debatable physical traces of their presence. However, in general it has to be accepted that most UFO reports do not include debris, though the initial postwar sightings established the appearance, characteristics and capabilities of what we now view as being standard for UFOs, or flying saucers.

The Maury Island incident was exploited by various people to the degree where separating the truth from the fiction in the historical records is now virtually impossible. Nevertheless, while there are those who still think it was a hoax, it *was* the first major postwar UFO sighting; and Dahl's descriptions of the UFO, whether or not invented, set the pattern for most of the future descriptions of UFOs.

Dahl said that the Maury Island UFOs were shaped like 'inflated inner tubes' and had no structural protuberances, appeared to be about 100 feet across, had 'holes' in their centres and portholes around their perimeters, with an observation window in their undersides (possibly the 'hole' in the centre), and looked metallic. They could hover virtually motionless in the air and were seen to ascend rapidly and vertically.

When Kenneth Arnold saw UFOs four days later, neither he nor anyone else had heard of the Maury Island sighting. Nevertheless, Arnold, a trained mountain-rescue pilot, offered remarkably similar descriptions of the nine unknowns that he witnessed flying over Mount Rainier in the Cascades. At first assuming the distant objects were P-51s, Arnold then realised that they were devoid of tail assemblies or other protuberances - other than, in the words of Flammonde, 'an apparent cockpit with a full window canopy' - and

that the whole fuselage of the craft resembled a single, particularly graceful, swept-back ‘wing’ or ‘boomerang’. While the objects appeared to be capable of extraordinary aerial manoeuvres, they flew horizontally like ‘speedboats on water’ or like ‘a saucer would if you skipped it across the water’.

Though Arnold had trained as a pilot, he was not a military man. For this reason, we turn to *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, in which Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, the Air Force’s most assiduous and honest UFO investigator, relates that four days after the Arnold sighting, on 28 June, at 3.15pm, an Air Force pilot, when flying his F-51 near Lake Meade, Nevada, saw a formation of five or six ‘circular objects’ off his right wing. That evening, four Air Force officers, two pilots, and two intelligence officers from Maxwell AFB in Montgomery, Alabama, saw a ‘bright light’ traveling across the sky, zigzagging with bursts of high speed, and making a sharp, 90-degree turn before shooting off.

On 4 July, at 11.00am, in Portland, Oregon, a carload of people driving near Redmond saw four ‘disk-shaped objects’ streaking past Mount Jefferson. At 1.05pm a policeman in the parking lot behind the Portland City Police Headquarters looked up to see ‘five large, disk-shaped objects’ flying at a high rate of speed and ‘oscillating about their lateral axis’. Minutes later, two other policemen, both former pilots, saw three similar objects ‘flying in trail’ and four harbour patrol crewmen saw flying disks ‘shaped like chrome hub caps’ and ‘oscillating’ as they flew overhead. Numerous citizens of Portland saw similar objects at approximately the same time.

That night, a United Airlines crew flying near Emmett, Idaho, reported seeing five unidentified flying objects which were ‘thin and smooth on the bottom and rough-appearing on top; two days later the crew of an Air Force B-25 saw ‘a bright, disk-shaped object’ flying lower than the aircraft; then a pilot flying across Fairfield-Suisun AFB, California, saw something that was ‘oscillating on its lateral axis’ as it traversed three-quarters of the sky in a few seconds.

However, the sighting that really made the Air Force sit up and take an interest in UFOs was the one that occurred four days later, on 8 July, at Muroc Air Base (now Edwards AFB), the supersecret Air Force test centre in the Mojave Desert, California.

At ten in the morning a test pilot observed what he thought was a weather balloon until he noticed that it was going *against* the wind. Studying

it more carefully, he thought it was ‘spherically shaped and yellowish white in colour’. It later transpired than ten minutes earlier several other officers and airmen had seen three similar objects, but of a ‘silver’ appearance, heading in the same direction. Two hours later, a crew of technicians on Rogers Dry Lake, adjacent to Muroc Air Base, observed a ‘round object, white aluminium colour’ in the vicinity of a formation of two P.82s and an A-26 aircraft which were carrying out a seat-ejection experiment. As the ejected experimental seat-and-dummy fell, the object followed it down, but drifting *against* the wind, until it was seen to have ‘a distinct, oval-shaped outline, with two projections on the upper surface which might have been thick fins or nobs’. These projections crossed each other at intervals, suggesting ‘either rotation or oscillation of slow type’. No means of propulsion were noticed and the object made no sound. It had the colour of an ‘aluminium-painted fabric’. Four hours later, the pilot of an F-51 flying at 20,000 feet spotted a ‘flat object of a light-reflecting nature’ which had no vertical fin or wings. He tried to pursue it, but could not climb high enough.

Already, the basic characteristics of UFOs had a striking consistency. They were semi-circular or circular, usually domed or with viewing windows on the top or bottom, and could resemble either an inverted plate or two plates together, one placed upside down on the other. They were usually of a whitish-grey or metallic appearance. They flew horizontally with a slight bouncing motion, like ‘speedboats on water’ or ‘a saucer would if you skipped it across the water’; but they could also change direction rapidly, ascend and descend vertically, and in general perform theoretically impossible aerial manoeuvres at remarkably low and high speeds. Most of them ‘oscillated’, but were silent and showed no means of propulsion.

If the Harold Dahl sighting at Maury Island was a hoax, it was a brilliantly conceived hoax indeed, because the UFOs described above were remarkably similar in configuration and envisaged potential to the ‘flying wings’ and ‘humped airfoils’ that were then being developed in the National Physical Laboratory and other aeronautical establishments through the US and Canada. In turn, these were based on the boundary-layer experiments that had already been conducted extensively in Nazi Germany.

By then, it had been widely accepted that control of the boundary layer was the key to hithertofore impossible high speeds and extraordinary

manoeuvrability in flight; and that the ‘suction’ method - in which air is sucked through air vents, or slots, in the wing, to be expelled as added propulsion - was superior to the ‘blowing’ method of standard rotors, or propellers. Because of this, numerous experiments had been conducted on elliptical, boomerang-shaped, and ‘humped’ airfoils, or flying wings, lined with suction slots - resulting in such aircraft as the Armstrong Whitworth twin-engined, all-wing jet, the AW-52 Boomerang. When one of the AW-52 Boomerangs crashed, further development of the model ceased; but it was followed by aircraft with an even greater sweepback and a more strikingly ‘triangular’ form - such as the Hawker Siddeley Group's ‘Aero Delta’ aircraft, the Avro 698 and Avro 707B, as well as other ‘flying wing’ jet-propelled prototypes. Such aircraft, with their elliptical, semicircular, boomerang, or triangular shapes, undoubtedly were the forerunners of the completely circular, supersonic aircraft known as ‘flying saucers’ and seen mostly by trained observers over top-secret military establishments.

Nevertheless, while the abovementioned sightings offered purely visual support for the general appearance of the UFOs, the *physical* reality of the UFOs remained in doubt. Ironically, the removal of those doubts began with a ‘classic’ UFO encounter that may in fact have been a ‘classic’ case of misidentification.

It was also the first instance of a human death being caused by a UFO.

The ‘Mantell Incident’ began at 1.15pm on 7 January 1947 when the Kentucky State Highway Patrol phoned the control tower operators at Godman AFB, Louisville, Kentucky, to inform them that a lot of people from Maysville, a small town eighty miles east of Louisville, had reported seeing a strange craft. Though nothing was known to be flying in the area at that time, the state police called back about fifteen or twenty minutes later with more reports of a ‘strange craft’ seen over the towns of Owensboro and Irvington, west of Louisville. Most witnesses described the objects as being ‘circular, about 250 to 300 feet in diameter’ and moving westward at high speed.

While the control tower operators at Godman AFB still had no record of anything in the air, they deduced from the reports that as the UFO would have had to pass north of Godman to get from Maysville to Owensboro, it might return.

It did. At 1.45pm it passed over Godman and was witnessed by the

control tower operators, the base operations officer, the base intelligence officer, and several other key personnel, all of whom, after studying the UFO through binoculars, decided that they could not identify it.

At 2.30pm four F-51s were despatched to take a look at the object and try to identify it. One of the aeroplanes was forced to return to base due to a lack of fuel, but the other three, led by the flight leader, Captain Thomas F. Mantell, climbed to 10,000 feet in pursuit of the object. At 2.45pm Mantell called the tower and said, 'I see something above and ahead of me and I'm still climbing.' This statement was confirmed by all of the people in the tower. What is *not* confirmed by everyone is that Mantell then said, 'I've sighted the thing. It looks metallic and it's tremendous in size... Now it's starting to climb!' Everyone in the tower *did* agree that Mantell then said, 'I'm going to 20,000 feet.'

According to the statements they gave later, Mantell's two wing men were then at 15,000 feet and trying frantically to call their flight leader, who had climbed above them and was out of sight. By the time the wing men had returned to their base at Standiford Field, north of Godman, Mantell had crashed and died.

Though Mantell's disputed statement, 'It looks metallic and it's tremendous in size... Now it's starting to climb!' was spread far and wide, the official stance was that Mantell had mistaken the planet Venus for a UFO and blacked out due to lack of oxygen when climbing too high in pursuit of a UFO that wasn't actually there. However, ATIC's Project Sign team soon discovered that this could not have been possible. On the other hand, two people, including an astronomer, had reported seeing a balloon in the sky at the time and subsequent investigations by the Project Sign team revealed that a classified skyhook balloon project may have been operating out of Clinton County AFB in northern Ohio. As the winds were such that a skyhook balloon launched from Clinton County AFB could have been seen from Godman AFB even as high as 60,000 feet, it is possible that Mantell *could* have died chasing just such a balloon.

Two things cast doubt on this possibility. One is that few of those who knew Mantell, an experienced pilot, could imagine him spending so much time - nearly twenty minutes - in pursuit of a balloon without realising what it was. Indeed, according to Captain Ruppelt, one of Mantell's friends went on record as saying that Mantell was one of the most cautious pilots he had

known and he could not conceive of him disregarding his shortage of oxygen.

'The only thing I can think,' Ruppelt reports this friend as saying, 'was that he was after something that he believed to be more important than his life or his family.'

According to Ruppelt, the second thing that casts doubt on the likelihood of Mantell chasing a skyhook balloon is that while the people who were working with the early skyhook projects claimed that they could remember operating out of Clinton County AFB in 1947, none of them were willing to be pinned down to that particular date.

Finally, in *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, Ruppelt comments: 'Somewhere in the archives of the Air Force or the Navy there are records that will show whether or not a balloon was launched from Clinton County AFB, Ohio, on January 7, 1948. I never could find those records.'

Whether or not the unfortunate Captain Mantell died pursuing something 'metallic' and 'tremendous in size' will never be known, but certainly many of the UFOs being seen at that time fitted those two descriptions. Mantell's death at least rocked the Air Force and made them sit up and take notice of the UFO phenomenon - but what really got them moving was an extraordinary sighting that took place eighteen months later.

At 2.45am on 24 July 1948, in the middle of a scheduled Eastern Airlines trip from Houston, Texas, to Atlanta, Georgia, the pilots, Clarence S. Chiles and John B. Whitted, saw an unidentified light straight ahead of them and closing fast. Chiles, the captain, quickly put his DC-3 into an evasive tight left turn. The UFO flashed by about 700 feet to the right and then pulled up in a steep climb.

Chiles and his co-pilot, Whitted, both got a good look at the UFO and later agreed that it had resembled a B-29 fuselage, with its underside emitting a 'deep blue glow' and a '50-foot trail of orange-red flame' shooting out the back. It also had 'two rows of windows from which bright lights glowed'. (Two years later, on 31 March 1950, the pilots of another DC-3, flying from Memphis, Tennessee, to Little Rock, Arkansas, almost collided with a UFO which they assumed was disk-shaped because of the 'circular arrangement of eight or ten "portholes", each one glowing from a strong bluish-white light' that seemed to come from the inside of the object.) Minutes after the sighting by Chiles and Whitted, a crew chief at Robins Air Force Base in Macon,

Georgia, witnessed ‘an extremely bright light’ passing overhead and traveling at high speed. Another pilot, flying that night near the Virginia-North Carolina state line at approximately the same time as the DC-3 was ‘buzzed’ by the UFO, reported seeing ‘a bright shooting star’ in the direction of Montgomery, Alabama.

The sightings were correlated by ATIC and according to Captain Ruppelt their findings confirmed that the UFO which nearly collided with the airliner would have flown almost over Macon, Georgia, after passing that aircraft - and it had been turning in the direction of Macon when last seen.

Because the story of the crew chief at Robins AFB, 200 miles away, seemed to confirm the sighting, not to mention the report from near the Virginia-North Carolina state line, the Air Force was finally convinced that the UFO phenomenon was real, that it involved solid, moving objects, and that it warranted serious examination.

When ATIC’s Project Sign submitted an official Estimate of the Situation, the UFOs stepped out of mythology and into reality.

The saucer-shaped configuration and manoeuvring capabilities of the UFOs had been verified, but confirmation of what appeared to be their unusually large size and remarkable top speeds was still missing. A Navy Commander, R.B. McLaughlin, had worked throughout 1948 and 1949 with a team of engineers, technicians and scientists on a classified skyhook balloon project, located in the Navy’s top-secret guided-missile test and development area in the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico. On 24 April 1949, at 10.00am in an ‘absolutely clear’ Sunday morning, when McLaughlin and his team were preparing to launch one of their huge skyhook balloons (100 feet in diameter), the whole crew saw a UFO which, though high up, was clearly ‘elliptical in shape’ and had a ‘whitish-silver’ colour. With a theodolite, stop-watch, and 25-power telescope, they were able to track the UFO as it dropped from an angle of elevation of 45° to 25°, then abruptly shot upward and disappeared. Even after putting a reduction factor on the data recorded on the theodolite, McLaughin estimated that the UFO was approximately 40 feet wide and 100 feet long, had been at an altitude of fifty-six miles, and was traveling at seven miles per second, or approximately 25,000 mph.

According to Captain Ruppelt, there was some ‘legitimate doubt’ as to the accuracy of the speed and altitude figures that Commander McLaughlin’s team arrived at from the data they measured with the theodolite. However, he

points out that ‘this doesn’t mean much’ and that even if they had been off by a factor of 100 per cent, the speeds and altitude of the UFO would be ‘fantastic’. He also reminds us that various members of McLaughlin’s team studied the object through a 25-power telescope and swore that it was a ‘flat, oval-shaped object’.

Shortly after relating this information to the public in an article he wrote for the March 1950 issue of *True* magazine, Commander McLaughlin was transferred back to sea.

Nevertheless, his report had finally confirmed the extraordinary speeds and altitudes reached by UFOs.

Three years later, when the Robertson Panel submitted its infamous recommendations for a mass ‘debunking’ of the UFO phenomenon (see Chapter 12, pages 268-73), its conclusions flew directly in the face of the evidence presented by the Project Blue Book chief, Captain Ruppelt, who was convinced that the UFOs were actual aircraft of highly developed technology. While visual sightings of UFOs were by then in great abundance, what Ruppelt wanted were some sightings which would, in his view, produce enough data to confirm that they were intelligently controlled vehicles.

He found three such sightings.

The first occurred over Haneda AFB, now Tokyo International Airport, in Japan, in late August 1952. The UFO was first observed by two control tower operators who saw a large, brilliant light in the northwest over Tokyo Bay. The light, which was moving, was observed through 7 x 50 binoculars. It had a constant brilliance, was circular in shape, and appeared to be the upper portion of a large, round, dark shape which was about four times the diameter of the light itself. Then, when it moved, the tower operators saw a second, dimmer light on the lower edge of the dark, shadowy portion. This particular UFO was tracked simultaneously by radar and observed by intelligence officers as it flew back and forth across the central part of Tokyo Bay, sometimes almost hovering, then abruptly accelerating to 300 miles an hour. It was pursued by, and ‘deliberately’ eluded, an F-94 plane.

The sighting was thoroughly investigated by the FEAF intelligence officers in the area, then later investigated just as thoroughly by Captain Ruppelt. Both agreed that it was not a weather target, definitely not a star, and that visual and radar lock-ons had proved that it was solid *and* moving. They also proved that each turn the UFO made was constant, and that the

straight ‘legs’ between the turns were about the same length. Indeed, Ruppelt later wrote that the sketch of the UFO’s flight path reminded him very much of the crisscross patterns he used to fly during World War II - and that the only time the UFO had seriously deviated from this pattern was when the F-94 tried to pursue it.

The second sighting was one that occurred on the night of 29 July 1952, when an F-94 attempted to intercept a UFO over eastern Michigan. This sighting was even more interesting in that there was a definite reason for every move the UFO made. First, it made a 180° turn because the F-94 was closing in on it. Next, it alternately increased and decreased its speed - but only increased its speed when the aeroplane was closing in on it and always slowed down when it was just out of range of the aeroplane’s radar.

Adding weight to his argument that such movements could not have been random, Ruppelt submitted a third report - the one he called the ‘best unknown ever’ - a report of an F-84 pilot who chased an object right across Rapid City, south Dakota. According to the pilot *and* the radar operators who had located the object, the target accelerated and decelerated so that there was always *precisely* three miles between it and the F-84 - and it kept this up until the F-84 started running out of fuel and was forced to return to base. Later, both the pilot and the tower controller told Ruppelt that the UFO seemed to have some kind of automatic warning radar linked to its power supply.

This capability has been attributed to every modern UFO, from the German *Feuerballs* and *Kugelblitz* to the more advanced craft seen ‘bobbing’ over mountainous terrain or the buildings of military establishments.

By the mid-1950s ex-Air Chief Marshal of the RAF, Lord Dowding, was backing the UFOs, but reserved his judgement on what they were. Herman Oberth, the ‘father’ of German rocket development, publicly declared that they were interplanetary vehicles. In Belgium, a senator demanded an answer to the UFO mystery from the Secretary of Defence. In France, the French General Staff set up a committee, the *Groupment d'Études des Phénomènes Aériens*, to study UFO reports. In England, the aviation magazine, *Aeroplane*, examined the subject, but refused to come to any definite conclusion. In the Iron Curtain countries, UFOs were widely discussed - but purely as a form of capitalist propaganda. In the United States, two civilian UFO organizations were formed: The Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO), located

in Tucson, Arizona, and the National Investigating Committee for Aerial Phenomenon (NICAP), located in Washington, D.C. Both gained a wide membership, including noted scientists and former military and air force personnel, as well as a great deal of respect internationally for the sane and sober manner in which they investigated major UFO sightings.

The UFOs were widely reported as being flat disks, domed disks, double-domed disks, hemispherical disks, and spherical, elliptical, triangular, or cylindrical in general outline. They were capable of flying soundlessly at remarkable speeds and of making extraordinary manoeuvres. They could ascend and descend vertically, hover impossibly in mid-air, change direction abruptly, follow the terrain of Earth, seemingly automatically, and disappear in 'the blinking of an eye'. They were mostly silvery or a 'whitish-metallic' colour, had 'portholes' or other 'orifices' around their rims, and 'oscillated' around their lateral axes.

The most commonly reported shape certainly resembled the Germans' World War II 'wide-surface ring which rotated around a fixed, cupola-shaped cockpit' or 'large rotating ring, in the centre of which was a round, stationary cabin for the crew'. Last but not least, the UFOs fitting this description invariably showed up on radar screens, were confirmed by theodolites as physical objects, and appeared to fly away when pursued.

In short: the UFOs, or flying saucers, were not as 'alien' as they appeared to be... and possibly originated right here on Earth.

Chapter 6

The UFO Invasion

The guided missile test range at White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico is spread over many square miles and, with its numerous cinetheodolite camera stations linked together by a telephone system, is fully equipped to track high, fast-moving objects. A cinetheodolite is similar to a 35mm movie camera, except that when a moving object is photographed with it, the developed photograph will also contain three readings that show the time the photo was taken, the azimuth angle, and the elevation angle of the camera. If two or more cinetheodolites photograph the same flying object, it is possible to obtain rough estimates of the object's size, speed and altitude – rough estimates because cinetheodolites do not give accurate readings and too many UFOlogists think they do.

Ruppelt, in *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, relates two incidents which proved for him that the UFO phenomenon was based on sightings of real, solid objects.

On 27 April 27 1950, shortly after a guided missile had been fired from the White Sands Proving Ground and fallen back to earth, Air Force technicians spotted an object streaking across the sky. As most of the camera stations had already unloaded their film, only one camera was able to catch a shot of the UFO before it disappeared. That photo showed only a dark, smudgy object - but it also proved that the object had been moving. A month later, during another missile test, another UFO appeared, and this time two members of the camera teams saw it and shot several feet of film of the 'bright, shiny object' streaking across the sky. That film was subsequently processed and analyzed by the Data Reduction Group at White Sands. By putting a correction factor in the data gathered by the two cameras, they were able to calculate that the object was higher than 40,000 feet, was traveling over 2,000 mph, and was over 300 feet in diameter.

Ruppelt makes it clear that these figures were only estimates, based on the possibly erroneous correction factor. However, what they did prove is that *something* had been in the air and it had been *solid* and moving very fast. The

photos were enough to convince Ruppelt of the reality of the phenomenon, but what shook the Air Force in general were two major flaps that came the following year: the Lubbock Lights and the Fort Monmouth sightings.

As related by Captain Ruppelt, the Lubbock affair began on the evening of 25 August 1951, when an employee of the Atomic Energy Commission's supersecret Sandia Corporation - one with a top 'Q' security clearance - looked up from his garden on the outskirts of Albuquerque, New Mexico, and saw a huge aircraft flying swiftly and silently over his home. He later described it as having the shape of a 'flying wing', about one-and-a-half times the size of a B-26, with six to eight softly glowing, bluish lights on the aft end of its wings.

That same evening, about twenty minutes after this sighting, four professors from the Texas Technological College at Lubbock - a geologist, a chemist, a physicist, and a petroleum engineer -observed a formation of lights streaking across the sky: about fifteen to thirty separate lights, all a bluish-green colour, moving from north to south in a semicircular formation.

Early in the morning of 26 August, only a few hours after the Lubbock sightings, two different radars at an Air Defence Command radar station located in Washington State showed an unknown target traveling at 900 mph at 1,300 feet and heading in a northwesterly direction.

On 31 August two women were driving near Matador, seventy miles north-east of Lubbock, when they saw a 'pear-shaped object' about 150 yards ahead of them, about 120 feet in the air, drifting to the east at less than the take-off speed of a Cub aeroplane. One of those witnesses was familiar with aircraft - she was married to an air force officer and had lived on or near air bases for years - and she swore that the object was about the size of a B-29 fuselage, had a porthole on one side, made absolutely no noise as it moved *into* the wind, and suddenly picked up speed and climbed out of sight in a 'tight, spiralling' motion.

That same evening, an amateur photographer, Carl Hart, Jr., took five photos of a V formation of the same bluish-green lights as they flew over his backyard. Finally, a rancher's wife told her husband (who related the story to Captain Ruppelt) that she had seen a large object gliding swiftly and silently over her house. That object was observed about ten minutes after the Sandia Corporation executive had viewed *his* object; it was described as 'an aeroplane without a body', and the woman said that on the aft edge of the

wing were pairs of glowing lights -an exact description of the Albuquerque sightings made by the Sandia employee.

Subsequent investigation by the Air Force's Project Blue Book team confirmed that the Washington State radar lock-on had been a solid target - not a weather target. It was then calculated that an object flying between that radar station and Lubbock would have been on a north-westerly course at the time it was seen at the two places - and that it would have had a speed of approximately 900 mph, as calculated by the radar.

The five photographs taken by Carl Hart, Jr. were analysed by the specialist Photo Reconnaissance Laboratory at Wright Field. The results showed that the lights, in an inverted V formation, had crossed about 120° of open sky at a 30° per second angular velocity - which corresponded exactly to the angular velocity measured carefully by the four professors from the Technical College at Lubbock. Analysis of the photos also showed that the lights were a great deal brighter than the surrounding stars and that their unusual intensity could have been caused by an exceptionally bright light source which had a colour at the most distant red end of the spectrum, bordering on infrared.

As the human eye is not sensitive to such a light, the light could appear dim to the eye - as many of the Lubbock lights did - but be exceptionally bright on film, as they were on the photographs. While according to the Photo Reconnaissance Laboratory, at that time there was nothing flying that had those particular characteristics, Captain Ruppelt and his fellow investigators were startled by the discovery that the lights on the photos were strikingly similar to those described by the Atomic Energy Commission employee as being on the aft edge of the huge UFO that passed silently over his house.

Did something solid pass over Albuquerque, New Mexico, and fly 250 miles to Lubbock, Texas, at an approximate speed of 900 mph? According to the witnesses, and to the radar and visual-tracking calculations, it did. The Lubbock files were also studied by a group of rocket experts, nuclear physicists and intelligence experts, and they were all convinced that the sightings had been of an enormous, solid object, most likely with a 'highly swept-back wing configuration' and with 'a series of small jet orifices all around its edge'.

According to Captain Ruppelt, the extraordinary findings of the Lubbock investigation, and the furore aroused by the sightings themselves, finally

galvanized a harassed Air Force into action. However, official ‘respectability’ truly came to the UFO problem with the Fort Monmouth sightings that took place a month later at the Army Signal Corps radar centre at Fort Monmouth, New Jersey.

The flap began at 11.10am on 10 September 1951, when a student operator was giving a demonstration of automatic radar tracking to a group of visiting top brass. After spotting an object flying about 12,000 yards southeast of the station, the operator switched to automatic tracking, but failed to hold the object and, in his confusion, blurted out to the VIPs that the object was going too fast for the set - which meant that it was flying faster than any known jet. After three minutes, during which it continued to fly too fast for the automatic radar tracking, the UFO disappeared.

Checks with the weather department revealed that there were no indications of the kind of temperature inversion that, by bending the light passing through it, can create unusual moving shapes or false radar images.

Twenty-five minutes later, the pilot of a T-33 jet trainer, carrying an Air Force major as passenger and flying 20,000 feet over Mount Pleasant, New Jersey, observed ‘a dull, silver, disk-like object’ below him. He described it as thirty to fifty feet in diameter. When the object descended toward Sandy Hook, the T-33 pilot went after it. As he approached, it stopped abruptly, hovered impossibly, then suddenly sped south, made a 120° turn, and vanished out to sea. The Air Force major confirmed this sighting.

At 3.15pm, back at the Fort Monmouth radar centre, a frantic call was received from headquarters, demanding that they pick up an unknown that was flying very high, to the north, roughly where the first UFO had vanished. A radar lock-on confirmed that the UFO was traveling slowly at 93,000 feet - or eighteen miles above the Earth - and it could also be made out visually as a silver speck.

No known aircraft of that period could fly eighteen miles above the Earth.

Next morning, two radar sets picked up another unknown that climbed, levelled out, dived and climbed again repeatedly, too fast for the automatic radar tracking. When the object climbed, it ‘went almost straight up’. The flap ended that afternoon when the radar tracked another slowly moving UFO and tracked it for several minutes, before it disappeared.

Following the sightings, Major General C.P. Cabell, representing the Director of Intelligence of the Air Force, ordered an immediate investigation. In a matter of hours, two officers from the Air Technical Intelligence Centre (ATIC) at Wright-Patterson were on an aeroplane to Lubbock. Once there, they worked around the clock, interrogating everyone involved in the sighting - pilots, radar operators, technicians and instructors - and a couple of days later they were in the Pentagon, submitting their report to General Cabell and other high-ranking intelligence officers. Every word of that meeting was recorded, but the recording, as Ruppelt states, was 'so hot that it was later destroyed'.

Nevertheless, the Monmouth sightings, combined with the Lubbock sightings, compelled Major General Cabell to order ATIC to establish a new, more serious UFO investigations project. In April, 1952, Project Grudge was renamed Project Blue Book and Captain Edward J. Ruppelt was placed in charge. He was soon faced with the most frightening UFO flap of them all... and with the revelation that the US Government and the Pentagon were not as keen on official UFO investigations as they appeared to be.

In 1952, Washington DC was 'invaded' by UFOs to a degree that had not been duplicated before and has not been since.

By June of that year, the US Air Force's Project Blue Book was going strong under the leadership of Captain Edward J. Ruppelt and had received more official UFO reports than it had done in any previous month in its history. In fact, according to Ruppelt, the sheer number of reports was making Air Force officers in the Pentagon frantic.

By 15 June, the locations, timing, and sequence of the reports indicated that the UFOs were gradually closing in on Washington D.C.

Throughout the afternoon of 15 June, reports of 'round, shiny objects' and 'silvery spheres' came in from all over Virginia, one after the other: 3.40pm at Unionville; 4.20pm at Gordonsville; 4.25pm at Richmond; then 4.43pm and 5.43pm at Gordonsville. At 7.35pm a lot of people in Blackstone, about eighty miles south of Gordonsville, observed a 'round, shiny object with a golden glow' moving from north to south. By 7.59pm the same object was observed by the people in the CAA radio facility at Blackstone. At 8.00pm a jet from Langley Air Force Base tried to intercept it, but five minutes later the object, moving too slowly to be an aeroplane, disappeared.

So inexplicable and disturbing were these reports that Captain Ruppelt was called to Washington to give a briefing in the restricted area of the fourth-floor 'B' ring of the Pentagon to General Samford, the Director of Intelligence, some of the members of his staff, two Navy captains from the Office of Naval Intelligence, and some others whom Ruppelt could not name for security reasons. That meeting resulted in 'a directive to take further steps to obtain positive identification of the UFOs'.

Meanwhile, the sightings continued. By the end of June, it had become apparent that there was a considerable build-up of sightings in the eastern United States. In Massachusetts, New Jersey and Maryland jet fighters were scrambled almost nightly for a week, but always foiled when their radar-locks were broken by the abrupt, swift manoeuvres of the UFOs. On 1 July, many UFOs were sighted over Boston, then began working their way down the coast. The same day, according to Blue Book reports, two UFOs had 'come down across Boston on a southwesterly heading, crossed Long Island, hovered a few minutes over the Army's secret laboratories at Fort Monmouth, then proceeded toward Washington'. A few hours later, the first report from Washngton was submitted by a physics professor at George Washington University.

For the next couple of weeks, reports about Washington sightings poured in at the rate of twenty or thirty a day and, according to Ruppelt, 'unknowns were running about 40 per cent'. Finally, on the night of 19 July, the most highly publicized sightings in UFO history began.

At 11.40pm two radars at Washington National Airport picked up eight unidentified targets near Andrews AFB, Maryland. The objects were flying at approximately 100 mph to 130 mph, then they suddenly accelerated to 'fantastically high speeds' and left the area. They soon returned, en masse. During the night, tower operators and the aircrews of several airliners saw unidentified lights in the same locations indicated by the radar. Before the night was out, and while interceptor jets tried and failed to catch them, the unidentified targets had moved into every sector covered by the radarscopes, including the 'prohibited corridor' over the White House and the Capitol. A colourful climax was reached when, in the early hours of the morning, the operators in the control tower at Andrews AFB, in response to an ARTC traffic controller's query about a target directly over the Andrews Radio range station, located near their tower, reported that a 'large, fiery, orange-

coloured sphere' was hovering in the sky directly above them.

Captain Ruppelt had not been informed of the sightings and only found out about them when he bought a newspaper at the Washington International Airport Terminal Building after a flight from Dayton, Ohio. He rushed immediately to the Pentagon where he had an urgent meeting with ATIC's Pentagon liaison man, Major Dewey Fournet, and Colonel Bower, an intelligence officer from nearby Bolling AFB. They confirmed that throughout the night the restricted corridor around the White House had been filled with interceptor jets trying to chase numerous UFOs, that the UFOs had been radar tracked all around Washington DC, that an analysis of the sightings had completely ruled out temperature inversions, and that the radar operators at Washington National Airport and Andrews AFB - plus at least two veteran airline pilots - had all sworn that their sightings were caused by the radar waves bouncing off solid objects.

On behalf of the Air Force, public relations officer Al Chops gave the press an official 'No comment' on the sightings. In the meantime, Captain Ruppelt tried to set up a thorough investigation, but was blocked whichever way he turned. He planned to go all over the area, to every sighting location, but he hardly got out of the Pentagon.

First, he called the transportation section for a car - and was refused. Next, he went down to the finance office to see if he could *rent* a car - and was refused that as well. Next, he was reminded that he was supposed to be on his way back to Dayton, and that if he didn't leave, he would be technically AWOL.Ruppelt gave up in disgust and returned to Dayton.

However, within a week to the hour of the first major flap, another UFO 'invasion' took place over Washington DC - and this time it was even more impressive.

At approximately 10.30pm on 26 July, the same radar operators who had seen the previous UFOs picked up a lot of 'slowly moving' targets... but this time the UFOs were spread out in a huge arc around Washington - from Herndon, Virginia, to Andrews AFB.

In short, they had Washington boxed in.

By 11.30pm four or five of the targets were being tracked continually over the Capitol. F-94 interceptor jets tried and failed to catch them. Shortly after the UFOs left the sky over the Capitol, UFO reports came in from Langley AFB, near Newport News, Virginia, where the operators described

them as unidentified lights that were ‘rotating and giving off alternating colours’. Another F-94 was despatched from Langley AFB and visually vectored to the lights by the tower operators. The pilot reported that as he approached one of the lights, it went out ‘like somebody turning off a light bulb’. No sooner had this happened, than the targets came back on the radarscopes at Washington National Airport. Again, F-94s were despatched to locate them - but each time they were vectored into the lights, the UFOs disappeared abruptly from the radarscopes and the pilots simultaneously reported that they had visually observed the lights blinking out.

This game of cat and mouse between the UFOs and the interceptor planes continued throughout the night until, just before dawn, the last of the UFOs disappeared from the radarscopes.

Throughout that same night, there was chaos in Washington.The press was furious because all reporters and photographers had been ordered out of the radar rooms at the time the Air Force interceptors were chasing the UFOs. However, once the press had gone, arguments blew up in those radar towers and in the Pentagon. According to Dewey Fournet, ATIC’s Pentagon liaison man, everyone in the radar rooms had been convinced that the targets had been caused by solid, metallic objects and could not have been anything else - and whatever they were, they could literally hover in the air, then abruptly accelerate to thousands of miles per hour.

Soon, a story was circulating the President Truman had personally witnessed UFOs skimming right around the White House. There is no confirmation for such a story, but it is known that about 10.00am the next day, the President’s air aide, Brigadier General Landry, called Intelligence at Truman’s personal request to find out what was going on. Captain Ruppelt was the one who took that call, but he had to hedge his answers, because he could not explain the sightings away.

It was the Washington sightings more than anything else that made the Project Blue Book staff suspicious of the official Air Force stance on UFOs. In fact, Blue Book spent over a year investigating the sightings and some of the team were shaken by what they discovered.

For a start, when the tower operators at Andrews AFB were later interrogated about the ‘large, fiery, orange-coloured sphere’ they had reported seeing right over the Andrews Radio range station, located near their control tower, they completely changed their story and said that what they

had really seen was a star.

Ruppelt found it had to credit that trained radar operators would mistake ‘a large, fiery, orange-coloured sphere’ for a star; he was further disconcerted when he learned that according to astronomical charts there had been no exceptionally bright stars where the UFO was reported to have been seen. Ruppelt then found out, from what he claimed was a reliable source, that the tower operators had been ‘persuaded’ to change their stories.

Likewise, the pilot of an F-94C, who had told Ruppelt about vainly trying to intercept unidentified lights, later stated in his official report that all he had seen was a ground light reflecting off a layer of haze - a patently ridiculous statement, since both the pilot and the radar had confirmed that the lights had repeatedly disappeared and reappeared in the sky before eventually shooting away.

Regarding the Air Force’s continuing insistence that the lights had been caused by temperature inversions, Blue Book checked out the strength of the inversions through the Air Defence Command Weather Forecast Centre - and at no time during that flap was there a temperature inversion strong enough to show up on the radar. Finally, no weather target makes a 180° turn and flies away every time an aeroplane reaches it.

The Washington sightings, according to Project Blue Book, are still unknowns.

While the UFO ‘invasion’ of Washington was unprecedented, it was followed by another series of sightings that would deepen Ruppelt’s concern about what the UFOs were, where they came from, and who knew about them.

A couple of months after the Washington UFO ‘invasion’, at the beginning of September 1952, there was a build-up of UFO sightings from the southeastern United States, notably Georgia and Alabama. A disconcerting number of them were from the vicinity of the new, top-secret Atomic Energy Commission complex at Savannah River; many more were over Brookley Air Force Base near Mobile, Alabama. That same month, the NATO naval forces were holding manoeuvres - known as Operation Mainbrace - off the coast of Europe.

On 20 September, a US newspaper reporter and a group of pilots and flight deck crew on board an aircraft carrier in the North Sea watched a ‘perfectly clear, silvery sphere’ moving across the sky just behind the fleet of ships. The object was large and appeared to be moving rapidly, so the

reporter shot several pictures of it. These were developed straight away and immediately studied by the intelligence officers on board the aircraft carrier. The pictures were excellent and the object shown looked like a large balloon - but no balloons were in the area and a later analysis of all the photographs proved conclusively that the object had been moving very fast.

The following day, six Royal Air Force pilots flying a formation of jet fighters over the North Sea saw a 'shiny, spherical object' coming from the direction of the NATO fleet. They took after it and lost it, but when they neared their base, one of the pilots noticed that the UFO was following them. He turned back towards it, but the UFO also turned away and outdistanced the RAF aeroplane in a matter of minutes.

Finally, on the third day of the NATO exercise, a UFO was observed near the fleet, this time over the Topcliffe Aerodrome on the English mainland. A pilot in a British jet was sent in pursuit and managed to get close enough to describe the object as 'round, silvery and white' and to note that it 'seemed to rotate around its vertical axis and sort of wobble'. When he tried to get closer, the UFO shot off and soon disappeared.

According to what an RAF intelligence officer later told Captain Ruppelt at a Pentagon meeting, it was the Operation Mainbrace sightings that finally forced the RAF to officially recognise the UFO phenomenon. Though this was later denied by the RAF, Captain Ruppelt had other reasons to be particularly intrigued, and disturbed, by events that related the Washington UFO invasion to the Mainbrace sightings in his thoughts.

In *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects*, Ruppelt reveals that prior to the famous UFO invasion of Washington on 20 and 27 July 1952, a scientist from an agency he could not name for security reasons told him with conviction: 'Within the next few days... you're going to have the granddaddy of all UFO sightings. The sightings will occur in Washington or New York - probably Washington.' Ruppelt also reports that in September of 1952, when the NATO naval forces were about to commence Operation Mainbrace, someone in the Pentagon mentioned that Naval Intelligence should keep an eye out for UFOs - which were subsequently observed by many involved in the operation. .

In other words, there were those in the White House and the Pentagon who seemed to have prior knowledge of when and where certain UFOs were going to appear. This led to the belief, widely suppressed at the time, that the

US had its own flying saucers.

Chapter 7

The Man-Made Flying Saucers

US Intelligence concern that the flying saucers might be highly advanced, long-range, jet fighter or reconnaissance planes constructed in secret by the Soviets began with the Scandinavian ‘ghost rockets’ of 1947 and grew in the following years. This can be seen in a formerly classified Memorandum for Record dated 29 April 29 1952, requesting information on Soviet ‘manned aircraft of unconventional design, orbital missile (including the Sanger global range bombing system) and orbital bombing platforms, and flying saucers’. This concern would only have been heightened by the reported crash of a flying saucer with Russian insignia at Spitzbergen, Norway, on 8 August the same year.

US Intelligence was aware of the fact that a patent for a ‘flying saucer with a circular fixed wing’ had been taken out by an American citizen (unnamed) as early as 22 March 1932.

The unnamed citizen was probably Jonathan E. Caldwell. This would explain why, on 19 August 1949, at the height of the immediate post-war UFO flap, the Air Force Command of Baltimore called a press conference to announce that two different types of prototypes which might solve the mystery of the flying saucers had been found in an abandoned farm near Glen Burnie, Maryland. According to the Air Force spokesman, both machines had been designed and constructed before the war by one Jonathan E. Caldwell, with the aid of a local mechanic, and one of the machines had actually been flown.

The machines had been abandoned for years and were falling apart, but as they were a combination of aeroplane and helicopter, with round wings and contrarotating propellers, it was the belief of Air Force intelligence that in flight they would have resembled flying saucers and therefore could have been the prototypes of the more advanced UFOs seen in the skies over the past few years.

This notion was quickly squashed when, less than twenty-four hours later, at another urgent press conference, a different Air Force spokesman

announced that the Caldwell machines had ‘absolutely no connection with the reported phenomena of flying saucers’. What the Air Force spokesman did not mention is that Caldwell had constructed his ‘plane with circular wing of the “parasol” type’ (it was raised above the fuselage, like an umbrella) in 1932 and it was tested the following year by Professor J. Owen Evans in a wind tunnel in Los Angeles, then flown by the well known pilot, Jimmy Doolittle, displaying a top speed of 97 mph and a landing speed of 23 mph. In 1936, Caldwell produced a modified version of the prototype, but it crashed, killing the pilot, thus putting Caldwell out of business for good. When he left Glen Burnie, in 1940, he bitterly informed Professor Evans that only the lack of another $5000 had stood between him and ‘an astonishing result’.

Nevertheless, US military Intelligence continued to be anxious about the possibility of man-made flying saucers, and was further concerned because most of the saucer sightings in the US ‘tend to cluster around key development stations such as atomic plants, guided missile areas, and Wright-Patterson Air Force Base’. It is clear, then, from these suspicions and other remarks sprinkled liberally throughout the now declassified intelligence documents of the period, that US intelligence findings ‘seem to exclude extraterrestrial origin of the saucers’.

If on the one hand they were concerned with Soviet advancement in this field, they soon began suspecting that the saucers might be of US or Canadian origin. Regarding the former, as the US Navy, Army and Air Force were in constant competition with one-another, each would have been loath to inform the other of any secret projects in the pipeline. Thus, even at the top-secret White Sands Proving Ground, used extensively by the US Navy for their aeronautical and missile experiments, there were research projects that even the CIA could not learn about and, given Navy interest in vertical-ascending aircraft, they could have included saucer-shaped aircraft.

The first rumblings about Canadian flying saucer projects were made in a classified CIA memorandum dated 18 August 1953 - a year after the Spitzbergen flying saucer crash report. The CIA memorandum states: ‘According to recent reports from Toronto, a number of Canadian Air Force engineers are engaged in the construction of a “flying saucer” to be used as a future weapon of war. The work of these engineers is being carried out in great secrecy at the A.V. Roe Company factories.’

This report was correct - as were the widespread suspicions that the US

Navy was conducting experiments on saucer-shaped, vertical-rising aircraft in secret hangars in the vast White Sands Proving Ground.
One belief widespread in Intelligence circles was that the formation of the lights in the famous Lubbock sightings and others were not indicative of small glowing saucers, but of the many exhaust jets along the edge of a massive 'boomerang-shaped' aircraft, or advanced 'flying wing', which would, when viewed from certain angles, strongly resemble a flying saucer, or saucers. This belief went all the way back to the immediate post-war years, as can be gauged from a once secret, now declassified Department of the Army intelligence memorandum, dated 21 January 1948 and circulated to the intelligence chiefs of the US, Canada, and Europe.

In this document concern is expressed that 'the German High Command indicated a definite interest in the Horten type of flying wing and were about to embark on a rigorous campaign to develop such aircraft toward the end of the war'. After clarifying that these aircraft were the IX, or Go-8-229 and Go-P-60 night-fighter planes being produced at the Gotha (Erfurt) plant, the memorandum continues:

> This plant is now in the hands of the Russians. A recent report indicates that the Russians are now planning to build a fleet of 1800 Horten VIII (six engine pusher) type flying wing aircraft. The wing span is 131 feet. The swept back angle is 30°. The Russian version is reported to be jet-propelled.

Included in this secret memorandum was a request for information on various technical matters relating to 'aircraft whose shape approximates that of an oval, disk, or saucer', including 'boundary layer control method by suction, blowing, or a combination of both' and 'special controls for effective manoeuvrability at very slow speeds or extremely high altitudes'.

The CIA were already holding copies of the lengthy paper presented by the Horten brothers at the Flying Wing Seminar in Bonn, Germany, on 14 April 1943, in which they confirmed that 'a sweptback wing without protrusions is suited to warding off cable barriers, balloon barrages etc... the sweptback wing has advantages at high Mach numbers' and 'sweepback becomes necessary for high-speed flight'. The writer of the Army intelligence memorandum, Colonel R.F. Ennis, GSC Chief, Intelligence Group, therefore

also requested information on the ‘present activities’ of the Horten brothers, Walter and Rismer.

The fact that the Horten papers found in CIA files had not come from Germany, but from the Chance-Vought Aircraft Company, a division of United Aircraft Company, Stratford, Connecticut, is of particular interest as this company would soon be embroiled in the US man-made flying saucer controversy.

The correlation between flying ‘wings’ and flying ‘saucers’ is a logical outcome of the aeronautical development of that period. Renato Vesco quotes Charles Gardner, then considered Britain’s best aviation editor, as saying:

> There is no doubt that the problem in passing through the ‘sound barrier’ will force us to make considerable modifications in the shapes of our flying machines... In order to overcome such difficulties many scientists have suggested a ‘delta’-shaped wing or a right-angled triangle... without tail or fuselage... From the ‘delta’ to the semicircle and from this to the full circle are two clearly connected steps...

Various ‘delta’-wing, semicircular, or ‘boomerang’ shapes were introduced shortly after World War II in the shape of such aircraft as the Armstrong Whitworth AW-52-G Bat - a ‘twin-engined, all-wing jet’ - and did indeed evolve into contemporary ‘right-angled triangle’ ultra-speed jet aircraft, such as the deadly Stealth night-fighter jets. What is not yet known is just how much has been done behind closed doors about the ‘connected steps’ from these semicircular, boomerang and triangular aircraft to the ‘full circle’ aircraft, or flying saucer.

We now know that such steps were certainly well under way in various top-secret establishments, first in World War II Germany, possibly then in the Soviet Union, and certainly in Canada and the US.

Evidence for US involvement with disk-shaped aircraft projects surfaced with information about the US Navy’s Flying Flapjack, or Flying Pancake. Designed by Charles H. Zimmerman of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics and constructed in 1942 by the Chance-Vought Corporation,

mentioned above, the Flying Flapjack, or V-173, was an experimental, vertical-rising, disk-shaped aircraft, a combination of helicopter and jet plane, powered by two 80hp engines and driven by twin propellers, with two fins (stabilizers) on either side of its semi-circular, or pan-cake-shaped, configuration. Reportedly it had a maximum speed of 400 mph to 500 mph, could rise almost vertically, and could practically hover at 35 mph.

A later, more advanced model, the XF-5-U-1, utilised two Pratt and Whitney R-2000-7 engines of 1,600hp each and was reported to be about 105 feet (30 metres) in diameter and have jet nozzles - resembling the 'glowing windows' seen on so many UFOs - arranged around its outer rim, just below the centre of gravity. It was built in three layers, the central layer being slightly larger than the other two. Since the saucer's velocity and manoeuvring abilities were controlled by the power and tilt of the variable-direction jet nozzles, there were no ailerons, rudders or other protruding surfaces. The material used was a metal alloy that had 'a dull, whitish' colour.

In short, a machine remarkably similar in appearance to those reported by so many UFO witnesses.

Information about the Flying Flapjack was released to the public in the April 1950 edition of the *US News and World Report* and it touched off some interesting speculations. The first of these arose from the retrospective knowledge that the US Navy had always expressed more interest in a vertical-rising aeroplane than the Air Force; they had, up to 1950, spent *twice* as much money as the Air Force on secret guided missile research; their top-secret missile-research bases were located in the White Sands Proving Ground - where the majority of military UFO sightings had occurred - and because they were not involved officially in UFO investigations, they could conduct their own research in a secrecy unruffled by the attentions of the media or the public.

According to the Project Grudge report for 1947, the UFO viewed over Muroc AFB on 7 and 8 July of that year was 'an oscillating object which flew *slowly* (author's emphasis) and had tactics unlike an ordinary aeroplane'. Some witnesses, all trained Air Force personnel, observed two disks at an altitude of about 8,000 feet, both manoeuvring in 'tight circles with varying speeds' and oscillating. Also, just like the XF-5-U-1, both disks had two fins on the upper surface.

Another interesting point is that the measurements taken by Navy commander R.B. McLaughlin and his team of Navy scientists of the UFO they had tracked over the White Sands Proving Ground in 1949 (two years after the Muroc sightings) corresponded closely, except for the speed, with the details of the original XF-5-U-1. It is also worth noting that initial reports of the extraordinarily high speeds recorded by McLaughlin turned out to be inaccurate and that later analysis of the data brought the speed much closer to that of an advanced jet plane or the original expectations for the Flapjack.

The *US News and World Report* also pointed out that the Air Force had called off official inquiry into the UFO phenomenon the previous December, even in 'the face of overwhelming evidence that the saucers are real'. This was seen by many as a clear indication that top Air Force officials now knew what the saucers are and where they came from. Therefore, while still denying that the Air Force was involved, they were no longer concerned about the saucers.

The article concludes: 'Surface indications, then, point to research centres of the US Navy's vast guided-missile project as the scene of present flying-saucer development.'

The production prototype of the Flapjack was due for a test-flight at Muroc AFB (now Edwards AFB) in 1947 - when the first 'flying saucer' sightings over that same base and at Rogers Dry Lake (then adjacent to Muroc, now part of Edwards AFB) were recorded. Whether such test flights were actually carried out has never been confirmed or denied by the US Navy. The only official statements given were to the effect that work on the Flying Flapjack had ceased the following year.

In an article published in the April 1950 issue of *Saucer News*, Dr Leon Davidson, then a chemical engineer at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, claims that LCDR Picket Lumpkin, US Navy, told him that 'it became apparent that the desired speed characteristics could be attained with less difficulty in a jet-powered aircraft'. Whatever the reasons, LCDR F.M. Lloyd, also of the US Navy, informed Davidson that the project had been dropped officially on 12 March 1948.

The first version, the V-173, is stored with the Smithsonian Institution...But US involvement with saucer-shaped aircraft did not end with this prototype.

It is worth recalling that in the reports that started the modern UFO scare - the Harold Dahl and Kenneth Arnold sightings of June 1947 - both men observed the UFOs in the vicinity of Mount Rainier in the Cascades in the state of Washington - which divides Oregon and Canada - and both stated independently that the UFOs flew away in the direction of the Canadian border. During the first week in July there were numerous reports of unidentified 'luminous bodies' in the skies over the Province of Quebec, Oregon and New England. The next major UFO flap was the 'invasion' of Washington DC in 1952; and while the official flap started on 19 July, there was a record, dated 17 June, of several hundred unidentified 'red spheres' that flew at supersonic speeds over the Canadian Air Base of North Bay in Ontario and then crossed over some of the south-eastern states. Finally, nearly all of the subsequent Washington DC UFOs were reported as flying away in a southerly direction; when they returned, en masse, on 26 July, their disappearance in a general southerly direction - toward the Canadian border - also applied.

It is, therefore, a matter of considerable interest that on 11 February 1953, the Toronto *Star* reported that a new flying saucer was being developed at the AVRO-Canada plant in Malton, Ontario.

The US and Canadian governments both denied involvement in any such project, but on 16 February, after freelance photographer Jack Judges had taken an aerial photograph of a flying-saucer resting outdoors in the Avro-Canada plant in Malton, the Minister for Defence Production, C.D. Howe, admitted to the Canadian House of Commons that AVRO-Canada was working on a 'mock-up model' of a flying saucer, capable of ascending vertically and flying at 1500 mph (2400 km/h). By February 27, Crawford Gordon Jr., the president of AVRO-Canada, was writing in the company's house journal, *AVRO News*, that the prototype being built was so revolutionary it would 'make all other forms of supersonic aircraft obsolete'. The aircraft was called the 'Avrocar'.

Soon, the Toronto *Star* was claiming that Britain's Field Marshal Montgomery had become one of the few people to view Avro's mock-up of the flying saucer (Georg Klein started telling the same story in 1954 in Zürich, Switzerland, though who picked it up from whom it a moot question) and a few days later Air Vice Marshal D. M. Smith was reported to have said that what Field Marshal Montgomery had seen was the preliminary

construction plans for a ‘gyroscopic fighter whose gas turbine would revolve around the pilot, who would be positioned at the centre of the disk’.

Confirmation that the craft actually existed came via the April 1953 issue of the *Royal Air Force Flying Review* which contained a two-page report on the Avrocar (also dubbed the ‘Omega’), including some speculative sectional diagrams. According to this report, the building of a prototype had not yet commenced, but a wooden mock-up had been constructed behind a closely guarded experimental hangar in the company’s Malton plant, near Ontario. The aircraft described had a near-circular shape, measuring approximately forty feet across, and was being designed to attain speeds of the order of 1,500 mph - more than twice that of the latest swept-wing fighters. It would be capable of effecting 180° turns in flight without changing attitude.

In early November 1953, Canadian newspapers were reporting that a mock-up of the Avrocar, or Omega, had been shown on 31 October to a group of twenty-five American military officers and scientists. By March the following year, the American press was claiming that the US Air Force, concerned at Soviet progress in aeronautics, had allocated an unspecified sum of money to the Canadian government for the building of a prototype of their flying saucer, that the machine had been designed by the English aeronautical engineer, John Frost - who had worked for AVRO-Canada in Malton, Ontario - and that it would be capable of either hovering virtually motionless in mid-air or flying at a speed of nearly 2,000 mph.

This story was followed by Canadian press assertions that their government was planning to form entire squadrons of AVRO-Canada’s flying saucers for the defence of Alaska and the far regions of the North because they required no runways, were capable of rising vertically, and were ideal for ‘subarctic and polar regions’.

Unexpected disappointment came when, on 3 December 1954, it was announced that the ‘saucer project’ had been dropped. Confirming this decision, the Canadian Minister of Defence pointed out that the project would have cost far too much for something that was, in the end, ‘highly speculative’.

However, this announcement was contradicted less than a year later, when, on 22 October 1955, US Air Force Secretary Donald Quarles released an extraordinary statement though the press office of the Department of Defence. Among other things, he said that an ‘aircraft of unusual

characteristics' would soon be appearing; that the US government had 'initiated negotiations' with the Canadian government and AVRO-Canada for the preparation of 'an experimental model of the Frost flying disk', and that the aircraft would be mass-produced and used for 'the common defence of the sub-arctic area of the continent'.

In February 1959, after a long silence, the press was receiving ambiguous US Air Force statements about a revolutionary new aircraft that had been undertaken jointly by the US Air Force, the US Army, and the Canadian government. Then, on 14 April, during a press conference in Washington DC, General Frank Britten implied that the first test flight of the aircraft was imminent and that it was destined to 'revolutionize traditional aeronautical concepts'.

In August 1960 the Air Force, giving in to public pressure, allowed reporters to view the prototype of the machine that had so fascinated them and their readers. What the news hounds were shown was a crude experimental aircraft that combined the characteristics of air-cushion machines - a crude flying saucer based on the principles of the jet ring and barely able to rise above the runway. Small wonder, seeing this, that they did not appear unduly surprised when, in December the following year, the Department of Defence announced that they were withdrawing from participation in the project.

So what, exactly, was the Avrocar, which may, or may not, have been what the reporters saw in August 1960? In the words of the *Royal Air Force Flying Review*:

> Apart from the platform of this aircraft, the most revolutionary feature of the project is the use made of the gyroscopic effect of a revolving power plant to acquire stability. The power plant housing rotates inside a stationary wing of near-circular platform whereas hitherto it had been assumed that such an aircraft would employ a swiftly rotating wing. The pilot of the saucer is seated in a central plastic capsule, which presumably can be ejected should the aircraft find itself in difficulties, and a gas turbine power plant of unconventional design revolves around this capsule at several hundred revolutions per minute. Surrounding the rotating power plant housing and forming the 'rim' of the saucer is the stationary wing, a series of

> slots in the leading edge which feed air to the turbine. Part of the intake of air is compressed and fed to combustion chambers in the wing and ejected through a series of exhaust orifices lining the outer rim of the disk. The remainder of the airflow appears to be fed over a series of vertical deflector vanes in the 'flattened' trailing edge of the aircraft for control purposes. A tripod-type launching gear is planned to enable the saucer to take off vertically.

The writer was careful to point out that:

> Although quite a number of aircraft featuring circular, disk-shaped or annular wing forms have been built and flown, the aerodynamics of such shapes cannot yet be considered as fully established, and the design problems facing the young Avro Canada design team in bringing this revolutionary project to fruition are of considerable magnitude.

This may have been true. Details released later by the A.V. Roe Company (AVRO-Canada) stated that the Avrocar, powered by three 1,000-hp Continental J69-T-9 turbojets, was planned to have a maximum forward speed of 300 mph and a range of 1,000 miles; but when test flown in 1960, it never did more than 'hover within ground effect' and was subsequently abandoned as a failure.

The prototype was placed on display for all to see at the Army Transportation Museum at Fort Eustis, Virginia.

In 1954 the Canadian Government announced that the 'flying wing' or 'highly swept-back wing configuration' controlled by a series of small jet orifices located all around its edge, as suggested by the Lubbock sightings of 1951, was exactly the kind of thing they had tried unsuccessfully to build. According to the statement, the project for the development of that 'saucer-like craft' had been taken over by the US Air Force.

Under pressure from the media to reply to this allegation, the US Air Force finally admitted that they had taken over the project, but insisted that it had been dropped at an early stage and that the crude prototype on display at Fort Eustis, Virginia, is the only one they managed to complete.

However, while the Canadian and US governments have insisted that they are no longer involved with flying saucer construction projects, there are many who believe that they are lying, and that the Canadian, British, US and even Soviet governments are continuing to work on highly advanced, saucer-shaped, supersonic aircraft based on the work done in Nazi Germany. What happened to the original Projekt Saucer team supports this: Habermohl was captured by the Russians and taken back to the Soviet Union, along with over 6000 German technical specialists of all kinds, to work on similar projects; Miethe went to the United States with Werner von Braun and other German rocket scientists and ended up working for Avro-Canada, in Malton, Ontario; and Rudolph Schriever insisted right up to his death that the Soviet Union and United States were both working on flying saucer construction projects based on material captured by them during the war.

In fact, the April 1953 edition of the *Royal Air Force Flying Review* stated that it was 'common knowledge' that aircraft designers throughout the world were then devoting increasing attention to 'flying saucers' when considering flying speeds of more than twice that of sound. It also contained a short report about man-made flying saucers that had recently skimmed over the rooftops of Belgrade, Yugoslavia. Reportedly, these were experimental models made by the Yugoslavian Air Force; they were less than twelve inches in diameter, weighed just over 4lb, had a top speed of 31 mph, and were controlled by radio - crude versions of the German *Feuerball*.

It seems clear, therefore, that work on 'circular flying wings' of various shapes and sizes was going on in America and Canada - and may have been going on elsewhere, notably in Soviet Russia. Also, there is a growing body of evidence that the Pentagon knew what the flying saucers were and where they came from, despite the lack of communication between the US Air Force and US Navy. Dr Leon Davidson points out that interservice rivalry between the two was intense and that the former would not have informed the latter about their secret aviation developments, such as the Flying Flapjack, even after the experimental models had been sighted over The White Sands Proving Ground.

Captain Ruppelt, when head of Project Blue Book, was adamant that, at least with regard to the United States, UFOs were spotted most frequently, by trained observers, over areas vital to the defence of the country. In his own words: 'The Los Alamos-Albuquerque area, Oak Ridge, and White Sands

Proving Ground rated high. Port areas, Strategic Air Command bases, and industrial areas ranked next.'

This concentration of UFOs over top-secret military establishments in particular leads to one of two conclusions. The first is that the Russians or Canadians were using flying saucers to spy on US military establishments. The second is that US flying saucers were being constructed in, and tested over, top-secret areas such as the White Sands Proving Ground.

Chapter 8

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UFO Landings and UFOnauts

Perhaps the world's best known and most respected UFOlogist is the astronomer, Dr J. Allen Hynek, whose involvement began in 1948 when he became the astronomical consultant to the United States Air Force (USAF) on their UFO research project. After the termination of Project Blue Book, Hynek became critical of the Air Force's methods and conclusions. In 1973 he became the Founder and Director of the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS) and since then he has been a fulltime UFOlogist.

While Hynek adheres to no particular theory regarding the nature of UFOs, he believes firmly in the reality of the phenomenon and that the solution to the mystery could lead to a 'quantum jump' in human understanding. He is the author of two of the most reliable books on the subject: *The UFO Experience: A Scientific Inquiry* (1972) and *The Hynek UFO Report* (1978). However, he first became publicly well known in 1977 through the release of Steven Spielberg's blockbusting UFO movie, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, for which he was the technical advisor.

The title of the movie was taken from one of the four terms coined by Hynek to describe the major forms of UFO contact: Close Encounters of the First Kind (CE-I), which are UFO sightings at close range without tangible physical evidence; Close Encounters of the Second Kind (CE-II), which are UFO sightings at close range accompanied by tangible physical evidence; Close Encounters of the Third Kind (CE-III), which are close range sightings of UFOs and one or more UFOnauts (UFO crew members); and Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind (CE-IV), which are the abductions of human beings by UFOnauts.

The question of contact with UFOs or their occupants is a vexing one, particularly since the earliest reported close encounters were undoubtedly hoaxes and even the more persuasive cases can seem fantastic. The incident that set the pattern for most contemporary hoaxes, as well as the basic appearance of the 'alien' UFOnauts, was the notorious 'Aztec' case of 1948. In *Behind the Flying Saucers* (1950), the author, Frank Scully, formerly

Hollywood's *Weekly Variety* columnist, alleged that 'the first saucer to land on this earth' crashed east of Aztec, New Mexico, in 1948, and was found virtually intact, with sixteen dead aliens, or UFOnauts, inside. The UFOnauts were only three-and-a-half feet tall and had 'flawless teeth' and unusually pointed features, but otherwise resembled human beings. According to Scully, the flying saucer, which was 99 feet in diameter (with all of its measurements reportedly based on a system of nines, rather than tens), was dismantled and the pieces, along with the remains of the sixteen aliens, were transported in secret to Muroc Dry Lake (now Edwards AFB), then on to the legendary top-secret 'Hangar 18' in Wright-Patterson AFB in Dayton, Ohio. Scully also alleged that there had been three other flying saucer landings during the same period and that a total of thirty-four dead aliens had been found and were also being preserved at Wright-Patterson.

Scully's book became a bestseller, but little substantiation could be found for his claims. Two years later, the investigative reporter, J.P. Cahn, revealed that Scully had received most of his dubious information from Silas Newton and Dr Gee, later identified as Leo A. Gebauer. In fact, both men were experienced confidence tricksters who had been arrested that very year for trying to sell worthless war surplus equipment as oil detection devices; and it is highly probable that they based their whole story on the better documented 'Roswell Incident', discussed below.

Nevertheless, Cahn's exposé of the Aztec case as a hoax did not stop the continuing flow of UFO 'crash' stories and rumours that alien corpses - at least those captured in the United States - were being preserved in Hangar 18 in Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio. As late as 1978, the UFOlogist and author, Leonard Springfield, was claiming that he had reports from 'twenty-five unimpeachable sources' that 'spaceships and frozen alien corpses' were being held at Wright-Patterson. A year later, William Spaulding, aerospace engineer and Western Division Director of the widely respected and scientifically-based organization, Ground Saucer Watch (GSW), was claiming that he was in possession of signed affidavits from 'retired colonels in military intelligence' attesting to the fact that a crashed disk and alien entity had been retrieved and transported to CIA headquarters at Langley, Virginia, from which it would, according to legend, have been shipped on to Wright-Patterson for examination and preservation in Hangar 18.

All requests to Wright-Patterson AFB for information regarding Hangar

18 are routinely given the reply that it doesn't exist. However, according to news commentator and reporter, Robert D. Barry, quoted in Timothy Green Beckley's *The Riddle of Hangar 18* (1981), one of his interviewees, a Civil Air Patrol Cadet on special training at Wight-Patterson in 1965, saw 'the famous hangar with the tall wire fence around it... completely around it... and all windows knocked out and replaced with concrete'. Also, on 24 October 1974, the syndicated news broadcast 'Earth News' revealed that a 'press spokesperson' for Senator Barry M. Goldwater had confirmed that 'the senator was once denied permission to the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base's Hangar 18. (Goldwater, a former Republican presidential candidate who took the UFO phenomenon seriously, eventually became a member of the Board of Governors of the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena [NICAP]).

While no more evidence for the existence of Hangar 18 and its extraordinary contents has been forthcoming (interested readers could try asking Wright-Patterson AFB for information on Building 18-A, Area B), further 'respectability' for the UFO-landing theory came with Gordon Cooper, the astronaut who claimed that he had seen a UFO while orbiting Earth in the Mercury 9 spacecraft on 16 May 1963. Later, as a guest on the *Merv Griffith Show*, Cooper boldly announced that in the early 1950s, while in a jet fighter group in West Germany, he had been one of many witnesses to a series of unidentified objects that 'would stop in their forward velocity and change 90°, sometimes in the middle of their flight path'. Later, Cooper told journalist Lee Spiegel that while at the Edwards Air Force Base Flight Test Center in California, either in 1957 or 1958, a team of photographers assigned by him to photograph the vast dry lakes near Edwards 'spotted a strange-looking craft above the lake bed'. The object was 'hovering above the ground. Then it slowly came down and sat on the lake bed for a few minutes'. It was 'at least the size of a vehicle that would carry normal-sized people in it' and was also 'a typical circular-shaped UFO' which 'took off at quite a sharp angle and just climbed straight out of sight'. In Cooper's words: 'There were always strange things flying around in the air over Edwards.' According to Cooper, the film of the UFO taken by his photographers was forwarded to Washington D.C. for evaluation -but no report came back and the movie has certainly not resurfaced.

Other 'landing' and 'crash' stories abound, but are similarly lacking in

substantiating details or verifiable names. For instance, in *The Riddle of Hangar 18*, author Timothy Green Beckley relates a story about Charles Wilhelm, executive director of the Ohio UFO Investigators League who, according to Beckley, claimed to have 'recently conversed with a radio electronics expert who was in the army in the mid-1950s and said that he was flown to Fort Monmouth, New Jersey' where, in the company of 'nine others, plus a major who was setting up the projector', the 'electronics expert' watched 'a special film' in order to 'analyze from the film anything that he could define from his experience in radar technology'. The film showed 'a strange, disk-shaped object with two guards, one on each side of the craft. The ship was sitting on two large blocks, and the technician estimated the craft to be fifteen to eighteen feet in diameter. Its surface was smooth, except for some tool marks around the door entrance. A ramp extended to the ground. The UFO was either silver or light grey in colour.' After showing the interior of the craft, which was relatively bare, except for some control levers, the camera was moved back outside where it focused on 'a table with three small bodies laid out'. All were approximately five feet tall, with abnormally large heads and human features. When the movie was over, 'the major' in charge would only say that the craft and its occupants had been found in 'New Mexico'.

This is an intriguing tale, but like so many other 'landing' or 'crash' stories it raises more questions than it answers. When was 'recently'? Who, exactly, was the 'electronics expert'? Who was 'the major'? Who were the 'nine others'? Precisely where and when in New Mexico was the object found? And last but not least, how could the unnamed 'electronics expert' possibly apply his 'experience in radar technology' to his viewing of a movie film of the supposed exterior and interior of a flying disk?

The mixture of unsubstantiated facts and disguised speculation is one of the major obstacles in any examination of the 'landing' or 'crash' UFO stories. Nevertheless, there is a growing body of evidence that some close encounters are genuine, as are certain rare cases of UFO landings or crashes, or even the capture of UFO and their occupants.

Dr J. Allen Hynek claims that genuine UFO landings took place at Cannon Air Force Base, New Mexico (18 May 1954), at Deerwood Nike Base (29 September 1957), and at Blaine Air Force Base (12 June 1965). However, even Hynek can only offer unnamed 'independent sources' for

such reports and makes it clear that none of them were transmitted to Project Blue Book.

According to articles written by journalists David Branch and Robert E. Klinn and published in the *Santa Ana Register* (California), on 15 and 23 November 1972, reports of the landing and take-off of two UFOs from Holloman AFB, located in the White Sands Proving Ground, New Mexico, were suppressed by the authorities. The first of these incidents reportedly took place shortly before 8.00am. on an unspecified day in September, 1956, when a 'domed, disk-shaped' aircraft landed about fifty yards from US 70, about twelve miles west of Holloman AFB. The ignition systems and radios of passing cars went dead and the peak-hour commuter traffic backed up as amazed witnesses - including two air force colonels, two sergeants, and dozens of Holloman employees - watched the UFO for over ten minutes, before it took off with a 'low whirring sound'.

Shortly after the disappearance of the UFO, word of the sighting flew from Holloman to Washington DC and the area was soon inundated with air force intelligence officers and CIA agents. Base employees who had witnessed the sighting were sworn to secrecy and the Pentagon's evaluation team wired a report stating that the UFO was 'not any type of aircraft under development by the US or any foreign terrestrial power'.

Two years later, in the summer of 1958, a mechanic at Holloman AFB was working on a grounded Lockheed F-104 jet interceptor when he saw a disk-shaped object hovering silently over the tarmac. After watching the object retracting its 'ball-like landing gear', he called another mechanic and both of them watched the UFO take off vertically at great speed. During a subsequent interrogation, both men identified the craft type they had seen from a book of over 300 UFO photographs. They were then informed that the personnel in the base control tower had observed the same object for two or three minutes. They were also warned not to discuss the incident and then made to sign a statement swearing them to secrecy.

The most striking feature of the landed and crashed UFO stories is that the most substantiated ones invariably have taken place, at least with regard to the US, on or near military and Air Force establishments in the top-secret White Sands Proving Ground. The UFO 'crash' at Roswell, New Mexico, was just such a case; the famous UFO 'landing' at Socorro, New Mexico, was another, even more disturbing, example.

The so-called ‘Roswell Incident’ was the first in which an official statement about a flying saucer landing was released to the public. According to Charles Berlitz and William Moore, who researched the case for their book, *The Roswell Incident* (1980), there was a considerable build-up of UFO sightings in the south-western area before the actual Roswell incident. 25 June 1947: a saucer-shaped object ‘about one half the size of the full moon’ was observed by a local dentist as it moved south over Silver City, New Mexico. 27 June: a disk-shaped object was witnessed in the vicinity of Bisbee, in south-eastern Arizona, near the New Mexican border; and a series of eight or nine ‘perfectly spaced disks’ traveling at high speed with ‘a wobbling motion’ were observed passing over Warren, Arizona. By 9.50 that morning, a ‘white disk glowing like an electric light bulb’ was observed as it passed over Pope, New Mexico. Minutes later, the same, or a similar, object was spotted over the White Sands Proving Ground by Captain E.B. Detchmendy, who reported it to his commanding officer. At 10.00am. a female witness reported a similar object passing over San Miguel, New Mexico. The following day, Captain F. Dvyn, when flying in the vicinity of Alamogordo, New Mexico, in the White Sands Proving Ground, reported ‘a ball of fire with a fiery blue trail behind’ as it passed *beneath* his aircraft. The next day, Army Air Force pilots were sent on an unsuccessful search for a UFO reported to have fallen near Cliff, New Mexico. That same day, a team of naval rocket-test experts working at the White Sands Proving Ground reported seeing a ‘silvery-coloured disk’ perform a series of manoeuvres at high altitude over the secret test range. Thirteen silver, disk-shaped objects were then witnessed by a whole neighbourhood as they flew over Albuquerque, New Mexico, on 30 June; a ‘bluish disk’ was seen ‘zigzagging’ across the sky over Albuquerque on 1 July; and on 2 July, at approximately 9.50pm, a married couple, Mr and Mrs Dan Wilmot, witnessed ‘a large, glowing object’ as it passed over their house in South Penn Street, Roswell, New Mexico.

This latter sighting marked the true beginning of the Roswell Incident.

Dan Wilmot and his wife later described the UFO as ‘a big glowing object’ that was shaped ‘like two inverted saucers faced mouth to mouth’ and glowing ‘as if lit from the inside’. Though Wilmot described the object as being perfectly silent, his wife thought she had heard a ‘slight swishing

sound' for a brief moment, as the object passed overhead. It was heading northwest, towards Corona, New Mexico, and passed over their house and out of sight in forty to fifty seconds.

Nearly a week later, on 7 July, at 4.00pm, Lydia Sleepy, the teletype operator for Radio KOAT, Albuquerque, New Mexico, received a call from Johnny McBoyle, reporter and part owner of sister station, KSWS, in Roswell. Clearly excited, he told her that a flying saucer had recently crashed near Roswell, that he had been out there and seen it, and that it looked like 'a big, crumpled dishpan'. According to McBoyle, 'some rancher' (W.W. Brazel) had 'hauled it under a cattle shelter with his tractor' and the army had since gone out there to pick up the object and seal off the whole area.

McBoyle asked Sleepy to get his message out on the teletype right away, but when she tried to do so, she was blocked by the incoming message of an unidentified sender: 'ATTENTION ALBUQUERQUE: DO NOT TRANSMIT. REPEAT DO NOT TRANSMIT THIS MESSAGE. STOP COMMUNICATION IMMEDIATELY. When Sleepy relayed this message to McBoyle, he changed his mind about transmitting the news of the UFO crash, said that obviously they were not supposed to know about it, and told her to forget what she had heard.

This attempt to comply with the authorities was rendered redundant when, the following day, without the authorization of his commanding officer, Lieutenant Walter G. Haut, public information officer of the Roswell Army Air Base (now Walker Air Force Base) released the following press statement:

> The many rumours regarding the flying disk became a reality yesterday when the intelligence office of the 509th Bomb Group of the Eighth Air Force, Roswell Army Air Field, was fortunate enough to gain possession of a disk through the co-operation of one of the local ranchers and the Sheriff's office of Chaves County.
>
> The flying object landed on a ranch near Roswell sometime last week. Not having phone facilities, the rancher stored the disk until such time as he was able to contact the Sheriff's office, who [*sic*] in turn notified Major Jesse A. Marcel, of the 509th Bomb Group Intelligence office.
>
> Action was immediately taken and the disk was picked up at the

rancher's home. It was inspected at the Roswell Army Air Field and subsequently loaned by Major Marcel to higher headquarters.

Lieutenant Haut would soon have cause to regret his hasty public announcement. While his press release was being enthusiastically picked up by the world's news agencies, the Roswell *Daily Record* of 8 July was confirming that the Intelligence Office of the 509th Bombardment group at Roswell Army Air Field had come into possession of the crashed saucer; that according to information released by the department, the disk had been recovered on a ranch in the 'Roswell vicinity' after an 'unidentified rancher' had notified Sheriff George Wilcox that he had found the crashed object on his land; that intelligence officer Major Jesse. A. Marcel had led the official recovery team and, after inspecting it, had arranged for it to be flown by aircraft to 'higher headquarters'; and that no details of the saucer's construction had been revealed.

By this time, Johnny McBoyle of Radio KSWS in Roswell had informed Lydia Sleepy of Radio KOAT in Albuquerque that he had seen an aeroplane, which he knew was destined for Wright Field (now Wright-Patterson AFB) in Dayton, Ohio, take off with the object, or parts of it, on board. However, he had not been able to get near the aeroplane because it was surrounded by heavily armed guards.

Another article in that day's edition of the Roswell *Daily Record* revealed that Mark Sloan, operator of the private airfield at Carrizozo, thirty-five miles south-west of the reported crash site, in the presence of flying instructor Grady Warren and pilots Nolan Lovelace and Ray Shafer, had witnessed a flying saucer speeding over the airfield at 10.00am at an altitude of about 4,000 to 6,000 feet. Sloan estimated that it was moving at between 200 mph and 600 mph and 'oscillating' as it travelled on a south-west to north-west course.

While no missile tests were being conducted at that time, there were violent thunder and lightning storms north-west of Roswell. Those could have accounted either for some of the reported UFO sightings or for the crash of *some* kind of aircraft.

Rumours began circulating to the effect that Brigadier General M. Ramsey, commander of the Eight Air Force District at Fort Worth, Texas, and Lieutenant General Hoyt Vandenberg, Deputy Chief of the Air Force,

had expressed their displeasure to Colonel Blanchard, commander of the Roswell Air Base, over his public information officer's unauthorized press release. Because of this, they had demanded that the man who located the crash debris, Major Jesse A. Marcel, personally fly it to Carswell Air Force Base, Forth Worth, Texas, for General Ramsey's personal inspection, before flying it on to Wright Field (Wright-Patterson AFB) in Dayton, Ohio, where it would undergo 'further analysis' under the personal supervision of General Vandenberg.

So widespread and persistent were these rumours that General Ramsey was driven to assuring the public, via a hook-up with Fort Worth's Radio WBAP, that the crashed flying saucer was in reality no more than a crashed Rawin weather balloon, that the remaining pieces of it were in his office, where they would probably remain, and that the 'special flight' to Wright Field had been cancelled.

This statement was supported with an invitation to the press to come and photograph General Ramsey and his assistant, Colonel (now retired Brigadier General) Thomas Jefferson Dubose, posing in the former's office with the debris of a real Rawin balloon. Colonel Blanchard, commander of the Roswell Air Base, went unexpectedly, or conveniently, on leave at the same time as Major Marcel was flying the crash debris to Carswell AFB, Forth Worth. He was replaced in his absence by the base deputy commander, Colonel Payne Jennings, who spent most of his time repeatedly telling the press that Blanchard was 'unavailable for comment'.

No sooner had the crash remains been delivered to Carswell, Forth Worth, than the base A-2 Division (Intelligence) chief, Colonel Alfred E. Kalberer, started making public appearances at various Fort Worth civic organisations, assuring them that there was no need for hysteria over crashed flying saucers. According to the records of the Forth Worth Army Air Base, while Kalberer was thus engaged, Colonel Irving, Assistant to the Chief of Staff, HQ Strategic Air Command (SAC), paid a visit to General Ramsey at Fort Worth for a discussion on an undisclosed subject, widely believed to have been the debris, and/or remains from the crash near Roswell.

In the days that followed, contrary to what the Army Air Force was trying to say about Rawin weather balloons, the word of numerous witnesses indicated that there may in fact have been *two* crash sites, both of which were connected with the same incident. There were also rumours about 'a large

flying saucer' and the remains of a number of small, humanoid creatures dressed in one-piece uniforms.

So what actually happened?

The first available information on the Roswell crash came from Major (now retired Lieutenant Colonel) Jesse A. Marcel, who at the time of the incident was the ranking staff officer in charge of intelligence at the Roswell Army Air Base. In interviews conducted between Marcel and UFO investigators William Moore and Stanton Friedman throughout 1979, Marcel confirms that he first learnt about the crash when, on 7 July 1947, he received a call from the Chaves County sheriff's office, in Roswell, informing him that a local rancher, W.W. Brazel, had come in to report that something had exploded 'over' his ranch, located on the south-east side of Corona, near Roswell, during a violent electrical storm several days before. According to Brazel, there was 'a lot of debris scattered everywhere'.

Brazel had not informed anyone before because he lived alone on his sheep ranch, thirty miles from the nearest town, and had no telephone.

On the instructions of his base commander, Colonel Blanchard, Marcel and a Counter-Intelligence Corps (CIC) agent named Cavitt followed Brazel out to the crash site, the former in a '42 Buick staff car, the latter in a Jeep Carry-all. In response to later enquiries about flying saucers and their occupants, Marcel stuck to his story that they found 'a lot of wreckage, but no machine'. Marcel was also adamant that whatever it was, the object had exploded above ground level and disintegrated before it hit the ground (thus confirming Brazel's description of an explosion 'over' his ranch), with the wreckage scattered over an area of about three-quarters of a mile long and several hundred feet wide. It was, he insisted, 'definitely not a weather or tracking device, nor was it any sort of plane or missile'.

The debris picked up was enough to fill the Carry-all and the trunk and back seat of the Buick. It included small beams, or rods, of an unknown material, which had indecipherable hieroglyphics embedded in them. They 'looked something like balsa wood, though they were not wood at all. They were very hard, although flexible, and would not burn'. Marcel's hieroglyphics were 'little numbers with symbols that we had to call hieroglyphics because [we] could not understand them... They were pink and purple. They looked like they had been painted on'. But: 'Those little

numbers could not be broken, could not be burned'. There was also a lot of 'unusual parchment-like substance which was brown in colour and extremely strong' and 'small pieces of a metal like tinfoil, except that it wasn't tinfoil... it was so light it weighed practically nothing'. Yet, as they were to find out later, the foil could neither be bent nor even dented with a 16lb sledgehammer. Also found was 'a black, metallic-looking box several inches square' and with no apparent opening. From this material, Marcel was only able to ascertain that the object had been big and constructed possibly from unknown materials. He could not judge its shape or general appearance.

The material was driven back to the Roswell Army Air Base, where reportedly it was stored in Hangar 84, which to this day remains sealed, unused, and off-limits.

The following afternoon, on orders from Colonel Blanchard, it was loaded onto a B-29 and flown to Carswell AFB, Forth Worth, Texas. There, after informing the press that the debris was from a crashed Rawin weather balloon, General Ramsey and his assistant, Colonel Dubose, staged their photo session. However, according to Marcel, after taking one photograph of him with a very small portion of the less interesting, albeit genuine wreckage, 'they cleared out our wreckage and substituted some of their own. Then they allowed more photos. Those photos were taken while the actual wreckage was already on its way to Wright Field.'

Marcel was adamant that 'it was General Ramsey who put up the cover story about the balloon just to get the press off our backs.'

Meanwhile, the unfortunate farmer, W.W. Brazel, was regretting having reported the incident. Shortly after leading Marcel and Cavitt out to where the wreckage was found, he was taken into custody and held incommunicado for almost a week. When he came out, on 15 July, he refused thereafter to talk to anyone about the crash.

Brazel died in 1963, but in an interview given to William Moore in 1979, Brazel's son, Bill, confirmed that for most of his remaining life his father had been 'very reluctant to talk about it at all... He took the most part of what he knew to the grave with him'. According to what Brazel *did* tell his son, the military, after locking him in a room and refusing to let him out, interrogated him for a week and then swore him to secrecy. 'He said they had told him to shut up because it was important to our country and was the patriotic thing to do, and so that's what he intended to do. He was very discouraged and upset

by the way they had treated him.'

Nevertheless, from what he could piece together from the various things his father told him over the years, Bill Brazel was able to confirm in just about every detail what Marcel had revealed about the crash, including the fact that in the middle of a lightning storm on the evening of 2 July 1947, his father had heard 'an odd sort of explosion, not like ordinary thunder' and that the following morning he had found 'this collection of wreckage scattered over a patch of land about a quarter mile long or so, and several hundred feet wide'. Bill Brazel's vivid recollections of the debris shown to him by his father match in almost every detail those given by Marcel. He also recalls his father saying that 'from the way this wreckage was scattered, you could tell it was traveling an airline route to Socorro, which is off to the south-west of the ranch.'

While there is no evidence whatsoever that dead aliens or UFOnauts were found at the Brazel site, Brazel's remark about 'an airline route to Socorro' is of interest in view of the fact that rumours have persisted to this day about another possible crash near Socorro, New Mexico, shortly after the crash near Roswell. It was widely believed that this was either a different disk entirely or the same disk which, after being damaged by an aerial explosion while flying over the Brazel ranch, had managed to fly for another 150 miles westward, before crashing.

The only evidence for this second crash is the word of Socorro civil engineer G.L. 'Barney' Barnett, who was working for the federal government in the area when he saw a disk-shaped object at rest on the Plain of San Augustin, west of Magdalena, New Mexico, on the morning of 3 July 1947.

Barnett died in April 1969, but was described by his boss, J.F. Danley, as 'a good man... one of the most honest men I ever knew'. Yet according to Danley, Barnett excitedly told him in the 'early summer' of 1947 that the flying saucers were real and he had just seen one. Danley instantly dismissed this as a joke, but a little later, when he asked Barnett if he had meant what he said, Barnett, now cooled down, would only add that he had seen a crashed object out on 'the Flats' (the Plain of San Augustin), that it had looked like a saucer, and that he didn't want to talk about it anymore.

However, Barnett later talked to other friends. While living in Socorro, he and his wife, Ruth, had become close friends with L.W. 'Vern' Maltais and his wife, Jean Swedmark Maltais. Interviewed by William Moore in

1979, the Maltaises confirmed that Barnett, a veteran of World War I, former commander of the American Legion Post at Mozquero, New Mexico, and engineer for the US Soil Conservation Service for twenty years, was the conservative, quietly self-assured type, not given to the spreading of wild rumours. Nevertheless, in February 1950, when the Mailtaises were visiting him and his wife in Socorro, Barnett told them that when working near Magdalena one morning, he saw ‘a large metallic object’ about a mile or so away on the flat desert land of ‘the Flats’. Thinking it was a crashed aeroplane, he approached it and found himself looking at ‘some sort of metallic, disk-shaped object about twenty-five or thirty feet across’. Even as he was studying it, some members of an archaeological team from the University of Pennsylvania arrived to study what they, too, had assumed was a crashed aeroplane.

Barnett was adamant that there were dead bodies both inside and outside the crashed flying saucer, which was made of ‘a metal that looked like dirty stainless steel’. The bodies were ‘like humans, but... the heads were round, the eyes were small, and they had no hair. The eyes were oddly spaced. They were quite small by our standards and their heads were larger in proportion to their bodies than ours. Their clothing seemed to be one-piece and grey in colour.’

While Barnett and the others were studying the crashed saucer and its strange occupants, all dead, ‘a military officer drove up in a truck with a driver’ and was followed by other military personnel. Barnett and the group from the University of Pennsylvania were told that it was their patriotic duty not to tell anyone what they had seen; then they were made to leave. The area was then sealed off and, presumably, the bodies and wreckage were removed by the military.

The basic scenario, therefore, is that somewhere between 9.45 and 9.50 on the evening of 2 July 1947, a UFO passed over Roswell, as witnessed by the Wilmots, then ran into storm lightning north of the town. As witnessed and heard by Brazel, it suffered some kind of explosion - either caused by a lightning bolt or by an internal malfunction - which sent debris raining down on the flatlands of Brazel’s ranch, near Corona. The damaged UFO then managed to fly as far as the Plain of San Augustin, near Magdalena, west of Socorro, where it finally crashed, resulting in the deaths of all crew members, whether alien or human.

As the intact, albeit damaged, saucer-shaped craft had crashed in Magdalena, it was easily traced and a military group from Alamogordo, in the White Sands Proving Ground, was able to get there quickly and remove the remains. However, since only debris had fallen near Brazel's ranch, and as Brazel had not notified the authorities until several days later, when the latter would have assumed that the event had been well suppressed, it was news of the Roswell crash, and not the Socorro crash, that inadvertently leaked and led to the now famous Roswell Incident. Although there appears to be no evidence for the second crash, other than the word of Barnett, there is plenty of evidence pointing to the fact that *something* crashed, if not in Socorro, then in Roswell, New Mexico, on 2 July 1947. Neither a weather balloon nor missile, it became the subject of a widespread cover-up.

Interestingly, the most persuasive case to date of a CE-III, or close encounter of the third kind, also took place in Socorro, New Mexico, nearly two decades later, on 24 April 1964.

The Socorro sighting is described by Dr J. Allen Hynek as 'one of the soundest, best-substantiated reports' and the only 'landing, trace and occupant' case listed as 'unidentified' in the Project Blue Book files.

In a sworn affidavit dated 8 January 1967, Opal Grinder, manager of the White Brothers' service station in Socorro, claimed that on Friday, 24 April 1964, at approximately 5.50pm to 6.00pm , the driver of a 1955 model Cadillac, which had a Colorado licence plate and also contained the driver's wife and three boys, stopped at Grinder's service station for gas. The agitated driver told Grinder that 'something traveling across the highway from east to west' almost 'took the roof off' his car as he was driving just south of town, north of the airport. He suspected the object had either landed or crashed, as he had also seen 'a police car head off the road and up a hill in that direction'. Continuing into town, he had met another police car heading in the same direction. To Grinder's suggestion that he might have seen a helicopter, the unnamed man said, 'That sure would be some funny helicopter!'

Given that Grinder's affidavit was made out three years after the incident, the sketchiness of the scenario is understandable. However, when speaking to Ray Stanford and other investigators a few days after the incident, Grinder's descriptions were more precise. According to these, the object observed flying only a few hundred feet to the north-east of the north-

bound Cadillac at 5.45pm on 24 April was ‘egg-shaped, had a smooth aluminium or magnesium-like surface, and seemed to be a little longer than the four-door Green 1955 Cadillac in which the family was riding’. The craft dropped to barely ten feet above the ground, flew directly at the Cadillac, and passed silently within ten feet of its top, almost touching the tip of the radio antenna. It streaked onward a few hundred yards to the south-west, where it stopped abruptly, hung in midair for about thirty seconds, then descended vertically, silhouetted by the low afternoon sun, to land just beyond a small hill which hid it from the view of those in the Cadillac.

The driver of the Cadillac and his wife then observed a white Pontiac police car as it turned off a north-south road that ran west of US Highway 85, cut across rough terrain, and headed for the rise beyond which the strange flying object had landed. Thinking that perhaps they had seen some ‘new type aircraft’ that was being developed in the area, the driver of the Cadillac kept driving toward Socorro, eventually passing another police car. This one, which was from the New Mexico State Police, was moving urgently in the opposite direction, also heading for where the strange aircraft had descended.

Once in Socorro, the driver of the Cadillac stopped at the Whiting Brothers’ service station on the north side of town, where he told the manager, Opal Grinder, what he had seen and complained that someone was flying ‘a funny looking craft’ dangerously low over the highway on Socorro’s south side, had landed, and was probably being checked out by the officer of the pursuing police car. Then the driver of the Cadillac continued his journey with his family.

The man in the white Pontiac police car was Lonnie Zamora, a 31-year old Socorro policeman described in a subsequent report by investigating FBI agent J. Arthur Byrnes Jr as ‘a sober, industrious and conscientious officer, and not given to fantasy’.

Zamora’s extraordinary experience had begun at approximately 5.45pm when he set off in pursuit of a speeding black 1964 Chevrolet, following it south, after pulling away from the west side of the courthouse. About a minute later, at approximately the same time as the unknown man from Colorado had sighted his UFO, when Zamora was a half mile south of Spring Street, he heard a roar and noticed a brilliant blue ‘cone of flame’ low to the south-southwest, at a distance of approximately 2,400 feet. As Zamora was wearing prescription glasses with green sunshades, he was at this stage

unable to distinguish the difference between the flying object's body and the 'blue cone of flame' shooting out of it. However, as the flame was over the location of a dynamite shack owned by the town mayor, Zamora assumed that the dynamite was blowing up, so instead of continuing his pursuit of the Chevrolet, he turned off the paved road and headed across the rough terrain, toward what now looked like a descending flame and sounded like a 'continuous roaring'.

Because of the position of the speeding Chevrolet, it is unlikely that its driver would have either seen or heard the descending object.

Zamora drove across the rough terrain, toward the roaring 'flame', for about twenty seconds. By this time he was able to note that the flame was definitely 'bluish, very brilliant, a little orange around the edges, more so near the bottom' and that it was 'sort of motionless, but appeared to *descend slowly*'. He could not see the bottom of the flame, which had just descended behind a hill; nor did he notice smoke; but some dust seemed to be moving over the area where it had landed.

The 'flame' disappeared completely behind the hill, but the roaring continued as Zamora tried more than once to make his Pontiac climb the steep, gravel-covered slope. Then, as he finally began to ascend successfully, the roaring of the hidden 'flame' died away.

Turning over the hilltop, Zamora saw a 'shiny type object' down in the ravine, or arroyo, to the south-west, at a distance of about 150 yards. He stopped his car for a few seconds, in order to study the object. At first he thought it was 'an overturned white car' with the far end raised higher than the nearest one. Then he saw two people in white coveralls very close to the object.

As if having heard Zamora's arrival, one of the persons turned and looked straight at his car, then jumped slightly, as if startled by seeing it there.

Zamora had only stopped for a few seconds. Now, as he started forward again in his car, he noted that the object was 'like aluminium - it was whitish against the mesa background, but not chrome' and it seemed oval or 'egg-shaped' with support legs extending obliquely from it.

The people in white coveralls looked like normal human beings, but 'possibly they were small adults or large kids'.

As he drove on again, Zamora descended into a dip and temporarily lost

sight of the object and the two people beside it. Worried that he might have come across a top-secret experimental vehicle from the White Sands Proving Ground, and wanting one reliable witness other than himself in case of trouble with the authorities, he radioed to the sheriff's office that he was checking a possible 10-40, or accident, down in the arroyo, and wanted New Mexico State Police Sergeant Samuel Chavez to come alone to the location.

As his message was being relayed to Chavez by Ned Lopez, the Socorro chief dispatcher, Zamora stopped his car again and started to get out, still talking on the radio. He dropped the microphone accidentally and leaned down to retrieve it. Even as he was straightening up, he heard 'a heavy slam, metal-like, heavier than a tank hatch... then another slam, real loud'. He was now completely out of his car and could see the object in clear view, about fifty feet away in the arroyo, with two of its four extension legs extending obliquely down to the ground. He could also see, for the first time, a large, red insignia on one side of the object's otherwise smooth, featureless, egg-shaped body.

The two people in white coveralls had disappeared - a fact which, combined with the metallic 'slamming' noises heard by Zamora, made him assume that they had entered the strange craft by some unseen door.

He had only taken two or three steps toward the object when he heard 'a roar... not exactly a blast, very loud roar... not like a jet... started low frequency quickly, then rose in frequency (higher tone) and in loudness, from loud to very loud'. At the same time he saw 'bright blue flame' shooting out from the underside of the object and it started to rise vertically from the ground.

Thinking that the object was about to explode, Zamora threw himself to the ground. He felt a wave of heat, but when no explosion came, though the roaring continued, he got up again and ran back to his car. Bumping into it while glancing fearfully back over his shoulder, he lost his glasses and sunshades. Picking them up, and determined to keep the car between himself and the ascending object, which he still felt might explode, he ran north across the mesa, glancing back two or three times to observe that in about five or six seconds the object had risen level with his car, about twenty feet above the bottom of the arroyo, and was still roaring and shooting flame from its underside.

About fifty feet from his car, when just over the rim of the hill, Zamora

turned back toward the object, but shielded his eyes with his arm in case it exploded.

At that moment, the roaring stopped and was replaced with a 'sharp tone, a whining sound' that went 'from high tone to low tone in maybe a second, then *stopped*'. Then there was silence.

Zamora saw that the object was no longer rising, though it was still moving: heading away quickly, in perfect silence, west-southwest, passing over, or rather south of, the dynamite shack as it flew away.

Realizing that the object was in flight and not exploding as he had feared, Zamora raced back to his car, picked up his glasses from where they had fallen, and once more radioed the Socorro sheriff dispatcher, Ned Lopez.

Lopez later confirmed that he had received the call from Zamora, breathlessly telling him to look out the window of the sheriff's office to see if the object was in sight. As Lopez was at the north window, not the south, and therefore could not see the object, he asked Zamora what kind of object it was. Zamora said, 'It looks like a balloon.'

Yet even as he was talking to Lopez, Zamora was watching the UFO disappearing in the distance. According to what he later told investigator Ray Stanford, it stayed about ten to fifteen feet above the ground, following the terrain, until it was near the perlite mill on the west side of US 60, about a mile away. There, it suddenly 'angled up at a steep climb and got small in the distance, over the canyon or mountain that way, *very fast*'. He remembered it as 'a bright, whitish oval getting smaller and smaller as it sped away, upward and over the mountains'.

Approximately one minute and fifty seconds after Zamora had first heard the roar and seen the 'flame' in the sky, the UFO was gone.

Sent urgently to the landing site by the message relayed through dispatcher Ned Lopez, New Mexico State Police Sergeant Sam Chavez reached Zamora just after the UFO had disappeared. Even as Chavez was approaching Zamora, the latter was making a sketch of the red insignia he had seen on the object before it took off. Though he had remained calm enough to do this, he was, according to Chavez, as 'white as a sheet' and in a cold sweat.

Examining the landing site with Zamora, Chavez also saw that the brush was smouldering in several places, after being ignited by the flame, and that there was what appeared to be a 'quadrangle' formed by four heavy, wedge-

shaped imprints in the soil.

Zamora's radio transmissions had been heard by others, including State Police Senior Patrolman Ted V. Jordan, who arrived at the landing site shortly after Chavez, in the company of Socorro Under-sheriff James Luckie. A cattle inspector named White, who had also heard Zamora's radio calls, turned up at the landing site; and just after 6.00pm FBI agent J. Arthur Byrnes arrived to investigate.

All of these witnesses were able to confirm that the brush had been scorched by flames and that the pad prints, or landing imprints, had been made, in the words of Ray Stanford, 'by wedge-shaped units being forced by great weight, down into the rather well-packed soil of the ravine'. The wedges had a horizontal length of 12 to 16 inches, a horizontal width of 6 to 8 inches, and a vertical wedge-depth of 4 to 6 inches, though this latter measurement was impossible to define accurately because of the inward falling of the soil. According to the detailed account in the 28 April 1964 edition of the local biweekly newspaper, *El Defensor Cheftain*, the landing gear imprints 'did not appear to have been made by an object striking the earth with great force, but by an object of considerable weight settling to earth at slow speed and not moving after touching the ground'.

Though some of the bushes were still smouldering when Chavez, Jordan, Luckie and White were present, they all agreed that there was 'no odour whatever that would indicate that combustion of any conventional fuel had caused the burn damage'.

Jordan was particularly impressed by the fact that the flame described by Zamora had obviously 'sliced' a large greasewood bush, located almost centrally in the landing gear quadrilateral, without leaving any signs of turbulence, such as that which would have been caused by normal rotors or jet exhausts.

Jordan also took Polaroid pictures of the landing site and the four imprints within minutes of arriving on the scene.

The details of the Socorro sighting and the landing site itself were investigated thoroughly not only by FBI agent J. Arthur Byrnes, but by Ray Stanford (later to become director of Project Starlight International and editor-in-chief of its *Journal of Instrumented UFO Research*, then in Socorro on behalf of the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomenon [NICAP), and Dr J. Allen Hynek, in his official capacity as consultant to the

US Air Force (USAF).

Examination of the landing site revealed that the diagonals of the quadrilateral formed by the four landing marks intersected almost exactly at right angles. This led Hynek to speculate:

> One theorem in geometry states that if the diagonals of a quadrilateral intersect at right angles, the midpoints of the side of the quadrilateral lie on the circumference of a circle, and it is thus of considerable interest that the centre of the circle so formed [on the Socorro landing site] virtually coincided with the principal burn mark on the ground. Under certain circumstances the centre of gravity of the craft would have been directly over the centre of the circle, hence making the presence of the burn mark more significant.

At Hynek's request, USAF'S Project Blue Book chief, Major Hector Quintanilla, contacted the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL), and fifteen industrial firms in the vicinity to find out if they had been conducting any experiments with lunar landing models. They all said, 'No.'

In *Socorro Saucer* Ray Stanford claims that by 7.20pm. on the evening of the sighting, FBI agent J. Arthur Byrnes and US Army Captain Ord/C, Richard T. Holder, up-range commander of the White Sands Stallion Site, had met in the Socorro County Building where they proceeded to interrogate Zamora. In the course of this interrogation, Byrnes told Zamora that it would be better if he did not 'publicly mention seeing the two small figures in white' and Captain Holder 'recommended' that in future Zamora refuse to describe the insignia he had seen on the side of the vehicle to anyone other than official investigators.

What was the insignia?

Red in colour and approximately one-and-a-half feet tall, the insignia described and sketched by Zamora was an 'inverted V', or a vertical arrow, with a line under it, vertical lines on each side, and a parabolic arc over the point of the arrow. While author and computer scientist Jacques Vallee states that it is similar to a medieval Arabic sign for Venus, author and engineer Leon Davidson insists that it is confirmation that the UFO was a man-made craft. To support his claim, he points out that by moving and rotating the

lines of the drawing, the initials ‘CIA’ and ‘AD’ can be formed, the latter representing the initials of Allen Dulles, then head of the CIA. To this intriguing theory, Ray Stanford adds the notion that the parabolic arc above the arrow, or inverted V, could have represented a ‘stylized cross-section of the body of the craft (or a pressure wave)’ while the arrow, or inverted V, with a line under it, could indicate that ‘a *vertical thruster* was centrally located in it’. Stanford also believes that the placing of the symbol on the side of the craft, just above the thruster orifice on its underside, could have been a warning that the thruster was located there; while the use of red for the symbol could have been a danger sign, just as it is with current aircraft (and other) symbols.

The implication, therefore, is that the Socorro sighting was of a highly sophisticated, piloted, man-made craft that had flown from, and returned to, somewhere in the White Sands Proving Ground.

Chapter 9

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UFOnauts and Close Encounters

There are a couple of sound reasons for concentrating on UFO sightings and encounters only in the US. The first is that while UFO landings and crashes have been reported from other countries, the US remains the most free with its information and, with the introduction of the Freedom of Information Act, has become even more so for the researcher. The second is that while we accept that highly advanced, disk-shaped aircraft may have been, or are being, created in countries other than the US, notably the Soviet Union, the available evidence makes us concentrate on the thread that leads logically from Germany's World War II technology to the US Navy's Flying Flapjack and the Canadian Avrocar, then on to the reports of UFO sightings, landings or crashes in the vicinity of the many top-secret military establishments scattered around New Mexico.

Most US atomic and space research, aircraft and missile development, and radar electronics and advanced weaponry experimentation takes place in New Mexico. It was from Eden Valley, near Roswell, south-east of Albuquerque, New Mecico, that Robert H. Goddard shot his first rockets skyward in the early 1930s. Shortly after World War II, the Roswell Army Air Field (now the Walker Air Force Base) became home to what was then the only combat-trained atom-bomb group in the world: the 509th Bomb Group of the US Army Air Force. Albuquerque itself is the home of the top-secret Kirtland AFB/Sandia National (Atomic Energy) Laboratories complex, located just south of the city, and the Manzano Nuclear Weapons Storage Facility, located to the east of Kirtland. New Mexico also contains the 'scientific community' of Los Alamos, created by the Manhattan (Atom Bomb) Project in 1943; once a 'secret city', it is still a highly restricted area, noted for its many atomic-energy laboratories. Two hundred and fifty miles south of Los Alamos is the White Sands Proving Ground, the US government's first rocket centre. The town of Alamogordo, lying between the Proving Ground and the site of the first atomic explosion, still proudly advertises itself as: *Home of the Atomic Bomb, Centre of Rocket*

Development. The Proving Ground, which measures 4,000 square miles, has on its western border the Organ Mountain (so named because its closely bunched peaks are said to resemble organ pipes) and is otherwise a wasteland of sand and sagebrush out of which have sprung the numerous restricted US Army and Air Force bases, including Holloman AFB, the location for several UFO sightings, as well as many of the US Naval Research Laboratory's top-secret experimental establishments.

Because of the proliferation and secret nature of these research centres, certain UFOlogists assume that the great number of UFOs observed over them – sightings reported mostly by base personnel – is an indication that the saucers are spy craft crewed by extraterrestrials. However, continuing space exploration has revealed that no planet known to us holds any form of life (many extraterrestrial theories and 'close encounter' stories have been discredited in the past decade by our growing knowledge of the Moon, Mars, and Venus) and that the problems of traveling to other galaxies are at this point seemingly insurmountable. Therefore we would appear to have increasingly valid reasons for believing that the 'circular, hyperbolic and spherical' craft of highly advanced capability are most frequently observed over top-secret military establishments because they are designed, constructed, tested and perhaps even used there, safe behind guarded fences, their reality confused by a constant smokescreen of disinformation.

If many of the sightings and encounters have taken place in such establishments, there have been even more extraordinary incidences elsewhere – Close Encounters of the Fourth Kind (CE-IV), or personal contact with, or abduction by, UFOnauts (UFO occupants, or crew members) – and since some of them, on first reading, appear to make mockery of the very idea of 'man-made' saucers, it is to them that we must now address ourselves.

One of the first and most famous contactee cases was that of George Adamski, a self-styled 'professor' in oriental mystical philosophy who founded his own cult (The Royal Order of Tibet), set it up as a religious community in California, then moved to Mount Polomar where, while working at a hamburger stand, he managed to convince many visitors, including journalists, that he was actually an astronomer at the famous observatory on the peak of the mountain.

In 1946 Adamski had written an unpublished novel, *Pioneers of Space*, which was about an imaginary journey to the Moon, Mars and Venus. It is very likely that this work of fiction was the basis of Adamski's later, hugely successful 'non-fiction' book, *Flying Saucers Have Landed* (1953), purporting to be a true account of how Adamski, in the company of friends (not including co-author Desmond Leslie), spied 'a gigantic spacecraft' near Desert Centre, California. Fearlessly approaching the saucer, Adamski met with a male Venusian with whom he communicated telepathically and with sign language. After explaining that the radiation from the fallout of Earth's atom-bomb tests was damaging the other planets in the solar system and that he had come to Earth to stop such tests, the Venusian gave Adamski a tour of the inside of his spacecraft. Before the spacecraft took off, Adamski was able to take a lot of photographs, but as one camera was out of focus and the other not working properly, he only managed to obtain a single, blurred photograph of the flying saucer, which was later widely derided as a fake. Adamski was also able to take a plaster-of-paris cast of the alien's footprint, though it was never satisfactorily explained why he had taken plaster-of-paris into the desert in the first place.

Adamski followed *Flying Saucers Have Landed* with two more books: *Inside the Spaceships* (1955), and *Flying Saucers Farewell* (1961). In these, he described his deepening friendship with the Venusians and numerous journeys made with them in their 'gigantic spacecraft' to the Moon, Mars and Venus, all of which contained wondrous cities and civilizations, none of which were remotely like the planets we now know so well. Other authors, including Truman Bethurum, Daniel Fry, Orfeo Angelucci, and Howard Menger, followed with similar tomes, most of them capitalizing on Adamski's contention that Jesus had been an alien spaceman and that the aliens were trying to save mankind from self-destruction through atomic warfare or fallout; but the (all male) authors also added the novelty of beautiful female extraterrestrials with whom they invariably had intimate relationships. In the age of the Cold War, with the atomic threat hanging over mankind, such books made for popular escapist reading.

As such early 'contactee' cases were fanciful nonsense, we can safely ignore them and instead turn to three of the most baffling 'abductee' cases on record: the New Hampshire case of 19 September 1961; the Pascagoula case of 11 October 1973; and the Alamogordo case of 13 August 1975.

Barney Hill was a black, 39-year old who worked for the United States Post Office. His wife, Betty, Caucasian, was a 41-year old State of New Hampshire social worker. On the night of 19 September 1961, when driving from Canada to New Hampshire along US Highway 3, through the White Mountains, they were tracked by a 'spinning' white light. When the light eventually approached their car, the Hills saw that it was 'a large, disk-shaped craft with windows around its rim'. Six beings, wearing dark uniforms, were watching them from the windows. According to the Hills' initial recollection, the craft was now hovering in the air fifty feet away, so they stopped to let Barney get out and look at it through his binoculars. As he did so, the object descended vertically and landed. 'Two fins, each bearing a red light, were slowly extending from the right and left of the craft. Another extension was lowered from its base.'

Terrified, Barney jumped back into his car and drove off quickly. He and Betty heard 'an irregular beeping sound' coming from what seemed to be the trunk of their car, and both experienced a 'tingling sensation and drowsiness'. Aroused by another series of beeps, they discovered that they had travelled thirty-five miles and could not recall what had happened in between. Also, their wristwatches had stopped running.

Ten days later, Betty began to suffer from vivid dreams in which she and Barney were taken aboard a flying saucer and medically examined. About a month after the incident, she and Barney realised that the trip from Canada to Portsmouth had taken at least two hours longer than it should have.

Beginning in December 1963, almost two troubled years after the UFO sighting, Betty and Barney were hypnotised repeatedly, in independent sessions, by Boston psychiatrist, Dr Benjamin Simon. Over the course of many sessions, Barney and Betty revealed separately that during the missing two hours of the night of 19 September 1961 they had been taken aboard a 'spacecraft' by 'humanoid' creatures with 'large eyes that reached around to the side of the head, no nose, and a mouth that was a slit without lip muscles'. The humanoids communicated telepathically. Betty and Barney were medically examined by the humanoids, shown a map consisting of dots, which they were told were galactical travel routes, then returned to their car. From inside the car, in the company of their visibly frightened dog, they were able to watch the 'spacecraft' ascending again, increasing in brilliance and resembling 'a glowing orange ball' as it left.

At the end of the many hypnotic sessions, Dr Simon's conclusion was that the Hills had 'undergone an imaginary experience caused by fear after an actual UFO approach'.

However, under posthypnotic suggestion, Betty Hill drew the star map she had been shown aboard the spacecraft and the results appeared to suggest something she could not possibly have known about: the stars Zeta 1 and Zeta 2, located in the Reticulum constellation and long held to be prime candidates as a possible source of extraterrestrial life.

While there are arguments against this interpretation of the map drawn by Betty Hill, and while the New Hampshire case in general has its detractors, it has become one of the most famous and controversial UFO 'abductee' cases on record. Almost as well known is the Pascagoula case. This began on the evening of 11 October 1973, when two shipyard workers, Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker, were fishing off a pier on the Pascagoula (Singing) River, just outside the city of Pascagoula, Mississippi – an area with a heavy concentration of government space research and military installations. Hearing a sudden buzzing noise, Hickson and Parker looked behind them to see a large eggshaped, or oblong, craft that was glowing a bluish-white as it hovered about three feet above the ground near where they were sitting. Paralysed with fear, both men watched as a door in the craft opened and three beings emerged and *floated* up to them. These creatures then took hold of Hickson and Parker (the latter had fainted), and 'floated' them into the UFO where, in a brightly lit room that had 'no corners or edges' (ie., circular), the still conscious Hickson was 'levitated' into a horizontal position and given what appeared to be a medical examination by a free-floating device. About twenty minutes later, both men were deposited back on the river bank, the UFO left the area ('straight up'), and Parker then regained consciousness.

Hickson and Parker were interrogated separately by intelligence officers at Keesler Air Force Base and the case was later investigated by J. Allen Hynek, representing the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), and University of California civil engineering professor James Harder, a consultant to the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO). While certain discrepancies in the reports indicate that Hickson and Parker may have been party to a hoax designed to lure tourists to the town, Hynek remained open-minded about it and Dr Harder, after

hypnotizing both men, said, ‘They are not unbalanced people, not crackpots… Hickson and Parker have been through a terrifying experience.’

Whether hoax or reality, the descriptions given of the UFOnauts are of particular interest. The creatures were less than five feet tall, with grey, wrinkled skin. Their heads were round-shaped, with no necks. They had ‘pointed protrusions’ jutting out where their ears should have been. They had no eyes. There was only ‘a small opening’ under the nose where the mouth should have been, though this could have been a covering made either from thin metal or ‘wrinkled’ material ‘like an elephant’s skin’. The ‘shapeless’ legs of the creatures ended in round feet with no toes. Most remarkably, they had unusually long arms with what resembled ‘claws’ instead of human hands.

Based on the descriptions obtained by Hickson and Parker during the hypnotic sessions, Dr Harder preferred to describe the UFOnauts as ‘automata’ with ‘pincers at the end of armlike appendages’. It was his belief that they were ‘advanced robots’ and that it was perfectly natural for the terrified Hickson and Parker to have projected human characteristics onto them.

This leads us naturally to the Alamogordo case, which has striking similarities to those mentioned above. On 13 August 1975, at about 1.15am, US Air Force Sergeant Charles L. Moody was watching a meteor shower over the desert near Alamogordo, New Mexico, when he saw ‘a glowing, metallic, disk-shaped object’ descend about 300 feet away, to an altitude of fifteen to twenty feet. Judged by Moody to be about fifty feet long and eighteen to twenty feet wide, it ‘wobbled on its own axis’ before moving steadily toward him. Unnerved, Moody attempted to drive away, but was unable to start his car. The UFO stopped its advance about seventy feet away, thus enabling Moody to see ‘a rectangular window’ and, framed by it, shadows resembling human forms.

By this time, a high-pitched whining sound could be heard. When it stopped abruptly, Moody felt a numbness creeping over his body. The next thing he remembered was the object rising into the sky and disappearing into the distance. When Moody turned the ignition key in his car, it worked normally, letting him drive back to his house, though still feeling terrified. Checking his wristwatch as soon as he arrived home, he saw that he had somehow lost about ninety minutes.

In the days immediately following the event, Moody suffered various psychosomatic illnesses. On the recommendation of his physician, he practised self-hypnosis and eventually pieced together just what had happened to him on the night of August 13. According to these recollections, shortly after the whining of the UFO had stopped and Moody felt the numbness creeping over him, two creatures, both about six feet tall and wearing skintight black clothing, approached his car. After a brief struggle, Moody was somehow rendered unconscious and awoke on a slab inside the craft, feeling paralysed. Looking down at him were the two creatures who had captured him, plus another one, only five feet tall and wearing a silvery white suit. Like the other two creatures, he had a large hairless head, a protruding brow, roundish eyes, small ears and nose, and very thin lips. His skin was whitish-grey'. The creature seemed to speak telepathically.

When the terrified Moody agreed not to resist, the shorter UFOnaut, whom Moody assumed was the leader, relieved his state of paralysis by applying a 'rodlike device' to his back. Moody was then shown around the ship and noticed a 'sweet, stifling odour'. He was informed that the UFO's 'mother ship' was located 400 miles above the Earth (Moody later changed this figure to 6,000), promised a future meeting with the occupants, and told that 'future contact with Earthmen' would not be attempted for another twenty years. Finally, after telling Moody that he would have no recollection of this experience until about two weeks later, the short UFOnaut placed his hands on the sides of Moody's head and rendered him unconscious. Moody awoke in his car just as the UFO was leaving.

The delayed recollections, psychosomatic illnesses and need for hypnotic retrieval of the experience make this similar to the New Hampshire case in particular. However, in all three cases communication was made by telepathic means and those abducted underwent some kind of physical examination. The creatures in the New Hampshire case had 'large eyes that reached around to the side of the head, no nose, and a mouth that was a slit without lip muscles'. The creatures in the Pascagoula case had 'no eyes. There was only a small opening under the nose where the mouth should have been', though this could have been a covering made either from thin metal or wrinkled material, 'like an elephant's skin'. In the Alamogordo case, the creatures had 'roundish eyes, small ears and nose, and very thin lips' with 'whitish-grey' skin.

Such descriptions, albeit distorted by terror and confused recollection, are surprisingly similar to one-another, as they are to the other famous abductee cases. For instance, in the Kelly-Hopkinsville, Kentucky, incident of 21 August 1955, the UFOnaut observed by teenager Billy Ray Sutton was about four feet tall and had ‘a round head’ with pointed ears, and ‘long arms’ with ‘clawlike’ hands. Bullets seemed to ricochet off it and similar UFOnauts, as if they were ‘covered in nickel-plated armour’, and they appeared to be able to ‘float’ like the creatures in the Pascagoula case. In the Cisco Grove, Placer County, California, case of 4 September 1964, the UFOnauts observed by three hunters were over five feet tall and dressed in silvery-white uniforms with hoods or helmets that went straight up from their shoulders; but they were accompanied by short, stocky, ‘robotlike’ creatures that were ‘dark grey or black’ in colour, had no discernable neck, but possessed ‘enormous, glowing eyes’ above ‘a square, hinged jaw which dropped open to form a triangular hole in the face’. What appeared to be a cloud of steam emitted from the hole. In the Betty Andreasson case of 25 January 1967, the UFOnauts were approximately four feet tall and had ‘pear-shaped’ heads with narrow chins, ‘holes’ for noses, ‘scarlike slits’ for mouths, and ‘large, almond-shaped eyes slanted around to the sides of their heads’ (exactly like those in the New Hampshire case of 1961). In the Falkville, Alabama, case of 17 October 1973, the UFOnaut observed up close and photographed by Police Chief Jeff Greenshaw was like ‘a man wrapped in aluminium foil’. It had ‘an antenna’ on its head but was otherwise featureless, and walked with ‘a stiff and mechanical gait’.

It is clear, then, from these descriptions and others, that the UFOnauts observed by the majority of contactees and abductees are either normal, albeit tallish, creatures very much like human beings or short creatures with certain human characteristics but also possessing bizarre, even nightmarish physical attributes. Though Dr Harder describes the latter as ‘automata’ and believes them to be ‘advanced robots’, contactee descriptions of ‘wrinkled’ and ‘whitish-grey’ skin, ‘like an elephant’s skin’, suggest that they may be cyborgs – half man, half machine.

If this were the case, neither the tall, human-like creatures nor the short, robotlike creatures would necessarily have to be extraterrestrials; they could in fact come from right here on Earth. However, the theory of Earthly origin would still be confronted with the other seemingly ‘magical’ or ‘impossible’

aspects of so many contactee and abductee reports, including paralysing or mesmerizing ‘devices’ and ‘beams of light’; levitation; telepathic communication; and information about the supposed extraterrestrial origin of the UFOs and their occupants.

Yet all of these aspects of the reports may be explainable within the present technology.

The brain controls most of our bodily functions, including what we see, hear, smell and feel. Yet since the brain is rarely used at even a *tenth* of its full potential, by awakening certain dormant areas of it, or by deadening others, either electrically, by the use of drugs, or through hypnotic suggestion, the scope of both our senses and our capabilities can be dramatically expanded or reduced, and our whole mode of behaviour changed. Such methods of affecting the brain can also induce pleasure, fear, many other emotions, and even physical pain; they can therefore be used to ‘reward’ or ‘punish’ the subject in a Pavlovian manner and by so doing completely control him.

Regarding the most common form of mind-control, namely hypnotism, the same principles apply, the only difference being that the sensations are induced, or recalled, by a process of suggestion, rather than by physical means. However, through routine hypnotism the subject can be directed to go to sleep or waken up, feel non-existent pain or ignore applied pain, turn as rigid as a plank, relive long forgotten experiences or forget past experiences, and frequently do what he would not normally contemplate. So real can the hypnotic experience be that a hypnotised subject, if told that he has just been scalded, will actually come out in blisters. Alternately, the same subject can be burned or pierced with needles and experience no pain at all; nor will he be marked with the burning or piercing when snapped out of the trance state.

It is a common misconception that only certain kinds of individual can be hypnotised. In fact, any intelligent adult and most children over the age of seven can be hypnotised. Only the mentally retarded and the psychotic can *resist* being hypnotised. Hypnotisability is in no way a sign of weak will. Indeed, the more intelligent and imaginative the individual, the better a subject he will be – but certainly most individuals can be hypnotised, whether or not they want to be.

There are three prime states of hypnotism: light, medium and heavy, the latter being a state of somnambulism.

Contactees frequently tell of how, though frightened, they felt drawn toward the UFOnauts or, at least, felt compelled to obey them – even when it seemed that the UFOnauts had not actually *spoken*. Another common denominator in the contactee experience is the feeling of remoteness, of divorce from the self, with the contactees invariably behaving as if they are zombies.

This is often the case with the (often rapidly flickering) 'beams of light' that emanate from the UFO – often accompanied by 'eerie' sounds – or from the hands of, or apparatus used by, the UFOnauts. When the contactees are struck by the flickering beam of light, they are either rendered unconscious (to reawaken elsewhere, usually in a daze) or placed into a state of what can only be described as fully conscious suspended animation: they are aware of what is happening to them, but unable to resist it in any way. In this condition, they are often convinced that they are 'floating' or 'gliding' between their captors and into the UFO; and that their captors are not actually speaking to them, even though they, the abductees, can somehow 'hear' what their captors are saying.

Such sensations are fully consistent with the hypnotic state. Once a person has been conditioned to accept the hypnotic state, a simple phrase or gesture (the waving of a hand; a light touch on some part of the face or head) can be used to put them into a hypnotic trance – but still awake, with eyes open.

As the often reported 'beams of light' emanate from the UFO and not the UFOnauts, we will return to them in a subsequent chapter. For the moment, let us concentrate on the other widely reported UFOnaut method of mesmerizing, which is the pressing of the contactee's neck, either by hand or with some kind of metallic device. This either renders the contactee unconscious or without will while still fully conscious.

Although this seems singularly mysterious, it is in fact another standard form of hypnotism: the 'instantaneous technique' or the 'carotid procedure', both of which are based on simple biology: the hypnotist merely applies pressure to a blood vessel near the ear, thus inhibiting the heart rate, interfering with the circulation of blood to the brain, and rendering the subject dazed and confused, and susceptible to suggestion.

'Wide awake' hypnosis is a commonplace hypnotic state in which the subject knows exactly who he is, where he is, and what he is doing – even

though only capable of doing what he is instructed to do by the hypnotist. This particular form of hypnotism can even be applied to a sleeping subject. The hypnotist simply attracts the attention of the sleeper with some sort of physical contact, hypnotises him by repeatedly telling him that he can hear the hypnotist's voice, has him perform what is required of him, then very gently puts him back to sleep. He will later waken up in a normal fashion, but with absolutely no recollection of being hypnotised or what he did while in the hypnotic state.

The 'amnesia' or bewildering, though uncomfortably familiar 'nightmares' suffered by so many contactees (as with Betty and Barney Hill) could be either a form of remote-controlled brain implantation, as discussed below, or a form of post-hypnotic suggestion. In this condition, the victim can be conditioned to remember nothing about what has happened to him – or, for the hypnotist's purposes of disinformation, to remember *some* of it, but only enough to confuse or frighten him or those who listen to him, because what he recollects will seem so senseless, bewildering, and therefore frightening.

Normal hypnosis could certainly account for this. However, electric brain implantation would be an infinitely more powerful and lasting way of doing the same thing.

As early as 1932 Dr Walter Hess had devised the modern technique of electrode implantation, thereby demonstrating that most of man's functions and emotions can be influenced by stimulation of specific areas of the brain. A simple method of doing this is to inject radiopaque materials into the intercerebral spaces inside the skull to facilitate, by X-ray, the visualization of various parts of the brain. This is done with a stereotaxic skullcap (similar devices are often described in UFO abductee reports) which, utilizing minute spikes that pierce the scalp, takes X-rays from many different angles and makes geometrical calculations to give three-dimensional coordinates for the positioning of the electrodes. The steel electrodes, which are as thin as hairs (small enough to be placed inside an individual nerve cell) are guided into the skull by micromanipulators, after which they can release the light electric current required for stimulation of the chosen area.

A state of constant drowsiness can be brought about by the electric stimulation of the caudate nucleus, the nucleus reticularis, or the inferior thalamus. Conversely, a similar stimulation of the mesencephalic reticular

formation will induce instant arousal. Another example is the hypothalamus: the area of the brain which controls our most basic, primitive needs. By stimulating the appropriate areas of the hypothalamus with submicroelectric electrodes, the controller can regulate the subject's blood pressure, heart rate and respiration; control his sleep or appetite, even the diameter of his pupils; can place him into a state of suspended animation or make him work till he drops. In short, he can totally control the subject's bodily and mental functions and even, with the aid of the appropriate computer-controlled interfacing equipment, do so from a distance, with the subject (or victim) not knowing that he is under control.

The possibility of physical and mental control of human beings was already well developed by the mid-1960s, with many bio-engineers claiming that computer and human brain would soon be directly linked. Said R.M. Page of the US Naval Research Laboratory: 'The information which a machine can obtain and store from a person in a few minutes will exceed the fruits of a lifetime of man-to-man communication.' As to method: 'The coupling mechanisms to carry out the functions will be myriad, including in some cases electrical connections to the body and brain. Some connections may be wireless, with imperceptible transmitting elements implanted in the body.'

While such research work was clearly under way in the top-secret experimental establishments of the White Sands Proving Ground (where the US Naval Research Laboratory, among others, has its own research centres), ESB, or electrical stimulation of the brain, was becoming dangerously innovative elsewhere. The suggestion that computer-controlled electrodes be implanted in the brains of babies a few months after birth, thus robotizing them for life, was made by the American electronics engineer Curtiss R. Schafer in a paper he presented before the National Electronics Conference in Chicago. In a similar mood, Dorman S. Isreal, a fellow of the Institute of Radio Engineers, proposed that 'newborn infants can be operated on and the latest submicroelectrical equipment installed in the brain and at certain critical points in the spinal column' in order to give them the benefits of 'non-radio communicative powers' and also enhance their creativity ability.

While such suggestions may have been made half in jest, it was already clear by the early 1970s that such proposals were being taken seriously by many scientists and that much of the experimentation was moving beyond the

already controversial area of vivisection and into the human arena, with subjects wired for electrosleep, electroprostheses, electrovision, electroanalgesia, electroanaesthesia and, increasingly, electrosociology.

In the field of electrosociology, Dr Jose M.R. Delgado, professor of physiology at the Yale University School of Medicine, and Dr James Olds of McGill University in Canada, both experimented extensively with the so-called 'pleasure centres' of the human brain, as did Dr Robert G. Heath of Tulane University. Meanwhile, Dr C. Norman Shealy, chief of neurosurgery at the Gunderon Clinic in La Crosse, Wisconsin, had perfected electro-analgesic techniques to the point where they were being applied to humans, mainly through the implanting of a .8 to 1.2 stimulating electrode in the spine rather than the brain. Regarding electrosociology, a team of doctors at Massachusetts General Hospital and Boston General Hospital were 'pacifying' violent human subjects with the implantation of electrodes into the rostral part of the caudate nucleus of the brain.

Such experiments had been going on for years – overtly in animals, covertly in human beings, with the latter experiments usually cloaked in secrecy. What *is* known is that electrodes implanted in the human brain have been used successfully to activate paralysed and artificial limbs; to control otherwise uncontrollable muscular spasms, as in Parkinson's Disease; to pacify violent mental patients and prisoners; and even to initiate 'thought control' between a human controller and a computer.

Given that any form of human brain manipulation can have frightening social and political ramifications, many of the experiments on humans have been conducted behind closed doors, most notoriously in mental institutions and state prisons, where prisoners receive certain benefits for becoming so-called 'voluntary' guinea pigs. The results of such experiments are rarely discussed openly, but given what has already been accomplished in these fields, it is safe to assume that remote-controlled 'programming' of individuals is well within reach and may, indeed, now be widespread.

Certainly it is no secret that the reflexes and appetites of animals have been controlled at a reasonable distance by a controller seated behind a computer-linked console. Such an animal can be made to sit, stand, play, fight, collapse in terror, eat, or starve itself to death. Regarding human beings, by the end of the 1960s it was still only possible (in unclassified experiments) to stimulate specific areas of the brain and do so under

immediate visual control. However, the possibility of long-distance control of implanted human beings was being explored in many areas; and though it was generally believed that the particular response required would be programd at the time of the implantation – fed into the brain via the computer – and would be limited to one or two responses only, those were early days and the reports were only of known experiments.

On the assumption that great advances have been made since then, it should now be possible to implant an electrode, or electrodes, in the brain of a human subject and then program him to feel pain or terror each time he attempts to recollect what his controller wants him to forget. This could certainly account for the many reports of amnesia, followed by headaches, nausea, terror or acute bewilderment, when the contactees have tried to recall exactly what had happened to them.

In *Phoenix* and *Genesis* (Books Two and Three in the *Projekt Saucer* series), I offer the present state of progress on prosthetics and other surgical nightmares as a possible explanation for the physical appearance and peculiar abilities of the UFOnauts. Since the reality of such creatures borders on science fiction, rather than fact, it will be instructive to look back at the work that was being done in those relatively early days in the various areas relating to UFOnaut appearance and capability.

By 1980 in the field of prosthetics work had been progressing with remarkable speed and success on the artificial heart (South Africa's Dr Christiaan Barnard completed the first human heart transplant in 1967), lung, gut and gill, as well as artificial cells, blood vessels, intestines and even skin. Artificial bones, joints and sockets were being used with increasing success, the main alloys being of the cobalt and chromium variety: tantalum, titanium, niobium and molybdenum. Blood vessels, heart valves, bone, skin, blood and even the cornea of the eye were all being preserved artificially. Skin, stored in DSMO for periods of years, had already been grafted successfully to the human body by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine. Bone frozen for years and revived with cobalt radiation had also taken when grafted to the body. Likewise, red blood cells had already been freeze-dried for years and as early as 1980 tissue banks were becoming commonplace. Indeed, as long ago as 1980, even before my novel *Genesis* was published, the US Navy tissue bank was able to supply some 3,000

square inches of human skin to Brazilian fire victims.

In external prosthetics, the myoelectric control of limbs was racing ahead. The Soviets were making the greatest advances in this particular field and had already perfected a hand-arm prosthesis in which all five fingers were capable of closing around objects of variable shape with the precision of a human hand. British scientists had developed, among other advanced prosthetics, myoelectric arms with interchangeable hands; while in the United States, a team of scientists and engineers from Harvard, MIT, and Massachusetts General Hospital, had developed a sophisticated myoelectric arm that could move at any angle, speed or force simply by being *thought* into action. The arm picked up muscle signals generated to the natural stump, transmitted them to a small amplifier, and used it to drive a compact electric motor. The machinery for all of this was housed inside a flesh-coloured, fibre-glass casing that resembled a real arm.

However, researchers at the Powered Limbs Unit of West Hendon Hospital, near London, England, were soon advancing on the above by developing an implantable electrode, or transmitter, called an Emgor. This used a resonator circuit that did not require batteries to detect myoelectric signals, thus obviating the need for frequent surgical intervention to replenish the power source.

Regarding the extent to which some surgeons would go openly in this kind of development, and to which some patients would willingly let themselves be used in the desperate hope of prolonging their lives under any circumstances, it should be noted that according to *World Medicine*, 1 March 1966, ‘lower body prosthetics’ had already been developed to the point where some surgeons were willing to perform hemicorporectomies: amputation of the entire lower half of the body, including legs, rectum and genitalia. This procedure had already been offered to patients in a prominent New York hospital as an alternative to death by abdominal cancer. Among those who accepted the offer was forty-nine year old James Cavorti who, ‘after months of the most mutilating and demoralizing operation known to surgical science, returned home with a complete lower-body prosthesis to support his sixty-pound torso’.

David Fishlock, who recounts the above story in his book, *Man Modified: An Exploration of the Man-Machine Relationship* (1971), gives other chilling

examples of just how much certain individuals may be willing to let themselves be butchered or mutilated if they have strong enough reason (one of his examples being that certain, perfectly sane, professional deep-sea divers would be willing to 'face the hazards of using their lungs as gills, in order to breathe underwater'); but both Fishlock and Vance Packard, author of *The People Shapers* (1978), show a healthy concern for the dubious attitudes and ethics of the 'bio-medical engineering' profession.

Living in a democratic society, it is hard to imagine that the involuntary use of human experimental 'animals' could take place anywhere other than in a Nazi concentration camp. However, as Fishlock makes clear: 'Even today there are people who believe that convicts, especially the criminal lunatic, and even conscientious objectors, should be compelled to lend themselves to science.' As an example of a much milder and widely accepted form of this, Fishlock points out that destitute citizens in the US can acquire a measure of care and attention in exchange for 'freedom of access to their bodies'. (Such 'access' would include the selling of blood, as well as laboratory sex with other humans or with the aid of prosthetics, frequently while being photographed and filmed.) In order to emphasise that many other scientists would be willing to go, and have gone, much farther than this, Fishlock tells us that in *Human Guinea Pigs* (1967) by Dr M.H. Pappworth: 'His search through a portion of the medical literature of recent years has yielded a wealth of evidence that experiments are made freely by a small number of medical research teams in the USA and Britain, on the sick and dying, on geriatric patients, on criminals, even on infants and pregnant women.'

The extent to which highly educated and supposedly civilized men will go to create a Brave New World is detailed in even more nightmarish detail by Vance Packard in *The People Shapers*. As this book was published sixteen years ago, it is chilling to read what had already been seriously considered up to that time. One of Packard's more illuminating examples is the 'amiable and highly respected' New York psychiatrist, Willard Gaylin, who 'explored at length' the possibilities of 'harvesting' the living dead and preserving them in special 'bioemporiums' that would house 'living cadavers' attached to respirators. In the words of Packard: 'Since their brains had stopped functioning they would be legally dead. But they "would be warm, respiring, pulsating, evacuating, and excreting bodies"' and could therefore be maintained for many years as 'a source of spare parts' and for medical

experimentation of all kinds.

We are reminded by Packard that in the Cleveland Clinic's Department of Artificial Organs, not only medical specialists, but 'mechanical, electrical, chemical, and biomedical engineers, as well as biochemists and polymer chemists', were, in their busy operating theatres, enthusiastically engaged in 'surgery connected to the development of artificial substitutes for other vital organs such as the liver, lungs, pancreas, and kidneys'. Conveniently within walking distance of the Cleveland Clinic's Department of Artificial Organs are the Neurosurgical Research Laboratories of the Cleveland Metropolitan General Hospital, where great interest was being expressed, as far back as 1967, in the possibility of transferring the entire head of one human being to another. Switching human *brains* from one head to another would be complicated and costly; but as Packard explains: 'By simply switching heads, on the other hand, only a few connections need to be severed and then reestablished in the neck of the recipient body.'

Robert J. White, then professor of neurosurgery at Case Western Reserve Medical School and head of the Cleveland Metropolitan General Hospital's live brain transplant research team, informed Packard that he preferred to call the procedure 'a cephalic transplant' because 'the phrase "head transplant" seemed to give some people the shivers'. The good doctor might have felt this way because in the same hospital some 'isolated' animal brains were being kept in cold storage while others, less lucky, were 'functioning, warm brains' that were being 'kept alive by hookups to blood machines or to live individuals of the same species. What is going on mentally inside those disembodied brains is a matter of speculation'.

In 1908 the American vascular surgeon, Charles Guthrie, grafted an extra head onto a dog, thus creating a two-headed animal; and in 1968 a team of Russian surgeons, led by Professor Anatoli Kanevsky, repeated the experiment more than once, then proudly reported that their twin-headed dogs ate, slept and performed their physiological functions normally, as if nothing had happened.

Nevertheless, while in those early experiments the head transplants did not survive long, brain-wave and chemical tests showed them to be functioning normally while alive and, according to Packard, 'somewhat better than before they were "isolated"', though possibly feeling 'bored and lonely, living on old memories.'

Certainly, with regard to the Cleveland Clinic's monkeys with transplanted heads, Professor White was adamant that the brains remained operational as far as the eyes, ears, nose, face and tongue were concerned. If a monkey was aggressive before the head transplant, it would remain that way after the transplant; if gentle before the transplant, it would remain so afterwards. Also, most of the heads that had been transplanted showed 'every indication of being alert to what was going on'. In other words, the transplanted heads would make sounds, accept and chew food, and track a human being with their eyes as he or she walked past them. So, though the monkeys with transplanted heads lived only a week, they were functioning properly while still alive.

At the time of these experiments, in the early to mid-1970s, it was known that the recipient body would remain out of contact with the brain 'until scientists master the problem of regenerating severed spinal cords'. However, it was White's belief that if we could grow spinal cords, we could 'transplant heads of humans with hope of achieving reasonably normal people'.

Indeed, in June 1976, even as Professor White was conducting his head transplant experiments with monkeys, a Soviet scientist, Levon A. Matinian, reported at the fourth biennial conference on Regeneration of the Central Nervous System that he had succeeded in regrowing the spinal cords of rats. Given that *Science News* described this achievement as one of 'monumental importance', it has to be accepted that more work in this area has continued behind closed doors and may now be remarkably well advanced.

Were this not enough, Packard informs us of the following: In one medical experiment, 'the heads of eight live young fetuses were cut off and then injected with radioactive compounds to study brain metabolism'. At a hospital for elderly chronic patients in Brooklyn, 'live cancer cells were injected into debilitated patients who did not suffer from cancer' in order to determine if cancer could be so induced. And at an institute for mentally retarded children on Staten Island, some of the children were injected with live hepatitis virus.

Last but not least, Packard points out that: 'A recent issue of *Modern Medicine* reported that most doctors favour experimentation on humans, even on prisoners, children, the mentally retarded, and other captive subjects, as long as there is peer review.' As in practice, peer review committees consist 'overwhelmingly of fellow staff members', Packard was of the opinion that

little legal, ethical, religious, or scientific restraint would be placed on such gruesome activities.

If such experiments were taking place in public hospitals and institutions so long ago, who is to say that even more ambitious experiments were not taking place behind the guarded fences and locked doors of the world's most secret military and scientific establishments? As David Fishlock reminds us: 'Men accustomed to solving the most intricate problems that aerospace and weapon technology could conceive turned with confidence to those of medical engineering.'

They certainly did. Remote-controlled robots are called 'phantoms' and at least two decades have passed since NASA's Manned Spaceflight Centre, in cooperation with the Illinois Institute of Technology Research in Chicago, produced 'a very sophisticated phantom' that resembled 'a human being in shape and size and in the way it moves its thirty-five joints, thirty-three of them fitted with strain-gauge torque sensors. In fact, it does almost anything but walk…' By the mid-1960s those primitive robots, or phantoms, had evolved into 'master-slave manipulators' called CAMS, or Cybernetic Anthropomorphous Machine Systems, which were designed to 'unite man's complex of sensory mechanisms with the power and versatility of a machine'. Used mostly for work in environments hostile to man (the sea bed, outer space, the handling of radioactive and other dangerous substances), the CAMS, or 'slave' machine, is operated by remote-control and 'mimics its master's arm, finger and thumb movements with such finesse that it can twirl a hula-hoop with its one digit'. This man-machine coupling was so efficient that 'the man need not think about the machine at all; he simply concentrates on the task'.

The early CAMS were operated through hydraulic servo-mechanisms that had their limitations, but progress was soon made on the 'sensitive coupling of the operator's nervous system' to powered manipulators that were even more versatile than human limbs. Interested in remote-controlled machines that could assist in the 'hostile' environment of a nuclear accident or attack, the US Air Force Weapons Laboratory soon produced 'an eleven-ton monster with two manipulators, each having six degrees of freedom and a nineteen-foot reach'. Not to be outdone, the UK Atomic Energy Research Establishment, at Harwell, England, created a 'remote inspection vehicle' which 'moves with the profile of a crawling man to gain access, but once in

position can stand erect in order to deploy its “eyes” and “arms”’.

In an aerospace conference given in Boston in 1966, engineer William E. Bradley, who developed the idea of cable-less man-machine manipulator systems for the US Defence Department’s Institute for Defence Analysis, stated his belief that man and machine would eventually be linked in such a way that by performing the manoeuvres himself, the man would cause them to take place, through the machine, at a distance of thousands of miles. This concept soon led to the weapon-aiming system devised by the Philco Corporation for the US Air Force, in which the pilot’s helmet is coupled by a servo-system that enables him to aim and fire his weapons automatically by merely swivelling his head until a camera located in his helmet shows the target.

Meanwhile, back on Earth, the sponsorship of the US Army and Navy had led to General Electric’s development of the exo-skeleton, or external skeleton, a ‘walking manipulator’ that gave its human wearer a ‘lifting capacity of three-quarters of a ton’ and could be used for heavy labour and underwater work. Once the operator stepped inside his hydraulically powered skeleton, a weight of 1,500 pounds would feel no heavier than 60 pounds and he could raise it six feet in as many seconds. When the man moved inside the skeleton, he looked like some kind of space-age monster.

By 1967, according to the 3 June issue of *Nature* magazine, an American Air Force scientist had taught people, himself included, to ‘think’ simple messages into a computer, using short and long bursts of alpha activity in a form of Morse code. When the computer reprinted what had been ‘thought’ into it, the first step had been taken in the ‘thought control’ of man-machine manipulators and advanced prosthetics. At approximately the same time, the scientists of many countries were experimenting with the control of myoelectric prosthetics with tiny sensors buried under the skin and capable of relaying EMG. (Electro-Miography) signals to an electronic circuit outside the body.

In the Neurological Prostheses Unit of Britain’s Medical Research Council, Professor G.S. Brindley was attempting to ‘implant electrode arrays in the brain which, when stimulated, might enable the patient to perceive sensations similar to those caused when lightwaves fall on the eye’ – in other words, to cure blindness. Also, by the mid-1960s corneal transplants were commonplace, as was the deep-freezing of blood to preserve it for years, and

the preservation and grafting of human skin. At approximately the same time work was racing ahead on the artificial larynx, lung, kidney, and heart, alongside the rapid development of miniaturized pacemakers and other sensors that could be implanted in the stomach, chest, or other areas under the skin. The discovery, in 1960, of 'acquired immunological tolerance' had already opened up the prospects for organ transplantation and now, thirty years on, the advances in this field are startling, if not always publicized.

Unconsciously indicating that the market for spare parts was about to expand, surgeons began to talk openly about the need to view persons suffering irreversible brain damage as an invaluable source of human organs. As Fishlock points out in *Man Modified*: 'Once the technical problems of transplantation are resolved, as is already the case with the kidney, the case purely on grounds of logic for regarding the unconscious cerebral cripple as a source of spare parts to be "cannibalized" may become overwhelming.' Fishlock also reminds us that many transplant surgeons had already expressed their belief that the most 'suitable and prolific' source of spare parts could come, ironically, from the most common 'mismatch' between man and machine – the young victims of automobile accidents, particularly those who die from brain damage. To this end, one London surgeon had even suggested having 'collection points' along motorways to 'harvest this valuable crop of bio-mechanisms'.

In a CIBA. Symposium on 'Ethics in Medical Progress' held in London in 1966, Dr Joseph Murray pointed out that the physiological requirements of space travel may have to be met with 'the grafting of accessory organs' such as extra adrenal glands and lungs. His view was supported by Dr Nathan S. Kline and Dr Manfred Clynes, both of the Rockland State Hospital in Orangeburg, New York, who insisted that the true conquest of space will only come when we 'equip man with exogenous components that would extend the self-regulating functions of the body far enough to adapt to a fresh environment'. In other words, a 'Cyborg'.

The astonishing surgical and bio-engineering advances mentioned above were all made before 1967. Since then, the transplanting of hearts, kidneys and other organs has become commonplace, the artificial womb has been created, natural skin can be grown in laboratories, plastic surgery has become an art form, sperm banks are big business, genetic engineering and cloning

have created a vast new industry, and computer intelligence has reached the point where there is genuine fear that it will soon start 'reproducing' itself and eventually break away from human control. Indeed, according to Ray Hammond in *The Modern Frankenstein: Fiction Becomes Fact* (1986) the interaction of man and machine is now so advanced that 'for practical purposes the "cyborg" is already here'.

If we assume that what we already know is only the tip of the iceberg, and that the bulk of the iceberg is hidden from view, we must accept that what is hidden from us by government and military scientists may be even more bizarre, and possibly more terrifying, than what has already been described. We should also bear in mind that the US Navy, Air Force, Army and government agencies such as NASA – all with top-secret research establishments in the White Sands Proving Ground and similar areas – have a particular need for advanced man-machine manipulators or cyborgs. Finally, we should note that if the necessary experiments are remotely like those performed openly, and described above, the moral, ethical, legal and theological ramifications would be enough to ensure that most of the work was performed in strict secrecy and, as with the UFOs, protected behind a smokescreen of official disinformation and ridicule.

Given these considerations, it is within the bounds of possibility that the small 'claw men' and creatures seemingly without eyes or mouths, as described by so many UFO contactees, could be cyborgs: half man, half machine – the result of decades of secret prosthetic experiments even more advanced that those mentioned above.

Theoretically, the lungs of such creatures would be partially collapsed and the blood in them artificially cooled. The cyborgs' respiration and other bodily functions would then be controlled cybernetically with artificial lungs and sensors which maintain constant temperature, metabolism and pressure, irrespective of external environmental fluctuations – thus, even if not protected by an antigravity (or gravitic) propulsion system, they would not be affected by the extraordinary accelerations and direction changes of their craft. The cyborgs would have no independent will, but could be remote-controlled, both physically and mentally, even across great distances, by computer-linked brain implants. Since this operation would render the mouth and nose superfluous, these would be sealed (possibly with the 'metallic' or 'wrinkled grey skin' coverings described by so many contactees) and

completely non-functioning.

To the mesmerized or terrified abductee, such unfortunate creatures would certainly look like ‘aliens’ or extraterrestrials.

On the understanding that research into the physical and mental mutation of human beings commenced as far back as the early 1960s and continues to this day behind closed doors, we can assume that the ‘secret’ work is even more advanced than the ‘known’ technology, which already includes genetic engineering and the cloning of life. If this is the case, it is possible that the UFOs and their ‘alien’ occupants – a mixture of normal humans and cyborgs – are members of a secret, Earth-bound society determined to pursue its research regardless of moral, ethical and religious considerations.

It is therefore possible that those abducted by UFOs are taken away for a variety of reasons: to undergo brain implantation and be returned to the real world as remote-controlled slaves who appear perfectly normal to those who know them; to be used as living subjects for even more advanced surgical, psychological and genetic experiments of the kind that would be morally unacceptable in normal society; or to be killed and used as a source of spare bodily parts for the cyborgs required by that society to work on the sea bed or in outer space.

This is not as far fetched as it may seem. Indeed, as shown in *The Human Body Shop: The Engineering and Marketing of Life* (1993) by Andrew Kimbrell, a host of startling new discoveries, including the cloning of life forms and fetal tissue transplants, has led to what amounts to ‘a new industrial age – a marketing revolution based on the manipulation and marketing of life’. This includes ‘the sale and manipulation of blood, organs, and fetal parts’; the marketing of ‘human reproductive materials – semen, eggs, embryos, and children’; and, finally, the ‘new biotechnology business of selling and engineering human biochemicals, genes and cells’.

As the human body is rapidly becoming no more than a ‘commodity’ in a ‘free market’, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that a secret, totalitarian society, based on a highly advanced technology and the control of mind and body, could be abducting people to be used as more fodder for their on-going experimentation and ever broadening mind control.

In short, the ‘aliens’ who abduct humans in their UFOs may not be alien or extraterrestrial. Like the UFOs themselves, they could come from right

here on Earth.

Chapter 10

UFO Technology

Discussing the cinetheodolite photos taken at the White Sands Proving Ground in April and May of 1950, Captain Ruppelt notes: 'By putting a correction factor in the data gathered by the two cameras, they were able to calculate that the object was higher than 40,000 feet, traveling over 2,000 mph, and it was over 300 feet in diameter.' Ruppelt makes it clear that these figures were only estimates, based on the possibly erroneous correction factor. However, what they *did* prove is that the object had been solid and moving very fast through the air.

Those and other sighting estimates serve to remind us that many of the supposedly 'remarkable' speeds assessed from cinetheodolite data (and all too often taken as gospel by proponents of the extraterrestrial hypothesis) are inaccurate. In fact, many trained observers believe that the UFOs have lower, therefore more technologically feasible, speeds than they are widely credited with, though they are still craft of extraordinary capability.

In order to assess whether or not such craft could have been built right here on Earth, we first have to assess exactly what they are in relationship to the present technology. We know that by and large they are disk-shaped, but depending on the angle of view they can appear to be round, oval-shaped, spherical, or like a cylinder viewed from one end. Kenneth Arnold's momentous description of the horizontal flight of the UFOs being like 'a saucer would if you skipped it across the water' remains the most apt, since the UFO, with its central, non-revolving dome, certainly resembles either one plate placed upside down (dome on top) or two plates placed one upon the other, the top plate resting upside-down on the lower one (dome top and bottom). Analysis of the many sightings suggests that the standard UFO (there are exceptions) has a diameter about ten times its thickness. While attempts to judge the size of any object in high-speed flight are bound to be problematical, it is now widely accepted that the bonafide 'unidentifieds' range from diameters of two feet (which would be something like the

German remote-controlled *Feuerball*) to 300 feet (for which the only remote comparison with present aircraft is the Lockheed C-5A Galaxy heavy-logistics transport aircraft: wingspan nearly 223 feet; length nearly 248 feet.)

It is assumed that UFOs between one and three feet in diameter are remote-controlled sensing devices. They could in fact be highly complex Cybernetic Anthropomorphous Machine Systems (CAMS), either flying with their long axis vertical or flying in the direction of their axis. Controlled by Remote Manipulator Systems (RMS), not much different from the ones widely known, they would most likely be used for reconnaissance and basic manual tasks, such as the gathering of soil or plant samples. The larger (but still relatively small) UFOs of between six to fifteen feet in diameter are, depending on size, either remote-controlled or single-pilot craft, used for more complex reconnaissance and collection purposes. The 'standard' model, about twenty-five to thirty-five feet in diameter, would be more like a jet fighter, with defensive or attack capabilities. This model revolves around its axis, and is piloted either by human pilots, by the kind of cyborgs described in the previous chapter, or by a combination of both.

The large UFO, from about 100 feet to 300 feet in diameter and two or three stories tall inside, would be the equivalent of the above mentioned Lockheed C-5A Galaxy heavy-logistics transport aircraft, though even more spacious, with many crew members, and probably used as a transport and refuelling craft.

Whether or not such a craft as a 'command' or 'mother' ship actually exists is a matter of pure speculation; but those reported have been as much as a mile in diameter and were seen to discharge and receive the smaller UFOs, often in large numbers. If they exist, they could be self-generating airborne colonies, capable of drifting in outer space or of hibernating on the sea bed, manned by a large crew of humans and cyborgs, the heavy labour performed by 'programd' slaves or CAMS. If this were the case, they would contain accommodations, workshops, laboratories, medical quarters, cryonics preservation units, various hangars, and a selection of the other, smaller disks.

The exterior surface of the UFOs is invariably described as smooth and seamless. When doors open, they usually do so in the side, sometimes falling down like ramps, or in the base, like trapdoors; but in the former instance, once the door closes again, no joins or dividing lines can be seen. It is not

known what the composition of the UFO's structure is, but it is usually described as metallic, aluminium, chrome, silvery, shiny, whitish-grey, or white. The surface, no matter the colour, sometimes has a soft glowing or luminous aura around it, while in other cases the 'aura' is blinding white, dazzling, intensely luminous, or like burning magnesium. Multicolored lights are often described, sometimes flashing simultaneously, sometimes sequentially, but these appear to be separate lights, emitting from specific parts of the craft. They are not produced by the composition of its surface material.

The colours suggest an exterior surface made from some kind of metal. For instance, the bright aluminum surfaces of an airliner, when viewed under an overcast sky or through atmospheric haze, will take on a dull grey, or even dark grey, appearance.

Nuclear physicist James M. McCampbell, whose speciality is planning and managing large-scale projects involving advanced technologies, is the author of *Ufology* (1976), the only book devoted solely to the physical nature of UFOs. In it he says: 'Some hints as to the actual metal of UFOs might be inferred from the properties required by their flight characteristics and mode of propulsion. These include lightness, strength and resistance to heat. McCampbell believes that the metal would have to be composed of elements that are already known, even if 'technological superiority may be evidenced by unusual purity or new mixtures and crystal structures'. He proposes magnesium and titanium.

This is interesting in that one of the most extraordinary metals now in existence is Nitinol, described by *Science Now* as 'the magic metal' because, though a simple, light alloy of nickel and titanium, it possesses properties that have perplexed the most knowledgeable minds in metallurgy for nearly thirty years. Nitinol is 'a metal with a memory' that can be made to remember any shape it is bent into and will always return to it after being heated. Nitinol also has the ability to 'learn' and if heated and crumpled enough times will not only remember its original shape but gradually 'learn' to remember its crumpled form as well. The aerospace industry has been using this 'magic metal' for years. In the words of *Science Now* (No.2): 'The speed and reliability of Nitinol's shape-changing response, the metal's lightness and its total resistance to metal fatigue make it an invaluable material for use in spacecraft.'

Dr James Harder, in his article ‘Looking at the Evidence’, published in *Worlds Beyond* (1978), claims that a piece of metal shot off a UFO over Washington in 1962 was found to be ‘magnesium orthosilicate, with some tiny round occlusions’; another fragment recovered in Sweden was ‘a chunk of tungsten carbide, one of the hardest metals known, next to the diamond’; and some fragments found in Brazil were of ‘ultrapure’ magnesium. Harder also points out that abductees taken aboard UFOs invariably describe the floor as being ‘very hard and cold’ and the materials they encounter ‘metallic or hard plastic’. Other than that, it is certainly worth recalling that the ‘tiny round occlusions' found in the magnesium orthosicilate suggest some form of porous metal, or *Luftschwamm*, which was, as we now know, a mixture of magnesium and aluminium.

The use of a porous metal with high heat resistance and a composition that charges the air around it could account for UFO speed and lack of noise. James M. McCampbell believes that the presence of a UFO in flight must be ‘telegraphed’ ahead to the gas molecules in the air; a force exerted by it then moves the molecules out of the way, and, after passage of the UFO, the air closes in behind it. By such means ‘the UFO could slip through the atmosphere with little expenditure of energy and no shock wave would be created on its leading edge’. It is McCampbell’s belief that the plasma on the surface of the UFO, or the radiant energy that stimulates it, is responsible for this. He points out that as early as 1968, the Northrop Corporation was reportedly experimenting with electromagnetic fields to ‘modify the air stream around supersonic aircraft to prevent shock waves’. It is also reported that by 1976 the North American Rockwell Company, under US Air Force sponsorship, had developed a radar-absorbing material composed of ‘advanced structural plastics’ and possessing ‘special electrical properties’. The material had been created not only to make aircraft lighter, but to make them ‘invisible’ to enemy radar.

A contemporary example of this attribute can be found in the F-117a Nighthawk, or Stealth night-fighter, which has often been mistaken for a UFO because of its appearance and capabilities. First test-flown on 18 June 1981, but kept secret from the public until 1989, the Stealth is a Delta-wing aircraft with a pyramidal structure that gives it a flying saucer appearance when viewed from most angles. With a wingspan of 43 feet 4 inches and a length of 65 feet 11 inches, the F-117a Nighthawk is powered by two General

Electric turbofans, armed with two laser-guided smart-bombs, has a low radar profile in flight and, because of its exceptional streamlining, makes little noise. Painted stark black with a special anti-radar paint, the F-117a Stealth is as near to an ‘invisible’ supersonic aircraft as it is possible to imagine within the known technology. However, as the authorities have finally let it be shown to the public, after years of denials regarding its very existence, it has almost certainly been superseded.

Its successor is possibly the Aurora - an officially non-existent supersonic aircraft often seen flying over Scotland and its off-shore waters. Invariably described as big, black and triangular, with no wing surfaces or tail surfaces, two thirds the size of the Stealth night-fighter (which would make it about ninety feet long), the Aurora is possibly radar invisible (at least its presence in the skies has been denied by all radar operatives under its flight path) and witnesses have reported that it makes no noise when in flight.

This mysterious, supersonic, silent aircraft, recorded as flying as fast as 6 Mach, is most frequently sighted in the vicinity of RAF Machrihanish, located on the tip of the Mull of Kintyre. Jointly owned by the United States, RAF Machrihanish is one of the most secret NATO air bases in Europe.

The Pentagon, which for years denied the existence of the F-117a Nighthawk, is now insisting that the Aurora does not exist.

The UFO’s ability to ‘just disappear’ or ‘blink out like a light bulb’ is often attributed to its extraordinary speed (which is certainly one cause, as we shall see), but it may also be related to its oddly ‘glowing’ colours. Another form of apparent ‘invisibility’ is that many UFOs, while not seen by those who have accidentally photographed them, have shown up mysteriously on developed film.

With regard to this apparent ‘invisibility’, official analysis of the photographs taken of the Lubbock lights during the famous sighting of August 1951 revealed that what the photographer had picked up was an exceptionally bright light source which had a colour at the most distant red end of the spectrum. This suggests that it was infrared - or something similar to infrared - which in turn means that the object would be dim to the human eye but bright on the photograph.

Let us take this hypothesis further by going beyond the known spectrum. If the UFO could produce such light, and do so at will, it would in effect be

capable of materializing and disappearing in the wink of an eye, even when *not* moving fast. As previously noted, the UFOs are usually described as being surrounded by glowing colours: blue, green, yellow, orange, red. Assuming that they are constructed with a metal composed of already known elements - possibly of unusual purity and radical mixtures - we can also assume that what we are *not* dealing with is a magical metal that can actually transmit light.

As electrical discharges of unusual strength will sometimes lead to a soft, white glow, a corona, near high-voltage transmission lines, it can be assumed that they have either some sort of negative potential that causes electrons to leak into the atmosphere surrounding it, an alternating potential that agitates gas atoms in the surrounding atmosphere to their ionization potential, or even an alternating current within the UFO's own shell which draws radiant energy from the surrounding atmosphere. This would account for a white glow.

However, let us assume that the UFO's luminosity is not caused by an unknown composition, but by the natural air closely surrounding it. If atoms are sufficiently agitated by the absorption of electromagnetic radiation, a few of their electrons will be elevated out of their normal orbits, or possibly removed from the atom completely; then, as more electrons fall back in these empty spaces, a certain amount of energy will be released and radiated away as photons. Within the visible region, a stream of such photons having the same wavelength and frequency will be seen by the human eye as an unusual, glowing colour, ranging all the way from violet to red. This is a form of electromagnetic radiation - and unusual traces of electromagnetic radiation have often been found upon examination of reported landing sites.

As the magnetic field in interstellar space is extraordinarily weak, we can assume that the UFO, which certainly leave Earth's atmosphere on occasion, would not be using electromagnetic propulsion and that the traces of electromagnetism found after so many sightings are related solely to the craft's composition. Assuming, therefore, that the UFO is made of some exceptionally pure composition of metals - say, aluminium, magnesium, titanium or strontium - and that the material is electronically charged, the UFO would often appear to be white or silvery up close, a dull or dark grey when viewed through atmospheric haze, and just as often be surrounded by a glowing halo of various colours. If such a craft also had the capability of

creating a colour source beyond the known spectrum and turning it on and off at will - it could be dim, or even invisible, to the human eye, show up on normal film, and yet materialize in our visible spectrum as required.

This may have been the case with the UFO sighted over Lubbock in August 1951 - as well as in many similar sightings. It may also explain the relative ‘invisibility’ and ‘silence’ of the Aurora, presently being sighted by so many, even as the Pentagon insists that it does not exist.

Though the ‘glowing’ colours indicate an unusual composition of otherwise known materials, they could also be indicative of the UFO’s mysterious propulsion system. UFOs have unusual and remarkable flight characteristics, including the ability to hang nearly motionless in the sky, settle gently on the ground, rise vertically, and make sharp, right-angled turns. Such manoeuvring capabilities, combined with the absence of air blasts, smoke and sonic booms, indicates that they are certainly not propelled by orthodox engines or rockets.

In a declassified, formerly secret Department of the Army Intelligence Memorandum, dated 21 January 1948, information was requested on various possible propulsion systems for ‘oval, disk, or saucer-shaped aircraft’. Among the systems to be investigated were ‘jet propulsion engines including turbo jets, rockets, ram-jets, pulse jets, or a combination of all four’. Nuclear propulsion (atomic energy) was also to be investigated on the grounds that ‘atomic energy engines would probably be unlike any familiar type of engine, although atomic energy might be employed in combination with any of the above types’. How the UFOs are propelled remains a mystery, but it is known that since that Memorandum was written and distributed, many experiments have taken place in advanced ion propulsion, electromagnetic and microwave propulsion, in certain cases nuclear fusion pulse rockets, and even antigravity, or gravitic, propulsion.

Ionization and electromagnetic discharges could be another cause of the plasma-like glowing that so fascinates UFO witnesses; the use of an anti-gravity shield, or gravitic propulsion, could account for the UFO's lack of turbulence and sonic booms.

McCampbell reminds us that according to technical analysis, the lift-off of the average UFO would require as much energy as the detonation of an atomic bomb, would cause the body of the UFO to heat up to about

85,000°C, and would naturally lead to intense deposits of radioactivity (often found on or near UFO landing sites). However, with an antigravity shield reducing the mass of the UFO to almost zero, it would require only a modest force to reach exceptionally high accelerations.

The UFO does not defeat gravity entirely. If it did so, it would continue to float upward into the atmosphere, instead of hanging motionless in the sky. Nevertheless, it must *almost* defeat gravity and could therefore be using some form of gravitic protection, or propulsion.

How would this work?

Gravity is the force that draws all bodies in Earth's sphere toward the centre of the planet. Where gravity exists, so does the inertial force, which is 'proportional and directionally opposite to the accelerating force'. According to Einstein's principal of equivalence, it is not possible to distinguish between the two: gravitational mass and inertial mass are, to all intents and purposes, identical. This being the case, if we manage to nullify the effect of gravity on a certain mass, we will also nullify the inertial mass that would normally act against it. So if we activate a so-called gravity 'shield' around our UFO, thus reducing its mass respecting gravity and the inertial force to almost zero, we will produce what McCampbell has termed 'neutral buoyancy' in the atmosphere.

Very modest forces exerted upon this virtually massless UFO would produce extremely high accelerations. In fact, a vehicle so shielded could accelerate out of sight faster than the human eye can see' Also, by applying 'a small force in the direction of flight', the gravity-shielded vehicle could be brought to an abrupt halt; while 'applying the force traversely would produce astonishing, sharp, nearly right-angle turns'.

As the inertial mass of such a craft would decrease the higher it goes, we can assume that such a mass would be reduced to nearly zero by the time it reached the limits of Earth's atmosphere. This could be the explanation for the UFO's widely reported 'two-stage' take-off: a slow rise to a hundred feet or so, then a sudden acceleration and disappearance. Finally, since the UFO's performance is related directly to Earth's gravity, and as the pull of gravity varies slightly from place to place, the UFO in horizontal flight would often appear to rise and fall slightly: the increase and decrease of gravitational pull would effect its inertial mass and makes it 'wobble' or bob up and down. This would also explain why the UFO appears to be able to follow the profile

of the terrain below it automatically.

An antigravity shield would certainly account for the UFO crews' apparent ability to withstand the extraordinary speed and direction changes of the machines. As the inertial mass is also nullified, the gravity-force would apply simultaneously to the crew *and* the UFO; as it provides a cushion of air around the saucer, it also prevents the UFO from heating up.

Antigravity, or gravitic propulsion, is not as revolutionary as it sounds. As far back as 1965, when UFO sightings over secret military bases were at their peak, there were at least forty-six unclassified G-projects being undertaken in the US alone - by the Air Force, the Navy, the Army, NASA, the Atomic Energy Commission, and the National Science Foundation. Given that these were only the unclassified projects, considerably more advanced projects could have been completed in any one of the top security research establishments, including those scattered throughout the White Sands Proving Ground.

Nuclear physicist Stanton T. Friedman has made the point that since you do not need right-angle turns and hovering capabilities when you are in interstellar space, there may be different kinds of, or a combination of, UFO propulsion systems. A gravitic propulsion system would undoubtedly make sense for flight within the pull of Earth's gravity; but for interstellar flight (assuming the UFOs make such flights), staged fission or fusion-propulsion systems would do the job. As someone who worked on both systems for General Electric and others, Friedman is able to point out that by 1978 the most powerful nuclear reactor to be tested in the Free World was the Phoebus 2-B nuclear-reactor rocket-propulsion system built by the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory. That system, which operated at a power level of forty-four hundred million watts - twice the output of the Grand Coulee Dam - was under six feet in diameter.

According to Friedman, fusion is even more exciting. 'If you use the fusion process properly, you can kick particles out of the back end of a rocket that have *ten million* times as much energy per particle as they can get in a chemical rocket.' With relevance to the enormous power of fusion being packed into the relatively small confines of a UFO, Friedman reminds us that a quasar represents the energy of a galaxy in something the size of a single star; and that when we moved from the atomic to the nuclear world, we 'went

down in size and way up in energy per particle'. Thus, when we go down from the nuclear world to the subnuclear world (which we are now doing), we will 'go down in size again and up in energy again'. In other words, fusion will present us with a form of enormous power that can be contained in minute housing.

'Fusion is something we know about,' Friedman says. 'H-bombs are fusion devices; the Sun is a fusion factory... We know how to do it.'

Friedman also suggests in his article 'Flying Saucers Are Real' (1978) that a propulsion system based on the ionization of the air could solve all the problems of high-speed flight. 'About ten years ago, an electromagnetic submarine was built in California. I believe you could build an analogous airborne system where you create an electrical conducting fluid, similar to the seawater around the submarine, by ionizing the air.' With ionized air, as opposed to 'neutral' air, it would be possible to interact with the electrically conducting fluid, or the electric and magnetic fields, thereby reducing heating and drag, increasing lift, and eliminating sonic boom.

According to Friedman, the UFO's frequent changes in colour, extraordinary flight characteristics, and absence of noise indicate the presence of ionized air and high magnetic fields. While he leans toward the extraterrestrial hypothesis, he does believe that 'there are a number of professional people working at a secret project, using the data input from the Aerospace Defence Command and others, trying their darnest to build a flying saucer'.

The 'spinning' of the UFO could be an integral part of its propulsion system. The only time a UFO does *not* spin is when it is resting on the ground. In most reports the UFO starts spinning as it lifts off the ground, with the rotations becoming faster as it ascends. In some cases, the whole UFO spins; in others, the outer rings spin around a fixed cockpit or central dome. According to McCampbell: 'It is easy to imagine that rotation of the entire vehicle, or a major component, would be used to achieve stability in the air; that is, to maintain the axis of rotation in a constant direction due to the angular momentum.' Clearly, since the passengers, or crew, could not be subjected to the rotation of the outer surface of the vehicle, the interior portions of the UFO would be uncoupled from the exterior and we can thus think of the craft as operating like a gigantic gyroscope.

Regarding this, Renato Vesco tells us that in 1945, along with reports of ‘constant-velocity airfoils, one with an elegant two-pointed meniscus shape and the other with a curious if not monstrous-looking mushroom shape’, there were leaks about the construction of an experimental ‘independent, gyroscopically stabilized cabin’ that was ‘ringed with a rotating organ of large dimensions, as in the Italian-German projectiles and the Fireballs, involving the need for autonomous and automatic stabilization’. At that time, the US National Physical Laboratory's division of applied physics was investigating the ‘direct gyroscopic stabilization’ research material of the captured Kreiselgeräte GmbH, located in Berlin Britz. That company (now liquidated) was so-called because it had designed and constructed the Kreiselgeräte: a mechanism that could reduce the oscillations of a violently shaking body to under one-tenth of a degree. Such a device, if applied to a fixed central cupola, or dome, placed within a rotating circular wing, or disk, would, at least in theory, have supported the often reported view that ‘seen from below, the UFO seemed to spin rapidly on its own axis, except for the central part, which appeared to be stationary’.

Reports indicate the presence of strong gusts of hot or cold air as the UFO descends, ascends, sweeps past, or passes overhead. The currents are often strong enough to bowl people over, bend trees, make grass and plants flutter wildly, and suck snow, water, sand, and loose materials up into the air. On odd occasions, trucks and cars have almost been lifted off the road by a UFO passing over overhead. According to McCampbell, the UFO can not only lift vehicles off the road, but ‘seems to impart a torque, or turning force to them, as confirmed by the spinning and swirling of other objects’. This phenomenon shows that the unknown force ‘prevails within a cylindrical zone having the same diameter as the UFO and extending from it to the ground’. What is most puzzling about this force is that instead of acting downward, as would be the case with jet exhausts, it acts upward, thus causing rotation to the objects affected. The force is also selective in what it affects, favouring electrical conductivity as a ‘responsive item’. Thus, stone or dry sticks are not so affected (unless wet); the human or animal body, metals, and water are. This suggests that the UFO may indeed be defeating gravity in some manner and, if so, is sharing this achievement with the ‘responsive items’ directly below it, which in turns suggests ‘gravity damping by electromagnetic radiation’.

More support for the presence of electromagnetic radiation comes from the charred grass and plants often found where UFOs have landed. As the roots of grass so affected are charred, but the blades are not damaged, it is possible that we are dealing with induction heating from a 'powerful, alternating magnetic field'. This offers the possibility of microwave propulsion. McCampbell points out that electromagnetic energy in the range of about 300 to 3000 MHz or higher seems to be responsible for stimulating coloured halos around the UFOs; producing a dazzling, white plasma on the vehicle's surface; turning off automobile headlights and stopping internal combustion engines; precipitating wild gyrations of compasses and magnetic speedometers; interfering with radio and television reception; disrupting transmission of electrical power; charring or calcining grass roots, insects and wooden objects; heating bituminous highways to the point of flame-up; heating the human body internally and causing people to feel electrical shocks; and inducing temporary paralysis in witnesses. Medical experiments have also shown that when pulsed at a low audio frequency, electromagnetic energy is capable of stimulating a humming or buzzing sound in the human ear - one of the few sounds attributable to UFOs.

In summary, the microwave energy radiating from UFOs may be an integral part of a propulsion system that is capable of greatly diminishing gravitational and inertial forces, furnishes the required thrust for acceleration, and moves air out of the flight path to minimize drag, shock waves and sonic boom. While such a system may be well in advance of the *known* technology, McCampbell is of the opinion: 'It does not appear to be so far distant that a well-organized and adequately funded research program could not make it available to humanity.'

Stories of contactees being mesmerized or temporarily paralysed by 'beams of light' or unfamiliar sounds (including the 'humming' or 'buzzing') emanating from UFOs are common. While such stories seem uncomfortably close to science fiction, they could be perfectly true. Lasers can concentrate high energies in narrow beams, have extremely pure colours, and produce well-ordered, regular light-waves - just like the beams of light emanating from UFOs. Also, it is now well established that under certain conditions light and sound can have extraordinary mental *and* physical effects on normal, healthy people.

For instance, a light flickering somewhere in the alpha-rhythm range, between eight and twelve cycles per second, can cause extremely violent reactions in the person exposed to it, including jerking limbs, faintness, lightness in the head, or unconsciousness. It is therefore possible that the mysterious beams of light described by so many contactees are strobe lights or laser beams which flicker on and off at the particular rate which affects the brain's basic rhythmic patterns and place the subject into a hypnotic trance. As for the strange humming, buzzing or 'vibrating' sounds which also appear to affect the contactees, laboratory tests have revealed that infrasounds, which are just below the limit of human hearing (thus making the listener imagine that he is *feeling* the sound, like a 'vibration') can affect humans in the same way as flickering lights: either hypnotizing them, stunning them, rendering them unconscious, or paralysing them while leaving them fully conscious.

Certain low frequency sounds can lead not only to a change in the brain's rhythmic patterns, but to actual physical changes, such as the breaking of glass, the deadening of ignition systems (also caused by electromagnetic energy, as explained above), and even the killing of human beings or animals, when their innards are crushed by pure vibration. Given that this is so, it seems perfectly feasible that the UFO's flickering beams of light, or laser beams, when combined with infrasounds, could have led to many cases of contactee hypnosis.

According to McCampbell, a weapon similar to the immobilizing lights used by the UFOs may have been developed during the 1960s by the Federal Aviation Agency under the direction of Dr H.L. Reighard. The purpose of this 'high-frequency radiation' weapon was to counter aeroplane hijacking, but the device was never used because of the dangers it might present if used inside an aircraft. In the same field, John Cover, a scientist in Newport Beach, California, developed the 'taser', which is a ray gun that passes an alternating current of 30/40 milli-amps through the body, temporarily freezing the skeletal muscles with no lasting adverse affects.

While much of the laser experimentation is top-secret, it is known that as far back as the 1950s the US Air Force was watching and photographing the secret Soviet laboratory at Semipalatinsk, where the Russians were known to be developing an extremely powerful 'beam weapon' capable of destroying intercontinental missiles at almost the speed of light. It was suspected that the beam comprised atomic or sub-atomic particles - electrons, protons or ions -

equivalent to billions of volts of electricity and accelerated toward the target at just under 180,000 miles per second. John Allen, senior US government scientist, stated that a weapon of this type appeared to be a distinct possibility; and both George J. Keegan, head of USAF intelligence, and Dr Willard Bennett, member of the US team that was obliged to abandon beam weapon work in 1972, believed that the Russians were well ahead of the Americans in this field.

So what, precisely, is a laser?

The acronym ‘laser’ is short for ‘Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation’. The laser ‘stimulates’ radiation when it ‘pumps’ energy into some material in a way that causes large numbers of its electrons to become precariously balanced at a high energy level, then drop back to their normal or ‘ground’ state. As each electron drops back, it gives up its excess energy by throwing out a ‘packet’ of radiation - a photon. The resultant energy gap between the upper, or ‘balanced’, and the ground, or ‘normal’, energy states, gives a particular frequency to the photon radiation emitted. When this particular form of radiation then falls on an energised atom, it ‘stimulates’ it into emitting its own photon, with each photon then stimulating more energised atoms in a perpetual chain reaction. The visual result is a beam of light formed when the ‘surge’ of light built up in the laser is reflected back and forth between precisely spaced mirrors. If one of the mirrors is partly transparent, an intense output beam can escape to form a visible, often dazzling laser beam.

But could secret laser research account for the affects of the ‘beams of light’ described by so many UFO contactees?

It is common knowledge in the West that unclassified laser technology has reached a state of advancement that once was only imagined by science fiction writers. In fact, laser technology has been on the agenda for almost four decades, with the first lasers demonstrated in 1960. Though these early demonstrations made the concept of the ‘death ray’ respectable, many scientists of the time refused to believe in their potential either for death-dealing or for other equally devastating applications. The laser arms race, however, accelerated at remarkable speed, producing ever more varied and powerful beams - electrical discharges, lightning flashes, neutron flux from a nuclear reactor - culminating in the most powerful of all laser weapons: carbon dioxide lasers with outputs in the megawatt range. These emit

invisible infrared radiation, though the beam is highly visible as a row of sparks like tiny lightning bolts. Their capabilities are still a matter of dispute, but it is known that as far back as 1980 such laser beams could destroy a small anti-tank missile at a range of one kilometre and that other laser beams were being fired at aircraft or in orbit during top-secret tests. According to published reports those first trials produced no spectacular results, but an official British study predicted that by 1995 anti-aircraft, anti-satellite and possibly even hand-held lasers would be in 'routine' use as weapons and for other, more productive uses, such as bloodless surgery.

At the time of writing (1994), serious research is being conducted regarding the possibilities of the gamma-ray laser, or graser. According to reports, while 'known' (ie., non-secret) technology presently lacks the controlled power required to pump a gamma-ray laser, such a weapon, whether created secretly or in the future, would be: 'a true death ray, horrifyingly powerful'.

While we cannot know what is going on behind the closed doors of our top-secret research facilities, we do know that the US Space Command, for example, has for years been seriously involved in a 'Star Wars' program that views laser-equipped satellites as a viable, and vitally necessary, weapon of the future. Despite the initial doubts of certain scientists, over the past two decades the major powers, notably Great Britain, Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) and the United States, have been pursuing this technology. As long as arms negotiators cannot agree to ban anti-satellite and laser weapons, this race will continue, with startling advances being made - for good and for ill.

Certainly, at the time of writing, laser beams are being developed not only as future weapons of war, but also for use in surgery, chemistry, biology, engineering, and nuclear fusion control. They are also being researched as potential mesmerising or immobilizing devices. It seems, then, that the laser-beam weapons reportedly used by UFOs as paralysing or more destructive weapons are not beyond the reach of the present technology. On the assumption, therefore, that the classified, or unknown, technological achievements must always be far ahead of known technology, the capabilities and characteristics of the UFOs do not place them beyond the possibility of Earthly origin.

Chapter 11

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Speculations on Terrestrial UFO Bases

UFOs are often reported to appear from, and depart toward, the sea. Given the relatively limited number of people traveling by sea, it is surprising that so many reports have concerned UFOs diving into or erupting from oceans all around the world, in areas such as the Bermuda Triangle, in the West Atlantic, connecting Bermuda, Puerto Rico and the coast of Florida; the so-called ‘Devil's Sea’ bounded by the southeast coast of Japan, the northern tip of Luzon, in the Philippines, and Guam; the coastal waters of Argentina, particularly near Plata del Mar; and the Great Lakes of Canada - all of which are also known as areas where many aircraft and ships mysteriously disappear without trace. This has led to much speculation about the possibility of USOs (Unidentified Submarine Objects) hiding on the sea bed, or of undersea laboratories which are visited frequently by UFOs.

Of the regions mentioned above, the Bermuda Triangle is the most notorious. Its reputation as a ‘Devil’s Triangle’ (not to be confused with the ‘Devil’s Sea’ mentioned above) really began on 5 December 1945, with what has since become widely known as the mystery of Flight 19. Months after the end of World War II, five US Navy aircraft vanished without a trace when on a routine training mission out of Fort Lauderdale Naval Air Base. Reportedly the control tower received some very strange, panicky messages from the flight leader just before the five planes disappeared. These included the words: ‘We seem to be off course, we cannot see land... we are not sure of our position... everything is wrong, strange... even the sea doesn’t look as it should... it looks like we’re entering...’ According to legend, the voice was then cut off, the planes and their crew vanished without trace, and the mystery was only deepened when, a few hours later, an aircraft participating in the search operation also vanished without trace.

It later became clear that no such words had been received by the control tower, that the air crews were inexperienced and in error about their course, and that the five planes probably crashed, with the crews and debris swept away beyond recovery. Nevertheless, the case of Flight 19 was soon turned

into a major mystery and the area gained the reputation for being responsible for hundreds of similar, inexplicable disappearances. Reportedly they were often preceded by terrified radio messages about weird fogs, an equally weird or 'different' sea or sky, pulsating lights, strange cloud formations, unaccountable loss of power in the ship or aircraft, and the aberrant behaviour of radar and other electrical equipment.

The 7th District Coast Guard has always maintained that the high degree of ship and aircraft disappearances in the Bermuda Triangle are due to three major factors: it is one of the busiest air and sea routes in the world;, the air and sea traffic includes thousands of private pilots and boat owners, many of whom are dangerously inexperienced; and the region is prone to sudden, dramatic changes in weather. The fact that many of the ships and aircraft disappear 'without a trace' is due to the Gulf Stream, which moves so fast that it can carry a disabled ship miles off course and disperse wreckage over a vast area in a very short time.

Nevertheless, if most of the disappearances can be accounted for, the area still has some unusual characteristics, including unexplained regional magnetic aberrations, shining or pulsating lights in the night sky or beneath the sea (possibly 'white water'), the often reported 'glowing fogs' and 'boiling clouds', and an unusually high incidence of UFO, or USO, sightings. Of particular interest in this respect is the fact that the 'white water' often found in the area is reported to contain unusual chemical properties, including sulphur, strontium and lithium, which have also been found in analyzed pieces of supposed UFO debris.

Charles Berlitz, author of *Without a Trace* (1978), makes an interesting connection between the Bermuda Triangle, or Devil's Triangle, and the Devil's Sea at the other side of the world: 'They both are located approximately between 20° and 35° north latitude, and the 130° east meridian runs approximately through its centre. This same meridian, when it crosses the North Pole, becomes 50° west longitude and runs through the eastern section of the Bermuda Triangle. Berlitz also points out that both areas are crossed by the Earth's agonic lines (lines with no magnetic variation, along which the magnetic needle points directly north *and* south) and suggests from this curiosity that electromagnetic forces may have much to do with the strange phenomena in both areas.

Because the Bermuda Triangle's known magnetic aberrations are

combined with a high incidence of UFO or USO sightings, there are many who believe that the missing ships, aircraft and crew members are somehow being 'abducted' by gigantic USOs that may emerge from, and return to, the sea bed. Dr Manson Valentine, former curator honoris of the Museum of Science in Miami and research associate of the Bishop Museum of Honolulu, believed that the disappearances within the Bermuda Triangle were due to fields of ionization created by the propulsion systems of UFOs, which could possibly change the molecular structure of ships, aircraft or people who strayed accidentally into their path or wake. Whether the cause of the disappearances is due to abduction or dematerialization, the widespread belief is that the Bermuda Triangle and other bodies of water like it hide USOs, or USO bases or laboratories.

Given UFO technology, this just might be possible. If such laboratories exist, they could be manned permanently by cyborgs or 'programd' human beings who would not be affected adversely, either physically or psychologically, by their undersea prison. As for the actual construction of laboratories at such depths, if, as reported, the 'mother' ships are up to a mile in diameter, they could simply settle onto the sea bed and the laboratory would then be constructed, or deposited, there with the aid of specially reinforced, remote-controlled CAMS. The UFO, or USO, would then ascend to the surface again, leaving the reinforced laboratory down there, complete with its crew.

Telechirics, or advanced man-machine manipulators, have already been used extensively on the sea bed. As far back as 1962, the Hughes Aircraft Corporation developed the Mobot, a complex 'swimming socket wrench' designed for Shell to complete the assembly of underwater oil well-heads. The Mobot had television 'eyes' and sonar 'ears' and was capable of wire-brushing surfaces and turning valves on and off at a depth of 1,000 feet. It was superseded by the even more ingenious UNOMO, a 'universal underwater mobot' that had four arms - two for work and two for hanging on to the well-head. That was nearly thirty years ago. Since then, within the *known* technology, manned descent to the deepest undersea point (35,800 feet) has been made, huge saturation diving complexes are already on the sea bed, and 'submarine homes' and 'floating islands' (contained within sea domes) have come onto the agenda. It is therefore possible, given the estimated technology of the UFOs, that they would be capable of at least

exploring, or settling upon, the sea bed.

Returning to dry land, the question of UFO bases has led to much wild speculation. It is clear that a great deal of UFO activity has taken place over military establishments, such as those scattered throughout the White Sands Proving Ground, and that many people think it possible that crashed UFO debris, and possibly dead occupants, are being preserved in guarded hangars on various Air Force bases. Nevertheless, if the presence of UFOs is felt most strongly on or near military establishments, the sheer number of sightings indicates that they are being mass produced and maintained in one or more top-secret, isolated locations.

It is the belief of Renato Vesco that one of the most likely locations for a hidden UFO base is the vast, mountainous, wooded region of southwest Canada, on the boundary between British Columbia and Alberta, bordering the state of Washington on the south. One of his reasons for this belief is that A.V. Roe Canada Limited (AVRO-Canada, since closed down) in Malton, Ontario, was responsible for the saucer-shaped Avrocar, or Omega, at a time when Canada was regarded as 'the Promised Land of Aviation' (J.H. Stevens) and 'among the greatest aeronautical powers in the world' (N.S. Currey), including, apart from AVRO, its fellow giants Canadair and De Havilland. Vesco supports his theory with the factually accurate contention that in the sightings that began the modern UFO era - the Kenneth Arnold and Maury Island sightings of 1947 - the UFOs were observed over Washington State and flew away in the direction of the Canadian border. It is also a fact that analysis of the UFO wave that preceded the famous UFO 'invasion' of Washington DC in 1952 revealed that the UFOs had advanced steadily on the capital from the direction of the Canadian border. The same has been true for many of the other American sightings.

The second most likely location for man-made saucers is in a sense the most unlikely, since it is inextricably entwined with 'hollow Earth' theories. Ironically, this idea, which had been around for centuries, became concrete for contemporary UFOlogists through aerial photos released in all innocence by an official US government body.

In early 1970 the Environmental Science Service Administration of the US Department of Commerce released to the press photographs of the North Pole

that had been taken by the ESSA-7 satellite on 23 November 1968. One of the photographs showed the North Pole wreathed in its customary cloud cover; the other, showing the same area without cloud cover, revealed an enormous black hole where the Pole should have been

Little did the Environmental Science Service Administration know that their routine weather reconnaissance photographs would lead to one of the most sensational and highly publicized controversies in UFO history.

In the June 1970 issue of *Flying Saucers* magazine, editor Ray Palmer reproduced the ESSA-7 satellite photographs with an accompanying article that claimed that the enormous hole shown on one of the photographs was real.

It had long been the belief of Ray Palmer and a great many other UFOlogists that the Earth is hollow, and that the UFOs emerge from and return to a civilization of superior beings that is hidden in the Earth's unexplored interior. Now, with an 'official' photograph of an enormous black hole at the North Pole, Palmer was able to assert that his subterranean super race probably existed and could most likely be reached through the holes at the North and South Poles.

According to Palmer, the ESSA-7 satellite photographs were proof that an enormous hole existed at least at the North Pole; and in subsequent issues of *Flying Saucers* he strengthened his case by resurrecting another long-standing 'hollow Earth' controversy: the famous expeditions of Rear-Admiral Richard E. Byrd to the North and South Poles.

Rear-Admiral Richard E. Byrd (1888-1957) of the US Navy was a distinguished pioneer aviator and polar explorer who flew over the North Pole on 9 May 1926, and then led numerous exploratory expeditions to the Antarctic, including a flight over the South Pole on 29 November 1929. From 1946 to 1947, he led the full-scale Operation Highjump, which was reported to have discovered and mapped 537,000 square miles (1,390,000 kilometres) of Antarctic territory. Just before his death, in 1957, he directed the 1955-1958 Antarctic expedition as a contribution to the International Geophysical Year.

Byrd's most famous polar expeditions were first drawn into the hollow Earth controversy when numerous articles and books - notably *Worlds Beyond the Poles* (1959) by Amadeo Giannini and *The Hollow Earth* (1969) by Dr Raymond Bernard - claimed that Byrd had actually flown, not *across*

the North and South Poles, but *down* into the great hollows that led into the Earth's interior. Ray Palmer, quoting extensively from Giannini's book (as, subsequently, did Dr Bernard), introduced this theory in the December 1959 issue of *Flying Saucers* and thereafter ran a voluminous correspondence on the subject.

According to Giannini, Bernard and Palmer, Rear-Admiral Byrd announced in February 1947, prior to a supposed flight of 1,700 miles (2,750 kilometres) beyond the North Pole: 'I'd like to see that *land beyond the Pole*. That area beyond the Pole is the centre of the *Great Unknown*.' Giannini, Bernard and Palmer also claimed that during Byrd's supposed flight over the North Pole in February 1947, he reported by radio that he saw below him, not ice and snow, but land areas consisting of mountains, forests, green vegetation, lakes and rivers; and, in the undergrowth, a strange animal that resembled a mammoth. Also, according to Giannini, Bernard and Palmer, in January 1956, after leading another expedition to the Antarctic, Byrd claimed that his expedition had there penetrated to a land extent of 2,300 miles (3,700 kilometres) *beyond* the South Pole. Last but not least, they claimed that just before his death in 1957, Byrd had called the land beyond the Pole 'that enchanted continent in the sky, land of everlasting mystery'. That land, according to other hollow Earth theorists, was actually the legendary Rainbow City, home of a fabulous lost civilization.

For Giannini, Bernard and Palmer, Rear-Admiral Byrd's reported comments merely confirmed what they had suspected all along: that the Earth is shaped 'strangely' at both Poles, something like a doughnut, with a depression that either goes down an enormous distance into the bowels of the Earth or forms a giant hole that runs right through the Earth's core, from one Pole to the other. Since geographically speaking it would be impossible to fly 1,700 miles (2,750 kilometres) beyond the North Pole or 2,300 miles (3,700 kilometres) beyond the South Pole without seeing water, it stands to reason that Rear-Admiral Byrd must have flown *down* into the enormous convex depressions at the Poles, into the 'Great Unknown' of the Earth's interior, and that, had he flown farther, he would have arrived eventually at the secret base of the UFOs belonging to the hidden super race - perhaps the legendary Rainbow City that Byrd had possibly seen reflected in the Antarctic sky.

Thus, when in June 1970 Ray Palmer was able to publish an official satellite photograph that showed what appeared to be an enormous black hole

at the North Pole, hollow Earth theorists all over the world were confirmed in their beliefs - and the controversy began.

But is the Earth really hollow? And do the holes in the Poles actually exist? The short answer is, 'No.'

The most extensive research has produced no confirmation for any of the extraordinary statements attributed to Rear-Admiral Byrd - nor for his reported flight over the North Pole in February 1947. (Byrd flew over the *South* Pole on 16 February 1947, during his extensive Operation Highjump.) Even accepting that Byrd *did* make such comments, it is more reasonable to assume that 'the land beyond the Pole' and the 'Great Unknown' were merely descriptive phrases for hitherto unexplored regions, rather than for unknown continents hidden in a hollow Earth - and that the 'enchanted continent in the sky' was no more than a description of a phenomenon common in Antarctic conditions: the mirage-like reflection of the land below.

But what, precisely, did Rear-Admiral Byrd say? In extracts from his journal, published in the *National Geographic* magazine of October 1947, he wrote: 'As I write this, we are circling the South Pole... The Pole is approximately 2,500 feet (760 metres) below us. On the other side of the Pole we are looking into that vast unknown area we have struggled so hard to reach.'

Did Byrd claim to have flown 1,700 (2,750 kilometres) beyond the North Pole in February 1947? No. Describing his flight beyond the *South* Pole on 16 February 1947, he wrote: 'We flew to approximately latitude 88° 30 south, an estimated 100 miles (160 kilometres). Then we made approximately a right-angle turn eastward until we reached the 45th east meridian, when we turned again, this time on the way back to Little America.'

Did Byrd report seeing on his journey, not ice and snow, but land areas consisting of mountains, forests, green vegetation, lakes and rivers; and, in the undergrowth, a strange animal that resembled a mammoth? No. According to his journal: 'Altogether we had surveyed nearly 10,000 square miles (25,900 square kilometres) of "the country beyond the Pole". As was to be expected, although it is somewhat disappointing to report, there was no observable feature of any significance beyond the Pole. There was only the rolling white desert from horizon to horizon.'

The fabled Rainbow City is almost certainly no more than a romanticized

rewrite of Rear-Admiral Byrd's original description of his flight back from the South Pole in February 1947, over hitherto unexplored country between the Beardmore and Wade Glaciers. 'It might have been called the Avenue of Frozen Rainbows,' Byrd wrote. 'To east and west towered great mountains. Some were free of ice - coal black and brick red. Others were completely ice-covered. These looked like titanic waterfalls. Where the sun struck their peaks and slopes the light was reflected from them in an indescribable complex of colours. There were blends of blue, purple, and green such as man seldom has seen.'

Thus, given Byrd's actual words as distinct from those attributed to him, we can see that neither lush green lands nor living mammoths were observed beyond the South Pole; that the quoted figure of 1,700 miles (2,750 kilometres) beyond the Pole, even if not invented, was probably extrapolated from an original figure given in square miles; that Rainbow City has no substance other than as Byrd's descriptive 'Avenue of Frozen Rainbows' - a normal atmospheric phenomenon in the Antarctic - and that 'the land beyond the Pole' and the 'Great Unknown' were actually, in Byrd's words, 'the vastest unknown which remains in the world'.

Nonetheless, could the Earth still be hollow? Again, the answer has to be negative. Contrary to the assertions of the hollow Earth theorists, the physical properties and structure of the Earth's interior can now be accurately measured with seismometers and electronic computers. Far from being hollow, the Earth is composed of three principal layers: the crust, the mantle and the core. The crust of granite and basalt rock is up to twenty-five miles (forty kilometres) thick (much thinner beneath the deep oceanic basins). Below the crust is the mantle, extending downwards for about 1,800 miles (2,900 kilometres), solid and composed of magnesium silicates, iron, calcium and aluminium. And below that is the core, believed to be predominantly composed of metallic iron in the molten state. Finally, at a depth of about 3,160 miles (5,090 kilometres), is the boundary of the inner core, which may be solid as the result of the freezing under the extraordinary pressure of about 3,200,000 atmospheres. Certainly, then, the Earth is not hollow.

So what about the enormous hole apparently shown on the ESSA-7 satellite photograph of the Arctic regions? The photograph is actually a mosaic of television images gathered by the onboard vidicon camera system of the satellite over 24 hours, showing the Earth from many angles. The

images were processed by a ground computer and reassembled to form a single composite view of the Earth as if observed from a single point directly over the Pole. During the 24 hours, every point in the middle and equatorial latitudes received sunlight for a period, and so appears on the composite picture. But regions near the Pole were experiencing the continuous darkness of the northern winter. Hence an unlit area occupies the centre of the picture.

Similar pictures made during the northern summer show the polar ice-cap. So do pictures made at any time of year using infrared (heat) wavelengths, since the Earth sends out heat radiation during both night and day.

In short, there are no holes at the Poles - and the Earth is not hollow.

Although the Antarctic is an inhospitable continent known as the White Desert and Home of the Blizzard, where snow and ice form 95 per cent of the surface terrain, it does have many ice free areas, such as the Taylor, Wright and Victoria valleys near McMurdo Sound. Other, lesser known ice free areas are hidden at the base of mountains or under the vast ice sheets that reach heights of 11,500 feet. Contrary to popular belief, Antarctica also has rivers, lakes, about 800 species of cold-tolerant land plants, mosses, linchens, liverworts, molds, yeasts, other fungi, and varied flora and fauna. As the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* tells us: ‘The continent was ice free during most of its lengthy geological history, and there is no reason to believe it will not become so again in the probably distant future.’

It is not yet known just what lies concealed in buried mountain ranges, such as the recently found Gamburtsev Mountains. The extraordinarily thick cover (average thickness of 6,500 feet), the extreme difficulty of the working conditions, and the great expense of mounting expeditions into remote areas have ‘long left geological knowledge of Antarctica far behind that of other continents’. In other words, while Antarctica is a place that can be inhabited by man, the greater portion of it remains relatively unexplored, therefore unknown.

While the Englishman Edward Bransfield, the American Nathaniel Palmer, and the Russian Fabian Gottlieb von Bellingshausen all claim first sightings of the continent in 1820, the first actual sighting is now believed to have been by the latter. Exploitation of the rich Antarctic and sub-Antarctic seas, particularly along Scotia Ridge, took place from the 1760s to about

1900, with the hunting of seal and whales by US, British, Argentine, Australian, New Zealand, German, and Norwegian vessels. Bellingshausen, commanding the Russian ships *Vostok* and *Mirny*, made the first circumnavigation of the continent in 1819-21; a British expedition led by Branson charted part of the Antarctic peninsula in 1819-20; the French expedition of 1837-40, commanded by Dumont d'Urville, led to the discovery of Adélie Land, which the French claimed; the US Naval expedition led by Charles Wilkes explored a large section of the East Antarctic coast in 1838-42; and during the British expedition of 1839-43, James Clark Ross discovered the Ross Sea and Ross Ice Barrier (now the Ross Ice Shelf), as well as the coast of Victoria Land.

The great era of land exploration began in the period 1901-13 when the Englishmen Robert F. Scott and Ernest Henry Shackleton led three expeditions into the interior, making important geological, glaciological, and meteorological discoveries that laid the foundations for the present-day scientific program. Even deeper probes into the continent were made by Scott and Shackleton in later years, both launched from base camps on Ross Island, with the latter reaching a point within ninety-seven miles of the South Pole on 9 January 1909. Scott eventually reached the Pole itself on `7 January 1912.

By this time Shackleton had presaged the mechanical age in Antarctica with the use of a motor car at Cape Royds, and Scott had presaged the aerial age by using a captive balloon for aerial reconnaissance. However, the true beginning of the mechanical, particularly the aerial, exploration of the continent began in the period between World Wars 1 and II, when motor transport, aircraft, aerial cameras and radios came into their own. The first Antarctic heavier-than-air flight was made on 16 November 1928 by Alaskan bush pilot C.B. Eielson and George Herbert Wilkins in a Lockheed Vega monoplane. Rear-Admiral Richard E. Byrd was first to fly over the South Pole, which he did on 29 November 1929. He followed this great achievement with his four famous air-supported expeditions, which took place between 1928 and 1947, leading to the increasing use of skiplanes and aerial photography.

The south geomagnetic pole, the theoretical pole of the Earth's magnetic field, was reached by a Soviet IGY (International Geophysical Year of 1957-58) tractor traverse on 16 December 1957; and the pole of relative

inaccessibility, the point most remote from all coasts, was reached, again by the Soviets, on 14 December 1958. After various set-backs, the dream of an overland crossing of the continent came true when, on 24 November 1957, using tracked vehicles and aided by aerial flights, the British Commonwealth Trans-Antarctic Expedition led by Vivian Fuchs left Shackleton Base on Filchner Ice Shelf and, by way of the South Pole, reached the New Zealand Scott Base on Ross Island on 2 March 1958.

By this time, territorial claims were being made by the various nations involved in exploration. Between 1908 and 1942, seven nations decreed sovereignty over certain sectors of the continent. While the US refused to recognize any claims of sovereignty as valid, Chile claimed Ellsworth Land, Australia claimed the American Highland near Amery Ice Shelf of East Antarctica, Nazi Germany claimed Queen Maud Land even though it was claimed by Norway, the French claimed Adélie Land, and though the British initially claimed Victoria Land, it was later claimed by New Zealand. In January 1943, in the middle of World War II, the British ignored Argentine's claim to Deception Island and established a base there. Britain, Argentina and Chile squabbled over various claims to the Antarctic Peninsula, with violence flaring up on occasion. By the early 1950s, with the US still refusing to recognize any claims of sovereignty as valid and the Soviet Union taking the same stand regarding claims made without its participation, a profusion of British, Argentine and Chilean bases was cluttering the Peninsula and nearby islands, while France, Norway, Sweden, South Africa, and Australia had raised their flags defiantly over other areas.

Notably absent from this collection was Germany, so recently defeated in war. This is ironic in that Nazi Germany had a particular interest in the Antarctic; and by the early 1950s, studies of the non-military aspects of Nazi philosophy were revealing just why this was so.

The Third Reich was born from a dangerous *völkish* mysticism: the Cosmic Circle of Munich; the Anthroposophy of Rudolph Steiner; the Theosophy and Rosicrucianism of Vienna and Prague; the Luminous Lodge and the Thule Group; the ancient dreams of Atlantis and Lemuria and the true 'Nordic' German. Central to this was the bizarre 'World Ice' theory of the unorthodox cosmologist, Hans Hörbiger, who preached that the universe had come into being because of, and was maintained by, an eternal struggle

between ice and fire. According to Hörbiger, the original ‘free’ matter in the universe was in the form of frozen ice. Chunks of the ice often fell into stars, and the debris from the resulting, immense explosion formed our planetary system. As this theory could be used to discredit the Theory of Relativity put forward by Dr Albert Einstein, an eminent Jew, it was taken up enthusiastically by many Nazis, including the party philosopher, Alfred Rosenberg, and the mystically inclined Heinrich Himmler and Rudolf Hess. The last two named also believed in Thule, which actually lies off the coast of Greenland, but which legend has it was a long vanished civilization, like Atlantis, consisting of a pure Aryan, or ‘Nordic’ peoples.

This vision of a ‘pure’ Aryan race, or ‘Master Race’, became inextricably entwined with the belief that the lost Thule was not the ‘Thule’ located in Greenland, but another place altogether, which had not been lost but merely moved elsewhere, either by the shifting of land masses or by one of the many ‘cosmic’ catastrophes described by Hörbiger. Last but not least, since part of Hörbiger's theory, as well as the so-called ‘secret doctrine’, has it that mankind lives on the inside surface of a hollow Earth, certain Nazis, including Himmler and Hess, began thinking of the resurrection of the Master Race in terms of isolated colonies, located in Nordic, or icy, areas where the ‘impurities’ of German youth could be breeded out and the ‘pure’ Aryan ‘Master Race’ be recreated through the process of selective breeding and monastic, military discipline.

To this end, the Nazi hierarchy created Himmler’s Death’s Head SS troops, practised the sterilization or extermination of ‘inferior’ races, researched racial characteristics through the *Ahnenerbe* (Institute for Research into Heredity), including the ghastly ‘anthropological’ experiments undertaken in the concentration camps, and established ‘breeding colonies’ in the shape of the ghastly *Lebensborn* organization which, under the guise of a national maternity home and hostel for nursing mothers, was actually a collection of stud farms for the elite of the SS. The Nazis also raced to invent highly advanced ‘secret weapons’ and find the great spaces (hopefully underground, or well hidden, like the many immense rocket sites) before the war ended with their defeat.

This much is known. Toward the end of 1938, Hitler, anxious for a foothold in the Antarctic, sent an expedition commanded by Captain Alfred Rischter

to the South Atlantic Ocean coastal region of Antarctica. The expedition arrived there in early 1939. Daily for three weeks two seaplanes were catapulted from the deck of the German aircraft carrier, *Schwabenland*, with orders to fly back and forth across the territory that previous Norwegian explorers had named Queen Maud Land. According to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: 'The German Antarctic Expedition of 1939 aerially photographed an extensive segment of Princess Astrid and Princess Martha coasts of western Queen Maud Land and, dropping metal swastikas over the region, claimed it for the Hitler government (the area is now claimed by Norway)'. The Germans called this territory Neu Schwabenland.

Throughout the war, German ships and U-boats continued to prowl the South Atlantic Ocean along the coastline of Antarctica, thus blocking any possible incursions into Neu Schwabenland. In 1941 a couple of large Norwegian whaling ships were seized by boarding parties from the German raider *Pinguin* as they rested at anchor in their own territorial waters just off Queen Maud Land. Within hours of that incident, a Norwegian supply ship and most of the nearby whaling convoy suffered the same fate. Not long after, in May 1941, HMS *Cornwall* located and sank the *Pinguin*, but not before the latter had captured a whole string of Allied merchant ships totalling more than 135,000 tons. What is also historical fact is that *Pinguin's* sister ships, appropriately named *Komet* and *Atlantis*, continued to prowl the Antarctic shores until the end of the war.

In London there was growing concern that a 'pro-German Argentine government' might take control of the vital Drake Passage. Thus, in 1944, the British established a permanent base on Deception Island.

On 25 April 1945 the German submarine *U-977*, commanded by Captain Heinz Schaeffer, put out of Kiel Harbour in the Baltic. That submarine stopped in at Christiansand South on 26 April, departed the following day, and was not seen again until it surfaced at Mar del Plata, Argentina, on 17 August - a period of nearly four months.

Where was the submarine all that time? According to Captain Schaeffer, he had left with the intention of patrolling the South Atlantic Ocean, had docked for fuel at Christiansand South the following day, and had then, several days later, heard over the radio the news that the war was over. Convinced that they would not be treated too kindly by the Allied Command, Schaeffer gave his crew the option of being put off along the coast of Norway

or instead traveling on with him to what he assumed would be a friendly Argentina. Since some of the crew preferred to return to Germany, the next few days were spent in hugging the Norwegian coastline, until, on 10 May, some of the men were dropped off on the mountain coast not far from Bergen. This done, according to Schaeffer, he and the remaining crew embarked upon what surely must have been one of the most remarkable naval feats of the war: a journey through the North Sea and English Channel, past Gibraltar and along the coast of Africa, to finally surface, all of sixty-six days later, in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean. During the next month they alternated between floating on the surface and diving back to the depths, once even surfacing off the Cape Verde Islands and going ashore on Branca Island; another time going so far as to 'disguise' the submarine when it was on the surface by rigging up false sails and funnel to make it more like a cargo steamer.

Finally, when close to Rio de Janeiro, they heard over their radio that another fleeing German submarine, *U-530*, had put into the River Plate and that its crew had been handed over to the United States as prisoners of war. Disturbed by this news, Schaeffer nonetheless put into Mar del Plata on 17 August 1945 - nearly four months after he had put out from Kiel harbour.

Since this is an unusually, even remarkably, long time for a submarine such as the *U-977* to be at sea, Captain Schaeffer, when he docked at Mar del Plata, was interrogated by the Argentine authorities regarding why he had arrived in Argentina so long after the war had ended. He was also asked if *U-977* had carried anyone of 'political importance' during its voyage to Argentina. He explained his late arrival in Argentina with the fantastic story recounted above, and stated that no-one of political importance had ever been aboard *U-977*.

Even more intriguing is that a few weeks later, an Anglo-American commission, composed of high-ranking officers flown especially to Argentina to investigate the 'mysterious case' of *U-977*, spent a great deal of time interrogating Schaeffer regarding the possibility that he might have taken Hitler and Martin Bormann aboard his U-boat, first to Patagonia, then on to a secret Nazi base in the Antarctic. Indeed, they were so insistent on this that they subsequently flew Schaeffer and his crew - *and* Otto Wehrmut, commander of *U-530* - back to a prisoner-of-war camp near Washington DC, where for months they continued their interrogations. The fate of Wehrmut

remains unknown, but according to Schaeffer, he repeatedly denied having shipped anyone anywhere. Nonetheless, he was then handed over to the British in Antwerp, Belgium, and *again* interrogated for many months. Oddly, since Schaeffer stuck to his story and reportedly the Allies found nothing unusual in *U-977*, the submarine was taken to the United States where, under direct orders from the US War Department, it was blown to pieces.

As for Schaeffer, whether telling the truth or not, he was shipped back to Germany, did not feel comfortable under Allied rule, and so went back to join other expatriate German officers in Argentina - which was, and remains, the last major stop before the South Atlantic coastline of Antarctica.

This much is known, also. The International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957-58 was created to allow the nations of the world to 'take advantage of increasing technological developments, interest in polar regions, and, not the least, the maximum sunspot activity expected in 1957-58. It was adopted by the International Council of Scientific Unions (ICSU) and coordinated by the Comité Spécial de l'Année Géophysique Internationale (CSAGI) and eventually, with 67 nations joining, plans were laid for simultaneous observations of the sun, the aurora, the magnetic field, the ionosphere, and cosmic rays. Twelve nations taking part established more than fifty overtime winter stations on the continent. Massive tractor runs and airlifts enabled inland stations to be established: Byrd Station in West Antarctica for the US; Amundsen-Scott Station at the South Pole, also for the US; and Vostok Station at the geomagnetic pole for the USSR and at the pole of inaccessibility, also for the USSR. Many coastal bases were also established.

This was the greatest scientific program ever launched in the history of Mankind - and its main concentration was on two areas: outer space and Antarctica. For eighteen months, from 1 July 1957 to 31 December 1958, there was a frenzy of scientific activity, resulting in a vast collection of data on cosmic rays, the aurora and airglow, geomagnetism, gravity measurement, ionospheric physics, meteorology, oceanography, and seismology. Even more startling, in recollection, is that this wealth of information was gathered by satellites launched by the United States and the Soviet Union. It was then, through World Data Centres established to collect all observations, made freely available for analysis to scientists of *any* nation.

Even as this unprecedented act of international cooperation was taking place, notably in Antarctica, worldwide UFO sightings were reaching their peak and, simultaneously, a blanket of disinformation and secrecy was falling over what was now being termed officially: ‘the UFO problem’.

Chapter 12

Disinformation and the International Cover-Up

US Air Force involvement in official UFO investigations began as far back as 1947 at the Intelligence Division of the Air Force's Air Material Command, based at Wright Field (now Wright-Patterson AFB) in Dayton, Ohio. Contrary to its public debunking of civilian UFO sightings, the Air Force was actually in a state of near panic because of a wave of sightings, first over Maxwell Air Force Base in Montgomery Alabama, then, to the horror of the top brass, over the White Sands Proving Ground - right in the middle of their Atom bomb territory. Finally, after a whole series of sightings on 8 July 1947, over Muroc Air Base (now Edwards AFB) - their top-secret Air Force test centre in the Mojave Desert, California - they decided to do something about it.

General Nathan Twining, commander of the Air Materiel Command, wrote to the commanding general of the Army-Air Force stating that the phenomenon was something real, that it was not 'visionary or fictitious', and that the objects were disk-shaped, as large as aircraft, and *controlled*. Shortly after, on 22 January 1948, a UFO investigation program, Project Sign, was established, given a 2A classification, and placed under the jurisdiction of the Intelligence Division of the Air Force's Air Material Command at Wright Field. Later renamed the Air Technical Intelligence Centre, or ATIC, its function was to 'collect, collate, evaluate and distribute to interested government agencies and contractors all information concerning sightings and phenomena in the atmosphere which can be construed to be of concern to the national security'.

The UFO-related death of Air Force pilot Captain Thomas F. Mantell over Godman AFB, Kentucky, on 7 January 1948, combined with the 'classic' UFO sighting made by Eastern Airlines Captain Charles S. Chiles and co-pilot John B. Whitted near Montgomery, Alabama, on the evening of 24 July the same year, prompted Project Sign to write an official, top-secret Estimate of the Situation. That Estimate outlined the whole history of UFO sightings, including the fireballs, Scandinavian 'ghost rockets' and American

sightings before 1947, then concluded that the UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin. Classified as top secret and issued in July 1948, the Estimate was sent through channels, all the way to Chief of Staff, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg; but to the surprise of all concerned, the general rejected it on the grounds that it 'lacked proof'.

Possibly it was fear of further offending the powerful general that led to a whole new policy at Project Sign: in the future, Sign personnel were to assume that *all* UFO reports were hoaxes. Not only that, but they had to check with FBI officers, and with the criminal and subversive files of police departments, looking into the private lives of the witnesses to see if they were 'reliable'. Most of the Project Sign team took this as fair warning that it was not particularly wise to raise the subject of UFO sightings - and as if to prove them right, the Sign Estimate was later incinerated, reportedly on the orders of General Vandenberg.

On 11 February 1949, Project Sign was renamed Project Grudge. While the Air Force claimed that this was because the classified name 'Sign' had been compromised, there were those who took it as another indication of General Vandenberg's displeasure with their findings. Certainly, the new, lowlier status of Project Grudge was indicated in the recommendation made in Project Sign's final report: 'Future activity on this project should be carried on at the *minimum* level (author's emphasis) necessary to record, summarize and evaluate the data received on future reports and to complete the specialized investigations now in progress.'

It now became the function of Project Grudge to shift the investigations away from the actual UFOs and on to those who reported them - but since a good twenty-three per cent of their reports were still classified as unknowns, this wasn't that easy. Nevertheless, Project Grudge launched a public relations campaign designed to convince the American public that UFOs did not represent 'anything unusual or extraordinary'. As part of their 'debunking' effort, they encouraged the *Saturday Evening Post* journalist Sidney Shallet to write a two-part article exposing UFOs as a waste of time; but when that backfired by increasing public interest rather than diminishing it, the Air Force tried to counteract by stating officially that UFOs were either misidentifications of natural phenomenon or the products of mass hallucination.

Project Grudge issued its final report in August 1949 - only six months

after its inception. Put simply, its conclusion was that while 23 per cent of the UFO reports were still classified as unknowns, most had ‘psychological explanations’ and the investigation was therefore a waste of time and should be downgraded even further. On 27 December the Air Force announced the termination of the project. Shortly after, the Project Grudge records were stored and most of its personnel were widely scattered.

The most famous, and certainly the most respected, head of the Air Force’s UFO research project was Captain Edward J. Ruppelt, who was assigned to the Air Technical Intelligence Centre in January 1951, working as project director under General Lieutenant Jerry Cummings. Prior to moving to ATIC, Ruppelt had no particular interest in UFOs, but what he found in the ATIC files intrigued him.

He was particularly impressed by the reports on the two movies taken in 1950 by Air Force technicians at the White Sands Proving Ground (not to be confused with the cinetheodolite photos taken earlier by Navy Commander R.B. McLaughlin), which was fully instrumented to track high-altitude, fast-moving objects - usually the guided missiles - and had camera stations equipped with cinetheodolite cameras located all over the area. In June of that year two UFOs had been shot by two different cameras. By putting a correction factor in the data gathered by the two cameras, the Photo Laboratory at White Sands was able to arrive at a ‘rough’ estimation of the objects’ size, altitude and speed. According to their report, the UFOs were over 300 feet in diameter, higher than 40,000 feet, and traveling at over 2,000 mph.

On 25 August 1951 the famous UFO sightings at Lubbock, Texas, caused an enormous stir with the American public. When those sightings were followed by the Fort Monmouth sightings of 12 September 1951 - which were clearly seen by a lot of visiting top brass - the Air Force was galvanized back into action and, in March 1952, Project Grudge was upgraded from ‘a project within a group’ to a separate organization. Renamed Project Blue Book, it was based at ATIC in Wright-Patterson AFB, Dayton, Ohio, with Captain Ruppelt as its chief.

Ruppelt took the UFO sightings seriously, but after the debacle of the Washington UFO ‘invasion’ of July, 1952, when he was hampered from doing his job and so many witnesses contradicted their original statements, he

became convinced that pilots reporting UFOs were being intimidated into changing their reports or simply remaining silent, that a lot of information was being withheld from Blue Book, and that the CIA were stepping into the picture for unexplained reasons.

The person who most worried Ruppelt was Chief of Staff, General Hoyt S. Vandenberg. It was Vandenberg who had buried the original Project Sign Estimate, caused its incineration, and had the project renamed Project Grudge. It is not clear just *how much* Vandenberg was influencing either the Air Force or the CIA, but he had been head of the Central Intelligence Group (later the CIA) from June 1946 to May 1947 and his uncle had been chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, then the most powerful committee in the Senate. Clearly, Vandenberg still had great influence in those areas - and according to Ruppelt, pressure was always coming from them to suppress the results of official UFO investigations.

Ruppelt was therefore not surprised when he was informed that the CIA and some high-ranking officers, including Generals Vandenberg and Samford, were, against the objections of the Batelle Memorial Institute (a private research group used by the Air Force to carry out statistical studies of UFO characteristics), convening a panel of scientists to analyze all the Blue Book data. Nor was he surprised to discover that this panel was to be headed by Dr H.P. Robertson, director of the Weapons System Evaluation Group in the Office of the Secretary of Defence - and a CIA classified employee.

The Robertson Panel was convened in great secrecy in Washington DC during January 1953. While some insist that it opened on 12 January, the dates on the group's final report state 14- 18 January. Apart from Robertson, the group's panel consisted of physicist and Nobel Prize-winner Luis W. Alvarez; geophysicist and radar specialist Lloyd V. Berkner, and physicist Samuel Goudsmit, both of the Brookhaven National Laboratories; and astronomer and astrophysicist Thornton Page, Deputy Director of the John Hopkins Operations Research Office. Other participants included J. Allen Hynek, then a consultant to the United States Air Force; Frederick C. Durant, an army ordnance test station director; William M. Garland, the Commanding General of the Air Technical Intelligence Centre (ATIC); ATIC's Pentagon liaison officer, Major Dewey Fournet; Project Blue Book chief, Captain Ruppelt; two officers from the Navy Photo Interpretation Laboratory; and

three high-ranking CIA representatives.

The seriousness with which the subject was supposed to be treated is best illustrated not only by the calibre of the men involved, but also by the fact that the group's report was to be given to the National Security Council (NSC) and then, if the decision was that the UFOs were of extraterrestrial origin, to the President himself. This may have been so much cotton wool.

For the first two days of the session, Captain Ruppelt reviewed the Blue Book findings for the scientists. First, he pointed out that Blue Book received reports of only 10 per cent of the UFO sightings made in the United States, which meant that in five and a half years about 44,000 sightings had been made. He then broke the sightings down into the percentage that was composed of balloons, aircraft, astronomical bodies, and other misinterpretations, such as birds, blowing paper, noctilucent and lenticular clouds, temperature inversions, reflections, and so forth, and pointed out that this still left 429 as definite 'unknowns'. Of those unknowns, it was clear that the most reported shape was elliptical, the most often reported colour was white or metallic, the same number of UFOs were reported as being seen in daylight as at night, and the direction of travel equally covered the sixteen cardinal points of the compass. 70 per cent of those unknowns had been seen visually from the air - in other words, by experienced pilots and navigators; 12 per cent had been seen visually from the ground; 10 per cent had been picked up by airborne and ground radar; and 8 per cent were combination visual-radar sightings. Ruppelt also confirmed that many UFO reports came from top-secret military establishments, such as atomic energy and missile-testing installations, plus harbours and manufacturing areas.

Ruppelt and Major Dewey Fournet had completed an analysis of the motions of the reported unknowns as a means of determining if they were intelligently controlled. Regarding this, Major Fournet told the panel of how, by eliminating every possibility of balloons, aeroplanes, astronomical bodies, and so forth, from the hundreds of reports studied, and by then analyzing the motions of the UFOs in the remaining unknown category, his study group had been forced to conclude that the UFOs were, in the words of the group report: 'intelligently controlled by persons with brains equal to, or far surpassing, ours'. The next step in the study, Fournet explained, had been to find out where those beings came from; and since it seemed unlikely that their machines could have been built in secret, the answer was that the beings

were from outer space.

The morning after Fournet's summary, the panel was shown four strips of movie film that had been assessed as falling into the 'definite unknown' category. These were the cinetheodolite movies taken by Air Force technicians at the White Sands Proving Ground on 27 April 1950 and approximately a month later; the 'Montana' movie taken on 15 August 1950 by the manager of the Great Falls baseball team; and the 'Tremonton' movie taken on 2 July 1952 by Navy Chief Photographer, Warrant Officer Delbert C. Newhouse.

One of the White Sands movies showed 'a dark smudgy object' which proved only, in the words of Ruppelt, 'that something had been in the air and, whatever it was, it had been *moving'*. The second movie had been analyzed by the Data Reduction Group at Wright-Patterson AFB, with results indicating that the object had been approximately higher than 40,000 feet, traveling over 2,000 mph, and was over 300 feet in diameter. The Montana movie showed two large, bright lights flying across the blue sky in an echelon formation; the lights did not show any detail, but they appeared to be large, circular objects. The Tremonton movie showed about a dozen shiny, disk-like objects fading in and out constantly, performing extraordinary aerial manoeuvres, and darting in and out and circling one another in a cloudless blue sky. Any possibility that the objects might have been astronomical phenomena was dispelled when the film clearly showed them heading in the same tight cluster toward the western horizon and, more specifically, when one of them left the main group and shot off to the east.

The Montana movie had been subjected to thousands of hours of analysis in the Air Force laboratory at Wright Field and the results proved conclusively that the objects were not birds, balloons, aircraft, meteors, clouds, or reflections - in short, they were unknowns. As for the Tremonton movie, it had been studied for two solid months by the Navy Laboratory in Anacostia, Maryland, and their conclusion was that the unidentifieds were not birds or aeroplanes, were probably traveling at several thousands of miles an hour, and were, judging by their extraordinary manoeuvres, intelligently controlled vehicles.

In the view of Ruppelt and Fournet, the evidence seemed conclusive - yet the Robertson Panel still managed to reject it. After going over the evidence for two days, the panel concluded in its report that the evidence was *not*

substantial, that the continued emphasis on the reporting of the phenomenon was resulting in ‘a threat to the orderly functioning of the protective organs of the body politic’, and that the reports clogged military channels, could possibly precipitate mass hysteria, and might encourage defence personnel to misidentify or ignore actual enemy aircraft. In other words: the real problem was not the UFOs - it was the UFO *reports*.

Based on this assessment, the Robertson Panel made some unexpected, even startling, recommendations. First, it recommended that the two major private UFO organizations - the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) and the Civilian Saucer Intelligence (CSI) - be watched because of what was described as their ‘potentially great influence on mass thinking’ in the event of widespread sightings. Included in this recommendation was the statement: ‘The apparent irresponsibility and the possible use of such groups for subversive purposes should be kept in mind.’ Next, it recommended that the national security agencies take immediate steps to strip the UFO phenomenon of its importance and eliminate the ‘aura of mystery’ it had acquired, the means being a ‘public education program’. Finally, the panel outlined a program of ‘public education’ with two purposes: training and debunking. The former would help people identify known objects and thus reduce the mass of reports caused by misidentification; the latter would reduce public interest in UFOs and thereby decrease or eliminate UFO reports.

As a means of pursuing this ‘education’ program, the panel suggested that the government hire psychologists familiar with mass psychology, military training film companies, Walt Disney Productions, and popular personalities such as Arthur Godfrey to subtly convey this new thinking to the masses. Also, contrary to what the CIA were later to tell Ruppelt, it was decided *not* to declassify the sighting reports and, instead, to tighten security even more and continue to deny ‘non-military personnel’ access to UFO files.

It was clear then, certainly to Captain Ruppelt and other members of Project Blue Book, that the whole purpose of the Robertson Panel was to enable the Air Force to state for the next decade or so that an *impartial* body had examined the UFO data and found no evidence for anything unusual in the skies. While this was an obvious distortion of fact, it *did* mean that the Air Force could now avoid discussing the nature of the objects and instead concentrate on the public relations campaign to eliminate the UFO reports

totally.

Given the nature of the Robertson Panel's recommendations, there can be little doubt that they were directly responsible for the policy of ridicule and denial that has inhibited an effective study of the phenomenon ever since.

In December 1952, when it became obvious that the CIA and Air Force intelligence were between them trying to severely limit the investigations of Project Blue Book, Captain Ruppelt asked for a transfer. By the following February, when he was due to leave, no replacement for him had arrived; nor were there any replacements when Lieutenant Flues was transferred to the Alaskan Air Command, when Lieutenant Rothstein's tour of active duty ended, or when others on the staff left or were transferred out. Thus, when Ruppelt was transferred out in February, he left a drastically reduced Blue Book staff. By the time he returned, in July, he found that the Air Force had reassigned most of the remaining staff, that they had sent no replacements for them, and that his Blue Book now consisted of only himself and a mere two assistants. Project Blue Book had virtually been closed down.

In August 1953 Ruppelt left the Air Force... and the Pentagon issued the notorious Air Force Regulation 200-2. This was drafted purely as a public relations weapon in that it prohibited the release of *any* information about a sighting to the public or media, except when it was *positively* identified as natural phenomena. In addition, whereas AFR 200-5, the previous classification, had stated that sightings should not be classified higher than restricted, the new regulation ensured that *all* sightings would be classified as restricted. Then, much worse, in December 1953 the Joint Chiefs of Staff followed AFR 200-2 with Joint-Army-Navy-Air Force Publication 146. This made the releasing of *any* information to the public a crime under the Espionage Act, punishable by a one to ten year prison term or a fine of $10,000. And the most ominous aspect of JANAP 146 was that it applied to anyone who knew it existed, including commercial airline pilots.

Needless to say, this new regulation effectively put a stop to the flow of information to the public.

By the end of that year, the investigating authority of the decimated Project Blue Book had been handed over to the inexperienced 402d Air Intelligence Squadron and most of its operations had been cut off by a drastic reduction in funding. Ruppelt, Fournet and the other original members of the

team were no longer involved; and General Garland, once a strong Ruppelt supporter, never again raised his voice in defence of any UFO investigation.

To all intents and purposes, and contrary to official Air Force pronouncements, the UFO project had been plunged into secrecy.

Why?

By 1953 the US was fighting the war in Korea, the Soviets had dropped their first hydrogen bomb, and the cold war was in its chilliest phase. This was good enough reason for the Robert Panel to claim that the UFO reports were a threat to national security: first, because a deliberately confused American public might think attacking enemy bombers were merely UFOs; second, because a foreign power could exploit the UFO craze to make the public doubt official Air Force statements about UFOs and thereby undermine public confidence in the military; and third, because in terms of psychological warfare, the communications lines of the whole country could be saturated by a few hundred phone calls; and such calls (which always came after a rash of UFO sightings) were putting the defence network in jeopardy.

Those were the reasons given for the recommended program of ‘public education’, or, in layman's terms, the suppression of information.

If it is true that national security was the issue, then the suppression of information had a certain amount of logic behind it. However, if national security was the *only* concern, why was the Air Force humiliating so many UFO witnesses, harassing its own ground and air crews into remaining silent, and even threatening civilian airline pilots with enormous fines or jail sentences? The only explanation is that the higher echelons of the Air Force were more concerned about the phenomenon that they were willing to admit, that they possibly knew more about it than they were willing to say, and that for reasons of their own, they were actively discouraging their most competent personnel, such as Captain Ruppelt, from investigating or reporting on the subject.

In September 1952, approximately four months before the convening of the Robertson Panel, Ruppelt had investigated the UFO sightings over the NATO fleet during Operation Mainbrace and assessed all the sightings as unknowns. This encouraged him to imagine that he could now pin down the UFOs for good - and it was this very enthusiasm that led to the destruction of

the most important system ever devised for UFO research.

For a long time Ruppelt and Brigadier General Garland, then chief at ATIC, had been looking for a way of getting concrete information about the UFOs. What they eventually came up with was a plan for visual spotting stations to be established all over northern Mexico - the area that had consistently produced more UFO reports than any other place in America. The visual spotting stations would be equipped with specially designed sighting devices, all of which would be linked with an instantaneous interphone system; any two stations could then track the same object and, from their separate readings, compute the UFO's altitude, speed and characteristics. Also at each visual spotting station would be instruments to measure the passage of any body that was giving off heat, any disturbance in Earth's magnetic field, and any increase in nuclear radiation at the time of the sighting.

This was the first time that a proper, scientific system had been designed and submitted to the Air Force. According to Ruppelt, it was virtually foolproof and had it been adopted, it would have been possible to track, photograph and measure UFOs with unprecedented precision - yet nothing came of it.

There is no proof that the Air Force deliberately killed it off, but these are the facts as reported by Ruppelt...

In December 1952, when Ruppelt's plans went to Washington DC for approval, the US Navy were preparing to shoot their first H-bomb during Project Ivy and some officers in the Pentagon, recalling the unidentifieds seen over Operation Mainbrace, directed Ruppelt to fly out to the test area and organize a UFO reporting team. That order actually came down in November, but Ruppelt's plans for the visual-radar sighting network were received in Washington DC the following month... and a few days later, for reasons never explained, Ruppelt's trip to Project Ivy was cancelled. A month later, in January 1953, came the Robertson Panel and its consequences. By August of that year, Ruppelt had left the Air Force - and the activities of Project Blue Book were wound down.

After leaving the Air Force, Ruppelt went to work for the Northrop Aircraft Company and, in his spare time, wrote *The Report on Unidentified Flying Objects* (1956), in which he stated his belief that UFOs were a genuine phenomenon and probably of extraterrestrial origin. Three years

later, however, he inexplicably revised the book, adding three chapters in which he completely reversed his previous opinions. Many believe that this was due to pressure from official quarters; others are equally convinced that it was his response to the wilder claims of UFO contactees.

Since Ruppelt died unexpectedly of a heart attack in 1960, shortly after revising his book, the truth will probably never be known.

Throughout the UFO controversy, the scientists had remained silent, but in 1965, after a fresh, spectacular wave of sightings over Texas had caused nationwide concern and a revival of press interest, the US Air Force in particular came under fire for supposedly not telling the truth about UFOs. Knowing of the Air Force's concern, Dr J. Allen Hynek suggested that they set up a 'panel of civilian scientists' to review the situation once and for all, and the Air Force, agreeing, turned the program over to the Public Information Office. This led to the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee to Review Project Blue Book. It was headed by Dr Brian O'Brien, and the rest of the team, excepting Dr Carl Sagan, were members of the Air Force's scientific advisory board. The committee met for one day in February 1966, reviewed the Robertson report, and decided that while the UFOs did not threaten the national security, they *did* warrant further investigation. Their main recommendation was that the Air Force negotiate contracts with a few selected universities to provide teams of specialists who could investigate 'promptly and in depth' selected sightings of UFOs.

On 20 March 1966, eighty-seven women and a civil defence director at Hillsdale College, Michigan, saw a 'football-shaped, glowing object hovering over a swampy area a few hundred yards from the woman's dormitory'. The object flew repeatedly at, and retreated from, the dormitory, dodged an airport beacon light, dimmed and brightened, and was observed by the witnesses for four hours. The next day, five people, including two police officers, in Dexter, Michigan, saw a similar object rising from a swampy area on a farm. It hovered for a few minutes at about 1,000 feet, then left the area. Over a hundred other reports of similar sightings were received in those two nights in those two cities sixty-three miles apart.

The sightings led to an extraordinary press conference, held in the Detroit Press Club. Representing the Air Force, Dr J. Allen Hynek suggested to the clamouring journalists that the UFOs, or lights, could have been the

result of decaying vegetation that spontaneously ignited, creating a faint glow - in other words, swamp gas. His tentative suggestion was blown out of all proportion by the press, leading to accusations that the Air Force was engaged in a cover-up. There were also demands in the media for a proper, scientific investigation to be mounted. So great was the uproar that House Republican minority leader (later US President) Gerald R. Ford and Weston E. Vivian, Democratic congressman for Michigan, formally called for congressional hearings. Thus, on 5 April 1966, for the first time in the history of the UFO controversy, Congress held an open hearing on the subject. This led to the O'Brien committee recommendations being implemented - which in turn led to what many would consider to be the biggest Air Force cover-up of them all: the Condon committee report.

A Gallup Poll undertaken in May 1966 indicated that 96 per cent of the American people had heard or read about UFOs and that approximately *nine million* of them were convinced that they had actually seen one. That same month, a besieged Air Force disclosed publicly that it was going to contract with scientists for a UFO investigation. Five months later, on 7 October 1966, the Air Force announced that the University of Colorado had accepted the UFO project and that Dr Edward U. Condon, internationally known physicist and former head of the National Bureau of Standards, would be in charge. Working with Condon on the project would be Robert Low (Assistant Dean of the Graduate School) as project coordinator, and psychologists Stuart Cook and Franklin Roach as principal investigators.

In October 1966 the Condon committee got off to a bad start and went inexorably downhill thereafter. Within days of its formation, Condon was making it publicly clear that he did not believe in extraterrestrials or flying saucers, but *did* believe that the Air Force had been doing a good job of investigating the phenomenon. He also stated that there was 'an appalling lack of understanding' of 'ordinary phenomena' that could resemble UFOs, and that he hoped to 'reduce the number of UFO reports' through 'approved teaching about these things'. By 25 January 1967 Condon was informing the Corning Section of the American Chemical Society that his personal inclination was to 'recommend that the government get out of this business' and that in general he thought there was 'nothing to it'.

By this time it had become clear to dismayed observers that Condon had already decided to concentrate on only two facets of the phenomenon:

‘misinterpretations of natural phenomena, and the psychological bases for UFO reports’. At roughly the same time, John Lear, science editor of the *Saturday Review*, publicly disclosed that the CIA had severely edited, or censored, the unclassified Robertson report, leaving out the names of the participants and many of their recommendations. Public concern over the actual contents of the report was only increased when Dr James E. McDonald, senior physicist at the University of Arizona’s Department of Atmospheric Sciences, revealed that he had read the classified Robert report and could confirm that the CIA had ordered the Air Force to debunk UFOs and those who reported them.

In view of Condon’s widely reported negativity about the phenomenon, McDonald’s revelations only increased cynicism about the motives and findings of the Condon committee. The committee staff included psychologists, a chemist, and an astronomer, and was backed up with project members of the calibre of Dr J. Allen Hynek, computer scientist Jacques Vallee, USAF Major Hector Quintanilla, the head of Project Blue Book, and Donald E. Keyhoe, director of the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), and his assistant director, Richard Hall. Nonetheless, it soon degenerated into a disturbing series of internal disagreements and personality clashes, most of them caused by the increasingly blatant cynicism of Condon and his project coordinator, Robert Low, both of whom showed a distinct partiality to absurd contactee-like claims and tried to block the inclusion of more reliable reports from military observers and civilian pilots.

These conflicts burst into the open when, in February 1968, Dr James E. McDonald revealed the contents of a memorandum submitted by Low in August 1966 to the administrators of the University of Colorado, in order to explain his views on the UFO phenomenon and the attitude which he felt the Condon committee should adopt. Low’s views, as expressed in the memorandum, were that the UFO phenomenon had ‘no physical reality’, that the staff of the Condon committee should be composed of ‘nonbelievers’, and that the best way to bolster a healthily negative attitude about UFOs would be to focus on the psychology and backgrounds of those who report them.

‘The trick,’ Low wrote, ‘would be to describe the project so that, to the public, it would appear a totally objective study but, to the scientific community, would present the image of a group of nonbelievers trying their

best to be objective but having an almost zero expectation of finding a saucer.'

The revealed contents of the Low memorandum nearly blew the Condon committee apart. An outraged Condon fired committee members David Saunders and Norman Levine, who had been instrumental in getting the report to Keyhoe and McDonald. The dismissal of these key members led to the resignation of Condon's administrative assistant, Mary Lou Armstrong. With Armstrong gone, others lost faith in Condon and left also, until eventually, out of the original staff, only Low and two other full-time staff members remained. NICAP then withdrew its support from the committee.

Saunders and Levine attacked Condon for his 'unscientific approach' to the subject. The same criticisms were levelled against Condon in Congress, which led to another Congressional hearing. This took place on 29 July 1968, under the auspices of the House Science and Astronautics Committee. Participants included Drs McDonald and Hynek, famed astronomer and writer Carl Sagan, sociologist Robert L. Hall, professor of civil engineering, James A. Harder, and astronautics engineer Robert M. Baker. These participants were prohibited from criticizing the Condon committee openly; nonetheless, the criticism was implied when they all recommended that the scientific investigation of UFOs be continued.

The Condon report was published in January 1969 with the seal of approval of the National Academy of Science (NAS). Its conclusion was that nothing of scientific value could come from the study of UFOs, that further study of the subject could therefore not be justified, and that Project Blue Book should be closed down. In order to reach this conclusion, Condon devoted most space to the 'identified' reports, carefully buried those considered to be genuine 'unidentifieds', wilfully ignored many of the conclusions reached by other contributors, and emphasized in his summary (which he placed at the beginning of the report instead of the end) the negative views he had been proclaiming publicly throughout the eighteen months of the Condon committee investigations.

In *The UFO Controversy in America*, David Michael Jacobs describes the Condon report as 'a rather unorganised compilation of independent articles on disparate subjects, a minority of which dealt with UFOs'. Others were not so generous. On 11 January 1969, a few days after the report appeared, McDonald, Keyhoe and Saunders held a press conference to

denounce it as a waste of money, pointing out that Condon had revealed his bias and the committee had failed to investigate the vast majority of 'significant' UFO reports. Later, on behalf of NICAP, Donald E. Keyhoe accused Condon of trying to discredit some witnesses, as well as concentrating on 'kook cases'. The Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) charged that Condon had not investigated enough cases, but added that his selected cases had been investigated inadequately, that the report was filled with inconsistencies and unsubstantiated conclusions, and that it should be 'dismissed and/or discredited'. James E. McDonald, J. Allen Hynek, and many others also offered extensive, valid criticism, much of which implied that Condon had been used by the Air Force to discredit the UFO phenomenon and give it an excuse to close down the UFO project once and for all.

This is did. On 17 December 1969, Secretary of the Air Force, Robert C. Seamans, announced the official termination of the Air Force's twenty-two year study of UFOs. The files of Project Blue Book were then placed in storage in Maxwell Air Force Base, Montgomery, Alabama.

As the Air Force had anticipated, the official closing of Project Blue Book dramatically reduced public interest in the UFO phenomenon. As a result of this, Dr J. Allen Hynek was no longer required and returned to teaching at Northwestern University. Membership of the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP) was soon reduced from 12,000 to 4,000. The Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) had the same problem and Donald Keyhoe, after twelve years as director, was eventually forced to step down. By 1970, the 'UFO problem' was practically a forgotten issue in the press, though the ridicule attached to the study of the subject had greatly increased.

In 1971, Dr James E. McDonald, a loudly vocal opponent to the Condon report, had that ridicule used against him to discredit his professional credibility. As the scientist who had discovered that supersonic transport (SST) aircraft would reduce the ozone layer and lead to thousands of more cases of skin cancer in the United States, he was called to testify before the House Committee on Appropriations. Throughout his testimony he was relentlessly mocked about his belief in 'flying saucers' and 'little men flying around the sky', while his perfectly accurate warnings about ozone depletion were ignored. With similar humiliations heaped upon him in the following

months, both in and out of Congress, McDonald began suffering from depression, his marriage broke up, and in June of that year, at fifty-one years old, he committed suicide.

By the end of 1972, public interest in UFOs had been nullified, humiliation had ensured that new reports were relatively few, and the US Air Force, formerly compelled to give answers, could retain a comfortable silence. That official silence has been maintained to this day.

Howard Blum is an award-winning former *New York Times* journalist whose work has twice been nominated by the editors of that paper for the Pulitzer Prize in Investigative Journalism. The publication of his book *Wanted! The Search for Nazis in America* initially led to ridicule being heaped upon him from various official quarters, but finally resulted in Congressional hearings, the creation of a Justice Department War Crimes Task-force, and the deportation of thirty-seven people accused of war crimes.

Blum had no interest in UFOs whatsoever until, in 1987, when investigating the notorious John Walker spy family, he received a call from a senior official at the National Security Agency (NSA), asking for a clandestine meeting. During the subsequent meeting that official told Blum that ‘a lot of strange things’ were happening in space and, as a result, the government had formed a top-secret panel of ‘hot-shots’ to look into the UFO phenomenon.

That single meeting led Blum into a two-year investigation of what turned out to be a massive cover-up by the government regarding the UFO problem. By the end of his search, during which he talked to top officials in secret military bases, laboratories, aeronautical establishments, the Pentagon, the White House and even CIA Headquarters, Langley, Virginia, Blum had discovered that in the winter of 1987 the government, disturbed by ‘unexplained intrusions into our planetary space’, had summoned seventeen members of the US intelligence community to the Pentagon. Formed into a top-secret UFO Working Group, those seventeen men, including members of the NSA and the CIA, had since been meeting once a month in ‘the Tank’ - the innermost sanctum of the Pentagon - to assess reports of UFOs that were being constantly monitored by the US Space Command’s Space Surveillance Centre. Blum also discovered that the Pentagon, while insisting that it had no interest in UFOs, was involved in a ‘dirty tricks’ campaign to ensure that

anyone delving too deeply into the UFO mystery ended up a laughing stock and that infiltration of UFO groups and the spreading of misinformation were being used to protect the Pentagon's own UFO investigations from public scrutiny.

Impressed by the contents of the MJ-12 documents first discovered by the widely respected British UFO research and author, Timothy Good (classified reports of the recovery in 1948 of the crashed flying saucer at Roswell, New Mexico, and the dead bodies of its supposedly extraterrestrial four-man crew) and by what he had been told by various interviewees, Blum naturally accepted that the secret working group was concerned with extraterrestrial intervention. However, when Blum published his findings in a book, *Out There: The Government's Secret Quest for Extraterrestrials* (1990), he received the expected flak from the government. The US Space Command dismissed Blum's claim that the UFO Working Group had been formed after a UFO penetrated America's defence perimeter in December 1986 and insisted that the 'tripping' of the electronic fence in space had been caused by 'an explosion of a rocket body broken up into 400 pieces'. The Pentagon categorically denied that the UFO Working Group existed and insisted that there was no such person as Colonel Harold Phillips, named in Blum's book as chairman of the group. The CIA denied all knowledge of the UFO Working Group and insisted that the agency had not been involved with UFOs since the Robertson Panel Report was issued in 1953. The Department of Defence stated that there was no record of any committee, either official or unofficial, called the UFO Working Group, and that since the conclusion of Project Blue Book in 1969 there had been no official or unofficial investigation, study, or involvement in the matter of UFOs by any branch of the Armed Forces or the Defence Intelligence Agency.

Blum responded by pointing out that the existence of the group had been confirmed to him by four separate sources and that he had found support for their assertions in classified military documents seen by him. He then pointed out that the government had responded in exactly the same way - with ridicule - to his book about Nazis living in America... until the subsequent Congressional hearings had proved him right. He also said that he hoped his book would 'break the taboo about writing on UFOs' and that he thought there was 'a chance of getting Congressional hearings on why this work is being kept secret'.

There was, of course, a good reason for that secrecy. The US Air Force had insisted that UFOs did not exist, yet made the release of information about UFOs a crime under the Espionage Act. It claimed that national security was its only concern, yet ensured at the same time that its own air and ground crews would *not* report unidentified flying objects. And since killing off Project Blue Book in a gale of publicity, it has possibly convened, in the strictest secrecy, a UFO Working Group that meets once a month in the Pentagon to monitor UFO reports.

Clearly, since national security is not the issue, the US government was, and still is, protecting some secret knowledge: the reality of the man-made flying saucers.

Chapter 13

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The Case Summed Up

If we go back to the first UFO sightings in the US, we can see that the technology of the late nineteenth century supports the contention that the Great Airship Scare of 1896-7 was caused by one or more genuine airships of advanced design, constructed secretly somewhere in the United States. The identity of the genius who designed them may never be known.

In the 1930s the first liquid-fuel rockets were constructed and flown by another American genius, Robert H. Goddard, in Roswell, New Mexico. Goddard's work was initially ignored by the US government, but adapted enthusiastically by the rocket scientists of Nazi Germany. Thus that country was soon leading the world in rocket technology and investing more than any other nation in advanced technology experimentation of all kinds. The existence of a Nazi 'flying saucer' program, Projekt Saucer, has now been proven. Press cuttings from the Imperial War Museum, London, and news agencies worldwide confirm that the 1945 reports of 'foo fighters' and 'balls of fire', were about a real, physical object which we now know to have been the German saucer-shaped anti-radar device, the *Feuerball*. Rudolph Schriever, Walter Miethe, and Georg Klein insisted separately that a larger, piloted version of the *Feuerball*, possibly named the *Kugelblitz*, was tested over Kahla, in Thuringia, which is in the immediate vicinity of Werner von Braun's underground V-1 and V-2 rocket establishment at Nordhausen. At the end of World War II, Schriever escaped and made his way back home to Bramerhaven where he insisted, to the day he died, that he had been involved in the German flying saucer project; Habermohl was captured by the Russians and taken back to work with other captured rocket scientists in the Soviet Union; and Miethe went with Werner von Braun to work for NASA, in the United States, but ended up working for A.V. Roe Canada (AVRO Canada).

The Soviets were the first to send a man into space, NASA was first at landing a man on the moon, and the first (known) man-made, completely saucer-shaped aircraft was the Avrocar developed by AVRO-Canada.

In the immediate post-war years Canada was one the greatest aeronautical

nations in the world. The first US-Canadian flying saucers were constructed at AVRO-Canada in Malton, Ontario. The first post-war UFO sightings, inaugurating the 'flying saucer' age, were made over the Cascade mountain range in Washington State, near the border of Canada, and the UFOs appeared to fly back in the direction of Canada (as was the case with the UFOs involved in the Washington DC 'invasion' of 1952). Because of this, Renato Vesco and others believe that there are hidden UFO bases in the vast, mountainous, wooded regions of southwest Canada, between British Columbia and Alberta, and that many of those UFOs land regularly, secretly on US military bases.

This may well be true, but another possibility, presents itself. The unworkable, unsigned flying saucer designs reproduced in *Brisant* magazine (see Foreword) were used to illustrate an unsigned article about Nazi flying saucers. The thrust of the article was this: the Captain Rischter naval expedition of 1938 had been for the purpose of finding a suitable ice-free area in Antarctic to be used as a hidden Nazi base after the war. This he found in a part of Queen Maud Land, which he claimed for Germany and renamed Neu Schwabenland. Throughout the war, the Germans sent ships and aircraft to Neu Schwabenland with enough equipment and manpower (much of it slave labour from the concentration camps) to build massive complexes under the ice or in well hidden ice-free areas. At the close of the war selected Nazi scientists and SS troops fled to Antarctica (this accounts for the Hitler and Martin Bormann 'escape' rumour), taking with them the technology required to complete the aborted Projekt Saucer. The Allies learned about this when a German U-boat surfaced at Mar del Plata four months after the war and its captain and crew were interrogated by Allied intelligence.

About a year after this, the Americans launched the biggest Antarctic expedition in history, Operation Highjump, led by the famous US explorer and naval officer, Rear-Admiral Richard E. Byrd. As Byrd's resources included thirteen ships, at least two sea-plane tenders, an aircraft carrier, six two-engine R4D transports, six Martin PBM flying boats, six helicopters, and a staggering total of 4,000 men, it was widely believed that the expedition was designed more as an assault force than as a simple exploratory expedition. It also seemed odd that when this virtual assault force reached the Antarctic coast, it not only docked, on 12 January 1947, near the German-claimed territory of Neu Schwabenland, but then divided up into three

separate task forces. When the expedition ended, in February the same year, reportedly much earlier than anticipated, there were numerous stories in the press about Rear-Admiral Byrd's references to 'enemy fighters which came from the Polar regions' and could 'fly from one Pole to the other with incredible speed'. The United States then withdrew from Antarctica for a decade.

During that decade, while the United States was keeping out of Antarctica, the US-Canada flying saucers came to light; and by 1954 the US press was informing the public that the Avrocar, or Omega, had been designed by John Frost for use in 'subarctic and polar regions'. This was followed, on 22 October 1955, by US Air Force Secretary Donald Quarles' references to 'aircraft of unusual characteristics' that would be used for 'the common defence of the subarctic area of the continent'.

The US finally returned to the Antarctic as part of the International Geophysical Year (IGY) of 1957-58, when it was inexplicably supported by the combined might of the USSR, Great Britain, and many other nations of the free world. After that, the US government announced that they were dropping their flying saucer projects; and eventually they also announced the termination of their UFO investigations program.

The same issue of *Brisant* contained another article, also without a byline, which insisted that Germany should claim back their rights to Neu Schwabenland, originally part of Queen Maud Land, still claimed by Norway.

The implication contained in these twinned articles was that at the close of the war certain Nazi scientists and troops fled to the Antarctic, via a friendly Argentina (as Hitler and Martin Bormann were rumoured to have done) to establish a secret UFO base hidden under the ice. The US, the Soviet Union, and other nations know about them and, having failed to dislodge them with Operation Highjump, are either cooperating secretly with them to share in their technology, or trying to defeat them by gradually taking over the Antarctic with the combined scientific might of the major powers and their allies.

Much of this theory can be traced back to a neo-Nazi group located in Canada. Taking note of the National Socialist leanings of the articles in *Brisant*, I checked the origins of the magazine and learned that it had been published in West Germany by a company that has long since disappeared

from its only known address: Lintec, GmbH, Jungfrauenthal 22, D-200, Hamburg 13. The company was not listed with any of the West German press organizations, nor with any public relations bureau.

None of the articles in *Brisant* carried bylines, but most of the information contained in them was originally published in the books, *UFO: Nazi Secret Weapons?* by Mattern Friedrich and *Secret Nazi Polar Expeditions* by Christof Friedrich. Neither book contains a copyright date, but both are published by Samisdat Publishers Limited, located at 206 Carlton Street, M5A 2L1, Toronto, Canada.

'Mattern Friedrich' and 'Christof Friedrich' are pseudonyms for one Ernst Zundl, an active neo-Nazi who appears to have many links with surviving Nazis in Argentina and elsewhere. He was once deported from the United States, and now runs Samisdat Publishers Limited as a mouthpiece of neo-Nazi propaganda and commercial enterprise, specialising in the sale of Nazi books, record albums, tape-recordings, photographs, medals, and other Nazi memorabilia.

Zundl's Antarctic-Nazi-UFO theories appear to have been culled from a variety of fanciful sources, most of them related to Vril (a secret society founded by a group of Berlin Rosicrucians and fiercely anti-Christian) and Thule mythology. However, his main source of inspiration may well have been Wilhelm Landig's *Götzen gegen Thule* (1971), described as 'a fiction full of facts' and promising the reader a wealth of information on 'secret military technology'. The similarities between this novel and Zundl's so-called 'factual' books are obvious.

The definitive analysis of the literary roots of Nazi-Antarctic-UFO theories can be found in *Arkto: The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism, and Nazi Survival* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1993) by Joscelyn Godwin. In this seminal work *Götzen gegen Thule* is described as the story of two German airmen who are sent, near the end of World War II, to a secret base named Point 103, located in the most remote region of Arctic Canada. Though the existence of the base is not known to either the Allies or most German authorities, it is an immense underground complex supported by a technology far superior to anything else in the world. Travel in and out of the base is by the V7 - a vertical take-off aircraft shaped like a sphere, surmounted with a glass dome and propelled by a rotating ring of turbine blades. (Reportedly, a few prototypes of this very craft were actually

constructed in German and Czech factories towards the end of the war, but never put into production.) In the secret Arctic base, the two airmen are taken under the wing of a Waffen-SS officer who, becoming their guide and 'philosophical instructor', tells them about Thule, that original Aryan paradise located at the North Pole, not far from their secret base, Point 103. Apart from being racial supremacists, Thuleans are aware of an 'esoteric world-centre' of 'ethically positive forces' which manifests itself through phenomena known as Manisolas. Unlike the German 'disk-planes', the Manisolas are 'bio-machines' that materialise as 'disks' which, by night, 'shine in glowing or glossy colours, showing on occasion long flames at the edges and red and blue sparks, which can grow so strong as to wreathe them in fire'; by day they 'display an extremely bright gold or silver luminescence, sometimes with traces of rose-coloured smoke which then often condense into greyish-white trails'.

The rest of Landig's novel is taken up with the heroes' physical and philosophical adventures as they leave the underground polar base to travel the world and spread the Aryan gospel of Thule. In the course of this epic saga, Landig concocts a battle between Thule and Israel - between the 'white' Aryans and the 'dark' Jews - while also constructing an intricate whitewashing of the Nazis. These include the now familiar claim that the shocking pictures of piled-up, emaciated bodies in concentration camps were actually the stripped victims of Allied bombing raids being used for Allied propaganda purposes.

The combination of flying saucers and Aryan supremacy are not the only common denominators between the two authors. In Landig's 'Aryan' novel, his two German airmen are tasked with preventing the V7 flying saucer and its technology from falling into Russian or American hands in the face of the Allied advance. In Zundl's supposedly factual books, he has the German flying saucers destroyed in the BMW plant at Prague just before the plant was captured by the Russians.

In fact, the only real difference between the plot of Landig's novel and Zundl's Nazi-Antarctic UFO books is that Zundl changes his location from the North Pole to the Antarctic.

Like Landig, Zundl uses the Antarctic-Nazi-UFO fantasy to exaggerate the Nazi 'genius' in all things military and technological whilst simultaneously denying the true horrors of the Nazis' supposed great

achievements during World War II. Zundl, however, also uses information culled from a wide variety of articles published in European and South American magazines. These articles are, in turn, based on some rather intriguing facts relating to Nazis, Argentina, and the Antarctic in the immediate post-war months.

Submarine *U-977*, under the command of Captain Hans Schaeffer, certainly put out of Kiel harbour in the Baltic Sea on 25 April 1945, stopped in at Christiansand South on 26 April, left there the following day, and was not seen again until it surfaced at Mar Del Plata, Argentina, on 17 August - a period of nearly four months. We will now never know whether or not Schaeffer carried someone of 'political importance' in his submarine; nor will we ever find out why Allied Intelligence were so concerned about what the submarine might have been carrying or why they crewed it all the way back to the United States, only to blow it to smithereens. However, regarding that particular, epic voyage, it is certainly worth noting that Schaeffer had spent much of his career as submarine captain protecting the rocket research centres at Regen and Peenemünde, that he was particularly experienced at patrolling the South Atlantic and polar regions, and that he was one of a select group of naval officers who had been sent to the Harz Mountains to study the highly advanced XX1 electric submarines. (While there, he heard many rumours about imminent 'death rays' and other Nazi secret weapons.) In other words, Schaeffer was not only a man familiar with the secret projects of the Harz Mountains and Thuringia, but also one ideally suited to make the voyage to Antarctica.

Could Nazi scientists, soldiers, even slave-labour and valuable equipment have been taken to Antarctica in German submarines of that period? They could: a great number of passengers and a considerable amount of equipment could have been shipped in many submarines, in the course of many voyages, over a period of years, throughout World War II, when other Nazi boats and submarines were protecting the South Atlantic coastline of Antarctica. It is also worth noting that the normal U-boat could cover 7,000 miles on each operational cruise. Also, the Germans had submarine tankers spread across the South Atlantic Ocean at least as far as south of South Africa, and any one of those tankers, which had a displacement of 2,000 tons, could have supplied ten U-boats with fuel and stores, thus trebling the time

that those submarines could stay at sea.

It would also have been possible for the Germans to build self-sufficient underground research factories in Neu Schwabenland or other areas of Antarctica, as the Antarctic continent has many unexplored, ice-free areas, many of which are well hidden from view by vast ice sheets and mountains. Given the German genius for the construction of immense underground production plants and factories, it is not inconceivable that they could have done so in the Antarctic, using their own architects, builders, troops and captured labour. Indeed, most of the underground research centres of Nazi Germany were gigantic feats of construction, containing air-shafts, wind-tunnels, machine-shops, assembly plants, launching pads, supply dumps, accommodation for all who worked there, and adjoining camps for the slave workers - yet few German civilians knew that they existed.

As an example of the immensity of some of those hidden factories, Philip Henshall informs us, in *Hitler's Rocket Sites* (1985) that the wind tunnel at Peenemünde was then the most advanced in the world, containing its own research department, instrumentation laboratory, workshops and design office. Though the wind tunnel was undoubtedly the showpiece of the research complex, the full enormity of Peenemünde can only be gauged from the fact that apart from the wind tunnel, it also had 'its own power station, docks, oxygen plant, airfield, POW camp for specially selected prisoners who provided cheap labour, and social and medical facilities associated with a town of 20,000 inhabitants'. It was, therefore, the prototype for the even larger, mostly underground, factories to be built secretly in the mountainous ranges of Germany and Austria, notably at Nordhausen in the southern Harz mountain range of Thuringia.

This immense facility consisted of a series of linked tunnels carved out of the Kohnstein Mountain near the town of Nordhausen. The parallel tunnels were 1,800 metres long. Leading off them were fifty side-chambers, a main work area of 125,000 square metres, and twelve ventilation shafts which had been bored down from the peak of the mountain. Work at converting the tunnels into a mass-production facility for rockets began in September 1943 with the use of 2000 engineers and 15,000 inmates from the nearby concentration camps. The slaves were kept in a separate camp located in a hidden mountain valley, less than a kilometre from the entrance to the tunnel. A new underground complex, to be linked to Nordhausen by another network

of tunnels, was in the process of being built underground near the town of Bleicherode, twenty kilometres away, though it was not completed by the end of the war.

Known as the Nordhausen Central Works, the facility was placed under the command of Brigadier Hans Kammler, then head of building construction for the SS and later to be placed in charge of the V-2 rocket launchings against London. Similar large underground production plants were created at Wittringen, in the Saar, and near Liège.

Between them, Nordhausen and Bleicherode constituted the first of the SS underground factories - virtually living towns -and what the Nazis were doing there, under the earth, they also hoped to do elsewhere, including Antarctica.

Could the Germans have built such enduring structures underground? Almost certainly. A measure of their ability to do so may be gleaned from a glance at the statistics regarding the V-2 rocket launching site found near the forest of Eperlecques, three miles north of the village of Watten, on the canal network between the sea and the Belgium border. The reception area was housed in a gigantic concrete bunker that contained offices and accommodation for staff. The railway station had a five-foot thick roof. The launch-control tower for the rockets was approximately sixty-three feet by seventy-three feet and fifteen feet high. The enormous main building had been constructed from reinforced concrete and was 300 feet long, 138 feet wide, and had work levels 260 feet below ground; its roof was eighty feet high and made from twenty-three-foot-thick reinforced concrete. Theoretically speaking, to pierce it would have required a bomb weighing about twelve tons and striking the ceiling at a speed of Mach 1, the speed of sound. In order to construct this towering, bomb-proof edifice, the Germans needed 49,000 tons of steel and concrete for the roof alone. Hundreds of jacks were used to raise the roof slowly, inches at a time, with the walls being built up beneath it, as it was raised. The enormous amounts of steel, cement, sand and gravel needed were brought in from Watten on a standard gauge railway. The site took six months to construct and used about 35,000 slave workers, who came from the two prison camps located about a mile-and-a-half away. At any one time there were always 3000-4000 men at work. The work went on around the clock in twelve-hour shifts, and the slave labour, or *Sklavenarbeiter*, were controlled by armed members of the black-shirted SS

Totenkopfverbande, who had no hesitation in executing anyone too ill or exhausted to work.

It is clear from these examples that the Nazis were well skilled in constructing enormous structures, many located underground, with the help of slave labour. It is therefore possible that men and materials were shipped to the Antarctic throughout the war years; that during the same period the Germans could have been engaged in the building of enormous underground complexes in Neu Schwabenland similar to those in the southern Harz mountain range of Thuringia; and that the Soviet, US and British 'cover-up' regarding saucer sightings could be due to the fact that the Germans are still entrenched there in a master-slave colony devoted to highly advanced, aggressive technology.

The hypothesis of a hidden colony of the elite of Himmler's SS defying the combined might of Russia, the US, and other countries that have political and scientific interests in the Antarctic is interesting, but not the only possibility. While it is true that the Germans were involved in flying saucer construction programs during World War II, it is also a fact that the Canadians and Americans (despite official denials), perhaps with the support of the British, were engaged in similar projects, based on the captured German technology, with the aid of German scientists and engineers.

We know that at the completion of Rear-Admiral Byrd's Operation Highjump, the US inexplicably stayed out of Antarctica for a decade. We also know that during this period the US-Canada flying saucer construction projects came to light and were being considered for use in sub-arctic and polar regions. We know, further, that despite the so-called 'Cold War', the US, the USSR, and many other nations worked together, for a common cause, during the International Geophysical Year (NYG) of 1957-58. During that period of unprecedented, international, scientific cooperation, the main focus was on Antarctica and outer space, including the study of the magnetic field and the ionosphere.

These facts raise the possibility that the unique international cooperation still extant in Antarctica (and possibly elsewhere) is due to the need to protect an ongoing technology that has already moved well beyond an ethically acceptable state of advancement. As we have seen, the Nazis paved the way for morally unimpeded physical experimentation on human beings; and

modern science, in the shape of bio-cybernetic and genetic engineering experimentation, has shown itself willing and able to continue down this nightmarish path. If the desire for such experimentation is so great that legal, ethical and religious restraints must be ignored, that work would have to be, and could be, carried out in secret, in Antarctic, Siberia, the White Sands Proving Ground, or even in establishments hidden in the wilds of Canada.

It is to be assumed that a technology capable of creating the UFOs would also be highly advanced in other areas of experimentation, including bio-engineering and similar sciences of a nightmarish nature. If this is the case, there would be very good reason for keeping the results of such work, both scientific and medical, well hidden from the eyes of the world.

Russia (formerly part of the Soviet Union) has many defence and scientific establishments hidden underground, such as the immense laboratory at Semipalatinsk and others located in the desolate wastes of Siberia. The North American Air Defence Command (NORAD) is a top-secret complex of awesome proportions hidden inside the snowcapped Cheyenne Mountain near Colorado Springs, with parts of it a half-mile below the ground. During the war against Iraq in 1990 we learnt that beneath the streets of Baghdad are cavernous nuclear bunkers and enough command shelters and barracks to house thousands of Saddam Hussein's imperial guards. US Intelligence believes that the tunnels between the various complexes run for miles. Each complex is capable of holding 1200 people and has command posts, sick bays, sleeping accommodations, decontamination units, armouries, kitchens, and stores for dried food and water. Theoretically, there is enough space for nearly 50,000 people and the bunkers are covered, like the World War II German bunkers and underground factories, by enormously thick reinforced detonator slabs capable of withstanding the blast of 500lb bombs. Clearly, then, the construction of such complexes underground, in Antarctica or elsewhere, would present no major obstacles in this day and age.

Since the end of World War II, the *known* science and technology has made advances so astonishing that it is virtually in the realms of science fiction. If saucer-shaped aircraft were being developed that long ago and have continued to be developed in secret, behind closed doors, or underground, right up to the present day, they could now be extraordinarily advanced machines, being constructed, maintained and supported in hidden locations

by a mixture of human scientists, cyborgs, and other highly advanced man-machine products of a morally unrestrained, nightmarish technology.

Could such a massive undertaking be kept hidden for so long? The short answer is: 'Yes'. There has been no attempt to keep the flying saucers secret - only to keep the *technology* a mystery... and to humiliate, confuse, or terrify into silence those who have reported seeing the UFOs. Also, one can point to the fact that some of science's most startling discoveries were kept under wraps for as long as fifty years. Antibiotics were discovered in 1910, but not applied until 1940. Likewise, nuclear energy was discovered in 1919, but the general public was not informed about it until 1965. In short, no matter how big the secret, it could be protected for years.

We have only to think of the extraordinary innovations in today's science and technology, then recall that such miracles are merely the tip of the iceberg and that what goes on behind the guarded fences of our top-secret establishments is probably decades ahead of what we know about from official statements. Given this, the speed and capability of the UFOs are not beyond the bounds of possibility. Nor is it beyond reason that the UFOs rumoured to have landed on various military bases, both here and abroad, are the products of military-scientific projects so secret that only the personnel involved know about them.

The technology that began with the liquid-fuelled rockets of Robert H. Goddard in the 1930s, was adapted by the Nazis during World War II, and became the foundation of aerospace travel. It still continues and will not be stopped. The known capabilities of the F-117a Stealth night-fighter and the estimated capabilities of its likely successor, the Aurora, suggest that man-made craft are now the equal of those once reported only as UFOs. Parallel with this are the advances being made in transplant operations, plastic surgery, cloning and other forms of genetic engineering.

Most of this work takes place behind closed doors, but as all scientific, surgical and technological achievements are superseded and made public eventually, we might, in time, learn the truth.

Afterword

The here and now…

The technology described in the original *Projekt UFO*, much of it black technology, is still ongoing behind closed doors and cannot be stopped. The F-117a Nighthawk, or Stealth night-fighter, has already been superseded by the triangular-shaped B-2 Spirit bomber, designed and built for the Pentagon by Northrop. While most aspects of the B-2 remain secret, it is reportedly the world's most expensive aircraft and no less than *900* new materials and processes were developed to build it. Because of its 3-D computer-aided design and manufacture (CAD/CAM), it is the first aircraft in history to go from the drawing board to manufacture without the need for a prototype. The exact nature of its coating is still classified, but it is known to have been largely made from lightweight composites that render it invisible to radar and equally hard to detect with infrared, acoustic, electromagnetic and visual sensors. Requiring only a two-man crew, the B-2 is capable of flying for 6000 miles without refueling, at an altitude of 50,000 feet, with a top speed described by the Pentagon as 'high subsonic'. This makes it seem remarkably similar to the man-made flying saucers described in this book.

Perhaps the most legendary of them all is the Aurora, rumored to be another successor to the B-2. Though the existence of the Aurora has always been denied by the relevant authorities (and was categorically denied by Donald Rice, Secretary of the Air Force, in December 1992), it has been the focus of intense interest since its name first appeared in a US P-1, or procurement budget document, in 1985, listed directly below the SR-71 Blackbird and the U-2. Interest increased dramatically when the budget for Aurora for 1987 jumped abruptly from $8 million to 2.3 *billion*. Yet the following year the Aurora vanished entirely from the P-1, never to return again. Naturally this gave rise to even more speculation about the supposed aircraft's importance in the world of deep black technology.

Numerous reports in the aviation press and national newspapers claimed that the Aurora, approximately 115 feet long, 65 feet wide, 19 feet high, with short, swept-back wings, had a bat-like, or wedge-shaped, appearance when

viewed from one angle, a saucer-shape when viewed from another. It was believed to have one of four possible propulsion systems: Pulse Detonation Wave Engine, Ramjet, Scramjet, or regular Pulsejet. It could fly as fast as Mach 8, reaching anywhere on Earth in three hours.

In 1989, an oil-drilling engineer, Chris Gibson, also a member of the Royal Observer Corps, when working on an oil rig in the North Sea, saw what he believed might have been the Aurora refueling with a KC-135 Stratotanker and two F-111s. Certainly the drawing he did of the unusual airplane fitted the bill. During the same period, as reported in the first edition of *Projekt UFO*, there were numerous sightings of an unknown delta-shaped, supersonic aircraft flying in and out of RAF Machrihanish, located at the tip of the Mull of Kintyre, Scotland, jointly owned by the United States, and one of the most secret NATO air bases in Europe.

Belief in the existence of the Aurora increased when, in March 1990, despite having smashed the official air speed record from Los Angeles to Washington's Dulles Airport, the SR-71 Blackbird was inexplicably dropped by the Air Force. This instantly led to a widespread belief that the still top secret Aurora was taking its place.

That same year, a series of unusual sonic booms, resembling what the locals referred to as 'skyquakes', were recorded by at least twenty-five US Geological Survey sensors over Los Angeles and central California. To at least one seismologist, Jim Mori, the low rumbling sounds of the skyquakes suggested the sonic booms of an aircraft returning from an altitude of about 10,000 feet, or even from space. The general direction of the rumbling indicated that such an aircraft would be heading towards the test ranges in Nevada, where the top-secret Groom Lake (Area 51) test site is located.

During the period covered by the skyquakes, there were many sightings of a wedge-shaped, or triangular, seemingly supersonic airplane with short, sweptback wings, over California and Nevada, including Groom Lake. Nevertheless, while the sightings continued for many years, the authorities continued to categorically deny the existence of the Aurora. And though there were rumors to the affect that the plane had been canceled in 1986, there are many who believe that it still exists and is still operational, possibly as an unmanned, robotic craft. 'Aurora', some say, is an acronym for 'Automatic Retrieval Of Remotely Piloted Aircraft'.

So the Aurora at least exists as the most legendary UFO, or flying saucer,

of them all.

Definitely in operation is Northrop-Grumman's X-47 Pegasus UAV (unmanned aerial vehicle). This was rolled out on 1 July 2001 and flown for the first time in February 2003. A scaled-down version (27.9 feet long, 27.8 feet wing-span) of the B-2 Spirit, it looks remarkably like a flying saucer even when stationary, preparing for take-off from its aircraft carrier. Its successor, the X-47B, is expected to take its initial flight this year (2007).

Another man-made flying saucer look-alike is the LoFlyte, the product of joint research by NASA and the US Air Force. Described as triangular, wedge-shaped or resembling a 'flying manta ray', the LoFlyte has a 'waverider' design (first proposed by a British scientist, Terrence Nonweiler, in the early 1950s) that prevents air building up in front of it and slowing it down; instead, using flight-control software, it 'surfs' on a stream of air by wrapping the shock-wave generated by the high speed around the fuselage while trapping a cushion of air below it; thus, while in flight, it meets with no resistance and can attain speculative speeds of up to 3000mph. This seems very much like an extension of the 'boundary layer' theories proposed twelve years ago in *Projekt UFO*.

Beginning in 1990, there was a whole spate of unexplained reports of flat, wedge-shaped objects seen by pilots near air force bases in California and even as far afield as Belgium. Indeed, in Belgium there were over 2,000 sightings in a single year. In at least one instance, when two F-16 aircraft from the Belgian Air Force were sent to intercept a UFO; the resultant radar tapes showed a triangular shape descending from 10,000 feet to 500 feet in five seconds, indicating a speed of 2000mph. More dangerously, in 1995 a British Boeing 737 flying from Milan to Manchester was involved in a near-collision with a triangular UFO over the Pennines. The UFO was going so fast that the air crew ducked as it passed within feet of their aircraft - yet radar operators on the ground were unable to track it. When the crew of the 737, Captain Roger Willis and First Officer Mark Stuart, filed an official 'air near miss' report, the sketches they made of the mystery aircraft looked just like a wedge-shaped waverider. Regarding the remarkably high speed of the UFO, the waverider design of the Loflyte is said to be so fast that computer software (designed by the Accurate Automation Corporation of Chatanooga) is needed to *teach the aircraft to fly itself*, after basic instruction from a pilot.

Given the nature of black technology (by the time an aircraft has been

shown to the public, it has already been superseded behind closed doors) the public showings of the B-2 Spirit and the LoFlyte, which took place in the mid-1990s, are sure indications that even more advanced aircraft are already on the way. Said John Pike, director of space policy at the Washington-based Federation of American Scientists: 'The public showing of the LoFlyte vehicle is very odd. It leads me to the conclusion that there may well be classified work going on.'

Yes, there certainly was. Another flying-saucer-shaped prototype of the UAV variety was the DarkStar, America's latest spy plane. Fifteen feet long, sixty-nine feet wide, a mere five feet high, it was designed to carry the most advanced infrared and electro-optical spy cameras available, capable of taking pictures down to a resolution of one square foot, night or day. Again, that new prototype was constructed from 'lightweight, radar-absorbent materials' that would render it virtually 'invisible'. The second DarkStar, which looks even more like a flying saucer, completed its first test flight on 29 June 1998, taking off from the US Air Force Test Flight Center at Edwards AFB, California.

Not dissimilar is Lockheed Martin's unmanned, preprogrammed Venture Star, planned as a hypersonic reusable launch vehicle (RLV) and, again, shaped like a wingless 'wedge' or a 'flying manta ray'. The prototype was being built in 1996 at Lockheed Martin's legendary Skunk Works in California, for decades the birthplace of advanced and often highly secret aircraft; also an area renowned for its many UFO sightings.

Finally, in a 2003 report submitted to the President of the US by the Commission on the Future of the United States Aerospace Industry, it was stated: 'In the nearer term, nuclear fission and plasma sources should be actively pursued for space applications. In the longer-term, breakthroughs that *go beyond our current understanding of physical laws* [author's emphasis] such as nuclear fusion and antimatter, should be investigated in order for us to practically pursue human exploration of the solar system and beyond.' Clearly, therefore, this is where black technology is presently headed.

Further to such research, experimental work on a wide variety of special lightweight and radar-absorbent materials has certainly been going on and is related frequently to saucer-shaped designs. On 17 February 1996, *New Scientist* ran an article with the subheading: 'Hypersonic flying saucers

driven by microwaves; not science fantasy but the goal of serious researchers in the US.' The article ('Rider on the Shock Wave', by freelance writer Mike Ross) described experiments taking place in the engineering laboratories of the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York State. The experiments required the use of 'one of the few wind tunnels in the world that can produce shock waves at more than twenty-five times the speed of sound' and were designed to test an 'air spike': a device that would control the airflow around an aircraft, reduce drag to a bare minimum, and enable it to travel at many times the speed of sound while greatly reducing the temperature of its skin to the degree where it would require no thermal protection. The men behind the air spike were Leik Myrabo, an aerospace engineer at Rensselaer, and Yuri Raizer, a plasma physicist at the Moscow-based Institute for Problems in Mechanics, both working on funding from the Space Studies Institute in Princetown, New Jersey. Myrabo and Raizer were keen on 'saucer shaped' prototypes. By 1996 they were planning to make detailed measurements of the pressure and heat transfer around 'a disk' protected by an air spike as it sat in a flow of air traveling at up to twenty-five times the speed of sound. Myrabo's stated belief was that if the air spike could be made to work at that velocity, it could lead to 'a revolutionary new generation of lightweight, reusable launch vehicles that would resemble flying saucers and get their power from beams of microwaves or lasers.' In pursuit of this dream, he had already designed a new type of vehicle that was called a 'lightcraft' and 'shaped like a flying saucer'. He had also envisaged 'a system in which constellations of orbiting satellites would convert solar power into microwaves and beam them downwards to a lightcraft below. The lightcraft must have a large surface area to gather as much microwave power as possible, so a flying saucer shape is ideal.'

Other innovations relating to the kind of technology first mentioned in *Projekt UFO* (brain implants, thought transference, human and animal mutations, the 'invisibility' of advanced aircraft, magical metals such as *Luftschwamm*, or aero-sponge, and Nitinol, a 'metal with a memory') have been progressing at a rapid clip. There isn't enough space here to cover all the new innovations in detail, but here are a few random samples.

Regarding the 'magic metals' and 'invisible' metal surfaces, according to *Der Spiegel*, by 2002 a ceramic research laboratory in Dresden, Germany, had developed aluminum that was three times tougher than hardened steel of

the same thickness – and *transparent*. In the same vein, ‘cold plasma’ research presently being undertaken by research groups at Stanford, Princeton, Ohio State, Wisconsin and New York Polytechnic has the aim of shielding satellites and ‘other spacecraft’ by making them invisible to radar. Cold plasmas – analogs to the sophisticated defensive grids, or deflector shields, on the fictional *Star Trek*’s USS *Voyager* spacecraft – are ambient-temperature, ionized gases related to those found deep within the sun’s core. Such plasmas could not only make spacecraft invisible to radar, but could also prevent the frying of electronics or the melting of metal at above-supersonic speeds. Since in theory a plasma could deflect a particle-beam or laser attack, the US Air Force has allocated millions of dollars to low-temperature plasma studies with a view to protecting their space satellites.

As recently as 19 August 2007, journalist Peter Stothard was writing in the *Sunday Times* about 'a miracle material for the 21st century'. The new material is Aerogel. Though described as 'one of the world's lightest solids' (so light, indeed, that it is nicknamed 'frozen smoke'), Aerogel can withstand dynamite blasts and protect against heat of more than 1,300C. No surprise, then, that it is already being tested for bomb-proof housing and armour for military vehicles. No surprise, either, that NASA is already using it in the development of insulated space suits for the first manned mission to Mars (scheduled for 2018), where hopefully it will protect astronauts from temperatures as low as -130C. As Aerogel has also been described by scientists as 'the ultimate sponge', with millions of tiny pores on its surface, its resemblance to *Luftschwamm* would make it even more valuable as a material for future black-technology aircraft.

Regarding thought transference, by the late 1990’s the Institute of Medical Psychology in Tubingen, near Stuttgart in Germany, was engaged in experiments that proved that human beings could *think* images on a screen into moving in any direction they chose. The experiments were part of a program aimed at giving humans, possibly aided with microchip implantation, the power to control machines through thought alone. Military and commercial applications included, for instance, giving pilots the ability to fly aircraft and fire missiles by ‘electronic telepathy’, thus obviating the need for manual controls. The theoretical work on which the ‘chip grafting’ was being based was conducted by a group led by Greg Kovacs, professor of electrical engineering at Stanford University, California. It was mainly

concerned with ‘creating an interface between micro-electronics and the nervous system’. By 1995, the team had ‘learned how to fuse the device [the microchip] with nerve endings’. Among those reported to be keen on developing the technology was the Defence Research Agency in Farnborough, Hampshire, formerly part of the Ministry of Defence. The agency’s main interest was in ‘the operation of machines by mental control’.

Even as far back as 1995, the British Medical Association (BMA) was expressing concern at ‘how far the field has advanced’. A BMA ethics committee, set up to discuss the issue, was particularly concerned with the potential uses of microchip technology implanted in humans. Said Simon Davies, a legal expert and consultant to the BMA: ‘Big Brother is here and we never saw him coming.’ Who knows where such experiments, undertaken behind closed doors, have led since then?

Regarding human and animal mutations, the horrors mentioned in *Projekt UFO* have by now become almost routine. The Brave New Science of transgenics (taking sequences of DNA and either altering them and putting them back into the same species or, more controversially, introducing them into a different species) has in recent years moved away from purely animal experimentation into the human arena, with the planning of mutated and cloned human beings well on the way. Meanwhile, the scientific and commercial trade in human body parts, which played such a large role in my ‘Projekt Saucer’ fiction series and this non-fiction addition to it, has now become a major, legal industry, with the Chinese routinely exporting human fetuses for use in ‘traditional remedies and health foods’ and an American ‘supermarket’, the International Institute for the Advancement of Medicine (IIAM), selling human body parts, including brains, hearts, spines, liver, appendixes, testicles, knees, elbows (at least seventy-five body parts in all) for so-called ‘research’ purposes.

It is clear, then, that much of the speculative and documented information given in my bestseller, *Genesis*, published twenty-seven years ago and then expanded in the first edition of *Projekt UFO*, published twelve years ago, has stepped out of the world of fiction and into the realm of hard facts.

Nevertheless, despite these hard facts, the ‘extraterrestrial’ hypothesis regarding UFOs continues to dominate the media in general and the publishing world in particular. During the 1990s, in a desperate attempt to

replace the lurid sensationalism of the early UFO writers (Adamski, Däniken, Palmer, et al), publishers turned to a new breed of writers who could be accepted as 'serious' by lieu of their backgrounds, and who would, therefore, be automatically accorded more respect by a gullible public and media.

Leading the pack was Timothy Good, warmly embraced as a 'serious' UFOlogist because, as every press release reminds us, he was educated at The King's School, Canterbury and was, further, a professional violinist who 'gained a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music, where he won prizes for solo, chamber and orchestral playing'. While it is difficult to imagine how a career as a professional violinist can lend credibility to the normally suspect study of UFOs, we are constantly reminded by Mr Good's publicity machine that he began his musical career with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, remained for fourteen years with the London Symphony Orchestra, played with the likes of Leonard Bernstein, Benjamin Britten, Igor Stravinsky, William Walton, and has been a session player for such pop luminaries as Paul McCartney, Elton John, Rod Stewart and the late George Harrison.

This distinguished musical background never fails to impress those interviewing Mr Good about UFOs and extraterrestrials. For this reason, he became an instant critical and commercial success with his first book, *Above Top Secret: The Worldwide UFO Cover-up* (1987). He then went on to write more UFO books and to be invited to lecture at 'universities, schools and… many organizations', including the Royal Canadian Military Institute, the Royal Naval Air Reserve Branch, the House of Lords All-Party UFO Study Group, and the Oxford and Cambridge Union societies. He was also invited for discussions at the Pentagon, lectured at the headquarters of the French Air Force, and even acted as a consultant for 'several US Congress investigations'.

Doubtless it was a combination of Good's 'respectable' middle-class background, good education, musical talent and undeniable skill as a public speaker that led to his early UFO books being accorded an unusual degree of respect, being praised in particular for the breadth of their research and the level-headed manner in which he was treating a notoriously controversial subject. Alas, as with most of those who make a full-time career out of UFO writing, Mr Good became ever more desperate to retain his readership and gradually drifted away from cool-headed reporting into the old Whitley Streiber *Communion*-styled claims of UFO abductions and extraterrestrial or

‘alien’ presences right here on Earth, as the titles of subsequent books clearly indicate: *Alien Bases: Earth’s Encounter with Extraterrestrials* (1998) and *Unearthly Disclosure: Conflicting Interests in the Control of Extraterrestrials* (2000). Mr Good, once highly touted as a ‘serious’ UFO researcher, has by now been reduced to hinting broadly during his lectures and in his more recent books that he, personally, might have been abducted by aliens. He is also selling the idea that the US Government has shrouded the UFO subject in secrecy to protect its ‘privileged contact’ with the extraterrestrials in our midst. Good’s main source of information for this dramatic hypothesis appears to come from accounts passed on by human ‘contactees’ who have, in turn, received their information from friendly humanoid aliens. No attribution required.

A more recent addition to the ‘serious’ pack is Nick Pope, whose main claim as a credible UFO researcher and writer is that he spent twenty-one years with the MoD (Britain’s Ministry of Defence) and, more importantly, worked for three of those years (1991-94) as the MoD’s UFO Desk officer. During that particular period, he researched and investigated: ‘UFO sightings, alien abductions, crop circles, animal mutilations and any other weird and wonderful reports that came my way’. Given this supposed wealth of ‘official’ UFO information, not normally available to the common man, Pope was able to produce his first ‘serious’ UFO book, *Open Skies, Closed Minds* (1995). Sold with the shout line, ‘For the first time a government UFO expert speaks out!’, the book successfully launched Pope’s career as another UFO writer with a ‘credible’ background., leading to a secondary ‘Timothy Good’ styled career as lecturer, documentary film producer, and general UFO pundit on a wide variety of radio and television programs. His writing career continued with a second nonfiction book, *The Uninvited: An Expose of the Alien Abduction Phenomenon* (1997) and two UFO/alien abduction novels. Finally, when the media began comparing Pope’s MoD UFO revelations with ‘The X-Files’, he became widely known as ‘the British Fox Mulder’.

In November 2006, emboldened by his success as a writer, lecturer, ‘UFO authority’ and ‘the British Fox Mulder’, Pope resigned from the MoD and went on to star in a DVD movie entitled *NICK POPE: The Man who Left the MOD*. In the documentary, he discusses, amongst other things, Russian and Black Technology, the Rendlesham Forest Incident, Quantum Physics, Psychology, and Government reports and sightings by insiders. According to

the Reality Films press release, 'Nick Pope is probably one of the best known UFO investigators on the planet. And yet, he is the only official UFO investigator employed by the British Government to ever go on record.'

Alas, as early as 1999, grave doubts were being cast on Pope's actual position within the MoD and on how much of his work at that establishment had actually been related to UFO researches. Starting to suspect that Pope's supposed MoD UFO reports were 'fiction disguised as reality', James Easton, Editor of *Voyager On-line*, wrote to the MoD for clarification regarding the work Pope actually did there. According to Easton, he received a reply from the Ministry, stating: 'Mr Pope was employed as an Executive Officer in Secretariat (Air Staff) 2… The main duties of the post concern non-operational RAF activities overseas and diplomatic clearance for military flights abroad… A small percentage of time is spent dealing with reports from the public about alleged "UFO" sightings and associated press correspondence… The Ministry of Defence has not investigated a case of alien abduction, crop circle formations or animal mutilation.'

Of course, the fact that the MoD has categorically refuted Mr Pope's high claims regarding his position there does not necessarily mean that the MoD is telling the truth; nevertheless, their clear indication that Mr Pope had not been involved as extensively with UFO sightings as he had claimed caused ripples of discontent in many a UFO circle. Nevertheless, Pope continued to sell himself as the 'British Fox Mulder' of 'serious' UFO investigators and writers. However, just like Timothy Good, he swiftly moved from a position of healthy skepticism about extraterrestrial UFOs to a declared belief in the reality of alien intervention on Earth. And, like Good, he even began hinting, by way of half-hearted denial of 'leaks' to the media, that he had, himself, once been taken aboard a UFO.

According to journalist Mark Macaskill, writing in the *Sunday Times* of 16 February 1999, Pope, during his tenure as the MoD's UFO Desk officer, had gone from skepticism to belief not only because of what he had learned there, but also because he was 'holding back part of the reason for his personal convictions'. The reason, apparently, was that in *The Uninvited*, Pope's second UFO book, his story about the UFO abduction of a couple named 'Peter and Jenny' was actually about himself and his girlfriend of the time. Reportedly, 'Peter and Jenny', while driving along a road in Florida, some time prior to 1992, suddenly found themselves several miles away on a

different road. Not being able to account for this seemingly impossible jump from one place to the next, a disturbed Pope later underwent hypnosis and recalled, in the hypnotic state, that he and his girlfriend had been 'lifted into the air' and then taken aboard an alien spacecraft. 'He remembered wandering along its metallic corridors, though he says he doesn't recall meeting any aliens. He now says it was the strangest event of his life.'

While Macaskill didn't say precisely how he knew Pope was actually writing about himself, disguised as 'Peter', and while he made it clear that Pope had neither confirmed nor denied the bizarre story, he *did* state that Pope had fictionalized his real-life experience because he was 'worried about implicating the woman called "Jenny" in the book; a woman who was then, but is no longer, his girlfriend.'

Whether true or false, whether or not Pope had actually given this story to Macaskill, the story offered a platform for Pope's move from skepticism to his apparent belief in the reality of extraterrestrial UFOs and alien abductions. Always a good man with a denial that hints at its opposite, Pope continued to keep his lips sealed about the story of his own abduction by a UFO while frequently implying that the MoD, which had failed to support his claims about the importance of his position with them, was now denying any interest in UFOs or alien abduction reports in order to conceal their own dealings with aliens operating on, or threatening, Earth.

By 2007, though Pope had produced no more UFO books of his own (he only wrote a couple of introductory texts for other UFO authors), he was appearing regularly on television, taking part in numerous radio programs, and lecturing at a wide variety of UFO conventions. By this time, he not only appeared to have moved completely from skepticism to belief, but was even complaining that the MoD UFO project had been 'virtually closed down', leaving the country 'wide open' to the possibility of an alien invasion.

'There has got to be the potential for that,' he was quoted as saying in the *Daily Mail* of 10 November 2006, 'and one is left with the uneasy feeling that if it turned out to be so, there is very little we could do about it.'

Yet despite what Pope and Good say to the contrary, there has not been the slightest hard evidence for extraterrestrial craft landing on Earth or for alien beings interacting with humans. It should be noted, however, that the most astounding and perplexing science of the past decade – quantum physics – may have produced the nearest we have come to an explanation for the

many seemingly real experiences that thousands of perfectly sane people insist that they have had with UFOs and/or extraterrestrials.

We are reminded by Phil Patton, in his marvelous book, *Dreamland* (Villard, New York, 1998) that some of the world's most respected physicists, in discussing the paradoxes of quantum theory, have raised the possibility of parallel or multiple universes and space-time 'wormholes' that make time-travel a theoretical possibility. Says Patton: "According to quantum theory, subatomic particles could apparently be in several places at once…Or, more to the point, a subatomic particle that is *here* in one universe might be *there* in its neighbor." Given this scenario, it is not beyond the bounds of probability that the more extreme or 'dreamlike' UFO sightings and extraterrestrial 'contactee' experiences could be, in the words of UFO photographer Kathleen Ford, confrontations with 'interdimensional entities', or, in Patton's words, 'creatures from other realms of space-time'. If this idea seems far-fetched, it has, as Patton says, 'roots in mainstream physics' and it certainly has, indeed, been presented as a viable proposition by the reputable physicists David Deutsch and Fred Alan Wolf. In *The Fabric of Reality: The Science of Parallel Universes – And Its Implications*, (Allen Lane/Penguin, 1997), Deutsch speculates that all of twentieth-century physics points to parallel universes. In *Parallel Universes* (Touchtone/Simon & Schuster, 1988), Wolf speculates that parallel universes could be the source of dreams, visions, schizophrenia, and… UFO sightings.

So the countless cases of normal people recollecting UFO/extraterrestrial experiences could be explainable within the scientifically possible, albeit bizarre, parameters of quantum physics, rather than proving that flying saucers, piloted by aliens, have landed on Earth.

Interestingly enough, the most recent attempt to make UFO writing 'serious' and 'respectable' came in the form of the only book, apart from my own, to suggest that UFO sightings might be related to experimental man-made craft. *The Hunt for Zero Point* (2002) received a lot of publicity because it was written by Nick Cook, Aviation Editor for the 'esteemed' *Jane's Defense Weekly*, the bible of the defense establishment and highly respected for its 'no-nonsense, nuts-and-bolts' reporting. Subtitled, 'Inside the Classified World of Antigravity Technology' Cook's book treats as a totally new concept the possibility that the US Government confiscated secret Nazi anti-gravity technology at the end of World War II and later may have

tested it in experimental aircraft. Some of that technology, Cook claims, probably made its way into the B-2 Stealth bomber and may account for the rash of post-war UFO sightings.

I have to confess that I took great personal offense at this book, particularly when one reviewer wrote: 'So even if Nazi flying saucers sound nutty on the face of it, there's nothing crazy about Cook asking the questions he does. You might even call it courageous.'

Courageous? In fact, the spinal column of Cook's book was almost certainly formed from information to be found in my bestselling novel, *Genesis*, first published way back in 1980, in my World War II 'Nazi UFO' novel, *Inception*, published in 1991, and in the first edition of my nonfiction work, *Projekt UFO*, first published in 1995. Certain of Mr Cook's supposedly original ideas can also be found scattered throughout my five-volume 'Projekt Saucer' fictional series, published between 1991 and 1999. (*Inception*, *Phoenix*, *Genesis*, *Millennium*, *Resurrection*.) As for SS General Hans Kammler's involvement with Nazi flying-saucer construction projects and the US Navy's involvement with their own flying saucer research programs – both of which Mr Cook breathlessly claims to be his own discovery – they were in fact first brought to public attention through two of the above mentioned books, namely *Genesis* and *Inception*.

Even more offensive to me was the way in which Mr Cook, while selling his book as a serious technical study of the dubious evolution of workable anti-gravity programs based on Nazi technology, writes not in the cool, objective tone of a former *Jane's Defense Weekly* Aviation Editor, but in the breathless style of a second-rate thriller writer. Thus, when his 'research' first leads him to the knowledge that the SS was in charge of the most secret Nazi technology (as first revealed by this author nearly thirty years ago), Cook feels 'a constriction in my throat. I was so keyed, my breath was coming in short, sharp gasps.'

More likely he was simply breathless from reading my novels and factual book, none of which were credited in the main text of his supposedly original tome, though the original edition of *Projekt UFO* was at least listed in his bibliography.

However, personal gripes aside, *The Hunt for Zero Point* can be credited with bringing the possibility of man-made UFOs and other secrets of black research programs back to public attention after all these years, particularly

with regard to the still problematical anti-gravity programs.

Rereading *Projekt UFO* twelve years on, I find myself still harboring doubts about certain aspects of it, notably the speculative underground colonies in the Antarctic (though they were certainly *physically* possible and anything *is* possible); but in the main I am struck by how accurate, not to say prophetic, most of the factual material, though considered speculative at the time, has turned out to be.

While the possibility of underground Antarctic UFO research facilities remains problematical, there can be no doubt that similar facilities, many of them vast, all of them highly secretive and dedicated to black technology, including the creation of bizarrely-shaped experimental aircraft, exist in a wide variety of known or rumored locations. Such top-secret facilities are to be found in Dulce and White Sands, both in New Mexico, in Tehachapi (known as 'the Anthill') and Helendale, both in California, and even in Bascombe Down, in the UK. While the American sites, in particular, have been widely credited with harboring aliens, or 'humanoid aliens', engaged in highly advanced technological experiments, including the surgical mutation of abducted human beings, the most famous site of all, Area 51, is more realistically recognized as the very hub of America's black technology.

Also known as Groom Lake, Dreamland, Paradise Ranch, and Home Base, Area 51 consists of approximately 4,742 square miles of restricted airspace and nearly four million acres of bomb range located in the Emigrant Valley of southern Nevada, close to Las Vegas, hemmed in by the Nellis Air Force Range and the Nevada Test Site, in an area of parched, windblown desert and lunar-like dry lakes. For years its very existence was denied by the US Government, but it came to the attention of the public in 1962, when the first Soviet spy satellite began orbiting Earth. Shortly after this momentous, threatening event, the existence of the fabled supersonic AF-12 Blackbird fighter, frequently observed flying over Area 51, was officially acknowledged as a desperately needed US propaganda exercise.

Nevertheless, Area 51 remains an area so secret that unwanted visitors are warned off with signs stating, '*Deadly force authorized and photography prohibited*.' Helicopters routinely sweep its borders to either sandblast intruders with the downwash from their rotors or pick them up and arrest them. Indeed, it is an area so secret that even the fighter pilots flying in and

out of nearby Nellis Air Force Base are forbidden to enter its airspace. Because of this extraordinary security, the area is one of particular fascination for those interested in black or 'stealth' technology. That interest grew phenomenally when one Bob Lazer, a man with a seriously checkered background, known to some as a professional con artist, claimed that he had seen and worked on flying saucers in an area known as S-4, at Papoose Lake, south of Groom Lake. However, even as the hordes of sky-watchers who then swarmed to the area were seeing 'mysterious lights' and UFOs, it became clear that Area 51 was in fact the top-secret, black technology site where the SR-71 Blackbird, and, most famously, the triangular F-117 Stealth fighter plane (both of which were often mistaken for flying saucers or, at least, triangular-shaped UFOs) were first constructed and flown. It was also the site most often mentioned in regard to the highly speculative Aurora and Black Manta prototypes. At the very least, it was, in the words of one sky-watcher, the place where 'we are testing vehicles that defy description, things so far beyond comprehension as to be really alien to our way of thinking.'

'UFO' is an acronym for Unidentified Flying Object(s) and many of the experimental craft observed over Area 51 were definitely of unusual, even bizarre, configuration, including shapes that resembled flying saucers. The bat-shaped F-117 Stealth fighter was certainly such a craft and its rumored successor, the Aurora, had, as we have noted above, a similarly unorthodox appearance. Thus, while its existence was being officially denied, the Aurora, when sighted by sky-watchers during a test flight, would have justifiably been described as a UFO.

And it has to be repeated that despite the 'extraterrestrial' or 'alien' theories put about by writers such as those mentioned above, the UFO sightings of the period covered by *Projekt UFO* were almost certainly caused, not by alien spacecraft, but by the experimental aircraft that preceded the supersonic, 'radar invisible' Stealth fighters, the 'otherworldly'-shaped UAVs (no cockpits, no windows, no wings or fins; bat-shaped, saucer-shaped or doughnut-shaped), and the even more contemporary prototypes mentioned at the beginning of this introduction: the secret products of an ongoing black technology.

Even the Roswell Incident of fifty years ago, which could reasonably be said to have started the UFO age (along with the Kenneth Arnold sightings of

the previous month), can now be attributed to the early days of black technology. While that particular incident has spawned more than three dozen books, hundreds of television documentaries or program segments, thousands of pages of press speculation, serious accusations of a massive and far-reaching government conspiracy, at least one complex hoax (the Ray Santilli 'alien autopsy' film) and a made-for-TV movie, no definite confirmation for what crashed in Roswell, New Mexico, on 7 July 1947, has so far come to light. Yet an increasing body of evidence supports the theory that it was some kind of man-made flying device.

Over the years, various kinds of balloons have been suggested, with the official explanation changing at least two times. First, as recounted in *Projekt UFO*, the military claimed that what crashed was a Rawin weather balloon – but a simple weather balloon could not account for the kind of debris reportedly found at the crash site. Next, on 8 September 1994, following pressure from Congressman Steven Schiff of New Mexico, the US Air Force issued an official statement that laid the blame on a 'high altitude' balloon of the kind used in a secret program known as Project Mogul. This may, indeed, have been the case.

Project Mogul's task was to detect Soviet nuclear tests by using sensitive instruments carried aloft by high-altitude balloons. Some of those balloons were launched from the Roswell Army Air Field.

According to Professor Charles B. Moore, then working at the Langmuir Laboratory for Atmospheric Research in Socorro, New Mexico, and the man in charge of balloon launches in the Roswell area, the Mogul balloons carried a new kind of monitoring instrument, designated the ML-306. The device utilized aluminum foil and wax paper, with balsa-wood beams and reinforcement tapes that were painted with various markings. Those markings, probably scientific symbols, were described by Air Force Major Jesse A. Marcel, placed in charge of the crash debris, as 'hieroglyphics'. (Marcel's unfortunate use of that word, so suggestive of mysterious races – as well as his growing conviction that what had crashed was not of this world – was almost certainly influenced by Kenneth Arnold's sensational UFO sightings of the previous month. Thus, the 'hieroglyphics' were soon taken up by cultists as the letters of 'extraterrestrial' or 'alien' writing.) Also, Professor Moore insists that the Mogul balloons used for that particular project were made from neoprene, instead of the customary polyethylene.

When the cluster of balloons expanded at high altitude and then burst, falling back to earth, Mac Brazel, the rancher who found the wreckage, described the debris as being 'smoky-gray in color'. This, says Professor Moore, is exactly how he personally would have described the color of neoprene balloons that had been stretched, as they would have been at high altitudes.

So the Mogul balloons *might* have been what crashed at Roswell, New Mexico.

However, a more intriguing possibility was raised in the November 2000 issue of *Popular Mechanics*. In an article entitled 'America's Nuclear Flying Saucer', author Jim Wilson recounts that among America's various top-secret projects of the time was an unmanned 40-ft 'flying saucer' designed to rain nuclear destruction on the Soviet Union (now Russia) from 300 miles up in space. Designated the Lenticular Reentry Vehicle (LRV), designed for the US Air Force by engineers at the Los Angeles Division of North American Aviation, and managed by Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Dayton, Ohio (where German engineers who had worked on Nazi rocket and flying disk projects had been resettled, and over which, at the time, many UFO sightings were made), the LRV could have been powered by one of the nuclear rockets then under development by the Air Force and the Atomic Energy Commission or, as an alternative, lifted into the stratosphere by a 'heavy-lift balloon'. According to the Air Force, such balloons were capable of lifting 15,000-pound payloads to 170,000 feet.

In 1997 the Air Force revealed details of several heavy-lift balloon research projects and stated that during the Cold War it had routinely used them to lift 'unusual airframes' for aerodynamic tests. It should therefore be borne in mind that the test flight of an LRV could, as Jim Wilson reminds us, 'certainly match the classic UFO reports of a silvery disc hovering motionless in the sky, then silently shooting upwards'.

So an LRV of the kind described above could be another explanation for what crashed that fateful day in Roswell, New Mexico.

Either way, if what crashed at Roswell was related to a top-secret aeronautical or defense project, the official response would have been to ensure that the general public did not learn about it. The best way to do that would be the spreading of carefully plotted disinformation. This may explain why, fifty years after the event, the many questions raised by the Roswell crash have never been fully answered.

What we can, however, say with conviction, is that what crashed at Roswell in 1947 was, like most of the other sightings classed as UFOs, almost certainly man-made.

There the case rests.

W.A.Harbinson
West Cork, 2007

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W.A.Harbinson
London, 1991

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W.A.Harbinson

In the year 2001 the son of bestselling novelist and biographer W.A.Harbinson offered his father a free trip as the sole passenger on a container ship that would sail from Shanghai to Haifa, with many other ports in between. Once on board the ship, Harbinson found that he was the only white face in a crew composed solely of Indian officers and Chinese seamen. He also realised that while he had previously sailed on passenger liners, he was 'all at sea' when it came to a working ship.

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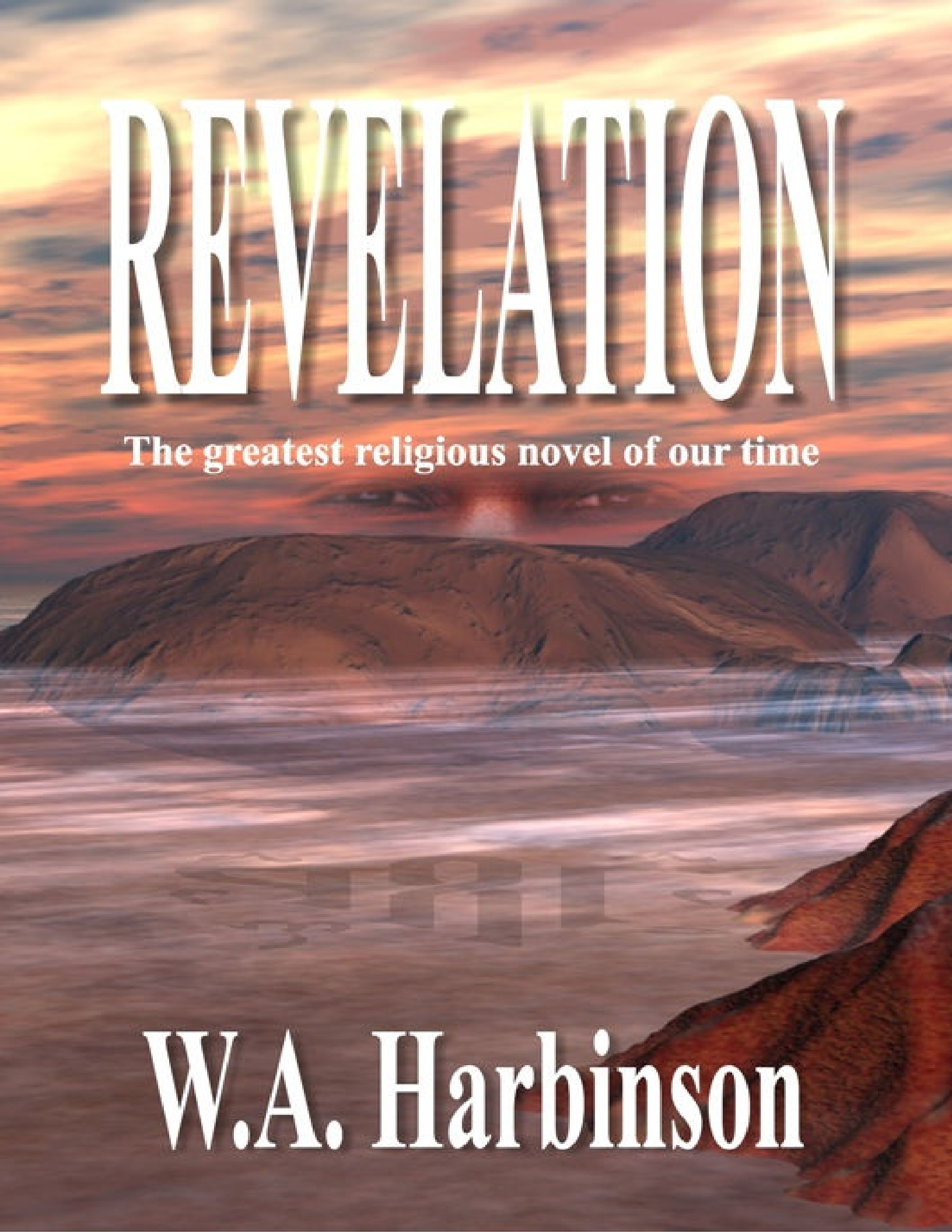
REVELATION
The greatest religious novel of our time
W.A. Harbinson

W.A.Harbinson was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in 1941. At nineteen years of age, he emigrated to Australia and enlisted in the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), serving in Australia, Thailand and Malaysia. Returning to London six years later, he became the editor of a variety of men's magazines and then began his long career as a freelance writer. His published works include a Number One US bestselling biography, *The Illustrated Elvis* (1975); two bestselling novels, *Genesis* (1980) and *Revelation* (1982); and a British bestseller biography, *Evita: Saint or Sinner* (1996). He is the author of the epic 'Projekt Saucer' series of novels, which remained in print for most of the 1990's. The five novels in the series are: *Inception*, *Phoenix* (nominated for the Arthur C. Clarke Award, 1995), *Genesis*, *Millennium* and *Resurrection*. Harbinson's early Australian novel, *The Running Man* (1967), was turned into a feature film, *The City's Edge*. He has also written for radio and adopted various film scripts into book form. His most recent works are the autobiographical *The Writing Game:Recollections of an Occasional Bestselling Author*, available only through the Internet at www.pabd.com or direct from Amazon; and *All at Sea on the Ghost Ship*, available from www.booksurge.com and Amazon. W.A. Harbinson, when not travelling, which he does a lot, divides his time between an apartment in Paris, France, and a renovated farmhouse in West Cork, Ireland.

REVELATION

W.A.Harbinson

BookSurge, LLC

First published by Corgi Books in 1982.
This edition published in 2006 by W.A. Harbinson.
www.waharbinson.eu.com

ISBN 1-4196-3098-9
Library of Congress Control Number: 2000000000
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Verily, I swear by the day of resurrection; and I swear by the soul which accuseth *itself*: doth man think that we will not gather his bones together? Yea: *we are* able to put together the *smallest* bones of his fingers. But man chooseth to be wicked, *for the time which is* before him. He asketh, When *will* the day of resurrection *be*? But when the sun shall be dazzled, and the moon shall be eclipsed, and the sun and the moon shall be in conjunction; on that day man shall say, Where *is* a place of refuge?
-*The Koran*

With the footprints of the Messiah, insolence will increase and dearth reach its height; the vine will yield its fruit but the wine will be costly. There will be none to offer reproof, and the whole empire will be converted to heresay. The meeting place of the scholars will be laid waste and Golan will be made desolate and the people of the frontier will go about from city to city with none to take pity on them. The wisdom of the scribes will become foolish, and they that shun sin will be despised. The young will insult their elders, and the great will wait upon the insignificant… The face of this generation is as the face of a dog; and a son does not feel ashamed before his father. On whom then can we rely? On our Father who is in heaven.
-*Sanhedrin* 79a (Quoted from *The Messianic Idea in Israel*, J.Klausner)

Woe unto you that desire the
day of the Lord!
Why would you have the day of
the Lord?
It is darkness and not light
As if a man did flee from a lion,
And a bear met him;
And went into a house and leaned
his hand on a wall,
And a serpent bit him.
Shall not the day of the Lord
be darkness, and not light?
Even very dark, and no brightness
in it?

-*Amos* 5: 18-20; also, *Isa*.2: 11

Armageddon (From the Hebrew words *har* = 'mountain' and Megiddo, place name.) The place where all the nations of the world will meet for a final battle, followed by universal peace. Mount Megiddo is in the northern Galilee, not far from Lebanon, Syria, Jerusalem, and the West Bank.
-*The Jewish Almanac*, Richard Siegal and Carl Rheins

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For my one and only

Tanya

PART ONE:

ANNUNCIATION

… and lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was.
-*Matthew*, 2:9

1

The fear limned the edge of the experience and the Whole drew her in. The Whole was a white hole, a burning light expanding, the light spreading out all around her and dissolving the darkness. The fear receded with the darkness. The sun climbed above the mountains. A light of white crosses dominated a breast of earth, and beyond were more hills, a shimmering haze, the desolate plains of the desert.

She knew it was a dream. The light shone on her father's grave. Each mourner added a shovelful of dirt and stepped back with head bowed. She did not bow her head, but instead drew in the burning sun, her dry eyes reflected in the sky where the silence condemned her. Someone chanted the mourner's *Kaddish*. God's greatness was affirmed. 'Beyond all the blessings and hymns…' A voice rising and falling.

She surveyed the distant desert. The fear returned and ebbed again. Her Self viewed the other by the grave, and both were locked in the dream. The rabbi was disenchanted, touching his skullcap with one hand, a mild wind tugging the dark cloth of his suit as he tried not to look at her. No tears. *You won't bend*. Only the rabbi could have made her weep. She ignored his silent reprimand and looked away, surveying the parched, ancient Holy Land.

I do not belong here; I resist and it destroys me. The pain, which was greater than that caused by her father's death, now forced her to rise up and glanced down upon herself on the windswept hill.

I'm a woman; I bleed. All women bleed, the rabbi said. You must accept the bleeding as a sign that life constantly renews itself. *I'm a victim of my body.* You err in thinking so. The body is the temple of your spirit and you chose to defile it. She refused to accept this. The open grave was her truth: her father's corpse in a plain wooden box now buried deep in the soil.

More dirt was shovelled in, the sun flashing off the spades, and the cantor stepped back to make way for the man offering the eulogy. *He was flesh and*

no more. An old man, he is no more. My father, a stranger, a memory: already swallowed by history. Leon's tired eyes examined her. She looked down and surveyed herself. The Valley of Kidron filled her eyes, grassy slopes strewn with rubble, the ghosts of Solomon, Hezekiah and Absalom permeating the air. Leon knew what she was thinking: *I will not give in to this*… Her confusion was greater than her grief and made the pain more unbearable. *I won't bend*, she insisted. That's your dilemma, the rabbi accused. She glanced up and was blinded by the sun and then she fell to her knees.

The Pool of Siloam was filled with water. The brilliant sunlight flashed around Him. He stretched out His hands to the blind man and restored that man's sight. The man called out and wept, kissed the bare feet in the sandals. The wind tugged at the white robes of Christ and made the red water ripple. Then He turned towards her. His radiant eyes filled her with shame. She lowered her gaze and saw the blood spreading across the Pool of Siloam, in which, with a rank, shocking foulness, a foetus was drifting. Someone's child. Her child. The butchered flesh of the unborn. She sobbed and felt a terrible loss as the breath of Christ touched her. Flowing white robes and dark hair. His hands outstretched in beckoning… She sobbed for the loss of her child and then fell at his feet.

-*Blessed child*.

-*God forgive me*.

Her grief made her cry aloud. She opened her eyes and saw the grave. The fear returned and filled her whole being as the ground roared and parted. The dirt fell away, a fierce wind lashed the hill; she dissolved and became a silent scream as the grave opened out. The dark soil was forced aside and the coffin was pushed back up; her father's fingers curled around the splintered edges as white light filled the darkness.

The blinding radiance of His presence. Exultation and terror. The bloody foetus in swirling water, the marble sheen of her father's face, the rabbi with his gentle accusations, Leon's tired, jaded gaze. The confusion increased her terror as the wind roared around her, and she fearfully turned away - from His radiance, His resurrection - as the arms in the white robes in the white light were raised to embrace her.

She cried aloud and awakened.

Kate flipped onto her back, tugging the sheet from her naked body, opening her eyes and glancing wildly about her, gasping harshly, heart pounding. Silence. Something else… The silent screaming of the dream… She saw the white walls of the bedroom, the window open, the curtains fluttering, a light breeze chilling the sweat on the tanned skin of her trembling limbs. She lay there, shaking helplessly, a child again, desolated, visions of blood and death in her head as her pounding heart settled.

'Damn,' she muttered, rubbing her face with the sweaty palm of her hand, 'I should never sleep alone.'

She sat up, wrapped her arms around her raised knees, and studied the quiet, dark room. White walls, a few paintings, some framed diplomas, scattered clothes, functional furniture and numerous books on psychology; little else of real value. She glanced about her and shivered. The night's silence was unreal. The phantasmagoria of the dream was still with her, cobwebbing her thoughts.

Her father's room was next door, but he had died a week ago. She recalled him lying in his bed, his body cold, his face white, an unrecognisable, alabaster mask, his fingertips pressed on his sightless eyes. Death: the inevitable. Death: the unforgettable. Kate shivered and removed her arms from her knees and then stretched her long legs. *Physician, heal thyself.* Kate tried to ignore the thought. She took a cigarette from the bedside cabinet, lit it and inhaled; then, with a sigh, her body cool, swung her legs off the bed.

The darkness was not comforting, the silence was oddly threatening, and bewildered that the fear should still be present, she stood up and stretched herself. Naked, she was alive, her flesh releasing her from her mind. A cool breeze came through the window, touched her skin and made her yearn for oblivion. Not mere pleasure - oblivion - the ephemeral drowning in sensuality. She thought about sex, about blood, the dream's foetus; and the fear, which for a brief moment had left, now returned to take hold of her.

'Damn it,' she murmured, 'I'm *still* dreaming.'

The words were no comfort, sounding ethereal in the empty room, echoing in the depths of her head as if spoken by someone else. She shivered again, inhaling deeply on her cigarette, her dishevelled hair caressing her shoulders and the blade of her spine. The fear was insidious and could not be explained; in trying to explain it, she returned to the dream and that merely

increased the fear.

Silence. Shifting shadows. A faint light fell through the window. Out there, beyond the window, was the night and its dark, treacherous deserts. Kate stared at the window. The light seemed to be calling to her. Shivering, she took a step forward, then stopped again, feeling nervous. *What is it?* (It is nothing.) She inhaled on her cigarette. Her body felt light, incorporeal, floating somewhere beneath her. The fear was irrational, yet her business was rationality; thinking this, she was touched by a shame that impelled her to move again. She let the smoke out slowly, ran her fingers through her hair, took a deep breath, then walked to the window and pulled the curtain aside.

She saw the star immediately, unusually large, too bright, dominating the glittering mosaic all around it with a pulsating brilliance.

A star. What star? She had never seen it before. Unfamiliar with astronomy, she nevertheless knew the sky and was convinced that that star should not have been there. She blinked and looked again, but the star remained there, pulsating yet unreal.

She saw little else. Her gaze was fixed on the heavens. The large star was at the vortex of an immense web of smaller stars and black sky, the pale moon wreathed in thin clouds, streaks of dark blue around it: the great tapestry of the cosmos, infinite, impenetrable, stretching over the sleeping hills and plains, the night's conspiracy of silence. Kate was drawn to that star; it drew her in and then dissolved her. She blinked, shook her head, looked again and saw its hard, glittering brilliance.

'This is stupid,' she whispered. 'You're being foolish. It's just a damned star.'

Her voice sounded strange, disembodied and unreal, lingering like an echo in her mind, before fading away. This, also, was disturbing, heightening her fear, forcing her thoughts back to the dream and its condemnations.

'A *star*?' she said softly.

She couldn't understand it: the star should not have been there. It was large and pulsating and unnaturally bright, dominating the glittering sky. That same sky had coloured her dream, that same moon had shone down; the pool of blood and the drifting foetus had been drawn from her past, but the star, which she had never seen before, had no place in her history. Kate inhaled on her cigarette, blew the smoke out and shivered, her lean body framed by the window and licked by the breeze. She kept staring at the star, shaking her

head in bewilderment, trying to accept that she was actually awake, feeling more like a sleepwalker.

'Five o'clock in the morning,' she said ruefully. 'I'm still drunk… or still dreaming.'

Still dreaming of nameless fears, of a past that refused to die, of the physician who could not heal herself and instead let her work rule her life. She did not belong here. This land was not her land. No longer young, now alone in an impassioned, divided country, she, who viewed passion as an irrational impulse, passed her days in a desperate fight against despair and could not sleep at nights. Also, her dreams were haunting, coloured with guilt and confusion, the contradictions of the spirit and flesh resurrecting her lost hopes. A child in a woman's body, a frightened being with a sharp, defensive tongue, a physician who healed damaged minds but could not soothe her own fears.

Kate Hirschfield was naked. Her eyes reflected an unknown star. She looked up, unable to believe what she was seeing, wishing that daybreak would come.

'Go away, damn you! *Go!*'

A star. *What star?* It did not belong there. It was far bigger than the surrounding stars, and seemed closer, more vibrant. Kate inhaled on her cigarette, exhaled slowly, licked her dry lips, hung-over, half asleep and confused, the fear slipping into her. She shivered and shook her head, trying to break free from the dream, thinking of Leon and the rabbi and her father's death, feeling obscurely defenceless. She had drunk too much last night and was drinking too much in general; between Leon and her own sense of desolation, she was losing touch with herself. *Physician, heal thyself*. Kate tried to smile, but didn't make it. She stared up at the star, wondering what it could be; and then, despising her rising fear, turned away from the window.

'I need sex,' she said.

She walked back to the bed, sat down and crossed her legs, stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray and then reached for the telephone. Her hand wavered in the air, a pale web in the darkness, fingers outspread and curving down slightly, hesitating, retreating… No, not this time… not at five in the morning. She shook her head wearily, crossed her hands to hold her shoulders, rocked her body languidly from side to side and then lay down on the bed.

‘He’s dead,’ she said. ‘My father is dead. I’m thirty-five years old.’

The confession was no comfort and did not dispel the fear that continued to coldly drape itself over her. She tried to rationalise the feeling, putting it down to the dream, but her eyes, roaming restlessly around the silent, moonlit room, were drawn inexorably back to the window and the darkness beyond. Kate felt disorientated. She couldn’t shuck the dream off. Now, blending in with the pervasive images of the dream, was the image of a large, brilliant star that should not have been there.

‘Kate Hirschfield,’ she said aloud, ‘you’re imagining things…or you simply never *noticed* that star before.’

The silence mocked her words. Though shivering with cold, she was sweating. She wanted someone beside her, on top of her, inside her, obliterating the fevers of the night and the fear clinging to her. What was making her fearful? Why did the silence chill her? Kate closed her eyes and touched her trembling body to confirm her own presence. She touched her breasts and nipples, ran her fingers over her stomach, slid both hands along her smooth thighs, felt inside, then gasped helplessly. She kept her eyes closed and explored herself, drifting out towards freedom.

Darkness and silence. She surrendered to sensation. The prison of her body vaporised and left her adrift. Her eyes were still closed. The moon and stars filled the void… Leon running his tongue slowly down her neck and filling his mouth with her breast. Last night, about midnight. Then more drinks and a taxi home. Not kosher, but good for sleepless nights before the dreams resurrected her… The dark, upturned soil, her father’s grave washed in white haze; the cantor and the rabbi and Leon, the murmured grief of the mourners. Fierce heat. Dazzling light. The sun climbing in the sky. Darkness falling with abrupt, startling speed to bring with it the moon and stars… The stars. *What stars?* That large star should not have been there. What sky is it? Where am I? I am here, in my bedroom. But that star was unnaturally large and too bright to be real… She looked up and the fear returned. The star expanded - in the sky or in her mind - and became a blinding light that spread out to engulf her.

Kate gasped with shock, heard the rumbling, felt the shaking, saw her paintings swinging crazily on the walls as the light filled the room. The fear shook her awake, but she didn’t know what was happening; the rumbling was a muffled sound all around her, outside and inside. The room continued

shaking, ornaments rattling, the paintings swinging, and Kate groaned and rolled onto her hip and grabbed the side of the bed. Then she blinked, disbelieving, taking in the dazzling light, crying out as her whole body shook and panic whipped through her.

The room was brilliantly illuminated, the floors were shaking and rumbling. The fierce white light was pouring in through the window and turning the night into day. Kate couldn't believe her senses. She heard the low, muffled rumbling. The room shook even worse than before and then the bright light transfixed her.

'Oh, my God! What - ?'

The muffled rumbling continued, cups and saucers were rattling, and then the brilliant light started flickering on and off with dazzling rapidity. Kate gasped and gripped the bed, felt it shaking beneath her, fixed her eyes on the paintings on the walls as they swung to and fro. The light and darkness formed a jigsaw of brilliant chiaroscuro, the stark black and white creating bizarre shapes, which were constantly changing. Kate opened her mouth to scream, felt the breath drawn from her lungs, choked and somehow managed a groan and then rolled onto her stomach, her face turned to the side.

'No more!' she whispered. '*No more!*'

The room was plunged back into darkness, the harsh rumbling faded away, and Kate lay there, too frightened to move, as the bed stopped its shaking. Silence. And darkness. She couldn't believe what had happened. Her heart was pounding and she felt very cold and yet her sweat stained the bed sheet. She licked her parched lips and let her racing heart slow down. The paintings on the walls had stopped swinging and the silence was absolute.

Kate lay there for some time, covering her face with her hands, too weak, perhaps too frightened to move, wondering what had occurred.

Perhaps it had been an earthquake. What else could it have been? Yet an earthquake would not explain the light that had poured in through the window. Kate lay there, still trembling; closed her eyes and saw the star… then retreating from the edge of the impossible, she opened her eyes again.

A dream. Or not a dream. An experience of the night. The fear limned the edge of the experience and would not let her go. She took a deep breath, let it out slowly, sighed and then licked her dry lips and rolled onto her back. She stared carefully around the room, feeling bewildered and paralysed, noting

that nothing had changed, but not feeling relieved.

She could not get off the bed. Her eyes were fixed on the open window. Still naked, she lay there on her back and wondered what was outside. She breathed deeply and evenly, closed her eyes and then opened them, looked up, hardly knowing the time or where she was, and saw the window framing only a crimson light which bled weakly from darkness.

Eventually, she stood up, feeling weak, her skin cold, and stepped forward as if in a trance and then stopped at the window. Shivering, she pressed against it, her flat stomach touching wood. She felt her body, the naked skin, the hard nipples, reaching out to the cold air. Where was she? She wasn't sure. What had happened? The inexplicable. And so fearful, hypnotised, a child startled by the unknown, she leaned against the window-frame, licked her lips, took a deep breath, and then, not too sure of what she would see out there, glanced up at the bloody sky, heaved a sigh of relief, then looked down at the golden domes and spangled minarets as they emerged from the quietly retreating darkness and took shape in the crimson haze.

Dawnlight.

Over Jerusalem.

2

Major-General Moshe Eitan, Chief of Staff of the Israeli Armed Forces, marched into the VIP lounge of Ben Gurion International Airport, twelve miles from Tel Aviv, just as the self-propelled passenger steps came to rest against the side of the El Al 747 beyond the light-reflecting, bullet-proof, plate-glass windows. Lieutenant Paul Frankel, standing in front of the windows, nodded at the soldiers outside, watched them march in two well-armed lines towards the parked aircraft, and then turned around and stepped forward to greet his superior officer.

'He's arrived?' Major-General Eitan said brusquely.

'Yes, sir. He's just about to disembark. I've placed men all around the airport terminal, at every entrance and exit.'

'Any more phone calls?'

'No, sir.'

'Very good. They're clever bastards, as always.'

Standing in front of the slim, neat, delicately handsome Lieutenant Frankel, Major-General Moshe Eitan looked even larger and more dishevelled than he actually was, his weather-beaten face, with its lined skin, broken nose and gelid eyes, a parchment of singularly harsh experiences, made even more intimidating by its finely controlled tension and by the body, all muscle and bone, that strained against a tight uniform. Now Moshe stepped forward, running his fingers through his tangled brown hair, and stopped when he reached the plate-glass window, placing his hand on his pistol.

'Any more information about this morning's earth tremor?'

'I'm afraid not. It was totally inexplicable. There would normally be signs of its coming, but in this case there weren't. So far we can't explain it at all.'

'I really can't accept that.'

'Nor can our geologists. They were still debating the matter when I left them – almost tearing their hair out.'

‘They were probably just upset at being pulled out of their damned beds.’

‘I don’t think so, sir. On the contrary, they seemed excited. There was no prior indication of such an earth tremor, so it has them intrigued.’

‘Sweet of voice, but short of brains,’ Moshe quoted. ‘Still,’ he added, ‘I thought it was some kind of huge explosion.’

‘So did I, sir. But it wasn’t. It’s an absolute mystery.’

‘Both mysteries,’ Moshe replied. ‘The earth tremor and the phone call. This is shaping up as a potentially bad day.’

With his fingers still pressed to the plate-glass of the window, Moshe glanced around the empty lounge, automatically searching for something amiss. Seeing nothing, he was nonetheless still worried. The telephone call had been made directly to the Air Traffic Controller at four-thirty that same morning, the unknown caller stating that there would be an attempt on the Prime Minister’s life when he disembarked at Ben Gurion Airport. The ATC had immediately notified airport security, and the message, relayed to Moshe through Shin Bet, had forced him to leave his bed and organise the temporary closing and thorough searching of the whole airport terminal. Neither a bomb nor a would-be assassin had been uncovered and, although it now seemed that the call had merely been one of harassment, Moshe still had good reason to be anxious.

‘You’re sure you’ve checked everything?’ he said to Lieutenant Frankel, without looking over his shoulder.

‘Everything,’ Frankel replied, rather testily. ‘We’ve turned the place upside down.’

‘And the call was untraceable?’

‘We only know that it came from the Jaffo area. It was too brief to be traced.’

‘Damn them,’ Moshe said.

Lieutenant Frankel walked up to beside Moshe and they both stared through the plate-glass windows as the soldiers fanned out around the aircraft. It was just after dawn and the sky beyond the plane was a cloudless, dazzling crimson, streaked here and there with yellow sunlight and silvery striations. The rear passenger door of the aircraft had been opened and two men wearing IDF uniforms emerged to take up positions at either side of the doorway, their eyes scanning the highest points of the terminal building and the shadowed ground of the apron area. The special task force, commanded

by two veterans of the last Israeli-Palestinian war, had now formed a protective triangle around the passenger steps. At the top of the steps one of the two uniformed men, obviously satisfied with the security arrangements, turned to glance back into the plane and then nodded his head.

'What a way to arrive home,' Moshe said quietly. 'Will we ever know peace?'

'I doubt it,' Lieutenant Frankel replied. 'It's getting worse every year. We'll only know peace when either the Jews or the Arabs are obliterated.'

'Hopefully the Arabs, lieutenant?'

'Naturally, Major-General.'

'Ah, yes… naturally.' Moshe offered the words with barely muted sarcasm, his voice quietly cutting. He glanced at the lieutenant, noting the blush on his cheeks, then grinned slightly, mockingly, before turning away to focus his cool grey eyes on the airstrip. 'There he is,' he said, nodding.

The Israeli Prime Minister, wearing only a pair of rumpled grey slacks and a white, open-necked shirt, with his jacket draped informally over one arm, had emerged from the interior of the plane and was carefully making his way down the steep passenger steps to the tarmac. When he reached the bottom, the soldiers of the special task force closed in around him, and then, when the Prime Minister had shaken hands with his personal secretary, the whole group started towards the terminal building.

The sun was rising behind the aircraft, an enormous, incandescent globe, yellow blending into gold, its shape distorted in the shimmering air, spreading out through the haze like a stream of molten iron, the surrounding sky streaked with blue and crimson, setting the few clouds on fire. On the tarmac, the soldiers were colourless, holding their rifles at the ready, their shadows stretching grotesquely in front of them, elongated and jittery. The Prime Minister was walking casually, glancing around at the heavy guard detail, mopping the sweat on his balding head with a handkerchief, a small man, deceptively insignificant, almost lost in the larger group.

'He looks tired,' Lieutenant Frankel said.

Moshe didn't reply. He merely stood where he was, leaning forward, fingers outspread on the glass, his head turned to the right, his cool eyes following the Prime Minister as he reached the door of the VIP lounge and disappeared into the corridor at the other side of the wall. The soldiers, forming a protective path stretching from both sides of the door, snapped to

attention and then performed an about-face, while Moshe, sighing profoundly, running his fingers through his hair, turned back to face the lounge, his body silhouetted in the exotic crimson dawn that was framed by the windows.

'So far, so good,' he said quietly.

The Prime Minister, followed by his immaculately suited male secretary, came into the lounge, blinked, rubbed his eyes, then looked up at Moshe and Lieutenant Frankel, offering a weary smile. 'I'm too old for all this travelling,' he said. 'I could sleep for a month.' The two soldiers in charge of the task force entered behind him, closed the door after them, then stood close to the urbane, grey-haired secretary, their Uzi sub-machineguns slung over their shoulders. Moshe nodded at both of them, offered a flickering smile, then returned his attention to the Prime Minster.

'So,' the Prime Minister said. 'Do we, or do we not, get to meet the famed Rashid Idriss?'

'Yes, Shlomo, we do. He's having breakfast in one of your offices in the Knesset right this minute.'

'I don't believe this,' the Prime Minister said, shaking his balding head from side to side, a bemused smile on his face. 'The dreaded PLO leader is right there in the Knesset. It's ridiculous… Impossible.'

Moshe grinned laconically, though the humour didn't quite reach his grey eyes. 'Well, he's there alright. He arrived just before I left. He's being entertained by the under-secretary - and he's breathless to talk to you.'

'If word of this leaked out, we'd *all* be in trouble.'

'The word won't leak out, Shlomo. We've only informed Mossad and Shin Bet. And Rashid is in the same boat as us: what would *his* people think if they knew he'd actually stepped foot in the Knesset?'

The Prime Minister nodded, scratched his nose and glanced around him. 'So, Moshe, how did you get him here?'

Moshe smiled, tilting his head to the right in a kind of salute, his eyes fixed on his old friend. The Prime Minister was a small, rather stocky figure whose sixty-three-year-old face still retained a deceptively childish innocence, his hazel eyes a bit too large, displaying constant surprise, his face finely boned and moon-shaped, his smile displaying the openness of a peasant. More than one man had made the mistake of judging Shlomo Ben Eleizer by that seemingly immature countenance, not realising that behind the

carefully cultivated peasant's simplicity lay a life of harsh military experience and cunning, often ruthless, political intrigues. What made Moshe smile, as he stared obliquely at his old friend, was the knowledge that he, too, even knowing what he knew, had fallen, more than once, for the Prime Minister's quietly theatrical air of naivety.

'He travelled incognito from Cairo to Suez,' Moshe said, 'took a boat across the Suez Canal to El Shatt, was met there by one of our men and flown to the airstrip at Hakira, then driven from there, in an escorted convoy, direct to the Knesset, arriving about an hour ago and being slipped in through a side door that was guarded by select members of Shin Bet. So, very few on either side know that he's here… Lieutenant Frankel arranged it.'

'Very good, lieutenant,' Ben Eleizer said. 'I am reassured.'

Understanding that the compliment was automatic rather than heartfelt, Lieutenant Frankel nevertheless blushed with muted pleasure and stroked the moustache on his dark, delicate face with a pianist's long fingers. Moshe noticed the gesture, sensed the lieutenant's suppressed nervousness, smiled slightly, then turned his head away to gaze out at the rising sun.

'So, Prime Minister, shall we go?'

'Yes, Moshe, let's do that.'

At a curt nod from Moshe, the two army officers removed their Uzi sub-machineguns from their shoulders, held them at the ready, and led the whole group out of the VIP lounge, down a private corridor that bypassed Customs, and out into an underground garage. Construction of the corridor and special diplomat's garage had been completed four months ago, after some PLO gunmen had, remarkably, managed to get into the airport terminal and attempted the assassination of the Prime Minister; now, the enormous garage, with its walls of thick concrete and electronically controlled doors, had the appearance of some ghastly, futuristic bomb shelter, the air cold, footsteps echoing. Moshe, who did not like enclosed spaces and was, also, now reminded of this morning's mysterious telephone call about another possible assassination attempt, was glad when they were all seated in the armour-plated limousine and it was bouncing over the top of the ramp onto the road that would lead them eventually to Jerusalem. The sun, now much higher in the sky, was filling the air with a pearly grey light.

'And how was New York, Shlomo?'

'Need you ask, Moshe? You've obviously read about my lamentable *faux*

pas - it's already sold lots of newspapers.'

Moshe grinned, withdrew a cigarette from his tunic pocket, held it up to the Prime Minister and received a nod of consent. 'Yes,' he said, lighting the cigarette with the lighter in the rear of the front seats. 'Whatever possessed you, Shlomo?'

The Prime Minister groaned histrionically, then put his head back and rubbed his eyes with his fingers. 'I shudder to think about it. I just stupidly lost my temper. We're not popular with the United Nations and I think it just finally got to me… But what a thing to say… so *stupid*… I behaved like a *klutz*.'

'Not like you,' Moshe said.

'No, Moshe, not like me.' The Prime Minister removed his hands from his head, looked up and shrugged, smiling sardonically. 'Well, you know what the General Assembly is like: sanctimonious morality and mock outrage… So, the Russian delegate was assuring the Assembly that so long as Israel continued to pursue her expansionist policies, they, the Soviets, would continue to supply arms to the United Arab Republic - and at that, very foolishly, I found myself proclaiming that should the need arise we would be prepared to use our atomic weapons… Well, you can imagine… Before I even crawled into my bed that night, my outburst had been eagerly seized upon and broadcast around the world as - '

'Israel's own Final Solution.'

'Please, Moshe, don't remind me.' The Prime Minister offered a rabbinical groan of despair, covering his lowered face with his hands and then removing them to glance wearily around him. He and Moshe were side by side in the rear seats facing the front of the limousine; Lieutenant Frankel, neat and handsome, nervously stroking his thin moustache, was sitting opposite, his back to the driver, his dark eyes fixed on them both. Up front, beside the driver, was a commando with an Uzi sub-machinegun; and two trucks filled with armed soldiers, out in front of the limousine, the other behind it, were churning up clouds of dust that were blotting out the exotic brilliance of the sunrise over the hills and plains around Ramla.

'Why not?' Lieutenant Frankel said, his dark eyes flashing with barely suppressed anger. 'Use our atomic weapons and put an end to it. Let the world complain later.'

Moshe glanced at the Prime Minister, saw a hint of amusement, then

turned his cool gaze on the young lieutenant.

'I admire your enthusiasm,' he said quietly. 'What you lack is discretion.'

The lieutenant blushed, looked down at his feet, then nervously stroked his moustache with his index finger. Twenty-eight years old, an Orthodox Jew, graduate of the National Defence Academy, Frankel was a relatively inexperienced but highly promising member of Shin Bet, the security service responsible for internal security and counterintelligence within Israel. Moshe also knew that Frankel was a fanatical Zionist who saw in the present government and its leading members the possible weakening of true Zionist ideals in the face of increasingly antagonistic world-wide opinion. Now, obliquely studying the young man, taking note of his embarrassment and suppressed anger, Moshe knew that he was secretly yearning for the time when the new generation, his generation of sabres, would sweep away the old regime and guide the Jews of Israel to what he imagined was their manifest destiny. Such feelings, which were understandable to Moshe, also filled him with dread, because such feelings, though rooted in a passion for Israel, left no room for compromise.

'Why all the guards?' the Prime Minister asked.

'We had another anonymous phone call.'

'A threat?'

'Yes. In the event, it appears it was simply harassment.'

'Arabs?'

'No, Shlomo.' Moshe took a deep breath. 'We think it was Jews.'

An uncomfortable silence followed Moshe's remark, causing them all to stare through the windows of the speeding limousine and dwell on the implications of what they had heard. The land here was flat, no longer green, parched by the sun; and as they passed the wrecked tanks and trucks, left there as monuments to the war of 1967, the irony of the scene was not lost on them. Moshe sighed and inhaled on his cigarette, feeling terribly weary.

'I find it hard to accept that it was Jews, Moshe.'

'I *refuse* to accept it,' Lieutenant Frankel said.

Moshe pursed his lips, exhaled the cigarette smoke, watched it drifting lazily in front of him and then rubbed his tired eyes.

'Our young lieutenant is shocked,' he said quietly, 'but unfortunately the facts speak for themselves.'

'What facts, Moshe?'

‘Four months ago, Shlomo, two PLO assassins managed to get into the airport and hide themselves there all night. How they managed to do it, we never found out, but we know that they couldn’t have done it without the assistance of Jews. An anonymous phone call put paid to the attempted assassination, but since the caller obviously knew exactly where the assassins were hiding, we can only assume that he was involved in getting them in there, but wanted to scare us rather than actually kill you.’

‘So, he was Jewish.’

‘Correct.’

‘And this morning?’

‘Obviously a similar case - both harassment and a warning. However, the anonymous phone call was made directly to the Air Traffic Controller, and that number, as you know, is classified. So it had to be someone who knew the airport, which means he was Jewish.’

An uncomfortable silence prevailed as the western outskirts of the Golden City came into view. The Prime Minister pursed his lips, Lieutenant Frankel stared at his own feet, and Moshe studied them both with his grey eyes concealing his thoughts… Jew against Jew. An unprecedented situation… Moshe felt a spasm of grief and outrage, an anguished incomprehension. What did Lieutenant Frankel know? His innocent world was not their world. Neither Orthodox Jews nor fanatical believers in Zion, Moshe and the Prime Minister were embroiled in international diplomacy and now had to accept that Israel was merely part of it. Lieutenant Frankel saw it differently, with young eyes, insular eyes, his view more emotional than realistic, rooted firmly in a devout, unyielding Judaism. Doubtless he had felt revulsion at bringing Rashid Idriss into Israel, had secretly felt like a traitor during every mile of the journey, convinced only that he was protecting an Arab murderer, a PLO leader. Moshe knew what he was thinking and could understand his suppressed anger: what was Israel coming to that she could stoop to negotiating with terrorists? That she could vacillate about the West Bank to the point where Jew was ready to kill Jew for it? Yes, Moshe understood - he shared the younger man’s frustration - but he also realised, with the heavy heart of an older man, that compromise, that very bitter potion, could not be avoided.

‘So, Moshe,’ the Prime Minister said eventually, ‘what do you think Rashid Idriss wants?’

‘What he’s *always* wanted,’ Lieutenant Frankel said, his bitterness obvious. ‘Some form of surrender.’

‘Hardly the correct word,’ Moshe admonished him.

‘It’s the *only* word,’ Lieutenant Frankel said.

The Prime Minister sighed, waving his hands to silence them both, then leaned his head back against the seat, suddenly looking his age. ‘We’re not in a good position, gentlemen. We’re out of favour in the West, the Arab Republic is almost united, and now the Netorei Karta zealots and the fanatics of *Gush Emunin* are turning the West Bank into a fortress and dividing the country, Jew against Jew… No, gentlemen, not a very good position. In fact, it’s never been worse.’

Moshe cupped his large hands, lowered his face to them, wiped the sweat off, then removed his hands and glanced outside the limousine, displaying his secret despair.

‘Jew against Jew,’ he said, whispering. ‘Who would ever have thought…?’

He didn’t complete the sentence, but instead stared at Lieutenant Frankel, the veil dropping back over his eyes, leaving them cool and unreadable. Lieutenant Frankel licked his lips, stroked his moustache with a nervous finger, then lowered his gaze and studied his own feet as if disowning the issue. Moshe smiled, without happiness, feeling weary and haunted, trying to steel himself for the meeting to come, and dreading what it might lead to.

The driver turned off the road, moving past wide green lawns that offered a panoramic view of the hills and valleys of Judea, sun-scorched and magnificent, before heading through dense trees and emerging in front of the Knesset, Israel’s Parliament House, while Moshe stared at the young lieutenant and the ageing Prime Minister, their eyes meeting for a brief, embarrassed moment, trying to express the unspeakable.

Five minutes later, in the Prime Minister’s office, they were informed that a bomb had exploded in Jerusalem.

3

The bomb had exploded at seven o'clock in the morning, destroying a synagogue and three houses in one of the densely populated streets of the Mae Shearim quarter. Thirty minutes after the explosion Kate Hirschfield was leaning against a wall in the Hadassah Medical Centre, looking on as the wounded and their shocked relatives and friends were brought into the reception area. The victims were all members of the unpopular Netorei Karta sect, the men wearing frock coats and dusty wide-brimmed hats, the women dressed in equally sombre clothes, looking shabby and archaic. The women wailed and wrung their hands, the men were dazed or murmuring prayers, and the medics, carrying the wounded in on stretchers, had to push them aside. '*Gevalt*!' someone cried. '*Gottenyu*, all the blood!' The blood was bright on the wounded on the stretchers and stained the clothes of those walking. The reception hall was in chaos, the weeping and wailing making it worse; the medics in their smocks were pushing through with the stretchers while the walking wounded or those simply shocked stared around in confusion.

'How many were hurt?' Kate asked.

'Nine,' the harassed doctor replied. 'Four are dead and five are badly wounded. The rest are shocked. Some are deaf.'

'Who planted the bomb?'

'We don't know yet, Kate. Either Arabs or fanatical Zionists… The Netorei Karta aren't popular.'

Still shaken by her dream and the bizarre events of the early morning, Kate stepped forward and waved her hand at Nurse Jabotinsky. The patients on the stretchers were disappearing, but the other zealots remained, the women shaking and sobbing, the men groaning or murmuring prayers, eyes dark, cheeks hollow, beards grey and long, their frock-coats covered in dust from the explosion, their wide-brimmed hats askew.

‘Let’s sort them out,’ Kate said. ‘Some are probably just dazed. I only want the really bad cases; we haven’t beds for the others.’

Nurse Jabotinsky nodded vigorously, her brown eyes big and bright, her worker’s hands pressing the heavy thighs of her short, fleshy body. ‘Terrible!’ she exclaimed dramatically. ‘What a terrible thing to do! For *this* we come to live in *Aretz*! We should all be committed!’ She stepped towards the milling zealots, her face flushed, her lips firm, while Kate, feeling exhausted and fearful, pushed herself away from the wall.

Another stretcher was carried in, the victim strapped down and groaning, both legs a ghastly mess of exposed bone and blood, plasma jars swinging above his head, a medic holding the rubber tubes high. ‘Make way! Let us through!’ Kate stepped aside to let them pass. A woman stared at the stretcher, her eyes widening, glazed with horror, then she shrieked and staggered forward, one hand outstretched, trying to reach for the wounded man. Kate quickly grabbed her wrist, jerked her back, snapped in her ear, and the woman, shuddering with shock, turned away and covered her face with her hands. The stretcher was rushed away, the medics shouting at one another, and Kate walked up to the side of Nurse Jabotinsky and stared intensely around her.

The women were still wailing, wiping the tears from their eyes, burying their faces in handkerchiefs and scarves, holding on to each other. The men were less demonstrative, if just as shocked or outraged, some licking their lips or covering their faces, others kissing their prayer books. ‘Beasts!’ someone exclaimed. ‘Who would do such a thing?’ Kate reached out to the speaker, an old man, his eyes dazed, placed her hand on his shoulder and shook him gently, whispering soothing inanities.

‘It’s all right,’ she said. ‘Quiet now.’

Blood, she was thinking. This whole country is drenched in blood. I live in a country that’s been built with blood and death; I dream about my own draining blood, about the deaths of the young and old. She looked at the man before her, a religious fanatic, an anachronism, the wide brim of his hat shading eyes that were glistening with tears. One of the Netorei Karta zealots, the guardians of the gate, an old man now resembling a child, his tears staining his cheeks. Kate felt sorry for him. She wanted to despise him, but couldn’t. Instead, she felt the sort of despair that twists down into bitterness.

This land was not her land, these people not her people. They lived with a

dream that had its roots in the past and was strangling in the thorns of its contradictions. Kate wanted no part of it. This impassioned land turned her cold. Her father dead, she was now on her own, and she wanted to leave.

'Medics!' she snapped suddenly, waving her right hand in the air. 'Get your hands out of your pockets and let's do some work. Over here, you *luftmenshes*!' The medics jumped to attention, their indecision swept away, galvanised into awareness by the familiar sound of Kate's commanding voice. 'Take these men to my clinic. Put those two women and that man in beds, the others into my waiting room. You understand? *Immediately*!' The medics did as they were told, moving amongst the dazed survivors, taking hold of the men and women, speaking reassuringly to them as they led them away.

'Go with them,' Kate said to the man standing directly in front of her.

The old Jew didn't move, towering over her, looking down at her, his eyes gleaming from the shadow of the wide brim of his hat, the tears rolling out of that shadow and draining into his grey beard. 'A bomb,' he said quietly, his voice cracked and dry, emerging from the depths of his dazed incomprehension like the sound of the wind across barbed wire. 'Why us? We are nothing…' Kate murmured soothing words, but the man's gaze remained fixed, weeping eyes focused inward on a past that ran back to the Holocaust. An obsessed visionary, a religious zealot, an anachronism, he would watch the world go down in smoke and flames before renouncing his faith.

Kate could not share such faith and did not believe in resurrection. She believed in the reality of flesh and bone, dust to dust, no returning. Yet staring up at the old man, she recalled her recurrent dream, the strange, unknown star, the light pouring in from the rumbling darkness as the bedroom shook wildly. The recollection was a challenge, making her question her own beliefs, now wondering, with the sort of chill that springs from inchoate panic, if the bizarre event had actually occurred, and, if so, what the dream and the extraordinary event had represented.

' - sorted out,' Nurse Jabotinsky was saying. 'We'll have to sedate the bad cases. I don't know about the others in your clinic, but no doubt you'll find out soon enough.'

Kate tried to focus her thoughts, wondering what was happening to her, gradually forcing herself back to the reality of the more brutal present. The

departing women were still wailing, their men folk chanting prayers, the medics ushering them away with professional hands and whispered words that meant nothing. Kate started to follow them, but someone called her name. She turned around to face Lieutenant Paul Frankel as he stopped in front of her.

'Filthy bastards!' the lieutenant said. 'Someone buys a loaf of bread from a shop and leaves a bomb by the door. What the hell are they trying to prove?' The lieutenant's handsome face was grim, his eyes luminous with rage, and he stroked his thin moustache with a finger, beads of sweat on his dark skin. He glanced briefly at the old Jew, who still stood in front of Kate, then looked back at Kate, shook his head and shrugged his shoulders despairingly. 'His son was killed,' he said, obviously referring to the old man. 'At least three buildings were demolished. A few others are moderately damaged and the fire is still burning. Filthy bastards! Why there?'

Kate looked around as a medic approached, a young man, an Arab, moving over to place his hand on the old Jew's shoulder, carefully keeping his gaze lowered. Lieutenant Frankel stared at him with hatred, obviously thinking of the bombing, and Kate, taking note of the light in the lieutenant's eyes, offered the Arab a friendly nod.

'It might have been Zionists,' she said. 'They have fanatics as well. The Netorei Karta zealots are against the Zionist State, and a few of them *have* been murdered because of that.'

'There's no proof that it was Zionists,' Lieutenant Frankel replied coldly. 'And you, Dr. Hirschfield, particularly given your standing here, should not be listening to subversive tales from the bazaars.'

Kate smiled and stepped back, letting the Arab reach the old Jew, looking on thoughtfully as he shook the old man gently and said, 'Please, sir, come with me.' The old Jew didn't move, but continued to stare straight ahead, his tearful gaze fixed directly on Kate without really seeing her. 'A bomb,' he said. 'Why?' He had stopped weeping, but his cheeks were wet. 'Please, sir,' the medic said quietly. 'This way… Come with me.' Lieutenant Frankel stared coldly at the Arab medic and then returned his gaze to Kate. 'I don't think the old man can hear; the explosion probably deafened him.' The Arab led the Jew away, looking very small beside him. Glancing down, Kate saw blood on the floor where it had dripped from the stretchers.

'I think you're an Arab sympathiser,' Lieutenant Frankel said stiffly.

‘No,’ Kate replied, ‘I’m not. I’m just sick to death of this damned country and its unreasonable hatreds.’

She turned and walked away, brushing the hair back from her eyes, feeling weary, confused and slightly feverish, the night’s fears still pursuing her. Nurse Jabotinsky hurried up to join her, saying, ‘A rude one, that lieutenant.’ They walked side by side along the corridor, following the Jew and the Arab.

‘He’s alright,’ Kate said. ‘He’s just a bit upset. It always hits them harder when they’re young… Was that an earthquake last night?’

‘Something like it,’ Nurse Jabotinsky replied. ‘It shook most of Jerusalem. At first, I thought it was an explosion - a big explosion, far away - but it went on too long to be that, and our whole street was woken up. Some sort of earth tremor that didn’t do any damage, so we all went back to bed and said our prayers.’

Kate was slightly relieved, but the feeling of foreboding remained with her, the memory of the unknown star and the frightening bright light keeping her in a state of nervous tension. They passed one of the emergency wards, glanced in, saw blood and bone, moved on to the psychiatric wing where Kate’s patients were waiting. *Physician, heal thyself…* Kate found herself shivering. A sharp banging sound accompanied swinging doors as a stretcher was pushed out of an operating theatre. Someone groaned, a medic cursed, light flashed off a plasma jar, rubber tubes swinging above the blood-soaked patient, the trolley’s wheels making squeaking sounds.

‘Did you see anything?’ Kate asked, unable to let the matter rest. ‘I mean, when you looked out after the earth tremor. Did you see anything strange?’

‘Strange, Kate? No. A lot of my neighbours in their pyjamas, I saw, all looking as though Judgement Day had come, none wildly attractive.’

Kate had to smile at that, but her good humour was fleeting, swept away on another tide of disbelief when she thought of that flickering, unnatural light. She wanted to rationalise the experience, to understand it and thus make it acceptable, but so far there was no explanation for what had occurred. Dwelling on this, feeling worse, a sense of unreality invading her, she turned a corner at the end of the corridor, went through another doorway, and entered the small reception room outside the psychiatric ward.

‘You look terrible, young lady.’

‘I’m not young,’ Kate replied.

‘You’re too young to be looking as you do, so confess to your sins.’

Kate didn’t reply, feeling too weary for idle banter, merely standing there and staring past the reception desk at the old Jew and the medic. They were at the door of the ward, the tall Jew with his head bowed, the Arab removing his finger from the doorbell and glancing back with pained eyes. Kate felt sorry for him, understanding what he must be feeling. She smiled at him and he responded, his eyes luminous with gratitude, then he looked up at the silent old Jew as the ward door swung open.

‘I don’t think he’s too bad,’ he said. ‘The shock… it will pass.’

The male nurse who had opened the door stepped aside to let them in, closed the door behind him, locked it and pocketed the keys, then turned around and waved his hand, indicating the shocked and grief-stricken survivors of the recent explosion.

‘They’re still hysterical,’ he said. ‘Two of the women are really bad. I think the rest will just need temporary sedation, but we haven’t given them anything yet.’

Kate glanced around the ward, a small room with eight beds, sunlight pouring in through barred windows onto white-painted walls, making the steel bedrails shine. Two of the women were lying down, still fully dressed, wailing loudly, one of them having her forehead stroked by a bearded zealot, the other surrounded by relatives or friends. A young Orthodox Jew, at the far side of the room, was repeatedly kissing his prayer book and rocking from side to side while murmuring a repetitive litany. The other survivors were less affected, though obviously not that well, either wandering about or staring around them in a daze, sometimes reaching out to embrace one another, weeping quietly and shaking.

‘Make them all lie down,’ Kate said. ‘I don’t want them walking about. We’ll probably need some chlordiazepoxide and meprobamate. I’ll be back in a minute.’

She didn’t know what was happening to her, but she felt the need to escape, wanting to rid herself of her patients and the demands they would make upon her, and aware, as she walked to her office, that she was losing control of herself. Nurse Jabotinsky hurried after her, always faithful, ever watchful, reaching out to touch her encouragingly on the shoulder as they entered the office.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘It’s terrible. All these bombings are too much. And

you… just look at you, poor child, you've had far too much work… And now this… and your father.'

Kate ignored the last remark, refusing to accept the truth of it, still not knowing if she was shocked by her father's death or by the possibility that she simply didn't care. What was grief, after all? It was the disease she was supposed to cure. Psychiatrist, she thought, heal yourself or accept that you're worthless. She sat down behind her desk, covered her face with her hands, massaged her tired eyes with uncertain fingers and then looked up at Nurse Jabotinsky.

'I don't care anymore,' she said. 'I think I might even despise them. I'm tired of the sick and the maladjusted and the shell-shocked. I feel nothing but revulsion at the sight of them. I want to scream. *I don't care anymore!*'

Nurse Jabotinsky smiled and nodded, obviously not believing a word of it, putting it down to the emotional exhaustion wrought by the recent spate of bombings and the death, also recent, of Kate's father.

'You're drinking too much,' she said. 'It's the influence of that Leon Halcomb. More Vitamin C is what you need, and that man won't provide it.'

Kate had to smile at that as well, amused that Jerusalem held no secrets, then she sighed and placed her hands on the cluttered desk, gazing down at the papers. 'You attend to them,' she said. 'I'm sure you know what to do. Sedate them if necessary and I'll have a talk with them when they're pacified. I'm not up to it right now.' The nurse nodded understandingly, unclasped her hands and turned to leave, but before she reached the door it swung open and Lieutenant Frankel marched in.

'Don't you know how to knock?' Kate said acidly, wanting someone to whip.

'My apologies,' the lieutenant said, touching his moustache with a restless finger, his skin dark from the sun, his gaze darker and fixed steadily on Kate. 'I would remind you, however, that I have certain responsibilities in this matter.'

'That sounds pretty pompous, lieutenant. What do you want?'

'I've been sent personally by Major-General Moshe Eitan - '

'I'm not interested in who sent you, lieutenant. I want to know what you want.'

The lieutenant, who was not used to being talked to in such a manner, least of all by a woman, flushed with anger and tried to keep his gaze steady.

‘I want tape-recordings of everything that’s said between you and those survivors during their forthcoming psychiatric counselling.’

‘You sound like a tape-recording yourself.’

‘I didn’t come here to be abused by your notoriously sharp tongue. I repeat: I want your tape recordings.’

‘You can’t have them.’

‘I demand them.’

‘No,’ Kate said icily. ‘I’m entitled to protect the confidentiality of my patients.’

‘It’s a matter of security,’ Lieutenant Frankel said, contempt creeping into his voice. ‘We need to know who bombed those people. The survivors might mention things that could be important, so we need to hear everything.’

‘Find out some other way.’

‘There *is* no other way. You’ll be talking to those people when they’re dazed or in shock, and what they might unwittingly reveal to you could be of great value to us.’

‘I’m not interested, lieutenant. I won’t betray the trust of my patients, and that’s all there is to it.’

‘To save your precious American conscience, I won’t *ask* you, Dr. Hirschfield. Instead, I will make it an order. You *will* pass on your tapes.’

Kate suddenly exploded, almost rising out of her chair, all her recent resentments and fears finding release when she banged her fist hard on the desk and glared at the shocked Lieutenant Frankel.

‘Damn you!’ she yelled. ‘Get the hell out of this office! I can’t stand your pompous patriotism and devotion to duty. Those people outside are *suffering*! I can’t help them unless they *trust* me! I will *not* abuse that trust by becoming a spy for the IDF, so go back to Shin Bet, to your paranoid friends, and have me turned in as a traitor. You understand, lieutenant? I’m telling you to go to hell. If you want to interrogate those people, you can do it when I discharge them - but until then keep your nose out of here and don’t bore me with platitudes. Now get the hell out of this office and close the door when you leave.’

The lieutenant straightened his shoulders, took a deep breath and glared at Kate, then turned and marched angrily out of the room, pointedly leaving the door open behind him. Kate glared at the open door, then let her breath out in a sigh and sank back into her chair. Shaking her head wearily from side to

side, she let the anger drain out of her. Nurse Jabotinsky cleared her throat, nodding her head automatically, then a smile illuminated her matronly face as she placed her hands on her hips.

'You still care,' she said.

'Perhaps,' Kate replied. 'Either way, the work has to be done, so let's go see our patients.'

They both walked out of the office and into the ward where the women were still weeping dementedly, the men murmuring prayers. Kate stared at them, mesmerised, deeply shocked by the familiar: the most extreme face of Israel as represented by those bereaved, stricken zealots.

The women had shaven heads and wore kerchiefs over their wigs, having given up the right to retain their attractiveness when they married their extremely pious men. The men were anachronisms, beards and fringes untouched by scissors, their breeches tight around the knees; their faces, deathly white beneath their wide hats, framed in long ringlets. These men lived for the Torah while their wives remained invisible, only recognised in secular matters - birth, marriage and death - and only allowed to shed tears while their men, all important, communicated directly with their God. It both appalled and angered Kate, made her feel that time had stopped, and that this land, the Holy Land, drenched with blood and dreams of freedom, was a land so totally devoted to its men folk that its women were ciphers. Kate couldn't take it much longer - her American soul was in revolt - and as the women continued wailing and the men kissed their prayer-books, she surrendered to shame and outrage, feeling alien and ostracised.

'I'm still an American,' she said obliquely. 'I'm just beginning to realise that. This country and I don't belong together and should never have met.'

'You're just tired,' Nurse Jabotinsky told her.

'Maybe. I hope so… But somehow I don't think it's true. I feel as if I'm drifting away and losing sight of these people.'

'Innocent fools,' Nurse Jabotinsky said, as if not quite hearing Kate. 'They can't even accept Israel. They still wait for the coming of the Messiah and think we've denied Him. What can we say to them?'

'Nothing,' Kate said. 'Just look at that old man. He's just lost his son and he's shocked, but his faith is intact.'

Kate wanted to go up to him and console him in his loss, but the old man, an anti-Zionist, member of the Netorei Karta zealots, obviously stunned by

the loss of his son, doubtless shocked beyond measure, nonetheless raised his head, touched his lips to his prayer book, and then, his eyes tearful, his hands shaking with emotion, placed the frontlet on his forehead, wound the *tefillin* around his left arm, and quietly buried his grief in the soil of his unyielding faith by praying fervently that the Messiah might come and establish the true Promised Land.

Kate was filled with despair.

4

‘I came here to talk,’ Rashid Idriss said, his voice soft and his English precise. ‘Not to fight; just to talk.’ They were in the new guest chamber, an austere, modern room, enlivened only by the Chagall tapestries that dominated one wall, the three of them in chairs at the end of the long table, Rashid and Moshe Eitan face to face, the Prime Minister between them. ‘The situation is getting out of hand,’ Rashid continued, ‘and I don’t think any of us wants it to worsen. That’s why I’m here.’

Moshe, leaning lazily back in his chair with one large hand stretched out on the table, tapping a pencil up and down on the polished wood, studied Rashid with a gaze neither friendly nor antagonistic, though it *was* deliberately unreadable. Rashid, knowing Moshe’s history, was not fooled by the neutral look, if not certain at least willing to accept that it might conceal hatred. Likewise, the Prime Minister, Ben Eleizer, an old fox with a sweet face, now leaning forward casually, his elbows on the table, his shirt sleeves rolled up, the shirt unbuttoned at the neck, looking like a simple member of the *kibbutzim*, his gaze deceptively mild and inoffensive.

‘The situation is getting out of hand,’ Moshe said, ‘because you, Rashid, and your terrorists are murdering more Jews every week.’

Rashid imperceptibly tensed and then forced himself to remain calm. Replacing his brief flash of anger was a vision of a Palestinian refugee camp in south Lebanon: dogs barking at Land-Rovers with machinegun mountings instead of seats; the young men in fatigues, bearing rifles and pistols, posing proudly under posters of Yasser Arafat, the posters tattered and bleached by the sun that blazed down on the dispossessed… And most of those dispossessed souls had originally fled from Galilee.

‘I did not come here to hear talk of Arab terrorists and murderers,’ Rashid said. ‘You can try giving that to your Western newspapers - though I doubt that even they, in their growing disillusionment with Zionism, would bother

chopping wood to get it printed.'

Moshe smiled at him, without warmth, with respect, while the Prime Minister, his elbows still on the table, nodded sleepily.

'Very good,' he said. 'Your reputation preceded you. We have heard of your excellent English education and talent for oratory… Now the proof has been offered.'

Rashid leaned forward in his chair, placed his hands on the table, looked directly at the Prime Minister and Moshe, his calmness concealing his anger.

'I risked a great deal to come here,' he said. 'I'm sure you both understand that.'

'We risked a great deal in letting you come,' Moshe replied. 'A fact I am sure *you* appreciate.'

Rashid just smiled at that, still suppressing his anger, keeping his head clear, silently saying thanks to Allah for his excellent education and what it had taught him about fighting with words.

'My terrorist murderers,' he said, 'are increasing their activities because the situation on the West Bank has become intolerable and their patience is running out.'

'The West Bank?' the Prime Minister replied, his mild eyes histrionically surprised.

'Such innocence would be touching, Ben Eleizer, if it were also convincing.'

The Prime Minister glanced at Moshe, smiled slightly, then lowered his gaze to the table. 'So, Mr. Idriss, what is this question about the West Bank?'

'You know about the West Bank, Shlomo Ben Eleizer. According to the Camp David peace agreement of 1979, Palestinians were to be granted a degree of self-government on the West Bank. For the past eight years, however, with the tacit agreement of Mr. Begin and the further connivance of every Zionist politician, the Jews of Kash, *Gush Emunim* and Netorei Karta have taken over practically the whole of the West Bank. They are now systematically driving most of the remaining Arabs away, by violence as often as not, determined to remove every last Palestinian from the area. Since your own government has done nothing about this, it seems increasingly clear that your intention is to ensure that ultimately there will be no Arabs in Palestine at all… I cannot control my men much longer, Ben Eleizer. They will not sit back and watch passively as the Jews rob them of the little they

have left in their own homeland.'

'This is the *Jewish* homeland, my friend.'

'The Balfour Declaration did not represent the word of God or Allah. You are here, Ben Eleizer, and I must accept that you will remain, but I cannot accept that Palestinians can have no say in this land.'

'Israel is open to those Arabs who accept Jewish rule.'

'No, Ben Eleizer, it is not. You have your Wailing Wall, but it hasn't satisfied your greed; now you have the Temple of the Mount as well, and soon you'll have the whole of the West Bank. As for Arab freedoms, it has long been perfectly clear that the Arabs of the occupied territories are being deprived of their rights, robbed of their homes, and systematically driven out to rot in the refugee camps of Lebanon and Syria. This is as true today as it was back in 1917 when our fine British friends sold us out by kissing the feet of Chaim Weizmann. You stole from us then, and you continue to steal from us today - so don't tell me this land is open to the Arabs.'

'Are you suggesting that we do nothing to defend ourselves against your assassins and bombs?'

Rashid stared at Moshe, studying his unfathomable grey gaze, but finding nothing either there or in his laconic smile to suggest the slightest weakness. 'Freedom fighters are not necessarily assassins,' he said quietly, 'and your own bombs have not fallen unnoticed. What I am suggesting, Moshe Eitan, is that your so-called acts of reprisal are in reality but part of a systematic drive to rid this country of genuine Palestinians.'

'Not true,' Moshe replied levelly.

'I'm afraid it is, Major-General.'

'We could argue about it all afternoon,' the Prime Minister said. 'Alas, it will get us nowhere.'

Moshe continued to lean back lazily in his chair, casually tapping his pencil on the table, his gaze calm and perceptive. This was not the first time that he and Rashid had met; nor was it the first time that Rashid had found himself wondering just what attitudes were concealed behind Moshe's hooded eyes. It was no secret that Moshe believed completely in preserving Palestine for the Jews; what had never been ascertained, even by Arab security, was the actual extent of that commitment. On the one hand, a man who had good reason to hate Arabs, Moshe was, on the other, a man who more than once had displayed a certain understanding of the Arab grievances;

one who had trodden a fine line between the dedicated Zionists and those who believed that Arab assimilation was essential to Jewish survival. Moshe was clever, and had eluded the spleen of successive governments, but Rashid was not alone in often wondering just where his sympathies really lay.

'Settlement of the West Bank,' the Prime Minister said eventually, 'has not been a deliberate policy of this government.'

'But you sanction it.'

'Not so. Settlement of the West Bank may have been encouraged by Menachem Begin, but it is desirable neither to the majority of Jews nor to me. Settlement of the West Bank has been made, without our consent, by the members of Kash, *Gush Emunin* and, recently, the more fanatical members of the Netorei Karta sect. Now, as you well know, most of those Jews are as unreasoning as the most pious of Muslims, so nothing we can say to them will make them move. It is their belief that God gave Jews the right - or, as they're more likely to put it - the holy duty to live on the West Bank, and successive attempts to persuade them to leave have proved to be fruitless.'

'You underestimate the situation, Ben Eleizer. First deprived of the Temple of the Mount - one of the most sacred shrines for all Muslims - my people are now being forced out of Hebron, one of Islam's most holy cities. Even as they protest against this, they are being systematically harassed by your soldiers and assassinated by Kash and *Gush Emunin* all over the West Bank - in Ramallah, Nablus, Hebron and Kiryat Arba, with the latter town now practically an armed fortress, controlled by those thugs you call Orthodox Jews.'

'We have never sanctioned such activities,' Moshe said.

'Nor have you tried to prevent them,' Rashid replied.

'We have a problem there,' Moshe said. 'You understand that problem perfectly. Only removal by force would clear those Jews off the West Bank - and neither politically nor morally can we afford to do that.'

'Morally?' Rashid said. 'And you think it is moral for the Arabs to be forcibly removed from their last foothold in Palestine?'

'They are not being forcibly removed,' the Prime Minister said.

'They are being *forced out*, Ben Eleizer.'

'I repeat: it is *not* government policy.'

'And I repeat: you cannot let it continue. If you do, I will be unable to control my men.'

‘Let *me* repeat,’ Moshe Eitan said, ‘that you are hardly controlling your men now. They’re crossing our borders in increasing numbers, planting bombs, ambushing soldiers, attacking innocent civilians and then boasting about it from the safety of Lebanon or Cairo. The situation is, as you say, getting out of hand, but things will not get better until you still the activities of your so-called freedom fighters.’

‘Honour the Camp David agreement before asking me to cool the ardour of my men.’

‘Gentlemen! Gentlemen!’ the Prime Minister exclaimed, waving his small, fine-boned hands. ‘We are at an *impasse*.’

Moshe placed his pencil back on the table, took a cigarette from the packet in his tunic pocket, lit it from a soiled box of matches, then blew a cloud of smoke to the room, his normally cool gaze, now fixed on Rashid, glinting with what might have been anger.

Anger or hatred? Rashid couldn’t be too sure. Eitan had good reason to hate him - to hate all Arabs on principle - and if such were the case, Rashid could certainly understand it. Yet even as he thought this, and felt a latent sympathy, he had a recollection of a similar case, one of a singularly intimate nature, frozen in a not so distant past and kept alive to sustain him… An Arab child awakening in the chill dawn of south Lebanon, awakened by the droning of aircraft… then the droning becoming the shrieking of jets, other catastrophic noises, his mother and father screaming, his sister weeping, all fleeing their beds… then mushrooming dust, fierce heat and flames, the walls collapsing around them with a roar… More images: the village street, the grey light filled with smoke, the men and women racing to and fro as the bombs blew their homes apart… Then silence. Swirling sand. The dust settling over the dead. And his father pointing up, his finger shaking, to a sand-covered ridge… Instant fear. A feeling of unreality. Stunned disbelief… A long line of troop carriers, the soldiers spreading along the dunes, silhouetted against the sand’s brilliant whiteness, moving down towards the village… The child’s father praying to Allah, the wind slapping his words back. The guns roaring and people wailing and falling, men, women and children… Death. Devastation. Another silence filled with sobbing. The child clinging to his mother, now dead, as was his father, the blood splashed on them both and on his sister, spread-eagled, no more… This bleak vision dissolved, became a glaring white sun which then shrank and

became the light bulb above Moshe Eitan's head… Moshe Eitan: a Jew. And like Rashid: without a family. So many in Palestine, Jew and Arab alike, were forced to live with the loss by violent death of someone they had loved. In this, as in their passion for Palestine, they had something in common.

'So,' the Prime Minister said, raising his hands in a desultory gesture, 'you've come here to ask us to remove our most fanatical Jews from the West Bank, if necessary by force. I tell you, Rashid Idriss, that we cannot do it. We cannot pit Jew against Jew.'

Rashid glanced briefly at the silent Moshe Eitan and then, leaning forward, clasping his hands together, fixed his gaze steadily on Ben Eleizer.

'I think you'll have to,' he said.

'Oh? And *why* will we have to?'

'Because, Ben Eleizer, Jew is *already* fighting Jew – and it will get worse if you don't do something about it.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' the Prime Minister said, his mild eyes as innocent as a child's, concealing his tension.

Rashid couldn't resist smiling, his amusement briefly defeating his anger, now aware that he had struck a delicate nerve and must not let it go.

'You know what I'm talking about. Both of you - you know. The settlers of the West Bank, which they call Judea and Samaria, are doing what they want because they believe that no Jewish government will use its conscript troops against fellow Jews who claim to be exercising their ancient biblical rights. So far this has been true, but since, in the last few years, settlement of the West Bank has become such a blatant violation of the Camp David agreement, it has outraged not only my people but the whole Western world, filling the majority of your Jews, conservative and anti-Zionist, with foreboding, and placing you in an unpleasant dilemma. Yes, already aware that both Jewish and international opinion might force you to attempt to clear the West Bank with your troops, the settlers, prepared to die for their beliefs, have turned their towns into fortified camps, with bunkers, minefields, heavy machineguns, armoured vehicles and anti-tank missiles - and although they pretend that this extraordinary wealth of hardware is there merely to combat the odd Arab freedom fighter, one of their leaders has publicly proclaimed that the security of the West Bank is more important than the constitution. You are, in short, on the brink of civil war - with Jew prepared to kill Jew.'

'That's not true,' Ben Eleizer said.

But Rashid knew that it was. While it was true that his Arab freedom fighters had increased their raids into Palestine, it was equally true that they only came in small numbers, carrying no more than hand grenades, small explosives or rifles for ambush. There was therefore no logical explanation for the fortified gates, heavy security and massive arsenals of the West Bank, other than the one Rashid had offered - and that explanation was original neither to Rashid nor the majority of conservative Jews of the occupied territories. The fortified towns of the West Bank, run by Jews, were designed to combat the potential threat of Jewish government forces. Rashid, studying Ben Eleizer and Moshe Eitan in turn, knew that they both understood this fact.

'It's true,' Rashid said, 'and you know it.' He waited for a moment to let his words sink in, and then asked them the one question that he knew they both dreaded to hear. 'Who planted the bomb in the Mae Shearim quarter?'

Neither Moshe Eitan nor the Prime Minister displayed the slightest physical reaction, but something almost imperceptible flashed between them, and Rashid knew that his question had struck home.

'Since you already know about the bombing,' Moshe Eitan responded, 'it was obviously planted by one of your own men.'

'Not so, Major-General.' Rashid kept his voice calm. 'Some of your more fanatical Jews are now convinced that eventually you will have to force them off the West Bank and they're willing to assassinate any prominent Jew who supports that idea. Indeed, even now, some of those Jews are trying to topple your government. The bomb that exploded in the Mae Shearim quarter was meant to kill Rabbi Nachman, a moderate Orthodox Jew concerned by the increasing number of Netorei Karta zealots who are disowning the Zionist State and consorting with Arabs. Ironically, that bomb, planted by a Netorei Karta zealot, merely killed one of his own kind.'

'And the West Bank?'

'You know your options on the West Bank, Ben Eleizer. The West Bank is now controlled by fanatical Jews who fear and despise their own legitimately elected government. Sooner or later, due either to outside diplomatic pressure, negative reactions from your own electorate, or the threat of all-out war with my people, you will have to return autonomy to the Arabs. Your Jewish fanatics won't move, so you will have to use your own conscript troops - Jew against Jew.'

‘That’s our problem. I still don’t know what you’re driving at.’

‘What I am saying, Shlomo Ben Eleizer, is that if you do not remove those Jews from the West Bank soon, when it would be relatively easy to do so, you will have to do it later, when the fanatics will have increased dramatically and will be in a position to start a civil war. Once that happens - when Jew is busy killing Jew - it will be impossible to prevent my people from trying to exploit the situation; and then, Allah forbid, the Russians and the Americans will have their excuse for the so-called War of Intervention that they both want so badly. In the name of world peace, the Soviet Union and the U.S. will then police all of Palestine, and neither Arab nor Jew will have a say in it. I come here, then, for both our sakes… This problem has to be solved.’

Now, while Rashid removed his hands from the table and sat back, much too casually, in his chair, it was the turn of Moshe Eitan to lean forward, his thick arms on the table, and stare at Rashid with his unrevealing, probing eyes. Rashid did not avert his gaze, but stared boldly back, his lips tight, until Moshe, with a slow, heavy sigh, raised his hands in despair. Then Rashid glanced quickly at the Prime Minister and saw his interlocked fingers.

Just that - the white knuckles - an acknowledgement of what had happened here.

An Arab had come to the Knesset and voiced the unspeakable.

5

It was late in the afternoon when Kate walked into the Jerusalem Intercontinental Hotel on the summit of the Mount of Olives and saw Leon Halcomb at his usual table in the Seven Arches restaurant, drinking whiskey, smoking a cigar, and gazing distractedly down upon the Old City. Walking up to the table, Kate noticed that Leon was, as usual, very dapper in his pinstripe suit and white shirt and tie, his cufflinks gleaming, his black hair neatly combed, his face flushed and looking healthier than he probably felt. When Kate reached the table, Leon glanced up and nodded, crow's feet around his bloodshot, restless eyes, his lips, which were thin, overtly sensual, covertly ascetic, forming a quick but oddly self-mocking grin.

'Ah, my lovely Kate, my darling psychiatrist, did you have a good day?'

'Obviously you've already heard.'

'An excellent day for journalists, Miss Hirschfield. Bombs are always good copy.'

'I can do without that sort of low joke.'

'A mere slip of the tongue, Kate.'

Kate smiled in acknowledgement of the patent lack of sincerity, then set her shoulder bag on the table and sat down facing Leon.

'I'm a very weary woman this evening.'

'A gin and tonic?'

'Why not?'

A resident of the hotel, Leon had no trouble in finding a waiter and getting Kate her drink. Kate had an appreciative sip, then lit a cigarette and sat back in her chair, feeling exhausted, both physically and emotionally. Looking down the slopes of the Mount of Olives, which were bathed in dimming light, she saw the archaic splendour of the Old City, the gold-and-silver domes still majestic. Then she slowly raised her eyes, unwillingly, almost fearfully, and saw the blue sky growing darker, streaked with drifting

grey clouds. The stars were not out yet. Kate shivered, feeling relief. She dropped her gaze and stared at Leon who was holding up two tumblers, topping up his fresh whiskey with the remains of the previous one, his lips puckered, one eye focused on the rim, the cigar still in his right hand.

'How long have you been here?' Kate asked him.

'I'm *always* here, Kate. I am, as you know, more or less a permanent resident, treated with the required condescension by the excellent staff.'

'I don't know how you stand it.'

'Hotels are very pleasant, both spacious and anonymous, God's gift to the non-domesticated man who carries only a suitcase.'

'Let me rephrase my question: What time did you get out of bed?'

'In time to cover the bombing in the Mae Shearim quarter and telex such information as was gathered to my superior beings in Washington DC - but quite a long time after you left me.' He finished topping up his fresh glass, then had a drink and licked his thin lips. 'Naturally I could only write about the casualties,' he added, 'but perhaps you will now inform me about the survivors.'

Kate smiled. 'No.'

'What a loyal Jew you are. I said it before and I stand by it: you're a real little *bubeleh*.' He grinned and inhaled on his cigar, his restless eyes roaming around the restaurant, then exhaled a cloud of smoke and reached out for Kate's hand. 'Seriously,' he said, 'you don't look too good.'

'I'm just tired,' Kate replied, remembering the events of the early morning, still uneasy but not wanting to discuss them, already doubting her senses. 'Too much sex, too much drink. Then, after the chaos in the hospital, an old friend paid a visit. He informed me that you're a very bad influence - and that made me wearier.'

'I won't ask you who said that about me - but, of course, he or she was quite right.'

'It was Rabbi Latinavots.'

'Ah,' Leon said. 'Our acting Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi. A nice man, but an old friend of your father's, so that could explain it. Also, he has a few problems of his own - the usual quarrels with the Sephardi Chief Rabbi, the customary disagreements with the Council of Torah Sages, the day by day headaches of the Rabbinic Court of Appeal - so it's possible that his nervous system has been shattered and he needs someone to horsewhip.'

‘His nervous system is fine - and he *does* have a good reason to detest you.’

‘Me? But I’m not even Jewish. Hardly more than a *tourist*.’ Leon sipped some more whiskey, his public-schoolboy face mocking, the cigar thrusting up from the fingers that stroked the back of Kate’s wrist. ‘So, Kate, how did the rabbi describe me?’

‘You want the brutal truth?’

‘I’m a masochist.’

‘You’re a cynic, a drunkard and an anti-Semite.’

‘That sounds quite reasonable.’

‘He really doesn’t like you.’

‘That’s because I’m always proclaiming loudly in print that this country is being divided by religious bigotry and the demented ravings of the chief rabbis, the Rabbinate, the Council of Torah Sages, and other likewise antiquated bodies. This has not helped to make me the most popular Gentile in Jerusalem, but it *has* made me a reasonably respected journalist.’

‘An unsavoury breed.’

‘True.’

‘The word is out that if you continue to write your anti-Zionist articles, a certain Major-General Moshe Eitan may have you thrown out of the country.’

‘I doubt it,’ Leon replied, inhaling on his cigar, exhaling blue smoke. ‘The venerable Chief of Staff is too aware of the negative shift in worldwide opinion.’

‘I’ve heard the very opposite: that Eitan is as stubborn as a mule, ruthlessly efficient, and doesn’t give a damn what anyone thinks of him.’

‘Ruthless and stubborn he certainly can be - but he’s also an astute diplomat. Bear in mind that Eitan is one of those legendary Israeli warrior-heroes with a history of personal tragedy and public glory. Born and raised on a kibbutz, noted fighter in three wars, wife and children murdered by Arab raiders, then leading light of the military command… Not, then, a great lover of his restless Arab neighbours, he is, nonetheless, a politically aware military man who has, more than once, cooled the ardour of the more aggressive members of the IDF. Ergo, while it’s true that Eitan detests my widely syndicated and extremely popular column - and please note the shameless self-advertisement – it’s also true that he’s not the sort of fool to seal the lips of a foreign journalist and invite the wrath of the democratic

countries.'

'A situation you exploit to the hilt, being thoroughly devoid of normal scruples.'

'Scruples are for the likes of Moshe Eitan. Israel's juicy hypocrisies are *my* game.'

'What hypocrisies?'

'You may further your education, sweet lady, by simply reading my columns.'

He grinned wickedly at Kate, removed his fingers from her wrist, then sat back in his chair and looked down at the walls of the Old City, after which he turned his gaze back to Kate, his blue eyes now even more bloodshot. Studying his eyes, which, though red with drink, were still bright with intelligence, Kate again found herself filled with a premonition of disaster, the feeling that Leon, hiding behind his cynical wit, was twisting slowly on the blade of self-contempt and unstated pain. Possibly he gauged what she was feeling - or at least sensed her lack of joy - for he now crooked his head, squinting at her with one eye, and offered a bright, encouraging grin.

'The lovely lady is not herself tonight.'

'No, I suppose not.'

'The cries of the bereaved in the hospital?'

'Yes… I'm fed up with it.'

'All psychiatrists go crazy in the end.'

'I won't argue that point.'

'Your father's dead, Kate. You have no one left here. Why don't you simply pack up and leave? Go back to America.'

'I don't know… that's the question.'

'Your Jewishness?'

'I don't think so. That's not what holds me here. In fact, I think it's the fanatical Jewishness of this damned country that's driving me crazy. I'm only Jewish by birth. My father's beliefs never touched me. I'm American and I feel it to my bones and this country defeats me… No, I think I've just been here too long to ever go back… I'm too old for a new life.'

Yet that wasn't the truth, since recent events had confirmed the opposite: first the dreams, then the strange star, then the earth tremor and flickering, unnatural light, then the fear that had dogged her through this day and drove her out of the hospital. The buried shame of her past? A premonition of the

future? Whatever their source or reason, the events had opened a chasm beneath her. An only child, she had missed her mother, who had died five years ago; but the death of her father, for whom she had felt no great affection, had torn her from the anchor of her past and then cast her adrift. Now, more than ever, she felt a foreigner in this country, isolated, confused, ostracised by its contradictions, wanting desperately to escape back to America, but too frightened to move. That fear, more than anything else, filled her long nights with shame.

'Too old,' Leon said. 'That explanation rings hollow. More likely the legendary magic of Judaism has rendered you senseless.'

Kate couldn't resist smiling. 'I don't think so, Mr. Halcomb. Your notorious disrespect is contagious and has turned me into a sinner.'

'Is that what they say?'

'Gossip always returns to its source. It's possible that I said it first, but now I'm branded for life: a thirty-five-year-old spinster, sharp-tongued, anti-Zionist, who drinks too much and sleeps with Leon Halcomb, a dissolute English anti-Semite.'

'A very pretty picture that conjures up.' Leon grinned and held his glass of whiskey high, as if offering Kate tribute. 'But tell me, dear,' he said, having a sip, putting his glass down, 'how did a nice girl like you end up with this pagan?'

'That's another question I've often asked myself.'

'But that isn't an answer.'

Leon's eyes, blue and bright, streaked with red but still sharp, studied Kate with a thinly disguised intensity that made her uncomfortable. Perhaps that was the answer: Leon's mockery revealed the truth; Leon's cynicism, with its grasp of the ridiculous and hypocritical, was a knife that stripped the flesh from the bones to show the poison beneath. The poison was life itself, its private dreams and public dramas, just as much a part of Kate, with her need to bury her guilt in work, as it was a part of Israel with its dream of freedom drenched in blood and its faith in the Messiah kept alive by the roaring of guns. The ridiculous and the hypocritical, both in public and in private: perhaps Kate was drawn to Leon because his lack of faith was comforting, his realistic view of life's horrors a rebuke to her own growing doubts.

'Yes,' she said, 'I want to leave. At least I *think* I want to leave. I no

longer like my work, the woes of my patients now depress me, and I keep thinking that I don't belong here, that my life is slipping away from me. Maybe it's just my age, my father's death, the empty house; something stupid like the fact that I'm not married and don't want to be; but that I, the psychiatrist, in my supposed wisdom, secretly dread the thought of being alone. I don't know if that's true. If it is, it's detestable. Nonetheless, I'm running scared, feeling alone, yet keeping my distance; not wanting to be involved, yet feeling hungry for some kind of commitment. I'm in conflict with myself. I'm beginning to behave like my patients. The truth is that I'm no longer a good psychiatrist. I'm just a woman… and stupid.'

Leon smiled and stubbed his cigar out. 'You have the premature, middle-aged blues,' he said. 'Not the stuff of the sabra.'

'No, not a sabra. Not even a good Jewish girl. I have strange dreams at night - about you and the rabbi, about my father and my past - and those dreams, perhaps more than anything else, make me want to leave Israel.'

'Your past?'

'Various skeletons. Long buried in various closets. I'm sure a man with your low boredom threshold wouldn't want to discuss them.'

Leon proved that point by turning his head and nodding at the waiter, who soon arrived with two more drinks and just as quickly departed. Leon raised his glass to Kate, then nodded again and took a sip, while Kate, recalling the events of the early morning, looked out at the sky: velvety blue turning darker, streaked with faint lines of crimson, aureoles of grey light around the clouds as the evening descended. There was nothing unusual there, and Kate wondered if there ever had been. She shivered, feeling unreal and nervous, then turned back to Leon. He was stretching himself and gazing around him, studying the tourists at a nearby table, a small, mocking smile on his lips, shadows under his eyes.

'And why a disreputable character like Leon Halcomb? That question hasn't been answered yet.'

'I told you,' Kate replied. 'I'm just a woman… and stupid. Also, I'm trying to keep my distance - and you're helpful that way.'

Leon's eyes, always alert, one eyebrow raised, turned back to fix on Kate's face. '*I'm* helpful? How come?'

Kate stubbed her cigarette out, lit another immediately, then glanced up at the darkening sky. It was, at least as far as she could see, devoid of unknown

phenomena. ‘Because you’re sweet,’ she said. ‘Because beneath it all, you’re soft. Because for all of your cynicism, you’re neither aggressive nor demanding and, believing in nothing, don’t stand in judgement. I think that’s what it is. You don’t expect anything from me. I can come and go as I please and you never complain… because you don’t give a damn.’

Leon looked interested. ‘And that’s what you like about me? The fact that I don’t give a damn?’

‘That’s it. That’s your answer.’

Leon raised his right eyebrow, ran his fingers around the rim of his glass, glanced distractedly left and right, his grin bemused, before returning his gaze to her.

‘I’m not sure I understand, Kate.’

‘It’s really not very complicated. Not wanting to possess or *be* possessed, I feel safe with you. It’s your inability to stake a claim on anyone that makes you attractive.’

‘My inability to stake a claim?’

‘Come on, Leon, don’t act innocent…You’re a married man, two children, separated from your wife, and, by your own admission, separated because you couldn’t stand home life. Now you travel the globe, carrying no more than your suitcase, hopping in and out of beds in impersonal hotel rooms, feeling comfortable with no place to call your own, with no lasting relationships. You and me, we’re both the same that way, which is why we get on so well. We’re both wary of involvement, of more than superficial experience, and we both look at life from the distance of supposed objectivity. You have your journalism – the unprejudiced eye, the clear ear – and you pretend to take no sides, to report only what you see and hear, and in this way you deny your own involvement in life’s irrational passions. Unfortunately, it’s a lie. Objectivity doesn’t exist. What you see and hear are filtered through your own emotions - and it’s this, the realisation of your weakness, that you hide with your wit. That also explains your suitcase and hotels and Kate Hirschfields: they’re all part of an impersonal world - a world of comfort, but twice removed - and you can take them or leave them as you wish, but they won’t draw you in. Your need for disengagement isn’t threatened - and that helps you feel comfortable.’

‘And Miss Hirschfield?’

‘Miss Hirschfield is in psychiatry, another supposedly objective field, but

psychiatry, like the farce of journalism, weaves its own sly deceits. Miss Hirschfield also analyses with her eyes, ears and brain, breaking down the thoughts of her patients, often complex beyond imagining, into patterns of words that presume to define the psyche in logical terms. In doing this, she must play a game, the game of human objectivity, a pretence of reason and understanding that transcends psychic chaos. A transparent hoax? Possibly. Yet it often works with the patients. Unfortunately, it also works with Miss Hirschfield, but in a negative way. Like Mr. Halcomb she fears involvement, seeks the safety of distance, and thus psychiatry, which insists upon a so-called objectivity, becomes the wall behind which she can hide…We are two of a kind, sir.'

Kate picked up her glass, swallowed a mouthful of gin, put the glass down and inhaled on her cigarette, breathing deeply and nervously. The restaurant was now more crowded, the conversations louder, and outside the first stars were appearing in a sky of dark velvet. Kate looked up, scanned the sky, saw nothing unusual, sighed with relief and lowered her gaze to stare straight at Leon. He lit another cigar, exhaled a thin ribbon of smoke, then placed the cigar on the ashtray and leaned over the table.

'Why Miss Hirschfield's fear of involvement?'

'I will never discuss that.'

'And what makes you think I'm not involved with you?'

'Don't even suggest it.'

They stared at one another, their faces close, neither smiling, held together by the sealed doors of their past and the words still unspoken. Then Kate turned her head, wondering what she had said, and saw the darkened Valley of Kidron, the blackened domes of the Old City, the spotlights beaming up through the palm trees and illuminating the limestone walls. Down there were the twisting lanes and Oriental *souks* and covered passageways, the Orthodox Jews and Franciscan monks, the Muslims in flowing robes and *keffiyes*, the nuns in their habits, the Bedouin women in their embroidered dresses, the young soldiers with their machineguns on their shoulders, all the stalls and bazaars. The Old City… a mirage. Kate's heart broke at the very thought of it. She looked up at the sky, saw the stars, all familiar; then stared back at Leon to see his blue eyes and thin lips - no smile, not the trace of a grin as he leaned closer to her, his voice low and passionate.

'Come to bed, Kate. *Now*!'

They made love in the impersonal comfort of Leon's room on the top floor, high above the darkened Valley of Kidron and the illuminated walls of the Old City, locked together in silence and the moonlit chiaroscuro, the white sheets thrown back across their feet as their limbs intertwined. Kate lay beneath Leon, legs raised, arms around him, feeling herself dividing in two, one part surrendering to sensation, the other divorcing itself from the sweat and flesh, surveying the act from a distance. To touch and be touched: possess and be possessed: these were needs that could not be denied and sought to circumvent the void within. Desire howled like the wind, but like the wind it passed away, always leaving in its wake the great silence that had to be filled again. Kate dreaded that silence, feared the challenge of its emptiness, sought the brief obliteration of her Self in the thickets of singing nerves. To touch and be touched: the sensuality of the skin; her Self, which refused to be obliterated, split in two and broke free. One part of her surrendered, willingly gave in to sensation, but her other Self, more frightened, held in check by the past, drifted somewhere above the moonlit bed and gazed down in cool judgement. Kate turned her head aside, her hair streaming across her face, eyes wide, reflecting stars and pale moon, her arms and legs holding Leon, both breathing in spasms.

Breathing also in desperation. What was causing it in Leon? He had brought her to this room in urgent silence and now seemed to be lost in her. Not the Leon she knew, no smile, no stinging wit, he filled his mouth with her breast and thrust himself deep inside her with a voiceless intensity that repudiated what she had said to him. He bit her lips and swallowed her tongue, his breath sour with cigars and whiskey, and she turned her head aside and felt his eyelids on the stem of her neck. Not Leon, someone else, a faceless assailant in the darkness, someone trying to drain himself of despair in the well of her body. Kate looked down and saw the tableau, coiling limbs, sweating skin, then her divided Self became one again and she felt the cool air.

Leon made love like a stranger, with a fierce, demanding hunger, straining above her body, pressing down on her breasts and stomach, his eyes closed, his black hair disarrayed, his spine pale in the moonlight. She saw him and turned her head, raising her legs, pulling him in, feeling nothing but the urge to draw him out of his strange, throttled anger. She was crushed by

his ferocity, some threat emanating from his pores, and she gasped and held him tighter with arms and legs and let him pour himself into her. He groaned and dropped his head, his body quivering like a reed, then just lay between her legs, breathing harshly, his cheek pressed to her breasts.

Kate sighed and stroked his head, stared at the window and saw the stars, shivered and closed her eyes and wondered who she was addressing as the night, with its ominous silence, lay its dark hands upon her.

'You can't have me,' she said.

6

‘So,’ the Prime Minister said, ‘I’ve finally met Rashid Idriss. An interesting man, very calm… Indeed, he seemed almost gentle.’

‘Don’t be fooled by his beautiful brown eyes, Shlomo. That Lebanese gentleman is as sharp as any Arab alive.’

The Prime Minister grinned and nodded, raised his glass and drank some beer, wiped his lips with the back of his free hand, then glanced down through the darkness. They were sitting at a small table on the patio of Moshe’s house on the summit of the hills of Talpiot, the lights of Jerusalem far below them, the Dome of the Rock and the El-Aqsa mosque still visible as impressive black globes above the floodlit walls of the Old City. Moshe stared down but saw little, his thoughts focused elsewhere, then he looked back at the Prime Minister, small, almost gnomic, his eyes too large for his moon-shaped face, and watched him having another sip of beer, his lips pursed and moist.

‘He seemed like a reasonable sort of chap, Moshe.’

‘A very British way of putting it, Shlomo.’

The Prime Minister chuckled, perhaps remembering his English acquaintances, old enemies and friends of long ago, when he had fought with the Palmach.

‘Rashid’s astute,’ Moshe said. ‘That’s why he seems reasonable. As he said himself: he has to accept that we’ll remain here. What he resents is our greed.’

‘Ah, yes,’ the Prime Minister murmured. ‘Jewish greed…’

Moshe took a cigarette from his tunic pocket, lit it, inhaled, and then blew a thin stream of smoke to the air, thinking of what the Prime Minister had said. As both a sabra and a soldier, Moshe had lived for years with the belief that Israel, to survive, must retain Jewish autonomy and guarantee the security of her borders with constant military vigilance. What this meant, in

effect, was that the country needed to be ruled by a military rather than a political consciousness, and that support for the military had to be constantly psychologically reinforced. However, in recent years Moshe had begun to wonder just where this philosophy was leading: the need for constant alertness had led to conscription and censorship, an unconstitutional use of internal and external security organisations and, perhaps inevitably, the increasing withdrawal of legitimate Arab rights with a parallel increase in Jewish authoritarianism. Rashid was right: the Jews were sowing the seeds of their own suspicions; and Israel, which had been founded on the principle of Jewish freedom, was now accepting that the end was justification for the means and embracing a thinly disguised form of totalitarianism in which religious and political suppression were unavoidably endemic to the system… Now, when Moshe thought of the Jews of the Holocaust, he also thought, with undeniable shame and guilt, of the Arabs of Palestine.

'Yet what can we do?' the Prime Minister said. 'Only our so-called greed will protect us. If we give the Arabs an inch, they'll take a mile… We must hold on to Israel.'

'That doesn't solve the problem of the West Bank.'

'Please, Moshe, don't remind me…' The Prime Minister rubbed his eyes and then blinked and glanced around him, obviously exhausted by his journey from New York, his present problems defeating him. 'At least,' he said eventually, 'we have talked to the enemy… and as usual it solved absolutely nothing.'

'I don't like it, Shlomo; it disturbs me.'

'What disturbs you?'

'What Rashid knows. The West Bank is our Achilles' heel - that's no secret anymore - but Rashid knows *too* much for my liking.'

'He has people on the inside.'

'*Jewish* people, Shlomo. We simply have to accept that it's happening and do something about it.'

'We *can't* do anything about it. We can't use force against our own kind. Even now, if we tried to remove those fanatics from the West Bank, we'd have hundreds of their supporters in the streets, all armed to the teeth.' The Prime Minister shrugged wearily, drumming his fingers on the table, a cool breeze blowing over the patio and whipping his white shirt. 'So, Moshe, what do we do? Do we invite a civil war? Do you want me to order you, my Chief

of Staff, to use your conscript troops against fellow Jews? No, obviously you don't. We both know what would happen. And yet, if we don't do something soon, the situation will worsen. There's no answer. *No* answer!'

Moshe sighed and stood up, glancing around at the dark hills, then walked to the wall of the patio and stared at Jerusalem. The land fell through the darkness and swept back up to the Old City, sacred to the three great monotheistic religions - the world's spiritual centre. Down there, cramped together within the lime-stone walls of the Old City, were the Wailing Wall, the golden-domed Mosque of Omar, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre - the most sacred sites of all to Jew, Arab and Christian respectively. Small wonder that for centuries Jerusalem had been ravaged by a succession of bloody wars and that that violence, which had started so long ago, was not finished yet. Moshe shook his head sadly, wondering where it would end, then turned back to face Ben Eleizer, feeling the trap closing in upon him.

'Rashid Idriss was right,' he said. 'He has us whipped, and he knows it. World opinion has turned against us, the West Bank problem is becoming explosive, and if Jew should openly move against Jew, the Arabs will swoop in from all sides. That's all the Russians and the Americans need: a convenient war of intervention. And if that happens, Israel as we know it will cease to exist.'

The Prime Minister looked up slowly, his large eyes unblinking, and Moshe, feeling cold, shivering slightly, knew at what cost his old friend was concealing his fears for the future.

'What we need is a miracle,' Ben Eleizer said. 'Nothing less will suffice.' He grinned sardonically and raised his hands, slapped them lightly on the table, then pushed himself to his feet, rising wearily, awkwardly. 'This wind is too cold for my liking. Let's continue inside.'

Moshe nodded and waved one hand, letting Ben Eleizer enter first, then he followed and closed the sliding glass doors behind him. The central heating was off, but the living room was warm, and as Moshe faced the room he felt both comfortable and desolated, surrounded by the bric-a-brac of his past and the tales they could tell. The furniture was functional, a haphazard collection of bits and pieces, obviously purchased without thought of compatibility or style - simply there to be used. There were a lot of books, scattered about the room as haphazardly as the furniture - Jewish and military histories, current affairs and foreign politics - on chairs, on the table, on the

cluttered shelves, many open and marked. Most revealing were the numerous photographs, very few taken recently: an adolescent Moshe in the fields of a kibbutz, his hair tousled, his grin wide and charming; the same young man a few years later, dressed formally and looking grave, his arm linked with the arm of his new bride, both afraid of the camera; then a series of family snapshots - his wife a quiet, dark beauty, his son and daughter more outgoing - on vacation in Cyprus, camping out in the Negev, swimming in the sea at Eilat, a birthday party in someone's garden; then a much older Moshe, rarely smiling, eyes haunted, usually feigning amiability, socialising with Golda Meir and Menahem Begin and Teddy Kollek, acting the diplomat with Harold Wilson and Henry Kissinger and Rashid Idriss. Moshe's history was on those walls - as was the continuing history of Israel - but when he looked at the photographs, when he studied his late wife and children, he did not look for long.

'Another beer, Shlomo?'

'I'd prefer a vodka, Moshe. Another beer would put me to sleep, and I can't face my bad dreams.'

Moshe went into the kitchen and returned with a bottle of Maccabee, a half-full bottle of Keglevich vodka and two glasses containing ice cubes. After pouring a considerable amount of vodka into one of the glasses, he passed the glass to the Prime Minister, opened his own bottle of beer and then went back to where he had been standing previously, close to the sliding glass doors that led to the patio. The Prime Minister, who had often been here before, sat in the chair behind Moshe's small desk and raised his glass on high.

'*L'chayeem*!'

'*L'chayeem*!'

They both drank, then the Prime Minister, after rubbing his tired eyes, grinned at Moshe and put his feet up on the desk. Amused by the Prime Minister's informality, Moshe returned the grin.

'I don't think young Lieutenant Frankel was very pleased at having to escort our Arab friend back to the border.'

'No, Shlomo, he wasn't.'

'Well, he's had a busy day. First meeting me at the airport, then going to check on that bombing in the Mae Shearim quarter, then escorting Rashid back to the border. Still, I've heard good things about him.'

‘He’s good,’ Moshe said.

‘And?’

‘Lieutenant Frankel is an intensely serious young man who probably, secretly, despises us.’

‘A Zionist?’

‘Yes.’

‘So are we.’

‘Not to that extent. Frankel is an Orthodox Jew with the Talmud in his hip pocket. For him, there’s no such place as Palestine, no such people as the Palestinians. The Holy Land belongs to the Jews and is no place for Arabs.’

‘The West Bank?’

‘It’s possible. He may sympathise with them. At the very least, he doesn’t see any problem there. He’d solve the problem by simply removing all the Arabs and supporting the activities of Kash and *Gush Emunin*. I doubt that he has time for our procrastinations.’

‘A representative sabra.’

‘That’s it.’

The Prime Minister sighed, topped up his vodka, and continued to lie back in the chair, his feet on the desk.

‘Do you think Rashid was right about the bombing in the Mae Shearim quarter? That the bomb was actually planted by a Jew?’

‘I doubt that he’d invent it.’

‘And what do we know so far?’

‘Not nearly as much as our good friend, Rashid. Lieutenant Frankel was the first man on the scene, and he took the survivors straight to the Hadassah Medical Centre. Naturally they were still in a state of shock. And according to Lieutenant Frankel, he was given a hard time by that psychiatrist, Kate Hirschfield.’

‘Mayer Hirschfield’s daughter?’

‘Yes.’

‘An interesting woman. I knew her father and mother well. Her mother died some time ago, and her father’s death, about ten days ago, was a considerable blow to the World Zionist Organisation and the Foundation Fund in particular. That man did an enormous amount of work to bring funds into Israel; and his daughter, from what I hear, has performed remarkable psychiatric work at the Medical Centre. Of course Hirschfield was a Zionist

with the immigrant's dedication, and I believe his daughter quarrelled with him over that.'

'Did you know that she also sleeps with Leon Halcomb?'

'I *have* heard that rumour… But I don't believe her love life should concern us.'

'No, perhaps it shouldn't. But I find it offensive that a woman whose father did so much for Israel should so blatantly sleep around with a drunken anti-Semite like Leon Halcomb. That man has done more to turn the world against us than any other single journalist enjoying the hospitality of this country. I shudder to think of what he's already written about your unfortunate remark to the General Assembly, but I don't doubt that he'll have made the worst possible use of it. And it angers me to think that that woman, with her background, could insult the memory of her father by openly flaunting her relationship with such a *momzer*.'

'Americans have their own morality in these matters.'

'Unfortunately that's so.'

The Prime Minister chuckled sardonically and had another sip of vodka while Moshe, removing his glass from his mouth, wiped his wet lips with the back of his hand. The land below was dark, the lights of Jerusalem shining magically, the illuminated walls of the Old City dreamlike and entrancing. Moshe thought of his wife and children, of how much they had loved this land, and then, with the old pain whipping through him, he put the glass to his lips again.

'So, what was this problem with Miss Hirschfield?'

'Not much, really,' Moshe said. 'Apparently Lieutenant Frankel, unable to interrogate the survivors immediately, asked her to give him all the tape-recordings of her forthcoming psychiatric consultations with the victims and was told, in no uncertain terms, to get the hell out of there. The highly principled lady, less principled about whom she sleeps with, refused to betray the confidentiality of her patients.'

'That's no problem, Moshe. We can make the request an order.'

'I believe Lieutenant Frankel already has.'

'Naturally. He would.'

Moshe was just about to turn away from the window when something in the distance caught his attention. Startled, not too sure of what he was seeing, he blinked, looked again, and saw a strange light in the dark sky just beyond

the Old City. The light appeared to be pulsating, winked out, winked on again, moving too slowly to be an aircraft and hazed in a dark cloud. Yet even as he saw this, there was an indistinct rumbling sound that seemed to emanate from below the house…and then, as the rumbling became louder, the floor started vibrating.

Moshe jerked his head around, saw the Prime Minister in the chair, cursing as his vodka splashed on his shirt and kicking his feet away from the desk. 'What…?' the Prime Minister exclaimed, glancing up, his eyes startled, placing his glass down on the desk as the vibrating grew stronger and the rumbling down below seemed to spread out in no fixed direction. 'Last night!' Moshe said quietly, remembering the inexplicable earth tremor and turning his eyes back to the window, his gaze fixed on Jerusalem. 'What on earth…?' he said, trailing off.

As the rumbling continued and the floor vibrated beneath his feet, Moshe stared through the darkness at the east side of Jerusalem and saw the strange, shapeless light spreading out through clouds of dust that were being swept up from the Valley of Kidron and then whipped into a dense, swirling mass. Amazed, Moshe placed his free hand on the glass of the sliding doors, his other hand shaking from the vibrations of the floor, splashing the beer over his wrist. Blinking, he tried to ascertain what the distant light was, saw it spreading out, shrinking, then spreading out again, diffused in the whirlwind of dust that rose higher and advanced across the summit of the Mount of Olives. The light in the middle was bizarre, expanding and contracting, moving across a sky now blotted out by the swirling dust, dropping lower and then spreading out again through the storm that by now had enveloped the Mount of Olives. Moshe felt the shaking glass, the floor vibrating beneath his feet, heard the rumbling and then the sudden squeaking of a chair on the floor. 'What is it? *What's happening*?' The Prime Minister's voice was shrill. Still looking down, Moshe saw the other lights winking out, first one, then another and yet another, as the swirling black cloud swallowed the houses on the Mount of Olives and raced on towards the walls of the Old City. Moshe kept staring, mesmerised, his fingers outspread on the shaking glass, the floor vibrating beneath him, the rumbling filling his ears, watching as the diffused light shot out through the swirling dust, briefly illuminated the summit of the Mount, then shrank with startling speed and disappeared, leaving nothing but darkness.

The rumbling sound faded away, the floor stopped its vibrating, and then the ringing of the telephone on the desk shattered the silence. The Prime Minister cursed, grabbed the telephone, snapped his own name, but Moshe didn't turn around, keeping his eyes fixed on Jerusalem, seeing the domes and minarets and lights disappearing as the swirling dust enveloped the Old City and gradually swallowed it. Moshe just stood there, disbelieving, transfixed by what he was seeing, as Jerusalem, the Golden City, the very heart of *Eretz Yisroel*, was devoured by a storm without precedent and then simply… vanished.

Moshe broke free from his trance, turned away from the glass doors. The Prime Minister put the phone down, looking up, his jaw slack, his eyes stunned as he started to speak with a strained, breaking voice.

'An unidentified flying object has disappeared below our radar's ground clutter, directly above the Chapel of the Ascension. It appears to have crashed.'

7

Kate stubbed her cigarette out, swung her legs off the bed, and then, still naked, feeling cold, walked across the room, through the moonlight, and stopped at the window. She saw the darkened Valley of Kidron, the white stones of the Arab graveyard, the Old City, its ancient walls bathed in floodlights, the Dome of the Mount and the El-Asqa mosque as black globes silhouetted against the starry sky. The air was cool and fresh, the breeze barely perceptible, as she took a deep breath and looked up to where the mysterious star had been that morning.

The star was not there. That particular area was covered with dark cloud. It was a single, large cloud, almost circular, nearly black, surrounded by a clear, vitreous sky and a mosaic of normal, familiar stars. She stared at it, mesmerised, feeling inexplicably nervous, trying to still the speculations that filled her head with uncomfortable clarity. It was a cloud, a normal cloud, a single cloud in a clear sky, but her imagination, stirred by the early morning's events, was obviously running away with her…Yes, that was it; put it down to imagination… But the tension remained with her, and she knew that she would have to go out there, to resolve the matter once and for all.

She looked up at the black cloud, a perfectly normal cloud, and shivered and turned away from the window and proceeded to dress herself. The room was very quiet, enough to let her hear her heartbeat, and she also heard Leon's even breathing, saw his pale form in darkness. His back was pressed to the headrest of the bed, his head tilted to the right, his hands folded primly on the white sheet that covered his loins. Kate dressed quickly, automatically, combed her long, tangled hair, then slung her bag over her right shoulder and walked up to the bed. Leon was snoring softly, his chest rising and falling. She leaned over and kissed him on the forehead and then left the room.

Once outside the hotel she did not immediately look up at the sky, but instead, refusing to accept that the fear was creeping back, went to the

observation point which, during the day, offered a breathtaking view of the Old City. Standing in the small amphitheatre, a growing wind tugging at her clothes, she lit a cigarette, her hands cupped, her eyes squinting, then inhaled and stared across the Valley of Kidron to see the black shape of the Dome of the Rock. It was too dark and distant to see the whole of the Temple Mount, but even in the alluring, blue-tinged darkness of the evening, she could see the eastern city wall, the scattered stones of the Moslem graveyard, and the dark breast of Mount Zion, crowned by the conical roof of the Dormition Abbey. She looked and was held and then tore her gaze away, thinking of the unknown star, of her recurrent dream and possible imaginings, and wondering what it was that now clung to her with such relentless tenacity.

This land was not her land, but it was a haunting land, resonant with the voices of its history and its place in men's dreams. She knew that this was so and that somehow it was affecting her; that it was slyly, insidiously creeping into her and making her part of it. This possibility, which would have pleased her father, did not please her at all, insulting her faith in logic and making a mockery of her profession, challenging the physician to either heal herself or accept that her logic was meaningless. I'm a psychiatrist, she thought, and believe only in the mind. This being so, what now frightens me and jerks me awake at nights? She had asked the question before and had not yet found an answer; now, as the night pressed its threatening hands upon her, she thought of the shock of her father's death, of the subsequent dreams and the unknown star, and wondered if this land, which both repelled and fascinated her, was somehow forcing her to face up to her buried past and return to the faith rejected in adolescence. That would explain the dreams, she thought, but what of the manifestation? The question immediately filled her with shame at what she viewed as her surrender to mysticism. You believe in logic, she thought, so don't accept the impossible. Thus resolved, she took a deep breath, raised her eyes defiantly, saw the black cloud and kept staring at it, determined to erase the matter from her mind... and then she saw the impossible.

The black cloud was breaking apart, thinning out in the middle, gradually taking the shape of an enormous smoke ring, a hazy light beaming through it. She stared at it, amazed, unable to repudiate the ridiculous, as the cloud became a dark, ragged ring around a large, brilliant star. That star should not have been there, was too large to be real, and yet it beamed down on the

summit of the Mount with remarkable brilliance.

'Oh, my God,' Kate said quietly.

She inhaled on her cigarette, held the smoke in her lungs, let it out slowly, reluctantly, her eyes fixed on the luscious star. It was there, large and brilliant, ringed impossibly with cloud, and much as she tried to will it away, it would not disappear. She felt her heart pounding, grew hot and claustrophobic, her reason slipping away in defeat before the incomprehensible. It was a star, had to be, could not be anything else… and yet, as she stared at it, disbelieving, forced to accept it, the star, or what she thought was a star, seemed to suggest something magical.

She dropped her cigarette, ground it flat beneath her shoe-heel, then turned right and started walking downhill, feeling tense and unreal. She looked down the dark path, looked up at the star, looked down and then looked up again, a silent prayer on her lips. The star was still there, big and brilliant, ringed with dark cloud - an unnatural sight, at once ominous and beautiful, like a huge eye staring down upon her… An eye? What was she thinking? Was that a logical response? Yet as she walked the narrow road where it began curving uphill again, she could not shake off the feeling that the star was observing her, following her as her feet kicked up the stones.

Where was she going? She'd hardly given it a thought. Now, thinking about it, confused but still walking, she wondered why she was moving in that direction for no obvious reason. She stopped and looked up, saw the star and moved on again, her will dissolving, an unfamiliar impulse pushing her forward. The dust drifted up around her, did not settle down again, and then she realised that the breeze had become a wind that was growing in strength.

The wind tugged at her clothing and then started moaning, sweeping across the dark Valley of Kidron and whipping up more dust. She glanced down the slopes of the Mount, saw scattered buildings, holy sites, domes and minarets floating in the darkness, blacker than the night. Something took hold of her heart - a sense of grief and desolation, a tormenting, overwhelming feeling that she no longer had roots - and she almost stopped again, changed her mind, not knowing why, and tore her eyes from the valley below and kept moving uphill.

This land was not her land and it would never give her peace: she decided this and made her decision as the wind closed about her. It was time to leave Israel, to resurrect her lost Self, to mould a new woman from the ruins of the

old by returning to her roots in the *goldeneh medina*. America - home - where being Jewish was incidental, a mere accident of birth, without importance, devoid of moral complexities. Why should she stay here? This land was not her land. She had been brought here in the wake of her father's religious faith and had never reconciled herself to it, even despising her father because of it. Why should she stay here? There was nothing to keep her here. Both of her parents were dead, she had no other family, and the victims of Israel's endless war now made her heart break. No husband. No children. Only the grief of her early loss. She sought relief from that grief in constant work and the oblivion of sex: one virtue, one vice, neither unique to Israel, both available in the less involving pastures beyond the Mediterranean. So why should she stay here? She had nothing but bad dreams here. Each night she suffered more, whether awake or asleep, and it was possible that the sickness of her patients was now poisoning her mind. No, she would not stay. To do so would be suicidal. The decision had to be made and she was making it… She would definitely leave Israel.

The wind was now much stronger, but hot, almost clammy, making her shield her eyes with her right hand as the dust swirled around her. At first she did this automatically, more annoyed than frightened, but then she suddenly wondered where the wind had come from, and the fear slithered through her. She passed the colonnaded courtyard of the Church of the Pater Noster, wondered again, briefly, just what she was doing here, and then glanced up at the unknown, cloud-ringed star and froze where she stood.

With the ring of clouds around it, the star looked like an enormous eye, a dark eye with a silvery-bright iris, fierce and unblinking. It had that - stunning brilliance - but it also had something else: a strange, majestic stillness and splendour, a mysterious beauty. She looked at it and shivered, closed her eyes and looked again, judged the star against the mass of stars behind it and then knew what was bothering her… The other stars were more distant, part and parcel of the night sky, but the unknown star was different, much larger, too bright, separated distinctly from the sky as in a three-dimensional photograph… Yes, that was it: it was too close to the Earth; it had not been obscured by the lone cloud but hidden *inside* the cloud… Kate licked her dry lips, tried to reject her own reasoning, blinked and looked up at the star again and then felt her heart pounding… No, she was not imagining it. There could be no doubt about it: the light of the star was illuminating the

extraordinary ring of cloud surrounding it, its rays shining clearly through the cloud to beam down on Jerusalem.

Kate took a step backward, letting out an involuntary groan, putting a hand up to her mouth and keeping it there, her eyes fixed on the brilliant star. She could not believe what she was seeing, kept looking, had to believe it, and then, faced with the impossible made actual, her reasoning started to falter. She groaned again and bit her lip, clamped her hand on her mouth, shook her head from side to side in denial, trying to hold down her panic. The moaning wind began to howl, unnaturally violent, too warm, as her hand moved from her mouth to shield her eyes and she took a step forward.

The wind was beating against her body, howling around her, racing on, whipping up clouds of dust and shaping the dust into dark streams that moved in immense, circular motions. Yet what she saw was worse, more bizarre and inexplicable: an enormous cloud of dust, swirling furiously and roaring, rising up from the Valley of Kidron, spewing soil and stones, moving inexorably towards the Garden of Gethsemane like a ravenous beast.

Kate stood there, scarcely breathing, the wind and dust hammering at her, her right hand shielding her eyes, her heart pounding, her sense of reality crumbling. The spiralling column was awesome, dividing the sky, obscuring the stars, even darker than the darkness of the night, but glowing strangely within. Then Kate raised her head, trying to find the unknown star, thought she saw it, then lost it, saw instead a stream of dust, black, dense, swirling wildly, sweeping out from the roaring column in the valley and hiding the unknown star from view.

Kate started running, hardly knowing where she was going, instinct driving her to find a hiding place before the storm devoured the summit of the Mount. She shielded her eyes with her hands, kept her gaze fixed on the ground, her feet kicking up the stones on the road as the dust swept around her. The wind continued howling, the dust hissed on all sides, and the roaring, now advancing towards her, grew louder each second. The sound was terrifying, encouraging her to keep moving, yet forcing her to turn her head and look again at the extraordinary phenomenon. The roaring column was rising higher, mushrooming above the valley, spreading out to obliterate the sky and devour the Old City. The southern wall disappeared, then the Dome of the Rock, then the dust enveloped the Antonia Tower, swept across the Moslem Quarter and spread out until all of East Jerusalem was

completely obscured.

No stars. No Old City.

Kate sobbed and turned away, kept her head down, watched the road, moving forward as the howling wind pummelled her and the dust swirled and hissed. She saw some Arab houses beyond a strip of waste ground, some Arabs hurrying through the violent storm, waving hands, shouting desperately. Then she heard the snorting of camels, was whipped by dust as she looked ahead, shielded her eyes and stumbled forward and saw the walls surrounding the Chapel of the Ascension. The camels were in panic, tugging frantically against their ropes, snorting loudly, looking enormous and bizarre in the thick, swirling dust.

Kate stopped and glanced left, saw the houses beyond the waste ground, lights flickering on and off in the windows, the dust sweeping across them. Someone ran across the waste ground, white robes whipped by the wind, calling out, arms waving, disappearing, a ghost in the stricken night. Kate glanced across at the Old City, saw nothing but swirling dust, a dark mass spreading out and advancing towards her, blotting out the whole world. She gasped and clenched her fists, felt a blast of hot air, was enveloped in a cloud of hissing dust and then pushed forward again. She let the wind carry her toward the bucking, braying camels, was lashed by flying branches and stones and heard the rattling of rolling cans. Then she passed the panicking camels, hugged the wall of the mosque. Eventually reaching the forecourt, she rushed through the open door.

Now she knew what she was: a creature stripped of all pride, its only instinct that of survival, past and future superfluous. She thought of this briefly, experienced a spasm of shame, then lurched forward, fighting against the wind and dust as the darkness deepened around her. Seeing the circular walls of the modest Chapel of the Ascension, she wanted to go inside, to find peace and shelter, but the howling became a roaring, something crashed down nearby, and then the ground began to shake, started rumbling and cracking, and then long, jagged cracks appeared in front of her, criss-crossing the courtyard.

The ground rumbled and cracked open just in front of her feet. She jumped back as the jagged cracks grew wider and snaked across the small courtyard. Gasping, she turned around, sensing the danger she was in, heading back towards the entrance and the open road beyond, wanting to be

clear of the walls of the mosque tower if the earthquake worsened. Already the courtyard stones were cracking, groaning and spitting cement, while beyond, filling the sky above Gethsemane, the column of dust had become an immense, swirling dark mass that filled her whole line of vision. A terrifying sight, extraordinary, unprecedented, it froze Kate where she stood, paralysed her, drained her mind, until something out there, something different, made her concentrate again.

That dark mass contained a glowing, a shapeless, pulsating white core, striations of pale light that spread out from the murky depths and appeared to move forward with the swirling dust. Kate blinked and looked again, wondering if she was hallucinating, covering her eyes with her hands and looking up as the demented wind pummelled her. No, she was not imagining it: there was light in that howling dark mass: a pulsating core of light buried deep in the storm and emitting striations of weaker light in every direction. The light was in the sky, inside the vortex of the raging storm, moving forward with the fiercely swirling dust and illuminating the darkness.

'No!' Kate shrieked. '*No*!'

She moved forward and stopped again, no longer sure what she should do, terrified to move ahead into the roaring dark storm, no longer keen to take shelter in the chapel as she had originally intended. Then the ground snapped and split, shook violently and growled, and then a jagged crack shot across the courtyard, from one side to the other. Kate gasped and stepped back, stared at the walls surrounding her, heard them cracking and saw the jagged lines forming a dust-spitting jigsaw. She jerked her head back, looking directly above her, and saw more cracks darting down the dome of the roof as a pillar broke in two and started collapsing. She returned her gaze to the front, saw the walls of the courtyard also collapsing, the howling dark mass everywhere, raging across the road outside, and then the roaring wind reached her, slapped her back, dragged her forward, picked her up and slammed her down to the ground and sent her sliding across it.

She did not feel fear or pain, dissolving into the experience, hardly aware that she was choking in the dust and being lacerated by sharp debris. She was only aware of the noise, a shocking bedlam, all around her, inside her head, spreading out and returning as the wind when she rolled onto her back. She rubbed her eyes and looked up, saw a dull light expanding, growing brighter and then suddenly flaring out with a blinding ferocity.

A shriek. Her own voice. Shocked, she closed her eyes and jerked her head around, pressing her cheek to the rubble as the ground shook beneath her. Then she opened her eyes again, dazed, disbelieving, and watched the Chapel of the Ascension rising up, ballooning outward, cracking apart and then collapsing with a catastrophic roaring, clouds of dust billowing up while the ground heaved and shuddered beneath her. Kate sobbed and clenched her fists, wanting something to cling to, then she closed her eyes and saw streaming stars and drifted into the void.

Shalom, she thought. *Peace*.

8

The dust that swept around Kate's prostrate body also swept with extraordinary force around Moshe Eitan's jeep as the driver, wearing goggles, raced it past the wall of the Old City which, even this close, was obscured by the roaring dark mass that seemed to have originated in the Valley of Kidron, travelled up the slopes of the Mount of Olives and was now coiling back in a great arc to cover Jerusalem. Moshe was sitting beside the driver, with a lieutenant and sergeant in the rear, all of them wearing protective goggles against the fine, swirling dust. The jeep passed the Dung Gate, leading into the Jewish Quarter; both the gate and the wall were nearly invisible in the howling dark storm.

'I don't believe this,' Moshe muttered.

Nor could he believe it; too much had happened too quickly: first the unidentified flying object that appeared to have crashed on the Mount of Olives, now this storm of unprecedented fierceness, so sudden, so inexplicable, springing up out of nowhere, following an unnatural course, and covering the Old City and the Mount of Olives as if trying to devour them. Moshe glanced up to his left, saw the towering mass of the Temple Mount, the Dome of the Rock now no more than a black globe soaring high above the obscured Turkish wall, the storm raging around it. Moshe didn't know what was happening, couldn't think of an explanation, and he felt the muscles tightening in his stomach as the tension took hold of him.

'It's getting worse!' the driver shouted.

'It doesn't matter,' Moshe replied. 'We've got to get to the summit of the Mount of Olives and find out what's happening there.'

They were now heading north, along the east wall of the Old City, the ground on their right sloping down to the Valley of Kidron, uncommonly dark, the clouds of dust still boiling skyward and sweeping over the Garden of Gethsemane and up the obscured slopes of the Mount of Olives. Moshe

glanced to his left, saw the Dome of the Rock behind the wall, heard a subterranean rumbling, and then felt the jeep shaking violently before careening sharply across the road. The men in the rear bawled, their weapons clanging together, the driver cursing and slamming his foot down, bring the jeep to a screeching halt as the ground growled and shook and became a jigsaw of gaping cracks that ran out from the centre of the road towards the low wall.

The driver cursed and smacked the steering wheel, licked his lips and glanced at Moshe, his eyes hidden behind the rubber-framed goggles, beads of sweat on his forehead. Moshe pushed himself upright, shook his head and turned around, staring beyond the men in the rear at the other two jeeps, which had also braked to a halt at the side of the road. The men were shouting and gesticulating, pointing at the jagged cracks in the road, and then the ground growled again, shook and heaved in short, sharp spasms, and Moshe heard a roaring, a gasp of horror from the driver, and he jerked his head back and looked up through the dense, swirling dust.

Even through the murk, he could see the ugly cracks appearing above the double arches of the magnificent Golden Gate; and then, as he looked on, hardly believing what he was seeing, the Byzantine structure shook violently, spitting pulverised mortar, a web of jagged cracks appearing, lumps of stone falling down, and then the whole walled-in section collapsed in clouds of billowing dust, leaving the entrance to the Temple Mount clear for the first time in centuries.

Moshe stared at the tumbling rubble, momentarily paralysed, while beside him the driver bowed his head and started murmuring a prayer. Moshe was similarly affected, both shocked and outraged, watching the rubble of the Golden Gate tumbling down the sloping ground, over the wall below and onto the road. The sergeant in the rear cursed loudly, the lieutenant answered with a throttled groan, and then Moshe broke free from his reverie and turned to the driver, punching him lightly on the shoulder and ordering him to start the jeep again. The driver raised his head, his eyes hidden behind the goggles, then licked his lips and opened his mouth to shout.

‘The gate!’

‘I said *move*!’

‘But the gate… the *Golden* Gate!’

‘Damn it!’ Moshe snapped. ‘It’s too late for that. We’ve got to get to the

summit of the Mount of Olives. Now start the jeep and *let's go*!'

The driver did as he was told and the jeep roared into life, churning up more clouds of dust and shooting off on squealing tyres, heading into the storm. Moshe turned to look back, saw Lieutenant Gonen and Sergeant Rifkin both staring at the gaping hole in the Golden Gate, neither saying a word. Moshe raised his right hand, waving the other two jeeps forward, then he looked straight ahead as the jeep turned away from the Old City, passing the road that led up to St. Stephen's Gate and heading for the Garden of Gethsemane. They entered the Jericho Road, passed the Tomb of the Virgin, and then headed up the crude, narrow track on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives.

Here the earthquake was stronger, the ground heaving relentlessly, splitting open in thin cracks that seemed to originate from the summit of the Mount and run back down towards the Old City. The jeep bounced over the cracks, its wheels squeaking in protest, throwing Moshe and his men from side to side, backwards and forwards. Also, the storm was worse, much louder, the dust thicker, rising from the far end of the Valley of Kidron, sweeping over Silwan and up the slopes of the Mount of Olives, back down over the Garden of Gethsemane and on towards the Old City. The storm's course defied logic, as did its singular ferocity, and now the air was filled with uprooted cacti and bougainvillaea, the olive trees bending and shedding their greenery above the walls of the Basilica of the Agony. Moshe saw this through his goggles, through the distorting murk of the tempest; he realised that he was sweating, that the wind was unnaturally hot, and as he wiped the sticky dust from his face his bewilderment increased.

Higher up, the storm was terrible, the spiralling dust-clouds almost solid, a dark mass blotting out the moon and stars and streaming back down the slopes. Moshe saw the clouds of dust, a darker mass, perhaps more dust, then a light - a very faint, pulsating glowing - in the depths of the storm. Lieutenant Gonen bawled something, his hand falling on Moshe's shoulder, shaking him, another hand passing his face to jab at the sky with an index finger. So, Moshe was not alone - he was not hallucinating - and he kept looking up, saw the light passing over the road, high up, in the sky, in the eye of the storm, first dull, then growing brighter, striations wavering through the clouds of dust, then suddenly flaring out in a brief, dazzling flash that swept over the whole area and just as suddenly winked out, returning the night to its

former darkness.

'*Riboyne Shel O'Lem*!' the driver exclaimed.

'What was that?' Sergeant Rifkin shouted.

'Don't stop!' Moshe bawled, hardly aware of his own voice. 'Damn it, keep your hands on the steering wheel! Put your foot down! Let's move it!'

The jeep kept going forward, bouncing dangerously on the steep track, the ground heaving and splitting open in spasms, the dust still swirling furiously. Moshe kept scanning the black sky, wondering what the light had been, seeing nothing but the extraordinary storm, feeling an odd kind of fear and awe. It was a different kind of fear - not the healthy fear of the trained soldier - and he cursed and tried to keep his wits about him as the storm raged and howled. The jeep kept grinding uphill, passing low limestone walls, then turned right, past the Mount of Olives Hotel, and screeched to a halt in front of the walls of the adjoining mosque. The jeeps behind did likewise, their engines spluttering into silence, but Moshe remained where he was, as speechless as his men, staring beyond the ruins of the tower of the mosque to the remains of the Chapel of the Ascension: now a mound of dust-covered rubble.

There was nothing to say. A chapel that had stood there for centuries had been destroyed in an instant. Moshe clambered out of the jeep, his body pummelled by the wind, hearing wails of despair from nearby houses, the camels braying in panic. The ground beneath his feet was steady, no longer rumbling and cracking, but the wind, which had diminished a little, was still too fierce for comfort. Moshe turned to the other men, saw them climbing out of their jeeps, their faces turned towards the ruins of the ancient chapel, their heads shaking from side to side. Then they gathered around Moshe, perhaps instinctively seeking comfort, aware that what had happened would particularly affect the Arabs and Christians, though they, too, were shocked by the event. Moshe studied them, looked away, stared at the ruins and shook his head, forcing himself back to reality and what had to be done.

'Okay,' he said, 'let's go.'

They scrambled over the rubble, smacked by wind, whipped by dust, and then spread out and made their way into the ruins. The walls of the courtyard had collapsed and the steel doors were buried in stones, so they advanced across the widely scattered rubble into more devastation. Hulda's tomb and the chapel had both been destroyed completely and were now merely two

mounds of debris, one large and one small. The men stopped between the two, looking around them, still stunned, lashed by the raging storm, almost deafened by the howling wind, all of them temporarily forgetting just what they were here for.

'No wreckage,' Moshe said, not bothering to shout against the wind, speaking more to himself than to his men. 'No wreckage… No sign of an aircraft.'

The remark drew their attention and made them look at him, but for a moment they seemed unsure of what to do, each locked in his private dream. Moshe felt it in himself - a hapless grief and disbelief - so he turned away from the rubble of the chapel to look down on Jerusalem. The storm seemed to be abating there, the dust thinning out and settling, the Dome of the Rock reappearing as a black globe in spiralling clouds of dust; then the Al-Asqa mosque and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre with the lights of the New City behind it. The Old City had survived - for that he quietly said his thanks - but then the storm raging around him snapped him back to attention and he turned again to survey the rubble that towered above him and stretched across the dark, windswept courtyard. Sighing and wiping the dust from his goggles, he waved his men forward.

'Spread out,' he said. 'We're looking for metallic debris. Obviously it wasn't an aircraft that crashed, but it had to be… *something*. If you see anything unusual, don't touch it: just tell me about it. Okay, let's go.'

The men didn't move immediately, but simply stood there indecisively, slightly stooped against the wind, their bodies rocking, the dust hissing and whistling around them. Moshe knew what they were feeling - being Jewish made little difference - but he turned his flashlight on and started walking, examining the ground at his feet. Eventually his men did the same, spreading out across the courtyard, moving around the cone-shaped rubble of the Chapel of the Ascension with their flashlights beaming down at the ground, searching for debris.

Moshe was not a religious Jew and sacred sites did not move him, but as he searched for the missing debris of whatever had crashed here, as the wind howled about him and swept the dust from the broken stones, as the broken stones, rolling, revealed nothing underneath, he felt something draining out of him and leaving him hollow. These ruins brought back other ruins, another time, another place… the torn dress of a girl, the smashed toys of a boy, a

tangled web of female hair stained with blood, sightless eyes staring sunward… He felt a choking anguish, the resurrection of buried grief, and was shocked that this terrible night had opened up that old wound. The pain was like a fist clenched around his racing heart, more cruel than the howling wind and stinging dust, draining the blood from his head. He stopped, feeling dizzy, blinking behind the dusty goggles, then cursed softly and started forward again, his torch shining on rubble… The other rubble had been different: not windswept, but still; not hidden in the darkness of night, but bright and sun-scorched. The bloody hair had been dark, the eyes dark, drained of life, and her lips, when he touched them with his lips, had been cold and unyielding… Moshe remembered and closed his eyes, saw his dead wife and children… Instantly, he opened his eyes again, retreating rapidly from the horror of that distant day and concentrating once more, with relief, on the windswept ground at his feet.

'Not a thing, sir.'

'Pardon, sergeant?'

'There's nothing here, sir. No aircraft could possibly have crashed here… nor anything else.'

No, not a thing. The whole night was a mystery. Moshe nodded at the sergeant, hardly seeing him, scarcely hearing him, and then walked on, skirting the rubble of the collapsed chapel, his torch still aimed at the ground. No memories, just the present, deadening the pain with activity, the beam of his flashlight on the rubble, the rolling rubble revealing nothing, no indication of what it could have been that crashed down on the chapel… The earthquake? Probably. No other possible explanation. Yet what had flown down beneath the radar's ground clutter and disappeared above the summit of this ancient, holy site? Moshe wiped sweat from his brow, spat the dust from his mouth, cursed the raging wind's demented howling and wondered why he felt hot… It was the wind that was hot, too hot, unnaturally so, and suddenly he felt haunted and claustrophobic, divorced from himself. What was happening to him? *The dead eyes staring sunward*. Moshe advanced around the rubble, returning to where he had started, saw the lights of the Old City reappearing above the rubble, then heard one of his men shouting and looked around, facing into the beating wind.

' - *here, sir! Over here*!'

One of the men was kneeling down, his left hand raised and waving, his

flashlight on the ground at his booted feet, beaming into the rubble. Moshe felt a pang of dread, something cold sliding through him, his mind filled with intimations of change that could not be defined. He licked his lips and stopped breathing, felt the pounding of his heart, listened intently to the wind, as if willing it to speak, and looked through the dust at that dark hand raised skyward, a snake's head weaving, simultaneously seductive and dangerous. A mere moment passed this way, perhaps two or three seconds, but a distant time unfolded, revealed its horrors and passed on, and only then did Moshe jerk himself free and force himself towards the kneeling man. The man stared up at him, teeth gleaming, eyes hidden by the goggles, then he lowered his head and pointed at the ground near his dust-covered boots.

'It's Kate Hirschfield. The doctor.'

Moshe knelt in the rubble, shone his torch on the woman's face, heard a groan and saw her licking her parched lips and staring upwards, eyes blinking repeatedly. Large eyes, deep brown, brown hair whipping across her face, long hair, thick with dust, her tanned face smeared with dust, her lips full and too wide, almost too wide for the face, at odds with the short nose, the nostrils slightly flared, framed by high cheekbones that emphasised the brown eyes and lent the face a taut, aggressive beauty. No, not beauty, at least not in the classical sense; but something else was there, certainly maturity and intelligence; and beneath that, behind the dark eyes, in the curve of the too-wide lips, was a suppressed sensuality, a finely controlled tension, a strength of spirit made luminous by its own inhibitions: an attractiveness based on some part of her that was just out of reach.

Something took hold of Moshe and wrenched him out of himself, hurling him brutally into his past and then hauling him back again. He stared down at the woman, shining his flashlight on her face, feeling anguished, disorientated, dissolving into her being; and then he reached out to place his free hand on her forehead and brush the hair from her face. The woman licked her lips, blinked her brown eyes, glanced around her, shook her head slowly from side to side and then looked up at him.

'Am I alright?'

'Yes, you're alright. You can probably sit up now.'

She sat up slowly, carefully, pressing her hands to the ground, the wind still whipping her long hair across her face as it howled all around them. The other men were moving towards them, shadowy forms in the dark night, and

Kate blinked and stared at them, her head moving left and right, one hand brushing the hair back from her forehead, the other opening and closing. Sitting up, she looked slim, almost bony, her breasts small, her legs long in loose slacks, the grey blouse now tattered and hanging free. She turned her head to look at Moshe, her gaze dark and direct, a quiet, sardonic smile at her lips as she pushed his flashlight away from her eyes. Moshe thought of another time, another place, a skein of dark hair; and the recollection, conjured up by Kate Hirschfield's presence, invited pain and despair, the resurrection of buried grief, and filled him with an unutterable longing that cast him adrift.

'What happened?' he asked.

Kate blinked and opened her mouth, started to speak and then stopped, her eyes filming over with fear and confusion, glancing up, moving left and right, studying the dark forms all around her, then returning to Moshe, staring at him, hardly seeing him, a sort of blindness in the gaze that was reflecting the light from his torch. Moshe raised his right hand, saw it shaking in the wind, the wind fiercer, much louder, almost smacking them both sideways as the ground began to rumble, first vibrating, then heaving upwards, much worse than before, more jagged cracks criss-crossing the courtyard and making the rubble dance as if alive.

'*Another earthquake*!' Kate said.

Moshe grabbed her right wrist, stood up and pulled her with him, saw large stones tumbling down the sloping rubble of the chapel as the ground shook with extraordinary violence and gave off a bass rumbling. The other men were already moving, running back towards the road, when the rubble of the chapel started rolling across the courtyard, the ground cracking beneath the large mound, unleashing a dreadful roar, then heaving upwards through the centre of the rubble and pushing it aside.

Moshe thought he saw light, couldn't believe it and turned away, his hand firmly on Kate's wrist as he pulled her with him, following his men towards the open road. The ground beneath them was shaking terribly, a relentless, rhythmic vibration, then the roar became deafening, a blast of hot air engulfed them, and Kate groaned as Moshe hauled her from the debris of the collapsed courtyard walls.

They stopped near the waste ground, neither looking at the other, both transfixed by the strange light that cut through the murk around them and

illuminated the faces of the other men, all frozen, their goggles glinting, their jaws slack, saying nothing, simply staring in stunned silence beyond Kate and Moshe, their gaze obviously fixed on the source of the heat and noise that had turned the raging storm into something demoniac.

Moshe and Kate both turned around, looking back where they had come from, and then stood there, just as frozen as the men around them, not believing their senses.

The centre of the courtyard was erupting as if in slow motion, the ground roaring and breaking apart, heaving up through the middle of the rubble of the chapel and exuding striations of brilliant white light. Blocks of stone screeched and cracked, poured down the slopes of the parting rubble, rolling in waves of smashed rock and powdered cement across the devastated courtyard. The ground below continued heaving, roaring hideously and spitting light, the earth thrusting up through the rubble of the fallen chapel as if being forced up by a giant fist. The wind howled and the dust swirled, forming billowing black clouds, spreading out and rushing down to meet the light streaming up from the heaving earth. A fierce heat came from the courtyard, the brilliant radiance eradicating the darkness - and in that stark chiaroscuro, in the unreal, dazzling clarity, the rubble of the chapel rolled away and another mound of earth appeared, the loose soil emitting smoke and then also rolling away to reveal a large, glowing, rectangular object.

The downpouring light vanished, winking off like a light bulb, and simultaneously, miraculously, the wind ceased its demented howling and the silence rushed back to rule the night.

No one said a word. The event had made speech redundant. The ground had stopped its terrible shaking, the spiralling dust was settling down, the stars reappeared in a clear dark-blue sky, and on a ragged mound of earth, where the Chapel of the Ascension had formerly stood, obviously buried in the earth but rising above the upturned soil, a large object of unknown origin, rectangular, glowing brilliantly, filled the darkness with heat and white light, illuminating the witnesses.

Moshe reached out for Kate’s hand.

9

They all stood there for some time, too stunned to think coherently, staring across the rubble at the extraordinary object that had emerged from the earth where the Chapel of the Ascension had stood for centuries. The storm had gone completely and now the night was calm and quiet, but eventually doors creaked open in the few houses beyond the waste ground and hesitant, fearful voices started calling to one another as the Arabs emerged from their homes to survey the devastation wreaked by the storm. Then a shout of surprise or horror, a woman's wail of fear or grief, as dazed eyes came to rest on the ruins of the chapel and that mysterious, awe-inspiring, glowing object.

Moshe, hardly aware that Kate's fingers were locked in his, stared through the subsiding dust and saw the stars reappearing in the sky beyond the high mound of rubble. He tried to focus on the large object, but did not find it easy - his vision distorted by the dazzling light, his senses stripped by the evening's events - but eventually, forcing himself to remember just what he was here for, he was able to bring himself back down to earth and gather together his scattered thoughts.

The object was huge, perhaps fifty feet long, its straight sides and flat top surmounting the arched rim of the rubble and giving off the blinding sheen of white-hot metal. The heat was intense, reaching as far as the waste ground, making the illuminated nocturnal air shimmer and distorting the stars beyond. Indeed, the object could have been a mirage, a holographic photograph, its linear contours distorted by its own radiant heat, bending and wobbling like jelly, its edges hazed by the fierce silvery brightness. For this reason it was difficult to judge its true shape and size, but from where Moshe was standing, about two hundred yards away, the object appeared to be rectangular and was either sitting upon or buried in the upturned soil. If, as Moshe thought, the object was buried in the soil rather than sitting upon it, it would not necessarily be rectangular; but either way it looked solid and was obviously

white-hot, made featureless by the radiance of that heat, its light illuminating the surrounding darkness.

Moshe turned to look at Kate, saw her dark eyes staring back at him, and then realised that she was holding his hand. Startled, embarrassed, he pulled his hand from her grasp and looked away, remembering other dark eyes, dulled by death, staring sunward, a skein of equally dark hair in the dust, a light breeze playing through it. His men were standing all around him, hardly aware of him, saying nothing, removing their goggles and squinting against the eerie light pouring over the rubble. The Arabs were moving across the waste ground, shocked that their mosque had been destroyed, their dark faces now clear in the moonlight, their shadows stretching out behind them to form bizarre, shivering shapes. Moshe studied them carefully - some were pointing excitedly, others wailing with grief - then he looked again at Kate, felt a spasm of longing, turned away and smacked the palm of his left hand with his right fist, stinging himself back into action.

'Lieutenant Gonen!'

'Yes, Major-General.'

'I want your men to move all civilians out of this area and then block off both ends of the road - there, at the far end of the Mount of Olives Hotel; and there, in front of the Church of the Pater Noster. When you've done that, ring the relevant people, tell them we have an object of unknown origin and nature up here, and ask them to send us a physicist, a specialist in esoteric weapons and explosives, a geologist, and anyone else who might have a specialised knowledge about what could have occurred here. I also want any information you can obtain from meteorology and Air Defence about the earthquake and the reported unidentified. Also, we'll want a decontamination unit to check if that object is radioactive, and a bomb disposal unit at the ready should our weapon's specialist decide that that… *thing*… is likely to explode. Finally, I want some representatives of Shin Bet up here. You got all that?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Okay, get to it.'

Lieutenant Gonen turned away and walked towards Sergeant Rifkin, while Moshe, feeling as if he was dreaming, turned back to Kate. The fierce wind had been reduced to a constant light breeze that was brushing her dark hair from her neck. Her back was turned to Moshe, her slim form shivering

slightly, silhouetted in the brilliant, eerie light, her shadow touching his feet. Moshe wanted to go to his jeep and call through to the Prime Minister, but the sight of Kate Hirschfield magnetised him and made him feel helpless. He thought of his dead wife and children, of the grief he had suppressed, studied the woman, slim and silent, bathed in that unreal light, and felt himself dissolving all around her, melting into her being. Embarrassed even as he felt this, he had to will himself to tear his eyes from her and concentrate instead on that strange object.

The object was still white-hot, its edges hazed in the shimmering heat waves, but the edges seemed straight and beneath their dazzling whiteness was a darker colour that suggested a solid surface. This possibility was staggering, since the intensity of the heat, Moshe surmised, was enough to melt the toughest of metals. Rubbing his stinging eyes, he looked again at the object, trying to ascertain if it was shaped like an enormous plate or actually had back and sides. He was convinced that it was box-shaped, something like a large room, but he couldn't be sure because the iridescent heat waves were diffusing the object and illuminating the rubble on all sides of it.

At that moment, Kate took a step forward, her right hand covering her eyes, the wind rippling her loose blouse and slacks, her shadow stretching out behind her. She took another step forward, stopped again, shook her head, then offered a muted groan and started walking as if in a trance.

Moshe was briefly startled, and just stood there, transfixed, as Kate brushed the dark hair from her eyes and hurried towards the ruins across the road. Then Moshe came back to his senses, feeling the scalding waves of heat, and rushed forward to grab Kate by the elbow and jerk her back to him. She tripped on a stone and came towards him in a spin, and as he reached out to grab her with his free hand, she swung her fist at his face. He ducked just in time and the blow merely glanced off his cheek as Kate hissed something incoherent and then pulled away, trying to make her escape. She was surprisingly strong, leaning forward, dark eyes gleaming, but Moshe tugged her back to him and slapped her face without thinking about it. She straightened up, shocked. Raising her shaking right hand, she touched her stinging cheek, blinked and licked her lips, then lowered her hand to her side.

'You hit me,' she said.

'Yes,' Moshe replied. 'I'm sorry. I didn't think you knew what you were doing, so I had to do something.'

‘Yes… of course.’

‘You were heading straight for that thing on the rubble. It could have burned you… or blinded you.’

‘I didn’t realise…’

‘No.’

‘I’m sorry. I don’t know what came over me.’

The light pouring around her had a dazzling intensity that turned her face into a featureless mask and bathed Moshe in a suffocating heat. Aware that the heat was already burning his skin, he took Kate by the elbow and walked her towards his men who were clearing the civilians, mostly Arabs, out of the area and blocking off the road at both ends of the devastation. Looking beyond the houses at the far end of the waste ground in front of the destroyed chapel, Moshe saw that the lights of the Old City had reappeared, the walls and domes clearly visible, the dark sky drenched with stars. This relieved him a little, but his thoughts were elsewhere, concentrated on the feel of Kate’s flesh between his fingers, spread thinly on the bone of her elbow, as he guided her forward. He noted that she was silent, her head lowered, her body shivering, the light breeze blowing her hair around her face in languorous motions. He flicked his eyes towards her, looked away, feeling guilty, remembering his wife’s blood in the dust, the dust covering her brown hair. He felt disorientated, strangely removed from what was happening; thought of what he had said a few hours earlier about Kate Hirschfield and wondered what was happening to him now. The light of the object illuminated the road, fell across the emptied Arab houses, and he saw his men holding the civilians back just beyond the parked jeeps.

‘What happened?’ he said.

‘I’m not sure,’ Kate replied. ‘The ground was cracking open, then a noise, the roaring storm… another noise… a light in the storm, spreading out, all around me…’

‘Around you?’

‘Above me. It came out of the sky. I swear, it seemed to come from the sky and then spread out, or explode, all around me… I fell down… was *thrown* down… heard a roaring, a dreadful noise… then the chapel either exploded or collapsed, and after that I passed out.’

‘You just saw a light?’

‘Just a light.’

‘Nothing else?’

‘Nothing else.’

Her voice was like an echo, strangely hollow, repeating his words, and then he saw her raising her head, her dark eyes staring blindly. (*The dead eyes staring sunward*.) Moshe felt haunted and unreal, an old pain whipping through him, as he reached the first jeep, which was parked outside the range of the object’s far-reaching light. It was darker here, cooler, the breeze soothing scorched skin. Lieutenant Gonen put the telephone down and turned around, looking weary.

‘Everything’s been arranged. The men you requested are on their way already. I also asked them to send up some floodlights.’

‘Floodlights, lieutenant? Are you serious? The light from that damned object is almost blinding!’

‘I don’t think it’s going to last long, sir. It’s becoming dimmer already.’

This was true. Looking back on the mysterious object, Moshe noted that the white-hot glow was dimming, the brilliant light already fading from the middle of the road, darkness creeping back over the houses and deepening around the ruined courtyard of the chapel. The object itself was less dazzling, the air around it no longer shimmering, and the dark sheen of its surface was emerging like streaks of black paint on fluorescent glass. The edges still looked ragged beneath the distorting white-hot glowing, but it was now perfectly clear that the top and sides of the object were straight. Whether or not the object was shaped like an enormous plate or was merely one side of a three-dimensional object was still an issue of doubt; but since the rays of light were now mainly beaming upwards, it was evident that the object was tilting back a little and thus effectively hiding any possible farther right-angled surface.

‘Well, lieutenant, what do you think it is?’

‘I don’t know, sir. I just can’t make it out. However, judging by the way that upturned soil has been pushed back, I’d say that it’s as deep as it is long.’

‘Box-shaped.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘That’s a pretty big box, lieutenant.’

‘Precisely.’

‘What about the earthquake - or earth tremor?’

‘A member of the Weizmann Institute, helpfully resident in Jerusalem, is

coming to talk to you.'

'And the unidentified?'

'A real mystery.' Lieutenant Gonen shrugged his shoulders and rubbed his eyes with his fingertips, either weary or bewildered, or both, his jowls displaying his advancing years. 'They had an unidentified on the screens for no more than a few seconds and it disappeared below the radar's ground clutter, right over this area. Whatever it was, it didn't ascend again, and it certainly hasn't been seen since. However, that unidentified was picked up by the radar at precisely the same time as the first earth tremors were recorded on the seismometers, so it's thought that there may be a connection. Air Defence also pointed out that although the unidentified was the first and only one observed, there *has* been inexplicable interference on the radar screens throughout the past two nights.'

'There was a tremor last night.'

'That's right… with simultaneous radar interference.'

Moshe sighed dejectedly, ran his fingers through his hair, then glanced over the lieutenant's shoulder at the men forming a barricade across the road. It was dark where the men were and it made them look ominous, their rifles held on high as they kept the jostling civilians from entering the area. The Arabs were unusually quiet, doubtless in a state of shock, most straining to see the object that had emerged from the earth and destroyed not only their mosque but one of the chapels most sacred to Christians. Above the people were the stars, shining brightly, perfectly normal, and Moshe looked up and then dropped his gaze and fixed his eyes on Kate Hirschfield. She was leaning against the jeep, biting her lower lip, her dark eyes gleaming, her brown hair fluttering gently against her face with its taut, repressed beauty.

'Are you alright?' Moshe asked.

'Yes.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm a psychiatrist.'

'That wouldn't necessarily help at the moment; you could be in shock.'

'I'm just confused, major-general. I'm not sure what's happening to me. I've been seeing things I just can't believe, but now I have to accept them.'

'You mean that thing over there?'

'That… and something else. I heard you talking about the radar, about an unidentified flying object, and I think I might have seen that as well.'

She offered a tentative, self-mocking smile, dropped her gaze to the ground, then, raising her eyes again, she stared at the glowing object, spread her hands in a gesture of bewilderment and returned her gaze to Moshe. He was drawn to her brown eyes, to their secretive depths, to something that was just out of reach and refused to reveal itself; and he felt that he was drowning, slowly losing his senses, his beating heart proclaiming his confusion and recollected despair. He rubbed his eyes, his head down, in retreat, then he looked at those brown eyes again and felt the strength draining out of him.

'Yes?' he said.

'It's crazy.'

'You're a psychiatrist; you should know.'

'It was a star, major-general. I saw it last night and tonight. It looked like a star, was too large to be a star, and was obviously very low in the sky. I first saw it last night, just before that minor earth tremor; I saw it again tonight, just before that terrible storm. It looked like a star, but I don't believe it was one: it was too low in the sky, an unnatural circle of cloud surrounded it, its light was beaming right through that cloud and it appeared to be *moving*. Whatever it was, it fascinated me. In fact, it nearly hypnotised me. I was in the Intercontinental Hotel, having a drink with a friend, and then, for no reason, I found myself walking up to here with the star practically following me. Then the storm came up. It started directly below that star. Then, when I reached here, and just before I passed out, I saw that light in the very heart of the storm, coming down right on top of me… Maybe I'm going crazy - I just might be - but that's what I remember.'

'Do you know the sky, Miss Hirschfield?'

'Yes, I do… But I can't explain that… *thing*.'

She stared directly at him, a steely light in her eyes, hair fluttering across high cheekbones and full, sensual lips. Moshe thought of Leon Halcomb, of this woman in his bed, and his revulsion, which came instantly, was made more complete because it was wedded to his own desire for her. His feelings astonished him, made him feel that he was crazy, more so because they were inseparable from the events of the whole evening, which were, by their nature, overwhelmingly more important than any individual consideration. He had despised this woman on principle, without knowing her, on hearsay; but now, standing face to face with her, he was lost in her dark gaze. It was incomprehensible, a product of aberrant reasoning - and what had happened

here, on the summit of the Mount of Olives, made such feelings seem no less than insane. Moshe tried to break free, to concentrate on what had happened, but the mysterious object, which grew dimmer with each second he stood here, seemed no more than the instrument that had brought him to this singular meeting.

'Major-General?'

'Yes, lieutenant.'

'I was wondering if we could send one of the men to walk around the courtyard to have a look at the other side of that object and possibly ascertain what it is.'

'No, lieutenant, I don't think so. He'd have gone too close to it. God knows what it is, but it just might be radioactive - and I don't think it's worth taking that chance. I don't want anyone to go near that thing without a lead-suit on, so we'll just have to be patient and wait for the decontamination unit to arrive.'

'It's getting really dim.'

'Yes, it is. We might even be able to see what it is without going near it.'

The dazzling white light had now disappeared completely and the object had become a red-hot rectangle surrounded by darkness. No longer obscured by the fierce, shimmering heat waves, it was obviously solid, its edges perfectly straight, its base nearly buried in the upturned soil and rubble, its surface dark beneath the dimming red-hot sheen. Judged from this distance, it appeared to be about fifty feet long and twenty feet high from the lowest point of the irregular rubble. The sky beyond it was now black, serene, drenched with stars; and the object, thrusting up to that sky, looked infinitely mysterious.

'I still can't see any sides, major-general.'

'I think it has them, lieutenant. As you just said yourself, the shape of the rubble suggests depth, so I think it might be as deep as it is long.'

'If so, it's a pretty enormous box.'

'Or a tomb,' Kate said quietly.

Moshe and Gonen stared at her, wondering what she had meant, then the lieutenant glanced at Moshe and shrugged his shoulders and looked down at the ground. Moshe kept his gaze on Kate, drawn again to her hidden depths, but was distracted by the growling of trucks beyond the crowd of civilians. The trucks ground to a halt, their headlights beaming through the darkness

and illuminating the spectators, mostly Arabs in flowing robes and *keffiyes*. When the sergeant barked an order, some of his soldiers broke ranks, stepping forward to force the Arabs aside and make way for the new men. The first to appear were members of the decontamination unit, bulky and bizarre in their loose white lead-suits, carrying their gas-masks in one hand, Geiger counters in the other. Leading them was Professor Paul Madsen of the Weizmann Institute, a featureless silhouette in the glare of the headlights, regaining his features only when he stepped around the jeep and stopped before Moshe. Wiping sweat from his pink, ageing face, his eyes widening in disbelief, he stared past Moshe at the large, unknown object thrusting up from the earth.

'Ai-ai-ai!' he exclaimed.

'That's it, professor. Don't ask me what it is - I've no idea - but I've let no one near it.'

'Very good. But how did it get there?'

'We still haven't a clue. It appears to have been buried beneath the chapel, but we can't be too sure of that.'

'You're not too sure?'

'No. It's all very confusing. Something unidentified might have descended over the chapel. That object either pushed itself up or was *drawn up* by something.'

'Now you're confusing me.'

'We'll discuss it later.'

'Any noise from the object?'

'No, not a sound.'

'Okay, we'll go over there.'

When Madsen nodded to the three men behind him, they all put on their metal helmets and breathing apparatus. Looking like astronauts and walking just as awkwardly, they moved off, making their way across the road towards the ruins of the courtyard. Turning his back to the jeep, still standing close to Kate, Moshe followed the progress of the men as they spread out through the ruins. He glanced once at Kate, saw her shivering and folding her arms, leaning back against the vehicle, her spine curved, her hair hanging almost to her waist. Moshe thought of another time, another place, a distant horror, then he silently cursed and looked straight ahead, his gaze following the men in white lead-suits. They were advancing slowly, carefully, holding their

Geiger counters in front of them, skirting around broken pillars and smaller mounds of rubble, gradually closing in on the huge object that surmounted the ruins of the chapel. The object was cooling rapidly, its red-shot sheen growing darker, now reduced to a mosaic of dull red patches on a vitreous black surface. Moshe looked on, feeling uneasy, aware of Kate's close proximity, suddenly imagining that she and the object were somehow related. This thought came and went as he studied the object, as he blinked and strained to see through the darkness and surrendered to disbelief. The edges of the rectangle had become invisible, merging in with the black sky, and as the men clambered up the rubble, lead-suits gleaming in the darkness, the red patches faded further, became pinpricks and vanished; and then, to the amazement of Moshe and those around him, including Kate, the men in white finally converged near the top of the piled-up rubble and were framed by a stark, total blackness.

The object had disappeared.

10

Lieutenant Gonen cursed loudly, Kate bit her lower lip, and Moshe felt himself falling down through a well without bottom. The unreal was now real, the impossible a fact, and he closed his eyes and tried to get a grip on his scattered senses. He was a practical man, quick-witted and highly adaptable, but nothing in the extremities of his experience had prepared him for this. He clenched his fists, shook his head and tried to think, then opened his eyes again and looked across at the men in the rubble.

'It's still there,' Lieutenant Gonen said.

'No, it's not,' Moshe replied.

'I can see it. It's even blacker than the sky. There are no stars where the object is resting - there's just a rectangular blackness.'

Gonen was right: obviously the men of the decontamination unit were moving about in front of something solid, inching carefully along the convex rim of the rubble, past a blackness devoid of stars. The object was still there, a blackness painted on black, a black rectangle blotting out the stars and stretched across the high rubble. Moshe heaved a sigh of relief, glanced briefly at Kate, noted the odd, remote glitter in her eyes and then reached for the telephone.

He talked to the Prime Minister while leaning into the jeep, his elbows digging into the front seat, beads of sweat on his forehead. The situation defied description and left him short of words, and as he heard Ben Eleizer's startled gasp, he glanced across at the Arab onlookers. They were unusually quiet, almost reverentially so, massed between the trucks and the jeeps, the soldiers pressing them back with raised rifles. Other men had arrived, two in plain clothes, some in army uniforms, all looking left and right, shaking their heads, as they approached the jeep. Moshe kept talking to Ben Eleizer, trying to explain, answering questions, but he hardly heard the sound of his own voice, his thoughts circling elsewhere. Eventually he rang off, promising to

keep Ben Eleizer informed, then he straightened up again, glanced warily at Kate, and then turned to the plain-clothed men, both of whom were members of Shin Bet, the internal security service.

'I can't see any object,' one of the men, Levi Shapiro, said. He was in his early thirties, had auburn hair and hazel eyes, and was wearing a white shirt and tie, his jacket over his arm. 'All I see is the wreckage of the chapel and those men in white boiler suits with their Geiger counters.'

'It's there,' Moshe replied. 'Those men are standing right in front of it. You'll see it if you look more carefully. It's blocking out the stars.'

'He's right,' the other man, Irwin Jordache, said. Too big for his tight grey suit, he had a shock of electrified, greying black hair over a battered, unsentimental face. 'I can see it… A very large, rectangular hole where the stars should be.'

'Is it *invisible*?' Shapiro asked sceptically.

'It's very black,' Moshe explained.

'Nothing's *that* black, surely.'

Moshe shrugged. 'We'll know soon enough, Levi. Those men are checking it out.'

They all looked at the distant men and saw them framed in the rectangular black hole, a space darker than the night, devoid of stars, a doorway to eternity. Moshe shivered at the sight of it, feeling as if he were dreaming, then he noticed that Kate was shivering as well, her eyes gleaming unnaturally. He wondered what she was thinking and how the experience had affected her, then he turned away, more disturbed than ever, and faced the men from Shin Bet.

'What about the earthquake?'

'Unaccountable,' Shapiro said. 'Apart from the damage up here, it destroyed a lot of buildings all over Jerusalem and badly damaged parts of the wall of the Old City. We just don't understand it. There was no prior warning of it at all. It was more like an explosion than an earth tremor - a subterranean explosion.'

'That doesn't make sense.'

'Nor does that thing over there. Something came down below the radar's ground clutter and then disappeared. That's impossible as well if, as you say, nothing crashed here.' Shapiro glanced at Kate, as if seeing her for the first time, let his appreciate gaze roam up and down her slim, shapely body, then

turned back enquiringly to Moshe.

'Kate Hirschfield,' Moshe explained. 'From the Hadassah Medical Centre. She was here when the chapel either collapsed or exploded, and she thinks she saw the unidentified flying object.'

'Oh?' Jordache said, casting a sceptical look in Kate's direction.

'Yes,' Kate confirmed. She moved back and sat sideways in the jeep and covered her face with her hands.

'What did it look like?' Jordache asked.

Kate didn't reply. She just sat there in the jeep, leaning forward, shivering visibly, hiding her face in her hands, the breeze brushing her long hair. Moshe watched her, entranced, letting her presence filter into him, wanting to know what was going through her mind, what she saw with her closed eyes. Jordache also studied her, but more objectively, with professional interest, and Moshe, unable to tolerate his objectivity, looked across at the men on the ruins.

'They're coming back,' he said quietly.

The men of the decontamination unit were making their way back down the rubble, ghostly white in the moonlit darkness, the enormous black rectangle above them, a framed void in the starry sky. Moshe studied that great space, could not believe that it was solid, kept looking and thought he saw a tunnel leading out to the infinite. His rational self was outraged, refusing to accept what it was seeing, but he still found himself searching the sky for a star that should not have been there. No such star was in the heavens. Moshe lowered his gaze to the men in white. They were coming back across the courtyard, moving laboriously, looking almost spectral in the night, their flashlights turned down.

Kate raised her head, brushed the hair back from her face, her eyes glinting with the light of obsession as the men came towards her. She rubbed her cheeks and licked her lips, smoothed her hair down with one hand, then stood up and leaned against the jeep, a clenched fist to her mouth. Her eyes flicked towards Moshe, recognised him, slipped away, then settled on the men in the white lead-suits as they crossed the dark road. Professor Madsen was in the lead, removing his helmet from his head; he stopped in front of Moshe, threw his helmet into the jeep, wiped the sweat from his face with the palm of his hand, then shook his head from side to side, expressing his bewilderment.

‘You won’t believe me,’ he said.

He didn’t say anything else immediately, but merely stood there gazing around him, his eyes gleaming and reflecting the headlights of the trucks, his white lead-suit covered in dust and smeared with reddish-brown soil.

‘What *is* it?’ Kate asked.

Moshe took note of the unnatural glint in her eyes, the moonlight falling over her face, one hand, briefly removed from her lips as she spoke, now back there again. She seemed singularly distracted, locked in a private dream, her gaze fixed on the rectangular blackness dominating the rubble. Perhaps, as with Moshe, that perfect blackness had chilled her soul, making her think of a tunnel leading to the infinite and the unknowable. Moshe drank her in, feeling soothed by her proximity, then he returned his attention to Professor Madsen, who seemed slightly dazed.

‘It’s a cube,’ Madsen said. ‘There’s no other way to describe it. It’s about twenty metres long, about the same depth and height, and seems absolutely solid from top to bottom. Don’t ask me what it’s made of. I can’t really say, though it certainly seems to be some kind of stone. It has a perfect, matte-black, non-reflecting surface that makes it practically invisible in the dark. It was cold when we reached it - and obviously went cold incredibly fast. It was red-hot in patches as we climbed up that rubble, but the last of the red patches disappeared just as we reached it. No heat. None at all. We couldn’t see a damned thing. We hadn’t bothered to use our torches because the red glowing was bright, but the instant the last red patch faded out, we were faced with pure darkness… Not darkness: a total blackness. It looked like a black hole… so black it pulled my eyes out of focus and destroyed my sense of direction. God, it was frightening! I’ve never seen anything like it. The blackness seemed to go on forever. Nothing solid. A void.’

Moshe gazed across the road, automatically, hardly aware of it, straining to see the surface of the object that was nearly invisible. There was just a rectangular blackness framed perfectly by the stars, the edges of the rectangle defined by how they cut through the stars - a large space, unreal and disorientating, mysterious and frightening.

‘Then we turned on our torches. You could see it with the torches: you could see a perfect circle of stone where the beams of the torches fell upon it…but you still couldn’t see anything, not a hint, outside that circle of light. It definitely wasn’t metal. I’m convinced it was stone. Matte-black, non-

reflecting, diamond-hard, not remotely like any stone I've ever come across… Then we walked around it - a weird experience; pretty frightening. We knew it was there, but it looked like a black hole and we were frightened to even lean against it, in case we fell into it… It's buried deep in earth and rubble. The whole thing is smeared with mud. That suggests that it's been pushed up from the ground, that it was buried down there. God knows for how long…'

He stopped talking and shook his head, staring at each of them in turn, clearly embarrassed by what he was saying, hardly able to credit it himself. Moshe glanced again at Kate, saw her staring across the road, oblivious to the people around her, her thoughts circling elsewhere. The moonlight fell on her face, emphasising her isolation, and Moshe, wondering what was happening to him, wanted to reach out and touch her.

'There's hardly any rubble at the back, so we checked that side carefully. The cube is tilting in that direction because there's no earth to support it, so at that point you can see near to the bottom. If it's stone, it's pretty damned smooth and would have to be man-made. I've never known stone that smooth before, so I can't work it out. Anyway, I examined it, hammered on it with a rock, tried to score it with a blade. I didn't make a dent or a scratch. That stone was solid, but the cube had a hollow ring. So it might be hollow. I wouldn't swear to it, but it might be. Then I ran my fingers around the surface area and thought I felt some fine cracks. Two vertical, one horizontal, the size and shape of a large door. The cracks were *extremely* fine, very easy to miss, so there's no way I could check how deep they were.'

'A *door*?' Shapiro queried.

'Maybe that,' the professor replied. 'Or a removable panel. No hinges, no locks, no sign of a way of moving it. And those cracks were too fine to allow that section to swing in or out at an angle. If those cracks go right through it, it would mean an incredibly precise fit and the panel would have to be pushed out or pulled in like a piece in a jigsaw. So, it might be hollow and it might have an entrance, but don't ask me how we're actually going to open it.'

'It's hollow,' Kate said, almost hissing like a cat. 'I know it! *Damn you, it's hollow*!'

Taken aback, they all stared at her, wondering why she was so convinced, were faintly embarrassed by the intensity of her outburst. She looked at them

and through them, as if not really seeing them, then shivered and turned away and once more stared intently across the road, her gaze fixed on the immense, rectangular blackness. Moshe watched her for a moment, wondering if she was cracking, then Professor Madsen's voice broke the silence, sounding hoarse, not too steady.

'There's no radioactivity, no form of radiation, so we won't have any problems when it comes to examining that thing properly. However, we're going to need a bulldozer to clear away the rubble around it - and the sooner we get those floodlights here the better, because that matte-black is completely disorientating and plays tricks with your vision.'

'What I can't understand,' Irwin Jordache said, 'is how that thing got there in the first place.'

'Don't ask me,' the professor said.

Moshe felt very strange, far removed from himself, some part of him floating away in the darkness and embracing the object. It was blacker than the night, too black to be real, a solid with the appearance of a void: neither shape nor dimension. He shook himself from his reverie, glanced around him, trying to focus, and saw the men in the moonlight, the soldiers beyond the jeeps, the Arabs massed under the stars, their eyes wide, disbelieving. Then he looked at Kate, the brown hair and brown eyes, one fist in her mouth, her body shivering, her gaze fixed on the middle distance. Moshe studied her at length, wondering why he was drawn to her, *knowing* why, remembering his wife's hair in the dust, refusing to accept the truth of this. Then he heard a rumbling sound, saw Kate turning rigid, and he looked across the dark, destroyed courtyard as the ground shook beneath him.

The rumbling came from the distant object, from the rectangular blackness, and was accompanied by the sliding of rubble as the ground heaved again. The men around Moshe looked startled, were gasping and shouting, and the Arabs beyond the soldiers moved back a little, their massed voices hysterical. The object remained invisible, but more stars disappeared as the dark line of its upper edge shifted slightly, moving up towards the sky. It had obviously tilted forward, its back edge lifting higher, the rubble along its front sliding away as it settled back down again. Then the rumbling stopped abruptly, the ground was still, silence reigned… Then a single, sharp explosion came from the far side of the object, and Kate, letting out a peculiar cry, ran across the dark road.

Moshe was frozen for just a second, his soldier's instincts betraying him, hearing a voice calling out Kate's name, his own voice, sounding stricken. Kate did not respond, but continued running across the road, her long hair flapping wildly about her shoulders as she reached the ruined courtyard. Moshe cursed and jumped forward, leaning into the jeep; he grabbed a torch, straightened up and spun around and then followed Kate. He saw her in the courtyard, wending her way through the rubble, a slim figure being swallowed by the darkness as she hurried towards the object. He called her name again, flicking his torch on, beaming it downward, but Kate didn't look back, refused to stop, so he had to keep chasing her.

He didn't know why he was doing it, but he felt a great fear, as if something in the object, or in the night's bizarre events, was a threat to the landmarks of his past and hopes for the future. His past was what sustained him, both in pleasure and in pain, but as the darkness devoured him, as that distant figure led him, he felt that his future was dependent upon what they would both find. His boots ground the broken stones and kicked up the fine dry soil while Kate, now at the start of the piled rubble of the chapel, stopped and glanced up, scanning the huge, black rectangle, then turned right and made her way around the high mound, trying to get to the back of it.

Moshe cursed softly when Kate vanished, swallowed up by the darkness, but he ran to the bottom of the high mound of rubble, his torchlight beaming ahead of him. Glancing up, he saw the object, a rectangular blackness directly above him, then he turned and followed the curved base of the rubble, his throat dry, his heart pounding. The rubble towered high above him, sloping down to his feet, but as he circled behind the ruins, as the darkness deepened, the top of the rubble dropped lower, came level with his shoulders, disappeared and left him staring at nothing: a complete, chilling blackness.

He stopped, disorientated, his senses streaming away from him, his eyes straining to adjust to a void defying shape and dimension. He felt disembodied, his mind adrift in the Nothing, black painted on black to infinity, all around him, above him. Then he clenched his left fist, raised the torch in his right hand, pointed it straight ahead and saw black stone at the end of the beam of light. He glanced up and saw more blackness, a dizzying Nothing high above him, its angled edge cutting through the stars, which filled the sky sweeping over it. Moshe gasped and held his breath, let it out, lowered his gaze, moved the beam of the torch to the right, watched it bend

and stretch farther. The beam now stretched out a long way, exposing black rock farther back, and Moshe sensed that he was seeing another wall set back deep in the base of the huge cube.

Kate was possibly inside.

Moshe put his left hand out, watched it disappearing into blackness, spread his fingers and felt a hard surface, very smooth, icy cold. He kept his hand on this surface, moved it right and then followed it, his torchlight travelling ahead of the moving hand to find the edge of the entrance. Then his foot kicked something. He glanced down and felt dizzy. He was standing on the edge of a rectangular black hole that made him lose all sense of direction. He raised his foot and dropped it gently, his heart pounding, still feeling dizzy. His boot stopped on the blackness, on something solid, and he let his breath out. It was part of the matte-black stone, a panel-shaped block of stone, and then he realised that the explosion, whatever its nature, had blown this section of stone off the object to expose its interior.

Moshe called out Kate's name, heard a cry from inside the blackness, kept his hand on the invisible surface and shone his torchlight to the right. The beam bent and travelled farther, moving deeper into the object's interior, and Moshe moved to where the beam of light was bending and found the edge of the opening. He moved on past the edge, put his hand out, felt nothing, then stepped forward into the cool, complete blackness and lost all sense of direction.

'Kate, where are you?'

'I'm here!'

There was no 'here' or 'there', no left or right, so their voices rang out and reverberated from no clear direction. Moshe was guided by his torchlight, a circle of light framing stone, then the light bent and travelled on farther and illuminated Kate's face. Large eyes, dark and deep, staring at him, wandering off; a choked sob as she moved away from him and her face disappeared. Moshe called her name again, heard his own voice reverberating, heard the echo of her footsteps, her choked sobbing as she stumbled through darkness. He walked into a wall, cursed aloud, found the edge, moved around it and shone his torchlight on the back of Kate's head, then advanced to grab her by the shoulder and pull her close to him.

'Hold my hand, Kate! *Hold it*!'

She broke free and ran forward, moving out of the beam of light, was

devoured instantly by the blackness and cried out in despair. Moshe walked into another wall, pulled his head back, looked up, saw a blackness so deep it made him dizzy, slipped sideways, moved forward. One wall, then another, slipping sideways, stepping forward, passing through invisible chambers filled with darkness and a stark, chilling silence. No ceiling, no floor, none to see, just to touch: the interior of the enormous, freezing cube was honeycombed with empty rooms. Then he suddenly heard Kate breathing, shone his torchlight on her brown hair, felt her warmth as he stepped up beside her and took hold of her arm. She was standing dead still, her eyes wide, looking ahead, and he followed her gaze and saw starlight pouring down through the blackness.

Moshe kept hold of Kate's wrist and stepped into the starlight, glanced up and saw the stars in a frame of black ceiling, then followed the starlight down, saw stone walls, a large chamber, a stone bed supporting the vision that would haunt him for the rest of his days:

A bearded man in a white shroud.

Kate returned to herself, tumbling back down through the dream, hardly knowing where she was nor how she had come here, only aware of falling light, swept by fear and exultation, hearing a sound, someone's voice, her own voice sobbing brokenly, seeing the man in the white shroud, his face pale and serene, ageless even beneath the beard, his hands folded on his chest, either unconscious or dead, not real, her only truth, as she looked and beheld him and turned away from his radiance, sobbing brokenly, triumphantly, her shaking hands clutching Moshe, her dishevelled hair trailing across her shivering lips as he rocked her from side to side.

'Oh, my God!' Kate cried. 'Help me!'

PART TWO:

NATIVITY

… And when she saw *him*, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be.
-*Luke*, 1:29

11

‘How long do you intend keeping me here?’ Kate said, swinging her legs off the bed, straightening out her white smock, and lighting a cigarette with sharp, nervous movements, the smoke making her squint. There was a bed and small cabinet, a writing desk and chair; the walls were white and bare; there were bars on the window, and the doors, also white, had a sliding grill that could only be opened from outside. ‘One of my own rooms, damn it. Locked up in my own ward! Your sense of occasion, if I may say so, is execrable - and I’ve now been here for two days. When, if ever, major-general, will I get out of here?’ She spoke with deliberate harshness, trying to get a response from Moshe, but sitting by the desk, his hands motionless, he remained impassive.

‘Just a few more days,’ he said. ‘It’s for your own good, Kate. You were in a state of shock, you slept for twenty-four hours, and like me, you had burn marks on your face and hands.’

‘I didn’t see any burn marks.’

‘They disappeared before you woke up. Nevertheless, although the inside of that object was extremely cold, we both had what appeared to be burn marks.’

‘They took skin scrapings?’

‘Yes - *and* blood samples. In the event, both were perfectly normal - a fact that merely deepens our confusion.’ He gazed steadily at her, his grey eyes unrevealing; but something about him, perhaps his lack of movement, convinced her that he was a man who felt most comfortable when not expressing too much emotion. He was leaning slightly towards her, his uniform badly pressed, his hair carelessly combed, his large body all muscle and bone, thick arms covered in dark hairs. Very physical, Kate thought. Not your Jewish intellectual. She studied him thoughtfully, noting the stone in his grey eyes, the small scar just below his left cheek, the broken nose and

webbed lines. A face carved from granite, like the body… perhaps even his soul.

'So they want to run more tests on me?'

'Yes, Kate, on both of us.'

'Radioactivity?'

'There was none.'

'Whether there was or wasn't, we were guinea pigs.'

'That's one way of putting it.'

Moshe offered a slight smile, but the humour didn't reach his eyes, which were, she noted, behind the coolness, perpetually weary. 'We couldn't take any chances, Kate. We had to try further tests. We didn't know what that object was, nor where it came from, so we had to cordon the whole area off and run instrument checks. The locals, mostly Arabs, were placed in quarantine, you and I were brought here, and then our scientists moved into the area to examine the object.'

'And?'

'I don't think you're going to believe this… The object disintegrated.'

Kate was shocked, her aggression swept aside, the hand holding the cigarette wavering as it went to her mouth. His face blurred and then changed, became another face, elsewhere, bearded and washed clean of experience, radiant with innocence. Not Moshe but the other, the face bathed in moonlight, the bearded man in the white shroud in that place which resembled the void. She closed her eyes and remembered, saw the dream within a dream, then shuddered and opened her eyes again and saw Moshe's face. The cigarette, which was wavering before her mouth, was now gratefully inhaled.

'Disintegrated?' she said, her exhalation like a sigh, the smoke drifting lazily before her. 'You mean, it just…?'

'Disappeared.' Moshe shrugged and lifted his left hand off the desk and then let it drop again, his fingers outspread. 'We still can't explain it. There's no rational explanation. The object seemed to be made of stone, some sort of perfect, matte-black stone, hard as a diamond and unquestionably solid… and yet it disintegrated. Apparently it happened quickly, about four hours from start to finish, and no one really knew it was happening until it was half gone. It was still dark at the time - a few hours before dawn - but because of the invisible effect of that matte-black surface, and because the floodlights were a

long time in coming, it must have been disintegrating for a couple of hours before someone noticed that the stars that had been blocked out by the object were gradually reappearing. Then the floodlights arrived, another half hour to set them up, and then, with the floodlights on, the scientists on the scene saw that the object was disintegrating, literally ageing before their eyes, cracking apart into pieces so fine they were like flakes, which, when they fell off, turned to dust. In short, the object simply disintegrated.'

'Nothing left?'

'Only dust.'

'And?'

'No one in the Weizmann Institute has managed to get to bed yet, but so far their analysis has only produced perfectly normal Judean dust. The problem, of course, is that no known dust can be transformed into a solid, perfect matte-black material. Nonetheless, that's all we're left with: a handful of dust. Up there, on the Mount of Olives, where the Chapel of the Ascension and mosque once stood, there's nothing but terrestrial rubble and dust - that, plus a great hole in the rubble - a hole filled with perfectly normal, commonplace soil.'

Kate shuddered, inhaled smoke and closed her eyes, saw darkness, the blackness, a black painted on black, an absolute Nothing defying shape and dimension, the interior of the object as a void that eluded the senses. Why had she gone in there? What had lured her on? Now, behind closed eyes, reliving the experience with frightening clarity, she saw the striations of moonlight pouring down from above and illuminating the white-shrouded, recumbent figure. That singular image: a bearded man in a white shroud, his face ageless and blank, as pure as the face of a newly born child, radiant with innocence. That vision had stunned her, laying waste to her senses, and even now, as she opened her eyes to stare at Moshe, she could hear her own voice, that cry of terror and exultation, and remembered how Moshe held her in his arms as she begged him to help her.

'The more you tell me, the less I understand,' she said.

'We all feel the same way,' Moshe responded.

'But it really happened.'

'Yes.'

'Like a dream…'

'That also.'

‘And that man… the man we found inside… Was he really…?’ The question hung on her lips, uncompleted, frightened of answers, retreating from the incomprehensible and what it might represent.

‘Human? Yes. Alive? More or less. He’s still being examined, so I can’t tell you too much, but I gather he’s flesh and blood, about thirty years of age, yet with a face that’s remarkably unlined. His heartbeat is too slow and sometimes erratic, his pulse is regular if practically undetectable, and his body temperature is quite a bit below normal. His EEG is recording a slight but definite electrical flickering, just above a flat tracing, so his brain is obviously registering *something*, though not very much.’

‘You’re describing a man on the verge of death.’

‘That’s right… except that his temperature, though low, isn’t dropping as it should; and the EEG reading, if almost flat, isn’t diminishing. In short, his condition, which by normal standards should be deteriorating, appears to be steady.’

‘That’s impossible.’

‘It *should* be,’ Moshe said, ‘but that’s what we’ve got here: that man, whoever he is, should be dying right this minute, but instead all his functions remain steady and he just goes on living.’

‘It sounds like a form of suspended animation.’

‘Something like that. We still can’t believe it ourselves, but the facts suggest a bit of a miracle.’

His grey gaze was level, revealing little, yet oddly comforting, as if veiling an emotion, a warmth, that he was wary of offering. Kate stared back, confused, thinking of Moshe and the other, that bearded man lying on a bed of stone, his pale face serene. The confusion was in her mind, in her recollection of what had happened; she possibly felt drawn to Moshe - a public figure, but a stranger to her - because he had shared that extraordinary experience with her and was therefore part of it. But a part of what? she wondered. How do we define the inexplicable? It’s still a dream, the impossible made manifest, defying credulity. This thought made her shudder again, glancing about her, hardly focusing; then she stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray and folded her hands on her lap.

‘I’m trying to grasp it,’ she said, struggling for words, ‘but it’s just too incredible to comprehend.’

‘You’re not alone,’ Moshe said. ‘We *all* feel that way.’

‘So what do you remember about it?’

‘You mean, when we entered it?’

‘Yes. I can’t remember much about it… just the darkness… that terrifying nothing…’

‘Unfortunately, I didn’t see much more than you did. I kept bumping into the walls, so I assumed there were lots of rooms, but apart from that, I only saw the man in the moonlight. That was the only window - the one letting the moonlight in to fall on that man’s face. The rest was absolutely solid. And it was really very cold - so cold it could have frozen us both - and so, as soon as we found that man lying there, I dragged you back out.’

‘But the burn marks…?’

‘We’re back with the impossible again. We were both covered in red patches and it should have been frostbite, but it wasn’t… Something definitely burned us.’

‘They faded too quickly to be burn marks.’

‘They were burn marks of *some* kind.’

Kate closed her eyes for a moment, opened them and stood up. She went to the window, took hold of the iron bars, started to pull and push herself to and fro, as if exercising. She felt confused and frustrated, nervous, yet strangely exultant, all her preconceptions of life, of reality and logic, swept aside by the knowledge that none of this made sense, that the laws of man and nature were being defied with each fresh revelation.

‘Go on,’ she said quietly, pulling and pushing against the bars, wanting to feel the reality of flesh and bone, the surge of her blood. ‘Keep talking. I’m listening.’

Moshe sighed, sounding weary. ‘The scientists and weapons experts went in after we left, wearing heavy protective clothing and carrying torchlights. This was just before the object started to visibly decompose, so they were able to have a pretty good look at it. It was like a mausoleum, pitch-black and soundproof, with seven square-shaped chambers of various sizes. Six of the chambers were empty and had remarkably smooth stone walls - but no decorations nor markings nor windows; no hint of who had made them, nor when. The seventh chamber - the one in which the bearded man was found - was similar to the others, but had a solid stone base upon which he was lying, and a single, square opening in the ceiling - which was, of course, the top of the object.’

‘An opening or a window?’

‘It appeared to be an opening. It was letting in fresh air. The object disintegrated before they managed to inspect the opening, but they suspected that it was the same as the entrance: a block of stone, fitted with remarkable precision, possibly blown off by the same explosion that blew off the main door when the object was finally exposed to the world.’

‘Which suggests that the object was man-made.’

‘Well, it was certainly made by *someone*.’

Kate stopped pulling and pushing against the iron bars, straightened up, shivered slightly, then ran her fingers through her dishevelled hair and turned back to Moshe.

‘What made that object finally surface?’

‘We think that the unidentified - as represented by that light in the storm - was some form of energy that created the storm, drew the object out of the earth, then somehow or other vaporised. There’s certainly no indication that the object *ascended* again.’

‘Some form of energy?’

‘Yes.’

‘Is that possible?’

‘Theoretically *none* of this is possible… Not even that man lying in the adjoining room.’

Kate sat on the edge of the bed, lit another cigarette, inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out, her face raised to the ceiling. Again, when she closed her eyes, she saw the man in the white shroud, his face pale and serene, unlined, inexpressibly beautiful. It was the beauty of innocence, of a soul untouched by life; the face of a man still a child, before the wounds of experience. A vision of the impossible, of the dream offered and withdrawn at birth, the flesh too pure and smooth to be human, absolutely unblemished. She thought of this with grief and wonder, shuddered visibly and opened her eyes, saw the ceiling, all white, painted by human hands, then lowered her gaze to stare at Moshe, feeling drawn to his silence. He was leaning forward in his chair, the shirt tight on his broad shoulders, his large hands folded together on the desk, his face webbed with the experience so lacking in the man in the white shroud.

‘How do you feel?’ he asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ Kate replied. ‘Frightened, dazed, disbelieving, overawed,

almost childish. I think of him all the time, day and night, in my dreams, as an image that can't be shaken off and is larger than life. Who is he? Where did he come from? How could he survive down there? The questions swim around my head like goldfish in a bowl, going round and round endlessly. I'm not used to this sort of thing. It affronts my sense of rationality. I feel that I'm dreaming, that I can't waken up, that if I don't waken up I'll go mad, trapped inside my own skull. Did it happen? Yes, it did. He's actually lying next door. I keep thinking of him lying next door and I want to go in there. I want to see him and touch him.'

'Your requests have been noted.'

'But consistently ignored. Why won't you let me go in there? Why are you keeping me here?'

'I told you: we want to run more tests.'

'That shouldn't prevent me from seeing him.'

'We are, as you must realise, running tests on him as well, but as soon as we're finished you can see him.'

Kate stretched her spine, exhaled a stream of smoke, and tried to glean some facts from the unrevealing eyes gazing at her. Moshe Eitan, she thought. This is the man who despises Leon. This is the famous major-general who has devoted his life to Israel and is reputed to be a man with few weaknesses. She put her cigarette to her lips and gazed at him through the smoke, both repelled by and drawn to his remoteness and air of quiet strength. He was a strong, physical presence, his face a parchment of harsh experience, but she imagined him changing and becoming the other: the man in the white shroud. The other, she thought. That's all I can think to call him. And why, when I look at Moshe Eitan, do I think of the other?

'You were with me,' she said.

'What does that mean?'

'You were with me when I found him. I keep thinking there was a reason for us being there - and that, also, is irrational.'

'Maybe,' Moshe said. 'Maybe not. Why did you go in there?'

'I can't remember. I just had to. I hardly knew I was doing it. I felt that I was dreaming - or that I was someone hypnotised - and something, some fierce conviction, just pushed me onward. Why do you ask?'

'Because that's what it seemed like at the time - as if you were hypnotised.'

‘It was the star,’ Kate said, staring at Moshe and seeing the other. ‘I saw the star the night before. Then, when the earthquake came, my room was filled with pulsating light and I didn’t know where that light was coming from. I connected the two together and couldn’t shake them from my thoughts. Then, the following evening, when I saw the star again, I was sure it wasn’t really a star and was fascinated by it. More than fascinated… I was almost hypnotised… and it led me to the chapel.’

‘It *led* you?’

‘Yes. That’s what it seemed like. And the light that came down through the storm was pulsating - just like the light that filled my bedroom.’

‘How do you feel about the man in the white shroud?’

‘I feel that he’s mine.’

She felt embarrassed the instant she uttered those words, her blushing cheeks confirming the fact, and she glanced at Moshe and then turned away, shrugging her shoulders forlornly. She inhaled on her cigarette, wondering how she could be so foolish, then exhaled the smoke and sighed at the same time, trying to focus her thoughts. It was no longer easy; her concentration was gone; when she tried to apply logic to what had happened, her thoughts spun and scattered. Why had she said that? What had she meant by it? Looking at Moshe, she thought of the man in the white shroud and felt enmeshed in them both.

‘Don’t ask me to explain that,’ she said, ‘but that’s what I feel.’

Moshe nodded and smiled, the merest hint of amused acceptance, then raised his hands in a rabbinical gesture and pushed his chair back. Standing upright, he was tall and very broad, all muscle and bone, and his face, lined and scarred, yet oddly handsome, was carefully composed.

‘Do you mind staying here?’ he asked.

‘Just a few more days,’ Kate said.

‘We’d like you to stay a bit longer - ’

‘I won’t.’

‘ - because we want you to look after that man next door.’

Kate jerked her head up in surprise, wondering if she had heard correctly; when she saw the serious expression on his face, she knew that she had.

‘You want *me* to look after him?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘Various reasons,’ Moshe said. ‘One: you’re a psychiatrist and that could be useful should that man actually return to his senses.’

‘And you think that’s possible?’

‘Yes, Kate, we do. On the one hand, we can’t explain that coma he appears to be in; on the other, we can’t find a thing physically wrong with him. By normal standards we would have to accept that he’s close to death, but remarkably he’s not degenerating: his condition is constant.’

‘That doesn’t mean it will improve.’

‘It has to go one way or the other: either he dies or he revives.’

The thought of either possibility was shocking to Kate, making her tremble and blush, her heart pounding, as she inhaled on her cigarette. Her feelings were mystifying, almost mystical in their intensity, yet she now had to accept that her whole being was inhabited by the presence of that man in the adjoining room. He’s mine, she thought. I know it. It’s ridiculous, but I can’t deny it. She tried to cast the vanity aside, to confess to its transparent duplicity, but the beating of her heart, her charged emotions, defeated her efforts. To never discover who he was or where he had come from would be a loss akin to the loss of an unborn child, the crushing of overwhelming expectation, the foetus torn from a bleeding womb. She knew the feeling well, was still scourged and haunted by it, and now, as she recollected that serene, ageless face, she knew that his loss would make her future a void of despair.

What, then, if he revived, if he opened his eyes and spoke, if he drew the veils away from the unknown and revealed his true nature? Kate shuddered at the very thought - the possibilities were too immense - and she stubbed her cigarette out, lay back on the bed, covered her eyes with the palms of her hands and saw his face in the darkness.

‘Well,’ Moshe said eventually, his voice muted and oddly tense, almost desirous as it floated somewhere above her in a fine web of fear, ‘will you stay a bit longer?’

‘Yes,’ Kate said. ‘He’s mine.’

12

Moshe left the room, trying to keep his face composed; closed the door quietly behind him and then took a deep breath. He stood there for a moment, pressing his back to the door, thinking of Kate lying inside and letting the thought cleanse his secret wounds. Here the light was bright and harsh, the corridor bland in its muted tones. Glancing distractedly about him, Moshe thought of Kate Hirschfield and smiled. The sinner, he thought. The woman I condemned. The American with the morals of a whore has the soul of the lost. He pursed his lips and shook his head, disbelieving his pain and joy, trying to separate what he felt for Kate from the events of the past few days. Unprecedented events, momentous and extraordinary, they should not, by the laws of common sense, have left him room for such sentiments. He shook his head again, his heart beating, his skin tingling, seeing her face in the darkness, illuminated by his torchlight, feeling the warmth of her body against his own, his ears filled with her haunted cry. The past and present merged. (*The dead eyes staring sunward*.) He felt fear, an onrushing love and grief, as he turned to the side.

Two army guards were standing outside the door of the adjoining room, their Uzi sub-machineguns slung across their shoulders, their sunburnt faces turned towards Moshe, at once respectful and casual. Moshe gave them a nod and they nodded in return. He glanced along the corridor, observed the nurses and medics, sighed, feeling almost adolescent, then approached the guards.

‘Anything happening in there?’

‘No, major-general. The doc’s who were examining him have left and they said he was sleeping.’

‘Sleeping?’

‘Unconscious. Out like a light. They told us to report any movement and the room’s wired for sound.’

‘They don’t want anyone to go in.’

‘But they want to hear him if he moves. The mike’s wired to a room in the doctors’ quarters. It’s our men in that room.’

‘Do you know who the patient is?’

‘No, sir. We weren’t told.’

‘But you were told how important this is?’

‘*Ken*. We were told.’

Moshe went to open the door and then stopped, undecided, remembering the black object, the total darkness inside, the image of a gateway that might have led to eternity, the illuminated face of a man who should not have existed. Moshe felt oddly haunted, not frightened but uneasy, cast adrift on the tide of disbelief that now constantly washed over him. So, he just stood there, unable to open the door, wanting to go inside, to avoid what was in there, thinking of the man in the white shroud, and of Kate, who had found him. He tried to reason and failed, not accepting his own deductions, remembering Kate on the dark road, her eyes fixed on the black object, her whole body straining towards it as if it possessed her. Yes, it had possessed her, and now she possessed him; and as he stood there and thought of the man in the white shroud, as his hand turned the door knob and let it go again, he realised that he had pursued Kate as if chasing his very future, and that now, as she lay there, as the man in the white shroud also lay there, his belief in his independence was crumbling and leaving him helpless.

‘You’re going in, major-general?’

‘No. I’ve changed my mind. Maybe later.’

He nodded and walked away, feeling guilty and disorientated, ashamed of what he felt was a weakness that had long been discarded. Turning left where the corridor ended, passing another two armed guards, he entered the hospital lobby, the reception area, and there, to his dismay, was confronted by a smiling Leon Halcomb. The journalist was wearing a grey suit, his shirt and tie immaculate, his black hair neatly combed, his face flushed, his eyes bloodshot but sharp. He grinned mockingly as he stepped in front of Moshe, one hand raised in the air.

‘*Shalom*, major-general!’ he said. ‘A few words for the hard-working press.’

Moshe stopped walking, feeling angry, not bothering to conceal his distaste. ‘How did you get in here?’ he asked.

‘I’m a *journalist*, major-general.’

‘You might describe yourself that way, Mr. Halcomb. I’d have other words for you.’

Leon shrugged and grinned. ‘Freedom of speech is all,’ he said. ‘However, not everyone shares your opinion - and I *do* have some friends left.’

‘One of whom let you in here.’

‘Correct.’

‘If I find out who he is, he’ll be in trouble.’

‘I must protect my sources.’

Moshe had never failed to be repelled by the mixture of extended youthfulness and dissipation in Leon Halcomb’s face; now he felt the urge to erase it with the back of his hand.

‘What do you want this time?’ he said.

‘I want to know what happened to Kate Hirschfield.’

‘You mean you want to see her.’

‘Correct.’

‘You can’t. She’s still in a state of shock. As I told you at the press conference, she was there when the chapel collapsed; she was in shock and now she’s under observation.’

‘You mean she’s unconscious?’

‘I didn’t say that.’

‘Then just let me talk to her for a minute.’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because she’s not in a fit condition to talk.’

‘I’m one of her most intimate friends, major-general.’

‘So I’ve heard.’

‘Do I sense disapproval in that remark?’

‘Kate Hirschfield’s private life is not my affair.’

‘Well, I’m glad to hear that. However, knowing Kate well, I can’t imagine her being that shocked by the collapse of an ancient Christian chapel.’

‘She was caught in the eye of the storm and thrown about quite a bit. She was knocked unconscious and is still badly bruised. Believe me, she’s in shock.’

‘No visitors at all?’

‘No visitors.’

‘I just want to look in her room and check that she’s really there.’

‘Are you calling me a liar, Mr. Halcomb?’

‘Alas, I lack such boldness. I merely suggest that you may have good reason for keeping her locked up.’

Leon made the last remark with his bloodshot eyes unblinking, his smile mischievous and mocking, advertising that he wasn’t impressed by rank or authority. Moshe required no such respect and was not perturbed by the lack of it; but Leon, with his neat clothes, arch mannerisms and cynicism, always outraged Moshe’s belief in the importance of moral conviction. Who was Leon to be so superior? He had little to win or lose. Like a parasite, he could live off the problems of Israel and then, if the situation became dangerous, fly back home to safety. Did the man believe in anything? Moshe seriously doubted it. Like too many from the West, Leon had led a cushioned life, had never known the constant threat of extinction, thought of life as a game. But life could never be a mere game to those who lived in Israel; and Moshe, who devoted his life to the preservation of the Jewish homeland, despised Leon for his cheap mockery of Israel’s predicament.

‘Good reasons?’ Moshe said, treading carefully. ‘Just what do you mean by that?’

Leon took a small cigar from his breast pocket and then, glancing around at the nurses and milling patients in the busy lobby, sighed forlornly and put it away again. ‘There’s a rumour circulating to the effect that the chapel and mosque weren’t destroyed by that earthquake, but by something that actually crashed on the Mount of Olives.’

‘Nonsense. The chapel and mosque weren’t the only buildings damaged by the earthquake - as a good look around Jerusalem will tell you. Most of the buildings on the Mount of Olives were severely damaged, and even parts of the Old City, including the Golden Gate.’

‘But the chapel and mosque were *completely* destroyed.’

‘The major turbulence happened to be in that area.’

‘Just the earthquake?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then why is that whole area cordoned off? And why, major-general, before you suggest the hazards of falling rubble, have all the people in that area been evacuated?’

‘The ground was badly cracked and the cracks remain; they’re deep and

dangerous.'

'Like the falling rubble, yes?'

'I'll answer your questions; I won't listen to your sarcasm.'

'Sorry. Where are the evacuees now?'

'I gave that information during the press conference: they have to be rehoused.'

'Admirable, certainly, but where are they at the moment?'

'You probably know that already.'

'Correct. They're being held here in the hospital. Why here, major-general?'

'Some are in shock and have to be treated, and we'd rather not separate the families. Also, we happen to have that new ward still available, so it was convenient to house them here until such times as alternative accommodation becomes available.'

'And where might that be?'

'We don't know yet.'

'A refugee camp?'

'Definitely not.'

Leon grinned. 'You *do* realise, major-general, that certain Arabs are already using this as yet another example of Israeli determination to remove all Arabs from this area? You are, after all, intending to rehouse Arabs whose homes weren't damaged by the earthquake.'

'Those houses are located directly opposite the chapel and were certainly damaged. I understand the Arab suspicions, but in this case they're wrong: those houses and the surrounding area are now dangerous.'

'Certain Arabs would say otherwise.'

'Which Arabs? All the Arabs from that area are in this building and have spoken to no one.'

Moshe realised that he had made a mistake when he saw Leon's tight smile, and he silently cursed himself for his stupidity in falling into the trap. He glanced briefly around the busy lobby, saw the diverse citizens of Israel - the Arabs in their flowing robes, pious Jews in black frockcoats, others, culled from the four corners of the Earth, wearing more casual clothing - and then thought of the man in the white shroud and what he might mean to them. The possibilities were frightening, so he forced the thought aside and concentrated once more on Leon Halcomb.

‘As you say,’ Leon said, ‘those Arabs have spoken to no one… A lot of journalists would like to know why.’

‘I’ve just told you - ’

‘Shock.’

‘Correct.’

Leon grinned at Moshe and shook his head from side to side, his disbelief clear in the gesture. ‘All right, major-general, we are at an *impasse*: I can’t talk to Kate, I can’t talk to the Arabs, and you insist that nothing crashed on the Mount of Olives. Would you therefore be willing to comment on the unidentified light that was observed by many people as it hovered inside the eye of the storm?’

‘We have no record of any unidentified.’

‘Why, then, were there numerous landing-and-take-off delays at Ben Gurion airport at approximately the same time as the storm commenced?’

‘As far as I can ascertain, the radar was temporarily malfunctioning due to electrical interference of the kind that often preludes a heavy storm.’

‘What kind of electrical interference?’

‘Ionisation of the atmosphere.’

‘A normal occurrence.’

‘Correct.’ Moshe had had enough and he glanced openly at his wristwatch, but Leon, who was familiar with such tactics, merely smiled in response. The smile angered Moshe again, but he held himself in check. Instead, he suddenly thought of Leon and Kate in bed together, and this image, which burned itself into his mind, both shamed and revolted him. He felt himself flushing, with embarrassment as much as anger, and he realised, with a shock, that his normal contempt for Leon was now coloured by unfamiliar jealousy. This realisation was humiliating, sweeping through him and rocking him, making him despise not only Leon, but his own lack of sense. He thought of the man in the white shroud, of Kate lost in the object’s darkness, and his world, which before had been orderly, threatened to plunge into chaos. Reeling inwardly, his emotions in collision, he tried to keep his voice steady.

‘Any more questions before you leave?’

‘I’m leaving?’

‘That’s right.’

Leon shrugged and scratched his nose with his index finger, grinning

slightly but more flushed than usual, as if concealing his anger. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘I’ll go. But let me put this on the record. I don’t believe that Kate’s in that ward because she’s still in a state of shock. Even if she *was* in such a state, that would hardly be reason for refusing to let her friends visit her. I have, furthermore, been informed that there are two armed guards on constant attendance at the room adjoining Kate’s, and that they’re there to guard someone else. I also have statements from a couple of witnesses who testify that they saw a light in the eye of the storm and that the light appeared to descend over the summit of the Mount of Olives. Finally, I have unofficial verification that the flight delays at Ben Gurion airport were caused by an unidentified blip on the radar screens just before the storm’s commencement, and that the blip, when it disappeared off the radar screens, was located over the vicinity of Jerusalem. I don’t believe you, major-general. You’re obviously covering up *something*. And believe me, I’m going to find out what it is. Put *that* down in your records!’

He stared directly at Moshe, no longer smiling, his anger apparent, then he turned and walked along the crowded lobby to leave by the front door. Moshe watched him go, expressionless, not moving, but inside he was boiling, his emotions in chaos, thinking of what Leon had said, of the man in the guarded room, of the terrifying possibilities in this unique situation - and then, helplessly, shamefully, his personal interests taking precedence, he thought of Kate and Leon in bed together, their limbs intertwined. This vision burned into his mind and remained there like a scar, making him realise that his logic, which he had always held so dear, was now contaminated with possessiveness and childish jealousy.

No, he thought, this can’t happen.

13

Leon drove down the Judean Hills towards the sun-baked Jordan Valley, his left hand on the steering wheel, a cigar in his right, the wind sweeping around the car and through the windows to whip his dark hair. He passed outcroppings of rock, isolated olive trees, stone villages unchanged since biblical times, children shouting, goats braying. Such scenes hardly touched him, were mere shadows in his mind, his thoughts focused on what had happened on the summit of the Mount of Olives and on why Kate was apparently involved with it.

Moshe Eitan was hiding something and that meant it was serious - more serious than the destruction of an unimportant Arab mosque and one of the sites most sacred to Christians. Also, Moshe was taking unusual chances. The loss of the chapel had appalled and shocked the whole Christian world, and already an international scandal was brewing because the Israeli government, offering vague generalities about danger, were refusing to let representatives of the Christian church inspect the ruins. Indeed, that very morning Msgr. Pio Lazzari, the Papal See's Apostolic Delegate in Jerusalem, had lodged a formal complaint with the acting Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of all Israel, Istvan Latinavots (Kate's good friend, Leon thought grimly, and disapproving of me) and, since no response had so far been forthcoming, Leon realised that something other than the destruction of the chapel, something truly extraordinary, was behind it.

Coming out of the hills and driving across the Jordan Valley, he surveyed the surrounding wilderness, its bizarre, barren beauty, then glanced up at the sky, his eyes protected by sunglasses, and saw the shimmering anvil of God, that merciless white void. That great emptiness offered nothing, no pity, no mercy, and Leon, in his secret, choked bitterness, thought it mirrored his life. He threw his cigar through the window, wiped the sweat from his brow, tried to work out what was happening to Kate and what Moshe was concealing.

First an unidentified flying object, then rumours of a crash, then someone other than Kate in a guarded room, surrounded by secrecy. An object, a crash, someone brought down from the Mount, someone rescued from the destruction that Kate had been witness to; and Kate, like that someone, also placed under guard because of what she had seen. A crashed aircraft? A satellite? No, the destruction would have been even greater. But only the chapel and the mosque had been destroyed, so the explosion must have been minor. What explosion? Any explosion would have been heard for miles around. So no explosion… Then… W*hat*?

Leon couldn't work it out. It just didn't make sense. What had Kate witnessed and whom were the soldiers guarding in the adjoining room? He glanced through the window, saw the huts of refugee camps, now derelict, the doors swinging in the wind, barren earth on all sides. The good old days, he thought. Rough justice and vengeance. The camps moved behind him and he looked straight ahead and saw the road cutting through the empty plain leading to Jericho. The town soon came into view, a lush oasis in the desert, first the excavated remains, then the small Arab settlement, open-front shops and stalls, fruit piled high in the streets, tourists mingling with the Arabs in flowing robes and *keffiyes*, children playing or begging. He drove past citrus groves, parked the car beneath some palm trees, climbed out and gratefully entered the shaded garden of the restaurant, smelling the orange blossom, seeing gardenias and bougainvillaea, then Lieutenant Paul Frankel sitting at a table, dressed in grey slacks and an open-necked white shirt. The lieutenant looked up when Leon approached the table, his dark eyes not surprised.

'Ah,' he said, 'you've arrived.'

'What does that mean? Am I late?'

'No. I wasn't sure of the time, so I thought to come early. You want something to eat?'

Leon sat down, lit a cigar, inhaled and then leaned back in the chair, glancing casually around him. The garden was cool and colourful, the Arab waiters in white robes, most of the tables crowded with tourists, all eating and drinking.

'I couldn't eat,' Leon said. 'It's too hot for food. I never eat lunch in this damned country. A chilled beer would be fine.'

Lieutenant Frankel raised his right hand and called the waiter over, gave the order in Arabic and watched the waiter departing, then smiled at Leon and

bit into his *felafel*. Some mashed chick peas fell out of the pita bread and littered his plate.

'That snack looks like a challenge.'

'It's very popular, Leon. Alas, as you say, it's a challenge and not good for the dignity.'

'I believe you had some problems with Kate Hirschfield - that she, also, wasn't good for the dignity.'

Paul removed the pita bread from his lips and looked up, his dark face flushed. 'She told you?'

'No. A friend in the hospital told me. This friend told me that you wanted some information and that Kate wasn't helpful.'

Paul put his bread down and sat back, dabbing at his lips with a napkin. His dark face, thin-moustached and too solemn, looked decidedly uncomfortable. 'That woman is more eager to bed anti-Semites than to help defend the country she lives in.'

'I'm not an anti-Semite; I'm anti-Zionist. And Kate, if not sharing your uncommon zeal, does valuable work for this country.'

Paul shrugged and spread his hands in the air. 'Forgive me,' he said with irony. 'I keep forgetting I'm a Jew. We Jews, as is well known, are all fanatical and offer mercy to no one.'

'I'll accept that jibe as straight comment. It describes, if not all Jews, at least your own good self.'

The Arab waiter returned, placed the glass of beer on the table, bowed slightly and returned to the bar. Leon picked the glass up, drank, then set the glass down again.

'So,' Paul said. 'What do you want this time?'

'You don't like dealing with me,' Leon said.

'Naturally, I don't.'

'Why? Because I'm anti-Zionist?'

'Yes, that's part of it. Unfortunately, in politics, we sometimes have to put our scruples aside.'

'And that, of course, is the other side of it.'

'Yes, you might say that.'

Staring down at his plate, Paul had the look of a sulky boy, his feelings hurt, his pride outraged. Studying him, Leon wondered just what it was that made him talk, that made him shift from one side to the other, trading out of

his left hand. Conviction, certainly; lack of faith in the old regime; the genuine belief that his elders had gone soft and would give up part of what they had earned to appease world opinion. Paul was an Orthodox Jew, a hard-line Zionist, a true believer; and his fear, patriotic in the extreme, was that his leaders, older men, men like Ben Eleizer and Moshe Eitan, would, in their acceptance of internationalism, betray the promise of Israel. So, there was that - he wanted to bring down the government - but behind that, in some dark part of his nature, there was something less noble. Now, looking at him, studying his handsome, humourless face, Leon was certain that Paul's weakness was vanity: the need to be recognised. Religious, dedicated, he was nonetheless all too human, and unable to admit that this was so, he had excused it with politics. Leon smiled, having seen it all before, knowing that nothing was sacred.

'Why did you want those tapes off Kate?' he asked.

'*I* didn't want the tapes; Shin Bet did.'

'They wanted to find out who planted the bomb in the Mae Shearim quarter?'

'Naturally.'

'And you already knew.'

'I didn't say that.'

'No, you didn't say that. But since what you say suggests that you weren't interested, why get angry with Kate?'

'Because the woman's contemptible – and please forgive me if she's your mistress. Also, because I was ordered to get the tapes and her refusal made me look like a fool.'

Leon chuckled and shook his head from side to side, not believing his ears. 'You're priceless,' he said. 'You're willing to have fellow Jews murdered for your beliefs, but can't stand the slightest blow to your pride. I should frame you and hang you on the Wailing Wall.'

Paul flushed with anger - or with the hatred of outraged pride - then he spread the fingers of both hands on the table, his thumbs curling under it. 'At least I believe,' he said. 'That makes me a human being. But you… What do you believe in, Leon? I think nothing. You have no reason to live.'

'What is there to believe in? Love, honour, patriotism, eternal life? I've seen all those beliefs on parade and they're no more than crutches.'

'And your nihilism has made you strong? No, Leon, it has not. You've

discarded your wife and children, you can call no place home, and you drink to deaden the pain of your loss, disguising your despair with cynicism. Show me it doesn't matter, Leon. Stop drinking. Face yourself without *that* crutch.'

Leon felt himself recoiling, deep inside, in his depths, and the shock of this retreat was unexpected, springing out of some buried faith. Certainly it was true: he had repudiated all belief; had discarded his wife and children, travelled the world as a voyeur, and gradually picked up a bad drinking habit that kept his tongue oiled. But had he ever believed in anything? Yes, long ago. And if now he truly believed in nothing, why the flurry of guilt? Pondering this, he thought of Kate in the hotel, before the storm; remembered that she had accused him of experiencing life from a distance, safe in his supposed objectivity, shielded by wit. He had wanted her desperately then, and had taken her with blind ferocity, not making love but exacting vengeance, perhaps pleading for clemency. Now, analysing it, recalling the intensity of his passion for her, he was struck by the nakedness of his need to make her accept him… *Accept* him? With what? With love instead of mere lust? If so, then her words, which had suggested a hollow man, had drawn from him some long buried need for simple human respect… Acceptance and love: both were based on belief. Was it possible that the hollow man had cried out for his barren soul to be filled? Leon wondered this and shivered, feeling a ghost pass over his shoulder; then he blinked and stared at Paul, at his handsome, humourless face, and grinned while picking up his glass of beer, avoiding the question.

'*Shalom*,' he said, sipping some of the beer and then setting his glass back on the table. 'By which I mean peace. Now tell me what's happening.'

Paul glanced down at the table and then looked up again, his brown gaze revealing embarrassment, his hands flat on the table. 'I take it you're talking about Kate Hirschfield?'

'Yes.'

'She's being held in the hospital.'

'I know that.'

'Then you also know that she's connected with what happened on the summit of the Mount of Olives.'

'I'd assumed that, naturally. What I can't figure out is why they're holding her in that hospital and why there are guards on the room next door.'

'I'm sorry,' Paul said, 'I can't help you there.'

‘You don’t know?’

‘I’m afraid not.’

Leon leaned forward to examine Paul more closely, noting his embarrassment, his shifting gaze, his fingers rising and falling. The Arab waiter came towards them, seeing Leon’s empty glass, but Leon shook his head, indicating, ‘No,’ and the waiter retreated.

‘They haven’t told you?’ Leon said.

‘No,’ Paul replied.

‘Why?’

‘I’m not sure. I think very few people, *very* few, know just what’s going on.’

‘If they didn’t tell you, it must be something very special, something unusually delicate… Or extremely dangerous.’

Paul shrugged his shoulders, then raised his hands and let them fall in a gesture of defeat. ‘There are rumours - I can’t call them more than that - but they come from strong sources.’

His hurt pride was obvious, brightening his eyes, pulling his lips down, and Leon, observing it, understood him more fully, realising just how dangerous he might be in the weakness of vanity. Resentment was in that face - perhaps the bitterness of rejection - and Leon, who knew ambition when he saw it, knew that it could not be thwarted. Moshe Eitan and Ben Eleizer had left Paul out in the cold, and that slight, combined with Paul’s lack of faith in their sense of purpose, could only intensify his need to bring them down. The irony was superb and filled Leon with grim humour: this dedicated Zionist would destroy his fellow Jews to prevent them from betraying their ideals… What he wanted was Judgement Day.

‘Okay,’ Leon said, ‘I’ll settle for rumours.’

Paul picked up his glass of *Arak*, had a sip and set the glass down, dabbed at his lips with his napkin, then spread his hands on the table. ‘The following facts are known,’ he said quietly, his eyes flitting from left to right. ‘In the early hours of the morning of September 14, just before the commencement of the first mild earth tremor, an unidentified blip was recorded on the radar screens and located high in the atmosphere above Jerusalem. That blip disappeared before our aircraft could get off the ground - and almost immediately after the earth tremor had subsided. The following evening, September 15, the blip reappeared, this time just prior to the commencement

of the major earthquake and the storm that caused havoc on the Mount of Olives. In this instance, the blip was tracked as it descended over Jerusalem, until it disappeared below the radar's ground clutter in the general vicinity of the summit of the Mount. That blip was not recorded again, which means it never ascended.'

Paul finished off his *Arak*, put the glass back on the table, licked his lips and glanced left and right, then looked straight at Leon.

'There the facts end,' he said. 'Here the rumours start… According to certain sources, various inhabitants of Jerusalem phoned in, shortly after the first mild earth tremor had ended, to report that their homes had been bathed in a brief, brilliant light whose source was not known. According to the same informants, various people, including Moshe Eitan and his men, had observed, during the second earthquake, a brilliant light that was located in the eye of the storm, advanced with the storm, then exploded over the summit of the Mount of Olives, before disappearing. Reportedly, that explosion of light - which occurred at the peak of the storm - also occurred just as the Chapel of the Ascension either collapsed or exploded. However, since the resultant devastation apparently stretches no farther than the chapel grounds, it is believed that nothing crashed on the Mount and that the chapel either collapsed or was somehow crushed.'

'Nothing crashed?'

'It doesn't seem possible.'

'So it wasn't any kind of aircraft or weapon?'

'No.'

'The earthquake could explain the collapse of the chapel. Why do they think it might have been crushed? That word suggests that something *crashed down* on it.'

Paul shook his head from side to side, obviously confused. 'The stories get mixed up,' he said. 'They conflict and confuse… No, nothing crashed: there was only an explosion of brilliant light. A crash, *any* crash, would have caused wider devastation, and reportedly that isn't the case. But the conflicting stories at least agree on one point - that brilliant light was the unidentified - and assuming that this was so, and that it was picked up by the radar, we can surmise that it was some kind of unknown force - a force that could have either crushed the chapel or pulled it apart. One suggestion is that the light, by somehow burning up the atmosphere, created a brief but

powerful vacuum which, to put it crudely, *sucked* the chapel out of the earth and then spat it back down again.'

Leon slumped back in his chair, feeling a trickle of fear course through him, his mind swirling with infinite possibilities beyond the believable.

'So,' he said, 'Kate was there when it happened.'

'Correct.'

'And where *was* she when it happened? I mean, precisely.'

'She told Moshe Eitan - this conversation was overheard - that she was standing inside the circular courtyard, close to the door by the tower of the mosque.'

'That's not very far from the chapel.'

'No.'

'Accepting your hypothesis of a brief but powerful vacuum, could Kate have survived such an experience?'

'Yes. It would depend on where the vacuum was localised and how widespread it was. Try to imagine the vacuum as the beam of a torch, emanating from the broader light that covered the whole area and only focusing on the chapel itself. If such were the case - if the vacuum was like a funnel which fitted only over the chapel - then Kate, outside that area, well away from the edge of the vacuum, would have been badly hammered by the air swirling around it, but otherwise, theoretically speaking, could have survived.'

'Which, of course, she did.' Leon looked at his cigar, which had been resting, unsmoked, in the ashtray. He stubbed out the charred butt and then leaned forward, resting his chin in his cupped hands. 'What about the hospital? Why are Kate and the local residents locked up there? And who's in that guarded room?'

Paul shrugged, letting his hands rise and fall, his brown eyes soft and wounded. 'When Moshe Eitan and his men arrived at the Chapel of the Ascension - hoping to locate what they then thought was an object that had crashed - they found Kate lying in the rubble and brought her back down. However, an unusually long period of time elapsed between when Kate was found and when she was actually brought into the hospital. While I don't know exactly what caused the delay, I *do* know that Moshe Eitan was also brought back with Kate and that both of them, for at least the next two days, were placed under intense observation. More interestingly, a source at the

hospital claims that an hour or so after Kate and Moshe arrived at the hospital, *a second* ambulance, surrounded by an unusually heavy guard detail, also came down from the Mount of Olives and went around to the back entrance. Whoever, or whatever, was inside that ambulance was taken to the room beside Kate's room. Now that room is under guard night and day; it's wired for sound and under surveillance, with no less than Moshe Eitan personally responsible for it. As for Kate, I can only assume that she saw something, but what she saw, I don't know.'

'Do you know why they're still guarding that whole area on the summit of the Mount of Olives?'

Paul shrugged again, lowering his gaze, glancing sideways, his hands rising and falling in a gesture that signified his bewilderment. 'All the soldiers on that detail are sworn to secrecy, so we're talking in whispers now. Whispers are confusing, more so when they're passed on, so I'm not sure about this; it could just be some nonsense.'

'Tell me.'

'There's nothing up there now. The bulldozers are shifting the rubble. But when I say they're shifting the rubble, I mean something more than that… Apparently they're filling in a very large hole where the Chapel of the Ascension originally stood. Not a crack in the earth: a very large, square-shaped hole. And according to the whispers, that hole contained something… something that was buried in the earth and finally exposed during the storm.'

'Anything else?'

'No, nothing else. That's all I could get.'

Leon leaned back in his chair, feeling dazed and confused, hardly able to comprehend what he had heard, let alone piece it together. He shook his head from side to side, puffed his cheeks, emptied his lungs, then took a deep breath and leaned forward, preparing to stand up.

'Why are you telling me all this?' he asked.

'Because I want to know what happened. Since I've obviously been excluded, they won't let me learn much; but you, with your contacts of a less restricted kind, might be able to find out more than me. I have to know what they're hiding.'

'Why?'

'You know why, Leon. You know my position. This government is weak and frightened of internal conflict, so sooner or later it will weaken further

and try to surrender the West Bank. We, my own kind, those who cling to the dream of Zion, simply can't sit back and let that happen.'

'And you think that what occurred on the Mount of Olives could help to prevent that?'

'I can't answer that yet. I have to know what happened first. At the moment I only know that what they found on the Mount of Olives was obviously of considerable importance. They're trying to hide it completely - from Jew, Muslim and Christian - and that means it's very big, very sensitive, almost certainly threatening.'

'So if it's threatening, you can use it.'

'Yes, I can use it.'

Leon pushed his chair back and stood up, still feeling dazed and a little fearful, unable to shake off the feeling that this might be a dream. Yet it wasn't a dream: Paul's intense gaze told him that. Remaining in his seat, having to stare up at Leon, Paul looked younger than his age, innocent, incorruptible, not as dangerous as Leon knew him to be.

'Tell me,' Leon said, 'I have to know… How does a pious Jew with such ambitions manage to sleep at nights?'

'By praising our Lord the One,' Paul replied.

Leon nodded and then left the restaurant, breathing gratefully of the orange blossom, brushing the purple bougainvillaea aside and walking under the palm trees. There were children near his car, Arab children, dark and beautiful, and he gave them some coins, watched them rushing away excitedly, then slipped into the car and drove off down the street. It was a long street, busy, filled with restaurants and gardens, and he passed the tourist buses, a profusion of date palms and citrus groves, and then put his foot down and accelerated almost viciously, letting the air whip his face as the town of Jericho disappeared and the Jordan Valley, with its magnificent, desolate grandeur, spread out all around him.

The sky was a white haze, casting down its fierce heat, burnishing the hills and plains in golden light, enclosing the silence. Leon wanted that silence, wanted time to speculate, content to be a prisoner in his car while the earth slid past eerily. To here Moses had led his people; here Joshua had fought his battles; here, also, John and Jesus had wandered, sanctifying the Promised Land. But Leon felt removed from this - like his belief, it was mere history - and as the land moved around him, as the wind whipped his face, he

thought only of what Paul had said, of what Kate might have witnessed, and tried to fit the pieces together in his head and view the parts as a whole. What had happened on the Mount of Olives? Who had been brought down with Kate? Why were Kate and the others in the hospital locked up like prisoners? He tried to work it out, to be objective, mathematical, but suddenly, with the fierceness of the sun's relentless splendour, he was gripped by a passion that overrode mere curiosity and made of the mystery a magnet drawing him closer to Kate.

The recent events were a mystery, unexplained, the lock unbroken, yet to Leon they now seemed like a curtain rising up on his buried past. Kate had spoken that same night - before the storm defied nature - had exposed him as a man in retreat from his own frailty, afraid to reveal his fear of life and its brutal reprisals. Paul had merely echoed her words, perhaps unwittingly, striking back; but now, as he pressed his foot down, as the car raced on, as the parched plains rushed past and the Judean Hills loomed before him, Leon remembered the ghost that had passed over his shoulder when, facing Paul, he had thought of Kate's words and realised that his denial of the need for love was really fear of accepting it.

The ghost had told him that, but what ghost had it been? Not one ghost, but all the ghosts, that parade of the damned, the faces that had floated past him in Londonderry and Con Thien, in other nameless villages lost in flames in forgotten countries, the dark, stricken faces of the women and children, the faces of all the boys who had grown old and died on their feet. He had retreated from that dying, embracing the horror as solace, casting off the pain of emotional commitment and instead taking comfort in nihilism. Yet nihilism is a commitment - a willed belief in the negative - and Kate, understanding this, recognising the duplicity of it, had consciously or subconsciously forced him to accept that his nihilism was a contradiction in terms. Now he saw it and was lost, wanting something new to cling to… Not something: someone… Wanting Kate, who alone had recognised him, to give shape to his life.

14

‘Come in,’ Kate said, and the rabbi opened the room door, breathing heavily, feeling the weight of his abundant flesh, silently suffering his old age. He saw Kate on the bed, lying flat on her back, her hands on her forehead, her long dark hair falling over her brown arms. She opened her eyes when he entered, the closing door drawing her attention, and he noticed that she looked ill and sleepless, smiling wearily, without humour.

‘Jozsef Latinavots,’ she said. ‘My good friend, the acting Chief Rabbi, come to offer me solace.’

‘Do you need it?’

‘Not religion,’ she replied. ‘I could do with a stiff drink.’

Jozsef sighed in despair, long familiar with Kate’s intransigence, but wondering, as usual, why this strong and wilful woman refused to embrace the peace of belief. He glanced at the chair beside her and she nodded and he sat down, automatically touching the skullcap on his head and rubbing his beard with the rough fingers of a former kibbutz labourer. Kate was still lying down, obviously too weary to move, wearing only a white hospital smock, her legs crossed, her feet bare, no longer young but still exceptionally attractive, staring at him with her dark eyes strangely haunted.

‘Who sent you?’ she asked.

‘Major-General Eitan.’

‘Why?’

‘He seemed to know we’re old friends - he’d met your father once or twice - and I assume he thought I might be able to comfort you.’

Kate smiled and closed her eyes, her hands still on her forehead. ‘Major-General Eitan is a considerate man,’ she said. ‘Particularly when he’s keeping me a prisoner.’

‘Hardly that, Kate.’

‘No, perhaps not.’ She opened her eyes and turned her head on the

pillow, no longer smiling. ‘Did he say I was disturbed?’

‘No. He merely said that you were under observation and might like to see someone. He felt that I, being a rabbi and a friend of the family, should be that person.’

‘Obviously he doesn’t know me all that well.’

‘No, obviously not. On the other hand, regardless of our differences of opinion, I still have great regard for you, Kate.’

‘Admit it, you love me.’

‘That, also, I agree. Perhaps I think of you as my daughter. I’ve known you, after all, since you first came to Israel, a young woman, but resentful; and watched you mature and draw away from your father, embittered and mocking his faith, cheapening yourself to outrage him. Yes, I love you, Kate - I loved you then and I love you now - but my love springs from sadness and despair that you should so waste your life.’

‘I don’t cheapen myself, Jozsef.’

‘You are blasphemous and promiscuous. You flaunt your reputation as a woman of easy virtue, advertising your contempt for the Torah and those who obey it.’

‘I didn’t believe, Jozsef, and wasn’t capable of hypocrisy. As for my virtue, each culture has its own, and I come from America. I’m a mature woman with physical needs - and I won’t repress them.’

Jozsef felt himself blushing, embarrassed by her bluntness, and he turned his head aside to fix his gaze on the white-painted wall. ‘Your lack of faith has always disturbed me, Kate, particularly in view of your parents. When I think of them - their belief, their contributions - I must confess, it bewilders me… I blame it on your profession. You treat psychiatry too literally. You’ve made a deity out of your logic and denied your true nature, burying yourself in your work, not out of devotion but desperation, and behaving promiscuously as if to prove that your mortal body has no spiritual centre. You are lost, Kate - and suffering.’

Now Kate turned away, rolling herself towards the wall, her hands spreading out to cover her whole face, like a child with a bad dream. Jozsef watched her, disturbed, sensing some change in her, and reminding himself of the recent, extraordinary event and how it might have affected her.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘it’s my profession. My life was shaped by definitions. If emotions surfaced, I felt compelled to analyse them, and in doing that I

stripped them of their mystery and reduced them to the commonplace. The spirit *couldn't* move me, Jozsef: I refused to recognise it. Spiritual emotions, logically speaking, were reactions to various stimuli, explainable in physiological or psychological terms. These were concretes, Jozsef. I could not deal with abstractions. Thus, by my logic, I was mortal - and the soul had no credence.'

She was still turned to the wall, her face covered with her hands, but her voice, though muffled and difficult to hear, sounded unusually tense. Jozsef felt inexplicably moved, waiting for something, not knowing what it was, but sensing that Kate was in turmoil, thrashing about in the dark.

'Is that why you deny your faith?'

'No, Jozsef, it's not. I didn't just deny my faith - I despised it - and all other faiths with it.' Her voice was now shakier, filled with bitterness and resentment, and Jozsef leaned forward in his chair, wanting to reach down and touch her. 'Religion!' she continued. 'The great opium for the masses! With religious faith men can be united against the free choice of others. I saw religious faith as selfishness, as a separating wall, as something dividing men against men and closing their minds to the faithless. My father was such a man - the worst kind: a convert. He spent his life amassing wealth, legally taking from the poor, making very mortal deals and breaking very mortal people, and living, as those in banking do, for material success. And yet, he was still a Jew - a closet Jew, growing older - and so, when he was wealthy, when the boredom set in, he looked for something to revive him, didn't find it in his family, and then turned to the religion he'd ignored, drowning his conscience in piety.'

She stopped talking and shivered, shaking her head from side to side, still covering her face with her hands as if to blot out the past. Jozsef watched her, feeling stricken, definitely shocked and a little wounded, remembering that her father was the friend he had greatly respected.

'You poor child,' he said. 'I never realised you felt so strongly… But surely you can see that your father's past way of life had no bearing on what he later contributed to Israel… All the charities… all that work… that selfless devotion to Zionism… Surely, Kate, he was a better man for it, giving all he had earned.'

'His gave *part* of what he earned. He used the rest for further investments. Money makes money - and what his money made in interest was

considerably more than he so ostentatiously donated to Israel. He *bought* respectability, Jozsef. He salved his conscience without sacrifice. Oh, yes, he had his virtue - he religion absolved him from all sin - but his contribution to Israel, that great abstraction you all worship, was paid for by his indifference to his wife and daughter, those less worthy beings.'

Jozsef sat up straight again, instinctively drawing away from her, startled by her venom, deeply wounded by her words, ashamed because he wanted to close his ears and retain his former respect for his old friend. 'I do realise,' he said, 'that you didn't want to come to Israel, but surely…'

Kate rolled onto her back, pulling her hands from her face, and lay there, breathing harshly, staring up at the ceiling.

'No, I didn't want to come. Nor did my mother. We may have been Jews, but we weren't Israelis. We were *American* Jews, Jozsef, and typical of that breed: hardly aware of what we were, rarely thinking about it, only reminded of it at weddings or the Bar Mitzvahs of friends' children, perfectly happy with our simple *goyish* pleasures and American freedoms. No, my mother didn't want it, Jozsef - and, God knows, neither did I - but my father, in the selfishness of his new religion, never asked our opinions. What age was I then? Twenty-two or twenty-three? Certainly too old to turn my back on my previous upbringing and change myself, virtually overnight, into a Marjorie Morningstar.'

She stared angrily at him, then looked away, raising her eyes once more to the ceiling, the dark depths out of focus. Jozsef, feeling the need to defend his old friend, leaned forward again.

'I understand your resentment, Kate, but let me just say this: your father, if not a perfect man, since few of us are, was always very concerned for your welfare.'

'You really think he cared, Jozsef?'

'Yes, Kate, I do.'

'He didn't give a damn, Jozsef. He hacked our roots out with an axe, determined to cut us off from our past and make us walk in his shadow. First the holidays in the Catskill Mountains, that revered centre of Jewish resorts; then active involvement with the United Israel Appeal; then our *goyish* pleasures were curtailed, our gentile friends were pushed out, and then my mother and I had to keep our mouths shut and listen as he unveiled his plans for our future. You understand, Jozsef? His religion had made him whole.

And so no longer happy to give mere financial support, he suddenly wanted to become the real thing: an important Zionist in Israel. Well, he got what he wanted - with no arguments accepted: he ended up in King George Boulevard, raising funds for the WZO, right here in the heart of *Yerushalayim*, next door to your Rabbinate. As for myself and my mother, we came with him - but he gave us no choice. Then my mother died - and believe me, she died of loneliness - and after that, I despised my father, and despised his damned religion, and finally despised *all* religions and their insular ethics.'

'Enough, Kate!' Jozsef snapped. 'That's blasphemy! You will not use such words in my presence!'

'Blasphemy?' Kate replied, finally turning towards him, propping herself up on one elbow and looking straight at him. 'Blasphemy against God or my father? And which is worse, Jozsef?'

'Stop it, Kate! I understand your rage, but I won't take much more of this!' He own rage pulled him upright, pushing his chair back, turning away from her, then he walked to the door and just stood there, his whole body trembling. 'I can't stay if you talk like that. You *know* I can't listen. I came here to help you, to listen, but I won't take your blasphemy. I fear for your health. This strange event has sickened your mind. Moshe Eitan asked me to come because he thought I might comfort you; he explained that you were obsessed with that man in the next room - just lying here, restless, wanting to see him - and he thought I could help you. That's what I'm here for. I would ask you to be calm. I would like to know why you're waiting for that man to miraculously open his eyes.'

There was no immediate reply, so he turned back to face her and saw her sitting upright on the bed, eyes wide, lips parted.

'So,' she said, 'you know.'

'Of course,' he replied. 'I was informed. I am still the Chief Rabbi. When a sacred site - any site of such importance - is destroyed, I am personally responsible for communicating the proper facts to the relevant authorities.'

'And you were told how we found that man next door?'

'Yes, Kate, I was told.'

'And?'

'And *what*?' Jozsef looked at her dark eyes, very large, now too intense, then turned his gaze away, feeling oddly confused, his soul filled with

intimations of chaos and inchoate, nameless fears. ‘If you mean, what do I think about that man, I can’t answer that yet. A mystery, certainly. Perhaps even miraculous. I prefer to think of rational explanations, but the mystery remains.’

‘Who *is* he, Jozsef?’

‘You know I can’t answer that.’

‘What about the building, the *object*, that came out of the ground?’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps a tomb. Who knows what it might have been? It disintegrated too quickly to be properly examined; there’s nothing left to be scientifically analysed.’

‘A tomb? Is that your answer? But what kind of a tomb? What kind of tomb disintegrates so quickly? And how long was it buried there?’

‘These questions are ridiculous. I can’t possibly give you the answers. Only science can do that.’

‘Science has failed in this instance - and that man is beyond it.’

Jozsef turned away again, seeing the door, his only hope, wanting to make his escape, both from Kate and from his own troubled conjectures, ashamed even as he thought this, understanding his mortal weakness, clenching his fists to feel the comfort of flesh, mutely begging for clemency.

‘He’s a human being, Kate. A mortal man, flesh and blood. The examinations, every analysis, confirm this: he is perfectly normal.’

‘Then how did he get there? What made that tomb materialise? Did something come out of the storm and deposit it there? And if so, what was it?’

‘I don’t know, Kate. *They* don’t know.’

‘No, damn it, they don’t know. They only know that something descended from the heavens - a light, an unknown force - and that whatever it was, it destroyed the Chapel of the Ascension and either deposited that object or pulled it right out of the ground.’

‘It was nothing physical, Kate. That light was obviously some form of energy. It might have destroyed the chapel, but it couldn’t have left anything behind it. The earth showed all the signs of an upheaval. It’s been examined. We *know* that.’

‘An upheaval,’ Kate replied, her eyes unnaturally bright. ‘Then the ground was either forced up or sucked up - and either way that means the object was buried there.’

‘Yes, Kate, I agree: it was buried there. But what does that mean? We don’t know. We can only conjecture.’

‘How *long* was it buried there?’

Jozsef turned back to face her, suddenly feeling his age, some part of him dissolving and pouring back down through his past: his childhood in Poland, the years of study in various *Yeshivot*, then arrival in *Eretz Ysroel*, burying the dead of the IDF, then the National Religious Party, studying the Talmud, learning diplomacy, pushed forward as Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv, righting wrongs, making mistakes, learning humility with the Batei Din; until now, an old man, shaped by sixty years of theology, he stood, the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi of all Israel, like a child in an orphanage. His past flew by in a second, without warning, almost mocking, vaporising as if to confirm that all his learning was useless. He was naked, defenceless, unprepared for Kate’s questions, finding nothing in the well of his experience with which to answer them properly.

‘I don’t know,’ he said.

‘No,’ Kate said, ‘you don’t know. He came out of that ground and he’s alive. And your religion, Jozsef, can’t explain that.’

‘Nor can science,’ Jozsef said.

‘I agree,’ Kate replied. ‘Neither science nor religion can explain how that man can exist.’

Jozsef truly felt his age, more than ever at that moment, thinking of Israel, of his years spent in studying it, of how it was divided now as it had been at its beginning, as divided as it was when Joshua brought down the walls of Jericho, when the Philistines slew King Saul, when King David conquered Jerusalem, when Jeroboam and Rehoboam split the kingdom in two and the ten lost tribes of Israel were scattered to the four corners of the Earth. The land’s history was its curse - it was the focus of disparate yearnings - and now Jozsef, in his age and sorry wisdom, saw it threatened once more.

He looked at Kate and felt the pain, the gentle torment of irony, realising that she believed in logic and was seeing that logic shattered while he, accepting the Torah and thus believing in miracles, was now faced with the possibility of a miracle that could well destroy Israel. This thought also came and departed, vaporising like his past; or, perhaps, rather than vaporising, being crushed by his fear of accepting it. So, feeling weak, deeply sickened by his mortal doubts, he stumbled to find a very mortal path upon which he

might tread with care and safety.

'We know nothing about him,' he said. 'There have to be rational explanations. It's pointless to speculate at this moment; much worse to imagine things.'

'Not imagine… *believe*!'

Jozsef glanced up, startled, wondering if he had heard correctly, his heart beating to the rhythm of inchoate panic, making his skin burn. Then he saw her big brown eyes, somehow changed, illuminated from within, her lips trembling like those of a mute attempting to talk, vainly fighting to express all the words that had never been uttered. His burning skin turned to ice, numbed by waves of chilling shock, as he recalled what Kate had said about her lack of religious faith and realised that she had used the past tense… *I didn't believe… The spirit couldn't move me*… She had spoken as if it was behind her and no longer of consequence. Jozsef suddenly understood, the truth hammering home brutally, and he felt his senses sliding away as he walked to the bed. He grabbed Kate by the shoulders, felt the bone beneath her skin, started shaking her violently from side to side as if exorcising her.

'Is *that* what you think?' he said, his voice harsh and filled with rage. 'Is *that* your form of conversion? Do you think to find atonement in this madness conceived by the devil? No, child, I won't let you! I won't turn my back on this! This blasphemy will die on your lips and be purged from your mind. Is it wings you're after? Is your vanity so outrageous? How dare you even let the thought live while your body still breathes! Do you hear me, my child? I will break your very bones! You are sick and the sickness is your guilt, but this isn't the answer. Do you hear me, my child? Are you listening? *Don't blaspheme in this manner*!'

He threw her against the wall and she tumbled to the bed, rolling over until she lay on her back, breathing harshly, dishevelled. She lay thus for a long time, staring up at the ceiling, then eventually turned her head to look straight at him, her eyes cold and defiant.

'He's mine,' she said. 'I don't know what that means… But I know that he's mine.'

Jozsef shuddered and turned away, drained by fear and despair, all his learning dissolving to dust and leaving him helpless. He reached out for the door handle, then stopped, flushed with shame, remembering who he was, what he was, and taking faith from this knowledge. He glanced back at Kate,

saw the drawn face, the white smock, then bowed his head and moved his parched lips, murmuring words that were part of him. He prayed for understanding, for the revelation of truth, for the forgiveness of his own mortal weakness and doubt; and, most of all, in the sorrow of his love, he prayed for the salvation of Kate's lost soul.

15

Kate lay on the bed, hardly aware of Jozsef's departure, studying the white sheen of the ceiling, drawn into it, drifting through to the white sky. She closed her eyes and searched for peace, swam in darkness and streaming light, her heart beating in rapture and fear, one reflecting the other. Her exhaustion was absolute, a draining of mind and spirit, yet sleep, in which peace might be found, ever more frequently eluded her. She was losing herself, slowly, the life dripping from her body, and yet, beyond reason or logic, she felt the beating of fresh life.

She opened her eyes again, looked around her, saw the window, the golden light of late afternoon, a streak of blue sky. Not white: blue; a few thin, drifting clouds; the beating black wings of a lone bird, drifting on high. It disappeared almost instantly, knowing the freedom denied to her, and she smiled, feeling the dryness of her lips, before closing her eyes again.

Her body was hollow, drained of life yet strangely radiant, charged with something other than her blood, the radiance spreading out languidly. She tried to think of what she had been, to apply logic to the past few days, but her thoughts, slipping in and out of shadows, merely teased and confused her… Leon, so intense, his pale body above her, making love with a violent desperation that mere words could not ease… Then the eye of the storm, a large star, a brilliant light, something drawing her forward against her will, filling her up with its presence… No rational explanations; just the urge for revelation… In Leon's confession, unspoken yet displayed, was the love she could not feel for him in return, the reflection of her fear of commitment because of what she had lost… The dream, that first evening, the bloody foetus in the Pool of Siloam: someone's child - her child - the life that was aborted so brutally before it saw light… And then that alien star, that great eye shining down upon her; her conviction that her past was being measured and held to account.

She kept her eyes closed, searching for logic, failing to find it, having to accept that what had happened on the Mount of Olives had changed her completely. She bled for the rabbi, that loving man, her caring friend; but his words, now that faith had enslaved her, could have no effect upon her. No logic could restrain it, no stern advice deflect it; her faith was in the awakening of her flesh and its response to the other. He lay parallel to her, the wall between them soon to fall, and as she weakened, so she felt Him stirring and returning to life…

It was darkness beyond measure, black painted on black, above and below and all around, without end, filled with silence. It was nothing, a void, but He was it, and it was Him: an impulse, a pulsation that existed where nothing could be. He was forming out of time, out of the infinite frozen moment, a consciousness flickering on and off and then dividing the darkness. He saw light and *was* the light, illuminating His own birth, Himself originating existence and then, being it, swelling out to give form to His own coming.

Existing, He was the light, illuminating Himself, expanding and pushing back the darkness and arousing its forces. He reached out and touched, and withdrew and considered; then sensed the manifestation of thought, which evolved from His being. In thought was dimension: time and space: the conceivable. He conceived and saw the web of time and space around which was the darkness. Beyond the darkness could be nothing: all that would be, must be within it. He therefore stretched Himself forth, expanding time and space, pushing the darkness back and thus creating from Himself all that had been or ever would be.

He existed and was All, blossoming out of the Nothing; and the darkness, now aroused from eternal slumber, saw the light which divided it. Divided, it was wounded, incomplete, without Oneness, and it closed in to make itself whole and heal the scar on the Nothing - that, which being nothing, had been perfection.

Blessed with thought, He was being - time and space; that which *is* - and in consciousness, which ordained time and space, He was bound to exist. Having originated that which is, being Himself the light of being, He accepted the imperfection of His creation and resisted extinction. The forces of darkness were His womb, offering existence or denying it, and thus conflict, the war between light and darkness, was the pulse that sustained Him.

The Whole was a white hole, a burning light expanding, the light spreading out all around Him and dissolving the darkness. The be whole, He became, stretching defiantly through the Nothing, creating positive and negative, past and future, eternal present; reaching out from the womb of darkness to touch the flesh of the Beyond, giving impulse to the impulse of life and ordaining her future.

'He's awakening,' Kate said.

She opened her eyes and jerked upright, her heart pounding, her body wracked, shook her head and saw Moshe by the door, his hand still on the handle. He stared at her, obviously startled, possibly hiding his embarrassment, then he walked in and closed the door behind him, and then stood there, his eyes veiled. She looked at him, feeling frightened, wondering what was happening to her, then tilted sideways and pressed her shoulder against the wall, trying to calm her conflicting emotions.

'A nightmare?' Moshe asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'Something like that. I've been having an awful lot of them lately. You should know: you've been watching me.'

He nodded, not offended, his gelid gaze revealing nothing, and she felt like getting up and slapping his face, just to see his reaction. This urge faintly amused her, almost bringing back her old self, but looking up at his face, at that strong, granite mask, she understood that it might be a mistake, inviting nothing but scorn.

'He's awakening, did you say?'

'No,' she lied. 'I didn't say that. I don't know. What difference does it make? I was having a bad dream.'

His lips curved, without humour, the smile not reaching his eyes, and she noticed that his body barely moved, his hands steady on broad hips. He was obviously suppressing something, keeping himself in firm control, and she studied him, wondering what he thought of her, finding nothing to help her.

'I thought you said that.'

'Think what you like,' she said. 'If what you think is as inaccurate as what you say, there won't be a problem.'

'I don't think I understand.'

'Neither do I, major-general. You informed the rabbi that that man next door obsessed me - which is true - but you forgot to tell him who asked me to

stay here.'

'You admit that you're obsessed?'

'I don't think that's the point. The point, Moshe Eitan, is that you *asked* me to stay, whereas the rabbi thinks you're keeping me locked up because I'm out of my mind.'

'I simply thought you might like a visitor.'

'And simply suggested that I needed help.'

'There was a reason,' Moshe said. 'I had a reason that I can't quite explain.' She noticed his drooping eyes, the slight pursing of his lips, the way his hands moved, fingers parting, spreading out on his hips. 'Let me try to explain,' he said. 'It's something to do with you and that man in the next room; with how you seemed to have an instinct about that object and what was inside it. You were drawn to that object; your body kept straining towards it. You actually said it was a tomb - an accurate description - before you went anywhere near it. That, plus the star. The star was obviously the light we saw. But what made you follow the star and end up at the chapel? So, I was intrigued. Your behaviour here has intrigued me more. Superficially you were logical – remarkably so, considering your experience – but beneath it, in some way I can't explain, you seemed to be drifting away from us, becoming more agitated, more restless and sleepless, your conversation, whether awake or asleep, dominated by one subject: that man from the Mount.'

'I found him. I almost sensed that he was there. I want to know who he is.'

'No, it's more than that. His presence seems to have taken you over. I'm not sure just what I mean by that; only you can explain it. I wanted to ask you, but it didn't seem appropriate - your behaviour was too oblique; you seemed frightened and secretive - and so I tried the rabbi, who'd been wanting to see you anyway. I said you were obsessed because I thought that might encourage him to ask the sort of questions I couldn't ask - and because I thought that he, being a rabbi, might draw the truth out of you.'

'I'm not the kind to be intimidated by a rabbi.'

'I never thought that for a second.'

'So what *did* you think?'

'I thought that him being an old friend, as well as a rabbi, you might give him your trust and confide in him.'

‘You should have just asked.’

‘Yes, maybe. So what can you tell me?’

‘There’s nothing I can tell you. I just feel things. I feel that I’m tied to that man. He’s already a part of me.’

Her words pushed the door back, revealing His graven image, the face that had materialised from the darkness in a pillar of light. The light, which had divided the darkness, had given life to her emptiness. Still leaning against the wall, her ear close to that white sheen, she tried to hear the sound of his stirring, but heard only silence. Perhaps she was mad; she could not ignore the possibility; more than once she had thought that this was so and longed to be cured. Yet now, even as she thought this, she rejected it with fervour, some part of her, once hidden but gradually taking her over, insisting that what she was feeling was a reality that could not be ignored: that in some way beyond her comprehension she was tied to the other.

‘His shroud,’ she said, the thought spring from nowhere. ‘Did you touch it?’

‘It was more like a robe – and we removed it.’

‘Why?’

‘We had to remove the robe in order to examine him. Also, we wanted to analyse the robe itself.’

‘What sort of analysis?’

‘Ultramicroscopic and radiological testing. They might tell us what the robe is made of, where it was made, and how old it is.’

‘You shouldn’t have touched it,’ Kate said.

She regretted the words immediately, not really knowing what she had meant, wondering if His voice had reached out through the silence of sleep. He lay there, awakening, a light growing in the darkness, drawing from her body and mind the strength He required. This concept was extraordinary, defying logic and common sense, yet it gripped her and refused to let her go, both exalting and frightening her. His presence was within her, taking from her and giving to her, and she wondered, with increasing joy and dread, what His nature might be.

‘*Why* should we not have touched it?’ Moshe was staring straight at her, his face thoughtful, almost gentle, his grey gaze concealing an emotion that she could not define. A solid man, she thought. Withdrawn but strong-willed. She took comfort from this knowledge, but was still uneasy with him, sensing

something other than mere curiosity in the way he talked to her.

'I just said it,' she replied. 'I don't know why. It just doesn't seem right.'

'It's only a robe, Kate.'

'I know that.'

'You're not religious.'

'No, I'm not religious; not that way… I don't know why I said that.'

She curled her legs beneath her, feeling weak and a little dizzy, as she usually felt when her menstrual blood was flowing and her body disgusted her. A woman's body could be her prison, administering punishment at regular intervals, inflicting pain and secret humiliation, turning flesh into stone. Sexual desire was not much better: a grossly physical appetite; a hunger that obliterated consideration and destroyed common sense. She had always mistrusted her body, quietly abhorring the demands that it made upon her; yet now, as she weakened, so it conversely seemed to be filling up with a warmth that both moved and bewildered her. Thinking this, she looked at Moshe and remembered how they had both found Him; she wanted Moshe to reach out and embrace her as he had done that first day. But he made no such move, merely stood there, staring at her, his eyes strangely tentative and veiled, as if sheltering a private dream.

'You think there's a bond between you?'

'Yes,' Kate said, 'I do. I can't help it; that's what I feel… and the feeling grows stronger.'

'And the dreams…?'

'About him.'

'What sort of dreams?'

'It was always the same dream.' The words now came easier. 'I was dreaming about what had actually happened: the total darkness inside that object, the awful blackness of it, my feeling that the emptiness was boundless, beyond space and time… Then that pillar of light, his face radiant in the light, that bearded and remarkably composed face with its terrible beauty… Why do I use those words? Because he's not like you or me; because apart from how we found him, apart from the knowledge that he was buried there, apart from the fact that he's still alive, he's someone quite different… I *know* he's normal flesh and blood - the examinations proved that – but his face, though superficially like that of a normal human being, is also somehow inhuman in its purity: its lack of human contrasts. Beautiful,

yes: a terrible beauty… its perfection is frightening.'

'I'm not sure what you mean.'

'It's a void… a void waiting to be filled.'

She glanced nervously at him, wondering what she was suggesting, then dropped her eyes and studied her hands, the fingers tugging the white smock.

'You said it *was* always the same dream. Why use the past tense?'

'Because the dream changed last night, and I re-live it when I close my eyes; wide awake, but experiencing the dream as if I was sleeping. I think it's about him, about what's inside his mind: I dream about a light growing out of a perfect darkness, and the light seems to represent him and the birth of his consciousness. That light, which I see in the dream, I also feel in my body… There's something tying us together, a sort of umbilical cord… He's reviving, awakening, and I know that as sure as I'm sitting here. That man, that being next door, will soon be awake.'

Moshe went down on one knee and took hold of Kate's wrists, gently tugging her clasped hands apart and then drawing her towards him. His grey eyes, close to her face, were protective and calming; and he stared thoughtfully at her, as if coming to a decision, and then, for the very first time, he offered a tentative smile.

'Yes,' he said, 'you're right. We think he's reviving. His temperature is rising, his slow heartbeat is quickening, and the EEG is starting to flicker. Not much in either case, but enough… he's returning to normal.'

The dream folded in upon her, enclosing her in silence, filling her with fear and exaltation and stripping her senses. She closed her eyes and saw the darkness, the void of the unknown, then a light, blossoming up from her depths, illuminated her being. She started to tremble, felt Moshe holding her wrists, and then, licking her lips and opening her eyes, was reassured by his presence.

'I have to see him,' she said.

He lay naked on the bed, sensors attached to his chest and wrists, his head wired to the EEG machine, which was flickering feebly. Sunlight poured through the window, a rich gold turning grey, illuminating the marble of pure white skin and his startling face. His body was long and lean, the stomach flat, the muscles hard, skin smooth and absolutely unblemished, almost translucent. His hands were by his sides, palms turned up, webbed with fine

lines, the fingers hairless and thin, not scarred, the delicate hands of the unborn.

Kate looked and was captured, her eyes drawn to his face, that mask of inhuman composure and impossible serenity. That face was the light, drawing it in and then reflecting it, turning it back upon Kate and making her burn. The face was a cipher, offering nothing, revealing all, at once innocent and wise, extremely young and very old, too blank to be real, too vivid to be forgotten, defying, in its terrible beauty and repose, definition and logic.

Kate was captured and held, her heart breaking with grief and love, seeing the child in the man, the man in the child, ascetic lips, sunken cheeks, the dark beard flecked with grey, the nose aquiline, the closed eyes with long lashes, forehead smooth, dark hair matted. A mature man. A child. One dissolved into the other. The face was a contradiction: a blank page, the map of history, a void waiting to receive and be received and thus fill itself up.

Kate sobbed and stepped forward, spread her fingers and reached down, touched his forehead, his eyes, his nose and lips, felt the shock of his living skin. Then she frozen and remained there, her fingers at his lips, the unknown opening out and drawing her in past that point where she could ever hope to return as what she had been.

She removed her hand and stepped back, shaking her head from side to side, and then, in her expectation and exaltation and dread, turned around and saw Moshe in the doorway, his eyes fixed upon her.

‘Oh, please God,’ she said, ‘hold me!’

16

‘So, gentlemen,’ Ben Eleizer said, spreading his hands in an oratorical gesture, ‘the man from the Mount is awakening and decisions are called for.’

‘Not *quite* awakening,’ Leonard Rosenberg said, scratching his chin with a pencil, his head down and his gaze focused upward, looking over his spectacles. ‘Physiologically speaking, he’s almost certainly returning to normal, but that process could reverse or possibly cease at any point – and either way there’s no guarantee that the patient will actually regain full consciousness.’

‘My point, dear doctor, is that either way we look at it, we still have a living creature on our hands.’

‘Quite so; I’ll support that.’

Ben Eleizer sighed and smiled slightly, sardonically, then glanced across the table, first at Moshe and then at Rabbi Latinavots, before returning his gaze to the table, as if examining his knuckles. ‘And the man is perfectly normal,’ he said. ‘Can we take that as read?’

‘Yes, Shlomo,’ the doctor said. ‘Perfectly normal. Very much a flesh and blood human being – and in excellent shape.’

‘So,’ Ben Eleizer said, still studying his knuckles, ‘where did he come from?’

They all glanced at one another, each foiled by the incomprehensible, each wrestling with his private, conflicting views of what the answer might be. Moshe lowered his gaze, feeling oddly embarrassed, aware that the unprecedented nature of this event had forced him to admit to the irrational and the possibility of miracles. Thus, his embarrassment, the reawakening of self-consciousness, a feeling of foolishness at what he was contemplating even as his every instinct, religious and secular, rejected it.

‘We’ve discussed this before,’ he said. ‘We still can’t answer the question. We might learn something if that man regains his senses or if

analysis of his robe reveals something. Meanwhile there's no rational explanation.'

The rabbi gave a sigh, obviously relieved at Moshe's response, well aware of what all of them were thinking and not wanting to face it.

'Fine,' Ben Eleizer persisted. 'We don't know anything about him. We only know there was an object, that the object defied known science, that it had to have been buried there for centuries, and that that man was inside it… Now what does that *mean*?'

'I pass,' said Rosenberg. 'I can only repeat that he's a human being. How he managed to stay alive, I don't know – it just doesn't make sense.'

'Some cryogenic process?'

'No,' Rosenberg replied. 'His blood is absolutely pure. He hadn't been tampered with, he was wearing a simple robe, and there wasn't another thing in that room except for the stone bed.'

'So he's been sleeping there for years.'

'That's impossible,' the doctor said. 'I simply cannot accept that. He could not have survived very long in his condition, so the object must have been planted in the ground just before it was found.'

'Fine,' Ben Eleizer said, 'that makes sense… But what planted the object?'

'It *had* to be the unidentified.'

'That's equally impossible,' Moshe intervened. 'That unidentified reached ground level and then simply disappeared; it was therefore some form of energy; nothing mechanical or physical… and believe me, nothing *crashed* on the Mount of Olives.'

'Thus,' Ben Eleizer said, 'it must have been buried there *before* the Chapel of the Ascensions was constructed… a small matter of centuries.'

Moshe looked at each man in turn, first Ben Eleizer, then the rabbi, then the doctor, Leonard Rosenberg, and, finally, General Yaankov Meshel, the present head of the Intelligence Committee, which co-ordinated the activities of the three Israeli Intelligence services. The general was leaning forward, his elbows resting on the table, a cigar between the fingers of his right hand, his face hard and aggressive.

'Moshe is right,' he said. 'We've discussed all this before. It's pointless to continue the conversation without adequate knowledge. At this moment we have to discuss that unidentified and how to explain it.'

‘We *don’t* explain it,’ Ben Eleizer replied. ‘We simply continue our denials, sticking to our story of unidentified atmospheric phenomena.’

‘A temporary measure,’ the general said. ‘It won’t hold water for long. That unidentified was also picked up by reconnaissance satellites and foreign radar as it flew from east to west and blinked out here. We could use atmospheric phenomena if it wasn’t for the storm; but the destruction of the chapel and mosque - and the widespread devastation around Jerusalem - has encouraged speculation about a crash. We can’t dampen that speculation and it makes for embarrassment. Both the Russians and the Americans are convinced that we’re hiding some hardware.’

‘Naturally,’ Ben Eleizer said. ‘They both think something crashed here - and each side thinks it belongs to the other and wants to know what it is.’

‘Right,’ the general said. ‘They’re worried about what we might have here. They’re asking a lot of questions and applying considerable pressure; and now the journalists, including Leon Halcomb, are starting to bang on some doors.’

‘What’s so special about Leon Halcomb?’

‘He seems to know more than the others do. He knows it wasn’t a normal accident, he suspects that something was found up there, and, worst of all, he seems aware that we brought someone down from there and are keeping him under guard in the hospital.’

Ben Eleizer glanced at Moshe, his gaze oblique, his eyebrows raised, and Moshe, understanding the unspoken question, shook his head from side to side.

‘No,’ he said, ‘not Kate Hirschfield. She hasn’t spoken to anyone. She didn’t leave that room until today - and she was watched all the time.’

‘Today?’ the general asked. ‘Why today?’

‘Because I took her next door to let her see that man from the Mount.’

The general stared at Moshe, at Ben Eleizer, then back at Moshe, not trying to conceal his amazement at what he had heard.

‘She found him,’ Moshe explained, ‘and the circumstances were very strange. Now she seems to be affected by his presence in a very odd way.’

‘Of course, Moshe: she *found* him.’

‘No, Yaakov, it’s more than that. There’s an almost psychic connection between them. Kate seemed to know that the object was hollow, she seemed to sense that someone was in there, and since we’ve kept her in confinement

she's developed an instinct for that man - and even knew, without us telling her, that he was reviving.'

'I don't believe in psychic connections,' the general said. 'You should address that to the rabbi.'

Moshe saw Jozsef's discomfort, his hand reaching up to touch his skullcap, as if consoling himself.

'Well, Jozsef?'

'I don't think so. I'm afraid I cannot accept that. The woman has not been happy, this event has badly shaken her, and now she has succumbed to this obsession that that man is her saviour.'

'A *saviour*?' the doctor said.

Jozsef shrugged, his face forlorn. 'This is a very delicate matter. I'm not at all sure of her motives, so permit me to speculate… The Chapel of the Ascension is one of the most sacred of all Christian sites. It was built over the rock upon which, according to the Christians, Jesus last stood before ascending to Heaven.'

'Kate Hirschfield is *Jewish*,' Ben Eleizer said.

'Correct,' the rabbi said, 'but she is also without faith – or, more accurately, in revolt against her faith. Nonetheless, still Jewish to her soul, that faith has to be replaced with another. So, we have the earthquake, an extraordinary storm, and Kate is right there when that object comes out of the ground beneath a chapel that's been standing for centuries.'

'A *Christian* chapel, Jozsef.'

'Of course, Shlomo, but it doesn't matter: the object is a miracle, beyond rational explanation - and the man inside, an even greater miracle, possibly buried for centuries. So, she is seduced, overwhelmed by the inexplicable, and faced with what appears to be the supernatural, surrenders her reasoning. The man becomes a miraculous being, possibly a Messianic figure, someone who is above normal men and has made her his chosen one.'

Something cold slid through Moshe, a chilling portend of the future, the feeling that the rabbi's words, dropped reluctantly from his lips, might mean more than even the rabbi could at present consider. He thought of Kate in the stranger's room, her body quivering like a reed, her eyes filled with dread and exaltation as she fell into his arms. Holding her, stroking her hair, he had felt, just like Kate, a mixture of childish awe and fear, swept away from his former self on the tide of a future that was, since the arrival of the man from

the Mount, a path leading to infinite possibilities, all of which stunned the imagination and opened the door to the unknown. He glanced again at the rabbi, sympathising with his plight, understanding that he, too, was grappling with nameless fears, now faced with implications more threatening than he dared to admit.

'A Messiah,' Ben Eleizer said.

'I merely speculate,' the rabbi replied.

'Your speculations, Jozsef, lead us into more disturbing possibilities… The destruction of the chapel has already shocked the Christian world, but what will be said if they find out about the man we brought down from there?'

Ben Eleizer had raised the subject that they had all avoided so far and now Moshe felt the tension in the room, an almost palpable reluctance to face the issue and try to resolve it. He shared that reluctance and could not be proud of it, but the reasons were complex and not related only to politics; rather, they sprang out of the soil of faith itself – a faith not only fundamental to the spirit of Israel, but also to the ineradicable beliefs of each individual. Those beliefs were now endangered – or, at the least, exposed to doubt - and the questions that would ultimately be raised could only lead to more questions: a confusion that could break the mind and spirit and render faith obsolete. This was what they were avoiding, but Ben Eleizer, a supreme realist, had thrown down the gauntlet and now Moshe felt compelled to pick it up.

'It's not only the Christians,' he said. 'It's also the Jews and the Moslems. We can no longer pretend that the destruction of a Christian chapel was the only thing that happened that night. The Chapel of the Ascension was destroyed, the Golden Gate was smashed open, and many of the graves in the Moslem graveyard on the slopes of the Mount of Olives were exposed by the cracks caused by the earthquake. These are the salient facts of this matter, and they can't be ignored.'

'I don't know what you mean,' Rosenberg said. 'I'm a doctor and I know little about theology, which is what you're suggesting.'

'So, Moshe,' the general said, stubbing out his cigar, his face hard but no longer aggressive, now carefully composed, 'just what are you driving at?'

'An unholy trinity,' the rabbi said. 'Moshe is right: we have to face it. What has happened embraces the three great monotheistic religions and could

lead to the most extraordinary reactions.'

'I'm listening,' Ben Eleizer said. 'I'm wide-awake. Please clarify this matter.'

The rabbi was reluctant, perhaps unable to utter the words, so Moshe, less committed to Judaism, broke into his silence.

'Christianity views itself as the fulfilment of Judaism, as the messianic prophecy come to life in the person of Jesus Christ; ergo, only Christ can be the true Messiah. To put it another way, whatever we Jews preach, teach, believe in and accept was actually fulfilled in Jesus; and the Second Coming of Christ, in which the Christians believe, will not only inaugurate the conversion of the Jews, but ordain the Christian world as the New Israel.'

'That's blasphemous,' the rabbi said.

'It's what they believe,' Moshe replied. 'And what matters at the moment is not just what *we* believe, but what the Christians and Moslems also believe.'

'What you're suggesting,' Ben Eleizer said, 'is that the Chapel of the Ascension was built over the rock upon which Jesus, according to the Christians, ascended to Heaven - and that that man from the Mount, whose materialisation seems supernatural, might be taken up by the Christians either as the resurrected Christ or as a sign of His Second Coming.'

'Yes,' Moshe said. 'The Son of - '

'That belief is anathema to both Jews and Muslims,' the rabbi interjected quickly, preventing Moshe from using the forbidden word. 'For both, there is no such thing as the Trinity – only the One.'

'But certain Muslims,' Moshe replied, 'particularly many of the Sufis, also believe in the Second Coming of Christ.'

'A belief condemned by the Orthodox,' the rabbi said.

'True, Jozsef… But the Muslims also believe in a Day of Salvation. Remember that the two main forces in Islam are the Sunnis and Shi'ites. The Shi'ites follow Ali, Muhammed's son-in-law, believing that he and his eleven successors, all Imams, or leaders, had the correct hereditary succession from Muhammad and were therefore infallible and free from sin. They also believe that the twelfth and last Imam disappeared and went into hiding, waiting to return on the Day of Judgement. The Mahdi is the hidden Imam: a spiritual being who will appear at the end of time to restore peace and justice to mankind and establish the full power of Islam over the nonbelievers -

namely, in the case of Israel, the Jews.'

'This is beginning to sound worse every second.'

'Yes, Shlomo. And it would be best not to ignore the fact that the Muslims also accept Jesus: not as a divine being or the Son of the One, but as one of the righteous individuals - or one of the prophets - selected by the One to be a channel between Him and His people. They might therefore view this man as the resurrected prophet - or as a sign of something even more dangerous.'

'Obviously you're referring to the Muslim graveyard.'

'Yes. The Muslims believe that the resurrection of souls will begin at the Moslem graveyard on the slopes of the Mount of Olives - and since the earthquake devastated the graveyard, opening up many of the graves, there are whispers in certain quarters, by which I mean Arab sectors, that the Day of Judgement is at hand. It therefore stands to reason that if they learn about that man, they might will convince themselves that he's the hidden Imam, the Mahdi, returned to Earth to inaugurate the Day of Judgement.'

'And if they did, it would encourage them to try and re-establish Islam over the Christians and Jews of the Holy Land.'

'Exactly,' Moshe said. 'And this danger from the Arabs is unfortunately compounded by the destruction, or opening up, of the Golden Gate.'

'I don't understand,' Rosenberg said.

'You should,' the rabbi retorted, as last feeling free to talk. 'American or not, you are a Jew and your ignorance is shameful.' He sighed, shaking his head from side to side, too distraught to be angry. '*I believe with a perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah*,' he said, quoting the great medieval Jewish thinker, Maimonides, '*and though He tarry, I will wait daily for His coming.*'

'No Jew would accept the destruction of a Christian chapel or Moslem graveyard as a sign that that man is the Messiah. That, Jozsef, would *surely* be blasphemous.'

'Not Christian or Arab, Leonard. Naturally, what I refer to is the Golden Gate… According to Jewish tradition, it is through the Golden Gate that the Messiah will enter Jerusalem when He ushers in the Redemption. The Golden Gate has therefore been walled-in for centuries, but that extraordinary storm destroyed the wall and thus opened the gate. This could, by itself, be explained as a freak of nature, but knowledge of that man from the Mount

could complicate matters. Please remember your learning, Leonard. For us Jews, the Messiah is the personality who will, through the power of the Most High, redeem Israel and inaugurate the sovereignty of Judaism. A descendent of the House of David, he will *not* be a supernatural being, nor will he be divine; rather, he will be a person of normal flesh and blood, but one with divine gifts or supernatural abilities. I risk blasphemy as I speak, but now the words must be spoken: that man from the Mount is very much flesh and blood, but his survival, at least so far, would appear to be supernatural - and we cannot ignore what might happen should this news be released.'

He lowered his eyes and said no more, perhaps regretting what he had already said. Moshe, looking around at each of the others in turn, felt the waves of disbelief washing over them and turning to fear. The fear was secular and religious, based on politics and faith, both of which were now being threatened by what remained unexplained. The unexplained was the event itself, what it had produced and might yet produce: that man of unknown origin and the inexpressible possibilities inherent in his return to the world of the living… his abrupt welding of the past to the present, perhaps to reshape the future. Moshe stared through the window, saw the sky above the Knesset, bright blue, flecked with white clouds, all too real, despite what he was feeling - distinctly unreal. Weary, confused, longing to be out there in the real world, he returned his gaze to the room, glanced at each of the men in turn, and saw General Meshel shrugging his broad shoulders and pursing his lips.

'Pure speculation,' the general said.

'But relevant,' Moshe responded. 'If word of that man from the Mount gets out, it could lead to bad trouble.'

'True,' Ben Eleizer said. 'So we have to keep him secret. We stick to our story of atmospheric phenomena - and ensure that Kate Hirschfield keeps her mouth shut.'

'Kate Hirschfield is no problem,' Moshe jumped in quickly, her image suddenly floating before him, resurrecting his buried pain, returning him to that which had been lost and giving life to helpless need. 'We're keeping her in the hospital for another week or so in the hope that that man will revive. If he does, she'll be useful.'

'How?'

'She's a psychiatrist. The man may be in a state of shock. His mental

condition could in many ways be delicate, and if so, we'll need her.'

'She's obsessed,' the rabbi said.

'That's why she'll stay silent.'

Moshe noticed the flush on the rabbi's kindly face, understood his grief and anger over Kate, and felt sorry for him.

'And Leon Halcomb?' the general asked.

'An anti-Semite,' Leon Rosenberg replied. 'If he learns anything, he'll be a happy man and we'll be in trouble.'

'He's convinced we brought someone down,' Ben Eleizer said, 'someone other than Kate Hirschfield, and I'd like to know who gave him the news.'

'It's not news,' Moshe said quietly. 'It's probably more like a whisper. Someone probably told Leon about the second ambulance, but that doesn't mean much on its own. Unfortunately, the whisper had to come from inside - so we have to face the fact that his informant was Jewish.'

That silenced the conversation, made them glance at one another, each looking both guilty and outraged, wondering who had betrayed them.

'There are other matters,' the rabbi said, his abundant flesh making him sweat, one brown hand reaching up to touch his skull-cap before slipping back down to stroke his grey beard. 'The Christian world, already shocked by the destruction of the chapel, is now incensed by our refusal to let their Jerusalem representatives - the formal caretakers of the chapel - examine the ruins and decide what to do about them. I have, as you know, received from the Papal See's Apostolic Delegate in Jerusalem, Monsignor Pio Lazzari, a formal complaint about this matter, and it places me in a delicate position. I have hesitated about replying to the complaint. Now I must either give him permission to take back control over that site or pass the matter into the hands of our security - which would, of course, be embarrassing.'

'There's *no* problem,' Ben Eleizer said. 'That hole has been filled in. We bulldozed the rubble back to where it belongs, so the site can now be opened to official visitors, including the press. The Vatican is only interested in the chapel and can't ask us about unidentifieds; you can therefore reply, passing the site back to its Christian caretakers, and you won't be asked questions on matters that don't relate to the Rabbinate.'

'In other words, I don't lie,' the rabbi said. 'I simply erase the full facts from my thoughts.'

'That's right,' Ben Eleizer said.

Moshe felt the rabbi's discomfort, the ambiguity of his position, perched, as he now was, on the painfully cutting edge that divided the whole truth from a form of deceit. Not the plain dishonesty of a deliberate lie, it was, nonetheless, a deception based on omission, morally questionable under any circumstances, more so for the rabbi. He knew what the rabbi was thinking and did not envy him his dilemma; already, the presence of that man from the Mount was forcing them to alter their own judgements and accept compromise.

'That only leaves the Soviets and Americans,' the general said. 'They both think we've captured some dangerous hardware; and since each thinks it belongs to the other, they're both waiting for answers.'

'We simply stick to our original story,' Ben Eleizer said. 'The site is now open and they're welcome to inspect it; when they do, since there's nothing to find, they might even believe us. Let them come and go home again; they'll find nothing but rubble - no scorching, no radioactivity - just the rubble left behind by an unusual earthquake that also affected other areas around Jerusalem. That's not a major problem and the opening of the site will simply help it. Our major problem lies with the Christians and the Arabs and our own Jews - how they might react if they find out about that man from the Mount.'

He looked at Moshe for confirmation, and Moshe felt sick to his soul, thinking of Kate in the hospital, of her dark, haunted eyes, of the rapture and dread that had made her turn away from that man and throw herself into his own arms. Moshe felt frightened and possessive, at once jealous and resentful; more resentful of that man than he had been of Leon Halcomb, more ashamed than he had ever felt before: humiliated by his own brimming selfishness. He glanced at Ben Eleizer, at the rabbi, then through the window, his gaze drawn to the clean sweep of the sky where the sun had dominion. Then, putting his head down, keeping his hands flat on the table, he heard his own voice as if coming from far away, distanced by expanding webs of guilt and the shame of betrayal.

'I agree,' he said. 'We don't have a choice. We must keep that man buried.'

17

The sun was sinking when Leon showed his press card to the guard at the wooden barrier that blocked the road, preventing entrance to the devastated area. The guard nodded at him, unsmiling but polite, then raised the barrier and let him walk through. Leon knew the area well, normally living in the hotel above it, but now, as he advanced, the sky darkening over Jerusalem, he felt totally disorientated and unreal, as if in a dream.

The ruins were quiet and ominous, dust drifting above the piled rubble, making an eerie hissing sound that complimented the barren scene. The tower of the Arab mosque, the Chapel of the Ascension, and the tomb of the prophetess Hulda, which adjoined the chapel courtyard, had originally filled the space between the Mount of Olives Hotel and the road that passed the Church of the Pater Noster; now that area seemed empty, strangely desolate and haunting, the piles of rubble blending in with the strip of waste ground at the opposite side of the road, beyond which, partly obscured behind a stone wall and trees, were the equally desolate, evacuated Arab houses.

Moving to the left side of the road, his feet kicking up stones, Leon stepped carefully over the rubble of the fallen wall of the chapel courtyard and stopped near the remains of Hulda's tomb. A steel door lay in the rubble, painted light blue, covered in dust: the door that had led into the grounds of the Arab mosque, at the centre of which stood the Christian chapel. Ridiculous, Leon thought. There's no sense to this country. He stepped forward and saw shards of glass, pulverised mortar and drifting dust, parts of the Arabic inscription on the broken stone of Hulda's tomb, the television aerials that had been swept across the road from the small collection of modest homes beyond the waste ground.

Leon stopped and looked around him, knowing that Kate had been found here, trying to recall the courtyard walls, the small, dome-shaped chapel; trying to visualise the storm sweeping over it with extraordinary ferocity. His

imagination failed him, quietly defeated by the desolation, but the breeze, hissing eerily around his feet, made him shiver unnaturally.

What was he looking for? The earth scorched by an unknown force? The tracks of a bulldozer that had possibly pushed the rubble back over a hole of mysterious origin? Yes, he was looking for signs, but his heart wasn't really in it; he had known from the moment that permission had been granted to come here, that such permission would not have been granted if there was something to see. Moshe Eitan was not that stupid, and his men had been here for a week: scientists and engineers and security officers, then finally the bulldozers. Not guards, Leon thought. Not your ordinary foot soldiers. They were not protecting people from the dangers of the ruins, but keeping them out while the chosen few thoroughly examined this site and then used the bulldozers to push the rubble back where it belonged… He glanced back at the road and saw evidence of the earthquake: the cracks formed a jigsaw that covered the whole area and had possibly undermined the Arab houses… Fair enough, he thought: a good excuse for removing civilians…but those cracks are only wide enough to break a careless ankle and would certainly not account for the week-long banning of the press and the representatives of the Christian church from the site… So, there was a mystery - something covered up or removed - and now Leon, watching the shadows growing darker on the rubble, thought of Kate in the hospital near Ein Kerem and wondered why she was part of it.

To think about her made him hurt, the pain emanating from a sense of loss, the conviction that he had to steal her soul in order to regain his own. Perhaps that's why he had come here, even knowing that he would find nothing: not just to see the ruins and try to imagine what might have happened, but in the hope that up here, where the mystery had begun, he might palpably feel her presence all around him and take small comfort from it. He smiled even as he thought this, shaking his head in self-admonishment, realising that the intensity of his feelings for Kate had reached a pitch that was almost religious. Yes, he thought bleakly, my soul has become religious: from nihilism to commitment is the leap of a religious impulse; and now, in my inanity and weakness, even this sacred site, which before meant little to me, is wrapping its history around me and drawing me into it.

The darkness was descending, casting its shadow on stone, and he looked at the rubble piled before him at eye level and realised that it was the Chapel

of the Ascension. Could it be possible? Was the sacred rock buried down there? Had a man called Jesus, in the process of changing history, stood on this spot (his countenance like lightning, his raiment white as snow) before ascending to sit by God's right hand? Leon seriously doubted it, but the imagery clung to him, surrounding him and drawing him in and revealing itself as Kate's dark eyes. He thought about her and tried to be her, trying to imagine her experience, stepping forward, stepping back, gazing around him at the gathering darkness, looking beyond the chilling ruins to the Church of the Pater Noster where, it was believed, Jesus Christ had taught his disciples the Lord's Prayer… *Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven… For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory…* and, Leon thought, the vain dreams of all men who could not accept their fleeting mortality. He shivered and turned away, looking back from whence he had come, seeing the Mount of Olives Hotel, a glass-windowed cube of limestone, the guard standing at the barrier across the road, his Uzi sub-machinegun pointed skyward.

'The real world,' Leon said, speaking aloud to hear his own voice, hoping to jolt himself back to the objectivity he had lost when he drove towards the hills of Judea and saw Kate's face before him. 'Liberty and democracy become unholy,' he added, 'when their hands are dyed red with innocent blood.'

Such was Israel's dilemma, the source of its shame and glory, holding the Torah in one hand, a gun in the other, shedding the blood of the innocent, its enemy's and its own, in an unholy bid to preserve the Holy Land and ensure the dominion of Zion. Such a war might never end, and even now was continuing; and the mystery of the Mount, shrouded in secrecy and deception, almost certainly had to be tied not only to religious matters, but to very delicate political concerns.

Leon tried to work it out, but his reasoning failed him, confused by the return of his restless emotions and the conviction that the mystery, which revolved around politics, contained within its secular intrigues a much more personal dimension; that it had, at the very least, ripped the veils from his own shame and was now, in some inexplicable manner, binding him tighter to Kate.

The darkness was deepening, turning the air to the colour of lead, and the stolen words did not remotely help him as he walked towards the barrier. His objectivity was gone, swept away by guilt and need, and as he left the silent

ruins, glancing around him, feeling defeated, he also felt that the mystery of the Mount was somehow stealing his rational self. His past stretched out behind him, a white wake on a black sea, travelling back to the mists of lost dreams and the shadow of failure. His need for Kate was buried there, blossoming out of his arid history, a need growing from the soil of discontent and impossible hopes. He had betrayed his inner life and now drifted towards ruination, slowly drowning in alcohol and debt, his strength and will disappearing. Yet he now wanted Kate and took hope from that need, as if in some blinding and inexplicable light her dark eyes had reflected the possibility of his future redemption.

He passed through the barrier, murmuring his thanks to the armed guard, and turned around in front of the hotel to look back at the ruins. They were now surrendering to dusk, sinking back into darkness, and he wondered what it was he had hoped to find when he climbed up the steep hill. Some evidence of a crash - not a crash; something else - simply something that would help him to solve the mystery of what happened that night. He had not seen Kate since then, the seven days had seemed endless, and now, thinking about her, feeling lost and unreal, his sudden pain again confused his intentions. He had come to discover the truth that was being hidden by Moshe Eitan, but as he studied the ruins, glanced at the guard, thought of Kate, he was overwhelmed by the conviction that the mystery of the Mount was, apart from politics and the schemes of mortal men, a riddle that was drawing him closer to his own fractured image.

He removed his gaze from the ruins and walked away from the hotel, turning down towards the Garden of Gethsemane and its dark, silent slopes. The sky was now black, the stars bright and multitudinous, and he hastened down the crude, narrow road, between the walls of rough stones. Here, in Gethsemane, Jesus had wept over Jerusalem; here the sweat of His agony had fallen to the ground as blood; and here, also, He had been betrayed and given birth to the Christian world. To remember this surprised Leon, casting him back to his Christian childhood, the days when he had believed all he read and held it close to his heart. Those days were long gone, their religious teachings undone, but now he marvelled at how deep his roots went and at their will to survive. He had tried to uproot them, to cast them over the wall, but as he hurried down the road, the dark slopes still and quiet, he felt the tide of his history at his unprotected back, pressing down upon his shoulders like

the mystery he was still trying to solve.

An unidentified light had descended over Jerusalem, exploding over the summit of the Mount of Olives and then disappearing… A light - not a crash - a light that rushed down and vanished, leaving in its wake a heap of rubble, possibly even a large hole… A light - nothing physical - possibly some kind of force, a burst of mysterious power that had caused a vacuum and pulled the chapel apart… What light? What kind of force? What sort of power could that be? And, if such a power had actually materialised, where had it come from?

He thought again of Kate, his imagination now set free; saw her standing in the darkness, the wind howling around her; saw the light rushing down and devouring the air and then brutally sweeping her off her feet. The vision filled his mind and blinded him, made him stop, almost dizzy, then he blinked and looked across the darkened slopes and heard a voice from below.

At first he thought he was imagining things, and shook his head, almost amused, but then he heard the voice again, masculine and harsh, obviously coming from farther down the path, on the lower slopes of the Mount. The man was obviously shouting, his voice passionate and angry, sounding barbaric and unearthly in the night, echoing over the dark slopes. Leon listened, strangely moved, unable to understand the words, and then, surprised at his own expectancy, he hurried on down the narrow road.

It did not take very long and he soon saw who was shouting: a man in his late fifties, tall and emaciated, Caucasian, his skin burnt dark by the sun, beardless but with unwashed white hair that blew around his wild features. He was facing the Basilica of the Agony, standing upon the low stone wall, looking down on a crowd of people, Arab and Jew and Christian, his arms raised and his black coat flapping loosely as he bawled his message. He was clearly some kind of preacher, certainly Christian and possibly mad, and as Leon, intrigued, stood behind the crowd and watched him, he stared fiercely up the slopes that led to the summit of the Mount, jabbing at the summit with his index finger, his voice hoarse and outraged.

‘They will not let us go up there!’ he shouted at the crowd below him. ‘They will not let us go up there to see because they have denied Him! For He said, Let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven, to divide the day from the night! And let there be lights in the firmament of the heaven to give light upon the earth - *and it was so*! And He made two great lights - the

greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night - but they will not let us go up there to see, *for up there was the light*!'

His right hand cut through the air, slashing down through the darkness, balling into a fist at his stomach as his body shook violently. Leon recognised the words, here distorted but still eloquent, and he felt the chill of dread, some cold and fathomless presentiment, as the old man threw his hands up in the air and started shouting again.

'They will not let us go up there to see because His light filled the dark void! Because He said, Let there be light - and there *was* light! And He saw the light and it was good; and He divided the light from the darkness. And He called the light Day, and the darkness He called Night; and up there, above the rock where He last touched the earth, *He made the light and darkness one and announced His returning*!'

He threw his hands out to the sky, his body curved, his black coat flapping, and the breeze, shivering through his long white hair, made it dance on his head. Leon watched, disbelieving, feeling the urge to walk away, but then the old man turned sideways, facing the slopes of the Mount of Olives, his finger jabbing at the summit as his voice raged defiantly. And Leon almost lost his senses, the familiar words shattering reason, ricocheting in his brain with intimations of revelations, vaporising even as he sensed them and leaving him drained.

'Listen! Let me speak! I will not be silenced! *They will not let us go up there to see, but I will not be silenced*! In Him is life and the life is the light of men, and that light shone in darkness *and the darkness did not comprehend it*! I come here as witness, to bear witness to the light, that all men through Him might believe and find the joy of redemption! He was *not* that light but was *of* it and will bear witness to it! *No*! I am not Him! I am not worthy of him! For He cometh unto His own and His own receiveth Him not! *No*! I am not Him! I merely come to bear witness! I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, Make straight for the way of the Lord who will soon come before you to make Himself manifest to Israel… *Do not deny Him*!'

Leon turned away from him, hurrying down the hill, torn between revulsion and excitement, feeling touched by some madness. The stones rolled before his feet, tumbling down the dark slope, and then he stopped, hardly knowing what he was doing, and looked back up the ancient path. The old man was still preaching, his voice harsh and obsessed, towering over the

silent people, the wind whipping his white hair, his hands raised above his head, fingers outstretched to the sky, while the stars, illuminating the darkness, swam around him in glory.

18

Kate felt weaker every minute, more light-headed, her body emptying, her thoughts drifting like smoke in the night, slowly turning and gradually vaporising. She stared down at his face, at his closed eyes, his greying dark beard, at that mask of inhuman composure and impossible serenity. Her body glowed when she saw him, lighting up from within, the warmth reaching out to touch her cold skin and make amends for her failing strength. He was taking that strength from her, draining her to fill himself, and as his white chest rose and fell, his hands motionless by his sides, she was torn between rapture and fear, wondering what would become of him.

She did not think of herself, but of the future now ordained, aware of its ambiguity and challenge, her whole being expectant. It was all in his face, in the terrible beauty of its repose, that image of the space where the moon eclipsed the sun and the darkness reappeared as the void beyond which there was nothing. She had seen it and dreamt it, when asleep and when awake, behind her closed eyes or looking at his face with its prismatic blankness. The dream of history was in that face, and yet its radiance denied history, obliterating definitions and judgement, at once nothing and everything.

Kate studied him a long time, almost dreaming, twice removed, only aware that he was coming to life as her strength drained away. She reached down and felt his pulse, placed her hand over his heart, put her fingers to his lips to feel his breath, stroked his forehead, stepped back again. The past had been and gone and now returned to meet the future; between the past and the future was the present, out of which he had called her.

Suddenly frightened, she turned away and lay down on her own bed, which was situated, parallel to his bed, at the opposite side of the room. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to still her beating heart, staring up at the white ceiling, feeling light, almost floating, her thoughts drifting to and fro and then dissolving into blankness and silence.

In silence was the truth, the one reality, beyond logic: the void that contracted as the light spread through the darkness and made itself manifest in her draining body. She no longer doubted the issue, but now accepted it in wonder, her mind ruled by the languor of her flesh as exhaustion crept over her.

She slept and awakened, hearing murmuring and movement, turned her head and saw the doctors in white jackets, leaning over his still form. They were checking his heartbeat, his pulse and his breathing, bending forward to study the EEG screen where a white line was flickering. Kate watched them, feeling nothing, her thoughts circling and returning, her body floating somewhere beneath her as if made of thin air. The men in the white jackets seemed unreal, far away, their voices muted, their hands rising and falling through striations of sunlight in which, like the basic matter of life, motes of dust were at play.

She turned away and closed her eyes, letting her body drift freely, ignoring the doctors as they left him alone and surrounded her bed. Her wrist was picked up and checked, the cold stethoscope touched her breast, there were whispers about her weakening condition and its mysterious cause. She felt amused but didn't smile, the amusement fleeting and remote, dying away like a light being withdrawn and fading out in the distant night. Then they moved away, still whispering, and the door opened and closed, after which, feeling grateful and at peace, she heard the hymn of his breathing.

She slept and awakened, licking her parched, shivering lips, feeling even weaker than before and unable to sit up. She could still hear his breathing, felt his presence all around her, and she wondered what would happen when he awakened and her strength was all gone. This thought came and departed, a mere whisper in her mind, and she raised her hand and spread her long fingers, watched them shaking and falling. She was too weak even for that, her body hollow, without feeling, as it had been after the bloody abortion all those years ago. Lost, but not forgotten, the relentless spectre of her dreams: the foetus turning in the Pool of Siloam at His feet, His arms raised in forgiveness. Now, she sighed, her strength gone, the light shrinking in the darkness. Hearing the door opening and closing, she opened her eyes and saw Moshe looking down at her.

'*Shalom*,' he said quietly.

She could not immediately answer, feeling dizzy and unreal, her thoughts

circling like birds in a mist, resplendent in silence. Moshe loomed large above her, his shirt tight on broad shoulders, his eyes, which were usually unrevealing, now strangely gentle. She kept looking at him, taking comfort from his rugged face, noting the scar on his left cheek, the broken nose and lined skin, understanding that in some way she was drawn to his remote, private nature.

'How are you feeling?' he asked.

'Weak,' she replied. 'My body feels totally drained and I can't think clearly.'

'Any pain?'

'No.'

'The doctors are baffled by your condition. As far as they can tell, there's nothing wrong, yet you're fading away.'

Kate smiled. 'It doesn't matter. He's recovering…that's what matters. You shouldn't worry about what happens to me; he's the one you should think about.'

'I worry,' Moshe said.

'I thought you didn't approve of me.'

'I'm not talking about approval,' Moshe said. 'It's the caring that matters.'

'And you care for me?'

'Yes, Kate, I care.'

'I'm surprised to hear that.'

She smiled again and raised her hand, reached out to him, but then let the hand drop, not really knowing what she was doing or what she was feeling, too tired to define it. Looking at Moshe, she saw the other, a different face, the same face, first Moshe and then the man from the Mount and then Moshe once more. He was gazing down at her, not smiling, his eyes gentle, trying to suggest the words his tongue refused to utter, his meaning felt if not stated. She studied him calmly, drawn towards him, drifting into him and becoming him; and then, being of him and within him, gazed out of his grey, wounded eyes. She saw herself on the bed, her wasted body in the white smock, her cheeks hollow and her shivering lips dry, her long hair dishevelled.

'I'm fading away,' she said.

'Yes,' Moshe said, 'you are.'

'Am I dying?'

‘No, I don’t think so. I think you’re feeding that man.’

‘He’s reviving?’

‘Yes.’

‘That’s important.’

‘I know it is.’

‘Moshe Eitan, the famous warrior and Zionist and private person, is not as harsh as his reputation would suggest.’

He smiled reluctantly, the humour reaching his eyes at last, and then she drifted up again, leaving her exhausted body behind, and dissolved into the mystery of his flesh and examined his grief. She saw dead eyes staring sunward, a skein of dark hair covered in dust, a woman and two children spread-eagled, the desert sky as white heat. As it was everywhere, so here, too, there was blood, now drying and matting the dusty hair and smearing the limbs of the children. His grief was lacerating, tearing the skin from her own wounds, and she shrank and retreated to herself, staring up from the narrow bed.

‘Don’t grieve too much,’ she said.

‘I’m not grieving,’ he replied. ‘I’m concerned that you should be in this condition and I’m wondering what caused it.’

‘You know what,’ she said.

‘I know it’s him; I don’t know how.’

‘It’s not me you’re concerned with - it’s him; you’re wondering where he came from.’

‘Not only that, Kate.’

‘You’re also wondering *who* he is.’

‘Yes,’ he agreed, ‘both those questions bother me. But you bother me, also.’

‘Why?’

‘That should be obvious.’

‘Nothing is ever obvious.’

‘It’s the concern of one human being for another. It’s not all that uncommon.’

He was no longer smiling and his gravity touched her heart, as did his hesitation to express his true meaning, his need to couch it in clichéd generalities. She thought of the dead eyes staring sunward, the woman and children spread-eagled, and wondered why that vision, with its connotations

of Moshe's past, should have come to her at this particular moment. His great tragedy had been widely publicised, but she had never known the precise details; and now, growing weaker, her thoughts increasingly fractured, she was convinced that the dead eyes staring sunward were the eyes of his family. Yet how could she know that? What had happened to her mind? As she weakened, so her mind seemed to expand to take in past and future. The other lay in the bed opposite, breathing evenly, reviving, and as He came back to life, taking His strength from her, so He seemed to be compensating her with unusual powers.

'There's no need for concern,' she said.

'Concern is natural, Kate.'

'I feel frightened for him; not for myself. I even feel strangely happy.'

'Happy?'

'All warm.'

'Your temperature's dropping.'

'I feel warm.'

'You're not warm, you're cold. Your skin is cold to touch. Your heartbeat is slow, your circulation is all wrong, and you haven't been able to eat for two days. There's no reason. We're worried.'

'Don't.'

'You should sleep.'

'I'm *always* sleeping.'

'Then sleep a bit more.'

She smiled and closed her eyes, oddly comforted by his presence, and let herself drift towards the light that rose out of the darkness. The light grew like a white flower, its petals unfolding, stretching out in every direction to divide the darkness and reduce its domain. Then the light warmed her, surrounded and enveloped her, and she felt her spirit expanding across the void to explore the unknown. Past and future were as one, the frozen moment of His birth, and His growing, which flowered around her in majesty and silence, was the sign that she would soon be renewed.

'All right,' she promised, 'I'll sleep.'

'Good,' Moshe replied.

'Don't stay away for too long. I think he'll soon waken up.'

'No, I don't think so. I think it's too early. His pulse and heartbeat are improving, but they're still much too slow; and his temperature, though rising

steadily, is still even lower than yours.'

'Have you made an estimate?'

'A few more days.'

'No,' Kate said, 'you're wrong.'

She opened her eyes when she heard his sigh, saw him shrugging his broad shoulders, reaching up to touch the small scar on his cheek, as if reminded of former pain. He was looking steadily at her, his grey eyes grave, studying her with a muted intensity that said more than words could. She realised this dimly, in some distant recess of her mind, but her feelings at that moment all belonged to the other who, breathing evenly in the adjacent bed, was dominating her senses.

'So,' Moshe said, 'I'll go.'

'Yes,' she replied. 'I'm fine.'

'Don't forget to ring the bell if you need anything.'

'Don't worry. I won't.'

He leaned forward instinctively and then stopped himself. He straightened up again, pursing his lips, then nodded, gave a hesitant smile and turned away and walked out. Kate watched the door closing, feeling oddly desolated, then she turned her head and looked across the room at the one in the other bed.

He was lying flat on his back, a sheet covering his lower body, his hands by his sides, the sensors attached to his wrists and chest, wires running from his head to the EEG machine, his profile silhouetted in the striations of sunlight pouring obliquely through the window above him. He looked like a dead man, horizontal, straight, but his chest rose and fell as he breathed in and out, and Kate, hearing the sound of his breathing, felt herself straining towards him.

She closed her eyes and put her head back, trying to slip into his mind, saw the darkness, then light, a spot of light growing larger, a pulsating light that soon became a sun obliterating the Nothing. The Nothing was her own body, the void created by His need, but now the light, which was He, giving birth to His being, flared out to touch the darkness with glory and return her to wholeness.

The darkness rolled back, the seas parted, the land appeared, the herb yielded seed and the tree yielded fruit, and the moon and the sun shared the heavens to let the stars shine. Out of the whirlwind came His voice, giving substance to the silence, and the seed, which was scattered on His breath,

brought the years and their seasons. He wept over His creation, moved by pity and love, and His tears formed the clouds and shed rain upon the stones of the Earth. The waters were abundant and the skies received the living, and the dry land grew green and fed the beasts both in darkness and light. To be whole, He became, and cast Himself around the firmament, and saw that His creation, which was good, was devoid of His image. And He breathed and raised the dust, and into the dust He breathed His life, and His image rose up and was touched with the wonder of innocence. In this innocence was dread, the isolation of singularity, and He, observing the reflection of His own anguish, split His image in two. She sprang forth from the other, to the fierce and blinding light, the female to His male, the plurality of His Oneness, and then He came out of the whirlwind and touched her to give life to the living.

Kate experienced great joy, a transcendental exultation, and felt the life pouring back into her body as the other awakened to sunlight. She opened her eyes and saw the ceiling, a white sheen, a shimmering sky, then she drifted up and merged and returned to find her body renewed. She turned her head and saw him moving, raising his right hand and clenching his fist, flexing his fingers to feel his coursing blood and confirm that he was. The hand dropped and he was still, breathing deeply, his head unmoving, still silhouetted in the sunlight pouring obliquely from the window above him.

Renewed, Kate sat up, her heart pounding, her blood warm, released from the languor of exhaustion, her skin alive and receptive. She felt triumphant and fearful, filled with love and trepidation, and as she swung her long legs off the bed, her thoughts collided and scattered. The room expanded and contracted, the light flared up and died, and she blinked and licked her lips and walked towards the burning orb of the sun. The sun was the light, a stream of gold above his head, illuminating the contours of his face as she reached out to touch him.

He stared at her, not startled, his eyes silvery-grey and neutral, reflecting light and her miniaturised image in some space beyond knowing. His serenity was absolute, a beginning and ending, couched in the acceptance of being and brooking no doubts. Kate looked and was enslaved, transported out of her self, surrendering to the imperative of his presence and embracing his will. She gazed down and was frozen, no longer able to act, simply waiting, with the patience of the lost, for his words to reveal her.

‘*Be*,’ he said, and thus became, his voice the signature to his birth, a whisper resonant with innocence and wisdom, at once a statement and order. ‘*Fore*,’ he said, after a pause, his lips shivering with the effort, as if the word was an indecipherable hieroglyphic, barbaric and strange. ‘*Abra*,’ he added, staring at Kate, destroying the myth of her maturity, the word conjuring up the mysteries of her childhood with its promise of magic. ‘*Ham*,’ he said, raising his right hand, studying his fingers, looking puzzled, as if the word, ricocheting in his head, had led him into confusion. ‘*Was*,’ he said, dropping his hand, his silvery-grey eyes focused inward, gazing back along the years to some beginning in the mists of lost time. ‘*Was I*,’ he continued, speaking slowly, savouring the words, tentatively knitting them together in search of sense, being foiled, almost sighing. ‘*I*,’ he said, isolating it, inching along the blade of meaning, letting the word drop like a pebble on ice, ringing lightly in Kate’s ears.

‘Before *Abraham*… was I,’ he said, trying to place the emphasis, raising his head and then letting it fall again, as if too weak to move. ‘Before Abraham *was*… I,’ and then he seemed to sigh again, the ages whispering as they glided through the silence of his interminable pause.

He closed his eyes and licked his lips, breathing evenly, his hands at rest, confused and yet perfectly calm, accepting one for the other. He lay thus for a long time, relaxed, all too human, his body coloured by rays of golden sunlight, his bearded face strangely ageless. Then he looked up at Kate, his silvery-grey eyes hypnotising, drawing her in to distant moons and wheeling stars and unsung planets, then reached up and touched her shoulder, his fingers exploring flesh and bone, and then took a deep breath, experimenting with his lips, and eventually, triumphantly, yet perhaps with a hint of sadness, gasped the words of revelation and faith and ineradicable commitment.

‘*I am*,’ he said.

PART THREE:

MINISTRY

‘Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.’

- *Matthew*, 5: 17

‘… and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.’

- *Matthew*, 16:18

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Having spoken, he fell silent, his brow furrowed in thought, as if his words, springing out of the vast silence of his gestation, had unlocked the door to human doubt. His confusion was obvious, rippling across his prismatic blankness, shadowing his impossible serenity and etching fine lines in his face, thus humanising his extraordinary composure and rendering him mortal. He blinked and gazed at Kate, his silvery-grey eyes growing dimmer, still magnetic but less alien that before, the pupils shrinking to normal size. Then he stared around the room, pursed his lips experimentally, raised his right hand, then his left, turned them slowly, flexed his fingers, taking in the geometry of flesh and bone before letting them fall again.

Kate stared at him, speechless, both exultant and disbelieving, his words echoing in her mind and fading away to leave a threatening silence. Why threatening? She wasn't sure. It was something in his silence; something forcing her to concentrate on his face and its subtle metamorphosis. The same face, yet different, altered almost imperceptibly, his skin neither white nor dark, his features faintly Semitic, the dark beard flecked with grey, the eyes now also grey, his serenity finally shattered by awareness and unspoken questions.

Studying him, Kate felt dazed, her emotions in turmoil, trying to reconcile her excitement and fear and get a grip on her senses. She shook her head from side to side, her thoughts spinning and colliding, only aware, as she reached out for the bell above the bed that her heart was beating dangerously fast. His eyes followed her shaking hand, saw the bell, returned to her; and her hand, which was dangling in the air, seemed to freeze of its own accord.

'No,' he said, speaking quietly, his voice gently commanding, slipping through the silence like the blade that hypnotises its victim. She heard the voice, or felt it, and her hand dropped away, still shaking as it hung by her side, the fingers opening and closing. She stared at him, confused, wanting to

protect him and frightened of him, feeling even in the warmth of her concern that his presence was dangerous.

'Who are you?' she asked, and her fear disappeared immediately, giving way to a feeling that might have been maternal love as he blinked, glanced about him and again looked confused, shaking his head from side to side and stroking his beard.

'I don't know,' he said, his voice soft and oddly resonant, speaking English with an untraceable accent, his words clear and precise.

'Do you know where you are?'

'Where I belong,' he replied. 'I only know that I am where I belong and that time will reveal me.' He looked directly at her, his steady gaze compelling, while the early evening light, growing dimmer, sketched dark stripes on his face. 'You have been with me a long time,' he said. 'What is willed, will be done.'

'What is… *willed*?'

'It was willed.'

He turned away, as if startled, as if someone else had spoken, his eyes widening and framed by the sunlight fading over his face… A grey light, on grey eyes, the eyes merging with the light, disappearing until his head dropped lower and the pupils contracted. He was still lying down, his upper body pale and lean, his lower body covered by the white sheet, his hands clasped on his stomach.

He glanced along his own body, saw the sensors on his chest and wrists, furrowed his brow in puzzlement, sighed, almost smiled, then used his right hand to tug the sensor off his left wrist, reversed the procedure to remove the sensor from his right wrist, then tugged the sensors off his chest and raised his hands to his head as if about to remove the EEG wires. His hands stopped in mid-air, hovering just above his forehead, then his brow creased in thought and his hands started shaking, moving away and then coming back again, the fingers outstretched and searching. He sighed, took a deep breath, then removed the metal cap, stared at it and shuddered a little and then threw it away. It struck the far wall and then bounced on the floor, ringing out like a bell, and Kate felt her body twitching with shock before his gaze returned to her. He studied her for a very long time, breathing evenly, calmly.

'No fear,' he said eventually, his voice hollow, almost echoing, an ethereal sound that writhed through the silence to reach out and touch her. 'In

my dreams, which were many, was this one recurring lesson: the darkness will roll back to reveal the light and there is no need to fear. Now, I am confused, and my words are not my own, and in my ignorance I only know one thing: that I do not know what fear is.'

Kate opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out immediately; instead she licked her lips and rubbed her eyes, feeling renewed, but unreal.

'You remember nothing?' she managed to say.

'The long darkness,' he replied. 'The light grew out of darkness and the dreams were mere fragments that comforted.'

Kate thought of her own dreams, which had blossomed as her body weakened, filling her with the love and fear that now bound her to the man on the bed. He was breathing deeply and evenly, his gaze focused on the ceiling, his fine-boned hands resting by his sides, not moving at all.

'I feel weary,' he said. 'I have slept a long time. My body is weak and my mind is no more than an empty shell. Who speaks? My voice sounds strange. The fragments float in a darkness. The Teacher of Righteousness is with me and once showed me the way.'

'The Teacher of Righteousness?'

He glanced at her in confusion, his brow furrowed, his face more human, his lips shivering with the effort of speaking the very words that confused him.

'Yes,' he said, 'the Teacher of Righteousness. He came before me and showed the way. In the darkness of the caves, which in darkness I could see, were the scrolls revealing the lineaments of the life that gave shape to my own.' He closed his eyes, his brow furrowed, slowly raised his pale hands, spread his fingers and placed them around his head and gently rocked it from side to side. 'My head is empty,' he continued. 'Filled with light, containing nothing. I speak words that come out of the Nothing and mean little to me.' He stopped rocking his head, removed his hands, opened his eyes, glanced at Kate and then stared up at the ceiling, his ascetic lips moving. 'I cannot plan my words and my speech belongs elsewhere; it comes forth from the emptiness inside and must be a foundation. The Tower of Babel, reaching heaven, scattered words across the Earth; and those words, of which I drank, remain with me as light to the darkness. The foundation is language, that which bridges the incompatible, and my words, which I do not understand, will in time weave my meaning.'

Kate listened and then leaned upon the mystery of his speech, drawn in on the ambiguity of his words and their haunting, faintly familiar resonance… Familiar? Yes. It was the resonance of her childhood memories: the words, often alien and obtuse, that had been preached in the synagogue. She was startled, a little frightened, unable to accept what she was hearing; but he drew her eyes towards him, his silvery-grey gaze luminous, and she felt herself surrendering to his will as the fear fell away again.

'Where am I?' he asked.

'In Israel,' Kate replied.

'What is Israel?'

'A country… a place… You don't know this at all?'

'This is part of the Earth,' he said. 'I know that the Earth is but part of the whole. I also know that the Earth, which abides and will endure, is where I have walked and will walk until the darkness descends again.'

'You've been here before?'

'Yes.'

'You remember?'

'I *know*. I stand upon the rock of my faith and have no cause to question it.'

He moved his head slightly, surveyed the room, closed his eyes, murmured something and then opened his eyes again, staring up at the ceiling.

'How do you feel?' Kate asked.

'Feel?'

'I mean your body.'

'My body is whole,' he replied, 'but of little importance.' He spread the fingers of both hands, pressed them down on the bed, and then, with what seemed to be a great effort, pushed himself upright. He shook his head from side to side, shrugged his shoulders, stretched his spine, then sat there, his arms angled behind him, his body pale in the darkening light. 'Flesh and blood,' he said. 'Feeling.'

Kate took a step forward, wanting to reach down and touch him, but then, having made that one step, remained where she was. She felt remote from herself, both fearful and excited, all her senses concentrated on the face of the man on the bed. A contradictory face, at once gentle and imperious, the face of an ancient prophet or warrior, beautiful and fierce. The early evening light

was grey, the room darkening, growing colder, and Kate shivered, feeling lost and ineffectual, wondering what she could say to him. This problem, unexpected but real, was soon solved when he looked at her.

'Where did you find me?'

'You remember nothing?'

'No.'

'You were in some sort of tomb on the summit of the Mount of Olives. That tomb - or whatever it was - appeared to have been buried there, but we don't understand how it got there.'

'I must see it,' he said.

'You can't see it,' Kate replied. 'It disintegrated, leaving nothing but dust. Now there's nothing to see.'

He did not seem perturbed. 'Dust to dust,' he murmured. 'Life rose from the dust and returns to it when we pass on to the other side.'

'The other side?'

'The real world.'

He swung his legs off the bed and placed his feet on the floor, his toes, marble white, the nails long, curling down to the tiles. 'Cold,' he murmured and leaned forward, rocking slightly to check his balance, letting his feet take the weight of his body, his toes rising and falling. The room was growing darker, shadows gathering in the corners, but the light from the window, now a dim haze, slanted down onto his shoulders. He stood up slowly, carefully, as if checking that he could do so, and the white sheet fell to the floor with a rustling sound. Kate saw only his eyes, now closing, now opening, silvery-grey and wandering around the room, unnaturally bright and intense. He stared at her, his brow furrowed, as if trying to recognise her, then ran his hands lightly down his face and gazed up at the ceiling.

'I remember little,' he said, 'but the fragments are enough, increasing with each passing moment and giving shape to my thoughts. I am calm and unafraid. I speak these words before I know them. My coming was prophesied in the scrolls in the dark caves, the rituals of my drama rehearsed by the Teacher of Righteousness. I know the name, but not the man. His face is blank, his source a mystery. He was there before I came into being, long ago, in a strange land.'

'What land?'

'That is unknown. The sun shines on parched soil. A land of great beauty

and desolation, where man's spirit abides.'

'How long ago?'

'I do not know where or when. I know of a time before my own, but in my mind they are one. My memories are like clouds, now obscuring, now revealing, offering isolated glimpses of things that do not make sense to me… A people called the Essenes, the curled edges of ancient scrolls, a *drachma*, a *denarius*, a pinnacle of stone, the presentation of a child in the Court of the Gentiles, when his keepers, male and female, offered a winged creature as a sacrifice.'

He lowered his gaze to look at Kate, his brow furrowed in confusion, as if uncertain of what he was saying, wondering where his words came from. Kate shivered, feeling cold, frightened by what she was hearing, but hypnotised by the glittering brilliance of his eyes and his noble bearing.

'You mentioned the Court of Gentiles,' she said. 'Do you know what that was?'

'No. I can only see it. The recollection is very clear. The sun shines on the sloping stone and colonnades, making everything bright. There is a barrier. The Court of Women. I do not know what such names mean. The Court of Women or the Court of the Israelites… perhaps one and the same.' He closed his eyes and shook his head, pressed his right hand to his brow, removed the hand and let it fall to his side and then looked straight at her. 'The Court of the Israelites,' he said. 'And you say I am in Israel… The child of whom I speak was myself, the presentation near here.'

Kate's feeling of unreality deepened, increasing her fear and awe, unravelling all the teachings of her past and leaving her naked. She stared at the wall above his bed, wanting to press the alarm bell, but his gaze, at once calm and commanding, seemed to paralyse her. She felt her senses sliding away, releasing her buried primal self, and she stifled the scream rising from her centre and cloaked it with faltering words.

'A… presentation?'

'A sacrifice.'

'What kind of sacrifice?'

'The child, being myself, was of age and was confirmed in His presence. The sacrifice... relates to this.'

Again he stopped talking, doubt rippling across his face, while the light, growing darker each minute, turned his body to stone.

‘I think my keepers were my parents. I was wrapped in swaddling clothes. They carried me up some steps to the just and devout one who confirmed the uniqueness of my birth. And the prophetess, also, serving then in the temple, looked upon me as the light of redemption and offered thanks to the Lord. And the priest took one of the birds to the lower corner of the altar, wrung its neck and sprinkled its blood on the altar and then put it aside. A second bird was then slaughtered, but also gutted and salted, its blood sprinkled on the top of the altar, its carcass thrown to the flames.’

Kate thought of distant times, of temples baked by the sun, of men in robes sacrificing birds upon an altar of flames. This vision filled her mind, briefly obliterating his features, pushing back the walls of the room to let the past live again. The sky was a white haze, the land harsh and awesome, and the great walls of stone materialised like a mirage in the wilderness. Surveying it, she was part of it, her shadow etched on the temple floor, and she held the precious child to her breast while the altar flames flickered. The child was father to the man, the man destined to change history, and she closed her eyes and opened them again to see the one who was full grown.

He was standing in the same place, his gaze slipping away from her, and the walls of the room moved back in to reinstate some reality. Kate stared at him, speechless, unnerved by what he had made her witness, then was calmed by the sound of his voice, strangely distant yet resonant.

‘I do not know what that means, but I remember my own infancy. Between the events of that day and my thirteenth year there is nothing at all. My thirteenth year was my true beginning. I know this because I utter it. I see the priests in the shadows of the colonnades of the temple, and know that in their presence I waxed strong in spirit and wisdom. I forsook my father and mother, learned detachment and concentration, and assumed my responsibilities as a student of the affairs of the Most High.’

He turned away from her, examined the door of the room, and then took a step forward, very slowly, as if learning to walk. His second step was also hesitant, his third taken with greater confidence, then he advanced to the door of the room and turned around and walked back to her. He stopped in front of her and took a deep breath, looking down at his own feet, raised and lowered his arms and walked away and turned back to her again. His eyes, gleaming unnaturally in the deepening gloom, drew her into their depths; in those depths there was fire and decomposing flesh and the bleached bones of

history.

‘At first you knew nothing,’ Kate murmured dreamily, ‘but now you’re remembering things…’

‘Mere fragments,’ he replied. ‘They pass through my thoughts like clouds. My infancy, my thirteenth year in the temple, then my first great temptation. Between these, there is nothing but the darkness and the silence of passing time.’

‘Your parents?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘And the Teacher of Righteousness?’

‘I don’t know… Someone who lived before my time and prophesied my coming.’

‘This awakening?’

‘No,’ he said. ‘My former awakening… in that time I now speak of.’

Kate started losing herself, retreating into her mind, gazing out of the long tunnels of her eyes at the creature before her. His face was now more human, etched with lines of experience, gaunt, almost primitive, yet inexplicably civilised and noble, touched with strange beauty. He was a normal human being, a creature of flesh and blood, but his genesis and the speed of his recovery had contradicted such facts. Staring at him, Kate felt childish, returned to innocence, filled with wonder, overwhelmed and frightened and excited, cast adrift from the rational world. The mystery of his presence teased her, threw her from one shore to another; then, drowning in quiet desperation, she sank down through her deepest fears.

‘What else do you remember?’ she asked, hardly hearing her own voice.

‘I see a ribbon of water. A line of people stretches to it. I wade in the water and am dazzled by the sun, and the man with the face of a prophet takes hold of my shoulders. He immerses me in the water, shouting words I cannot hear, and I rise up as the heavens open out and a white dove appears.’ He fell silent and closed his eyes, looking back into his past, obviously trying to weave some meaning from his words, but bowing his head in defeat. ‘I do not know what this means, but I know that it was willed; and after it - how long I cannot say - I was tempted and tested.’

Kate started to speak, but immediately forgot what she wanted to ask, the sound of his voice emptying her mind and letting him pour himself into it.

‘I see myself in the wilderness, refusing to turn stone to bread; on a

mountain with the desert at my feet and the evil one whispering. He, who is my opposite, wishes to tempt me but fails; he then guides me to a pinnacle of the temple beneath the sun, where, to test my powers, he commands me to throw myself down and let the angels protect me. I refuse to tempt the Lord as the evil one tempts me; and after this, turning away from his seductions, I embark on my calling.'

Fascinated, Kate stared at him, hardly aware of his nakedness, her gaze drawn to the glittering of his eyes and their invincible calmness. He was not returning her gaze, but instead was looking inward, his brow furrowed as he tried to survey the voids between his sparse recollections. Then he raised his eyes again, looking at her and into her, his power flowing out all around her to render her helpless. She held her breath and clenched her fists, feeling fear and love at once, wanting desperately to press the bell and call for help, but unable to do so.

'You still don't know who you are?'

'No,' he replied. 'The words offered tell all there is to know for the present; perhaps time, if not obstructed, will reveal more… I have patience. You must practice it.'

He looked directly at her, his heavy-lidded eyes unblinking, growing brighter in the deepening gloom and resembling cats' eyes. Kate shivered, more confused, no longer sure of his nature, thinking of good and evil, of purity and amorality, and wondering what the voids in his recollections might eventually reveal.

'The words uttered,' he continued, 'were uttered before I knew them, but already I am learning to express my thoughts and colour the voids. Soon I will be full-grown, my body and spirit as one; and then, by the grace of the Most High, I will learn of my purpose. In the meantime, until time itself reveals me, you will stand by my right hand.'

An imperious request, offered quietly and implacably, it cut through Kate's confusion and doubt to leave only fear. She tore her eyes from his face and stared blindly at the wall, thought of Moshe and then raised her right hand to press the alarm bell. Yet even as she made this move, her fingers wavering in the gloom, she was bathed in a wave of heat, her raised arm became numb, and she thought she heard his voice inside her head, a sound stripping her senses. She stepped back, her heart pounding, wanting to scream but simply gasping, the breath drawn from her lungs by the wave of

heat that seemed to pour from his body. Then the light flared up around him, a shimmering haze distorting his features, and Kate blinked and it faded away, taking with it the burning heat. Kate gasped and licked her lips, trying to control her pounding heart, then fearfully, helplessly, as if no longer in charge of herself, she dropped her hand and was drawn again to his eyes, mesmerised by their brilliance.

'What is that?' he asked.

'It's a bell… to call those listening.'

'Those listening?'

'Our voices are being recorded. They can hear us in another part of the hospital. But they won't come in here until I ring the bell. They want to talk to you, also.'

'They are men of authority?'

'Yes.'

'That is good. With such men I can give and receive and eventually find revelation. What is willed, will be done.'

The brilliance faded from his eyes and the room returned to normal as he stepped back, gave an audible sigh and then nodded at her. The fear fell away from her and was replaced with a rapidly growing, protective love as inexplicable as the paralysis that had preceded it. She was transported out of herself, her will now his will, and she stepped forward and saw in his gaunt face a terrible weariness. He covered that weariness with his hands, bowed his head and murmured something, then moved away to sit on the edge of the bed, leaning forward and taking deep, even breaths. Kate was overcome with emotion, with a desperate, inchoate yearning, and she turned aside, too shaken to say anything, and finally managed to press the bell.

She stood there for some time, keeping her finger on the bell, thinking of the bright star, the storm advancing towards her, the black monolith rising out of the rubble, Moshe embracing her in that ultimate darkness as their hearts beat together. She also thought of the stranger's recovery, of her own weakening as he grew stronger, of her dreams about his life growing out of the void and her belief that a bond existed between them and might never be broken. And then she thought of his mesmeric powers, of the light and heat that had emanated from him, and she shivered, feeling fear and love at once, and wondered what was still to come.

Footsteps could now be heard racing along the corridor outside. They

stopped right by the door. Kate looked up as the door opened and Moshe entered the room, his eyes, also grey, very bright and intense as he stared at her, nodded, then studied the man on the bed, obviously shaken by the revelation of his recovery. The man raised his head, spread his hands out in the air; then, his face still gaunt with that terrible weariness, and yet, in contradiction, almost radiant with inner peace, quietly offered the words that gave substance to his being and separated him from all other men.

'My name is Joshua,' he said.

20

Leaving the hospital in the early hours of the morning, walking away from the room in which the miraculous had occurred and his own world, once orderly, had exploded, Moshe felt his heart beating and electrifying his blood, while his thoughts, uncontrollable, swirled around the image of Kate, her brown eyes reflecting rapture and fear before the man from the Mount. Moshe stopped once and took a deep breath, blinked his eyes and glanced around him, seeing the spacious reception area, now quiet, nearly empty, trying to will himself to accept that it was real and not part of a strange dream. A medical orderly passed him, his white smock rustling in the silence, and Moshe bit his upper lip and then walked on, heading for the exit.

Kate's face floated before him, making his heart race all the more, drawing his buried self out of its tomb and resurrecting his lost hopes. He thought of his wife and children, of how their deaths had affected him, and understood that the appearance of the man from the Mount was, with its mystery and terrifying implications, tearing him from the rock of his former self-discipline and leaving his emotions, long hidden from further wounding, exposed and responsive to Kate's presence.

He walked through the swinging doors and stopped again on the top step, breathing deeply of the chill morning air and gazing up at the cloudy sky. There were no stars up there and the silence was complete, but he felt, as he had never felt before, that the void was alive. Reality was the dream, the illusion masquerading as truth, and the very presence of the man from the Mount had made logic redundant. What manner of man was he? What had kept him alive? Moshe remembered the ringing bell, his urgent race along the corridor, the door opening to reveal Kate's haunted eyes, the naked man just behind her. After that it became unreal, a confusion of noise and motion, people coming and going as if in a dream because no one could grasp it. Moshe recalled it vaguely, still too dazed to take it in: the startling words on

the tape-recording, the interrogations leading nowhere, the man's ambiguous recollections and invincible calm as Kate, like someone caught in a trap, retreated into herself. Once Moshe reached out to touch her, ignoring the doctors and security men, and this recollection - of his fingertips at her pale cheek - had a pure, vivid clarity. All else was but a dream that would surely soon dissolve: the security men taking over, the man facing them with frightening self-containment, the door finally shutting him in as Kate was escorted along the corridor and laid down on a bed in another room. Moshe had stood beside her bedside, looking down at her closing eyes, wanting to drown in her lips, on her body, and walking out with reluctance. Was it logical? No. But it had exploded his last defences. Confusion and fear, love and yearning and pain, had rolled over him to sweep him away from the chains of his past.

Moshe knew what was happening to him, but he didn't quite know why. It had started on the Mount of Olives when he first laid eyes on Kate and saw, in the stricken rigidity of her features, his wife and children in death. A nightmare and dream, an ending and beginning: the ending of his self-willed emotional isolation and the beginning of his obsession with Kate and her buried pain. So, it was happening and he had to accept it; but now, as he stood and watched the dark clouds in the black sky, he could no longer ignore the nagging possibility that Kate's helpless involvement with the man from the Mount, was, like his own helpless involvement with Kate, preordained and impossible to break.

Moshe lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply and blew the smoke out, then walked down the steps and turned left towards the small, modern synagogue. Still shaken by what had happened, his every thought including Kate, he was startled out of his reverie when a dark figure emerged from beneath the Marc Chagall windows of the synagogue. Moshe froze where he stood, his body tensing for action, but then, as the shadowy figure advanced, he recognised Leon Halcomb.

'Not you again,' Moshe said.

Leon stopped just in front of him, swaying slightly and steadying himself, removing a silver hip flask from his lips and grinning laconically. He had obviously been up all night and was clearly very drunk, his tie loose, his face sagging with exhaustion, his bloodshot eyes blinking repeatedly.

'An early-morning call,' he said, grinning, 'but I've been waiting for

hours.'

'What for?'

'A few answers.'

'You're drunk.'

'That's very true.'

'I'm not accustomed to talking to drunkards, particularly at this time of the morning. Go to bed, Leon. Sleep it off.'

Leon winked and cocked his head, waving one hand in refusal, leaning forward and then straightening up again, trying to keep his eyes open.

'Unpleasant, major-general. Not sociable. I'm only doing my duty, after all.'

'What duty?'

'The journalist *par excellence* never sleeps. You should know that by now.'

'This is ridiculous. Get out of my way, Leon.'

'No.'

'If you don't move, I'll have you arrested.'

'Kindly have me arrested.'

Moshe sighed and shook his head, feeling contempt rather than anger, then, recalling the relationship between Kate and this man, let the anger and bitterness wash through him. He tried not to think about it, to retain his objectivity, but a vision of Leon and Kate coiled together sprang to life in his head. He looked at Leon and then lowered his eyes, trying to obliterate the image, then shook his head from side to side, shame and guilt whipping through him.

'All right,' he said wearily, raising his head. 'What is it this time?'

'The same as always,' Leon said.

'You know that's not possible.'

'Why?'

'We have our reasons.'

'Either let me see Kate or give me a reasonable explanation. Damn it, Moshe, you know you've no right to hold her, and I'll soon have to use that fact.'

'Any mention of Kate in your column and you'll be out of this country.'

Leon visibly stiffened, his shoulders straightening, his hip flask motionless, the hand holding the flask near his lips, his eyes staring across it.

Moshe saw his eyes clearly, even through the starless night, and realised that Leon, though drunk, had not lost his wits. For a moment Moshe almost admired him - or at least respected his tenacity - but then, when Leon grinned, offering the blade of his mockery, Moshe felt his detestation returning like phlegm in the throat.

'Are you threatening to deport me?' Leon said dryly.

'Something like that,' Moshe replied.

'Then you must be holding Kate against her will.'

'No, Leon, we're not.'

'She can't still be in shock.'

'I'm not at liberty to discuss her condition.'

'Nor, may I assume, are you willing to expand on your rather curt answers.'

'You assume correctly.'

Leon grinned and lowered his eyes, studying the darkness around his feet, nodding his head as if talking to himself and then looking up again.

'This is a very strange business,' he said softly. 'I just can't work it out.'

'I'm not sure what you're getting at, Leon.'

'I'm talking about that incident on the summit of the Mount of Olives and, in particular, about the people you brought down from there and placed under guard in this hospital.'

'We've discussed all this before. There's nothing more to add. The destruction was caused by some unknown phenomenon and those people, including Kate, are being kept under observation for that very reason.'

'Then why all the secrecy? Why can't I even *telephone* Kate?'

'She was caught in the eye of the storm. She was therefore confused. We don't want her, or the others, to speak to the media until we've sorted out just what happened. We would not, after all, wish to cause undue panic because of honestly reported misinterpretations.'

'That sounds very pedantic, major-general.'

'It wasn't intended that way.'

Moshe glanced past Leon's head at the cars beyond the garden, saw the darkness over the valley below, the soaring hills farther on. He felt exhausted and unreal, his thoughts slipping and sliding, and he knew, as he returned his gaze to Leon, that he would have to be careful. Leon's head was tilted sideways, shoulders slumped, but his eyes remained bright. He raised the hip

flask to his lips and had a drink, licked his lips and then sighed.

'What about the belief of the Americans and Russians that something actually crashed on the Mount of Olives?'

'Nothing crashed and you know it. If anything had crashed on the Mount of Olives, Kate wouldn't be alive right now.'

'It could have been something small,' Leon insisted. 'Perhaps a satellite exploded and part of it - a very valuable part - destroyed that church on the Mount.'

'You've been reading the wrong newspapers,' Moshe replied.

'Really?'

'Really. There was no sign of scorching or radioactivity - and that site is now open for inspection.'

'And the bulldozers?'

'What about them?'

'Why did you need them, if not, as some have claimed, to cover up a large hole in the ground?'

'There was no large hole in the ground. The rubble of the ruins had fallen across the road, and we simply used the bulldozers to push it back.'

Moshe kept his gaze steady, challenging Leon's laconic grin, trying to force the image of Kate from his mind and control his emotions. Her body. Her naked body. Leon naked between her raised legs. He was shocked that he could think this, visualising it with such clarity, and his shame at the strength of his possessive outrage caused his heart to beat quicker. This is lunacy, he thought. An unforgivable childishness. The man from the Mount is alive, his resurrection could change history, and I can't keep that thought in my head because of Kate Hirschfield. He put his hand up to his face, closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead, then opened his eyes again and looked at Leon, wondering how he could lose him.

'Well,' Leon said, 'we can only hope that you come up with a rational explanation pretty soon, because apart from my personal interest in getting Kate out of there, the lack of an explanation is already starting to cause you embarrassment.'

'You've lost me again, Leon. Absolutely.'

Leon nodded and grinned, obviously amused by Moshe's denial. He put the hip flask to his lips, had a drink, lowered the flask, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand and kept his gaze steady.

‘You know exactly what I mean, Moshe Eitan. You know exactly what the Chapel of the Ascension, the Golden Gate and the Muslim graveyard mean to certain Christians, Jews and Moslems respectively. It’s no secret at all that the Christians are extremely disturbed by the destruction of the Chapel of the Ascension and are demanding a coherent explanation. Nor is it a secret that the opened graves in the Muslim graveyard have encouraged a lot of Moslems to believe that their Day of Judgement is at hand - and that last week there were moderately violent demonstrations by some of those Moslems. Finally, word of mouth has it that the recent embarrassing clash between Netorei Karta zealots and your own conscript troops started because the zealots wished to worship at the Golden Gate - now collapsed, therefore open - and were incensed that that area, like the Muslim graveyard, had been cordoned off. Word of mouth, frequently reliable, also insists that those zealots are convinced that the opening of the formerly sealed Golden Gate is a sign that the Messiah will soon be coming to usher in the redemption.’

‘Pure hypothesis,’ Moshe said.

‘Is it? I wonder. Such scenes are increasing rapidly around Jerusalem - in tandem with the rumours. This suggests, Moshe, irrespective of what you might say, that what happened on the Mount of Olives, if left unexplained much longer, could lead to bad trouble in Jerusalem.’

Moshe felt his heart racing, but he kept his gaze steady, trying to look more assured than he felt, a distant fear creeping towards him.

‘I’m tired of all this,’ he said. ‘It’s four o’clock in the morning. I think I’d like to go to bed and forget this whole business.’

‘You sleep alone?’ Leon asked.

‘What was that?’ Moshe said, startled.

Leon took a step forward, tilted his head and grinned mockingly, his eyes glinting in the moonlit darkness, his gaze steady and sharp.

‘I just wondered,’ he said. ‘You’ve been a bachelor for a long time. Not a thing has been revealed about your personal life since the death of your family. Interesting, yes? Moshe Eitan, the Jewish hero. Idolised by half the women of this country, but has no private life. No woman has told her tale, no pleasant vice has been reported, and Moshe Eitan, the macho warrior and *folks-mensh*, seems as pure as the driven snow. Give me a story, major-general. A real exclusive for the masses. The real man behind the public image, naked and unafraid.’

The rage took hold of Moshe with sudden, shocking force, blinding him to all but Leon's face as it wavered in moonlight. He balled his fists by his sides, clenched them tight but kept them there, trying to fight the enormous tension in his body and the urge to do violence. He saw Leon staring at him, grin mocking, eyes observant, and he wrenched himself back to common-sense and slowly unclenched his fists.

'My private life is my own,' he said.

'Do you actually have one?' Leon responded.

'Your anti-Semitism is becoming obscene, Leon, but you've no right to ask that.'

'I'm not anti-Semitic, Moshe. I'm against Zionism; there's a difference. If I were anti-Semitic I wouldn't be concerned for Kate Hirschfield.'

'You're concerned only for yourself. She's your mistress, as is well known. Your concern is for your own empty bed, so let's leave it at that.'

'That's *my* private life,' Leon said.

'Then kindly keep it to yourself.'

'I just thought, given your celibacy, that you'd like to hear about it.'

'Keep your filthy mouth shut!'

Moshe regretted the words immediately and recoiled from his own vehemence, stepping back and then a little to the side, as if about to move off. Then he stopped, suddenly numb, feeling Leon's eyes upon him, and turned his head to look directly at him and gauge what he was thinking. Leon was leaning slightly forward, his brow furrowed in concentration, the mocking smile no longer on his face, his ascetic lips tight. Moshe watched him, feeling cold, the distant fear now surrounding him, and then Leon, as if realising something, straightened up and nodded.

'Is that it?' he said. 'Two motives disguised as one? One motive is the mystery of what happened on the Mount of Olives; the other, more touching, is that the great Moshe Eitan has romantic designs on Kate Hirschfield. Don't tell me it's true, Moshe!'

Moshe started to walk away, feeling torn by rage and guilt, but Leon, moving forward quickly, grabbed hold of his elbow. Moshe tugged his arm loose and looked around to see Leon's flushed face.

'It's true, isn't it?' Leon said.

'Don't be ridiculous,' Moshe replied.

'Damn it, Moshe, it's written all over your face; her very name gets you

jumping.'

'You're drunk, Leon. You're talking nonsense.'

'Damn you, Moshe, tell the truth! You can hardly bear to hear her name mentioned - especially by me.'

'That's enough. I'm going home.'

'I want to see her.'

'You can't.'

'Two motives instead of one, Moshe. I know it! *That's what you're hiding*!'

Moshe hurried away, whipped on my Leon's voice, something breaking and crashing down inside him, leaving him damaged. His rage gave way to guilt, a shameful acceptance of the truth, and he marched across the garden towards the parked cars with his heart pounding furiously. Then he heard Leon's voice, ringing out of the night behind him, loud and precise and filled with rage, almost out of control.

'You won't get her, major-general! You hear me? *You won't get her*! And don't pretend you're just performing your duty! *You won't keep her that way*!'

Too ashamed to face Leon, Moshe didn't look back, but instead kept walking towards the cars parked above the valley's vast darkness. He climbed into his own vehicle, slammed the door and drove off quickly, relieved when the hospital fell far behind him and the darkness surrounded him. The clouds were thinning, letting moonlight filter down, illuminating the desolate, silent land on both sides of the car. He drove slowly and carefully, too disturbed to go faster, still shaken by what Leon had said and by his own urge to deny it.

Yet he could not deny it, and was haunted by Leon's words, having to accept that he had lost his heart to Kate and was helpless before her. Leon had seen it in his face (and doubtless heard it in his voice) and now, as he headed up the hills towards Talpiot, Moshe was shocked that he could so little conceal the love and pain he was feeling.

He glanced down at Jerusalem, now sleeping, couched in darkness, and shivered, thinking of what the storm had brought and what it meant to the future. The public or private future? In his mind they were the same. He could no longer separate his love for Kate from his personal history; nor could he divorce it from the events on the Mount of Olives and his own

emotional involvement in those events. And this confusion, aroused by his extraordinary experiences with Kate, was what Leon had sensed and laid bare.

Moshe pulled into his driveway, climbed out of the car, glanced down at the darkened domes and minarets of Jerusalem, then looked thoughtfully at his house. A light shone in the living room, beaming out over the patio, and Moshe, knowing who was inside, thought of Leon and trembled. My private life, he thought. What ever made him think of that? He recalled Leon's words, his invidious suggestiveness, and was lacerated with shame and trepidation as he approached the building. Does Leon know? he wondered. Or was it just jealous spite? The questions coiled like thorns around his heart as he opened the front door.

He locked the door behind him and walked through to the living room, feeling burdened with the weight of Leon's words and his own guilt and shame. Leah was sitting in an armchair, drinking a Sabra, her long legs crossed, her dark hair falling onto her dark dress and the curve of her breasts. She glanced up when he entered, smiled sleepily, waved one hand, her fingers tanned and thin, devoid of rings, her fingernails bright with polish. Dark eyes, like his wife's eyes, like Kate's eyes, dark as death, each face blending into the other and stripping his senses. He stopped just in front of her, tried to smile and failed dismally; instead he reached out and stroked her hair, then let his hand fall away.

'You're late,' she said.

'I was held up at the hospital.'

'I'll have to charge you extra for that.'

'You always do,' he replied.

My private life is my secret shame, he thought, and Leon somehow sensed it; now, on top of my jealousy and rage, I'll have to live with his knowing. Yet why do I do it? Why not someone who cares? Why must it always be someone who treats it as trade? He glanced around the room, surveying the photographs of his family, concentrating on his wife with her dark hair and dark eyes, wounding himself by looking back down at the whore and accepting what he was doing. No involvement, he thought. The denial of emotion. A pathetic charade involving dark hair and dark eyes, but no involvement other than that: their flesh bought but not yielding. Now he knew what he was doing, had been doing all those years, and as he draped his

jacket over the settee he saw Kate there in front of him.

'What do you want, Moshe?'

'The same as always,' he replied.

'You won't solve the problem that way,' Leah said. 'My hands won't make her go away.'

'It's all I can do, Leah.'

'I doubt that, major-general. You won't betray your late wife by coming inside me; you'll just put her to rest at last.'

He smiled at that, but shook his head from side to side, saying nothing but feeling the anguish swelling deep inside him. She was wrong: he couldn't do it. He hadn't been able to do it for years. He had loved and his love had been so true that his wife's death had numbed him. An emotional and physical paralysis, a retreat from further wounding; he had wrapped himself in ice and drifted away past all hope of returning. Now he looked down at Leah, his secret whore, almost an old friend; saw his wife and then Kate, one face superimposed on the other, and understood that what he was seeking in Kate was his own resurrection.

His emotions swelled up and threatened to burst his beating heart, grief and love and inextricable guilt bringing tears to his eyes. He undressed quickly, letting his clothes fall to the floor, then sat in the chair and started trembling as if with some fever. Leah stared at him, startled, opening and closing her lips, then she undressed and knelt on the floor and placed her hands on his thighs. He tried to smile but couldn't manage it, so closed his eyes and put his head back, concentrating on the softness of her lips and the artful play of her fingers. Then Kate entered his mind, her dark eyes revealing death, the dark eyes of his wife staring sunward, gazing into eternity. He opened his eyes and looked down, seeing himself in Leah's fingers, thinking of what Leon had said, of the wounds Kate had exposed, of the destruction inherent in his need to view her as his manifest destiny. That belief was a charade, an infantile self-deception, a subterfuge for the more basic need to lose his guilt in Kate's body.

Understanding this, Moshe broke, groaning aloud and then sobbing, letting the waves of pain pour out to leave him spent in the relative peace of acceptance. He sobbed a long time, quietly, without shame, and then stood up, waved a hand in rejection, and entered his bedroom.

He lay down and closed his eyes, drifting languidly in the darkness, then

sat up when he heard Leah's footsteps, the door opening and closing. He then reached for a cigarette, lit it and inhaled, blew the smoke out as he climbed off the bed and returned to the lounge. The room was empty and silent, chilled by memories of grief, and eventually he looked around him, studying the photographs of his family, and accepted that he had turned the room into a mausoleum for the shards of the broken past.

My wife and children were killed, he thought, and the pain was too great; my emotions, stripped bare at that moment, turned as cold as the dead. He shuddered again as he remembered (*the dead eyes staring sunward*), then inhaled too deeply on his cigarette, still aware of his beating heart. I had to live with it, he thought, and the pain was unendurable; so fearful of ever suffering like that again, I turned away from involvement. He blew smoke to the cold air, watched it drifting away, dissolving in the air like his will, disappearing forever.

What he faced was the truth, the revelation of his self-defeat, the knowledge that he had suppressed the very emotions that give men dignity and instead filled the wastelands of his scorched soul with patriotism and duty. No love had been admitted, no potential pain invited, and his physical needs, divorced from his emotions, had been coldly appeased. The occasional whores had been necessary, preventing the humiliation of self-abuse, but their hands, while drawing the seed from his loins, could not obliterate the shame of a transaction that ignored deeper feelings. Now those feelings had returned, arising out of his hidden depths, resurrected by the miracle of the man from the Mount, then given new life and commitment in the mirror of Kate's eyes.

The miracle of the Mount had indeed introduced him to Kate, but his feelings for Kate were not miraculous. He loved her and wanted her with him in the most Earthly way.

Moshe took a deep breath, stubbed his cigarette out, straightened up and glanced around the room in which his hopes had been buried. He shook his head from side to side, silently admonishing himself for his stupidity, then walked around the room, took his family photographs down, and then, feeling sadness and joy at once, locked them up in a cupboard. Finally, still naked, hardly aware of the cold, his thoughts filled with Kate and the possibility of redemption, he stood on the patio and looked down on Jerusalem, which, like the dream of his lost years, was emerging from darkness.

Jerusalem the Golden. His home. What would become of it?
He wept again before dawn broke.

21

The Range-Rover braked to a halt in front of an old villa high in the hills above Tyre, near the southern border of Lebanon. The villa was the headquarters of the local Fatah command, and Leon, examining it, was struck by its modesty, not failing to note its peeling yellow walls and loose, broken tiles. Below the mountain clearing were the sun-scorched valleys of citrus trees, above it loomed the encircling, snow-capped mountains. The clearing itself was surrounded by Cyprus trees and filled with trestle tables and long wooden benches. The tables were covered with clean plates, mugs of coffee and bottles of beer; and the Arabs who should have been sitting there, Lebanese and Palestinian, were gathered together at the far end of the clearing, listening to their leader, the renowned Rashid Idriss.

Climbing out of the Range-Rover, the dust drifting lazily around him, Leon felt the fierce heat, experienced a fleeting spasm of nausea, and silently cursed himself for having drank too much the previous evening in Beirut. The drinking, excessive even by his normal standards, had followed a restless sleep during which he had dreamt of Kate in the storm over the Mount of Olives, her long hair streaming out in the wind as she drifted magically away from him. Now, as he placed his feet gingerly on the ground and heard Rashid Idriss propagating the Palestinian cause, he understood that the dream, which refused to leave his head, was the product of his increasing frustration at not seeing Kate for so long. She was still locked up in the hospital, well protected by Moshe Eitan; and Leon, standing between his two Fatah commando escorts, realised that his negative feelings about Moshe were not based solely on political differences.

Moshe's most immediate enemy, Rashid Idriss, was still giving his speech to the Arabs gathered in front of him under the Cyprus trees at the far end of the clearing. His audience consisted of Palestinian refugees, the more committed aristocrats of Beirut, uniformed Fatah commandos and dark-eyed

Arab children, some ragged, some beautifully dressed. All of them were listening with the attention of the devoted as Rashid, exceptionally youthful for a man in his early forties, eloquently harangued Zionist Israel, praised the tenacity and courage of his own fighters, and implored those in a position of strength - the sophisticated and wealthy Lebanese - to support the Palestinian cause. His voice, which in normal speech Leon had found to be strikingly quiet, was now surprisingly loud and impassioned, almost messianic.

'We must not give in!' he cried out in summary. 'Without a homeland we are nothing! Our people are of the desert and the mountain and the river; and, by the will of Allah, will remain so when the Zionists are dust. To this end, and for the sake of our children, we must continue the fight. Those who carry the guns must fire them, those with wealth must lend their support. We must not be divided, one Arab against the other, while the Jews increase their expansionist activities. Palestine belongs to the Palestinians. *Revolution until victory*!'

When Rashid raised his balled fist in a dramatic gesture, the Arabs around him cheered and applauded. The Fatah commandos, including those at each side of Leon, then started to chant 'Revolution until Victory!' while raising and lowering their weapons in unison. Stepping down from the bench upon which he had been standing, Rashid disappeared into the jostling mass of excited men and women, many of whom were obviously attempting to embrace him or kiss the back of his hand.

Familiar with such scenes of politically based adulation, but in no way moved by them, Leon lit a cigarette, inhaled deeply, and then cast his eyes around the clearing. The smell of chicken stew and boiling rice led his wandering gaze to the Arab women, wearing aprons, who were stirring the contents of some large, steaming cauldrons near the encircling trestle tables; beyond the tables, beneath more Cyprus trees, were the Range-Rover, Mercedes Benz and BMW cars that had brought most of the people up from Beirut or the nearby refugee camps. Looking back at the tables, Leon saw the Arab women setting down jugs of coffee and tea, bottles of beer and plates for the food, while those around Rashid Idriss, hugging one another and talking excitedly, moved away to take a place on the long wooden benches.

Emerging from the tight circle of his most trusted men, Rashid, wearing his Fatah uniform, his eyes shaded beneath a peaked cap, walked up to Leon and stopped just in front of him with his right hand outstretched. When they

shook hands, Rashid stepped back and offered Leon a modest smile.

'So, Mr. Halcomb, you made it to our little gathering. I hope you enjoyed your short stay in Beirut and were not led astray.'

'And why should I be led astray?' Leon asked, sensing the seriousness behind Rashid's gentle mockery.

'I am told you're a man not averse to pleasure - and Beirut, for such a man, could be a temptation.'

'I was tempted only with thirst… and that was well satisfied.'

'Good,' Rashid said. 'I had hoped to meet you sooner than this, but…' He raised his hands in apology… 'I was unfortunately delayed.'

'That was a nice speech you made.'

'A bit theatrical, but necessary.'

'One of the benefits of formal education.'

'Quite so, Mr. Halcomb.' Rashid turned slightly sideways and indicated the only empty table. 'Come. You will sit with me. We will eat and then talk. I'm very glad you accepted my invitation and there is much to discuss. But first, a little Arab hospitality - if your stomach can stand it.'

Taking note of the last remark, Leon flushed and inhaled on his cigarette, his stomach less unsettled than before but still not in good shape. Saying nothing, he followed Rashid across the clearing and sat beside him at the trestle table. It soon became clear to him - after the Arab women had served the chicken stew and rice - that no one else would be joining them at the table. Confirming this supposition, Rashid indicated that Leon should start eating.

'You live humbly,' Leon said, gazing down at his steaming stew.

'To lead the people one must be *of* the people,' Rashid replied. 'My formal education hasn't made me forget that I'm an Arab. I eat as my people eat, and drink as they drink. A man needs food only for sustenance; all else is pretension.'

Leon nodded and smiled, then they both started eating, washing the chicken stew down with beer and talking only of small things. The stew was simple but delicious, settling Leon's upset stomach, clearing his head and making him feel more alert, his curiosity aroused. Aware that Rashid would not invite a Western journalist to this place for a routine interview, he wondered just what was forthcoming; and, also, why he had been singled out in particular. Rashid studiously avoided the issue until the meal was finished,

when, with a gentle sigh, he turned around to face Leon, his liquid brown gaze clear and steady, his lips forming a slight smile.

'You enjoyed the meal, Mr. Halcomb?'

'Yes. May I smoke?'

'Of course. Your pleasure is my pleasure.'

Leon lit a cigarette and inhaled gratefully, leaning back against the hard wooden bench. The other tables were completely full, the people leaning towards one another, drinking and waving their hands excitedly, their voices rising and falling. Around the clearing, at various points beneath the trees, armed commandos kept watch.

'I'm told that you've been trying to arrange an interview with me for some time,' Rashid said. 'This is true?'

'Yes,' Leon said.

'Why? I can't tell you anything that I haven't already told the press. My views, as you well know, have been widely publicised.'

'If you know that I've been trying to arrange a meeting,' Leon said, 'then you'll also know that I want something other than a redundant interview.'

Rashid smiled in acknowledgement of that truth. 'Correct,' he said. 'I was told it was something else. I was also told that you refused to discuss it with anyone but me personally.'

'Correct again,' Leon said.

Rashid's smile revealed genuine amusement combined with sly mockery. 'So,' he said, 'you're after something else. What might that be?'

'What I want is something that could give me an exclusive and be of considerable value to your cause.'

'Your concern for the Palestinian cause is touching. Now what do you *want*?'

The sudden change of tone was enough to convince Leon that Rashid, with his dark poet's gaze, could be pure steel at the bargaining table.

'What I want,' Leon said carefully, 'instead of a redundant interview, is the opportunity to present an intimate portrait of your men by travelling with them, let's say for a month, as they move around the country. More precisely, I want to travel with you, wherever you go.'

He kept his gaze steady as Rashid leaned back a little, no longer smiling, and studied him with those calm, thoughtful eyes for a considerable period of time. Eventually, when the silence became too much, he offered another

slight smile.

'And why should I let you, Mr. Halcomb, enjoy such a privilege when I've denied it to every other Western journalist?'

'You read all the Western newspapers, Rashid; you must know what I've written.'

'I assume you're referring to your anti-Zionist tirades.'

'Quite.'

'You're not the first Western journalist to take a stand against Zionism. Indeed, such a stand has become increasingly popular and may well be a profitable stand for a journalist to take.'

'I was attacking Zionism when the Western media was spitting on the Arab world. You know that, Rashid, as you also know that I gave a great deal of space to Arab grievances when no one else would.'

Rashid smiled again, raising both hands in the air as if begging forgiveness; nonetheless, a hint of mockery was still present.

'Yes,' he said, 'that's true, and your efforts have been appreciated; but I still must say "No" to your request.'

'Why?'

'Let me answer your question with another question. Do you really think you can explain the Arabs by travelling with them?'

'Yes.'

'But you've already expressed our grievances in your columns.'

'That's right,' Leon said. 'But the West isn't interested in those grievances because they don't trust the Arabs.'

'They don't trust the Arabs because they don't understand the Arab mentality.'

'Correct.'

'And you do?'

'Also correct.'

'Wrong,' Rashid said. 'You assume too much, my friend. You may sympathise with us, but you don't understand us; for this reason, when you try to explain us, you simply cause more distrust. How can you understand us? Even our poetry baffles you. We come from the boundless deserts, from bitter, harsh lands, from the places where no white man can endure let alone comprehend. You do not understand us. You define us by Western standards. And such standards, created out of your own needs, have no relevance to us.

Customs alone do not separate us; nor do language and politics; God's anvil, the desert, serenely beautiful and merciless, has shaped us in a manner that defies your relentless Western scrutiny. In your eyes we are cruel - to ourselves and to others - but our cruelty, which you view as barbarism, is the desert's quick justice. There are no laws in the desert - the rule of law is the white man's sword; in the desert, which respects no human need, there is only the burning sun. Life or death is all that matters; survival is all; we spring from the wandering nomads whose one enemy was nature and who found, to their cost, that there was only safety in numbers, with the individual subordinated to the whole. How can the white man judge us? He believes in freedom and mercy. But for us, who live where human life is cheap, freedom and mercy are dangerous. Such concepts are a Western luxury - life is easier in the West - but such concepts, if practised by the Arabs, could bring about our destruction. No, Mr. Halcomb, you don't know us at all. You may sympathise with us - and even try to accept us - but as long as the wind blows on the desert, you will not understand us.'

There was a sudden cacophony, blaring from loudspeakers in the trees, and from under the trees came a detachment of armed commandos, all marching in time to the music. Rashid turned away to watch them, nodding his head in approval, as they marched around the clearing, passing the diners at the tables, and eventually stopped in front of him, presented arms and then stood at ease. The diners all applauded, standing up, their hand raised above their heads; and then, at a nod from Rashid, the commandos broke ranks and went to join their families at tables still laden with food and drink. The music was still playing, extremely loud and discordant, when Rashid turned back to face Leon, who saw the steel in his brown eyes.

'Did you study them?' Rashid said. 'Did you notice how young they are? All Arabs, Mr. Halcomb, not one of them over twenty, and yet all of them have killed and will kill again without what you call conscience. That, also, is a Western luxury, a romantic notion of protected children; but *my* children know only one thing: that the homeless are lost. To dispossess the Arabs is to rob them of their pride; and an Arab without pride values nothing except getting it back. Homeless, they are lost and thus have nothing to lose; stripped of pride, their whole life becomes meaningless - and other lives, equally so. Thus, they will fight and die, and then their sons will replace them, one generation after the other until the Jews yield. How can you

understand? Nothing matters to you that much. You, with your ephemeral Western values, are divorced from such passion.'

Leon picked up his glass and had a long drink of beer, a nervous pulse beating in his stomach as he put the glass down again. When he raised his eyes, he saw Rashid leaning forward, his brown eyes wide and intense, beads of sweat on his forehead.

'Let's talk about Western values. What are *your* values, Mr. Halcomb? You say you want an exclusive and that it could be of value to our cause. In other words, my journalist friend, you are trying to convince me of your sincerity while helplessly admitting to your own selfish interests. But our cause means nothing to you. It's your exclusive that matters. It's true that you defended us while your fellow journalists reviled us; equally true is that by doing so, you became a controversial figure who was able to command a much bigger fee. Where were you before you defended us? On the fifth column of some back page. In defending us you got what you needed: a great deal of attention. And yet now you need an exclusive. Why is that, my friend? It's because the Arabs are no longer being reviled by your fellow journalists and your lone stand is no longer quite as profitable. In short, Mr. Halcomb, you need something that will set you back on your feet.'

Feeling his cheeks burning, Leon lit a cigarette, his hand shaking when he put it to his lips and inhaled deeply on it. He blew the smoke out slowly, squinting through it at Rashid, trying to control his face while his emotions collided in some dark pit where fear had dominion. He tried to speak but felt choked, his planned denial drowning in bile, rising up to his throat from the nausea in his stomach and emerging through his lips as a whisper devoid of conviction:

'That's not true,' he said feebly.

'Yes, it is, Mr. Halcomb. Did you think I would let you come here without having you checked out? I know all about you. You're a man with some problems. Your column is no longer popular, your income is falling dramatically, you drink far too much for your own good, and your reputation is crumbling. Also, you're a romantic, an idealist with no beliefs; and your cynicism, once directed at others, is now aimed at yourself. Idealists are pathetic: in the end, they can't face life. Your contempt for yourself is now evident in your work and represents your increasing sense of shame at your lack of commitment. No, Mr. Halcomb, it's not the Arabs you care for; what

you care for is an exclusive that will pull you out of debt and hopefully bury your feelings of failure in material success. You are, in short, a desperate man who thinks the Arabs can help him. All right, Mr. Halcomb, I will help you - but the price will be high.'

Holding the cigarette near his lips, Leon started shaking again. He lowered his hand to the table, nicked the cigarette, glanced around him, feeling sweaty and ill and bewildered, the truth making his ears ring. Failure based on disillusionment, desperation based on fear: the truth in Rashid's words hammered home and shattered all his defences. Kate had seen it as well - the defeat in his cynicism - and now, recalling the intensity with which he had made love to her, he understood that her revelations had stripped him down to the very bones of his terror. It was the terror of lost faith and a consequent loss of will; and finally he would have to pay the price, no matter how high.

'All right,' Leon said, his voice sounding hollow with defeat. 'What do you want from me?'

Rashid's face moved away a little, the slight smile still on his lips, his brown eyes still direct, though much softer, almost benign.

'I want to know what happened on the Mount of Olives,' he said. 'And I want to know what was brought down from there.'

Leon suddenly felt claustrophobic, sensing the trap closing in on him, as if his life, with its succession of failed hopes, was narrowing down to oblivion. He had reached middle-age and had little impetus left; his only remaining motivation was the fear of insecurity, and now Rashid, understanding the full extent of that fear, was about to push him close to the edge where decisions are made.

'Unknown atmospheric phenomenon,' he said. 'That's the official explanation – and very possibly it's all that they know.'

'I'm sorry,' Rashid said, 'but I cannot accept that.'

'Why?'

'There's been too much talk about something discovered on the Mount of Olives. Such talk is usually based on some kind of truth. It's said that the Jews cordoned off that area and worked throughout the night with bulldozers, obviously trying to cover up *something*. Also, it's known that the Arabs who lived in that area were evacuated from their homes and are still being held by the authorities without explanation. Finally, my sources tell me that you,

Leon Halcomb, have been spending a lot of time at the Hadassah Medical Centre, trying to find out why Kate Hirschfield has been held there under guard since the night she was brought down from the Mount. It's clear from all this that something strange is going on - and like you, I want to find out what it is.'

'And you want me to get you that information.'

'Correct. That's our deal.'

Leon thought about Kate and felt sick to his soul, aware that if he did what Rashid wanted, he would never forgive himself. He glanced up at the bright sky, blinked and stared about him, saw the commandos beyond the crowded trestle tables, heard singing and laughter. Lighting another cigarette, he saw that his hand was shaking, and understood, as he turned back to Rashid, that he was shaking with shame.

'They won't let me in to see her,' he said, trying to delay the issue, but realising, even as he spoke, how lame his words sounded.

'So,' Rashid replied, 'they won't let you in to see her. But sooner or later, they will have to release her and then you can talk to her.'

'That doesn't mean she'll tell me what happened,' Leon said, still trying to wriggle off his bed of thorns. 'If, as you seem to think, the Israelis are trying to keep the facts hidden, they won't release her without swearing her to secrecy.'

'You weary me, Mr. Halcomb. Why do you make excuses? The woman is your mistress, she obviously trusts you, so if you promise to keep your mouth shut, she will almost certainly confide in you.'

'I gain her confidence and then I betray her.'

'It's your choice, my friend.'

Leon saw Rashid's brown eyes, their liquid, limpid depths, and felt his will slipping away with the remains of his pride. He inhaled on his cigarette, felt nauseous and almost choked, coughed and stubbed the cigarette out and wished his heart would stop beating. The people around him had grown silent while an Arab sang a mournful song, his guitar weaving intricate refrains around his high, tragic voice. Leon listened and was captured, thinking of when he had last seen Kate, and was suddenly torn between his desperate need for her and the thought of betraying her. The pain welled up inside him, almost bursting his heart, and then he tried, even knowing that he was lying, to deny the inevitable.

‘I won’t do it,’ he said.

Rashid studied him a long time, his gaze calm but thoughtful, then he shrugged and opened the fingers of his right hand, as if releasing a dove of peace.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘It’s your choice. Only you can decide. I leave the offer open should you happen to change your mind later on.’

‘I won’t,’ Leon said.

‘Perhaps not,’ Rashid replied. ‘But then we never really know what we’ll do until we have to decide. Only you can decide what is most important to you: the respect of Miss Hirschfield or your whole future. No information, no exclusive. The choice is all yours, Mr. Halcomb, and soon you must make it.’

Leon put his head down and closed his eyes to survey the darkness, trying to lose himself somewhere in the void at the back of his head. The sound came out of that darkness, first a sibilance, then a screeching, then a roaring that erupted all around him and tore through his mind. The air was sucked from his lungs in a terrible, soundless rush, and he opened his eyes to see the earth spinning over and slamming down on his face. Pain exploded from his head and stabbed through his body as he choked on dirt and stones and felt the ground shaking against his belly. More screeching, more roaring, waves of heat and raining soil, then something slammed into his spine and stopped his movement as he opened his eyes again. He saw mushrooming soil, sheets of flame in boiling smoke, a screaming woman racing after a burning child, bodies spinning and breaking. Above the smoke something glinted, a Phantom jet climbing high, looping over and swooping back towards the clearing at high speed.

The ground erupted again, spewing soil and vegetation, human screams daggering out of the explosions as the flame and smoke blended. Leon grabbed hold of a tree-trunk, tried to stand and collapsed, looked about him and saw Arabs running to and fro through the murk. A man jack-knifed to the ground, a shredded woman shrieked and writhed, a bloody child stood with his thumb in his mouth, the smoke swirling around him.

Leon tried to stand up again, heard a roaring, felt the blast, was jerked away from the tree and pulled around and found himself facing Rashid, his brown eyes, unnaturally bright, filled with anguish and rage, almost unreal as they floated in the smoke that grew darker each second. Rashid was shouting at him, jabbing his finger towards the trees, and then he grabbed him by the

shoulder and pulled him forward through the bedlam and chaos. Leon followed, or tried to follow, his spirit willing, the flesh weak, but he was picked up in a maelstrom of light and noise and then hurled back to earth. There was no fear at all, just the familiar disbelief, and he rolled across the ground automatically, his hands over his ears. The ground shuddered and rumbled, then the rumbling became a roaring filled with shrieking and hissing and spitting and dull thudding sounds. Leon lay on his belly, opened his eyes and stared ahead, saw a man rising out of the streaming smoke, his arms outstretched and pleading. Ringed with fire, he became a torch, a flaming figure staggering forward, some sound that was not remotely human coming out of his melting lips. The smoke swirled and devoured him, passed on across the clearing, left behind it a smouldering black rag that sank to the ground. The bloody child still stood alone, sucking his thumb and staring blankly, then a white-robed figure swept him away as flames licked at the empty space. Leon lay there, stretched out on his belly, staring into the chaos.

Death. Devastation. The Israeli jets shrieking. People screaming and bawling and falling down and waving fists at the sky. It only took a few minutes, but seemed to go on forever, the jets shrieking overhead, the ground erupting and roaring, the smoke swirling around the Arabs as they raced to and fro, tripping over the fallen bodies, grabbing hold of one another, weeping and screaming and cursing, the villa blazing behind them.

Leon lay there and watched, the smoke stinging his eyes, feeling bruised and exhausted and filthy, only saved by his outrage. The anger defeated fear, gave him someone to hate, and eventually, as he watched the Israeli jets flying away, also gave him the justification that he needed for what was to come. The jets disappeared, leaving drifting smoke and silence, and Leon climbed to his feet, shaking his head, clearing his ears, then heard broken sobs, children crying, people groaning, and turned his head, when a hand touched his shoulder, to see Rashid's brown eyes.

'We are cruel?' Rashid said. 'The Arabs are cruel? Take a good look around you, Mr. Halcomb, and then tell me what justice is!'

Leon saw the smoke thinning out above the clearing, drifting away from the smouldering trees and blazing villa, making the blue sky look grey. The clearing itself was a shambles of broken tables and chairs, countless shards of glass glinting from the charred, blackened soil in the hellholes. Here a dismembered head, there the bright splash of intestines, all around the

blistered flesh and shivering limbs of the mortally wounded. A woman wailed and rocked her child, a bloody bundle in her arms; a man sat up and looked at his mangled legs and then screamed and fell back again. Blood flowed and congealed, soaked the ground, dried on hot stones, and the boy with his thumb in his mouth gazed about him with blank eyes. Leon stared and saw it all, the pure horror, his excuse, then he turned back to Rashid, his stomach heaving, and heard the shame in his own voice.

'I'll do it,' he said.

22

He was not a supernatural being but a man of flesh and blood, yet unmistakably one with divine gifts or supernatural abilities. Kate, in her fear and love, had understood this from his awakening, but as the days passed and his empty mind was filled she had the proof to contend with.

He learned remarkably quickly, never forgetting what he heard or read, sublimely calm as he sat like a prisoner in his room - asking and answering questions, reading books by the dozen, letting the facts of contemporary life colour the darkness of his mind - or lay on a table in the laboratory, being examined by physicians and psychologists, his silvery-grey eyes bright and undisturbed, his bearded face in repose.

He still called himself Joshua and remembered the Teacher of Righteousness, but other than what he had told Kate, his past was an empty page. He had told her all he knew and could not fill in the blanks, knew nothing about his own resurrection and seemed to care little. He existed; it was enough. ‘I am that I am,’ he said. The statement was startling for many reasons, not least for its arrogance, and it led to a further flurry of examinations by a variety of specialists.

The hypnotists tried and failed, unable to capture his mind, but then, almost amused by their perplexity, he put himself into a deep sleep. No fresh memories were unveiled, no hidden secrets revealed; in his trance he merely repeated, word for word, the fragments passed on to Kate. He then awakened of his own accord, obviously refreshed, smiling slightly, and mesmerised the hypnotist sitting above him by simply waving his hand.

‘What do you see?’ he asked.

‘What you described,’ the hypnotist replied. ‘I see the scrolls in the dark caves, the Teacher of Righteousness, yourself as a child being presented in the temple; and now… Yes, I see you… You look like a mature child, perhaps thirteen or fourteen years old, sitting in the shadows of the

colonnades, having words with the priests.'

'You are seeing what's in my mind?'

'I'm seeing what you remember… Baptism in the water, a white dove, meditation in the wilderness, your temptation… You're now a grown man.'

'You may wake up now.'

The hypnotist awakened and retreated in confusion, taking with him his very frightened colleague and saying nothing to Kate. Joshua sat up on the bed and stared at her, smiling slightly, making her feel the love and fear as a single emotion that defied human reasoning. She wanted to walk out of the room, to be alone with her thoughts, but his eyes, with their silvery-grey neutrality, seemed to drain her of will.

'Love and fear are the same,' he said, as if reading her mind, 'for love is the surrender of that self which we need to protect us. If you cannot forget the fear, you must accept it and learn to feed off it.'

The linguists were also foiled, pacing back and forth, muttering, making tape- recordings of his voice, analysing his speech patterns, trying to trace his accent back to its time and source, but becoming hopelessly lost. The Tower of Babel was in his speech, a veritable multitude of voices; he spoke every known language with a casual, startling fluency, his accents fitting the region requested with infallible accuracy. The linguists were stunned, unable to believe their own findings, knowing no more at the end than they had at the beginning, having to confess that his origins were a mystery, his time indefinable.

'What do you hope to find?' he asked them. 'There is only one voice. It is the voice of each and every individual and belongs to the whole. I do not select my speech. I speak in the tongue of the one addressing me. I speak without thought or calculation and let the words build their own shape.'

'You speak every known language.'

'There is only one language.'

'You have every possible accent at your command.'

'There is only one accent.'

He glanced at Kate as they left, offering nothing, demanding nothing, quietly forcing her to travel down through her Self to some point beyond nakedness. Stripped bare, she was defenceless, a throbbing core of raw emotion, pulsating and then spreading out to become pure sensation. There was beauty and terror, the primal scream of inchoate rage, ecstasy and pain

and redemption as she blossomed inside herself. Darkness gave way to light, a mere pinprick growing larger, then she blinked and saw the sunlight pouring in on his hair and beard.

‘You are everything,’ he said, ‘and without you, there is nothing. Through ourselves we make the universe manifest - and without us it cannot be. You must not be frightened of this. You must accept your fleeting grace. You are here, we are here, in this room and outside it, as we were in the past and are now and will be in the future. This concept must not destroy you; it must give you strength and faith. In me, and in yourself, you must believe and thus find your true nature.’

The psychologists crowded around him, wearing white coats and bland smiles, speaking softly as they tried to find the key to the hieroglyphics in which his nature was couched. They examined his learning and thinking, his intelligence and personality, his motivation and emotion and behaviour, his group dynamics and sensation-perception and possible psychoneuroses. He understood them and responded, teasing their lust for the unusual, playing tricks with their mazes and one-way mirrors and sound-wave generators, producing images on their spectroscopes and distortions on their colorimeters, spending days in the black silence of the anechoric room and emerging without the slightest sign of change, his silvery-grey eyes unblinking. The psychologists stopped smiling, but started rubbing their furrowed brows, utterly baffled by this apparently human creature who defied normal laws.

‘We have a ghost on the spectroscope. An image that shouldn’t be there. You were photographed in that chair and we saw that you didn’t move; yet here, in the photograph, standing right beside the chair, is a figure that shouldn’t exist.’

‘I briefly left my mortal shell. It seemed natural to do so. It is good to be released from the flesh, though it cannot last long.’

‘The electroencephalograph went crazy; it contradicted itself. It gave a normal alpha reading of approximately eleven cycles, yet it also showed extraordinary, almost violent activity in the deeper levels of the reticular formation. That just doesn’t make sense.’

‘I felt peace and excitement. I meditated and felt joy. I was calm, yet my spirit soared aloft to embrace sun and sky.’

‘You spent five days in the black room. You made no sound or

movement. You hadn't changed in the slightest when you emerged. What happened in there?'

'Nothing.'

'You weren't affected?'

'I didn't know that was expected. I was conceived out of darkness and silence and returned to it willingly.'

'You're not human.'

'I am.'

'Perhaps physically; not otherwise.'

'I only know that I am as you were - before your weakness stole from you.'

'*My* weakness?'

'The weakness of Man… his flight from the Whole.'

The last psychologist departed, the light of terror in his eyes, and then Joshua turned his gaze upon Kate where she stood by the window. She stared back, her thoughts colliding, feeling divorced from her body, torn by love and the fear of an awareness beyond what she had known before. She kept staring, trying to think, concentrating on his appearance, wondering why he had insisted on the white robe that now draped his lean body. He was a tall man, starkly handsome, at once gentle and imperious. The child in her saw a father, the woman in her saw a son, and somewhere between the two, lost in time, was the ghost of her former self. He had insisted that she stay with him, offering no explanation, and yet now, in her resentment, desperately yearning to be free, she understood that without his consent she lacked the will to walk out.

'I have patience,' he told her. 'You must practice the same. I do not know why I want you here with me, but I know it was willed. You were called and came to me, giving energy and light, and now, as I evolve out of ignorance, you will act as my beacon. What I bring, you have been seeking; what you offer is my reward. You and I, we are one and the same and but part of the Whole.'

The parapsychologists soon took over, using the notes of the failed psychologists, experimenting to learn the extent of his powers and understand how they worked. They strapped him into an electroencephalograph-and-cardiograph harness, checked his resting physiology, and discovered that he had a magnetic field surrounding his body that was only eight times less

powerful than that of the Earth; and that his brain-wave patterns could, at his conscious bidding, generate fifty times more voltage than normal. When this happened, windows cracked, tables shook, test tubes broke, while those standing close to him developed headaches or nausea and dizziness.

'How did you gain such power?'

'All men have such power. All men are of the earth and the sky, but refuse to have faith. What is willed, will be done; transcendence lies in faith. Rejecting faith, man rejects his hidden strengths and squanders his riches.'

'Your powers are very unusual.'

'They are commonplace, but ignored.'

'You're suggesting that you're just a normal man?'

'There are no normal men.'

He proved his point by displaying his aura without using colour-glass screens, standing radiantly before them like a thermographic photograph, his figure suddenly shimmering in a phosphorescent orange and red surround, his hair and beard black, his nose yellow, his ears green, striations of light spreading out from his fingers to disappear some distance away.

'I am normal,' he said. 'You have seen all this before. I merely show you what you see with your cameras and once saw with your eyes. You are blind and I give you sight. You lost your vision when you lost your faith. What I radiate, you radiate also, but your eyes now reject it. I am flesh and blood. Normal.'

Refusing to believe him, they continued to experiment, testing his psychokinetic energy, his eyeless sight and thoughtography, first placing him in a restraining jacket, then in a Faraday cage, then inside the thick steel walls of a radiation counting chamber from where, with stunning ease, he reproduced his thought images on the photographic plates in another room. He stared at objects and made them move, described objects when blindfolded, removed the blindfold and stared at some papers and set them on fire. All of this he did calmly, with a quiet, weary patience, until finally, both excited and fearful, the parapsychologists gave up.

'You're unbelievable,' one of them said.

'Believe and you will see.'

'Your physiology is normal, but that's all; otherwise you're a miracle.'

'Such a word has no meaning.'

Alone again, Kate was stricken, finally feeling fear for him, realising the

full extent of his innocence and what it might lead to. He knew not where he had come from, nor why he was here, and his ignorance about the world, particularly when combined with his paranormal powers, could lead to a multitude of dangers. Kate thought of this with grief, with a stabbing, maternal love, her fear of the unknown giving way to fear for his future. Then she thought of herself, of the horror expelled from her bleeding womb, and the guilt that had haunted her for years rose like smoke in her mind. Choked with shame and remorse, wanting to cleanse herself of sin, and wanting, even more, to nurture this full-grown child to manhood, she walked across the sunlit room and raised her hand and touched his chest with her fingers.

'I'm real,' he said. 'You know that.'

'I just wanted to confirm it.'

'You worry for me and resent me at the same time, wondering when I will free you.'

'I can leave anytime.'

'You may wish to, but you won't. You see your life in the mirror of my eyes and are starting to question it.'

'You frighten me.'

'No. You are reflected in my eyes. You look into me in order to see yourself, and that brings on the fear.'

'What fear?'

'Your past shame.'

'I did nothing to be ashamed of.'

'You lie to yourself in order to kill the pain, but it won't go away. Admit what you now deny, for in shame there is repentance. Stop dreaming of the child in the pool of blood and let the healing bring new life.'

Kate gasped and stepped back, covering her face with her hands, terrified by his knowledge of her thoughts and their tormenting persistence. She felt his hand on her head, his fingers outspread through her hair, his palm pressing down on her skull with a gentle insistence. Her knees bent and touched the floor, the stone cold against her skin, and obeying his command she bowed her head and then opened her eyes again. She saw the curve of her own breasts, the white blouse stretched across them, her legs, pressed together, in blue denims, her hands on her thighs. Then her clothing seemed to melt, turning to liquid and vaporising, and she saw her naked skin as a jigsaw of shadow and light. She tried to scream but heard nothing, tried to

move but was helpless, and then, as her body became translucent, she surrendered to wonder. Her flesh was shifting sand, the sand alive with sound and colour, eddying and swirling and parting to reveal further wonders. Her enzymes were the stars, her blood cells the great moons, her haemoglobin streaming out like crimson mist across the cosmos within her. Her beating heart was the pulsating sun, her blood was oxygen and fire, and her consciousness, the manifestation of all that was, traversed time and the infinite. In that void there was nothing, and being nothing, nothing to fear, and she saw it and touched it and embraced it and returned to her mortal shell. She blinked and shook her head, saw her blue-denimed legs, her breasts heaving beneath the tight white blouse, no longer shivering with panic. Then she raised her eyes, studying his strange, ascetic face, feeling his hand slipping away from her head and seeing it fall to his side. She stood up, shakily, not too sure that she would make it; made it and stepped back again, opening her mouth, saying nothing.

'I am that I am,' he said. 'That which is, has its purpose. The questions on your lips will not be asked because there cannot be answers. I have patience; you must practice it. Time alone will reveal our meaning. I am, as you are, a stranger in a world filled with strangeness. Nothing is without its reason. Your own shame has shaped your life. Your shame is what leads you to repentance and the need to affirm. To affirm is to live. Not exist, but embrace. We embrace the pain and doubt to find faith and once more stand in grace. Your pain and doubt are your unanswered questions and I cannot assist you. I am that I am - that is all. There is no other answer.'

The security men returned, having despaired of the specialists, and sat in chairs facing the bed upon which Joshua was resting. He gazed at them with interest, neither amused nor resentful, simply waiting with the patience of the innocent for their words to reveal him. The security men were nervous, both shaken by the inexplicable, their eyes wandering from Joshua to Kate and then back again. Kate watched them from the other bed, saying nothing, feeling frightened, wondering what they would do when they finally had to accept the unacceptable.

'Tell us who you are.'

'I cannot answer that question.'

'You can't or you won't?'

'I can't. I don't know.'

‘And you don’t know where you came from?’

‘You already know all that I know.’

‘According to what you told us - and if we accept that it’s true - we’d have to assume that you’re two thousand years old.’

‘You assume; I do not.’

‘You deny it?’

‘I do not assume it.’

‘We want to know how you were buried on the Mount of Olives and you refuse to co-operate.’

‘I do not refuse to co-operate. All your questions teach me something. Like you, I would like to know the answer, but my mind is a blank.’

‘We refuse to believe that.’

‘You must believe what you believe. You must accept or reject as you feel, but I cannot assist you.’

‘Who sent you?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘What’s your mission?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘We just can’t believe that. We think you’re trying to bluff us. You have a remarkable brain, you speak every known language, your rate of learning is too fast to be natural, and you are, given the circumstances in which you were found, too calm and collected to be innocent. Who taught you all you know? Who trained you in parapsychology? And why, if you honestly don’t know who you are or where you came from, are you not even remotely disturbed?’

‘Why should I be disturbed? What is willed, will be done. You will show me who I am in due course, so there is nothing to fear.’

‘*We* will show you who you are?’

‘It is you who seeks to know.’

‘And you?’

‘I am merely a witness. Let events take their course.’

‘We could keep you here forever.’

‘If you do, it was intended.’

‘We could probably have you shot as a spy.’

‘Every death has its meaning.’

The security men departed, shaking their heads in disbelief, but Kate stayed where she was on the bed, trying to order her thoughts. She no longer

feared him, but now she was frightened for him, aware that his innocence was being misconstrued as some dangerous ploy. The security men were suspicious, the chief rabbis were nervous, and the full facts about him, if disclosed to the general public, could be misconstrued in even more dangerous ways, perhaps leading to havoc. Yes, she was concerned, and now she studied him with woe, thinking of how his ignorance about himself could be used and abused. The Jews might claim him as their Messiah, the Muslims as their Mahdi, the Christians as their Christ in His Second Coming. Should such come to pass there would be unavoidable conflict, with each side assuming the mantle of religious sovereignty. Understanding this, Kate trembled, turning away from his face, aware that his eyes were fixed upon her in merciless scrutiny. Then she thought about his strange powers, his ability to work miracles, and wondered what would happen if his serenity was turned into anger.

'You show nothing,' she said.

'There is nothing to show.'

'You don't show what you're feeling inside, and I find that disturbing.'

'I show what I feel. What you see is what I feel. If what I show is less than you expect, you must examine yourself.'

'I don't understand that.'

'You have feelings I lack. You have anger and fear and grave doubt, and in me they are missing.'

'Why?'

'I don't know. Perhaps because I am unformed. With time we gather experience and feeling, but my time is still short.'

'You don't relate to people.'

'I am watching and listening. I am taking in what they say and do - and will soon learn their meaning.'

'Meaning isn't feeling.'

'Without meaning there *is* no feeling. Men rarely mean what they say; how they say it means more. They speak with their bodies, not only their tongues, and the manner in which they gesture when they speak reveals more than their words do. I watch and I listen, and take in what is revealed, and in this way I learn what feelings are and what they resolve.'

'You're talking about logic.'

'Without feeling there is no logic. Logic is the purest expression of

controlled emotion; lack of feeling is madness.'

'I can't accept that.'

'That's why you are torn. You have tried to separate your reason from your feelings, and now you are paying the price. You are divided within yourself, emotionally crippled and confused, afraid that by surrendering to feeling you will lose your integrity.'

'What integrity?'

'I think you know: the integrity of your mind. You view logic separated from feeling as the ultimate virtue.'

'And that isn't so?'

'No, it is not. The mind and emotions are one – and divided, they fall.'

'And yet you feel nothing.'

'I feel what you feel. Through you I am learning to respond to conflicting emotions.'

'You have not displayed emotions.'

'I only know them through you.'

'Knowing is not the same as feeling.'

'That will come if required.'

The door opened and Moshe marched in, followed closely by two guards, both of them carrying Uzi sub-machineguns and looking uncomfortable. Moshe stood there in the middle of the room, his large hands on his hips, staring first at Joshua and then at Kate, as if searching for words. Kate returned his stare, feeling a sudden rush of emotion, seeing something in his eyes, a quiet despair, that made her want to console him. He kept his eyes upon her, as if signalling a message, a pained plea for forgiveness or understanding for what was to happen. Then she realised that she was standing, had stood up without knowing it, her heart beating in the conviction of trouble, her throat dry, her legs shaky. She just stood there, staring at him, then at Joshua and back again, until she saw him lowering his eyes to the floor and slowly looking back up, his face pale in the sunlight.

'I have to take him away,' he said. 'We're handing him over to Shin Bet. They're not satisfied with what he's told us, so they want to personally deal with the matter. I'm sorry, Kate. I can't do a thing about it. I simply have to deliver him.'

'Shin Bet?' Joshua said. 'What is this?'

'Internal security and counter-intelligence,' Kate explained. 'They're not

as patient as doctors.'

She saw Moshe grimace, his cheeks turning red, and her anger, which had rashly boiled up, quickly turned into sympathy. Torn, she turned away and covered her mouth with her hand, took a deep breath and turned back again, concentrating on both of them.

'You will take us?' Joshua said.

'Not both of you. Only you.'

'I will go, but she must be by my side. What is willed, will be done.'

'I'm sorry,' Moshe said, 'but you have to come alone. Your insistence on having Kate with you has made them suspicious.'

'Suspicious?'

'They think you're using her, that you've some hold on her, that somehow or other you're tied together and have to be separated.'

'We will go together.'

'I'm sorry, but you won't.'

'I am merely a witness. Let events take their course. But I tell you, we will go together. Kate must stay by my side.'

Moshe shrugged and stepped back. Instantly, the two guards advanced upon Joshua, aiming their sub-machineguns at him. Alarmed, Kate stepped forward, something cold cutting through her, the cold inexplicably making her burn as she tried to reach Joshua. He was still on the bed, staring up at the gun barrels, but his face, which before had been serene, now looked almost anguished. He shook his head from side to side, closed his eyes and leaned forward, then his whole body started to tremble as if with some fever. Kate opened her mouth to scream, smothered the scream with her hand, saw an egg-shaped, silvery haze forming around his body as his head emitted dazzling beams of light. One of the soldiers stepped back, his weapon clattering to the floor, while the other, falling to his knees, was diffused in the shimmering haze. Kate screamed when Moshe stepped forward, trying to warn him away, but a roaring drowned her voice as the room began to shake and the walls, suddenly webbed with lengthy cracks, spat plaster and dust. Moshe stumbled and fell, his hands slapping on the floor; then he pushed himself back to his knees and lowered his head and covered his ears with his hands. Kate started moving forward, her head filled with the roaring, then was blinded by the light and thrown back by some invisible force. She felt the wall against her shoulder, a sharp pain in her back, then fell onto the bed and

looked up and saw a whirlpool of light. Moshe was still on his knees, a dark form angled backwards, his body jerking as if being whipped, the light swirling around him. The light seemed to come from Joshua, spinning out of some source within him, roaring and screeching about the room and tearing plaster from brick. Kate could hardly see Joshua, only a shadow shaking violently, a shadowy form in a maelstrom of light and sound, an explosion of energy.

Another figure materialised, rising awkwardly from the floor, lifting his arms in the eloquence of entreaty and then jerking backwards. He struck the floor and rolled over, slapped forward by the light, reached up and grabbed Moshe by the shoulder and dragged him down with him. They were swept away together, plaster raining upon them, then stopped in a tangle of arms and legs at the wall by the door. The light raced through the door, carrying lampshades and bed sheets, then the door shrieked and broke loose from its hinges and vanished into the corridor.

Kate clung to the bed, dazzled by the light, almost deafened by the terrible roaring, a fierce wind tugging at her. She saw Joshua on the bed, a diffused form in white fire, the light streaming from some source within him and racing out through the door. He was burning, disintegrating, melting into the maelstrom, while one of the soldiers, screaming dementedly, was swept out of the room. Moshe was still by the wall, wrapped around the other soldier, both of them being pummelled by the wind as if by a hurricane.

Kate groaned and closed her eyes, felt the bed shaking beneath her, gripped the mattress and hauled herself forward and huddled against the wall. She tried to blot out the roaring, to resist the clawing force, but her head started splitting in two as her body was hauled back. Her fingers dug into the mattress, trying to use it as an anchor, but her body, stretching out to its limit, eventually made her let go. She felt as if she were being devoured, sucked into an enormous throat, and then, when the roaring seemed to be all around her, she cried out and fell down.

She hit the floor and rolled over, coming to rest on her back, and then lay there, not moving any farther, as the roaring receded. Still motionless, she looked up, saw the maelstrom settling down, the light retreating from the walls and then shrinking to a globe around Joshua. There was a distant rushing sound, like water pouring down a faucet, then the light around Joshua flared up and shimmered briefly and finally disappeared into his body.

Kate stared at him, mesmerised, then managed to look the other way; she saw Moshe and the soldier rolling apart and lying flat on their backs, both gasping for breath. Her heart went out to Moshe, a love she scarcely recognised, then she turned her head in the other direction and again looked at Joshua. He was in the same position, bent forward, not moving; then he put one hand down, tugged aimlessly at his white robe, then raised his head and stared directly at her, his face human and anguished.

'It was rage,' he said quietly.

23

Hardly feeling like a human being, let alone the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi, Jozsef lowered himself into his chair at the crowded committee table just as Moshe was finishing his summary of the recent events. Making himself comfortable, though still sweating too much, Jozsef nodded at Ben Eleizer, silently apologising for being late, then looked at the people seated around the table, none of whom seemed too happy. Moshe and Kate were side by side, the former addressing the table, the latter rubbing her closed eyes with her fingers, both drawn, almost haunted. Leonard Rosenberg, the Medical Director, and General Yaakow Meshel, the head of the Intelligence Committee, were sitting together at the opposite side, Leonard doodling distractedly on a sheet of paper, the general staring grimly at Moshe. To Jozsef's surprise, Lieutenant Paul Frankel was also present, his dark, handsome face expressing shock at what he was hearing.

'So,' Moshe summarised, glancing at everyone in turn, 'those are the up-to-date facts of the matter. The subject is now open for discussion.'

'This is extraordinary,' Paul Frankel said.

'A constructive start,' Ben Eleizer responded. 'We appreciate your shock, Lieutenant Frankel, but please try to control it.'

Paul glared at the Prime Minister, then blushed and lowered his eyes, a slight tremor running through his body as he picked up a pencil and started fiddling nervously with it.

'For a start,' Ben Eleizer added, 'perhaps someone can tell me why Lieutenant Frankel, a relatively inexperienced officer, should have been invited to sit in on this meeting.'

'I felt that Shin Bet should be involved,' General Meshel explained.

'I asked for Military, not Internal, Security to handle the matter.'

'I wasn't satisfied with their results,' Yaakow replied, glancing at Moshe, 'so I felt that Shin Bet should be given a chance.'

‘And Lieutenant Frankel?’

‘Although he is, as you say, a relatively inexperienced officer, he is also, unquestionably, one of our most successful interrogators.’

Jozsef glanced across at Paul and saw his flickering smile, a helpless demonstration of pride as he lowered his eyes again. Ben Eleizer clasped his hands beneath his chin.

‘Shin Bet wants that man,’ he said, ‘but Shin Bet has already failed. In insisting that he be separated from Kate, his first contact, they encouraged him to practically demolish the room with his remarkable powers.’

‘No one could have anticipated that, Shlomo.’

‘And are you still going to try and separate them?’

‘I don’t think we should attempt that for the moment,’ Moshe said. ‘We have no way of dealing with such abilities; we don’t know what he’s capable of.’

‘And naturally we still don’t know who he is or where he came from.’

‘No, I’m afraid not. At least nothing other than tentative speculation based on what he remembers.’

Ben Eleizer sighed and rubbed his face with his hands, removed his hands and looked up again, this time directing his attention to the rabbi.

‘So, Jozsef,’ he said, ‘you have heard the tape recordings. What is your assessment of this man?’

Feeling his cheeks burning, Jozsef lowered his eyes to the table, unable to utter words that might verge on the blasphemous. He felt sweaty and ill, infinitely wearied by age, all his learning reduced to dust in his mind, blowing through it and blinding him. Raising his eyes, he glanced at Kate, his heart going out to her, now accepting that what she was enduring was what tortured him also.

‘I am lost for words,’ he said. ‘The situation is without precedent. I’m a rabbi - a man of faith, not of reason - but the facts overwhelm me.’

‘Precisely what *are* the facts?’ Ben Eleizer asked.

‘It’s unlikely,’ Moshe said quickly, ‘that Shin Bet will get much further than we have. The man has been examined by physicians, psychologists, parapsychologists and linguists; and apart from ascertaining that he possesses extraordinary powers, we know no more now than we knew when he first spoke to Kate.’

‘Those powers are really very unusual, Moshe. One might even describe

them as miraculous - if not downright inhuman.'

'Not necessarily,' Moshe replied. 'The man is flesh and blood, physiologically a human being, and his powers, though certainly extraordinary, could be explainable in human terms.'

'I find that hard to accept,' Leonard Rosenberg said.

'I'm talking about parapsychology, Leonard. We know that powers such as this man has demonstrated have also been demonstrated, to an admittedly much lesser degree, under laboratory conditions in various institutions. The Russians and Americans are particularly interested in this field; and subjects like Ted Serios, Nelya Mikhailova and Rosa Kuleshova have been confirmed as advanced psychokinetic personalities.'

'Don't suggest that he's a secret agent,' Kate said sarcastically. 'We both know that's ridiculous.'

Moshe flushed with anger. 'I'm not suggesting any such thing,' he said.

'We are talking,' Rosenberg said, 'about a man who can see when blindfolded, who can transfer his thought images onto photographic plates, who can make objects move and shatter glass without touching it, who can hypnotise his hypnotist and speak every known language and adopt every accent down on record. Not to mention the devastation he caused by simply feeling angry.'

'I appreciate that, Leonard, but I'm merely pointing out that if this man's abilities have, to a lesser degree, been demonstrated by other human beings, then extraordinary or not, he could still be a normal human being.'

'Human, yes,' Leonard muttered. 'Ordinary? Definitely not.'

'Let's accept that he's basically human,' Ben Eleizer intervened. 'Have we analysed his ambiguous statements and, if so, do we now have some idea of what they mean?'

'*I'll* tell you what they mean,' Kate said, leaning forward, her face pale and drawn, her eyes shadowed, her whole body tense. 'Since your code-breakers are likely to invent something that doesn't exist, I thought I'd give you the simple facts and let you make your own minds up.' She stared down at her notes. 'The first thing to bear in mind is that although he remembers little, he's convinced that he's been on Earth before. He doesn't know where or when, but certainly his recollections are of biblical times; while the land as he describes it - great beauty and desolation, the sun shining on parched earth - is remarkably similar to Israel.'

‘It’s also remarkably similar to Africa or Spain,’ General Meshel said, ‘but we’ll ignore that minor point for the moment.’

‘No,’ Kate responded. ‘I’m afraid your sarcasm is out of place. He mentions a people called the Essenes, a *drachma*, a *denarius*, the Court of Gentiles and the Court of the Israelites… Not Africa or Spain, General Meshel, as I think you’ll agree.’

‘Such descriptions could have been learnt overnight from a school history book.’

‘We’ll have to accept - at least for the sake of our hypothesis - that his recollections are genuine.’

‘With reluctance, my dear.’

Kate nodded, her pale cheeks flushed with anger, then she returned her gaze to her notes.

‘Few Christians,’ she said, ‘would have trouble in translating these statements. His first memory is of the presentation of a child, himself, in a temple that included the Court of the Gentiles, the Court of Women and the Court of the Israelites - all of which were, of course, part of Solomon’s Temple, now the Haram es-Sharif, the noble enclosure, on top of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. In discussing this presentation, he first mentions the Court of the Gentiles and then talks of the sacrifice of two birds. He was, according to his recollection, wrapped in swaddling clothes and taken to the temple by his parents. He clearly states that he was carried up some steps to a “just and devout one” who confirmed the uniqueness of his birth, that a prophetess serving in the temple offered thanks to the Lord, and that a priest then sacrificed the two birds, sprinkling the blood of one on the lower corner of the Altar, burning the other on top of the Altar. Whether or not this actually happened to Joshua, we *do* know that in the period he recollects, the first born male, after being circumcised, would have been presented in the temple, that his parents would have had to enter the temple via the Court of the Gentiles, that there they would have purchased two pigeons for sacrifice, that they would then have passed through a barrier and climbed some steps to the Court of Women, gone through a gate and then on as far as the step marking the end of the Court of the Israelites, where the priest would have sacrificed the two birds in the manner described. Indeed, such a ritual has its roots buried deep in the history of Israel and its details are minutely prescribed in the Mishnah. Also, according to St. Luke, this happened to the

child Jesus - and according to Joshua, it happened to him.'

'This strikes me as blasphemous,' Paul said. 'We should not have to listen to it.'

'Go on,' Ben Eleizer said.

'He claims that between his presentation in the temple and his thirteenth year, he has no memory of anything at all. This is particularly interesting in that there are no written records of Jesus' life between *his* presentation and his thirteenth year - and, indeed, this whole period of Jesus' life is an absolute mystery.'

'This is Christian doctrine,' Paul said angrily. 'We are all Jews in here.'

Ignoring him, Kate continued: 'According to Joshua's next statement, he is sitting in the shadows of the colonnades of the temple, learning from the priests, thus assuming the responsibilities of a student in the affairs of the Most High. Here, I need only point out to you that just as we Jews celebrate the *Bar Mitzvah*, when the thirteen-year-old male assumes the responsibilities of adulthood, so, too, in the time of Jesus, did the thirteen-year-old male assume his responsibilities by going to the temple to be taught by the priests. He would neither communicate with, nor return to, his family until his teaching had ended - and here, again, in recalling his own teaching, Joshua states that he had forsaken his parents to go to the temple. Likewise, according to the New Testament, Jesus forsook his father and mother, and went, at the age of thirteen, to be taught in the temple.'

'Your parallels are singularly disgusting,' Paul said, 'and should be erased from the minutes of this meeting.'

'His next statement is this,' Kate continued as if in a trance. '"I see a ribbon of water. A line of people stretches to it. I wade in the water and am dazzled by the sun, and the man with the face of a prophet takes hold of my shoulders. He immerses me in the water, crying words I cannot hear, and I rise up as the heavens open out and a white dove appears."' She raised her head to stare at everyone in turn, her glance almost defiant. 'At the risk of offending you, I must speak like a Christian and point out that that statement has striking parallels in *Matthew* 3:16, *Mark* 1:10, *Luke* 3:22 and *John* 1:32 - all describing John's baptism of Jesus Christ.'

'I must protest!' Paul exclaimed.

'Protest denied,' Ben Eleizer said. 'We're not necessarily accepting what Kate says, but we must hear her out.'

‘His next three recollections are visions of temptation,’ Kate continued, ‘and each of them is recorded in the New Testament as relating to Jesus. First, in the wilderness, he is tempted to turn stone to bread; next, on a mountain, he is offered the world for his soul; and finally, he is taken to the pinnacle of the temple, where he’s tempted to throw himself down and let the angels protect him. For those of you unfamiliar with the New Testament, I will simply point out that all three incidents are recorded in *Matthew* and *Luke*, where they describe Christ’s temptation by the devil. Joshua recounts exactly the same temptations, but calls his tempter “the evil one”.’

‘Luckily our man calls himself “Joshua”,’ Ben Eleizer said, not without a certain note of relief.

‘Unfortunately,’ Kate said, ‘“Jesus” and “Joshua” represent the same name. “Jesus Christ” is merely the Greek translation for the Hebrew “Joshua the anointed”. And our Joshua’s very first words - “Before Abraham was, I am” - have long been attributed to Jesus.’

A sudden, shocked silence descended upon the table as each of them took in what they had heard and tried to grasp its full import. Jozsef studied them each in turn, his heart beating too quickly, his spirit plunging into some cavern where fear limned the darkness. Jesus the Jew, he thought, that most remarkable and ambiguous man, who divided the Jewish world into Jews and Gentiles and branded the Jews as the killers of Christ, the Earth’s most despised race. Then, of course, there was the irony - the Christians worshipped a Jewish prophet - but beneath that, like the thorns beneath the rose, lay the nightmare of vengeance. Two thousand years of persecution - the endless blood of the Crucifixion - as the Christians, avenging their Jewish Christ, tried to obliterate Judaism. Jozsef thought of it with woe, with a fresh, frightening clarity, and wondered, even as he glanced across at Kate’s dark, haunted face, how he could possibly handle this extraordinary event.

‘Let me get this straight,’ General Meshel said slowly, his voice no longer harsh with cynicism, his gaze directly on Kate. ‘Can I take it that you’re suggesting this man is the resurrected Jesus Christ?’

‘I’m not willing to suggest anything,’ Kate replied. ‘I’m merely pointing out that his fragments of recall are all remarkably similar to the known facts on Jesus Christ, that all our tests have proven that he’s not consciously lying to us, that he thinks he’s called Joshua, which simply means “Jesus”, and that like the original Jesus, he’s a normal human being, albeit one with unusual

powers of the kind shared by few men.'

'Hypnotically induced amnesia and the implantation of his few recollections could conceivably have been arranged in a Soviet or American military laboratory. As for his extraordinary powers, they could be the result of intense parapsychological training in some similar environment.'

'No,' Rosenberg said. 'No kind of hypnosis could defeat our psychological tests, let alone account for Joshua's unprecedented command of every known language. Nor could any kind of parapsychological training account for the manner in which Joshua devastated his room. Human he may be, but natural he is not; he's a very rare kind of human being, beyond rational analysis.'

Jozsef clasped his hands together and started cracking his knuckles, a sound that seemed shockingly loud in the room's stricken silence. Embarrassed, he stopped immediately and placed his hands back on the table. Ben Eleizer stared at him, automatically, scarcely seeing him, then sighed and looked down at the table, as if deep in thought. General Meshel was studying Kate, his eyes narrowed, no longer cynical, his right hand tapping a pencil up and down, his left holding a smouldering cigarette. Leonard Rosenberg was leaning back, his hands clasped behind his head, shaking his head from side to side in disbelief. Moshe and Kate both looked haunted, glancing uneasily at one another, their eyes locking and then breaking apart before meeting again.

Then Jozsef glanced at Paul Frankel and immediately felt more uneasy, aware that the young lieutenant was an extreme Orthodox Jew - perhaps even more extreme than he was willing to show - and disturbed by the intensity of his gaze as he leaned towards Kate.

'You claim that you're willing to suggest anything,' Paul said, 'but in fact your every word suggests that you believe this man to be the resurrected Christ of the New Testament.'

'I don't know *what* I believe,' Kate replied. 'I'm just very disturbed. The facts are almost beyond comprehension, but they can't be disproved.'

'Neither his recollections nor his seemingly magical powers constitute proof that he's the Christian Jesus - and even if he were, it shouldn't disturb us, since we're Hebrew, after all, not Christian.'

He turned to Jozsef for support, his dark eyes glittering intently, and Jozsef, even against his every instinct, faced the issue that was normally

avoided by Jew and Christian alike. There was the Jesus of the Jews and the Christ of the Christians, and this division, ironic in the extreme, was also destructive. Christianity and Judaism had sprung from the same root, but neither religion was willing to recognise the fact. And nor was either religion, in the duplicity of self-righteousness, willing to accept the Jewish background of the man called Jesus. Yet Jesus was a Jew, immersed in scripture, taught by rabbis - not, in Jewish eyes, the Son of God, but most certainly a prophet. Judaism and Christianity therefore had much in common, but were divided over the interpretation of this one man and his extraordinary impact on history. Now there was the man called Joshua, another Jesus of mysterious origins, and already, like his remarkable predecessor, he was causing dissension. Whether resurrected or not, whether the same man or another, his very presence on the soil of Israel could lead to terrible consequences. Jozsef thought of this and trembled, glanced at Paul and felt despair, suddenly wishing that Jew and Gentile could be one as they had been in the beginning. Then, lowering his eyes, trying to keep his voice steady, silently praying for guidance and understanding, he let his words find their own way.

'I'm afraid we must be disturbed,' he said, 'since Kate omitted one recollection. This man, Joshua, also made mention of the Teacher of Righteousness, of scrolls in dark caves, of how the Teacher of Righteousness went before him and showed the way, and the scrolls revealed the lineaments of the life that gave shape to his own. Presumably, then, the scrolls showed the path he would have to follow, and revealed it through the actions of a predecessor, the Teacher of Righteousness.'

'You're talking about the Dead Sea Scrolls,' Paul said.

'Correct,' Jozsef said. 'The Dead Sea Scrolls, discovered by a Bedouin shepherd in the remote caves of Qumran, revealed a prototype for Jesus a century before his birth, this man a leader of the Jewish sect known as the Essenes - which Joshua also mentioned. No matter: the Dead Sea Scrolls revealed that the Essenes had developed a curious hybrid of Judaic creed that diverged from both Saducee and Pharisee Judaism, still managed to resemble both in certain ways, but bore a distinct resemblance to the future Christianity, including a protocol for seating foreshadowing the Last Supper and a ritual foreshadowing the Christian communion. The central figure of this sect was a mysterious figure known as the Teacher of Righteousness. Viewed by his disciples as the suffering servant of God and the instrument of

salvation for mankind, often called the *nezer* - the Nazarene - and believed to be the "shoot" of the House of David and the rock upon which the future church would be built, he was also destined, like the later Jesus, to be slain at the hand of a "wicked priest". The name of the Teacher of Righteousness is not known, but after his execution, about 65-53 B.C., his disciples, convinced that he would reappear amongst them, settled in the area around Qumran and awaited his return, doubtless also then writing the Dead Sea Scrolls and preparing themselves for Judgement Day.'

Jozsef slowly raised his head, feeling weary and confused; he glanced at Paul and then looked across at Kate, drawn to her haunted face. Her eyes, dark and luminous and passionate, made him feel less self-conscious.

'As you can see,' he continued, 'the resemblance between the Teacher of Righteousness and the later Jesus Christ is rather remarkable. More important, however, is that the discovery of this curious sect and their leader shattered the myth of the originality of Christianity and confirmed that it had evolved out of Judaism. While this dismayed the Christians, it also dismayed us Jews, since we now had to face the fact that many of the Christian rituals reviled by us had been conceived and practised by Jews two centuries before Christianity existed. Therefore, this man Joshua - whether or not he is the resurrected Jesus or another man altogether - could be claimed quite legitimately by Christian and Jew alike…and the resulting conflict between our two religions would be catastrophic. And, it should be noted, there is no question at all that Joshua believes his future course was foreshadowed by the Teacher of Righteousness.'

'He also states,' Kate added quickly, 'that his last recollection is of his final temptation - and that after it, he turned away from further temptation to embark on his calling. We can take it, then, that he believes he's on Earth for some undefined purpose.'

Jozsef watched her gaze shifting to each man around the table, and he felt his love and sorrow rising up as if to sweep him away. Yet he also felt exultant and helplessly grateful, sensing that his lost child had been found and returned to the fold. She, who had lost faith, was finding it again; and no matter the basis of that faith, it was something to build upon.

Thinking thus, he was stunned, his exultation draining away, abruptly turning back into confusion and the sharp blade of doubt. For, indeed, what was he accepting? That this man was the Chosen One? That this man, in his

mystery and power, was the tool of conversion? Jozsef glanced at Kate and trembled, again swept by love and sorrow, wanting to reach out and take her in his arms and then pray for salvation - not just her's, but his own.

'So,' General Meshel said, 'we have circumstantial evidence, but not quite enough to prove our case. No matter what you say, we're still left with a man whose origins simply cannot be ascertained. And I, for one, really can't accept that he lived in Jerusalem two thousand years ago.'

'Which brings us to Joshua's shroud,' Moshe said. He leaned forward and placed his elbows on the table and then raised his hands. 'Shortly after finding Joshua,' he said, 'we removed his shroud, or robe, and sent it in a sealed container to the Weizmann Institute for analysis. While a proper, scientifically verifiable report will take another year to complete, we feel that the results obtained so far are well worth reading out at this meeting; and since Leonard has been in charge of the programme, he'll give you the details.'

Letting his chair fall forward, Rosenberg leaned over the table, glanced nervously at Jozsef, then lowered his head and started reading from his notes, his voice sounding shaky.

'So far, tests on the shroud have included ion microprobe analysis, X-ray fluorescence work, X-ray transmission work, spectroscopic examination, infra-red thermography, radiological testing, and incomplete radiocarbon dating. The basic material proved to be linen. To ascertain the precise nature of this linen, selected threads were removed from under the shroud with microscopy pincers and examined under the microscope, then viewed under polarised lights for the best possible contrast. The fibre showed no signs of disintegration. The style of weave was revealed to be a three-to-one herringbone twill of the kind common to Palestinian, Roman and Egyptian linens during the first century A.D., albeit in silks rather than linen, this suggesting a fairly costly manufacture. Also found were traces of cotton, the fibre corresponding to the species *Gossypium herbaceum*, which is characteristic of the Middle East. A more precise estimate of the geographic origins of the material was obtained through the analysis of particles of dust removed from it, particularly a one-by-one examination of various pollen grains. Electron microscope examination of such grains revealed typical halophytes: plants common to the desert region of the Jordan Valley and specifically adapted to live in a soil with a high content of sodium chloride,

such as that found almost exclusively around the Dead Sea. Tentative dating of the linen was obtained with a carbon-14 test - a technique used most successfully on the linen wrappings of the Dead Sea Scrolls - and from these still incomplete tests we've obtained a dating plus or minus two hundred years. This tentative dating places the linen in either late B.C. or early A.D. Our preliminary assessment, therefore, is that the shroud, or robe, originated in the Middle East, was certainly worn in the area around Palestine, and was almost certainly woven at least eighteen centuries ago, possibly earlier.'

No one said anything for a considerable period of time, all too stunned by what they had heard to fully accept it. Jozsef closed his eyes briefly, sinking down through his mind, trying to reason through the chaos caused by panic - and failing dismally. He opened his eyes again to see Moshe's veiled gaze, Kate's haunted expression, then concentrated, with increasing trepidation, on Lieutenant Frankel. Paul was leaning across the table, staring at everyone in turn, his eyes bright but slightly unfocused, as if staring inward.

'It's a miracle,' Paul said. 'We can no longer doubt it. But it doesn't mean we have to accept that this man is the original Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was crucified - the Turin Shroud was the proof of that - so this man should have scars on his hands and feet, like those shown in the Turin Shroud.'

'No scars,' Moshe said wearily. 'No scars at all.'

'Then he isn't Jesus Christ,' Paul replied with some intensity. 'Jesus Christ, as we know, was a zealot who was crucified, and clearly this man wasn't crucified.'

'There could be reasons why the scars no longer show. They could, after all, have been erased with passing time. They could have just faded away.'

'If we're to accept that this man is nearly two thousand years old, if we're to accept, as the tests show, that neither he nor his shroud were damaged, then we must also accept that the condition we found him in was the exact same condition he was in when he was buried, in a manner defying our comprehension, in that tomb on the Mount of Olives. In other words, if he'd been crucified, the scars would still be there.'

'Very good,' Ben Eleizer said, 'but it doesn't solve our problem. I still want to know what we have here.'

'Was he circumcised?' Paul asked.

'Yes,' Leonard replied.

'A Jewish prophet,' Paul said fervently. 'Perhaps even the Messiah. He's

not a supernatural being but a man of flesh and blood, yet unmistakably one with divine gifts or supernatural abilities. Such will be the Messiah and such is this man – and his presence here, combined with the opening of the Golden Gate and the fact that he was brought down from the Mount of Olives, surely testifies that he *is* the Messiah and that the Age of Redemption is at hand.'

'No!' Jozsef cried hoarsely. 'I will not permit this! You're abusing Jewish folklore and tradition to fortify your delusions!'

'*My* delusions?' Paul retorted, his resentment finally breaking loose. 'You do not believe in the coming of the Messiah as revealed in the Torah? No, Jozsef, probably not; your blasphemous modernism is well known. Your liberal view of Judaic creed has been noted and has caused much resentment.'

'I do not encourage fanaticism or antiquated religious bigotry - neither that of the Netorei Karta zealots nor that of *Gush Emunim*. That I attempt to interpret the Talmud with an open mind isn't blasphemous - it's sensible.'

'It's – '

'Gentlemen, gentlemen,' Ben Eleizer said firmly, 'this is no time for theological debate - we must consider the facts.'

Jozsef was grateful for the interruption, feeling ashamed of his angry outburst, but understanding, as he settled back into his chair, that the young lieutenant was dangerous. A wave of grief passed through him, an intimation of tragedy, and he found himself thinking yet again of Jewish conflict and separatism. Lieutenant Frankel, a zealot, far too pious for his own good, was unfortunately one of an all too common breed that could not be ignored. Never before and not now - most assuredly not now - since public knowledge of the man from the Mount could lead to public disorder. And if fanatical Jews and Christians could adapt this man, then so, too, could the Muslims.

'So,' Ben Eleizer said, glancing sceptically at Paul, 'we have a man who might be approximately two thousand years old and carries in his head recollections that suggest the life of Jesus Christ. He has no scars at all, which at least suggests that he wasn't crucified, but he certainly possesses abnormal powers and thinks he's here for a purpose. What do we do, gentlemen, to make our speculations concrete? Wait for another year in the hope that the completed shroud tests will, given the wonders of science, produce all the answers? I think not. We need something else.'

'I want to take him out,' Kate said. 'I want to show him around Jerusalem. I want to see how he reacts when we take him to some of the locations where

Jesus was reported to have walked. That may or may not prove something, but we've little to lose.'

'He might run away,' Moshe said.

'No,' Kate replied, 'he won't. He doesn't know what he's here for or what he's supposed to do, so he simply does that he's told and lets events take their course. Also, he's convinced that it's through me that he'll find what his mission is, so he'll go wherever I take him and return without argument.'

'He didn't let events take their course,' Leonard said, 'when Moshe attempted to separate him from you.'

'True,' Kate replied. 'But again, what he did was designed to keep me close by his side.'

'We'll need witnesses,' Ben Eleizer said.

'I'd like Moshe to come with me.'

'I'd like Shin Bet to be represented,' General Meshel said, 'so you can also take Lieutenant Frankel.'

'I'm a Jew,' Paul replied. 'Some of those sites are forbidden to me. My beliefs would not permit me to enter Christian houses of worship.'

Jozsef noticed Paul's sharp glance, a blend of contempt and accusation, and he felt his anger rising again at the young man's self-righteousness. He tried to control it, unwilling to let rage blind him, determined to stay as calm as possible and get at the truth. He looked at Kate and then Moshe, saw them staring at one another, suppressed emotion rippling across both their faces and erasing their weariness. Seeing that, he felt better, oddly comforted and energised, and he turned his head again to speak to Paul, his gazed fixed, his voice steady.

'This is an important matter,' he said, 'for Jew and Gentile alike; and may also be of considerable importance to the Muslims. If, as you say, this man might be the Messiah, it's your duty to confirm or deny after seeing the evidence. You may enter the Christian sites if not entering to worship and if, in the witnessing of what transpires, you return with the truth.'

He kept his gaze fixed on Paul, finally saw him nodding tentatively, then turned away and glanced blindly around the table, feeling strangely excited. The silence was uneasy, a mute sigh that filled the room, only broken by the moaning of the wind outside the Knesset. Jozsef pondered on his feelings, trying to analyse his excitement, failed and then experienced deep shame at his abrupt lack of despair. He was behaving unnaturally, perhaps even

immorally; letting his curiosity threaten the very tenets of his faith, and possibly hoping, in hypocritical fashion, that Paul's belief in the Age of Redemption might be coming true. Feeling hot, he wiped his brow, lowered his eyes and studied his hands, then raised his eyes again and looked across the polished wood of the long table. Moshe and Kate had shifted slightly, their bodies turned towards one another, their eyes locked in some silent communication that involved pain and yearning. Startled, slightly shocked, feeling almost like a voyeur, Jozsef coughed into his clenched fist and moved his eyes until he found the Prime Minister.

'So be it,' Ben Eleizer said.

24

He said nothing as they drove along the Hebron Road, passing the Kibbutz Ramat Rachel and the Mar Elias Monastery and then descending into a biblical panorama of orchards and fields where the black-garbed Arabs tended their sheep and goats. Nor did he say anything when they stopped the car and showed him Shepherd's Field, where the angel had announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds tending their flock. Nor did he say anything when they drove on to Bethlehem, stepped out into the noisy Manger Square, and walked past the taxis and tour buses to the Church of Nativity. Finally, he said nothing when they stood in the Grotto of the Nativity, but merely gazed at the star on the floor, glowing golden in the candlelight, returned the curious stares of the few tourists and their guides, then went to examine the Chapel of the Manger. Seeing nothing recognisable, obviously getting no reaction from it, he shook his head from side to side in a negative gesture and let them lead him back out.

They all remained silent as they drove back around Jerusalem, then headed north across the beautiful plain of Esdraelon, Moshe following the winding road as it ran up through fruitful forests and then fell down to the natural amphitheatre in which Nazareth nestled. Joshua maintained his silence as they drove through the modern town, his silvery-grey gaze curious but registering no shock as they passed cars and buses and donkeys and carts, along streets lined with cafés and shops, filled with Christians and Moslems. They stopped and disembarked outside the Roman Catholic Church of St. Joseph, but again, although he gazed at it with interest, he did not seem perturbed.

'It means nothing to you?' Paul asked.

'No,' Joshua replied.

'Then you cannot have been the son of the carpenter, Joseph.'

'I never claimed to be,' Joshua said.

Leaving the church, they led him to the Basilica of the Annunciation, first taking him through the Upper Church with its modern mosaic panels, then down to the dark and shadowy grotto in the lower church, lit only by flashes of colour from its small windows. There he stood for some time, the surrounding pillars casting shadows upon him, his head leaning into the beams of light and then moving back again, his eyes lost in the darkness. Finally, he stepped back, letting the gloom dissolve his features, and spoke, his voice hollow in the cave, unnaturally quiet, almost spectral.

'There is nothing of me here. I feel something nearby. I think of the great Via Maris, which linked nation to nation. There were pilgrims and merchants and soldiers near the foot of the hill. That is all I can see.'

'The great highway,' Kate explained, speaking for the first time. 'It ran between Egypt and the nations of the North and the East, passing a short distance from Nazareth and then travelling across the Plain of Esdraelon. It existed during the time of Jesus Christ.'

They left the Basilica and took him to the Greek Orthodox church, down the small stairway, then along an ancient, marble-lined passage to the well at which it was believed the archangel first appeared to Mary and the boy Jesus would have come to collect water. He stood for some time, staring down at the well, his noble brow furrowed in concentration, his hands opening and closing. Then his hands closed, became tightly clenched fists, and a tremor ran visibly through his body and then passed away. Kate watched him and felt dizzy, closed her eyes and saw two shadows, a woman and a boy bending over, their hands dripping water. She shivered and felt fear, opened her eyes and saw his face, turned towards her and offering a glance that calmed her immediately.

'You saw it?' he said.

'Saw what?' Moshe asked.

'A woman and child,' Kate replied. 'Possibly just in my mind. I closed my eyes and seemed to see them by the pool for a second or two.'

'And you?' Moshe said to Joshua.

'It was in my mind,' Joshua replied. 'She rolls back the stones of my past and releases the shadows.'

'Who were they?'

'I don't know.'

'You don't think the child was you?'

‘I have no idea who the child was; I saw little, felt nothing.’

‘Let’s get out of here,’ Kate said.

‘Why, Kate, are you frightened?’

Kate shivered. ‘Maybe. I feel strange. I want to leave here right now.’

They left and headed back towards the town centre until they arrived at the Greek Catholic church, said to be the site of the synagogue attended by Jesus. Once there, he lowered his head, closed his eyes and started shaking, then opened his eyes again and stared at Kate with a hard, bright intensity. Kate instantly felt faint, closed her eyes and saw more shadows, felt a wave of anger coming towards her and pushing her backwards. Then she felt Moshe’s hands, resting lightly on her shoulders, holding her upright as she opened her eyes again and looked straight at Joshua. His eyes, with their silvery-grey luminescence, seemed calm but unnatural.

‘I might have been here,’ he said. ‘A great anger was directed at me. There was much debate and anger near this place, and I feel I was part of it.’

Kate turned to Moshe and Paul, her lips dry, her heart racing. ‘According to St. Luke,’ she said, ‘when Jesus taught in the synagogue, he so angered the townsmen that they dragged him away and attempted to throw him off the brow of a nearby hill. The traditional site of that hill is now located at Djebel-el-Qafse, approximately a mile from here. The anger that Joshua sensed - and that I sensed - could have come from that incident.’

‘A Christian myth,’ Paul said, ‘with no basis in fact. You’ve recently studied the New Testament in detail and now remember your reading. You are, in short, trying to convince yourself regarding your own dubious parallels.’

‘But Joshua felt it as well,’ Moshe said quietly.

‘Perhaps,’ Paul said. ‘But how do we interpret it? It seems certain that he lived in the times of which he speaks, but not necessarily as the Son of the One: more likely a prophet.’

From Nazareth they drove through a sweeping wasteland of rocky gorges and parched hills, the sun blazing down mercilessly on an ever bleaker landscape, until they arrived at the verdant green of the palm trees and fruit orchards of Jericho; then they drove on to the Wadi Qelt gorge and the towering, spectacular cliffs where Christ was said to have spent his forty days in meditation. Taking Joshua to the walled enclosure on the summit of the Mount of Temptation, where Jesus was said to have been tempted by the

devil, they all stood there in breathless silence, awed by the stupendous panorama stretched out below them - the barren wilderness shimmering under the sun and rolling away to the horizon - then glanced uneasily at one another, neither willing to speak, and eventually turned their eyes upon Joshua, wondering what he would do.

He stood near the edge of the cliff, the wind blowing his white robe out, his long hair whipping wildly around his face as he gazed down on the magnificent desolation of the hills and valleys of Jordan. Kate stepped forward to touch him, then stopped, feeling frightened; closed her eyes and felt the presence of evil as a palpable force. She clenched her fists and started trembling, her heart pounding too fast, then heard a whispering that seemed to surround her and was filled with pure malice. A spectre. A presence. An invisible, malignant force. There were visions of torture and pain and the most pitiless hatred. A scream rose up from her centre, bubbling into her throat, and she shook her head frantically from side to side, trying to stifle her terror. Then someone's hands grabbed her, Moshe's hands, large and firm, and she opened her eyes to see the broad sweep of the wastelands shimmering under the sun. She blinked and stared at Joshua, saw his silvery-grey eyes, their serenity drawing her out of herself and leading her back to calm pastures.

'What was it?' she asked.

'You nearly walked off the edge,' Moshe said. 'You closed your eyes and started to walk forward and nearly fell off.'

'It was the Evil One,' Joshua said. 'As he was, so he is. He stretches around the firmament like a cloud, dividing darkness from light.'

'You saw him?' Moshe asked.

'No,' Joshua replied, 'I felt him. The Evil One exists by wind and fire and is part of the Nothing.'

They left the Mount of Temptation and drove on through the wilderness towards the sleepy Arab village of El-Azariye, or Bethany, where they stopped at the modest tomb of Lazarus, close to the nineteenth-century Franciscan church. Joshua went down the stairs and stood in front of the shrine, his white robe looking spectral in the gloom when Kate walked up behind him. They both stood there for some time, neither saying a word, hardly aware of the tourists murmuring piously around them, some of them mistaking Joshua for an Arab and averting their shocked eyes accordingly.

Joshua shivered again, and Kate closed her eyes and drifted, the darkness rolling back across the curtain of her eyelids to reveal dark-shawled women kneeling low in lamentation, their hands rising and falling in prayer above a man in the shadows. Kate felt terrible grief, then was filled with exultation; heard the cries of surprise and disbelief and then opened her eyes again. She saw Joshua staring at her, his eyes unnaturally bright, and then she hurried out of the tomb and let him find his own way out.

'Well?' Paul enquired.

'He knows the place,' Kate replied.

'That doesn't necessarily mean he was the Christ.'

'I never stated such,' Joshua said.

They drove him to the Jordan River where it ran east of Jericho and stood on the traditional site of Christ's baptism. 'Let it be now,' he said, his face radiant in the light, while Kate, her feet cleansed by the flowing water, felt the shock through her body. The water came up to her ankles, but she felt submerged in it, first struggling in darkness and cold and then emerging to light. Something fluttered above her head, a white bird travelling east, and the heavens opened out in her mind and filled her spirit with warmth. She opened her eyes and saw Joshua, felt the tears on her cheeks, raised her right hand and wiped the tears away and then turned to Moshe. He was standing close to her with Paul just behind him, the former concerned, the latter looking bewildered, neither moving at all. Kate smiled, or felt that she was smiling, and lowered her hands to her sides.

'You were crying,' Moshe said.

'Yes,' Kate agreed.

Joshua stepped forward and touched her with his hands, his fingers light on her shoulders. 'Tears of joy,' he said. 'The waters carry the joy with them. It was here that the prophet called my name and ordained my deliverance. What was willed, will be done.'

'What *was* willed?' Kate asked fearfully.

'It was willed and will be repeated. The seasons come and go and repeat themselves; and just as it is with the seasons, so it is with mankind.'

Kate felt a great fear that only deepened in intensity when they arrived at the deserted caves of Qumran by the banks of the Dead Sea. They stood in the Wadi Qumran, the ancient cliffs towering above them, the caves pock-marking the cliff face like dead eyes, a lunar silence surrounding them.

Joshua gazed along the cliffs, his eyes scanning the dark caves, then he turned and looked across the Dead Sea, as if searching for something. The sun beat upon the smooth sea, cutting through the cloud of haze, the hills of Judah sweeping down to the western shore on the opposite bank. Joshua turned back to the caves, stepped forward and stopped again, bowed his head and covered his face with his hands, as if silently weeping. Kate walked across to him, feeling only his great love, seeing nothing but the radiance of his face where the sunlight exploded. In that dazzling light he changed, becoming someone much darker, a man wise and burdened beyond his years, knowing what was to come. Kate reached out to touch him, her fingers spread and shaking slightly, and felt the burning skin of his forehead, a slight shock bolting through her. Dazed, her body hollow, she removed her hand and stepped back, then noticed, as a cloud covered the sun, that Joshua seemed perfectly normal.

'It was not I,' he said. 'But here my coming was prophesied. Here the Teacher of Righteousness told the tale of the trial to come. He was here before my time, and before my time he knew me, and his life, a mere prelude to his death, precisely mirrored my own. He was here and is here in my head with the light shining out of him. I must leave this place and never come back because the trials begin again.'

'The trials?'

'Those which will come in the near future. For myself. And for you.'

The fear clamped around Kate as she turned towards Moshe, letting him hold her hand and lead her to the car, his silence offering her solace. In her fear was a desperate love, the pain of yearning and helpless need, and as she sat down in the back of the car, she wondered who had aroused it. Almost certainly Joshua, but not him alone; beyond Joshua, in some realm where the past and present met, she was being tormented by the need to express a more common commitment. Joshua slid into the seat beside her while Paul clambered into the front, then Moshe closed his door and turned on the ignition and drove off too quickly. Kate studied his broad shoulders and the nape of his neck, then turned her head and studied Joshua's profile as sunlight passed over it. A remarkable profile, at once noble and oddly primitive, it belonged to every race and every creed and refused to divide them. Kate sat back in her seat, closed her eyes and drifted away, letting the droning of the car soothe her ragged nerves in an impermanent peace.

They drove back to Jerusalem and up to the summit of the Mount of Olives, disembarking near the Intercontinental Hotel and walking across to the amphitheatre with its breathtaking view of Old Jerusalem. Joshua studied the lovely sheen of the golden Dome of the Rock, let his eyes wander across to the silver dome of the Mosque of El-Aqsa, then finally fixed his gaze on the majestic, conical roof of the Dormition Abbey.

'Zion,' he said. 'I know it as Mount Zion. Beyond that, I know nothing at all. That hill is Mount Zion.'

Kate glanced at Moshe and saw him looking at Paul, whose brown eyes, like stones in the darkness, reflected pale light. Obviously shaken, Moshe turned away, murmured something and then walked on, and they followed him down the short, sloping road and back up to the waste ground. The ruins of the Chapel of the Ascension were desolate and strangely ominous, a fine dust drifting languidly across the rubble and settling over their shoes. Joshua studied the ruins at length, walking back and forth in silence, while Kate, recalling the night of his discovery, visibly trembled. Joshua noticed and walked up to her, stopped in front of her and put his hand out, touching her cheek lightly with his fingers and offering a gentle smile.

'No fear,' he said. 'There is no reason to fear. What was done has been done and cannot be undone, and has, like you and I and our brothers, a reason for being. I know it was here, and that my coming was preordained, but I still do not know what came before and perhaps never will. You were called and you came and now the fear grips your heart, but beyond the fear is love and redemption, which exist by our faith. No fear. You must not have fear. Let your faith fill your heart.'

'You remember nothing else?'

'No,' he said. 'Nothing else.'

'Naturally not,' Paul said. 'The famed ascension is pure myth. You were, and probably still are, a prophet. By my faith, I believe this.'

They both stared at him in silence, as if staring at a stranger, then Joshua turned away, his body visibly trembling, and walked across the sad ruins. They followed him, walking carefully, kicking up stones, and then entered the Pater Noster Church, blending in with the tourists. Here, set into the tiled walls, were the words of the Lord's Prayer, written out in sixty-two different languages. Joshua glanced left and right, taking in every language, and then murmured the words to himself, as if reciting from memory. Paul shivered

and turned away, his brown eyes displaying confusion, and they followed him through the colonnaded courtyard, back out to the sunshine.

They did not return to the car, but instead walked down the narrow road to the Franciscan church of Dominus Flevit. Joshua instantly changed, his eyes becoming moist, and then, for the first time, his head turning away from them, he covered his face with his hands, bowed his head and wept.

'For Jerusalem,' he said, his voice as hollow as the wind. 'For the days shall come upon it that its enemies shall surround it and not leave one stone upon the other nor let the dust settle.'

He dried his eyes and walked on, leading them down the stony path, then stopped at the Basilica of the Agony, his eyes widening in shock. There were Arabs with camels, Jews hawking souvenirs, and the tourists were queuing up with their money, all hoping to purchase a piece of history. Joshua did not respond immediately, barely able to accept the scene, then he stared across at the Old City, returned his gaze to the crowd before him, and eventually uttered an indistinct imprecation and reached out to a hawker. His hand chopped down through the air, then swept viciously sideways, sending postcards and assorted souvenirs flying off the small stall. The hawker looked up in shock as his customers jumped clear, then Joshua turned, his rage almost demoniac, and walked away like a blind man. Ignoring the mosaic scene of Christ praying in Gethsemane, he walked on into the garden without speaking to anyone. Kate followed him in, Moshe and Paul hurrying after her, and saw him standing quietly, surveying the cacti and bougainvillaea, then dropping to his knees beneath the branches of a gnarled olive tree, one hand reaching out to touch the trunk, his tears falling silently.

Kate suddenly felt incorporeal, as if the blood was draining out of her, but she walked forward, ignoring Moshe and Paul, to lay her hand soothingly on Joshua's shoulder. He shivered as if with fever, shaking his head from side to side, but probed the tree trunk with the fingernails of his right hand, digging deep for the truth.

'It's an olive tree,' he said. 'Such trees never die. When an old trunk is decrepit, it sprouts new wood and thus always renews itself. This tree existed when I walked here, when my tears turned to blood, and it lived through the silence of my great sleep and will witness my passing. It is, like the sun and the moon, more lasting than memory. It endures. We pass on.'

His body shook as he wept again, his head turned away from Kate, then

he stifled a final sob and stood up and dried his eyes with his hands. He stared at Kate as if haunted, then at Moshe and Paul, kept his gaze fixed on Paul for some time and then trembled and walked away. They all followed him out, Kate's heart racing again, something inside her reaching out to Moshe, as if begging for help. He was walking beside her, his head bowed, shoulders slumped in despair, and her rioting emotions converged in the well of his quiet strength.

They entered the Grotto of Gethsemane, which Joshua viewed without reaction, then went under the Crusader arch and descended the stairs to the Orthodox Church of the Assumption. At the bottom, in the gloom, surrounded by hundreds of votive lamps, a dull gleaming illuminated the sepulchre and the scent stung their nostrils. Joshua studied the milling tourists, the fat priests in black robes, saw the boxes being extended for coins and turned his gaze back on Kate.

'I came here,' he said, 'without knowing why I came; and now that I am here, I am lost, feeling nothing within me.'

'It's for Mary,' Kate explained. 'The virgin mother of Jesus. It's supposed to be the site of her burial and assumption – though the Dormition Abbey, which you seemed to recognise, claims a similar honour.'

'This is a temple for the gathering of coins. I feel nothing but anger here.'

They walked up Jericho Road and turned left into the Old City, passing under the great arch of Lion's Gate, at the beginning of the Via Dolorosa. Here the tourists were numerous and the Arab touts highly vocal, many of them no more than children, their eyes dark and beautiful. Joshua looked upon them with kindness, at the Via Dolorosa with suppressed revulsion. Kate led him into the grotto beneath the Church of St. Anne, where Mary, the mother of Jesus, was presumed to have been born. He studied the grotto with detachment, obviously receiving nothing from it, and then was shown the adjoining excavations of the Pool of Bethesda, where Jesus was said to have cured the crippled man. Again, there was no reaction, so Kate led him away, walking him along the narrow, shabby Via Dolorosa to the El-Omariye School, the first step along the Stations of the Cross.

In the courtyard of the school, opposite the Franciscan monastery, Joshua reached out and held Kate by the shoulder to let his tension pass into her. She closed her eyes and saw a bowl, two hands emerging, dripping water; heard the words of condemnation in her head before they led her away. She opened

her eyes and saw Moshe, staring at her with great intensity, the Chapel of the Flagellation behind him, its refurbished walls dark. Joshua looked at her and held her, his fingers digging into her shoulder, and she closed her eyes again and lowered her head, gazing into herself. There was the humiliation of mockery, the sudden stinging of the whips, then she felt the thorns biting into her head and heard the baying of vengeful crowds. Held tightly, she was led away, wanting to weep, unable to do so; turned a corner and stumbled to her knees, opened her eyes and glanced up. Moshe and Paul were staring at her, looking down with startled eyes. Between them, on the wall of the Polish chapel, was the relief of Jesus bearing the cross. Clinging to Joshua, she stood up and saw him studying the relief, his face displaying tension and bathed in sweat, his silvery-grey eyes too bright. He turned his head and stared at her, his eyes growing slightly darker, then they all continued along the Via Dolorosa until they arrived at the Armenian Catholic Church, the fourth Station of the Cross. Here Joshua closed his eyes, the tears shining on his cheeks, while Kate, feeling the anguish of a mother, trembled helplessly beside him. She reached out and touched Moshe, fingers outspread on his face, desperately wanting something human to cling to, feeling the warmth of his lips. Then they walked on, and stopped again at the Franciscan oratory, where Kate, as if unburdened of a terrible weight, straightened her spine and breathed deeply. Joshua likewise seemed relieved, but then shuddered and walked on, his right hand resting lightly on Kate's shoulder, keeping her close by his side. They came to the Church of St. Veronica, but did not venture inside, satisfied when Kate reached out, automatically and blindly, to gently wipe the sweat from Joshua's face with the palm of her hand. At that moment, there was love, an outpouring of grief and warmth, but then they walked to the crossroads of the Via Dolorosa and Khan ez-Zeit, and there, where the clamour of the bazaar filled their ears, Kate blacked out momentarily and slid to her knees, her hands clinging to Joshua's white rob, her head shaking from side to side in protest. Joshua looked down with pity, placed his hand on her head, and then, as the passers-by looked on with interest, gently tugged her back to her feet and placed his hand on her shoulder. Kate glanced at Moshe and Paul, saw them staring at one another, turned away when she saw Moshe glancing at her, his grey eyes concerned. Moshe turned away then, leading them farther along the route, and they soon came to the stone relief on the wall that marked the eighth Station. Here Kate

began to sob, uncontrollably, bitterly, and the passers-by, Jew, Christian and Moslem, gathered around to observe them. Joshua moved away from Kate, his hand dropping from her shoulder, and then, his eyes surveying the curious crowd, he spoke loudly and forcefully.

'Do not grieve for her,' he said. 'Instead, grieve for yourselves. Grieve also for your children and the days they will surely inherit. For the day is coming to Jerusalem when the barren shall be beholden, when wombs that never produce child and breasts that never give milk shall be blessed instead of cursed for their sterility. It is then that you will beg for the mountains to fall upon you, for the hills to cover you up, and for the green tree, which refuses to die, to shed its leaves and turn dry. Jerusalem, your Golden City, will fall, and only faith will redeem it.'

Paul gasped and stepped back, covering his mouth with his hand, his dark eyes showing fear and stunned reverence, a spasm lancing his body. He glanced at Kate and then at Moshe, saw people scattering in embarrassment, then turned his gaze back upon Joshua, who was staring straight at him. Paul stood there, transfixed, licking his lips, and then stepped up to Joshua.

'What made you say that?' he asked.

'It seemed fitting,' Joshua replied.

'And you still do not know who you are?'

'I only know I was called.'

Paul sobbed and turned aside, wiping his eyes with his fingers, and they followed him up the Via Dolorosa to the Ethiopian Convent, the ninth Station of the Cross. Inside, it was gloomy, the monks striding back and forth, and Kate wiped her eyes and bit her lower lip, her gaze fixed on Joshua. She felt nothing in this place, only the heartbreak of her love, and her feelings, pouring out into the gloom, became one with the silence. Joshua watched her, clearly curious, a gentle smile on his lips, then he touched her cheek lightly with his fingers and led her back out.

The Church of the Holy Sepulchre was on the Hill of Golgotha. When Joshua entered through the Crusader portal and glanced around the exotic interior, seeing the artefacts and hanging lights of the numerous sects that shared the church - Syrian and Armenian, Coptic and Abyssinian, Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox - and then saw the workmen's scaffolding, their clutter of ladders and tools, he stopped, briefly foiled by the sight, momentarily frozen. The holiest of holy sites to all Christian denominations,

it was filled with chattering tourists and black-frocked priests and their acolytes, long queues forming to view the final Stations of the Cross, coins dropping into strategically placed boxes, cameras clicking incessantly. Joshua stood there for some time, just inside the busy entrance, taking in the golden chapels and illuminated paintings and religious figures, then he turned to face the nearby Stone of Unction and visibly trembled.

Kate walked up to him and held him, her hand resting on his shoulder, and then closed her eyes and dropped down through herself to where his anguish was buried. There was thunder and lightning, the pouring rains of grief and loss; and the pain, more appalling than endless night, was a fuse to redemption. She entered into his pain, travelling through it to freedom, letting the darkness drain the agony away as light flared in the distance. Then she moaned a protestation, felt shame and affirmed again, and the light, spreading out through the darkness, swept around her and soothed her. The peace of understanding, the glorious warmth of acceptance: her tears flowed between the banks of the River Jordan and made her one with the Holy Land. Kate opened her eyes again, saw the high-domed Rotunda, the hanging lamps shedding their light on Joshua's eyes and making them luminous.

'We must leave here,' he said. 'I cannot stay in this place. In here is the anguish and glory of the mystery to come. It is too soon to know, and my way must be in innocence; and this place, in which pain and death reside, is the end of my journey. I feel it; and my body is breaking; but the time is not yet come. We must leave on the instant.'

They walked along the Rehov HaYehudim, between the Jewish and Armenian quarters, left the Old City by way of the Zion Gate and continued on to Mount Zion. Beneath the gold and polychrome mosaics of the sanctuary of the Dormition Abbey, in the crypt where the Virgin Mary was said to have spent her last days, Joshua stared at the effigy of the mother of Jesus and again showed no visible response.

Retracing their footsteps, they crossed to the opposite side of the abbey and entered the Coenaculum above the Tomb of King David. A small and humble room with Crusader archwork and Turkish prayer niche, it seemed fitting as the setting for the Last Supper, oddly desolate and sad. Joshua gazed around the room, his hands motionless by his sides; and yet even as he shook his head in a negative gesture, Kate surrendered to grief. She closed her eyes and drifted away, then returned in another time, saw the breaking of

bread, the cup passing from mouth to mouth, the bare feet of the twelve apostles being washed by the one on his knees. The grief and sadness overwhelmed her, being torn from love and faith, and she opened her eyes again and saw that Joshua was perfectly calm.

'No,' he said, 'it wasn't here. Yet what you felt was the reality. What you felt was the manifestation of the need of those who have come here for centuries. There was a parting of love and sorrow, a final partaking of bread and wine; but what happened did not occur here, but somewhere over the valley.'

He walked out of the Coenaculum, moving quickly and decisively, and they followed him back through the Zion Gate and then down the untended slopes of the Kidron Valley. He seemed to know where he was going and looked neither left nor right as he led them up the side of the inconspicuous Mount Ophel to the mosque above the Upper Pool of Siloam. Standing on the edge of the slope, a breeze making his white robe flap, he gazed down at the long, narrow pool with a peculiar intensity. Kate was standing just behind him, between the silent Moshe and Paul; and thinking of her recurrent dream, and of what it represented, she was unable to move to the edge and gaze down at the water.

'He knew it was here,' Paul whispered. 'He came here deliberately. And according to the New Testament, this is where Jesus Christ healed the blind man.'

'Also,' Moshe replied, 'according to the New Testament, Jesus made clay with his spittle and healed the man by rubbing it in his eyes. That was not a ritual prescribed by Jewish tradition.'

'That means little,' Paul said fervently. 'Jesus the prophet was a Jew. The Jews, according to the Mishnah, used this very water for purification both in the ancient ceremonial of the Red Heifer and for the water poured out before the Lord at the feast of Tabernacles. In fact, this pool represented the spring of David's Jerusalem and thus was central to Jewish concerns. He was Jewish. So is Joshua.'

His passion disturbed Kate and made her turn away from him, again thinking of how dangerous Joshua could be in his innocent passivity. Her eyes fell upon Joshua's face, noting his concern and confusion, and she quickly averted her gaze, feeling torn, though not understanding her feelings. Then Joshua glanced over his shoulder, waved a hand to beckon her forward,

and she did as she was bid, moving tentatively to the edge, aware that Moshe and Paul were close behind her, both breathing too heavily. Joshua looked directly at her, smiling slightly, his silvery-grey gaze consoling.

'Admit what you have denied,' he said, slightly amending a previous statement. 'Stop dreaming of the child in the pool of blood and let the healing bring new life.' He pointed down at the pool with his right hand, the index finger extended. 'Look - and will the blood. Do not turn away from it. Let the water turn to blood and accept your shame and then put it behind you. In this way you will heal yourself.'

The fear gripped Kate and choked her, almost making her gag, but she forced herself to lean slightly forward and look down at the pool. It was a long, narrow pool, its water exceptionally clear, springing out from an arch beneath the mosque, still fed, as it had been for centuries, by Hezekiah's underground channel. There were a few ancient column drums thrusting out of the water, but otherwise the pool was perfectly normal, reflecting the masonry work above it.

'Will the blood,' Joshua repeated. 'Make it flow. Cleanse yourself and be set free.'

Kate looked down and saw the water, her own rippling reflection, a thin line of light dividing her face and emphasising the shadows. She looked down and was mesmerised, saw her reflection and then looked up, saw herself high above, looking down, her eyes widening in disbelief. The water rippled and swirled, formed a languid, graceful whirlpool, and out of the vortex, as if bubbling up from a blocked faucet, was a flower of rich blood. The blood spread out through the water, was drawn into the coiling current, spread out farther and moved around the darker red of its centre. Then the darker red changed, growing larger and more irregular, becoming a foetus turning slowly in the eye of the bright, bloody whirlpool.

Kate gagged and almost choked, feeling the terror searing through her. She turned her hands into fists and kept staring as her fear turned to shame. Not shame, but something else - perhaps a murderous sense of loss - almost certainly the knowledge that fear itself was the greatest destroyer. She kept looking at the Pool of Siloam, at the bloody foetus in its bed of blood, and she sobbed and out of blind weeping eyes beheld the truth she had buried.

In shame was redemption and from that she gained new life; she looked down and was set free, becoming the foetus and looking up, seeing herself

high above, looking down, her eyes clear with renewed faith. The ripples contracted, drawn back in to the vortex, then the blood, first gurgling and then sighing, became a bubbling red flower. The petals of the flower folded inward, became a red bud in the water, then the red bud sank below the surface and soon disappeared.

Kate looked down, entranced, gradually awakening to rejuvenation; saw the clear, unblemished water, her own rippling reflection, a thin line of light dividing her face and emphasising the shadows. After a long time she looked up to see Joshua, Moshe and Paul, forming a semicircle around her, only Paul's eyes averted.

'I saw it,' Moshe said. 'We all saw it. You didn't imagine it.'

A choked sob broke from Paul and he fell to his knees, leaning across Joshua's feet, his hands covering his face.

'Not the Christ of the Christians,' Paul said, sounding choked, 'but the Jesus of the Jews. Not a supernatural being but a man of flesh and blood, yet unmistakably one with divine gifts or supernatural abilities. Such will be the Messiah and such have you proven yourself to be. Not the Son of the One, but His messenger. Indeed, you *are* the Messiah!'

Kate saw Moshe's grey eyes, drawn by love, bound with fear. Her heart turned like a leaf in the wind and flew out to be captured.

25

‘It’s been a long time,’ Leon said. ‘Nearly two months. I just want you to know that I’ve been faithful, doubtless due to senility.’

Kate smiled wanly but did not reply, still looking uneasy, her body long and angular in the bikini, her gaze fixed on Eilat. Leon navigated out of the lagoon, gradually leaving the marina behind, slipping past the yachts and small boats, the wind surfers and scuba divers, staring across the brilliant blue of the water to the Moab Mountains and Aqaba. He only looked at Kate occasionally, feeling as uneasy as she obviously did, well aware that their long separation had, more than expected, made them feel unfamiliar with each other. He wanted to believe that this was so, but felt a little uncertain; in his depths he sensed that Kate had somehow changed and was no longer close to him. This possibility, in his mind but inadmissible, sent a chill rippling through him.

‘You were very quiet in the car,’ he said.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be. It’s just that I’ve been so long in that damned hospital, it feels strange being out at last.’

He believed half of the statement and decided not to question it, his every nerve alive to the tension that almost palpably came off her. He was standing in the open cockpit, at the navigating controls, and Kate was sitting beside him on one of the companion seats, her knees bent, her feet up, her long hair blowing freely in the wind, her eyes hidden behind a pair of sunglasses that emphasised her high cheekbones.

‘You don’t look well,’ Leon said.

‘I don’t feel so good either. Two months of air-conditioning is enough to make anyone look ill. That’s why I suggested coming here, instead of sitting in some bar. I wanted clean air and wide open spaces and the salt of the sea.’

‘I’m disappointed,’ Leon replied. ‘I had assumed it was nostalgia. We’ve spent a lot of time together on this boat, which is why I still treasure it.’

‘You can afford it, Leon.’

‘Not any longer, my pet. If something doesn’t break soon, I’ll have to leave here and look for real work.’

Feeling guilty and furtive, understanding what he was doing, recalling Rashid and the bargain they had made, he turned his head to look down at her. She was leaning into the hull, her breasts pressed against the railing, her face turned towards the mountains of Moab beyond the languid blue water. Her indefinable beauty tugged at him, breaking his heart, stirring his loins, and he turned away and looked straight ahead, trying to keep his voice casual.

‘I thought they were keeping you a prisoner.’

‘No, Leon, they weren’t.’

‘Major-general Moshe Eitan said you were suffering from shock and were therefore being kept under observation. I refused to believe that of my Kate, but the great man insisted.’

‘I can’t talk about it, Leon.’

‘Was it shock?’

‘Just a little.’

‘So why won’t you talk about it?’

‘I’m sorry. I can’t.’

‘Security reasons?’

‘Yes, Leon. You know that.’

‘I’m still a journalist, Kate.’

Leaving the lagoon, he entered the Red Sea proper and headed south towards Coral Island, relieved that the bustling port was now behind him, appreciating the cooler air. Glancing down at Kate, he saw her windblown hair, her curved spine and broad hips; and the tension, which he felt almost physically, was clear in her posture.

‘You haven’t recovered yet,’ he said.

‘I recovered a long time ago. I was kept in the hospital because they didn’t want the matter discussed.’

‘You mean what happened on the Mount of Olives?’

‘Don’t play innocent, Leon. You’ve been grilling Moshe Eitan ever since it happened, so you believe there was something. Unfortunately, you want to know more and I can’t help you there.’

‘The whole world is curious about it.’

‘What was reported was the truth: the authorities still don’t know what it

was - and neither do I.'

He didn't believe that for a second and her flushed cheeks showed the lie, before her face, automatically and primly, turned away from him.

'Was something brought down from there?'

'You've already asked Moshe that.'

'Eitan has obviously relayed all our conversations straight to you; the pair of you must have talked a great deal.'

She turned towards him, then, her eyes hidden behind the sunglasses, the wind blowing her hair across her lips, which were certainly not smiling. She studied him in silence for some time before turning away again.

'Yes,' she said, 'we talked a lot. We were forced together a lot. It was a security situation, after all, and Moshe was in charge.'

'A dedicated man,' Leon said.

'No sarcasm, Leon, please.'

'I'm sorry,' Leon replied. 'It's just that I got drunk one night, confronted the major-general, and ended up receiving the distinct impression that he was particularly fond of you.'

Kate refused to reply, but continued staring out to sea. Leon reached down and picked up his glass of gin and had a long, cooling drink. Straight ahead was the Red Sea, a clear, alluvial blue, barren mountains rising up to white clouds in an equally blue sky. Over there, at the base of the mountains, was the Jordanian city of Aqaba.

'Well, is he fond of you?'

'I don't want to discuss this, Leon.'

'I want to know why he kept you in that hospital if nothing was found up there.'

'What's more important to you? What Moshe feels for me or what was found on the summit of the Mount of Olives during the storm?'

It was a clever, mean question, cutting through to the bone, and Leon felt himself flinching with shock. What was more important to him? A future with Kate or his future in general? If he denied Rashid what he wanted, he might still have a future with Kate, but his future in general would be in danger. If, on the other hand, he decided to betray Kate, he would gain the world but possibly lose his soul. Now, thinking about this, his heart briefly lurched, his indecision placing him on that ledge where fear strips the nerves bare.

‘I don’t know what you mean,’ he lied.

‘Yes, you do,’ Kate said. ‘We came on this trip because we haven’t seen each other for two months, but already you’re starting to ask me questions that you know I can’t answer.’

‘Does that anger you?’

‘Yes. You’re trying to use me and I won’t let you. They let me out on the grounds that I kept my mouth shut, and whether or not what I know is important, I won’t break my promise.’

Leon had another drink while keeping the boat on an even course, glancing across the glittering water to the southern outskirts of Eilat, seeing the small, glass-bottomed boats above the coral reefs, people swimming and diving.

‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I take your point and I’m sorry. I’m a journalist and I can’t help myself, but I promise to try. The subject, quite obviously *verboten*, will be mentioned no more.’

‘Fine,’ Kate replied, turning towards him and glancing down, not smiling as she picked up her glass and had a long drink. Finished, she put the glass down and bent her neck across the railing, exposing her face to the sun, her long hair hanging free. Her body, long and lean, still sun-tanned, was a magnet to Leon’s eyes.

‘You’re still beautiful,’ he said.

‘My lower half,’ she replied. ‘I’m too thin and my breasts are too small, but my legs have some merit.’

‘Such legs drive men wild.’

‘Don’t get wild, Leon. Please.’

‘You sound as if you really mean that.’

‘I don’t know what I mean.’

She didn’t smile when she said it, and that made him more uneasy, more convinced that she had definitely changed in some as yet unknown way. He glanced at her closed lips, at her almost gaunt cheeks, let his eyes roam down to her breasts, then on down her long legs. No, she wasn’t beautiful, at least not obviously so, but her sensuality and attractiveness were of the kind that few men could ignore. Understanding this, he studied her, thinking of sex and feeling love, his emotions rampaging over physical desire and making him suffer real pain. He looked away, had a drink, put the glass back on the shelf, saw the rock of Coral Island ahead and tried to keep his voice steady.

‘You mean you’re not sure about me?’

‘I don’t know, Leon. I’m tired. I spent an awful lot of time in that hospital, and it wasn’t all pleasant.’

‘All right,’ he said. ‘I promise not to ask you about the hospital. I simply want to know why it changed you and how it affects me.’

‘Why should it affect you?’

‘You admit, then, that you’ve changed?’

‘I don’t know what you mean when you suggest that I’ve changed, but since you seem to believe that it’s true, how would it affect you?’

‘I believe we had a relationship.’

‘We had sex; that’s not a relationship.’

‘I thought we were friends in *and* out of bed.’

‘That’s still not a relationship.’

Leon sighed, exasperated, still not used to her intransigence, but also feeling, as he had not felt before, that she was slyly eluding him. He poured himself another drink, filled Kate’s glass and glanced at her, wishing she would remove the sunglasses and let him study her eyes. As if reading his mind, she put her hand up to the sunglasses, slid them slightly down her nose, then changed her mind and slid them back up. Leon offered another sigh and returned to the open cockpit; he had a sip of gin, then put the glass down, feeling worse every minute. Coral Island was just ahead, the rock supporting a Crusader fortress, the remains blending in with the barren island and looking beautifully desolate. He manoeuvred the boat between the island and the beach not far away, then continued his southerly direction towards the Fjord, which was where he intended dropping anchor.

‘So,’ he said lightly, ‘we didn’t have a relationship. We simply had regular sex and were good friends, which is something quite different.’

Kate had another sip of her drink and then raised her head. ‘Please, Leon, don’t get upset. You never made claims before.’

‘You claim something when you share a bed.’

‘Not necessarily something permanent.’

‘What happens if I want it to be permanent?’

‘Don’t, Leon. Just stop this.’

She turned her head away again, watching the island falling behind them, then stared across the glittering blue sea as if thinking of far-off things. Leon watched her, feeling gloomy, a grey cloud smothering his thoughts,

something ominous and darkly confused, based on how Kate was reacting to him. She was hesitant, distant, distracted and too tense, the latter tightening the skin on her face to make her look older. He thought of what had happened on the Mount of Olives, and of her long time in the hospital, and then, as something twisted inside of him, he thought of Moshe Eitan.

'There it is,' he said, keeping his voice neutral.

'Pardon?'

'The Fjord. One of Israel's natural wonders. Norway with sunshine.'

It was indeed a majestic sight: a great bay shaped like a horseshoe, the blue water as clear as glass, showing coral and exotic flora, surrounded by towering mountains, barren and sun-baked, tumbling down to sandy coves and a beach that thrust out towards the boat. Kate had seen it before, but she looked up nonetheless, sliding her sunglasses a little way down her nose to look over the top of them, then pushing them back up again. The beach was clean and deserted, almost white in the dazzling sunlight, and the silence, once the engine had been turned off, was almost ethereal.

'It's beautiful,' Kate said. 'It will *always* be beautiful. It's places like this that make you never want to leave Israel.'

Startled, Leon stared at her and took note of her expression, a combination of suppressed fear and yearning, intangibly haunting. He turned away and dropped the anchor, trying to distract himself from his thoughts, but then, straightening up again, he felt compelled to pursue the matter farther.

'I don't believe my ears,' he said. 'This can't be Kate Hirschfield talking. The Kate Hirschfield I knew hated Israel and wanted to leave.'

'I changed my mind,' Kate replied. 'I saw things differently in the hospital. And it's not that I'm too old to leave, but that I really belong here.'

'What made you change your mind?'

'I can't explain that, Leon.'

'Moshe Eitan?'

'No, Leon, not Moshe; it was more than just Moshe.'

It was an impulsive admission, stating at least one part of the case, and Leon, after he really took it in, felt deeply wounded. He glanced around the magnificent bay, which had once overwhelmed him, but his gaze, instead of being drawn to the mountains, was focused inward. There was pain to contend with, a growing desperation and need, and he began to understand

that if it was possible to have Kate, he would gladly cast his future to the winds and ignore Rashid Idriss.

'Shall we eat?' he asked.

'Just a little bit,' Kate replied.

'This place used to make you laugh and throw your clothes off and make love; and after, you'd eat like a pig, if with the grace of a lady.'

'I'm just tired, Leon. I told you.'

'This trip hasn't been successful.'

'I'm honestly not as miserable as I look. Let me tend to the hamper.'

She put the trestle table up and started unloading the hamper while Leon, not encouraged by her words, uncorked a bottle of wine. He kept glancing furtively at her, ashamed as he did so, but unable to control the temptation to read her mind from her face. She laid the table efficiently, with feigned enthusiasm, and he noticed that her tension had increased and was making her hands shake. He thought again of Moshe Eitan, recalled shouting after him, burned with shame at the recollection of his own words, wondering if they were true or false. The table was quickly set and Kate pulled her chair up. They both sat at the same time, then Leon poured the wine; they raised their tumblers and touched them together in salutation.

'Cheers,' Leon said.

'*L'chayeem*!'

He noticed the use of Hebrew, but passed no comment about it, since the lunch, prepared by Kate, was certainly Jewish, if not strictly *kosher*: a small selection of *pates*, a roast leg of lamb, pimentos, cucumber, fresh tomatoes and olives, a cheese spiced with paprika, another spiced with assorted vegetables, fruity yoghurt and pastries and bread sticks. Nevertheless, they both ate in a desultory manner, without real enthusiasm, but the first bottle of wine soon disappeared and Leon uncorked another. This bottle was soon half-empty, but Leon, to his surprise, still did not feel even remotely relaxed. He studied Kate and noticed that far from being drunk and at ease, her tension seemed to be increasing every minute and her hands still visibly shaking.

'Are you alright?' he asked.

'Yes,' she replied.

'You keep staring at the mountains and the sea, but you don't seem impressed.'

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I’m not giving you a good day. I’m tired. I really am tired. I can’t get used to this freedom.’

‘What are you thinking about?’

‘Nothing. Not a thing.’

‘As a psychiatrist, you should know that that’s impossible, so what are you thinking about?’

‘I can’t explain it,’ Kate said.

‘The hospital?’

‘Yes.’

‘In that case, I can ask no more questions; now you’ll have to start talking.’

‘I’m sorry. I’m truly sorry.’

‘So am I, but it doesn’t help. Normally, by this time, we’d both be lying on that deck, but I can’t see it happening today.’

‘No, Leon, it won’t.’

‘Why?’

‘I can’t explain it.’

‘The hospital?’

‘Yes.’

‘Moshe Eitan?’

‘Please don’t ask that question.’

The pain was unexpected and shockingly real. Feeling feverish and confused, he poured another glass of wine, had a sip and tried to keep himself calm. Looking around him, he saw the mountains, the blazing anvil of the sun, the sea as blue as the sky above it, still and silent, without shadows. He sipped more wine and then turned back to Kate, still hoping for the return of the warmth that had once been between them. There wasn’t a sign of it.

‘It’s Moshe,’ he said finally.

‘No,’ she said, ‘not *just* Moshe. If you’re concerned, nothing happened between us. It isn’t *just* him.’

‘I don’t understand, Kate.’

‘I can’t tell you, that’s all.’

‘Either it’s Moshe or it isn’t. If not Moshe, it’s something else. You’ve changed and you hardly recognise me, and I have to know why.’

‘Why?’

‘Because I care.’

‘Not that much.’

‘That much.’

‘You never cared that much and you never will. I can’t tell you. I won’t.’

She pushed her chair back and stood up, then sat down on the companion seat, and Leon, standing up automatically, followed her into the cockpit. She removed her sunglasses and glanced restlessly left and right, displaying fear and indecipherable yearning, then covered her face with her hands.

Leon stood there, feeling choked, torn by unfamiliar confusion, unable to grasp what was happening but desperately wanting to help her. He thought of what he had promised Rashid, of his own plan to betray Kate’s trust, and his shame, like a hot blade in butter, cut through him with ease. Seeing the state of her, he was lost, his future not worth a damn, his every impulse concentrated on the need to win her over and shelter her. To betray her was inconceivable, the very negation of his reasoning, so he reached out and placed his hand on her shoulder and tried to draw her back to him.

‘I missed you,’ he said, covering his shame with a simple truth. ‘I really missed you more than I ever thought I could - and I hope you believe that. I thought about you a lot. I could hardly stop thinking about you. It was as if, when we were in bed together just before that dreadful storm, something chained up inside me broke loose from its bonds and demanded, as it couldn’t have done before, your complete recognition. You understand what I’m saying? I’m trying to say I love you. I couldn’t say it before because I couldn’t trust myself, because my suitcase, as you so notably pointed out, was my life’s shabby symbol. I thought I’d move on again, another suitcase, another room, still retreating from the failures of my past, afraid of failing again. I always lacked commitment, Kate, could never give of myself. I had a strict Catholic background, believed passionately and then lost faith, but what I never lost was the need to replace that with another. I tried communism and socialism, read Engels and Marx, was disillusioned and then read Adam Smith and became an English Conservative. Alas, that also soured, becoming a web of contradictions, and my bitterness, curling my insides like poison, left me beached on the bleak shores of self-contempt. Unable to stand daily trivia, I left my wife and family: packed the oddments of my life in a suitcase and went looking for hideaways. Thus, Vietnam, Northern Ireland, International Terrorism and the Third World, my beliefs constantly switching, first the Left and then the Right, never able to take a firm stand

and thus haunted by my own moral cowardice. *Was* I cowardly? Oh, yes! Not physically, but morally. Most certainly I was haunted by a sense of failure and the need to believe. So, I became a cynic, knowing prices, not values; and when I met you, and felt what you made me feel, I could scarcely believe it. I thought I'd run again - pack my suitcase and just walk out - but then, in the hotel, just before that storm, when you said you were only drawn to me because of my inability to commit myself - it was then I suddenly realised that I might actually lose you, and that I valued you and wanted to fight for you. Yes, Kate, it was then, at that precise moment, that I understood the full extent of my commitment to you and wanted to show it. But I was foiled by that storm. The storm stole you away from me. And in the days since then I've lived with the conviction that the storm had said, *Show it*! I'm trying to show it now. I'm trying to say it loud and clear. I love you, Kate. I really and truly love you. Please believe me. Accept it.'

Falling silent, he stepped closer to her, his heart racing with tension, as if everything kept locked up for years was about to burst out of him. He saw her trembling and leaning forward, hiding her face in her hands; and then, as he knelt before her, sliding his arms around her and pulling her into him, her felt her shaking in aching spasms as she quietly, brokenly wept. Then at last he did burst, his suppressed emotions pouring out of him - pouring out like water from a dam to wash Kate away. She responded in kind, her deepest fears surfacing, and his exultation spiralled out of his pain to cleanse him of pain. He clung to her, and she to him, and he rocked her to and fro, holding on to her as if to a child, desperately wanting his love to heal her sorrow and unite them once more.

'I have to tell someone,' she sobbed. 'I can't bear all this confusion. It's all been like a dream, or a nightmare, and I can't grasp the truth of it. I have to talk to someone. Not someone who was involved. I have to talk to someone without beliefs of the kind that he represents. You have to promise not to repeat it. You have to swear to that and stick to it. If you love me, if you truly care for me, you'll give me your word on that. I want your promise. *Your promise*!'

'I promise,' Leon said, truly believing it at that moment, his heart breaking with sorrow and concern, no other thought in his head. 'Who's *he*? Is it Moshe?'

Then she told him about Joshua, her words tumbling out like stones,

forced along by the babbling brook of her confusion and falling brutally on Leon. He listened, disbelieving, trying to grasp it and failing, the immensity of what she was telling him almost shattering his reason. He sat back to stare at her, concentrating on her lips, trying to gauge from their rapid, demented movement, if the words added up. She kept talking, breathing harshly, letting her words cleave the air, mentioning Moshe and Paul Frankel and Joshua as if talking of dreams. Then he looked into her eyes, into their dark, tormented depths, and, seeing fear and yearning combined, understood that she was speaking the truth. The mystery of the Mount, the descending object that did not exist, the bulldozers pushing and piling the rubble over the hole where the black obelisk had emerged from the ruptured earth - all the pieces now fit.

Leon stood upright, then stepped closer to Kate, his hands reaching out to her head with its dark, tangled hair. He pressed down on that hair, lightly, reassuringly, then slid his fingers over her face to wipe the tears from her cheeks. He felt stunned by disbelief, rocked by terror and jubilation, and his faith, once a dried-up riverbed, now flowed out to embrace her. He bent over to kiss her head, his lips as dry as that riverbed, and remained that way, paralysed, perhaps dazed, for a very long time.

'It's alright,' he whispered.

'I know,' she said, also whispering. 'I feel better for having let it out, and now I think I can face it.'

'*We* can face it,' Leon said, as if the miracle had joined them. 'We can go away and simply forget it and let them work it out.'

Then he realised what he had said, what it was he really wanted, and he removed his lips from her head and straightened up to look down upon her. She was returning his gaze, her upturned eyes wide and wet, almost luminous with gratitude and relief and a terrible trust. He thought of what she had experienced, then of Joshua and what he meant, and he realised that even at World's End personal need would prevail. The Messiah, the Mahdi, the Christ of the Christians - in the end it mattered little who Joshua really was, since in the end his very presence was stupefying. The human mind could not grasp this, and failing to grasp it would turn inward, rejecting the more terrifying possibilities and searching for a private peace. Now Leon wanted that peace, not believing in Judgement Day, more concerned with the reality of flesh and blood and his inviolable rights. The irony was excruciating, as stupefying as Joshua's mysterious presence on Earth; so Leon, even

understanding this truth, once more reached for Kate's redeeming love.

'Don't stay here,' he said. 'You can't take this situation. Neither of us has to be involved. It's not real. We don't need it.'

'*I* need it,' Kate replied.

'I don't understand, Kate.'

'There was never enough between us, Leon. This is where I belong.'

She raised her eyes to his face, silently pleading for understanding, and Leon felt the winds of loss sweeping through him to destroy all his hopes.

'You mean Joshua?'

'No, Leon, not just Joshua. I mean more than that.'

And then her words came back to him, ringing out like bells of doom, brutally forcing him to face what he had missed in the drama of Joshua… The other participant was Moshe Eitan, who had been present from the beginning; who had, whether willingly or not, been drawn into Kate's dream and had since, in Leon's absence, been the rock upon which she had stood.

'You mean Moshe?'

'I think so.'

He turned away from her, his heart beating against his chest, his senses flying out like the wind to scatter all he had gained. He hardly knew what he was doing, saw the anchor, heard the engine, then the boat was heading out of the Fjord and back into the Red Sea. The majestic mountains fell behind and the empty beach disappeared, leaving only the broad expanse of glittering water dividing Jordan from Israel. Kate was silent by his side, now calmer, perhaps resigned, and he felt his thwarted love clamping around him to crush the life out of him. He was dying, suffocating, his dreams turning to dust, and as the boat passed Coral Island and headed back to Eilat, he felt his hatred rising up to fortify him and give him something to cling to.

He had lost her to Moshe, completely, irrevocably, and now he was alone, his whole future in the balance, owing nothing to no one but himself, but with much to avenge. He spoke no more to Kate, but instead stared straight ahead, then glanced across at the Moab Mountains, at the distant town of Aqaba, and knew that he could now betray her trust without feeling a damned thing.

He would sell the story of Joshua.

He dropped Kate off at the hospital and they parted in fraught silence, his car churning up the stones as he left and drove back to Jerusalem. Kate stood

there for some time, looking around her in a daze, then eventually she turned away and entered the hospital and went straight to her room. She undressed and lay down, her body rigid on the bed, her eyes dry and her heart beating quickly as darkness descended. Sleep came in due course, carrying her along a silent stream, taking her out to where the mountains and valleys offered solace and hope. The air shimmered and flashed, revealing the mirage of her dilemma: the faces of Moshe and Leon and Joshua materialising like grey clouds. She melted into the rock, became one with the parched earth, and let her pain, which before had been unbearable, drift away with the shifting sands.

The room door was pushed open and she awakened to morning light, flooding the room and burning into her eyes as she pushed herself upright. Moshe was standing above the bed, his lips tight, his grey eyes hard, his body visibly trembling with rage and, possibly, shock. He was holding a bunch of newspapers, most of them foreign, and he threw them over the bed, over her, one by one, as if wanting to bury her in rubbish.

'There's no by-line,' he said, his voice harsh and contemptuous, 'but we've no reason to doubt who blew the story. Joshua's on the front page of every newspaper we've received, and our telephones haven't stopped ringing. That bastard, Leon Halcomb, your good friend, has told the whole world about it. Now just watch it explode!'

He walked out and slammed the door, leaving Kate with her shame, and she rolled over to stare at the wall and try to live with her guilt. What she learned at that moment, in terrible wonder and grief, was that if the world exploded and history changed forever, she, a mere woman, would go with it, thinking of only one thing: her betrayal by Leon and, by lieu of that, her equally destructive betrayal of Moshe.

She closed her eyes and wept brokenly.

26

The flashlights exploded as Moshe and Ben Eleizer emerged from the crowded Press Room and sat behind the long table on the wooden dais in front of the gathered reporters. Moshe and the Prime Minister sat together with Paul Frankel on Moshe's left side and Rabbi Latinovats, obviously uncomfortable, seated at the other side of Ben Eleizer. Gazing down upon the jostling reporters, temporarily dazzled by the flashlights, Moshe saw Leon at the very back of the room, his face weary and thoughtful. Moshe quickly looked away, trying to hold down his automatic rush of rage, as Ben Eleizer leaned towards his microphone, his face deceptively bland.

'Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen,' he said, his voice carefully modulated and untroubled. 'Since Lieutenant Frankel has already given you the unclassified facts on the discovery and subsequent investigation of the man known as Joshua, I need only add here that this conference is to be treated as an informal question-and-answer session, and that we will answer, to the limits of discretion, as honestly as possible. Now the first question, please.'

Most of the reporters shot their hands up and started shouting for attention. Shading his eyes against the popping flashlights of the many cameras, Ben Eleizer pointed to a female journalist in the front row and let her question bring back a semblance of order.

'Why the need for discretion, Prime Minister? And why are certain facts of this matter still classified?'

'I think you'd agree that we should not, given the sensitivity of this matter, release information that has not been verified or substantiated.'

'Can we assume from that statement that this man is still under investigation?'

'You can.'

'And will the full details, or results, of that investigation be released to the

media?'

'At this stage any answer to that question would be deemed improper.'

'Why?' Leon called out from the back of the room.

'I don't have to tell you, Mr. Halcomb, that the world-wide reportage on this subject to date has already led to a lot of wild speculation of the kind that is not particularly helpful.'

'By wild speculation, do you mean - ?'

'That world reportage,' another journalist interjected, 'was based on a syndicated article that was published without a by-line. Are we to assume that it didn't originate from one of your sources?'

'You assume correctly.'

'You didn't want that information released?'

'No. We felt it was premature. It's not our belief that a case such as this should be opened up to public discussion before a full investigation has been completed.'

'Do you know who released the information?'

'We believe we know the individual involved, but unfortunately we can't verify it.'

'Are you suggesting by the use of the word "unfortunately",' Leon said, 'that you would, if you could prove your case, take retaliatory action against the journalist involved?'

'Yes,' Moshe replied, trying to keep his face controlled. 'We try, as much as possible, to respect the freedom of the Press, but we won't encourage journalists to abuse that freedom with such underhand methods.'

'Do you know the journalist's source?' another reporter enquired.

'No,' Ben Eleizer said.

'It was obviously inside information,' the same reporter said. 'Does that worry you much?'

'We're naturally shocked,' Paul said, 'that this leak came from the inside, and the matter is now under investigation.'

Another journalist picked up on Leon's interrupted question. 'By wild speculation, do you mean the world-wide debate on whether or not this man is some sort of messianic or Christ-like figure?'

'Precisely,' Ben Eleizer said.

'Such speculation should bother the Rabbinate more than the government. Why does it bother you?'

‘That question, coming from a journalist, is surely superfluous. It’s no secret that already some of the more extreme Jews, Moslems and Christians are adopting this man as their saviour. The Jews are claiming him as their Messiah, the Moslems are suggesting that he might be the returned Mahdi, and the Christians are discussing him in terms of the Second Coming of their Christ. While it is not the function of this government to involve itself in anything other than secular matters, it *is* of great concern to us that such views are leading to dissension, increasingly violent, between Jews, Christians and Moslems, and that thousands of people are now clamouring to come to Israel in what can only be termed a mass religious fervour.’

‘Reportedly thousands of Diaspora Jews are already pouring into Israel, and are having no trouble in getting in.’

‘Israel has always been open to those Jews who wish to come here. We cannot, and will not, revoke that right.’

‘The Christians are protesting that they’re not being given the same privilege - that they are, in fact, having considerable trouble in getting into Israel.’

‘We simply cannot handle the numbers involved - and the Jews, in all cases, must be given priority.’

‘What about the Arabs, Prime Minister?’

‘What about them?’

‘Is it not true that no Arabs at all are now being allowed into this country?’

‘Unfortunately, we were forced to take that measure.’

‘Why?’

‘We cannot admit Arabs whose sole interest in wishing to come into Israel is to inflame insurrection by spreading the news that this man is the returned Mahdi. Many of the recent riots in the streets of Jerusalem have been caused by extremist Muslims who are claiming that we’re holding their Mahdi prisoner and that his presence here is a sign that the sovereignty of the Moslem religion must now be established at any cost.’

‘By all-out war, if necessary.’

‘Correct.’

‘But isn’t it also true,’ Leon said, ‘that many of those riots were started by extremist Jews, such as the Netorei Karta zealots, who are making similar claims for your prisoner - namely, that he’s the Jewish Messiah who will

inaugurate the sovereignty of Judaism and establish the true Promised Land?'

'He's not a prisoner,' Moshe said, 'but a man under investigation. As to your main point, yes, unfortunately that's true – but those riots wouldn't be happening had not the news of this man been prematurely and unofficially released.'

'Would the major-general care to comment on the widely held belief that the Israeli government is admitting thousands of Diaspora Jews into this country - while keeping the Arabs out - because they're concerned that another Arab-Israeli war might break out and they want to build up their human resources to combat it.'

'Our intelligence sources have reported no increased signs of aggression on the part of the Arabs,' Paul lied, 'and it's not our belief that the violence on the streets of Jerusalem will incite those Arabs outside Israel's borders.'

'The riots in the streets of Jerusalem,' another reporter said, 'are reaching epidemic proportions and have already involved Jews, Arabs and Christians. Many of the rioters, when interviewed, claimed that they were demonstrating for the release of the man you're now holding. Would you care to comment on that?'

'What sort of comment do you want?' Moshe responded.

'Do you intend releasing that man?'

'That would depend on the results of our investigations.'

'What are you trying to prove, major-general?'

'We're trying to ascertain just who, precisely, this man is.'

'The man has recollections of biblical days, he speaks every known language, he can apparently work miracles, and according to reports his shroud has been dated to approximately the time of Jesus Christ. What more do you need to know?'

'Much of that information has been exaggerated.'

'That hardly answers the question, major-general.'

'To answer the question would be improper before all the tests have been completed.'

'And when might that be?'

'Possibly another year.'

'That's ridiculous, major-general, and you know it.'

'The man may be suffering from amnesia and his so-called biblical memories could be fragments from his former education. His command of

every known language is admittedly a remarkable phenomenon, but it could still be a human phenomenon for all that. His much-exaggerated ability to work miracles could be explained in terms of highly developed parapsychological abilities. As for the shroud, the published reports of its authenticity are premature, and a full analysis will require another year.'

Some of the journalists laughed openly, others shook their heads cynically, and Leon, still standing at the back of the room, merely offered a tight, knowing grin.

'So you intend keeping him prisoner for another year?' another reporter asked.

'Not necessarily,' Ben Eleizer said. 'We're hoping to find out through interrogation who this man really is.'

'Is the Prime Minister stating that he doesn't believe in the resurrection theory regarding this man?'

'I'm stating that the evidence received so far doesn't constitute proof of such a theory.'

'What other possibility could there be? Do you mean your man could be a foreign agent?'

'That possibility has to be considered.'

'But do foreign agents normally come with such abilities?'

'There's a first time for everything,' Ben Eleizer said.

The journalists laughed at that, obviously appreciating some light relief, but then Leon took a step forward and raised his hand.

'Yes, Mr. Halcomb?'

'In an official statement, the Vatican has rejected any possible theological interpretation of Joshua - '

'That is correct,' Rabbi Latinovats said too quickly.

'- but unofficial sources claim that the Vatican has sent a secret communiqué to the Rabbinate, asking if it would be possible for Joshua to be interrogated by the Sacred College of Cardinals in Rome. Would the Chief Rabbi care to comment on that?'

'You are as aware as anyone in this room,' Jozsef said, 'that the Rabbinate would not be able to comment on *any* secret communiqué.'

'You are admitting, then, that such a communiqué has been received?'

'I am not. I am saying that if such had been received, I would not be able to mention the fact.'

‘That sounds like an admission.’

‘It is not. It is simply a statement of fact.’

‘Let us assume, then, that the communiqué is hypothetical. If such a communiqué were received, what would be the reaction of the Rabbinate?’

‘The Rabbinate would have no secular, theological or legal grounds for preventing this man from speaking to anyone.’

‘So you’d be willing to hand him over to the Vatican?’

‘It’s not a question of the Rabbinate either holding him here or handing him over to anyone. Jurisdiction over this man is in the hands of the security services.’

‘Regarding the riots in Jerusalem - ’ someone began.

‘Would the Chief Rabbi,’ Leon continued stubbornly, ‘be willing to state the Rabbinate’s view, theologically speaking, of this man?’

Jozsef looked even more uncomfortable, cracking his knuckles and blushing. Moshe, staring directly at Leon, felt a cold, clean contempt. In the event, Jozsef managed to give his statement in a calm, measured tone.

‘The Rabbinate’s view, as of this moment, is that this man represents a secular, rather than a religious, matter. Since the most extensive physical, psychological and forensic tests have failed to prove conclusively that this man is anything other than a normal human being, we must reject the various claims being made on his behalf.’

‘Is it not your view,’ said another reporter, ‘that he *is* the Messiah?’

‘No.’

‘Yet the Rabbinate has *not* formally stated that view,’ Leon said. ‘A surprising omission in view of the recent riots by extreme Orthodox Jews.’

‘The Rabbinate cannot deny what it does not recognise. Until proven otherwise, this man is a man like any other, and a formal denial would therefore be superfluous.’

‘Would the Chief Rabbi not agree that such a statement is superfluous in view of the recent riots by certain members of his own Jewish community? It is, after all, the function of the Rabbinate to give moral and theological guidance to its community. Surely, then, a formal denial from the Rabbinate would put an end to the rioting.’

‘The Rabbinate condemns the rioting, but is in no position to offer a formal denial of a claim that it has not officially published.’

‘Semantics!’ someone yelled.

‘Exactly,’ Leon said. ‘Are you claiming that the Rabbinate has not even discussed this extraordinary event?’

‘The Rabbinate has not formally discussed the event.’

‘But it *has* discussed it *informally*?’

‘Individual members have naturally stated their points of view.’

‘Hypocrites!’ someone yelled.

‘The Vatican and the World Council of Churches,’ Leon continued, ‘have taken a similarly cowardly stand: they refuse to make a formal declaration about the matter, but discuss that same matter in secret communiqués.’

‘I cannot speak for the Vatican or the World Council of Churches.’

‘To get back to the riots in Jerusalem,’ another woman said, ‘would either the Cabinet or the Rabbinate be willing to officially request that the Vatican and the World Council of Churches put out a statement formally condemning those rioting in Jerusalem in the name of this as yet unproven saviour?’

‘Since the Rabbinate has not been officially involved with this man, it cannot put out an official statement of any kind.’

‘And the Cabinet?’

‘The Cabinet,’ Ben Eleizer said, ‘has given the army complete freedom in the curtailing of the riots and is drafting up new laws to deal with offenders. Since it is the function of the Cabinet to deal with secular rather than religious matters, obviously it can do no more than that.’

‘Has the Prime Minister any comment to make about the fact that in taking such action he has pitted Jew against Jew?’

‘The Prime Minister,’ Ben Eleizer said, ‘would like to state that he deeply regrets these unfortunate events.’

‘What about the West Bank?’ Leon said.

‘What about it?’ Moshe replied.

‘It’s a known fact that the West Bank has become an armed fortress controlled by the fanatics of Kash and *Gush Emunin*, and that both groups, in their determination to rid Palestine - ’

‘Israel,’ Moshe said.

‘ - Palestine of all Arabs, have made it clear that they would like to topple the present government and replace it with an ecclesiastical Cabinet devoted to Zionism.’

‘That’s a statement,’ Moshe said, ‘not a question.’

‘Would the major-general care to comment on what course of action he’s

likely to take now that both groups of Jewish fanatics are demanding the release of your prisoner, Joshua - ’

‘He is not a prisoner.’

‘ - and, even more embarrassing, claiming that he’s the Messiah and that His coming is a sign that the sovereignty of Judaism is at hand and that Israel must therefore be purged of all non-Jews?’

‘The theological claims of such groups are of no concern to the Defence Forces.’

‘The claims of those groups must be of concern to the DF when those groups are arming themselves to the teeth to fight not only the Arabs but your own conscript troops.’

‘That scenario, if I may say so, is purely hypothetical and worthy of a notoriously antagonistic journalist.’

‘I apologise for my antagonism,’ Leon responded, ‘but surely the experienced major-general must be aware that his own troops have already been forced to take retaliatory action against a group of Kash fanatics who tried to storm the Hadassah Medical Centre and spirit your famous prisoner away.’

‘The isolated action of a group of political thugs is hardly proof of a major Jewish insurrection.’

‘Possibly,’ Leon said, ‘but what has the major-general got to say about the fact that his troops have dramatically increased their so-called security raids on such Jewish strongholds as Ramallah, Nablus and Kiryat Arba - all on the West Bank - and have, during such activities, been resisted with gunfire and hand grenades?’

‘We have always had trouble with the West Bank, as you know, but we believe that situation can be contained.’

‘You haven’t had armed resistance before.’

‘That matter,’ Ben Eleizer said, ‘is indeed of grave concern, but may not be related to this man, Joshua.’

‘It’s related to Joshua because both Kash and *Gush Emunin* are openly claiming that he’s the Messiah.’

‘I do not think - ’

‘Could someone else get a question in here?’

‘Of course,’ Ben Eleizer said, obviously relieved, his bland façade momentarily cracking before hastily reinstating itself. ‘We’re delighted to

give attention to the *Observer* of London.'

'Thank you, Prime Minister. I'd just like to follow up on the remarks made by my expatriate colleague, Mr. Halcomb, by asking Lieutenant Frankel, member of Shin Bet and an Orthodox Jew, what his reaction, both personal and political, is to this situation.'

Paul flushed beneath his dark skin, lowered his eyes and then looked up again, his fingers spreading out on the table as if trying to grab it for protection.

'Since I am here as a representative of internal security and counterintelligence, I'm afraid I must keep my personal views out of it.'

'And your political views?'

'My political views are the views of the serving government, since my sole function is to serve the government in office.'

'Your view, then, is that this man is still something of an unknown quality and must therefore be treated as a possible subversive or enemy agent?'

'Correct.'

'Is it not true, Lieutenant Frankel, that you're an extreme Orthodox Jew with a rather strict view of Zionism?'

'I've never tried to hide my Zionist beliefs.'

'Can you therefore, in the present situation, with Jew fighting Jew, keep your political and personal views apart?'

'That question,' Jozsef intervened, 'is already too personal and has little bearing on this matter.'

'Are you not disturbed, Rabbi Latinovats, that at a time such as this, with Jew, Moslem and Christian all fighting together - and all over this man of unknown origin - that a member of Shin Bet, the internal security service, should hold the sort of views that have led to a lot of criticism of your own more liberal preachings as Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi?'

'Judaism is a coat of many colours - and hopefully will always remain so. The fact that Lieutenant Frankel has views different from my own in no way reflects upon his activities on behalf of Israel.'

'Lieutenant Frankel has long been noted as one of the brighter stars in the Shin Bet firmament; nonetheless, since he's a relatively young officer, the fact that he has recently been put in charge of security regarding the man, Joshua - and, indeed, is representing Shin Bet at his conference - has led a great number of people to think that this is a purely diplomatic move,

designed to pacify the more extremist Orthodox Jews. Does the Chief Rabbi have any comment regarding this?'

'Such a question should not be directed at the Chief Rabbi,' Ben Eleizer said smoothly, 'but at Lieutenant Frankel's superior officers in Shin Bet.'

'There are no such officers present at this conference. Perhaps Major-General Eitan would care to comment.'

'I'm afraid not,' Moshe said. 'As an officer of the IDF, it's not my duty to comment on decisions regarding the deployment of members of Shin Bet.'

'If I may change the subject a little,' Leon said, his voice ringing out loud and clear, 'is it not true that the Soviet and American governments are both disturbed by the possibility that the riots in Jerusalem - whatever their reasons - could spread throughout Israel and encourage the surrounding Arab states to exploit the situation?'

'Another hypothetical situation,' Moshe replied.

'Not quite so hypothetical, major-general. The United Nations is already alarmed at the increasing violence in Jerusalem and is convinced that it's going to explode elsewhere. Indeed, if we may forget Israel for a second, there have also been less violent demonstrations in many other countries - notably those with a deeply religious culture - and the United Nations therefore has, according to Reuters, stated its concern over the rioting in Jerusalem and demanded clarification on the situation. Ergo, it's not so hypothetical to add that the Soviets and Americans have expressed similar thoughts and are concerned about certain troop movements along the Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian borders.'

'We cannot comment on any movement along those borders.'

'Would you be willing to comment on the widely held belief that if the Israelis fail to control their more fanatical and increasingly violent Jews of the West Bank, and if, because of that, the Arabs decide that the time is ripe to sweep into a divided Israel, the Soviets and Americans, overtly to maintain peace in the Middle East, covertly to ensure the continuous flow of Arab oil, will have to take sides in the issue in a so-called War of Intervention and thus subsequently carve Israel up between them?'

'No,' Moshe said, 'we wouldn't care to comment.'

'Is the major-general speaking on behalf of the Prime Minister and his Cabinet?' another journalist asked.

'Yes,' Ben Eleizer said.

‘You refuse to accept the possibility that this could all happen because of the man you’re presently holding?’

‘Let me just say this,’ Ben Eleizer replied. ‘The riots in Jerusalem are the results of religious fervour encouraged by exaggerated media reports about the man we are holding, but they will die away, as all riots do, with the passing of time. The problem of the West Bank, which has been with us for years, has merely been inflamed by the same highly irresponsible media reports and doubtless will be resolved in due course. As for the Arab situation, I need only point out that to date not one Arab leader has offered a formal comment regarding the man Joshua, and the movements along our borders, while not to be ignored, are certainly not as dramatic as has been suggested. Finally, let me just add that there is still no absolute proof that this man is anything other than a normal human being, that time will doubtless prove him to be just that, and that this whole situation, unfortunately inflamed by the media, will gradually become less controversial.’

Ben Eleizer nodded at Moshe, as if to signal that the conference was over, but Leon’s voice, again ringing out loud and clear, made him stay in his chair.

‘Since the Chief Rabbi has refused to either admit or deny the existence of any communiqué between the Vatican and the Rabbinate - or, indeed, between the Rabbinate and the World Council of Churches - would you, Prime Minister, care to comment on the widespread rumour that both the Soviets and the Americans are demanding their own unbiased examinations of the man you are holding, particularly in view of the fact that you have consistently denied that anything solid crashed on the Mount of Olives?’

‘We do not comment on rumours, widespread or otherwise.’

‘Would you state, categorically, that neither the Soviets nor the Americans have made any such request?’

‘I would not make any comment on any rumour.’

‘What would your reaction be to such a request?’

‘The man is of unknown origin but was found in Jerusalem, so until such time as his nationality can be ascertained we must treat him as an Israeli citizen. There would therefore be no justification whatsoever for handing him over to any foreign power.’

‘Would you consider the Vatican to be a foreign power?’

‘I believe we’ve already covered that, Mr. Halcomb.’

Leon smiled, but said no more, merely letting his gaze slip towards Moshe; but Moshe, determined to keep his feelings neutral, kept his eyes off Leon.

‘One final question,’ Ben Eleizer offered.

‘It’s been a fortnight since the news of this man’s discovery was broken,’ a female journalist said, ‘and in that short time there have been violent clashes between the various religious sects in Jerusalem, less violent demonstrations in many other countries, an enormous upsurge of interest in numerous occult, UFO and other esoteric organisations, a mass migration of Diaspora Jews into Israel, a total blocking of most Christians, including tourists, and all Arabs into this country, and a build-up of Arab troop movements along the Syrian, Lebanese and Jordanian borders. Do you not think, given these extraordinary events, that the man you’re keeping under surveillance should be exposed to the public, at least by means of the media?’

‘No,’ Ben Eleizer said. ‘I’m afraid we cannot agree with that. We cannot release this man until we are fully satisfied regarding his origin and nature - and until we understand how he came to be here. Violent demonstrations will not help; we simply will not release him. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.’

Moshe raised his eyes and looked along the room, but Leon had vanished.

27

The taxi driver refused to take her along Jaffa Road, but instead headed away from the smoking rooftops of the Mae Shearim quarter by driving along Agrippas and turning right into King George V Street. The normally busy street was unusually quiet, many of the windows boarded up, and the few lights bleeding into the darkness seemed bleak and forbidding. Kate glanced through the rear window and saw the smoke over Mae Shearim, a red glowing fanning above the rooftops where the flames were still burning. The sound of gunfire made her twitch, then she shivered and turned away, glancing through the window on her left to see the soldiers around the heavily guarded entrance to the Plaza Hotel. There were few tourists left, but the hotels were filled with recent immigrants, most of whom were enamoured with the Messiah and oblivious to the armed guards. Thinking of this, Kate shivered again, feeling haunted with guilt, then she wondered what she might say to Moshe, and the pain bit inside her. The taxi turned left at Keren Hayesod and King David Street, crossed the road and then stopped outside the King David Hotel, directly facing the floodlit YMCA and its magnificent, oriental tower.

After paying the driver, she slipped out of the vehicle and stood for some time on the pavement, looking up and down the broad boulevard on which the trees cast their shadows in the lamplight. The dark smoke was still billowing in the starlit sky above West Jerusalem; the gunfire, sporadic and distant, was eerie and chilling. She could not believe that it had happened, so brutally and quickly, and she shook her head sadly from side to side and walked up to the hotel. The armed guards at the swinging doors checked her identification, then nodded, their young faces solemn, and let her walk through.

The enormous lobby was packed with soldiers, many on cots or in sleeping bags, the furniture pushed back against the walls beneath the large

Victorian paintings, weapons glinting in the bright light of the chandeliers hanging down from the ceiling. Some of the soldiers were sleeping, others playing cards or reading books, while the women volunteers, notably all Jewish, were wending their way between the prostate bodies, serving simple food and drinks.

Kate crossed the lobby, feeling the eyes of the soldiers upon her, and made her way to the terrace overlooking the Oriental Gardens. Most of the tables were taken, both with soldiers and determined clientele, and she saw Moshe near the edge of the room, framed by the gardens. She almost turned away and walked back out, the panic seizing her instantly, but instead she stopped briefly, nodded at him, and then walked over to him. He was drinking a beer, the glass small in his big hand, but he placed the glass back on the table and gave her a pained smile.

'*Shalom*, Kate.'

'*Shalom*.'

She did not sit down immediately, but stood there, feeling paralysed, the guilt and shame turning her flesh to stone and draining her mind. Moshe raised his left hand and pointed at the chair opposite, his face terribly weary, his eyes dull, his hand visibly shaking.

'It's alright,' he said. 'Sit down.'

'You look completely exhausted.'

'I am. I haven't slept for two days. Now please, Kate, sit down.'

She sank gratefully onto the chair, placing her shoulder bag on the table, glancing around her at the soldiers and civilians, thinking of how things had changed so much in such a short time. Eventually, when Moshe's silence became unbearable, she returned her gaze to him.

'The lobby looks like a battlefield,' she said. 'Are they all riot-control troops?'

'Yes,' Moshe said.

'I saw the light of the burning buildings in the Mae Shearim quarter, and also heard isolated gunshots.'

'The Arabs are particularly incensed at the messianic claims of the Mae Shearim quarter since those same Arabs naturally believe Joshua to be their Mahdi. In all fairness to them, the situation was doubtless exacerbated by the fact that the Jewish fanatics of Kash and *Gush Emunin* have been similarly terrorising the Arabs in every major town on the West Bank.'

‘Do you think the situation can be contained?’

‘No, I don’t. I think the situation is getting out of hand. During the past few days we’ve had fighting in Bethlehem, Nazareth, Tel Aviv and Netanya. I can’t spare enough troops to deal with it.’

‘And you can’t use your border-patrol troops?’

‘No. Contrary to what we normally say, or wish to believe, the mass fervour that’s gripped every religion in Jerusalem is now spreading out beyond her borders. Apart from the fact that a great many Arabs, both inside and outside Israel, are convinced that the Mahdi has returned, the less religiously inclined are viewing the riots in our streets as a sign that Jerusalem is about to fall. Small wonder they’re massing around our borders and preparing for war. So, no, I can’t use my border-patrol troops. In fact, I have to take troops from the streets to swell the thinning ranks of those protecting our borders.’

‘You sound really weary.’

‘I’m weary. I don’t know what to do.’

He called a waiter over, ordered a beer and a gin-and-tonic, then sat back and rubbed his eyes with his fingers, shaking his head wearily from side to side. Kate watched him, wanting to beg his forgiveness. He leaned forward and placed his large hands on the table, staring at her, not smiling.

‘So,’ he said, ‘how have you been?’

Kate shrugged. ‘Not so good. I’ve had a lot on my mind. I don’t think I have to elaborate on that. You must know what I’m talking about.’

‘Why did you do it, Kate?’

‘An answer would be an excuse. At least any answer would *sound* like an excuse, which is probably the same thing.’

‘You must have trusted him a lot.’

‘Yes, I suppose I did. Although I’m not at all sure if it was that… if that even came into it…’ Her voice trailed off, dying to a whisper, a sibilance that arched through the air to form a question mark. ‘No,’ she said, ‘it was something else. Trust didn’t even come into it. What I mean is that I didn’t think about it, one way or the other. I just had to tell someone - someone I hadn’t experienced it with - and Leon, also the person closest to me, happened to be there at the right time. I just let it out, trying to get rid of the doubt and pressure, and remember exacting his promise not to tell anyone, as if that would absolve me.’

‘Then he told the whole world.’

‘Yes, Moshe, he did. He told the whole world and it shocked me because I was the guilty one.’

‘You trusted him.’

‘You trusted me.’

‘I don’t think it’s the same thing.’

‘Why? Because I’m just a silly woman and you’re a sensible man?’

Moshe winced. ‘I didn’t mean that. Why are you always so defensive? I simply meant that he was your lover and that that sort of trust is different from the trust I had in you.’

‘Why different?’

‘It’s a trust based on love - and love doesn’t ask questions.’

Kate almost flinched with shock, as if she had been slapped, then was further shocked by what she was feeling and by its mindless intensity. What she was feeling was resentment and an almost childish hurt because Moshe, either deliberately or innocently, had disowned any such feelings for her. Understanding this, she almost laughed, feeling the hysteria bubbling up to her throat, a bitter and self-mocking humour that luckily died on her lips.

‘You think I loved Leon?’

‘I naturally assumed so.’

‘You mean, you assumed from the knowledge that Leon was my lover that I had to be in love with him?’

‘I’d have thought that was a natural deduction, Kate. After all, it was more than a one-night stand.’

‘You mean a woman has to be in love to take a lover?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

She had to smile at that, amused by his impossible innocence. ‘Lord,’ she said, ‘what a good Jew you are: so puritanical and moral. What does a woman do with a man like you in this day and age?’

She saw the trace of a smile, but he quickly hid it by picking up his glass and having a sip of his drink. He set the glass back on the table and examined it thoughtfully.

‘You think I’m old-fashioned?’ he asked.

‘The thought’s crossed my mind occasionally.’

‘And you, of course, are an emancipated lady of this wonderful day and age.’

‘You disapprove,’ Kate said.

‘I’m not a rabbi,’ Moshe replied.

‘Nevertheless, I can sense your disapproval and I’d like it explained.’

He shrugged and looked away, gazing around the other tables, his attention obviously focused on the other soldiers as they tried to relax.

‘They’ve had a bad time,’ he said. ‘They’re patrolling the town in shifts. They haven’t had a decent sleep for days and the work isn’t pleasant.’

‘Because they’re fighting and arresting fellow Jews?’

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It eats at them.’ He turned back to face her. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, weary and filled with a sadness that tore at her. ‘So,’ he said, ‘the lady wants an explanation for my supposed disapproval.’

‘Yes,’ Kate said, ‘I do.’

‘I don’t really disapprove. I simply don’t understand. Maybe I’m prejudiced, maybe I *am* old-fashioned, but I just don’t understand how a woman like you can be so casual about whom you go to bed with. I just find it bewildering.’

She felt a flicker of anger that made her lips tighten, but the impulse to stand up and slap his face was also the impulse to touch him tenderly.

‘I have physical needs,’ she said, ‘of a perfectly normal kind, and I see little value in frustrating them. As for being casual about it, I don’t think that’s quite true, since I felt a great deal for Leon Halcomb.’

She saw the shifting of his gaze, a helpless sign that she had hurt him, and she felt an equally helpless satisfaction combined with faint hope. She had a drink and put her glass back on the table, trying to keep her hand steady.

‘So,’ he said, ‘you felt a great deal for him, but you didn’t quite love him.’

‘That’s it, Moshe. Precisely.’

‘You sound almost defiant.’

‘Why should I be?’

‘Because you think I’m attacking you over this, but believe me, I’m not.’

‘Admit it: you disapproved.’

‘I found it difficult to comprehend. On the other hand, you’re a very attractive woman, so perhaps I *am* prejudiced.’

She felt her hope growing, like the blossoming of a rose, but her fear, like the thorns around that rose, still threatened to strangle her. He was so unrevealing, so hesitant and withdrawn, and her anger at his inability, or refusal, to express himself also drew her inexorably towards him and made

her want to release him. It was very much a feminine attitude, but she wasn't too comfortable with it.

'Do you mind if I smoke?'

He shrugged indifferently, then picked his glass up and had another sip of his drink while she lit a cigarette with nervous movements, feeling confused and resentful. She inhaled and then blew the smoke out and kept her gaze on his thoughtful face.

'Just how attractive do you think I am, Moshe?'

'*Very* attractive, Kate.'

'And did you expect me to lead a celibate life?'

'Well…' He hesitated. 'Not quite.'

'So if you didn't expect me to be celibate, what did you imagine my private life was like?'

'All right, Kate, I get the message.'

'No, Moshe, I don't think so. I seriously doubt that you get anything. Like most men, you have a double set of standards, one for men, the other for women, and your disapproval, which you pretend not to feel, simply can't be disguised.'

'You're becoming angry, Kate.'

'Damned right, I'm becoming angry. Tell me this, major-general - and please give me an honest answer… How would you respond if I made it perfectly clear that I thought you were an attractive man?'

'Why? Do you?'

'Damn it, I didn't say that. I merely asked how you would react if it were true.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'My reaction was perfectly natural. We male chauvinists are like that.'

'It was mockery without malice, offered quietly and dryly, but Kate felt an unreasonable resentment that made her want to strike back at him. Her response was automatic, purely emotional and instinctive, and she realised, with a trace of self-mockery, that she wanted to capture him. He was wary, uncertain, unable to express what he was feeling, and the irony of this was a mirror to her hapless dilemma. He wanted her as she wanted him, but there were walls to be knocked down.

'You haven't answered my question, Moshe.'

'No,' he said, 'I didn't answer it.'

‘Well?’

‘I think my vanity would be touched - another natural reaction.’

‘And if I invited you into my bed?’

‘Please, Kate, that’s enough.’

‘I want an answer.’

‘I would find the offer hard to refuse. I think you know that damned well.’

‘Fine,’ she said. ‘An honest answer. We’re getting somewhere at last. And do you think, major-general, that in taking me to bed you would later disapprove of yourself?’

‘No, Kate, I don’t think so.’

‘Then why on earth disapprove of *my* private life?’

‘All right, Kate, I get your message. Loud and clear, as they say. And I have, incidentally, taken note of the fact that you always call me “major-general” when you’re angry.’

She looked away in disgust, or perhaps in feigned disgust, feeling more like an adolescent than a grown woman and thus resenting him even more. The soldiers were coming and going, all weary and much too young, and the smoke from their cigarettes filled the terrace, making everything hazy.

‘I’m sorry,’ Moshe said, after a lengthy silence. ‘Believe me, Kate, I really am sorry, and this time I mean it. Your point has been taken and you’re absolutely correct: I disapproved of your affair with Leon Halcomb, and I’d no right to do so.’

‘Just my affair with Leon?’

‘Yes, Kate, I’m afraid so. I’m not quite as old-fashioned as you seem to believe, and your former private life didn’t interest me.’

‘Why, Leon?’

‘Various reasons, not all easy to explain. I knew about you before I met you and I was, rightly or wrongly, annoyed because you’re a Jew and Leon is a notorious anti-Semite.’

‘He’s not an anti-Semite; he’s anti-Zionist.’

‘Maybe, maybe not, but it hardly made any difference: you happened to be the daughter of one of our more prominent and respected Jews, and so your very public affair with Leon Halcomb was, at least to me, a blatant insult to your father’s work with the WZO.’

‘I thought my father was a hypocrite, Moshe, and I wanted to punish him. That’s not why I had the affair with Leon, but it *is* why I flaunted it.’

‘Yes, Kate, I know. At least, I came to understand it, particularly during your stay in the hospital, when you were locked up with Joshua. My attitude changed then - towards you; not towards Leon - and my disapproval, for want of a better term, became something more personal.’

She wanted him to continue, but instead he looked away, obviously uncomfortable and trying to distract himself by studying his troopers. She knew how exhausted he was, and how serious his problems were, and yet she couldn’t resist her ruthless desire to make him state what he felt. Following his gaze and also studying the troopers, seeing their young, weary faces, she suddenly remembered, with stinging guilt, what was happening because of Joshua, and that she, in her inexcusable weakness, had been personally responsible for it. To know this was almost unbearable, a wide-awake nightmare that refused to go away, but much worse was the knowledge that even in her shame and guilt her feelings for Moshe were taking precedence over everything else and obliterating the terrible weight of her crime. Jerusalem was in flames, Jew was pitted against Jew, the Arabs and Christians were rampaging through the streets - and she, Kate Hirschfield, who had sparked it all off, was more concerned with her feelings for this man who might suffer in her stead. Now her shame was even greater, her guilt shocking in its intensity, and yet, as Moshe turned back to face her, she couldn’t resist leaning towards him.

‘Just what are you trying to say, Moshe?’

‘I don’t know. I’m not sure. I think I’ve probably said too much already - and it makes me uncomfortable.’

‘Why?’

‘I’m not sure what we’re talking about. I don’t think you know your own mind. We met under extraordinary circumstances, have shared some remarkable experiences, and your feelings for me, like my feelings for you, might have nothing to do with anything other than the highly charged emotional atmosphere of those experiences.’

‘Does that matter?’

‘Yes. Because I’m not as strong as you think I am. There are things in my past that have marked me in strange ways and made me mistrust my own feelings. I confess, Kate, I’ve wanted you, and hated Leon for having you; and now, because of Leon, because of what has been done, I can’t rid myself of the feeling that in you all I’m after is vengeance.’

‘Do you know what you’re confessing, Moshe?’

‘That’s what I’m not sure of.’

‘We’re actually discussing how you care for me and how I care for you.’

‘I didn’t want to discuss it.’

‘I want to be in your bed, Moshe.’

‘Not now, Kate. Not at this time. We can’t commit ourselves now.’

‘Not commitment: just bed.’

‘That’s not enough. Not for me.’

‘Forget about Leon and my past, and just take me to bed.’

‘No, Kate, I can’t do that.’

She stubbed her cigarette out, feeling juvenile and defeated, humiliated by her blatant, shameless candour, wanting to walk away from him. But she knew that she couldn’t do it, not now, possibly never, because what she had experienced with him, irrespective of what he said, was as binding as a ring on the finger - and possibly more so. She raised her head to stare at him, trying to read his veiled grey eyes, but he simply turned his head and looked away, surveying the crowded, smoke-filled terrace with its mass of exhausted troops.

‘Do you know where Leon is?’ she asked abruptly.

‘He’s vanished,’ Moshe said. ‘Like a puff of smoke. We haven’t seen him for weeks.’

He stared steadily at her, taking note of her obvious discomfort, and she felt, with resentment and pleasure, that he was reading her mind.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘I still care for him. I’d be a liar to say otherwise. But it still doesn’t concern you and me; in that sense, it’s all over.’

When he nodded thoughtfully, his eyes drooping with weariness, she felt a resurgence of hope and helpless relief. He reached out for his glass of beer, picked it up, set it down again, then ran his finger around the rim in a distracted manner.

‘How’s Joshua?’ she asked him.

He shrugged. ‘The same as always. Inhumanly passive and patient. He’s virtually a prisoner, the whole world is crying out for him, and he sits there in his room, surrounded by guards, simply waiting for something to happen. We still don’t know who he is - and I don’t think we’ll ever find out - but though he knows no more than us, he’s convinced that he’s here for some purpose and that his time will come soon.’

‘That’s why he finally let me go,’ Kate replied. ‘He said that I’d served my purpose, that I’d guided him from the darkness, and that now he was ready to face whatever was coming.’

‘And how did you feel about that, Kate?’

‘Strange. Confused. I think I felt almost maternal. Like a mother watching her child grow away from her: at once wounded and proud.’

She found herself gazing down at the table, embarrassed by what she had said, one part of her torn by her feelings for Leon and Joshua, the other part wanting to capture Moshe and hold him close to her.

‘You two had a strange relationship.’

‘Yes, it was eerie,’ Kate replied.

‘You seemed to be able to read his mind.’

‘And he, mine,’ she said.

She raised her eyes again, suddenly feeling remote, and saw Moshe leaning across the table towards her, his gaze now intense.

‘What was the blood in the Pool of Siloam?’ he asked. ‘Joshua told you to *will* the blood. He told you to admit what you’d previously denied, to accept the shame and then put it behind you. What did he mean by that?’

Kate stared down at the table, then glanced blindly around her, seeing nothing but the agony of her past and the guilt she had buried. Joshua’s words filled her mind, his voice reverberating spectrally, and she recalled the foetus turning in its pool of blood to release her from guilt and set her free. She felt that freedom now - not shame or the former guilt - and so she turned her eyes back upon Moshe, relieved to be telling him the truth.

‘My abortion,’ she said. ‘The guilt I tried to ignore. He was telling me to free myself from guilt by accepting that guilt.’

His eyes flickered with shock, but he held it in check, trying to honour the pact they had made without uttering a word. She wanted to reach across the table and take his hand, but she didn’t dare do it.

‘Let me explain,’ she said. ‘The great irony of my life is that my first real position was as a psychiatric consultant in a legitimate New York abortion clinic. A good Jewish girl, I was relatively innocent at the time, and what I saw in that clinic - what very few men have to see - was enough to put me off men for life.’

‘I thought abortion was routine,’ Moshe said dryly. ‘At least in New York.’

‘The operation, dear Moshe, may well be routine, but the psychological repercussions, for both patients and staff, create a problem that has yet to be solved. Think of what it means to be a woman working in an abortion clinic: young and emotional, almost certainly romantic, she’s brutally exposed to the real blood and marrow of sex and its impersonal, almost surgical terminology: not violins and roses and the light touch of a lover, but the Pill and the Diaphragm, the Intra-Uterine Device, the vaginal jellies and creams - the whole messy business coupled with the lesser known possible side effects, such as benign tumours or gallbladder disease, migraine or heart disease, vaginal or cervical cancer, heavy bleeding or perforation of the uterine wall - the part of sex that few men understand or are willing to acknowledge. How easy for the man to have his moment of idle pleasure and then treat it as a casual encounter; not so casual for the woman who discovers that she’s pregnant and then pays for her moment of pleasure with menses extraction, vacuum aspiration, dilation and curettage, hypertonic saline or intra-amniotic prostaglandin abortion, dilation and evacuation or, if she’s particularly unlucky, hysterotomy or hysterectomy. The aftermath of careless passion - the dilating of the cervical canal, the injection of saline solution into the amniotic sac, the uterine wall scraped and the foetus and placenta removed, either sucked out or pulled out with forceps - flesh and blood, love’s reality. God, yes, it’s unpleasant - a far cry from love’s romance - and if the women survived it physically, a great many were wounded emotionally; and some of the nursing staff, who saw more than their patients did, just couldn’t take it. It was the late abortions that did it, that gave rise to thoughts of murder: when the foetuses had perfect shape, when the salines were born alive, and they were dumped into a bucket of formaldehyde or left to die on the operating tables. A lot of us couldn’t take it - we suffered nightmares and even crack-ups - and for me the experience separated love from sex, making the latter seem at best a dangerous pleasure, at worst a crudely primitive physical impulse… Yet ironically, once it made me feel that way, I went out and got myself pregnant.’

Moshe was staring steadily at her, neither sympathetic nor disapproving, his face, with its square, granite good looks, concealing what he felt. Yet his eyes, bloodshot and weary, lined with age and lack of sleep, were unable to hide his brimming shock at what she was telling him.

‘I had trouble sleeping,’ she continued. ‘I kept dreaming of foetuses: giant

foetuses in the cupboards, at the foot of my bed; foetuses wriggling in buckets of formaldehyde or on smooth, shiny tables. I lost a lot of sleep and I wanted someone with me, but sex, as it hadn't been before, now seemed squalid and frightening. *Physician, heal thyself*: the good psychiatrist, I decided to do so: I decided to take a lover not to satisfy desire, but to prove that I was still a normal woman and that sex was a good thing. That's no way to choose a lover, much less soothe emotional stress, and the man I found was what I deserved: a stud always on heat.'

Moshe visibly winced at that and she wished she hadn't said it, not wanting to hurt him more than necessary, but not wanting to soften the blow either. He glanced down at the table and then looked up again, obviously finding it painful to listen, but determined to do so. If not courage, it was a form of honesty that deeply moved her.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'but that's the only way to describe him: a stud always on heat, an unemotional, selfish animal, a brute who prided himself as a sexual athlete, but knew nothing of feelings. Perhaps I picked him because it was easy - because he made it easy for me - but whatever, he ended up in my bed the first night we met. If he was good, I hardly knew it - I never judged men that way - but certainly, when I went to bed with him, I scarcely thought of the consequences. I had only one thought, which was to rid myself of fear, but my work in the clinic, instead of frightening me off pregnancy, had given me some peculiar aberrations: the Pill made me nervous, I couldn't bear an IUD inside me, the thought of inserting a diaphragm filled me with repugnance, and any other form of contraception seemed clinical and messy. He was angry when he found this out, though promised not to come inside me; but it was clear, shortly after he started, that he wasn't happy with me. I knew he was going to do it and I begged him to stop, but he just called me a stupid bitch and held me down with both hands and then, hardly knowing the word "rape", pushed even deeper inside me. He wasn't trying to excite me or make me forget myself: he was punishing me, as only men can, for trying to deprive him of the satisfaction of coming inside me. So, he came inside me - as far into me as he could manage - and when he did, I knew as surely as I was breathing that I was going to be pregnant.'

She kept her eyes on Moshe's face, determined not to release him, knowing that she had to tell it all and let him take it or leave it. So far he had not averted his gaze, and his large hands were steady.

‘I never saw him again,’ she said, ‘since my lack of precautions had clearly annoyed him; but he left me with a child in the womb and too much guilt to bear. My father was, at that time, returning to Orthodox Judaism; and apart from my disgust at what I felt was his rank hypocrisy, I knew that to tell him about the baby would have made life impossible. Cowardice? Yes. And I despised myself for it, while hating the man who’d made me pregnant and also loathing my father for unwittingly forcing me to opt for an abortion. Nevertheless, I delayed it, wanting the baby, frightened of having it; until, by the time I finally decided to go through with it, I was seventeen weeks gone and required a second-trimester abortion. I was given the saline infusion fairly early in the morning, spent most of the day convinced that my insides were falling out, and sometime late that evening I had a miscarriage, the foetus was expelled, and I looked down to see it lying on the bed in a pool of blood. I didn’t make a sound. I was too horrified to scream. I propped myself up on my elbows and just stared at that bloody foetus as it lay there on the bed between my legs, looking as if it was still alive. The nurse refused to take it away until the placenta came out - which took another thirty minutes - and during all that time, the longest nightmare of my life, I just lay there, supporting myself on my elbows, staring hypnotically at the poor little creature that I felt I had murdered. Then, when the placenta came out and they finally took the foetus away, I fainted with horror and shock.’

She kept her eyes fixed on Moshe, refusing to let him look away, aware that what she was telling him could destroy his feelings for her, equally aware that she did not wish to have him under false pretences. He gazed back steadily, not trying to avoid her eyes, and she thought of their first meeting, of the black obelisk on the ruins, of the beam of light pouring down through the darkness, onto Joshua’s face. She and Moshe had been united then, in fear and incomprehension, but now, she was convinced, they were united by something deeper and truer. It was love of a very Earthly kind - and it would break or endure.

‘I changed after that,’ she said. ‘I divorced my mind from my body, separating my physical desires from my emotions and thus dividing my nature. I did this because of guilt and shame, denying them both by trying to bury them, using sex as the means of obliteration; keeping emotion, which would have reminded me of what I’d lost, well clear of my various affairs. That’s what I eventually found with Leon: a lack of commitment that made

me feel safe; in Leon I found a remote, dry affection that never seemed threatening. It wasn't love, Moshe - at least not as you imagined it - and when Leon mistook what I felt for love, I had to let him go, also. As for Joshua, he understood that I was divided and unhappy, that I wouldn't be able to live with myself until I accepted my guilt and shame; so he made me draw the past from my mind, face it squarely; and, in facing it, find freedom…You understand, Moshe? Now I'm free. And being free, I want you.'

She fell silent and stared at him, her gaze focused on his lips, waiting, for what seemed like an eternity, for his reply to emerge. The eternity came and went, stretching out and then dilating, and she felt a brief fluttering of panic at what his response might be. He seemed unreal at that moment, out of focus, hazed in smoke, but his presence percolated through her and made her part of him. She waited quietly for his decision, trying to control her desperation, but then a shadow fell upon him, briefly obliterating his features, and she glanced up to see a young soldier leaning over the table. He handed Moshe a written note, and Moshe read it, his lips tightening, then rubbed his forehead wearily with one hand and raised his eyes to look at her.

'I'm wanted urgently at the Hadassah Medical Centre,' he told her, 'and I think you'd better come with me… They're going to release Joshua from custody. They're setting him free.'

28

The Jeep turned left off Keren Haysod and went along Derekh Azza, heading away from the flaming rooftops of the besieged West Jerusalem to the quieter environs outside the city. Yet even here there were soldiers, passing their jeep in crowded trucks, the latter all heading back towards the city and its dark, smoke-filled sky. They heard the sound of an explosion, behind them and far away, and Moshe winced, thinking of what was going on and wanting to be in control of it. He turned his head to look at Kate, saw the lamplight on her dark eyes, her long hair blowing out in the wind to reveal her angular features. She obviously sensed his attention and her eyes turned towards him, one hand brushing the hair from her forehead, the other pressed to the seat.

'What did the note say, Moshe?'

'Nothing very informative. Just that they had to release Joshua and they wanted me up there.'

'The violence is getting worse.'

'That's right. Every minute. I suspect that's why they have to release Joshua; because they just can't contain it.'

'And they think that releasing Joshua will help?'

'Well, it's Joshua they're fighting over. The Jews and the Moslems and the Christians all want to lay hands on him.'

'That's what I mean,' Kate said. 'I think what they're planning is dangerous. What are those people, now fighting each other, going to do when Joshua's let loose?'

'It might pacify them.'

'Why should it do that? Indeed, what do they expect of him? He can't be Jesus Christ and the Messiah and the Mahdi all at once, yet those warring groups all want to lay claim to him. What happens if he picks one group over the others? I don't think they'll accept that.'

Moshe studied the neck of the driver in front of him, then turned to look

back on Jerusalem as if fell far behind them. He saw the towering office blocks, darkly outlined against the red sky, skeins of smoke drifting across the few lit windows, isolated yellow flames flickering dimly, as pretty as candles. Joshua had prophesied it and now it had come to pass: Jerusalem the Golden, his home, was being set to the torch. Moshe shuddered and turned away from that eerie sight, scarcely able to credit it.

'It's like the end of the world,' he said.

'It's only Israel,' Kate replied.

'Israel is the centre of the world - and if it falls, the world breaks.'

'You think this will spread farther?'

'It's already spread, Kate. There have been demonstrations in an awful lot of countries, some of them violent.'

'Not as bad as this.'

'Not yet, but it might come. Joshua, whoever or whatever he is, has set the spark to men's dreams.'

He covered his face with his right hand, closing his eyes and trying to think, a desperate fear churning up from his stomach and filling his mind. It was an unfamiliar fear, divorced from thoughts of physical danger, arising from an increasing feeling of helplessness before the intangible. The jeep growled and shook beneath him, slightly comforting in its reality, but it wasn't enough to shake him out of the coils of the nightmare surrounding him. He was a soldier, a man of concretes, a man who knew the rules of war; but this extraordinary situation, which had exploded around Joshua, defied every tenet of his teaching and left him adrift. He felt Kate beside him, her thigh pressed to his, her warmth like a beacon to his senses, luring him in. He wanted her there and then, in the jeep, beneath the stars, but no sooner had he felt this than his thoughts vaulted back to the real world. Death and destruction by the bullet and the bomb. Would Joshua's release put an end to it or fan the flames farther?

He glanced briefly at Kate, wanting to reach out and touch her, wondering why he couldn't say the words that were perched on his lips. The wind was rushing through the jeep, blowing her hair around her face, and she raised a hand to brush it away and let it fly out behind her. He wanted to reach out and touch it, to lose his fingers in it, to wipe it like a rag across his face, cleansing himself with its softness. The desire was voluptuous, slightly decadent in its nature, and so, shocked, he turned his face to the front and

surveyed the road ahead. The jeep was turning towards the hospital, the land dark on both sides, but he glanced up at the sky and saw the stars in their remote, glittering brilliance.

'Are you alright?' Kate asked.

'Yes,' he said, 'I'm fine.'

'You seemed very strange there for a moment.'

'I'm just tired. My mind's drifting.'

It was the truth as subterfuge and he used it without guilt, simply surprised at Kate's instinctive response to what he was feeling. She knew him, as he knew her. They had been drawn together through Joshua, and now they were bound up in a drama that transcended them both. He wondered if they could hold together, alone, without Joshua, and his doubts, like the spectral mist in a dream, swam around his pained love. He glanced out of the jeep, trying to let the night dissolve him, and there, at the beginning of the sloping road, were the first of the security checkpoints.

'I don't believe it,' Kate said.

'You'll have to,' he replied. 'Now we know why they want to release Joshua: clearly they don't have a choice.'

The security checkpoint was new, with a wooden barrier and armed troops; both sides of the road winding up to the hospital were lined with even more troops, all heavily armed. The soldiers were not facing the road but the grassy slopes on either side, their weapons pointed at the hundreds of people - Jew, Christian and Moslem - who had obviously come to demand the release of Joshua. They were chanting in unison, 'We want Joshua! We want Joshua!', their clenched fists moving up and down, also in unison, many holding large, burning candles. It was a virtual multitude, covering the fields on both sides of the road, and every one of them was looking uphill at the linear buildings of the Hadassah Medical Centre.

When the driver stopped at the first road block, a young sergeant approached the jeep, saw Moshe and nodded in recognition; he did not salute but merely glanced nervously about him before returning his attention to Moshe.

'Major-general,' he said, nodding again, the term of address both casual and respectful, his youthful face not too happy.

'Any trouble?' Moshe asked.

'Not yet, sir. They're refusing to leave until we release that man, but more

are arriving every minute.'

'How many are here at present?'

'We think close to a thousand, sir. There's been a few fist fights, some of the soldiers have been abused, but apart from that, they're just lighting candles and waving their fists.'

'But you think it'll get worse.'

'Almost certainly. They're getting angrier each minute.'

'Thank you, sergeant. Now let us through.'

When the roadblock was raised, the driver headed uphill, towards the hospital, passing the stiffened spines of the soldiers on either side of the winding road. The massed people were still chanting, their fists rising and falling, their raised faces illuminated by the pale moon and starlight, and by the hundreds of candles flickering in a light breeze. The jeep kept moving uphill, past the soldiers and chanting masses, then inched through the car park that overlooked the dark hills and finally stopped at a second road block near the synagogue and hospital entrance. Here the soldiers had set up spotlights that were beaming over the crammed car park; the soldiers, heavily armed and at the ready, were grouped in front of the solid mass of trucks that filled the hospital grounds. Another sergeant approached Moshe, recognised him and nodded; then Moshe and Kate disembarked from the jeep and entered the building.

Moshe gazed along the lobby and saw another group of soldiers, some sitting on the seats, others on the floor, women moving amongst them to serve them with drinks and food and magazines. Some nurses and medical orderlies were present, obviously waiting for the anticipated trouble, and stretchers were piled up along the walls with heaped blankets and first-aid kits. Joshua was at the far end of the room, standing upright, wearing his white robes, anachronistic with his long hair and beard, yet undeniably dignified. Close by were Ben Eleizer, General Meshel and Lieutenant Frankel, the three of them in serious discussion, heads nodding, hands waving.

Moshe turned to look at Kate and saw her staring at Joshua, her eyes oddly luminous and intense, filled with love and sorrow. She trembled and closed her eyes and then opened them again, staring again at Joshua and then turning to Moshe, one hand reaching out for him. He caught her hand in its downward motion, squeezed her fingers, felt her warmth, then let the hand

gently fall away while his spirit sank into her, drowning.

'Are you alright?'

'Yes,' she said, 'I'm fine. I just feel that I'm losing him.'

'You never really had him, Kate.'

'I know… but that just makes it worse.'

He nodded and took her elbow and then walked her across the lobby, occasionally nodding at a soldier he recognised, but not saying a word. Paul looked up when he approached, his handsome face tense, his brown eyes taking in Kate before moving away again. Ben Eleizer, looking diminutive beside the barrel-chested General Meshel, offered a slight, grateful smile, obviously glad to be seeing him.

'Ah, Moshe,' he said quietly, 'you received our message.'

'Yes, Shlomo.'

'How were things in Jerusalem?'

'Bad and getting worse.'

'We should send in the tanks,' General Meshel said. 'We'd clear the streets in no time.'

'I do not think it wise,' Ben Eleizer said, 'to show the world Israeli tanks blowing holes in Jerusalem. I think it wiser simply to let Joshua go.'

'And you think that'll stop them?' Kate asked.

'Who invited this lady here?' Ben Eleizer responded, looking directly at Moshe.

'I think she could be of assistance,' Moshe said. 'We don't know how Joshua will react, and Kate might have to talk to him.'

'I doubt that, Moshe. We've already told him we're letting him go. He simply gave us his silvery-eyed blank look and nodded his head.'

'He's agreeable?'

'We assume so.'

'And which side is he going to support?'

'We asked him that, but he simply stared at us and offered a slight smile. I don't think he comprehends the situation, but I can't be too sure of that.'

'You tried explaining the situation to him?'

'Yes, Miss Hirschfield, we tried. He just nodded in a rather judicious manner and then turned to the wall.'

'He's looking at us right now.'

'Yes, Miss Hirschfield… perhaps because you're here.'

Kate ignored the sarcasm and merely glanced at Joshua where he stood, as steady as a rock, with his back to the wall. He saw her staring at him and responded with a gentle smile, then turned his silvery-grey gaze on Moshe, looking at him and into him. Still disturbed by the man's very presence, Moshe stepped closer to Kate.

'I repeat,' Kate said, speaking to the Prime Minister, 'do you think this will stop them?'

'I take it you mean the release of Joshua?'

'Precisely.'

'You've seen the riots in Jerusalem and those people massed outside. I don't think I have to elaborate on the reason: we must give them that man.'

'If he sides with one group, one religion, over the others, you'll have even worse riots.'

'Maybe,' Ben Eleizer said, 'but we have to try something. The riots in Jerusalem have encouraged similar riots in other parts of Israel and, indeed, in various other countries. As for the Moslems, while no Arab leader has openly expressed support for the view of Joshua as the returned Mahdi, there can be little doubt that the Arabs are massing along our borders in order to exploit our internal problems - and are just waiting for those problems to get out of control. Nor can we ignore the fact that the United Nations, the Americans and the Russians are all openly discussing the necessity of military intervention should the Arabs decide to cross our borders and head for Jerusalem. So, as you can see, we have to bring order back to Jerusalem; and the only possible way of doing it, short of sending in the tanks, is to give them the man they're all clamouring for. We're not saying it will work, but we have to try. We have no other options.'

'And what if it doesn't work?'

'Then we send in the tanks,' General Meshel said.

Moshe caught Kate's frightened glance and lowered his gaze, ashamed to look at her, knowing that the tanks would be unavoidable if the rioting continued.

'Has it occurred to any of you that someone might try to kidnap him?' Kate said. 'After all, a gang of Kash fanatics has already tried to do that right here in this hospital; and as they tried it when he was here, they'll almost certainly try it when he's unprotected.'

'We have reason to believe that won't happen,' Paul Frankel said,

addressing Kate for the first time.

'What reason?'

'We believe his remarkable powers will protect him.'

'He might use his powers to protect himself from violence, but if anyone tries to spirit him away, I think he'll go with them.'

'And why would he do that?' Ben Eleizer asked.

'Because he doesn't know what he's here for, or what he's supposed to do, so he'll simply let events take their course. The sight of a gun might well make him use his powers, but if someone, or some group, simply asks him to come with them, I think he'll passively do so, in the belief that it's preordained and part of his fate.'

'He wasn't very passive with the members of Shin Bet when they tried to separate him from you.'

'That was a different matter, General Meshel. Both those soldiers were carrying guns. And at that time, Joshua was convinced that I had to stay with him.'

'I still don't think anyone will try to abduct him,' Paul said, 'or attempt any violence against him.'

He was addressing Kate, but he glanced quickly at Moshe, his gaze at once nervous and evasive. Moshe recalled him at the Pool of Siloam, after the blood had materialised, falling to his knees in abject worship, convinced that Joshua was the Messiah. Although he was trying to hide it, that conviction was still with him; and now, observing his restless, evasive gaze, Moshe was certain that he was becoming more fanatical and would have to be watched.

'Why not?' Moshe said, keeping his voice calm and level, determined not to show his suspicions and latent contempt. 'What Kate says seems reasonable to me.'

'Not necessarily,' Paul said, glancing at everyone in turn, then finally forcing himself to look directly at Moshe. 'The fact that Joshua has been viewed variously as the Christ of the Christians, the Jewish Messiah and the Moslem Mahdi is the very fact that could keep him from all harm. It's true, as Miss Hirschfield says, that should Joshua side with any single group, or religion, over the others, those disowned may well be outraged. On the other hand, if Joshua takes no side - and so far he hasn't done so - then each of those individuals, in the conviction of his own religion, will assume that Joshua is his personal saviour and consequently won't lay a hand on him. In

short, he'll be sacred to each and every individual - and will therefore be safe.'

'The fact that they thought him their Messiah didn't prevent them from storming this hospital.'

'I'm aware of that, Prime Minister,' Paul replied. 'However, interrogation of the captured Kash members revealed that they truly believed Joshua to be the Messiah and were merely going to locate him in Hebron, where all believers could have contact with him, while the military, in all likelihood, could be kept out. They didn't intend holding him prisoner; on the contrary, they were simply going to keep him there for a few days, let the news of his freedom spread throughout Israel, and then either let him stay there, well protected by them, or leave to travel wherever he wished to go.'

'Assuming, in both cases, that he's definitely Jewish and will therefore either stay gladly in Hebron or go travelling to inaugurate the sovereignty of Judaism.'

'Correct.'

'And the Moslems and Christians?'

'Lieutenant Frankel is right,' Kate said. 'While Joshua's recollections suggest a peculiar mixture of Judaic and Christian history - and could just as easily be interpreted in favour of Moslem history - his reactions to the most well-known religious sites were non-conclusive and even contradictory; and Joshua himself has never suggested that he's one thing or the other. Given this, if he continues to make no claims for himself and retains his undeniably ambiguous form of speech - an elliptical form of speech that can be interpreted in just about any light - then, as Paul says, each individual religion will claim him as its own and no single individual will dare to touch him.'

'Peace on Earth,' Ben Eleizer said.

'It might work,' Moshe added quietly.

'We simply don't have a choice,' Paul said fervently. 'We have no options left.'

Again, Moshe found himself staring at Paul, trying to penetrate the veils of his brown eyes and see what he was thinking. He would not quickly forget the sight of Paul on his knees, head bowed over the feet of the man whom he thought was the Messiah. Paul was an Orthodox Jew, an extremist, a true believer; and now, with a Messiah to follow, he would not be stopped easily. This bothered Moshe, but what bothered him even more was the fact that

Paul had not, since that fateful day, made his new belief known.

'Is it not true,' Moshe said, 'that you, Lieutenant Frankel, believe this man to be the Jewish Messiah?'

Paul stared at him, startled, then blushed and looked at Joshua, who returned his stare with grey-eyed equanimity, hardly moving a muscle. Paul shivered, licked his lips and lowered his head, then turned back to Moshe.

'Yes,' he said, almost whispering, 'I do. By my faith, I believe this.'

'And you're willing to let Joshua go down there, amongst the Moslems and Christians?'

'Yes,' Paul replied. 'In my faith, I am willing. If, as I believe, he's the Messiah, then no harm will come to him.'

'And if he's the returned Mahdi or Jesus Christ?'

'He is not.'

'But if he *is*?'

'Unless he specifically tells me otherwise, I refuse to believe otherwise. Until he specifically denies it, he *is* the Messiah.'

'Fine,' Ben Eleizer said. 'Lieutenant Frankel is a believer. If, as we believe, the others are equally adamant, and if, as we hope, Joshua takes no particular side, we might just have the odds in our favour. It would seem, then, that our fate lies with Joshua's decision - but, alas, he's not forthcoming on that matter.'

Kate instantly left the group and walked up to Joshua, who lowered his gaze to look down upon her face when she stopped just in front of him. Moshe glanced at Ben Eleizer, who smiled sardonically and shrugged, then they all went and gathered around Joshua where he stood by the wall. He did not look at any of them, but instead kept staring at Kate, his silvery-grey eyes uncommonly bright and observant, his lips curved in an almost imperceptible smile that showed warmth and affection.

'You willed the blood,' he said, 'which took courage and faith; now, in your eyes, is the light of redemption and faith.'

'Yes,' Kate replied.

'That is all you need to say. You must hold to your faith as to the root of a tree, and let the seasons bring what they will. You will not break or fall.'

'I have to talk to you about something.'

'I understand there is a problem.'

'Do you understand what's happening outside and what people expect of

you?'

'The situation was explained to me. There is little I can do about it. If they wish to send me out there, it is my time, but I cannot give reasons.'

'They think of you as their saviour.'

'They must believe what they believe. If, by simply being, I give them faith, I might thus save their souls.'

That remark filled Moshe with dread, but he noticed, with a glimmer of hope, that Kate did not seem perturbed.

'You mean, you think you're their saviour?'

'I would not presume such. I merely state that if they believe in me, that belief may redeem them.'

'Redemption through you?'

'Not through me: through their faith. It matters not how they come to faith. Faith itself is what matters.'

'There are Moslems, Christians and Jews.'

'I do not recognise such. Those are names for the religions of men, but such religions are false. There is only the one religion: the worship of the One. The religions of men divide - they do not unite - and as such they debase Him.'

'Some think of you as the Mahdi.'

'I neither confirm nor deny it.'

'Some think of you as the Messiah.'

'I neither confirm nor deny it.'

'Some think of you as the resurrected Jesus Christ.'

'I am Joshua and can say no more than that. I am what I am.'

Kate nodded and stepped back, turning her head to glance at Moshe, and he saw, in the luminous darkness of her eyes, the calm of acceptance. She looked at General Meshel, then at Paul and Ben Eleizer, and the latter, after failing to out-stare her, finally spoke to Moshe.

'Well, what do you think?'

'I think you have your answer.'

'It says neither one thing nor the other.'

'That's just what we want.'

Ben Eleizer raised an eyebrow, his scepticism obvious, then, when Moshe refused to add any other comment, he surrendered with an ambiguous smile and turned to Paul Frankel.

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Let’s get Joshua out of here. Let’s find out what happens.’

‘I want to go with him,’ Kate said.

‘So do I,’ Moshe said.

‘We’ll *all* go with him as far as the end of the car park,’ Ben Eleizer said. ‘No one goes any farther than that. *Oy vay*, let’s get moving!’

At a nod from Kate, Joshua left his position near the wall and began walking along the crowded lobby, followed first by Kate, then by Moshe and Paul, with Ben Eleizer and General Meshel in the rear. The nurses and medical orderlies stopped what they were doing as Joshua walked quietly past them. Likewise, the soldiers lounging by the walls or sitting on the floor fell silent as they watched him, taking in his biblical attire and strangely primitive, noble face, then filling up with awe before looking away to study, with the relief of familiarity, Moshe and the others coming up behind him. Moshe nodded at some of the soldiers, understanding what they were feeling, but was relieved when he and the others finally made it through the lobby and stopped on the steps outside the hospital, where the darkness, though divided by the spotlights, still offered some solace.

More armed soldiers were massed in front of the entrance, forming a cordon across the road, and the spotlights, moving back and forth repeatedly, were focused on the lawn behind the synagogue and the car park beyond it. Army trucks were coming and going, roaring and clattering, but even this noise could not entirely obliterate the rhythmic chanting from the fields below the car park. Joshua gazed at the synagogue, then raised his eyes to look above it, as if willing himself to see the crowds who were chanting beneath the glittering, star-bright sky. He glanced briefly at Kate, his lips shadowed, his eyes in moonlight, then turned away and started forward without saying a word.

They all followed him around the synagogue and across the moonlit lawn, taking the shortcut directly to the car park above the mountainous valley. Here the sound of the trucks was weaker, the rhythmic chanting louder; and the spotlights, weaving back and forth eerily, illuminated the crammed cars. Moshe kept his eyes on Kate, inexorably drawn to her slim form, wanting to reach out and stroke her long hair when the wind made it shiver. She was walking beside Joshua, looking deceptively small beside him, her blue denims and suede jacket at odds with his white Arab robes. A spotlight

picked them out, passed across them, leaving darkness, then they arrived at the soldiers guarding both sides of the road that snaked down from the car park. Some of the soldiers stared at them, recognised them and stepped aside, allowing them to walk off the lawn and onto the road.

'We stop here,' Ben Eleizer said.

From where they stood they could look down and see the people massed on the grassy slopes at both sides of the road. They were all staring uphill, the candles flickering above their heads, those empty-handed raising and lowering clenched fists to the loud, rhythmic chanting. 'We want Joshua! We want Joshua!' they chanted in unison, their joined voices forming a hollow, bass chorus that reverberated ethereally. The scene was bizarre - the hundreds of flickering candles, the stars glittering above, the candlelight and starlight both illuminating the hundreds of faces in the darkness - and was not, in Moshe's view, made any the less bizarre by the sight of Joshua standing above it all like some biblical prophet. As if reading Moshe's mind, he turned around to stare at each of them in turn, but finally let his gaze settle on Kate.

'I am free to go?' he asked.

'Yes,' Kate replied. 'But please, Joshua, be careful.'

'What is willed, will be done.'

He walked off down the road, between the two lines of soldiers, his body erect, his white robes whipping out behind him, his feet kicking up stones. The crowds saw him and stopped chanting, their voices trailing off in confusion, their raised fists gradually sinking to their sides as they took in his presence. The sudden silence was eerie, giving life to a rising wind, and the hundreds of faces, illuminated by candlelight and starlight, moved slowly around as they followed the man walking down the guarded road. Joshua went slowly, steadily, repeatedly glancing left and right, as surprised by the watching people as they were by him, and finally stopping about halfway down the road, with crowds on both sides of him. The crowds started surging forward, instinctively impelled towards the road, ignoring the soldiers' raised weapons, pushing the soldiers aside and rushing between them, until eventually they were leaving the grassy slopes *en masse* and reaching out to touch Joshua with hungry hands.

Moshe felt the rising wind and then noticed the dark clouds gathering, materialising impossibly from the clear, starlit sky to form an ominous black mass directly over the road. He stared at it, startled, recalling the storm over

Jerusalem, and then looked down and saw Joshua's white robes flapping out in the sudden wind. The people around him had stopped moving, obviously as startled as Moshe had been, and were staring wildly from Joshua to the sky and then back again. Some fell to their knees, stretching their arms out in worship, while others stepped back even farther, moved by fear and confusion. The wind started howling, whipping Moshe and rushing past him, moving in a circular motion that took in all the others. He saw Kate just in front of him, her hair whipping out behind her, then bolts of lightning tore viciously through the boiling clouds and were followed by thunder. Moshe glanced up, disbelieving, waiting for rain that didn't come, then he looked down the road and saw Joshua as a shimmering white dream. The people were still gathered around him but had moved away from him, beaten back by both the wind and their fear of what they were witnessing. Joshua stood with arms raised, his robes billowing out behind him, the lightning daggering out of the clouds and disappearing in a whitish haze that coiled down like a faucet through the darkness and surrounded his body.

Kate sobbed and turned to Moshe, pressing her face into his shoulder, and he held her in his arms and stroked her hair as the wind howled about them. Paul entered his line of vision, stepping forward as in a trance, his jaw slack and his brown eyes enlarged as he looked down at Joshua. Following his gaze, Moshe saw the storm, a minor tornado over the road, Joshua standing untouched in the vortex, the crowd outside the swirling dust. Kate sobbed and clung to Moshe, her warmth negating the wind's fierce cold, and he felt himself dissolving into her body as the storm raged below. The dust was swirling around Joshua, just outside the shimmering white haze, while he stood there, his arms still outstretched, his robes whipping around him. Then the thunder roared again, the lightning flashed and disappeared, the white haze around Joshua faded away into darkness, and the wind seemed to sigh as it expired to let the swirling dust settle.

Kate raised her head again, glanced at Moshe and then turned around, her spine pressed to his body as she leaned wearily against him and they both stared down the dark, silent road. Joshua was standing in the starlight, lowering his arms to his sides, his shoulders slumped as if something had been drained out of him and had now left him spent. He bowed his head for a moment, raised it again and looked about him as the crowd, now completely silent and awed, gradually moved in to touch him. Their hands fluttered like

birds, touching lightly and then retreating, and Joshua straightened his shoulders, as if finding his strength again, and then, with the confidence of one accepted, moved on down the road. Moshe watched him disappearing, being swallowed up by his flock, and then, when the last of the worshippers had disappeared, realised that his hands were on Kate's shoulders - feeling flesh and blood, her coursing blood, and wanting her desperately. He looked at Ben Eleizer, at General Meshel and Paul; then, suddenly embarrassed, dropped his hands, knowing what would become of him.

'A reprieve,' Ben Eleizer said.

29

‘Peace in Israel,’ Jozsef said. ‘At least for the moment. He has given everyone a little of what they need and they are temporarily satisfied. Regarding how long it will last, your guess is as good as mine, but for the time being each has claimed him as his own, and he has taken no sides.’

They were walking along the Sea of Galilee, on the northern shore, facing Tiberias, the sun blazing down on the limpid blue water and the greenery surrounding them. Kate was wearing a pair of slacks and an open-necked blouse, her face scrubbed and healthy, her eyes clear, her long hair hanging loose. Jozsef studied her with fondness but could not forget the heat, his abundant flesh sweating too much, his breath emerging in spasms.

‘I’m too old for this,’ he said, mopping his brow with a handkerchief. ‘The Chief Rabbi, in the responsibility of his station, rarely gets such good exercise.’

‘We could have driven,’ Kate replied.

‘I thought the walk would do us good. A noble thought, if rather too ambitious, as I’m now finding out.’

Kate didn’t look at him, but she smiled to herself, her gaze focused on the bleached grandeur of the Golan Heights in the distant heat haze. Jozsef followed her gaze and remembered the Yom Kippur War, when the guns of the Syrians had fired from those very same mountains. He had been much younger then, without doubts, his faith a rock; now that faith, in its complexity and mystery, was being put to the test.

‘Is he clever or innocent?’

‘What do you mean?’ Kate said.

‘He moves from Jew to Christian to Moslem, and gives each what they want.’

‘He gives them nothing,’ Kate said. ‘He neither confirms nor denies. He simply lets them define him as they wish because he knows nothing else.

Joshua is passive, an empty well to be filled; from that well they can draw what they need and depart feeling better.'

'He's avoiding the issue.'

'For him there is no issue; he doesn't know who he is or where he came from, and he thinks they can tell him.'

'They all tell him he's their saviour.'

'He neither confirms nor denies that. Not knowing who he is, he has to listen to what they believe of him.'

'Messiah, Christ and Mahdi - all three rolled into one. He believes, at the very least, that he's been called and is one or the other.'

'He believes he's been called, but certainly not in the sense you mean; he doesn't think of himself as Moslem or Christian or Jew, but as someone with an undefined purpose that will soon be revealed.'

'It doesn't matter what Joshua thinks; what matters is what *they* think... and each assumes that he's come to inaugurate the sovereignty of his personal religion.'

'And you think it will explode?'

'Yes. Sooner or later, it has to.'

He glanced across the blue water and saw the town of Tiberias, its white-walled buildings nestling in the lush green of the hills of Galilee. They had taken the ferry from there, stopping for lunch in the Kibbutz Ein Gev, and now, though well replenished with St. Peter's fish, Jozsef was feeling exhausted. The sun was fiercely hot, beating out of the azure sky, and he rubbed his stinging eyes and looked at Kate, wondering what she was thinking.

'Do you want to rest?' she asked.

'No,' he replied. 'We're nearly there. If I sit down, I'll never stand up again, so we'd better keep walking.'

Kate smiled again, glanced sideways at him, then let her gaze roam across Yam Kinneret, her cheeks no longer hollow with tension, her bare arms brown and healthy. Jozsef thought of her in the hospital, her face drawn, her eyes wild, and his relief at the positive change in her made him feel slightly younger. Nonetheless, he couldn't stop thinking of Joshua and the dreams he was nourishing.

'He performs miracles,' he said. 'At least people say he does. I've yet to meet anyone who's actually *seen* him perform a miracle, but everyone knows

someone who has, which amounts to the same thing.'

'What about me, Jozsef? And Moshe and the Prime Minister? All of us, and more, have seen just what Joshua can do.'

'A form of parapsychology. I'm talking about miracles: the healing of the sick and the lame and the blind, the conversion of the masses through magic: we have not witnessed that.'

'His extraordinary powers, in human terms, are magical - and magic makes miracles.'

Jozsef gazed across the water, looking again at Tiberius, seeing the motor launches racing back and forth, towing people on water-skis. Jesus had avoided the town, but his presence was all around it - in Tabgha and Migdal and Capernaum, and right here on Yam Kinneret. Here he had gathered his followers - Simon, Andrew, James and John - and here, also, he had filled the empty fishing-net and walked on the waters. A Christian myth, possibly, but like most myths it was rooted in fact; and those bronzed young water-skiers, to a primitive eye, would likewise be walking on water and appearing miraculous.

'Magic,' Jozsef said. 'I sometimes think you might be right. Joshua has been all over Israel, reportedly often in separate places at the same time - and no one knows how he gets there. Also, he speaks to everyone, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, and was recently found meditating in the eastern corner of Solomon's Stables which, according to Christian tradition, is the Pinnacle of the Temple where Jesus was brought by Satan during his final temptation.'

'What's so unusual about that?'

'Because, dear Kate - and I merely repeat the widely spread story - when Joshua was thus engaged, those around him in Solomon's Stables felt a dreadful, searing cold, experienced feelings of horror and dread, and heard a terrible hissing and wailing which they thought was pure evil. This was, of course, exactly what you experienced on the Mount of Temptation and it could well be some form of mesmerism. However, according to other reports, all conveyed to us by those present, at precisely the same time as Joshua was supposed to be in Solomon's Stables, he was also seen by numerous worshipping Arabs at Abraham's altar in the El Haram es-Sharif; was, at the same time, observed by other Arab and Christian pilgrims studying the Rock in the Mosque of Omar - from which Mohammed is said to have ascended to heaven - and was also, simultaneously, observed at the Wailing Wall by

worshipping Jews. I repeat, Kate: all at the same time - and with numerous witnesses.'

'Has anyone asked him about this?'

'I believe Lieutenant Frankel did so. Joshua merely replied that he had been sleeping at the time mentioned, but that he had, during his sleep, experienced those incidents as dreams of particular intensity.'

'Jew, Christian and Moslem...'

'An unholy trinity,' Jozsef said. 'He cannot unite Jew, Christian and Moslem by being the saviour to all of them.'

They passed the ghostly stones of the excavated remains of Capernaum, including the ruins of the synagogue built over the one in which Jesus had preached, and then began the uphill climb to the Mount of Beatitudes. Jozsef had to stop and rest, sitting gratefully on an angled stone, mopping the sweat from his face with his handkerchief and shrugging forlornly.

'I'll never make it,' he said.

'A short rest and you'll be fine. You'll soon feel as good as you look in your sports shirt and snappy pants.'

Her good humour pleased him and he smiled in return, thinking back on how she had been in the hospital and amazed at the recent change in her. It was based on her experience with Joshua - he knew that without a doubt - but he wondered at the nature of the faith she had obviously regained.

'What about you?' he said. 'You've been closest to Joshua. Can it be that he's returned you to the faith that you renounced years ago?'

She smiled at him and turned away, looking back down the hill, surveying the blue water, the blue-hazed mountains, the dazzling blue of the sky. The great lake, which could be treacherous, was exceptionally still and quiet, the water-skiers now far away, their white wakes forming jigsaws.

'Faith?' Kate shrugged lazily. 'Yes, a kind of faith. Not Orthodox Judaism, nor the Christianity you feared, but certainly a belief in the Almighty and His ultimate benevolence. Perhaps faith in faith itself - the simple acceptance of being - the belief that no matter what His nature, He brings light to the darkness. I needed that faith, Jozsef. I think all human beings do. To live without faith, believing yourself to be ephemeral, is to live with a fear of extinction beyond what we can bear. Lack of faith is extinction, the kiss of death to the living, and I think that in turning my back on Judaism I invited that torment. That's how Joshua brought me redemption - he gave

me back faith in my own future - and in doing that he forced me to accept a private and separate peace. Not Judaism, Jozsef, and not Christianity - for those and all other religions are divisive and binding. What he gave me was freedom - the joys and terrors of personal choice - and now, without the strictures of a religion created by men, I can still feel that my faith is untarnished and that my life has its meaning. I don't need Judaism any longer... Faith itself is enough.'

Deeply moved, Jozsef turned his head away, fixing his gaze on the lush vegetation at both sides of the track. But if moved, he was also embarrassed, remembering his accusations of blasphemy, and now, in the shimmering light of Kate's conviction, he hardly knew what to say. His own belief was something different, a faith grown from solid roots: all the law codes and commentaries of the Talmud and its sweeping guidelines. He had faith, but it was ordered, perhaps too literal to be pure, hemmed in by the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*, bound by man's moral needs. His faith was like a rock, but his beliefs had been moulded gradually, hammered out on the anvil of a discipline imposed from outside him. For most men this was necessary, bringing order to moral chaos, but it did, in certain ways, remove from them the burden of personal choice. Kate had now chosen that burden, taking her faith from within herself, led into it by the man known as Joshua, but now left on her own. For that Jozsef had to admire her - if also fearing for her - and he sensed, more importantly, that the challenge she had faced might soon shake the roots of the three great monotheistic religions and render their laws and rituals obsolete. This possibility, given the needs of the mass of men, did not offer him comfort.

'Perhaps you're right,' he said, turning back to look at her, seeing the sunlight flashing around her tall figure and blotting her face out. 'Perhaps faith itself, without discipline imposed from outside, if held firmly and closely to the heart, will purify and sustain. For some this has been so, but alas not for many, and the majority need the guidance of moral laws, no matter how imperfect those laws might be. This is the function of the theologist - in mosque, church or synagogue - and the religions of men, the Almighty's imperfect creatures, are necessary to the mass of mankind, no matter their differences. Are the religions of man divisive, pitting brother against brother? Alas, we must accept Joshua's judgement, for indeed this is true. Yet what would we do without them and the moral laws they impose

upon us? Born in ignorance, and into moral chaos, we need signposts along the way. Man's religions serve that purpose, imposing order on moral confusion, and no matter how imperfect they may be, they represent a foundation. Some don't need that foundation, but the majority do, and until man himself becomes perfect we can't let it go.'

'And Joshua? Where does that leave him? Will he destroy your foundations?'

'That question remains open and is not without its terrors, for either he will bring us together or he will tear us apart. Is Joshua good or evil? Innocent or calculating? If innocent, is his innocence as dangerous as the forces of darkness? I admit, I feel shame, for myself and for the Rabbinate, for the Vatican and the World Council of Churches and our long, cowardly silence. Yet what can we say? How can any of us survive Joshua? The Christians await their Christ, the Jews their Messiah, the Moslems their hidden Imam, the Mahdi - but all of these are abstractions. Were they ever more than symbols, the graven imagery of our hopes, the very necessary humanisation of a spiritual quest? We all wait for Judgement Day, for revelation and redemption, and the bridge between man and his Creator must be instantly recognised. The Torah isn't a history - nor is the Bible and the Koran - these works represent man's attempt to give shape to a Deity beyond our powers of conception. How do we recognise Judgement Day if we can't recognise Him? We cannot, so we have to build a bridge between the human and spiritual. That bridge is theology, the great works of religious thought, all the words that give shape to an abstraction and render it human. Thus Christ, the Messiah, the Mahdi of the Moslems - the recognisable bridges between man and his Creator, the images that shadow our lives and reflect our poor vanity. Yet Judgement Day is in the future - it was *always* in the future. Thus the image of our Saviour, or the Almighty's messenger, is in truth just as unrecognisable as the darkness of Judgement Day. Will Judgement Day ever come? And if so, how do we recognise it? Given this, how do we recognise a Christ or Messiah or Mahdi? Do you understand, Kate? Do you comprehend my shame? Neither the Rabbinate nor the Vatican nor the World Council of Churches are equipped, whether willing or not, to pass judgement on Joshua. How do they accept or deny him? On what grounds can they do so? Let the rain turn to flames, let the earth turn to dust - these are mortal men faced with a question that they simply can't answer. So, they must stay silent. The

foundations must not be shaken. If our religions are to crumble it must not be from within, but from some force beyond our control – either the Lord's or the devil's. So, we must wait, as we have waited for centuries; as Joshua, in his innocence or wisdom, also patiently waits. Like Joshua, who knows not what he is or where he came from, we are passive and await the revelation that won't require answers.'

He stood up as Kate walked towards him and stopped just in front of him. She stared at him, smiling slightly, a soft blush on her cheeks, then leaned over and kissed him on the forehead with a shy, touching tenderness. He didn't move, feeling lost, love and trepidation blinding him, then she turned without a word and walked away and he followed her uphill.

It was a long, arduous walk, made no easier by the heat, and they said no more until they reached the summit with its hospice and chapel. The chapel was baroque, eight-sided and domed, standing over three hundred feet above the Sea of Galilee which, shaped like a lute and surrounded by blue-hazed mountains, glittered and reflected the glory of the dazzling, azure sky. Jozsef looked down in wonder, his spirit soaring like a bird, understanding why Israel, with its violent, bloody history, could still make men cling to the dream of paradise here on Earth.

'Why did Joshua come here?' he said. 'Did it mean something to him? Did he know about the Sermon on the Mount and the choosing of the Apostles?'

'No,' Kate said. 'Some Christians brought him here. When he arrived here, he seemed to recognise the place and decided to stay a while.'

'He's been here for two months?'

'All over Galilee,' Kate said. 'He's been wandering all over, collecting more and more followers, talking and listening and, as you pointed out, healing the sick, the lame and the blind.'

'He invited them to join him?'

'No, they just remained. People seem to know where he's going to be, and they simply get up and follow him.'

'All kinds?'

'Jews, Christians and Moslems - all wanting his blessing.'

'Does he bless them?'

'He answers them – that's all. I think they see what they need to see and hear what they need to hear.'

They didn't enter the chapel which, inside, on the eight sides of its dome, listed the beatitudes stated by Jesus. Instead, drawn forward by the murmuring of nearby voices, they passed the Italian hospice and continued across the Mount to where the land started sloping downhill again. There, on the grassy slopes, the Sea of Galilee far below them, was Joshua with his large group of followers, including the Franciscan nuns from the hospice. There were over a hundred people, some sitting, others standing, all forming a close-knit circle around the white-robed Joshua who, also seated, his arms wrapped around his knees, was tilting his head, first left and then right, obviously listening and talking to the people who kept coming up to him. The sun, blazing out of a flawless sky, bathed the scene in a brilliant light.

Jozsef felt strange, as if time had suddenly stopped, and the murmuring of the people around Joshua made this moment seem even more unreal. He mopped sweat from his forehead, felt the aching of his muscles, and then saw that Kate was looking down the hillside, her gaze fixed upon Joshua. Jozsef thought of her in the hospital, her face tense, her eyes wild, but now, as he studied her, he saw something quite different: not obsession, but an almost maternal love, a calm acceptance and trust.

'Are we going down?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said, 'that's what we came here for. I want to hear what he has to say. I want to know if he's changed.'

When she started down the slope, Jozsef hurried after her, feeling the eyes of Joshua's followers upon him and becoming self-conscious. There was no antagonism - simply a quiet curiosity - but he sensed a kind of muffled hysteria behind those beatific eyes. It was almost like a dream, something vivid but unreal, and he was glad when he reached the white-robed Joshua and could kneel beside Kate. The grass was warm to the touch, its physical reality reassuring - then he looked into Joshua's silvery-grey gaze and was instantly disorientated. Calm eyes - inhumanly so, their depths draining his senses. Now, they stared at him, recognised him and turned away, fixed themselves steadily upon Kate, becoming darker and softer.

'Kate,' he said simply, his voice resonant and warm, touched with a candid affection of the most human kind. Kate did not reply, but merely offered a bashful smile, her brown eyes fixed steadily upon him, her hands on her knees. 'I haven't seen you for a long time,' he said, 'but I'm glad you came.'

‘How are you?’ Kate asked.

‘As I should be,’ he replied. ‘The light blossoms in the darkness and my head fills with the knowledge of men.’

‘Does that knowledge make you happy?’

‘I am not as I was. I talk and I listen, and by giving I receive, and what fills my head is the pain and bewilderment of Man. Lost, he is bewildered; without faith, he suffers pain; and his anguish and confusion are reflected in his greed and suspicion. Now I take it into myself, experiencing men and becoming Man, my strength weakening, my soul flirting with temptation, my heart breaking in silence. There is something coming towards me - something dark and destructive - a wind of desolation that will cover Jerusalem and clear away to leave me to my fate. Yes, desolation: Jerusalem’s suffering and shame; the manifestation of the sickness of men, a boil bursting to heal itself. And then, only then, when the healing has begun, will my penance and the suffering of Jerusalem ordain the redemption. No, I am not what I was - but I am what I will be.’

Sweating profusely, Jozsef froze, the cold coming from within, a chill that went beyond the merely physical and clutched at his heart. He glanced at Kate but couldn’t focus, looked at Joshua and regained his sight, saw himself twice reflected in those grey eyes, their depths luring him in.

‘Jerusalem?’ he heard himself whispering, his voice as dead as a tomb. ‘I don't know what you mean by that.’

But in truth he did know, and felt the shame of his cowardice, his refusal to accept the blinding terror that Joshua’s words had encouraged. He tried to tear his eyes away, but Joshua held him, his gaze implacable, his voice frightening in the calm of its acceptance, letting truth have its day.

‘Jerusalem the Golden must fall to rise again; and my blood, which will signal its shame, will also herald its redemption.’

Jozsef tore himself away, hardly knowing what he was doing, and found himself heading back up the hill with his heart pounding madly. He heard Kate calling his name, her voice sounding far away, but he didn’t have the strength to look back and see the face of the future. She caught up with him quickly, her hand clutching his left arm, and he turned his head away to hide his fear and then saw Moshe above him. Moshe was standing by his jeep, wearing full battle dress, his hand on the pistol at his hip, his face grim and forbidding. Jozsef stopped just in front of him, feeling Kate by his side. He

saw Kate and Moshe looking at one another, and felt the tension between them.

'I've come to say goodbye,' Moshe said. 'I might be gone for some time. We think the Arabs are going to attack, and it might be today. It all started with the *Hajj* - the Muslim's annual pilgrimage to Mecca - and has something to do with the Black Stone that's housed in the Ka'bah, the stone placed there by Abraham. The Arabs have started claiming that the Black Stone in the Ka'bah is made from the same substance as the black stone of our Mount of Olives obelisk. Ergo, Joshua is the Mahdi - and the Arabs now support that - and they've sworn to recapture the Temple Mount before the week's out. They've been massing all night along the Syrian and Jordanian borders, and we think they're ready to launch their attack, probably starting from Syria. I have to leave now.'

He looked at Kate, and she at him, the tension palpable between them, and Jozsef sensed that there was something left unspoken, some question unanswered. He felt dizzy, disorientated, caught between them and Joshua, and his thoughts, dominated by his beating heart, seemed to fly to the wind. Then he heard a distant rumbling, a faint, familiar sound, and turned around, following Moshe's startled gaze, to see the smoke on the Golan Heights. The smoke rose in separate columns, ballooning up and drifting sideways, almost black against the blue of the sky before dissolving to dirty grey. Kate gasped, Moshe cursed, and Jozsef looked down the hill, and saw Joshua staring at him, his silvery-grey eyes clear, affirming that the destruction he had prophesied was the war that was starting.

The planes suddenly screamed overhead.

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Dearest Kate:
Already the war is over, perhaps the shortest war in history, a mere twenty-four hours from start to finish and the dust not yet settled. Is it possible that it really happened, that it could begin and end so quickly, or was it simply some mass hallucination engendered by Joshua? It might have been better had this been so - if all of us had just gone mad - but now, in the cold light of sanity, we must count up the cost: the Americans in the United Arab Republic, the Soviets in Jordan and Syria, and both 'benefactors' trading off prerogatives in the guise of containment. Zion, that forlorn dream of Orthodox Jews, is now wrapped up in chains.

Have you personally survived it all? Perhaps I've no right to ask. My shame drove me east, out of the Garden of Eden, and my tongue was so tied to my throat that I didn't dare tell you. I am staying for the time being in Damascus - possibly just to be alone and study the mirror without pride, certainly also because I would not be comfortable in Jerusalem after what has occurred. Time seems to be endless and requires a lot of filling; and my mind, once so lively with malice, has become a blancmange. I walk below the minarets, through the fig trees to the desert, and too often, with a hip flask in my pocket, spend hours in the unprofitable contemplation of that implacable Nothing. Other hours are whiled away in exploring the covered 'Street called Straight', looking mindlessly at silks and leather, gold and silver filigree work, in the bazaars that cross the city from east to west. I walk and I walk, a man obviously in a trance, through the gardens and orchards of the Barada River, trying to convince myself that nothing has changed. Alas, the camel trains have been replaced with a noisy stream of trucks, the only authentic history is in the Qasr al-'Azm Museum, and in the Marjah Square, between the fashionable shops, the government offices are filled with men who talk of Israel as if it is lost. Only 4% of the population are Jews, which

may account for this view.

Is Israel lost? My head is too muddled to think about it. I walk about Damascus with a hip flask in my pocket, and the days dissolve slowly but surely into the dream of the evenings. The traditional house with patio and fountain is no longer being built (though still to be found in the Old City), French and Italian styles are now much in evidence, and my own dubiously Mediterranean villa is in the Al-Akrad quarter on the slopes of Jabal Qasiyun - considerably less grand than the ambassador's houses in Abu Rummanah, but suitable to my sinking station in life and my late drinking habits. I am rambling already, because I'm drinking as I write, and the night, which is hotter than hell, seems to suffocate clear thought.

I don't know quite what to tell you, but I have to tell you something - if not for your sake, certainly for mine, since I now sink into the well of self-pity and need my memories for comfort. When I fled from Jerusalem (running from Moshe Eitan's contempt?) I went travelling around Lebanon, Syria and Jordan with Rashid Idriss and his bunch of merry men. We sometimes stayed in good hotels, but mostly slept in trucks and tents, nestling down in that wilderness which only the Arabs know and arising in the brilliant light of dawn to a crystalline silence. I now remember the murderous heat, the merciless glare of the sun, the silence that haunted my thoughts and made them dwell on the Void. The desert takes what it wants and gives nothing back in return, and in learning this I came to understand what makes Arabs so hard. I was not hard, and they knew it and accepted it, either amused or contemptuous of my weakness in their pitiless world. That world is unique, a shimmering dream on the shifting sands, and it makes a man travel through himself to where the truth spills its guts.

The Arabs only know black and white, truth and untruth; they have no time for the doubts and introspection that haunt Western man. My moral confusion amused Rashid, made him mock my indecision, and he frequently interpreted my political greyness as self-indulgence and cowardice. 'We believe,' he said, 'simply because we believe; we do not need to justify.' Whether right or wrong, the remark made me feel weaker, separated from the inner core of my being and refusing to face myself. Anger, outrage, the lust for vengeance and domination: these are weaknesses which we in the West try to hide while the Arabs, either wisely or ruthlessly, accept them and use them. We view this as cruelty, but the Arabs view it as truth; and after a few

weeks with them, as if changing my skin, I came to view myself as a hypocrite of the most awesome kind, and my lack of commitment, both personal and political, as abdication based on cowardice and self-deceit. We do not cleanse ourselves by wiping the blood from our hands; we have to accept that there are causes and effects, and make some sort of stand on that basis. I now know, and can never forget, that I refused to admit this.

Can I live with this truth? Not too well, I fear. I drink constantly - as I am drinking right now - to kill the shame that eats at me. In my moral cowardice I lost myself, and in losing myself I then lost you, and during those nights in the desert, lying awake with that awesome silence, I learned to face these facts with no little amount of pain and came to understand that they were more important to me than the possibility of Judgement Day.

Judgement Day - Joshua - the terrible challenge of revelation - all the nightmares and glories suggested by his presence on Earth. I lost you because of Joshua, because he showed us both the truth, and now Israel itself might be lost to the Americans and Russians. Intervention is a foul word, a mere excuse for expansionist greed, and now Israel, through the stupidity of threatening the Arabs with atomic weapons, is surrounded by the two superpowers who think of nothing but oil. Israel is trapped, and now the nightmare has trapped me, and here in Damascus, the crossroads of the Middle East, I slide down the tunnel of drink into the dark tomb of witchcraft.

Witchcraft - Joshua - the unexplainable in human form, the revelation that the more we discover the less we will know. God or the devil? Reality or unreality? Does Joshua represent the ultimate truth or the final illusion? He started this war - the war that could have been the last one - and he did it without saying a word, without raising his finger. A fantasy? No: the Arabs were also obsessed with him. Rashid Idriss refused to discuss the matter in public, but in private, throughout the Moslem world, in Bedouin tents and sheikh’s palaces, the Man from the Mount was an issue that grew larger each day. Did Joshua encourage it? No, he said nothing. But like the ghost horse that races through the night, his silence was everything. He neither affirmed nor denied, leaving a blank slate to be filled, and eventually, as all silence must be filled, the wind of heresy was everything.

Joshua the Mahdi, the twelfth and last Imam, now returned to spread the word of Muhammad, but being held by the Jews. Rashid tried to control it by

threatening punishment for those who discussed it, but the whispering was carried on the wind and obviously travelled to Mecca. From wishful thinking to reality - man imposes what he wills - and before long there were rumours about the Black Stone in the Ka'bah - rumours that would fan the flames of Islam and make Joshua the Mahdi.

It was the time of the *Hajj*, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, when Muslims from all over the world flock to Saudi Arabia to share the supreme moment of their lives: to make seven circuits of the Ka'bah in the Sacred Mosque and see the Black Stone once kissed by Muhammad. It's the greatest spectacle in the world - over a million and half people in one place at the same time -but it's no time for the spreading of rumours about the return of the Mahdi.

At first Rashid was amused, not believing the stories, but gradually even he, with his Western education, succumbed to the magic of Islam and its timeless seductions. Each day a thousand million people throughout the world turn five times in prayer towards the city of Mecca, their thoughts focused on the Ka'bah, the first House of God built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. Standing in the immense courtyard of the Sacred Mosque around which Mecca was built, and covered in the *Kiswah* - the enormous black cloth embroidered in gold with verses from the Koran - the Ka'bah is also the site of the sacred Black Stone, first placed there by Abraham and later kissed by Muhammad after he drove the idolaters from the temple. The Black Stone has never been seen by any non-Muslim, but reportedly it's composed of some totally unknown substance and imbued with mysterious powers. Consequently, your Joshua, possessed of his own mysterious powers, became part and parcel of a startling new story regarding the Black Stone of Mecca.

For the whole world, including the Muslims, one of the most intriguing aspects of the story of Joshua was the large black obelisk, or tomb, in which he was found. From what substance had it been made that it could have been so completely black and then disintegrate into normal dust shortly after its appearance? Now, according to the Muslims, there were two new revelations: Joshua's tomb had been made from the same substance as the Black Stone - and the Black Stone had recently started to give off strange glowings and show holographic images from the life of Muhammad and his followers. Ergo, Joshua was the returned Mahdi, and the Black Stone was calling him to Mecca.

Rashid's amusement turned to intrigue and then to concern when the whisperings about Joshua and the Black Stone gradually turned into shouts. The Black Stone was calling Joshua, demanding his return to Mecca, and the Muslims, becoming increasingly obsessed, wanted to do something about it. Rashid was losing control - his men wanted to capture Joshua - and eventually he decided to go to Mecca and check it out for himself. As I said, non-Muslims aren't normally allowed into the city, but Rashid, with his considerable authority, obtained permission for me to go with him. That journey, which now seems like a dream, was a journey into the Self.

We flew out from Beirut and landed at Jeddah to join the thousands of other pilgrims as they were channelled through the airport and onto the government buses that would take them to Mecca. There, in the *Madinat al-hujjaj*, while passing through Customs, we were surrounded by the mass of pilgrims, all wearing their white *Ihrams*, all constantly repeating, *Labbaika-Allahumma, Labbaik!* - Here I am, O God, at Thy command, here I am! The numbers were enormous and totally overwhelming: 50,000 pilgrims a day were passing through Jeddah airport alone, thousands more were coming in by sea and overland, and even more thousands were landing at the airports of Medina, Dahran, Riyadh, Jizan and Najran - well over a million, all to perform the *Hajj*, all in the state of *Ihram* - body and soul dedicated to God - all repeating the *surahs* from the Koran, and all, in this terrifying year, whispering feverishly about Joshua, now their very own Mahdi.

I think Rashid changed then, possibly swept up in the fervour, his Western education turning to dust in that immense, white-clad mass. He had always been a moderate, both in politics and religion, but there, in the *Madinant al-hujjaj*, in that extraordinary religious atmosphere, his eyes took on the gleam of a man who had just found himself. Now he knew what he was - a true Arab and Muslim - and in truth, as I stood there, as that mass fervour gripped me, I felt that I was being stripped of my Westernised modes of thought and returned to some primal state of grace and inchoate, elemental truth. Belief or unbelief - no grey areas in between - at last, as I studied the pilgrims swarming around me, I understood a little of what that meant in its deceptive simplicity.

From Jeddah, crossing the Hejaz, we drove the forty-five miles to Mecca, arriving in the early morning light, just before the Dawn Prayer. The road was filled with cars and buses, thousands of pilgrims walked alongside

it, and the dust, like the clouds of the Apocalypse, fell over us constantly. Then Mecca and the Sacred Mosque, more thousands gathered outside, all preparing to pray, being guided by the *muezzins*, whose voices were amplified through the hundreds of unseen loudspeakers that cover the city. It was an awesome, haunting sight, the sound of the *muezzins* making it more so, their voices ringing out above the pale blue light of dawn as the thousands of worshippers, all wearing white *Ihrams*, knelt down on their prayer mats on the ground around the mosque, bowing and prostrating themselves in unbroken chains.

In any gathering of one and a half million people there can be no less than 150 deaths a day. Thus, at the end of the *salam* - the salutation denoting the end of prayers - an *imam* led the kneeling multitudes in the funeral prayer, the *salat al-janaza*, after which it was time to enter the Sacred Mosque through the Door of Salvation.

The experience was extraordinary, a feast for all the senses, at once a spectacle and an intimate drama, a strange and beautiful catharsis. The inner courtyard of the Mosque was huge, containing half a million worshippers, its arched portals and balconies serenely attractive above us, its eight minarets soaring to the sky in the dawn's light blue haze. The Ka'bah was in the middle, a great cube draped in black cloth, the words from the Koran embroidered in gold and dazzling the eyes. Bizarre, unreal, it appeared to melt into the dawn, to be suspended rather than sitting on the ground, its beauty springing from its very simplicity and relative lack of adornment. Already the worshippers were moving around it, shoulder to shoulder, their heads raised, crying, 'God is great! God is great! There is no other God but God!', their hands reaching up to touch the sacred stone as they made the seven circuits that formed the circumambulation. It looked like a human whirlpool - a white whirlpool in blue light - and that half million voices, murmuring prayers or crying to God, emerged into a single bass rumbling that seemed to come from the earth.

Being a non-Muslim, I wasn't allowed near the Black Stone, but Rashid in the course of the circumambulation was able to see it. He was away a long time, making his seven circuits of the Ka'bah, and when he returned the sun was high in the sky, the heat vicious and clammy. He appeared to be transformed, his brown eyes shining brightly, his expression one of helpless exultation and passionate yearning. I asked him what he had seen, but

initially he refused to comment, merely filling his flask with water from the holy Zamzam well, and then leading me on the *sa'y* - the required walk between the hills of al-Safa and al-Marwa along the air-conditioned, marble-paved *masa* - during which, as we passed holy men and cripples and praying women, he spoke once before returning to the silence of his obviously exalted thoughts.

'In the Black Stone I saw only the sun's reflection,' he said, 'but that light, which kept changing like a prism, filled my soul with contentment. That contentment was the product of redemption and belief in the future. I thought instantly of the El Haram es-Sharif in Jerusalem, and understood that we would have to get it back to ordain the Day of Salvation. The Black Stone, if it showed me nothing else, showed me what I must do.'

That's when the war started - though I wasn't to know it then - when Rashid saw whatever he saw in the Black Stone and vowed to recapture Jerusalem and the lost Temple Mount. No, I didn't know it then, though I saw the change in Rashid, who looked every minute, in a way I can't explain, more and more an authentic, vengeful Arab, born and bred in the desert: a religious leader rather than a politician-warrior, a man shedding his old skin.

This change was also manifest in the thousands of worshippers around us, most of whom, in normal circumstances, would have been quiet in reflection, but were now, after their circumambulation, unusually excited. Perhaps excitement is the wrong term: it was more than that - it was a fever. Who knows what they saw in the Black Stone - or what they imagined they saw? It only matters that they took from it what they wanted at that time, and that the images it reflected, if existing only in their minds, were enough to fill their heads with thoughts of Joshua and his return as the Mahdi. Thus, they were in a state of fervour, a million worshippers breaking loose, and as we travelled on to Arafat, through the darkness of that same evening, I was caught up in this fervour myself, and felt my old Self dissolving.

The second stage of the *Hajj* is the Standing at Arafat where, on the Mount of Mercy, where Muhammad preached his last sermon, the pilgrim must worship before the sun rises on the new day. Again, the scene was extraordinary, almost defying the senses: a veritable city of tents, with perfectly straight streets and avenues, containing over a million worshippers and spread across the immense plain hemmed in by the mountain range of the *Ta'if*. Both sexes were represented, all social classes and races mixed, and

they covered the whole plain and the Mount of Mercy itself, packed so closely together that their *Ihrams* and the tents formed a shifting white sea that filled the starlit darkness with murmuring. The murmuring ceased just prior to dawn as the million faces turned towards Mecca, their heads bowed in prayer and silent worship and self-abnegation. Then the sun came up, the heat like a furnace, and then noon came and went and the sun eventually set again, and the *maghrib*, the final prayer, was spoken by everyone. After that, with considerable haste, in emulation of the Prophet, the *ifidah*, the race to Muzdalifah, commenced.

For the pilgrim, Arafat is not the final station of his spiritual journey but the station marking the birth of the New Man - one who has been 'cleansed' and is now actively committed to God. Here, by the Sacred Monument, the *Mashar al-Haram*, he is required to remember God as He who guided the people along the 'straight path', which symbolically starts from Arafat. Rashid was, by this time, almost certainly a New Man - suddenly stripped of his Western influences, more completely a native Arab - and as he prayed by the Sacred Monument and collected stones for the ritual at Mina, I felt that he was taking unto himself the burning rage of his people. Yes, there was anger, slowly rising from religious fervour, spreading out through that extraordinary mass of pilgrims with their thoughts of the Mahdi. Rashid sensed it and grabbed it, taking it unto himself, and as we headed for Mina, again driving through the darkness, I heard him muttering to his lieutenants about Joshua, his hands waving excitedly.

It was a slow drive to Mina, over a rugged mountain pass, following the road that the Prophet took for his Farewell Pilgrimage, passing the lights of the tents and shacks on either side, and eventually leading to the luminous *al-Khayf* Mosque and the largest camp-site ever witnessed by human eyes.

By now there were over two million pilgrims, their tents swamping the village of Mina, spreading across the central plain and right up to the encircling hills with the pilgrims like white ants between them. Here, over a period of three days and three nights, the stones gathered at Muzdalifah would be thrown at the sacred pillars. This ritual would then be followed by the great Feast of Sacrifice - and here, during these rituals, the former calm of meditation would erupt into the frenzy of hatred that would lead to the war.

The Sacred Pillars are said to mark the three places where Satan appeared to Abraham and his family, and attempted to dissuade them from

obeying the divine command - and the ritual stoning of the pillars, or the 'throwing of the pebbles', is referred to as the 'stoning of Satan'. There has always been an element of violence in this ritual, and the subsequent Feast of Sacrifice, for which two million animals were to be slaughtered, adds to the stoning a further element of blood and death which, in this instance - given their obsession with their 'captured' Mahdi, Joshua - possibly led to the forthcoming cries for war.

I don't know how it happened, by what magic or osmosis, but sometime during the last of the three nights that great mass became one. One mind, one body, one eruption of blind emotion, one voice that suddenly turned into a roar that rose to the starlit sky. I had seen the anger building - in the throwing of stones and the slaughtering of animals - and as accidents occurred and human blood was shed, the anger joined them together. I was on a hill with Rashid, overlooking the enormous camp-site, gazing down on that swarming mass of white-clad pilgrims and their city of tents. I was no longer myself, but someone else, a naked stranger, divorced from the protective cynicism of my past and forced to face my own failures. Rashid likewise had changed and was now a stranger to me, his cultivated Western manners obliterated and replaced with blind fervour. He was giving a speech to the Arabs around him, saying that Joshua was in Jerusalem, that he had been seen by Abraham's altar in the El Haram es-Sharif, and that his presence there was a sign that the Muslims must recapture the Temple Mount. Rashid was fiery and eloquent, his voice raging over the gathered pilgrims, and then a blazing torch appeared, and then another, and another, until eventually the dark hill had become a sea of yellow fire and the separate voices had become one voice, first chanting, then roaring, rising up from that sea of fire and from the city of tents below it, filling the darkness of the desert with the cry that set the torch to the Middle East: *Jerusalem! Jerusalem!*

What am I writing, Kate? Am I telling stories or asking questions? I think I'm writing this letter to myself - to make what happened seem real. It was not real at the time - or, at least, it never seemed real - and with each passing day, every drink, it grows more like a dream. It sprang out of whispered rumours, began and ended so quickly, and now, in the threatening silence of its aftermath, it seems never to have happened.

Were you there when they bombed Jerusalem? Did it wound you beyond

repair? Or did you, intelligent lady, simply hate me for what I had done? These questions are not asked lightly, though my pen pretends to mock; for in truth, behind that pretence, is a shame that I can't seem to shake off.

I betrayed you, Kate, and in doing so betrayed myself, and now, as I write, as the bottle gradually empties, I am forced to confess that I can no longer deny my criminal guilt. I betrayed your trust and then I went with the Arabs, first to Mecca and then to the Golan Heights for twenty-four hours of penance. A brief and bloody war, perfectly normal otherwise - the jets screaming overhead, the shells exploding in fiery patterns, men screaming and dying in their own blood, the sand swirling around them - and of course I was there, thinking only of myself, sometimes hugging the earth, sometimes running for my life, now frightened, now excited, mostly just very weary, perhaps longing for the bullet that would cleanly put an end to my shame. Then, suddenly, it was over, the sparring partners separated, the Soviets and Americans, the world's so-called friends and benefactors, surrounding Jerusalem with their guns, driving their tanks through Jerusalem, and waving the flag of truce while preparing to trade off prerogatives, getting ready to carve up the Middle East in the name of World Peace.

Jerusalem is in chains and I, also, am in chains, imprisoned in the cell of my Christian guilt and hypocritical soul-searching. I am staying in Damascus to hide away from my sins, and to unravel the various lessons I learned on the journey to Mecca.

The Arabs are cruel but in their cruelty is justice: the refusal to pretend that Man is more than he is; the acceptance of our logic as no more than the mask that hides the face of our still primitive emotions. We aspire to cultivation, to reasonable thought and self-control, but the Arabs, in that wisdom which was gleaned from the desert's savagery, understand that the mores of civilised men are a transparent veil. No logic explains love, or the murderous impulses of hatred, or that impulse, supreme above all others, for the need to have faith. In the West we cannot accept this - it threatens our sense of order - but the Arabs, evolving out of the murderous desert, find their faith in blind passion. You, Kate, are an American, and I, Leon, an Englishman, and both of us have lived with the misconception of logic as Truth. The Arabs would have despised us for it, as we came to despise ourselves, but then you - alas, through Moshe - finally surrendered to your emotions while I, through my exposure to Arab 'truth or untruth', was forced

to face the fact that my renowned cynicism was, beneath its surface of jaded wit, no more than a coward's refusal to take a stand one way or the other. I learned this through the Arabs, and indirectly through Joshua, and now, in this sorry wisdom, but still hopelessly Westernised, I am compelled to view myself as one divorced from his inner being: that centre where Man grows or quietly dies and which the West has long lost.

We civilised souls are lost, our sense of truth destroyed by logic, and as one of the lost, now trapped by guilt and shame, having lost myself before losing you, I assume that I am waiting, with fear and fascination, for my own, highly personal Judgement Day.

I loved you, Kate.

Leon

31

‘The American tanks are moving out of Jerusalem,’ Kate said, standing just outside the doorway and glancing around the lounge with a mixture of curiosity and shyness. She had just arrived, unannounced and unexpected, so Moshe, at once embarrassed and pleased, simply stood there and stared at her. ‘Well,’ Kate added, still standing inside the doorway, ‘did you hear what I said?’

‘Yes, Kate, I heard you. I’m just surprised to see you here. I mean, I didn’t expect to find you on my doorstep. Come in. Take a seat.’

She smiled and slipped past him, her shoulder sliding across his chest, then he closed the front door and followed her in, feeling childishly hesitant. She was standing in the middle of the lounge, wearing a loose shirt and denims, looking slim, casually elegant and attractive, her face sun-tanned and healthy. She glanced around the room, then through the glass doors to the patio. When she turned back to face him, she was smiling nervously, her right hand on her shoulder bag.

‘So,’ she said, ‘I’m in your house at last.’

‘You’re very welcome,’ he said.

She nodded, still smiling, then removed the bag from her shoulder, draped it over the back of an armchair and looked at him again.

‘You knew about the tanks?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he replied, ‘I knew. The Americans only came in to stop the fighting in Jerusalem, and now that the dust has settled down they have no cause to stay.’

‘I thought, once in, never out.’

‘I think they were hoping for that,’ he said, ‘but neither the Russians nor we are keen to stand by and see that happen. So they’re leaving Jerusalem, but the situation still stinks: the Americans are keeping their troops in the area, forming a protective flank along the United Arab Republic, and the

Russians have done likewise in Syria and Jordan. Now, with a legitimate excuse, they're starting to trade off prerogatives, the Russians acquiescing in the American occupation of the Arab peninsula and the United States agreeing to the introduction of Soviet forces into Syria and Iraq. This, they both claim, will put them in a position to proceed along the road to a so-called "Final Settlement" of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian question. It stinks – but we're bound to it.'

'The Prime Minister should never have threatened to use our atomic weapons against the Arabs.'

'Correct,' Moshe said. 'That *was* a bad mistake. It was this, more than anything else, that gave them the excuse to intervene. And, of course, those bastards in the United Nations then backed them up, while the governments of Japan and Europe, practically down on their hands and knees, diplomatically displayed their pleasure in the *rescuing* of their precious Middle East oil from the vile, greedy Arabs.'

Kate smiled at his anger. 'Not everyone agrees, Moshe. China has accused the Russians and the Americans of having engineered the whole thing for their own, quote, imperialist purposes, unquote, while the governments of the predominantly Hindu countries have taken a similar stand. So, dear Moshe, you still have some friends left.'

'Israel has no friends. It's too valuable for that. Now sit down, Kate, while I pour you a drink.'

'Gin and tonic?'

'It's coming.'

He went into the kitchen and poured her a gin and tonic, then opened a bottle of beer for himself and returned to the lounge. She was sitting in an armchair, one long leg crossed over the other, the denims stretched tight on her thighs, the curve of her small breasts clearly visible where her shirt was unbuttoned. Desire seized him instantly, almost mindless in its intensity, and he felt the heat rising to his cheeks as he passed her the drink. Her brown eyes focused upon him, looking upward, large and melting, making him feel that he was falling towards her, into the blacks of her pupils. He controlled himself and straightened up, then took the armchair facing her, watched her putting the glass to her lips and taking a small sip of her drink. When she lowered the glass again, he drank some beer and tried to look at his ease.

'And how long do you think the present peace will last?' Kate asked.

‘That’s the million dollar question,’ Moshe replied. ‘The Soviet and U.S. intervention was only part of the reason for the Arabs’ cessation of hostilities; the other was that various Arab representatives, such as Rashid Idriss, were guaranteed access to Israel in order to speak personally to Joshua. As it is, Joshua is further helping the situation by materialising, mysteriously, amongst Moslems, both inside and outside Israel, giving everyone a little of what they need without actually committing himself to anyone. Jews, Moslems and Christians – all are still claiming him as their own – and luckily, since he’s now free to walk amongst them all, they’re all happy with their individual beliefs. But how long this lasts is the moot question: the Arabs still want Jerusalem back, and we won’t let them have it.’

‘So you think that sooner or later they’ll try it again.’

‘Yes. Obviously they still view Joshua as the hidden Imam, or returned Mahdi, which means they think the sovereignty of Islam is at hand. Sooner or later they’ll want the El Haram es-Sharif, which means taking Jerusalem.’

Kate was staring thoughtfully at him, as if studying him intently rather than just listening to him, and he suddenly felt that this conversation, no matter its relevance, was a subterfuge for that more personal matter that had yet to be resolved. The possibility made him uneasy, even slightly embarrassed, still foiled by his inability to accept her and forget what was haunting him. He glanced at her long legs, at the curve of her small breasts, wanting to touch her and lose himself in her, but held back by the shame of his private life and the fears it had given him. Now a mature man, but feeling more like an adolescent, he felt himself retreating behind his eyes, sinking into self-consciousness.

‘It’s uncanny,’ Kate said, ‘but Joshua prophesied that war - just before the bombs fell on the Golan Heights.’

‘Yes,’ Moshe replied, ‘and that disturbs me even more. According to Rabbi Latinovats, what Joshua actually said was that Jerusalem would fall to rise again, and that his blood, which would signal its shame, would also herald its redemption. Well, Jerusalem hasn’t fallen and Joshua has shed no blood, so those parts of his prophecy haven’t materialised yet. On the other hand, it’s worth noting that when we escorted Joshua around the religious sites, he wept for Jerusalem, saying its enemies would surround it; and later he said that the whole of Israel would be laid barren. If we’re to assume, as it seems, that Joshua can foresee the future, we must then assume that the

recent war, which has left Jerusalem and Israel intact, was *not* the war that Joshua has three times prophesied. That war, Kate, is the war that will come if this situation explodes again.'

'It may never happen, Moshe.'

'I think it will, Kate. If it doesn't start from outside - through the Arabs' lust for West Jerusalem - it could start because of the actions of our own zealots.'

'You mean their recent attempts to set up an ecclesiastical Cabinet.'

'Correct. Kash and *Gush Emunin* and the Netorei Karta zealots are claiming that Joshua's presence in Israel is a sign that the sovereignty of Orthodox Judaism is at hand - and that the way to ordain it is to replace Ben Eleizer's Cabinet with a purely ecclesiastical Cabinet composed of the most Orthodox members of the community; and, much worse, with the Defence Forces and all other religious and political parties subordinated to a newly elected Israeli Rabbinate. So far, both the government and the presiding Rabbinate have refused to lend their official support to any claim that Joshua is the Jewish Messiah; but if the zealots get into power, they'll immediately make that very claim and use it as the reason for removing all non-Jews from Israel and inaugurating the pure Zionist State - a situation that would lead to another Arab-Israeli war.'

Feeling restless, he stood up, holding his glass of beer in one hand, aware that he was telling her what she already knew and knowing exactly why he had said it. He was uneasy with silence, with her thoughtful, steady gaze, aware that she had come here uninvited and understanding just why. She knew that he wanted her, as she wanted him, and her instincts, at once ruthless and honest, had made her come to him. He was hesitant, perhaps frightened, haunted by Leon's accusation; and now, recalling that night when he had taken down all his family pictures, he also recalled what had happened with the whore and quietly recoiled within himself.

'You seem nervous, Moshe.'

'Yes,' he said, 'I am. I keep thinking about what's happening in Israel, and it keeps me on edge.'

He looked directly at her, not finding it easy, every nerve in his body reaching out to be touched by her presence. She was staring up at him, her face framed by her dark hair, the sunlight pouring over her brown eyes and making them luminous. He saw himself in those eyes, his miniaturised form

twice reflected, mere ghosts in the space that she inhabited, his real self still to follow.

'You look well,' he said.

'That hardly constitutes a compliment.'

'I'm pretty slow with compliments,' he said, 'but you look very nice.'

'Just tell me I'm beautiful.'

'That might be a lie. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder - and I can't trust myself.'

'That's a beautiful compliment.'

'A mere accident of speech.'

'Some accidents make you feel more alive - and that's how I feel now.'

He had to look away, a little shocked by her candour, beginning to feel that his inhibition was puritanical, if not based on cowardice. He stared through the glass doors, across the patio to Jerusalem, its ancient walls and modern buildings clearly visible on the hills in the distance. Jerusalem the Golden, the centre of the world, the symbol of all that he had gained and lost in the past. Thinking of this, he glanced about him, at the walls of the living room, seeing the lighter patches of white where the photographs had been before he had taken them all down and hidden them away. He wanted to put the past behind him, to plant new roots in Kate, but that memory of the dead eyes staring sunward lay like ice on his racing heart.

'We know where Leon is,' he said, turning back to face Kate, aware that he was staring intently at her to gauge her reaction. 'He's been travelling with Rashid Idriss and is now in Damascus - reportedly not too healthy and drinking too much.'

'Yes,' she replied, 'I know. He sent me a letter. It was a very long letter, very strange, and he didn't sound happy.'

She glanced down at the floor, obviously upset by the recollection, her hair tumbling over her shoulders and across her white shirt. Moshe stared at her, entranced, wanting to reach out and touch her, but held back, in yearning and fear, by the words still unspoken. She raised her eyes again, smiling wearily, one hand rising and falling.

'You have to forget him, Moshe. Don't let him stand between us. We were lovers, but I never pretended to love him, and now it's all over.'

The pain came and then departed, sharp but mercifully brief, and he knew that she was speaking the truth and offering herself to him. He was shaken

and deeply moved, filled with sad, shameful triumph, finally accepting that his love for her was, in its very strength, as selfish and possessive as the sun that drained the desert of life. His gain was Leon's loss, his joy Leon's sorrow, but he knew that with all the sympathy in the world, he would not change positions.

'Go out onto the patio,' he said, 'and watch the sun going down. I'll get you another drink.'

Standing upright, she handed him her glass, smiling slightly, ambiguously, then nodded, pushed the glass doors apart and went outside, onto the patio. He watched her leaning against the low wall, facing Jerusalem, her back turned to him, and he wanted to press himself against her spine and her long, slender legs. The desire was voluptuous, a mixture of love and primal lust, and he turned away, startled, suddenly flustered, and went into the kitchen. He poured the drinks automatically, hardly aware of what he was doing, his need and suppressed emotion building up, threatening to shatter him totally. Then he picked the glasses up, took a deep breath and released it in a sigh as he left the kitchen again. He crossed the living room in silence, seeing her spine, the long legs, then she turned around and smiled and reached out to take the glass from his hand.

'That's a lot of gin,' she said.

'I'm sorry; I wasn't thinking.'

'Are you trying to get me drunk?'

'No, I'm not.'

'No,' she said, 'not your style.'

She had her back to the wall and turned away to lean against it, the both of them facing Jerusalem and the hills all around it. Moshe thought of that first night, of how the storm had erased Jerusalem, and of how, not much later, that same storm had introduced him to Kate. Large eyes, very brown, brown hair whipping across her face, long hair, thick with dust, her tanned face smeared with dust… the face of an unknown woman, though also the face of his wife when her body was spread-eagled in the dust, her dead eyes staring sunward. He remembered both days and would never forget them, still dreaming, as he did, of one face superimposed upon the other in that fierce, howling storm. He had died when he found his dead wife, his pain numbing his senses, the later years filled with grief buried in work until Kate resurrected him. Now, he wanted life, the pain and joy of love's commitment,

but his shame, which had wrapped his flesh in thorns, still had to be exorcised.

'Do you know about my wife?' he asked.

'Yes,' she replied. 'I do. I read all about it in the papers, so you don't have to tell me.'

'It was during the Yom Kippur war,' he said, his voice sounding distant, emerging from some dark cave in his soul to shred the very air with his suffering. 'We were living in a kibbutz . My wife and children were working the fields when the Arabs came out of the hills and cut them down with Uzi sub-machineguns. I wasn't there at the time, but I did hear the shooting, and by the time I got there, running all the way from our house, the Arabs had fled. I loved my wife, Kate, and still love her in my memory, thinking only of the children she gave me and of the love she showered on them. I loved them and treated them well, but my real commitment was to the Army; for all my attempts at care and consideration, I loved the Army even more. It was ambition, certainly, but it was also dedication; I truly believed that a man without a purpose was hardly a man. My wife took a different view: she thought love was life's prime commitment; the love of a man and woman for one another, their shared love for their children. It was our only source of disagreement, sometimes bitterly so, but always, irrespective of what she thought, the Army came first and foremost with me. Then, when they were murdered, when I found them in that dusty field, when I looked down and saw their dead eyes staring at me, I felt a pain so deep and lacerating that the lie became manifest: no commitment to an abstraction, to an ideal or cause, should stand above the more enduring commitment of one individual for another. And that's where I failed.'

He had another sip of his drink, not daring to look at Kate, his gaze fixed on the vast, sinking sun and the hills' shifting shadows.

'Yes,' he said, 'I loved them - certainly a lot more than I knew - with an intensity that I only fully understood when I saw their dead eyes. How I hated the Arabs then, thinking of them as bloody murderers, but I hated myself even more for not protecting my family. Oh, I knew it wasn't my fault, that it could have happened anytime, but what I couldn't forget was the fact that I'd put them in second place. True, I'd shown them love, but it was a distant, distracted love, not as selfless as my love for the Army and, of course, for Israel. And so I came to hate myself and shouldered the blame for what had

happened; and then ironically, with that self-deception unique to us human beings, I gave myself even more fully to my country, burying my guilt and shame in patriotism: the commitment to an abstraction, to an ideal or cause, that drove me even deeper into myself, away from love's dangerous pleasures.'

He had another sip of beer, licked his lips and glanced at her, saw her profile outlined against the darkening, blood-red sky, her gaze fixed on Jerusalem. The top of her shirt was open, revealing her curving skin, and he wanted to touch that skin with his lips, press his cheek to her breasts. It was physical desire and emotional need combined, the yearning to lose himself, to surrender his former self and be renewed in the well of her body. Seized by this emotion, he turned away to fix his gaze on the distant hills.

'So,' he said, 'the memory haunted me - the dead eyes staring sunward - and I travelled deeper into myself and built a fortress from hard work. The Army became my life, my bed and my synagogue, and as the years passed I found myself freezing in the ice of retreat. The pain of their death had numbed me, leaving only the need to hide, a fear of ever experiencing such pain again through the loss of a loved one. Physical pain didn't bother me; nor was I concerned with the possibility of public failure. But behind the soldier's veneer of ruthless courage was this great fear of love. So, I retreated, refusing to involve myself emotionally, separating my physical needs from my emotions and making love a transaction… Yes, I turned to prostitutes, paying for purely physical release, easing the hungers of the flesh and ignoring emotional needs. As Leon said, I had a secret life… but that wasn't the whole of it.'

He kept his eyes fixed on Jerusalem, now golden in the twilight, surrounded by the hills and plains, the spreading shadows of evening. It was the landscape of a dream, one that circumscribed his being, containing joy and sorrow in equal measure, shredding the heart and renewing it. Kate was leaning forward beside him, her elbows resting on the wall, the light breeze blowing the hair across her face and her darkly glittering eyes. Her right shoulder was touching his, her hair occasionally brushed his cheek, and he felt her body's warmth seeping into him and stroking his senses.

'I never entered those women, Kate. That was something I couldn't do. It was as if, in some lost and guarded corner of my mind, the impulse that gave the flesh life had found a will of its own. I felt that entering them would be a

betrayal, the repudiation of my former love, and so I only let them use their hands and lips, their expert playing on nerve ends. A hypocritical sense of purity, a defiled moral superiority: the point was to allay all thoughts of self-abuse while keeping emotion in check. Ridiculous? Certainly. Shameful? Even more so. I was piling guilt upon guilt, shame upon shame, and calling that mess self-protection. Oh, I tried other women - they came and went in despair - but their bodies, like my wife's prostrate body, lay like death there beneath me. In the end, I gave up, tried no more, perhaps ashamed, and then, Kate, that night, the night of Joshua and the storm, when it seemed like Jerusalem was falling and Judgement Day was at hand, I found you in the ruins, your brown hair, your brown eyes, and understood in that moment, in a flash of revelation, that my life, which had been nailed down by guilt, could be lived once again. I wanted you then, Kate, and I want you now and always will; but I also want you to know and accept the truth of what I've been in the past… I don't deserve you… I want you.'

He heard her set the glass down and then felt her turning into him, one hand reaching up, fingers outspread, to slide over his face. He pressed his lips to her skin, grabbed her wrist, kissed her fingers, then released his other fingers from the glass and let them find her soft hair. She turned her face towards that hand, licked the skin between his fingers, and then he spread his fingers through her hair again, tugged her head back, leaned over her. She was staring up at him, her eyes enlarged, dark and deep, strands of hair coiling across her moist lips as they opened out to him. He felt his hands around her face, her hard cheekbones, her warm skin, then closed his eyes and felt his tongue drowning in the well of her mouth. He was holding her, crushing her, his whole body pressing against her, one hand heavy on her spine, the other between her shoulder blades, all his senses concentrating on her belly and breasts, as if, in that extraordinary warmth and softness, he might find revelation.

Nothing mattered but her being, the flesh and bone beneath his hands, the heat that poured from her melting loins and set his thoughts to the torch. His will had dissolved, his inhibitions had been demolished, and he felt the burning magnet of her body drawing the bonds from his long-imprisoned flesh. Her tongue licked his eyes and nose, drew a line around his lips, then slid down between his teeth, into his mouth, her breath mingling with his. He felt as if he was inside her, a beating impulse in her head, and her being, like

the pale moon and stars, seemed to swim all around him. Nothing mattered but the instant, the past and future being one, his heart beating with anguished need and exultation to the rhythm of pounding blood. He was gasping, jerking his head back, sliding his hands around her ribcage, opening his eyes to see his fingers outspread on her white shirt, curling down to tug the collars apart and reveal her tanned breasts. Eyes brown, breasts brown, the skin rising and falling, twin mounds that filled his hands with startling softness and sublime, heavy warmth. He saw them and lost them, his eyes closing to gaze inward, dimly aware that he was licking and sucking like a child seeking milk. Someone's fingers - in his hair. Other fingers - on his spine. He groaned and leaned forward, bending her backwards, stretching along her, mesmerised by her writhing pliancy and heat, his body ruling his mind.

The sun was sinking behind the hills, a crimson fire reflected on glass, his own reflection superimposed upon it as he carried her inside. The room grey, growing darker, shadows sliding along the walls, as he felt her hands clinging to his neck, her weight pulling his arms down. He could not recall picking her up and didn't see the bedroom door - only the bed, its springs squeaking in protest, as he dropped her across it. He either lay or fell beside her, grabbing her hips, pulling her towards him, stripping the shirt from her body and unzipping her denims as her spine arched and her body moved into him and she sucked on his tongue. She was gasping, kicking her legs, letting him slide the denims off, and his own clothes, removed by her hands, were soon lying with hers. They touched, their bodies met, her breasts flattening against his chest, and then she uncoiled beneath him, opening out to draw him in, her flesh rising and falling like a river pouring endlessly over him.

He closed his eyes to gaze inward, seeing darkness and light, now moving deep inside her, letting her flesh and heat envelop him, his every nerve reaching out to touch her and join her, becoming her and feeling what she felt as she tightened around him. She did not divide in two and survey the act from a distance, but let herself melt around his hardness and weld her flesh to him. Welded to him, she became him, her heart beating in time to his, their joined bodies a single river of sweat and tears that flowed into a timeless zone. She took him and let him take her, conquered him and surrendered to him, lost herself for the first time in the wonder of pure sensation, descending deep into the depths of herself to where her stripped nerves scorched her. There was sound - her joyous sobbing, their synchronised gasping, his

strangled moans - and then she felt the crushing weight of his body as the spasms whipped through her. She flew apart in that brief delirium, her senses spinning through light and heat, catapulting over the chasm of her fears, into the harbours of freedom. He felt her as she felt him; they felt each other as they collided, shuddering together in the ecstasy of release and the slow glide to contentment.

The river, flowing endlessly, had not flowed for long at all, but he lay upon her belly, kissing her breasts, like a man resurrected. He felt cured and purified, touched with wonder and hope, and as she ran her fingers lightly through his hair, he gave himself to her, totally. His draining tension told her this, the tender sliding of his tongue, and she glanced around the room, saw the white walls in darkness, and let the silence capture her beating heart and lay it gently upon him.

'I'm yours,' he said. 'Take me.'

32

He was in the middle of the wilderness, a light breeze tugging at his white robes, the sun beating down on his bowed head where he sat on a rock. He was motionless and silent, his face covered with his hands, apparently deaf to the sound of the jeep as it braked to a halt. Kate sat there for some time, too surprised to move immediately, one hand resting lightly on the steering wheel, the other holding the handbrake. Joshua looked like an apparition, a shimmering mirage, a lonely figure in the desert's vast expanse, sand drifting around him. The silence was eerie, the heat fierce and relentless, but he sat on the rock with his head bowed as if he was sleeping.

Kate shook her head from side to side, wondering what had brought her here, yet feeling, even as she clambered down from the jeep, that the question was pointless. Joshua had brought her here, calling her out of Moshe's bed, making her drive through the pearly-grey light of dawn, following her instincts. She knew this as she advanced upon him, her feet kicking up small clouds of sand. Joshua didn't move when she approached, remaining in the same position, his head bowed, his face covered with his hands, his hair falling about him.

'Joshua?' she said, not a statement but a question, as if, when eventually he raised his head, she might see someone else. 'It's Kate. Are you alright?'

He did not answer immediately, but his posture changed slightly, his head dropping and then rising again, his chest expanding to let him breathe in. His whole posture suggested weariness, a massive draining of physical strength, and Kate wondered where he had been and what he had done during his month-long disappearance.

'Joshua?' she said again, leaning forward to shake him lightly by the shoulder, her fingers spreading out on the white robe to feel the firmness of flesh and bone. 'It's Kate. Can you hear me?'

He shuddered and took a deep breath, held it in, released it, breathing

deeply in slow, regular rhythm, as if exercising. His head was still bowed, his face covered with his hands, but eventually he removed his hands and glanced up, blinking against the dazzling light. Kate was shocked by his appearance, not prepared for what she was seeing: he looked a lot older, his face gaunt, the skin lined, deep shadows under his silvery-grey eyes, his hair and beard filmed with sand. He glanced away and then looked at her again, his brow furrowed, then finally shook his head from side to side and offered a sad smile.

'I called and you came,' he said. 'My voice carries on the wind. In the night, in the silence of the wilderness, my own voice fills my head.'

'You called me?' she responded. 'I didn't know what was happening. I just woke up in the middle of the night and felt compelled to go for a drive. I didn't plan anywhere in particular. I simply had the urge for silence. So I thought I'd drive into the desert to be alone with my own thoughts.'

'What thoughts were those?'

'About Moshe and me. About how you introduced us. I was thinking of how you drew us together and how it seemed preordained. We'd made love earlier on, but I could still feel him inside me, my body seeming to reach out to take hold of him and make him a part of me. It was a remarkable feeling, very beautiful, almost religious, and I realised that the night we first made love was the same night you disappeared. So, I was thinking of that, of how long you'd been gone, of the fact that Moshe and I had been lovers for a month and that you hadn't been seen during that time. Then, unable to sleep, I left my bed and drove into the desert.'

Joshua smiled again, as if at a private joke, but kept his neutral gaze fixed upon her. 'What is willed will be done,' he said, 'and being done has been preordained - but there was no connection between your first night with Moshe and my disappearance.'

'Why did you disappear?'

'To be alone and meditate. I am not as I was, and my heart is pained and weary, and I take unto myself the sins of Man and his numerous temptations. I know that my time is coming, and feel pain and despair, but beyond that is the light of revelation and the hope of redemption. Yet now I am weak, sorely tempted by Earth's domain, and I hope that what transpired in my isolation will return me to strength. Such strength will be needed for the time which is to come, when nation shall rise against nation and kingdom turn against

kingdom.'

His words sent a chill through her, filling her thoughts with shifting shadows, and she recalled the smoke over the Golan Heights the last time she had seen him.

'Are you talking about another war?' she asked.

'The war has already begun, and you were witness to its beginning, the smoke signalling the prelude to the drama that will end after me.'

'*After* you?'

'When I am gone. When Israel is devastated. When Jerusalem is desecrated and made barren and must find its redemption.'

'The war you prophesied is over.'

'It has just begun and continues. The silence that now hangs over Jerusalem is the silence of fever. Men dream and then scheme, and their scheming brings their downfall, that defeat which offers hope or despair, good or bad, the last choice. Jerusalem must fall to rise again in its glory, radiating its light around the world of which it stands at the centre. That fall has not yet come, but it will come when I am gone; and then, out of my anguish and joy, Jerusalem will sing.'

The noon sun was merciless, beating out of an azure sky, making the distant mountains shimmer in heat waves that rose from the burning sands. Kate glanced about her, unnerved by the silence, then wiped sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief and stared at Joshua again. He was still seated on the rock, looking at her, veiled pain in his eyes.

'You disappeared for a month,' she said, 'and that caused widespread concern: the Jews blame the Moslems, the Moslems blame the Jews, and the Christians blame first one, then the other - each thinking that the other has stolen you and is keeping you hidden. If, as you say, there's going to be more trouble, then possibly your disappearance will be the cause of it.'

'I return today,' he said. 'You will drive me into Jerusalem. From this day forth my fate will be sealed and the fall will commence.'

'The fall of Jerusalem?'

'And the beginning of Man's rebirth - his transformation into that which is good or evil, redeemed or defiled.'

'You don't know which?'

'No.'

'You could be the instrument of either?'

‘I am the instrument of revelation - no more and no less - but what will be revealed is a mystery known only to God.’

‘You believe you come from Him?’

‘I only know that I believe *in* him. We are made manifest by His will and without Him we cannot be.’

‘You do not know Him?’

‘He is not to be known. The mind cannot encompass His glory, but the heart must accept Him.’

‘Faith?’

‘And love. We must give to receive. We must surrender ourselves to the whole and know the joy of redemption.’

‘Where does your faith come from?’

‘From doubt and temptation. From the conquest of both. My faith is a light blossoming out of the darkness, as boundless as the desert to a single grain of sand, as enduring as this rock upon which I now rest my Earthly body. At first I was innocent, knowing neither faith nor lack of it, simply watching and listening for the sign that would mean revelation. Then in watching and listening my emptiness was filled, all the vanities and weaknesses of man pouring into my nakedness. Thus humanised, I knew rage, the curse of greed and ambition, the temptation to use my uncommon powers for personal gain. Then I came to the wilderness, to the purging heat of God’s anvil, and spent thirty days and nights on a journey through the depths of my soul. I saw light and darkness, the forces of good and evil, knew the eternal pain of sin, heard the angelic song of virtue, was touched by the flame of lust and the ice of a continence that could lead, eventually, to transcendence. In me they were at war - as in all men they are - and I saw that I would have to take a stand and chose the present or future.’

Kate was hot, but she shivered, wrapping her arms about her body, feeling drawn to the gateway of his eyes and the cosmos beyond. He kept talking, and his voice was like the wind on a desolate planet, at once frightening and beautiful.

‘The present is what men have and live their lives in fear of losing: the known, the familiar, the instantly recognisable, the comfort of the illusion of Reality and the mirror of fellowmen. The future is something else: the great darkness, the unknown: that which terrifies because it has no shape and might never materialise, possibly no more than the worm in the flesh - then the dust,

the black Nothing. To some men it is that, but to others something worse: the bottomless pits of hell, the blade and the fire, devils and ogres and demons beyond description; eternal damnation and torture and fear - all the horrors and terrors of their dreams and festering nightmares. This, then, is Man's choice: between the known and the unknown, between reason and faith, between the satisfactions of the real present or sacrifice for an unreal future, between the weakness of his mortal human heart or the strength of his spirit. Thus, as a man must choose, so I, too, was forced to choose, having taken the vices of man into myself to know doubt and temptation.'

He stopped talking and glanced about him, his eyes reflecting the distant mountains, then lowered his gaze to survey the wilderness floor upon which his feet rested. In that silence Kate felt lost, wrenched away from the familiar, her fear rising as ethereally as smoke, with a quiet, lazy malice. She wanted Moshe beside her, on top of her, inside her, his flesh offering the one form of transcendence that the present could hold. She had faith, but it was weak, bound with vanity and Earthly love, and with Moshe, as she had discovered in his bed, she could feel that faith flowing.

'Why choose the unknown?' she asked, keeping her voice level, trying to control her racing heart and its threat of betrayal.

''Knowledge,' he replied, closing his eyes as if to pray. 'The revelation that my recent unhappiness was caused by my doubt. In the beginning I knew peace, the joyous calm of not knowing, the contentment that comes from an innocence that simply accepts. Then I became as other men, learning vanity and greed, wanting so much to drink from the present that I doubted the future. Who had called me? And why? What sign had He given me? Was I child to the blinding light or the forces of darkness? Such questions were like thorns, drawing blood from my broken flesh, biting deep into the marrow of my faith and dividing my spirit. I was tempted and turned away, tempted again and turned more slowly, tempted a third time and found myself faltering on the brink of acceptance. Mortal pleasures, power on Earth, the love of Man and not his hatred, the avoidance of the pain yet to come - these rewards were at hand. So, I refused, refused again with less conviction, tried to refuse a third time and went dumb, as if frightened of speaking. Yes, I was tempted, my lips drawn to forbidden fruit, and then, in the shame of doubt and weakness, I fled to this wilderness.'

He opened his eyes again, raised them slowly to take her in, his face

simultaneously wounded and radiant, the deep lines etching pain and joy.

'Knowledge,' he repeated, quietly returning to his beginning. 'The knowledge denied to the mass of men because its terrors are manifold. I travelled down through myself, thirty days and thirty nights, down that well of light and darkness within, to where the soul meets its source. There was silence beyond silence, a stillness beyond Nothing, a void so minute it could only blossom out at the far side of the infinite. There, in stillness and silence, in the resonance of the unknowable, was the war that began before time and now transcends eternity. In the Nothing was the light, which was blinding in its purity; and around it, in the darkness of the other Nothing, were the forces of evil. There, where there was no beginning, no middle, no end, my being, like that of all men, had to make its commitment. The forces of evil were tangible, a manifestation surrounding the void - known, recognisable, present, and seductively real. The light of good was less comforting, as opaque as an illusion, unknown, without shape or dimension, challenging weakness and doubt. To be, we must choose - between good and bad, belief and unbelief - between a faith that transcends our mortal fears and the rejection of hope. Knowing this, I explored my Self, surveying the forces at war within me - there, where the soul bridges the finite and the infinite - and realised that my worldly learning, my accumulation of greed and vanity, had brought me nothing but the anguish and irrevocable despair of those who can never commit themselves by accepting the light of redemption. Thus, I committed myself, casting doubt and temptation aside - and immediately felt the light blossoming out from my centre to dissolve the forces of darkness around me and let me be Whole. Then, knowing joy, the redeeming flame of faith and hope, I ascended back up through my Self and returned to the mortal world. Here, to test my faith and the strength of my humility, I must suffer the anguish that will come to force His children to Judgement Day - their Day of Decision.'

Kate took a step backward, trying to retreat from his revelations, but his silvery-grey gaze, almost luminous, refused to let her escape. He smiled at her, gently, like a loving father with his child, then pressed his hands against the small rock and pushed himself upright. Standing before her, he was tall, the robe trailing around his feet, his face gaunt with an all too human suffering, the features filmed with sand. He smiled again and touched her cheek with his fingers in melancholic affection.

‘Walk with me,’ he said.

They walked away from the rock, heading into the wilderness, towards the mountains that formed a dividing line between white sand and blue sky. The heat hammered down from the sky, making Kate feel almost dizzy, and she saw the air shimmering before her to distort the landscape. Joshua didn’t appear to notice - neither the heat nor the desert’s beauty - his gaze focused inward upon himself and the trials to come. Nevertheless, he did not walk far, perhaps no more than fifty metres, then turned around to study the small rock upon which he had sat.

‘I am weary,’ he said, ‘my strength drained from my meditation. Now I must learn to brave my fear of what is to come.’

‘What makes you so sure it’s coming?’

‘My heart and mind communicate. I know because I feel it inside me - and my feelings don’t lie.’

‘Do you know what will happen?’

‘Not to me: that is hidden. I only know that I will suffer and pass on to lead the way for Jerusalem.’

‘Why must you suffer?’

‘Because men will grieve and rage; and, in so doing, set in motion that which will eventually lead them to Judgement Day.’

‘Can you not avoid the suffering?’

‘No. It is ordained.’

‘Can you not use your extraordinary powers to move men in some other way?’

‘No, that would be blasphemous, going against the given way, an abuse of my faith and His trust, an admission of cowardice. I was given those powers to impress men, to draw them to me and make them wonder, but now that my time is coming near I must become as they are. I cannot use my powers to save myself or change events, for in doing so His word would be revoked and damnation would reign.’

‘But you can’t always control your powers,’ Kate said. ‘You couldn’t that day in the hospital, when you thought that you and I might be separated.’

‘No, I could not, because fear and rage blinded me, making me behave, in the weakness of my doubt, like normal men. This must not happen again, no matter how I feel or what I might be thinking, so now, at the beginning of my trial, I must exhaust my great gifts and leave myself to my mortal fate. My

powers, like the wind, will dissipate and leave me as other men.'

He raised his right hand and Kate felt a deep fear, born insidiously from the knowledge of what could happen and freezing her mind. She wanted to stop him but was powerless, her muscles turned to stone, and she saw him fix his gaze upon the rock in the shimmering distance. His raised hand started shaking, then vibrated like a diving rod, and he kept his gaze fixed on the distant rock, his eyes wide in the blinding light. Kate felt the power coming, rushing in from the elements, surrounding Joshua and then pouring through him and flowing into the earth. The ground rumbled and shook, started breaking up around them, then the sand began spitting and a jagged crack appeared, racing towards them from the base of the rock and terminating in front of them. Kate looked and was held, her thoughts frozen, only seeing, bearing witness, as the ground around the rock heaved and cracked, spitting clouds of sand into the air where they swirled like dark veils. Then the heaving earth exploded, mushrooming in languid waves, and the rock suddenly moved, nosing up into the air like an iceberg breaking loose, growing broader at its base as the growling earth was forced away, inching higher, growing larger, one edge cutting through the sun, soil and sand falling off it, until finally, with a muffled roar, the earth stopped its convulsive heaving and the buried mass of the original, much larger rock was exposed as a large, mud-covered hillock over which the sun flashed.

Kate's mind was frozen, admitting nothing but the visual, not open to fear or normal wonder, observing with lucidity. She saw the large hillock, silhouetted against the sky, striations of brilliant sunlight flashing around it to form a dazzling prism. The earth had stopped shaking, but Joshua was still trembling, his hand forming an arch across the sky and its few drifting white clouds. He was sweating, his lips tight, his brow furrowed, and a wind, sweeping out of the former stillness, blew his hair out behind him. He leaned forward, white robes whipping, fighting against the rushing air, then the sun, half of it hidden by the hillock, sank behind it and disappeared. The cold came instantly, springing out of the sudden gloom, then the sun reappeared at the far side of the hillock, and the heat, claustrophobic and draining, had dominion once more.

The heat was in the wind, which made the burning sand swirl, hissing around Kate as she stared at Joshua and his snapping white robes. His arched hand became a fist, trapping the elements in its grip, and then the wind, dying

away to a whisper, let the sand settle down. There was stillness and silence, a frozen, brilliant clarity, and Kate glanced up to see a pale moon gliding out from the white clouds. The moon was abnormally large, its black craters distinct, and it drifted across the blue sheen of the sky towards the immense, golden sun. The light darkened, turning grey, the mountains casting great shadows, and the wilderness, formerly distorted by shimmering heat waves, became a colourless dream. Then the moon reached the sun, slid across it to cover it, deflecting its rays of light into space and letting the darkness roll in. The moon stopped in front of the sun, obliterating it completely, and the stars shone in glory in a blackness that covered the wilderness.

Kate looked up and saw it, looked down and saw the same: the stars glittering above and below her in a featureless Nothing. The sand and stones were the stars, the desert floor a carpet of stars, and her feet, which she saw even in that darkness, stood on a bed of starlight. She did not move at all, feeling nothing, simply observing, and then a pool of light grew around her feet, spreading out through black night. In that eerie light was her reflection, her multiplied image, countless masks of herself drifting out in all directions to fade away in the distance. She was the stem of a flower, her Self forming the petals, the petals dying and floating away and renewing themselves. Then she sank down through the stars, through the reed of her Self, and saw the light blossoming around her, pushing the darkness back. The light brought the heat that bathed her body in sweat, became a brilliance that dazzled her eyes and erased every star. There was white haze, blue sky, a ragged mass resembling mountains, then the wilderness and sky were divided and the sun conquered all.

Kate stood in the wilderness, her gaze fixed on Joshua, the hillock that had formerly been a small rock soaring up just behind him. The wind whipped his white robes, the sand swirled around him, and Kate saw her Self standing there beside him, gazing down at the parched ground. He reached out and touched her, laying his hand upon her shoulder, and a globe of light, brighter than the sun, surrounded their bodies. Surveying her Self, she was herself, looking out from the dazzling light, seeing her Self, multiplied in the distance, forming a circle around her. She left herself to greet her Self, the past and future coexisting, passed through her Self and stopped in front of the hillock that was cutting off half of the sun. She studied the hillock, silhouetted against the sky, striations of blinding sunlight flashing around it

and quivering above her.

‘I am drained,’ he said. ‘Mortal.’

His white robes snapped in the wind as the lowered his arms, closed his eyes and then wearily bowed his head to let the elements retreat. The wind faded away, letting the swirling sand settle; then, in its lust to devour the silence, the earth growled and heaved again. The hillock shook violently, mud and sand sliding down it, then the soil around its base started sinking, sucking the hillock down with it. The hillock sank slowly, with a sublime, sombre majesty, sinking down as the sand subsided beneath it and dragging more sand down with it. The noise was catastrophic, the earth roaring in its hunger, and the hillock continued sinking, the sand pouring in around it, until only the peak remained, a small rock on the desolate plain, the great orb of the sun shining upon it to render it lifeless.

Joshua fell to his knees and placed his hands on the modest rock, spreading his fingers to explore its burning surface and then bowing his head. He was silent for a long time, breathing heavily, his body sagging, the light breeze blowing through his dishevelled hair and brushing sand from his white robes. Eventually he spoke, his voice pained and yet joyous, a haunting music carried on the wind and swept gently to Kate’s ears.

‘Around this rock,’ he said, ‘I will gather my Ministry - not to destroy, but to fulfil… for all men… and all time.’

Kate returned to her mortal shell, to the doubts and fears of life, and felt the spasms whipping through her body, bringing back her senses. She saw Joshua on his knees, his hands on the burning rock, his fingers outspread like a web around the globe, his head bowed in exhaustion. She wanted Moshe inside her, setting her free, absolved of all commitment, but her voice, as if mocking this desperate wish, whispered out over Joshua.

‘What Ministry?’

‘The world.’

PART FOUR:

CRUCIFIXION

His blood be on us, and on our children.
- *Matthew*, 27:25

33

The schemes of men, Jozsef thought, are always nurtured behind closed doors, away from the curious eyes of the world and its numerous victims. He thought this as the closed door opened and Rashid Idriss was ushered in, his brown eyes moving from Moshe to Ben Eleizer, then to Jozsef, as the guard stepped back out of the room, closing the door behind him. Rashid stood there for a moment, not pretending to be friendly, then nodded and walked across to the long table and sat down facing Moshe. They stared silently at one another, neither revealing what he was thinking, then the Prime Minister coughed into his fist and pursed his lips thoughtfully.

'We're glad you could make it, Rashid.'

'I've come to see the Mahdi.'

'I seriously doubt that he's the Mahdi, but you can certainly see him.'

'You assume he's your Messiah?'

'No, I do not. I merely suggest that he may not be what he seems - to you or to us.'

'He *is* the Mahdi.'

'There's no proof of that.'

'He has appeared to many Moslems.'

'He's also appeared to many Jews and Christians, but we can't all lay claim to him.'

'I know what I feel.'

'You're too educated for that, Rashid.'

'My Western education is now behind me, cast off like a useless rag.'

Moshe and Ben Eleizer glanced uneasily at one another, unable to hide their surprise at the abrupt change in Rashid. Jozsef, too, was surprised, his gaze drawn to Rashid's brown eyes, which glittered with the bright, hard intensity of growing fanaticism. Rashid had formerly been approachable, moderate in politics and religion, but the Arab who sat across the table from

them was very different from that. Jozsef knew about the Black Stone and how it had affected the Moslems, but he hadn't been prepared for the extent of Rashid's personal conversion. Now Rashid was staring at each of them in turn, his face stony and challenging.

'I'm surprised to see no Americans here,' he said.

'Why should there be Americans here?' Ben Eleizer responded. 'This is Israel, not America.'

'It must be difficult to admit that the Americans and Russians are on your doorstep, with the Americans pulling the strings that manipulate Jerusalem.'

'We are not puppets, Rashid.'

'But you *are* in chains, Ben Eleizer. Right now, the Americans and the Russians are deciding your fate.'

'Both armies have left Israel.'

'And are presently massed around it, negotiating in the tents between the tanks and quietly mapping out your future.'

'The United Nations is mediating.'

'The United Nations is a joke. As usual, the United Nations is impotent and merely gives empty speeches.'

'Our fate is your fate, Rashid.'

'Not quite,' Rashid said. 'The United Arab Republic has the oil; you have nothing to trade.'

He was sitting up straight, looking at each of them in turn, his eyes bright with the purity of his conviction, his lips forming a thin line.

'Neither the Americans nor the Russians are interested in trade,' Ben Eleizer said. 'They're only interested in stealing as much as possible in the name of world peace.'

'They've brought peace to Palestine.'

'A temporary peace, Rashid. While it's true that the so-called peacekeeping forces have kept us from each other's throats, it's also true that the peace is precarious. The Americans and Russians both feel that the presence of Joshua in this area remains a threat to them. As things now stand, you Moslems are convinced that Joshua is the Mahdi who'll ordain the sovereignty of Islam over all the Arabs states and Israel; a great number of Jews are equally convinced that Joshua is their Messiah, come to Earth to pave the way for the sovereignty of Judaism; and the Christians, both here and in Europe, are convinced that Joshua is the resurrected Jesus Christ

who'll inaugurate the conversion of the Jews and, presumably, the Moslems. No matter what Joshua is, no matter his nature, the three great monotheistic religions are equally convinced that Joshua belongs to them; and they're ready to move heaven and hell to establish their individual supremacy in his name. The present peace in Israel is therefore very precarious indeed - and further outbursts of violence between Jews, Arabs and Christians are already occurring.'

'The Christians have little bearing on the problems of Palestine. I'm only concerned with Zionists and Moslems.'

'Unfortunately the Christians, if having little effect within Israel, might soon be affecting this country from outside.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'I'm talking, Rashid, about that speech the Pope broadcast world-wide yesterday - the speech proclaiming Joshua as the Christian's Son of God and announcing the unification of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches into the one, once more unified, Christian Church. In other words, the Christian world has been united by what they are insisting is the Second Coming of Christ.'

Jozsef put his head down, feeling ashamed and humiliated, still shocked by what had happened and unable to reconcile himself to it. He was a rabbi, a Jew, and therefore not personally involved, but when he thought of the Pope's speech, and of the motives behind it, he also thought of what he had said to Kate during their walk to the Mount of Beatitudes, and wondered if he had been deceiving himself. In defending the silence of the Jewish and Christian religious bodies, he had claimed - as he had then genuinely thought or, perhaps, desperately wanted to believe - that their silence had been based on their inability to give an honestly objective judgement of Joshua; but now, given what had transpired in Europe, he was not at all sure of that.

'The claims of the Christian Church are of no interest to me,' Rashid said. 'The Christian Church has little influence over Palestine.'

'I think you may be wrong there,' Ben Eleizer said. 'The united Christian Church, if not directly involved with Israel, is certainly involved with the Russians.'

'The Vatican diplomatically kisses the hand of the Russians, but that hardly has any bearing on their claim that the Mahdi is Jesus Christ.'

'On the contrary, Rashid, we have reason to believe that the two are

intimately connected.'

'Your reasons, Ben Eleizer, if I may say so, are probably all in your head.'

At this point, Moshe pulled his chair closer to the table and glanced down at the papers spread out between his large hands. He scanned them quickly and then looked up again.

'Before you speak, major-general,' Rashid said with a flickering smile, 'please let me congratulate you on your recent marriage. I hope it brings you joy.'

It was the first sign of humour that Rashid had shown, and Moshe, obviously still wary, responded with a hesitant grin.

'Thank you,' he said. 'I, too, hope it brings me joy. I appreciate your interest in my personal affairs and accept it with gratitude.'

The mockery was gentle, but not without its point, and Rashid, clearly accepting it in good spirit, smiled again and shrugged slightly.

'So,' he said, 'let me hear about the Vatican and how it relates to Palestine.'

'Let me give you some background details,' Moshe said, looking down at his papers. 'The Pope, a Pole, is only the second non-Italian Pope in four and a half centuries, and as such has a particular interest in his own country and Eastern Europe in general. It's now clear that he was elected to the papacy as a sign that the Church was reasserting Eastern Europe's place in the religions of the West and, by implication, condemning Soviet influence in Eastern Europe. However, in doing this, as the Pope well knew, the Church was deliberately confronting the Soviets with the unenviable choice of either surrendering its influence to that of the Church or embarking on the task of eroding the Church completely in Eastern Europe. In short, it was a very specific conflict, engineered by the Vatican.'

'Those facts are hardly secret,' Rashid said.

'Wait,' Moshe said. 'I'm not finished yet… Prior to the appearance of the man known as Joshua, this conflict had been coming to a head, with the Pope finding himself under increasing pressure from the Soviets to pull in his horns and remove the Church from the political arena lest the Soviets reassert their authority by intensifying religious suppression - and possibly crushing the influence of the Church, once and for all - throughout Eastern Europe. However, with the advent of Joshua - and the widespread Christian belief in

him as the resurrected Jesus Christ - the Pope's dilemma has become even more acute.'

'This has no relevance to Palestine,' Rashid insisted.

'You surely must know of the increasing religious anarchy in Europe,' Ben Eleizer said. 'Many of the most bizarre and dangerous religious cults have adopted Joshua as their leader; there have been violent demonstrations by Jews, Moslems and Christians in every European capital; and along with the mass conversions, many based on hysteria, there's been a public outcry against the silence of religious leaders, to the extent that the Vatican had to call in riot troops to St. Peter's Square in Rome.'

'I still don't see the relevance,' Rashid said.

'It has relevance,' Moshe told him. 'The growing religious anarchy in Europe has been caused, in most instances, by the widespread Christian belief that Joshua is the Christ and that the Church has refused to either support or deny this view. The Church, however, has a problem: it knows that a denial of Joshua as the Christ will simply lead to hysterical outrage, more religious anarchy, and a widespread rejection of the Church itself - a situation disastrous for the Church and beneficial to the Soviets. If, on the other hand, the Church formally supports Joshua as the Christ, the Soviets will be convinced that it's doing so merely to reinforce Christianity and strengthen its own bargaining position - and that would almost certainly lead to Soviet suppression of the Church throughout Eastern Europe. That dilemma, seemingly insoluble, is what's caused the Vatican and the World Council of Churches to remain silent about Joshua for so long.'

'A silence that was broken yesterday,' Rashid said.

'Correct.' Moshe nodded. 'As the Prime Minister said, yesterday the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches were formally united as the one, so-called Christian Church - and together proclaimed the Second Coming of Christ.'

'United, they become twice as powerful.'

'That, also, is correct.' When Moshe flicked his eyes toward Jozsef, the latter felt himself blushing, unnerved by the recent events and his own confused thoughts on the matter. 'The Chief Rabbi,' Moshe continued, 'has just returned from a trip to Rome, and I think he should fill us in here.'

Jozsef leaned closer to the table, gazing at Rashid with some reluctance, scarcely able to formulate the words that now had to be uttered. He thought

of his trip to Europe, of what he had witnessed there, and the ice of an insidious, relentless fear filled the blood in his veins. Joshua's influence was contagious, causing exultation and dread, driving some to religion, driving others to madness, giving rise to joy and guilt and bewilderment, cementing beliefs or blowing them apart, leaving few unchanged. The Son of God to some, the devil to others, he had, just by being, drawn out of the mass subconscious all the passions, both noble and homicidal, that were normally suppressed. In England there had been thousands of suicides, the formerly empty churches were now packed, orthodox religions and occult sects were flourishing side by side, and on hills and in valleys, by day and by night, thousands were waiting for the coming of Joshua's fellow extraterrestrials or, in equally fearful surrender, for the fire and brimstone of Judgement Day. It was the same all over Europe, and not much better in Rome, where, west of the Tiber, behind the walls of Vatican City, beneath the statues of the saints atop the balustrade of St. Peter's Square, the worshippers had turned into rioters at war with the police. Jozsef thought of it with woe and a great deal of moral confusion, having to accept that his very own Rabbinate had been equally silent about Joshua.

'There were various reasons for the Vatican's compromise,' he said, 'and compromise, unfortunately, it has to be termed.' He found himself glancing at Moshe and Ben Eleizer, as if seeking their approval. 'As Moshe has already explained,' he continued, 'the Pope's main consideration was his fear of possible Soviet oppression in Eastern Europe. On the one hand fearful of outraging his congregation by denying that Joshua was the Christ, he was, on the other, equally concerned that the Church could not, if it supported Joshua, stand alone against the full onslaught of Soviet oppression. Torn between these two equally dire possibilities, the Pope simply could not decide what to do, and therefore continued his official silence. Alas, with the pressure increasing - from the outrage of his own Catholics on the one side and, on the other, the Soviet insistence that he take no formal stand on the matter - he succumbed, with the encouragement of the World Council of Churches, to the Christian church's ancient fear of the Jews.'

Jozsef closed his eyes for a moment, feeling weary and sick at heart, understanding that even though he was Jewish, he was not without sin. The Rabbinate, like the members of the Holy See in Rome, had made its own dubious compromises.

‘For its entire history,’ he continued, opening his eyes again, ‘the Church has worked for the conversion of the Jews. Indeed, in its Good Friday liturgy, the Roman Catholic Church made a special point of praying for the so-called perfidious Jews - *pro perfidis Judeis*: “That our God and Lord will remove the veil from their hearts, so that they, too, may acknowledge our Lord Jesus Christ…” This was the only passage during which the faithful did not kneel - though they knelt when they prayed for heretics, schismatics and pagans. This passage was altered by Pope John XXIII, but the sentiment remains - and for the Christians, unfortunately, the Second Coming of Christ is closely connected with the expected conversion of the Jews. How ironic, then, that the supposed Second Coming of their Christ should have taken place on the Jewish soil of the Holy Land.’

‘On *Palestinian* soil,’ Rashid said firmly.

Jozsef heard the remark clearly and, strangely, felt embarrassed, as if he had been caught in the act of stealing, his hand still in the till. Startled, confused, suddenly doubting his Zionist principles, he found that he could not look at Rashid and, instead, lowered his gaze to the table.

‘A mortal man,’ he continued, ‘with mortal man’s weaknesses, the Pope unfortunately surrendered to his church’s fear of the Jews; in this case the fear of what might happen to Christianity should the Jews of Israel - where Joshua had, of course, been discovered - manage to convince the Christian world that Joshua was not the Son of the Almighty, but His messenger as heralded in Judaism - fearful, in fact, of mass conversion and the threat of a dominant World Jewry.’

‘What about Islam?’ Rashid asked.

‘I don’t think they considered it.’

He raised his eyes to Rashid, sympathising with his anger, aware that he was thinking of all white men’s religions as being riddled with racist superiority and arrogant self-righteousness. Then, unable to brave Rashid’s gaze, he lowered his eyes to the table once more.

‘It *is* possible,’ he continued, ‘that had it not been for this old fear, the Pope might have maintained his official silence. Alas, this fear, combined with his fear of ostracising his congregation, drove him closer - irrespective of his own views, which remain ambiguous - to an official recognition of Joshua as the Christ of the Christians.’

‘Which would, in turn, have antagonised the Soviets,’ Rashid said, ‘and

led to the suppression of his own beloved Eastern Europe.'

'Correct,' Jozsef replied. 'Fearful for the religious freedom of Eastern Europe, but more frightened of ostracising the majority of his flock, he decided that he would have to risk the wrath of the Soviets, but desperately searched for a means of discouraging them from their intended acts of religious suppression. A possible solution was then suggested by the representatives of the World Council of Churches - who were, of course, equally anxious about the threat of mass conversion to Judaism and wished to strengthen the whole Christian world. So it was that in a secret meeting between the representatives of the Holy See and the World Council of Churches, the decision was taken to unify the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches, using the Second Coming of Christ as the reason for so doing, irrespective of what a proper theological interrogation of Joshua might reveal. The point was to unite both churches into the one, more powerful Christian Church, which would, at least in theory, frighten the Soviets into keeping their hands off Eastern Europe.'

Jozsef sighed and sat back, feeling obliquely defeated, unable to feel morally superior to the Christian delegates, no matter how obviously shameful their recent actions. His Rabbinate, after all, in a similar surrender to political expediency, had retained an equally shameful silence on matters pertaining to Joshua.

'So,' Rashid said, 'it might work and it might not - but either way, at least from where I sit, it has little bearing on Palestine.'

'Unfortunately,' Moshe responded, speaking quietly and calmly, 'our Intelligence reports indicate that the plan is already back-firing. Initial indications are that the Pope's speech has aroused the wrath of those Christians who do not believe in Joshua as the resurrected Christ, encouraged the lunatic fringe in their view of Joshua as the first of an imminent invasion by extraterrestrials or Satan come to inaugurate the Age of Darkness; and, more importantly, has *not* scared off the Soviets, but has, on the contrary, made them even more anxious to suppress the Church completely in Eastern Europe. Their intentions have been conveyed to the Vatican, and it seems that nothing will stop them.'

'Never bend over in front of a goat,' Rashid said. 'And the Soviet mind is a goat's mind.' He smiled at his own joke, but the smile contained steel, convincing Jozsef that he would not be persuaded easily to work against his

own interests. ‘So,’ he continued, raising his hands in mock bewilderment. ‘The Soviets are about to suppress the Church in Eastern Europe… How does this affect Palestine?’

Ben Eleizer had been sitting quietly with his chin resting on his folded hands, his elbows propped up on the table; now he waved his hands and shrugged his shoulders in a rabbinical gesture, his round face deceptively innocent.

‘The Soviets are in Syria and Jordan,’ he said, ‘so surely any move they make should be of concern to you.’

‘I am not concerned with their movements in Christian Europe.’

‘Well,’ Ben Eleizer said, ‘*we* are. The Americans will almost certainly view the suppression of the Christian Church in Eastern Europe as a flagrant act of aggression, a warning to the Christian world - which of course includes America - that the Soviets will not be intimidated by Joshua, the supposed Son of the Almighty. This might, in turn, encourage the Americans to set their own example by taking so-called preventative military actions in the Middle East, naturally using Israel and the United Arab Republic as their playground. In short, they might conceivably move their troops back into Israel to protect it from any possible Soviet religious suppression of the kind so brutally demonstrated in Eastern Europe - as the Americans will, after the Soviets have obliterated the Church, diplomatically phrase it.’

Jozsef looked thoughtfully at Rashid, intrigued by his face, which was, paradoxically, poetically delicate and hard with intelligent pragmatism. His gaze moved repeatedly from left and right, from Ben Eleizer to Moshe, but eventually settled on Moshe, whose rugged face revealed little. Now married to Kate, Moshe had changed and was less remote, but in political or military matters he remained, as Jozsef had noted, reserved and difficult to analyse. Now he was staring directly at Rashid, his grey gaze veiled.

‘What exactly do you want from me?’ Rashid asked.

‘If the Americans are given an excuse for moving back into Israel, it’s unlikely that we’ll get them out again. Should that happen, all of us will lose, Jew and Moslem alike.’

‘If the Americans use potential Soviet aggression as an excuse for moving back into Palestine, we Arabs could do little to prevent it. We’re not in a position, Moshe, to take action against the Americans or the Russians.’

‘You miss the point, Rashid: we don’t want it to get that far. The religious

suppression of Eastern Europe will scare the Americans into action, but it won't, politically speaking, be an acceptable *reason* for such action. No, our Intelligence indicates that the Americans are already viewing the Soviet intentions with alarm, but are themselves intending to use the resurgence of violence between Arabs and Jews as their excuse for moving strategically back into Israel. Once that happens, both the Jews and the Arabs will lose control of their own fate.'

'You want me to form an unofficial alliance with the Jews, and stop my Arabs from further acts of violence?'

'Precisely.'

'But your own zealots are responsible for that violence.'

'I don't think that's wholly true,' Jozsef put in. 'The Moslems are fighting because Joshua is here and they believe he's their Mahdi. They're fighting to win Jerusalem back and ordain the sovereignty of Islam.'

'The majority of Arabs, Chief Rabbi, were willing to stop fighting on the condition that they be granted access to their Mahdi. However, your own zealots have made it perfectly clear that they think of the Mahdi as their Messiah, that the sovereignty of Judaism must now be implemented, and that they intend throwing the present government out of the Knesset and forming an ecclesiastical Cabinet with their own, flagrantly Arab-hating members. As they have also made clear, they intend, once they are in power, to inaugurate the Zionist State and remove all non-Jews from Palestine. Such ambitions would be acceptable from a few harmless zealots, but now they are being supported by some of your most influential politicians and military leaders, and that means that they could possibly succeed in doing just what they want. My fighting Arabs are very much aware of this - and of what it could mean to them.'

'I think you exaggerate the situation, Rashid.'

'It cannot be an exaggeration when one of the strongest supporters of the zealots, namely Lieutenant Paul Frankel, is not only a leading member of Shin Bet, but the man formally placed in charge of our Mahdi.'

'I insist,' Jozsef said, refusing to dwell on Paul Frankel, 'that there are no grounds for calling Joshua the Mahdi.'

'Yet your Jews call him their Messiah.'

'The Rabbinate has not supported that claim.'

'Nor has it denied it.'

Jozsef felt trapped by that statement, knowing full well that he had no defence and suffering a harsh, shameful guilt. He was the acting Chief Rabbi, a leading member of the Rabbinate, and he had tolerated, in timidity and humiliation, his Rabbinate's cowardly silence. There was a valid reason for it - human doubt and fear of error - but behind that, inexcusably, was the ignoble wedding of religion to politics, that sordid bed in which moral judgements were clouded and values subtly changed. Joshua's discovery in Israel had drawn the veils from that bed, forcing Jozsef, and others in his position, to examine themselves. Mortal men, indeed, with mortal men's weaknesses; and he now knew that religion, which gave men moral guidelines, could itself form the slippery path into the sin of dishonesty.

'You have no answer, Chief Rabbi?'

'Yes, Rashid, I have. We abdicated our responsibilities in order to protect our faith, and neither Joshua nor what men tried to make of him can excuse what we did.'

He felt better for having said it, no less guilty but less ashamed, relieved to have unburdened himself of self-deceit and cleared the way for forgiveness. He would pray for the Lord's guidance and strength and then let events take their course. Like Joshua, he would listen and observe, and hope to find revelation.

'Well, Rashid,' Moshe said, 'we're still waiting for your answer. Are you willing to co-operate with us to keep the Americans out?'

'Joshua is the Mahdi.'

'You're welcome to that belief.'

'I wish to see the Mahdi, to speak with him, and I'll let his words guide me.'

'He won't advise you, Rashid. He won't confirm that he's your Mahdi. He doesn't know who he is or where he came from - and he never takes sides.'

'The true saint rarely recognises himself, nor takes credit for being one of the blessed; so if the Mahdi, in his humility, says little, I will know what he means.'

Catching his passing glance, the mosque challenging the synagogue, Jozsef decided to modestly turn his gaze away and discuss the matter no further. He looked at Moshe and Ben Eleizer, the former thoughtful, the latter acting bland; and saw them staring at one another, communicating even in

silence, before Moshe shrugged and turned back to Rashid, a slight smile on his lips.

'Alright,' he said. 'We have Joshua waiting outside this room. We'll bring him in and than you can decide.'

He picked up his phone and spoke to the guard outside the room, then put the phone down and sat back, his hands flat on the table. The brief silence was deceptive, seeming longer than it actually was, and Jozsef glanced down at the floor between his feet, feeling tense and unreal. He thought of Joshua, one man, his presence on Earth dividing the world, and realised that the fate of whole nations could hinge on his utterance. Joshua was passive, letting events take shape around him, and his innocence, or ignorance, was the living blank slate upon which the world's future was being written. He did not know who he was, nor where he had come from, but he had, simply by being, forced the world to reap the whirlwind, and the future, still obscured in the winds of chance, had yet to reveal itself.

The door was pushed open and Joshua walked in, his long hair, ascetic face and white robes making him look like a biblical prophet. The guard closed the door behind him as he walked up to the table, stopping when Rashid climbed to his feet and stepped forward to greet him. He studied Rashid for some time, his silvery-grey eyes hardly moving at all and yet strangely appealing. Rashid seemed to be hypnotised, then he suddenly turned away, glanced at Moshe and Ben Eleizer and Jozsef in turn; then, his brown eyes bright with either panic or exultation, he looked again at Joshua and licked his lips, his spine straight, his hands shaking.

'You wished to see me?' Joshua asked, his voice level, almost gentle, reaching out to caress and soothe Rashid, understanding his tension.

'Yes,' Rashid replied. 'I've been haunted by your presence. It's said that you're the hidden Imam, the Mahdi, and I wish to confirm this.'

'I can neither confirm nor deny it.'

'You're the Mahdi. I can see it.'

'We see only what we want to see, which for most is enough.'

'You do not know who you are or why you are here?'

'I am that I am - this I know. No more and no less.'

'Do you know what these men want of me?'

'They do not know themselves. They speak out of the fear of the moment, seeing little beyond it.'

‘Palestine is the centre of the world and the whole world now wants it. Who shall have Palestine?’

‘The East and the West are God’s; therefore, whichever way you turn, there is the face of God. There is no piety in turning your face towards the East or the West; but he is pious who believes in God, the scriptures, and the Last Day. Bear only this in mind: no one is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself; do not be envious of each other, and do not outbid each other, and do not hate each other; do not oppose each other and do not undersell each other. The dominion of the heavens and of the Earth is God’s; and you have neither patron nor helper, save God.’

Rashid clearly recognised the words, and in his exultation was terror: the knowledge that the answer he had been given had left a question mark over him. He licked his lips and glanced about him, knowing that help would not be offered, that Joshua, or the Mahdi, had left him with nothing but faith. Jozsef watched him, sympathising, understanding what he was feeling: he was being challenged to accept the will of God and let events take their course. No bartering, no intrigue, no hatred, no opposing; no dependence upon aid or patronage, whether political or spiritual; no looking East or West, neither to the Soviets nor to the Americans - only love for his fellowman and trust in God, who alone had dominion. Truth or untruth, belief or unbelief: Israel, the land Rashid knew as Palestine, would stand or fall by his faith.

Jozsef leaned closer to the table, his every thought focused on Rashid, his whole being flowing out to the space into which Rashid’s words would fall. Rashid and Joshua were face to face, very close, neither moving, and the silence, like a song in a deaf man’s ears, seemed to quiver and breathe. Rashid took a step back, turned his head and stared at Jozsef, let his gaze roam to Moshe and Ben Eleizer, then back to Joshua. He stared at Joshua for some time, his eyes bright and intense, and then shivered, as if casting off a ghost, and sank to his knees, his head bowed before Joshua.

‘In you I have faith,’ he said. ‘For me you are the Mahdi. I do not need confirmation or proof; in my faith, I believe it. I will not look East or West, nor harbour envy or hatred, but will love for my brother what he loves for himself, and will await the final judgement of our Lord. Upon this I swear, and by this I stand: as long as you are safe, as long as you freely walk the land of Palestine, I will not take up arms against my brothers nor incite them to war.’

He reached out for Joshua's hand, drew it to him and kissed it, then stood up and silently crossed the room, opened the door and walked out. Ben Eleizer raised his eyebrows, displaying his disbelief, as Moshe sighed and sank wearily into his chair, clearly relieved. Then Jozsef looked at Joshua, drawn inexorably to him, and saw, instead of the silvery-grey eyes, the shadowed hint of a smile.

A Mona Lisa smile. Ambiguity and mystery. Whether a smile or a grimace of despair, it chilled Jozsef to the bone.

34

Kate drove up the Mount of Olives to the Intercontinental Hotel and parked near the small amphitheatre overlooking Jerusalem. It was daylight, very bright, the domes and minarets gleaming in gold and silver, and she sat for some time in the car, her gaze fixed on the Old City. Staring at it, she hardly saw it, her thoughts imprisoned by her flesh, by the life that was growing within her and making her whole. She desperately wanted the child, for herself and for Moshe, yet even as she thought of this with joy, she also felt uneasy. She thought of when she had last been here - when she had last made love to Leon, when the unnatural storm had materialised, when the black obelisk had emerged from the ruins of the chapel, when she had first met Moshe and then found the robed Joshua in the blackness that defied definition and made the heart leap - and, in remembering, she felt even more uneasy, wondering why she had agreed to see Leon even against Moshe's wishes.

She climbed out of the car, locked the door and breathed deeply, then looked at the modern hotel above the sloping green gardens. The sky was a radiant blue, sending down a fierce heat, yet she shivered at the touch of the breeze, as if totally naked. There were tourists in the amphitheatre, taking photographs of Jerusalem, and their voices drove her forward, past the parked, dusty taxis, to the steps that led up through the gardens and into the hotel.

She wished that Leon hadn't phoned her, was glad that he had, felt confused, recalling the eagerness and trepidation with which he had taken her call; and, with more clarity, Moshe's anger when she had told him where she was going. His anger had not surprised her, but the violence of it had, and now, with her love for him rippling through the body, she wondered if she was doing the right thing in paying Leon this visit.

The hotel lobby was deserted, the restaurant still and silent, and she

thought of all the drinks she had shared with Leon beneath those large windows. Memory was a curse, nostalgia a seductive trap, and as she walked up the stairs, acutely aware of her extra weight, she wondered if Leon had deliberately picked this place to make her feel more defenceless. The hotel was air-conditioned, drying her sweat, reducing tension, but when she stopped at the door of Leon's room, she was already exhausted.

She stood there for some time, wanting to see him, wanting to leave, trying to work out just why she had come here and what she expected. There was no point in denying it: she had felt deeply for him - not love, but certainly something close to it: sexual attraction, camaraderie, simple warmth, a good-humoured affection. Love? Not really. Love's full commitment had been lacking. Her love flowed like a river to Moshe and did not suffer doubt. So why had she come? Perhaps the letter from Damascus: that atypical, if mildly sardonic cry of pain and unexpected bewilderment. The letter had moved her deeply, making her cast off his betrayal, goading her gently into the shallows of a helpless, slightly protective concern. She owed him something - a hand to hold in his despair - but as she stood there at the door, her hand raised, her fists clenched, she could only think of how Moshe had looked when she walked out of the house.

Taking a deep breath, she knocked on Leon's door, first lightly, then harder, and the sound seemed too loud in the silence of the long, deserted corridor. She did not wait for long - he had obviously been expecting her - but even as the door opened and Leon's face swam into view, she recalled with gratitude how Moshe had relented - not easily, but attempting to understand, stifling his anger and hurt. Her love, flowing endlessly like a river, went to him for that.

Leon now stood in front of her, unshaven, grinning crookedly, his hair dishevelled and his clothes badly wrinkled, the room behind him too dark. She was shocked by his appearance, the one thing she hadn't expected, but when he lowered his head and raised his eyes to her, his grin seemed more familiar.

'You came,' he said, slurring. '*Wunderbar*!'

'You're drunk already,' she replied.

'I'm seeing the world through rose-coloured glasses. It's more bearable that way.'

He stepped aside to let her in, bowing slightly, mockingly, his left hand

on the door, a large glass of whisky in his right fist. She stepped past him too quickly, her shoulder brushing his bowed head, and immediately smelt the staleness of a room that had not had much fresh air. The windows were shuttered and most of the room was in semi-darkness, illuminated only with a small bedside lamp that covered the unmade bed in yellow light. Leon's clothes and a lot of magazines and newspapers were strewn all over the place.

'You haven't been looking after yourself,' she said. 'This place is a mess.'

'No,' he said, closing the door, his voice coming from behind her. 'I decided to dispense with the chambermaid, but it's not working out.'

She sat at the table, just beneath the shuttered windows, and glanced up as Leon crossed to her, the ghost of his former self. He moved out of the semi-darkness and into the pale yellow light, which made him look drawn and ill, emphasising his frailty.

'You haven't been eating,' Kate said, feeling claustrophobic and nervous.

'When not drinking whisky, I drink brandy, which I'm told contains vitamins.' He stopped in front of her, grinning crookedly, looking older than his age, then nodded at the bottles on the table, his eyes bloodshot and sleepy. 'Can I offer the lady a drink? Or is it too early for that?'

'It's too early, Leon.'

'A coffee?'

'No, thanks.'

'You're a woman of strong moral fibre, which I hope Moshe appreciates.' He put the glass to his lips, gulping the whisky down as if it was water, then wiped his lips with the back of his free hand and sat on the edge of the bed. His eyes, in the pale, yellow light were bloodshot and baggy. 'So what's it like, my little pacifist,' he said, 'being married to the new Minister of Defence?'

'It's fine,' Kate said, not amused by his mockery. 'But I don't think we should talk about that right now.'

'Why not?'

'It's my private life.'

'That sounds terribly prim and proper.'

'I didn't come here to listen to your sarcasm.'

'Why *did* you come, Kate?'

She closed her eyes and lowered her head, recalling the phone call he had made, the unusual intensity in his voice when he asked her to visit him. Now,

she was angry, feeling as if she had been violated and that his question, offered with quiet deliberation, was intended to hurt her. She opened her eyes and stared directly at him, wondering what he was after.

'I came because you asked me to come,' she said, 'and you sounded quite desperate.'

'I was drunk.'

'That's true… but you insisted that you had to see me. In fact, you said it was really important. So, here I am.'

Leon had another drink, lowered his glass and grinned at her, his thin lips curving slowly and uncertainly towards the humour of bitterness.

'Did you tell Moshe you were coming here?'

'Yes, Leon, naturally.'

'And how did the Minister of Defence react to that?'

'He didn't forbid me to come.'

'That was decent of him.'

'Yes, Leon, it was.'

'I can tell that this conversation is making you angry, but I didn't intend that.'

'I'm not amused by your sarcasm.'

'I'm not amused that you married Moshe.'

'I wanted him, I married him, now I'm pregnant - and I don't regret anything.'

The shock made him visibly flinch, as if he had been whipped, and he glanced aimlessly around the untidy room to avoid looking at her. He was not the Leon she knew, but someone else, a haunted man; and the room, in its squalor and semi-darkness, reflected the change in him. Kate smelt the stale air, saw the shadows in the corners, and had the urge to get up and open the windows to let light and air in.

'I'm surprised they let you back into Israel.'

'So am I,' he replied. 'Nonetheless, I was simply waved through, so I must be forgiven.' He managed to look at her again, but his eyes were not pretty, bloodshot and terribly weary, deep shadows beneath them. 'You should know,' he said. 'You're married to Moshe. Did he mention my name?'

'No, Leon, he didn't. He didn't say anything about it. He didn't even know you'd returned, so he wasn't involved with it. More likely Shin Bet was

responsible.'

'Internal security,' Leon murmured. 'Of course, it would have to be them. They must want a talk with me.'

'I doubt it,' Kate said. 'I think they're just not concerned. You're a journalist and you were doing your job, so I don't think they'll touch you.' She glanced at the magazines and newspapers strewn haphazardly around the room, at the clothes draped over the furniture and thrown carelessly onto the floor, at the empty bottles and overflowing ashtrays. 'You used to be a tidy man,' she said. 'Why are you living like this?'

He shrugged with weary indifference, had a drink and licked his lips, lowered his head and stared at the floor, his shoulders slumped in defeat.

'Why not?' he said. 'The point is simply to pass the day. I have very few friends, none at all in Jerusalem, so I drink, occasionally eat, sleep a lot, usually alone, and spend hours studying the walls of this room in which we once made grand love.'

'Studying the walls won't bring it back. You won't solve anything that way. The only thing you're going to find in a bottle of whisky is the cork of another.'

'You always *were* sharp with your tongue, Kate.'

'You don't do too badly yourself.'

'And now, alas, my tongue has been lathered by too many whiskeys.'

'You said it.'

'I did.'

'You could pull yourself out of it. It's not pleasant seeing you like this, and I can no longer help you.'

'No, you're a married woman.'

'Yes, Leon, that's right. I still feel a great deal of concern for you, but it stretches no farther than that. I came here to see you – because I still happen to care for you – but I also came to find out what you wanted, and you still haven't told me.'

'Don't rush me, Kate. Please.'

'I'm trying to keep you awake.'

'I'm awake. I'm simply dead on my feet… my new full-time condition.'

Kate felt herself breaking, her defences washed away, pouring out on the tide of a compassion that sprang from old memories. She had truly cared for Leon - not with love, but with deep affection - and now, hearing his words,

seeing the frailty of his pose, she understood that her concern, now almost painfully resurrected, was based on the emotions they had shared and could never forget. She was not betraying Moshe, nor holding on to Leon's love, but recognising what could not be denied and affirming her genuine concern over what he was suffering.

'I received your letter,' she said.

'I vaguely remember writing it.'

'It was an eloquent letter, very passionate, filled with wonder and despair.'

'Really?'

'You remember, Leon. Don't pretend that you've forgotten. The Arabs filled you with wonder, with the enchantment of their conviction, but you ended on a note of despair over what you had lost.'

'I lost you.'

'You didn't mean that. Perhaps that, also, but certainly not that alone. More important than me, more destructive than your feelings for me, was the revelation that your lack of commitment had left you nothing to cling to. You envied the Arabs, Leon: their code of truth or untruth, their passionate belief in black and white, their refusal to recognise any grey area between, any emotion that left them in doubt or without the will to take action. Yes, Leon, you envied them, and felt smaller in their presence, convinced that in abdicating from commitment you had lost every value. All of that was in your letter – in the lines, not between them – it was there with the shame and the guilt that brought you back to this room.'

'I loved you and lost you, Kate. It was no more than that. I was filled with self-pity, perhaps feeling humiliated, and swept along in the extraordinary fervour of the *Hajj*, with the chanting and the singing and those thousands massed together, I naturally became somewhat melodramatic and put my hot pen to paper.'

'Are you denying what you wrote?'

'I might as well have been drunk.'

'Drunk, you couldn't have written as you did - and damned well you know it.'

'Please, Kate, this is painful.'

'You're inflicting the pain on yourself. You had the sense to recognise your own weakness, and now you're denying it.'

Leon sighed and stood up, haunted in the baleful light, went to the table and refilled his glass and instantly had a long drink. He sighed again and licked his lips, scratched his chest with his free hand, then walked over to the bed and just stood there, his back turned towards her.

'My weakness?' he said. 'My lack of commitment? What has commitment ever brought anyone except disillusionment? Politics, religion, art and romantic love: all these things, constantly changing, are as ephemeral as a burning candle. All men dream of tomorrow - the tomorrow that never comes - and from dreaming comes scheming, all the plans and ambitions, the pitiful belief in a future much improved on the present. How else could we survive it? Life's repeated deceits. And how else could we suffer our children and the crime of their birth? To be born is to be convicted, doomed to pain and certain death, and no belief or commitment of any kind can help us forget that. No, Kate, I don't believe - not in Joshua and not in Judgement Day - and so, lacking any belief, I can feel no commitment.'

'You're lying to yourself, Leon, trying to bury your true feelings. You committed yourself to me - let's say it: to love - and now, having lost me, you're trying to convince yourself that it never happened. It won't work, Leon. You can't live with that sort of lie. The fact that there may be no tomorrow has nothing to do with it. Don't use your children, Leon. Don't use disillusionment. We're born, and being born we must make choices, one way or the other. You made at least one choice - right or wrong, you chose me - and now, having lost me, you're reneging on even that small commitment. That's always been your problem: you could never accept loss or failure. It's not that you don't believe in anything, but that you can't stand to lose it.'

'I refuse to accept that.'

'You refuse to accept the truth.'

'The truth is what gets you through the night.'

'Is the truth in that whisky?'

The remark made him flinch again, but he didn't turn around to face her; instead remaining where he was near the bed, his back still turned to her. He was silent for a long time, breathing deeply and harshly, and when finally he spoke his voice was filled with self-lacerating bitterness.

'Yes, you're right,' he said. 'That's why I betrayed your trust. I couldn't stand the thought of losing you, I was angry more than hurt, and like a child smashing his toys in frustration, I betrayed you to punish you. You didn't

deserve that, and I don't feel proud of it, even less when I examine what I felt for you and come up with the truth. The truth is that I lied - to myself more than to you - and that my love for you, though based on genuine affection, was at heart the cowardly hope that in committing myself to you, I might be able to pretend that I did at least have one thing to believe in. That isn't real love - it's self-deception and the abuse of love - and so, understanding that, having to finally face up to it, realising that I couldn't even honestly commit myself to you, I had to accept that I was incapable of truly giving myself to anything, that I couldn't take a stand on any issue or trust my own feelings. No, Kate, I didn't love you - not as much as I pretended - and that fact in itself is an eloquent testimony to the self-deceptive cowardice of my nature. I was using you to hide from my sins, and that can't be called love.'

'It's love of a kind, Leon.'

'It's a halfway kind of love. A love that only goes so far, stopping short of commitment.'

'Is that why you left your wife and children?'

'Yes, I think so. At the time I laid the blame on political disillusionment, but in truth what I was hiding was the knowledge that I just didn't care enough.'

'Why don't you go back to them?'

'It was years ago, Kate. Even if I cared, if I now felt for them, it would be too late for that. In the event, such a gesture would be pointless since I still can't feel anything.'

He finally turned around to face her, grinning bleakly, without cynicism, then sighed and sat on the edge of the bed, his gaze fixed on the floor. Kate wanted to help, to touch him and reassure him, but she sensed that he had gone beyond that and had to find his own way back. Studying him, she thought him frail, the mere ghost of his former self, his skin sickly and his body undernourished, shoulders slumped in defeat. The glass of whisky, almost empty, reflected light from the web of his fingers.

'When did you leave Damascus?' she asked him, changing the subject.

'About six weeks ago.'

'You mean you've been in this hotel for the past six weeks?'

'No, Kate, I've only been here a week. I spent five weeks in Europe. I was writing about the riots and hysterical conversions, about the ritualistic murders by the new devil worshippers, about the thousands at Stonehenge

and other mystic sites who stand, in the silence of the night, and gaze up at the stars. Joshua is Jesus Christ. He's also the devil. He's also an extraterrestrial whose presence here on Earth is a sign that the Super Race is coming to either protect us or enslave us. The Europe I knew has gone and won't ever return, all its values, its culture and history, made redundant by Joshua. Every religious organisation and cult, good and evil, is flourishing; people are refusing to go to work and instead are demonstrating in the streets, chanting their demands to see Joshua the Christ; industry and commerce are grinding to a halt in the face of the new anti-materialist ethos; and the great new Christian Church, in the fifth week of its life, is under pressure from every government in Europe to do something about it.'

'Their plan back-fired,' Kate said, 'and then blew up in their faces. They united the churches and hailed Joshua as Jesus Christ to broaden the base of Christianity and protect the religious freedom of Eastern Europe. Unfortunately, in their panic, they forgot to consider the possible effects, both personal and public, on society in general. Now Western Europe is breaking down, the Church is being held responsible, and ironically, considering why all this came about, the Soviets have still made no move against Eastern Europe.'

'*Why* have the Soviets made no move, Kate? Have you thought about that?'

He raised his eyes to stare at her, not grinning, his gaze steady, the pale yellow light falling across him and shadowing his face. He was obviously very serious, very concerned, and that made her feel nervous.

'No,' she said, 'I hadn't thought about it. Why? Have you heard something new?'

He nodded, stood up and walked across to the window, raised his hand as if about to open the shutters, changed his mind, dropped his hand. He stood there, looking down at the table, swirling the drink in his glass.

'I owe you one,' he said. 'In my anger, I betrayed your trust. If I believe in nothing else, I believe in personal trust, so perhaps, in giving you this, I'll make amends, both to you and to Moshe. I could not, in all honesty, and with the best will in the world, give the information personally to your husband. So I'm going to tell you what I learned, whether or not it's helpful.'

He glanced at her, showing a pained, tentative longing, then stared down at the table again, speaking quietly and evenly.

‘I learned this from a disillusioned Vatican source,’ he said, ‘and knowing him well, I can guarantee that he speaks the truth. The Soviets have made no move because the Pope has agreed to a new deal that will get him off the hot seat and hopefully solve his mounting problems. Appalled by the unexpected results of his machinations with the World Council of Churches - including his confirmation of Joshua as the Christian Christ - and torn between his desire to preserve the moral fabric of Western Europe and his desire to save his beloved Eastern Europe from the threatened Soviet suppression, the Pope was left with no alternative but to offer the Soviets, unofficially and secretly, his second and most shameful compromise.’

Kate leaned forward, placed her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands. She stared down through her fingers, seeing nothing, concentrating on Leon’s words.

‘Shortly after the unification of the two great Churches and their proclaiming of Joshua as their Christ, the Soviets made it clear to the Vatican that they would not be intimidated and that they intended, within a fortnight, to proceed with their plans for the obliteration of the Christian Church in Eastern Europe. The Pope was given two weeks grace to enable him to either dissolve the unification of the Catholic and Protestant Churches or to come up with some suitable alternative. The Soviets, further, made it clear that they were more concerned with the Church’s official acceptance of Joshua as Christ - with its far-reaching implications - than they were about the unification of the two Churches. Knowing this, and aware that the unification of the Churches could not be amended, the Pope had no choice but to accept from the Soviets their own, highly diabolical proposal: Joshua will be brought to Rome, interrogated by the Sacred College of Cardinals, and then, irrespective of their individual assessments, be proclaimed publicly as a false Messiah and not the Son of God as formerly announced.’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Kate murmured.

‘Believe it,’ Leon said.

‘If he does that,’ Kate said, ‘a lot of Christians will be even more outraged.’

‘That, Kate, is true, but it’s a choice between two evils, and in this case, no matter how high the price, the gains will outweigh the losses. The Vatican needs the political and fiscal support of Western Europe, but that support is already being withdrawn because of the chaos caused by its recent actions;

therefore, in renouncing Joshua, the Vatican will not only please the Soviets, but will also, by disillusioning a population seduced by Joshua, encourage the return of the materialistic ethos and the gratitude of the politicians and businessmen throughout Western Europe. Church attendance will fall again, and a lot of the converted will renounce their faith, but the Church will still stand, its public principles intact, and Eastern Europe will be saved from the boot heels of Soviet oppression.'

Kate didn't want to believe it, but she knew it must be true, and she felt a faint nausea and dread spreading out deep inside her. She looked up and saw Leon staring at her, his face drawn and solemn.

'So,' she said, 'they not only save themselves, but also wash their hands of what happens in the Middle East: in renouncing Joshua, they return the whole issue to the Jews and the Moslems.'

'That's correct,' Leon said.

'Ben Eleizer won't stand for it. He'll understand what's going on. He'll simply ignore their communiqué - as he has all the others.'

'He won't be able to,' Leon said. 'They won't use a communiqué. This time it won't be secret - the Pope needs a public drama - so the request will be made, sometime next week, through a widely publicised world-wide broadcast.'

Kate glanced about the room, at the semi-darkness and squalor, and suddenly felt disturbingly unreal, as if locked in a dream. She thought of Joshua and what he had become - to the individual and to the world in general - and a fear as relentless as a tidal wave swept through her and shook her. Men dreamed and schemed, and in their scheming wrought destruction; and now Joshua, in his ambiguity, was the pivot around which these schemes moved. She felt that Joshua was in danger, that the tide was moving against him, and the fear, now like ice around her heart, seemed to close in and crush her. Looking up, she saw Leon looking down, a ghost standing in shadow.

'Why did you want to tell me this?' she asked. 'Surely it can't affect things in Israel, one way or the other.'

'I think Moshe should know,' he said, 'and, in turn, Ben Eleizer, because the Americans are bound to view it as a victory for the Soviets in Europe. Viewing it thus, they'll also view it as a deliberate attempt to isolate Joshua's influence to the Middle East. That narrows it down to Jew and Moslem, both trying to claim Joshua, and it still begs the question of who will finally have

that dubious honour. The fate of the Middle East could be decided by a word from Joshua, and the Americans, viewing the Soviets across Israel, won't forget Joshua's presence. They will, indeed, view him as the innocent instrument of Soviet intentions.'

'You mean they might want to use him before the Soviets attempt to do so.'

'I mean the Vatican, once allowing the Pope to speak, will most likely have left them little choice - and Israel, whether she likes it or not, will have to deal with the Americans.'

He picked up one of the bottles and poured himself another drink, his hand shaking and letting the whisky splash over the table. Kate watched him, feeling troubled, frightened for Joshua, sad for Leon, then she lowered her eyes, trying to blot it out, feeling sweat on her brow.

'That's it,' Leon said. 'That's my favour. You can take your leave now.'

She glanced at him, startled, stung by his sudden harshness, and watched him step away from the window and go back to the bed. He placed his glass on the bedside cabinet, kicked his shoes off and lay down, covering his closed eyes with his hands and taking slow, even breaths. The pale yellow light fell across his body, but his face was in shadow, and his voice, coming out of that darkness, was the voice of a broken man.

'You heard me, Kate. I said you could leave. You've no reason for staying here.'

Kate stood up, feeling wounded, silently grieving for his suffering, but understanding that there was nothing she could do except leave him alone. She walked away from the table, newspapers rustling around her feet, and stopped when she came to the door, turning back to look at him. He was still outstretched on the bed, his face hidden in the shadows, the pale light illuminating the dishevelled shirt that fell off his white body. He did not make a sound, and appeared not to be breathing, but eventually his hand emerged to the light and reached out for the glass of whiskey on the bedside cabinet.

'Open the shutters,' Kate said. 'Let some light and air in. Admit the world and stop killing yourself with your pathetic self-pity.'

His hand disappeared into the darkness, taking the glass of whisky with it, and she knew he was having a drink while still flat on his back. Shaken, feeling lost, she placed her hand on her own belly, checked the life stirring

within her; felt, if not joyous, at least hopeful. Then she walked from the room.

35

Looking out of the window of the roaring helicopter, shading his eyes to combat the dazzling brilliance of the sun, Moshe saw the wastelands of the Sinai Desert, far below, giving way to the incandescent blue of the Gulf of Suez. He looked down for some time, feeling drawn towards it, as if, were he not strapped into his seat, he would have thrown himself out. He loved the emptiness of the desert, was seduced by its dangerous beauty, and now, feeling trapped, hemmed in by mounting pressures, he wanted to be standing on his own feet on that hot, burning sand.

'So they know,' Ben Eleizer said.

'Yes, Shlomo, they know. When I rang them to give them Leon's news, they said they'd just picked it up.'

'Then that's what they want to talk about.'

'I'd think so. Almost certainly.'

'Well, we're in for an interesting conversation, but it may not be pleasant.'

Pleasant it would not be, as Moshe understood fully, but as he looked down at the Gulf of Suez, at that ribbon of water dividing the deserts, he was thinking of Kate's meeting with Leon and feeling resentful. His resentment was ridiculous, almost childishly stupid, and when he thought of Kate, pregnant and proud, he was ashamed of himself. She had been sad when she returned from seeing Leon, obviously shocked by his appearance, and in telling him how Leon had changed, she had not mixed her words. Moshe had felt better then, less suspicious of her motives, but still, like acid rotting the guts, a faint resentment remained.

The helicopter was dropping lower, casting its shadow on the blue water, and then the edge of the Eastern Desert, looking white in the shimmering heat-haze, advanced as the Gulf slid past below and then gradually disappeared. Moshe looked down on Egypt, at the United Arab Republic, and

saw the rippling sand dunes sweeping away to parched brown-and-purple mountains, a single road snaking as a black line through the barren lowlands. The mountains advanced quickly, becoming higher, three-dimensional, then suddenly they were spread out around the helicopter, blocking out the sky. The helicopter started ascending, moving up the face of the cliffs, then it flew over the summit, across the parched, cracked rock, until the desert opened out at the other side and seemed to go on forever.

'There they are,' Ben Eleizer said.

The American tanks were in the desert, spread out in long lines, forming a protective flank along a makeshift airstrip on which the aircraft sat in neat rows, their wings reflecting the sunlight. There were also trucks and jeeps, gun emplacements and supply dumps, and the hundreds of tents, forming white, linear patterns, housed the thousands of men who for now resembled black ants moving in columns through a pool of liquid gold.

'Yankee Doodle Dandy,' Ben Eleizer said blandly. 'They sure know how to put on a show and make an impression.'

The remark didn't amuse Moshe who, looking down, felt only the dryness in his throat and an odd kind of nausea. What he saw down there was power, military might and its need to strike, and as the helicopter dropped lower and the tanks seemed to spread out farther, he thought of the Russians in Syria and Jordan, and understood the position.

'They mean business,' he said.

'Most assuredly, my friend.'

'Those people aren't here to protect anyone; they're here to take over.'

The helicopter dropped lower, roaring louder and rocking slightly, coming down above the tanks, then heading west across the tents, whipping the sand up as the land spread out around it and eventually hovering just above the airstrip, beyond the last row of aircraft. There were combat troops around the landing zone, their weapons held at the ready, and behind them, in two well-guarded jeeps, were the high-ranking officers. The sand was blowing across them, swirling away above their heads, as the helicopter dropped even lower, bobbed up and down a little, and finally, with a mild thudding sound, settled onto the LZ.

Moshe unclipped his seat belt as the rotors slowed down, stood up as they stuttered into silence and came to a halt. He glanced through the window and saw some soldiers breaking ranks, moving apart to let the two jeeps advance

and stop close to the LZ. The door of the helicopter was opened, making a shrill grinding sound, then the ladder, clanging brutally, was dropped down through the inpouring sunlight. Ben Eleizer sighed wearily, composing his moon-shaped face, then he moved towards the door and reached out to take hold of the engineer. The young man responded, helping Ben Eleizer down the ladder. Following him down, Moshe finally placed his feet on the soil of Egypt. He turned around to see the Americans walking towards him through the shimmering heat-haze.

General Kernan was in the lead, offering his hand to Ben Eleizer, flanked by two lieutenants and another two men wearing plain clothes. The general shook hands with Ben Eleizer, then did the same with Moshe, nodding his head and offering a formal smile that did not reach his gelid, hazel eyes. The other officers were introduced, lieutenants Green and Schonfield, then the two men in plain clothes, Cohn and Thompson, who belonged to the CIA. General Kernan apologised for the lack of formality, pointing out that this was Arab territory, making a joke about the delicacy of the situation as they walked to the jeeps. Moshe and Ben Eleizer shared the first jeep with General Kernan. The driver headed along the airstrip, past rows of crowded tents and gleaming planes, then turned left and passed jeeps and trucks and the ominous gun emplacements, churning up the sand and hurling it over the nearest soldiers, before stopping at a particularly large tent at the hub of the camp.

‘Home sweet home,’ General Kernan said, climbing down from the parked jeep. ‘It’s not quite the Pentagon, Shlomo, but at least there are chairs inside.’

The tent was spacious and cool, the chairs surrounding a large trestle table, lamps wired to generators shedding light on the various maps spread out between the ashtrays and glasses and field telephones. The general indicated two chairs and Moshe sat beside Ben Eleizer as the other four men entered the tent and also sat at the table. General Kernan, facing Ben Eleizer and Moshe, mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

‘A drink, Shlomo?’

‘Just water.’

‘Moshe?’

‘I’ll have a beer, thanks.’

‘Let’s settle for cans of beer and jugs of water. Okay, corporal, get to it.’

The corporal did as he was told, using the assistance of two privates, setting bottles of mineral water and cans of beer on the table, and then being dismissed. When he had departed, they all helped themselves to drinks - only Moshe and the CIA men drinking beer, the others settling for water. Their thirst slaked, they prepared themselves, lighting cigarettes, slyly studying each other, then General Kernan leaned closer to the table to address Ben Eleizer.

'This talk is off the record, Shlomo.'

'I *had* assumed so, Ralph.'

'If this leaks out, we'll deny it.'

'We'll do exactly the same, Ralph.'

The general nodded and sat back, mopped his forehead with the handkerchief, glanced uneasily at the two men in plain clothes and then leaned forward again. He had silvery-grey hair, a broken nose, a brick-shaped chin; and his eyes, slightly baggy, webbed with lines, held little real warmth.

'Our information confirms what you picked up from that English lush,' he said. 'The Vatican is going to deal with the Soviets in order to keep their hands off Eastern Europe.'

'Quite,' Ben Eleizer said.

'I don't think I have to tell you how we feel about this projected move, except to say that it's a clear defeat for the Vatican in the face of Soviet aggression.'

'But the Vatican is stepping down to *prevent* the suppression of the Christian Church in Eastern Europe.'

'Right,' the general said. 'Which is, in itself, a clear victory for the Soviets, weakening the authority of the Vatican and strengthening that of the Soviets throughout Eastern Europe - by implication, without the threat of physical force.'

'I fail to see how the Soviet Union, in agreeing to keep its hands *off* the Christian Church in Eastern Europe, will actually strengthen its authority in that area.'

'Don't act naïve with me, Shlomo. You know as well as I do that in forcing the Church to back down, the Soviets will have won an enormous psychological victory and reaffirmed - to the world and the peoples of Eastern Europe in particular - that their control, in political *and* religious matters, is still absolute. All the Vatican has done, Shlomo, is walk right into

the Soviet trap: giving them the opportunity to increase their authority throughout Eastern Europe without the embarrassment of having to use physical force - and demonstrating to Western Europe that even the Vatican, with all its power and prestige, can't stand up to the Kremlin.'

'I think you're reading too much into this,' Ben Eleizer said.

'We know how the Soviet mind thinks,' the general replied, 'and if they think they've scored a victory, that's enough - they'll try it again.'

'You mean here, in the Middle East?'

'Precisely.'

'Ah,' Ben Eleizer said. He clasped his hands together on the table, turned them over, examined his fingernails, furrowed his brow as if trying to think, his face deceptively innocent.

'It's our belief,' the general continued, 'that the Soviets, having won so easily over Eastern Europe, will now try to exploit their moral victory by taking similar steps in this area. It's also our belief that part of their strategy concerning the Vatican was to confine your man Joshua to the Middle East and the Jewish-Arab claims for him.'

'And how would that benefit the Soviets?'

'They'll simply wait until Joshua leans one way or the other - and then they'll move accordingly.'

'I don't think I understand, Ralph.'

The general glanced at the men around him, clearly exasperated by Ben Eleizer's coyness; then one of the CIA men, Thompson, leaned forward, his face as flat as an ironing board.

'I think you know what we're talking about,' he said. 'The mystery of this Joshua, whoever he is, has stirred the imagination of the whole world, causing chaos in Europe and America, inflaming the Middle East situation, and encouraging the Soviets and Chinese, plus the predominantly Hindu and Buddhist countries, to accuse us of having used him to manufacture the recent Arab-Israeli war.'

'A war you certainly appreciated,' Moshe said, unable to let the point pass.

'We're here to protect our interests in the Middle East,' the general said, 'and to ensure that Israel doesn't drop an atomic weapon on the heads of our Arab friends. We're here, in short, to prevent a Third World War.'

The statement was marginally true, but not nearly true enough, and Moshe

felt the acid of anger in his stomach, the heat in his cheeks.

'We didn't manufacture the recent war,' Thompson said. 'It came about because of your man Joshua - and that's my whole point.'

'What point?' Ben Eleizer asked,

'The point, Mr. Prime Minister, is that the man known as Joshua has become a danger to everyone with interests in this sensitive area - not only us Americans, but the Russians, the Moslems and you Jews. Already, he's led to one war; he could soon lead to another. The Arabs think of him as their Mahdi, most Jews think of him as their Messiah, and now, with the Vatican about to disown him completely, the claims upon him are about to be narrowed down to the Jews and Arabs alone. We happen to believe that the Russians, in forcing the Vatican to disown Joshua, have deliberately returned the problem to where it started: right here in the Middle East.'

'Why?'

'The Russians are presently massed along the borders of Jordan and Syria, their tanks and guns facing Israel. By reducing the question of who or what Joshua is to a running conflict between the Jews and Arabs alone, they're hoping that the conflict will erupt into another war that would - due to your former threat to use your atomic weapons - give them an excuse for crossing the border into Israel as a so-called peace-keeping force. Such an action would be taken without prior warning - and once in, as it was with Afghanistan, you won't get them out.'

Ben Eleizer looked up, spreading his hands on the table, his bland gaze scanning everyone in turn, his moon face unrevealing.

'I don't think the Russians will do that,' he said, 'unless Joshua takes a definite stand, one way or the other.'

'Right,' the general replied. 'If Joshua claims to be the Messiah, the Jews will attempt to inaugurate the pure Zionist State, the remaining Arabs in Israel will all be thrown out, and the Arab world, understandably incensed, will retaliate with war. If, on the other hand, Joshua claims to be the Mahdi, then the Arabs will be impelled to inaugurate the sovereignty of Islam and, again, will embark on a war against Israel. Either way, sooner or later, something will break - and neither we nor the Soviets can let that happen.'

'Our experience convinces us that Joshua will take no side, and that those events, at least as you envisage them, simply will not materialise.'

'That's the whole point,' Thompson said. 'You're mistaken in thinking

that Joshua would have to pick one side over the other in order to start another war; unfortunately, the facts would seem to suggest otherwise. Joshua's presence in Israel - just his presence - is enough; and current events, all springing out of his presence, are already leading to war.'

Moshe caught Ben Eleizer's glance, the merest flicker of movement, and knew that he was less bland than he looked and was, in fact, worried. Moshe was likewise worried, but his anxiety was touched with anger, a cold fury that the Americans and Russians, in the arrogance of their might, could manoeuvre through such squalid intrigues to settle the fate of the Holy Land.

'I admit to bewilderment,' Ben Eleizer said, 'but do, pray, continue.'

The other CIA man, Cohn, lit a cigarette, taking his time about it, blowing the smoke out before speaking.

'We're talking about your own zealots,' he said, 'and their obsession with Joshua.' He stared hard at Ben Eleizer, but received no visible response. He glanced briefly at General Kernan and his two lieutenants, then shrugged his shoulders. 'Okay,' he continued, 'I'll spell it out for you. Your zealots, believing in Joshua as the Jewish Messiah, are determined to inaugurate the Zionist State and throw all the Arabs out of Israel. They always wanted that, of course, but their intentions didn't bother us, since they were, at most, a minority group without any great influence. Now, however, with the advent of Joshua, they've picked up some powerful supporters and can no longer be safely ignored. They want to oust your presiding government and install their own Cabinet - a Cabinet consisting of handpicked, fanatical Zionists - and, having done that, they intend making good on all their promises.'

'They won't get me out,' Ben Eleizer said.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Prime Minister, but I'm afraid they will. Our Intelligence reports reveal that widespread belief in Joshua as the Jewish Messiah will ensure that eighty percent of your Jewish citizens will vote for the zealots. It's also worth noting, if painful to accept, that the Soviets are supporting the zealots with secret supplies of arms and money - because they know that when the zealots get in they'll have the war they so badly need.'

For the first time, Ben Eleizer failed to maintain his bland façade, his cheeks flushing, his eyes widening in shock, his fists clenching on the table, as the shock of what he was hearing bolted through him. It only lasted a moment, perhaps one or two seconds, but it was enough to make Moshe understand just how badly he felt. Moshe was suffering a similar shock, as if

a trap door had been opened beneath him, as if he was falling down through a darkness that would never let light in again. The world was closing in on Israel, wanting to bury it in order to gain the Middle East; and Moshe, in his fear and despair, had to fight to control himself.

'Presuming that what you say is true,' Moshe said, trying to keep his voice level, 'just what are you after?'

Cohn glanced at Thompson, nervously seeking his approval, received a nod and returned his gaze to the front, his eyes roaming back and forth between Moshe and Ben Eleizer, as if he wasn't sure which one of them he was addressing. His voice, like the information he was conveying, had a funereal ring to it.

'Please bear in mind that whatever you desire, as things stand at the moment, the zealots will soon be running your country. If you let that happen, there'll be another Arab-Israeli war and the zealots, already supported by the Russians, will turn to them for aid. The Russians will agree to help them, but the price will be high - notably the inclusion of their so-called "advisors" in the reconstructed Israeli government and the acceptance of a long-term Soviet peace-keeping army in Israel. This will effectively give the Russians dominance over the Middle East, with their military forces controlling Syria, Jordan and, surreptitiously, Israel. We cannot, and will not, allow such a disaster to take place.'

'So,' Moshe said, 'you want to get in first.'

'Right,' Cohn replied, looking even more uneasy. 'No matter how distasteful, you simply have to accept the fact that sooner or later you're going to have to make a deal with either the Russians or us. If you decide to do nothing, the zealots will deal with the Russians anyway - and the fate of Israel will be out of your hands. If, on the other hand, you accept our proposal, we can guarantee the survival of your presiding government and the freedom of Israel.'

'Wonderful!' Ben Eleizer exclaimed quietly. 'But what do you expect in return?'

General Kernan coughed into his clenched fist and then studied his hands at length, while Cohn, glancing again at his partner, laid his cards on the table.

'We have two concerns,' he said. 'The first is to abort the Soviet's expected triumph in Eastern Europe, and the second is to find a final solution

to the problem of Palestine.'

'Israel,' Ben Eleizer corrected him.

'Sorry,' Cohn said.

'And by a final solution, you mean a formal agreement concerning Soviet and American containment of this area.'

'I'm afraid so,' Cohn said.

Moshe glanced down at the table, feeling despair and increasing anger, silently cursing his fellow Jews for their disparate religious passions and their inability to live with one another. Israel, which had once been divided between Jew and Arab, was now, more ironically, divided because of Jew fighting Jew. It was meat for the Americans and Soviets, a dinner set down on a plate, and the Jews, their heads bowed, their thoughts focused on Judgement Day, would still be worshipping when their country was devoured by those more realistic. The thought of it made Moshe sick to his stomach.

'So,' he said bitterly, now unable to conceal it, looking directly at Cohn. 'What's your proposal?'

'Our proposal,' Cohn replied, 'is that Joshua be removed from the scene before he reaches the Vatican.'

There was a long, shocked silence that seemed to last forever, then Moshe heard the sound of his own voice, twice as old as it should be.

'Are you talking about kidnapping?' he asked.

'Termination,' Cohn replied bluntly.

Moshe glanced at Ben Eleizer but his stare was not returned; Ben Eleizer was gazing down at the table, his head in his hands. He stayed like that for some time, silent, not moving, but eventually, with an audible sigh, he looked up once more. His eyes roamed from Moshe to General Kernan and his two lieutenants, then finally came to rest on the two CIA men, particularly Cohn. He stared at Cohn for a long time, not saying a word, until Cohn, obviously getting the message, finished off his proposal.

'To remove Joshua from the scene,' he said, 'before the Pope can make his request, will, in preventing the Pope from publicly disowning him, ensure that the authority of the Church isn't undermined by the Soviets - and, incidentally, since the Vatican won't be responsible, leave the godless communists with no excuse for suppressing the Church in Eastern Europe.'

'So,' Ben Eleizer said, 'you deny the Russians that particular victory, and in making it impossible for the Church to deny Joshua, ensure that the

conflict about his nature isn't confined to the Middle East.'

'That, as far as it goes, is correct.'

'And the rest?'

'Please remember, Mr. Prime Minister, that if you reject this proposal, the zealots will take over Israel, there'll be an Arab-Israeli war, and the Soviets will end up in control of Jerusalem.'

'Please, Mr. Cohn, get it over with.'

Cohn sat up straight in his chair and tried to keep his gaze steady. 'Our proposal is that Joshua be terminated, by pistol shot, in some area where his body is certain to be found. Once his dead body is discovered, the news of his murder will spread like wildfire, with the Jews blaming the Arabs and the Arabs blaming the Jews for the crime. The shock and anger engendered by this - particularly throughout the Arab world - will give us an excuse for embarking on further preventative action right here in the United Arab Republic, but also entailing a base from which to expand our military presence into the Arab oil states of the Persian Gulf. Having done that, we'll be in a stronger strategic position when it comes to negotiating with the Soviets as we orchestrate, with them, a final settlement of the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian problem. As part of that settlement - and negotiating from a position of strength - we'll offer the return of the Egyptian, Jordanian and Syrian territories, but insist, in return, upon the fulfilment of the Israelis' dream of statehood, and ensure, during this process, that certain Israeli laws be amended to reduce to the barest minimum level the political freedoms of the zealots. Your own Cabinet, along with Israel's freedom, will thus be protected - and the United States will be able to guarantee the security of your borders from a position of much greater military strength.'

'The United States, Mr. Cohn, will be able to guarantee the security of our borders because they will, to all intents and purposes, rule most of the Arab world.'

'Better the United States than the Soviet Union, as I'm sure you'll agree.'

Moshe caught the flickering of Ben Eleizer's eyes, his flushed cheeks, as he tried to control his anger over what he was hearing. For Moshe it was a nightmare, something chillingly final, God's punishment for an Israel divided within itself and torn by the passionate religious differences that made Jew fight Jew. He glanced around the table, seeing the faces of normal men, and wondering, with a suffocating bitterness, at their suspicion and greed. He

wanted to hate them, but failed to do so, since their duplicities were not uncommon, but were in fact endemic to Israel and its religious dissension. As for himself, he was no better - and now he understood it - because even as he accepted the horror of what was being proposed, he knew that he was going to agree because he, meaning Israel, had no choice.

Ben Eleizer's moon-shaped face was drawn and pale, and Moshe knew, from the distracted flickering of his eyes, that they were thinking the same thing.

'Let's assume for the moment that we agree,' Ben Eleizer said. 'If, as you propose, we are to assassinate Joshua, who's to be responsible for pulling the trigger? I can't think, off hand, of one Jew or Arab who'd be willing to put a gun to Joshua's head.'

'Not at the moment,' Cohn said, 'but it can be arranged.'

He nodded at his partner, Thompson, and the latter, putting on a pair of spectacles, leaned over the file opened before him: clearly a CIA Intelligence report.

'Obviously,' he said, 'the United States cannot be seen to be involved in this, so using one of our own agents is out of the question. The assassination, therefore, will have to be arranged by you and carried out by one of your own Israelis. Assuming that this will be the case, it is our belief that in the unlikely event of the assassin's identity being uncovered, a religious zealot with a grudge would make it easier, diplomatically speaking, to absolve the Jews in general of the crime. Ideally, then, what we're after is a military-trained religious zealot who'll either keep his silence after the assassination or can be dispensed with shortly after the event.'

'A religious zealot,' Moshe said, feeling almost numb with disbelief, 'would be the last person to consent to murdering Joshua, the so-called Jewish Messiah.'

'A fanatic is a fanatic,' Thompson replied levelly, 'and fanaticism in a human being makes him or her into an instrument that can be turned, if handled with care, in any direction.'

'You have someone in mind?'

'Yes, major-general, we have. He's Lieutenant Paul Frankel. Lieutenant Frankel is a zealot, but he's also a trained soldier. He's been supporting the overthrow of your government, he's passionately devoted to Joshua, whom he thinks is the Messiah, and we believe that if properly handled, he'll turn

on his master.'

Moshe took a deep breath, feeling as if he had been stabbed, and then glanced across the table at Ben Eleizer, to check his reaction. The Prime Minister, no longer able to feign indifference, was staring at Thompson with wide eyes. Moshe, disorientated, wanting to get up and walk out, expelled his breath and gazed down at the table, thinking of Paul with pure hatred.

'Paul Frankel,' he said, 'may indeed have supported the zealots, but he certainly wouldn't support them to the extent of trying to overthrow this government.'

'On the contrary,' Thompson said, not looking up from his papers, 'Lieutenant Frankel is something other than a run-of-the-mill zealot. He believes that Joshua is the Messiah, that Judgement Day is at hand, and that his duty as a Jew - above all other moral considerations - is to ensure, at any cost, that the present, secular government is overthrown and that a new, purely ecclesiastical Cabinet is installed in the Knesset. Lieutenant Frankel, therefore, doesn't only *support* the zealots: he arranged for the bombing of the Mae Shearim quarter to kill one of his religious rivals; he passed secret information to foreign journalists, including Leon Halcomb; and finally, most importantly, in order to incite the Arabs and weaken the credibility of your government - thus giving the zealots their first chance to replace you - he personally revealed the secret of Joshua to a world-wide syndication agency. It was not, we can assure you, that journalist, Leon Halcomb, but Lieutenant Paul Frankel of Shin Bet.'

Moshe stared in a daze at Thompson, not believing what he was hearing, then accepting it and reeling from the shock and a pure, violent contempt. He glanced at Ben Eleizer, at General Kernan and his two silent lieutenants, then forced himself to concentrate on Thompson, who was finally raising his head from his papers. Thompson removed his spectacles, wiped them with a paper napkin, placed them on the papers before him and then spoke with calm, chilling conviction.

'Lieutenant Frankel is a fanatic, a man of immense frustration, and if we can turn that frustration in another direction, we can make it work for us. Though fanatically devoted to Joshua, he'll be just as fanatically against him if you convince him that Joshua, during his meeting with Rashid Idriss, confirmed that he was the Mahdi of the Moslems and said he would make it public knowledge by taking up residence in Mecca and spreading the gospel

of Muhammad. Though fanatically devoted to Zionism, he'll do as you wish if you point out that Joshua, the Mahdi, if allowed to stay alive, will incite the Arab world to a Holy War designed to win back Jerusalem. Finally, Lieutenant Frankel, who exposed Joshua to the world, will - if informed how his crime could benefit the Arabs and humiliate his fellow zealots - perform his military duty and keep his mouth shut as long as you maintain your silence about his crime. Given these facts, I think we can all safely assume that Lieutenant Frankel will assassinate Joshua - Messiah *or* Mahdi.'

Moshe didn't know what to say and could scarcely formulate his thoughts, his head swimming with images of Leon and Kate and Paul Frankel and Joshua, of the web of love and deceit and betrayal that now bound them together. He felt lost and ineffectual, totally drained and empty, and then, out of the silence of the wilderness inside him, he heard the sound of his own, much-altered voice, whispering rather than talking:

'So be it,' he said.

36

Paul entered the office tentatively, his expression aggressive, his brown eyes cool, obviously aware that the request to see him was not routine and wondering what it could mean. He closed the door quietly behind him, keeping his back to it, facing the desk, looked at Moshe and Ben Eleizer in turn and then walked up to them. Ben Eleizer nodded at the chair in front of the desk, saying nothing, his face blank, and Paul sat down, folding his hands in his lap and keeping his spine straight. Ben Eleizer was behind the desk and Moshe was standing in the corner nearest to him, his arms folded, his eyes sliding across Paul before settling on the middle distance. Paul lowered his head and coughed into his clenched fist, then raised his eyes again.

'I'm sorry to have brought you over here at such short notice,' Ben Eleizer said, 'but the matter is particularly important and urgent.' He looked steadily at Paul, his hands cupped beneath his chin, but Paul, merely blinking and licking his dry lips, offered no reply. 'Before proceeding to the main subject,' Ben Eleizer continued, 'I feel obliged to say that I'm extremely unhappy about your public support of the zealots, including Kash and *Gush Emunin*.'

'I'm a Zionist,' Paul replied, raising his chin to show defiance. 'Such a belief isn't forbidden in Israel, though you may disapprove of it.'

'I disapprove,' Ben Eleizer said, 'and would be a liar to say otherwise, but it hasn't been my practice to try to suppress the views of the Zionists. The point in your case, Lieutenant Frankel, is that you're a member of the Defence Forces and as such are committed to serving the government in office, keeping your political differences to yourself, except when conversing with friends or at the polling booth.'

'I've only gone against this government by expressing my religious views and publicly supporting those groups who share those views.'

'The groups who share your views are very active politically, and your

support of them must therefore be interpreted as political activity.'

'You can't suppress free speech, Prime Minister.'

'Your activities have gone beyond that.'

'This government has betrayed Zionism and doesn't deserve office; only the zealots, as you call them, have the will and belief to lead Israel away from compromise and into pure Zionism, undiluted by your diplomatic considerations and opportunistic internationalism.'

'Israel cannot stand alone, nor ignore events outside its borders. It has to deal with the international community and make certain compromises. Your friends, with their religious ideals, are politically naïve.'

'You're betraying Judaism.'

'This is the modern age, Paul. We can't turn our back on the rest of the world and hope to survive.'

'Your kind of compromise is blasphemous. The Holy Land belongs to the Jews. The Moslems and Christians have no place here and must be removed. That time is now coming. The Messiah has arrived. His presence here on Earth is a sign that the sovereignty of Judaism is at hand. The Messiah is the sign, but under him we are the instruments: we must inaugurate the pure Zionist State and await Judgement Day.'

Moshe looked into Paul's eyes, sweetly brown, much too bright, and understood that the intensity of his belief had indeed made him fanatical. He belonged to the Mae Shearim quarter, to the gun emplacements of the West Bank, and sooner or later, if left alone, he would unleash his fury. The CIA man was right - that fanaticism had to be directed elsewhere - but Moshe, in the knowledge of what was happening, still felt sick to his soul. He glanced at Ben Eleizer and wondered if he felt the same, but the Prime Minister, with his chin in his hands, was showing nothing at all.

'Can I take it,' he said, his steady gaze still fixed on Paul, 'that you're refusing to co-operate with us by keeping your views to yourself?'

'I won't give up my freedom of speech, nor change the company I keep.'

His specific crimes had not been mentioned, and would not be until strictly necessary. For the moment, Ben Eleizer's sole intention was to gently, slyly, lead him to Joshua.

'Your own beliefs,' Ben Eleizer said, 'and the beliefs of your friends, are clearly based on the assumption that Joshua is the Jewish Messiah.'

'Yes,' Paul said, 'of course.'

‘But Joshua has never made such a claim.’

‘Nor has he denied it.’

‘A lack of denial is hardly confirmation, as I’m sure you’d agree.’

‘He doesn’t have to know who he is or what he is. I’ve listened to his words and been witness to his miracles, and I know, from what I’ve seen and heard, that he *is* the Messiah. Do you need to know more? Is your lack of faith so blinding? He came down from the Mount of Olives the night the Golden Gate was opened; he’s a man of flesh and blood, but one with supernatural abilities; and his ignorance about himself hasn’t blinded him to the knowledge that he’s here on Earth for some specific purpose, which has to be the Redemption. As surely as the Golden Gate has been opened, Joshua *is* the Messiah.’

Ben Eleizer had what he wanted - confirmation of Paul’s fanaticism - so he leaned back in his chair, removing his hands from his chin and letting them rest on the table. He stared flatly at Paul, revealing nothing of his thoughts, and Paul eventually looked away to glance at Moshe, his dark eyes confused. Moshe felt uneasy, even guilty, almost criminal, understanding that what he was involved in was, if necessary, undoubtedly sordid. As a soldier, he was used to making unpleasant decisions, hardened to the necessity of political and military intrigue, conditioned in the acceptance of sacrifice as a means to an end; yet now he felt vile, his hands sweaty, his stomach heaving, convinced that what they were doing was pure treachery and murder, and that his own hands, which would soon be stained with blood, would never be clean again.

‘To support the Zionists is one thing,’ Ben Eleizer said quietly, ‘but to proclaim Joshua as the Messiah - in defiance of your own government’s official silence - is something we simply cannot tolerate. It was bad enough before, but it will now be more embarrassing - since Joshua will personally soon be proclaiming that he’s not the Messiah, but is, rather, the Mahdi of the Moslems.’

Paul visibly stiffened, his eyes widening in disbelief, then the hands that had been folded in his lap came apart and moved restlessly.

‘That’s nonsense,’ he said.

‘I wish it was,’ Ben Eleizer replied, ‘because it means bad trouble for us. Alas, it’s absolutely true and we just have to face it.’

Paul’s hands were opening and closing spasmodically on his thighs, as if

wanting to grab hold of something and cling to it for dear life.

'I don't believe you,' he said, though his voice sounded strained, emerging from his lips with reluctance and fading slowly, painfully, into a lingering silence.

Ben Eleizer broke that silence. 'Don't accuse me of lying,' he said, his face convincingly angry and offended, his fists clenching dramatically. 'As you know, Rashid Idriss had a meeting with Joshua - here, in this very office, only a few weeks ago. Rashid came here at Joshua's request, because Joshua wanted to talk to him. When they met, in my presence, the first thing Joshua said was that he was the Mahdi, not the Messiah, and would need Rashid's protection when eventually he ventured forth to Mecca. That's what the meeting was for - to arrange Joshua's journey to Mecca - and once there, as he explained, he was going to take up residence and thereafter preach the gospel of Muhammad. He'll be making that journey within the next few days - and once he does, the Messiah theory will be finished and the Moslems will own him.'

'*No*!' Paul exclaimed, the word exploding like a pistol shot, a denial and a cry of fear at once, whipping Moshe with its violence. 'It's not true. *It's not true*!'

Ben Eleizer stood up instantly, seizing the drama of the moment, and hurried around his desk to grab Paul by the shoulders and vigorously shake him.

'Damn you!' he snapped. 'It's true! Joshua's going to Mecca. He's going to proclaim himself as the Mahdi and gain the allegiance of the whole Arab world. Do you want to check this out? Then go and see him - right this minute! As I speak, he's in the El-Aqsa mosque with Rashid Idriss. Do you think the Jewish Messiah would worship Muhammad? Go and ask him, Paul. *Ask him*!'

He had bawled the last words, his face very close to Paul's, and he shook him again and then released him and walked back around his desk. Sighing loudly, despairingly, shaking his head in a weary gesture, he sank into his chair and then leaned forward, keeping his hard stare fixed on Paul. The latter was sitting up straight, his fingers digging neurotically into his thighs, his brown eyes, enlarged, roaming to and fro restlessly, as if in his searching he might find something hopeful to cling to. Eventually, with a shudder, after trying to speak and failing, he wiped his lips with an agitated hand and

managed to get the words out:

'Is it true?'

'Yes,' Ben Eleizer said. 'Right now, Joshua is with Rashid Idriss. He's been staying with Idriss for quite a few days now, and soon he'll go with him to Mecca to spread the gospel of Islam.'

What Ben Eleizer said was true - or was at least based on truth - since Joshua, presently staying with some Arabs in Silwan, had been visited every day by Rashid Idriss. There the truth ended, however, and the fiction began: Joshua alternated between Jew and Moslem, between Moslem and Christian; but he listened more than he talked, and, when he talked, couched his words in a studied ambiguity that avoided commitment to any single religion. If he had been seen in the El-Aqsa mosque, he had also been seen at the Wailing Wall; and his conversations with Rashid Idriss, all instigated by Rashid, had so far produced no clarification of who, or what, Joshua might be. Ben Eleizer had lied with skill, basing his lies on certain facts, and now Paul, if he checked out those facts, could think only the worst.

'Do you know what this means?' Ben Eleizer now said melodramatically. 'If Joshua goes to Mecca to be hailed as the Mahdi, the Arabs will be compelled to go to war and recapture Jerusalem.' He paused to let his words sink in, not removing his gaze from Paul, not flinching at the sight of Paul's anguish and shocked disbelief. 'Do you understand?' he continued. 'We simply cannot let that happen. If Joshua proclaims himself as the Mahdi, he'll unite the whole Arab world, and the Arabs, once united, will sweep in on Israel from all sides.' Paul was now leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, his hands clasped and his head tilted downward, his body wracked by visible spasms of grief. 'We'll be surrounded,' Ben Eleizer continued. 'Every Arab state will attack us. From Saudi Arabia, from Jordan and Syria, from Lebanon and the Arab Republic of Egypt - they'll all want Jerusalem.' Paul choked back a sob and wiped his eyes with trembling fingers, while Ben Eleizer, histrionically intense, leaned over his desk. 'Jerusalem will fall,' he said. 'We won't be able to prevent it. Inflamed with thoughts of the Mahdi and Judgement Day, the Arabs will wipe out the Jews.'

'The Russians won't allow it,' Paul whispered with pitiful desperation.

'I'm afraid they will,' Ben Eleizer said. 'Informed by Rashid Idriss of Joshua's statement, they're already negotiating the return of the Arab territories and their share in the future division of Israel.'

‘They can’t do this! *We agreed*!’

‘We know about your agreement, Lieutenant Frankel. Unfortunately, at least for you, that agreement only had relevance while the Jews could proclaim Joshua as their Messiah. Now, with Joshua turning to the Moslems, the Russians must deal with the Arabs.’

Paul raised his head again, his brown eyes too large and bright, as if they were no longer looking outward, but inward, to himself. The thought of the Messiah had given him new life, making real the dream of Zion, and now, as Moshe could see in every line of his face, in the expression of his anguish, he was seeing that dream fall apart, his illusions shattered. Though despising him, Moshe sympathised; indeed he felt a corrosive shame: for Ben Eleizer, for himself, for the Americans and the Israelis; and, most of all, for the despicable thing they were planning in order, rightly or wrongly, to preserve the precious freedom of Israel. At that moment, he despised himself, wanting to find some other way, but he knew, even as he heard Ben Eleizer’s voice, that he would follow it through to the bitter end.

‘This can’t happen,’ Ben Eleizer said. ‘We simply can’t let it happen. If Joshua is allowed to go to Mecca, if he proclaims himself as the Mahdi, then nothing on Earth will stop the Arabs from overrunning Jerusalem. When that happens, neither the zealots nor my own Cabinet will be able to prevent the dismantling of Israel. Jerusalem will become the new Mecca - and Islam will reign.’

The words were spoken with quiet brutality, calmly hammering the lies home, and Moshe, having listened to them, aware that he was a collaborator, lowered his head to avoid Paul’s stricken gaze and yearned for the floor to devour him. He looked up again, his eyes drawn against their will, when Ben Eleizer, with his gently murderous skill, slipped the blade between Paul’s ribs.

‘Joshua has to be removed,’ he said. ‘We can’t let him reach Mecca. We can’t have this man - whom most of the Jews think is the Messiah - turning around and proclaiming himself as the Mahdi. We wouldn’t survive psychologically - nor would we survive the ensuing conflict - so Joshua, this man claiming to be the Mahdi, must never reach Mecca.’

‘We can’t stop him,’ Paul whispered.

‘We can,’ Ben Eleizer said.

‘We can’t stop him from proclaiming himself as the Mahdi.’

‘He can disappear,’ Ben Eleizer said.

Paul stared at him, shocked, understanding the implication, and his eyes, which had been tearful with despair, now melted into panic.

‘Disappear…?’

‘He must be terminated.’

‘*No*!’

‘We have to do it, lieutenant. We can stop him from going to Mecca, but we can’t stop him talking, and once he proclaims himself as the Mahdi, Israel is lost.’

Now Paul knew exactly what Ben Eleizer meant, and the horror, sinking in, made him sit up straight in his chair. He glanced at Moshe, his eyes blind, looking inward, but then his head turned in a slow, distracted movement, until he faced Ben Eleizer once more.

‘No,’ he said, shaking his head from side to side. ‘Not me… I can’t do it… No, not that… even now… I just can’t… *I won’t do it*!’

Ben Eleizer remained calm, his saintly patience an indecency, as he waited for Paul to settle down and stop shaking his head. Then he leaned across the table, touching the edge with his chest, pressed his hands down and spread his thin fingers and twisted the blade in Paul’s flesh.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you’ll do it. Your own beliefs will make you do it. You’ve supported the zealots and proclaimed Joshua as the Messiah; now, if your Messiah proclaims himself as the Moslem’s Mahdi, the zealots supporting your beliefs will be humiliated. Do you understand, Paul? The dream of Zion will dissolve. You’ll be dishonourably discharged from the army for having released that information, your zealots will reject you for having made them look like fools, and the possibility of a true Zionist State will dissolve and then melt away entirely. So, you’ll do what we want, lieutenant - for yourself and for your ideals - and, having done it, you’ll never mention the deed, in return for which we’ll never mention the fact that you, and not Leon Halcomb, released the story of Joshua.’

Paul gasped and sucked his breath in, covering his face with his hands, bent forward as if he was praying, then straightened up again. He removed his hands slowly, opening his eyes as he did so, glanced at Moshe, licked his dry lips, turned away and finally faced Ben Eleizer. The latter let the silence flay Paul alive - and then he gave his instructions.

‘Every night,’ he said, ‘Joshua walks to Gethsemane to meditate, alone, in

the garden of the Basilica of the Agony. Few know that he goes there - and at that time the garden is deserted - so tomorrow evening, precisely at midnight, you'll be there to greet him. We want you to use a handgun. We also want you to use a silencer. When you've completed your task, you'll simply walk away and let us do the rest. Now is that understood?'

Paul looked at Ben Eleizer for a very long time, and then, in a silence utterly damning, the tears rolled down his cheeks. At first, Moshe was revolted, then he felt only pity, his revulsion reserved for himself and his part in this vile plot. Paul wept silently and helplessly, not moving, his tears glistening, and Moshe felt that everything he had believed in was turning to mud. Paul's tears were like rain, falling mournfully for Zion. Moshe thought about Kate, about the child she was carrying, about Joshua who had resurrected belief from the deserts of hopelessness. Joshua had given him Kate, another child, a new life, but now, as Paul's tears signified, Joshua had outlived his usefulness. Feeling sick, his soul choked with guilt and shame, Moshe turned his face to the wall.

'Yes,' Paul sobbed. 'I understand.'

37

Moshe drove into the carport of his small house in Talpiot, feeling like one of the damned, crushed by despair. He turned the ignition off, switched the lights out and just sat there, looking over the dark flatlands and hills to the distant lights of Jerusalem. In two hours from now Paul would be leaving, wearing plain clothes, carrying a handgun, to hide himself in the garden of the Basilica of the Agony and await the arrival of Joshua, who had shattered his Zionist dreams. Moshe thought of their terrible deception, of the plotting and the intrigue, and shivered, feeling feverish and haunted, confused between right and wrong.

After climbing out of the car, he glanced about him, grateful for the darkness, his fugitive heart needing it to hide in, and then walked around to the front of the house and opened the door. The light was on in the lounge, beaming into the short hallway, and he hung his jacket up and then entered to find Kate on the couch. She was showing her pregnancy, her body heavy and maternal, but her skin glowed with vitality, an inner radiance and contentment, and her dark hair, still long and hanging loose, framed her calm, loving face.

He leaned over and kissed her, pressing his lips to her forehead, sliding one hand through the softness of her hair and pulling her towards him. He sensed that she was smiling, pulled her head back and confirmed it, was simultaneously touched and disturbed, being unable to forget what was happening, what he was involved in. Right now, in Jerusalem, Paul Frankel was preparing to kill Joshua - and Kate, as Moshe knew too well, was devoted to Joshua.

Straightening up, he looked down at her, his heart beating too quickly, various emotions conflicting within him, some warm, others ice-cold. Kate patted her swollen stomach, still smiling, obviously happy, nodding to confirm that her body was giving its blessing.

‘It’s a girl,’ she said. ‘I know it. She’s as stubborn as her mother. Do you want another woman in the house or would that be too much for you?’

‘Two Kates are better than one. I’ll be spoiled beyond repair. No man, if he has any sense at all, could complain about that.’

‘I could be wrong,’ she said. ‘It might even be a boy. The competition won’t do you any harm and could do me some good.’

‘How?’

‘I’ll be appreciated.’

‘You’re appreciated now.’

‘I’m pampered,’ she said. ‘Really.’

‘Let me pamper you by getting you a drink. A glass of wine can’t be harmful.’

As he entered the kitchen, her face floated through his mind, her inner radiance merely increasing his feelings of guilt and shame over what was to come. He poured the drinks automatically, a white wine for Kate, a beer for himself, only noticing that his hands were shaking slightly when he picked up the glasses. He tried to wipe the tormenting images out of his thoughts, but failed to do so, his imagination running riot, seeing the Basilica of the Agony, the garden dark and silent, Paul emerging from behind an olive tree, his handgun aimed at Joshua. The thought of it shook him badly, made him feel almost nauseous, and as he went back out to Kate, carrying the drinks in his unsteady hands, he was haunted not only by his personal part in the affair, but by the sudden understanding of how Kate would feel when she heard of the murder.

He gave her the drink, silently watched her sipping it, as contented as a cat with milk, and wanted to reach down and embrace her and tell her the truth. That thought alone was enough to chill him, conjuring an image of her reaction: he could visualise, with shocking clarity, the horror in her face, the disbelief at his complicity in the matter and her subsequent revulsion. Disturbed, he turned away and faced the glass doors of the patio, looking beyond the low wall to Jerusalem, twinkling high on the hills.

‘How are things working out?’ Kate asked.

‘What things?’

‘The current intrigues… The Vatican and the Soviets, the Pope’s forthcoming announcement… Whether or not you’ll let Joshua go… All those humdrum affairs.’

‘Nothing’s changed,’ he lied, feeling the heat rise to his cheeks. ‘The Pope will make his speech in a week or so, and then we’ll have to let Joshua go.’

‘I think you should talk him out of going.’

‘Joshua can’t be talked out of anything. As well you know, he’ll simply accept the Vatican summons as being preordained. So of course he’ll go.’

‘Then what happens, Moshe?’

‘Then anything can happen, Kate. There’s not a damned thing we can do about it. We’ll just have to wait and see.’

He despised himself for lying, for the political expediency that made him do so, and, most of all, for the fact that it was a betrayal of Kate. Feeling ashamed, he had to face her, turning his back on Jerusalem, looking down at her with love, shame and guilt, feeling treacherous and sordid. Why was he doing it? Did he love Israel that much? Would the freedom of the Holy Land in time wash the blood from his hands? At that moment he doubted it, feeling increasingly like a criminal, unable to look at Kate without thinking of Joshua and imagining the pain it would cause her when she heard of his death.

‘How *is* Joshua?’ she asked.

‘As far as I know, he’s fine. He moves from Jew to Moslem, from Moslem to Christian, from Christian back to Jew, giving everyone a little of what they need while making no firm commitment. He’s still passive, an observer, only responding, never initiating; still ignorant, I think, of what he is and where he came from.’

‘He may still be ignorant,’ Kate said, ‘about who he is or where he came from, but he is, at least, convinced that his resurrection is a sign that he’s here for a specific purpose.’

‘That conviction, if anything, is even stronger.’

Kate frowned and lowered her gaze, as if disturbed by what she was thinking, then her hands, in a gesture of hope, came to rest on her belly.

‘Don’t think about it,’ Moshe said.

‘I can’t *stop* thinking about it. He’s not sure of what’s coming - at least not in detail - but he’s convinced that his own blood will be shed and that Jerusalem, or Israel, will then fall in order to rise again.’

Moshe instantly thought of Paul, now preparing to kill Joshua, and the second, more hideous aspect of the affair took shape in his mind. Who, or what, was Joshua? Where had he come from? Was he truly on Earth for some

specific purpose and, if so, what was it? Those questions had not been answered and were still blowing in the wind, hanging over the whole world like an immense cloud blotting out the sun. Joshua's nature was a mystery - perhaps the greatest the world had known - and now, before that mystery had been solved, he was to be terminated. It was a crime beyond the normal, a sin of staggering proportions, possibly a defiance of God and His intentions for the future of mankind. Irrespective of his personal beliefs, Moshe could not ignore this thought, because Joshua, in his very ambiguity, by the miracle of his resurrection, had become a challenge to the beliefs of men and nations, magnifying their ignorance. Joshua represented the unknown - he was possibly the key to revelation - and yet now, out of fear, because of human weakness and doubt, he was about to become the victim of a crime that history might never forgive. Moshe thought of it with horror, with a growing nausea and fear, and his hand, when he put the glass to his lips, was visibly shaking. He drank, trying to calm his churning emotions, and then looked down at Kate.

'He prophesied the recent war,' Kate said, looking up with dark, anxious eyes. 'He implied that the war hadn't really ended at all, and that his blood, when it was shed, would signal the coming downfall of Israel. I'm worried, Moshe. I think I know what he meant: his death, which will come soon, will lead to another war - and this time, it won't be a minor war, but something catastrophic. I'm worried about him, Moshe, and I'm worried about the future of Israel.'

Moshe took the chair facing her, not wanting to be too close to her, afraid that her proximity and warmth would break his resolve. He had a long drink of his beer, wanting to soothe his ravaged nerves, then he put his glass down on the coffee table, not feeling any better.

'You worry too much,' he said.

'I can't help it,' she responded. 'I've got Joshua in my blood. As long as I live, I won't be able to shake off the feeling that Joshua and you and me and our child are all connected in some mysterious way. That storm, that strange star, meeting you, then finding Joshua, the conviction, even before I found him, that someone was calling me - all of it, Moshe, including those weeks in the hospital with him, the feeling that he was somehow feeding off me, taking energy and life from me; the conviction that he was coming alive in my mind as, in fact, he then *came* alive - all of it, Moshe, ties me to him in a bond I

can’t break. You understand what I’m saying? It’s some kind of love, Moshe. Not like my love for you, not like my love for the child I’m carrying, but something even more mysterious, something spiritual, beyond me, a feeling that his fate and our fates are intertwined and that we, in a manner I can’t explain, are responsible for him. I guided him into the world, Moshe - yes, and you, too - together we looked after him, allowing him to grow, and now, though he’s on his own, and with the whole world trying to claim him, I feel that he’s in danger, that something terrible is about to happen, and that whether or not he knows about it, I can’t let it happen.’

Moshe leaned forward in his chair and placed his clasped hands to his lips, feeling that he was slipping into a nightmare and floundering in darkness. His love for Kate had released him, giving him new life and commitment, but now that very love, in its need for truth and honesty, was making him feel even more strongly the imprisoning guilt of duplicity. What he had sanctioned was an awful business, lacerating him with shame, but even worse was the thought of how Kate would feel when Joshua’s body was found. She wouldn’t know that Moshe was part of it, but her ignorance would hardly help her: the pain that she would suffer over his death would be terrible for her. Moshe didn’t want to think about it - he wanted to pretend that it would not happen - and so, in desperately wanting to change the subject, he took an equally dangerous road.

‘I’ve something to tell you,’ he said.

‘About Joshua?’

‘No.’

‘You have that serious look on your face.’

‘It’s about Leon,’ he said.

Her cheeks reddened a little, with embarrassment and anxiety, but she kept her eyes squarely upon him, not hiding anything. He no longer felt jealous or suspicious of her feelings, but he knew that the mention of Leon’s name still made her uncomfortable.

‘This information is bona fide,’ he said. ‘It comes from American Intelligence. Leon didn’t blow the story of Joshua… He had nothing to do with it.’

She stared at him for some time, saying nothing, not moving, letting the words sink in, then her eyes moved to the side, almost furtively, with guilt, sliding back to focus directly upon him, her face showing bewilderment.

‘He had nothing to do with it?’

‘No, Kate, not a thing.’

‘Then why…?’

‘I have no idea, Kate. You’d better ask him yourself.’

Her cheeks were still burning, her body shook briefly, and he knew that she was struggling with guilt and a great deal of confusion. Seeing that, he felt wounded, perhaps sharing her pain, understanding that the joy which her pregnancy had heightened was being eroded by her growing anxiety over Joshua and Leon. He felt worse every second, accepting the responsibility for this, having to face the fact that what he had implemented was going to make her pain even worse.

‘Why?’ Kate said. ‘*Why*? He never once tried to deny it. Why did he take the blame for all that? I just don’t understand it!’

Moshe stood up and went to her, bent down and embraced her, pulling her head into his chest and stroking her hair as she trembled against him. She held him tightly, sobbing quietly, not trying to hide it, then she gently, reluctantly, pushed him away and stood up, her cheeks wet. She smiled painfully, biting her lower lip, and wiped the tears from her eyes, then shook her head from side to side in self-mocking despair.

‘This is all too much,’ she said. ‘First Joshua, now Leon. I can’t take any more for tonight, so I’m going to bed. Do you mind?’

‘Of course not.’

She nodded distractedly, still smiling, if painfully, then slid her arms around him and clung to him, her head on his chest.

‘Joshua and Leon,’ she murmured. ‘The other two men in my life. Leon very much of the Earth and Joshua out of my dreams. They both managed to change me, Moshe, to make me view myself more clearly: Leon by making me face the self-deceptions of my emotional life; Joshua by making me see that there were things *beyond* this life. It’s a form of faith, Moshe - I think that’s what they both taught me - faith in myself, but also faith in my future here in Israel, where I rightfully belong. I owe them both and love them both, Moshe - but not the way I love you.’

She held him even more tightly, trying to glue herself to him, letting him feel the swelling of her belly as she pressed herself to him. He kissed the top of her head, stroked her shoulders, squeezed her waist, then again she gently pushed him away, her eyes closing and opening.

‘Come to bed,’ she said. ‘*Soon*.’

She turned away and entered the bedroom, leaving the door slightly ajar, and he stood there until the light, once turned on, had been turned off again. Hoping that she would sleep well, undisturbed by thoughts of Joshua, he went into the kitchen and poured another beer and then returned to the lounge. He looked out across the patio, at the distant lights of Jerusalem, then sat down in the chair behind the table and drank the beer too quickly. The alcohol didn’t soothe him, but had the opposite effect instead: snapping the stretched threads of his control and letting the fear take command. He thought of Kate and her love for Joshua, of what she had just said about him, and instantly, vividly, imagined Paul aiming his pistol, his hand jerking as he fired, and Joshua falling to the ground, his heart stopped by the bullet. The feeling of horror was overwhelming, almost pinning him to the chair; but then, when he heard Kate screaming, when that sound slashed through his reverie, he jumped up and rushed into the bedroom with his heart pounding wildly.

Kate was sitting upright on the bed, her knees raised, her arms around them, holding herself and rocking back and forth, her eyes filled with panic. A beam of moonlight was pouring in, cutting a line across her face, and that light, in its thin, wavering brilliance, made her skin look like marble.

‘*Joshua*!’ she exclaimed. ‘Something’s happening! I know it! *I feel it*!’

Moshe sat on the edge of the bed, hardly knowing what he was doing. Twisting sideways, he leaned forward to embrace her. She was sobbing, her body trembling, and he rocked her to and fro, pressing her head to his chest, feeling her hair at his lips, guilt and a lacerating dread whipping through him in spasms. Paul would now be on his way, wearing plain clothes, carrying a pistol, emotionally blackmailed into carrying out a deed that could never be rectified. He was doing it for Israel - for this abstraction that ruled them all - but now, as Moshe rocked Kate, as she sobbed in his arms, he felt that the assassination was of a vileness that could never be justified. To let it happen would be a sin - against Kate; against God - and as he felt Kate’s warmth coursing through him, he knew what he must do.

He kept rocking her in his arms, stroking her hair, whispering reassuring words, until eventually she stopped sobbing, sniffed her tears back and fell silent. Emotionally drained and exhausted, she fell asleep on his shoulder. He eased her back onto the bed, tucked the blankets around her, kissed her

lightly on the forehead, and then, feeling the urgency of his heartbeat, quietly left the house.

It was cold and dark outside when he drove the car away, heading as fast as he dared back to Jerusalem. His headlights beamed through the darkness, illuminated the rushing road, and it seemed as if that road was moving endlessly and leading him nowhere. His thoughts scattered and spun, weaving arabesques of panic, his heart beating to the rhythm of the car as it raced down the winding road. The lights shone on the distant hills, fewer now as Jerusalem slept, seeming to slip in glittering splendour across the sky as the road curved away from them. Moshe cursed quietly, checking his wristwatch, seeing the hour-hand creep towards midnight, thinking of Joshua meditating in the garden, unaware of Paul's coming. He tried to blot it out, to retain his objectivity, but that vision of faith and destructive doubt wrapped his tight head in thorns.

The road levelled out, revealing the outskirts of Jerusalem, darkened houses and synagogues whipping past while streetlamps dazzled his tired eyes. He drove blindly, automatically, more carelessly than he knew, tormented by the image of Paul advancing upon Joshua and raising his pistol. A crossroads…another car… the Old City passing by… The final leg of the journey was composed of fragmented scenes, the familiar sights that in the darkness, in his dread, now seemed unreal. Only the Golden Gate distracted him, drawing his gaze to the gaping hole, and he shivered and followed the road to the right, in the direction of the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives. It was dark and deserted here, the Kidron Valley as black as pitch. He braked below the Basilica of the Agony and then turned the ignition off. The sudden silence was shocking, rushing into his head, and he sat there, feeling numb, glancing over the moonlit slopes, and then suddenly jumped out and slammed the door and headed up towards the walls of the Basilica.

He hardly knew what he was doing and looked neither left nor right, his every impulse and thought concentrating on what he might find. He thought of Kate in her bed, her dreaming thoughts streaming outward, travelling over the distance he had come and spreading out through the garden. She was living and breathing Joshua, her nerves tuned to his every impulse; and Moshe dreaded the effect it would have upon her if that shot had been fired. He entered the garden at a trot, kicking up twigs and fallen leaves, saw splashes of moonlight on bougainvillaea and cacti, emphasising the shadows

that shifted and changed in the silence.

Not silence: someone sobbing. There was no sign of Joshua. Moshe saw Paul on the ground, resting against an olive tree, bent forward with his forehead on his knees, his hands clasped behind his neck. He was rocking back and forth - as Kate had rocked back and forth - and his sobbing, like Kate's sobbing, held an anguish that cut to the bone.

Moshe froze where he stood, suddenly confused and disorientated. He stared at Paul and then glanced about him in a vain search for Joshua. The bougainvillaea whispered, dripping moonlight, casting shadows, but Joshua was nowhere to be seen and Paul sobbed all alone. His lower spine was against the tree-trunk, his huddled body bent forward, and his sobbing cut through the crooning of the breeze with a choked, ragged hollowness.

Moshe went to him, feeling embarrassed, no longer fearful for Joshua, and stopped a few feet away from him, wondering what had occurred. Paul heard him and raised his head, letting his hands fall away, looking up with his brown eyes enlarged and glistening with tears. Moonlight filtered through the branches, falling over his body, illuminating his dark, handsome face and its terrible anguish.

'I couldn't do it,' he sobbed. 'He was here, but I couldn't do it. I tried to, but I couldn't press the trigger when I looked at his face. He was staring straight at me, not frightened, just smiling, and I knew, when I gazed into his eyes, that I just couldn't do it. "Not yet," he said. "Not yet - and not you. It is coming, but not by your hand and not in this garden." Hearing that, I was terrified. Seeing his smile, I was in torment. I knew then that he could not be the Mahdi, but was indeed our Messiah. "Is this what you want?" he said. "Can you truly betray yourself? Is your faith of the kind that can be shaken by the whispering of mortal men?" My heart broke when he said that. My shame destroyed my will. In his eyes, and in his smile, I saw reflected my own weakness and doubt. Then he raised his right hand, brushed the pistol aside, touched my cheek with the tips of his fingers and said, "Don't be frightened." Only that. Nothing else. He turned away and walked out. I was left in the silence of this garden with my shame and self-hatred.'

He turned his head away from Moshe, his body heaving convulsively as he wept, the moonlight falling over his shaking shoulders to splash on green grass. Moshe watched him, feeling stricken, not knowing what to do, cheeks burning with the shame of his duplicity and evil intentions. He thought of

Kate in the safety of her sleep, but the thought brought no comfort.

'We betrayed him,' Paul sobbed. 'In our weakness, we doubted him. We dreamed and schemed for the Holy Land, committing our crimes in the name of faith, and in the end, forgetting the nature of our faith, we let our vanity rule us. We betrayed him by betraying ourselves, refusing to wait for His sign, and then, in our impatience and greed, we were corrupted by doubt. He looked at me and smiled. I will never forget that sight. Whether a smile or a grimace of despair, it chilled me and frightened me. We betrayed him - you and I, Ben Eleizer, the Holy Land - and I knew, when he walked from this garden, that I would never forget it.'

He started weeping again, his head still turned away, the moonlight beaming down through the tangled branches and falling over his shoulders.

'It's alright,' Moshe said. 'It's all over. You can forget it. Nothing happened, so there's nothing to worry about. Just go home and relax.'

He then walked away from Paul, unable to bear his sobbing, wanting to get out of the garden as quickly as possible and lie down beside Kate. He did not get very far before he heard the single gunshot, loud and clear in the stillness of the night, blotting out his senses for a moment. Horrified, he spun around and saw the shivering olive tree, the moonlight still filtering through its branches to fall upon Paul. He lay on his side, his legs bent, one arm outstretched, the other curved under his face in the tree-trunk's dark shadow.

Moshe walked back and looked down, but there was nothing he could do. Paul had placed the barrel of the pistol in his mouth and blown his own head off.

38

The modest house was in Silwan, overlooking the Kidron Valley, its front door open and shedding light into the darkness. Moshe stood outside, observing the visitors coming and going, a constant stream of Moslems, Jews and Christians, all solemn and awe-struck. He felt sweaty and unclean, thinking of Paul's suicide, and his shame, which before had been acute, was now a bottomless well. He wanted to see Joshua alone, to warn him about the plot against him, knowing full well that Paul's inability to carry out his task had not put an end to it. Too much was at stake - for the Americans and the Israelis - and Moshe, whose love for Kate was at odds with his love of his country, had decided, once Paul had killed himself, that enough was enough. He loved Israel, the Holy Land, the land dominated by Jerusalem, but he now felt that nothing worth having could spring out of their vile scheme. What Paul had said was correct - in a bid to preserve Israel they were betraying what Israel stood for - and now Moshe, in his despair, in the horror of what had happened, was convinced that no matter the importance of their cause, the murder of Joshua would be a crime beyond forgiveness, gaining nothing but infamy.

He waited a long time, feeling the cold eating at him, hearing the murmuring from inside the house, seeing the faithful emerging, each silhouetted briefly in the outpouring light before being swallowed by the darkness as he or she headed for home. They seemed to come and go forever, as if none of them ever slept, but eventually, in the early hours of the morning, the endless flow tapered off. An Arab materialised in the doorway, wearing a striped *keffiyes*; he reached out to close the door for the night and then saw Moshe standing there. He gazed enquiringly at Moshe, glanced back into the house, then turned again to Moshe, smiling in welcome, and motioned him inside.

Moshe stepped in, stooping low, feeling sweaty and slightly feverish,

unable to shake off the nightmare of Paul's suicide, and aware that what he was doing would not please Ben Eleizer or the Americans. The house was small and Spartan, its stone walls unpainted. Joshua was seated behind a crude wooden table, still wearing his white robes. The only source of illumination came from a few hanging oil lamps, and their light, which was dim and pale yellow, brightened his silvery-grey eyes. He gazed steadily at Moshe, a faint smile on his lips, then he nodded at the old Arab, who lowered his head and backed out of the house, closing the door quietly when he went, offering privacy.

'So,' Joshua said, 'you came.'

'You sound as if you were expecting me.'

'I knew that you could not let transpire what was not meant to be.'

'You mean Paul Frankel?'

'Yes.'

'Did you know what you were doing to him? When you left, he put the pistol in his mouth and blew his brains out.'

Joshua's response was minimal, a mere flickering of his eyelids, but he kept his gaze squarely on Moshe, his hands flat on the table.

'I did nothing to him,' he said. 'I merely made him question himself. If he took his own life, it was preordained - and not without meaning.'

Moshe was chilled by this response, which, in its tone of calm acceptance - or, perhaps, indifference - struck him as utterly inhuman. Who, or what, was Joshua? They had never found that out. Now, looking at him, at the smile that was not a smile, Moshe wondered if Joshua was good or evil, on the side of God or the devil. They had all assumed his goodness, his relationship to the Almighty, but sometimes, though he had never mentioned it to Kate, Moshe had wondered about that.

'You feel nothing?' he said.

'Love and sorrow,' Joshua replied. 'But such feelings are not for Paul alone; they embrace all of mankind.'

'What about individuals?'

'I could not prevent Paul's death. My powers, once formidable, are gone, and now, like you, I am mortal.'

'The faithful who come here hardly think so.'

'They take from me what they need. They speak to unravel themselves and I listen to learn.'

‘So what have you learnt?’

‘That the time for change has come. That my own time, so brief, will soon be over, and revelation will come.’

He was gazing steadily at Moshe, his lips curved ambiguously, in a manner that suggested a smile that was not actually visible. Moshe felt even more unreal, as if locked in a waking dream, unable to comprehend Joshua’s nature or feel any warmth for him. Kate loved him and felt part of him, her nerves tuned to his every impulse, yet Moshe, staring into those silvery-grey eyes, felt only confusion. Joshua was a cipher, his mysterious nature seductive, but Moshe, in his presence, saw only his remote, unrevealing face. Did Joshua really feel love and sorrow? His eyes belied the possibility. Those eyes, like the dark side of the moon, had the chilling beauty of lifelessness.

‘You doubt me,’ Joshua said. ‘Your face cannot hide that truth. In thinking of your wife and her feelings, you wonder why you feel differently.’

‘We don’t know who you are. You claim not to know yourself. You claim to feel love for all mankind, but you don’t show your feelings. Are you good or evil? Are you here to help us or destroy us? Your face is a closed book, a mask, concealing what you might be.’

‘My face conceals nothing, but merely displays my own ignorance. I do not know who I am, if I am good or I am evil, but only that I am here for a purpose that will soon be revealed. I believe in the Almighty, who is Himself unknowable, and, given the mystery of His nature, I must stand on my faith. Is the Almighty good or evil? Can either exist without Him? Is it possible that good and evil - both concepts of mortal man - are in fact the two sides of the Almighty’s face. These questions cannot be answered - not by you and not by me - but I have to accept what I feel and know it to be true. I am here to serve a purpose, and only this do I know about it: Jerusalem, now tarnished, must fall to rise again, and I am the instrument of that event. Will it rise again to glory? Will it inaugurate a new Dark Age? I am not here to answer such questions, but to make men face up to them. These are my feelings - the only feelings I know - and if, as you say, I do not show my feelings, perhaps there is nothing to show beyond curiosity. I am here to observe and listen, and to wait for my sign - and you, coming here to this house, are revealed as that sign.’

‘I came here to warn you.’

‘That Paul was just the beginning? Yes, you came to warn me - you have

the need to save my life - and that, in itself, is the sign that I have been patiently waiting for.'

'You have to leave Jerusalem.'

'I belong to Jerusalem.'

'You'll probably have to leave Israel entirely. If you don't, they'll kill you.'

'What is willed, will be done. Your coming here is the sign. That which will be done is now beginning - and cannot be stopped.'

'You won't leave?'

'I will not.'

'Don't martyr yourself.'

'I do not. I simply orchestrate the events that will lead you to Judgement Day.'

'I don't believe in Judgement Day.'

'That's why you see nothing in me. You look at me and wonder why your Kate has such deep feelings for me. Her feelings come from faith - or, more accurately, from belief - and your Kate, like the others who come here, takes what she needs from me. Think of me as a mirror: I reflect what the viewer seeks: faith, hope, confirmation of the hereafter, the promise of forgiveness and mercy through the joy of redemption. You do not believe in such - at least you question their validity - and so, when you look at me for meaning, your own doubts are reflected.'

'I have doubts about your nature, about whether it's good or bad, and it worries me that people assume that you represent goodness.'

'Then why try to save me?'

'Because I can't condone murder, because I believe that your death will do more harm than good, and because I don't want to be instrumental in causing pain to my wife.'

'Those are public and private reasons.'

'There can't be any other.'

'You have not denied me - you have simply clung to natural doubt - and in doing so, you have admitted to yourself that all things are possible.'

At that point he smiled, a genuine, gentle smile, and Moshe felt himself responding automatically, with helpless warmth and respect. He tried to fight it and failed, gradually losing himself, his antagonism and doubt disappearing to leave him stronger. He looked at Joshua and thought of Kate, felt her love

and passed it on, and Joshua's silvery-grey eyes, in response, became much more human. He was doomed and knew it, his eyes reflecting joy and sorrow; and Moshe, even knowing that it was useless, felt compelled to press on.

'You can't let them kill you.'

'That they want to means I must.'

'I can't stand aside and let it happen.'

'Your own gun is the instrument.'

Moshe reached instinctively for the pistol holstered on his hip, hardly knowing he was doing so, and then, when his fingers curved around the butt, he felt a numbing chill. He started to speak, but failed to get the words out, his mouth opening and closing without making a sound, and a fear such as he had never known before stripped his senses raw. More than fear: horror, a cold and clammy revulsion, rising up as he looked into Joshua's eyes and understood what he meant.

'You must go through with it,' Joshua said. 'You must end what you have begun. My presence on Earth has changed the world forever, and the fate of Israel will change it even more. And whatever that fate, good or bad, it cannot be avoided. I know what is being planned - that certain men wish to deny me - and I cannot, whatever the cost, let that denial be uttered. I am here as a beacon, to light the path to Judgement Day, and it is imperative that the light is not diminished by those who would fear me. For this reason I must depart, leaving my name on the lips of men, and you, who came here as the sign, must remain as the instrument.'

Moshe felt the butt of the pistol, fitted snugly between his fingers, and he jerked his hand away, feeling scorched, his will evaporating under Joshua's unblinking gaze.

'The instrument?' Moshe whispered, hardly recognising his own voice, a sound that cut through the silence like a knife shredding paper.

'Yes,' Joshua confirmed. 'By your pistol I will die. And you, being the instrument of my passing, must come with me tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow?'

'In the evening. When the moon dissolves the sun. You will drive me along the road I need to take and ensure that the end comes.'

'No, I can't do it!'

'You tried to make Paul do it.'

'And then went to stop him!'

‘And then he killed himself because of what you had almost forced him to do. You are guilty, Moshe. Pay for it.’

The words cut Moshe to the quick, leaving no room for pride, opening him out to let hatred rush in and offer protection. He stared at Joshua with fear and loathing, seeing his logic as the road to hell, his blunt honesty as a weapon more final than the pistol in Paul’s hand. Joshua’s eyes were prismatic, reflecting all things to all men. Life and death were in those eyes, the vaults of heaven, the flames of hell, and below the eyes, rich with ambiguity, was a smile that was not a smile. He was gentle - and gently murderous, offering no respite from truth, his words uttered softly, offering nothing but cold, precise logic. Human beings could not contain him, nor cleave to what he valued; and Moshe, feeling human and therefore powerless, had to bend to his will.

‘Why me?’ he asked.

‘Because you came to this house. Because you and Kate found me, and through me became one; and because, having come to this house from Kate, you are completing the circle. Let the circle be unbroken. Let my passing fill men’s minds. When your child comes, and the dust of the Apocalypse reigns, you will look to the future.’

‘I feel nothing but hatred for you.’

‘You did not feel it before.’

‘I feel it now.’

‘You feel that hatred only for yourself - and I reflect it back onto you.’

The door behind Moshe opened and the cold air rushed in, caressing his neck with icy fingers that caused him to shiver. He glanced back over his shoulder, expecting to see the old Arab, and instead, with a shock, saw Leon Halcomb, his blue eyes bloodshot. Leon closed the door behind him, obviously drunk but in control, then bowed mockingly, his grin less than assured, his cheeks flushed and unshaven.

‘So sorry to have intruded,’ he said. ‘But I didn’t expect to find you here, major-general.’

Moshe did not reply, but stepped sideways, automatically, leaving the space between Leon and Joshua free, feeling faintly embarrassed. Leon stared at him, still grinning, ghostly in the dim light, then took a couple of steps forward to look down upon Joshua.

‘I’m Leon Halcomb,’ he said.

‘I have heard of you,’ Joshua said.

‘As a good journalist, I have a leading question: When do you sleep?’

‘You are drunk,’ Joshua said.

‘That’s true, Messiah or Mahdi. But your observation doesn’t answer my question: When do you sleep?’

‘I admit, your question baffles me.’

‘Because sleep itself baffles you. I came here at this time because I’ve heard that you see people any time.’

‘My time on Earth is brief.’

‘Any time and anywhere.’

‘People see me when they need to feel my presence - wherever they are.’

‘You don’t sleep?’

‘It is natural.’

‘When?’

‘When it is needed.’

‘Then you move through space and time like a ghost - or like a god seeking shelter.’

‘No, I am not a god.’

‘Then what?’

‘I am mortal.’

‘If mortal, how do you explain yourself?’

‘I am here to be witnessed.’

Moshe noticed the change in Leon, his subtle slide back to sobriety, his shoulders straightening and his grin disappearing as the fear cleared his bloodshot eyes. He rubbed those eyes with his fingertips, his head bowed in apparent weariness, then pressed his fingers into his cheeks and opened his eyes again. He studied Joshua for some time, his face thoughtful, no longer cynical, while the wan yellow light from the oil lamps made him look like a dying man.

‘Why did you come here?’ Joshua asked.

‘Curiosity,’ Leon said. ‘I couldn’t bring myself to leave the Holy Land without seeing its saviour.’

‘You are leaving?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘As was written,’ Joshua said.

‘Nothing was written,’ Leon responded. ‘I just decided to leave.’

‘Why?’

‘My time’s up.’

‘Time runs out for us all.’

‘I think we’re talking on two different wave-lengths; what I mean is, I’m finished here.’ Moshe caught his brief glance, at once uneasy and challenging, as if, still surprised to find him here, he didn’t know what to do. Perhaps realising this himself, Leon turned back to Joshua. ‘You’ve obviously heard of me,’ he said, ‘but you talk as if you know me. Know me, shall we say, in an intimate manner, which certainly puzzles me.’

He was attempting to be flippant, but was no longer grinning, and his eyes, illuminated by the flickering pale yellow light, revealed suppressed fear. Moshe gazed at him with sympathy, no longer capable of despising him, feeling for him, much to his surprise, an almost tender regard.

‘I know you,’ Joshua said. ‘You were called, but not chosen. Like the majority of men you feel rejected and diminished in stature.’

‘I’m not sure I understand.’

‘You have not been chosen to lead. Needing to be blessed, you were blessed but not called, destined to swim in the tide that makes most men common. Unrecognised, you felt bitter, refusing to accept your fate, and in anger you turned away from Him, embracing sin and self-hatred.’

‘The thirteenth Apostle?’

‘Yes. The one called but not chosen. The one representing the mass of men and their hope for rebirth.’

Leon took a step back, as if someone had slapped him, his hands slipping away from his face and sliding down to his chest. He seemed haunted at that moment, his face drawn, his lips shivering, his skin, in the dim, flickering light, like some pale, ancient parchment.

‘This is nonsense,’ he said.

‘You did not come here for nonsense. You came here in search of suitable punishment before burying yourself.’

‘I’m not a masochist,’ Leon said. ‘I won’t be burying myself, metaphorically or otherwise. I’m leaving Israel for no other reason than that I’ve been here too long.’

‘You lie,’ Joshua said. ‘To me and to yourself. You are leaving because of failure - both in life and in love - and because, being called but not chosen, you now feel rejected. Your cynicism is a mask, hiding your need for the

faith you lost, and my presence here in Israel, which has focused your attention, has made you look deeply in the mirror and see your base self-betrayal. No, you are not a masochist, but you valued yourself too highly, putting yourself above other men and expecting His grace. An idealist, you asked for too much, wanting more than His blessing, wanting not only to be called as the mass of men are, but to be chosen and separated from the mass of men, as very few are. Yet why did you feel rejected? To be called is enough. Those who are called by being born are the salt of the Earth. The Earth abides and is abundant, nurturing his flock through its trials, and those who care called but not chosen are a bridge to the heavenly vaults. Those chosen are but His messengers, spreading His gospel throughout the Earth, but they are not held in greater esteem for it, since He sees all as equal. You were called but not chosen, one blessed, though not a saint, and in your arrogance you felt as one cast out and thus turned away from Him. Now you come here in shame, hiding your shame in cynicism, but you also come like a child in trembling guilt, in search of punishment and the ultimate cleansing. This is what you are here for.'

'*No*!' Leon cried out.

'Yes,' Joshua said. 'You came here as you were destined to come - to purge yourself with self-sacrifice.'

Joshua finally stood up, looking fragile and weary, then walked around the table and up to Leon, placing his hands on his shoulders.

'This man, Moshe, is your brother,' he said, 'as all men are your brothers. Like you, he suffers doubt and confusion through the weakening of faith. He was called and then chosen, but does not yet accept it; but tomorrow, when the moon dissolves the sun, he will have understanding. You leave Israel tomorrow. You go to bury yourself. Bring your belongings to this house and come with us before you take your final leave. Be a witness to understanding. Support your brother in his hour of need. Do this and you will come to self-sacrifice and find purification.'

His gaze was fierce and commanding, almost mesmeric in its brilliance, and his hands, arched over Leon's shoulders, now dug deeper to shake him. Leon stared back like a blind man, licking his lips and breathing harshly, the wan yellow light washing over his features to make him ghost-like. He glanced at Moshe, at once embarrassed and fearful, then tore himself away from Joshua's hands and turned his face to the door. He stood there, like a

man in a trance, breathing deeply and trembling.

Moshe stepped forward, wanting to say something, then stopped, unable to speak, feeling himself turning inexorably towards Joshua, who was staring straight at him. Joshua's eyes seemed too large, their brilliance piercing the dim light, his beard and hair tangled and dusty, his face fiercely ascetic. Moshe felt himself floating, spiralling out of his body, his essence, the reality, spreading out above Joshua and Leon. He looked down on them with pity, understanding what was to come, then his pity changed to love and compassion and enveloping terror. There was beauty in that terror, the recognition of necessity, and his essence, the reality, having observed and accepted, drifted back to the mortal shell of his body and bore witness to Leon's final decision.

'Damn you,' Leon said. 'Yes!'

Joshua smiled at him, without malice, even with warmth, and then he closed his eyes and lowered his head, having no more to say.

39

Kate slept after lunch, her swollen body exhausting her, and awakened, in the hot, sunlit bedroom, feeling deeply depressed. She scrambled carefully off the bed, blinking and gazing around her, still held in the web of the dream about death and destruction. Fiery skies and drifting smoke, the earth exploding around Jerusalem: in her dream she had seen it, an apocalyptic rain, but had also seen Joshua, his white robes red with blood, sinking down with his head in his hands, his eyes raised to the heavens. Now Kate felt haunted, convinced that something was wrong, and when she heard the front door slamming, then the growling of Moshe's car, she went to the window of the room, more fearful than ever.

He had said that he was going to the Knesset and might be there all night, but as she watched him drive off, creating billowing clouds of dust, she was more certain than ever that something unpleasant was in the wind. She still had that feeling now, in the bright light of morning, so she looked down at her considerably enlarged stomach and took comfort from it. She spread her fingers to feel the child, imagined its movement and felt better. Holding her face up to the sunlight pouring in through the window, she let the heat bring warmth to her skin and make her feel healthier.

'I want this child,' she said, taking comfort from her own voice. 'A boy or a girl, it doesn't matter, so long as it's healthy.'

Turning away, she went downstairs, into the empty living room, and glanced across the patio wall to Jerusalem, resting high on the sunlit hills. The domes and minarets of the Old City were clearly visible, separated from the modern town; and the thin white filaments of cirrus clouds drifted across the blue sky, so pretty they almost seemed artificial. It was a beautiful sight, at once peaceful and uplifting, and yet Kate could not shake off her feeling that something was wrong.

Entering the kitchen, she drank some water and then just stood there,

feeling isolated and uneasy, but not knowing why. It was something to do with Moshe. He had been moody ever since seeing the Americans - still affectionate, but more distracted, his brow constantly furrowed with anxiety, his lips pursed in a tight line.

Still sleepy, she closed her eyes, letting her senses take wing, trying to imagine her child, the years passing, the child growing, and then seeing, instead of a mature child, the whipping white robes of Joshua. The white robes were covered in blood and spread out on the sand, then blown off to reveal Joshua's face, his dead eyes staring skyward. Kate felt fear and deep grief - suddenly aware of what was wrong - and then, before she could open her eyes again, she saw Moshe and Leon. They were standing in the desert, their eyes fixed upon one another, the body of Joshua lying between them, the sand covering his spilt blood. Kate gasped and opened her eyes, saw the kitchen wall in front of her, then twitched when the doorbell rang, sounding louder than usual.

Hurrying out of the kitchen, she crossed the living room and opened the front door. It was Leon. His eyes were sleepless and shadowed, his face pale and gaunt, and when he shrugged, without offering his customary grin, his whole body trembled.

'Well, can I come in?'

She was startled to see him - not only because of his wasted appearance, but because she hadn't expected him to come to this particular house. So, she just stood there, staring at him, embarrassed and confused, then managing to get her senses back, she smiled and waved him in.

He sat down immediately, sinking into a soft armchair, his back turned to the hills around Jerusalem, the sunlight pouring in over him. He glanced about him automatically, his journalist's eyes still restless , but then quickly returned his gaze to her, staring up with deep weariness. In truth, he looked awful, his eyes baggy, cheeks sunken, the skin of his face almost yellow and pulled tight on his cheekbones. He was thin and seemed fragile, his jacket and trousers too lose, and his former ebullience, his witty cynicism, was no longer in evidence. Truly shocked, unable to accept the change in him, Kate sank into the chair directly facing him, feeling weak and forlorn. He shrugged and waved his hand in a desultory fashion, tried to grin and failed dismally.

'So,' he said, 'I've finally seen your new home. I feel rather privileged.'

'I didn't imagine you'd ever come here.'

‘Nor did I, Kate.’

‘Why did you?’

‘I’ve come to say goodbye. That’s it. I’m leaving it short and sweet.’

It was a sharp, unpleasant shock, surprising in its intensity, and she understood immediately, without the slightest doubt, that she was seeing him for the last time. There was pain in this knowledge, but also something chilling, as if, in awakening to her depression, she had sensed what was coming.

‘You’re leaving Israel?’

‘For good.’

‘When?’

‘This evening. I’d have told you a lot sooner if I’d known, but I just didn’t know.’

‘A last-minute decision?’

‘Something like that.’

‘You’re packing the oddments of your life in a suitcase and just taking off again.’

‘That’s it, Kate. Exactly.’

He ran his fingers through his hair, shaking his head from side to side, then distractedly massaged the back of his neck, eyes closed, head bowed. Kate felt a terrible sadness, the first intimations of loss, and her grief wasn’t eased by the conviction that he was seriously ill.

‘Are you alright?’ she asked him.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I’m fine.’

‘You look awful.’

‘Too much drink, too little food… Maybe that’s why I’m leaving.’

‘I doubt it. *Why*, Leon?’

‘Different reasons.’

‘Am I one of them?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘I’m not worth it.’

‘Alas, you are, Kate… But I learnt that too late.’

She didn’t know what to say, though she blushed like a schoolgirl, an odd reaction given their former relationship, perhaps due to her pregnancy. She was keenly aware of her own appearance, her extra weight and swollen stomach, so she lowered her gaze to the floor, feeling uncommonly shy.

‘You’re looking forward to being a mother?’

‘Yes, Leon, I am.’

‘Then why do you seem so very anxious?’

‘It’s not because of my pregnancy.’

She raised her eyes to the sunlight, hoping to beat her depression, but the ominous feeling remained to darken her thoughts. Looking at Leon, she thought of Moshe; thinking of Moshe, she thought of Joshua - and the three faces, merging in her mind, merely heightened her fear. Yes, it was fear, a premonition of pain and grief; and as she studied Leon’s face, noticing how the skin was stretched tight on the bone, she felt that his departure was merely the beginning of some much greater tragedy.

‘So, why are you anxious, Kate?’

‘Why are you leaving, Leon?’

‘Is that why you’re anxious? Because I’m leaving?’

‘It’s a shock - and you know it.’

He smiled bleakly at that, his eyes wandering around her face, always focused on some point just beyond her, never meeting her gaze.

‘You’re one of the reasons,’ he said. ‘I’d be a liar to say otherwise. I learned too late just how much you meant to me - and having learnt it, I lost you. So, yes, you’re one reason for my going - I believe we’ll both benefit from my absence - but there are, I must confess, other reasons, most of which I learned through you.’

‘Through me?’

‘Through your honesty. Your refusal to tell a lie. The lie, for instance, that you loved me - a lie you never once uttered.’

‘I didn’t feel good about hurting you.’

‘No, Kate, you wouldn’t. I think that telling me about Moshe hurt you as well, and I respect you for that.’

‘And still hate me a little?’

‘On the contrary, I still love you. If I value nothing else in my life, I *do* value that.’

She tried to keep her eyes upon him, but failed and looked away, warmed and embarrassed by his revelation, knowing how she had wounded him.

‘And the other reasons?’ she asked.

‘Too many to discuss,’ he replied. ‘Feelings of failure, feelings of shame, too many glances in the mirror, too many mornings coming out of sleep

wondering how to get through the day. What am I doing here? I don't really belong here. I'm an Englishman working for an American newspaper from a hotel in Israel. Schizophrenia, dear Kate. The utter loss of myself. I am leaving for a complex of reasons that sum up my lost self.'

She studied him thoughtfully, trying to read between his words, believing what he said, but also believing even more that the reasons he was offering were a subterfuge for something far greater. He refused to meet her gaze, but instead examined the space around her, as if, in looking at her, he was drawn to a presence over her shoulder. She shivered, feeling haunted, sensing that Leon was also haunted, his flight from Israel motivated by something that he could not divulge. Leon and Moshe: two haunted men, both hiding within themselves. She recalled Moshe arriving home in the early hours of the morning, his face troubled when he lay her down to sleep before leaving for work… Troubled, secretive, pretending to be light-hearted, yet emanating fear and despair from every pore in his body. Leon and Moshe: the men divided by Joshua's presence; the men joined by their commitment to her, both now steeped in misery. She thought about it and felt bewildered, wondering if she was to blame, and then saw Leon moving too slowly, standing up like an old man. He shrugged, grinning bleakly, too frail to be healthy, then rubbed his wasted face with his hand, the fingers visibly trembling.

'Where will you go?' she asked

'Back to England - home.'

'To your wife and kids?'

'No, I don't think so. It's too late for that now.'

He still avoided her gaze, instead looking over her shoulder, in search of that distracting, ghostly presence that she felt might be real. Joshua? Imagination? The concealed fear of her pregnancy? She tried to cast such dire thoughts aside, concentrating on Leon. He sensed her gaze and lowered his eyes, examining his dusty brown-leather shoes, rubbed his eyes as if they were filled with insects, then took a deep, painful breath. At that moment, she felt it - his fear and despair - and what she felt emanating from him suddenly gripped her like ice.

'What's the matter, Leon?'

'It's nothing. I'd better go.'

'There's something else, Leon - not your leaving - and it's eating away at

you.'

'You're imagining things, Kate.'

'No, Leon, I'm not. I know you as well as anyone can and there's something disturbing you.'

He made a move towards the hall, walking as if dragging chains, beads of sweat on his face, distractedly rubbing his forehead. She watched him, feeling frightened, contaminated by his odd behaviour, recalling her dream, the blood splashed on Joshua's robes, Leon and Moshe standing over his body, the sand swirling around them. A dream… no more than that… subconscious fears in search of meaning. She tried to rationalise the dream, to put her fears in proper perspective, but her feelings defied rationality and left her nerves jangling. Leon turned back at the hallway, his lips pursed in thought, and then, for the first time since he'd arrived, he managed to look in her eyes.

'You deserve Moshe,' he said. 'He's a lot stronger than I am. I think that if I'd won you, I'd have dragged you down to my sorry level, whereas Moshe, a much better man than I, will keep you where you belong. He's still not my favourite man - moral rectitude isn't my bag - but he is at least a man of strong convictions, so you're clearly well matched. Be considerate to him, Kate. He may be in for a bad time. Certain things could be happening that you won't quite understand, so try to keep yourself from blaming Moshe. In fact, he'll need your support.'

He went along the hallway and opened the front door. She followed him with her heart racing uncomfortably at what he had said. Reaching out, she grabbed his shoulder, making him turn back to face her, his eyes once more refusing to look directly at her and instead roaming restlessly about her. She felt the ghost over her shoulder, that emanation of pain and grief, and she trembled, as if touched by an icy wind, and then heard the whispered sibilance of her own voice.

'*What things*?' she said.

'I don't know, Kate. Not the details. I only know that there's a lot going on, and that Moshe is involved in it.'

'The Americans?'

'That's right.'

'And the Russians?'

'Right again.'

‘And does Joshua fit into this somewhere? Tell the truth, Leon. *Tell me*!’

She shook him hysterically, but he pulled away from her, stepped outside and then turned back to face her. For the second time, he looked directly at her, though only for a brief moment.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘Joshua’s involved. At least I *think* he’s involved. I honestly don’t know precisely how, but I’m sure something’s coming.’

Kate thought of her dream - of the flame and smoke around Jerusalem, of Joshua lying dead between Moshe and Leon - and then the fear, which before had been like a fog, became a blade that cut all the way through her to leave her in disarray. She reached out for the door, feeling weak and dizzy, and then placed her free hand on her stomach, trying to find reassurance.

‘I’m sorry,’ Leon said. ‘This is no way to say goodbye. I wanted to warn you, but perhaps I shouldn’t have mentioned it, since it might make things worse for you. Who knows? It may not happen. The wind might blow it all away. Have faith, Kate, and be a good mother. The world won’t end with this.’

He made a move towards his car, but she grabbed his arm again, feeling torn by the finality of his departure, drowning in a sense of hopelessness at the thought of what might be happening. Trying to smile, but failing to do so, Leon held her hand.

‘Yes, Kate?’

‘One last thing. I have to know before you go. *Why*, Leon? Why did you take the blame for releasing the news about Joshua?’

‘Self-punishment,’ he said. ‘The punishment I deserved. In planning to tell the world about Joshua, I betrayed you - and I meant it as vengeance. Yes, it’s true I didn’t do it, that someone else beat me to it, but if they hadn’t, if I’d managed to get in first, then I certainly would have. It was the intention, Kate: that nasty need to make you suffer. You rejected me and I wanted to pay you back by betraying your trust. Someone saved me from doing it - Paul Frankel, I believe - but he only did what I’d planned to do, which hardly lessens my guilt. Would I have done it in the end? Maybe - maybe not. Now I’ll never know - and neither will you - and that, by itself, is enough to prove that I’m guilty. Do you understand, Kate? I took the blame because I deserved it. If I believed in nothing else, I believed in my love for you, and I’m hoping that I shouldered the blame to reaffirm that belief. I loved you and still do. I’ve kept my faith in that belief. And I want you to remember it and

keep it with you always - not in the hope that it'll make you feel guilty, but in the hope that you'll think of me with kindness instead of contempt.'

Kate felt the tears coming, trickling gently down her cheeks, and she stepped forward, shaking with emotion, to let his arms slide around her. He held her close to him, pressing his lips to her forehead, and his body, also shaking, seemed as breakable as a reed in the wind. He was fading away, killing himself with drink and guilt, and she knew that whatever she said, he would never return. She pressed her hands against his spine, digging her fingernails into his jacket, feeling no sense of betrayal, no guilt over Moshe, as she tried to let him know that she still cared and that her heart still beat for him. He responded with a groan, a muffled cry of loss and yearning, and then pushed her away from him, with tenderness, and walked back to his car.

He drove off too quickly, the car churning up clouds of dust, his free hand thrusting out through the window, waving slowly and weakly. Then he was gone, the dust settling back on the road, and she stood there in the silence, the tears still on her cheeks, her grief battling with the clammy, relentless fear that was creeping back over her. After a long time, feeling haunted and heartbroken, she returned to the empty house.

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Moshe drove straight through Hebron, continued south to Beersheba, then followed the asphalt road past the remaining fertile stretches and into the desolate grandeur of the Negev Desert. Leon saw little, feeling trapped inside his head, his thoughts swirling like a murky, dangerous whirlpool that was sucking him down. He felt ill and weak, broken up at seeing Kate, and now, in the jeep, sitting beside the silent Joshua, he wondered just where they were going and what was to happen.

Glancing at Moshe, he saw that roughly handsome profile and noticed what could only be fear in the lines of his deeply tanned skin. That emotion was what united them, binding them together in speechless wonder, neither willing nor able to speak for fear of what might be said. Leon kept his eyes on Moshe, saw the sweat on his forehead, sensed his revulsion and despair, but didn't know what was causing it. Did he know what was going to happen? If he did, it could not be pleasant. What Leon sensed in him was a horror that was clearly contagious.

He tried to forget it, sinking down through himself, trying to will the past to return and blot out the present. He saw the fires of Con Thien, the smoking streets of Londonderry, the other nameless villages lost in flames in nameless countries where he had, in his weakness and self-deceit, lost the will to go on. Then his wife and two children, if not nameless, now faceless (How old were they now?), mere ghosts that occasionally crossed his mind and touched his soul with mild guilt. Beyond that, there was no past - only Israel and Kate - or, at least, an Israel in transition since the arrival of Joshua. The whole world had changed since then - as Kate had changed and he had changed - and he now felt cut off from all the strands that had woven his reality. He was a dreamer, a sleepwalker, impelled by intangible forces, neither knowing in what direction he was headed nor what he would waken to.

Glancing out of the jeep, blinking against the glaring light, he saw the

desert sweeping out to the mountains and their harsh, primal beauty. The sun was melting as it sank, the heat distorting its fiery brilliance, making it look like an enormous pomegranate with its blood-red juice flowing. Leon blinked and turned away, his gaze falling on Joshua, his profile made unearthly and mysterious in the darkening crimson glow.

Leon shivered, feeling frightened, wondering just who Joshua was, whether a saint or a sinner, God's child or the devil's, the incarnation of man's theological dreams or his most monstrous desires. The world had changed because of Joshua - and was going to change more - and yet Joshua, the most passive of living creatures, had done nothing to warrant it. He had simply materialised, emerging magically out of time, and had, since that moment, offered nothing but his seductive ambiguity. He had changed the world just by *being*, affirming nothing, denying nothing, simply waiting, with inhuman patience and dignity, for the world to reveal itself. And that the world had done, removing its mask and showing its real face, every impulse, good and bad, pouring out to create a new countenance. So, Joshua had changed the world - not by living; by merely existing - and now, as Leon accepted this fact, he felt his fear growing stronger.

'I have to catch a plane,' he said.

'Patience,' Joshua responded.

'It'll take hours to get back to Tel Aviv, so I want to know where we're going.'

'We are going to where the end begins.'

'What end? What does that mean?'

'It is not very far,' Joshua said. 'I will know it when we arrive there.'

Leon glanced across at Moshe, but saw no change in his face, the beads of sweat still glistening on his forehead, his lips forming a straight line. He knew that Moshe was not himself, that some imminent horror had engaged his thoughts, and realising this, his own fear no help at all, he recalled the light of terror in Kate's eyes and wondered what she had sensed.

'There's nothing here,' he said. 'We're in the middle of the Negev. Apart from the Bedouin, there's nothing but desert and mountains.'

'Here the end begins,' Joshua said.

'You still haven't explained that. You couch everything you say in ambiguity, as if frightened of truth.'

'Do you know what truth is?'

‘Do you?’

‘I seek to find it. The end begins where truth reveals itself and forces wise men to stutter.’

Leon did not reply, his fear of Joshua sealing his lips; instead he glanced across the burning plain at the immense, ochre cliffs. The sun was lower in the sky, an enormous blood-red orb in shimmering heat waves, its lower half melting and spreading out as twin streams of red-and-yellow lava. The cliff peaks had started bleeding - or at least appeared to bleed, the jagged peaks turning pink, then crimson, then blood-red, the blood dripping down the scarred face of the rock to cover its dark, pock-marked surface.

Leon was feeling cold even though he should be burning, and he turned his eyes away from the bleeding cliffs to look into himself. He saw darkness and light, the latter shrinking in the former, his soul retreating before the advancing unknown and what it might represent. The unknown was the darkness, the challenge in Joshua’s smile, and the light was the flickering of his own will at the doors of oblivion. Why had he come with them? What had he hoped to find? He had come because that light, the final flickering of his will, had been challenged by the mystery of Joshua’s smile to flare up in defiance.

‘I can’t fight you,’ he said before he heard himself speaking. ‘I no longer have the will to believe - and belief requires will.’

‘Open your eyes,’ Joshua said. ‘Don’t be frightened of looking at me. I am mortal, I bleed, I have known the sin of pride; and you, because you feel that sin acutely, are no less than I am. You spoke before knowing that you had done so - and that requires some belief.’

Leon opened his eyes to see the blood on the nearby cliffs, the sun melting and pouring away to dissolve into the shimmering heat-haze. A pale moon was materialising, still faint in the bright sky, and Leon felt, more than ever, that he was living the events of a dream.

‘What can you possibly show me that I haven’t already seen?’

‘What do you wish to see?’

‘Riddles, enigmas, conundrums - I didn’t come here for those.’

‘You wanted something specific?’

‘You promised me some kind of revelation.’

‘I promised only self-sacrifice and purification - and you obviously wanted it’

Leon flinched from that truth, recalling what had been said, accepting the accuracy of the statement, but appalled by its heartlessness. The Messiah or the Mahdi - possibly even the Christian Christ - Joshua lived by the breath of every word and would not let one pass. Was it heartlessness or faith? A stern belief in ultimate truth? Leon sighed in his ignorance of the answers, then glanced down at his hands. Flesh. Blood and bone. The only reality was himself. The only truth was the love he had felt and let slip through his fingers. He thought of Kate and felt despair, the awful grief of his final farewell, realising that in her, through her honesty and strength, he had understood the fallacy of cynicism and lack of commitment. She and Joshua were the same, two sides of the same coin; and Joshua, in his heartlessness, in his calm grasp of the truth, was the embodiment of an honesty and commitment that eluded most men.

'Why did I come?' Leon whispered, his voice emerging behind the thought. 'We're just driving like lunatics through this desert with no fixed destination.'

'You came for revelation.' Joshua's voice was like the wind. 'And what is a fixed destination when the Earth shifts so much?'

'I want to know where we're going.'

'You are frightened of your future.'

'I won't find any future in this desert.'

'You will. When the end begins.'

He turned his head to smile at Leon, a strange smile, touched with grief; a smile contradicting itself by binding joy to its opposite. Leon sighed again, feeling helpless and lost, no longer capable of trusting his own judgement, wondering where joy and anguish met, if one supported the other. Glancing at Moshe, he saw only the anguish, the excruciating pain of dreadful anticipation, and then he knew that the terror in Kate's eyes had been based on sound instincts. Moshe was caught in some kind of trap, his face revealing a secret nightmare, and Leon knew, with a dreadful sinking sensation, that it was bound up with Joshua.

'Are we close?' he asked of Joshua.

'Yes, I believe we are.'

'You don't know?'

'I only know what I feel - and I feel that we're close.'

'Stop the car,' Leon said.

‘Why should we stop?’

‘Because I don’t want to go any farther; I want to turn back right now.’

‘You are frightened?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. I only know that I won’t go any farther, so I want to turn back.’

‘You will never turn back again.’

‘Moshe, please stop this car.’

‘If you insist, we will stop,’ Joshua said, ‘because this must be the place.’

Moshe slowed down and stopped, applied the handbrake and then just sat there, leaning slightly forward over the steering wheel, his eyes fixed straight ahead. He had not said a word throughout the whole journey, and now, in his silence, there was a tension that seemed almost palpable. Disturbed, Leon glanced around and saw the darkening crimson sunset, the top edge of the sun sinking behind the western cliffs, and the blood, which was the light of the sun, turning black on the parched rock. A pale moon was in the sky, its light seeming to dissolve the sunlight, and then Leon, in recalling what Joshua had said, felt even more frightened.

‘Here,’ Joshua said. ‘It ends here. This is where it begins.’

The contradiction had a resonance that shook Leon leaf and bough. As he turned to see Joshua getting out of the jeep, he felt himself beginning to shake as if with some fever. In desperation, he glanced at Moshe, wanting a sign of what was coming, but Moshe, as he also left the jeep, kept his eyes averted. Leon felt himself freezing, paralysed with indecision, only his eyes still alive, flicking repeatedly from Moshe to Joshua, ascertaining with the clarity and unreality of a vivid dream that they were standing about six feet apart, directly facing each other.

Moshe’s face now seemed ravaged by fear and doubt, his left hand wiping the sweat from his furrowed brow, then falling away like a wounded bird. Leon started out of the jeep, again feeling ill and dizzy, his eyes shifting from Joshua to Moshe and then back to Joshua. The pale moon had dissolved the sun - that image filled Leon’s head - and as he placed his feet unsteadily on the ground, the crimson twilight enveloped him. The sand dunes were rust-red, the red mountains darkly shadowed, and that red light, falling over Moshe and Joshua, made them both look oddly demoniac.

‘What is it?’ Leon heard himself saying, as if from a great distance. ‘What’s happening? Why are we…?’

The question died on his lips when Moshe visibly trembled, shaking his head from side to side in protest as he withdrew his pistol. Leon just stared at Moshe, not believing what he was seeing, suddenly realising what was happening, and then, in the desperate hope that it would not come about, he turned his gaze upon Joshua. The silvery-grey eyes were staring at him, ignoring the pistol in Moshe’s hand, glittering unnaturally, but with calm, ruthless challenge, through the darkening crimson dusk.

‘No,’ Joshua said. ‘Not Moshe. It was never him. It is *you*.’

Leon stepped back in confusion, then with swiftly mounting terror, understanding what Joshua was implying and unable to face it. Self-sacrifice and purification - now he knew what was meant by that - and the darkness, briefly erasing the crimson sky, was caused by his upraised right hand. He felt fear and despair, a ghastly revulsion and nausea, and as his hand dropped away, letting the crimson sky rush back, he saw the shock on Moshe’s face, the pistol dangling from his fingers, and realised that Moshe was merely to be the witness to his own transgression. The horror of this was catastrophic, whipping his nerves, lancing his soul: he, Leon Halcomb, the one called but not chosen, was, in the end, being chosen to test his faith in the flames.

Leon lost his senses then, finding faith in delirium, stepping forward into the streaming crimson haze, his hand outstretched and searching.

Kate dreamed of Moshe and Leon, of Joshua stretched out between them, and awakened in the crimson haze of sunset with her heart beating wildly. She opened her eyes and saw the room, its white walls tinged with pink, a bloody womb in which her soul was being contained, well away from the living world. There was no wind outside, allowing the silence to have dominion, and she heard, in the completeness of that silence, her own slow, painful breathing.

She climbed slowly off the bed, one hand resting on her swollen belly, stood up, feeling weaker than expected, and then put on her dressing gown. Her lonesome feelings still possessed her - had, in fact, been exacerbated by Leon’s sad farewell - and as she slid her feet into her slippers, she wished that Moshe would come home.

Leon had gone for good and this knowledge filled her mind. The sadness

overwhelmed her, but was mixed with a clinging fear, mainly caused by the fact that the morning's dream had been repeated that afternoon. She felt haunted and almost crazy, unable to grasp what was happening to her, convinced that the dream, with its blood and death, was a sign to the future.

The crimson haze filled the room, making her feel that she was still dreaming, and she walked too quickly into the lounge, feeling less claustrophobic. It was brighter here, less threatening, the crimson haze not so prevalent, as she walked to the glass doors of the patio and looked across to Jerusalem. It sat high on the hills, its gold and silver domes gleaming, its high-rise buildings silhouetted against the blood-red twilight.

Leon's departure had hurt her. Moshe's secrecy had caused concern. The dream about Joshua had dragged him back into her thoughts, his image spiralling languidly in her mind until it formed a large question mark. She and Joshua were bound together, her nerves tuned to his every impulse, and now, as she gazed upon Jerusalem the Golden, she thought about him with anxiety - and then she felt a sharp, stabbing pain that briefly numbed her whole body.

She cried out and pressed her stomach, shocked and terrified by the pain, then heard the roaring of thunder and glanced up to see lightning daggering impossibly across the clear crimson sky. Stunned, not believing it, she stepped forward to look again, then realised that she could not feel her legs and sank to her knees. Pain exploded through her left shoulder, stabbing down her flailing arm, and she cried out as her body twisted sideways, punched by an invisible fist. The thunder roared and the lightning flashed, and she looked up, amazed, seeing no trace of a cloud in the sky and wondering if she had started hallucinating. Pain exploded again - this time in her left hip - and she shrieked and fell onto her right shoulder, then rolled onto her back.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to regain her senses, feeling the life returning to her limbs as the numbness wore off. A roll of thunder erased her thoughts, then she heard the crackling lightning, and the floor beneath her started shaking as if in an earthquake. The fear was luminous within her, forcing her eyes wide open, and she looked up to see jagged cracks appearing in the ceiling above.

Dust and plaster rained down as she slithered across the floor, moving backwards, stretched out on her spine, the child pressing upon her. Thinking

of this, her fear increased, almost turning into panic, and she reached out for the edge of a chair and pulled herself up onto her knees. She shook her head, trying to clear it, trying to think straight, but then the thunder rolled again, followed by the snapping lightning, and she turned around, still on her knees, to look out at the patio.

Joshua was standing there, his hands raised, fingers outspread. He was motionless, but his white robes flapped dementedly in a sudden, fierce wind. He was there and yet not there. His white robes were transparent, as, indeed, was his body. Through his transparent body she could see the low wall of the patio and , beyond it, the distant domes of Jerusalem.

Fear grabbed Kate like a vice - not love, but mindless fear - and she blinked and looked again to see his white robes whipping out from his raised arms. Now the robe was opaque, revealing nothing but his outlined form, the fierce wind sweeping across the patio and pressing the cloth to his body.

Thunder roared and lightning flashed, daggering out of a clear sky, darting fingers of silver in the crimson haze of the darkening twilight. The wind howled across the patio, sweeping pots and plants away, making Joshua's white robes billow dramatically and blowing his hair about. Then a bolt of lightning struck him, exploded blindingly around him, and he burst into flames, became a floating ball of fire, and then the fire became a dense cloud of smoke, which the wind quickly scattered.

The sound of Kate's screaming reverberated through her head, and she threw her hands over her ears as she turned away from the patio. The thunder roared, the floor shook, the chair beside her slid sideways, the carpet started rippling like waves and the bedroom door slammed shut. That sound shocked her badly, froze the scream on her lips, and she glanced around the room in a panic as the cracked walls spat plaster. The room was bathed in the crimson haze, growing darker and hotter, and the carpet, still rippling as if alive, had a will of its own.

Then death. The grave's darkness. She felt a violent, icy wind. The room was silent and the floor had stopped shaking and she heard her own breathing. She thought of death and then heard it, creaking like a rusty hinge. She turned her head and saw the bedroom door opening, very slowly and quietly.

The terror froze her where she crouched, in that darkening, crimson haze, but refused to let her move her eyes away from that opening door. A beam of

light trickled out, pouring across the floor towards her, coming closer as the door opened wider to let even more light out. Then a shadow materialised, thin at first, but growing broader, stretching along the rectangular strip of light to reach out and touch her. She tried to pull her hand away, her fingers stung by the ice of death, but the shadow grew wider and longer and finally stopped at her knees. She looked down at the shadow, her thoughts numbed by fear, then her eyes, against her will, travelled back along the shadow to where it ended, parallel with the doorway, at two tanned feet in sandals.

Joshua was standing there, silhouetted in the beams of bright light pouring out of the bedroom.

Kate stared at him, terrified, looking through him to the room behind him, as his body faded in and out like a light growing weaker, then stronger. He faded away and then returned, his white robes clearly visible, and his eyes, which had the sheen of polished stones, revealed nothing at all.

Kate sobbed and struggled backwards, moving along on her hands and knees, tugged between the seductive dread of death and the life kicking inside her. The living child gave her life, encouraging fear and the urge to flee, and she turned away from Joshua, trying to stand, feeling the cold at her back. The glass doors to the patio were the colour of blood, reflecting Joshua's white-robed form, and Kate screamed her defiance, a single word of denial, '*No*!', as his image disappeared from the glass and let her see Jerusalem again.

Freedom. The patio. She had to get out of the room. She saw the darkening sky, the pale moon in its ascendance, and stumbled forward to reach for the door handle and pull the doors open. Her hand fell on the door handle, and she shrieked, her fingers burning, then glanced down to see blue ice on the glass, illuminated by lightning. Straightening up, her senses scattering, she looked out at the patio and saw Joshua, clouds of sand sweeping over him.

She was drawn to the wintry depths of his eyes and felt them sucking her in. Inside him, she became him, her nerves tuned to his every impulse, feeling death coming closer every second, bringing horror or glory. She let it come and was not afraid, knowing Joshua as light and darkness, his nature as mysterious as good and evil, perhaps embracing them both. She felt the nearness of death, let it touch her and surround her, its silence seductive and sly, offering peace everlasting.

A dream. Or not a dream. An experience of the night. The fear limned the edge of the experience and then cast her back out. She heard sobbing - her own sobbing - and then opened her eyes again, the tears streaming down her cheeks as grief laid its chilling hands on her heart. She saw the lights of Jerusalem, the crimson sky turning darker, a cloud of sand drifting languidly across the patio, the frost melting in warm air.

The cloud materialised out of nothing, not too high up in the sky, first a dark spot, then what looked like a ball of smoke growing larger each second. It was dark and dense, boiling out of itself, mushrooming and spreading across the sky to blot out the pale moon. Kate watched it, mesmerised, remembering that first night, the discovery, as the cloud, growing larger, descended and drifted over the house. The first tendrils caressed the patio, spiralling lazily, draping the wall, then more cloud, like grey smoke, drifted down and obscured the whole area.

The lingering silence of death. The slow descent of death's darkness. She watched the moon disappearing, then the stars, then Jerusalem, and finally, when the lights of Jerusalem had vanished, she cried out for Moshe. In this pain was her humanity, the refusal to surrender, and she stepped back, her eyes fixed on the door, the child kicking inside her.

She saw Joshua on the patio. His head was bowed and he was weeping. He raised his head, his eyes gleaming through the grey cloud, and she saw his tears flowing. The child kicked in her stomach. Thunder roared and lightning flashed. She felt love and fear at once - for her child and Joshua, for Moshe and Leon, for Jerusalem and the promise of a future, no matter its nature - and then the lightning daggered down, snapping and crackling through the cloud, turning Joshua into flame and shimmering light, signifying the end.

Kate knew it was over - that Joshua's death had finally come - and her grief and exultation came together and fused her child to her. The grey cloud flashed and crackled, hissed and glowed in electric splendour, and then the thunder rolled again, the lightning daggered from the sky, and the glass doors containing Joshua's image exploded into the room.

Thrown backwards, Kate was saved, falling under the flying shards of glass, but she screamed in fear for her child, her stomach pounded by the sliding table, and then pain, or perhaps implacable horror, plunged her into oblivion.

The rolling thunder awakened Moshe, jerking him out of his stunned reverie, and he looked up to see a bolt of lightning daggering out of the cloudless sky. Startled, hardly believing it, he lowered his gaze to look at Joshua, saw him bathed in the darkening crimson haze as he stepped towards Leon. Moshe felt lost, his senses in disarray, but he suddenly understood what was happening, and he glanced wildly around him, at the desert and nearby cliffs, and then forced his gaze back to Joshua and Leon, where they stood in that fiery light. Joshua was reaching out to Leon, placing his hands on his shoulders, and Leon, at the touch of those hands, seemed to break deep inside.

'Not Moshe,' Joshua said. 'It was never him. Now you know it was you.'

The horror returned to Moshe immediately, making him tremble where he stood, the weight of the pistol dragging his hand down as it had not done before. What was happening was unreal, too bizarre to be true, and he wondered, with a bitter, self-wounding humour, if he was going insane. Yet Joshua and Leon were there, the one calm, the other shaking, and then he saw the bright delirium in Leon's eyes as he took hold of Joshua's wrists.

'No!' he said. 'I won't do it! You can't ask me to do it! I won't sacrifice myself for your madness! I won't do it! You're crazy!'

Thunder rolled and lightning flashed, daggering out of a cloudless sky, illuminating Leon's eyes as he clenched Joshua's wrists and tore his hands off his trembling shoulders. Joshua stepped back, smiling slightly, ambiguously, yet keeping his gaze firmly upon Leon, refusing to pardon him.

'You claim not to believe,' he said. 'You have lived your life by that claim. You have stumbled into darkness and despair in support of that claim. Is your pride, then, that meaningful? Is your future worth the having? Can the pain that you inflict upon yourself be any worse than this moment? Judge not as you be judged. What is asked is necessary. I must stand by my faith, and you, too, must so stand, pursuing the law of your logic to its absolute end. You claim to believe in nothing. That belief can now be tested. If, as you say, you believe in nothing, then you have nothing to lose. What you will be, which is what you want to be, will soon be revealed. You must press the trigger for me. Believing in nothing, you cannot sin. If, as you believe, there is no justice, the lack of justice absolves you. You will press the trigger, Leon. You have left yourself no choice. You were called but not chosen, and let bitterness destroy your faith, and now, with neither faith nor belief, you

have nothing to live for. My death will release you, Leon. It will bring you revelation. Whether exalted or debased, good or bad, right or wrong, that revelation, whatever it reveals, is all you have left. Now find out. Press the trigger.'

Leon sobbed and turned away, his shoulders stooped, his body shaking, and Moshe felt a terrible wonder and grief that almost destroyed him. Thunder rolled and lightning flashed, daggering through the darkening sky, and the pale moon, like an eye slowly closing, was obscured by a passing cloud. The crimson haze started fading, letting the cliffs sink into darkness, and Moshe felt the wind tugging at his clothes, then saw it sweeping the sand up. Leon sobbed and shook helplessly, his back still turned towards them, and the sand, carried up on the growing wind, started swirling around him.

Moshe slowly raised the pistol, feeling demented and unreal, only aware that it was he who had started this bleak affair and that he could not, no matter what Joshua said, allow Leon to finish it. The pistol wavered in his hand, being whipped by the rushing wind, and he saw Joshua's head, the noble profile, the whipping hair, and then saw Kate's face floating before him, her dark eyes filled with pain. That pain lanced through him, lacerating his resolve, and he tried to think of Israel, the Middle East, the whole world, willing himself to believe that salvation could rest in one gunshot. He tried, but did not succeed, feeling embarrassed by his vanity, unable to accept that the future could depend on his actions. Who was Joshua, after all? No one knew, nor ever would. He was a man of unusual talents, of seductive and mesmeric powers, but for all that he was still a normal man, flesh and blood, a mere mortal. Let the world decide its own fate, let the sands of time take charge: it was vanity and possible hysteria that had led to this moment.

'Don't be frightened,' Joshua said. 'Death will not have dominion. I go to my death to bring life to the wounded and lost. What is asked is necessary. Beyond death is revelation. And revelation, its horror or glory, is all we can hope for.'

Moshe started lowering the pistol, feeling defeated and ineffectual, now aware that no matter what Joshua said, he could not press the trigger. Thunder rolled and lightning flashed, and he looked up, disbelieving, and saw an immense black cloud descending as the sand spiralled skyward. The desert was in revolt, either attacking or defending Joshua, and Moshe lowered his eyes and saw Leon turning into the swirling sand. He stared at Joshua with

weeping eyes, rubbed his lips with his hand, let the tears trickle down over the knuckles, and then turned towards Moshe.

Moshe stepped back automatically, hardly aware that he had done so, as Leon stumbled towards him out of the swirling sand, his eyes demented and haunted. Joshua watched him, saying nothing, then raised his face to the sky. Leon reached out and snatched the pistol from Moshe and then turned away from him. Moshe stood there, briefly frozen, glancing down at his empty hand, then looked up to see Leon aiming the pistol at Joshua. The pistol wavered in his hand, being whipped by the howling wind, and Moshe stood there, paralysed, unable to accept what he was witnessing, and then found his hands clawing at Leon, trying to snatch the pistol back.

Leon sobbed and jerked away, then turned back, his right hand swinging, and the pistol, slammed into Moshe's head, made him stumble and fall. He managed to stay on his knees, his head reeling, filled with pain, and the blood, pouring over his eyes, seemed to pour over Joshua. He jerked and stumbled backwards - only then did he hear the shot - and then raised his hands to shoulder-level, his fingers curved downward. Leon cried out and fired again, without skill, his arm jerking, and Joshua twitched and took another step back, his white robes splashed with blood. Thunder roared and lightning flashed, then the third shot rang out, and Leon sobbed as Joshua fell to his knees, the sand swirling around him. He raised his hands in entreaty, his dangling fingers dripping blood, and then the wind, after the fourth and fifth gunshots, made him fall gently sideways. Leon sobbed and ran forward, aimed the pistol, fired the last shot, and Joshua, his bloodied robes flapping wildly, quivered once and was still.

Moshe climbed back to his feet, feeling dizzy, swaying slightly, then looked through the dense, swirling sand, trying to focus his eyes. He saw the huddled form of Joshua, his bloodied robes like a fallen flag, the pistol thudding into the sand by his head as Leon turned away from him. Moshe walked forward, moving awkwardly, feeling nauseous and weak, and reached out to take hold of Leon's shoulder and pull him towards him. His hand found the wind-whipped air, the sand biting his dangling fingers, then he saw Leon making his way past the jeep and heading into the wilderness. Leon was still sobbing - Moshe could hear it from where he stood - and that sound, replacing the thunder and lightning, was the cry of a dying man.

Moshe ran forward, calling out to him, trying to bring him back, but then

he stopped, the blood blinding him, the dizziness defeating him, and sank to his knees in the sand, feeling drained and exhausted. The wind abruptly died away, the swirling sand settled down, and the cloud that had obscured the moon and stars was no longer in view. Moshe wiped the blood from his eyes, raised his head to look at Leon, saw him shrinking and eventually disappearing in the vast, starlit wilderness. Only then, feeling broken, the full horror rushing through him, did Moshe turn back and look at the huddled form in the bloodied white robes.

Joshua was dead.

PART FIVE:

RESURRECTION

‘Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father: but go to my brethren, and say unto them, I ascend to my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God.’
-*John*, 20:17

‘The end begins where truth reveals itself and forces wise men to stutter.’
-*Joshua*

41

Every corridor in the hospital was being guarded by soldiers, all of them armed to the teeth. Moshe nodded at them as he passed, taking no pleasure from their presence, too aware of the reason for their being here and disturbed by the thought of it. He still felt that he was dreaming, that Joshua's death had not occurred, but news of the killing had been broadcast two days ago, and already the repercussions were shaking the whole Middle East.

Kate was in a private ward, leaning against her pillows, her long hair pinned up on her head, shadows under her eyes. Moshe stood in the doorway, hardly able to enter, his guilt and shame more than he could bear, his deception lying upon him like chains and draining his spirit. Kate smiled when she saw him, but her pain was clearly visible, etching fine lines around her eyes and making her lips shiver slightly.

'*Shalom*, Kate.'

'*Shalom*. Don't just stand there: come in. You look almost as ill as I feel, so we should change positions.'

He advanced to the bed and kissed her, appreciating her attempt at levity, but knowing that her smile hid real anguish. Stepping back, he saw her eyes, now luminous with grief and fear - grief at Joshua's death and fear for her baby, still convinced that the blow to her abdomen had caused her some damage. He pulled the chair closer, sat down and held her hand, trying to keep the guilt from his face, feeling furtive and criminal.

'So, how do you feel?'

She shrugged. 'Not too good. I have the same dreams every night, and during the day I'm depressed. I'm trying not to give in to it - honestly, Moshe, I'm trying - but the tears come before I can control them, making me feel like a child.'

'It's Joshua,' Moshe said, ashamed to even speak that name. 'You still haven't recovered from his death; it's been a bad shock to you.'

She turned her head away, shielding her face with a cupped hand, obviously about to weep and trying to hide it.

'Who?' she said. '*Why*? And what was Joshua doing out there? Someone must have taken him out there for that very purpose.'

'We'll probably never know,' Moshe lied. 'He was found by some wandering Bedouins two days after it happened.'

'Maybe the Bedouins did it.'

'No,' Moshe said, 'they didn't. We have witnesses who saw them in the camel market in Beersheba at approximately the same time that Joshua was murdered. The Bedouins stayed in Beersheba until late that evening and only found Joshua's body when making their way back to the Negev Desert. That, plus the fact that they had no weapons, makes it clear that they weren't involved.'

He wanted to reach out and stroke the nape of her neck, but his guilt at the deception he was practising made the thought seem indecent.

'So where are they keeping his body?'

'Right here in the morgue. We thought it best to keep him in Jerusalem until we decide where to bury him. He'll probably be buried near here, on the Mount of Olives, more or less where we initially found him.'

Kate started sobbing, her back still turned to him, her spine curved, her hands covering her face. Sunlight poured in through the window, falling obliquely on the bed, and Moshe felt it on his already burning cheeks as he leaned closer to her. She had pulled her hand away from his in order to cover her face, but he tugged at her elbow, gently coaxing her hand back, and when eventually it slid into his, he drew it close to his chest. She leaned against the pillows, sniffing mournfully, her gaze fixed on the ceiling.

'You'll forget it,' Moshe said. 'Sooner or later… The pain won't last forever.'

His own words cut a hole in him, letting more guilt rush in, the rank hypocrisy of his remark producing a wave of shame and remorse. Joshua was dead - and he, Moshe, had planned it and witnessed it - and now, weaving his web of deceit, he wanted to walk out and throw up. He had lied to Kate, betrayed her, and was still deceiving her; and he would, to his dismay, have to maintain that lie into the future. Thus, his love turned to lead inside him, weighing him down and draining his spirit, so he raised her hand and pressed his lips to it, hoping to comfort himself.

‘I’m always frightened,’ Kate said. ‘I feel frightened and confused. I’m tormented by the conviction that Joshua’s not really dead, that his presence, at least, is still around me, refusing to leave. The dreams are so vivid - the sort of dreams you don’t forget - and sometimes, when I sleep during the day, I’m not sure that they’re dreams. I’m often convinced that I’m awake - I check the room and pinch myself - and then, if I blink and look again, I can still see him standing there. He’s always standing in front of the door, right there, where you stood, saying nothing, his hands by his sides, smiling ambiguously. Sometimes I speak his name. When I do, he smiles and nods. When he does that, I usually feel comforted and drift back into sleep…’

She blinked repeatedly and licked her lips, obviously foiled by her own thoughts, trying to reconcile reality with the dream and touch solid ground.

‘I can’t forget what happened,’ she continued. ‘I mean what happened the night he was murdered. When I saw him, when my world turned upside down, I felt nothing but fear. I loved him, but he frightened me - whether in my mind or not - as if, instead of the warmth I’d felt in him, suddenly there was nothing but malice. It was evil, pure and simple, radiating from his image; and I wondered then, and still wonder now, if it came out of me.’

‘No,’ Moshe said, squeezing her hand reassuringly, ‘it didn’t come out of you. It was death, Kate - you sensed that he was dying - and what you felt was that horror. Given that, you must have imagined the rest of it - you might even have imagined Joshua - but whatever it was that caused that havoc, it didn’t come from you.’

Not convinced, she closed her eyes to think, then opened them again and glanced down at the hand Moshe was holding.

‘He seemed evil,’ she said. ‘And then he seemed good again. At first, in my terror, I sensed evil all around me, and then, not much later, when he wept on the patio, he radiated compassion and love, as he did when I knew him. Now we’ll never know, and I’ll always be haunted by it: not knowing whether Joshua was good or evil - or maybe both at the same time. Perhaps he *was* just a mirror, reflecting what we normally hide - or an empty vessel being filled up with our virtues and vices. Was he God’s or the devil’s? We’ll never know… But his death… Yes, it haunts me.’

Moshe could not meet her gaze, feeling defiled by his own deceits, so he studied the sun-tanned skin of her wrist, very smooth, highly sensual. He thought of Leon in the desert, his eyes bright with delirium, being lured into

hell's fiery portals to find revelation. Glory or horror; salvation or damnation: just as he would never discover Joshua's true nature, so, too, he would never come to know what Leon had found. Death, almost certainly; and beyond that, the unknowable: the peace of eternal sleep or the nightmare of life everlasting. Moshe was chilled by that possibility, wanting only the one life, so he bent over and kissed Kate's frail wrist, taking hope from her touch.

'You're very affectionate today, Moshe.'

'I'm lonely without you.'

'I feel frightened without you - unprotected - and I want to get out of here.'

'You have to stay a few more days. They want to keep their eye on you. They don't think the blow caused you any damage, but they need to be sure.'

It was the wrong thing to say, as he realised on the instant, silently cursing himself for his stupidity when she turned away from him. She covered her face with one hand, her body trembling as she wept, obviously trying to choke back the tears but failing to do so.

'Damn him!' she sobbed. 'It was Joshua - I didn't imagine it. He was there, materialising wherever I looked, and he caused all that havoc. What was he trying to do? Was he deliberately trying to hurt me? He devastated our home and nearly killed me and might have damaged our baby. It was Joshua. I know it! When he smiled, I was terrified. He made all those things happen, tried to frighten me and hurt me, as if seeking revenge for something I'd done. But what did I do? Was he after our baby? Damn him! He tried to hurt the child, and I'll never forget that.'

She shook her head in disbelief, still sobbing and shaking, while Moshe held her hand, feeling humiliated and remorseful, unable to forget what he had done, almost crushed by the weight of it.

'No,' he said, 'I think you're wrong. I think it was all some sort of accident. You were very close to him - you seemed to be tuned to his every impulse - and I believe that when he was dying, maybe just before his death, the emotions he went through, rage or fear, grief or pity, were made manifest through you, in the house, with particular force. Joshua might have thought about you – the woman always closest to him – and, in thinking about you, caused the manifestations that occurred about the same time as his death. Not evil or malicious, Kate. Possibly neither good nor evil. Perhaps simply a paranormal manifestation of highly charged emotions. You were there, Kate,

and felt what he felt at the moment of his death.'

In saying this, he was accusing himself, since he had sanctioned the original plot; and now, knowing it, unable to forget it, his humiliation was bitter and cut deep. He felt haunted and debased, pursued by his own shadow, unable to gaze into the mirror that would show him his conscience. He had done it for Israel, even knowing how Kate felt, and in doing so had made a clear choice between his country and Kate. He was loathe to admit this, but the truth of it stuck, and his only consolation was the fact that he had changed his mind at the last minute, stopping either out of fear or because of his enduring love for Kate. He would never know which.

'We'll never know,' Kate said despairingly, almost echoing Moshe's thoughts. 'That's what haunts me more than anything else. We'll never know if he was good or evil, compassionate or malicious, and because of that, if anything happens to my baby, I'll never forgive myself.'

'Yourself or Joshua?'

'Not Joshua - me. For having given myself to Joshua. For believing, without proof, on faith, that Joshua was good. I should never have done that - it was romantic and immature - and now, even suffering as I am from his death, I can't help feeling hatred for him - for endangering my child.'

'The baby's in no danger.'

'Damn you, you don't know that! You're a man, you're not pregnant, and you can't know what I feel, so don't sit there and tell me there's no danger. *You don't know a damned thing*!'

Moshe recoiled from her outburst, slightly stunned by her vehemence, and felt the blush rising to his cheeks as the hurt made his heart leap. But she turned her head away, obviously just as shocked as he was, and then started trembling again as she choked back her tears.

'Oh, damn it!' she said. 'I didn't mean to say that. Really, Moshe, I didn't. I'm behaving like a bitch, trying to take it out on someone. I'm frightened for our baby, I'm convinced that something's wrong, and so, even knowing that it's your child as well, I'm trying to make you suffer in my stead, as all bitches do. Yes, I'm a bitch - I'm being thoughtless and selfish - but I just can't get it out of my head that something is wrong.'

Sniffing her tears back, wiping her eyes with her fingertips, she turned to face him once more. He stood up and leaned across the bed to pull her into his arms. She came to him, like a child, her strength and courage briefly

weakened; but he embraced her and kissed her tangled hair, trying to reassure her, even while secretly enduring the torments of hell. He deserved what she had said for the damage he had done - to Joshua, Leon, Paul Frankel, and her - and accepting this bitter truth while holding her in his arms, he let his brimming pain be the punishment that might never end.

'The baby's fine,' he whispered. 'There's no need to worry. I've talked to the doctors and they said nothing's wrong, that you're just suffering from a form of mild hysteria that will soon go away. You have to try to forget Joshua - forget what happened in the house - and instead remember that you and the baby are doing just fine. You'll soon be a mother, Kate - *a mother* - and nothing else matters.'

'You spoil me.'

'You deserve it.'

'You deserve more than me.'

'Having you, I'm worth more than I was. I want our child… I want you.'

He pressed his lips to her soft hair, holding her tight, feeling her warmth, and then she raised her face and kissed him on the lips, clinging to him, her eyes closed. He then closed his own eyes, kissing her cheeks, her neck and shoulders, travelling down through himself, through his crippling guilt and shame, to take succour from the magic of her skin, with its promise of permanence. Their child would be an anchor, holding them steady in future storms, and he knew, as he gradually released her, that she sensed this as well.

'I have to go now,' he said. 'I'm wanted urgently at the Knesset. There's a lot of Arab movement along the borders and it's causing concern.'

'Because of Joshua?'

'I'm afraid so. They're convinced that he was murdered by the Jews. Certain Jews are, of course, equally convinced that he was murdered by Arabs.'

'You think there'll be more trouble?'

'I'm certain of it, Kate. The Arabs believe we murdered their Mahdi, so they're set for a Holy War.'

He didn't want to discuss it further, so he leaned forward and kissed her, then hurried to the door and glanced back, trying to seem unconcerned. She was still sitting upright, leaning back against the pillows, and her dark hair, being piled upon her head, made her face look too thin. She smiled, but her

eyes, large and luminous, didn't show the same humour.

'*Shalom*,' Moshe said.

'Come back soon,' Kate replied. 'It doesn't matter what we say or believe - I only relate to what I feel - and I'm frightened for my baby, particularly because the dreams are so vivid, they seem almost real… Joshua's presence…? I *feel* it.'

He nodded and walked away, feeling as if he was deserting her, shivering briefly because her parting words clung to him like a lingering bad dream. Armed soldiers were in the corridors, nodding respectfully as he passed, contrasting starkly with the white-smocked medics and nurses who were moving about with an air of quiet efficiency. The windows framed a bright day, the sun high in the sky, beaming down on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, where the hospital was located. Moshe longed to be outside, in open space and fresh air, but he forced himself to enter the chilly gloom of the well-guarded morgue.

Joshua was stretched out on a surgical table, still wearing his white, bloodstained robes, his hands folded primly on his stomach, his feet bare and washed clean. Rabbi Latinavots, wearing a plain shirt and slacks, was silently gazing down upon him. The Rabbi glanced up when Moshe entered, then shook his head from side to side - a gesture of weary bewilderment, if not actually of sadness.

'*Shalom*, Moshe.'

'*Shalom*, Jozsef.'

'Well, he's back where he came from. A mortal man, he died like a mortal man and can be buried as such.'

'Let's hope so,' Moshe said.

He stepped up to the surgical table and looked down at the dead Joshua, wondering what he had expected to find and feeling shocked when he found it: the same mask of inhuman composure and unnatural, undeniable serenity. Joshua's face was the light, drawing it in and reflecting it, turning it back upon Moshe to make him uneasy. The face was a cipher, offering nothing, revealing all, at once innocent and wise, very young and very old, too blank to be real, too vivid to be forgotten, defying, in its terrible beauty and repose, definition and logic.

Moshe gripped the edge of the table, his heart racing with sudden panic, seeing the child in the man, the man in the child, ascetic lips, sunken cheeks,

the dark beard flecked with grey, the nose aquiline, the closed eyes with long eyelashes, forehead smooth, the hair matted. A mature man. A child. One dissolved into the other. The face was a contradiction: a blank page, the map of history, a void waiting to receive and be received and thus fill itself up. Shocked, Moshe stepped back, touching his dry lips with his fingers, blinking and then staring at Jozsef as if seeing a ghost. Jozsef smiled and spread his hands in the air to suggest resignation.

'You felt it, too?' he said. 'You saw it? What is it we're looking at? A mortal man, certainly. But a *normal* man? I doubt it. There's something in that ostensibly normal face that defies comprehension. Who was Joshua? *What* was he? That mystery remains unsolved. It will haunt me for the rest of my days, frustrating my faith.'

He lowered his hands to his side, glanced at Joshua and shivered, then let his gaze roam around the gloomy, chilly morgue before settling back on Moshe.

'You saw Kate?'

'Yes.'

'And how was she?'

'Not too good. She's still convinced that that blow to her stomach might have harmed the baby. The doctor thinks so, too, but I didn't tell her that, since, as the doctor also said, her other fears aren't helping her condition.'

'What other fears?'

'Joshua,' Moshe said, deliberately keeping his gaze away from the corpse on the surgical table. 'She's having exceptionally vivid dreams - so vivid they seem real - to the degree where she's no longer sure if she's dreaming or hallucinating. She sees him repeatedly, just standing there, smiling, his hands by his sides. When she speaks his name, he disappears.'

He saw Jozsef's startled expression, his eyes widening, his cheeks flushed, and the dread that had recently took hold of him slithered back through him.

'What's the matter, Jozsef?'

'What you said… about what Kate saw… A lot of people, Jew, Arab and Christian, are reporting the very same phenomenon.'

'Dreams of Joshua?'

'More like visions. They also see him when awake. He's been seen in broad daylight, by more than one person at a time - at the Wailing Wall, in

the Haram es-Sharif, by the Garden Tomb and in the Garden of Gethsemane - and even in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, reportedly standing at the Sepulchre itself, gazing down at the shelf that was cut out of the rock of Golgotha. Of course it could be mass hysteria - common in religious matters - but some of the sightings have been remarkable… and reported by reliable people.'

Moshe glanced automatically at Joshua, felt fearful and looked away, wondering about the nature of reality, if the mind harboured a separate world.

'It's not helping us,' Jozsef said. 'It's merely increasing speculation. The obsession with Joshua, always acute, now seems even greater.'

'I know,' Moshe said. 'And it's infecting the Arabs. Rashid Idriss is claiming that Joshua is the Mahdi, that the Jews arranged his murder, and that the Moslems are now honour-bound to take his body to Mecca.'

'We can't concede to that?'

'No,' Moshe said, 'we can't… And that's why Rashid's talking about a Holy War… A war designed to capture Joshua's body and transport it to Mecca.'

'Do you think that's likely to happen?'

'Yes, Jozsef, I do. The whole Arab world is now obsessed with the notion of Joshua as their Mahdi, and because of that, for the very first time, they've put their differences aside. They don't care about the Americans or the Russians - they only care about their Mahdi - and the possibility of dying in a Holy War is a song in their hearts. They're massing all along our borders, defying the American and Russian so-called forces of intervention, and I believe that their sole concern is the capture of Jerusalem and, thus, Joshua's corpse.'

'Is Joshua's corpse worth such a war? I'm not sure that it is. If Jerusalem is threatened, it might be best to surrender the corpse and avoid a war that no one can win.'

'We can't do that, Jozsef, for more than one reason. As you surely know yourself, too many Jews think of Joshua as the Messiah; consequently, if we handed him over to the Moslems, we'd be accused of blasphemy and find ourselves fighting our own Jews. Likewise, the Christian world has adopted him as the Christ of the Christians and would therefore be outraged if we surrendered his body to the Arabs. No, Jozsef, we're hemmed in on all sides, so we have to keep hold of him.'

He turned away from Jozsef, not wanting him to see the guilt that his words had resurrected. What he had said was perfectly true, but it wasn't the most important truth: the fact that Joshua's body had to remain here in Israel to inflame the Arabs into the war that America needed. The plan formulated in the desert now had to proceed, to enable the American forces to intervene - to their own benefit as well as Israel's. Moshe had sanctioned that plan, in shame and humiliation, but now, unable to meet Jozsef's gaze, he wondered what he had started.

'Joshua,' Jozsef said, letting the name hang in a brief, uneasy silence. 'He came, he saw, and he conquered - and he hasn't left yet.'

They stared at Joshua's corpse, both feeling frightened and fascinated… and at that very moment, as if Joshua had responded, the floor shook and they heard a dull rumbling sound that seemed not too far off.

Moshe knew the sound well and felt the dread lancing through him; he saw nothing but Jozsef's widening eyes as his head jerked around. The floor shook again, the rumbling noise was repeated, and then, impelled by instinct, Moshe rushed to the door of the morgue. Jozsef called out to him, but Moshe didn't look back, and then he heard Jozsef's footsteps close behind him, following him as he hurried out of the morgue and turned into the corridor. The armed soldiers were alert, checking their weapons, bawling instructions, while the medics and nurses seemed frozen, as if trying to see through the walls. The rumbling sound came again, making the walls and floor shake; then Moshe heard another sound, the deafening roar of an explosion, and a jet plane shrieked low across the hospital, heading south to the Negev.

Moshe started running, hearing the soldiers shouting on all sides, their voices drowned out by another jet plane, then a third and a fourth. The walls shook and trolleys rattled, bolts were slamming home in rifles, and then another explosion, obviously close to the hospital, reverberated around the corridor and was followed by the rumbling of collapsing walls. There was bawling, a single scream, more jet planes shrieking overhead, as Moshe rushed into the main lobby to see swirling clouds of dust and smoke where part of a wall had been blown away. Moshe stopped running and took it in - the bloody bodies in smouldering debris - and then he turned in the direction of the reception office, in search of a telephone. More jets screamed overhead, another explosion came from the direction of Jerusalem, and then an army lieutenant, surprisingly young, bathed in sweat, emerged from a

dust-filled doorway and stopped just in front of him.

‘HQ has just called,’ the young lieutenant said breathlessly. ‘The whole Arab world seems to be on the move and heading straight for our borders. They’re already crossing at Lebanon and still advancing from Syria - and their aircraft are heading towards us from Jordan and Egypt. Obviously they’re defying the Americans and the Russians - neither of whom have made any move yet - and the attacks appear to have been synchronised with the bombs that have just exploded all over Jerusalem. Right now, on the West Bank, and in certain areas of Jerusalem, there are an awful lot of Arabs on the loose, most bearing arms. In short, we have a war in Jerusalem - and at all of our borders.’

Jozsef hurried up to Moshe, breathing heavily, sweating profusely, his dazed eyes taking in the swirling smoke and the broken, bloody bodies lying in rubble. Clearly shocked, he stared at Moshe, but the latter turned away from him, unable to believe that he had sanctioned what was now just beginning.

42

It was a slow descent into hell. At first, from the summit of Mount Tabor, it looked almost pretty, the sun shining on the hills of Galilee, reflecting off the lake itself, beyond which, the smoke of war no longer visible, were the lost Golan Heights. It was also pretty in the other direction, looking across the Plain of Jezreel, where the Israeli tanks, forming a wall in front of Megiddo, were moving forward into purple mushrooms of purple smoke and darting fingers of yellow flame. The Lebanese guns were beyond the plain, south of Nazareth and Haifa, and their shells, exploding between the advancing tanks, soon started darkening the clear air. Moshe looked back in the other direction, the binoculars straining his eyes, and saw the Syrians advancing, a mass of ants on the rolling hills, spread out between Tiberias and Zefat, a thin smoke drifting over them.

Most of Galilee was gone and he couldn't hold the plain much longer, so he stood up in the jeep, feeling weary and bitter, and waved his right hand, slowly and methodically, to indicate that the evacuation of Mount Tabor should commence. The troop-trucks and jeeps moved out quickly, trundling down the dusty road, sunlight reflected off mirrors and weapons, a strong wind whipping parched grass. The dust soon filled the air, forming a single, boiling cloud, and Moshe had to use his binoculars again to see the broad plain below him. The tanks were still advancing, zigzagging sluggishly, trying to avoid the explosions of scorching flame and spewing soil, crawling forward into the thickening smoke with the foot soldiers spread out behind them.

'We need more aircraft,' Sergeant Aranow said. 'We can't hold out without them. Those tanks won't hold anything back if we don't get more air support.'

'We won't get it,' Moshe informed him. 'We have to let this area go. Most of the aircraft are being used to stop the Arab advance in Sinai, the few

remaining to keep the Jordanians back, though that can't be for long.'

'We're pulling out of the Jezreel Valley?'

'We don't have a choice. The Syrians have captured most of Galilee, the Lebanese have captured Haifa, and so we have to pull back north of Samaria and pray that something positive will break.'

'That leaves a lot unprotected.'

'I repeat: we have no choice. Anything north of Nablus will simply have to go, including all the coastal towns north of Netanya. We've got to try to hold Tel Aviv and Nablus, and keep them out of Samaria. If they manage to capture Samaria, they'll get Jerusalem and we can call it a day.'

The scenario, a nightmare, was not much worse than the reality: the Jordanians were advancing towards the River Jordan, the Egyptians were advancing across Sinai and would soon be in the Negev, and in and around Jerusalem, where army strength was minimal, there were bombings, ambushes and minor battles every hour of the day. Moshe despaired when he thought about it, and felt fear when he thought of Kate, wondering if she was safe in the hospital, guarded or not.

'It's hopeless,' Sergeant Aranow said, scratching his nose in a distracted fashion, his eyes scanning the Plain of Jezreel, below, where the tanks were advancing. 'We can't hold them off on all sides without some kind of help. We don't have enough men, enough tanks, enough aircraft, enough anything. We need the intervention of the Americans or Russians, whether we like it or not.'

Moshe looked down on the Plain of Jezreel, which seemed a lot closer now, and saw the smoke swirling across the tanks and over the men massed behind them. The Lebanese guns were firing constantly, the shells hissing and then shrieking, exploding with a monstrous roaring between the tanks, sending black smoke boiling outward from balls of fire.

'They're already moving,' Moshe said. 'They were just taken unawares. They didn't think the Arabs would ignore them, they didn't expect them to be co-ordinated, and they certainly weren't prepared for the sheer number of Arabs involved.'

He thought of this with bitterness, not forgetting his own role in it, now faced with the fact that the situation was out of control, and that neither the Americans nor the Russians could put a stop to it. The Americans had miscalculated, underestimating Arab fervour, and had, in re-routing their

forces to the Arab oil states of the Persian Gulf, depleted their forces in the Arab Republic of Egypt and opened the door for the invasion of Sinai. This situation, bleak at best, had degenerated further when the Soviets, outraged by the 'imperialist aggression' of the Americans, used the major portion of their forces in Syria and Jordan for a 'defensive' invasion of northern Iraq, thus weakening the line dividing the Syrians and Jordanians from Israel, allowing them to quickly conquer all of Galilee. Both the Soviets and the Americans were now rushing in fresh forces, but the likelihood of them stopping the Arab advances seemed very remote. Indeed, Jerusalem could fall before the Americans managed to reach it; and Moshe, when he thought of this possibility, knew what the damned suffered.

The road ahead was levelling out, snaking towards the Plain of Jezreel, and Moshe gazed across the flat expanse of land at the smoke in the distance. The tanks looked like large stones, the troops like ants at the rear, and the shells were raining down at a murderous rate, the noise now much louder. The earth roared and erupted, spewing soil and jagged flames, the latter forming into dazzling balls of silvery-white fire that spun crazily in the air and then spiralled away as black smoke. The tanks moved left and right, lumbering through the inferno, and then the soldiers, suddenly within range of the guns, started zigzagging furiously. The shells shrieked and then exploded, fire and soil swirled and soared; then one tank was hit, slewing sideways, vomiting smoke, and then a series of explosions ripped viciously through the soldiers, throwing them into the air like broken dolls and then hurling them down again.

Moshe tore his eyes away and looked at the tracks ahead, the column now following the road across the plain to the ruins of Megiddo. The army was scattered around Megiddo, the tents flapping in the wind, with more tanks and half-tracks and men moving out very minute. From here, Megiddo was a small mound on the skyline, rising above the army massed around it, the modest ruins overgrown. Megiddo*: Har Megiddo*. Armageddon: the ultimate battlefield… Now the battle had come, very possibly the final battle, and Moshe suddenly smelt the smoke and cordite as the trucks raced into the thick of it.

The trucks growled, the guns roared, the shells shrieked and exploded, and the smoke, swirling wildly above the tanks, was carried back on the wind. The air abruptly turned dark, became a grey, choking cloud, and then

the trucks up ahead started scattering left and right, driving around the outlying tents to brake near the big guns. Men were running back and forth, reduced to shadows in the murk, while the big guns, roaring awesomely, rocking violently to and fro, made the ground shake beneath them as they belched flame and smoke.

Moshe's jeep came to a halt, its wheels shrieking in soft soil, and he immediately stood up and jumped out, the smoke making his eyes sting.

General Meshel was in the command tank, jabbing his index finger at some officers, all of them grouped around a trestle table that was covered with maps. He glanced up when Moshe approached, not smiling, his eyes bloodshot, but his hand reached out to touch Moshe on the shoulder in a gesture of sympathy.

'We have to pull back,' Moshe said. 'The Syrians have nearly reached Mount Tabor. When we left, their southernmost flank was closing in on Sharona, so it's only a matter of time before they reach here.'

'And the Lebanese?'

'Their guns are close and their army's advanced to Yoqne'am. Another arm has advanced through Haifa, is moving down the coast and should shortly be reaching the outskirts of Caesarea.'

'What about air support?'

'It's not possible,' Moshe said flatly. 'We need all our remaining aircraft down south, for the Sinai and Jordan.'

The guns roared and the ground shook, the Lebanese shells kept falling, and more tanks and half-tracks were pulling out, churning up the dried soil. Moshe gazed across the Plain of Jezreel, saw the flames and soil erupting, the oily black smoke sweeping across the weaving tanks and zigzagging men. It was a nightmarish scene, extraordinarily violent and surrealistic, the soldiers looking like spectres in the dark, streaming smoke, the tanks resembling weird, prehistoric monsters, some broken and dying.

'We're being slaughtered,' General Meshel said.

'Pull them back,' Moshe responded. 'We can't hold Galilee any longer, so there's no point in staying here.'

As the general reached for the field phone, Moshe stared across the plain to see the Syrian jets glinting above Mount Tabor, heading straight for the camp. He opened his mouth to warn the officers, automatically, hardly thinking, but before he could say a word, the jets were diving straight at him.

He saw the smoke trail of the rockets, heard the jets screaming past, and then the ground ahead erupted, geysering up between the tents, forming monstrous umbrellas of spewing soil and smoke, immense balls of dazzling fire spreading out and soaring upward and then splashing back down again. The tents disintegrated in a second, became smouldering rags in flight, flapping furiously and falling back on the human torches that were screaming dementedly. The jets returned, shrieking hideously, the rockets howling; then the hell began again, the flames devouring men and tents, a tank outlined in flames, a truck shuddering and then exploding, the smoke and dust sweeping across the camp with the force of a hurricane.

General Meshel was bawling, his lips close to the field phone, ordering his tank commanders to pull back, his voice barely audible. The ground spasmed and erupted, making a catastrophic din, and a cloud of dust was swept through the tent on a wave of fierce heat. Moshe turned and saw light, was sucked into it, somersaulting, fell down through a tunnel of scorching heat and found himself on his back, sprawled out, spread-eagled. Dust and soil rained upon him, showering out of an oily black smoke, and he kicked his feet, rolled onto his belly and then stood up again. General Meshel was slamming the phone down, smacking his temple with his free hand, then he blinked, stared at Moshe and nodded vigorously, his lips set in a tight line.

'Right,' he said, 'they're retreating. They can actually see the Lebanese. You men…' He turned to the officers gathered around the table…'Start evacuating the camp.'

The officers scattered in different directions, zigzagging around the erupting earth, while Moshe looked above the flames of the burning camp to see the jets flying off. Blackened men were screaming terribly, all blistered, some still smouldering, and the medics were racing frantically through the smoke, carrying stretchers and field packs. Moshe saw blazing trucks and tanks, the skeletal frames of burnt tents, a blind man wandering aimlessly about, his hands holding his bloody head. Then Moshe looked the other way, across the Plain of Jezreel, and saw the first of the retreating soldiers racing out of the smoke, the tanks rattling and rocking behind them, some smouldering, some burning.

Another field phone rang and General Meshel grabbed it, his free hand reaching up to stop the blood that was trickling out of one ear. He shook his head and listened intently, trying to hear above the exploding shells, while

behind him, like phantoms in a nightmare, more retreating men emerged from a wall of smoke. The shells were still falling, tearing the men to pieces, the flames illuminating the soaring smoke that seeming to push the soil ahead of it, after which the soil rained back down through the smoke in great looping waves. Moshe stared at it, mesmerised, his guilt and shame freezing thought, then General Meshel tugged at his arm and held out the field phone.

'It's the Prime Minister,' he said. 'He wants to talk to you. He sounds agitated.'

Moshe took the phone, covering one ear with his hand, trying to hear above the roaring of the guns and the cataclysmic explosions.

'Shlomo?'

'How are things?'

'Terrible,' Moshe confessed. 'I'm afraid we've lost the whole of Galilee, so we'll have to pull back.'

'Where are the Syrians?'

'Right here.'

'And the Lebanese?'

'Nearly here. They're also moving south along the coast, clearly heading for Tel Aviv.'

Ben Eleizer was silent, obviously shocked by what he was hearing, and Moshe looked straight ahead to see more men racing out of the boiling smoke. They were running and falling, catapulting and spinning, mere puppets in a maelstrom of daggering flames and dark, swirling soil. A tank shuddered and exploded, its barrel snapping and flying away, its turret-lid falling back to reveal a man's head and shoulders, briefly silhouetted in a tongue of yellow flame that licked over the hatch, burning the crew alive.

'I need you back here,' Ben Eleizer said eventually. 'I want you to personally take charge of Joshua's body. I want the body removed from the morgue and taken out of Jerusalem to our temporary HQ in the New Hebrew University, where we'll keep it until this conflict is resolved, one way or the other. We can't afford to lose him, Moshe - it would have catastrophic results - and Jerusalem is now practically in a state of siege, with Arab fighters swarming all over the place. I'm talking about professional fighters, men well-trained and briefed: they've bombed the Central Post Office and the Hebrew Union College, the Jewish Agency, half a dozen synagogues, and various parts of the Mae Shearim quarter. We caught some of them at it and

tugged their tongues for information; they belong to Rashid Idriss, parachuted into the Negev, and now we've reason to believe that Rashid himself is here, making his way to Jerusalem with a group of skilled Fatah commandos, determined to get to the Augusta Victoria Hospital and take Joshua out of there.'

'That's where Kate is,' Moshe said.

'I know, Moshe. I know. You can collect her as well and bring her here to the university; then we'll transfer her to the Hadassah Medical Centre, where you'll be able to keep a closer eye on her. I want you to do it immediately, Moshe. We can't afford to lose Joshua's body. Joshua might be the only card we have left: we might need him for bartering.'

'Bartering?'

'With the Arabs. I don't think the Americans can help us. In their greed for the Arab oil states, they left it too late, and now, even though they're trying to get here, I don't think they've a chance. The Arabs will get here before them - we can't pretend otherwise - and the only thing that might keep them out is the offer of Joshua.'

'What about the Jews and Christians?'

'We can't worry about that now. Let the Christian world protest - we can deal with that when it comes - but an Israel filled with any kind of Jew is better than no Israel at all.'

'Okay,' Moshe said, 'I'll do it.'

Ben Eleizer hung up and Moshe put the phone down as the retreating men poured in around the tent, covered in filth and exhausted. The falling shells were coming closer, the explosions making the tent shake, the dust and soil pouring in on waves that lashed his skin like a whip. He heard the growling of the tanks, the frantic roaring of trucks and half-trucks, and looked around to see them all moving off, heading back towards Samaria. General Meshel was staring at him, suppressed pain in his bloodshot eyes, then he turned away and watched his men retreating, his shoulders stooped in dejection. Moshe walked up to him and took hold of his shoulder, wondering how it could come to this.

'They want me in Jerusalem,' he said. 'I've got to go immediately. Don't hang around here any longer than you have to; we'll need you down south.'

The general nodded but said nothing, his gaze fixed on the retreating soldiers, then he suddenly stepped forward, straightening his shoulders on the

move, bawling orders and waving his hands as the column moved off.

Sergeant Aranow was in the jeep, the ground erupting about him, and he glanced around as Moshe waved his hand and told him to move. The jeep was moving as Moshe climbed in, reversing sharply in clouds of dust, and then it whined and wound its way through the retreating soldiers, passing trucks and half-tracks. Moshe caught a glimpse of General Meshel, standing upright in another jeep, but then a cloud of smoke obscured him, Sergeant Aranow put his foot down, and when Moshe next looked the general was gone, now far behind with his marching men.

They soon left the column behind, travelling an empty road to Jenin, then turning onto the road to Nablus and Ramallah, racing past fields of olive trees and grape vines and wheat, the sun blazing out of a sky free of smoke, the wheat bending in waves. Moshe saw little of the scenery, his senses numbed by defeat, his sole thought to get Kate out of the hospital before it was too late. He felt drained and exhausted, letting time pass in a dream, but then Sergeant Aranow shouted while stabbing the air with his index finger. When Moshe looked up, he saw a column of dust spiralling over the road ahead.

Moshe reached for his Uzi sub-machinegun as Sergeant Aranow slowed the jeep, one hand still on the steering wheel, the other slipping down to his pistol. They approached the column of dust, saw one civilian, then another, then a great mass of civilians tramping the road to Jerusalem, all fleeing from the direction of Netanya, in fear of the Lebanese. Some were walking, others were cycling; some empty-handed, others with suitcases; yet others pushing carts piled high with furniture, their children sitting on top. The column was moving slowly, the wheels of carts creaking and squeaking, and occasionally a car would inch through, its horn honking repeatedly.

‘Go through them,’ Moshe told his driver. ‘Just go through them. We have to get to Jerusalem.’

The sergeant did as he was told, advancing slowly through the shuffling people, honking his horn when they didn’t move quickly enough, ignoring their pleas for a lift. They seemed lost and desolated, a cloud of dust hovering over them, the wind whipping frocks and baggy trousers and racing on through the wheat fields. The column stretched right down to Nablus, the town chaotic with refugees, but thinned out considerably at the far side, letting the jeep race ahead, the road rising and falling and bending on the way to Ramallah.

There were more refugees at Ramallah, snaking a mile back from the town, and Moshe felt a mixture of grief and frustration when Sergeant Aranow slowed down again. His grief was for Israel, for the dead and the homeless; his frustration sprang out of his fear for Kate and what might already be happening. He was frightened of being too late - of marauding Arabs getting there before him - and when the jeep's horn started honking, when they parted the refugees, when they crawled at a snail's pace through the crammed streets of Ramallah, he felt the fear rising like a sea that was sucking him under.

They broke through at last and headed straight for Jerusalem, the sergeant pressing the gas pedal flat until the jeep whined in protest and started shaking. They soon reached the outskirts, passing apartment blocks and hotels, and Moshe noticed how the streets were unusually empty, how the air stank of smoke and cordite. He heard shots in the distance, an explosion, more shots, saw some Jews running across the road ahead, crouched low, armed with rifles. Sergeant Aranow didn't stop as Moshe raised his sub-machinegun, holding it level with his chest, looking left and right, searching for the glint of an assassin's weapon as the buildings rushed past him.

He saw nothing but the smoke, a grey gauze over the streets, rising and falling, coiling languidly, spiralling upwards and then drifting away. There was the smell of conflagration - burning wood and smouldering rubble - and then he saw buildings reduced to ash, with blue and yellow flames flickering. An explosion, geysering sparks, a great mushroom of black smoke - and then the jeep turned a corner and some Arabs were firing at it, crouched low behind the ruins of someone's home, their weapons snapping and spitting. Sergeant Aranow cursed, lowered his head and put his foot down, and as the jeep raced ahead, bouncing over the street's debris, Moshe twisted to the side and aimed his sub-machinegun and then pressed the trigger. The weapon bucked in his hands, making a horrible, metallic noise, and he saw the rubble spitting pulverised limestone as he raked the whole area. The Arabs dropped out of sight, jumped up again as he passed them, and their guns started screeching and rattling as they dropped far behind. Moshe fell across the seat, letting the bullets whine overhead, then he sat up and saw the walls of the Old City, also covered in skeins of smoke.

The jeep bounced over more rubble, careened around a corner, and then raced alongside the Old City, through another pall of grey smoke. There were

corpses lying by the roadside, the Arab robes flapping forlornly, the black coats of the Orthodox Jews almost brown from the dust.

Moshe looked away, revolted, fixing his gaze on the Mount of Olives, its summit rising above the pall of smoke and made bright by the dazzling sun. More jet planes shrieked overhead, flying south to Sinai, and some Israelis, armed to the teeth, passed by in a truck. The lower slopes were free of smoke, the air crisp and clear, but then, when they neared the hospital, the smell of smoke returned, and Moshe, to his horror, heard gunshots and another explosion.

'Hurry up!' he snapped. '*Hurry*!'

Taking no precautions, Sergeant Aranow raced recklessly into the hospital grounds and then slammed on the brakes, letting the jeep slide into a minor skid and then stop in a cloud of billowing dust. Moshe jumped out without a word, seeing more smoke streaming skyward, his heart pounding as he raced forwards the entrance, thinking only of Kate. The smoke was coming from the far end, from an explosion around the corner, but some of the windows in the front wall were shattered, the walls pockmarked with bullet holes. The Medical Director was in the lobby, broken glass beneath his feet, shaking his head wearily from side to side as some nurses surrounded him. Seeing Moshe, he raised his right thumb and gave him a smile.

'Kate's out of it,' he said. 'I took the liberty of moving her earlier. You'll find her in the Hadassah Medical Centre, probably under sedation. There's something wrong with her, Moshe, but we don't know what it is yet; in the meantime, she's a lot safer there than she would be here. Arabs shot us up and they might not be the last; they also planted a bomb at the northern wing and blew half the wall away. Luckily, there's nothing there but the morgue - and dead meat feels no pain.'

Moshe turned away and started running, closely followed by Sergeant Aranow, the latter unclipping his pistol on the move, the former still holding his sub-machinegun. Smoke was drifting along the corridor, growing darker and more dense with each step they took, until eventually, by the time they reached the morgue, they could scarcely see anything. Moshe ran straight into the morgue, not concerned with lingering Arabs, and was met with a wall of dense smoke, beyond which he could not see. Sergeant Aranow crashed into him, grabbed his shoulder, steadied himself, and then they both inched forward through the smoke and looked down on the familiar surgical table.

Joshua’s body was gone.

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The pain in his head was fierce, dragging Jozsef from unconsciousness, and he opened his eyes and looked around him, at first thinking that he was still in the morgue. The reality came soon enough: the truck growling and shaking beneath him, the canvas top shivering and shadowing the watchful eyes of Rashid Idriss and the Fatah commandos, most of whom were sitting on the wooden benches on both sides of the vehicle, their weapons clattering together as it bounced over holes in the road. Jozsef sat up slowly, feeling dizzy, his head aching, and then gingerly touched the lump on his head where Rashid's pistol had felled him. He licked his lips and blinked repeatedly, trying to focus his watery eyes, and then looked beyond his feet to see the dead Joshua stretched out on the floor. He stared at Joshua for a very long time, feeling worse every second.

Rashid was kneeling on the floor of the truck, holding onto the wooden bench for balance, directly facing Jozsef and right beside Joshua's prostate body. He leaned forward, a slight smile on his face, though no malice was visible.

'How do you feel?' he asked.

'You knocked me unconscious, Rashid.'

'I didn't want you running off to tell your friends that we were taking the Mahdi.'

'You mean stealing him,' Jozsef said.

'I mean *taking* him,' Rashid replied. 'Joshua, as the Mahdi of the Moslems, must be buried in Mecca.'

He smiled with his lips but his eyes were bright with fervour, afire with the conviction of the belief that had inflamed the whole Arab world. Jozsef glanced down at Joshua, shivered briefly at the sight of him, then glanced around the rear of the truck, at the faces of the young Fatah commandos, most of whom were exhausted and filthy, their clothes reeking of cordite.

They stared back at him, merely curious, no enmity in their eyes, but still he felt uncomfortable and nervous, wondering what would become of him.

'Why did you bring me along?' he asked.

'You might be useful as protection. Presumably the Jews value their Chief Rabbi and won't want us to harm him.'

'Where are we going?'

'The Negev Desert.'

'And then?'

'We'll meet our brothers. Right now, the Arabs are advancing across the Sinai Desert and will soon reach the Negev.'

'You will never take Jerusalem.'

'I think we will, Rabbi. The presence of the Mahdi has united the Arab world at last – and now nothing can stop us.'

'The Americans or Russians might stop you.'

'That seems highly unlikely. Their mutual suspicion and greed has greatly reduced their chances of stopping us. Most of the Russians are in Iraq, most of the Americans are in the Persian Gulf, and now, though both sides are rushing more troops to Palestine, those men will arrive far too late to be of much use to them. We will capture Jerusalem and, once having done so, will keep the Moslem world united around it, once and for all.'

Jozsef held his aching head and examined the floor of the speeding truck, understanding that what Rashid had said could be true, and deeply, bitterly shocked by the thought of it. *Yerushalayim*, the Holy City, the sacred centre of Jewish belief, might indeed fall to the Arabs, taking Israel down with it, thus tearing the very heart out of Judaism and rendering it prostrate. The possibility was monstrous, too horrible to contemplate, and he tried to blot it out of his mind, feeling pain when he failed.

'You won't help the Moslems by claiming that Joshua is the Mahdi when the rest of the world thinks of him otherwise. Joshua, whoever he is, has become all things to all men, and your insistence that he's the Mahdi will only turn the Christians and Jews against you.'

'The Christians can do nothing – and the Jews will no longer hold Palestine.'

'And what do you intend doing with the Jews once you have Israel?'

'We'll treat the Jews as successive Jewish governments have treated the Arabs: Palestine will be open to those Jews who obey Palestinian law.'

The irony was not lost on Jozsef, but he found it difficult to smile, his heart breaking at the thought of the possible fall of Israel and the equally likely dispersal of the Jewish nation. He glanced out of the back of the speeding truck, saw the road racing away through sandy flatlands, isolated houses and hamlets whipping past and then receding, bathed in the brilliant light of the sun beyond the cloud of dust being thrown up by the wheels of the vehicle. It was his land, his home, the very roots of his being, and losing it, he now realised, would be tantamount to losing his very soul.

'The Jews won't bend to accept Arab law,' he said. 'You know that just as you know, as surely as you're sitting there, that eventually you'll remove the Jews completely from Israel.'

'The choice will be theirs,' Rashid replied, his brown eyes glittering with uncommon intensity. 'We'll only be doing unto them as they've done unto us - dispersing them, if they resist, as the Arabs have been dispersed, and letting them enjoy the refugee camps that we'll no longer need. Try not to be upset, Rabbi; think of it as natural justice. The Jews will simply learn to taste what they've made the Arabs eat: every Arab village demolished to make way for new Jewish homes will be rebuilt over the ruins of those Jewish homes; every Arab farmer exiled to make way for Jewish settlers will return during the exodus of those settlers to the refugee camps. I call it natural justice, but it's not even that harsh: we'll merely return to the Arabs what the Jews callously stole from them.'

'There were injustices, certainly.'

'It was deliberate exploitation.'

'We're talking of the mistakes that men make when they fight for their lives.'

'The Jews weren't fighting for their lives - they were fighting to steal this land - and now, having had the land stolen from us, we are fighting to get it back.'

'And what if you succeed? Do you believe it will bring you peace? There'll be no peace in Israel so long as the land is divided.'

'It wasn't divided until the Jews came. Before the Jews, this land was not at war. The Jews divided the land, as they also divided Jerusalem, robbing the Arabs not only of their homes, but also of their houses of worship. The Jews, in the self-righteousness of their obscene religion, spat on Muhammad.'

'Certain Jews - not all. You also have your extremists. The actions of such

people, on both sides, haven't always been helpful.'

'And that's your excuse? That only the extremist Jews are guilty? Is the Chief Rabbi absolving himself from sin by denying his responsibility for Jewish actions?'

'I'm not denying my personal sin, nor the sins of the Rabbinate; I'm merely pointing out that both sides have their extremists; and that both sides, Jew and Arab, have been guilty of certain crimes.'

'Our only sin, Chief Rabbi, is that we let the Jews deprive us of our homeland. We didn't steal from the Jews; they stole from us. That crime was one-sided.'

'The Jews also needed a homeland and it had to be Israel. In coming here, we simply returned to our original source.'

'We let the Jews settle here. We gave them all the land they needed. When they had what they needed, they wanted more and began stealing from us. They proliferated like lice, taking more and more from us, casting us out of our own homes, murdering those of us who resisted, and eventually setting their sights on the whole of Palestine, irrespective of Arab rights. Don't mention original sources to me: you came here and stole from us.'

Jozsef didn't reply, knowing the argument would go in circles, both of them right, both of them wrong, neither capable of offering satisfactory answers. He looked out of the growling, rattling truck, saw the Arab hamlets and smallholdings, the parched land rising and falling on both sides, becoming ever more barren. The driver was using the back roads, avoiding the main towns, and the army truck, having been stolen from the Israelis, passed on unmolested. Recognising the area, Jozsef knew that they had just passed Beersheba and were heading south into the Negev Desert, where the war would soon rage.

He stared at Joshua, fascinated, thinking of what his presence in Israel had wrought - plots, counterplots, religious squabbles and political intrigues, a world divided in the name of God, the Holy Land once more in flames; and then he imagined a dark, devouring mass closing in on Jerusalem. Galilee had fallen already, the Jordanians were heading for the Jordan River, and right now, farther south, their hearts and minds inflamed by Joshua, thousands of Arabs were swarming across the Sinai Desert and approaching the Negev. The picture was terrifying, more so in his tormented thoughts, his imagination, overwrought with grief and despair, turning it into a nightmarish

reconstruction of the portals of hell. It was, indeed, Armageddon, that final, most terrible battle, and Israel, if it managed to survive at all, would never be the same again. Jozsef wondered if he would survive to see it, or if the Arabs would let him return; and the possibility that he had seen it for the last time filled him with woe. He glanced at Joshua and then at Rashid, the dead more alive than the living, and wondered at the mystery of belief that had bound them together. Rashid, staring back with brown eyes, was no longer smiling.

'What will you do with me?' Jozsef asked.

'When we get there?'

'Yes.'

'We can hardly leave you to the mercy of the desert, so you'll have to come with us.'

'To the Arab Republic?'

'Of course.'

'And then?'

'Wherever you wish.'

'Including Israel?'

'No, I'm afraid not. Once in power, we won't permit the return of the exiled Chief Rabbi.'

'You mean you'll make an example of me.'

'That's more or less the case. Your absence will emphasise that Jerusalem is no longer Judaic, that the Rabbinate has little authority, and that the new rulers, the Moslems, will not be intimidated by protests from even the most illustrious of Jews. I'll repeat what I said before and would ask you to remember it: Palestine will be open to those Jews who obey Arab law - but certain Jews, such as Ben Eleizer and Major-General Moshe Eitan, will be deported as an example to Jewish citizens that we mean business. No Jew of major importance will be allowed to remain, but the nameless, as long as they obey our laws, will be treated respectfully.

'You will, in short, remove all possible resistance.'

'We will ensure peaceful sovereignty.'

Jozsef lowered his head, closed his eyes and sighed as the truck growled and shook and carried him far away. He thought longingly of Jerusalem, as if years had already passed, as if the shock of his abduction had disorientated him completely and was eroding his sense of time and place. He thought of Kate and Moshe, of Ben Eleizer and his fellow rabbis, and they seemed as

remote as the faces from his childhood, conjured out of some impossibly distant era that would never return. He was travelling into the wilderness, across God's scorching anvil, and he felt that he was making his final journey into the void of the unknown.

'It was strange,' Rashid said, 'to blow the wall of that morgue away and walk in and find you standing there.'

'Why strange?'

'Unexpected. What did you want in there? We know from our sources that you went there every day - alone and for no apparent reason - just to look at him. What were you looking for, Rabbi? What were you thinking? You've consistently refused to acknowledge him as either Messiah or Mahdi, so why were you so obsessed with him?'

Jozsef glanced around the truck, at the faces of the young Fatah commandos, then looked out at the road as it unwound behind him, becoming a black line in the distance, snaking back through the desert. They were now deep in the Negev - the word actually meant 'south' - and he felt that they were travelling south forever, to the world's hidden centre. He saw the rippling sand dunes, the ochre cliffs tearing the blue sheet of the sky, and his thoughts travelled down to that point where man's logic meets truth. Why indeed had he repeatedly visited the morgue? What had drawn him there every day? One: the fact that Joshua's body had not decomposed. Two: what the law courts would term 'irresistible impulse': a need beyond personal hunger or logic, an inane fascination. What had he hoped to find? Had he imagined that the dead would speak? Now, thinking about it, trying to avoid Rashid's brown gaze, glancing constantly, repeatedly, at Joshua, he had to face the hard truth: he had gone there in expectation, waiting for something, wanting something, knowing only that Joshua had haunted his dreams with a startling reality.

'I don't know,' he confessed.

'I think you do,' Rashid replied. 'I think that you were looking for the answer to your own brimming doubts.'

'What doubts?'

'About Joshua's nature. About who or what he was. About whether he was the Messiah or the Mahdi or the Christ of the Christians.'

'I don't believe he was either.'

'Then what?'

‘I refuse to contemplate.’

‘You contemplated when you went to the morgue every day he was lying there.’

‘I was curious, of course.’

‘One day is curiosity. *Every* day is more like an obsession, an irresistible impulse.’

Jozsef was startled, as if someone had slapped his face, not believing that Rashid could have used that particular phrase by accident.

‘Yes,’ Rashid continued. ‘You may not have known why - you may have refused to admit it - but you went to that morgue, every day without fail, because you felt that you could find revelation in Joshua’s dead eyes.’

‘What revelation?’

‘The secret. *That* secret! The truth that lurks in sleep. The one mystery that has challenged all men, irrespective of creed: the secret, the unanswerable riddle of the nature of being. Yes, Rabbi, you went to the morgue - in fear and trembling and expectation - or, rather than *going* there, you were *drawn* there because Joshua had called you. Messiah or Mahdi? The Christ of the Christians? Do such questions, in the end, really matter in the presence of Joshua? You said it yourself, Rabbi - he’s become all things to all men - and that, in the end, is all that matters as the world spins in panic. *Of course* Joshua is the Mahdi! What else could he be to us? If Joshua is all things to all men, then he *must* be our Mahdi. You want him. We want him. The whole Christian world wants him. We all want him and need him, for reasons both good and bad; and, this being so, no matter the rights or wrongs, someone must eventually claim him and loudly proclaim him. Jew, Christian or Moslem? What known logic can resolve this issue? The truth, my Jewish friend, my searching rabbi, is in irresistible impulse. You were called as I was called. We were both called to that morgue. We were called, Jew and Moslem, to journey south to where the desert breeds silence.’

‘Silence?’

‘The unanswerable. The only thing that unites all men. In my dreams he came to me, his Arab robes white and radiant, and spoke of the need to believe. Truth or untruth. A clear choice between two opposites. Black or white, no grey areas in between, only hard, pure commitment. Come to me, he said. Either come or turn away. If you come, you must come for your brothers, who are all things and all men. And so, Rabbi, I came - to the

morgue and to you - and there, at that moment, with the sound of the bomb still reverberating, I saw you leaning over his body and knew that you, too, had been called. No, Rabbi, you're not our protection. You're not here for that. You're here because he called and you answered, so now we are brothers. Will I take you to the Republic? Will I leave you in the desert? Those are questions that are written on the wind as it blows towards Judgement Day.'

Jozsef felt an electric shock, the sudden light of revelation, looking deep into Rashid's brown eyes to see himself twice reflected. What, indeed, was Joshua, if not all things to all men? The Messiah, the Mahdi and the Christ, all rolled into one. Did it matter who held Jerusalem? Did it even matter who claimed Joshua? Joshua, being all things to all men, would join opposites together. Jerusalem would still stand, singing the gospel of the One, and life, being all things and all men, would continue evolving. Jerusalem the Golden, if nothing else was an abstraction, a symbol of the brotherhood of Man, built on disparate creeds. It didn't really matter who held Jerusalem - nor who was in charge of the body of Joshua - what mattered was that Joshua, in the wisdom of his silence, had forced men to examine themselves and acknowledge their frailty. Jew, Moslem and Christian - all were one and the same - and Armageddon, that final, most terrible battle, would resolve their sad differences.

'Leave me in the desert,' Jozsef said. 'I want to die here in Israel.'

'We will see what is written,' Rashid replied. 'Let Joshua decide.'

What was it? The end! And exploding hell of noise and light and heat: the truck screeching and careening sideways and leaping upward and rolling over as its canvas top burst into flames and the men, tumbling into each other, screamed and burned and died. First the sky, then the mountains, then the desert spinning over, a wall of flame rushing at him and around him, then the ground smashing into him. *Aircraft* - one thought: a spark of consciousness fading rapidly - then sinking through the infernal bedlam, the screaming men, the crackling flames, through parting curtains of pain to a darkness that swept soothingly over him, offering oblivion.

The wilderness.

Silence.

44

The doctor was waiting for Moshe when he arrived at the Hadassah Medical Centre, the lights flashing off his rimless glasses and concealing his eyes. Moshe glanced quickly around the lobby, unable to ignore the weeping and wailing, the floor covered in stretchers, the young soldiers soaked in blood, parents and relatives grouped around them, murmuring soothing words, sobbing. He looked away again quickly, returning his gaze to the doctor, and knew instantly, from the expression on the doctor's face, that the situation was serious.

'I'm sorry to drag you away at a time like this,' the doctor said, 'but I thought I should take to you personally, before you talk to Kate.' He nodded towards the corridor at the end of the chaotic lobby, then lightly touched Moshe on the elbow and led him away. 'Let's go to my office,' he said. 'It's a lot quieter there. These kids were all butchered in the battle just outside Netanya, and we don't have any room left in the wards.'

They made their way across the lobby, weaving through the wounded, sometimes forced to step over stretchers and their pitiful burdens. Moshe was relieved when they reached the corridor, leaving the suffering and grief behind, the stench of cordite and urine and sweat being replaced by the disinfected air of the hospital proper. The doctor said nothing as they walked, his Lithuanian face composed, and Moshe felt his heart fluttering with panic at what was to come. They soon turned into the doctor's office, a small room, Spartan and clean, and the doctor thoughtfully closed the door behind him, before giving his attention to Moshe.

'Do you want a drink?' he asked.

'No,' Moshe replied, 'I don't. I want to know what's wrong with Kate, and I haven't much time.'

'She's in a dangerous condition, Moshe, and getting worse every hour. Having this baby could kill her, so we want to abort.'

The pain was cold and clean, cutting through his exhaustion, slicing away the cobwebs in his mind and reawakening his dulled senses.

'What kind of condition? Something other than hysteria? Are you saying that the blow from that table somehow damaged the baby?'

'No, Moshe, I'm not saying that. The blow from the table didn't harm her at all. But she's suffering from acute toxemia, or, more accurately, eclampsia.'

'What the hell's that?'

'The toxemias are disorders occurring spontaneously only in human females and only during pregnancy or the puerperium. They can, when severe, lead to numerous complications, including kidney, heart, pulmonary and gastrointestinal disturbances.'

'What causes it?'

'The factors producing it are still unknown: what *is* known is that there's a generalised spasm of the minute arteries, with associated severe circulatory effects. The term "eclampsia" is reserved for those instances in which there are convulsions or coma - both of which Kate has been intermittently suffering - and really severe eclampsia can lead to death.'

The pain was clean no longer, but was now inducing nausea, a combination of dread and revulsion that made Moshe start sweating.

'And the causes are unknown?'

'That's right, Moshe. Totally unknown.'

Moshe glanced down at the floor, then closed his eyes, trying to think, hoping to feel what Kate was feeling, doubtless fear and despair, still convinced that her affliction was caused by Joshua for some obscure reason. What could he now say that would make her think differently? It was a disease of unknown origin, without rational explanation, and that in itself would be enough to convince her that Joshua, still haunting her, had cursed her. Moshe raised his eyes again, trying to keep his features composed, determined to do the right thing by his wife, no matter what befell Israel.

'Are you absolutely sure it's this eclampsia thing?'

'Yes, Moshe,' the doctor replied. 'Kate's displaying all of the symptoms. She's excreting more than six grams of protein in her urine every twenty-four hours; she's suffering from pulmonary oedema, or cyanosis, which is a bluish or purplish colour of the skin; and, as I said, she's also suffering minor convulsions and brief comas - all of which would indicate a rapidly

deteriorating situation in which the toxemia is seriously affecting her cardiorespiratory apparatus. If we allow the pregnancy to come to term, she could end up with fluid in the lungs, which would in turn lead to heart failure. We therefore feel that her pregnancy should be terminated by caesarean section.'

Moshe covered his face with his hands, pressing his eyelids with his fingers, observing the white spots in the darkness while his grief stripped him bare. For a moment he drifted away, seeing the advancing hordes of Arab fighters - now marching through Netanya, approaching the outskirts of Nablus, swarming down the Mountains of Moab towards the glittering Dead Sea, stretching across to the Sinai Desert and then heading inexorably for the Negev to commence the encirclement of Jerusalem - but even this nightmare, totally hideous and final, could not ease the pain he felt at what he was hearing. He knew what Kate felt - how much she wanted their child - so even as he looked up, and heard his own words tumbling out, he knew what the answer to his question was going to be.

'You've told her all this?'

'Yes, we've told her - but she refuses, absolutely, no matter the risk, to have an abortion. She insists on bringing the pregnancy to term - and we can't talk her out of it. You understand, Moshe? It's all up to you now. If Kate sees this pregnancy out, if she insists upon having the baby, we can't be responsible for her life. You have to talk to her, Moshe.'

Moshe turned away without a word and hurried out of the office, heading for Kate's room as the blood pounded fiercely at his temples. The corridors were also packed, the soldiers lining up for treatment, some leaning wearily against the walls, their heads thrown back, eyes closed, others grimly supporting one another, blood and filth on their uniforms. The doctor rushed up behind him, breathing heavily, his white smock rustling, and together they entered Kate's room, stopping by the bed.

Moshe looked down at her, shocked by the sight of her, knowing that he would never forget this day as long as he lived. She was lying back against the pillows, her face gaunt, her skin bluish, her eyes deeply shadowed and too large, filled with glittering dread. She smiled when she saw him, her right hand rising weakly, and when he took that hand he felt that he was holding a frail, wounded bird.

'*Shalom*, Kate.'

‘My Moshe.’

‘I’ve just heard the bad news. There’s no doubt about it at all: you have to have the abortion.’

‘No, Moshe.’

‘You might die.’

‘No, Moshe, I won’t do it. I’m going to have our baby - I *will* have it - and you won’t talk me out of it.’

‘Kate, it’s too *dangerous*! I simply can’t let you do it. It’s not that important - we can try again - but you can’t have this baby.’

Though she offered him a smile, her lips were parched and cracked, her eyes almost luminous with the fear that she refused to acknowledge.

‘I can’t have my baby? Is that what you’re trying to tell me? That having already aborted one, I should abort another and go back to the start of it? No, Moshe, I won’t do it. The doctors, with the best will in the world, can’t be certain of what’s going to happen. They *think* it might harm me - they don’t *know* - and that isn’t enough for me. Joshua didn’t curse me, Moshe: he just put me to the test. He made me will the blood and face the truth, and having faced it, find faith. Now he’s testing that faith - and my faith in our future - and I’m not going to let my fear destroy the rest of my life. How could I do that, Moshe? If I did, could I then live with myself? Could I live with the possibility, after losing my child, that the doctors had been wrong and that I could have given birth to the baby without harming myself? We can’t answer that question - not until the baby comes - but as long as there’s the chance that I’ll survive, I can’t let them destroy my child.’

Clearly, though she was fearful, she had the need to preserve her faith, so Moshe sat on the edge of the bed to place his hand reassuringly on her forehead. She was feverish and sweaty, her long hair a tangled mess, but her face, with its odd, suppressed beauty, drew him in through its healing light.

‘I’m worried about you,’ he said. ‘I want the child, but not that much. I don’t want you doing this for me, because the risk is too great. It’s not worth it, Kate. In giving birth, you might die. I don’t want to live without you, darling - and I don’t want this gamble.’

‘Have faith, my Moshe. I won’t give up that easily. I see Joshua in my dreams, and when my eyes are wide open, and I know that what happened in our house was not the product of malice. He soothes my pain, Moshe, and eases my fear when he’s here; and I know that what’s happening is a test of

my faith, and that whether I live or die, I can't sacrifice a child for the second time. The baby's kicking me right now - him or her, I can't tell - and as long as I feel that movement inside me, I won't even consider an abortion. Don't ask me again, Moshe. Don't make me refuse you. I love you and want to stay with you, but I won't kill my baby.'

Her weak smile stole his will, her defiance stole his resolve, so he leaned over, hiding his own fear, to press his lips to her mouth. Her free hand fell on his head, her fingers wandering through his hair, and he quivered, torn by yearning and fear at once, his heart silently breaking.

'My Moshe,' Kate said. 'Trust me.'

He pulled his head back and sat upright, watching her hand fall away, then he squeezed her other hand and stood up, his smile still hiding his fear.

'Okay,' he said. 'Fine.'

'No, Moshe!' the doctor exclaimed.

'It's her child,' Moshe said, 'and her choice… and I can't take that from her.'

The doctor threw his hands up, rolling his eyes melodramatically, then turned and walked out of the room. Moshe looked down at Kate, feeling helpless, still fearful, convinced that if he reached down and touched her she would break into pieces.

'I have to go now,' he said.

'The war?'

'It's getting worse. I'll try to keep in touch as much as possible, but it may not be easy.'

'Be careful.'

'*You* be careful.'

'I'll be alright… I know it.'

'If I don't get back, I'll ring you this evening. *Shalom*, Kate.'

'*Shalom*.'

He turned away and walked out, hearing a plane shriek overhead, not daring to look back, but averting his eyes from the soldiers who were filling the corridors with blood and misery as they waited for treatment. He stepped outside, feeling broken, taking lungfuls of fresh air, glancing around him at the hills that were bathed in dazzling sunlight, not yet ravaged by the choking smoke of war and its multiple horrors. They would come soon enough, filling the silent air with screaming, and as he clambered into his jeep, about to drive

to the university, he shook with the agony of his fears for Israel… and for Kate.

The smooth green lawns of the university were swarming with troops, filled with trucks and half-tracks and big guns and portable canteens. More trucks were coming and going, bringing more troops into the area, swelling the ranks of the battalions around the nearby Knesset and the Shrine of the Book. Moshe went straight to the new HQ in the heart of the university, passing hundreds of troops in the corridors of the main building, some sleeping, others reading, yet others eating and drinking, and eventually entered the assembly hall that had been converted overnight into the centre of defensive operations. Ben Eleizer was waiting for him, his moon-shaped face anxious; he was surrounded by various high-ranking officers, none looking too happy. They were standing around a long table, studying maps and grid-lines, jabbing their index fingers and arguing heatedly with one another as Moshe approached.

'How's Kate?' was Ben Eleizer's first question.

'Not too good,' Moshe said honestly. 'They wanted to perform an abortion, but she wouldn't let them, so things could be tricky.'

'I'm sorry, Moshe. Truly.'

'Bad days all around,' Moshe said. 'They can't be sure when it's going to happen, but they'll call through to here.'

'I'll make sure you get the message.'

'So what's happening here?'

'It looks like we're finished.'

With shoulders slumped in exhaustion, Ben Eleizer rubbed his eyes, then raised his head and looked straight at Moshe, trying to keep his voice steady.

'The situation is this,' he said. 'The Lebanese have captured Netanya and are now advancing south towards Tel Aviv. The Syrians have taken Nablus and are now advancing across Samaria to Ramallah. The Jordanians are entrenched along the base of the Mountains of Moab and are preparing to launch themselves across the Dead Sea. In short, it's only a matter of hours before they march into Jerusalem.'

'We can't let that happen,' Moshe said.

'No, Moshe, we can't.' Ben Eleizer exhaled his breath, puffing his cheeks out in what, in another situation, would have been a comical manner, then reluctantly returned his gaze to Moshe. 'We're going to have to use our

atomic warheads,' he said. 'There's no other way out of it.'

Moshe felt himself retreating inwardly, wanting to hide deep in himself, not willing to accept what he was hearing, reluctant to sanction it. Ben Eleizer kept staring at him, his gaze steady, pragmatic, refusing to let sentiment intervene, pinning Moshe to the wall.

'It's *Jerusalem*,' he said eventually.

'I know,' Moshe replied.

'We simply cannot let them take Jerusalem. If they do, it's the end for us.'

Moshe lowered his head and thought of Kate in the hospital, imagining an Arab shell screaming down and tearing into her room. He burned up at the thought, but he also felt shame, realising that her safety was, at least for him, more important than what he and Ben Eleizer were contemplating in all of its horror. Eventually, feeling defeated and dirty, he looked up again.

'The Lebanese, the Syrians and the Jordanians are too close,' he said, 'so presumably you're thinking of the Egyptians.'

Ben Eleizer nodded. 'Correct,' he said. 'And if we do it, we do it now. The Egyptians are approximately halfway across the Sinai Desert, still advancing towards our army in the Negev. We'll use an atomic warhead to decimate the Egyptian army, and then, when the world learns about it and is reeling from the shock, make it clear that we're prepared to do the same, suicidal or not, to any army still advancing from north of Jerusalem.'

He was staring steadily at Moshe, not letting him off the hook, but Moshe knew, with a sinking heart, that he would have made exactly the same decision.

'We think it'll work,' Ben Eleizer said. 'It'll be interpreted as desperation. One atomic warhead - just one dropped on the Sinai - will put a stop to the rest of them.'

'And the Americans and Russians?'

'They're moving in very fast, but unfortunately they still won't get here in time. That atomic warhead will buy us some breathing space - putting a stop to the Arabs closing in on us - and by the time they decide whether or not they're going to advance again, the Americans and Russians will be in a position for more positive military intervention.'

'Where are the Russians now?'

'Following the Arabs into the Galilee.'

'And the Americans?'

‘Spread out between Suez and Sharm el Sheikh, in hot pursuit of the Egyptians.’

‘They won’t do much good behind them.’

‘Exactly my sentiments. And it means that the salvation of Jerusalem might rest with the Russians.’

‘And our threat could also keep the Russians out.’

‘Correct. So let’s do it.’

He started to turn away, but Moshe reached out and grabbed him by the elbow to make him turn back.

‘How long before we launch the missiles?’

‘About thirty minutes,’ Ben Eleizer said.

‘I want a helicopter to take me to the Negev. I should be with my men.’

‘Keep in touch,’ Ben Eleizer said.

Moshe hurried away, feeling driven and possessed, wanting to be out there when the light of the desert turned to mushrooming smoke. He was doing this for Israel, for Kate, for their future, but these reasons, important though they were, could not diminish his shame. It was the survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle, and that law, in all its bloody permutations, had come to dominate Israel. Was anything worth it? Did Israel need to survive? Moshe was starting to doubt it, feeling revolted when he thought of it, and as he left the university and drove off in the jeep, he wondered how it was that he could still breathe in the swamp of his guilt.

The helicopter was nearby and was always ready for lift-off, the crews being rotated in shifts and condemned to wait inside the craft. The men were there when Moshe climbed in, and they took their places automatically, without a word, and even before Moshe had strapped himself in the rotors roared into action. Moshe glanced around as they took off, again surprised at how young the crewmembers were, then looked out as the helicopter ascended and the ground fell away below. He saw the buildings of the university, then the Shrine of the Book, then the Knesset in its setting of green lawns and strategically placed trees. The helicopter kept ascending, then flew south across Jerusalem, and he looked down at the domes and minarets, the maze of *souks* in the labyrinth of the Old City. Then the wilderness of Judea, starkly beautiful and desolate, rolling on to the northern edge of the Negev Desert, with its raw, rippling grandeur. Looking down there, at parched rock and drifting sand, he felt the weight of his sorrow.

He put his head back on the seat, closing his eyes, trying in vain to relax, hoping to find some hidden corner of himself that was not webbed with guilt. Failing to find such a place, he felt his sweat breaking out, the physical manifestation of the tension that he now suffered constantly. He thought of Joshua and Kate on the night he had found them both, and was filled with an almost childish wonder at the changes since then. Joshua's face floated before him, vivid, all too real, his smile as mysterious as the dark side of the moon, his gaze as enigmatic as the Mona Lisa, drawing light to its darkness. Yet Joshua was dead, a suicide by assassination (he had willed it, after all) and Moshe felt a deep chill passing through him when he thought about Leon. First Joshua and Kate, then Kate and Leon, then Leon and Joshua in the wilderness, finally putting an end to it. Moshe would never forget that - he dreamed about it every night - and now, as he opened his eyes, as he looked down upon the Negev, he wondered how far Leon had gone before the killing sun cut him down.

The helicopter was descending, letting the mountains reveal their features, and Moshe saw the shadowed rock, the jagged peaks bathed in sunlight, and then, in the rippling sand of the wilderness floor, the tanks and troops of the Israeli army. They were spread out a great distance, between Tel Sharuhen and Mizpe Ramon, facing the burning hell of the Sinai Desert and the Arab advance.

The helicopter dropped lower, coming down south of Shivta, and Moshe soon saw the tents of the command post with the big guns around them. He looked towards the Sinai, his eyes dazzled by the scorched wastelands, then glanced around the gloomy helicopter, his thoughts wandering back to Kate. The fear gripped him instantly, tearing savagely at his nerves, and he knew, with a sudden, fierce conviction, that Kate was in labour. His nerves started falling to pieces, letting the fear have dominion, but then the helicopter touched down, rocking lightly from side to side, and he managed to regain control of himself as he unclipped his safety belt.

The door slid back with a screech, the ladder clattered to the ground, and a crewmember moved to the side to let Moshe make his exit. He climbed down to the burning sand, was dazzled and felt the heat, instantly put his sunglasses on and then looked straight ahead. Major Steinberg was waiting for him, silhouetted in the white light, his face only regaining its features when Moshe stopped in front of him.

‘We’re still waiting,’ Major Steinberg said.

‘Five more minutes,’ Moshe replied, checking his wristwatch.

‘I still can’t believe we’re really going to do it.’

‘Nor can I, Saul. Not really.’

He entered the command tent and shook hands with the assembled officers, noticing that none of them were smiling and that few met his gaze. There was tension in the air, an almost palpable manifestation, and he turned away, trying to ignore it, and picked up a pair of binoculars.

‘How far away are they?’

‘Thirty miles,’ Major Steinberg said. ‘They’re advancing on a very broad front - and they’re coming right at us.’

Moshe stepped out of the tent and placed the binoculars to his eyes, surveying the vast expanse of the Sinai Desert, but seeing nothing at all. He turned north and surveyed the Negev, seeing his own tanks and planes, stretching back in separate groups to the horizon, the sun blazing upon them. Feeling dazed, he lowered the binoculars, rubbed his eyes and shook his head, then looked at the unlined face of Major Steinberg, whose hazel eyes revealed disbelief.

‘I’m sorry, Saul, but it’s going to happen.’

‘I know, Moshe. I know. I know, but I just can’t believe it. I keep thinking I’m dreaming.’

They joined the other officers at the far side of the tent, all facing the spectacular immensity of the Sinai Desert, all holding binoculars. Moshe checked his wristwatch. There was one minute to go. He put the binoculars to his eyes, saw the sky, the rippling sand dunes, a dazzling whiteness rolling away to a brighter whiteness in a shimmering heat-haze. Looking at it, he became it, dissolving into its deathly silence, letting the silence surround him and seduce him until the moment of impact.

Nothing happened. Not a thing. Moshe checked his wristwatch and then looked out there again. Nothing happened and he stared at the other officers to see them shaking their heads in bewilderment. They kept looking at the Sinai, at the sky, at one another, until two minutes had passed, then three and then five, and only then, looking stunned, clearly as stunned as Moshe felt, did they realise that nothing was going to happen and they were wasting their time.

After that it became unreal, a dream without solid substance, sliding down

over Moshe like an invisible curtain that transformed the whole world. He tried to clear it away, to take a grip on reality, but the events, too bizarre to be real, were too real to be dealt with. The news came over the radio, one message after another, destroying logical thought as one hour passed into the next and the Arabs materialised on the horizon like a line of black ants.

The first missile had vanished, inexplicably, illogically, disappearing at the apex of its arc somewhere up in the stratosphere. A second missile had been launched, but disappeared just as mysteriously; and a third, launched approximately two hours later, had suffered the same fate.

More hours passed in chilly silence, the radio crackling with static, the black ants on the horizon growing bigger, spreading out, still advancing. Another voice on the radio, almost strangled with disbelief, conveying more information that made logic redundant.

More missiles had been launched. All had disappeared in the stratosphere. Mossad had talked to London, and London to Washington, and Washington had talked to the Kremlin and received the same news: the nuclear world was dying out, the computers no longer working, the atomic reactors and missile silos malfunctioning and surrendering to silence.

Moshe believed - and did not believe. He no longer needed the binoculars. He saw the black ants on the Sinai as Arabs, moving forward inexorably. The hours passed and they still advanced. He wondered why there were no aircraft. He passed the order for his own planes to take off, but their engines malfunctioned. The planes stayed on the ground, their engines dead, the pilots baffled, and the tanks, when Moshe ordered them out, likewise stuttered and died.

Moshe dissolved into the dream, his thoughts circling endlessly, being drawn in ever shrinking rings to the crackling radio. A new shift, another voice, equally strangled and hysterical, trying to wrap itself around the impossible and make it coherent. Information from Mossad: the nuclear age had just ended; every satellite in the stratosphere, defensive or offensive, Russian and American, British and Chinese, had blinked out on every known radar screen and was no longer traceable. The nuclear age had ended. The great silos were silent. The darkness was descending as Moshe looked across the Negev and saw the Arab tanks slowing down and finally stopping. The Arab soldiers kept marching. The night took command abruptly. Then a surreal crimson light, materialising out of the darkness, illuminated the

thousands of soldiers in the rich hue of blood.

The sky was on fire.

45

The Arabs started running towards the Jews. It was, perhaps, panic rather than aggression, since the surreal crimson light, turning the darkness to streaming blood, was emanating from no fixed direction and seemed part of the atmosphere. Moshe instantly bawled his orders, hearing his words even before he thought about them, and the officers hurriedly grabbed the field phones to pass on his commands. The crimson light was eerie, turning everyone into a spectre, and Moshe had to turn away, gripped by fear, and again saw the Arabs. They were coming at him in their thousands, making high-pitched, wailing sounds, looking ghostly and unreal in the crimson night as they swarmed over the sand dunes. A few rifles started firing (they at least, Moshe thought, were working) and then the big guns, also working, suddenly roared from the flat plain behind him. The sand between the Arabs erupted, geysering high in graceful fountains, forced up on spreading fans of yellow flame and boiling black smoke. The Arab guns replied in kind, sounding muffled in the distance, and then the first shells exploded nearby, catastrophically violent. More explosions, heat and light, the quavering anguish of human screaming; then the machineguns and rifles, the big guns roaring again - and Moshe stepped out of the tent, into that frightening crimson gloom, looked straight ahead at the thousands of Arabs coming towards him, and then, suddenly thinking of Kate with a powerful, bitter longing, looked up at the sky and saw a single star, growing bigger, descending.

Stunned, he just stood there, the guns roaring on all sides, the wailing of the advancing Arabs in his ears, as the bright star descended. Not a star: a brilliant light, illuminating the crimson night, spreading out and become immense and corrupting his senses. He tried to see where it ended, wanting to ascertain its shape and size, but it wasn’t, as he had surmised, actually spreading across the sky, but materialising out of the very atmosphere to

swallow the crimson light. The night sky became a white haze, a protoplasmic, boiling mass, the white becoming almost silvery, phosphorescent and dazzling, lighting up the desert with a clarity even greater than daylight.

The running Arabs slowed down, looking above them in confusion, shading their eyes as the night turned to day and a fierce heat poured down. The new sky was a living thing, at once beautiful and terrifying, a boiling silvery mass that stretched from horizon to horizon as it descended inexorably upon them, as if to devour them. The Arabs scattered wildly. Some sank to their knees to pray. Moshe glanced back over his shoulder and saw his fellow Jews doing exactly the same. The big guns had ceased firing, the rifles stuttered into silence, and then, as the pulsating sky seemed to drop lower, becoming a vast ceiling, all the men, Jew and Arab alike, started bawling and screaming.

They were kneeling to pray, jabbing their fingers at the descending sky, running blindly to and fro, or just staring silently, either filled with wonder or stunned. Rifles thudded into the sand, caps and helmets were thrown away, and the fierce heat, coming down from the still descending sky, made some rip off their clothing.

The sky continued falling upon them, a pulsating silvery mass, still stretching from horizon to horizon like shivering jelly. Panic spread throughout the ranks, infecting Jew and Arab alike, and some men started babbling dementedly as their sanity crumbled. Moshe kept his gaze skyward, his eyes dazzled by the silvery light, and then, as that ceiling of light dropped even lower, as it covered the whole plain, he felt himself escaping from his dread and instead filling up with a sense of wonder. He thought of what Kate had witnessed, of the light that had introduced them, and his love, rising eagerly to greet the light, set him free from all fear. His sense of wonder blossomed, a child's wonder, seeking magic, and he stepped out beneath the descending sky in the expectation of goodness.

The sky abruptly stopped falling, about two hundred metres up, shivering and pulsating like protoplasm, a shimmering white streaked with silver. That low it was awesome, stretching across the visible spectrum, its fierce light and heat pouring down upon the thousands below it. The men were weeping and praying, babbling dementedly or staring up in silence, but Moshe, hardly aware of them, his head back, his eyes wide open, was looking at a whirlpool

of darkness that was rapidly taking shape and growing bigger above him.

It was a grey-streaked black hole, swirling languidly, growing bigger, descending through the dazzle of the pulsating sky and taking the shape of a funnel. The funnel's base was immense, its dimensions impossible to calculate, and it was spinning at an incredible rate with silvery sparks shooting through it. The funnel created the wind, first mild and then violent, a hot wind that raced in great circles to sweep up the sand. The sand hissed and spun wildly, started roaring and became a storm, and then it turned into a raging tornado that obscured the whole desert.

Moshe was picked up and hurled back down, punched across the shifting sand; he crashed into the wheel of a truck and then crawled in beneath it. He lay there, gripping the wheel, feeling the wind tugging at him, rubbing the sun from his eyes and looking out as the storm roared and raged. The noise was appalling, threatening to split his head in two, and he saw waving arms and spinning bodies in the dense, swirling sand. He thought of Kate, that first night, the storm raging across Jerusalem, and his love, like an anchor to his sanity, kept the fear at bay.

The storm scattered the opposing armies, causing panic and havoc, throwing men into the air like rag dolls and then casting them down again. Moshe looked on and understood - Armageddon: the final battle - and in understanding this he was released from the shame of his actions. What was willed was now done, changing the world for all time, and as the storm died away, having lasted only a short time, he knew that the future, if unknown, was nonetheless guaranteed. Joshua had come and gone, his spirit breathing on the Earth, and life, as men had known it and lived it, would march along a new path.

The storm died away, the swirling sand settling down, falling lazily on the men who were scattered widely on flat land and sand dunes. The spinning black hole had disappeared, shrinking back up into the new sky, then that sky, like a white fog illuminated from within, vaporised to let the darkness return and reveal the real stars.

The Arabs were scattered over the sand dunes. The Jews covered the rippling flatlands. The thousands of men, Jew and Arab alike, were too dazed to do anything. Time passed and brought life back. Myriad eyes turned towards the stars. Eventually, standing upright, the Jews and Arabs moved towards one another. They had no weapons and were silent, covered in sand,

their bodies shaking, as they advanced through the starlit darkness, approaching each other in a dream, and then mingled together, some sobbing, others smiling, sharing water and cigarettes and food, finally crossing the barriers of race and religion and enmity. Their murmuring words, springing out of the silence, expressed the inchoate hope for reconciliation and peace everlasting.

Moshe sighed and rubbed his eyes, still weary but filled with wonder, thinking of Kate and Joshua and Leon and Jozsef, of the events that in tearing them apart had bound them together. He knew that Kate was in labour - this conviction could not be challenged - and as he studied the men around him, Jews and Arabs intermingling, he knew with even greater conviction that child and mother would live.

He rubbed his eyes again, then stared back across the Negev, unconsciously attempting to do the impossible: to view Jerusalem the Golden. Instead he saw another light, about forty miles away, boiling out of some space in the empty sky above the plain and emitting great striations of silver that fell obliquely to earth. Moshe kept staring, entranced, thinking of Joshua and Kate, of the child that Kate would have, and seeing, in that triangular column of light, a sign of hope for the future. The light fell obliquely to earth, pouring down from a greater light, an immense, dazzling, spherical mass that sank lower each second. It appeared to drop behind the mountains, illuminating their jagged peaks, and then it almost touched the earth, its light setting the ground on fire, and then it flared up to an abrupt, blinding flash and just as abruptly winked out.

First the light.

Then the darkness.

Jozsef opened his eyes, saw the stars, the velvet sky, briefly transported to beauty and wonder before the pain flayed him. He groaned and bit his lower lip, suffering the agony of blistered flesh, and raised his right hand to affirm that he was still alive. The hand dangled in the air, clearly visible in the starlight, the flesh shredded and terribly burnt, exposing soot-blackened bone. He shuddered with revulsion, hardly able to believe it, then let the hand fall to the sand, forgetting the pain it would cause him.

When the fresh pain came, it was shocking, daggering along his right arm, and he heard his own strangled, sobbing groan as his limbs twitched

helplessly. Settling down, he just lay there, breathing deeply but not with ease, distracting himself by looking at the stars and surrendering to them. The heavenly vault was a dark pool, first below him, then above him, reflecting the light of the stars and couched in dead silence. He lay there, unwilling to move, and then it all came back to him…

The shriek of the jet plane, the sudden sibilance of the rocket, the truck bursting into flames and turning over and throwing him out… Recalling this, he remembered Rashid, the other Arabs scattered around him; and, unforgettably, by Rashid's booted feet, stretched out on the desert floor in his bloody white robes, the cold, lifeless Joshua.

Jozsef closed his eyes for a moment, trying to slow his racing heart, feeling the sand drifting languidly over him as if wanting to cover him. A shocking pain spread through his body, stripping bare his every nerve, and he felt warm tears trickling down his cheeks with a will of their own. He tried to ignore the pain, and, failing this, to join it, sinking into the hell of his blistered skin and becoming part of it. Eventually, still aware of the pain, yet more able to bear it, he awkwardly turned his head to the left and looked across at the truck.

It was lying on its side, its metal ribs blackened, no longer smouldering, the wheels covered in hardening melted rubber, the engine blown off completely. The driver was hanging out of his cabin, his head resembling a pomegranate, and in the rear, beneath the remaining strips of canvas, was a pile of dead bodies. Other young men lay scattered about, spread-eagled, their bodies broken, their dead eyes staring up at the stars and shining like marbles. A white flag fluttered feebly, highly visible in the starlight, then it became a white robe, the sand drifting over it, the robe fluttering across the dead body of Joshua, who lay flat on his back. His eyes, unlike the eyes of the other dead men, were closed and at peace.

Jozsef studied him a long time, letting Joshua ease his pain, sinking into a reverie so complete that it made him feel he was dreaming. He saw Kate in the hospital (*Is this your form of conversion*?), then Joshua, his smile enigmatic, preparing for Judgement Day. Conversion had come, taking many shapes and colours: for Kate, very possibly for Leon, for himself in a different way. When had that happened? What kind of conversion was it? A Jew and a Rabbi, he still believed, though in something quite different… Kate, by the Sea of Galilee: they had walked side by side; he had cursed her

conversion as blasphemy before understanding it. Understanding came later, by the waters of *Yam Kinneret*, the revelation tripping off his own tongue as he looked into Kate's eyes... *Perhaps faith itself, without discipline imposed from outside, if held firmly and close to the heart, will purify and sustain…* So, there it was: a very personal and private faith, not bound by literal theology or dogma, but springing out of the heart… Jozsef smiled and saw Joshua, starlight falling upon his face, then he turned his head and looked the other way and saw the sand-covered mound.

It was a globe-shaped, modest rock, the only rock on the flat plain, and resting against it, shaped like a human being, was a sand-covered mound. Jozsef stared at it, mesmerised, feeling as if it was calling to him, speaking out of the silence of the wilderness with a soft, anguished eloquence. He blinked and licked his lips, kept looking, his eyes straining; heard the wind crooning lightly around him and saw it blowing the sand away. The sand spiralled off the mound, forming dark, drifting tendrils, thinning out on the mound to reveal, first, a hand, then a shoulder. It continued spiralling away, like a curtain slowly rising, to show the squatting form of a human being. It fell away from the head, drifting slowly to the ground, and then he saw the hands and feet, the blistered lips and blind eyes… the thin, sun-scorched and anguished face of the dead Leon Halcomb.

Jozsef stared, disbelieving, feeling haunted and frightened, then his fear, as if surrendering to his grief, slipped away to leave only sorrow. Leon was staring straight at him, his dead eyes reflecting the moon, while his hands, the palms turned upwards on his thighs, suggested entreaty. Jozsef felt that he was dreaming, that his senses were betraying him, but the physical pain that gnawed away at his body let him know otherwise. He kept staring at Leon, wondering what he had been seeking, his back pressed to the modest rock on the flat plain, his eyes surveying the wilderness.

A mystery. No answers. Jozsef shuddered and closed his eyes. In his mind he saw that lone rock in the wilderness, drawing Leon towards it. He opened his eyes again, his attention drawn by human groaning, and then, turning his head in the opposite direction, saw Rashid Idriss.

The Arab was still alive, crawling forward on his belly, his face blistered and shredded down one side, his eyes bright and determined. He looked at Jozsef, staring blankly, obviously trying to remember him, failed and then inched forward again, his fingers digging into the sand. He was crawling

towards Joshua, gritting his teeth and sometimes whimpering, but his eyes, flaring out of that broken face, were grimly determined.

Jozsef watched him, feeling pity, then compassion and even love, wanting to help him as he crawled towards Joshua, but unable to move. Rashid reached out to Joshua, tried to touch him and failed. He groaned and tried to pull himself forward, but his strength finally failed him. The wind crooned as Rashid sobbed, his hands scrabbling in front of Joshua, and then Jozsef, unable to bear his brother's pain, suffered his own pain with gladness. The pain lashed him when he moved, scourged his flesh when he rolled over, tried to skin him alive as he crawled forward, pouring sweat, dripping fresh blood. It took a long time, an eternity in hell, but eventually he made it, almost swooning with the pain, and reached out to turn Rashid's hand upward and place Joshua's hand in it.

They lay there together, Jozsef, Rashid and Joshua, their hands clasped as light filled the darkness.

Jozsef saw the light and felt it, a fierce heat pouring down, and he managed to twist around and look up as that brilliance descended. The light formed an enormous circle, dazzlingly bright, almost magical, growing larger as it descended upon him to blot out the natural sky. He stared at Rashid and Joshua, turned his head to glance at Leon, saw the light stretching out to embrace Leon and the small rock behind him. Leon turned into marble, reflecting the light and also devouring it, as the shadow of something larger than the light moved away from the modest rock. Jozsef turned his head again, looking at Rashid and Joshua; he saw Rashid staring up at the light as if begging for blindness. Tears were trickling down his cheeks, then the light erased his features, becoming so bright that it made him and Joshua shimmer and eventually disappear. Jozsef closed his eyes and prayed. He felt a wondrous exultation. Sighing, he rolled onto his back and opened his eyes to the heavens.

First the darkness.

Then light.

Not darkness, but light - a brilliant light in her mind - offering the revelations of transcendence and obliterating her fear. Kate bit her lower lip, embracing the pain in order to crush it, determined to give birth to her child, no matter how great the risk. She was alone in the dark room, the silence

pressing in upon her, and the sound of her own breathing, asphyxiated and irregular, confirmed that her circulation was failing as the doctors had predicted.

Her time had not yet come, but she knew that it was close, feeling the child struggling inside her as she laboured to free it. Her lungs seemed to be on fire, her body wracked by pain, but she saw the light growing in the darkness, giving birth to the future. She cried aloud and gripped the bed, trying to fight the clawing pain, her thoughts slipping in and out of reality as the drugs took command.

The light grew out of the darkness, illuminating the desert sands, and she suddenly saw Leon and the rabbi in that fierce luminescence. Leon was sitting against a rock, staring blindly at the rabbi, and Jozsef was stretched out on his back, holding the hand of an Arab. The light was a brilliant star, descending slowly, growing larger, and then it suddenly flared up into a sheer, blinding radiance, making Leon and Jozsef and the Arab dissolve, then abruptly shrinking back into darkness.

Kate opened her eyes and saw the darkness of the room, moonlight beaming through the window to her right and falling onto the bed. Was she awake or still dreaming? What had happened to Leon and Jozsef? She glanced repeatedly around her, fighting the pain, trying to breathe, and understood that she was definitely awake, though struggling to survive. The child struggled with her, inside her, wanting to spring forth to the world, but her womb, now contracting spasmodically, refused to release it. Kate groaned, her body arching, then reached for the alarm bell, tempted to call the doctors and nurses, but still reluctant to do so. Her hand wavered and dropped away, falling lightly onto her swollen belly, then she closed her eyes and sobbed, wanting Moshe, recalling what he had told her.

The nuclear age had ended. The great silos were silent. Every satellite in the stratosphere, defensive and offensive, had blinked out on all the radar screens and was no longer traceable. The tanks and aircraft were also silent, no longer capable of moving; and in the Sinai Desert, facing each other in the darkness, the Jews and Arabs had stopped fighting. The balance of terror had ended. Armageddon had been averted. Or at least Armageddon, that final and most terrible battle, had been fought around the ruins of Megiddo before the missiles were fired. Now the missiles were no more - they had vanished in mid-flight - and the possibility of nuclear destruction was no longer a worry.

Judgement Day had come, bringing reconciliation - between Jew and Arab, between the two great Christian churches - and the future, for good or evil, would be built from the eerie silence of a tentative, hoped for, peace.

Kate sobbed as her body quivered - out of pain; for the world - realising that Israel had been saved and that Moshe had survived. She closed her eyes and embraced the pain, travelling down through herself, sinking into the dark well of her womb and becoming one with her child. All around her was darkness, a black painted on black, closing in and retreating and then closing in again, until a pinprick of light, growing larger, flared up to reveal him.

Did she dream of him or see him? It scarcely mattered at that moment. He raised his hands to let his robes spread out, white and windblown and fluttering. His face was the light, drawing it in and also reflecting it, turning it back upon Kate to bathe her in radiance. A mature man. A child. One dissolved into the other. His silvery-grey eyes, luminous even in darkness, drew the pain from her twitching limbs.

'It is over,' he said. 'What was willed has been done. My time on Earth has passed and has served its cleansing purpose: the gates before the road to Judgement Day have at last been opened. Man must enter or turn away. The choice lies with him alone. The gates lead to where the sun reflects his image in the shape of a question mark. Will the future be good or evil? Will there be regeneration or degeneration? Will man, in his wisdom or folly, even walk through the gates? He can enter or turn away. The decision remains with him. He must decide in the silence of this transient peace and be marked by his choice.'

Joshua was the light, drawing it in and also reflecting it, letting it fall obliquely through the darkness to the wilderness floor. Kate saw Leon and Jozsef, the former dead, the latter blind, and then both of them - and the Arab between them - dissolved into the dazzling light. Joshua drew that light to him, sucked it up in the shape of a funnel, then Joshua changed and became a star that ascended and winked out. Then Kate saw the nocturnal desert. Leon and Jozsef were still there. Leon leant against the rock, his dead eyes like two stones, and Jozsef lay on his back on the ground, holding the hand of the Arab. He died slowly and peacefully, fading away with the Arab, both swept away by the radiance of revelation, death freezing their smiling lips. The sand drifted and whispered and covered their outspread limbs, as eventually it covered Leon and the rock against which he was leaning - until, when the

light of dawn appeared, they were buried completely. The vision faded as Joshua materialised, his hands clasped in front of him.

'They have passed on,' he said. 'Like the wind, they are here and gone. They joined hands at the moment of revelation and have now become one. Do not grieve for them, Kate, nor for me or my brothers; feared by men, death is merely transmutation to redemption's eternal light. We are here, though we are gone. We will always be with you. The bodies being covered by the desert sands are no more than our broken shells. Think about us and we will live. Recall us and we will come. We are with you now as we always were with you - and always will be.'

Kate went tumbling back through the darkness, away from Joshua, real or imagined, sinking again into a coma, fighting desperately to breathe, but determined to defeat the pain and affirm her faith by giving life to her child. In the depths she thought of Moshe, world's end, the new world's silence; and her heart, breaking in two, was renewed because Israel still stood. Her child's future was in that fact. What was it that Moshe had said? *Israel is the centre of the world - and if it falls, the world breaks…* Well, Israel still stood, as did Jerusalem in its glory, and Kate, who for so long had rejected it, was now, in fighting to give life to her child, affirming her faith and accepting it. She belonged to Israel - and Israel to the world - and the survival of her country was a sign that the world would be saved. Kate knew this in her bones, through her love and determination, as she struggled back up through the darkness, past accumulated layers of pain, and saw the light spreading out through the room to let Joshua materialise again. Whether real or imagined, he filled her vision with a crystalline brilliance.

'No,' he said, 'there are no answers. I settle the matter before you raise it. I emerged from a fragmented history and am fading back into it. Where did I come from and where do I go? This mystery is as real to me as it has been to you; and revelation, if it comes, will only come when it is too late to speak. I was, that I might be. I only knew what I learned from you. My purpose was to draw men towards me and let them see their own souls. Think of me as a reflection, man's conscience and hope, the manifestation of his glory and shame, the question mark drawn before his future that he might learn to brave it. I materialised and disappeared. I left no evidence of my existence. Men will search for the proof of my existence and find only frustration. Did I ever exist? Was I real or merely a myth? In time, as the new world, good or evil,

takes shape, what I was or might have been will be coloured by man's yearnings and hopes. I was, that I might be. Having been, I will remain. My signature will be written across the sky as the Earth slowly spins. I belong to you, Kate, and to your brothers and to your child; and my presence, whether real or imagined, will live on in your hearts. For your child, as for you, I will endure as a light in the darkness… Will the light. Let it shine!'

He had confirmed that her child would live, and she felt a great joy, rising out of her pain as a light mushrooming up through her soul. She called out for Moshe, wanting him with her, wanting to share her joy with him, and then, remembering that he was still in the desert, she reached for the alarm bell. She opened her eyes and saw the dark room, heard the song of the morning's silence, looked for Joshua and saw nothing but the moonlight fading slowly as dawn broke. She pressed the bell to call the nurses, her body arching, pushing down, embracing the pain and willing her weakening lungs to work as the contractions increased. She heard footsteps outside. The door opened and light poured in. The breath rushed from her lungs, there was pain and sudden nausea, then the blood pounded violently in her head and sent her into oblivion.

No light.

Just the darkness.

The cry of a child. Behind closed eyes was the darkness. Kate opened her eyes to the light and saw the child in her arms. Not a child, but a baby, wrapped warmly in swaddling clothes, its face pink and pinched, eyes closed, lips tight and determined. A tender love filled her heart, defeating the pain still in her body, and she held the baby close to her breast and felt its softness against her. She lived and had life, and would not let it go; and when Moshe entered the room, his face filthy, his eyes weary, she held the baby up on her trembling hands and let her smile tell him everything. He stopped and stared at her, at the child, at the floor, then he stepped up to the bed and gazed down at the gift she had given him. He wanted to touch it but was frightened - not of death, but of new life - and then his tears, pouring out of the deep well of his relief, trickled down his cheeks to fall on the child as he leaned over to kiss it. He said nothing to Kate, and she had nothing to say to him. They just stared at one another, gazing across the crying child, looking into each other's eyes to that future which love might make whole: *shielded and lifted*

by its precepts as a dove by its wings.

Information on books by W.A. Harbinson
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THE BLOOD OF THE LORD

W.A. HARBINSON

Part One
Chapter One

Anna uncoiled, her naked body sweat-slicked, turning like a wisp of smoke above a light flame. The stained sheet fell off her, trailing down to the floor. Anna sighed and raised a long, shapely leg, then opened her eyes. They were as blue as the sky outside, but slightly troubled, distracted, as if she had lost track of herself and hardly knew where she was. Her head turned on the pillow, her golden hair a glorious tangle, then she bit her lush lower lip and stared out the window.

She'd just had a dream in which God's light, shining upon her, had made her feel whole.
She had that dream often.
The sun was indeed shining over the flatlands outside, reflecting off the pumps of the gas station and beaming in through the window of this rickety old house to illuminate Anna's tanned limbs and return her to life. She yawned and stretched, a voyeur's vision, seductive, then slid her legs off the bed and stood up to get washed and dressed.
The house didn't have a shower, so Anna used the cracked sink. She just ran the cold water, rubbed it over her naked body, dried herself with a towel, and then put on her clothes. She didn't use deodorant, but her body had a sweet smell. Her mother disapproved of perfume and make-up, so Anna, when she had dressed, had only to comb her hair, which fell to above her waist, shining like gold in the sunlight beaming in on her back.
When Anna tightened the belt on her dress, she was something to see.
She thought of her dream, about God's light shining upon her. In her dream, that light made her feel good, but now it disturbed her. It always did when she'd wakened.
Shivering, she opened the door and walked out of the bedroom.
Her mother Beth was in the kitchen, doing ham and eggs, staring down grimly at the frying pan, as if at an enemy. Her grey hair was pinned up and her skin was brown and wrinkled, making her look older than she was. Yet when she heard Anna come in, she raised her eyes and broke into a smile that

lit up the room.
'Mornin', honey,' she said.
'Mornin', Ma.'
'Did you sleep well? You didn't have bad dreams?'
'No,' Anna lied. 'I didn't. I feel really fine, Ma.'
Beth grabbed a plate, flipped the ham and eggs onto it. 'Here,' she said, dragging her clubfoot across the floor and placing the plate on the table, 'eat it all up. A growin' girl needs her nourishment.'
'I'll get fat,' Anna said, pulling a chair out while Beth sat down at the other side of the table and grabbed her packet of cigarets. 'Fried food is unhealthy.'
'It's a treat,' Beth replied, lighting a cigaret and blowing smoke sideways. 'You don't get fried food that often. Besides, the Nicholson women aren't fat. We're all thin as reeds. It's your family inheritance.'
The radio was playing country & western music that filled Anna with fine feelings as she had her breakfast. For someone so nervous, she had a surprisingly healthy appetite and always enjoyed the first meal of the day.
'A real scorcher,' Beth said, gazing sideways, out the window. 'It's gonna be hot as hell out there. Sun's bin up for a long time.'
Anna glanced out. She saw the rusty gas pumps and desolate flatlands stretching out to the horizon. Nothing out there but parched earth and sky. The sun was a fierce, shimmering orb; the sky looked like sheet metal.
'I like it hot,' Anna observed. 'It makes my body feel whole.'
'Never mind your body,' Beth replied firmly. 'Let others think about that. You just try to stay sensible.'
Anna didn't reply. She didn't know what her mother meant. She just finished off her eggs and scooped up the gravy with some bread. The coffee tasted real good, as well.
Beth blew a cloud of smoke, sucked her breath in with a sigh. 'Trinity, East Texas,' she said. 'The end of the earth! I haven't had one customer this morning. They don't even need gas here.'
'It's real early, Ma.'
'Yeah, honey, I know. I get up too early for my own good, and that makes the day seem long. Then I look out my window, at that little ol' gas station, and I think the only thing worse than actually living in Trinity is havin’ to live on the edge of town. You know what I mean, hon'?'
'I like it,' Anna replied, licking her fingers as if wanting to eat them. 'I've

always liked being alone. Some folks just make me nervous.'
Beth didn't reply to that. She thought it best to skirt the subject. Sighing again, she gazed out the window, where the sunlight was brightening. The noise of the flies buzzing in the kitchen blended in with the music.
'Well,' she said, 'at least something excitin' is comin' to town at last.'
'The Reverend Juble Lee revivalist tent?'
'Yeah, honey, that's right. He's really taken this whole state by storm, so I can't wait to see him. The Lord be praised, he might do this town some good, and that can't be a bad thing.'
'I've never been to a revivalist meetin'.'
'I'm gonna take you, honey. They came around a lot when I was a kid, but there aren't many these days. Reverend Juble Lee... they say he's the best there's bin in years, so it should be excitin'. Gimme that old time religion, honey. Get them tambourines rattlin'.'
Anna pushed her plate away, sat back in her chair, then glanced distractedly around the room. The kitchen and living room were one, untidy but clean, as spartan as Beth's sun-dried face and her piled-up grey hair. There were photographs on the walls, as old and brown as the curtains, of Beth's mother and father, born and died in this state, though surprisingly there were none of Anna's dad, who'd disappeared a long time ago. The only photo of her dad was the wedding picture of him and Beth, now resting on the table in Anna's room. It gave her comfort to see it there.
'We doin' anything today?'
'Yeah,' Beth said, 'we're goin' to town. We've got to get us some shopping.'
She pushed her chair back, stood up, and dragged her clubfoot across the bare wooden floor to turn off the radio. A news announcer was talking about the latest drought in Wyoming and how it was devastating the economy. Beth cut him off in mid-sentence. 'I can't stand the news these days,' she said. 'No news is good news.'
Anna stood up to start clearing the table. She didn't like the idea of going to town and felt nervous again. 'What about the pumps?' she asked hopefully. 'What if somebody comes by? Don't you want me to stay here?'
'The hell with 'em,' Beth said. 'No-one from Trinity travels far, so they can come back this afternoon.'
'I'd prefer to stay here,' Anna said, thinking of hungry eyes that turned and stared. 'I think I should look after the pumps while you get the shopping.'

'I need someone to help me carry it,' Beth said, 'so you best come along. What's the matter? You suddenly don't feel good?'
'I don't like going to town.' Anna was almost whispering. 'I don't like the way the boys stare at me. It makes me uncomfortable.'
'It's because you're so beautiful,' Beth said, ' and boys their age like that. You'll just have to get used to it.'
'It makes me feel naked. They also stare as if I'm some kind of freak. As if...'
She couldn't get the words out, so Beth said it for her. 'It's because you're sick, Anna. You might as well admit it. You're beautiful - but you're also sick, which is something they can't forget. They want you and they're frightened of you as well. You'll have to always be careful, child.'
'Just let me stay here, Ma.'
Beth came around the table, dragging her clubfoot. When she stopped in front of Anna, her eyes, which were as blue as her daughter's, narrowed to slits.
'No,' she said. 'You're comin' with me. You can't hide all the time. Your beauty is as much a penance as your illness, but you'll have to learn to live with it. Damn the boys in town! To hell with their rotten fathers! You're my daughter and you'll hold your head high for as long as I breathe. Now is that understood?'
'Yes, Ma,' Anna said. She nodded, her lovely gaze troubled, then started cleaning the table.
The sun shining through the window warmed her face and she saw it as God's light.

Chapter Two

Tom Beale wanted Anna. He knew this every time she drove into town with her mother in their old beat-up truck, to buy their groceries for the week, which they did just about every Saturday morning. As usual, Tom was there with his pals, just passing time in front of the drugstore, when Anna got out of the truck, wearing only a cheap cotton dress that was pressed to her perfect body by the constant winds that blew in off the flatlands and straight along Main Street. Larry Mitchell, standing right beside Tom, gave a low, measured whistle.

'There she blows,' Pete Fallow said.
'Just let me at it, Gary Johnson boasted.
'There's nothin' under that dress but naked flesh,'

Larry said with a lewd grin. 'An' every inch of it lush.'

They were the old gang from high school, but they'd left it last year. Now two of them, Tom and Larry, worked for their fathers, and the other two, Pete and Gary, were unemployed, like most kids in town. They spent a lot of time there, on the porch outside the drugstore, hassling the girls coming in and trying to make out. They did that most evenings, though it didn't get them much, and they all knew why they came here on Saturday - to catch sight of Anna.

'What I'd give,' Gary said.
'Stop hopin'.' Pete grinned at him.
'If she took that dress off,' Larry told them, 'you'd

jump out of your skin. What she needs is a man, kid.' 'Like you?'
'Yeah, Tom, like me.' Larry rolled the gum in his

mouth, his smile filled with challenge, but Tom was still staring across the road as if he'd been blinded. He was staring at Anna. She was helping her Ma down. When she reached up, the cotton dress tightened against her breasts

and rippled down the curve of her spine. The wind was making her hair whip like a flag, long and golden in sunlight. She was a vision out of heaven, too lovely to be real, and Tom felt consumed by the sight of her.

Then the clubfoot appeared, dropping down out of the truck, and old Beth, looking as tough as they come, was helped down by her daughter. Tom shivered just to see her. The clubfoot made her different. He was frightened of old Beth, just as he was of Anna, though his fear of the latter was based on shyness and the ache in his yearning heart.

'A cripple and an epileptic,' Larry said. 'A real cabaret act.'
'It's not their fault,' Tom said.
'Didn't say it was, Tom.'
'I tell ya,' Gary said, his chubby face already sweating, his checkered shirt too tight on his heavy body, damp under the armpits. 'That Anna's some looker, no question, but I don't wanna know.'
'You're just scared,' Larry said.
'Good reason,' Gary replied. 'Epileptics are possessed by the devil - ain't no doubt about it.'
'That's an old wive's tale,' Tom said.
'Maybe,' Pete said. 'Maybe not.' Over six feet tall, he was as skinny as a cornstalk. Wearing a tight shirt, denims and high-heeled boots made him look even taller. 'I only know,' he said, staring down solemnly at short Gary, 'that I don't wanna mix with epileptics and goddamned clubfoots. You got two things like that in one family and it just doesn't sit right. I'm not suspicious, but…'
'Shoot,' Larry said, 'you're as suspicious as my grandma. You think Beth's gonna put the evil eye on you if you just *glance* at Anna. Me, I only know one thing for sure
- that Anna's there for the takin'.'
'How would you know?' Tom asked.
'I heard rumours, pal.'
'She never did a damn thing at school, Larry. She didn't act like a tramp.'
'Folks still talk,' Larry said. He grinned and rolled his gum, checked his reflection in the plate-glass window, slicked his hair back and shrugged his shoulders, then hitched up his pants. A real macho man at seventeen years

old. 'Boy, just look at that ass on her!'
Anna was following her mother into Sarah Greeve's general store, stepping up onto the porch and under the awning. Tom hated to hear dirty talk about her, but even he couldn't ignore the truth: when she raised her leg, the short dress tightened around her backside to reveal its perfection.
His throat tightened and he had to swallow, heart racing, flushed. He was dazzled by the sight of her even from this distance - the curved spine and broad hips, the long legs and golden hair - and felt bereaved when she was up in the porch and obscured by the shadows. He just blinked and when he opened his eyes again, she'd already entered the store.
'Come back out,' Larry said. He was the leader of the pack. A good looker, he always got the girls and was pretty sure of himself. Tom knew that's why he really wanted Anna: just to say that he'd done it. The mere thought of Larry getting his hands on her made Tom feel pretty bad. 'No use gawpin' at the door,' Larry said. 'She's gone inside, kid.'
'She'll be comin' out again.'
'It must be love,' Gary said. Short and fat, he was sweating like a pig, though he grinned like a friend. 'Is that what it is, Tom?'
'Naw,' Tom lied, 'I just like to look at her - just like all of you guys. You see anything *else* there?'
He was trying to be laid back, but he had a real point, which he realised, as he had done before, when he looked up and down Main Street. It was a real one-horse town, a Green River railroad town, with a population of 400 souls, most brain-dead from too much sun and too little work, what with the drought and all. Not much crops around here. Even the cattle were dying. There were two schools and three churches, a library and a railway station, and everything else was on Main Street, which was all there was, really. It looked like a cowboy town, like something straight out of the movies, with clapboard buildings and steps leading up to porches shadowed under broad awnings. A couple of bars, a few diners and stores, one hotel, the sheriff's office, the cinema and a drugstore for the kids, and that was it, folks. This was Main Street. There wasn't much hidden behind it. At one end of it was the railway station, run by Tom's dad, and farther on, at the edge of the flatlands, was old Beth's gas station and the clapboard house in which she and Anna lived. There were other girls in town besides Anna, but they weren't worth the watching.

'You see anything *else* out there?' Tom repeated, trying to act cool.
They all glanced up and down, automatically, maybe hoping, and their eyes fixed on the only two girls about - down there, by the hardware store. It was the Proctor sisters, Betty and Lorraine, both twenty years old, unmarried and already washed out. They were wearing wide skirts and loose jackets, with their feet in flat shoes. Their hair was pinned up just like Beth's, and they looked almost as old. Sitting side by side, on a rocking bench on the porch, they had their hands folded in their laps and were staring down at their crossed feet.
'I see somebody's future,' Larry said, his grin slipping sideways, 'and I fear for the future. Any volunteers, guys?'
'No, thanks,' Gary said. 'I have enough bad dreams.'
'You smile at 'em,' Pete added, 'an' they jump out of their skin. You talk to 'em an' they turn white and run away. Those girls are *weird,* man!'
Tom didn't say a word. He didn't think there was anything funny about the Proctor sisters. There were too many girls like them in town and it made him depressed. They were quiet and polite, but mostly too nervous, and they all wore really drab clothes and tried to look unattractive. No wonder Anna looked great.
At that moment, Dan Proctor, tall, gaunt and unshaven, emerged from the hardware store and said something to his daughters. Meekly, with heads bowed, they got up and followed him along the sidewalk.
'That Dan Proctor must be one real mean Daddy,' Larry said. 'Those girls are suppressed, man. Whoops! Here she comes.'
Anna was on the porch, half lost in the shadows, strands of her golden hair whipping out into the light, then falling back over her face. She stepped down, into the light, the dress riding up her long legs, then brushed the hair back from her face and started crossing the street. She crossed at an angle, heading away from the drugstore, her profile and body outlined in striated sunlight. She seemed to glow and glide, her body shimmering, in slow motion, and Tom was so dazzled by her presence that he thought he'd go blind.
'Just look at those melons,' Larry said. 'And that ass! Oh, my God! How the hell can old Beth be so protective, then let her dress like that?'
'She's trying to drive us all crazy,' Pete said, grinning down from his lofty heights, 'and I think she's succeeding.'

Reaching their side of the street, which was helpfully in the sunlight, Anna jumped onto the sidewalk with a quick, graceful movement. Then she wandered toward the boys in her familiar, distracted manner, going up and down the steps and along the dusty porches, repeatedly brushing her wind-whipped hair from her face as she stared into windows. She also sucked her thumb. It was something she did a lot. It made her seem like a little kid, but everything else about her was something else: that ravishing face, the golden-coloured, long hair, that perfect body accentuated by the wind-flattened cotton dress, her legs brown, her small feet in dusty moccasins - she was some kind of dream.
'It's either her or a video-tape,' Larry said. 'Otherwise I'll explode.'
He had said it loud and clear, knowing damned well she could hear it, since she was stepping up onto the porch that ran along to the drugstore. She froze where she was, obviously startled, suddenly seeing them, and her eyes, which were as blue as the sky, filled up with panic. She glanced at Tom - or so it seemed to him - and he burned up with shame.
'Oh!' she exclaimed, not sucking her thumb now.
'Hi, Anna,' Larry said. He grinned sideways at the others, slicked his hair back, rolled the gum in his mouth. 'We haven't seen you this close in a long time. You're lookin' real good.'
Anna opened her mouth to speak, left it open, struck dumb, and Tom noticed the flush beneath her brown skin as she lowered her eyes.
'You wanna a milkshake?' Larry asked, spreading his legs, straightening his spine, looking handsome in his white shirt and black pants, his big belt-buckle gleaming. 'You wanna suck on a straw with me?'
'Lay off!' Tom whispered. He wanted to die right there and then. Anna was kicking up the dust with her right foot and studying the boards on the porch.
'What about a drive?' Larry asked. 'We could go out to the river. Just you, me, some beers, and maybe a blanket. Whatd'ya say, Anna?'
Anna kept her head down. She was kicking up the dust. She glanced at Larry, then stared across the street, as if looking for Beth.
Tom felt really bad. 'Let her pass,' he said to Larry. He saw that Pete and Gary were grinning sheepishly, trying not to show their shame, but that Larry was enjoying himself, making up for his loss. 'Let her pass, Larry,' Tom repeated. 'Stop trying to embarrass her.'
'*Embarrass* her?' Larry replied, looking mock amazed, rolling his big grey

eyes and grinning broadly again. 'Wouldn't *dream* of it, pal!' Then he stepped aside and performed a mock curtsey, bowing low, indicating with a wave of his hand that Anna could pass. 'Please walk on,' he said.

Anna studied the dusty boards. She kicked up more dust. She raised her eyes to stare at Larry, then glanced accusingly at Tom. Even as he blushed, burning up with embarrassment, she skipped down the steps and ran off across the road, waving at Beth as she emerged from the general store, burdened down with some heavy bags. Anna took the bags from her and heaved them into the truck. She helped her mother up and clambered in behind her. Then the truck coughed into life and trundled off, churning up clouds of dust.

'Some day - ' Larry began.

'Shut up, dammit,' Tom said, shocked by his own vehemence, turning away to hide his burning face, then jumping down off the porch. The truck was a long way off and he watched it disappearing, thinking all the while of how he had often dreamed of Anna - seeing her as an angel descending from heaven, unreal in dazzling light, then turning into a living, full-blooded, romantic creature whose love rescued him from the crushing boredom and misery of adolescence in Trinity.

He had that dream often.

Chapter Three

Anna loved animals. Back home, in the early evening, when the sun was going down, she walked out of the rickety old clapboard house by the gas station to feed her two fierce Alsatian dogs and half a dozen cats. The cats were all strays that she'd picked up in Trinity, one after the other, when overcome by pity at the sight and sound of them, bone-thin and scraggly, meowing for food along the road through Main Street. Anna just couldn't resist a hungry or lonely cat because, having lost her own father, she knew what they were suffering.

The Alsatians were guard dogs, called Batman and Robin. Though indifferent to the cats, they'd been trained to look out for strangers and give them a hard time. Beth didn't trust strangers. Nor the townsfolk for that matter. She had often told Anna to be wary of strangers, particularly men, even those in Trinity, and she'd personally trained the Alsatians to be vicious and make lots of noise.

The dogs were safe if Beth was present and they practically worshipped Anna. They only became agitated when customers stopped by for gas. That explained the lack of customers. Flaherty's gas station, at the other side of town, did a lot more business; but that fact didn't bother Beth a bit. Her only concession was to shoo the dogs behind the mesh-wire door of the house when someone arrived for gas or other business. But often both dogs would be all over the customer's car, snapping and slathering, playing hell with the paintwork, before Beth or Anna had time to get out of the house and order them off. When that happened, most customers wouldn't get out of their cars. No, thanks. They'd just disappear in a cloud of dust, heading over to Flaherty's.

Every Christmas, Flaherty sent the dogs a card. It was his little joke. Anna smiled, remembering that, as she knelt down to feed the dogs. She lifted the raw meat from the bowl with her elegant fingers and dropped the pieces into the smaller bowls for Batman and Robin. Then she licked her fingers. It seemed a natural thing to do. She patted the dogs on the head and

walked back to the porch, unbuttoning her thin cotton dress to let the air at her body. She was naked beneath the dress, except for a pair of panties, because she needed to feel as free as possible, at one with the elements. When she reached the porch, she sat down, undoing the button below her breasts, then tugged the lower part of the dress off her thighs to let the sun on her legs. The top of the dress was already hanging off her shoulders and the evening breeze cooled her down.

She looked out across the land. It was her favourite time of day. The sun was sinking beyond the flatlands, setting fire to the horizon, and the first stars were appearing in the sky where pink bled into darkening blue. She liked to imagine that her father was out there, just beyond the horizon, building a life better than the one he had left behind and preparing to come back and take her and Beth away with him. It was something to dream about.

A light breeze picked up and blew dust across the flatlands. It crooned as it blew around Anna and tugged at her dress. She felt it on her bare shoulders, on the top of her breasts, on the brown thighs exposed to the falling night. She was taking the breeze in through her pores when she heard the car coming.

The dogs started barking immediately, even turning away from their food, staring wildly at the approaching car and baring teeth covered in blood. The feeding cats scattered, running for shelter beneath the porch, and Anna stood up, as calm as you please, and walked toward the dogs.

'Batman!' she snapped softly. 'Robin! Get back in the house. Go on now! Get going!'

The dogs ignored her for a moment, working themselves into a frenzy, but when she stamped her foot on the ground and slapped at them, they loped back to the house, still making a lot of noise. Beth was there at the outside door, opening it up to let them in, and when they slipped past her, she closed the door again and pressed her nose to the mesh wire, looking down through narrow, suspicious eyes into the dimming light. Anna stepped out as the car, a dusty 1987 Chevrolet, stopped by the pumps.

The nearside window was rolled down and a man's face appeared. When Anna walked up to him, he gave a low whistle, then held the keys out through the window.

'You're a sight for sore eyes,' he said. 'Fill 'er up, thanks.'

Blushing, but not thinking to do up the buttons of her dress, Anna took the

keys off him and went about filling the tank with gas. The man got out of the car, stretched himself, then stared at her. He was portly and balding, his tie loosened, his shirt sweat-stained, and his hazel eyes, though weary from driving, took all of her in.
'Travellin' far?' Anna asked him, feeling nervous, wanting distraction.
'All the way from San Antonio. On my way to Oklahoma City. A long way to go yet.'
'You tourin'?'
'I'm travellin"
'You mean work?'
'Somethin' like that.'
'It must be pretty lonesome on the road.'
'A man misses certain things.'
Anna put the cap back on. She felt pretty uncomfortable. She glanced at the man, couldn't meet his bold gaze, so wiped her hands and stared across the plain, where great shadows were shifting. The breeze, which was crooning across the flatlands, blew the dress off her thighs.
'You want the oil and water checked?'
The man let his breath out in a loud sigh. 'Sure,' he said. 'Naturally.'
Anna lifted the hood and went about her business. The hood blocked off her view of the man, but she knew he was watching her. She was bent over, working down there in the engine, the dress tight on her spine and rump. She hadn't thought, at this late hour of the evening, that she might have a customer.
'A nice dress,' the man said. Anna didn't reply. She was too busy topping up the oil and trying to be quick about it. 'A nice suntan as well,' the man said. 'The dress shows it off well.'
Anna straightened up, wiping the oil off her hands. She still had to top up the water and she dreaded the thought of it.
'You don't talk much,' the man said, looking her up and down, grinning.
'Do you really need water?' she asked him.
'Yeah,' he said. 'I need water.'
She went to fetch the water can. The wind was pressing the dress against her. It was blowing it right off her legs, but she couldn't prevent it. She picked the can up, having to bend down to get it. When she straightened up and turned around to walk back, the man was staring right at her.

'What age are you?' he asked.
'Seventeen,' she replied.
'You're some hot-lookin' number for seventeen. You live here alone?'
'No, with my mother.' She wished she'd added her father. When she walked past the man, he stepped forward and their bodies touched lightly.
'Is she in the house now?'
'Yes,' Anna said, taking a deep breath and bending over the engine to top up the water. When she poured, her hand started shaking and water splashed on her dress. When the water soaked through to chill her breasts, she felt even more nervous.
'What's she like?' the man asked. He was standing right behind her. He was only about a foot away from her and his breathing was audible.
'Who?' Anna asked, hardly knowing what she was saying, only aware of that man right behind her, looking down on her.
'Your mother. Is she old? Is she deaf, dumb and blind? Is she out back, in the kitchen, in the john, or can she see us right now?'
Anna replaced the water cap and straightened up with relief. When she turned around, the man was standing right in front of her, beads of sweat on his nose and around his lips, glistening under his wide eyes. His breathing was heavy.
'She's up there with two dogs,' Anna said, 'and she's probably in the front room. She likes to keep her eye on me.'
The man grinned at that, misinterpreting what she'd said. When he stepped forward, she quickly stepped aside, but he just slammed the hood down. Anna's heart skipped a beat. She felt as if she'd been violated. She turned back to face the man and saw his grin when he took in her soaked dress.
'What about the windscreen?' he said. 'You gonna do that as well?'
'If you want.'
'I want,' he said, his sweaty grin broadening into a crooked leer that made her feel naked. 'I want it all, kid.'
She didn't want to do the windscreen. It meant leaning across the hood. She'd forgotten that she was wearing this dress and that she'd unbuttoned most of it. She quickly did the top buttons, though it wouldn't help much. The water had soaked through, exposing her breasts, and she knew he could see that.
Taking another deep breath, her heart racing, she leaned over the bonnet with the wet rag to polish the windshield. She tried to stay as upright as possible, but she knew it was useless; she was stretched out, twisted slightly sideways,

over the hood, with the thin dress stretching tight on her body, breasts exposed by the wet patch.
She knew how men normally looked at her, and this was making it worse. The man stepped forward and stopped right behind her, so close his groin was touching her thigh. Anna wanted to straighten up, but was too scared, so she started drying the windscreen.
'What about it?' the man said, sounding strangled. 'In the back of the car. I'll even pay you. I don't give a damn. You'll be worth every cent. Five minutes is all, kid.'
His hand fell on her thigh, sliding under the dress and along her bare skin. A spasm of fear and revulsion daggered through her, making her jerk upright, turning around and slapping him with the wet rag before she could think. He stepped back and she pushed him farther, dropping the rag, crying, 'No!' Then she pressed herself back against the car and covered her lips with her fingers. He blinked the water from his eyes, licked it from his lips, rubbed it from his face and then stared at her, turning purple with rage.
'Goddammit,' he croaked, then gave up trying to speak and reached out to take hold of the dress just above her wet breasts.
He was stopped by the barking dogs.
Anna glanced up to see Batman and Robin bounding down the porch steps, making a dreadful noise, illuminated in the light beaming through the open door and silhouetting Beth in the hallway. The man glanced over his shoulder, into the dimming light, as the two large Alsation dogs, barking and snarling, cleared the fence and rushed at him. Grabbing Anna by the shoulder, the man threw her aside, jumped into his car, and slammed the door just before the dogs got to him. Anna ran back to the house, reached the gate and looked back. Batman and Robin were on their hind legs, front paws pounding on the windows, snapping and snarling like hounds from hell as the man gunned the engine. The car took off in a billowing cloud of dust and raced off down the road, pursued for a while by the two dogs, then disappearing. When the dogs returned, emerging from settling dust, Anna reached down and patted them.
'Anna!' Beth bawled from the porch. 'Come on up here, child! Leave the dogs out there for a while just in case he comes back. Now get into this house, girl!'
Anna did as she was told. When she climbed the porch steps, her mother was

waiting for her, half of her face in shadow, one eye caught in brightening moonlight, her lips pursed in a grim line. She reached out to place her hand on Anna's shoulder, then shook her gently.
'You alright?' she asked.
'Yes, Ma, I'm fine.'
'Okay. Come inside, girl. Dinner's on the table.'
They said their prayers before eating, then picked up their knives and forks. Yellow light from the oil lamp flickered over mashed potatoes, green beans, and steak done rare and bleeding. Beth had a few mouthfuls, then spread her hands on the table, her knife and fork pointing at the ceiling, like weapons of war.
'Goddamned men!' she said with contempt. 'They only think of one thing!'
Anna knew what that thing was. She had seen it in the eyes of the boys who gawped at her; in the eyes of the married men, slipping helplessly, guiltily sideways each time she passed by. She had also seen it in her dreams, but in more confusing form, when her visions of God, or His magical light, were mixed up with other visions of violent, terrifying carnality devoid of clearly defined shape.
She felt herself to be the victim of forces beyond comprehension.
When she thought about this, she tried in vain to recall her father. Even though she had been thirteen when he left home for good, she could hardly remember a thing about him. For that reason she was convinced that he'd been some kind of saint, standing on the right hand of God and casting light on her childhood. When she lost him, she lost a whole world and was never secure again.
'All men can't be bad,' she told Beth.
'Most are,' Beth replied.
'You told me Dad was a good man.'
'Yes, child, he was that. He was a good man who treated us well - but then he just upped and left.'
'You've never told me why.'
'That's because I don't know. I was a good wife to him and he seemed to be contented - then suddenly, he just upped and left and never returned. No note. Not a thing. He just disappeared, Anna.'
'You think there was another woman?'
'There wasn't another woman.'

'Maybe he just too sick, Ma, and couldn't take it no more. Maybe he was too sick to think and just wanted to hide away.'
'He wasn't a suicidal man.'
'I mean sick... in the head.'
'No, Anna, he wasn't sick in the head. I only wish that he had been. God damn it, child, I don't know why he left. I've wondered about it ever since. I know it hurts you, but it hurts me as well. That's why I want to forget him.'
'That's why you mistrust men.'
'That's one of the reasons. The other reason should be obvious even to you - just think of that man out there.'
'Not all men are like that, Ma.'
'Not many *aren't* like that. And you, Anna - you're more beautiful than you know, so men look at you differently.'
'They know that I'm sick.'
'Yes, they know that as well. That only makes them more dangerous. They fear you and lust for you at the same time - and few men can take that. The more they want you, the more they're gonna fear you - and that makes them dangerous. You'll always have to be careful, child.'
The thought depressed Anna and she finished her meal in silence, occasionally glancing around the spartan room, now dimly, erratically illuminated in the flickering oil lamps. When she had finished, she put down her knife and fork and sat back in her chair.
'I feel really tired, Man... That man - I think he exhausted me. I'm gonna go to bed early.'
'You do that, child. That's wise. Best to sleep it away and wake up feeling refreshed. You go on. I'll clear up here.'
Anna went to bed, stripping naked as usual. She lay between the sheets and stared out at the moon, imagining it was God's eye up there, gazing down to protect her.
She needed that protection because she didn't have a father. If she had, he wouldn't let the males of Trinity look at her the way they did. They embarrassed and humiliated her. Sometimes they frightened her. All of them except Tom Beale, her former schoolfriend. When Tom looked at her, even with desire, his gaze showed shy tenderness.
In fact, Anna had been dreaming about Tom for months. He was all mixed up with God in her dreams of love and destruction. Not too sure of just what that

signified, she closed her eyes and tried sleeping. The dogs occasionally barked outside, the wind moaned, but otherwise there was silence. Anna drifted out of herself on wings of light to find God in her dreaming. Tom was mixed up, somehow, with God to bring terror and love. Anna's body was burning.

Chapter Four

Tom was still awake. He was in the dismal old house that stood by the railway station, run by his father and mother, with some help from him. Tom had lived there all his life and couldn't stand the place. The only interest was in the occasional passenger stepping down and looking around with distaste. Few visitors stayed for long.

Tom was crowded into the hot, cluttered living room with his Mom and Dad, and three older sisters. His mother Myrna was a worn-out rag, ironing clothes while watching TV; his father, fat-bellied, jowly and mean, was slouched deep in the only comfortable chair in the house, swigging beer and smoking a cheroot while also watching the TV.

Tom's sisters were watching, too. They didn't really have a choice. In this house, you did as you were told or suffered the consequences. Still, that didn't explain Tom's sisters, Betty, Jean and Clara, eighteen, nineteen and twenty years old respectively, but exceptionally dim and cowed. They were sitting close together, like rag dolls on the sofa, wearing baggy, unattractive clothes, with their hair prim and proper. They all had their hands in their laps and they didn't move much.

They were watching some dumb quiz show. The sets were in garish colours. The applause and laughter had been amplified and the noise was atrocious. It didn't disturb Tom's mother and father, who were both glued to the box, the former watching and ironing in deathlike silence, the latter belching and bawling rude comments about the halfwitted participants.

Half-witted, Tom thought resentfully, just like my sisters. Like my Mom and Dad, too. Dear God, let me out of here.

'That dumb sonofabitch!' his father sneered about a hapless contestant. 'He doesn't even know where the Channel Islands are! They oughta feed him some peanuts!'

'Where are they?' Tom asked.
'In England, fat-head!' his father sneered. 'England *is* an island,' Tom said.
'What do *you* know? Get outa here!'
Tom wanted to strike him, but knew that if he tried,

his Dad would break every bone in his body. Well, not quite, but he'd certainly slap him around some, just as he often did to Tom's mother and three terrified sisters. That probably explained them. It explained a lot of things. Like why living here was hell on Earth or, at least, some kind of purgatory.

'Look at the balloons on that wife of his,' Jack Beale said of another participant on the TV quiz game. 'I guess that's where her brains are.'

'*Please*, Jack!' Myrna remonstrated feebly.

'Shut your mouth,' Jack replied. 'Hey, girls,' he added, turning to his daughters. 'What do *you* think?'
Betty and Jean lowered their heads, looking down at their twisting hands. Clara cast Tom a dead-eyed glance, then stared straight at her father. 'Ha, ha,' she murmured.
'You don't think that's funny? Hey, you two,' he shouted at Betty and Jean, 'why the hell are you blushing? You haven't got tits or something? Is that it? You don't like to hear talk about them? What's the matter? You're *shy*, girls?'
'*Please*, Jack,' Myrna whispered again.
'Shut up, Myrna, I'm warning you. Jesus, what a brood! The walking dead! No wonder they can't get a goddamned man. Their conversation's too dazzling.' He burped, had another slug of beer, then wiped his lips with the back of his hand. 'Hey, Tom,' he said, 'go and close up the station for the night. I've gotta see this show finished.'
'Okay,' Tom said. It was like getting out of prison. He stood up and turned around, his eyes scanning the gloomy room: unpainted clapboard walls newspaper cuttings; faded prints, and photographs; the furniture, old and torn, covered with clothes and magazines; empty plates and crushed beer cans on the serving counter of the kitchen; ashtrays filled with ash and peanut shells all over the place; a mangy mutt chewing bones by the unlit fire on a dust-

covered floor. Tom couldn't stand the sight of it and gratefully hurried covered in browning outside, glad to see space all around him and breathe in the fresh air.
Still, it was desolate. These were the flatlands of East Texas which, in the darkness, looked like a taut black sheet stretching out to the star-covered mountains on the distant horizon. Not much out there at all. The wind moaned night and day. The only thing moving out there was that wind and its swirling dust clouds. They moved lazily, eerily, obliterating the moon and stars, forming great loops and arcs and other ghostly shapes that invariably swept over the railway station and accompanying house.
Located on the outskirts of town, the house and station, illuminated in the darkness, seemed mighty lonesome.
It was just a milk-stop station, with a one-man switchbox, a water tower, a waiting room on a short, exposed platform, and another room for the mail and stationmaster. That was Tom's dad, Jack, though Tom now helped him out. Like a lot of other kids, he couldn't find work locally - the drought had killed off lots of jobs - so he didn't have any choice in the matter. At least it got him out of the house, which was some kind of blessing.
Tom soon crossed the short distance between the house and the station, leaning into the wind, covering his eyes against the sweeping dust, and climbed the wooden steps up to the station door, which was open and held back with a hook and pin. Walking through, he emerged to the platform, walked along to the end of it, jumped down and crossed another stretch of ground, then climbed up to the switchbox.
He liked it up there. You had a good view all round. There were only two tracks, going in opposite directions, both of them perfectly straight as far as the eye could see. Not many trains came through. When they did, they only stopped to deliver the mail being sorted through Houston. Few passengers disembarked. Those that did, the brave few, usually just squinted through the dust in all directions, saw nothing but flat plains and a one-horse town named Trinity, so boarded the train again, more grateful to be on it, and let it carry them away to somewhere better.
Tom often wanted to make that journey with them, but sensed that he never would.
Besides, he didn't think he could make that journey if he couldn't take Anna.
Sighing, filled with longing, he turned out the lights, climbed back down the

ladder, then crossed to the platform. Stepping up onto it, he walked along to the mailroom, ensured that it was locked, checked that the waiting room was empty, then locked that as well. When he had finished, he went back through to the entrance and stood there for a while, letting the wind and dust blow around him as he studied the lights of his rickety old home and, beyond it, the lights of Trinity, most of them now beaming out of the homes behind Main Street, but gradually winking out, one by one. Soon darkness would cover the whole town and then it would, at least temporarily, cease to exist.

There were times when Tom wished with all his heart that this was actually so.

Only the thought of Anna made him glad that he'd been born and raised here. He couldn't see her house from here. It was at the other side of town. But he gazed in that direction, trying to imagine it - a house no better than his own, located beside a gas station that few people went to. Anna had lived there all her life, breathing gasoline fumes, and Tom had first seen her at school when she was five years old, the same age as him. He recalled that even then he had been dazzled by her golden, curly hair and angelic beauty. The hair had straightened out, though the golden-blonde colour had remained, and Anna had become a lovely adolescent blighted by tragedy.

Her mother, old Beth, had always had that clubfoot, which couldn't have helped much. Then Anna's father disappeared when she was thirteen years old and soon after, Anna started having fits. When that happened, things changed. She was off school for weeks, but returned eventually like someone different: a grief-stricken, beautiful angel, who refused to associate with the other kids and dropped out as soon as she could. Now, she hardly ever came to town, rarely spoke when she did, and was protected fiercely by her mother. Tom loved her, but didn't know how to tell her, and that broke his heart even more.

He jumped down the steps and started back to his house squinting through the swirling dust at its lighted windows as the wind moaned about him. It was a twostorey house with a gabled roof and veranda, the paint flaking off its weathered boards and its drainpipes all rusted. With all its lights on, beaming out into the darkness, it looked a bit like the house in *Psycho,* one of Tom's favourite movies. He liked the movie, not the house - at least not his own house. Standing there on its own, all lit up in the night, the house only reminded Tom of how desolate his life in this place was. He often thought

that if he didn't get out of here, he was likely to go mad.
Going back inside, he found everyone exactly where they had been before, his mother still doing the ironing, the rest watching TV. Not much else to do in here. They all had to live together. That meant they had to do what Tom's dad said and keep their lips buttoned. Jack Beale drank an awful lot of beer and lived on a short fuse.
'You see anyone in town today, honey?' Myrna asked, as Tom took a hard wooden chair against the wall, to the side of the glowing, noisy TV set, facing his father and sisters.
'No-one new,' Tom replied, untying his shoe laces and starting to kick off the left shoe. 'Anna Lansing came into town with old Beth. Apart from that I just saw the guys.'
'Haven't seen 'em for years,' Myrna noted. 'Is Anna still pretty?'
'She likes to show what she's got,' Jack Beale said, resting his beer can on his belly and still staring blearyeyed at the TV screen. 'She has a woman's body, wears a dress that shows it all, and sucks her thumb like a little bitty girl, but otherwise flounces around like a whore. That's how pretty *she* is!'
'She's beautiful,' Tom said quietly.
'She's also crazy,' Jack replied. 'And the first man that grabs her's gonna get her, so you better jump in there, kid'
'*Jack!*' Myrna snapped. 'That's enough of that dirty talk! We've got a decent boy here and three girls who don't need that kind of talk.'
'Shut your dumb mouth,' Jack replied. 'If you don't, I'll shut it for you. Won't be the first time I've laid you on your back, and it won't be the last. As for these kids, they should know the facts of life - and that's what I'm teaching them. Isn't that right, kids?' Nobody replied, so he laughed and drank more beer. He burped and wiped his lips with the back of his hand, then rubbed the wet can on his bare belly, hoping to cool it down. 'Marriage!' he grumbled to himself. 'What the hell does it get a man? You're better off in a whorehouse.'
Tom knew the signs, so he decided to get out of there. Once started, his dad didn't let up on things - and that could get them right back to Anna. If that happened, Tom wouldn't be able to stay silent, then a riot would commence and he, Tom, would end up black and blue.
'I'm going to bed,' he said.
'Yeah,' Jack said, 'you do that. Keep yourself entertained between the sheets. It's all you're good for.'

Tom glanced at his sisters. They were probably all blushing, just like him, but they had lowered their heads. He stood up and crossed the room, leaving his shoes by the chair, then gratefully hurried up the stairs and into his bedroom. He didn't switch on the light. Nor did he undress. He just glanced out the window, at that vast expanse of darkened flatlands and sweeping, star-filled sky, then lay down fully dressed on the bed, cradling the back of his head in his folded hands and gazing up at the ceiling.

His heart was racing while he burned with humiliation. He felt that if he stayed in this hellish place, he would surely go mad... He'd go mad without Anna.

When finally he drifted into sleep, he dreamed again of his angel, golden haired and radiant in a light that erased the whole world, leaving only the two of them.

'Anna!' he whispered.

Chapter Five

Anna awakened the next morning with the light of God warming her naked body. She sighed and stretched, then slid out of bed. When she had washed, this time in the hot tub in the adjoining room, she put on her best Sunday dress, white and starched, then joined her mother in the living room. Beth was already in the kitchen, making breakfast as usual, but all dressed up in a black skirt and blouse, with a scarf at her throat.
'You look fine and dandy,' Anna said. 'I can see

you're all set for it.'
'It's a sign of respect for the Lord. This should be a great day. Now sit down and eat, child.'
As they were going out this morning, they only had cornflakes in milk, washed down with coffee. Beth was visibly excited, even smiling once or twice, and she couldn't clear the table quickly enough. Then she picked up her handbag.
'Let's go,' she said. 'I don't wanna be late. I wouldn't miss this for anything.'
When Beth opened the door, Batman and Robin rushed out, barking and snapping, already looking for the enemy, and raced down the steps to tear up the dirt and pound the yard fence. Beth called them back up, her voice as hard as sheet metal, and they reluctantly did as they were told, looking really deprived. When Beth had locked them in, to savage any foolish intruder, she and Anna walked down the steps and crossed the yard to the truck. 'I dusted the seats down this morning,' Beth explained, 'so we won't get too much of it on our clothes. But put this sheet of newspaper under your backside, just to make sure.'
Anna climbed into the truck, placed the newspaper on the seat and sat on it. Beth did the same on her side, then

turned on the ignition. The truck was old but reliable and it sprang into life instantly. Beth released the handbrake and drove the truck over the rough earth, then onto the road. 'The Lord be praised, there's hardly any wind,' Beth said. 'It's a beautiful day for it.'

'Yeah,' Anna said, glancing across the flat, brown plain surrounded by distant mountains, into brilliant sunlight. 'We won't get covered in dust. We should still look pretty decent when we get there.'

'That's a good sign,' Beth told her.

The great tent for the Reverend Juble Lee's Revivalist Meeting had been raised on the flatlands just north of the town, not far from Pat Flaherty's gas station. By the time Beth and Anna got there in their old beat-up truck, most of the townsfolk were already present, dressed up in their Sunday best. A lot of the men were in highheeled boots, light-grey suits and Stetson hats, while the women wore suitably modest dresses and broad hats, some even carrying dainty parasols to keep the sun off them. A few people were still circulating between the trestle tables outside, but most were already inside the tent, hoping to get as close as possible to the raised stage, where the spirit might move them all the more.

After parking the car with the couple of hundred others covering the flat plain, Beth led Anna to the big flapping tent, by way of the trestle tables, where the Reverend Juble Lee's people were selling bibles, religious pamphlets, assorted books and souvenirs, as well as cool drinks and hot dogs. Beth was clutching a Bible in her right hand as she dragged her clubfoot through the dust, letting nothing stop her. When they neared the flapping, creaking tent, Anna became self-conscious, feeling hemmed in by the crowds, uncomfortably aware that even when dressed modestly, she was causing too many men to stare at her. She was blushing already.

'Hi, Beth!' a familiar voice said. 'Hi, Anna! Haven't

seen you two in a long time. How are you keepin'?' When Beth stopped walking, Anna almost bumped
into her. Her heart started racing and she filled up with
panic when she saw that the man speaking was Jack Beale.
Big and bloated, his grin lascivious, his stare too direct, he
was standing in their way with his worn-out wife, three
browbeaten daughters, and only son, Tom, bunched up
behind him.
Anna glanced at Tom, feeling something lurch
inside her, then she saw the bold stare of his father and
tumbled down into chaos. She reached out blindly until she
found her mother's hand, then squeezed it entreatingly. 'What's the matter, Beth?' Beale asked, while still
grinning lasciviously at Anna. 'The cat got your tongue?' 'Anna!' Beth snapped, tugging her forward. 'You
come with me, girl!' Anna did as she was told - not really
having a choice, but wanting to anyway and was
practically dragged by Beth past Beale and his family, on
into the big tent. A lot of heads turned when they entered,
making Anna blush even more, but Beth hurried along a
carpet laid down between rows of folding chairs, then down
the central aisle, toward the stage, until she found two good
seats.
'Here,' she said, handing Anna another sheet of
folded newspaper. 'Put your backside on this.'
Almost dying with embarrassment, Anna unfolded
the sheet of newspaper, placed it on the chair and sat down,
grateful to be hidden away at last from the many eyes she
felt boring into her, mostly the eyes of men, young and old,
all wanting a piece of her.
'If ever a man needed this,' Beth informed her, 'it's
that fat pig, Jack Beale. If he dares approach us again,
ignore him and his brood. Praise the Lord, it's beginning!' The Reverend Juble Lee was a Christian and
Democrat, so the choir that came out on stage was a
mixture of black and white. They were all wearing red

robes, with purple, priest-like collars, and took their places along the whole length of the stage, beneath an enormous American flag that had a painting of the Reverend's face in the middle, his grey hair shining like silver, his blue eyes, almost phosphorescent, staring down at his audience. A chill went down Anna's spine. Those staring eyes petrified her. She wanted to look away, but the eyes couldn't be avoided, so she tried to distract herself by letting her gaze roam about them to take in what else was happening on the stage. The choir had taken their positions and look colourful beneath that huge flag. Other men and women, wearing white robes or plain clothes, were taking up positions along the stage, behind the microphones and between the amplifiers. They all seemed really happy and were beaming smiles at the audience. Then a woman walked out, wearing red robes like the choir, and when she stopped at centre stage, facing the choir, the people in the tent applauded wildly, as if at a concert.

Even Beth was applauding.

With that woman conducting from centre stage, the choir burst into song, accompanied by an organ, a synthesiser, tambourines and clapping hands, making an exultant, jubilant sound that soon had the audience swept up with it and clapping as well. The choir sang a whole batch of songs, mostly rocking gospel tunes, and the beaming people at the front of the stage exhorted the audience to join in, until everyone was clapping and stamping, and singing as loud as could be.

Beth sang with the best of them, her eyes gleaming in the light, but Anna, though excited and feeling unreal, just moved her lips.

Then the choir stopped singing. There was the silence of expectation. When the good reverend didn't come on immediately, the crowd, now excited, became restless and started stamping and clapping their feet in unison, as if already demanding an encore. At last, when this was deafening, threatening to bring down the whole tent, one of the men in normal clothes, beaming his love at everyone,

raised his hands and shouted into a microphone: 'Ladies and gentlemen - brothers and sisters - Hallelujah! - the Lord be praised - your friend and mine, the Lord's servant... *The Reverend Juble Lee!*'

The audience roared with one voice and jumped up and applauded wildly as the Reverend Juble Lee walked out onto the stage, raising his hands in benediction, or perhaps in a gesture of modesty, to take his place behind the microphone located front and centre of the stage. He cut an imposing figure, tall, broad and elegant in a grey suit and black shoes, with a white shirt and striped tie. His silvery-grey hair was shining in the dazzling light from arc lamps and exploding flashbulbs, and his eyes were as blue as the sky in his handsome, suntanned face. When he raised his hands and cried 'Brothers and sisters!' the whole crowd went wild.

Anna couldn't help herself. She just flew out of herself. At one with the congregation, swept up in the excitement, she lost herself by surrendering to the stagecraft of the Reverend Juble Lee. He ranted and raved, threatened and beseeched, clenched his fists and spread his hands, fell to his knees and jumped back up, cursed the devil and praised the Lord and kept screaming 'Hallelujah!' and then had the choir singing again with those tambourines beating.

The congregation was ecstatic, hysterical, raised on high, with people, male and female, young and old, sick and healthy, falling to their knees or fainting, holding oneanother, sobbing, stopping only long enough to fill up the collection boxes that were passed back and forth and then back again, until they were gleaming like pots of gold and rattling just like the tambourines.

The Reverend Juble Lee didn't rest. His voice exhorted and beseeched. He jumped down off the stage and moved up the central aisle, reaching out to touch the sick and the lame and let them fall at his feet. Anna viewed it as a dream. None of it seemed real at all. There were eyes streaming tears, flushed faces and open mouths, folks down on their knees to reach up and touch the hem of his garments. His eyes were a brilliant blue, matching the eyes on that great banner. When Anna tried to look away from his piercing gaze, she was

transfixed by the giant eyes above the stage and felt even more unreal. The Reverend Juble Lee stared at her. He was looking her up and down. He was transfixed just like her, breathing heavily in her face, and he reached out and grabbed her by the shoulder, bawling, 'Down on your knees, child!' Anna did as she was told, kneeling in front of his outspread legs. She looked up to see those piercing blue eyes forming whirlpools above her. His face was spinning like a wheel. The whole tent was spinning above her. Anna felt her heart racing, she started to shake, then her heart burst and her head seemed to explode and she swooped into darkness.

'She's havin' a fit!' someone called out as the sound rushed back in.
'Stand back! Stand back!' the Reverend Juble Lee bawled. 'This child has been possessed by the Lord. *The Lord's will be done!*'
Anna opened her eyes. There was something between her teeth. She spat it out, licked her lips, and stared up at a circle of faces. Beth and Tom Beale were there, both looking pretty worried. When she saw Tom, something lurched inside her, but then his face floated out of sight. The Reverend Juble Lee's face appeared suntanned and handsome, eyes like diamonds; he smiled and put his hand on her forehead, then leaned down even closer. 'We have the same colour eyes,' he said, whispering. 'Ain't that something, child?' Then he stood up, raising his hands, turning around to let the whole crowd see him. 'Brothers and sisters!' he bawled. 'This child has seen the glory of the Lord! *The Lord be praised! Hallelujah!*' The whole place went wild. The Reverend dropped back to his knees. He and Beth were close together, in a circle of faces, all staring down as Anna looked up, feeling dazed and unreal.
'Take this child home,' the Reverend Juble Lee said. 'This child is obviously someone very special. Take her home - and take care of her.'
Anna was helped up. She felt dizzy, sick and weak. Too many people were crowding around her and trying to touch her. All those hands, all those fingers - she trembled and turned to Beth. The Reverend Juble Lee stared at her, as if trying to possess her, then abruptly turned away and raised his hands to scream, 'Praise the Lord!' The crowd went wild again, the choir burst into song, and the congregation broke into applause and stood up on the chairs. When the Reverend Juble Lee jumped back on stage, a majestic figure in dazzling lights, his own likeness enlarged behind him with those greater eyes staring down, the crowd became even more hysterical and some women

fainted.
Beth led Anna out, practically carrying her along the aisle, and Anna saw, or imagined seeing, Tom's face as she passed the Beale family. Then she was outside, in the sunshine and fresh air, and was able to walk to the truck and climb up beside Beth. They didn't speak on the way back - Anna was dazed, Beth excited - but when they reached the house, Beth insisted that Anna go straight to bed and let her racing heart settle down.
'I thought it was a fit,' Beth said, 'but the Reverend Juble Lee was convinced that the Lord had possessed you. He told me to take you home. I'd never have left otherwise. Praise the Lord, he gazed into your soul and saw how special you were. Now you go and lie down, child.'
She led Anna into the bedroom, holding onto her, still frightened for her. Knowing that Anna slept naked, she turned away to let her undress alone. Still dazed, Anna undressed and slipped into bed.
'Trust in the Lord,' Beth said, tucking her in as she always did when concerned. 'Thank the Lord for men like Reverend Juble Lee. Faith is all we have left now.'
Left alone, Anna slept. She awakened when it was dark. A cloud was gliding over the moon, both framed in the window. Anna felt disorientated and clutched her pillow, needing something. She saw the face of Tom Beale, his brown eyes filled with concern, and wanted to reach up and stroke his black hair, touch his lips with her fingers. Yet even as she thought this, she remembered his father and was shriven by that bold look and leer, falling back into panic. Her heart started racing and her throat became constricted. Swallowing, she licked her dry lips and saw the Reverend Juble Lee. He was blue-eyed and handsome, but as old as her mother; yet even now, when she recalled how she'd knelt at his feet, she felt again as she had done at that moment: consumed by fire, scorched by flame.
Anna closed her eyes again. Those three faces materialised. She tossed and turned on the bed, her body sweating, then burning, before falling asleep for a second time and dreaming about God - that faceless figure in streaming light, descending from on high to embrace her and carry her off.
But this time it was different. God turned into the devil. The devil looked like Jack Beale, then became something worse, and Anna screamed and awakened, jerking upright on the bed as her mother hurried through the doorway, enabling the light from the living room to fall over the bed.

Anna looked down in terror at her stinging hands.
The palms of both hands were bleeding.

Chapter Six

Steve McLean wanted money. He needed it real bad. He knew this when he boarded the train at Houston, and knew it even more when, later, he looked out of the window at the desolate flatlands of East Texas. It didn't look too good out there. It sure as hell wasn't a city. McLean wasn't a man comfortable out of cities, and this looked like a wilderness. Barren flatlands running out to distant mountains under grey clouds and drifting dust. This train had been on the move for an eternity on rails as straight as an arrow. That just about said it all.

'Hey, partner,' McLean said to the old coot sitting opposite, 'how much longer before we get to Trinity?'
The old coot shrugged and spat tobacco juice on the floor. It landed close to McLean's patent-leather shoe and made him jerk his foot back. 'Dunno,' the old coot said. 'Never bin there myself. I'm only goin' to see the Reverend Juble Lee and that gal with the bleedin' hands.'
Well, at least they existed. McLean had sometimes had his doubts. When his boss, Ralph Bleeker, editor of the *Weekly Enquirer*, a sensationalist rag that entertained the low tastes of McLean's hometown, had called McLean into his office to show him a cutting from the *Trinity Gazette*, McLean had thought it was some kind of joke. The article claimed that a local girl, Anna Lansing, had fainted during a Reverend Juble Lee revivalist meeting, gone into an epileptic fit, then started bleeding from the palms of her hands. Apparently the girl's mother had later shown the stigmata to the Reverent Juble Lee. She had done this in confidence, but the good reverend, always looking for publicity, had decided to spread the news.
'You want the job?' Bleeker had asked.
'Nope,' McLean had replied. 'I can't stand getting dust on my shoes. I hate breathing fresh air.'
'You got all this aggravation,' Bleeker responded. 'Gambling debts, alimony, the demands of your other women - you're a man with a lot of financial problems, so this could be your salvation. You refuse, I've got nothing else to offer. Now what do you say, McLean?'

'You're a real pal,' McLean said.
Now, here he was, on a train for Cowboy Land, with old coots who spat tobacco juice on the floor and hardly knew where they were. Still, a man had to make sacrifices when the odds were stacked against him, and his problems, he knew, could be solved if this bucket held water. Bleeding palms? He didn't believe it. Not for one second, pal... But then he *was* writing for Bleeker's filthy rag, where the word 'truth' was unknown. Monsters lurking in dishwashers, aliens coming down the chimney, women giving birth to dogs, and three-headed children speaking Esperanto from the day they were born... it was *that* kind of news.
'Hey, partner,' McLean said to the old coot sitting opposite, 'how come you don't know how far Trinity is when you only got on at the last stop? I mean, the last stop is where you *live,* right?'
'Right.'
'So - '
'I ain't never bin as far as Trinity,' the old coot said, chewing his tobacco with toothless gums, his cheeks as flexible as the gum, and scratching what balls he had left beneath his greasy coveralls. 'Nothing there I ever needed. This trip's costing me ten dollars return and that's enough for one lifetime.'
Couldn't be far, McLean thought. We should be there any minute. Let's just hope this old bastard doesn't get a heart attack and keel over to complicate my life. Damned amazing he's still alive.
'So,' he said to the old coot, feeling desperate for conversation, 'you're going to see the Reverend Juble Lee and the girl with the bleeding palms.'
'S'right,' the old coot said, brimming over with conversation.
'Why?'
'What?'
'Why do you want to see the Reverend Juble Lee?'
'The Lord be praised, he'll wash away my sins and heal my arthritis.'
'You believe he can do that?'
'I've heard it told,' the old coot said. 'Lots of folks in my town, they saw him when he came through, and some of 'em, once crippled, they could walk again; some sick, they were cured. Me, when I refused to go an' see 'im, I came down with arthritis.'
'What age are you?' McLean asked.
'Eighty-nine this April. Healthy as a kid all my life, then I get this arthritis.

The Lord works in mysterious ways.'
'He sure does,' McLean said, hardly able to believe this shit. Lighting a cigaret, he blew a cloud of smoke at the old coot's face to let him have a good coughing fit.
'What about the girl with the bleeding palms?' McLean asked when the old coot had managed to stop his coughing. 'You think that really happened?'
'Stigmata,' the old coot said. 'The wounds of the Cross. Sure as God, it's a miracle that occurred, and I want to see it.'
'Could be fakery,' McLean observed.
'Reverend Juble Lee witnessed it.'
'And that's enough? That the good reverend witnessed it?'
'That's enough for me, son.'
To stop his own sigh of despair, McLean inhaled on his cigaret. He could never believe how gullible people were, but without them, where would he be? Bored, he pursed his lips, puffed out his cheeks, then blew another cloud of smoke at the old coot and watched him coughing convulsively.
'A little problem with those lungs,' McLean said. 'That might be worse than arthritis. Hi, ho, here we are.'
It was pretty amazing, really. He couldn't believe he had arrived. You didn't get any warning like you did with a city, first seeing the suburbs, then the junkyards, then the slums, until finally the plate-glass and chrome was all around you, soaring up to the sky, kind of phallic, suggesting wealth and power. No, nothing like that here. This was obviously the *real* world. One minute you're looking at what might have been a desert; the next you're in Trinity station, with the whole town behind it. A real onehorse town. McLean could see that much. No wonder the old coot never came here: it looked as dead as he'd soon be.
McLean stood up and yanked his suitcase from the rack, then glanced at the overnight bag resting beside the old coot. 'Stop coughing,' he said to the old bastard. 'You'll just encourage a rupture. I'll see you around, pal.' He started walking out, not wanting to get involved, but when the old coot, still coughing, sat down again, he had to turn back. 'You okay?' he asked.
'Just breathless,' the old coot said.
'Must be all this fresh air,' McLean said. 'You're probably not used to it.' The old coot had stopped coughing and was looking up forlornly. 'Okay, okay,' McLean said, stubbing out his cigaret and picking up the old coot's bag with

his free hand. 'I'll carry this out to the platform. Do you think you can walk that far?' When the old guy nodded, wiping tears from his eyes, McLean walked along the carriage, his suitcase in one hand, the bag in the other, then opened the door and stepped down onto the dusty wooden platform of Trinity station.

He placed the suitcase and bag on the platform, then glanced left and right. No-one else had disembarked. There was no-one waiting to board. The station had a mailroom and waiting room and switchbox. A kid about seventeen years old was taking mail off the guard from the train and putting it into the mailroom. There was no guard on the mailroom. The door was wide open. You could walk in there and lay one on the kid and waltz out with the whole works. Trusting folk out here, folks.

McLean walked along the platform, which took about two seconds, then glanced past the station at the first thing he saw, which was a big old clapboard house with gabled roof and veranda, its paint flaking and its drainpipes all rusty. It reminded him of the house in the movie, *Psycho*, so he moved his gaze onward.

There the town was, about half a mile from here, sprawling untidily around the main street, which looked dead and bleached of colour in the noon's shimmering light. The wind was moaning and blowing clouds of dust over the whole town, making it look a bit unreal, as if made from fine gauze.

McLean hoped that in the absence of a thriving red-light area there might at least be a lively bar, but he couldn't bank on it. Ten minutes east and west, north and south, and you had the town covered.

'Two days here and I'm out of my mind,' he said, speaking to himself. 'Let's hope that's all this job takes.'

He walked back along the platform and stopped by his suitcase. The guard had climbed back on the train, but the old coot was nowhere in sight, though his bag was still here. McLean thought to ask the kid, but then decided against it; instead, he picked up the bag and hopped back on the train, not wanting to have his life complicated if the old coot had died. Luckily, he was still alive, just about, and wiping tears from his eyes.

'What's the matter?' McLean asked.

'Asthma attack,' the old coot said. 'Don't think I can make it into Trinity, so I'll just stay on board. This train's goin' straight back, the guard said, so I'll just stay right here.'

'You'll be okay?'
'Yeah. My inhaler's right here.' He fumbled in his pockets as the train whistle blew. 'A few sniffs and a rest goin' back an' I'll be right as rain. Thanks for the bag.'
'Don't mention it,' McLean said, wanting to kill him. 'The best of luck, pal.'
'Same to you.'
'Adios.'
McLean hurried along the carriage and hopped out of the train just as the kid from the mailroom was about to slam the door closed. He practically knocked the kid over, but got clear soon enough, and the kid shut the door as the train pulled out again, heading back to where it had come from. The kid was wearing a dusty uniform and had lost his peaked cap. He bent over to pick it up, wiped the dust off it with his elbow, put it on his head of dark hair and looked up with big brown eyes.
'Sorry, kid,' McLean said. 'I hope I didn't do you damage.'
'No,' the kid replied, 'I'm okay. I didn't know you were still on board.'
'Do all the trains stop at this station? Is this the end of the line?
The kid pointed along the rails, away from the departing train. The track went as far as the eye could see and didn't bend once.
'Don't tell me where it goes,' McLean said. 'I don't want to know. Well, kid, I'll see you around. Best of luck here in Purgatory.'
He picked his suitcase up and walked through the door marked 'Exit'. When he got to the other side, which he assumed was the station's entrance, he found himself looking over at a short stretch of parched land with that house from *Psycho* standing all on its own and the town a good half-mile beyond it. When he looked down the steps, he saw... Nothing. No people. No cabs. Nothing at all... Just the wind and the swirling dust.
McLean gave a loud sigh, spat on the ground, then turned and walked back through the station. To his amazement, the kid was brushing the platform with an old straw broom, even as the dust swirled about him. What more could be said?
'Hey, kid!' McLean called out, walking purposefully toward the rube, half expecting him to stick his tongue out, roll his eyes, or maybe chew on a straw. 'How the hell do I get to the town? I mean, where's all the transport?'
The kid stopped his brushing and looked up, surprised. His brown eyes, when McLean saw them close up, were filled with crystalline innocence.

'I'm sorry,' he said, just like a normal human being, 'but there isn't any transport in this town. We don't have the need for it.'
'What about the passengers?'
'We don't get very many.'
'How the hell am I supposed to get to town?'
'I'll give you a lift.'
'In what?'
'My dad's truck. It's round the side of the station.'
McLean sighed again. 'So why didn't you tell me that in the first place?'
'Most folks coming here have someone waiting for them. Why else would they come here?' The kid stared steadily at McLean, not even trying to be funny. He might be a yokel, but he wasn't the kind easy to put down. McLean liked him for that. 'You go back to your suitcase,' he told McLean, 'and I'll bring the truck round.'
'Great, kid. You do that.'
McLean walked back through the station, another two seconds lost, and emerged to the sight of Tony Perkins' grisly house being covered in the dust of the flatlands. The kid came soon enough, driving a battered old truck, and when McLean was in, he headed into the wind, straight toward that old house.
'If that's the town's hotel, I'll shoot myself,' McLean said. 'You mind if I smoke?'
'No,' the kid said.
McLean lit a cigaret. 'What's your name, kid?' he asked.
'Tom Beale,' the kid said.
'Tom. Good to know you. I'm McLean - Steve McLean. You work full-time at the station?'
'I just help my dad. He's the station-master. He was up in the switchbox when you came. He's worked there since the drought killed his farm. We went bust, like lots of folks.'
'You live in the town?'
'Yes.'
'Where, exactly?'
'Right there,' Tom Beale said, pointing up at the old house as they drove past it.
'Gee, kid,' McLean began, not embarrassed, but thinking, *You dumb jackass:*

there goes your helping hand…
'With my dad and mom and three sisters,' the kid continued as if he wasn't perturbed. 'It's not too much fun.'
McLean didn't reply. He just blew a cloud of smoke. He watched it spiralling around Tom Beale's face as the kid turned to study him.
'You got folks living here?' Tom asked him.
'Folks *here?*' McLean replied, outraged by the very thought. 'No, kid, I'm here purely on business. Out here working for the *Weekly Enquirer*. You ever heard of the rag?'
'No,' Tom Beale said. 'It's a newspaper, right?'
'That's stretching it a bit far,' McLean said, 'but I guess you could call it that.'
They'd turned around the big old house and were heading along a straight road that appeared to run through the centre of Trinity to form the main street. Behind both sides of Main Street were clapboard houses and buildings that looked haphazard, badly weathered and neglected, though mercifully they, too, were obscured by drifting clouds of dust. A couple of church spires soared optimistically above the rooftops, but there were no neon lights or skyscrapers. McLean didn't envisage a great social life, but he had to pay for his sins.
'Hey, Tom,' he said, wanting to be friendly, 'what goes on here at nights?'
'Nothing,' Tom said.
'So where are you taking me?'
'To the hotel,' Tom said.
'They've got a *hotel* in this town? Gee, whiz, I'm in pure country heaven!'
Tom Beale smiled at that. 'I guess it's not much to you. I mean, a reporter an' all. What's a reporter from Houston doing in Trinity?'
'You've heard of Anna Lansing?' The kid almost drove off the road. 'Hold on there, Tom! Watch it! Keep your eyes straight ahead. I take it you *have* heard of Anna Lansing?'
'Yes,' Tom said. I know her.'
They had reached the town already and were bouncing into the end of Main Street, passing a garage, then a blacksmith's and adjoining hardware store, followed by a row of different stores, all on raised porches. There were even some people there - a few women with their kids
- and then McLean glimpsed a guy wearing a Stetson and real high-heel boots. McLean looked for the tethering posts for the horses; but, shucks, there

weren't any.
The kid pulled up in front of a clapboard building with a sign that said: *Hotel*. It looked more like a boarding house.
'Well, Mister McLean, here we are - this is Rhoda's hotel.'
'Looks wonderful,' McLean said. 'So tell me, Tom, before you depart: Why did you nearly run off the road when I mentioned Miss Lansing?'
Tom blushed and said, 'I didn't.'
'Oh, yes, Tom, you did. Don't tell me you're in love with the little lady.'
'Don't be stupid,' Tom said.
McLean grinned. 'But you know her.'
'It's a small town, Mister McLean. Everyone knows everyone. I've know Anna since we went to school together. That's all there is to it.'
'What about the bleeding hands?'
'What about them?'
'Are they real?'
'I've never seen them, Mister McLean, that's the truth - but a lot of folks have.'
'Where does Anna live?'
'At the other end of Main Street. Just outside the town. In a house beside her mom's gas station. Her mom has a clubfoot.'
'An epileptic and a clubfoot,' McLean said. 'Ralph Bleeker of the *Weekly Enquirer* will be in absolute heaven.'
Tom just looked at him, bewildered. McLean patted him on the shoulder. 'Don't worry, Tom,' he said. 'There are worlds you cannot know. How much do I owe you for the lift?'
'Two dollars,' Tom said.
McLean paid him and stepped down. Tom handed him the suitcase. McLean glanced left and right, wondering where the action was, then spat on the ground near his own feet. 'I'll see you around, kid,' he said. Then he entered the hotel.

Chapter Seven

Jack Lomax was desperate. He was the mayor of Trinity and the town wasn't doing well at all. The recent drought had destroyed agriculture, that loss had destroyed business, and then the cattle and sheep had started suffering from diseases caused by some goddamned hole in the ozone layer, whatever *that* was. Now the banks were pulling their money out of the town and it was starting to die.

Lomax was also haunted. Just the other day, he had seen that Anna Lansing - the last person he wanted to think of walking around in her usual daze, but this time showing her hands to all and sundry.

The palms of her hands were bleeding alright. Even Lomax had seen that.
It gave Lomax the shivers, making him think of retribution. Even now, outside his office, on the porch, sitting there in his rocking chair in the hope of breathing cool air, he was nervous of all the attention that Anna was getting.
A crippled mother and an epileptic, he thought. Though Anna sure is some looker. That could explain a few things...
'Hi, Mister Lomax,' a youthful voice said, making Lomax almost jump out of his chair. He looked up and saw Tom Beale, Jack's only son, smiling down at him. An awfully sweet boy, considering Jack's vile nature, always willing to do you a favour and not ask for payment.
'Oh, hi, kid,' Lomax said, settling down. 'What are you doin' in town?'
'Someone just got off the train,' Tom informed him. 'I took him to the hotel.'
'Someone got off the *train?*' Lomax said. 'Who the hell would that be?'
The kid squinted along the street as if looking for someone. He kicked up the dust with his boot, then shrugged and said, 'A reporter from Houston. He's here on business, he said.'
When Lomax rocked his chair it squeaked a lot, but now it stopped squeaking.
'A *reporter?*' he asked.
'Yeah,' Tom said, 'that's right. Said he worked for the *Weekly Enquirer* and was here to see Anna.'

Lomax straightened up in his chair. It squeaked a little when he did that. He cleared his throat and groped around in his pocket to pull out a butt. His throat was dry, but he lit the butt anyway and had a good drag. Thought it might help his heart slow down.
'Did you say the *Weekly Enquirer?*' he asked, when he'd gotten his wind back.
'That's right,' Tom said, his eyes scanning the street, taking in the parked cars and trucks, probably looking for Anna. 'Why? Do you know it?'
'Know it?' Lomax said. He kept repeating Tom's words. 'No, no,' he lied brazenly, being a regular subscriber, finding it relaxing to read when he'd had a few beers, trash and filth being easier to digest when the brain was befuddled. 'Not that I can recall. I just wondered what a reporter from Houston wanted with Anna.'
'A story,' Tom said. 'That's pretty obvious, ain't it? He asked me about her bleeding palms, so I guess that's what he's after.'
Damn right, it was. Lomax knew the *Weekly Enquirer*. Cannibal children, child-molesting priests, threebreasted women, nymphomaniacal Venusians, piranha fish that came out of toilet bowls to feed on your privates... it was *that* kind of news. Lomax loved to read the rag, but he didn't want it here. The very thought of one of those journalists in Trinity was making his heart race.
'I don't like it,' Tom said.
'What?' Lomax asked distractedly.
'The thought of what he might say to Anna. I think he might harm her.'
Lomax dropped his smouldering butt, ground it out beneath his boot heel, then glanced in both directions along Main Street, which he felt was all his. He was looking for someone - a friend in need, a shoulder to lean on - but all he saw were old men with bandy legs and Stetson hats, a bunch of worn-out women and their daughters, buying groceries and clothing. Not much else here in Trinity. All the life was draining out of it. Not much left, but at least it was his if it wasn't brought tumbling down. That could happen if this drought continued. It could also happen because of Anna. If that reporter... Goddammit, if he sniffed around, he might blow it apart. It didn't bear thinking about.
'Harm her?' he said. He was echoing Tom again. 'Naw, I don't think he'll do that. He'll just ask a few questions, get his story, and clear on out of here.'

'He might make a fool of her,' Tom said. 'That's what they like to do. And this reporter, he sounded pretty sceptical. Sounded real mean as well.'
'Well,' Lomax said, feeling slightly less fearful, 'if he takes the piss out of her, she's not gonna know, 'cause it's only gonna be published in Houston, which lets us off the hook.'
'What do you mean?'
'What, kid?'
'About letting you off the hook.'
Jesus Christ, Lomax thought, the kid's sharp. I better watch myself here.
'Nothin',' he said. 'I mean, nothing in particular. Just meant that he can't do much damage if he hounds back to Houston.'
'Damage to the town?'
'Damage to *Anna,* kid. I mean, no-one here reads that filthy rag, so she should be okay.'
'I thought you didn't know it.'
'What?' Lomax asked, confused.
'The *Weekly Enquirer.* You told me you didn't know the paper; now you say it's a filthy rag.'
Lomax licked his dry lips. His heart was racing again. To drown out the sound of his beating heart, he started rocking the chair. Its squeaking sometimes got on his nerves, but now he found it consoling.
'I just remembered it,' he lied. 'I haven't read it, but I know about it. I mean, I heard about it sometime, from someone, and its one of those filthy rags. Not sex - I don't mean *that.* I mean, it's got that as well. But it's really sensationalist, pretty wild... What some would call *far out*.' Lomax was a Christian and didn't want to shock the kid, so he avoided the more entertaining subjects when describing the rag. 'You know? World War Two aircraft found on the moon. Flying saucers landing on solid citizens' backyards. Ghosts and poltergeists and aliens made of jelly. Unexplained phenomenon and miracles and... people like Anna. They're sort of... *gross,* you might say.'
'You mean he'll take the facts and distort them to make a fool out of her.'
Lomax sighed. 'I guess so.' Not that he gave a damn about Anna's bleeding hands. What worried him was what she might say if that reporter asked too much. To ask Anna too much could upset her, and then... 'Hell,' Lomax said, waving the buzzing flies from his eyes, 'there's no need to worry, Tom. That

reporter, he'll just write a silly story and then forget all about her. As for Anna, she'll never know what he wrote, so relax, kid. Don't worry.' He stopped rocking the chair. The squeaking was getting to him. Removing his kerchief from his pocket, he wiped his forehead and dabbed his fat cheeks.
'By the way,' he said, 'what was the reporter's name?'
'McLean,' Tom said distractedly, scanning Main Street, still looking for Anna. 'Steve McLean.'
'An' he's in Rhoda's place?'
'That's right, Mister Lomax.'
'I might just have a talk with him, Tom, and pass on your concern.'
'Gee, would you?'
'Sure, Tom, why not? After all, I'm the mayor of the town and I guess that's my duty.'
'Gee, thanks, Mister Lomax. Thanks a lot!'
Lomax smiled, though it hurt. 'Now you run along, Tom. This being Saturday lunchtime, you're allowed to enjoy yourself. Have a good day, son.'
'Yeah,' Tom said, 'I will. Thanks again, Mister Lomax.'
He cut obliquely across the street, obviously heading for the drugstore, and Lomax started rocking again as he watched him departing. He liked his rocking chair. It made him feel he was in his cradle. It made him feel innocent and protected, though those days were long gone. In fact, he broke out in a cold sweat at the thought of what could be coming.
'Retribution!' he whispered.

Chapter Eight

It wasn't really a hotel. It was just a converted house. McLean had been in dumps like this before and he found them comfortable enough. Besides, he fancied the owner, the redheaded Rhoda Benning, who was resting her tits on the reception desk and letting him look down her dress. She was twenty-one years old.

'The room okay?' she asked him. She had sent him up alone.
'Terrific,' McLean said. 'A nice bed. I bet it's seen lots of action.'
'I wouldn't know,' she replied with a laconic grin. 'I hardly ever go up there.'
'You don't make the beds yourself?'
'Yeah,' she admitted, 'I make the beds.'
'Then you must know what's going on,' McLean said. 'I'll try not to show too much.'
Rhoda grinned at him again with those brightly painted lips. Her red hair fell around bright green eyes that made him think of a big cat.
'What's a girl like you doing working here?' he asked while signing the register.
She sighed. 'It's owned by my dad, but he doesn't like running it. He spends most of his time in the bar, complaining about how badly *I* run it.'
'Can't you get other work?'
Rhoda's laugh was a short bark. 'Ha! That's a good one! Not much work around here for man or beast, let alone for the likes of me.'
McLean put the pen down and straightened up again. He'd had a good look down Rhoda's dress and liked what he saw there. 'Still,' he said, 'it must have its moments.'
'What moments?' she asked him.
He shrugged and spread his hands in the air, his grin as wide as a barn door. 'The guests,' he said. 'People passing through. There must be some interest there.'
Rhoda looked up, grinning also, before leaning over the high desk. She took a deep breath to give him a good view, then opened her brightly painted lips. 'You mean people like you?'

'Sure,' McLean said, 'why not?' He lit a cigaret, blew some smoke, watched it drifting around her. 'Place like this, it must be a relief to see the face of a stranger.'
Rhoda stared steadily at him, her painted smile knowing, then she raised her hand and studied her long fingernails, sometimes blowing upon them. 'So what's a stranger like you doin' in Trinity? Come to see your grandma?'
'Anna Lansing,' he said. 'That's the one I've come to see. Writing up a little piece for the *Weekly Enquirer.* You ever heard of it?'
'Nope,' Rhoda said. 'Only read the local rag. They sold a few copies off Anna, so why not start there?'
'You should be a reporter,' McLean said.
'Wish I was,' Rhoda replied.
'You know Anna?' Rhoda nodded. 'So what do you think? Is she for real or is she pulling a scam? Is she the kind who could do that?'
'I don't think Anna's capable of a scam. Not her; not her mother.'
'So you think the bleeding's genuine?'
'That's what the town quack says. According to Doc' Reynolds, he tried every test in the book and found no sign of fakery. The scars are genuine. The blood's real and Anna's blood type. What's unnatural is how fast the scars heal as soon as the bleeding stops.'
'Any word on what's causing it?'
'You want to know what might be the cause, go see Doc' Reynolds. His surgery is just along the street, fifty yards from the *Trinity Gazette*, which is run by Dwight Stewart. Those are the two you should talk to. They know more than I do.'
McLean studied Rhoda's face. She looked older than her age. She wasn't as tough as she tried to seem, but she sure wasn't innocent.
'I've never trusted doctors,' McLean said. 'Always moaning and groaning about my liver. Drive me straight back to drink.'
Rhoda opened a drawer, pulled out a nail file, started carefully filing her long nails, which were as red as her lipstick. 'Then try the Reverend Juble Lee. He's getting the benefit.'
'Yeah,' McLean said. 'Sounds like it.' He straightened his shoulders, inhaled, blew more smoke, had another quick look down Rhoda's dress, then gave a loud sigh. 'Well,' he said, 'I better get going. No time like the present. What do you do nights?'

Her green eyes rolled up to fix steadily upon him. She had a bold, measuring gaze that made her seem a lot older than she was. It was the look of experience. 'Not much,' she said. 'Whatever comes along, I guess.'
'I might see you later on,' McLean said. 'You never know what the night brings.'
'I can tell you're real shy, Mister McLean.'
'A real momma's boy. Which way do I go?'
'Turn left. It's just along Main Street.'
'I'll be seeing you, Rhoda.'
He winked and walked out, feeling better already, having found his one hope for salvation in this land of the living dead. It certainly looked that way on Main Street. Not a neon sign in sight. If it wasn't for the lack of hitching posts, he'd be expecting John Wayne. Lots of women about, in and out of the stores, looking no more attractive than their daughters, who trailed after them, eyes fixed on the ground, like nuns in a convent. McLean walked along the street, fascinated by the women. The men he could take
– they wore Stetsons in Houston, too - but the women, young and old, were wrung-out rags, wearing old-fashioned clothes. Not a sexy dress in sight. No long hair flowing freely. If it hadn't been for Rhoda's low-cut dress and red hair, he'd have thought that he'd stepped into the past, through some kind of time-warp.
Thank God, he hadn't drank on the train: he would have called this the D.T's.
There were two girls just ahead, on a swinging bench on the porch, both wearing those old-fashioned clothes, hands folded demurely in their laps. McLean stopped just before he walked past them and gave them a big smile.
'Hi, ladies!' he said, sounding friendly and open, gazing down as they both looked up, startled, their eyes widening with panic. 'I'm a stranger here, ladies - just got off the last train - and I'm wondering if you could kindly direct me to the *Trinity Gazette.* The local rag, don't you know.'
They stared at him in silence, glanced at oneanother, then blushed deeply and looked up at him again, their panic growing each second.
'The *Trinity Gazette,* ladies?'
One of the girls took a deep breath, sank back into her seat, then pointed on down the street, now bathed in fierce sunlight.
'Down there,' she said, practically whispering.
'Gee, thanks,' McLean said, 'that's real helpful. I'll see you around girls.'

Not much experience there, he thought. Not like Rhoda at all. The very thought of a man taking off his clothes would probably put them in shock. He walked up and down steps, crossed a couple of porches, and soon came to the tinted glass windows of the town's only rag. Without pause, he opened the door and entered, glad to be somewhere cooler.

It wasn't like he'd imagined no old-fashioned printing press. Just an open-plan office with a couple of cluttered desks where some girls were working wordprocessors, like they did back in Houston. There was another office at the far end, a smaller office, mostly glass, where a guy with white hair and moustache was leaning over his desk, squinting down through his specs as he scrawled on some papers. That had to be Dwight Stewart.

One of the girls, a brunette, adolescent and petite, looking livelier than the two he'd met outside, came up to the counter. 'Hi!' she said with a big, Colgate smile. 'Can I help you, sir?'

'I'm looking for Dwight Stewart,' McLean said, laying on his own Colgate. 'I take it that's him over there the one actually writing.'

The girl glanced over her shoulder and giggled as she turned back to him. She didn't ask McLean if he had an appointment; she just said, 'What's your name?'

'Steve McLean. I'm a reporter from the *Weekly Enquirer* and I need some assistance.'

'Just a moment,' the girl said.

She went into the back office, spoke to Dwight Stewart, then returned and opened the gate in the counter. 'Come in,' she said, smiling. When McLean had done so, she led him to the back office and introduced him to the white-haired Dwight Stewart, who shook his hand warily.

'The *Weekly Enquirer?*' he asked.

'That's right,' McLean replied. 'It's kind of an unusual rag.'

'Yeah,' Stewart said. 'I know it. Here, take a seat. Can I get you a coffee?'

'No, thanks,' McLean said. 'So what do you think of the *Weekly Enquirer?*'

'I'd better not say, friend.'

McLean grinned and took a chair as Stewart sat behind his desk. 'I've come about Anna Lansing, Mister Stewart.'

'Yeah,' Stewart said. 'That figures.'

'You've interviewed her, right?'

'I'm the town's only reporter.'

'Folks tell me that the bleeding is genuine. Is that what you think?'
'Yeah, McLean, it's what I think. I can't explain it, but I think it is. We had Doc' Reynolds examine her and he thinks so as well. As for me, I can only tell you that I saw the bleeding and, later, the scars. We ran tests and the scars fade unnaturally fast, before the bleeding comes back. When it does, the scars come back as well. There's no trickery about that.'
'What do you think?'
'It doesn't matter what I think. I only report what I see. You wanna know what might be the cause, go ask Doc' Reynolds. Either him or the preacher-man.'
'You mean the town priest or the Reverend Juble Lee?'
'Take your pick.'
'Okay,' McLean said, talking turkey with a fellow scribe. 'So what are you feelings about the Reverend Juble Lee? I mean, what have we got there? Religion or showbiz?'
Stewart grinned at that. 'A bit of both, I guess. The good reverend, he believes what he says - but he's also a showman. He likes the smell of the greasepaint and the roar of the crowd, but he has his own brand of sincerity. I'm sure you know the type well.'
'Yeah,' McLean said, 'I do.'
'So what else does the *Weekly Enquirer* want to know?'
'Do you think this is some kind of con trick?'
'No, I don't think so. I don't think Anna's capable of that. Not her. Not her mother.'
'The clubfoot.'
Stewart winced. 'You sure got a mouth, McLean.'
'Things just pop out, I know. Like, what about Anna being a tease? Thumb in the mouth, acting real shy, but flaunting all she's got, which I believe is considerable.'
'Who have you been talking to?'
'I've seen the news photos. I've also read a few of the more scurrilous stories. Some old buddies wrote them.'
'Nice buddies you've got,' Stewart said. 'So what if she's attractive and likes to flaunt it?'
'It might have some bearing.'
'What bearing?'

'Exhibitionism. A girl wants attention that much, she's capable of anything.'
Stewart shook his head sadly. 'It's all idle gossip,' he said. 'Based on jealousy, sexual frustration, or plain, smalltown malice. And those emotions, combined with fear of Anna's epilepsy - now with fear of her bleeding hands as well - have caused too many tongues to wag too often.'
'Which gets us back to the stigmata,' McLean said. 'You must have an opinion.'
'I can't see any trickery,' Stewart told him, 'and that's all I can say. Go see Doc' Reynolds.'
McLean stood up. 'I'm on my way, Mister Stewart.' He turned away to leave, but was stopped when Stewart spoke to his departing back. 'You're gonna stir this up, aren't you, McLean?'
'I guess so.'
'You're a real sonofabitch, you know that?'
'We all are,' McLean said.
He walked out of the office, turned left and moved on. He soon came to Doc' Reynolds' surgery and opened the unlocked door. There was no-one in the waiting room. A healthy bunch in the town of Trinity. McLean couldn't see a receptionist's window, so he knocked on the next door. A male voice said, 'Come in.'
Entering the doctor's office, McLean found a lean, grey-haired man with a good-humoured, untrustworthy face, leaning back in his chair, his hands folded behind his head and his feet on the desk.
'Doc' Reynolds?'
'Yep.' Reynolds didn't remove his feet from his desk, but offered a wide-open smile. 'You're not one of my regular patients, which means you're a stranger. Did you get off the wrong train?'
'Nope. I'm here of my own accord. Do you mind if I sit down?'
The doc' slid his feet off the desk and spread his hands out on it instead. 'Not at all,' he said, indicating the wooden chair. 'By all means, help yourself.'
McLean pulled the chair up and sat down while the doc' opened one of his desk drawers and pulled out a quart of Jack Daniels. 'It's good luck to share a drink with a stranger,' he said, separating two plastic cups from the stack on the shelf behind them, then unscrewing the cap on the bottle and pouring two stiff ones. 'You have the look of a man who likes a drink. It's all under the eyes there. Am I right or wrong, stranger?'

'You're right,' McLean said. 'I'm just sorry it shows.'
'It lends a man character,' the doc' said. 'It's the women who suffer.' He passed a cup to McLean, then sat back in his chair. He sipped some of his drink, sighed with pleasure and then licked his lips. 'So what can I do for you?'
'I'm a reporter,' McLean said.
'I didn't think you were a patient.'
'I've just been to see Dwight Stewart and he recommended I have a talk with you.'
'Not about your state of health,' Reynolds said, 'so I take it you mean Anna Lansing.'
'Right. Bleeding hands.'
Reynolds sighed and sipped some more. 'You want to know if the bleeding's real or not. You want confirmation.'
'Correct.'
Reynolds nodded. 'It's real alright. There's no trickery about it. I've tried every test in the book and I can't find the fakery. The scars are real enough. The blood's real and of Anna's blood-type. What's unnatural is how fast the scars heal as soon as the bleeding stops. No, sir, there ain't no trickery at all, though what it is, I can't say.'
'Anna's an epileptic.'
'That's no secret,' Reynolds said.
'Is there a chance that the wounds could be psychosomatic, maybe due to her fits?'
Reynolds studied his plastic cup, swirled the drink around, then smelt it. 'It's obviously been discussed, it's clearly possible, but we can't say for sure. There's no proof that the subconscious, even hysteria, could produce bleeding and scarring of that kind. It's just a theory, that's all.'
'What about religion?' McLean asked.
'Go to church,' Reynolds told him.
McLean grinned, then finished off his Jack Daniels and stood up to go. 'What about the Reverend Juble Lee? Do you think he works miracles?'
'Not for me, friend,' the doc' said laconically, 'but others swear by the man.'
'Anna?'
'She doesn't have an opinion, though her mother, old Beth, well, she's something else again and is convinced, as is the Reverend Juble Lee, that Anna's been touched by the spirit of the Lord and is bleeding His blood.'

'You think the reverend really believes that?'
'I don't know, Mister…? '
'McLean - Steve McLean.'
'I only know that since he said it, it's sure brought in the crowds and filled up all those empty collection plates. Which doesn't mean the good reverend isn't genuine. I'd just hedge my bets, is all.'
'I think I'll go see him.'
'You do that, young man. You look like you've lots to confess, so it won't harm you none.'
McLean grinned, amused by the doc's perception. 'Thanks,' he said. I'll be seeing you.'
'I'm sure,' Reynolds said.
McLean left the office, walking into brilliant sunlight, then wandered up and down Main Street, trying in vain to find a car rental company. Defeated and frustrated, he wandered back to his hotel. Rhoda received him warmly, listened to his problem, then passed over a set of car keys. 'The red Ford outside,' she said. 'We keep it just for guests. I'll add the rental on to your check. You wanna know what it costs?'
'I trust you implicitly,' McLean said. 'I can tell you've got heart.'
Rhonda smiled while keeping her green gaze steady. 'Drive safely,' she said. 'We might need the car tonight.'
'You and me?'
'Yeah, McLean, you and me.'
McLean nodded and walked out and climbed into the red Ford. As he was driving out of town, his bones rattling from the potholes, he passed a beat-up truck that was going in the opposite direction, churning up angry clouds of dust. He caught a glimpse of what looked like a luscious, long-haired blonde, sitting beside a driver of indeterminate sex. The sight of her, being so unexpected in this dump, almost made him go off the road, just like Tom had done. Then the truck had passed and McLean was heading out of town, determined to drive around and explore, to find out what was where. Ten minutes east and west, north and south, and you had the town covered. He had to pay for his sins.

Chapter Nine

Lomax heard the squealing of worn brake pads, the rattling of loose parts, and opened his eyes, where he was sitting in his rocking chair, to glance across the sunblasted, parched road. Beth's old truck had pulled up in front of Sarah Greeve's general store and was shuddering like a dying dinosaur in a subsiding cloud of dust. Anna got out first, that long leg coming down, the dress riding up her body, while Lomax, still not blasé about her, sucked in his breath. It was fear and desire at once, the former engendered by the latter, and it compelled him to wipe the sweat from his face with the palm of his hand. Anna walked around the truck, wearing her dress like a second skin, brushing her long blonde hair from her face as she disappeared around the far side. She was obviously helping Beth down. Lomax stood up to see them. They stepped up on the porch together, Beth dragging her clubfoot, Anna holding her by the elbow, as they disappeared into the general store. Lomax shuddered, feeling dazed by lust and dread, then he glanced left and right.

Half the goddamned town was watching. The women as well, now. The men watched Anna with a mixture of guilty lust and fear, the women with curiosity and resentment based on fear for their men. The bleeding hands had made it worse, making the whole town think about her. The last thing Lomax wanted was that, so he shuddered again.

What should he do? He glanced left and right again. Tom Beale and his buddies were standing outside the drugstore, just as they did every Saturday, daydreaming and wishing. Tom Beale was okay. A nice kid, all things considered. The rest weren't bad either, but they didn't have any work, which made you wonder what they were dreaming, day in and day out. About Anna, no doubt. Not much competition elsewhere. Lomax wondered what would happen if they found out, and the thought made his skin crawl.

As for Tom, he was one of the closest to it, and that really scared Lomax.

He went into his office, picked his phone up, put it down. Chewing his lower lip, he wiped sweat from his face and then picked the phone up again.

'Yeah?' said that dumb bitch, Jean Ford, chewing gum with a great deal of noise at the town's only switchboard.

'This is the mayor,' Lomax said. 'Put me through to

Sarah Greeve's general store.'
'Yes, *sir!* the dumb bitch said.
Lomax waited. Jean was muttering to herself. She

was probably sticking the wrong jacks in the wrongs plugs and getting New Zealand. Lomax glanced across the road. A bunch of women were milling about the general store, all trying to look casual. They were waiting for Beth and Anna to come out, to see a miracle walking.

There was static in Lomax's right ear, then a rough, female voice: 'Greeve's store. What is it?'
'It's Lomax. Is Beth Lansing still in there?'
'Yeah.'
'Let me talk to her.'
There was a bang at the other end. Sarah must have dropped the phone. Lomax heard their muffled voices, sounds of coughing, then Beth came on.
'Lomax?'
'That's right, Beth.'
'What the hell do *you* want?'
'I have to talk to you, Beth - in person. Not on the phone.'
'I don't want to talk to you - not now, not ever.'
'Don't hang up, Beth! Listen! Don't hang up! We've got to talk, Beth. I mean it. Godammit it, it's *serious*.'
'What about?'
'Come on over.'
'Give me a clue or I hang up.'
'Someone's arrived in town,' Lomax said, 'and he could cause some problems.'
Beth was silent for a moment. There was murmuring in the background. Lomax stared through his window, across the road, as if somehow he'd see them. He just saw the old truck, the door of the general store beyond it, and

the townswomen milling around and trying to act casual.
'Okay,' Beth said at last, ‘I'm comin' over... But this better be good.'
She put her phone down, leaving Lomax with the static. He slammed his own phone down and poured a shot and knocked it back in one swallow. Gasping, he lit a cigaret, took a few soothing drags, then stared across the street, through the window, feeling pretty damned nervous. Beth and Anna came out. There was a shift in the watching women. It was comical how they tried not to look, though their heads just kept turning. Beth glared at them, of course, making them suddenly look away. Anna just stood there, distracted, immune, smoothing down her dress and glancing about her as if in a dream. Lomax almost had an erection. Only the fear kept it in check. He inhaled too much and started to choke and coughed out a forest fire. When he recovered, when he looked back through the window, Anna was wandering in her vague manner along the far side walkway and Beth was already crossing the road, grimly dragging her clubfoot.
Lomax kept his eyes on Anna, being fearful of bulging pants, and moved away from the window when Beth, with no mean bit of effort, hauled herself up onto the porch just outside his office. The outside door was open, and now he opened the inside door. He stepped back when he heard Beth's clubfoot thumping down the bare boards of the hall and then in through his door. When he saw her standing grimly in the doorway, he tried his town mayor's smile.
'This better be good, Lomax,' Beth said, her voice about as gentle as barbed-wire being dragged across your throat. 'I hope it's no joke.'
Lomax stopped smiling. 'I wouldn't dare joke with you, Beth. Step inside. Take a seat.'
'I ain't no cripple. I can stand on my own two feet. Now what do you want? You said someone had arrived in town and that it might give us problems. What did you mean by that?'
Lomax took a deep breath and let it out in a nervous sigh. 'It's a reporter,' he told her. 'A guy called Steve McLean. He's from Houston. He works for one of those sensationalist-type rags and he wants to see Anna.'
'How did he know about her?'
'How do you think, Beth? He probably received a cutting from that article in the *Trinity Gazette*.'
'You shouldn't've let Dwight write that.'

'I didn't think at the time.'
'No, you didn't think at the time. None of you bastards ever do.'
'Okay, Beth, that's enough.'
'Not thinkin's what started this.'
'It's not to be discussed any more, Beth. That was part of the deal.'
Lomax felt a tremor of fear. A lightning bolt passed through his head. After briefly illuminating the nightmare, it mercifully passed on. He shuddered, though, and wiped sweat from his face, too aware of his racing heart.
'This man,' he tried explaining, 'he's from the *Weekly Enquirer*. That means he's an unscrupulous bastard who'll go for all he can get. I don't want him talkin' to Anna. He won't make it easy for her. He'll start sweet until he gains her trust, then he'll just wade right into her. He'll dig as deep as he can go. What he can't find, he'll invent. We can survive that, but what we won't survive is Anna having a recall. That might happen if he pushes her too far and she breaks down and brings it back. You understand what I'm saying, Beth?'
'Yeah, I understand.'
'He's gonna have to go through you,' Lomax said, 'so you better not talk to him.'
There was silence for a moment, while Beth took it all in. She wasn't that dumb, but she was careful and also digging at Lomax, sticking pins in a clay doll. He knew that, alright. He could see it in her eyes. Those eyes, which were almost as blue as Anna's, were as hard as cut diamonds. Then she smiled... Beth Lansing actually smiled... and Lomax went cold all over.
'It's good to see you sick with worry,' Beth said with a dreadful smile. 'But even that won't make me talk to McLean. Relax, Lomax. Stop sweating.'
She turned away and left his office, dragging her ugly clubfoot, leaving Lomax to collapse into his chair like a punctured balloon.
'Jesus Christ,' he said, shaking.

Chapter Ten

The great tent for the Reverend Juble Lee's Revivalist Meeting was flapping and snapping on the flatlands just north of town. McLean parked his car and climbed out to cooler air, then stretched himself and glanced all around him. Everywhere you looked there was featureless flatlands. The mountains were always on the horizon, obscured in the heat haze. McLean spat on the ground. Might help the soil flourish. He lit a cigaret and inhaled some more cancer, then glanced across rows of empty trestle tables to the opened flaps of the big tent.

There were signs all over the place. Just like a circus, McLean thought. Arrows indicating toilets and firstaid areas and prayer tents, the latter being smaller affairs attached to the main tent. A lot of people were at work, getting ready for tomorrow. McLean grinned and followed the arrow to 'Public Relations', located in another side tent. He went in to find a trestle table covered with a pile of press material. The girl behind the table was white-skinned, golden haired, and shapely, with a big toothpaste smile.

'Hi!' she said.
'Hi!'
'Can I help you, sir?'
'I hope so.' McLean gave her a flash of his Press

Card and asked to see the big cheese.
'Have you an appointment, sir?'
'No.'
'The Reverend likes to have appointments.' 'Tell him I'm from the great city of Houston and I

go back this evening.'
'Please take a seat, sir.' She stood up and walked
out, looking neat in white skirt and blouse, not tight
enough, McLean noted, to give offence to righteous
women, but tight enough to make the eyes of male sinners

slip sideways when she walked down the aisles with her tambourine. High heels, as well. Good legs in sheer stockings. You let her loose with an empty collection plate and she turns into Fort Knox. She returned, smiling brightly, tugging her dress down on her hips, letting McLean see how generous the Lord could be to repentant male sinners. For that he was willing to convert. Any day. Any time. 'The Reverend understands your schedule problems, sir, and will see you right now.'

'Gee, thanks,' Lomax said.

She led him out of the small tent, her hips swinging like a metronome, then took him into the big tent and around the back of the stage. He glanced up at the Stars and Stripes and that huge painting of Juble Lee, entertained by the notion that humility came in all shapes and sizes. 'Here we are, sir,' the PR lady said. 'You'll find the reverend in there.'

Her teeth flashed and then were gone. McLean looked at more tent flaps. This was obviously the master suite. McLean assumed this because of the two heavies guarding the entrance. They stared at him through dark glasses - at least he *thought* they were staring at him - then one of them pulled a flap aside and said, 'Right in here, sir.'

McLean ducked low and entered the tent of the Reverend Juble Lee.

He was sitting behind a desk - not a trestle table: an antique desk - with his large hands spread possessively on his fan mail, his rings glittering brilliantly. He was handsome and blue-eyed. His gaze was steady and benign. He had a suntan and thick, silvery-grey hair and a generous smile.

'I am the Reverend Juble Lee,' he said. 'Welcome, son. Good to see you.'

As he stood up to shake McLean's hand, McLean took a quick scan of the tent. There were chairs of the finest leather, a big bed at the back, a portable TV, videorecorder, and refrigerator,

all run, McLean surmised, from
the portable generators he'd seen out the front. He shook
the reverend's hand. The grip was firm, but not challenging.
No masculine ego on the rampage here; just one of God's
chosen few. The reverend indicated two facing leather
armchairs and said, 'Let's sit down there. Can I fetch you a
drink?'
'You got Jack Daniels back there?' The reverend smiled benignly at him.
'Sorry, son,'
he said in a deep, mellifluous tone. 'Only soft drinks, I fear.'
His big body shook when he chuckled, but his blue gaze
was watchful. The good reverend knew all about the press
and wouldn't let his guard down.
'No problem,' McLean said. 'I don't really want a
drink. I'm a bit short on time - '
'Yes, Mary told me. You go home tonight.' ' - so I'll just get out my notebook
and pen and we
can get down to business.'
'Yes, son, you do that.'
They sat in the facing chairs. McLean sank into
luxury. He pulled out his notebook and pen and then looked
up with a sweet smile.
'You don't use a tape-recorder?' the reverend asked,
sounding slightly concerned.
'I don't think that's necessary,' McLean said. 'I
mean, this isn't a profile. Just a few comments about a few
things. Nothing too complicated.'
'I'm sure you won't mind if I…' The reverend
leaned sideways to switch on his own battery-operated
tape-recorder, then sat back to face McLean again. 'Just to
be sure,' he explained with a brotherly smile.
'Sure,' McLean said, 'no problem.' He coughed into
his clenched fist, glanced thoughtfully at his notebook, then
looked up again. 'I guess you know I'm gonna ask about - ' 'Yes, son, I know.'
The reverend sighed, as if pained
by human baseness, though understanding its needs. 'I

guess a humble country preacher's not important in the presence of miracles. Fire away, son.'
'You think the bleeding of Anna's hands is miraculous?'
'Of course. What else could it be?'
'Fakery?'
'The relevant tests have been run. There is no sign of fakery.'
'Do you believe in miracles, reverend?'
'Of course, I'm a man of God. I believe what I read in the Bible - and it's filled with miracles. Haven't you *read* the Good Book, son?'
'A long time ago, but I remember the miracles. I didn't think they were meant to be taken literally.' 'They were, son. They *are*.'
The reverend took a deep breath. His chest expanded dramatically. He let his breath out in a sigh that seemed oddly threatening.
'Have you ever come to the Lord, son?'
'No.'
'I feared not.' The reverend leaned forward, his azure gaze intense, offering brotherly love with a smile that could have formed a new Ice Age. 'So why are you here?' he asked. 'You must have read that I believe. Did you think I would suddenly change my mind and give you a retraction?'
'I thought you might explain why you believe Anna's wounds are genuine.'
The reverend sat back in his chair. He seemed less threatening that way. The light of God shone into the tent and made his silvery hair shine.
'You are a sinner, my son.'
'Yes, Reverend, I guess I am.'
'So you come here not believing in stigmata and ask me to support you.'
'No, Reverend, I don't. I've come to find out if you really believe in miracles or are simply exploiting this girl.' The reverend

took another deep breath, the jacket
tightened against his broad chest, and he opened and closed
his hands repeatedly, as if agitated. They were exceptionally large hands,
McLean noticed, and those rings
could flay skin from bone.
'What I meant…' McLean began.
'It's alright, my son. There's no need to apologise. I
prefer an honest sinner to a lying Christian. I am *here* for
the sinners.'
The reverend took some even breaths, showing
admirable self control, then leaned forward again in that
threatening manner, his gaze very direct.
'I believe in miracles,' he said. 'I also believe in
stigmata. Now what else would you like to know?' 'Is Anna's stigmata
religious or hysterical? Do you
think there's a difference?'
Reverend Juble Lee smiled. 'So what is stigmata?
In the religious sense, it's the reproduction on a living
person of wounds or scars corresponding to those of the
crucified Christ.'
'I know that,' McLean said, not about to have his
hand held. 'The wounds are usually on hands and feet, near
the heart, sometimes even on the head, shoulders and back.' 'As if a cross had
been carried,' the reverend noted
smoothly.
'Right,' McLean said.
'And what are the religious possibilities of
stigmata?' the reverend asked rhetorically, taking a breath
before answering his own question. 'The Church believes in
the possibility of supernatural, or divine, stigmata, in which
the cause is to be found in God. By this it is meant that God
may produce in certain persons an emotional condition that
externalises itself in the body.'
'But - '
'However,' the reverend interjected, raising his right
hand, not about to be contradicted by any mortal, much less

a sinner, 'the Church also believes in what is termed the psychophysical repercussions of ecstatic trance. While the first known stigmatist was St. Francis of Assisi, the majority are women, which may account for this second religious possibility.'

'The psychophysical repercussions of ecstatic trance.'

'Very good, Mister...?'

'McLean.'

'Of...?'

'The New York *Herald-Tribune*.'

'Of Houston, Texas.'

'I work as a freelance,' McLean lied, unabashed by this grilling. 'It's hard work, but I'm free at least.' 'Freedom is an illusion,' the reverend said, then sat back and smiled. 'Your soul is in hock to God.' He raised his right hand, studied his glittering rings, blew on them, then rubbed them on his coat sleeve and smiled benignly again. 'As for Anna,' he said, holding up his index finger, 'the psychophysical repercussions of ecstatic trance. That would seem to explain it.'

'You think so?'

'I do.' The reverend leaned forward again, fixing McLean with his sky-blue eyes. Those eyes were as empty as the sky, but not nearly as warm. 'Think of it,' he said, again raising his index finger. 'The girl is an epileptic. Epilepsy is still a mystery. She comes to my congregation, is brought to God through me, falls into an ecstatic trance and then produces stigmata. We are talking *religion* here!' He nodded emphatically, stood up and paced the floor, his face bathed in the down-pouring sunlight, his right fist raised and clenched. 'Yes, my son,' he said, turning to McLean. 'What *else* could it be?'

'Hysteria,' McLean said. 'Good old-fashioned hysteria. It's been proven that hysteria can produce physical manifestations like stigmata. I think that's what we have

here.'
The reverend walked up to McLean, spread his legs, gazed down upon him. From where McLean sat, the Reverend was a giant whose thin smile was like death warmed up. 'And what if we have?' he asked. 'Is that not the same thing? What is the difference between hysteria and an ecstatic trance? Both experiences plumb the depths of the human soul. Both are essentially religious.'
The reverend let out his breath in a sigh of pleasure, then walked back to his desk. He glanced at the fan letters spread across it, then turned back to McLean.
'I'm a modern, urban man,' McLean said, standing up, 'and I tend toward the scientific viewpoint. Doc' Reynolds thinks the wounds are psychosomatic, and I agree with him. They're psychosomatic in a medical sense - not in a religious sense.'
'Why can't they be both?' the reverend said without pause. 'Anna's an epileptic, which may also be psychosomatic. The illness didn't manifest itself until after the disappearance of her father - and she certainly had an intense religious experience at my revivalist meeting. The wounds, then, no matter the cause, are genuine and religious.'
'And certainly not harming your business,' McLean said. Then he grinned and walked out.

Chapter Eleven

'There she blows!' Pete Fallow said when Anna parted from old Beth on the sidewalk opposite and started wandering in her dazed fashion along Main Street. 'It's Saturday mornin' again, folks!' He took off his Stetson hat, scratched his thatch of fair hair, put his hat back on his head and beamed down at his three pals from his lofty heights.

Gary gave a low whistle. 'Ain't that somethin', fellas! I never get tired of the sight of it. My legs are shakin' already.'

Tom wished they'd all shut up, maybe show a little respect. Just because Anna was shapely and wore that skimpy dress didn't mean they had to talk like she was a tramp. Anna wasn't that way at all. Never had been in her life. Even at school, when she was developing into a woman, she had always been shy. But it hadn't stopped the boys gawping. Even Tom had been guilty. He hadn't gawped, but he'd certainly gazed sideways and dreamed about her a lot. Yet she never once used it, never fooled around with anyone. If anything, the constant gawping of the boys in the school yard had just made her even more self-conscious. Then her father disappeared, and after that she was even worse. From then on, she'd become a virtual recluse, hiding out with her mother. No, Anna was no tramp. She was just proud of her body. She was innocent, not knowing what she looked like nor the effect that her body had on men, so she wore what was comfortable. It was as simple as that.

'That's it,' Gary said. 'Just keep walkin' towards us,

Anna.'
'Two more buttons undone,' Larry noted, 'and those
melons would tumble out.'
'You're disgusting,' Pete chided him.
'But you're waiting, Larry replied.
'I'd rather have her from a distance,' Pete explained.
'I don't want complications.'
Anna was trailing along the porches, glancing into

the store windows, sometimes sucking on her thumb and always looking distracted. The dress was real flimsy, a onepiece number in patterned cotton, buttoned up along the front, though lots of buttons were undone, low cut and with the hem above the knees. She had firm breasts and long, sunburnt legs, a small waist and broad hips. Even her face
was a vision.
The wind, beating at her, pressed the dress tight to
her body, but whipped it off those long legs each time she
took another step forward. Her blonde hair was blowing
around her face and she kept pushing it back with her hand. Gary groaned melodramatically.
'Knock it off,' Tom said.
'Yeah, knock it off,' Larry said. 'Tom's in love and
you're hurtin' him.' He glanced into the plate-glass window,
had a good look at himself, slicked his hair back with the
palms of his hands, then hitched up his belt. 'Here come the
Proctor sisters,' he said. 'They suit you dumb rubes much
better.'
The Proctor sisters, Betty and Lorraine, were
approaching along the sidewalk, stepping daintily up and
down the low steps and over the porches. Betty was twenty
and her sister was nineteen. Neither of them had a
boyfriend and they both looked washed out. They were
wearing frilly dresses with flared sleeves and high collars,
with flat shoes and wide bonnets on their heads. When they
saw the boys, they stiffened like two boards, but walked on
resolutely.
'Hi, girls,' Larry said. 'You comin' into the
drugstore?'
'No,' Betty whispered, 'we're just walkin'.' 'Waitin' for Ma and Pa,' Lorraine explained. Larry turned around to face them, spreading his
legs, blocking their path, hitching up the big buckle on his
belt as he flashed his white teeth.
'You want a real man for an escort?' he asked. 'Please step aside,' Betty said. She sounded firm, but looked frightened. So did her
sister. Both were glancing left and right, up and down, with

big, panicky eyes.
'Let 'em go,' Tom said, hating Larry's mean games.
'You know they don't like it.'
Larry shrugged and turned sideways. 'Just tryin' to
be friendly,' he said. 'A big mistake in *this* town.' The girls hurried on by, holding hands, looking
down, as Tom glanced across the road at Anna with his
heart spinning over. She had reached the end of the block
and was turning to head back to the grocery store. She'd
soon be gone for another week.
'Now *that,*' Gary said, following Tom's gaze, 'is
more like the real thing. Why, oh why, I ask myself, are so
many of the girls in this town so damned lifeless? They're
like nuns, man, I tell you. If it wasn't for Anna, over there,
we'd have nothin' to dream about.'
'That's it,' Larry said, coming up to stand beside
them, squinting into the afternoon light as he looked Anna
up and down. 'You just *dream* about it. That's about all any
of you guys are capable of *dreamin'* about it. Me, if I
could get past old Beth, I'd show Anna what's what.' 'You'd be takin' a big chance,' Pete said. He was
standing behind them, towering over them. Already over
six-foot tall, he wore high heels and seemed to sway in the
wind. 'A clubfoot and an epileptic - like I told you, that's a
bad sign. Did you see her in that tent? At the big revivalist
meetin'? There she was, rollin' about the ground and
kickin' her legs, just like a wild thing. Now she's afflicted
with bleedin' hands as well, an' I say that's witchcraft. No,
man, don't go near her.'
Larry just chuckled and slicked his hair back with
his hands. 'She can put a spell on me anytime. I think it's
worth the risk, fellas.'
Anna was walking back to the store, her long
blonde hair blowing out, the winding pressing the dress
against her body and blowing it off her legs. The hot air
was shimmering up all around her to make her look

magical. Tom choked up as he watched her.
'You're just as scared as us,' Gary calmly informed Larry, stretching himself and letting his belly hang out, far too big for a small guy. 'If you found yourself alone in a room with Anna, you'd probably dive out the window.' 'I'd dive into *Anna*,' Larry replied, his gaze dreamy.
'She'd feel me inside her for weeks after - and that's a fact, buddy.'
'Godammit!' Tom exploded, unable to stop himself. 'Do you guys have to be so damned insulting? To hell with it, I'm going!'
He jumped down off the porch, leaving them all startled, and hurried without thinking along the road, walking parallel to Anna, his heart pounding like he'd just run a race, his whole body burning. He hardly knew what he was doing and didn't stop to think about it; he just hurried along the street, back toward Lomax's office, but crossed the road a good bit before he got there and jumped up on the opposite side. He was ahead of Anna now. She was walking straight towards him. Her short dress was rippling on her body and being whipped off her legs. The long blonde hair was blowing across her face as hot air shimmered about her. Tom took a deep breath, then moved out onto the porch. He was blocking Anna's path and she stopped walking, as if shocked by his presence. She blinked and brushed the blonde hair from her face to stare at him with blue eyes. She looked like an angel.
'Hi, Anna,' Tom said. He didn't sound like himself at all. When she didn't reply, but just continued staring at him, he blushed even more deeply, shuffled his feet, and then coughed into his clenched fist to clear his throat. 'Listen,' he said. 'Don't run away. I mean, I want to say something.'
She stared solemnly at him, her gaze uncomprehending. Sliding a thumb between moist lips to touch her teeth, she said softly, 'Oh?'

Tom didn't know what to say. What the hell was he doing here? He was consumed by her face, overwhelmed, and could hardly think straight. 'I just want to say... I mean, I want to apologise... I mean, my pals, the way they talked to you last week... I mean, they didn't mean anything... You know? They're just foolin'.' He had to stop at that point. His heart was beating too fast. Anna was pressing her front teeth with her thumb and staring solemnly at him. 'That's not what I wanted to say at all,' Tom blurted out. 'God, Anna, say something!'

She took the thumb out of her mouth and said, 'Tom... Tom Beale. How are you, Tom?'

Tom breathed a little easier. 'I'm fine, Anna. Great. We don't see you around much any more.'

'No, Tom, I guess not.'

'Lookin' after the gas station?'

'Yeah, I guess that's it. Gotta be there all day long, you know? Besides, I like it out there.'

'You should come to town more often.'

'I don't like it here, Tom. Folks stare at me. I don't like them starin'. I guess that's why I don't come in.' 'They stare because you're real pretty.'

'They stare because I'm an epileptic and my mom has a clubfoot. They're frightened of me *and* my mom. Now because of my bleedin' hands, they think I'm either a witch or a saint, so they stare even harder.'

'They also stare because you're pretty.'

'I don't like that kind of stare.'

'I sometimes stare that way myself, Anna.' 'No, Tom, you stare differently.'

There was silence for a moment. Tom felt dizzy and unreal. The sunlight flashing over Anna's blonde hair made it look like pure gold. Tom felt himself melting into her. 'What did you want, Tom?' Though her voice was soft, it startled him. 'You didn't tell me what you wanted to say. What was it, Tom?'

He could hardly remember. Too busy losing his

senses. His insides were turning upside-down and he felt pretty shaky. He had the urge to reach out and touch her face, but he didn't dare move. Then at last he remembered... 'There's a reporter in town,' he said. 'That's what I wanted to tell you. He's from a newspaper in Houston and he wants to talk to you.'

'I've got nothing to say.' Anna turned her hands over and glanced down at the palms. Right now they weren't bleeding, but Tom saw the scars. 'Ma won't let me talk to anyone any more, least of all about this. I've got nothin' to say to him.'

She kept studying her hands, first the palms, then the backs, turning them this way and that, as if hypnotised. When Tom coughed into his fist, she looked up, her blue eyes big and startled. Tom was lost in her beauty. 'I'd sure like to see you again,' he managed.

'Anywhere. Anytime.'

She stared solemnly at him, her gaze as radiant as the sky, then reached out to trace the line of his burning cheek with tentative fingers.

'I go swimmin',' she confided. 'Down by the bend in the river, not far from the house. Every night when the sun sets.'

'I'll be there tomorrow night,' Tom said, feeling breathless. Then hearing the clump-clump of Beth's clubfoot, he hurried away.

Chapter Twelve

Convinced more than ever that Anna and the Reverend Juble Lee were in collusion for profit, McLean drove to Anna's house on the outskirts of town, following instructions given to him by Rhoda. The sun was going down, sunlight shrinking back into darkness, the grey clouds above the mountains on the horizon streaked with pink, but still casting great shadows across the flatlands. Real eerie out there. McLean didn't like it at all. He didn't mind muggers, panhandlers or junkies, but he couldn't stand the wide-open spaces or creepy-crawlies or animals. He just wanted to pin down this Anna Lansing and then get the hell out of there.

He braked to a halt when he saw the gas station. The house was just beside it. It was an old clapboard house, all spread out on one floor, but raised off the ground and with a wooden veranda running across the front and down both crooked sides. The wood was chipped, the paint flaking. There was junk all around the yard. McLean recognised the beat-up truck that he'd seen driving into town that day, and realised that the stunning blonde in the passenger seat must have been Anna. He started the car and drove forward, stopping again when he was near the yard fence, between the house and the gas pumps.

'Some dump,' he said aloud.

He had a good look at the house, trying to visualise how they lived: old clubfoot and the teenage epileptic all alone in this junkyard. It was probably worse inside. They probably lived in a squalid mess. Pretty lonely out here for two women and no man to clean up for. Yeah, McLean thought, a mess. Women without men are useless. Best to keep the darling creatures in their cages and feed them some birdseed. He grinned at the thought, opened the door and climbed out. Grateful to be a member of the superior sex, he flexed his shoulders, straightened his spine, and walked up to the house.

The dogs came out of nowhere, two great slathering monsters, snapping and barking like hounds from hell as they leaped over the yard fence. McLean nearly fainted, but recovered just in time, spinning around and racing back to

his car just before they got to him. He dived in and slammed the door, his heart pounding like a drum, but heard a louder pounding on the window and looked into the jaws of death. The pounding came from large paws, from those monsters out there, both of them standing on hind legs while trying to smash through the window. Their lips were pulled back to show teeth that would have made a shark jealous. They had long tongues and wide jaws.

'Jesus Christ!' McLean whispered.

The whole car was rocking and he feared it might turn over. Either that, or the windows would be smashed and they'd tear him to shreds. He reached for the ignition key but was too shaky to use it, so took a deep breath and tried again, this time succeeding.

The engine coughed into life. The dogs suddenly disappeared. McLean heard a harsh voice snapping, 'Batman! Robin! Get back in the house!' In his panic, he assumed he was hallucinating, but then a woman appeared. She was middle-aged, but worn out with it, dragging a clubfoot, and holding a rifle at the ready as she advanced on the car. Bending down, she stared in through the window, her lips pursed in a grim line.

'You want gas?' she shouted.
'*What?*' McLean replied.
'I can't hear you with that window rolled up. Roll it

down, you damned fool.'

McLean glanced past her shoulder. The dogs seemed to have disappeared. He rolled the window down a little and heard no barking, so rolled it down farther. The woman staring at him was younger than she'd appeared at first, but her skin had been wrinkled by too much sun and lined by hard living. Her lips formed a thin, asexual crevice, her blue eyes were fierce, and her grey hair was piled up on her head. She was wearing a coverall.

'You want me to fill 'er up?' she asked.
'No,' McLean said, still trying to get his breath back. 'This is a gas station, mister.'

'You're Beth Lansing. I'm a journalist. Steve

McLean. I'd like a talk with you.'
Beth straightened up. 'You mean you'd like to talk with Anna.'
'I'd like to talk with you both,' McLean said. 'I think I could help you.'
'Help us?'
'Yeah.'
'How?'
'I can pay. Give me a good enough story and I promise I'll make it worth your while. My boss is generous that way.'
Beth went rigid as a board. 'Get the hell out of here.'
She stepped back and started aiming the rifle like she knew how to handle it. 'You get out or I'll fill this car with lead and then set the dogs on you.'
'Listen, Mrs Lansing - '
'I'm gonna count to three.'
'If you just give me - '
'One,' she said. 'Two - '
'I don't believe you'd do this.'
'Batman! Robin!' she bawled. 'Get yourselves down here!'
McLean heard them, then saw them, coming at him like the wind, and he rolled the window up just before they reached the car to hurl themselves viciously at the door. He gave gas and screeched off, churning up clouds of dust, and saw the two monsters in his rear-view mirror, in hot pursuit with their teeth bared. He accelerated and raced ahead, his heart pounding again, and only slowed down when they disappeared from sight, obscured by dense, boiling dust. He took a deep breath, slowed down and then stopped. He let his breath out and turned the car around and headed back where he'd come from.
The sun had started sinking, a great dome of boiling

lava, pouring itself along the horizon as the darkness took over. McLean's heart had stopped its pounding, but his fear of the dogs remained, so he turned off the road and bounced across the rough flatlands as soon as the gas station came into view. He stopped a good way out, in the middle of nowhere, then rolled the window down again and picked up his binoculars. Leaning his elbows on the window, he placed the binoculars to his eyes and patiently waited.

The sun was going down when Anna Lansing emerged to feed her six cats and two hounds from hell. She was wearing a short dress that didn't hide too much. The wind was flattening the dress against her perfect body while whipping that golden hair around her face. When she knelt down to feed her slavering beasts, the dress fell off superb legs.

Seen in close-up, through the powerful binoculars, she was a heavenly vision.

McLean was transfixed.

Chapter Thirteen

Tom was sweeping the station platform. It was noon and the sun was high. The wind was blowing across the platform, laying down the dust as quick as Tom could sweep it up, but he kept sweeping because that was his duty at this time of the day. 'It's regulations,' his dad had told him so many times he'd lost track. 'It's written down in the manual of instructions an' I do my job right. Every noon you got to sweep the goddamned platform, so get out there and do it.'

Tom did it every day, come rain or sunshine, though mostly these days it was sunshine, so hot you could fry in it. His dad knew how hot it was, which is why he was resting, sitting over there in the shade, on the bench by the waiting room, slugging beer and keeping his eye on his son, who came at no charge. Kids could be a pain, but there were benefits, and Tom knew he was one of them.

He stopped to rest a while, glancing across at the house, and saw the mayor's car turning around it and parking by the front gate. Lomax climbed out and walked up the yard path, obviously looking for Tom's dad, and Tom gazed beyond the house, to the town, trying to see to the far end.

Impossible, of course, but he thought he'd try anyway. He conjured up the gas station and the old house beside it, with Beth clumping about in the living room and Anna in her bedroom. He imagined her getting dressed, getting undressed, combing her hair, having a bath, lying down on the bed, maybe even thinking of him. He was going to see her this evening by the river and the thought made his heart leap.

Lomax walked back to his car. He must have spoken to Tom's mom. He climbed into the car and it shuddered into life again, lurching forward and churning up clouds of dust as it headed straight for the station. The dust was everywhere. It came out of the parched soil. The wind blew it across the flatlands, day in and day out, and laid it like a blanket on the town and everyone in it. Dust and desolation, burning sun and bright sky. The days

were long in Trinity, East Texas, and Tom longed to make his escape.

'You gonna stand there all day looking bare-assed?' his dad bawled from the shaded bench. 'Git that broom movin', boy!'

Tom went back to sweeping the platform. Lomax got out of his car. Looking up to see Tom on the platform, he waved his right hand. Then he hurried up the steps, entered the station, and came out onto the platform, right beside the waiting room. Not seeing his big buddy slumped behind him, he turned towards Tom.

'Hey, Tom!' he shouted. 'Your ma said your pa was over here Where's the old bastard hiding?'
'Right behind you,' Tom said.
Lomax, small and fat, always sweated a lot and chewed gum with quick, nervous movements and far too much noise. He was doing that now, his jaws working overtime, as he turned away from Tom and looked down at his beer-swilling dad.
'Hi, Lomax,' Jack Beale said from the bench. 'What the hell are you doing here at this time of day?'
'I wanted to talk to you, Jack.'
'Sure,' Beale said. 'Have a beer.'
Lomax glanced over his shoulder at Tom, then looked back at Beale. They were silent for a second. Tom saw his dad glancing at him. 'Hey, Tom!' his dad finally shouted. 'Take a break! Go get lunch!'
Tom picked up the broom and walked over to them. He should have been pleased, but instead he was curious, wondering why Lomax was looking so nervous at seeing him there. When he reached them, Lomax stopped chewing his gum long enough to say, 'Hi, Tom. Howya doin', kid?'
'Fine, Mr. Lomax,' Tom said. 'Did you go see that reporter?'
'What?'
'That reporter I told you about. McLean. The one who - '
'Oh, him! Yeah, right. No, I haven't seen him yet, kid. But don't you go worrying about a thing. He won't be botherin' no-one.'
Tom's dad straightened up, wiping his lips with the back of a hairy hand, holding the can in the other. 'Worry? What's Tom worryin' about? An' whose

this reporter you're talkin' about?'
'Hey, kid,' Lomax said, taking hold of Tom's shoulder and shoving him toward the exit. 'Go get your lunch. He's not worried about anything, Jack. Okay, Tom, you git goin'.'
Tom leaned the broom against the wall, glanced at both of them and left. He was just about to walk down the steps at the entrance when he changed his mind and went back inside. Without thinking, he walked on tip-toes, making sure they didn't hear him, and stood quietly just inside the door to peer round the doorframe.
Lomax was taking a seat beside Tom's dad and cracking a can. When the beer foamed out, he had a long swig, then licked his fat lips.
'Some reporter arrived in town yesterday,' he said, 'and Tom just happened to tell me about it. Some guy called McLean.'
'A reporter?'
'That's right. From Houston's *Weekly Enquirer.* That's one of those rags that likes way-out stories and this guy has come here to talk to Anna.'
'So what's Tom worried about?' Beale asked, slopping down some more beer.
'The same thing *I'm* worried about,' Lomax said, 'if the kid did but know it.'
'What the hell are you talkin' about?'
'I'm talking about Anna. Tom's worried that this reporter might do Anna damage - maybe upset her real bad
- and that's exactly what *I'm* worried about.'
'If Tom's worried about her, he's got ants in his pants, but why the hell should *you* be concerned? Let the bitch be upset.'
'You don't understand, Jack. We're talkin' *Weekly Enquirer* here! The guys who work for that rag aren't cleanlivin' Christian boys. McLean won't go back to write about Anna comin' to Christ. He'll want somethin' a lot hotter than that somethin' really sensational. He's snoopin' around town, tryin' to dig up some dirt. I'm worried that if he digs deep enough, he might come up with somethin'.'
'Like what?'
'You know what.'
'He won't dig that deep, Lomax. No-one's ever gonna talk about that, no matter how deep he digs.'
'That guy digs graves for the livin'.'
'Graves always keep their silence.'

'The one I'm worried about is Anna,' Lomax said. 'She's the one out of reach.'
'Right, Lomax, she's out of reach. She's that way because she's mad. She doesn't know a thing, it's been wiped out, so I don't see your problem.'
'She's unpredictable,' Lomax said. 'She has those fits an' that makes her dangerous. This reporter, he could push her too far and maybe upset her.'
'Let 'im upset the whore.'
'You're not following me, Jack. If he pushes her too far, if he upsets her, it might all come back - and if it does, we're cooked goose.'
Tom started shaking. A tremor of dread passed through him. He didn't know what they were talking about, but the brutality wounded him. His father's choice of words, particularly when talking about Anna, had punched through to Tom's core. There was that and something else: the subtext he could not translate. He didn't know what they were talking about, but understood that it wasn't good.
'Stop worryin',' Beale said. 'This McLean won't find a thing. What's known was lost to Anna long ago and won't be comin' back. The guy will write what he wants to write. What he can't find, he'll invent. What he'll publish is a sensationalist story about a modern-day miracle: the blood of the Lord on the hands of a teenage epileptic. Hell, Lomax, he might even do some good for the town, so let him get on with it.'
'Some *good,* Jack? Some good for the *town?* I don't know what you mean.'
'Think about it,' Beale said. 'Already folks is comin' from miles away, from all around, to catch a glimpse of that little bitch and then purge their goddamned souls in the tent of the good ol' Reverend Juble Lee. This reporter fella, he could jack the story a mile high - make it nationwide then this town would be boomin' with tourists and we'd all be floatin' in greenbacks.'
'Jesus, Jack, I never thought about that.'
'Think about it,' Beale said.
Tom sneaked out of the station, still shaking, his heart pounding. Though he emerged to scorching heat and dazzling light, it was tears that were blinding him. He ran all the way back to the house and went straight to his bedroom, fully intending not to emerge until it was time to see Anna. That resolve was not broken.

Chapter Fourteen

'I must confess,' Rhoda said, 'I was expectin' somethin' better than that, but I guess you're just a poor city slicker in need of some nourishment.'

McLean rolled off her, still gasping, sweat-slicked, and reached out for the pack of cigarets lying beside Gideon's Bible. 'Swear to God,' he lied, 'that's never happened to me before. It must have been all that drink I had last night. I still feel sick as hell.'

'Where'dya have all that drink?'

'In that bar at the end of Main Street. You should know it. It's the only bar in town and they pour gasoline.'
'Riley's,' Rhoda said. 'I should've known when you didn't show. I was boilin' mad, I don't have to tell you. All dressed up an' all. Give me a drag on that.'
McLean gave her the cigaret and she slipped it between her lips. Her lipstick had all been mashed off, but her lips were still full. She passed the cigaret back.
'So why'd you get divorced?'
'What?' McLean asked, inhaling.
'Anything to do with your little problem? Did she go somewhere else?'
'What problem?' McLean replied. 'I haven't got a problem. The only problem I've got is the gasoline served down in Riley's.'
'A real dive,' Rhoda said. 'I wouldn't go there unescorted. The only place you'll get a good drink in this town is right here in Rhoda's. Why not open the bottle?'
'Good idea,' McLean said. He filled two glasses with the bourbon and handed one to Rhoda. He didn't have to look down her dress because right now she was naked.
'So why'd you get divorced?'
'We had problems,' McLean said. 'I must confess, I've had this problem before, but mostly with Liza.'
'That was your wife?'
'Right.'

'What led to the little problem?'
'The little word 'familiarity',' McLean said. 'We just got too familiar.'
'You must be lacking in imagination.'
'There are only so many ways. I tried them all and then I turned to other women, which I'd always done anyway. What I mean is, I turned to *more* women, and Liza didn't like that.'
'How did she find out?'
'I used to bring them home,' McLean said. 'She was working at an office and I was working out of home, so I found it convenient to call them over and you can't do that too much. Rumpled sheets, hairpins, and diaphragms - it all came out in the wash.'
'Why did you get married?'
'I got her pregnant,' McLean said.
'You had a kid?'
'She had an abortion. She always hated me for making her get it, which is how the end started.'
'Did you love her?'
'No. I don't know what that means. My parents fought a war that never stopped until one of them died, so I grew up assuming that men and women were perfectly mismatched. I didn't even have an adolescent romance - I just learnt about sex.'
'Obviously you still need some lessons.'
'It'll come back,' McLean said. 'I just need a little drink and a drag, then I'll be right as rain.'
But he wasn't too sure of that, being still in a state of shock. That vision of Anna Lansing kneeling over to feed her animals was still burned into his mind as if branded there.
She had looked like an angel.
McLean was all shook up, confused by his emotions, not experienced enough in finer feelings to know how to deal with this. He didn't believe in romantic love, nor in the soul, nor in beauty, yet the beauty of that girl by the gas tanks at sunset had plumbed the depths of whatever soul he had, making him feel a need beyond sex. He sensed that, but could not define it, or failed to recognise it, and now thrashed in the thickets of a bewilderment that edged into fear. McLean was not a fearful man. He had seen all there was to see. Yet now, unable to grasp what he was feeling, the fear slipped in to fill the

breach.
For the first time in his life he felt lost, which is why he felt fearful.
He was frightened of angels.
'How do you do it?' Rhoda asked, sipping bourbon, smiling sweetly. 'I mean, how can you write up all that sleaze and still live with yourself?'
'I can do it because that's what *people* do and my job's to report. I can do it because I don't respect people and that's based on experience.'
'You mean you don't think there are many worth respecting?'
'Do you? If you don't mind me saying so, you look like someone who hasn't been treated well. Like someone hiding a few scars.'
'I'm hiding nothing.' Rhoda sipped some more bourbon. 'You won't find any scars on this girl. Just a few little bruises.'
'You've got skeletons in your closets, right? You also have a lot of nightmares. What causes them, Rhoda?'
'We all have skeletons in our closets, but I won't show you mine. As for the nightmares, they're too private to discuss, so let's change the subject.'
'Sure,' McLean said, 'let's do that. You're a real attractive woman, great body, good face. So tell me why you're still living alone.'
'I live with my dad.'
'Let me rephrase the question: Why, in a town so short of attractive women, are you still on the shelf?'
Rhoda bit her lower lip, turned the glass in her hands, studied it, put it to her lips and then had another sip. 'I can't... I mean, I won't...' She quickly finished off her drink. 'Dammit, McLean, it isn't your concern. Here, give me another.'
McLean filled the glass, then studied Rhoda's naked body. He wanted it, but each time he tried to take it, he saw Anna Lansing. He was haunted by her, obsessed with her, already possessed by her, and he felt the singular fear of incomprehension and loss of identity. There was only one thing to do, one line of defence, and that was to take the job to its limits and scourge himself of her that way. Thus resolved, he turned away from Rhoda and picked up the telephone. No secrets here, he thought.
'Hi,' he said to the switchboard girl, another Trinity halfwit. 'How you doin', beautiful? Fine? Good. Yeah, right, I'm fine as well. Listen, honey, just get me this number, will you?' He gave the dumb bitch the number, glanced at Rhoda and rolled his eyes. While he waited, hearing the music of the static, Rhoda put her glass down and rolled over with a wide-eyed, wicked smile to

press her lips to his stomach. 'Mmmmm,' McLean hummed. 'Wow, honey, that's nice!'
'It's *what?*' Ralph Bleeker asked at the other end of the line, in the editor's office of the sleazy *Weekly Enquirer* in civilised Houston. 'Who the hell is this?'
'Jesus! Hi, Bleeker!' McLean pushed Rhoda's head away. 'It's me, boss. McLean. I'm in Trinity, East Texas. I should get paid compensation just for coming. So how are things there in Houston?'
'It hasn't changed much in two days, you dumb shit. Why are you calling?'
Rhoda put her tongue out and McLean flashed his teeth at her. She leaned over and stuck her tongue in his navel and started having some fun. McLean almost yelped.
'It's a story,' he said instead. 'The bleeding hands are real, Bleeker. I've checked with the town quack and the editor of the local rag, and both of them have no doubts at all that the stigmata is real.'
'What's stigmata?' Bleeker asked.
'Bleeding hands,' McLean explained. It was nice to have a literate editor when involved in great literature.
'I don't like the word 'stigmata'.'
'You don't?' McLean asked.
'That seems like a pretty heavy word. Let's call it "the blood of Christ".'
'The blood of the Lord,' McLean said, thinking of Anna, feeling dazed, aware of Rhoda's tongue playing its tricks down there, yet not really effected.
'So, what's the angle?' Bleeker was starting to sound impatient. 'We've got a case of stig- whatever it is, but that's just a miracle. What's the *hook*, McLean?'
McLean couldn't believe his ears. What more did this bastard want? He glanced down and saw the top of Rhoda's head and felt a twinge of excitement. Then he thought about Anna. 'Jesus, Bleeker, I thought that *was* the hook. I mean, a *miracle,* for chrissakes!'
'It's happened before,' Bleeker said. 'There's that guy, Francis - he had it. A couple of broads in Italy had it. So we need to add something. A little spice for our fine readers. This girl with the paws, what is she? Can we make something out of her?'
'Dammit, Bleeker,' McLean said, running his fingers through Rhoda's red thatch, imagining it was Anna's golden hair and only managing to come alive

that way, 'I would've thought that bleeding hands on a sexy, blonde adolescent would have been enough to - '
'Sexy! That's good! We've got a photographic angle. But we need to dig some dirt to go with it. Is she some kind of tramp, or what?'
'No, I don't think so.'
'Be inventive, McLean. Any dumb shit can become a reporter, but you work for *us*.'
'Correct, Bleeker. I do.' McLean sighed and gave up, pushing Rhoda's head away. She rolled off him and sat up on the bed stark naked, creamy-skinned and voluptuous... but having no effect on him. Despairing, Rhoda lit a cigaret and blew smoke in McLean's face.
'Okay,' Bleeker said. 'Stick around a bit longer. Send me the photos of the broad so I can see what she looks like. Then try to dig up some - '
'I don't have any photos. I haven't got to her yet. Anna Lansing is well protected by her mother and two hounds from hell.'
'*What?* Her *mother?* You're worried about someone's *mother?* I'm gonna hang up, McLean - I never heard that. Her *mother*, for chrissakes! I don't wanna know about mothers or hounds from hell or other dumb shit, so just get off your ass and go out there and take me some photos, then find me a hook for the goddamned story. Keep in touch, McLean. Adios.'
The line went dead, so McLean put the phone down. He lit a cigaret, then blew a couple of smoke rings, letting his breath out in a sigh that filled the whole room.
'A sexy, blonde adolescent,' Rhoda said. 'Now I know what the problem is.'
There is silence and there is *silence*, and this was the latter kind. McLean tried to fill it out with another sigh, but it didn't help much.
'I didn't mean it that way,' he said.
'You should have heard how you sounded.'
'I don't want this conversation,' McLean said, 'so I think I'll go back to work.'
'Yeah, McLean, you do that.'
McLean got out of bed, had a shower and dressed himself. Glancing at Rhoda, he grinned forlornly, shrugged his shoulders, then opened the door.
'That Anna gets all the attention,' Rhoda said as McLean was leaving.
'It's the way of the world,' McLean replied, then stepped out and closed the door.
Yet as he left the hotel and stepped into the sunset, he wasn't feeling as

cynical as he had sounded when speaking to Rhoda. In fact, for the first time in his life, or at least as long as he could remember, his heart was racing at the thought of meeting a woman - or, in this case, a girl. Anna Lansing, a mere girl, was more beautiful, more sensual, more perfect than any woman he'd ever seen. He had studied her face for a long time through his binoculars, and saw in it an innocence so complete it made him think of some other world.

She was more than all the women he had ever known - a woman much too good for him.

Which is exactly why he had to possess her.

McLean burned with that need.

Chapter Fifteen

The sun was setting over the Green River when Tom arrived and saw Anna, sitting on a patch of parched grass and weeds, under a dying tree, the hem of her dress pulled up over her brown thighs, her bare feet dangling over the bank, toes dipping into the dark, running water. A lump came to Tom's throat because she looked like a dream. The dying sunlight was golden and her long hair blended with it, blowing across her face, falling over her bared shoulders, lying like gilded threads on her breasts swelling under the cotton dress. She brushed the hair back from her face, turned her head and gave him a radiant smile.

'Hi, Tom,' she said.

He heard the ringing of bells. His heart was near to bursting. Blushing, he walked up to her and just stood there, struck dumb by love. 'Hi,' he said, short of words as well as breath. 'I told you I'd come.'

'Yes, Tom,' Anna replied. 'I knew you would. Here, sit beside me.' She patted the dead grass and Tom sat there, crossing his legs. His knee touched her thigh and he almost died, it felt so damned good.

'So,' Anna said.
'Yeah,' Tom replied, setting his rolled-up towel beside Anna's and trying to act natural. She was staring right at him, so he lowered his gaze, pretending to study the river. There was silence for a while. Tom was having problems breathing. When the silence became too much to bear, he looked up again. Anna was still staring directly at him, smiling slightly, ambiguously.
'It's nice here,' Tom said.
'Yeah, Tom, that's why I come here. It's somewhere I can come to be alone. I like the sound of the river.'
'Hope I'm not interrupting.'
'I didn't mean it that way, Tom.' She smiled more broadly and placed her hand on his wrist, making his heart leap. 'I'm glad you came, Tom.'
He nodded, relieved. The river sounded good to him. He thought of the many

times she must have come here alone while he lay on his bed, thinking about her. It made him feel like a fool.
'We used to be real close,' he said.
'Yes, Tom, I remember.'
'I thought you were the prettiest thing in school. At least that hasn't changed.'
'I'm older now, Tom. I'm different. We're not at school any more.'
'I wish we were, Anna. I miss you a lot. I only ever see you on Saturdays - and that's from a distance.'
'You could have talked to me before.'
'We're all frightened of your ma. She's fierce when it comes to you, Anna. She protects you too much.'
'It's because of the epilepsy,' Ann said. 'It can strike anytime.'
Her hand was still on his wrist and the warmth of her burned through him. He was glowing with an ethereal heat that made him feel disembodied.
'It's more than that,' he said. 'It's because you're so pretty. She doesn't want anyone to get near you. She's fierce about that as well.'
Anna smiled and squeezed his wrist. Her face filled his whole world. Brushing strands of blonde hair from her lips, she said, 'Well, that's natural.'
'No, Anna, it's not natural. Not the way your mom has it. She's been fierce since your dad disappeared. That's when we stopped seeing you.'
'My choice,' Anna insisted, her voice oddly muted, lowering her gaze to look at her own hand, the fingers spread on Tom's wrist. 'His leaving hurt me bad, Tom. I was in a state of shock. I had blackouts and I still can't remember much about that particular time. Then I started having the fits and stopped going out. That's all there was to it.' She raised her eyes to stare directly at him, as if near to tears. 'But I missed you, Tom. I didn't forget you. I just couldn't see anyone.'
Tom was trembling all over and he wanted to hide the fact. 'I thought we came here for a swim,' he said.
Anna smiled. 'Yes, we did.' She stood up and started unbuttoning her dress to let it fall off her shoulders.
She was naked beneath it.
Tom nearly died. Anna's beauty stripped his senses. When she unbuttoned the rest of the dress, his trembling became worse. She let the dress fall to the ground and just stood there, stark naked, as if it was the most natural state in the world, not unusual at all.

'Skinny dipping,' she said.
'What?' Tom croaked.
'It's the only way to swim,' Anna said. 'I hate the feel of wet clothes on my body. Come on, Tom, get undressed.'
'I can't,' Tom said. He had good reason not to stand. 'I'm wearing my swimming trunks under my pants, and that's how I'm goin' in.'
'Then I won't go in with you.'
'Dammit, Anna!'
'I won't.' But she smiled and turned away, showing a flawless posterior, and said, 'Okay, I'll tell you what I'll do. If you promise to skinny-dip, I'll go in now and then you can follow. I won't see you, Tom.'
'Okay,' Tom said, relieved. 'I guess that's a deal.'
Anna chuckled, a melodious, sensual sound, then slid down the muddy bank and into the water, giving a little shriek when she splashed in. Tom stood up, embarrassed by what was showing, and glanced down at the river. Anna was swimming out toward the centre, face down, arms and legs churning, so he hurriedly took off his clothes, including his swimming trunks and underpants, then raced down the bank and followed her in. The cold water was merciful.
They swam about for quite a while, splashing each other, sometimes racing, behaving like two ten-year old kids, playing all kinds of games. It allowed them to touch each other, getting used to one-another, and when they climbed out and flopped down on the towels, nothing could stop them.
Tom reached out like a blind man, sightless with love and longing, to run his fingers lightly across her lips and then stroke her hair. She kissed the back of his hand, turned it over, kissed the palm, then lay back, pulled him down on her naked body and opened her lips.
That first kiss changed him forever, sweeping away what he had been, filling him with something more demanding than what he had known before. He lost himself in her mouth, at once devoured and devouring, and shrank until he was no more than an impulse about to explode. His hands were not his own - they were simply part of Anna and his body, though it burned in ethereal heat, was also enslaved to her.
Her skin… her *bare*skin… he was aware of nothing else... Then, just before he could explode, she gently pushed him aside.
'No!' she whispered. 'I can't. It frightens me. Just touch me, that's all.'
That was good enough for Tom. Not quite, but enough. Maybe he was still

frightened as well, though for different reasons. So he sat with her, stroking her, bare fingers on naked skin, and felt all the wonder of the unknown expanding inside him.
'What frightens you?' he asked.
'I don't know,' Anna replied. 'I want it, but then, when I think about it, I just get real scared.'
'That's natural,' Tom said.
'You're scared?'
'I guess so.'
'You're sweet to admit that to a girl, but what scares me is different.'
'How?'
'I'm not sure. I only know that it is. It's not the thought of doing it that scares me. It's something behind it. I think about it, then I have these bad feelin's, these visions, and they slip in and out of my head and make me start shaking.'
When she shuddered, Tom pulled her close to him, melting into her tender flesh. 'What about you, Tom?' she asked. 'You don't seem too happy.'
He glanced down at the river, which here moved as slow as time. Usually the slow passing of the days drove him crazy, but now that he had Anna in his arms, it was God's benediction.
'I hate it at home,' he said. 'Dad bullies us all. Mom's all washed out and my sisters are timid and miserable. That's why they're still on the shelf, like a lot of girls in this town. They're made to wear those awful clothes, all baggy and unattractive, and they're watched as much as Beth watches you. The spirit's been knocked right out of 'em.'
'I couldn't stand clothes like that. I hate to feel clothes on my skin. I like as much of me to be as bare as possible. Clothes make me think of my bad dreams.'
'What do you dream about?'
Anna shivered. 'Heavy cloth against my skin. Maybe just wet and clinging. Shadows that shift along the walls and seem to be breathing. Something wet. Suffocating. I never know what it is. I always wake up screaming before I find out. Guess that's why I like to be as bare as possible. I need to feel free.'
'That's why you wear those skimpy dresses?'
'Yeah, Tom, I guess so.'
'That's why the guys stare. Why the older men stare, too.'
'Most of the older men are like your dad - they drink too much and stare too

hard.'
'Yeah, Tom,' said, 'I know.' He glanced at her bare shoulder, ran his eyes over her breasts. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen and she made his heart ache. 'God, I hate my Dad. He's just a foul-mouthed drunk. It started when the crops died and he had to sell the farm and take that lousy job in the railway station. My Dad - him and Lomax - they ran this town, but now there's nothing to run. Now he drinks and abuses us.'
'Gee, Tom, that's so sad.'
The river ran slow and quiet, snaking through the whole county, coming from and going to places he might never see. It made him feel like a prisoner.
'I sometimes think your life's just as bad,' he said. 'People say your mom's crazy.'
Anna just smiled. 'No, Tom, she's not crazy. She's just had a hard life. Her folks died when she was a kid, she married when she was young, then she crushed her foot in a car accident a year after the weddin', when I was two months old. I think the clubfoot, and maybe my epilepsy, were what made Dad take off.'
'You don't leave a crippled wife and sick kid. A decent man doesn't do that.'
Anna didn't get angry, though she *was* firm about it. 'No, Tom, he was good. I remember that much. Before he took off, he was really considerate. Even Ma admits that. Don't suggest otherwise, Tom, or I'll just get upset.'
'Okay, Anna, I'm sorry.' All girls need a decent father. Thinking that, Tom felt wise. He stroked her naked spine with outspread fingers and lit up inside.
'I guess you're right,' he said. 'I remember he was quiet. Yet him and my dad were real buddies - and my dad's a pig.'
'Don't say that, Tom.'
'It's the truth.'
'Don't say it anyway. Maybe your dad wasn't *always* bad. Maybe that's why him and my dad are friends. You can't remember it clearly.'
'I can't remember my dad ever being nice.'
'Oh, Tom, I'm so sad for you.' She kissed him on the forehead, then full on the lips, making him drain out of himself and float about in a cloud. When he opened his eyes again, she was staring at him, her steady blue gaze a treasure-chest.
'Do you want me?' she asked.
'God, yes!' Tom exclaimed.

'Then kiss the scars on the palms of my hands. Only that, Tom. No more.'
He turned her hands over. The scars were visible, but fading. They were nail-shaped, the size of barn spikes, and the skin around them was withered.
'Does it hurt when you bleed?' Tom asked.
'Yes, Tom, it hurts.'
'What else do you feel? What do you think about?'
'I see Christ on the Cross.'
Tom held her hands up. His tears fell on the scars. He kissed the palm of her left hand, then the right, then did it over again.
Tom sealed his love with those kisses, then lay down with his angel.
He liked the sound of the river.

Chapter Sixteen

They parted at the crossroads, not far from Anna's home, just before darkness had taken hold, but when the stars were already out. Tom clung desperately to her, not wanting to let her go, but eventually, with the gentlest of smiles, she pushed him away.

'Tomorrow night?' she whispered. 'The same place?' 'God, yes.'
'That's good,' she said.
Then she was gone. The night swallowed her up.

They called it the 'flatlands' but it wasn't really flat: it rose and fell gently and had trees here and there, so Anna appeared to float upward and descend and then mysteriously disappear. It was an optical illusion, wrought by dimming light and shadow, but it placed a magic seal on the evening and made Tom feel enchanted.

He had to walk home and it was quite a way to go, since he cut around the back of town and then on to the far end. He stuck to the fields, not wanting to meet anyone, and quietly revelled in the feel and smell of Anna, now all over him like a wonderful second skin, giving warmth and fresh hope. For the first time in a long time he liked the desolation, the wide open spaces, the sky that fell away to the horizon, drenched with stars, streaked by moonlight. He felt renewed and made whole, at last returned to his lost self, and started dreaming of taking Anna away, where they could build their own life.

Then the old house loomed up, its lights burning into the night, and he felt the return of an oppression that had been with him too long. Only the thought of Anna saved him. The feel and smell of her stayed with him. He spread his fingers and touched himself where she had touched him, and it made him feel better. When he reached the house and was going up the yard path, he was floating on air again.

Still, you couldn't forget this house. You walked in and it swallowed you. The nightly routine was unchanging and not geared to high spirits. Tom's

mom was still ironing, his dad was slouched in the chair, drinking, and his sisters, all three of them, were sitting side by side on the couch, staring dull-eyed, like Tom's mom and dad, at the color TV.

Tom didn't know why they bothered. There was so much static, it looked like snow. The people on the screen had crimson eyes, green ears, purple lips and yellow cheeks; the picture kept fading in and out and was crisscrossed with silvery lines. The sound was even worse, all static and distortion, with the tail end of practically every sentence and phrase uttered being drowned out by canned applause or laughter. Tom thought TV was a nightmare. There was nothing real about it. In America, Tom was certain, the sole purpose of television was to fill people's heads with mindless pap and turn them into the living dead... Just look at his mother and sisters. Just look at his parents.

'Where've you bin?' his father asked.
'In town,' Tom replied.
'When I ask a question, I expect a proper answer.

Now where have you *bin?*'
'At the drugstore,' Tom lied. 'With the guys. Just hangin' out.'
'Fibber,' Clara whispered.
Surprised to even hear her speak, Tom stared at his eldest sister. She was twisting her hands in her lap and lowering her eyes again.
'What did you say?' Tom asked.
'She called you a liar,' his dad informed him. 'With that tramp, of all people,' Jean said, though she didn't look up.
Tom felt suffocated. It was hot and gloomy in here. His dad liked to save money by only keeping one lamp on and its pale light bled weakly through shadows and made everyone ghostlike. Particularly his sisters, Clara, Jean and Betty, sitting like three statues on the sofa with their hands in their laps. All three were studying their hands, frightened to look him in the eye, though Betty, the youngest, was

bright red and glancing repeatedly at him as if begging forgiveness.
'Well?' his dad said.
'Well, *what?*' Tom responded.
'Where you in town with the guys or were you not?' 'You've obviously heard different.'
'Damn right I have. You and that tramp, Anna Lansing. You were seen comin' back from the river just after sunset. Now is that true or not?'
Tom glared at his sisters, but Clara and Jean refused to look up. Betty, the youngest and prettiest, was still bright red and wide-eyed. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't mean nothin', Tom. I just mentioned it, that's all.'
'With that tramp,' Clara said with deep bitterness, still not looking up. 'Our own brother! The shame of it!' 'She's not a tramp,' Tom said.
His father just laughed at that, but the laughter turned into coughing and burping. When he'd finished, he drank some beer, wiped his lips with his hand, inhaled on his cheroot and added more smoke to the stifling room. 'You hear that, Myrna?' he said to his wife. 'Our boy here's been lyin' by the river with that tramp, Anna Lansing. Did she give you a piece?' he asked, turning to Tom. 'She sure knows how to do it!'
Tom almost went for him, but managed to control himself when his mother, still at the ironing board, gave a rare demonstration of anger, snapping, 'Jack! That's enough!'
'Shut your mouth, Myrna. I just want to know, is all. Well, Tom, are you grown up now or not? Did she put out or not?'
'That tramp!' Clara hissed through pursed lips. 'An epileptic!' Jean whispered, obviously horrified.
'And maybe possessed!'
'She's not possessed,' Tom said.
'Her hands bleed!' Jean whispered. 'Some say it's the

blood of the Lord, others say it's the devil. You'd fornicate with the devil?'
'We didn't…'
'Oh, no?' His father's sneer was like a switchblade.
'Are you tryin' to say you didn't do it? An' her so damned good at it!'
'She's not that kind,' Tom insisted. 'She isn't!' 'She's that kind alright. She surely is. And you better
believe it!'
Tom wanted to strike him, but instead crossed the room, preparing to go up the stairs and lock himself in his bedroom. As he passed his sisters, Betty, the youngest, eighteen and still pretty, looked up at him with tears in her eyes. 'I didn't mean nothin' by it - honest! I just mentioned it, that's all.' Tom nodded and tried to smile, but he couldn't quite make it; instead, he turned back to his father and said, 'You've no reason for saying that.'
'Yes, I have,' his father said. 'I know a lot more than you think, so I - '
'Jack!'
He glanced up and saw his wife's warning look, then he turned back to Tom. There was silence for a moment, the kind that spoke volumes, then he finally waved his hairy right hand and said, 'Go to bed, kid.' He was raising the bottle to his lips as Tom hurried upstairs, glad to make his escape.

Chapter Seventeen

Hungover and bleary-eyed, McLean was having a shave in his hotel room, at the mirror above the sink located by the window, when he heard a vehicle pull up with a squealing of brakes, followed by the sound of dogs barking. Almost jumping out of his skin, he turned off his electric razor, then looked down through the window. Beth's old beat-up truck was shuddering in a cloud of dust just outside the vet's premises, opposite. Batman and Robin were in the back, leaping about, snarling and barking, but tied on leashes to the steel bars that ran along the open end of the truck. McLean couldn't believe his luck.

When Beth confirmed his good luck by untying her monsters and taking them into the vet', McLean finished shaving, put on his shirt and jacket, then hared it down the stairs to the lobby, where Rhoda was back in 'Reception' and looking bored mindless.

'Mornin',' McLean said.
'Why are you lookin' breathless?'
'Does that vet' over the road get a lot of business?' 'All the townsfolk have animals.'
'A packed waiting room, right?'
'You don't get out in a hurry.'
'Thanks, Rhoda. I'll see you tonight.'
'I'll be waitin' here, breathless.'
McLean liked a sharp-tongued woman, but he didn't

have time for small talk, so he beamed her his earlymorning special and then hurried outside. The red Ford was there, a featureless heap with all that dust, and he climbed in and glanced nervously at the vet's premises, then shot off down Main Street, heading north, to the outskirts of town. He was there in two minutes, the town already behind him, and burning along the flat, dusty road toward the gas station. One more minute and he was braking to a halt right beside the gas pumps. No Beth with a rifle, no raving dogs, just six cats by the steps. McLean, who was scared of no man, was certainly not scared of

cats.

He climbed out of the car and hurried around to the front gate, then walked up the yard path, between rusty oil drums, discarded tires, piles of planks and heaps of firewood, two or three old lawnmowers and a lot of other bits of junk, before mounting the few steps to the veranda and reaching the door. It was only an outer door, its wooden frame filled with mesh wire. There was a squareshaped hallway with bones lying on the floor and another, solid door on the other side. McLean tried unsuccessfully to open the mesh-wire door, then looked around it for a bell and failed to see one. Exasperated, not knowing what else to do, he put his lips close to the mesh wire and bawled Anna's name.

There was no response. He bawled her name again. When that didn't work, he said, 'I'm a reporter, Miss Lansing! From Houston! I just want a few words! Please come out, Miss Lansing!'

'I'm right here,' Anna said.

McLean almost freaked. He wasn't expecting her behind him. Automatically thinking of Beth and the dogs, he spun around and stepped back. His heart was already racing, but it raced for a different reason when he saw Anna standing just below him, close to the porch steps. She was wearing another thin cotton dress and her blonde hair was whipping. Shading her gorgeous eyes with her hand, she squinted up at him.

'What do you want, Mister?'
'I'm a reporter,' McLean said.
'I already heard that.'
'I'm from a newspaper in Houston,' McLean said. 'I heard that as well.'
She was calm and collected, which was more than

he was, and when he walked down the steps, she stepped back to let him stand facing her. Up close, her beauty was magical, Madonna-like, oddly elusive, a loveliness made even more appealing by her air of nervous distraction. She wasn't nervous of him - he sensed that immediately. It was a fear that lurked deep inside her and ran right through her system. She wasn't

really focused on him. She was looking inside herself. She was staring at him, but her gaze was focused inward, at once watchful and fearful.

She was a woman with frightening thoughts. 'I'm Steve McLean,' he said and held out his hand. Anna looked down at it, as if wondering what it was, then took it in the most tentative manner, as if scared of touching it. Her fingers, light and dry in his fingers, sent a small shock right through him.
'I'm Anna,' she said, smiling. 'But I guess you know that.' The smile was impossibly lovely and lit up her azure gaze, making McLean feel mesmerised, enslaved, imprisoned by new, unleashed feelings. He was not the McLean he knew so well, but he would hide that fear from her.
'You're still holding my hand,' Anna said, sounding childish and seductive at once, her eyes steady upon him. When he smiled back and let go of her hand, she said, 'What did you want?'
'Can I examine your hands?'
She smiled and held out both hands, the palms turned up to him. He held both her wrists, which was a good excuse to touch her, and looked down at two vanishing, nail-sized scars.
'When did they last bleed?'
'About a week ago.'
'Will the scars disappear completely?'
'Yes - if the bleeding doesn't start first. If it does, the scars will return.'
She tugged gently to release her wrists, but he pretended not to notice. Instead, he leaned a little closer, drawn by a sweet, sublime perfume.
'Mmmm,' he hummed. 'That's nice.'
'What?'
'Your perfume.'
'I don't use perfume,' Anna said. 'I never have. I don't like it.'
McLean leaned closer. He sniffed and smelt the perfume. It was a sweet, unfamiliar, real odour that aroused his sensual feelings.
'I can smell a sweet perfume,' he repeated.
'I don't use perfume,' she insisted. 'You must be imagining it.'
When she tugged her wrists away, he let them go, but then studied her face. He was overwhelmed by it.
'Do they bleed at special times?'
'No. I don't think so. They bleed when I get too emotional or have one of my

fits.'
'The epilepsy.'
'Yes.'
He was struck by her calm and collected manner, her lack of embarrassment. It sat oddly with her air of nervous distraction, just as her remarkably sensual appearance was at odds with her shyness. McLean felt himself faltering.
'What do you feel when you have the bleeding?'
'Pain.'
'In your hands?'
'Yes.'
'And what do you see?'
'Christ on the Cross. I see that when I close my eyes.'
'What happens when you open your eyes?'
'I see the real world, but I still feel the pain. The pain goes away when the bleeding stops, but the scars... they stay longer.'
'But they fade away unnaturally fast.'
'Real fast,' Anna said.
McLean nodded and smiled at her. Smiling back, she still seemed solemn. Her blue gaze, which had the radiance of the sky, brought a lump to his throat.
'It's not a trick?'
'No,' Anna said, 'it's not a trick.'
'You don't mind me asking?'
'No. Why should I?'
She had the stillness of self-conviction, the calm repose of the innocent, making McLean feel as shabby as a pimp who had once been an honest man. He didn't like the feeling and even found it unnerving, which is why he had to hold himself steady and fight against what he saw and felt.
Seeing true beauty for the first time, he felt emotions that were frightening, based on the kind of love he had denied for most of his life. He had to have Anna in order to degrade her and crush the fear engendered by his wanting her. What he felt for her, this burgeoning love, he would destroy to protect his source of strength. He could only protect his cynicism by destroying her innocence.
'What do you want?' she asked him.
'I want to help you, Anna.'

'How can you help me, Mister McLean?'
'By selling your story.'
'You already know my story.'
'The tip of the iceberg, Anna. I need a lot more, your whole life, then I can sell lots of stories. For that, I need your cooperation. Are you willing to give it?'
He took hold of her wrists, raised her hands, turned them over, pretending to study the fading scars but wanting only to touch her. Leaning closer, again he smelt the perfume she had claimed she did not use.
Tugging gently until he released her wrists, she gazed solemnly at him.
'You'll have to talk to my mom.'
'I've talked to her. She won't help me.'
'I won't do anything without her permission. I'm sorry. Goodbye.'
She went past him and up the steps. He turned around to watch her go. She had a very narrow waist, broad hips and long legs, which were enhanced by the clinging cotton dress and her body's natural ebb and flow. Every line of her was fluid, pure poetry in motion, and McLean wanted to run up and grab her, to take her right there and then. It was lust, but also love, a cauterizing emotion, and he turned away, bereaved by her departure, and heard the outer door closing. When he glanced up, she wasn't looking down, so he returned to his car.
He drove off, feeling desolate, but still smelling her body's sweet perfume, surprised by its persistence.

Chapter Eighteen

As the drive back to town took him past the big tent, McLean decided to pay a visit to the good old Reverend Juble Lee. The main tent was busy, with most of the staff working overtime, realigning the folding chairs and checking the mikes and amplifiers while the choir, black and white and now wearing normal clothes, ran through a rehearsal of their gospel songs. It was a pretty terrific sound, rousing the spirits even now, and McLean, who liked rock 'n' roll music, was soon snapping his fingers. He saw the two goons there as well, the reverend's bodyguards, wearing shades, and realising that this was indeed his lucky day, he hared around the back of the stage and went straight to the reverend's tent.

He was just about to p ull the tent’s flaps apart when he heard a female murmuring inside. Stopping just in time, he took a step back and called out, 'Reverend Juble Lee!'

There was a moment's silence. Shocked silence, McLean thought cynically. It was followed by the sound of glasses set down on a table, then the squeaking of springs and the reverend's deep, mellifluous voice: 'Yes, who is it?'

'This is Steve McLean, Reverend! You remember? The reporter from Houston. We met yesterday!'
Was that a soft curse in there? God forbid, McLean thought. Three Hail Marys is what I'd be demanding if old Jube was a Catholic. He stepped back and waited patiently. Fixed the smile on his face. When the flaps were opened up from the inside, he was waiting, prepared.
The starched beauty in charge of 'Public Relations' appeared in the opening in the tent, still adjusting her Snow White blouse, her immaculate blonde hair just a teeny bit dishevelled and the Barbie Doll smile moving into place.
'Why, Mister McLean!'
'I know, I don't have an appointment. Thing is, I missed my train last night and I'm at a loose end. Thought me and the good reverend might - '
'The reverend *does* prefer appointments.'
'Let Mister McLean come in,' the reverend said, his voice as warm as

Antarctica. 'Thank you, Miss French.'
Blushing prettily, Miss French stepped out of the reverend's tent, patted her untidy hair, flashed McLean another embarrassed smile, and hurried away on her high heels. Entering the tent, McLean found the reverend already seated behind the big antique desk, his striped shirt buttoned up to the neck, his hands clasped and propping up his chin. The smile on his face didn't reach his eyes; his gaze was steady and searching.
'I thought you were leaving,' he said.
'Missed my train,' McLean answered.
'How unfortunate.'
'Not really, Reverend.' McLean raised his hands in benediction. 'Gave me time to see Anna.'
The reverend raised his eyebrows. 'You saw Anna?' he asked. 'I'm surprised her mother let her speak to you. Beth's not keen on reporters.'
'I have my charms,' McLean said.
'Obviously,' the reverend replied. He removed one hand from under his chin and indicated the chair by his desk. 'Please,' he said, 'take a seat. Can I offer you lemonade?'
McLean glanced over the reverend's shoulder at the bed behind the desk. The sheets were freshly rumpled and two glasses of what looked suspiciously like bourbon were on the table beside the bed. 'No, thanks,' McLean said, taking the chair and gazing across the big desk.
The reverend was again resting his chin on his clasped hands, his blue gaze as steady as a rock and not all that much warmer.
'So,' he said, 'Beth let you speak to Anna.'
'Right,' McLean lied.
'And you concluded?'
'Well, she certainly seems *sincere,*' McLean said, being careful not to show what he was feeling, which was more than he understood.
'So at least you no longer think it's some kind of trick cooked up by the Reverend Juble Lee?'
'No, Reverend, I guess not.' McLean smiled like a little schoolboy. "Course I still think it's not doing you any damage. Here you are, still in Trinity. You don't normally pitch your tent for so long beside these dust-bowls.'
The reverend's smile was bleak. 'It was fortuitous, I'll admit. I do so without shame. Anything that brings sinners to the Lord is fine and dandy with me.'

'But you didn't arrange it?'
'No. Certainly, the fact that Anna started bleeding shortly after having a fit in my tent encouraged folks to connect the two events. And why not, Mister McLean? The two events might indeed be related. The Lord works in mysterious ways.'
'Your congregation thinks the Lord possessed Anna at your meeting and then showed Himself through her bleeding hands.'
'That sums it up neatly.'
McLean nodded, deep in thought, trying to work this twister out. The reverend was no fool and wouldn't pass up a good chance, but that didn't necessarily mean he was a crook. A bit of a *charlatan*, maybe, but that was almost traditional. The choir was singing away in the big tent. The Lord was still being praised.
Taking a deep breath, about to wing it off the cuff, McLean was stopped by the sweet smell of Anna. When he smelt her, he practically saw her, that radiant beauty right there before him, and it instantly consumed him with longing and fear combined, filling him with the need to destroy what he wanted too much.
'So, Mister McLean,' the reverend said, making it clear that he was trying to be patient but had mortal limits, 'what else did you come here for? Surely not just to say that you *believed* me. I can't imagine you bothering.'
'I can tell you have a low opinion of me.'
'God loves the sinner.' The reverend opened his hands, as if holding a glass of wine, sniffed, and then slowly expelled his breath in an oddly threatening manner. 'So what is it?' he asked.
McLean sat forward in his chair. 'Does Anna use perfume?'
'Is that a trick question? Are you suggesting I… ?'
'No, it's not a trick question. I'm not talking about you and Anna. Today, when I spoke to her, a sweet smell came off her - like a pretty fancy perfume - but she swore that she didn't use the stuff. I wasn't imagining it. The sweet smell was definitely there. As a matter of fact, I can *still* smell it. Is Anna lying or am I going mad?'
The reverend stiffened in his chair, looking genuinely surprised, then stood up and walked around the desk to lean down and sniff at McLean's clothes. Satisfied, he straightened up again and said, 'I can't smell a thing.'
'But *I* can,' McLean told him.

Looking excited, the reverend paced the floor, then stopped to look down at McLean with eyes filled with wonder.
'The odour of sanctity!' he exclaimed as if seeing a revelation. 'What you smelt was the odour of sanctity - and that's the proof she's genuine.'
'*What?*' McLean asked.
'The odour of sanctity!' the reverend repeated. 'That's what you smelt on Anna. It's a sweet perfume that seems to have no earthly source. A person smells it only during moments of particularly intense religious experience. You'd normally only smell it if *you* were having that experience, but in this instance you picked it up from Anna. It was *Anna's* religious intensity you were experiencing - and, obviously, smelling. *The girl is truly miraculous!*'
Leaning down to McLean, the reverend grabbed his wrist, raised it, then took hold of his hand and vigorously shook it. 'Thank you, my son,' he said, tugging McLean out of the chair, then squeezing his shoulder and embracing him. 'You have been sent by God. The Lord be praised. Thank you! *Thank you!*' Then he hurried out of his tent, leaving McLean to rob the place, and was shouting at the people in the big tent even before McLean had managed to rouse himself and follow him out.
He was in the big tent, raising his hands and calling for attention. The choir tapered off into silence and everyone else stopped working. The reverend kept his hands up in the air and his big legs were spread wide.
'Anna Lansing has the odour of sanctity!' he bellowed. 'The girl has been sent to us by God! Praise the Lord! *Hallelujah!*'
The gathered people went wild, cheering and clapping, hugging themselves, some with tears streaming down their cheeks, others radiant with joy.
'Hallelujah!' they cried. 'Praise the Lord!' others shouted. The choir on the stage, black and white, burst out in song again. The gospel music filled the tent with the sounds of jubilation while the Reverend Juble Lee's brothers and sisters all gathered around him, either laughing or crying.
McLean hurried out and drove back to town to put a call through to Bleeker.
'I've got the story of the decade,' he told his boss.
'Oh, yeah?' Bleeker said.

Chapter Nineteen

Tom and Anna sat on the bank of the Green River, watching the sun setting over the distant mountains. The heat haze made it look like molten metal pouring out of a giant pot. It bled along the horizon, as if washing over the mountains, and crimson bled into darkening blue where the stars were appearing. The flatlands were still in light, though the shadows of the trees were long, and larger shadows, like great pools of black ink, were cast down by the clouds.

It was eerily beautiful out there, making Tom want to travel, though for now he was content to be with Anna, shoulder to shoulder, thigh to thigh, fully dressed but feeling nicely naked, his arm looped around her. The warmth of her body filled him up and made him glow inside. His free hand was holding her hand where it lay in his lap. He felt as good as can be.

'Lordy,' Anna murmured in a dreamy, soft-voiced way, 'it sure is a beautiful sight. I can never get used to it.'
'A beautiful prison,' Tom said. 'All that space is our prison. It reminds me that there's a better world out there, way beyond the horizon. That's where we should be.'
'You want to get out, Tom?'
'Yes, Anna, I do. I've wanted that for as long as I can remember. It gets worse every year.'
'Even as a kid? You were unhappy even then?'
'I don't remember it as being better then. I always wanted to get out.'
'That's sad.'
'That's a fact.'
'I still think it's sad, Tom. Least we can expect is a happy childhood. God owes us that much.'
'You had a happy childhood?'
'I can't remember much,' Anna said. 'But it wasn't until Pa disappeared that the badness set in. It was good. *He* must've been good. My childhood was okay.'
They both stared across the river where the night was falling quietly, letting

the flatlands melt into the darkness like smoke dissolving in air. Tom felt a great aching in his heart that was mixed up with joy. It was hard to breathe sometimes.
'Do you mind this?' Anna asked him.
'Mind what?' Tom replied.
'Just sittin' here. Me not letting you…'
'No, I don't mind at all. I mean, I do, but I don't. I mean, I'm not that experienced.'
'You're nice.'
'Gee, thanks.'
'You're honest.'
'I try.'
Anna leaned forward, coming away from his arm, then she turned in towards him. She unbuttoned the dress and slid it off her shoulders to let him look at her. He was stunned by the contours of her body and its smooth, sublime skin.
'You like to look at me, don't you?'
'God, yes,' he croaked, 'I do.'
She picked his hand up and laid it on her breast, right over the nipple.
'You like to touch me, don't you?'
'Oh, God, Anna,' he groaned.
She leaned into him, pressing her breast against his hand, the nipple stiffening against his palm.
'Touch me, Tom. I want you to touch me. I could die when you do it. Touch me all over, Tom.'
Tom thought his heart would burst. He started trembling and burning. When he kissed her, she sucked his tongue into her mouth and slid her hands up his spine. Her fingers curled through his hair, taking hold of his head, and her tongue and lips stripped his senses bare as he squeezed her full breast. She leaned into him, groaning, then fell away and pulled him with her, until he was stretched out on top of her, scorched by her ambient heat. He tugged the rest of her dress apart, wanting nothing to be between them, though even when she had stripped of his shirt, he still had his pants on.
Then he touched her all over, his fingertips like magic wands. There were sparks coming out of his fingertips to sparkle within him. When he touched her, he felt her… more than skin and bone… her insides. He touched her very

essence, her spirit, and was raised on high by it.
The rest could come later. That great mystery would bide its time. For now, Tom was enraptured and torn by all the love pouring out of him. She reached down to hold him there, and when she did, he just dissolved. He turned into roaring winds, exploding galaxies, streaming light, and the tides of pain and rapture washed him clean and left him renewed. When he groaned, which he did when he soaked her body, he was offering his heart and soul.
'God, I love you,' he gasped.
'I love you, too,' Anna whispered. 'And I think our love might have cured me, Tom. I don't bleed any more.'
She gently pushed him away and he slid down to the river. He washed himself, then soaked the towel in the water and clambered back up the bank. He rubbed Anna's belly clean, kissed it tenderly, smiling quietly, then let her roll onto her back and rest her head in his lap. Looking up at him, she held her hands up, fingers outstretched, palms facing him.
'Look, Tom, the scars are gone. I haven't bled for weeks now. I think I'm cured. I feel clean inside. Love heals everything, Tom.'
Tom took hold of her wrists, kissed the palms of her hands, licked her wrists, then ran his tongue along both arms, one after the other. She rolled over to sit beside him, then started tugging her dress back on. The blonde hair on the tanned skin of her shoulders looked like threads of pure gold.
'You still want to escape, Tom?'
'Yes,' he said, 'with you.'
'You want to take me away from all this?'
'It's all bad here, Anna.'
'I think I'm cured, Tom. I think your love has cured me. I get the fits when the fear becomes too bad, which is why my hands bleed. It's not the Lord, Tom, and it's not the devil either: it's fear that turns into hysteria and then makes my hands bleed. I think you've cured me, Tom. I'm not frightened any more. What I needed was the love you're giving to me, and some day we'll make it real.'
He knew what she meant and let her seal it with a kiss. When they parted at the crossroads, in the dark, windblown fields, he didn't feel like a virgin or confused adolescent, though deep down he knew that he was both. His heart was bursting, but he felt like a man who could ride the whirlwind.
The stars were inside his head.

Chapter Twenty

Anna felt good, washed clean of her sins, released from the nightmares in her head and prepared to take wing. When she left Tom to walk back across the moonlit fields, she felt the light of love shining within - Tom's love, her gift from God - and approached her house in the radiance of that glorious new dawning.

Batman and Robin were in the yard and came loping out to greet her, barking and wagging their tails, almost tripping her up. She looked up at the house, which had filled her with so much dread, but didn't feel threatened by it any more, which she took as a good sign. She went up the steps, leaving the dogs outside, and went in to find her mother at the stove, peering into a steaming pot. The house was lit dimly from the flickering light of the oil lamps, but the shadows that danced across the walls scared Anna no longer.

'Hi, Mom,' she said.
'Hi, honey. Did you have a good swim?'
'Yeah, Mom, real good.'
'I'm cookin' this up for tomorrow. Pour yourself a

glass of lemonade and turn on the TV.'

Anna went to the refrigerator, which was just behind Beth. She filled a tall glass with lemonade and went out to the table. 'I don't want to watch TV,' she said. 'Let's keep the radio on.'

'I'm not fussed,' Beth said.

It was a Country & Western program - Willie Nelson, Dolly Parton, Emmylou Harris, Mickey Newbury and the music drifted soulfully across the room to keep Anna's spirits soothed. She glanced around the living room, which was spartan, gloomy and clean, and thought about Tom's dream of escape to somewhere much better. She had wanted to escape as well, but not because she was bored; it was the visions and nightmares that had made her

dream of finding peace elsewhere. Now, it didn't matter. She was convinced that her fears had gone. She and Tom had a love that would protect them against any ill wind.

'How are Batman and Robin?' she asked. 'What did the vet' say?'
'Those dogs are as fit as we are. I don't know why I bother.'
'It's best to get them an annual check-up.'
'Yeah, I guess you're right. Better to be safe than sorry, and we're safe for another year. That damned journalist from Houston *he* knows how fit they are! When they went for him, he tailed outa here like he had no tomorrow.'
'You mean that man, McLean?'
Beth stopped stirring the pot. 'That's right' she said. 'McLean. How did you know that?'
'He came here this afternoon - when you were at the vet's. I found him shouting at me through the door, but I was right there behind him.'
Beth wiped her hands on a towel as she emerged from the kitchen. 'That sonofabitch,' she said. 'He came back! He musta seen me in town. Did you talk to him, Anna?'
'Sure, I talked to him. He was pretty nice, really. Had a look at my hands, wanting to check if they'd really bled, and told me he could make us lots of money by selling my story.'
'Sonofabitch!' Beth said again, throwing the cloth on the table and pulling up a chair facing Anna. 'And what did you say?'
'I told him he'd have to talk to you. He said he had, but you wouldn't cooperate. I told him in that case I couldn't help him, then I came in.'
'He went away then?'
'Yes, Ma.'
'Scared of me comin' back with Batman and Robin. Scared of gettin' a hole in his pants and maybe much worse. Still, I gotta give him his due: he sure is persistent.'
'We could make money, Ma.'
'Not that way, honey. He'd make you the laughin' stock of the county and ruin you for life. You keep away from him, honey.'
Beth lit a cigaret. She liked a drag now and then. After inhaling as if she was taking her last breath, she blew a decent-sized cloud of smoke. When Beth smoked, it was like having a man around and that made Anna feel good.

'A city slicker,' Beth said. 'That's what McLean is. He'd promise you the moon and the stars while he's diggin' your grave. No principles there, I tell ya. Not a clean bone in his body. A gutter-rat with a nose for the dirt, which is what he'll try findin' here. Stay away from him, honey. If you can't avoid him, ignore his charm. That kinda charm comes too easy to his kind, which means you can't trust it. You walk wary, girl.'
She blew another cloud of smoke, her gaze focused on the ceiling, eyes slitted and lips pursed in a grim line that invited no argument.
'You always tell me that,' Anna said. 'You say that about *all* the men.'
Beth lowered her gaze and waved the hand holding the cigaret. 'That's right, girl. That's exactly what I say. An' I stand by my words. Some are better than others - I'm willin' to grant you that - but there's not a man alive that I'd trust when you really get down to it. There's no season with 'em. What they want, they *always* want. They think about it night and day, every hour, every minute, and they'd sell their wives and daughters to get it. Don't you ever forget that, girl!'
Anna felt a flash of anger, thinking of Tom by the river bank. 'They're not *all* like that,' she said, meaning Tom, not daring to mention him. 'What about the Reverend Juble Lee? Do you think *he's* like that?'
Beth stubbed her cigaret out with angry, stabbing movements. 'A man of God!' she snapped. 'You should wash your mouth out, child. That man, praise the Lord, is a saint who brought the blood of Christ to you. He's not like other men and you know it, so don't even suggest it.'
Anna kicked her chair back and stood up, flushed with anger, thinking of Tom by the river and what he had done for her. 'It's not the blood of the Lord,' she said. 'It was caused by my epilepsy. I had visions of the Lord because I had that attack when in the tent of the Reverend Juble Lee. But that doesn't make it Christ's blood. It only makes it the blood of fear. The fear's caused by all the things you keep telling me; by the prison you keep me in. But I'm gonna be free, Ma. I don't think all men are bad. I don't believe that Tom Beale is bad and I'm gonna keep seeing him. I - '
'*What?*' Beth nearly screamed it, grabbing hold of the table's edge, her knuckles as white as her face as she pushed herself upright. 'Did you say... *Tom Beale?*'
Anna was taken aback, hardly remembering what she had said, not prepared for the vehemence she had aroused at the mention of Tom's name. When her

heart began to race and she started shaking, she covered her mouth with her hand. Then Beth hurried around the table, clump-clump with the clubfoot, to grab her shoulders and stare fiercely at her.
'Did you say Tom Beale? Are you *seeing* Tom Beale? *Answer me!*' She shook Anna violently. '*Are you seeing Tom Beale?*'
Anna tried to break free, but her mother's grip was like a vice. 'Yes!' Anna cried. 'I'm seeing Tom! We meet down by the river!'
Beth grabbed the hem of Anna's dress and pulled it up to examine it. 'Mud!' she snapped, dropping the garment as if it had scorched her fingers. 'You've been laying down with Tom Beale!'
Anna burst into tears while Beth shook her by both shoulders. 'Not him!' she snapped. 'Not any of that clan! You keep away from that family! Did he…? Did you…?'
'No!'
'Not with him, child! *Not ever!*'
Anna ran into her bedroom, slamming the door behind her. She fell on the bed, sobbing hysterically, as the light of love turned into the darkness of fear and despair.
The blood trickled out of the palms of her hands to stain the white sheet.

Chapter Twenty-One

When the telephone rang, McLean thought it was a pneumatic drill. He wondered why they were drilling outside Riley's bar at midnight, then realised that he was lying in bed with the sun shining in on him. 'Jesus Christ!' he said. Nice to have a pillow to talk to. He had Anna mixed up with the pillow when he reached for the phone. 'Yeah?' he said, sounding hoarse. 'Hi, sexy,' Rhoda replied. 'If only the girls in Riley's could see you now! I bet they're missing a treat!' McLean opened his eyes. Nice to have a pillow to look at. It was clear that the pillow wasn't Anna and that Rhoda was talking.

'What time is it?' he asked.
'Ten in the morning, lover.'
'You just left two hours ago,' McLean said. 'I didn't

think you were that keen.'

Rhoda gave a throaty chuckle. 'No, you weren't too good, McLean. Still, you sure know how to make me smile, so I guess that makes up for it.'

'I don't feel well,' McLean said. 'What is this? Is it punishment?'
'No,' Rhoda said, 'it's not punishment. Can you actually listen?'
He felt ill, but not *that* ill. It was something in Rhoda's voice. His head was filled with visions of him and her in Riley's bar, lots of gasoline on the table, the old Wurlitzer pounding, girls and boys on the dance floor, none remotely under-aged, with breaking glass and whoopin' and hollerin' and God knows what else. McLean was a city slicker who normally thrived in the midnight hour, but since coming to this Land of the Living Dead he was more dead than living. There was only one bar in town because few people drank. What that meant is that the few who *did* drink had a prodigious capacity. One of those was Rhoda, who drank a lot to kill her nightmares. McLean didn't know what the nightmares were about, but she had them more often than not and claimed they tormented her. Rhoda was more than she seemed, a haunted woman acting hard, and McLean, who had come to respect her, knew every nuance in her voice.

Which is why, when he heard her tone of voice, he sat upright, wincing.
'Yeah,' he croaked, 'I can listen.'
'Two things,' Rhoda said. 'The first is that by nine this morning the public relations representative of the Reverend Juble Lee was knocking on the door of the *Trinity Gazette* to inform Dwight Stewart that Anna Lansing has somethin' called the odour of sanctity - '
McLean groaned.
' - which, accordin' to Juble Lee, proves that the blood on her hands is the blood of the Lord.'
McLean groaned again.
'The second,' Rhoda said, 'is that I just saw Beth and Anna Lansing get out of their old truck and enter Doc' Reynolds' surgery. Anna's hands were bandaged.'
'*What?*'
'You heard me. She had her hands bandaged.'
McLean slammed the phone down, swung his legs off the bed, stood up, felt the room spinning around, but then quickly regained control. The shower was along the hallway, which was too far to walk, so he leaned over the sink to splash his face, but almost threw up. Almost, but not quite. Being experienced, he straightened up, took some deep breaths, slugged down the mineral water that he always kept by his bed, then leaned over again without danger and attended to his ablutions. When he was finished, he slithered into his clothes and hared on down the stairs, coming out in the lobby.
'What a sight for sore eyes,' Rhoda crooned. 'If the ladies in Riley's bar could see you now!'
'Okay, Rhoda, that's enough.'
'You were so witty last night. So urban and urbane. All those jokes about city slickers and country pumpkins had the whole place convulsed. I didn't mind that at all. Brought a smile to my face, in fact. I stopped smilin' when we got back to your room and you mistook me for Anna.'
'Oh, my God,' McLean muttered.
Rhoda gave a bitter grin, shrugged bare shoulders, brushed her hair back. Taking a deep breath, she let him see her breasts while her eyes filled with tears. 'The abuse of men,' she said. 'The abuse, the abuse... Goddammit, why do we stand it? Just go to hell, McLean.'
He almost said 'I'm on my way!' but her tears shocked even him. Struck

dumb, he hurried on out the door and turned left, along Main Street. The sun was shining already, a pearly light on the dusty road, broken up by the shadows of the clapboard buildings and a few drifting clouds. McLean hurried along the street, noting how quiet it was. Passing the premises of the *Trinity Gazette*, he walked on to Doc' Reynolds' place. He stopped before he got there, seeing Beth's truck outside, and sat on the edge of the porch to wait until she came out. He had given up smoking long ago, but now he wanted a cigaret.

He seemed to be there forever. In fact, it was ten minutes. Anna came out first, all blonde hair and blue eyes, a vision of loveliness in a white skirt, both hands in white bandages. She brought a lump to McLean's throat. He ached to hold and possess her. Distraction was offered when Beth came out behind her, pushing her forward with some impatience. McLean took a deep breath, got to his feet and walked up to them. When Anna stopped to gaze at him in a dazed way, he knew she'd been crying.

Beth glared at him with widening eyes. 'Step aside, Mister!'

'I know all about it,' McLean said. 'She's been bleeding again.'

'So, she's been bleedin'. I said, step aside, Mister.'

But McLean stayed where he was, blocking her path. 'What started it, Beth?'

'It's not your concern.'

'Come on, Beth. What started it this time?'

'She just got upset,' Beth said. 'She'd been seein' Jack Beale's boy. I told her she had to stop seein' him and she went all hysterical. Then the bleedin', the Lord be praised, started up again.'

McLean felt a stab of pain and a fierce, jarring jealousy that bordered on helpless hatred for young Tom. Shaken, he glanced at Anna. She was staring blindly, weteyed, across the street, so he turned back to Beth.

'What's wrong with young Tom?'

'It's the whole goddamned Beale family. I want nothin' to do with them. In fact, Tom's the only halfway decent one in the bunch. Jack Beale's a drunken brute, his wife Myrna's just pitiful, and the daughters are so cowed, they're probably idiots. I think that whole family's crazy.'

'Some folks think *you're* crazy, Beth.'

'They say it, but I'm not. You know that alright, McLean. But those Beale girls - and half the others in this town - they're not like normal folks. That's all *I've* got to say!'

She has a point there, McLean thought The girls in this town aren't so bright. Never seen a stranger bunch in my life, and that's saying something.
'Anyway, it's true that Anna's hands are bleedin' and that's all that matters. Now step out of my way, McLean.'
'No,' McLean said. 'The Reverend Juble Lee's spreading the word. It'll soon be nationwide, Beth.'
'Whatd'ya mean, he's spreadin' the word?'
'His PR has been at work.'
'PR? What's that?'
'A person dealing with public relations. *Publicity*, Beth.'
'Oh?' Beth's slitted eyes showed more interest. 'What's being publicised?'
'The Reverend Juble Lee believes that Anna has the odour of sanctity. That means he believes that the blood in Anna's hands is truly the blood of the Lord. He's told all his staff about it. He's told them to spread the word. He sent his public relations lady to the *Trinity Gazette* to ensure that they spread the news in the paper. This town's gonna bust open, Beth.'
'Dwight won't print the story.'
'Why not?'
'He just won't.'
'This is a real tight-lipped town, I'll grant you that, but Dwight won't have a choice. If someone takes that kind of story to him, he's gonna have to run it or answer a few questions about why he didn't. Why *would* be refuse?'
Beth was silent for a moment. 'He has his reasons,' she said eventually.
'He's gonna have to run the story, Beth, then this town will bust open.'
Anna gazed at him in a daze. She didn't seem to be listening. She was listening to voices inside her head and they were making her fearful. McLean wanted to lie down and die for her, but instead he'd destroy her. He was in love with her - he accepted it now - and he couldn't bear that emotion. Yet it hurt just to see her there.
'What are you tryin' to say, McLean?'
'Anna's going to be public property. It doesn't matter whether you want that or not - it's going to happen, believe me, Beth.'
'So?'
'I can protect her. I can hold the wolves back. Let me draw up an agreement that'll put me in charge and enable me to *control* how the story's handled. I'll make money out of it - no question about that - but you'll be selling a story

that they'd otherwise take for free and I'll give Anna a measure of protection that she's sure going to need. Believe me, Beth. You don't know what real newshounds from the cities can be like. They'll tear Anna to shreds. Better the devil you know that the one you don't know, so what do you say?'
He glanced at Anna, but she was just staring through him. He might as well have been the Invisible Man, though it just made him want her more. But Beth was looking more keenly at him, with reluctant respect.
I've got her, he thought.
'Okay,' Beth said. 'You draw up your agreement. Be careful how you do it, McLean, because I'm no country bumpkin. I'll read everything, includin' the small print, and I won't stand for nonsense.'
'You got it,' McLean said.
'When you've got the agreement drawn up, come on out to the house.'
'What about the dogs?'
Beth actually grinned briefly. 'We're on the phone,' she said. 'You can get us through the switchboard. Call us when you're plannin' to come and I'll tether the dogs. Okay, Anna, let's go.'
She took Anna by the elbow and led her to the truck. When they were in it, the truck coughed into life and trundled away down the street, leaving McLean alone on the road in a cloud of subsiding dust.
He stood there a long time.

Part Two
Chapter Twenty-Two

The tourists had come to Trinity. McLean watched them with pleasure from the window of Mayor Lomax's office as they poured out of the buses that had brought them from all over the country. The breaking of Anna's story had changed Trinity virtually overnight, making it prosperous again, with tourism replacing cattle and agriculture, bringing in the greenbacks. New stores and restaurants had opened. Rhoda's hotel was always booked out. Lomax had built a new hotel and a couple of bars, managing to throw them up in six months and now filling them every day. People actually used Beale's railway station, coming in by their hundreds, to ritualistically attend a Reverend Juble Lee Revival Meeting and hopefully catch a glimpse of Anna Lansing, described variously as a saint and a witch, but always good news for the media. The Reverend Juble Lee's tent had become a permanent fixture, packed just about every day, with the trestle tables outside doing a great trade in bibles, books, pamphlets and souvenirs, not to mention hamburgers, hot dogs, and various soft drinks.

The whole town was booming.
McLean had done well, also. Beth had signed his agreement and he was now in charge of Anna, controlling her media profile, selling interviews and articles to the highest bidders, syndicating the whole works. There was also talk about a book, with maybe a lucrative movie deal, though he was still in deep negotiations with the agent phoning in from Hollywood. All in all, he was having a hot streak, though not feeling that hot.
'You must be rolling in it,' Lomax said as they both gazed through the window at the tourists pouring out of the latest bus. 'Trinity, East Texas, has been good to you, McLean, putting a flush on your cheeks and a bulge in your billfold.'
'You haven't done so badly yourself,' McLean pointed out. 'You own that new hotel and those new restaurants and bars. The money's been blowin' in on the breeze. You've got a lot to be thankful for.'
'No doubt about it,' Lomax said, enjoying his whisky and cigar, filled with

pleasure at the sight of all the tourists. 'Anna's sure done us proud.'
The very mention of Anna's name filled McLean with love and rage, the latter because of the former, which he suffered helplessly, in anguish, despising feelings he had always mistrusted but could not now control. Of course there were compensations - bulging billfolds and so forth but the fact that he still hadn't possessed Anna was burning him up.
'How *is* Anna?' Lomax asked.
'She's fine,' McLean replied. 'I see her just about every day and she's doing okay.'
'You've got her locked up nice and tight?'
'Signed, sealed and delivered. Old Beth always keeps her in sight and lets her talk to no-one.'
'Unless you say so, of course.'
'Naturally,' McLean said.
'Beth knows what side her bread's buttered on.'
'It's more than that,' McLean said.
'Oh? What?'
'It's not the money, Lomax. That's just a fringe benefit. I got Beth to agree by painting a lurid picture of how hellish the big-city newshounds would make life for Anna. I gave the impression that they'd tear her to shreds and maybe do her real damage. Now she and Anna are getting the benefit while also being protected. At least that's what Beth thinks.'
'We *want* her protected, McLean. That girl's our bread and butter. We don't want some bloodsucker upsettin' her and maybe blowin' this whole thing. You're doin' a good job there, McLean. Here, have a Havana.'
'No, thanks, I don't smoke. Smoked too much when I was married. Two packs a day and coughed all night while my wife cried in bed. Gave it up when I got divorced.'
'Hope you feel better for it.'
'I've made up for it with drinking.'
'I haven't noticed you using my bars.'
'Rhoda likes it in Riley's.'
'You like that Rhoda?'
'We have a kind of arrangement.'
'Does she talk?'
'What do you mean?'

'You know... about the town.'
'She talks a lot about gettin' the hell out, if that's what you mean.'
'Not about the townsfolk?'
'No, Lomax. Why?'
'I just wondered, that's all. I mean, Rhoda... Well, she has an inventive tongue and you can't believe all she tells you.'
'What did you think she'd tell me?'
'Nothin' special. I just wondered, that's all.'
'Keeping wondering,' McLean said.
He had another sip of whisky, then stepped closer to the window. Jack Beale's car had pulled up at the other side of the street, near the general store, and Beale, unshaven and bloated, was just climbing out. He was followed by his downtrodden wife, his three very strange daughters, and the only normal person in the household, Anna's boyfriend, Tom.
McLean had seen them around a lot and they always fascinated him. Beale's daughters, though practically full-grown women, had a dull-eyed, defeated look and were always rigid with nervousness. As for Beale's wife, Myrna, she seemed twice her age, rarely opened her mouth, and never looked anyone in the eye. Only Tom, the one son, the boy Anna claimed to love, seemed normal, if not particularly happy. McLean hated the sight of him.
It wasn't Tom's fault. It was just that Anna loved him. McLean had actually liked the kid when he met him, but now he wanted to strangle him. McLean had always believed that love led to hatred; now he knew this was true.
'Just look at them,' he said. 'Beale's wife and daughters! Living proof that the dead can actually rise. How the hell did they get like that?'
Lomax cleared his throat. 'Nothing special,' he said. 'They're just plain country folks who've had it hard. They live tight and private. It's pretty common around here.'
'You think those girls are normal?'
'A bit nervous, I'll admit.'
'More than a *bit* nervous,' McLean said. 'Those damned girls look *haunted*.'
'You're imagining it,' Lomax said, coughing into his fist again. 'You're just used to all them high-flyin' fillies from the big-city streets.'
McLean sighed. 'Yeah, I guess so. Lots of girls like that in Trinity. In fact, most of the girls their age are like that.'
'Except for Rhoda and Anna.'

'That's right,' McLean said.
Tom was talking to his father. Beale nodded and waved his hand. Tom hurried gratefully away from his family, heading toward the drugstore. Beale stretched his big body, glancing up and down the street, then he waved his hand again and started walking. His wife and daughters, taking note of his waving hand, sheepishly fell in behind him. They headed along the street, toward the new stores, and were cut off from view.
McLean turned away from the window, thinking of Tom, seeing Anna, burning up in the fires of his love and anger and jealousy. It made him feel out of control, like some dumb adolescent, and the hatred he'd directed at Tom he actually felt for himself.
Loving Anna, McLean had become her victim and was losing himself. He just couldn't bear that thought.
'The Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,' he said. 'We are gathered together here in Trinity to pay tribute to its upstanding citizens, better known as the living dead. Must be nice to be mayor.'
'That's not funny, McLean.' Lomax filled up his glass and lit another cigar. McLean noted that he was shaking a little bit and sweating too much.
'You drink and smoke too much,' McLean said. 'It can't be good for your health.'
'I'll survive,' Lomax said. When he raised his glass to his lips, his hand was shaking so much, he spilled some of the drink down his shirt.
He heaved a loud sigh of relief when McLean took his leave.

Chapter Twenty-Three

'She's not gonna come,' Gary said. 'She hasn't come in for weeks.'

'She's too busy healing the sick and the lame,' Pete informed them. 'She's too busy with the layin' on of hands to bother with mortal men.'

'She can lay her hands on me anytime,' Larry said, sticking resolutely to the secular point of view. 'I'm pretty sure I'd rise to the occasion. What do *you* say, Tom?'

'I say you have a filthy mouth, Larry, and should go wash it out.'
'Gee, you sound just like my mom. I feel humbled to know you.'
They all laughed at that. Even Tom had to smile. They were gathered together as usual outside the drugstore, waiting for Anna to appear, though she rarely did these days.
'Any of you guys been out there?' Gary asked.
'Out where?' Pete responded.
'To the tent of the Reverend Juble Lee,' Larry informed him. 'With all the howlin' sinners and tourists. Is that where you meant, Pete?'
'Right,' Pete said. 'Tell the truth now. Hands up! Who's been out there to fall on their knees and sob, "Take me, Jesus!" just to get close to sexy Anna?'
'I have,' Gary admitted.
'Me, too,' Tom said.
'We all knew *you'd* go,' Larry said to Tom, 'but *you,* Gary - that's heavy, man.'
Gary looked a bit embarrassed, but he took these things seriously. Resting his hands on his belly, which was flopping over his belt, he focused his gaze on the distance and said, 'I don't know, guys, I was curious, you know? I wanted to see what was happenin'.'
'So, what *was* happenin'?' Pete was smiling down at Gary. Six-feet-two, but still wearing high-heel boots, he seemed to sway high above them.
'Incredible,' Gary said. 'Absolutely incredible. That black an' white choir was belting out gospel songs, the Reverend Juble Lee was preachin' up a storm, and Anna was standin' there in a white robe, holding up her scarred hands. Christ, she looked wonderful! That white robe showed what she had.

Underneath, she was as naked as a jaybird - of that I'm convinced.'
'Nice to know you went there to worship,' Larry observed, slicking back his greased, well combed hair. 'So what else did you see?'
'Incredible,' Gary said. 'Absolutely amazin'. What with singin' and preachin' and Anna holdin' up her hands, the whole congregation was goin' wild and almost wreckin' the tent. Folks were laughin' and cryin'. Some were dancin' in the aisles. There were cripples tryin' to get out of wheelchairs beautiful!'
Tom himself. What Gary was saying was true, but Tom didn't want to be reminded of it. It was just too embarrassing.
'Unbelievable!' Gary said. 'I mean, really way out! They were comin' up the aisles in their wheelchairs, on crutches, and the reverend's helpers - wearin' shades, big guys with barrel chests - would push 'em back and only let 'em get at Anna one by one, in a queue. Then she'd lay on her hands, whether bleedin' or just scarred, an' I swear, some of those cripples startin' walking', though maybe not all that well. There'd be clappin' and whoopin' and hollerin' when that happened - and Anna... Well, she'd have her eyes closed, but with tears streamin' down 'er face. Christ, she looked sexy!'
Pete nodded judiciously, taking all of it in, debating it philosophically in his mind, way up there above Gary. Larry, admiring himself in the plate-glass window, was too busy with higher thoughts.
'Fantastic!' Gary Anna's laying on the hands and the cripples are tryin' to walk an' the Reverend Juble Lee, well, he's preachin' up a storm and exhortin' everyone to put money in the collection plates being passed hand-to-hand. The money's fallin' like rain. Real good lookin' girls collecting. The choir's beltin' out the gospel an' Anna's laying on the hands an' then the reverend starts callin' folk to the Lord and they rush up in droves. They're all on their knees, weepin' and wailin', wringin' hands, cryin' "Save me, Lord!" an' "Hallelujah!" and "Take me, Jesus!" an' things like that and the reverend, well, he's havin' a field day, throwin' out the big net. A great catch every time. I went two or three days and walk up to Anna. Christ, she looked

didn't want to listen. He had been there

said. 'Absolutely incredible! runnin'. Damned near converted myself each time I laid eyes on Anna. Who'd have blamed me? Right, Tom?'

'Right,' Tom said bitterly. He wanted to forget it. He felt embarrassed just remembering and filled up with shame for Anna, still not able to believe that she was part of that whole sorry spectacle. It was as bad as TV. In fact, he thought it was worse. With TV, you could pretend it wasn't real or else switch it off. He had gone to see Anna, being that desperate by then, but what he saw had shocked him immeasurably and reduced him to tears. Not tears for the Lord, nor for his soul, but tears for how he had lost her.

That bastard, McLean.

Tom hadn't seen her for months and he knew whose fault it was: McLean, her new, so-called 'manager' and 'representative', who was quoted in all of the articles about Anna and her 'gift' from the Lord. Tom was still in a state of shock, not believing what had happened to her, still in thrall to the recollection of their few days by the river, when she'd told him, and showed him, that she loved him and thought his love had cured her. Then her hands had bled again, the word had spread like wildfire, and before Tom could get to see her again, McLean had stepped in.

Tom had gone back to the river. He had done it a lot. Night after night, he had sat there, but Anna never showed up. Then she suddenly turned up in newspapers and TV - right there in Tom's own home! - and McLean and the Reverend Juble Lee were both prominent, also. Anna stopped coming to town. Beth installed an answerphone. Anna started making appearances at the Reverend Juble Lee's Revival Meeting and people from all over the county flocked in to see her.

That's when Tom noticed McLean. That city slicker was always present. He talked on Anna's behalf in newspapers and magazines, interrupted Anna on radio, and always shoved his face in on TV if Anna showed some confusion. He was reported as being her 'manager', her 'agent', her 'representative', and as his and Anna's so-called 'media profile' expanded, the people flocked in not only from Texas, but from every damned state in the Union.

The laying on of hands was new, a relatively recent innovation, and Tom didn't know if Anna really believed she had that 'gift' or if McLean, or even the Reverend Juble Lee, had invented it for her.

He felt sick when he thought of it.

'There's that dude from Colorado,' Larry said. 'You think *he's* gettin' Anna?'
Tom looked along the street. McLean was ambling in this direction. He'd obviously just come out of the office of Mayor Lomax, getting richer every day with his hotel, bars and restaurants, and was moseying along to Rhoda's hotel, where he'd been living ever since coming to Trinity. Seeing him, Tom filled up with an anger that made him jump down off the porch, without even saying goodbye to his buddies. Then he hurried along the road, blind with rage, to stop McLean in his tracks.
'Hi,' he said. 'Remember me?'
'Young Tom,' McLean said flatly.
'I gave you a lift into town and - '
'I know, kid. I remember.'
'I should've thrown you back on the train.'
'What?'
'I think you heard me. You came here to talk to Anna and I was worried about that, and everything that worried me came to pass. You're pretty rotten, McLean.'
McLean grinned at that. 'Pretty rotten,' he repeated. 'Some would call me a bastard. Some would call be a sonofabitch. Some would even call me a shit, but you say "pretty rotten". What a nice boy you are.'
'I suppose you think that's funny.'
'I did, but you're not laughing.'
'I think that what you're doin' to Anna is lousy. Real low-down and mean.'
'What am I doing, Tom?'
'You're using her, that's what.'
'With her consent and the consent of her mother, which is more than you'd get.'
'You're just out to make money.'
'For them as well as myself. If I'm using them, I'm also protecting them, which right now they need.'
'Protecting them from what?
'From what and from whom? From the ones who'd use them *without* protecting them. You don't know what the world out there is like, kid, so stop being so damned high and mighty.'
The city slicker was a fancy talker and Tom knew he was being beaten. His fists were clenched and he wanted to use them, which was an impulse that

shocked him. He had never been violent before, but now he felt truly murderous. He wanted to smash McLean.
'Anna used to be my girlfriend.'
'You didn't tell me that.'
'She was.'
'I'd never have guessed. So, what's your problem, kid?'
'I can't get to see her.'
'She's as free as a bird. If she wanted to see you, she would, but she's never mentioned your name.'
'That's because she's not herself.'
'I only know the one Anna.'
'Who told her to start the layin' on of hands? Anna never believed that stuff.'
'She believes it now, Tom. Believe me, she believes it. I didn't put her up to it - I swear - she did it all on her own.'
'You and the Reverend Juble Lee - you're partners in this, aren't you?'
'No.' McLean didn't hesitate. 'It benefits both of us, I'll grant you, but partners? No, we're not.'
'Did he put her up to it?'
'When I asked him, he denied it. He could be lying, but I think he's on the level. It was all Anna's doing.'
Tom didn't want to believe it. Thinking about it was bad enough. What he wanted was to obliterate McLean and get Anna back. Nothing else meant a damn.
'You want her, don't you?' he asked, before he knew what he was saying. 'That's why you've built the walls all around her - you want her for yourself.'
McLean didn't smile at all, just went from white to red, then he shook his head from side to side, saying, 'No, that's not true.'
'Yes, damn you, it's true. It's *Anna* you want. You think I'm just a rube, a dumb country boy, but I sussed you as soon as I met you - and now I know what you want.'
'Anna.'
'Right. But you're not gonna get her. She doesn't want you, McLean - she wants me - and when I get to her, when I get to talk to her, she'll see sense and you'll lose her.'
'When I want her, I'll get her,' McLean retorted shortly. Then he skipped around Tom and sauntered away like a man with all the time in the world.

Tom had tears in his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Walking away from Tom, McLean felt ashamed of himself. The kid was hurting real bad and McLean had twisted the knife some more, unable to resist wounding the one person who had Anna's affections. That's what being in love was like: it made you possessive, jealous, vindictive, and plain stupid. It turned you into an irrational person, and McLean couldn't stand that. Experienced in the ways of man, that bottomless pit of vile activity, McLean prided himself on the contempt that had kept him aloof from it. Now, he had lost it and was riddled with mindless passions, including adolescent yearning and petty vindictiveness, which just made him despise all the more his love and desire for Anna Lansing.

Picking on kids, for chrissakes! What next? he wondered.
Entering Rhoda's hotel, he found the lobby filled with tourists, most of them middle-aged or elderly, many carrying bibles. Rhoda wasn't behind the desk, but Belinda Hart was there - as dumb as they come, completely devoid of charm, and scared shitless of McLean's urban ways. Right now, Belinda was giving instructions on how to get to the Reverend Juble Lee's revival tent to a bunch of bluerinsed, bespectacled matrons from Baton Rouge, Louisiana. When she saw McLean, she blushed. McLean grinned and walked on. He took the stairs while pondering on how much life had changed in recent months in the sleepy town of Trinity, East Texas.
I should get an award, he thought.
His room door was already unlocked. Stepping inside, he found Rhoda on his bed, fully dressed in that clinging red number, which was pulled back off her knees, while she had a glass of bourbon and a smoke. She smiled with that familiar hint of wickedness as soon as he walked in.
'Hi,' she said.
'Hi,' McLean replied, closing the door behind him and starting to take off his jacket. 'What are you doing here at this time of the day? It's not even noon.'
'Don't you want me here, darlin'?'
'You look a treat, I'll admit that.' McLean hung his jacket in the wardrobe, then turned back to face her. 'I'm just surprised,' he said. 'That's all.'

'I've got time on my hands, McLean. Lots of it these days. Now that we're so busy and I can afford a receptionist, I spend most of my time talkin' to the guests and holdin' their hands. I enjoy it, but it isn't exactly wildly stimulatin', so I came in here for a welcome break.'
'Welcome,' McLean said, sitting on the edge of the bed and pouring a stiff one. 'Cheers,' he said, touching Rhoda's glass with his. Then he had a good slug of it.
'Say, hey!' Rhoda exclaimed. 'It's early yet! Better drink that more slowly.'
'To hell with it,' McLean said. He had another drink, put the glass on the table, then rested his hand on Rhoda's knee. He knew the knee well by now.
'Hotel's busy,' he said.
'Never better, McLean.'
'You'll soon have enough money to leave this town. Is that still in your plans?'
'Is that an invitation, McLean?'
'Not really, Rhoda. I'm not a man for permanent relationships. I just wondered, that's all.'
Rhoda sighed with disappointment. 'Naw,' she said, 'I'll probably stay here. What could I do if I went elsewhere? I only *know* this hotel.'
'I thought you hated this town.'
'Hate can keep you alive, givin' you somethin' to cling to when the night closes in.'
'You still get the nightmares?'
'Doesn't everyone?'
'Not me.'
'Sure, I still get the nightmares. I guess they're with me forever.'
'What are they about?'
'Never mind, McLean. You know me well enough already. Let me keep something private.'
McLean grinned and stroked her knee, slid his hand down her shin-bone, ran it around the back of her leg, then back up to the knee.
'Mmmmm,' Rhoda crooned. 'So where have you been this mornin'? In fact, where have you been the past few days? I'm gettin' lonesome for love and attention, but my lover's not here.'
'I was having a drink with Lomax. A pre-lunch aperitif. Just checking out how thing's are going. He says the town's booming.'

'Well, he's right there. He should know, since he's the mayor. He's also making more out of it than the rest of us put together because he happens to own half the town. He must look like a fat, sassy cat. With a big Cheshire smile.'
McLean squeezed Rhoda's raised knee, then ran his hand up her leg. He let it come to rest between her thighs, which were tender and warm. 'Lomax didn't look fat and sassy,' he said, 'and was wearing no Cheshire cat smile. In fact, he seemed strangely nervous when we spoke, as if something was bugging him. That started when we saw Beale and his brood and discussed those weird sisters. That's when he got nervous.'
Rhoda chuckled and sipped some bourbon. 'He's just frightened of girls,' she said. 'Maybe that's why he's still a bachelor. Just a poor little shy man.' She closed her thighs on McLean's hand, making a sandwich of it. The heat of her smooth skin was exciting and started arousing him.
'Mmmmm,' Rhoda crooned.
'That's nice,' McLean said.
'So why don't you come around more often? It's *your* room, after all.'
'Real frantic,' McLean said. 'All this business about Anna. I'm so busy taking care of things, I hardly have a free moment.'
'Twenty-four hours a day,' Rhoda said. 'That's real dedication.'
Knowing every nuance in her voice, McLean knew what she meant. 'It's not that,' he lied.
'Yes, it is, McLean. That little bitch gets all the attention and now she's got yours. You've got the hots for her, you're obsessed, and now you can't keep away from her.'
'I'm *managing* her,' McLean insisted, 'so I *have* to see her a lot. Believe me, even if I wanted to snatch her, old Beth wouldn't let me.'
'Bless old Beth,' Rhoda said, 'but the point is that you want to. Dammit, McLean, why Anna instead of me? What *is* it with her?'
'I don't know,' McLean said.
Rhoda opened her legs to express her disgust, so McLean stood up and went to the window to look down on the street. The folks he'd seen in the lobby were piling into the bus that would take them to Reverend Juble Lee's big tent. The sun was high in the sky and Main Street was becoming livelier, with tourists wandering up and down the porches, in and out of the stores. A lot of the stores were new and most sold souvenirs, including postcards of Anna

with her hands raised, palms outward, showing the scars of her stigmata. It made McLean's stomach churn, but it would have happened without him, so better that he got something out of it than some other bastard.
He heard the bed creaking, then Rhoda walked up behind him. She slid her arms around him, clasped her hands on his chest, and leaned into him, flattening her breasts against his back to let him feel her whole body.
'I'm sorry, honey,' she whispered. 'I shouldn't have said that. I'll just have to learn to share you with Anna - and remember that I'm gettin' the most of you. Greedy girls should be punished.'
McLean saw the Beale family coming out of a store opposite and gathering in a bunch on the porch. Big Jack was obviously snarling something at poor Myrna while the sisters, dressed as usual in figure-concealing clothes, stood silently to the side with their heads bowed, trying not to see anyone.
'Look at them,' McLean said. 'Young Tom's three elder sisters. I've never seen girls so lifeless and cowed as the bunch in this town - except you, of course.'
'And Anna!' Rhoda said.
'Right. Anna, you, and some others. But why are most of the young girls in this town just like Tom Beale's sisters?'
'Ask your friend, Jack Lomax,' Rhoda said. 'After all, he's the *mayor.'*
Slipping around McLean, she dropped to her knees in front of him, kneeling between his legs and the wall, just under the window. 'Just you stay there, honey,' she said, unzipping his trousers, 'while I make up for making you feel bad. Think of Anna while I'm doin' it. I don't mind. I'm used to bein' abused. Just stay where you are, McLean.'
McLean looked down on the street as the Beales walked away. When he thought of Tom, who wasn't with them, he thought also of Anna and felt a great, swooping fear that made him start trembling. Either fear or just Rhoda, who was working her wonders on him. McLean stood there trembling with fear and desire, accepting that if he didn't get Anna soon he would simply explode.
He leaned forward to rest his hands on the wooden frame of the window, his body convulsing in silent spasms that gave him no joy.
He groaned aloud.
In despair.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Tom was in an agony of unrequited love when he was forced to attend, in the company of his family, a hot Sunday gathering at Reverend Juble Lee's Revival Meeting in the big tent outside town. Still hurting from his confrontation with the hated McLean, whom he was convinced was going to exploit Anna sexually as well as materially, he was also fearful of McLean's worldly experience and more desperately yearned to protect Anna. For this reason, he badly wanted to see her - but not here, not now, at this meeting with his family beside him. He was just embarrassed to be here.

Most of the townsfolk were at the meeting, as well as many tourists, and the big tent was packed and as hot as hell. The people in the rows of folding chairs were mopping sweat from their flushed faces and trying to keep it off their hymn books while the choir, dressed in red robes and spread across the stage, were belting out their rousing gospel songs and clapping their hands to the rhythm. The huge American flag was behind them, stretching high above them, and the enormous painting of the Reverend Juble Lee could not be ignored. His eyes were sky blue and piercing, looking down on the congregation, and it was impossible to look up at the stage without seeing that giant's accusing gaze.

Another egomaniac, Tom thought. Like all those fools on TV.
When the gospel choir had whipped the audience up into a state of high excitement, the Reverend Juble Lee came out on stage like some kind of superstar. The whole place went wild, with people standing up on their chairs to clap, and only when the reverend had raised his hands did they settle down again. Then the reverend started preaching, giving them brimstone and hellfire, and people shouted 'Hallelujah!' and 'Praise the Lord!' and stuff like that, then were whipped up even more than before when the reverend gave them the works. His voice was something special, an actor's voice, hard and soft, and he fell to his knees, spread his hands dramatically, and sometimes looked like he was about to burst into tears, which many watching him did. The sound of sobbing was mixed up with all the shouting and made Tom more uncomfortable.

'And now, brothers and sisters!' the reverend Juble Lee announced at last. 'Here's the child who's been chosen by the Lord and sheds His blood for all of us. Brothers and sisters - a miracle in the flesh! Don't be shy, child! Come on out!'

Anna walked out on the stage, wearing an anklelength white robe, her hands clasped together in front of her, her blonde hair hanging loose down her back, looking golden in a dazzling web of spotlights. When the reverend gallantly stepped aside to let her take centre stage, she turned around to face the congregation, then raised her hands.

You couldn't see much from where Tom was.

The congregation went wild anyway. People jumped back on their chairs, other chairs were kicked over, and the sick and lame struggled to get into the central aisles and make their way up to the stage. They were stopped by the reverend's helpers, the big men wearing shades, and either waved back to their seats or pushed back in their wheelchairs to enable the other helpers, the attractive ladies in tight skirts, to make their way between the rows of folding chairs with big smiles and collection plates.

'He's sure organised,' Tom's dad said cynically. 'I'm obviously in the wrong business.'

In all that noise and activity only Tom's family was still, his father staring at Anna in a steady, ambiguous way, his mother muttering prayers but otherwise not moving much, and his three sisters, though joining in the hymns, only raising their eyes from the ground when looking up at the stage. Some things never changed.

Tom's throat was constricted and his heart was fit to burst. When he looked up at Anna, a golden beauty in silvery light, the white robe hanging off her breasts and falling over her broad hips, he was torn between love and despair, all mixed up with his shame for her. Then he saw McLean at the side of the stage, giving quotes to the reporters, letting photographers through, glancing frequently, possessively, at Anna, and he wanted to run up there and obliterate him from the face of the earth.

Instead, he just clenched his fists.

The women were still collecting money and the sick and lame were agitated, so the Reverend Juble Lee, maybe carried away himself, suddenly shouted, 'Go to 'em, child! Go down among the flock! Mingle with your brothers and sisters and give them your faith. Let them feel the power of the Lord and be

brought to His mercy!' Anna glanced at him, shocked, but he gave her no time to argue. Rushing forward, he took her by the elbow and led her down off the stage.

The congregation went wild again.

Reverend Juble Lee led Anna along the central aisle, with Beth on one side of her and McLean on the other, making her turn left and right while holding up her hands to give everyone a good look at the palms. The sick and lame fought to get at her, in wheelchairs, on crutches, and the reverend took Anna's hands and placed them down on heads and shoulders until she started doing it herself to those who got near her. Some people on crutches fell. The wheelchairs bumped into them. Other people, when touched by Anna, sobbed hysterically or fainted dead away, collapsing into the arms of the guards with shades, who dropped them back in their seats. Other cripples stood unaided, though wobbling uncertainly, and screamed to all and sundry that they'd been cured. Others wept or applauded.

Then Anna reached Tom, who was sitting amongst his family, his father and mother in the two seats by the aisle, his three sisters on the chairs at the other side of him. They all stood up when Anna approached. It seemed a natural thing to do. When Anna reached Tom's row, she stopped dead and stared at him, as if shocked to see him there, then her blue eyes brimmed up with tears. She started reaching out to him, opening her mouth to speak, but then, when she suddenly saw his father, she stepped back with a gasp.

Beth stared at Tom's father with pure hatred, then violently tugged Anna away and led her right past them.

McLean, catching Tom's eyes, grinned at him and walked on, following Anna, Beth and Reverend Juble Lee along the noisy, chaotic aisle toward the back of the packed tent.

Tom felt confused and torn.

He didn't understand what had happened. His father was staring at Anna's back with a small, deadly smile, but his mother was studying her own feet as if in a state of shock. Anna glanced back once, her eyes large and still tearful, then was lost between Beth and McLean, the Reverent Juble Lee and his bodyguards, as they made their way around the rear of the tent and then back up the other side. By the time they stepped onto the stage again, the tent was filled with weeping and wailing, cries of praise and loud groaning. Then the choir burst back into song, bodies swaying, hands clapping, the tambourines

beating, with the organ and guitars amplified to make them sound like a fullblooded orchestra.
The Reverend Juble Lee's tent was filled with jubilation, but Tom was in unutterable anguish and left before it had ended.
He had to see Anna.

Chapter Twenty-Six

When the meeting was over, Tom didn't go home with his family. He told his father that he'd arranged to meet some of the guys in town and wanted to be dropped off at the drugstore. When his father dropped him off, on the way back to the house at the other side of town, Tom waited until the car had disappeared along Main Street, then walked all the way back to the big tent.

Although the revival meeting was over, a lot of people were still milling about between the trestle tables, some buying books, pamphlets or signed photographs of Anna, others having a cheap lunch of hamburgers or hot dogs with soft drinks. The sun was still shining, making everything seem bright and festive, and most of the people were still flushed with excitement over what they had seen and heard.

Tom walked around the big tent, following the many signs on posts, until he came to the queue of people who were waiting to have an audience with Anna. He was filled with fear and trepidation, expecting McLeod or Beth to see him, but when, after an hour, he had reached the entrance to Anna's side tent, there was still no sign of either
- only a couple of guys with shades, one at each side of the entrance, both with their hands folded in front of them, neither one of them smiling.

When Tom became first in the queue, he started sweating and feeling shaky, as if he was going to see the Queen of England. He hated himself for it, but just couldn't control it, and was glad when the tent flaps parted and the woman who'd been before him came out at last. There were tears on her cheeks, but she was glowing with joy, and when a man, presumably her husband, approached her, she threw herself into his arms and clung sobbing to him. The man was patting her spine with big hands when Tom entered the smaller tent.

Anna was sitting behind a small table, still wearing the simple, revealing white robe, her golden hair framing that perfect face with its full lips and blue eyes. There were piles of pamphlets and signed photographs on both sides of

the desk, and her hands were folded on the table between them. Tom just stood there, not knowing what to say, until she looked up.

Her lovely eyes brimmed up with tears, but she didn't actually cry. Instead, she wiped the tears away with her fingers, then took a deep breath.

'Hello, Tom,' she said.

Her voice had a hymnal quality, which Tom thought was appropriate, but when she waved her hand to indicate that he take a chair, he shook his head and said, 'No, thanks.'

'Can I help you, Tom?'
'What?'
'I said, can I help you? That's why those folks are

waiting outside. They want me to help them.'
'How can you do that?'
'By listening to what they say.'
'You give them advice?'
'No. I only tell them to have faith. That's what I tell

all of them.'

Tom was perplexed, and also deeply wounded, to be this close to Anna at last, yet feel so far away. He was awash in his love, but also buffeted by confusion, yearning for her to stand up and embrace him, turned to stone when she didn't. If pain had a quantifiable limit, he was reaching it right now.

'I didn't know you believed in this,' he said. 'Yes, Tom, I believe. Why else would I do it?' 'I thought maybe they'd made you.'
'Who?'
'That McLean. Maybe the Reverend Juble Lee.

Maybe even your ma...'
'No, Tom, no-one made me do anything. I just saw
the light, that's all.'

'When?'
'Pardon?'
'When did you see the light? We were on the riverbank, you told me you loved me, we arranged to meet the following night -and then McLean took you over. What happened, Anna?'
'My hands bled, Tom. They bled that night when I got home. I thought our love had cured me, but it hadn't; it was just wishful thinking.'
'What happened when you got home?'
'I told you: my hands bled.'
'What happened before your hands bled?' 'Nothing.'
'You're lying.'
Anna turned her hands over, palms up, to study them in what seemed like a trance. When she looked up again, there were tears in her eyes.
'I can't see you again, Tom. I can't go against my mother. She told me I couldn't see you again. I don't know why. She just did. I can't go against her, Tom.'
'If you love me, why not?'
'I love God more, Tom. My stigmata have shown me that the only road open to me is God's road. I see Him when I bleed.'
Tom had a flash of revelation. It came as sure as a bolt of lightning. It lit him up and gave him the courage to speak like an older man. He was totally confident. 'You're frightened,' he told her. 'You're frightened of our love. You love me, but you're frightened of *making* love, which is a whole different ball game. That's why we never made love, isn't it? You never wanted to go that far. You were scared of us getting into that, and so you ran away from me. It's not your mother that you're frightened of - it's me - making love; having sex. Why, Anna? *Why?*' Anna started weeping. 'You're wrong, Tom,' she said. 'It's not like that at all. I bleed the blood of the Lord and that's what separates us. I love you, but my love for Him comes first. That's why we can't meet again. So please

leave, Tom - for both our sakes.'
'You're frightened,' Tom insisted. Though not
happy, he was confident. 'It's what our love would lead us
to, Anna: the physical proof of it.'
She kept sobbing without a sound. 'Please leave,
Tom. Please go.'
Tom felt an extraordinary exhilaration mixed up
with his pain; heard a distant note of triumph in his defeat.
'Okay,' he said. 'If you want me to, I'll go. But just promise
me this one thing, Anna, and then I'll go happier.' She
raised her fine eyebrows in a questioning manner. 'No
matter what else, please promise me this: That you won't,
under any circumstances, let that bastard, Steve McLean,
have you.'
Anna pushed her chair back and stood up to glare at
him. 'How could you even *think* such a thing? Please leave,
Tom. Goodbye.'
Tom did so, flicking tears from his eyes, but filled
with an odd jubilation, seeing light in his darkness. 'Awopbopaloobop
alopbam-boom!' he chanted
while snapping his fingers, as if that would protect him.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

'The Lord is generous,' the Reverend Juble Lee said. 'That was a wonderful meeting. We've never had so many converts in one day. The Lord be praised for his goodness.'

'It's Anna you should be praising,' McLean replied. 'That little walk down the aisle. An inspired idea, Reverend.'

The reverend offered his icy smile. 'Inspiration comes from faith. The Lord gave me guidance and I passed it on to Anna. The power of the Lord was passed through her and reached all those sinners.'

'Filled the collection boxes as well.'

'The cynic must have his day. Here, McLean, have some lemonade. You look a bit pooped.'
The Reverend's bourbon was out of sight, so McLean had the lemonade. He swirled it in his glass, but didn't drink it, not trusting its potency.
'You might have gone too far, Reverend.'
'What does that mean, my son?'
'Anna's laying on of hands. That's borderline stuff, Reverend. A lot of folks could get offended by that, especially the media. If they're looking for something to knock, you might have handed it to them. Also, it can't be good for Anna. She might think it's for real.'
'But it *is* real, McLean. Anna sheds the blood of Christ. Those poor sinners, if they think they've been cured, then surely they *are* cured.'
'I didn't see too many cures. I saw a lot of wishful thinking. I also saw a lot of hysterical optimism that'll soon turn to tears.'
The reverend spread his big hands, as if saying, 'What can I do?'
'It wasn't Anna's idea, Reverend. You dragged her off that stage. When you got her down there among the sick, you started her off. You took hold of her hands and laid them on until she started to do it.'
'I don't remember that, McLean.'
'You're a disingenuous man, Reverend.'

'And you're a man with a tongue, my young friend a tongue that needs cutting out.'
'Silence the sinner.'
'No, my son, *save* the sinner. I'm determined to save your soul, McLean, which is why you're still here.'
'I'm still here because of Anna,' McLean said, 'which is why *you're* still here. Without her, you'd be moving on.'
'I like it in Trinity,' the reverend said disingenuously. 'The name of the town has a certain aptness that makes me feel welcomed though I'll move on eventually.'
'When it all backfires on Anna.'
'Anna's in the Lord's hands.'
'You told me the Lord's in *her* hands, but I guess that's nit-picking.'
The reverend just smiled and sipped his lemonade, then sat back in his chair, breathing deeply, his chest expanding, while his gaze took in the many envelopes on his desk, most containing contributions to his ministry, as well as telephone numbers. The ladies liked the reverend. They viewed him as a force of nature. When he came on with the fire and brimstone, they practically wet their seats. McLean still couldn't figure him and felt outfoxed by him. The reverend was a true believer and truly believed in Anna, but he was also a man of the flesh who knew just what he was doing - and what he was doing was using Anna, just as much as McLean was. The reverend enjoyed money, power and notoriety; he also relished the simpler things in life, such as bourbon and women. True believers, it was now clear to Mclean, came in all shapes and sizes.
'How *is* Anna?' the reverend asked. 'No problems there, I trust.'
'She's starting to believe what she hears and reads about the media's Anna, so I don't anticipate too many problems.'
'You mean her divine gifts.'
'That's right: she believes in those.'
'She's not alone in that belief, my son. I, too, believe in them.'
'I think you really mean that.'
'I don't expect you to understand. You look at the collection plates and the items we sell and think that I use Anna for fiscal gain, but that's not strictly true. I *do* appreciate the money God's work couldn't be done without it - but I truly believe in Anna's gifts and think them miraculous.'

McLean believed in Anna, also. His love for her was his curse. He was tormented by the intensity of his need to both love and degrade her. She had unearthed his buried self, that lost child who believed in goodness, and almost drowned him in the kind of emotions he could no longer tolerate. In loving Anna, he was helpless, deprived of his cynicism, and his fear of finding weakness in himself had formed the need to destroy her. He had to possess her, to get to know her completely, then, having done so, degrade what it was he most loved. It was his penance for weakness.
'You look thoughtful, McLean.'
'I'm a thoughtful man, Reverend. I was thinking of the confrontation between Anna and the Beales. Not just young Tom -- he used to be her boyfriend - but more the way Anna looked at his father, as if seeing the devil.'
'I remember. There was definitely something there. I don't know what it was.'
'Beth knows what it was. She shot daggers at Jack Beale and practically dragged Anna away. I don't think it was anything to do with Tom. It was *Beale* they were frightened by.'
'I can't imagine Beth Lansing being frightened of anyone. Anna - yes - but not Beth. She's a woman of spirit. As for what might have gone on between them, I can't help you at all. I'm a stranger here, McLean, as much as you are. I know as little as you do.'
McLean nodded and stood up. 'Thanks for the lemonade.'
'You didn't even drink it,' the reverend complained.
'It's bad for my stomach.'
McLean waved and walked out, then went to see Anna. The queue outside her tent had disappeared, so he ducked down and entered. Anna was at the table, leaning forward, elbows propped up, covering her face with her hands and taking deep, even breaths. When McLean coughed softly into his fist, she looked up with a start.
'Hi!' McLean said.
The evening sunlight, bleeding weakly through an opening in the tent, formed a gauze-like web on Anna's face, making her seem even more beautiful and slightly mysterious. She smiled in a weary, distracted manner and languidly waved a hand.
'Hi,' she said. 'What time is it?'
'Four o'clock.'
'It seems a lot later than that.'

'You've had a long day.'
She nodded and closed her eyes. She kept them closed for some time. Her mouth was slightly open, as if she was asleep, and McLean felt a sudden rush of desire that made him feel weak and unreal. He wanted to have her there and then, on the floor behind the desk, and almost reached out to touch her, before regaining his senses. 'Where's Beth?' he asked hoarsely.
'She went home for a rest. She said she'd come back for me later, when all the people had gone. I told her to come back about five.'
'Another hour,' McLean said.
His voice sounded unnatural to him. He felt as if he was choking. It was hot and claustrophobic in the tent, and he noticed that Anna was flushed. He also noticed that her eyes were too red, as if she'd been crying.
'Are you okay?' he asked.
'Yeah,' she said. 'Just hot and tired. I can hardly keep my eyes open and I'm covered in sweat.'
'There's no-one left outside,' McLean said. 'You can take the robe off.'
'That's a thought,' Anna said.
She lowered her hands beneath the table, grasped the bottom of the robe, then pulled it up over her body, then over her head. When her arms were raised, her breasts pressed against the white blouse. Her perfect body seemed to twist in sensual motion as she jerked the robe off. She let it fall back over the chair, took a deep breath, brushed her hair back. The white blouse had no sleeves, with only straps over her shoulders, and its top couple of buttons were undone, to reveal the curve of tanned breasts.
McLean realised that she suntanned in the nude and choked up when he thought of it.
'I'm so tired,' Anna murmured, rolling her head on her shoulders. 'It's so tiring just sittin' here listening to all of their talk. I'm achin' all over.'
McLean walked around the table to lean against it, almost sitting, his leg running down past Anna's shoulder, practically touching it. He reached out to put his hand under her chin and tilt her face upward.
'Were you crying?'
'Yes,' she said.
'Why?'
'It was nothing.'
'It must have been something,' McLean said. 'I'm just tired,' she told him.

McLean knew that wasn't true. At least it hadn't caused the tears. He was convinced that someone had been here and he could guess who it was. He kept holding Anna's chin, staring down as she looked up, and gradually saw in the distracted gleam in her blue eyes the light of clashing emotions. A desperate yearning came out of her, almost palpable, radiating, and it gripped him and drew him towards her with a will of its own. He spread his fingers across her cheek, felt its tenderness, its burning, then ran his hand down the side of her neck and around to her throat. She sighed and closed her eyes.
'No,' she whispered, though not moving. McLean took a deep breath and leaned down to press his lips to her forehead. 'Please, don't,' she murmured, though she tilted her head back, letting him move his lips down her nose and onto her mouth. She didn't part her lips. McLean tried to slide his tongue in. When she still didn't open her mouth, he slid his hand down her blouse. 'No!' she groaned, opening her mouth, letting his tongue divide her lips, while her body, which felt as smooth as silk, trembled under his fingertips. She groaned, but couldn't speak. McLean's tongue was in her throat. Her body trembled even more, as if stricken by some augue, as he tugged the blouse down off her shoulders and slid his hands to her breasts. She jerked her head away, freeing her mouth, then grabbed his wrists and screamed, '*No!*'
She pushed him off and tumbled back, the chair spinning to the side, and rolled over when she fell on the floor with her whole body shaking. McLean fell to his knees, not understanding, wanting to rape her, but was stopped when she started thrashing about in an epileptic convulsion.
'Oh, my God!' McLean cried out.
Anna writhed and groaned dementedly, possessed by her private demons, and was starting to foam at the mouth when Beth entered the tent. She stopped to stare down in horror at her moaning, convulsing daughter, then gasped and hurried across the tent, dragging her clubfoot.
'Give me your billfold!' she snapped. *'Dammit, do what I tell you!'*
When McLean gave her the billfold, she jammed it between Anna's teeth to prevent her from biting her own tongue. Then she knelt on Anna's chest, pressed her shoulders against the floor, and held her down until the terrible fit had passed.
When Anna had fallen into the sleep of exhaustion, Beth silently studied her bared shoulders and breasts, then looked up contemptuously at McLean.
'You sonofabitch,' she said quietly. 'You're just like all the rest. Get the hell

out of here.'
Shocked and deeply ashamed, McLean fled from the tent.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Anna woke up at home. The morning sun was falling upon her. She felt drugged and still haunted by the nightmares, but her heart wasn't racing. Beth was sitting by the bed. Batman and Robin were in the corner. Beth was leaning slightly forward, reading her Bible, her brow furrowed in deep concentration, her lips pursed in a grim line. When Anna rubbed her eyes and yawned softly, Beth turned to stare at her.

'Ah,' she said, 'you're awake!'
'How long have I been asleep?'
'Since yesterday,' Beth told her. 'Since shortly after

four. You had a fit in the tent, then went unconscious, so we called for an ambulance. You've been sleepin' for sixteen hours, child, so I hope you feel better.'

Anna smiled weakly. 'I do, Ma. Just a bit weak, is all.' She glanced over at the dogs, which seemed unnaturally large in the small bedroom, then glanced out the window and saw a bright-blue, cloudless sky. There were birds winging up there, heading south, and she wanted to join them. 'I wanna leave here forever,' she said. 'I feel so ashamed.'

'Not your fault,' Beth said. 'McLean took advantage of you. I don't know how far it went, Anna, but that's certainly what caused it. You and men... You know what happens when you even think about it... Lordy, why did you let him?'

Anna took a deep breath and released it in a sigh. She took another deep breath and held it in until she thought she would die, which is what she was hoping for. 'I don't know,' she admitted, finally letting her breath out. 'I was all hot and tired. So tired I was hardly there. Tom came to see me and that made me feel real bad. When McLean... Damn it, Ma, you should know. I was thinkin' of Tom. I was wantin' Tom, Ma.'

'So you let McLean…'
'I didn't let him. I just didn't try to stop him. I wanted it - wanted Tom - needed someone real bad... Then, when McLean touched me, the fear returned... and that brought on the fit... I was *rememberin'*, Ma.'
Beth closed her eyes, clenched and unclenched her fists, nodded and patted Anna's wrist, then sat back in her chair. She gazed out the window. 'How far did it go, child?'
'It didn't go anywhere. He just kissed me, Ma... and kinda touched me... On my shoulders and... That's all.'
'That bastard, McLean. He probably sensed how you were feelin' and took advantage of it... But you should have known better. You shouldn't have let him. It always brings on the rememberin' - and that brings on the fits.'
'I couldn't help myself, Ma. I was thinkin' of Tom and hurtin' real bad. I want Tom so much.'
Beth suddenly glared at her with bright, furious eyes, then reached down to roughly shake her by the shoulder. 'No, Anna! I won't let you! I don't care how much it hurts! Not with Tom! You've gotta keep away from Beale! *Do you understand, child?*'
Anna jerked away, turned around on the bed, and lay on her side, facing the wall, her tears falling again.
'Yes, Ma,' she whispered. 'I understand. Now please leave me alone.'
There was a moment's deadly silence, finally broken by Beth's loud sigh.
'Okay, Anna,' she said. 'I'm sorry, but I had to say it. Now I'll leave you alone. Stay in bed today, child. Rest up. I'm goin' to town to fetch some things, but I'll be back in an hour. You try to relax now.'
She got up and left the room, clump-clump with the clubfoot, taking Batman and Robin with her, leaving Anna to stare at the nearest wall with her thumb in her mouth. She hadn't done that for a long time, but she needed to do it now. Sucking her thumb, she felt like a little girl who still had no bad memories.
They came back when she closed her eyes. She saw the shadows along the walls. Elongated, they moved all around her and filled her with dread. She was suffocated and crushed, humiliated, obliterated, but she couldn't fix a face to the shadows and retreated from knowing them. She didn't want to be touched, felt revulsion when it happened, and escaped into the bolt-hole of hysteria where everything disappeared. God's light, which only came out of

that darkness, was the one hope she had.
Anna opened her eyes again. The sun was shining on the wall. She thought of how, even after she'd given her promise to Tom, she'd almost let McLean have his way with her.
The thought filled her with shame.
Rolling onto her back, she stared up at the ceiling, the tears trickling down her cheeks as her heart started racing. She thought of McLean with shame, of Tom with despair, then closed her eyes and saw the shadows along the walls in that evening five years ago. With that, rising inexorably from her shame and despair, came the fear that she felt would never leave and would finally destroy her.
The real pain, physical pain, lanced through both of her hands, making her cry out and jerk upright on the bed, her fingers twitching spasmodically. There was blood in the palms of her hands, seeping out of two small wounds.
I'm impure, Anna thought, and always will be. What was done, can't be mended.
She felt a great anguish boiling up to consume her, and decided that the only way to stop the bleeding was to rid herself of her blood. It was a flash of revelation, a bolt of lightning that lit her up. When she thought of Tom, whom she loved, and of the grief she had caused him, she was rid of all doubts and realised that she had to empty herself to become a new person.
Get rid of the blood, she thought.
Anna slipped out of bed, feeling weak and lightheaded, and then tiptoed out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. She glimpsed herself in the bathroom mirror, a haunted beauty, not quite real, then took the straight razor used for shaving her legs, and calmly slit her wrists with it.
It stung a bit, but didn't hurt nearly as much as her hands, so she put the razor down, pleased with herself, and slid to the floor.
She hung her wrists over the bath and heard the blood dripping into it. She felt good for a moment, but then the anguish consumed her, and she drifted down into a darkness that now seemed so familiar.
The light of God filled her dimming eyes.
'Tom!' she whispered, then passed out.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The news soon hit town: Anna Lansing had tried to slit her wrists, but had been discovered by old Beth just in time and taken to the local hospital. There she now lay unconscious, her bloody wrists bandaged, but with the palms of her hands still seeping blood.

The news shook a lot of folks up.
Tom was one of them. He saw it on TV. He watched in growing shock as Anna, on a stretcher, was lifted down from an ambulance, placed on a trolley, and wheeled into the Trinity General Hospital by guys in white smocks. Then the anchorman came on, old Joe Cameron, a local celebrity, to inform his audience that Anna had tried to kill herself and was now in intensive care. There were more shots of the hospital. Beth came out to face the reporters. There was no sign of that bastard, McLean, nor of the Reverend Juble Lee. Beth confirmed the bad news, but said that Anna would survive. She was unconscious right now, but she would live, praise the Lord and good afternoon.
Joe Cameron came back on, looking suitably solemn, to say, 'Well, there it is, folks. The girl with bleedin' hands is now bleedin' from the wrists and some folks may have a lot to answer for. We'll keep you informed.' Joe Cameron disappeared and was replaced with an ad' for toothpaste, so Tom got up and switched the TV off and went into his bedroom. He lay down and cried a lot. First the pain, then the hatred. He kept thinking of McLean. If Anna had tried to kill herself, McLean had something to do with it. Tom knew that for sure, with the clean conviction of jealousy, and kept imagining what McLean had done to drive her that far. He didn't want to think about it, feeling dirty when he did so, but the thought of sex raised its ugly head like a snake in the parched grass.
McLean had finally gone and done it. The city slicker had made his play for Anna and, whether or not he'd succeeded, she was now near death's door. Tom wanted to kill him.
He burst into tears again, burying his face in the pillow, trying to stifle the sobs while his body shook as if coming apart. He fell asleep and had terrible

dreams about Anna in pools of blood, then awakened as the sun was sinking outside and the darkness was creeping in. When his mother called him to dinner, he shouted back that he didn't want it, then started crying again, wiping his wet eyes with his shirt-sleeve and sniffling a lot. He kept thinking of Anna lying unconscious while McLean had a good laugh.
Yes, he wanted to kill McLean.
Someone hammered on his door. Tom didn't respond. 'What the hell are you doin' in there?' his dad bawled. 'Pinin' for that tramp, Anna Lansing? Get your ass out here, boy!'
'I don't wanna,' Tom responded.
His dad kicked the door open. You could tell that he'd had a few. He was framed in the doorway, damned near filling it out, with striations of light from the living room spraying in all around him. He looked pretty big standing there.
'Snifflin' in here like a baby! Is that what you're doin'? Get off that bed before I drag you off it. We've got somewhere to go.'
'I don't wanna go anywhere.'
His dad stepped into the bedroom. More light from the living room, beaming in around him, turned him into a stark silhouette in a silvery web that seemed to quiver magically about him. He stopped, towering over Tom's bed, and said, 'Get up or I'll pull you up.'
Tom knew better than to argue, so he swung his legs off the bed. His dad's fists were clenched and they looked menacing. He reached out to take Tom by the chin and jerk his face up.
'I knew it. You've bin cryin'.'
'I wasn't.'
'Yes, you were.' His father gave a mirthless chuckle. 'Shit! A boy your age, turned eighteen last month, and you're cryin' like a baby in its cradle for that tramp, Anna Lansing.'
'She's not a tramp.'
'How would *you* know?'
'She isn't.'
'She's a crazy little whore,' his father said, 'and you're best off without her.'
'Don't say that about her.'
His father grinned. 'Well, that's better! At least you're showin' a little bit of spit. Come on, kid, come with me.'

'Where are we goin'?'
'Don't argue, kid. Stand up.' A big hand came down and grabbed Tom by the shoulder and jerked him upright. 'We're goin' out for the night, Tom. We're gonna hang one on. I'm gonna teach you how to behave like a man and put all thoughts of that crazy little tramp out of your head. Now shut up and don't give me any arguments, 'cause we're goin' right now. Put your shoes on and let's go.'
Tom did as he was told, following his dad into the living room. His three sisters were sitting as usual on the sofa, pretending to stare at the TV, but glancing sideways to take note of his red eyes. He didn't try to hide them. Braved his sisters face to face. When he did, they all looked back at their feet, as if counting their toes. Then Tom glanced at his mother, who was doing her ironing near the TV. She threw him a look of such despair, he wanted to run up and kiss her.
'Me and Tom are goin' out,' Jack Beale said to his wife. 'Don't wait up for us. We won't be back early. Any damned questions, Myrna?'
Tom's mother opened her mouth to speak, saw the look on her husband's face, trembled and lowered her head and started ironing again. 'Have a good time,' she whispered.
Tom followed his father out and sat beside him in their old Ford. The stars in the dark sky formed a tapestry around the moon; the wind moaned as usual across the flatlands, giving life to the dust. Tom glanced across at the railway station, remembering the day McLean arrived. The recollection honed his rage to a fine point and made him feel stronger. His father gunned the engine, released the handbrake, and the car cruised away, churning up a cloud of dust, then turned around the front of the house and headed for Trinity.
'You ever bin to Riley's bar?'
'No,' Tom said truthfully, though recalling that he'd often seen McLean entering or leaving the place, usually in the company of that woman, Rhoda, who ran the hotel and had a reputation.
'Well, that's where you're goin' tonight, to get drunk, throw up, and have a woman. I'll make a man of you yet, boy.'
'I'm not old enough, Dad.'
'They won't worry 'bout that at Riley's. As long as you've got two legs and a billfold, you can just walk right in.'
'I don't wanna go.'

'You're goin', so don't give me no arguments. We'll be there in no time.'
It took no time at all because Riley's was in Main Street. The town was in darkness and most of the stores were closed, but lights were beaming down off the porches and out of the windows. Tom's father braked in front of Riley's, which Tom had only seen from the outside. You couldn't see inside because the windows were tinted glass, but even from where Tom sat in the car he could hear it was noisy.
His father got out his side of the car and said, 'Okay, let's go.'
Tom felt really wild, torn between grief and anger. Hardly thinking straight at all, but knowing McLean might be inside, he flipped open the glove compartment and pulled out the pistol that his dad always kept there for emergencies. Then he slipped it under his shirt, between his belly and his belt, and got out of his side of the car before his father had noticed.
'Okay, Dad,' he said.
When his father walked through the entrance of Riley's bar. Tom followed him in.
The noise exploded over him as the door slammed behind him. The bar ran along one side and was lined with high stools, all occupied, and the rest of the place was taken up with tables scattered around a small dance floor. The music came from an old Wurlitzer, pounding away there in the corner. The people dancing and sitting at the tables or along the bar were mostly in their twenties and thirties, most coming from the ruined ranches and farms that were scattered like debris around Trinity. The men looked like cowboys, wearing Stetson hats and high-heel boots. A lot of the women also wore Stetson hats, but with tasselled dresses, spangled jackets, spikes, and far too much makeup. A lot of drink was going down and the air was filled with smoke; with loud laughter and an awful lot of shouting, accompanied by breaking glass.
'*There's* a joke for you,' Tom's father said, pointing to Mayor Lomax, who was sitting with Jack Proctor at one of the tables close to the bar. 'Old Lomax, he has his own bars but comes here for his drinkin'. Come on, let's go join 'im.'
When they reached Lomax's table, Tom saw that he was loaded. 'This boy is under-age,' he said, indicating Tom, 'but I promise not to tell the sheriff. Sit down, gents. Have a drink. Is this boy *allowed* to drink?'
'That's what I brought him here for,' Beale retorted. 'Thought I'd let him hang

one on. He's bin pining for that crazy Anna Lansing and I've had enough of it. Time to tell him a few facts of life. Maybe get him a woman here.' Beale indicated the painted ladies at the other crowded tables. 'I'm sure a night with one of these would do him good. Get Anna out of his system. Here, kid, gulp this down.'
He shoved a glass of bourbon at Tom. It smelt awful, but Tom drank it. Burning down his throat and chest, it made his head go kind of funny, but soon he was feeling pretty bright and prepared for another.
'Here,' Beale said, 'have another.'
'Thanks,' Tom said, glancing at Jack Procter and noticing the dead light in his dark eyes. 'Don't mind if I do. This is quite a place, isn't it?'
'Lomax likes it,' Beale said. 'He leaves his own bars to the tourists. That doesn't say much for his own bars, but we'd best not discuss that.'
Lomax grinned. 'What a smart-ass! A real live-wire we got here. I just decided not to mix with my own customers. Keeps things more businesslike. Tell me, kid,' he said, turning to Tom, 'what's this about Anna? You're hot for her, is that it?'
Drunk already, Tom was feeling bold and gave Lomax a hard stare. 'That's my concern, Mister Lomax, sir.'
'Just askin',' Lomax said.
'That Anna,' Proctor said. 'She might have done this town proud, but I reckon she's crazy.'
'That's what *I* said,' Beale told him.
'I'm not listening,' Tom said.
'We've good reason to believe she's crazy,' Lomax said, then gave a short, bitter laugh as he turned back to Beale. 'Just what facts of life were you plannin' to teach this boy, Jack?'
'If I were you, I'd watch my tongue,' Beale said grimly. 'It's a little bit loose there.'
'Yeah,' Lomax said. 'Right. There's nothin' but trouble in that direction. Now the dumb bitch goes and slits her wrists just when business is boomin'. I hear the sinners who converted have already lost faith and are turnin' back to their sinnin' ways. The sick who were healed have decided they're sick again; and those who said Anna was a saint now say she's a witch. Amazin' how quick folks can turn, whether Christian or not.'
'Hypocrites,' Tom said, brimming over with pain again, thinking of Anna

lying there in the hospital, close to death's door. 'Just a bunch of damned hypocrites,' he expanded on his theme, feeling exceptionally bright in the head, as well as melodramatic. 'Can I fill my glass up?'
'Sure,' Lomax said. 'Help yourself from the bottle. Damned right, they're a bunch of hypocrites, but they brought money in. It's gonna dry up real quick. A lot of pilrims are goin' home. There's even talk that the good ol' Reverend Juble Lee is gettin' ready to leave town. Lucky we made our money when we did. I think the tourists are dying off. We'll soon be back to the old ways.'
'That little bitch, Anna,' Proctor said, 'she's bin nothin' but trouble.'
'What the hell are you talkin' about?' Tom said, feeling even more drunk and bold. 'She put this town on the map. It was dead and she brought it back to life.'
'Then she ruined it,' Lomax said. 'Just like I knew she would. That little bitch, I always said she'd be the one to bring hell and damnation. She's gonna do that, I tell ya.'
'What are you talkin' about?' Tom asked, feeling grown-up and mad. 'She made you money and now that it's drying up you're saying she's ruining you?'
'He didn't mean that,' Proctor said.
'Then what the hell *did* he mean?'
'He didn't mean nothin',' Tom's dad said. 'Shut up, Lomax, you've said enough.'
'I wanna know what he meant.'
'You're drunk, Tom,' Beale said. He was grinning, but it wasn't affectionate and his dark eyes were burning. 'Here,' he said, 'have another. When you throw up all over the floor, we're gonna get you a woman. Ain't that right, Lomax?'
'Damned right,' Lomax said.
Tom didn't give a damn. He was drunk and despised them all. They were a bunch of goddamned hypocrites, only out for themselves, and they'd worked hand in hand with McLean to drive Anna to that suicide attempt. Tom felt a burning anguish. The drinking had only made it worse. He touched the pistol at his belly, wondering why he had brought it in here, then saw McLean sitting across the room, pretty close to the front door.
McLean was all on his own and didn't look very happy.
'That bastard,' Tom said.
'*What?*' his father responded.

'That bastard, McLean,' Tom said. 'He used Anna, then tried to seduce her and drove her near to suicide.'
'You don't know that,' Lomax said. 'No-one knows why she did it. Some say she was just suffering stress and had one of her fits.'
'It was McLean,' Tom said, finishing his bourbon in one gulp, 'and I'm gonna take him out for it.'
He started to stand up, but his father jerked him back down. 'No point in actin' like John Wayne,' he said, winking at Lomax and Proctor. 'Not unless she's *worth* somethin'.'
That remark was all Tom needed. Nothing would stop him now. Even as Beale spoke, McLean pushed his chair back, stood up and walked unsteadily toward the door, clearly intending to leave. Tom was struck by the expression on his face, which was one of pure misery, but he kicked his own chair back and also stood up, thinking only of one thing.
'I'm gonna take that bastard out,' he said. 'Make him pay for what he did.' He slipped his hand inside his shirt as he walked away from the table, hearing his father and Lomax laughing behind him, not knowing that he was groping for a pistol and was all set to use it. 'It's for Anna!' he whispered.
McLean went out the door and Tom followed him out. McLean was staggering and Tom knew he was drunk, but that didn't matter. McLean stepped off the porch. He almost missed the step and fell. When he'd recovered, he looked repeatedly up and down the street, as if not knowing which direction he should be going in.
Tom unbuttoned his shirt and jerked the pistol out, then jumped down off the porch, just behind McLean, who wheeled about and looked at Tom in surprise.
Tom held up the pistol and took aim. 'You bastard!' he said. He was only a few feet from McLean. The noise of the old Wurlitzer was coming out of Riley's bar when McLean, swaying slightly, rubbed his eyes and then stared at Tom's pistol. 'You made Anna slit her wrists. It was you, McLean - wasn't it? You said that when you wanted her, you'd get her, then you went on and did it. Did you seduce her? Is that why she did it? I'm gonna kill you, McLean.'
McLean raised his eyebrows. He was drunk, but his gaze was steady. He was staring straight into the barrel of the pistol, but he didn't seem too concerned. 'I didn't do a damned thing to her,' he said. 'But go ahead - shoot me anyway.

It's all I deserve, kid.'
Tom just stared at him, immobilised by his indifference, shocked by his haunted gaze.
'Goddamn you,' he said eventually, 'don't try to fool me. Stop acting noble. I don't want your city-slicker tricks. I'm going to kill you, you bastard.'
'I don't care,' McLean said.
The music lay low in the night. It came out of Riley's bar, slightly muffled and distant, and seemed to float down from the stars as if it had always been there. Tom heard it magnified as he confronted McLean in the darkness, and wondered at its power to affect him so deeply, even as he was cocking the pistol and trying to take aim. It was the voice of the Irishman, Van Morrison, Van the Man, singing 'You're my woman,' and repeating the phrase again and again in a trance of passion and grief.
Tom was blinded by the tears in his eyes, and his hand started shaking.
Then his father, Lomax, Jack Proctor and some friends practically fell out through the door of Riley's bar. They disentangled themselves and stared down at Tom and McLean, just as the *Trinity Gazette* proprietor, Dwight Stewart, came out, looking concerned.
'Just look at the two of you!' Beale sneered. 'Fighting over that whore!' He fell against Lomax, but was propped upright, to sneer again. 'Yeah, that's right - the whore! You think she's a virgin 'cause neither of you have had her. But she ain't a virgin, boys. *I've* had her! We've *all* had her!' He waved his hand to indicate Lomax, Dwight Stewart, half the town... 'Damn it, boys, don't you see it in her eyes? *She knows what we all know!*'
Tom went for his father, swinging the pistol, trying to brain him, but was pushed away by Lomax and Dwight Stewart, then pulled off by McLean.
'What was that?' McLean asked as he held the struggling Tom back. 'What did you mean by that?'
'Nothin',' Beale said, suddenly sober and turning away. 'It was just drunken talk. Nothin' else. Take that boy of mine home.'
Then he walked back into the bar, followed by Lomax, Proctor and Stewart, while Tom broke into tears and dropped the pistol, then turned into McLean.
'It's okay,' McLean whispered, his voice trembling and hoarse, while Tom sobbed brokenly in his arms. 'It was just drunken talk.'
'No, it wasn't,' Tom said.

Chapter Thirty

McLean felt like hell, but that wasn't going to stop him. When he practically fell out of bed, his eyes stinging from the morning sunlight, he was still half asleep, still thinking of Tom Beale, and filled with a guilt so deep and true that it made his hands shake.

Tha t… and the drink… the long night he'd spent in Riley's. He'd driven Tom home, dried his tears, sent him in, then returned to Riley's bar to confront Tom's father and that bastard, Lomax. Alas, he was too late. They'd gone on, he was informed, to one of Lomax's bars, gibbering, he was also told, about the problems that were coming with the loss of Juble Lee's star attraction, Anna, and the tourists that she'd attracted to Trinity.

'The town's gonna die again,' Rhoda had told him in Riley's. 'That's what those two scumbags were sayin' as they staggered out of this joint. They were goin' off to check out the possibilities of Lomax's bars and see how they could maximise profit when the tourists stopped comin'. Drinkin' here, in Riley's bar, folks tend to become optimistic - but *you* don't feel that way, do you, McLean? Here, have another one.'

McLean and Rhoda had drank a lot, into the wee small hours, then returned to McLean's bed where again he mistook Rhoda for Anna. She had left in disgust, leaving him to sink or swim, and now, in the morning's grey light, as he rolled out of bed, he was convinced that he had died and was lost in the Land of the Living Dead. What he meant was that an awful lot of people here in Trinity were not exactly what they seemed to be. They weren't like *real* people.

All drunkards were paranoid, after all. He was a drunk. He accepted it. Washed and dressed, he felt much better - almost a different person - and he knew, as he left the hotel, smiling brightly at the dumb receptionist, that the guilt he was feeling over Anna would sustain him for life. He had almost destroyed her, which is what he had wanted, but when he realised just what he had done, he also found his own limits.

He had loved once in his life and been frightened by its intensity. In attempting to destroy the object of his affections, he had learned what real love meant.
He loved Anna enough to give her up and let her find what she needed.
That goddamned kid, Tom.
Well, what else could a real man do?
He could finish the job *that's* what he could do and that's exactly what he was planning to do when he walked from Rhoda's hotel to the *Trinity Gazette* and had a talk with its proprietor, Dwight Stewart.
Old Dwight, who had been at Riley's bar the night before, was still looking fresh and sweet-faced, smiling out from under his white moustache and occasionally stroking his white hair.
'That was some scene last night,' he said. 'I hope you got the kid home.'
'Yeah,' McLean replied. 'I got him home okay. What bothered me was why I had to do it. What was going on there, Dwight?'
'Tom was blaming you for Anna's troubles. That seemed pretty obvious.'
'I don't mean that,' McLean said. 'I'm after what's behind Anna. There were things being said there last night that I don't understand.'
Dwight pushed his chair back, stroked his white moustache, smiled sweetly.
'I've no idea what you're talking about, McLean. It was just drunken gibberish.'
'Is Anna a tramp?'
'I don't know. Why ask me?'
'Half the men in this town call her a tramp, but I can't find the proof.'
Dwight shrugged and smiled again. He had the smile of a wicked schoolboy.
'This town isn't exactly noted for its vivacious, attractive ladies, so Anna's always been something special. When men lust after women they can't possess they have the need to degrade them. Here, in Trinity, they do that by calling Anna a tramp. What else do you need to know?'
The need to degrade. The phrase rang in McLean's head. Ashamed, he was more determined than ever to make amends for his sins.
'I think there's more to it than that,' he said, not taking his eyes off Dwight.
'There's something *behind* Anna
- something all those guys know. Whatever it is, it frightens and angers them. What is it, Dwight?'
Dwight shrugged and smiled his schoolboy's smile, though it didn't come

easy now. 'I can't help you,' he said.
McLean didn't trust him. He had seen too much to do so. That schoolboy smile in the face of a man with white hair and moustache struck McLean as being pretty damned unnatural. There was more here than met the eye.
'About three years ago,' McLean said, choosing his words with care, 'Anna's father disappeared. Then Anna became an epileptic - probably through shock. What have you got on that?'
'Nothing,' Dwight replied.
'The town's sole newspaper has nothing on an event of such importance?'
'For good reason,' Dwight said. 'Initially, I *did* try to investigate the affair, but I was silenced by Mayor Lomax and the members of his so-called Town Committee, including most of the prominent businessmen, as well as Jack Beale.'
'You were silenced? How?'
'They threatened to withdraw their advertising from the paper if I wrote any more about the matter. And since I couldn't afford to lose my advertising... '
'You dropped the story.'
'Yes, McLean. I protected my newspaper.'
'What do you think they were trying to hide?' McLean asked.
'I can't tell you that.'
'And you don't want to know. I thought all the lousy journalists were in Houston. Have a good day, Stewart.'
McLean walked out without saying another word and went straight back to his hotel. Though intending to call Ralph Bleeker at the *Weekly Enquirer,* to tell him that the story was dead and he was coming back home, he couldn't do it because Rhoda was in his room, on his bed, fully clothed, smoking and having a glass of bourbon at ten in the morning.
'You look a pretty sight,' McLean said, 'but I thought you'd just left me.'
Rhoda smiled. She'd always liked his sense of humour. 'I left at six this morning,' she informed him, 'when you looked like a wet rag.'
'Still feel like one, Rhoda.'
'At least you're honest, McLean. Where have you been so early in the morning? It must have been something serious.'
McLean told her.
'You poor bastard,' Rhoda said. 'Steve McLean, the so-called cynic, is in love with the sweet Anna Lansing and wants to know what's behind her. Whose

soul are you trying to save, McLean? Her's or your own?'
'Maybe both,' McLean said. 'Not that it makes much difference, since this town has a zip on its collective lip and I'm running in circles. I was hoping to find you here, Rhoda. You're the one key I'm holding.'
Rhoda smiled up from the bed. She looked lush in the tight red dress. McLean sat on the edge of the bed and placed his hand on her thigh.
'What's going on here, Rhoda? What's behind Anna? You and Anna are the only two ladies in town worth knowing. The rest are scared out of their wits and dress like old-fashioned spinsters. You say you have nightmares. Anna has those as well. You're an attractive woman, but you still haven't married. Anna has epileptic fits, mysterious bleeding, and a mental block about her father's last days at home. Is Anna epileptic or hysterical? And what's haunting you, Rhoda? What the hell's going on?'
'Don't ask me. I'm just a poor country girl. I can't count beyond one and one.'
'You mean I should be able to?'
'Right, McLean. That's what I mean.'
'Beale and Lomax,' McLean said. 'The broken girls, the disappearance of Anna's father. Anna's so-called epilepsy or fear of sex... How do *you* fit in, Rhoda?'
'I was one of those broken girls,' Rhoda confessed. 'I just happen to look a lot older. That's because I survived it.'
'Survived what?' McLean asked.
'Lomax, Jack Beale, and... Yes, damn it, Anna's wonderful father... Do you really want to hear this?'
'I thrive in cesspits,' McLean said.

Chapter Thirty-One

When McLean called Tom to say he wanted to meet him, Tom felt nothing but an awful embarrassment about the previous night. He covered it up by asking what McLean wanted, but McLean refused to tell him over the phone and said he had to tell Tom in person. They met in the drugstore in the early hours of the morning, when no-one else was about. McLean looked as hungover as Tom felt, though that gave Tom no comfort. They sat in one of the booths and had coffee, face to face, neither easy.

'About last night...' Tom began.

'It's okay,' McLean said. 'I don't mind being threatened with a pistol. It's all part of the job.'
Tom had to smile. 'I feel so stupid,' he said.
'You're not stupid, Tom, you're just decent. That's a heavy cross to bear.'
'Of course, I wouldn't have shot you.'
'No, I don't think you would have. Still, it's the thought that counts, kid. You sure proved that you loved her.'
'What they said wasn't true.'
'About Anna?'
'She's no tramp.'
'I know it, you know it, and they know it, so stop worrying, Tom. Start thinking about saving her.'
'How do I do that?'
'Go see her in the hospital. Tell her that the Reverend Juble Lee is clearing off and that she's soon going to be as free as a bird.'
'How can she be free? Her hands are still bleeding. As long as she has those bleeding hands, she'll think she's guilty of something.'
'She’s not guilty of anything. She’s just another victim. Now I'm going to tell you something and it's going to hurt you badly. It's going to set you even more against your dad, but that can't be avoided. You don't like him anyway. There's something about him that scares you. You don't know what it is, but your sisters do, so he scares *them* even more. What I'm going to tell you will seem like a nightmare - but you've always suspected something, your mother

and sisters have been broken by it, and if you know it, you can set them all free and also save Anna. I'm going to tell you what it is that Anna refuses to face, and if you tell her that you know, and that you still love and want her, the palms of her hands will stop bleeding and she'll be yours for life. Are you willing to risk this?'
'Yes,' Tom said. 'Anything.'
McLean told him the story. Tom cursed and cried a lot. When McLean was leaving, he looked down at Tom's clenched fists and said, 'Your knuckles are white.'
'I'm okay,' Tom said.
'I think you are, kid. I know it hurts about your dad, but knowing it, you can help your mom and sisters. You can also save Anna.'
'You love her, McLean, don't you?'
'It hasn't been returned.'
'So why are you doing this for me?'
'I'm doing it for Anna. I've never been in love before and this has taught me one thing: that it's better to love than *be* loved, because at least it's your choice. That belief keeps me sane when the pain comes, so I'm going to cling to it.'
'You're a decent man, McLean.'
'It's decent of you to say so.'
'I guess I'd better go and see Anna.'
'Right, Tom. You do that.'
Tom walked out of the drugstore, leaving McLean sitting there - not an old man, but aged by his surroundings and the life he had lived. Tom was choked up, now knowing he'd wronged McLean, but he took heart from the knowledge that McLean had learned something, too. Life was all give and take. It was learning and unlearning. Tom learnt that much as he hurried through the streets behind Main Street and came to the Trinity General Hospital and went in to see Anna. He only faltered when he thought he might meet Beth, but she was nowhere in sight.
Tom asked to see Anna. There was no problem at all. He was given instructions and pointed in the right direction, and soon found himself standing outside her door with his heart pounding dangerously.
He took a deep breath and walked in.
Anna was sitting up in the bed, surrounded by ‘Get Well' cards, the blonde

hair falling around her lovely face and framing those exquisite blue eyes. When she saw him, her eyes opened and closed, but otherwise she showed little.
'Hi, Tom,' she said.
'Hi, Anna,' he responded. He had the feeling that they'd said all this before, but some things you could live with. 'You look great. Really great.'
'So do you,' Anna said.
There was silence for a moment. It was just like on TV. The girl's dying, but she looks really lovely and the guy's near to tears. Tom had seen it all before. He knew that TV was garbage. Still, he had to admit that Anna looked really beautiful, and when he did, to himself if not to her, he came near to tears.
'Jesus!' he whispered.
Anna held her hands up. There were no scars on her palms. This time, the bandages were on her wrists, which is what she was showing him.
'I guess I'm pretty damned stupid,' she said.
'Yes,' Tom said, 'you are.' He walked across the room, took hold of her wrists, kissed the bandages, then sat on the bed and smiled tenderly at her.
'I love you,' he said. 'I'm not my dad - I'm *me*. No matter what's said, what comes out, I'm yours, now and always.'
'I know that,' Anna said. 'I've *always* known that. But what can come out? What do you mean, Tom?'
He took a deep breath. 'You really don't remember your dad?'
'Only that he was good.'
'And you don't remember why he disappeared?'
'No, Tom, I don't.'
Tom took hold of Anna's hands and turned the palms up, then kissed them, one after the other, and pressed them down on his cheeks. 'Please don't hate me, Anna.'
'Why do you think I could hate you, Tom?'
'I'm gonna tell you the truth.'

Chapter Thirty-Two

McLean drove up to Beth Lansing's house and stopped in a cloud of dust by the gas pumps. When he tooted his horn, Batman and Robin came streaking out, but McLean had put the locks on all the doors and had faith in the windows. Thump, thump, went the paws, hammering frantically against both windows. Their teeth were bared in fierce snarls and they looked like hounds from hell as they panted and barked in his face at the other side of the glass.

You couldn't help being nervous. The brutes were rocking the whole damned car. Then Beth came out, clump-clump with the clubfoot, dragging it down off the porch and along the yard, then out through the gate and toward his car, barking almost as loud as the dogs and making them back off. When they had vanished back inside the house, McLean got out of the car.

Beth had the shotgun in her hands and was lifting it up to aim it at him. He knew damned well she'd use it.

'Okay, Beth,' he said, holding his hands up in the air in mock surrender. 'Go easy now.'
'I oughta blow your brains out. Or blow your goddamned balls off. That'd be more appropriate.'
McLean couldn't help grinning. 'Yeah, Beth, I see your point. But nothing went on with me and Anna. I promise you that.'
'The point is that you tried.'
'I couldn't resist her, Beth. But I wasn't viewing her as some little tramp. It was a lot more than that.'
'Don't tell me you love 'er. I hate that kind of talk. When men talk about love, they mean somethin' else. I've known that for an awful long time. It's somethin' I learnt well.'
'The hard way.'
'What do you mean by that?'
'I mean that I know exactly what went on with Anna. I know what causes her fits. I know everything, Beth.'
McLean looked up at the house and imagined it in darkness. When he

thought of that night three years ago, a shudder went through him. In one evening, in less than an hour, Anna's whole world had been turned upside-down and became a nightmare. McLean shuddered again, thinking about it, feeling rage and despair. Then he cast his gaze around the front yard and finally settled on Beth.

'So you know,' she said, lowering the shotgun to her side and letting go of the barrel until it was pointing safely at the ground and not at his head.

'Yes, Beth. I know that it happened three years ago, when Anna was fifteen. I also know that your husband was involved. So where did you bury him?'

Beth stared steadily at him, without animosity, then turned around until she was facing the house. She pointed to a pile of rusty barrels in the front yard.

'Over there,' she said.

There was silence for a moment. McLean didn't know what to say. Now that Beth had told him, confirming it, he didn't know where to go. Beth kept staring at the gasoline barrels, as if recalling that dreadful night, then she sighed again and turned back to face him, her gaze steady and hard and unashamed, brooking no condemnation.

'The shock of it made Anna forget everything. *Everything!* And I didn't want her to ever have to re-live it. She loved him so much - he was her father, after all - and when it happened, she blotted it out of her mind and survived it that way. I've no guilt at all, Mister.'

McLean nodded, understanding. He would have done the same himself. Even now, he was filled with simmering rage and despair for his fellowman. When he thought of Anna in the hospital, he filled up with love for her. When he thought of that girl three years ago, the rage threatened to choke him. Yes, he understood why Beth had done it and had no cause to blame her. If his own rage and despair were any measure, Beth must have been justified.

'Who else was involved?' he finally asked her, wanting to put an end to it.

'They *all* were,' Beth replied with deep bitterness. 'It's that kind of town.'

Chapter Thirty-Three

'Boredom,' Lomax said. He looked pitiful behind bars. 'I guess you could say it was that, though it don't excuse anything. We didn't plan it at all. It just kinda sneaked up on us. You don't know what it was like to live here, McLean, when the ranches and farms went bust. It was awful. Just awful.'

Lomax was alone. The others had their own cells: Jack Beale, Proctor, Doc' Reynolds, and maybe half-adozen more at this point in time. McLean knew that more were going to be hauled in over the next few days, as the ones already caught started squealing to reduce their own sentences.

'It was a graveyard, McLean. The whole damned place just died. The drought killed off the crops, folks lost their ranches and farms, and those that didn't leave Trinity altogether had no money or jobs. Men without work are dangerous. The days are long in East Texas. A lot of drinkin' was done, there were fist-fights every night, guns were fired, and a lot of cars were smashed up. A kind of madness took hold of us all, which is when it began.'

Lomax wiped sweat from his brow. His kerchief was soaked. There were dark stains under the armpits of his shirt and his eyes had a blind look.

'Bored men fantasize,' he said. 'The less they have, the more they want. We had videos and TV to show us what we'd never have, which was money and what it can buy, including beautiful women. Not many of those in Trinity. The women here, they work hard. We're talkin' ranchers and farmers and women who work the fields and look worn out. That's what we all had.'

Lomax sniffed, as if about to cry, but wiped his eyes with his kerchief. The kerchief, being soaked with his sweat, made his eyes look even worse.

'You know what I mean, McLean? There was lots of fantasising. Lots of drunken talk in lots of bars scattered around Trinity, most of it focused on sex and other kinds of excitement.'

'I think I know what you mean.'
'At first it was just a joke. A lot of jokes about their wives. About how they were worn out and hardly worth looking at; about how the only attractive women around were the girls, the teenagers. In other words, their own daughters.'
McLean didn't want to hear this. He liked young girls himself. A lot of his friends claimed that they didn't, but McLean knew they were lying. That knowledge didn't help now.
'A lot of drinkin', McLean. More than you can imagine. The drinkin' made everything the same and they traded notes on their daughters. Just jokin' at first. "Mine looks better than yours." Then it got to, "My kid is real attractive, but I think yours looks sexier." Just jokin', of course. Jokes that soon had an edge. Pretty soon they were drunkenly comparing notes on who fancied whose daughter. The drinkin' made it acceptable.'
'You always say "they",' McLean observed, 'but you were part of it.'
'I'm not married,' Lomax said.
He took a nervous breath, let it out with a sigh. After wiping his face again, he glanced down at his soaked kerchief. McLean noticed that his hands were shaking badly, as if he had fever.
'It was just a game at first,' he said. 'We talked about it, but did nothing. Then Jack Beale, being really drunk one night, when Myrna was at her mother's, joked that we try one of his daughters... and the joke became serious.'
McLean thought of Beale's big house, looming over the wasteland beside the railway station. It had made him think of the house in the movie, *Psycho,* and now he understood why. The decay in Beale's soul was in the house and it showed on the surface. The corruption of Beale was in the woodwork, the peeling paint, the rusty pipes. The house was rotting like Beale.
'We had 'er at the railway station. We queued up in the waiting room. We took Beale's eldest daughter, Clara she was only fifteen at the time - an' we had her one by one on the floor while she bawled her eyes out. Sick? Yes, we were. Sickened? That as well. But once we started, we couldn't stop. Beale was the first, I was the last, and when we'd finished, we told Clara to dry her eyes and keep her mouth shut. We told her we'd kill 'er if she talked an' she took that to heart.'
'That's why none of the girls ever talked. They thought they'd be killed.'
'Yeah, McLean. Right.'

Lomax scratched his nose. He then tugged at his ear. He bit his lower lip, wiped the sweat from his face, and glanced with the longing of the lost through his cell's one barred window. He would have to get used to that.
'Later,' he continued, 'though we were horrified by what we'd done, we were also excited and, usually drinkin', egged each other on to do it again. Some of us, me included, wanted to stop, but we just couldn't do it. You know? We'd lose face.'
'*What?*' McLean said. He could hardly believe what he was hearing. In the pits of human vice, he had seen it all, but that didn't help now. He kept thinking about Tom's sisters, those broken girls with heads hung low, and of all the other girls their age that he'd seen in Trinity, washed out and hung up to dry for the rest of their days. What he'd sensed in those girls was a dread that could now be explained. They had endured a nightmare.
Lomax shrugged. 'It was machismo. We were frightened of losing face. After Clara, we couldn't back down, so we started to trade. One of Proctor's daughters came next. Then Doc' Reynolds' kid. Then another one of Beale's. Then Benning took us to his Rhoda, and so it went on... It was a regular little thing: we all swopped, and noone could say "No." So it went on and on.'
'Until Beth and Anna Lansing,' McLean prompted him.
Lomax sighed in despair. 'Yeah. Our Alamo. In fact, a blessing in disguise. We took Anna in her house when Beth was at a prayer meetin'. Anna's father, that bastard, well what can I say? He broke her in for us and gave her the back of his hand when she tried to resist... He was into it then. He was one of the worst. Once he started, he couldn't get enough of it and pushed us all farther... He was worse because of Beth. Said the clubfoot made it difficult. The marriage hadn't worked out and Lansing claimed he'd been starved of it for years. He'd wanted Anna real bad... We all did, even then.'
McLean wanted to strangle him, but held himself in check. He thought of Anna in that old house, trapped in her own bedroom, the shadows shifting along the walls, as they did in her dreams, as the men gathered panting around her bed. She had told him about those shadows, her nightmares about faceless men, and now he knew why the thought of consummation was linked to hysteria.
'So Abe had his own daughter.' Lomax spoke like the walking dead. 'We were in the bedroom, all standin' around the bed, excited by what we were seein' and waitin' our turn. There were six of us that night. Beale, Proctor,

Benning…even Doc' Reynolds. We all had our turn, then Abe wanted it again, and although we wanted to stop him, we couldn't - he just started in on her.'
Lomax went silent, as if frightened to go farther, but McLean, shocked to his core, feeling murderous, gave him no respite. 'And then?'
'Beth returned when Anna was in hysterics an' that was the end of it.'
McLean was choked up. He felt strangled by his own rage. He recalled the blood in Anna's hands, the distracted look in her blue eyes, and understood why his own attempt to seduce her had led to slit wrists. The shame he felt was not only for himself, but for most of mankind.
We are all collaborators, he thought. I can't wash my hands of this.
'Beth came up on us real quiet. She must have heard Anna's cryin'. She probably thought it was strangers attackin' Anna, so she came in with the shotgun. When we heard her gasp of horror, we looked over our shoulders. Saw her standin' in the doorway. She was already raisin' the shotgun to her shoulder when we raced out of there, pushin' frantically past her... We all fled, McLean. Ran like hell for our cars... We left Abe Lansing on top of his sobbing daughter, desperately tryin' to roll off her, then we heard the gunshots.'
Lomax offered a whimpering sound, a choked sobbing; he bit his knuckles to gain control of himself, then removed his fist from his dribbling lips and continued his story.
'Some of us went back in. Anna was still stretched out on the bed, though her white skin was splashed with patches of blood and she was shaking somethin' dreadful and moaning. Abe was lying on the floor beside the bed, his pants down around his ankles, all bloody and torn up, and it was clear that old Beth had shot him as he rolled off his daughter. He was dead. That was pretty damned clear as well. Then Anna, still shaking and moaning, hardly aware of our presence, sat upright on the bed, saw her dad's body, and then glanced down to see the blood on her own body. When she saw it, when she realised what it was, she became hysterical, started screaming dementedly, and had the first of her epileptic fits. When she recovered, about ten minutes later, she didn't remember a thing. She'd just blotted it out...'
'Come on, damn you, finish it,' McLean said in a choked voice, just wanting to know the end of the story and then make his escape.
'When we saw that Anna had already forgotten what had happened, had

blotted it out completely, we knew we were saved. We persuaded Beth that if she talked, Anna would suffer somethin' dreadful - and old Beth, well, she loved that kid so much, she swallowed it whole. She let us bury Abe - there and then, in the front yard - and although she's hated us ever since, she's kept her mouth shut… At least until *you* talked to her.'

Lomax smiled like a broken man. He then leaned forward, covered his face with his hands, and spoke through his trembling, outspread fingers.

'Yes, McLean, we shared our daughters around... and God help us all.'

McLean stood up and walked out.

Chapter Thirty-Four

'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,' the Reverend Juble Lee said as the door of the big truck containing his tent was slammed shut by the workmen. 'Let that be a lesson to your readers - poor sinners all.'

Everything had been taken away and now the field looked oddly desolate, as if a bomb had hit it, obliterating a whole community, leaving only dead earth. Juble Lee and his crew had been here a long time; it seemed strange that they wouldn't be here any longer, filling up all that empty space. His two immense removal trucks and a lot of cars were lined up and all set to go.

'I'll give my morally polluted readers your blessing,' McLean said. 'I'm sure they'll sit up and take note.'
The reverend smiled, and this time it reached his eyes. 'I only regret that I didn't save you, McLean. Now *that* would have been a real achievement. Something worth taking pride in.'
'I'm sorry you were disappointed.'
'My faith will sustain me. Had you a similar brand of faith, McLean, you'd be a happier man.'
'Maybe,' McLean said.
Miss French, the starched beauty in charge of Juble Lee's public relations, and something else besides, was walking away from the reverend's limousine and coming toward them.
'So they've all been rounded up?' the reverend asked.
'Yeah,' McLean said. 'Beale, Lomax, Dwight Stewart - the whole gang. All behind bars and awaiting trial. It should be quite a show.'
'A vile business,' the reverend said.
'It's human nature,' McLean responded.
'No, McLean, it's only *part* of human nature. One side of the coin. Human nature can be base, but also noble. Just look at yourself.'
I didn't know you thought so highly of me, Reverend.'
'You're a sinner worth saving.'
When Miss French reached them, she flashed McLean her professional, white-toothed smile, then turned to Juble Lee, whom, McLean knew, she

revered to the point of intimacy, and said, 'Looks like we're set to roll, Reverend. Whenever you're ready.'
'Thank you, Miss French. I'll join you in the limousine in a moment, when I've said goodbye to McLean here.'
Miss French turned to McLean and flashed him another smile. 'Goodbye, Mister McLean.'
'I'm sure going to miss you, Miss French. Now I only have dreams left.'
Miss French blushed and smiled, but waved her hand in a resolute manner, then walked back to the limousine.
'She's your driver?' McLean asked.
'That's correct, McLean.'
'She must help to make the long journeys bearable.'
'I'll ignore the implication in that remark. The sinner must have his day. Still, you have your worthy side, McLean. I was quite entertained.' The reverend put his big hand out to let McLean shake it. 'Goodbye, McLean. I'll say a prayer for you.'
'You do that,' McLean said. Juble Lee turned away to go to his limousine, but McLean stopped him with: 'Just one more thing, Reverend.' Juble Lee turned back to face him. 'Tell me the truth, Reverend. Are you just another charlatan or do you genuinely believe in all this?'
McLean waved his hand to take in the field where the tents and tables had been pitched, as well as the two immense removal trucks, the cars, and Juble Lee's gleaming limousine. After taking in what McLean was indicating, Juble Lee gazed at him with a seductive, though oddly threatening, smile.
'Every coin has two sides,' he said. 'Take your pick, McLean.' Then he waved and walked off, climbed into the limousine, and was driven away by Miss French.
The rest of the convoy moved out behind him, churning up clouds of dust, and eventually disappeared in the distance, leaving only the empty flatlands and a vast, empty sky.
Empty sky.
Empty everything.

McLean drove back to town, parked outside Rhoda's hotel, and went up to his room to collect his things. Rhoda was in his room, sitting cross-legged on the bed beside his packed suitcase, smoking and looking pretty sexy in a blood-

red sheath dress.

'The train leaves in twenty minutes,' she said. 'I was gettin' worried that you were gonna be late. Truth tell, I was hopin'.'

'That's nice,' McLean said. 'Why don't you come with me?'
Rhoda sighed. 'I swear, I've thought about it, but it just wouldn't work. You and me, we make a nice, casual couple, but livin' together is out. I'll never live with a man as long as I live. I know enough to know that much.'
'You were one of those girls?' McLean asked, as if he didn't already know.
'Yeah,' Rhoda replied laconically, exhaling smoke. 'All the men here have intimate knowledge of me.'
'Are you going to tell the cops about your dad?'
'No,' Rhoda said. 'He's old and sick and fadin' away with guilt. Why the hell should I bother him?'
'That's pretty decent of you, Rhoda.'
'No, it's not. He's my dad. Girls can't give up their fathers that easily, no matter what's been done to 'em. That's a hard fact of life.'
True enough, McLean thought, though he still felt quiet amazement. He looked at Rhoda with a new sense of respect and growing affection.
'How the hell did you manage to stay sane?' he asked.
'I just grew up overnight.'
'Obviously I had you figured all wrong.'
'That's the trouble with men, McLean.'
He leaned down and kissed her forehead, then held up his right hand. 'The keys for the rented Ford,' he said. 'How do I get to the station?'
'I'll drive you,' Rhoda said.
It only took a couple of minutes, but they had their excitements. The Rydell sisters were in Main Street, sitting on a swinging bench, both with their hands in their laps, both looking down at their feet. Their loose clothes revealed nothing.
'Don't tell me,' McLean said. 'It's their dad who picks their clothes.'
'Right,' Rhoda said. 'No red dresses for them. Their fathers, the rapists, are concerned that other men might lust after them. Aren't men really cute?'
'We're a swell bunch,' Mclean agreed.
The sun was burning down on the station. McLean got out of the car,

removed his suitcase from the trunk, glanced up at Jack Beale's big old house, and couldn't help shivering. Then he walked back to the front of the car and leaned down to the window.
'Thanks, Rhoda. I'll see you around.'
'No you won't, but the thought's nice. Have a wet dream on me, McLean.'
'I'll do that. Adios.'
He kissed her, then straightened up and walked away, not looking back to see the tears misting her eyes. He heard her cursing softly, then the car roared into life. It shot away with a squealing of tires as McLean reached the station. He glanced back over his shoulder to see the Ford in a cloud of dust. It turned around Beale's big house and disappeared, leaving silence behind.
McLean entered the station.

After carrying his suitcase out onto the platform, the first person that McLean saw was Anna. She was wearing a simple cotton dress that clung to her perfect body, being flattened by the beating wind, while the blonde hair whipped around her lovely face and fell like gold on her shoulders. She was sweeping the dust-wreathed platform with a broom as if the wind didn't matter.

Tom Beale, wearing the station-master's cap formerly worn by his father, was changing the timetables on the wall near the waiting room where his sisters had been abused, one after the other, three years ago.

When Tom and Anna saw McLean, they both stopped what they were doing and smiled at him. Tom had moved in with Anna, with the blessing of old Beth, and now both of them looked radiantly happy. That made McLean feel good, almost paternal, a human being at last.

Ignoring Tom, he took hold of Anna's wrists and turned the palms of her hands up.
'The scars are disappearing,' he said.
'Yeah,' Anna replied, 'and they won't come back. I give you that as a fact, McLean.'
McLean grinned sardonically, feeling the ache of love for her, but willing to bear the pain of his loss if it meant her salvation. 'I believe it,' he said, then let

her go and turned to Tom. 'You're just a country boy, a yokel, a rube... and one hell of a guy.'
'Thanks,' Tom said. 'I hope so.'
The train howled in the distance. McLean watched it approaching. It materialised out of featureless flatlands and spiralling columns of dust.
It looked like all hell out there.
When the train stopped at the station, McLean got on board, but turned back to face Anna and Tom.
'The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away,' he said. 'Some you win, some you lose. Good luck, kids.'
'Good luck, McLean.'
Both voices sounded as one as the trained pulled out of Trinity, heading for that distant horizon where the land met the sky.
God's light shone on all of them.

Information on other books by W. A. Harbinson can be found at:
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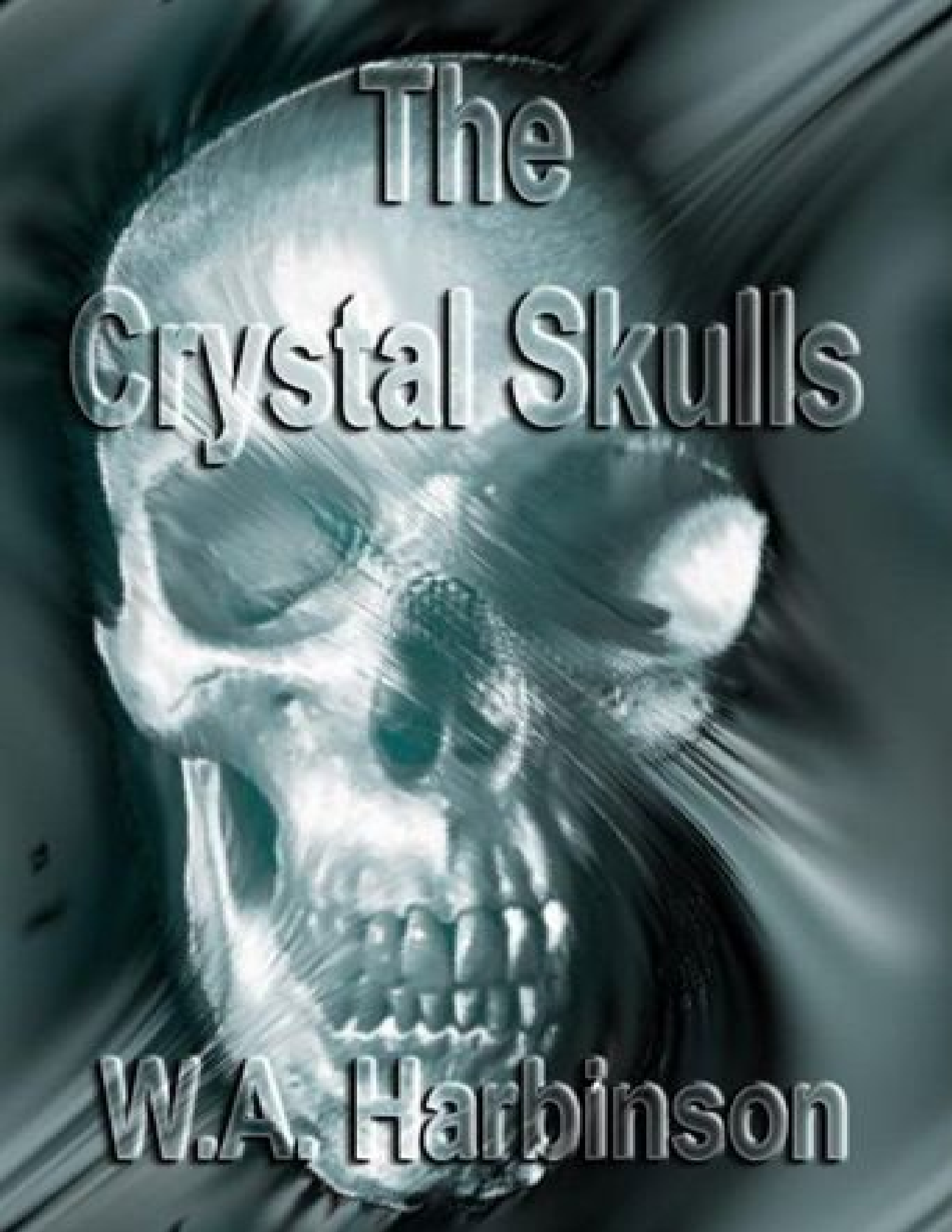
The
Crystal Skulls
W.A. Harbinson

W.A.Harbinson is the author of two bestselling novels, *Genesis* (1980) and *Revelation* (1982). His epic fictional series, 'Projekt Saucer', including *Inception, Phoenix, Genesis, Millennium,* and *Resurrection,* remained in print for most of the 1990s. An updated edition of Harbinson's seminal nonfiction work, *Projekt UFO: The Case for ManMade Flying Saucers* (1995) was published as a POD book in 2008. A science-fiction novelette, *Into The World of Might Be,* was also published as a POD book in 2008.
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The Crystal Skulls

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Custom Books Publishing

First published by New English Library in 1997 This edition published in 2008 by W.A.Harbinson
www.waharbinson.eu.com
ISBN 1438203527 ISBN 13: 9781438203522
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For Miles & Suzanne Walker &
Miles Jr.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Crystal Skulls is a work of fantasy and the fantastical should not be hemmed in by mere facts. There is, indeed, a Museum of Mankind in London, England, and it did, and possibly still does, display an early Mayan crystal skull. However, the Museum of Mankind mentioned in this novel is purely a figment of the author's voluptuous imagination, and the physical layout and security systems described herein bear no relation to those of the real Museum of Mankind and are not recommended to those planning burglary. Likewise, while there is a British Embassy in Bangkok, the British Consulate described in this novel does not exist in reality.

The pursuit of fiction is not the pursuit of facts, and *The Crystal Skulls* is entirely a work of fiction.

W.A.Harbinson West Cork, Ireland

Prologue

The Great Pyramid of El Castillo at Chichén Itzá, Yucatán, was bathed in the moonlight, under a star-filled sky, when two Mexican peasants, each using a hammer and chisel, chipped away the cement around one of the heavy stone slabs in the flat roof of the Shrine at the summit. Once the cement had been chipped away, they began prising the stone slab out of its ancient, dust-filled foundations.

Exposed to the chill night wind sweeping across the open-sided Shrine thirty metres above ground level, surrounded by the other Mayan ruins of this ancient site, the Mexican peasants were breathing harshly and sweating from their efforts to lift up a slab that had been embedded there for many centuries.

They were being watched intently, nervously, by a redhaired American with a scarred face who was dressed in a badly rumpled light tropical suit. Though normally a hard man, cold as ice, casually murderous, he could not help feeling nervous at the thought of what that equally murderous swine Lu Thong would do to him if, after all this time and effort, he returned empty-handed to Bangkok.

Either Lu Thong or that psychopathic bitch Mai Suphan, the American thought. Neither will welcome me back with a smile if I return without what they sent me here for. I'll be dead meat for sure.

Filled with dread at this thought, the American became impatient and, when the slab had been removed and set aside, he roughly pushed the peasants away and dropped to his knees to look into the dark rectangular hole. A few seconds later, when his eyes had adjusted to the darkness and he could see properly, he gave a low whistle of disbelief, then reached down into the hole and pulled out a macabre, eerily shining skull.

'God Almighty!' he whispered.

Holding the skull up in both hands, he turned it slowly in the moonlight beaming obliquely under the roof of the Shrine. It was a life-sized skull, made of clear crystal, with a smooth, domed head, two gaping, empty eye sockets, and parallel rows of perfect, exceptionally large teeth gritted together in a mouth whose upper lip merged with the cheek bones and the flat line of the nose. Everything – head, jawbone, eye sockets and teeth – was made from the same clear crystal and it appeared to have been carved from one solid

block, being without the slightest trace of a seam, except for the hinges of the jawbone.

In the moonlight it gave off an unreal, mesmeric glow that only enhanced its dreadful, frightening appearance.

The two Mexican peasants had started gibbering fearfully the instant they set eyes on the crystal skull. But now, as the American examined it, helplessly filling up with awe and exhilaration, thinking, *Even that animal Lu Thong can't touch me now*, they glanced up at the roof of the Shrine and let out wails of absolute, almost inhuman terror.

Startled, the American also looked up and saw something that defied his comprehension.

Though the roof of the Shrine was directly above him, he somehow saw, as if seeing *through* it, an enormous, saucer-shaped, pulsating light, materializing magically in the moonlit darkness of the sky and growing wider as it descended silently upon him.

Still looking up, disorientated by what he was seeing, suddenly thinking that he was dreaming, he squinted against the light, tried to study it more thoroughly, and imagined that within its oddly pulsating brilliance he could discern… *stars*.

Not the stars in a normal sky – which had, in fact, been erased by the brilliant light – but much bigger, far closer stars that formed a slowly spinning, glowing whirlpool, now only a few metres above him and either melting, or somehow obliterating, the roof of the Shrine.

'Well, I'll be damned!' he exclaimed in disbelief.

The two Mexican peasants had fallen to their knees on the floor of the Shrine and were wringing their hands and gibbering ever more fearfully, obviously offering up their prayers, when a much brighter light exploded out of that pulsating phenomenon – a blinding light that spread over the great temple – and the American was bathed in a wave of heat so fierce that it sucked the breath out of him and scorched him beyond the limits of pain.

He and his companions screamed dementedly as they burst into flames.

They collapsed on the instant, turning into three human torches, quivering in the spasms of death as they were covered in smoke. They were still burning, though no longer moving, released from pain through death, when the saucer-shaped light shrank back into the darkness, as if sucked up into a gigantic, invisible funnel, letting the moonlight return and the roof of the Shrine

reappear.
When the flames consuming the burning men finally died away, leaving only smouldering remains, the moonlight beamed obliquely on three hideously charred corpses… and on the miraculously untouched, gleaming crystal skull that had fallen from the scorched hands of the American. Now it rested on its chin, its face turned towards the east, on the windblown floor of the Shrine, on top of the ancient pyramid, high above the flat, moonlit Earth, far below the stars in the heavens.
Had anyone been left alive to study the skull at that moment, they would have seen, inside it, another cosmos of stars that, glowing and pulsating oddly, were swirling like a slow, silent whirlpool.
Those stars vanished with the stars in the heavens when dawn broke over the ruins.

Part One
Chapter One

Dawn was breaking when Tom Powell turned off the Mex.180 highway, heading for the ruins of Chichen Itzá. Twenty-nine years old, with a boyish, inexperienced face, unruly auburn hair and brown eyes that saw no evil, he was wearing rumpled blue denims, a sleeveless photographer's waistcoat over an open-necked red-and-blue checkered shirt, and a pair of laced-up, rubber-soled canvas boots.

He had left Mérida in the early hours of the morning with the intention of beating the heavy commercial traffic on the highway and now, as he left the main road and his rented jeep bounced over the rough gravel and potholes of the narrow track that wound through the soaring mahogany and dyewood trees of the rain forest, he felt proud of his initiative and was glad that he had decided to test his courage by coming on this trip alone. Indeed, he was deliberately taking this narrow back road to the ancient site as another test of his courage, determined, as he had been since leaving Mérida, not to be a normal tourist, resolved to shuck off the constraints of his past and to turn himself into a more worldly, independent man.

He was therefore very surprised when, mere minutes into the rain forest, he saw an attractive young lady up ahead, clearly Caucasian, wearing denims

and shirt, with only a rucksack on her back, frantically waving him down.

Tom carefully braked to a halt beside her.

‘Hi,’ she said.

Tom looked at her, speechless. He was often speechless in front of ladies. This one didn’t actually look like a ‘lady’ in her faded denims and shirt, with her blonde hair pinned up on her head under a peaked cap clearly intended to keep the sun off her prominent nose and sunburnt pale skin. She had sharp green eyes and full lips that seemed curved in a perpetual grimace of mistrust, but her body was slim and full-breasted, supported on long, shapely legs.

‘You dumb or something?’ she asked, sounding like a New York cab driver.

‘Pardon?’

‘I said “Hi” and you’re just standin’ there gawpin’. The cat got your tongue or what?’

‘Sorry,’ Tom said. ‘You just took me by surprise. What on earth are you doing out here?’

She rolled her eyes. ‘Bird watching.’

‘Really?’

She rolled her eyes again. ‘No, not really. I’m tryin’ to get to Chichén Itzá, which is where this road leads to. You’re going there, too, I guess.’

‘Yes,’ Tom said.

‘So… Are you gonna give me a lift or do I stand here and fry in the heat when that sun rises properly?’ ‘Of course,’ Tom said. ‘Naturally.’

Before he could change his mind, she removed her rucksack from her shoulders and threw it into the back of the jeep, then she clambered onto the seat beside him and strapped herself in.

‘Great,’ she said. ‘Let’s go.’

Disconcerted, wondering if he had done the wise thing in picking up this particular young lady, Tom started the jeep and drove off, making his way carefully over the potholes in the narrow track and trying to avoid the marshy ground around the trees on either side of his vehicle. He did, however, sneak a sideways

glance at his passenger and judged her to be in her early twenties. She was attractive in a kind of rough-hewn way, but when she popped some gum into her mouth and started chewing – not bothering to offer him any – she seemed distinctly aggressive.

‘So what’s your name?’ Tom asked.

‘Molly Beale,’ she replied, sighing as if aware that she would have to pay for the lift with forced conversation. ‘American?’ Tom asked.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘From Brooklyn.’

‘That’s in New York, isn’t it?’

Molly rolled her eyes for the third time. ‘Lord have mercy!’ she exclaimed.

‘I’m sorry. I’m not familiar with America.’

‘So it seems,’ Molly said.

Tom drove in silence for another minute or so, aware of the rising heat and humidity, then he broke the uncomfortable silence by saying, ‘I just thought it odd that you’d be in the rain forest instead of hitching a lift on the highway.’

‘What’s odd about it?’

‘The rain forest could be dangerous for a woman travelling alone,’ Tom said.

‘Dangerous. You gotta be kidding! What’s dangerous is that damned highway, I can tell you. You hitch a lift and you’ve got male hands crawlin’ over you like spiders – that’s a fact of life, buddy.’ Tom winced at her words, but Molly just went on, unperturbed. ‘Christ, these Mexicans! They see a white woman alone and they practically rape her with a glance, before actually tryin’ it on. After a couple of days of that, I’d had enough and decided to take the back route. I’d rather get eaten alive in this rain forest than deal with those bastids.’

Tom watched the road ahead, embarrassed by Molly’s way of talking. The sun was clearly rising and, though he couldn’t see it, he saw its light forming silvery striations between the tall trees, falling on the branches and green

leaves, forming luminous pools on the forest floor. The heat was rising as well.

‘You’ve come from Mérida?’ he asked her, now knowing what else to say.

‘Been all over,’ she replied. ‘Hitch-hiking through Mexico and Yucatán. I’ve been here forever.’

‘You’re interested in Mayan culture?’ Tom asked her. ‘Don’t know anything about it,’ Molly replied, ‘except what I’ve read in my stupid guidebooks. I just wanted to get away, distract myself with something different, and this place seemed exotic enough when I saw it on TV. So I said, “Go screw yourself,” to my useless boyfriend and then packed my rucksack and lit out with no particular plans. So, here I am.’

Tom sneaked another sideways glance at her to see her blowing a bubble with her gum, then sucking it back into her mouth. She certainly had a prominent nose and, as Tom glanced at her, she tapped it a couple of times with her index finger.

‘You’re looking at my hooter,’ she said, ‘so let’s get it over and done with. I’m Jewish on my Mom’s side. My Dad’s a bog-Irish immigrant. Does that give you problems?’

‘No, of course not,’ Tom said, even more embarrassed. ‘My Mom wanted me to be Jewish but Dad put a stop to it. He told me that I was a tart just like most other women and couldn’t be helped with religion. That probably made it easier for him when he felt up me up in bed – at least until I’d had enough of his crap and lit out of there. He was a bit of a lush, I guess, and used to beat up on my Mom, so she disappeared when I was only twelve years old, leaving me with him. With her gone, he had to do it with someone and he tried it with me until I lit out for good. I moved in with some junkie friends to a dive in the Lower East Side. Winos and junkies in the hallways, garbage stinkin’ up the joint, but even then it was better

than home, so I stayed on for a while.'
'You poor girl,' Tom muttered.
'Not so poor,' Molly said. 'It wasn't all that bad. I didn't take junk myself – I mean, I wanted to live a life, not wander around like a zombie – but my junkie friends looked after me as best they could. Then I got a job and, eventually, a boyfriend.'
'That must have been nice,' Tom said.
'A nightmare,' Molly said. 'Brad Crawford. What a creep! I was working in a supermarket, a checkout girl – damned boring, I can tell you – and he was working in the stock room, unpacking the crap we sold. Jet-black hair and big brown eyes, sleeves rolled up, muscles rippling, a grin most girls would kill for. He took me out for a beer and charmed me witless, then, of course we ended up in the sack and it went on from there. Downhill from Day One.' 'Deary me,' Tom said. He didn't know what else to say.
He wasn't used to this kind of conversation – the women he knew were not like this one – and it made him feel distinctly uncomfortable as he drove on through the forest. 'First mistake,' Molly said. 'I moved in with him, practically just around the corner, and his place was even worse than the one I'd been in. He hadn't cleaned it since *he'd* moved in, and it was clear, from the minute I stepped through the door, why he wanted me there. I worked night and day to keep that pig-pen clean, but he kept throwin' his beer cans on the floor and throwin' up on his moth-eaten rugs. Second mistake. I thought I could change him but he kept drinkin' like a fish, stayed out all night with his pals and other girlfriends, and obviously kept his muscles in trim by beatin' up on his women. Naturally, since I was his woman of the moment, I ended up black and blue. So between him and my old man, my so-called Dad, I figured I'd had enough of men. What bastids they are!'
She turned to glare angrily at Tom, obviously incriminating him in the crimes of all base men, making

him nervously finger the collar of his shirt with one hand while continuing to steer with the other. Cobwebs glistened on the branches of the trees slipping past on both sides of him.

‘Well, I…’ he began.

‘Blow you!’ Molly exclaimed. Tom nearly jumped out of his skin. ‘That’s what I said to that bastid. “Blow you, I’m getting’ out of here!’” And that’s just what I did. I waited until he was sleeping – drunk and snoring like a pig – then I stole his billfold and lit out of there, determined to be my own woman.’

She lit a cigaret without offering him one. Not that he smoked, but he would, at least, have appreciated the offer – as he would, indeed, have appreciated a piece of her gum to freshen his mouth, which was dry after his early morning drive. He thought this, with a little resentment, when he glanced sideways and noted that she was still noisily chewing her gum, when not puffing smoke from her cigaret. Fearful that she would see his sideways glance, he turned his eyes to the front again.

‘I’d already thought of Mexico.’ Molly certainly knew how to talk. ‘I mean, I’d seen it on TV – and so, like I said, I stole his goddamned billfold. I also took the cash he’d hidden under his mattress – ‘cause a fool with money, he didn’t have a bank account – and rode a Greyhound all the way to Tijuana, where I stopped for a while, trying to work out what to do with my future.’

‘By way of being your own woman,’ Tom ventured. ‘Yeah, right,’ Molly said, then she turned to stare at him, incidentally blowing a cloud of smoke over him. ‘Hey, you bein’ sarcastic, or what? You Limeys are famous for that.’

‘No! No!’ Tom exclaimed, almost stuttering, while trying to concentrate on the muddy track ahead, which was, he realized, much narrower than he had expected it to be – and potentially dangerous. The branches of the trees were scraping the jeep; the ditches on both sides were filled with

water. Tom was keen to test his courage in certain ways, but Molly Beale was distracting him. ‘I merely meant – ’ ‘Yeah, right.’ Molly looked to the front and exhaled another cloud of cigaret smoke. ‘Anyway, as you can imagine, between that bastid and my Dad I wasn’t exactly keen on men, and then, to make some bread, I took a job in a Tijuana, selling smokes in a casino.’ She inhaled again. ‘You know? Do I have to paint a picture? Black stockings, stiletto heels, my boobs bulging out of a bit of cloth that wouldn’t have covered a postage stamp – and I was instructed to lean forward, real low, letting a bit of cleavage show, when the gamblers asked for a pack of smokes and leered like serial killers.’

‘How awful,’ Tom said.

‘An easy number,’ Molly informed him. ‘I mean, the tips were gi-normous. Then, on top of that, you got all these invitations to all kinds of gatherings – parties and dinners and breakfast in bed, endless champagne to round out the night – and *they* paid for everything! Then I made the mistake of falling in love again and that screwed me up again.’

‘Oh, dear,’ Tom said. He didn’t know what else to say. He was shocked by her story, not to mention her vocabulary, and he was wondering if he’d be able to get rid of her when they reached Chichén Itzá. He sympathized with her, of course – her life had clearly been a nightmare – but he really just wanted peace and quiet, which was what he had come here for.

‘A damned gambler,’ Molly said. ‘I know how to pick ‘em, right? He liked to gamble and he was fifty-five years old and had the hots for young girls.’

‘And you are…?’ Tom asked.

‘Twenty-three.’

‘I see,’ Tom said.

Molly sighed, exhaling more smoke, then blew another bubble with her gum, popped it and sucked it back in again. ‘He was nice when he won,’ she said. ‘Real generous with

those greenbacks. There was nothing he wouldn't give you when he won – but, oh boy, when he lost!' She inhaled and coughed raggedly when exhaling, then waved the smoke from her face. 'Fists and boots,' he said. 'A real rave-up of despair. Accused me of bringin' him bad luck and then made me suffer accordingly. Of course, I lit out. I mean, I'd been that route before. First my Dad, then that bastid, Brad Crawford, now this lunatic who lost more than he won and
needed someone to blame. So I lit out again.'
Tom felt that at this point he should make a
contribution to the conversation, but when he glanced
sideways at Molly and saw the grim set to her lips – full
lips beneath a generous nose and, possibly, attractive when
she smiled, which so far she had not done – his
nervousness made him decide against it.
Instead, he returned his gaze to the front, concentrating
on the narrow track, watching out for fallen logs or wild
animals or, even worse, the bandits that he was convinced,
despite his optimistic, lying travel books, inhabited the rain
forest. Though he had come here to prove his manhood, he
still feared certain things.
'The same crap all over again,' Molly continued,
puffing another cloud of smoke and noisily chewing the
gum that would have refreshed Tom's dry mouth and
cleaned his unbrushed teeth. 'I took a job at the racetrack.
Goin' back to my roots, you know? I'd had enough of the
high-rollers, all those gamblers with greenbacks, an'
thought I'd fit in better where the gambling was done by
guys in coveralls. It could've been nice, really. I mean, I
had a protective window between me and them - the meshwire with the small slot below – and they just slid their
hands under it, handing over their dollars. Unfortunately, I had a boss. He was broader than he was tall. He had a wife you would have died to avoid and his kids were real monsters. Frustrated, right? Wanted somethin' more to live for. Couldn't keep himself from pawing me all over and breathed like a gorilla. Did I get involved? Yeah! I mean, I needed the job. So I ended up meeting him in motels and pretending I liked it. Then his wife found out. I

mean, she found us at the wrong time in the wrong place doin' the wrong thing. She walked in when she found out where we were and all hell broke loose. Of course – '

'You lit out again,' Tom said.

'Yeah, right. I lit out again.' She turned to glare at him, lips grim, green eyes blazing. 'Say, are you bein' sarcastic again? You bein' a Limey an' all.'

'No! No!' Tom denied strenuously, his heart racing. 'I merely meant to say – '

'Yeah, right,' Molly said. 'Okay. No sweat, pal. Anyways, I just lit out of there and started travellin' again. Hitch-hiking, mostly. Not really knowing where I was going and not really caring. Hitched all the way through Mexico, enjoyin' the sights, and then bought myself a little guide book and let it lead me to here. Just wanted out, right? To be on my own, right? Thought I might as well see a bit of somethin' that I might never see again. Pyramids, old ruins – that kind of crap – so that's why I'm here. What about you?'

'Me?'

'Yeah, you. You think I'm talkin' about the man in the moon? Where do *you* come from?'

'England,' Tom said. He didn't wish to discuss himself. 'England,' Molly said. 'Terrific. Now I know all there is to know.'

'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to sound so abrupt. It's just that I've little of interest to say. I'm just – '

'You're wearin' one of those photographer's jackets – you know? That canvas number with all them pockets for lenses and things. Are you a photographer?'

'Well, no, not really,' Tom replied, embarrassed once more. 'I have a camera, of course – I mean, I take the odd picture – but I'm not a professional photographer. I only take photos for personal gratification. The jacket – ' 'Yeah,' Molly interjected. 'I noticed that all those pockets are empty. Just decoration. So why the hell are you

wearin' that kind of number?'
'It seemed appropriate for tropical climates,' Tom explained, trying to regain his lost dignity. 'I mean, it has lots of pockets – '
'All empty,' Molly reminded him.
' which hold money and passport and various documents,' Tom continued doggedly, 'and, of course, though it's quite warm when one needs warmth, it doesn't have sleeves, which keeps one cool when required. So, though I'm not a photographer, it *did* seem like a sensible garment to wear on this particular trip.'
'Yeah, right,' Molly said.
Feeling humiliated, Tom decided not to respond and concentrated instead on his driving, taking note of the striations of sunlight now beaming down through the soaring trees and of the heat, which was steadily rising and making him sweat. He was also sweating because his heart was racing, but he tried to ignore that fact.
'So, come on, *tell me*!'
'Pardon?' Tom said.
'Tell me why you're here. Just touring, is that it?' 'Well, yes, sort of,' Tom said, not wishing to discuss his personal life.
'Just touring?'
'Yes,' Tom confirmed.
'All on your little lonesome?'
'Yes,' Tom said.
Molly took a last drag on her cigaret and flicked the butt out into the rain forest, not concerned that she might set it on fire. She then turned to blow the smoke in Tom's face, while offering a slight, sardonic smile.
'You speak really nice,' she said.
'Do I?'
'Yeah. At least to my ears. I mean, you sound really English, kinda posh, an' I'm not used to that.'
'Really?'

‘Really.’
‘I don’t really speak posh,’ Tom said. ‘It’s just normal English. But then you *are* from New York.’
‘Where we don’t speak proper English,’ Molly said. ‘I didn’t mean – ’
‘No, of course not.’ Molly leaned back in her seat, blew a bubble of gum, popped it and sucked the gum back into her mouth before speaking again. ‘So you’re touring the Yucatán on your little lonesome. Why’s that, may I ask?’ Tom didn’t wish to discuss it. It was still too painful for him. ‘I don’t wish to discuss it,’ he said. ‘It’s a personal matter.’
Molly turned to glare at him, obviously outraged. ‘You don’t wanna discuss it? Oh, terrific! I mean, you don’t mind askin’ *me* a lot of questions, prying into *my* personal life, but now you don’t wanna discuss your own business. Boy, that really takes the cake!’
Tom couldn’t recall asking her any questions at all, but he didn’t wish to say so in case she became even angrier.
‘Well,’ he said, hesitating, his embarrassment now acute, ‘like you, I came to get away from things.’
‘What things?’
‘Well…’
‘Yeah?’
‘Actually, I’ve just been through a rather painful divorce,’ Tom confessed, feeling ever more uncomfortable, not wanting to think about it, ‘and I came here to put it all behind me and sort myself out.’
‘Why here?’ Molly asked, sounding none too sympathetic, which, given the life she had lived, might have been understandable.
‘I’ve always been deeply interested in Mayan culture,’ Tom explained, sounding rather portentous, perhaps because he was uneasy, ‘and so I decided that coming here, seeing the ancient sites at first hand, as it were, would be a way of finding perfect peace while gaining intellectual satisfaction.’

‘That sounds like a right mouthful,’ Molly retorted, ‘but if you’ve come to see the sites, here they are. What more could you want, pal?’

And they were, indeed, leaving the gloomy rain forest behind them and heading along an open road that led to the vast sprawl of Chichén Itzá, its great pyramids and ruined temples and soaring columns bathed in dawn’s pearly light. ‘Oh, how wonderful!’ Tom exclaimed.

Chapter Two

Though a nominal fee was normally charged for entrance to the site, there was no one on duty yet and Tom was able to drive right up to the low fence at the edge of the vast, smooth green lawns that stretched out in all directions around the ruins. Once there, he braked to a halt, turned off the ignition, applied the handbrake and climbed out.

As he removed his camera from the bag in the rear seat and slung its strap around his neck, letting the camera rest on his chest, Molly clambered out of the other side of the jeep to yawn loudly and stretch herself. When she did that, the shirt tightened on her body and showed off her fine breasts and slim waist. Tom felt a sexual stirring that he tried to ignore. Instead, he let himself fill up with awe at what he was seeing. Molly, however, merely blew more bubbles of gum, her face a picture of cynical bemusement.

‘Man, this is weird!’ she exclaimed.

The ruins certainly looked eerie in the dawn light, with their Chac Mools, friezes of ancient warriors, carved jaguars, soaring columns shaped like serpent bodies, their heads at ground level, and great stone stairways with sculpted serpent balustrades. Immediately ahead, beyond the fence, was what Tom most wanted to see: the great pyramid of El Castillo, with its four massive stairways facing the cardinal points and leading up to the Shrine on the high summit.

Impressed by that sight, Tom clambered over the low fence, again followed by Molly, then went up to the pyramid and started walking around its immense greystone mass, with Molly sticking close to him. Now genuinely awestruck, he took in the pyramid’s calendric-cycle panels and many terraces and steps, wondering at the ingenuity behind it all and wishing

that he could view it alone, as he had planned originally. When he reached the north-west side, he stopped walking and just stared at the ancient temple in respectful silence.

'You look disappointed,' Molly said, having blown another bubble of gum, popped it and sucked it back in, clearly not as impressed as was Tom.

Understanding instantly why he wanted to be here alone – and certainly without the proximity of this bubblegum-chewing, cigaret-smoking, New York floozie – Tom replied: 'I'm only disappointed because I really wanted to come here during either the spring or the fall equinox, in March and September, when – '

'The *what*?' Molly interjected.

'The equinoxes,' Tom explained. 'That's when the sun crosses the equator, and night and day are of equal length in every part of the Earth.'

'Big deal,' Molly said. 'But what's it got to do with that pile of stones?'

Tom sighed. 'During the equinoxes, an unusual solar phenomenon, the interplay of light and shadow creates a sunlit serpent on this side of the pyramid. That serpent is about thirty-four metres long and it appears to slide down the building to join the head of the stone serpent at the bottom of the steps. As you can see,' he continued before Molly could interrupt him again, waving his right hand to indicate the serpent-shaped columns and sculpted serpent balustrades of this and the other ruins, 'the serpent is very much part of the Mayan culture. So clearly this temple was created deliberately to have that sunlit serpent materialize, almost magically, during the summer and fall equinoxes. That's rather marvellous, don't you think?'

Molly stopped chewing, studied the north-west side for a moment, then said, 'Men need their little toys to play with, including their snakes, which probably made the Mayan males think of their – '

'I *beg* your pardon?' Tom interjected, outraged.

'So what's all that other crap I see?' Molly asked, not returning to her original sentence. 'All those panels and things.'

Shocked by what he viewed as her philistine nature, but also deeply embarrassed, Tom blushed and coughed into his clenched fist. Removing his hand from his mouth and wondering how he could get rid of this crass creature, he said, 'The panels correspond to the number of years in the Mayan calendric cycles, so there are fifty-two in all, and there are eighteen of those terraces on each side, with each side representing the eighteen-month

religious year.'
'There are only twelve months in the year,' Molly corrected him.
'Not for the Mayans,' Tom said, being a patient man. 'As for the steps,' he continued doggedly, 'leading up to the summit, upon which the Shrine is built, there are ninety-one steps on each side, adding up to three hundred and sixty four, so if you add the summit, or the floor of the Shrine, which is treated as another step, you have three hundred and sixty five, which is the number of days in the year. So the outside of the temple was created as a kind of religious calendar.'
'Gee, whiz, you sure know your stuff.' Molly chewed her gum even more vigorously while studying the great pyramid, obviously trying to make sense of what she was being told. 'So is it solid?' she asked eventually. 'Or is there something inside it?'
'Well, it *is* a temple,' Tom emphasized, as if speaking to a child, 'so it would hardly be solid. Inside is the temple built to Kukulcán. It contains a jaguar-throne encrusted with seventy-three jade disks, representing spots and eyes, as well as a reclining Chac Mool monolith in an adjoining room.'
'A *Chac Mool*?'
'A statue of the Messenger of the Gods, formerly used as a vital prop in sacrificial rites.'
'What kinda sacrifice?'
'Human hearts, torn from the living flesh of the unfortunate victims, were flung, still steaming and beating, into the laps of the Chac Mools by knife-wielding priests as offerings to Kululcán, the Quetzalcoátl of the Mayans.'
Molly shivered melodramatically. 'Oh, boy!' Obviously, like an adolescent at a horror movie, she enjoyed feeling shivery. 'So what's the Quetzalcoátl? Some kinda high priest?'
Clearly she was at least *listening* to what Tom was telling her. 'Not quite,' he said. 'The Quetzalcoátl of the Toltecs was a legendary figure widely believed to have arrived as a god in the tenth century with the first wave of Toltec-Nahua invaders. The name means 'plumed serpent' in both languages.'
'Back to phallic symbols again.'
'Yes,' Tom said, determined to educate the brainless, possibly sex-obsessed creature. 'And while that mythical figure came to be thought of as the incarnation of the god, the real Kukulcán didn't actually arrive until the middle of the thirteenth century. He's been credited with founding Mayapán

as the civil capital of the peninsula, though this place, Chichén Itzá, long remained as its principal religious center.'
Molly nodded, then looked again, more thoughtfully, at the Castillo. 'So why's that pyramid called the Castillo?' she asked, 'when it was really a temple?'
Surprised and pleased by the percipience of the question, Tom gladly explained. 'Because the Spanish used it as a fortress.'
'That makes sense,' Molly said. 'Can we go inside?'
'Unfortunately, not yet, though I certainly plan to enter it later, when the guards open the place properly and they start selling tickets.'
'So why'd you come so early?' Molly asked.
'I wanted to get here before the tourists arrived. I wanted to contemplate the place in reverent silence.'
'Now you've got me makin' noise,' Molly said.
'I don't mind,' Tom lied.
Appreciating that she might not be as dumb as she sometimes sounded, he suggested that they explore the whole site together.
'Sure, what not?' she responded.
First, they walked the rest of the way around the great temple, with Tom taking photos of its four separate sides. When he was satisfied that he had seen enough, he led them on to the Ball Court. More than 500 feet wide, it had massive stone platforms on either end of its vast walls. As they crossed it in silence, with Tom taking more photos, he tried visualizing the young men of the mysterious Nahua and Mayan people playing their ball games here.
'This is a kind of football pitch,' he explained to Molly, who was glancing left and right with searching eyes. 'The game was called *Tlachtli* or, in the Mayan, *Pok-To-Pok – '*
'Sounds like sex,' Molly interjected with a grin. 'You know? Have a poke '
Tom ignored the saucy remark. 'From the written records,' he continued, 'it seems to have been a rather bizarre mixture of soccer, basketball, and lacrosse. The object was to propel a solid *chicle* ball through high stone rings using only the forearms, knees and hips, all of which were well padded.'
'Not too dangerous, then,' Molly noted.
'It could be,' Tom replied. 'As you can see from the magnificent reliefs on those two walls, the losers were often sacrificed.'
Molly studied the two reliefs and shivered. 'Hell's bells!' she said.

Halfway across the Ball Court, Tom turned north onto the *saché*, or sacred road, that ran for approximately 300 yards to what appeared to be a solid mass of jungle.
'What the hell are you goin' there for?' Molly asked. 'There's nothing there but the trees!'
'Yes, there is,' Tom said.
He was right. At the end of the sacred road, they came abruptly, almost shockingly, to what seemed like a gaping wound in the forest: a vast hole nearly 200 feet across and dropping just over seventy feet to the surface of a darkly glittering jade-green pool.
'Oh, boy!' Molly exclaimed softly, her eyes growing big as she looked down.
'This is the *Cenote Sagrado*, or Well of Sacrifices,' Tom explained with satisfaction, noting the look of awe on Molly's normally cynical face. 'The victims were hurled into that pool to propitiate the god *Chac*.'
'Virgins, no doubt,' Molly said. 'And thrown down there by males.'
'Not only virgins, but children of both sexes, most of them under twelve years old.'
'The barbaric bastids!' Molly exclaimed with deep feeling.
'Not really,' Tom said. 'It was a deeply religious rite. However, the pool was dredged in 1968 and they found not only the bones of those poor children, but also many artefacts – hundreds of tiny copper bells, gold ornaments, jade fragments. Not that this cleared up the mystery of the Mayans, since apart from some 1,200-year-old jade fragments and bits of pottery, most of the artefacts were from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and of Centraland-South American origins.'
'A real mystery, these Mayans, right?'
'Right,' Tom said.
Believing that he was getting her serious attention at last, and hoping that this would make his tour more enjoyable, he led her back along the sacred path to the *Tzompantli* and the House of the Eagles and Tigers, the first a large platform of human skulls, the second a smaller platform adorned with carved eagles and jaguars holding human hearts in their claws.
'A bloodthirsty bunch of bastids,' Molly said. 'You don't need a fancy education to tell *that* about them.'
'That's a simplified way of looking at it,' Tom said, offended by her crass comment.

‘Oh, yeah?’ Molly retorted.
Deciding that he may have been wrong in imagining that he was gaining her *serious* attention, Tom took some more photos, then led her to the magnificent Temple of the Warriors. As large as El Castillo, it was fronted with a colonnade of square columns carved with plumed warriors and dominated by a recumbent Chac Mool, gazing towards the pyramid of El Castillo and flanked by two enormous serpents columns.
‘More phallic symbols,’ Molly said.
‘Do you mind?’ Tom responded, sounding like a stern headmaster. ‘There’s more to this architecture than – ’
‘Violence and sex,’ Molly interjected. ‘Torn-out hearts and snakes. Don’t give me any intellectual crap to justify your pitiful male ego. These bastids were just like all men, and their women were, as usual, victims.’
‘That’s ridiculous!’
‘Oh, yeah?’
‘It’s a gross simplification. Clearly, you know nothing about the ancient religions or those who once practised them.’
‘All men,’ Molly reminded him. ‘It was the women who were sacrificed, remember?’
Outraged again, Tom glanced south and east to see the Court of the Thousand Temples with its remaining columns, representing giant plumed serpents, rising out of the surrounding rubble.
Oh, God, he thought, more serpents. She’ll go mad if she sees them. Clearly, she’s a deranged Women’s Libber. How on earth can I lose her?
‘Can I just explain – ’ he began.
‘No, you can’t,’ Molly said firmly. ‘These bastids ripped the hearts out of virgins, threw them into that goddamned pool, then raised monuments to their own supposed glory. What’s that if it isn’t male ego runnin’ rampant as usual?’
Shocked almost speechless, Tom turned away and started walking back to his jeep.
‘Where you going?’ Molly called after him.
Trying to control his anger, Tom turned back to face her. ‘To my jeep,’ he said. ‘I have to leave now.’
‘Already?’
‘Yes, already.’

‘I thought you wanted to see inside the temples.’
‘I’ve changed my mind,’ Tom said. ‘I have to travel on to Uxmal and I’d like to go now.’
He hurried away from her, heading back to the great pyramid of El Castillo, which in truth he had wanted to climb before the Visitors’ Center opened and more crass tourists like Molly made his life a misery. Now, however, he was so angry, so determined to get rid of her, that he kept on walking past the pyramid – until stopped by the challenge in her voice, ringing out loud and clear from where she had come up right behind him.
‘Hey, you!’ she called out.
Tom stopped and turned to face her again. She grinned and pointed up to the summit of the pyramid. ‘Don’t you want to go up there?’
‘No.’
‘Why not?’
‘I’ve seen all I wish to see,’ Tom said.
‘You’re lying.’
‘I am not!’
‘That thing up top, the…?’
‘Shrine.’
‘Yeah, right, the Shrine. It’s supposed to have a great view of the Court of the Thousand Columns and the Temple of the Warriors. They’d make really good photos – and you know that if you don’t take those photos, you’ll never forgive yourself. So why aren’t you doing it?’
‘I don’t wish to.’
‘You do. It’s just ‘cause I’m here. If I wasn’t here, you’d be climbing that thing and taking photos from up there.’
‘I would not.’
‘Scared of heights?’
Tom sucked his breath in, trying to control his racing heart. She was, of course, correct. More than anything else, he had wanted to climb to the summit of the pyramid, yet he now found himself reluctant to do so – not only because she was annoying him, but also, as she had clearly deduced, because, as he realized when he glanced upwards, he *was* afraid of heights.
‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ he said.
‘You’re afraid of heights,’ she insisted.
‘I am not!’

‘You are!’
‘If you’re so damned smart, why don’t you come with me?’
‘I will,’ Molly said.
Realizing that he was trapped, Tom strode manfully to the massive steps of the pyramid, took a deep breath, and then began the arduous, dizzying climb to the summit. Molly joined him, coming up behind him, soon catching up with him, and grinning when she saw him perspiring and heard his heavy breathing. He was breathing heavily not only from exertion, but from visible nervousness.
‘Are you nervous?’ Molly asked, when they were only halfway up and had stopped for a rest, though Tom pretended that he had done so to take photos of the surrounding landscapes.
‘Of course not,’ Tom replied, squinting bleary-eyed through the camera’s viewer and worrying that he might faint, given the fact that the ground was already far below him. ‘But if *you’re* nervous, by all means go back down and I’ll continue alone.’
‘No way,’ Molly retorted. ‘I used to keep pigeons on my roof when I lived in Brooklyn. I’ve always liked heights.’
Defeated again, Tom clambered up higher, surprised to find how tall the steps were, but eventually had to stop for another rest, when, trying to hide his exhaustion and nervousness, he took some more photos.
‘So what’s your fascination with Mayan culture?’ Molly asked, glancing about her and also squinting against the morning’s brightening light.
‘Oh,’ Tom said, surprised to hear an intelligent question from her and glad to be distracted from his fear of heights. ‘Their… their mysterious origins, I suppose.’
‘What’s so mysterious about ‘em?’
‘Well…’ Tom hesitated, wondering if he could manage to discuss such esoteric matters with her, but relieved to be talking instead of climbing. ‘Well,’ he began again, ‘we really know so little about them. In fact, all we really know about them is what you see before you. We *do* know that the Mayan empire included present-day Guatemala, British Honduras, Honduras, Salvador, and, of course, Mexico and Yucatán, but we only know that from the evidence of their great lost cities.’
‘Like this one, right?’
‘Right. But we still don’t know where they came from, why they periodically

abandoned their cities only to reoccupy them centuries later, and why their great civilization broke down and eventually dispersed even before the arrival of the Spaniards. So, given this, the Mayans were surely one of the most mysterious people on Earth, which is what makes them especially fascinating – at least to *me*.'

'I can tell you're an intellectual,' Molly responded, chewing gum, blowing bubbles, 'so let me tell you something about intellectuals: they all have holes in their brains.'

'Oh? How come?' Despite himself, Tom was becoming intrigued by this blunt-tongued young American lady. She had the confidence of all fools, he thought, and that lent her a certain charm.

'They can't see the woods for the trees,' Molly explained. 'I mean, these Mayans, they're probably just like our American Indians – like, they've been here since time began, right? There ain't no mystery to it.'

'Ah, yes,' Tom said, glancing down upon the lawns far below, but quickly looking away again, feeling dizzy. 'That theory belongs to the "Independent Origin" school of thought – '

'Pardon?'

' – which holds that American Man – in this case, the Mayans – was here from the beginning. However, there *is* another school of thought, the diffusionist theory, which holds that a large body of evidence indicates that other races – Chinese, Etruscans, Negroes, Phoenicians and Jews – '

'Don't drag *us* into this!'

' – came here first and contributed elements of their own culture to the Mayans.'

'Just hold on there, pal. Regarding us Jews – '

'However,' Tom continued, now enraptured with his own thoughts, being distracted from the dizzying heights, 'wherever the Mayans came from, they were almost certainly in this peninsula as early as 1500 BC, and it's possible – only *possible* – that their many migrations were due to periods of drought. As to their disintegration and ultimate dispersal, it is possible – just *possible* – that during one of the many droughts the peasants revolted, slaughtered the ruling priests and nobles, and thus, depriving themselves of their knowledgeable leaders, ordained their own destruction.'

'Possible,' Molly echoed him.

‘Pardon?’
‘Only possible. You intellectuals don’t know nothin’ from nothin’ – you’re just making guesses. With guys like you running loose in Academia, I’m glad I didn’t have a proper education.’
‘Very funny,’ Tom said.
Molly grinned at him. ‘You wanna start climbing again?’
‘Why not?’ Tom said boldly.
This time, Molly took the lead and Tom, though resenting that he was behind and below her, could not help feeling comforted by her presence, which somehow seemed protective, even though, when you really thought about it, he would have been more protected had she been behind and below him, to possibly break his fall if he slipped. In the event, after more strenuous effort, he followed her up onto the flat roof of the pyramid, this being the floor of the Shrine, which had its own roof, and gratefully crawled into its breeze-blown, cool, silent shadows.
That was when Molly screamed.

Chapter Three

In his palatial home in the rich man’s quarter of Bang Kapi, Bangkok, Thailand, the wealthy and powerful criminal Lu Thong was having lunch with the beautiful, diabolically evil Mai Suphan. Having just removed his golden, catlike body from his wide bed – not quite as catlike as Mai Suphan’s, but certainly just as slim – he was seated at the bamboo table in his dressing gown of shiny Thai silk, handwoven and dyed by the peasants whom he ruthlessly exploited.

‘So, my dear,’ he was saying to Mai Suphan as he smoked one of the cigarets that he was convinced, rightly or wrongly, would kill him sooner or later, though sooner, he often thought, might be better than later, ‘what is the situation with regard to the pharmaceuticals?’

He spoke perfect English with an Oxford accent of which he was proud, having been educated at that excellent university. His father, a Bangkok businessman of dubious reputation, had wanted him to be a corporate lawyer, which would have helped the family business, but Lu Thong, perhaps taking after his father and certainly loathing the English weather, had, upon graduating with a Law degree, returned home to create a criminal empire

based on drugs, prostitution and, more to his personal liking, the sale of stolen works of art and antiques. By ‘pharmaceuticals’ he did, of course, mean drugs and Mai Suphan understood this, being one of his most efficient lieutenants as well as his remarkably sensual, untrustworthy mistress.

‘We have no problems,’ she now told him, finishing off her caviar on toast and dabbing at her luscious lips with a hand-painted paper napkin of the kind used only by the exceptionally wealthy. ‘Every dealer in Bangkok is now under our control, and the streets, it can safely be said, are yours to command.’

‘I’m surprised you’ve had no problems,’ Lu Thong said, exhaling a thin stream of smoke and fully aware that Mai Suphan, though his mistress, was not a girl to be trusted. Like many a Thai girl who had come up the hard way, she had very expensive, Westernized tastes and she was, furthermore, as independent as a wild cat in the forest. Sooner or later she would want to be her own woman. He would have to watch out for that.

‘You mean those who refused to cooperate?’

‘Exactly,’ Lu Thong said.

‘They’re all either in their graves or went up in smoke,’

Mai said, referring to the crematorium, which was how most in Thailand preferred to go to their Maker. Most of the drug dealers, coming from traditional families, had gone up in smoke. ‘Not one has survived.’

Lu Thong smiled. ‘I’m sure you enjoyed that little task, my sweet.’

‘I’m sweet because I enjoyed it.’

‘Your pleasures run to the diabolical,’ Lu Thong said, ‘and I find that irresistible.’

They were sitting on velvet cushions placed on the floor on both sides of a low glass-topped table. Mai, wearing a skin-tight Malaysian *cheongsam* slit up to the thigh, curled her long, shapely legs beneath her, drawing his dark, glittering gaze to her silken skin and perfect ankles in stiletto-heeled shoes.

‘You think I’m evil,’ she said.

‘I don’t believe in the concept. I only believe in what men – and women - *do*. And they do what they need to do in order to survive – no more and no less. Moral judgement, the concept of good and evil, becomes redundant when a man – or a woman - knows only one way to survive and has no choice but to take it. Where is the evil here? No, my dear, I do not think you’re evil; I think you are as you were born to be – and you can’t be anything else.’

‘*I* think I’m evil,’ Mai said, ‘but I rather enjoy it.’
‘I’m sure you do,’ Lu Thong said.
He studied her face, which was beautiful beyond compare, and wondered how such beauty could mask a soul so utterly black. She didn’t have an evil face – for indeed it was sublime: high cheekbones, enormous liquid brown eyes, an almost perfect, piquant nose and the kind of full lips that made men imagine the most exquisite pleasures. It was also, however, a face that could become all things to all men by shifting through moods of darkness and light in a way that bordered on the prismatic. She was an actress at heart, only alive when playing roles, the more dangerous and deadly the better. Certainly she was as skilled at melting a hard man’s heart as she was at destroying the soul of a decent man or, if the occasion called for it, coldbloodedly killing him.
Lu Thong understood this because he’d virtually created her, abducting her from her jungle *kampong*, rescuing her from the thatched shacks raised high on stilts, from the stench of the open drains, from the squawking chickens and the goats, from the old men smoking opium and the women ageing dreadfully before their time because of endless labour and lack of hope. Mai had been abducted by one of Lu thong’s roaming gangs of brigands – the ones who regularly raided the *kampongs* and trading boats, pillaging and looting, murdering all witnesses, and abducting young girls for the slave trade. Mai had been such a girl, a rare beauty in rags, and Lu Thong’s brigands had carried her off in their boat and brought her, with other abducted girls, to one of Lu Thong’s many Bangkok brothels. There he had known her for the first time: her ravishing beauty and lust for life, her seductiveness and cruelty, the pleasure she gained from sex and violence, having been abused as a child, all of which made her a woman to reckon with. So he had decided, in the fullness of time, having personally sampled her sensual artistry and total lack of morality, that he could mould her into what he wanted her to be and then use her for better things.
This he had done. But she was even better than he had thought, a natural talent, an unscrupulous little witch who could never be trusted. It was no accident, therefore, that he had carefully trained her, refined her love of violence, encouraged her lust for wealth and power, eventually turning her into his deadliest, most efficient lieutenant in his ever-expanding world of vice and crime. She was ideal as a tool for blackmail, for various forms of

entrapment, and finally, when he had addicted her to drugs, as a killing machine. She was a cold, calculating, clever woman, dangerous even to him.
‘Actually,’ she now said, having learnt her perfect English from him, ‘I’m just a simple girl with a simple girl’s needs, easily satisfied.’ She raised her glass of champagne before her melting brown eyes, alight with selfconfidence. ‘Champagne and caviar and great wealth. What else does a girl need?’
‘Sex?’
‘That’s for the taking.’
‘For your kind, that’s true. I consider myself lucky to have you just by snapping my fingers, but I know you have others.’
‘So do you,’ Mai said. ‘You’ve always told me that boredom kills lust, variety being the spice of life, and that I, like you, should take what I can where I find it. What you tell me, I practise.’
Lu Thong smiled again, amused by her impertinence. He had strangled other women for less, but Mai Suphan was a special case. Being dangerous, she kept him on edge and that was better than boredom.
He had a low boredom threshold, finding most of life banal, and he needed the thrill of danger, high risk and conquest, to regenerate his easily depleted spirit and strengthen his flagging will to live. Mai Suphan was such a challenge, being treacherous beyond belief, but he still needed power beyond measure to keep him afloat. For that he would need the Crystal Skull – and it loomed large in his thoughts.
‘You do what I tell you,’ he said, ‘because it gives you more freedom than you could possibly have otherwise. You do what I tell you because it suits you, but when it doesn’t, you’ll stop.’
‘And then?’
‘Then we’ll come into conflict.’
Smiling like a Cheshire cat, Mai placed her champagne glass back on the table, then leaned forward to sniff up the cocaine that lay like snow on its surface. As she did so, the silk *cheongsam* rippled over her body, outlining every exquisite curve and hollow, making Lu Thong breathe deeply. Hearing that sound, Mai straightened up again and said, ‘You’ve just had me.’
‘And will have you again if I so desire.’
‘You’re insatiable,’ Mai said. When she leaned back on her hands, her long black hair fell onto the cushions, spreading out like a rug. ‘You’re insatiable

because you're restless,' she said. 'Like a spoilt boy, you've smashed all your toys and now need something new.'
'What toys?' Lu Thong asked.
Mai waved her right hand, indicating the spacious lounge with its rare paintings, glittering chandeliers, antiques and rare crystals, some purchased legally, but most of them stolen and all of them priceless. 'All of this,' she said. 'All the wealth you've acquired. You've got it because it was a challenge to acquire it and now it means nothing to you. What comes after this?'
What a smart bitch she is, Lu Thong thought. Too smart for her own good. I drag her out of the *kampongs*, I teach her everything she knows, and now she throws her knowledge back in my face. It's my own fault, of course.
But he had to admire her for it, so he told half of the truth. 'I'm bored with drugs and sex – even with my wealth and power – but I'm compensating by reaching beyond the merely rare and priceless – the world's great paintings and antiques; those bought and sold behind closed doors – and am now striving to obtain only those artefacts that are not only rare, but legendary.'
'What does that mean?'
Lu Thong offered a loud sigh, feeling oddly inadequate, and turned his head to gaze through the panoramic window that overlooked the sprawling city of Bangkok, with its 3,000,000 lost souls. They were all lost, of course, because this was God's wish (or so Lu Thong thought) and they included the wealthy of this very area, Bang Kapi, the squatters of Klong Toei, where Lu Thong's drug business thrived, and the tolerably poor of Din Daeng and Hua Mak, ghettoized in their welfare-housing estates and more fodder for Lu Thong's pimps and drug traffickers. Most Thais called Bangkok 'Krung Thep' – the City of Angels – and Lu Thong, who was fond of the decadence of Los Angeles, always thought of that great American city, where crime was richly rewarded, when he considered the cesspit he now ruled. Down there, in the sweltering humidity, around the banks of the Chao Phraya river, the Chinese of Samp Peng, the Indians of Wang Burapha, and even the Westerners in the affluent eastern section of the city were all subjected, in one way or the other, to his rule. The city was overcrowded and this overcrowding, not unlike that of a bee's nest, was honey to Lu Thong. He exploited not only the poverty, but the gap between rich and poor, as well as the witless yearning of foreigners for exotic experiences. Thus, his nightclubs and restaurants, his

bars and brothels, brought him excellent revenue.
Nevertheless – and this saddened him – he could also see down there the many *wats*, or Buddhist monasteries, over three hundred in all, that upheld the values with which he had been raised, but now could not accept. He was a religious man at heart – he felt that life must have some meaning – but until he could find something greater than life's banality, the meaningless crawl from birth to death, he would never be able to sleep well without his nightcap of opium. For this reason – to rise above the need for opium and other sedatives, including Mai Suphan – he required nothing less than the world's greatest treasure.
He needed the Crystal Skull.
Sighing again, turning back to the gorgeous Mai Suphan, he said, 'There are treasures, my dear, that you cannot even begin to imagine – treasures so rare that they're often assumed to be legendary, rather than actual artefacts, but treasures that actually *do* exist and are so highly prized that only those with extraordinary determination – and, of course, the financial means – can possibly obtain them.'
'Such as?'
'The missing Lodestone from the Great Pyramid of Giza, said to be the Philosopher's Stone imbued with unearthly powers. The Excalibur Sword of King Arthur, also imbued with magical powers. The Holy Grail, which may or may not exist as a physical object but is widely believed to be the chalice used by Christ at the Last Supper and therefore capable of giving magical powers to the one who possesses it. The coded manuscript from the church of Rennes-le-Château, said to reveal the location of the most fabulous treasure in the world – that of King Solomon. The infamous *Necronomicon*, a book containing the secret code that can summon forth the Great Old Ones and enable the holder to take possession of the whole world. And, of course, the legendary Crystal Skull of the Maya – for, alas, there is more than one, though not all of them magical – that is said to be able to conjure up all the hidden powers of the universe, perhaps even revealing the true face of God and the devil. These are treasures so rare and valuable that even I, who have treasures that many would willingly die for, find them irresistible. In fact, these are the *only* treasures that will now satisfy me, and I'm determined to find at least one of them – for indeed, if a man possesses even one of them, he'll have as much as any human being can reasonably deal with. He will, in

truth, be gambling with the Great Unknown – and that, my dear, I am convinced is the only challenge now worthy of me.'
'Are you serious?' Mai asked.
Insolent bitch, Lu Thong though. She can help me, but her time will surely come and I'll be there when that happens.
'Yes,' he said, 'I'm serious. Even now I'm in pursuit of the legendary Crystal Skull of the Maya… And I believe that it's at last within my grasp.'
'What makes you believe that?'
Though Mai Suphar was clearly sceptical of what she had been told – she was an earthly woman, after all, finding gold in cesspits – she also respected Lu Thong's judgement and would, at the very least, give serious consideration to anything he told her. If he believed that this Crystal Skull was valuable, then almost certainly it was – not, in her view, as a magical artefact, but almost certainly as a saleable item in the illicit international marketplace for antiques. She was interested because of that and that alone, so she wanted to hear more.
'You must know,' Lu Thong said, 'that if I do anything, I do not do it by halves.'
'Yes, I know that,' Mai said.
Lu Thong nodded his appreciation. Then, with a lazy curving of his index finger, he pointed at the ceiling, indicating the upper floor of his palatial home.
'Up there,' he said, 'is Professor Paul Schwarz, an English expert in antiquities and the world's foremost authority on the ancient Maya. Learning that he had been hired by the Museum of Mexico to work in their library and update their records on Mayan relics, I paid him handsomely to use his own knowledge and, of course, the museum's considerable research facilities, to learn everything he could about the original Crystal Skull and pass that information on to me. Having been doing that on my behalf for the past couple of years, the good professor has finally come up with the information, strongly substantiated, that the only genuine Crystal Skull in the world – apart from the one held in the Museum of Mankind in London – is to be found in a specially carved repository
– a kind of miniature tomb – in the roof of the Temple of the Warriors in Chichén Itzá.'
'No problem there,' Mai Suphan said.

‘Exactly,’ Lu Thong said. ‘So a few days back – the same day, in fact, that Professor Schwarz brought me this news – I despatched one of my best men, an expatriate American gangster, to go to Chichén Itzá and bring the Crystal Skull back here. And…’ Lu Thong checked his international wristwatch, then looked up again. ‘According to my calculations, he should have found it by now and will already be on his way to Mérida, en route back to here.’
‘Sounds good so far,’ Mai said.
‘Are you being cynical, my dear?’
‘No,’ Mai replied. ‘I’m merely thinking that if your Yank gangster-friend *has* actually found this Crystal Skull, then you’re going to have to keep the matter secret until you decide what to do with it.’
‘So?’
‘So the only person who’ll know about it – apart from your Yank gangster and, of course, me – is that helpful academic now resting upstairs. Namely, Professor Schwarz.’
‘Ah, yes,’ Lu Thong said. ‘That fact is undeniable. Not that I hadn’t thought about it, but it’s nice to be reminded. He will, of course, be disposed of.’
‘Don’t do that,’ Mai said. ‘You’ll be depriving me of my pleasure. Let Professor Schwarz return to his hotel. He won’t last very long.’
Lu Thong smiled, knowing exactly what she meant, and said, ‘He’s all yours, my sweet.’
Returning Lu Thong’s smile, Mai uncurled her delicious legs and stood up by the low table, stretching her fabulous, seductive body.
‘You want anything before I leave?’ she asked.
‘You’ve exhausted me already,’ Lu Thong replied.
Smiling even more broadly, her cynicism obvious, Mai picked up her alligator-skin bag, slung it over her bronzed shoulder, then nodded and walked out of the room.
When Lu Thong heard the front door slam shut, he picked up his intercom, dialled a number, and told his goons to inform Professor Schwarz that he could pack his overnight bag and come down to the lounge. The professor arrived within minutes, his bag hanging from one shoulder. Dressed in a light-grey suit with shirt and old-school tie, he was slim, silvery-haired and still handsome, though clearly scared mindless.
‘Does this mean I can…?’
He had been invited three days ago to convey his latest findings about the

Crystal Skull over an unforgettable, wine-sodden gourmet meal. Once he had conveyed the news that Lu Thong so badly wanted to hear, he had been sent up to a guest bedroom with one of Lu Thong's exquisite slave girls. When the good professor awoke the next morning, he found the girl gone and, even worse, his room door locked. He had remained there, albeit with a luxurious *en suite* bathroom and with meals delivered three times a day, for three lonely days, no doubt tormented by the knowledge of what fate might now be in store for him. So, having been finally released from the bedroom, his prison, and allowed to bring his overnight bag with him, he was visibly relieved, though still not sure if he had good cause to be so.

'Yes, you can leave,' Lu Thong said. 'I *do* apologize, my friend, for having kept you here for so long, but I had to be sure that your information was correct. Luckily for you, a call from my man in Yucatán confirmed that the Crystal Skull was indeed where you said it was and that he was going to the temple to collect it and bring it back to me. Almost certainly he will have done that by now – so you may leave. Please rest assured that you *will* be well paid.'

'I've been paid enough already,' Professor Schwarz replied, inching back towards the door of the lounge, obviously still not believing his good luck. 'But, of course, if you insist, a small bonus would be…'

'Appreciated,' Lu Thong said, completing the professor's sentence for him, understanding that he had a dry throat and needed reassurance. 'You can be sure that you'll be paid more than you can imagine for what you have done. Thank you and good day.'

'Good day, Mr Thong.'

Breathing heavily, Professor Schwarz turned away and hurried out of the room. When Lu Thong again heard the front door slam shut, he sighed, smiled triumphantly, then picked up the telephone and asked for a number in Mexico City. The line was not good – there was an awful lot of static and the operator was an idiot – but eventually he managed to connect with his friend on the ground and asked if the Crystal Skull had been located.

The answer wiped the smile from his face and made him slam the phone down.

Chapter Four

Molly's frightened screaming tapered off as Tom straightened up and saw her at the other side of the floor of the Shrine, silhouetted by the brightening morning light. She was staring down, bug-eyed, at what looked like three piles of blackened rags scattered around a rectangular hole in the floor. One of the stone slabs, Tom noted, had been chipped free with a hammer and chisel, which he could see lying close to the hole. He was still wondering what had made Molly scream when he realized that the piles of blackened rags were actually the charred remains of three human beings. Discerning this, and then smelling the scorched flesh, he almost threw up.

'Oh, my God!' Molly exclaimed, staring at each of the corpses in turn. 'What the…?'

Holding his handkerchief over his mouth and nostrils, Tom was still fighting to stop himself from retching. When he felt that it was safe to do so – when his heaving stomach had settled down – he removed the handkerchief from his face and forced himself to look at the charred corpses. He did not look for long. The sight of those burnt men was too awful to contemplate. Revolted, he turned away and gazed out over the ruins of the Complex of the Thousand Columns, the nearby Temple of the Warriors, and, beyond it, the dense trees of what seemed like endless, almost totally flat jungle. Then, reluctantly, he turned back to Molly and her wide-eyed, disbelieving gaze.

'They're all burnt to a cinder,' she said, obviously regaining control of herself but still scared.

'Yes,' Tom said, just as scared, or possibly more scared than she was, but trying not to show it. 'Burnt to a cinder – quite so.'

'And you can still smell the poor bastids – '

Almost retching at merely being *reminded* of that fact, Tom placed the handkerchief over his mouth again.

' – which means that whatever happened here, it only happened a short time ago. But what the hell *did* happen?'

Managing to control his churning stomach once more, Tom removed the handkerchief from his face and said, 'They've been burnt to death. I should think that was obvious.'

'But how? And by *what*?'

'Pardon?' Tom was still too dazed and shaken to think straight.

'Look around you,' Molly said. 'What do you see? Those corpses have been burnt to a cinder, but nothing else here – not even the floor – has a burn mark

on it. So what incinerated those guys without touching anything else?'
'A flamethrower?' Tom ventured.
'A flamethrower would have burnt the stones of the floor or at least one of the walls, but the only things blackened here are the corpses. Now how the hell could that happen?'
'I'm sure there must be a logical explanation. I…'
'So look around you again.' Demonstrating, Molly turned slowly on the balls of her feet, intending to study every side of the Shrine. Then she stopped and her eyes grew wide again.
'What…?'
Tom followed Molly's downward gaze… and nearly jumped out of his skin when he saw, not far from the three dead men and also resting on the floor, a brightly glittering, life-sized crystal skull. Its empty eye sockets appeared to be staring at him.
'Christ!' Molly exclaimed.
'Deary me,' Tom said.
'What the hell's *that*?' Molly asked.
'A skull,' Tom replied, stating the obvious.
'Not a real one, buddy. It's made of glass or crystal. It looks pretty damned valuable to me – and those guys there…' she indicated the charred corpses on the floor… 'were obviously here to remove it from that hole in the floor.'
'Stealing it?' Tom responded, not being too bright right now.
'What the hell do *you* think? It had to be hidden in the floor, under that stone that's been removed. And shortly after they took it from there, they were charred to a cinder. But how? And by *what*?'
Tom started forward, intending to study the skull up close, but at that moment he was struck by two dazzling beams of light that shot forth from the skull's gaping eye sockets.
Molly screamed again.
Temporarily blinded, shocked by Molly's sudden screaming, Tom thought briefly of the three charred corpses on the floor and imagined that he was about to suffer the same fate – burnt to a cinder by that magical, dazzling light. Instinctively, as if attacking a dangerous beast, he jumped forward and kicked out at where he judged the crystal skull to be located. The toe of his boot connected with it and sent it flying away to hit the wall behind and, judging by the ringing sound it made, to roll over the floor.

When Molly stopped screaming, Tom opened his eyes again. Though surprised and relieved to find himself still alive, he was stunned to see that the interior of the Shrine was being swept by brilliant beams of light that were flashing on and off rapidly. Squinting between those dazzling striations, orientating himself by the sections of gloom behind them, which offered depth and definition, he saw that they were still beaming out of the eye sockets of the crystal skull as it rolled across the floor towards Molly. The beams of light were still flashing in silvery striations when the eye sockets turned sideways and upwards, creating a bizarre *son et lumière* spectacle within which Molly looked eerily ghostlike.

'Let's get out of here!' she yelled, obviously imagining, like Tom, that the beams of light were the cause of the charred corpses around the hole in the floor.

With heart racing and hands shaking, Tom needed no further urging to make his way across the floor to the steps and start down the sloping side of the temple. Molly was doing the same when the skull stopped rolling and the lights beaming from its eye sockets blinked out and did not come on again. On an impulse, Molly raced back across the floor of the Shrine, tentatively touched the skull with her fingertips, ascertaining that it wasn't hot, then picked it up and carried it down the steps, hurrying to catch up with Tom. When she reached his side, he was still running towards the low fence. He saw the skull in her hands. 'What are you doing?' he shouted, still running.

'We can't just leave it there!' she shouted back. 'It's too valuable to leave behind!'

'That's why you can't take it!'

'If I don't, someone else will. Now let's get the hell out of here!'

They clambered over the fence and piled into the jeep, then Tom drove away from the ancient site as fast as he dared, this time taking Mex.180 and not really thinking about where he was going. He just wanted to get as far as possible away from Chichén Itzá and the horror of what they had experienced there.

'You keep driving,' Molly said, leaning back over the seat to carefully place the crystal skull in her rucksack. 'Don't stop until we're really far from here. We don't want anyone following us.'

'Following us?' Tom asked, still too shocked to think straight. 'Who would want to…? You mean that crystal skull? You mean that someone might

follow us because you stole that crystal skull? I mean, why did you *do* that?'
Though realizing that he was sounding hysterical, he could not help himself.
'I didn't steal it, you dummy,' Molly said. 'I rescued it! Those guys were obviously stealin' it and they were burnt to death when they were doin' it, so the skull must be pretty damned valuable and it's better that we take it than someone else.'
Trouble, Tom thought hysterically. I knew that the minute I laid eyes on her. Every instinct told me so. Now she's made us both leave the scene of a multiple homicide and stolen that artefact into the bargain. Oh, dear God, this is serious!
'It's theft!' Tom shrieked, more hysterical than ever.
'It's rescue,' Molly insisted. 'Those dead men were obviously stealin' it. That means they were crooks. So we simply rescued it from a bunch of goddamned thieves. We might get a reward.'
'*We*?' Tom responded. 'Please don't include *me* in this. You stole that crystal skull – I had nothing to do with it – so please do *not* use the word "we".'
'Watch your driving,' Molly said.
'Don't change the subject,' Tom admonished her.
'All them vultures lifting slowly off the road,' Molly said. 'If you're not careful, if you don't watch them goddamned vultures, you might come across one too late and have to swerve to avoid it.'
'Please don't tell me how to drive,' Tom said testily. 'That's the absolute limit.'
'Okay,' Molly said. 'Fine.'
Tom was in fact driving at a dangerously reckless speed, either looking frequently in his rear-vision mirror to ensure that they were not being followed or glancing left and right at the vast Henequen plantations on either side of the road, half expecting to see a police helicopter lifting out of the trees to pursue him and bring him to justice. Realizing that he was suffering from acute paranoia caused by fear and disbelief, he tried to compose himself and turned back to the front just in time to see a vulture, bloated from having just fed on the body of a squashed, bloody chicken, rising awkwardly off the tarmac right in front of the jeep.
He swerved to avoid it.
'Damn!' Molly exclaimed.
The jeep went careening to the opposite side of the road and almost struck a

battered truck that was coming from the opposite direction. Swerving again to avoid the truck, Tom went into a screeching, shuddering skid that almost had him falling out of the vehicle while Molly hung on with all her might, holding herself well away from the windshield. Luckily, the jeep came to a rough, bone-jolting halt in a patch of dusty wasteground at the side of an ovalshaped building with a thatched roof and walls made of poles. Tom and Molly both coughed to clear their throats while vigorously waving swirling dust from their faces.

'Damned bird,' Tom muttered when the drifting dust had settled down.

'A vulture,' Molly clarified.

'Alright! Alright! So it was a vulture! What's the difference?'

'I told you so,' Molly said. 'I told you that if you – '

'Yes, yes,' Tom interjected, not wishing to be reminded by this stupid girl of just how stupid *he* had been. 'Thank you very much, my dear, but I think it's time we got out of this jeep and discussed what to do next.'

Molly glanced sideways at the oval-shaped thatched building that looked like it was about to fall down. It had an advertisement for a world-famous American beverage dangling over the front door. 'You mean over there?' she asked.

'Of course,' Tom replied grimly, already clambering down from the jeep and taking his travelling bag in one hand, being sensible enough not to leave it in the vehicle. 'Why not, may I ask?'

'That's just a shack,' Molly said.

'It's a *Posada*,' Tom informed her. 'A cheap hotel. We should be able to get a drink in there – and right now I could do with one.'

'That's not a *Posada*,' Molly replied. 'It's just some kind of sleazy bar.'

'I would never drink in a sleazy bar,' Tom assured her, 'and right now I intend entering that *Posada* for a soothing libation.'

'It's just a sleazy bar,' Molly insisted, though she climbed down from the jeep and picked up her rucksack. 'You might get more than a quick drink in there. You might get your throat cut.'

'It's a perfectly respectable establishment,' Tom said, 'but if you're nervous, by all means stay in the jeep until I return. As for me, I am thirsty and can recognize a normal *Posada* when I see one, so I'm going on in.'

'Okay,' Molly said. 'Fine.'

Shrugging, she followed Tom across the wasteground to the thatched

building. When they reached it, Tom saw that the building was indeed in a very bad state of repair and that the door – or what he had imagined was a door – consisted of no more than a piece of sackcloth hanging down to cover an empty doorframe. Tom stopped instinctively, wondering what was inside, but then he felt Molly coming up behind him and had no choice but to enter. Pulling the sackcloth aside, he created another cloud of dust. When he entered and he saw what was inside, he wanted to turn around and walk back out again. Indeed, he started doing so, actually making a half-turn, but when he saw Molly staring directly at him, her steady gaze challenging, he took a deep breath, turned back to the front, and entered the building.

The floor was bare soil, the bar was clearly the missing front door torn off its hinges and now resting horizontally on upright barrels, the few tables were made from chipped wood, and the paint had peeled off the metal chairs and left them all rusty. There were a few men at the bar, most of them short, brown-skinned, and black-haired, drinking either beer or the anise-flavoured liquor 'X-Tabentum', none friendly as Mexicans normally were.

'Oh, Lord!' Tom whispered.

'A *Posada*!' Molly said, loud and clear.

'Alright, so it's *not* a *Posada*.' Tom could scarcely contain himself. 'Now why don't you just take a seat while I fetch us a drink?'

Molly took a seat at the nearest table, placing her rucksack on the dirt floor at her feet.

'I respect my body,' she said, 'so nothing alcoholic for me – certainly not at nine o'clock in the goddamned morning. You wanna destroy your body with that poison, you go right ahead. Get drunk before you even have breakfast. I won't even pass comment.'

'Oh, won't you, indeed?'

'No, I won't.'

'I'm so grateful,' Tom said. 'So what would *you* like to drink?'

'*Horchata*,' Molly said.

'Pardon?'

'*Horchata*. It's a non-alcoholic drink made from rice, sugar, vanilla essence and ice water. More likely to quench a thirst than alcohol, but don't you listen to me. I mean, what would *I* know? If *you* need a shot of false courage, then by all means have alcohol.'

'I do *not* need a shot of false courage!'

‘You don’t have to shout.’
‘I’m not shouting!’
‘You are.’
‘Oh, go to hell!’ Tom said, then he spun on the heel of his boot and stomped to the bar, inflamed that a woman so immature could talk to him, a mature man of thirty, as if she was twice his age, and worse, cast reflections upon his courage. When he reached the bar and saw the unsmiling, unshaven faces around him, his courage sank back into his boots, but he managed, with his basic Spanish and a great deal of confusion, to obtain the drinks and pay for them. Then, even more aware of the grim faces along the bar, he returned to the table and chairs on their bed of dirt. Sitting down opposite Molly, he pushed her glass of *Horchata* across to her, had a good sip of his *Monteja* beer, then slammed his glass back down on the table.
‘Very good,’ he said. ‘Excellent.’
‘Quenched your thirst, did it?’
‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Perfectly.’
Molly had a sip of her *Horchata*, then placed her glass back on the table with deliberate delicacy. Moistening her full lips with her tongue, she said, ‘That’s pretty damned good.’
‘I’m pleased to hear that,’ Tom said.
‘No, you’re not,’ Molly said. ‘You’re so mad, you’d like it better if this was cyanide, but I won’t hold that against you.’
‘How kind of you,’ Tom said.
‘Hey, can we stop this? I mean, neither of us needs this. We’ve just shared an extraordinary experience, so let’s talk about it.’
‘Yes, let’s do that,’ Tom said.
Glancing left and right at the grim-faced denizens of this sleazy bar, all of whom were staring directly, antagonistically, at him, he recalled how he had desperately wanted to get rid of this sharp-tongued American floozy. But now, he realized, given the company they were both keeping, he was reluctantly comforted by her presence. She was tough, after all – she had *street cred’* – and that was more than he had. What he had was good breeding and an excellent education, neither of which were likely to be very helpful in these circumstances. So in truth, though he was loath to admit it, he was starting to appreciate the fact that she was sitting there facing him.
He could get rid of her, after all, in the near future, when life didn’t seem

quite so threatening. He could slip surreptitiously away from her.
‘So,’ he said, ‘where do we begin?’
‘We begin with this,’ Molly said.
Reaching down into her rucksack, she pulled out the macabre crystal skull. Shocked that she should be so stupid in front of what he assumed to be a bunch of Mexican bandits, Tom was about to protest when he heard from the bar behind him a series of frightened outcries that made him glance back over his shoulder. Most of the men at the bar – who had looked to Tom like fearsome bandits – were now staring fearfully at the crystal skull and speaking loudly amongst themselves. Even before Tom could get fully to grips with this, they hurriedly downed their drinks and rushed out of the building, glancing apprehensively at the crystal skull as they passed the table and then looking away again. When they had left, only the barman and one other customer remained. Though clearly not as frightened as the others, they were whispering to each other.
‘Well, really!’ Tom said, turning back to Molly, who had placed the crystal skull on the table, holding it between her hands, and was staring directly into its gaping eye sockets. The light from the naked bulb above reflected off the clear crystal of the skull and made it seem to glow magically within. Molly did not respond to Tom’s remark. She appeared not to have noticed the men stampeding from the building and was, Tom noted eventually, staring at the skull as if hypnotized by it.
After speaking to her a few more times and receiving no response, he realized, with a shock, that she *had* been hypnotized by the skull and could neither see him nor hear what he was saying. Shocked and even more frightened, he reached across the table, slid the skull away until it was out of her line of sight, then gently shook her right shoulder. Her eyes opened instantly, but she blinked a few times and glanced about her, as if disorientated.
‘What…?’ She rubbed her eyes as if they were sleepy, then stared at Tom as if seriously bewildered. ‘What happened?’ she asked.
‘You were hypnotized by that skull,’ Tom told her. ‘*Really* hypnotized. Your eyes were wide-open, but you didn’t seem to be hearing or seeing anything. Do you *remember* anything?’
‘Yeah,’ Molly replied after a considerable pause, her eyes slitted to denote that she was thinking.

‘What?’
‘The last thing I remember is looking into the crystal skull and…’
‘Yes?’
‘It went all kinda milky – or cloudy – and then I saw…’
She paused again, clearly reluctant to give credence to her own words.
‘Yes?’ Tom said again.
‘Stars,’ Molly said. She slumped back in her chair, took a deep breath, glanced nervously at the crystal skull, then quickly looked away again. ‘Just stars,’ she continued, returning her gaze to Tom. ‘Millions of stars in a galaxy. I felt myself floating into those stars… and that’s all I remembered till you woke me up… Nothing but stars.’
They were silent for a moment, both trying to take this in, then Tom repeated, ‘You were obviously hypnotized.’
‘Yeah,’ Molly said. ‘Right.’
Tom sighed nervously and glanced at the bar, where the barman and his sole remaining customer were staring steadily at him. Lowering his gaze and feeling clammy with unease, he said to Molly, ‘So what do we do now?’
Regaining her senses, Molly glanced at the crystal skull, which now, being away from the naked light bulb, was not shining quite so much. ‘Christ,’ Molly said, ‘whatever that thing is, whatever it can do, it must be real valuable. I say we take it to a museum in Mérida and find out just what it is, and, you know, find out just how *valuable* it is and if we can clean up by selling it.’
‘I suspect that selling it would be illegal,’ Tom said.
‘Oh, yeah?’ Molly responded with a sly grin.
Realizing beyond any shadow of a doubt that this young lady was not only street-wise but unscrupulous, and could get him into a whole heap of trouble, Tom was about to make the retort of an honest man when the barman walked up to the table. After glancing at the crystal skull, then, or so it seemed, deliberately looking away, he said in faltering English, ‘*Perdóneme*, *Seňor*, but where did you find that?’
‘What?’ Tom asked innocently, though Molly quietly dragged the crystal skull towards her.
‘That,’ the barman said, nodding to indicate the artefact without actually looking at it. ‘That crystal skull on the table.’
‘We bought it,’ Molly said, lying brazenly, Tom noted, with practised ease.

‘From a roadside trader.’
‘*Perdóneme, Seňor*, but you’re lying,’ the barman said. Like most Mexicans, he was short, as broad as he was tall, but, unlike most Mexicans, his unshaven, swarthy face was threatening. Also, his hairy right hand was dangling over the knife tucked down behind his belt. ‘No local trader would deal in such an object – not even an artificial skull. So, please, where did you get it?’
‘We found it in a field,’ Molly lied, this time even more brazenly. ‘So what’s it to you?’
Shocked that Molly could be so insolent to this meanfaced brute with a knife in his belt, Tom was about to calm what he imagined would be troubled waters when the barman said, ‘Please understand, Seňor, I don’t want the skull. I don’t even want it in this bar. I only want to know if you found it in Chichén Itzá. This is all I ask.’
‘Yes,’ Tom confessed, ‘that’s where we found it.’
‘In the pyramid of El Castillo?’ the barman asked.
‘That’s right,’ Tom said. ‘Why?’
The barman took a deep breath. ‘Seňor, if you truly found that skull in the pyramid of El Castillo, you’ve come into possession of the legendary Skull of Doom.’
‘Which is?’ Tom asked.
‘According to Mayan legend, the Skull of Doom was hidden in the pyramid by the priests of ancient times. They hid it because it has magical powers that can be used for good or evil; and the priests, when they saw that their civilization was collapsing, did not want it to fall into the wrong hands. It is called the Skull of Doom because only the pure of heart can possess it without fear, and so most of those who have found it, being mortal men with mortal weaknesses, have come to bad ends. So please, Seňor, leave my bar and take that crystal skull with you and do not return. That skull is a curse not only to those who possess it, but also to those who gaze too long upon it. Please leave here right now.’
‘I’ll just finish my drink,’ Molly said.
‘No, you won’t,’ the barman said, lowering his hand to the knife at his belt. ‘If you please, you will get up and leave right now.’
‘Of course!’ Tom said. ‘Naturally! Come on, Molly, let’s go.’
Though she grinned mockingly at him, Molly lowered the crystal skull back

into her rucksack and then pushed her chair back. As Tom did the same, preparing to leave, he noticed that the sole remaining customer, still standing at the bar, was staring steadily, fearlessly, at him with only one eye. His other eye, Tom noticed, was made of glass and it seemed to glitter unnaturally.
Shocked by that sight, feeling as if he was dreaming, Tom hurriedly turned away and led Molly out of the building. When they were both in the jeep, he drove off as quickly as possible, heading for Mérida. He was hoping for peace and quiet, for time to think, but Molly soon started talking.

Chapter Five

All heads turned when Mai Suphan entered the busy lobby of the Oriental Hotel overlooking the Chao Phraya River. The child of a Thai mother and Chinese father, Mai was a truly exquisite combination of the two races, with lightbrown, almost golden skin, heavenly brown eyes, long black hair that fell to her slim waist, small but perfect breasts, and long, shapely legs that were always emphasized by her stiletto-heeled shoes and a skintight *cheongsam* of shimmering silk, slit up to the thigh. When Mai strode deliberately across the lobby, her hips swinging sensually, tight buttocks quivering, the slit in the *cheongsam* repeatedly exposed each of her long legs in turn, causing most of the men present to suck their breath in.

The hotel was famous for having housed Joseph Conrad and Somerset Maugham, but Mai did not know this and wouldn't have cared if she had. Her only interest in this opulent establishment was the fact that it was used mostly by Americans and Europeans, all of whom had more money than they knew what to do with. This was Mai's general interest and it was strictly professional: she usually came here to pick up clients and seduce them into selling their souls to the devil for ephemeral pleasure. Her particular interest this day, however, was in seeing Professor Paul Schwarz, who, after his brief taste of heaven, would be slung into hell.

Taking the lift up to the sixth floor, Mai walked along to the suite being used by Professor Schwarz, though it was, of course, being paid for by Lu Thong. When she rang the bell, the door was opened by Schwarz, who beckoned her in so urgently that she knew he was embarrassed to be using the services of a whore, albeit high-class, which he assumed Mai was. Amused, Mai stepped inside, deliberately letting her breasts brush against the

professor's chest. The suite was spacious and exotic, with french doors overlooking the river, Siamese-styled furniture decorated with lacquered Thai mother-of-pearl Celadon lamps and Bencharong ceramics, and a magnificent four-poster, highcanopied double bed covered in a quilt finely woven by hill-tribe women.

'You *are*, I take it, the woman sent by Lu Thong?'

Professor Schwarz asked as he closed the door behind her. 'Yes,' Mai replied. 'Mr Thong told me to tell you that I've been sent here as a sign of his appreciation and to reward you for your services to him.'

'Do you know what those services were?' Schwarz asked nervously.

'No,' Mai lied blandly. 'I'm just a call girl. Mr Thong hires me by phone to pleasure certain of his friends and associates. He never tells me their business. I'm just given their name and address and the date and time of when I'm to visit them. When I'm finished, I invoice him by email and he always pays promptly. It's as simple as that.' 'You speak perfect English,' Schwarz said, clearly relieved by what she had told him.

'Thank you,' Mai said.

The professor was slim, silvery-haired and still youthfully handsome, with the slightly naïve air of a man who had spent most of his life in scholarly pursuits. Though wearing grey slacks and an open-necked shirt, his feet were bare.

Already prepared for bed, Mai thought, though he's nervous about it. This one should be easy.

The french doors offered a superb view of the river, its huge steel barges heavily laden with sand, old teak rice barges used as family homes, tugboats, longtail boats, fishermen's boats, bum boats, sampans, and ferries packed with vehicles and foot-passengers. Glancing down, Mai saw some water-borne vendors cooking and serving steaming noodles to those on the family barges, while halfnaked children dived off the sides to swim in the filthy,

polluted water.
I could have been one of those poor kids, Mai thought. Rather them than me.
Turning back to face Professor Schwarz, she noticed the up-and-down movement of his eyes, which were slightly dilated, having just taken in the length of her wondrous body. She also saw the bulge in his trousers and knew just what he wanted.
‘Can I fetch you a drink?’ Professor Schwarz asked.
Mai saw a half-finished bottle of Singha beer and an empty glass on the bedside table. There was also a bottle of champagne in an ice bucket, with two flute glasses beside it. Clearly, the professor, ill at ease in this kind of situation even while he desired it, had prepared for her arrival and was hoping to break the ice with alcohol. ‘Some champagne, perhaps?’
‘No, thanks,’ Mai said, having drunk champagne earlier with Lu Thong and, also, wishing to amuse herself by playing on the Englishman’s nervousness. ‘Do you have Mekhong whiskey?’
Schwarz nodded. ‘Yes.’
‘Then that’s what I’ll have,’ Mai said. ‘With club soda and lime.’
‘I’ve heard that Mekhong whiskey packs a powerful punch,’ the professor said. ‘It could be too strong for someone with a delicate constitution.’
‘So?’
‘You’re a woman. Mekhong whiskey may be too strong for your stomach.’
‘Nothing’s too strong for my stomach,’ Mai replied, not referring to the drink but to the many dreadful things that she had seen and done in her checkered past. ‘So please make it a whiskey.’
‘Right,’ the professor said.
As he was pouring her drink, Mai dangled her crocodile-skin shoulder-bag over the arm of a chair, then

sat on the edge of the bed, crossing her legs, thus exposing a teasing length of golden thigh. When Schwarz turned back to see her, that sight almost took his breath away and brought a blush to his pale cheeks.

Mai smiled. Schwarz stepped towards her and then stopped, holding a glass of whiskey in each hand, but seemingly paralyzed. Mai smiled again and patted the area of bed right beside her.

'Sit here,' she said.

Nodding obediently, Schwarz stepped forward again, handed Mai her drink, then sat beside her, quite close but not as close as she had indicated, clearly still feeling nervous. He studied his own feet, then had a sip of his whiskey and raised his uneasy gaze to her.

'I was surprised to receive Mr Thong's call,' he said, 'telling me that he was sending a woman over.'

'He's a kind man,' Mai said, 'but he doesn't do it for everyone. He only sends me to those he feels indebted to. He must owe you a lot.'

'Not really,' Schwarz said. 'And I don't think he's quite as kind as you say, since he practically kept me prisoner in his home for three days and nights.'

'Oh? Why was that?'

'I gave him some information that I knew he desperately wanted and he said I had to stay there until he had it checked out. He said that if it didn't check out, he was going to kill me – and I'm sure he meant it.'

'He certainly did,' Mai said. 'On the other hand, he must have been satisfied with what you told him, once it *had* checked out. Otherwise he wouldn't have sent me to you. Aren't you *pleased* that I'm here?'

'Well…' Schwarz looked at Mai, at her heaving breasts and gorgeous, almost fully exposed legs, then sighed with lust and embarrassment. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

Mai let him watch her drinking and held his gaze while she licked her lush, moisturized lips. The bulge in his

trousers was still there, but the glass in his hand was shaking and his gaze was distracted. Clearly, he was stunned by her beauty and drunk on his lust. Mai was pleased to observe this.

‘You’re a very handsome man,’ she told him.

‘You don’t have to say that,’ he replied.

‘I meant it,’ Mai said. ‘You’re a very handsome man for your age, though you seem a bit shy.’

‘I’m just not used to this.’ He had another sip of his whiskey, then rested the glass on his right knee. ‘I wouldn’t do this in England.’

‘You’re married?’

‘Yes.’

‘Children?’

‘Two.’

‘You feel guilty?’

‘Yes, I suppose so.’

‘That’s nice,’ Mai said.

The professor thought she was being kind, when in fact she was taking pleasure from his guilt and playing with his emotions.

‘Do you want me to leave?’ she asked, deliberately crossing one leg over the other, exposing even more thigh to mesmerize his guilty, lustful gaze. ‘Ýou don’t *have* to have me – though, of course, Mr Thong might be offended and blame *me* because this didn’t work out. Nevertheless, if this is making you feel bad, I’ll leave the room right now.’ ‘No, please don’t,’ the professor said.

Clearly, he was a decent man and this knowledge pleasured Mai even more. Imperceptibly, while crossing her legs seductively, she had moved closer to him. Now she turned slightly sideways, placing her breasts close to his chest, breathing deeply, sensually, her fabulous lips parted slightly. He was aware of her closeness, her heat, and his own breathing quickened.

‘Do you love your wife?’ she asked, deliberately

reminding him of that dear woman in order to torment him even more. ‘Í mean, is she why you’re feeling so guilty?’ ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Í suppose so.’

‘That’s nice,’ Mai repeated. ‘So what would you like?’ ‘Pardon?’

‘I said, what would you like? There’s nothing you can imagine that I can’t do, but I have to know where you want to start.’

She had another sip of whiskey, deliberately licked her wet lips, then placed her hand on his trembling knee and gave it a light squeeze. His knee trembled even more.

‘Well,’ he said, practically stuttering, ‘I don’t…’

‘Know.’

‘Pardon?’

‘You don’t know. You’re a happily married man, and although you love your wife, there’s a limit to what you’ve done together, so you don’t know what to ask *me* for. Well, what would you *like*?’

Now in as much pain as a man on a rack – increasing guilt on the one hand, helpless lust on the other, both encouraged by Mai – the professor had another sip of whiskey and blushed with embarrassment. When he shrugged, hardly knowing what to say, too inhibited to give voice to the wild, reckless desires that now filled his thoughts, Mai slid her hand higher up his leg, up to near where the bulge was, then spread her fingers and squeezed encouragingly again. Professor Schwarz trembled visibly. ‘Tell me,’ Mai said, almost crooning.

‘I…’ The professor opened and closed his mouth, then licked his dry lips, but he didn’t get further. Mai took hold of his free hand and placed it over her heaving breast, then pressed it down for him. He closed his eyes and breathed deeply.

‘Look at me,’ Mai said with quiet authority.

The professor opened his dazed eyes.

‘Why don’t I get undressed?’ Mai suggested, ‘and we can go on from there?’

The professor stared at her with dazed eyes, as if deaf, then eventually he nodded. ‘Yes.’
‘Why don’t you help me?’ Mai said.
In fact, she wanted to undress because she couldn’t move too much in the skintight *cheongsam* and soon she would need to move a lot. After removing the whiskey glass from the professor’s visibly shaking hand, she stood up, went to the bedside cabinet, and put both glasses down, his and her own. Then she returned to sit beside him again, first touching her knees to his, then smiling at him and licking her pouting lips, then helpfully squeezing the bulge in his trousers, and finally, artfully, turning her back to him.
‘Unzip me,’ she whispered.
With trembling hands, Professor Schwarz unzipped the *cheongsam*, running the zip all the way down her spine. He sighed audibly at the sight of her flawless golden back, then, forgetting his guilt, driven helplessly by his need, he leaned forward to press his hot lips to the skin between her fine shoulder-blades. Mai sighed and deliberately arched her spine to make him think she was loving this.
‘Mmmm,’ she crooned. ‘Now remove the dress completely.’
Breathing harshly, the professor tugged the shimmering dress off Mai’s smooth shoulders – works of art, as she well knew – and then peeled it off her lithe body, all the way down to her waist, groaning softly and repeatedly kissing her as he did so – the back of her neck, her shoulders, the shoulder-blades, then down her back until he reached the juncture where the spine leads to the crack at the start of her rump. By this time, the learned professor was on his knees, breathing harshly and practically sobbing, his body shaking with need.
‘Oh, God!’ he groaned. ‘Christ!’
He was tugging frantically at the *cheongsam*, trying to work it down farther, but he couldn’t do that until Mai

stood up, which is what she now did. When she stood over him, gazing down upon him, he looked up with blind eyes. ‘Take my shoes off,’ Mai said.

Obligingly, she raised her right foot, then her left, to enable the panting professor to remove the stiletto-heeled shoes while kissing her feet and sucking her toes and licking her ankles. When both shoes were on the floor, while the professor was still slobbering over her feet, she grasped his hair and jerked his head up, to let his eyes crawl all over her like spiders.

‘Now peel the dress off,’ she whispered.

Still on his knees, practically choking for breath and losing muscular control, the professor used both shaking hands to tug the *cheongsam* all the way down Mai’s long, shapely legs and over her ankles. She helped him by raising each foot in turn and stepping out of the dress. Then she bent down to pick the dress up and lay it out neatly on the bed, so as not to crumple it. This done, she turned back to face the professor, who was still kneeling on the floor, and spread her legs just in front of his flushed face. She was wearing a push-up bra, though she did not normally need it, and panties so brief that they were hardly more than a piece of string. She knew that to the average man she would have looked no less than breathtaking. As for the highly educated, distinguished professor, he was desperately trying to catch his breath, even as his widening eyes travelled up over her.

‘Now what do you want?’ Mai asked, looking down upon him with a small, deadly smile.

‘Anything. *Everything*!’

‘Then stand up,’ Mai said.

Freed from her skintight *cheongsam*, Mai was all set to go; so when the professor stood up, breathing hungrily in her face, she kneed him in the groin, making him scream like a stuck pig, then karate-chopped him on the side of the neck, sending him flying sideways to land spreadeagled across the big four-poster bed. The professor lay there, groaning, hardly knowing what had happened to him, until

Mai leaned down and dragged him off the bed, then picked him up and swung him over her shoulders and slammed him into the wall. He struck the wall with a sickening thud, actually cracking the plaster, then fell to the floor in a cloud of dust and rolled onto his back. His eyes were glazed and only came back to life when he vomited over his shirt. ‘You poor baba,’ Mai murmured.

She leaned down to him, smiling warmly at him, then took hold of the lapels of his vomit-soaked shirt and hauled him back to his feet. He stood there before her, swaying groggily from side to side, blood dribbling from his nose, until she kneed him in the groin again, making him scream and jackknife. Then she karate-chopped the back of his neck, hammering his face into her raised knee, breaking his nose entirely, then flipped him over her outthrust right leg to slam him into the floor for the second time. He gasped and groaned miserably and threw up again. Then Mai hauled him back to his feet, spun him around until he faced her, and used a jujitsu movement to roll him over her stooped shoulders, and finally, straightening up, to send him hurtling bodily through the air. He smashed through the french doors, glass exploding in all directions, and fell screaming to the crowded sidewalk six storeys below. Even as the sounds of wailing onlookers and skidding or crashing cars came wafting up from below, Mai was slipping back into her immaculate *cheongsam* and picking up her shoulder-bag and walking out of the room, a big smile on her lovely face, her eyes bright with excitement.

She walked along the corridor and stopped at a lift. When the lift door opened, a waiter from Room Service came out, bearing a tray of cocktails.

‘For me!’ Mai said. She picked up a cocktail, drained it in one gulp, placed it back on the tray, then gave the stunned waiter a glowing smile and took the lift down. When she emerged from the hotel, a crowd of onlookers was gathered around the broken body of Professor Paul Schwarz and the road was covered with shards of broken glass. Schwarz had crashed onto the

bonnet of a passing car and dented it badly, drenching it in his blood as he bounced off and onto the sidewalk, coming to rest between shocked passers-by. Some of those people were now sitting on the sidewalk, sobbing and being consoled by friends or other pedestrians. Also, due to the falling body, some cars had crashed into each other and the drivers were now violently arguing, each hoping to apportion blame to the other.

Satisfied with her evening's work, amused by what she was seeing, Mai called a three-wheeled taxi to the sidewalk and let the *samlor* driver pedal her away from the chaos that she had artfully wrought. She told him to take her to Bang Kapi, then sat back and enjoyed the ride.

Chapter Six

'All I'm sayin',' Molly was saying as Tom, who had dearly wanted peace and quiet, drove along Mex.180, heading back to Mérida, 'is that those men were burnt to a goddamned cinder, yet nothing else in the vicinity was scorched – so it couldn't have been done with a flamethrower or any other kinda weapon. You get my drift, pal?'

'I think so,' Tom responded, not wanting to recall the dreadful sight of those burnt men, let alone discuss the matter with the inexhaustible Molly. 'Perhaps it was a gangster-styled execution of the kind that one sees in the movies. You know? Someone pours petrol over some poor souls and then sets a match to them.'

'Petrol?'

'Gasoline.'

'Oh,' Molly said. 'Right. But that doesn't wear with me. If that'd happened, there would've been burn marks on the stones around them. Besides, if someone had done that to 'em, they'd have done it to get their hands on the crystal skull.'

'Sounds logical,' Tom said.

'Except they *didn't* bother to take the crystal skull. Now do you think it's logical for someone to set those three guys on fire and then not take what they came for? No way, pal. *No* way!'

Wishing that she would shut up for a few minutes at least, though feeling obliged to respond to her, if only to hear his own, much saner voice, Tom

said, ‘I don’t know why. Maybe in their haste to get away, they just *forgot* to take it.’
‘They set three guys on fire just to get it, and then they just *forget* it? Hey, gimme a break here! And besides, as I’ve just said, if those three guys had been torched with a flamethrower or set on fire with gasoline, there would’ve been burn marks on the floor, walls or ceiling – but there weren’t. So that’s the most mysterious part of the whole damned thing and it’s sure got me thinkin’.’
She’s thinking, Tom thought. God help me. The poor dear imagines that she’s thinking. The self-delusion is wondrous.
He studied the scenery passing by, the endless rows of cacti in the Henequen plantations stretching out to the flat horizon in the morning’s bright light. Eventually, returning his gaze to the road ahead, he said, ‘So what are you thinking? I can’t wait to hear it.’
‘Sarcasm,’ Molly said.
‘I can’t help myself,’ Tom retorted.
‘You’re just trying to shut me up, but I won’t shut up, ‘cause this subject needs talking through.’
‘It needs *thinking* through,’ Tom corrected her.
‘I’m thinkin’ aloud,’ Molly informed him. ‘An’ what I’m thinkin’ is that somethin’ really weird went on back there.’
‘Why do you sometimes complete your words and sometimes not. Like “thinkin’” instead of “thinking” - and so on and so forth?’
‘I’m being confused by your fancy English talk. I’m bein’ corrupted by your high-toned education. But I still say, speakin’ proudly like an American, that somethin’ weird went on back there.’
‘Weird,’ Tom murmured.
‘Yeah, weird.’
‘It wasn’t *weird*, my dear, it was *horrific*. Three men were brutally murdered back there.’
‘Right. But… *How*? And by *who*?’
‘Whom,’ Tom corrected her.
‘Okay, *whom*.’
‘Well…’ Tom began.
‘We’re agreed,’ Molly continued, though Tom could not recall agreeing to anything, ‘that they couldn’t have been burned by a flamethrower or torched

by gasoline, ‘cause nothing else around them was scorched. Right?’
Tom sighed wearily. ‘Right.’
‘Which means we’re dealing with something unnatural, right?’
‘Something…’ Tom was intrigued, despite himself. ‘Something… *unnatural*?’
‘Exactly! ‘Cause how else could that have happened? And if a human element was involved, they’d have taken the crystal skull with them.’
Tom glanced to the side and saw another Henequen plantation, with the cacti running in new rows for what looked like miles and the odd thatched shack rising lonesome out of them.
‘I’m afraid I can’t accept that…’
‘You ever hear of spontaneous combustion?’ Molly asked.
‘I don’t believe so.’
Clearly, Molly was getting into her element and becoming excited. ‘Spontaneous combustion,’ she explained enthusiastically, ‘is a mysterious phenomenon that makes human beings burst spontaneously into flames for no known reason. And what’s so weird about it is that, though the victims are burned all over, practically cinders in parts, they seem to have burst into flames from inside of themselves – and, even stranger, the burning is purely localized.’
Impressed that Molly would even use such a term as ‘purely localized’, but feeling that this line of speculation was off the wall, Tom merely repeated, ‘Localized?’
‘Yeah, right. I mean, the victim might be sitting in a chair when he or she bursts into flames and is burnt to death – yet the chair won’t have the slightest burn mark on it. Or the poor bastid’s in the bath or on the can and he’ll suddenly burst into flames and burn down to a cinder – just like the men we saw – yet there won’t be a burn- mark anywhere: not on the bath, not on the toilet, not on the walls around him, not on the floor or the ceiling. So, you know, it’s just like what happened back there - and I think that’s real weird.’
‘I’m sure there’s a rational explanation,’ Tom said.
‘Yeah. Some people think it’s caused by an unusual electrical discharge, though no one seems to know what kind it is.’
‘I see,’ Tom said. ‘So you believe…?’
‘Right,’ Molly interjected excitedly. ‘Those guys were the victims of some kind of spontaneous combustion – but what caused it to happen

simultaneously to all three of them? That's what *I'd* like to know.'
'Well, perhaps it *wasn't* spon… '
'Spontaneous combustion,' Molly reminded him. 'But it had to be. Nothing else would explain why they were burnt so badly and yet nothing around them was burnt at all. So it had to be some kind of…'
'Spontaneous combustion.'
'Right. The only question being: How come all three bought it at once?'
'Well, perhaps…'
'And what *I* say,' Molly went on, growing more excited by the second, 'is that they were attacked by some kind of unnatural force that was protectin' the crystal skull. It killed those guys, but it didn't take the skull, 'cause it wasn't a physical entity; it was some kind of…' She stopped chewing her gum, had a good think, then shrugged in defeat. 'Some kind of… *alien* force. Maybe somethin' released by the skull itself… So that's what I think.'
Realizing that the sun was becoming hotter and that he was actually very thirsty, perhaps because of his increasing tension, Tom pulled in when he saw what looked like a genuine *Posada* with a neatly thatched roof, rainbowcoloured beaded curtains across the door, and, standing out front, a sign advertising a well-known American beverage.
'We're stoppin' already?' Molly asked, as Tom braked to a halt in the dusty ground near the entrance.
'I'm parched,' Tom said.
'We should keep driving,' Molly insisted. 'We should try to get as far as possible from Chichén Itzá before stopping again.'
'I'm thirsty and tired,' Tom said, clambering out of the jeep and reaching into the back for his travelling bag. 'I was out of bed terribly early this morning in order to get to Chichén Itzá before sunrise. It was a drive of nearly eighty miles from Mérida, and that, plus the recent dreadful events, may perhaps have tired me more than usual.'
'You got out of bed terribly early?' Molly asked sarcastically, as she too clambered out of the jeep and picked her rucksack off the back seat. 'What time was that?'
'Five A.M.'
'Oh, big deal!' Molly exclaimed in disgust, falling in beside Tom as he headed resolutely for the *Posada*. 'You mean, you slept all night in a nice bed in a hotel in Mérida, but had to get up at five in the mornin' and the effort has

practically killed you?'
'I am merely pointing out that – '
'Well, let me tell you, buddy,' Molly interjected as resolutely as Tom was advancing upon the *Posada*, 'that I've been sleeping in goddamned fleapits in Mérida and that I *hitchhiked* all night, risking mugging and rape, to get to that site – so don't whine to *me* about how tired you are. Jesus Christ, what a wimp!'
'Must you always be so aggressive?' Tom asked rhetorically as he reached the front door of the *Posada* and parted the brightly-coloured bead curtains.
'I'm just telling you what I think, is all.'
'Keep your thoughts to yourself, thanks.'
Tom passed through the beaded curtains and entered the gloom of the *Posada*, which was considerably better than the previous joint, though hardly of luxury standard. There were, however, tablecloths on the tables, solid chairs of varnished wood, and a bar of similar wood with proper bar stools. The barman was swarthy, plump-cheeked and round-eyed, colourful in his long-sleeved, open-necked *guayabera*. A petite and pretty Yucateca, dressed in an equally colourful *huipil*, a loose-fitting shift flowered about the neck and hem, worn over a lace-trimmed underskirt, was wiping one of the tables. She glanced up when Tom and Molly entered and gave them a glorious smile.
'*Buenos días,*' she said.
'*Buenos días,*' Tom replied, placing his travelling bag by a chair at the nearest table and pulling up the same chair. '*Habla usted Inglés*?'
'*Sí, Seňor*. A little.'
Relieved that he would not have to resort to his Spanish phrase book, Tom asked Molly what she would like to drink and, being informed that she would take a coffee, ordered that and an orange juice for himself.
'Would you like breakfast?' he asked Molly.
'Are you treating me?'
'Yes.'
'Great.' Molly studied the menu at length, while the waitress was off fetching their first drinks, then, when the waitress returned, she ordered Eggs Mexicana with French toast, bread rolls, a grapefruit juice, a second coffee with cream, and a bottle of *aqua minerale*.
'For the road,' she explained, regarding the latter.

‘Naturally,’ Tom said. He ordered toast with honey for himself and sat back to drink his orange juice, his glance automatically taking in the pretty waitress as she headed back to the bar.
‘If your eyes were spiders they’d be crawling all over her,’ Molly said. ‘And her just a kid an’ all. God, you guys are pitiful!’
Blushing to his roots, Tom tried to hide his face with his glass of orange juice, but the drink didn’t last long enough. Placing the empty glass back on the table, he felt his cheeks still burning and tried to distract Molly from the sight of them by saying, ‘You don’t have to be so sexually obsessed. I merely glanced at her. She *is* quite pretty, after all, and extremely charming. I wasn’t exactly thinking of rape, which seems to prey on your mind.’
‘That’s all you guys ever think about,’ Molly retorted, ‘even when it’s *not* rape.’
‘Do you mind if we talk about something else?’
‘Not at all. Fire away, pal.’
Desperate to change the conversation and realizing that he was uncomfortably aware of how shapely *Molly* was, never mind the young Yucateca, Tom opened with: ‘Well, I must say your theory about how those men died is intriguing, if not quite believable.’
‘I’m not saying that my theory’s a fact, but something *very* strange went on back there and it wasn’t remotely natural, that’s for sure.’
‘I think we’re in trouble,’ Tom said. ‘That crystal skull is obviously a dangerous item, if only in the sense that someone wants it, which is why those men were there – to steal it. And *something* - some unnatural force, as you would have it – may be protecting it. Perhaps we should dump it.’
‘No way,’ Molly said. ‘I’m going to get that thing valued if it kills me.’
‘It just might,’ Tom said.
Molly grinned. ‘Scared, are you?’
‘Let’s just say that I have a healthy respect for my own skin, and that when three men get murdered over an ancient artefact, I’m inclined to be careful. Whoever sent those men to find that crystal skull might send another bunch to find us – so, yes, I’m concerned.’
‘We’re off and running,’ Molly said. ‘No way could they find us. They don’t know who we are. They don’t even know that anyone, apart from their own men, was there. So if they exist, and if they try to track us down, they’re not gonna find us.’

‘I truly hope not,’ Tom said.
Molly grinned again and then finished off her coffee. ‘So you study Mayan culture,’ she said. ‘You ever heard of this crystal skull before?’
‘A little,’ Tom said. ‘There are plenty of these artefacts floating about the world, but only two are considered to be genuine and of any real value.’
‘What are the others?’ Molly asked.
‘The Zulu Skull, sometimes, like this one of ours, called the Skull of Doom, which was stolen from the Zulus many years ago and has not been seen since. The Masai Skull, stolen from the Masais, is also still missing. A socalled Berlin Skull, in the possession of the Gestapo during World War Two, remained hidden in Berlin until the mid1980s and then was taken to Italy; though its present location has not been confirmed, many believe that it’s now held in the Vatican. The Paris Skull, also known as the Aztec Skull, is kept in a collection somewhere in France. The Amethyst Skull, so called because it’s made of pure amethyst, is in a collection in San Jose, California. Another, known as both the Southern France Skull and the Skull of the Light of Christ, is reported to have connections with the Knights Templar and to be in the possession of a secret society known as The Light of Christ and located somewhere in France. Finally, another Mayan skull, appropriately called the Mayan Skull, was looted from a tomb in Guatemala and is now in a private collection in Texas.’
‘And you think those skulls aren’t genuine?’ Molly asked.
‘Those in the know are convinced that they’re not. Most likely, they’re the fanciful products of old legends and myths, rather than actual ancient artefacts.’
‘So what about the two genuine ones?’
‘One is the Rose Quartz Skull, widely believed to be the finest and purest in the world. Though it’s rumoured to be hidden somewhere in Mexico or Guatemala, its exact location isn’t known.’
‘Somewhere in Mexico or Guatemala,’ Molly echoed him.
Tom sighed nervously. ‘Yes.’
‘Then we might have found the Rose Quartz Skull.’
Tom sighed again. ‘Yes.’
‘And the other genuine one?’
‘The other one’s on display in the Museum of Mankind in London. Known as the British Museum Skull, or the Aztec Skull – not to be confused with the

– its earliest known record is a listing with Tiffany's, the renowned New York jewellers, who had it in their possession in the 1890s. Eventually – I don't know when – it was sent to the British Museum in London. How it got to Tiffany's, I can't tell you, but now, as I've said, it's on display in the Museum of Mankind, London.'

'Anything special about those two skulls?' Molly asked.

'I'm a little vague on the details,' Tom confessed, 'but the skulls *are* of unknown origin, and are rumoured to possess unusual characteristics, including occult powers.'

'Including mesmerism?' Molly asked.

'I believe that power has been mentioned,' Tom said.

'Anything about seeing *stars* in them?'

Tom smiled. 'Lots of people have reported seeing lots of things in their crystal skulls – ancient buildings, dragons, underwater scenes, strange creatures, even extraterrestrials – but as only two of the skulls are known to be genuine, I think we can safely say that most of what was reportedly seen was wishful thinking.'

'But the two genuine ones are believed to possess magical powers?'

'Yes,' Tom said. 'Though their origins remain unknown, the little evidence we have about them indicates that they may have originated with the ancient cultures of Central America – either the Mayans, the Aztecs, or the Toltecs – and that they were used for rituals of worship or for esoteric rites. They are also believed to have been used to *will* death. Perhaps because of this – or *only* because of this – a widespread belief has arisen to the effect that the skulls possess magical powers that can be used either for good or for evil. This sounds like so much nonsense to me, but it's what is believed.'

'It could be possible,' Molly said, 'and I happen to think it is – 'cause what happened back there in Chichén Itzá was pretty damned weird.'

'Inexplicable, certainly.'

'So we'd better get this goddamned thing checked out.'

'I think we should,' Tom agreed.

They talked around the subject until the waitress returned with their food and drink. When the waitress had departed, Molly raised a forkful of Eggs Mexicana to her mouth, then stopped, placed the fork back on her plate, and thoughtfully pursed her lips.

‘New York,’ she said emphatically. ‘We could take the crystal skull to Tiffany’s in New York and have it checked out by them.’
‘That’s too far to travel with it,’ Tom said, distractedly spreading honey on his toast. ‘Also, I should remind you that you’re in possession of a *stolen* artefact and certainly cannot take it through Customs. My suggestion, therefore, is that we show it to a friend of mine, Professor Emilio Juarez, one of the world’s leading authorities on ancient artefacts, who’s presently working in the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. We’ll let him examine the skull and base our decision on what he says. I think this would be wise.’
‘Wise, hell, he’s a friend of yours!’
‘I beg your pardon?’
Molly swallowed some of her Eggs Mexicana and gave Tom a beady-eyed, suspicious look. ‘This Mexican bastid’s a friend of yours,’ she said, ‘and will probably say what you want him to say. Such as, leave it with me, folks, and you, Tom, my friend, can sneak back later for your little cut on the sale… Well, thanks, but no thanks!’
Outraged, Tom hurriedly swallowed his bitten-off piece of toast with honey, washed it down with a slug of coffee, and said, ‘Professor Juarez is *not* a so-called Mexican bastard! He’s an eminent Mexican scholar, specializing in the ancient Maya. And I’m simply going to ask him to examine the crystal skull, tell us if it’s genuine, if it’s legal to keep it, and if it has any market value at all. After that, we’ll decide between us what to do with it. It’s as simple as that.’
‘Oh, yeah?’
‘Yes!’
‘Okay, but just remember that *I’m* the one who had the presence of mind to actually grab this damned thing and bring it down from the pyramid – so *I’m* the one who should be given priority regarding its fate.’
‘Which you will be,’ Tom snapped, though he was outraged by the very suggestion that he was being dishonest. ‘Now will you kindly drop the subject for now and let me finish my breakfast?’
‘Oh, oh,’ Molly whispered, freezing with her fork held to her lips and her eyes fixed on the front door, almost directly behind Tom’s back. ‘Don’t look over your shoulder.’
Tom twitched with nerves when he heard the beaded curtain rattling and then

footsteps coming over the wooden floor towards him. The footsteps stopped briefly behind him, then turned around to go past him. He looked up from his plate to see a man walking away from him and taking a stool at the bar. He was wearing a checkered shirt, faded denims and high-heeled boots, with a knife sheathed at the big-buckled belt around his thick waist.

After taking the stool, he ordered a beer in Spanish, then swivelled around until he was facing Tom. He stared malevolently at Tom with one eye, his other eye being made of glass.

'Oh, Lord!' Tom whispered.

Molly leaned across the table towards him, clenching her fists in front of her face, and whispered, 'It's that oneeyed guy we saw in the other bar! That bastid's been following us!'

'Nonsense,' Tom said, though his voice was shaky.

'Not nonsense,' Molly insisted. 'That bastid has his eye on our crystal skull and he's obviously been following us, probably intending to rob us.'

'Nonsense,' Tom repeated.

'Go challenge him,' Molly said.

'Pardon?' Tom responded in a panic.

'If you don't believe he's following us, go up to him and demand to know if he *has* been and let's see what he says.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' Tom said. He felt flushed and his heart was racing. 'I can't go up to a perfect stranger and ask him if he's been following us. He'll think I'm as mad a loon – and so will the barman.'

'He's followed us and you know it and so do I – so you go up there and tell him to get off our tail.'

'That man's a ruffian,' Tom said.

'That's why you've got to challenge him.'

'That man looks like the violent type and could explode if offended.'

'So offend him. Let's find out if I'm right. Go up and ask him if he's been following us, and then, no matter what the bastid says, tell him you don't believe him and that you want him to get off our goddamned tail, 'cause if he doesn't, you'll break his balls.'

'Pardon?' Tom repeated, burning up in a fever of fear as his weak stomach heaved. 'I can't possibly – '

'Goddamn it, you're scared!'

'I am not!'

‘Yes, you are!’
‘Alright, then, I’m scared. I don’t want my throat cut. I’m going to pay the check and get out of here - and that’s *all* I’m going to do.’
‘Christ, you goddamned English wimp!’ Molly snapped, then she grabbed her rucksack, pushed her chair back, and stomped out of the building.
Tom didn’t go to the bar. He didn’t have the nerve for that. Instead, he called the waitress over, quickly paid the check, and then, without waiting for his change, he pushed his chair back and stood up. He glanced briefly at the bar, saw the one-eyed man grinning at him, mockingly, malevolently, so he shivered, picked up his travelling bag, and followed Molly outside.
The man laughed hoarsely behind him.

Chapter Seven

As the *samlor* carried her back to Lu Thong’s mansion in the hot and humid early evening, Mai crossed her long legs, giving an eyeful of thigh to male passers-by, and gazed with her diamond-bright hard gaze at the sensuous feast of this most diverse of cities, with its golden-spired temples, *wats* with bell towers, canals shaded by drooping palms, towering skyscrapers of glass and steel, exotic, chaotic markets, beseeching sidewalk vendors, and dense, roaring, polluting traffic. Here beautiful prostitutes in revealing clothes, bare-footed, saffron-robed monks carrying alms bowls, distracted businessmen in shirts and slacks, bearded men wearing white prayer caps or turbans, and teenagers of both sexes in Westernized clothing, all walked casually side by side. Here Thais, Chinese, Indians, Burmese, Laotians, Vietnamese, Europeans and Americans – Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and Christians of all denominations – lived in a harmony only broken by the impersonal crime and mayhem common to most major cities.

Mai knew all about crime. As she sat in the *samlor*, legs crossed and exposed, watching her world pass by, sniffing the heady aromas of roasting chicken, the sweet incence smoke spiralling out of Chinese shrines, the seductive scents from the garlands of orchids overhanging the canals, and the stench of human waste coming up from the canals themselves, she thought of the man she had just killed, the man who had ordered his execution, and the life she had led up to now.

It had been, for the most part, a life of profitable crime, really only

beginning when she was fourteen years old and hardly worth considering before that. Though Mai preferred not to consider it, she nonetheless recalled certain things about it, notably that she had been raised in a floating house in a badly depressed riverside village near Ayutthaya, north of Bangkok, and that her life there had been miserable and hard.

As Mai clearly recalled, she and her brothers and sisters (five in all, three girls and two boys) were made to work almost as soon as they could walk, usually helping their brutal father to gut and pack the fish he caught daily in his boat, then transport them in heavy loads to the nearest market town. Because of this, they never went to school, ran about barefooted and in rags, were often beaten black and blue, and harboured few hopes for the future.

Mai's only other recollection of the time before 'real life' began were that she, alone among her brothers and sisters, constantly burned with resentment and the need to escape; that before she was fourteen she was raped at least three times by strangers passing though the village, and that at some point she realized that the lust of men could be useful to her. She found this to be true when, at fifteen, she was abducted by some of Lu Thong's brigands and installed in one of his brothels in Bangkok. Her 'real life' began from that moment on and she never looked back.

Rather than being shocked at finding herself in a brothel, already sexually abused and generally hardened by experience, Mai viewed it pragmatically as the opportunity of a lifetime and decided to ruthlessly exploit it. Delighted to have escaped from her poor riverside village, informed by the *mamasan* of the brothel that she was exceptionally beautiful and irresistible to men, Mai soon had customers queuing at her door and could hardly deal with them all. Then Lu Thong stepped into the picture and her life changed again.

She had, of course, heard about her unseen boss long before he told his men to bring her to him. Lu Thong: the notorious Lothario who had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth, educated at Oxford, England, and returned to Bangkok to lend support to his father's criminal activities, including drug-running, organised prostitution, protection rackets, and a lucrative trade in stolen antiques and works of art, while furthering his sexual education in the fleshpots of Patpong and Sukhumvit Road. Lu Thong: the notorious criminal who came into conflict with his father, reportedly had that father murdered, and took over his deceased parent's criminal empire to become the most powerful crime baron in Bangkok. Lu Thong: the notorious

drug dealer and addict who had often been seen in the strobe-lit discos and videotheques off the Vipavadee Rangsit Highway or in the middle of the rice paddies by the Pechburi Road, personally dealing in Crack or Ecstasy or even more dangerous drugs, just as often seducing those he addicted into dealing for him. Lu Thong: the notorious devil incarnate who was rumoured to indulge in extraordinary sexual activities, both hetero and homo, with partners of all ages, and whose mansions in Bang Kapi was widely reported to be the scene of diabolical rites based on the most ancient and dangerous of the black arts… Yes, the notorious Lu Thong, who even owned the brothel that Mai was working in, and, having heard about her remarkable sexual talents, eventually had her brought to his home in order to check her out personally. So Mai went there, knowing exactly who he was, not knowing what to expect.

At that first meeting she was taken aback to see just how handsome he was and shocked at the harsh ascetism that she sensed lay behind his exquisite, oddly tormented features. His face was stripped almost to the bone, all angles and flat planes, with the inner luminescence often seen in the dying; and his body, though as languid as a cat's, was so undernourished that it seemed as insubstantial as a wisp of smoke. The unnatural glitter of his brown eyes was certainly due to drugs, but also sprang, Mai was convinced, from experiences so diabolical and extreme that few men would have even dared to consider them, let alone have survived them. In the event, when Mai came to know him better, she learnt that this was indeed the case: Lu Thong was so easily bored that only the most extreme experiences could arouse his interest. He was a man who lived on the very edge and dared himself not to fall off.

During their initial encounter, he told her that he had heard about her from the *mamasan* and wanted to see her with his own eyes. He told her that she was even more beautiful than he had imagined and that such beauty, if combined with her reported sexual talents, could gain her much more than she would ever have if she remained in the brothel. He wanted her to work for him, he told her, to do more than just whore, though certainly that would be part of it, albeit in an elevated manner. He wanted to use her for blackmail, for smuggling and dealing, for seductions that would have a greater purpose than mere sexual pleasure. She would have her own place, he told her, a magnificent apartment right here in Bang Kapi, and, if she did what he asked

of her, she would end up with more wealth than she had ever dreamed of.
'I'm your woman,' Mai told him.

But first she had to prove to him that she was as good as he had heard – she had to show him what she could do – and this she did for the next five days, rarely leaving his vast bedroom with its duvets of Chinese and Japanese silk, its exotic Indian carpets, its Laotian frog-drum tables, its bronze utensils stolen from the burial mounds of Ban Chieng, its erotic paintings and drawings smuggled in from the four corners of the globe, and its seemingly boundless supply of opium and cocaine. She performed in his bed, on the floor, in his *en suite* bathroom, first above him, then below him, in front of him, behind him, doing everything he asked, no matter how perverse, showing him some perversions that even he had not tried, and she did it all in a haze of opium dreams and cocaine fevers, until he was completely satisfied. By the end of that five days, she had turned into an addict – addicted not only to drugs, but also to extreme sensual experiences – and shortly after that testing, which she passed with flying colours, she moved into her own luxurious apartment located not far from Lu Thong's house. Lu Thong paid her rent.

Thereafter, he had used her for a wide variety of tasks, including the seduction of important men for the purposes of blackmail; the smuggling of cut jade from Burma, silver jewellery from Khmer, Lao and Shan, drugs from Cambodia and Columbia, and rare paintings, antiques and religious manuscripts stolen from ancient Thai temples; and, finally, the harsh disciplining of his prostitutes, drugpeddlers or dealers in the fake antiques that were sold in Chiang Mai and Chatuchak Market. Though Mai excelled at all of this and certainly enjoyed doing it, she didn't really discover her true nature until, at Lu Thong's request, she killed for the first time.

'It's a necessary part of our profession,' he told her, 'but that's not the only reason you must do it. To kill your fellow man in rage is a meaningless act; but to kill pragmatically, in cold blood, in full awareness of what you're about, is the ultimate high for creatures like you and me. As for you, with your lust for life, for the extremes of human experience, drawing blood and watching your victims breathe their last will set you free and exalt you. More than sex, more than drugs, the act of cold-blooded murder will offer you transcendence to a state of being beyond good or evil – a state of *pure* being. When you kill, when you see the fear in your victim's eyes, you will come

close to God.'

'Is that what you're seeking?' Mai asked him. 'Him or the devil,' Lu Thong replied.

'I think you *are* the devil,' Mai said.

'Who knows? Now go and kill for me.'

Mai's first victim was a Chinese drugs dealer who had

been falsifying his financial records in order to retain more of his cut than was normally allowed by Lu Thong. As this was a crime punishable by death, Mai was sent by Lu Thong to kill the offender in his office in Wongwienai. When the well-fed Chinaman, dressed in an immaculate grey suit with shirt and tie, fell to his knees before Mai, tearfully begging for his life, his hands clasped under his chin, she felt more powerful than she had ever felt before. She then found 'transcendence' – to use Lu Thong's terminology – when she ignored her sobbing victim's entreaties and shot him between the eyes.

That killing was only the first of many, each more exciting than the last, and over the years Mai became increasingly inventive, devising ever more novel ways of terminating her victims – by the gun and the blade, by smothering and strangulation, by the injection of lethal drugs and force-feeding and poisoning – often taking as long as she could, mercilessly toying with her victims, tormenting them with the knowledge of what their ultimate fate would be, frequently physically torturing them, in order to prolong her own pleasure. She learnt through this that her soul was as dark as night and that the fear she instilled in others, the pain and suffering she caused, gave her a satanic, sensual satisfaction. She orgasmed on blood lust.

'You're my most exquisite creation,' Lu Thong told her eventually. 'A perfect killing machine. You could surely cross the face of the sun and not leave a shadow. You're hardly human at all.'

'Just like you,' Mai said.

In truth, *he* was hardly human – or, at least, he didn't appear to want to be so – and the longer Mai worked for him, the more she came to understand him, seeing in his drug addiction, his bisexual extremism, his obsession with death and the occult, all the passions of a man whose ultimate high would come only through some form of suicide. His opium dreams came from the dark side of the moon and he would go there some day. In his heart that was where he wanted to be – in eternal darkness and silence. He would sell his soul to the devil for that - and he was working towards it.

When the *samlor* stopped in front of Lu Thong's home in Bang Kapi, Mai paid the driver, added a handsome tip, then pressed the bell on the electrified gates. Identified by the guard inside (he could view the grounds of the house, including the front gates, on the video-monitors installed in his security booth), she was permitted entry and the gates swung open to offer access.

Mai made her way up the driveway, under large drooping palms, passing rainbow-coloured orchids and other exotic fauna and flora, to the front door of the house, where a barrel-chested, grim-faced man, armed with a hidden Browning 9mm High Power handgun, was standing guard. This gorilla stepped aside to let Mai press the door bell, which automatically activated another video-monitor inside. When the guard recognised Mai for the second time, he spoke through the intercom, giving the gorilla permission to let her in. The gorilla opened the front door with his personal key. When Mai stepped in, he closed and bolted the door behind her.

Once inside the house, Mai went straight to the Oriental lounge. There she found Lu Thong seated at the glasstopped bamboo table, wearing only his dressing gown of shiny Thai silk and looking as frail as someone at death's door. Nevertheless, he seemed to glow with an inner radiance, a magical, perhaps diabolical energy, and though his brown eyes were, as usual, brighter than they should have been, his gaze was steady and searching.

The devil thinks he's God, Mai thought, as she sat on the cushions at the other side of the low table, curling her shapely legs beneath her, letting him see her perfect, golden thighs. And I'm his dark angel. Sooner or later, we'll turn against each other and then all hell will break loose. I look forward to it.

'Welcome,' Lu Thong said, his voice eerily sepulchral, yet as sensual and seductive as the unnatural glittering of his heavy-lidded, long-lashed, drugged eyes. 'What brings you back here, my pet? Have you some news to impart?'

'Yes,' Mai said. 'You can stop worrying about Professor Schwarz. He's just met with an unfortunate accident of a terminal nature.'

'Mmmm. Did you say "terminal"?'

'I did.'

'And am I allowed to ask how this unfortunate termination came about?'

'Professor Schwarz threw himself out of the window of his room on the sixth floor of the Oriental Hotel and ended up like English jam on the pavement below.'

‘Suicide, was it?’ Lu Thong sounded sardonic. ‘It could be viewed that way. After that kind of fall, it would be impossible to tell if he was damaged *before* he crashed onto the sidewalk or by the fall itself. Either way, Professor Schwarz is now out of the picture and your secret is safe.’

Lu Thong smiled bleakly. ‘I trust you enjoyed your brief visit with him. I wouldn’t like to think, my dear, that you were doing it *only* for me.’

‘I wasn’t,’ Mai said, taking note of the sarcasm and realizing that he was angry about something. When angry, Lu Thong was a dangerous man, so Mai spoke up quickly. ‘Is something wrong? Have I done the wrong thing?’ ‘No, my dear, you haven’t done the wrong thing. But something *is* wrong.’

‘Can you tell me about it?’

‘I’ve already told you about it and a man has just died because I did so.’

‘Professor Schwarz.’

‘Correct.’

‘That means you’re concerned about the Crystal Skull.’ ‘Correct again,’ Lu Thong said.

‘So what’s your concern? Professor Schwarz, being dead, can’t tell anyone what you told me. Your secret is safe.’

‘Not any longer. I’ve just had a call from a friend in Mérida, telling me that – ’

‘The American gangster you told me about,’ Mai interjected. ‘The one who was on his way to Chichén Itzá to dig out the Crystal Skull and bring it to you.’

‘No, not him,’ Lu Thong replied, his dreamy eyes now glittering not only with cocaine but with rage and what seemed like confusion. ‘Though certainly he’s part of the problem.’

‘What does that mean?’

Lu Thong sighed, as if wearied by life, which he often

was. ‘My American gangster friend is dead. A few hours ago, three corpses, all charred almost to a cinder, were found on the stone platform of the Shrine on the summit of the Castle, or El Castillo, in Chichén Itzá. As the platform of the Shrine is where Professor Schwarz insisted that the Crystal Skull was hidden, those three men – all burnt beyond recognition, thank God – were almost certainly my American gangster friend and his Mexican helpers.’ ‘And the Crystal Skull?’
‘The charred corpses were found scattered around a rectangular hole in the floor of the platform, where one of the stone slabs had been removed. That hole had to be where the Crystal Skull was hidden, but according to newspaper reports of the incident, nothing was found in the hole when the bodies of those three men were discovered by the guards opening the site a few hours after the fire was said to have taken place.’
‘What kind of fire?’
‘The newspapers didn’t say. But according to my friend in Mérida, there was something strange about it. Reportedly, though those three men were burnt to a cinder, no damage was done to the Shrine itself.’
‘That’s impossible,’ Mai said.
‘That’s the story,’ Lu Thong said.
‘And the newspaper reports made no mention of a crystal skull having been found at the scene of the accident?’
‘No. Not a word.’
‘Maybe it wasn’t there in the first place,’ Mai said.
‘Maybe Professor Schwarz lied.’
‘Professor Schwarz was too frightened to lie. If he said the Crystal Skull was there, then it was. Besides, someone obviously burned those three men to death and those murders must be related to the Crystal Skull. Whoever killed those men almost certainly did so in order to steal the artefact from them. So somewhere out there…’ Lu Thong languidly waved his wafer-thin hand to take in the world

outside his home… ‘Somewhere, I’d say, between Chichén
Itzá and Mérida, someone is trying to make his escape with our Crystal Skull.
I want that person, or those persons,
found. And I want you to find them.’
‘And if I find them?’
‘Kill them and bring me the Crystal Skull.’
‘I will,’ Mai promised.

Chapter Eight

‘I simply don’t like embarrassing scenes,’ Tom said, still trying to defend himself as he drove into the outskirts of Mérida. ‘That’s all there was to it. I mean, why make an unnecessary scene when one can simply walk out? Heroism is, after all, a fool’s virtue, and to confront that one-eyed bandit would have been tantamount to suicide.’

‘That’s a faggot Englishman’s excuse for cowardice,’ Molly retorted, then she turned her head away in disgust, letting Tom drive on in silence.

In truth, he appreciated the silence because they had been arguing about his so-called ‘cowardice’ for the past forty minutes, ever since leaving the *Posada*, and he now felt exhausted by her constant abuse. He also felt guilty because, despite his repeated denials, he *had* been terrified of that malevolently sneering one-eyed bandit. Finally, he was glad of the silence because he wanted time to think, to work out his confusions, which were composed of his excitement at finding the crystal skull, his fear of the danger the skull might put him in, his frustration at having to deal with this highly strung, foul-mouthed American girl, and his growing awareness that despite his own reservations, he was having sexual fantasies about her.

With regard to the latter, he was trying desperately to distract himself from his uncomfortable awareness of her close proximity, but each time he removed his gaze from the road ahead, his eyes automatically gravitated to the long, shapely length of her thighs as revealed in the tight denims, the fullness of her breasts as emphasized by her tucked-in shirt, and even the sensual lushness of her lips, which, though too often curved in a sneer of derision, made him burn in the lambent heat of lust. He had even found himself wondering, when glancing at the blonde hair piled up under her peaked cap, just what that hair would look like when it came tumbling down.

The very thought of it had given him an erection, and now, in the growing humidity of late morning, he felt drowsy and even more sensual, too close to her for comfort.

As if knowing what he was thinking and deliberately tormenting him, Molly crossed one long leg over the other and then ran her fingers lightly over the raised thigh. Instantly imagining his own fingers doing the same, Tom blushed and quickly averted his hungry gaze.

‘So where are we going?’ Molly asked him.

‘Pardon?’ he responded, as he often did with Molly, this being a sign of his increasing disorientation.

‘You deaf or something? I asked where we’re going. I mean, I assume we’re gonna spend the night here, before driving on to Mexico City.’

‘I suppose we must,’ Tom said.

‘Don’t sound so enthusiastic, pal. I could weep, I’m so welcomed.’

‘Sorry,’ Tom said, trying to concentrate on his driving and wondering how he could possibly lust after this girl, who was so obnoxious. ‘I was just a little distracted.’

‘So are we going to your hotel?’ she asked him.

‘*My* hotel?’ Tom was embarrassed. The very thought of waltzing Molly into the neo-colonial elegance of the de luxe Casa del Balam Hotel sent a tremor through him, though he wasn’t about to let her know this. Instead, he lied, practically stuttering, ‘I’m afraid I booked out of my hotel when I left for Chichén Itzá and I really don’t think I’ll get back in. So I suppose we’ll have to look somewhere else. Also, my hotel was rather expensive, and…’

‘You can’t afford to put me up there as well.’

‘Well, to be truthful… I mean, do you have *any* money at all?’

‘Hitchhiker’s money. Not much. Just enough for basic food and amenities. I couldn’t *afford* a decent hotel.’

‘Exactly. So – ’

‘So you’re going to treat me to a room, but you can’t afford to do it where you were staying before.’

‘That *would* be rather expensive,’ Tom managed, thouogh he was writhing with discomfort behind the steering wheel.

‘I understand that,’ Molly said understandingly. ‘So where were you staying, as a matter of interest?’

‘The Casa del Balam,’ Tom said.

Molly gave a low whistle of appreciation. ‘Oh, boy, that’s a real five-star joint. Real de luxe, so I’m told.’
‘I could only afford one week there,’ Tom said quickly. ‘A sort of treat, as it were, before I moved on to somewhere cheaper.’
‘Oh, yeah?’
‘Yes.’
He was heading for the Old City, downtown, having previously revelled in its remarkably clean pastel streets, its Spanish-Moorish-Mayan architecture, its red-tiled rooftops, and its many *veletas*, or windmills, while driving even more carefully than normal (and he *was* a nervous driver) to avoid the city’s many cars, pedestrians in *guayaberas* and *huipils*, and the ubiquitous pony-drawn buggies known as *calesas*.
‘You’ve got money, haven’t you?’ Molly said.
‘Money?’ Tom responded uneasily, since he had it but was careful with it.
‘Yeah, money. The stuff you put in your billfold. You stay in that hotel, even for a week, and that means you have bread. So what do you do in England, pal? You haven’t told me that yet. In fact, you haven’t told me a damned thing about yourself, though you’ve let *me* talk my head off. So tell me what you do for a living’. I mean, I’m dyin’ to know.’
Taken aback, once more, by the crass young lady’s assertion that he had somehow tricked her into talking about herself, when in fact he had not being able to stop her tongue from wagging, Tom replied, ‘Well, that’s rather difficult to explain. I mean…’
‘I can’t wait to hear it,’ Molly asserted, ‘so just spit it out.’
‘Well…’ Tom always felt vaguely embarrassed to be talking about himself, more so when he was dealing with someone like Molly, to whom his background would be virtually incomprehensible. ‘Well,’ he began again, ‘I’m a kind of… perpetual student. I don’t really have a job as such. I mean, I’ve spent the past few years studying ancient civilizations, mostly through archaeology, which is why I’m now touring the Yucatán. But I only do it as a kind of hobby… To give me something to do, as it were.’
Having become lost in Mérida’s dense traffic, he now found himself in the immense *zocalo*, or Plaza de la Independencia, lined with Indian laurel trees, dotted with conventional benches and Victorian love-seats, and dominated by the Casa Monteja, the palace constructed by the younger Monteja in 1549. As he had already done his standard tour of the city a couple of days ago, he did

not wish to repeat it and so kept driving until he came to the beautifully weathered colonial structures of the Old City. Once there, crawling at a snail's pace, he kept his eyes peeled for somewhere to stay.
'You don't have a profession?' Molly asked him.
Tom sighed. 'Alas, no.'
'But if you stayed in the Casa del Balam Hotel, you've obviously got bread and plenty of it. So how did you manage that?'
This was the part that Tom always hated, so he took a deep breath and let the words out as he exhaled. 'I inherited it,' he confessed. 'I don't like to talk about it, but my father and mother are English aristocracy. When my father died, which he did a few years back, I inherited his estate. We're not exactly the *crème de la crème* of the English upper classes, but I have to confess that we're rather well off, and so, once I'd completed my education at Oxford, I didn't have to work for a living. To you, this must sound terrible.'
'It sounds wonderful,' Molly said. 'But what do you mean when you say "we"? I thought you'd separated from your wife.'
'I did. By "we" I mean the family in general, including my mother, who is alive and well and still living in Reigate, Surrey.'
'You've got one of them big fancy English castles?'
Tom couldn't resist smiling at the remark, even though the recollection of home, given his last few years there, was still painful to him. 'Hardly,' he said. 'Though it's certainly a large Georgian house with extensive grounds.'
'You live there all the time?'
'My mother lives there all the time and the house is open to tourists, which is the only way we can maintain it properly. My wife moved out when we divorced and returned to her own family, which owns an even bigger estate in Windsor.'
'Is that where the Royal Family live?'
'Correct.'
'Gee, this is really too much. I'm travellin' with English aristocracy! Damn right, you pay.'
'Pardon?'
'For the hotel.'
'Oh… Of course.' Landed with this, Tom kept his eyes peeled for some decent accommodation, but set his sights, as it were, even lower, which meant even cheaper.

‘So where do *you* live? In the big house with your Ma?’
‘I go there most weekends,’ Tom said, ‘but when my wife moved out, I decided I didn’t want to stay there with only my mother, conducting tourists around the place, so I moved into a small apartment in Mayfair, London.’
‘I hear it’s a great city,’ Molly said, actually smiling and seeming to warm to him.
‘It is,’’
‘Is that why you moved there? To have a good time?’
‘For the distraction,’ Tom said. ‘I was alone and I wanted lots of people around me, including my old friends from Oxford, many of whom now lived and worked in the capital. Also, London is a wonderful place for research and as a jumping-off place for worldwide travel; so when I immersed myself in the study of ancient cultures, which also involves a lot of travelling, London seemed the sensible place to be.’
‘Hell, man, it must be incredible to have all that bread at your disposal and be able to do what you want and go where you want without worrying.’
‘It certainly has its advantages,’ Tom said.
He pulled into the parking lot of a small, relatively modernized hotel on the Parque Cepeda, downtown, facing a busy *calesa* stand. It was an old colonial building recently renovated, with Indian laurel trees on both sides of the short driveway lending it a rustic, romantic appearance. Sleepless, and having drunk beer on an empty stomach, Tom was feeling much warmer towards Molly and thinking dangerous thoughts, including the thought that she seemed much warmer towards *him*.
‘What do you think?’ he asked.
‘I think it’s fine,’ Molly replied. ‘It ain’t exactly the Casa del Balam, but I suppose you don’t wanna be embarrassed to be seen with me in a swanky joint like that.’
‘Not true,’ Tom diplomatically lied, as he applied the handbrake, clambered out of the jeep, and removed his travelling bag from the rear seat. ‘It’s just that I came here on a tight budget - ’
‘But you’re loaded!’ Molly said, getting out of the other side of the vehicle.
‘ – and having to pay for you, as well, will put a strain on it, so this place is a compromise.’
‘You English are known to be tight-fisted bastids,’ Molly said as she picked up the rucksack containing the crystal skull, ‘but that’s okay by me. I mean,

beggars can't be choosers, after all, so I'm not about to complain.'
'That's terribly decent of you,' Tom said, then turned away to lead her into the hotel.
He heaved a sigh of relief to note that the hotel was as pleasant inside as it was outside, with old colonial furniture, floors of fine Carrara marble, potted plants, and functioning air-conditioning. At the reception desk, which was manned by a genial Mexican wearing a brilliantly coloured *guayabera*, he ascertained that the place had a swimming pool, bar, and restaurant. Pleased, he asked for two single rooms.
'Sorry, *Seňor*,' the desk clerk responded, 'but we are almost booked out, being always extremely popular, and so only have one single room left. Cheaper for you, *si*?'
'I ain't sleeping in a fucking room with you, that's for sure,' Molly said.
Blushing to have such foul language spoken in front of the amiable, polite desk clerk, Tom coughed into his clenched fist and said, 'Really, we would *prefer* separate rooms. So if you could – '
'Please, *Seňor*,' the desk clerk interjected, shrugging and raising his hands pleadingly in the air, 'if I could help you, I would, but I only have one single room left.' He smiled seductively at Molly. 'And this young lady, I am sure, is understanding and will surely – '
'Share the single bed with him, right?' Molly responded, boldly staring the desk clerk down. 'Well, to hell with that, buddy. We're not here to have some hokeypokey together – I mean, this is a *business* trip – so you fix us up sharpish with two rooms or we'll go someplace else.' 'That would be difficult, Seňora – '
'*Seňorita*,' Molly firmly corrected him.
' – because this is the time of carnival and every other hotel in Mérida is booked out.'
'Except this dump,' Molly said. 'With its one remaining single room and single bed. Thanks a lot, pal!'
'Well, really,' Tom said timidly. 'I believe that this fine gentleman is merely trying to help us, and – '
'Get me into your filthy bed. Thanks, but no thanks!'
'May I suggest,' said the desk clerk, unperturbed and smiling, understanding that certain *gringos* could not be *seen* to be sleeping together, 'that we solve this little problem by putting an extra bed in the room? This, I fear, is all we

can do for now, so I trust it's agreeable.'
'Well…' Tom began, embarrassed, but also helplessly thinking, in the back of his mind, that perhaps he and Molly would actually…
'I'm not wearin' it,' Molly said firmly.
'Either this single room or we sleep in the jeep,' Tom said. 'It's up to you, my dear lady.'
'Don't call me "dear",' Molly said.
'Sorry,' Tom said.
Molly sighed and stretched herself, thus showing off the perfection of her large breasts and small waist, the exquisite curve to her long legs. 'Okay,' she said. 'If we have to, we have to. But don't get any fresh ideas, pal.'
'I won't,' Tom promised solemnly.
He signed the register. Then, having been informed that it would take half an hour for the room to be prepared and the extra bed moved in, he suggested that he and Molly retire to the restaurant for a spot of lunch.
'Great,' Molly said. 'I'm starvin'. I could eat a goddamned horse.'
As both were reluctant to give away their bags (in Molly's case, the rucksack), they carried them into the restaurant and placed them on the floor beside their chairs. The restaurant was a pleasant, spacious, Mexican-styled room, filled with tourists here for the carnival. Tom was actually too tired to eat properly and really just wanted a couple of drinks, but he dutifully ordered lunch – a filling *mucbil pollo* for Molly, a more modest *pollo pibil* for himself - and merely picked at his own food while managing to polish off a whole bottle of imported California red. By the time Molly had enthusiastically devoured her large *tamales* stuffed with pork and chicken and drenched in *anchiote* sauce, Tom was into his second bottle of wine and seeing Molly in a very different light. Though he couldn't see her shapely legs, which were tucked beneath the table, he was increasingly mesmerized by the tightness of her open-necked shirt (he saw the hint of cleavage there) and by her full, always-on-the-move lips. As for her blonde hair, still piled up beneath her peaked cap, which she still had not removed, he kept imagining it tumbling down around her bare shoulders, onto her bare breasts, and the thought of this almost made him swoon.
They talked throughout the meal. At least, Molly talked and Tom responded as best he could, until, when Molly had finished eating and Tom's second bottle was almost empty, she said, 'You sure know how to put away that

booze. You must be a sad sack.'
'Perhaps,' Tom said, hiccupping.
'So why did it break up?'
Tom shrugged forlornly. 'I don't know; it just happened. The marriage was practically arranged – in the sense that both sets of parents wanted it – and I guess we both slipped into it just to please our families. It wasn't that we weren't initially *fond* of each other – certainly, being childhood friends, we were – but we weren't really in love. So we were married and it didn't really work and we just drifted apart.'
'Lousy sex, eh?'
Even drunk, Tom was embarrassed. 'Not so bad,' he lied. In fact, the sex between him and Lucinda had been a disaster from Day One, which was why, he assumed, he was so sexually frustrated and presently lusting after the luscious Molly. 'It was more of an emotional problem. We simply didn't have much to say to each other, and the silences became longer, and, as it were, louder, until we just couldn't stand it. We separated – and later divorced – by mutual consent, though we still keep in touch.'
'Any kids?'
'No.'
'That was lucky,' Molly said. She finished off her glass of non-alcoholic *horchata*, glanced around the busy restaurant, then returned her gaze to him. 'How long will it take us to drive to Mexico City?' she asked.
'About twenty-two hours,' Tom said.
'Christ,' Molly retorted, 'that's a long drive.'
'Yes,' Tom agreed. 'And I'm really feeling rather tired. So I suggest that we try to sleep this afternoon, and then, if we feel up to it, commence the drive to Mexico City in the early hours of the morning. That way, we'll reach our destination in the daylight and find it easier to locate a hotel. We can then have a proper sleep tomorrow night and awaken refreshed the following morning. How does that sound?'
'Sounds fine,' Molly said, offering what seemed to be a warm smile.
'Excellent,' Tom said.
He signed for the meal, then, with Molly beside him, left the restaurant, swaying slightly, being extremely drunk, and humming happily to himself. He dangled the room key suggestively from his index finger, swinging it to and fro like a metronome, as, with Molly still beside him, he made his way

along the ground-floor corridors, squinting owlishly and grinning like a lucky man as he searched for their room. When Molly placed her hand lightly on his shoulder, obviously trying to keep him steady, he mistook her touch for affection and swelled up with emotion.
‘Thank you so much,’ he said.

Chapter Nine

The curtains had been drawn to keep out the sun and the room was in semi-darkness when Tom and Molly entered it. It was a pleasant room, sparse but comfortable, with two single beds along opposite walls, a couple of soft armchairs, and an antique writing desk by the window. Rather than open the curtains, Molly turned the lights on, then she placed her rucksack by the side of one of the beds, while Tom, given no choice, placed his dusty travelling bag by the other. Drunk, he was in a mood both amorous and mischievous, which was not his normal self, and so he threw Molly a big, flush-cheeked smile, and said, ‘Well, now, how cosy!’

‘It could’ve been cosier,’ Molly retorted, falling backwards to stretch out on the bed and gaze at the ceiling. ‘It could’ve been a de luxe hotel – the one you’d probably have returned to if I hadn’t been with you.’

‘Not fair,’ Tom said, smiling even more broadly, letting his bleary gaze roam fondly along the length of Molly’s slim body, from her feet in sandals to her flat, white belly (slightly exposed where the shirt had come out of her denims) and upthrust, intoxicating breasts, more prominent than ever under the tightly drawn shirt. ‘Unkind, my pet. I merely felt that since I came here on a strictly limited budget, I would have to make some cuts if I also included you in my expenditure. It’s as simple as that.’

‘You’re a tight-fisted English bastid,’ Molly said. ‘It’s as simple as *that*. Either that, or you’re embarrassed at the thought of being seen with me in a fancier joint.’
‘That, also, is untrue.’
‘Then you’re just a skinflint. You’re English

aristocracy, loaded, but your kind hates to spend it. I always heard the English were like that and now I believe it.’

‘That’s nonsense,’ Tom said, feeling desperately in need of sleep but unable to take his eyes off Molly’s supine body and therefore unable to bring

himself to lie down. ‘It’s true that I have a certain amount of money back home
– more than adequate, I confess – but, alas, it is there and not here. And I did, indeed, come here on a limited budget, so I have to be careful.’
‘You’re startin’ to sound like a pansy English actor,’
Molly said. ‘All florid and plum-in-the-mouth, like.’ ‘Well, I’m terribly sorry if my way of speaking offends
you, but that’s how one speaks where I come from and one simply cannot help oneself. Do I complain about *your* manner of speech?’
‘I speak perfectly fine, thanks. I don’t come out with all of your *one*-this and *one*-that horseshit. I say “me” or “I” like a normal person. I don’t talk like I’m in an English TV series, wearing top hat and tails. Anyway…’ She turned her head to stare at him from her supine position on the bed.
‘You’re just changing the subject – note how I’m pronouncing my words properly – and I still say you’re a skinflint and a disgusting lecher into the bargain, judging by the way you’re staring at me. Why don’t you stop ogling me, you poor bastid, and lie down and sleep?’
Now too drunk to be embarrassed and so opting for outrage instead, Tom straightened his shoulders, stared sternly at Molly, and said, ‘I wasn’t *ogling* you, my dear.’ ‘Don’t call me “dear”.’
‘I am not the kind to *ogle*. I was merely giving you my attention as we talked, to let you know I was listening.’ ‘You were ogling me,’ Molly said. ‘Admit it. Your eyes
were popping out of your head and crawling all over me like spiders. Legs, belly and boobs.’
‘That’s ridiculous,’ Tom said. ‘You have a rich imagination. I’ve noted before, and have informed you accordingly, that you suffer from certain sexual obsessions of an unhealthy, or possibly egotistical, nature. If you’re not feeling threatened with rape, you imagine you’re being ogled. Absolute codswallop!’
‘Just lie down and let us both sleep.’

‘Certainly,’ Tom said with dignity.
With a melodramatic sigh, he removed his shoes, switched off the light, and stretched out on the bed. The minute he closed his eyes, his head started swimming, so he instantly opened his eyes again and took a couple of deep breaths. That seemed to help. He closed his eyes again and this time his head didn’t swim, but he felt that he was suffocating in the humidity and so he opened his eyes again. Turning his head, he glanced sideways at Molly, whom he could just about discern in the semi-darkness, and noted that she had closed her eyes and was either sleeping or simply breathing deeply. He suspected the latter. Was it possible, he wondered, that she was thinking of him, just as he was thinking of her? No, of course not… But then, again, you never knew… She was a healthy young woman with normal desires and she had smiled at him a couple of times, which was certainly hopeful. Tom heard her even breathing, saw the rise and fall of her sweet breasts, and he filled up with drunken emotion, burned with sensual need. Sighing, he closed his eyes, hoping to find distraction in sleep, but instead her image swam around in his head to tease and torment him. She was silent in these visions, not whiplashing him with her tongue, and so he saw only what he wished to see, which was her soft, unclothed body. He saw himself on her bed, stretched out beside her, unbuttoning her shirt to expose the brassiere he had fleetingly glimpsed now and then. He saw her breasts in the brassiere, her denims slipping down over her broad hips, exposing her white, flat belly (also exposed only fleetingly now and then), and then he saw her spreadeagled beneath him, stark naked… voluptuous. Groaning, Tom opened his eyes again, staring blindly at the ceiling, gradually returning to his senses, and realized that he’d been sleeping and dreaming. Agitated, he glanced sideways to see Molly on the other bed, still outstretched, eyes closed, breathing evenly, almost certainly sleeping. Even more agitated,

feeling drunk and unreal, he swung his legs off the bed and stood up and went to the window. Standing there, he glanced sideways at the sleeping, evenly breathing Molly, at the mesmeric rise and fall of her breasts in the tight shirt, in the seductive semi-darkness. Then, in an attempt to distract himself, he pulled the curtains apart to look out.

He was surprised to see that it was dark out there. Realizing that he had slept a lot longer than he had imagined, he glanced again at the sleeping Molly and was consumed by the sight of her, so he gulped and looked out the window again, still seeking distraction. This room was on the ground floor, at the rear of the building, and pale moonlight was falling on a quiet road that ran alongside a park with trees silhouetted against a starry backdrop. As Tom was studying the road, distracting himself by staring at nothing in particular, a red Ford Escort came into view and stopped by the rear garden of the hotel. Its headlights remained on. The driver's window was rolled down and the indistinct blob of a human face appeared and seemed to be staring straight at the hotel, and, as Tom imagined it, straight at him.

The hairs on the back of Tom's neck stood up when he realized that the distant face was, indeed, staring straight at him – or, at least, at his room.

Even as he accepted this, the face disappeared back into the car, then the driver's door opened and the driver stepped out. Though Tom still couldn't discern the man's features, he could see that he was wearing a checkered shirt, faded denims and high-heeled boots, with a knife sheathed on the big-buckled belt around his thick waist. Tom knew then, without doubt, that he was looking at the one-eyed bandit who had smiled malevolently at him in the last two bars that he and Molly had been in.

Molly was right: the one-eyed man was following them. Shocked back to sobriety and instantly scared, Tom

watched the one-eyed man as he walked from his car to the fence at the rear of the garden. The man disappeared when he approached the fence, but a few seconds later his white knuckles, illuminated by moonlight, could clearly be seen where his hands had gripped the top of the fence as he prepared to haul himself up and over. Even as Tom guessed what the man was doing, the latter did indeed appear on the top of the fence, balancing precariously as he glanced left and right, checking that no one could see him.

'Oh, God help us!' Tom exclaimed involuntarily, his eyes almost popping out of his head as he stared at the man on the fence.

'What…?' Glancing sideways, Tom saw Molly sitting upright on her bed and rubbing her sleepy eyes. She blinked a few times and stared at him. 'What the hell's going on?' she asked.

'That man!' Tom exclaimed in a panic-stricken whisper that sounded, to him, like a scream.

'What man?'

'That one-eyed man who was following us!'

'You insisted he wasn't following us,' Molly reminded him.

'No, I didn't!'

'Yes, you did.'

'Well, he's following us!' Tom said, his whispering still resounding like a scream in his head. 'And he's come to this hotel and right now he's clambering over that fence out there, about to drop down into the garden. *He's coming for us*!'

'Stop shouting.'

'*I'm not shouting*!'

'Yes, you are.'

'What's the difference? I'm telling you that that oneeyed man's out there in the garden, and he's – '

'You said he was on the fence.'

'*What's the difference?*' Tom almost screamed properly

this time. ‘He’s on the fence and he’s about to drop into the garden and he’s coming for us!’
‘Not for us,’ Molly corrected him. ‘He’s coming for the crystal skull.’
‘WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE?’ Tom screamed. He couldn’t believe how calm she was and shame made him lower his voice again. ‘If he’s come for the crystal skull, he’s obviously going to kill us to get it. He’s – ’
‘He won’t necessarily kill us,’ Molly said.
‘*What*?’ But he’s…’
Tom turned back to the window and looked out just as the one-eyed man dropped off the fence, into the garden, briefly disappearing into the darkness of the lawn, then reappearing in striations of moonlight as he made his way at the half-crouch towards the hotel in general and Tom’s room in particular.
He was holding a pistol in one hand.
‘*He has a pistol*!’ Tom hissed.
Instantly, Molly rolled off the bed, groped around in her rucksack, then rushed up to stand beside Tom and look out through the window.
She was holding a Browning 9mm High Power handgun in one hand.
‘That’s a gun!’ Tom exclaimed, staring, shocked, at the weapon.
‘Damned right, it’s a gun,’ Molly retorted. ‘So where is that bastid?’
‘You can’t shoot him!’ Tom exclaimed.
‘Wanna bet? Where *is* the bastid?’ She was staring intently down through the window, trying to catch a glimpse of the man who had vanished into another patch of darkness. ‘There he is!’ she said excitedly and started opening the window while holding the handgun up beside her head and releasing the safety catch.
‘Oh, my God!’ Tom exclaimed. Looking down through the opening window, he saw the one-eyed man emerging

again from darkness, crossing a pool of pale moonlight, and rapidly approaching the room.

When the one-eyed man saw the window opening, he stopped in surprise. Quickly recovering, and, more importantly, seeing that Molly was aiming her weapon at him, he swung his pistol up in the hope of firing first. ‘Don’t fire that thing!’ Tom bawled at Molly.

Molly fired. The sound of the shot ricocheted in Tom’s head. He closed his eyes in shock and opened them again to see that the one-eyed man had not been hit and was now running back towards the fence. Molly fired another shot. The noise almost split Tom’s head. He closed his eyes again, but felt compelled to open them once more and saw that the one-eyed man was now clambering back over the fence. Once straddling it, he twisted sideways, took aim with his pistol, and fired a single parting shot. The bullet ricocheted off the wooden window-frame, just beside Tom’s head, making him drop instantly to the floor in fear for his life. Molly fired a third shot. Tom stayed there on the floor, keeping his eyes closed, until he heard the roar of the Ford car racing away, followed by Molly speaking. ‘You can stop licking the tiles with your tongue,’ she said. ‘That bastid’s gone.’

Tom raised himself high enough to glance over the bottom of the chipped window-frame and confirm that the one-eyed man and his car had indeed vanished. When he stood up fully, though keeping well to the side of the window, Molly was sitting on the edge of her bed, putting more bullets into the magazine of her handgun. When she had finished, she applied the safety catch, then slipped the handgun back into its leather holster and carefully inched the complete package down through all her junk, to the very bottom of the battered rucksack. She patted something inside the rucksack and then straightened up again. She gave Tom a big grin.

‘Just thought I’d check,’ she said calmly. ‘The crystal skull’s still there and in one piece. Don’t know why I

bothered to check. Just instinct, I suppose. Thought it might have vanished *without* that bastid's help. I'm superstitious that way.'

Tom stared disbelievingly at her, aware of his racing heart, then said in a shocked whisper, 'You're carrying a loaded gun!'

'Not much use if it ain't loaded.'

'A loaded gun! That's dangerous!'

'Only to the bastid it's aimed at – and it certainly made that bastid run away.'

'I refuse to travel through this country with a woman carrying…' Tom began. But he was cut off by the hammering of knuckles on the door and a male voice telling them in Spanish to open up. Even more shocked, Tom glanced at the door, then back at Molly. 'Oh, my God! Is that him?'

'No,' Molly said calmly. 'It won't be him. It's prob'ly the manager. You better open the door.'

'*You* open it,' Tom said.

Rolling her eyes, Molly stood up and went to open the door. She was right. It was the manager. He spat a steam of Spanish at them, then reverted to English and demanded to know who had been firing a weapon in his respectable hotel.

'Weapon?' Tom said. '*I* didn't fire a weapon!' 'Me neither,' Molly lied, then she jabbed her finger at the open window behind her. 'But we heard the sound of gunfire from out back and opened the window to see what was happening. There was somethin' going on out there. We think it may have been a robbery. There was a police car and the cop was on the sidewalk, right by your rear fence, and firing at a man we could see running away from him. I guess that's what you heard.'

'The shots came from here, *Seňora*.'

'*Seňorita,*' Molly corrected him. 'And the shots didn't come from here, pal – they came from out there. I mean,

what kinda place are we staying in, if that kinda crap goes on at night? Is this a dangerous area?'
'No, no, *Seňorita*.' The manager, who was short in stature, with a face as round as his belly and large liquid brown eyes, waved his hands frantically in denial and took a couple of steps back. 'This is a respectable establishment in a *very* safe area. What you saw and heard rarely happens around here and I must apologize for it. Our local police force, which is excellent, will surely apprehend the criminal intruder, and in the meantime, *Seňor* and *Seňorita*, in recompense for your suffering, I offer you this room for free. I trust this is acceptable.'
'Most kind – ' Tom began.
'We could sue you,' Molly said. 'We've spent a fortune in your restaurant and were almost murdered in our beds by way of thanks. We could sue you for damages.'
The manager was aghast. 'I include the meal, *Seňorita*. I throw in all your drinks from the mini-bar and, of course, your breakfast. Also included will be a hamper of food to send you on your way in the morning. I trust *this* is acceptable.'
'Well…'
'We accept,' Tom said quickly. 'You're really too kind, Seňor. Thank you and good night.'
'*Buenas noches*, my friends.'
With a quick, graceful bow, the manager departed, and Tom just as quickly closed the door after him. He then turned to face Molly. His heart was racing and he felt his cheeks burning, but Molly was grinning triumphantly. 'Pretty neat, eh?'
'*What*?' Tom exploded.
'The way I took care of that greaser – *and* that bastid outside. Now we can stay here for free, eat and drink all we want, and then light out of here tomorrow morning with a hamper of food, before that one-eyed bastid comes back, which he surely will.'
'You're carrying a gun!' Tom repeated.

‘You’ve already said that.’
‘I refuse to travel with a woman, a mere slip of a girl, who’s carrying a dangerous weapon in her rucksack. That’s really too much.’
‘A girl from New York doesn’t travel alone through Mexico without some kinda protection. And if *I* hadn’t been carrying a gun, you’d be dead meat, *amigo*.’ ‘Nonsense! I can take care of myself. I don’t need some gun-toting American lunatic to come to my rescue. I could have dealt with the matter on my own, without causing mayhem.’
‘Oh, yeah? How? By having a civilized English chat while that bastid shoved the barrel of his pistol down your gullet and squeezed the trigger and ran off with our crystal skull? Don’t come it with *me*, pal! Besides, you were face down on the floor while that guy was advancing, practically shitting your pants, so don’t tell me you know how to protect yourself. I protected you and I got this room for free, so why not show some gratitude?’
Tom turned away from her to sit on the edge of his bed and put on his shoes.
‘What’re you doin’?’ Molly asked him.
‘If, as you insist, that one-eyed man’s going to return, I think we should get out of here right now and put as much distance as possible between us and him.’
‘He’ll be out there right now,’ Molly said.
Tom stopped tying his shoe laces. ‘What does that mean?’
‘He’ll be out there right now, watching the entrance to this hotel, and he’ll be delighted if we leave in the dark. In darkness, he can pick us off easier – and without being seen. So I suggest that we wait until morning and travel on in daylight. Of course, if you insist, we’ll leave right now, and…’
‘No, no,’ Tom said quickly, untying his shoe laces and kicking the shoes off again. ‘Why not stay, indeed? It’s not

that I necessarily agree with you, but why waste a perfectly good room when it's going for free?'
'You're scared,' Molly said.
'I am not,' Tom said stoutly.
'You're scared and you have a right to be, but you just won't admit it.'
'I'm really rather tired,' Tom said with a feigned yawn, 'and could do with another good sleep. Do you mind…?'
Without waiting for his rhetorical question to be answered, he lay down, still fully clothed, on the bed and closed his weary, bloodshot eyes.
'Well, fuck you,' Molly said.
Tom pretended to sleep. He didn't want another argument. He intended keeping his eyes closed, even if he couldn't sleep, but when he heard Molly rooting about in her rucksack, he sneaked a sideways glance at her. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, her gorgeous legs crossed, and rolling what looked like an unusually thick cigaret. After lighting it and inhaling deeply, she exhaled a cloud of smoke that Tom, though not a smoker himself, recognized by its sweet smell.
'Marijuana!' he whispered as he pulled his blanket up over his head. 'Dear God, what next?'
'What a wimp!' he heard Molly murmuring just before he did, indeed, slip off to sleep.
In his sleep, he had vivid erotic dreams… about Molly, of course.

Chapter Ten

The Thai and Chinese girls on the stage in the middle of the noisy bar in Patpong Road were wearing either G-strings or see-thru negligees, with black stockings and stiletto-heeled shoes. Their breasts were bare. All were slim, smoothskinned, long-legged, and, in the subdued crimson lighting, irresistibly sexy as they gyrated their hips, rolled their bellies, shook their naked rumps, and writhed up and down the steel poles that rose phallically

from the floor of the small, revolving, neon-lit stage, surrounded by tables packed with locals and tourists. The girls were dancing to a string of hit records and the volume was well up to challenge the din of wolf whistles, ribald remarks, drunken laughter, and bellowed conversation.

Observing them as she drank her flute glass of vintage champagne, Mai Suphar's eyes gleamed with a rapacious light that Lu Thong knew only too well. Earlier in the evening he had taken her to the Thai boxing tournaments in the Lumphini Stadium on Rama 4 Road and she had, as usual, been stimulated by the violent spectacle. Certainly one of the fiercest sports ever invented, Thai boxing had originated in ancient days as a martial art, then evolved into a competitive fight in which not only gloved fists, but elbows, feet, knees, and nearly every other part of the boxer's body could be used to kick, jab, chop and generally pummel an opponent into submission. Few things thrilled Mai more than to see two superbly fit, almost naked men inflicting ferocious punishment on one another over the five three-minute rounds of non-stop brutal combat – and certainly she was sexually excited by it.

Lu Thong wanted Mai to be sexually aroused when he took her to bed later that evening for a drug-heightened orgy. Knowing that Mai, being bisexual, was also aroused by the sight of scantily-dressed teenage girls performing erotic dances in the many strip joints and nightclubs of Patpong, he had deliberately brought her here straight from the excitements of the Lumphini Stadium. The combination of fierce Thai boxing between sweating men and the erotic dancing of these beautiful young women was having its effect, and Mai, who also loved vintage champagne, was clearly becoming even more excited and repeatedly licked her moist, lush lips.

Remarkably, even when compared to the lovely teenagers on stage, Mai, in her short black-silk dress held on by thin shoulder straps, her long legs in stiletto heels, and her ink-black hair hanging all the way down her spine, she was still the most attractive girl in the place, drawing many a hungry glance.

Lu Thong himself was hungry for her and pleased that he'd brought her here.

'Would you like one of those?' he asked, nodding to indicate the girls dancing on the revolving stage in visually enhancing crimson light.

Mai smiled. 'Why? Are you going to purchase one for me?'

'If you want one, I'll purchase one, my lovely. But, alas, not tonight. Tonight

you’re all mine.’
‘So why did you suggest it?’
‘Just curious.’
‘About what?’
‘Your preferences. Do you prefer men or women?’
‘Women are less trouble,’ Mai said, ‘particularly when young and tender like those dancers. But men have their uses as well. With regard to what I prefer, it really just depends on my mood and you’ll do for tonight.’
Lu Thong smiled wryly at her insolence. He admired it, but he was also wary of it, knowing that it could lead to rebellion and, from that, betrayal. Mai, he knew, was capable of both, and that made her dangerous. ‘So what would you do if you had one of those young girls instead of me?’
Mai studied the girls on the stage, then licked her lips and looked dreamy. ‘Assuming she was heterosexual – or at least thought she was – I’d take my first pleasure from seducing her and observing her initial shock and disgust change to rapture. Once she was mine, enslaved by my lips and hands, I’d take more pleasure from showing her everything that two women can do together, with or without my various aids, including dildos and drugs. Then, having pushed her to the edge, beyond guilt or shame, I’d make her pleasure *me* in every conceivable way, doing things she could not have imagined herself doing just a few hours before. Finally, when she was addicted to me, imagining me to be her whole world, I’d persuade her to let me tie her to the bed. Once she’d done so, once she was helpless beneath me, I’d embark on the final stage, from orgasm to death. So that’s what I’d do, my dear.’
‘You’d kill her?’
‘Slowly,’ Mai replied, licking her lips and trembling pleasurably at the very thought of it. ‘I’d tape her sweet mouth closed to prevent her from screaming and then work slowly and surely, with all the skill at my command, keeping her alive as long as possible, only ending when I could no longer bear my own excitement and had to release it through orgasm. She would die in agony as I was dying from pleasure. That’s my ultimate high.’
‘It would not be the first time, would it, Mai?’
‘No,’ Mai replied.
Lu Thong studied her thoughtfully, then he smiled and glanced around the crowded bar. The mostly male customers were seated at packed tables around the revolving stage, where the strippers and erotic dancers were still

performing to pounding rock music. They were sitting either with bar girls in miniskirts and hotpants or with handsome young Thai men in short-sleeved shirts and tight trousers. A lot of hands were roaming under those tables, a lot of deals were being made, and the young whores, male and female, were mostly desperate enough not to dwell on the awesome dangers of their profession. In fact, as Lu Thong knew, young whores of both sexes disappeared every day in Bangkok and either were not seen again or were next seen, torn and bloody, in some sleazy hotel room or found floating face-down in the Chao Phraya river: beaten to death in drunken frenzies, stabbed to death by psychopaths, tortured to death by sadists, or overdosed, either accidentally or against their will, on lethal drugs. Invariably, the perpetrators of such crimes were male clients, but certainly more than one death had been due to the most beautiful woman in this bar, Mai Suphan, who sought her highs in the most perverse ways. Now, turning back to his lovely companion, Lu Thong gazed steadily at her for some time, then said, ‘Don’t get similar ideas about me. I would not be amused.’

‘No, you’d be dead.’ Mai’s smile was as cold as ice. ‘But… who knows? It might be the best way for you to go. You’re a man drawn to death, possibly to suicide, certainly to the most extreme kinds of experience, so being taken from orgasm to death might be good for your twisted, immortal soul. Try imagining it as your ultimate adventure

– your last orgasm and your last breath simultaneously. Perhaps that’s what you secretly want, Lu Thing.’

‘The ultimate adventure – death’s doorway – yes, that’s what I want. But not your way, my pet.’

‘Then what way?’

‘Magic. The occult. Power beyond what we can imagine. Perhaps a power that can only be purchased with death, which would make the dying worthwhile.’

‘The kind of power said to be given to the one who possesses the Crystal Skull?’

‘Yes,’ Lu Thong said.

‘Which is why you want it.’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you sure the Crystal Skull has magical powers?’

‘I’m certain of it,’ Lu Thong said.

‘Why?’
‘Because of its history. Or, to be more precise, its strange lack of history, since in fact it’s an ancient artefact with no verifiable history and therefore no historical references from which we could assess what it really is or where it came from.’
‘But there must be clues.’
‘Mostly conjecture,’ Lu Thong said. ‘There are those who believe that all thirteen of the known crystal skulls have magical powers and originated in Atlantis at least 17,000 years ago. According to this theory, Atlantis had thirteen so-called *healing* temples and one skull was utilized in each temple. Tenuous evidence links the skulls to Sha-Tree-Tra, a priestess who was killed during one of the last earthquakes in Atlantis. The original skull of this priestess was transmuted into crystal through a process known as “morphocrystallic transformation”, and that skull is believed to possess the powers known to the priestess when she was alive.’
‘Atlantis!’ Mai exclaimed sardonically. ‘It probably never existed.’
‘Maybe not,’ Lu Thong said, ‘but the story is interesting in that it at least gives a rough date for the origin of the crystal skulls. That date, give or take a few hundred years either way, was confirmed when one Francis Joseph, an historical writer researching Mayan civilizations, attempted to identify the race of the person who modelled for the skull – or the priestess whose original head was used for the morphocrystallic transformation – by reconstructing the face from a plaster mould of a skull.’
‘I see,’ Mai said sceptically. ‘Please continue.’
After studying Mai through his cocaine-brightened, dangerously perceptive eyes, Lu Thong continued: ‘Francis Joseph called on the assistance of Peggy C. Caldwell, a consulting forensic anthropologist for the Smithsonian Institution, and Frank Domingo, a composite artist with the New York Police Department. Between them, using the plaster model and various photos of the skull, they came up with a drawing of the face of a young woman, seventeen to twenty years of age, with Oriental- Mongoloid features of a kind that linked her to early Mesaoamerican civilizations. Due to this, it’s now believed that the crystal skulls are, if not human skulls *transformed* into crystal, certainly replicas of the head of an ancient Mayan high priestess, or goddess. It’s also thought that they’re made out of pure rock crystal, because the Mayans believed that crystal has magical properties and used the skulls in

their esoteric rites. It may be no accident, therefore, that the various owners of the skulls have reported that the artefacts could send them into trances, possessed healing properties, revealed secrets about the origins of mankind, and helped them communicate with other worlds.'

All that cocaine has done his brains in, Mai thought, but I might as well humour him. Besides, the Crystal Skull, even if not remotely magical, is certainly valuable in the international marketplace, so it's well worth the having.

'Such powers could be dangerous,' she said.

'Yes,' Lu Thong said. 'Reportedly, the magical powers of the skulls can be positive or negative, used for good or evil, to bless or to curse. Indeed, more than one owner of a skull has committed suicide after allegedly being cursed by it. However, it's thought that the awesome energy of a genuine Crystal Skull, if harnessed correctly, could unleash the hidden powers of the cosmos, turning mortal man into Superman.'

'But you don't know how to release that energy.'

'No,' Lu Thong confessed.

'So why do you want this particular Crystal Skull?'

'First, because it's one of the most valuable artefacts in the world. Second, because once it's in my possession, I can experiment with it and hopefully learn how to arouse its forces or turn on its energy. Others have done so before me, so I don't see why I can't do the same.'

'And if you do, what then?'

'It's believed that he who attempts to arouse the sleeping powers of the Crystal Skull must accept that he is dealing with the unknown and gambling with his own life. It's that gamble – the ultimate gamble between life and death, between mortality and immortality – that I wish to make when I gain possession of the artefact.'

Mai glanced at the revolving stage, taking in the sight of the tender flesh – perfect buttocks, firm breasts, flat bellies, long legs – of the young, eager dancers. She visualized the thin blade of her knife making crimson traceries upon its youthful perfection. Almost swooning at the thought, she controlled herself and returned her attention to Lu Thong. Gazing at that beautiful, wasted face, into the glittering depths of his brown eyes where the cocaine madness held sway, she wondered if what he was telling her was true and what it could mean.

Limitless wealth and power, at the very least, and that made the risk worthwhile.

‘So what’s happening in the Yucatán?’ she asked.

Lu Thong sighed, shaking his head from side to side as if disgusted. ‘The three who died at Chichén Itzá were supposed to have taken the Crystal Skull, when they located it, only as far as a certain *Posada* located on Mex. 180, about thirty minutes drive from the site. There, the skull was to be passed over to a local hard man, a one-eyed former policeman and professional criminal named Emmanuelle Cortez, who was to take it in his own car to Mérida airport. There he would deliver it to another of my men, a Mexican working as a Customs official. Had he received the skull, that bent official would have smuggled it onto a flight to Los Angeles. From there, in the care of another bent official, it would have been flown on to me. In the event, my three men were burned to a cinder at Chichèn Itzá, and, as you know, the Crystal Skull wasn’t found with the charred corpses.’

‘Right,’ Mai said. ‘Someone took it. The question is: Who?’

Lu Thong nodded. ‘I can tell you that Emmanuelle Cortez was still in the *Posada*, wondering what had happened to the men who were supposed to bring him the skull, when he received a phone call from a friend, yet another bent cop, telling him about the bodies found at Chichén Itzá, and saying that no mention of a crystal skull had been made in the reports of the incident. Just as Cortez was about to leave the *Posada*, to pass on this information to my man at the airport, an Englishman about thirty years old and an American female about five or six years his junior, entered the *Posada*. They sat at a table, ordered drinks, and then proceeded to study a crystal skull that the girl had pulled out of her rucksack. This took place hardly more than an hour after my men dug up the Crystal Skull and then were fried to a crisp – and just after the skull went missing. And those two people – the Englishman and the American female – had been observed by my one-eyed friend in the *Posada* to have come from the direction of Chichén Itzá.’

‘So the Crystal Skull must have been there at the top of the pyramid, in the Shrine, when those two found the three dead bodies. They took the skull and fled.’

‘Correct,’ Lu Thong said.

‘Do you know who they are or *where* they are?’

‘Approximately. When they left the *Posada*, they took the Crystal Skull with

them, but Emmanuelle Cortez kept on their tail. They drove straight to Mérida and booked into a hotel in the Old City. Flashing his police identification at the desk clerk, Cortez learnt that the Englishman was called Tom Powell and that he was travelling on a British passport and driving a rented jeep. Powell signed himself and his female companion in as man and wife, though the desk clerk was adamant that they weren't married and that the girl was an American hitch-hiker. Cortez then asked what room they were staying in. It turned out to be a groundfloor room at the rear of the building.'

'Convenient,' Mai said.

'I would have thought so,' Lu Thong said, 'but when, that evening, Cortez tried to reach that room in order to kill those two and recapture the Crystal Skull, he was shot at by one of them and had to beat a hasty retreat. Returning to the hotel the following morning, again flashing his police identification, he was informed that the couple had already signed out, asking the desk clerk to book them into a hotel near the Zocala in Mexico City. The desk clerk did so. We have the name of the hotel. They left for Mexico City early this morning, taking a free hamper of food with them, obviously intending to drive there without stopping. The drive takes at least twenty hours, possibly longer, but Cortez is following them all the way, and, hopefully, will soon relieve them of the Crystal Skull.'

'And their lives,' Mai said.

'Yes… and their lives.'

'Let's hope so,' Mai said. 'Particularly given what you've just told me.'

'Meaning?' Lu Thong asked.

'If the skull has the powers you claim for it, those two could become more of a problem than you think.'

'You mean they could gain the powers of the Crystal Skull.'

'Exactly,' Mai said.

'They could, but it seems unlikely for now. The powers of the Crystal Skull have to be aroused somehow – and the "how" is the problem. If those two don't know that the skull has magical powers – if they're just running away with it because they assume it has fiscal value, which it certainly has – then the latent powers of the skull will remain dormant.'

Raising his eyes to the revolving stage in the middle of the crowded, noisy room, Lu Thong saw the flimsily-clad teenage girls dancing sinuously to pounding rock music, rolling their groins, shaking their breasts, wrapping

their legs around the phallic steel uprights and writhing against them. He was aroused by that sight, imagining them all in his bed at once, but he came even harder when he looked at Mai Suphan, at her exquisite, deadly beauty, and imagined her in bed with the same young girls, using her diabolical sexual artistry for pleasures beyond the pale. He almost gasped at the thought. He was on cocaine and his skin was burning. He wanted Mai Suphan, the young girls up on the stage, the male whores in the audience, anything and everything, but most of all he wanted the Crystal Skull and its hope of transcendence. Life was short and brutal, a sequence of couplings and disengagements, of petty desires and their disappointments, but the Crystal Skull could help him transcend the commonplace and replace it with magic. He needed that magic, the siren call of the otherworldly, and in the meantime, while he waited for the delivery of the Crystal Skull, he would try to lose himself in Mai's inventive, potentially deadly perversions.

Perhaps sensing what he was thinking, Mai leaned forward to slide her hand under the table and lay her calculating, expert, tormenting fingers on his pulsating erection.

'Let's go back to your place,' she said, her voice husky and sensual, and also slightly mocking. 'You can test *my* magical powers. Then we'll discuss the Englishman, this Mister Tom Powell, and the American bitch he's running with.'

'Yes, let's do that,' Lu Thong said, feeling breathless, sounding hoarse, then he stood up, not trying to hide what he was feeling, and left the bar with Mai by his side.

She's an angel from hell, Lu Thong thought, and that's where I'm heading.

The thought gave him comfort.

Chapter Eleven

Tom and Molly had formed an uneasy truce by the time they completed the drive from Mérida to Mexico City, leaving the former just after breakfast and arriving in the latter early in the morning of the following day, when the normally dense traffic was relatively thin. This time, when they booked into their hotel – medium-priced and near the Zocalo, or main square – they were able to obtain separate rooms, which saved them both further embarrassment, though Tom also felt a disappointment that he could not admit to, now being

tormented by sexual fantasies about this girl who annoyed him so much. He was also worried that she might lose the crystal skull or that it would be stolen from her in his absence.

'Perhaps I should look after the skull for you,' he suggested anxiously as he picked up his travelling bag at Reception, preparing to go to his room.

'No, thanks,' Molly said, slinging her rucksack over her shoulder and looking determined.

'I'm worried that we're still being pursued and that someone might attempt to take it off you.'

'I'm the one with the handgun,' Molly reminded him, 'so I'm the one who can look after myself *and* the skull. Fat chance of that with you, pal, given how you performed back there in Yucatán.'

'You don't have to be insulting,' Tom replied, 'just because I don't happen to travel with an offensive weapon on my person.' In fact, he was thoroughly ashamed of the way he had acted in that hotel in Mérida, when the oneeyed man had come at them with a pistol and Molly had so successfully put him to flight. He had been shocked, certainly, to find that Molly had a pistol, but was secretly grateful that this had been the case. He could not say that now, though. All he could do was fight to retain his dignity in the face of her onslaughts. 'Come to think of it,' he said, defending himself by taking the offensive, 'are you *licensed* to carry a loaded pistol?'

'That's none of your goddamned business,' Molly retorted. 'So what time do we meet?'

They agreed to sleep until lunchtime, then meet in the lobby for an early lunch and then, hopefully, a visit to Professor Emilio Juarez in the National Museum of Anthropology, taking the crystal skull with them. Thus, in accord for once, they entered their separate rooms, one adjoining the other.

In his attractive single room of Spanish colonial design, Tom slept uneasily, being tormented first by his fear that the one-eyed man would come crashing through the door, wielding his pistol as he had done back in Mérida, and, when he slept, by more erotic dreams about himself and a naked Molly in carnal embrace. He did, however, awaken feeling relatively rested, and, after freshening up with a shower, phoned Professor Juarez at the museum. The professor, an old family friend who had previously helped Tom with Mayan research, was delighted to hear that he was in town and gave him an appointment for four that afternoon.

As he had plenty of time to kill and only Molly to kill it with, Tom decided to be nice to her when he met her down in the lobby. She was wearing the same shirt and tight denims, but had a canvas bag slung over her shoulder instead of her rucksack.

‘Is the crystal skull in that bag?’ Tom asked anxiously.

‘What the hell do you think’s in it? My make-up?’

Tom tried to keep his cool, but their truce started breaking down, first when they both started coughing and developed watery eyes from the city’s notorious pollution, then when Tom suggested having Mexican food, and Molly, perhaps feeling wan from the unusual atmosphere composed of a dangerous mixture of lead, sulphur and ozone, responded by saying that she wouldn’t touch ‘that spicy greaser crap’ and recommended dropping into a Burger Boys instead. Appalled by the very thought, Tom insisted that he would not eat that ‘American filth’. They wrangled over it a bit and then compromised by having Italian in the form of a sit-down pizza in a Pizza Hut. Molly washed her ham-and-pineapple pizza (‘Nothing spicy, thanks!’) down with a strawberry milk shake, but Tom, disgusted at being forced to eat pizza in Mexico, insisted upon having a beer when the meal was finished.

‘Yeah, right,’ Molly said, ‘you just go ahead and poison your system with more of that alcohol. I won’t say a word.’

Forcing himself not to make any retaliatory comment about, for instance, her smoking of marijuana, Tom consulted his Fodor’s *Mexico* and then led her along densely packed sidewalks, past endless streams of traffic pouring out more eye-watering pollution, to the highly recommended La Opera, described as ‘a handsome turn-ofthe-century bar’ with ‘lush Victorian décor.’ His edition of Fodor’s, though a good few years out of date, did not let him down.

‘More authentic than a pizza parlour, don’t you think?’ he said to Molly while coughing to clear his throat, wiping his tearful eyes dry, and swigging his glass of cold Bohemia beer.

‘It’s not bad,’ Molly agreed reluctantly, also trying to clear her throat and dry her teary eyes while sipping her iced lemonade spiced with *chía* seeds.

‘It was one of Pancho Villa’s favourite hangouts,’ Tom informed her, having memorized this detail from his Fodor’s, ‘which may explain why, up until a few years ago, women weren’t even admitted.’

‘You’d have liked it better then, wouldn’t you?’ Molly sneered.

‘No, no,’ Tom spluttered hastily, to prevent another feminist tirade. ‘I merely

mean that this is a traditional establishment, well worth the visit.'
'Yeah, right,' Molly said. 'Filled with Mexican male chauvinist bastids. Their time will come, pal.'
Ignoring her remark, Tom deliberately checked his wristwatch. 'Well,' he said, looking forward to some serious sightseeing, despite the awful air, 'we still have a couple of hours to spend, so let's go exploring.'
'I don't wanna see any boring churches,' Molly warned him. 'I wanna look at the shops.'
'Quite,' Tom said, his enthusiasm for sightseeing instantly dampened, though he was too gentlemanly to refuse her. 'I think you'll find those in the Zocalo – the main square – and it's not far from here. So, let's get started.'
He had really wanted to visit the Metropolitan Cathedral, with its unique mixture of Ionic, Doric, Corinthian, and Baroque architecture, as well as the National Palace, formerly the Palace of Moctezuma, then the headquarters of Cortés, but Molly had eyes only for the many shops clustered together under the picturesque arches on the north side of the square. She depressed him even more by spending nearly an hour in the Monte de Piedad, or National Pawn Shop, known as the Mountain of Pity, telling him that it was the 'most terrific pawn shop' she'd ever seen, and adding, 'Not that *you'd* be interested in somethin' like this, being filthy rich and totally removed from the real fucked-up world.' When eventually Tom managed to drag her away from the hundreds of pawned items in the massive establishment, he tried sneakily to lead her across the great plaza to the Cathedral, but her voice, resounding grimly behind his back, stopped him dead in his tracks.
'No way!' she told him. 'We gotta get to the Zona Rosa. That's where it's all happening in this city and I wanna see it.'
'Of course,' Tom said obediently.
The walk to the Zona Rosa took only minutes and led them to a lively neighbourhood packed with boutiques, art galleries, artists' studios, hotels, bars, restaurants, discothèques, sidewalk cafés with colourful umbrella tables, and more shops selling everything from Mexican curios to eighteenth-century antiques. To his surprise, Tom actually enjoyed himself (the area was filled with pretty girls, most looking a lot happier than Molly) but eventually, with pollution exhaustion setting in, he insisted that they start off for the museum, even though they were still too early for his appointment.
'Yeah,' Molly said, 'right. Let's talk to this greaser friend of yours and find

out what we've got here.'

There were plenty of taxis and white *peseros*, or minibuses, passing by, but all of them were full, and after trying for about twenty minutes to wave one down, Tom decided that it would be quicker to walk. This turned out to be true, though the walk was quite dangerous, since the density of the traffic remained appalling, the fumes from its exhausts were dense enough to be sandwiched, and few drivers took any notice of pedestrians.

The museum was located in the handsomely forested Chapultepec Park, on the west side of the city, and it certainly lived up to its reputation as the finest in the world. A truly magnificent building, it was constructed as a series of halls built around a patio, with at least six of the chambers devoted to the major pre-Columbian civilizations of Mexico, including the Toltecs and the mysterious builders of the pyramids at Teotihuacán.

Passing the huge statue of Tialoc, God of Rain, which stood imposingly outside, they entered the building and spent the remaining twenty minutes studying murals and exhibits dealing with the history of Mexico and MesoAmerica, and, in particular, the Mayans. While Tom found all of this to be fascinating, Molly's face was a picture of monumental boredom, her jaws working relentlessly on gum, her pursed lips blowing bubbles.

'Nothin' here about the crystal skull,' she noted sourly.

'No,' Tom replied. 'There wouldn't be. The true origins of the crystal skulls aren't known – though they're widely believed to be Meso-American – so they wouldn't be included here. Nevertheless, Professor Juarez has a particular interest in them, believing them to be of early- or pre-Mayan origin.'

Molly impatiently checked her wristwatch, then looked up, relieved. 'Time's up,' she said.

Tom told one of the uniformed guides that he had an appointment with Professor Juarez and was promptly led downstairs, with Molly by his side, to a room in the basement. Entering, he found the professor seated behind a large, cluttered table surrounded by archaeological rarities, ancient ceramics, faded manuscripts covered in hieroglyphics, other desks piled high with books and papers, and walls covered with maps. Juarez had a thick thatch of healthy grey hair, a neatly trimmed grey beard, and a surprisingly youthful, good-humoured Spanish face. Standing up and coming around the desk to shake their hands, he revealed himself to be short and barrel-chested, almost

bursting out of his grey suit and buttoned-up waistcoat.
'*Buenas tardes*,' he said, vigorously shaking Tom's hand. '*Mucho gusto en*…' Then, breaking into perfect English, he continued: 'It is so good to see you, my friend. It's been so long… How long?'
'Five years,' Tom said. 'The last time you were in London.'
'Ah, yes, so it was. When your father was still alive. A good man, a great friend… But what can one say?' Seeing the shadow of remembered pain that flickered across Tom's boyish face, he emotionally threw his arms around his shoulders and hugged him, then turned to Molly and shook her hand also.
'And you are…?'
'Molly Beale.'
'*El gusto es mio*,' the professor said, eyeing Molly up and down with undisguised macho appreciation. 'The pleasure is mine.' Molly glanced at Tom, a cynical glint in her eyes, while the professor indicated the two wooden chairs facing the table. 'Please, take a seat.' When Tom and Molly were seated, the professor sat opposite them, then clasped his hands beneath his bearded chin, raised his bushy eyebrows inquiringly, and said, 'So! What is it you wished to discuss with me?'
Tom explained what he and Molly had found in the Shrine of the Great Pyramid at Chichén Itzá. When he had finished, the professor nodded thoughtfully. 'So those men obviously removed the crystal skull from that hole in the platform of the Shrine before being burnt to death.'
'Correct,' Tom said.
'Well,' the professor said, 'I can certainly confirm that most of us in the field believe that there are only two genuine crystal skulls. One of them is in the Museum of Mankind, London, and the other – the so-called Rose Quartz Skull, reportedly the finest and purest in the world – disappeared centuries ago and was rumoured to be hidden somewhere in Guatemala or Mexico. It would seem to me, therefore, that if this skull is genuine, it's almost certainly the long-lost Rose Quartz Skull and has been buried in the platform of the Shrine for centuries. If it is, then your find is truly astounding – and the skull will be priceless.'
'Great!' Molly exclaimed.
Offended by her mercenary attitude and hoping to receive something more from this than mere filthy lucre – perhaps his name in the history books – Tom asked of Professor Juarez: 'But can you prove if it's genuine or not?'

Juarez nodded. ‘Let me examine it properly,’ he said.
‘You mean we have to leave it here with you?’ Molly asked with bald suspicion.
‘No,’ the professor responded with a knowing smile and not without taking another eyeful of Molly’s crossed legs and pert breasts. ‘Naturally I understand your concern, but I can examine the skull right here, under your watchful gaze.’
Nodding and grinning, not remotely embarrassed that the professor was aware of her lack of trust, Molly removed the glittering crystal skull from her shoulder bag, balanced it on the base of its neck, and slid it across the table to him. Seeing it, he offered a low whistle of appreciation, then picked it up to turn it this way and that, studying it at length, causing the light from the overhead bulbs to flash on and off it. After probing the empty eye-sockets with his fingers, he opened the jaws as wide as possible and stared into the crystal throat.
‘Mmmm,’ he murmured. ‘Fascinating!’
When he had seen all that he could with the naked eye, he studied the skull with a large magnifying glass, then under what looked like a combination of giant microscope and telescope, lit up inside with tiny bulbs.
‘What’s that?’ Molly asked.
‘A binocular microscope that gives me a threedimensional view of the artefact. However, in order to see fully just how this skull was made, I have to complete another test.’
He carried the skull to a glass tank filled with milky liquid, lowered it carefully into the liquid, then turned on the overhead lights. Instantly, the submerged skull took on an eerie luminosity that showed its interior in startling depth, making it seem much bigger than it was, revealing the hidden hollows, curves and joinings of its formally unseen structure. It resembled, to Tom’s inexpert gaze, a large prism streaked with darkness and light.
‘This is a bath of index-matching benzyl alcohol,’ Professor Juarez explained. ‘By viewing the skull in the benzyl alcohol, under polarized light, I can determine whether it was cut from one chunk of quartz. I can also ascertain the angle it was cut relative to the natural axis of the crystal… Mmmm. Fascinating!’
Satisfied, he removed the skull from the benzyl alcohol, dried it, then placed it under what looked like an electric drill. However, the bit did not revolve

but merely applied electronically controlled pressure to the top of the skull and recorded some kind of measurements on an illuminated graph. Satisfied again, the professor returned to his chair and placed the skull on the table.
‘It’s certainly rock quartz,’ he said, ‘rating seven on Mohs’ Scale of hardness.’
‘Meaning?’ Molly asked.
‘That it’s very hard indeed. Diamond, for instance, is ten. So a Mohs’ rating of seven makes this skull remarkably hard – certainly harder than any rock quartz that we know of today.’
The professor gazed thoughtfully at the skull for some time, then again clasped his hands under his bearded chin. He took a deep breath and released it as he spoke.
‘The tests,’ he said, ‘confirm that both the skull and the jawbone were cut from one single chunk of quartz, albeit of a rare size and quality. Indeed, I think I can say with confidence that given a crystal of the same size, our foremost contemporary producers of cut quartz could not produce a skull of comparable quality. It is my carefully considered opinion that it would have taken centuries of work to produce a skull of this quality; and, as I’ve said, I don’t believe that it could be produced at all in this day and age. My deduction, therefore, is that this skull is genuine, ancient, remarkable, and absolutely unique.’
‘Why unique?’ Molly asked with a percipience that again took Tom by surprise while making the professor smile. ‘I mean, what makes it so different from the other crystal skulls you’ve examined?’
‘Well, apart from the quality of the cut, as I’ve just mentioned, it has a remarkable set of optical properties carved into it. Look here.’ He held the skull up, opened the jaw, and turned it in the artificial light, to let them see inside it. ‘Halfway back in the roof of the mouth, here…’ he indicated with his index finger… ‘there’s a broad plane that acts like a forty-five degree prism, directing light from beneath the skull, into the eye-sockets. This means, for instance, that if the skull was placed in front of some kind of fire or light – say, an altar with a light concealed behind it – that light would be visible through the eye-sockets as if it was actually inside them. This means, in turn, that a fire projected through the eye-sockets in that way would create an extraordinary flickering light-show that would impress, or even awe, the unknowing.’

‘Amazing!’ Tom exclaimed softly.
Molly threw him a sardonic glance, but turned her attention back on Professor Juarez as the latter continued: ‘Also, placed next to that prismatic plane, there’s a ribbonthin surface that acts like a magnifying glass. Finally, behind the prism, which to all intents and purposes that plane is, there are convex and concave surfaces that gather more light and direct it out through the eye-sockets. More ingeniously, the back of the skull also acts as a kind of camera lens, gathering light from behind itself and projecting it through the eye-sockets.’
‘Extraordinary!’ Tom exclaimed.
‘Weird,’ Molly said flatly.
‘I haven’t finished yet,’ Professor Juarez told them. ‘Another unusual aspect is the zygomatic arches carved next to the cheekbones.’
‘The *what*?’ Molly asked.
The professor smiled at her again. ‘Zygomatic arches. Arches formed by the joining of the malar bone and the temporal bone of the skull.’
‘Oh, right. Keep going, professor.’
‘The zygomatic arches carved next to the cheekbones have had a narrow space of crystal material removed from beneath them, to enable light from behind and underneath to flow into and through the eyes again. Even more ingenious effects are then produced when a light source behind the skull is moved about or flicked rapidly, repeatedly, on and off.’
‘What kind of effects?’ Tom asked.
‘All kinds of vague or ghostly images. Here, let me show you.’
The professor dimmed the lights in the room, plunging it into semi-darkness, then he turned on a small, brilliant light that was concealed behind the upright skull. His first adjustment of this light made dazzling striations pour out of the empty eye-sockets. When the hidden light was moved again, the striations pouring out of the eye-sockets flashed up and down the walls, floor and ceiling, then criss-crossed each other, and, being refracted off the different planes and lenses inside the skull, formed startling, shadowy images that changed constantly as he kept changing the position of the light behind it. Those shadowy shapes merged with faint colours to produce even more startling effects and shapes, with the latter looking in turn like the silhouettes of misshapen humans and bizarre animals, shadowy whirlpools, pools of silvery light, stars within patches of pitch darkness, and even enormous,

glistening spiders' webs formed by the play of light and shadow.
It was a bizarre, disorientating *son et lumièr*e spectacle that almost mesmerized Tom. In fact, he was starting to feel faint and dizzy when the professor turned the hidden light off and switched the room lights back on. Tom heaved a sigh of relief.
'Jesus, that was weird,' Molly said.
'Quite remarkable,' Tom said.
'Even more remarkable,' the professor said, 'is that there are two holes here…' He picked the skull off the table and then turned it left and right, to show them the barely visible holes, one at each side of the base. 'Both are invisible when the skull is stood upright. However, if you insert two thin rods into the holes – rods so thin they would not be seen in gloom or darkness – they support it at a perfect balance point that enables it to be rocked to and fro. So! Observe!'
He inserted two thin steel rods into the holes, dimmed the lights in the room again, then lifted the skull slightly off the table and tapped it gently to make it rock to and fro, thus throwing more fantastic, moving light images onto the walls, ceiling and floor.
'This, as you can see,' he continued, 'produces even more frightening effects.'
The remarkable combination of light-and-shadow effects did indeed produce even more lifelike moving images that grew and shrank dramatically as well as taking on many different shapes and oddly glowing colours.
When he was satisfied that they had seen enough, the professor turned the room lights back on and switched off the light hidden behind the skull. He then removed the steel rods.
'It's like having a bad dream,' Molly said.
'That was probably the intention,' Tom said. 'Can you imagine those effects working on the imagination of primitive, deeply religious Mayans who believed everything their priests told them? Certainly, they would have been very impressed.'
'And probably scared shitless,' Molly said.
The professor glanced at her, startled by her obscenity, then he quickly turned his gaze upon the embarrassed Tom.
'Finally,' the professor said, holding the skull close to them and vigorously working the jawbone, 'the jawbone fits perfectly into two polished sockets,

which means that the top of the skull can be moved up and down on the jaw, and vice versa. By turning on that light behind the skull – or, in the case of an ancient temple, some kind of fire or concentrated flame – the effects you've just seen would emanate from the jaw as well as the eye-sockets. And if the priests decided to produce vocal effects, the skull would appear to be speaking in a rather hollow, ethereal manner.'

'Oh, boy!' Molly exclaimed.

They were silent for a moment, watching the professor as he carefully placed the skull back on the table and then stared steadily at them. He smiled, but said nothing.

'So who do you think made it?' Tom eventually asked him, breaking the lengthy silence.

'It's my belief that this particular skull is, indeed, the long-missing Rose Quartz Skull, one of which is rumoured to have been carried by an ancient and mysterious race, before the Mayans or the Aztecs, in a legendary migration across the Earth, from the west to the east, at least 3,500 years ago.'

'What race?' Tom asked.

'Well,' the professor said tentatively, 'we only know that a chain of remains of ancient civilizations stretches between southern Asia, across various Polynesian islands and Easter Island, all the way to Meso-America – the name given to the ancient American cultural region that extended from Chichén Itzá in northern Yucatán to the southernmost outposts of the Inca civilization in what is now Chile.'

Obviously pleased to be talking about this, he turned away from them, picked up a wooden pointer, and tapped it against the large map of the world spread across the wall directly in front of them, indicating certain places as he talked.

'It's not known if that ancient civilization followed the trade winds from east to west, or whether the ancient cradle of humanity, Asia, sent emissaries of its culture with the seafaring Polynesians as far as Easter Island and still farther eastward.' He tapped the location with his pointer. 'However, it *is* believed that the forbidden city of Angkor, now in Cambodia, in the Khmer Republic, here…' he tapped the location with his pointer… 'would probably have been the first stop on the eastward journey. The oncesacred lagoon city of Ponape, in the Polynesian Islands, here, would have been a halfway house.

On barren Easter Island, here, the ancient mariners certainly left their fabulous monuments, in the shape of the giant sculptures still there today. The next stops, therefore, would have been Yucatán and British Honduras – here and here – which suggests that the mysterious travellers had to be preMayan.'

'What about the other crystal skull?' Tom asked. 'The one in the Museum of Mankind, London.'

'Since the other crystal skull was originally found in British Honduras, and since it's been assessed as approximately 3,500 years old, almost certainly it belonged to that same mysterious race of ancient Mayans. And with this second skull being found on top of the Great Pyramid in Chichén Itzá, it seems likely that both skulls were left behind by that same ancient race as it moved on from the Yucatán peninsula to Peru, where it finally came to rest, creating the holy city of Tiahuanaco.'

'Do we have a means of proving that?' Tom asked.

'Yes. By showing this skull to my British counterpart and friend, Professor Julian Weatherby, presently working for the British Museum, London. Julian's the foremost authority on the crystal skulls and can tell you all you need to know about this particular one.'

'Well, I'm on my way home, anyway,' Tom said, casting a nervous glance at the suspicious Molly, 'but I doubt that we can get the skull out of Mexico without being stopped by Customs officials.'

'Then let's make it official,' Professor Juarez said. 'To let this priceless artefact fall into the hands of Customs officials, Mexican or otherwise, would be tantamount to giving it away. May I suggest, therefore, that you let me send the skull with other artefacts from this museum to the British Museum in London, which is preparing an exhibition of rare Mayan treasures. Once in the possession of Professor Weatherby, the skull, accompanied by a formal letter from me, detailing your involvement, will be separated from the listed exhibits and kept under his personal supervision until your arrival. Once you've met him and talked, learning all you need to know about the skull, you can decide what you wish to do with it.'

'Excellent,' Tom said.

'How can we trust that Limey professor?' Molly asked.

Tom winced with embarrassment, but Professor Juarez merely smiled, obviously admiring a woman of spirit, and said, 'As Professor Weatherby

would have problems in explaining how he came to be in possession of this particular skull, I think we can take it as read that he won't try to keep it for himself. Apart from that, he's an honest man and dedicated academic, devoted to his work. He does not steal ancient artefacts of any kind, so your skull will be safe with him.'
'Okay, I'll buy that,' Molly said. Then, bold as brass, she turned to Tom, and said, 'But if you go to London, I go, too, and *you'll* have to pay. Otherwise, this skull goes with me to New York.'
'I won't be able to get it into New York,' Professor Juarez said, either telling the truth or slyly taking Tom's side.
'*I'll* get it in,' Molly said. 'At least, I'll damned well try
– I'll run the risk of being caught – rather than let him' (nodding at the embarrassed Tom) 'go to London without me, and maybe set up some deal between himself and your Limey professor friend. I mean, money talks, right?'
'Well, *really*!' Tom exploded. 'The very idea that I would stoop to – '
'I go to London with you,' Molly interjected bluntly, 'or the crystal skull comes to New York with me.'
'Oh, alright!' Tom snapped.
'Great,' Molly said.
'So you want me to ship the skull to London?' Professor Juarez asked.
'Yes,' Tom said.
'Yes,' Molly said.
They glared at one another, then Tom turned away to write down the contact details of Professor Julian Weatherby, as dictated to him by Professor Juarez. He then thanked his old friend, shook his hand and embraced him. Finally, gratefully, still burning up with embarrassment and leaving the crystal skull on the table, he led Molly out of the office, then out of the museum.
Though no longer in possession of the crystal skull, they still had each other.
'God help me,' Tom whispered.

Chapter Twelve

' *What's* that?' Molly asked as they left the museum and again tried in vain, while coughing and wiping eyes that were watering from the city's polluted atmosphere, to wave down a taxi.

‘Nothing,’ Tom said. ‘I was just thinking aloud.’ ‘You whispered “God help me”, right?’
‘Well, yes, but I just meant…’
‘Thinkin’ about bein’ stuck with me, right?’
‘Not really. I…’
‘Why are you stuttering?’
‘I’m *not* stuttering. I’m merely feeling a little…’ Hitching her almost empty bag onto her shoulder,
Molly turned to face him on the sidewalk. ‘Listen, you little prick, let’s get a couple of things straight *right now*.’

‘By all means,’ Tom said, desperately looking up and down the road for an empty taxi and feeling mortified by Molly’s fresh outburst. He hated scenes, and Molly sure knew how to create them, so now he was burning with embarrassment as well as suffering from the pollution – parched lungs, dry throat, watery eyes – and wanted to disappear in a puff of smoke.

‘First,’ Molly said, raising her index finger and burning holes in him with her bright gaze, ‘you can stop bein’ so superior just ‘cause I’m a woman and younger than you are and not too well educated. *I’m* the one who had the presence of mind to grab that crystal skull at Chichén Itzá when all *you* could think of doin’ was getting’ the hell out of there. I’m also the one who protected us from that oneeyed bandit when all *you* could do was fall on the goddamned floor and bury your head in the sand. Second,’ she continued, raising another finger, ‘I have more right to that crystal skull than you and that entitles me to speak my piece about what we should do with it. Third,’ she went on, raising a third finger, ‘the only reason you’re having to pay my expenses regarding hotels and our flight to London is that *you’ve* decided we’re going there instead of New York, and I don’t have the bread for that kind of trip. Fourth,’ she climaxed, raising a fourth finger, ‘I may not be as educated as you, but that doesn’t mean I’m not intelligent and can’t think for myself, so you can stop all this English condescension crap and talk to me like we’re equals, at least when it comes to decisions about the crystal skull – which is what we should be doin’ right now. Agreed?’

‘Agreed,’ Tom said. ‘Oh, look! There’s a taxi!’ Amazed to actually find an unoccupied taxi in Mexico City and relieved to see it pulling in towards him, he continued, ‘You’re absolutely right, Molly. I take all of that on board. I didn’t mean to be condescending – I was just overly anxious and said the

wrong thing – but I certainly feel that you're an equal in this matter and will treat you correctly in the future. I think we're in danger, Molly – *real* danger – and I'm concerned for the both of us. By all means, let's discuss this, but please bear in mind that I have my own sensitivities and that your constant abuse, including many obscenities, pains me deeply and has possibly caused what you believe to be my condescension. It's not that, really. I'm just trying to defend myself. And I'm easily embarrassed by scenes and don't know how to deal with them. I'm not used to women who talk like you do, and so I say all the wrong things. Can we forgive and forget?'

Molly stared at him, half touched, half amused, then, grinning, said with a shrug, 'Well… Okay, then.'

Like a gift from God, the taxi pulled in and they both clambered into the rear. After giving the driver the name of their hotel, Tom settled back in his seat and was instantly aroused by the closeness of Molly beside him: her long legs outlined in the tight denims, one crossed over the other, and the heat of her body, whether real or imagined, permeating his left arm and thigh. He distracted himself by gazing out the window, beyond the dense, chaotic steam of cars, streetcars, trolleybuses, motorcycles and *peseros*, at the city's extraordinary architectural mixture of old churches, Aztec ruins, and modern buildings of steel and glass. It was hot in the back of the taxi and he felt himself sweating.

'So,' Molly said eventually, breaking the uncomfortable silence, 'why do you think we're in danger?'

'Well, that's obvious, isn't it?' Tom replied. 'It's perfectly clear that we're being pursued by that one-eyed bandit – and that man had a pistol.'

'That was back in Mérida,' Molly said, 'and I don't think he'll have followed us all this way. He was probably just some local hoodlum who happened to see us examining the crystal skull in that bar, and decided to steal it. He didn't look to me like he was exactly rolling in bread, so I doubt that he'll have followed us to here, even if he knew where we were staying, which is highly unlikely.'

'I trust you're right, Molly, but he could have been *hired* by someone, in which case he's professional and could still be pursuing us. So that's one of the dangers.'

'And the other?'

'The crystal skull itself. If, as Professor Juarez suspects, we're in possession

of the Rose Quartz Skull, we could be in personal danger from its legendary magical powers.'

'*What*?' Molly glanced sideways at him, a sardonic grin on her face.

'The two genuine skulls,' Tom explained, 'including the one we possess, are believed to have remarkable parapsychological powers that can be used either for good or for evil. Those powers include the ability to mesmerize, to will illness or death, to look into the future, and to create all kinds of magical phenomena – spirit beings or the manifestation of creatures from the subconscious. I know it sounds crazy, but there are countless recorded examples of people going mad and committing murder or suicide after coming into possession of one of the two genuine skulls. Many examples, Molly. Many! And while I'm not saying that our skull *definitely* has those properties, I *am* saying that we should be especially careful when dealing with it or handling it.'

'Those stories are probably all bull… nonsense,' Molly said, making a decent attempt at not swearing. 'I mean, you saw what the professor did back there with the skull – all those incredible images he created just by playing with that light he placed behind it – and the stories you've heard probably came from people seeing similar effects. As the professor said, the effects produced by the skull were probably used by the priests of ancient times to scare the livin' daylights out of their subjects; but they *were* effects, no more and no less. So our skull won't be magical or dangerous – it's just incredibly valuable as an ancient artefact – and that's why we'll make a lot of bread once we've proved that it's genuine.'

As the taxi entered the Zocalo, Tom glanced out at the immense square dominated by the Cathedral and the National Palace. The shops under the arches were packed with tourists, shoeshine boys were vigorously polishing the boots and shoes of men seated at the outdoor bars and cafés, and people were cramming onto the trolleybuses, holding on for dear life. The sun was going down, though the light was still bright, and it created ever-changing, shifting shadows across the great plaza.

'Well,' Tom said, speaking with particular care as his admiring gaze took in the Cathedral's baroque mixture of architectural styles, reminding him of the glories of history, 'that *is* the question, Molly. Do we think of the skull in purely mercenary terms or do we consider its immense historical value?'

Molly threw him a glance of dark suspicion. '*What*?'

‘I merely meant – ’
‘You want to give it to some fuckin’ museum or art gallery,’ Molly interjected, quickly forgetting her resolve not to swear. ‘Is that what you mean?’
‘Well, it *did* occur to me that – ’
‘Oh, fucking great!’ Molly exploded. ‘You’re an English aristocrat and you’ve no money worries, so you’re gonna ask me to give up the only chance I’ve ever had in my life to make some real dough. Well, to hell with you, pal, I won’t do it. If that skull’s genuine, if it’s worth a lot of bread, I’m gonna get something out of it.’
‘But of course,’ Tom responded, backing off instantly, not relishing another foul-mouthed tirade. ‘I appreciate your concern and was merely suggesting that – ’
‘Forget it, Tom,’ Molly said, using his Christian name for the first time. ‘Just *forget* it! If that skull’s worth money, then I’m gonna make some and that’s all there is to it. We can *sell* it to a museum, for Chrissakes! I mean, those museums have bread to burn. So don’t even consider askin’ me to give our skull away. I won’t. And that’s it, man.’
‘Yes, Molly, of course. I understand your concern. If it’s worth something – ’
‘It is!’
‘ – then I’ll certainly ensure that you’ll profit from it. I only ask that you let me find a good home for the skull, rather than sell it to just anyone.’
‘A good home for it’s the one that pays for it. So you find that museum and I’ll sell it.’
‘Understood, Molly. Naturally.’
Fingering the collar of his sweaty shirt, Tom was relieved when the taxi pulled up outside their hotel. After paying the driver and giving him a lavish tip to avoid another argument, this time with the driver, who, being Mexican, would almost certainly be volatile, he started towards the entrance to the building. Then, drawn by an instinct that he could scarcely comprehend, he glanced across the car park, at his expensively rented jeep, and saw that it had been vandalized: all the tires punctured and the windshield smashed, with shards of broken glass glinting on the bonnet in the early evening’s dimming light.
‘Oh, God!’ he exclaimed forlornly.
‘What?’ Molly asked.

Tom pointed at the jeep. ‘It’s been vandalized,’ he said.
‘Those goddamned shits!’ Molly said.
They hurried across the tarmac to examine the jeep and confirm that it had indeed been thoroughly trashed by some person or persons using blunt instruments to do in the windshield, smash the headlights, batter all the doors, and, as they had previously observed, puncture all the tires.
‘Why the hell would they do that?’ Molly asked rhetorically, glancing at all the other, untouched vehicles. ‘I mean, they only attacked *our* car; they touched none of the others.’
‘Because they’re *not* commonplace vandals,’ Tom said, unable to prevent a sliver of fear from slithering icily through him. ‘Why pick this one vehicle out from all the others? It’s a jeep and it’s open and there was nothing in it to steal. It was picked *because* it’s our car; because the vandals *knew* it was ours. This jeep is now a mess, we can’t possibly drive it, and that must be exactly what they wanted. We’re still being followed.’
They stared at one another, locked together in fearful silence, and then, for the very first time, even Molly expressed her anxiety.
‘Shit,’ she said, ‘this is serious.’
‘I think I need a drink,’ Tom responded.
‘So do I,’ Molly said.
Hurrying into the hotel, they went straight to the bar. Tom ordered two whiskies and Molly didn’t argue. When they had received the drinks, they sat at a table near the windows and stared out at the descending evening where a blood-red sun was casting its crimson glow on the car park and on their vandalized jeep. They both sipped nervously at their drinks.
‘Maybe we’re just imagining it,’ Molly said eventually. ‘It *could* have been vandals and they *could* have picked our jeep at random. You know? A bunch of psyched-up kids wandering in and attacking the first vehicle they happen to see.’
‘My jeep would not have been the first vehicle they saw; it’s practically in the middle of the car park. So it can’t have been a random choice.’
‘Well, maybe…’
‘There’s no *maybe* about it. That jeep was smashed to render it unusable, and it was clearly chosen specifically. We’re being *followed*, Molly.’
‘Yeah, right, well…’ Her voice trailed off as her bloodshot eyes widened, focusing on the bar across the wide room. Following her gaze, Tom saw that

familiar, one-eyed, unshaven face turned in his direction. The Mexican was with some barrel-chested companions, all wearing worn denims and shirts, all grinning like hyenas.
‘Oh, my God!’ Tom whispered.
‘To hell with ‘em,’ Molly said, reaching up to tug automatically at the strap of her shoulder bag. ‘I’ve still got my handgun in here and I’m gonna challenge those bastids.’
‘No, you’re not!’ Tom said, almost shrieking.
‘We can’t let them scare us,’ Molly said, starting to rise from her chair and swinging the shoulder bag around to get at her handgun. ‘I’m gonna brace ‘em and if they make one false move, I waste the whole goddamned bunch.’
‘No!’ Tom exclaimed.
‘Yes!’ Molly insisted. ‘Either I do it or you do it, but one of us has got to face them down, so let’s get the ball rolling.’
‘No!’
‘Yes!’
‘That one-eyed man has a gun!’
‘*I’ve* got a gun,’ Molly reminded him, ‘and I know how to use it.’
‘You can’t!’
‘I can!’
‘I refuse to let you do this!’
‘Then *you* do it,’ Molly said, staring challengingly at him. ‘Let ‘em know you’re not scared of ‘em and threaten to call the cops if they look like givin’ you trouble.’
‘What good will *that* do?’ Tom asked.
‘Scared, are you?’
‘Yes.’
‘Then to hell with you. I’m going to challenge those bastids.’
But when Molly started to stand upright, Tom leaned across the table and jerked her back down again.
‘Alright, Molly, *I’ll* do it!’
‘Good. So get to it.’
Unable to ignore her challenge, Tom actually managed to stand upright in preparation for his march across the room. Just as he did so, however, the one-eyed man hooked a finger into his own eye-socket and popped out his glass eye, which landed, like a coloured marble, in the upturned palm of his

hand. As Tom turned pale and almost dizzy with disbelief, the one-eyed man placed the glass eyeball on the table in front of him, then made it spin like a top. When it stopped spinning, its gleaming glass pupil was staring directly at Tom.

Shocked, Tom grabbed Molly by the shoulder and ushered her out of the room while the hoodlums hooted with contemptuous mirth behind them.

'Godammit!' Molly exclaimed as they hurried across the lobby. 'I just don't believe this!'

'I do,' Tom said firmly.

'So what do we do now?'

'We go to our rooms and lock ourselves in,' Tom said, feeling positive for the first time in a long time, 'and then I'll book us on the first flight to London.'

'Right,' Molly said. 'Okay.'

Nervously hurrying upstairs, they went to the doors of their adjoining rooms.

'Make sure you lock the door,' Tom said, being manly. 'I'll call you as soon as I've booked the flight. In the meantime, stay in there.'

'Right,' Molly said.

Tom opened his door, stepped inside, then closed and locked the door behind him.

'Dear God,' he whispered, glancing around him.

His room had been ransacked. The contents of his travelling bag had been upturned on the floor, the bedclothes were scattered around the bed, the mattress had been slashed to ribbons, and every drawer in the chest-ofdrawers had been pulled out and also thrown on the floor, with their contents distributed wildly around the room. Tom thought of that bunch of men down in the bar and his stomach turned over.

Someone knocked on the door.

Almost jumping out of his skin, he turned back to the door and whispered, 'Yes? Who is it?'

'It's me! Molly! Let me in!'

Relieved, Tom let her. She entered quickly, brushing past him, carrying her rucksack, still packed, in one hand. Tom closed the door and turned around to face her. She was staring, wide-eyed, at the devastation of his room.

'You, too!' she exclaimed.

'They ransacked your room as well?'

‘Yeah, right.’ She stared directly at him and he melted in her gaze. ‘We’ve gotta get out of here right now. You understand? *Right now*!’
‘I agree,’ Tom said.
Decisive as he had never been before, he picked up the phone and called the Aeropeurto Internacional to book the first flight to London. He was offered the first flight out on the following morning and promptly accepted, booking it with his credit card. When he put the phone down, having completed his transaction, he turned to Molly and said, ‘We have to check in at eight in the morning, but I think we should leave here right now and spend the night in the relative safety of the airport.’
‘Fuckin’ A,’ Molly said, still forgetting her vow on non-obscenity in the heat of the moment. ‘Except your jeep’s clapped out. You’ll have to call ‘em and get ‘em to bring another car around here.’
‘Good Lord,’ Tom said, recalling the condition of the jeep and shaken by the thought of telling the rental company. ‘I can’t possibly do that. I mean, I can’t let them see what’s happened to their vehicle.’
‘Why not? It’s rented. That means those bastids are insured. Just call ‘em and tell ‘em you’ve been vandalised by their countrymen an’ need another car to get you to the airport.’
‘They certainly wouldn’t agree to that, Molly dear. In fact, they’re going to be extremely agitated when they see the state the jeep’s in.’
‘To hell with them,’ Molly said. ‘What’s their number?’
Tom gave her the number of the car rental company and commenced picking up his strewn clothes as she went to town on the unfortunate administrator at the other end of the line. Tom was impressed. Molly put on a great show of hysterics, wailing that the car had been vandalised and demanding to know what kind of town this was where any hooligan could walk into a hotel car park and vandalize a car rented by a tourist. She demanded compensation, threatened them with action from the American Embassy, warned them about possible repercussions from her lawyers, and then slammed the phone down and grinned broadly.
‘They’ll be here in twenty minutes with another car - and it’s on the house. Come on, let’s get out of here.’
Having finished his packing, Tom picked up his travelling bag and followed her out of the room, then back down the stairs. After glancing around the brightly-lit lobby to ascertain that the one-eyed bandit and his leering

companions were not present, he went to the reception desk and paid his check. Then he and Molly went outside to wait for the new rental car, free in this instance, which arrived twenty-five minutes later. It was a battered old Volkswagen Beetle. Tom took the driving seat, Molly sat beside him, they belted up, and then Tom started off, driving more recklessly than he had ever done before, feeling clammy with fear.

The sun had gone down and the town was lamplit, but the traffic in the city center was still dense and chaotic, with kamikaze motorcyclists weaving dangerously between other cars, taxis, streetcars, trolleybuses and the ubiquitous *peseros*. Though normally a nervous driver, Tom hardly noticed the clamorous chaos around him and weaved his way through it with surprising skill, hoping to make his escape as soon as possible.

The long road out of the city center took him past magnificent mansions built into landscapes of lava, rock, and windblown foliage, backed up by the *ciudades perdidas*, where the poorest of the poor lived in their thousands of cardboard and sheet-metal huts. Soon, however, he found himself on the long, straight highway that led to the airport, under a moonlit, star-filled sky, with the wind beating noisily against the car. The traffic here was less dense than in the center of the city, but it was still plentiful and potentially dangerous.

'I've never seen you drive so well,' Molly remarked.

'Fear's a wonderful incentive,' Tom replied. 'And right now, I'm fearful.'

'Why? We're well out of it.'

'I don't know. I just feel that we're not. It's probably my over-active imagination, but that's how I feel.'

'You're a real cute one, Tom.'

It was pleasantly reassuring to hear her using his first name at last, but the feeling of clammy fear persisted. As he drove along the highway, listening to the wind beating fiercely against the car, dazzled by the lights of the other vehicles racing up behind him to shoot carelessly around him, he was convinced that he was still being followed by… someone, or… *something*.

Certain that this was so, he repeatedly looked in the rear-view mirror, then up at the sky, and found himself wondering, in particular, why he was studying the latter. He lowered his gaze from the sky, concentrating on the road ahead, the rear lights of the other vehicles, then he glanced again in the rear-view mirror and saw the headlights of a car, a battered Mercedes Benz, that was

moving too fast even for this road… and it was catching up with him.
‘It’s them again!’ he whispered, sounding strangled.
Even as he realized beyond doubt that he was being followed, the Mercedes caught up with him, its main beams turned on to dazzle him, and then it bumped into the back of his Volkswagen, once, twice, a third time, making it jolt and almost go into a swerve.
‘What the hell…?’ Molly exclaimed, glancing over her shoulder but forced to squint into the main beams of the Mercedes that was repeatedly bumping them from behind. ‘Goddamnit…’
Though already driving faster than he had ever done before, Tom accelerated to get away from the Mercedes, but it repeatedly caught up with him and bumped him again, making the Volkswagen jolt dangerously. Tom swept into the other lane and the Mercedes then raced up beside him and kept pace with him.
Glancing sideways, Tom saw the one-eyed man staring at him. His three hoodlum friends were in the car with him, all grinning wolfishly.
‘It’s him again!’ Tom shouted. Then he saw the rear side-window of the Mercedes being rolled down and the barrel of a pistol aiming at him. ‘They’re going to shoot us!’ he bawled.
Pressing his foot down hard, he let the Volkswagen surge forward, temporarily leaving the Mercedes behind. But it accelerated immediately, racing to catch up, and Tom quickly pulled back out to the other lane, almost hitting the car ahead and causing a lot of drivers to hoot their horns.
Before he knew quite was happening, Tom found himself weaving desperately in and out of the fast stream of traffic, swerving and wobbling on screeching tires, causing more horns to honk and other drivers to start doing the same. This did not deter the one-eyed man, who drove with reckless abandon, still trying to catch up and let his gunman get off a shot. When that first shot was fired, ringing out loud and clear above the bedlam of the swerving, honking cars front and rear, Tom put his foot down to the floor and went barrelling onto the first slip road leading off the highway.
‘Oh, Christ!’ Molly wailed.
The car driven by the one-eyed man came barrelling down after them.
Still racing ahead, Tom kept going until he found himself on a dark road that ran up into the hills of the shanty towns known as *vecindades*. The road soon turned into a potholed track that made the Volkswagen rock and roll,

screaming and rattling dementedly. Another gunshot rang out and Tom glanced in his rear-view mirror to see that the Mercedes was catching up with him. With no choice, he kept driving, wrestling with the steering wheel, desperately trying to avoid the potholes and ditches, the car being constantly whipped and scratched by the branches of Montezuma cypress trees. Then he came over the brow of a hill and found himself racing through a *vecindade*, past shacks with tin roofs and cardboard walls and dirt gardens, scattering the adults and children who had been squatting by the roadside, the car's wheels running over campfires to send flaming debris flying, and then he plunged back into the moonlit darkness of another quiet road. He could see lights in the hills around him, the fires of other *vecindades*, and the streams of light of the vehicles on the highway, now far below him.

Suddenly, the narrow track broadened and the Mercedes raced up beside him to strike the Volkswagen broadside, trying to force it off the road. Tom clung grimly to the steering wheel and managed a quick sideways glance. He saw that glassy single eye staring at him and then the barrel of a pistol aiming at him from the lowered rear window of the Mercedes. That vehicle struck his Volkswagen again, making it lurch dangerously towards the edge of a ditch, and the pistol, now mere feet away, roared sharply, followed by the high, keening sound of the bullet as it ricocheted off the Volkswagen's wing-mirror and went whistling away into the dark night.

'Fuck 'em!' Molly snapped, then she whipped her handgun out of her rucksack and twisted sideways to take aim and fire a shot from behind Tom's head.

'Oh, God!' Tom cried out as the noise of Molly's shot reverberated through his head and the rear window of the Mercedes exploded in a glittering shower of spraying glass fragments. Molly fired twice more. Her bullets ricocheted noisily off the hood of the Mercedes, but it suddenly raced ahead to pull in, directly in front of the Volkswagen. Then it slowed down, braking steadily, forcing Tom to do likewise.

'They're gonna stop us!' Molly wailed.

At that moment, however, an eerie, circular light appeared low above the road just ahead of the Mercedes, a mere pinprick at first, then rapidly expanding – as if flying out of the distance at tremendous speed, growing bigger as it approached – and then abruptly it was an immense, glowing, circular shape, a ghostly, slightly transparent, flying saucer, about thirty feet

wide, that descended vertically just ahead of the Mercedes and then hovered in the air right in front of it.
Either blinded by the dazzling light, shocked by what he was seeing, or simply trying to avert a crash with that eerie object, the one-eyed man made the Mercedes swerve violently, then it went off the road, crashed down into a ditch, flipped over, bounced a few times, and then burst into flames.
Tom's Volkswagen was racing towards that hovering, weirdly glowing object, and he thought he was doomed.
His car crashed into the object – or so it seemed to Tom
– and he was dazzled by star-filled light and lost all sense of direction. But the Volkswagen kept going, as if travelling through the cosmos – a brief glimpse of distant worlds and double moons and pulsating suns – and then emerged to the darkness at the other side of the object, and raced on down the road.
When a disbelieving Tom and Molly glanced back over their shoulders, they saw the great, glowing, circular object shooting vertically skywards, shrinking rapidly as it ascended, and soon becoming no more than another star in the vast, star-filled sky. Then it simply blinked out.
Scarcely believing what he had seen, too speechless to speak, as was Molly, but now fully aware that they were both involved in a dangerous, possibly supernatural game, Tom glanced once more over his shoulder at the blazing car now far behind, and then turned to the front, slowed the Volkswagen down, and eventually made his way back to the highway, this time driving with care. When the lights of the Aeropuerto International came into view, he heaved a sigh of relief.
The next morning, he and an equally shaken Molly were flown to London.

Part Two
Chapter Thirteen

Tom and Molly did not speak much on the flight to London, being too overcome with disbelief about what had happened on the road to the Aeropuerto Internacional in Mexico City, and also trying to recover from the toxic fumes of the great but hopelessly polluted metropolis. Exhausted physically and mentally, they both slept throughout most of the flight, only

being awakened by the enforced conviviality of modern air travel with its movies, duty-free goods, and endless supply of meals that could not be refused.

More than once, just as they were both nodding off again, Molly would drift back to consciousness to find that her head was resting on Tom's shoulder, that she felt comforted by this fact, and that his snoring, his boyish face in the repose of sleep, made her feel soft and warm. He was a little English snob, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, but there was something touching about him and he secretly touched her. She was surprised by this feeling, though it was undeniable and growing steadily, yet her own background, that hell of rejection and poverty in New York, made her mistrust it. Nevertheless, as she drifted off to sleep again, she kept her head on his shoulder. She had sweet dreams about him.

They both felt a lot better when they arrived at Heathrow Airport, rejuvenated by air only marginally less polluted, and as they were driven to London in a taxi paid for by the grumbling Tom, along a busy road lined with suburban houses, their throats cleared, eyes dry, they fell into obsessive conversation about what had occurred.

'All I know,' Tom said, 'and I'll understand if you don't believe me, is that when driving us to the airport in Mexico City I was haunted by the feeling that we were being followed by someone, or… *something*. Yes, someone or some *thing*. That someone was the one-eyed man and the *something* was that weird light that came out of nowhere to make that Mercedes crash.'

'That thing, that light, looked like a flying saucer,' Molly said, recalling it vividly and instantly filling up with the kind of fear that she had not known since childhood. 'But I don't think it was physical. I mean, it was like something I saw before, when I gazed into the crystal skull. Remember? When I was hypnotized by it? That flying saucer was more like some kind of light and I noticed that it had stars and things inside it – big moons and stuff – like a scene from outer space. So I think it was some kind of… *substance*… maybe a spirit manifestation or something. Anyway, that's what I think.'

'Correct,' Tom said. 'I agree entirely. I thought we were going to crash into it, but the car just passed right through it, and, as it did so, I too saw what you saw: stars and great moons. A distant galaxy, maybe, or a parallel universe.'

‘God,’ Molly said. ‘Jesus.’

‘And whatever it was,’ Tom continued excitedly, ‘it certainly made that Mercedes swerve off the road; and then, when we drove right through it, it ascended and disappeared in the heavens. I still can’t believe it.’

‘Believe it,’ Molly said. ‘That light, that flying saucer thing, came down outta the sky and went straight back up into the sky once it had rescued us.’

‘Rescued us? You think that’s what it did?’

‘Yeah, right. No doubt about it. It rescued us and then it took off again.’

To distract herself from the fear and awe, to bring herself back down to Earth, she glanced out of the taxi and saw that the nice suburban houses with leafy lawns had given way to increasing traffic and visibly polluted air – exhaust smoke from leaded petrol, more black smoke from industrial chimneys – on a road that ran between prefabricated factories, warehouses of steel and concrete, rows of crumbling council houses with washed clothes flapping in back yards, garages and supermarkets on pavements strewn with rubbish, and stores with plate-glass windows that reflected the snarling traffic that was gradually slowing down to a snail’s pace. Molly had been enthralled for the first half hour of the drive into London, seeing in those comfortable middle-class houses with their leafy trees and green lawns all that she had thought England would be. Now, however, the scenery had changed dramatically and she recognized a more familiar environment: dense traffic, polluted air, and constant noise. It was just like New York.

‘Hell,’ she said, ‘I’m practically back home!’

‘Not quite,’ Tom replied. ‘Anyway, what I’m trying to say is that if that saucer-shaped… *manifestation*… truly came down to rescue us from those villains, then I’m convinced it was a manifestation created by the crystal skull, which means that we’re under its influence for good or for evil – and, frankly, that scares me.’

Molly didn’t want to believe any of this – she was a practical, street-wise woman – but when she recalled how the crystal skull had affected her when she looked into it, she, too, felt scared. She had been mesmerized by it, drawn into its darkly gleaming depths, and then found herself surrounded by unfamiliar stars and multiple moons, in a vast, teeming cosmos. It had been like a dream, a silent journey through time and space, and she had come out of it feeling distinctly strange, as if divorced from herself. Since then, she had relived the experience several times in dreams, and she felt haunted by it. So

maybe Tom was right
– just maybe – and this thought was disturbing.
‘Well, it scares me, too,’ she confessed, ‘but we may be imagining it. I mean, that manifestation *could* have been some natural, if unusual, phenomenon – note the big words I’m using – of the kind you read about in UFO stories. You know? They’re perfectly sane folk and they think they’ve been harassed by a UFO, or flying saucer, and it turns out to be Venus or ball lightning or some other optical illusion caused by the atmosphere. So that’s what it *could* have been in our case – I mean, we *did* drive right *through* it – and the driver of that Mercedes, the one-eyed guy, just panicked and swerved to avoid it. That seems more likely to me.’
‘Mmmm.’ Tom pursed his lips, deep in thought. Molly thought he looked real cute and attractive in his sensitive English way. ‘Perhaps. On the other hand, that one-eyed man and his friends were after the crystal skull – they assumed we still had it in our possession – and I think that may have something to do with it. Bear in mind, also, that those men on the platform of the Great Pyramid in Chichén Itzá were burnt to death in an unnatural manner – since nothing *around* them or *near* them was burnt – and that obviously happened when they unearthed the crystal skull. They were trying to steal it, Molly, and they were killed by an unnatural phenomenon to prevent them from doing so. From that we can assume that some mysterious force was indeed released by the crystal skull when it was unearthed
– and whatever it was, it killed those men in the Shrine.’
‘So how come it didn’t kill us? I mean, *we* stole the crystal skull when we found it, and we’re not dead yet. Not only that, but we are, according to you, being protected by that very same force. That doesn’t make sense, Tom.’
She liked uttering his name. It made her feel a lot closer to him, and that surprised her as well.
Tom sighed and glanced out the window. The taxi had now entered London proper and was passing an area that looked, to Molly’s urban eye, to be seedily sophisticated, with the houses, formerly grand, now decaying. However, they soon gave way to a busy high street, shops filled with fashionable clothes, then a sidestreet lined with restaurants and more shops, then another busy main road. The traffic was crawling lethargically in smoky air, but few drivers were honking their horns. Clearly, the English were, like Tom, as polite as reported.

‘I don’t know,’ Tom confessed. ‘It’s a mystery to me. All I can tell you is that the crystal skull is reputed to have unusual powers that can be used for good *or* evil. Perhaps, for some reason I simply can’t fathom, it favours us over the men who were trying to steal it. So maybe we *do* have to give serious thought to what we should do with it. Indeed, maybe what we decide to do with it will decide our fate. Please think about this.’
‘You mean that if we sell it just for gain, the powers could turn against us?’
Tom nodded affirmatively. ‘Perhaps.’
‘I think you’re tryin’ it on, pal.’ Molly still felt clinging fear, but she had too much to lose here. She was fearful because she felt that he might be right, but she couldn’t be swayed by that. ‘Listen,’ she said. ‘I’ve had enough hard times to last me a lifetime, and I want no more. So if you’re tryin’ to con me into giving the skull away, believe me, you’re gonna be disappointed.’
‘I’m not saying that, Molly. I’m simply saying that we have to be very careful what we do with it. If we sell it, we have to make sure it ends up in good hands. That’s all I’m saying.’
‘Well, we’ll see,’ Molly said. She glanced out of the taxi and saw that they were inching along a busy main drag packed with pedestrians and lined with elegant stores. As the taxi moved on, it passed the Ritz Hotel and then Fortnum & Mason’s. A uniformed doorman was standing outside the revolving doors of the latter, and an oldfashioned horse-and-carriage was stationary on the sidewalk with another uniformed man in the driving seat, holding the reins. ‘Wow!’ Molly exclaimed. ‘It’s just like in the movies! Where are we now?’
‘Piccadilly,’ Tom replied, lost in thought.
‘I thought that was a roundabout with a statue in the middle.’
‘That’s Piccaddily Circus,’ Tom explained. ‘This is Piccadilly.’
‘Are we staying near here?’
‘Yes, Molly. We’ll be at the hotel in a couple of minutes.’
‘Great,’ Molly said, though she was wondering if she dared enter those posh shops in the rags she was wearing. She turned to glance at Tom, dishevelled and sleepy in his traveller’s clothes, and she felt a slight trembling within, and a rush of warmth for him.
Godamnit, she thought, what’s happening here? I must be losing my mind.
The taxi turned off Piccadilly and went up a narrow sidestreet filled with Georgian buildings, black-spiked railings around them, and lined with

parking meters. A lot of the men on the sidewalks were wearing pinstripe suits and carrying briefcases and rolled umbrellas. The women all looked elegant.

‘I’m gonna feel like a fish out of water here,’ Molly said, ‘in this crap I’m wearing.’

‘No, you won’t,’ Tom replied. ‘The hotel you’re staying in is nice, but not that fancy, and it’s used by tourists who dress just like you. I *do* think, however, that you could do with some clothes more suitable to some of the places we’ll be visiting, so I’m going to buy you some.’

‘Ashamed of me, are ya?’

‘No,’ Tom said quickly. ‘Those clothes are perfectly suitable for running around town, but you’ll need more formal clothing for other occasions. Why feel like a fish out of water when you can feel perfectly comfortable?’

‘Damned right. That’s good thinkin’.’

She looked fondly at him, warming to his smile, and, yes, his consideration, as well as the knowledge that he had obviously been hurt by his broken marriage and was trying to heal himself as best he could while still retaining his dignity. She could respect him for that. She also knew, from the way he looked at her, that he found her attractive but didn’t quite know what to do about it. This, too, touched her secretly. In fact, given the kind of men she was used to, all the deadbeats she had known and suffered with, this nervous, rather formal English gentleman now struck her as being special and unexpected.

‘You know, you’re not bad at all,’ she told him as the taxi pulled into the curb in front of a small, Georgianfronted hotel that had steps leading up to its ornate entrance. ‘I don’t really deserve you.’

‘You’re too kind,’ Tom said.

He smiled nervously at her, then climbed out of the taxi. Molly slipped out behind him.

‘Where’s this?’ she asked him as the driver was removing her rucksack from the boot of his vehicle.

‘Mayfair,’ Tom said.

‘Swank territory,’ Molly said, glancing up and down the street, taking in the refined ladies and gentlemen meandering up and down under a leaden sky.

‘Let’s go in,’ Tom said, carrying her rucksack and leading the way.

‘Hey!’ she called out to him, stopping on the first step and glancing back at

the taxi, which was still parked by the curb with the driver perusing a newspaper, clearly not going anywhere. She turned back to Tom. ‘You’ve forgotten your bag.’

‘I don’t need it,’ Tom replied. ‘Now let’s get you signed in.’

Before she could say another word, he turned away and entered the hotel, which did not, Molly noticed, have a doorman. Hurrying up the steps after him, she passed through revolving doors and entered a narrow reception area of darkly varnished wood and brass fittings. It was very English in an old-fashioned way, but seemed modest enough to prevent her from feeling out of place. Tom was already at the reception desk, her rucksack on the floor by his feet, and he was removing his credit card from his billfold while talking to the desk clerk. The latter was wearing a normal grey suit, with a white shirt and striped tie. He was pale-faced, black-haired, very formal and as thin as a rake.

‘Hey,’ Molly said again when Tom had finished his lengthy negotiations with the desk clerk and was taking his credit card back. ‘What do you mean, you don’t need your bag?’

Looking embarrassed, his eyes flitting from her to the desk clerk and back again, Tom replied, ‘Well, I *did* say it was *your* hotel, Molly. I’m not staying here myself.’

‘*What*?’

‘I’m not staying here. I’m staying in my apartment around the corner and it’s too small for both of us.’

‘Oh, really?’ Molly said, burning up instantly.

‘Yes, really.’

‘You mean, you don’t want to share it with me.’

‘I told you: it’s too small.’

‘Only one bedroom, has it?’

‘Well, no, but…’ Blushing with embarrassment, Tom distracted himself by signing the credit slip placed before him by the bland-faced, but possibly intrigued, desk clerk.

‘So it has a spare bedroom.’

‘Well, yes, but…’ Tom finished signing the credit slip and slid it back to the desk clerk, who then pushed a registration form towards Molly.

‘Could you please fill this in, Madam?’

‘What?’ Molly glared at the desk clerk, then at the form on the glossily

varnished wooden counter.
‘The registration form. We require your passport number and other details.’
‘Yeah, right. Just a minute, bud.’ She turned back to Tom, who was visibly wilting before her wrath. ‘So it’s got a spare bedroom,’ she said, loud and clear, making sure that the desk clerk could hear her, ‘but you don’t want me in it. Is that it?’
‘Please, Molly, don’t make a scene,’ Tom said, squirming. ‘It *does* have a spare bedroom, but the apartment is rather small, fairly cramped, and so I thought…’
‘Oh, it’s too small, is it? Well, we shared a single room in Mérida and *that* wasn’t too small!’
The desk clerk coughed discreetly into his clenched fist, making Tom blush an even deeper crimson. ‘Well, I just thought, Molly, that we could both do with a little privacy, and my apartment, though having a *tiny* spare room, is too small for us to feel really comfortable together in it.’
‘Bullshit!’ Molly exclaimed.
The desk clerk, having already coughed discreetly into his clenched fist, now moved a little way along the counter, though not out of earshot.
‘*Please*, Molly,’ Tom said, ‘this is really most embarrassing.’
‘*Embarrassing*? Damned embarrassing for *me*, I can tell ya! You lettin’ that prick behind the counter know just what you think of me.’
‘I think highly of you.’
‘As long as I’m not in your goddamned apartment. Alright! *Alright*!’ she added as Tom turned away to walk out. He turned back to her, his face burning with humiliation, and that made her feel bad. ‘Okay, let’s forget it, Tom. Just tell me what we’re doin’ today and then I’ll go to my room. What’s the game plan?’
Relieved, though casting another embarrassed glance at the desk clerk, now studiously scanning some documentation on his desk, though his ears were clearly flapping, Tom said: ‘Well, I thought that perhaps we should catch up on our sleep, have a decent lunch, and then meet up again this evening for dinner.’
‘Great,’ Molly said. ‘So what time’s lunch?’
‘Pardon?’
‘Lunch! Are you deaf?’ She was angry again. ‘What time are we meeting for this goddamned lunch?’

Tom glanced self-consciously at the bland-faced, listening, desk clerk. ‘Well, actually,’ he said, running a finger around the collar of his shirt as if he was strangling, ‘that wasn’t the plan at all. I thought we’d have lunch separately, and then meet later for – ’

‘*What*? My first day in London and I have to have lunch alone? Christ, I’ve never been here in my fuckin’ life, I don’t know one street from the other, I don’t have any lousy English money, and – ’

‘You don’t need money, Molly, and you don’t need to know your way around. You can have lunch in the restaurant of this hotel, and just sign for it. Then I’ll pick you up this evening to show you around.’

‘Great. I eat alone in the restaurant. I sit here bein’ gawped at by the fuckin’ hoity-toity English, bein’ treated as a freak ‘cause I’m stayin’ all alone in this dump and so I must be a whore. Thanks a million, pal!’

Tom did not fail to notice how Molly’s vocabulary degenerated – words cut short, obscenities tripping off her tongue – when she was agitated. It deeply distressed him. ‘I have to go now,’ he said, and turned towards the front door, hoping to make his escape, though she instantly jerked him back around to face her.

‘So where are *you* havin’ lunch?’ she asked him. ‘Are you cookin’ for yourself in your nice apartment?’

‘No.’

‘So where are you havin’ lunch?’

‘Actually, I’m having it in my club.’

‘What club?’

‘A gentleman’s club, right here in Mayfair, just around the corner from my apartment.’

‘A *gentleman’s* club?’

‘That’s correct.’

‘So why can’t I at least have lunch with you there? Am I too common, or what?’

‘It’s not that, Molly.’

‘So what is it?’

‘My club, being a gentleman’s club, does not admit women as a matter of policy.’‘Christ!’ Molly exclaimed, almost exploding. ‘First I have to endure your snot-nosed English snobbery, now I’m suffering from your fuckin’ male chauvinism.’ The desk clerk coughed again into his clenched fist, this time

staring disapprovingly at both of them. Molly glared at him, and then turned back to Tom. ‘Well, go screw yourself!’ she said, loud and clear, making sure that the desk clerk could hear. ‘I’ll see you later this evening.’
‘Right,’ Tom retorted. He turned away to walk out, but Molly tugged him back again.
‘Do I at least get your phone number?’ she asked. ‘I mean, in case I get mugged, raped or murdered by some Limey psychopath.’
‘Of course,’ Tom said. ‘Naturally.’ Glancing despairingly at the disapproving desk clerk, blushing bright red, he pulled out his billfold, withdrew one of his personal cards, and passed it shakily to Molly. She snatched it violently from his hand.
‘Right!’ she snapped. ‘Have a good day!’
‘I will,’ Tom said.
He turned away and hurried out the front door, back to his waiting taxi and travel-bag, actually making it this time.
Filled with fury, Molly turned back to the reception desk, scribbled her details onto the registration from, handed it to the bland-faced desk clerk, and snapped, ‘So where’s my goddamned room key?’
‘Room twenty-four, second floor,’ the desk clerk said, handing her the door key.
‘Enjoying yourself?’
‘Pardon?’
‘Never mind.’ Molly lifted her rucksack off the floor. ‘You got a lift in this dump?’
The desk clerk nodded to the left-hand side of the lobby. ‘The elevator is over there, Madam. Just press the button.’
‘I think I can manage that much,’ Molly said. ‘Y’all have a good day now.’
‘Thank you, Madam. I’ll try.’
Without another word, Molly turned away, took the lift to the second floor, and let herself into Room 24. It was a very nice room with a good-sized double bed, a dressing very nice room with a good-sized double bed, a dressing inch TV set, all surrounded by the framed prints of English countryside landscapes that were hung on the walls. There was also a nice, recently renovated bathroom with a toilet and shower.
Still brimming over with anger and muttering dire threats against, ‘Mr Toffee-Nosed Tom Powell’, she showered and slipped naked into bed,

determined to have a good sleep. She was just getting cosy, dropping off, when the telephone rang.
Exasperated and perplexed, she picked up the phone beside the bed and gave the caller her name. There was a lingering silence, the sound of even breathing, then she heard Tom's soft voice.
'You know you really love me,' he said.
'Go to hell!' Molly snapped.
When Tom chuckled, she slammed the phone down and lay back on the bed, pulling the covers up to her chin. She stared grimly at the ceiling for a moment, wanting to kill the bastid… then she broke into a helpless smile and gratefully closed her eyes.
Tom was in her dreams when she slept, and so she slept like a baby.

Chapter Fourteen

The following morning, Tom escorted Molly to the British Museum in Great Russell Street. Molly was in good mood again. The day before she had caught up on her sleep, had an excellent lunch in the hotel's restaurant, albeit alone but treated with unexpected courtesy by the staff, and then, that evening, still amused by Tom's phone call, she had met him in the lobby, as planned, to be given a tour of the West End.

Even before they left the hotel, she had asked him if he had meant what he had said on the phone, and he had blushed, which he did easily, and confessed that he'd had a few brandies in his apartment, and those, combined with the lack of sleep, had made him drunk and mischievous. Nevertheless, she had sensed that if he didn't actually mean what he had said, he was certainly growing more fond of her and was even attracted to her, so she had gone with him into the West End in an upbeat mood.

He had given her a great time, taking her on a roundabout route from Piccadilly Circus to Leicester Square, then up into Chinatown and Soho, then back to Trafalgar Square, along the Strand and Fleet Street, then up into Convent Garden. Molly had loved it, especially as the weather had improved greatly since their arrival. While the tourist squalor of certain areas of the town had reminded her of New York, she had been enchanted with the outdoor cafés of Soho and the street performers in the Piazza of Convent Garden, where, in the evening's summery warmth and dimming light, the

outdoor tables of the restaurants had been packed. Later, Tom had taken her for a meal at Mr Kong's in Chinatown – an unpretentious restaurant where the food was divine – and followed it with a crawl through what he had assured her were the best pubs in Soho.

They had talked a lot throughout the evening, without animosity for once, and he had loosened up and told her about himself: his upbringing in his parents' stately old home in Reigate, Surrey; his education at Oxford; his marriage, virtually arranged, to a débutante, Lucinda ReesMannering, from Windsor, then the death of his father and his divorce from Lucinda eighteen months after the funeral, only two years ago.

It was clear from what Tom told her that he had, indeed, been born with a silver spoon in his mouth and, even luckier, to loving parents. While the family had neither a butler nor servants, as Molly had imagined they would, Tom had certainly been brought up with a variety of nannies and had never known the dread of insecurity. He had, however, been a delicate, nervous child – an only child
– and the death of his father, whom he had worshipped, had, in his own words, 'devastated' him.

'He was a lovely man,' Tom told her. 'An astronomer with the Royal Society of Astronomers, highly respected in his field. A bit dizzy, perhaps even a little eccentric, but he had a head buzzing with ideas and he taught me all about the stars and, incidentally, stirred my interest in the nature of time, and, subsequently, ancient civilizations. He gave me lots of attention and was always terrific fun, so when he died I took it very hard… and then my marriage broke up.'

The marriage, Molly deduced from what Tom told her, must have been doomed right from the start. While it had not actually been 'arranged' in the style of an Indian marriage, the young couple had clearly been pushed into each other's arms, and their union was viewed as mutually beneficial to both families. Shy and respectful, loving his well-meaning parents, Tom had simply let himself drift with the tide, and it had carried him straight to the altar.

Lucinda Rees-Mannering had indeed been a débutante, pretty and dim, addicted to socializing, and no spark of true passion had ever been struck between her and Tom. Their sexual union was a disaster from the beginning and did not improve with time. Within a year, they had virtually stopped

having sex and were living together more like brother and sister than husband and wife. For Tom, the relationship had been more than traumatic, shattering his fragile confidence; and then, when his father died unexpectedly of a brain tumour, what little self-esteem he had left rapidly vaporized. Having not yet decided what he wanted to do in life, having been cosseted and protected from the need to have gainful employment, he had started drinking heavily, practically living in his various gentlemen's clubs in London, often staying overnight, until eventually, when this happened once too often, Lucinda filed for divorce. They were divorced eighteen months after the death of Tom's father, and he was shattered again.

'Finally,' he told Molly, 'I managed to pull myself together by drinking a lot less and going back to my interest in ancient civilizations. In short, I became, as I believe I've already said, a perpetual student, and I remained far too timid for my own good. So while I then went to Mexico because of my continuing interest in ancient civilizations, particularly the Mayas, I also went because I knew that I was too timid for my own good, too protected by my sheltered upbringing; and I decided that travelling all alone might force me out of myself. Silly as it seems, and probably is, I wanted to test my courage with the trip – and given the experiences we've both had, I think I *am* being tested. Perhaps it was preordained.'

'Seems like it,' Molly said.

He had finally dropped her off at the hotel just before midnight, and she had slept like a baby for the second time. Now, as he walked her in the hazy light of late morning from Mayfair, back up through Soho to Tottenham Court Road and Great Russell Street, she found herself thinking back on what he had told her about his life, and comparing it with her own life in New York. For the first time she understood that she, too, albeit for different reasons, had been running away from her past. She had liked to believe that she was tough, that she didn't need anyone, but now she saw, in the mirror of Tom's similar set of problems, that she had buried the pain of her childhood behind a front of indifference.

Brooklyn now seemed far away, but she still remembered her parent's squalid apartment above their grocery store, her big, beefy father in his stained sweatshirt and loose pants, boozing, forever bellowing, beating up on her mother, sexually abusing his daughter, until, when she was sixteen years old, Molly had had enough and ran away for good, moving into that awful

dive in the Lower East Side with a lot of winos and junkies. She had learnt to defend herself, to hustle for what she needed, and every experience from then on had confirmed that she needed to do just that. She had seen life as a cesspit, men as brutes, herself the victim, and by the time she lit out for Mexico, she was as hard as a hammer.

But that hardness was a front, her armour and shield, and now she realized that her growing feelings for Tom, her awareness of his innocence, had filled her with maternal concern and the need to show him some love. He was the first decent man she had ever met and he filled her with wonder. He frustrated her and often made her mad, but her rage sprang from love. She sensed this, but could not yet accept it - though what she could not deny was that he was making her feel, for the very first time, like a natural woman. She was grateful for that. She could have loved him for that alone.

‘Is that it?’ she asked, as they walked past the art shops of Great Russell Street and the black railings in front of a majestic colonnaded building came into view on her left. ‘Is that the British Museum?’

‘Yes,’ Tom said, ‘that’s it.’

‘It’s Victorian, right?’

‘No, Molly, not quite. Construction of the building

began in 1823 and was completed in 1847. So it was *completed* at the beginning of the Victorian era, generally viewed as 1837 to 1903. A good try, though, my dear.’

Amused, he led her through the mass of tourists at the main gates, then across the crowded courtyard to the broad steps that led up to the museum. He had phoned the day before for an appointment, so once inside, he asked for Professor Weatherby and was directed through a series of hallways displaying antiquities of Egypt, Asia, the Orient, Greece and Rome, as well as the new and impressive Mayan exhibition, to an office located on an upper floor at the rear of the building. There they found Professor Julian Weatherby, another academic with grey hair and a shorttrimmed grey beard. Like his friend, Professor Juarez, he was seated behind a cluttered desk and surrounded by packed bookshelves, old parchments, maps, and graphs of hieroglyphics, many relating to Aztec and Mayan culture. When they had closed the door behind them, he came around the desk , introduced himself and shook their hands.

‘I’m so glad you could make it,’ he said when the introductions had been

completed. ‘I was rather worried about having your skull in my possession, and, frankly, surprised that Professor Juarez sent it with the other artefacts. He *is*, of course, Mexican, and though a dear friend tends to liberal interpretations when it comes to matters of legality.’

‘What’s that mean?’ Molly asked, taking an instant dislike to Professor Weatherby.

‘What it means, my dear, is that, technically speaking, we’re breaking the law by allowing such a valuable artefact to be shipped into this country, unregistered, with our other, perfectly legal, artefacts. No matter, please take a seat.’

Tom and Molly sat down. The professor then went back around his desk and sat behind it and stared at them.

‘You’ve got the skull here?’ Molly asked, feeling anxious.

The professor nodded. ‘Yes.’ He pointed to a large safe in one of the walls. ‘It’s in there,’ he said.

‘Undamaged?’

‘Yes. The skull is, after all, carved from quartz crystal and that’s next to impossible to damage. So what can I tell you before you take it away?’

Tom recounted what Professor Juarez had told him about the crystal skull, and then asked if the information could be authenticated.

‘Yes,’ Professor Weatherby said. ‘At my friend’s written request, in a letter that came with the skull, I examined it thoroughly and can confirm that it’s genuine in every respect. As we only know of two genuine crystal skulls, the others all being either fake or the products of wishful thinking, I must agree with my learned friend that this one is the long-missing Rose Quartz Skull. Therefore it would, as Professor Juarez informed you, have travelled with that ancient race, pre-Mayan or Aztec, on its great migration across the Earth, from the west to the east, including a period in Meso-America, and, of course, Chichén Itzá. Given that the second crystal skull – the one presently on display in the Museum of Mankind, here in London – was discovered in British Honduras and is approximately 3,500 years old, it seems likely that both skulls were left behind by that same mysterious race as it moved on from the Yucatán peninsula to Tiahuanaco in Peru. If this is so, I can confirm that your skull is an extremely valuable item – though I don’t want it here.’

‘Why not?’ Molly asked.

‘Because, as I said, it’s been brought in illegally. Professor Juarez should not

have sent it to me without proper clearance, but as he has, I'll simply return it to you and then conveniently forget that I ever saw it.'
'Before you conveniently forget it,' Tom said, sounding bolder than normal, 'can you tell us if you believe the skull has unusual characteristics?'
'It's unusual in every respect, as I believe Professor Juarez has already told you.'
'By unusual characteristics, I meant remarkable, possibly occult, powers. Do you think it has those?'
Weatherby smiled cynically. 'Ah, yes,' he said. 'The occult powers of the crystal skulls, reported to have been used in esoteric rites by their original owners.' He leaned back in his chair and clasped his hands under his chin, distractedly stroking his grey beard. 'I've heard all the stories,' he said, 'and find them amusing, but personally I place no credence in them, and certainly can't substantiate them. The skull is remarkable because we don't know how it was made – or, indeed, who actually made it – but that doesn't mean it's endowed with remarkable powers, supernatural or otherwise. My interest is antiquity, not magic.'
'What about the skull in the Museum of Mankind?' Tom asked.
'What about it?'
'Where did it come from?'
'I can only tell you that it was originally purchased, from an unknown person, by Tiffany's in New York, then brought back here by an Englishwoman, the daughter of Ronald Barratt-White, the famous, some would say notorious, explorer who found it in British Honduras in the first place. Lady Barratt-White gave it to the Museum of Mankind as a gift, and there it remains to this day.'
'Why was Ronald Barratt-White thought to be notorious?' Molly asked.
'Because he was more of an adventurer than an explorer,' Weatherby replied, 'and his interests were, to put it mildly, somewhat bizarre. He wanted to be taken seriously – and certainly he had a genuine interest in ancient cultures, particularly those of Central America, such as the Mayans, the Aztecs and the Toltecs. However, he was also a theosophist, a lover of mystical sciences, a member of various secret societies, and an open believer in the legend of Atlantis. For those reasons, and because Barratt-White liked to be seen as a swashbuckling character, there were many who believed that he did not in fact find his crystal skull in British Honduras, as he had claimed, but

purchased it from someone and planted it in the rubble of his excavation of the lost city of Lubaantun, in the jungle near Belize City, for his daughter to find.'

'Why would he do that?' Tom asked.

'In order to make himself famous and regain the legitimacy that he'd lost through his open support of outlandish theories.'

'Do you think that's true?' Molly asked.

'I've no idea,' Weatherby replied. 'I only know that the skull is genuine and that Lady Barratt-White, who was then seventeen and working on the site with her father, insists to this day that she was the one who actually found it and that the find was genuine.'

'Do you think there's a connection between the two skulls?' Tom asked.

'What kind of connection?'

'A connection in the sense that, though we don't know who actually made the skulls, it's now widely accepted that they almost certainly belonged to that mysterious pre-Aztec or pre-Mayan race, that they were both used in the esoteric rites of that ancient race, and that for unknown reasons they were both left behind in Meso-America, most likely in British Honduras and Yucatán. A connection in the sense that whatever they were used for, they might have been always used in Tandem.'

'That's certainly possible,' Weatherby said. 'But what's your point, Mr Powell?'

'My point is that the skulls might be a pair. Not just structurally similar, but somehow related to one another, perhaps working only in tandem.'

'Working?' Weatherby asked, looking bewildered.

Tom leaned forward in his chair, his gaze intense. 'If the crystal skulls *do* have unusual characteristics, or occult powers – and I appreciate that you don't believe this – they may communicate somehow with one another, and need one another to function fully.'

'That's ridiculous, Mr Powell. Whether separately or together, the skulls have no supernatural powers. I can't believe that a man of your background would even consider such a ludicrous possibility. Such theories belong to the realms of cranks, along with UFOs and zombies. This is the *British Museu*m, Mr Powell, so please treat it as such. We are interested in history, not in magic, so please desist from this particular line of reasoning, at least in my presence.'

‘Sorry,’ Tom said, though he did not, to Molly’s surprise, look even remotely apologetic. Indeed, rather than looking as if he had been reprimanded, he simply leaned back in his chair and offered a nonchalant smile.
‘Is Lady Barratt-White still alive?’ he asked.
‘Yes,’ Weatherby said. ‘She’s nearly ninety years old and seriously ill, but she *is* still alive. Why?’
‘I think I’ll pay her a visit,’ Tom said. ‘Can you give me her details?’
‘She’s in the phone book,’ Weatherby replied, clearly wishing to be involved no further in what he viewed as lunacy.
‘Good,’ Tom said, then he pushed his chair back and stood up. ‘Thanks very much for your assistance, Professor Weatherby. Can we have our skull now?’
‘My pleasure,’ Weatherby said. He went to the safe in the wall, opened it, and withdrew the skull, wrapped in cardboard and paper tied together with string. Placing the package in a British Museum shopping bag, he handed it to Tom. ‘I can’t believe you’re going to walk out of here with that priceless item in a shopping bag,’ he said, ‘but I’m glad to be rid of it.’
‘Thanks for looking after it,’ Molly said.
‘No thanks required,’ Weatherby replied. He then walked to the door and opened it for them, but stopped them just as they were leaving. He checked his wristwatch. ‘Good Lord!’ he said. ‘It’s lunchtime. Time for my pint. Let me walk you both down.’
Together, they made their way back through the grand hallways filled with the antiquities of many countries, then down the broad steps and across the crowded courtyard to the sidewalk. There, surrounded by milling tourists and snapping cameras, Professor Weatherby shooks hands with Tom and Molly, then wished them good luck. They thanked him and had turned away to leave when he called out Tom’s name. When Tom turned back to face him, Weatherby was looking very serious.
‘One final thought,’ he said. ‘Much as I’m glad to get rid of this particular artefact, I have to say it grieves me that it’s not in professional hands. Please be careful, Mr Powell. A lot of people would like to get their hands on that skull and some of them are the kind to be avoided. Be extremely careful about who you show it to, who you talk to, because otherwise you could find yourself in serious trouble.’
‘I’ll be careful,’ Tom said.
Professor Weatherby nodded, then he crossed the road to enter the Museum

Tavern on the opposite corner. Tom watched him entering the venerated old pub, then he led Molly back along the crowded sidewalk of Great Russell Street, carrying the precious crystal skull in the museum's shopping bag.
'Let's have a drink and a private talk,' he said.

Chapter Fifteen

Mai Suphar watched Tom and Molly until they disappeared along Great Russell Street, then, with a chilly smile, she crossed the road and entered the Museum Tavern, which was busy, smoky, and warm. Dressed in a long black coat over a skirt of black silk, with a snow-white blouse and red scarf setting off the golden skin of her lovely face, and high-heeled black boots emphasizing her long legs, she was a picture of sophisticated elegance and heart-stopping beauty. While not actually stopping, more than one male heart skipped a beat when Mai entered the pub, as she could tell by the widening eyes of those who looked at her. She also saw, as she walked to the bar, that Professor Weatherby, sitting there with his pint of English beer and sandwich, beneath a tinted-glass window and potted plants, was one of the gawkers.

Standing at the bar, with her leather bag slung over her right shoulder, she ordered a Campari with soda, speaking perfect English in a low, sensual tone of voice and lowering her brown eyes as if shy. When the barman had served her, trying not to ogle overtly, though clearly he found this difficult, Mai shyly thanked him and carried her drink to the helpfully empty table beside Professor Weatherby's. As she sat down, crossing her long legs to let the black coat fall off them, displaying them, she glanced sideways at the professor and caught him hastily lowering his gaze to the newspaper spread out on the table before him. He took another bite of his sandwich, as if distracted, though that distraction was caused by Mai, and she smiled slightly and then glanced about her, as if, just like any other tourist, she found this historical English pub fascinating.

In truth, she was enjoying herself. She had never been to London before, had always wanted to visit it, and when Lu Thong had ordered her to come here, to pursue Tom Powell and the American girl, she had been delighted to do so.

According to Lu Thong, Tom Powell and the American girl, now known

to be one Molly Beale, a nonentity from New York, a hitchhiker in Yucatán, had been pursued by the one-eyed criminal Emmanuelle Cortez all the way from Mérida to Mexico City. At that point, Lu Thong had been expecting a phone call from Cortez, informing him that the couple had been killed and the crystal skull regained; instead, he had received a call from another of his minions, informing him that Cortez and three of his hooligans had been found dead in their car, where it had crashed and exploded on a back road that ran above the highway leading to Mexico City's Aeropuerto Internacional. From this, Lu Thong had deduced that Cortez must have been pursuing the Englishman and his girlfriend to the airport, chased them off the highway, and then made some fatal error and crashed. Subsequent investigation by Lu Thong's minion had confirmed that Tom Powell and Molly Beale had boarded the first flight to London the following day.

'I have an informant at Heathrow Airport,' Lu Thong had told Mai. 'He checked the records of all those who had booked hotels through the tourist office at Heathrow during the morning of Powell's arrival, and learnt that his travelling companion, this Molly Beale creature, was booked into an hotel in Mayfair, London. Powell personally made that booking, but didn't book himself in, which suggested that he was staying elsewhere, presumably at his own place. A check of the London telephone directory revealed that he does indeed have an apartment in Mayfair, just around the corner from the hotel. So we have his address and the name of that American tart's hotel, which solves some of our problems.'

'What are the others?'

'It was not my belief that the Englishman or the American tart would have been able to smuggle the crystal skull through Customs and that they must have made other arrangements for its transportation to London. I therefore checked my taped conversations with the late Emmanuelle Cortez, who, when still alive and well, was phoning me regularly from Mexico City with precise details of the movements of the frustrating twosome, and noted that they had paid a visit to the National Museum of Anthropology in Chapultepec Park. Visitors to members of staff of that establishment have to sign the guest book. From that book we ascertained that Powell and his girlfriend had signed in for a visit to Professor Juarez, the museum's leading authority on Meso-American antiquities in general, and the Mayans and Aztecs in particular. Since Cortez, God rest his soul, is no longer with us, I

despatched another of my men to the home of Professor Juarez, and the good professor, having little resistance to pain, revealed, before dying in an unfortunate accident, that he had, with Powell's agreement, sent the crystal skull, along with other, legally cleared Mayan artefacts, to Professor Julian Weatherby at the British Museum, London, with a note informing him that Powell would eventually collect it and would be requesting further information about it. Your job, therefore, is to wait until Powell and his floozy have visited Professor Weatherby, then find out exactly what he told them and what fate has befallen the crystal skull. When you find that out, please get rid of Professor Weatherby – we don't want him talking to anyone else – and then collect the crystal skull, if he still has it, or, if it's back in the hands of Powell and Co., get it off them and then put out their lights. You leave for London tomorrow.'

It was a job that Mai could not refuse, and now, here she was in London, sitting beside Professor Weatherby, having had all of yesterday to enjoy herself – seeing the sights, buying more clothes, sampling the best restaurants – before getting back to work. To this end, she had conscientiously arisen early this morning and caught a taxi to Molly Beale's hotel. Taking a seat in the lobby while residents were still going into the restaurant for breakfast, she had waited patiently, chain-smoking cigarettes and offering a chilling, off-putting stare to all who glanced at her, until Tom Powell entered the lobby from the street. She recognized Powell from a blurry black-and-white photo taken off the video-film routinely recording the movements of all passengers at the Aeropuerto Internacional security gates. Eventually, when a young blonde woman emerged from the hotel's restaurant to greet Powell, speaking with an American accent, Mai knew that she had to be Molly Beale. Thus, when Powell and Beale left the hotel and commenced their walk to the British Museum, Mai knew exactly who she was following.

When they entered the museum, she followed them in. She lost them temporarily when they were escorted into an area forbidden to the general public, but she picked them up again when they emerged from that same area with the grey-haired, bearded Englishman, whom Mai could only assume was Professor Weatherby. Right now, the professor was still sitting beside her, chewing on the last of his sandwich and, when not glancing furtively, helplessly, at her, pretending to read his newspaper. He looked like an easy mark.

Mai waited until the professor had finished his sandwich and was sipping his beer while casting surreptitious glances at her. To hold his attention, she kept crossing and recrossing her fabulous legs, and eventually, when she sensed that he was already fantasizing about her, she turned towards him, as if to reach into her shoulderbag, now resting on the seat beside her, and deliberately knocked her glass over. When the drink spilled from the overturned glass and splashed onto her dress where it fell between her crossed thighs, she let out a girlish cry of despair and let her hands, with their exquisite fingers, flutter helplessly, as if in search of a napkin. Unable to find one, being a typical helpless female, she raised her gorgeous eyes pleadingly to the professor, and he promptly leaned sideways, to pass her his napkin.

'Oh, thank you,' Mai said. Uncrossing her legs, she dabbed delicately at the slight stain on her dress, pressing the damp patch down between her thighs, thus making the dress tighten across both legs. Then, while the professor was staring wide-eyed at those legs, Mai giggled like an embarrassed schoolgirl, and placed the damp napkin back on the table. Turning back to the professor, breathing nervously, therefore deeply, thrusting her breasts out, she gave the professor her most heavenly, though supposedly embarrassed, smile. 'God,' she said, 'what a silly thing to do. I feel such a fool. But thank you. That was kind of you.'

''Not at all,' Professor Weatherby said.

Mai sighed, breathed deeply, and stretched her body, once more thrusting out her breasts, then smiled again and shook her head ruefully, letting her long hair spill down her back like a shimmering black shawl. She fluttered her eyelashes a couple of times, spread her legs slightly to glance down at the small stain – which was now situated in the cleft between her thighs, precisely where the dress had tightened sexily across them – then giggled again, and said, 'Oh, well, it's not *that* bad. I suppose I'll just have to stay here for a while, until this stain dries out.'

The professor nodded agreement, but was too shy to speak, so Mai sighed again, then reached into her bag for a cigarette. She also groped around in vain for a lighter, then shook her head and exclaimed softly, 'Damn!' Smiling girlishly at the professor, though giving him the full effects of her luminous brown gaze, she added, 'I'm not getting anything right today. Now I've forgotten my lighter. Do you happen to smoke?'

'A pipe,' Professor Weatherby replied, 'though never in public, since most

people hate it. But I *do* have my box of matches.'
Pleased, Mai smiled at him, licked her luscious lips, slid the cigarette between them, then leaned closer to the professor, her breasts practically touching him as her coat fell open, to let him light the cigarette for her. As he did so, his eyes were glued to her lips and they had a glazed look. Mai inhaled, which forced her breasts out farther, then she sat back again, though managing, in so doing, to inch slightly nearer to her new friend.
'Thank you,' she said.
'Not at all,' the professor said, placing his box of matches back into his pocket. Then, feeling more confident, he asked, 'Are you a tourist, by any chance?'
Mai nodded and brushed the hair from one eye with languid, long-nailed fingers. 'Yes,' she said. 'I just arrived yesterday. It's a wonderful city.'
'You've never been here before?'
'No. But I've wanted to come here for years. Now, at last, here I am.'
She crossed her left leg over her right and the dress inched up her thigh, making the professor's eyes widen even more before he realized what was happening and graciously looked away. By the time he did so, however, Mai had moved even closer to him and was staring steadily, admiringly, at him, like a young girl on her first date.
'You're here alone?' the professor asked.
'Yes, that's the worst part. I was supposed to come with my father, a bank executive in Bangkok, but his business here was cancelled at the last moment and so he sent me on alone, rather than disappoint me. Of course, I like it in a certain way – he's normally far too protective – but it's difficult when one doesn't know anyone. I mean, I really haven't travelled all that much, and I'm shy of entering places on my own.'
'You speak wonderful English,' the professor said.
'Do I? I'm so pleased. I was educated in an English convent in Bangkok, which is why I speak the way I do. And, of course, most of my father's acquaintances are in business and speak mostly English.'
'Your father must be well off.'
Mai nodded. 'He is. I suppose that's why I'm overprotected. I always had English nannies, and later, when I was in the convent, the nuns were rather strict. So being here, I feel quite inexperienced, though I think it's good for me.'

‘I’m sure it is,’ the professor said, visibly warming to her for reasons both paternal and licentious. ‘Can I buy you a drink?’

Mai acted hesitant, as if pondering the proprieties of this delicate social situation. She glanced down at the stain on her dress, pressed it lightly with her fingertips, thus tightening the dress across her thighs even more, and finally, smiling, offering her innocent trust, she said, ‘Well, since I can’t leave until this stain has dried, I suppose I might as well have another drink. Yes, that *would* be nice, thanks.’

Two hours later, when the professor had downed three more pints of beer and Mai had accepted some more Campari- and-sodas, they were sitting close together, no longer inhibited, talking with a great deal of what the professor, at least, thought was encouraging intimacy. While conversing, Mai repeatedly giggled and let her hand come to rest on the professor’s wrist, as if doing it unconsciously, perhaps because of the alcohol, and the professor responded by doing the same to her in an avuncular fashion. Finally, when the professor had clearly forgotten that he was supposed to be back at work, Mai giggled like a naughty schoolgirl and confessed to her secret sin.

‘Oh, dear,’ she said, ‘now that we know each other, I suppose I should confess at last.’

‘Confess what?’ the professor asked, intrigued.

Mai giggled again, shyly covered her mouth with her hand, then removed the hand to let him see her flawless teeth, framed by lush lips.

‘I really can’t!’

‘Please do.’

‘Well… Alright, then,’ she said. ‘Actually, it’s no accident that I have an interest in the ancient Mayans and now find myself now sitting beside this lovely professor who works in the antiquities department of the British Museum. In fact, I saw your photograph in the catalogue of the Mayan exhibition and was struck by something in your appearance.’ She shook her head from side to side, giggling again, as if deeply embarrassed by her own words. ‘Don’t ask me! I don’t know what it was. I just saw something in your face that I seemed to recognize, and so I desperately wanted to meet you, to talk about the Mayans. Then, shortly after, when I saw you coming out of the museum with that young couple, I could hardly believe my eyes – or my good luck. So I have to confess…’ Again, she covered her mouth with her hand, ostensibly to stifle a giggle, only continuing when she had seemingly

managed to control herself. ‘So I have to confess that, bold as it may seem, when you parted from the young couple at the gate and then entered this pub, I couldn’t resist the temptation to follow you in and somehow arrange to meet you – which I did in the end… Now isn’t that terrible?’

The professor responded by leaning closer to her and patting the back of her hand, which now happened to be resting on his knee, the long-nailed fingers pressing gently, distractedly, as if the ravishing though seemingly immature young creature hardly knew, in her innocence, that she was doing it.

‘No, it isn’t terrible,’ the professor said. ‘It’s my pleasure, I’m sure.’

‘Anyway,’ Mai said, now practically breathing into the professor’s ear and occasionally lowering her head onto his shoulder, letting her jet-black scented hair tumble over him, as if she was drunk and about to fall asleep, ‘who *were* they? Friends or relatives?’

‘Just a couple interested in Mayan antiquities,’ the professor replied, reaching out without thinking to stroke Mai’s hair and run his hand down to her spine. ‘They wanted some information.’

‘About what?’ Mai asked sleepily, as if just making small conversation.

‘Oh, just some old artefact,’ the professor said, placing his index finger under Mai’s chin to raise her head and look into her dreamy eyes. ‘Nothing important.’

‘So what did they want to know?’

The professor smiled tenderly at her, breathing into her lovely face, then lowered his gaze from her eyes to her lips, which were opened ever so slightly, letting him see her pink tongue. ‘Frankly, my dear – and please don’t take offence – I spoke to the couple in confidence, and don’t feel I should break it.’

Mai pouted, disappointed, then gently poked her tongue out. The professor was mesmerized by that tongue as it trailed over her full, deliciously moist, upper lip.

‘Well,’ he said, breathing heavily and flushed more than he should have been, but clearly not wanting to disappoint her, ‘I suppose it hardly matters, what with you not being in the business and just here on a visit…’ Mai’s fingers were stroking his burning thigh in a touchingly innocent though certainly exciting manner. ‘They came to collect a crystal skull and obtain some information about it. I told them what they wanted to know, and then they left with the skull. That’s all it was, dear.’

‘A crystal skull?’ Mai said. ‘How fascinating! So what did they want to know?’
‘Oh, just some rubbish, dear.’
Realizing that the professor was still reluctant to discuss confidential matters, and was, indeed, becoming obsessed with the possibility of possessing her, Mai deliberately dropped her head onto his shoulder, seductively squeezed his upper thigh, and murmured huskily, ‘Oh, dear, I believe I’m drunk. I think I’m going to pass out.’
‘Good God, don’t do that, pet!’
‘I think I’d better go back to my hotel now. Don’t you?’
‘You can’t possibly go back alone in this state.’
‘It’s alright. I’ll get a taxi.’
‘You still can’t go back alone in this state. You’d better let me go with you.’
Mai sighed and wearily raised her head to give him a grateful smile. ‘Oh, would you? You’re so sweet.’
‘Come, my dear, hold on to me.’
More drunk than was Mai, though he wasn’t to know that, Professor Weatherby stood up with her, placed his arm around her waist, and led her out of the pub, to catch a taxi. Twenty minutes later, they were in Mai’s room in the Savoy Hotel, where (having been excited by the feel of her lying against him in the taxi, the skirt high up her thighs, her breasts pressing against his chest as she seemingly slept on his shoulder) the professor stretched out on the double bed beside her, still wearing his suit, and with Mai’s leather bag resting upon the pillow just above his head.
The professor seduced Mai – or at least he thought he was doing so. He could scarcely believe that he was doing it – being a respectable married man with a loving wife and two good children, an academic of some standing, not *au fait* in worldly matters – but before he quite grasped how it had happened, her coat had been removed, her blouse had been unbuttoned, and her hand was pressing his hand onto her bared breast while she ground her hot belly against him.
‘Just tell me,’ she whispered, sensually licking his ear, inflaming his hardened organ with her restless writhing. ‘I like to talk while I’m doing it. It’s just something to talk about. What did that couple want to know and what did you tell them?’
‘Oh, God,’ the professor groaned, pressing his lips to her golden breasts,

licking the nipples, gasping for breath, ‘they just wanted to know a lot of nonsense that I couldn’t really help with, so now they’re off to see an eccentric old woman who’ll probably tell them what they want to hear… Oh, God, Mai! Oh, my love!’

‘Yes, darling,’ Mai crooned. ‘Oh, Julian, that feels so good, so sexy, so exciting… What woman, darling? I’ve got to talk, dearest. Who were they going to see?’

Professor Weatherby gasped and groaned. He was now licking Mai’s navel. She was stretching out below him, one hand tugging his shirt open, the other flung in seeming abandonment above her tousled head, almost touching the leather bag on the pillow. ‘Oh, God, Mai, you’re so beautiful! It was Lady… *Christ...* Barratt… God, Lord, you feel wonderful! You’re sublime, I’ve never known… *No*, Mai! Oh, God , *yes*… They were going to see… God, Mai, *yes*… Lady… what’s her name? *Barratt-Whit*e! Yes, Lady Barratt-White. Another eccentric. Claims to have found the crystal skull that’s presently in the Museum of Mankind… Ah, God, Mai! Oh, God help me, that’s wonderful, my precious. Don’t stop, Mai! *Don’t stop*!’

‘Mmmm,’ Mai crooned. ‘Lady Barratt-White. Does she live here in London?’

‘Yes, Mai! *Don’t stop, Mai*!’

Mai stretched her fabulous body, raising her belly to his face, and as his tongue frantically slipped into her navel, she groped inside the leather bag on the pillow and finally found what she wanted. It was a hypodermic syringe, filled with poison, ready to use. She simply prodded the plastic cap with a sharp fingernail, and it silently popped off. She lowered the needle towards the professor as he rolled, groaning and gasping, between her legs. Then, as he cried out, ‘God, I want you!’, she plunged it into his neck.

Weatherby’s convulsions were not caused by orgasm, but by the spasms of death.

When he was dead, Mai kicked him off the bed and heard him thud to the floor. She then stood up, adjusted her clothing, fixed her hair and make-up. Finally, when she had picked up her suitcase, she left the room. She went down to the lobby and checked out (having signed in under an assumed name), and then, feeling pleased with herself, she caught a taxi to another hotel.

She was not finished yet.

Chapter Sixteen

Having phoned first for an appointment, Tom and Molly were greeted at Lady Barratt-White's front door by a maid almost as old as her mistress. The latter was, according to the data collected by Tom, eighty-seven years old this year. She lived in decaying elegance in a large apartment in Knightsbridge, not too far from Harrod's, and she received them in an expansive living room filled with Victorian furniture and an impressive collection of antiques from many parts of the world. She was seated on a fading floralprint sofa under a large framed black-and-white photograph of herself with her husband, the legendary explorer Roland Barratt-White, obviously taken when they were excavating the lost city of Lubaantun in the jungles of British Honduras, now known as Belize, in Central America. White-haired, her face deeply lined, she was wearing a loose-flowing Victorian floral-print dress that blended so perfectly with the sofa that it made her seem almost transparent, rather like a ghost.

The maid, also white-haired, wearing a black dress and white apron, stooping low as she walked, or, rather, inched forward step by painful step, served tea and biscuits, then departed, leaving them free to talk.

'I must say,' Lady Barratt-White said, sounding terribly posh, though her voice had the shakiness of old age, 'that it was pleasant to hear you on the telephone, Mr Powell – the perfect diction and proper grammar – instead of what I usually receive: occultists and flying-saucer fanatics with their working-class accents and vile colloquialisms. So what can I tell you?'

'We're in possession of a crystal skull,' Tom said, and then nodded to Molly, who carefully withdrew the gleaming skull from her shoulder-bag and set it on the coffee table between them. 'And I wondered if you could have a good look at it and tell me if it's the same as the one reportedly found by you in British Honduras.'

The old lady stared at the gleaming, macabre skull, and then raised her rheumy, though still perceptive, gaze to Tom.

' *Reportedly*?' she queried sharply. 'Don't disappoint me, Mr Powell. Surely you're not another of those tiresome creatures who has only come here to insinuate that I've been lying for most of my life. I found my crystal skull during the excavation of that lost city and my father swore to the day he

died that he had not planted it there for me to find.'

'I'm sorry,' Tom said. 'I didn't mean to insinuate anything. I merely wanted to hear the story from you personally, as I think it would help.'

Nodding, the old lady leaned forward to run her blueveined, trembling hands over the crystal skull on the table. She studied it silently for some time, and then sat back again, breathing heavily. Her eyes flitted from Molly to Tom, and then settled on the latter. She had a steady, bold gaze.

'Your skull is genuine,' she said. 'There is absolutely no doubt about it. Where did you find it?'

'It was buried in the platform of the Shrine on the summit of the Great Pyramid at Chichén Itzá. It must have been there for centuries.'

The old woman nodded again. 'The second skull, the lost skull, was known to have been buried somewhere in the land of the ancient Mayans, *somewhere* in Central America. What you have there is undoubtedly that lost skull – the so-called Rose Quartz Skull. You're a very lucky couple.'

'Is it the same as the one you found?' Molly asked. 'Yes, young lady, it is.'

'Can you remind me of how you found your skull?'

Tom asked, feigning ignorance in order to receive the unvarnished truth.

'I can,' Lady Barratt-White said, sinking back into the sofa, into the floral-print pattern, as if about to disappear into it. 'The word *Lubaantun* means "place of the fallen stones", and the existence of the lost city of Lubaantun, a true collection of fallen stones, was first reported to the British colonial government office in the late nineteenth century by inhabitants of the Toledo settlement, located near the site we excavated. We were not the first there, of course. The Governor of British Honduras initially commissioned Dr Thomas Gann to investigate the site. He began his excavations in 1903 and published his report in England the following year. In that report he stated that he had managed to excavate around the central plaza and concluded from his findings that the lost city had been very large indeed, with a substantial population. About ten years later, in 1915, Professor M. Merwin of Harvard University, picked up where Dr Gann had left off, and, after further excavations, uncovered a ball court and three carved stone markers depicting men playing ball games. My father arrived at the site almost ten years after that. Included in his expedition were the same Dr Gann, who had first opened the site nearly two decades earlier, Lady Fiona

Williams, my father's close companion and financier, and, finally, me, then only fourteen years old.'

The old lady fell silent, lost in her memories. She glanced back over her shoulder at the large framed photo on the wall behind her, as if using it to jolt her fading memory. The grainy monochrome photo showed the teenage girl and her famous explorer father, both wearing old-fashioned shirts, slacks, and floppy hats to protect them from the sun, both standing in the ruins and rubble of the excavation site in British Honduras, surrounded by beaming Mayan workers. Sighing with sadness for the loss of her best times, the old woman turned to face them again.

'We worked there for three years,' she continued, 'digging, sifting, and collating, gradually uncovering various parts of the ancient ruins. Then, on my seventeenth birthday, when I was helping to dig around a collapsed altar, I saw something glinting in the rubble. When I ordered my Mayan workers to dig it out, removing the last of the heavy stone slabs that were covering it, what I had in my possession was a life-sized crystal skull in perfect condition – the very same skull that is now on display in the Museum of Mankind, right here in London.'

'And this occurred on your seventeenth birthday?' Tom asked sceptically.
'I know! I know!' the old woman snapped, shaking her head from side to side in frustration and turning red in the face. Eventually calming down, folding one blue-veined, trembling hand over the other, she coughed to clear her throat, and continued. 'It was my seventeenth birthday, believe me. And that *is* an unfortunate
truth, since I'm convinced that it was this simple fact that led to all the stories about my father having planted the skull there just for me to find – either as a birthday present or to gain himself notoriety. But that's nonsense, Mr Powell. Believe me, it's rubbish. I repeat that to the very day he died, my father swore that this was not so – that he had never seen the crystal skull before and that the find was genuine.'
'What happened when you found it?' Molly asked.
The old lady picked up her cup and saucer, which rattled together in her trembling hands. She sipped some tea, then gently placed her tea cup back on the saucer and put both on the table. Leaning back, she gazed at the ceiling and into her distant past.
'The Mayan workers were ecstatic when they saw it. Some of them actually

performed a ritualistic dance around it and others bowed low to worship it. They stopped working on the instant and, instead, erected a crude altar to support the skull and insisted that they were going to pay homage to it every hour of every day. Realizing that work on the excavation would grind to a halt if the skull remained on the site, my father presented it to the chief of the local Mayans, telling them to keep it in the settlement. After that, when they had the skull in their possession, the Mayans returned to work. A few months later, when our expedition was preparing to return to England – this was in 1927 – the Mayans gave the skull back to my father as a sign of gratitude for all that he had done for them. So we returned to England, bringing the crystal skull with us, and my father kept it in our home in London until his death in 1959. He left it to me in his Will, and that, despite all rumours to the contrary, is how it came to be in my possession.'

'And eventually you donated it to the Museum of Mankind,' Tom said.

'Yes. I was growing old – as you can see, now I'm truly *very* old – and so I thought it should have a proper home, which I trust it now has.'

Tom glanced at Molly and saw that she was sitting up straight in her tall-backed Victorian chair, holding her cup and saucer in a steady hand and sipping more effetely than was her custom. Realizing that tight blue jeans and dirtsmeared tee-shirts were not quite the thing for a young lady to be wearing when visiting the likes of Lady BarrattWhite, let alone wining and dining in the kind of places that he was accustomed to, Tom had taken Molly on a shopping spree along the better end of Oxford Street, encouraging her to select clothes that were neither too adolescent nor too sophisticated. Right now, she was looking, if not quite sophisticated, then certainly welldressed and girlishly attractive in a thick bouclé shirt, cream-coloured, shaped satin blouse, dark trousers pleated into an elasticated waist-band, and low-heeled black shoes. The outfit showed off her fine figure without being obvious.

'Did you learn anything about the crystal skull,' Molly asked intelligently, 'while it was in your possession?'

'No. In fact, I made a point of *not* trying to learn anything about it because I believe that the two skulls, yours and mine, the only two *genuine* skulls, can haunt those who look too deeply into them, and have powers that can be unleashed in some as yet mysterious manner. Indeed, this is why I gave mine to the Museum of Mankind. And even there, so I am told, the skull is said to haunt those who clean the building. Indeed, whether right or wrong, the

members of staff are so convinced of this, they have insisted that each evening the crystal skull be covered with a black cloth – presumably to ensure that they don't accidentally look into its dreadful eye-sockets and possibly become mesmerized by them.'

'I saw stars in our crystal skull,' Molly said, speaking with more care than normal, avoiding swear words, clearly determined not to offend the aristocratic old dear.

'Stars?'

'Yes, stars. I looked into it and was hypnotized by it and saw stars all around me.'

'Well, that's certainly possible. I *have* received many letters and phone calls over the years from people, highly intelligent, academic, to whom I lent the crystal skull for the purposes of research. A lot of those people – indeed *most* of those people – had serious problems in conducting their research, because the skull affected them strangely. Some saw what you saw, others were hypnotized as you were, and still others became prone to tormenting hallucinations, suffered physical illnesses, or even became suicidal. For this reason, most of my researchers returned the skull to me before they could complete their work on it. One can only handle the crystal skulls for so long, before they start playing tricks on one.'

'What about flying saucers?' Tom asked.

'What about them, young man?'

Tom recounted his and Molly's adventures, beginning with their discovery of the dead men in Chichén Itzá and concluding with the saucer-shaped light that had seemed to come to their rescue on the road to the airport in Mexico City. When he fell silent, Lady Barratt-White stared thoughtfully at him, then sighed and nodded.

'I believe you,' she said. 'The powers of the skull were obviously protecting you, even as they were turning against the others. Why this is so, I can't say, though I would speculate that you're a good man with honourable intentions, whereas the others were mercenary gangsters, intent on using the skull for evil purposes. That may explain it.'

Tom felt a sliver of fear trickle down his spine as he thought of what he had already experienced because of the crystal skull and what might lie in wait for him in the near future. When he glanced at Molly and saw how pretty she looked, even with her prominent nose and slightly hardened, street-wise

features, he realized that he felt something for her, and was, despite his frequent frustrations with her, deeply concerned for her. He and she were in this together, and now it seemed almost preordained. Wondering just where this was leading, he turned back to Lady Barratt-White, who, blending perfectly with the sofa, seemed even more like a transparent ghost.

'Did your father also believe that the skulls had magical powers?' Tom asked.

'Most certainly,' Lady Barratt-White replied.

'What made him think that?'

'He had always been convinced that the original owners of the skulls were early Mayans – a most mysterious race, widely believed to have magical powers and to have practised esoteric rites. When he saw how the local Mayans behaved when we uncovered that crystal skull during our excavations of Lubaantun – how they seemed to recognise it and worshipped it – he took this as proof that the skull originated with that earlier, mysterious race of Mayans. Finally, because those early Mayans were said to have possessed magical powers, he came convinced that the two genuine crystal skulls – his own, and the legendary, longlost Rose Quartz Skull – could, when working in tandem, reproduce the magical powers of that ancient race.'

'Did you say *in tandem*?'

'Yes, young man.'

'What gave your father that idea?'

The old lady picked up her tea cup, gazed down into it, and saw that it was empty. Sighing, she placed it back on its saucer, then smiled sweetly at Tom.

'Mayan hieroglyphics found in my father's private collection of rare parchments suggest that the two crystal skulls were deliberately separated and hidden by the high priests of that ancient race with the intention that they would one day, in the distant future, be found and returned to their source. Why they did this we cannot yet say, but certainly the two skulls have been found – one by me, the other by you – and so they must soon be returned to their source.'

'But what source is that?' Molly asked, trying to sound well-spoken and academic.

'According to my father's reading of the hieroglyphics, they must be returned – and I quote verbatim – *to that majestic and long-hidden city that is linked to the stars* – unquote.' The old lady nodded affirmatively, her grey head

bobbing in the shadows that fell over the floral-print sofa and her floral-print dress, again making her seem faintly transparent. Thankfully, she then leaned forward a little, letting Tom and Molly see her face again. She looked terribly serious. ‘And until the skulls are returned to their source,’ she said, her voice trembling and ethereal, ‘the Earth’s so-called hauntings will not cease.’

There was silence for a moment, only broken by the regular ticking of the grandfather clock, deeply varnished and decorated with gold-leaf motifs, which stood like a sentinel by the door.

‘Hauntings?’ Tom eventually asked, to break the silence. ‘What hauntings would those be?’

The old woman shrugged. ‘Ghosts, evil spirits, various inexplicable calamities – yes, even flying saucers and extraterrestrials – everything that bewilders us or haunts us. Such manifestations will either come to an end or their mystery will be solved when the crystal skulls are returned to their source. Meanwhile, those who would seek to profit from the skulls will come to a bad end.’

Tom and Molly glanced at one another, both trying to be sceptical, yet both feeling uneasy. In that mood, Tom glanced around the museum-like living room, at the many antiques collected from the four corners of the globe, found in various excavations, some of them almost as macabre as the crystal skulls. He thought of the great mysteries of human history, and saw only a black hole.

‘To get back to their source,’ he said finally, breaking another lengthy silence. ‘You mentioned a city linked to the stars. What could that mean?’

‘According to the hieroglyphics, an ancient bridge between the east and the west – the legendary City of the Sun. In other words…’

‘Tiahuanaco!’ Molly exclaimed triumphantly, recalling what she and Tom had been told by Professor Juarez.

‘Of course!’ Tom said, also excited. ‘The holy city on the southern shore of Lake Titicaca in Peru. The site of the legendary Sun Gate.’

Lady Barratt-White smiled slightly and nodded, signifying agreement. ‘So may I ask what you intend doing about all this?’

‘Well…’ Too confused to answer immediately, Tom hesitated and glanced instinctively at Molly. Turning back to the old lady, he said, ‘Well, I don’t know. I’m not sure. Right now, I only want to solve the mystery of the skulls – find precisely what they are and where they came from.’

‘And this need obsesses you?’
‘Yes,’ Tom confessed, without thinking. ‘It’s come to obsess me.’
‘It’s obsessed me for years,’ the old lady said. ‘Alas, while all of my researchers were being foiled in *their* attempts to unlock the mystery, I grew too old to do anything about it myself. You’ve come to me as a godsend.’
‘What?’ From Molly.
‘Pardon?’ From Tom.
The old lady smiled sweetly at both of them, but then turned back to Tom. ‘You’re an honourable man, Mr Powell. I can see it in your face. You may have made a few mistakes in your life, but you’re one of the pure in heart. That’s why the skull has been protecting you while destroying the others. It senses the goodness in your heart and the purity of your intentions. You have a mission in life, young man, though you may not have realized it; and that mission is tied to the problem that’s concerned me for years.’
‘What’s that?’ Molly asked.
The old woman gazed steadily at her, assessing her, and eventually accepting her. ‘As it was me and my father who removed that crystal skull from where the early Mayans had buried it, and as that skull, like the other, must be returned to its source, I feel personally responsible for finding out precisely where both skulls came from and then returning them to that sacred source. However, as I am now too old to do this, you must do it for me. You can do it because you’re both pure in heart and the skulls will protect you.’
Tom glanced at Molly and saw the wonder in her face; the realization that this old lady thought highly of her, which no one, apart from him, of course, had ever done before. His heart went out to her, combined with guilt at his own omissions, yet he knew that he’d come as far as he wanted to go, that this was now far too dangerous. He was not pure in heart, as the old lady seemed to think; in fact, he was a pure coward at heart, and now his fears were returning.
‘It will cost a lot of money,’ Lady Barratt-White said, ‘but I’m dying and I have money to burn and want to put it to good use. I’ll finance all your trips, pay for anything you need, then finally pay you a handsome fee, if you finish this for me.’
‘I’m not in need of money,’ Tom said promptly.
‘*I* am!’ Molly declared. ‘Excuse me, ma’am,’ she went on, turning to Lady Barratt-White, ‘for sounding mercenary, but I’ve never had real money in my

life, and so this means a lot to me.'
'I know that, my dear. I knew it before you came here. I've been waiting for you both to come along, though I didn't know precisely who you'd be. But I've seen you in my dreams, felt you deep in my heart, and I knew that you would come here to resolve this mystery and let me go to my grave in peace. Do this for me and you'll be richly rewarded. Why not discuss it between you?'
Obviously understanding that they were in conflict, she stood up laboriously, balanced herself on her walking-stick, and, smiling sweetly, left the room. 'I'll be back in a few minutes,' she said as she closed the door behind her.
Tom and Molly stared silently at each other, neither smiling at all. The silence stretched out forever.
'God damn you,' Molly said eventually, to break the silence. 'I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna go on a real fancy trip and get paid handsomely for it. Then, when I get back, I'm gonna get paid even more and have a very nice future.'
'*If* you get back,' Tom said.
'I'm a born survivor,' Molly retorted.
'You can't do this, Molly. You'll be exploiting that dear woman. She's obviously as mad as a hatter, and you're taking advantage. I think it's shameless. Disgusting.'
'Mad as a hatter, Tom? Is that what you really think? No, it's not! You don't think that at all. You know she's as sane as we are, but you don't want to admit it. Yes, Tom, you believed her. Every last word. You're just scared and now you're tryin' to say she's mad 'cause that lets you off the hook. Well, to hell with it, get out! I'll do the rest of it myself. I'll take the two skulls back to where they belong – which should satisfy you, at least – and then that old bird will pay me for my labours and I can live my own life. But I'm goin' and then I'm gonna come back to see the shame in your face.'
Tom knew it was the truth and he could have hated her for it, but when he thought of what she might have to brave in the future, he knew that he could not desert her now, no matter how scared he was. Besides, she had challenged his manhood, and he couldn't let that pass.
'Alright,' he said, 'I'll do it. I think we're both crazy, but I'll do it. Now finish your tea.'
After staring haughtily at him, Molly picked up her cup and saucer, her little finger raised, and finished off the last of her tea. She was just setting the cup

and saucer down when Lady Barratt-White came back into the room, hobbling unsteadily with the aid of her walking-stick, to sit again on the sofa.
‘Well, have you decided?’ she asked.
‘Yes,’ Tom said, ‘we’ll do it.’
‘Excellent,’ Lady Barratt-White said. ‘Just get in touch with me when you need anything – plane tickets, money, introductions – and I’ll do the necessary.’ Looking flushed with excitement, she waved her hands before her face. ‘Oh, dear, I’m so thrilled! Alas, my heart is racing too fast, so I must have a lie-down. Is there anything else, dears?’
‘Yes,’ Tom said. ‘If the crystal skulls work in tandem, we have to take both of them with us. Do you think you can persuade the curator of the Museum of Mankind to hand over the other one?’
‘I’m *sure* I can,’ Lady Barratt-White said. ‘I shall phone him as soon as I’ve had my sleep, and tell him you’ll be calling in to collect it. Say…?’
‘Tomorrow afternoon,’ Molly said. ‘That should give him time to remove it from its pedestal and wrap it up. So let’s make it late afternoon.’
‘Wise thinking, my dear. And now I really must…’
The old lady started rising from the sofa, wanting to show them to the door, but Tom, a gentleman first and foremost, motioned for her to remain where she was.
‘We’ll let ourselves out,’ he said as he stood up, indicating that Molly should do the same.
‘Thank you, dear. You’re too kind.’
Molly stood up as well. She glanced at Tom, then smiled at the old lady and walked around the low table to shake her hand.
‘Thanks a million,’ she said, then she placed the crystal skull back into her shoulder-bag, and led Tom out of the apartment.
‘Goodbye, dears!’ Lady Barratt-White called out to them as they were closing the door.
It was raining outside.

Chapter Seventeen

‘Darling,’ she said sarcastically into her cell phone, speaking to Lu Thong in Bangkok from her new location in the Ritz Hotel. ‘It’s me, your beloved Mai Suphar, speaking from London, where it’s raining cats and dogs. How

are you, my revered lord and master?'

'In a good mood, are you?' Lu Thong replied, his voice sleepily sensual from drugs, and, no doubt, some other diabolical form of self-indulgence.
'Yes,' Mai said, 'I am.'

She was stretched out on her large double bed, wearing a dressing gown of sky-blue Thai silk, her delicate feet in furred slippers, her precious body warmed in the British cold by an electric blanket purchased personally from Harrod's, and was idly scanning that morning's edition of the London *Evening Standard*, the first edition of the day, while holding the cell phone to one ear.

The front-page story in the newspaper was about the mysterious death of the British Museum's leading authority on antiquities, Professor Julian Weatherby, who had been found lying on the floor beside the bed in a room in the Savoy Hotel, dead from an apparent heart seizure. Neither the professor's bereaved wife nor any of his associates could explain what he had been doing in a room in the Savoy, let alone at that time in the afternoon, though it was known that the room had been taken by a female tourist who had signed in under the name of Anna Chow from Singapore, Malaysia. Ms Chow had checked out some time before the body was discovered, and, the story's writer hinted, might simply have fled in embarrassment after Professor Weatherby, almost sixty years old, had his heart seizure during sexual intercourse. The Metropolitan Police were still trying to trace Ms Anna Chow, but so far no leads had come up. Though there was no suspicion of foul play, the case remained open.

'Mmmm,' Mai purred with satisfaction into her cell phone, stirred by a rush of sexual heat by being reminded of her terminal grappling with the late Professor Weatherby.

'You're definitely in good mood,' Lu Thong said, audibly inhaling, probably sniffing up a line of cocaine. 'So what's brought it on? Have you good news for *me*?'

'Yes,' Mai replied, reaching out to the bedside cabinet for her glass of bubbling Dom Perignon champagne, sipping it and then resting the glass on her flat belly. 'As requested, I tracked down Professor Weatherby, had a lengthy discussion with him, and ascertained from him that your Mr Tom Powell and his American tart, Molly Beale, are indeed in possession of the crystal skull. It was sent to the professor, as you rightfully suspected, and

they paid him a visit, squeezed some info' out of him, and then left, taking the crystal skull with them.'

'Do you know what the professor told them?' Lu Thong asked, his voice still sleepily sensual, though Mai knew that he was just as alert and deadly as ever.

'Yes,' Mai said. 'It wasn't much, but it was all that I need. He told me that they'd asked him a lot of crazy questions…'

'About the magical powers of the skull.'

'Correct… and that they had told him they were going to visit Lady Barratt-White, to find out more about it.'

'Lady who?'

'Barratt-White.'

'That name rings a bell.'

'She's the ageing daughter of Ronald Barratt-White, the famous, or notorious, explorer who discovered the crystal skull now on display in the Museum of Mankind.'

'Ah, yes,' Lu Thong said. 'And, in fact, it was the daughter, now Lady Barratt-White, who actually found the skull. Very good, Mai. So what's happening now?'

'I haven't finished yet,' Mai said.

'So sorry, my dark angel. Please continue.'

'Knowing that Powell and Co were going to see Lady Barratt-White, who is now nearly ninety and receives regular visits from social workers, I bought some downmarket clothes in that ghastly Camden Market – motheaten pants and jumper, a pair of shoes that looked like industrial boots, an old football scarf, and a hideous beret – and then, resembling your classic ethnic lesbian social worker, paid the old girl a visit before our friends could get there.'

'Beautiful,' Lu Thong said.

'Lady Barratt-White is so old, she's nearly blind, so I flashed my *old Carte Orange* from Paris, which she mistook for a Westminster Council identity card, and told her I was the new health inspector and wanted to check that the old-age pensioners in my care were being treated okay. She invited me in and we had a good talk and I made her a strong cup of tea. When her weak bladder gave out and she had to go to the toilet, as I knew she would, I planted a bug on her landline phone. When she returned, I kindly washed the dishes for her, and then took my leave.'

‘Pure genius, Mai, but from where did you listen in to her subsequent conversations?’
‘You gave me some names, remember?’
‘Ah, yes, of course. Including the names of some bent Scotland Yard detectives who once specialized in high-tech surveillance of diverse insurgents in Northern Ireland.’
‘Exactly,’ Mai said. ‘So they sat outside the old bird’s apartment block in an illegally equipped surveillance van and brought the resultant tapes to me this morning.’
‘I hear sweet music, my pet.’
‘Sweet it was. Mr Powell and Molly Beale duly paid their visit to Lady Barratt-White and had a good conversation with her. To paraphrase, she’s financed them to get hold of the other crystal skull, the one in the Museum of Mankind, and, once they have it in their possession, to take both skulls back to their original source.’
‘Which is?’
‘At this point, it appears to be the holy city on the southern shore of Peru – the site of the legendary Sun Gate.’
‘Is that what they think?’
‘So far,’ Mai said. ‘Naturally, that may change, but so far what they *do* know for certain is that the two crystal skulls can only be fully utilized when they’re used in tandem. So Powell and Beale are now going to try getting their hands on that other crystal skull, and, to this end, they have an appointment with the curator of the Museum of Mankind this afternoon.’
‘How do you know that?’
‘Because we recorded Lady Barratt-White making the appointment and then calling Powell to give him the details. He’ll be seeing the curator of the museum just after the museum closes for the day. That’s perfect for me.’
‘If I were capable of love,’ Lu Thong said, ‘I would love you, my sweet.’
‘Maybe some day,’ Mai said.
Lu Thong chuckled, then trailed off into a silence that lingered for a long time. It was not a complete silence: Mai could hear his distant breathing. He was breathing in and out, very deeply and slowly, inhaling cocaine or some other, possibly even more dangerous, substance, risking his life in order to feel alive, which is all he could do these days. He sighed, as if exhaling the fumes of hell, and then blew her a kiss.

‘I’m so weary,’ he said.
‘You have everything, Lu Thong.’
‘That’s why I’m so weary,’ he said. ‘I’ve had too much too soon. I’m jaded with sex, with money, with Earthly power; and now the only thrill I can imagine is braving the unknown.’
‘You’ve been doing that since childhood,’ Mai said. ‘Living on the edge. You’ve pushed yourself as far as any human being can go, and now, alas, you’ve nothing left to push against.’
‘I’ve got you,’ Lu Thong said.
‘You can’t be sure of that,’ Mai told him.
‘That’s exactly what I mean. I’m so powerful, I don’t even have an enemy who could put me at risk – only you, Mai. You can’t be trusted, you’re absolutely ruthless, you obtain your thrills from causing wreck and ruin – and you’d love to ruin me. I taught you everything you know, and you won’t be happy until you turn those skills against me. You’d orgasm on that, wouldn’t you? It would make you feel transcendent. You’re the only worthy opponent I have left, which is why I adore you… But you’re still not enough.’
‘Then what is, my hero?’
‘The ultimate risk. The only gamble worth the taking. The opportunity to see what lies on the other side of life – and maybe even return from there. That’s why I need the crystal skulls. It is *I* who must return them. Used together, they could release all the powers of heaven and hell. I have to know if that is so. To find out, I must risk all. I have to return the crystal skulls to their source and then see what transpires. So get those two skulls for me, Mai. I don’t care how you do it. Get them for me and then kill Mr Powell and his American floozy.’
‘I will,’ Mai said.
Lu Thong was silent for a moment, though Mai heard his heavy breathing, then he whispered, ‘Ah, God, I am drifting… drifting… drifting away…’ He went out on a lengthy, eerie sigh, and then the line went dead.
Realizing that Lu Thong had drifted into a drugged stupor, Mai switched her phone off and finished her champagne. Licking the last of it from her lips, she rolled off the bed, letting her dressing gown fall to the floor, and then, naked, she went into the bathroom to prepare for the afternoon.
Thirty minutes later, she emerged wearing a grey windcheater with bulging pockets, a dark-green woollen pullover, blue denims and flat, rubber-soled

black shoes. Her long hair was pinned up on her head and covered with a wrap-around scarf. She looked as commonplace as a woman with her beauty possibly could.

Seeing that the rain was lashing down outside, she removed a short-handled umbrella from her suitcase, and then left the room. Once outside the hotel, she remained in the doorway until the uniformed doorman had hailed a taxi for her, and, walking beside her, holding his own umbrella up over her, escorted her to the taxi and closed the door behind her.

'The Museum of Mankind,' Mai said curtly to the driver.

'It's only a five-minute walk from here,' the driver responded.

'Do you want my money or not?' Mai retorted. 'Take the long way around.'

'No skin off *my* nose,' the driver said.

Even the long way around was a fairly short distance, but the dense traffic ensured that the journey took nearly fifteen minutes. Mai enjoyed the trip, settling in and gazing out, seeing the lights of Piccadilly and then Mayfair through the glistening rainfall. It was only five in the afternoon but the evening darkness was falling early because of the heavy rain, with the lights of the streetlamps and shop windows falling over the sidewalks. Already Mai had decided that she liked London a lot and thought she might live here some day; find a nice house in Knightsbridge or Chelsea, and then marry a rich old man whose sudden death from an unexpected heart seizure would seem perfectly natural. A woman could have a good life here, picking her victims up off the streets. London was a glamorous, lonely city, where the missing were rarely missed. Mai thought of Professor Weatherby, of the sexual thrill that his death had given her, and she looked forward to repeating the experience with Mr Tom Powell.

'Here we are,' the driver said.

Looking out, Mai saw the entrance to the Museum of Mankind, drenched and still being lashed by rain. She paid the driver, told him to keep the change, then dashed for the museum without bothering to open her umbrella. Once inside, she strapped the umbrella to her belt and then walked to the reception, where she was warned that the museum would be closing in fifteen minutes.

'That's long enough for me,' Mai said.

Having already been given a map of the museum and informed of the crystal skull's whereabouts, Mai walked up to see where it was on display on one of the landings, at the top of the stairs, gleaming and looking suitably macabre

in the overhead lighting. Satisfied that it was actually still there, she explored the rest of the museum, checking where the doors where, including the emergency exits, and then she wandered around, ignoring the many wonderful exhibits, in search of one of the cleaning women. Taking it for granted that the domestic wing of the building would be on the ground floor, she went back down the stairs just as the attendants were calling out closing time and visitors were surging towards the exit. Fearless as always, Mai simply stayed out of sight, while keeping the exit in view, until she saw an attendant closing the doors behind the last of the visitors.

At that moment, she also saw a woman, obviously working-class and not here for the fun of it, passing around a wooden barrier at the end of the ground-floor hall, and disappearing through the doorway behind it.

Checking that the attendants now gathering around the exit doors to complete their last-minute duties and take their leave were not looking in her direction, Mai padded softly across the brightly-lit exhibition hall and them skirted around the wooden barrier to go through the doorway previously taken by the cleaning lady. The doorway led into a corridor that smelt of a wide variety of detergents, with a series of storage rooms running along both sides. Mai saw the cleaning lady enter one of those rooms, and, still padding quietly on rubber soles, she followed the woman into that room.

The room was filled with buckets, mops, dustpans, brushes, detergents, and all the rest of the woman’s cleaning paraphernalia. As Mai entered, treading as quietly as a mouse, the woman had her back turned to the doorway and was shucking off her overcoat, to put on the coveralls hanging from a hook on one of the walls. The woman didn’t hear a thing when Mai stepped up behind her, withdrawing a length of fine cord from one of the bulging pockets of her windcheater. Stretching the cord taut between both hands, she quickly looped it over the woman’s head and pulled it tight, before the woman knew what was happening.

Mai tugged hard on the cord, crossing it behind the woman’s neck and pressing her knee to the woman’s spine as she jerked even harder. The woman gasped briefly, quivering like a bowstring, bent backwards against Mai’s knee, but then the cord cut deeply into her windpipe and choked the life out of her. She quivered even more violently, but beyond that could not move, and soon her body went limp, started to sag, and then collapsed against Mai. The latter loosened the cord, but kept hold of the dead woman until she

had lowered her gently to the floor and could release her completely.
‘Sweet dreams,’ Mai whispered.
After carefully rolling up the cord and placing it back in her pocket, Mai removed the coveralls from the hook on the wall and put them on over her own clothing. Because she was still wearing her windcheater, the coveralls were tight, but apart from that she felt fine.
Needing a good-sized bag for the transportation of the crystal skull, she looked around the room and saw a large canvas bag hanging from the handles of a wheeled trolley piled high with more cleaning paraphernalia. Smiling, she removed the bag from the trolley and then went to the doorway. Inching her head out, she looked left and right. Seeing no one, she left the room and walked back the way she had come, out through the door at the end of the corridor, back around the wooden barrier, and then across the expansive hall filled with exhibits, only stopping when the entrance/exit doors came into view.
The doors had been closed and all the attendants had gone home, though a security man was sitting in a chair close to the front door. When Mai approached him, he glanced up in surprise, relaxed when he saw her cleaning woman’s coveralls, then frowned when he failed to recognize her, though by then it was too late.
Mai grabbed him by the hair, swiftly jerked his head down, brought her knee up into his face with remarkable speed and brutality, and then, before he could even fall over, she chopped him across the back of the neck with the hardened side of her open hand. The man grunted and started falling, but Mai held him upright, not wanting any noise, then lowered him quietly to the floor.
Reaching into another of her bulging pockets, Mai withdrew a hypodermic syringe of the kind she had used on Professor Weatherby. After glancing back over her shoulder, to ensure that no one was coming, she removed the protective cap from the syringe, then plunged the needle into the side of the unconscious man’s neck. When she removed the needle, the man went into violent convulsions, flapping his arms, kicking his legs, but then he died and was still.
Mai put the cap back on the needle, placed the syringe back into her pocket, picked up the canvas bag, then turned away and went through the doorway, which, according to the map given to her by one of Lu Thong’s informants,

contained the main switches and burglar alarm system.
The informant had not been wrong.
Having been trained in the criminal arts by Lu Thong's best men, Mai knew exactly what she was doing, and did it with speed. Removing an all-purpose knife from one of her bulging pockets, she used a small screwdriver to shortcircuit the electricity, plunging the building into darkness and aborting the burglar-alarm system.
Thankfully, no emergency back-up alarm bells started ringing.
Pleased, though knowing that there were other people still in the building, including other security guards and, possibly, Tom Powell and Molly Beale, Mai wasted no time in removing a torchlight from one of her pockets, turning it on, and making her way up the broad stairs until she came to the crystal skull, which had already been covered in a black cloth. Just to be sure, Mai removed the cloth.
The skull gleamed in the light coming in through the windows, making her think of her bad dreams.
At that moment, she heard the shouting of various men
– probably security guards – echoing around the darkened floors above her.
Being careful to avoid gazing into those gaping eyesockets, she slipped the black cloth back over the crystal skull, removed the skull from its tall pedestal, and carefully placed it inside the canvas bag. She then slung the canvas bag over her shoulder and made her way back down the stairs.
The dead guard still lay on the floor near the main doors, but otherwise the ground floor was deserted.
Satisfied, Mai made her way back across the darkened ground-floor hallway, guided by her torchlight, and then into the corridor at the rear. Once there, she started running, holding tightly to the canvas bag, shining the torchlight on the walls, until she saw the dully gleaming steel bars of an emergency exit. She tried to open the doors, but they were locked, though even that didn't stop her.
Moving swiftly, she took a small package from one of her bulging pockets. It was a simple, home-made bomb, consisting of Semtex explosive, an electric initiator, and a blasting cap with bridge wire, wired to a remote-control firing device.
Using black masking tape, Mai stuck the bomb to the lock of the door, ran the detonating wire out about fifteen feet along the corridor, attached it to the

remote-control device, and then pressed the button.
It was not a massive explosion, but it certainly sounded so in the confined space of the dark corridor, almost deafening Mai and dazzling her with a jagged sheet of flashing light that made her close her eyes briefly. When she opened her eyes again, she saw billowing smoke and the scorched, mangled lock clattering noisily to the floor to bounce off the opposite wall. While the shattered lock was still spinning on the floor, Mai made her escape.
She emerged to falling rain, to the early evening's gloom, to the bright lights and clamour of passing traffic and the many pedestrians passing by. Not wishing to take a taxi – the driver might recall her face – she unstrapped her umbrella, held it above her head, and then, with the canvas bag still slung from her shoulder, she strolled back to the welcoming grandeur of the Ritz Hotel.

Chapter Eighteen

Entering the museum ten minutes before closing time, Tom and Molly gave their details at reception and were escorted through the building to a small waiting room outside the curator's office. There they were told to take seats and assured that the curator would see them in ten minutes or so, just as soon as the building was closed for the evening and his other administrative tasks were completed. Thanking the young lady who showed them in, they watched her disappearing around the corner at the end of the corridor, then they sat there, side by side, on their hard wooden chairs, neither knowing quite what to say.

Finally, to break the silence, Molly said in her admirably blunt manner, 'Okay, admit it - you're scared.'
'Of meeting the curator?'
'No. Of getting even deeper into this. You're scared of that, and right now you hate me 'cause I won't let you out.'
'Not true, Molly.'
'Yes, it is, Tom.'
'I, too, want to see this through to the end, to return the crystal skulls to their original source, where clearly they were meant to be, and to see what happens when we do so. If I'm scared – and certainly we both should be – it's not only for myself, but also for you. I care for you, Molly, after my fashion, and

I feel concern for you. Those men who died at Chichén Itzá were undoubtedly criminals, and the ones who followed us were clearly dangerous men and almost certainly not working alone. Whoever wants our crystal skull wants it badly and may not have given up yet. I think we're both in real danger.'
Molly turned to stare at him with eyes widening and brimming over with emotion. 'You care for me?'
'After my fashion.'
'What does that mean?'
'I care for you more than you might think and I have concern for you.'
'So what does *that* mean?'
Tom was uncomfortable. He found it hard to discuss such matters. The emotional world was tricky and he wished to avoid it. 'I think you're cute,' he said. 'Too foulmouthed by far, but decent for all that. I believe the American word for it is "spunky" and I find that admirable. I've always lacked physical courage myself, but you have it in bagfuls. Also, I happen to know that you've grown fond of me. Now why don't you admit it?'
'Gee, whiz, the guy's in love!' Molly was grinning, but her eyes were moist.
'I didn't say that, Molly. I merely said I cared for you. And that's just what I meant.'
'Oh, yeah?'
'Oh, yes. But of course I know that you've grown fond of *me*, so why not admit it?'
'Pompous little shit, aren't ya?'
'You don't have to be foul-mouthed again.'
'I use the language I learnt in the streets. I can't talk with a plum in my mouth, but I get my meaning across.'
'You certainly do.'
'You love me,' Molly said.
'You love *me*,' Tom replied.
Molly chuckled and shook her head from side to side, filled with wonder and gratitude. 'The man loves me, but he's too fuckin' English to express his true feelin's. Come on, Tom, why not say it?'
'You say it first.'
'I love you.'
'Really?'

‘Yes, really.’
‘You’re a woman with surprisingly good taste.’
‘Go screw yourself, bud!’
Amused and blessedly distracted, Tom was about to offer a retort when the door to the curator’s office opened and a man with a long, pale face and no hair whatsoever stepped out to stare at them. He was as thin as the stem of a lamp-post, wearing a pinstripe suit with white shirt and striped old-school tie. He looked like a fairly decent man who had never smiled in his life.
‘Mr Powell?’ he asked of Tom.
‘Yes,’ Tom replied, rising to his feet and offering his hand.
‘William Postlethwaite,’ the curator introduced himself. They shook hands, and then Tom introduced Molly, who also shook the curator’s hand.
‘Please come in,’ Mr Postlethwaite said. When they were inside his office, seated in front of him, gazing at him across his surprisingly bare desk, he gave them the full blankness of his decent face, and said, ‘Before we go any further, may I just say that had it not been Lady BarrattWhite who called on your behalf, I would not have given you this appointment. I have a great deal of respect for that good Lady, but she *is* rather old now, not to say a little eccentric, and when she says she wants us to return the crystal skull to her, and, even worse, hand it over to two perfect strangers, I’m bound to say in response that this is something that I, representing this museum, simply cannot agree to do.’
‘So why give us the appointment?’ Molly asked tartly, before Tom could even open his mouth.
‘I gave you the appointment,’ Mr Postlethwaite replied bluntly, being a decent and honest man, ‘because I respect Lady Barratt-White, appreciate her great gift to this museum, and therefore felt obliged to at least see you.’
‘Did you tell her you wouldn’t let us have the crystal skull?’ Tom asked.
‘No, I did not. I didn’t wish to upset her. She’s a dear old lady with not too long to live, so I felt it best to humour her, and, I must confess, to find out just why she had the sudden urge to take the skull back and pass it on to someone else. May I ask who you are, why you want the skull, and how you came in contact with Lady BarrattWhite? The world of antiquities is a small one, and your name’s not familiar.’
Taking a deep breath, aware that he was in treacherous waters, and unwilling to let the upright Mr Postlethwaite know that he and Molly were in illegal

possession of the second crystal skull, Tom thought hard before exhaling. Then he plunged in: ‘Well, Mr Postlethwaite, while I’m not professionally involved in the world of antiquities, I’ve been studying the subject for many years and have a particular interest in early Mayan culture in general and your crystal skull in particular.’

As Mr Postlethwaite raised his left eyebrow progressively higher in increasing disbelief, Tom, hardly aware of what he was saying, but instinctively leaving out any mention of his experience at Chichén Itzá and his possession of the Rose Quartz Skull, managed to explain, with a few little embellishments, how he had come to see Professor Weatherby in the British Museum, was ‘recommended’ by him to Lady Barratt-White, and had been ‘encouraged’ by the latter to return her crystal skull, the one in this very building, to its source in Tiahuanaco, Peru.

When Tom had finished, wiping sweat from his brow with the white handkerchief that he always kept tucked into the breast pocket of the pinstripe suit had had worn since returning to London, Mr Postlethwaite raised his left eyebrow to its maximum altitude, then lowered it and practically quivered with outrage.

‘Are you some kind of crank, Mr Powell?’

‘Hey, watch your mouth!’ Molly exploded.

‘*Please*, Molly,’ Tom said, and then turned back to Mr Postlethwaite. ‘No, I certainly am not!’

‘Yet you believe that the crystal skull has to be returned to its original source in order that its magical powers might be released?’

‘That’s correct,’ Tom said.

‘That’s ridiculous,’ Mr Postlethwaite retorted. ‘I’m embarrassed to even hear it. I find it hard to believe that you can walk into this museum and tell me this rubbish straight-faced.’

‘Lady Barratt-White agrees with me,’ Tom said, ‘which is why she wants *me* to have the crystal skull.’

‘As I said before, *sir*,’ Mr Postlethwaite said, placing an emphasis on the ‘sir’ as if it was a dirty word, ‘I have the utmost regard for Lady Barratt-White, but she *is* rather old now and, like many people her age, perhaps not all there in the head, and so susceptible to the blandishments of charlatans.’

‘Hey, watch your mouth!’ Molly exploded again. ‘As for your supposed visit to my former colleague, the late Professor Julian Weatherby, I would like to

know why you made that visit, since Professor Weatherby, God rest his soul, was found dead in suspicious circumstances in a room in the Savoy Hotel, where, to the best of my knowledge, he had no business being in the first place. So when did you visit him?'

Shocked to hear this news, which really was news to him as he hadn't read a newspaper since returning to London, Tom felt himself falling into a deep well of fear. Glancing at Molly, he saw that she felt the same way. However, he managed to regain control of himself and boldly faced the curator's accusing gaze.

'If you're suggesting that I had something to do with Professor Weatherby's death,' Tom said, 'just because I happen to have paid him a visit, I would just like to say that

_ '

He didn't complete the sentence, because the room was suddenly plunged into darkness.

'What…?' Mr Postlethwaite's voice resounded eerily in the abrupt silence of the darkened room. Then Tom heard a clattering sound as something on the desk fell over, obviously knocked over by Mr Postlethwaite's groping hand, and then he heard the telephone being picked off its cradle, followed by the sound of it being dialled. 'This is the curator,' Mr Postlethwaite said. 'My lights have just gone out.' A brief silence was followed with: 'A power failure? The whole building? Surely that's not possible. We have override switches to avoid that kind of incident, so the lights should have come back on automatically.' He went silent again, obviously listening to bad news, then said, sounding shocked, 'The burglar alarm system as well? But surely *that* isn't possible! The system has its own override facility and can't just… Pardon? *What*? You believe that both systems have been… *sabotaged*? Oh, my God, then…' But instead of completing his sentence, he slammed the phone down, kicked his chair back and stood up. Tom's eyes were still adjusting to the darkness as Mr Postlethwaite groped frantically in a desk drawer, then the beam of a flashlight split the darkness and Mr Postlethwaite, holding the torchlight in one hand, ran from the office.

'Let's go!' Molly snapped.

Hurrying after the curator, they followed him along the darkened corridor to the stairs leading down to the lobby. As they followed him down the stairs, guided by the frantically wavering beam of the torchlight, they could hear the

panicky shouting of security guards echoing eerily around the other darkened exhibition halls. Mr Postlethwaite had just reached the bottom of the stairs when the lights came back on to reveal a body lying rigidly on the floor near the front doors. The man appeared to be dead.

'Oh, my God!' Mr Postlethwaite wailed, stopping near the dead man and glancing frantically left and right, his face pale with shock.

Tom and Molly stopped behind him, hearing footsteps running down the stairs, and more panicky shouting. Before Mr Postlethwaite could make another move, a security guard came running out of an open doorway, practically skidded to a halt, glanced down at the dead man on the floor, then turned to face the curator.

'He's dead,' the security man confirmed.

'Oh, my God!' Mr Postlethwaite repeated, blinking repeatedly like someone in deep shock.

'I've just been to check,' the security man said, flushed with too much excitement for one evening, 'and the mains electric and burglar-alarm systems have both been tampered with.'

'You mean… *sabotage*?'

'Yes, boss. I've just turned the back-up generator on, which is why we have lights now.'

'But my telephone was working!'

'A different system,' the security man said. 'That's British Telecom. I've already called the police and…' He nodded, indicating one of the front doors, which was being opened by another security man. 'We're opening the doors to let them in.'

'But what…?'

Another security guard came running across the exhibition hall to their right and stopped breathlessly in front of the curator.

'There's a dead woman back there,' he said. 'A cleaning woman – Mrs Branson. The poor creature's been strangled.'

'Oh, my God!' Mr Postlethwaite repeated yet again, obviously about to lose the power of speech, glancing about him as if expecting to be attacked by a gang of armed robbers. 'I just can't…'

Footsteps advanced behind Tom and Molly, then another security guard ran around them to stop breathlessly in front of Mr Postlethwaite.

'The crystal skull's been stolen,' he said.

‘*What*?’
‘I said…’
‘Let’s go!’ Molly snapped. Then she grabbed Tom by the hand and raced him to the open front door, where she rudely pushed the security guard aside and made her escape. ‘Keep running!’ she bawled.
Tom’s heart was racing as he followed Molly along the street, dazzled by the streetlights and the brightly-lit shop windows, drenched in slanting sheets of rain. When they had turned up a side street, out of sight of the museum, Molly slowed down to a walk, released Tom’s sweaty hand, and raised an umbrella over their heads.
‘Walk as naturally as possible,’ Molly said, ‘and stop lookin’ so scared.’
‘I can’t help it,’ Tom said.
At first, he didn’t know where she was leading him, and he didn’t really care, being too frightened to think straight, but he soon recognized the area that he lived in. Then they arrived at the hotel that he’d booked for Molly.
‘We’ve gotta talk,’ Molly said.
When they entered the hotel, she shook the rain off her umbrella, folded it up, went to the reception desk for her room key, then led Tom to the lift. Once upstairs, they entered her room, where Molly turned the light on and then carefully locked the door behind her. Tom glanced at her bed and then looked away, feeling oddly uncomfortable. His racing heart was gradually settling down, but he still felt fearful.
‘You want a drink?’ Molly asked.
‘Desperately,’ Tom said.
‘You don’t mind if I use this mini-bar at your expense?’
‘Of course not,’ Tom said.
Molly knelt in front of the refrigerated mini-bar to open the door and look inside. ‘We’ve got whiskey and brandy and – ’
‘Brandy. I could do with a brandy.’
‘I’ll try that,’ Molly said. ‘I’ve never had it before.’
After removing two tiny bottles of brandy from the mini-bar, she kicked the door shut and handed one of the bottles to Tom. As he was unscrewing the metal top, she fetched two glasses and handed him one of those as well. She sat on the edge of the bed while he took the only chair in the room. They both drank and then stared at one another, temporarily speechless.
Eventually, Molly brushed her wet hair from her forehead and crossed her

long legs. They were very nice legs.
‘Why did you run us out of there?’ Tom asked. ‘You shouldn’t have done that. Now they’ll think…’
‘That we had something to do with the theft of the crystal skull, and, even worse, with the death of Professor Weatherby? Yes, Tom, but they’ll be thinking that anyway. That’s *why* I ran us out of there. We were there when the lights went out, when the crystal skull was stolen. We also saw Professor Weatherby the same day he died, probably murdered, and that curator, already suspicious about that, was about to ask questions. Then the lights all went out and the crystal skull was stolen, so he’s bound to think his suspicions were correct. He’ll tell the cops about us – and about our visit to Weatherby – so the cops are gonna want to talk to us… We have to leave London, Tom.’
‘Leave London? You mean… *now*?’
‘If not now, pretty soon. Before the cops track us down. We might as well take our single skull to Peru and see what happens there.’
Tom finished off his brandy and helped himself to another. When he had poured it, he sat back in his chair and had a good slug. It warmed him and went to his head and made him feel a lot calmer, if a little unreal.
‘The police won’t have too much trouble finding me,’ he said. ‘I’m listed in the phone book, after all, and that’s the first place they’ll look.’
‘Then we have to leave as soon as we possibly can, preferably on the first flight out tomorrow.’
‘We can’t,’ Tom said. ‘We have to take *both* skulls with us. One skull may be useless without the other, so we have to find out who took the other one and then take that as well.’
‘That might not be possible,’ Molly said.
‘Perhaps, but we have to try at least.’
‘We have one day – maybe two or three at most – and then we have to go, even if we go with only one skull. Anyway, think about it, Tom. Whoever wants that skull wants it pretty badly – he’s willing to kill to get it – so he probably knows as much about it as we do. And if that’s the case, then he knows it’s got to be returned to its source if it’s to have any value. Given this, I say that if we take our own skull to Peru, the other guy – ’
‘It could be a woman, Molly.’
‘It’s a figure of speech, Tom… Anyway, the other guy, or gal, will probably

know that we've no choice other than to go to Peru, so either he'll follow us or he'll take his own skull to the same place. Either way, those two skulls are going to meet up, sooner or later.'
'Then we'll be killed and robbed of our own crystal skull.'
'Not necessarily. You heard what Lady Barratt-White said. For whatever reason, we're bein' protected by the magical powers of the crystal skulls while our enemies are bein' attacked by those same powers. Maybe it *was* destined to happen this way – so I say we've got to go.'
Tom thought about it, filling up with dread again, but realized that he didn't have a choice. 'Alright,' he said, 'we'll go. But I need a few more days. I need to find out more about the crystal skulls and I know just the man I want to ask – an old friend of mine. Also, since this old friend is in the business, he might pick up some info' about the whereabouts of the stolen crystal skull.'
'Fine,' Molly said. 'But you only have a few days. In the meantime, you've got to move out of your apartment and stay somewhere else.'
'I'll move into my club,' Tom said. 'It'll take the police some time to learn that I'm a member of that establishment.'
'Good thinking,' Molly said. She leaned sideways to place her glass on the bedside cabinet, then, with a sigh, she fell back on the bed, stretched out, breasts up thrust, with her legs dangling over the mattress and her feet on the floor. Lying there, she looked voluptuous and irresistible. Tom was embarrassed.
'God, I'm pooped!' Molly exclaimed.
Aware that he was sexually aroused, Tom felt even more embarrassed, so he stood up and placed his glass on the dressing table, saying, 'Well, I think I'd better get going.'
Molly sat up straight again. 'So what happens tomorrow?'
'Meet me in the Museum Tavern,' Tom said. 'The pub facing the main gates of the British Museum. We're going to visit that friend of mine at his very strange shop in Covent Garden. About noon?'
'Great,' Molly said, then she pointed to the bag containing the Rose Quartz Skull. 'What about that?'
'What do you mean?'
'Someone murdered Weatherby over that crystal skull, which means they must want it pretty badly. Is there anywhere safer than this room we can hide it?'

‘Yes,’ Tom said. ‘In the safe in my gentleman’s club.’
‘Then you’d better put it there.’
‘Right.’ Tom picked the bag up, hoisted it only his shoulder, and then, still embarrassed to see Molly on the bed, he turned away and opened the door, preparing to leave. Molly, however, jumped off the bed and rushed up behind him. Taking hold of his shoulders, she turned him around to face her. Before he knew what was happening, she kissed him full on the lips. When he stepped back, she grinned at him.
‘Ah, ha!’ Tom said, hoping to cover his embarrassment and pleasure. ‘It must truly be love!’
Before she could see the tenderness in his face, he turned away and hurried out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Chapter Nineteen

That evening, Tom moved into his elegant gentleman’s club in Mayfair where, as a guest from out of town (his formal address being his Reigate estate), he was allowed to stay a maximum of three nights each month. Though planning to go to bed early and be fresh for tomorrow when he would, he was convinced, be a bundle of nerves, waiting for the police to catch up with him, he was surprised to hear a knocking on his room door. Already in his pyjamas and dressing gown, he was embarrassed to open the door and even more embarrassed when he did so and found a beautiful Eurasian girl standing there. Taken aback, not expecting to find a woman, other than cleaning staff, in the building, he just stared at her in open-mouthed confusion.

‘Mr Powell?’ Her voice was low and sensual, but sounded desperate.
‘Yes,’ Tom said.
‘I know I’m not supposed to be here, but please invite me in. It’s really dreadfully urgent.’
Glancing nervously up and down the corridor, all varnished oak beams and dust-covered chandeliers, to check that no members of staff were in sight, Tom nodded and stepped aside to let the young lady enter his room. When she hurriedly brushed past him, he closed the door behind her, and then turned to face her.
Again, he was struck by how beautiful she was - and only then did he

recognise her as a native of Thailand. Her face was truly lovely, with large, luminous brown eyes, long black eyelashes, a perfect nose, and very full, crimsonpainted lips. She was wearing an expensive black gabardine, belted tightly at the waist, and high-heeled black-leather boots. Her hair, which was as black as her coat, hung to her waist.

'Since it's so late,' she explained before Tom could ask the obvious question, 'I just lingered outside the entrance to the building, where I could see the receptionist, and then, when he temporarily left his desk, I hurried in and managed to get up the stairs without being seen. I know it was an awful thing to do, but I'm absolutely desperate.'

She burst into tears.

'There, there, dear girl,' Tom said, instinctively reaching out to squeeze her shoulder in a reassuring manner. 'Please be seated and let me fetch you a glass of water. Here, take this chair.'

Still sobbing wretchedly, the girl sat on the wooden chair, dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief, and then, seemingly without thinking, untied the belt around her black gabardine and took a deep breath, just as Tom was hurrying back with the glass of water. When he handed her the glass, the gabardine fell open, hanging down to the floor, revealing a breath-taking figure in an elegant, tightfitting black dress. The gorgeous creature was wearing jewellery and clearly had class.

'Drink it up,' Tom said, indicating the glass of water. 'I'm sure it will help. Then tell me what you're doing here. I mean, I could get into trouble if you were found here, so…'

'I know! I know! That's why I feel so bad. But I just had to come. I *had* to!' And she started sobbing again.

'There, there,' Tom repeated, compassionately patting the distressed creature on the shoulder and, uncomfortably aware that he was wearing only his pyjamas and dressing gown, trying to stop himself from staring at her superb, trembling figure. When she had managed to control herself again and was dabbing the tears from her lovely, longlashed eyes, Tom sat on the edge of the bed and gazed sympathetically at her.

Returning his smile with one of her own – a smile so glorious that Tom, despite his new feelings for Molly, felt his heart lurching – she said, 'I'm a friend of Lady BarrattWhite, that dear woman, and I'm in trouble and went to see her this afternoon. When I told her the kind of trouble I was in, she

recommended that I come and see you immediately.'
'Me?' Tom responded, surprised. 'Why me? I've only met the dear lady once, and…'
'Yes, she told me – and told me why you had gone to see her. Which is why she sent me to you. My name, by the way, is Mai – Mai Suphar. I'm so pleased to meet you.'
Tom leaned forward to shake her hand. 'My pleasure, I'm sure.'
Mai smiled. It was a ravishing smile, but quite shy, which only made it all the more heartwarming. She dabbed at her moist eyes with the handkerchief, sniffed pitifully a few times, then confessed, 'I did a terrible thing.'
'Oh? What was that, dear?'
Mai took a deep breath and held it in, thus emphasizing her superb breasts. Then, like a woman in deep despair, she let her breath out again as she spoke, turning every word into a seductive sigh. 'Earlier this evening, under pressure from an extremely dangerous person, I stole a crystal skull from the Museum of Mankind.' And she burst into tears again.
Instantly, Tom jumped off the bed and took the two steps that carried him to her. He reached down with one hand to again squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. Seemingly without thinking, for all the world like a hurt child, she pressed her forehead against his belly and clutched the side of his dressing gown, to pull him protectively against her. Tom was shocked by the sensual warmth that flooded through him, but he was also filled with sympathy for her. Aware of these contradictory emotions, he squeezed her shoulder again and then gently disengaged to sit back on the bed. Mai managed to control her sobbing again, dabbed at her wet cheeks with her handkerchief, and then took another deep breath – Tom could not ignore those heaving breasts – and raised her head to stare solemnly at him, her lovely eyes filled with shame.
'You stole the crystal skull?' Tom asked incredulously.
'Yes,' Mai said. 'I stole it. I was given no choice. That's why I went to see my dear friend, Lady BarrattWhite, and why she then sent me to you. She said that you had an interest in that skull, desperately needed it, and that any information I could give you would be helpful to you. By giving you this information, she told me, I would make amends for my sins. That's why I'm here, Mr Powell.'
Hardly knowing what to say, feeling naked in his pyjamas, Tom ran his

fingers through his ruffled hair and managed, ‘Oh, dear. Well, what can I say? I mean… You *really* stole the crystal skull?’
Mai nodded, staring soulfully at him with her big brown eyes, drawing him to her like a moth to a flame, filling him with conflicting emotions, including compassion and lust.
‘I think you’d better explain,’ he said.
Mai nodded again, dabbed delicately at her wet eyes with the handkerchief, then she took another deep, breastenhancing breath, and looked up again.
‘Mr Powell, please understand that life in Bangkok, where I come from, is very different from life here in England.’
‘Well, I’m *sure* it is,’ Tom said, trying not to stare at her, but drawn helplessly to the soulfulness in her brown gaze, as well as to her perfect breasts and slim waist and broad hips and long legs and swan’s neck and delicate wrists and hands and fingers. The more he tried not to stare, the more he stared, not knowing where else to look.
‘For most poor people, Mr Powell,’ Mai continued, ‘life in Bangkok is very hard.’
‘I’m *sure* it is,’ Tom repeated.
Mai nodded affirmatively. ‘I come from a very poor family in Wat Dusit, near the railway station. As you probably know, Mr Powell, there are so-called red-light districts around the railway stations of most major cities, and it was in such a district that I was born and brought up.’
‘You poor thing,’ Tom said, feeling even more compassion for her.
‘Yes,’ Mai said, clearly grateful for his compassion. ‘And at a very early age, my mother was forced into prostitution. Then my sister, too, was forced into the streets, to the despair of my father, who then killed himself.’
‘How dreadful!’ Tom exclaimed.
‘Yes,’ Mai said, looking as if she was about to cry again, but managing, with some more dabbing at her moist, fluttering eyes, to control herself. ‘I only avoided the same fate,’ she continued, ‘by marrying a wealthy Chinese businessman and moving with him into the Bang Kapi district, where we lived happily for a short while.’
‘A *short* while?’ Tom asked.
The poor girl started sobbing again, though this time she did so silently, merely letting the tears roll down her golden cheeks while nodding and saying, ‘Yes, a short while. In marrying my dear husband, I angered a man

who had wanted me for his mistress: an evil brute named Lu Thong, the very same pimp, drug addict and murderer who controlled the red-light district around the railway station, and who had turned my mother and sister into prostitutes.'

'Oh, you poor thing. How horrible!'

Mai nodded her agreement, gave him an anguished, though still ravishing smile, dabbed at her wet eyes again, and continued: 'Yes, that same Lu Thong, that monster, was terribly angry when I married my dear, devoted husband, and swore that he would get me in his bed, one way or the other. Then…' But unable to control her grief, she burst into tears again and was only able to continue when had Tom jumped off the bed, fetched her another glass of water, given her a compassionate squeeze and returned to his awkward position on the side of his bed. 'Then,' Mai continued tearfully, 'only six weeks ago, my dear husband was killed in a hit-and-run accident. Though the driver of that vehicle was never traced, Lu Thong let it be known to me that he personally had organized the socalled accident. He then said that something similar would happen to me if I did not relent and become his mistress.'

'Dreadful!' Tom exclaimed, now positively overcome with compassion. 'Absolutely horrendous! You poor, haunted child. What on earth did you do?'

Mai raised her head to stare at him with a pride that went straight to his heart. 'I refused him,' Mai said. 'I told him that I would rather die than be his mistress – and I meant it, Mr Powell, I really did. I would have died first.'

'Most admirable,' Tom said. 'But then how come…?'

Mai burst into tears again, was comforted again by Tom, gave him what appeared to be a deeply emotional, grateful hug, and only continued when he had managed to wriggle free and sit back on the bed.

'Knowing that I would willingly die,' Mai continued tearfully, 'rather than become his mistress, Lu Thong did something even more dreadful.'

'No!' Tom exclaimed breathlessly.

'Yes!' Mai looked at him with luminous, shocked eyes. 'He told me that if I didn't become his mistress, he would kill my poor sister in the worst possible way – and I knew that he meant it.'

'The vicious brute!' Tom said.

'Yes,' Mai agreed.

‘And you…?’ Tom couldn’t bear to complete the question.
‘Yes, God help me – and to my eternal shame – I became that monster’s mistress… and that’s why I’m here.’
Thinking that this was the most dreadful story he had ever heard in his life, Tom wanted to step over to the poor child and embrace her and hug her. However, the knowledge that he was wearing only his dressing gown and pyjamas, coupled with his frustrated desire for Molly and helpless sexual attraction towards this astonishingly beautiful, tormented creature, prevented him from doing so. Instead, he listened with a breaking heart to the rest of her tragic tale.
‘It was Lu Thong,’ Mai explained, ‘who first told me about the crystal skull. He’s obsessed with it, Mr Powell, believing it to have magical powers, and determined to have those powers for himself and use them for his own evil purposes.’
‘Typical!’ Tom interjected passionately.
‘Yes, typical. Typical of such a monster! And so he told me that the crystal skull was in the Museum of Mankind and that he was sending me to London to bring it back for him. He did not tell me, however, until I arrived in London, that he had arranged for some of his thugs to sabotage the electrical wiring and burglar-alarm systems of the museum; and that I personally would have to enter the building as a tourist, hide myself away until the building was closed for the evening and the security systems had been aborted, then steal the crystal skull from its pedestal and somehow spirit it away. When I told him, by phone, that I was frightened of doing this, that I could go to prison for it, he put my sister on the phone. She sobbed and told me that he was had a hypodermic syringe filled with AIDs-contaminated serum and would plunge it into her neck if I didn’t do what he wanted. So I did it, Mr Powell. To my eternal shame, I did it. I stole the crystal skull from the Museum of Mankind and then made my escape by an emergency exit at the rear of the building. Now I’m a criminal, Mr Powell, and I feel like killing myself.’
‘Oh, don’t do that, my child!’ Without thinking, Tom jumped off the bed again and advanced the couple of steps that took him to her. When she burst into tears again, clearly moved by his compassion, he had no choice but to place his arms around her and let her rest her forehead on his belly while clinging to him and sobbing. Tom stroked her smooth, sweet-scented hair and

patted her trembling spine. ‘There, there,’ he said. ‘You poor child. But it’s alright, I’m here.’ Then the heat of her body flooded his loins and he stepped back again, though this time not as far as the bed. He just stood about a foot away from her, gazing down upon her. When she started up at him, her eyes widening even more, he almost drowned in their dark, beckoning depths.

‘But what can I do to help?’ Tom asked. ‘Why come to *me*?’

‘Because Lady Barratt-White, that dear woman, my good friend, told me about your interest in the crystal skull, insisted that you had to have it, and asked me to inform you of its whereabouts. She said you would attempt to get it back – ’

‘*Me*?’ Tom interjected.

‘Yes. And now that I’ve kept my part of the bargain with that monster, Lu Thong, thus saving my sister’s life, I’m happy to give you the information you need in order to gain the crystal skull.’

‘Really?’

‘Really. As Lu Thong won’t know that I gave you this information, when you manage to steal the crystal skull back from him, my sister won’t be endangered and I’ll have the pleasure of seeing his evil plans thwarted.’

Though his heart was racing with panic and the blood rushed to his head, Tom managed to croak, ‘I have to get the crystal skull back from Lu Thong?’

‘Yes,’ Mai said. ‘At this very moment, even as we’re talking, the crystal skull, secured in a Thai Embassy diplomatic bag, is being flown to Lu Thong in Bangkok.’ She reached into her black-leather shoulder-bag and pulled out a neatly folded piece of paper, which she handed to Tom. ‘This is Lu Thong’s address. The rest is up to you.’

Now feeling almost faint with fear, as well as dizzy with desire, Tom glanced at the piece of paper but was unable to focus upon it, so folded it again and placed it in the pocket of his dressing gown. When he gazed at the lovely Mai, his desire briefly overcame his fear, making him feel disorientated.

‘I have to tell you,’ he said, trying to get a grip on himself and not be swayed by tender emotions, ‘that tragic though your story is, and much as I would like to get my hands on that crystal skull, I really don’t think I’m equipped, either mentally or physically, to fly all the way to Bangkok and face up to a professional criminal and murderer like that swinish Lu Thong. No, my dear, I’m afraid not. Now, my friend, Molly – ’

‘Yes,’ Mai interjected. ‘Lady Barratt-White told me about her. Clearly she’s a

most admirable young woman.'
'Indeed,' Tom said. 'Admirable – absolutely. And certainly mad enough to do as you suggest. Molly would. I wouldn't. I'm sorry, but that's all there is to it. I simply won't do it.'
Mai lowered her pretty head and crossed one leg over the other. Those legs, in sheer black stockings, flowing down from the hem of the tight, shimmering black dress, were truly a spectacular sight. 'I understand,' Mai whispered.
Tom sat on the edge of the bed again, feeling cowardly, generally confused, and far too emotional. When Mai raised her head to gaze at him, he was mesmerized by her melting brown eyes.
'You really won't do it?' Mai asked softly.
'No,' Tom said. 'I'm sorry.'
'But you think Molly would?'
'Yes.'
'Would you mind if I went to see her?'
'That's your choice,' Tom said.
Realizing that this timid but rather cute Englishman meant what he said and would not fly to Bangkok, which meant that he was redundant, Mai decided to have a little pleasure by seducing him and then putting his lights out. To this end, she sighed mournfully, then pushed her chair back and stood up. Before Tom knew what was happening, she walked up to him where he still sat on the edge of the bed, and gazed sadly, yearningly down at him. His eyes were as large as two saucers when he raised his head to look up at her.
'I understand perfectly,' Mai said, speaking softly, caressingly, 'and would like to thank you anyway for your kindness. You're a good, thoughtful man.'
Leaning down, she placed her hands on his shoulders and kissed him on the cheek. Her lips lingered. She was breathing into his ear. Her body, she knew, was irresistible to most men, and Mr Powell was not immune to it. His breathing quickened. When she stroked his cheek, it was burning. Murmuring, 'You're so kind, *so* kind,' she kissed him full on the lips and pushed him back onto the bed, until he was stretched out beneath her.
Tom tried to protest, making groaning, gargling sounds, but when her body was stretched out on top of his, he was lost to the world.
Indeed, he could not help himself, being confused and overwhelmed, cast adrift on a tide of conflicting emotions compounded of rising guilt, growing

fear, and helpless desire. He hardly knew what was happening, was only dimly aware of it, consumed, as he was, in a heat that scorched all thought out of him.

He was crushed by Mai's body, trapped in her writhing limbs, deprived of will when her electric fingers stroked him, obliterated by feeling. He didn't know how they had managed it, could not even remember moving, yet somehow they had moved up onto the bed, his head near the pillow. Mai was still on top of him, her belly pressed on his belly, her breasts rubbing against his chest as she unbuttoned the top of his pyjamas and then tugged them open. Her tongue licked his bared skin, her teeth sank into his neck, and he heard someone groaning piteously – himself – as she pressed her groin against his throbbing erection and sucked the skin of his throat.

'Oh, God!' Tom groaned.

He had caught a glimpse of Molly somewhere out there in the ether, an accusing face floating in the cosmos of his disjointed, scattering thoughts. Guilt scorched him like a flame, making him open his eyes, and he saw Mai's hand groping across the crumpled bedsheet, as if searching for something. Her leather bag was lying there, not too far from Tom's head. Her fingers found it and managed to flip it open to grope deep inside it. Tom wondered what she was doing. That thought broke through his delirium. He saw something thin and glittering in her hand… and then the room lights blinked out.

The sudden darkness was startling, a shock to his whole system, and then he heard a rush of wind, or what seemed like rushing wind, and an eerie light materialized out of the darkness and surrounded the bed.

'What…?' Mai whispered, freezing on top of Tom and glancing about her. What the hell…?'

The eerie light around them brightened, illuminating the bed, and the rushing wind became a distant humming that seemed almost physical. Tom thought he could *feel* the humming, a kind of pulsating infrasound, and then he saw that the brightening light was pulsating rhythmically as it filled up with…*stars*.

'What the hell…?' Mai repeated in a whisper as she rolled off the bed.

Even as Tom tried to sit upright, in which he was not successful – as some invisible force was now pressing upon him – featureless, slightly transparent, possibly feminine figures materialized magically out of that eerie, pulsating

light, now forming a dazzling, star-filled haze. The figures seemed to be whispering, though no words could be heard, and they gradually encircled the bed, and then moved right up to it. They were figures of silvery light, weaving slightly like windblown reeds. They had normal-shaped heads and an odd kind of face. They had no eyes, no nose, no lips… no facial features at all.

Mai screamed in terror.

That screaming lashed Tom and also filled him with dread as the ghostly whispering turned into a roaring that made the bed shake and rattle. Tom tried again to sit upright, but he seemed to be paralysed, though Mai, who had stopped screaming, dropped something close to his head as she jumped off the bed. Instinctively grabbing her shoulder-bag, she raced to the room door, running right through the spectral, incorporeal figures and disappearing into the darkness beyond the dazzling light.

Tom was stunned and shaken. Mai had run straight *through* those ghostly, faceless figures, as if they did not exist.

Abruptly, the roaring receded and the dazzling light dimmed. Tom heard the door being jerked open, followed by the sound of Mai's footsteps as she ran off down the corridor. Even as the footsteps receded, the light dimmed and shrank rapidly, as if sucked into a vacuum, taking the ghostly figures with it, and then the figures were totally swallowed up in the expanding darkness and the light shrank to the size of a dime. That tiny light floated briefly in the darkness and then it blinked out entirely.

The room lights came back on.

Tom sat upright and this time had no problems in doing so. He was, however, sweating and shaking and the fear would not leave him. Eventually, when he felt that his senses had returned, he looked down to see what Mai had dropped on the bed. It was a hypodermic syringe.

Tom stared at it, terrified.

Chapter Twenty

'So I had the hypodermic syringe checked by a friend in the Pathology Department of the Royal Free Hospital, Hampstead,' Tom informed Molly the next day while they were having lunch in the Museum Tavern, 'and he told me it contained a toxin that would induce a fatal heart arrhythmia

without leaving any traces behind. In other words, that seemingly tragic young Thai lady was about to kill me.'

'Mmmm,' Molly murmured thoughtfully.

'And, of course,' Tom continued, perplexed by Molly's subdued response to his frightening news, 'when that strange light invaded the room, when those bizarre… *apparitions* materialized out of nowhere and moved in around the bed, forcing Miss Suphar to flee, they were obviously protecting me from her, just as that saucershaped light protected us on the road to the Mexico City airport.'

'Mmmm,' Molly murmured thoughtfully.

Frowning at her, wondering what was wrong with her, Tom continued doggedly: 'Then, just as you saw stars in the crystal skull and we both saw stars seemingly inside that great saucer-shaped light, I saw stars in the pulsating light in my room – *and* saw the stars either through, or inside, those incorporeal, faceless beings who surrounded the bed.'

'Mmmm,' Molly murmured.

Glancing in exasperation around the pleasant, oldfashioned pub, Tom was glad to see that it was busy with lunchtime diners and drinkers. Realizing that he was beginning to feel paranoid about being alone, he turned back to Molly's unusually thoughtful gaze.

'Finally,' he said, 'I don't suppose we have to speculate too wildly to reach the conclusion that the Miss Mai Suphar in my room and the Miss Anna Chow in that room of death in the Savoy Hotel are one and the same… Yes or no? Are you listening?'

As if startled out of a trance, Molly blinked repeatedly, glanced distractedly around her, then turned back to Tom and said, 'What *I'd* like to know is what you and the dropdown-dead gorgeous – according to you – Miss Suphar were doing together in your room.'

'I've just told you. She wanted me to fly to Bangkok and…'

'Yeah, yeah, I got all that,' Molly said impatiently. 'But what I want to know is what you were doing together on your *bed* before all that other business began.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'You heard me.'

Tom smacked his own forehead in melodramatic frustration. 'I can't believe my ears! I'm telling you the most amazing things and you're sitting there

being jealous of that woman. This is just too ridiculous!'
'That doesn't answer the question.'
'Molly, *please*!'
'Well? What the hell were you doing on her bed? I mean, didn't you have a *chair* in that room?'
'Yes, of course I had a chair and initially she sat on it, but then she… Well, what I mean is… Nothing to it, really… She seemed distraught - or she acted distraught – and then, just before she left, she came to sit on the bed beside me, and…'
'Yeah?'
'Nothing happened, Molly! She just happened to sit down for a second on the edge of the bed… and…'
'But you said that when those manifestations materialized, you tried to sit upright but couldn't.'
'Well, yes, that's true, but…'
'So you were *lying* on the bed when it all happened.'
'Well, yes, but…'
'So why were you lying on the bed?'
'I don't know.' Tom was practically stuttering now. 'I just happened to fall back on the bed when…'
'She got her hypodermic syringe out of her bag where it was lying on the bed near your pillow.'
'Agreed, but…'
'And then, if I recall correctly and I'm sure I do, she dropped the syringe on the bed beside you, grabbed her bag from where it was lying near the pillow, and then ran right through the apparitions around the bed - which means she had to be *on* the bed, right?'
'Right, but…'
'And to get the syringe out of her bag and then drop it beside you and pick up the bag, she had to be *stretched out* on the bed, right?'
'Well, alright, you're right,' Tom said frantically, 'but you're grossly misinterpreting the situation. The woman - '
'Black widow spider, more like.'
'Pardon?'
'You know? The black widow spider. Has sex with its mate and then kills him.'

‘Devours him, actually,’ Tom automatically corrected her.
‘Very fucking funny, I’m sure.’
‘Molly, please…’
‘So she was stretched out on the bed,’ Molly went on relentlessly. ‘Was she above you or beside you or below you? Just answer me that, Tom.’
Tom was mortified with guilt and shame, knowing full well what had been about to happen between him and Mai Suphar, but convinced that it hadn’t been his fault, though he couldn’t seem to explain that to Molly. ‘Listen, Molly, it wasn’t what you think. She just… we just… Well, what I mean is that…’
‘She seduced you, right?’
‘Yes – *no*! I mean, nothing happened, Molly. She just sort of pushed me back on the bed and even before I had time to resist her, the lights went out, and…’
‘You dumb shit,’ Molly said. She was really very angry. ‘That bitch just has to give you a smile and you jump into her knickers. That’s just fuckin’ pitiful.’
‘Alright, it was pitiful.’
‘As long as we’re in agreement.’
‘But I was thinking of *you*, Molly, believe me, and maybe that explains – ’
‘You thought of me and then you fucked that other woman. Well, that’s – ’
‘*We didn’t fuck, Molly*!’
‘Stop shouting, Tom. Everyone’s lookin’ at us. Let’s just change the subject, okay?’
‘Alright.’ Tom checked his wristwatch. ‘It’s time to leave anyway,’ he said, ‘so let’s get up and go.’
They had finished their lunch and drinks, so they stood up and left the pub, aware that a lot of customers were staring at them, some of them smirking. Once out on the sidewalk, Tom turned left and let Molly fall in beside him. They walked along in silence for a minute or two, then Tom said, ‘I just want you to know that what happened with Mai Suphar last night – and nothing sexual happened, Molly! – was not something that I planned or wanted to happen. Though I repeat, nothing sexual occurred. That’s all I’ve got to say.’
‘Fine, Tom. Go fuck yourself.’
Luckily, they did not have far to walk and soon came to the shop in Covent Garden. It was a very strange shop, its display window filled with books on

the occult, the paranormal, flying saucers and ancient civilizations; adorned with hideous ritual masks, shrunken heads, and other equally bizarre paraphernalia. Tom's friend was a tall, barrel-chested, blond-haired man with a handsome face flushed with too much drink and enlivened with a quick, mischievous grin. He embraced Tom emotionally when he entered the shop, then stepped back to examine him.

'Well,' he said, 'you don't look so bad after your trip to Yucatán. Maybe a little tense from too much travelling, yes? But then you always *were* the nervous type. So who's this you've brought to me?'

'Molly, this is my eccentric Dutchman, Paul van der Veer, who owns and runs this unique little shop. Paul, this is Molly.'

'Hi,' Molly said.

'Welcome,' Paul replied, kissing her on the cheek, then stepping back to add: 'So are you giving my friend Tom what he needs? A regular helping of the good old in-and – '

'We're here to get some information on the crystal skulls,' Tom interjected quickly, knowing that Paul enjoyed shocking the ladies.

'Then you've come to the right place, my friend. What would you like to know? Here… come back here.' He led them around the cash register and into a poky room in the back where, on an old card table, he kept an electric kettle, a carton of milk, a box of sugar cubes, and a well-attended bottle of whiskey. When they were seated around the table, he filled three cups with the whiskey and passed them around. 'So,' he said, 'shoot.'

'Is that your knee pressing my knee?' Molly asked him.

'Sorry,' Van der Veer said. 'I just couldn't resist it. So, Tom, the crystal skulls.'

'Well…' Tom began.

'What do you do?' Molly asked of van der Veer. 'I mean, what makes you an authority on the crystal skulls?'

'Didn't Tom tell you?'

'No.'

'He keeps my light under a bushel. This shop, which I own and manage, is the most famous of its kind in the world, with an unsurpassed collection of esoteric books, old manuscripts, prints, and other items relating to the occult, the paranormal, UFOs, and ancient civilizations. Apart from running the shop, I'm a practising white magician – we do good instead of bad – and an

explorer of some note, having visited most of the major so-called lost cities of the world. Regarding this, I've contemplated my navel in a monastery in the mountains of Tibet, explored the interior of the Sphinx, lived and worshipped with the Dogon, discussing the Sirius mystery with them. I've searched for Atlantis and visited every possible location for it. I'm also the author of *Lost and Found Again*, the classic text on ancient civilizations. Last but not least, I'm a wellknown, respected hypnotist who's placed many a young lady in a trance before screwing her until she was ecstatic. Is that enough for you?'

'That's fine,' Molly said, not impressed. 'Now if you'll get your elbow out of my left tit, we can all proceed further.'

'Molly!' Tom warned her. 'You're insulting my friend just to get back at me!'

'Damned right,' Molly said.

'Do I sense a little *fissure*?' van der Veer asked with a knowing grin. 'Can I be of assistance?'

'Let's concentrate on the crystal skulls,' Tom said. 'That's what we're here for.'

'Fire away, my good friend.' Van der Veer beamed at Molly while Tom, after clearing his throat by coughing into his clenched fist, said, 'We've been presented with the theory that the crystal skulls – the *genuine* crystal skulls – '

'Of which there are only two,' van der Veer interjected.

'Correct,' Tom said. 'Anyway, we've been told that they're the artefacts of an ancient, mysterious race, almost certainly pre-Mayan, which is believed to have made a great, centuries-long migration from west to east – a migration that took in the Yucatán peninsula and ended in Tiahuanaco, Peru, which of course you know well. Any truth to this theory?'

'What's your interest in this, Tom?' When Tom told him, van der Veer looked impressed. 'Sounds to me like you really *do* have the long-lost, priceless Rose Quartz Skull. That's some find, my friends.'

'We have it,' Tom confirmed. 'So what about it – and the other skull? What about that mysterious, pre-Mayan race?'

Van der Veer threw Molly a grin like the beam of a lighthouse, then he turned back to Tom, looking more thoughtful.

'Lady Barratt-White's contention,' he said, 'that the source of the skulls is a

city linked to the stars is certainly not strictly hypothetical. While not much is known about the ancient city of Tiahuanaco, it *is* on record as having been a sanctuary, a holy city like Mecca or Jerusalem, and, I quote, *a city linked with mythic conceptions of the creation of the stars*, unquote. And certainly the records, scant though they may be, indicate that this ancient race of pre-Mayans emerged from somewhere in Asia, the cradle of civilization, and travelled restlessly for centuries, from the west to the east, stopping first in Angkor, then in Cambodia, where they built the so-called Forbidden City. Following an eastern trajectory, the next stop would certainly have been the Polynesian Islands, where the once sacred lagoon city of Ponape was located, then on to Easter Island, where they were responsible for the fabulous monuments, then the Yucatá Peninsula and British Honduras where, of course, the two crystal skulls were found. The next stop, if we're to assume that they continued east, or by now south-east, would have been Peru, where they constructed the holy city of Tiahuanaco.'

'How did they get there?' Molly asked sarcastically. 'Flying by Pan Am?'

Grinning at her, van der Veer patted the back of her delicate hand with his extremely large, indelicate mitt. 'No, my dear, by boat.'

'Are you trying to tell us,' Tom asked, glaring at Molly until she surreptitiously removed her hand from under that of the attentive van der Veer, 'that before recorded history there was a centuries-old *maritime* civilization?'

'Correct,' van der Veer said, shifting restlessly in his chair to make Molly also shift restlessly, fidgeting with her feet. 'As I stated in my seminal work, *Lost and Found Again*,' he continued, nodding at Molly to remind her that he was, amongst other things, a well-known author, 'when I was exploring Tiahuanaco, I uncovered sufficient evidence to prove conclusively that it had once been a port with vast docks – one of them big enough to hold hundreds of ships. While there, I also learned about the local legend of Viracocha, which is the name of the white god of the sea, though he's usually known in Peru asThunupa. Also in Tiahuanaco is a seven-foot statue, carved out of red sandstone, and believed locally to be the statue of the same Thunupa. Finally, it's worth noting that above the Sun Gate itself, also known as the Gateway to the Sun, there's a figure holding a weapon in one hand and a thunderbolt in the other – another statue of Viracocha, or Thunupa. So certainly there's an abundance of evidence in Tiahuanaco that the ancient city was built and

inhabited by a maritime civilization.'
'There's somethin' crawlin' up my leg,' Molly said, 'and I wish it would drop off.'
'Sorry,' van der Veer said, unperturbed, but placing his hand back in full view on the table, studying his fingernails. 'I don't know how it got there.'
'What timescale are we talking about?' Tom asked, being used to his eccentric friend's antics, but still having to force himself to keep his cool.
'I believe the civilization that built Tiahuanaco predated dynastic Egypt by many thousands of years.'
'Really?' Molly asked, sounding sarcastic again, working her chair sideways a little, inching it away from van der Veer and bringing it closer to Tom, who noticed the movement and was gratified.
'Really,' van der Veer said, also noticing Molly's surreptitious movement and smiling with amusement before giving Tom his most solemn, thoughtful gaze – his serious author's gaze. 'The building blocks of Tiahuanaco weigh as much as four hundred and forty tons each – more than twice the weight of the blocks used in the construction of the Sphinx Temple at Giza in Egypt. Also, one of the friezes on the Sun Gate shows the rough form of an elephant, unknown on the South American continent, though a similar creature with tusks and trunk, the *Cuvieronius*, is known to have become extinct there about 10,000 BC. Another animal shown on the Sun Gate is a toxodon, a creature rather like a hippopotamus, which vanished from the Andes at about the same time as the *Cuvieronius*. In this regard, we should not forget that mathematical calculations based on Tiahuanaco's astronomical enclosure, Kalasasaya, the Place of the Standing Stones, produced evidence indicating that the observatory could have been constructed approximately 15,000 BC, when, according to orthodox historians, man was still a primitive hunter, pursuing mammoths with spears. This date was later amended by more authoritative research to 10,500 BC, which, interestingly enough, would place the destruction of Tiahuanaco and the Sun Gate in line with the most widely accepted date for the destruction of Atlantis.'
'So how was it destroyed?' Molly asked, now sitting closer to Tom and no longer fidgeting.
'Almost certainly by some great natural catastrophe,' van der Veer said.
'What makes you think that?'
'Located twelve miles south of Lake Titicaca and more than a hundred feet

above it, the port of Tiahuanaco is surrounded by a great number of huge, chaotically scattered blocks of stone, indicating that it was destroyed in some massive disturbance – an earthquake, most likely. Also, the available evidence indicates that the Sun Gate was split in two before it was actually completed, and the scattering of blocks around it indicates that this was *definitely* caused by an earthquake. It is the opinion of Professor Arthur Posnansky, our foremost authority on Tiahuanaco, that this earthquake took place in the eleventh millennium BC, that it temporarily drowned the city of Tiahuanaco, and that it was followed by a series of seismic disturbances that lowered the level of the lake and made the climate colder. In short, if the ancient Aztec legend stating that Viracocha, the white god of the sea, landed on the east coast of Central America, his influence certainly travelled to the other side of the continent and he clearly came from a vast, possibly worldwide maritime civilization that may have been destroyed when the agricultural revolution of Egypt was destroyed in a series of natural disasters, when Tiahuanaco was also destroyed, and when, according to the most widely accepted date, Atlantis sank into the sea. The approximate date for all of those disasters is 11,000 to 10,000 BC.'

Having completed his lecture, the amiable van der Veer leaned back in his chair, sipped a little whiskey, then smiled at Molly, his gaze clear and steady and inviting. Molly, who still trusted few men, stared stonily at him.

'That's all very interesting,' she said, 'but you still haven't explained why Tiahuanaco is supposed to be that ancient city linked to the stars.'

'Kalasasaya,' van der Veer responded unhesitatingly. 'The Place of the Standing Stones. That enclosure was an observatory with two observation points marking the summer and winter solstices.'

'The *what*?'

'The points at which the sun is directly overhead at the Tropic of Cancer and Capricorn.'

'So?'

'No matter what date we choose for the construction of that observatory – 15,000 BC, 10,500 BC, or even, as some would suggest, wrongly I believe, 4,000 BC – it was an extraordinary achievement for its day and almost certainly the only one of its kind. So given the existence of that observatory – our evidence that the ancient, mysterious race was, for religious reasons, observing the cosmos – we can take it as read that Tiahuanaco was indeed –

and I quote again – *that majestic and long-hidden city that is linked to the stars*. Unquote. Case proven.'
'Think you're smart, don't ya?'
'Molly!' Tom warned her.
But van der Veer was merely amused. 'The question, my dear, is: *Do you*?'
'I don't fancy men who fancy themselves.'
'My loss,' van der Veer said.
'But,' Tom said, determined to keep this conversation on an even course and prevent his eccentric friend from giving vent to his baser instincts, 'what makes so many believe that the crystal skulls originated there?'
'They did *not* originate there,' van der Veer said, 'though they may have been used there. Certainly they were used in esoteric rites, though that ancient observatory would not have been used as one would naturally imagine – to scientifically study the cosmos – but to act as a link between ancient man and the stars or, in his view, the gods. So Lady Barratt-White's contention that the two crystal skulls must be returned to their source – to that long-hidden city linked to the stars – *could* suggest Tiahuanaco: the final stop on that long migration, after Yucatán and British Honduras, now Belize, where the two skulls were actually found. However, Tiahuanaco was not the source of the skulls, but was, in fact, only the final resting place of that great, mysterious civilization.'
Ever more perplexed, Tom asked, 'So if Tiahuanaco wasn't the actual source of the skulls, where *did* they originate? And who, in fact, were those pre-Mayans? Were they Mayan at all?'
Van der Veer shrugged, now so lost in his thoughts that he had even stopped fooling around with Molly. 'The Mayas are a mystery. We don't know where they came from and, in a very real sense, we don't know where they went. All we really know is that they were an extraordinary race, that they built city-states in the jungles of Central America, and that in approximately AD 600, for reasons yet to be explained, they abruptly abandoned their cities, moved to new locations in the jungle, and went into a slow decline, gradually drifting into virtual primitivism. However, given the content of Olmec and Mayan legends, we have strong grounds for believing that they evolved from that mysterious race that came to South America, probably under the leadership of Viracocha, or Thunupa, the so-called white god of the sea, and that they could have originated in Asia, possibly in Cambodia, where they

built their first great city-state: the Forbidden City of Angkor.'
'So the skulls could have originated in Angkor,' Tom concluded.
'They could have… though this ain't necessarily so. Bear in mind that the journey from Angkor to Tiahuanaco took centuries, with many lengthy stops along the way. So the skulls could have originated in any of those places: Ponape, Easter Island, or even where they were actually found: Yucatán and British Honduras.'
'Which gets us back to where we started,' Molly said sardonically.
'My apologies,' van der Veer replied, offering a sly grin. The door in the shop out front squeaked open and then closed again. 'Ah!' van der Veer exclaimed, cocking an ear and looking pleased. 'I hear the sound of a customer! I must leave you now, dear friends, and attend to my business.'
They all pushed their chairs back and stood up. Van der Veer, after giving Tom another hug, kissed the back of Molly's hand.
'You're really *very* attractive,' he said. 'Should you ever tire of helping Tom with his exercises, please give me a call.'
'You'll be lucky,' Molly said.
Van der Veer bellowed with laughter, then led Tom and Molly back into the shop where a lone customer, longhaired and wearing a brightly-beaded kaktan, with thongs on his bare feet, was perusing a shelf of occult books. Just as Tom and Molly were about to leave, Van der Veer called out to the former, saying, 'I've got something rattling in the back of my head, but I can't quite dredge it up. Come and see me again.'
'I will,' Tom promised. Then he and Molly walked back out into the busy street where, unexpectedly, the sun shone warmly upon them, and Molly, as mysterious as all women and ancient races, shook her head slowly from side to side and smiled to herself.

Chapter Twenty-One

'Let's go for another drink,' Tom said as they walked away from van der Veer's shop, warmed by the sunshine and, in Tom's case, pleased to be surrounded by the denselypacked pedestrians, many of whom were tourists, either avidly snapping pictures with mostly digital cameras or studying breeze-blown maps of London. Tom preferred to be in a crowd these days. He felt safer when not alone.

‘You’ve already had two pints of that awful English bitter,’ Molly said. ‘You should be drunk already.’
‘Well, I’m not and I’m thirsty.’
‘You’re always thirsty when it comes to liquor, Tom. That stuff poisons your system.’
‘You drink your Coca-Cola and I’ll drink my beer. So why are you grinning?’
‘Nothing.’
‘You’re not the kind to grin over nothing, so I repeat: Why are you grinning?’
‘I was thinking of your friend van der Veer – what a card he is.’
‘Liked him, did you?’
‘Not at first, but then he kinda grew on me. He’s not as bad as he acts.’
‘He’s a dreadful womanizer,’ Tom said, feeling obscurely threatened, ‘and can’t understand why I’m not the same.’
‘Yeah, I gathered he’d like to corrupt you.’
‘He’s always trying,’ Tom said.
‘And of course he hasn’t a hope in hell of succeeding.’
‘What does that mean?’ Tom was affronted. ‘Are you suggesting that I’m some kind of puritan?’
‘Well, you certainly weren’t last night,’ Molly reminded him.
‘Don’t bring that up again,’ Tom said. ‘Particularly not after the way you behaved with that insatiable womanizer back there.’
‘Hey, hold on! I put the guy off!’
‘He certainly didn’t seem to think so. And now you have the cheek to tell me you like him. Why not go back and ask him for a date? I’m sure he’ll oblige.’
Molly grinned again. ‘What’s this I hear? Jealousy?’
‘I’m merely putting matters straight. If I’m not allowed to complain about you and van der Veer, you’ve no right to complain about me and that woman, Mai Suphar. She could have killed me, for goodness sake, and all *you* can think about is what we *might* have done on that bed. Now, after being groped by van der Veer, you have the cheek to tell me that you *like* him. Well, thanks very much!’
‘You’re jealous. That’s why you’re angry – and that’s why I’m grinning. You’re in love with me, Tom.’
‘Please don’t embarrass me, Molly.’
Grinning and shaking her head ruefully, Molly stopped when they came to

traffic lights and then turned to face him. ‘Okay,’ she said, ‘let’s change the subject.’
‘Yes,’ Tom said, ‘let’s do that.’
‘I don’t care what your friend says,’ Molly told him. ‘When I looked too deeply into that crystal skull, I saw stars inside it. Later, when we were rescued by that saucershaped light on the road to the airport in Mexico City, we *both* saw stars inside it. Finally, when you and that black widow spider – ’
‘Molly!’ Tom interjected as a warning.
‘When you and that Thai woman were surrounded in your room last night by that weird light, you saw stars either inside or through those ghostly creatures.’
‘Correct,’ Tom said. ‘So?’
‘*Stars*, Tom! The common denominator is *stars*! So I’m convinced more than ever that Lady Barratt-White was right and that the crystal skulls belong to that city linked to the stars. In short… *Tiahuanaco!*’
‘So?’
‘So I say that we should try to get our hands on that other crystal skull and then make a tidy packet by taking both skulls to Tiahuanaco, as requested by Lady BarrattWhite.’
Though the sun was shining, its light falling over the grey grandeur of the Victorian and Georgian buildings along the road, over the milling pedestrians, and over the jammed traffic that was belching acrid fumes, a chill, unseasonal wind was rising and Tom yearned more than ever for a cosy pub – for the warmth, if not the drink. Molly, however, was deeply engrossed in her thoughts and seemed extremely excited.
‘And how, pray,’ Tom asked, ‘do we get our hands on the crystal skull stolen by Mai Suphar, aka Anna Chow?’
‘Well, you *did* confirm that she was from Thailand and she said that she’d come from Bangkok at the behest – note the fancy word, Tom – of that criminal, Lu Thong. Now, given that she intended killing you anyway, to prevent you from repeating what she’d told you, my bet is that she told the truth about certain things and that Lu Thong is a real guy and that she *will* take the crystal skull back to him in Bangkok, where both of them live.’
‘So we fly to Bangkok and look up this Mr Lu Thong…?’
‘That’s right,’ Molly said.
Tom couldn’t believe his ears, but he tried to be patient with her. ‘So how do

we *find* Mr Lu Thong once we get to Bangkok?'
'He's probably in the phone book.'
'You think so?'
'Yeah. Why not? Most criminals in America have phones and most of them are listed. And if *they* are, Lu Thong probably is as well.'
'And if he happens to be a criminal who likes his privacy?'
'If he's as criminal as that bitch Mai Suphar says he is, then, even if he's not in the phone book, he's going to be known to practically everyone living around the Bangkok railway station. He won't be hard to track down.'
'So says the street-wise Brooklyn girl.'
'You don't have to be sarcastic, Tom. I *do* know more than you about certain things.'
'Criminal things.'
'Yeah, right.'
'But if he's as criminal as Mai Suphar says, my dear Molly, he's unlikely to hand the crystal skull back – not without a fight.'
'So we fight him. We outwit the bastid and get the crystal skull back, one way or the other.'
'You really think we can do that, Molly?'
'Yeah, I think so.'
'I think you're mad, Molly, truly demented, and I don't want to hear another word. Come on, let's go for that drink.'
They started walking again, but only managed to cover a few yards before Molly tugged him to a standstill and looked grimly at him. 'So what do you suggest, buddy?'
Tom took a deep breath and let it out nervously. 'What I suggest, Molly, is that we accept that we're out of our depth, that we could be in serious danger, and that we get rid of our crystal skull by giving it to the Museum of Mankind in return for the one that was stolen. Then we forget this whole nightmarish business and return to our normal lives.'
'You're scared.'
'Yes,' Tom confessed, 'I am. But for both of us, Molly. It's insane to think of flying to Bangkok to confront a notorious professional criminal who'd have no compunction about killing us. I'm not going. Forget it.'
'I'm not giving back my crystal skull,' Molly insisted, 'and if necessary, I'll go to Bangkok alone.'

‘Then you’ll go without your crystal skull,’ Tom said, ‘because I’ve got it in the safe in my club and I’m going to give it to the Museum of Mankind.’
Molly was furious. ‘You can’t do that! I gave it to you in good faith. You’ve got to give it back, Tom.’
‘No, Molly, I won’t. I refuse to help you with this. I know that in this instance I’m betraying your trust, but believe me, I’m doing it for your own good and I won’t change my mind.’
‘You bastid!’
‘Sticks and stones, Molly.’
‘Okay,’ Molly said, changing her tack. ‘Then just let me remind you that the minute you enter that museum, even with the crystal skull, they’ll have you arrested for the theft of *their* skull and probably thrown in jail. I hope to hell you rot there!’
With that, she turned away and walked off.
Tom watched her go, feeling indecisive, realizing that this situation was even more complicated and dangerous than he had previously imagined. He still felt like a drink, but didn’t want to drink alone, and then, recalling van der Veer’s parting words, he turned back to see him again. When he entered the shop, the hippie-styled customer had left and only van der Veer was present, sitting behind his cash register and reading a book. When he saw Tom, he grinned.
‘Back already!’ he said. ‘Where’s the lovely Molly?’
‘She said she couldn’t stand any more of your groping and wanted to go straight back to her hotel.’
‘She’s waiting for my phone call,’ van der Veer said, but he grinned again and spread his hands in the air, as if pleading for mercy. ‘I tried it on and was rejected,’ he said. ‘You should be proud of her, Tom.’
‘I am,’ Tom said decisively. ‘You said something was rattling about in your head. Do you recall what it was?’
Van der Veer nodded. ‘Yes, I think so.’ He came around the counter and showed Tom the book he had been reading. It was Carl Jung’s *Flying Saucers: A Modern Myth of Things Seen in the Sky*.
‘Know of him?’ van der Veer asked.
‘Of course I do. The famous Swiss psychologist and psychiatrist, a disciple of Freud, who happened to have an interest in UFOs.’
‘Right. And in this book he speculates that UFOs may either be psychic

projections resulting from our need to believe in a higher power, or, failing that, manifestations from the racial memory of the whole of mankind.'
'Is that what was rattling about in your head when you weren't too busy making advances on Molly?'
'Not quite,' van der Veer said, acknowledging Tom's sarcastic comment with a grin, but otherwise ignoring it. 'But it *is* part of it. Let's close the shop and go to the British Museum. I've got something to show you.'
Van der Veer put on his jacket, an old tweed with leather elbows, then locked the shop and led Tom along the crowded sidewalk, talking as they walked.
'I have to confess,' he said, 'that I was pretty intrigued by those stories you told me about what Molly saw in the crystal skull, what both of you experienced on the road to the airport in Mexico City, and what happened to you in that room in your club.'
'The common denominator, as Molly pointed out, being *stars*.'
'Well, that's true enough,' van der Veer responded. 'You two certainly see an awful lot of stars. You have stars in your eyes.'
'Does that mean we're in love?' Tom asked anxiously.
'I think so,' van der Veer said. 'However, what really fascinated me about the stories was the saucer-shaped light that you saw on the road to the Mexico City airport and the ghostly figures, also seemingly composed of light or some other incorporeal substance, in your room in the club. You said that the ghostly figures, though faceless, looked feminine.'
'That's right,' Tom said. 'I don't know why I thought that, because, as you reminded me, they had no features and their bodies were nothing more than thin blades of light. I had the impression that they had arms and maybe legs, but I can't even be sure of that. I only know that they struck me as being feminine. Something to do with them being so slim and the way they moved like reeds in a wind
– it was graceful and sensual. Does that sound mad to you?'
'It intrigues me,' van der Veer said, 'and it jolted my memory. So I've something to show you. After you left, I phoned a friend in the museum and he should have taken the item off the shelves by now. I think *you'll* be intrigued.'
They arrived at the museum in a matter of minutes and van der Veer led Tom straight to the manuscript department where he introduced him to his friend, William Claxton, the present head of the department. Claxton was short and

portly, with a round, pink, kindly face, two tufts of snowywhite hair above each big ear, and a bald head that shone like a polished eggshell in the bright strip-lighting. He was seated behind his desk with a finely bound antique book in front of him. When he had been introduced to Tom and shaken his hand, he pushed the book over to him and van der Veer, both seated at the other side of the desk.

'I've already been through it,' he said, 'and marked the pages you want with slips of paper. Now I'm off for a quick cup of tea. I'll be back in five minutes. Is that enough time for you?'

'That's enough,' van der Veer said. 'And thanks a hell of a lot.'

'My pleasure,' Mr Caxton said, then he left the office.

Tom glanced at the cover of the book. It was entitled *The Dresden Codex*.

'This is a reproduction,' van der Veer explained, 'of one of the only four surviving Mayan books. It is thus extremely rare and invaluable.' Sitting close to Tom, he opened the book where a paper slip had been inserted by Mr Caxton. Tom found himself staring down at the drawings and name glyphs of two women from ancient times. 'The young Moon Goddess and the old Moon Goddess,' van der Veer informed him. 'The hieroglyphics on these pages suggest a Mayan belief that at some stage in their earliest history, in a place, quote, *where the sun always sets* – the west, possibly Angkor – a light – and I quote again – *brighter than the sun* – brought to Earth the Old and Young Moon Goddesses – the only gods in the whole Mayan pantheon ever to take human form.'

Looking at the drawings of the ancient goddesses, Tom recalled the ghostly figures in his room in the club and felt that he was seeing their faces. A shiver ran down his spine.

'Are you suggesting,' he said, hardly knowing where to begin, 'that those ghostly figures I mentioned are…?'

'Wait!' Van der Veer raised his index finger for silence. Then he quickly flipped over more pages and scanned one intently. 'These hieroglyphics,' he said, pointing to the relevant place on the page, 'also indicate that the two goddesses, after inspiring the Mayans, or pre-Mayans, to their earliest great achievements, possibly including – I quote again – *that great migration to where the sun rises* – pined to return to their spiritual state, but eventually died an Earthly death. The high priests then made replicas of their skulls in crystal, in the belief that the crystal, containing magical properties, would

retain their souls.'
Van der Veer closed the book and turned to look directly at Tom. 'Therefore,' he said, 'the two crystal skulls are almost certainly the magical replicas of the two Mayan goddesses, designed to house their souls, and made either in Angkor, before the great migration commenced, or at some point during the centuries-long journey from Angkor to Tiahuanaco.'
Tom closed his eyes and tried imagining the two faces he had just seen as drawings in the *Dresden Codex* superimposed on the faceless creatures that he'd been haunted by in his room. When he did that, he then visualized arms and legs on those sensuously swaying, glowing, feminine forms. Shocked, he opened his eyes again.
'What are you saying?' he asked.
'What I'm saying is that flying saucers may indeed spring from a racial memory of mankind, and that as you and Molly were protected by a star-filled light shaped like a flying saucer, it could well have been a manifestation from the ancient past. What I'm saying is that the crystal skulls could have magical powers, because they do indeed house the souls of those two Mayan goddesses and they're protecting you because you are, in a sense, protecting *them*. Finally, what I'm saying is that the ghostly figures, filled with stars, that you saw in your room, struck you as being distinctly feminine, so they could have been the souls of the moon goddesses, incorporeal but made visible as star-filled light. Those crystal skulls, Tom, have magical properties and may form a bridge between Earth and the Otherworld, where the souls of the goddesses still reside. I don't exactly know what this means – I can't speculate – but there's certainly a great mystery to be solved here, and now you're part of it. You and Molly, of course.'
Reminded of Molly, Tom felt love and fear at once, but realized that he must now complete the journey that they had, accidentally, begun together. Given what he had just learned in this office – and what he had experienced in his room the previous evening – he had little choice.
'I'd better find that other crystal skull,' he said.
'It might be worth it,' van der Veer said. 'All you can lose is your life.'
Grinning, he pushed the *Dresden Codex* back across to Mr Claxton's side of the desk just as the latter came back into the office. 'Finished?' he asked.
'Yes,' van der Veer replied, pushing his chair back and standing up. Tom did the same. 'Thanks a million for that.'

‘That’s an odd thing to be studying,’ Mr Claxton said.
‘I’m an odd man,’ van der Veer replied, then he shook hands with Mr Claxton, as did Tom, and they both left the office and then made their way back out of the museum.
‘Fascinating,’ Tom said when they were about to take their leave from one another just outside the main gates. ‘I suppose I’d better go and see Molly, tell her all about this, and let her know that I’ve changed my mind about Bangkok.’
‘You do that,’ van der Veer said, ‘and also give her my warmest regards and phone number.’
‘No way,’ Tom said.
‘So what’s she like in bed?’ van der Veer asked. ‘That’s *my* business,’ Tom said.
‘You pitiful, inhibited English!’ van der Veer said with a grin, then he gave Tom an affectionate hug, bade him farewell, and hurried across the road to disappear into the Museum Tavern.
Longing for a drink himself, but now feeling compelled to see Molly as soon as possible, Tom caught a taxi to her hotel. Entering the building, he went straight to her room, intending to knock on the door and, when she opened it, kiss her full on the lips and finally confess that he loved her.
Her room door was open.
Surprised, then instinctively feeling nervous, Tom timidly called out her name, but received no response. Even more nervous, he opened the door farther and entered the room.
The first thing he saw was that the bed was unmade and looked unusually rumpled – as if a struggle had taken place upon it or around it.
The second thing he saw was a glittering hypodermic syringe, lying on the crumpled sheets near the pillows.
Shocked, Tom picked up the syringe to examine it and saw instantly that the serum had been ejected, indicating that the syringe had been used.
And Molly had vanished.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Heartbroken and shattered, convinced that Molly had been killed by Mai Suphar using the same toxin that she had tried to inject into him, Tom hurried

out of the hotel and made his way back to his club. Unable to bear the thought of being in his room alone, realizing that he was near to tears, and finding it impossible to shake from his head the thought that Molly had been murdered because Mai Suphar must have imagined that she still had the crystal skull, he asked the porter to conduct him to the communal safe in the basement, where he checked that the crystal skull was still there. It was. Relieved to know this, but trembling with grief and disbelief (the porter noticed his distress and asked if he was alright), he still avoided his room and instead went into the bar for a drink, hoping that it would settle him down and enable him to think more clearly.

The drink didn't help much.

He had another. He couldn't think clearly at all. He kept recalling his frightening experience with Mai Suphar and imagined Molly suffering the same, but without being rescued as he had been. All too vividly, he imagined Mai Suphar hiding in Molly's room (clearly as criminal as Lu Thong, she had probably picked the lock) and pouncing upon her as soon as she walked in. Drinking too quickly, aware that his heart was racing and seemed about to burst, he suffered shocking visions of Mai Suphar wrestling Molly to the bed and then plunging the needle of the hypodermic syringe into her neck.

Tom shuddered at the thought, felt revulsion and deep pain, but could not shake from his mind the ghastly vision of Molly quivering in the spasms of death as her heart raced too quickly. He even imagined Molly lying there, dead, before being spirited away by Mai Suphar, probably with the help of some equally vicious friends, all on Lu Thong's payroll.

Mai Suphar was a murderer and obviously professional, almost certainly working for Lu Thong and knowing just what to do. She would have used some of Lu Thong's men, all professionals as well, and Tom shuddered to think of how they might have disposed of Molly's body.

A body bag, probably. Tom saw it all too clearly. He saw Mai Suphar killing Molly, the men entering the room, their expert handling of Molly's body as they slipped it into the body bag, and then their removal of that body in some ghastly, cold-blooded way.

Tom had read about such things. Such things beggared belief. He had read about psychopaths killing their victims and then cutting them up into pieces and carrying the pieces out in suitcases and burying them somewhere. Of course that meant a lot of blood. Tom groaned and sobbed at the very

thought. Then he realized that there had been no blood in Molly's room and that the carpets had not been changed.

Perhaps Molly was still alive.

No, that wasn't possible. The toxin used had been poisonous. Molly had been killed by Mai Suphar and then her body disposed of. The question was: How?

Tom broke down in tears again and saw the barman staring at him. The barman was a long way away, but he could still see Tom crying. Embarrassed, Tom tried to control himself. He wiped his eyes and took deep breaths. Closing his eyes, wanting peace, he visualized the whole scene again: Mai Suphar killing Molly, the dead body on the bed, Lu Thong's hoodlums coming into the room, pushing a wheeled laundry trolley. They slipped the dead body into a body bag, then shoved it into the trolley, then wheeled the trolley out of the room and took it down to the basement garage. Once there, they put it into their car and drove away from the hotel. They buried the body somewhere outside London and then callously went off for a drink.

'Oh, Christ!' Tom sobbed.

The bar was filling up and people were starting to look at him, so he took himself up to his bedroom, despite his fear of being there. Feeling ill, he threw up into the toilet and then had a shower. Thus refreshed, though still feeling half demented, he lay down on the bed. He didn't think he could sleep – he was too tormented – but he fell asleep instantly.

In his dreams, he saw Molly being murdered, wrapped up in a body bag, then lowered with ropes to a car waiting below at the back of the hotel. Mai Suphar and her henchmen clambered into that car and then drove away.

Tom groaned and awakened.

Was he asleep or awake? He couldn't be too sure. He recognized his room, understood that he was in bed, and then saw that familiar light materializing to surround him with stars. Then the eerie figures materialized too, slim and swaying like reeds, featureless, composed of light and stars, but definitely feminine. They closed in on the bed, looking upon him, though eyeless, and he instantly filled up with fear and rapture. Then they faded away. There was a roaring far off in the cosmos, where the stars reigned supreme, and then it turned into a sibilance that soon became a loud, nerve-shattering ringing.

Tom awoke to the ringing of the telephone on the cabinet beside his bed.

'Oh, my God!' he said. 'Christ!'

His heart was racing when he picked up the phone and gasped his own name. He heard a soft, sensual voice.
‘This is Mai Suphar, Mr Powell. I think you’ll remember me.’
Shocked almost mindless, Tom just sat there, holding the phone, aware that his hand was shaking, wondering if he was still in his dream or if this was for real.
‘Are you still there?’ Mai Suphar asked.
‘Yes,’ Tom said, ‘I’m still here.’ He reached across to the lamp on the cabinet and turned the light on. ‘What do you want?’ he asked.
‘The question is: What do *you* want?’
‘I want Molly,’ Tom said.
Mai Suphar chuckled. ‘What a sweet man!’ she said, almost crooning. ‘But what makes you think Molly’s still alive?’
‘Just tell me,’ Tom said.
There was silence for a moment and he imagined that bitch smiling, taking her time to torment him some more, getting her kicks from his suffering. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, she said, ‘Yes, she’s still alive.’
‘You injected her,’ Tom said.
‘That’s correct,’ Mai Suphar replied.
‘I had that toxin checked out and it’s lethal, so Molly must be dead.’
‘Molly’s still alive, Tom. I used a different toxin. The one I used on Molly was something else altogether and is widely used in the slave trade for the transportation of unfortunate kidnapped children who must, while being abducted and travelling under false passports, be seen to be perfectly normal and travelling willingly with adoring parents.’
‘What does that mean?’ Tom asked.
‘It’s a mesmerizing drug, affecting certain parts of the brain. Molly’s still alive, her eyes are open and she can function normally, but she’s in a deep trance and will only respond to my commands. When she does so, when she does what I tell her, she seems perfectly normal – certainly normal enough to fly to Bangkok, which is where I am taking her.’
‘*What*?’
‘I think you heard me correctly.’
‘Yes,’ Tom said, ‘I did.’
Mai chuckled again, then went silent, though Tom knew she was smiling. He

could almost feel her sadistic pleasure coming down the line as she drew the silence out to torment him. He wouldn't give her that satisfaction.
'Where are you?' he asked.
'At Heathrow Airport. Molly's standing here beside me. She's in a trance, but she looks and acts normally. We've already been through Passport Control and are now in the departure lounge, preparing to board. The plane takes off in thirty minutes – and that's why I'm calling you.'
'You want the crystal skull,' Tom said, anticipating her.
'What a bright boy you are. I want you to bring it to Lu Thong's place in Bangkok. If you don't, we'll send your precious Molly back to you in a foul-smelling body bag.'
Tom winced at the very thought of that, but refused to rise to the bait. 'And what happens if I do? What guarantee do I have that you'll let me and Molly leave there alive once you have the crystal skull?'
'You don't,' Mai Suphar said, still managing to sound sensual and seductive. 'But what's love if it isn't a gamble? Will you gamble for her, Tom?'
'Yes,' Tom said, without hesitation.
'That's so touching,' Mai Suphar said. Then her soft, seductive voice turned to ice. 'You'll find Lu Thong's phone number and address in your mailbox downstairs. You have seven days to get to Bangkok. That's seven days, Mr Powell – not a second more. We look forward to seeing you. If we don't see you within the prescribed time, your beloved Molly will disappear for good. Is that understood?'
'Yes,' Tom said, 'I understand.'
Mai Suphar chuckled again and then the line went dead, leaving Tom to fester in a silence that seemed to stretch out forever.
He was more frightened now than he had ever been in his life, yet despite this, his heart was filled with joy because Molly was still alive.
That thought gave him courage.

Part Three Chapter Twenty-Three

Arriving in Bangkok, which should have terrified him, given what he had to do, Tom was calmer than he had ever been in his life. So calm, in fact, that he was able to relax in the back of the taxi taking him from the airport to the city centre and observe in fascination the exotic world passing by outside:

first the jungle around the city, then the broad agricultural fields and industrial areas, then sprawling squatters, camps of wood-and-thatch shacks. The latter merged gradually into welfare housing estates and hundreds of Chinese shop-houses five or six storeys high, so crowded together that no motor traffic could pass between them, their linked alleyways like great cobwebs and filled with citizens wearing the diverse costumes of various Asian countries. However, only when the taxi was approaching the city-centre, where the traffic was dense and chaotic, hemming in the three-wheeled *samlor* taxis, did Tom see the Bangkok he had imagined: Colonial-andThai-style office buildings, golden-spired temples and *wats* with bell towers, the many palm-shaded canals known as *khlongs*, sidewalk vendors with steaming bowls on their wheeled carts, and, on the crowded sidewalks, saffronrobed monks, ravishing Thai girls in local and Western clothes, a strikingly diverse mixture of Asiatics, including Thais, Chinese, Indians, Burmese, Laotians, Vietnamese and, of course, many Europeans and Americans. Even given the high-rise buildings of steel, concrete and glass, Bangkok was an exotic city, and Tom, perhaps *unnaturally* calm, was pleased to be here.

After checking into his hotel, a five-star monstrosity with every imaginable luxury and an almost total absence of human warmth, he decided to forget the latter and exploit the former by relaxing in his king-sized bath, stretching out on his king-sized be, and enjoying a meal fit for a prince, even though delivered by Room Service. He then dressed in an open-necked shirt and light tropical suit, both purchased earlier in New Bond Street, London, and poured himself an excellent whiskey from his overpriced mini-bar. Finally, feeling like a new man, he removed from his billfold the phone number and address of Lu Thong, which Mai Suphar had helpfully left for him in his mail box in his club in Mayfair. No longer frightened, he dialled Lu Thong.

‘Hello, Mr Powell,’ a familiar, seductive voice said, ‘this is Mai speaking. Having seen you arriving at your hotel, we were expecting your call. Do you wish to speak to Lu Thong?’

‘Yes, please,’ Tom said.

Mai chuckled, clearly amused by his politeness, and then there was silence. Tom waited patiently. He had nowhere else to go. He also knew that these people liked playing games and were probably testing him.

Well, as Molly would say, he found himself thinking, fuck you. Fuck the whole damned lot of you. This time I won't bend.

After an interminable silence (though he thought he heard Mai chuckling again) there was the sound of hollow breathing over the line. Then the walking dead spoke.

'Mr Powell?'

'Yes,' Tom said.

The voice he had just heard sent shivers down his spine because it sounded as ethereal as the whispering of the ghostly figures who had invaded his room in Mayfair. But this wasn't a ghostly voice: it was the voice of a living person – a male person, clearly not very old, and yet jaded beyond belief. It was the voice of despair, expressing dreams that could never be realized, and it came from the dark side of that moon where haunted souls languished. Tom could not put a face to that voice, but it reached deep inside him, resurrecting every lost hope of his childhood and somehow challenging him to make them come alive again. It was, in fact, the voice of a man who could never accept that there were things he could not have: the voice of a man who could not accept that God was actually greater than he was; the voice of a child, perhaps, who had refused to grow up. Tom listened and shivered.

'I am so pleased to be speaking to you,' Lu Thong said, speaking perfect, though rather formal, English in a dry, mocking manner. 'I've been dying to meet you. Of course, I'm dying anyway – we're all doomed, are we not, from the day we are born – but I'm keen to meet a man who loves a woman so much that he will even give his life for her.'

'Is Molly alright?' Tom asked.

'Ah, the man proves my point! I practically tell him that he has come here to die and he still expresses concern for his true love. Tom, I love *you* already.'

'Just cut the crap,' Tom said.

It was a phrase he had learnt from Molly. She had taught him an awful lot. She had been teaching him all those things that he badly needed to know and he hadn't had the sense to see it. Now he loved her even more.

'Come, come, Tom,' Lu Thing said. 'Such terminology doesn't suit you. It suits Molly – this much I have learnt already – but it trips unnaturally from your tongue. I fear that little Molly has corrupted you in the most dreadful way.'

‘Is she alright?’ Tom repeated.
‘Of course,’ Lu Thong said. ‘What good would she be to me if she were not? While Molly’s alive, you are mine.’
‘I’m not yours,’ Tom said.
‘Give it time,’ Lu Thong replied.
‘I’ve come here to make a straight trade, Mr Thong. The crystal skull for Molly.’
‘You brought it, then?’
‘Yes.’
‘You are wise as well as courageous. In my pitiful world, my cesspit, my hell on Earth, I meet few like you. Alas, I have been jaded by past experience and cannot trust even a gentleman such as your own good self. How did you get the skull into Bangkok? You must tell me this, Tom. If you don’t, I won’t believe that you have it and poor Molly will suffer.’
Tom thought he was hallucinating, hearing a voice from beyond the grave, but something in that eerie voice was calling to him, inviting him to find something in himself that otherwise he might never find. That voice was a siren call.
‘You know an awful lot about me,’ Tom said. ‘I’m surprised you know so much. You had me followed in Yucatán, you had me followed in Mexico, you have the phone number and address of my club in London – so you know all about me.’
‘How true,’ Lu Thong said.
‘So knowing all about me, you must know that I have friends in high places – my academic background, my good breeding – and therefore must also know that I could use those connections to bring the skull into Bangkok.’
‘Diplomatic courier, Tom. Was that it?’
‘Yes,’ Tom said. ‘It’s now in the safe of the British Consulate, where even you can’t get at it.’
Lu Thong chuckled and made an odd humming sound that tapered off into a lengthy silence. At least, Tom thought at first that it was silence, but it wasn’t… he could hear Lu Thong breathing.
‘Sublime,’ Lu Thong said eventually. ‘What an artful creature you are, Tom.’
He was silent again, expecting Tom to say something, but Tom, knowing that he was being toyed with, decided to hold his peace.
‘But what’s the point?’ Lu Thong asked. ‘You wish to trade the skull for

Molly. If you come here, you must bring the skull or poor Molly will suffer. Why the British Consulate?'
'You'll receive the skull,' Tom said, 'when I've personally met you and ascertained with my own eyes that Molly is safe.'
There was another lengthy silence filled with Lu Thong's heavy breathing, then that voice, which had the ring of rattling bones, said, 'I'll send my car for you.'
The line went dead at Lu Thong's end.
Tom sat on at his desk, holding the telephone in his hand, listening to the hollow buzzing of the dead line as if, in its eerily unsilent silence, he could still hear Lu Thong. He felt hypnotized, slightly divorced from himself, but eventually he managed to get his senses back, and then he put the phone down.
Pouring himself another drink, he went to his window and looked out over the great curve of the Chao Phraya River, with its wide variety of boats and, beyond it, the railway station, located close to Wat Dusit, where Lu Thong had supposedly been born and raised. A likely story, Tom thought. Before coming to Bangkok, he had done his homework – studied the maps and old newspaper cuttings – and now, given Lu Thong's address by Mai, he knew that far from running the sleazy district around the railway station, Lu Thong lived like a lord in the rich man's quarter of Bang Kapi. As for Mai, far from being Lu Thong's pitiful victim, she was almost certainly his willing accomplice and every bit as ruthless as her friend. Tom knew that they intended killing him, but even that didn't worry him any more.
Lu Thong was prompt. Fifteen minutes after the phone call, Tom received a call from Reception, informing him that a lady was waiting for him downstairs in the lobby. Fully aware of who that lady was, Tom made his way down to the lobby where he saw Mai Suphar in all her glory, as dazzlingly beautiful as she had been in London and possibly even more so with her shiny black hair hanging to her perfect rump and her ravishing body encased tightly in a Malaysian-style *cheongsam* of silvery-white Thai silk. Taking a deep breath and then letting it out slowly, Tom walked up to her and stared steadily, fearlessly, at her.
'So,' he said.
Mai offered her most dazzling smile. 'How nice to see you again, Tom. It's been far too long.'

‘Let’s go,’ Tom said.
Realizing that Tom was not as timid as he had been previously, but merely amused by this knowledge, Mai smiled at him again and then led him out of the hotel, her broad hips moving like a metronome under her slim waist and above those long, exquisite legs balanced neatly on high heels. A Chinese chauffeur wearing a black suit, black tie, white shirt and black peaked cap was standing by a metallic-grey Mercedes Benz, and when Mai and Tom approached, he bowed slightly, then opened the rear door to let them get in.
Sitting beside the murderous Thai beauty as the Mercedes moved off, Tom was uncomfortably aware of her presence and of the fact that she had deliberately sat as close as possible to him, her shoulder pressing against his shoulder, her hip touching his hip, meanwhile crossing one golden leg over the other to let her *cheongsam*, slit up both sides, expose a teasing length of smooth thigh. Still dangerously seductive, she was clearly toying with him, but he wasn’t about to fall for it this time and steeled himself to resist her.
‘I’m glad you came, Tom,’ she said, almost crooning, her voice like honey and yoghurt. ‘Mr Thong is looking forward to meeting you. I’ve told him so much about you.’
‘I’m looking forward to meeting him,’ Tom responded. ‘You’ve told me so much about him.’
Mai noted the sarcasm and smiled. ‘Why, Tom, I think you’re actually being wicked – and I *do* like wicked men.’
‘Is Molly really alright?’
‘Why shouldn’t she be? Any bad that befalls her will happen later, when she’s no longer of use to us.’
‘You said that drug had put her into a trance state. What state is she in now?’
‘She’s perfectly normal, Tom. The effects of the drug have worn off. I only needed her pacified for the flight, which was made without incident. Now, though our prisoner, she’s enjoying a life of luxury while pining to be rescued by her hero. Will you rescue her, Tom?’
‘I’ll certainly try,’ Tom said.
Mai uncrossed her legs, crossed them the other way, then turned her head to stare directly at Tom, breathing into his face. Her slight smile showed off her flawless white teeth and the pink of her wicked tongue. ‘Why bother with a little frump like Molly when you can have a woman like me?’
‘You’re a black widow spider,’ Tom said. ‘I’d end up being breakfast.’

Mai chuckled and that and tickled Tom's chin with her index finger, which had, he noted, an unusually long, crimson-painted nail that could have slashed his face open. He pulled his chin back, out of range.
'So what happens to Molly if I don't manage to get her out of there?'
'You won't get her out. When you hand over the crystal skull – and I'm sure you will, in the end – your dear Molly will either die or end up as one of Lu Thong's playthings, to be used personally by him before being handed over to one of his thugs and then sent into a brothel. She will just disappear, Tom.'
'You're an exceptionally nice crowd of people.'
'Survival is all. Life is hard in exotic Bangkok, so we must do as we have to do. Would you like a kiss, Tom?'
'No, thanks,' Tom said.
Clearly admiring Tom's new-found courage and insolence, Mai continued to flirt with him until the Mercedes turned into the driveway that snaked between expansive lawns and tropical foliage to the entrance of Lu Thong's large, secluded residence in Bang Kapi. As Tom emerged from the car, relieved to escape the close proximity of Mai Suphar, he noted that the electrified gates had closed behind him and that the house was protected by high-tech surveillance systems and well-armed security guards who could be seen even now patrolling the grounds. This did not augur well for him.
'You like it?' Mai asked, coming up to stand beside him at the wide steps leading up to the front door.
'Very nice,' Tom said, taking note of the many palm trees, rainbow orchids, and other exotic flora and fauna that enhanced the broad smooth green lawns. 'More modest than I'd imagined it to be.'
'Lu Thong is a modest man.'
There was a big ape by the front door, Chinese, wearing a black suit, but he stepped aside when Mai and Tom approached, letting the former press the door bell. When a tinny voice came out of the intercom, authorizing Mai's entry, the big ape opened the door with his personal key and then stepped aside to let them walk in. When the guard closed the door behind him, Tom heard the key turning in the lock and then being removed. He was now trapped inside.
'Nice, isn't it?' Mai said.
'Very nice,' Tom replied.
Mai led him across an expansive lobby with marble tiles, exotic carpets and

wall hangings, as well as a proliferation of what clearly were rare, doubtless stolen, Thai and Vietnamese antiques. Following Mai through a doorway off the lobby, Tom found himself in an equally expansive, luxurious, Oriental lounge with bamboo furniture, more exotic carpets and wall hangings, and a panoramic window overlooking the high-rise buildings of the city.

In front of that window, a man wearing a dressing gown of Thai silk was seated on velvet cushions on the floor, his black-haired head bowed over a glass-topped bamboo table on which tiny piles of what looked like baking soda were laid out in a straight line along the edge.

The crystal skull stolen from the Museum of Mankind was resting on the glass-topped table close to the man's head.

The man sniffed some of the powder up through one nostril, then raised his head to gaze at the ceiling and take a deep breath, before sighing with either relief or pleasure. The sigh turned into a loud gasp, then he lowered his head again to stare steadily at Tom, studying him at length.

'Well, well,' he said, after a long silence, his voice as soft as a breeze on dry sand, suggesting vast desolation. 'Who have we here?'

'This is Tom Powell,' Mai said. 'He's just *dying* to meet you.'

Lu Thong smiled, but that smile was ice and fire, striking Tom as the grimace of a man who was yearning for death. Tom was shocked by what he saw, though he didn't quite know why, since Lu Thong was very much like the voice that he had heard on the telephone… disembodied… not quite real. He was handsome, certainly, in a rather wan way, but his features, though unusually delicate, seemed oddly tormented, the face appearing to be stripped to the bone, all angles and flat planes. His brown eyes were beautiful, almost soulful, but also sleepy from drugs and imbued with that inner luminescence often seen in the dying. Undernourished, he seemed as insubstantial as a wisp of smoke. When he smiled again, the smile did not reach his eyes, which were focused elsewhere, almost certainly inward.

'And I've been dying to meet *you*,' he said to Tom, indicating with an airy wave of his hand that Tom should come to the table. 'Please, Mr Powell, be seated. We have so much to talk about.'

Tom sat on the velvet cushions that had been placed on the floor around the table. He sat directly facing Lu Thong, and Mai then sat beside him, tugging the *cheongsam* up over her knees as she curled her legs beneath her. Lu Thong studied Mai's lovely legs at length, and then smiled at Tom.

‘May I just begin,’ he said, ‘by saying how much I admire your courage in coming all this way to rescue dear Molly.’
‘Where is she?’ Tom asked.
‘She is here,’ Lu Thong informed him, ‘and perfectly safe. You will get to see her in due course.’
‘That’s why I’m here,’ Tom said.
‘And your crystal skull?’
‘You’ll get that when Molly’s back in my hotel. We’ll have to come to some kind of an arrangement.’
‘What makes you think that when you give me the crystal skull I won’t terminate you, not to mention dear Molly?’
‘I’ll worry about that when the time comes. Now let’s discuss how to do this.’
Lu Thong smiled again. He seemed genuinely amused. ‘Alas, Tom, we have to talk first. That’s really why I blackmailed you into coming here.’
‘What do we have to talk about?’
‘We’ve tried before to kill you, Tom.’ He nodded to indicate Mai Suphar. ‘We tried to kill you in Mexico City, we tried again in London, but in both instances some very strange things happened and your life was miraculously saved. We are talking about the paranormal, Tom, and that’s one of my many interests. You’re being protected by the magical powers of the crystal skulls and I’d like to know why. To understand it, or at least to attempt to do so, I have to talk with you.’
Tom shrugged. ‘Talk away.’
Lu Thong sighed. ‘You are being impertinent, Tom. but I admire that. It will not, I assure you, lengthen your life, but I still have to admire it.’
He bowed over the table, sniffed up another line of cocaine, put his head back to breathe it in, then let his breath out with a long sigh, ending with another gasp of relief or pleasure. Lowering his head again, he stared at Tom with his sleepy, yet oddly intent, gaze, looking out from somewhere deep within himself, where his demons resided.
‘Did you know, Tom,’ he asked, ‘that I have a particular interest in antiquity?’
‘No,’ Tom said, ‘I didn’t.’
‘In fact,’ Lu Thong continued in his quietly mesmerizing manner, ‘I possess one of the world’s greatest collections of illegally-gained antiques – one that

you, given your particular interests, would kill to have in your home.'
'I doubt that,' Tom said.
'There's nothing you would kill for?'
'No.'
'Not even Molly?'
'Perhaps for Molly,' Tom said.
Lu Thong smiled at Mai Suphar. 'Did you hear that, my dark beauty? Tom would kill for his little Molly. Such love is unknown to me and you. We may be the less for it.'
'We can live without it,' Mai said. 'I can assure you of that.'
Nodding, still smiling, Lu Thong turned back to Tom, and said, 'Anyway, dear Tom, to return to the subject at hand…One of my most prized possessions is an item so rare that even the specialists in this particular field have long argued as to whether or not it actually exists.' He waited for Tom to respond, but when Tom, wanting to slight him, resisted doing so, he continued, unperturbed: 'It is the famous lost book of early Mayan history: the legendary *Mérida Codex*, a book of pre-Pleistocene MesoAmerican history, which proves that the Mayans came from a mysterious, more ancient race. At the dawn of time, that particular race migrated over the centuries from their first holy city at Angkor, in what is now Cambodia, to Polynesia, Easter Island, the Yucatán peninsula, including what is now British Honduras, and, finally, to the area that's now divided into Bolivia and Peru. There, by the shores of Lake Titicaca, they built Tiahuanaco, also known as the great city of the stars.'
'I know all that,' Tom said.
Ignoring Tom's deliberate rudeness, refusing to be baited, Lu Thong stood up, moving with possibly deliberate weariness, and went to the bookshelves lining one of the walls. It was clear to Tom, from one glimpse of those bookshelves, that they contained a magnificent collection of rare books and parchments, most of them almost certainly stolen. After removing one of the books, a superbly bound antique volume, from the top shelf, Lu Thong returned to his place at the far side of the table, sitting again on the velvet cushions and opening the volume to gaze down at certain pages. He studied the pages as if in a trance of quiet delight, then raised his head and returned his sleepily intense gaze to Tom, who noticed, for the first time, that Lu Thong appeared never to blink. Tom found this disconcerting.

‘This,’ Lu Thong said, tapping the opened book with a delicate finger, ‘is the legendary *Mérida Codex*, so named because it was discovered in archaeological diggings in Mérida, which is, as you know, near Chichén Itzá. Now what the book tells us, Tom, is that at the dawn of Mayan history, when the Mayans were another race altogether, located mostly around the holy city of Angkor, disembodied alien beings materialized on or *in* Earth – *in* Earth in the sense that they may have accidentally tumbled out of another sphere of existence, or parallel universe, rather than from a distant galaxy.’

Lu Thong paused to let his words sink in, and Tom did, indeed, take them in, though deliberately he offered no response. Gazing steadily at him, as if taking his measure and finding him worthy of serious consideration, Lu Thong offered his diabolical smile and continued his monologue.

‘Those disembodied beings,’ he said, speaking softly, calmly, as if this were the most normal conversation in the world, ‘while being sexless as we know it, were of a female, or, rather, feminine nature and could inhabit the material bodies of human beings. However, two of them were trapped accidentally inside some Earthlings: priestesses of that ancient, mysterious race. Unable to escape from their physical prisons, the aliens turned their human hosts into the living embodiment of their formerly incorporeal selves. Which meant, in effect, that those two human beings, both female, looked perfectly normal, but had inherited the magical powers possessed by the aliens.’

‘This is ridiculous,’ Tom said.

‘It’s the truth,’ Lu Thong insisted. ‘Just think of what occurred on that road to the airport in Mexico City. We also know what took place when you and Mai, a naughty twosome, were in the bedroom of your club in Mayfair, London. A saucer-shaped, star-filled light – that was on the road to the airport – followed, later, by alien presences in the room in your private members’ club. Those were not hallucinations, Tom – you were protected – so please don’t treat this as foolishness.’

‘Alright,’ Tom said, vividly recalling both instances and shaken again by the recollections. ‘I am all ears. Continue.’

‘Oh, I will, Tom. I will…’

Lu Thong bowed his head to sniff up another line of cocaine, to put his head back and breathe deeply and sigh and gasp loudly with pleasure or relief. This task completed, he returned his sleepy, eerily penetrating gaze to Tom. His brown eyes were unblinking.

‘The two aliens in human form, being possessed of magical powers, were treated by the primitive pre-Mayans as goddesses, and eventually, since they had come from the sky in – you know the quote, Tom – *a light brighter than the sun* – were named the Old Goddess of the Moon and the Young Goddess of the Moon, both of whom are illustrated and annotated in the four rare Mayan Codexes.’

After staring steadily, thoughtfully at Tom, he studied his stolen Méridan Codex in a contemplative, dreamy manner, but eventually, with a sigh, looked up again.

‘Though pining to return to their spiritual, or, as we would have it, *alien* state of being,’ he continued, speaking and looking like death warmed up, ‘the two goddesses died a normal, Earthly death. Shocked by this loss, the high priests of that ancient, pre-Mayan civilization made replicas of the skulls of the two goddesses. Believing that crystal possesses magical properties, they carved the skulls from quartz crystal, thereby hoping to retain, or imprison, the souls of the aliens and, at the same time, turn the skulls into magical objects of worship. In this, they succeeded.’

Lu Thong glanced at Mai Suphar, still sitting beside Tom, her long, golden legs curled beneath her, displaying a good deal of teasing thigh. Lu Thong’s sleepy gaze travelled the length of those legs, all the way up to the crotch, then he sighed, as if saddened by his base, Earthly desires, and turned his gaze back on Tom.

‘However,’ Lu Thong continued, as if sermonizing in a temple, ‘the others in that essentially feminine, selfpropagating alien species – whose consciousness, incidentally, forms a single entity – could not rest while the souls of their two lost sisters were missing. Thus, they tried repeatedly over the centuries – time is meaningless to the disembodied – to break through to the space called Earth – though solid to us, a mere space to them – and draw their lost sisters back to their own sphere of incorporeal existence. Those failed attempts to cross over into the material world have been witnessed throughout the centuries by many disbelieving human beings… in the shape of ghosts, UFOs, and aliens – just like the ones seen by you and Molly, and, indeed, by Mai Suphar.’ He nodded at Mai to let her know that he had not forgotten her. ‘There the story ends, Tom.’

‘Or begins,’ Tom replied.

Lu Thong offered another deathly smile. ‘How perceptive you are, Tom.

Talking to you is certainly not a waste of time. So where does this lead us?'
'You tell *me*,' Tom said.
'Please humour me, Tom.'
'The crytal skulls,' Tom said, 'must be returned to their source, that majestic and hidden city linked to the stars – namely, Tiahuanaco, in Peru – in order that their magical powers can be united. When that happens, the two alien beings trapped in space and time will be released back to their own incorporeal world, where space and time have no meaning.'
'Very good,' Lu Thong responded. 'You're close, Tom, but not quite right. Why do you think I still live here in Bangkok, which I loathe to the depths of my weary bones?'
'I don't know,' Tom said. 'Why?'
Lu Thong bowed his head to sniff up another line of cocaine, before, with eyes ever more intense yet faraway, he could reveal to Tom the secrets of his blighted soul. 'Because, dear Tom, I've always wanted to experience *everything* – money beyond counting, prestige beyond imagining, sex beyond all moral restraints, and finally, limitless power on Earth. And now that I have all that, which I do - believe me, Tom, I have it all – there is only one thing left for me to do… To unravel the ultimate mystery of what lies beyond this mortal, seemingly meaningless, world.'
'Through the crystal skulls,' Tom said.
'Correct,' Lu Thong said. 'This is the knowledge that the crystal skulls will reveal if they're returned to their source.'
'Which isn't in Bangkok,' Tom said tartly.
'Nor in Peru, my insolent young friend. Tiahuanaco was the *end* of the pre-Mayans migration from west to east; but the *beginning* of that migration – the origin of the crystal skulls – was the forbidden city of Angkor, in what is now Cambodia, bordering Thailand.'
He straightened his spine, raised his hands above his head, clasped his fingers together and cracked his knuckles. Tom imagined those fingers crushing human bones, and was reminded of just how dangerous this extremely handsome, seemingly wasted man was.
As if reading Tom's mind, Lu Thong lowered his arms and leaned forward with a tight, challenging smile.
'Look at me, Tom.'
Tom stared steadily at him, trying to stare him down, but he felt that he was

being drawn into those brown eyes, which had the fires of hell in them. Tom had to forcibly shake himself out of this reverie and lower his gaze.
‘Could I mesmerize you with my eyes?’ Lu Thong asked him.
‘I think you could,’ Tom confessed.
‘Yes, Tom, indeed I could. Eyes can certainly mesmerize. Yet while Molly was mesmerized by the eye *sockets* of the crystal skulls, she was not mesmerized by its *eyes*, which, of course, are missing.’ He pointed to the macabre crystal skull on the table to make this point clear, then he turned back to Tom. ‘They’re missing, but they’re still there in spirit. So how can this be?’
‘Just tell me,’ Tom said.
‘Ah, Tom, you are impatient! This I like very much. You need to solve this mystery as much as I do – and this will make you my victim. But that, of course, is for later.’
‘Yes,’ Tom said impatiently, ‘of course. Now what about the missing eyes?’
‘It is said that the skulls’ eyes, which are also made of magically endowed quartz crystal, are located beneath a stone slab on the summit of Ta Keo, the first of the two great royal cities in the holy city of Angkor. Fearful that the power of the skulls would be exploited for evil, the high priests removed the eyes from them, which vastly reduced their powers, and buried them under a stone slab on top of Angkor’s first great temple mount. Only then did they begin their mass migration eastward, taking the eyeless skulls with them, leaving behind not only their magnificent holy city, but also the seeds of that city’s future Khmer civilization. Centuries later, near the end of their epic journey, for reasons now lost in the mists of prehistory, they buried the two eyeless skulls in separate places in the Yucatán Peninsula – one, as we now know, in Chichén Itzá, the other in British Honduras, now Belize – and then ventured forth to their final destination and ultimate destiny: to create the holy city of Tuahuanaco, Peru, and there, where the sun rises to mark the dawn, raise their great Sun Gate as a bridge between west and east, between the past and the future.’
‘And the crystal skulls?’
‘When the hidden crystal eyes are placed back in the empty sockets of the crystal skulls, another bridge between past and future, between the Here and the There, will be created, uniting the Earth to that other world of incorporeal, star-filled alien life.’ Lu Thong leaned forward again, to hold Tom’s attention

with his opaque, mesmerizing gaze. ‘Do you understand, Tom? That’s why I still live in this cesspit. Because Bangkok is the gateway to Cambodia – and there, in the jungle, in the once-holy city of Angkor, will be found… the true meaning of existence.’
‘You sound almost religious,’ Tom said sarcastically, though he felt the return of a fear that went beyond the fear of death.
‘My religion is limitless power,’ Lu Thong replied, ‘and the crystal skulls could make me omnipotent.’ ‘Oh?’ Tom remained sceptical. ‘How?’
Lu Thong was all too pleased to explain, and did so, though still speaking softly, with uncommon fervour. ‘The lost souls of the two aliens can only be released and returned to their own sphere of existence when the crystal eyes are placed back in the empty eye sockets of the skulls and then laid to rest at their source – in Ta Keo, the first royal temple of Angkor. I cannot be sure, but I think it very likely that whoever does that will gain the powers possessed by the aliens – the ultimate power on Earth.’
Lu Thong leaned back again, releasing Tom, smiling thinly at him. ‘So, my friend, you will die here in Bangkok, while I go to Angkor with the two crystal skulls… to either find unimaginable horror or become…’
His voice trailed off into a resonant, tingling silence… and at last his drugged eyes actually blinked. Leaning forward, he sniffed up some more cocaine, then he sat straight again. He shrugged and smiled knowingly, shaking his head in a weary manner, as if to say that the answer, though put in the form of a question, could not be refuted.
‘*God*?’ he softly suggested.

Chapter Twenty-Four

‘Oh, dear,’ Lu Thong said as if ashamed of himself. ‘I am being a very bad host. Tom, you must eat!’
‘Just let me see Molly,’ Tom said.
‘Well, of course, Tom. Of course! Molly must eat as well. In the excitement of our conversation, I simply forgot. Please attend to our lunch, Mai, and ensure that dear Molly is invited to join us.’
Clearly not a person to work herself to death, Mai performed her duties by switching on an intercom and calling the kitchen. When she had completed this task, she made another call, speaking in Siamese to the person at the

other end of the line. When she had finished, she switched the intercom off and gave Tom a mocking smile.
‘I told the guard to inform Molly of your arrival,’ she said, ‘and let her know that you wanted to see her. She should be here any minute now.’
‘Thank you,’ Tom said.
‘Tom, Tom,’ Lu Thong said, clearly enlivened by his lines of cocaine, ‘I can tell by your lack of conversation that you deeply resent us. You must not, my friend. Death comes to us all and yours will be quick, which is more than one can say for those unfortunates who die a natural, lingering death. Think of it this way. I am saving you from cancer or paralysis or multiple sclerosis or bloody incontinence related to painful bowel disorders – all the dreadful ailments that come to those who foolishly run their natural course. I should get an award, Tom.’
‘I have none to give.’
‘Very good, Tom. Your quick wit warms my soul. Yet I sense that behind your little jokes, you still deeply resent me. This is truly unfair. I’m not a cruel man, after all. You will not die just yet – you and Molly will be reunited – and before I release you from this vale of sweat and tears, I will feed you and let you fuck Molly and perhaps have a decent night’s sleep. Life begins and ends there, Tom – in the belly and in the bed – and there are many right here in Bangkok who would sell their souls to the devil to have either. Why resent me for merely relieving you of the burden of trying to live on this blighted Earth?’
‘You don’t have the crystal skull yet,’ Tom reminded him.
‘All in due course.’
Before Tom could ask Lu Thong what he meant by that, a door to his right opened and a Vietnamese waiter – white jacket, black bow tie, black trousers and black slippers – entered the room, wheeling a trolley the size of a coffin. Approaching the table, he bowed to Lu Thong, then to Mai Suphar, and finally to Tom, then proceeded to transfer from the many shelves and swinging drawers of the trolley a great number of *Bencharong*, mother-of-pearl, and lacquered bowls piled high with a variety of foods, some of which were steaming lightly and gave off a rich, mouthwatering aroma. When these bowls had been spread out on the glass-topped table, under the eyeless gaze of the macabre crystal skull, they made for a colourful mosaic composed of vegetables, peppers, noodles, rice, fruit, seafood, chicken and meats. Four

eating bowls with spoons and forks – not chopsticks, Tom noted – and, of course, finger bowls and napkins, were placed around the table, with one place set, presumably for Molly, beside Lu Thong. When the table had been prepared, the Vietnamese waiter bowed again to everyone, then wheeled the trolley back out of the room. No sooner had he disappeared than Molly entered.

Tom's heart skipped a beat.

Molly looked different from normal, though certainly attractive, in a high-necked, sleeveless, Chinese-styled blouse of finely-woven sky-blue Thai silk and matching pants, comfortably loose but not quite loose enough to hide her womanly figure, which, though not as voluptuous as Mai Suphar's, was certainly womanly enough for Tom. She had thongs on her bare feet, which were, Tom noticed keenly, as white as snow and surprisingly delicate. Her blonde hair was hanging loose, tumbling over her bare shoulders, and, although she was wearing no make-up, she looked, even with her prominent nose, as sexy as sin.

Tom's heart skipped another beat.

'You came,' Molly said to him with a smile. 'I always knew you'd come. I knew you wouldn't desert me.'

'No, I wouldn't,' Tom said.

Lu Thong turned to Mai Suphar. 'Did you hear that, my dark angel? Have you ever before witnessed such devotion? You and I could learn a lot from these two – and we might be better souls for it.'

'I'm sure,' Mai replied.

'Come, Molly,' Lu Thong said, waving a tissue-paper hand, beckoning her to his side. 'Please come to the table and be seated. Tom is dying to talk with you.'

Molly glanced at the bowl placed beside Lu Thong, then she turned to Tom.

'I don't wanna sit beside him,' he said. 'He gives me the creeps.'

'Come, come, Molly,' Lu Thong said. 'Please don't hurt my feelings. If you do, I might have to hurt *you* and the pain would be unimaginable. So be a good girl and sit beside me. The food's getting cold.'

Molly glanced doubtfully at Tom, but when he nodded in a reassuring manner, she sat beside Lu Thong.

'Did you see that?' Lu Thong asked of Mai Suphar. 'He just nods and she does his bidding. It isn't fear, Mai, it's love and trust, virtues that you and I

should adopt to enrich our poor souls.'
'Absolutely,' Mai said.
'Are you alright?' Tom asked of Molly.
'Yeah, Tom, I guess I'm okay. I can't remember coming here – that bitch drugged me, so I'm told – but apart from making me take a bath and eat and sleep like a regular gal, they haven't really bothered me much. They just wanted you here, Tom – that's all they wanted. I mean nothin' to them.'
'Untrue,' Lu Thong said. 'Unkind, my sweet Molly. It's been a pleasure to have you in my humble home, brightening up my stale life.'
'Hey, bitch,' Mai Suphar said.
'What?' Molly responded.
'You ever call me a bitch again and I'll cut your tongue out.'
'And she'd do it,' Lu Thong said.
'Go – ' Molly started to say.
'Molly!' Tom interjected fearfully. 'That's enough! Don't you dare say another word!'
Molly glared at him, then at Mai, but eventually she picked up her spoon and fork. 'Okay,' she said, 'let's eat.'
'That's the spirit,' Lu Thong said. Picking up his own spoon and fork, though holding them together between thumb and forefinger, he proceeded to point out the dishes one by one. 'This,' he said, 'is *Kuay Tiew*, or rice noodles, these are *Ba Mii*, which are noodles made from wheat flour, and this is, of course, simple boiled rice. Either dish goes well with the *Gaeng Khiao Waan Gai*, here, a chicken curry with chicken meat, coconut cream, eggplants, and a variety of fragrant herbs; or the *Tom Kha Gai*, here, another chicken dish, but with boned chicken, coconut cream and lemon grass. This one, which tastes divine when poured over the rice – not the noodles – is the *Plaa Krapong Thawd Krathiem Prik Thai*, a local salt-water fish, fried until crisp, then laced with garlic and black pepper. And this,' he continued, 'which looks like broccoli, which it is not, is *Phak Khanna Pha Nam Man Hoi Sai Hed Hawn*, a deliciously crunchy vegetable fried with oyster sauce and black Chinese mushrooms. The seasonings,' he droned on, 'are these small bowls of *phrik kii nuu*, known locally as *mouse-dropping chillies*, to be approached with caution unless you have a throat and stomach of cast iron. What more can I tell you?'
'You can tell me what's for afters,' Molly said, ''cause I can't eat this shit.'

‘Come, come, Molly,’ Lu Thong said, ‘be a little more adventurous. This is *Bangkok*, my dear, not Brooklyn. We do not serve hamburgers.’
‘What’s for afters?’ Molly asked again, looking sullen.
Lu Thong sighed. ‘We have papaya and watermelon and pineapple and banana and pomelo and sapodilla and lichee and mango - but, alas, no ice cream.’
‘I’ll kick off with the afters,’ Molly said, picking up a piece of peeled, cut pineapple and looking at it suspiciously. ‘At least I won’t get the runs.’
‘You darling girl,’ Lu Thong said.
They ate the magnificent repast in a silence only broken by the tinkling of forks and spoons against bowls. As the meal went on – and it certainly took a long time – Tom studied Lu Thong and realized that although he was only in his mid-thirties and had skin as smooth as butter, he looked truly ancient in some indescribable way, as if decadence and a surfeit of self-satisfaction had prematurely aged him. Nevertheless, Lu Thong’s eyes, though sleepy with drugs, possessed a glittering intensity contradicting the deceptive sleepiness, and they sometimes wandered up and down Mai Suphar, crawling like spiders over her golden limbs, but dispassionately, with academic curiosity. Seeing this, Tom realized that he was looking at the only man he could possibly imagine could be immune to Mai’s deadly charms. Lu Thong also studied Molly, again with no more than academic curiosity, as though she were some kind of insect under his microscope. Tom knew then, without a doubt, that Lu Thong was beyond the pale, that he’d done too much too soon, that he’d had too much too early, and had prematurely reached that point in life where he had little to live for. Only danger, the ultimate gamble, the throwing of dice with God to perhaps find the devil, would recharge his batteries. He was as frightened of the crystal skulls as was Tom, but the fear gave him life. Lu Thong would willingly go to hell if it offered him that – and he was, Tom sincerely believed, on the dark road that led there.
Eventually, when they had finished their main courses and caught up with Molly, still on her afters, making short shrift of the fruit, Lu Thong fastidiously dabbed his thin lips with his napkin and said, ‘So, Tom, to the business at hand. Make me tremble with fear.’
‘The deal is – ’ Tom began.
‘I do not deal, Tom. I dictate.’
‘The deal is,’ Tom repeated, ‘that I’ll walk out of here, unharmed, with

Molly. Once we're back safely in my hotel
– and your men can follow us there – I'll call you with the details concerning where the crystal skull can be picked up.'
'That's all there is to it?'
'Yes.'
'And how am I to know, Tom, that once you're back in that hotel you won't break your word and fly off with the crystal skull?'
'Because I know that if I try to do that, you'll send your men around to drag me and Molly back here.'
'Which indeed I would, Tom.' Lu Thong leaned forward to pick a mouth-scalding *phrik kii nuu* chilli out of the bowl, pop it into his mouth, and chew it as if it were as harmless as a green bean. When he had swallowed it, he dabbed fastidiously at his lips with his napkin, then sat back and smiled. 'Very good, Tom. I admire your little display of chutzpah. Unfortunately for you, no matter what we agree, I cannot let you or Molly continue to live. You know about the crystal skulls, about Angkor, about me, and for these reasons you must both disappear.'
'Then I can't let you have our crystal skull.'
'You can't *stop* me from having it.' Placing his napkin back on the table, right beside the crystal skull, which gazed at Tom out of hollow eye-sockets, Lu Thong raised his hands above his head, cracked his knuckles, thus making Molly wince, then lowered his hands to the table and offered Tom his most diabolical, deadly smile. 'Ah, Tom,' he said, as if speaking to a child to whom he had to give bad news, 'I can't decide if you're heroically courageous or simply naïve. Have you ever wondered, my dear friend, why, in this pestilent city, which is a veritable hotchpotch of nations and religions, the Thais and Chinese and Indians and Burmese and Laotians and Vietnamese and white expatriates manage to live and work together without strife? Do you know why that is, Tom?'
'No,' Tom said, 'I don't.'
'It's because we're all so deliciously corrupt, Tom, and I, being more corrupt than most, have exploited it beautifully. Bangkok is a heap of excrement and I squat on top of it, my tentacles reaching out to root about in even the smallest, darkest hole. I have people everywhere, Tom, and they all live in fear of me, and one of them works in the British Consulate as my mole and general fixer. He let's me know what's happening. He gets me false passports

and visas. He slips items into diplomatic pouches and has them transported worldwide for me. He has the key to the safe, Tom.'

Even before Lu Thong spoke again, Tom knew what was coming, and it sent a sliver of fear shivering through him, convinced, as he was at that moment, that he and Molly were doomed.

'Yes,' Lu Thong continued, 'unfortunately for you, you have told me little that I didn't already know. Indeed, you've simply confirmed what I suspected all along. There are only two ways you could have brought your crystal skull into Bangkok: either as an artefact hidden in a consignment of other, legal artefacts being transported from one museum to another – as you did when you had it transported from Mexico City to London – or in a protected diplomatic pouch. But I know Bangkok, Tom, and it has no museum of the kind that would have use of such an artefact, so clearly it was not shipped in that way. Which only leaves the diplomatic pouch, Tom, and so that's what I bet on. I repeat: you have simply confirmed what I suspected all along – so now your crystal skull will be mine. I will simply call my man in the British Consulate and ask him to confirm that the skull is there. When I receive that confirmation, I will order him to remove the skull from the safe – and then I will terminate you and Molly… Poor Tom. What a fool you've been.'

He turned to Molly, reaching out to pat the back of her wrist, but she jerked her hand away and glared at him. Lu Thong just smiled at her.

'Tom loves you, Molly,' Lu Thong said with dry, sly mockery, 'but, alas, love is not enough when it comes to living or dying. He failed you, Molly, and now you will pay the price, but I trust that this will not destroy your love for him, which is surely worth dying for.' He then turned to Mai Suphar. 'Let this be a lesson to both of us, my dark angel. The love that you and I have never known would not have taken us too far. This is a sad fact of life.' Finally, he turned his glittering, cocaine gaze upon Tom, whom he clearly admired and would solely miss. 'Do you know what it is, Tom, that Mai enjoys more than anything else in the world?'

'Killing,' Tom said.

'No, Tom, not just killing. She enjoys inflicting pain. Indeed, she enjoys it so much that she's devised countless highly inventive ways of doing it, all of them slow. I will now, with great reluctance, hand you over to my dark angel and then observe what diabolical form of torture she comes up with. As she is demonstrating her dark arts and cruel talents, I will hope to learn from your

suffering whether or not the love that you and Molly share can withstand hell on Earth. If it cannot, I'll be sorely disappointed and lose the last of my pitiful, worldly illusions.' He turned to Mai Suphar, who was smiling grimly at Molly. 'Make it exquisitely slow,' he told Mai. 'Let their pain become music to our ears.'

'That's guaranteed,' Mai replied, still smiling as she rose to her feet and advanced upon Molly.

'No!' Tom bawled.

That instinctive outburst of love and defiance seemed to move the very heavens.

There was a fierce rushing of air that quickly turned into a roaring, then the panoramic window behind Lu Thong exploded, showering him in shards of broken glass, and a dazzling silvery light filled the room to temporarily blind them all.

Battered by a howling wind, closing his eyes against the light, Tom threw himself to the floor and then opened his eyes again. The dazzling light still filled the room, but it was not a normal light: it pulsated and flickered rapidly and was broken up with streams of darkness, and there, between the light and the darkness, Tom saw ribbons of stars.

He crawled to Molly. She seemed immune to the whole experience. She was still sitting upright, staring about her with wide eyes, as Lu Thong and Mai Suphar, both being battered by the maelstrom, were picked off the floor and slammed into the bookshelves, then fell back to the floor. Mai screamed and Lu Thong cursed, both silhouetted in the unreal light, while ghostly figures materialized around them to look down upon them. The figures did so by simply lowering their heads, since their faces contained no features

– no eyes, nose or lips - and they formed a circle around Lu Thong and Mai, then reached down as if wanting to touch them.

Yes, they had arms and hands, though these appendages were formed by light, and as their fingers touched Lu Thong and Mai, streams of phosphorescence darted out of them to surround Lu Thong and Mai in an eerily glowing cocoon in which more stars could be seen. As if electrified, Lu Thong and Mai went into spasms, screaming like stuck pigs.

Tom completed his crawl to Molly, took her hand and tugged her towards him. She was on her knees and she fell into his arms and let him give her a hug.

‘Let’s get out of here!’ Tom bawled.
The roaring wind was like a tornado, devastating the whole room, as Molly grabbed the crystal skull off the table and then ran with Tom to the door, carrying the skull in the crook of her arm. Tom stopped briefly in the doorway, looking back, disbelieving, to see books and bowls and forks and spoons and wall hangings and rare paintings swirling in a great circle around the room as if caught in a whirlpool. The whole room was filled with stars, glowing even in that bright light, and in that light, which was still pulsating and flickering rapidly, creating a slow-motion effect on everything within it, Tom saw the eerie, silvery figures of the faceless aliens, still surrounding Lu Thong and Mai Suphar. The latter were still on the floor, trapped in that glowing cocoon of light, being jolted repeatedly by the bolts of phosphorescence shooting out from the fingers of the aliens, into their bodies. Tom bore witness to it, hardly believing his own eyes, then he turned away and tugged at Molly’s free hand, and they fled from the room.
‘We won’t get out of this building,’ Molly gasped.
‘Yes, we will,’ Tom said.
And indeed he was right. Racing across the broad hallway, they found the front door open, its scorched, twisted lock lying on the floor in a pile of still-smouldering wood splinters. Rushing outside, expecting to be faced with the Chinese guard, they were dazzled by more unnatural light and almost deafened by another howling wind.
Squinting into the light, Tom saw that the guard had vanished, though his Browning 9mm High Power handgun was there on the top step of the porch. Instinctively reaching down to pick up the weapon, Tom shoved it into his jacket pocket, and then, reminded that something very strange was still happening, he hurried down the steps with Molly, both leaning into the wind, and glanced up as they ran along the driveway.
Hovering directly above Lu Thong’s house, about a hundred feet above it, was an enormous, saucer-shaped, pulsating silvery light with stars gleaming in its dark, seemingly depthless, swirling base. That base, which was like a whirlpool viewed from underneath, like an inverted funnel, was creating the tornado now devastating the house while filling the air around it with flying foliage, soil, and other debris.
‘Good God!’ Tom exclaimed, slowing down and almost coming to a halt. ‘What on earth…?’

‘There’s a car!’ Molly bawled. ‘The door’s open! Come on, Tom, let’s go!’
She tugged Tom towards a black BMW that was parked by the edge of the driveway, down near the electronicallycontrolled gates. Those gates, Tom noticed, had either been opened by one of the fleeing guards or had been opened magically by that immense, saucer-shaped light still hovering over the house. The driver’s door of the BMW was hanging open and the key was still in the ignition, indicating that the driver had fled at the appearance of the saucer-shaped light and the sudden, unnatural storm. Realizing that he and Molly were being protected again, Tom slipped into the driver’s seat, waited until Molly had taken the seat beside him, holding the crystal skull firmly in her lap, then turned the ignition on and drove the car out through the gateway, turning into the road that led back to the centre of the city and the Chao Phraya River.
‘Look!’ Molly shouted.
Glancing sideways at the house, then raising his gaze to look above it, Tom saw that great whirlpool of light ascending vertically at high speed, shrinking rapidly as it ascended, taking the roaring wind with it. Within seconds, when it was the size of a single star, though clearly visible in broad daylight, in that vast sheer blue sky, it blinked out, letting the fierce wind die away altogether. The debris that had been swirling around the house suddenly fell to the ground.
Lu Thong and Mai Suphar rushed out of the house to glance wildly about them, obviously trying to ascertain what had happened while, at the same time, looking desperately for Tom and Molly.
Tom laughed and kept driving.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Checking repeatedly that he was not being followed, Tom drove through the achingly slow traffic of the city until he reached the British Consulate, located in the government district near the Grand Palace and Ratchadamnoen Boulevard. Parking a good distance from the building, he checked again that they were not being followed, saw no cars slowing down and no one approaching, so indicated to Molly that she should get out of the car and come with him.

‘What about this?’ Molly asked, indicating the crystal skull in her lap.

‘We can’t take it into the Consulate,’ Tom said, ‘so we’ll just have to take a chance that we haven’t been followed and leave it in the boot of the car.’
‘Lu Thong will know that we’ve come here to collect the other crystal skull and his hoods might recognize their own car.’
‘That’s why I parked so far away,’ Tom explained. ‘They’ll either look for their car in the Consulate car park or in the streets immediately surrounding the building. They’re not likely to find it tucked in here.’
‘Gee, you’re so clever,’ Molly said.
‘I have my virtues,’ Tom said.
‘Why don’t I wait here?’ Molly asked. ‘I’d feel better not leaving this crystal skull behind.’
‘I’d rather lose the skull than lose you,’ Tom replied. ‘And if Lu Thong’s men *do* find this car, there’s no way you could protect the crystal skull - and those bastards would kill you.’
‘That’s the nicest thing I’ve ever heard, Tom. I mean, you saying you’d rather lose the skull than me.’
‘My pleasure. Now let’s go.’
Molly slipped out of the car and joined Tom as he was raising the lid of the boot. It was cluttered with various tools, an old canvas bag, and a white sheet covered in dirt and what looked like blood stains.
‘Jesus!’ Molly exclaimed softly.
‘They must use it for the transportation of their unfortunate victims,’ Tom said. ‘That sheet might have been meant for us, Molly, so you’re *definitely* coming with me.’ Checking the canvas bag, he found it empty except for some spent cartridge shells. ‘They obviously use this for carrying weapons in,’ he said, ‘but we can put the skull in it.’ Molly carefully placed the crystal skull in the canvas bag and then Tom zipped it shut. Then he closed the lid of the boot, and said, ‘Now to the Consulate.’
The walk to the Consulate took about five minutes. Tom had to identify himself at the reception desk and ask for his friend, Leonard Clarke-Smith. Shown up to Mr Clarke-Smith’s office, they entered to find a tall, slim, impeccably-dressed Englishman – pinstripe suit, striped shirt and old-school tie – with a lean, pale face, thick auburn hair, and a rather languid way of moving, as they could observe when he rose from his chair. He came around the desk to take hold of Tom’s shoulders and shake him affectionately. Then he looked enquiringly at Molly.

‘Molly Beale,’ Tom said, by way of introduction. ‘A dear friend of mine.’
‘Pleased to meet you,’ Clarke-Smith said. ‘Any friend of Tom’s is a friend of mine, particularly when she’s as attractive as you are.’
‘Gee, thanks,’ Molly said, clearly meaning it this time.
Clarke-Smith turned to Tom. ‘I trust you’ve come to take that bloody awful artefact off my hands.’
‘Yes, Leonard, I have.’
‘Thank God. That thing gave me the shivers when I opened the package and saw those gleaming, empty eyesockets. What on Earth is it?’
‘A crystal skull,’ Tom said.
‘I gathered *that* much,’ Clarke-Smith retorted. ‘But what *is* it, Tom? I mean, what’s its significance?’
‘It’s just an old Mayan artefact,’ Tom said. ‘Quite rare and valuable.’
‘So where did you find it?’
‘Don’t ask,’ Tom replied.
Clarke-Smith gazed thoughtfully at him, then offered a slight, sardonic grin. ‘Well, Tom,’ he said, ‘you are surely a dear friend, but don’t ever ask this of me again. The next time, I’ll want to know what I’m dealing with.’
‘There won’t be a next time.’
‘Good,’ Clarke-Smith said. ‘’So let me get this damned thing brought up and then take it out of here.’
He started to pick up the phone, but Tom placed his hand on his wrist. ‘Wait,’ Tom said. ‘Are you phoning the man in charge of the basement safe?’
‘Of course,’ Clarke-Smith replied.
‘What nationality is he?’
‘Siamese… Thai. Why?’
‘Have you ever heard of a criminal named Lu Thong?’
‘God, yes. Who hasn’t? He’s the worst of a very bad bunch, and certainly the most powerful of them all. Why, Tom? What is this?’
‘I’ve good reason to believe that the man in charge of your safe is working for Lu Thong, acting as a mole, gathering confidential information and also supplying Lu Thong with false passports and visas, using, or misusing, the Consulate’s facilities. You’d better check him out, Leonard. In the meantime, I’d rather you personally went down there and brought the skull up yourself.’
Clarke-Smith had stopped smiling and was wrinkling his high forehead in disbelief. ‘Are you sure about this, Tom?’

‘Yes, I’m sure.’
‘From whom did you obtain your information?’
‘Directly from Lu Thong.’
‘*Pardon*?’
‘You heard me.’
‘You’ve had *personal* contact with Lu Thong?’
‘Yes, Leonard. Exactly.’
Exasperated, Clarke-Smith ran his fingers through his thick thatch of hair, and said, ‘I have to tell you, Tom, that while I appreciate this information, I’m seriously concerned about how you came by it. What on earth is your connection to the notorious, possibly insane, and certainly criminal Lu Thong?’
‘I’ve only met him once and it wasn’t pleasant. Now, given the nature of my conversation with him, I have to flee from Bangkok.’
‘Tom, this sounds wretched.’
‘Just fetch the crystal skull and I’ll be out of here, out of your hair. When I’m gone, have your Thai friend investigated. I’m sure you’ll discover that I’m right and that he works for Lu Thong.’
‘Wait here,’ Clarke-Smith said.
He left the office. Tom sank into the chair in front of the desk. Molly approached him, placed her hands around his face, raised his head and kissed him full on the lips. When she straightened up to look down upon him, she was wet-eyed and smiling.
‘You’re not an English wimp at all,’ she said. ‘You’re the man of my dreams.’
‘I hope so,’ Tom said.
‘What are you like in bed?’
‘Not very good.’
‘I’ll have to do something about that, when we have the right time and place.’
‘And where might that be?’ Tom asked.
‘God knows,’ Molly said. ‘So what happens when he brings you that other crystal skull?’
‘We return to my hotel, buy you appropriate clothing, pick up our travelling kit, then catch a train to Ubon Ratachathani, which is deep in Thailand. From there, we’ll make our way to Angkor in Cambodia. Do you still have your passport?’

‘As a matter of fact, I have,’ Molly said, looking triumphant. ‘That bitch Mai Suphar was so busy making fun of me when I came out of my trance and was being told where I was, that she didn’t notice me taking my passport out of my travelling bag and slipping it into the top of these pants, just over my ass. It’s there right now.’
‘You’re a very bright girl, Molly Beale.’
‘Not as bright as you, Tom, but I know how to survive. I learnt that on the streets of New York and I won’t ever forget it.’
‘I think you’ve a lot to teach me, Molly.’
‘And you, me,’ Molly said.
They fell silent after that, feeling comfortable with each other, united by love and mutual respect, taking confidence from it. About ten minutes later, Clarke-Smith returned, carrying a cardboard box under one arm. He placed the box on his desk and then turned to face them.
‘I’ve already checked the box,’ he said, ‘and the crystal skull is in it. My Thai friend wasn’t there when I collected it, so he doesn’t know it’s missing. I’ll have him checked out, as you suggest, but for now please take that gruesome object out of here.’
Tom stepped up to the desk and opened the flaps of the cardboard box. Looking into it, he saw the gleaming dome of the crystal skull. Satisfied, though still feeling a little paranoid, he closed the box again. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that’s it.’ He picked the box off the desk, tucked it under one arm, shook Clarke-Smith’s hand with his free hand, and said, ‘Thanks a lot for this, Leonard.’ When he started for the door, Molly rushed ahead to open it for him, but then Clarke-Smith called out to him.
‘Where are you going,’ Clarke-Smith asked, ‘when you leave Bangkok?’
‘It’s best you don’t know that,’ Tom said.
‘Is what you’re planning to do dangerous?’
‘I think so,’ Tom said.
‘Does it involve Lu Thong?’
‘Yes.’
‘Then the best of luck to both of you. You’ll need it.’ ‘Thanks, Leonard. Goodbye.’
‘Goodbye, Tom.’
Molly closed the office door. She and Tom then made their way back downstairs and out of the building. When they emerged, the sun was high in

the sky, the air hot and humid. As they hurried along the palm-lined street they both started sweating. A few minutes later, they reached the parked BMW, placed the cardboard box in the boot, beside the other crystal skull, then slipped into the vehicle and drove off, heading for Tom's hotel.

Tom drove carefully, nervously, inching along in the dense traffic, trying to avoid the thrust-and-parry of the expert *samlor* drivers, the crazy motor-cyclists, the scurrying, ignored pedestrians, constantly checking in his rear-view mirror for any car that might be following him. The drive seemed to take forever, but eventually they arrived at Tom's hotel, both sighing with relief. Tom drove down into the basement car park and, after circling around for a few minutes, found an empty space.

When he and Molly clambered out of the car, they both looked about them, automatically searching for Lu Thong's men. They didn't see anyone. Relieved again, they removed the crystal skulls from the boot, taking one each, and them made their way up to the lobby. Stopping at the reception desk, Tom collected his key, informed them that he was checking out, and asked for his itemized bill to be prepared. This done, he and Molly took the lift up to the fifth floor, then walked along the corridor to Tom's room.

Even there, Tom did not relax for a second.

He opened the door slowly, stepped tentatively inside, saw nothing, heard nothing, but still went, treading lightly, to check the bathroom. Only when he had fully accepted that there was no one in the room did he finally place his cardboard box on the bed and turn to face Molly. She had placed her canvas bag on the floor and was gazing lovingly at him.

'So what now?' she asked.

'Now I pack,' Tom said, going straight to the chest-ofdrawers near the bed and pulling open the top drawer.

'Immediately?' Molly asked.

'Yes,' Tom said, transferring the clothing from the top drawer into his travelling bag.

'Maybe we should sleep first,' Molly suggested. 'You know? Get some rest.'

'I don't think so,' Tom said, opening the other drawers and continuing to transfer his clothes from them to his travelling bag. Molly watched him in silence until he was finished and had zipped up the bag. Then she walked up to him, placed her hands on his shoulders, and nodded towards the big, double bed.

‘Let’s go to bed, Tom,’ she said. ‘We might never get the chance again. We don’t know what’s going to happen after this, so let’s at least have our moment together. To hell with all the rest of it. Let’s snatch this while we can. If you’re bad in bed, I wanna teach you to be good and we’ll both feel better for it. So come on, Tom, let’s use it.’

Tom choked up with emotion, with embarrassment and love and fear, but what moved him at that moment wasn’t the fear but his need to protect her.

‘No, Molly,’ he said, ‘we can’t. We simply don’t have the time. Lu Thong or Mai Suphar or their hoodlums will come here sooner or later - and I’d judge that to be sooner rather than later. In fact, they’re probably on their way here right now, so we have to leave straight away.’

‘Damn it, Tom, that’s an excuse.’

‘No, Molly, it isn’t. It’s my declaration of love. I don’t want us to be caught in that bed when those bastards burst through the door. I don’t want you humiliated or killed. What I want is a future for both of us, which we won’t have if we don’t get out quickly. So please pick one of those crystal skulls off the bed and let’s get the hell out of here.’

‘Okay,’ Molly said. ‘Yes, sir.’

She grabbed the canvas bag containing one of the crystal skulls, Tom picked up his travelling bag and the other skull in the cardboard box, then they both left the room. Once downstairs, Tom went straight to the reception desk, telling Molly to go to the shop in the lobby and pick out some clothes more appropriate to where they were going. After paying the check, Tom went to the shop where he found Molly with sensible clothing draped over one arm: denims and shirts and underclothes. She was also holding a pair of rubber-soled canvas boots and scouting for something to put them in. After settling on another canvas bag, a well-designed travelling bag, they went to the cash register, paid for the goods with Tom’s credit card, packed the clothes and boots in the bag, and then, still carrying their separate crystal skulls, made their way back down to the underground car park.

Tom looked about him again, checking for Lu Thong’s men. Seeing no one, he opened the boot of the car, placed his suitcase, the two crystal skulls and everything else in it, closed the boot and slipped into the driver’s seat. When Molly was strapped in beside him, he turned on the ignition and drove out of the car park, back into the chaotic traffic and bedlam of the teeming city.

It was now late afternoon, but the light was still bright, burning down through

the fumes of car exhausts that were belching out on all sides. Tom turned towards the Pracha Thipok Road, which would take him across the river, but no sooner had he straightened the car out than he saw, in his rear-view mirror, a silvery-grey Mercedes Benz – the same one used earlier by Mai Suphar – pulling out from the curb to slip in directly behind him.

'Oh, Christ!' he said. 'They're right behind us, Molly. *Now* what do we do?'

'Just keep drivin',' Molly said. 'They can't do much in this goddamned traffic, so just head for the station. We'll decide what to do when we get there. There's nothin' else we *can* do.'

Taking her advice, not really having any choice, Tom followed the flow of the slow-moving traffic while keeping his eye on the rear-view mirror and trying not to evacuate in his pants. Fighting to control the fear that he had thought was well behind him, but taking hope from the knowledge that he was more concerned for Molly than he was for himself, he checked out the car behind, Mai Suphar's Mercedes Benz, and saw enough to know that it was packed with passengers. All of those passengers, he knew, would be armed to the teeth and gunning for him. His heart started racing too quickly and he felt himself sweating.

'Can you see them?' he asked of Molly.

In fact, she had twisted around in her seat to look through the rear window. Turning back to her normal position, she said, 'No, I can't make 'em out, but I'd say they're his goons, 'cause Lu Thong's too smart to be caught in a firefight in the streets. I don't think Lu Thong or Mai Suphar are there. It's just the goons with the guns.'

'*Just*?' Tom retorted. 'What will we do if they attack us. We can't *fight* them, Molly!'

'Yes, we can,' Molly said. 'I don't have my handgun – Mai Suphar took that off me before we reached Heathrow Airport – but you've still got the Browning that you picked up from Lu Thong's drive. I can use that, believe me.'

'This isn't a movie, Molly! We can't have a shoot-out. We have to think of something else. Think, Molly! *Think*!'

'We dive into the river and drown ourselves. That's my thought for today. Now give me that handgun.'

Feeling that he was dreaming, or, more accurately, having a nightmare, Tom handed Molly the weapon and then concentrated on making his way around

the roundabout, chaotic and dangerous, to reach the bridge that spanned the Chao Phraya River. Surviving the roundabout, he turned onto the bridge and looked down upon the river, which was, as usual, crammed with boats of all kinds. Though possessed with the sudden urge to jump out of the car and dive into those muddy waters, Tom concentrated instead on his driving, seeing two parallel lines of traffic heading in both directions across the bridge in billowing clouds of exhaust fumes. Confident that even Lu Thong's men would attempt nothing here, he tried to relax enough to think straight… Then he saw a jet-black Honda Accord pulling out from the line of oncoming traffic, causing many horns to hoot in protest, and careening across the road to come between him and the cars crawling bumper-tobumper in front of him. Shocked, he braked to an abrupt halt.

'Jesus Christ!' Molly exclaimed, having been thrown forward by the sudden braking and then jerked back by the safety belt, but now raising the Browning 9mm Highpower handgun in her right hand and releasing the safety catch.

'Oh, my God!' Tom exclaimed.

Glancing in his rear-view mirror, he saw that the traffic had banked up behind him, the drivers angrily tooting their horns, and that Lu Thong's hoodlums were emerging from the stalled Mercedes Benz, now directly behind him, and were armed with a variety of weapons, including handguns and sub-machine guns. Appalled to see this, he looked straight ahead and saw more hoodlums pouring out of the jet-black Honda Accord, all of them also well armed.

'Sonsofbitches!' Molly exploded, winding her window down in order to lean out and fire her handgun.

'Molly don't!' Tom bawled. Then he glanced in the rear-view mirror and saw that Lu Thong's men were taking up firing positions behind the open doors of their car and taking aim with their weapons. As they did so, the drivers behind them started reversing or attempting impossible three-point turns to save their own skins.

'Oh, God!' Tom exclaimed again, without thinking, then he turned to the front and saw that the hoodlums who had poured out of the Honda Accord were also taking up firing positions behind the open doors of their vehicle and that the drivers in front of them, on both sides of the bridge, were doing exactly the same as the drivers behind, either reversing or trying to make impossible three-point turns that only caused them to crash into other cars.

‘*Molly*!’ Tom screamed as he twisted around, grabbed her by the shoulders, pulled her back from the open window and then forced her down onto the seat and threw himself on top of her, intending to use himself as her shield. ‘Stay down!’ he bellowed. ‘*Stay down*!’

As Molly wriggled frantically beneath him, he heard the simultaneous sounds of gunshots and bullets smashing the front and rear windows of the car, then ricocheting noisily off the metalwork. Shards of glass rained down upon him as the weapons continued firing – quickly repeated single shots from the handguns, sustained bursts from the sub-machine guns – and then he heard another sound, an ethereal bass humming, unreal, almost *physical*, an almost palpable sound that seemed to press down upon him, tightening his head as it gradually turned into a distant roaring – it seemed distant, but it was *here*, all around him

– and then the gunfire tapered off and was replaced with shouts and screams, men and women in panic, and he raised himself off Molly and looked out and saw what he had clearly seen before but could still not accept.

His car was surrounded by light – not sunlight: an unearthly light – and that light was spreading out in great, wavering striations that formed an immense fan across the bridge. Within that light were stars – their light was brighter than the other light – and within the stars, between the stars, where the light had made daylight darken, he saw a host of ghostly forms, with arms and legs, though faceless, not walking but somehow *drifting* across the road of the bridge, alighting here and there, touching the cars with fingerless hands, sending tiny bolts of lightning from those hands into whatever they touched.

The whole bridge was in chaos. Cars were swerving and crashing. Lu Thong’s hoodlums, front and rear, were throwing down their weapons and either falling to their knees, hands raised to their chins in prayer, or running away in both directions, some vaulting over cars in their determination to escape, others throwing themselves off the bridge to fall into the river far below, preferring death to the unknown.

‘Hold me, Tom!’ Molly wailed.

Seeing Molly’s fear and wonder, both unfamiliar to him, Tom pulled her into his arms and pressed her face to his chest. In doing this, he felt ennobled, raised above his weaker self, and he looked out at what was happening on the bridge, and understood, without a shadow of doubt, that it had been preordained. Released from fear, blessed with wonder, taken back to his

childhood, to the dreams that he had lost and finally found again, he cast his gaze upwards to the sky, knowing what he would see there.
An enormous, saucer-shaped, pulsating light, outlined with a silvery-white haze and filled with radiant stars, was descending slowly, inexorably, majestically, over the whole bridge. When it was mere feet above the bridge, its dazzling, unearthly brilliance obscuring the structure itself, making it melt into infinity, sending it back where it belonged – to Bangkok, in the present – the gently weaving, sinuous forms, those faceless beings of no known substance, surrounded Tom's car and closed in upon it to carry it off.
'Hold me, Tom!' Molly wailed again.
Tom fell upon Molly, kissing the back of her neck, holding her head with his loving hands, and then he felt the whole world turning – and turning him inside-out – and then time shrank, sucking space into itself, and sent him winging past suns and moons and all the stars of eternity. He saw himself, past and present, young and old, here and there, and then he returned, dazed and disbelieving, to a present that he could never have imagined.
When he opened his eyes again, raising his head, which required great courage, he realized that he had passed in an instant from childhood to manhood, regaining faith in himself.
He raised his head and looked out of the car, wondering what he would find out there.
White light.
Jungle mist.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Tom blinked repeatedly, bewildered. Molly was in his arms. They were still in the BMW, but it was parked at an unusual angle, practically turned over on its side, caught in a tangle of enormous branches and leaves at the foot of the soaring trees of an Oriental jungle.

And there, outside the car, stretching away for miles, was the once holy, now forbidden, city of Angkor. It was immense, magnificent, and covered in the rot of centuries. The mist drifted around the towering trees and great mountain-temples. The silence was frightening.
'Oh, my God!' Tom whispered.

Molly yawned and opened her eyes, then sat upright to look out of the

weirdly angled car. Her eyes went as wide as two spoons when she saw what was out there.

‘What the…?’

‘That’s Angkor,’ Tom said. ‘We’re in Cambodia. How on earth did we get here?’

‘I dreamt about stars,’ Molly said. ‘The same stars and moons – double moons – that I saw when I looked into the crystal skull. So maybe it wasn’t a dream, after all. Maybe…’

She didn’t complete her sentence, because what she was thinking defied reason and could not have happened.

‘’I dreamt about stars as well,’ Tom said. ‘Stars too large to be our stars and surrounding double moons. I remember us being on the bridge that spanned the Chao Phraya River in Bangkok, the light descending, the aliens, and then I lay across you and closed my eyes, and the world, either outside or inside my head, seemed to turn inside out. Then I fell asleep - at least I *think* I fell asleep - and saw outer space, the cosmos, stars I couldn’t recognize, double moons, and then I opened my eyes, or I woke up, and this is what I found. We’re still in the same car, the car seems fine, but here we are in Cambodia.’

‘Í’m scared, Tom,’ Molly said. ‘I’m really scared. Is that ruined city, that Angkor, in Cambodia or is it someplace else? Where *are* we, Tom? What *year* is this?’

‘We’re in Angkor,’ Tom insisted. ‘I know it intimately from books I’ve studied. We’re in Angkor, Combodia – that’s Cambodian jungle out there – but *when*, whether in the past or the future, well, I haven’t a clue.’ He checked his wristwatch. It showed five in the morning. He saw striations of weak sunlight breaking through the dark clouds, a hint of dawn light, and assumed that his wristwatch was now set to local time. He could not imagine how they had come to be here, still in one piece, his wristwatch set to local time, but he was certain that this was Angkor in Cambodia, and it was just before dawn.

‘Come on,’ he said. ‘Let’s clamber down.’

Overwhelmed, he and Molly lowered themselves out of the car and clambered down through the thick branches to the ground. Suddenly panicking, realizing that they had both forgotten what had actually caused them to be here, Tom climbed back up and, to his immense relief, found the two crystal skulls still in the boot of the car, one in its cardboard box, the

other in the canvas bag once used to hold weapons. He lowered both to Molly, then clambered back down until he was standing beside her.
‘I don’t really believe we’re here,’ he said, ‘but I think we’ll be alright.’
‘Let’s hope so,’ Molly said.
They embraced and kissed, then, carrying their separate packages, walked through the jungle’s mist, towards the soaring towers and minarets of Angkor. As they advanced carefully into the great complex, still surrounded by dense jungle wreathed in morning mist, Tom wondered if he and Molly were really alive, still in their mortal bodies, in the same year or time-frame, because the city was totally deserted, with neither tourists nor guards, and it gave off no sound, other than the cry of a distant bird or the eerie call of some unseen animal. Nevertheless, he kept walking, side by side with Molly, taking his faith from her love and trust, determined still to protect her.
As they advanced into the complex, heading north, Tom constantly looked about him, trying to take in what he was seeing and make some sense of it. Though struck by the chilling lack of humanity in the ancient temples, reservoirs and canals, their bleakly imposing profusion of almost identical grey sandstone gods, dancing girls, and various animals, some unrecognizable, he was awed at the very thought of how this immense complex, formerly the center of one of the largest kingdoms in South-east Asia, had been sacked and then abandoned by Thai armies over five hundred years ago. He was awed, too, by the knowledge that although this ‘forbidden city’ was known to have been the center of the magnificent Khmer dynasty, then extending from the tip of the Indochinese peninsula northward to Yunnan and, from Vietnam, westward to the Bay of Bengal, it was believed to have existed long before that, beyond the veils of recorded history, way back in the mists of prehistory, when it could, indeed, have been built by that ancient, mysterious race that had travelled from here to Meso-America.
‘Tom, I’m scared,’ Molly repeated.
‘Don’t be,’ Tom said. ‘Hold my hand. That should help you feel real again.’
Molly took hold of his hand and squeezed it. ‘Yeah, right,’ she said. ‘I feel real again. You and me, we’re an item.’
‘Aren’t we ever?’ Tom said.
He wanted to make her smile, though he was just as scared as she was, and did not feel any better when they completed the five-kilometre walk that eventually brought them to Angkor Wat, the greatest of all the sites, located

about three kilometres west of what he was looking for: Ta Keo, the first of the two royal temples, where, hopefully, the crystal eyes of the crystal skulls were hidden.

As they made their way through the labyrinthine pathways of the complex, walking under the towering walls, along the sides of the empty canals and moats, embalmed in deathly silence, Tom thought of how history had constantly been rewritten, and of how, before recorded history, the only constant was mystery. Angkor was itself a mystery, raised to foil time, widely believed to have been constructed as a symbolic universe based on imported Indian cosmology, but designed to concentrate the potency of the soil upon which the prosperity of that ancient kingdom had depended. Yet before that, before its history could be recorded and, thus, rewritten, it had existed, either in reality or as a dream, as the living center of the cosmological, star-filled universe, beyond Earth, beyond time; and its great pyramid-temples, some still standing, defying time, might have been raised, or conceived, as repositories for the hidden powers of that universe and all it contained… other worlds; alien beings.

Tom thought of this with wonder and awe until he and Molly, after hiking another three kilometres to the east, reached Ta Keo, the first of the pyramidal royal temples.

‘This is it,’ Tom said.

‘We have to climb to the top of it?’ Molly asked.

‘Yes,’ Tom said. ‘Don’t you want to?’

‘It looks creepy,’ Molly said doubtfully.

‘Just keep holding my hand.’

Ta Keo was indeed imposing, being over a hundred metres wide at its base and rising over twenty metres, on three separate levels, one containing a continuous, sealedin gallery, to a forty-six-metre-square terrace surmounted by five ornate sanctuary towers. Though the walls of each of the lower terraces were broken up with open doorways, each framing the darkness inside the unfinished temple, a flight of broad stone steps led upwards from the base of the building to the high terrace with the sanctuary towers.

‘I’m convinced that the eyes of the skulls are hidden in one of those sanctuary towers,’ Tom said. ‘So take a deep breath and let’s start climbing.’

Still carrying their separate crystal skulls, one in its canvas bag, the other in a cardboard box, Tom and Molly commenced the arduous climb to the top

terrace, taking the broad steps carefully, one by one, advancing from one terrace to the next, passing friezes of gods and the vague outlines of figures that might or might not have been girls, who might or might not have been dancing, might or might not have been human – indeed, as Tom noticed, who seemed not quite like girls, though they *were* distinctly feminine, reminding him of the alien beings formed out of light and swaying gently, sinuously, like windblown reeds.

Eventually, breathless, they found themselves on the top terrace, overlooking the vast complex of Angkor and the jungle surrounding it. The terrace was over forty metres square and grass was sprouting between the stone slabs. A tall sanctuary tower, raised to the sun, moon and stars, stood at each corner of the terrace, with a fifth tower, the tallest, in the middle.

'That's it,' Tom said, pointing to the central, and highest, sanctuary tower. 'The eyes of the crystal skulls, if they're here at all, will be hidden in that central tower. There are doorways around the base of that tower, so let's see what's inside.'

Entering, they found a square-shaped room of grey sandstone walls and dust-covered stone slabs, gloomily illuminated by the weak morning sunlight bleeding in from outside. The place was completely empty, offering not the slightest hint of where the crystal eyes might be hidden.

'Now what?' Molly asked, her voice reverberating eerily in that enclosed space.

Tom didn't know what to say. He felt unreal and disorientated. Looking out through the doorway, at the other pyramid-temples of the vast, jungle-enshrouded complex, trying to work out what time it really was – even what year it was or what planet he was on – he saw only a somnolent cloudy sky, a vast anonymity. Then, just as he was about to turn away, the sun broke through the clouds, one curved yellow rim sliding free. Striations of light fell upon the ruins and reached out to the temple.

Squinting, turning away, looking back down at the stone-slab floor, Tom saw a single ray of sunlight beaming in across his shoulder to illuminate a slab fixed into the far corner. That finger of light made Tom remember the aliens and the beams of sparkling light, some unknown form of energy, that had darted from their fingerless hands when they reached out to anything material. He knew then, without a shadow of doubt, where the eyes of the crystal skulls were hidden.

‘Put your bag down,’ he said to Molly. ‘We’re in the right place.’
As Molly did his bidding, Tom knelt on the floor near the illuminated stone slab and placed the cardboard box by his side. He studied the stone slab and was instantly elated to note that although it had supposedly been there for centuries, the cement surrounding its two sides, where it was not fixed tight against the two walls forming the corner, had turned to powder, and those two sides of the slab seemed to be loose. When he looked around him, he saw that the other stone slabs were firmly embedded.
‘This is it,’ he said with absolute conviction.
Molly knelt beside him, studied the stone slab, ran her finger around it, and then, as practical as always, said, ‘The cement may be loose on those two sides, but there’s still no way to lift that damned slab out. We don’t have any tools, we have nothin’, so we don’t have a prayer.’
‘Let’s unpack the crystal skulls,’ Tom said. ‘Let’s just see what happens. We’ll unpack them and place them beside the stone slab, one on each side of those two sides where the cement has been loosened.’
‘And then?’
‘We simply sit back and see what transpires.’
‘Oh, my hero,’ Molly said with affectionate sarcasm, then she opened her canvas bag and withdrew her crystal skull while Tom removed his from its cardboard box. They placed the skulls, as Tom had suggested, one to each of the two free sides of the slab forming the corner.
‘Move back,’ Tom said.
They sat together in the opposite corner, beneath the finger of sunlight beaming in and now falling – and eerily illuminating – the two macabre, eyeless, crystal skulls.
Nothing happened for some time. The only sound was their nervous breathing. Molly reached out to take hold of Tom’s hand and tug it onto her lap, where she squeezed it repeatedly. She didn’t say a word and he didn’t speak to her, but both of them were mesmerized by the crystal skulls which, illuminated in that eerie light, seemed to take on a magical sheen and odd, shadowy features.
The finger of sunlight brightened, then it moved as the sun moved, and eventually it fell directly upon the eyesockets of the two skulls, and those eye-sockets reflected the light to fill the gloom with criss-crossing, constantly shifting, striations. Those striations, in their turn, fell upon Tom and Molly,

forming a dazzling mosaic, distorting what they were seeing, making them both imagine that the stone slab was moving, rising out of the floor.
They blinked and rubbed their eyes, then squinted into the dazzling light. They heard a muffled rumbling, a louder grinding sound, and then, though they could scarcely believe it, they saw that the stone slab was, indeed, rising out of the floor, as if being pushed up by an unseen hand. Eventually, when its base was level with the floor, it fell over at an angle, falling between the two crystal skulls without actually touching them. When it struck the floor with a dull, reverberating thud, the finger of light blinked out.
'Jesus Christ!' Molly whispered.
Without thinking twice, Tom jumped to his feet and raced across the floor to look down into the hole in the corner.
Four eyes of clear crystal, embedded in loose soil, stared up through the gloom.
'Oh, Christ!' Tom whispered.
He fell to his knees and just stared down upon those awful crystal eyes as Molly also jumped to her feet and rushed over to join him. When she, too, looked down into the hole, she let out a soft gasp. They both stared at the gleaming crystal eyes for a long time, both too shocked and thrilled to speak, then Tom reached down and carefully picked them up, one by one, and then, just as carefully, placed them in the eye-sockets of the two crystal skulls.
The four eyes fitted perfectly, and the crystal skulls, with their crystal eyes back in place, looked even more fearsome.
'What now?' Molly said.
'We just sit back and wait again.'
At first nothing happened. Tom began to feel uneasy, turning numb with disappointment, but then, just as he was starting to think that this whole venture had been in vain, he heard a distant throbbing, growing louder, coming closer, and finally, when the throbbing had turned into a roaring, the floor of the temple shook slightly, making small clouds of dust boil up.
Realizing that the noise was not coming from the floor or walls of the sanctuary tower, Tom turned his head to look to the side, out over the spires of the other temples, that vast web of ancient ruins, the maze of canals and moats, the lush green jungle beyond. The noise was coming from over there… not from the ground… from the sky… and as it grew louder, it became more familiar… and then Tom saw what it was.

A helicopter descending.
Even as he saw it, hardly believing his own eyes, feeling crushed by disappointment, the helicopter dropped below the high canopy of the trees, into a clearing not far away, and Mai Suphar jumped out, wearing figureenhancing lime-green coveralls and holding a pistol in her right hand. She glanced up at the temple, obviously knowing just what it was, then she ran across the clearing to briefly disappear from Tom's line of sight. He heard her boots clattering up the broad stone steps that led to the terrace.
'Damn!' he exclaimed, turning to Molly. 'Where's the handgun?'
'I don't know. It must be back in the car. I probably dropped it when we both blacked out.'
'Damn!' Tom exclaimed again.
He glanced desperately left and right, across the broad expanse of the temple roof, but clearly there was no place to go, apart from one of the other sanctuary towers, where Mai would surely find them.
'What's happened to those crystal skulls?' he asked rhetorically, as he heard Mai's boots clattering up the stone steps and nearing the summit. 'Now we *really* need their magical powers!'
'Oh, fuck!' Molly exclaimed.
By now, the sun had moved out from behind the clouds and its light suddenly flared brilliantly in great striations that fell over the temple. At that moment, Mai Suphar emerged onto the roof and advanced carefully on the central sanctuary tower, holding her pistol at the ready. The wind was whipping her long black hair across her golden, gorgeous face, and her figure, emphasized in the tight, lime-green coveralls, was truly something to see.
Shocked to realize that even in these circumstances he could not ignore Mai's beauty and was, indeed, helplessly entranced by it, in danger of becoming its victim, of being *devoured* by it – by the salivating jaws of the black widow spider –Tom rescued himself by taking hold of Molly's hand and squeezing it reassuringly, thus reassuring himself. Then, heartened, though certainly not out of danger, he led her outside, where the sunlight, becoming brighter by the second, temporarily blinded him.
Squinting into that light, he saw Mai coming towards him, smiling triumphantly, raising the pistol in her hand, first aiming it at him, then, grinning even more broadly, turning the weapon on Molly. She stopped when she was mere feet away, keeping the weapon aimed at Molly.

‘I’m pretty fond of shy English gentlemen,’ she said to Molly, ‘and I want this particular one to play with, so you have to go first.’

With a fearful, choked sob, Molly turned to Tom and wrapped her arms around him. Disgusted by this display of unseemly emotion, not realizing that it was calculated, Mai took another step forward, to pull Tom and Molly apart. But when she grasped Molly’s shoulder, the latter spun around, springing out of Tom’s embrace, and chopped the side of Mai’s neck with the edge of her open palm - a brutal, expert blow that made Mai stagger backwards and drop her pistol. When the weapon clattered noisily to the floor, Tom picked it up and stared at it, bewildered, not knowing how to use it, then looked helplessly at Molly as she kicked and chopped at the stunned Mai, using the skills that she had resolutely picked up in the meaner streets of New York.

‘Shoot her, Tom!’ she bawled. ‘*Shoot the bitch*!’

But Tom, being a gentleman and having led a sheltered life, didn’t know how to cock the weapon, let alone fire it, so he just stood there, wondering what to do with it, as Molly took one final kick at Mai, then threw herself to the floor, rolled away, and then jumped to her feet again.

Eyes flaring with rage in the brightening sunlight, Mai whipped a dagger out of the belt around her waist and lunged viciously at Molly.

Molly ducked and cried, ‘Damn it, Tom, just fire that thing!’

‘I can’t!’

Mai slashed again. Molly ducked again. ‘Throw it to me!’ she shouted, waving her hand for the pistol.

Mai slashed and Molly feinted. Mai slashed again and Molly weaved. ‘God damn it, Tom, throw me that pistol!’

Tom threw the pistol. Molly ducked, caught the pistol, turned it on Mai, and fired. The bullet hit Mai in the chest, punching her backwards, soaking the front of her limegreen coveralls with a bright stain of crimson. She stopped staggering backwards, stared at Molly with surprise, managed to croak, ‘Beginner’s luck, bitch!’ and then sank to the floor, her lovely legs bending slowly, as in a dance, but tantalizing no more. Eventually, she fell onto her back, legs and arms akimbo, to stare up into the dazzling sunlight with wide-open, dead eyes.

Shocked by what she had done, Molly dropped the pistol and Tom instantly bent low to pick it up. Before he could do so, however, Lu Thong’s voice

rang out behind him: ‘Don’t bother, Tom!’
Tom straightened up as Lu Thong stepped onto the terrace and advanced languidly across the grass-sprouting stone slabs, holding his own pistol at the ready.
‘Nice try, my friend,’ he said, stopping a few feet away, still aiming the pistol at them while glancing down at Mai, who lay bloody and lifeless at his feet. Raising his gaze again, he shook his head from side to side, saying mournfully, ‘Dear, dear, what a dreadful thing to do. How *could* you, Tom?’
‘He didn’t. I did it,’ Molly said.
‘I might have known,’ Lu Thong said. ‘So, Tom, where are the crystal skulls? Inside that sanctuary tower behind you?’
‘Yes,’ Tom said. ‘Where else?’
‘And did you find the missing eyes?’
‘Yes,’ Tom said, sweating in the humidity and realizing that the sunlight was becoming so bright that it seemed unnatural.
‘And did you, dear Tom, place them back where they belong?’
‘Yes,’ Tom said, ‘I did.’
‘So what happened, Tom?’
‘Nothing,’ Tom said.
Lu Thong looked disappointed, then confused and disbelieving. He glanced past them, to the tower, his eyes narrowed against the brightening light, the dazzling light, an unreal light, then he nodded and waved his pistol up and down, indicating the tower. ‘Get back in there, the pair of you.’
Entering the base of the central tower, Tom noticed immediately that the sunlight was falling upon the crystal skulls, directly onto their crystal eyes, making them reflect that same light in a fan of phosphorescent striations that cast eerie shadows on the walls. Temporarily blinded, he blinked a few times, letting his eyes adjust to the light, though this did not prevent the feeling of unreality that was creeping over him.
‘Sit down in that corner,’ Lu Thong ordered. ‘The pair of you, back to back. And don’t try any nonsense.’
As Tom lowered himself to the floor, back to back with Molly, he heard more footsteps advancing across the terrace outside. Glancing sideways, he saw four of Lu Thong’s hoodlums, all armed with pistols, coming up behind Lu Thong. While one took up a position beside Lu Thong, holding a coiled rope in his big fist, the others spread out around the base of the tower to ensure

that Tom and Molly could not escape.
‘Tie them up,’ Lu Thong said.
While Lu Thong kept them covered, his henchman tied them back to back with the thick rope, pulling it tight and knotting it with a double loop. This task completed, he stepped back to let Lu Thong, attentive as always, kneel in front of Tom. He stared steadily at Tom with eyes no longer sleepy, but now glittering with cocaine-induced intensity. Though smiling, he seemed slightly deranged, adrift in his secret world, unreal in the unnatural, dazzling light.
‘We’ve both been fooled,’ he said. ‘We both pursued a vain dream. We’ve both gone to great lengths to find the lost eyes of the skulls, and although they’re now back where they belong, the world remains unchanged. I’m deeply disappointed, Tom. I’m also angry beyond belief. I came here to find revelation and now the crystal skulls, in doing nothing, tell me that I can’t. I could hate you for that, Tom, for building up my hopes, but unlike Mai, I’m not a vindictive person and I seek no revenge. Nonetheless, you two must die. Alas, you know too much about me. Besides, I saw what happened in my house and on that bridge in Bangkok, so I know that though nothing has happened here, the crystal skulls still have magical powers. How do we release those powers? Clearly not as we had imagined. We now have the crystal eyes in the crystal skulls, and yet the world, which is a meaningless cesspit, remains as it always was. Yet the skulls have magical powers. We have both seen that, Tom. We have seen it and so I still must have the skulls and you two must die, because I cannot have witnesses to my vile transgressions against God and man. The skulls are still priceless, Tom. They have powers that *can* be released somehow. So I’ll take them back with me, to examine them at great length, and sooner or later, preferably sooner rather than later, I’ll unravel their secrets. But you and Molly, my dear Tom, must stay here and watch the sunset with sightless eyes. The caretakers, when they come later, will find you, both as dead as these ancient stones.’
‘What caretakers?’ Tom asked out of some deep intuition that temporarily buried his fear and led his nose to sniff the wind of truth.
‘The ones who work here every day,’ Lu Thong replied. ‘It’s still early, Tom, not yet full daybreak, but they will come in due course.’
‘It’s not full daybreak yet?’
‘No.’
‘Then why is it so bright?’

Lu Thong stared at him, looking confused again, then he glanced about him with widening, disbelieving eyes, and finally stared at the crystal skulls.
The crystal skulls were shimmering in a radiant, unnatural light, their crystal eyes reflecting other, different rays of light that illuminated Lu Thong's wasted face and made it seem like a death mask.
'Good God, Tom, you're right!'
'How did you get here?' Tom asked.
'You saw that – by helicopter.'
'It was a perfectly normal flight?'
'More or less,' Lu Thong said. 'Though, come to think of it, maybe not… We flew through the night. At first it was dark and cloudy, the sky threatening rain, but then suddenly there was turbulence, a very peculiar kind of lightning… not normal lightning… *sheets* of light… we were surrounded by weird light… and then, where there should have been clouds, we saw only the stars. We thought we were lost. The stars seemed to be all around us… above and below and cascading on both sides… and then the engine of the helicopter cut out and we thought we were going to crash and die… Then, suddenly, the engine came back on, the stars blinked out, and abruptly we were back in stormy clouds. Shortly after, much sooner than we had expected, we were looking down upon Angkor in first light… Why do you ask, Tom?'
'Because I think the skulls are working,' Tom said, 'and they've transported us here.'
'Where's *here*, Tom?'
'I don't know.'
Frowning, Lu Thong crossed to the crystal skulls and reached down to pick one of them up.
When he touched it, his world turned inside out – and at last he found what he had been seeking.
Eternal life.
Hell.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The instant Lu Thong touched the first crystal skull, its crystal dome flared into life, its mouth gave forth with a roar, and daggers of fierce light

shot out of its crystal eyes. Even as Lu Thong staggered backwards, temporarily blinded, his face scorched, the second skull, as if triggered by the first, also roared and exploded with light, sending the beams from its bulging crystal eyes in the opposite direction. The beams were hot and phosphorescent, pulsating, filled with sparks, like laser beams, and they fanned out to criss-cross each other and cast black-andwhite mosaics that had a life of their own. The skulls now seemed to be alive, being illuminated from within, that light reducing the normal daylight to darkness while burning in the depths of the skulls as globes of silvery fire. Darkness swirled around the skulls, a black whirlpool streaked with more lights, and as Lu Thong recovered, opening his eyes, staring downwards, that light broke up and turned into streaming stars that seemed, in their extraordinary brilliance, to be here and faraway at the same time, defying all reasoning.

Lu Thong stood there, transfixed, mesmerized by what he was seeing, as the beams of light around him, like the ones forming two great fans, first started bending in an unnatural manner, then, making whipping, whooshing sounds, arched and coiled through one another like snakes, rising up and coiling back down, sweeping around to form circles that imprisoned him and closed in upon him.

Startled, disbelieving, feeling fear for the first time, Lu Thong struck out at the beams of light with his pistol and saw the weapon go through them. He tried to step out of his prison, to escape the encircling snakes of light, but when he touched them he was scorched by a fierce heat that sent electric shocks through his body and made his every nerve sing.

The crystal skulls roared again and streams of stars shot from their mouths. Surrounded by those stars, losing all sense of direction, of space and dimension, confused between up and down, left and right, Lu Thong became disorientated and staggered this way and that, repeatedly striking the encircling streams of light with his body and limbs, being scorched and shocked repeatedly.

‘No!’ he bawled. ‘*Not this*!’

Tom saw this dreadful spectacle from where he sat on the floor, still tied back-to-back with Molly, who was wriggling and gasping in frustration. Yet he and Molly remained untouched, bearing witness, not involved, the swirling light streaming above them and past them, before, without touching them, rushing away to explode over the hoodlums outside, cocooning them in

a phosphorescent glowing that grew ever brighter. The hoodlums all screamed at once, dropped their weapons, went into spasms, and then the glowing cocoons exploded with a mighty roaring and set fire to those trapped inside. The hoodlums, screaming dementedly, suddenly burst into flames and within seconds were separate balls of fire that gave off a black, billowing smoke. Three collapsed and one tried to run away, still in flames, but then he, too, collapsed and was still, becoming no more than a heap of smouldering rags.

'Christ!' Molly said. 'Jesus!'

Tom was trying to wriggle free, but his bonds were too tight, and as he struggled, refusing to give in, Lu Thong, still trapped in swirling coils of phosphorescence, screamed out in terror – yes, even Lu Thong was terrified – and raised his pistol to fire upon the crystal skulls and blow them to pieces.

He never fired a shot. The crystal skulls roared again. Their mouths spewed twin streams of sparks that exploded against Lu Thong's hands, burning them instantly, turning the pistol into a piece of red-hot metal that forced his scorched fingers to release it. The pistol clattered to the floor where the light was drawn to it, spreading out to fall over it, covering it like translucent lava, and the gun, after turning red-hot again, melted into the stone.

'Push, Molly!' Tom shouted, trying to make himself heard over the roaring of the crystal skulls, above the whipping and whooshing of the swirling streams of light, as he struggled to loosen their bonds and set them both free. 'Push as hard as you can against the ropes! We might be able to break them!'

'It's impossible,' Molly replied, though she did as she was told, leaning forward, away from Tom, as the light swirled above her, going past her, streaming outside, and Tom continued wriggling frantically to loosen the ropes, refusing to give in.

'Don't stop, Molly! Try it!'

Yet even as he was struggling, he saw the crystal skulls changing, taking on ghostly features, turning into female faces, oddly beautiful, ageless, their full lips smiling ethereally, dark eyes radiant with the dawning awareness that they were being released from their Earthly prison. They found freedom in that instant, flaring up and fading away, and then the crystal skulls dissolved, sucked back into their own light, becoming mere clouds of dust, which, when

it settled, released an even greater light, a veritable explosion of silvery-whiteness, that swept away the streams of light that had been swirling around the room and then consumed them as it filled the whole tower and appeared to make the walls melt.

Tom saw stars on all sides, above and below, as Lu Thong, who could not see the floor, lost his balance and twisted wildly this way and that, then fell screaming disbelievingly into darkness. That darkness was below, where the floor should have been, and it looked like a bottomless pit with stars in its deepest depths. Lu Thong screamed as he looked down – he had the feeling that he was at least lying on something solid – 'The floor's still there!' Tom bawled, hoping to ease Molly's fears – and then, looking down, he saw exactly what Lu Thong was seeing…and was equally petrified.

Pools of lava glowed down there, illuminating banks of mud. Men and women, all naked, were either waist-deep in the lava, waving arms, wailing dementedly, or writhing in the mud, trying in vain to stand upright, their blistered bodies covered in serpents and spiders and scorpions and vermin. They, too, were wailing dementedly, or sobbing or groaning, and around them, in the putrefaction of eternal decay, wandered other members of the dead and the damned.

Lu Thong screamed in mortal terror, seeing what he would soon become. When he looked down, as did Tom, into that swooping, depthless darkness, seeing the damned and then seeing *through* them, he perceived, even farther down, in those depths beyond time and space, a mountain of bones covered in maggots, dismembered limbs filled with worms, wide-eyed faces, so far away and yet so near, wrapped in cobwebs and covered in slime, wailing throughout eternity for God's mercy.

Lu Thong also screamed for mercy, trying to raise himself from the deep, but as he broke free, jerking upright, gasping painfully for breath, a great roaring emanated from the dark pit beneath him, from the very bowels of the Earth, from the lowest basements of hell, and a blast of hot air enveloped him, sucking the breath from his lungs, and he was dragged down, protesting hysterically, wriggling frantically, screaming insanely, into a vortex of swirling flame and boiling blood and tripe and slime, into the belly of the beast created by him in his wild cocaine dreams.

Tom saw him down there, being offered what he had sought, but now that Lu Thong had what he had always sought – eternal life – he was horrified by

the price he would have to pay and screamed blasphemous insults. Thus, he was spewed back out, carried up on a bed of smoke, and reached where he had been before – that mere sliver of time – only to fall back into the darkness that still covered the stone-flagged floor.

Realizing that the floor was still there, he stood up and ran outside.

Tom broke free from his bonds – at least, he assumed that he had done so – but as the rope was torn apart and he felt the bonds around him loosening, he saw more streams of light spewing out of the far corner, rising from the hole where the stone slab had formerly been, covering up the crystal eyes, forming a triangle with two sides for the crystal skulls to be positioned by – the skulls that had vaporized, turning back into crystal powder, into the dust of centuries past – and then he saw those familiar figures materializing out of the light, slim, faceless, swaying sinuously, in silence, to surround him and bathe him in their light and lean down to touch him.

In fact, they could not touch him, but their power reached out to him: minute bolts of lightning filled with sparks that shot out of their fingerless hands to burn and sever his bonds.

Tom spread his hands in the air, free at last, and cast the severed ropes aside.

‘Yes!’ he cried. ‘*Yes*!’

‘Christ, let’s go!’ Molly snapped.

They jumped to their feet and ran outside, then stopped abruptly, seeing Lu Thong in front of them.

He looked like all hell, face blistered, hands scorched, but when he saw them, his cocaine eyes were further brightened with fury and fear. Reaching down to the ground, he picked up a pistol dropped by one of his hoodlums. He aimed it at Tom.

‘It’s all over for me,’ he said. ‘My life no longer has meaning. As it is for me, so it is for you, but you will go to hell sooner. First that tart and then you.’

He turned the pistol on Molly and cocked the hammer, preparing to fire, but Tom, without thinking, dived at him and crashed into him, sending him bowling backwards to the ground.

They struck the ground together in a tangle of arms and legs, but Tom pushed himself away and jumped back to his feet, and then, as Lu Thong also jumped to his feet, close to the edge of the broad terrace, Tom rushed at him and brought him down with a football tackle, once more crashing to the stone slabs. He rolled sideways as Lu Thong fell backwards over the edge.

Lu Thong offered his last sound on Earth – a long, drawn-out scream.
That scream seemed to reverberate for an exceptionally long time – it was not abruptly cut off by Lu Thong's contact with the ground – and as a vast, saucer-shaped light materialized directly above Ta Keo – a dazzling radiance filled with stars – and descended over the temple to obscure the five sanctuary towers in its pulsating, silvery haze, offering Tom and Molly protection, Tom crawled to the edge of the terrace and nervously looked down.
He saw a maelstrom of light and sound.
Lu Thong was down there, a mere puppet on a string, a silhouette in pools of phosphorescence, being turned this way and that, raised on high and then cast down again, before finally being turned inside-out, his soul released from his mortal body; and that soul, long corrupted beyond measure, turned back, like a black widow spider, to devour its own mate.
Lu Thong saw it coming – the monstrous beast of his own creation; his mirror image, his dominant dark side – and he screamed with the collected terror of all the damned of eternity as he was sucked again into the maelstrom, into the very jaws of hell, and then, his fate decreed, the unholy fires awaiting him, his Earthly body was allowed to continue its journey from the hard, unforgiving ground far below. He thudded into the timeless soil of the ancient city of Angkor, obliterated by its indifference, and remained there, his features crushed and erased, to make manure for the future.
'Well, well,' Tom whispered.
The maelstrom settled down, becoming a harsh wind, then a mere breeze, letting the normal daylight return, and Tom rolled away from the edge of the terrace to look directly above him. The great saucer-shaped light was dimming and shrinking as it ascended vertically, serenely, to the clouds, where it abruptly blinked out.
Tom climbed back to his feet.
'Day's work done,' he said.
Molly was staring at him. Though shell-shocked, she recovered quickly. Walking up to him, she cupped his face in her hands and then kissed him full on the lips. Her lips felt very nice.
'To hell with the money,' she said. 'To hell with it all. Why not marry me, Tom?'
'That would make you a respectable woman.'

‘I can live with that,’ Molly said. ‘Come on, let’s get out of here.’
They took the steps down to the bottom of the mountain-temple, then made their way back across the ancient city, past the dried-out canals and moats, the ruins shrouded in jungle mist, which had mysteriously returned, and on to where the BMW was still resting where they had left it, oddly angled over the tangled undergrowth around the base of the soaring trees. Without thinking, not speaking, they clambered up over the tangled roots, the rot of centuries, and climbed back into their respective sides of the car, where they sat side by side, in tingling silence, not fastening their safety belts.
When Tom glanced out of the car, he saw the caretakers of the site, all moon-faced Cambodians, piling out of an old wreck of a van and advancing into the complex, obviously assuming that this was just another day, not worth thinking about.
‘We’re in the real Angkor,’ Tom said to break the silence. ‘In Cambodia and clearly in the present.’ He checked his wristwatch. It still showed five in the morning. Time had stopped for him and Molly, though not for the real world, and the caretakers would get on with their work, not knowing what had taken place here. Tom and Molly were safe.
‘So how do we get home?’ Molly said.
‘Don’t ask me,’ Tom replied.
Molly turned into him, resting her hands on his shoulders, and gazed steadily into his eyes while smiling mischievously.
‘Tom?’
‘Yes?’
‘We might not get another chance like this. Have you ever fooled around in a car?’
‘I don’t believe so,’ Tom said.
‘Give me your hand, Tom.’
Tom let her hold his hand. She unbuttoned her Chinese blouse and pulled it off her shoulder, then placed Tom’s hand on her bare breast and sighed with deep pleasure. Tom closed his eyes.
‘Do you like the feel of me, Tom?’
‘God, yes, Molly, I do.’
‘There’s an awful lot more of me, Tom, and you’re a born explorer. Go exploring, Tom. Live a life.’
Tom kept his eyes closed. He let Molly be his guide. Together they went to

places that he had never been before, and the experience lifted him out of himself and offered transcendence. There were stars in his head. The cosmos unfurled before him. He was released from the inhibitions that had constrained him and he felt resurrected. Good spirits surrounded him. Though faceless, they smiled upon him. He felt their warmth and it poured down to his loins and let him melt into Molly. Entering Molly, he found a new life, a world beyond time and space, and he sensed that the world he had left behind, if still there at all, had been changed in some way he could not imagine; though the changes, he was convinced, were for the better and might bring peace on Earth.

Not that it mattered. Nothing mattered but his new feelings. He saw more stars and was raised on high by angels and surrounded by white light. The white light was benevolent.

‘God, I love you,’ Tom said.

Revelation

W.A.Harbinson

Without warning, after a night of terrifying disturbance, an event of unparalleled significance occurred to shake the foundations of civilisation.
It was an event so magnificent, so extraordinary, that it would alter forever the political structure and the spiritual beliefs of Western society.
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the peace that passes all understanding…
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-Bookseller

All at Sea on the Ghost Ship

W.A.Harbinson

In the year 2001 the son of bestselling novelist and biographer W.A.Harbinson offered his father a free trip as the sole passenger on a container ship that would sail from Shanghai to Haifa, with many other ports in between. Once on board the ship, Harbinson found that he was the only white face in a crew composed solely of Indian officers and Chinese seamen. He also realised that while he had previously sailed on passenger liners, he was ‘all at sea’ when it came to a working ship.

All at Sea on the Ghost Ship is Harbinson’s account of his unpredictable, always fascinating voyage. Rich in feeling, acute in observation, and often very funny, *All at Sea on the Ghost Ship* is a book to give us hope and make us smile. It is also an intriguing, rare glimpse into the mind of a writer.

The Writing Game

Recollections of an Occasional Bestselling Author W.A.Harbinson

The Writing Game is an autobiographical account of the life and times of a professional writer who has managed to survive the minefield of publishing for over thirty years.

Unlike most books on the subject, ***The Writing Game*** does not try to tell you how to write, or even how to get published. Instead, it focuses with gimlet-eyed clarity on the ups and downs of a unique, always unpredictable business.

On the one hand, a compelling look at a life lived on the edge, under the constant threat of failure, both artistic and financial, on the other, an unusually frank self-portrait enlivened with colourful snapshots of editors, fellow authors and show business celebrities, ***The Writing Game*** succeeds, as few other books have done, in showing how one professional, uncelebrated writer has managed to stay afloat in the stormy waters of conglomerate publishing.

Here, for the first time, a working author tells it like it really is.

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Into the world of Might Be

W.A.Harbinson

Two astronauts, a man and a woman, are taking part in a scientific experiment designed to gauge the effects of prolonged isolation and weightlessness on the human body. At first everything runs smoothly, but then things start going wrong. First, the Skylab inexplicably malfunctions, then the astronauts have magical, fearful experiences. But are their experiences real or imagined? Is the Skylab haunted or not? Or are both of them simply going mad?

Into the World of Might Be is a tour de force of prose writing, an astonishingly vivid evocation of the bewildering ‘new reality’ of quantum physics, alternate or parallel universes, black holes and the mysteries of Time. Uniquely combining hard scientific facts with a philosophical, metaphysical and, at times, deeply religious work of fiction, this could well be the ultimate short text for the New Age… for a new generation. Read it and take wing.

More information on books by W.A.Harbinson can be found at:
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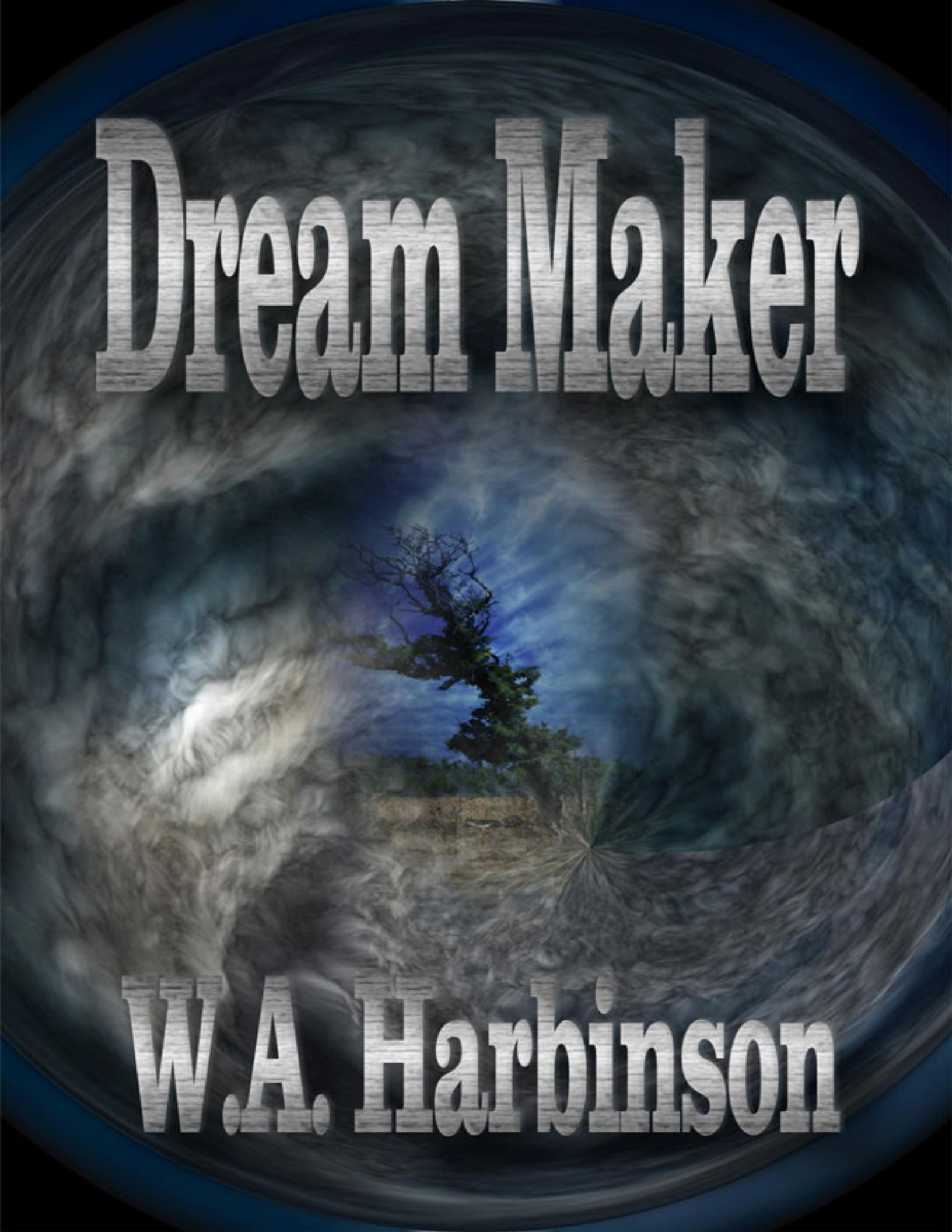
Dream Maker



W.A. Harbinson

DREAM MAKER

"The fires were burning in the darkness of America..."

The scientific community thinks it knows what's destroying the ozone layer until a brilliant, but overly emotional, NASA physicist, Tony Rydell, hits upon the truth in a terrifying and near fatal flight over Antarctica. But nobody will listen to what Tony has to say because neither the US government nor the military, with their short-term interests, can afford to do what has to be done.

Only Clare Holton, an attractive, strong-willed, but emotionally repressed government scientific liaison officer, is willing to give Rydell a hearing. However, her lover, the ruthless White House financial advisor, Jack Douglas, has the President's ear and is determined that *nothing* will undermine his plans to make the United States *the* world's dominant economic power - even if it costs the environment in the process.

So while the world's governments sit back and do nothing, Tony and Clare, initially antagonistic but gradually drawn together, emotionally and sexually, embark on a dangerous, magical quest: to save Earth from the Dream Maker - a mysterious force now growing stronger in the ever-widening hole in the ozone layer... a force that feeds off people's minds and sends them into an alien dream world filled with UFOs and ghosts, monsters and resurrected loved ones... a world where the line between dreaming and reality is gradually being eroded.

This in turn brings fire and flood, famine and disease... and America, the most powerful nation on earth, is being forced back to its pre-industrial age and facing total breakdown.

The race is on to prevent this...

DREAM MAKER is a fascinating combination of love story, horror story, science fiction and hard facts - a prediction of the world to come if we don't deal with today's terrifying environmental problems.

First published in Great Britain in 1991 by
Orbit Books, a Division of Macdonald & Co (Publishers) Ltd,
London & Sydney

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ISBN 0 7474 0542 5

This ebook edition published in 2012 by W. A. Harbinson

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Designed in the Isle of Wight, Great Britain, by www.inkdigital.org

Dream Maker

W. A. Harbinson

Part One

Chapter One

Tony saw it coming. At first it was just a pinprick in a vast sheet of darkness, then a gleaming white eye, but then it expanded, flaring out in all directions, and raced at him and exploded around him, obliterating the real world.

He was sucked through space and time, hurled into another dimension, then spiralled down through the cascading voices of history and returned to his constant dream.

Space folded into itself. The sudden silence was stunning. He looked up from Europa, across the valleys and frozen mountains, and saw the vast golden globe of Jupiter. It hung above the white mountains, which in fact were frozen ice, and it was streaked with yellow and gold, its Great Red Spot a bloody wound. Around it were the satellites, thirteen, maybe more, and all of them, the enormous apple and its seedlings, were drenched in the stars.

Tony knew where he was. Close to Jupiter... in his dreams. He knew it as he emerged from his dream to the dawn's pearly light...

Suzy was sleeping beside him, snoring softly, her body warm, and he wanted to stroke her blonde hair and roll gently into her.

'Godammit!' he whispered.

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, returning reluctantly to the real world. Glancing around the small bedroom, sparsely furnished, untidy, he wished that he could *really* fly to Jupiter or some other world.

No arguments there, he thought.

Suzy murmured in her sleep, curling up tighter, pressing against him, and he felt a rush of heat, his helpless lust and hardening, and so groaning in despair at his mortal weakness, he pressed himself into her.

'Hon',' he whispered tentatively,

'Uh?'

'Come on, Hon',' he said, hopefully stroking the smooth arch of her raised hip and thigh, 'let's get it on.'

She groaned and tugged at her raised nightdress. 'Gawd, Tony! What's the time?'

'It's dawn,' he told her, pressing even closer to her. 'I'll be leaving soon, sweetheart.'

'Yeah,' she said. 'Right.'

'For four weeks.'

‘You volunteered.’

‘Four weeks is a long time, darling, so come on, turn around.’

‘I don’t feel like it, Tony.’

‘Jesus, Suzy, I’ll be gone for four weeks!’

‘You volunteered,’ she repeated.

Her sleepy resentment dampened his ardour, bringing him back to earth, making him aware again of the liquor on her breath and reminding him that she hadn’t come home until the early hours, after leaving him and the kids alone for most of the evening. She had done it, even knowing that he was leaving this morning to take part in a four-week National Ozone Expedition in Punta Arenas at the southern tip of Chile. And she hadn't even done it to spite him.

She did it all the time, these days.

Sighing in despair, he rolled away from her, gazed forlornly at the ceiling, then eventually slipped out of bed and hurried into the bathroom. He slammed the door behind him, letting her know what he felt, and by the time he had showered and returned to the bedroom, she’d aroused herself and could be heard in the kitchen, preparing breakfast and having words with the kids. She didn’t sound very happy.

‘Here goes,’ Tony murmured.

He walked into the kitchen-diner and smiled brightly at his kids, Don and Ronnie, twelve and ten respectively, who were having their breakfast cereal at the table. They both looked a bit scruffy - he was unhappy to see that - but Ronnie still had the face of a golden-haired angel and his elder brother, Don, was listening to him with his familiar expression of grave concern.

‘Spiders,’ Ronnie was saying, tapping his spoon on the table and automatically scratching his ribcage. ‘I dreamed about spiders again. I *always* dream about spiders these days. That’s ‘cause I hate ‘em.’

‘You shouldn’t hate ‘em,’ Don said helpfully. ‘They’re just living things, that’s all. I mean, spiders think they look perfectly natural, right? And to each other, they do. They probably think *we* look as ugly as we think *they* look. So, you know, you shouldn’t worry about ‘em. After all, they’re not dangerous like snakes. They give *me* the shivers!’

‘I still hate ‘em,’ Ronnie said.

‘Just try not to think of ‘em,’ Don said, ‘and you’ll stop dreaming about them.’

‘Stop talking about spiders,’ Suzy said wearily, not taking her eyes off the frying pan, making flapjacks and eggs. ‘I can do without spiders at breakfast, so

shut up and eat, kids.'

She was still slim and long-legged, her figure emphasised sexily by her figure-hugging denims, high-heeled boots and tight, open-necked checkered shirt. She was also blonde-haired and pretty, with oddly sensual-childish features, though this morning her cat's green eyes were puffy and bloodshot.

'Morning, kids!' Tony said. 'Morning, Suzy!'

'What's good about it?' Suzy replied automatically.

'I didn't say it was good. Merely mentioned its existence. Not feeling well, darling?'

'Ha, ha. You want flapjacks?'

'With ham and eggs, sunny-side up. If it's not too much trouble.'

'No trouble at all. That's what I'm here for. Just being a good little housewife. It's all in a day's work.'

'I dream about rats, too - ' Ronnie began.

'Shut up!' Suzy warned him.

'I was just saying - '

'Don't say anything, Ronnie. I don't like rats at breakfast either, so just finish your cornflakes.'

Tony poured himself some coffee. 'Let him talk,' he said to Suzy. 'He just wants to express his subconscious fears, and that can't be a bad thing.'

'He should just try to forget them, like Don told him to,' she replied, breaking eggs into the pan. 'All this talk isn't good for him.'

Nor for us, Tony thought, letting the coffee burn down inside him, smelling the frying ham and eggs, and gazing out at the other houses of Greenbelt, Maryland, which this morning were bathed in bright sunshine.

'It's all psychology,' Don said helpfully. 'I read that in one of your books, Dad. All these things that scare us come to the surface when we're dreaming. That's why Don dreams of spiders and rats.'

'One more mention of those things at breakfast,' Suzy said grimly, 'and you'll both end up starving. Why don't *you* make them stop, Tony? They're *your* kids, as well!'

'Okay, you two,' Tony said, grinning broadly at them as Suzy placed his plate on the table. 'You're *my* kids, as well, see? So stop all this talk about spiders, rats and snakes and get on with your breakfast.'

Both boys laughed at that, but Suzy just glared at him, and when he sat down to eat, he could feel her eyes boring like lasers into his spine.

‘Okay,’ he said, tucking into his breakfast, ‘let’s call it a truce. I’m going *away* today, kids.’

‘You’re *always* going away,’ they both said simultaneously.

‘Right,’ Suzy added.

She brought a cup of coffee to the table, sat down, lit a cigarette, exhaled a thin stream of smoke.

‘At breakfast?’ Tony asked sarcastically.

‘At least I’m home,’ she replied, then turned towards the kids. ‘Are you finished?’

‘Yeah,’ Don said.

‘The sun’s shining and it’s Saturday morning, so you can go out and play. Just keep the noise down, right?’

‘You got a hangover?’ Tony asked.

‘Yeah, I’ve got a hangover. What's that to you? Okay, kids, get going.’

The boys hurried from the kitchen, forgetting spiders, snakes and rats. Tony watched them disappearing through the door with a great deal of pleasure... But when he turned back to Suzy, she was staring accusingly at him, her face hazed in the cigarette smoke, making him wonder what had happened to the girl he’d once loved so much - and possibly still did.

They had both been born and raised in the high prairie plains of west Iowa, brought up by staunch Republican parents on neighbouring farms, and met for the first time at high school in Des Moines. Almost immediately they’d plunged into a passionate, blind, teenage romance that encouraged them to marry, probably too young, but certainly soon after leaving high school. Pregnant with Don, their first child, Suzy had remained in their small apartment in Ames, while Tony went on to study physics at Iowa State University. However, Suzy had soon become dissatisfied with being a housewife and mother, trapped at home all day, and her mood was not improved when Tony, having passed his exams, was offered a job as a junior physicist with the Manned Spacecraft center in Houston, Texas, which meant leaving Iowa, which Suzy loved, and moving to a tract house in Seabrook, a small town located in the dry flatlands between Houston and Galveston.

It wasn’t a particularly nice place to live. The winds from the Gulf of Galveston continually swept across the town, bringing with them the suffocating, unhealthy stench of natural gas, petrolium, sulphur, salt, and the various chemicals from the many oil fields and plants producing cement,

textiles, synthetic rubber and cotton. It was also hot and humid, prone to violent storms, and even the sleepy town they lived in seemed as mean as the weather.

Tony hadn't liked it much, but at least he had loved his work; whereas Suzy, who'd had a busy social life in Iowa, almost went mad with boredom. They had another child, Ronnie, and she started drinking shortly after, then got an itch for places like Gillie's bar and other noisy watering holes. Invariably she went out with her girlfriends, some married, others single, rarely returning until after midnight, usually red-eyed.

He kept waiting for her to stay out all night, but so far, to his surprise, she hadn't done that.

Yet things weren't too good between them. As Tony's workload at MSC had increased, as his work began taking him over and he became a workaholic like most of those at NASA, he and Suzy had grown even more distant to one another, she had started going out more, and the drink, even while making her irritable, had started making visible inroads in her appearance.

Like him, she was twenty-eight, but unlike him (he liked to think), she looked like someone in her early thirties - a hell of an age, really - a woman still sensual, even sexy, but no longer attractive.

At least, that's what he told himself.

Looking at her now, and convincing himself that she looked worn-out, he realised that he'd been hoping their recent move to here, to Greenbelt in Maryland, where he was working in the space environmental physics department of NASA'S Goddard Space Flight center, would have changed her - but it hadn't. She hated Greenbelt as much as she had hated Seabrook, complained constantly that he was away from home too much - which was true - and was drinking maybe even more than ever.

Tony felt that his marriage was dying, but he didn't know what to do about it.

'Look,' he tried, 'about this trip - '

'I don't wanna discuss it, Tony.'

'We *have* to discuss it. You're angry. I can tell that. So let's get it out in the open. It's healthier that way.'

'What is there to discuss? It's your goddamned *work*, after all. I mean, the trip's already booked - and as you said yesterday, it's part of the job and you couldn't get out of it if you tried. You *have* to travel a lot for your work, so why bother discussing it?'

In fact, he wanted to discuss it, but wasn't allowed to... He was going to the

Antarctic, as his boss and neighbour, Dwight Connors, had informed him, because a USAF pilot had recently crashed there, after becoming unaccountably hysterical in his aircraft. Even now, Tony felt shivery, unreal, when he recalled the pilot's hysterical shouting on the tape of his transmission: 'Something's out there! It's above me! Beside me! *Below me!* Jesus Christ, oh my God, I don't believe... Please, no! No, no, no... *Keep away from me!*' Then he'd started screaming dementedly as his airplane went out of control, eventually crashing into the Antarctic ice, where it burst into flames... It was a mystery, all right, and one that Tony wasn't allowed to discuss it, which was no help with Suzy.

'You want me to give up my job? Is that what you want? You want me to leave NASA and take a job where the money's a lot less and the work's not worth doing, but at least I'll be home all the time. Is that what you want?'

'At least we'd *see* each other now and then!'

'I'm not away that often, Suzy. I only make these trips four or five times a year. A month's the longest I've ever been away. I mean, I'd *like* to be at home a bit more, but what the hell can I do? The money's good and - '

'It's not the money and you know it. You stay there because you like it. You're fanatical about your work and you love making these trips and you don't give a damn that I'm rotting here while you have a good time.'

Tony was outraged. 'While you *rot* here?' he practically shouted. 'At least I go away to *work*! And when I'm home, at least I'm home! I'm not out every evening, getting drunk and making eyes at the ladies, like you do with those cowboys. Godammit, I - '

'Cowboys? *What* cowboys? We're not in Texas now, Tony. We're in Greenbelt, Maryland, in a dumb tract house in the boring suburbs, and our neighbours are pilots, astronauts, scientists and their godawful wives. I don't make eyes at *cowboys!*'

'You know what I mean, Suzy.'

'Right, I know what you mean! But since you're married to your work, I don't know why my activities should concern you. And without them, without getting out at nights, I'd go mad in this place.'

'You said that in Texas, too. You'd say it wherever we moved to. Other women would take pride in raising their kids and running a decent home, but all *you* want is to have a good time with those tramps you call friends.'

'And why not?' she retorted, blowing a cloud of smoke at him. 'You love your work, so *you're* having a good time. If you, why not me?'

She had him there and he knew it. He loved his work and always had. Even as a kid he had dreamed about being a scientist involved with space research - and since then, he had single-mindedly devoted himself to achieving his goal. Not sure as an adolescent just what branch of science he wanted to enter, he'd had no doubts at all about his obsession with outer space and to that end had read voraciously about the great rocket pioneers - Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, Hermann Oberth, Robert Goddard, Wernher von Braun - and built countless ingenious models of various airplanes and rockets while most of his friends were out cruising or at the movies. At one time toying with the idea that he might become an astronaut, he thought of joining the Air Force, but changed his mind because he didn't want to wear a uniform. Instead, he took flying lessons while studying physics in Iowa, and eventually, given his academic brilliance and dedication, he made it into NASA, eventually progressing to work with the Earth System Science program of the NASA-Goddard Institute for Space Studies, created to study the increasing dangers of the 'greenhouse' effect, caused by the widening hole in the Earth's protective ozone layer. Now, though still a physicist, he was more frequently called a climatologist and had, on behalf of NASA, worked with climate change models for a broad range of climatology organisations, including the National center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, the Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory at Princetown University, the Meteorological Office in Bracknell, Berkshire, England, the Beijer Institute in Stockholm, Sweden, the center for Applied Climatology and Environmental Studies in the University of Munster, West Germany, the TATA Energy Research Institute in New Delhi, India, and numerous other similar organisations in Europe, England, and the United States.

No wonder Suzy was mad at him. He *did* travel a lot. And if that was true enough, what was equally true is that he loved his work and couldn't give it up for anything - not even his marriage.

He felt guilty about that.

'Listen,' he said, as he had said once too often, 'I've got to go now. We'll discuss this properly when I get back. We'll work something out.'

'No, we won't, Tony. You always say that, but it never happens. You'll just go off for a month, leaving me alone with the kids, and when you come back, you'll be too busy writing your damned reports to have time to discuss our situation. Then, before you *get* time to do it, you'll be off on another trip.'

'It'll be different this time, Suzy.'

‘No, it won’t. Not at all. And I’m fed up listening to your goddamned stories each time you take off. To hell with you and your work. I’m sick of being left alone here. This time, I’m warning you, if you go, I won’t be here when you come back.’

Tony sighed and stood up, glancing down at his suitcase. ‘You’re just being melodramatic. I’m going to go while the going’s good.’

‘I won’t stay here! I swear it!’

‘You’ll leave home?’

‘Yes, I will.’

‘Don’t be stupid.

‘Just go to hell, Tony! You walk out that door and we’re finished. Do you understand, damn you?’

Startled, he stared at her, hardly believing her vehemence, gradually realising that she meant what she had said, feeling all hot and bothered.

‘Christ,’ he said, ‘this is crazy!’

‘It’s not crazy; it’s the truth.’

‘When I get back - ’

‘I won’t be here!’

‘Will you *listen* to me?’ Tony raised his hands as if in prayer. Though he hadn’t stepped outside to brave Maryland’s morning heat, he was already sweating. ‘Will you just goddamn *listen?*’

‘No!’ Suzy snapped. ‘Why should I? You *promised* you wouldn’t go away again and yet you’re going already. Damn you, Tony, I hate you!’

She had been saying that for months, but now he knew she was starting to mean it. He glanced through the window, trying to control his heavy breathing, then looked up at the brightening sky over Greenbelt and yearned to be in it.

‘I have to go and you know it,’ he said, ‘so I’m going right now.’ Picking up his suitcase, he took note of her flushed face, and convinced himself that he no longer cared for her, no matter how much he wanted to. ‘You’ll calm down as soon as I leave. You’ll think more clearly then. Do I get a goodbye kiss?’

‘No, damn you, you don’t.’

He shrugged, trying to shake off the hurt. ‘Okay, Suzy, goodbye.’

She inhaled on her cigarette, stubbed it out in the ashtray, blew a cloud of smoke and stood up and walked from the room.

That was her answer.

Tony sighed, then, not knowing what else to do, he picked up his suitcase,

walked out of the house, and found Don and Ronnie on the front lawn. They stopped playing when they saw him, both staring at his suitcase, then impulsively embraced him and stepped away to let him walk off.

Shaken by the fight with Suzy and deeply moved by the boys' impulsive display of emotion, he stopped before getting into his car and turned to look at them. They smiled and waved and he filled up with love for them. Then Suzy, smoking another cigarette, appeared in the doorway behind them and staring silently at him. Not knowing what to do, he just shrugged his shoulders, climbed into his car and drove off.

Chapter Two

Utilizing the will-power she had developed as one of the few female astronauts, Clare Holton slept like a log, awoke at 9.00 am precisely without the aid of a room call, slipped out of bed, showered and dressed herself, then had the light breakfast she had ordered from room service. Then she sat down at the desk overlooking Montreal's St. Lawrence River and proceeded to work.

As the scientific representative and public speaker for NASA's National Space Technological Laboratories, as well as liaison officer between NASA and the Department of Defence, she had spent the past seven days attending a meeting of the representatives of the technologically developed countries, being held under the auspices of the United Nations. Now, while the representatives of over thirty countries were individually deciding whether or not they should sign the first global treaty aimed at reducing worldwide atmospheric pollution, she reappraised the mass of detail she had soaked up over the past week. Later that afternoon she was going to speak to the assembled delegates on behalf of NASA, which in this instance was representing the US government's official stance on the matter.

Three hours later, she finished her task, folded up the notes and put them into her bag, then left the room and went downstairs to join Jack Douglas for lunch in the hotel's restaurant.

'*Bonjour*!' Jack exclaimed, raising his glass of Scotch to her as she approached his table. '*Comment allez-vous*?'

‘I’m fine,’ she replied, though her command of French was better than his. ‘I’m actually feeling bright and healthy - which is more than you’ll feel if you have another Scotch before the conference.’

He grinned wryly as she took the chair facing him.

‘A mere medicinal,’ he said. ‘Of course we know that Miss Holton, physicist and former astronaut, is not in need of artificial stimulation like most other mere mortals. Can I *tempt* you at least?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Clare replied. ‘I’ll have a Perrier water and the Caesar salad. And *you* should eat, too.’

‘I could eat *you*,’ he said.

‘I didn’t mean sex, I meant food. Have an omelette, at least.’

‘You’re so sensible, Clare.’

He called the waitress, ordered the food and drink, then leaned over the table to ask: ‘Have you prepared your speech?’

‘I wrote it this morning.’

‘Of course,’ he said, sipping his Scotch and grinning at her. ‘Your intellectual brilliance is renowned, your dedication much lauded. That’s why you intimidate so many men: they can’t be men in your presence.’

‘You mean they can’t look after me, feed me sugar, pat my head. They can’t have my blind adoration.’

‘That’s right,’ Jack said. ‘They’re frightened by your intelligence and independence. They lose their balls in your presence.’

Clare couldn’t help smiling. ‘I don’t seem to intimidate *you*, so what does that prove? That you’re a man amongst men?’

‘Not a man amongst men, but certainly more of a man than you are. Or, to be more precise, that I’m a man who’s not frightened of women who don’t fear me. But you’re so completely your own woman, most men can’t get to grips with you.’

‘And you?’

‘Not being frightened of you, I can treat you as an equal. And since that’s such a rarity for you, you were attracted to me, though not as much as I’d like.’

‘And how much is that?’

‘As much as it takes to make you marry me.’

‘That’s too much,’ she told him.

He didn’t flinch, and she admired him for that; it was the kind of strength, so rare in a man, that had drawn her into his bed.

Just short of forty years of age, which made him ten years her senior, he possessed matinée-idol good looks, was too bright for his own good, and had cynicism welded to his intelligence and rampant ambition. An economic advisor on environmental issues, he worked, where she also worked, in the Old Executive Office Building next to the White House, reported directly to the President, and was widely rumoured to be a mean man to mix with where work was involved.

Clare enjoyed his cynicism, though she didn't actually share it, but she was also wary of him because of his rumoured mean-streak. Just occasionally, when she had teased him about something, she had sensed him suppressing his anger... and that, at least in the past few weeks, had made her wary.

'*Why* won't you marry me?' he asked abruptly, as if reading her mind.

She sighed. 'I've told you before. I just don't want to be married.'

The waitress brought Jack's omelette, Clare's salad and Perrier water, placed them on the table and left.

'Why not? Were your parents unhappily married?'

'No, Jack, they weren't. They were very happily married. But they were also independent and gave themselves the kind of personal freedom that's so rare in marriage. They gave that to me as well, and told me to hold it dear. So I grew up aware of the clinging possessiveness of most people. And because my parents were both devoted to their work, they drilled discipline onto me, will power, and the belief that since work takes up so much of our time, we should work only at what we truly love and put nothing above it.'

'Not even personal relationships?'

'I doubt that I could get seriously involved with a man who didn't share my beliefs.'

'Such a man,' Jack said, 'would obviously have to love his work even more than he loved you. That's pretty unusual.'

Clare sighed. 'I suppose so.'

'Did your father love his work more than he loved your mother?'

'You're simplifying the issue,' Clare said. 'It wasn't as simple as that.'

She tried to explain it as they ate their meals. As she did so, she smiled, thinking of her parents with all the love of a single, cherished child.

Born and raised in an elegant town house just off Wisconsin Avenue, in Georgetown, Washington DC, she had nothing but loving memories of her childhood in a home that was always filled with people and, at least to her

child's perception, with optimism, good humour and hard work. Her father had been, and remained, a Professor of Astronomy Space Sciences, formerly at NASA, presently at the Center for Radiophysics and Space Research. Her mother, when alive, had been a distinguished analytical chemist and writer of numerous, now standard reference books.

Clare, raised and guided by two singular personalities, influenced by their philosophy and experience, had been filled forever, so she thought, with the absolute conviction that only people who first respected themselves could offer true respect and freedom to their loved ones. Certainly she had learned that her father and mother, both dedicated to their individual careers, had each, by putting their work first, given the other the freedom to do the same. She would never forget that.

'So when, six months ago, my mother died,' she told Jack, 'my father and I were able to deal with it because we had what even my mother thought was the most important thing: work that we loved. In other words: a reason to be. Not too many have that, Jack.'

He stared at her in an oddly intense, curious manner, though his smile, when eventually it came, was slightly sardonic. 'And it's that simple? That's why you still haven't married?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'I think I'm still single because I was taught to retain a strong sense of myself. And I haven't yet met a man who was so attractive to me that he made me want to surrender my independence. Not even you, Jack.'

'My God, you're one hard, direct lady. No wonder I like you.'

'You like me because you think I'm just like you, but I'm not. I'm not that cold.'

'You think I'm cold?'

'Yes. You're hot in bed, but you're calculating. You know how to please a woman sensually, but emotionally, you're not involved.'

'I am. I keep asking you to marry me and am constantly refused. Why would I take that if I didn't really want you?'

'If I'd said "yes" the first time, you'd have lost interest. You're a man who can't stand being refused. That's why you're in politics.'

Jack was about to reply when the ringing of his cellular phone distracted him. Clare had always been annoyed by the increasing use of such executive toys in public places, but she simply got on with her meal as Jack, merely nibbling at his food, conducted a lengthy conversation with his broker. He enjoyed playing

the market and had many investments. Now, while Clare ate and glanced around the crowded restaurant, taking note of the mostly male clientele, wondering how many of them realised just how quickly their world was changing, Jack was buying and selling shares in the very multinationals that she was trying to fight. The more she knew him, the more he annoyed her, though she still shared his bed.

'Sorry,' he said, putting the phone back on the table.

'Bad enough that you have to bring one of those ridiculous things into the restaurant; even worse is what you're using it for. Don't you realise that what you're doing represents a conflict of interests?'

'I'm not sure I get your drift, Clare.'

'You're the president's financial advisor on environmental issues and, according to rumour, might soon be his new chief of staff. You shouldn't be at this conference publicly lending your support while privately supporting the multinationals with your numerous investments. It's not only a conflict of interests: it's damned hypocrisy!'

'Only true if your suppositions about the ozone hole are also true - and that hasn't been proven yet.'

'That's semantics.'

Jack grinned. 'That's politics. And by the look on your face, I think I'll be safer at the conference.'

'Then pay up and let's go.'

When he had paid the check, they left the hotel, caught a taxi to the conference center, and took their places with the other delegates. The large room was packed and hot. After seven days of often acrimonious debate, most of the delegates had clearly made up their minds, one way or the other, and were merely enduring the closing summaries without showing any great degree of interest. Nevertheless, under the glare of the spotlights and in front of the massed TV cameras, boom-mikes and photographers, Clare spoke on behalf of NASA. Afterwards, she summarised her speech for those who would only see only an edited version, either on TV or in the newspapers.

In simple terms she explained that the ozone in the atmosphere protected the surface of the Earth from ultraviolet radiation produced by the Sun, which might otherwise destroy life on most of the planet. 'And ozone,' she said, 'is a form of oxygen, the active ingredient of the air we breathe, the gas that's essential for all forms of animal life on Earth.' She then reminded them that the ozone layer was

presently being destroyed at an ever-increasing rate by the fumes and gases of spray cans, insecticides, paints, polishes, disinfectants, and car and aircraft exhausts - destroyed, indeed, to the degree where it had finally formed an invisible 'hole' in the atmosphere - a hole the size of the United States and the height of Mount Everest.

'The complete destruction of the remaining ozone layer will result in increased skin cancer, cataracts and other diseases,' she told them. 'As well as blighting food crops and harming animals, it will upset the world's climate and life-support systems. Also, if the depletion of ozone isn't checked, it will cause a shift in the global average temperature, which would, in one direction, plunge us back into a full Ice Age or, in the other, melt the polar ice caps and inundate cities like New York, London and Leningrad.'

She paused to let her words sink in, then continued with: 'In short, if we do not vote, here and now, to take specific steps to reduce worldwide atmospheric pollution and protect the Earth's ozone layer, we'll be accepting the eventual destruction of human life as we know it. Ladies and gentlemen, thank you.'

She stepped down to enthusiastic applause.

Later that afternoon, when all the votes had been counted, nearly thirty nations had officially pledged to reduce the release of chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCS, by fifty percent by the end of the 21st century.

Clare was well pleased.

Chapter Three

'No,' Suzy said, wiping a tear from her eye, 'I won't listen, Maggie. I've had about as much as I can take, so this time I'm doing it.'

'For God's sakes, calm down,' Maggie said, 'and just think about it. You're upset, that's all. Give yourself time to think about it and I'm sure - '

'Are you gonna help me or not?' Suzy hauled more clothes out of the chest of drawers in the bedroom and threw them into a suitcase. 'If not, you can leave!'

Maggie was her neighbour and the wife of Tony's best friend, Dwight Connors. Luckily she had seen a lot of life and did not take offence. Plump and blonde, she simply shrugged, raised her hands and said, 'Okay! *Okay!* I'm here

to help, right? I'm gonna make you some coffee and give you a cigarette and try to calm you down and talk sense to you. That's what friends are for, right?'

'Wrong. I don't need that now. What I need is a friend who won't give me lectures, but'll help me carry this stuff out to the car. Now will you do that or not?'

Maggie sighed. 'Yeah, I'll do it. Dwight'll kill me when he gets back, but I'll do it. I just think you should sit down and have a drink and talk this thing through.'

'That's the best idea you've had,' Suzy said. 'At least pour me that drink. I can pack while I'm drinking it.'

She kept pulling clothes out of the chest of drawers and putting them into suitcases while Maggie left the room and returned with two glasses of bourbon. When Maggie gave her one, she sipped gratefully, then set the glass on the table and started zipping up the first suitcase.

'Why are you doing this?' Maggie asked.

'Because our marriage is finished.'

'It's not finished,' Maggie said. 'It's just going through a bad patch. Most marriages go through the same thing, but they often recover. Just give it a chance.'

'Give *him* a chance, you mean.'

'Yeah, give Tony a chance. I mean, the guy works for NASA. *All* those guys are workaholics. Even Dwight, for chrissakes, works all the time - but apart from that, he's okay, a good man - just like Tony. You're giving up a lot for a little, Suzy. It's all out of proportion.'

Suzy lit a cigarette, inhaled greedily, blew smoke rings. She could hear the boys packing in the next room and that made her feel worse.

She'd only told them an hour ago that she wanted a break from their dad, wanted to go live with her folks and take them with her, to go to a strange place and new school and different friends; and if that had shocked them enough, they'd been shocked even more when she told them they were leaving immediately, with no time to even say goodbye to their friends, let alone their own father. They'd asked why and she'd tried hard to tell them, but she couldn't explain it.

'I don't care what you say, Maggie. I think I'm doing the right thing. You've been living like this for years and maybe you even like it, but I can't stand being here all alone while Tony travels the globe and spends most of his time working

when he *is* home. I'm just not cut out for this. I've tried, but it isn't working. I'm not a scientist's wife, I never will be, and we don't love each other any more, which just makes it worse.'

'Love changes as you get older,' Maggie said. 'It's still there. It's just not the same.'

'Oh, yeah? What does that mean?' Suzy could still remember the feelings she'd had for Tony at high school - the blinding intensity, the all-consuming passion, the radiance that lit you up inside and made you feel magical. She hadn't felt anything remotely like that for years - only neglect and frustration - and the knowledge of what she had lost only made her feel worse. 'I mean, either it's there or it's not. If it's not the same, it's not there.'

'You're so romantic.' Maggie sighed. 'You still feel like an adolescent. But you're gonna have to learn to grow up, Suzy, and keep a check on your feelings.'

'I don't wanna be that way. It's not what I am, Maggie. I wanna live every day of my life and not get buried alive. He doesn't see me anymore. He only sees his goddamned work. I mean, even when I threatened to leave, he put his work first.' She shrugged, to hide her deep hurt. 'Well, to hell with him.'

After another slug of bourbon, she zipped up the second suitcase, hauled it off the bed, placed it heavily on the floor, then glanced wildly around her.

She was looking for Tony.

'You can't go home again,' Maggie said.

'What does that mean?'

'What the hell are you going to do in Iowa? I mean, what's there for you now?'

'My parents,' Suzy said. 'They still have the same farm. They live in the bread basket of America and they have a good life. So I'll stay with them. I might even help on the farm. The boys can attend a local school, breathe clean air for a change, and maybe even go to church once or twice. It'll work out fine, Maggie.'

'And that's it? You're set to go? You're just gonna leave a farewell note, get in the car, and drive off to Iowa with the kids?'

'Yeah, Maggie, that's right. And I'm taking all my CDs and those books and letting him have the rest. So come on, help me carry them.'

'Dear God,' Maggie murmured. But she did as she was told, picking up the box of books, which was all she could manage the first time, while Suzy resolutely took the suitcases and walked out of the bedroom. She put them down

in the living room, glanced into the boys' bedroom, and saw that they'd practically finished as well, though they weren't looking happy.

'Are you set to go?' she asked them.

'Yeah,' Don replied.

'Then bring your stuff out to the car.'

'Okay,' Ronnie said.

She ignored his wounded look, though was hurt by it all the same, knowing damned well that what she was doing was wrong, but not able to stop herself. She was too emotional, was why, and she'd always been that way, and when she felt neglected, as she had this past few years, she just couldn't handle it. She'd tried to, of course, but being here hadn't helped. She needed attention, was willing to give it, and so didn't feel comfortable in this scientific community, where everyone was so damned intellectual and obsessed with their work.

Tony was the same. He lived and breathed his goddamned work. And in doing that, he'd forgotten she existed, forgotten the love they'd shared in high school, and almost turned her into one of those wives who die quietly at home while still as fit as a fiddle, just dwindling away each day. He'd never treated her badly nor played around with other women, but he'd forgotten what had joined them together and she couldn't forgive that.

She still loved the little scatterbrained bastard, but he was too dumb to notice.

More resolute, she picked up the suitcases and followed Maggie out to the car.

Having just placed the box of books into the trunk, Maggie straightened up, breathing heavily.

She looked near to tears.

'I can't believe - '

'Believe it,' Suzy said. 'I'm really doing it this time.'

Maggie glanced over her shoulder. 'The boys are coming,' she said. True enough, they came down the lawn, carrying their gear. Don, the eldest, was grimly serious, whereas Ronnie looked wounded, but both of them gave Suzy their suitcases to be placed in the trunk.

'Are you okay?' she asked them.

'Sure,' Don replied.

'Look, I told you,' she lied again. 'It's not for a lifetime. We're just gonna give it a try. If you really don't like it after a time, I'll send you both home. Okay?'

'Okay,' Don said.

Ronnie didn't say a word, just glanced up and down the street. He hadn't even

said goodbye to his friends and that was obviously bugging him... That and the shock of leaving in general... Suzy choked up just seeing him.

'Okay, kids. Get in the car. We'll be off in a minute.'

They did as they were told, climbing into the back seats, and then Suzy led Maggie up the lawn and back into the house. She checked all the windows, the gas, the electricity, then sat down at the kitchen table to write Tony a short goodbye note.

Maggie started crying then. Suzy glared at her. Maggie went into the bedroom and returned with the CDs. 'I'll see you out at the car,' she said, and then hurried outside.

Suzy struggled with the note. She didn't know where to begin. She hardly ever had to write (like most people, she used the phone) and trying to put her feelings onto paper made her feel a bit threatened. She started a few times, tore the paper up, tried again, chewed her lower lip, sniffed back her tears and remembered their better days.

God, he used to be so cute! He'd charmed her immediately. A bit scatterbrained and most times dishevelled, but he'd had that little thing about him - a kind of childishness or innocence - and strangely, an awful lot of girls had liked it. He didn't threaten them, was why. He was too distracted to be a threat. If you wanted him, you practically had to rape him, though he'd never complain. In fact, that's what *she'd* done: come on real strong in the car. And they'd done it in the car - not too well, but with lots of feeling - and after that, he could fill her up with such tenderness, she just couldn't believe it.

Then they'd married and somehow lost it and she couldn't forget that fact.

She'd tell him that in this note.

But she couldn't do it. You had to touch someone to say that. So, touching only pen and paper, she wrote carefully:

> *'Dear Tony,*
> *I can't take any more. So I'm keeping my promise. I'm taking the kids with me to my folks in Iowa and I'm leaving you everything but my CDs and favourite books. Don't think you have to keep in touch. Goodbye and good luck. Yours sincerely, Suzy.'*

Leaving the note on the kitchen table, Suzy left the house for the last time. After

carefully locking the front door, she walked to the car.

Maggie, wiping tears from her eyes, said, 'Please, Suzy, just think about what you're doing. Just give it a - '

'No,' Suzy said. She smiled, feeling light headed, then suddenly brimming over with emotion, she embraced her good friend. 'You take care,' she said.

'And you.'

'Don't let Tony do anything too stupid.'

'I won't,' Maggie said.

They hugged emotionally again, then broke apart, embarrassed. Suzy climbed into the car, closed the door and turned on the ignition.

'Are you kids okay?' she asked.

'Sure,' Don said.

'Sure,' Ronnie added.

Suzy drove off as Maggie waved goodbye and both boys waved back.

Suzy kept driving, her vision blurred by tears. She turned the corner at the bottom of the street and said, 'Here we go, kids.'

'Aw, Mom!' Ronnie said. There were tears in his eyes as well.

Suzy slowed down, eventually stopped the car, and just stared straight ahead.

'Iowa!' Don said. 'What will *we* do in Iowa? We don't know a soul in Iowa. And what about Dad?'

'I told you: I'm leaving him.'

'It's not right,' Don said.

'I don't wanna leave home,' Ronnie said. '*Please*, Mom, don't go!'

'I've got to,' she told him. 'You don't understand, but I've got to. If you don't want to come, then don't come, but I've got to do this.'

'Would you be upset?' Don asked. Now he, too, was almost crying.

'No, Don,' she said. 'I understand. You two do what you have to do.'

The boys stared at one another, both with wet eyes. Then Don nodded and they opened the rear doors and climbed out of the car.

Suzy opened the trunk from inside. The boys removed their suitcases. After slamming the lid of the trunk closed, they both walked up to her. Don stuck his face down to the open window to show her his glistening eyes.

'Please don't go, Mom,' he said.

She smiled and kissed him. 'I have to.'

Don sniffed and sighed too loudly and stepped away as Ronnie stuck his face up to her. She kissed the tears from his cheeks.

‘We love you, Mom,’ he said.

‘I know. I love you too. But right now, I just can’t help myself. I’ll come and see you soon. I promise you that. In the meantime, you look after your Dad. Here,’ she added, handing Don her set of door keys. ‘Now get back to the house’

Don took the keys and nodded, but this time he couldn’t speak. Ronnie shuffled his feet uneasily, looked up at his elder brother, then tugged at his arm and made him pick up his suitcase and walked him away from the car, back towards their own street.

Suzy watched them turn the corner and disappear from sight. When they were gone, she just sat there, her heart beating like a drum, thinking of Tony in the Antarctic - working, always working - and surrendering inexorably to a pain that threatened to tear her apart.

She wanted him to feel what she felt, to know what she was feeling now, and tried to send those feelings leaping over the vast distance between them, to explode all around him.

Failing and frustrated, she burst into tears, hammered the steering wheel with her clenched fists, then eventually stopped her crying and drove off... all the way to Iowa.

Chapter Four

Entering the briefing room in the prefabricated building at the edge of the airstrip in Punta Arenas, Chile. Tony Rydell, normally bright, was instead feeling sleepy and distracted. While this Airborne Antarctic Ozone Experiment had been organised and was being managed by NASA, the National Science Foundation, the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and the US Chemical Manufacturers Association were also involved. The briefing room, Tony noted instantly, was filled with their representatives, as well as with the members of university and government research establishments in the United States, Britain, France, Argentina, Chile and New Zealand. Most of these men, like Tony, were looking Neanderthal in their flying suits, but none seemed as distracted as he was at that particular moment.

Taking a seat near the back of the crowded room, he felt slightly hungover, looked forward to taking some oxygen in his airplane, and had only vague memories of the previous evening when, in the bar of the Cabo de Hornos hotel, in the Plaza de Armas in downtown Punta Arenas, he had first thought long and hard about Suzy, then proceeded to get drunk with a vengeance. He *did* remember that at some point in the evening, he had left the hotel and staggered down to the shore to observe the sunset over the Strait of Megallan, with its spectacular view of Tierra del Fuego, the Land of Fire. He had fallen asleep on the beach, was drenched by a rainstorm, and awakened shivering with cold, ashamed of himself.

He had never acted like that before.

Still ashamed of himself and disturbed by his continuing lack of focus, he noticed the sudden hush in the room and tried to concentrate when Dwight Collins, the Energy and Environment program Director of the NASA-Goddard Institute for Space Studies, also Tony's good friend, walked up to the small stage at the front of the room to take his place behind the desk, in front of an enlarged image of the ozone layer over the South Pole, computer-processed from last year's Total Ozone Mapping Spectrometer (TOMS) data. It looked like a surrealistic painting of a globe, with the different coloured circles representing atmospheric readings.

The ragged black hole at its center was disturbingly clear.

Dwight, who would not be flying with the Airborne Expedition, but was looking ruggedly handsome in his air force pants and flying jacket, grinned laconically as he picked up a pointer and tapped the black hole in the computer-processed aerial view of the South Pole.

'Good morning, gentlemen,' he said. 'This,' he continued, tapping the black hole again with his pointer, 'is where you'll be spending the next six or seven hours - flying through the hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic, to make what we hope will be, in combination with our unmanned balloon, satellite and land-based observations, the most complete examination yet made of the growing hole in the ozone layer. That hole is presently the size of the United States and the depth of Mount Everest. It's getting bigger all the time. And since it threatens to alter the face of the Earth, we have to ascertain what's causing it, then find a way to stop its growth. That's your mission, gentlemen.'

Putting the pointer down and leaning his hands on the table, he carried on. 'This immense hole in the ozone layer was first noticed by members of the

British Antarctic Survey team, working at Halley Bay, Antarctica, in 1982. Although those ozone readings were taken with a fairly primitive spectrophotometer, the data collected was later supported by the findings of our own satellite, Nimbus 7, whose Total Ozone Mapping Spectrometer, or TOMS, and Solar Backscatter Ultraviolet, or SBUV experiment, between them confirmed that the depletion of ozone over Halley Bay amounted to more than thirty percent, that it wasn't *just* happening over Halley Bay, and that the loss of ozone from the stratosphere was increasing rapidly, both upward and outwards, at a dangerous rate.'

Pausing dramatically, to let the fill import of his words sink in, he glanced around the room, caught Tony's eye, so gave him a nod and slight smile.

'By 1986,' he continued, 'we had discovered a definite link between high altitude clouds over Antarctica and the formation of the ozone hole. The clouds, called Polar Stratospheric Clouds, or PSCs, form in the lower stratosphere over Antarctica in the winter months, then dissipate in the spring. We believe that a series of chemical reactions within the clouds is releasing chlorine in an active form, leading to drastic destruction of the ozone. Certainly, we know that a link exists between extreme cold, the formation of Polar Stratospheric Clouds, chemical reactions on the surfaces of those cloud particles and the destruction of the ozone. This in turn has led to the great hole in the atmosphere over the South Pole. The purpose of this expedition, then, is to find out everything we can about this startling phenomena.'

Tony usually enjoyed his friend's scientific pep talks, but this morning he couldn't concentrate as normal. Sitting in a hut on the edge of an airstrip in the southernmost city in the world, he wished that he was, instead, in a briefing room in the Goddard Space Flight center in Greenbelt, Maryland, ten minutes drive from his home. He kept thinking of that home, of his problems with Suzy, turning over in his mind, with grief and self-pity, recollections of how he and Suzy had changed over the years, drifting further apart, until they hardly recognised each other as the people they had been. He also thought about his kids whom, in his view, Suzy had started to neglect; and about her threat to leave before he got back. He didn't want to believe that she would do that, but you never could tell.

Almost groaning aloud, but checking himself just in time, he tried to concentrate on what Dwight Collins was saying.

'For this particular expedition,' Dwight continued, 'we'll make about twenty

flights over the next month, using two aircraft filled with our instruments. One of the aircraft is a converted DC-8 airliner, which will hold up to forty passengers and their equipment, flying at an altitude of about 12 kilometres at the bottom of the ozone layer. The other aircraft is the ER-2, an updated, research version of Lockheed's U-2 spy plane, one of the best of its kind for high-altitude flights. However, since it's a single-seater aircraft, with its scientific payload packaged in two pods, one under each wing, those of you who can fly can take turns with the ER-2 while the rest of you will be together in the DC-8. And since Tony was instrumental in initiating this whole project, I think he should be the one to have the pleasure of the first flight in the ER-2 today. Any others who want to have a go, put your name down and you'll go in strict rotation. Okay?'

There was a general murmur of agreement and much shaking of heads while Tony, taking in what he had heard, felt even worse.

At least I'll get my oxygen, he thought, *without being seen.*

Which made him feel better.

'Right,' Dwight said. 'You've all got your separate instructions. Any queries during the flight you can put direct to me in the control tower. Now get going, and good luck. Tony, you wait here.'

Tony climbed to his feet with the others, but waited until most of them had left the room before approaching Dwight. Over six-foot tall, Dwight looked down at him with a broad grin.

'You like your birthday present?' he asked.

'You mean the ER-2?'

'Right.'

'Yeah, thanks,' Tony said without conviction. 'I really appreciate it, Dwight. I can't wait to get up there.'

Dwight's brow furrowed thoughtfully. 'You don't look so keen,' he said. 'In fact, you've been a bit distracted since you got here. What's going on?'

Tony shrugged. 'Nothing.'

'Don't bullshit me,' Dwight said, forthright as usual. 'Something's wrong. I can tell. Is it Suzy again?'

'Yeah,' Tony confessed. 'It's Suzy. She's threatened to leave me.'

Dwight sighed. Living not far from Tony in Greenbelt, he and his wife socialised a lot with their neighbours and knew them better then most. Certainly, Dwight had observed Tony and Suzy growing apart over the years. He had

flirted innocently with Suzy because he knew she liked the attention, but privately he disapproved of her and had said so to Tony.

'She's not the NASA kind,' he said, repeating what he had told Tony before. 'She's never understood that we're dedicated to what we do, that we have to work all hours, and that a NASA wife has to support that, even if she doesn't like it. Suzy comes from a small town, from a bunch of Iowa farmers, and she's more inclined to live for the moment than to think of the future. She can't see that we live for the future; it's what our work's all about. She just can't get to grips with that.'

'Yeah, I agree,' Tony said. 'But she's my wife and the mother of my kids. What the hell can I do?'

'Stop worrying, for a start. You've got a job to do here. She's gonna be there when you get back. She's just angry, that's all.'

'I think she meant it this time.'

'They *always* mean it,' Dwight retorted. 'At least when they say it, though that doesn't mean too much. How many times have you heard it before? How many times were you breaking up?'

'A lot, I suppose.'

'Damn right, so forget it this time. You'd do better to concentrate on your work, because this flight could be dangerous. You'll be flying at an altitude of about twenty kilometres, which is, as you know, about as high as you can go without a rocket-propelled spaceship. You're going right into the area where the unmanned balloon flights have shown the most ozone depletion. It's gonna be damned cold and the air's so thin up there that one fault in that single-engined baby could prove to be fatal. So forget Suzy, concentrate on the job and be very careful. Okay?'

'Okay.'

'Good. Let's get going.'

Leaving the quonset hut, they stepped into the wind blowing forcefully across the airstrip, lined mostly with the planes of the Chilean Air Force. The single-engined, single-seater aircraft with the payload pods beneath each wing had been prepared for take-off and was surrounded by wind-whipped engineers. Still not too happy, but now able to concentrate, Tony clambered up into the aircraft's cockpit, strapped himself in, then gave the thumbs-up to Dwight and watched him hurrying away. He called the control tower to request permission for take-off, received it, checked the wind speed and direction, the length of the runway,

then manoeuvred out of the parking bay and prepared for take-off.

With the plane roaring in his ears, he covered his face with the oxygen mask, took a deep breath and instantly felt better. Removing the mask, he checked the flying controls and instruments, ran through the appropriate take-off drills and finally, when the take-off clearance came, pushed the throttle forward with his right hand, controlling the nosewheel steering tiller with the other. He repeatedly called out his speed as he taxied along the runway, the white center-line markings rushing at him ever more quickly. When the plane reached the decision speed, Velocity one, he saw the nose rise and the ground fall away and was filled with irresistible, childish exhilaration as the landing gears moved back into their wells and the plane climbed steeply into silvery light.

The airport disappeared and was replaced with a widening landscape: the fjords, lakes and lagoons and great mountains of Patagonia suddenly sweeping out on all sides to the Earth's curved horizon. Tony felt better then, losing his cares in the joy of flight. He watched the land retreating, the rivers running into the sea, stippled with light and shadow, a great sunlit, reflecting bowl in which glaciers were drifting. Then he left it all behind, flying across a white-foam sea, in a trance of delight, hardly aware of passing time, until he saw a boot of land, the Antarctic Peninsula. Crossing the Antarctic Circle, over the Bellingshausen Sea, he finally saw, emerging out of a striated, silvery haze, the vast, overwhelming expanse of the Antarctic continent.

That sight took his breath away.

The ozone hole covered an area even greater than the whole Antarctic, so he realised that he was inside the hole when he saw the white wilderness.

Since the scientific instruments packaged in the two pods, one under each wing, operated manually once they were switched on, he switched them on as soon as he crossed over the snowy wastes of Ellsworth Land and began his careful ascent to an altitude of twenty kilometres.

The instruments in the pods beneath his wings were automatically measuring what the thirty-odd scientists in the DC-8 were also measuring at a lower altitude with their individual instruments: ozone concentrations, chlorine and bromine monoxides, nitrogen oxides and nitric acid, aerosol particles and water.

Looking down, Tony was fascinated by the spectacle, almost drunk on the awesome beauty of that most fabulous of Earth's continents, with its dry valleys of moss and lichens, green and brown, flecked with snow; gleaming white ice shelves and frozen mountain ranges and glittering lakes. There were brown

gravel canyons with glacier tongues licking at them; pack ice, sheet ice and alluvial ice falls; glaciated earthen ridges between polar plateaux where the mountain peaks towered majestically over the gleaming ice caps. The snow banks appeared jade-green because of the algae and plankton that survived on the rocky knolls between the plains of virgin snow. Piles of whalebones also lent their surrealistic contours to the otherwise immaculate sheen of the white-flowing wilderness.

It seemed to go on forever.

Tony flew high above it, farther into it as he ascended, taking the ER-2 to the very limit of its 5,500 kilometre range. There, in the polar vortex, where the circumpolar winds isolated the air inside from the rest of the atmosphere, he flew into the dangerous haze of Polar Stratospheric Clouds, or PSCs. Ignoring them, he stayed on course, trusting his automatic pilot. Glancing down, he saw nothing beneath him but deepening haze.

Then he saw the UFO.

He blinked and looked down again. He couldn't believe what he was seeing. The Antarctic had disappeared, there was only a silvery haze, and pacing his aircraft, almost directly below him, but gradually ascending, was what looked like an immense, magically glowing, disc-shaped craft, its light forming an even brighter haze around a swirling dark core.

Suddenly, Tony felt cold. Not from the atmosphere - from something else. It was an unnatural, numbing cold: a cold so real it seemed almost palpable, with a definite... *presence*.

He couldn't credit what he was thinking. *The cold*, he thought. *It's alive!* Then he glanced down again, saw the glowing, disc-shaped craft growing larger as it ascended: a silvery island surrounded by shimmering, pulsating light; a swirling darkness at its center. His heart raced as he turned on the radio and tried to contact the base camp.

He couldn't even hear himself talking.

There was nothing but static.

Frantic, he tried again. The static simply increased in volume. It was filling his head with demented crackling and ghostly voices. Glancing out of the cockpit, he saw that the silvery haze was spreading around him, felt that he was being swallowed by the glowing thing beneath him, and then...

Nothing.

Or so it seemed. It might have been an illusion. He had a recollection of

darkness, the spinning well of a black hole, imploding stars and antimatter, the past meeting the future in hellish fury and splendour; then a swift return to an even greater horror that threatened his sanity. Recovering, or more aware, he was filled with unholy terror, felt the cold deepening, and then, in the ghastly light of another world, he felt a weight on his legs.

Someone was sitting on his lap.

Opening his eyes, he saw Suzy.

Tony almost screamed, but he managed to choke it back. He felt that weight on his lap, someone's arms around his neck, then found himself staring again at Suzy, whose gaze was accusing.

He saw her and felt her. In fact, he even smelt her. Staring at her, *through* her, he saw her face and the clouds behind her. Filled with dread and guilt and a shocking awareness of his own mortality, he loved her, denied her, was terrified by her presence, as he heard the static, or the voices of his history, all around him, *inside* him.

His fear squeezed all sense out of him.

The plane started descending and he regained his senses. Taking hold of the controls, his hands passed *though* Suzy. She smiled with a slight trace of mockery and gradually disappeared.

Lack of oxygen! he thought. *Hallucination! It was no more than that!*

But he couldn't believe it.

He was cold, yet bathed in sweat, his hands too numb to grip properly, but he clawed at the controls, saw the silvery haze vanishing, and then, thank God, the frozen wilderness was beneath him, even though it was spinning wildly, making him dizzy, as it rushed up towards him.

His airplane, spinning down through the ozone hole, was going to crash.

He was numbed by the cold, with fear and disbelief, but he recalled that glowing UFO, his ghostly Suzy, the static's voices, then felt the warmth of Earth rush back around him, returning touch to his fingertips.

The white wilderness stopped its spinning, levelled out, came much closer, and he took control again - of the airplane and his pounding heart - then went winging back up towards the sky and its promise of life.

Though still shaken by fear and disbelief, he managed to fly back to Chile.

Chapter Five

The informality of the meeting took Clare by surprise. After a thirty-minute wait in the adjoining federal building, she was collected by a baby-faced, presidential aide, almost certainly armed, wearing a light-grey suit with shirt and tie, who led her through the North Entrance, along the marble floors of the Cross Hall and on to the Oval Office in the south-east corner of the West Wing. When the aide opened the door and waved her inside, she found the President of the United States seated behind the ornate oak desk that England's Queen Victoria had presented to President Rutherford B Hayes in 1880. The present incumbent was having an informal conversation with Jack Douglas, who had arranged this official meeting for Clare.

Both men stood up when she entered, smiling as Jack introduced her to the President.

'Hi,' the President said. 'Nice to meet you at last, Miss Holton. I've heard so much about you from various sources - not only Jack here - and all of it good.'

'Thank you, Mr President,' Clare replied, shaking his hand, instantly charmed that he seemed so natural with her. 'And thanks, also, for seeing me about this matter. It really is urgent.'

'So Jack's told me,' the President said. 'Here,' he added, indicating an antique velvet chair resting to one side of the Victorian desk on the turquoise-and-pale gold oval rug. 'Take a seat.' He even pulled the chair out for her to sit down. Jack took the chair at the other side of the desk as the President resumed his place facing them. He was framed by the presidential flag and the flag of the United States, which flanked a smaller desk upon which were displayed numerous photographs of his wife and children. There were potted plants in Chinese vases on either side of the french windows overlooking the Rose Garden. The presidential seal in low relief was set into the ceiling.

Clare lowered her gaze as the President sank back into his chair, clasped his hands on his lap, and gave her another easy-going smile.

'Do you like the office?' he asked her.

'I love it,' she replied sincerely. 'It's real cosy, as befits a democracy.'

He smiled warmly again. 'Yes, that's the point.' Then he glanced at his wristwatch - the first sign of formality - and said, 'Jack tells me you want to discuss this problem of the ozone layer on behalf of NASA. I'm not sure why you should come to me for this, but I'm willing to listen. Jack's filled me in on

your background and on the details of NASA's involvement, so feel free to get right to the point.'

'Thank you, Mr President.'

She glanced at Jack, who smiled reassuringly at her and then spoke to the President.

'Can I remind you, Mr President, that Miss Holton is officially the scientific liaison officer between NASA, its National Space Technology Laboratories and the Department of Defence, and that while defence is not the major issue in this case, the economic considerations raised by NASA's discoveries could have great bearing on matters of defence.'

'Well, that sounds like quite a mouthful, Jack, but I think I get your drift. Okay, Miss Holton, let me hear it.'

Realising that the President was not as soft as he seemed and aware that the baby-faced White House aide breathing evenly behind her was probably armed, Clare leaned forward in her chair and said, 'As you know, Mr President, earlier this month the first global treaty aimed at reducing atmospheric pollution was recently agreed between twenty-seven nations in Montreal.'

'Yes, and I know that you represented us most effectively. I also know, from Jack here, that you wanted this off-the-record meeting to reassure me that the countries who signed the agreement really *can* take the necessary steps to reduce the pollution that's causing the hole in the ozone hole.'

'I confess, that's why I've come, Mr President.'

'Well, you can try convincing me otherwise, but certainly, based on what I've learnt so far, the problem seems to be atmospheric, rather than environmental. And if that's the case, we simply have to pray that the winds will blow it away.'

'Unfortunately, Mr President, that *isn't* the case. Initial reports indicating that the hole in the ozone layer was being caused by natural chemical changes in the atmosphere were wrong. Chemical changes in the atmosphere *are* depleting the ozone layer, but the problem is environmental, it's caused by human intervention, and it can be solved if we take the appropriate action.'

The President stared thoughtfully at her, rubbed his chin, then smiled slightly, quizzically.

'What you say contradicts what I've been told, so you'd better explain yourself.'

'At the time of the Montreal meeting,' Clare told him, 'it was widely believed that man-made pollution of the atmosphere was having an effect on the hole in

the ozone layer. Since that meeting, however, a combined satellite, balloon, and land-based and airborne Antarctic Ozone Experiment, organised and managed by NASA with the support of the National Science Foundation and similar organisations world-wide, has come up with conclusive evidence that the hole in the ozone layer is being caused almost *exclusively* by man-made pollution of the atmosphere.'

'Man-made?'

'Yes. Put simply, the depletion of the ozone layer is being caused by the increasing release of chemicals called chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs, into the ozone layer around the Earth. Those CFCs are caused by the fumes and gases of spray cans, insecticides, paints, polishes, disinfectants, and car and aircraft exhausts. Unless we can dramatically reduce the use of such products on a world-wide basis, that great hole over the Antarctic will become even deeper and wider, until the ozone layer is destroyed altogether, thus exposing the Earth to extremely harmful solar ultraviolet radiation. This isn't science fiction, Mr President, it's fact, and what it means is one of two equally frightening scenarios.'

The President smiled, then glanced again at his wristwatch. 'Please continue,' he said, returning his gaze to her.

'In both scenarios,' Clare said, deliberately meeting his gaze, 'the destruction of the ozone layer will result in increased skin cancer, cataracts, hepatitis, the herpes virus, and other infections of the skin caused by parasites. It will also cause a dramatic shift in the global average temperature. Given regional differences in the prevailing temperature, a shift in the global average temperature could either plunge us into another Ice Age or, just as likely, cause widespread famine through the destruction of agriculture. At the same time, the melting of the ice caps will lead to the flooding of many major cities worldwide, including New York. Either way, we'd be in for an unprecedented global disaster.'

The President glanced at Jack Douglas, whose expression was neutral, then he sank back into his chair and gazed up at the presidential seal set into the ceiling. Eventually, having gathered his thoughts, he sighed and lowered his gaze, giving Clare his political charmer's smile.

'It sounds serious,' he said. 'I've no doubt that it *is* serious. But I'm still not too sure that here, in the United States, the most technologically advanced nation on Earth, we can take the steps that were recommended in Montreal. If what you're

saying is true, motorised transport, aircraft, agricultural insecticides, chemical plants and oil fields are all contributing to the destruction of the ozone layer. It would require enormous sacrifices, both agriculturally and industrial, to save it, but I'm not sure that we can afford to make such sacrifices, let alone get support for them. What you're asking, in effect, is that we use less of the products that produce the CFCs, as you call them, and that means - at least, until we find other ways of doing without them - cutting down drastically on our industrial, chemical and agricultural growth. That's not what I see as the function of this presidency. Since our function is to create growth, not limit it, what you ask isn't feasible.'

'Because the President can't make unpopular decisions?'

'That's insulting, Miss Holton.'

Now she saw the steel in him and was briefly unnerved by it, but remembering what her parents had taught her, she said what she believed - despite the warning glance that she received at that point from Jack Douglas.

'I don't think it's insulting. I think it's a fact. You believe what I'm telling you - that the whole world is under threat - but since you think it won't happen during your own term in office, you're going to put off the problem in the hope that it'll resolve itself eventually without undue embarrassment.'

The President's face remained friendly , but his gaze became cool.

'No,' he said. 'You're wrong. You're misinterpreting my reasoning, which isn't based entirely on self-interest, as you seem to think. My reasoning, Miss Holton, is based *very much* on the present: on my belief that some of the countries who've signed your precious ozone-reduction agreement, particularly the European Community, might be doing so simply because they know that the only way the US can make its contribution would be through dramatic reductions in its industrial, chemical, technological and agricultural growth, which would be of significant value to those countries.'

'I'm sorry, Mr President, but I don't see how - '

'What the President is trying to explain to you,' Jack Douglas interjected, 'is that the economic realities of international politics can't be ignored.'

'Precisely,' the President added. 'The Soviet Union may be dead and Russia no longer a threat, but unfortunately we have the rest of the world to deal with and that world is at war with us. Notably Russia, Japan, and the European Community.'

'Pardon?'

‘I’m talking about a war in which industrial, chemical, technological and agricultural growth will decide who wins and who loses. And what you propose, Miss Holton - the drastic reduction of the very output that makes us strong - could threaten the economic superiority of the US. It isn’t purely self-interest that decrees what I can and can’t risk.’

Clare understood his reasoning, but she didn’t admire it.

‘And the hole in the ozone layer?’ she asked, ignoring Jack’s chastising glance. ‘Do you intend letting it grow and grow until there’s no ozone left and the world either freezes or succumbs to a combination of famine and flood?’

‘No,’ the President said, ‘I don’t. But I believe your sense of urgency is unwarranted. While I accept that the hole in the ozone is a serious problem - and one that can’t be ignored - I also believe that we’ve time to more carefully consider what should be done about it. I *have* taken note of what you’ve just told me. I also have the very thorough briefs on the subject written by Mr Douglas, whom I respect and trust, and I’ll ensure that the matter is placed on the agenda for immediate attention. But I *won’t* guarantee a reduction in our use of CFCs. I *will*, however, guarantee that the matter will not be ignored.’

Clare was just about to make an angry retort when the baby-faced aide stepped forward, placed a hand lightly on her shoulder, as if by accident, though clearly it was intentional, then said, ‘I’m sorry, Mr President, but I’m afraid you have another appointment and you’re already running late.’

‘Of course,’ the President responded, as if surprised. Then he shrugged apologetically, raised his hands in the air, and said, ‘I’m sorry, Miss Holton, but my time’s so limited. Maybe another time.’ Before she could reply, he had stood up and walked around the desk to bid her farewell. Even as the aide had subtly encouraged her to rise to her feet by tugging gently, insistently at her shoulder, the President was shaking her hand. ‘Believe me,’ he said, ‘your contribution has been invaluable. I’m sure we’ll meet again real soon.’

‘I hope so, Mr President.’

Stifling her anger, Clare forced a stiff smile, then walked through the door opened by the aide. Jack fell in beside her, taking hold of her elbow, guiding her back through the West Wing and eventually out of the White House altogether. Clare didn’t speak until she was outside. Then she exploded.

‘God!’ she exclaimed. ‘I’m so mad I could spit! I think I need a strong drink.’

‘It’s lunchtime anyway,’ Jack responded, unperturbed, ‘so let’s go to Maison Blanche where you can have something to eat while you drink, and hopefully

calm down.'

'No, thanks,' she replied ungratefully. 'Certainly not Maison Blanche. I've had enough of politicians for one day. Besides, I don't want a full meal. A snack would be fine. Can you take the afternoon off?'

'Of course.'

'Then let's go back to your place.'

Clearly amused, he grinned at her. 'I'll have to thank the President,' he said, glancing up and down Pennsylvania Avenue in search of a cab. 'I'm benefiting from the anger he caused. He should get an award.'

'He should get a psychiatrist,' Clare retorted. 'He's obviously paranoid.'

A cab pulled up beside them and Jack held the rear door open for her. 'Get in,' he said, even more amused, and then slipped in beside her. 'Dupont Circle,' he told the driver, letting his hand rest on Clare's thigh as the cab pulled away from the sidewalk. 'No,' he said, 'he's not paranoid. And he's not stupid, either. He just pulls that good ol' boy act for the folks. But don't under-estimate him, Clare. He's a match for you any day.'

'I'm not in competition with him. I just want some action taken. I want his support for what we're doing, not his paranoid politics.'

'What's paranoid about what he said?'

'All that crap about an economic war with the US up against the whole damned world, including the EC. It's paranoid nonsense!'

'No, Clare, it's not. He just phrased it a bit dramatically.' Jack squeezed her thigh as she gazed out at the Renwick Gallery. His touch made her feel a lot less angry and increasingly sensual. 'But what he said was essentially sound and can't be ignored. The world *is* at war and it *is* a war of economics. So we can't lower our industrial and agricultural production to reduce the level of CFCs while other countries, not bothering to do the same, gradually gain economic superiority over us. That's the President's major concern, Clare, and it's one that I share.'

He guided the cab driver to an imposing Georgian-styled building in a leafy street off Dupont Circle, paid him, then led Clare into his apartment. Though not especially large, it was elegant in a rather austere manner. The afternoon sunlight fell between plain, cream-coloured curtains onto black-leather armchairs, deep white pile carpet, and what were, to Clare, rather chilly, contemporary paintings. It certainly wasn't a woman's place.

'Home, sweet home,' Jack said.

Presently in the middle of an acrimonious divorce from his wife of fifteen years, Jack had rented the apartment only three months before, after moving out of his family house in Georgetown, not far from where Clare lived with her father. In fact, she had first met him at a party in her own home, given by her parents, and had later been invited to his house, where she had met his wife and teenage children. She had been impressed by their decency while being intrigued by his calculating charm, intelligence and urbanity; but had not, thank God, become involved with him until after his wife had sued for divorce and he had moved out, into this expensive bachelor apartment.

It was shortly after the break-up of his marriage that Jack had become the President's financial advisor on government scientific research expenditure. Once he had moved into his office in the Old Executive Building, Clare, due to her liaison work for NASA and the White House, had come into regular contact with him, eventually ending up in his bed, despite her reservations about his character. Even now, though she enjoyed him in bed, she didn't take him too seriously and was wary of his obvious need to manipulate people as well as events. Some people, she knew, would think her attitude cold, but she thought it was sensible.

'Why did your wife file for divorce?' she asked him as she unbuttoned her jacket and draped it over a sofa.

'Incompatibility,' he said. 'Which, translated, simply means that we'd been married too long and could no longer feel excitement with each other. It also means we'd both turned to other partners with increasing frequency.'

'In other words, a pretty normal marriage that had gone past its prime.'

'Yeah, you might say that.'

'She seemed such a nice woman.'

'She was and is,' he said honestly. 'But niceness has little to do with marriage when it starts turning sour. We were moving in different directions, seeing less of each other, and so, when the kids became old enough to be self-sufficient, the discipline that had held us together just slipped away.'

'Any regrets?'

'Not so far. I've never been too emotional. Like you, I've usually placed my work first and foremost. I'd like to feel nostalgia for our shared past, but I simply can't do it. I feel only relief.'

'You're a selfish bastard, Jack.'

'That's why you like me,' he said, grinning. 'It makes you feel safe. You think

that I won't get too close to you, and that's what you want. You're selfish enough to want your independence, so we're not all *that* different.'

Which was true enough, she acknowledged. It was her self-interest, her invincible pragmatism, that made her feel comfortable with him. Certainly, she didn't want involvement with the kind of man who would be hurt by her refusal to commit herself. Jack was intrigued by her refusals, even aroused by them, but certainly he wasn't hurt by them, and that made her feel at ease.

'Anyway,' he said, 'I'm not as selfish as the President. I'm just more *open* about my selfishness. Now that wily bastard, he has theatrical talents and can charm the birds from the trees when he wants to.'

'A politician to his fingertips.'

'Like little ol' me, right?'

'Right.'

'You're so honest, it destroys me.'

'I doubt that you'd be destroyed by honesty, Jack, since you wouldn't see it if it stared you in the face.'

She thought that she might have pushed him too far, but he just grinned laconically. 'So,' he said, removing his jacket and slinging it over the nearest armchair, 'let's have a drink and a snack. What would you like?'

'I'd like you to take your clothes off. We can have the snack later.'

He was amused more than surprised, being used to her by now. 'A woman who knows what she wants,' he said. 'How could I refuse?'

He started taking off his clothes, without batting an eyelid, and she watched him, saying nothing, appreciating his lean physique and tight muscles, his hard masculinity. When he was naked, she made him undress her, arousing him with her touch as he did so. She sank slowly to her knees, kissing down his burning body. Trembling, he followed her down, kissing, licking and stroking, until, when she was stretched out on the floor, he could sink himself into her.

She wanted to lose herself, to be out of control, even if only for a short time, and it happened when he played his tricks upon her and then burned up inside her. She heard her own sighs and moans, a distant sound, a receding plea, then felt herself tumbling backward, as if out of her own skin, to plunge into a deep, dizzying well of pure sensual feeling.

Not her: someone else. Not the scientist: the woman. And that woman, wanting freedom, clinging always to her pride, lost the latter and surrendered the former for what seemed an eternity.

When eventually she returned to herself, she felt breathless, exhausted and dazed, yet also strong and triumphant.

'Very good,' she whispered into Jack's ear. 'You did really well. Now I'll have a tuna salad and white wine - and I'll have it in bed.'

'Yes, Madam!' he gasped.

And as he walked barefoot into the kitchen to prepare her light lunch, she climbed into his bed, covering her lower half with the quilt, and thought of that great hole in the ozone layer, growing larger each day. She imagined the light of death burning through it while she burned with the lust for life.

She wanted life in a dying world.

Chapter Six

‘She’s gone!’ Tony blurted despairingly into the phone to Dwight, who had also returned that day from Punta Arenas. ‘She really did it this time! When I came home, I found this note she’d left on the kitchen table, telling me she was going back to her folks in Iowa and taking the kids. The kids are still here - they wouldn’t go with her - but goddammit, she’s *gone*, Dwight!’

He could hardly believe what he was saying. He had only been back an hour. Even now, though he was managing to control himself, he felt hurt and confused.

‘Yeah, I know,’ Dwight responded, sounding embarrassed. ‘Maggie’s just told me.’

‘What? *Maggie* told you?’

‘Yeah, Tony, that’s right. She didn’t know, you understand - it wasn’t *planned* or anything - but when Suzy decided to leave, she asked Maggie to help her.’

‘And Maggie did that? She actually helped her?’

‘Come *on*, Tony! They’re friends. I mean, what do you *do*, you know? The situation is difficult.’

‘What you do,’ Tony said, not believing what he was hearing, ‘is refuse to help your best friend’s wife walk out on him without warning. You don’t actually *help* her!’

‘Maggie tried to stop her. She just couldn’t do it. What did Suzy say in the note?’

Tony glanced at the note crumpled up in his free hand; then, glancing out the window, he saw that his two sons, playing on the front lawn, had suddenly started fighting one another. They didn’t often do that, so he took it as a bad sign and realised, reluctantly, that they would soon need a firmer hand than his.

‘She wrote that she couldn’t take it any longer,’ he said. ‘By which I assume she meant my work and this house and the whole of fucking Maryland. She also said that I needn’t keep in touch. I mean, Jesus, the nerve of her!’

Dwight chuckled over the phone.

‘This isn’t funny, Dwight! How the hell am I gonna handle this situation, look after the kids, and also get on with my work?’

‘Take some time off. I think you need a rest anyway. As I told you, that

hallucination during your flight was a sure sign of stress. That's why I grounded you.'

'It wasn't stress!' Tony was almost shouting, recalling his experience in that airplane with a deep chill of fear. 'Goddammit, Dwight, I've told you a thousand times: it was a genuine *experience*.'

'It was stress.'

'It was a phenomenon! It was caused by something in the ozone hole. *I didn't imagine it!*'

Dwight sighed in despair. 'It was imagination, Tony. If, as you say, it was a phenomenon caused by the ozone hole, how come none of the pilots who replaced you have experienced the same thing?'

'How the hell do I know? And how do *you* know they haven't experienced it? Since you grounded *me* for reporting the goddamned thing, they wouldn't be likely to tell you if they experienced the same thing, would they?'

'I've said it before and I'll say it again, Tony: You were worried sick about Suzy, you were thinking non-stop about her when you made that flight, and then, in the thin atmosphere near the top of the ozone hole, your anxiety made you imagine you saw her.'

Tony felt insulted. 'Oh, yeah? So what about the UFO? What the hell had *that* got to do with Suzy? Answer me *that* one, wise guy!'

There was a lengthy silence from Dwight, then: 'Let's talk about it some other time. Let's deal with this problem first. I think you should take some time off until you sort this mess out.'

'I *can't* take time off. I've got too much work to do. I want to help analyse that Antarctic data. I want a few answers, Dwight. So how the hell can I do all that and sort this mess out at the same time?'

'Call your mother,' Dwight suggested. 'Tell her to come right over. She'd probably be thrilled if you asked her to look after the kids. She'll be there in a flash.'

'Christ, Dwight, that's brilliant! Why didn't *I* think of that? I'll give her some work to do. She'll think she's in heaven.'

'Right. And I'll try to call around later in the day to see you. OK?'

'OK, buddy.'

Feeling less isolated and depressed, Tony put the phone down. Then he glanced through the window at his kids and felt depressed all over again. Things hadn't been working out, but he certainly hadn't expected Suzy to pack up and

leave. Now he felt really low.

Determined to be positive, or simply being selfish, he picked the phone up again, dialled the retirement home where his mother was staying and asked to speak to her.

'Yes?' his mother said, already sounding suspicious.

'Hi, Mom, it's me. Tony.'

'Tony?'

'Yes.'

'I thought you were away, son.'

'I'm back. So how are things in Menopause Manor?' he asked, using the name that she had jokingly given to the retirement home.

'Oh,' she responded, 'the same as always. They're all mad around here and getting worse.'

'Well, you can get away from that, Mom. You're gonna have to come home. Suzy's just left me - she said it was for good - and I'm gonna need help.'

'Suzy *left* you?'

'Yep.'

'Well, I know she's threatened that before, but I never thought she'd actually go and do it.'

'Well, she did it. She left this morning and said she wasn't coming back. Now I'm here all alone with the kids. So you have to come home, Mom.'

His mother coughed into the phone, clearing her throat, then said, 'I always knew that Suzy was a bad one.'

'No, Mom, she isn't really. She just got bored because I was away so much and then she finally blew her stack. Now I'm here all alone with the kids and too much work on my plate. I need you. I really do.'

'Well, if you really *need* me...'

'I do. I'm desperate.'

'It's nice to know I get these invites when you're desperate. It makes me feel really wanted.'

'I *always* wanted you here, Mom.'

'That Suzy of yours didn't.'

'Suzy isn't here anymore,' Tony said, almost sweating, 'and the kids and I really do need you.'

'Those kids need a firm hand. Suzy never raised them proper. If I told her once, I told her a thousand times: those two boys need more discipline.'

‘You’re right, Mom. So are you coming or not?’

She sighed, as if martyring herself. ‘Oh, all right. I’ll get this sadist of a nurse to pack my suitcase and call for a cab. I’ll be there this afternoon.’

‘Great, Mom. I love you.’

‘Bye, son.’

‘Bye, Mom.’

Intensely relieved, he put the phone down and glanced once more at the crumpled note in his hand. He folded it neatly, then, recalling his experience in the airplane over the Antarctic, he shivered with fearful incomprehension.

‘Fuck!’ he murmured despairingly.

Returning to the present, he stuck his head through the open window and bawled at the boys to come inside. They did as they were told, but with visible reluctance, dragging their feet. Tony made them sit together on the settee while he gave them his pep talk. He hardly knew where to start.

‘Look, kids, I want you to listen carefully, ‘cause I’ve got something important to tell you. Though your Mom’s left us temporarily, I’m really pleased that you decided to stay on. I mean, it must have been difficult.’

‘I just did what Don decided we should do,’ Ronnie said.

Hearing the pain in the boy’s voice made Tony’s cheeks burn. ‘Say, hey!’ he exclaimed with false brightness, ‘your big brother had to make a decision and it must have been hard on him, so stop fighting over it. OK?’

‘OK,’ Ronnie said in an unconvinced manner, his golden locks falling over lowered eyes.

‘Anyway, your Mom’s gonna come back soon, so stop worrying about it. I mean, when women get mad, which they do a lot, they do these crazy things. But they get over their moods fast and when your Mom gets over hers we’ll have a little talk and I’m pretty damned sure she’ll come back home. In the meantime, Grandma’s getting out of the rest home and coming here, for a short time, to look after us. So, all in all, there’s nothing to worry about.’

The boys glanced at one another at the mere mention of Grandma. Clearly, her coming here was a sign that things were worse than they thought. Not better, as their Dad was suggesting.

‘Any questions?’ Tony asked.

‘Why Grandma?’ Don responded.

‘Because she’ll look after you better than I can.’ Tony coughed into his clenched fist. ‘Any more questions?’

‘We can look after ourselves,’ Ronnie said.

‘Right,’ Don added. ‘We’re not kids.’

‘You *are* kids,’ Tony informed them, ‘and you need looking after, and right now, before Grandma gets here, I want you to tidy up the mess in your bedroom.’

‘Gee,’ Ronnie complained, ‘it’s startin’ already. We’re gonna get worked to death.’

‘You’ll get *beaten* to death,’ Tony threatened, ‘if you don’t tidy up that bedroom. Now go in and get started.’

They went into the bedroom, but they didn’t do much work, instead distracting themselves with a noisy pillow fight, followed by television, then a few more heated arguments at maximum volume, making Tony’s head ache. Still, he hadn’t the heart to stop them. Instead, he poured himself a beer. Feeling better, he had another, which exacerbated his jet lag, thus encouraging him to stretch out on the settee and have a siesta. It was not a restful sleep. He had bad dreams about Suzy. He was twisting and turning on the settee, groaning, when Grandma shook him awake.

‘What a welcome home!’ she whined. ‘You asleep in front of the TV with empty beer cans beside you and your children goin’ wild in the bedroom. I got here just in time, I see.’

‘Good to see you, Mom. Real good. Here, give me a kiss.’

‘Oh, all right, then.’

Tony kissed his mother’s cheek as she sniffed and wiped a tear from her eye.

‘I don’t know where to start,’ she said, glancing around the untidy, cluttered living room. ‘This place is such a mess. And those kids... just listen to the noise... they’ve gone to hell and highwater. I’m not criticizing, I’m not casting stones, but that Suzy had an awful lot to learn about bein’ a mother. I *definitely* got here just in time. The Lord works in mysterious ways.’

Tony sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. ‘Listen, Mom,’ he said, ‘I’ve got to get to work. I won’t be there long, but I’ve really got to get there urgently. So do you mind if I leave right now?’

A self-made martyr, she sighed melodramatically. ‘You do what you have to, son. Suzy never understood you like I do. I tried to tell her, but she never listened. “Suzy,” I said, “that boy of mine has to work for those greenback dollars and that’s why he’s away all the time. It’s not pleasure to him,” I said. Of course, she never listened. Thought she knew it all, that girl. And now here we

are, in a right pretty mess, with two motherless boys and a man weighed down by his responsibilities. Suzy never understood that, son, but I do and always did. So you go to work and I'll sort the kids out and clean the house and prepare a decent meal. That's what mothers are for, son.'

'Thanks, Mom, you're a doll.'

Tony kissed her again, then he went to fetch his jacket, impatient to check the data from the expedition that had already given him so much trauma. He felt guilty, however, because his urge to check that data was as great as his concern over Suzy's departure. What had happened to him in that airplane over the Antarctic was something that he could neither forget nor ignore. No, he had to get to the NASA-Goddard Space Flight center and check out the data. He wouldn't sleep if he didn't.

'Right, Mom,' he said, 'I'm going now, but I'll be back by six. OK?'

'Back for dinner,' she emphasised, knowing his clever ways. Then she sighed. 'OK, son.'

Tony hurried out of the house as his mother headed for the boys' bedroom. She was shouting instructions as he clambered into his car. He drove away from the tract houses and bland prettiness of Greenbelt, heading for the architecturally bland administration buildings, laboratories, hangars and geometrically laid out concrete paths and lawns that formed the NASA-Goddard Space Flight center, five minutes away.

Once there, he hurried to the data-processing unit of the Institute for Space Studies, where he found Mike Esposito, fat, flabby and brilliant, surrounded by banks of computer monitors. Esposito, who smoked like a train, was coughing more than was good for him.

'I didn't expect to see you until tomorrow,' he said, 'or maybe even next week. You must be really steamed up, my friend.'

'What makes you say that?'

'I had a talk with Dwight Collins.'

'And?'

'He said you had a weird experience over the Antarctic and might not be yourself.'

'Did he tell you about Suzy?'

'Yeah,' Esposito said sheepishly. 'I'm real sorry she's left you.'

'Thanks. Did you tell you anything else?'

'No.'

‘I’m amazed,’ Tony said sarcastically. ‘Anyway, let’s get on with our work. Just what have we got here?’

Esposito surprised him by shaking his head from side to side in a gesture of bewilderment. Waving his hands languidly to indicate the many printers and their trailing reams of printouts, he said, ‘You tell *me*, old buddy.’

While the payload pods on Tony’s ER2 had been taking their measurements near the top of the hole in the ozone layer, a mass of other data had been accumulated by the forty scientists in the DC-8 flying through the lower area of the same hole, by the TOMS on Nimbus 7, by American and European satellites and balloons, and by numerous land-based information-gathering stations around the globe. Now, as Tony studied the data displayed on the various monitors, he found himself feeling as Esposito looked: dazed and disbelieving.

‘Jesus Christ!’ he said softly.

Chapter Seven

Suzy had forgotten just how beautiful Iowa was. She arrived at her old home in the evening, just as the sun was sinking, and the pink light that bled into the deepening azure sky, to bring out the stars as she had not seen them for years, made her think that she was in a fairytale world, where magical events might occur.

The fields of maize went for miles, all the way to the flat horizon, a green-and-yellow sea turning deep gold in the twilight’s soft darkening.

Even the breeze was soft.

As he had done in the evening for as long as she could remember, her father was sitting out on the porch of the house, in that same old rocking chair, wearing his dungarees with braces, his face hidden in the shadow of the overhang, his feet close to the railings. It was a lovely old house, bright white in the sea of gold, and the lights inside it were burning and beaming onto the porch.

The house was a long way from the road, but Suzy saw all that clearly.

She sat on in the car, wondering if her father had seen her. He wouldn’t know the car if he had, but he wouldn’t be worried. Her father was a calm man, at one with the seasons, and the faith by which he abided included trust in his fellow man.

Life was different in Iowa.

Feeling like a kid again, Suzy glanced about her, taking in the fields of maize, undulating and whispering, glorious under a vast, subtly changing sky in which the stars were emerging like crystals twinkling on velvet. It was so beautiful it seemed artificial - nature's own theatre.

She'd forgotten that view of things.

Starting the car, she turned off the road, went between white-painted fences and drove up to park in the driveway in front of the house. She turned the engine off, applied the handbrake, glanced up at her father, still rocking in his chair, and saw that he was gazing directly at her in a manner that suggested he couldn't see her. She smiled, even though he couldn't see her, then opened the door and climbed out.

The air was so clean, you could practically taste it. The breeze brushed her like feathers.

'Hi, Dad!' she called out, just loud enough for him to hear, closing the car door as he stopped rocking, removed his feet from the wooden railing of the porch and leaned forward, out of the shadow of the overhang, to get a good look at her.

'Suzy?'

'Yeah, Dad.'

He didn't get out of his chair when she walked to the house, but as she mounted the steps onto the porch, she saw his welcoming smile. He didn't even look surprised, just delighted to see her, and it made her feel a whole lot better after what she'd been through.

Leaning over him, she saw his thick grey hair and lined face, his eyes as blue as the Iowa sky at the height of the summer. Without embarrassment, she gave him a hug and kissed him full on the lips, then straightened up again.

'You look real good, she said.

'So do you, Suzy. You could probably do with a change of clothes, but otherwise you look fine.'

'I drove all the way, Dad.'

'From Virginia?'

'Right.'

His gaze shrewdly took in the empty car, then he looked up again.

'No husband, no kids,' he said. 'So what is it, darlin'?'

'I've left home,' she told him.

He didn't bat an eyelid - at least not in condemnation. He just stared steadily at

her, giving her time to take her breath, letting her know that whatever she had to say, he'd be willing to listen.

'Where's Mom?' she asked.

He tilted his head towards the house behind him. 'In the kitchen,' he said. 'You got here just in time for dinner. There's enough food for you as well.'

His grin was so damned warm, it made her feel good again. She'd driven a long time to get to here, drained by guilt and confusion: through West Virginia to Ohio, in tears half of the time, thinking of Tony and the kids and what she was running from. Cried again in Cincinnati, in a motel just outside of town, then back on the road at the break of dawn, right across Indiana, spending her second night in Peoria, Ilinois, in another lonely motel. She hadn't cried that night; instead, she'd practised self-justification. She'd spent the night condemning Tony (as his judge and jury, his hangman), and only cried when she hung him in her mind and got back in her car.

After that it was easy, another two or three hundred miles, past farms producing oats and hay and barley and soya beans, through a landscape that hourly became more familiar, with names that took her back to her adolescence and childhood - Galeburg, Rock Island, Davenport, Iowa City, then the final run through the cornbelt of Montezuma and Brooklyn and Little Red Rock - then across the river of Des Moines and right on to this rich, rolling farmland, where the working farms, including this one, were now on the tourist routes.

All the way from Maryland, Virginia, to the home of her childhood, near a place called Indianola, Ohio... She felt like a pioneer.

'I'll go in and say hello to Mom,' she said.

'No, don't,' her father replied. He pointed at the wooden chair beside him and said, 'Sit right here. Let her get on with the dinner. She'll come out to get me and to check how much beer I've drank and the expression on her face when she sees you will be worth the seein'. Come on, honey, sit down. And I always keep those extra glasses on the table in case someone visits, so quench your thirst with a beer. A long drive from Virginia to Iowa. You musta had a strong reason.'

He was too polite to ask, but was gently opening a doorway to the subject. Suzy sat down and poured herself a beer and felt a great weight fall off her. She looked across the land, a sea of green husks turning golden, and saw the crimson lava of the sun pouring along the horizon. As the sun sank, which it did with majestic ease, the stars became brighter.

‘God,’ Suzy said, ‘I love coming back here. Nothing’s changed at all, Dad.’

‘How long’s it bin?’ he asked.

‘About six years, I think. Ronnie was only four at the time, so it must’ve been six years.’

‘Things don’t change here that quick.’ He’d always cut his words off short. ‘The rain falls and the sun climbs high in the sky and then the rain falls again. It just goes on and on.’

‘The farm’s doing well, right?’

‘Why not? We do our work. If a man and woman do their work, they get rewarded an’ the land understands that.’

‘Not always, Dad.’

‘This is Iowa, the heartland of America.’

‘The bread basket of America.’

‘Right,’ he said with a grin. ‘The richest agricultural land in the world. If you work it, it works for you. You just have to respect it.’

‘The land can turn on people.’

‘Not this land. It goes on forever.’

The sun had almost disappeared, setting the whole damned world on fire. It was not a fire to scourge, but one that beautified all it touched: the gold-tinged green of the seas of corn, the odd silhouetted tree, the geometry of the fences criss-crossed on swells of land, the horizon which, though flat, seemed slightly curved, the sky drenched with stars. The sinking sun, which had a magical liquidity, poured its fire across everything, transforming the landscape, and making Suzy remember the dreams that had enriched her childhood.

‘It’s so romantic,’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ her father said. ‘I guess so. That’s why I like to sit in this old rockin’ chair and drink beer and just look at it. What the hell, it’s done me proud all my life - *and* my Dad - and *his* Dad. You think of that and you know you’ve got an anchor that no one can steal. Not too many can say that.’

Suzy raised her hand. She held the moon between her fingers. She’d wanted to give that moon to her kids, but she’d left them instead. Decent folk didn’t do that.

‘I won’t stay too long,’ she said.

‘As long as you like, Suzy.’

‘I’ll tell you all about it.’

‘If you want to.’

‘I wanna tell you. I need to.’

‘That’s important,’ he said.

Suzy sighed and poured more beer, filled her father’s glass as well, then she sat back in the chair and looked up at the brightening stars. She felt choked with love and grief.

‘What did you think of Tony, Dad?’

‘I kinda liked him. He amused me. Not a practical man, by any means, and not too good on the manners, but he didn’t have a nasty streak in him - just a tongue that was too quick. I think he got that from his mother. She was one sharp-tongued critter. That woman, she could make the devil grovel, though she did have her charms.’

‘What charms?’ Suzy asked.

‘That was quick, darlin’ girl.’

‘Tony’s mother never liked me at all. I could always tell that.’

Her father shrugged and grinned. ‘They were dirt poor - you know? Farmed a bit of land about forty miles from here. Nothing much to talk about - just a couple of acres - and they just struggled along, probably working themselves to the bone, but managed to send Tony to university, which was something to boast about.’

‘You mean that?’

‘Yeah. I respected them. I thought they had lotsa guts.’ He had a drink of beer, licked his lips, watched the sun going down. ‘Mostly *her* guts,’ he said as his face sank into shadow. ‘Tony’s dad was an honest man, but that don’t buy bread and butter. She was the one who did the pushin’ and shovin’ when it got down to business. He died early, of course - I think she exhausted him - but that woman, she did what she said she’d do... Got her boy off to college. That was part of her charm for me.’

Suzy watched the darkness building, shifting east and west, rising, as if painting itself quietly on the daylight, taking over the canvas. The beer tasted real good, as well.

‘And Tony?’

‘I told you. Not a farmer, but I liked ‘im. Shook his hand when you introduced him, looked into his eyes, and knew he didn’t belong in this world, but had a clean, kindly nature. Not a man to be organised. More than bright, but dizzy with it. You could tell he wouldn’t wanna hurt a fly, though he might aggravate it. A good kid, I thought. Drive you crazy, but okay. I always thought you coulda

done a lot worse and maybe never done better. You got a problem? It's up to you.'

'I walked out on him, Dad.'

'And the kids?'

'Them as well. I mean, I wanted them to come, but they wouldn't, and I had to respect that.'

'Sure,' he said. 'You did.'

'But you don't approve.'

'No. I think a woman stays with her kids, come hell or high water.'

Suzy put her glass down, closed her eyes, sank to her knees, then wearily laid her head on her father's knees.

'You think right and you always did,' she said. 'I feel godawful, Dad.'

He placed his hand on her head and stroked her hair with unbearable tenderness.

'You did wrong,' he said, 'but you're not alone in that. What you did has been done, but that ain't the end of things. Let's find out exactly why you did it and maybe try fixin' it.'

'That might take some time.'

'Sure,' he said. 'These things do. Everything worth doin' takes time and the sun is slow sinkin'. Look! There she goes!'

Suzy looked up. Her father's hand was like a warm hat. The last slice of the sun was being eaten by darkness and stars. Then the stars filled the velvet sky.

'I love him,' she said. 'I know that. But he just drives me crazy.'

'That sounds normal,' her father said. 'If it's something else, tell me. I can take it. Does he beat you, or what?'

'No, he doesn't beat me.'

'I didn't think he would.'

'He's just forgotten what we meant to each other. It's his work he loves - not me.'

'Men love their work,' her father said. 'If they don't, they shouldn't be doin' it. If they do it, but they don't love it, they die, though they're still on their feet. Say your thanks it's his work and not a woman. You always were a demanding child.'

'But you still love me, right?'

'Yes, Suzy, you know that.'

'You still love me and you've still got your work, but Tony just loves his

work.'

'That can't be too bad.'

'Yes, it is. I'm locked out.'

'A man's work is what he *is*, child. It's *him*. You just got to accept that.'

'I can't. It's just not in my nature, Dad. I need his attention and I'm willing to give him mine, but he thinks that if he's nice he's giving enough and otherwise I'm demanding. Also, he's crazy. You know that? He's the pits. He'll wear the same clothes for days, hates socialising, forgets the kids, can't bear to look at paperwork, never checks the car, but has the house wired up like a laboratory and keeps blowing the fuses. Our anniversary? Forget it! Birthdays? Forget them! I swear, I sometimes think he even forgets my name, though he always wants breakfast. I can't live with it anymore. I can't take not being noticed. I need magic in my life - what I had as a kid - and if I can't have my dreams in the flesh, then I don't want to know. Do you understand that?'

'I have to think about it,' her father said, 'and that might take some time. But we got lots of that in Iowa. Here comes your mother.'

The door creaked on rusty hinges and Suzy's mother walked out, wearing an old shirt and slacks and a gleaming white apron. 'I'm gonna let you finish off that beer,' she said, 'and then dinner is...'

Suzy stood up and saw her mother's eyes widen - dark eyes and dark hair and an ageing, still lovely face - then that smile, which had warmed her all her life, not failing her now.

'Lord have mercy, I do not believe...'

'Aw, God, Mom, I'm a mess!'

Feeling her mother's arms around her, a soft kiss, all that love, she collapsed into tears of relief and the spasms of grief and guilt.

'Let's have dinner,' her mother said.

Chapter Eight

Clare wet her parched throat with some more water, placed the glass back on the table, then squinted into the hot glare of the TV lights and flashbulbs that were turned upon her and the other members of the American Geophysical Union.

She hated press conferences in general, and this one, being held in Baltimore, was more crowded than any she had attended in a long time.

'Sorry,' she heard herself saying, 'I didn't mean to – '

'What you're saying,' said Art Tabori, the particularly aggressive reporter from the *Washington Post*, 'is that while just about every other technologically developed country has signed the first global treaty designed to reduce the pollution of the atmosphere, the US, though having signed the agreement, is expressing certain doubts about its feasibility.'

'Well, yes, I suppose - '

'Suppositions aren't answers, Dr. Holton. Is it true or not?'

Clare felt like a crooked lawyer, but was trapped by her official position. While not wanting to protect the President's stance, she was here representing NASA.

'I apologise for my supposition,' she answered more confidently than she felt, 'but it's a fact that the issue isn't as simple as you'd like it to be.'

There was a ripple of laughter, so Art Tabori changed his line of questioning to something less daunting.

'According to the latest NASA press release, the recent Antarctic Polar Expedition discovered that the hole in the ozone layer is growing bigger at an alarming rate, that it will eventually leave the Earth unprotected from ultraviolet radiation, and that this will in turn lead either to a new Ice Age or widespread destruction by famine or flood.'

'I wrote that press release,' Clare said, 'and I stand by its contents.'

'Would you also stand by your statement that the technological nations of the world must unite to drastically reduce the use of CFCs? Which means, of course, a possibly dangerous reduction in most of the products that support the US economy?'

Clare saw the trap, but could not avoid it. 'It's my personal belief,' she ventured without hope, 'that a limited restriction on the use or production of anything involving CFCs could be counteracted with other kinds of production. It is also my - '

'It may be your belief, Dr. Holton, but it's certainly not the belief of either the President or his scientific financial advisor, Jack Douglas, so the country is interested in the conflicts aroused by the recent ozone expedition. Are you willing to discuss the rumoured disagreements?'

And so it went on. Clare was greatly relieved when the press conference finally ended and she could head back to her room, where she intended having a

soothing drink. Instead, she was waylaid before she reached the elevator.

'Excuse me, Dr. Holton, I - '

'The press conference is over,' Clare said, cutting the speaker off in mid-sentence. 'I have no more to say.'

She started to brush past him, but he grabbed her shoulder, practically dragging her back and forcing her to turn in towards him.

He was a short man, slightly overweight, his blue eyes bright but darkly shadowed, his features hidden by an untidy beard under dishevelled brown hair. He was wearing dirty jeans, unpolished boots with too much heel, a tasteless checkered shirt unbuttoned at the neck, and an awful, old-fashioned, black-leather jacket. A small-town journalist, obviously.

'Hey, hold on a minute!' he exclaimed with a hint of anger. 'Gimme a break here! I'm not a goddamned journalist! I'm a physicist. A climatologist. I work for NASA and I was part of the Antarctic Ozone Experiment. I've just sat through your ridiculous press conference and now I want to talk to you. OK, lady? No crime?'

Clare could hardly believe her ears. 'You work for... NASA?'

'Yeah. And I'm a damned good scientist. Now can we sit down somewhere and talk?'

She was annoyed by his insolence. 'The fact that you work for NASA doesn't mean I have to - '

'No, you're right, it doesn't. At least, not under *normal* circumstances.'

She caught his emphasis, his uncommon intensity, and stepped back, releasing her shoulder from his grasp, staring more closely at him.

'*Normal* circumstances?'

'You don't know me personally,' he said, his gaze direct, 'but I'm one of your best physicists. When I flew through the hole in the ozone layer, I had a very strange experience. Back at NASA-Goddard, where I work, I analysed most of the data from the experiment. Came up with something that's even stranger than what I experienced. Now will you listen or not?'

'I was going for a drink,' she said.

'I won't argue with that.'

'Sorry, *what* did you say your name was?'

'Rydell. Tony Rydell.'

'Okay, Tony, I apologise for being rude. I've been under a bit of pressure over this business. Please let me make amends with lunch. You *do* eat, I take it?'

‘I’ll accept your apology *and* the lunch.’

She had to smile at that. ‘I really need to breathe some fresh air. Do you mind going to the harbour? It’ll only take five minutes in a cab.’

‘That’s fine with me, Miss Holton.’

‘Clare. Please call me “Clare”.’

‘No sweat,’ he said.

They had mussels and beer at Bertha’s, on Fell’s Point, overlooking the many boats in the Inner Harbour of the Patapsco River. The sun beamed in on their table, making the river look silvery, and that, with the light food and cold beer, soon made Clare feel refreshed.

Rydell also ate with relish and clearly enjoyed his beer. Though he looked uncouth and sometimes talked like a cowboy, it soon became apparent to her that he was bright, if possibly eccentric.

Over the meal, he told her in detail about the Airborne Antarctic Expedition, which she found fascinating, then about his computer analysis of the scientific data collected by his ER-2, the DC-8, and the numerous payload-carrying satellites and balloons.

‘What I’m trying to tell you,’ he summarised grimly, ‘is that nothing that anyone can do will stop the depletion and ultimate destruction of the ozone layer.’

‘Rubbish,’ she replied.

‘No, Clare, not rubbish. Your problem isn’t the President; it’s that a reduction in your dreaded CFCs won’t make the slightest difference in the rate of ozone depletion, since an immense disparity exists between how fast the ozone should be disappearing, according to our calculations, and how fast it’s *actually* disappearing, according to the computer analyses of NASA-Goddard.’

‘There can’t be such a gap. It’s impossible.’

‘But it’s happening. There’s no question about it. I didn’t check only my own ER-2 data; I also called in the data collected by the forty scientists in the DC-8 that was flying through the ozone hole at low altitude at the same time. Not satisfied with that, or not willing to believe my own computer analysis, I called in the TOMS data received from Nimbus 7, as well as the data received from the other satellites and balloons by every damned tracking station being used: Carnarvon Station and Honeysuckle in Australia; Goldstone in California; Corpus Christi in the Bermudas; Tananarive Station in the Indian Ocean; Hawaii, Madrid, Mexico, the Bahamas – you name it, I got it. And finally, when

I still couldn't believe what I was getting, I had my results cross-checked by Mission Control, Houston, to where the same data had been relayed by the tracking stations. And the answer was always the same – the ozone over the Antarctic is definitely disappearing much faster than the CFCs can account for. In other words, something - *something unknown* - is now destroying the ozone layer much faster than the man-made substances that originally began the process.'

'Something *unknown*?'

'You heard me.'

Her impulse was to laugh, but his intensity stopped her. Instead, she just studied him, trying to place him in her thoughts, aware that his name was tugging at her mind as if half remembered. He was a physicist for NASA, on the Earth System Science program, and that meant he had to be good, even one of the best. It also meant, of course, that she had almost certainly come across his name at one time or another, in one NASA file or another, but right now it was frustratingly vague, hovering just out of reach. She had heard about him – she didn't know why – but now she wished that she did.

'I'm afraid I remain sceptical,' she said eventually. 'There must be some kind of mistake. It just doesn't make sense.'

'I've just told you. I cross-referenced everything and there's definitely no mistake. Something unknown is eating away the ozone layer faster than the CFCs. And I'll tell you something even more scary...'

'Please don't,' she said with a smile, trying to make a joke of it.

'My analysis of the data received from around the globe reveals that the hole growing over the Antarctic isn't doing so all alone. The TOMS data and all other cross-referenced measurements show conclusively that another hole is forming in the ozone layer over the Arctic - '

'Oh, Christ!'

' - and there's recently been depletion of the ozone layer as widely spread as forty-five degrees south, to the southern tips of South America, New Zealand, and Australia. In fact, measurements from the SBUV instruments on Nimbus 7 have shown a rapidly increasing depletion in the concentration of stratospheric ozone right around the globe.'

He pushed his empty beer glass aside in order to lean across the table and stare even more intently at her.

'You hear me? I said a *rapid* increase – too rapid for CFCs. Something's up

there – and it isn't just exhaust fumes, insecticides or the gases from spray cans. It's something else altogether.'

Clare glanced at his empty beer glass because she couldn't meet his gaze. 'Let's be rational,' she said. 'The only thing that can possibly be up there is man-made pollution.'

'No,' he insisted. 'It's something else. When I flew through that hole, I saw an unidentified flying object. It was right below me, pacing me, then it ascended and seemed to surround me. It was blindingly bright, filled with noise, seemed incorporeal; and it made me pass out for a short while; then, when I awakened, I found what appeared to be my wife sitting on my lap. An apparition, right? Yeah, that's what I thought. But then I realised that I could *feel* her and even *smell* her – that her presence was palpable, almost physical. Then, when the light and noise of the UFO faded away, she faded away with it... There's something up there, believe me.'

Clare couldn't believe what she was hearing, could hardly accept that he was serious, but his blue eyes, which were bright with intelligence, displayed no sign of mischief.

'Let me get this straight,' she said when she had gathered her wits together. 'You saw a flying saucer - '

'I didn't say it was a flying saucer. I said it was a UFO – an unidentified flying object – and that's *all* I said.'

'OK. First you saw an unidentified flying object – which may or may not have been a physical entity – and it ascended toward your aircraft, seemed to dissolve around it, briefly rendered you unconscious, then made you hallucinate that your wife was there in the cabin with you.'

'It wasn't an hallucination,' Rydell insisted. 'I could actually *feel* her and *smell* her.'

'You could have hallucinated that as well.'

'I could, but I didn't.'

God, he was serious. Not joking at all. Maybe he was having a nervous breakdown or had already gone mad. And to think that he worked for NASA. She had better have him checked out... But even as she thought of doing that, she remembered what she had heard about him. She didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

'Excuse my scepticism, but aren't you the same Tony Rydell who caused NASA some embarrassment a few years back with your publicly stated belief in

the existence of flying saucers?'

He clenched his fists on the table, then opened them again, pursing his lips before speaking, obviously stifling his anger.

'Right and wrong,' he said. 'Before you start sniggering, let me remind you that it was my investigations of the environmental impacts of supersonic transport aircraft, or SSTs, that led to the whole damned ozone debate in the first place - '

'I'm aware of that,' Clare interjected impatiently.

'And it was shortly after my discovery of the link between SST operations and a reduction in the concentration of ozone in the stratosphere, and a further link between that ozone depletion and cancer, that I made my simple remark to the effect that UFOs - not flying saucers, as you so crudely put it - should be treated as unexplained phenomena and scientifically investigated without prejudice. Since my innocent remark was blown up out of all proportion and nearly destroyed my career, I think it's safe to say that my negative comments about supersonic transport aircraft must have hurt the vested interests of the airline companies. In short, I'm not a crank, Dr. Holton, so don't try it on.'

Embarrassed because he'd had to remind her of his revolutionary work with ozone depletion, but still unable to accept that what he was saying made sense, Clare tried to wriggle out of her discomfort by keeping up her attack.

Sighing loudly, as if weary, she said, 'Nevertheless, you *have* expressed a belief, or interest, in UFOs and that certainly makes your recent experience suspect. I'm afraid I can't - '

'And the data!' he said, his face flushed. 'Does that lie as well?'

'I didn't say you were lying. I merely suggested that your obsession with UFOs had some bearing on - '

He cut her off in mid-sentence by noisily pushing back his chair and standing up.

'It wasn't a goddamned *obsession*,' he said angrily and loudly, making some of the other diners turn and stare at them. 'It was scientific curiosity. At least I wasn't just sticking my head in the sand out of fear of what my colleagues might think of me - as you're doing right now!'

Clare was instantly outraged. 'I resent - '

'You resent being faced with something you can't comprehend and you haven't the guts to admit that my facts have you baffled. That's probably why you got moved up from the laboratory to administration: you're more of a

politician than a scientist. I should have guessed that immediately.'

'How dare you!'

'Good-bye, Dr. Holton - and thanks for a lousy lunch!'

He turned away and walked out of the restaurant without looking back.

Chapter Nine

Phoenix, Arizona, Tony thought, rendered sleepy by his flight from Washington DC and now driving from the airport to Scottsdale. *I need it like a hole in the head, but a man has his work to do*.

In fact, he was about to have what promised to be a pleasurable reunion with an old friend. The anger he was directing towards the city was really an expression of his guilt and shame, because a few days after installing his mother at home, he'd had to bid the kids good-bye again.

They hadn't been very happy and he couldn't really blame them. He was hardly ever at home these days and he hadn't improved since Suzy's departure. He knew they weren't keen on his mother, though she sometimes amused them. His mother wasn't all that bad - you just had to get used to her - but the boys were clearly hurting over Suzy's departure. They were sullen and resentful, fought each other all the time, and in general behaving like little horrors.

Not like his kids at all.

His mood had not improved during the flight to Phoenix. He had spent most of his time gazing intently out the window, thinking of UFOs, sneakily hoping to see one, and also brooding on his run-in with that arrogant bitch, Clare Holton.

He burned up just thinking about her, but also found himself dwelling helplessly on the fact that she was damned attractive.

The thought surprised him.

Thankfully, it didn't take him long to reach his destination on Pinnacle Peak Road in the recreated Western community of Scottsdale. Pulling into a parking space beside some hitching posts, thinking that perhaps he was on the lot of the movie *Westworld*, he climbed out of the car, into the scorching midday heat, and hurried along the street to a building that looked like a large nineteenth-century saloon, though it was, in reality, a restaurant owned by his friend Rick Polanski

and frequented mostly by tourists.

Tony entered the building, gratefully putting the heat behind him. Even this early in the day, the place was already frantic, with sexily dressed, pistol-packing waitresses serving a noisy bunch of tourists and some locals wearing Stetson hats and cowboy boots. When the cowgirl behind the desk asked Tony if he had a reservation, he told her that he'd come to see Rick. She smiled prettily and jabbed her thumb over her shoulder, indicating the bar. Tony saw Rick behind the counter, massive in all directions, face flushed and beaming beatifically under a white Stetson as he helped two barmaids serve a lot of customers. Seeing Tony approaching, he grinned and waved.

'Tony! You son of a bitch!' he hollered. 'Good to see you, old buddy!' He leaned across the counter, pushing two customers apart, to pump Tony's hand. 'You just off the plane?'

'Yeah, right.'

'Feel like lunch?'

'Terrific.'

'Good. We've got a bus-load of tourists eating here, but I kept us a table. Over there,' Polanski said, jabbing his index finger at the only empty table in the restaurant. 'You sit down and I'll bring us some beers and we'll talk about old times. Go on, put your ass down!'

Tony did as he was told and Polanski soon joined him, carrying a large pitcher of beer in one hand, two glasses in the other, holding them well out in front of him, away from his big belly, which flopped generously over his gold-buckled belt. It crossed Tony's mind that he probably ran a successful restaurant because he looked like someone who enjoyed his food and drink. He did *not* look like someone who had once been a NASA astrophysicist, had retired because of their refusal to finance his planned instrumented UFO research program, and now, in his spare time, was the head of what Tony thought was the most reliable UFO organisation in the whole country.

'Here,' Polanski said, taking a seat, pushing an empty glass towards Tony, and filling it up with beer from the giant pitcher, 'slake your thirst. So,' he added, touching Tony's raised glass with his own, 'what's been happening in Washington DC, apart from the usual mugging, rape and murder? Home and family in one piece?'

'Not quite,' Tony confessed. 'The home's still there, but Suzy's packed up and gone.'

‘That’s why you look so rested!’ Polanski cracked. ‘So what else is new?’

‘I have an interesting little mystery,’ Tony said. ‘You want to hear about it?’

‘Are you talking about the sky?’

‘Right.’

‘It sounds more interesting than marital discord. But let’s order first and talk while we eat. Since I own the joint, I recommend the food - and I eat a lot of it.’

After calling over a hip-swaying, blonde cowgirl, he squeezed her rump playfully, chauvinistically, while ordering the food. She didn’t seem to mind, in fact giggled and winked at Tony, then flounced back into the kitchen with her tightly-clad hips swinging like a metronome. Deciding that he was interested in Tony’s marriage, after all, Polanski enquired about Suzy’s reasons for leaving home. When Tony told him about his extensive travelling and Suzy’s boredom when home alone, Polanski, a divorced man, chuckled understandingly and said, ‘Sounds like the same old story. It’s what working for NASA does to marriages. Well, now you can get on with your work without being hassled. Can’t be *all* bad, buddy.’

Not sure about that, Tony was glad to change the subject and discuss what had happened to him in the airplane over the Antarctic. This he did at great length while devouring a broiled two-pound porterhouse steak, served with sourdough bread and pinto beans. He finished his story as Polanski finished his meal (Tony couldn’t get through his) and put down his knife and fork, looking thoughtful.

‘You say you could actually feel and smell the... apparition? That it was practically... *physical*?’

‘That’s just what I said, pal.’

Polanski gave a low whistle. ‘Weird!’ he exclaimed. ‘Really far out!’ After drinking some more beer, he wiped his lips with the back of his hand and looked thoughtful again. ‘You’re sure it wasn’t just the high altitude and cold? A sort of - ’

‘I’m sure,’ Tony interjected firmly. ‘I blacked out - I know that - but it was only for a few seconds and when I recovered I was totally aware, in command of my senses. That UFO was *something*, Rick, it wasn’t imagined, and if Suzy - the apparition - was some form of hallucination, she was certainly no ordinary one. She *was* practically physical, damn it, and the smell of her lingered in the cabin long after she’d vanished.’

‘And she vanished as the UFO disappeared?’

‘Yeah, Rick, that’s it. I think that Suzy, though not real, was some kind of

entity. I think she was produced by that UFO, though don't ask me how or why.'

Polanski gave another low whistle, shaking his head from side to side in bewilderment. 'Oh, boy,' he said, 'ain't that something? You've got my interest, for sure. So how can I help?'

'I want you to check your records to find out if there are other cases like this and, if so, if there's any kind of pattern to them.'

'I'm a man who loves his work,' Polanski replied, 'so let's get up and go.'

'Is it far?'

'Just a five-minute drive - on the outskirts of town. Five minutes through hell.'

He meant the heat. It clamped around Tony as soon as they left the restaurant, making him feel that he was suffocating. As they made the short drive to the eastern edge of Scottsdale, Tony tried to distract himself by recalling Polanski's work with SETI, or Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence, the US government's attempt to locate extraterrestrial civilisations through the use of radio astronomy.

Initially frustrated by NASA's aborted Project Cyclops - which would have consisted of a circular array of about fifteen hundred antennas, each larger than a football field, covering about twenty-five square miles - Polanski had helped initiate a more successful SETI program between the Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, NASA's Ames Research center at Moffett Field, and the existing antennas at the Deep Space Network in Goldstone, California, which between them had conducted a targeted study of selected stars within one thousand light years of Earth - an immense undertaking.

'You never found anything through SETI, did you?' Tony asked, now feeling almost groggy with the heat.

'Not so far,' Polanski replied, slipping sunglasses over his squinting eyes as he drove into the blinding sun. 'It was real damned frustrating. Of course that doesn't mean they're not out there. In fact, given that there are, for instance, three hundred thousand stars in only one such group of stars, Messier 13, in the Great Cluster of Hercules, the possibility of no intelligent life-forms existing there is extremely unlikely. On the other hand, you have to bear in mind that even if intelligent beings intercepted our communications, the distance of nearly twenty-four thousand light years from Earth means that it'd be at least forty-eight thousand years before we'd get an answer back. So, they're almost certainly out there. But contact with them, if it's to be made in our lifetime, is going to have to be made some other way - not through radio astronomy.'

‘What about the so-called UFOs?’

Shrugging his shoulders, Polanski pulled into the parking lot of a large prefabricated building in the parched flatlands just outside of town. The building was covered in glittering bowl-shaped antennas and a wide variety of aerials. ‘Who the hell knows?’ he asked rhetorically. ‘We can only assess them with our own technology, but if the UFOs are from a highly advanced extraterrestrial civilisation, our hardware would hardly be up to the task. Already Einstein’s Theory of Relativity is under attack - and if it falls, a lot of things thought to be impossible will suddenly be possible.’

‘Such as the need to actually travel those twenty-four thousand light years.’

‘Right,’ Polanski said, cutting off his engine and applying the hand brake. ‘It might be possible to go *through* that space or somehow avoid it. If quantum physics replaces our present understanding, *all* things become possible. So, here we are.’

When they were both out of the car, Tony let himself be led from the scorching sunlight into the air-conditioned coolness at the other side of the main door of the building, above which was a sign stating: *Project Skywatch International*. A non-profit organisation financed by the tax-deductible contributions of those who believed in the value of instrumented UFO tracking and monitoring, Project Skywatch was primarily housed in two linked laboratory buildings, but with many smaller facility houses, filled with state-of-the-art instruments, scattered widely about the surrounding hills and plains, from where they constantly monitored the sky to detect and record UFO activity.

Polanski, like a proud schoolboy, gave Tony a guided tour of the facilities, introducing him to the many volunteer scientists and technicians while showing him the vast array of technical equipment needed to monitor the sky, including radar, a laser system, magnometers, a gravimeter, a microcomputer, ambient and parabolic microphones, a multichannel sensor-activated chart recorder, video equipment, and every imaginable kind of camera.

‘If a UFO’s located,’ Polanski explained, stopping in front of a simulated UFO tracking program on a computer monitor, ‘the data from the instruments in the facility stations is fed in binary format into the computer, which then calculates and displays the distance, altitude and size of the object. The UFO then appears on a video picture superimposed over an image of the area beneath it. We can also display a three-dimensional model of the magnetic field around the UFO, showing each component of it in a different colour. And by using the latest

helium neon laser, we can even receive the UFO's voice, code, or television signals, should such ever be present.'

'Which they haven't been so far.'

Polanski sighed. 'No.' He led Tony away from the banks of computer monitors and into his office, which had its own complex computer system, 'But we're not wasting our time. So far, we've managed to obtain UFO light pulsation measurements by photographic analysis, instrumented recordings of UFO plasma emissions, shock-wave emissions and propagation, magnetic-field-effect Faraday-rotation rings, and instrumented data of precise UFO size determinations. We're getting somewhere, at least. Here, take a pew, pal.'

There were two swivel chairs in front of the working shelf along one wall of the office, facing three separate computer monitors. Polanski settled his large bulk into the chair facing the central monitor, indicating that Tony should take the chair beside him. Polanski turned the main computer on. While waiting for it to load, Tony studied the charts pinned up on the other walls.

One was an illustrated chart of the most commonly reported UFO shapes, grouped into flat discs, domed discs, Saturn, or double-domed, discs, hemispherical discs, flattened spheres, spherical, elliptical, triangular, and cylindrical. Another chart was broken into two illustrated sections, one showing the most commonly reported UFO formations, the other showing UFO manoeuvres both singly and in formation. Other charts showed the world-wide locations and flight directions of the major UFO waves from 1896 to the present; major UFO events in the United States and overseas; the major areas of alleged magnetic deviation around the world, including, as Tony noted, the North and South Poles; and the names and communication details of the world's major UFO organisations.

'OK,' Polanski said, starting to move the flickering cursor down the list of files displayed on the computer monitor. 'Just what are we looking for? After-images? No. Aliens? Not quite. Contactees? No. Close encounters of the third and fourth kind? No. Electromagnetic effects? Well, you *did* have those, didn't you?'

'Right,' Tony replied. 'Fading and loss of radio reception; static; odd noises; possibly even the brief stalling of the airplane's engine when that UFO practically swallowed it. But we won't learn anything new there, so keep searching.'

Polanski moved the cursor down again, then stopped and moved back up until

the cursor was illuminating '**Ethereans**'.

'Hold on,' he said. 'This could be interesting.'

He accessed the file and Tony leaned forward to read it.

Ethereans. *Hypothetical, invisible creatures who inhabit Etherea*.
Etherea. *Name given to a hypothetical, invisible world composed of ether, an invisible substance that has been postulated by physicists as pervading space and functioning as the medium for the transmission of radiant energy. UFOlogists who support the etheric hypothesis claim that UFOs are both inanimate craft and living aeroforms, propelled and sustained by orgone energy, which exist in the etheric realms. Inhabitants of Etherea are known as* Ethereans.

Tony studied the screen for some time, reading and rereading the short article and thinking with a shivery feeling of the eerily real Suzy he had found in the airplane with him. When he noticed Polanski staring at him in a questioning manner, he said, 'It's worth thinking about. An invisible substance pervading space and functioning as the medium for the transmission of radiant energy, which could be orgone energy. Remember Wilhelm Reich? He used the term to describe what he believed was the universal life-force that acts through the medium of magnetic current. He was convinced that the Earth, as well as all its living creatures, was surrounded by an aura of such energy. He also believed that energy to be the power source of Etherean craft, or UFOs. And UFOs, as we now know, are definitely related to magnetic current - which is why you have that chart on the wall, showing the world's areas of alleged magnetic deviation - all areas with a high incidence of UFO activity.'

'Right,' Polanski said. 'And accepting this hypothesis, we can then assume that the apparition of Suzy could have been created out of some form of Etherea: an invisible substance briefly rendered visible by that UFO, which also appeared to dematerialise. Another form of Etherea?'

'Shit,' Tony said, 'I don't know. Go back to the files.'

Polanski exited the file and again ran the cursor down the screen, stopping when he came to *Hallucinations*.

'OK,' Tony said. 'Retrieve that.'

The summary in the retrieved file told him what he already knew: that among the numerous cases of hallucinations were physical and emotional deprivation

or emotion disturbance ('That's you!' Polanski said with a chuckle) and that a great many UFO sightings had been encouraged by the use of hallucinogenic drugs. Tony perked up, however, when he read that a certain number of UFO sightings had been assessed as hallucinations 'induced by some unknown force or some unknown intelligence'.

'I think we're getting warm, Rick.'

It was a lengthy file, but Polanski kept scrolling down until he came to the heading: *UFO-Related Materialisations from the Subconscious*. He stopped scrolling and accessed the file. They both read in silence.

UFO-related materialisations from the subconscious have offered a novel addition to the UFO phenomenon – particularly since the first such report was recorded as late as 1979. In that report (Flying Saucer Gazette, Vol.3, No.9, September 1979), *New Zealand Air Force Capt. Harold Falke claimed to have almost crashed his C-130 cargo plane when, on August 4, 1979, during a flight from McMurdo Sound on Ross Island, Antarctica, to Christchurch International Airport, New Zealand, an apparition of his wife materialised inexplicably in the cabin. During his subsequent debriefing by the authorities at Christchurch, the subject insisted that he had not been hallucinating, that he had been aware at all times of where he was and what he was doing, that the so-called apparition had been 'almost physical' and that he had been able to touch it and even smell it. Since the subject had recently been through a traumatic divorce from his wife, his experience was felt to be an extremely vivid hallucination brought on by stress.*

A trickle of excitement rippled through Tony, followed by a distinct touch of fear and an eerily vivid recollection of his own experience in the ER-2 over Antarctica. He glanced at Polanski, who was grinning triumphantly at him, then nodded to let his friend scroll on down through the rest of the text.

There they were, one after the other: the many reports of similar hauntings, beginning in 1979, running up to the previous year, and linked together by a common theme: *All the reports had been submitted by professional pilots and every 'materialisation' had occurred over Antarctica*.

'Jesus Christ,' Polanski said, 'ain't this something? One: There was no report of this kind until 1979. Two: All reports since then confirm that the hallucinations, or apparitions, had an almost physical presence, as well as smell.

And, three: Every report was submitted by a professional pilot who had his experience when flying over the Antarctic.'

'Exactly,' Tony said, still excited and frightened at the same time. 'And what does that suggest, my friend?'

'Fucked if I know.'

'The hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic,' Tony said, 'first appeared in 1979. The first report of this particular kind of materialisation was made in 1979. And that report, as well as all the others since, named the Antarctic as the location of the incident.'

'So that kind of materialisation is directly linked to the ozone hole over the Antarctic.'

'Correct,' Tony said. 'There *is* another agent eating away the ozone over the Antarctic... And whatever it is, it's also causing materialisations from the subconscious... *Not* hallucinations, *not* apparitions, but materialisations that have a physical reality... Those things are being *created*.'

'By what?' Polanski asked.

'You tell me,' Tony said.

Chapter Ten

Suzy started to unwind with her folks on the farm in Iowa. She'd almost forgotten what it was like to be looked after - cooked for, talked to, given some attention - and although she was still guilty over the kids, she felt something come back to her. It was like being a child again, secure again, taken in, and she surrendered to the routine of the household and let her heartbeat slow down.

'I just wish the kids had come,' she told her mother. 'That would make it all perfect.'

'You think so?'

'Sure.'

'And what about your husband, Suzy?'

'I feel better without him.'

'Do you?'

'I do.'

‘How long will that last? I wonder. You’ve been with Tony a long time, practically since you were teenagers, and to try and cut that out of your life could leave a big hole.’

‘I can live without him, Mom. I’ve *been* living without him. That man, he was never at home, so I don’t see the loss.’

‘He was only working, Suzy.’

‘I don’t see the difference.’

‘A man isn’t away from home if he’s out there doin’ work. He’s always there, right beside you, in spirit, if he’s not with a woman.’

‘There wasn’t another woman.’

‘It’s good that you can say that.’

‘Thing is, Mom, I gradually became invisible and that’s hard to take.’

‘You want too much attention.’

‘I’m too emotional, I know.’

‘You’re gonna have an awful big hole to fill - and I don’t think you’ll do it. You need the kids, Suzy, and your home and that man. Lord knows, he may be a bit distracted, but he’s better than most.’

‘He never beat me, that’s true.’

‘Never cheated on you, either.’

‘You’re just trying to make me feel bad, Mom, but I did what I had to do.’

‘Tell that to your kids.’

Her mother could talk that way without causing offence. She spoke out of a love that lent resonance to her voice, but she also had a fine wedge of honesty that could not be dislodged. Like her husband, she did not believe in saying what didn’t come naturally.

‘Some day I might,’ Suzy said.

They got up real early, when the sun was still rising, and had breakfast together in the big kitchen, around the pine table. Then Suzy’s father would go off to work, wearing his dungarees and battered hat, and Suzy and her mother would talk for hours while doing the chores. It was like life in the previous century, much slower, more orderly, and it helped her feel less hemmed in by the world and more in control of things.

‘He’s so brilliant,’ she told her mother, still talking about Tony, ‘but he just doesn’t look where he’s going or think about what he’s saying. He’s like a horse wearing blinkers - he always stares straight ahead - and if you don’t happen to be right in front of him, he’s blind to your presence. That’s why he forgot me. I

wasn't involved with his work. I shared his bed, cooked his food, washed and ironed his damned clothes - and like a rich man with his servant, he forgot that I was actually there, every hour, every day. He just ploughed his straight furrow.'

She helped around the house, did the shopping with her mother, and often went for long drives in the car, exploring what she had left behind. She took the long, straight roads, past fields drenched in green and gold, into the silvery haze of noon, under the vast, azure sky. It was where she'd grown up, blooming just like the flowers, and she recaptured her childhood during those journeys, filling up with old memories. She visited the old schoolhouse, the church and general store; went to Indianola to retrace her childhood footsteps, and even to Des Moines, where so many places reminded her of her adolescence with Tony: the high school, the university, the movie houses, the ice-cream parlour, and the streets they had cruised in his old car, which had suited his nature.

She often choked up when she saw those places, which just made her resent him more.

'He's so creative,' she told her mother, 'but he destroys things so easily. He knows all about things, but he doesn't understand people. Oh, he doesn't mean any harm, there's no malice in him, but he gets up their noses, rides rough-shod over them, and never stops to think about what he's saying or who he's saying it to.'

'I kinda like that aspect of him,' her mother said while beating dough on the table. 'At least it shows that he's honest.'

'But dumb with it, Mom. Never knows when to shut up. Like that flying saucer business last year, which almost cost him his job. I mean, he said he believed in 'em, that the government should investigate, and NASA, wanting money for other things, caught the flak from the media. Gawd, the humiliation! It was even on TV! They treated his off-hand remarks like an official NASA statement and the big boys at NASA and other places went out of their minds. They wanted to kick him out, to get rid of him for good, and if it hadn't been for Dwight Collins, they'd've probably done it. That's the kind of thing he *always* does, Mom. He just can't keep his trap shut.'

'Some men, they're just impulsive,' her mother said.

'Some men are just nuts.'

She even went to church, which she hadn't done for years. She'd forgotten what it was like to get up to the sound of church bells, say prayers over breakfast, and take the car along an empty road to a white-painted, packed

church. She felt real fine and dandy dressing up for the occasion, filing into the pew, smiling at the congregation, then opening her hymn book and letting loose with all the power of her lungs.

There were men in that church older than she was, but they still gave her glances. She was worshipped, as well.

'It's so hot,' her mother said.

'I love it,' Suzy replied.

'It's the hottest summer we've had for years. We'll have to be pretty careful. Are those from the kids?'

Suzy kissed both the letters, one from Don, the other from Ronnie. She had written to them and asked them to write back and they'd done so immediately.

Don's was real grown-up serious, the sentiment held in check, but Ronnie's was almost heartbreaking in its transparent grief. They both wanted her back, but they said it in different ways: Don saying that he missed her, but knew she must have her reasons; Ronnie saying that the house seemed too big, now that she wasn't there.

She read both letters repeatedly, first one, then the other, and soaked them with her tears and rubbed them ragged with the tips of her fingers - trying to touch them, to feel them. Then she put the letters under her pillow and had vivid dreams.

That's what love could do to you.

It sure made you love your bedroom and her's hadn't changed at all; her folks had left it exactly as she'd left it, not removing a thing. It was a small room with big windows, overlooking the back lawn, and between the lawn and the starry sky were dark fields that seemed endless. The room itself was a cosy mess, filled with teddy bears and toys, the walls covered with posters of David Bowie and Richard Gere, her dreamboat. She'd liked cuddling up in there, taking a teddy bear to bed, though she'd had to give it up when she got married and cuddled Tony instead. Now, not having him, and yearning more and more for the kids, she went back to her teddy bears, sometimes even giggling guiltily, and lay there in the darkness, looking out at the moon and stars, thinking about how wonderful life could be when things didn't press in on you.

It was heavenly being home.

'We should never've left here,' she said. Her mother stared at her, amused. 'We were neither of us cut out for the big time in Texas or Maryland. Or course, Tony didn't notice. He'd be happy in an igloo. Just give him a notebook and

pencils and tell him he's working! But *I* noticed, yeah. I always knew I didn't belong there. Those people, they were like Tony - they all lived for goddamned NASA - but me, I had too many emotions and needed folk who *felt* things. I lost all that in Greenbelt.'

'Surely not,' her mother said. She sounded so English sometimes.

'Well, not completely,' Suzy confessed. 'I mean, they weren't *all* workaholics. There was Maggie, my next-door-neighbour and the wife of Tony's best friend, and...' She could see the faces clearly, though not quite get their names. 'And... what I mean is, most folk stayed well clear because Tony was...'

'Unpredictable?'

'Yeah, Mom, that's right. I mean, he treated the kids swell and always tried to make me laugh, but - you know? - like, he'd *die* if you suggested a dinner party or drinks or a barbecue. It'd always be next week, next month, next year - and then, if you *did* get something going, he'd blow it by turning up late, or having a fight with someone, or saying something like, "Jesus! Where'd you get this steak? It crawls faster than I do!" You know? A real wise guy.'

'He could always make me laugh,' her mother responded. 'I guess that's why I liked him.'

Suzy couldn't believe that. Then she did, but didn't want to. She wrote back to the kids, told them how much she missed them. But she missed them even more in the telling and made a mess of her pillowcase. Still, she had the stars, that great moon, the silky dawns, and could soak in the sun of each new day and let the golden fields dazzle her.

She loved the long, lazy, loping hours.

'It was so frantic there,' she said, telling her mother about Maryland. 'It was folks coming and going and the telephone ringing and driving the kids to school and going shopping and collecting the kids and then making dinner. It was cleaning up after him - his computer disks and CDs and books and discarded clothes - and it was traffic jams and being home alone until he turned up, which wasn't that often. But here? It's completely different. Now I know what I missed. What I missed was the feeling of family and things that abide. I missed my man coming home at nights.'

Her father usually returned home in the early evening, swinging the front door open and entering from an explosion of striated, incoming sunlight, his broad shoulders covered in corn cobs, looking like some great living tree that couldn't possibly die.

He'd done that throughout her childhood, always filling her with faith in life, saying things like, 'The land will endure. You have land and you're safe.' He didn't say that any more, though in the light his hair was silvery; instead, he said, 'It's just too damned hot. It ain't natural, honey.'

That night they watched TV - a program about the weather. Great Britain was being devastated by terrible storms, the river Ganges, in India, was flooding her banks, normally sunny Spain was a sodden mess denuded of tourists, and Florida, though not yet like Siberia, was unusually cold.

'It's all them chemicals,' her father said. 'They're changing the weather.'

'*We* use chemicals,' Suzy's mother pointed out.

'We need 'em, honey. This hot weather breeds things. We need to keep the land healthy. Without that, we'd be finished.'

Suzy loved the land, too. It was all she possessed now. She'd left her old life behind - her husband and kids; her hopes and disappointments - and now she was taking refuge in the soil that had formed her in childhood.

In daylight, the corn was green and yellow. At twilight it turned golden. At night, when it was bathed in the light of the moon, it was a dark, constantly shifting, murmurous sea.

There was no land at night, just dark sea and starry sky. Suzy lay in her bed and looked out and knew those stars fell on Maryland.

They covered her whole life.

There was nowhere to hide. You had to admit that was true. She did, but didn't know what to do, since she'd burned all her bridges. So she slept and dreamed about them, awoke and blessed the new day, and tried distracting herself by spending more time with her father, standing side by side with him, shoulder-deep in corn cobs, looking out across a rippling sea of food, a great bread basket, into the iridescent light of a voluptuous summer.

'It's too hot,' her father said, sounding anxious.

'Yeah,' Suzy agreed. 'Hot as hell.'

Chapter Eleven

The sun was shining over Greenbelt when Clare drove through the guarded

gates of the NASA-Goddard Space Flight center, made her way through the maze of right-angled roads, past featureless office blocks and laboratories, and eventually stopped outside the building containing the Goddard Institute for Space Studies. Leaving the car in the parking lot, she entered the building, told the receptionist that she had an appointment with the institute's Energy and Environment program Director, Dwight Collins, and was escorted to his office in the environmental physics department.

The office had no windows, just four plain white walls, all covered with a mass of charts and graphs relating to atmospheric phenomena and worldwide pollution.

Dwight Collins, who had been informed that she was coming, stepped forward as soon as she walked in.

'Hi, Clare,' he said, shaking her hand and squeezing her shoulder. 'It's good to see you again. I just hope you're not bringing me money problems or some godawful paperwork.'

She smiled at his suspicions, but shook her head and said, 'No. I haven't come to see you on Department of Defence business. It's something else altogether - and right now, something private, a purely personal interest.'

'Well, *that's* a relief,' Dwight said with a pleased grin. 'You're a beautiful lady and were a wonderful astronaut, but since you became a liaison officer between us and the Department of Defence, your appearances here are usually the sign of bad news, most notably budget cuts. Now you tell me you're not here on official business, you look even more beautiful.'

'If I were that beautiful, you'd offer me a seat.'

'Whoops! Please allow me!' He pulled a chair up for her, then returned to his seat behind the desk. 'Coffee?'

'No, thanks, Dwight.'

'Tea? Whiskey?'

'Whiskey at *this* time in the morning?'

'Now you know where my budget goes. So, what's your problem?'

'One of your physicists, Tony Rydell.'

Surprised, Dwight rested his chin on his clasped hands and stared quizzically at her.

'Right,' he said. 'A physicist. A climatologist. Why is *he* bothering *you*?'

'Because of guilt,' she said bluntly. 'He waylaid me at the American Geophysical Union in Baltimore, Maryland, and told me about a fairly

extraordinary theory he's developed since returning from that Airborne Antarctic Ozone Experiment you headed earlier this year. Recalling that infamous UFO scandal he'd been involved in, I treated him like a crank and made him angry; but then I ran a check on his career and now I know he's one of our best physicists. So naturally, apart from feeling guilty, I'm wondering if his theory *could* be plausible. And so, and so...' She shrugged, feeling oddly embarrassed. 'I thought I'd have a quiet talk with you and sound you out about him *and* his theory.'

Dwight sat back in his chair, leaning his head against his clasped hands, and studied her with what seemed to be a cross between annoyance and suspicion.

'It must have been some theory,' he said carefully, 'if he went to see you about it. What did he tell you?'

Clare recounted Tony's story of his bizarre encounter inside the ozone hole over Antarctica, then outlined his theory that something unknown was gobbling up the ozone much quicker than the CFCs produced by man-made pollution of the stratosphere.

'And he therefore believes,' she concluded, 'that the Montreal agreement is an irrelevancy - that nothing we can do will halt the ozone depletion, since in fact it's being depleted by an unknown agent. It sounds crazy, but that's what he believes, and since meeting him, no matter my scepticism, I keep wondering about it. You were on that expedition with him. You're also his neighbour and good friend, so what do you think?'

Dwight leaned on the desk, now smiling slightly at her, as if amused by the incongruity of the conversation.

'Well,' he said, 'you've been through his records, so I don't have to tell you how bright he is.'

'Academically bright, yes, but also eccentric, so how far can we actually trust his judgement? He's already caused NASA embarrassment over that UFO business.'

'He was widely misinterpreted. He didn't say he believed in flying saucers, but that's how it came out. What he *was* trying to say is that if hypersonic vehicles were destroying great quantities of ozone, which was true, then unidentified flying objects, less scientifically known as flying saucers, could be doing the same and thus should be investigated officially and not just by amateur UFO groups. The media, more interested in a good scare story than in what a brilliant young physicist was actually saying, grossly misinterpreted him and turned him

into some kind of UFO freak. There's also no doubt in my mind that the media were encouraged in their activities by certain members of the commercial airline companies, who were none too well pleased with Tony's revelation that their passenger-carrying airplanes were responsible for a lot of our problems in the stratosphere. True, it embarrassed us and damaged him, but it wasn't his fault.'

'It was his fault for not choosing his words more carefully,' Clare said, feeling almost ashamed as she said it, wondering if she was deliberately doing him down because she couldn't get him out of her mind and resented him for that as well.

Yet Dwight just grinned at her. 'That may be so,' he said, 'but Tony is a physicist, not a politician, and he's always been a bit loose with his tongue.'

'So I gathered,' Clare said.

Dwight grinned more broadly. 'Can I take it from that remark that you had your little problems with him?'

'Just a little. He got annoyed when I didn't show too much patience with his ozone-hole theory.'

'That's m'boy,' Dwight said.

'So tell me what this guy's really like.'

Dwight shrugged. 'You've read his reports, Clare. You already know he's a damned good physicist on an academic level. He's also dedicated, independent, and very outspoken, but then you've gathered that, also.'

'Wipe that grin off your face. I want to know what he's like as a human being. Is he emotionally stable? Does he drink? Does he beat his wife? Is he unusually imaginative?'

'He's more normal than he seemed to you,' Dwight said, 'and he's certainly stable. A decent husband and father, though a bit haphazard with it, if only because he lives for his work and rarely gets his nose out of it. He hardly knows what goes on around him - he works even at home - and because of that, he has a disorderly house and dissatisfied wife. But does he drink? Only normally. Does he beat his wife? Never! He's emotionally stable, at his very best when working, and though he's highly imaginative, I've never known him to let it impinge on his work. In fact, he's one of the best men I've got - and I don't say that lightly.'

'Do *you* believe what he says?'

'You mean regarding the ozone hole?'

'Yes.'

‘Tony’s my friend, but I have to confess that I view his interpretation of what happened with some scepticism. I know for a fact that just before leaving home to go on the expedition, he was told by his wife that she would leave him if he went. In other words, he was certainly under a certain amount of stress during the expedition; and that, combined with the thin atmosphere and cold he would have experienced during the flight, could have led to that particular hallucination. I think that’s what it was.’

‘*Did* his wife leave him?’ Clare asked before she could stop herself.

‘As a matter of fact, she did. She was gone when he got back. I certainly don’t think that helped his temper. And that was only a few days before you met him.’

‘Oh, God,’ Clare said, as if sympathising, but feeling hot with shame at the feeling of relief slithering through her.

I don’t believe this, she thought.

‘Tony insists,’ she continued, to distract herself from her own confusion, ‘that his aircraft was surrounded by some kind of unknown light, or even a craft, and that he could actually *feel* and *smell* his wife.’

Dwight shook his head from side to side. ‘Makes no difference, Clare. Hallucinations can possess a powerful reality, so I still think my explanation fits the facts.’

‘What about his belief that something other than CFCs is depleting the ozone layer?’

‘He didn’t tell me about that. He must have come to that conclusion only recently. And he probably didn’t tell me because I was so sceptical about his experience.’

‘Do you believe it’s possible?’

‘All things are possible, but it strikes me as being unlikely. Certainly the ozone is being destroyed much faster than we’d first anticipated, but we don’t have all the facts and figures in yet. Here at NASA we know exactly how much our SSTs and shuttle flights are destroying the ozone in the stratosphere; but we can’t be too sure of how much of a contribution is being made by European and Russian hypersonic vehicles and prototypes.’

‘But Tony claims that his calculations are based on computer analyses of the data collected worldwide by the Airborne Antarctic Ozone Expedition.’

‘He actually said that?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then we better have a talk with him,’ Dwight said, suddenly sounding

concerned. ‘He wouldn’t lie about that. I’m not saying his findings are sound - he could have misinterpreted the data - but he certainly wouldn’t lie about his source, which is what disturbs me. Let’s call him in now.’

Clare’s heart started racing, though she wasn’t sure why; she only knew that she wasn’t ready to see Tony walking through that door, to be trapped in this uncomfortably small room with him. The very thought of it made her burn, her emotions in turmoil.

‘Let’s wait,’ she said, trying to sound as casual as possible. ‘I’d like to discuss this with a colleague before taking it further. It goes beyond your department, maybe touches on national security, so I might have to talk to Tony alone, on behalf of the Department of Defence, rather than NASA. What do you think?’

‘I think you’re right,’ Dwight replied. ‘Tony went directly to you without consulting me, which could make for certain embarrassments in our working relationship. So it might be better if officially I know nothing about this.’

‘Right,’ Clare said. ‘Thank you.’

She shook Dwight’s hand and gratefully left his office, still feeling hot and bothered, realising that she was more disturbed by her growing feelings for Tony than she was by the terrible future he had forced her to contemplate.

Chapter Twelve

The sun was sinking when Clare arrived back in Washington DC. She decided to stop off, on the way home, at Jack Douglas’ apartment near Dupont Circle. Pleased to see his car in the driveway, she parked just behind it and rang the bell beside the door.

‘Yes?’ he said.

‘It’s me. Clare.’

‘Do you have an appointment?’

‘Let me in, damn you, before I get mugged.’

Hearing his soft, sardonic chuckle, then the buzzing of the intercom, she pushed the door open and entered. He was on the third floor, but she decided to walk - not exactly nervous, but wary of crazies in lifts - and found Jack standing by the open door of his apartment with a grin on his face.

‘You can come without an appointment anytime,’ he said. ‘This sure is a

pleasant surprise.'

They embraced and kissed in the hallway, then entered the apartment. Jack removed her coat and hung it up for her, while she sat on his leather sofa, facing his collection of modern art.

Tony Rydell, she thought, wouldn't have an apartment like this. His home would be cluttered, as untidy as his appearance, whereas Jack's apartment resembles *his* personality: cool and detached.

Just like she had been before meeting...

Tony... She kept thinking about him... even here, with her lover.

'I've just been to Goddard,' she explained to Jack, 'and thought I'd drop in for a quick drink on my way back to Georgetown.'

'Only a drink?' he asked hopefully.

She smiled. 'Only a drink. That and a little talk. I'm feeling a bit unsettled at the moment, not too sure of my bearings. A neat bourbon would help.'

Jack looked down at her, surprised. 'A bit unsettled? *You*? Clare Holton not too sure of her bearings? I can't believe my own ears!'

'Just get me the bourbon.'

He fetched her the drink, then sat beside her with his glass of beer. They touched glasses and Clare sipped some bourbon. When Jack placed his hand on her thigh, she felt oddly uncomfortable.

'Well,' Jack said, 'this *is* a surprise! The coolest, most pragmatic woman I know is feeling unsettled. So, what's the problem?'

'It's work,' she replied.

'I'm glad to hear *that*, Clare!'

'It's to do with what we discussed with the President. The hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic.'

He sighed. 'Christ, not that again. It's becoming your obsession. I've already told you, these things always take time. The President agrees in principle with you - he knows what needs to be done - but even he can't change the world overnight and suddenly cut by half the country's use of insecticides, chemicals, oil, automobiles and aircraft. You're losing sleep over *that?*'

'Not just that,' she said. 'Something else entirely. It's possible that the ozone layer is being eaten away a lot faster than we've calculated - and by something other than CFCS.'

'It's no use trying this on, Clare. It's not going to work. Our own people have all the facts and figures, and what *you* say won't budge them - or, at least, won't

make them hurry up. The depletion of the ozone layer is an officially recognised problem; but it requires worldwide coordination, and that could take years. Nothing you say, no trick you can play, is going to change that.'

'It's not a trick, Jack. It's something I've been told since having my talk with you and the President. Have you ever heard of a NASA physicist called Tony Rydell?'

Jack thought about it for a moment. 'No,' he decided. 'But then my concern is with NASA's accounts, not with their personnel. And they have a lot of physicists on the payroll.'

'Okay,' she said, 'listen to this.' She told Jack about her meeting with Tony, about what he had told her, then added, 'And that's why I went to see his boss today - to sound him out on the matter.'

'I hope he kicked you out of his office.'

'No, he didn't. He simply confirmed what the records had revealed: that if Rydell's a little eccentric and something of a mouth, he's also an exceptionally gifted physicist, now specialising in climatology and, in particular, the depletion of the ozone layer, which he was instrumental in discovering in the first place. This guy isn't a fool.'

Jack grinned wryly. 'No, of course not. He just sees flying saucers and ghosts. No fool at all.'

'Jack, if what he says is true, we're in worse trouble than I'd thought.'

'Don't even whisper that,' Jack said. 'You'll just unsettle *me*.'

'It's started already, Jack. Already, most of these here United States have been devastated by the fiercest heat wave and drought we've experienced for fifty years. In Minnesota, animals died in their hundreds while corn and soy-bean production was only a fraction of what it should have been. On the West Coast and in the Rockies there were the worst forest fires in living memory. The Mississippi river is now at its lowest level since records began in 1872 - and severe water restrictions have been in force from Chicago to San Francisco.' She stared steadily at him, trying to drill her intensity into him. 'And that was just *this* country. Russia was also devastated by unprecedented drought. China was devastated by simultaneous drought *and* floods. More floods in Bangladesh and Brazil. In other countries, hurricanes and cyclones and typhoons, killing millions and shattering whole economies. That great hole in the ozone layer is *already* changing the climate, with the results I've just mentioned. So if, as Rydell thinks, it's changing even faster than we've calculated, then we have to

find out what's causing it and do something about it. And I mean *now.*'

But Jack remained unconvinced.

'So a guy with an eccentric reputation has come up with a theory based on *his* reading of the data. That data would have to be analysed by an awful lot more people before the Department of Defence, let alone the White House, would make a move on it. And I'm surprised that *you're* taking it so seriously at this early stage. What's convinced the great realist?'

It was a pretty good question: one she had asked herself.

'I'm not sure,' she confessed. 'There's just something about this guy. He's impressive - a bit cocky, but convincing - and he's certainly made me re-think this whole situation.'

'Yeah,' Jack said, 'I can see that.'

Something in the tone of his voice made her look at him. She saw only his cool, questioning gaze.

'What do you mean, Jack?'

'Why are you taking this outlandish theory so seriously when you have no proof for it, other than the words of a man who is, by your own description, a bit of a mouth? You're supposed to be a hard-headed realist, so why this sudden faith in a theory for which you've no proof? This just isn't you, Clare.'

That was true enough. It wasn't like her at all. She had known this all along, but refused to face it, and now she blushed to think of it.

'I'd planned to ring Rydell,' she continued nervously, 'and arrange to analyse the data with him and see what I come up with.

'Oh, did you, indeed?' Jack's voice was cool, his tone slightly mocking. He removed his hand from her thigh and leaned closer to her. 'And is that a necessity?' he asked her. 'Or just an excuse?'

Suddenly, she felt embarrassed and childish. 'What the hell does *that* mean?'

'It means you're showing unusual faith in a man you've just met. You're confused between the theory and the man, but don't want to admit it. What's this guy like, Clare?'

'For Christ's sake,' she said, feeling more confused, 'I don't know what you...'

'You're intrigued by him, Clare. That much I can tell. You already believe in his story, though you haven't checked his data, and you're using that data as an excuse to see him again.'

'That's nonsense!'

'I don't think so. I've never seen you like this before. I've never known you to

accept anyone else's theories before checking them out. Why this time, Clare?'

'Because it could make sense.'

'Because *what* makes sense? This guy tells you that something else, something *unknown*, is destroying the ozone, and you actually *believe* him!'

Feeling humiliated and angry, aware of the truth in his remarks, Clare stood up and hurried towards the door, saying, 'Damn it, Jack, I won't listen to this nonsense! You sound just like a...'

But she couldn't complete the sentence, so he did the job for her. 'Juvenile? I sound just like a kid? How the hell do you think you're behaving, Clare, coming here with this crap?'

'Goodnight, Jack,' she said firmly, opening the door, preparing to leave.

'Whether or not Rydell's theory has any validity,' Jack said, 'your interest in it is more than strictly scientific. Don't kid yourself otherwise.'

'Go to hell, Jack!'

She walked out and slammed the door, then hurried back down the stairs. Though shocked at her outburst and burning with shame, she was unable to return and apologise, just wanting to escape.

Darkness had fallen. The domes and spires of the capital looked eerily beautiful under moonlit grey clouds, as she drove to Washington Circle, turned into Pennsylvania Avenue, then crossed Rock Creek and entered M Street. She hardly knew where she was going, driving instinctively, thinking only of what Jack had said and ashamed of the truth in it.

An only child, too precocious by far, she had inherited from her parents a strong, independent nature and respect for the mind, rather than matters of the heart, which she had generally viewed with grave suspicion. Romantic or sexual love, which she had experienced only in adolescence, had always left her feeling helpless and distraught, betrayed by what had later seemed like foolishness. She had survived that adolescence, not liking it a bit, and thereafter had devoted herself to her education and work, just like her parents. The sex she had accepted - it was a therapeutic necessity - but the messiness of other human emotions she had left well behind her. That's why she normally felt comfortable with Jack Douglas: his pragmatism presented no threat to her. It was also why she felt so confused when she thought of Tony Rydell.

She couldn't think rationally about him. That was the first shock. When she forced herself to do so, she thought of him as a mess - a dishevelled,

undisciplined, ill-mannered, arrogant lout - but despite that she knew, without rhyme or reason, that she had to see him again.

Turning down one of the narrow streets off Wisconsin Avenue, lined with Federal-period homes and too many cars, she soon came to her father's house. Letting herself in, she hung her coat up in the hallway, then went into the lounge where, since the lights were still on, she expected to find her father. He wasn't there, which meant he was in bed, so she decided to ring Tony immediately and get this thing over with.

To her shame, she had to pour herself a drink before she could do it. Sipping her bourbon as she dialled, she forced herself to think in a rational manner and keep in mind that he was not her sort at all.

Someone lifted up the phone and yawned and then said, 'Yeah?'

'Mr Rydell?'

'Right. Yeah.'

'Mr Rydell, this is Clare Holton. We - '

'*Who*?'

'Clare Holton. You came to see me at the American Geophysical Union in Baltimore, Maryland. I'm the scientific liaison officer between NASA and the Department of Defence, and you spoke to me about - '

'Dammit, lady, do you know what time it is? It's nearly midnight, for chrissakes, and I've two kids and an old lady trying to sleep here. What *is* this? An *emergency?*'

Embarrassed that she had forgotten the time, glancing at her watch to confirm it, Clare said, 'I'm sorry. I didn't realise. I was so immersed in my - '

'Work. Yeah, right. I understand.' He sighed at the other end of the line. 'So what is it, Miss God-Almighty Holton who thinks I'm a crank?'

'You don't have to be offensive. I *said* I was sorry. And I'm calling because I'm concerned about what you told me and I want to go over the data with you.'

There was a brief, tormenting silence, then he said, 'Am I hearing right, lady?'

'Please don't call me *lady*. I think it's demeaning. Either call me Clare or Miss Holton. And, yes, you did hear correctly.'

'So what changed your mind... *Clare*?'

She closed her eyes, wanting to strangle him. 'I just thought it over,' she said, opening her eyes again, 'and decided that I should have at least offered to double-check your data. It's my way of apologising for my rudeness, so I hope you'll accept.'

‘When can you come over?’

‘Well, let’s see... I’m a bit busy this week. What if we make it..?’

‘The weekend. Let’s do it at the weekend. The other guys will all be at home and can’t look over our shoulders. Unless, of course, you think that being *alone* with me wouldn’t be kosher.’

God, he was impossible! Where the hell had he been raised? Probably in some godawful Western town with swinging doors and a tethering post.

‘Since I’m not Jewish, I’m not concerned with being kosher,’ she said. ‘Will Saturday morning do?’

‘We don’t *all* have servants! I do the shopping on Saturday mornings. What about Sunday?’

‘What time?’

‘Ten. In the morning.’

‘Fine. Goodnight, Mr Rydell.’

She dropped the phone before he could answer, almost slamming it down, and immediately poured herself another drink. Crossing the old-fashioned room with its imported Regency furniture, she noticed the note left on the writing desk. Puzzled, she picked it up and read:

My dearest daughter, my Clare

When you read this letter I will already be gone. I know that what I have done may be morally indefensible and will certainly wound you deeply, but I beg you to understand that it was done out of love and respect. I love you as I write this and that love helps m to do what I know I must.

A few weeks ago I was informed that I had an illness that will eventually render me helpless. I do not wish to become an invalid with you as my nurse. I do not wish to deprive you of the life you so richly deserve.

My suicide is an act of love.

I have taken some tablets. I will suffer no pain at all. It is the best, the only decent way out. At times like this, words cannot say enough. Farewell, dearest one.

Your loving father, Walter.

Clare's hand was shaking. She was blinded by her tears. Her heart was racing when she gently laid the letter back on the desk, then walked into the darkness of her dread, towards the light in her father's bedroom. That light fell into the hallway. She stopped just outside the door.

She could hardly bear to walk in. It was only the thought of her father's courage that gave her the strength to do so.

The room was fully lit. He had not wanted to frighten her. He had put on his pyjamas, stretched out under the sheets, folded his hands on his lap, and died quietly, with dignity. At some point, just before death's long sleep, he had opened his eyes again. Now he seemed to be smiling.

Clare was no longer frightened, but her grief knew no bounds. She walked slowly to the bed, looked down at her dead father, sat beside him, gently stroked his cold forehead, then closed his eyes.

She lay upon him, her cheek resting on his stilled heart, listening to his great silence.

Her tears fell for a long time.

Chapter Thirteen

The colours of her childhood were disappearing, bleached out by the sun. Suzy saw that it was happening, but she wasn't sure just why – didn't know if it was actually the weather or her changing view of things.

The weather certainly was unusual, too hot even for summer, and her father was complaining all the time that it was ruining the crops. That had something to do with the colours - the fabulous greens and golds drying out and becoming brownish - but she also sensed that it was the way she was seeing things, which was not so romantically. She still loved being home, talking to Mom, helping Dad, but even for her it was too hot, and now their talk was anxious, and she found herself thinking more of Maryland and shedding tears for her kids.

She really wanted to see them.

She'd received a letter from Tony, asking her to come back. If not for his sake, he'd said, then for the sake of the kids. It burned her up to read it, since it was so typical of him: she thought he'd at least write to say he loved her and missed her

- but, no, he only mentioned the kids, as if he wasn't concerned himself.

She wanted to scream when she read that.

She started going out in the evenings, mostly wandering about Des Moines. looking in on the old places where she and Tony used to fraternise, but mostly just hopping in and out of bars, hoping to find some friends. Of course she didn't see a soul - all her old girlfriends had moved away - and so she found herself drinking more and more, brooding on Tony and lost dreams.

He hadn't even said he wanted her back. Only mentioned the kids. What a sonofabitch he was! Literally speaking, considering his mother, whom her father admired some. You just couldn't credit it.

'You're staying out a lot these days,' her mother said. 'What do you do all night?'

'It's not all night, Mom. It's just the evenings. And I just walk around.'

'Looking for what?'

'Old faces, I suppose.'

'The younger folk are moving out,' her mother confirmed. 'I never see your old friends.'

'I like to have a drink and think.'

'About Tony and the kids?'

'Yeah.'

'You miss them?'

'I want my kids, at least, but I've got too much pride.'

'They didn't want to come, you said.'

'But they want me back, Mom.'

'Then go.'

'I'm not ready for that yet. Phew! It's real hot in here!'

She often went out to avoid the heat. It was even hot in the evenings. It was cooler in the streets of Des Moines than it was on the farm - and the bars, thank the Lord, had air-conditioning, which the farmhouse did not.

She drank alone in the bars, out of sight of the stars, thinking of Maryland and her kids in their beds, starting to convince herself that she couldn't go back because she didn't deserve them.

She'd deserted them - and any woman who did that, didn't deserve her kids.

Thinking that, she had to take out her kerchief and wipe tears from her eyes.

'Anything wrong?' someone asked her.

He was over six-foot tall and had lazy blue eyes and thick brown hair. His

muscles were bursting out of his short-sleeved shirt and he wore a white apron. He worked the bar and cleaned tables.

'No,' she replied, feeling a bit flustered. 'Just got a bit of dirt in my eyes.'

'Oh, yeah?'

'Yeah,' she said.

He nodded thoughtfully. 'Don't I know you?' he asked. 'Didn't you used to go to..?'

'High school!' She almost screamed it. 'You're Joe Wheeler! You and me used to... Lord!' She almost giggled.

'Yeah,' he said, 'we made eyes. Then you married..?'

'Tony... Tony Rydell.'

'That's right. The bright spark.'

'Yeah,' she said, 'real bright.'

He lifted her glass and wiped the table. 'You just visiting?'

'Yeah.'

'You bin gone for years, right? Since you got married. You went to..?'

'Texas.'

'Yeah, right.'

'Then to Greenbelt in Maryland.'

'Kids?' Wheeler asked.

'Two.'

'I never got married,' Wheeler said. 'Don't know why. It just never happened. Now it's too late to think of it.'

'Don't know why. You're an attractive guy.'

'Sounds like poetry, Suzy. You're here with your husband and kids?'

'No. All alone this time.'

'Really?'

'Yeah.'

'Just here seein' the folks?'

'Right.'

'I sometimes see your mother in town, though I don't think she recognises me. One helluva a fine dame, that woman. You oughta be proud.'

'I am.'

'You look good.'

'You think so?'

'Yeah. No kidding. You look like a goddamned million dollars.'

‘Stop it. You’re making me blush.’

‘That just makes you look prettier.’

Suzy laughed at that. She could never resist a compliment. Also, men could make you feel good in a way women couldn’t; they could reach in and pull out that part of you that too often stayed hidden. Without a man, she didn’t feel right, not whole, missing something, and she guessed that it came from her happy childhood, then marrying so young. First her Dad, then Tony, the two pillars of her life, her Dad as solid as a rock, though growing more anxious lately, Tony able to make her laugh and keeping her balanced on her toes, getting ready to sprint around any madness he raised - never boring, at least. Yeah, she’d liked him for that. She liked a man who could make her laugh. But somewhere along the line she’d stopped laughing, which is why she was here now. Laughing with this old flame, Joe Wheeler, and feeling good for it.

‘You want another drink?’ he asked.

‘Sure,’ she said. ‘Why not?’

The place was practically empty, so when he brought her the fresh drink, he also brought himself a beer and took the seat facing her.

‘Do you mind?’

‘Not at all,’ she said. It was good to have a man about her own age sitting right there in front of her. He had a nice, easy smile.

‘You been running this place long?’ she asked him.

‘*Too* long. About ten years. I took it over when my Dad died. As a favour to my Mom. She died about five years ago and now, here I am still - the sole owner and only member of staff. It beats some jobs I know.’

‘You see many of our old friends?’

‘Naw. They mostly got married and had kids. Scattered and went away. Those were some days, eh?’

Suzy smiled, remembering being a teenager; maybe wanting to be one again, without all these problems. ‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘You used to give me that heavy-lidded look - obviously thought you were Richard Gere.’

‘You used to like him. I remember that.’

‘I still do,’ she told him. ‘You look a bit like him, you know that? Same lips, the same long-lashed eyes.’

‘Gee, now you’re making *me* blush.’

‘It makes you look younger.’

‘Why don’t I close up and we’ll go eating?’

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘I’d like that.’

Instead, when he closed the doors, they went up the stairs and somehow became undressed and climbed into bed. It seemed a natural thing to do, no embarrassment in it at all, and he was really very nice, very considerate, and everything blocked up in her poured out in a great wave of relief.

She stayed there all night, flexing her muscles, stretching her body, and he stroked her and licked her all over and made her purr like a cat. And what was nicer was when they weren’t making love, he continued to talk to her. She really liked him for that.

‘Smokin’ in bed,’ he said, ‘is a dangerous habit, but I really like doin’ it.’

‘And having bourbon in bed, too.’

‘Yeah, at four in the mornin’. Makes you feel you’re on an all-night party, gettin’ higher each minute.’

‘Makes you feel young, right?’

‘Yeah, Suzy, I guess.’

‘Marriage takes that away from you,’ she told him. ‘It just slips away quietly.’

‘It hasn’t been working out?’

‘We had something, but we lost it. He just doesn’t see me anymore. It’s like I’m there, but I’m not.’

‘You left home? Is that it?’

‘Yeah,’ she confessed. ‘I did. I asked the kids to come along, but they didn’t want to, so I left them as well. That’s what makes me feel shitty.’

‘You think you’ll go back?’

‘I don’t know. I don’t think so. I’m too proud to go back. I also think that a woman who leaves her kids deserves all she gets. I don’t deserve them, no more.’

‘That’s bullshit, Suzy.’

‘It’s kind of you to say so. And it’s nice to be with a man who knows how to look at me.’

‘And how’s that?’

‘With greed.’

‘Come here, honey. Let me hold you again. I wanna show you what greed is. You sure are some handful!’

‘Godalmighty, that’s good! That’s so good! Don’t stop, Joe. Take as long as you want. Keep me locked up in chains.’

‘Don’t tempt me,’ he said.

He asked her what she liked and tried to please her and made her smile, and when dawn broke, when she finally walked out of there, she felt like a new woman. She got back to the farm in Indianola just in time to miss breakfast.

'Where you bin all night?' her mother asked, as she cleaned up the table.

'With an old friend,' Suzy said.

'A girlfriend?'

'No, Mom,' Suzy confessed. 'It wasn't a girlfriend.'

'I don't think your Dad was pleased.'

'No, I don't suppose he was. You got any coffee in that pot?'

'Sure, help yourself.' Suzy poured some coffee. 'Who is he?' her mother asked.

'Joe Wheeler. I don't know if you remember him. He went to my high school.'

'I remember him,' her mother said. 'A nice kid, but never married. I hear he runs his dad's bar in town and retains an eye for the ladies.'

'He enjoys being a bachelor, Mom.'

'And you're on his list, right?'

'I need someone in my life right now, Mom, and he's kind and considerate.'

'You be careful, child. Remember you're still married. You've got things to work out.'

'Thanks, Mom. I'll bear that in mind.'

'Okay, then, let's drop it.'

And that was that. They didn't like it, but accepted it. Suzy saw Joe again, then it became a regular thing, and she soon spent more time in his bedroom than she did in her own.

She'd gone off her own room. It now seemed small and confining. She'd sit there on the bed and look out through the window and notice that the healthy sea of maize had turned a dark, dried-out brown. She saw her father standing shoulder-high in the dying maize, his eyes crawling all over it. He'd pull cobs off and drop them on the ground and then glance anxiously about him, looking unreal in that silvery light, a man no longer sure if the earth abides and would always sustain him.

Suzy knew he was frightened.

Chapter Fourteen

Coming out of sleep, Tony had his familiar dream. At first all he saw was a pinprick of light in a vast sheet of darkness, then a gleaming white eye, but then it expanded, flaring out in all directions, and raced at him and exploded around him, obliterating the real world.

He was sucked through space and time, hurled into another dimension, spiralled down through the cascading voices of history and cast forth into silence. He looked up from Europa, across the valleys and frozen mountains, and saw the vast golden globe of Jupiter, its Great Red Spot a bloody wound. Around it were the satellites, thirteen, maybe more, and all of them, the enormous apple and its seedlings, were drenched in the stars…

He usually woke up then, but this time it was different. This time the enormous apple somehow drew him towards it, changed shape as it did so, and gradually became a human face in a dazzling white haze. He was sucked in, surrounded, perhaps even ingested, and when he saw the face again, the teasing smile, the mocking green eyes, he recognised it as Suzy's.

She was very close to him, giving off heat and light, at once extraordinarily sensual and frightening, her smile chilling his blood.

His lust for her dissolved into terror and he screamed and...

Awakened.

'Goddammit!' he whispered, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, naked and sweating beneath the sheets, his heart racing uncomfortably. He glanced around the bedroom, taking in the real world, still caught in the web of his dream and working out what it meant.

He had been dreaming for years about flying to Jupiter - it was a simple yearning for escape - but the recent addition of Suzy to the dream was extremely disturbing. She was so vivid in it, almost palpable in her reality, that she made him remember, with a shudder of dread, what had happened when he had flown through the hole in the ozone layer.

Had that creature been an hallucination, a ghost, or some other form of life disguised as his Suzy? He was convinced that it was the latter... But why Suzy?

Because she had left him. Because the thought of her had filled him with guilt and recrimination, shame and rage and frustration, all of which had obviously been preying on his subconscious and would not let him go. Certainly that had been part of it, but it didn't wholly explain his bizarre experience. Nor did it

explain why, ever since that fateful day, his dreams of Suzy had made her seem different from the Suzy he knew. In his dreams, though she certainly *looked* like Suzy, she was inexplicably frightening. Not Suzy at all.

Bewildered, sighing, he swung his legs off the bed, rubbed his face with his hands, listened to his kids shouting and his mother barking at them, then wandered into the bathroom to wake up with a shower. He took it cold, feeling brave and triumphant, emerged feeling far more alive, then dried himself and got dressed.

'Groaning in your sleep again,' his mother said when he entered the kitchen. 'It's not a good sign, son.'

'All right, Ma, no analysis.'

'You've been sick ever since that Suzy left you. You've hardly had a good night's sleep since then - all that moaning and groaning.'

'I have bad dreams, Ma.'

'So do I,' said Don, looking up from the dining table where he was sitting with Grandma and Ronnie. 'I have terrible dreams all the time. It's 'cause I'm neglected.'

'*I'm* neglected,' Ronnie added, staring pugnaciously at his brother in that way he'd developed lately. 'I bet I have more bad dreams than you do - and real bad as well!'

'Crap!' Don replied.

'Watch your tongue!' Grandma snapped.

'Okay, cool it!' Tony said as he sat down with them. 'I want no fights this morning. How are you, Mrs Gomez?'

The question was directed at the portly Mexican woman where she stood at the cooker, dressed in a plain dress and apron, pouring sweat as she fried eggs and flapjacks.

'I feel real bad,' she said as toast popped out of the electric toaster and the coffee boiled noisily. 'I don't feel good since I get here. I only been here for five days and already I'm done for. This place is a zoo, *Señor*!'

'And we all know who the animals are,' Grandma said. 'We certainly know *that* much, at least!'

'See, *Señor*? You hear how she talk to me? This old crow, she has a tongue like a razor and I bleed all the time.'

Grandma smiled with grim pleasure, making Tony's heart sink. He'd had to bring in Mrs Gomez because Grandma was chaotic, and the latter had displayed

her resentment by picking relentlessly on the former. Now Mrs Gomez, whose exhausted face had once been suffused with kindness, was pouring sweat over the cooker and looking distraught.

'Oh, yes,' she said, glaring fiercely at Grandma. 'She looks innocent now, smiling sweetly and saying nothing, but she picks, picks all the time, sniping here, backbiting there, and she encourages the kids to do the same, like making fun of my accent. It is too much, Señor!'

The boys burst into laughter while Grandma smiled smugly and Mrs Gomez, still working automatically, tossed the flapjacks.

'Shut up, you two,' Tony said, glaring at them. 'And you can stop that goddamned smirking, Ma. You've got nothing to smile about.'

His mother smiled even more broadly, as if at an invisible friend sitting by the far wall. 'I'm American and speak the language,' she said. 'Others still have a lot to learn.'

'Godammit, Ma!' Tony exclaimed in exasperation.

'You hear?' Mrs Gomez exclaimed, her large brown eyes tearful. 'That old crow is a racist from the Midwest. She is evil and mad!'

'Sticks and stones!' Tony's mother trilled, her voice musical with pleasure, while the boys covered their mouths with their hands to stifle their laughter.

'And all the time she criticizes!' Mrs Gomez was almost hysterical. 'I don't clean the house proper. I don't do the food good. She shows me dust on her finger and moans that the meat is under-cooked and complains that my chilli is too hot and my coffee too cold. She follows me everywhere, sniffing at me like a dog, and she holds the dishes up to the light to find invisible dirt. And these kids, they do the same. She encourages them to do so. They also play stupid tricks - they try to frighten and confuse me - and when they succeed, she cackles with pleasure and rewards them with money. I can't take no more, Señor!'

Mrs Gomez threw more flapjacks onto the plates and then simply stared at them, paralysed by the weight of what she was saying, visibly shaking with outrage.

'She also takes her time serving us,' Grandma noted. 'That's why the food's always cold.'

'Grandma!' Tony snapped.

Mrs Gomez let out a wail. 'Aye! Aye! That's enough! This is the last abuse I take!' She threw down the spatula, breaking a plate, then hastily untied her apron and flung it to the floor. Tony pushed his chair back and stood up to talk

to her, but was distracted by his mother's snort of mirth.

'Godammit,' he snapped, 'shut up! Mrs Gomez, please wait a minute...'

'No!' she said with magisterial dignity. 'I leave this madhouse right now!'

'*Please*, Mrs Gomez! I just want you to try...'

But Mrs Gomez cut him short by pointing a finger at his frail, silvery-haired, smirking mother. 'That woman,' she said, jabbing her finger at her own temple and twisting it like a corkscrew, 'is as mad as a starving coyote - and just as unpleasant. And these,' she continued, removing her finger from her temple and pointing at Tony's two boys, 'are more delinquent than the wetbacks *she* says are ruining this country. *Adios*, Mr Rydell. You're a good man, but your family is terrible. You can mail me my money.'

Having regained her lost pride, she glared at Tony's mother, stuck her tongue out at his giggling boys, then marched from the house.

The boys fell about laughing, Grandma smiled at the wall, and Tony, who hadn't had even a coffee, suddenly found himself lunging across the table, his hands slapping wildly. The boys kicked their chairs back and rushed out of the room, their footsteps making a racket in the hallway. The back door opened and slammed shut, then the boys were gone, leaving Tony alone with his mother. She was nodding at an invisible friend across the room, her smile one of triumph.

Tony loved her, but she wasn't herself these days, which had made for some trying times.

'Happy, are you?' he asked her.

'What do you mean, son?'

'You know damn well what I mean. Mrs Gomez was a really good housekeeper, and you've driven her out.'

'*I* didn't drive her out. I didn't do a thing, dear. The woman was just a bit hysterical, as most Mexicans are.'

'You *made* her hysterical.'

'What an awful thing to say. 'Specially knowing that foreigners, *her* kind, aren't like us at all.'

'She's an American, just like you.'

'She's *Mexican*, not American.'

'She's an American citizen, born and bred, but let's forget that for now. The point is that she's gone, she certainly won't be returning, and that puts the ball in your court. I mean, I got her to get all this off your back and *now* look where we

are. Again, there's no-one to look after the house and kids; just you and me, Ma.'

His mother stopped smiling. 'You and me?' she said. 'Oh, no, I don't think I can do that. I'm exhausted already.'

'Exhausted?'

'Yes, exhausted. Those two boys are so trying. You left Suzy to look after them, Suzy was inadequate, and now they're like a pair of juvenile delinquents, almost out of control. I *always* said Suzy was useless. I said it a lot, but no-one listened. That Suzy, I said, she's as pretty as a little bird, but she doesn't have the sense of a rabbit and just isn't a housewife. And now the proof, God help us, is in the pudding and those two boys need discipline.'

'That's why I asked you to come back. I needed someone to impose a little discipline and I thought you could do that.'

'I couldn't with you,' she reminded him. 'Just look at the state of you. *You're* as unruly as your kids - and that's saying a lot, son.'

Tony couldn't believe his ears. But when he thought about it, he realised, with a shock, that she was speaking the truth. He *had* been an unruly child, was *still* a bit unruly, and knew only the disciplines of his work, which didn't help much in daily life. It certainly hadn't been good for Suzy and the boys - that much was clear.

'It's all your fault,' he said. 'I'm *your* son, after all. You brought me up. You made me what I am.'

'Don't blame me,' she replied. 'You've blamed me all your life for all your problems, but I wasn't responsible. Now I'm too old and feeble for all this. I wanna go back to the rest home.'

'Dammit, Ma, you can't leave me now!'

'I have to. I have a migraine. In fact, I think I'm gonna faint.' She placed her hand on her head, swaying slightly on her chair, looking faint. 'Lord, I'm going to have to lie down.' She stood up, preparing to lie down. 'Please ring the rest home - '

'Menopause Manor,' Tony interjected sarcastically.

' - and tell them to come and collect me this evening. I should feel better by then.' She started to leave the room, still holding her hand to her head, but stopped when she reached the kitchen door. 'But don't worry about me, dear. You go on to work. I know you have to do that, even on Sundays, and that's okay with me. Just make sure the children stay outside. At least tell them to be

quiet. When I wake up, no matter how bad I feel, I'll make lunch as usual.'

'You don't have to.'

'And after that, I'll pack my own suitcase and wait for the ambulance.'

'I'll be home by then, Ma.'

'You don't have to be.'

'I will be.'

'Okay, Son. I have to lie down now. Have a good day, dear.'

'You have a good sleep, Ma.'

She sighed. 'I'll try, Son.'

He grinned when she walked out, amused despite himself, then he thought of Mrs Gomez's departure and knew he had problems. Still, he rang the rest home, not having much choice, and arranged to have his mother collected that evening. He was about to get his jacket when a car-horn honked repeatedly outside.

Don and Ronnie called out excited greetings... then Tony heard Suzy's voice.

'Jesus H. Christ!' Tony murmured.

He didn't go out straight away. Instead, he went to the front room window, pulled the curtain back, and looked out furtively to see a dusty red Ford parked by the sidewalk, with a shadowed, unrecognizable man seated behind the steering wheel. Suzy was hugging the boys on the front lawn, all three of them so excited it made him resentful.

Eventually Suzy straightened up, patting her blonde hair into place, chewing gum, and adjusting her sunglasses as she glanced at the house. She was wearing a tightly belted, open-necked shirt and high-heeled leather boots which, combined with her skin-tight denims, emphasised her long legs. She sure as hell didn't look like the mother of two boys. She looked too damned attractive.

'Okay, Tony,' she said, lowering her sunglasses and staring right at him. 'You might as well come on out.'

'Why not come in?' he responded, feeling embarrassed.

'I don't want to,' she said.

Letting the curtains drop back into place, cursing softly at his own stupidity, Tony walked out onto the porch, closing the front door quietly behind him and then leaning against it. Suzy slid her sunglasses back up her nose and stared solemnly at him, looking too sexy for her own good, flanked by their sons, each one holding a hand of hers.

'Hi, Tony,' she said.

'Hi, Suzy.' He glanced over her shoulder, at the car by the sidewalk, and saw

the man seated inside it, smoking a cigarette, his fingers drumming lightly on the steering-wheel, his face hidden in shadow. 'Who's that in the car?'

'Just a friend,' Suzy replied.

'It's not your car,' Tony noted.

'It's a rented car. We've just come from the airport.'

'You flew here from Ohio?'

'Yeah.'

'Your folks pay for it?'

'I know what you're implying,' Suzy said, 'and you're totally wrong. My folks paid for me; Joe paid for himself.'

'Joe! You've got a boyfriend named Joe. Did you know him before you left?'

'Sure, I knew him, but not the way you mean. I didn't leave you for that.'

'You know him that way now, right?'

Her grin was defensive. 'Yeah, Tony. Right. Nothing lasts forever, you know? We all have to move on.'

It was definitely his Suzy. There could be no doubt about it. He wasn't frightened by her appearance, only angry and wounded, but he did think of that vision in the cockpit of his ER-2 and wondered, as he had done so often, just how real it had been. As for Suzy, the real Suzy on his lawn, she was certainly still capable of disturbing him, but for very real, human reasons.

It hurt just to see her.

'Hey, kids,' he said, 'go inside for a minute. I have to talk with your Mom.'

'Aw, gee!' Ronnie exclaimed.

'She just got here!' Don complained.

'It's okay, kids,' Suzy said, releasing their hands and pushing them towards the house. 'I'll see you before I leave. Go inside and let your Dad and I talk and then we'll call you back out again.'

'You promise?' Don asked, looking grave.

'Yeah, I promise. *I promise!'* She grinned and stomped her boot on the lawn and the kids reluctantly ran into the house, not looking up at Tony as they brushed past him. When the kids had gone, Suzy stopped grinning.

'You're obviously not coming back,' Tony said, 'so what the hell are you doing here?'

Suzy shrugged, an oddly forlorn gesture. 'I just wanted to see you and the kids. You know? Just a visit.'

'Are you here to make trouble?'

‘Whatya mean, Tony?’

‘If you want to see the kids, you must miss them. Do you want them back, Suzy?’

She lowered her head, kicked distractedly at the lawn, then looked up again, still chewing her gum. ‘No,’ she said, ‘I don’t. I mean I do, but I know I can’t. I mean, I miss them -you know? - I really do, but I left them and that’s that.’

‘They need a mother, Suzy.’

‘More than you need me, right?’

‘I needed you, dammit, in my way. I just had my work, that’s all.’

‘Yeah,’ Suzy said. ‘Work.’

‘Why not come back?’ he said.

‘For you,’ she asked, ‘or the kids?’

‘Godammit, Suzy, for all of us. We all need each other.’

‘You don’t need me, Tony.’

‘Okay, dammit, for the kids.’

‘No,’ she said. ‘For you. You want someone to do the housework and cooking while you get on with your work. Isn’t that true, Professor?’

‘Just stop this shit, right?’

‘Still foul-mouthed, I note.’

‘Given the kind of company you keep, it shouldn’t shock you too much.’

He couldn’t resist looking at the guy she had picked up. He couldn’t see his face; just the shoulder and arm that were framed by the car’s window, suntanned muscles bursting out of a short-sleeved shirt, fingers drumming the steering wheel.

‘That’s some ape you’ve got there in the car,’ he said. ‘Where did you pick him up? On the farm or in some honky-tonk?’

‘He’s no ape,’ Suzy said. ‘He owns his own bar in Des Moines and he makes more than you do.’

‘Gee, whiz, I’m impressed. He owns a bar and earns more than me! That sure makes him something, right?’

‘You used to know him, Tony. His name’s Joe Wheeler. He went to our high school and...’

‘Yeah, yeah, I remember. He was built like a gorilla, imitated Richard Gere, and had eyes that you thought were soulful and I thought were dumb. Don’t let’s have a class reunion on the lawn. My stomach’s churning already.’

Suzy sighed. ‘Let me say goodbye to the kids.’

‘What the hell did you come here for?’

‘I came to say hello to my kids, but I want to leave now.’

‘Aw shucks, I’ve hurt your feelings!’

‘I’m immune to your sarcasm. Now do I get to say goodbye or not? Just let me know where I stand.’

‘What’s the matter? You got a *conscience* or something? You wanna pretend you still care? Go to hell, Suzy! Clear off!’

‘You’re a shit, you know that?’

‘I didn’t leave my kids, Suzy. I didn’t leave them, then turn up at the house with some stud in my car, like you did with Joe Wheeler.’

‘He loves me!’

‘He loves your sweet ass. Now waltz it back to him.’

Suzy sniffed back her tears. ‘I don’t deserve that,’ she said.

‘Don’t bring your boyfriends back here again. Now goodbye, Suzy. *Adios*.’

Before she could respond, he turned away and walked back into the house, slamming the door, his heart beating too fast. Don and Ronnie rushed up to him, but froze when they saw him. They glanced at the closed door, then at one another, and only when the car outside roared off did they rush to the window.

They watched the car departing and that made Tony feel worse. He knew that he’d behaved badly and that the boys knew that too. Unable to move, paralysed by shame, he leaned against the door to let his racing heart settle as the sound of the car faded away.

The boys turned towards him, Ronnie more bewildered than hurt, Don reaching out to place his hand on his arm, trying to show understanding.

‘You fought again, didn’t you?’

‘Yes,’ Tony confessed, ‘we did.’

‘It’s okay, Dad,’ Don said, his eyes wounded. ‘We know you didn’t want that. We understand. It’s okay.’

Tony couldn’t believe it. The generosity was too much. He pulled both boys against him, hugged them passionately, kissed their heads, then released them and hurriedly left the room.

He was still wiping tears from his eyes when he walked out of the house, aware that he was going to be late for his meeting with that hard-case, Clare Holton.

Chapter Fifteen

Even though Tony was late, Clare didn't act like a hard-case when he met her this time. In fact, she seemed unusually subdued, maybe even sleepless, and merely smiled wanly at him when he walked into the reception lobby of the NASA-Goddard Space Flight center in Greenbelt.

'Sorry I'm late,' he said.

'It's okay. It doesn't matter.'

'No, really,' he said, taken aback by her manner, 'there's no excuse for...'

'I wasn't checking the time,' she said, 'so really, it's okay.'

'That's decent of you, Miss Holton.'

'Clare - please call me *Clare*. Now shall we get down to business?'

'Yeah, Clare, let's do that.'

He took her straight to his office in the environmental physics department of the Institute for Space Studies. Since this was a Sunday morning, most of the offices were deserted, and Tony felt oddly intimate with her. More aware of her, he found himself glancing frequently at her, though he tried not to do so.

'Would you like a coffee?' he asked, as he switched on the computer monitors that were on a shelf along the wall facing his desk.

'No, thanks,' she replied. 'I'm fine. If I want a drink, I'll help myself to water.'

'Very healthy,' he said, pulling up another chair. He placed it beside his own and indicated that she should sit on it, behind the desk, facing the flickering monitors. 'Okay,' he said when she was seated, 'here we go. What I'll do first is show you the climate model figures on which we calculated what the ozone-depletion rate *should* be. Then I'll show you the comparison figures between the climate-model summaries and the actual ozone depletion over the Antarctic, as assessed from that last Antarctic expedition. As you'll then be able to see for yourself, there's a hell of a difference between how fast the ozone layer *should* be disappearing and how fast it's *actually* disappearing. And the difference, believe me, is dramatic and, so far, inexplicable. Okay?'

She nodded.

He accessed the required file on each of the computer monitors until every screen looked like a brilliantly coloured, abstract painting composed of phosphorescent whirlpools, irregular black patches, and other streams and

islands of blue, yellow and crimson, with windows of complex printed data overlaid onto them.

'What you're seeing,' he explained, 'are the computer enhancements and analyses of the Earth's atmosphere, taken from the principal climate modelling centers, namely, our own Goddard Institute for Space Studies in New York, the Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory at Princetown University, the National center for Atmospheric Research in Boulder, Colorado, the British Meteorological Office in Berkshire, England, and even the Soviet Hydro-Meteorology center in Moscow. Do you know what climate models are?'

'Yes,' she replied without irony. 'Since it's impossible to represent the Earth's atmosphere, in its entirety, in the detail necessary for atmospheric analysis, the climate, or greenhouse, models are a way of dividing Earth's surface and atmosphere into so-called numeric "boxes". Each box covers a surface area of up to a thousand kilometres square and the atmosphere into ten or twenty layers. By doing this, you can mathematically reproduce the changes that are presently taking place in the atmosphere, as well as calculate more accurately the expected changes up to approximately the next hundred years. Am I right?'

'Yeah, you're right.' He was pleased that she knew so much. 'And the data in those windows on the computer screens corresponds to the visual representations of the Earth's changing atmosphere on the same screens. As you can see, according to the calculations, there should be a depletion of ozone of about fifteen to twenty-percent over the next ten years alone.'

'I know this already. I also know it's too much. That's why I've been trying to get the White House to sit up and take notice.'

'Right,' Tony said, impressed by her tone of certainty, 'it's already too much. Yet those figures don't match up to the figures gained from that last expedition. According to *those* figures, the speed of depletion is twice what it should be.'

'Dear God,' Clare murmured.

Pleased that she was taking it seriously this time, Tony exited the climate models and accessed the files obtained from the Antarctic airborne expedition. He noted that Clare was jotting down notes. That further impressed him. She examined each monitor screen in turn, scribbling in her notebook, sometimes using a calculator, cross-checking the TOMS and SBUV readings that had been taken during the last expedition and relayed back to the numerous tracking stations, then on to here, via NASA, Houston. When she had finished, she checked her results against the figures that she had taken off the climate-model

analyses. Having studied them at length, she finally looked up, clearly shaken by what she had concluded.

'I apologise,' she said.

'There's no need,' he replied, pleased. 'But are you willing to take a stand on what you've seen?'

'Yes, Mr Rydell, I am.'

'Call me Tony,' he said.

She sighed nervously. 'Yes, Tony.' She glanced around her, as if in shock. Her gaze wandered over the separate monitor screens, as if hypnotised by them, but eventually came back to focus upon him in a slightly blind manner. 'Let me get this straight. The ozone is disappearing at twice the rate we anticipated and nothing in our knowledge of the atmosphere can account for it.'

'That's it. You've got it. And if nothing in our knowledge can account for what's doing it, then it has to be something unknown.'

'But what is it? And where did it come from?'

'That's what we've got to find out.'

Feeling more excited, forgetting his domestic problems in the thrill of exploration, Tony picked up another diskette and slotted it into one of the hard disks.

'My prize possession,' he said. 'I had this information transferred from the analysis system of Project Skywatch International, in Phoenix, Arizona. It's the most reliable UFO tracking organisation in existence - no, don't say a word! - and it's run by Rick Polanski, the former NASA physicist who worked on the SETI project, before leaving NASA in disgust at their lack of commitment.'

'I've read about him,' Clare said. 'It was before my time.'

'Lucky you,' Tony replied, then accessed the file named *UFO Related Materializations from the Subconscious*. Scrolling down the list of case histories, he said, 'Have a good look.'

He watched her as she read the screen. She had a fine profile, a high forehead, full lips, and the dark hair falling over her shoulder matched her luminous brown eyes. She was serious, too sophisticated for him... but he was secretly drawn to her.

When she had finished reading, she sat back in her chair and smiled at him.

'Okay,' she said, 'other people have had experiences like the one you had over the Antarctic. What does that prove?'

'You missed something,' he replied, unable to prevent a grin of pleasure as he

jabbed his finger at the list on the monitor screen. ‘You should have checked the dates. Hallucinations are common - but *palpable*, or even *physical* manifestations of the kind I and all those people experienced are a relatively new phenomenon... and it started in 1979.’

She was quick on the uptake. ‘Which was the year that the hole in the ozone layer appeared and the greenhouse effect began.’

‘Exactly,’ he said.

‘Which you’re taking as proof that the physical manifestations are being caused by the unknown something that’s gobbling up the ozone over the Antarctic.’

‘It sure seems to be that way.’

She gazed thoughtfully at him, but with that odd, slightly stunned look that he’d noticed before. Then she stood up and restlessly paced the office, letting him see how slim she was, her legs long and curvaceous in the high-heeled shoes. Eventually, as if the silence was unbearable, she stopped and looked down at him.

‘So *what* is it?’ she asked.

Tony shrugged. ‘There’s only one way to find out.’

‘To make another flight through the hole over the Antarctic?’

‘Right,’ Tony said.

She smiled at him. ‘Very clever, Tony. I *wondered* what you were after. And now I can’t say no, can I?’

‘Not if you face the facts.’

She smiled again. ‘You’ve hooked me. But what you’re asking for won’t be that simple. The President’s scientific financial advisor, Jack Douglas, is already concerned about the money being spent on the ozone problem, and the President himself is more concerned with his own period in office than he is with anything happening in the future. I should also point out that Jack Douglas is extremely sceptical about you - and has been ever since the media had a field day with your UFO theories. Given that, it’s not going to be easy to persuade them to finance another airborne expedition.’

‘You’ve got to try, Clare.’

‘I will - on one condition.’

‘What?’

‘That if I manage to pull it off, I go with you as part of the team.’

‘I don't think...’

‘Wait a minute,’ she said, raising her right hand to silence him. ‘I’m not just an executive. I *was* an astronaut, I *am* an experienced pilot, and my particular branch of astrophysics is biotechnology. I’m just what you need.’

‘I’m not sure I understand.’

Now Clare was looking excited, as if released from the private torment that had clouded her eyes. ‘What’s up there?’ she asked. ‘What’s eating the ozone layer even faster than the CFCs? Whatever it is, it’s invisible to the naked eye and hasn’t been picked up by our scientific instruments. Whatever it is, then, it’s not something real in any sense that we know.’

‘I’m with you so far,’ Tony said, caught up in her growing excitement and wanting to hug her.

‘Since 1968,’ she continued, ‘many of the molecules basic to chemical evolution - water, carbon dioxide, ammonia and hydrogen cyanide - have been found spectroscopically in outer space. Organic molecules, including amino acids, have also been found in meteorites. Because of this, a lot of physicists, including myself, believe that alien life doesn’t have to be carbon-based and organic. We believe that space could in fact hold two other forms of life - plasmodes and radiobes - the former evolving within suns, the latter in interstellar space. And that, Tony, is what we could have up there at the top of the ozone hole: either a plasmode or radiobe form of life.’

‘The fourth state of matter,’ Tony said, excited. ‘An electrically neutral gaseous mixture of positive and negative ions, or charged particles.’

Clare smiled again. ‘You’re showing off,’ she said, ‘but you’ve certainly got the message. That unknown factor feeding off the ozone layer could be a plasmode or radiobe form of life, possibly borne to Earth’s stratosphere by some passing meteorite or in the tail of something like Halley’s comet.’

‘Not Halley’s comet. That passed over in 1986 and the hole in the pole was first observed well before that. In 1979.’

‘Damn!’ Clare exclaimed in frustration. She paced the room, then stopped and excitedly snapped her fingers. ‘No!’ she said, arguing with herself. ‘The journey that brought Halley’s Comet back into the path of Earth was the one in 1910. That was the year the Earth actually passed through part of the tail of Halley’s Comet. And that tail contained the cosmic dust of the Orionid and Eta Aquarid meteor showers that travel in Halley’s orbit. So our assumed plasmode or radiobe life form could have attached itself to that cosmic dust and then spread itself around the globe of the Earth, with most of it settling over the Antarctic.’

Tony was so excited, he couldn't stay seated. Standing up, he was directly in front of Clare, staring into the brightening depths of her lovely eyes.

'Could be,' he said. '*Could* be...' And then faltered, disappointed. 'But we still have this goddamned year of 1979. The ozone didn't start disappearing until that year - sixty-nine years *after* the Earth passed through the tail of Halley's Comet.'

Clare didn't miss a beat. 'According to the panspermic hypothesis, the seeds of life are in the form of spores, which can survive prolonged intervals in vacuum - outer space - as well as conditions of extreme cold. However, on return to more favourable conditions, such as a warm climate, they return to their particular form of life again. The same could be true of a plasmode or radiobe form of life contained in the cosmic dust of, say, Halley's Comet. It survives in a kind of sleep throughout its cold journey through space, is cast off in the Earth's stratosphere, and is gradually revived by Earth's warm climate.'

'A climate growing even warmer as the alien life form feeds off the ozone layer.'

'Yes. And the more it devours the ozone layer, the warmer the Earth becomes and the stronger the alien life form becomes. In short, the Earth dies to feed it.'

Tony suddenly felt unreal, as if divorced from his body, all his senses focused on Clare's brown eyes, with their luminous, far-flung depths. He was looking into her soul, but also into the depths of space, and he wasn't too sure what it was that he'd eventually find there.

'You've got to arrange that Antarctic flight,' he told her.

'I'll try my damnest,' she said.

She glanced vaguely around the room. As she did so, she changed, the excitement fading from her eyes, giving way to the oddly stunned look he had noticed before.

'I'd better get moving,' she said. 'I'm going to have a hell of a lot to do.'

'Are you okay?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said and shrugged. 'Sure. Why do you ask? Do I look any different?'

'As a matter of fact, you do. At least, you *seem* different. You're not as high-stepping as when we first met. You seem slightly... *exhausted*?'

She smiled in a weary manner. 'Yes, maybe that's it. You're an exhausting man, Tony.'

She said it with good humour and it pleased him, making him smile. Then he led her back out of the building and across to the parking lot, aware as she

unlocked her car that she had him in a state of agitation. Confused by this, he placed his hand on her shoulder. Her brown gaze seemed opaque.

'You haven't been an astronaut for years,' he said, 'and haven't practised astrophysics for a long time. So why do you want to go back to basics by flying into that hole?'

She stared steadily at him, though her gaze seemed focused inward. Eventually, she took a deep breath, puffed her cheeks out, released her breath and said with quiet simplicity, 'I buried my father last week and now I need an escape. You've just given me that. Thanks. I'll be seeing you.'

Then she slipped into the car and drove off in a cloud of dust, leaving him alone in a silence broken only by the church bells pealing out over Greenbelt.

Chapter Sixteen

Still in a state of shock and grief over her father's suicide, Clare was also in a state of emotional turmoil over her growing feelings for Tony Rydell. Only he could crowd out of her mind the awful events of the past few days: the discovery of her father's body, the reluctant acceptance of his death, the awful business of arranging the funeral and, finally, the grim ceremony itself. She had endured it automatically, in shock's merciful trance, but was haunted constantly by the same recurring images of death and only escaped them when thinking about Tony.

'I don't understand it,' she confessed to her best friend, Nicola Tyler, when they had lunch in the baroque splendour of Clyde's, at Tyson's Corner, Virginia. 'He isn't my kind at all. He's the kind that should drive me mad. And yet I can't get him out of my mind and keep wanting to see him. It just doesn't make sense.'

'That's your weakness,' Nicola replied. 'You believe in commonsense. Then, when that somehow eludes you, you don't know how to deal with it. Put it down to infatuation, honey, and pay your dues to the devil.'

'Oh, God, don't even say that! It can't possibly be that. More likely I'm just compensating for the loss of my father. I need someone, something new, in my life. I think that explains it.'

Nicola's laughter was raucous. '*That's* a good one!' she exclaimed. 'If you can't find one reason, you'll find another. So why not Jack Douglas? Why didn't the death of your father push you closer to *him*?'

'He isn't *new*,' Clare responded, feeling distinctly foolish. 'Because he's part of the life I was living before the death of my father. Tony Rydell represents something *different*, for sure, and I think that's why, even if he's not my type, I've got him under my skin.'

Nicola grinned, shaking her head, and said, 'Mind if I smoke?'

'Of course not.'

Nicola lit a cigarette, exhaled a cloud of smoke, and smiled winningly at a couple of the well-dressed men in the expensive restaurant. She was big-boned, twice divorced and filthy rich,

'Why don't you just admit you've got the hots for him?' she asked.

'I don't believe in having the hots, as you crassly put it. I don't think of him that way.'

'I'll bet,' Nicola said.

While her worldly friend stared sardonically at her, Clare couldn't help but remember her meeting with Tony at NASA-Goddard. He had convinced her of his theory - and, if it was true, it was history's greatest story - and yet, even knowing that, it was *him*, much more than his work, that she was constantly dwelling upon. She was certainly getting her priorities mixed up and this knowledge disturbed her.

'Talking about the hots,' Nicola said, 'it's a real relief to be in this air-conditioning after being outside. This is one hell of a summer!'

'Yes,' Clare agreed, still brooding on her meeting with Tony Rydell and what he had told her. 'Too hot for comfort.'

'But not too hot for love. So what's this new man of yours like?'

'A bit rough,' Clare said without thinking. 'Well, not rough actually - more like a brilliant schoolboy. He's one of our best physicists, but says too much too loudly, and he's certainly not the most sophisticated guy you're likely to meet.'

'But cute, eh?'

Clare sighed helplessly. 'Yes, sort of.' She avoided Nicola's knowing grin by glancing around the busy restaurant and nodding at the friends and acquaintances seated at other tables. Most of those she recognised were agents from the Central Intelligence Agency headquarters at Langley, with a smattering of Pentagon and Capitol Hill politicians, as well as some wealthy Georgetown

residents out for the day. The sophisticated ambience had always appealed to Clare, but when she tried to imagine being here with Tony Rydell, she came to a blank wall. Likewise, when she thought of her home in Georgetown - that lovely Federal-period house that now seemed so large, empty and haunting - she could not imagine entertaining Rydell there. He wouldn't feel comfortable. She and Rydell came from very different worlds and that's all there was to it.

'You'd probably like him,' she told Nicola. 'You'd probably find him unpredictable, entertaining, and a little bit rough around the edges. Just your type, really.'

'Are you accusing me of liking rough trade, Clare?'

'You know what I mean.'

Nicola laughed again and glanced around the restaurant, trying to pick out her old flames or set her eyes on a new one. Born and bred in Georgetown to wealthy, party-loving parents, she had inherited their lust for pleasure and devoted most of her days to having a good time. Though overweight from eating and drinking, she was a natural sensualist and had led a life of what seemed, at least to Clare, to be good-natured, life-affirming chaos. Inheriting her wealth, she had only married wealthy men, but she had always gone for the rougher kind - self-made tycoons and entrepreneurs - which had virtually guaranteed violent quarrels, emotional reconciliations, and eventual divorce. Currently between husbands (she would certainly find another), she was socializing widely and having a good time. Clare was appalled by her emotional chaos, amused by her conversation, and increasingly envious of her ability to throw herself wholeheartedly into life. Clare only wished she could do the same.

As if sensing what Clare was feeling, Nicola leaned across the table to take hold of her wrist and squeeze it affectionately.

'So how *are* you faring?' she asked with genuine concern. 'Are you able to deal with it?'

'You mean my father's death?'

'Yes.'

Clare shrugged. 'I'm okay,' she lied, still feeling like hell. 'Not great, but okay. I find the silence of the house oppressive, I have trouble sleeping at nights, and sometimes I'm haunted by the feeling that he's still in the house.'

'That's natural,' Nicola said.

'Yes, I suppose so, though it's also the worst part of it - that and the constant recollections of the previous week, which just seemed like a bad dream. I felt

better once he was buried - at least the worst of it was over - and of course I went straight back to work, to help me forget it. So, I'm okay. A bit shaky, but surviving. There's just this sudden, shocking awareness of being totally alone for the first time, an awful feeling of isolation, and that's what I have to learn to deal with, one way or the other.

'Make it the other,' Nicola said. 'This new man you have the hots for. You *do* need something different in your life and he sounds just the ticket.'

'I think he's *too* different,' Clare said.

'That difference could give you new life,' Nicola told her, 'so why not give it a try?'

'It's not my style, Nicola. Anyway, I've to get back to work now, so let's get up and go.'

Having already paid the check, they were able to leave immediately, walking around the gushing fountain, waving or smiling at friends, and then making their escape by the crowded bar facing the front door.

Outside it was hot and humid, definitely more so than usual, and as they walked to their parked cars, Clare thought of the greenhouse effect and what it was doing. It was like a bad dream, not quite real... yet the world seemed so normal.

'So what about Jack Douglas?' Nicola asked, as they were opening the doors of their respective cars, parked side by side. 'Are you still seeing him?'

'Yes. As a matter of fact, I'm going to see him right now, though this time about work.'

'Don't tell him about the other guy,' Nicola said with a broad, wicked smile as she slipped into her car. 'He might react badly.'

'There's nothing to tell him,' Clare insisted. 'I'm not *involved* with Tony Rydell.'

Nicola slammed her door shut and then rolled down her window. 'Oh, yes, you are,' she said firmly. 'You may not know it, but you are. You hardly talked about anyone else during lunch and that's not normal for you. You're infatuated, whether or not you accept it, and I'm delighted to see it.'

'I'm not listening,' Clare said, then impulsively leaned down to kiss Nicola's forehead. 'Drive carefully,' she added, straightening up. 'And let's meet again soon.'

But before she could walk away, Nicola reached out to grab her by the wrist and pull her back down again.

‘Will you take a word of advice from an old friend?’ she asked.

‘Sure.’

‘Beware of Jack Douglas. I’ve been hearing talk for months now, and I don’t think the man is what he seems.’

‘He’s always had a reputation for being ruthless,’ Clare began, ‘but that doesn’t bother - ’

‘No, Clare, it’s more than that. Rumour has it that his marriage actually broke up because of his relentless domination of his wife, which included slapping her around. Finally, she’d had enough and got out - though Jack never tells the tale that way. Also, according to Capitol Hill gossip, his political ambitions are more extreme than he lets on and have caused some concern amongst the doves in the White House and Pentagon. Reportedly, he’s obsessed with the threat of Chinese, Japanese and even European economic dominance. And that’s the word, Clare: *obsessed*.’

‘Oh, God,’ Clare said, suddenly feeling flushed. ‘I knew the President was thinking along those lines, but I didn’t believe that Jack...’

‘He has the President’s ear,’ Nicola said, ‘and whispers into it day and night.’ She tugged at Clare’s hand, wanting to gain her full attention. ‘What I’m trying to say is that Douglas isn’t what he seems. He’s a violent man who likes to control and manipulate; he’s also more virulently right wing than you’d care to imagine.’

‘Christ!’ Clare whispered.

‘So be careful, Clare, not to cross him over Tony Rydell. Because Douglas, if he decides to go for you, will go all the way. You understand?’

‘Yes, Nicola. Thanks.’

‘My pleasure, sweetheart.’

With those parting words, Nicola reversed out of her parking space and drove off.

Clare followed Nicola out of the parking lot and then headed for Capitol Hill and the Old Executive Office building, west of the White House, driving through the dazzling light of a premature summer and unusual heat wave. The closer she came to Washington DC, the more nervous she felt - not only because of what Nicola had told her, but also because she knew that Jack Douglas wouldn’t be pleased when he heard what she wanted. He would think she had gone mad.

Once parked under the massive French Second Empire edifice that had formerly been the State, War, and Navy Department building, but now, as the Old Executive Office building, accommodated a presidential 'hideaway' suite and most of the President's White House staff, she tried to conquer her nervousness by avoiding her own office and walking resolutely to the Department of Management and Budget, then into Douglas's surprisingly spartan office. He was sitting behind his expansive desk, leaning back in his chair, tapping his perfect teeth with a pencil and not smiling at all.

'Where have *you* been?' he asked her.

'Pardon?' She glanced automatically at her wristwatch, checking if she was late.

'I don't mean this morning,' Jack clarified. 'I mean all of the past two weeks.'

She knew what he meant and was instantly embarrassed. Then, recalling what Nicola had told her, she felt a spasm of resentment, perhaps even a touch of fear.

'Are you going to ask me to sit down?'

'Sorry,' he said. 'Pull up a chair.' As she sat in front of the desk, he stopped tapping his teeth with the pencil and gazed steadily at her. 'I haven't seen you since the funeral and it's bothered me greatly. Particularly since I've left messages on your answerphone and haven't had a single call back.'

'I thought you'd have understood,' she replied. 'Some things you have to face alone - and this was my time for it.'

It was a lie, of course. Or at least half a lie. She *had* wanted to be alone, to adjust to her father's passing, but she had also deliberately avoided Jack because of Tony Rydell.

'And that was it?'

'Yes, Jack, that was it. And I don't think you should even have raised the question. After all, you've no claims on me.'

'No,' he said, 'no claims at all. It's just that I expected you to lean on me during this bad time.'

'I'm not the sort to lean on anyone, as you know.'

'I just forgot,' he replied, then he sighed and let his chair fall forward until he was leaning over the desk, his chin in his clasped hands. In doing this, he moved out of the sunlight and became less resplendent. 'So why am I blessed today, Clare? You *did* say it was business.'

Clare took a deep breath. 'It's about Tony Rydell's theory,' she said as calmly as she could manage, 'concerning the depletion of the ozone over the Antarctic.'

Jack's face hardened immediately. 'Yes, I remember. The theory you were willing to believe on his word alone. I *should* remember, since that's when I last saw you, except for the funeral. We had a fight, did we not?'

'Please, Jack, let's stick to business.'

'Okay. Give me business. You were going to visit him and cross-check his data. I take it you did so.'

'Yes.'

'And?'

'I'm forced to conclude that what he suggests is substantially correct.'

Jack wasn't thrilled, but he straightened up a little; not back into that halo of sunlight, but far enough to at least let her see that his face had suddenly turned into granite. 'And the data's in that file on your lap?'

'Yes.' She handed the file to him. 'You can have it cross-checked again, but I'm willing to stand by my findings. Rydell's not talking nonsense. The ozone is being depleted at a terrifying rate, and unless we find out what's doing it and somehow stop it, we're going to have a major global crisis within the next two years.'

Douglas looked at the closed file as if it contained a bomb, then gently placed it on his desk without opening it.

'I'll certainly have it cross-checked,' he said. 'I'm sure we'll find a rational explanation. But on the unlikely assumption that you're correct, what do you want?'

'Since it's vital that we find out what's devouring the ozone in the stratosphere, I want you to finance another airborne expedition. And since, as the report reveals, the mostly likely cause of the problem is a plasmode or radiobe form of life, the solution can only be found through biotechnology, which is my special field.'

'You want to go with him.'

'Yes,' Clare confessed.

As if trying to control his temper, Douglas covered his face with his hands, remained like that for a short while, then removed his hands and stared angrily at her. His eyes, always bright with cold intelligence, now looked like cut diamonds.

'Are you losing your mind?' he said. 'You *know* that's not possible. NASA's already overdrawn on its credit and is no longer popular with the administration. As for this extraordinary theory, how can I take it to the President? He's already

wary of your insistence that we dramatically reduce the production of anything involving CFCs. Now you want me to go back to him with the possibility of an *alien entity* up there. I can't do this, Clare - and probably wouldn't if I could. I think the whole thing's cock-eyed, I'm convinced your judgement is askew, and I'm not sure if it's being caused by your father's death or something to do with you and that lunatic, Rydell... Is this *personal*, Clare?'

She felt that he had slapped her face. It was the shock of the truth. Humiliated, confused, ashamed even as she spoke, she spat out, 'Of course it's not personal! How dare you even imply it! We're faced with the possibility of alien contact and you're saying it's *personal!*'

'Contact with what? With some kind of cosmic dust? Do you want me to take *that* to the President and keep my face straight?'

'Yes, dammit, I do!'

'Well, I won't do it, Clare. I won't encourage your foolishness. What we have here is the theory of a physicist noted for controversy; and, even worse, a theory supported by a woman formerly noted for her scientific objectivity. But you're not being objective in this case.'

'Examine that file, damn you!'

'You're not being objective because you *want* to believe this theory and have almost certainly, in your cross-checking, made only the selection of facts that will support your belief. A lot of scientists do it, Clare, when they become too emotionally involved with their work. And in my view, given my knowledge of you, this is just what you're doing. You *want* to believe Rydell. That alone will distort your judgement. And since you're so bright, you'll be able to present a case that would take us months to crack. So I'll have your file cross-checked, but I'll ensure that it's done properly, and in the meantime, you'll just have to wait and hope we find in your favour. This should take at least three months.'

'We can't afford three months!'

'Nothing is that urgent, Clare, and you damn well know it. Now is there anything else?'

She was shocked into silence and just stared at him, feeling helpless, defeated by his insight, until the anger that was hiding her embarrassment made her walk to the door. She stopped there, burning up, almost out of control, then turned back to glare at him and say, 'Damn you! This is just irresponsible!'

'*I'm* not irresponsible, Clare. *You're* the irresponsible one. You didn't want to get married because you didn't want to be enslaved by your emotions or

demeaned by dependence. You took pride in your emotional health and in your pure, scientific objectivity. I admired you for that, Clare. It was something rare in a woman. But now you're making a fool of yourself, because you've let your personal interests interfere with your work. You're obviously besotted with Rydell and you're behaving irrationally.'

'Go to hell,' Clare replied, humiliated, blind with rage, feeling stripped bare and loathing him for his perception. Then she left his office, slamming the door behind her, and hurried out of the building.

She had to call Tony.

Chapter Seventeen

Tony was in the middle of a domestic crisis when Clare called him.

With his mother and the Mexican housekeeper gone, he had to deal with the boys on his own and he wasn't really cut out for the job. To make matters worse, ever since the brief visit by Suzy, the boys had become more resentful of him, often blaming him for her departure and insisting that they wanted her back. Tony told them it wasn't possible, that Suzy didn't want to come back, but that only made them more resentful and rebellious.

Don had taken to sulking in his room, refusing to eat, and bullying his younger brother, Ronnie, who, in his turn, began wetting his bed, complaining constantly of various illness, and playing truant from school. The school complained about Ronnie's truancy; the cops twice brought Don in after catching him vandalising the flower beds in Greenbelt Park. So, in their different ways, the boys had become near impossible. When not fighting each other, they were quarrelling with the harassed Tony - and it was in the middle of such a quarrel that Clare rang with her bad news.

'You're going to school!' Tony was bawling at the sobbing Ronnie while the sullen-faced Don played with a yo-yo and studied the TV. 'Don't tell me you've got pains in your goddamned stomach! You've pulled that one too often!'

'It's *true* this time! My stomach hurts!'

'Crap!' Don exclaimed.

'Shut up, Don!' Tony said as the telephone started ringing. 'This is none of

your business. You can switch off that TV and stop playing with that yo-yo and pick up your schoolbooks and leave right now while I sort this kid out.' And then he picked up the telephone.

'I've got a headache,' Don said.

'You're a liar!' Ronnie shouted. 'You're just saying that 'cause I've got stomach pains. You always copy what *I* do!'

'Shut up the both of you. Yes?' Tony said into the telephone.

'Tony?'

'Yeah, right. Don, turn off that TV!'

'This is Clare.'

'Clare?'

'Yes, Clare Holton.'

'Sorry, Clare. Hold on a moment. Let me fix something here.' He grabbed a telephone directory and hurled it across the room at Don; it bounced off his shoulder and hit the TV set, making him jump up and switch the set off and, grabbing his schoolbooks from the table, hurry out of the house, followed immediately by the galvanised Ronnie, who was not without commonsense. 'Okay, Clare,' Tony said, 'I'm with you. I'm all ears. How did it go?'

'He didn't buy it,' she told him.

'Who?' he asked, not concentrating, still agitated because of the boys' behaviour and observing them through the front window, quarrelling violently as they waited for the bus that would take them to school.

'Jack Douglas. At the Department of Management and Budget. He refused flatly to mount another airborne expedition. He was adamant, Tony.'

Outside, little Ronnie lunged at the bigger Don and started swinging wild punches at him while Don held him off. Tony's instinct was to bawl abuse at them, but the windows were closed.

'What the hell do you mean, he was adamant? Didn't you show him the file?'

'Of course I showed him the file! I gave him the file, I told him what was in it, and he said he would have it thoroughly checked, but that it would take at least three months in all.'

'Three months!'

'He also insisted that there had to be a more rational explanation than the one we'd suggested, and that I was letting my scientific objectivity be distorted by some kind of wishful thinking. I had a terrible time there.'

The bus pulled up outside. Don pushed Ronnie away from it. When Ronnie

rolled on the lawn and jumped back up, screaming something, Tony felt like screaming as well, but started shouting instead.

'So what?' he shouted at Clare. 'So you had a terrible time! You shouldn't have walked out of his goddamned office until he'd agreed! You *know* how important this is! You should have impressed that upon him. How the hell do you have the nerve to ring me and say he just didn't buy it?'

'Hey, hold *on* a minute, Tony!'

'You should have told him he *has* to buy it! You're supposed to know how to talk to those guys, so why didn't you do it?'

'I tried my best, damn you!'

'Then go back and try again!'

'There's no point. Even the President's against it! What can I do against that?'

'Go back and argue, for chrissakes!'

'I *did* argue! He was adamant! And your involvement in this matter didn't help me, since he thinks you're a dreamer.'

'That goddamned UFO business.'

'Your scandal, not mine.'

'So you let him use that against our case and you didn't kick back.'

'I did!'

'Not enough.'

'Damn you, Tony – '

'I won't accept this.'

'You can't fight Jack Douglas *and* the White House.'

'You can't, but I can.'

Tony slammed the phone down. He watched the school bus moving off. Ronnie was flopping into a seat inside, well away from his brother. The bus disappeared and Tony sighed with relief, then he poured himself a cup of coffee and turned on the TV set. What he saw didn't register. He simply wanted the flickering image. He could hardly believe what he'd said to Clare and felt ashamed of himself.

It was because of the kids. It was because of all the hassle. It was because he was obsessed with what was devouring the ozone layer and, to his astonishment, also increasingly obsessed with Clare Holton. He couldn't accept that he'd fallen for her, felt confused and out of his depth, and so he'd flown off the handle. She'd tried to help, and he'd slapped her face in return.

Pretty neat, Mr Rydell.

Yet he had meant one thing: he wouldn't accept their refusal. Politicians only cared for the present, for their own term in office, and were ruthless in turning their backs on anything that posed a threat to it. That's what was going down here with that bastard, Jack Douglas: he was supporting a President whose sole concern at the moment was to keep the US economy healthy during his own term in office, irrespective of the long-term cost to the country, let alone the whole world. For that reason he would ignore the increasing use of products that released CFCs into the atmosphere... and for that reason he would actually suppress the knowledge that an unknown factor, possibly an alien life-form, was feeding off the ozone in the stratosphere.

Jack Douglas, on behalf of the President, would ruthlessly bury what could be the most important discovery in history.

If he, Tony Rydell, didn't do something to stop him.

Tony stared at the TV set, thinking of what he had said to Clare, understanding that what he was about to do would give her even more trouble... But he just had to do it.

Ashamed, but grimly determined, he picked up the telephone.

Chapter Eighteen

Suzy couldn't sleep at nights without Joe Wheeler beside her. She wasn't in love with him, at least not as she recalled the feeling; it was more that she needed to be filled up to help her forget. She wished she'd never gone back to Maryland to see Tony and the kids, to be humiliated and hurt and forced to hurry away in shame, and now she needed to be filled up by Joe Wheeler in order to forget it, at least for a while. You could do that with sex.

She liked Joe. He was kind and considerate and filled her up beautifully. She just didn't love him.

'Thing is,' she told her mother, 'that he gives me what Tony didn't - a little love and a lot of attention and respect for my person. A woman needs that.'

'Tony gave you that,' her mother said, preparing dinner at the kitchen table. 'He just did it in a different way. He wasn't obvious about it, since he's not the obvious type, and he took it for granted that you'd know and wouldn't worry

about it. He's always been a man involved with his work, but that don't make him neglectful.'

'Oh, *I'm* to blame, right?'

'I didn't say that, Suzy. I'm simply trying to point out that you can't compare Tony to Wheeler; that one's a married man with two kids and important work, while the other's single, runs a bar in town, and has all the time he needs to be attentive. That's all I'm sayin'.'

'Joe's busy as well, Mom.'

'Only with his other women.'

'We're not married. He's entitled to play the field.'

'You sure hold yourself cheap that way.'

'I just wanna have some fun. I don't wanna be involved. I've had enough of involvement with Tony and now I just want my freedom. I can have that with Joe.'

Her mother sighed. 'Here comes your father. Let's change the subject.'

'Yeah, Mom, let's do that.'

Her father came through the door, bringing rays of sunlight with him, was framed there in the sunlight as he kicked the earth from his boots, looking like a big tree with roots as he took his boots off. Then he entered the kitchen, a big man somehow diminished, and wiped the sweat from his face with grubby hands as he took a deep breath.

'It's still hot as hell out there,' he said. 'I just don't believe it.'

He didn't smile at either of them. He'd forgotten how to do that. He just went to the fridge and pulled out a can of beer and cracked it and drank it real quick, like it might be his last. Then he gasped and wiped his lips with his free hand and took a seat by the table. He glanced at the food his wife was making, but his eyes had a dulled look.

'If we don't get rain soon,' he said, 'we're not gonna make it.'

That's all he talked about these days - the state of his crops - and it made him seem less than he had been when she'd first come back here. Then he'd been just like the country, big and healthy, filled with life; but now, when he complained about the weather, he was somehow diminished.

'Crops is dyin',' he said. 'Too much sunshine, no rain. Ain't never had a summer like this one an' never want one again. It ain't natural, I tell you. There's a plague on this goddamned land. This was once the bread basket of America and now it's a dust bowl. I don't know what we're headed for.'

Suzy loved him, but he'd changed. The changing landscape had changed him. Now, when Suzy looked out her window, she saw what he was talking about. The greens and yellows had turned to brown, the sun had painted the blue sky white, and the dust, which in the daylight drifted lazily in the breeze, was so dense it even obscured the stars at night and made them less magical.

She could no longer recapture her childhood.

What had been, would be no more.

'It'll get better,' she said, trying to make her father smile. 'Any day now, you'll hear a clap of thunder and the land will be drenched. It'll all come out right then.'

'If that happens,' her father said without a smile, 'it'll be Noah's flood. The land's cursed. I can tell that.'

The conversations were all like this, filled with gloom and foreboding, and they drove Suzy out of the house and back into Joe's bed. He always welcomed her with open arms, big arms, the muscles bulging, and lay beside her, on top of her, below her, every which way, helping her to lose her bad thoughts and feel valued again.

'You're a treasure,' Joe told her. 'Your skin shines in the moonlight. I just have to feel your warm breath to get hard again. I wanna make you breathe quicker then, and see your pretty tits stiffen. I wanna make you part of me.'

'I believe you,' she replied, ''cause I can feel you. That's why I sound breathless.'

'Jesus, Suzy, let's do it!'

She loved him in heat, when he could hardly stop himself. She liked to spread across the bed like a sheet and let him be her blanket.

You could do that when you had air-conditioning, which her own bedroom didn't have.

'It's so hot there,' she told him. 'That house is like a furnace. I like it a lot better here, with the air-conditioning an' all. You can't enjoy this in the heat. You have to be cool to get hot. When you're hot - I mean hot all the time - you just want to cool down. That's why I like it here. It's so cool and you make me burn. We lie on crisp sheets and roll about and leave 'em soaked with our sweat. I feel so alive here.'

'What about me? Do I get credit?'

'You're some kinda man, Joe.'

He had his vanity, of course, but she didn't mind that at all. He was fairly

modest with it, just begged now and then, and she only had to feed him some sugar to make his tail start wagging again. He was decent, but not too bright, thoughtful, but not too sensitive, but bright enough, and with enough sensitivity, to give her more than his body. He took her out a fair bit, got her into the fresh air - trips along the river on the *Mississippi Belle*, the Boone and Scenic Valley Railroad, thrills and spills in Adventureland - but he also drew her out of herself by letting her talk and by talking back and not acting deaf. He was surprising that way, as well.

'It's all changed,' she told him. 'It's nothing like I remember. When I came back, I thought it was the same, but I only imagined it. Nothing lasts, that's the truth.'

'It *was* the same,' he told her. 'It's all changed since you got here. This place has changed more in the last few months than it's done in my lifetime. It's the weather, honey. We've never had weather like it. The crops are dying, the land's turning to dust, and the sun just gets hotter. This summer's lastin' forever.'

'I think my father's farm's in trouble.'

'A lot of farms have already closed.'

'If the farms close, this place will be hell on Earth.'

'You can bet on it,' Joe said.

Sometimes they made love in the fields, in the tall, dust-covered grass, and then lay side by side, their clothes a mess, to drink beer and talk even more. It was something she needed.

'I still miss them,' she told him.

'Your kids?'

'Yeah, that's right. When I have you inside me, I feel good, free as air, but when you stop, I think about them again and come over all guilty.'

'You'll go back to them in time.'

'I had my chance and refused. Now, if I try to go back, I think Tony might stop me.'

'You could be surprised,' Joe said.

'I'm too scared to take the chance. I don't think I could bear the humiliation of being worked over twice.'

'Tony sure was rough on you. I remember. You were crying.'

'He made me feel that I'd behaved like some kinda whore. Like I'd abused my own kids.'

'He was just angry, Suzy.'

‘No excuse.’

‘I think it is. When we’re angry, or even feeling betrayed, we do all sorts of dumb things.’

‘Tony’s not dumb.’

‘But he’s angry and feels betrayed. That’s exactly how you felt when you left him, so you should understand that.’

Suzy sighed and wiped the dust from her skirt and stood up in the dead grass.

‘Yeah,’ she said. ‘I see what you mean... but I still can’t go back. I won’t risk being rejected again. I couldn’t take it a second time. Come on, let’s get going.’

Joe drove her to Des Moines, where she picked up her own car and headed back to the farm, driving through the afternoon’s dazzling light and clouds of fine, drifting dust. The fields rolled away to the horizon and merged with the silvery sky, but the colours of the landscape had been bleached out, leaving it ominous. Suzy hardly recognised it, kept imagining she was somewhere else, and was glad to see the old, white-walled farmhouse rising out of approaching fields. She turned into the driveway, parked outside the house, noticed that her father’s truck wasn’t there and then went inside. Her mother was wearing her apron and preparing the dinner.

‘Dad still out?’ Suzy asked her.

‘Yeah,’ her mother said. ‘But he should here any minute now. He’s always real punctual.’

There was a pitcher of chilled lemonade on the table and Suzy poured herself some.

‘Had a good day?’ her mother asked.

‘Yeah,’ Suzy said. ‘Terrific. We cooled down by taking the boat along the river, then went for a picnic. Now I feel parched, but healthy.’

She drank some lemonade and it felt good, wetting her dry throat.

‘And you?’ she asked.

Her mother shrugged. ‘Same as always. I just felt the heat a lot more. It must be my age.’

‘It’s hot,’ Suzy said. ‘Hot as hell. Even *I* feel it these days.’ She glanced at the TV. The news was showing stormy weather. Europe was being hammered by storms and floods of unprecedented ferocity, with many lives lost. From where Suzy stood, in the kitchen’s claustrophobic heat, it didn’t seem possible. ‘The world’s weather’s going crazy,’ she said.

‘It sure is,’ her mother said.

The truck pulled up outside and Suzy looked at the front door. She was waiting for her father's entrance, that oak-like presence in striated sunlight, and when he didn't materialise as expected, she went to the open door and looked out through the wire mesh.

Her father had walked away from his truck and was at the far end of the lawn, kneeling in the shadows by the edge of the cornfield and scooping the earth up in his right hand.

Suzy went out, down the steps, across the lawn, and reached her father as he opened his right hand. He let the dry earth fall out between his fingers, then turned to look up at her.

She saw in his deeply shadowed eyes the gleaming pain of betrayal.

'You were right,' he said. 'The land sometimes turns on you. We're finished. We're done for.'

Then his eyes filled with tears.

Chapter Nineteen

When Clare heard the tone of Jack Douglas' voice she knew that something was wrong.

'Please come to my office right away,' he said with no preamble over the phone. 'And I *mean* right away. Drop whatever you're doing and come here now. This subject can't wait.'

He dropped his phone before Clare could reply, leaving her stunned.

To get where she was going she had to pass the packed, busy offices of the Vice President, assistants of the President and Presidential commissions, and by the time she reached Jack's office, she was breathless. She was also filled with the uncomfortable conviction that she was going to see the side of Jack Douglas that Nicola had warned her about.

When she entered his office, he was restlessly pacing the floor, his face as grim as she had ever seen it. When he saw her, he stopped, glared at her, then picked a copy of the *Washington Post* off his desk and shoved it brusquely into her hands.

'Have you seen this?' he asked her.

An article had been encircled by a black felt marker pen, with what was

obviously Jack's angry exclamation mark slashed beside it. The article had been written by Art Tabori, the same journalist who had hassled her at the American Geophysical Union in Baltimore, and sensationally entitled, THE GHOST IN THE OZONE HOLE.

Her stomach turned when she saw that, but she felt even worse when she read the article, which was a thorough, reasonable summary of everything that she and Rydell knew about the ozone hole over the Antarctic and the 'something unknown' that was devouring the ozone at a frightening rate. The article concluded with the information that the complete obliteration of the ozone layer would now take place within five years, instead of decades, and lead to an unprecedented global crisis, including flood and famine; that the only way to prevent this from happening would be to discover what was devouring the ozone and somehow counteract it; and that the United States government, concerned only with the immediate cost, was refusing to mount a vitally necessary second Airborne Antarctic Ozone Experiment.

Clare's hands were shaking when she placed the newspaper back on Jack's desk and then faced his angry gaze.

'Did *you* speak to that journalist?' he asked her.

'No,' she replied truthfully.

'Then it had to be that bastard, Rydell. No one else knows about this.'

Clare felt hot with guilt and rage, because she knew that Douglas was correct and that it had to be Tony. She had been angry with him anyway, because of his ungrateful outburst over the phone, made worse by his hanging up on her; but now, knowing what he had done, she felt used and betrayed.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I didn't have anything to do with this, but I suppose I'm responsible.'

'Damned right, you're responsible. If you hadn't encouraged that lunatic, he wouldn't have done this.'

'I didn't encourage him.'

'You lent your support to his crackpot theory. In doing that, you encouraged him to think he can do what he likes. Now, in doing this, he's virtually blackmailed our department into financing another airborne experiment. Thanks a lot, Clare!'

He turned away from her, marched around his desk, fell heavily into his chair, then glared fiercely at her.

'You're going to finance the expedition?' she asked him.

‘We don’t have a choice. Rydell knew just what he was doing when he blew that story to the *Washington Post*. He’s embarrassed the President, as well as this department, and now we either finance his expedition or stand accused of cynical neglect.’

He kept opening and closing his right hand, as if wanting to slap the desk - or someone’s face. His gaze remained coldly furious.

‘You think *I’m* ruthless? Then what about your precious Rydell? He’s outfoxed us all, the ruthless bastard, and now he’s got what he wants. Thanks for being so cooperative, Clare. I’m sure Rydell loves you for it.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t think he would...’

‘Just remember this.’ Douglas jabbed his finger at her. ‘I don’t know what it is between you and that damned physicist, but he *is* a troublemaker, he *has* caused a furore here, and *you're* now implicated with him in this sordid affair. He’s won this first round, but the President isn’t happy - not with him and not with you - and *I’m* certainly not going to forget what he’s done with your help. He’s got permission for his expedition and you can go along with him, but if nothing beneficial springs from it, God help the pair of you. Do you understand, Clare?’

‘Yes, Jack, I understand.’

He stared searchingly at her, his gaze relentless, then asked bluntly, ‘Are you having an affair with this guy?’

‘No,’ she replied, more urgently than she’d intended.

‘Are you going to have an affair with him?’

‘Of course not,’ she said.

‘I don’t believe you,’ Jack said, ‘so here’s some advice for you... You’ve finally let your emotions take precedence over your intellect and already the results have been disastrous. Think about it before you get more seriously involved. Now get out of my office.’

‘Jack, please...’

‘Just get out.’

She did as she was told, feeling shocked and humiliated, at once wounded by Jack’s rejection and outraged at Tony’s betrayal, torn between the two men in her life, between her mind and her heart.

Hurrying back to her own office, she gave in to her rage, which protected her from the shame, and dwelt with an almost murderous intensity on what Tony had done. He could not have failed to know that in giving their confidential information to the *Washington Post* he’d be betraying her trust, exposing her to

shame and humiliation, and possibly even damaging her career - and yet he'd gone on and done it. Yes, he was ruthless.

Convinced that her doubts about him had been confirmed, she stomped into her own office, determined to have her revenge. Sitting behind her desk, she picked up the phone and dialled his office at NASA-Goddard. His voice rang in her ear.

'Rydell here.'

'Tony, it's Clare.'

There was what she assumed was a nervous pause at the other end of the line, before he said, 'Oh. You read the newspapers?'

'Yes,' she said.

'I had to do it, Clare. I didn't want to, but I had to. This is too big an item to be buried, so there wasn't a choice. Don't be mad at me, Clare.'

'I'm not mad,' she lied, trying to sound as excited as possible. 'I think it was a great idea. In fact, I'm ringing to tell you it worked. I've just come from Douglas' office and he told me that the expedition's been approved. He was hopping mad, but clearly didn't have a choice. The expedition's going to be financed and you and I will go with it. I'm so excited, I can hardly wait to go. Congratulations, Tony.'

'Gee, that's terrific news,' he replied. 'Thanks for calling to tell me. And I'm sorry about how I spoke to you the other day. I mean, I wasn't myself that day. I was having some trouble with the kids and...'

'Don't apologise,' she said, sounding as pleasant as possible. 'I wasn't bothered at all. I know the kind of strain you must be under. Anyway, why not get together to celebrate your success and maybe talk about what we plan to do once we're in the Antarctic?'

'Oh, sure,' he said. 'That sounds terrific. What's your suggestion?'

Thinking it typical of him that he'd ask *her* to arrange something, but in this case finding it convenient, she said, 'Are you free this evening?'

'I can get away, I think.'

'Then why not come over to my place, about eight, and we'll have some drinks and... see where the evening leads us?'

Having deliberately added a sensually teasing element to the last phrase, she wasn't surprised when he paused again, before saying, 'Yeah, that sounds terrific. Where do you live?' When she gave him her address, he said, 'Georgetown! I might have known! Trust you to live with the nobs. Do I have to

enter through the servants' quarters?'

'Just ring the front-door bell.'

'Okay, then, I'll see you at eight.'

'I look forward to it.'

She put the phone down with a smile, now genuinely looking forward to the evening, and spent the rest of the afternoon at her desk, trying to distract herself with work while contemplating revenge.

That evening, she drank a bourbon while in the bath, then dressed as sexily as possible, wanting to tempt Rydell as much as she could before slapping him down. She had sensed that he was attracted to her, no matter how his aggression hid it, and she was determined to use that against him when he came for his good time. She felt angry, vengeful and *very* feminine. She really wanted to hurt him.

As usual, he did not arrive on time. In fact, he was forty-five minutes late, by which time Clare had drank two more glasses of bourbon and was feeling drunk. Tony seemed distracted. Instead of being seduced by the sight of her, he wiped sweat from his forehead, ran his fingers through his untidy hair, cast his eyes around the living room and gave a low whistle.

'Oh, boy,' he said, 'you really live in style! This sure is some joint.'

'You're late,' she said, already starting to lose the seductive poise she'd been practising. 'By forty-five minutes.'

'Yeah, right.' He avoided her gaze, taking in the decor. 'Sorry about that. I had a bit of trouble with the kids, but it's all sorted out now.'

'Trouble? What trouble?'

'Now that Suzy's gone, they resent me going out in the evenings. They say they'll get molested or murdered and it'll be on my conscience. A real cute pair I've got there.'

'Can't you get someone to look after them?'

He finally looked at her, at the bourbon in her hand, and she hastily placed it back on the table as he said, 'Well, it's been a bit difficult, you know? I mean I've tried it once or twice, but it doesn't seem to work out. No one's ever returned for a second bout - not even my mother, though I'm hoping she'll change her mind soon. Am I allowed to *sit down*?'

God, he was rude! And his children sounded like little horrors. A case of 'like father, like son', all happy in their menagerie.

'Don't bother,' she said as coldly as she could manage. 'You'll only have to get up again.'

'*What*? I thought we were having drinks and a talk. Maybe even a meal. Why the hell can't I sit down?'

He was trying to be offhand, but instead he wasn't sure how to behave. It made him more appealing to her, even though she was angry. For the first time since she had known him, he seemed insecure, almost like a teenager, and she felt a rush of warm feelings that she had to suppress.

'You're not having a drink, a talk or even a meal,' she informed him. 'I've only brought you all this way to tell you exactly what I think of you - and that isn't much. I didn't think much of you originally, but I certainly didn't think you'd be as self-centerd as you've turned out to be... Excuse me. I have to have a drink. Just stand there and wait awhile.'

She picked up her bourbon, had a sip and placed the glass back on the table

while Tony licked his dry lips.

'You're a shit, Mr Rydell. A regular little shit. That's the first time I've sworn in my life. I trust it lends the word extra weight.'

'It sure does,' Tony said.

Clare studied him in bewilderment, wondering why he had obsessed her, since in truth he was too short, overweight, with unhealthy skin, his brown hair and beard equally untidy, his clothes not in the best possible taste. Yet undeniably, even as she raged against him, she felt herself succumb to him.

'And *why* are you a shit? Because you don't *give* a shit! Not about me, probably not about your family, and certainly not about much outside of your work. You only care about what you want, not about how you get it. You don't care about other people's feelings - you hardly know they exist. You're rude, aggressive, unpunctual and inconsiderate, a dishevelled, scatter-brained man with no sense of morality - and that makes you a shit.'

'Are you finished? Am I allowed to sit down now?'

He was trying to be flippant, but it didn't quite come off. He looked pale and the hurt showed in his face as he took a step forward. Clare was held by his brightening gaze, transfixed by his intensity, and then realised that her anger was a futile attempt to stifle the growing feelings she had for him.

'No, damn it, I'm *not* finished! And you're not allowed to sit down! You'll stand there like a good little boy until I tell you otherwise.'

'Why?'

'Because I despise you. Because you betrayed my trust. Because apart from being rude and ungrateful and thoughtless, you showed indifference to my position and the damage your ploy might cause when you gave my information to the press to suit your own ends.'

'You've no proof of that, Clare!

'*What*?'

'You've no proof. Art Tabori didn't say where he obtained his information - and believe me, he won't say.'

'It could only have been you. When I phoned you today, you admitted that you'd given that interview.'

'That doesn't necessarily mean that I passed on your confidential information.'

'If not you, then who?'

'There are industrial spies, Clare. There are hackers who get into computers and steal the material. Have you thought about that?'

‘It was you and damned well you know it, so don’t try denying it.’

‘It *could* have been a hacker and I could be as innocent as a turkey, plucked clean for Thanksgiving. The fact that Jack Douglas has *accused* me of doing it, doesn’t constitute proof. So I’m denying it, Clare. And since no one can blame you without proof, I didn’t betray you. All I did was get you what you wanted: that trip to the Antarctic. Now do I get to sit down and have that drink or do I get hung unjustly?’

She stared at him, amazed, taken aback by his cheek, then a bubble of mirth burst inside her as he stepped closer to her.

‘You’re outrageous,’ she whispered.

He took another step closer, leaving only inches between them. She felt his body’s heat, the electric charge of his secret longing, and she suddenly brimmed over with the emotions she had tried to suppress. Tony’s eyes were bright and glistening, as if about to shed tears, and she realised that she had shared one thing with him: the fear of feeling too deeply. Now she let that fear go and felt it taking wing, releasing her, leaving her unencumbered by doubt and ripe to receive him.

She reached out instinctively, hardly knowing she was doing so, to touch the light that glowed beneath his skin and illuminated his features. He closed his eyes and she kissed his eyelids, his forehead, his nose and lips, then felt his hands sliding down her spine as his body pressed into her.

She didn’t remember what happened next. Most of the details were vague. She only knew that her clothing was stripped off her on the bed to which, by some magical means, they had painlessly travelled.

‘Oh, God,’ she whispered breathlessly in his ear, ‘I just don’t believe this!’

He didn’t reply - at least, not immediately. He was too busy beside her, above her, inside her, making love as if he knew her instinctively and could make her flesh sing. And while her flesh sang, she purred, stretched herself, coiled about him, and finally lost her senses in a spasm that seemed to go on forever.

Recovering, but still breathless, her emotions in disarray, she kept her eyes closed and traced the contours of his face with her fingers, trying to learn more about him. His presence filled the darkness behind her closed eyes and made her feel whole.

‘You don’t have to believe anything,’ he said. ‘You just go with the flow.’

Those words set her free.

Chapter Twenty

Rydell and Clare were in Punta Arenas, Chile, for three days before the converted DC-8 airliner had been prepared for its flight. To Tony's disgust, Dwight refused to let him or Clare take the single-pilot ER-2 research plane because of Tony's officially reported 'inexplicable behavioural patterns' during his previous solo flight through the top of the ozone hole. Instead, he and Clare would journey through the bottom of the ozone layer, with a group of other scientists, at an altitude of a mere twelve kilometres while another pilot ventured in the ER-2 through the top of the hole.

'Anyway,' Dwight told him, 'if you've finished with your bitching, you might as well know that the DC-8 won't be equipped for another three days, so you and Clare can enjoy the scenery and have a good time. That should settle you down, pal.'

Delighted that Dwight had picked up on the new relationship between him and Clare, and that he seemed to approve, Tony took his advice and had what amounted to a three-day vacation with Clare. At ease in the knowledge that his mother had agreed to leave Menopause Manor once more and return home to look after the two boys during his two-week absence, and transported to new heights by the love he felt for Clare, he was able to show her the surrounding countryside of magnificent lakes and mountains without suffering guilt – indeed, with a great deal of pleasure.

He and Clare shared a room in the Cabo de Hornos hotel, in the Plaza de Armas in downtown Punta Arenas. During their three days together, Tony showed her the race tracks, tennis courts and golf course of the Club Hipico, impressed her with his knowledge of Indian culture when in the Salesiano Regional Museum, and then really surprised her by showing her that he could ski when he led her down the snow-covered slopes of the Patagonian Andes, just four miles from Punta Arenas, but very much like another world.

'You're full of surprises,' she told him later, 'but skiing I still can't believe!'

'I learnt it during all those trips to Europe,' he explained, 'which were financed by NASA. I've never skied in America. I'm kind of a different person when I'm away; I wear my old skin back home.'

He was certainly a different person with Clare, less frazzled, more assured,

much closer to the self he had lost in a life shared with Suzy. He and Suzy had shared little - he had lived for his work; she had lived for pleasure - but with Clare, who superficially seemed his opposite, he felt he had found his true identity. Of course, he couldn't tell her that. It would seem too goddamned *soft*. Instead, he made her laugh a lot, slept with her, made love to her, and let her know that if he was a bit of a shambles, he was not without merit.

'You have your charming side,' she replied to that suggestion. 'It's not much, but it's something.'

Their final day of freedom was spent on a boat cruise to the San Rafael Lagoon: eerily majestic beneath imposing glaciers, the sun flashing off the blocks of broken ice drifting around the boat and turning them into fantastic colours. Later they returned to the Plaza de Armos, to its vibrancy and colour, where Clare kissed the foot of the statue of Magellan, then laughed and kissed Tony, then got mildly drunk with him at a table outside the bar, and finally fell into his arms in their bed in the hotel, where they made love, in between short bouts of sleep, for most of the night.

The next morning, when they returned to the airstrip, they were surprisingly fit.

'Welcome back, boys and girls,' Dwight greeted them. 'Now let's go to the briefing.'

Leaving his office in the prefabricated hut at the edge of the airstrip owned by the Chilean Air Force, he took them into the briefing room, which was not as full as it had been during the previous mission, with a mere half-a-dozen men, all wearing bulky flying outfits, scattered through the otherwise empty seats. When one of the men looked over his shoulder and gave Tony a wide, beaming smile, then walked up to him, he was surprised to see that it was his old buddy, Rick Polanski.

Rick slapped his large hand down on Tony's shoulder and shook him affectionately. 'Dwight kept me as a surprise for you,' he said. 'You evil sonofabitch!'

'A surprise? Evil? What *is* this?'

Polanski, a big man, looked enormous in his flying suit and actually seemed about to topple over when he chuckled with all his flab quivering. 'You evil little bastard,' he said, revising his first remark. 'I don't get the *Washington Post* in Phoenix, but I *did* get a visit from some of Jack Douglas's pals, and they

kindly brought a copy of the article to help keep me up-to-date. That was some stunt you pulled, kid.'

'I didn't have a thing to do with it,' Tony lied. 'It was some hacker, believe me.'

'Some hacker, my ass! It was you and we all know it. But Jack Douglas, who wouldn't even trust his mother, thought it *might* have been me - something you intended, no doubt.'

'Jesus, Rick, would I do that to you?'

'You would and did.' Polanski obviously admired him for it. 'Anyway, Douglas's men insinuated that any further info I picked up should be treated as classified and that any more breaches of security would bring heavy penalties raining upon my tender head. Then they escorted me to Washington DC, where, with Jack Douglas, I discussed the possibility of my coming on this expedition. So, here I am - for reasons that you're about to find out. Now let's take a seat.'

'This is Clare Holton,' Tony said. 'The scientific liaison officer between NASA and the White House, via Douglas's office, but here as a biotechnologist.'

'Pleased to meet you,' Polanski said, glancing admiringly at Clare's face, since little of her slender body could be observed inside her bulky flying suit. 'Well, it's showtime, folks.'

They took their seats as Dwight, wearing corduroy trousers, an open-necked shirt, and a leather flight jacket, walked onto the small stage and stood with his back to a large artist's impression of the mountain-shaped hole in the ozone layer. The flight paths of the ER-2 and DC-8 were both marked on the drawing, showing the former's planned flight through the top of the hole, the latter much lower down, at an altitude of twelve kilometres.

'Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,' Dwight said smoothly. 'You can all breathe easily this morning, since this particular briefing *will* be brief.'

When his small audience had stopped laughing, Dwight touched the large drawing with his pointer and gave them the same flight information that Tony had heard during his briefing with the first expedition. Then, when that was clarified, Dwight said: 'The purpose of the previous expedition was to ascertain the rate of the depletion of the ozone around that widening and deepening hole over the Antarctic. You, gentlemen - and Clare Holton, of NASA - have been brought together, under the supervision of our old friend, Rick Polanski, for a very different purpose altogether.'

Here, he paused, grinned at Tony, then continued, 'According to our reading of

the previous TOMS and SBUV experiment data, the ozone over the Antarctic is being depleted much faster than the CFCs in the stratosphere can account for. This means in effect that something else, something *unknown*, is devouring the ozone at what appears to be a dangerous rate. Since previous expeditions through the ozone hole failed to reveal anything unexpected or unknown in the stratosphere, we can only assume, at this point, that what we are faced with is an unknown organism that may take the shape of cosmic dust, bacterial spores, or charged particles, such as plasmodes or radiobes.'

'Are you talking about an *alien life form*?' Polanski asked, with deliberate, loud emphasis on his last words and a slight, victorious grin on his face.

Dwight gazed steadily at him, then returned the slight grin. 'No,' he said carefully, 'I didn't quite say that - though I'm not about to stop anyone here from forming their own opinion.'

'Gee, thanks,' Polanski said.

When the chuckles had subsided, Dwight continued, unperturbed: 'Our mission is to ascertain if anything organic - or, to please Mister Polanski, *living* - actually exists within the ozone hole. The search for cosmic dust or bacterial spores can only be done with balloons or, more likely, the exo-biology facilities of a space station; so initially you'll concentrate on the charged-particle hypothesis and try to discover whether *anything* of an unknown quality, possibly ion-based, is having an effect on the ozone hole.'

'This sounds like something alien to me,' Polanski said with another broad grin.

Dwight merely smiled slightly, then said, 'Mister Polanski is obviously enjoying himself because this is his field. Indeed, most of you are here at his recommendation. You had to wait three days for the DC-8 to be prepared because the ozone-reading instruments had to be removed from the aircraft and replaced with the instruments you know and use when trying to locate and identify unidentified flying objects. Why? Because what we're trying to find is certainly unidentified and, if it exists, of an unknown nature. If there's anything up there, whether visible or invisible, we want to hear it, see it, or at least get some kind of reading from it.'

Someone gave a low whistle, which Dwight ignored.

'If we come back with nothing,' he said, 'this project will be aborted. If, on the other hand, we get even a hint of something unknown, we'll be talking about a whole different ball game.' Saying that, he grinned at Tony and the beaming

Polanski. ‘Oh, one last thing. According to certain reports, whatever is up there, if it exists, can have strange effects on human beings, notably by creating hallucinatory states of mind. Should anything like that occur, try to stay calm, remember you’re not alone, and assess as much as possible of what you’re experiencing. Okay, any questions?’

There were no questions as such, but the half dozen scientists glanced in a bewildered manner at one another, as if they couldn’t believe what they had heard.

‘Okay,’ Dwight said, ‘let’s get going.’

Five of the other six men wearing flying outfits pushed their chairs back, then stood up and left the briefing room. The sixth man approached Dwight when he had jumped down from the platform, then stopped with him in front of Tony, Clare and Polanski.

‘You two don’t have to look so smug,’ Dwight said without malice to Tony and Polanski. Then, offering Clare an easy grin, he said, ‘You’ve got two Cheshire cats on your tail. The best of luck, Clare. Tony,’ he said, indicating the man beside him, ‘this is Group-Captain Matthew Horowitz of USAF. He’s going to make the same flight you previously made in the ER-2. You two are going to be in radio contact as you fly separately through the hole, so each of you will know what the other is experiencing at any given time. Naturally both conversations will be recorded.’

‘Sure,’ Tony said. ‘Fine. Nice to meet you, Captain.’ He introduced Clare and Polanski, then Horowitz said, ‘Dwight was telling me about your weird experience during your previous flight up there. You got any advice to pass on?’

‘Yeah,’ Tony said. ‘What you see, or what you feel, could be disorientating to you - it might even frighten the hell out of you - so just try to keep your wits about you. Try to distance yourself from the phenomenon and think about it as objectively as possible. Finally, keep reminding yourself that it’s not real and can’t possibly hurt you. We’re gonna be in radio contact anyway, and that might be a help. Okay?’

‘Okay, Tony.’

‘Well, let’s get going. There’re all waiting out there.’

‘Yeah, right,’ Dwight agreed. ‘On your way... and good luck.’

With Clare on one side of him and Polanski on the other, Tony followed the Group-Captain out onto the runway. A fierce wind was blowing and dark clouds threatened rain, so he was glad when they parted from Horowitz and made their

way into the relative shelter of the DC-8's fuselage. Its engines were already roaring as Tony followed Clare up the steps and then into the aircraft.

The fear began then.

It was as if, by merely stepping into the aircraft, he was reminded in detail of just how frightening his previous experience had been. The aircraft seemed longer and darker than it actually was because most of the seats had been removed to make way for the mass of scientific instruments. Looking along it, Tony felt oddly trapped, beyond the point of no return. The fear wasn't severe at first - more like a sudden attack of nerves - but although he managed to control it, he still felt badly shaken.

'Where do I sit?' Clare asked him.

'Beside me,' Tony said. 'You've got nothing to do here but observe, so you'll sit beside me in the pilot's cabin while I'm on the radio. Polanski here, he's in charge of these men and all this equipment. At this point we can't check for cosmic dust or bacterial spores, but Polanski's team can take readings of any electronic, orgone, magnetic or gravitational anomalies inside the hole, and also, if we have a miracle, take monochrome, full colour and infrared photographs and films. Naturally they'll also record any infrasounds, if such exist. Now follow me, Clare.'

He squeezed Polanski's broad shoulder, gave him the thumbs-up, then led Clare along the interior of the aircraft, past the scientists with their radar and laser systems, magnometers and gravimeters, ambient and parabolic microphones, various recording devices, and the video, motion-picture and still cameras that had been placed in front of various windows on both sides of the fuselage. The doors of the aircraft were closed as he led Clare into the pilot's compartment. He indicated that Clare should sit beside the pilot, then he strapped himself in at the other side of her.

When the DC-8 took off a few minutes later, Tony's throat felt uncomfortably dry.

Once more he watched the ground falling away, though not so fast this time, to let a vast landscape of lakes, fjords, lagoons and mountains unroll below great swatches of white and grey clouds. The rivers ran towards the sea, the land gradually disappeared, then the sea became a vast bowl of black-shadowed, silvery ripples, filled with rainbow coloured blocks of ice and glittering glaciers.

'It's fantastic!' Clare shouted against the roaring of the plane. 'It was worth it just to see this!'

Tony grinned and put his thumb up, but he didn't feel that happy. He kept staring straight ahead, to where the cloudy sky met the sea's concave horizon, thinking about what he was flying into, which was what caused his fear. Ashamed, he silently chided himself for being stupid, but he couldn't help remembering his hallucination, that ghost, the Suzy who should not have been there, and as more clouds gathered in around the aircraft, his fear grew inexorably.

He dreaded seeing the Antarctic, but eventually it glittered on the horizon, its frozen mountain ranges and ice shelves growing higher and wider as the aircraft crossed the Bellingshausen Sea and approached Ellsworth Land. Then the snowy wastelands were below, the white wilderness spread out around him, and he saw jade icebergs covered with algae and plankton, sheet ice and ice falls, polar plateaux and sheer snow-banks and lakes reflecting towering glaciers: a general whiteness that swept out on all sides to a stunning blue sky.

It filled him with dread. He was inside the ozone hole and that knowledge knotted in his guts, making him reach out for Clare's hand and a touch of reality.

She jerked her hand away. Startled, he looked at her. She was staring straight ahead, out of the cockpit, at the sky, and the skin on her face was deathly white around her widening, frightened eyes.

Tony looked out as well, saw white clouds striated with sunlight, glanced back at Clare and saw her trembling and breaking out in a cold sweat. He reached for her again, but felt only an icy presence. He jerked his hand back as something materialized in front of Clare…a ball of darkness near her feet, spreading out, rising up, taking the shape of a human figure, a ghostly silhouette... then a silvery-haired man in a pinstripe suit.

Clare watched the man materializing. She seemed torn between love and terror. When the man smiled and reached out to her, she twitched and then groaned.

'Oh, my God!' Tony murmured.

A flash of light filled the cockpit and faded away in a second. Looking away from the apparition in front of Clare, Tony saw a silvery disc, a flying saucer, fly away towards the east, stop abruptly, hover briefly, then rise vertically at incredible speed before abruptly disappearing, leaving nothing but empty sky.

Tony blinked and rubbed his eyes and looked out again.

The sky was empty... No, it wasn't. Something flashed past and was gone. The sky was empty and then there were more flashes and they changed into silvery

discs. They were crossing the DC-8's flight-path, rising and falling, criss-crossing, connected by streams of silvery light and shimmering heat waves.

They were vivid, yet unreal.

Clare was sobbing, muttering incoherent words, her knuckles white where she was gripping her chair, her tears falling freely. Tony saw that the man in front of her, whose hand was on her shoulder, had been joined by a woman roughly his age, whose gentle smile seemed all wrong.

Then the pilot saw them also. His eyes widened in disbelief and he started to say something, but instead glanced down at his own lap. He screamed when he saw a giant tarantula crawling between his legs.

'Oh, Christ!' he cried. 'Jesus!'

He swiped at the tarantula, but his hand just went through it, and as he stared down, gibbering, obviously losing his senses, Tony shouted, 'Don't panic! It's not real! Put the plane on autopilot and get a grip on yourself!'

The pilot shuddered and closed his eyes. '*Do it now!'* Tony bawled. The pilot opened his eyes as the tarantula disappeared, and then he reached out, turned on the autopilot and sank back, breathing heavily. When he looked up and saw the ghosts in front of Clare, he shuddered, closed his eyes again, and let out a helpless groan.

'Oh, no!' Clare sobbed. 'Please no!'

She was trying to twist sideways in her seat, away from the apparitions, but was being held back by the safety strap and didn't think to unbuckle it. She was trembling, pouring sweat, opening and closing her eyes frantically, and again, when Tony tried to touch her, an icy cold almost burned his fingers and made him jerk his hand back.

The apparitions remained there. The radio was crackling dementedly. When Tony looked out of the cockpit he still saw the flying saucers, some far away, the size of dimes, others much closer, the size of aircraft, shooting back and forth, up and down, stopping and starting abruptly, with a speed and manoeuvrability that made a mockery of science.

Then Tony felt Suzy.

She was there before he saw her. He smelt her scent and felt her body. He knew immediately that she was sitting on his lap with her hands on his neck. His heart raced and he started choking. The space before him dissolved to darkness. Suzy materialised out of that darkness, giving shape to her substance. She was sitting on his lap, leaning back in a teasing manner, wearing the clothes she had

worn when she had visited the house, her smile slightly mocking, seductive, and somehow terrifying.

Yes, Tony was terrified.

'Suzy?'

She didn't reply. She just smiled at him, chilling him. Then, as if hearing Clare's sobbing, she turned and looked at her. She registered nothing, just stared at her, as if staring through her, and remained that way, clinging to Tony's neck, staring blindly at Clare.

'Jesus Christ!' Tony whispered.

The plane continued flying, guided by the autopilot, heading deeper into the ozone hole.

Someone behind Tony screamed - someone in the main cabin - and then someone else cursed loudly, a man bellowed a woman's name, and then the pilot at the other side of the sobbing Clare let out a strangled groan.

A snake was sliding up between his legs and curling over his belly.

He screamed and slapped wildly at it and started kicking his legs while Clare continued sobbing and the main cabin, behind them, turned into bedlam.

Trying to keep calm, Tony reached down between himself and the ghostly Suzy, felt her belly against his hand, unbuckled his safety belt and lurched forward, hoping to adjust the radio and get something more useful than static.

Although he could feel and smell Suzy, he appeared to pass through her.

It made him feel nauseous.

He tried to contact the ER-2, but received only static. When he tried to contact the Antarctic land bases, the static increased. Cursing, he sat back, pressing his spine into the seat. Suzy instantly reappeared in his lap, leaning back, smiling at him.

That smile chilled his blood.

'Christ!' he whispered. 'Jesus Christ! Don't panic! Stay in control!' But he couldn't take it anymore - the ghostly Suzy, the weeping Clare, the groaning pilot, the spiders and snakes - so he jumped out of his seat, passing through Clare's apparitions, and hurried back into the main cabin to see what was happening there.

The whole damned place was haunted.

The gloom in the long, narrow cabin was filled with streaks of silvery light linked to spinning discs that bobbed magically in thin air and glided gracefully to and fro, particularly around the stunned Rick Polanski. Some of the scientists

were weeping, others were clearly shocked, and all of them were looking at people who should not have been there. The ghosts seemed human, though they wore clothes of different periods, and two of them, kneeling in front of a weeping scientist, were no more than ten years old.

The video, movie and still cameras at the windows were unattended, as was the rest of the scientific equipment.

It was a living nightmare.

Mentally prepared for it and keeping a grip on himself, Tony realised that the plane, on autopilot, was taking them deeper into the ozone hole... and that the deeper in they went, the more vivid the apparitions were becoming.

Returning to the cockpit to get the pilot to turn back, he was blinded by a flash of brilliant light. Stopping, he rubbed his eyes, adjusted them to the light, then looked into the cockpit.

What he saw horrified him.

The pilot, now covered in snakes and spiders, was paralysed with fear. Clare was leaning forward slightly, her face hidden in her hands, trembling uncontrollably as the two elderly people, now kneeling, embraced her, smiling with a frightening, glacial kindness. And there, beside this chilling tableau, was another Tony and Suzy.

The latter was on the former's lap, still clinging to his neck and smiling, as the skin on her face stretched tighter, revealing the bone beneath.

Beyond her was a sky that should not have been there: black as pitch and filled with stars, above and below, all around, offering only eternity.

Time stood still at that moment.

Chapter Twenty-One

'Let me go over these facts again,' Dwight said softly. 'When you returned to the cockpit, you...'

'For Chrissakes, Dwight, we've been over it a dozen times. I'm getting goddamned tired of this crap. Let's just call it a day, right?'

'Please, Tony, just one more time.'

Exasperated, Tony glanced at Clare, who was staring down at her clasped

hands, her face still pale and drawn, her shoulders slumped in defeat. Disturbed to see that, he glanced around the briefing room, which was empty apart from him and Clare. It was also decidedly bleak and too cold for comfort. Sighing, he returned his gaze to Dwight and raised his hands as if praying.

'Okay,' he said. 'One more time.'

Dwight nodded and smiled, then glanced down at his notes and looked up again.

'You returned to the cockpit and...'

'The pilot was covered in snakes and spiders. Clare's two apparitions - as she says, her mother and father - were kneeling in front of her, as if consoling her. I saw an apparition of myself, sitting exactly as I'd been sitting when I left the cockpit, with Suzy on its lap, just as she had been - except that the skin on her face was stretching tighter and tighter, revealing the bones beneath, as if about to peel off altogether, or maybe just melt away.'

Clare shuddered beside him, so he reached out to squeeze her shoulder reassuringly. This time he could touch her.

'And outside the plane?' Dwight asked him.

'I still can't believe it. Instead of the sheer blue sky over the Antarctic, there was nothing but a great darkness filled with stars. No sign of the Antarctic. No trace of the normal sky. Just this great darkness filled with stars, like being in outer space.'

'And the flying saucers?'

'No sign of them either.'

'And the DC-8 was still on autopilot?'

'Right. And according to the instrument panel we were keeping to our course and should have been, at that point, directly above the Vinson Massif, in Marie Byrd Land - not surrounded by goddamned stars in what seemed like outer space.'

'We lost contact with you long before that,' Dwight said. 'Five minutes after you crossed the Antarctic Circle, to be exact. We lost contact with you and the ER-2 at exactly the same time, but at least you returned.'

Clare shuddered again and Tony knew what was bothering her: according to Dwight, shortly after crossing the Antarctic Circle, the pilot of the ER-2 had started screaming dementedly, then apparently lost control of his aircraft and crashed. Tony wondered just what the pilot had experienced before going down.

'Yeah,' he said, 'at least we returned. I guess I was able to control myself better

than the others because I'd had my previous experience and was more prepared. Anyway, when I saw that according to the instrument panel we *were* still on course - and that what was outside was probably as much an hallucination as what was going on inside - I realised that the deeper we flew into the ozone hole, the more varied and vivid the hallucinations were becoming. So, ignoring what was going on around me in the pilot's cabin, I took the plane off autopilot and turned us back towards the Antarctic Circle. I also tried to make radio contact, first with the ER-2, then with ground control. I failed on both counts.'

'You got nothing but static.'

'Right. But the static was really weird. I was convinced I could hear hundreds of voices, all distant, ghostly, and overlapping, but definitely voices. Then I thought the voices were actually in my head, which made me feel crazy.'

'And you report that they weren't all speaking English.'

'Correct. I'm pretty certain I heard English words mixed in there, but there seemed to be an awful lot of other languages. I recognised bits of French, bits of German. I'm not sure of the others.'

'You don't personally speak any language other than English?'

'Only high school French.'

'Okay, Tony, continue.'

'Well, like I said, the closer we got to the Antarctic Circle, the more normal the static began to sound...'

'The voices gradually faded away and were replaced by normal static?'

'Right. And I also noticed that the skin that had appeared to be stretched so tight on the ghostly Suzy's face began returning to normal, the apparitions of Clare's mother and father actually stood up to take their previous positions, and the snakes and spiders on the pilot started fading away. Then, just as we approached the Antarctic Circle, they disappeared altogether and the pilot recovered from the trance he'd been in. As we flew back across the Antarctic Circle, first my own doppelganger disappeared, then Suzy, and finally the two apparitions in front of Clare... and as you know, everything returned to normal at the same time back in the main cabin.'

Dwight nodded thoughtfully, glanced at the distraught Clare, then stood up, walked to the window, and looked out at the airstrip as he spoke.

'Well, we know at least one thing. All of the hallucinations were related directly to the most prominent emotions or concerns of the individuals involved. In your case, the major anxiety of the past few months has been the fact that

Suzy left you - and it was Suzy you saw in both cases. Clare, here, recently lost her father - and lost her mother not too long before that - which may explain why she saw them both in the pilot's cabin. As for the pilot, we checked his psychological profile and learned that while he's in excellent mental health, he has a phobia about snakes and spiders. As for the scientists in the main cabin, one of them saw his two children, who drowned together eighteen months ago; another saw the fiancée who'd ditched him for another man; the others saw various relatives and friends, alive or dead. Rick Polanski saw only the flying saucers - *his* major concern in life.'

'So,' Tony said, 'the hallucinations are obviously drawn from the individual's subconscious, but once given shape, they become so real that they can be observed by others, as well as giving off human smells and being almost physical.'

'*Almost* physical,' Dwight emphasised. 'You could feel Suzy on your lap and you felt her hands around your neck, yet when instinct made you jump up without thinking, you appeared to pass through her.'

'Christ, yes, that's right.'

'So the extent of their physical reality is, in a sense, dictated by the will of the individual creating them.'

'Right. And the question is...'

'Who, or what, is controlling the mind of the individual?'

'The unknown factor that's feeding off the ozone - whatever it is.'

Dwight sighed. 'Jesus!' When he looked out the window as if, by studying the sky over Chile, he would somehow solve the mystery.

Tony placed his hand on Clare's shoulder and let it rest there. She raised her head and smiled at him, but her eyes were filled with grief, and he knew that the apparitions of her parents had severely disturbed her.

'Are you okay?'

'Not too good,' she said, 'but I'm getting over it slowly. I'm just convinced that I'll never forget the experience, and I can't bear the thought of that.'

'You'll forget it in time,' Tony said reassuringly, though he wasn't sure that she would, since he didn't think that *he* would. 'So what happens now?' he asked Dwight when he walked back to their chairs and sat down.

Dwight raised his hands in the air, as if praying for clemency. 'Well, something's happening up there - that much is for sure. Your first experience has now been corroborated by the experiences of Clare and all the others, and we

know that *something* is effecting those who fly into the hole in the ozone layer. We also know that though your experience wasn't shared by those flying through the bottom of the hole during the first flight, during the second, your experience *was* shared by all the others; while the pilot flying through the top of the hole suffered an experience so dreadful that it made him lose control of his aircraft and crash. So whatever it is that's causing the phenomenon, it's obviously extended its presence most of the way down the hole, from the top to the bottom, and is now coming dangerously close to Earth.'

'So what happens now?' Tony repeated.

'We're preparing a report on what happened to both airplanes; we'll submit it to the White House, through Jack Douglas. We're also waiting for the analyses of the readings of the scientific instruments on board - we hope they continued functioning throughout the whole event - and the results will be included with the main report. What happens then, depends on what the instrument readings tell us, but clearly, given what happened to you guys, we can't examine that unknown organism - if it *is* an organism - with a manned space station. We can only use payload-carrying balloons, which I'm planning to recommend.'

'And when will we have the instrument readings from the DC-8?'

'Tonight,' Dwight said. 'I'll call you at the hotel. Meanwhile, pack your bags, since no matter what readings we get, you two, Polanski and the others will be flown back to the States tomorrow morning. You can do nothing else here.'

'Are you staying on here?'

'Just to finish my report. I'll fly back in a day or two. Now go and have a good rest.'

Driven back to the hotel in Puntas Arenas by a solemn-faced Chilean Air Force corporal, Tony and Clare sat close to one another in the Jeep but didn't say much. Tony had his arm around Clare's shoulders, her head resting on his chest. She was leaning against him, her cheek pressed to his chest, and he felt her bewilderment, fear and grief as if it was his. He also knew that she would be haunted by what she had seen for the rest of her days.

The dead had returned to her.

For him, it was much easier, since his Suzy was alive and well, yet even he would never forget what he had seen or felt in that airplane. Nor would he ever look at the real Suzy as he had done before

Once in the hotel in the Plaza de Armas, he and Clare retired to their shared room, went straight to bed, and fell asleep without making love. Tony had a

restless sleep, his dreams based on what he had been through, and was awakened, in the early hours of the evening, by Clare's lips.

She was silently weeping. Her tears dropped onto his chest. She kissed his lips and throat, his chest and belly, and then rolled upon him.

'I can't sleep,' she whispered. 'Make me forget. Damn, *I have to forget!*'

Later, satiated, they dressed and went downstairs, had a light meal in the restaurant, drank too much wine in the bar, and then walked hand in hand to the shore where, as the sun was sinking, they gazed out over the Strait of Magellan at Tierra del Fuego.

'My father and mother,' Clare said. 'I still can't believe it. They were so real - I could touch them and was touched - and now I feel that they're still alive.' The sinking sun had set the sea on fire, filled the sky with bloody ink, and a crimson light veiled her windblown hair and finely-etched profile. 'I can't live at home anymore,' she said. 'It would remind me of what I saw. I'd be haunted by the expectation of seeing them and the pain that would cause me. I'm going to move out, rent the house, try to put this behind me. And God help me, but I'm in love with Tony Rydell. Do you think he would comfort me?'

'As best he could,' Tony answered, as if speaking about someone else. 'But bear in mind that he lives for his work and has difficult kids.'

'I need that,' she said, finally smiling. 'It'll give me a challenge. And that's what I'm going to need if I hope to forget this.'

'Something different, eh?'

'Yes, something different. A new life with someone new.'

'Move in anytime,' Tony said.

They waited until the sun had set, then wandered slowly back to the hotel, had another drink in the Winter Garden, then went up to their room. This time, Tony made the first move, pulling her to him in the darkness, aroused by the image of her in his home and so needing to have her. He made love with surprising skill, surprising himself by so doing, and when she wept he kissed the tears from her cheeks and then watched her fall asleep. Her sleeping face was like a painting, solemn and mysterious, and he closed his eyes only with reluctance, not wanting to lose it.

He was just about to drop off to sleep when the telephone rang.

'There's something up there,' Dwight said.

Part Two

Chapter Twenty-Two

‘There’s something up there?’ the President asked, as if he hadn’t heard properly or simply couldn’t believe what he had heard.

‘Yes, Mr President,’ Jack Douglas said, placing Dwight Collins’ report on the desk that had been given to the country by England’s Queen Victoria. ‘The data’s all here. There’s not too much of it, and what there is isn’t great, but it’s enough to have convinced NASA’s top scientists that something is up there.’

The President glanced left and right, as if frightened of being overheard, then, obviously remembering that he’d already despatched his aide, he leaned forward a little and said, ‘Just what are you saying? Do you mean..?’

‘Something unknown,’ Douglas said, trying to avoid the word ‘alien’ and feeling less calm than he looked. ‘We don't know what it is - we only know what it *does* - but we now know that something’s definitely there.’

‘Where, exactly?’ the President asked.

‘It was originally at the top of the ozone hole over the Antarctic, but since the last airborne expedition, four months ago, it’s spread down to the bottom and is now dangerously close to Earth.’

‘*Spread* down to the bottom?’

‘Yes, Mr President. It hasn’t *moved* down from the top to the bottom. It’s *grown*. And now it extends from the top of the ozone hole to the bottom, practically into Earth’s atmosphere.’

‘You mean it’s some kind of... *substance?’*

‘We don’t know yet. Whatever it is, it’s invisible. The video, motion-picture and still cameras on board the DC-8 recorded nothing. But highly irregular fluctuations were recorded on the magnometers, and the helium neon laser system picked up what further analysis may reveal as unique infrasounds.’

‘Pardon?’

‘Sounds below the normal frequency range.’

‘Oh, I see.’

‘And there were instrumented recordings of what appear to be shock-wave emissions. Naturally, all these readings were taken from the DC-8, which was flying through the bottom of the ozone hole at an altitude of about twelve kilometres, which proves that this...’ Douglas shrugged, feeling inept... ‘That whatever affected Rydell during his flight across the top of the same hole, at an altitude of twenty kilometres, had extended down to an altitude of twelve kilometres.’

It was an unusually hot day and Douglas wiped his face with a handkerchief, thinking of the greenhouse affect and wondering if it had started, as Clare had suggested. When he thought of Clare, he also thought of her affair with Tony Rydell and quietly burned up inside.

‘Since the ER-2 crashed without revealing what its payload recorded, how can you be sure that this...’ and here the President groped for a suitable word... ‘this, *whatever*, didn’t actually *descend* all that way, rather than spreading down that far?’

‘Naturally,’ Douglas said, feeling surprisingly impatient, ‘since the ER-2 crashed deep in the Antarctic, probably somewhere in the mountains of the Vinson Massic, we’re unlikely to ever find it or its instruments. However, I think it’s safe to say, from what the land base picked up over the aircraft’s radio before contact was lost, that the pilot, one of our best, experienced something that was frightening enough to make him lose control of his airplane. In other words, a more dramatic version of what Rydell experienced during the first flight.’

‘The... apparitions.’

‘Yes, Mr President.’

‘And this... this *thing*...’ The President was obviously still having difficulty in fitting the word to the situation. ‘This thing that makes humans hallucinate in an extraordinary, dangerous manner, is also eating away the ozone layer even faster than Earth’s CFCs.’

‘Yes. And at the rate it’s doing so, the ozone layer will be depleted within the next five years - which will lead to a hotter Earth. This in turn will lead to flood, famine, and other catastrophes; and that unknown organism, if such it be, might well keep spreading around the globe, with who knows *what* results.’

‘Dear God,’ the President said. Looking like a man having a bad dream, he studied the Oval Room, as if seeking reassurance, then, gazing at the silver-

framed photograph of his wife and children, asked, ‘And we’ve no idea what this thing is?’

‘No, sir, we don’t. According to Clare Holton’s report - she is, you may recall, a biotechnologist by profession - it could be composed of plasmodes or radiobes...’

‘I’m sorry, Jack, I don’t – ’

‘Electrically charged particles, or ions.’

‘Ah, I see.’

‘However, Miss Holton also postulated the possibility that it could be composed of bacterial spores, possibly transported here in the tail of some meteorite, such as Halley’s Comet. She also offers the novel suggestion, gleaned from the former NASA astrophysicist, Richard Polanski - now a committed UFOlogist, I should warn you - that we could be faced with etherea, or ether, an invisible substance that possibly pervades space and functions as the medium for the transmission of radiant energy, perhaps orgone energy. Electrically charged particles and ether could both account for the unusual magnetic fluctuations recorded during the flight. As for the panspermic hypothesis...’

‘What?’

‘Bacterial spores.’

‘Oh, yes, right.’

‘The only way to check if this is the case, is to send up the relevant recording devices in stratospheric balloons. Either that or we send up a manned space station, but that still leaves the problem of the hallucinations, which would seem to kill that idea. The balloons, then, are clearly the best way of finding out what’s up there and discovering an antidote.’

‘You make it sound like some kind of virus.’

‘It sure seems like one.’

Obviously being used to more earthly problems, the President tried not to look bewildered and nodded affirmatively.

‘And what do you think, Jack?’ he finally asked.

‘I think we have to tread cautiously,’ Douglas said, thinking of Clare and Rydell with a clean, icy hatred. ‘I think that what we have here *is* something unknown, but that those involved, notably Rydell and Polanski, both wishful thinkers regarding UFOs, are convincing themselves, and are trying to convince us, that what’s up there is *alien*.’

He had avoided using the word until he could turn it to his own benefit. Now

he knew how to do that.

'You mean...?' the President started to ask, then stopped, clearly flustered.

'Yes, Mr President. I think that if we're not careful, they'll have us publicly supporting their view that what's up there is some kind of alien entity. This would not only make us look extremely foolish, but could also lead to widespread public panic.'

'Yes, of course. I can see that.' The President's face was clouded with doubt. 'But if it's *not* something alien, then what the hell is it? And if it didn't come here with the cosmic dust of some meteorite, then where did it come from?'

'Mr President,' Douglas said, moving in on his favourite theme, but coating the pill with sugar, 'as you know, I want to believe as much as you do in world peace, but CIA reports suggest that this... *phenomenon*... could originate from some foreign power and is being used to penetrate our defence systems, violently change our weather, and in general cause mayhem to our infrastructure and, therefore, our economy.'

'I know this theory of yours, Jack, and I have to say I don't necessarily agree with it.'

'I appreciate that, Mr President, but you should bear in mind that even the Russians, no matter the mess they're presently in, have been experimenting for years with cloud-busters and other so-called atmospheric weapons, some of which have been pretty successful at altering weather around the globe, to the disadvantage of the West. And what's up there could be an extension of that kind of research, even if it doesn't emanate from Russia.'

The President chuckled indulgently. 'That wouldn't make sense, Jack. If, as you say, the destruction of the ozone is going to lead to a hotter Earth, with widespread famine and the flooding of many cities, including Leningrad, what would the Russians gain from such a weapon? In fact, their own agricultural crisis is surely ample proof that it's in their own interest to strengthen their commercial ties with the United States, not sever them, which they would do with this weapon. So in both senses, your theory doesn't hold water.'

'I think it does,' Douglas said, secretly despising the President's wish to create a lasting bond with those countries now threatening the economic superiority of the United States. 'At least it will in the long term. I'm not suggesting that we should resurrect a new kind of Cold War with our so-called allies, including Europe and Japan, but I have to emphasise that what the world is engaged in, whether consciously or not, is a war for *economic* superiority - and our potential

enemies include all those I've just mentioned.'

'Okay, Jack, I'll buy that.'

'Well, Mr President, accepting that, we have to accept, also, that the only way to reduce our production of CFCs - which will at least slow down the rate of ozone depletion and give us breathing space - would be to dramatically reduce our industrial and agricultural output.'

'That's what's been recommended by Miss Holton and other greenhouse theorists.'

'Yet to do that, Mr President, would badly effect our economy, which in turn will eventually aid our enemies, both here and abroad. I therefore feel that Miss Holton's call for a reduction in the use of CFCs would diminish US influence worldwide, with a simultaneous increase in economic power for those countries that quietly ignore their own production of CFCs. There'll be quite a few, doubtless.'

Now it was the President's turn to take out his handkerchief and wipe the sweat of his forehead. He glanced back over his shoulder, squinted against the brilliant light beaming in through the french windows, then turned back to Douglas and sighed.

'So you're suggesting that even if we reduce our use of CFCs, the other advanced countries will make promises, but actually do nothing.'

'Yes, Mr President. Their industrial and agricultural output will increase while ours diminishes, eventually making us dependent on *them*.'

The President glanced at his sweat-soaked handkerchief, folded it neatly, then placed it back in his jacket pocket. 'Well,' he said in a hesitant manner, 'that *could* be true, but it still leaves the problem of the depletion of the ozone layer, not only by CFCs, but by that other... *something* up there. So what are you driving at?'

Douglas knew he now had the President exactly where he wanted him and that he could, while advancing his own interests, also get Clare and Rydell under his indirect control and ensure that they didn't step out of line in the future.

'It's my belief that we can *use* the alien element that's depleting the ozone layer. We should *not* reduce our production of CFCs, as we've promised. Instead, we should encourage Clare and Rydell to identify what's up there and then find some way of controlling it, or preventing its growth. It's possible that with such knowledge we could actually create other ozone holes that we could open or close anywhere in the stratosphere, as we wished. In this way, the

United States could manipulate the Earth's atmospheric conditions and weather, and indirectly, surreptitiously, control the whole world. What's up there, Mr President, is a gift. We have to accept it and use it.'

The President was lost for words and glanced around in confusion, then stood up and went to the french windows. There, between the two flags, he looked over the sunlight splendour of the Rose Garden. He was taking the weight of the world upon his shoulders and wanted Douglas to know it. Eventually, after what seemed like an eternity, he turned around again.

'Can I place you in charge of this?' he asked.

'Yes, Mr President.'

Chapter Twenty-Three

'This is Clare,' Tony said, nervously enough to make Clare feel uneasy. 'She's coming to live with us, as I told you. Clare, this is my mother...'

'Howdedoo,' the beady-eyed, grey-haired old woman interjected keenly.

'And my sons, Don, who's thirteen - '

'Practically fourteen,' Don interjected sourly.

' - and Ronnie, who's twelve.'

'Eleven,' Ronnie corrected him. 'You don't even know my age, goddammit. That's 'cause you're never at home these days.'

'Blasphemy!' Tony's mother said. 'That boy needs a good hiding!'

'Right,' Tony said. '*Eleven*. Ronnie's a bit sensitive about his age because - '

'He's so small,' Don informed her.

'I'm not!'

'You are!'

'Okay,' Tony said. 'That's enough. A bit of quiet from you two. Say *hello*, for chrissakes!'

'Hi,' Don said to Clare, bouncing his words off the floor and blowing a bubble of gum.

'Hi,' the much smaller Ronnie said, playing with a yo-yo and studying her with a frank curiosity that did not include warmth. 'Do you know my Mom?'

'No, she doesn't,' Tony said hastily. He could see that Clare was disconcerted

by the reception she was getting. ‘Clare and I work together at NASA and that’s all you need to know.’

‘It’s nice to meet you all,’ Clare said.

‘Yeah, right,’ Don said sarcastically.

‘You must have more spunk than sense,’ Grandma said, ‘to come and live here. The last housekeeper fled.’

‘I’m not a housekeeper,’ Clare said.

‘She’s living with *me*,’ Tony said tactlessly.

‘I hope she can cook,’ Ronnie said. ‘Grandma’s food is like vomit.’

‘Tony’s told me so much about you,’ Clare said desperately to Tony’s mother, then tentatively extended her hand. ‘It’s nice to meet you at last.’

Tony’s mother clasped her blue-veined hands together, then flexed her fingers. ‘Arthritis is a terrible thing,’ she said, ‘though I’m not the complaining kind. Which room are you sleeping in?’

‘She’s sleeping in my room,’ Tony said, ‘and damn well you know it. Now why don’t you make a cup of coffee while I show her the house?’

‘I was just about to do it,’ his mother whined. ‘You don’t have to boss me around.’

While the frail old woman reluctantly stood upright, Clare glanced around the living room of the tract house and was shocked at how small and cluttered it was. Having lived most of her life in the immaculate elegance of her parents’ spacious house in Georgetown, she was already feeling slightly claustrophobic in this small, low-ceilinged room and, even worse, was taken aback by its remarkable untidiness. There were books all over the place - on the table, on the chairs, piled up on the floor - and, to her distress, many of the albums around the music center were out of their covers, lying on the floor, covered with dust.

‘They’re mostly my books,’ Tony explained, when he saw her wandering gaze. ‘Mostly books on science. I like to have them all within reach, so I keep them around the place.’

That didn’t explain the albums, the sight of which made Clare’s teeth grind, but she didn’t think it wise to complain at this early stage.

‘I collect vinyl,’ Tony said, as if that explained the mess. ‘I’ve always gone for the covers and the great liner notes. Come on,’ he added, picking up her suitcases, ‘I’ll show you the bedroom. Then we’ll get organised.’

The bedrooms, which were at the back of the house, seemed as small and untidy as the lounge. Tony hadn’t even made his bed that morning.

‘Excuse the mess,’ he said. ‘I was in a hurry to get to work. And my mom’s not wildly reliable when it comes to house-keeping.’

‘You lost your housekeeper?’ Clare asked him.

‘More than one,’ he replied. ‘I’m not sure if it’s the boys or my mom, but I know that neither’s an easy task. Hey,’ he added, seeing the look on her face, ‘it’s an experience, right? You want something different from what you’ve had and that’s what you’re gonna get. Come on, give me a kiss!’

When she kissed him, she felt better, her love for him surging back, but then he led her out of the bedroom, back into the cluttered house, and she saw his peculiar mother and sullen sons and again felt confused.

She had not forgotten the Antarctic, that dreadful experience in the airplane, and was still feeling badly shaken by it, as if living inside a dream. Now she had to face Tony’s home, the messy life of the man she loved, and she wondered, in an odd, distracted way, if her love would sustain her. Her love for Tony certainly didn’t make her adore his children, neither of whom seemed too pleasant.

‘I’m hungry,’ Don said.

‘I’m bored,’ Ronnie added.

‘Thank God for your health,’ Grandma said, ‘which is something I’ve lost.’

‘That’s why I’m hungry,’ Don said.

‘’Cause he’s healthy,’ Ronnie explained. ‘We haven’t had a thing to eat since breakfast, and that was just cereal.’

‘Don’t blame me,’ Tony’s mother whined. ‘I didn’t have *any* breakfast. My asthma almost choked me, my arthritis was crippling, and then, when I crawled into the kitchen, I found nothing to eat. This place just isn’t organised.’

‘*You* were supposed to organise it,’ Tony said. ‘That’s why we let you out of that funny-farm known as Menopause Manor.’

‘It’s not a funny-farm. It’s a rest-home and you know it. And I had to go back there for a rest after living with you lot.’

‘But you returned! You came back, Mom!’

‘And I still can’t get you organised, since you’re all so unhelpful.’

‘Okay, let’s get organised,’ Tony said, beaming brightly at Clare. ‘Let’s you and I go to the supermarket and bring back the works. We’ll have a new life from now on. Okay, Clare?’

‘Okay,’ she said, in desperation to get out, not realising that he would invite his two sons to keep them happily occupied. They didn’t appreciate the gesture, wanting to watch TV instead, and when Tony forced them to come along, they

weren't happy and decided to show it. They fought noisily in the car, went wild in the supermarket, and in general made Clare, who wasn't used to shopping anyway, feel that she was shockingly ignorant of the ways of the real world.

'She can't even push the trolley,' Don said. 'You'd think she'd never used one.'

'I never have,' Clare replied.

'Were your servants as dumb as you?' Ronnie asked, 'or did they go to good schools?'

'*Ronnie!*' Tony snapped.

'What's the matter?'

'Don't be rude!'

'He's just making conversation,' Don explained, 'but she never replies.'

'Okay,' Tony said! 'That's enough. Here, Clare, give me that trolley.'

Tony pushed the trolley while Clare collected the food, feeling confused by the endless rows of tins and packets, more so because the two boys were so noisy and distracted her terribly. Tony seemed more at home here, telling her what to collect, but he had a haphazard way of shopping, buying purely on impulse, and by the time they reached the checkout gate, the trolley looked like a mountain.

And Clare was exhausted.

She knew it was purely emotional, a product of disorientation, and tried to fix that firmly in her mind as she stacked their many purchases into boxes in an urgent, haphazard way. Don and Ronnie didn't help - they were too busy insulting each other - and Tony was too busy flirting with the girl at the till. Clare felt like screaming, wanting to flee from it all, but then Tony slid his arm around her waist and kissed her flushed cheek.

'Okay,' he said. 'You did really good, Clare. Now let's get back to the house.'

As they drove back to Greenbelt, with the boys hollering in the back seats, Clare looked out at the suburban scenery, the neat rows of tract houses, and thought longingly of her family home in Georgetown, which she had recently rented, with deep regret, to an English diplomat and his family. The regret had been caused by her love of the house and all the memories it contained; the necessity to move had been caused by the knowledge that since her frightening experience over the Antarctic, she would always feel that the house was haunted by the ghosts of her parents. She had decided to move in with Tony because she loved him and needed him, but also because, as he had reminded her, she now needed something different in her life. However, as she studied the sleepy

suburbs and their blandly pretty tract houses, while being deafened by the squabbling of Tony's two undisciplined children, she realised bleakly that she hadn't begun to imagine the extent of the differences between the life she had led and the one she had let herself in for. She could still hardly accept that she had fallen in love with Tony; now she had to accept that she had inherited his wild boys, possibly crazy mother and untidy, cramped house. It didn't seem real, somehow.

Already secretly yearning for silence and privacy, for the abiding pleasures of the intellect, instead she found herself struggling up the path and into the house, carrying two heavy boxes of groceries while the boys, still hollering in an earsplitting manner, chased one another and kept bumping into her.

'Excuse me,' she said to Don as he started turning on the garden hose, 'but it'd help if you opened the door for me.'

'Just kick it,' he said as water gushed out of the hose and he aimed it at the shrieking, retreating Ronnie.

'Ronnie!' Tony admonished as he came up behind Clare, carrying more groceries. Clare managed to kick the door open and stumble into the house, where she immediately placed her two boxes on the nearest table.

'That's it,' Grandma whined from where she was sitting beside the table. 'I've just managed to tidy this place up and already you're dumping that rubbish the first place you see. The kitchen's out back, my girl.'

'I was just resting,' Clare explained, trying to get her breath back, glancing around the room and noticing that it was just as messy as before.

'There's no rest for *me*,' Grandma said. 'I'm used here like a nigger servant. I'm too old and fragile for all this work, but no one thinks about that.'

'Stop that, Ma,' Tony said, carrying his boxes straight to the kitchen. 'We can do without your redneck remarks and moans about overwork. Clare!' he shouted as he disappeared into the kitchen. 'Let's prepare dinner!'

Grateful to get away from Grandma and the two boys shrieking outside, Clare carried her boxes into the kitchen and let Tony embrace her. She felt good in his arms, as if born to be there, and only wished they could be alone together instead of in this menagerie.

'Don't mind my mom,' he said. 'Her bark's worse than her bite. As for the boys, they've been unmanageable since Suzy walked out, but I'm pretty sure your presence here will make a difference, given time.'

'I wonder,' she replied. 'I mean, I think they resent me.'

‘Kids forget their resentments pretty quickly, so just play it by ear. Now kick your shoes off and put your feet up and let me cook dinner. I’m the burger king of Greenbelt!’

‘That sounds wonderful, but I’ll settle for a salad, which I’ll make myself.’

‘Terrific,’ he said. ‘You do the salad, I’ll do the burgers and French fries, and we’ll open a bottle of wine right now and get drunk as we’re cooking. Do you think that’ll help?’

‘It sounds like music to my ears. You pour and I’ll drink it!’

Getting drunk helped. When the food was ready, Clare went onto the porch to call the boys in, and when they said they didn’t want to eat, she had the courage to challenge them.

‘You think we did all this work for nothing? The food’s cooked and you’ll damned well eat it. Now come in right this minute, wash your hands and comb your hair, then sit down at the table like civilised people and eat with your mouths shut.’

‘You can’t give us orders,’ Don said.

‘You’re not our mom,’ Ronnie added. ‘We only take orders from mom or dad, and you don’t look like either.’

‘Would you like a good hiding?’

‘*What*?’ Ronnie said, stepping backwards.

‘One more word out of you - or you, Don - and I’ll take you straight into your bedroom and give you a hiding. Now come in, wash your hands and comb your hair, and sit down at the table. And I mean *right now!*’

They did as they were told. They even ate with their mouths shut. Tony’s French fries looked soggy, his burgers were burnt, but Grandma tucked into Clare’s salad with great relish, saying, ‘I’ll probably suffer for this later, but I’m too polite not to eat.’ Tony opened another bottle and even Grandma had a sip, saying, ‘If the Lord Jesus Christ could sip wine, then I don’t see why I can’t.’ Clare had to laugh. She felt drunk and more at home. When she laughed, Grandma gave her a sly smile and the boys, after staring tentatively at one another, also grinned at her.

‘Are you a scientist?’ Ronnie asked her.

‘Yes,’ she said, ‘just like your dad.’

‘But she was also an astronaut,’ Tony said. ‘One of the few female astronauts.’

‘An *astronaut?*’ Don asked in disbelief.

‘Yes,’ Clare said, ‘a few years back.’

‘Did you fly to the moon?’ Ronnie asked, his eyes wide.

‘All the way there and back,’ she said.

They were as impressed as all hell, suddenly seeing her in a different light, and because she was drunk and starting to feel more at home, she answered their many questions, filled them with awe, and won their hearts over that long, drunken, leisurely meal.

‘And you’ve come to live with us?’ Don asked her.

‘If you don’t mind,’ she said.

‘*I* don’t mind,’ Ronnie replied. ‘Boy, just wait till I get to school and tell my buddies.’

‘Yeah,’ Don said, just as excited as his younger brother. ‘It’ll knock them out of their socks!’

They all laughed at that and Tony poured more wine. Then someone shouted through the front door, saying, ‘Anyone in there?’

‘Come on in,’ Tony said and Dwight Collins entered, wearing a gaudy shirt and shorts, carrying a couple of six-packs, followed by an overweight blonde woman, who was holding up a bottle of champagne and smiling attractively.

‘We’ve come as your new neighbours,’ Dwight said to Clare, his grin broad and mischievous. Indicating the cheerful blonde, he added, ‘This is my wife, Maggie. Maggie, meet Clare, who used to be a sensible woman before she met Tony.’

Maggie laughed and shook Clare’s hand, then waved the bottle of champagne. ‘We live just around the corner, Clare, so if you need anything, drop in. Meanwhile, if one of these so-called men can open this bottle, we’ll celebrate your arrival. Here, Dwight,’ she said, handing him the bottle. ‘You do the honours.’

Clare liked her immediately, and liked her even more after they’d both had a couple of glasses of champagne. Clare’s home had been formal, her parents loving but less demonstrative, and in Tony’s small tract house, though it was hot as hell and cluttered, she felt a certain loosening of inhibitions and lack of constraint. The conversation was loud and careless, argumentative, spontaneous, and in Maggie - a less sophisticated version of her wealthy, rumbustious friend, Nicola - she felt that she had found a shoulder to cry on, a witty and good-natured friend.

‘Just look at them,’ Maggie said, indicating their two drunken men. ‘If they weren’t so goddamned intelligent, you’d think they were cowboys. That’s cause

they’re NASA men, right? They live for their work. Or, as *they'd* put it, they play as hard as they work, which is pretty much seven days a week, one running into the other. They’re not bad, I suppose - they’re too *busy* to beat their wives - and a guy who loves his work is less trouble than one who’s plain bored. Even Tony -let’s face it, no gentleman! - has a certain, weird charm. Now isn’t that right, Tony?’

‘Right!’ Tony said agreeably.

Grandma watched the TV, sipping wine, muttering constantly, and the two boys, Don and Ronnie, having inherited a former astronaut, took turns at topping up Clare’s glass as an excuse to talk to her. Then she sent them to bed. She was drunk enough to try it on. She said, ‘Tomorrow, if you behave, I’ll bring back lots of photos from NASA, some of which, being signed by the astronauts, you can sell in the school yard. Now how about that?’ They were thrilled into obedience, even kissing her goodnight, then followed Grandma’s wavering, frail form into the back of the house, where, as Clare remembered in a dreamy manner, the bedrooms were located.

‘Gee whiz!’ Maggie exclaimed. ‘I don’t believe what I’ve just seen! She’s got those uncontrollable kids eating out of the palm of her hand!’

‘That’s why she’s a liaison officer,’ Dwight said. ‘I always wondered about that.’

‘The more we drink, the more we learn,’ Clare responded, then had a fit of the giggles. ‘God, I just don’t believe this!’

‘You’re in love,’ Maggie told her.

Which was the truth, after all, the only thing that made sense, the inviolable reality that washed her clean, purified her, when Dwight and Maggie had gone and she and Tony went to bed and there, in that small, humid room, burned against one another in sensual fever. Clare took confidence from that, chucked her fear off and breathed, at least briefly forgetting that airplane in the Antarctic, the ghosts of the dead, and instead regaining her lost faith in the love she gave and received.

Then at last, she slept soundly.

Chapter Twenty-Four

‘I don’t give a goddamn about the weather,’ Suzy’s father said, slumped lethargically in a dusty armchair and drinking beer from the bottle. ‘I ain’t gonna move out. I was born and raised on this farm and here’s where I’ll die.’

They were all sitting in the living room on a Sunday afternoon, having just finished lunch and now having drinks and watching the news on TV, which as usual was not good. It was mostly about catastrophes being caused by the changing weather. Europe was still being devastated by fierce winds and floods, the Antarctic ice was melting at an unprecedented rate, the oceans were rising and many rivers flooding their banks, and while Russia’s agricultural wilderness was becoming unexpectedly rich, the American heartland, including Iowa, was turning into a dust bowl.

‘No talk of help for the farmers,’ Suzy’s father said. ‘Just this scientific gobbledygook about holes in the atmosphere. What the hell’s goin’ on here?’

He’d just come back from Des Moines, where he’d been talking to his bank manager, and was looking incongruous in his old-fashioned, rarely worn, grey suit with a white shirt and tie. Now he loosened the tie, unbuttoned his shirt-collar and gave a loud sigh.

‘Godammit,’ he said, ‘who wants science? What about us out here?’

Since he was talking to himself there was no need to reply, but Suzy glanced at him, surprised at how changed he was, aware that he had never before drank beer from a bottle, uttered a blasphemy, or looked as diminished as he did in that awful grey suit. Then she realised that he was so tuned to the land, he was fading away with it. He had thought that the land would endure forever and now it was failing him.

The shock and grief were destroying him.

‘The Lord works in mysterious ways,’ Suzy’s mother said, doing her knitting and sipping lemonade. ‘Praise be, he’ll protect us.’

Not sharing the faith that her mother had in abundance, Suzy returned her gaze to the TV in time to learn that the weather wasn’t the year’s only bizarre offering. Not since the 1950s had there been so many reports of UFOs and other unusual phenomenon. The reports, which were worldwide, were believed to be the products of hysteria caused by the uncommon weather. Certainly, so far, no concrete evidence had been produced to support the contention that the reports were based on anything other than emotional and mental disturbances. It *was* pretty weird.

‘Flying saucers!’ Suzy’s father exclaimed in disgust. ‘I don’t believe what I’m hearing! The bread basket of America - the bread basket of *the world!* - is being destroyed by the goddamned weather, and all *they* can do is try to distract us with news about UFOs and ghosts and other so-called unexplained phenomena. Is this a public service or is it not? We oughta write and complain!’

He had another slug of beer, wiped his lips with his hand, then leaned forward and switched the TV off.

‘I can’t stand it,’ he said.

‘Neither can I,’ Suzy said, glad of an excuse to get out for a while, so standing up and stretching herself. ‘I think I’ll go into town for a while. Go and see Joe.’

‘It’s time you went to see your husband,’ her father said. ‘That might be more profitable.’

‘I’m sorry, Dad, but I’m not ready for that yet, so let’s drop the subject.’

He just shrugged and slugged some more beer. ‘Have it your way,’ he said.

He didn’t really care. He was too concerned with the weather. His crops were dead and he was running out of money and there was no sign of rain. Feeling sorry for him, suddenly seeing the child in the man, Suzy kissed the top of his head, then left the room. She put on a light jacket, then went out and climbed into her car and headed for Des Moines.

It was the middle of the afternoon and the sun was a fiery ball, its light dazzling where it fell on the fields that had turned brown and barren. Suzy felt drained just driving, suffocated by lack of air, but luckily the dust churned up by the car was blown out behind her.

She was glad to get to Des Moines, even though, once verdant, it was now as barren as the fields of maize. Driving straight to the Court Avenue District, she parked near the office towers. From there, she walked through the skywalk system and on to Joe’s bar, located amongst the restored vintage buildings, art galleries, restaurants and fancy shops of this formerly bustling entertainment district. Since the drought, though, people were spending less and the area was already starting to look seedy.

Entering Joe’s cosy, colonial-styled bar, Suzy was glad to feel the chill of the air-conditioning. Most of the tables were empty, as they usually were these days, but a few men were strung along the bar and Joe was there, cleaning glasses. His muscles were bulging out of his short-sleeved shirt and he looked pretty cool.

He smiled when he saw her, so she smiled back and took a stool at the far end of the bar, well away from the other customers. Joe poured her a bourbon on the rocks and brought it along to her.

'You look like a million dollars,' he said. 'The prettiest woman in here. So have one on the house.'

Suzy, the only woman in the bar, smiled and picked up her glass and tilted it towards him. 'Here's looking at you,' she said, before taking a sip.

'I wasn't expectin' to see you today,' Joe said. 'Anything happening?'

Suzy shrugged. 'No,' she said, lighting a cigarette, 'I just had to get out. My dad's been to the bank and started drinking beer from the bottle. It's not a good sign.'

'You weren't expectin' good news.'

'But we live in hope, Joe. He's been told that he has to sell the farm, but he swears he won't do it.'

'Give him time to adjust,' Joe advised her. 'He'll face up to it soon enough. It's happenin' all over the damned place: they're sellin' up, movin' out. He musta seen a lot've his friends goin', so he isn't alone.'

'He's lived there all his life.'

'So did most of the others.'

'I think his heart's broken already.'

'Broken hearts can be mended.'

There was a sudden roaring sound from the TV above the bar and they both looked up to see the torrential rainfall over most of southern Spain. People were sitting on red-tiled rooftops, on the walls of Moorish villas, looking down at the water sweeping under them, carrying furniture and beach umbrellas and other debris, even people spinning slowly on make-shift rafts and rubber dinghies, through streets that had once been dry as bone. Then the scene changed abruptly: from howling wind and pouring rain to burning heat and parched farmlands, with Americans piling their furniture onto trucks and moving onto the dusty roads. Wiped out by the drought, they were leaving their farms and heading for the cities, desperately hoping to find work.

'Turn that shit off,' a man along the bar said. He was wearing muddy dungarees and had a burnt face, his weathered hat resting beside his beer-glass. 'I came in here to pick myself up,' he said. 'Not to be reminded of why I'm drinkin' at three o'clock in the afternoon. Turn it off, Joe, godammit.'

'Sure,' Joe said. 'I'm sorry.' He turned the TV off and no one else complained.

‘The farm he worked on’s just been taken by the bank,’ Joe explained. ‘He’ll have to hit the road soon. No family, no more work in this area, and he’s fifty-eight years old. Hard times ahead, right?’

‘Goddamn!’ Suzy said. She finished off her bourbon, pushed the glass towards Joe, and said, ‘*I'm* drinking at three in the afternoon, and now I know why. Fill ‘er up, Joe.’

Joe grinned and filled up her glass and brought it back to her. She blew smoke rings of different sizes and watched them drifting away.

‘Strange times,’ Joe said, maybe just to fill the silence. ‘Hot places turnin’ cold, cold places turnin’ hot, and here, in Iowa, the bread basket of America, the land’s turnin’ into a dust bowl. Folks are sellin’ up and takin’ to the road, just like they did back in the Thirties. We’re right back with the Okies.’

‘But it ain’t the Thirties,’ Suzy said. ‘It seems like it, but it ain’t. You know that when you turn on the TV and switch through the channels, avoiding the weather reports, and always come, sure as Jesus, to a program about the increase in UFO sightings and apparitions and other weird happenings. ‘Course, officially they’re denied, but the reports can’t be stopped and are comin’ in from all over the world. You didn’t get *that* in the Thirties, Joe, and I think it’s real weird.’

‘Yeah,’ Joe said, ‘it is.’ He gave her that grin that could make her glow inside. ‘There’s even talk of airline pilots startin’ to see things - strange lights in the sky, flying saucers and so on - though most of the reports aren’t made official. But I hear things, pick ‘em up in this bar, and lotsa folks are havin’ lotsa strange experiences. I put it down to this weather, which can drive some folks crazy, and to the fact that the land’s bein’ wiped out, with all that entails. Folks are under terrific pressure, feelin’ haunted, and so they start seein’ things.’

‘What about you, Joe?’

He shrugged and grinned again. ‘I’m suffering a little bit - business ain’t as brisk as usual - but so far the only visions I have are of you in my bed. Real pity I’m workin’ right now. You sure do look invitin’.’

Suzy glowed inside again. He could always make her do that. In fact, the longer she stayed away from Tony, the more she needed that feeling. Joe had been good for her, making her feel alive again. She’d even started thinking of moving in with him and bringing the kids here. He’d be good for them, she felt. He had the kind of strength they needed. He wasn’t chaotic and undependable like Tony, and he obviously loved her. And now, with the blight on her parents’ farm, there were other reasons for staying.

‘Hey, Joe,’ she said, feeling pretty drunk, ‘just how much do you love me?’

‘You’ve had more than one demonstration, honey, so you’ve no need to ask.’

‘No, I don’t mean that. I don’t mean sex. I mean, how much do you *love* me?’

‘One whole heap, m’darlin’. ’

He poured himself a beer, had a drink, kept hold of the glass.

‘What’s one whole heap, Joe?’

‘You want me, I’m yours.’

‘How much?’

‘Whatya mean?’

‘I sometimes think we should live together, Joe. It’s not right, bein’ apart like this.’

‘You mean married? You’re already married, Suzy.’

‘I just mean livin’ together, Joe. I mean, just to get closer to each other... to give it a try.’

He had another gulp of beer, wiped his lips, played with the glass.

‘I dunno, Suzy’ he said. ‘Why spoil a good thing? I mean, we got a pretty good thing goin’ here, so why risk it with that?’

‘With what? Livin’ together?’

‘Yeah, Suzy, I guess. I mean, lovin’ is one thing, but livin’ together is another. I’ve been livin’ on my own a long time an’ I’m kinda fixed in my ways. You know? A man gets like that...’ He trailed off in an uncertain manner, slugged more beer to cover confusion, then offered a crooked, nervous grin. ‘Besides,’ he said, ‘sooner or later, you’ll go back to Maryland, to your husband and kids. I don’t see the point, Suzy.’

Even drunk, Suzy started feeling as nervous as Joe looked with that smile of his. It almost sobered her up.

‘That’s the whole point,’ she said. ‘I’d only go back for the kids. And instead of doing that, why not bring ‘em back here? Then you and I can stay together and not be broken up. You understand what I’m saying, Joe?’

Joe finished off his beer, then went to pour himself another. When he came back, he didn’t look too thrilled and his gaze was evasive.

‘Listen, Suzy,’ he said.

‘Yeah?’

‘I love you one whole heap, you know that... But this thing, this business with the kids... Well, I mean, I don’t know... I mean, I’ve never been married, Suzy. That’s a whole different ball game. And livin’ together... Well, that’s marriage,

no two ways about it. So there's that and the kids. I mean, okay, they might be nice kids... But a man like me, never bin married, might find some problems there. You're talkin' responsibility. A whole heap of it as well. You're talkin' about a really big commitment for kids not my own... I dunno, Suzy. I mean, I won't say no outright. I'm only sayin' it needs a lotta thought and a lotta time for the thinkin'. I mean, a man has his ways, you know?'

'You don't want my kids.'

'I didn't say that, Suzy. No.'

'So what if I say, forget about the kids, let's just you and me share things?'

She really had him rattled there. He drank more beer and stroked the glass. It was like he wanted to dive into the glass and swim down to Australia. She wanted to die when she saw that.

'Gee, Suzie,' he began. He sounded just like a goddamned school kid. 'I love you - '

'A whole heap.'

'Right! But lovin' and livin' together are two different things and... You know, you've bin married - *are* married - and can deal with certain things. But I've never shared anything with anyone, or had kids or anything. So... you know... I'm not sure I could look after them properly, or...'

'I've got parents as well,' Suzy said. 'You know all about them, don't you? They're gonna lose their farm and everything that gives them dignity and have to do an awful lot of things that they're not used to doing. In short, they're gonna need my help and I'll need help in helping them.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'Right. I mean, I understand that, Suzy. It's just that I don't know that I'm really equipped to deal with...'

'Yeah,' she said. 'I understand perfectly. Goodbye, Joe... and good luck. When I say my prayers, after I've made my wishes, you're going to need that luck.' She said it correctly, speaking proper English, no longer wanting to sound like him. 'You're going to need that luck because I'm going to curse you to hell and back. Go fuck yourself, Joe.'

Then she walked from the bar.

Of course, she couldn't stop crying and drove the car while blind with tears. She drove across the Des Moines River as the sun was going down, her heart hammering with outrage, the shock making her sweat more, and headed into the dust-wreathed, crimson twilight in a state of dreadful despair. She was angry

and disappointed, disgusted and pained. She felt like a victim of her own dreams and vain, childish hopes.

Tony would never have responded that way. Give it to him: he wouldn't have done it. Tony, no matter what his private fears, would have stood up and been counted. He'd have proved his love with something, not eloquently, but with sincerity. He wouldn't have wriggled like a worm on a hook, with his eyes slipping sideways. You had to give it to him: despite his faults, he rose above them. Yes, Tony, who had almost driven her crazy, had never failed her that much.

That's why she still loved him.

She cried more when she thought of that. Damned near went off the road. The sun was sinking and the fields of maize were ruined and the crimson light was unreal. Maybe that contributed to it - what it was she thought she saw - that sudden vision of her children, Don and Ronnie, plain as day, standing there in the headlights of her car as she raced straight towards them.

'*God, no!*' she screamed.

There was no time to brake. She was through them in a second. They were there, plain as day, then she shot through them and saw only the road again.

She couldn't believe it. When she looked in the rear-view mirror, she saw nothing at all, but then, when she looked sideways, she saw a disc-shaped light flying over the rolling hills. It was a dazzling, silvery plate, gliding beautifully in the crimson twilight. It flew from the horizon, ascending as it approached, and passed over the car like a flickering light-bulb, then abruptly disappeared.

Suzy almost crashed the car. Later, she didn't remember much about it. Screaming brakes and a howling engine. Billowing dust and her own pounding heart as the car groaned and settled down. It was a living thing dying, first shuddering, then subsiding. When it was still, and when the swirling dust had settled, she looked out at the sinking sun.

Nothing there but the parched fields. No Don and Ronnie, no flying saucer. Nothing out there except the rolling plains and a vast, blood-red sky and a darkening, sinking sun.

Suzy was terrified. *It's just shock*, she thought. She rationalised that she'd been upset, thinking of Tony and the kids, and that the tension caused by Joe, as well as the news on his TV, had caused her to conjure up that experience as some kind of catharsis.

She liked the sound of that word: *catharsis*. It helped her rise above her

feelings. It didn't stop the pounding of her heart, but she drove on home anyway.

She was concerned for her parents.

Chapter Twenty-Five

'Clare seems to be settling in well,' Dwight said, as he drove the car out of his driveway, just around the corner from Tony's house. 'In fact, she seems to be blossoming. I just couldn't imagine her living here - not in Greenbelt, not in a tract house, and not with you and your mother and kids - certainly not after the life she used to lead in Georgetown. Yet it seems to be working.'

'That's 'cause I'm a really swell guy,' Tony replied, as the car turned into the Greenbelt Road. 'You just never saw it, Dwight.'

Dwight grinned. 'I guess not. But I'm still damned surprised.'

'Pleasantly so, I hope.'

'Absolutely. Clare's not only been good for you - she also seems to have tamed your kids and kept Grandma in order. She should get an award.'

That was true enough, Tony thought. In the month that Clare had been living with him in Greenbelt, she had not only managed to put the house in order - even his record albums were in their sleeves - but had charmed his two kids into some kind of disciplined behaviour, as well as getting his mother onto her side. What was most surprising about it all, was that she had done it without prior experience - having no children of her own and previously living only with wealthy parents - but certainly she had brought into his life the sense of order that had never been there when he had shared it with Suzy. Now the house was tidy and clean, the boys were better behaved, and his mother was so taken in with her new 'daughter' that when Tony and Clare had to leave home together for a few days, usually on NASA business, she willingly looked after the kids.

'It's still exhausting,' she had said to Tony, 'but not as bad as it was before. And besides, I don't mind if it's for Clare. She's worth her weight in gold, that one.'

'Why didn't Clare come with us this morning?' Dwight asked, as he drove past the fences of the Goddard Space Flight center in the rolling Maryland countryside. 'I asked her to come.'

‘You asked her too late,’ Tony replied, squinting into the sun and realising that they were in for another uncomfortably hot day. ‘She’s already there, Dwight. But she’s in the Laboratory for Extraterrestrial Physics, checking on the progress of the balloons that were sent up into the hole from the base at McMurdo Sound.’

‘Any results yet?’

‘They’re analysing the data right now. That’s why Clare’s there so early. Like a mother with her new-born baby, she just won’t let it go.’

‘She’s the NASA type,’ Dwight said with undisguised admiration. ‘A woman who loves her work and is relentlessly thorough at what she does. That’s why she became one of the first of the female astronauts and ended up liaising between us and the White House - she has the skill *and* the gumption. I just hope that her new domestic situation doesn’t make her lose that.’

‘I don’t think it will, Dwight.’

Still, as Dwight turned the car through the guarded gates and into the sprawling complex of NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center, Tony couldn’t help wondering if he was right. Like him, Clare loved her work and could not live without it, and although superficially she appeared to have adjusted to her new life in Greenbelt, he sometimes wondered how long it would be before the trials and tribulations of domesticity took their toll on her. At the moment, she seemed happy, intrigued by the novelty of being a surrogate mother and housekeeper, but right now she was also excited about the ozone project. What would happen, Tony wondered, when that project came to an end and she was given time to dwell on the difference between the life she had left in swanky Georgetown, to live here, in more humble circumstances, in the suburbs of Greenbelt. It made him nervous to think of it.

‘Another day, another dollar,’ Dwight said, parking the car in front of the Institute for Space Studies. ‘Let’s get to it, Tony.’

As he climbed out of the car, Tony noticed how hot and bright it was.

‘Christ,’ he said, gratefully entering the air-conditioned Institute for Space Studies, ‘the weather really *is* getting warmer.’

‘Right,’ Dwight replied. ‘And if we don’t stop that hole in the ozone from growing, it’s gonna get warmer and warmer, until...’ He shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

‘The ice caps start melting,’ Tony completed his sentence for him. ‘Which they’re *already* doing.’

‘You’re kidding!’

‘No, I’m not. Jack Douglas recently sent Clare a report from the Laboratory of Oceans. It said that their most recent ocean and cryospheric science experiment has revealed a slight rise in the sea level of the South Atlantic Ocean. This is already spreading to other seas and oceans, which explains the rise of many rivers and the dramatic changes of weather around the globe. It’ll get worse as the ice-caps continue melting.’

‘Jesus Christ,’ Dwight said. ‘It’s happening quicker than I’d expected.’

‘Exactly,’ Tony said, glancing idly at the people in the offices they were passing. ‘According to our climate-model calculations, we were expecting, by the year 2030, the equivalent of a two-hundred percent increase in carbon dioxide. That would induce a global warming of between 1.5 and 4.5. degrees Centigrade. That, in turn, would cause a catastrophic drying of the world’s chief wheat and corn belts, as well as sea-level rises of twenty to forty centimetres, eventually leading to the flooding of major land masses. However, with the present, unexpected rate of ozone depletion, all of this has already started and should, at the rate it’s progressing, lop about thirty years off our estimate.’

‘*How* much?’

‘You heard me. Based on the hole over the Antarctic alone – in other words, ignoring any other possible areas of depletion - we can expect even more damaging climatic changes within the next decade: say, by the year 2,000.’

Dwight stopped walking and stared at him in shock.

‘Did you say those calculations hadn’t taken into account any other areas of ozone depletion?’

‘Right.’

‘Shit!’ Dwight exclaimed softly, then shook his head from side to side in a despairing manner and started walking again. ‘You’re in for an interesting morning,’ he said as he entered his office. ‘You better believe it. Here, take this chair.’ He pulled a chair up to the front of his desk, and when Tony was seated offered him a coffee.

‘Sounds like I might need it,’ Tony said.

‘With some Valium, old buddy.’ Using the intercom on his desk, Dwight asked his secretary to bring in Captain Mantell, along with three cups of coffee.

‘Who’s Captain Mantell?’ Tony asked.

‘A USAF pilot from the Wallops Flight Facility in Virginia, recently returned from a tour at our base in Thule, Greenland. He was sent home after ejecting

himself from his aircraft during a research flight across the North Pole. I'll let him tell you the rest.'

He was just about to kick his chair back and swing his feet onto the desk when the telephone rang. Picking it up, he listened a moment, then grinned and said, 'Hi, Clare! Yeah, he's with me right now. Why not speak to me instead of him? I'm a much better listener.' He waited for the response, grinned more widely and then passed the phone to Tony. 'She wants only you, handsome.'

Tony took the phone. 'Hi. Where are you?'

'I'm in the Science Information Systems Center,' Clare said, 'assessing the data we received from the experiment sent up from McMurdo Sound last week. The balloons' payloads took external readings both at the top and the bottom of the hole in the ozone layer. The data was then interfaced to the Information Processing Division of NASA for processing and evaluation by the Laboratory for High Energy Physics, which concentrated on the origin and structure of any particles, electronic or otherwise; the Laboratory for Atmospheres, which focused on the ozone balance of the stratosphere; and the Laboratory for Extraterrestrial Physics, which looked for charged particles, magnetic and electric fields, and plasmas. The separate findings of those three laboratories were then passed on to the SISC, right here, where the numerical simulations of data produced what may be the answer.'

'Which is?' Tony couldn't hide his impatience.

'What we appear to be dealing with,' Clare said in a suddenly quiet, deliberately controlled manner, 'is something that isn't organic or carbon-based, but *is* alive in some way or another.'

'Jesus,' Tony whispered.

'We're talking plasmodes,' Clare said. 'The analysed payloads have produced what appears to be some kind of organised motion of plasmodes created by the interaction of electrons and ions. We've defined the plasmodes as being alive in the sense that they appear to have a definite structure, are feeding on the energy of the stratosphere and atmosphere, including the ozone layer, and are constantly reproducing by magnetically converting random particle clusters into non-random ones. In other words, the basic trinity of life: structure, feeding and reproduction. Whatever it is, it's alive, feeding off the ozone layer and other elements of the atmosphere and stratosphere, and constantly reproducing its own kind... It's alive and... *growing!*'

Tony studied the wall, feeling stunned, not sure if he should feel exhilarated or

terrified.

An alien life-form... It was there, above Earth... It was growing as it travelled down through the atmosphere to...

'Are you still there or have you fainted?' Clare asked.

'I'm still here,' he replied.

'A bit of a shock, eh?'

'Yeah, Clare, a bit of a shock. I don't know what to say.'

'I don't blame you. Anyway, obviously we don't know if it's conscious or self-aware, though we're inclined to believe it's been dormant for a long time, is gradually coming awake, or back to life, and is responsible for the hallucinations being created inside the ozone hole.'

'How?'

Clare sighed. 'I don't know. No one knows. We only know what we've seen: that it manifests life-like images from the individual's subconscious. Whether or not it's actually *aware* of what it's doing, we can't say. We can only say with certainty that it's alive and has some kind of consciousness.'

'Christ!' Tony exclaimed.

At that moment, Dwight's secretary ushered into the office a well-muscled man in a short-sleeved white shirt and pants. He had short-cropped brown hair, looked every inch a pilot, but was oddly tentative in his movements, as if uneasy. He smiled painfully at Dwight and then, when Dwight nodded, took the chair beside Tony and glanced in a distracted manner around the office.

'I've got to go now,' Tony said to Clare, 'but thanks for the phone call. I'm pretty shaken, as you might expect, but it sure was worth hearing. I'll see you tonight.'

'Okay. Love you madly.'

He hung up on her sweet voice as Dwight's secretary, the leggy, good-humoured and efficient Joanne Woods, brought three coffees into the office, set them on the desk, gave a wave of her hand and walked out again.

'Tony,' Dwight said, indicating the man in the other chair, 'this is Captain Joe Mantell, the USAF pilot I mentioned. Joe, this is Tony Rydell, one of our best physicists. I think he'll find your story pretty intriguing. Do you mind repeating it again?'

'No, not at all.' Mantell stood up to shake Tony's hand, He was tall and very broad, yet oddly lacking in vigour. 'Hi,' he said. 'I've heard a lot about you and it makes me feel better.'

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re taking this business seriously. When it happened, I thought I was hallucinating or had maybe gone mad. When it was over, when I was making my report in the debriefing room at the base in Thule, I thought *they’d* think I’d gone mad and they probably did. So it’s a relief to know I’m not alone. Like I said, it makes me feel better.’

Dwight offered Mantell a coffee, but he said he was too nervous to drink.

‘You don’t look the nervous type,’ Tony said.

‘I wasn’t – at least not until this business happened. Now, shit, yes, I’m nervous. Night and day. Every hour. I can’t go back in an airplane. Jesus, man, it was awful.’

‘So what happened?’ Tony asked.

‘I’ve told this so often, I...’

‘Just tell me.’

Mantell shrugged forlornly. ‘Okay,’ he said. ‘I’ve been a pilot with the Wallops Flight Facility for years, specialising in payload-carrying flights for upper atmospheric research, most of them across the Arctic Circle from our base in Thule, Greenland. I was good at my job, right? Highly experienced. No hassles. Then, last week, when I was flying my customary research version of the ER-2 - which I believe you're familiar with…’

‘Right,’ Tony said.

Mantell grinned mournfully. ‘Okay. So when I was flying my ER-2 across the Arctic Circle, passing over the Lincoln Sea, heading towards the North Pole, at an altitude of fifteen kilometres, I suddenly felt very strange, disorientated… then I saw an unidentified flying object.’

‘A flying saucer?’

‘Well...’

‘You can tell me.’

‘Well... I wouldn’t say it was a flying saucer, exactly. More of a brilliant light, a sort of shimmering, pulsating light, that spread out around the airplane, filling my cabin, until I couldn’t see a goddamned thing - not the instrument panel, not my own hands or legs - just this dazzling light.’

‘Any sound?’ Dwight prompted him.

‘Yeah, right, sound...’ Mantell grew even more nervous, just remembering... ‘Most sounds were cut off when the light appeared, leaving nothing but what seemed like static. I tried to contact Thule and got nothing but more static, then

the light became so bright, I couldn't see the control panel, and then the static seemed to fill my goddamned head and made me come close to screaming.'

'It was static?' Tony asked him.

'Sort of,' Mantell replied. 'I mean, it sounded like static at first. Then it got louder, too loud to be real, and seemed to be something *inside* my head... a *collision* of sounds, maybe voices... I don't know... It was just this godawful, fucking noise that nearly drove me insane... So I took the plane down to my lowest recommended altitude of twelve kilometres, hoping for peace and quiet.'

Mantell glanced left and right, as if being spied upon, then wiped sweat from his forehead with his hand and took a deep breath. He was dissolving in sunlight.

'I had a brother,' he said. 'We were real competitive as kids. Our dad was a USAF pilot and we wanted to be the same, but I was the one with the talent, so my brother lost out. When I won my wings, he started drinking. His career and marriage were a disaster. The better my life became, the worse his became, and eventually, when he was still only twenty-eight, he committed suicide, leaving a note saying he hadn't had a hope as long as I was alive. Yeah, that was my brother.'

He took a deep breath, puffed his cheeks, then let his breath out. He seemed like a lost child.

'I was haunted by that for years. I secretly blamed myself. I often dreamed about my brother, felt haunted by him... and then, in that strange light in the ER-2, my brother materialised...'

He stopped talking and looked at the floor, then glanced up at Tony. He had the gaze of a drowning man.

'Go on,' Tony said firmly.

Mantell shrugged. 'It was goddamned awful. He was so real, I could smell him. He was sweating and I heard his heavy breathing and then he reached out and touched me.' Mantell shuddered. 'I *felt* his touch. There's no doubt about that. I felt him and smelt him and heard him and then lost my self-control. Jesus, yes, I just lost it...' He shuddered again and pressed his fingers into his eyes, as if trying to blind himself. 'I couldn't stand it,' he said. 'He was so real, he was alive. I knew that the heavy breathing I was hearing was the sound of his dying breath. He had killed himself over me. Yes, I knew that I was hearing his accusation in the sounds of his dying. He died again right in front of me - he dissolved as the airplane nosedived - and I nearly went mad...'

Mantell sucked his breath in, then let it out in a stricken sob. ‘I ejected from the plane,’ he said. ‘I shouldn’t have done it, but I had to. I just couldn’t bear to stay in that cabin, re-living my brother’s death. So I ejected and let the plane go down and then I had to be rescued.’ He wiped the tears from his eyes, shook his head, then sniffed and looked up again. ‘In that moment, I destroyed my career. I’ll never fly again... Never!’

‘Yes, you will,’ Tony lied.

Mantell smiled, grateful for the lie, then stood up wearily and placed a heavy hand on Tony’s shoulder.

‘No,’ he insisted, lowering his gaze, ‘I won’t fly again and we both know it. But I want you to keep pursuing this thing and find out what’s happening. Whatever happened to me, whatever’s causing this to happen, it can’t be good for me or anyone else, for the country, the world. There’s something up there, man, something unknown, and it’s like nothing else. Please find out what it is.’

‘We will,’ Tony said. ‘Thanks.’

Mantell nodded and hurried out, as if running away from a nightmare. Tony stared across Dwight’s desk and met his cautious gaze.

‘It didn’t happen in the Antarctic,’ Dwight reminded him. ‘This one took place over the Arctic... at a very low altitude.’

‘Yeah,’ Tony said, sweating profusely even though he felt cold. ‘As Clare said, it’s alive and it’s growing. What the hell do we do now?’

‘We pray,’ Dwight said.

Chapter Twenty-Six

‘I don’t want you to go,’ Clare insisted after Tony had kissed her goodbye on the doorstop.

‘Stop worrying,’ Tony said. ‘It’s business, pure and simple. I wanna check on her apparition - whether or not she senses it or is in any way aware of it - and I also want to discuss the divorce. So it’s purely business - personal as well as NASA. Besides, she called and insisted on seeing me, so maybe *she* wants a divorce, which would solve a lot of the problems I see looming. So I’m going. Okay?’

Clare sighed. ‘Okay. But don’t linger if she starts coming on to you. Just get

out that door again.'

Tony grinned. 'Godammit! Clare Holton, the fierce pragmatist, is jealous. I just don't believe it!'

'Believe it,' Clare said.

Knocked out by her grace and beauty, Tony kissed her again, then walked along the path to his parked car, got in and drove off. He saw her waving from the doorstep and he quickly waved back, then drove out to the Greenbelt Road, turned left towards the Parkway, and eventually took the road to Annapolis.

According to what Suzy had told him when she called, she was still living with her folks in Iowa, they weren't doing too well, and she had flown to Maryland to talk to him about 'something important.' When Tony had pressed her on exactly what that meant, she had refused to elaborate, saying only that she wanted to talk on neutral territory, rather than the house. She was spending her three days in Maryland at the Annapolis home of her best friend, Caroline Blackwood, but she and Tony were going to meet in a bar in the town.

Since he was now in love with Clare, Tony was hoping that Suzy was more seriously involved with Joe Wheeler and therefore going to ask for the divorce that he now believed *he* wanted. However, he sensed that the meeting wasn't going to be that easy, and that what he'd be faced with would be more angry demands that he let the kids return with her to Iowa, which he wasn't prepared to allow. Merely thinking of the meeting to come therefore filled him with dread and he prayed silently that it wouldn't be too unpleasant.

Just let it be over quickly, he thought. *Please God, no more scenes*.

Reaching Annapolis, he parked his car down by the waterfront. As he walked through the hot, blinding sunlight towards McCarvey's Saloon & Oyster Bar, where he was to meet Suzy, he thought of her ghost, or doppelganger, and felt a kind of clammy unreality falling upon him and wondered who or *what* he could expect when he walked into the restaurant. Perhaps the Suzy he was going to see might not be the real one.

In the event, she was real enough, waving at him from the bar, her blonde hair framing a face still sensually provocative. She was wearing a loose white T-shirt that fell off her full breasts. Tight denims and stiletto-heeled shoes emphasised her long legs. She looked, he thought, like a saucy teenager. He had forgotten how cute she could look.

Slightly shaken to find that he still had strong feelings for her, he returned her wave as he approached the bar, aware that more than one set of eyes was

studying him enviously. When he reached her, she turned her head aside to blow a thin stream of smoke.

'Still smoking,' he said.

'My only vice,' she replied. 'Right now, I'm as pure as a nun, which should make you happy.'

Ryell took the stool beside her, almost kissed her, changed his mind. 'It doesn't make me anything,' he said, then glanced at her empty glass. 'What are you drinking?'

'Bourbon on the rocks.'

'It's only lunchtime.'

'I'm obviously a born liar,' she said. 'You've just discovered my second vice.'

She looked at him with bright eyes, her smile gently mocking. He shook his head from side to side in disgust and ordered more drinks: a bourbon on the rocks for her, a beer for himself.

'You wanna eat?' he asked her.

'Can we afford it?' she replied.

'There's no *we* anymore, Suzy, just you and me; and at the moment, at least before our conversation, I can afford to buy lunch.'

'You think I called you just to discuss money?'

'Yeah.'

'You're a real bright boy, Tony.'

Yet she was visibly wounded, which explained her sardonic tone, and it made him ashamed of what he had said on the spur of the moment. Disconcerted, feeling ambushed by his past, he glanced along the bar, saw businessmen and boaters rubbing elbows at the counter, eating oysters and hamburgers and eggs Benedict, drinking bourbon or beer.

'A busy joint,' he said, returning his gaze to Suzy.

'Yeah,' she replied. 'I like it 'cause it's friendly and informal. We used to come here a lot.'

'Who?'

'You and me, Tony. Remember? We used to come here at least once a month and take a boat out. We both loved to do that.'

'Oh, yeah,' he said, remembering with some embarrassment. 'Right.'

' I'm staying with Caroline.'

'Yeah,' he said, knowing Caroline well, since it was with her and her husband, Ron, that he and Suzy had spent so many weekends here. 'I haven't seen her or

Ron for a long time. How are they doing?'

'They're fine. They send their regards. They said you should come see them sometime and not mind about us.'

'Terrific. I'll do that. So what made you decide to stay in Annapolis?'

'I just wanted a break. A friend to talk to. See water after the parched plains and rusting tractors of that dust bowl, Iowa.'

'Things are bad there, eh?'

'Yeah. Real bad. My folks' farm is done for. The bank's trying to force my dad to sell but he refuses to do it.'

'He was always a stubborn man.'

'It runs in the family.'

'Yeah,' Tony said. 'I guess it does, Suzy.' He had a sip of his beer. 'Still shacked up with Joe Wheeler, are you?'

He regretted the remark immediately, though she didn't seem too offended.

'I was never *shacked up* with him, Tony. We just met occasionally. It was good while it lasted, but it's finished.'

'Why?'

She shrugged and blew a few smoke rings, watched them drifting away from her. 'Something happened that made me think a lot less of him. I was real disappointed.'

'That guy was all muscle and no brains. He never had any class.'

'I've never been very bright when it comes to men,' Suzy admitted. 'I married *you*, didn't I?'

Tony had to grin at that. He felt surprisingly affectionate towards her. 'So, do you want to eat or not?' he asked.

'Not really,' she said.

Tony nodded. 'It's too early for me as well.' The barman brought their drinks. 'Anyway,' Tony said, 'it's good to see you. You're looking great, Suzy.'

'You're looking pretty good yourself. She must be taking good care of you.'

'Who?'

'The woman you've moved into our home.'

'How did you know about that?'

'The kids and I talk on the phone,' she said, 'and they think she's a knockout. I could choke just saying that.'

'Don't choke, Suzy. Have a drink instead. Here's to the future.' They touched glasses and drank. 'Jesus,' Tony said, licking his lips, 'I sure do like my beer. So

what do you want, Sue?'

'You know I hate being called that.'

'Okay, Suzy, I'm here and I'm waiting. What do you want?'

'I want to know if you miss me.'

He was taken aback by that and suddenly remembered the other Suzy, the apparition in the ER-2. Abruptly feeling that he was tumbling backwards into a dark well, he had another sip of his beer, then wiped his lips with his hand.

'Miss you?' he said. 'Why do you ask me that?'

'Why do you think?'

'You're suddenly bored with your freedom?'

'You really demand your pound of flesh, don't you? Don't look so smug, Tony.'

'I'm not looking smug and I certainly don't feel it. I just want to know why you're suddenly so concerned about whether or not you've been missed.'

'I'm not concerned,' she said. 'I'm just curious. I always felt that you were never that concerned, and so, you know, I just wondered. Not that I should have asked. The fact that you've moved some bitch into the house is all the answer I need.'

'She isn't a bitch.'

'She's in my house with my kids.'

'You left both of your own accord, so you can't complain too much. What I wanted to ask,' he said, quickly changing the subject when he saw her cheeks flush with anger, 'is if you had any special reason for suddenly wanting to know if I'd missed you. I mean, apart from the trouble with the farm, are things going okay?'

She shrugged, had a sip of her bourbon, kept her eyes on the glass. 'Not bad,' she said. 'I mean, I get a bit lonely sometimes. I miss the kids. I even miss you, dammit. So a lotta times I wanted to come back, but couldn't do it - you know? Woman's pride and all.'

'Yeah, Suzy, I know.'

'Anyway, I couldn't do it. I wanted to, but I couldn't. Then Don told me on the phone that you had this other woman in the house, so I figured there wasn't a chance of my coming home.'

'No,' Tony said, 'there isn't.'

Suzy nodded solemnly. 'Yeah, I understand. Anyway, knowing that, I went and got myself a job - I serve in a diner in Des Moines - and that helped me feel

better. I mean, it may not be much, but it's something. It helps me and my folks.'

'If I can help you with money…'

'No, I didn't come here for that...' Her words trailed off nervously.

'I wanna ask you something,' Tony said. 'Since you left me, have you ever felt strange in any way? Or seen or felt anything strange? Have you had *any* kind of experience that seemed weird or mysterious?'

'Whatd'ya mean?'

'Ever feel..?' He hesitated, hardly knowing how to phrase it, searching for the right word. '*Haunted*?'

She stared solemnly at him for a moment, then burst into laughter. 'Haunted?' she said, when she'd stopped laughing. 'What way do you mean? By the memory of you, or what?'

'No,' he said, realising how stupid he sounded. 'I'm not suggesting you couldn't forget me. I mean haunted in the proper meaning of that word. Did you see or *sense* anything weird or even unusual?'

She stubbed out her cigarette, her brow furrowed in thought. 'You mean by ghosts?' she asked him.

'Yeah,' he said, feeling embarrassed. 'Something like that. Have you ever felt another presence around you, inside you? I don't know... just... anything strange.'

She shook her head from side to side, breaking into a helpless smile. 'No, Tony, I didn't. I felt miserable at times, often guilty, but nothing ghostly or weird. Why the hell are you asking me this?'

'No real reason,' he said too quickly.

'You must have had a reason.'

'Nothing important,' he lied, recalling the ghostly, more frightening Suzy who had materialised magically in his ER-2 airplane. 'It's just a private research project of mine. I'm asking lots of people that question. I mean, I'm wondering if this unusually hot weather is affecting people in any way. That's all there is to it.'

She furrowed her brow and looked sceptically at him, then grinned and shrugged. 'You always *were* a bit kooky,' she said, 'and that obviously hasn't changed.'

'No,' he said, 'I guess not.'

Suzy stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray, had another sip of bourbon, then

turned serious and said, ‘You know, there *was* something funny, come to think of it.’

‘Oh? What?’

‘You’re interested in things that may be caused by the weather?’

‘Right.’

‘Well, I guess you already know that there’s been a lot of reports of people in Iowa seeing strange things...flying saucers, ghostly figures, and so on.’

‘I read about it, yeah.’

‘Well...’ She hesitated, as if embarrassed, then continued: ‘The day I broke up with Joe Wheeler, when I was all upset and driving from his bar in Des Moines, back to our farm, I had this sudden vision of Don and Ronnie standing together in the road right in front of my car. It was a real vivid vision. I nearly fainted when I saw them. I didn’t have time to brake, so I drove straight into them. Not into them - through them. Or I *seemed* to go through them. Then, when I got out of the car to approach them, they just disappeared. Damn, I was scared!’

Tony was scared just to hear that, but he tried not to show it.

‘Anything else?’ he asked.

‘Yeah, there *was* something else...’ She had another sip of her bourbon, as if to steady her nerves. ‘Immediately after that incident, when I was still drivin’ and lookin’ around for the kids, I saw what looked like a flying saucer coming at me from the east at terrific speed. It shot across the car, right above me, then disappeared like the kids. It was so real, I went into a skid and almost shot off the road. When I stopped, my heart was pounding, I can tell you. I was so scared, I couldn’t breathe.’

‘Anything else?’

‘Well, when I recovered, I looked around, but I couldn’t see anything unusual, so I just started the car and drove on home. I’ve seen nothing since then.’

Recalling Clare’s contention that the alien virus could be manifesting lifelike images from the subconscious of the individual, Tony asked, ‘And this occurred immediately after you’d broken off with Joe Wheeler?’

‘Right. I mean, the word around Des Moines is that a lot of the so-called visions are due to the anxieties and traumas caused by the destruction of the land... troubled people imagining things... That might have been the case with me, ‘cause when I broke off that day with Joe, it was over our kids. He’d made it clear that he wasn’t interested in looking after them or my folks, so I was thinking of Don and Ronnie when I had that vision of them.’

‘That could make sense,’ Tony said, secretly delighted that Wheeler hadn’t wanted to look after Don and Ronnie, but also disturbed that Suzy had even considered the idea. ‘But it doesn’t explain your sighting of a flying saucer.’

‘Well, it might,’ Suzy said thoughtfully. ‘I mean, earlier that same day, when Dad returned from the bank and we heard his bad news, we were all feeling real low, sat down to watch TV, and saw a program about the increasing incidence of flying saucer sightings and other strange happenings. So, there was that on my mind as well. Then, when I went to see Joe in his bar in Des Moines, we discussed the very same subject before discussing the boys.’

‘Did you ever feel anything odd regarding yourself?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I mean, did you ever get the feeling that you were somewhere else? Or that there were two of you and *one* of you was somewhere else?’

‘Hell, no. That’s crazy!’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Absolutely!’

Satisfied that she had been in no way connected to the apparition he had seen in the ER-2 and that it had therefore been released from his subconscious, Tony decided to steer the subject back to more immediate concerns.

‘I’m enjoying this little reunion,’ he said, trying to sound more unconcerned than he felt, ‘but I’ll really have to be going soon, so what did you want?’

‘I want my kids,’ she told him. ‘Since I can’t come home again, I want the kids to come with me to Iowa. They’ll be better off with me and also good for my parents. Besides, I don’t want them being brought up by that woman of yours.’

‘You’ve no right to ask for the kids back when it was you who walked.’

‘I didn’t intend leaving them for good. I just had to be alone for a while, to sort myself out. I was feeling sorta bruised, hurt that you’d ignored my threat to leave, and I wanted to think about that before deciding what I should do: either go back home and beg forgiveness, or stay away for good and send for them. Since that choice has been taken from me, since that woman’s in my house, I want you to give the kids to me, to live in Iowa.’

‘You’ve just told me that your folks’ farm is finished, so where will my kids live?’

‘When we sell the farm to pay the debts, we should have enough left to buy a small house near Des Moines. I’ve already got a job, Dad can maybe get something else, and the boys will at least have their real mother.’

‘Some mother!’ Tony said.

‘I was fine,’ Suzy retorted. ‘It wasn’t until you started ignoring me that I went off the rails.’

‘Iowa’s gonna be wiped off the map,’ Tony said. ‘I’m not sending my kids there.’

‘It’s not that bad, Tony. It’s only the farms. Des Moines is still okay, a lot healthier than here, and with good schools and universities and lots for the kids to do.’

‘I’m sorry, Suzy, you can’t have ‘em. They’re both doing fine here. Besides, you’re bound to end up with another boyfriend. Let’s not forget that.’

‘So what? A woman’s entitled to her relationships. It’s not gonna do the kids any harm to see me with another man. And after all, you’ve got that woman in our house.’

‘You gotta be joking!’ Tony exclaimed, feeling affronted.

‘What do you mean?’

‘I hand over my kids to be looked after by you and your goddamned boyfriends? I won’t buy that,’ he said. ‘You must think I’m crazy. You walked out on us, Suzy, leaving nothing but a lot of problems, but now the kids are happy again - they think Clare’s great - and you want me to start the disruption all over again? No way, Suzy. No chance! And now I’ve got to be going.’

He started walking out of the bar, but she slid off her stool and followed him, catching him just as he stepped outside, into the blinding light.

‘Hey, wait a minute,’ she said, jerking him around by his shoulder and glaring at him. ‘Those are *my* kids, godammit, and I still love them and want to care for them. Just as I once cared for you, even when you ignored me.’

That took his breath away, since he saw the truth in it, but he managed to shut the truth out, saying, ‘You’re not going to get the kids back, Suzy, and that’s all there is to it.’

She looked hurt and angry at once, which made him feel even more guilty.

‘If I don’t,’ she said, ‘I’ll make your life a goddamned misery. I’ll file for divorce and I’ll fight about money, and if nothing else, I’ll bury you in legalities that’ll drive you insane.’

‘You wanna see the kids, come see them,’ Tony said, ‘but believe me, you won’t get them back. I’ll see you around, Sue.’

‘Don’t call me Sue!’ she shouted behind him, as he walked to his parked car.

‘Right, Suzy!’ he called back, sounding sarcastic, not feeling it, surprised to

discover that he still cared greatly for her, and aware that the guilt he was feeling had its roots in his carelessness. Then he climbed into his car and drove off, only looking back long enough to see Suzy, her shoulders slumped forlornly, dissolving in silvery light.

It was as hot as hell out there.

Part Three

Chapter Twenty-Seven

'He's only been gone a week and I miss him already,' Clare confessed to Dwight when she had drinks with him and Maggie around Tony's garden table, out back of the house in Greenbelt. 'He's more of a nuisance than he's worth, but dammit, I miss him.'

'I don't,' Grandma said, sitting beside her in the shade of the umbrella, knitting a pullover, and keeping her rheumy eyes on the boys, who were playing in the inflatable pool. 'It's a regular vacation with him gone - no more migraines or headaches. That boy of mine, he'll be the death of me someday, so I'm enjoying this break.'

Maggie threw her head back and laughed in her appealingly raucous manner. 'Come on, Grandma,' she said, 'tell us another tall tale! You *dote* on that boy of yours!'

'I do not!'

'Of course you do!'

'Well, *I* dote on her boy,' Clare said, smiling, 'though he doesn't deserve it.'

'That boy of mine has a heart of gold,' Grandma reminded them. 'He's just easily distracted. That's why he's gone off on another trip - he always has to be on the move.'

Clare knew that Tony's latest trip was based on more than restlessness - it was truly important - and she thought of it with a feeling of deprivation, as well as helpless envy. This was their first anniversary: she had been living here for a year. In that time the ozone layer had thinned dramatically in many places, the

mean temperature had risen dangerously, and the effects were being felt around the globe in unexpected, frightening ways. Now Tony was in the Amazon, one of the worst affected regions, officially in order to check out the more bizarre results of the ozone depletion, unofficially to get a break from the recent outburst of legal warfare with his wife. He was dealing, then, with a public and private crisis, and she wanted to be with him.

'I appreciate you dropping in like this,' she said to Dwight and Maggie. 'It's nice to have some company when Tony's not here.'

'Anything for a free drink,' Dwight replied, grinning and holding up his glass of beer. 'It's all in a day's work.'

The remark made Clare smile, but she did feel grateful to both of them. Sitting here in the backyard, in the dazzling heat of an unnatural summer, she was reminded of the fact that she had lived with Tony for a year now, and that it had been the strangest year of her life, for more reasons than one.

Having come from a society of pragmatic, ambitious and often powerful people, in Washington DC, she had been forced to adjust her way of thinking in order to settle into this more commonplace environment. As she had soon come to realise, she was now living in a relatively insular colony of NASA scientists, technicians, computer operatives, test-pilots and administrators, most of whom were employed either by NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, right here in Greenbelt, or at the Navy's Surface Weapons Center in nearby Whiteoak. Most of them were intensely involved in their work and few seemed to have any major interests. Thus, whereas Clare had formerly socialised mainly with politicians, journalists and high-ranking military personnel, she now spent most of her spare time with 'cowboy' test-pilots, often eccentric scientists and technologists like Tony, and a lot of hard-drinking men and their women at boozy parties and barbecues, or in noisy bars. To her surprise, she liked it, enjoying the informality, released from the constraints of her intellect in sensual pleasures. She was no longer merely a creature of the mind, but a woman of flesh and blood. The transition had been made a lot easier because of the unobtrusive support of Dwight and Maggie, who lived just around the corner from Tony and were clearly his best friends. Now they were her best friends, too.

'I swear you've blossomed,' Dwight said in his casual manner, gazing steadily at her. 'You look younger than you did a year ago -and you looked pretty young then. This new life must be good for you.'

‘Love and passion,’ Maggie explained, her smile broad and mischievous. ‘She’s come down to Earth, to the basics, and it’s made her temperature rise.’

Clare felt herself blushing. ‘Stop it, Maggie. You’re just trying to embarrass me. I know you love doing that.’

‘I hope you have a strong bed,’ Dwight said.

‘We can hear the noise in our house,’ Maggie added.

‘You two have filthy minds,’ Grandma said, glancing up from her knitting, ‘but this gal’s looking healthy because she’s found a healthier way of life: looking after her man and his children and taking pride in the home. That’s a woman’s place, when all’s said and done.’

‘A woman’s place!’ Clare exclaimed.

‘Oh, my God!’ Maggie added.

‘That’s it,’ Grandma said. ‘Make fun of me, the pair of you. But a woman’s place is in the home, always was, always will be. And that’s why Clare’s blossoming. She’s found that there are more important things in life than independence and money. Go on, Clare, admit it.’

‘Definitely not!’ Clare retorted, though aware that she had done what she had sworn she would never do: give up her independence for a permanent relationship. And in the case of Tony, her charmingly dishevelled and undomesticated workaholic, the relationship, while undoubtedly real enough, had been bought at a high price. She had given up most of her luxuries, turned her back on security, and accepted the burden of Tony’s children, slightly loopy mother, and ostracized wife, who, over the past few months, had displayed a real talent for making life hell on Earth. Clare hadn’t met Suzy yet, but felt that she knew her. At least through her solicitors.

‘I’m tired,’ Grandma said. ‘I can’t take this heat. I’ll go inside and check how lunch is doin’ and give you a call when it’s ready.’

‘Thanks,’ Clare said.

‘No need for thanks,’ Grandma replied. ‘I’m not the kind to accept favours. As long as I’m here, I'll earn my keep.’

‘Let me help you,’ Maggie said.

‘No need. I’m perfectly capable.’

‘I know you are,’ Maggie said diplomatically, getting out of her chair, ‘but I want to help anyway. I need something to do.’

‘Of course you do,’ Grandma said. ‘You're a woman in the prime of her health with a lot of energy to burn off. Well, all right then, let's go.’

The boys whooped in the pool, having a good time together, while Grandma and Maggie retreated into the kitchen to prepare a late lunch. Clare had a sip of her orange juice, then looked across the table at Dwight

'What's Tony doing in the Amazon?' Dwight asked her. 'Checking on more ghosts?'

'That's it, Dwight. That's exactly what he's doing. Since the hallucinations, or ghosts, caused by whatever's eating the ozone layer, started materialising on Earth, the Amazon's become one of the most strongly effected areas. Tony's gone with a bunch of other physicists to check it out.'

And not just there, she thought with a feeling of deprivation. In fact, over the past three months, with members of British, European, Canadian and Indian government-sponsored research teams, all cooperating to solve the mystery of the alien virus, Tony had been to the Arctic and Antarctic, New Zealand, Bali, Great Britain, and even Tucson, Arizona. Clare missed him and envied him, but unfortunately she had to stay in Maryland or, more specifically, Washington DC, to deal with Jack Douglas and the President.

'Tony has all the fun,' she said.

Dwight grinned. 'He's a busy boy, all right. And at the rate that thing's spreading around the Earth, he's going to be even busier. That virus, for want of a better word, is starting to cause chaos on a worldwide scale. It's pretty damned frightening.'

Clare knew what he meant. The unknown, alien 'virus' was spreading around the globe and eating its way down through the thinning atmosphere in many different locations. Even before reaching the lower atmosphere, it had started altering the face of the Earth with melting ice caps, rising sea levels, the blighting of crops, increased skin cancer in humans, and numerous related diseases in animals, affecting food and other resources.

Also, during the past three months, when the virus had seeped down through the thinning atmosphere, aircraft pilots had started reporting that during their flights they were being tracked by UFOs and harassed by hallucinations or ghosts. Such reports had been submitted with increasing frequency all over the world, causing alarm and growing concern, until eventually what had been feared actually occurred: pilots started either ejecting in terror from their aircraft or actually crashing.

Luckily, only individual pilots had been so effected, but many governments were now concerned that sooner or later, the crews of passenger-carrying

airliners would be similarly affected, with dire consequences. What could happen should the virus spread to other forms of transport, defence installations, or even the general populace?

Wide scale destruction and death.

Already, in certain parts of the world, for reasons of safety, commercial airline services had been cancelled and the citizens reduced to travelling either by boat or overland. The possibility of that happening in the United States was not too far away.

'Yes,' Clare said, 'it's frightening. That's why we've got to stop it. We have to find out more about it and then neutralize it.'

'What do you have so far?'

'Damn little, Dwight. We're still analysing it. We only know that it's some kind of plasmode life-form, based on the interaction of electrons and ions, and that it's constantly reproducing itself, or growing, by feeding off the ozone in the atmosphere. We believe it was somehow transported here from somewhere else in the galaxy, most likely in the cosmic dust of a meteorite, such as Halley's Comet, and that it's been dormant for a long time and probably brought back to life by the heat generated by the depletion of the ozone layer.'

'A depletion actually started by us.'

'Right,' Clare said. 'We started the depletion of the ozone layer with our irresponsible use of CFCs, then, once we had awakened the sleeping giant, the virus, it began eating the ozone layer even faster than the CFCs had been. Now it's spreading all over the damned place, gobbling ozone wherever it goes. That's all we know about it at the moment, but it's enough to cause sleepless nights.'

'It's causing *me* sleepless nights,' Dwight said, 'that's for damned sure. From what I hear, there's been a sudden spate of so-called "ghost" reports from as close as Andrews AFB, with one case of a pilot ejection prior to crashing. That means the virus has seeped down over this area.'

'No one's going to admit it,' Clare said. 'Just as there's been no official mention of the virus anywhere in the world. It's the world's best-kept secret.'

'They're frightened of panic,' Dwight said. 'Just as I secretly panic when I think of the virus seeping down over here.' He waved his hand to take in the whole of Maryland, Washington, DC, Virginia... 'This area's filled with air force bases, national defence establishments, and numerous research facilities, including NASA. A lot of them come under my command. Now I lie awake at

nights, with Maggie complaining beside me, wondering when the first materialization is going to appear to a NASA employee engaged in highly sensitive or dangerous work. I keep imagining that man going crazy and then *doing* something crazy - and possibly damaging - as a consequence. That's my new nightmare, Clare.'

'Lunch is on the table!' Maggie called out from the kitchen, 'so get yourselves indoors!'

'We hear you loud and clear,' Clare called back. 'Kids, get out of that pool!'

The boys did as they were told and Clare helped them to dress, then the four of them trooped into the house to sit down to lunch. Grace was not said in this house, but when Clare glanced around her, at Dwight and Maggie, Grandma and the boys, she thought of the invisible virus spreading out above Maryland and wanted, for the first time in her life, to offer a simple prayer.

She would pray for salvation.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

It was raining in the Amazon jungle, a torrential downpour, as Tony huddled with the others beneath the high canopy of the trees, his boots buried in mud.

'Shit!' Polanski complained, huddled up beside him in his rubber cape, like a rock in a waterfall. 'Constant humidity, goddamned gloom and mud, spiders and bugs the size of your fist and now this goddamned rain! It's a real bitch, I'm telling ya.'

'Yeah,' Tony replied, wiping the rain from his eyes and squinting into the dripping forest, 'I feel like a worm wriggling through slime. I'd like to go home right now.'

'How much longer?' Polanski asked their guide, the handsome Brazilian, Antonio Bozzano, who was squatting beside them, unconcerned.

'Not much longer,' Antonio replied, then shrugged, as if time was irrelevant. 'Once the rain stops, perhaps thirty or forty minutes. It depends on whether or not the Indians have moved again - and since this started, they've moved a lot.'

It was because of what had started recently that Tony was here, with Polanski, two of his paranormal scientists, Larry Curtis and Ray Maneer, and some heavy equipment. The systematic, ruthless destruction of the Amazonian rain forests

by the Brazilian government had made it one of the areas where the depletion of the ozone in the atmosphere was the greatest. Because of this, there had been more reports of the 'virus hallucinations' made here than anywhere else, with an attendant, dramatically high number of accidents involving airplanes, trains and even road transport. All were due to a loss of control on the part of crew or drivers, reportedly caused by the sudden materialisation in cockpits and cabins of ghosts, doppelgangers and other bizarre materializations.

The majority of the reports had come from the most devastated areas of the rain forest, above which the ozone layer would be thinnest; and according to reports submitted to the authorities in Manaus, the Indian tribe that Tony and his team were hoping to meet up with had been most severely affected by unexplained phenomena, to the degree, indeed, where it was threatening to destroy the tribe's whole way of life. Reportedly, half of the tribe's people had gone mad because of what they had experienced. Tony, Polanski and his two paranormal specialists were here to try to record as much as they could of the disturbing phenomena.

The other two scientists, Larry Curtis and Ray Manner, were sitting under a tree facing Tony and Polanski, surrounded by their equipment and three of Antonio's Indian bearers. They were all covered in mud, as drenched as river rats, and looking as miserable as Tony felt.

Tony was an urban man, not used to the wild, and as he sat in the mud, hearing the relentless, heavy drumming of the rainfall, he thought longingly of his warm, cosy tract house in Greenbelt, and of Clare, who would be in bed right now, hopefully yearning for him.

'Shit!' Polanski exclaimed again. 'Even Manaus, when I think of it, is starting to seem almost civilised, maybe even appealing. Just put me back in that sleazy hotel with a hot bath and clean sheets, and I'll never complain again.'

The remark made Tony grin. The journey to the rain forest had, in terms of comfort, been one of diminishing returns. Now, he found himself thinking back yearningly to their first few days in the exotic splendour of Rio de Janeiro, staying in a suite in the Copacobana Palace, overlooking the famous beach, and given a tour of the famous sights by the urbane Antonio Bozzano. After a few pleasurable days they had taken an airplane to Belem, located at the mouth of the mighty Amazon river, surrounded by lush islets and dense jungle. The hotel in Belem had been less luxurious, but they had been charmed by the town's Portuguese colonial buildings, *Belle Epoque* houses, and streets lined with

mango trees, leading to elegant squares, serene parks and busy markets. Then another flight to Manaus, the chief inland port of the Amazon basin, a seedy but exotic town on the bank of the Rio Negro, just above the confluence of the Amazon. Their hotel had been down town, a decaying, ramshackle place, its rooms too seedy for comfort, its lobby filled with pimps and whores, and with cockroaches and spiders emerging from the many cracks in the walls. They had been there only one night, but that was one too many for Tony, and he had been relieved when, the next day, they had boarded a paddle-steamer for their journey to the confluence of the Amazon, where the coffee-brown of the Amazon met the inky black of the Rio Negro in a magical manner, though the waters appeared not to mingle, the line between them visible for miles. From there, they sailed another fifty miles upriver where, at a wooden jetty that was shadowed by soaring trees. There they had been met by the three Indian bearers. Since then they had been marching north, ever deeper into the rain forest, for what seemed like eternity.

In fact, they had only been marching for two hours, but Tony felt exhausted, drained and disorientated, as if he had awakened in that alien planet which he had so often dreamed about.

'I think the rain's stopping,' Antonio said, holding his upturned palm out to catch some drops. 'We can start off again.'

'I'm not sure I can do that,' Tony said. 'I think I'm too numb to move.'

'Get your ass out of the mud,' Polanski said, grinning as he clambered to his feet. 'Just pretend you're a boy scout.'

'Another day, another dollar,' Larry Curtis joked. 'And we're earning it, brothers.'

'Aye, aye,' Tony murmured, rearranging the straps of the rucksack on his back as the Indian bearers picked up the rest of the equipment and started into the forest. They were followed by the two scientists, who were swallowed up by the trees, then Antonio motioned Tony and Polanski forward and fell in beside them.

Tony hated the rain forest. It overwhelmed and confused him. As they marched deeper into it, he felt more oppressed and nervous. He had imagined it as being beautiful - the greenery lush in brilliant sunlight, the flowers blooming in a profusion to dazzle the eyes - but the sunlight rarely penetrated as far as the forest floor, the constant dampness and humidity encouraged claustrophobia, and the ghastly, pervading silence made even the greenery seem threatening.

‘It’s like a fucking bad dream,’ Polanski said, breathing heavily beside him. ‘I can’t wait to get out of here.’

‘Are we close?’ Tony asked Antonio.

‘Yes,’ the guide replied. ‘We’re nearly there. And if what I hear is true, if the tribe is breaking up, we should find them scattered throughout this area, so we must be careful.’

‘Why careful?’ Polanski asked.

‘If it’s true that the manifestations have caused the tribe to break up, the Indians could be unpredictable - and possibly dangerous. Also, if, as you’ve informed me, we could experience what they do, then we, too, might become unpredictable and be equally dangerous.’

‘Yeah, we have to watch out for that,’ Tony said. ‘We have to try to keep a grip on ourselves, no matter what happens.’

‘Right,’ Polanski said. ‘You got it. I wish we were there, though.’

Rubbing sweat from his eyes, Tony saw the scientists up ahead, the native bearers in front of them, machetes rising and falling, creating a path through the dense foliage.

Green, all green, now deepening in the gloom. Tony had to look carefully to see the other forest colours: the shadowed brown of the tree trunks, the whitish brown of the dangling lianas, the yellowish white of the fungi that covered the entangled branches, the dark clusters of Cannon-Ball fruit, the red petals and silvery-white fruit of the heisteria flowers that occasionally lent colour to what seemed, at first glance, to be colourless. Tony hadn’t expected this - he had expected a riot of colours - but now he knew that most of the colour was high up in the forest canopy, up there near the sun, with the true wealth of forest wildlife: the insects, monkeys, snakes, and great variety of birds. Yes, the beauty was all up there, breathing the air, warmed by the sun; down here was the gloom, the damp mud and silence, with stinging flies, poisonous spiders and eighteen-inch rodents, brown moths and sloths and large cats and giant, deadly snakes. Down here, where he stumbled and sweated, was a world to make the flesh creep.

And even as he thought this, feeling dizzy and unreal, he heard, between the hacking sounds of the machetes, a noise, nearby and also unreal, that really *did* make his flesh creep.

A high-pitched, ghastly wailing.

Tony stopped with all the others, glanced around but saw nothing. He caught

Polanski's startled gaze, then again looked about him.

The ghastly wailing continued.

'What the fuck…?' Polanski whispered.

'It's an Indian woman,' Antonio said. 'I know that sound. It's the wail of someone in mourning. They must be here, all around us.'

The woman's wailing continued, echoing eerily through the gloom, before another sound, the whip and slap of parting foliage, heralded the approach of a shadowy, painted figure, emerging from the forest.

The Indian, almost naked, his body as brown as a berry but painted in gaudy colours, stopped when he saw the white men, stared at them with mad eyes, then looked back over his shoulder as his double appeared and stopped, exactly as he had done, to do what he had done.

The first Indian stared at his double, let out a cry of fear, then plunged sideways into the forest and was lost in the foliage.

The second Indian disappeared on the instant, as if by a conjuring trick.

The three Indian bearers, who had placed their equipment on the ground, started gibbering amongst themselves, their eyes wide with dread, then raced back the way they had come, scared out of their wits.

The woman in the forest continued wailing.

'Jesus Christ!' Polanski whispered. 'It's enough to freeze your blood. Did you see what that Indian was running from?'

'Yes,' Tony said. 'His double.'

'Like in that airplane, right, Tony?'

'Yes, Polanski, the same.'

'And they're creating those doubles from their own minds, right?'

'You're a bright boy, Polanski.'

'The flying saucers,' Polanski said, 'the ones I saw in that airplane...'

'You created them out of your own mind because you wanted to see them.'

'And what the others saw - the dead relatives and snakes and spiders - were also created out of the minds of the individuals present?'

'Yes,' Tony said, not wanting to discuss this, recalling Clare's stricken face as she stared at her two dead parents and the airplane travelled on into infinity, 'I think you've got it, Polanski.'

The distant, ghastly wailing continued.

'Holy shit!' Polanski said.

'What happens now?' Curtis asked, looking excited, rather than frightened.

‘Do we go on or not?’

‘I didn’t come all this way just to turn back,’ said the other scientist, Ray Maneer, looking challengingly at each of them in turn, ‘so let’s divide the equipment between us and head for that woman.’

‘Right,’ Tony said.

After dividing the portable equipment between them, they marched on into the forest and soon came to the woman who was wailing. She was squatting cross-legged in the mud, beside a mound that looked like a grave, rocking a baby in her arms. The baby looked slightly unreal, oddly transparent, but she was sobbing and hugging it like someone demented. When Antonio knelt beside and spoke to her in Portuguese, she looked up at him, startled, then spat out a stream of words, burst into tears and started wailing again.

‘It’s her dead child,’ Antonio explained to the group. ‘That’s its grave she’s sitting beside. The child died a month ago and was buried right there, but a few days ago, while others were also being haunted, she awakened from normal sleep to find the child kicking in her arms. She came here immediately, expecting to find the earth dug up, but seeing that the grave was untouched, she couldn’t bear to leave. So she sits here with the child, going crazy, and refuses to move. She also told me that the village is haunted and that most of those who lived there have either fled or are mad. Come on, let’s get going.’

After that it became a nightmare. As they moved deeper into the rain forest and approached the Indian village, they repeatedly came across Indians, men, women and children, all of whom had obviously run away in the hope of escaping their individual demons, sprung from their subconscious. Most often their demons took the shape of people - either doubles of themselves or the reincarnation of lost loved ones or enemies - but frequently they were manifested out of fears and phobias, taking the shape of spiders, snakes, alligators, piranha fish, and other demoniac creatures from bad dreams.

Some of the Indians writhed moaning on the ground, scratching and slapping themselves; others clung to ghostly loved ones, cowered from ghostly enemies, or simply stared, rendered helpless by terror, at their equally terrified doppelgangers, who, not knowing they were unreal, didn’t know who the real ones were.

The rain forest was dark and humid, a dream of shadow and shifting light, and at the base of the enormous tree trunks, beneath the giant lianas, the Indians, isolated from one another, sobbed, smiled, sang, screamed, and were destined

either to starve to death or succumb to insanity.

Their own thoughts were destroying them.

Tony stumbled with the other scientists into the village clearing with the feeling that he was escaping from a nightmare. Instead he entered another one. All around him, in front of the thatched huts, in the rain-soaked mud, more Indians, men, women and children, were either wailing, giggling hysterically, or gibbering dementedly.

Shocked, Tony focused on a patch of sky high above the soaring trees and used that as his hold on reality. Then, when eventually he lowered his gaze, he saw Polanski staring intently at him.

'Are we really seeing this?' he asked of Tony. 'Or are we just fucking dreaming it?'

'I don't know,' Tony said.

'Lord have mercy on all of us,' Antonio said, now clearly rattled. 'May His light shine upon us.'

'This is sensational!' Larry Curtis cried out, as he excitedly unpacked the instruments. 'This is the greatest paranormal event in history - and we're here to capture it.'

'Damn right,' said his partner, Roy Maneer, taking in, with his cool, opportunistic gaze, the madness surrounding them. 'It's the opportunity of a lifetime. I can't believe what's going down here. It sure is something to see.'

'It may not be UFOs, but it's hot,' Polanski said, as he helped set up the portable magnometer, ambient and parabolic microphones, and video and motion-picture cameras. 'It's *fanfuckingtastic*!'

He was just fixing the video-camera onto its tripod, when, as if answering his subconscious desires, a pulsating, disc-shaped light materialised in the visible portion of sky directly above the clearing.

'Holy shit!' Polanski exclaimed softly. 'What the hell's *that?*'

'A UFO,' Tony said. 'A flying saucer, Polanski. It's what you've been searching for all your life - you and half of the world. The virus is feeding off your mind, ingesting your subconscious thoughts and deepest desires, then recreating them right before you eyes. What's willed, will be done.'

Polanksi squinted up at that brilliant light, watched it bobbing and weaving, then shook his head from side to side in denial.

'We've been searching the skies for years for these things,' he said, 'and they were all in the mind. There it is, a goddamned flying saucer, yet without us, it

can't exist.'

'You got it,' Tony said, jerked out of his mesmerized state by the sound of his own voice.

Glancing up at the flying saucer, he was almost blinded by it, so he lowered his gaze and looked at the men around him. They were shading their eyes to squint upward, trying to see the flying saucer in more detail, but like Tony, they lowered their gaze to glance about them once more.

At that moment, Tony heard Clare's voice whispering his name.

He jerked his head around and saw her. She was squatting by a thatched hut, wearing the shirt and slacks she had worn when they said goodbye. She was looking up at him with a warm smile.

That warm smile chilled his blood.

'Oh, no!' he heard himself whispering. 'Please, God, I can't bear this!'

He had to look away. That ghostly Clare was too much for him. The sun was burning down through the clearing, turning the rain to steam that coiled and spiralled over the earth to form a silvery mist. A nut-brown Indian uncoiled from mud-brown earth, spitting foam, his eyes mad, and drew from his belly his poisoned entrails, which he proceeded to eat.

Larry Curtis stared at him, too stunned to operate his camera, while beside him, Ray Maneer, being embraced by his dead mother, wept the tears he had been unable to shed when she was buried six years ago.

'Clare?' Polanski whispered. 'Am I seeing right? Is that *Clare* over there?'

He was staring at the thatched hut. Clare ignored him, but continued smiling at Tony, chilling his blood.

'Control!' Tony bawled, feeling insane. 'Keep control! Stand outside it and see it and treat it for what it really is! Bear in mind that it's not real!'

Polanski looked down at his feet, which were buried in green slime. He shuddered and gasped. The slime coiled around his legs, slithered up towards his groin, developed tentacles and icy eyes and a slobbering mouth as it dragged him down to the ground.

Polanski screamed as he fell, but Maneer and Curtis ignored him, the former weeping, still being embraced by his dead mother, the latter still too stunned to work his camera, just standing there as if shell-shocked, dissolving in the silvery, pulsating light that beamed down from above.

'*No!*' he suddenly screamed.

There was nothing happening to him - he was just denying what he was seeing

- but the sound of his voice whipped Tony raw and made him turn back to Clare. She stood up and walked towards him, passing the Indian with dripping entrails, and as a flying saucer glided overhead, casting its eerie light upon her, she held her hands out and smiled as if she wanted to drink his blood.

Tony's heart broke.

'Lord have mercy!' he heard Antonio exclaimed. 'We must flee from here! *Now!*'

Then Antonio grabbed his shoulder, tugged at him, slapped his face, and Tony blinked and looked above him and saw the pulsating light, then lowered his gaze to see Polanski being swallowed by that green mass with many tentacles, icy eyes and a slobbering mouth.

Polanksi had often joked about his greatest fears, making light of his nightmares: his belief that an alien life-form, if highly advanced, could have transcended the physical body and become a protoplasmic, pitiless intelligence. He was now being devoured by the manifestation of his most deeply rooted fear.

'Oh, Christ!' he sobbed. 'Jesus!'

'It's not real, Polanski!' Tony bawled, carefully keeping his gaze away from Clare's double. Then he reached down and grabbed hold of his friend and jerked him up from the mud. '*Let's get the hell out of here!'*

That did the trick. Polanski cursed and jumped upright, grabbing Tony by the shoulders, kicking at the nightmarish creature at his feet and making it disappear as he did so. He then bawled at Maneer and Curtis, who also jerked back to reality, and then, alongside Tony and the others, they fled from the village.

'The equipment!' Curtis shouted.

'To hell with it!' Antonio responded as he ran. '*We must get away from here!'*

Tony didn't have to be told and kept running, refusing to look back, passing the many Indians who were scattered throughout the forest, writhing, groaning, clawing bloodily at themselves, some smiling beatifically and waiting to die, to join the dead that they had brought back through love. Tony ran past them all, past the dying and the demented, away from the flying saucers and Polanski's monster and his ghostly Clare, thinking only of what was here - that invisible presence from the stratosphere, the mysterious, alien offspring from the hole in the ozone layer - and wondering how they could ever defeat while it did these things to them.

He ran around the towering trees, clambering over the giant lianas, fell in the mud and got up again and kept running until there were no more haunted

Indians, no flying saucers, no ghostly loved ones, and a breeze from a lake in a nearby clearing cooled his hot, sweating skin. *Then* he fell down - they all fell down as one - and gasped in anguish for breath.

'We left the equipment,' Curtis gasped.

'We got nothing,' Maneer said bitterly.

'We got out with our sanity,' Polanski said, 'which is more than we might have done.'

'We failed,' Tony said.

No one replied to that. There was nothing to say. They just lay there in silence, gradually getting their breath back, sinking into the mud, surrendering to the forest gloom, expressing with the eloquence of the dumb their dread and despair. Then they all climbed wearily, reluctantly to their feet and started the long trek back to the river.

Tony thought of Clare's double smiling at him and was chilled to the bone.

She had smiled like the living dead.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The way it happened, you couldn't believe it because it didn't seem possible. Suzy thought she knew when it had started - that vision of Don and Ronnie and the flying saucer shortly after - but then she decided that it had begun before that, when she'd lain awake all those nights, brooding about whether or not she was guilty of deserting her children, had betrayed Tony or not with Joe Wheeler. She'd had lots of visions, then, those awful dreams, lying in bed, but whether or not that was the start of it, she still couldn't say.

Certainly the kids on the road. Now *that* hadn't been a dream. It might have been an hallucination, or just vivid wishful thinking, but certainly, with that saucer-shaped light, it had been *some* kind of experience.

You just never knew.

Well, you did.

She knew now.

The first time she knew that the visions were for real was the evening her father didn't come in to dinner and she went to the window to look out for him. He'd gone out to check his fields, as he did so often these days, trying to

convince himself that the dried crops would somehow get better, that the rain might eventually fall. So, she looked out the window, wondering why he hadn't come back, and saw him kneeling at the far end of the lawn, looking up at another man in dungarees. The other man was her father's age and looked a bit like him. He was standing there as still as a rock and just gazing down, smiling. Suzy saw him clearly, illuminated in the crimson twilight, and didn't think for a second that he wasn't real, though something about him seemed strange.

Then, with a shock, she realised what it was.

The man had no shadow.

Hardly able to believe her own eyes, Suzy turned cold in the heat, then burned up with a flush of panic. She rubbed her eyes and looked at the man again.

No shadow.

No movement.

That was strange as well. The man was too still to be real. He looked just like her father, was about the same age, and he stood in that unreal, crimson twilight, smiling down at her father who, kneeling there and looking up, was crying and wiping the tears from his eyes with the back of his hand.

With her heart racing, Suzy left the house and hurried across the lawn. She felt terrified, in a kind of wide-awake dream, but she managed to cross the lawn and, before reaching her father, called out his name.

When her father jerked his head around to look at her, the other man vanished.

Just like that... into thin air.

Shocked almost witless, Suzy froze where she stood, blinking repeatedly and looking around her, until she got her senses back. Then she noticed that her father was also glancing about him, as if trying to find the missing man, and he was sobbing, which he had never done before, and wiping the tears from his eyes.

'It was my father!' he cried out.

For days after that event, Suzy's father talked obsessively about the manifestation, saying his father had been as real as night and day, that he'd even heard his breathing, and that he'd looked exactly as he had been about ten years ago, just before he died. He talked himself to exhaustion, then became listless, and would spend hours on the porch, just looking over the barren fields, obviously waiting for his father to return and maybe give him a sign.

Nothing else happened out there. It took place in the house next time. It

happened a couple of days later, when Suzy's mother was preparing dinner. Suzy heard her loud gasp, then the clattering of the pan dropped in shock.

'Oh, dear God!' Suzy's mother whispered.

Looking up from the sofa, Suzy saw her mother framed in the kitchen doorway, her hands across her mouth, her brown eyes widening as they focused on the big kitchen table... Then Suzy saw the three people at the table... Her father, the man he'd claimed was his father, and a woman who looked the same age and wore old-fashioned clothes. They were sitting facing her father, at the other side of the table, smiling silently at him.

Her father, staring at them, mesmerized, had tears on his cheeks.

Suzy thought she could see faintly through both people, but she couldn't be sure of that.

They filled her with terror.

Her mother started weeping, finally breaking the dreadful silence, and her father, jerked out of his reverie, looked up. When he did so, the people sitting opposite him became vaporous, transparent, then gradually faded away, just like smoke rings.

Suzy's father and mother clung to one another, both weeping profoundly, while Suzy sank back into the sofa, feeling weak, shaking badly.

She was seeing her father's hallucinations - and so was her mother.

She was seeing inside their thoughts.

'Yeah,' her father told her, 'I'd been thinkin' about them a lot. As I watched the farm die, when the bank said I had to sell, I started thinkin' more and more of the good ol' days, when my folks ran the farm and we ate well an' had a good life. I was yearning for that, see? I wanted it back. And so I thought a lot about that, about my younger days, my folks, and so must've willed them back into existence. Praise the Lord, it's a miracle!'

'It's the devil's work,' Suzy's mother said fearfully. 'We have to get out of here. It's a sign that we got to sell up and move somewhere else. This place is haunted, I'm sure of it.'

'I ain't movin', darlin'. No way. I was born and raised on this land and I'm gonna die here. It's a miracle, I tell you. A *good* sign. The Lord be praised, we'll be saved!'

But they wouldn't be saved. Suzy knew that for a fact. The land had died and their debts were piling up and the bank was growing impatient. Half of the

county had been forced to move, selling up, hitting the road, and Suzy knew it was just a matter of time before her father would be forced to face the facts and do exactly the same. She dreaded that day, the heartbreak it would cause, and maybe that's why she also started seeing things, just like she had that first awful night, after breaking it off with Joe Wheeler.

An awful lot of people were seeing things.

The whole damned county was haunted.

Suzy saw her dreams come true. Her troubled thoughts were given life. She hadn't been quite the same since her last meeting with Tony and now, on top of the worries she was having about her parents, and after the disappointment she'd had with Joe Wheeler, she was pining to be back home where she belonged, with Tony and the kids. So, she thought about them, too much for her own good, and then started *seeing* them, like her father had seen his folks: by the side of the road, in her bedroom, out there in the ruined fields.

When she saw them, she was filled with a combination of terror and longing.

A lot of folks in this particular, blighted area were reporting similar visions. At first people were shy of talking, but then too many things happened and gradually, when it all became too much, the word went around. People confided in one another, saw psychiatrists, took sedatives, but soon even the most reliable of witnesses were reporting strange visions. The visions were discussed at home, then from the pulpits in the churches, then in the revivalist tents that soon sprang up all over the place to deal with the newly converted. A lot thought it was the Second Coming, that the visions were signs from God, and every kind of religion, good and bad, was given a new lease of life.

'When I see them,' Suzy's mother said, referring to her own hauntings by her dead parents and a sister, 'I simply get down on my knees and pray. Seeing them sometimes breaks my heart - it's as painful as the day they died - but other times I feel a rush of love that washes me clean. I used to think it was the devil's work, but now I say praise the Lord, 'cause I know, as sure as they're in front of me, that we'll meet again soon.'

Others claimed it was due to the changing weather, the destruction of local agriculture and commerce - just folks driven mad by debt and the loss of their farms - but there were also whispers about the atmosphere, the pollution and thinning ozone layer, affecting people's brains and making them hallucinate...

'I wouldn't praise the Lord too soon.' Suzy's father was slugging beer. 'They had that case on TV - the local farmer who killed his family. They'd been

known as a happy family, no problems at all, then he picks up his shotgun, slaughters his wife and four kids, then sticks the barrel of the gun in his mouth and blows his own head off. Was losin' his farm, of course - that could've been part of it - but they say that most likely he saw somethin' and was driven insane. I'm inclined to believe that.'

The local media picked it up, then the national media, and although it then became known that other parts of the country were similarly affected, Iowa was clearly the worst hit so far.

After a few weeks, you took the hauntings for granted, even if frightened by them.

'You have to will them away,' Suzy told her folks, 'but that can take time. Sometimes you see them too suddenly and at the wrong time. When that happens, *anything* can happen and that's how you get tragedies.'

Being awake was like dreaming, which meant it was dangerous. It was easy to crash your car when you suddenly saw something; easy to run over a pedestrian; easy to get a heart attack or burn your house down by accident. Folks were doing it more and more. Though it was officially denied, there was an alarming rise in traffic accidents and crashing aircraft. And too many people were found dead from heart attacks brought on by shock. Either that or they committed suicide.

It was caused by the visions.

There was that and the cancer.

No one talked loudly about diseases, but whispers carried a long way, and besides, you just had to look around you and you couldn't deny it. It wasn't just the crops (though Lord knows, they'd surely died) but also the animals dying in the fields, before your very eyes, from infections of the skin caused by parasites, which, according to the TV programs, were caused by the sunshine.

'The Earth's atmosphere's getting thinner,' Suzy explained to her dad when he slumped deeper in his chair in front of the TV after yet another ecological program. 'We've polluted the atmosphere with all our spraying and dust-cropping and supersonic aircraft and so on; now the atmosphere around the Earth is getting thinner, even disappearing some places, leaving us unprotected from the rays of the sun.'

'The sun's *good* for you,' her father retorted. 'It's like Vitamin C.'

'Only when it's filtered by Earth's atmosphere,' Suzy explained. 'There are these rays, you know? They contain something called UV-B. We're all exposed

to UV-B - like when we get a suntan - but now we're getting too much of it and it's causing real problems. Cattle suffer from ailments such as cancer-eye and pink-eye, which lead to blindness; fish and other forms of marine life will die out for lack of larvae and phytoplankton - '

'What's that mean?'

'Some kind of food, I guess. And human beings will suffer from an increase in all kinds of diseases, including herpes, hepatitis, cataracts, various infections of the skin caused by parasites, and two forms of skin cancer. One can be cured by surgery, but the other, malignant melanoma, is incurable.'

'You mean fatal?'

'Yes, Dad.'

'So we have to get out of here,' her mother said, looking twice her age, sipping lemonade and repeatedly wiping sweat from her face with the sleeve of her blouse. 'Go somewhere not so bad. Iowa seems to be worse than most other places, at least so far, and since we can't keep the farm going anyway, we might as well move on.'

'Move on where?' her husband asked, crumpled deep in his seat, looking diminished, slugging beer from the bottle. 'We ain't *got* nowhere, honey.'

'Yes, we have,' Suzy said. 'We can go to Maryland. The problem isn't near as bad there. In fact, so far it hardly exists there and I've got good friends there. And Tony, though he won't have me back, will certainly help us. So let's go to Maryland.'

'You mean give up the house,' her father said.

'Yeah, Dad, that's what I mean. We're gonna have to do it sooner or later, so let's do it now.'

'I ain't movin' until they throw me off,' her father said. 'Take that as a fact, gal.'

Suzy lit a cigarette. She smoked an awful lot these days. She knew she wasn't helping the Earth's atmosphere, but she just couldn't help herself.

'Why wait till they throw you out? Why suffer that indignity? When they decide to do it, they'll come here with state troopers and you'll just have to go. So why not go now?'

'Because I won't have it said I cut and ran. I wanna make my protest.'

Suzy sighed in frustration. 'We may not get out then,' she said. 'That may be too late. These visions have caused a lot of accidents, including crashing dust-croppers, and there's talk that if a passenger plane crashes, the commercial

airlines will be closed down. If that happens, we'll revert to bein' a nation on wheels and the roads are gonna be crammed with refugees. Yeah, Dad, the roads'll be packed with *Okies* - 'cause that's what we'll become.'

'This ain't the Third World, Suzy. It's the United States of America!'

'It was the same America in 1934, but they still had the dust bowl and the Okies. So if we wanna get out as best we can, we've got to go now.'

'I ain't shiftin',' her father said.

In despair, Suzy went to bed early, feeling older than her years, then, feeling the need to be a child again, she cuddled up with a teddy bear. She cried herself to sleep, dreamed about the house in Greenbelt, was about to prepare breakfast for Don and Ronnie, prior to school... then she realised that it wasn't a dream, that her eyes were widen open.

They weren't sitting across the table in the kitchen-diner in the house in Greenbelt, but in the moonlight coming in through the window at the end of her bed. They were wearing their normal clothes and staring at her and smiling unnaturally. She swelled up with love and fear.

'Go away!' she hissed.

Their unnatural smiles broadened.

'Go away!' she repeated. 'You're not real! Godammit, you're just my imagination. You don't exist. *Go away!*'

Though terrified of the apparitions, they made her yearn for the real thing, and Don, as if sensing this, turned his head to give Ronnie a ghastly smile and place his hand on his shoulder. Ronnie, with the deathly grace of a somnambulist, stood up and stepped forward.

Suzy sucked in her breath.

Ronnie stopped when she did that, as if whiplashed by the sound. His smile wavered as her yearning for him, for the *real* child, was obscured by her fear. Then, when she remembered that she'd created him, she slid off the bed.

'Don't come near me,' she said.

It was a ridiculous thing to say (they couldn't hear her, after all) but it made her feel calmer and in control. She tried to will them away, to shut them out of her mind, but since they remained there, she opened the room door and stepped into the hall.

She walked down to the kitchen, where the lights were still on. Her father and mother were sitting at the table, holding hands and silently weeping at the

ghosts of themselves.

They had created what they wanted back - the better past that had sustained them - and were looking at themselves ten years younger, at the other side of the table. When they trembled, the others did. When they wept, the others wept. When they laughed hysterically, which they did more than once, the others mimicked them perfectly.

Both couples looked the same and you had to study them closely to see that one couple wasn't quite real. You could tell they were apparitions because the light went straight through them, leaving no shadow at all, faintly revealing what was beyond them. At least it *seemed* that you could see what was beyond them, though you couldn't be sure of that.

Suzy held her breath. She wasn't too sure what she should do. She knew that if she interrupted - made a noise, walked up to them - the illusion created by her yearning parents would be broken and the apparitions would abruptly disappear. She was going to do that, but felt immediately, oddly guilty, sensing that her parents, in their despair, were having a moment of bliss.

It was in the nature of the hauntings - they brought either bliss or dread - and since in this case they were obviously bringing bliss, Suzy returned to her bedroom.

Don and Ronnie, or the apparitions she had created, had gone when she left, leaving everything normal. The moonlight beaming obliquely through the window fell on an empty floor.

Suzy knelt there. She felt as if she was at an altar. She closed her eyes to the light, bowed her head and clasped her hands, then whispered the prayers she had uttered every night of her childhood.

She asked for forgiveness and mercy.

She begged for release.

'Please let me go home,' she said.

Chapter Thirty

'I thought I'd meet you here for lunch,' Jack Douglas said, 'to remind you of the world you gave up for life with Rydell.'

Raising her eyes from her crab cakes and glancing around at the wealthy political diners in the Jockey Club, Clare knew what he meant.

'I'm not denying that I'm enjoying this unexpected lunch,' she said, 'but frankly, I'd be happy enough without it. This really isn't my scene anymore'

'Is that true, Clare?'

'Absolutely.'

'I just can't imagine it. You out there in Greenbelt, the little obedient housewife, dining on hamburgers and beer on his lawn with the neighbours. You belong here, not there.'

'I belong where Tony is,' she said firmly, 'which means Greenbelt is home to me.'

'You said you'd never surrender your individuality for the love of a man.'

'That remark was probably based on the calibre of man I knew at the time.' She saw his cheeks redden with suppressed anger, but she pressed on regardless. 'In fact, I feel that I've discovered my individuality by moving in with Tony, and that what I was before wasn't the real me, just some kind of pretender. As for being an obedient housewife, that's not remotely true. I'd remind you that I'm still working for NASA, the Pentagon and the White House. I'm not *just* a housewife.'

He sat back and stared at her without warmth. 'No,' he said, 'not just a housewife. A hot little mistress.'

'I certainly hope so.'

His cheeks turned red again, his lips forming a grim line. 'So does your beloved Rydell know you're having lunch with me today?'

'Of course.'

'He doesn't mind?'

'Why should he? He knows I have to meet gentlemen like you as part of my work for NASA and, more importantly, as part of my campaign to protect the ozone layer. He knows I'll return safe and sound.'

'I can't even steal an hour, then?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

'Just think, Clare, it would be almost like adultery - with all the excitement that holds.'

'I'm not interested in that kind of excitement, so put it out of your mind, Jack.'

'I have to confess, I'll never forgive you for dropping me for Rydell.'

'I know. And it shows.'

‘God, Clare, you’re still one tough lady.’

‘No, Jack, not with Tony.’

His eyes flashed when she said that, his clenched knuckles turning white, but he soon regained his cool composure and superficial charm.

‘Do you mind if I smoke?’ he asked.

‘I’d rather you didn’t,’ she replied.

‘You’ve joined the anti-smoking lobby, have you?’

‘I can’t let people smoke in my presence, given what I’m involved with.’

‘The hole in the ozone layer.’

‘Exactly. I won’t encourage further contributions to our current rate of production of CFCs.’

His smile didn’t reach his eyes, which were icily curious, and she wondered how she could ever have lain beside him, her naked skin touching his. He had been her lover, certainly, but never someone she could have loved - and that possibly explained her attraction to him before she met Tony.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘since, as you believe, an alien presence is devouring the ozone, why the hell should we worry about our relatively minor contribution to the depletion?’

‘Very clever, Jack, but not clever enough. While it’s true that the unknown entity is destroying the ozone even faster than the CFCs, it’s also true that our continued use of CFCs isn’t helping us to slow down the rate of depletion. In fact, as long as the West continues to contribute CFCs to the atmosphere, it stands guilty of aiding that unknown entity. To discover the nature of that thing and find a way of stopping its growth, we need all the time we can get and smokers don’t help us. Not that your office is helping much either, but then who would expect it to?’

Douglas heard her sarcasm, but refused to be rattled by it. ‘What do you expect? You ask us to believe that something alien is in the atmosphere, but even you and your friends don’t know what it is.’

‘We know it’s some form of plasmode or radiobe life-form that organises itself, and communicates with itself, by means of electromagnetic forces. We just don’t know exactly where it came from or how to stop it from spreading.’

‘That’s not much to go on. And the Russians - or anyone else for that matter - could have created it in a laboratory.’

‘It’s true that scientists have created primitive plasmoids and radiobes in laboratory experiments, proving that they could exist under certain conditions,

but we've a hell of a long way to go before we can create anything capable of lasting more than a few seconds and surviving in normal atmospheric conditions. So your theory is nonsense.'

'In the meantime,' Douglas said, as if he hadn't heard her, 'any dramatic reduction in the use of CFCs would weaken us economically and, therefore, politically. Sorry, Clare, we can't wear that.'

'But you know that something different's entered our atmosphere and is causing chaos. Why do you refuse to face up to the fact that we have to do something to stop it?'

'The President and I are in agreement that something has to be done, which is why we're financing your work with Rydell. However, it's our belief that this new presence in our atmosphere isn't an *alien* presence, but more likely some kind of new atmospheric weapon being produced, most likely, by the ever more desperate Russians. They have, after all, previously used cloud-busters to alter the weather where it suited them, so this new element could very easily be no more than an extension of that work. We haven't heard, for instance, of any reports of similar hauntings taking place in Russia. This suggests that the virus hasn't reached them yet, which it wouldn't if *they* were controlling it.'

'That's nonsense, Jack.'

'That's what was said about cloud-busters, but the first droughts in the United States since World War Two were caused by the primitive cloud-busters of the former Soviet Union.'

'You can't be certain of that.'

'We're almost certain. At least in the sense that we know for a fact that the Russians still possess cloud-busters that actually work.'

'Is that why you're now committed to supporting the agricultural and industrial lobbyists in the White House?'

'Correct,' Douglas said without shame, perhaps even with pride.

'And that's also how you've managed to convince the President that this whole thing is a Russian plot to weaken the economy of the Free World.'

'Who are you to say what the Russians are, or are not, doing?'

'Come off it, Jack!'

'It's my duty to convey to the President what I honestly believe, particularly regarding matters relating to the national and international economy. And I certainly believe what I've just told you regarding foreign intervention in the atmosphere.'

‘That sounds like a pretty pompous mouthful, apart from being nonsensical.’

‘You always *were* a lady with a sharp tongue.’

‘Why don’t you just tell the truth, Jack? You don’t believe a word of that crap. You’re only using it as a cover-up because you have strong financial ties with many of the companies responsible for the CFCs, notably those involved with airlines and oil.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘An old friend. A *Washington Post* journalist.’

‘His name?’

‘That’s my business.’

‘An old friend of Rydell’s, most likely. The same old friend who leaked this story in the first place.’

Clare smiled. ‘Are you going to deny your personal financial interests?’

‘Naturally. Would you care for dessert?’

‘Since it’s free, I’ll have the cheesecake.’

‘An excellent choice,’ Doulgas said.

They ate the cheesecake in silence. Clare didn’t know what to say. She glanced occasionally at Douglas, aware of how much he had changed, and realised, if she had ever had any doubts, that he resented her affair with Tony and was letting it cloud his judgement regarding the growing holes in the ozone layer. Possibly because of this, he had also changed in other ways: his normal anti-communism had become more strident and, regarding his influence with an ailing President, positively dangerous. Finishing her cheesecake, she put her spoon down and stared boldly at him.

‘What you’re telling me,’ she said, ‘and what you’re implying to the President, is based on the most pitiful form of self-deception.’

‘I think I’ll pick up the check and pass on the brandy,’ he said, nodding at the waiter.

‘The fact that the Russians haven’t reported any manifestations doesn’t mean a damned thing,’ she said. ‘The Chinese and Japanese haven’t reported any manifestations either - but they, like the Russians, aren’t as free as the Western World with this kind of news.’

‘I think I get your drift, Clare.’

‘I’m sure you do, but I’ll make it clearer anyway. What I’m suggesting is that the Russians - or the Chinese and Japanese for that matter - wouldn’t necessarily report such a phenomenon, even if they were experiencing it. That they haven’t

officially announced it doesn't mean it's not happening.'

'If it was happening, we'd know about it, Clare. We have good intelligence.'

'It's good, but it gossips. I have it on gossip picked up in Clyde's restaurant at Tyson's Corner, Virginia - a favourite CIA hangout - that since the Arctic and Antarctic ice caps are already melting and causing a rise in sea levels, thus beginning the process that will eventually lead to the flooding of Leningrad, the Russians certainly wouldn't be engineering it themselves. In fact, as you well know, in 1985 Gorbachev and Reagan signed an agreement to cooperate in the protection of the environment. Since then, Russia and the US, despite their continuing differences, have been working together on global warming problems.'

'Scientific cooperation doesn't necessarily go hand-in-hand with politics,' Douglas insisted as he hastily signed his credit slip, returned his card to his billfold, then pushed his chair back to stand up. 'And since global warming will dramatically increase agricultural productivity in the central region of Russia, as well as Europe, while dramatically decreasing it in the US, their scientific cooperation in this case could be superficial.'

'Nonsense!' Clare snapped. 'The Russians are well aware of the fact that the increased agricultural productivity in the regions around Moscow is hardly likely to compensate for the flooding of cities such as Leningrad. In fact, if anything, they've good reason to have doubts about us, since according to certain of their scientists, we in the US, either accidentally or by design, may have altered the atmosphere by using our satellites. And even those Russians who *don't* believe we've a political motive, suspect that we may have started this business on a purely experimental basis and have since lost control of it. In that sense, then, they believe it's our fault.'

'Bullshit,' Douglas said as the waiter pulled Clare's chair back. 'I haven't heard a damned thing about this. I think you've invented it.'

'You've heard about it, all right,' Clare said, walking out of the restaurant with him. 'You've known about it a long time, but you're trying to blame the Russians for it, in order to unburden Western multinationals of their responsibilities and enable them to keep up production and line your pockets. Isn't that true?'

'This conversation is finished, Clare.'

They parted on the sidewalk and walked off in opposite directions, no longer friends.

Clare drove back to Greenbelt with a feeling of great sadness and trepidation, sensing that Douglas would now turn more resolutely against her. As she drove along Greenbelt Road, past the familiar fences of the Goddard Space Flight Center and the houses of those who worked there, she became aware of the sunlight, too bright for this early afternoon, and felt slightly suffocated in a heat that should have gone by this time of year. Though bright, the light was hazy, an ever-shifting, silvery mist, making the houses of Greenbelt seem unreal as they slid past the moving car. The weather was changing, she knew, though not many people did, and she wondered just how long it would take for the alarms to ring worldwide.

When she arrived at Tony's house, she was surprised to see him standing on the porch, shading his eyes with his hands, squinting into the bright light. She was even more surprised when, as she emerged from the car, he hurried towards her. When he reached her, he took hold of her shoulders and squeezed gently but urgently, his normally good-natured face grim.

'There's just been a news flash item on TV,' he said. 'A packed PANAM 747 crashed into the Atlantic shortly after taking off from Kennedy Airport. So far there's no reason to believe it was a malfunction. According to ground control, everything seemed perfectly normal, until suddenly, without reason, the flight crew started screaming hysterically. The 747 went out of control and crashed into the sea. There were no survivors.'

Clare stared at him, too shocked to speak, then fell into his arms.

'It was the virus,' she whispered.

Chapter Thirty-One

The man who climbed out of the car in front of the house in the silvery light of the afternoon wore a finely cut grey suit, an immaculate white shirt and tie, and expensive black, patent-leather Italian shoes that already were covered in dust.

Suzy's father was sitting beside her in his rocking chair on the porch, his shotgun resting across his knees, his gaze steady on the man as he stood beside the squad car, leaving the door open, and patted down his windblown silvery hair and started fixing a nervous smile. The driver's door opened and the county Sheriff, Jack Baker, got out, adjusted the Stetson hat on his head, tugged at the holster belt around his heavy hips, then nodded at the neatly suited, nervous man.

They both walked to the house.

Suzy's father gently kicked his booted heel against the floor, starting his chair to its gentle rocking, and ran his fingers lightly along his shotgun without moving his body. He seemed very relaxed.

When Sheriff Baker and the city guy reached the steps of the porch, Suzy's father, still rocking gently in his chair, said in a neutral tone, 'Put one foot on that porch-step, Jack Baker, and I'll blow you to Kingdom Come.'

The sheriff stopped and raised his hands as if surrendering to the enemy. He glanced at the man beside him, grinned nervously, then said, 'Okay, Abe, we don't want no quarrel. We just came to deliver.'

'I figured that.'

Relieved, the man in the suit put one foot on the porch and started withdrawing a paper from his jacket pocket. Suzy's father lifted the shotgun off his knees and the man immediately stepped back again.

'Suzy,' her father said, 'what do you see in front of you?'

'I see a man with a paper in his hand, Dad. Some kinda document.'

'That's right,' her father replied, stroking his shotgun. 'That's just what I see. What you got there, Mister?'

'What we've brought, Abe,' Sheriff Baker began, 'is - '

'I asked the city gentleman,' Suzy's father said. 'I'm sure he can answer for himself.'

'You know what I've got, Mister Winger. You know I'm from the bank. You refused to sell your farm and you've run out of funds and now we're gonna ask you to move. This farm belongs to us, sir.'

'No, it doesn't,' Suzy said. 'We don't owe you that much.'

'If he won't sell, M'am, we'll have to sell for him and take what we're owed.'

‘You’ll sell real cheap, right?’

‘No demand these days, M’am. Just look at the weather, at the fields, and you’ll know what I’m sayin’. We don’t want this, M’am, no more than you do, but facts are facts and business is business, so this farm has to go.’

‘The only one’s gonna go is you,’ Suzy’s father said, ‘if you place one goddamned foot on my porch. And that goes for you, too, Jack.’

The sheriff, an old friend, remained right where he was, toying idly with the pistol on his hip, but looking embarrassed.

‘Listen, Abe,’ he said, ‘we gotta deliver these papers. If you don’t take ‘em, we’ll just drop ‘em on the ground and that makes it legal. You’ve gotta go, Abe. The law’s the law, after all. The farm’s dead and you’ve got a lotta debts an’ someone’s gotta collect. That’s the bank, Abe. That’s what banks are for these days. Mister Peters, here, he’s just like you and me - he just does what he has to do. It’s all over here, Abe. Everyone’s movin’ out. You just gotta cut your losses and go and try somethin’ else, somewhere else. That’s it, Abe. I’m sorry.’

‘I ain’t givin’ my house to no goddamned bank. The farm - yes. Not the house.’

‘The house is part of the farm, Abe,’ the city gent said. ‘Right now, the most valuable part. It’s the house and the land the bank wants. And if they want it, they’ll get it.’

‘Think you’re smart, don’t you?’

‘No, Mister Winger, I don’t. I’m just a man that has to do a dirty job ‘cause I can’t afford otherwise. You should understand that.’

Suzy glanced at her father. His handsome face was like granite. It was only the way he stroked the shotgun that made you realise how mad he was.

And he was hurting real bad as well.

‘Get off my land,’ he said. ‘Get off or I’ll blow you off. They’ll be pickin’ the pieces up in Des Moines and I won’t give a damn. You’re trespassin’ an’ that gives me the right and this is America. Go to hell. Goodbye, gentlemen.’

Sheriff Baker sighed and raised his hands even higher. ‘When we come tomorrow,’ he said, ‘we’ll come with a lot of help. That means shotguns and dogs and even bulldozers, to raze this place to the ground if we meet with resistance. Don’t be crazy, Abe. You can’t fight this. Just pack up and go.’

‘I’ll think about it, Jack. I’m thinking about it. I’ve thought about it. Get goin’.’

‘Abe - ’

Suzy’s father, a deeply religious man, turned the shotgun in his hands until it

was aimed at his old friend, Sheriff Baker.

'You better get going, Jack.'

The sheriff dropped his raised hands to his sides and shrugged in defeat.

'Okay' he said. 'You win. At least for today. Harry,' he said to the man in the neat suit, 'just drop those papers on the ground at your feet. This is still Abe's land, so by dropping 'em you've delivered 'em legally. Okay?'

'Okay,' the city gent said and opened his hand and dropped the papers. They lay in the dirt of the lawn and everyone stared at them. 'If you're not gone by tomorrow morning,' the man said, 'it's gonna turn really nasty. I'm sorry, but that's all I can tell you. Now you folks have a good day.'

He got back into the car. Sheriff Baker shrugged and followed him. The car was backed out of the driveway and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Suzy looked across the land, at what had once been golden plains, and saw the brown desolation of the blight and the clouds' shifting shadows. These days you often saw other things - flying saucers, ghostly lights, all the things that you'd dreamt about - but what you never saw in the sky anymore were real-life airplanes. There'd been too many crashes of airliners and private airplanes, so now the only people allowed to fly were those in the Air Force. Iowa had gone back to the wheel, to the long dusty roads, and other states were gradually going the same way, one after the other. It was like the Third World: blighted crops and primitive transport. The country had changed virtually overnight and gone back to the past.

'Sun's goin' down,' her father said.

'Yeah,' Suzy said.

'It looks different when you see it through all that dust.'

'It doesn't seem real, Dad.'

The door behind Suzy squeaked open and her mother came out. She'd just been doing the dishes inside and was drying her hands with the dishcloth. She looked awfully old these days.

'We got the order to move, right?'

'Yeah,' Suzy's father said. 'The papers are lyin' there on the lawn if you wanna dirty your hands.'

'I just cleaned them, Abe.'

Abe chuckled. 'Good woman.'

'We've gotta go, Dad,' Suzy said. 'We can't fight the law.'

'You don't think so?'

‘No.’

Her father sighed. ‘I guess you’re right. It’s just that I won’t give them the house. It’s mine and I’m keeping it.’

‘It’s mine as well,’ Suzy’s mother said.

‘I know that, Gladys. I ain’t forgettin’ that. When I say somethin’s mine, I mean it’s ours, and darn well you know it.’

‘Stop rockin’ that ol’ chair of yours, Abe. Sit still when I talk to you.’

‘Okay, Gladys. I’m listening.’

Suzy felt a hand lightly brushing her cheek as her mother passed her and sat in front of her father, on the steps of the porch. You could tell she was gazing down at the papers on the lawn, but she didn’t move to fetch them, wouldn’t dirty her fingers, and instead just cupped her chin in her hands and gazed out at the dead fields.

‘I can’t take it no more,’ she said. ‘There’s no reason for this, Abe. The land’s dead and gone and it ain’t comin’ back and we’re haunted so much we can’t sleep, so we might as well go. We get these visitations - that’s a biblical word, honey - and I say they’re as biblical as the word, a sign from God that we’ve got to go. We can’t live with the past. The visitations are from the past. We get my parents and your parents and our grandchildren and dead friends - and we get ‘em ‘cause we’re yearning for the past that was killed by the weather, by the sun, by the atmosphere. Suzy knows all about that.’

‘I know she does. I’m still listenin’.’

There was a moment of silence. Suzy watched the sun go down. The very mention of her mother’s grandchildren, her children, had made her go all weak at the knees and feel lonely as hell - and she knew that if she let that feeling grow, the kids would appear magically right in front of her.

That could be heaven or hell and you never knew which.

It was best avoided, most times.

‘What I’m sayin’,’ her mother said, having gathered her thoughts together, ‘is that we’ve held out as long as we can and reached the end of the line. I know you love the farm, Abe - dammit, I love it too - but when land dies, it’s just like a human bein’ - it rots and gits buried. Let’s bury it, Abe. We got no reason to stay here. As Suzy says, an’ has said for so long, you can’t fight facts forever. They’re gonna come tomorrow for sure. They’ll have the weight of the law behind them. We can leave on our own or get thrown off, and I say, let’s have dignity. I say let’s leave tonight.’

‘And everything that’s inside the house? You wanna leave that as well?’

‘I don’t want it, Abe. These visitations are enough. All that’s inside the house is the past - and the visitations are enough of the past to last for our lifetime. Let’s take what we can carry. Pile it up on the truck. Anything that don’t fit, don’t go, which is a good way of doin’ it. We gotta take the truck anyway. There’s no airplanes flyin’. Like the TV said, the whole country’s back on wheels, so we ain’t got the choice. We take what we can take and then we go. Don’t let pride make you blind, Abe.’

‘A man has his dignity.’

‘There’s a way to keep that, Abe.’

‘If I let ‘em take the house, I’ll be lettin’ ‘em kill me.’

‘You just have to leave, Abe.’

‘And the house?’

‘I’m just walkin’ away. What I don’t see, I don’t know.’

‘Okay, Gladys. Let’s do it.’

Suzy felt like someone else. She couldn’t believe what she was hearing. These were her parents, decent, law-abiding folk, but they had their own language, a morality carved in rock, and if they couldn’t keep their dignity one way, they’d do it another. She knew what they were talking about, what would happen, what it meant, and while it shocked her, making her feel like a criminal, it also made her exultant.

‘They’ll be here as soon as sun comes up,’ she said, ‘so let’s start straight away.’

Her mother stood up in front of her, silhouetted in fading light, and glanced down at the piece of paper on the lawn, but made no move to touch it.

‘It’s bin a long time,’ she said.

‘Yeah,’ Suzy’s father replied. He stopped rocking in the chair and laid the shotgun on the floor and stood behind his wife and embraced her like a sixteen-year-old. ‘A long time,’ he repeated.

Suzy looked at them standing there, silhouetted by the sinking sun. She wanted to see the golden fields, the brilliant sky, the crystal stars, but her folks were posed against a background of parched earth and dust-darkened twilight, facing World’s End.

‘Praise the Lord, we had a good time.’

‘What we had, He took from us.’

‘I’ll wash your mouth with iodine, Abe Winger, if you say one more word.’

‘I feel broken, Gladys.’

‘You won’t when you say goodbye.’

‘I’m not stealin’. I’m just refusing to let *them* steal.’

‘That’s why I’m lettin’ you, Abe.’

It took a long time to pack. It took half the damned night. First they had to make choices - do we take this or that? - then they had to load the truck and choose what to discard and then, when even the suitcases were bulging, they had to discard more. Suzy worked hard to help them, but also watched and listened, and learnt a lot about the silence of dignity and the pain it could hide. She never heard them crying - she only saw the glint of tears - and then, when the pain increased, when it became close to unbearable, it released what they needed to replace it and help them endure.

They packed their things in a house filled with the ghosts of the loved ones they’d lost.

The house filled up with the dead.

Suzy saw her grandparents. She’d last seen them as a child. They were sitting around the kitchen, in the gloom of sunset, and they glowed with an almost imperceptible light and seemed a little transparent. They were apparitions - she knew that - but you could see them and hear them breathing... and when you reached out to touch them, your hand went through them, though they stayed where they were.

They were there, yet not there. Real, yet not real. You could have called them reflections, but they didn’t do what you did. They sometimes did what you *wanted* them to do, but they did it all on their own.

They could fill you up with love or terrify you. They could drive you insane.

Suzy’s folks were healthy people who’d received love and given it. What they saw, then, and what Suzy saw, only strengthened that love.

They saw God in the walking dead.

When you saw Him you cried and her parents cried a lot, but they wept out of love and were renewed and did what they had to do. They loaded their best things on the truck, packed the suitcases to bulging, and then, before dawn, when the stars were dressed in pink light, they fell to their knees in front of their relatives - parents and grandparents and grandchildren and old friends - and clung to one-another and wept profusely and reached out to touch the dead.

The dead could not be touched. They were there, but not there. You could hear them and smell them and know that they existed, but when you tried to touch

them, to actually *feel* them, your hand just went through them. And invariably, when that happened, they disappeared, as if violated.

You had broken your own spell.

Suzy's parents did just that. They touched their relatives and let them go. Then, wiping tears from their eyes, they both looked at Suzy.

'You okay?' her father asked.

'Yeah,' she replied.

'Then let's get going,' her mother said. 'We got a long road ahead of us.'

They walked out of the house, down to the truck beside the lawn. Suzy glanced up at the sky, at the stars obscured by dust, then across the dead fields lit by dawnlight and shadowed by passing clouds. It wasn't what she had known - that magical place of her childhood - and so she climbed up into the truck with a sense of relief. Her mother climbed up the other side and then slid in beside her.

It was real quiet at dawn.

Suzy stared at the old frame house, its walls white in the predawn darkness, and saw the lights from inside beaming out onto the porch containing the rocking chair. Her father wasn't on the porch - he was inside the house - and sometimes his silhouetted form was framed by the windows. He was in there a long time, doing what he had to do, but eventually he backed out of the house and down the steps of the porch. He was shaking a can up and down, a man who knew what he was doing, and he'd obviously used more than one can and left the rest stacked inside. He kept backing towards the truck, splashing the porch, then the steps, and eventually threw the empty can aside and straightened up and spread his hands in the air.

No, he wasn't praying. He was just stretching himself. Then he walked up to Suzy and smiled at her and said, 'You know what I'm doin'?'

'Yes, Dad. And you do it.'

His smile broadened like the dawn light. 'I won't give 'em the house,' he said. 'I won't let 'em sell it off and give me dimes and then ask for my thanks. I'll keep what's my own.'

'If they don't get it,' Suzy's mother said, 'then it's always your own.'

'Right,' Abe Winger said with pleasure. 'You're a woman worth knowin'.'

That was his name. Abe Winger. Her father. And the name made her think of him as someone as strong as a redwood tree. She had thought of him that way for years, ever since she was a child, and had only changed her mind in recent months, when the dying land had diminished him. Now he showed her what he

was made of - yes, dammit, he broke the law - when he lit a match and threw it onto the kerosene he'd emptied onto the lawn, all the way from the house.

The morning's darkness was filled with flames.

Yellow flames and black smoke. The flames moved with the speed of light. They raced away towards the house, eating up the kerosene, then danced up the steps of the porch and straight through the front door. There was a rushing, roaring sound. God was taking a deep breath. God let his breath out with a mighty roar and set the whole house afire. It was so fast, it was shocking. First the white house, then a furnace. A ball of fire, white, yellow and red, ballooned up to the starlit sky. The stars disappeared. The flames ate away the darkness. The house crumpled as the sun started rising beyond the dead fields. The fire became a great spectacle.

'Godammit,' Abe Winger said.

'You did right,' his wife responded. 'It's okay to cry, it don't matter. We kept what was ours. Okay, Suzy, start drivin'.'

Suzy wiped the tears from her own eyes and drove into the dawn light. She saw a column of dust not far ahead and knew what it meant... more people in flight.

'Lord have mercy,' her mother said.

Chapter Thirty-Two

'The other night I woke up to find my dead parents by my bedside. I am the President of the United States, Mr. Douglas, and that's what I experienced. We must put an end to this.'

Douglas knew what he meant. In the few months since he'd had his unpleasant lunch with Clare, everything he had tried to keep hidden had dramatically surfaced. Now, as he gazed with a feeling of hopelessness at his ailing President, he thought it a bitter irony that the accident that had unlocked Pandora's box had occurred even as he and Clare were having that lunch - the crash of the PANAM 747 en route from London to New York.

That airliner had crashed because the crew had been driven temporarily insane, or at least out of control, by what they had experienced on the flight deck. Worse: they had all gone berserk while full contact was being maintained

between them and Ground Control, thus ensuring that their experience did not remain a secret and, even worse, eventually was leaked to the media through the release of pirated tapes of the transmission.

Within days of that event, the whole world had confirmation that something strange was happening in the atmosphere, and that the many unofficial reports or unsubstantiated rumours of bizarre occurrences around the globe, most concerning apparitions, ghosts, doppelgangers and flying saucers, were really taking place and had been caused by something that was rumoured to be an alien 'virus' that no government had as yet officially acknowledged.

'I agree, Mr. President, that we must put an end to it,' Douglas said, 'but it isn't as easy as it sounds.'

'I'm not saying it's easy,' the President responded, 'but I want to know what's been happening. You said earlier that those physicists, Tony Rydell and Clare Holton, who've been investigating the phenomenon, have finally completed their work and submitted a report through NASA's Space and Earth Sciences Directorate. Have you brought the report?'

'No, Mr. President. The report is being edited - '

'I beg your pardon?'

'Not censored, Mr. President,' Douglas said too quickly. 'The report, which is written in scientific jargon, is being edited into a comprehensible format and will be on your desk tomorrow morning.'

'Well, since the comprehensible format will probably be as incomprehensible as its predecessor, perhaps you could tell me, right now, in plain language, just what it says. I mean, what *is* this alien entity we're all being haunted by?'

Douglas glanced down at his notes. 'According to the report of Rydell and Holton...'

'You mean, they're not officially representing NASA with this report?' the President interjected in a short-tempered manner.

'Of course, they are, Mr. President. I'm merely suggesting that this is *their* opinion...'

'An opinion officially endorsed by NASA? I mean, it *is* an official NASA report?'

'Well, of course, Mr. President!'

'Then we must accept the report as valid, must we not?'

'Yes, Mr. President.'

'Good. Let me hear it.'

Humiliated, Douglas glanced down again at the notes.

'According to the final analyses by NASA of the international research material collated by Rydell and Holton, the so-called virus is formed from two alien life-forms - plasmodes and radiobes - that were picked up in interstellar space and transported in the tail of Halley's Comet as part of its Orionid and Eta Aquarid meteor showers. The alien life-form was left behind by the comet, in the shape of a cosmic dust, during its flight of 1910, when Earth actually passed through the comet's tail. In summary, therefore, the cosmic dust is an inorganic intelligence which organises itself, and communicates with itself, by means of electromagnetic forces.'

The President, perhaps because he was ailing, remained very calm. 'Did you say... *intelligence?'*

'Yes, sir. And that intelligence is growing stronger in the increasing global warmth caused by the thinning ozone layer, and, worse, taking even more strength - and many physical shapes and forms - from the most intense thoughts of human beings.'

The President leaned forward on his desk, looking even more anxious. 'Let me get this straight. The virus has lain dormant since 1910, when the Earth passed through the tail of Halley's Comet, including its meteor showers, and picked up this intelligent, but sleeping, cosmic dust.'

'That's correct.'

Pleased with himself, the President nodded and continued: 'The sleeping plasmoid life-form was then initially brought to life, or returned to consciousness, by the warming temperature caused by mankind's use of CFCs, which depleted the ozone layer and let in the sun's more harmful ultraviolet radiation.'

'Also correct.'

The President nodded again, then clasped his hands, sage-like, under his sagging chin. 'And once the virus had come back to life, or returned to consciousness, it realised that it needed Earth's warmth to survive. So it started devouring the ozone layer even faster than our CFCs had been doing.'

'Yes. I believe...'

'And now,' the President continued, ignoring Douglas, 'having devoured most of the ozone layer, it's somehow feeding off the more intense thoughts of individual human beings and materialising as the physical embodiment of those thoughts - dead relatives, feared enemies, various phobias such as spiders and

snakes, and so on... Is this what we have here?'

Douglas took a deep breath, almost shaking, thinking of how he had sneered at Clare and Rydell and now humiliated because they had been right. 'I fear so, Mr. President. And now Earth is becoming populated with living ghosts - the phantasms of the dead - and doppelgangers - the phantasms of the living - as well as other apparitions, such as flying saucers.'

'Why would they see flying saucers?'

'Wishful thinking is one reason. Since the manifestations are created from the minds of the witnesses, they're obviously seeing what they'd like to see: the spacecraft of the superior beings who've come to protect them. Another theory, first propounded by Jung, is that flying saucers are the manifestations of the racial memory of primitive mankind, which believed that all the gods came from the sky. So, for one reason or the other, that's what people are seeing now.'

'And these various manifestations are causing increasing worldwide havoc by haunting pilots and astronauts, train, bus and automobile drivers, vital computer operators, and the controllers of national defence systems - not to mention causing fear and derangement in normally sane citizens.'

Douglas sighed, unable to answer, and then nodded affirmatively.

'So the world's practically falling apart,' the President said.

'Yes, sir, it is. In some places, worse than others. And right here, in the United States, we're suffering more than most and becoming, as near as damn it, a Third World country, with no commercial airlines running, some states cancelling train services for reasons of safety, and most of the country suffering from severe drought and, in some places, famine. The Midwest has been devastated and thousands of people are on the move, most of them heading for the cities, where they hope to find work. And because of that, the land's filling up with gangs of scavengers and the general crime rate is rising. It's one hell of a mess.'

The President stared steadily at him, as if trying to reach into his mind and pluck the truth out.

'So all this is happening, but you still don't accept that it's being caused by an *alien* virus.'

'No, sir, I don't.'

'You believe it's a man-made catastrophe, maybe caused by the Russians.'

'There's no proof that it's an alien virus,' Douglas said, thinking only of his vested interests in chemical and oil producing companies, since the banning of

commercial airline flights had made his shares in those companies plummet to rock bottom. 'NASA only has proof that it *exists*, but it could have been man-made.'

'Why would the Russians - or any other foreign power for that matter - create such a thing, since it also puts them at risk?'

'I can't speak as yet for any other foreign powers, but we know that the Russians, certainly as the Soviet Union, were attempting for years to manipulate the weather with the aid of cloud-busters. It's the belief of the CIA...'

'Rarely reliable,' the President interjected impatiently.

'It's the belief of the CIA,' Douglas repeated desperately, 'that the Russians continued with the experiments of their Soviet masters, managed to advance their research in so-called atmospheric warfare, then attempted to expand their power over the atmosphere. That experiment, while wreaking havoc on the West, then went out of control, backfiring on them to create mayhem in Russia as well.'

'I have to say, Jack,' the President said sardonically, 'that while you're blaming the Russians, they're blaming us; the Israelis are blaming the Arab States and vice versa; South East Asia is blaming Japan, which is blaming the Chinese; and the Chinese are blaming everyone not massacred in Tiananmen Square. Most of those laying the blame on others are politicians, of course. According to my FBI reports, our own scientists are now notably reluctant to support our claims and are leaning more towards the theory of an unnatural, or alien, phenomenon. So given these contradictory theories, I'm not sure *what* to think.' He paused, as if contemplating his own confusion, then asked: 'What else do we have to deal with? Please leave nothing out.'

'I think you know the rest, Mr. President,' Douglas said with a sinking heart. 'The depletion of the ozone layer is dramatically changing Earth's atmosphere and climate. On a global level, once fertile areas are suffering from famine, former areas of constant drought are now being flooded by torrential rainfall and rising tides caused by the melting ice caps, and the increasing lack of protection from the sun's ultraviolet radiation has led to widespread skin cancer in human beings, including malignant melanoma, as well as a dramatic rise in herpes, hepatitis, cataracts, and numerous infections of the skin caused by parasites.'

'Mostly white people.'

'Yes. And this, in turn, is leading to unpleasant social developments, including those I've already mentioned with regard to the US.'

‘Of course,’ the President said dryly.

‘And apart from the agricultural devastation caused by drought and flooding,’ Douglas continued, ‘there’s been an economically ruinous degradation of the health of domesticated food animals, fish, and even the uncultivated vegetation that could otherwise have replaced the crops destroyed by the droughts.’

‘An unprecedented catastrophe,’ the President said.

Douglas sighed. ‘I’m afraid so.’

‘Dare I ask about the political implications?’

‘Another disaster for us,’ Douglas confessed. ‘While we suffer from drought, the central agricultural region of Russia, around Moscow, is having more rain than ever and a consequent fourteen per cent increase in grain produce. Longer growing seasons and faster growth rates are also increasing agricultural production in most of northern Europe. Even Japan is having a massive agricultural boom. Now those nations are wealthier than we are and that makes them dangerous. Already, Europe and Russia have put their heads together and are increasing their charges for the grain importations we now require. They’re going to suck us dry, Mr. President, if we don’t do something about it.’

‘What do you propose, Jack?’

Douglas knew exactly what he was going to propose and why. He’d been angry with Clare for surrendering to her emotions, for falling in love with Rydell, but now he knew that his anger was caused by primitive jealousy, the knowledge that Clare had given him up for another man and, worse, the very man who had made a fool of him with that story leaked to the *Washington Post*. Now Douglas was forced to accept that he was as petty as other men, that his need for revenge against Clare and Rydell was as strong, if not stronger, than his desire to cast his shadow across the world. It was as strong as his greed. Thus he burned with a passion as fierce as his ambition to make Clare and Rydell pay the price for what they had done to him. Obviously it was senseless - more senseless, to his mind, that Clare’s love for Rydell - yet with all the will in the world he could not rise above it. So, when he spoke to the President, he chose his words with care.

‘We sit tight. There’s not much else we can do. Whether or not this thing is alien or man-made, sooner or later those two physicists, Tony Rydell and Clare Holton, will find a way to stop its growth. They might also find a way of controlling it and actually using it. When they do, no matter who originally created it, we can turn it to our benefit.’

‘To *our* benefit? How?’

‘We’ll be able to control the atmosphere and the weather.’

‘To what end?’

‘Right now, Mr. President, the Soviet Union, Europe, and Japan are enjoying an unprecedented agricultural boom while we slide into a pit of drought and accumulating debt. This is making us increasingly dependent upon them. This trend *must* be reversed and it *can* be reversed. If we can control that alien virus and actually learn to use it to change weather conditions wherever, whenever, we choose, we can totally reverse the present trend and become the superpower that we used to be. As I see it, Mr. President, this isn’t political aggression, but the ultimate responsibility for which this great nation was destined.’

‘I have doubts about that, Mr. Douglas.’

‘I don’t, Mr. President.’

‘I’ll have to take your word for it,’ the President said, perhaps too ill to argue. ‘Okay, Jack, we’ll sit tight.’

‘I think that’s wise, Mr. President.’

Chapter Thirty-Three

Driving home in the early evening from the Old Executive Office Building in Washington DC, Clare found herself glancing nervously at the other cars on the Baltimore-Washington Parkway, fully expecting some driver to go crazy and cause a murderous pile-up. It was not a paranoid fear, but one based on a new reality: the spreading effects of the alien virus seeping out of the atmosphere. It had seeped down over Virginia, Washington DC, Maryland, the whole damned country, and for the past few months had been causing havoc. The hauntings, now so-called, drove a lot of people crazy and were making daily life increasingly dangerous. Recently, for reasons of safety, following the practice in those states affected earlier by the alien virus, all flights of the last operating commercial airlines in the United States had been banned; and it was rumoured that soon even trains and bus services would be cancelled.

Pretty soon, Clare thought, *we’ll be back to travelling by wagon-train, just like the pioneers*.

She recalled what she’d seen recently on TV... all those farmers from

Oklahoma and Iowa and Illinois, moving in their hundreds, in automobiles and trucks and trailers, all piled high with belongings, from the farms and onto the dusty roads that led to the cities... just like the Okies in the Thirties, dispossessed overnight.

It was a whole different world these days.

Taking the Greenbelt turn-off, she squinted against the silvery twilight, reminded by it of how the weather had changed to make the summers seem endless. The sun was that much hotter, the light stung the eyes, and she thought of the American heartland, which was stricken with drought. Yes, it was a new world, unprecedented, inexplicable... Parched crops here, unexpected floods elsewhere; strange diseases in animals and humans, as well as sorrow and madness... Clare died a little, just thinking about it, wondering if it would ever end.

She and Tony were working on it and knew more or less what it was; what they didn't yet know was whether or not the alien virus, which undoubtedly was conscious, had reasoning, self-awareness or motive. Because he was convinced that it had consciousness, but no self-awareness; that it was essentially some kind of etherea, Tony had just finished another week with his friend, Rick Polanski, at the latter's UFO organisation, Project Skywatch International, in the burning hell of Phoenix, Arizona. He and Polanski had recently discovered that the areas with the highest incidence of hauntings were those with the greatest magnetic deviation - the same areas where previously many UFOs had been witnessed - and they now believed that the alien virus, a plasmoid life form, was also a form of orgone energy, acting through the medium of magnetic current. In the desert heat of Phoenix, which had greatly increased in the past year, they had a lot of phenomena to examine. Tony was due back later this evening, and Clare, who missed him terribly when he was gone, looked forward to seeing him.

Darkness was falling as she parked the car in the drive of Tony's tract house. The lights were on inside, falling over the lawn, and she looked up automatically at the sky, but saw nothing unusual. Then she locked the car and walked inside, looking forward to having a shower, dressing herself up for Tony's return and settling down with a drink.

When she stepped inside, she heard both boys sobbing in a choked, frightened manner.

That sound chilled her blood.

She stopped just inside the front door, in the bright light of the living room. When she saw that the cluttered room was empty, she took another step forward.

She stopped when she heard that the boys were sobbing out back in the kitchen.

The living room and the kitchen were divided by a short hallway, now bathed in the striations of pale light beaming in from the kitchen. The boys were sobbing like demented creatures. There was no other sound. Clare looked left and right, hoping in vain to see Grandma, then crossed the front room, practically on tiptoe, and nervously entered the hallway. She stopped again, frightened by the unseen, temporarily paralysed by the sound of the boys' sobbing, feeling unreal. She wanted to call out their names, but was too frightened to do so, and instead, after taking a deep breath, walked through the hallway and stopped, where the light was brighter, to look into the kitchen.

She burned hot and cold.

The boys were, as she had suspected, sitting at their normal places, facing Grandma. They had obviously been sitting down to dinner, but the food was untouched. Something had happened to stop them eating and they were frozen with fear. They were sitting side-by-side, sobbing loudly, but not moving at all.

They were too frightened to move.

According to what Tony had told Clare, both boys had always had a phobia about spiders. That phobia had been released from their subconscious and given hideous reality.

The spiders covered the table in front of them, as well as the floor around them, too large to be real, yet vividly realistic: silky-furred tarantulas, black-widow spiders, and other monstrosities, forming a seething mass around the boys. And because the boys were too frightened to move, the spiders just watched them.

Clare felt her flesh crawling.

Grandma was there as usual, sitting opposite the boys, and, apparently oblivious to the seething mass of spiders, was staring upward, in a trance of delight, at a man wearing coveralls. Though grey-haired, he looked like an older Tony.

Clare thought of the photograph of Tony's father that Grandma had in her bedroom and realised that the man in coveralls was Grandma's dead husband.

'Dear God,' Clare whispered.

The boys saw her and took heart, their eyes widening with relief, but the

spiders, as if reflecting what the boys were in fear of, closed in, in a quietly seething mass, as if about to devour them.

The boys quivered, then froze again.

Grandma was oblivious. She was smiling up at her dead husband. There were tears on her cheeks and she wiped them away, wept more tears, tried to sniff them back and kept smiling beatifically.

Her dead husband returned her smile.

Clare thought she was suffocating. She saw Tony in that dead man. She understood that the dead man, though real, was *not* real, and that although he could have touched her and she could have felt him, she would, if she tried to take hold of him, simply pass through him. She understood that, yes, but it didn't help much, because in him she saw the ageing of Tony and she didn't want to face that.

'He's not real!' she said aloud. 'Nor are the spiders. *Grandma, look at me!*'

Grandma looked at her, smiling. 'Hi, sweetie,' she said.

'Grandma...'

'Yes, honey?'

'Are you all right?'

'I'm in heaven. I always knew Sam and me would be reunited and here we are, bless the Lord.'

'He's not real, Grandma.'

'Don't be a bitch, Clare. I swear, child, you're sounding just like Suzy - another bitch to be sure.'

'He's not real, Grandma.'

'Stop it, Clare! That's downright nasty!'

'He's just a dream and you're just dreaming, Grandma, so stand up and walk to me.'

Grandma stared at her, bewildered, then became visibly frightened. 'What do you mean, he's not real? Have you gone crazy, Clare?'

'*Please,* Grandma...'

'Of course he's real!' Her ghostly husband placed his hand on her shoulder - or seemed to do so. Grandma, though careful not to touch him, returned his dead smile. 'Why,' she said, 'he's the spitting image of his son and...'

'*Don't say that!'* Clare snapped.

The boys stared at her again. She covered her face with her hands. Her heart

was racing and she felt crushed by terror and incomprehension.

'God,' she whispered. 'Dear God.'

'We've been reunited by God,' Grandma said, 'and we won't let you part us. You don't even belong here.'

Shocked, Clare looked up. She saw Grandma's crazed eyes: the eyes of someone staring into the grave that she had secretly yearned for since the death of her husband. And her husband was inviting her, smiling at her in a deathly manner, confirming that what she had desired was now being offered.

Grandma glared at Clare, resenting her intrusion, then smiled again at her husband.

'I'd die before I'd go with that floozie,' she said to the apparition. 'When do we leave, dear?'

Her husband's deathly smile widened, forcing Clare to look away - which made it impossible to avoid the boys surrounded by spiders. Still sitting side-by-side, not touching, they were trying to choke back their tears.

'Don,' Clare said.

He didn't reply.

'Ronnie!' she called out.

He stayed silent, also.

'Those spiders aren't real,' she told them. 'They look real, but they aren't. You can probably smell them, you can possibly even feel them, but if you have the guts to just walk right through them, believe me, they'll disappear. Now get up and walk to me.'

They glanced at her, then at the spiders, shuddered, then froze again, so she took a deep breath, held it in and walked straight towards them. She tramped on some of the spiders and they disappeared, but the others remained. Ignoring them, she grabbed both boys by the shoulder.

'*Get up, damn you!'* she screamed.

And as if whipped by an invisible assailant, they promptly obeyed, kicking back their chairs and racing with her out of the kitchen, clinging to her and sobbing and breathless as they crossed the brightly lit living room. Clare kept going, pushing them out of the house ahead of her, saying, 'Don't stop! Keep going! We're going to Dwight's house. Keep running and don't look back!'

She was holding them by the hand, racing them over the dark lawns. Don wiped tears from his eyes and said, almost sobbing, 'It was Grandpa! Grandpa's dead! We were about to have dinner when he appeared in Dad's chair and

smiled at Grandma! But he's dead, Clare! *He's dead!'*

'It's okay,' Clare said, still running. 'Calm down. He wasn't real. I'll explain to you later.'

But then Ronnie started crying. He was sobbing as he ran. 'We were scared!' he said, weeping. 'So scared we couldn't move. Then the spiders suddenly appeared all around us and that made it worse. They were real. *We could feel them!*'

'They weren't real! Now be quiet!'

She ran even faster, desperate to put it all behind her, and was relieved when they reached Dwight's house, around the corner from Tony's place. She frantically rang the bell, then tried to compose herself, but when a surprised Maggie opened the door, she heard herself blurting out like a demented person, 'Is everything okay in here?'

'Clare!' Maggie exclaimed, squinting into the evening's darkness at her and the boys. 'What..? Sure, everything's okay in here! Why? What's up, Clare? Has something..?'

'It's okay, no one's hurt,' Clare said, pushing the boys past Maggie and into the house, then brushing past her to follow them in. 'God, I'm so glad you're home,' she said. 'Okay, kids, settle down now.'

The boys had managed to stop their crying and were now merely sniffing as they stood undecidedly near the door of the living room. Dwight appeared in the doorway as Maggie slammed the front door shut. He glanced down at the boys, motioned them inside, and said, 'Take a seat, kids.' When they did so, facing the flickering TV, he asked, 'What's going on, Clare?'

'I need a drink real bad, Dwight,' she told him.

'Bourbon?'

'Right. On the rocks.' As he poured her the drink, she told him and Maggie what had occurred in Tony's house. 'Obviously,' she concluded, taking the drink offered by Dwight, 'Grandma conjured up her dead husband and then the boys, terrified by seeing that, unwittingly conjured up what they dreaded the most: spiders. In other words, they created their worst nightmare out of their terror.'

'Lord have mercy,' Maggie whispered, glancing down at the boys, who, though still visibly frightened, had calmed down a little.

'The virus is here,' Dwight said. 'We already know that. There *have* been other hauntings in Greenbelt - as well as illness and even death caused by virus-induced diseases, including skin cancer. Godammit, it's here!'

‘You boys want a drink?’ Maggie asked.

They both replied with a nod.

‘The cat got your tongues?’ Maggie asked them in her winning, mock-stern way.

‘No,’ Don replied.

‘I’ll have a coke,’ Ronnie added.

‘You want a coke as well, Don?’

‘Yes, please.’

‘Okay.’

Maggie went into the kitchen. Clare sipped gratefully at her bourbon, then walked to the window of the living-room and looked across the darkened lawn to the back of Tony’s house. She could see the light beaming out of the kitchen, though she couldn’t see Grandma. Shivering, she turned back to Dwight and said, ‘I can’t take the kids back there for at least a day or two. They’ll be too scared to go back there. Can you put them up for a few days?’

‘Sure,’ Dwight said. ‘We can do with the company. Is that okay with you kids?’ They smiled and nodded assent. ‘Okay, that’s settled. The boys are staying here for a couple of days,’ he told Maggie when she returned with the iced cokes. ‘Is that okay with you?’

‘My pleasure,’ Maggie said, smiling reassuringly at them as she gave them the drinks. ‘I could do with some new men in my life. Things are looking up, kids.’

The boys smiled gratefully again, sipped their drinks, looked at the TV, as Dwight unobtrusively led Clare and Maggie back into the kitchen.

‘So,’ he said, ‘the boys are taken care of. Now what about Grandma?’

‘I’ll have to go back,’ Clare said, shivering just to think about it. ‘Her haunting won’t last forever; it’ll probably disappear when she gets tired or falls asleep. And if she shows no signs of doing either, I can probably make the apparition disappear by slapping Grandma out of her reverie.’

‘But according to you,’ Dwight said, ‘she *wasn't* in a reverie. In fact, according to what you told us, she became aggressive when you said her dead husband hadn’t actually returned to her, that she was only seeing an apparition.’

‘Dammit, yes,’ Clare said, remembering with another spasm of dread. ‘I forgot about that.’

‘She could be dangerous,’ Maggie said. ‘There’s been a lot of cases like that recently. As the virus spreads, it seems to grow in strength. The materialisations are becoming more real and, in a lot of recent cases, the victims of the hauntings

have turned violent, rather than let themselves be awakened, if that's the right word, to the degree where their ghosts or doppelgangers can be dematerialised. If it's a ghost of someone they love, as it is with Grandma, they'll fight to keep the goddamned thing with them. And by the sound of it, Grandma's close to that condition, so you'd better be careful.'

'Where's Tony?' Dwight asked abruptly. 'Is he still in Phoenix?'

'Oh, my God,' Clare said, thinking of Grandma and her ghost, dreading how it would effect Tony if he entered the house and saw an apparition of his dead father. 'He's due back any minute! We can't let him enter the house without preparing him first. I've got to get back there and wait for him and tell him what's inside. *I've got to go back right now!*'

'I'll come with you,' Dwight said.

'And I'll stay here to look after the boys,' Maggie said. 'Now you better get going.'

Clare kissed her on the cheek, then left the house with Dwight and hurried back across the darkened lawns, toward the end of the street. Her heart was racing, her blood pounding, as she turned right at the end of the street and looked toward Tony's house.

'Oh, shit!' she whispered, stopping when she saw that Tony's car was parked in the driveway. 'Oh, God, we're too late!'

'Come on,' Dwight said, taking hold of her arm and starting to run again, over the lawns, toward the house. 'He must be inside already!'

Clare couldn't bear to think about it, yet her head was filled with it, imagining what Tony would be feeling as he stared at the father who had died eight years ago. Feeling his shock and pain, his disbelief and heartache, she was near to tears as she raced into the house, close behind Dwight. She called out Tony's name as she rushed through the living-room and into the hallway, where Dwight, stopping abruptly, let her pass into the kitchen.

Tony's back was turned to her. He had not heard her call. He was breathing harshly as he stared across the table at his mother and father.

His mother was still in her chair, looking up at her dead husband, holding his hand, enraptured by his fixed smile.

'Oh, God!' Tony said, his voice breaking, his body shivering in spasms. 'Oh, Jesus! Oh, no!'

Clare placed her hand on his shoulder and he stared at her, his eyes tearful, then looked back at his father and mother and shivered again.

‘No!’ he bawled at his mother. ‘He’s not alive! *Stop thinking about him!*’

His mother turned her head, stared at him in surprise, then said sweetly, ‘Your dad’s returned to us, Tony. I prayed to God and He answered.’

‘*No!’* Tony bawled.

And even as he denied the existence of his father, that ghostly figure seemed to quiver, becoming brighter, then darker. Then, as Tony’s mother looked up in shock and grief, it began to dematerialise magically, fading and shrinking.

‘No!’ Tony’s mother cried out in terrible grief, her hand clawing desperately at the air where the apparition had been standing. ‘Don’t go, Sam. Come back!’

‘Go!’ Tony bawled. ‘*Go!’*

And as if obeying him, his dead father faded and shrank simultaneously, until he was no more than a cloudy shape the size of a child.

Tony’s mother wept. Clare was filled with grief and fear. She kept staring at that childlike shadow, that amorphous spectre... Then, to her horror, she saw it changing again, gaining shape, definition and distinct, haunting features...

‘Oh, Jesus!’ Tony cried out as the cloudy substance took the form of a child.

The boy was about ten years old and looked just like Tony. He had dishevelled brown hair, a gravely intelligent face, and was staring at Tony as if bewildered by what he was seeing.

Tony stared at himself.

‘Oh, my child!’ Grandma exclaimed, her face radiant with joy, then she rose from her chair, reaching out to embrace the boy, her face flushed unnaturally. ‘Oh, please let me hold you!’

‘*No!’* Tony exploded, hurling himself forward, propelled by fear and outrage. He clawed at the boy and passed through him and crashed into the wall behind.

The boy vanished abruptly. Grandma cried out and fell. She was clutching at her heart and writhing on the floor as Tony and Clare knelt beside her. She moaned softly, then shuddered and died.

‘Oh, God, no!’ Tony sobbed, cradling her grey head in his arms, rocking her gently back and forth, his tears wetting her face.

Clare looked on, feeling helpless.

Chapter Thirty-Four

The fires were burning in the darkness of America. All over the land there were camps just like this one, sprawling collections of tents and sleeping bags and automobiles and trailers, with the people huddled together under the stars, around open fires, boiling coffee and making baked potatoes and trading experiences.

It wasn't safe to travel by night, since gangs of scavengers were all around, and the camps were usually formed outside of the towns because the townsfolk didn't want the new 'Okies' cluttering up their environment. So the Okies huddled together for safety, not wanting to travel by night, though even being together didn't necessarily guarantee their safety.

Apart from the outlaw scavengers, there were the vigilantes to deal with, recently formed gangs of local groups who despised the new Okies, didn't want them even near their town, and came out in darkness, wearing masks and carrying weapons, to harass them, abuse them, and often fire upon them, wanting them to pack up and move on, which they usually did.

Still, the camps formed anyway, being better than nothing, and at night their fires burned all over the land, illuminating the new, disordered America with the eerie glow of the lost.

'Who'd have thought,' Suzy's father said, 'that we'd end up like this? Livin' off the land like hoboes and bein' treated like bums. It sure makes you think some...'

He was kneeling in front of a fire in a field outside Clarksburg, West Virginia, resting up with Suzy and her mother before making what they hoped would be the final leg of their journey to Greenbelt, Maryland, where they hoped that Tony would help them out. Looking at her mother, who seemed older every day, Suzy hoped they would make it, since they'd already been on the road too long and were starting to feel it.

The journey this far, which by airplane would have taken about an hour and by road, under normal circumstances, a couple of days, had taken them three arduous, hellish weeks.

'If we'd known it was goin' to be like this,' Suzy's mother said, 'I don't think we'd have started.'

'Nope,' her father replied. 'I guess not. But we can't turn back now.'

He said it with quiet pride and Suzy understood why; when she thought of what they'd been through these past few weeks, she could scarcely believe it.

You never really thought of how big the country was until you had to do

without airplanes, take to the road, and get blocked and harassed at every turn by townsfolk who couldn't bear the sight of you.

She and her folks had started this journey, thinking they'd just drive straight to Maryland, not knowing that thousands like them had already clotted the roads, that townsfolk despised them and thought them a tide of hoboes, now called the 'new Okies', and that around every bend in the road, beyond every hill, gangs of outlaw scavengers or local vigilante groups would be waiting to ambush them, terrorize them, or, if they were lucky, just turn them back.

When turned back, they'd gone another route, cutting across country or making great, looping detours, and while that worked, while it helped them advance that much farther, it took a hell of a lot longer and didn't save them from running into more trouble.

They'd travelled by day and camped out at night, but their progress during the day, because of the constant harassment and having to turn back so often, had been made at a snail's pace, Nevertheless, they'd been lucky even managing to get this far, and now, when Suzy thought about it, the journey seemed like a bad dream.

They'd joined the first weary travellers just outside Des Moines, latched on to the tail of that great, dust-wreathed column of automobiles and trailers and trucks piled high with furniture, and stayed with it until they were stopped that first evening, outside Davenport, by a gang of townsfolk carrying shotguns and clubs and insisting that they couldn't even rest up inside the city boundaries. A fight broke out, shots were fired and people were screaming, so Suzy burned out of there and headed south, towards St. Louis, even though it was completely in the wrong direction.

She managed to head east again when she passed around Fort Madison, but ran into another column of Okies on the road to Peoria. They saw their first camp there - a great sprawl of automobiles, caravans, trucks, tents and sleeping bags - and because it was sunset, they were forced by the police to go into it and camp there for the night. In fact, they were kept there for two days, treated almost like prisoners, and only let out in rotation, as part of a group of about a hundred, which is how the police guards were doing it - one group at a time.

They hit the road again, but didn't get very far, being turned back at Bloomington, forced to go all the way to Springfield, and only managing to cut across Illinois after spending a couple of days in another camp.

There was a long tail-back at La Fayette, Indiana, and it was attacked by a

gang of scavengers - about twenty men and women who swarmed out of the woods on either side of the road, wearing ragged clothing and firing pistols and swinging machetes, to grab what they could from whoever was closest and, if they weren't shot or wounded themselves, run back into the woods with their booty. There was a lot of firing and screaming, but it was all over quickly, though by then a lot of Okies had been killed or hurt badly, while one of the scavengers had been wounded and captured. Some of the Okies, enraged, beat him to death with sticks and rifle-butts, then left his battered body at the side of the road and continued their slow, forward progress, towards whichever city they had set their minds on, whether or not it would welcome them.

At Kokomo, Indiana, the police arrived in force to arrest those responsible for the killing of the scavenger at La Fayette. When no one would admit to the killing, the police used it as an excuse to imprison the whole group in a make-shift camp just outside town. That evening, a local vigilante group, many of them drunk and hollering, drove wildly around the circular barbed-wire fence in their cars, firing indiscriminately into the camp, killing and wounding many men, women and children. The police, who'd been guarding the camp, had mysteriously disappeared by then, and when the vigilantes had gone and the Okies had buried their dead and loaded their wounded up onto the trucks, they smashed the gate down and drove off, scattering into small groups that headed into the darkness in all directions.

You only travelled at night if you had to - and that night, they had to.

Near Dayton, Ohio, they were in another long column of Okies that was attacked by more scavengers, these ones sweeping by in open-topped trucks and on motorcycles, firing pistols, grabbing valuables from the Okie vehicles, and even snatching up a couple of teenage girls and racing away with them.

The girls were not seen again and everyone knew why.

By the time they reached Springfield, Ohio, Suzy and her folks had learned that they belonged to a despised group - the dispossessed, the new Okies - and that people more fortunate than themselves, less affected by the changing weather, feared and loathed them as some other kind of species.

They also realised that they had been passing through the landscape of a dramatically changed United States, with barren fields, empty granaries, closed factories and silent skies, in which rising unemployment and a breakdown in communications - all mail now delivered overland and the mail service overburdened - was leading to increasing lawlessness and localised, vigilante

justice.

A more dangerous country.

Now, in another camp in Clarksburg, West Virginia, their thoughts set on Baltimore, which they'd heard was the least dangerous route, Suzy and her folks were just three amongst thousands, dispossessed and looking for somewhere to lay down their weary heads.

Suzy wanted to lay her head on Tony's pillow, but she didn't think that would happen.

She leaned towards the fire, spreading her hands, feeling the heat, and sniffed to take in the smell of smoke and baking potatoes. Her mother, who could not lose the habits of her kitchen, was holding the potatoes over the flames on a long, blackened fork. She looked awfully old.

'I can't wait,' she said to Suzy. 'I keep thinkin' of your kids. When you get old, you look to the kids to give you the strength to go on. That's all that's kept me goin', Suzy. When it got rough, I thought of them. I willed them to appear and they appeared and became the raft I could float on. The visitations are good that way. They frighten some, but not me. I see them as affirmations of life and it gives me my strength. The visitations are blessings.'

Damned right, the world had changed. Suzy thought that by the fire. She thought of the journey they'd made from Iowa to here and realised that the hallucinations, or visitations, had become commonplace. You looked around and saw them. You looked upward and saw them. Even now, by the camp fire, glancing up at the night sky, Suzy saw flying saucers, lights that dazzled and tormented, faint images of faces and events through which the light of stars shone. Others saw the same things and reacted in their own ways, some dropping to their knees and praying to what they witnessed, some screaming and falling down and going into fits of panic, others simply sighing or shrugging and lowering their gaze.

It was dealt with on an individual basis and you couldn't predict that. What you could predict was what it had done in a general sense: created a lot of lunatics and bizarre religious cults; made the real world and the world of dreams merge; made daytime like night.

'We've gotta go,' Suzy's father said. 'We can't hang around here. I've got a feeling about this place and the feeling ain't good and what it tells me is that the people runnin' this place don't know truth from bullshit. Excuse me, Mother, I'm sorry.'

‘It’s okay,’ Suzy’s mother said.

She was on her knees, leaning forward, turning the potatoes in the flames, refusing to give up her kitchen, even here, in the open air. There were flying saucers streaking across the sky above her, but she didn’t look up. She was too busy cooking.

‘What I mean,’ Suzy’s father said, ‘is that this place don’t smell good. Those policemen at the gate and that sheriff who put us in here, they seemed nice enough, they acted decent, but they smiled like dead animals. We ain’t here as guests, I tell you. We’re here as prisoners, sure as dammit. Come tomorrow, when we try to drive out, we’re gonna find those gates locked. That, or somethin’ else. Maybe somethin’ a lot worse. Those people, they don’t have farms, they haven’t lost, and they fear those that have. I don’t know - I could be wrong, I know that - but I just have this feelin’.’

‘So do I,’ Suzy said.

She had lots of feelings these days. They were all wrapped up inside her. They were feelings about Tony and the kids and the love they’d shared, and the feelings, when too intense, became visions that had a life of their own. She’d lived with them night and day, taking succour from them, frightened by them, and now she just wanted to get her family back and know the real from the unreal.

That was the good in the visitations - they could remind you of what you valued - but in the end, what you wanted was the *real*, to protect you from ghosts.

As for this camp... yeah, her dad was no fool... it had the feel of a prison.

‘You both have these bad feelin’s,’ her mother said, forking the potatoes and pulling them from the flames and placing them, nicely blackened and blistered, on the cloth by her knees, ‘but what do we do? We can’t sneak out tonight - the gates are heavily guarded - and even if we managed to get out, we’d be helpless alone. You know what those scavengers do - they rob and rape and kill - and if we didn’t get picked off by them, the vigilantes would get us. So I say we stay put. I say we’ve no choice. These folks is all we’ve got now. We can only move out when they move on, and that’s a hard fact of life.’

Suzy glanced around her. There were lots of fires burning. The flames flickered in the night of America and made the starry sky smoky. Not the country she knew - no golden fields of maize, no blue skies, no green hills - but another country, a foreign land, an alien terrain, where the dust of blight was the

norm. These fields weren't farmers' fields, but the barren soil of imprisonment, containing automobiles and trailers and trucks piled high with possessions and tents that had originally been bought for pleasure and, inside and around the tents, people stripped of their dignity. They still had their pride - you couldn't take that from real people - but the changing weather had changed their lives, destroying their livelihood, and overnight they'd become the pariahs of the country, not wanted anywhere.

No wonder they took the hauntings as commonplace. It was the *real* world that frightened them.

Right now, for instance, there were real people and apparitions, and unless you were experienced, and looked carefully, you couldn't tell which was which. Of course, you could if you checked them out - the apparitions had no shadows, seemed a little transparent (you had to look real hard to see that) and moved little and slowly, like puppets on a string - while the real people, the ones creating them, were either gibbering like fools or shedding tears or smiling beatifically.

The world of dreams had become real.

'Okay,' her father said. 'We stay. I guess we've got to. I'm just sayin' that I don't know what will happen come the dawn and it's time to go. I'm not too sure we'll be goin'. There's somethin' brewin', I'm tellin' you.'

'Here,' Suzy's mother said. 'Have a potato. It's the best I can do.'

'Your baked potatoes are the best in the country, even when they're charred black.'

'You never *were* good with compliments.'

Suzy had to smile at that. It did you good to see love shining. She picked up a baked potato, which smelt of earth and ash, and bounced it from one hand to the other because it was so hot.

'I feel like a kid again,' she said. 'Like we're all camping out.'

'You remember that?' her father asked.

'Yeah,' she said, 'of course I do. You and Mom and me. We'd all go out on a Sunday and have us a picnic.'

'You were real cute in those days.'

'I'm not now?'

'Now you're beautiful.'

'I take back what I said,' Suzy's mother said. 'He *is* good with compliments!'

'I know my women,' Suzy's father said.

‘You learnt the easy route, Abe.’

‘It takes a man with sense to take that route, Gladys, and you sure look good on it.’

Suzy loved it when they talked that way, bantering easy, their words lingering, but it didn’t make her think her mother looked good. Even kind words had limits.

In three weeks, her mother had aged thirty years.

It scared Suzy to look at her.

Scared her more when the shots rang out.

She would never be able to piece together exactly what happened, except that at first she thought it was outlaw scavengers, then realised, when she saw the masks and decent clothes, that it was a group of vigilantes from the town, hell bent on getting rid of the Okies or just having some vicious fun.

They’d surrounded the camp quietly, driving their cars without lights, but they all switched on their lights at the same time and started firing their weapons.

The sudden roar of the guns was shocking, followed immediately by people screaming, then the cars outside the fence roared into life and started racing around the perimeter with the vigilantes still firing.

The apparitions vanished the instant the guns fired, when those creating them were jerked from their reveries by the godawful noise.

The Okies scattered for cover, women sweeping up their children, but a lot of them cried out and fell down, sometimes right on the fires. Sparks showered into the air, the cars’ headlights were blinding, and then some of the vigilantes started letting off fireworks that hissed and whined into the sky to add to the chaos.

Dropping her baked potato, Suzy jumped up and grabbed her mother’s hand and said, ‘Come on! Let’s go!’

Her father was already moving, holding his shotgun across his chest, and together they ran to their truck and clambered inside. There was a loud crashing sound, then the shrieking of twisting metal, and Suzy saw a vigilante truck smashing into the main gate, tearing the posts from the ground, and then bringing the whole gate down and bouncing over it. The truck just kept coming, racing into the camp, and the men in the back were firing rifles and hollering like crazy. More fireworks were going off and exploding in the night sky, the sparks and coloured streamers arching back down to blend with the smoke.

Suzy pressed her foot on the accelerator and headed straight for the fallen gate.

People were running every which way, ducking bullets, falling down, and more vigilante trucks came bouncing over the smashed gate, with the men in the back hollering and firing as if at a funfair. The police had conveniently vanished, as they did every time, and it was clear that these particular townsfolk were going all out, no limit. Men were spilling off the trucks, swinging clubs, grabbing women, and as Suzy gunned the engine and raced towards the fallen fence, Abe stuck his shotgun out the window like a man who meant business.

'Sonsofbitches!' he said.

He fired the shotgun at someone. Suzy just kept on driving. She had to swerve out of the way of an oncoming truck, and as she passed it she glimpsed sweaty faces and hot, hungry eyes. Gun barrels spit fire. Bullets ricocheted off the truck. Suzy gripped the wheel tightly as the truck hit the fallen gate and bounced up and rattled its way across it and bounced down the other side. She heard women screaming, kids crying, men laughing, then an explosion, probably a petrol bomb, as she turned right and headed along the road, away from the bedlam.

'Lord have mercy,' her mother whispered to herself, 'but these are terrible times.'

Her father slumped in the seat beside her, taking deep, faltering breaths, then laid the shotgun across his knees and pressed his hands to his belly.

'God, it hurts,' he said quietly.

He removed his hands and held them up and they were covered in blood. Satisfied, he placed them back on his stomach and said, 'Keep drivin', Suzy.'

She felt a great, swooping fear, but kept her voice calm. 'We're gonna have to stop and bandage that wound, Dad.'

Her mother's head jerked around, her eyes widening in terror. 'What..?'

'It's all right, Gladys,' Abe said. 'It's not as bad as the blood suggests. Keep drivin', Suzy, until we're well away from that camp and those crazy townsfolk. Don't worry 'bout me none.'

'We stop now!' Suzy's mother said.

'No, we don't,' Abe replied. 'We don't stop till we've put a lot of miles between us and Clarksburg. It's too dangerous for you two.'

'Pull over, Suzy!' her mother snapped.

'Keep goin',' her father insisted.

'You pull over right this minute, Suzy!'

‘Okay, Mom,’ Suzy said.

She pulled over to the side of the road and cut the engine when the truck was under the trees. He father turned to open his door, then gasped and sat back, pressing his hands tighter to his stomach and starting to sweat.

‘Someone’s gonna have to help me down,’ he said, his voice hoarse and shaky.

‘Oh, dear God!’ Suzy’s mother said, then opened the other door and clambered down. Suzy put on the hand-brake and stared at her father. He was sweating and biting his lower lip and trying to smile.

His breathing was anguished.

Suzy’s mother opened the other door and reached up to Abe. ‘Okay, Abe,’ she said, ‘take a deep breath and then turn towards me. You’ll just have to bear it, Abe.’

He took a deep breath, gritted his teeth and turned towards her. He shuddered, as if whiplashed. Suzy took hold of his shoulders, steadying him and wanting to hug him as he edged off the seat. He took another deep breath, held it in and then slid to the ground. He groaned aloud as he slipped out of the cabin and into his wife’s arms. She held him for a moment, supporting him, kissing him, then helped him down to the ground. He sat there, propped up against a tree, with his hands on his belly. When he removed them, the blood squirted out and splashed on his legs.

‘Oh, my Lord!’ Suzy’s mother said.

She tore his shirt away and looked at his belly, then closed her eyes briefly.

‘Suzy,’ she said, as Suzy dropped onto the grass, ‘get a towel from that bag in the truck. Make sure it’s a clean one.’

Suzy did as she was told. Fear was flapping its wings around her. When she passed the towel on, her mother ripped Abe’s shirt away and wrapped the towel around his belly and tied it real tight.

Abe groaned aloud again.

‘I’m sorry, Abe,’ Gladys said, ‘but it’s got to be tight. It might hold the blood in till we get help, though I don’t guarantee it.’

‘We ain’t gonna get help,’ Abe said. ‘You can’t move me again.’

‘You’ll be all right.’

‘No, I won’t, Gladys. My insides are all torn up.’

Gladys bit her knuckles, but couldn’t stop her tears. ‘Don’t you go and take that attitude, Abe Winger. You’ll be all right. You know you will.’

‘Hold my hand, Gladys.’ She did as she was told. ‘Suzy,’ he said, ‘kneel down

behind your mother and put your arms round her.' Suzy knelt on the grass and put her arms around her mother. 'Let's just stay awhile like this,' her father said, 'and stop all this snifflin'.'

But Gladys kept crying and Suzy soon joined her, feeling a blanket of fear settle upon her to blot out the stars. She held onto her mother. Gladys held her husband's hand. The breeze crooned through the trees, made the brown leaves dance and rustle, and Abe closed his eyes and whispered, 'Glory Road! I see a light in the distance. All the way down the line, there.' His breathing became heavier. He coughed and spat blood. He shuddered and Gladys tightened her grip as Suzy pressed closer to her.

Gladys murmured the Lord's Prayer. Abe muttered something and then went silent. Gladys finished her praying and Abe opened his eyes. He whispered, 'What the hell? I don't know...' and then closed his eyes again. He shuddered and offered a light, profound sigh, then he passed on to Glory Road.

Gladys fell against him, embracing him, sobbing with grief, and Suzy just knelt there on the grass, looking at them in disbelief.

Her heart was breaking. Her whole body was constricted. She heard another noise, something besides her mother's sobbing, and glanced back the way they had come, to see what it was. The distant lights were blurred by her tears, but approaching at good speed. She thought it was probably the vigilantes, but she just didn't give a damn.

The sound of her mother's weeping filled the night and that's all that concerned her.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Tony awoke in the dawn with a dreadful sense of foreboding. He had dreamt about his mother's funeral, which had taken place three months ago, as well as suffering visions of Suzy and what she'd been through. He hadn't been himself since then, had felt constantly haunted by death, and now, when he lay in the bed beside Clare, staring up at the streaks of sunlight that were fanning across the ceiling, he felt oddly dislocated from the real world, as if dreaming himself.

He recalled seeing the child that was himself the day his mother had died. That child had never returned and so far, at least, Tony hadn't been haunted by his

dead parents. Yet others were being haunted, all over the world now, and he knew that any day he could awaken to find someone standing there. The thought filled him with dread.

Hoping to distract himself, he turned into Clare, explored her with his hands, awakened her and took pleasure from her smile, but didn't make love to her. He wanted to, but this morning he felt too guilty, so he just gave her a hug. Then he slid out of bed.

'Can you take the kids to school?' he asked, when he had showered and was getting dressed. 'I have to have an early meeting with Dwight and then go and meet Suzy.'

Clare rolled over in the bed. 'Sure,' she said. 'That's no problem.'

'You really don't mind me seeing Suzy?'

'No, Tony. I think you *should* see her. She's obviously been through one hell of a time, so it's the least you can do.'

'Yeah,' he said, 'I guess so.'

But he felt pretty bad, torn between love and duty, filled with guilt because he knew that seeing Suzy was hurting Clare, while not doing so would be just as hurtful to Suzy, for whom he still had deep feelings. He'd never thought too much about feelings until his marriage broke up; now his feelings were all over the place and threatening to swamp him.

Christ, it was awful.

'Thing is...' he began.

'You don't have to say it, Tony.'

'Yes, I do. I've gotta say it. She didn't only come back - she came through hell to get here - and while I'm pretty sure what she's gonna ask for, I've still got to go. I owe her that, at least. It's a simple matter of respect. Her father's dead and she's got a sick mother and she's there in Annapolis, so I've got to go.'

'I know all that already,' Clare said. 'You don't have to repeat it.'

She wasn't angry, but he knew she was exhausted and that could be the reason.

'She was in Annapolis six weeks,' he said, 'before she even picked up the phone. She came from Iowa by road and lost her dad and now she has a sick mother - and she still didn't phone. She said she just didn't have the nerve, but that now she needs help.'

'I know,' Clare said. 'You told me.'

'So you're angry.'

'No, I'm not. You're feeling guilty, but I'm not angry. I just wish you'd accept

the situation without getting so emotionally confused. You owe her a lot, Tony, you really do, and I don't resent that. It's *you* who feels guilty.'

'Yeah,' he said, feeling pretty damned foolish, 'I guess that's what's bugging me.'

'Go and see her and you'll feel better.'

'You don't have to worry...'

'I'm not worried about that at all. I'm just very tired, Tony.'

He leaned over the bed, kissed her, and said, 'Are you going to work today? You should take a day off.'

'I think I will,' she replied. 'I feel like giving myself a break. I've worked every damned weekend for the past month and now I'm feeling exhausted.'

'You *look* exhausted,' he told her. 'You've looked that way for weeks now. I've told you before, you shouldn't let this project obsess you. You're working too hard.'

'We have to crack it, Tony.'

'A *lot* of people are trying to crack it, but they're not all working themselves to death, as you seem to be doing.'

'I'm okay.'

'You're wiped out. You fall asleep in front of the TV. You can hardly get out of bed in the mornings - and when you do, you're still tired. You should take a day off now and then. At least one a week. My woman needs her rest.'

She smiled at him. 'Okay, Tony, I'll try. Now you better get going.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'I guess so.'

Sitting in his car during the short drive to NASA he hoped that Clare would take him seriously and try to rest up. She *had* been extremely tired recently, not her usual self at all, and he was convinced that it was a combination of the shock of his mother's death and her growing obsession with the alien virus that was changing the face of the Earth.

Her exhaustion was clearly caused by overwork, which was something he knew about.

Him and Suzy, for instance...

Suzy had left him because he'd worked too much and spent too much time away from home. He'd ignored her resentment, or at least treated it lightly, and in the end, she'd simply felt neglected and looked elsewhere for recognition. In a sense, then, he was guilty of having driven her out; and he'd done so because of his obsession with nothing other than work. No mistresses. No one-night

stands. Just goddamned work... And now Clare was obsessed as he had been and was becoming exhausted. He'd have to keep his eye on her.

When he had settled into his office in the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center, he put a call through to Dwight. 'Rise and shine, sleepy head! Here I am, bright and bushy-tailed.'

Dwight chuckled and said, 'Get your ass down here and let's have our talk. Then you can go and see Suzy.'

'I'm really looking forward to that.'

'I bet you are,' Dwight said.

Tony grinned and put the phone down, then went to see his friend in his office in the Institute for Space Studies. The windowless walls of the office had formerly been covered in charts and maps relating to atmospheric phenomena and worldwide pollution; now they were related solely to the hauntings caused by the alien virus. Tony noticed that the many coloured pins now covered the whole world.

'It's no longer just America, is it?' he said, glancing up at the charts and maps.

'Nope,' Dwight replied from the other side of the desk upon which rested a small, gold-framed sign announcing, *Dwight Collins: Energy and Environment Program Director*. 'It's now a global phenomenon. Even the people Jack Douglas said were responsible for it are now suffering from it - the Russians, the Japs - which should have left him with egg on his face.'

'*Should* have?' Tony asked, pulling a chair up.

Dwight grinned laconically. 'Douglas is a consummate politician who just thunders ahead.'

'And how's the great man doing that?'

'By responding to each new development with a brand new political philosophy that blandly ignores the one that's gone before. And the President, now pretty ill and tired, just nods and hops when his strings are pulled.'

Tony grinned at that, but Dwight leaned forward, placed his elbows on the desk and, with his chin resting on his hands, suddenly looked serious.

'I wanted to see you,' he said, 'because I want to know why you think Douglas is being so generous with us.'

'You mean in financing our ozone-hole research?'

'Exactly.'

Tony shrugged. 'Search me. I can only assume that he's after the glory he can steal if we manage to crack this.'

Dwight nodded. ‘Maybe. And then again, maybe not. I think he has bigger fish to fry and that you have to be careful.’

‘Why?’

‘You stole his girl, Tony, and he’s known as a vengeful man.’

‘I don’t think he’s a schoolboy,’ Tony said, ‘and that’s what you’re suggesting. He’s hardly likely to use this extraordinary business for a personal vendetta.’

‘You don’t think so?’

‘No. He’s a mature man, not an idiot.’

‘There are no mature men in love or war - and we’re dealing with both.’

‘It’s been a few years, Dwight.’

‘Vindictive men have long memories. And if Douglas can pay you back *and* profit by it, I think he’ll try it on.’

‘Well, maybe you’re right, but what can he do?’

Dwight sighed. ‘I’m not sure. I only know that for the past few years the whole world’s been in conflict over the virus in the atmosphere, with each country thinking it was the secret weapon of the other and assholes like Douglas using it as gung-ho American propaganda. Now, since the rest of the world is also suffering from the climatic changes and virus-hauntings, we know it isn’t a secret weapon created by a foreign power, but a real phenomenon of a dangerous, alien nature. Yet...’ Dwight shrugged and turned his hands upward, as if appealing to God. ‘Human nature being what it is, the presence of the alien virus, instead of uniting the world against it, has simply changed the balance of power in the world and made the United States practically a Third World country. We’ve had a crippling drought, our exports have been halved, and given the speed of the rise in the world’s mean temperature, I think it’s safe to assume that New York will be flooded within five years. In which case, we might as well pack up and go live in Calcutta.’

‘All of this I know,’ Tony said. ‘So what about Douglas?’

‘This is off the record,’ Dwight said.

‘For chrissakes, Dwight...’

Paranoia was in the air. You inhaled it when you breathed. Tony knew exactly how his friend was feeling, since he felt the same way: frightened by the changing world, by how it was changing politics, and by the demons locked up in his mind and preparing to spring free. He was frightened of giving his thoughts to the virus and becoming its victim. It was himself he was frightened of.

‘Shit,’ he said, ‘let’s get it over and done with. Just spit it out, Dwight.’

Dwight didn’t spit it out. He took a deep breath and spoke with deliberation, trying to sound even-handed.

‘As you know, a few years back the European Economic Community and the former Soviet Union signed a formal agreement designed to combat the devastation caused by the changing climate through the opening of doors to the free exchange of commerce and scientific ideas. Right now, they’re exchanging crops, industrial and chemical products, and any research material they’ve so far found on the alien virus, but they’re not including us in this brave new form of *glasnost* - they’ve left us out in the cold.’

‘Right,’ Tony said. ‘I know that.’

‘Douglas loves it,’ Dwight informed him. ‘It’s right up his street. He’s been trying to shift power from the Presidency into economics and now, given the fact that the United States has been isolated, he’s been able to convince the President, no bright spark, as we know, that the new Russian-European-Japanese alliance is using the ecological disasters and hauntings to further degrade US influence in the international business community. In other words, we grow weak, while they grow strong.’

‘I believe you,’ Tony said. ‘Douglas likes to play power games. But where the hell do I fit into this? Even Douglas can’t...’

‘Off the record, right?’

‘For chrissakes, Dwight...’

‘Okay.’ Dwight took a deep breath, letting it out as he spoke. ‘There are whispers that Douglas, in convincing the President that the recent cooperation between the aforenamed is increasing our problems, has also convinced him that you - who’ve done so much work on weather engineering with foreign scientists, including some in Europe and Japan - were instrumental in making conditions caused by the ozone hole worse here than they are anywhere else. In short, you’re a traitor.’

‘What bullshit,’ Tony said.

‘Not according to Douglas,’ Dwight replied. ‘According to him you’ve spent half of your professional life in Europe, working closely with European, Russian and Japanese scientists, whereas you have, in your *own* country, done nothing but antagonise those you work with, as you did with your theories about UFOs and other paranormal subjects. Then, of course, when your beloved Europeans, Russians and Japs advanced from simple cloud-busting to more

advanced weather engineering, you, Tony, were right in there, helping them. Therefore, according to Douglas, if not totally responsible, you certainly helped create the weather conditions now destroying these here United States. He's about to try that story on the President to turn him against you.'

'Jesus,' Tony said, scarcely able to credit what he was hearing. 'So what do I do?'

'Well, it'll be a few months before Douglas makes his move. He'll have to prepare his case against you with a great deal of care. In the meantime, since I think his plan is to have you drummed out of NASA, you'd better double your efforts to stop the spread of the alien virus and, while you're doing it, keep looking over your shoulder and preparing to duck.'

Tony sighed and stood up. 'Thanks, Dwight.'

'Remember: this is all *off the record*.'

'No sweat. Now I'm going from one problem to another.'

'Suzy?'

'You got it.'

'Best of luck.'

'Thanks. I'll see you.'

Driving to Annapolis, he had to squint against the heat haze, scanning the sky for flying saucers created by the virus and giving careful attention to the other drivers, any one of whom could suddenly be 'haunted' while driving and lose control of his vehicle in panic. It happened a lot these days, as could be seen by the many wrecks scattered along the roadside - now too many to be towed away by the local authorities.

The psychologist, Carl Jung, had turned out to be correct in his belief that certain UFOs were psychic projections resulting from man's need to believe in the existence of a higher power. Because the virus created realistic images from men's minds, from wishful thinking, imagination, it was now creating flying saucers that harassed aircraft, automobiles and even pedestrians, thus causing accidents. So Tony drove with care, checking every passing car, and was relieved to reach Annapolis without incident and walk unharmed into the bar, where Suzy was waiting for him.

'Why am I always the first?' she asked him with a nervous smile. 'Do you arrive late on principle?'

'You're living in Annapolis,' he replied, feeling distinctly uncomfortable, 'but I

have to drive here.'

'I hate driving these days. It's become so damned dangerous. The last time I drove to Washington, those flying saucers crossed the road and caused a godalmighty pile-up. I was lucky. Real lucky. Can I get you a beer?'

'Yeah, Suzy. Thanks.'

She was looking surprisingly well, considering her recent experience, and wearing formal, less sexy clothes, which made her seem more mature. She looked really attractive.

Feeling guilty that he should even think that way about her, Tony waited until she'd ordered his beer, then said, 'I'm really sorry about what happened to your dad. It must have been pretty rough.'

'It's always rough, Tony.'

'If you'd told me I'd have gone to the funeral. I felt bad, being left out.'

She glanced down at the floor. 'I should have told you. I know that. It's just that I couldn't bear to face you at that particular time. I wasn't ready for that. So there was just me and Mom and Caroline and Ron, who took us in when we got out of the hospital in Annapolis.'

'You ended up in a *naval* hospital?'

Suzy chuckled and shook her head, as if she didn't believe it herself. 'Yeah. We were real lucky. When Dad died of that gunshot wound by the side of the road, we saw headlights coming towards us and thought it was some of the vigilantes who'd attacked the camp we'd escaped from. In fact, it was a bunch of cadets on their way back to the Naval Academy at Annapolis. Real nice kids. They helped load Dad back up onto the truck, then stayed with us until we reached Annapolis, where they took us straight to a naval hospital. Dad's body was taken away and we were looked after for the night. Next day, I phoned Caroline and she and Ron came to collect us and took care of Dad's funeral. Me and Mom, we were too shocked and exhausted to even think straight.'

'You're still staying with Caroline and Ron?'

'No. We only stayed there at first because we had no cash. The farm was wiped out completely. That's why we were originally coming here to see you. I was hoping you'd help us out for a time and, more important, help Dad's wounded ego by finding him some decent work to do.'

'I'd have done that, Suzy.'

'Yeah, Tony, I know you would have. Now, of course, Dad doesn't need a job. And Caroline got me fixed up as a waitress in a friend's restaurant near the

waterfront. It's nice, it pays well, and Mom and me are now in our own apartment. So, you know, we're okay now.'

'Your mother's recovering?'

'She took it real hard, but she's okay. A lot older-looking these days, but she's out and about.'

'Listen, if there's anything I can do to help...'

'I just want my kids back.'

Tony sighed in exasperation. They were back to it again. He really sympathised with her, and felt guilty as hell about her, but he still wouldn't let her have the kids, no matter how much she tormented him. Which she'd been doing for the past six weeks, through her solicitors.

'I'm getting exhausted with all this legal business, Suzy. I wish you'd give it a break.'

'I can't,' she replied with no sign of animosity, just stating a fact of life. 'I want my kids back and I'm gonna get them and that's all there is to it.'

'You won't get them, Suzy. You left us, after all. Besides, they're perfectly happy where they are. Clare looks after them well.'

'I'm not arguing against that - I mean, I've nothing against Clare - but no matter how nice she is to them, she isn't their mother.'

'You're making my life hell on earth, Suzy.'

'I told you I would.'

'Aren't you ever going to stop?'

'Not until I get my kids back.'

'It must be costing you every cent you earn.'

'It is, but it's worth it.'

A mother's love, he thought. *You can't fight it*. And then, maybe in frustration, he said what he hadn't planned to say at all. 'I want a divorce, Suzy.'

His words seemed to cleave the air. She stared at him with widening eyes, visibly shocked, making him feel like a louse.

'You want a... *divorce?'*

'I think it's time, Suzy.'

'Gee, I only want my kids back. I never dreamed of *divorcing* you.'

'But we don't live together. It's been nearly two years, Suzy! And since then, you've had your boyfriends, so why do you want to stay married?'

'*You're* living with another woman. I've just had some boyfriends. I've never let one of them move in, like you did with Clare. And now you want a divorce!'

She turned her head away, sniffed a little, then sipped at her drink, making him even more ashamed of himself.

'Goddammit, Suzy!' he exclaimed, glancing along the crowded bar, inhaling a lungful of smoke from the cigarette of the big guy beside him. 'We haven't lived together for two years! Why *not* get a divorce?'

She looked back at him again, her green eyes threatening tears. 'I left you, sure, 'cause I thought you'd come after me. When you didn't, I felt even more hurt, but I couldn't crawl back. So I stayed with my folks. I had boyfriends, but that was all. I lived that way, goddamn you, 'cause I couldn't believe that you wouldn't actually come and drag me home, sooner or later. But you didn't! Instead, you got another woman. And even then, I kept thinking it would end and that you'd then want me back. You understand, Tony? It's something called love. I always had it for you and damned well proved it, but you didn't return it. Instead, you neglected me, let me go without a fight, then rearranged your goddamned life without once looking back. A divorce? I don't believe in divorce! I believe in our marriage. Goddammit, I loved you and still do. Are you that blind, you damned fool?'

She didn't wait for a reply, but quickly slid off the stool and hurried out of the bar without paying the check. Too stunned to think clearly, his cheeks burning with shame, Tony started after her, was called back by the barman, paid and then hurried out, into the afternoon's blinding light.

He looked left and right, but he didn't see Suzy. He walked up and down the street, looking into the side-streets, but he still didn't see her. Assuming that she had shot off in a taxi while he was still paying the check, he wandered down to the waterfront and looked out, beyond the anchored sail-boats, at Chesapeake Bay.

He felt like drowning himself, but of course he didn't do that. Instead, he sat on a bench, let his racing heart settle down, and realised that Suzy had filled him with shame for the way he had treated her. He was now in love with Clare, so there could be no turning back, but Suzy had reminded him of the love he'd once shared with her and of how - and this he now accepted - his neglect was the cause of their break-up. His children had lost their mother and Suzy was now alone, but throughout it she'd continued to love him and want him back, while he, too blind to see, as usual, had built himself a new life. Though he was now in love with Clare, he felt responsible for Suzy's suffering and knew, even as he faced this fact, that he still felt love for her. Certainly not the kind of love

he felt for Clare, but love all the same.

Confused and badly shaken, he drove back to NASA-Goddard and put in an unsatisfactory afternoon's work. He couldn't concentrate properly and instead kept drifting off into painful, tormenting thoughts about Suzy, Clare, the hole in the ozone layer, and the plot that Jack Douglas was hatching against him. His forebodings of the morning returned to haunt his afternoon, making him forget the time and stay on longer than usual.

Because of the 'hauntings' most people tried to avoid driving by night... and now it was night time. Cursing to himself, he hurriedly locked his office, left the building and climbed into his car, to start the drive home. He pulled out of the car-park, drove between the guarded gates, then started the short drive along Greenbelt Road. The stars in the sky were brilliant, the moon was a mottled cheese, and he noticed that the road was deserted, which made it less dangerous.

Then he saw the woman standing far down the road in the beam of his headlights.

Instantly filled with dread, he put his foot on the brake-pedal, slowed the car down, then started flashing his headlights to warn the woman to move.

She didn't take any notice. She didn't move at all. She was wearing a familiar black dress that fluttered in the breeze, and she stared directly at him, into his headlights, as the car raced towards her.

'Godammit!' he muttered, pressing harder on the brakes and feeling a sick lurching in his stomach because that ghostly figure standing in his headlights was somehow familiar.

It was Clare.

He slammed on the brakes and went into a skid, just missed her and came to a shuddering halt.

Shocked, frightened, he gazed out the window and noticed that she hadn't moved an inch and was facing in the same direction, her back now turned towards him, the breeze rippling her black dress.

He opened his door, calling her name as he did so, practically falling out of the car. Clare turned towards him. He was just about to ask her what the hell she was doing there, when he saw the deathly smile on her face, illuminated by moonlight.

'Oh, no!' he whispered.

It wasn't Clare. It was her double. She had Clare's smile, but a deathly one. Tony shivered and glanced left and right, desperately wanting the real Clare.

Then he looked back at her double. She was walking towards him. She was smiling and raising her hands in the air as she tried to embrace him.

She passed through him and vanished.

Tony was briefly paralysed, then he suddenly felt nauseous, and he hurried to the side of the road and vomited onto the tarmac. When he had finished and was straightening up again, he knew that something was wrong.

Something to do with Clare.

In a sudden panic, he jumped back into his car and drove home as quickly as he dared. The lights in the house were on, but in this case gave no comfort, and as he hurried up the path to the front door, he felt frightened and feverish. He opened the door with his key, filled with dread at what he might find, but when he stepped inside the kids, looking normal, were in the living-room, watching TV.

His kids, not their doubles.

'Where's Clare?' he asked.

Don jerked his thumb in the direction of the kitchen, but kept his eyes on the TV.

'Thanks,' Tony said and hurried into the kitchen to find Clare, the real Clare, but wearing the same black dress he had just seen on the road and sipping a mug of coffee in a strange, unnaturally calm manner.

When he walked up to the table and smiled at her, his smile was returned, though in a weary, pained way.

'I saw your double on the Greenbelt Road,' he said, 'and knew that something was wrong. What is it, Clare?'

'You'd better sit down,' she said.

He took the chair facing her and looked directly at her, tremendously relieved that it *was* her, but still shaky with fear.

'Well,' he said, 'here I am, sitting down. So what's wrong, sweetheart?'

She reached out and took his hand. There were tears in her eyes. She raised his hand and kissed it, her lips lingering over it, then lowered it back to the table, but kept holding it, squeezing it.

'This morning I lied to you,' she said. 'I didn't take a day's rest. I've been feeling so bad lately, much worse than I told you, so this morning I went to the hospital to have myself checked out. I've since become another statistic on the growing list of diseases caused by the alien virus. I'm suffering from malignant melanoma. Yes,' she clarified. 'Cancer.'

Chapter Thirty-Six

‘Until this happened,’ a distraught Tony said a week later to Clare, ‘I desperately wanted to make contact with the virus in some way or another - learn about it and maybe communicate with it - but now I hate it and want to destroy it. That’s all I can feel.’

Clare was lying in a hospital bed, looking surprisingly healthy and rested, waiting to have radiation treatment, though she didn’t believe it would help at all. She was being brave about it, really cool, and that made him hurt more.

‘You shouldn’t feel that way,’ she said, squeezing his hand reassuringly. ‘As a scientist, you should disregard what’s happened to me. The virus, after all, though alive in some way, doesn’t actually know what it’s doing to us, if indeed it knows anything at all, so you have to keep me out of the picture and retain your scientific objectivity.’

‘That’s impossible,’ Tony said, feeling bitter and unable to hide it.

She smiled at him and squeezed his hand again. ‘No, it’s not,’ she said. ‘Difficult, but not impossible. And it’s your duty as a scientist, as a father, as my lover, to find a bridge between us and the virus, between the known and the unknown, just as you and I have found a bridge between us. If *we* can build a bridge between us, Tony, then *nothing’s* impossible.’

It was a joke with serious undertones and it got a smile out of him, but when he looked at her lovely face and thought of how quickly its light would fade, he was filled with unutterable rage and fathomless grief. He had suffered the grief all week, often feeling numb with shock, and at times felt awake in a nightmare that he couldn’t shake off. The virus had done for his mother and now it was killing Clare, giving her the cancer it had given to thousands of others. Clare, however, had noted sardonically that this hardly made her a special case.

Maybe not in global terms, but she had certainly been special to him and it filled him with grief, hopeless anger and a burgeoning hatred of the growing alien virus, now seeing it as a great darkness covering the Earth and creating out of its mysterious, frightening depths a world peopled with only the living dead or those doomed to die. He shuddered to think of it.

‘I don’t know how you can adopt that benevolent attitude towards it,’ he told

her. ‘I’ve tried, but I can’t.’

‘Maybe because you take for granted what I only received as a gift. Our life together. Your children.’

‘Some people would call that a penance.’

Clare smiled at that. ‘It was a gift to me, Tony. I never had to give that much before, so never knew just how much I could get back in return. And what I got back from you and the kids was a hell of a lot.’

‘I don’t understand that. I thought you had loving parents.’

‘Yes, I did. I was lucky that way. My parents *were* loving, but not in the way you’d know it, so what they gave me, more than love, was respect and belief in myself. They didn’t teach me to *feel*; they taught me to *think*; and so for years I was ruled by my head and not by my heart.’

‘Very sensible,’ Tony cracked.

‘No,’ Clare said, ‘it’s not sensible. It’s a form of denial, a rejection of a part of yourself in the hope that life will be simpler. But then I met you, fell in love against my will, and in accepting the differences between us, I conquered that cowardice. I also learned to love your kids, and that still makes me feel good. It also makes me concerned for the future they’ll have if we don’t manage to stop the virus spreading. That’s why you’ve got to try it, Tony. It’s something you owe them.’

He knew what she meant when he tried to visualise Earth’s future. He saw a world of fire and flood, of drought and famine and phantasms, with ultraviolent rays travelling all the way from the sun to light without resistance on Earth, causing cancer and death. He saw the dead returning, materialising out of thin air, to torment those they had recently left behind in a literal hell on Earth. He saw a world in which the line between life and death, between dream and reality, would no longer be definable to the living: a world in which the dead would be as real as those who perceived them.

It was the world his children would inherit if he didn’t try to prevent it.

‘Right,’ he said, feeling more determined. ‘I’ll give it a try, at least.’

‘That’s my boy,’ Clare said, smiling. ‘You do it for all of us. Do it particularly for the kids and I’ll feel a lot better, no matter what I have to go through. And do it as quickly as possible, before Jack Douglas goes too far.’

‘Too far?’

‘Two years have passed since we became involved with the hole in the ozone layer, the greenhouse effect and the virus. Thankfully, during that time, most of

the developed countries have stopped thinking of the virus and its effects as a secret weapon created by some other country and instead accepted it for what it is: an *alien* entity.'

'Yeah, right,' Tony said, thinking of that other alien entity inside her, the tumour already spreading to her lymph nodes and liver, and hiding his urge to scream or weep with a sardonic grin. 'I already know that, Clare.'

'But human nature being what it is,' she continued with admirable equanimity, 'instead of uniting the world against it, the virus has simply changed the global balance of power.'

'With all that implies for their political clout when it comes to dealing with us,' Tony said. 'And your old boyfriend, Jack Douglas, is growing ever more paranoid about that.'

'Yes,' Clare replied, not embarrassed by his jibe and possibly pleased by his unconscious display of jealousy. 'And according to what I heard on the grapevine, he's convinced that if these climatic trends continue, the US will be forced to take dramatic steps to keep the wolves from its door.'

'What steps?'

'It's Douglas's belief that northern Europe, Japan and the Russians, now united in their economic strategy and becoming more arrogant as their wealth and power increase, will try to starve the US of the imported agricultural product it now needs and thus reduce it to a state of total dependence upon them. If that happens, Douglas believes, the United States should take over at least some of the territories of Europe by force.'

'Jesus Christ!' Tony exclaimed. 'Politicians!'

'I also picked up a rumour,' Clare continued, 'that although Douglas was, in a sense, forced into backing our project, he's also hoping that our research will lead not only to a way of stopping the growth of the virus, but to a means of actually controlling it, as well as the ozone depletion. That would give the US control over the world's weather, thus indirect control over the whole global economy. Jack's no Good Samaritan.'

'Shit,' Tony said, 'I don't believe it. That guy's a well that runs deep.'

'That's right,' Clare said. 'He'll sink as low as he has to go. That's why we've got to stop the spread of the virus and return the Earth's climate to normal, without giving Douglas a way of then using it to his own ends. So you have to stop hating the virus, Tony, and instead find out what it is and then find either a bridge of communication between it and Earth or a way of getting rid of it

altogether. And you have to do it before Jack Douglas or someone like him does something catastrophic.'

'I agree,' Tony said. 'I just find it difficult not to hate the virus when you're here in this hospital.'

'The virus is conscious in some way we can't imagine and appears to want only one thing. It wants to live – as *I* want to live and you *want* me to live. Why should that be a crime?'

Tony sighed. 'Well, I guess in that sense it's not a crime, but I *still* hate the fucking thing.'

'You shouldn't,' Clare said. 'We shouldn't even be calling it a *virus*. A lot of people now call it "Dream Maker" and I think that's better. It reproduces our dreams and nightmares and makes them seem real. That's a gift or a penance, depending on what you see, but it's certainly what Dream Maker does.'

Tony glanced out the window. He saw silvery lights flying across the white sheet of the sky, given life by the minds of wishful thinkers all over the land. The flying saucers were beautiful, the products of romanticism, but dark dreams and horrors were also created out there, leading to heartbreak and tragedy and all kinds of madness. The world had become a hall of mirrors where the images were not reflections, but the hopes, enchantments and furies of the unlocked subconscious. It was a world of bizarre splendours, of demons and ghosts, and you had to keep your wits about you to judge what you were seeing. You could learn to control it - at least most of the time. You could learn to sense them coming, to feel your mood creating them, and to blot them out of your thoughts before they took shape. You could do that sometimes, but not always, so you could never relax.

Now, thinking about that and strangely moved by it, Tony leaned across the bed, raised Clare's hand to his lips, kissed it, then lay his head upon her breasts and tried to hear her heartbeat.

It was beating for him.

She ran her fingers through his hair, kissed the top of his head, whispered, 'It's all right. I'll be fine,' and then, her body trembling with emotion, held him passionately, longingly.

'Oh, Christ,' he whispered.

The door behind him opened and he knew without looking that the nurses had come to take Clare for her treatment. He straightened up reluctantly and tried to look composed, but felt his heart breaking with love when he saw her slight,

tender smile.

'I'll be here, waiting,' he said. 'Don't you worry about that.'

'I'm not worried. I'll let you do all the worrying. You'll worry enough for both of us.'

He kissed her smiling lips. They weren't as warm as they should have been. He stood up and nodded at the nurses, then gave a quick wave of his hand and fled from the room.

He waited outside the hospital, in blinding sunlight, torn between pain and rage.

His love and grief knew no bounds.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Leaving his ailing President in a decaying Oval Office, Douglas didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Wiping sweat from his face and silently cursing the fierce heat, he saw the cracks in the dried-out walls of the corridors of the West Wing and was reminded that the walls of the Oval Office had not been much better. The heat was destroying the walls, plaster insets and window-frames quicker than they could be repainted, and the White House, once immaculate, was running to seed.

Just like the President. The man Douglas had just left was a sad reflection of his former self. Humiliated by the steep decline in United States' economic and political influence on the world, shattered by the recent death of one of his daughters by a cancer apparently caused by the depleted ozone layer, haunted by her repeated appearance, he was gradually, wearily, surrendering his authority to Douglas and his economic administrators.

Douglas wanted to weep when he thought of how the mighty had fallen; but felt like laughing when he thought of how easily, surreptitiously, he had taken command of the White House. He had succeeded in doing this simply by convincing the increasingly distracted, grief-stricken President that his former allies were exploiting the ecological disasters that had beset America during the past two years and, by so doing, were waging a successful economic war against the United States.

Because of this, Douglas had told him, it was imperative that the White House

decision-making apparatus be shifted away from the Department of Defence and instead placed under the authority of the Department of Management and Budget, headed conveniently by Douglas himself. Now Douglas, as he walked through the West Wing, could not resist the thought that at last he was more powerful than the President.

For the purposes of intimidation, he had deliberately arranged for NASA's Energy and Environment Program Director, Dwight Collins, to wait for him in the lonely splendour of the West Wing Reception Room, or Appointments Lobby, rather than his own office. As he opened the door and entered, he was expecting to find a nervous, overawed victim.

'You're late,' was Dwight's lazily acidulous greeting when he looked up from the antique sofa, under the mid-19th century American landscape painting, beside a late 18th century English library bookcase filled with porcelain birds. 'I've been burning my ass here for twenty minutes and I'm not amused, Douglas.'

'I'm sorry,' Douglas said, taken aback by Dwight's lack of humility. 'I've just come from the President and...'

'I'm a busy man,' Dwight replied, obviously unimpressed by the mention of the President, 'and when the person I'm meeting suggests the time, I expect them to stick to it.'

'Okay,' Douglas said, feeling flustered and not liking Dwight for it. 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be late.'

'No,' Dwight said sardonically, 'I'm sure you didn't. Now what do you want?'

Studying Dwight, who was large-boned and handsome, Douglas realised that he could not easily bluff him or in any way frighten him. The man was a former astronaut, which meant he was Clare's friend, and when Douglas realised that, he thought once more of Tony Rydell and was consumed with hatred.

Douglas hadn't given up his marriage for Clare - they had met after his separation - but his affair with her had certainly encouraged him to turn his back on his family. Then Clare had fallen for Rydell, that sloppily egocentric physicist, and Douglas, being left out in the cold and not thrilled with his bachelor life, had tried to get back in with his wife and family. Rejected, he had turned toward his work, growing ever more powerful as his hatred for Clare and Rydell became a ruling obsession. He was aware of this obsession, loathed its grip on him, but couldn't resist it. He had to have his revenge.

'What I want,' he informed Dwight with pleasure, 'is for you to drop Tony

Rydell from the National Ozone program.'

'Why?'

'That's not your concern.'

'I'm the Energy and Environment Program Director and Rydell happens to be my best man, so this *is* my concern. Now why should I drop him?'

'Rydell's a notoriously controversial character whose public utterances have been an embarrassment to this administration and politically damaged NASA in particular. That's reason enough, I think.'

'No, it's not,' Dwight said. 'Rydell first got into trouble for stating publicly that the UFO phenomenon should be officially investigated - he didn't even claim that they existed - but since millions of people are now being haunted by flying saucers, I think it's safe to say that his stand has been vindicated. He got into trouble again when someone informed the press of the existence of the alien virus in the atmosphere, but since there's no actual proof that he's the one who blew your cover, I can't use *that* as grounds for his dismissal.' Dwight spread his hands in the air in a mocking gesture and shrugged his broad shoulders. 'So why should I dismiss him?'

'Because your President wants you to.'

'Then my President has to give me a reason that I can convey to the press. And so far, he hasn't, through you, even come close to doing so.'

Douglas forced a smile, even though he felt enraged. He sat in the white chair by the table opposite Dwight.

'Can I get you a drink?' he asked.

'No,' Dwight said. 'I'm working.'

'And honourable NASA-men don't drink while they work.'

'No, sir. They might get dismissed. It's always best to be safe, right?'

'You're an arrogant shit,' Douglas tried for a reaction.

'I'm the product of my training,' Dwight replied. 'And you people financed that.'

Douglas knew then, without doubt, that this man was Rydell's friend and would do everything in his power to protect him. He envied Rydell that, which just made him loathe him all the more.

Sighing, trying to hide what he was feeling and instead act like a man with deeper concerns, he said, 'Okay, let's forget Rydell. Let's not be so personal. Let me put it to you plain and simple, no matter how much it hurts.'

'Please do,' Dwight said.

Douglas could have strangled him, but instead he just smiled bleakly and said, 'Rydell was just our excuse because, as you've just confirmed, he's your best man. In fact, what we really want is the dropping of the complete National Ozone program. No more and no less.'

He had thought it an inspired lie, but again it didn't work, since Dwight simply leaned forward on the gold-coloured sofa and calmly repeated the one word that Douglas couldn't bear to hear:

'Why?'

'Pardon?'

'Why should we drop the program?'

'Because it's costing a fortune,' Douglas said, 'and hasn't produced a damned thing. It's a complete waste of time.'

'I don't think so,' Dwight said. 'In fact, I think we've solved the mystery of the virus and can actually stop it, thanks to Rydell and Clare. Am I allowed to continue?'

Dwight's smile was like a razor-blade, cutting cleanly into Douglas, making him realise that he was the victim of a carefully planned coup. This bastard, Dwight, in cahoots with Rydell and Clare, had obviously set him up, and now, no matter how hotly he burned, he had to look cool.

'Of course,' he said. 'Why not? By the way,' he added, unable to resist retaliation, 'how's Clare these days? I believe she isn't feeling too well and has been off work a lot.'

'She's contracted a virus-induced malignant melanoma,' Dwight said.

Douglas suddenly felt chaotic. 'Cancer?' he asked stupidly, his heart racing with a blend of shock and fear for himself.

'Yes,' Dwight said. 'You heard me. A skin cancer caused by the virus you don't want to stop.'

'Malignant?'

'What do you think?'

'Oh, Christ!' Douglas said. And felt a spasm of anguish, a brief flickering of real compassion, before surrendering to self-concern and wondering fearfully when the virus would encircle *him* in its invisible claws. He was terrified of it, as were most sensible people, but he feared anonymity even more, since the very virus that was haunting the world was giving him power. 'Unbelievable. Even Clare, for God's sake!' He nodded judiciously, as if forced to be brave. 'Well, we owe it to Clare and all the others to defeat this damned virus - and

contrary to what you've just said, I *do* want to defeat it. So continue. I'm listening.'

'The research program headed by Rydell and Clare has proven conclusively that the alien virus takes its energy and consciousness from heat and is invading the Earth for that very purpose: to feed off its warmth. So, the way to stop the virus is to freeze it back to sleep and then somehow replace the ozone that's been destroyed.'

'And how do you intend doing that?' Douglas asked.

'While the virus has spread over most of the globe and is feeding off its atmosphere *and* the energy of human brain-waves, thus reproducing human consciousness in life-like form, it's still a single entity or, more precisely, one giant brain, or consciousness.'

'I'm following you,' Douglas said impatiently, nodding to indicate that Dwight should continue.

'So,' Dwight explained, 'if we can somehow perform a lobotomy on the consciousness, or brain, of the virus, we believe that the rest of it, scattered around the globe, will then gradually die off, or at least return to its former dormant state... its long sleep.'

'A neat theory,' Douglas said with soft sarcasm, 'though it raises the question of how you perform a so-called lobotomy on such a virus. Have you solved that one also?'

'Yes,' Dwight replied without hesitation, unable to resist another smile. 'Tests undertaken by the Laboratory for Extraterrestrial Physics at the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center, in Greenbelt...'

'Under Clare's supervision.'

'Correct. As I was saying, the results of those tests have led us to believe that we should fly a plane through the major ozone-hole over the Antarctic and spray it with liquid oxygen cooled to at least minus 200 degrees centigrade - just below the so-called "safe" point for cryonic preservation. That should make the virus retreat from the ozone-hole, back into the relative warmth of the unfiltered sunlight just above the stratosphere, before freezing the bacterial spores of the virus back into insensibility. The spray will have been mixed with an artificial gaseous matter composed of water, carbon dioxide, ammonia and hydrogen cyanide: a combination that forms the molecules essential to chemical evolution and the creation of ozone. We hope that in this way the depleted ozone will be replaced and again act as a shield between the Earth, the sun and, more

importantly, the once more sleeping alien virus, letting the world's climate gradually return to normal. We think it will work.'

Douglas thought he might be right, but took no pleasure from the fact, since he had personally profited from the misfortunes created by the virus. The threat of the destruction of the US economy had removed power from the Oval Office and placed it in Douglas's department; and no matter the long-term danger to the Earth, he could not bear to lose that power. On the other hand, faced with this fait accompli, he could hardly say no.

'Well,' he said, trying to buy time and think of a way out, 'you've certainly given me something to think about. Obviously, if you think it'll work, we have to try it. On the other hand, it's not the kind of decision I can make alone, and I think that any unforeseen dangers should be discussed.'

'There's one obvious danger,' Dwight said.

'What's that?'

'The hauntings. Anyone attempting to fly into the ozone-hole over the Antarctic, where the virus has its strongest influence, could go insane by being exposed to the most extreme form of the hauntings: an experience that could possibly destroy his sanity, no matter how objective he tried to be. That's Rydell's greatest fear.'

'*Rydell's* greatest fear? You mean Rydell is the chosen pilot?'

'Of course,' Dwight said. 'What better choice is there? Rydell knows more about the virus than anyone else. He also has a personal commitment that could help him combat the virus's hauntings, if that's at all possible.'

'Do *you* think it is?'

Dwight lowered his gaze, studied his hands, then shrugged and raised his eyes again.

'I don't know,' he said.

Douglas thought of the bizarre hauntings that were causing chaos, destruction and madness on a worldwide scale. Having himself experienced their awesome reality, he could imagine the hell that would be created in the very heart of the virus.

No, he did not think that Rydell or anyone else could defeat that, but if he did, he would then bring back with him the secret of control over the virus and the ozone itself, which is what Douglas wanted.

'Well,' he said, trying to sound as neutral as possible, 'if Rydell wants to try, we'll have to let him. I'll set the wheels in motion immediately and pray that it's

worth it.'

'Thanks,' Dwight said drily.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Suzy saw the fires burning in the American night. They were burning across the land to let the people know that the new dispossessed were on the move, looking for a place to lay their weary heads. The smoke from the thousands of fires billowed up from the dark fields and mingled with the clouds and then formed a hole in the atmosphere that now was even bigger than the United States and an awful lot taller than Mount Everest. There was something living in that hole, growing bigger every day, and Suzy knew in her dream that it was called the Dream Maker and was feeding off her dreams and the dreams of others to make those dreams real.

Suzy dreamed that she was inside the Dream Maker and making real what was unreal. She somehow knew she was dreaming.

The bedroom was in darkness. She knew that without looking. She opened her eyes, awakening, and saw that she was right, then recalled the dreadful journey from Iowa to Maryland and let the eerie pale glowing take shape at the end of her bed.

Her dead father came back to life.

He just sat there and stared at her. He seemed to be in a chair. At first he was motionless, then he smiled a little, but there was certainly something odd about the smile, as if it wasn't quite making it. She could see him and hear him breathing, watched his hands open and close, but his eyes, which had always been filled with kindness, had an uncertain, blind look.

'Hi, Dad,' she whispered. 'Can you hear me?'

But he didn't reply.

You always wondered what they experienced, if they saw or heard anything, and although if he sat beside her, she'd be able to feel him, she knew that if she actually tried to touch him, her hand would go through him and, most times, make him disappear again.

At first the apparitions had been frightening, like you expected a ghost to be, but after a while you got used to them, learned to take them as you pleased, and

even learned to call them up or blot them out with the power of your mind.

Suzy had learned to do that - she had a special facility for it - and it made her feel more in control of the world of mirrors outside.

'I've been invited,' she told her dead father. 'That makes this day something special.'

He still didn't reply.

The pain of losing him filled her up, like a mournful bell inside her, and she threw the sheets back and crawled forward to reach out and touch him. When she reached him, she saw through him, the faint shape of the cupboard behind him, and his eyes, when she saw them up close, were looking through her. She shivered, then, and tried gripping his shoulder, but her hand slid through space.

He dissolved into nothing.

Suzy slid off the bed, stood where her father had been, thought that it was colder than where she had been, so stepped forward and felt warmer air, then stopped by the window. The apartment was high in the hills, with a view of Chesapeake Bay, and the rising sun was laying its light on the water and making it glitter.

Most of the town was still asleep and the dawn was filled with peoples' dreams: Suzy saw the disc-shaped lights gliding gracefully across the bay, rising and falling in silent motion, hovering over the rooftops of Annapolis, as if protecting those sleeping.

She saw other visions as well: a white-robed man walking on water, a flower becoming a tree, houses bathed in the imagined light of God, a lawn covered in stars.

She saw what people were dreaming, what they yearned for in sleep, and although there were nightmares as well, she deliberately shut them out. She had learned that she could do that. She would feel them coming and stop them. When she felt the fear trickling up from the dark depths, she just closed her mind.

She had that facility.

Turning away from the window, she left the bedroom and went into the one next door. Her mother was in bed, studying the brightening light in the window, a dreamy, inward smile on her face, which now seemed old and wise. When she saw Suzy standing there, she looked up and smiled even more lovingly.

'The kids are sleepin' soundly in their beds,' she said. 'I just saw them clear as day.'

‘That’s good,’ Suzy said.

‘Why?’

‘I’ve been invited.’

‘Yeah, Suzy, you told me. You were in a bit of a daze when you told me, but you told me last night.’

‘Dad’s alive and well,’ Suzy said. ‘He just passed over, but he’s there all right. He came to the foot of my bed this morning, and I knew he was okay.’

‘Yeah,’ her mother said. ‘I often see him myself. I see him an’ my folks an’ they’re all okay and I might soon be joining them.’

‘Don’t talk that way, Mom.’

‘It’s the truth and you know it, Suzy. I’ve got that illness the Dream Maker gives to a lot of people, skin cancer, but now I know there’s nothin’ to fear, that it’s just passin’ over. What did Abe call it? Glory Road! And that’s what it is. It’s just a road to the other side.’

‘I haven’t told Tony.’

‘You did right in that. In your circumstances, it wouldn’t be fair to tell him. You’d get him back the wrong way.’

‘You mean he’d feel more guilty.’

‘He’s that kinda man, Suzy. He feels a lot more than he shows. He loves you, but he’s blind as a bat and too distracted for reasonin’. So, no, you can’t tell him yet.’

‘You want breakfast, Mom?’

‘No. I want to dream. I guess I’ll go back to sleep. When’s it all gonna happen?’

‘This morning. Ten this morning.’

‘I’ll be awake when you get back.’

Suzy left the room, went into the kitchen, made breakfast. When she’d finished, she had a shower and dressed and then left the apartment. The sun had risen fully and flooded the bay with light. The hills around it, once verdant, were now parched and brown. The boats seemed to float in the heat haze above the water’s flat surface. It was an illusion, of course - the boats were actually in the water - but the heat haze could fool you.

The apparitions could fool you, too, and you had to drive carefully, which Suzy did when she drove away from her apartment and down the hill to Annapolis. The town tumbled around the bay, looking as pretty as a movie set, and the silvery saucers gliding over the water were serene in their beauty. They

never looked quite real - the clouds sometimes showed through them - but they glided silently to and fro, rising and falling, sometimes hovering, and a lot of people had already gathered around the bay to spend hours looking at them.

Some people worshipped them.

Suzy turned away from the town and took the road to Washington DC, keeping a close eye on the other drivers and avoiding the sky. Being on the road was dangerous, as the many wrecks testified; drivers would lose their concentration and let the Dream Maker get to them and suddenly find themselves with ghosts and apparitions inside the car, then panic and lose control and crash into other cars. They would see the ghosts of the dead or the manifestations of their phobias - snakes and spiders and giant ants and cockroaches - and, unprepared, they'd go crazy behind the wheel and that was the end of it. It was those or things outside their vehicle - the apparitions of loved ones suddenly standing in the road ahead; flying saucers suddenly flying across and blotting out your vision; the road seeming to split open or bridges falling down - and those, also, would make them do the wrong thing and cause terrible accidents.

That's why you had to learn control, concentrate on feeling them coming, blot them out of your mind before they took shape and still handle the car. Suzy could do that now, though a lot of others couldn't, and that's why, as she drove along at a safe speed, she passed the many wrecked vehicles, too many to drag away, that littered the roadsides and fields.

Wrecked cars were now commonplace.

She felt more nervous about the invitation than she did about the apparitions, but she still keep firm control of her thoughts and a keen eye on what others were creating.

Just before reaching Greenbelt, she saw an enormous flying saucer racing out of the east, shooting over the freeway, and causing a driver ahead to swerve across the road, into the oncoming traffic, ending up in a tangle of shrieking metal, hooting horns, screaming people.

Suzy didn't stop. There was nothing she could do. As she passed the crashed cars she felt a wave of pain and terror, sensed something in the car beside her, blocked it out of her mind with her will and managed to lose it.

She was glad she could do that.

Not that it was easy with the things she had on her mind. She kept thinking about the kids and Tony and Clare, and those thoughts kept crowding in upon her and threatened to weaken her. She could be thinking about them and maybe

forget about all the rest and then the apparitions would take her by surprise and make her do something stupid.

Still, you had to do it. You had to balance your thoughts somehow. You had to focus on the apparitions while also dealing with your own thoughts and somehow keep them all apart and under control.

She was doing that when she took the turn-off to Greenbelt and became even more nervous.

'I've been invited,' she said aloud.

Suddenly, she had a flash of Don and Ronnie standing in the road right in front of her. She almost slammed on her brakes, which could have led to an accident, but she checked herself just in time, shot on through her ghostly kids. When she glanced in the rear-view mirror, she saw nothing but the car on her tail.

Thank God, she hadn't braked.

She was on the long road that took her straight to their house, driving past the endless fence of the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center, and it made her fill up with emotion over all she had lost.

She kept her eyes on the other drivers, braced herself for the flying saucers, but she also thought of her kids and Tony, of her neighbours, Dwight and Maggie, of the good times they'd had and the troubles they'd shared before she and Tony lost touch and she felt all that hurt.

Again, Don and Ronnie flashed up ahead, but she closed her mind and willed them away, gripping the steering wheel so tight she almost lost control and went off the road. Then she thought of Iowa, the land's beauty, its destruction, and remembered that hellish journey to Maryland, during which she had grown up. Yeah, she had matured, learnt about life and death, and knew that even the passing on of her father had taught her to live again.

'Glory Road!' her father had whispered.

In death there was new life.

Her tears came straight from her heart, brimming up in her eyes, and she felt the pain and love and despair and wondered where it was leading her. She turned off the Greenbelt Road, drove between the tidy houses, looked at all the dried-out, dead lawns and welled up with yearning. Stopping in front of her own house, she cut the engine and sniffed back her tears. She was nervous as hell and all confused, but she wouldn't show that.

She was here for a very good reason.

She had been invited.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The radiation treatment hadn't worked, the surgery had also failed, and now Clare felt like an old woman, her inner light dimming. Sitting in the rocking chair by the window in the front room of Tony's house, looking out at the silvery mid-morning, she yearned to join her father and mother in death, where pain and humiliation couldn't reach her.

Yes, humiliation... She touched the wig on her bald head, then ran her fingers down her browning skin and gave a faint shudder, wondering when it would end.

Please let it be soon, she thought.

She was alone in the house. The children were at school. Tony was at NASA-Goddard, clearing his desk before his trip, and Suzy should be arriving any minute for the meeting that Clare had arranged without Tony's knowledge.

She felt compelled to sort this matter out before facing the other thing. It was a form of repayment.

Gazing out the window, waiting to see Suzy's car, she thought of how much she owed Tony for what he had given her: his love and the love of his children, a less lonely life, the knowledge that she was better than she had thought and had a meaning beyond work. He had helped her break loose from her constraints and become a free woman. She owed him for that.

Looking out at the silvery haze, which represented a changing world, she realised that it was the virus, that the virus was *in* it, and that it could manifest itself at any moment through even her thoughts. She would see her father and mother, talk to them, feel them, as she had done so many times since that first time in the airplane over the South Pole. She hadn't told Tony about it, hadn't wanted to disturb him, but now, with her initial fears led to rest, she actually wanted to see them. Since the cancer, she wanted to join them and escape from this hell on Earth.

It would all come in good time...

A car drove out of the heat haze and stopped just outside the house; a woman climbed out, blonde and slim, sedately dressed. She squinted across the lawn, at

the house, then walked up the path. Clare sighed and stood up, reaching the door as the bell rang. When she opened it, she saw the face of a sad, world-weary, lovely child... and a tentative green gaze.

'Suzy?'

'Yeah, right. You're Clare, I suppose.'

'Yes.'

'Gee, I still can't get over this. A call from my husband's live-in woman! I feel really weird, you know?'

'Yes,' Clare said, liking her immediately. 'I know what you mean. I feel foolish inviting you into your own home, but please, Suzy, come in.'

She stepped aside to let Suzy enter, watched her standing uncertainly in what had once been her own living room, then closed the front door behind her and said, 'Relax. Sit wherever you like. Can I get you a drink?'

Suzy stared wonderingly around the room, as if reliving old memories. 'Yeah, thanks. You got a beer?'

'Sure.'

'A beer would be okay.'

Clare went into the kitchen as Suzy sank into an armchair. She returned with a beer, handed it to her, then took the chair facing her. Suzy stroked the wet rim of her glass, then licked her finger.

'It must feel pretty strange with me here,' Clare said.

'Yeah, it does.' Suzy sipped at her beer and her artfully painted, sensual lips broke into a smile. 'I thought you'd be younger,' she said innocently, without malice. 'I mean, you look a bit older than I'd... Whoops, sorry!' And she covered her mouth with her hand as her cheeks burned bright red.

Amused, Clare said, 'Don't be embarrassed. 'I know what you mean. In fact, I'm not as old as I look. I'm just pretty ill. Which is why I called you.'

''Cause you're ill?'

'Yes, Suzy.'

Suzy glanced around the house again, then sipped more beer. Resting the glass in her lap, she sighed and said, 'Well, here I am. What do you want?'

It was a simple, direct question, compelling Clare to compose her scattering thoughts and troubled emotions.

'You still love Tony, don't you?' she asked, feeling a little embarrassed.

'Yeah,' Suzy replied, rolling her big green eyes and offering a sigh. 'I guess that's my problem.'

‘You’ve been giving him hell over his application for a divorce. You’re not going to agree to a thing, are you? You won’t ever let him go.’

A flush brightened Suzy’s cheeks and her gaze showed resentment. ‘Why should I? It’s *my* kids you’re looking after. And besides, I *belong* here.’

‘But you walked out,’ Clare reminded her.

‘Yeah, right, I walked out. That doesn’t mean I didn’t want to come back. I walked out ‘cause I thought he’d drag me back, but he didn’t, the bastard. Instead, he met you and moved you in and wiped the slate on his past. He broke my heart when he did that.’

‘He didn’t mean to do that.’

‘But he sure as hell did it.’

‘He thought you really wanted to leave him and that hurt him badly.’

Suzy shrugged and glancing longingly around the room, then studied her glass of beer. ‘Well, I guess it’s all over now... but he can’t keep my kids.’ She looked up again, her gaze angry, her lips pursed defiantly. ‘And I suppose that’s why you wanted this private talk? To persuade me to stop my legal claims and let you have my kids!’

‘No, Suzy. That’s not why I brought you here. I know you won’t give the kids up and I don’t want you to.’ She wasn’t too sure how she should continue, so just came out with it. ‘I’m seriously ill, Suzy. That’s why I wanted to see you. In fact, I don’t have much longer to live...a few weeks, maybe days.’

‘Oh, Jesus!’ Suzy whispered, turning red and glancing about in confusion, as most people did when confronted with that statement. ‘Oh, hell! I mean, I don’t... I...’ Eventually she regained her composure and asked simply, ‘Does Tony know?’

‘He knows, but he thinks I still have a lot of time. He doesn’t know it’s going to happen soon and I don’t want him to know.’

‘So why tell me?’

‘Because I love Tony *and* the kids and I know they love me...’

‘Yeah,’ Suzy said bitterly. ‘Right!’

‘But they also love you more deeply than me and they’re going to need you back when I’m no longer here.’

‘Are you kidding me?’

‘No. Tony still loves you.’

‘And you?’

‘What he feels for me is something entirely different, partly based on his need

for company and having a woman in his life. But I know that he's always felt guilty at letting you go without trying harder to get you back. He feels deeply for me, yes, but I could never replace you, and when I'm gone, he and the kids are going to need you. I love them enough to want you to come back to them. And now I'm glad to know just how badly you want to do that.'

Obviously finding it hard to take in what she was hearing, Suzy clasped her delicate hands together and distractedly studied them.

'Gee,' she whispered, 'I don't know what to say. I mean, I don't know if it's right that we're discussin' this now, you being so...'

'It's right, Suzy. It's proper and fitting. Now I want you to promise that when I'm gone, you'll get in touch with Tony. I'm sure you'll find him responsive.'

Suzy turned her hands in her lap, then sighed and nodded. 'Okay, I promise.' She sucked in her breath, released it as a sigh. 'Is that all?'

'Yes, that's all.'

'Okay.' Suzy stood up and glanced around her. 'I guess I better be goin', before they all come home.'

'Yes, I think that's best.'

Suzy nodded distractedly, moving from one foot to the other. Eventually, after reluctantly opening the front door, she turned back for a moment.

'I want you to know,' she said, 'that I think you're a fine lady. My kids told me how nice you were and you've looked after them better than I did, and I think I've learned a few things from that. I was pretty immature and didn't know what I was doin', but if I get 'em back, I'll do better than I did before. As for Tony... God knows, he's not the easiest, but that doesn't excuse me. He owes me some, but I owe him some as well, and we'll just have to work it out. I'm sorry, but I don't know what else to say. I'm not good at this kinda thing.'

'Neither am I,' Clare said.

Suzy smiled, then looked embarrassed again. 'You got skin cancer from the hole in the atmosphere?'

'Yes.'

'My mom's got it as well, but don't tell Tony; he'd just be bothered. An awful lot of people are getting it these days.'

'I know I'm not alone, Suzy.'

'I didn't mean it like that.'

'It's commonplace, but we can't discuss it. No matter what words we use, they always seem the wrong ones.'

‘My mom discusses it. I think she almost welcomes it. She says that the virus, the Dream Maker, is beneficial, that the diseases it gives have their purpose, and that dyin’ is just a simple passin’ over to where our loved ones are. That’s why we see dead folks a lot these days. The Dream Maker’s lettin’ us see them as a form of welcome. At least that’s what my mom says.’

‘It’s an interesting theory,’ Clare said, feeling slightly better.

Suzy scuffled her feet and looked at the floor. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘it’s been nice to meet you.’

‘Nice to meet you as well.’

‘Goodbye, Clare.’

‘Goodbye, Suzy. And good luck.’

Suzy smiled in a hesitant manner, then nodded and stepped out, closing the door quietly behind her. Clare watched her through the window, feeling relieved to have talked to her. She sat on until Suzy had driven away, then got out of her chair. Going into the bedroom, she lay on the bed and instantly fell into the sleep of exhaustion.

She was awakened by the sound of the boys in the kitchen. Opening her eyes, she saw Tony staring at her, his gaze filled with concern.

‘Hi, honey,’ he said. ‘You okay?’

‘Yes, I’m fine.’ She sat up and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. ‘Just resting, that’s all.’

‘Can I get you a coffee?’

‘No. Just hold my hand.’ When he had done so, she asked, ‘Have you told the boys they’re moving in with Maggie while you and Dwight are away and I’m in the hospital?’

‘Yeah. They’re thrilled. I think they treat Maggie’s house as a summer camp. I packed their bags this morning and Maggie’ll take them back when she comes over to say goodbye to you. Then I’m gonna take you to the hospital and drive on to the airport after that. Dwight left this morning.’

‘Back to the Antarctic,’ Clare said, ‘for your greatest adventure.’

‘Let’s hope it’s a *successful* adventure.’

‘I’m sure it will be,’ Clare said with less confidence than she felt, well aware of what Tony was going to and what could happen to him.

She thought of that great hole in the ozone layer, of the mysterious heart of the alien virus, and was filled with a terrible dread that she had to conceal. Tony

would have to fly into the unknown and might never return; and even if he did survive, she would be dead before he returned home. This was their final farewell, though Tony still didn't know it.

'Dammit,' he said, squeezing her hand, 'I just wish it wasn't happening right now. I don't like being away when you're having that treatment.'

'Stop worrying. Maggie's going to visit me every day, so I won't feel too lonely.'

'That's something,' he said, as the front door opened with a bang and Maggie called out their names. 'In here!' Tony called back and Maggie entered the bedroom, her plump face, surrounded by blonde hair, filled with good cheer.

'Hi,' she said, standing in the doorway. 'I've come to say goodbye and take the boys back with me. How are you feeling Clare?'

'Fine. A bit tired, that's all. It's probably emotional.'

'All these farewells, eh?'

'I guess so, Maggie. First the boys, then Tony here. It's one of those days.'

Maggie walked across to her, leaned down and kissed her cheek. 'We'll both feel ten years younger,' she said, straightening up again, 'by just getting rid of these guys for a few days. We'll have us a lazy time.'

'Right,' Clare said.

'Shame on the pair of you,' Tony added.

'So, Tony's taking you to the hospital...'

'Right.'

'And I'll drop in tomorrow afternoon, after the treatment.'

'Thanks, Maggie.'

'And right now I'll take the boys away and let you both have some peace.'

'A real sweetheart,' Tony said.

Maggie ran her fingers through his hair, then walked back to the door and bawled for the boys to come and say goodbye. They appeared almost immediately, crossing the room to stand by the bed, where Tony was sitting. They knew that Clare was ill, but had been told it wasn't serious; nevertheless, they were both a bit shy when they looked at her drawn face.

'All set?' Tony asked them.

'Yeah,' Don said.

'Clare's going into hospital this afternoon, I'll be flying off a few hours later, and both of us should be back the same time - about ten days from now. In the meantime, I want both of you to behave yourselves and not drive Maggie crazy.

Okay?'

'Okay,' both boys said simultaneously, looking uncomfortable.

'Give me a kiss,' Clare said, 'and then you can go.'

The knowledge that she wouldn't see them again made her brim over with an emotion she didn't dare show. She embraced each of them in turn, holding them too tightly, kissed them and maintained her composure with gentle sarcasm.

'Okay, you pair of trouble-makers,' she said, 'you can now torment Maggie. Take your baggage and *go!'*

'See you, Dad!' Don said, embracing him.

'In a week,' Ronnie said.

'Right,' Tony said. 'In a week. And meanwhile, behave yourselves.'

'Okay,' they both said at the same time, then hurried out of the room.

Maggie kissed Clare again, patted Tony on the head, and said as she left, 'Give that man of mine my regards when you get to Antarctica. And I'll see you tomorrow, Clare.'

'Right,' Clare said. 'Tomorrow.'

Maggie waved one last time and disappeared through the doorway, leaving Clare and Tony alone, still holding hands.

'I want you to do me a favour,' Clare said on an impulse.

'Oh? What's that?'

'I want you to leave now and go straight to the airport. I don't want us to say goodbye in the hospital. I want us to say goodbye in this house, where we've shared so much together.'

'You wanna go to the hospital *alone?'*

'Yes, I'll take a cab.'

'I'd feel lousy if I let you do that, so don't ask me, Clare.'

'Please,' she insisted. 'I'd prefer it this way. I want to say goodbye here and now, in this room we both loved so much.'

'You make it sound so final, Clare. I'll be coming back, I promise you. That virus won't make *me* go insane. I'll fly in and out again.'

'I don't know about that,' she said. 'What you're doing is really dangerous. Jack Douglas has only given you permission because he's convinced you won't make it back. He has no other motive.'

'I don't give a goddamn about Jack Douglas. I'll come back, believe me.'

'I still want you to leave now. I won't say goodbye in a hospital. I want to say goodbye here, where we shared so much, and I want to do it right now. I don't

want it dragged out.'

He gazed steadily at her, then squeezed her hand. Finally, he kissed her on the forehead and whispered, 'Okay.'

'I'll come and see you to the door.'

'Man and wife,' he replied.

She thought of Suzy, but didn't say anything; instead, she got dressed properly while he called for a cab, joined him in the front room until the cab arrived, then clung to him until he opened the door.

There were tears in his eyes.

She had never seen him cry before and the shock rippled through her, tearing at her heart, making her cry as well, and forcing her back into his embrace for one last, desperate moment. They kissed repeatedly, clinging to one another, before Tony dried his tears and walked out, deliberately not looking back.

She watched his departure through the window, her tears falling silently.

The cab turned the corner at the end of the street, taking Tony out of her life for all time. She stood on, staring into the silvery heat haze, as if inside her own dream.

Then she sat down in the silence of the empty room and contemplated her own demise.

Chapter Forty

Tony was flown out that November, which was the austral summer, on an ancient Military Air Command C141 cargo plane from Point Mugu Air Force Base in California on a sixteen-hour flight to Christchurch, New Zealand, with stops in Honolulu and Pago Pago, American Samoa, in between. After losing a day crossing the International Dateline, he landed, as it were, in the past, at the Christchurch International Airport, then flew on a New Zealand Air Force cargo plane for another eight hours towards the American base at McMurdo Sound, on Ross Island, Antarctica.

Strapped into his seat in the rear of the ever reliable four-motor propellor plane, with nothing to look at but the huge stacks of freight chained to the deck, he couldn't help recalling his last flight over Antarctica, when the airplane had been harassed by UFOs, Clare had been haunted by her dead parents, the pilot

had been terrified by spiders and snakes, and the rear of the aircraft had been turned into an insane asylum, in which even the redoubtable Rick Polanski had been terrified. Such hauntings were now part of everyday life, a commonplace terror, but nowhere more powerfully alive than in the Antarctic, over which the heart of the alien virus mysteriously beat. And so, as the airplane flew above the black peaks and vast white plains of Cape Adare, then across the Ross Sea, he was not surprised to see, above that water filled with ice, the remarkably graceful flying saucers.

He was now convinced that the saucers were no more than the creations of the common, subconscious yearning of Man for something beyond his grasp. Tony thought they were wonderful.

He willed them out of his consciousness as the plane descended over the Ross Ice-Shelf and had managed to lose them completely before the plane landed on the ice runway of McMurdo Sound.

He had not been personally haunted on the plane, for which he was grateful.

Dwight was there to greet him and drive him back through the deceptively ramshackle complex of buildings, storage yards, muddy streets, garbage dumps, trucks, bulldozers and forklifts of McMurdo Station, on the southern extremity of Ross Island, surrounded by ice-filled grey water and gleaming white glaciers.

'About a mile from here,' Dwight told him, 'is Observation Hill, where the New Zealanders erected a cross in memory of Scott and his buddies, who died on their return from the Pole. If you fail, I'll erect one to you, right here on Cape Armitage.'

Tony grinned at that. 'When do I make the flight?'

'The day after tomorrow,' Dwight told him. 'When you've caught up on your sleep.'

'Good thinking, pal.'

Tony caught up on his sleep that same evening, but awakened in his bunk bed to find the room, which he was sharing with Dwight, filled with an unearthly light in which faint figures quivered.

Dwight was still sleeping, but tossing and turning restlessly, and Tony guessed that the faceless figures in that ghostly white light were the people in his dreams made manifest. It was a shivery experience, but one he was now used to: sharing the subconscious thoughts of one's fellow human beings. When he slid out of his bed and shook Dwight awake, the light receded back through the walls and the faceless figures disappeared.

When Tony told Dwight what he had seen, the latter grinned ruefully and admitted that he had been dreaming that he was dying and his bed was surrounded by grieving relatives. 'It's just a foretaste of what you're going to be in for,' he added, 'when you fly into the ozone-hole. Best brace yourself, pal.'

'I'm already braced,' Tony replied. 'I saw a lot of flying saucers when we flew in; then this business in here. I've heard reports that the Antarctic has become a huge fantasy land, with more apparitions per square mile than anywhere else on Earth. Is that true?'

'Hell, yes, it's true. It's just too bizarre, man. If you want to work here, you have to accept magic as the norm. Which is another reason we're not letting you fly until tomorrow: just being here will form a kind of preparation for what you'll find in the ozone-hole. Whether or not it'll be enough, we can't say; but at least it'll help.'

This proved to be true. That morning, Tony saw many small flying saucers gliding serenely under the azure sky, across the glittering ice peaks, as well as many human apparitions who constantly haunted the hundreds of administration, maintenance, transportation and communication personnel of McMurdo Base. Most of the men treated the hauntings with indifference or idle curiosity, though occasionally someone would break down in tears and have to be comforted. It was a world of flying saucers, visionary lights and spirits, coexisting with the real, physical world of the base, with its rusty buildings, machines and garbage dumps, its muddy streets and snow-covered surroundings. It was very bizarre.

To fill in Tony's time that afternoon, Dwight took him on a visit, first to Shackleton's hut at Cape Royds, twenty-five miles farther north on Ross Island, then to Scott's hut at Cape Evans.

Nothing happened at the former, but when outside Scott's hut, studying the surviving bales of hay for Scott's ponies and the pony harnesses still hanging in the open stalls adjoining the hut, Tony thought of the great explorer and then suddenly saw him materialising magically, initially as a dark shape rising out of the snow, then as a clearly defined man, wrapped up in his Antarctic clothing, with frost on his beard, standing clearly in front of the empty kennel, near which lay the mummified remains of a dog, its leather collar with a rusted chain still fastened around its shrivelled neck. The skin of the dog's head had shrunk away, exposing the skull and the white teeth in a frozen snarl, but the ghostly Scott, as if not seeing this, knelt down to stroke the animal, then turned away and entered

the hut.

Intrigued, Tony and Dwight followed him in. In the gloomy interior of the hut, they found Scott's ghostly companions lying on the two-tier bunks in their original sealskin, fur-lined sleeping bags. Their breathing was audible. Scott, or his apparition, had gone to the far end of the large room and was standing motionless, but with a bewildered expression on his bearded, frost-covered face, by the cast-iron stove, near the shelves that still contained dishes, preserved foods, and spices of all kinds.

Glancing at Tony and Dwight, as if not sure what he was seeing, Scott went to the table in front of the window, examined its assortment of chemical equipment - alcohol burners, glass-stoppered reagent bottles, test tubes and stands - then went to the other table to study the corroding components of a primitive wireless set. When he reached down to touch it, his hand went right through it, so he frowned and glanced across at the framed photograph of King George V and Queen Mary, which hung against the partition near the center of the room, but was beginning to fade. As Scott gazed at that fading photograph, he too started fading away. When an airplane passed overhead, breaking Tony's concentration, Scott abruptly disappeared altogether, as did the men lying in the sleeping bags, which now were all empty.

'Jesus Christ!' Tony whispered.

'Get used to it,' Dwight advised him. 'You'll get a lot more tomorrow.'

Whether a dream or an hallucination, Tony couldn't be too sure, but that night, as he was sleeping, he saw Clare vividly, having her radiation treatment in the hospital and looking distressed.

Opening his eyes, feeling as distressed as Clare had looked, he saw only the room's gloom. He thought he might have glimpsed a fading light, but he couldn't be sure of that.

The next morning, feeling more tired than he should have been, he prepared to take off.

In the early hours of the morning, Dwight drove Tony in a pick-up truck to Williams Field, an airport on the Ross Ice-Shelf, five miles from McMurdo Base. The artfully redesigned ER-2 was waiting on the airstrip, dwarfed by the soaring ice-cliffs, its new payload packaged in different pods, one under each wing. Escorting Tony from the pick-up truck to the airplane, Dwight said, 'Please be really careful, Tony. Try to keep control of yourself. What you've

seen here so far isn't a tenth of what you're going to see up there; and once you enter the heart of the alien virus, at the top of the ozone-hole, you'll probably lose radio contact, which won't help you at all.'

'I'm aware of that,' Tony said.

'And another thing. I'm particularly bothered by that last experience you had when you looked out the cockpit and saw nothing but a great darkness filled with stars, like being in outer space or some other galaxy, when you should have been directly above the Vinson Massif in Marie Byrd Land. We don't know what that was, but it certainly proved that the deeper into the ozone-hole you fly, the more varied and vivid the hallucinations are likely to be.'

'But I *did* make it back,' Tony pointed out.

'Yeah, you made it back, but you hadn't gone as far as you intend going today. What we don't know is what you'll experience if, after seeing that same phenomenon, you keep on flying, as you'll have to today. What I'm saying in effect is that if the hallucinations don't get you, that starry darkness, whatever it represented, might get you instead. You understand?'

'Yeah.'

They stopped by the ER-2, studied the white pods containing the cooled liquid-oxygen, then faced one another and shook hands.

'Good luck,' Dwight said.

'I was *born* lucky,' Tony said, trying to smile, but instead choking up when he looked at Dwight and thought of his wife, Maggie. He was so grateful to them both for taking on Don and Ronnie, as well as visiting Clare at the hospital.

The hospital... Radiation treatment... The hope of remission...

Hope Clare did not share.

Tony was shaken suddenly. When he dwelt on Clare, he thought of death. And in thinking of death, he was led on to the alien virus, which could bring the dead back to life and make dark dreams come true. Then he thought of Clare's double on the Greenbelt Road that evening, and his love for her turned into a fear that made his heart lurch.

Clare's double had smiled like the living dead.

He knew, then, that there would be no remission for her, and that the treatment she was receiving back in Maryland would serve no real purpose. She was dying, knew that this was so, and had hidden it from him.

Tony filled up with grief.

'If I don't come back, Dwight...'

‘Don’t say that, Tony.’

‘If I don’t come back, tell Clare and Suzy and the kids I was thinking about them today.’

‘They all know that, Tony.’

‘But tell them I *said* it.’

‘Okay, Tony, I’ll tell them you said it. Though you’re definitely coming back, so stop all this bullshit.’

This dismissive remark was good for Tony, making him pull himself together, but he couldn’t help thinking that this could be his last trip, his final day on Earth, and it made him well up with emotions that tugged him first this way, then that.

‘Clare’s dying, isn’t she?’

‘Nonsense,’ Dwight said.

‘She’s dying, and you and Maggie know it and want to protect me.’

‘Jesus, Tony...’

‘Don’t let her die alone.’

‘Maggie’s on her case, Tony. And don’t even ask me about the boys; I’m their godfather and guardian.’

‘You’re also the best friend I’ve got.’

‘Just get in the airplane.’

They embraced emotionally, then Tony climbed into the airplane. A few minutes later he was in the air. There was no going back now.

Suzy was watching him, protecting him with her will. She saw him in the dimming light of her mother’s eyes as he flew into the unknown.

Her mother was on her bed in the apartment in Annapolis, fading away into death’s darkness, her eyes fixed on that distant light. It was a long road into darkness - Glory Road, as Abe had called it - and the light shone helpfully at the far end, like a beacon at sea. Suzy could see that light, the flicker of hope in her mother’s eyes, illuminating her twin reflection, drawing her into herself.

‘There’s nothin’ to fear,’ her mother said. ‘It’s no distance at all. I feel Abe waiting for me.’

Suzy used her facility to see what there was to see, falling into the bottomless well of her mother’s gaze to find what she most wanted. Her father was there, Don and Ronnie, even Tony’s mother, all doing whatever they had to do in the world she knew well. The kids were playing on the lawn, Tony’s mother was

watching TV. Abe was on the porch in the house in Iowa, his steady gaze fixed on the sunset as he rocked in that old chair. Then Suzy saw Tony, in the cockpit of an airplane, his face covered with an oxygen mask, his eyes filled with confusion. She *saw* what he was thinking: about her and the two boys, about Clare, about his mother and father. They were all there with him in the cockpit, bound together by love and pain and the need for commitment.

Tony saw them as well.

Suzy's heart went out to him, her love wrapping itself around him. Exhausted, she lay on her mother's breast to hear the last of her heartbeat.

'Glory Road!' she heard her mother whisper as her dimming eyes widened. 'As God is my witness!'

Then, as her mother passed on, Suzy reached out to Tony.

He flew over the Ross Ice-Shelf and the Beardsmore Glacier, then the frozen peaks of the Transantarctic Mountains came into view. He flew farther and higher, above dark peaks embedded in white and blue ice, cascading ice falls, smaller, more scattered peaks, glistening expanses of virgin snow, until finally, about an hour's flight from the South Pole, the awesome, featureless, seemingly endless Antarctic ice-sheet was spread out below him..

He was farther south than he had ever flown before, yet nothing had happened.

During the flight he had been keeping contact with McMurdo Base, but suddenly, just as he was wondering why nothing had occurred, as he was checking the illuminated digital display of the navigation computer, radio contact was lost and replaced with static.

He checked the control panel. He was at latitude 89S. He began his steep ascent into the heart of the ozone depletion, where the alien virus thrived most healthily at an altitude of 20 kilometres. As he did so, the static's volume increased and the control panel blinked out.

He was flying blind.

'*Don't worry*,' Clare said.

She had spoken out of the static, but her voice was loud and clear, and Tony nearly lost control of the airplane, so great was his shock. He looked left and right, fully expecting to see her, but saw only a panorama of blue sky and endless white plains curving across the horizon.

He felt his heart racing, but kept ascending, flying blind, and cursed that he didn't know how high he was nor when to release the cooled liquid oxygen into

the atmosphere.

'*Yes, Tony, I'm dying.*'

He saw Suzy's face, but it was Clare he heard speaking: '*I'm doing this for you. I won't let it drag out*.' She was right there in front of him, speaking out of Suzy's lips, and he almost screamed when Clare's face emerged, superimposed over Suzy's vanishing image. The last he saw of Suzy were her green eyes wreathed in smoke rings, which vaporised, leaving nothing but stars in what seemed like boundless space.

Tony didn't make a sound, but he plunged down through himself, retreating from Clare's dying by seeking his essence and emerging to that place in his subconscious where time and space had no meaning. He was in the past and the future, Here and There simultaneously, and when he tried to break free by looking out of the cockpit, he saw only a vast inky darkness filled with stars and strange moons: a vertiginous cosmos.

He tried to release the liquid oxygen, but couldn't find the control, and groped blindly across the dead control panel, wondering where it had gone. Then Clare impressed herself upon him, writhing against him, melting into him, and the living heat of her alien body set a torch to his senses. He heard the scream of his breaking heart, a sound so physical he could touch it, then the darkness of the cockpit filled with light that beamed down from above. Looking up, he saw an enormous flying saucer, descending upon him.

'No, damn you!' he cried aloud, and tried to will it out of existence, to squeeze it out of his mind, though did nothing but drain himself of energy and set free his spinning thoughts.

He was in the heart of the virus, in a cosmos created by it, and he felt the airplane diving (or was it actually ascending?) and then the flying saucer above him (or below him?) multiplied and divided and became many smaller saucers, glowing, spinning particles which, interacting, formed the magical, dazzling consciousness of the Dream Maker.

Tony found himself racing towards himself in the creation of time.

Passing through the Dream Maker, he went back through his past, through his life, to his origins: first Clare, then Suzy, then his boys, Don and Ronnie, then his mother and father. Here the dead had dominion. They were spread out all around him. The myriad ghosts of his subconscious: his loved ones and heroes, his closest friends and bitter enemies, his dreams (those great leaps through the mind!) and his nightmares: giant spiders and centipedes, entrails writhing like

worms, his fear of drowning or being buried alive, decapitated or burned to death... he saw them all, *felt* them, was exalted and terrified, until eventually he was drawn magically back into his mother's womb, then ejaculated in water and blood to the thunderous noise of the living world.

His mother heard his first cry. His umbilical cord was cut. He was dangling upside-down, kicking furiously in God's strong grip, then tumbled through an unfamiliar radiance and fell upon soft flesh. He gargled and sucked, demanded and was fed, was nurtured and grew into a child, forgetting what he had been. He remembered only his recent past, existing in an eternal present (always past) and looked forward to the overlapping, hopeful futures that might never be, existing only in dreams. He glimpsed this timeless vision of himself in the heart of the virus, the Dream Maker, and having glimpsed it, he fought to escape from it.

While the spinning, pulsating lights swept past on either side, he only knew that he was either plunging towards Earth or ascending toward the stratospheric heights were the alien virus's heart beat. Yet even as he groped again for the control to release the liquid oxygen, the alien virus, the Dream Maker, filled his mind, drank from it, recreated it, and hurled him beyond his precarious present and its fears, into that future that had haunted his dreams ever since his childhood.

Tony saw it coming.

At first it was just a pinprick in a vast sheet of darkness, then a gleaming white eye, but then it expanded, flaring out in all directions, and raced at him and exploded around him, obliterating the real world.

He was sucked through time and space, hurled into another dimension, spiralled down through the cascading voices of history and returned to his constant dream.

Space folded in upon itself. The sudden silence was stunning. He looked up from Europa, across the valleys and frozen mountains, and saw the great golden globe of Jupiter. It hung above the white mountains, covered eternally in deep ice, and it was streaked with yellow and gold, its Great Red Spot a bloody wound. Around it were the satellites, thirteen, maybe more, and all of them, the enormous apple and its seedlings, were drenched in the stars.

Tony knew where he was - close to the Jupiter of his dreams - and realised that the dream had been telling him about this moment in time. Throughout his life

he had dreamed about the future that had now come to be.

Finally understanding this, he understood the alien virus: that it encompassed the past, present and future simultaneously, consuming them as one, regurgitating them at will, taking its sustenance and sense of reality from the collective mind of humanity, which had become, since the alien's awakening in Earth's stratosphere, its sole source of self-knowledge, its only known past and future.

The collective humanity of Earth was the alien's God. Without Earth, it could not be.

'Yes,' Clare said, loud and clear, repeating the words she had spoken to him, 'the virus is conscious in some way we can't imagine and appears to want only one thing. It wants to live – as *I* want to live and as you *want* me to live. Why should that be a crime?'

And when he heard her, he saw her.

Clare was looking right at him. He grew strong as she grew weak. He emerged out of the ether, that oddly glowing white light, and took shape at the end of her bed until he seemed almost solid. He looked a little confused, as if not sure of what he was seeing, but she sensed that in some way he could perceive and would know what was happening. That made it easier.

She had planned it meticulously, to save him and the children pain, and there, in the hospital, on her bed in the private ward, where the nurses would find her and be able to deal with her, she followed the example of her father and swallowed some pills.

'I won't be humiliated,' she said, speaking to Tony's double, 'and I refuse to make you or the children suffer by letting it drag on. I do this for love, Tony.'

And then, as Tony's double looked on, she washed the pills down with water.

After that, it was easy.

He was there, after all, in the airplane over the South Pole, but he was also here in the ward, standing beside her father and mother, between Don and Ronnie, to share their love and concern as she faded away. She knew they would stay with her during the journey she had to make, along the dark road to the light that led to the other side, perhaps in the living heart of the alien virus, also known as Dream Maker. Perhaps the dark road was Glory Road and she would find resurrection there.

Fading away was easy: you went just like an apparition. You focused on those

you loved and their smiles were like the sun and you dissolved into the light of the spheres and drifted out of your pain. You knew exactly who she was. She was Clare, loved by Tony. She loved Tony and his children and her parents, where they stood in her radiant dreams.

The children were at home with Maggie. Her parents were waiting for her. Tony was in the airplane over the Antartic wilderness, exploring the heart of the alien virus, his own heart, the world's center, and he would venture forth into the great unknown, but always return to her. She was Clare and she was dying, yet could not die because Tony loved her.

You were Clare.

I am Clare.

When Clare died, she joined...

Tony survived the ozone-hole, doing so through his love, taking the faith and courage he needed from what others gave to him - Clare's selfless sacrifice, Suzy's abiding need and loyalty, Don and Ronnie's dependence upon him, his own need to make amends. The lines of light that bound them all together were the feelings that saved him.

Taking the airplane up about as high as it would go, into the mysterious heart of the alien virus, the Dream Maker, above the vast and desolate beauty of the Antarctic wastelands, he sensed the dying of Clare and Suzy's mother. He shared the experience with them, gave himself to Clare and Suzy as he had never done before, and felt more concern for their feelings than he did for his own fate...

Which is why he survived.

His ascent into the heart of the ozone-hole was a journey into the light-flecked mind of the alien virus and, since the virus had soaked up his thoughts like a sponge, it was also a journey into his own forgotten self. He was drawn down through his center, through the labyrinth of his inner being, travelling into the boundless cosmos of his subconscious to find his own source. There he discovered his past and future, both at one with his present, in the shape of his father and mother, Suzy and the children, then found himself face to face with Clare, whom he touched and made whole.

At that moment, she was as real as he felt.

And at that moment, she died.

He knew she had just died because the virus told him so. It also told him that

the love he was losing would always be with him.

Clare wasn't dead. She was only sleeping. She was here, like him, in an eternal present, and would always exist for him.

And in knowing this, he understood that the alien virus, the Dream Maker, was not an enemy, that it was destroying the world through innocence, having no awareness of original sin or the pain it had caused. The alien virus was male and female, Man and Woman, in the Garden of Eden, an innocent babe, naked and crying, hungry only for life.

Tony survived his countless hauntings, the terrors and splendours of a world beyond him. He was hurled into a bizarre voyage through space and time, beyond the finite world, into the infinite, where nothing was remotely what it seemed and all things were possible. He had no sense of direction, no idea of where he was, but he felt that he was tumbling down through an immense well of dream-haunted darkness.

First the darkness was flecked with lights, silvery pinpricks on a black sheet, then the lights expanded to become saucer-shaped craft and immense, glowing moons. They shot upward, out of sight, and were replaced by glittering stars, rising silently, majestically, forming great waves of luminescence that curved over him and swept him away. He was cast through spinning space, a kaleidoscope of colour and sound, living every moment of time simultaneously, hearing the incoherent babel of restless humanity, before flying along a darkening tunnel with a light at its far end.

He thought it was death's door.

The light expanded and flared up, became a radiant, blinding sun, and he went through it and was scorched and consumed, then was spat out the other side, into the ultimate darkness.

He heard a silence so complete it was terrifying and he broke it by screaming.

That scream, reverberating throughout the universe, was the beginning and end of life.

Tony died, was reborn, burst back into time and space, crying out in exultation and dread before becoming a full grown man again.

He was in the cockpit of the airplane, the sky above, the land below. Finally back in the real world, given strength by his love and faith, he released the gas created by Clare, starting the process that would make the alien virus, the Dream Maker, retreat beyond the stratosphere, letting the ozone layer renew

itself and return the real world to normal. Flying back and forth, inviolate, he sprayed the heart of the ozone-hole, also the heart of the Dream Maker, ignoring his doppelgänger and the phantasms of the dead, refusing to let spinning moons and voluptuous suns intimidate him, viewing the flying saucers and cascading stars as benevolent visions, responding to Clare's and Suzy's doubles with love instead of fear. He kept going until the tanks beneath the airplane's wings were empty and he could, without guilt, with pride, head back to the base.

He turned the airplane around, caught the sun, was dazzled by it. He blinked and saw Clare disappearing, followed by Suzy and all the others, until only the clean sky remained above the boundless, white wilderness.

And having done that, he flew back to McMurdo Sound where Dwight Collins, his best friend, pale-faced and distraught, welcomed him back. Then he told him that Maggie had just phoned to inform him of the deaths of Suzy's mother and Clare.

'Yes, I know,' Tony said.

Chapter Forty-One

Clare was buried in the parched fields of Maryland in the heat of the afternoon. Even as her coffin was lowered into the earth, dead grass mixed with dried mud, the love and grief of those gathered around her was made manifest in the shape of the flying saucers flying serenely overhead, under the cumulous clouds and a silver-streaked azure sky.

Those flying saucers, Douglas knew, would gradually disappear as the Earth, now freed from the alien virus and its attendant apparitions, returned to what it had been a few years ago, when he and Clare had been lovers.

He had lost her before she died, as he had lost his wife and children, and now he had nothing left but ambition and the power it would give him. He would use that power to get at the man who had made him lose all the rest.

That shit, Tony Rydell, now looking shocked.

He was being comforted by Dwight and Maggie Collins while his two sons, dressed neatly in dark suits, clung to their mother. Suzy Rydell was dressed demurely in a dark skirt and jacket, but Douglas, who had heard a few stories,

wasn't fooled for a minute.

As common as mud, just like Rydell. Water finds its own level.

Taking satisfaction from this thought, Douglas waited patiently for things to end, just biding his time, still smarting from Rydell's success and looking forward to crushing him. He watched the coffin being lowered into the ground, felt a twitch of guilt, which he instantly disowned, then played his part in the subsequent rituals of mourning, shaking hands, patting shoulders. Eventually, when the funeral was over, he nodded coolly at Dwight Collins, smiled sympathetically at the chaplain, then walked up to Rydell, where he stood, dry-eyed but clearly shaken, with his wife and children.

Rydell stared at him, startled.

'Hello, Rydell,' Douglas said.

Rydell sighed. 'Hi, Douglas. I'm sorry if I look a bit surprised. I didn't expect to find you here.'

'Why not? I was one of her oldest friends. Surely you know that.'

'Yeah, right,' Rydell said.

Douglas studied him carefully. He was bowed, but not broken. He had obviously taken a certain amount of strength from his wife's return. Douglas, now examining her closely, found her attractive. She was holding the hands of her two sons and studying him with candid, green eyes.

Douglas introduced himself. 'I'm the President's aide,' he said.

'Before or after he fell to pieces?' Suzy replied. 'Did you help him with that?'

Douglas was taken aback by the remark. Feeling humiliated and outraged, realising that the little slut was not the fool she seemed, he refused to commit himself to a reply and instead turned back to Rydell.

'I'm really sorry about Clare,' he said.

'Sure,' Rydell replied, doubtfully.

'She would have been proud of what you did in the Antarctic. I mean, you've practically saved the world.'

'Thanks, but that's not strictly true. A lot of people around the world contributed to solving the problem; Clare and me, we just collated their work and supervised the analyses. Of course, Clare's the one who found out how to control the virus; I just did what was necessary.'

'And succeeded,' Douglas said, remembering how humiliated he had been when Rydell had done that, but now gaining pleasure from the forthcoming rewards which he thought the physicist, in cooperation with Clare, had

inadvertently given him.

'From what I heard,' Rydell said, in his customarily blunt manner, 'you *didn't want* me to succeed, because the problems being caused to the country by the virus were actually enhancing your career.'

Douglas grinned, barely able to conceal his pleasure, moving in for the kill.

'Well,' he said, 'it's certainly true that the problems caused by the ozone hole and a dramatically altered climate changed the country's political priorities and placed my economic considerations ahead of those of the Department of Defence.'

'I dig,' Rydell said, with soft sarcasm.

'On the other hand,' Douglas continued, unperturbed, bearing down with all his might, 'the destruction of the alien virus - '

'It's just asleep,' Rydell corrected him.

' - will eventually return our climate to normal,' Douglas continued enthusiastically, 'thus returning economic power to agricultural and industrial America. It's *also* true that the method you used to put the virus to sleep could be used in reverse, I believe, to awaken it whenever, or wherever, we desire. In other words,' he continued, expressing his fondest hope, 'the gas that Clare created has shown us how to *control* the hole in the ozone layer, opening or closing it at will, thereby also controlling Earth's atmosphere. In short, you've given this government unprecedented control over the Earth's weather. This means we can control worldwide agriculture and thus the whole global economy. I'm back in business, Rydell - and it's all thanks to you and Clare.'

He felt victorious when he said it, flushed with pride, excited by vengeance... Then he saw the glint of humour in Rydell's eyes.

'You're daydreaming,' Rydell told him. 'We'd never give you that opportunity. We knew damned well you were trying to use us and ensured that you couldn't.'

'But I can!'

'No, you can't.' Rydell grinned in a manner that suddenly made Douglas nervous. 'The opening of an ozone-hole anywhere in the world would reawaken the dormant virus - as I said, it's not dead, it's only sleeping - and let it back in through the thinning atmosphere. And once in, it would spread again in an unpredictable manner, which means *you* wouldn't be able to control it any more than anyone else. You're fucked, Mister Douglas.'

The obscenity was offered deliberately like a slap in the face and Douglas almost recoiled from it. Turning away, looking neither left nor right, he walked

to the limousine that had been supplied by the White House and let it take him back to a future he could not bear to face.

He had been foiled by Clare and her lover, Tony Rydell. Now his future was bleak.

When Clare's double materialised eerily beside him, her smile like ice and fire, her dead eyes mesmerising, he knew he was damned and would certainly be haunted, with or without the alien virus, for the rest of his life.

Chapter Forty-Two

Clare was dead in body, but not in spirit. Her spirit lived on in the fact that Earth was returning to normal, the ozone layer was back in place, and the alien virus was locked outside the stratosphere, again dormant, or sleeping.

In time the world's mean temperature dropped, the ice-caps stopped melting, the crops and animals became healthy again, and, most importantly, at least to those who had personally suffered, the increased incidence of skin cancer and other ailments caused by the sun's unchecked ultraviolet rays fell back to a more normal level.

Suzy's mother was also buried, returning to the earth she had loved, and then Suzy moved back in with Tony to start a new life. She knew that she'd changed, was more mature, aware of suffering, and the love she felt for Tony was different and somehow more meaningful. Without him and the kids, she'd been empty, incomplete, but once home, with the comforts of the familiar, she felt like someone redeemed.

As for Tony, he was still dishevelled, distracted and work-obsessed, but now he thought enough to glance occasionally over his shoulder and check how she was doing. He'd changed in other ways, too, was more considerate of her feelings, and when he touched her in bed it was like being drawn back to adolescence. They were both like kids again, making love tenderly, slow and easy, and they slept arm in arm as real lovers, not as bored man and wife.

It was like being reborn.

What relieved Suzy the most was that Clare didn't intrude. Her presence was in the house - she turned up with their other loved ones - but that just helped them both accept that it was okay for Tony to think about her without feeling

embarrassed.

Clare usually appeared around the house when Tony was open to his grief: sometimes on the moonlit lawn, wearing that black dress, her hair windblown, other times at the table in the kitchen, just smiling at them. She never came when the kids were there - Tony wouldn't have let that happen - but she materialised when he let his guilt or grief pour out to create her.

He sometimes wept when he saw her, his tears falling against his will, and when that happened, Suzy would take him in her arms and rock him just like a child.

'It's alright,' she'd say. 'It doesn't matter. It's doing you good. That's what she's here for.'

You could share life with the dead the way you couldn't with the living; their impermanence made it easier to trust them and hold them in good stead.

Clare never materialised in the bedroom, which Suzy took for a good sign, and gradually, as the weeks passed into months, she came less and less, was increasingly insubstantial each time she did appear, and eventually faded away altogether and never returned.

Just like all the others.

The apparitions were disappearing, all over the world. As the hole in the ozone layer shrank and Earth's temperature returned to normal, the hauntings tapered off and gradually became few and far between. A lot of people no longer saw them, even when they were present, and only those with a special facility, like Suzy, could still summon them up at will.

For as long as possible, she clung to her folks that way, seeing her father in his rocking chair, her mother right there in the kitchen, sometimes even seeing herself as a child in the old white-painted house... but gradually they also faded away and failed to return.

Suzy sure as hell missed them.

'Some day,' she said to Tony, who was sharing a beer with her in the living room, 'we're gonna look back on what happened and not be able to believe our own memories. We're gonna think we've gone senile.'

'I'm senile already,' Tony replied, 'and it's a good way to be. Just think of my mother.'

'Menopause Manor.'

'It's right there on your doorstop. We're all heading for Menopause Manor, one way or the other.'

He sounded more like her father every day and that made her feel good.

'Are you happy, sweetheart?'

'I have my moments,' he replied. 'If you mean, am I happy being back with you, the answer is yes.'

'You love me, don't you?'

'I always did, Suzy. I just have a forgetful disposition, though I'm trying to fix that.'

'You're never gonna fix that, Tony, but now I know how to handle it. You and me, we're a team for life.'

'Amen,' Tony said.

He took her hand and squeezed it and she glanced through the window and saw a white light with a tail streaking across the vast, starry sky. At first she thought it was an apparition, something wrought from her beating heart, but realising that it couldn't be that, she sank back into her chair.

Shooting stars were a natural phenomenon, even though they looked magical.

That thought, though neither new nor original, filled Suzy with wonder.

She might stay young forever.

One evening, a few years after his great experience over Antarctica, shortly after celebrating the anniversary of Clare's death and the rebirth of the natural world with Suzy, Don and Ronnie, and their best friends, Dwight and Maggie, Tony climbed into his car and drove alone to the long road that ran between the suburbs of Greenbelt and the high fences of the NASA-Goddard Space Flight Center. He stopped halfway along the road where he had once seen Clare's double, then got out to stand all alone in that still, moonlit darkness.

There, in the night, in that vast bowl of silence, he thought about life and love, about marriage and children; about how Suzy had returned to him, a different person, as he was; and, especially, about how Clare, before her suicide, had left him a note saying that Don and Ronnie needed their real mother, thus teaching him that love has many faces and is filled with surprises.

The three of them, he, Clare and Suzy, had been touched by the Dream Maker. They had all been redeemed by it.

He thought of Clare with the pain of loss, brimmed over with love for Suzy, then gazed up at the lustrous, star-bright sky, at the pale eye of the moon, remembering that the alien virus was not dead but simply sleeping, and that some day, some way, it might reawaken and return to the Earth.

In what form? To do what?

Awed by that knowledge, but also strangely uplifted, he held the image of his loved ones up before him like a beacon as he drove back, in the dead of the night, to his modest, untidy home.

W. A. Harbinson is the author of many novels, including the bestsellers, *Genesis* and *Revelation*. Information about his books can be found at:

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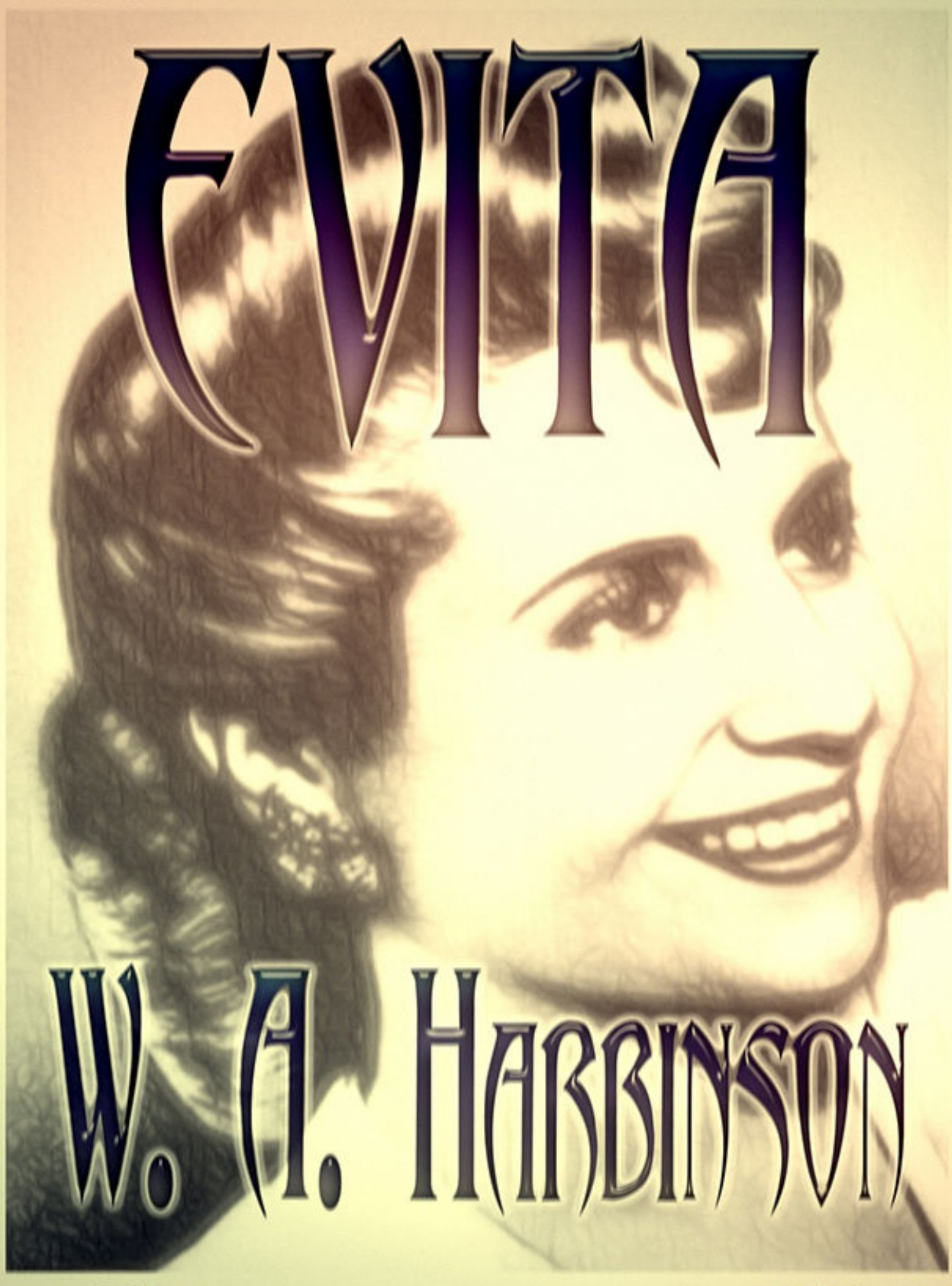
EVITA



W. A. HARBINSON

‘I will return and I will be millions’

So said ‘Evita’ Perón, who rose from obscurity to become one of the most powerful, adored and reviled women in the world. The death of Evita in 1952, followed by the mysterious disappearance of her body, led to almost forty years of intrigue and intense speculation that only fuelled her legend and made her even more mythical than she had been in real life. But what, exactly, was she in real life?

W. A. Harbinson, author of a Number One US bestseller, *The Illustrated Elvis*, *Beauty and the Beast: The Story of Nastassja and Klaus Kinski*, and the explosively controversial *Iconic Voices*, attempts to answer that question in what may be the definitive text on the most famous female figure of her time.

‘Riveting… No novelist could have dreamed up a heroine like this.’
-*Good Housekeeping*

Evita

W. A. Harbinson

First published as *Evita! A Legend for the Seventies*
A Star Book published by W. H. Allen & Co. Ltd. (London),
1977

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Reprinted as *Evita: Saint or Sinner?* with an additional essay on the making of the 1996 film adaptation directed by Alan Parker and starring Madonna.
Published by Boxtree Limited (London) 1996
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Evita

Part One: Death and Deification

Without fanaticism one cannot accomplish anything.
-Evita Peron

Chapter One

When one of the world's great lovers, Rudolph Valentino, died in the summer of 1926, the then unheard-of sum of 50,000 mourners turned out in Manhattan, New York, to pay their final respects.

When another of the world's great lovers, Dona Maria Eva Duarte de Perón – better known to the people of Argentina as Evita, the Lady of Hope, the Lady of Compassion, and officially named Spiritual Chief of the Nation – died in the summer of 1952, some 700,000 Argentinians turned out in Buenos Aires, demonstrated passionately in the streets, and lost themselves so completely in their grief that sixteen of them were killed, 3,900 ended up in various hospitals, and thousands more had to receive first aid.

To feed these multitudes, the army had to set up twenty-four field kitchens, giving away sandwiches, oranges and coffee. In an attempt to quell the mobs that howled and crushed one another in the Avenida de Mayo, other soldiers were forced to offer batons instead of nourishment. In the Avenida de Mayo itself, placed there at an estimated cost of $2 million, approximately 8,300 wreaths had been laid, some of them piled thirty feet high.

Argentinian newspapers, normally limited to six or eight pages daily by newsprint shortages, were told by the government that they could now use all the paper they wanted in reporting the career and death of the beloved Evita. Radio stations cut their scheduled programs and played solemn music instead. The Argentine Press Office rebroadcast the announcement of Evita's death at fifteenminute intervals. More first-aid stations sprang up in the streets for the many jostling, weeping multitudes.

The following day, Evita was exposed to her people. In a flowing white tunic, her blonde hair (dyed) splayed over a white pillow, she lay in state in a silver-trimmed cedar coffin with a full-length glass top, in the National Congress Hall. Day and night, often in torrential rain, miles-long queues waited in the black-shrouded streets to see her.

Two million filed past Evita's bier in the first few days. They filed slowly past the beautiful blonde hair, past the once delectable body now shrunken in death, past those brightly painted lips that on posters and hoardings had suggested fellatio to the fevered imaginations of her most macho subjects. These macho subjects now shuffled past, holding their caps

in their rough workers' hands. They gazed down at the 'little whore', the glamorous actress, their benefactress; at the poor girl who had emerged from the desolate pampas to enrich their poor lives. And, shuffling past her, they also shuffled past Juan Domingo Perón, the President himself, now the bereaved husband, big and bulky, wearing a black tie and armband, his dark, overfed, ravaged schoolboy's face lowered to gaze down upon his deceased other half.

The *descamisados*, Evita's poor 'shirtless ones', shuffled past with their heavy wives trembling by their sides. Dressed all in black, these women were wringing their hands and sobbing and holding on to each other. They glanced with awe at the President and saw the tears on his cheeks. They saw the people around him, but these people were not so familiar. Amongst them were Evita's mother, her three sisters, the Governor of Baires, the Minister of Communications, the Minister of Technical Affairs, the Minister of Political Affairs, and Raul Apold, UnderSecretary of Press, and Atilio Renzi, Evita's personal assistant. The *descamisados* possibly also saw Jose Espejo, the boss of Evita's unions, who would soon be arrested by Perón and never be seen again; and Evita's dissolute brother, Juan Ramon Duarte, who had been her personal aide and who would soon resign suddenly and 'commit suicide' in a manner not easily explained. No matter: the *descamisados* shuffled past. They saw their 'madonna' in the coffin, the public grief of the President, and then they moved back out into the streets, to rejoin the other massed thousands.

Two million grew to three million. The queues seemed never to end. In the chaotic streets some were actually crushed to death and many more were injured. In the open- air clinics people lay on camp beds, pale and bewildered, many covered in blood, succumbing to exhaustion or starvation after days of being ignored by over-worked medics. And at night, beneath the huge, black-draped portrait of Evita that dominated the Avenida de Mayo, the blaze of countless torches held aloft by the mourners illuminated the stacked, garish flowers.

The mourning continued. The country came to a virtual standstill. Factories, slaughter-yards, offices and schools stood silent and empty. Across the nation they were renaming streets, institutions, an entire county and the city of La Plata in Evita's memory. Buildings and lampposts were draped in

black and Masses were celebrated, until, after two hysterical weeks, Evita's body was transferred via a gun carriage towed by fifty men and women in a pageant reminiscent of Cecil B. Demille, along a one-mile funeral route packed with weeping thousands, to the headquarters of the General Confederation of Labor (CGT) where, resting in the glass-topped coffin in an immense horseshoe of white and mauve orchids, *Santa* (Saint) Evita's body was to remain until a mausoleum, 150 feet taller than the State of Liberty, could be built in downtown Buenos Aires. So great was the grief of Evita's husband, President Juan Domingo Perón, that on October 17, the anniversary of the Perónist revolution, he dedicated the day to Evita. Argentina subsequently exploded with an avalanche of commemorative busts, medals, pictures, records, pennants, key rings and postage stamps. Thousands of copies of Evita's book, *La Razon di mi Vida* (*The Reason for my Life*) were distributed. More streets, schools, squares, even rivers and mountains were named after her. And every evening, on the radio, the main news bulletin was preceded by the words: 'It is now 20.25, the hour when Eva Perón entered immortality.'

Drawings for her tomb were submitted. The exterior was to be adorned with sixteen statues of the 'deity' reposing in the silver sarcophagus inside. A 140-foot-tall statue of a *descamisado* (its construction to be financed by the extraction of one day's earnings from every lowly paid 'shirtless one' in employment) would tower on the roof.

Plans were made to have the body embalmed.

The religious fervour of the mourning continued. While the people still wept in the streets, the Minister of Public Health, Ramon Carillo, ordered a 220lb candle, the same height as Evita (5ft 2in) to be installed in the Ministry and lit for an hour on the 26th day of every month, thus ensuring that this symbol of Evita's death would remain for posterity. Not to be outdone, the Union of Workers and Employees of the Food Industry cabled a request to Pope Pius XII to canonize Evita. The request was denied.

While schoolchildren were receiving prizes for poems and essays praising the deceased and being told that Evita, like Christ, had died because she had 'kissed the ill, the lepers, the consumptives', the newly formed Association of Friends of Evita was basing its organization's principles on the simple credo: 'What would Christ have done without His disciples?'

Not content with this, various senators in the Congress were waxing eloquent as to how the First Lady of Argentina had combined the best virtues of Catherine the Great of Russia, Queen Elizabeth I of England, and Isabella of Spain. Having thus aligned Evita with both Christ and three of the greatest ladies in history, the government then announced that July 26, the day of her death, would be observed for 'the rest of history' as a day of national mourning. And good *Perónistas*, the party ruled, would wear black ties at future party meetings… *forever*.

It did not pass unnoticed that both Evita and Christ had died at thirty-three years of age.

Nor that Evita, like Christ, had achieved sainthood.

Chapter Two

Three years later, President Juan Domingo Perón, still wearing black in mourning for his deceased wife, was banning photographs of himself and a group of high-school girls of the Union de Estudiantes Secundarios, the 124-acre presidential estate he had turned over to them for their games. The reason for the banning was that one of the girls, then only sixteen years old, was rumored to have become his mistress two or three years earlier – a story that the 'shirtless ones' were all too willing to believe, given their fondness for the memory of Evita, their conviction about Juan Perón's singular sexual proclivities, and the rumor that Perón had, earlier that year, secretly married the nineteen-year-old Laura del Solar.

At roughly the same time, the esteemed but, in this instance, certainly naive Herbert L. Matthews of the *New York Times* was assuring his readers that the Argentine President's fondness for playing games with adolescent girls was nothing other than a 'normally innocent and politically astute policy to gain more popularity' and that, since the death of his beloved Evita, 'there have been no other women and there surely will be none'. Matthews went on to inform his readers that Perón's popularity was undiminished by Evita's passing, that his power was 'supreme' and that his position as President of

Argentina was ‘unchallengeable’ – an unfortunate claim.

For some time Perón had been quarrelling with the church, the military clique and the wealthy. His argument with the church soon made him the first, and so far only, twentieth-century head of state to be excommunicated by the Vatican. Worse was to come, however. On July 16, 1955, three years after Evita’s death, elements of the navy bombed May Square and the presidential mansion (the Casa Rosada). Perón’s supporters started burning churches in retaliation. By September the military were in power again and Perón, hiding on a Paraguayan gunboat on the Plata River, was scribbling to his sixteen-year-old sweetheart: ‘You are all I have left now the workers have deserted me… I miss you every day… Many kisses and many desires…’ and signing the note, ‘Papi’, Argentine for ‘Daddykins’.

While Perón, still hiding on the gunboat, was scribbling this adolescent nonsense to his adolescent mistress, the more divisive passions within the country had reached the state where everything that bore the name ‘Perón’ or ‘Evita’ was being destroyed, including posters, statues, and Evita’s beloved Children’s Palace. Meanwhile, investigators working for the new regime were exposing Perón as a sixty-year-old libertine who, in the acidulous words of *Time*, ‘liked his girls young, his gadgets golden and his plunder plentiful’. Included in the rather sordid revelations about the ‘people’s’ President was the fact that Perón had stashed away enormous wealth in various overseas banks and had led a private life of extraordinary luxury.

Evidence of the lifestyle of the supposed protector of the *descamisados* came in the shape of at least five properties, including the presidential estate at Olivos, an exclusive Buenos Aires suburb where Perón (‘Just call me Poncho!’) often went to join his adolescent girls in basketball, sailboat racing and skating; or to award wallets containing 500-peso notes to graduates (all female, all adolescent) of the classes in dancing, gymnastics and drama.

Among these pupils was Nelida Rivas, the fourteen year-old, green-eyed janitor’s daughter, whom Perón made his mistress and to whom he gave jewels from his late wife’s collection, as well as ‘poodles, perfume, and a nice little concrete house in the suburbs with her folks’.

Also found by the investigators was a third holiday residence in the pampas south of Buenos Aires, fitted out with bearskin rugs and a fencing court. A fourth residence was an apartment atop an eight-storey building

where, in ‘boudoirs lined with mirrors’, the President enjoyed himself with the now seventeen-year-old Nelida. Closets were crammed with suits, uniforms, jackets and riding boots.

The fifth house, a two-storey Buenos Aires bungalow at 2102 Teodora Garcia Street in the fashionable suburb of Belgrano, turned out to be a veritable gold mine. Included in the collection were cigaret, jewellery and bonbon boxes, clocks and watches, coins of various countries, spoons and bowls, toilet sets, ashtrays, and a gold-plated telephone with ivory ear-and-mouthpieces. The house had at least ten television sets. Dozens of mink, sable and other luxurious fur coats were found in a deep freeze. There were two hundred suits and over eighty pairs of shoes. Downstairs was a well-stocked bar under the lewd motto: ‘Someone always gets assaulted when a poor man has some fun.’ Also downstairs was a huge gold elephant with an enormous emerald – said to be the second largest in the world – embedded in its forehead. Other treasures included precious rugs, tapestries and pictures, as well as an extraordinary collection of paintings, including works by Rembrandt and Velázquez. The basement garage held two of Perón’s sixteen cars of every high-priced foreign make. In various safes, vaults and drawers the investigators found close to $20 million in cash.

Obviously conscious of the politics of Argentina and of his own, always precarious, part in them. Perón also had a bomb shelter, which was joined by a secret panel to the ground-floor press room of his own downtown publishing house. An underground vault lined with rosewood, the bomb shelter contained a bedroom, numerous pairs of silk pyjamas, an emergency supply of oxygen, and a ‘wall safe big enough to walk into’. Behind one of the walls was another long underground escape tunnel, which led to the office building next door.

While all of this was being uncovered, and while revolution still raged in the streets of Buenos Aires, Juan Domingo Perón, the recent President of Argentina, lover and husband to the revered Evita, was allowed to leave the gunboat on the Plata River and fly off to political exile in Paraguay.

Chapter Three

In 1956, when the new Argentine regime's National Investigating Committee had submitted its report on corruption during the Perón era, it revealed, amongst other items withheld for possible future court proceedings, that Perón had cheated his mother-in-law out of half of her bequest from the late Evita Perón; that he had probably arranged the assassination of Evita's brother, Juan Duarte; that he had arranged the arrest and subsequent disappearance of Jose Espejo, the boss of Evita's beloved unions; that he had lavished millions on the clubs of his Union of High School Students, favoring teenage girls in all such cases; that he had given car import licences worth thousands of pesos to various of his friends; and that both he and his revered wife, Evita, Spiritual Chief to the Nation, had stashed away a mass of pilfered wealth in unnamed Swiss banks.

By 1962, ten years after the death of Evita Perón, the keys to a Swiss bank vault in which Evita had deposited cash and jewels worth $25 million had been hunted on and off by both the investigators of the new regime in Argentina and the indefatigable Juan Perón himself.

The assassination of Evita's brother, Juan Duarte, was directly related to this chase.

Shortly after Evita's death, Juan Perón had learned that his wife had for three years been systematically dispatching suitcases full of jewellery, cash and *objets d'art* to Switzerland, using for this purpose two women, the first an unknown secretary, the second Delia Parodi, a Congresswoman. Evita's dissolute brother, Juan Duarte, at this time still trusted by Perón, was sent in company with Hector Campora, a Perón Congressman, to Geneva, to find out exactly how much Evita had hidden in the bank vaults and what had happened to the missing keys. Reportedly, they both returned without success.

In April 1953, Juan Duarte was betrayed by Maliza Zini, one of many mistresses whose company he had kept in Buenos Aires. It was never known what she had said, but some days later Duarte was found with a bullet in his brain. Although the death was treated officially as a suicide, a police surgeon later let it be known that the bullet had been fired from such a distance as to rule this out. Also, some of Perón's agents had ransacked Duarte's apartment and it was common knowledge that the object of the search was the keys to Evita's vault in Switzerland.

Those keys were never located.

In exile, Perón did not starve. When the Revolution came and forced him out of Argentina, Perón was in possession of £430,000 sterling belonging to the Eva Perón Foundation; a ranch worth £261,000; two apartment buildings in Buenos Aires; a £38,000 house; a smaller country estate in Cordoba; shares worth £230,000 in a ranch near Buenos Aires; and £19,000 in shares in Uruguay.

All of this came from the *descamisados*, who had revered Juan Perón and, even more so, the saintly Evita.

During the eighteen years following the death of Evita, the deposed Juan Perón wandered restlessly across Paraguay, Nicaragua, Venezuela, the Dominican Republic, and Portugal, eventually settling in Madrid with another woman much younger than himself, the flamenco dancer Isabel Martinez. With her he dreamed and schemed of a return to glory.

While Perón was thus engaged, his dead wife, Evita, was being resurrected and again deified in the hearts and minds of the people of Argentina.

A bizarre fate had overtaken the corpse of Evita. Embalmed at an estimated cost of 100,000 pesos, her body, in its silk-lined coffin, was stolen from its temporary resting place in Labor Confederation headquarters in 1955 by agents of the new Argentine president, General Pedro Aramburu, placed in a coffin, dumped in the back of an army truck, and driven off into the night.

From that moment on, the whereabouts of Evita Perón, now *Santa* (Saint) Evita – whose remains could be used as a powerful symbol for or against any existing government – became a subject of almost feverish concern and conjecture throughout the Argentine and the whole of Latin America. There were rumors that she had been incinerated and that her ashes had been strewn over the Plata River; that the body was in Chile with Evita's widowed mother and two sisters; that Evita was not in fact dead, but had been kidnapped by Juan Perón and now lived with him in exile in Paraguay. For eighteen long years such rumors proliferated until eventually Evita, once a poor girl and 'little whore', became a legend and a memory of hope to the suppressed of the Argentine.

In April 1971, when the body of Evita Perón reappeared and was delivered with great ceremony to the then 74-year old but still ambitious Juan

Perón, there was only one mystery left unresolved.

What made Evita, the cause of so much corruption, intrigue and violence, a legend of such saintly proportions?

Part Two :
The Rise and Fall of Evita Perón

For many years I have had a limitless quantity of illusions and dreams. I felt most deeply that the anguish, the grief and the sadness of our people could not be eternal. -Evita

Chapter Four

To be a saint one must first be a human being. The one room brick house in Los Toldos is now a wreck being used as a store room. The corrugated iron walls are gradually collapsing over the patio at the back and grass sprouts wildly from the flat roof. Back in 1919 it was habitable but hardly much better. The most desolate of pampas small towns, Los Toldos was built on the site of an Indian camp, 150 miles west of Buenos Aires, the low, flat-fronted, dusty houses symmetrical with the flat monotony of the prairies and surrounded by dirt streets and whitewashed *paraiso* trees.

Into this vast silence, in the early morning of May 7, 1919, was born the child Maria Eva Duarte, the fifth of the five illegitimate children of Juan Duarte and Juana Ibarguren, who lived in the *estancia* La Union. Since this was Tragic Week, when striking workers were massacred by the army, there was perhaps a certain aptness to the birth.

Eva's father, Juan Duarte, rented a ranch at La Union, close to Los Toldos, and lived there with Juana, a local peasant girl. Shortly after Eva's birth, her mother took the family to live in Los Toldos and it was there, in an adobe farmhouse, with chickens and goats and earthen floors, that Eva was to

spend her growing years.

Stretching 600 miles from the city of Buenos Aires, the pampas is an area of sandy hills, fertile prairies and marshy lowlands criss-crossed by rambling rivers. Though its wide variety of climates and soils enables it to produce an abundance of wheat and corn (maize), sugar cane, olives, tobacco, tea and cotton, it was, until the middle of the 19th century, a poor region, given over to cattle and mule breeding. However, with the coming of the railway, progress in ocean transport, and the introduction of British beef cattle – Aberdeen Angus, Hereford and Shorthorn, as well as French Charolais – the raising of livestock became the main source of the country's wealth and the farmers of the region did not suffer. Though the labor performed by these men was hard and isolating, with little to distract them during the long, lonely days, when they rode with the herds or worked the land, the money was there for the taking and many of them prospered.

Eva's father, Juan Duarte, was not one of them. Initially, however, he was certainly not poor. Renting the farm at Los Toldos, he had peons – members of the landless agricultural classes – working for him and was proud of the fact that he possessed the most up-to-date, expensive farm machinery. Another sign of his relative prosperity is that, though living on the farm with Juana Ibarguren and her children, including Eva, he had a legal wife, by whom he had other children, living in another farm in the nearby market town of Chivilcoy.

Described as an 'indolent, agreeable, attractive' man, he tended little to the farm, gradually let it deteriorate, and eventually accrued more debts than he could handle. First the peons went, then the machinery, until eventually, sadly, there was nothing left. The indolent Juan Duarte now had to search for a poor living in a very bleak landscape.

Thus it was that early in her life, Eva Duarte learnt the nature of humiliating poverty, acute boredom and grinding frustration. The days were long in Los Toldos, the land was flat and empty, and the silence that surrounded the household made it seem like a prison. Few people departed, visitors rarely arrived, and the richness of the pampas was now beyond the reach of the unfortunate Duartes.

Nor were they helped by the rigid Argentine caste system that divided the wealthy from the poor. The Duarte offspring were not only poor: they

were also bastard children, the fruits of Juan Duarte's unsanctified liaison with the peasant girl, Juana. In the eyes of the other villagers, Juana was a *casa chica* (the 'other wife') and someone to be pointedly avoided. For this reason, Eva and her four sisters were looked upon as 'brats' and often prevented from associating with the other children of the village.

The sense of rejection that was instilled in young Eva by this was something she would never forget and certainly never forgive. Indeed, she would always nurture a secret resentment and the need for revenge, as eventually the Oligarchy, the ruling classes of Buenos Aires, would find out to their cost.

Young Eva's awareness of the privileges of the rich could only have been heightened by the sight of the *estancia*, the village squire's home, with its 'cool courtyard and magnificent rooms' filled with music and laughter. The owner of the hacienda, who also owned great herds of cattle, hired and fired the gauchos, or cowboys, and had total power over the village, must have seemed godlike to the small girl. Given that this particular god appeared not to recognize Eva's existence, that he and his family would only sneer at the sight of her, it is reasonable to assume that at a very early age, her awe would have been mixed with resentment and the need to right the wrongs being done to her. Indeed, she came to hate the rich with a venom that stemmed from the humiliations of her childhood and eventually warped her every emotion.

'I believed that poor people existed as naturally as grass and that the rich were as natural as trees. Then one day a laborer told me that the poor existed because the rich were too rich; and this revelation had a very strong impression on me.'

The other poor were the gauchos, who rode constantly through the village. Wearing nothing but ponchos and moth-eaten trousers, with jangling spurs strapped to their bare feet, these sun-scorched, laconic, tough 'cowboys of the pampas' were the first 'shirtless ones' that Eva ever knew. Locally they were known as '*los paisanos'* and they worked from dawn to dusk for practically nothing. Now obsolete and romanticized in Argentinian literature as men of nobility, selfless and courageous, they were, when Eva was a child, widely scorned as heavy drinkers and shiftless vagabonds. Given their rough, chauvinistic nature, that insularity bred from their long, lonely days on the

prairies, it is likely that they, too, either ignored or mocked the little bastard, Eva Duarte. Certainly, in later years, when Eva had found fame and fortune, she would not so much feel sympathy for the poor as blinding, abiding hatred for the rich.

'There are rich and there are poor,' she would say, 'and the odd thing is that the existence of the poor pains me less than the knowledge that at the same time others are rich.'

The flames of Eva's rage would be fanned by her mother. While Eva's father was a conservative, accepting the status quo despite his dire circumstances, her mother was instinctively a radical. Independent and strongminded, she was resentful of her position in this country that treated women as second-class citizens and she therefore instilled in Eva her own drive and self-conviction, a refusal to give in to negative circumstances. It was this maternal influence, combined with the awareness of her illegitimacy and low standing, that turned Eva into a determined, self-serving force.

Another feeling of resentment, this time against men in general, sprang from the fact that her father had a legal wife and children, that they were more respected than the Duartes, and that he was often away from home in Los Toldos, visiting his 'real' family in the town of Chivilcoy. From this, Eva would come to see that the Argentine male was inclined to view women as mere chattels, to be used for physical pleasure and moral support while being denied personal freedom and pride. This, also, was something she would never forget.

Thus, at a very young age, she developed hatred for the rich and contempt for male chauvinism. She also learned early that people could use and could *be* used and decided that she must not be one of the latter. Certainly, though Eva was the youngest of the five sisters, the second youngest girl, Erminda, felt that Eva had always been older than her years and was in many ways the strongest, most matured member of the family.

'She had a much stronger personality,' Erminda says, 'and people thought we were twins, even though I was two years older than her… Her temperament made up for my years… She always had this thing: she always gave orders. Everyone was glad to obey her. She knew how to make herself obeyed, either by being nice or being tough.'

This trait – getting what she wanted by being nice or by being tough –

would stand Eva in good stead in the future.

At primary school in Los Toldos, Eva was a relatively bright but unexceptional student. Though seemingly bored with her studies, she adored appearing in the school plays and, like most of the other girls, was obsessed with film magazines and the exciting world beyond the pampas – in Buenos Aires and Hollywood. Her desire to become an actress began then and was nurtured by the movie magazines that she begged, borrowed and stole from her friends because her father could not afford to buy them. She spent hours poring over the magazines, mesmerized by the glamorous pictures, and imagining herself living the life of the movie stars. She could do it, she was absolutely convinced, if only she could make her escape from Los Toldos and the vast, desolate pampas. It was a thought to sustain her.

The dream of becoming an actress, preferably a movie star, could only have been heightened by the increasing poverty of her existence (the family resources, not good to begin with, were now dwindling rapidly) and out of the need to escape from the seemingly hopeless future represented by the world's end of Los Toldos. This drab 'island in a rolling ocean of grass' would have encouraged her large brown eyes to search the horizon for escape and adventure.

Rafael Reta, who at that time lived on a small farm on the edge of what was once the Duarte ranch, recalled that for some years things had been going well for the Duarte family, but that in the middle of the '20s, just before Juan Duarte's death, there was a drought which, combined with Duarte's increasing lack of interest in the farm, robbed him of his few remaining pesos. The family's poverty was now absolute, there was no light on the horizon, and each day little Eva must have gazed at the nearby hacienda and burned with her growing resentment of the wealthy.

In the event, a change of scenery came sooner than expected, though in a most brutal, unexpected manner.

In 1926, when Eva was only seven, her father was killed in a car crash. As Duarte had been an 'agreeable, attractive' man, his loss must have been a considerable shock to her. Her pain would not have been eased by the fact that his body was not brought home, but instead was delivered for burial to the legal family in Chivilcoy. To make matters worse, when Eva, with her mother, sisters and brothers, attended the funeral, they were greeted as the

‘bastard family’ of Juan Duarte, herded apart, kept out of the cemetery until the burial was over, then rudely snubbed by the legitimate offspring.

Again, this was something that Eva would neither forget nor forgive – another grudge in her lengthening list of grievances against the contemptible middle classes.

With Juan Duarte’s death, life became more difficult for the whole family. Luckily, because Duarte had been a member of the local ruling conservative caste, Señora Duarte received financial aid from the local party. They also found employment for the eldest daughter, Elisa, in the post office in Junin, the nearest town in the province of Buenos Aires.

It was then common in Argentina for single or widowed women to accept the ‘protection’ of a man of means, becoming his *casa chica* in return for financial security. It was therefore no accident that Señora Duarte was eventually aided by a wealthy ‘protector’ of the local Radical Party and, with his help, was soon able to open a boarding house in Junin. Determined and capable, she turned the boarding house into a profitable venture and married off two of her daughters: Elisa to Major Alfredo Arrieta, an officer in the Argentine army; and Blanca (an attractive girl with the blonde hair that dark-haired Eva bitterly envied) to Justo Rodriguez, a promising lawyer. When Erminda, Eva’s favorite sister, then married Orlando Bertolini, who operated the lift in the Town Hall of Vincente Lopez, Eva’s future must have seemed even more bleak than ever.

Just reaching adolescence, Eva is described as being, at this time, ‘a small but buxom girl, brown-eyed and with dark brown, tousled hair’. She is also described as ‘vain and moody, much given to the reading of film magazines’. If her sisters had been known for their relative docility (being fatherless and rejected repeatedly as bastards, docility might indeed have come naturally to them), Eva and her brother Juan were to make up for it. In fact, Juan had become known as a ‘lad of the village’, or a bad boy (a reputation he would take with him into adulthood), and Eva, while charming when she had to be, could display a ferocious temper and wilful nature.

Certainly, at fifteen, she was more determined than ever to escape the dreary provincialism of Junin. Also, by this time, she was willing to use her body as a means of escape.

For an illegitimate teenager in Argentina, particularly an attractive

‘buxom’ girl, life could not have been easy. Already what the Argentinians term a *resentida*, a resentful one, Eva was aware of the crushing limitations imposed upon women in this country of relentless male chauvinism. Her mother, now widowed, had been compelled to use at least one ‘protector’ and Eva would have been aware of the situation and, most likely, deeply resentful of it. Now spending her days in the boarding house, surrounded by macho males, fetching, carrying, dusting, scrubbing and fighting off the inevitable advances of the boarders, she must have realized that her only hope of escape lay in the desires of such men. It was the men who had the freedom and earned the money to use it. And it was the men from Buenos Aires who could offer her the means of escape.

The vanity of the Argentinian male was such that he would sacrifice a great deal to have a young mistress who could pleasure him without making him feel that he was committed. However, the majority of such men, though proud to boast about their *casa chica*, felt only contempt for any *casa chica* not their own. It was into the steamy waters of this ripe hypocrisy that Eva would have to leap if she was to find an escape from dreary Junin – and she was able to make that leap because her growing contempt for men in general was her psychological protection.

Little is known about Eva at the time she first met the professional guitar-player and tango singer Agustin Magaldi, and it is possible that her subsequent liaison with him, at the tender age of fifteen, was her first sexual experience. It is, however, likely that she had already dipped her toe into those dangerous waters in Junin itself, learning, as she would have done, that an unattached girl must make herself of some use to men if she was to gain anything remotely worth having. Certainly, in the enforced intimacy of a boarding house for males, she would not have been able to avoid the more obvious manifestations of her sexual allure to the men she was servicing as a maid.

She was ‘buxom’ and ‘vain’. She would, therefore, have attracted the men and, given her vanity, taken a certain amount of pleasure from their attentions. However, she was not dealing with the kind of men she had read about in her movie magazines and secretly yearned to meet – the famous, the glamorous, the rich. Rather, she was in a boarding house that catered to passing trade and those men would have been low on the ladder: traveling

salesmen, small farmers, lonely soldiers on leave, poor, frustrated bachelors living out of suitcases. Cleaning up after them, seeing their stained bed sheets and often filthy toilet bowls, learning of their secret vices and base desires and pathetic needs, would in no way have enhanced her affection for them. On the other hand, given her vanity and the growing awareness of her sexual power, it is safe to assume that overtures were made and, eventually, accepted.

What we *do* know is that she desperately wanted out and understood that she couldn't escape without the help of a man who had an interest in her. Also, aware that two of her sisters had been married off to lodgers and that her mother now wanted her to stay in Junin and run the boarding house, hopefully to marry a lodger and settle down in Junin, Eva must have been filled with despair and, perhaps, growing panic.

It is therefore not surprising that in 1934, when she was fifteen and saw Agustin Magaldi, at least ten years older than her, but a professional nightclub performer, handsome and debonair in his flashy suit and bow-tie, playing his guitar and singing in a nightclub in Junin, she was overwhelmed by his glamor (her first 'celebrity', after all) and, when she saw his interest in her, cold-bloodedly used it to her advantage.

Either way, she certainly met Magaldi after that first show, embarked on an affair with him, and eventually made her escape from Junin with him, adopting him as her 'protector' and guiding light. Whether she was victim or exploiter, it is a tribute to her iron will, to her already highly developed sense of survival, that at fifteen, still a raw and relatively ignorant country girl, she packed her bags, sneaked out of her mother's boarding house, and fled on the arm of her elder lover, Agustin Magaldi, to seek a new life under the bright, bewitching lights of Buenos Aires.

Chapter Five

Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina, is the fifth biggest city in the world, with flea markets, jockey clubs, polo clubs, nightclubs, cinemas and numerous theaters. French is the second language. In the 1930s, the wealthy

sent their children to Paris or London to be educated. They also emulated the leisured, affected, luxurious lifestyle of Europe in the 1920s, and, convinced that the wealth of the pampas would never dry up, were the biggest spenders in the days of big spenders.

While the beef and corn were shipped out of the magnificent harbor, making many Argentinians millionaires, the city also attracted the poor, who flooded in to search for work. As the city became more industrialized, so the demand for laborers was growing. The needs of industry were drawing the workers from the land, but those workers did not share in the wealth they produced. Thus, within this city of extravagant living and glamor, there were thousands who existed in dire poverty.

'On arriving there,' Eva says, 'I discovered it was nothing like I had imagined. On the outskirts I saw the deprived areas, and looking at the streets and houses, I realized that rich and poor did exist in the cities too… I have only experienced sadness that matched this disillusion on one other occasion in my life; that was when I discovered that the Three Wise Men didn't really come on their camels bearing gifts.'

It is hardly likely that at fifteen years of age, with the sophisticated Agustin Magaldi by her side, Eva would have shown concerns that were so altruistic. If disillusionment there was, it would have been of a more personal kind, based on the harsh realities of personal survival. She had just fled her home, she was living with an older man, a professional entertainer, and having already acted in a school play, *Arriba Estudiante* (*Students Arise*) and been stirred by the experience, she was determined to find fame as a star. Given this, her obsessions would not have been about the inequalities between rich and poor, but about how to find success and security for herself.

Though often described as buxom, Eva, with her peasant girl's speech, her country girl's taste in clothes, and her heavy, adolescent calves and ankles, was not particularly striking when placed alongside the beauties of Buenos Aires. Nevertheless, she had indomitable courage, the faith of the desperate, and so she had publicity pictures taken of herself and then did the rounds of the theatrical agencies along the Avenida Corrientes, the Shaftesbury Avenue, or Broadway, of Buenos Aires.

Eva's growing contempt for men would be fuelled by this experience. Already haunted by the memory of her mother's hard life (her humiliation as

a *casa chica* on the ranch in Los Toldos, bearing Juan Duarte's five children, all out of wedlock, then suffering the contempt of his legal family and the other villagers), she would find that the journey recently embarked upon with Magaldi (he using her body; she using his connections; a rancid alliance growing ever more bitter) must continue if she was to climb the slippery slopes of Buenos Aires show business.

Although the city then had three film production companies, thirty-five theaters, nine radio stations and a considerable number of independent producers, acting jobs were not easy to find. But, if things were hard, Eva was not about to be defeated and, well armed with Magaldi's list of names and personal introductions, as well as her iron determination to succeed, she went out to suffer what she would for what she wanted so badly.

'At first, when she started work, things were hard for her,' Erminda says. 'I missed her a lot. I used to tell her, "Come back, Eva, come back home." She used to say, "Listen, sister, I will come back when I have conquered Buenos Aires.'

Given the casual sexual blackmail rampant along the Avenida Corrientes, very few were the women who rose unscathed to success. Indeed, the 'casting couch', whether a myth or a reality in Hollywood, was almost a way of life in Buenos Aires show business circles. Eva and others like her would have been faced with a simple choice: lie down on the casting couch or get out. Eva didn't get out. Once she had learnt the rules, she simply dropped Magaldi and started climbing up the ladder, through a succession of men, never looking back to count the cost.

Later, when she became *Santa* Evita, it was this part of her life that the Oligarchs, the aristocracy, could neither forget nor forgive.

Nevertheless, it was the life she led then. For a number of years she wandered the streets of downtown Buenos Aires, haunting the theaters and the offices of the big producers, making contacts where she could, being obliging when necessary, smiling readily when the call came, and generally doing what she felt she had to do, no matter how distasteful.

Eventually noted along the Avenida Corrientes for her provocative skin-tight dresses and insatiable ambition, she was also known, particularly in the old port area, Boca Gorda, where she lived for a while, as a girl with 'a tongue to skin a donkey'. Indeed, Boca Gorda was a rough, colorful breeding

ground for the *chirripos*, the spivs who gathered together in the narrow, crowded streets, their trousers of 'special masculine cut', their eyes ogling the passing women, their sharp tongues slicing the air with a stream of bawdy invective. Against such tongues only a rapier could advance and Eva sharpened her tongue accordingly. She also learned to protect herself when traveling on the notorious Buenos Aires underground system, which holds the world record for male soliciting, and to handle herself well when riding on the notorious *colectivo* buses to and from the city center.

Such experiences could only make her cosmopolitan. No longer the gauche country girl, now slim and longlegged and crafty, she was developing that hardness, that protective veneer, which was her only shield against the humiliations of her low station in life. Her brightly painted red lips, which would later glisten on posters and hoardings all over Argentina (thus giving rise to rumors about her artistry in fellatio), were doubtless finding their covert uses in these teeming, amoral streets.

Nevertheless, while Eva, during those early years, starved on occasion, she gradually picked up modeling work for fashion houses and hair stylists, gained small parts in sponsored plays put on by Radio Argentina and Radio El Mundo; and, more importantly, frequented such Buenos Aires nightclubs as the Gong, the Golden Gate, and the Embassy, where tenth-rate actresses like herself, apart from making useful contacts, could supplement their low wages by selling their sexual favors to wealthy men.

Eventually, through sheer hard grind and ruthless, amoral determination, she began to find better work. She did it mostly through men – it was men who ran the business – and, although she despised them for how they were using her, she was not known to have many women friends either, perhaps viewing other aspiring actresses as competition. (How ironic, therefore, that she would later defend women's rights with a genuine passion.) One female friend, however, was the popular comedy actress, Señora Pierina Dealessi, who gave Eva her first professional acting job on the stage.

* * *

'Here, in this little theater, in 1935,' says Dealessi, 'a thin little girl came to see me. "I want to work," she said. "My name is Eva Duarte." So I gave her the opportunity… Eva worked for many seasons here with me. Later she left my theater. She worked for other companies. She did radio, cinema, and lots

of other things. Step by step, she kept progressing in her career. Then, later on, I used to see her and ask her: "Are you the same little girl I knew? From where did you get the fire? That strength?" She used to smile and kiss me. That's how she was.'

Sympathetic to the struggling Eva, Dealessi first gave her a small part in *La Señora de Perez*, produced for the Comedia Theater in 1935. A soon-forgotten domestic comedy, it starred Eva Franco, one of Argentina's most popular actresses, and the actor Pascual Pelliciota. Eva (Duarte) was soon having a professionally helpful affair with Pelliciota and, though *La Señora de Perez* ran only a few weeks, by July that year she was acting in another, *There's a World in Every Home*. By June 1936 she was touring with *The Mortal Kiss*, a play about 'the evils of sexual promiscuity'. Thereafter, the promiscuous Eva took everything she could get.

It is difficult to judge just how much she achieved through talent and how much on the casting couches or in the beds of her various 'protectors' – but most reports of the time suggest that she was dreadful as an actress, lacking warmth and emotion, though she was supremely good at persuading producers, all male, to give her opportunities. ('A very, very poor actress,' said Cesar Marino, head of production at Radio Argentina. Nevertheless, like other men who thought little of her talents, Marino was instrumental in finding her acting jobs.) As for the 'fire' that Señora Dealessi remarked upon, this was more the fire of brute ambition, of steely self-conviction, than any great blossoming of histrionic ability.

Indeed, Eva's entry into films came about when, in 1937, she was interviewed by the theater and movie magazine, *Sintonia*, and instantly embarked on an affair with its owner, the former racing driver Emilio Kartulovic. Given good exposure by Kartulovic, she was soon acting in her first movie, *Seconds Out of the Ring* (1938) and engaging in an affair with its star, Pedro Quartucci. She followed it up with a string of other, equally mediocre movies, including *The Charge of the Brave* (1939), *The Unhappiest Man in Town* (1940), and *A Sweetheart in Trouble* (1941). In none of them did she show the slightest shred of talent.

One is an actress or one is not. Eva wanted to be an actress for all the wrong reasons: because actresses were 'stars', led glamorous lives, had money and were admired by the whole world. The true actress has to empty

herself and reconstitute herself as someone else; but Eva Duarte, haunted by her impoverished past, motivated by resentment and the desperate need to be successful by any means, could not possibly imagine being anyone else, let alone feel emotions not her own.

'She was terrible, cold as an iceberg,' said Pierina Dealessi, 'incapable of stirring an audience.'

To put it mildly, Eva was a blank on the screen, and, although she picked up work, it was not for her talent. Thus, instead of glamor, she found only the hard, demeaning slog of a bit player who has to spread her legs in order to feature briefly in trash. In this sense, she did it all – frothy comedy, high drama, too many costume epics – and we see her in the stills as a dark-haired, reasonably pretty, anonymous face that will leave no deep imprint on the memory. Nevertheless, she continued to work and, to her family back in Junin, she must indeed have seemed like the glamorous star she wanted to be.

Still envious of her sister Blanca's blonde hair and, also, because she revered American movie stars like Lana Turner, to whom she bore a passing resemblance, she dyed her dark hair blonde and moved closer to what she wanted to be: a wet dream for the masses.

Certainly it helped. By the time she had made *Le Cabalgata del Circo* (1944) her photograph was featured on the advertising poster and she was eighth on the cast list. She was blonde and bare-shouldered.

However, she was hardly the 'star' that she had wanted to be and she must have suffered her fair share of humiliations, sexual and otherwise, to get where she was. She despised these movies and the men who had put her in them, but she continued to be an actress while scheming to go on to bigger things and become her own woman. She didn't know quite how she would do it, but she was ready for anything.

In the event, it was two members of her family who led her onto the right road.

* * *

Eva's brother, Juan Duarte, was working in a bank in Buenos Aires and already gaining a reputation as someone with few scruples. (He was soon fired for stealing money from the bank.) Handsome and dissolute, enjoying women and the night life, he mixed with a lot of people, some with dubious reputations, and had many valuable contacts in show business. After

introducing Eva to a soap manufacturer who sponsored radio shows, he stood aside while Eva courted the man and seduced him into giving her work on Radio Belgrano, mainly in sponsored, weepy soap operas. Given regular employment and paid 150 pesos per month, Eva was soon renting an apartment in a more fashionable section of the city and, combining her radio work with the movies and bit parts in stage comedies, she started living a relatively good life. Since as an actress she was shallow, whereas her voice had its own resonance, eventually she was given her own radio slot, delivering gossipy news.

The second family member to help was Eva's sister, Elisa, who often visited with her husband, Major Alfredo Arrieta. It was through Arrieta that Eva met other army officers, notably a Colonel Anibal Imbert, who, as Government Director of Posts and Telegraphs, was coaxed into helping Eva move higher up the ladder by forcing Radio Belgrano to pay her more money and give her more air space. Before long she was better known as a radio celebrity than she was as an actress.

Eva's relationship with Colonel Imbert was her first step on the road to a fame far beyond that of show business – and almost certainly, by this time, she was astute enough to know just what she was doing. While Argentina was then being run by a conservative coalition headed by President Ramón Castillo, the government was strongly (some would say almost totally) supported by the military. Army officers of senior rank were therefore men of enormous influence and authority. Introduced to such men by her brother-in-law, Major Arrieta, Eva saw how they could help her and, in particular, how Colonel Imbert, who as Director of Posts and Telegraphs had such a strong influence on radio broadcasting, could advance her career. For this reason, Colonel Imbert became the first, though certainly not the last, of the many military officers who would be used and then cast aside by her as she continued climbing the ladder.

There can be little doubt that Eva was, at this time, using men in a cold-blooded pursuit of her goals. It is very likely that from the moment of her seduction by, or of, Agustin Magaldi, she had started to view her relationships with men as purely functional. They wanted her body and she needed their connections; each was therefore using the other in a pragmatic transaction.

Eva managed to use her woman's wiles to open many doors, even though there was a coldness to her beauty. It was the kind that promises everything but real affection or warmth: a carefully made-up, alabaster, photogenic prettiness that goes no deeper than the paper on which it is printed. Nevertheless, her painted lips spoke to many of the whore's expertise at fellatio, her brown eyes had learnt to flash with a feigned sensuality, and her body, now slimmed down by constant, ruthless dieting, was seductive in its tight-fitting clothes. She had long legs and showed them off.

She was, however, always working. She had the soul of a model so divorced from her own body that she could view it as no more than a tool, to be temporarily lent out and then reclaimed. Thus, there was a smooth, hard sheen to her beauty. It was all in the make-up, in the delicacy of her bone structure; it was not a beauty that sprang from within to capture the heart. Just as, much later, Evita would learn to subtly alter her appearance to suit the occasion (either modeled on a specific movie actress or on a famous historical figure), so, now, she was learning to split her personality and offer the separate pieces to her own advantage. Certainly there is little evidence that she ever had a relationship with a man who could not advance her career.

'*Todos me acosan sexualmente*,' she is quoted as saying of her actress days. 'Everybody makes a pass at me.' Naturally they did. But if it is in the nature of the Latin-American male to make a pass at a woman like Eva, it was certainly in Eva's nature to respond to such a gesture only if the propositioning male was of some use to her.

The rumors, or truths, of Evita's history as a 'little whore', as an artiste in fellatio, would spring directly out of the national memory of her early struggles in Buenos Aires. Argentinians love rumors. They also firmly believe that all rumors are based on facts. And in Evita's case, they certainly believed that the facts spoke for themselves. In her early years, Evita, Eva, was not a professional prostitute. She simply used what she possessed. She used it with men she had secretly come to despise and, in so doing, she had to also secretly despise herself.

Not for nothing would she, much later, when broadcasting as '*Santa* Evita' from her sickbed, open up with the sublime Freudian slip: 'Ladies of Argentina, I am speaking to you from my old workbench!' If the dying Evita had been blind to her own remark, nevertheless it had sprung out of genuine

recollections of her early, hard years in Buenos Aires. Eva's bed in Buenos Aires was undoubtedly the 'workbench' upon which her grand future was shaped.

Giving herself to those men, who by the nature of the transaction would treat her contemptuously, Eva came to despise them (and their wealth and their power) and withdrew into a deeper, more feverish self where dreams of conquest and vengeance could sustain her.

As we have seen, her cultivation of members of the military sprang from her awareness that the ruling junta would always have a great deal of sway over broadcasting. And, just as she had taken up with Colonel Imbert in order to further her broadcasting career and exact larger wages from Radio Belgrano, so now she was about to drop Imbert and move on to the higher echelons of the most recent regime.

* * *

Argentine politics, which had, after the military coup of 1932, settled down into a vague form of democracy, were again being torn apart by conflicting ideologies. Indeed, after Pearl Harbour, the turmoil inside Argentina had been such that President Ramón Castillo was forced to proclaim a state of siege. This had come about because the government was split between the pro-Axis Argentine Army and his own conservative coalition, which believed in an Allied victory and so wanted to side with the Allies. The army generals, who favored Hitler and Mussolini and were fed up with the vacillating policies of Castillo, had decided to make up his mind for him.

So it was that on June 4, 1943, General Arturo Rawson, Commander of the Cavalry School, led the small garrison down from the Campo Mayo and along the Avenida of the same name. Before they completed their march to Government House, President Castillo fled to a waiting gunboat on the Plata River. Consequently, General Rawson, who had merely carried out the plans of the Group of United Officers (GOU), announced from the balcony of the Casa Rosada the 'resignation' of President Castillo and the appointment of himself as Chief Executive.

However, the GOU had other ideas and, after two days as President, General Rawson was forced to stand down and was sent off as Ambassador to Brazil. General Pedro Ramirez, the War Minister, was proclaimed the new President, with a certain Colonel Juan Perón named as Secretary of Labor and

Social Welfare.

In fact, Juan Perón was the real architect of the Revolution of June the Fourth – and his revolutionary ambitions were not yet quenched.

At this time, Eva Duarte was still working at Radio Belgrano (for something considerably more than 150 pesos per month) and, conscious that the ladder to success might be compounded of the military junta's mattresses, she kept her attention focused in that direction. Already notorious for her flamboyant attempts to bring herself to the notice of producers and other influential people (and consistently rejected by Hollywood, for which she despised the Americans), she now surprised even those closest to her with a piece of steel-nerved histrionics.

One night in July 1943, a month after the revolution, Eva went to a telephone in a room in Radio Belgrano and, turning to an actress friend, told her to listen. Picking up the phone, she dialled a number, announced herself as Eva Duarte of Radio Belgrano, and asked to speak to President Ramirez. Obviously enamoured by a call from the charming and popular actress, Ramirez decided to speak to her.

'Is that you, Pedro?' Eva said chirpily. 'This is Eva speaking. Yes, I'll be delighted to have dinner with you. Tomorrow evening. *Buenos*.'

The insolence – and the success – of this bold gesture soon reached the ears of Señor Jaime Yankelevich, the owner of Radio Belgrano. Though despising Eva as a pushy woman and rank opportunist, he was not a man to miss an opportunity when he saw one, so he promptly raised her salary to 5,000 pesos per month and gave her her own radio show.

Eva went on to have her dinner with President Ramirez and became his 'close friend', but eventually, on the advice of Señor Yankelevich, she turned her attention to one Colonel Guilbert, another of the leading revolutionaries whom Yankelevich felt would soon be of even more importance than Ramirez. A few months later, towards the end of 1943, on the set of her latest movie, *La Prodiga*, Eva was introduced by Colonel Imbert to Colonel Juan Domingo Perón.

By now, Eva had the well-earned reputation of being able to spot, and catch, the coming men; her choice, therefore, of Colonel Perón as a suitable target for her attentions (against the advice of Señor Yankelevich, who would later have cause to regret that he had been wrong) would suggest that she

knew of Perón's activities in the new government and was aware that he would soon be going places. Subsequently, she discarded Colonel Guilbert and turned her inviting gaze upon Colonel Perón, a 48year-old widower with a reputation for political ruthlessness and a passion for younger ladies, especially actresses.

Eva Duarte, a well-known actress and radio personality, was twenty-four years old.

Chapter Six

Like Eva Duarte, Juan Domingo Perón was born in the pampas in the province of Buenos Aires. Also, like Eva, he was not one of the aristocratic *estanciero* (big rancher) class. A Creole, he was a descendent of families that had settled in Argentina for years, but he also had Italian and French ancestors, as do most Argentinians in this land filled with immigrants. His grandfather was Dr Thomas Perón, a general practitioner well known and greatly respected in his district, but his father, Mario Perón, just like Eva's father, had no talents or ambitions and worked on the ranch of the Guerrero family for many years. There he met and married a *chinita* (a country girl with Indian blood in her veins) working on the *estancia*.

Juan Domingo Perón was born on October 8, 1895, in the town of Lobos, sixty-five miles south of Buenos Aires. When he was five years old the family moved to Patagonia in the south, a desolate, cold, windswept terrain where, as he grew up, he was forced to live like a gaucho, learning to ride almost before he could walk, breaking wild horses, lassoing ostriches, and eventually riding the stony, freezing *mesa*, wrapped only in a poncho and with silver spurs strapped to his bare feet. Like many upwardly mobile, lower-class, male youths, he entered the Army Military Academy in Buenos Aires in 1911, at sixteen years of age, became a sub-lieutenant two years later, and was promoted to a full lieutenant at twenty. A fine athlete, muscular and full of energy, he distinguished himself in boxing, fencing, marksmanship and skiing, as well as excelling at German, Italian and, to a

lesser degree, English. At a relatively young age he married Aurelia Tisson, a schoolteacher of French descent, and was presented with a daughter, Maria Inez. There would be no further children and his wife would die (like Evita) of cancer in 1938, rarely to be mentioned again.

Perón was often to say that his great-grandfather was a Sardinian senator; and, while this may or may not have been true, he could have been Italian on his father's side, as a few of the older residents of Lobos recalled a time when the Peróns were called Peróni. Since, on his mother's side, there was supposed to be Argentine Indian blood, the fullgrown Perón could well have been of unusual character. Certainly the Italian side of Perón had always been evident in his grandiloquent gestures, his hearty (and frequently false) laughter, and his tendency to greet and leave friends with a crushing *abrazo*, or embrace.

If this more public side of Perón was evidence of his Italian descent, his more private nature, which was in fact humorless, might have sprung from the pragmatizm of his French blood. However, Perón was harder than that. Like Eva Duarte, he was impelled by the need for domination and absolute devotion from those around him. He also possessed a total ruthlessness and lack of morality when pursuing his goals.

Noted at both school and the Army Military Academy more for his brawn than for his brains, he was frequently involved in brawls because of his inflammable temper. That he rarely lost such fights might be due to the fact that he rarely fought with only his fists, but instead would throw anything that came to hand before closing in on his victim with terrifying ferocity. Although, as with his schooldays, he did not distinguish himself as a scholar, he *was* distinguished by his Latin-American good looks, by his 'film star' smile, and by the fact that for a number of years he held the Army Swordsmanship Championship and was always in the top bracket of expert riflemen.

After being promoted to full lieutenant, he was assigned to the General Arenales Infantry Regiment. Two years after his unremarkable period as an infantry officer, he received an appointment to the General Staff. The following year, he was transferred to the Ministry of War as Private Secretary to the Minister, but, when the Minister became dissatisfied with his performance in this undemanding position, he was appointed Professor of

Military History at the Senior School of War (*Escuela Superior de Guerra*). After five years as a captain, he received a routine promotion to major.

Though Perón prided himself on his macho image, there was a slight feminine streak to his make-up. This had been noticed at the Army Military Academy and was also noticed at the Senior School of War. His feminine streak took the form of a certain childishness, a girlish petulance when things went wrong, and a distinct, overweening vanity. Later there would be widely circulated stories about Perón's extracurricular activities with both young girls *and* young boys, but there is no record of any particular incidents at the Military Academy beyond the fact that he was a womanizer with a noted fondness for 'very young girls'. Given his dashing good looks and his total lack of morality, it is safe to assume that he rarely suffered a lack of willing partners.

In 1930, when thirty-five years old, he took part in the military revolution led by General Jose E. Uriburu, an event now seen by many as the first step on the downhill path of Perónism. Returning to his duties at the Senior School of War, he wrote several books on military strategy in which his admiration for Hannibal, Julius Caesar and Napoleon was clearly evident. Intent on paying tribute to the genius of German military might, he plagiarized Clausewitz, blamed the loss of the First World War on the ABC Conference (Argentina, Brazil and Chile), and assured his readers that, the next time around, the Big Three would agree and moved together against the Allies. Because of this, he was recommended to the Nazi government as Argentina's coming man.

Perón's ability to bend with the prevailing wind was most evident in his complicity with the Nazis. In 1938, when Hitler was sending vast sums of money to Argentina to suborn the notoriously hard-up officers of the Argentine Army into sympathy with the Third Reich, Juan Perón, now promoted to lieutenant-colonel, was appointed Military Attaché on the staff of the Argentine Embassy in Chile – one of the two countries (the other was Uruguay) strongly opposed to Hitler's proposed *Bloque Austral*. Shortly after arriving to take up his position in the Embassy, Perón was accused by the Chilean government of being the head of an espionage ring backed by the Nazis.

Added to this indictment was a protest at his conduct with teenagers of

both sexes.

Displeased with Perón's bungling, the Nazis promptly disowned him. He was, however, reinstated in their good books when he cultivated the friendship of General Freidrichs Wolf, the Nazi agent, and became infamous for the golden handshake he received for his protection of many other Nazis. Eventually he solicited Mussolini (whom he revered) and had himself appointed Military Attaché to the Argentine Embassy in Rome. While there, he never missed a speech by Mussolini, closely studied his style of oratory, and adapted it for his own future use. He also studied the way in which Mussolini controlled all of Italy from Rome and he resolved to do the same in Argentina.

When not engaged in these more serious matters, Perón picked up a reputation as an insatiable party-goer, embarked on a brief but intensive tour of the other dictatorcontrolled countries such as Germany, Hungary, Albania, Spain and Portugal, and dallied with playful Nazis in Paris. It was in Paris, in 1939, that gossiping French tongues spread the news that Juan Domingo Perón shared with the Nazis certain aberrations of a kind not strictly political.

In 1941, still ambitious and still committed to the army, he was placed in charge of troops in Mendoza and started a 'crusade of spiritual renovation.' This was actually a scheme to staff the Argentine government with idealistic, hard-working and deeply nationalistic young army officers. This idea soon crystallized into the GOU, an organization of officers below the rank of general. The letters stood for *Grupo de Oficiales Unidos* (Group of United Officers) and were later idealised as *Gobierno, Orden, Unidad* (Government, Order, Unity).

Back in Argentina, Perón formed his GOU by using blackmail to force the resignations of those officers who dared to disagree with him. Since most of those officers had borrowed money from the German bank in Buenos Aires, when Hitler was generously buying their support, Perón, who was in possession of the recorded transactions of all those who had made withdrawals, had no problem in either enlisting them or getting them to sign their resignation papers.

In 1943, the GOU, of which Perón was now the acknowledged head, launched the Revolution of June the Fourth, which sent the unpopular President Ramón Castillo running for the gunboat on the Plata River and

briefly installed General Arturo Rawson as President. Two days later, General Rawson was replaced by General Pedro P. Ramirez, and Perón, after a brief period as Secretary of Labor and Social Welfare, became Vice-President and Minister of War.

Thus, by the time Perón met Eva Duarte for the first time, ironically on the set of her movie, *La Prodiga*, his acceptance of corrupt methods to obtain his own ends was an ineradicable part of his nature.

The future *Patron* and the future *Santa* Evita held hands.

Chapter Seven

A week after their first meeting, Eva Duarte and Colonel Perón were to be seen wining and dining at El Tigre, a riverside resort of shaded creeks and restaurants just outside Buenos Aires. Within days of this meeting, Eva began arriving at Radio Belgrano in a War Ministry car and her salary soon spiraled accordingly. Rumors then spread that Eva had marched around to Perón's apartment in the Calle Posadas and thrown out his teenage mistress. Whether or not this was true, Eva certainly moved into the apartment directly adjoining Perón's and was soon spending as much time in his apartment as she was in her own.

News of the liaison spread like wildfire through the gossipy streets of Buenos Aires and was soon filling newspapers nationwide. If other members of the military junta were quietly uneasy about the relationship – aware of Eva's reputation as a 'little whore' who had used other military officers to get where she was – the general public, particularly the 'shirtless ones', had no such qualms. Indeed, they loved the idea of their beloved Eva Duarte, well-known radio personality and minor movie actress, getting together with the flamboyant army colonel. Eva was tiny and Perón was tall; Eva was slim and Perón was broad – a veritable brute of a man – and many excited *descamisados*, in the bars and cafés, in the slaughterhouses and docks, bartered lewd jokes about how he and she, the long and the short of it, went about doing what they did when the lights were turned out.

‘Put the bull onto a mouse,’ some would say, ‘and what’s left on the bedsheets?’

They said such things, in particular, because of Eva’s reputation – her colorful days in Boca Gorda, the rumors of expertise in fellatio, the many men who had been and gone, including other military officers – and they said such things because they had wet dreams about her and envied Perón. But the ‘shirtless ones’ admired Perón, just as they fantasized about Eva: he was a true Argentinian, a real macho man, while she was a poor girl who had fought her way up from the pampas to become a successful, glamorous creature who could mix with the likes of him. So the ‘shirtless ones’ followed the affair with great interest and discussed it endlessly.

Within weeks, the relationship between Eva and Perón, played out boldly before the public, had turned Eva, once a minor celebrity, into an object of feverish speculation – a star in her own right.

Now she was under the patronage of her new ‘protector’, Colonel Juan Perón, the politically powerful Secretary of Labor and Social Welfare, Eva’s career suddenly soared to dizzying heights. Described by many drama critics as a ‘cold’ and ‘inexpressive’ actress, she nevertheless found herself in as many movies as she wanted and with an authority that was irresistible to her. (‘We had to put up with her dominating everybody,’ said Juan Jose Miguez, the nominal star of *Spendthrift*.) Already beginning to live out her grandiose fantasies, she was soon interviewing leading members of the junta for her radio programs and being photographed with them in the Radio Belgrano studios and on her film sets. Before long, she had persuaded, or bullied, Señor Yankelevich (who now dreaded the sight of her) into letting her star in a series of plays inspired by the lives of great women, including Catherine the Great, Lady Hamilton, Queen Elizabeth I, Madame Chiang Kaishek, and so forth. In none of these roles did Eva show signs of greatness. However, the Radio Association of Argentina was founded during this period, and Eva, to no one’s surprise, was nominated as President.

There were many in those days who saw Eva’s affair with the much older Perón as no more than a ‘little whore’s’ bid for the pot of gold. Certainly there could be no doubt that Perón was infatuated with her (he had always chased actresses, particularly *young* actresses, and Eva was precisely half his age), but whether or not this infatuation was returned in kind was the

question that many asked themselves. Eva's reputation for deliberately pursuing influential men made many doubt the sincerity of her feelings for Perón. It was widely felt that she was using him, exploiting his infatuation with her, in order to further her career; and, since Eva had never had an affair with a man who could not help her, there was certainly strong grounds for so thinking.

Yet if Eva was not in love with Perón in the normal sense of the term, it is possible that she *was* infatuated with his unbridled ambition. Perón wanted to be President. He had *always* wanted to be President. He lived for the army and the army represented the country. Perón's ambitions knew no limits. He was totally fearless. Like Eva, he had a need to succeed that was almost abnormal.

It was possible that Eva could not truly love anyone – yet she *could* feel infatuation. She had been infatuated for years with her dreams of great achievement, and Perón, in his own way, shared that dream. It is likely, therefore, that she became infatuated with him, or with what he represented, and was swept up, beyond love or even affection, into their binding relationship. Her own words, which cannot always be trusted, do at least suggest this.

> We loved each other and we loved each other because we both had the same aim, we both wanted to do the same thing; he, knowing exactly what he wanted to do, while I only felt it in my bones. He had intelligence; I had my heart. He was prepared for the struggle; I was ready for anything. But I knew nothing. He was educated and I was unsophisticated. He was huge and I was tiny. He was the teacher and I was the pupil. He was the figurehead and I was his shadow. He was sure of himself and I had extraordinary confidence in him.

Even propaganda has its buried truths. If not loving Perón in the normal sense of the word, Eva certainly loved what he represented and could offer to her. Her infatuation was therefore genuine. She was truly obsessed with Perón. He was educated and he would guide her; he had power and he would use it to unshackle her from all the old chains.

How could she not be infatuated? What other man could so clearly reflect her self-image? Perón was moved by ambitions beyond mere sex and other sensual pleasures: like Eva, he had a larger role to play. His very presence made her think this. His restless energy gave her strength. Despised, humiliated, Eva had stored up her resentments and now believed in nothing but the will to succeed. To succeed, one must fight. Not to succeed was unthinkable. There were only the rulers and the ruled and she could not be the latter.

Eva saw life in those terms. Creativity was conquest. She could not love the poor, but she could certainly hate the rich, and she confused the one emotion with the other.

Confusing her contempt for the rich with her sympathy for the poor, she felt a great spiritual awakening that would not be denied.

Eva and Juan Perón complemented each other. He wanted power and she would guide him to its source and capturing it would weld them together. Yes, Eva loved Perón. Her fevered emotions told her that. She would be but his shadow, she would encourage his every step, and she would nudge him to the fountainhead of power, where he might then unveil her and show her to the nation. She in turn would gain everything.

Eva knew where the power lay. It lay with the workers, the *descamisados*, the 'shirtless ones', who had been sleeping for centuries.

* * *

While Colonel Perón, as the publicly known Secretary of Labor and Social Welfare and the shadowy head of the GOU, was surreptitiously juggling assignments and slipping his own men into all the important government posts, he was also quietly adding to his duties the Directorship of the National Labor Department and loudly persuading the more timid President Ramirez to elevate the same department into a Secretariat of Labor and Welfare, which would make it more powerful, with himself as Director. By November 1943 he had succeeded.

By now, Perón was coming under harsh criticizm from the press, the universities and the Labor movement. He had not previously thought of the potential in organized labor support and it is likely that he first started thinking about it after his girlfriend, Eva Duarte, in one of her onthe-spot broadcasts from a riverside slum, gave a gushing eulogy to 'this new genius

[Perón] who will become a father to our poor.' Certainly it was shortly after this that the lawyer, Juan Atilio Bramuglia, a great friend of Eva's and barrister to the Union of Railwaymen, joined the Perón gang and persuaded the railwaymen, who had the strongest and best-organized trade union in the country, to become the first Labor supporters of the future dictator.

Subsequently, on November 27, 1943, Perón officially opened his Secretariat of Labor and Welfare with an impassioned and (for him) unexpected support for the suppressed *descamisados*.

There can be little doubt that the driving force behind this sudden love of the 'shirtless ones' was Eva Duarte. Now a celebrity in her own right, but despised by the snobbish middle classes of Buenos Aires as a 'little whore' who had found success on her back, on the 'workbench' of her bed – obsessed also with her past, her memories of poverty and humiliation – Eva genuinely saw the workers as her (and the country's) salvation. If Perón, on the other hand, had rarely thought of the workers, but had instead cherished his belief in the purity of the army, he was now listening more and more to the public broadcasts and the private conversations of his mistress.

Eva used this brilliantly. Aware of the slumbering power of the workers, she was now specializing in a brand of propaganda, put out over the radio, that heaped vilification on the ruling classes and espoused Perón as the saviour of the country. Because of this, and particularly after Perón's cunning November speech, when he had formally opened his Secretariat of Labor and Welfare, President Ramirez was growing worried. Having foolishly gone on holiday over the Christmas period, he sent an order forbidding Perón to make any more public speeches without permission, then he, President Ramirez, hurried back to Buenos Aires.

He was too late. A devastating earthquake had hit San Juan, and Perón, as head of the new Secretariat of Labor and Welfare, raced to the scene of the disaster, where he organized a San Juan Relief Fund of £4 million and drenched the country with so many heart-rending speeches that he became, virtually overnight, a national figure, hailed as the 'Saviour of San Juan'. This event was also publicized by Eva Duarte on her evening radio programs (during which she repeatedly mentioned 'the handsome colonel' and 'his good deeds') and was puffed up even more when, in Buenos Aires' Luna Park, the Actors' Association organized a benefit festival in aid of the

victims. It was midway through this festival that Colonel Perón and Eva Duarte were 'formally' introduced – and this very public occasion not only cemented Perón's popularity with the *descamisados* but also marked the start of the 'official' relationship between Perón and Eva.

(No satisfactory account was ever made of the disposal of the £4 million San Juan Relief Fund contributions. With the earthquake quickly forgotten, only the survivors were to know that little more than a token reconstruction of San Juan had been undertaken and that even this was subsequently dropped. Shortly after, Perón supervised and financed the construction of a special 'home' for a number of 'attractive' teenage orphans. It was widely believed that he did so with the money originally donated for the reconstruction of San Juan.)

Events now progressed with bewildering speed. All too aware of Perón's popularity with the *descamisados* and of his intention to eventually become President himself, President Ramirez ordered a thorough investigation of the Ministry of War and the Secretariat of Labor and Welfare. When the investigation revealed that all the major posts in the Ministry were held by Perón's GOU officers, Ramirez, on February 23, 1944, declared the GOU formally dissolved and then called for Perón's resignation.

That night, six of Perón's GOU officers entered Ramirez's study and forced him, at gunpoint, to sign his own resignation. By the following morning a new government had been formed, officially headed by Ramirez's Vice-President, General Edelmiro Farrell. Since everyone knew that Farrell was no more than Perón's trained seal, there could be little doubt in anyone's mind as to who held the real power. By May 4, Perón was Minister of War and by July 7 he was the Vice-President of Argentina.

* * *

Eva Duarte was now showing her fangs – both as a revered public figure and as a private, vindictive woman. In June, even America's *Time* magazine (which Eva would eventually ban in Argentina) was reporting: 'The breathless eight-month rise of Eva Duarte from artistic obscurity to one of Argentina's highest-paid radio contracts is the talk of Buenos Aires. Eva is lovely to look at – tall, svelte, brunette, alabaster-skinned, twenty-six. She is also the favorite of Colonel Juan Perón, Minister of War and strong-boy of Argentina.'

Time has never been known for the accuracy of its articles and its report was inaccurate on a few counts. Eva, if a natural brunette, was then blonde. She was not 'tall' but was actually only 5ft 2in, a sly deception being practised by the use of her three-inch heels. However, *Time* then recounted a story that was in essence true.

Eva, now known by the diminutive of 'Evita' (little Eva), was in competition with Nina Cascallar, the then favorite of Captain Villegas, Argentine Federal Interventor of National Radios. The confrontation between Eva and Nina occurred on one of Argentina's national holidays when Radio Belgrano, Buenos Aires' most popular broadcasting station, fell behind schedule. Nina, who was supposed to go on the air ten minutes before Evita, wanted to be heard, although her time had already overlapped with Evita's. Evita refused to give her the extra time and, being the mistress of Colonel Perón, received backing from a Belgrano official.

Stung, Nina waited until Colonel Perón left town the following week for an inspection trip to Cordoba Province. Then, one evening during that week, just before Evita was scheduled to go on the air as star of *My Kingdom for Love*, a dramatization of the Elizabeth Essex romance, someone in the control room switched on the microphone prematurely and listeners all over Argentina heard the announcer proclaiming, 'That tart is on!'

The Press-Propaganda Office promptly hit Radio Belgrano with a forty-eight-hour advertising suspension for 'expressions which constituted an affront to the nation's culture and violated the fundamental principles of broadcasting, which today is the greatest vehicle for the diffusion of spiritual, social and moral culture.' By the time the suspension was lifted, it had cost Radio Belgrano £2,000 worth of advertising revenue – and it also cost Nina Cascallar her job.

The affront had not been to the nation's culture, but to the mistress of the Minister of War, Colonel Juan Perón.

And Evita was now Radio Belgrano's leading lady.

With Evita now in a position to become the most powerful propagandist in the country, and with Perón established as official Vice-President and unofficial leader of Argentina, the great love spectacle of the century could begin.

Chapter Eight

Perón and Evita now set out to build an unbreakable political power structure. Since successive governments had ignored the country's underpaid laborers, the *descamisados*, Perón began his bid for the Presidency by announcing that he was a 'syndicalist', a 'patriot' and 'the first Argentine worker.' In fact, even as he was publicly aligning himself with the 'shirtless ones', he was quietly incarcerating the labor leaders who had turned against him in prison camps in El Chaco and Patagonia. This task completed, he took control of the unions by seducing their remaining leaders with highly paid government jobs.

Urged on by Evita, now the secret fantasy mistress of the working masses, he began talking the language of the workers, was photographed sharing wine with them in waterfront bars, dressed as casually as they did, pretended to listen to, and take note of, their grievances, and finally, having already bought off their remaining leaders (those more easily corrupted than the ones he had thrown into prison), he installed his own supporters as the new heads of the unions. Also, more often than not in the company of the glamorous and increasingly popular Evita, he began personally attending innumerable labor meetings up and down the country. Together, he and Evita sought out the workers in the shanty towns of Buenos Aires, in the slaughterhouses of Avellaneda, the granary centers of Rosario and Santa Fé, the industrial cities of Cordoba, the vineyards of Mendoza, even the remote rural regions of Salta and Corrientes, in order to win their hearts and minds.

Adopting the style of oratory he had learned from his hero, Mussolini, Perón became increasingly successful at convincing the *descamisados* of his sincerity in wishing to place the country's affairs in their hands. In this he was helped enormously by Evita, who, having become the most popular woman in the country, their very own 'little Eva', would give lengthy speeches in her impassioned, actressy manner: voice raging, brown eyes blazing, hands waving expressively above her blonde head, spine curved, breasts out-thrust, her crimson lips pouting and beseeching, reminding them of what she was supposed to be good at: her carnal road to sainthood. Evita was both saint and sinner to them – and they could not resist her.

In fact, Evita now believed in her own manifest destiny. Having literally turned herself into one of her imaginary childhood heroines, she was living the role to the hilt and being raised on high by it. At last she had a reason to *be*, and it was greater than she was. Already a celebrity, the focus of mass dreams (star of stage, screen and radio; her picture on the covers of newspapers and magazines), she now viewed her growing legions of fans, the *descamisados*, as extensions of herself. A poor girl from the pampas, exploited and abused, she knew exactly how the workers suffered and felt at one with them. She knew what they needed, what they wanted, and she shared their frustration. They in turn were the heart and soul of the country and only she could unite them.

Driven by a huge ego and supreme self-dramatizing, Evita came to believe the very myth she was creating about herself, now seeing her past struggles and countless humiliations as the fire in which her destiny had been forged.

'I'm not leading my people because destiny demands it,' she would say later, 'but because, perhaps without realizing it, I prepared myself as if I knew instinctively that one day this responsibility and privilege would fall to me.' Evita created her own legend. Having created it, she then came to believe it and felt herself sanctified.

The combination of sex and sincerity was irresistible to the masses. For how many generations had the *descamisados* dreamed of attaining power, of tearing the wealth out of the hands of the bourgeoisie who had ruthlessly abused and exploited them? Now that power was being offered. Now that wealth would soon be theirs. Now the old, suppressive structure was being torn down to make way for self-rule and social justice. Even better, it was being offered by Juan Perón – not a remote politician, but a common man like themselves, a true child of the pampas, and a bold, macho soldier who (and how could they not admire this?) had an eye for the ladies.

And what a lady he now had! Their very own little Eva – Evita – this beauty who had escaped the same poverty that had imprisoned them, who like them had suffered hardships and dreadful humiliations, who had offered her full, crimson lips and her 'little whore's' artistry as the price to be paid for her freedom.

How many of them had dreamed about her? How many had worshipped

her on the silver screen? How many had thrilled to the sound of her voice on the radio, its histrionic sensuality, its promise of forbidden fruit, and imagined that she was talking personally to them?

Too many to count.

The whole show was irresistible: two children of the pampas, one of whom becomes a courageous military hero, the other his beautiful, blonde mistress, both of whom go on, hand in hand, to lead their people to glory. Love and sex and suffering and commitment – a soap opera for the long deprived, yearning masses; a fairy tale for the times.

To the average working Argentinian, who thrives on romance and scandal, the love affair between Juan Perón and little Eva was a blandishment beyond hope of resistance, an almost total seduction.

By the middle of 1945, Perón and Evita had a massively unionized country with the unions firmly under their control. Now heavily infiltrated by Perón's minions, the unions were faced with his Six-Point Labor Plan: (1) State control of all unions; (2) The State to elect the union members; (3) No central controlling union; (4) Suppression of political activities; (5) Submission to the judgement of the State in solving industrial problems; (6) Army discipline and military organization methods for the unions. Thus backed by the growing authority of the State and reinforced with the allies he had built up within the unions, Perón now held a power much greater than the military itself could hope to command. National leadership was therefore his (and Evita's) next goal.

Though the Second World War was ending and Perón was being deprived of the support of the Nazis, it was becoming clear to one and all – particularly to the ruling classes and the students of the universities – that he was trying to set up a self-serving fascist dictatorship. In June 1945, the Socialist and Radical Parties violently expressed their antagonizm to Perón's affairs and similar passions then raged throughout the whole of Argentina, with the students, in particular, demonstrating noisily and frequently. By August, an extraordinary anti-government coalition of conservatives, radicals, socialists and communists was demanding that the Supreme Court should take over the administration of the country and hold an election. By September, thousands of student protestors were marching through the streets of Buenos Aires.

Perón reacted by closing down the universities and sending most of their deans and rectors to jail. When the students counter-reacted by once more swarming into the streets, they were attacked by mounted police and armored vehicles; others were fired upon by the army, resulting in many casualties; and thousands were arrested and imprisoned. Refusing to quit, the students barricaded themselves into the colleges and surrendered only when attacked with tear-gas bombs. By this time, the members of the coalition's Board of Democratic Coordination were either in prison or in hiding – and the beloved Evita, who had never shown fear before, was carrying a hand grenade for protection.

Stories of wholesale beatings and torture were rife at this time and many of them were later substantiated.

By now, even the Argentine army was suffering dissension within its ranks and there were officers who, fearing that the increased public disorder would result in the overthrow of the entire social structure, felt that Perón must be restrained. This came to a head on October 9, when senior officers of the Campo de Mayo met in a council of war and decided that Perón had to go. Stung by this news, Perón, a mere Vice-President, sent his message boy, President Farrell, to the Campo de Mayo to slap the wrists of the recalcitrant officers. Farrell did not return. Instead, Generals Pistarina and von der Becke arrived with the statement: 'The President feels it is advisable that you should resign.' Left with no choice, Perón reluctantly signed his resignation papers.

By October 12, the whole of the government had resigned, with General Farrell remaining as President, though General Avalos was effectively in charge. That night, Perón was arrested, escorted on to the gunboat *Independencia*, and then transferred to prison on Martín García Island.

The Kingdom of Evita was at hand.

Chapter Nine

Evita had gained power by offering her love and was now hopelessly in love with power itself. Having seen the light of glory in the eyes of the *descamisados*, having captured them with her Goebbels-like mastery of the

radio (her voice rising and falling, now murmuring, now shrieking, now emoting with a vibrant, sensual sob) she suddenly saw her chance to strike out on her own and align herself fully with Perón.

Whether or not Perón was in love with her or simply wanted her body, he was certainly now aware that their romantic-political relationship was one of his most potent weapons. It will never be known if he would have approved of what she was planning; what is certain is that, once the plan had succeeded, he could not let her go for fear of losing the support of the *descamisados*. Yet he must have been worried. Who really controlled the *descamisados*? If they loved Evita more than they loved Perón, how much of his forthcoming power would he have to share with her?

Juan Perón sat in jail. Evita schemed to get him out. She had been attracted to Perón's power and that power was now growing every day. As a woman alone, Evita could not rule Argentina, but with Perón beside her, with her pulling the strings, she could exact vengeance for all the old wrongs and raise herself to unassailable heights. Given her subsequent actions and her fierce resentment of the Oligarchy, it would seem that the salvation of Perón was solely a political move on her part.

While Perón was sweating it out in the island jail of Martín García, his friends in the unions organized a revolt of the workers on his behalf. Perón had gone to prison on October 12. By October 16 the slaughter-yard and packinghouse workers of the nearby towns had begun to move into Buenos Aires by train, truck and foot. By the 17th, they had occupied the city. On that same day, Perón's strong-arm union man, Cipriano Ryes (who would later be brutally tortured in one of Perón's prisons) persuaded the factory owners that it would be 'healthy for themselves' if they closed down their factories for a day's holiday. Subsequently, that morning, thousands of workers poured across the Riachuelo Bridge to demonstrate in front of the Central Military Hospital where, so it had been rumored, Colonel Perón was due to arrive for treatment.

This rumor was true in the sense that Perón had been complaining of pleurisy (a ruse to have himself removed from the island prison and thus, automatically, out of captivity), and that General Farrell, after seeing the thousands of workers in the capital, decided to capitulate and use Perón's hospitalization as an excuse for releasing him.

As for Evita, who had been relentlessly stirring the masses with her histrionic radio speeches, she was also arranging for every kind of transport to bring great numbers of workers, male and female, from the neighboring towns and villages. By late afternoon of October 17, the center of Buenos Aires was packed with thousands of workers, most of whom were coatless (a shocking sight in bourgeois Buenos Aires) and, even worse, shirtless.

It was then that Evita, shrieking passionately into a microphone placed high above the teeming thousands, turned the word '*descamisados*' – formerly a shameful word – into one of glorification and self-respect.

'This word *descamisados*,' she cried out, 'has been transformed into a synonym for struggle, for revindication, for justice, for truth! It has created a state of national conscience! It has been implanted in the soul of the people, like a magic impulse, to carry them forward!'

The thousands of *descamisados* roared their approval – and that roaring gradually changed into the thunderous, repetitive chanting of 'PAY-RÓN! PAY-RÓN! PAYRÓN!' Given this, President Farrell had no choice but to give in. That evening, a car fetched Perón from the hospital and took him directly to the Casa Rosada (the Government House in the Plaza de Mayo from which many a President had previously fled) while the cheering mobs raced around the vehicle. Amid scenes of mass hysteria, President Farrell, now repentant, and Colonel Perón, now forgiving, appeared together on the palace balcony and embraced. Colonel Perón then offered an impassioned speech in which he gave his 'first welcome' to the true soul of the country: namely, the roaring *descamisados*.

* * *

On October 21, 1945, Juan Domingo Perón and Maria Eva Duarte were married in a secret ceremony performed in her home town of Junin. The marriage was to be solemnized, on December 10, with a church ceremony in the town of La Plata.

If love had formed part of the marriage, it had certainly not formed the whole. In fact, the marriage had sprung out of political motives. All of Buenos Aires and much of the rest of Argentina had been speculating on the next development in the Great Argentine Love Story. If Perón's *casa chica* was the collective dream of the *descamisados*, she could not be allowed to remain as such: Perón either had to get rid of her or legitimize the

relationship. While many felt that Perón was reluctant to do either (he may have wanted Evita, but he was also wary of her), his closest friends and supporters felt that the popularity of his *casa chica* made it mandatory that their union be legalized. So it was that Perón and Evita, the dream couple of Argentina, finally became man and wife.

Evita could now exact vengeance on all those who had wronged her.

First to feel the hand of retribution was Señor Yankelevich of Radio Belgrano. Long weary of the incessant demands of his influential minor actress, Yankelevich, upon hearing of the arrest of Juan Perón, had given Evita the boot. Ten days later, as Perón embraced President Farrell on the balcony of the Casa Rosada, Yankelevich not only had to let Evita resume her place behind the microphone but was forced to pay for her absence, give her another enormous rise in salary, and throw in limitless freedom regarding the contents of her program.

From this point on, Evita more or less ran Radio Belgrano.

Determined to be the First Lady of Argentina (having, as it were, already sampled the unique benefits of power), she used her control over the radio station to shower her listeners, in particular the *descamisados*, with her love and Perón's undying devotion. Given such sterling support, Perón launched himself forth as Presidential candidate, first resigning from the army, then proclaiming at a rally of his supporters: 'I join the ranks of the *descamisados*!'

To ensure that he would have the full support of the shirtless ones, he had the government decree that all employers must pay their workers a thirteenth month's wages as an annual bonus. Thus buying the loyalty of the formerly oppressed workers, he went on to suppress all opposition. With Evita on Radio Belgrano and with all other stations strictly controlled, his police and bully-boys went out to break up all opposition meetings. The Oligarchy and the Jews soon became the common enemy, antagonistic foreign journalists were threatened or beaten up, and a lot of middle-class professional citizens had their collars and ties shorn off.

According to Spruille Braden, then the American Ambassador to Argentina, 'civil liberties, the right of assembly, and the freedom of both speech and the Press' were suspended. Braden also described the Presidential candidate as 'a self-styled Leader, supported by a Party aping its Nazi

prototype'. Within days of this report, Perónist leaflets appeared in the streets of Buenos Aires, describing the American Ambassador as an 'undershirt diplomat', a 'cowboy', a 'rustler' and a 'gangster' comparable to Al Capone. Also, Braden's life was threatened.

The Perónist cause steamrollered on. In November, a new Labor Party made its appearance in Argentina, headed by Perón's old friends, Cipriano Reyes and Luis Gay. Included in their program was the nationalization of telephones, electric power and railways – all of which were predominantly owned by foreigners – and shorter hours and a share in the profits for industrial workers. After passionately proclaiming his faith in the New (Perónist) Argentina, Luis Gay, President of the new party, announced Colonel Juan Perón as his candidate for President.

In an attempt (ultimately successful) to gain the support of the strong Radical Party, Perón found ministerial posts in President Farrell's government for Juan Hortensio Quijano and a couple of his fellow deputies. Forming an organization called the Radical Reconstruction Committee, the three collaborationists prepared for a Nomination Convention in the New Year to put forward Perón and Quijano as their candidates for President and VicePresident respectively. A few days later, the Labor Party nominee for the Vice-Presidency, Colonel Mercante, was forced to stand down and make way for Perón and Quijano.

The Perónists and trade unions now arranged a fullscale *blitzkrieg* against the opposition, breaking into their offices, disrupting their public meetings, beating up their supporters, and calling in both the federal police and the army when strong-arm tactics were required. Allied to this was an increasingly brutal campaign against the Jewish quarter ('Be a patriot: kill a Jew!' was an early slogan of the *Perónistas*) and the arrest of countless members of the Oligarchy, including 'ex-Foreign Ministers, Nobel prizewinners, surgeons and leading land-owners'. By December, Buenos Aires had become a battle-ground of street fights, riots, police baton charges, tear-gas attacks, shooting, bomb-throwing and arson, with crowds of frightened citizens squabbling daily for places on board the steamers to Montevideo.

Appalled by what was going on, Argentina's few remaining independent businessmen arranged a lock-out in the New Year as a protest. Known as the

Employers' Strike, it was the most threatening opposition that Perón had had to face so far. He solved the problem by summoning the trade union leaders and pointing out to them that, if the employers held up production for a period of even a few months, the power of the Perónist movement might be smashed forever, leaving them back where they had started, at the mercy of the hated Oligarchy. The locked-out workers were then brought back into the factories (reportedly by gangster tactics) where they were encouraged to get production going again. On orders from Perón, one of the tactics used to make them return to the factories and keep them at work even against their will – since many were justifiably frightened to be seen defying the factory owners – was the deliberate flooding of their homes by the Fire Department. This drove whole families, who might otherwise have resisted, back to work. The Employers' Strike was smashed.

While frightened citizens continued to queue or fight for places on the steamers to Montevideo and while Perónist thugs were breaking up opposition meetings with clubs, axe handles and knuckledusters, Evita was not lying low. Indeed, aware that about one in every five Argentinians was illiterate and therefore totally dependent upon the radio for news, she had been working relentlessly in that area. Still employed by Radio Belgrano, which she now controlled almost totally, she was also Perón's official publicity officer as well as his wife, and did not hesitate to use the stream of broadcasting 'regulations' that had been pouring out of President Farrell's Perón-dominated offices to deny radio access to opposing parties whenever possible. She also spoke a lot herself, taught Perón the tricks of broadcasting, and in general ensured that Perónism dominated the airwaves.

Finally, on election day, no strong-arm tactics were required to collect Perón's votes. The previous barrage of demagogy and violent persuasion had managed to eliminate all opposition. On February 24, 1946, the male citizens of Argentina, by an honest vote, elected Juan Domingo Perón as their President.

That night, the celebrations in Buenos Aires were spectacular. Food and wine were lavished upon the Perónist supporters, oxen were barbecued in the streets and parks, and dancing and singing continued until dawn.

The day that Perón became their legal President, more than a million Argentines roared with unquenchable enthusiasm. Packed in behind the rows

of steel-helmeted, bayonet-bearing soldiers who lined the Avenida de Mayo from the Chamber of Deputies to the Casa Rosada, the ecstatic *descamisados* waved and cheered and threw flowers. At the stroke of midday, resplendent in the bluegold-encrusted dress uniform of a brigadier-general, Perón strode into the great hall of Congress, surrounded by beribboned generals and starched diplomats. Smiling from her special box was the alabaster beauty, Señora Peron, beloved as 'Evita'. Seated close to her, his many medals glittering, was Constatin V. Sheveley, commercial representative of the Soviet Union, who had just announced the resumption of relations between Russia and Argentina. Later would come the drive to the Casa Rosada, between the blue-and-white-striped Argentine flags, and, in the blue gloom of the Casa Rosada's white salon, surrounded by grenadiers in the uniforms of the Independence period (blue tunics, red-striped trousers, red pompom-topped shakos), the handing of the mace from the tearful exPresident, Edelmiro Farrell, to the solemn-faced, inwardly jovial President Perón.

Evita was now the First Lady of Argentina.

Chapter Ten

Shortly after meeting Juan Perón, Evita made her final two films, *La Cabalgata del Circo* (*The Cavalcade of the Circus*) and *La Prodiga* (*The Spendthrift*). The latter had a title so prophetic as to be miraculous, but instead of being released to the general public, it was given to President Perón as a 'personal gift' from the producers. The former, a critical and box-office disaster, was one of the many movies starring Eva Duarte that the more dignified Evita would have destroyed. From this point on, she would make no more movies, though in truth she would never stop acting.

In fact, Evita had made a great number of movies, most of them dire, a series of historical romances filled with drama and great achievements of the kind she had imagined in her childhood. On the radio and in cinema she had played the great women of history and other, fictional, women of singular achievement. Now, as the line between theatricality and real life became

blurred in her mind, she created a composite of all her favorite characters and gradually turned this magical creature into the one who would soon become widely known as *Santa* (Saint) Evita.

'She created a character,' said Señor Julio Alcaraz, her regular hairdresser. 'In her public life she created a character for herself, and she lived this character totally.'

Undoubtedly this was true. From the moment Eva Duarte took up with Colonel Perón, the remaining shreds of her more human side were stripped away. Evita now loved Perón as the child Eva had loved her daydreams, seeing neither reality nor truth: only the possibility of glory in the eyes of her lover. If Perón had once been flesh and blood, he had since gone beyond that: he was the miracle of a dream made manifest, his destiny mapped out. Evita shared that destiny. The country's heart beat in her breast. She and Perón and Argentina – the Holy Trinity – were one and the same. For this reason, her love for Perón, which was a passion like no other, had changed into something more noble than the body's base hunger.

> I was not just the wife of the President of the Republic; I was also the wife of the Leader of the Argentine people… I feel as though I am the real mother of my nation… Perhaps I don't suffer with it? Perhaps I don't enjoy its happiness? Perhaps its griefs do not grieve me? Perhaps my blood doesn't race when it is insulted or criticized? My loves are its loves. For this reason I love Perón in a different way to that in which I used to. Before I loved him for himself. Now I love him because his people love him!

What greater love than this? What country could ask for more? If Evita was to be childless, if her rumored distaste for sex was real, was it not also true that when she made love to Perón she could enjoy it only because she felt that through him she was the whole nation's mistress. Others insisted that she was the nation's mother. So through Perón she made love to the nation and gave birth to its future. If sexless, she had emotions. Or, like an actress, she *conveyed* emotions. Once Eva, now Evita, that more intimate 'little Eva', she would encourage her people to view her as both mistress and mother.

> When I chose to be 'Evita' I knew I was choosing the path of my people. Now, after making that choice, it is easy for me to show that this was the case. Only the people call me 'Evita'. Only the *descamisados* learnt to call me that. Government ministers, political leaders, ambassadors, businessmen, professionals and intellectuals and all the others who visit me usually call me 'Madam'; and when in public some of them say, 'Your most excellent and worthy ladyship', or sometimes, 'Lady President'. They only see me as Eva Perón. On the other hand, the poor only want to know me as 'Evita'. That's how I introduced myself to them when I went to meet the poor of my country; saying that I would prefer to be 'Evita', rather then the President's wife, if this 'Evita' could help relieve any grief or dry any tears.

Evita's conviction that she represented the soul of her country began during her days as Perón's mistress. Now, as the First Lady of Argentina, her belief in the power of the working masses confirmed, she set out to become the most powerful woman in Latin America and, hopefully, the world.

Afire with the revealed love of her loyal *descamisados*, moved by the conviction that she represented the New (Perónist) Argentina, she wasted no time in turning her flamboyant dreams into reality.

Soon after taking over the Presidency, Juan Perón gave his wife a desk and a few 'small chores' to do at the Secretariat of Labor, his old post. Within weeks, the Secretary of Labor was simply running Evita's errands while Evita got on with running the whole show. Before a month had passed, seasoned politicians who had thought of Evita as no more than an ambitious 'little whore' were learning, frequently to their cost, that she was tough, shrewd and ruthless.

Adapting the same dawn-to-dusk working routine as her husband, she interviewed hundreds of people weekly and traveled all over Argentina, making speeches at countless union rallies. In no time at all, she had taken over the management of the rowdy but loving *descamisados* from Perón, seducing them into submission with her charm and generosity, thinking rarely of the consequences of what she was giving away, only concerned with the

immediate, invariably warm, response.

The response was always the same, though it grew ever warmer. Soon the workers thronging in May Square, instead of chanting ‘Perón! Perón!’, were chanting ‘Evita! Evita!’ until the latter took precedence over the former. And, under her alluring command, the once powerful General Confederation of Labor became a docile Perónist instrument, reduced to carrying out orders and staging mass demonstrations in the Square.

‘She’s worth more to me than five ministers,’ Perón announced to the press.

Under Evita’s direction, Perón had made political capital during his Presidential campaign out of designating women’s suffrage a basic plank in the Perón platform. Now Evita, a woman with no female friends, was using women’s suffrage to strengthen her position with the underprivileged. Adding a votes-for-women campaign to her long list of public activities, she also broadcast in its favor every Wednesday night from Radio Belgrano. Not content with this, she ‘bought’ control of the newspaper, *Democracia*, and entered the publishing field, kicking off with a new daily column: ‘The Argentine Woman Wants to Vote’. By now she had gained indirect control of the principal Argentine newsreel companies and was ensuring that she appeared at least two or three times in every newsreel, usually against background scenes of other women and children, and invariably proclaiming the right of women to vote.

This gambit was no accident. Like the good public performer she was, Evita knew that much of her appeal lay in her good looks and that her major support, which came from the macho workers, had incidentally caused resentment amongst their women. By liberating women, and by her forthcoming acts of charity, she was not only widening the broad base of her support, but also heightening her image as a saint. Because of this, she became a heroine to her formerly oppressed countrywomen.

‘Evita represents the authentic symbol of the Argentinian woman,’ said Ebe Bedrune, a popular young bandleader, ‘because, above all else, she has not lost her feeling for humanity.’ And regarding Evita’s fight for women’s rights: ‘She is the first girl, if I may call her that, who has elevated our thoughts and taught us our mission as citizens.’

Ostensibly a women’s liberationist (before the term became fashionable

in the West), Evita was actually laying the groundwork for a pro-Perón (thus pro-Evita) Women's Party. Yet to say this might well be an injustice, since, if Evita was many things (cold, calculating, shrewish, vindictive), she was also genuinely involved in the plight of her countrywomen. Her own past – with its hardships and humiliations, its revelations of how an Argentinian woman would always be a second-class citizen, mere chattel to men, forced to beg and surrender her honor for what she needed – had imbued her with this singular, genuine passion.

Even though her economic ignorance, distorted view of social justice and vengeful nature would eventually lead the country to near ruination, her passion for women's rights was sincere. Like many a woman who has been used by many men, Evita both despised and was totally dependent upon the male sex. Though her steely resolve and unwavering ambition in a man's world had divorced her from close friendships with other women, she continued to despise men for how they had used her and, aware that other women had suffered similarly, she sympathized with women in general. Indeed, one of her legitimate triumphs was won in September 1947 when her bill giving women in Argentina the right to vote was approved.

* * *

However, by late 1946 Evita was still rushing breathlessly through her new career as First Lady of Argentina. In her office on the fourth floor of the Central Post Office Building she was receiving trade union delegations before her bourgeois neighbors (who despised her) had risen from their beds in the swank houses along the Avenida Alvear. Cabinet ministers eager to hear and kowtow to her views, teachers and nurses quick to note a militant feminist, ragged mothers from poor villages, hungry gauchos from the pampas, and trade union leaders seeking pay rises for workers poured daily into her jammed waiting rooms. When not seeking to deal with these humble souls, Evita would be sitting in on conferences to debate her husband's latest labor policy or the government's anti-inflation campaign, much to the annoyance of the other cabinet ministers – an annoyance they dared not show.

Abused and used in childhood and adolescence, Evita had come to understand the mechanics of power and the value of having trustworthy friends placed in useful positions. It did not pass unnoticed that her playboy brother, Juan Duarte, had promptly been elected as her private secretary. Nor

that Evita was surreptitiously surrounding the President with more and more of her own men, most of them servile mediocrities who would leap to obey her. Thus well guarded from the rear, she could turn her pretty face towards the masses awaiting her charitable ministrations. And the public and private faces of Evita were two different masks.

'It wasn't difficult to publicize Eva Perón,' said Raul Apold, the Press and Propaganda Secretary, 'given that she gave so much. During the Presidential campaign she was really Perón's backbone. For the people she was part of their flesh and blood. Especially in the interior, where they had real admiration for this young girl with her smile and her strong, piercing eyes. Eva wasn't worried if she made enemies herself, but she couldn't forgive those who were enemies of her husband.'

The public Evita was the soul of saintliness and generosity, but the private Evita was a different person altogether. She enjoyed taking revenge for all the real or imagined wrongs done to her, and now, with her authority and power, she set out to do so.

Señor Yankelevich of Radio Belgrano had already suffered at Evita's tender hands and now two of the country's most popular actresses, Dolores del Rio and Amanda Ledesman, found themselves in a similar position. Ledesman, who had been the star of a radio show in which Evita appeared during her early years in Buenos Aires, suddenly found radio work unobtainable. As for Dolores del Rio, she was already successful in the Hollywood despised by Evita because it had so consistently rejected her. So, for some real or imagined slight, dating back to when she was working in a picture in which Dolores del Rio was starring, Evita had the actress barred from all Argentine studios. Eventually, North American producers came to realize that US movies featuring Dolores del Rio were no longer being bought by Argentine cinemas. Dolores del Rio, her career in Argentina destroyed, went off to Hollywood and never returned.

Among others forced out of Argentina by Evita were:

Huge del Carrill, who had pinned a facetious note on Evita's first mink coat in a Buenos Aires nightclub; Nina Marshall, the Argentine's leading radio and film star, who had made the mistake of imitating Evita at parties; and Pedro Cuartucci, who had refused to sing a serenade on the balcony of the Casa Rosada on the day of Perón's liberation from prison. Likewise, while

Evita would greet the poor and the humble with a radiant smile and a generous check book, she would coldly abuse and then dismiss any nonunion worker or middle-class professional in her presence.

This private Evita – the one who needed revenge for all real or imagined slights and who had to destroy all those opposed to her or her husband – was now about to embark on the most flamboyant escapade of her political career: the infamous Rainbow Tour.

* * *

If Evita had been accepted by the *descamisados* as their saviour and Lady of Hope, she was still despised by the wealthy of Buenos Aires (the Oligarchy) who could not forgive her for her common background and her early years as an actress, regarding her as a vulgar, ambitious tramp. In a sense, while Evita had won the love of the 'shirtless ones', she had still not proved herself as a woman fit to be the President's wife. It was perhaps because of this that Evita began to dress more lavishly in public, to adorn herself with all the regalia of a Great Lady, dressed primarily by Christian Dior, wrapped in other glittering gowns by Fath and Rochas and Balmain, in expensive furs and extraordinary jewelery. No longer a Lana Turner lookalike in period costume, she was now more in the line of an Argentine Grace Kelly, she of *The Swan*, a blonde-haired, sophisticated beauty of the most refined kind. In doing this, Evita was seeking to impersonate and, perhaps, equal the very people she most despised: the wealthy, snobbish women of the Oligarchy. So far it hadn't worked.

However, Evita had a second reason for launching the Rainbow Tour. Much of her growing popularity at this time was due to her cleverly staged public acts of charity towards the poor. Though other, more reputable, charity organizations had been doing their work quietly for years, Evita was now putting them in the shade by ensuring that her own good deeds were widely publicized. (Her personal photographer was never absent when she dished out the money.) More vitally, she had already started wresting control from many of the other charities and was using her authority to do them serious damage.

The most important of these charities was the Sociedad de Beneficencia (Society of Philanthropy), which was run by the female social élite of Buenos Aires. The perennial president of the organization was the wealthy Señora Maria Unzue de Alvear; but the post of honorary secretary was traditionally

reserved for the wife of Argentina's President, who was, at this particular time, Evita. Evita wanted the post, but the women of the society refused to offer her the position, making it clear that they still despised her as a commoner.

It was Evita's intention to force the snobbish upper crust of Argentine society to receive her socially, primarily by electing her as honorary president of the Sociedad de Beneficencia, and she felt that she could do this by courting the crowned heads of Europe and returning to Argentina as an honored lady. The Rainbow Tour was therefore, at bottom, a self-serving public-relations campaign.

'I send you my rainbow,' President Perón cabled to the Spanish government.

Evita left on her Rainbow Tour in June 1947, reportedly with five dozen lavish costumes, enough jewelery to sink a battleship, and a considerable amount of Argentine pesos in cash. Stopping first in Spain, she passed on the regards of one dictator to another by saying to General Franco: 'I did not come here to establish an axis, but only as a rainbow between our two countries.' General Franco, a wily old fox, awarded the mink-coated beauty the Cross of Isabel La Catolica and sent her out to greet the worshipful Spaniards. The Spaniards, ever enamoured with women who wore ostrich plumes and mink, gave her a rapturous reception while she dispensed gifts of hard cash to the tune of over £1,000 per day.

It was all downhill after that.

From Spain she went to Italy where, from the balcony of a forty-room mansion that had cost Perón's Embassy in Rome £100,000 to prepare, she was shocked by the roars of 'Down with Perón! Down with Argentina! Down with fascism!' Undeterred, she went on to an audience with Pope Pius XII, from whom she hoped to receive the highest papal decoration, the Supreme Order of Christ. Instead, after an audience of thirty minutes, she was awarded the Grand Cross of the Order of Pius IX, a magnificent, diamond-studded, eight-pointed star that was, nonetheless, only second in the papal hierarchy. As if this were not enough, when she then visited Northern Italy, the communists bawled obscenities, most notably by calling her a whore. Shocked again, Evita turned to her official escort, a former senior naval officer who slyly ground salt in her wounds by murmuring, 'Think nothing of

it, my dear. I haven't been to sea for fifteen years and they still call me an admiral.' Finally, after Evita had suffered a merciless grilling by the press, some American GIs showed their own kind of respect with wolf whistles.

Simultaneously outraged and humiliated, Evita left Italy and travelled on to France.

In Paris, after being received by President Vincent Auriol and other leading dignitaries, she witnessed the signing of a Franco-Argentinian commercial treaty, extending a loan of £150,750,00 to France. Alas, if the glamor-smitten Spaniards had given her a rapturous reception, the more sophisticated French were less impressed. After Evita had obliged the photographers (she was always more keen on photographers than on journalists, as is the case with most actresses) by showing off the furs, gowns, hats and shoes that she had acquired in an orgy of shopping, one member of the French press was moved to write: 'Madam Perón would be more palatable to the French workers and peasants if she were dressed as a piece of Argentinian frozen beef.' Following this, she had her car's windshield smashed and the windows cracked by an expertly thrown brick and was then grossly insulted in a Paris nightclub. Subsequently, though compelled by her official schedule to remain for some time in Paris, *La Bella Blonde d'Argentina* lost her enthusiasm and, suddenly tired and pale, her smile infinitely more painful, started canceling appointments and waited listlessly for a call from the Queen of England.

Evita was expecting to be invited to stay in Buckingham Palace as a house-guest – the one thing that would finally force the ladies of the Avenida Alvear to accept her and make her honorary president of the Sociedad de Beneficencia – but, alas, such was not to be the case. After a lot of hedging by the guardians of the Palace, she was finally invited merely to take tea with the Queen. Furious, she resolved to return home.

Something else might have disturbed her during her stay in Paris. Throughout the period she was there, her activities were being watched by Perón's Secret Service and reported back to Argentine's Government House in Buenos Aires. It is possible that Evita found out about this, since her brother, Juan Duarte, also close to Perón, was traveling with her. What Evita *did* know is that Perón had made his first world broadcast in her absence and that he had, subsequently, taken to the air in a big way. In fact, Perón was to

make over one hundred broadcasts during 1947 and many of them were made, often to be broadcast much later, during Evita's seemingly convenient absence. Evita, therefore, with her passion for personally controling the Argentinian airwaves, might have felt resentment and possibly even fear at learning what her husband had been up to behind her back. Certainly, later, there would be many ominous rumors of private rifts between her and Juan Perón.

No official explanation was offered in Argentina for the fact that Evita and her brother made a brief trip to Switzerland. Though it was hardly mentioned by the press, a number of Argentinian officials would later suspect that the trip had been made for the purpose of setting up Evita's notorious Swiss bank account.

Whatever the purpose of her visit, Evita soon returned from Switzerland and then left Paris quietly, without the cheers and boos of Madrid and Rome respectively, slipping away as if she had never been. After dallying briefly on the Riviera (where, for the first time, she deliberately avoided the press photographers), she returned to Argentina by way of Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro, where she attended the Inter-
American Joint Defence Conference, the streets were covered with thousands of huge posters of her, most of which the Brazilian police hastily tore down. Finally, smiling brightly to hide her true lack of spirit, she returned to a triumphant welcome in Buenos Aires, where Perón gave a passionate public speech and Evita, also in public, wept for joy.

* * *

The Rainbow Tour made Evita's fame (or infamy) known worldwide, but it still did not gain her the honorary presidency of the Sociedad de Beneficencia. It was out of this dogmatic refusal, this all too public sign of the Oligarchy's contempt for the 'little whore', that Evita's most obsessive lust for vengeance and total power was born.

Less than a year later, she had killed off the historical Sociedad de Beneficencia, replaced it with 'the biggest racket the world has known in our time', and finally, with a malice that knew no bounds, refused permission for the remains of the recently deceased president of the society, Señora Maria Unzue de Alvear, to be buried next to those of her husband in the family tomb of a church that had been founded and built by Señora de Alvear out of

her own purse.

Evita, having proved that she could not be scorned, turned her back on the ruination she had wreaked and went on to bigger things.

Chapter Eleven

The Perón's method of consolidating their power was simply to take care of everyone who supported them, irrespective of the future cost. Perón spent lavishly on the army and allowed, or didn't dare stop, Evita's own extravagant spending. The basic *modus operandi* was to offer a public spectacle of generosity, keep everyone happy, strengthen their popularity with the workers, and let the future take care of itself. Because of this, by early 1948 Perón had not only spent the whole of Argentina's war profits, but had also, with his grandiose expansionist schemes, run the country £500 million into debt.

Evita's personal contribution to this immediately beneficial and ultimately disastrous form of government was to shower pesos like pennies from heaven on the eternally grateful *descamisados*. When the Railway Union asked for a 40% rise, Evita generously gave them 50%. When the telephone operators planned to get half of 70%, Evita nobly gave them the lot. Already, in her offices in the Ministry of Labor and Welfare, she was handing out money indiscriminately – or, at least, as she herself saw fit. Not only was she signing checks by the dozen, but the sight of a pleading face before her would encourage her to pull a wad of pesos from her desk drawer and shove them into the hand of the astonished recipient. Evita was also starting to ignore the need for records of such transactions. Where the money came from might be something that interested her; what clearly did not concern her was where it might come from in the future.

Determined to fix the 'old hags' of the Oligarchy for good, Evita, on June 23, 1947, brought the portentiously entitled Maria Eva Duarte de Perón Social Aid Foundation into being. Aware of the power that such a charity could bring her, she first removed every competitor in private welfare and

crushed their hated bones beneath the weight of her own ambitions. The Maria Eva Duarte de Perón Social Aid Foundation reportedly started with a modest amount of Evita's own money, began its life in the General Post Office building, moved on to the larger Secretariat of Labor and Welfare, and then, about eighteen months later, was moved into an extraordinary Grecian-styled building, seven storeys high, fronted by marble columns topped with a number of statues. The whole building filled an entire city block.

The initial modest sum of money, reportedly Evita's own money, was dramatically increased by the expropriation of huge sums of money from the various trade unions, the reluctant businessmen, and finally from the workers as well. Few of these contributors were volunteers.

On Labor Day, May 1, 1951, by order of the General Confederation of Labor (virtually controlled by Evita), every worker in the country was required to hand over a full day's earnings to the Foundation. Shortly after, the civil servants were 'encouraged' to hand over 10% of their combined annual salaries to the Foundation and did so, with a fat check, at a public demonstration in the Colon Theater in Buenos Aires. More money was extracted from the major employers by 'persuading' them to pay by 'lunar' months and donating the check for the thirteenth month of the year to the Foundation.

In 1951 it would not have been considered safe to even *think* of criticizing the Foundation; and many famous and anonymous citizens of Argentina were hounded into exile for having made the mistake of doing just that.

(Richard Balbin, leader of the Radical Party, said in a speech to the House of Deputies: 'The public charities of the President's wife seem to rebound to her private good.' He was subsequently sentenced, after eight month's wait in jail, to five years' imprisonment for 'disrespect towards the President and other un-Argentine activities.')

Other methods of extortion (called 'voluntary donations') abounded. For instance, employees of the Banco Central *not* wishing to donate one day's pay to the Foundation were to notify the Board of Management *in writing*. Likewise, when the young winner of a radio contest stated that he was not going to hand over his winnings to the Foundation, Evita's Publicity Office put out the news that the entire audience at the contest had broken into tears

upon hearing the young man's selfish refusal. It was not reported just how this particular offender was punished for his disrespect and lack of public feeling, but certainly all future winnings were turned over to the Foundation and the winners received only a personal note of thanks from the First Lady.

By mid-1951, government lotteries and gambling casinos had also come under the hammer and were reported to have 'contributed' 36,458,296 pesos during the first six months of the year; casinos not contributing would soon have their licences revoked for 'unlawful practices'. Likewise, when a large manufacturer of chocolates refused to contribute, he was visited by three municipal sanitary inspectors who found his factory to be unsanitary and closed it down for all time. Thereafter, industrialists in the Argentine more readily handed over the cash.

Eschewing the more blatant forms of suppression, such as concentration camps, Evita and Perón nevertheless crushed resistance to their government with lengthy jail sentences, by ruining opponents economically, or by harassing them until they fled across the river to Uruguay. Evita had already displayed her penchant for 'legal' suppression by financially ruining all charities except her own, by gaining control of all the newsreel companies, and by wresting direct control of the newspapers *Democracia*, *Laborista* and *Noticias Graficas*. (By this time, expanding her business interests, she also owned a medical, surgical, mathematical and scientific instrument company and was setting up an agricultural product company under her own name.) Criticizm of Perón's government, or of Evita's scandalous Foundation, was therefore rendered furtive and highly dangerous. While Perón was packing the courts and universities with his stooges, encouraging Congress to vote him absolute power over his seventeen million people, including the right to jail them for 'disrespect' (an abstraction beyond all possibility of defence), Evita was ensuring silence by the 'legal' suppression of any organization antagonistic to her.

As we have seen, foremost among the victims were various leading Argentine newspapers. *La Razon*, the prominent Buenos Aires daily that had long been openly hostile to the Peróns, became the next, and the biggest, to fall. Determined to ruin *La Razon*, a team of Evita's municipal inspectors constantly harassed the paper's offices, first accusing the accountants of keeping inaccurate accounts (untrue), then inspecting the washrooms, lifts

and fire extinguishers (all in order), then fining the proprietors hundreds of thousands of pesos for minor infractions, and, finally, claiming a major sanitary violation because an office fan was too small. *La Razon* paid up, dropped its editorial page, and for the first time in its illustrious history expressed no opinions of any kind about anything. Later, to the dismay of many Argentinians, *La Razon* was closed down entirely.

Nor did it end there. The *Argentine Libre* was suddenly told by its printer in Buenos Aires that he could no longer handle the paper. The owner promptly found another small printing shop in La Plata, thirty-five miles from the capital; but after the La Plata shop had brought out only one issue, it was closed by municipal authorities because it 'lacked proper washroom facilities'. Another leading opposition paper, the Socialist Party's *La Vanguardia*, was closed because the sound of its printing presses at night violated a municipal anti-noise measure, the loading of papers into delivery trucks tied up traffic on the block, and the press room lacked first-aid equipment.

Finally, since Perón's government controlled the flow of newsprint, it could and did divert it from unfriendly to friendly papers. And since, due to the nationalization of the banks in March 1946, all bank loans had to be cleared through the Banco Central of Argentina, any newspaper antagonistic to Evita and/or Perón would have found it impossible to obtain even a routine loan. The Post Office, also, often refused to distribute newspapers expressing antiPerónist views.

The creation of an Undersecretariat of Press and Radio sealed up the remaining gaps in this massive suppression. The Undersecretariat's job was to take a personal interest in the 'type and tone' of political news, which meant in effect that free access to primary news sources was increasingly denied to news reporters. Increasingly, they were forced to rely on handouts from the Undersecretariat; and official press conferences would consist of the distribution of mimeographed communiqués presenting the government point of view. Due to the Undersecretariat, further loss of freedom of expression was ensured by the limiting of the licence system for radio stations. Since all stations had to operate under temporary licences granted by the government, it was easy to make them understand that the broadcasting of anti-Perónist news or opinions would lead to a revocation of their licences. It was also

made clear that no one could speak out against the President, his wife, or the government as a whole, and that commentators could only say that they were *for*. On the other hand, three times a day, without paying for the air time, the government broadcast its own news program over every station in Argentina.

Though this massive repression was going on daily, it was scarcely noticed by the majority of working Argentinians. Formerly either ignored entirely or ruthlessly exploited by the Oligarchy and successive governments, the workers now had, in Perón and in his saintly wife, Evita, staunch defenders of their livelihood and future. Suddenly, after years of being treated like slave labor, they saw their wages doubled and even trebled, they were receiving bonuses and paid holidays, and summer camps and rest homes were being built for them.

However, if the workers were happy, the regime's opponents were more concerned, pointing out the high cost of these so-called gains. In many cases the rise in the cost of living had paralleled, and sometimes exceeded, the wage increases. It was also noted that the benefits won by the unions had been gained at the cost of their independence. In particular, the General Confederation of Labor, once the most powerful union in the country, had been reduced to a mere chattel of the government and was now conducting most of its business (which was Perón's business) in a room in the Casa Rosada. There, three military men on Perón's staff, with the help of a mimeograph machine and the Confederation's stationary, issued Labor edicts and Labor news that had been written by Evita's Publicity Office. A further source of irritation was that those unions that played the government's game had little difficulty in getting what they wanted, whereas the unions that tried to maintain a measure of independence found themselves unable to function freely.

One of Perón's many methods of breaking independent unions was the use of the so-called Federal Intervenor, whose job was to manage the affairs of the union on behalf of the government. One such union, the fifty-year-old Union of Office Workers of Cordoba Province, was 'intervened' in January 1948, after which it had its charter annulled and its right to represent the workers cancelled. Likewise, while a group of pro-Perón industrialists were enjoying special 'under-the-table' privileges, the ordinary businessmen, or those antagonistic to Perónism, were finding themselves controlled at every

turn and having to operate under a law, designed to forbid ‘speculation’, that was so vague as to render day-to-day dealings almost impossible. So, too, did the universities find themselves short of many able professors, who had either been forced to resign or prematurely ‘retired’.

Finally, to ensure that the courts could not redress any of these Perónist wrongs, Perón had Congress throw out three of the more difficult judges and filled their seats with his friends. (One of these was Justo Rodriguez, the husband of Evita’s sister, Blanca.) When doing so, he always made a point of firing judges who had jurisdiction over civil rights. Given this knowledge, as well as the fact that those who remained would not want the same medicine, it was a foregone conclusion that the courts would support all future attempts to suppress newspapers, radio stations and recalcitrant trade unions – and this is precisely what they did.

To all intents and purposes, Argentina was now totally controlled by Juan Perón and Evita.

Chapter Twelve

With all means of criticizing them throttled, Juan Perón and
Evita could now smother the whole country in marshmallow. Perón’s official plans to beat inflation and Evita’s more personal plans for the Eva Perón Foundation were sold with the aid of an extensive, relentless publicity campaign. Indeed, the public love affair between the President and his wife was as carefully orchestrated as one of the overheated Argentinian movies that Evita, when plain Eva Duarte, had formerly starred in. The story, not uncommon in those kinds of movie, went something like this…

Little Eva is born of poor parents in the pampas – a true *descamisado* – and grows up to be a beautiful, blonde teenager who attracts the beastly attentions of many men. After suffering the common woes of the ‘shirtless ones’, she leaves the farm and travels to the Big City where, after many hardships and humiliations, sexual and otherwise, she turns herself, Cinderella-fashion, into a sophisticated young woman. She becomes a movie

star, finds fame and fortune, but also learns that it is Lonely at the Top. Luckily, the dashing army officer, Juan Domingo Perón, now enters the picture and, as befits this traditional movie, it is Love at First Sight.

('I saw him appear,' says Evita in her fanciful memoirs. 'He stood out from all the others. They would cry "Fire!" and order the advance; he cried "Fire!" and advanced himself, determinedly and relentlessly in one direction, without faltering at any obstacle. In that moment I felt his war cry and his path were my own.')

Also born in the pampas but now high up in the army, little Eva's handsome lover, Colonel Juan Perón, is a macho man, a war hero, and a playboy irresistible to women. Nevertheless, deep down, he is dissatisfied with his hedonistic lifestyle and in search of his Destiny. He meets little Eva, now a glamorous, famous lady, and his love for her changes him overnight and makes him a better man. She reminds him that both of them come from the pampas and that fame and fortune cannot replace the love they had once received from their own kind, namely the shirtless ones. Perón is transformed! Now dedicated to his country, but seeing injustice on all sides, he becomes a Friend to the People, is jailed by the corrupt ruling junta, and sends his devotion to the shirtless ones through his beloved little Eva, writing faithfully from the darkness of his prison cell.

('I searched eagerly through his letters for words of love,' says Evita in her memoirs. 'Instead, he spoke of hardly anything except his "workers", who, when they were loose on the streets, he had begun to call *descamisados*. Entrusting me with his "workers" were his words of love, his most deeply felt words of love. As long as I live, I shall never forget that.')

Little Eva, who loves Juan Perón, who in his turn loves the people through little Eva, encourages the *descamisados* to demonstrate for his release from prison. The Friend to the People is duly released. He then overthrows the corrupt ruling junta, takes over the country, pours his contempt upon the Oligarchy, and brings Justice and Prosperity to the *descamisados*… And beside him, radiantly beautiful, but also humble, even saint-like, is little Eva, now the glamorous Evita, whose love is eternal.

('I am only a humble woman,' says Evita in her memoirs, 'a swallow amongst a vast flock of swallows. He was, and still is, the giant eagle flying safely high among the clouds, close to God. If it were not for the way he

swooped down to my level and taught me to fly differently, I would never have known what an eagle is, nor would I have been able to contemplate the magnificent extent of my people. Because of this, neither my life nor my heart belong to me. Nothing I am or possess is mine. All I am, all I own, all I think and all I feel belongs to Perón.')

The violins soar. The sun glints in Evita's blonde hair. She stands beside the dashing President, her husband, Juan Perón, on the balcony of the Casa Rosada, as the cheers of their beloved *descamisados* lift them up on a great wave of adulation to the right hand of God. Love and loyalty conquer all…

The public, the formerly oppressed *descamisados*, could not resist it. They were being swamped by the greatest soap opera of their times and it had them enthralled.

Central to the growth of this nauseating spectacle was the Eva Perón Publicity Office. Organized by this office were the huge posters of Evita and Perón that soon covered every wall in Buenos Aires. Written by that same office were the countless propaganda speeches that were delivered histrionically week after week by Evita or Perón. Still enamoured by the style of his old hero, Mussolini, Perón would thunder and gesticulate, his coat off and his sleeves rolled up, one hand placed over his heart or else balled in a fist that slammed up and down as he raved. And beside him, little Eva, the *campañera Evita*, her large brown eyes flashing, blonde hair shining, body trembling, first humbly lowering her head, her voice a tremulous whisper, then abruptly straightening up, punching the air with her fists, all fire and fury, sometimes weeping with emotion, flaunting diamonds and sables and Christian Dior gowns as she told the ragged workers: 'I was once just as you are now! I am taking these jewels from the Oligarchy only for you! *All* of you! One day you will inherit this whole treasure! You will *all* have clothes like these!' And the *descamisados*, the shirtless ones, now drunk with excitement, believing her every word, would stumble away from May Square and look up at the countless posters saying 'Perón Fulfils His Promises' or 'Juan and Eva – a Blessed Couple' or 'Evita, We Love You' or 'Evita is Love' and they would sob with pride and joy.

Who could resist it? What mere mortal could withstand it? The Argentinians are in love with the very idea of love, and this great love between their President and his wife, their adored Evita, was all-embracing

and perfect.

If Evita had once been a second-rate actress, she had now, by sheer tenacity and cunning, won her Academy Award.

'It struck me as a kind of popular Vaudeville,' said Sir John Balfour, then the British Ambassador in Argentina, 'with Perón as the stage manager and Eva as the lead actress. Perón… put her on the stage.'

The main stage for Evita's histrionics was undoubtedly the Maria Eva Duarte de Perón Social Aid Foundation. Now the most influential woman in the hemisphere – hailed in Argentina as being in a class with Eleanor Roosevelt, Madame Chiang Kai-shek, and the consort of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem; awarded, on top of her previous accolades, with the Dominican Republic's Grand Cross of the Order of Juan Pablo Duarte (no relation) and Bolivia's Order of the Condor of the Andes; hailed by her own subjects as *la Dama de la Esperanza* (the Lady of Hope) – Eva had become obsessed with her own image as a saint and was tireless in attending to her flock.

'She worked fourteen or fifteen hours a day,' said Atilio Renzi, her private secretary. 'It was quite common to finish at three or four in the morning and be back at work at seven thirty.'

Up and dressed by six o'clock in the morning, Evita would drive in her Rolls-Royce three times a week to her rooms in the Secretariat of Labor and Welfare. There she would hold a bizarre court to listen to the problems of the poor, the sick, the lame and the old. On each of these occasions the corridors leading to the 'Charity Court' would be jammed tight with humble or conniving supplicants. A corps of secretaries, male and female, always flanked Evita's desk, the most prominent feature of which was a large alms box. Apart from an oil painting of one Juan Carlos Alonso, the only other pictures on the walls were of the Peróns – and, perhaps deliberately, of Christ.

The supplicants would approach the Christ-like Evita at her desk and pour out their troubles. If the problem was money, one of Evita's secretaries would reach into the alms box and hand over at least a one-hundred peso note. If, on the other hand, the problem was something else, that would be dealt with as well. If a man needed a job, a job was found for him. (The chosen employer would not dare to refuse him work.) If a woman's husband had deserted her, Evita's strong-arm men would seek him out. (The erring

husband would rarely refuse to return home.) If someone owed rent, the required sum would be provided and the 'victimizing' landlord reprimanded (even if in the right). Evita also had on her staff some strong-arm 'charity men' whose job was to locate drunken husbands and more or less beat some sobriety into them. Evita personally ordered clothing, bedding and furniture for those who needed it; and she personally wrote prescriptions for drugs. In short, whatever the case, Evita *worked*.

The sublime inanity of the Social Aid Foundation was to be found in the fact that it was not obliged to keep records of its spending. It was also ludicrous in that the enormous annual contributions (received through legalized forms of extortion) were not being invested in more farranging or long-term projects but were being dispensed with random generosity to whoever managed to get an audience with Evita. In actuality, therefore, the Social Aid Foundation was, on the one hand, Evita's greatest act of vengeance against the now obsolete Sociedad de Beneficencia's 'haughty dowagers' and, on the other, a massively organized propaganda platform from which the beloved *Primera Dama* could launch herself forth into sainthood.

> The Señora's desk was set up under floodlights [John Dos Passos recorded] behind a big bronze oversize bust of some hero of Argentine independence… When she finally arrived the floodlights were turned on and there was a great rush of cameramen in the narrow room. Distinguished visitors were posed in an admiring group behind the Señora's handsome blonde head as she leaned over the desk to listen to the troubles of the poor women and their tear-stained children… When a delegation of businessmen appeared with a check in five figures for the Señora's Foundation all other business was suspended while the cameramen posed the group. The check had to appear in the photograph. The Señora's white hand was held out to receive it. The leader of the delegation was presenting it with a deferential bow.

Indeed, behind the façade of charity, when the women and their

weeping children had departed, '*Santa'* Evita would show herself as someone quite different. Dos Passos also recorded that 'with her secretaries and the government officials her manner was domineering, the manner of a rich hostess ordering the help about, but with the delegates it was level and sisterly.' So she hid behind two masks. One was cruel and one was kind. But the kindness was reserved solely for formal public appearances, while in private the political animal took precedence. In the words of journalist James Cameron: 'When I first met her in the plushy wonders of the world's most opulent Ministry of Employment, it was like looking into the eyes of Rita Hayworth and finding Aneurin Began looking out of them.' The radiance of those eyes, which gazed in a kindly manner from the city's hoardings, did not reflect the real, much harder, Evita.

> Perón was down to earth, cynical, realistic [said Sir John Balfour] and I can't say that when we were talking together *her* sentiments were exactly gentle and soft. At one moment she said to me – she was making up, incidentally, just before rising to her feet to make her after-luncheon speech – and she said to me, 'You know I love a fight. If there weren't a fight I'd have to invent one. And if it hadn't been for Perón' – who had been sitting beside her and she gave him a nudge as she said this – 'I would have been the revolutionary out of the barracks, stringing all the Oligarchs up by the neck.'

Nevertheless, if Evita was a ruthless woman, her followers were now looking up to her as the true Saint Evita and could not keep her name from their lips. Señor A. F. Cafeiro, a junior minister in Perón's government, was of the opinion that Evita's greatest tactic was the way she actually mixed with the people, even going out into the streets to shake their hands and kiss their babies and give them pesos. He says:

> Eva had no ideological formation. Perón spoke to the people from the balconies of the government house; she spoke to the people in the hospitals, in the schools. She was a revolutionary. She had no ideological idea… she did it in the facts. In a way she was a myth. She created a character, but she lived that

> character; she lived it sincerely. As a person she had also a strong personality… people loved her or hated her.

The people who most hated her were the people she most hated: the Oligarchs, the wealthy (‘Shall we burn down the Barrio Norte?’ she would shriek at the crowds of *descamisados*. ‘Shall I give you fire?’), particularly the women who, in the safety of their *porteno* drawing rooms, would talk about the ‘little whore’, about her ridiculous Social Aid Foundation, about how she had destroyed the Sociedad de Beneficencia and now dispensed all the charity whilst flaunting her own illicitly acquired riches.

Clearly they had a point. Evita’s hypocrisy was blatant. Only the rich could have eyes and ears close enough to the Social Aid Foundation to know what was happening to the contributions. It was the rich who knew that Evita had a Swiss bank account, that she had a warehouse in Buenos Aires bulging with fashionable clothes, that while she built wastefully expensive (and often useless) homes for indigent mothers and working girls, she was also one of the country’s biggest property holders and the boss of six Buenos Aires newspapers, the radio station El Mundo, and at least two manufacturing plants.

‘Suffer little children to come unto me,’ Evita had proclaimed publicly – again comparing herself to Christ – and, while the worshipful *descamisados* were repeatedly informed of her ridiculous Children’s Village (a compound of small-scale houses, a church, bank, school, jail, luxurious dormitories, dining rooms, playrooms and accommodations for hundreds of children), yes, while the *descamisados* were being reduced to tears by the saintliness of this offering, only the wealthy knew that Evita was spending thousands of pesos per annum on her wardrobe, that she shared five luxurious homes with Perón, that she gave wealth and power to the other members of her bastard family, and that, most damning of all, the numerous properties she had acquired had been bought as ‘investments’ with some of the millions of pesos pouring into her Social Aid Foundation.

Yet Evita got away with it. She poured out her love. On the radio, on posters, on the many billboards of the city, this great love of Evita’s was advertized. When Evita walked through the streets of the city, her most fanatical admirers would strew roses for her to walk on and then throw

themselves onto their knees when she passed. Women would kiss her hands and weep. Men would bow their heads and tremble. They would doubtless have read, or heard on the radio, about the infinite humility of their *Santa* Evita: about how she tended the poor, about how she suffered the sick, about how she rose at dawn and never slept before the early morning hours, working herself to exhaustion for her beloved people. Her glittering jewelery would not offend them. Her mink stoles would simply dazzle them. For indeed, were not these riches no more than an indication of what the poor would one day have for themselves? Most certainly they loved Evita. She remained at heart a *descamisado*. Had they not read in her newspapers and been informed by her radio stations of how cruelly austere her childhood had been? Of how she would cook her own *empanadas* in her own old-fashioned oven and serve visitors with humble *maté*? Evita came from a pampas farm. She was one of the poor. She wore the splendour of the Oligarchs only as an indication of what would soon come to the shirtless ones. *Santa* Evita! *La Dama de la Esperanza*! Little Eva, *Saint* Evita, was irresistible.

Then, of course, there was how she looked. Her beauty denied all evil. First a chubby-faced girl, then a coldly seductive Lana Turner, she now possessed the pale, austere beauty of a heavily burdened, deeply responsible Grace Kelly. There is dignity to her face, yet her crimson lips hint at carnality. The carnality and the dignity combined turn her into a common dream. Those lips had to know fellatio. (So say the gauchos with admiration.) Those dark eyes had to know what suffering meant. (So sob the wives of the gauchos.) Thus her beauty speaks to all and bridges two worlds. On the one hand is the flesh that learnt its hard lessons in the Avenida Corrientes where a starlet must find fame on her back; on the other is that nobility, that transcendent, outpouring love that turns the most sinful woman into a saint. Evita was now a saint. She had paid her dues and emerged triumphant. She was every poor farm girl, every struggling *descamisado*'s daughter, who had struggled from obscurity to success. The Argentinians admired that.

> She was by any standards a very extraordinary woman [says Sir John Balfour]. If you think of Argentina, and indeed Latin America, as a man-dominated part of the world, there was this woman who was playing a very great role; and of course she

> aroused very different feelings in the people with whom she lived. The Oligarchs, as she called the well-to-do and privileged people, hated her; they looked upon her as a ruthless adventuress. The masses of people, on the other hand – at any rate for a large part of the time I was there – worshipped her. They looked upon her as a lady bountiful who was disposing from Heaven.

Indeed, the *descamisados* had good reason to love *la Dama de la Esperanza*. She had defeated the Oligarchy, brought the employers to heel, and raised immeasurably the living standards of the workers. For this the Argentine male could only adore her. As for the long-suppressed Argentinian women, Evita had given them the right to vote, put through an amendment whereby they would not have to show their ages in registration polls, set up homes for unmarried working girls, and stimulated the idea of women in careers – all this in a country where women had never had a role before. In doing this, she had altered for all time the balance between the sexes in Argentina and throughout Latin America.

She also gathered further massive support for herself. In fact, so strong was the additional support of the mass of women in Argentina that some, including Juan Perón, felt that if he were to die, a popular vote of all Argentine men *and* women would ensure Evita's succession to the Presidency.

Santa Evita was now more popular than Juan Perón.

Chapter Thirteen

Evita's popularity was bought at the expense of the whole country's economy. During Perón's first year as President, he and Evita had managed to spend the whole of Argentina's war profits from meat, wheat and maize as well as running the country into a £500 million debt. Since then, there had been nothing but further reckless spending. During the next three years another £250 million in assets in the US were squandered and £180 million in gold in the Central Bank vaults had been reduced to a mere twenty million.

Increasing the debts was the fact that the railways taken over from the British in 1948 were losing money at the rate of £50 million a year and that the huge telephone system bought from the Americans in 1946 for £22 million was losing at the rate of £9 million a year. US firms engaged in the meat-packing industry, previously one of the most prosperous in Argentina, were nearly bankrupt. Many other foreign businesses had been forced to close, including branch plants of the American Ford and General Motors companies. Inflation was rampant. The value of the peso had been halved. Money was pouring from the printing presses, the granaries were full of unsold maize, and £20 million worth of linseed oil just could not be sold. In a desperate attempt to save the worsening situation, Perón had sacked Miguel Miranda and appointed three young men, all under forty, to restore some semblance of order out of the chaos into which the Argentine economy had sunk.

While much of the blame for this can be laid at the doorstep of the grafting and inefficient Perón, undoubtedly a lot of it was due to Evita and her extravagant attempts to buy popularity – and this was starting to backfire on her in other ways. Government officials and military officers were resentful of Evita's constant interference in their affairs and very worried by the fact that she had usurped her husband's position and was surreptitiously running the whole country. Their attitude was probably best summed up by the opposition who, during the 1948 debate that resulted in the expulsion of the Radical Party Deputy Ernesto Sammartino for criticizing Perón, said that they would not 'dance to the tune of Madam Pompadour' and charged the majority party with taking orders in the form of 'perfumed notes from the boudoir'. They were also aware that Evita, in a bid to strengthen her own position, had put her dissolute brother Juan Duarte into a top post in Perón's Secretariat; had made her eldest sister Elisa practically the political boss of Junin Province; had given the husbands of two of her other two sisters lucrative political appointments; and had, until Perón replaced them both, made her mother's old friend Enrique Nicolini head of the vital Posts, Telegraphs and Radio Department, and given another old friend, the incompetent Miguel Miranda, the job of sorting out the whole economy.

For many, the fact that Perón had actually replaced both these old friends of Evita's was a sign that a rift was growing between them. It was felt that the famous lovers were not only creating their own over-lapping

administrations but were secretly fighting it out with each other in a battle for control of the strongest, most powerful country in Latin America. While this may or may not have been true, Perón's fellow party members and senior army officers were worried because, where power had made Perón more cautious, it had made Evita even more reckless. 'All or nothing is my motto,' Evita had told her intimates, echoing Adolf Hitler. 'And if I go down, look out for the crash. There won't be anybody left standing.'

A further worry to the army officers – who were increasingly looking upon Perón as a deluded victim of Evita's wiles – was that in the division of authority Evita had managed to secure a decided advantage by taking control of what the Argentinians could publicly read, hear, see and, therefore, think. Newspapers and radio were now under her personal control. The Argentine film industry, largest in the Spanish-speaking world, had to submit every script for her approval, as did the theater. Against this blanket control of, and attention given to, the public, Perón was beginning to seem relatively nebulous. Indeed, cultivating an air of Olympian detachment, he was moving farther away from the daily chores of running the country and letting Evita follow through on his decisions. How much these decisions were his own and how much born from Evita's prompting was another question that haunted the military.

It was the belief of the army officers that many of Argentina's current problems had come about because Evita's activities offended tradition, made too many enemies, and were ultimately undermining the Perón government. The army was also firmly convinced that Evita was at the center of the anti-US feelings that were currently prevalent, at a time when the Argentine needed US friendship and help. And the senior army officers, all traditionalists, as Perón had been, felt that Evita, an ambitious commoner, was antipathetic to all that they stood for.

As far as the army was concerned, Evita had traded on sex appeal, cheap emotionalism and patriotic jingoism to back her intuitive but often wayward emotional flair. It was also felt by her more nervous opponents that Evita could 'out-talk, out-coax and out-manoeuvre' Perón and that she was gradually bewitching him into ruination.

Such fears sprang directly from the differences between Perón and *campañera* Evita. Perón, a military strategist, liked to plan every detail; Evita

acted on the spur of the moment. Perón, a born politician, would pragmatically make peace with former enemies if he felt that it would benefit the government; Evita, on the other hand, a mere woman of the streets, could never forgive anyone who had snubbed or crossed her, no matter the cost to the government.

Clearly these differences were crucial and, in the eyes of the army officers, gradually leading to the fall of the country. They were all too aware of the fact that while Perón had been willing to cooperate with the US for the good of Argentina, Evita was against it on the simple, childish principle that Hollywood had rejected her as an actress. It was also noted that Evita, still raging over her rejection by Buckingham Palace during her Rainbow Tour, had encouraged the Argentine men-of-war to dispute the Antarctic territories with Britain. She had also encouraged her servile friend Miguel Miranda to raise the price of Britain's beef to intolerable levels when Perón, who feared the dislocation of his country's traditional economy, had wanted a truce in the Antarctic tussle.

The fact that Perón had finally replaced both Miguel Miranda and Evita's Enrique Nicolini with his own men was a sign to the army that he was at least worried about Evita overreaching herself. Yet the army remained anxious because it believed that while Perón was still motivated by deeply rooted, totalitarian convictions (acquired through the army and his admiration for Mussolini), plus a desire for a place in history as Argentina's Man of Destiny, Evita was driven by more elemental, therefore destructive, urges: the desire for respectability, wealth, absolute power and, clearly, revenge.

The army finally became convinced of Evita's insatiable lust for power and of Perón's gradual domination by her when, in early 1951, he suggested that she be put up as a candidate for the Vice-Presidency.

By now, Perón, fifty-three years old, was looking ill and exhausted, his face blotched by eczema, and he was smoking two packs of cigarets a day. Evita, on the other hand, had never been so relentless in pursuing what she wanted and seemed illuminated from within by the flame of her own burning ambition. To the army, therefore, this latest announcement by Perón was a sign that Evita had to be stopped.

(It is worth noting at this juncture that to the army the very thought of a female Vice-President was abhorrent and ran counter to the whole history and

tradition of the Argentine. It is also worth pointing out that even if Evita had been an exemplary and honest political figure – which she was not – the very fact that she was a woman would have ensured the army's firm resistance. Argentina was a *man's* country and Evita's liberation of women was something for which the army, the seat of tradition, would never forgive her.)

Evita's plan, which was to seek out the VicePresidency in the 1952 election on the ticket with Perón, was based on the knowledge that of Perón's three main sources of power – the Women's Party, the General Confederation of Labor, and the Perónists – the last was the weakest in voting power while the first two were now directly controlled by herself. Indeed, it was Evita's public identification with the mass of Argentine women that had immeasurably strengthened her position and made her stronger than Perón.

> I am only a humble woman belonging to a vast nation… A woman the same as millions of others in the world. God chose me and put me here, beside the leader of the world: Perón. Why was I chosen and not someone else? I don't know. I only think of myself as the humble representative of the women in the country. I feel that, like them, I am at the heart of a home… the fortunate home that is my Fatherland which Perón is leading to its highest peak of fulfilment… Within the great home of the Fatherland, I am exactly the same as any other woman in any of the numerous homes in our nation. Like her, I am, in the final reckoning, a woman.

An early sign of the Vice-Presidency bid was when, following Evita's visit to Perón with the leaders of the Women's Party, the President, in naming the Women's Party, the General Confederation of Labor and the Perónists as his three major assets, had pointedly omitted any reference to the army, which he was supposed to represent. This was immediately noted by political observers and interpreted, correctly, as an open invitation to nominate Evita for the Vice-Presidential candidacy.

Evita's ruthlessness had grown in direct proportion to her reputation as a saint and nowhere was this more evident than in her attempts to clear the decks of all possible rivals to herself for the Vice-Presidency.

The first victim was Colonel Juan Mercante, an old friend of Perón's and a man who, as Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, was entitled to regard himself as the natural successor to the Vice-President. One evening, when the colonel was en route from La Plata to Buenos Aires in response to a summons from Perón, his car had a collision with a hit-and-run driver. Mercante, who was lucky to have escaped with his life, emerged from the 'accident' a very frightened man. Shortly afterward, he announced that he would not be standing for the VicePresidency.

Another possible contender was Colonel Filomeno Velazco, Chief of Federal Police. Strangely, after announcing that he was going to run in the forthcoming elections, he, like Colonel Mercante, received a call from President Perón, summoning him to come to Buenos Aires for an unspecified purpose. Aware of what had happened to Colonel Mercante, Velazco pleaded illness, remained in Corrientes Province, and displayed no further ambitions regarding the Vice-Presidency.

With the competition removed from the political arena, Evita now swung her massive propaganda machinery into action. Apart from the usual electioneering tactics, such as supporters wearing shirts and pullovers inscribed with 'Perón Achieves!' and 'Evita Dignifies!', other supporters involving themselves in highly publicized competitions and stunts, and the Evita-controlled radio and press pouring out their customary lies, Evita also sank to offering bicycles, dolls and other toys to children as an inducement to their parents to visit the capital for demonstrations in a Buenos Aires park. So great were the crowds that many did not get to within a quarter-mile of the park, thousands returned home with empty hands and wet eyes, and beneath the huge banners emblazoned with 'Suffer little children to come unto me' two children were knocked down and trampled to death. Evita also reverted to her 1945 trick of supplying free transport, food and drink to encourage thousands more to her demonstrations. (All opposition attempts to do the same were blocked.) Last but by no means least, the new edition of Argentina's *Who's Who*, in a biography dictated by the thirty-two year old Evita, gave her age as twenty-nine – a year less than the age set by the constitution for candidates for the VicePresidency. In the event, Evita's combination of vanity and cunning contributed to her first major disaster.

As an inducement for a popular demonstration for her nomination on

August 22, 1951, Evita had planned to gather together at least two and a half million supporters in the vast Plaza Moreno on Avenida 9 de Julio, most of whom were to be drilled in shouting and pleading for her to accept the Vice-Presidency. Timed to run from Thursday morning to Saturday night, the spectacular show turned out to be a spectacular disaster.

Earlier that week, the opposition learned of Evita's false entry in the Argentine *Who's Who* and used it to publicly flay her and make a fool of her, either castigating her for blatant dishonesty or making jokes about her 'feminine' vanity. They also made it clear that the army had refused to accept her nomination. The ploy worked. Evita's popularity had already been waning because of the punitive measures she had introduced in order to bolster an economy being drained by her own 'charitable' enterprises. Realizing that they were now being made to pay for the many benefits she had given them, the *descamisados* were beginning to wonder where it all might end. Thus, when they learned that Evita had lied about her age and, also, that the army was now resolutely against her, they failed to give her the support she had expected.

Only one-tenth of the anticipated number turned out for the meeting in the Plaza Moreno and most of the few who came did not even stay long enough to hear Evita stumbling through the farce of 'bowing to the will of the people' and accepting the nomination. The planned threeday fiesta had to be cancelled. Evita abruptly fled from the Plaza, the scene of her humiliation, and within hours there was widespread speculation that she might not run at all.

This was true. Shocked by the knowledge of her diminishing popularity, humiliated that her real age had been revealed by the opposition, and finally thwarted by the army's refusal to accept her nomination, Evita was forced to accept her first defeat.

On September 2, eleven days after the nightmarish affair, Evita, dressed in a severe black suit and a highnecked black blouse, spoke on the radio, her voice trembling and hoarse, torn by the barbs of its own dishonesty.

> I want to communicate an irrevocable and definite decision to my people, a decision I have taken by myself, to resign the noted honor given to me by the open forum of the twenty-

> second. Already, on that memorable afternoon, I realized that I should not change the post I already held with the Perónist movement for any other. I have only one great personal ambition; that is, when history writes its glorious chapter on Perón, for it to be said in a small footnote: 'Beside him was a woman who dedicated her whole time to expressing the hopes of the people to General Perón, who then converted them into reality, and that this woman was known, caressingly, as Evita.

And Evita was dying.

Chapter Fourteen

In January 1951, when Evita was operated on for appendicitis, the surgeons had seen what they suspected was the beginning of cancer. Later, during that fateful September, Evita's Secretariat announced that she was suffering from 'influenza'. Later still, it was announced that she was to be operated on for 'pernicious anaemia', an illness for which there was then no known operation. What was *not* announced was that in October Dr Abel Carcano, the leading Argentine cancer specialist, flew to Evita's despised United States of America to bring back Dr George Pack, famed cancer surgeon of New York's Memorial Hospital. On November 4, after examination by Dr Pack, Evita was admitted to the Polyclinico Presidente Perón. Two days later, news bulletins announced that she'd had surgery for the removal of a uterine growth.

In fact, she was dying from cancer of the uterus, haemorrhaging through the vagina, and already starting to waste away.

The waning of Evita's popularity was obviously tied to the waning of the country's economic stability. Yet, if the healthy have faults, the dying rest in renewed purity and the news of Evita's illness would give her back her lost credibility. Over the past eight years, Evita had made many enemies and their dissatisfaction with her had recently spread even to her beloved *descamisados*. What had once been only rumors and gossip about her Social

Aid Foundation extravagances had turned into hard facts and much grumbling was going on amongst the 'shirtless ones'. Perhaps sensing this, Evita had long since dropped her flamboyant manner of dress and started appearing in more simple clothes, her long blonde hair pulled back tight around her sharp features to lend her a rather maternal look.

When her blatantly propagandist, autobiographical book, *La Razon di mi Vida* (*The Reason for my Life*), was published that year, it contained more than a dozen photographs of Evita in her jewelery and grossly expensive clothes; yet once the book was issued, Evita, clearly realizing that this was no longer the politically correct image, had the first edition withdrawn and a new edition published, with the original photos removed and the new ones showing her in dark, severe suits, moving about in the homes, shops and factories of the workers. This gesture, however, came too late. Well before her disastrous bid for the Vice-Presidency, crude posters had begun to appear on the billboards of Buenos Aires depicting her standing nude with crowds of little men marching between her legs – a reminder of her past as a 'little whore', of her megalomaniacal ambitions, and of the fact that even the *descamisados* were becoming disillusioned.

Amongst the items that had led to the waning of Evita's once shining image was the fact that increasingly she had become exposed as Perón's hatchet woman. If Perón wanted someone removed from the political scene (or from the streets), it was Evita who arranged to have it done. Indeed, in Uruguay, the customary first stop for the exiles who got away alive from Perón's dangerous Argentina, Evita was now known as 'Pocahontas' for her acknowledged ability with the tomahawk. This image, which contrasted violently with Evita's other image as a saint, was compounded by the massive expansion of Perón's Secret Service and by the increasing number of accusations of torture by members of his staff.

Lisandfo Saldivar, one of the highest-paid members of Evita's Ministry of Labor and Welfare, was tried and, naturally, acquitted three times of charges of homicide. Martinez, the Chief of Police, who had been denounced by US Ambassador Spruille Braden, was accused by the exiled author Ernesto Sammartino of torturing to death Carlos Aguirre, friend of the leading union man Cipriano Reyes; Sammartino added that Reyes himself (once a Perón ally) had become a mere wreck of a man as the result of torture

he had undergone repeatedly in a Perónist prison after he had shown ‘disrespect’ to Perón. And, since Evita covered up and protected her husband from such charges, her own reputation was greatly tainted.

Another black mark against Evita – even apart from the growing rumors of deliberate mishandling of the Foundation’s funds – was her penchant for looking after her relatives at the expense of the country. After Evita’s succession to power, her sister Elisa, who had no political or administrative experience of any kind, was made political boss of the Province of Junin; while her husband, Alfredo Arrieta, rose quickly from nowhere to become a member of the Argentine Senate. Dor Justo Rodriguez, husband to another of Evita’s sisters, Blanca, was highly publicized by the Eva Perón Publicity Office as the ‘coming’ judge of the Argentine courts and eventually became Minister of the Supreme Court of Argentina. Orlando Bertolini, whose only experience in politics was in operating the elevator in the Town Hall of Vincente Lopez, married Evita’s other sister, Erminda, and promptly became a director of both Argentine’s Customs Department and the government-operated fishing company, the Maritime Hunt. Finally, and most deplorable of all, Evita continued to protect, when not actually encouraging, her dissolute brother, Juan, and his various criminal activities. Noted especially at the time was the receipt of £1,150,000 from some Italian businessmen in return for letting them bring an aluminium factory into Argentina (Juan was placed temporarily under house arrest, but subsequently released) and the alleged favoritizm shown in the granting of import licences to certain US firms in return for considerable sums of money.

Nevertheless, with the news of Evita’s illness, a wave of love and sympathy swept the nation. Much of this was due to the religious romanticizm of the Argentinians, to the fact that they could no longer think of Evita as anyone other than *Santa* Evita, and to the fact that Evita had, over the past year, been displaying an extraordinary, passionate and emotion-arousing conviction about the glory of the Peróns and Argentina.

Some time between 1947 and 1949, Evita started believing her own propaganda. Certainly, as early as 1947, she was publicly comparing her husband to Caesar, Alexander the Great and Napoleon. Indeed, her fervour was such that she could later write without a trace of irony: ‘Nobody, absolutely nobody in the course of history has received such delirious

affection from their people as Perón has done… If anyone has, then no one has known how to use it for the happiness of their people, as he has.'

By 1949 her delusions of grandeur had turned into religious conviction and she was telling a meeting of newly enfranchized female political leaders of Argentina that it would not surprise her if one day they should 'wake up to find that Perón had disappeared from the earth, and thus the Divine Visitation will be over.' Increasingly convinced that Perón's spiritual stature (therefore her own) was positively god-like, she was soon implying, by way of soothing the troubled Catholic Church, that if Perón was not a god he was at least guided by 'Holy Inspiration'. Statements of this kind became commonplace until, her deluded dreams getting the better of her, at a huge demonstration in the Buenos Aires football stadium, she blasphemed in the eyes of the church with a particularly melodramatic piece of rhetoric.

'Perón is the air we breathe!' she shrieked into her microphone. 'Perón is our sun! Perón is our life! The humble people, my General, have come here to prove, as they have always done, that the miracle which happened two thousand years ago is occurring again!'

Fantasy and fact were now one and indivisible. The character she had created was taking her over, and she, a failed actress, was now playing the role of her life.

'The role of Eva Perón seems easy to me,' she wrote. 'And that's not surprising. Isn't it always much easier to play a theatrical role than to live in reality? I'm quite sure that in my case, as Eva Perón, I'm playing a traditional role which many women have played throughout the years.'

So much for little Eva, the housewife. As for Evita, the beloved *Santa* Evita: 'As Evita, I'm living out a reality which perhaps no other woman has experienced in the history of humanity.'

Yes, in discarding the Christian Dior gowns and mink sables and diamonds, in wearing the clothes of a plain woman and binding her blonde hair behind her head like a matron, she was not becoming modest or accepting her age, but was, instead, displaying a growing infatuation with herself – or with that image of herself as a saint bringing God to the people. If Perón was God, Evita sat at His right hand, the living link between Him and His shirtless ones, the heart and soul of the country.

> I shall never forget that I was once, and that I still am, a swallow. If I fly higher, it's thanks to him. If I move among the clouds, it's thanks to him. If my wings sometimes almost touch Heaven, it's thanks to him. If I see clearly who my people are, and if I love them and feel their affection caressing my name, it is only through him… I held the lamp that lighted his darkness; I kept it burning as best I knew how, guarding his flank with my love and faith.

To the *descamisados* such sentiments had been irresistible, and now, with the news of Evita's mortal illness, they would return to consume them. In that bleak year of 1952, while Evita lay on her sickbed, as she haemorrhaged from the vagina and the flesh shrank from her bones, the lost love of the shirtless ones welled up again and they were blinded by grief. Now the billboards in Buenos Aires, which had formerly shown a crimson-lipped Eva, the smiling star of their collective fantasies, were displaying a new Evita, a more spiritual, austere beauty: her blonde hair pulled tight behind her small head; her face pale, almost ethereal; her lips now unpainted; her brown eyes imbued with tragic understanding, gazing down forgivingly upon her flock.

Doubtless she had trouble believing in the reality of it; was driven to believe that she could defeat the cancer and live on to fight another day. For indeed, how could she die? Her work was not yet finished. Touched by glory and the conviction of her own eternal worth, she would not be able to accept that it must finally end.

Thus, she continued working. She worked less, but she kept going. She made occasional forays into the harsh light of day, looking wasted and pale and slightly haunted, to talk, to croak, to her people, then she was carried back to her dark room and wrapped up in her bed, racked by pain and exhausted. Still she would not accept it. It could not be happening to her. Had she not come from obscurity, from ignorance and humiliation, to climb to the unassailable heights, to be supreme, inviolate?

> Until I die [she wrote] I want to be able to open new horizons and paths to my poor people, my workers, and to my women. I

> know that, like any other woman, I am stronger than I seem, and am healthier than the doctors believe. Like them, I am prepared to continue struggling for happiness at home. I am not aiming at anything other than this happiness! This is my vocation and my destiny. This is my mission. Like any other woman in the country, I want to fulfil it right up to the end. Perhaps one day, when I am definitely dying…

But dying she was. Her draining blood told the tale. She was finally compelled to stay in her bed and vote for Perón from there. After this, she had no choice. She simply had to accept it. She was drugged and yet the pain would not leave her; it bit and it tore. Doubtless, her religion helped her. She was still a practising Catholic. She had God on the one hand and her 'shirtless ones' on the other, and she would live on as *Santa* Evita, the sanctified myth. She believed in it wholly now. It was probably what sustained her. With her dark eyes burning out of that frightening skeleton's head, she perceived a world kneeling in worship to her own blinding image… Little Eva. *Santa* Evita… She wept for joy and was comforted.

How did Evita die? Reportedly with great courage. It was the courage of a growing, megalomaniacal belief in her own spiritual affinity with Argentina. Not for nothing had the people said that in bedding down with Perón, Evita had been bedding down with the whole nation. It had been suggested that she was sexless, that her orgasms were found in power, that her love affair with Perón was a love affair with the whole of the Argentine. Now Evita was proving it – broadcasting from her deathbed. As her face shrank, her brown eyes grew enormous and held a fierce luminosity.

'Today,' she had said in October 1951, 'I have left my sickbed to pay a debt of gratitude to Perón and to the workers. I do not care if I have to part with pieces of my life to pay for it.'

Who could resist such a performance? Her death could only ennoble her. And, if she had been ill in October, she was much worse the following year, in June 1952, when Perón was sworn in as President for the second time. Could Evita disappoint her subjects? Was she not a bridge from them to Perón? So now Evita had to go on to reaffirm her own sanctity, to appear

before the public for the very last time, and she did so heavily sedated, looking no more than a wraith. She fainted twice and was then carried away and was not seen again.

In the final month of Evita's life, which was spent entirely in her sickroom, Argentina scrambled to pour new honors upon her. While hearing fifty-nine speeches of eulogy, Congress officially made her 'Spiritual Chief of the Nation', ordered the construction of a huge monument in downtown Buenos Aires, and conferred on her the 753diamond Collar of the Order of the Liberator. Prayers for her recovery were offered night and day. However, a series of crises carried her lower and lower, until, towards the end, she weighed less than eighty pounds. 'I am too little for so much pain!' she cried. Finally, when ever larger injections of morphine threatened to kill her, surgeons severed some brain nerves to reduce the pain. Meanwhile, Perónist fanaticizm reached such a pitch that sobbing women crawled repeatedly around the Presidential mansion on their hands and knees.

On July 9, 1952, President Perón hurried away from the Independence Day parade, refusing to remain for the scheduled ceremony of lowering the flag, in order to be by the bedside of his dying wife. Ten days later, at 6.30 p.m., the government's Bureau of Information interrupted radio programs on all Argentine stations to broadcast a bulletin which said: 'The state of health of Señora Perón declined noticeably this afternoon.' Police cordons were thrown around the President's residence and traffic was detoured within two blocks of the house. Finally, on July 26 at 9.42 p.m., all radio stations interrupted their programs to report: 'The Sub-Secretariat of Information fulfils the very sad duty of announcing that at 8.25 o'clock, Señora Eva Peron, the Spiritual Chief of the Nation, passed away.' The announcement was followed by religious music.

At the bedside when Evita died were President Perón and a dozen relatives and close friends, including her mother, Señora Juana Ibarguren de Duarte; her three sisters, Elisa Duarte de Arrieta, Blanca Duarte de Alvarez, and Erminda Duarte de Bertolini; her brother Juan Duarte; the governor of Buenos Aires, Carlos Aloe; Minister of Communications, Oscar Nicolini; Minister of Technical Affairs, Ramon Subiza; the Under-Secretary of Press, Raul Apoldi; and Señora Perón's personal secretary, Atilio Renzi.

Outside the residence, thousands of *descamisados* had gathered to

resurrect and deify the legend of Evita.

Like Christ, she had died at the age of thirty-three.

Part Three:
Resurrection and Immortality

Suffer little children to come unto me. -Evita

Chapter Fifteen

On September 2, 1971, a hearse belonging to an Italian undertaker's firm left Milan for Madrid. The funeral company had been contracted to transport to Spain the body of a woman. According to her documents she was Maria Maggi de Magistris, born in Dalmine, Italy, died in Rosario, Argentina, February 23, 1951.

The contract had been drawn up by a man who said he was the dead woman's brother, Carlos, and that he was carrying out his mother's last wish to have the body buried with her in a grave in Madrid. The driver's name was Roberto Germani and only much later did he discover whose body he had actually transported to Madrid.

With Carlos Maggi (actually the Argentine intelligence officer, Hector Cabanillas) beside him, Germani headed for the French border. Since the Argentine authorities had secured the cooperation of the Italian, French and Spanish governments, there were no searches or delays at customs posts. Once inside France, however, the hearse was escorted by motorized *gendarmes* as it raced towards Spain. The hearse spent one night in a Perpignan garage, then early next morning it was driven across the Spanish frontier, where it was escorted by two carloads of Spanish police on the final 460-mile lap to Madrid. The cavalcade drove to the Calle de Navalmanzano

in Madrid's most elegant suburb, Puerta de Hierro, and stopped at number six, a two-and-a-half-storey, gabled house of modern design, standing in spacious grounds behind a screen of tall cypress trees. Parked outside, as it was every day and night, was a jeep filled with uniformed policemen. Two plainclothes policemen of the political brigade, both wearing dark glasses, strolled up and down the pavement in front of the house.

Waiting on the steps were the 70-year-old Juan Perón, his 39-year-old wife, Isabel, secretary Lopez Rega, Perón's personal representative, Jorge Paladino, and Brigadier Jorge Rojas Silveyra, Ambassador in Madrid.

Under the watchful eyes of the security men, the coffin was removed from the hearse, carried into the house, placed on the dining-room table, and then, in an 'eerie silence', prised open.

'I went three times to look at Evita,' Perón had written fifteen years previously. 'The doors… were like the gates of eternity.'

Now, standing beside his third wife, Isabel (not counting the reported marriage to 19-year-old Laura de Solar), and gazing down at the face he had not seen for so long, Juan Domingo Perón openly wept.

'She is not dead,' he said of Evita. 'She is sleeping – only sleeping!'

The body was quickly removed to a basement room where, the following Sunday, it was examined by Dr Pedro Ara, the eminent pathologist and mortician who had originally embalmed it. Dr Ara, a small, bald Spaniard who traveled with the guillotined head of a Creole beggar in his baggage, was much in demand with the aristocracy for his skill in transforming the dead into 'permanent sculptures'. Reportedly, he had studied the extraordinary embalming process employed on Lenin and had, for a fee of £100,000, taken a year doing the same to Evita.

First, he had replaced her blood with alcohol, later with glycerine of a temperature of sixty degrees Celsius, pumped in through the heel and an ear. Reduced to normal temperature, the glycerine solidified, leaving the body semi-embalmed, its organs and skin intact, the skin now having an unusual elasticity. Finally, the body was dehydrated and immersed in unspecified chemicals. After a year the skin took on a near transparency, a pale, tranquil beauty, though the corpse itself had been reduced in size to that of a twelve-year-old girl.

Examination of the corpse now revealed that both knees had been

broken; the chest was marked with half a dozen perforations and a wide cut near the throat; the nose was broken; cuts were visible on the left ribs, forehead and left cheek, and one of her thumbs was missing. Evita's blonde hair had been cut off at the neck and her shroud was in tatters.

Washed, repaired and clad in a fresh white shroud sewn by Evita's sisters, Elisa and Blanca, the body was placed in a new blue-silk-lined oak coffin. According to unsubstantiated reports, Perón kept the coffin on the dining table for many months in order to weep over the corpse every day. More likely is that the coffin was taken upstairs, where it was securely locked up in a small room under the eaves. There it was to remain until the people called Perón back to Argentina.

Evita had been missing for seventeen years.

Chapter Sixteen

When, in 1955, the revolution had driven Perón into exile, his immediate successor, General Lonardi, realized that possession of Evita's body by one or other of the rival factions could become an inflammatory issue. The deposed Perón, now plotting relentlessly in Madrid, had begun making demands to have Evita's body shipped to him, but the new President, obviously playing for time, refused all such requests, also refused the Duarte family, and deliberately appointed a government team to 'determine the authenticity' of the corpse. A thumb was duly amputated and its print examined. Evita's identity was confirmed. Further requests from the distant Juan Perón were ignored.

On November 19, a mere four months after he had taken office, General Lonardi was ousted by General Pedro Aramburu and Evita was kidnapped from her resting place in Room 63 in CGT headquarters in the Calle Azopardo. In command of this operation was Colonel Carlos Eugenio de Moori Koenig, head of military intelligence and a bitter enemy of Perón, who had previously demoted him. Also in the room at the time was the pathologist and mortician, Dr Ara, who had been making one of his regular inspections

of the corpse. Unable to challenge the authority of Colonel Koenig, nor that of the armed soldiers around him, Dr Ara had no choice but to let them remove the body to ‘ensure that it gets a decent burial’. Subsequently, the corpse was dumped in a cut-price coffin, slung into the back of an army truck, and driven off into the night.

The body was taken to a warehouse near Military Intelligence headquarters, where it remained for a further two months, its whereabouts kept secret. Then, on January 5, 1956, it was moved again, first to one place, then to another, until eventually, after five stops, it was transferred to a packing case and delivered to the apartment of Koenig’s deputy, Antonio Arandia.

Evita’s influence, even in death, proved destructive again.

News of the ‘kidnapping’ and subsequent disappearance of Evita’s body had aroused faithful Perónists to a howling fury. As wild rumors swept the country (Evita had been cremated; her body had been thrown in the Plata River; it had been stolen by Perón and was presently with him in Uruguay; it was in the crypts of the Duarte or Perón families), the Perónists searched through Buenos Aires, scouring the streets for news of Evita’s whereabouts.

As many of the more fanatical Perónists were armed, Major Arandia took to sleeping with a pistol under his pillow. One night, disturbed by unfamiliar noises and not knowing that his pregnant wife had gone to the bathroom, he saw a shadow in the bedroom doorway, fired twice and killed his wife outright.

Major Arandia’s wife was duly buried and Evita was moved once more, this time to the fourth floor of the Military Intelligence headquarters. Still in the packing crate, she was stacked amongst other packing crates, all labeled as holding radio sets, and left there while Koenig flew off to Chile to propose handing over the body to Evita’s mother.

This plan did not go ahead. In June, Koenig was replaced by the head of President Aramburu’s Secret Service, Colonel Hector Cabanillas, who soon discovered the packing crate on the fourth floor. Informing President Aramburu of this, he was told by the President to arrange a Christian burial.

As Evita’s presence in the capital might further inflame the Perónists, Colonel Cabanillas decided against burying her there. Instead, he had a lot of identical coffins made. One of these contained Evita’s corpse; the others were

filled with lead the weight of a medium-sized woman. (According to an Argentine bestselling *roman-à-clef*, *Santa Evita*, by Tomas Eloy Martinez, the coffins contained several identical replicas of the corpse, sculpted from wax and vinyl. However, no proof for this claim has been offered and it seems highly unlikely.) That September, the various coffins were taken from Argentina by plane and by ship, each coffin bound for a different destination and each courier convinced that he alone was about to bury the real Evita. Each of the coffins was duly buried while the real Evita was shipped to Bonn via Brussels. In Bonn, unknown to Ambassador Raoul de Labugle, it was stored for some months with the dead files and bric-a-brac in the Embassy storeroom. From there it went eventually, via Rome, to Milan.

When the body arrived in Milan, it was in the care of Giuseppina Airoldia, a lay sister of the Society of St. Paul. The sister had been told that the body was that of Maria Maggi de Magistris, an Italian widow who had died in Argentina with a last request to be interred in her homeland. So it was that under the name of Maria Maggi de Magistris, the corpse of Evita Perón was finally laid to rest in lot 86, garden 41 of the Musocco Cemetery in Milan.

It remained there, undisturbed, for fifteen years.

Meanwhile, as is customary with turbulent Argentina, a new President, General Alexjandro Lanusse, had assumed power. In April 1971, he announced that Evita's body should be found and returned to her ex-husband, Juan Perón. In order that this be expedited as quickly as possible, intelligence agents, policemen, priests and Perón's old associates were sent swarming across Argentina, Spain and Italy, questioning innumerable people and ransacking various vaults for old documents. All of this was in vain. Eventually, for reasons still not explained, President Lanusse decided to call on his personal confessor, Father Rotger.

It transpired that Father Rotger, with the assistance of members of the Vatican, had arranged the transfer of the body to Italy. Now in hiding in Madrid because of assassination threats by the same Perónist terrorists who had, a year earlier, murdered President Aramburu, Father Rotger was persuaded to emerge from hiding and fly to Milan for a meeting with Colonel Cabanillas. After telling Cabanillas where the body of Evita was actually buried, Father Rotger returned to Madrid and Colonel Cabanillas, alias Carlos

Maggi, went to the Milan cemetery armed with written permission to exhume his fictitious sister's remains.

Thus, on September 3, 1971, after a total of seventeen years, Juan Perón was reunited with Evita.

Chapter Seventeen

Evita's embalmed body had been returned to Señor Perón as a weak gesture of reconciliation by the military government in Argentina. The reason is that Perón, obsessed with regaining power in his country, had for years been controlling his loyal Perónists from his villa in the Puerta de Hierro in Madrid. Now affectionaly called *El Viejo* (the old man), Perón would chain-smoke cigarets, pore over the flood of political reports that came into the villa daily by special telex from Buenos Aires, six thousand miles away, and send commands back by the same telex. Bankrolled by the Justicialista Party in Argentina, Perónist labor unions and some wealthy sympathizers, Perón had for twelve years been able to destroy every successive government and poison every effort to restore Argentina's political and economic health. In doing so, he was hoping that Argentina's economy would continue to deteriorate and that nostalgia would then create an overwhelming urge for the Good Old Days of Perónist rule.

Remarkably, he was correct. The many young Perónists who demonstrated in the streets of Argentina could remember little, and doubtless cared even less, about the more revolting aspects of the Perón-Evita regime seventeen years earlier. Rather, what they remembered was the beauty of Evita, the generosity of Perón, the love and the support that both had shown for the 'shirtless ones'. Now Argentina was in chaos once more and its economy was nearly in ruins. Forgetting the Secret Service and the arbitrary arrests, the torture and the deportations and the general corruption of the Perón era, a good third of the country still yearned for the return of Perón and the feeling of grandeur that he and Evita had generated.

Gradually becoming aware of the fact that the insatiable Perón, with the aid of another young, attractive, show-business wife, was managing to disrupt

the government even from faraway Madrid, President Lieutenant-General Alexjandro Lanusse, who twenty years before had been sentenced to life imprisonment by Perón, was obliged to find and return Evita's body as a sign of good will. As if this were not bad enough, Lanusse, realizing that if Argentina could not be run by Perón it certainly could not be run *without* him, was forced to eat humble pie and allow Perón to revisit his home country.

The initial return of *El Viejo* was disappointing. On November 18, 1972, accompanied by dark, slim and remote Isabel, Perón stepped down from his Alitalia jet on to the tarmac of a rainswept Buenos Aires – not to the teeming thousands he had anticipated, but to a mere *three* thousand extremely wet Perónists. The lack of numbers was due to the fact that President Lanusse had cordoned off the airport for ten miles in every direction with 35,000 heavily armed troops and armored cars and tanks. Lanusse himself had cold-shouldered the arrival; and when some two thousand Perónists tried to storm the barricades, they were driven back with guns and tear-gas.

As Perón left the airport to be grilled by Brigadier General Martinez (subsequently receiving permission to hold the first of many rallies), sixty petty officers at a naval engineering school on the outskirts of Buenos Aires were surrounding the officers' quarters and demonstrating in favor of their former President and his enchanting Evita. After shooting two of the guards, the petty officers took four hostages and fled towards the airport, where they later surrendered.

Proof as this was that the fervour of certain Perónists had not dimmed, that fervour had not yet become the plague that would bring Perón back for good. After settling into his house in fashionable Vincente Lopez, Perón talked patiently and cleverly to the thousands who had daily massed outside, marshalled his forces for the electoral battle scheduled to take place in February the following year, and got down to the business of laying the groundwork for a national coalition to take over from Argentina's present military rulers. However, President Lanusse slyly scotched these plans by refusing to rescind an edict requiring Presidential candidates to have been in Argentina on August 25, thereby rendering Perón's candidacy obsolete before it even began. Shortly after, a defeated Perón returned to Madrid.

Yet Perón was not finished. Now, after eight presidents, most of them

military men, Argentina, an immense and fertile country, rich in grain and cattle, with a population of twenty-three million, was drifting into even worse chaos. The people were in despair, their pockets were empty, and they thought increasingly about Perón and Evita, who between them had sustained a vision of the country's potential greatness. Almost shirtless again, certainly impoverished and frightened, the *descamisados* remembered Perón's strength, his bold decisiveness, and Evita's abiding hatred of the rich. Religious, superstitious, they also thought of Evita's body, which reportedly, after twenty years, had not decomposed. And suddenly, not surprisingly, it all happened again: everyone was a Perónist.

Once more the billboards of Buenos Aires featured pictures of Evita as a wave of nostalgia swept through the Argentine.

As we have seen, in the first election of 1973 Perón was unable to stand because of the residency requirements imposed by the outgoing regime. However, with Perón controlling the whole show from his villa in Madrid, his colleague Hector Campora became the standard-bearer of Perónism and was elected President with 39% of the vote. This mission accomplished, on June 21 Perón flew back to Buenos Aires to repeat the Perón-Evita spectacle by preparing to run for President in the forthcoming September elections, with his wife, Isabel, aiming for the Vice-Presidency.

Perón's arrival in Buenos Aires was noteworthy for the customary violence that accompanied it. The Argentine army refused a request for President Campora to increase security precautions, so twenty people were killed and 380 injured when vicious gun-fights broke out at Ezeisa airport. There were no troops at the airport, there were very few police, and young Perónists were used to keep order.

Three weeks later, President Campora abruptly resigned and, in the elections of September 1973, Juan Domingo Perón was again voted in as President, with his wife, Isabel, as Vice-President.

Nine months later, on July 1, 1974, President Juan Domingo Perón died at the age of seventy-eight.

Chapter Eighteen

Isabel Perón was born Maria Estela Isabel Martinez on February 4, 1931, in the province of La Rioja, north-west of Buenos Aires. She was the youngest of six children of a bank executive who died in 1938 after moving with his family to the capital.

Isabel never went beyond the sixth grade at school, but she studied the piano and dancing, appeared in folkmusic groups and nightclub acts, and dreamed of becoming a star.

It was when she was performing as a dancer in a nightclub in Panama that Isabel met General Juan Domingo Perón, who was in exile after the military coup that had displaced him.

Isabel was thirty-five years younger than General Perón.

Isabel became his ‘companion’ and secretary, answering letters and typing the manuscripts of the numerous books that the former President was then writing.

Isabel accompanied Juan Perón when he moved from Panama to Venezuela, then to the Dominican Republic, and finally to Spain where, in 1961, he married her.

Isabel Peron became the first female President of Argentina.

Chapter Nineteen

The funeral of General Perón was delayed while hundreds of thousands of people filed past his open coffin in the Congress Building in Buenos Aires. Such scenes of mourning had not been witnessed in the Argentine capital since the death of Evita in July 1952.

Perón had left instructions that he was not to be embalmed and that his body was to be buried in his family tomb in the cemetery of Chacarita. Instead, he was returned to the chapel of his home in the suburb of Olivos, where the embalming process, already begun, was completed.

During his final nine months as President of Argentina, Perón, faced with a dangerous war between the left and right wings in his movement, had chosen the right. Subsequently, the young radicals and guerrilla groups, who

had demonstrated and fought in the streets for his return, became disillusioned. However, though Perón had betrayed the left, the memory of Evita lived on. In fact, it was the disappearance of her body that had helped to keep the Perónist myth alive and fire a new generation who had come to see in Perónism those virtues that had never existed in the first place. 'Evita lives! Evita lives!' they had chanted during the demonstrations. And so, beyond any shadow of doubt, it was the young revolutionary left wing's identification with the dead Evita that encouraged the new President, Isabel Perón, to bring Evita's body back to the Argentine.

In a radio and television address to the nation, announcing the return of Evita's body, Señora Perón called Evita 'the Spiritual Leader of the Nation'. She also said that the 'sacred' remains of Evita would lie, together with those of General Perón, in the Olivos Chapel, from where they would eventually be transferred to the Altar of the Fatherland, the mausoleum then being built in a Buenos Aires suburb.

The embalmed body of Evita was flown from Madrid to Buenos Aires on November 17, 1974. Isabel Perón, General Perón's third wife and political heir, accompanied by two of Evita's sisters, headed a large committee of government and military officials as the remains were taken by car from the airport to the presidential chapel in Olivos, on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Thousands of men, women and children lined the route, throwing flowers at the passing car and weeping.

The embalmed body of Evita was put on public display in December 1974, in a crypt at the presidential residence in Olivos. It lay beside the sealed coffin of General Perón.

Twenty-four years after her death, in October 1976, the body of Maria Eva Duarte de Perón was finally returned to her family. It now lies buried fifteen feet underground in a specially armored private vault in the most exclusive cemetery of Buenos Aires.

Determined that the Duarte family vault in the Recoleta Cemetery should be Evita's final resting place, secure from further political body-snatching, the family and the military authorities called in a firm specializing in the construction of armored bank vaults to reinforce the tomb.

In the center of the floor of the burial chamber containing the coffins of other departed Duartes, an elaborate trapdoor has been inserted. It consists of

three heavy-gauge steel plates, each individually locked with a different combination. The hinges are embedded in specially reinforced concrete and the cracks between the doors are covered with another thick steel flange. Beneath this hopefully impregnable trapdoor, in total darkness and eternal silence, is a second burial chamber containing the corpse, either well preserved or rotting, of Evita Perón.

'I will return,' Evita had said. 'And I will be millions.'

Acknowledgements

Personal thanks to: Rexton S. Bunnett and John Basham for theater research; Tanya Harbinson for film research; Ken Welsh and Mark Little of *Lookout* magazine for information regarding Juan Perón in Spain; Adam Webb of www.inkdigital.org for culling the Internet; the Hans Tasiemka Agency for press cuttings; Martin Atcherley and the staff of the library at Canning House for research regarding Argentina.

I am indebted to the following books: *The Woman With a Whip* (Garden City, New York, 1952) by Mary Main; *Bloody Precedent* (Random House, New York, 1952) by Fleur Cowles; *Perón: His Rise and Fall* (Cresset Press, London, 1957) by Owen Frank; *Eva Perón* (W. H. Allen & Co., London, 1978) by John Barnes; *Eva Perón* (André Deutsch, London, 1980) by Nicholas Fraser and Navarro Marysa; *Evita – The Legend of Eva Perón 19191952* (Elm Tree Books/Hamish Hamilton, London, 1978) by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice (main text by the latter); and *The Musicals of Andrew Lloyd Webber* (Virgin, London, 1995) by Keith Richmond.

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Co-Starring

Marilyn Monroe,

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Iconic Voices

Starring: Elvis Presley, Marlon Brando, Norman Mailer, John Lennon, and Andy Warhol.

Co-starring: Colonel Tom Parker, Debra Paget, Frank Sinatra, Ann Margret, The Beatles, President 'Tricky Dicky' Nixon, Marilyn Monroe, Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Michael Jackson, The Rolling Stones, Germaine Greer, Truman Capote, Yoko Ono, Salvadore Dali, Edie 'Superstar' Sedgwick, Bob Dylan, Martin Amis... and a host of other celebrities.

&

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W A Harbinson is the author of the bestselling novels, *Genesis* and *Revelation*, and a wide variety of other novels. He is also the author of a Number One US bestseller biography of Elvis Presley, plus biographies of Charles Bronson, George C. Scott and Evita Peron. He presently lives in West Cork, Ireland.

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Iconic Voices

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Custom Books Publishing

Copyright © 2011 by W. A. Harbinson
This edition published in 2011 by W. A. Harbinson

www.waharbinson.eu.com

ISBN-13: 978-1466237230
ISBN-10: 1466237236

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For Bernard and Deirdre

Contents

Elvis

Marlon

Norman

John

Andy

Elvis

1935 – 1977

I'm tired of being me. Elvis. The King. I was tired of being me back in 1977, before that concert in Rapid City, South Dakota, the one that sonofabitch Colonel Parker insisted on filming for a CBS-TV special, despite the damned awful condition I was in. 'How do I look?' I said nervously to someone standing beside me, waiting to go onstage, not really giving a damn, just filling the silence. 'You look good,' the yes-man standing beside me said. 'Yeah, right,' I said, without thinking, 'I'll look good in my coffin.' And not long after that encounter, there I was in my coffin, being driven along Elvis Presley Boulevard in Memphis, Tennessee.

Some funeral, I'm telling you! Biggest thing of its kind since the burial of Valentino, but in my case, even bigger than that. Over 150,000 fans lining the four-mile route from Graceland to Forest Hills Cemetery, a lot having flown in from as far away as Japan, Australia and Europe. Over a thousand security men and cops fighting to hold back the growing crowds as they attempted to break through the gates and scale the walls of my humble home, Graceland. An emergency medical center and ten ambulances required to deal with the hundreds who'd fainted or were crushed in the crowd. One woman going into labor pains and giving birth in the back of an ambulance. A drunken 18-year-old driving into a crowd of mourners, killing two teenage girls and critically injuring another. The funeral cortege consisting of forty-nine cars led by a silver Cadillac, plus a police motorcycle escort, inching slowly along Elvis Presley Boulevard, past that weeping and wailing 150,000 onlookers. The lawns of the cemetery covered in an estimated 3000 floral tributes in the shape of guitars, hound dogs, crosses and broken hearts. As I recall it ('if my memory serves me well,' as Bobby Zimmerman, aka Dylan, would have it) there was a short service in the mausoleum and then my casket, with me in it, naturally, was placed in the crypt. A few days later my beloved mama's

coffin was removed from her grave in the same cemetery and placed next to mine in the family mausoleum. A couple of weeks later, a guy called Adkins, with two buddies, was arrested and charged with attempting to steal my body from the mausoleum, hoping to 'ransom' it. That incident, combined with the predatory activities of a lot of my more fanatical fans, led to both coffins being moved out of Forest Hills and into the Meditation Garden at Gracelands. So at least I was back home pretty quick.

Or was I? I mean, where, exactly, am I now? I mean, I can see my own death and funeral, relive them over and over again, but right now I feel perfectly alive, even if a little confused and disorientated, wondering where I am and what lies ahead of me. Not much here, that's for sure. At least, not at the moment. I'm sure I'm alive but I also feel I could be asleep, or maybe sleepwalking, like I did regular during childhood and adolescence. Yeah, I'd sleepwalk a lot. So did my mama and daddy. All three of us were inclined to sleepwalk. Zombies. The Land of the Dead. I still recall being aware that I wasn't really awake, that I was sleeping on my feet, even though I was vaguely aware of what I was doing, of where I was walking. That's kind of how I feel now, alive but half asleep, with my past and present, from my birth to my death, like a ribbon of dreams unfolding in my head. I mean, I'm here and there also. I have the feeling I'm in the past and the present simultaneously. Maybe sleepwalking through Eternity. Maybe that's what this is.

I blame the sleepwalking on the death of Jesse Garon. I'm the surviving child of twins. My mama, Gladys, actually gave birth to two boys, Jesse Garon and me, Elvis Aaron. Jesse came first, but he was stillborn. I came thirty-five minutes later and survived. Jesse was buried forty-eight hours later in a shoebox in an unmarked grave in the Priceville Cemetery, just below the Old Saltillo Road. It's said that if you lose a limb you go on feeling the missing limb, just as if it was still there, for the rest of your life. Well, I believe that's pretty much how I felt about Jesse Garon. I spent the rest of my life feeling incomplete without my stillborn twin and would even visit his grave to 'talk' to him. Sometimes, in later years, when my medication was getting a grip and maybe doing my head in, I'd even talk to him in the darkness of my bedroom. I'm not ashamed to admit it.

So how did I get to where I am now, even though I'm not sure where I am right now?

Okay. Just let me recollect here. I was born on January 8, 1935, in a two-room, shotgun shack in East Tupelo, Mississippi. My daddy built that place with his own hands. The famous writer, William Faulkner, was born and raised only thirty-five miles from there. In the April of that same year, about three months after I was born, a catastrophic storm tore through Tupelo, killing 235 people, injuring 350, and destroying forty-eight city blocks. Though the tornado wrecked St. Mark's Methodist church, our shotgun shack, located directly opposite, remained untouched.

My mama thought that was a miracle. She also thought that my survival, after Jesse being stillborn, was also a miracle. So she treated me as if I was a walking miracle and we grew uncommonly close because of it. In fact, there were those who claimed that mama had psychic intuition when it came to me and I often felt the same about her. That was something to do with the loss of Jesse – her loss and mine – and it's what forged the intense love between us, leading some to think of me as a mama's boy. Well, I wasn't ever quite that, but we were sure pretty close.

I had a pretty idyllic childhood, really. Never much money around and a few bad times – like when my daddy went to prison, for instance – but really, it was mostly a pretty good, simple life with lots of love and few complications. Well, lots of love from my mama, at least. Not too sure about my daddy. He was okay, I suppose – at least he never mistreated me - but he sure as hell wasn't much to look up to, no guiding light, as it were. He did his best, I'm sure, but he was generally so passive that by the time I was in my teens I'd become, to all intents and purposes, the real head of the house. I did everything in my power to look after my mama – my daddy, too, naturally – and that was the drive behind my early success. From childhood on I'd always swore that some day I'd at least buy them their own house and a car, which is exactly what I did, as you must know. I mean, I did it in spades.

But I wasn't no mama's boy. No! Not the way it's been misconceived. Though I was only three years old when my daddy was convicted of forging a cheque and served time in the Parchman Penitentiary, I grew up knowing about it, never forgot it, was secretly shamed by it. That was one of the incidents that had a profound effect on me, making me more dependent upon, and simultaneously protective of, my mama. Then there was the time, about 1942, during the Second World War, when my daddy, who worked away from home a lot, left home again to help build a prisoner-of-war camp in Como,

Mississippi, about 170 miles from Tupelo, and in his absence my mama, pregnant again, had a miscarriage and was taken into the Tupelo Hospital. I was seven years old at the time and I remember walking alongside the stretcher, holding her hand and crying. And my mama, having now lost *two* children, loved me, the miraculous survivor, even more passionately.

But those were just a couple of the few bad times I had. Mostly as I've said, I had a pretty idyllic childhood, living in a variety of places, including the edge of Shakerag, Tupelo's colored section (now Elvis Presley Circle; how's that for fame?) and, later, Memphis. Segregation was rife in the South – yeah, I'll admit it – but I never had no truck with it, nor did my folks, and despite my close bond to my mama, I moved around a lot on my own, including the colored neighborhoods of Tupelo and Beale, 'the Home of the Blues', in Memphis. And despite being shy in certain ways, I always liked being different, had a taste for the flamboyant, so had my hair brilliantined, pompador at the front, ducktailed at the back, and bought my unusually flashy clothes – black pants with pink stripes, bolero-styled jackets, two-toned shoes - in Laskey Brothers clothes shop on Beale Street. Hell, I even helped my colored truck-driver friend, John Allen Cook, deliver groceries for Brown's Store on Gloster Street, next to Milam School, so interacting with the colored communities was no problem for me.

I sang from an early age. Man, I sang all the time. My mama and daddy attended the First Assembly of God church on Adam Street, Tupelo, and they told me that there, when I was only two years old, I'd frequently scramble up onto the stage to join in with the choir. I also sang with my folks at church or social functions, or simply with friends, which we were called upon to do often. Gospel music was everywhere. I drank it in through my pores. I even took some of my later bodily movements from the black and white preachers who went wild in their churches, cutting up all over the place, jumping on the piano, moving every which way. Man, they were frantic and I loved them.

I mean, I wanted to be a singer from as far back as I can remember, way back when I was attending the East Tupelo Consolidated School which, though located on the wrong side of the tracks, was well disciplined and had a good educational record. I was already obsessed back then with becoming a singer. Overprotected by my mama? Well, maybe, but not so much, I'd say, since from the tender age of eight I was hitching rides every week to the Saturday Jamboree country music program of the local radio station, WELO,

ocated on Spring Street in Tupelo, where I'd regularly get up to sing verything from gospel to country, even World War Two songs, and my avourite weepy, 'Old Shep', which I later recorded. By the time I was twelve, was singing 'Old Shep' all over the place, including at school, where it lmost reduced my fifth grade teacher to tears, and outside the Tupelo Hotel, where I sang for cash that I always gave to my mama. When my school principal, Mr Cole, then entered me for the children's talent contest in the 945 Mississippi-Alabama Fair and Dairy Show, when I was ten years old, I walked off with the second prize of ten dollars and free admission to the rides. Finally, in 1953, even before graduating, I hitchhiked the 240 miles to Meridan, Mississippi, to take part in the talent contest of the first Jimmy Rodgers 'The Father of Country Music' Festival. Again, I won second prize. 'm still convinced that in both cases I should have won first prize, but nothing's fair in life, is it? After years of being managed by Colonel Parker I ure as hell know that.

We were sometimes so poor that I'd have to walk to school barefoot, wearing dungarees, but always with my first guitar slung over my shoulder. Though I could silence most of the girls with my singing, some of the boys esented it and I often had to defend myself with my fists, which I did pretty vell. (I also took a lot of flak because of my greased hair and flashy clothes.) Some of those kids called me 'white trash' because my family was poor, because our house had no porch, and because my daddy had gone to prison, so always felt emotionally insecure – though never insecure in my singing. It ust seemed like second-nature to me. I learnt gospel music from my folks and t church, I learned guitar-picking from the guitar-playing preacher Frank Smith, and I learnt about country music from Mississippi Slim and the many other musicians and singers on Radio WELO. I picked up on Dean Martin, Perry Como and other crooners by listening to the popular-music radio tations. Finally, I first heard Negro music in the Sanctified Church services in Shakerag, located on the 'wrong side of the tracks' in East Tupelo, then practically fell in love with it when, in 1948, my family moved to Memphis nd I was exposed to the great rhythm and blues performers of Radio WDIA nd, finally, in the clubs of Beale Street, filled with honky-tonks, hookers, lrug peddlars and great colored musicians, and where, as a supposedly 'over-protected' teenager, I frequently performed.

Man, I just tore those colored kids up, as I'd later do with the white kids.

But I learnt a lot of what I did from the rhythm and blues performers I was being exposed to. Guys like Rufus Thomas, Joe Hill Lewis, and Ray Brown, whose 'Good Rockin' Tonight' I'd soon be recording for Sun Records, a predominantly 'black' label where the legendary blues guitarist, singer and song-writer, B. B. King, was already signed up. I remember that Robert Henry, the Beale Street promoter, used to take me to watch the colored singers and later insisted that I'd taken my 'wiggle' from Charlie Burse, known as Ukulele Ike, who performed regularly in the Gray Mule and the Hotel Improvement Club. Well, maybe I did. I *do* know that I also loved at that time the likes of Arthur 'Big Boy' Crudup, Chuck Berry and Little Richard, so when I performed in those clubs in Beale Street I knew just what I was doing. And those colored audiences were crazy about me.

Okay, fair play to me. Later on, when I was famous, I openly acknowledged my debt to my colored mentors. As far back as 1956, in an interview I gave to the *Charlotte Observer*, I said, in my unsophisticated, countrified way: 'The colored folks been singing it and playing it just like I'm doin' now, man, for more years than I know. They played it like that in the shanties and in their juke joints and nobody paid no mind until I goosed it up. I got it from them. Down in Tupelo, Mississippi, I used to hear old Arthur Crudup bang his box the way I do now, and I said if I ever got to the place I could feel all old Arthur felt, I'd be a music man like nobody ever saw.'

No accident, then, that when I turned up at Sun Records, my first commercial release was Arthur Crudup's 'That's All Right [Mama].'

Sam Phillips was a great man. He once said that he'd gone out into this no-man's land and knocked the shit out of the color line. Well, he surely did that. He also said that musically speaking, the lack of prejudice on my part was the best thing that could have happened to Sun Records. What he meant by that, I think, was that he'd 'knocked the shit out of the color line' by running a 'white' recording company specialising in 'black' musicians, but that he'd always wanted to push the envelope, to blow everything wide open in terms of a wider acceptance for colored music, by finding a white man who sounded like a Negro. That was me, folks. When I became famous by innocently combining all kinds of music, from gospel to country and ballads and the blues, all the barriers were kicked away and it all became the one music. No, man, that's one credit they can't take away from me.

Naturally I was still a bit on the shy side when, in 1953, I first walked into

Sam Phillips' Memphis Record Service at 706 Union Street to record 'My Happiness' for my mama's birthday. At least that's what I said at the time, but my mama's birthday was well past by then and I really just wanted to hear what I sounded like. And what I heard, I didn't like. But, luckily, Marion Keisker did.

Good old Sam and Marion. Sam was already a well known figure in the music business when I first entered his premises. Born in Florence, Alabama, he became fascinated by Negroe music when he was still a child and heard the blues' of the coloreds working in the fields. After working as a DJ at various stations in Alabama, he moved to Nashville and worked at WREC. Eventually he founded the Memphis Recording Service, located at 706 Union Street, where he defied local prejudice by recording mainly colored artists and selling the masters to Chess Records in Chicago. Man, he had courage! He recorded, among others, B. B. King, Chester 'Howlin Wolf' Burnett, Walter Horton, Bobby Bland, Little Junior Parker, Rufus Thomas and the Johnny Burnett Trio. In 1952 he founded Sun Records in the same building and hired Marion Keisker, a former 'Miss Radio' of Memphis, as his assistant. When I first walked in to cut 'My Happiness' it was Marion Keisker, a great lady, who welcomed me.

Surprisingly, despite having already caused rioting at a Beale Street benefit show, despite having caused a couple of girls to faint when singing 'Cold, Cold Fingers' to 1,600 pupils at the Humes High school's musical contest, I was still pretty insecure as a person while being totally secure in myself as a singer. This odd mixture certainly intrigued Miss Keisker. When she asked me what kind of singer I was, I said, 'I sing all kinds.' When she asked me who I sounded like, I said, 'I don't sound like nobody.' When she asked if I sang hillbilly, I said, 'I sing hillbilly.' When she asked who I sounded like in hillbilly, I repeated, 'I don't sound like nobody.' So there I was, clearly feeling insecure and biting my fingernails, which I did all my life, but totally confident in telling her that I could sing anything. That's the only belief I never lost during the bad years ahead.

Anyway, the rest is musical history. A few months after paying my four bucks for an acetate with 'My Happiness' on one side and 'That's When Your Heartaches Begin' on the other, I was called back to the recording studio to work with guitarist Scotty Moore and bass player Bill Black. After some false starts over a couple of tentative days we cut loose with Arthur Crudup's blues

ıumber, ‘That’s All Right [Mama]’, backed it with Bill Monroe’s country ong, ‘Blue Moon of Kentucky’, but sang to a hard-rocking beat, and had an nstant local success with it. Sure as hell there was no stopping me after that. After a few more local hit records for Sun and extensive touring of the mid-West and south with Scotty and Bill, being managed by Bob Neal, Colonel Parker stepped into the picture, arranged for RCA Records to buy out my Sun contract, and then sent me on the road to fame and fortune and heartbreak.

No denying it, folks. Fame corrupts and absolute fame corrupts absolutely. t all started innocently enough with me: more girls than I could count, ıvailable anytime, everywhere, screaming hysterically when I performed, obbing their eyes out, storming the stage doors, clambering through the lressing room windows, chasing me like packs of wolves, tearing my clothes off, swarming over my cars, scrawling their names and addresses and phone ıumbers in lipstick on the hoods and windows, ripping lumps out of the seats ıs souvenirs, even pulling blades of grass out of our lawn on Audubon Drive before we moved to Graceland), and in general acting like they worshipped he ground I walked on. It had its scary moments, but mostly it was fun and I oon learned to search out the prettiest girl in the audience, get one of my uddies (later known as my Memphis Mafia) to bring her to me and then have ne the nicest time with her before moving on. I did this in every town I erformed in. Just took it as natural. It never entered my head that my home own sweetheart, Dixie Locke, might take offence at this gallivanting and inally decide, despite our vows of eternal love, to marry someone else. Same vith Barbara Hearne, another home town sweetheart who soon saw the vriting on the wall and sensibly faded out of my life. It also happened with erhaps my favorite girl up to that time, June Juanico, who simply couldn’t gnore my highly publicized romps with Las Vegas dancers like Marilyn Evans and Dottie Harmony, as well as implied or actual affairs (no comment) vith celebrated movie stars like Natalie Wood – and later with the girl who’d ecome my wife, Priscilla Beaulieu. It was a pattern that repeated itself hroughout my life and it was due, I now have to admit, to the corruptions of ame.

There were, of course, other forms of corruption due to fame, such as the etrayal, due to pressure from Colonel Parker, of old friends like Scotty Moore and Bill Black, who were soon downgraded by the colonel from equal nembers of our group to mere wage-earning supporting players behind the

tar. They were even kicked off my first picture, *Love Me Tender* (1956), and ater would break with me in disgust at what they viewed was my lack of upport for them. I loved those guys, but they were right about that: I never lefended them. Never having the moral courage to face up the colonel, I let he sly old bastard corrupt my relationships.

What the hell! There *were* compensations. By that time I'd been described by at least one journalist as 'the Marlon Brando of the mountain-music set'. The 'mountain-music' phrase was deeply offensive to me, but any kind of comparison to Brando really gave me a kick. That's because, despite being passionate about music, I was even more passionate about becoming a movie tar, though not a 'musical' star. No, this was the time of 'crazy mixed-up kid' novies like *The Wild One* (1954) and *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), so I vanted to be a *serious* actor like my two favorites, James Dean and Marlon Brando. In fact, I saw those two movies so many times, obsessively mouthing he dialogue as it was spoken on screen, that I memorized every single line. Question: 'What are you rebelling against?' Answer: 'What have you got?') t stands to reason, then, that I was practically in heaven when my performance in *Love Me Tender* had some critics describing me as the natural uccessor to Dean while others called me the new Brando. It didn't matter that he comparisons were unfavorable ('First of all he does not walk: he slouches, umbles, almost minces.'); just being mentioned in the same sentence as Dean or Brando was enough to have me walking on air.

Anyway, apart from all the hit records and my relentless touring, with nounting hysteria everywhere I performed, I was also knocking them dead on TV – and so Hollywood beckoned. Well, you can imagine, given the implicity of my childhood and adolescence, how overwhelming Hollywood vould have been to me. I mean, I took to being a rock and roll star like a duck o water, enjoyed most of it, actually, particularly getting the girls, but going o Hollywood, without any previous experience, to work with folk that I'd lways thought of as 'stars'… Well, frankly it just scared the piss out of me. Even Richard Egan, the second lead in my B-movie debut, *Love Me Tender*, vas a bit of a 'star' to me. (Mildred Dunnock was a great lady of the silver creen, who treated me with kindness, but she was really too old to otherwise consider; appropriately, in *Love me Tender*, she played my mother.) However, he female lead, Debra Paget, even before I met her in the flesh, was a egendary beauty who'd done some of the sexiest exotic dancing I'd ever seen

n my life and given me more than one teenage erection. Debra Paget! Her previous movie had been Cecil B. Demille's *The Ten Commandments* (1956), playing the seductive water girl, and I even had a boner watching her in that. So when I met her on the set (after a brief initial meeting on the Milton Berle TV show), I was initially overwhelmed, my knees practically trembling with awe, though pretty soon they were trembling with lust 'cause all I could think of was getting into her pants. No hope. She was actually quite nice, but didn't fancy me that way, so we joined together in a strictly professional manner. I did like her, though. She was gorgeous and had a lot of nerve. In 1958, a year after *Love Me Tender*, she married a headed-for-nowhere actor-singer, David Street, and stuck with him for all of *four months*. Two years later she married the movie director Budd Boetticher, but left him after *twenty-two days,* divorced him a year later, and only finally settling down when she married a wealthy Chinese-American oil baron, domiciled in Houston, Texas, and then became a committed Born Again Christian, God bless her adventurous heart and big tits.

Yeah, I really liked Debra when I worked with her for a while, but initially, the thought of working with actual movie stars gave me sleepless nights. I wasn't helped any when, for my next movie, *Loving You* (1957), one of my co-stars was Lizabeth Scott. Man, she was scary! Of course I'd seen her before in quite a few movies, usually playing a husky-voiced femme fatale in noir genre crime films, a kind of second-rate Lauren Bacall or Veronica Lake, and I would have been scared anyway, just knowing that she'd worked with the likes of Humphrey Bogart. But what really scared me, man, when I first learned that she was going to be in *Loving You*, was the knowledge that a few years back, about 1955, she'd sued *Confidential* magazine (which we all read and loved at the time, though few of us would admit to it) for stating that she spent her 'off-work hours' with 'Hollywood's weird society of baritone babes', meaning *lesbians*. Even worse: the same article also claimed that her name had been found on the client's list of a call-girl agency. So, there I was, an innocent country boy, being faced with the prospect of working with a mature actress who'd possibly been a *lesbian call-girl* before becoming a star. I mean, hell, man, back in Tupelo and Memphis we only thought of women as being like, well… yeah, like my mama… maternal, loving, supportive… Most times we only uttered the word 'lesbian' in frightened whispers, wondering what the hell it meant but convinced that it was something pretty dark and

legenerate. So there I was, about to make a movie with the mannish Lizabeth Scott. Man, I was terrified! I really found it hard to look her in the eye. But he was pretty nice to me, as things turned out, really sinking into her role as a kind of female Colonel Parker, the manager of a rising rock star, full of lies and con tricks, but, being a woman, unlike that cold-eyed bastard, Parker, decent at heart and filled with womanly concern for me. Still, no matter how nice she was, both on screen and off, I spent most of the movie-making process avoiding her cool, *possibly lesbian call-girl* gaze, my heart racing uncomfortably.

Thank God for Dolores Hart. She was real pure at heart. My romantic interest in the movie, Dolores made me feel good right from the start because she was even more inexperienced in movies than I was. I had, at least, made one picture before *Loving You*, but Dolores, though with a showbiz background, hadn't made any. So I felt a little more confident when working with her. Besides which, she had the face of an angel and was so sweet, both on and off screen, that a lot of my fans thought we were sweet on each other. We were, but not romantically, so nothing happened between us that way. I certainly thought about it occasionally, but there was something about Dolores that made you feel that the word 'carnality' wasn't in her vocabulary. This turned out to be true in the sense that after making another nine movies in five years, and despite being hailed as the new Grace Kelly, she became engaged to an L.A. businessman, Don Robinson, but broke his heart by breaking off the engagement to become a nun instead, despite having already played a nun in *Francis of Assisi* (1961). She's been a nun ever since. Still alive, she's now the Prioress of the Convent in the Benedictine Abbey of Regina Laudis in Bethlehem, Connecticut. No more movies for her, then. And no more for Lizabeth Scott, who retired from the business after making *Loving You*.

Of course, *Loving You* was hugely successful, even more so than *Love Me Tender*. Unlike that dog's dinner, for which I was described by one critic as looking 'smooth and damp' like 'a sausage' (a dog's dinner), *Loving You* was loosely based on my own rise to fame and gave me the chance to perform my songs like I did on the stage: wild and free, hip-swinging, knee-bending. Boy, I was hot! Also, it was in color and I looked terrific in color and, even better, was given the chance to act sullen and tormented when the occasion called for it. This really pleased me, 'cause I was convinced that my movie heroes of the time, Brando and Dean and Montgomery Clift, were so successful at what

hey did ‘cause they were rarely seen to smile on screen. I had to smile a lot cause my crooked grin was beloved worldwide, but in *Loving You* I also got o act serious and that really thrilled me.

I was allowed to be even more serious in my next two movies, *Jailhouse Rock* (1957) and *King Creole* (1958), both shot in black and white because it vas felt that it suited the subjects more than color. I agree with this theory. *Jailhouse Rock* told the ridiculous story of an aggressive young man (me) who gets thrown into jail on a manslaughter charge, is taught by an older jailbird Mickey Shaughnessy) how to play the guitar and sing, manages to perform a spectacular song-and-dance number (the classic title song) for a nationwide TV audience while still in jail, then, upon his release, goes on to become a major rock and roll star and first-class asshole. Though it was essentially stupid, I loved the part because it allowed me to be mean and moody like Brando in *The Wild One*, but I was also occasionally disturbed by the part cause it reminded me of my daddy’s spell in prison and I wondered if the scriptwriter’s had actually based my role on their knowledge of this personal humiliation. Also, I’d recently punched out a garage attendant and been hauled nto court for it, so they managed to slip that in as well. I mean, despite my huge success they had this kind of superior attitude to me in Hollywood, putting me down behind my back, secretly thinking of me as a country yokel or truck driver who’d just happened to strike it lucky, so sneaking background letails from my real life into their dumb scripts was second nature to them.

My personal favorite of my own movies, however, was my next one, *King Creole* (1958), which was also shot in black and white, was directed by a real director, Michael Curtiz, who’d also directed *Casablanca*, and had a terrific supporting cast, including Walter Matthau, Caroline Jones, Dean Jagger, Vic Morrow, Dolores Hart (playing my virginal girlfriend in our second movie ogether) and Dolores’ personal friend Jan Shepard, who went on from *King Creole* to act in *Attack of the Giant Leeches* (1959) and then worked again vith me in my 1966 offering, *Paradise Hawaiian Style*, which was possibly even worse than *Attack of the Giant Leeches*. I was also pleased to be in *King Creole* because one of my co-stars was the French actress/dancer, Liliane Montevecchi, who’d recently worked with Brando in one of my favorite novies, *The Young Lions* (1958). In that movie she had some great scenes vith Brando, but in *King Creole* all she got to do was perform a sexy dance vhile wearing a skimpy ‘banana’ costume and singing a song about bananas.

She was one sexy lady, though.

King Creole was the last picture I made before being inducted for my two-year stretch in the Army and then, upon my release in 1960, dramatically changing my image. The Colonel carried the can for that, but in all fairness he *did* have his reasons. As a performer I'd always caused a lot of controversy, mainly because of my links to so-called 'nigger' music and my supposed obscene' gyrations on stage. This worked a treat for a time, gaining me enormous publicity, but by 1958 rock and roll music in general, and Elvis Presley in particular, were being linked to the race issue in an increasingly divided society (think the riots in Little Rock over integration) and, as such, analysed politically in congressional hearings, derided by the press and, worst of all for me and my deeply religious folks, condemned from the pulpit. From the Colonel's point of view, then, going into the Army for two years and keeping my nose clean while in it, could only rectify the damage done at home. Unfortunately, I was sent to serve in Germany at the height of the Cold War and the Soviets soon started using me as a political tool, on the one hand describing me through their media as a glaring example of American decadence, on the other spreading the news that by deliberately posting me to Germany to serve in the Thirty-Second Tank Battalion, Third Army Division, also known as the 'Mailed Fist of Europe', the American authorities were blatantly using me as an anti-Soviet propaganda weapon. In the words of Buddy Holly: 'Oh, boy!'

No choice, therefore, as far as the Colonel was concerned. Having already proved myself as a decent American boy by serving honorably in the Army for two years (and spending much of that two years obsessively practising to extend my vocal range, already planning to record 'O Sole Mio', later retitled 'It's Now or Never'), I now had to become even more decent by dropping my controversial image and becoming a clean-cut All-American Entertainer. Which led to my first post-army TV appearance on a Frank Sinatra special, wearing a bow-tie, my sideburns shorn, singing a couple of duets with him, including his 'Witchcraft' and my 'Love Me Tender', followed by my first post-army movie, appropriately entitled *G.I. Blues* 1960), shamelessly based on my two years with that Army tank regiment in Germany, and packed with some of the weakest songs that I'd recorded up to that point. It was good wholesome fun, with me singing first to a couple of puppets, then to a howling baby, and the only thing I got out of it, apart from

ny first dose of creative anger, was having a hot fling with Sinatra's former girlfriend, the leggy dancer, Juliet Prowse, my co-star in the movie; thus, at he same time, getting my revenge on Sinatra for his widely publicized comment that rock and roll was 'sung, played, and written for the most part by retinous goons… the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the ace of the earth.' Well, I didn't have sideburns when I appeared on his TV pecial, but I sure had my revenge with his girlfriend. And did so again when he press started feverishly speculating that I was having an affair with his laughter, Nancy. (No comment.) And did so a third time when Nancy co-tarred with me in *Speedway* (1967) one of my very worst movies. By that ime Nancy looked like she was made of silicone, but then, let's face it, so did .

Okay, I'll admit it: most of my movie musicals, after *King Creole*, were errible. Once Colonel Parker and those Hollywood producers realized that hey could makes fortunes off my back with cheap productions, crap scripts nd lousy songs, they ignored my proven potential as a serious actor and dug ny artistic grave with their trash. I blame them and my fans. Yeah, my fans lways put the blame squarely on the Colonel, but it was the fans who ignored ny more serious movies – *Flaming Star* (1960) and *Wild in the Country* 1960) – while turning a sand-and-sun songfest like *Blue Hawaii* (1961) into a nonster hit, with its soundtrack album becoming my biggest seller ever.

Initially I was thrilled to be in *Flaming Star* because it was a vehicle riginally written for my idol, Marlon Brando, and for that reason alone I gave t my all and was pretty good in it, hardly smiling at all, even though the novie, having practically no songs, did relatively poor business at the box ffice. I was equally thrilled to be in *Wild in the Country* because, apart from getting up real close with sexy Tuesday Weld and sweet Millie 'Ann Frank' erkins, my main-co star was Hope Lange, so touching as the romantic partner o my other screen hero, Montgomery Clift, in the *The Young Lions* (the main ead being Brando), and also featuring John Ireland, of whom I was in awe ecause he'd co-starred in the classic movie, *Red River*, with my third favorite ctor, Montgomery Clift. Still, despite my initial excitement at being in a novie with such an illustrious supporting cast, I started freezing up on screen vhen I gradually realized that again, just as with *Jailhouse Rock*, the creenplay was utilizing some of the most painful incidents of my own life, articularly when Hope Lange, as a typically unbelievable psychiatrist social

vorker, says, ‘Your mother seems to have meant a great deal to you,” and hen, asking me what I’m thinking regarding her comment, receives the numbled reply, ‘About the dreams I used to have… money… fame… I could ıave bought my ma her freedom with money and fame…’ Even worse, the cript writer, some jerk-off called Clifford Odets, who’d *almost* won a Pulitzer Prize for one of his stage plays and, more impressively, before jerking off over *Wild in the Country*, written the terrific screenplay for *The Sweet Smell of Success*, had my character give a lengthy, self-pitying speech about his ma’s mpoverished suffering in order to protect her child and how he, the child, could have ‘bought’ his ma away from all that, ‘bought’ her way out of the ticks and into town, and ‘bought’ her a house just like Hope Lange’s swell ad… but she died before he had a chance to do it. You get it? What we’re alking about here is the young Elvis Presley and his beloved mama and Graceland and his mama’s death within a year of moving into it: out of the ticks and into town. So, no question that Clifford Odets, who *almost* won a Pulitzer Prize and did at least write *Sweet Smell of Success* before jerking off ver his story about a genius writer who plays guitar, sings songs and drives vomen crazy, went the road of all those other Hollywood windbags by neering down his long Jewish nose at my humble origins and utilizing them *nd* my close relationship with my mama, for his luridly melodramatic ombination of *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Peyton Place*. And so, when I had o speak his godawful dialogue, I just froze up and gave one of the most vooden performances of my career, but in a so-called ‘serious’ movie. No ccident, then, that *Wild in the Country*, like *Flaming Star*, performed poorly t the box-office, at least compared to *G.I. Blues*, putting paid to any hopes I ıad of making ‘serious’ pictures in the future. Instead, I was forced to spend he next eight or nine years making increasingly dumb movies in which I lrove racing cars, flew airplanes, dived off cliffs, swung on trapezes, had a lot f fist fights, and sang songs written by the cheapest talents available to goofy ids and slobbering hound dogs and vacant-eyed bimbos in bikinis.

By 1965 I was reduced to making movies like *Tickle Me*, which was roduced so cheaply that we shot it in ten days and didn’t even have to pay for ny original songs because the Colonel, in his infinite wisdom, decided that ve could save even more money by raiding my back catalogue. (This did, at east, raise the quality of the songs on offer.) The only thing I liked about that novie was the presence of my co-star, Joceyln ‘Jackie’ Lane, often described

by the media as the English Brigette Bardot, even though she'd been born in Vienna. Still, she *did* look a bit like BB with her cock-sucking lips and instant-erection figure, but despite lusting for her I didn't get to first base with her because, as the pint-sized snot-nose was always quick to point out, her sister was the then famous model, Mara Lane, and she herself, darling Jackie, had studied ballet at the Sadler's Wells Ballet of London, England, so wasn't about to damage her high-class image by fooling around with a low-life, washed-up rock and roll idol like Yours Truly. No, Jackie was drawn to sophistication and went on to prove it by getting out of the movie business entirely and then marrying Prince Alfonso of Hohenlohe-Lagenburg and Marbella, Spain, the latter a kind of Spanish Las Vegas, which may have been appropriate since that's where they were married in 1973. They were divorced, ha, ha, in 1983, but Jackie went on, no doubt aided by fistfuls of the Prince's generous alimony payments, to become a successful businesswoman.

The movies, you might say, were the death of me. Which is not to say that during that awful period, the 1960s, they were *all* bad. One exception to the rule was *Viva Las Vegas* (1963), co-starring the wonderful Ann Margret. In 1962 alone I'd had three top-grossing movies in a row, beginning with *Blue Hawaii*, and been ranked as one of the most popular movie stars in the world, but MGM were really excited about this new one because they believed that the chemistry between me and Ann Margret could create a whole new market for my pictures. They believed this because Ann Marget, then only twenty-two years old, was a sexy singer, a sensual dancer, could certainly act, and had just had a huge success in *Bye Bye Birdie*, the film version of an equally successful Broadway musical based on the story of a rock and roll singer who gets drafted – in other words, based on me. They also believed it because Ann Margret had been widely described as 'the female Elvis Presley'. So, you know, they were hot. And so was I. I was hot from the minute I laid eyes on her, with her long red hair and terrific figure and vocal and dancing talents and great sense of humor. We hit it off immediately. And it was more than just lust, though there was plenty of that. No, it was love, pure and simple, and the electricity between us off screen certainly showed on screen, turning the movie into a smash hit, even bigger at the box office than *Blue Hawaii*.

Yet movies were the death of me. Maybe Ann Margret was the death of me. Certainly Colonel Parker was the death of me, despite making me rich.

What happened to me and Ann Margaret? We had a hot affair and we may

have seriously loved each other (though I also loved Priscilla Beaulieu, hidden back there in Graceland) and she fitted in really well with my buddies, my so-called Memphis Mafia, where Priscilla had never really adjusted to them, being a bit on the 'jail bait' side of too young and not really at her ease with a gang of macho guys hanging around her and me all the time. I mean, I *loved* Priscilla. I really did. She was just *different* from Ann Margret. But no question that I also fell in love with Ann Margret because of her stunning looks, her vivacious nature, and her feisty, independent spirit. Yet just as it had been with June Juanico, what I loved most in women wasn't always something I could easily live with.

Yeah, I'll admit it: I always had to be in control. I mean, my mama loved me obsessively and thought I was God-given, perfect, beyond criticism, so naturally I expected the same attitude in my girlfriends. I expected them to do what I wanted, always be where they were supposed to be, dress as I wanted them to dress, never argue and let me win every game. I was the same with most things, actually. Though loving all kinds of competitive sports, and playing them all with my gang, my so-called Memphis Mafia, I really got uptight if they didn't let me win. And just as it was with them, so it was with my women, though even more so, they being women. As far as I was concerned, a woman should know her place. And the woman's place, according to our southern gentleman's code, is to stand by her man. Which June Juanico, for instance, even though I was crazy about her at the time, clearly failed to do. Man, she was stubborn! Had a mind of her own. Wouldn't take shit from anyone – not even from me – and resented most of my buddies hanging around me all the time, playing what she thought were silly games, trying to out-macho each other, even fooling openly with a lot of female fans who were in Graceland hoping to get to me instead. (I always had first choice, then the guys shared the rejected ones between them.) So June, no matter how much I loved her, simply had to go. Then, when in Germany, humbly serving my country in a blaze of non-stop publicity organized by the canny Colonel, I met Priscilla and saw my salvation.

She was only fourteen at the time. Now I'll admit that was a bit of a problem. I mean, she first heard my records when she was only twelve years old, but then her parents, disturbed by my reputation for arousing unsavoury passions in pubescent girls, refused to let her watch me on the Ed Sullivan Show on TV. However, being only twelve and pretty bright with it, she saw

he forbidden show by opening her bedroom window to an angle where she ;ould catch the reflection of the TV screen on it. So she saw the whole show. Then her daddy, an Air Force career officer, Captain Paul Beaulieu, was ɔosted with his family, including Priscilla, to Wiesbaden, West Germany, vhere I was stationed with the Army, living with my daddy, various family nembers and, naturally, a couple of the guys, in a rented house in Bad Nauheim, only forty-five minutes drive from Wiesbaden. Then a mutual riend, Currie Grant and his wife, brought her to the house, having promised ıer parents that they'd chaperone her and ensure that the notorious rock and oll celebrity didn't despoil her.

Man, she was one beautiful kid. Real petite, almost doll-like. Wearing a :ind of blue-and-white sailor dress, with white socks and flat shoes, she ooked even younger than fourteen and I assumed she was a junior or senior in ıigh school until she told me she was in the 9th grade. We hit it off mmediately. Could talk easily to each other. I was having a bad time, ollowing the recent death of my beloved mama, also worrying about what vas happening to the music scene back home while I was serving in Germany, :utting no new records, making no movies, but I could unburden myself to ıer, despite her being so young and me being a good ten years older. So I used :very bit of my legendary charm to persuade her parents to let her keep :oming to see me on a regular 'chaperoned' basis, promising not to 'harm her' n any way. And I kept that promise, not having *actual* sex with her (I was ;etting that from various fans, the mature wives of male visitors, and my ;oung, immature live-in secretary), just kind of fooling around with her on the ɔed while popping a lot of pills to keep me awake or put me to sleep. About ix months later we were separated anyway, with me being flown back to the States to get demobbed and resume my career, while she remained in Germany, still a virgin, with her folks.

So why did I pick Priscilla out of all my other women, eventually (after a wo-year separation) move her into Graceland, and live with her for another ix years without consummating the relationship, despite media speculations o the contrary?

Well, I was proud to be old fashioned in certain ways. For instance, I ivided women into four different categories: (1) mothers; (2) wives; (3) laughters; (4) all the others. So though I was having all kinds of women, 'the

›thers', all over the place – devoted female fans, Las Vegas dancers, Hollywood starlets – when it came to *serious* relationships, meaning the ›ossibility of marriage, I expected my chosen woman to be as I'd always magined my mama to be: as pure as the driven snow. (I never thought too leeply about how I'd been conceived.) For this reason, I never thought of my lings with female fans and other women as anything special, not even as ›etrayals, but I expected absolute loyalty from Priscilla and I knew I would ;et it. In fact, when I look back on it now, I realize that my passion for Priscilla was based on her passivity and relative lack of experience; on my :nowledge that I could mould her into being my perfect woman, using the nake-up I bought for her, wearing the clothes I picked out for her, even tyling her hair as I preferred it, never making her own decisions about ınything, and, most important, being absolutely obedient, existing only to ›lease me. No way could I have had that with June Juanico or, later, with my ›eloved but independent Ann Margret. So Priscilla, apart from being beautiful ınd classy, was my perfect Pygmalion. I usually addressed her as 'Little One'.

And so, two years later, I moved her into Graceland, charming her parents nto agreeing to the unusual arrangement, promising not to 'harm her' and to :eep up her education and do anything else that would make them feel secure. So she lived there for another six years, going to all-girl Catholic school, ıaving dancing lessons, doodling with paint and canvas, putting up with my :ver-present Memphis Mafia (except when we were in Hollywood making novies, leaving her back in Graceland, in the company of my numerous live-n relatives and staff and various hangers-on), and in general being exactly vhat I wanted her to be, our relationship remaining close but *chaste*. By this I nean that we didn't have *actual* sex, though I taught her various ways of ›leasing me anyway, like having her dress up in her schoolgirl's uniform and :nact various stories, such as her being a student being seduced by her teacher me being the teacher), while I took Polaroid pictures, getting a good Lolita-ixation boner in the process. We took an awful lot of those pictures. I had to :eep sending her to the local drugstore for more Polaroid film and she later :onfessed that this really embarrassed her because of the looks she got. Still, trictly speaking I kept my word to her parents by not having *real sex* with ıer, though I was surely getting more than enough of that with other women in Hollywood. Which pretty well gets me back to Ann Margret.

Yeah, no question about it: while working on *Viva Las Vegas*, Ann Margret

ınd I performed great together, igniting each other, playing teasingly off each ɔther, singing sexily (she brought 'sex' back into my vocals) and dancing ogether as if fornicating, which is what made the movie such a success. So vhat happened to us?

Two words.

Colonel Parker.

What we're talking about here is one huge personality. So huge that he ven managed to take over the biggest star in the world (me) and then have ıimself co-starring in every public pronouncement about 'our' activities, ıigning everything 'From Elvis and Colonel Parker'. In the end, he wasn't ɔnly taking fifty percent of my income, but deducting all of his so-called expenses' from *my* fifty percent, including his gambling debts, leaving my ɔercentage bottom of the well. Naturally, knowing that I didn't have the ɔatience to check any contract, he milked the cow for everything it was worth. f I hadn't died just in time, I'd have certainly been broke.

The most famous entertainer in the world.

Broke.

Thank God I died (if I died) before it happened.

Well, I was pretty unsophisticated and innocent, no question about it, and had ɔeen brought up to respect my elders, so I never looked at the Colonel too losely, though was always torn between respect and fear when dealing with ıim. For a start, he had eyes as blue as the sky – as cold as a winter sky – ınd though he had a sense of humor it was pretty malicious and his tempers ould make him seem on the edge of madness. (I found that especially listurbing 'cause I knew some folk thought the same about me.) He had charm n spades up front, of course. A lot of wit there. He told me and everyone else ıbout his outrageous 'carney' tricks: living on Indian reservations, telling ortunes, selling sparrows that he painted yellow and passed off as canaries; ınd a scam that would actually end up fictionalized in the movie *Paper Moon*, vhere he would get to a town where he wasn't known, read the local ɔbituaries, have the names of the recent dead, preferably males, inscribed on Bibles that he'd bought cheap in other towns, then call on the grieving vidows, pretending to be a Bible salesman, and show them the Bible with heir late husband's name in it, saying that the 'dearly departed' had ordered it ınd already paid the first half of the money. And the grieving widows, nvariably deeply moved to learn of their late husband's secret devotion to the

good Lord, would pass over the second half of the money and take the Bible nscribed, as they thought, especially for the husband at his personal request.

As a deeply religious person, and knowing how deeply religious my mama ıad been, I found the very thought of the Colonel doing this deeply offensive. But I said nothing about it. Like I said nothing about a lot of other subjects hat should have been raised. Said nothing because the few times I tried, the Colonel scared the piss out of me.

So why was I so scared? Well, it had become increasingly clear that there *vere* a few things pretty strange about the Colonel and how he was managing or mismanaging) my career. Most notable was the fact that he had never once gone to Germany during my tour of duty there and that, since then, he'd offered a wide variety of terrifically inventive excuses for not letting me perform anywhere outside of the United States. So talk started circulating that he Colonel wasn't exactly legit, that he had something to hide, that maybe he vas even an illegal immigrant, frightened to make any deal that required him o leave the country or even apply for a passport. At the same time, no one vanted to ask him too many questions, because the Colonel, when angered, could be frightening in his rages. He had even been seen (I was one of the vitnesses) hypnotizing people into doing exactly what he wanted. And certainly there were times when, after being cooped up alone with him in ome pokey office or other, I'd leave with my tail between my legs, feeling hat *I'd* just been hypnotized into agreeing with everything the old bastard had nsisted upon, even when I secretly disagreed. So, yes, I was scared of him.

Yeah, I'll admit it. Most folk assumed that I'd always revered him, but ıs far back as *Loving You* – and knowing that my mama loathed him – I was tarting to feel that I was being manipulated by him, that I was just 'product' o him (a sparrow painted yellow to be sold as a canary), and resentful of how ıe was trying to take control of my relationships with my parents and girlfriends and musicians, especially Scotty Moore and Bill Black. So I'd tarted throwing a few tantrums in protest. But the Colonel had the instincts of ın alligator. Either eat or be eaten. He could see every strength and weakness, very vice and virtue, in a person, and promptly suss just how to use them. And having met my mama, despite her obvious distrust of him, he learned enough to suss that I would have done anything – and I mean *anything* – to keep her from poverty, to give her the best of everything, and he used that to play on my insecurities and have me back off at the slightest suggestion that

ny success might be lost. He did that throughout my whole career – even long ıfter my mother had died – and it worked every time. The very thought that ny career might collapse was the biggest fear of my life. And the belief that ny success was almost totally due to the Colonel – a belief carefully nurtured ›y him – was the one belief I could never shake off.

He also knew that ever since my daddy's imprisonment I had an instinctive ear of authority – and the ruthless sonofabitch used that as well.

So how did it affect me and Ann Margret?

Despite the fact that Ann Margret and me struck sparks off each other, urning *Viva Las Vegas* into my most successful musical, the Colonel became :onvinced that the director, George Sydney, was giving her too much screen ime, too many close ups, and threatening to make it as much her picture as nine. So, despite everyone else's belief that we were electrifying together and the subsequent box office proved it; my biggest success since *Blue Hawaii*), he removed two of the three duets that we'd recorded for the movie ınd also had a lot of her best moments excized from the final cut. The colonel vas also concerned because Ann Margret was taking up a lot of my time off creen, as well as on screen, and he knew that this could seriously complicate ny life, given that my little Lolita – Priscilla – was stuck back there in Graceland, reading in newspapers and gossip magazines about our hot affair ınd demanding ever more loudly that I bring her, Priscilla, out to Hollywood, vith no more excuses for not doing so. 'I hate her,' my normally placid little weetheart screamed at me one fine day during a violent row (she hurled a lower pot at me) over Ann Margret. 'Why doesn't she keep her ass in Sweden vhere she belongs?' So the Colonel talked to me. I mean, he really got stuck nto me. Blinded by love, revitalized by Ann Margret's very presence, I made he mistake of asking the Colonel if he'd manage her as well as me and he esponded with his notorious Svengali tactics, convincing me that such a move :ould damage my career, possibly even finish it, and in general scaring the ›iss out of me. So I never raised that subject again to the Colonel. Even worse, stopped seeing Ann Margret on a regular basis and generally put a cooling listance between us (except for the assassination of President Kennedy, when he came to the house in Perugia Way and we spent the day weeping ogether), until the affair, like some of my recent songs, gradually tapered ıway to nothing. Then I went back to making real shitty movies, with lousy cripts and atrocious songs, despising myself for what I knew was my

cowardice. Yeah, the Colonel sure knew how to play on my insecurities, my ongoing fear of a return to anonymity, even poverty, and I couldn't resist his mesmeric, emotionally blackmailing, ways. No, instead I could just increasingly despise myself and look elsewhere for comfort.

I found it in religion.

I found religion through my hairdresser. His name was Larry Geller. Of course I'd been religious since the day I was born, brought up in a Christian household, regularly attending the First Assembly of God church in Tupelo, then listening to and singing gospel songs. This was followed by my growing fascination with Hawaiian mythology and Polynesian culture, during and after the making of *Blue Hawaii*. This in turn explains why I always wore around my neck both a Christian cross and a Jewish Star of David: to keep my options open. But now I needed a different kind of religion and I found it through Larry. He came to my place on Perugia Way in Bel Air in 1964 on the recommendation of one of my Memphis Mafia during the making of a load of shit called *Roustabout*. (Co-starring Barbara Stanwyck, another actress rumored to be a lesbian and with a voice like sandpaper. Believe me, I kept well away from her.) Anyway, by that time I was in a state of deep self-loathing, convinced that my fame had been the cause of my mama's heavy drinking and early death, equally convinced that I was squandering my talents on crap like *Roustabout*, and increasingly convinced that in giving up Ann Margret to protect the very career that had killed my mama, I had given up one of the great loves of my life and settled instead for a compromised existence. Sooner or later, I knew, I would have to marry Priscilla (my little Lolita's continuing presence in Graceland was leading to scandalous speculations in the media and her daddy was putting appropriate pressure on me), and that such a marriage, no matter how much I loved her, which I did (I mean, I loved her as much as I loved Ann Margret, but in a *different way*) would represent a compromised existence for sure. So, I needed something to boost my flagging spirits and I found it in religion, through a hairdresser who, with the scissors clicking away in his delicate hands, talked endlessly about his spiritual interests.

Larry was great. He agreed with everything I said. When I confessed that I was convinced I had a higher purpose in life but didn't yet know what it was, he not only agreed, but brought me a lot of religious books that he said would help me in my spiritual quest. When I said that intellectually I'd understood all

he books that he'd given me, but that I'd never had the kind of 'profound, piritual experiences' they described, he agreed indirectly by informing me hat such experiences had nothing to do with 'intellectual' perception but were ased more on emotion, 'a surrendering of the ego to God'. When I said that I eeded to be away from everyone, from my usual hangers-on, my Memphis Mafia, because I was 'really into something important within myself', he greed by saying that he understood. Hell, man, he even agreed when, during a lrive from Memphis to Los Angeles, possibly over-stimulated by my rapidly ncreasing medication, I suddenly screamed that I could see the face of Joseph talin in the clouds. Yeah, he agreed that he'd seen Stalin up there as well, just efore the image faded away. Even better, when I jumped out of my car in the niddle of the desert, somewhere near Flagstaff, Arizona, near the San rancisco Peaks, in the land of the Hopi Indians, and took off into the vilderness with tears rolling down my cheeks, to tell Larry that the image of talin had changed to the face of Christ and that I'd finally surrendered my go to God… Well, yeah, he agreed with that as well. But when, a few days ater, back in Bel Air, I told him that I wanted to finish entirely with show usiness and enter a monastery instead (I mean, if Dolores Hart could do it, vhy couldn't I?) and I expected him to find a suitable monastery for me, well, e got this kind of scared look in his eyes and I knew immediately that he was errified of what the Colonel would say and do when he found out what we vere up to.

So the monastery was out. That, however, didn't stop me becoming nvolved with an ecumenical movement called the Self-Realization ellowship, based in Pasadena and run by Sri Daya Mata, a disciple of aramahansa Yogananda, whose body, when it was laid to rest, at least ccording to Larry, didn't deteriorate for three weeks, thus proving, according o Larry, that just before his death he'd been in a 'remarkably evolved state'. hrilled by this new knowledge, I paid a visit to the Self-Realization ellowship Lake Shrine, where I had an urgent meeting with the new head of he movement, who'd only recently returned from one of her many 'seeking' rips to India. Sri Daya Mata, known to her disciples as 'Ma', was a handsome ifty-year old woman who presided over the movement's tranquil retreat Priscilla: 'the flowers, the garden paths, the simple shrines') located high in Mt. Washington, overlooking Pasadena, on the outskirts of Los Angeles. She vas a deeply spiritual woman (I saw the gentle radiance of her pure soul in her

ace: the spitting image of my mother, Gladys) who, when I explained that I vas in search of inner peace, a meaning to my life, and that I wanted to join a nonastery, form a commune, become a leader of her Fellowship and teach the aith to all my fans, gently reminded me that such aims took time, that they ould not be instantaneous, that there were no shortcuts; and that I was a great ntertainer, a wonderful calling in itself, deeply spiritual in its own way, and hat I could use my work, *my calling*, to find inner peace and spiritual ranscendence if I daily practised patience and self-discipline, which is omething, I'm now willing to admit, that I'd always sorely lacked. Still, lespite my self-doubt, she reduced me to tears. And so I rushed straight back o the crowded house in Bel Air to inform Priscilla, my Memphis Mafia and veryone else of my new resolve.

Well, that didn't go down well with the Colonel. Already hating Larry Gellar's guts – as did Priscilla and most of the Memphis Mafia – he accused ne of being on a religious kick that was damaging my career, then proceeded o harass Larry, first by having his house burgled, stealing all his files on arapsychology, astrology, palmistry and numerology, as well as his tapes of nusic from the Church of the Self-Realization Fellowship, then by pressuring ne into marrying Priscilla, now twenty-one, no longer 'jail bait', and, finally, y forbidding anyone to talk to me about religion and by insisting that they, he Memphis Mafia, were to ensure that Larry was never *left alone* with me. A ew days later, the Colonel insisted that I burn all the religious books that arry had given me. And I did. Naturally, taking the hint, Larry quit the ollowing month and no one else ever breathed a word about religion to me.

So I turned to guns.

We all love guns, of course. It's the American way of life. (Just ask harlton 'Ben Hur' Heston.) Personally, like any well brought up, red-blooded merican kid, I'd loved guns since I saw my first Western movie and started ollecting them as soon as I could afford them. Right. Everything from small andguns to an M16 automatic assault rifle. But not much use, are they, if you an't use them? So I gave guns as presents to every member of my Memphis afia and we'd have really great times throwing light bulbs into the wimming pool and then shooting them, or shooting at targets pinned to the vall of the shed containing my great collection of fireworks (which made a ew of the guys nervous), or shooting birds out of the sky, or shooting the easts of the field, or, in my case, shooting the shit out of TV sets when some

personality annoyed me or studio amplifiers when the sound wasn't right or almost shooting various individuals, including girlfriends, when, not concentrating fully because of my medications, I'd fire one of my weapons accidentally, both indoors and outdoors. On a safer level, making my daddy breathe easier after he'd complained a few times about the noise and destruction, we used water pistols instead, chasing each other all over the grounds of Graceland, squirting water at each other while laughing hysterically. But even that became boring in the end.

So I turned to drugs.

Drugs? I *never* took drugs! *Medication*, yeah, but that was all. For medicinal purposes. Codeine, Morphine, Methaqualone (that's Quaalude, above toxic level), Diazepam (that's Valium), Diazepam metabolite, Ethinamate (Valmid), Ethchlorvynol (Placidyl), Amorbarbital (Amytal), Pentobarbital (Nembutal), Pentobarbital (Carbrital), Meperidine (Demorol), Phenyltoloxamine (Sinutub), and last but not least, Elavil and Aventyl, both anti-depressants. Medicines, right? Not drugs. And I knew all about them because *The Physician's Desk Reference* was practically my Bible (the Bible being my all-time favorite read) and I never had it far from my bed, where, as the years went by, I spent more and more of my precious time, sleeping during the day, staying awake most of the night (like a vampire, ha, ha), and engaging in a lot of deep thinking. Like: What am I here for? Why did God anoint me with my great talent? Why do the millions still worship me? And why am I so damned unhappy and taking all these tablets?

Truth be told, I started on the tablets a long time before Bel Air: between 1958 and 1960, when I was serving with the Army in Germany. Initially I took Dexedrine to keep me awake during the long, freezing nights in the mountains on manoeuvres on the border of Communist-ruled Czechoslovakia, then I took others to help me sleep after my sleepless nights and yet others to keep me slim because I always ate too much. But as generous as always, I passed them around. I mean, most of my Memphis Mafia received their fair share. Then, again, when I first met Priscilla in Germany, when she was still only fourteen years old, she confessed that she was spending so much night time with me (all chaste!) that she was falling asleep at school, so I slipped her some pills to keep her awake at school, though I later learned that she just kept them in a box, being too frightened to take them, still being a schoolgirl. A few years later, when she'd just arrived to spend Christmas in Graceland and was jet-

agged and keyed up and told me she hadn't slept for days, I made her take a couple of 500 mg Placidyl tablets, telling her they'd relax her, and she nervously swallowed them and was unconscious so long (two whole days, in fact) that my daddy and some of the guys went into a panic, begging me to call a doctor or an ambulance. But I told them not to worry, that she'd recover, and sure enough she did, though the experience, possibly a 'near death' experience, put her off pills for life.

Not me, though. From then on, until the very end, I just kept taking them tablets. Of course, they had their side effects. I'd always had a temper but the medications made it worse and, even worse than my worsening temper tantrums, was my tendency to lord it over those around me, particularly the Memphis Mafia, and, even worse than that, I started putting on weight. And once started, no stopping.

It was boredom. I was so bored in Bel Air, between making those damned movies, that I even bought a chimpanzee and called him Scatter because he caused so much mayhem in the house. My bored Memphis Mafia encouraged him and certainly loved to watch him 'cause one of his tricks was to look up the ladies' dresses. After he'd escaped from the house and shocked some of the female neighbors with his voyeuristic activities, I shipped him off to Graceland where I had air-conditioned, heated quarters built specially for him. That little bastard sure had it made. On the other hand, when I think back on it, I might just have bought the chimp because I'd read that my acting hero, Marlon Brando, had had a similar situation with a pet racoon that caused mayhem in his apartment in New York. Anything that was good enough for Marlon was good enough for me.

It has to be said, though, that I really *did* love animals, all kinds, and began collecting them, keeping them in my private zoo in the grounds of Graceland, just like I collected my cars and motor-cycles and golf carts and clothes and jewellery and guns and medications. Man, I had horses, ponies, dogs, monkeys, peacocks, other tropical birds… You name it, I had it… But that didn't stop me from being bored. So I gradually increased my intake of medications and, behind the Colonel's back, in the safety of Graceland, Bel Air, Hawaii or Las Vegas, returned to religion and practised spiritual enlightenment by preaching to friends and family, reading religious books to them, patiently explaining the more difficult passages to them, and generally sermonising to them for hours on end, pleased that they always received my

vords of wisdom in total, reverential, wide-eyed silence. And it was round bout this time that I truly came to understand that God had chosen me out of ll others to be one of His messengers on Earth. My great gift as a singer, as n entertainer, was truly a gift from God.

And so, now believing more than ever in God, in the spiritual world and ny personal relevance to it, being one of the Chosen Ones, I began talking ven more frequently, in the darkness of my bedroom, to my dead mama and tillborn brother, Jesse Garon. We had some great conversations. They both aid they were looking forward to seeing me when I reached the Other Side.

That's where I think I might be right now, though I still haven't seen hem.

The Beatles paid me a visit in 1965. It was a special request from them nd so, being 'the King', I passed on my kind permission via the Colonel. Most of the civilized world treated that minor event like some kind of musical Summit Meeting, but it was really just a PR stunt arranged by the Colonel vhen he learnt that the Beatles wanted to meet me. He thought it would help ny flagging career because by that time the Beatles were even bigger than I vas. I didn't really want to meet them, mainly because of my natural shyness vith strangers (which is why I avoided the social life of Hollywood and kept nyself surrounded by my Memphis Mafia), but also because, though still just bunch of kids, they were putting out masterpieces like 'Yesterday' and Help!' while I was singing 'The Song of the Shrimp' and 'There's No Room o Rhumba in a Sports Car'. So, I was embarrassed. Still, they came to see me n my house in Perugia Way in Bel Air. I think it was August. It was supposed o be a quiet affair, but the Colonel ensured, with a few quiet phone calls, that hey had to battle through a crowd of paparazzi to reach my front door. To over my embarrassment (and also to remind them that I was still 'the King') I cted pretty casual when they were escorted into the living room, barely rising off the couch I was sitting on, and then remained coolly polite while they just tood there, staring bug-eyed at me. Feeling better to note that, despite their own fame, they were clearly awed by my presence, I managed to have a altering conversation with them for thirty minutes or so, then, when the ilences became too embarrassing, I played something on my jukebox – I hink it was Charlie Rich – and picked up a guitar and sang along with the ecord. That kind of broke the ice and pretty soon more guitars were handed round and a jam session was under way, with me, John Lennon and Paul

McCartney harmonizing. I mention only John and Paul in this context because although I was known to loathe drugs (I only took medication), the tall, lanky one, George Harrison, was clearly stoned out of his skull and promptly disappeared into the back garden to continue taking whatever he was on. Naturally, hating drugs and drug addicts, I found this deeply offensive, though, being naturally polite and calmed by my medications, I chose to say nothing about it. Ringo was okay, though. Amiable as he always appeared to be on television, not as star-struck as the others, he proceeded to have a game of snooker with some of my boys, acting as if he'd known them for years and filling the pool room with sweet-smelling cigarette smoke. Paul McCartney was a charmer. He soon made me feel at home, even though it *was* my home, and he made sure not to play his borrowed guitar better than I was playing mine, which was not very well. I mean, he knew how to acknowledge a King's privileges. John Lennon was pretty funny, very quick with flip remarks, but despite making it obvious that he thought I was awesome, you could tell that it wouldn't take much to make the Hamburg hooligan turn vicious. And it was clear, despite their awe of me, that they were both pretty high on some substance or other, just like that George Harrison lurking outside, the pathetic drug addict. All drug addicts, the lot of them. I could see this with the heightened clarity I always gained when filled with my numerous medications. So when, a few hours later, they were taking their leave, having received clear indication from me that I was tired and wished to retire (my little act to encourage them to leave), John and Paul invited me to their rented house in nearby Benedict Canyon, and I just said, 'We'll see,' because I had no intention of returning the visit. No matter. When they were gone, I stayed up most of the night as usual, relieved to be alone, watching television with only Priscilla and all of my Memphis Mafia for company. However, the next day, after Joe Esposito had phoned the Beatles' manager on my behalf to decline their kind invitation, Jerry Schilling couldn't resist going to see them on his own. After his visit, safely back in my place, his pupils not abnormally enlarged, he excitedly informed me that John Lennon had made a point of telling him to tell me that if it hadn't been for me, he, John Lennon, would have been nothing. Naturally the compliment pleased me. (It was the least he could have said.) But I still didn't visit the Beatles or invite them back and I never saw them again.

I mean, apart from anything else they were into drugs and I wouldn't

vear that. I know it was widely rumored that *I* was into drugs, but there was ıo truth to it. Believe me, I only took my medications, strictly controlled, as aid down by the rules of *The Physician's Desk Reference*, which I read every lay, just like I read the Bible every day. I hated real drugs and drug addicts ınd dealers, which is why, in 1971, though I was pretty strung out on my nedications, I decided to make a personal visit to President Nixon and ask ıim to make me a Federal Narcotics Agent.

It all started when I had a serious fight with my daddy over Colonel Parker. I wanted to fire the bullying old bastard, but my daddy didn't, clearly ıot trusting me to manage my own affairs, so I just stormed out of Graceland ınd took off for a few days. Called together the crew of my private airplane ınd flew to Washington D.C. Swallowed a lot of my medications en route, felt ›retty high and so passed the time thinking out my strategy. Holed up in the Hotel Washington for a couple of days, took a lot more medications, flew back o L.A., feeling even higher, still ignoring the folk at Graceland, then called ·erry Schilling and told him to book us some tickets to D.C. under the name of ·ohn Carpenter, a pseudonym I often used when seeking anonymity. Arranged ·or Sonny West to meet us in Washington, bringing some cash, because I lidn't have a dime on me. Ate a lot of chocolate, felt really sick, so had some nore of my medications to settle my stomach. Flew back to D.C. with Jerry ınd en route composed a thoughtful letter to the President, telling him that I vanted to help my country combat its drug problem, reminding him that as a ;reat entertainer I could communicate with people of all ages, and suggesting hat I could do more good if I was made a Federal Agent at Large. Went traight to the White House at 6.30 in the morning and handed the letter to the guard on duty at the gate. I was disappointed at first when he failed to ecognize me (I was wearing my big, jewelled glasses, my massive gold belt, ınd my dark Edwardian jacket with brass buttons, draped over my shoulders ike a Batman cape), but I perked up when recognition soon followed and he ıccepted my letter. Went with Jerry from there to our hotel where I called for ı doctor because I wasn't feeling too good. The doctor examined me and told ne I'd be fine if only I'd stop eating all that chocolate. I thanked him, paid ıim, took some more medications, then paid a visit to the Bureau of Narcotics ınd Dangerous Drugs, hoping they'd arrange for a visit with J. Edgar Hoover ıt FBI headquarters. They didn't. I did, however, receive a call from Jerry, elling me that Egil Krogh, deputy counsel to the President, had called to say

hat he was in receipt of my letter to the President and inviting me to stop by ıis office in the Old Executive Office Building in the White House grounds. Took a taxi to the hotel to pick up Jerry. Sonny, who'd flown in from Memphis, arrived at the hotel just as I did. Accompanied by Jerry and Sonny, I ırrived at Krogh's office carrying a World War II Colt .45 that I wanted to give to the President. They told me I couldn't take the gun into the Oval Room, but that one of their agents would pass it on for me. Fine, I said, ıanding over the pistol. Then I spoke at length to Krogh, persuading him that I ıad valid, vitally important reasons for seeing the President. I soon charmed ınd eased the fears of that oddly nervous sonofabitch, so come shortly after nidday we were walking together to the Oval Office, leaving Jerry and Sonny ɔehind. I shook hands with President Nixon. He seemed pretty confused. I tood there, still wearing my oversized sunglasses, looking like Batman, and ilver-tongued him into giving me what I wanted: a BNDD badge. Then I gave he President a hug. This was not normally permitted, but I took him by urprise. Then, while he was still reeling from the shock, I suggested that he ay hello to my two friends, Jerry and Sonny, and give them BNDD badges as vell. And he did. And I proved my worth to him by reminding him that the lrug culture was the vanguard of violent anti-American protest and that the Beatles, just for instance, all of whom took drugs, had come to our fine :ountry, made themselves a fortune in good old U.S. greenbacks, then flown ɔack to England to foment more druggy anti-American feeling with their lecadent songs. This patriotic speech completed, I hugged the President again, hook his hand again, and then flew back to Memphis to be made a private leputy by Sheriff Roy Nixon of Memphis. That the Sheriff and the President hared the same surname was purely coincidental.

Anyway, having been sworn in as a Federal Narcotics Agent and now in ɔossession of my official BNDD badge, I started driving around Memphis at ıight and stopping any drivers I suspected of committing driving offences or ɔeing in the possession of drugs. I had a flashing blue police light on my car. I ılways carried two pistols, one in my boot, the other up my sleeve. I'd wave ny badge in their faces and tell them off for speeding or demand to search heir cars for illegal drugs. I don't know what impressed them most: the fact hat it was me, the world-famous Elvis Presley, or the fact that me and my two ɔuddies actually had official drug squad badges to wave in their faces. I even ısed my new authority to intervene when I saw guys arguing drunkenly

outside dens of iniquity or having fist-fights on the sidewalks. At such times I always wore my outsized sunglasses and Batman-styled cape, so I was pretty impressive when coming on to my chosen criminals in the dead of the night.

But I still wasn't happy.

Of course, Priscilla and me were married by that time. And at least, whether awake or dreaming, whether dead or alive, I still remember the date: May 1, 1967. We were married in the Aladdin Hotel, Las Vegas, in the suite of the owner, Milton Prell. Judging by the photos that I can conjure up in my head right now, I looked plump and sleek, with too much black lacquer in my hair, and Priscilla looked remarkably like me. Of course, that was my intention. I really don't know why. I only know that I spent the six years she spent locked up in Graceland moulding her into the very image of the girl I wanted. Though without make-up she had beautiful, fine features, I practically buried them by making her have piled-up, heavily lacquered, jet-black hair, false ink-black eyelashes, super-heavy eyeliner, thick lipstick and far too much mascara. So, by the time of the wedding, we looked almost like twins. Eerie, right? So maybe, all those years, I'd been subconsciously trying to turn her into the spitting image of myself, or, more likely, into a female version of what I imagined my stillborn twin brother, Jesse Garon, would have looked like. So maybe I was still looking for Jesse Garon.

Best not to think of it.

Anyway, we honeymooned in Palm Springs, finally consummated our lengthy relationship, then returned to a flashy house at Rocca Place in Bel Air, remained there for the first few months of our marriage, then moved into a pseudo-French regency mansion located in Hillcrest Road, in the exclusive Truesdale Estates, Los Angeles. For the rest of my marriage to Priscilla, I commuted between there and Graceland while making Priscilla spend most of her time in the latter, not wanting her to get too close to my movie-making activities, ha, ha, in Hollywood.

Actually, she didn't have too much privacy in Graceland, having to contend on a daily basis with my ever-present, bawling, brawling Memphis Mafia, and with the ever-expanding Graceland staff, including cooks, secretaries, chauffeurs, valets, maids, gardeners, security guards, beauticians and a wide variety of human oddities. Not forgetting my creaking grandma, Minnie Mae, who sniffed snuff and left her false teeth lying all over the place; her foul-mouthed, diabetic-alcoholic daughter, Diane, who had a pet dog later

lescribed by my bright daughter as ‘the dog from hell’; plus my daddy, Vernon, his conniving wife Dee, her three rapidly growing sons, all of whom I letested, and a lot of other long-term, sponging relatives. Enough to keep her ıappily distracted, I thought.

During that first year of marriage life at Graceland continued pretty much ıs normal. I practised karate with Priscilla and the guys, went horse-riding vith Priscilla and the guys, watched too much television with Priscilla and the guys, fooled around with loaded pistols without Priscilla but with the guys, ɔlayed football with show business friends and, as always, with the guys. I ılso threw a lot of late-night parties in Chanault’s restaurant in Bellevue Boulevard, Memphis, for Priscilla and the guys, regularly rented the Crosstown Theatre, the Memphian Theatre, or the Avion Theatre in West Memphis, for all-night movie sessions with Priscilla and the guys. I also hired he whole of Liberty-Land, the Memphis funfair, in order to ride the dodgems vith Priscilla and the guys – either at midnight or in the early hours of the norning – and also enjoyed some all-night frolics with Priscilla and the guys ıt Memphis roller rink, Rainbow Rollerdome, located in Lamar Avenue, Memphis. Getting to sleep and waking up again were taken care of, for all of ıs, with amphetamines and barbiturates, uppers and downers. We should have ɔeen having a whale of a time, but I couldn’t help feeling depressed and kept osing my temper.

The greatest moment of my life up to that point was the birth of my laughter, Lisa Marie, on February 1, 1968, exactly nine months to the day ıfter Priscilla and me were married. I offer this as proof that I never had a ɔroper sexual relationship with Priscilla until we were married. Though we’d ɔooled around a lot in bed during her six unmarried years in Graceland, she emained chaste until the first night of our honeymoon. This came about ɔecause I truly believed that a Christian man should only marry a virgin.

The sex stopped as soon as she announced that she was pregnant, ɔecause I simply couldn’t make love to a pregnant woman. The sex stopped ɔor good, or close enough to it, because I couldn’t make love to any woman vho’d had a baby, not even my wife. I put this down to my abiding belief, my outhern gentleman’s belief, mentioned previously, that there are only four ɛinds of women: (1) mothers; (2) wives; (3) daughters; and (4) all the others. So when Lisa Marie was born, I stopped having sex with her mother and went ɔack to the others. This caused no end of trouble.

Looking back on it, I suppose I should have realized that when I refused o have sex with the fourteen-year old Priscilla in Germany, because she was oo young, but while I was blatantly fooling around with other girls, mostly ans let into the house for that very purpose, she might have felt that she was eing rejected. Looking back on it, I suppose I should also have realized that vhen I continued to refuse to have sex with Priscilla during the six years she ived with me in Graceland (on the rare occasions I was there), while I was latantly fooling around with female fans let into the building for that very urpose, or, just as blatantly, having widely publicized affairs with my co-tars (think Ann Margret) and other female celebrities in Hollywood (though lenying it blandly every time), she might have started feeling that her ndisputable attractions were not being appreciated by her husband. So when I topped having sex with her while she was pregnant, then stopped again, for good, after Marie Lisa was born, she was surely justified in feeling resentful nd then causing some trouble.

Even recalling it, makes me think that if I'm dead it might be a good hing. A man can only take so much.

But before the trouble came, the birth of Marie Lisa filled me with joy, ifted the woes from my shoulders and rejuvenated my flagging spirits, giving ne back my lost ambition, encouraging me to lose weight, and propelling me oward the Great Elvis Comeback. This came at the tail-end of the last four novies I ever made, three diabolically bad, the last not bad at all, merely nediocre, and it took the shape of my revelatory NBC-TV Special, directed by determined young guy called Steve Binder and shown in December 1968. Typically, the Colonel had wanted me to just stand in front of a TV camera nd sing Christmas songs for sixty minutes, but Steve Binder, bless his stout eart, resisted that notion and instead put me into a sexy black-leather suit, eminiscent of Marlon Brando's outfit in *The Wild One*, sat me down with a couple of my old musicians, namely Scotty Moore and J.D. Fontana, and had ne belt out my classic rock and roll songs, including 'Lawdy Miss Clawdy', Hound Dog', All Shook Up', 'Don't be Cruel' and 'One Night', while eating the hell out of my guitar. Man, I was so glad to be back that I sang hose songs like they'd never been sung before. Having been deprived of his ixty-minutes of Christmas songs, the Colonel insisted that we climax the how with at least *one* Christmas song, but instead, again at the urging of quietly stubborn Steve Binder, the producers had a brilliant 'inspirational'

ong composed specially for me. It was called ‘If I Can Dream’ and my mpassioned singing of it at the end of the Special produced tears nationwide then worldwide) and it became my first single in years to sell a million opies.

I was back with the world at my feet.

Then it all went pear-shaped.

But not immediately, as I recall. First there was an inspired recording ession at American Recording in Memphis, leading to a couple of great lbums and a whole string of hit singles. Then there was my spectacular return o live performances, first at Las Vegas, then on tour across America (because f Colonel Parker’s dark past, I never left the country), with critics raving bout how ‘Elvis was supernatural, his own resurrection’. Then the touring, ven though wildly successful, became a real bore and also pretty exhausting, o I had to take even more medications to keep my energy levels up and then, vith my energy levels raised, I decided that I needed something ‘different’ to eep my audiences satisfied. This led me to thinking back on my childhood ove of Batman and Captain Marvel comics, particularly the latter, which in urn led me to style my already dyed-black hair even more in the color and tyle of the Captain Marvel drawings (ink-black verging on purple, including ideburns and forelock) and to have my already flamboyant jumpsuits and apes tailored like Captain Marvel capes, as well as the Captain Marvel ightning-bolt emblem on my TCB (Taking Care of Business) and TLC Tender Loving Care) jewellery, not forgetting the lightning-bolt on the tail nd of my private airplane, the *Lisa Marie*. Pretty impressive, right? At least ny audiences thought so. Certainly, when I began climaxing my live erformances by turning my back to the audience, falling to one knee, and aising my arms to spread the cape out like a great fan, all gold like a blazing un or decorated with a gold-embroidered American eagle, as the orchestra oared on the final stirring notes of ‘An American Trilogy’ (‘Oh, I wish I was n the land of cotton/Old folks there are not forgotten’) they’d go completely lemented.

Unfortunately, when that became boring as well, I had to revert to my nedications to keep the boredom at bay and keep my weight down because I vas eating like a pig because I was so bored, and also because my nedications, more and more every day, were increasing the weight caused by ny overeating and making me blow up like a balloon. Man, it was sad!

And Priscilla was mad. Colonel Parker was mad. They were mad because hey believed that my medications were making me behave irrationally, with ın increasing need to shower expensive gifts on people – flowers, jewellery, ıorses, ponies, automobiles, trucks, houses, ranches – anything 'the leeches' as my daddy termed them) desired, to the point where I was literally spending ortunes. And they were mad because I had gone back to spending hours of neditation in my darkened bedroom, having 'conversations' with my dead nama and stillborn twin brother, Jesse Garon, while fanatically studying soteric religions and philosophies, while bedding visiting fans and other adies, usually in the house in L.A., but sometimes, Lord have mercy, even in Graceland, sneaking them in through the back door. And they were mad ecause they were mistaking my perfectly legitimate medications for hard lrugs and blaming them for my increasing weight and my tendency to give ong, rambling monologues on stage ('Instead of singing', as the Colonel put t) and because I was paying more attention to my karate lessons than I was to utting new, decent records. So… They were mad.

Even now, where I stand, or where I'm sleeping or maybe dreaming, or naybe even dead, I don't know what they were complaining about. But if they vere mad at me, I was just as mad at them because of their condemnation of ny passion for karate, since I actually employed my karate exercises in a pectacular fashion on stage, wearing my gaudy jumpsuits, and the audiences oved it. Later, I was even more incensed by their comments about my karate, vhich Priscilla also practised, because Priscilla, when she decided that she'd ıad enough, had an affair with our karate instructor, Mike Stone, and then left Graceland – and me – for good, to go and live with the back-stabbing onofabitch. So much for karate!

But I have to confess: Priscilla's departure and the loss of Lisa Marie, vho went with her, was the greatest blow I had suffered since the death of my nama.

It all went pear-shaped after that.

But wait a minute. Get that light out of my eyes. It's a light at the end of ı long, dark tunnel and it's either drawing me toward it or it's coming toward ne. Can I see something, or someone, down there?

No. Stop imagining things.

When I look back on my life, I feel troubled, but there *were* a few ıchievements to be proud of, even during the dark, final years. Going back to

he beginning, to those early Sun records, Sam Phillips and me between us did ndeed knock the shit out of the color line. And Sam confessed that without ne he couldn't have done it. And then there were the RCA years, all the joy I rought to millions while breaking down the demarcation lines between lifferent kinds of music, by covering them all, from country to the blues, from gospel to rock and ballads and even opera ('O Sole Mio' and so on). Yeah, ight. And sold so many singles that if you lay them down side by side they'd ircle the whole world twice. Then there were the movies: most were bad, but ome were good, including the documentaries that set the matrix for all future ock documentaries and included the *Aloha From Hawaii* satellite show, iewed simultaneously by over a billion people in over forty countries, giving ne the greatest single audience in history. And the awards, man. Lord, yes! More music awards than any other singer alive. And the many benefit shows. The thousands of dollars given to charities. And finally, despite the divorce, a vife and daughter who loved me right to the end and always supported me.

So that was the good.

Now to the bad.

Where are you, mama? Where are you, Jesse Garon? Why did you both eave me? And why am I here all alone, waiting for your return?

Okay, if I still don't know exactly where I am, at least I now know *why* 'm here. I know it's confession time.

An English writer once wrote that in surrounding myself with the nembers of my Memphis Mafia I was surrounding myself with the voices of ny childhood. That English writer was right. When my mama died, I blamed nyself for her premature death because it was caused by my success and I ould see it but could do nothing about it and so tried to put it out of my mind. She was lovely when she was young. She lived only for me. She wanted me to ucceed and she was pleased with my success, but she had no idea of just how lestructive fame could be and when she finally found out it killed her. *I* killed ıer. I did. I did it with the very best of intentions, but I was to blame. First, she vas frightened of losing me, her only surviving child, and then, with my early ame, I was touring all the time and I didn't get home too much at all. Next, he justifiably felt that increasingly she was losing me to Colonel Parker and o the many temptations of show business. Then, with the very best of ntentions, I moved her out of our shotgun shack in Tupelo and into a four-edroom house in Lamar Avenue, a much better neighborhood. Six months

ater, we moved again, this time into a grander, three-story house in Getwell Street. Finally, I bought us our first house in Audubon Drive, in a wealthy, quiet area. I also bought mama a pink Cadillac. It was what she'd always vanted, but she never got round to driving it. And while pretending to be pleased, it was clear that she was deeply unhappy in her new home, having ost her old friends and being unpopular with the snot-nosed neighbors who vere always complaining to her about the noise and constant activity caused by my fans and the media. She could only have been made more miserable vhen the neighbors actually brought a public nuisance complaint against me, hough thankfully the judge ruled in my favor. That's when my mama started ıer secret drinking. Though she believed it was secret, my daddy and me knew ıll about it, so a year after moving into Audubon Drive, I purchased Graceland, a two-story, 23-room mansion with thirteen acres of land, located ust outside Memphis at what's now 374 Elvis Presley Boulevard. Soon after he purchase, I installed the now-famous wrought-iron 'music gates' and a swimming pool, then I raised the walls and planted trees to give us some privacy. But none of it worked. Mama just felt more isolated than ever, dislocated from all she knew, and complained that I was being taken away from her by managers and the media and my fans. On top of all this, she was ıeartbroken because she'd been so fond of my first girlfriends – Dixie Locke, Barbara Hearne, June Juanico, Anita Wood – all local girls – and was desperately hoping I'd marry one of them and give her grandchildren. Instead, suddenly I was dating Las Vegas dancers and Hollywood starlets and soft-ouch female fans while losing contact with the girls my mama was fond of. All of this only increased her secret drinking and led to the rapid deterioration of her health. Then, when I was serving with the Army, mama died from acute ıepatitis and severe liver damage caused by her heavy drinking. And I ıbsolutely blamed myself for that.

That was when I first saw the dark side of fame. In the early days of my ame I'd taken a coltish pleasure from the screaming and sobbing of my emale fans, but by the second year of it, when their antics were getting out of ıand, when they were pulling at my clothes and writing on my cheeks in ipstick or dancing up and down on the hood of my car or driving a knife into he upholstery, I saw that they were doing it with the queerest light in their yes and that kind of frightened me. Then, when my mama was being buried ıt the Forest Hill Cemetery in Memphis, even though I was distraught with

grief, almost out of my mind, sobbing relentlessly, clinging to my daddy, the fans were all over the place, taking pictures, screaming at me for autographs, some even laughing and joking with each other, turning the funeral into a circus – and that was the first clear picture I had of the dark side of fame.

I hadn't found freedom in fame; I'd been imprisoned by it. And that's why, when I was serving in Germany with the Army, but living outside the base, I brought family and friends from home to share my rented house in Bad Nauheim. The friends were Red West and Lamar Fike: the first members of my soon-to-grow Memphis Mafia. Only now can I clearly see that I wanted to be surrounded by family and friends, the 'voices of my childhood,' as a form of protection in a world without my mama, without my childhood sweethearts, the ones my mama thought I'd marry, and increasingly, until the arrival of Priscilla, without any seriously close relationships. I was a 'star' and that removed me from the real world and eventually forced me to create my own. By the time I returned to the States, in 1960, I wasn't the man I had been. I was someone else entirely. I was 'the King' and the Memphis Mafia were my courtiers. They lived by and for me.

Despite being back in Graceland, the pressures grew and grew. First and foremost was my guilt over Mama's death. Next was the growing feeling that I was all alone in the world, despite having my daddy with me – because my daddy had already shocked me by having an affair in Germany with a married blonde who boldly forced herself into our lives only months after my mama had died. That seriously angered me, putting a distance between me and my daddy that hadn't been there before. Even worse, when I was discharged from the Army and moved back into Graceland, leaving Priscilla back there in Germany with her folks, my daddy moved his new woman, the still married Dee, in as well, along with her three children, and eventually she was divorced and they got married. I couldn't stand it. I couldn't stand the thought of my daddy and this woman sharing a bed under the same roof that had sheltered my mama. So shortly after they married, which secretly disgusted me, though I tried to be civil about it, I moved them out of Graceland, into a house I'd had specially built for them out back of the main house. But I was never really easy with my daddy or Dee after that.

Everything had changed and I had changed as well. First my guilt over my mama, then the side effects from my medications, then the endless politics of life as a King surrounded by courtiers – the Memphis Mafia, family, distant

elatives, staff – who were constantly vying for my favors and frequently at ach other's throats to gain a more strategic position for themselves. I loathed t and used it at the same time, deliberately saying one thing to one of them, he opposite to another, slyly pitting them against each other, making them ompete for me, while also frequently screaming abuse at them and then howering them with gifts (which saved me from apologising) and in general ehaving like one of the Pharaohs. And just like a Pharaoh, I began believing hat everyone was out to use me (proved more than once) and scheming ehind my back for some underhand purpose or other. Then, of course, there vas the Colonel, one of the world's most brilliant schemers, manipulating this nd manipulating that and starting to interfere with my music (which he hadn't lone before) and now addicted to gambling away fortunes in Las Vegas and elling me short to make up for his crippling losses. And, finally, there was riscilla, my ever more beautiful wife (her good looks actually improved with naturity), the mother of my beloved daughter, feeling neglected by a husband vho refused to have sex with her because she'd had our child, who was more requently involving himself with other, invariably younger, women, and vhose growing dependence on medications was making him erratic and hreatening to send him off the rails altogether. So she had an affair with my ack-stabbing karate instructor and then went off for good to live with him, aking my beloved daughter, Lisa Marie, with her. After that… Yeah, right. I vent off the rails altogether.

Do I want to dwell on the rest of it? The long slide down into hell. (Is hat where I am now?) The divorce in 1973. The break-ups and reconciliations vith Colonel Parker. The ballooning weight thereafter. The overeating and omiting. The physical collapses in Graceland. The slurred speech. The out-f-focus, wandering gaze. The rambling monologues on stage. The cancelled hows and recording sessions. The repeated hospitalisations. (Enlarged colon, lrug detoxication, glaucoma, liver damage caused by the drug abuse; with my nama it was drink, not drugs, but otherwise it was pretty much the same hing.) The firing or the walking out of old friends and formerly loyal nusicians. The various live-in girlfriends – Linda 'Miss Tennessee' Thompson; Priscilla lookalike Ginger 'Miss Memphis Traffic Safety' Alden – oth required only to give me cuddles for comfort because I couldn't get it up nymore. And the final humiliation when three of my closest friends, members f my Memphis Mafia, Red and Sonny West and Dave Hebler, all recently

ired by my daddy and not defended by me, got together with an Australian ıack to produce a book of reminiscences deliberately chosen to prove that I ook ‘drugs’ (medications!) in huge quantities, engaged in some ‘unsavoury’ exual activities (strictly heterosexual!), and had an unwholesome obsession vith guns, mortuary corpses, videotaped sex, and the ‘ghosts’ of my dead nama and twin brother. That book shocked the whole world as much as it hocked me. Indeed, it shocked me so much that it finally made me give up he ghost.

I remember lying face-down on the bathroom floor, with the light gradually fading around me, but that’s *all* I remember.

Maybe it was suicide. Maybe not. Who the hell cares?

Now, here I am. Somewhere. Some time. I still don’t know if I’m awake or dreaming, alive or dead, if I have any future other than the expectation that omehow, wherever I may be, I might soon be reunited with my beloved nama and twin brother, Jesse Garon. Yet oddly enough, while I’m waiting for hem to appear, possibly emerging from the light at the end of that long, dark unnel, I keep going over my past, over and over again, like a ribbon of lreams, my successes and failures, my ups and my downs, my hopes and lost ıopes, realising that despite all of my many achievements it’s the failures that ontinue to torment me. My caving in to Colonel Parker. My betrayal of Scotty and Bill. The early death of my mama, caused by my huge success, vhich took me away from her; and then the loss of my first three Tupelo girlfriends, which broke my mama’s heart because she wanted a grandchild ınd saw the possibilities fading; followed by the bitter loss of Ann Margret, possibly the great love of my life, and then the loss of my neglected, betrayed vife, Priscilla… all of them, in various ways, given up in the end for fame and ortune. And maybe, worst of all, I remain tormented by my failure to become ı serious actor because that, despite my love of music, was what I’d always vanted the most: to be the new James Dean, or, even better, Marlon Brando. And thinking back on this, I keep recalling a brief meeting that, no matter how elatively insignificant in God’s Great Plan, meant more to me than anything lse in my whole life, other than the birth of my daughter, Lisa Marie.

It happened in 1958, during the making of *King Creole*. I was having a break with Jan Shepard in the commissary of the Paramount lot. Sophia Loren and Carlo Ponti were sitting at the table right next to us and that kind of sighting could still excite me. Then the famous actor, Colonel Wilde, came

over to my table and asked me for an autograph for his daughter. That excited me as well. (Being famous themselves, they always claimed that the autograph was for a spouse or child.) However, what excited me even more, indeed practically stunned me, was when Jan Shepard leaned across the table, grinning mischievously, to whisper that my idol, Marlon Brando, was sitting right behind me. I started shaking on the instant. I was that overwhelmed. I kept glancing over my shoulder, at his back, but I just couldn't move. Eventually, knowing what I was going through, Jan grinned and insisted that we leave. So we stood up to leave and I kind of brushed against Brando as I was passing his table – maybe did it deliberately – and he instantly grinned – that immortal, slow-burning, seductive grin – and pushed his chair back and stood up to offer his hand, telling me how pleased he was to meet me. And then he sat down again and I hurried outside, not daring to look back over my shoulder, still shaking, hardly believing what had happened.

And here I am, recalling it again, having recalled it so many times, even while yearning to see my mama and Jesse Garon, still wondering exactly where I am and what may be waiting for me out there, beyond an unseen horizon, in my problematical future. But maybe that small incident, more than any other, more than the records and the movies and the money and the many women, the highs and the lows, the successes and the failures, reminds me of all that I won and then lost, of what I most wanted to attain, but never did. Yeah, it's that single, still vivid, abiding memory, going round and round in my head like a ribbon of dreams.

I once shook hands with Marlon Brando.

Marlon

1924 – 2004

I should never have said what I said about Elvis. I was just being flippant with that *Playboy* interviewer, Lawrence Grobel. We were talking about celebrity in general and I described Elvis as a bloated, over-the-hill adolescent entertainer who had nothing to do with excellence, just myth. It was a really cruel thing to say, particularly knowing, as I did, that Elvis revered me as an actor and had based a lot of his image on me – the so-called 'sullen' look, the black leather 'Wild One' jackets, the motor cycles, and so on. Really mean of me, but what the fuck? I was sitting there on my private island, Tetiaroa, in the South Pacific, being interviewed by Grobel, and |I just wanted to wind the asshole up. Of course in the end Elvis *was* bloated and over-the-hill, but then so was I, so maybe I was just criticizing myself. Or, more likely, being hypocritical. I was always good at that. I mean, I also railed at Grobel about celebrities who lent their presence to expensive charity dinners – I described them as 'shills' – and then I ended up befriending Michael Jackson, of all people, and spending a lot of time living for free in his disgusting Neverland ranch, his Disneyland-styled playground, near Santa Barbara, and even appearing as a Don Corleone styled gangster in one of his ridiculous music videos. Even worse, I agreed to appear at a Michael Jackson tribute at Madison Square Garden and was booed by the audience. That audience clearly had more sense than I gave them credit for. They knew what I was doing up there. I was there for the money. Michael paid me a million bucks. So I sat on a leather recliner on the stage, wearing my big sunglasses, looking like a fucking elephant, and deliberately mumbled on and on.. and on… about the horrors of sub-Saharan Africa, until the audience, who only wanted to be entertained by a string of pop performers paying their self-

serving ‘tributes’ to Michael, were going mad with frustration. Dear Michael, who was seated with Elizabeth Taylor (who, before she, too, fattened up, played my promiscuous wife in *Reflections in a Golden Eye*), just sat there, looking increasingly embarrassed. I mean, he was only paying me a million bucks for the appearance, so I thought he deserved a little winding up.

Jesus, why am I suddenly thinking of Elvis Presley and Michael Jackson? Am I still unconscious? Am I dreaming? Am I dead or alive? I remember dreaming that I’d died and the dream seemed very real, but I can’t have died or I wouldn’t be here. But then, come to think of it, where’s *here*? I feel that I’m half asleep, but I don’t think I’m lying down and I can’t even feel my huge, heavy bulk; I feel disembodied. Yes, a dream, it must be a dream. I’m kinda sleeping, *partly* sleeping, and the room’s pretty dark, so dark I can’t even see the walls, though there’s a small light, a faintly flickering light, straight ahead and not too far away, maybe fixed to that unseen wall. But I can’t be sure of that. I mean, I can’t judge the distance. I only know that I’m aware of myself and that I feel sleepy, disembodied, and I keep imagining that I died, or dreamt that I died, and I’m in this total darkness and my thoughts keep returning to the past, one scene coming after the other, like an unwinding ribbon of film: the mighty Orson’s famed ribbon of dreams.

Okay, to hell with where I am. To get back to the Grobel interview, I’ll accept that I *was* being pretty mean, particularly since the bloated, bleary-eyed Orson Welles of rock and roll had only recently died (in August of the previous year), but with the biggest fucking funeral since Valentino’s. I *do* remember thinking, ‘No way am *I* going to have that size of audience when I finally kick the bucket.’ So, yes, there was a little resentment there, though my resentments about Elvis went a good way farther back than that.

So *did* I kick the bucket? Why do I even think that? If I’d actually kicked the bucket I wouldn’t be thinking about it now. On the other hand, who knows what lies on the other side? Which is where I could be right now. Shit, this is all too confusing. I’m just dreaming, that’s all. I’ve been a manic-depressive all my life, so weird dreams aren’t unusual. So what was I thinking? Ah, yes…

I knew, of course, as far back as the 1950s, when Elvis first broke out, that he had a fixation about me and James Dean, one of my most brazen imitators. I’d read and been told by friends that he’d seen both *Rebel Without a Cause* and *The Wild One* so many times, in both cases mouthing the words spoken

by Dean and me as they were uttered onscreen, that he knew every single line of both scripts and could quote them verbatim. Like lots of people at the time, Presley thought that me and Dean were similar as actors and I particularly resented the misconception because I believed that Dean was just a poor imitation of me. Though *Rebel Without a Cause* was considered to be one of the seminal 'mixed-up-kid' movies of the 1950s, I thought it was a self-pitying load of crap with the parents all treated as cartoon characters to emphasize even more the supposedly 'sensitive' nature of the troubled teenage character played by Dean who, being a self-pitying little shit in real life, played it for all he was worth. *The Wild One* may have been a crap movie, with a lot of pseudo 'hip' dialogue ('If you're gonna stay cool, you got to *wail*. You got to put somethin' *down*. You got to make some *jive*.'), but at least my character, Johnny, wasn't self-pitying like Dean in *Rebel*. In fact, although I played a lot of troubled characters, they were never self-pitying. So when Elvis placed me side by side with Jimmy Dean, even though he did so in admiration, I really wasn't too pleased.

Then Dean died in a car crash, which left only me (Monty was pretty much out of it by this time, being a little too keen on his hip flask), so Elvis started acting more frequently like Johnny (me) in *The Wild One*, which really annoyed me. Bad enough that the rock and roll legend was repeatedly photographed on motorcycles (like guess who?), but I happened to switch on the TV one afternoon just as he was being interviewed by a guy called Wink Martindale and I felt like putting my boot through the screen. Though Wink looked as straight as an arrow – proper suit, shirt and tie, bland features – Elvis looked like a young hooligan, chewing gum in an exaggerated manner while leaning sleepy-eyed on a studio jukebox, mumbling and slurring his words just like I was reported to do, though I never did at that time, at least not onscreen. Anyway, it only took me a few seconds to realize that Elvis was brazenly imitating me, talking in a hesitant, distracted manner (one of my trademarks) and even rhythmically smacking the jukebox with one hand just as I'd done in a famous scene in *The Wild One*. I felt my teeth grinding, but a couple of weeks later I caught him being interviewed by the walking dead, Hy Gardner, on the *Hy Gardner Calling*! TV show, and again he did an exaggerated imitation of me, looking sleepy-eyed, taking an eternity to reply to simple questions, and practically whispering his words when finally he *did* reply. So that was one cause of resentment. However, I'd initially had great

admiration for him because of the way, in the early days of his career, even when black people were still being lynched down south, he defied musical prejudices by boldly breaking down the barriers against so-called 'nigger' music, gaining it wide acceptance, also openly befriending black singers. So I resented him even more when, during the 1960s, when me and a lot of other celebrities were taking part in the civil rights marches, which was pretty fucking dangerous (think of the paparazzi photographing you on your bad side), he was holed up in his fancy houses in Memphis or Bel Air, surrounding himself with a bunch of hangers-on, his so-called Memphis Mafia, living like a king (the 'King' of rock and roll) with his yes-men courtiers, refusing to offer any kind of political comment, and going for the easy money with all those dumb beach-and-bikini movies.

I met him once, actually, when he was making *King Creole* for Paramount. I was having lunch in the commissary with a couple of slavering producers who were trying to con me into something or other, and one of them, obviously being flummoxed by my typically disjointed, evasive way of responding to any kind of question regarding movie projects, leaned toward me and whispered that Elvis Presley, then the hottest thing in town, was sitting at the table behind me and that his friend, a minor actress called Jan Shepard, was nodding in my direction, looking all excited, and clearly telling him that I was sitting there right behind him. Since Sophia Loren and Carlo Ponti were at the table on the other side of me, this news was hardly likely to impress me, so I didn't bother to turn around and say hello. Then Elvis did this really dumb thing that actually touched me. I heard his chair scraping as he stood up to leave, and as he passed my table he brushed lightly against me, as if accidentally, though I knew it was deliberate, and then instantly apologized, as if not recognizing me, and then, his eyes lighting up with faked sudden recognition, exclaimed, as if in awe, '*Marlon Brando*!' So knowing that he was a great fan of mine, imitating me in so many ways, the 'Marlon Brando of rock 'n' roll', I stood up, smiling smarmily, and shook his hand, not saying a word, and then, taken aback by just how handsome he was, how absolutely fuckable, despite his innate shyness, I sat down again and let him hurry, obviously all shook up, out of the room. And that was my one and only meeting with the legendary Elvis Presley, a nice kid, but incredibly sexy as well, who'd shown great potential as an actor in his first few movies, some of which I'd seen, but who would go on to make some of

the worst movies ever to come out of Hollywood.

Not that my own movies were much better at that particular time. Remember *Bedtime Story*? *Morituri*? *The Appaloosa*? *The Countess from Hong Kong*? *Candy*? *The Night of the Following Day*? *The Nightcomers*? Those movies represented my 1960s, which I'd rather forget: the years when my contempt for acting seemed to be at its peak and I was only really interested in politics. By the end of the '60s, given how bad those movies were, my career was virtually at an end and I didn't give a shit, except for hurting from my rapidly dwindling finances. At least that's the impression I gave as a form of self-defence. I mean, a man has his pride. But while the widespread belief at that time was that I simply hated acting – a belief encouraged by my own statements – it wasn't quite true.

Despite my often stated contempt for acting, the real source of my discomfort with it stemmed from the fact that each time I performed in a movie I was reminded of how, as a kid, I used to have to 'act' for my mother to waken her out of her drunken stupors. My mother was an artistically frustrated, philandering alcoholic. My father was a philanderer who liked his booze, too. I was born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, the third child coming after two sisters, Jocelyn and Frances. In certain ways it was an ideal life, a typical Midwestern life, in a pretty wood-shingled house, with the dogs and the cats and the milk-giving family cow, a big front yard to play in. But that was the good part. Set against that was our mom and dad, 'Dodie' and 'Pops'.

My father, Marlon Sr., was a military man who'd attended Shattuck Military Academy and fought in the Great War, then became a travelling salesman (limestone products) who drank like a fish and bought whores in the many towns he stopped at. He was a hard-as-nails bully who rarely showed us any affection and often gave me a hammering with his fists, so I hated his guts. Started calling him 'Pops' as a sly form of contempt and, oddly, he let me get away with it. My mother, Dorothy, formerly a Pennebaker, known to us as 'Dodie', was something of a bohemian and talented actress who received rave reviews for her early performances at the Omaha Community Playhouse, where she played against Harriet Fonda, her daughter Joyce, and her then twenty-one-year-old son, Henry, who, like me, subsequently went on to fame and fortune in film. As I see it now, my mother had always been a pretty solid drinker in the bohemian manner of the period, when Prohibition made drinking even more exciting, but when Pops moved

us to Evanston, Illinois, outside Chicago, she was cut off from her artistic friends, saw her hopes of becoming a serious actress vanishing, and so drank even harder and soon became a full-blown alcoholic. Pretty soon she was having affairs on the side and going out to drink in bars, neglecting both her home and her kids. When Pops came home, which was rarely, him and my mother would drink the beer we brewed at home, followed by hard liquor, and then have violent arguments; when he left, my mother would return to the local bars, from which she often had to be rescued by one of her children. In various interviews, and in *Last Tango in Paris*, I implied that I was the one who most often had to endure this particular humiliation, but at that time it was mostly my sister, Franny. I didn't have to drag Dodie out of bars until much later, when she'd separated again from Pops and was living in New York. On the other hand, if Franny did the hard work in Evanston, I was already pretty talented as a mimic and used to encourage my drunken mother out of her catatonic states by pulling all kinds of faces and using lots of different voices, expertly mimicking various relatives and friends and even animals. (I could growl like a lion; I could bleat like a lamb.) That's certainly one of the reasons why, even though I initially took acting seriously, I was never comfortable with it. Acting always reminded me of those terrible days when I 'acted' to entertain my mother and waken her out of her drunken stupors.

Anyway, I'm convinced that all the fucking around of my parents – their heavy drinking, their constant fighting, their frequent separations and reconciliations, their moving from town to town in the vain hope of a better tomorrow – left its mark on me, making me deeply suspicious of grown-ups, increasing my love of the many stray dogs and cats that I brought home, and certainly making me rebellious both at home and at school. Truth tell, I was a bit of a terror. Got up to all kinds of mischief, probably seeking attention. With Pops away so often and my mother frequently catatonic, I could virtually do what I wanted and I took advantage. Bullied my sisters. Had to win at everything. Didn't think twice about cheating to make sure I won. And at school – Jesus, at school! High-profile misbehaviour with rubber bands, spitballs, paper airplanes. Would stick my foot out in the aisle to trip my classmates; terrify girls by chasing them with a dead snake in my hand. Once even used a can of lighter fluid to write 'shit' on the blackboard and put a match to it just as the teacher entered the classroom. Often got kicked out of

school for three or four days at a time, sometimes a week or two, and they often had to send for one of my parents to take me home because I was causing so much disruption. Lots of fist fights as well, often in defence of my friend, Willy Cox, whose mother was also an alcoholic and was soon to disappear for good with her lesbian lover. Wally, initially shy, later extroverted, eventually became well known as TV's Mr Peepers and we remained close friends right up to the end.

What end? Wally's end? My end? Why am I even thinking of my end when I'm right here, if half asleep, in a room so dark I can't see the walls, though I can still see that tiny light straight ahead. It's just that I dreamt that I'd died and now I can't feel my normally heavy bulk. I've been like an elephant the past few years and my weight dragged me down. It's not doing that right now.

But the past, the past… It keeps coming back to me. Now I'm remembering that to avoid confusing me with my father, Marlon Sr., most of those who knew me called me 'Bud'. This was okay by me, since I hated Pops so much I didn't want to be associated with him even by name, though I continued to seek out the attention I wasn't getting from him. In other words, I kept getting up to mischief. Took the pins out of the hinges on the door to one of the classrooms. Hung a dead skunk on the football scoreboard. Threw firecrackers out of the classroom windows in the middle of class. Poured hydrogen sulfide into the blower of the school's furnace, thus spreading a stink through every corridor and classroom. Came to a French lesson with my homework written on toilet paper and then, when asked to read it, stood up and unrolled the toilet paper sheet after sheet. My teacher wasn't amused.

If I recall it correctly, I was attending High School when I began to disassociate from the other pupils, to keep my distance, just watching and listening, rarely speaking, only whispering or mumbling when forced to speak, usually to answer a question. I'd sit in class and just stare out the window, as if I was elsewhere, but actually still listening and watching, observing the behaviour of my classmates and teachers with eyes in the back of my head. Gradually I became totally fascinated by human behaviour and that in turn became the bedrock of my future acting ability: a genius at the small but telling gesture. I also learnt pretty quickly, in my study of human nature, that an 'otherworldly' air, combined with a steady, penetrating stare, could fascinate the girls. This was a lesson I was never to forget. Being

withdrawn only added to my reputation of being someone ‘different’. The girls loved the mystery.

‘When you stare at me that way,’ so many of them said, ‘I feel that you’re secretly undressing me.’ So I always obliged.

All human behaviour is a form of acting and this was acting on my part. Whether I liked acting or not, it came naturally to me and I was good at it right from the start. But I was troublesome even then. When I joined the Dramatics Club at school I showed a natural aptitude for acting, but argued constantly with the dramatic coach, Mr Bergfald, about how a role should be played. Years later, even when praising my talents, he qualified the praise by pointing out that I didn’t like being told what to do and that sometimes I was ‘downright rude’. He was correct on both counts.

I did, however, continue to mix with other pupils in the sense that I was fond of sport and usually good at it, mostly in football and boxing. I also worked out with weights in the school gymnasium, which built up my muscular physique. I also became addicted to music, mostly big band swing, but also black jazz, the blues, and Latin music, the latter inspiring my life-long love of bongo drums. These interests, however, didn’t prevent me from repeatedly cutting school and staying at home all day; when I did I either played my bongo drums or read voraciously. Yeah, I read everything. Mostly the classics collected by my artistically frustrated mother: Shakespeare, T. S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald. Plus books on Taoism and other, mostly Eastern, religions. Even now, I can quote Shakespeare at the drop of a hat. To the day I died (if I actually died and didn’t just dream it) Shakespeare and Tennessee Williams were the only two writers whose words I wouldn’t interfere with, not even for my beloved improvisations.

Sex? God, I started into that real early and, once started, couldn’t stop. My sexual drive was prodigious. I might even say insatiable. I mean, I first tried sex, while still a pubescent boy, with our family housekeeper, Erma, in Omaha and Evanston. Erma was my first ‘exotic’, being a mixture of Dutch and Indonesian. I didn’t actually penetrate her, being only six years old, but we played together during the day and often slept in the same bed at night, with her stark naked and me lovingly rubbing myself against her. Naturally, I was deeply devoted to her, so when she finally left to get married, never to return, my heart was broken, I felt betrayed, and my trust in my fellow human beings, particularly women, was greatly diminished. But it didn’t stop my

need for sex. Later, when I was only aged fourteen and we'd moved to Libertyville, thirty-five miles northwest of Chicago, I fucked our new, black housekeeper. And didn't ignore sex at school either. There I was already perceptive enough to distinguish between the sexually conservative girls from those I considered available and always went without a qualm for the latter. Thing is, after Erma, I didn't have the patience for romance or sweet words. I just wanted to get it as easily and as quickly as possible: wham, bam, thank you, mam. That attitude didn't really change much over the years. Even in my late years I had whores service me in my place in Mulholland Drive to save me the bother of being nice to various girlfriends. You can do that if you're famous and rich enough and it makes life much easier.

That tiny light in the darkness is very slowly getting bigger. I still can't see the walls – this darkness is pretty deep – so I'm only assuming that the light, right there in front of me, is fixed to a wall. On the other hand, because I can't see the wall, I've no idea how near or far away the light is. Sometimes it looks like a distant star in a night sky, but it can't be that. I must be in my darkened bedroom, still alive, still ill, as I've been for a very long time. I just wish I could feel the weight of my bloated body, but I feel that I'm floating. And I'm thinking. Remembering…

To get back to my school days, despite my many interests I continued to play up and get into trouble and receive lousy grades, so in 1941, when I was seventeen years old, oblivious to the fact that the Nazis were gobbling up most of Europe, Pops decided to send me to his old alma mater, Shattuck Military Academy, hoping it would instil some discipline in me. It didn't. I caused as much trouble there as I'd done at high school: playing the same kind of tricks, upsetting the school routine as much as possible, and generally being a smart-ass, quick with cynical or insulting wisecracks. I hated it. I hated the fucking uniforms and the old farts in charge and the military discipline and having to keep my hair short like a regular soldier. I hated it even more when the Japs bombed Pearl Harbor, America entered the war, and my fellow students all turned gung-ho with patriotism, which didn't interest me one bit. So I kept playing my pranks, kept disrupting their whole routine, kept doing everything I could think of to make them mad at me. Naturally, they kept threatening to expel me and eventually they did, which infuriated Pops, but thank God, before that black day, I actually had some positive experiences.

First was my affair with a fellow student. He was pretty much of a hopeless case, kind of timid, clearly gay, always looking at me with puppy-dog eyes, so I initially fucked him just out of curiosity, wondering what it would be like, always fascinated, as I was, to learn everything there was to know about my fellow man. It was also a mercy fuck – he always seemed so desperate – but eventually we became a regular item, thus showing me that I was, if not homosexual (I liked women too much) possibly bisexual. This didn't bother me at all. In fact, it kind of pleased me. I felt that an understanding and acceptance of bisexuality could only be an invaluable aid to my planned career as a professional actor: one more addition to my accumulating knowledge of the bottomless well of sordid human behaviour. The second good thing was when I joined the Dramatic Association and was taken under the wing of the head of the English department, Earle 'Duke' Wagner, an elegant, eccentric gentleman, almost certainly homosexual. Though he never came on to me, he was, in my view, the first human being ever to offer me the sort of encouraging words that I'd never heard from the lips of my icily superior, sarcastic Pops. Even better, Duke repeatedly told me that I had serious acting potential and should pursue it as a career. Since Pops had repeatedly told me that I'd end up as a bum, Duke's validation often reduced me to tears, though I only shed them in private. His validation also encouraged me to stick with the Dramatic Association, and my subsequent performances led to standing ovations, confirming that his faith in me hadn't been misplaced. Eventually, however, my continuing bad behaviour, my outrageous pranks, my continuing contempt for all forms of authority, including heated arguments even with Duke when he tried to direct me too much, led to my expulsion from the academy – an absolute disgrace – and my premature return to Libertyville.

Pops went bananas and we had some serious fights that sometimes led to physical violence. This situation was made worse by the fact that I was now the only child in the house, Franny and Jocelyn having gone to New York, the former to study painting, the latter to become engaged to a guy called Don Hammer and, having already shown talent as an actress, to work in the theatre. Possibly more incensed than ever at my failure to conform, Pops continued to put me down and make heavy demands upon me: sneering about my many failures, making me do the household chores, and even, worst of all, making me milk the family cow, a messy, smelly business, just before I

went out on my teenage dates. When I picked my date up in the car, the car stank of shit. This shook me up so much that the trauma emerged years later in one of my improvisational monologues in *Last Tango in Paris*. To make matters worse, my mother's alcoholism became even more pronounced and she tried committing suicide a couple of times, first gobbling too many pills, then trying to slit her wrists, being hospitalized on both occasions. At the same time, the fights with Pops were growing worse, sometimes leading to physical violence. So eventually, between the two of them, I'd had enough and decided to go to New York and study acting.

Man, I just loved New York. Came alive there. Moved in temporarily with my sister Franny, who had a tiny apartment in Greenwich Village. Had a brief affair with Frannie's neighbor, the exotically named Estrellita Rosa Maria Consuelo Cruz, then moved in with another neighbor, Celia Webb. Not that Celia could hold me. I was fucking everything that came within range, be it man or woman. Explored Broadway and Harlem, falling passionately in love with jazz and Afro-Cuban music, playing my bongo drums wherever they'd let me. My obsession with the 'exotic' world of bongo drums and dark-skinned bodies was only increased when, having just turned twenty-one, I joined the Katherine Dunham School of Dance, where most of the dancers were either black, Haitian or Spanish, and the drumming, both with congas and bongos, put me in close contact with Haitians, Harlem blacks, and passionate Latinos. I had the time of my life in that place, fucking night and day, both sexes, all nationalities, no prejudice at all. Then the real world, in the form of my sister, Jocelyn, made me act more responsibly.

Worried that I was actually heading nowhere and could indeed, as Pops had cruelly insinuated, end up as a bum, Jocelyn, knowing a lot of people in theatre and convinced of my talent, pushed me into becoming a student in the drama department of the New School for Social Research on Twelth Street in the village, within walking distance of where I was living. It was run by a German martinet, Erwin Piscator, a real pain in the ass, but my class included Shelly Winters, Rod Steiger, Elaine Stritch, Harry Belafonte, and Kim Stanley. More importantly, however, it was my participation in the New School drama classes that led me to the two people who would become most important to my career: Stella Adler and Elia Kazan.

Stella. Jesus! Even now, wherever I am, the very thought of her makes me want to have an erection (though those days are long gone). Man, she was

gorgeous. Though about forty years old (she always lied about her age), Stella was a failed actress with the beauty of a successful actress and all the confidence that comes from a prestigious theatrical background. Her father was Jacob Adler, greatest star of the Yiddish stage, her mother was Sarah Adler, a famous Yiddish actress, and her brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces and in-laws were all in show business. Stella began acting professionally at the age of five, quickly gained a reputation as a child prodigy, toured the world with various Yiddish theatrical groups, appeared in a couple of Hollywood movies, studied under Lee Strasberg, married Harold Clurman, joined with Clurman, Strasberg and Cheryl Crawford to form the hugely influential Group Theatre, but fought with Strasberg over their conflicting theories regarding the Stanislavski school of acting, and then, when the Group Theatre collapsed, she became the most famous acting coach in the New School's drama department. When I first entered her class, wearing my customary dirty T-shirt, ripped jeans and well-worn sneakers, she said, 'Who's the vagabond?' But she was soon addressing me as 'Marlon dear' and 'my darling' and telling everyone that I was destined to become the greatest actor in the American theatre. Whether or not that turned out to be true, I always believed, and still believe, that she taught me more about acting than anyone else on Earth, though she always insisted that she'd simply kicked open the door and that I'd then breezed in with my natural talent. She also introduced me to her many artistic Jewish friends, immersing me in Jewish culture and politics, and giving birth to my enduring love of, and respect for, Jews in general. I fucked her, of course. We were really pretty close. I was fucking her teenage daughter, Ellen, at the same time, each knowing about the other and accepting the situation, but surprisingly we, meaning Ellen and me, became life-long friends. She was one of the few.

Then there was Elia Kazan, the second most important person in my whole career and possibly my greatest loss in the long term.

By the time I met Kazan, nicknamed 'Gadge', I'd already appeared in a couple of Broadway plays, including John Van Druten's *I Remember Mama*, for which I was applauded hysterically by the audiences but ignored by the critics; and Maxwell Anderson's *Truckline Café*, co-produced by Kazan, already famous as a Broadway director for his dazzling productions of Clifford Odets' left-wing plays, *Waiting for Lefty* and *Golden Boy*. (I knew Odets personally because he had a crush on me, so I gave him a couple of

mercy fucks, then discarded him because he became pathetically clingy.) Kazan hated the play, thought my initial reading was a disaster, wanted Burgess Meredith instead of me, was outraged by the fee demanded by my agent, but changed his mind when he saw the audience's reaction to me. Though the play failed, as Kazan had anticipated, he didn't forget my performance and thought of me when trying to find someone to play Stanley Kowalski in *Streetcar*. So he sent me down to Provincetown, on Cape Cod, to do a reading for the great playwright, Tennessee Williams, who was staying there with his latest temperamental boyfriend, Pancho Rodriguez, and Margo Jones, who'd directed Tennessee's first big success, *The Glass Menagerie*. Kazan had given me the money for the train fare, but I spent it before I left New York, so hitchhiked down and arrived with a girl I'd picked up en route. The instant I met Tennessee, with his little high-pitched voice and cigarette-holder and delicate hand movements and dreamy deep-southern accent, I sussed that he knew nothing about anything other than writing, so I fixed his blocked toilet and sorted out his electrics and then gave a cold reading of monologues from *Streetcar*, which, so I was reliably informed, caused him to excitedly call either Kazan or his own agent, maybe both, to tell them that the reading had 'overwhelmed' him and that Margo Jones had said it was the 'greatest reading' she'd ever heard. So Kazan, a doubting man validated, put me into *Streetcar*.

Huge success. Made me famous overnight. After that, with Kazan, who became a father-figure to me, came the movie adaptation of *Streetcar*, plus *Viva Zapata!* and *On the Waterfront*, as well as my movies for other directors, including *The Men*, *Julius Caesar* and *The Wild One*. Women were falling over me, left, right and centre, and if I didn't manage to fuck them all, I certainly tried. For a while there I was king of my castle, but then my mom and dad, Dodie and Pops, both trying Alcoholics Anonymous, also tried another separation. So Dodie came to New York, settled into a ten-room apartment in West End Avenue (Pops was earning big money by then), and invited all her kids to move in with her. While we didn't actually move in full-time, we all used it as a flop house, as did half of the lower orders of Manhattan. Dodie spent her eight months there falling on and off the wagon, first sober and elegant, then disappearing and having to be hunted down until she was found pie-eyed in some awful dive. And this time, instead of Franny, it was my turn to search the bars and beds of skid row until I found her,

sometimes alone, other times with a bum that she'd gone on a bender with, once even having to shake her awake beside the one-legged drunk she'd fallen asleep with. Though I tried to be cynically humorous about this, when discussing it with acquaintances, it broke my heart and possibly killed any belief I still had in intimate relationships. It certainly hardened my callous attitude to women and made fucking without conscience easy-peasy. From then on, given the benefits of fame, there was no stopping my sexual and trouble-making activities.

Looking back on it now, I have to confess (maybe I'm here to confess; maybe this is my Judgement Day) that I could certainly behave like a bastard, or, at the very least, a real trouble-maker, both on and off stage. In *I Remember Mama*, I loathed the pompous, scene-stealing star, Oskar Homolka, so for a scene where he had to sweeten his genuine coffee with spoonful after spoonful of sugar, I substituted the sugar with salt and made him virtually throw up onstage. The old fuck responded by not speaking to me for three months. Also, round about that time, I started my trick of turning up at sophisticated parties wearing my filthy T-shirt and torn jeans and worn-out sneakers and deliberately speaking to no one, as if in another world. It may have offended the host and hostess, but it sure as hell sucked in the women. Then again, when I mistakenly allowed myself to be roped into a production of George Bernard Shaw's *Candida*, produced by the legendary Guthrie McClintic and starring McClintic's wife, the queen of Broadway, Katherine Cornell, not forgetting Sir Cedric Hardwicke, I was so disgusted by their old-fashioned, declamatory style of acting that I deliberately stumbled late on stage as if I was drunk, which I wasn't, and then proceeded to either mumble or forget my lines to the point where I needed frantic 'reminders' from the prompter's box. I did not last long in the run. Our greatest playwright, Eugene O'Neill? I 'fell asleep' reading the first act of *The Iceman Cometh* and then sent it back to my agents with a note saying it was 'ineptly written and poorly constructed'. Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne, the supposed leading lights of Broadway? Reading for a part in one of their plays, when Lunt asked me to say something, wanting to know what I sounded like, instead of reading from the script I said, 'Hickory, dickory, dock, the mouse ran up the clock. The clock struck one, the mouse ran down, hickory, dickory, *dumb*.' I did not get the part. Tallulah Bankhead? A notorious seductress as well as a florid actress, she kept trying to seduce me

during the run of *The Eagle Has Two Heads*, but since in sexual situations she always had to be in charge, and since in sexual situations *I* always had to be in charge, and since, as well, she was far too old for me, when she tried to make a meal out of kissing me onstage, I filled my mouth with peanuts, garlic and mouthwash. This not only put her off, but got me thrown out of the play, to be replaced by Helmut Dantine, who was slayed by the critics. Noel Coward? When the great man offered me a part in his new comedy, *Present Laughter*, I informed him that I considered the play to be 'trivial and unworthy of a time when people are starving in Europe and Asia.' Mr Coward never approached me again, but I didn't care, because I was also turning down offers from Hollywood, including one from famed producer Joe Schenk, who advised me to get a nose job. I didn't need a nose job. I'd had my nose broken in a boxing match during the run of *Streetcar*, used it to get myself a few days rest in hospital, and found out, when I returned to the play, that most people thought my broken nose was actually an improvement, making my formerly perfect features look slightly more human, whatever 'human' means. So with my new nose, even better than perfect, I kept making trouble.

God, was I that bad? Well, you don't have to be particularly nice to be talented. Look at Frank Sinatra. That sawn-off runt with the badly fitted toupee could sing like an angel, was totally dedicated to his music, but had a terrible temper, was quick to use his fists, believed in violent revenge and revered his Mafia friends. He hated my guts because I always won the roles he most desperately wanted. I did this to him three times. First, he desperately wanted to play Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* because he'd been born and raised in Hoboken, New Jersey, where the movie was shot. I not only got that role but won an Oscar for it, so Frank-baby must have been truly pissed. As a matter of fact, according to his valet, he half-demolished his own house in a rage when he heard that Elia Kazan (my favorite director) had picked me for the role. Then, when we were contracted to star together in the movie adaptation of the successful Broadway musical, *Guys and Dolls*, Frank desperately wanted to play the romantic lead, Sky Masterson, but I was given that part instead (I had only to ask) and Frank was forced to settle for second lead, the gambler Nathan Detroit, whose songs weren't as good as mine. What galled him even more was the knowledge that I couldn't really sing or dance (Frank was pretty good at both) so, despite being given the

leading role, I had to have vocal and dance coaches in order to play it. To make matters worse, Frank hated repeating himself (he had a flawless memory for dialogue) while I was constantly changing my dialogue (I could never remember it properly), thus necessitating our scenes together to be reshot many times, driving Frank crazy in the process. Naturally, the more frustrated Frank became, the more I deliberately mumbled and either changed or pretended to forget my lines, just to torment him. By the end of shooting he was talking openly about my 'Method shit' and referring to me as 'Mumbles', but I got my own back by telling a room full of journalists during a subsequent PR binge for the movie: 'Frank's the kind of guy, when he dies he's going to heaven and give God a hard time for making him bald.' The third time I stole a role from Frank was, of course, when I was picked to play Don Corleone in *The Godfather*. Despite being convinced (and furious) that a character in the original novel, Johnny Fontane, a singer backed by the Mafia, had been based a hundred percent on him (the widely spread rumor being that the Mafia had leaned on the producers to ensure that Frank was given the role of De Maggio in *From Here to Eternity*), Frank, because of his Sicilian antecedents and helpless admiration for his many Mafia friends, desperately wanted to play Don Corleone. Unfortunately for him, I won that part as well and the picture went on to become a monster success that resurrected my failing career, gave me another Oscar, and put me back in the 'A' list. My bet is that when Frank heard the news, he had to stuff his toupee into his mouth to stop his false teeth from grinding. So three up for me, pal.

Mind you, when I say Frank hated repeating himself, I don't mean he did a scene differently every time he had to repeat it. Quite the opposite, in fact. Because he hated repeating himself, Frank always insisted that the director use the first take (except when working with me) whereas I'd repeat a scene as many times as it took to get it right, doing it a little different every time. In this sense, I'd have driven Olivier as mad as I did Frank, because Olivier detested improvisation and had to have his whole performance thought out in advance, meticulously structured before the scene was shot. He was the same on the stage. But I didn't do that even in my early years, when I was on the stage. I'd do anything, even fooling around, to keep boredom at bay.

That's why I hated working with Charlie Chaplin. That sadistic bastard. I only signed up for *A Countess from Hong Kong* because I loved his silent pictures and thought he was a genius – about the only one in film – but I

didn't realize what a tyrant he was until we were shooting the picture. He didn't let me improvize a damned thing. He acted out every move for me, told me exactly where to stand, what gestures to make, how to speak, until I felt like strangling the old goat. I didn't like the way he treated his son, Sydney, either, always dressing him down and blowing him up in front of the whole crew, really humiliating him, so when he tried the same tactics with me, I told him – loudly and clearly, in front of the same crew – never to use that tone of voice with me again. Later, I took my frustrations out on my co-star, the majestically beautiful Sophia Loren, by saying, during a romantic kiss shot in close-up, 'You've got hairs up your nose.' Just trying to shock her, you know? And it surely worked. She treated me like shit after that and never let me lay a hand on her. I really lost out with that one.

And I'm feeling lost right now. I mean, I don't know where I am. The last event I can remember was struggling for air in the UCLA Medical Center in L.A. with my sister Jocelyn sitting at my bedside. I was eighty years old. I'd been ill for months and just undergone emergency tests that confirmed that I was suffering from obesity, pulmonary fibrosis, diabetes, cardiac failure and an enlarged, potentially cancerous liver. Realistic to the end, I was very much aware that I didn't have long to go and in truth, by that time, I just wanted to fall asleep and not waken up. Which is what may have happened. Either I slipped off and died or I fell into a deep sleep and I've just woken up, still in my sick bed, in the middle of the night, though the room is even darker than normal, except for that weird light straight ahead, that unblinking eye, coming closer, I think, or I'm moving closer to it, though I can't feel the familiar, excessive weight of my bloated body and sometimes think that I'm adrift in thin air.

Damn it, this is ridiculous. It's just a wide awake dream. But it's a dream filled with recollections going all the way back to my childhood and adolescence, to my early fame and later life, a veritable ribbon of dreams, like a series of scenes on film, making me relive every moment, every feeling, every hurt, each segueing into the next, just as right now my abiding hatred for Pops is segueing into my frustrated love for him and into the times I worked out my frustrations and pain in so many of the roles I played onscreen.

Yes, I can admit it now: a lot of my frustrations over my relationship with my father were worked out in some of my movies. For instance, my

performance in *On the Waterfront* was so good because I viewed the relationship, the betrayal of Terry by his brother, Charlie, played by Rod Steiger, in light of my relationship to Pops. In the same film, I viewed the priest played by Karl Malden, a father-figure to Terry, as the kind of father-figure I'd so desperately wanted but never had. So no wonder I was seeing my psychiatrist on a regular basis throughout the shooting of the movie. Likewise with the only movie I've ever directed, *One-Eyed Jacks*. I always claimed that I didn't really want to direct that picture, that Stanley Kubrick was supposed to do it, that we were in my house with Stanley and the writer Calder Willingham, playing chess, throwing darts, playing poker, supposedly discussing the movie, me banging on an Oriental gong to get their attention each time the conversation flagged, when Stanley, exasperated, said, 'Marlon, I don't know what this picture's about.' And I replied: 'I'll tell you what it's about. It's about three-hundred thousand dollars that I've already paid Karl Malden.' And Stanley, a real serious kind of guy, said, 'Well, if that's what it's about, I'm in the wrong picture.' So Stanley walked and I had to direct myself and the end result broke my heart. At least that's what I claimed.

In fact, I *did* want to direct it. *One-Eyed Jacks* was my final act of revenge against my father. I didn't realize it at the time, but I see it now. For a start, I made it through my own production company and I called that company 'Pennebaker' deliberately using my mother's maiden name to spite Pops. Then, having used Dodie's name, I brought Pops in as a so-called 'executive'. Then, throughout the production, with him working, as it were, under the name of the wife he'd abused, I repeatedly humiliated him, telling him he couldn't make any decisions, that only *I* could make decisions, and finally accusing him of driving Dodie, Jocelyn and Frannie into alcoholism and me into decades of psychiatric treatment. (A few days later, a psychatrist called me to inform me that Pops had just been to see him, suffering from severe depression.) Also, *One-Eyed Jacks* was the story of a love-hate relationship between Rio, 'the Kid' (me) and the friend who betrayed him, 'Dad' Longworth (Karl Malden again), so its relationship to me and Pops was all too painfully obvious. Shit, man, I often found myself quietly seething, practically gritting my teeth, when I was acting in, and directing, that movie. Then the producers took it off my hands and fucked up the editing and I felt betrayed all over again.

Come to think of it, I felt the same kind of betrayal with Elia Kazan, or 'Gadge', who got the best out of me with his brilliant direction of the stage production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, then directed me in three of my finest movies: *Streetcar*, *Viva Zapata!* and *On The Waterfront*. Gadge was certainly like a father-figure to me, knowing how to deal with me, giving me the courage to burrow deep into myself and do some of my best work, so I trusted him completely and virtually looked upon him as the 'Dad' I never really had. But then, when he 'named names' to save his own skin during the McCarthy anti-communist witch-hunts, just before we went into the shooting of *On The Waterfront*, I could barely look him in the eye and found the shooting of the movie to be agonizing. After attending the first viewing of the completed work, I got up and walked out without saying a single word of either congratulations or thanks to Gadge. A lot of people thought I'd done it because I hated my own performance, but I'd actually done it because, seeing the movie in its completed form, I couldn't help viewing it as a belated apology by Gadge and the writer, Budd Schulberg, another supposed Leftie who'd named names to the HUAC committee. I never worked with Gadge again – and I never made another movie as good as the movies I'd made with him, at least not until *The Godfather* came along. Without Gadge I had no one to guide me, to give me proper support. I often thought that cutting off my relationship with him was a form of slow suicide.

But then I knew all about suicide, didn't I? Suicide has always fascinated me. I never tried it myself, though I've often thought about it and I know that a lot of people were convinced that my ballooning weight, caused by gross overeating, was another form of slow suicide. Personally, I doubt it. Like Elvis, I was just addicted to junk food and ice cream. But interestingly enough, a lot of my old flames tried to commit suicide, some even succeeding. Gia Scala, my secretary Susan Slade, and the exquisite Pier Angeli, just for starters. I was the first to fuck Pier, during our hot affair in Rome, then she went to Hollywood and bewitched Jimmy Dean, causing him misery when she married the singer Vic Damone; but after only a few years of marriage, she divorced Damone, went off to Europe, made a lot of crap movies over there, and committed suicide before turning forty. Also to be included in the roll call of suicides, in this instance failed suicides, is my demented former wife, Anna Kashfi, the mother of my son, Christian, and Rita Moreno, my on-and-off mistress for many years. Maybe it was because

so many of my women were known to go off the rails that I was blamed in the media for the suicide of Pina Pellicer, my romantic lead in *One-Eyed Jacks*, who I was fucking at the time, though I was also fucking, at the same time, Katy Jurado, who played Pina's mother in the film, and two other former lovers who were also in the cast, Joan Petrone and Miriam Colón, as well as the up-and-coming Asian actress, France Nuyen, each time she came to visit me on the set. Anyway, though I was blamed for the emotionally fragile Pina's subsequent suicide, having had an on-set affair with her and then ignored her, as was my wont, she had in fact tried to commit suicide long before working on *One-Eyed Jacks* and finally succeeded in doing it, two years and two movies later, in Mexico, not because of me, but because of a troubled lesbian relationship she'd been having with an older Mexican woman. So though I may be guilty of using her and abusing her, I wasn't the cause of her suicide.

Now Rita Moreno, she was a different kettle of fish altogether. We went all the way back to the early '50s, about the time I was doing *Julius Caesar*. At that time, Rita was still a relatively unknown Puerto Rican dancer-actress, under contract to MGM, and I was bouncing between her and Katy Jurado while setting up house with Movita Castaneda in Laurel Canyon. Rita was totally obsessed with me and always available for a session between the sheets when I stopped off in L.A. She first tried committing suicide in 1961, when I was making *Mutiny on the Bounty* and becoming seriously involved with Tarita, my Tahitian romantic interest in that movie (Movita, seven years my senior, had appeared in the 1935 *Mutiny on the Bounty*), and continuing my endless legal battles with Anna Kashfi, while also serving my old flame, Anna Gobray, on the side and trying to keep Movita happy where I'd dumped her 'cause I needed to be free. So Rita, neurotic as always, aware of all these other women and knowing I'd flown back to L.A. for a break from filming in Tahiti, but hadn't bothered contacting her, tried to off herself by swallowing a lot of sleeping pills in the home of my secretary, Alice Marchak, and then begging Alice to take her to my home in Mulholland Drive, to let me see the awful despair I'd driven her to. I wasn't home when they arrived, but after a phone call from Alice I arranged for my physician to have Rita admitted to St. John's Hospital where they saved her life by pumping her stomach. I later learnt that she was on the road to recovery as I was flying back to Tahiti.

Not that being saved from death stopped Miss Moreno. About a year later

she arrived at my house in Mulholland Drive and persuaded me to go for a drive to discuss the wobbly state of our relationship. During our drive through the Hollywood hills, she became so violently agitated that I lost control of the car and she was thrown forward, her face smashing into the dashboard. So she ended up in hospital, covered in blood and hysterical, with the paparazzi's flashbulbs popping non-stop. A couple of days later, when she was still in her bandages, we had another screaming argument and she slashed her wrists and again ended up in hospital. Round about the same time, Marilyn Monroe, whom I'd fucked quite a few times and really liked a lot, was either murdered or committed suicide; and another woman of mine, Vaea Benet, a Tahitian dancer, tried to commit suicide because we'd had a brief affair and, as she kindly informed the press, she was in love with me and being ignored by me.

Jesus! Women! I tell ya! Not that all of this trouble made me turn my back on Rita. Why, I even took her on a visit to my farm house in Mundelein, Illinois, where I'd dumped my Tahitian mistress, Tarita, she of the latest *Mutiny on the Bounty* (not Movita's earlier version), though we didn't stay with Tarita, not wanting to upset her, but instead shacked up in a nearby motel and dropped in to see her every day we were there. That was about 1966 when I was shooting *The Chase*. By the following year, when I was shooting a load of crap called *The Night of the Following Day*, Rita had married a New York cardiologist and had a child with him, but knowing that she still carried the flame for me and (come on, Marlon, admit it) probably resenting her marriage, I recommended her for the role of my drugged-out accomplice in the kidnapping related in the movie. Naturally, despite being on the set with her husband and kid, she couldn't resist me and soon we were at each other again behind her husband's back. At first Rita loved it – it was just like old times – but as I was openly shipping in a string of other women at the same time, her former hysteria was resurrected to the point where, during a scene were we were supposed to be having a quarrel, all her buried frustration and anger came pouring out and the fake quarrel became a real quarrel and then turned into a knock-down, drag-out fight, with things being thrown and hair being pulled and her screaming dementedly – and all of this with her husband and kid, standing just off the set, looking on goggle-eyed. Interestingly enough, that scene was left in the picture and was the only one to receive positive reviews from the critics, who deemed it the only scene

with any kind of genuine emotional impact.

Which gets me neatly to Anna Kashfi, who turned the next decade of my life into hell on Earth.

My own fault. I'd always been a sucker for 'exotic' women (think Moreno, Movita, Tarita) so when, in 1956, I first saw the exotic-looking Anna Kashfi sitting at a table in the Paramount commissary, slender and beautiful and *very dark*, I was instantly knocked out. Even more so when I was introduced and she told me that she was twenty-two years old and had been born in Calcutta, the daughter of an architect, Devi Kashfi and a woman named Selma Ghose. When still a small child, she told me, her mother had married again, to William Patrick O'Callaghan, a British citizen, and they'd all left India to live together in Wales, Great Britain. After an education in a French convent and a brief period in Italy, she'd tried to be a model in London, then decided to try her luck in Hollywood, soon landing a modest role in a Spencer Tracy picture, *The Mountain*. Well, I couldn't resist her, could I? She was everything I desired in a woman: exotic, dark-skinned, beautiful and *virginal*. So I seduced her and fucked her as often as I could, which was a lot, then flew off to Japan to play Sakini in *Teahouse of the August Moon*. Returning to Culver City, I learnt that Anna was in City of Hope Hospital, suffering from tuberculosis, and I visited her just about every day for three months, sitting by her bedside, consoling her through her slow recovery, becoming completely obsessed with her, telling her about my traumas over my mother's alcoholism, even giving her the earrings, brooch and favorite pillow that Dodie had given me before she died, shortly after the release of *On The Waterfront*. I must have been fucking mad. Even madder was when, just before Anna's discharge from the hospital, I slipped my mother's engagement ring on Anna's finger and proposed. Alas, she said, 'Yes.'

A disaster. Still obsessed with Asia, I returned to Japan for the shooting of *Sayonara*, poured my soul out during a vodka-sodden interview with that poison dwarf, Truman Capote, who made me, for a brief period, the laughing stock of Hollywood, then returned to the States and let myself be railroaded into marrying Anna, who'd informed me that she was pregnant by me. Naturally a lot of women had been made pregnant by me, but I'd always paid for their abortions (I had my own abortionist on standby), so why I agreed to marry Anna I'll just never know. Anyway, I did. And my son, Christian Devi, was born. And then I learnt that my 'exotic' wife was not Anna Kashfi at all:

her real name was Joanna Mary O'Callaghan, and she wasn't an Indian, but the daughter of a dark-skinned Frenchwoman and an English railway worker. Anna – Joanna – had in fact been only a café waitress and cashier in Wales, before moving to London, changing her name to 'Anna Kashfi', concocting her more 'exotic' but fictitious background, and then flying to Hollywood to win her pathetically small role in *The Mountain*. I could have killed the bitch.

The marriage started to crack almost immediately. Less than two months after we were married, in October 1957, I waltzed into our house in Mulholland Drive with the ravishing France Nuyen on my arm and Anna fled into the bedroom, bawling that I had thirty seconds to get my girlfriend out of the house. It was all pretty much downhill after that. I was in a foul mood anyway, because Pops had married a woman who looked just like Dodie, and, even worse, I'd just made another movie, *The Young Lions*, with my bitter rival, Montgomery Clift, and his reviews were a lot better than mine. Then I found out that Pops, who'd been put in charge of the finances of my Pennebaker production company, had mismanaged the funds and landed us in deep financial shit. So between that and the humiliation caused by the revelation of Anna's real background, as well as her increasing moans about my other women, we had lots of melodramatic, often violent, fights. Then our Japanese maid, Sako, drowned while swimming in our pool and I received a mistaken message that the victim had been Anna, so I rushed home only to find Anna still alive and be accused by her of being *clearly disappointed* to find her still in that condition. She left the house the same day, taking Christian with her. When she later heard, erroneously, that I'd been threatening to drown myself in the same pool, she drove straight back to the house and screamed, 'Jump, you sonofabitch! Jump!' Naturally, that was the end of the marriage and the beginning of a lot of court battles that went on for years and eventually turned our son, Christian, into a deeply troubled child.

Was it my fault? Of course not! Anna's career had petered out, she took to drink and drugs, in her drugged state she started believing in her own fictitious background (her real parents were outraged), and then she published a scandalous book about me, *Brando for Breakfast*, telling all sorts of lies, denigrating my sexual prowess, and then became my relentless opponent, taking me to court time after time, often physically attacking me in court or in front of the panting paparazzi, once even in my own home after clambering through an open window, battling repeatedly for custody of Christian, who

became an emotional wreck at a fairly young age, cruel to his pets, smashing up his toys and throwing his food at the walls. Admittedly, while all this was going on, I might have done the wrong thing when I took up openly with my old flame, Movita, got her pregnant, then married her in Mexico and installed her and the baby, Miko, in a house in Coldwater Canyon while I continued my bachelor life in Mulholland Drive. Learning about these events didn't cool Anna Kashfi's hot temper. Things came to a head in late 1964, when, having just survived a drug overdose – a reliable mother, right? – she broke into my house and abducted Christian, taking him off to a sleazy Hollywood hotel. With the aid of a detective I tracked them down, rescued Christian, and left Anna with a court order calling for my son's return. After that, he was shuttled back and forth for a while, between me and Anna, often sobbing for no good reason, but eventually ended up in the care of his aunt, my sister Fran, who was having her own drinking problems and informed me, after only a few days with him, that he was seriously disturbed. He was even more disturbed when, while I was making *Last Tango In Paris*, his mother, now in a haze of pills and alcohol and convinced that I was about to gain custody of him again, arranged for five petty criminals to abduct him from his private school in California (which he had tried to burn down) and spirit him out of the U.S. With the aid of a detective hired by me, Christian, then still only thirteen years old, was eventually found shivering with fever under a pile of dirty clothing in a tent in Baja California, being guarded by his five abductors, who were patiently waiting for the promised ten thousand dollar payment from his mad mother. Following his rescue, I was granted sole custody for the next year and took him off to stay with my other family in Tetiaroa, where he could interact with his unfamiliar half siblings, Cheyenne and Teihotu, and be looked after by his stepmother, Tarita. But despite this, Anna didn't let up for years, causing one round of custody talks after another, making a lot of lawyers rich, and then Christian, when finally freed from her madness, a grown man at last, but deeply troubled, disoriented by drink and drugs, shot dead Dag Drollet, the boyfriend of my lovely but also deeply troubled daughter, Cheyenne, in the living room of my home in Mulholland Drive.

I had nothing to do with it.

No, I don't want to think about this. I don't want to relive it. I want to remain here in this darkness, possibly my darkened sick room, but maybe

someplace else, but either way feeling helpfully divorced from reality, not having to face up to my nagging feelings of guilt, pretending they don't exist, but finding it increasingly difficult to do because that single eye of light that's directly ahead, how far away from me or close to me I can't tell, though it may be the eye of God, if He actually exists, or possibly a distant doorway leading to somewhere else, though it's definitely getting bigger, brighter, yet still surrounded by total darkness, like the light at the end of a long dark tunnel, and I feel that somehow it's judging me, or maybe making me judge myself, face up to my past sins, like the sin of bad fatherhood and too many women and marriages that weren't proper unions and the children who suffered. Ah, yes, always the children. God help the children…

To get back to my second marriage, I married Movita in 1960, shortly after divorcing Anna Kashfi, and, though we rarely lived together, I had two children by her: a son, Miko, born the same year, and a daughter, Rebecca, born six years later – though the only proof that they were actually *my* children was Movita's insistence that they were. (Since we didn't live together, she had other men in her life and rarely failed to let me know it.) Still, I *did* support them from time to time over the years, if not *all* the time. Then, as everyone in the world seemed to know, being informed by a feverish media, during the shooting of *Mutiny on the Bounty*, in 1962, I had an affair with my romantic lead, Tarita Tumi Teriipaia, who later lived with me in Tahiti as a common-law wife and bore me two more kids: a son, Teihoutu, born in 1963, and a daughter, the doomed Cheyenne, born in 1970. As they're not the only kids I have, I can't be expected, even in my present condition, wherever I may or may not be, to remember all their names, let alone the names of their various mothers.

That light is definitely getting bigger. I'm convinced it's coming closer. I'm coming around to the notion that I'm in a pitch-dark tunnel, with that single eye of light at its far end, either coming closer to me, or drawing me to it, either to pass judgement upon me or to make me pass judgement on myself, or to suck me in and spit me out into someplace else: another world on the other side. No, I don't want this. I don't want it to be real. I want to go back to believing that I'm still alive and just dreaming, still lying in my sick bed and recollecting my life in a series of unfolding scenes on a ribbon of unwinding film. Now, in one of those scenes, I see myself wearing a snakeskin jacket, distractedly strumming a guitar. Though I've put on some

weight, I'm still not too fat; I still look poetically handsome, slightly unreal: a fallen angel, perhaps. That was…

Round about 1960, trying to compensate for the financial losses of my Pennebaker production company and, also, having to pay for Anna Kashfi's outrageous divorce settlement, I took on a role I'd been avoiding for years: Val Xavier, the washed-up blues singer with guitar and snakeskin jacket in *The Fugitive Kind*, based on Tennessee Williams' *Orpheus Descending*, one of his lesser works. I'd avoided it for years because Tennessee had really written the original stage play for the temperamental Italian actress, Anna Magnani, whom he adored, so the male lead, the 'Snakeskin' character, was badly unwritten and too abstract to be believable. Aware of this, I was fearful that Magnani, with the better part, might wipe me off the screen. In the event, she didn't. Knowing that she was nicknamed 'La Lupa' (the Wolf) by her worshipful Italian fans, that she had won acclaim for the same part in a stage production in Italy, that she'd won an Oscar in 1955 for *The Rose Tattoo*, also written by Tennessee Williams, and that although she was fifty-one years old, she was still sexually rapacious and had her wolf's eyes set on me, I got in first by pulling all sorts of little stunts to collapse her confidence, including treating her with the kind of exaggerated deference that you normally reserve for old ladies, and by the time I finished with her, having avoided having sex with her to remind her of her age, she was so unsure of herself that she could barely speak the little English she'd previously mastered. Most of the critics loathed the finished film and everyone in it – me, Magnani, Joanne Woodward, Maureen Stapleton – but I didn't give a damn because I'd been paid a million dollars for it, which made me the first American actor ever to receive a seven-figure paycheck. Then I went straight from that into *Mutiny on the Bounty*, another disaster for which I was unjustly blamed, followed by the worst decade of my career, with a lot of movies so bad I don't even want to think of them anymore. Indeed, movies so bad that a lot of former fans viewed them as a form of self-flagellation, the products of my innate contempt for acting.

Yeah, the widespread belief was that I never really cared about acting. Yet now, when I look back on it, even when I wasn't doing something as personal as *One-Eyed Jacks*, I mostly tried (except when I needed money) to find projects that had some meaning for me. I did it most overtly in 1963 with *The Ugly American*, based on a novel that indicted U.S. foreign policy in

Southeast Asia, which was one of my passions. Of course, I also did it for the money in the sense that my production company, Pennebaker, was then in serious financial straits, thanks to my dumb dad, and Al Kanter, my agent, became a producer at Universal Studios and not only offered to rescue Pennebaker by purchasing it for $1 million, but also agreed to back a movie we'd optioned three years before, at considerable cost, but never got around to making, namely *The Ugly American*. So being eternally grateful to Al for what he'd done, I decided to be on my very best behaviour, always turning up on time, always knowing my lines, not interfering in any way except to insist that Jocelyn, my sister, whose acting career had bottomed out and who was now a single mother with two boys to raise and who'd been on Hollywood's political blacklist since the 1950s and who was, like my sister Fran, drinking too much… so, yes, I insisted that she be given, absolutely, no argument, a part in the movie. So she was cast as the deeply caring director of a children's hospital in our invented country of Sarkhan, which was actually Thailand. In the movie that we shot there at my specific request, though I was on my best behaviour, I played U.S. ambassador Harrison Carter McWhite, a pompous true believer in America's ability to deal with the supposed ignorance, hunger and disease of communist Asia, and certainly, buttoned up in a pinstripe suit and sporting a trim moustache, which made me look ridiculous, I tried to stick to my vow of being well behaved. Well, at least I tried. For the first week or so. Then, when it started sneaking up on me that with the real war heating up in Southeast Asia and our bright new President, John F. Kennedy energizing the nation and making *The Ugly American's* negative views of American foreign policy suddenly out-of-date and irrelevant and even offensive, not forgetting my personal anxieties over my financial obligations to my wide variety of women, my tropical island, my many employers and employees, and, finally, when I started suspecting that the director of the movie, George Englund, though a personal friend, was more talented as a businessman than a movie director… Well, when all of this sneaked up on me, I just lost interest, switched off my talent, and concentrated more on fucking whatever women were available, including the groupies who came to the set, many of whom, being Thais, this being Thailand, appealed to my love of 'exotic' females. Needless to say the resultant movie, when quietly released, died an even quieter death at the international box office.

Not so *The Godfather*. I mean, I really wanted to play Don Corleone

because *The Godfather* struck me as being as much about the legitimate corporate world as it was about the illegitimate Mafia. *The Godfather* was really based on the idea that a man with a briefcase can steal more money than a man with a pistol, and that's exactly what I thought corporate executives were doing with their underhand price-fixing, their constant manipulating of supply and demand issues, their obsession with profit ratings, their total lack of social responsibility. So I loathed them and their Madison Avenue claptrap – all that advertising about how they were committed to helping the world and its environment – and didn't really see any difference between their morals and those of the Mafia. So that's one of the reasons I did *The Godfather*. It painted the Mafia as just another side of corporate America. Another side of the same coin.

Same with *Burn!* More commonly known as *Queimada*. I did that because I wanted to work with Gillo Pontecorvo, the writer and director of *The Battle of Algiers*, a really great political film. Except, as I soon found out, a large gap existed between what Gillo believed in and how he actually lived. We shot the movie in Cartagena, Columbia, using locals as extras, and when I found out that Gillo was paying the blacks a lot less than he paid the whites, and serving them slops instead of decent food, I went ape-shit. Naturally he took offence and started fucking around with me, playing all kinds of tricks, so I started to do the same to him. Ended up, we were practically at each other's throats and Gillo started coming to the set carrying a gun and threatening to use it if I didn't do what he said. Naturally, I ignored the dumb shit and only did what I wanted to do. Then, when I found out that he was paranoid suspicious, walking around with his pockets full of plastic charms to ward off evil, scared witless by things like broken glass and people walking under ladders, I started to wind him up by deliberately walking under ladders on the set, or walking up to him holding a big mirror and hammer, saying, 'Hi, Gillo!' then smashing the mirror with the hammer right in front of him. I even spent a few days throwing salt wherever he tried to walk, making him go all weak at the knees and desperately try to find other ways to the set. He wasn't amused either, when, en route back to the location after a short break in Los Angeles, wearing a full beard so as not to be recognized, I amused myself by asking the stewardess if this was the flight to Cuba and was swiftly escorted off the plane and out of the airport, which bought me another three days paid vacation in L.A. Poor Gillo, already running late on his schedule,

was completely freaked-out. Yet I had a great deal of faith in *Queimada* and was disappointed when it failed at the box office. But that's life and life only.

Thinking about Queimada reminds me about how I was often blamed when things went wrong on pictures that I was part of. The most notorious example being *Mutiny on the Bounty*. I mean, the media had a field day blaming me for all the delays and soaring costs, but I didn't have a damned thing to do with that fucking disaster. First off, they didn't have a workable script when shooting started. Next, the first director, Carol Reed, was accused by the producers of not shooting the picture they wanted and of taking too much time to shoot what they didn't want anyway. So Reed quit and was replaced with Lewis Milestone, which set the schedule back again, and then it turned out that Milestone, he of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, but then getting on in years, was almost deaf and color blind and, on top of that, really didn't have the energy for the task. He also hated me for some reason, so that didn't help. Then some of the other actors – Trevor Howard, Richard Harris, that other English prick whose accent I stole without acknowledgement – started talking to journalists and blaming me for what was happening, saying I was too involved with the local v*ahines*, including Tarita (also acting in the picture and being attended to by me) to give the picture my undivided attention. To be blunt, they said I was being obstructive. So the next thing I knew I was being blamed in newspapers and on TV for the whole sorry mess. A real injustice, that was.

But why am I worrying about this? Why in God's name does it matter? The whole problem with *Mutiny* was surely nothing other than the fact that apart from being obsessed with fucking Tarita (see her dancing in the movie and you'll understand why) I'd temporarily lost interest in acting. On the other hand, to the good, not being satisfied with acting, which I thought was an essentially childish way for an adult to make a living, I'd involved myself increasingly in politics, starting with my involvement, way back in the late 1940s, in the creation of the state of Israel and my support for a so-called Jewish terrorist group. I mean, I didn't know shite from shinola about politics until I became involved with Stella Adler and Harold Clurman in New York, when I was first getting into acting. Lots of Jews in the New York acting fraternity, all obsessed with the creation of a Jewish state in Palestine. So I was in a play by Ben Hecht, *A Flag is Born*, which was put on specifically to raise money for the Irgun Zvai Leummi, or the League for Free Palestine. My

idol, Paul Muni, was in the play as well. We took it around the country, raising money for arms and ammunition, protelyzing wherever we went, arguing in favor of the Irgun instead of the Haganah. I was proud to be doing it. And as I was getting a lot of pussy en route, it was more than a little satisfying.

Later, in the 1960s, with movies like *Bedtime Story* convincing me that my life as an actor was meaningless, I involved myself with the civil rights movement. The election of John F. Kennedy, strongly supported by African-American voters, galvanized the young, leading to the sit-ins at segregated lunch counters and the civil disobedience advocated by Dr. Martin Luther King, and to civil rights activists like Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and the Black Panthers. Inspired by all of this, I began attending meetings with Dr. King and other minority leaders, including Chicanos working for the rights of Hispanic laborers and Native American leaders addressing the country's abysmal history of broken treaties and false promises to the Indians. I took the stage of the Apollo theatre in Harlem to raise funds for the march of Washington, DC. I protested segregation in Alabama by marching with black leaders and fellow actors like Paul Newman and Anthony Franciosa. When Dr. King gave his unforgettable 'I Have a Dream' speech at the Lincoln Memorial, in August 1963, I was standing just a few feet behind him, mouthing the words as he spoke them.

When President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas, I went into shock for a while, flew to Samoa to recover, then bought a coral atoll – a dozen or so small islands called Tetiaroa – near Tahiti. Built a house on the beach, moved into it with Tarita and our son, Teihotu, then went native, beachcombing, swimming, watching the sunsets, just generally relaxing. Returned to Hollywood, leaving Tarita and Teihotu behind, to make *Morituri*, another dog's dinner, then, being box-office poison by this time, pursued my abiding interest in native American Indians. That got me into a whole heap of trouble. In 1964 I was arrested at a fish-in for Indian rights in Washington, along with an Indian from the Puyallup reservation and a priest from San Francisco. We went to jail for a bit, but they didn't book us in the end; they just dismissed us, probably because I was famous. Then, in 1975, I joined a group of Menominee Indians who'd taken over a monk's abbey in Gresham, Wisconsin, in an attempt to get back the deed to land that had once been theirs. That sit-in turned violent, with weapons firing on both sides, a real

firefight in the snow, but the Indians finally won and got their deed. Then the priests who owned the site, the lying bastards, took the deed back and had the defeated Indians thrown into the Gresham jail, where they languished for months, or maybe years. (I kind of lost touch.) Undeterred, I then took part in what became known as 'The Longest March', when all the Indian tribes joined together to march from California to Washington, DC. I even lent my trailer to Dennis Banks, the Indian activist, after he was involved in a shoot-out with the Oregon highway patrol, but the trailer was all shot up and the cops traced the ownership to me, so I brought Banks to my place in Tetiaroa and kept him there, safe and sound, for two months. Of course the FBI and the Justice Department were mad as hell, but what the fuck could they do?

Pops died in 1965. I was mad as hell. Particularly when I had his books forensically examined and discovered that he'd deposited most of my Pennebaker money in banks all across the country, but under a variety of false names, so though I knew where the various accounts where, I couldn't claim a single cent of the money. I also discovered that practically all of his crazy financial investments had been a disaster, again leaving me with nothing. If the old fuck wasn't already dead, I'd have surely killed him.

By this time, my film career was a mess and I blew my one chance to make another movie with my former mentor and father-figure, Elia Kazan. Gadge wanted to direct his own adaptation of his own bestselling novel, *The Arrangement*, and I'd implied that I was seriously considering it. (Not that I'd read it.) Then, in April 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King was assassinated as he stood on the balcony of a motel in Memphis, Tennessee. Even as blacks were rioting in cities all across the nation, displaying their anger and grief, I invited Gadge to come and see me at my place in Mulholland Drive. He sounded pretty excited to hear that, clearly thinking I was going to discuss his movie. I did. Without even letting him into the house, I walked him back to his car and told him, on the move, that I couldn't possible consider making a movie at this particular, politically desperate time, then I gently eased him back into his car and waved him goodbye before he realized what was happening. That was the last time I ever spoke to him. Then I signed up to play Sir William Walker in *Queimda*, also known as *Burn!*, to be directed by that superstitious lunatic, Gillo Pontecorvo. Another fucking disaster.

Thank God for *The Godfather*, my biggest artistic and commercial success since *On the Waterfront*. Ironically, by the time I made it, my career was at

an all-time low and when Francis Ford Coppola suggested me for the part, Paramount's self-adoring production boss, Robert Evans, a failed actor, practically laughed him out of his office. But Francis persisted, so Paramount insisted that I, the formerly great Marlon Brando, take a screen test. Those insulting fuckers. So Francis came to my house with a single video camera, and I stuffed cotton-wool into my mouth, to make my cheeks bulge out, and croaked instead of speaking, to make me sound older than I was, and the Paramount fuckers, not even initially recognizing me when they saw the filmed screen test, were astounded by what they witnessed, and then, still not fully trusting me, offered me $100,000 and ten percent of the gross. That ten percent made me a rich man all over again.

Despite my pride in *The Godfather*, when it came to Oscar night I made my protest on behalf of Native Americans by sending along a pretty twenty-six-year-old Indian woman, Sacheen Littlefeather, wearing full Apache regalia, complete with buckskin dress and beads, to collect my Oscar for me and give, instead of the customary fawning words of thanks, a lengthy speech detailing Hollywood's mistreatment of the Indians in their Western movies. The audience was outraged, Sacheen's speech was cut brutally short, and, later, the media, always keen to attack me, tried to imply that Sacheen wasn't even a real Indian, but only a struggling actress with a Native American background and whose career was most notable for the winning of the accolade 'Miss Vampire' in 1970. What a bunch of poisonous shits! In fact, although Sacheen was not a full-blooded Indian, since her mother had French, German and Dutch forebears, her father had ancestors from the White Mountain Apache and Yaqui tribes in Arizona, she had been born in an Indian reservation, and she had been involved for much of her young life in the civil rights movement for Native Americans. So despite all the uproar, she was certainly Indian enough for me – and I still have my Oscar.

Come to think of it, I've always been dogged by controversy, from as far back as my first great success in the stage production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (the very title was provocative) when I used to massage my cock before going on stage, to make it stand out in those carefully designed tight trousers, matching the skin-tight tee-shirts on my well-muscled body. Let's face it: I caused a sensation, loved by some, loathed by others. Then there was *The Wild One*, which was banned in many American states and foreign countries for its glamorization of teen violence and which, for that very

reason, encouraged half the teenagers of America and Europe to start wearing black leather jackets and use 'hip' vernacular. Even *The Godfather*, one of my most highly regarded movies, caused a huge controversy over what was viewed as Francis Ford Coppola's romanticising of the Mafia and my humanizing of the quietly murderous Don Corleone. Then came *Last Tango in Paris*, which was hailed as a masterpiece and also reviled as a piece of intellectualized pornography. Revered and feared critic Pauline Kael kick-started the whole controversy by stating that the New York Film Festival presentation, in October 1972, was comparable to the evening in May, 1913, when Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Primtemps* had its premiere. *Last Tango*, she said, had 'the same kind of hypnotic excitement as the *Sacre*' and then she added, even more portentiously, that director Bernado Bertolucci and I had, between us, 'altered the face of an art form'. Naturally, Kael, and others, went on to use my improvisations as proof that I had dived deeply into the murky waters of my own psyche to come up with the characterisation of *Last Tango's* lead character, Paul, an expatriate American who played bongo drums (like me), had bitter memories of a drunken mother and brutal father (like me), was tormented by memories of being forced to milk the family cow just before meeting his date, thus filling his car with the stench of cow-shit (like me), and who was, but natch, a good 'stick man' obsessed with impersonal sex (like me?). No matter. Kael's lengthy essay was reproduced verbatim in the United Artists advertising copy, causing another sensation, and then was followed promptly by an equally long essay by the highly competitive Norman Mailer, who couldn't bear to have Pauline get one up on him. Mailer, of course, concentrated almost solely on the already notorious sex in the film, with its then very daring frontal nudity, four-letter words, masturbation and sodomy (the latter being a subject long dear to Norman's heart), and he even tried suggesting that the movie could only have fully succeeded if it had shown my real cock entering Maria Schneider's real cunt. Thanks very much, Norman. I do not say this facetiously, since the Kael and Mailer essays, in combination with *Newsweek* and *Time* cover stories, led to a veritable deluge of controversy, meaning good publicity. This in turn led to *Last Tango* being banned in Italy, copies of the film being seized and destroyed by the authorities, and Bertolucci being given a four-month suspended jail sentence and having his civil rights revoked for five years. Even better: in England the film was the first to be brought to trial under the

Obscene Publications Act, though the prosecution was dropped when it was recognized as being a film, not a publication. Last but by no means least, back in the good old U.S. of A, the Catholic Conference placed *Last Tango* on its list of condemned movies and Cincinnati went one better by declaring it to be obscene and stopping all cinemas from showing it. It goes without saying, does it not? *Last Tango* went on to make a fortune worldwide. And with my ten percent of the box office, I made a fortune as well.

So how did Norman Mailer get into my spinning thoughts? Because of his famous review of *Last Tango*, which I can, in this pitch darkness, staring into the pulsating light of that single eye, that judgmental eye, coming toward me or drawing me to it, perhaps to suck me in and spit me out elsewhere, read the essay virtually word for word and be reminded of how his comment about my cock and Maria's cunt had, on the one hand, deeply, secretly, offended me, and, on the other, simply made me smile in recognition of the underlying jealousy and resentment that had made Norman write it.

Oh, yes, jealousy and resentment. I'd first met Norman way back in my *Streetcar* days, when my politically active sister, Jocelyn, also an actress, dragged me along to a Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace, held at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel, covertly backed by the U.S.S.R. (which we didn't know at the time) and endorsed by a lot of political innocents, including me and Jocelyn and supposedly more sophisticated types, like Lillian Hellman, Clifford Odets, Norman's tortuously boring French friend and so-called intellectual mentor, Jean Malaquais, and Arthur Miller, whose play *Death of a Salesman* was generally held in higher regard than Norman's hugely successful novel, *The Naked and the Dead*. Norman, ever bright, went against the grain of the conference by giving a speech that actually denounced the U.S.S.R., thus gaining himself a great deal of controversial publicity (he was always a genius at that) and also ensuring that he would not have to face the wrath of the witch-hunting, anti-communist HUAC committee that had destroyed the lives of so many others. God, he was smart.

I next met Norman at a party he threw in his loft in Monroe Street, near the Manhattan Bridge. The Lower East Side was one of those areas that had a lot of Puerto Ricans, so I took Rita Moreno along for protection. There were about fifty people in there, a very crowded situation, and the guests included the writers Vance Bourjaily and Calder Willingham (who would later work with me on the screenplay for *One-Eyed Jacks*) and my bitter actor rival,

Montgomery Clift, who had a homosexual crush on the macho Norman and had told me that he was dying to be fucked by him, Monty always needing to be the passive partner. (I didn't want to be fucked by Norman, but I think he may have wanted to fuck me. Why else would he write about my 'tragic angelic mask of incommunicable anguish which has spoken to us across the years of his uncharted heroic depths'? I mean, if that isn't true love, what is?) Anyway, I was just sitting there with Rita on my lap, my customary erection digging into her ripe rump, when a bunch of street kids, all wearing black leather jackets, straight out of *The Wild One*, barged in uninvited, looking for some girl who'd slapped one of them on the face as she was entering the building, and one of them attacked Norman with a hammer, drawing blood and sending him to the floor. Naturally, Norman, being addicted to fighting at that particular stage of his exciting life, retaliated with his fists and soon the crowded room turned chaotic. Complete screaming, violent, bloody madness until the kids left. Norman, though covered in blood, had obviously loved it, but I hadn't moved from my chair throughout the whole event, just sitting there with Rita on my lap, confident that the very sight of my fiery Puerto Rican beauty would guarantee my personal protection. It did. But not liking violence, unless started by me, I'd had enough for the night. So when Norman started explaining to his assembled guests, some covered in blood, others with torn clothing, some white-faced and trembling with shock, that his assailants had barged in looking for the bitch who'd slapped the face of one of them because he'd innocently been fresh with her as she entered the building (they'd raped a woman the night before), I quietly manoeuvred Rita off my lap and led her out of the building, wondering what the fuck Norman was doing living in a hell-hole like that.

Later, when I got to know him better, I gradually learned that he had an absolute obsession with Marilyn Monroe, more so because Arthur '*Death of a Salesman'* Miller had married her and Norman couldn't understand what she'd seen in him when a better man, Norman himself, was standing in the wings, gasping. I didn't have it in me to tell Norman that I'd fucked Marilyn even before she met Miller, when I was making *Viva Zapata!* She was actually having an affair with the director, Elia Kazan, at the time (the man in all the world I most trusted), but when he had to go to Mexico for a few weeks of further research, I moved in straight away on Marilyn and we had our secret affair in his absence. We got together a lot over the years, not

always in secret, and poor Norman, who never got to lay a hand on Marilyn, resented me for doing so. That's why he couldn't even give me full credit for *Last Tango in Paris*; why he had to bring my cock and Maria Schneider's cunt into the equation, implying that a latent sexual cowardice had prevented me from fucking her on camera. It was his way of getting his own back on me for my long-running, casual affair with the delicious, but to him unavailable, M.M. Just as in his subsequent biography of Marilyn, he couldn't resist putting down Arthur Miller, both as writer and as Marilyn's lover and husband. So much for my cock and Maria's cunt.

Still, looking back on it, I now realize that I more or less gave up the ghost after *Last Tango*. Just couldn't be bothered any more, so went for the easy money. $3 million for ten minutes screen time in *Superman*, plus a percentage of the box office, bringing it up to $14 million for three weeks work. $3.5 million for about twenty minutes of screen time in *Apocalypse Now*, also with a percentage that sent my total earnings sky-high. (Though, despite the money made, I seriously wanted to make a statement about our corrupt war in Vietnam and who else could have pulled off that ending?) Accepted a piddling $25 thousand to play the American neo-Nazi, George Lincoln Rockwell, in *Roots: The Next Generation*, because I believed passionately in the subject matter, the victimization of black people by American neo-Nazis and Ku Klux Klanners; and this brief appearance, my only appearance in a TV drama, netted me an Emmy to add to my Oscars. Another $3 million up front for three short scenes opposite George C. Scott in *The Formula*, making it $1 million per scene. Won a Golden Raspberry award for worst performance and was slammed by *Variety* for being 'grotesquely fat and ridiculous.' Retired from acting for nine years, spending most of my time in my island, Tetiaroa, experimenting with various ecological projects, losing money on most of them, not really giving a shit. Increasingly, as I exercised less and less, ate more and more, and put on more pounds, I amused myself at nights as a ham radio operator, calling myself Martin Brandeaux and altering my voice when talking with other amateur radio operators all around the world. Finally returned to acting when I accepted the Screen Actors Guild minimum of $4000 for a few brief appearances in *A Dry White Season*, an anti-apartheid movie directed by the black South African, Euzhan Palcy, and donated the money to the anti-apartheid cause. Made up for my noble self-sacrifice by demanding another

$3.3 million and eleven percent of the gross for appearing in an amiable comedy, *The Freshman*, denigrating my legendary *Godfather* performance by playing virtually the same character as a joke. Another $5 million up front for ten minutes of disinterested acting in a load of crap called *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery*. Hardly recognizable but competent in *Don Juan de Marco*, absolutely ridiculous in *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, then small roles in two movies that never got released: *The Brave* and *Free Money*, both shot in 1997. Finally, in 2001, I co-starred with Robert de Niro, widely regarded as my natural successor, and Edward Norton, widely regarded as De Nero's natural successor, in a caper movie, *The Score*, and the three of us together, in a movie directed by a man most famous for directing the Muppets in *Sesame Street* before progressing to the likes of *Little Shop of Horrors* and *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels* (a pitiful remake of my pitiful *Bedtime Story*), managed to come up with something not only forgettable, but best forgotten. And that was the end of my movie career: going out, not with a bang, but with a whimper.

It was all Anna Kashfi's fault.

Okay, maybe I'm here to be judged (wherever I am and I'm not at all sure, but it's starting to feel like some kind of Purgatory, even though I may still be in my sick bed and dreaming the rest of it) and I'm trying to wriggle out of it, to absolve myself of all sin. But come on, just looking back on what happened, it had to be that mad bitch's fault. You think I don't have the right to blame her for the murder? For what drove my son to it, putting a bullet into another young man's head in the living room of my own house in Mulholland Drive when I was, and others were, sleeping upstairs? I mean, think of what he'd become because of his mother's insane behaviour. Taking us repeatedly to court in order to get custody, and then, when she gained custody, bewildering and terrifying him in their shared home with her alcoholic-and-drug-fuelled hysterics, which led to the courts handing him back to me. Then abducting him from my house when he was still just a child, and then, even worse, even more traumatizing for him, having him abducted by five paid criminals and kept under a pile of filthy rags in a tent in the middle of wasteland in Baja California. And then not only fighting again for custody, but attacking me physically in court, screaming and slapping, to feed the paparazzi the juicy photos that Christian couldn't possibly ignore. So for sure he was mixed up. A genuine crazy, mixed-up kid, just like in the movies. But

I did my best for him. I never ignored him. I may have pretty much ignored Miko, my other son by my second wife, Movita, with whom I'd refused to live, though I really respected her, but I made it a point never to neglect Christian. So when, at twenty-three, he married a cosmetician, I let them live with me a few months before sending them out on their own. Unfortunately (not my fault!) they separated a year later and Christian, having dropped out of university and having no skills, returning to form, descended once more into alcohol and drugs. But I paid all his debts, bought him a car, introduced him to my own therapist, had his teeth fixed, his health checked, then tried to set him up as a tree surgeon, though he failed at that as well. So, disgusted with him, I flew back to Tahiti, to spend some quality time with Tarita and my other two children, Teihotu and Cheyenne. Then I flew back to Los Angeles to make another movie and was in my house in Mulholland Drive when the killing shot was fired.

I will never forget that date as long as I live. or, if I'm already dead, which I may well be, for as long as eternity. It was the night of May 16, 1990. Christian was then thirty-two years old. My daughter Cheyenne, then eight months pregnant but still extremely beautiful, on a visit from my other home in Tahiti, was staying in the house in Mulholland Drive with her half-brother, Christian, and her boyfriend, Dag Drollet, twenty-eight years old, scion of a prominent Tahitian family, and father of the child-to-be. Christian was, by that time, deeply into his latest bout of alcoholism. I was lying upstairs in bed when I heard the fatal shot. Rushing downstairs, I found Dag dead, his head bloody from the single shot, and my son, Christian, holding the pistol. The first person I called was the activist lawyer, William Kunstler, whom I'd known since the days of the civil rights marches. 'The messenger of misery has visited my house,' were the first words to come out of my mouth, perhaps inspired by my many years as a Method actor, though my grief and horror were real enough.

Naturally, the subsequent days turned into a 'celebrity' trial, with me as much as Christian in the dock. Under investigation it transpired that earlier that evening Christian and Cheyenne had shared a meal and, as Christian downed glass after glass of liquor, Cheyenne, who also had serious psychological problems, including drugs, alcohol and various unhealthy sexual fantasies, one of which related to me, told Christian that Dag had frequently beaten her up in Tahiti and had even attacked her again a few days

ago in our house in Mulholland Drive. Later that evening, when they returned to the house, Cheyenne took herself off to bed, and Christian, now manic with drink and believing his half-sister's fabricated story, found Dag watching TV, aimed a .45-caliber pistol at him, demanded to know if he'd been slapping Cheyenne around, and then, as he later insisted, accidentally pressed the trigger of the pistol. Unfortunately, forensic examination revealed that Dag had been shot through the back of the head, so the murder was deemed to be calculated and Christian was sentenced to ten years in prison.

I was devastated. And certainly paid for my sins in the months that followed. Cheyenne was sent back to Tahiti, but her baby, when born, had to be placed in postnatal detox and then, possibly ashamed of herself for having drunk heavily and taken drugs while pregnant, she attempted to overdose with sleeping pills and was placed in intensive therapy. Three months after Christian entered the California Men's Colony in San Luis Obispo, to commence his ten-year sentence, the wife of Miko, my other, too often neglected, son by Movita, was killed on a freeway in downtown Los Angeles when a drunken driver smashed into her vehicle. Miko had been acting as a bodyguard for Michael Jackson, whose Neverland ranch I was then making extensive use of, and for a short while he received more publicity than his famous father.

I should be so lucky. And I wasn't. With my debts mounting because of divorce settlements (Anna and Movita), child support (I've lost count), legal costs, lawyers' bills, and upkeep of my increasingly expensive private island, including devastation caused by storms, I needed to make more money, so sleep-walked through my role as Tomás de Torquemada, the Grand Inquisitor, in that Christopher Columbus mishmash, then finally caved in and accepted a vast sum of money to write (with the help of a real writer) my so-called autobiography, *Songs My Mother Taught Me*, in which I managed to honestly recount the frustrated love I had for my alcoholic mother and my unburied hatred for my fish-eyed, cold-hearted, bullying, stupid father, before going on to denigrate everything I'd most valued in life, including acting, the theatre, movie-making, my best films (even *On the Waterfront* and *The Godfather* were sneered at), and formerly respected friends and mentors, such as Elia 'Gadge' Kazan and Francis Ford Coppolla. Perhaps worst of all, I also denigrated my own talent with comments such as: 'If a studio paid me as much to sweep the floor as it did to act, I'd sweep the floor.' Though I didn't

believe a word of it myself, I took the money and ran.

But I was punished. God, yes, I was punished. More disturbed than ever, my daughter Cheyenne, talking to an avidly researching biographer, Peter Manso, who clearly wanted to *be* me and had indecently tracked her down to where she was incarcerated temporarily in a psychiatric clinic in Berkley, informed him that I had sexually abused her (another demented fantasy), compared me to the manipulative Don Corleone, and described me as a demon who kept a psychological influence over her to prevent her from living a normal life. My punishment was completed when, nine days after the opening of my latest movie, the not-so-bad *Don Juan de Marco*, Cheyenne, no longer beautiful, vastly overweight like her famous father, and distraught that because of her mental condition the court would not allow her custody of her four-year-old son, Tuki, hung herself in my family home in Tahiti.

It was all Anna Kashfi's fault. Her drink and her drugs and her abductions and criminal kidnappings and physical violence in court, causing Christian to be tugged repeatedly, agonizingly, between his two parents. She turned him into an emotional wreck and thus turned him on to drink and drugs. She made him just like she was.

So what about Cheyenne?

Okay. I think I'm here to be judged. I'm not sure if I'm awake or dreaming or dead, if I'm lying down in my sick bed or standing up or sitting in a chair that I can't feel, if I'm still in the room where I'd thought I was dying, with my sister Jocelyn holding my hand as I sank, or if the darkness all around me, broken only by that expanding light straight ahead, yes, expanding, growing bigger as it approaches, or as I approach it, wondering if it leads to somewhere else, yes, if that expanding light straight ahead is the one of God's judgmental eyes, demanding that I accept the truth of where I let my life lead me.

My son shot dead a man in my house in Los Angeles. My daughter hung herself in my other house in Tahiti. A lot of the women I was involved with either ended up on drink or drugs or committed suicide. So. Yes. I think I've been trying to avoid thinking about these matters, to absolve myself of guilt for them, but a recollection is emerging from that light straight ahead – the light coming toward me or toward which I'm advancing as if floating on thin air – and it's filling my head with the vivid image of myself in the courtroom during Christian's trial, my great bulk in the chair, the awful ruins of my

former self, as I sob and helplessly mutter the words that sum up what eventually led to Christian and Cheyenne and which cannot in any way be refuted.

'I led a wasted life. I chased a lot of women. Perhaps I failed as a father… There were things I could have done differently.'

Not all Anna's fault, then.

No matter. After that life lived, for good and for bad, I didn't have any ambitions left. I didn't want to do the major plays. I didn't want to act for the sake of acting. I didn't feel that I had to prove myself. You don't have to repeat yourself to show you can still do it. The fact that you've done it is enough. Orson Welles said that.

So to Mailer I say, 'Go and fuck yourself, Norman. Go and put *your* ageing cock up some woman's cunt in full view of the lip-licking public, as you wanted the on-screen Marlon to do in *Last Tango*.' As for me, I'm going back to my innocent beginnings, back to that sheltering home in the fresh-aired Midwest, to that wood-shingled house in Omaha, with the dogs and the cats and the milk-giving family cow, to my sisters playing with me in the big front yard, my lost mother inside, my hated father out of sight, and there, in this repeatedly unwinding ribbon of dreams, I can become again what I once was, before fame and the likes of Norman Mailer turned me into a 'name', a disembodied thing, to be toyed with in print. Come on, Norman. Come talk to me.

Why not? We've been friends for years.

Now, just where the hell am I?

Norman

1923 – 2007

Having stated loud and clear that I wanted no less than to revolutionize the consciousness of our time, I determined to leave my mark and began this Herculean task by stabbing my wife with a penknife in the back and upper abdomen, thus becoming famous for the second time, again virtually overnight. Pity poor Saul Bellow. Though a superlative novelist and superior brain, he had to slog grimly for a couple of decades in order to gain the kind of fame that I, with a single stabbing, at least leaving a mark or two on my wife, if not on the consciousness of our time, gained in no time at all. And why not indeed? All Saul did, after all, was write one great novel after the other, win a lot of awards (Pulitzer Prize, Nobel Prize for Literature, National Medal of Arts, three National Book Awards) marry five times, and father four children, the last when he was eighty-four years old. Not much there to crow about. I, after all, have won *two* Pulitzer Prizes, one National Book Award, and the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contributions to American Letters, while marrying *six* times, fathering *nine* children, and in general keeping my beloved Avenger existentially engaged, perhaps even more than Saul had done. But since Saul hadn't stabbed any of his wives, or stabbed anyone else for that matter, my fame soon outstripped his, this being the way of life in the Age of Celebrity.

Stabbing my wife, while not being particularly admirable, was no great deal in the end. Even my mother, the redoubtable Fanny, defended me, telling the media that my wife must have driven me to it. This was understandable as Fanny worshipped the ground I walked on. I was born on January 31, 1923, and Fanny, who had described me as 'perfect, a really lovely baby,' gave me the Hebrew name Nachum Malech, or Norman King. The 'King' was

important. It was the way Fanny viewed me right from the start. But when it was decided that it would be silly to call me 'King' in English (what would my school friends say?), Fanny's niece Marjorie suggested Kingsley, the name of one of her favourite authors. So Norman Kingsley Mailer it became.

My maternal grandfather, Chaim Yehuda Schneider, was ordained at sixteen in a yeshiva in Russia and became the unofficial rabbi of Long Branch, New Jersey. If my mother thought of me quite literally as being a king, our family's sovereign being, my father, Barney, considered me a genius right from the start and assumed that I'd inherited my huge intellect from Rabbi Schneider. The rabbi's family owned a grocery store in Long Branch and Fanny and her sisters ran it for him. So apart from being considered a genius, I grew up being mothered by a lot of adoring women. By the time I was six my mother was convinced that she could see signs of greatness in me and told everyone that I was someone 'very special'. No surprise, therefore, that from my early days I had a big head as well as big ears.

Fame was everything to me, so I'll sum up my pre-fame days succinctly. When I was nine, the family moved from Flatbush to Crown Heights, a middle-class Jewish neighborhood located well away from what Fanny termed 'the cheap *goyim*', who were mainly working-class Irish. In this very pleasant area I was indulged totally by Fanny, who always let me do anything I wanted and made excuses for even my worst behaviour, which could be very bad indeed. In other words, I never received a single spanking and was brought up believing that I could do anything I wanted – *anything* – without fear of redress. This belief stood me in good stead for the rest of my outrageous life.

Had my bar mitzvah day at thirteen, shocking my elders by talking about Spinoza, excommunicant and atheist, and thereafter showed little interest in Judaism. Experimented with smoking and drinking at fourteen. Read everything I could get my hands on and got my hands on a lot of girls at the same time. Sex-mad from adolescence on. Wrote an unpublished science fiction novel, *The Martian Invasion*, filling two hundred pages in three notebooks. Went to Harvard. Being a Jew amongst a majority of WASPs, I felt like a fish out of water, but had no real problems, certainly not with anti-Semitism, and majored in aeronautical engineering. But my main obsession was with modern American literature, particularly James T. Farrell's Studs

Lonigan novels and proletarian literature in general. Studs swaggered, so I swaggered. Studs never backed down from a fight, so neither did I. Studs dreamt of conquering the world and mastering beautiful women, so I cultivated the exact same ambitions. Gained an A+ in English A for a novella, so wrote fourteen more stories by the beginning of my sophomore year and decided to become a professional writer. Never wavered. Wrote about Hemingway for the *Harvard Advocate*. Then wrote a parody of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* entitled 'For Whom Your Balls Squall'. Wrote a short story, 'The Greatest Thing in the World', and won *Story* magazine's first prize. Wrote a full-length, unpublished novel, *No Percentage*, about a boy being suffocated by middle-class Jewish parents who are convinced he's a genius (ho, ho), thus driving him to flee home and hitchhike around the country to learn what the *real* world is all about. Wrote many more short stories, imitating Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Started imitating Hemingway in real life, acting the tough guy and swearing a lot and hitting on girls. Spent the summer after my junior year working at Mattapan, Boston State Hospital, filled with crazy young people and senile old people, and wrote a play, *The Naked and the Dead*, based on the experience. The play was rejected by the Harvard Dramatic Society. Pearl Harbor was attacked. War came. Tried to imagine the war in a novella, 'A Calculus at Heaven', patterned after the fiction of John Dos Passos. Wrote another full-length novel, *A Transit to Narcissus*, based on my experiences in the mental wards of Mattapan, but the novel was rejected by about twenty publishers. Was drafted into the army. Served in the Philippines and Japan, barely saw real combat, but came close enough to it to believe I could at least write about it. Discharged in May 1946, I returned home and wrote my first published novel, basing its structure on 'A Calculus at Heaven' and taking the title, *The Naked and the Dead*, from my rejected play. Naturally I was hugely successful virtually overnight. And the rest, as the saying goes, is history.

But why in God's name am I remembering all this? Where the hell am I? Last thing I remember, before waking up here, wherever 'here' is, was being in hospital, slipping away with acute renal failure. The years leading up to that had been rough, with shot knees (two walking sticks required), failing eyesight (spectacles repeatedly upgraded), encroaching deafness (two hearing aids required) arthritis and even angina. Then that lingering final illness and those last awful days in Manhattan's Mount Sinai Hospital, before falling off

to sleep more often than I was awake and then, at some point, drifting off and only now wakening up, though not knowing where I am, maybe in my same sick bed, the room in darkness, though, again, maybe not, because although I feel that I'm in some kind of an enclosed space, I can't actually see any walls, only walls of a deeper, impenetrable darkness, and maybe… Is that a light I can see straight ahead? Maybe near, maybe far, I'm not sure. My thoughts keep drifting away from it, from that light, back to the past, to the war and my famous war novel, *The Naked and the Dead*.

Talking about war, I didn't actually engage the enemy during my time in the Philippines, though I always talked as if I had, employing the accent that I'd stolen from the tough, foul-mouthed Texans in my squad. I did, however, *almost* engage the enemy when I was sent out with about thirty other men to destroy about one hundred Japanese marines. We never reached them. When struggling up a steep hill, we were attacked by a swarm of angry hornets (someone had accidentally kicked over their nest) and went tearing back down the hill to get away from them. That was the humiliating incident I used in *The Naked and The Dead*. As I put it later in my forgotten book on writing: 'We were ready to lose our lives that day, but we weren't up to getting stung by a hornet.' No heroics there, then!

The Naked and the Dead was published in May 1948 to great fanfare. It was followed five months later, in October, by Irwin Shaw's *The Young Lions*, which many reviewers thought captured a broader picture of World War II than any other novel of its time. Where *The Naked and the Dead* was set on a Pacific island, dramatising the war against the Japanese, focusing on a single long-distance patrol by American troops, and James Jones' *From Here to Eternity* was set in Hawaii in the days leading up to Pearl Harbor, *The Young Lions* ranged far and wide, from Bavaria to New York, England, Africa, France and Germany in a way that Shaw clearly hoped would buy his book comparisons to *War and Peace*. There was that aspect to it, certainly, it's panoramic, Tolstoyian sweep, but Shaw's writing, strongly influenced by the precise, bloodless prose of *The New Yorker*, for which he'd written a lot of short stories, was too facile, nay, too *polite*, to make his war convincing to me. *The Naked and the Dead*, on the other hand, being foul-mouthed and sordid and certainly shocking for its time, presented a more realistic view of war, certainly of soldiers in combat, even if I had to water down its obscenities by using 'fug' instead of 'fuck', a surrender for which I've never

fully forgiven myself. Anyway, Shaw got his wish when Leland Hayward came out with his widely publicized declaration that *The Young Lions* was the greatest war novel since *War and Peace*. Hemingway, the bastard, slyly put both of us down when, in Lillian Ross's profile of him in *The New Yorker*, he referred to 'young writers from Brooklyn who think they're Tolstoy.' Since Shaw and I were both from Brooklyn, I've no doubt that the literary champ was referring to both of us with that comment. He always *was* a resentful bastard when it came to other writers.

Still, none of this did any harm to our sales and almost certainly increased them. Shaw's book made its first appearance at fifth place on the *New York Times* bestseller list, when *The Naked and the Dead* was securely in first place, but by November, *The Young Lions* had gone to the top spot, with my book just below it. Over the next month or so the two books kept swapping positions, until finally, toward the end of that year, sales of both started falling away. Naturally, the cocktail talk of the season often centred around which book was the best, but I didn't resent that half as much as I resented the fact that although Shaw and I had remarkably similar backgrounds – growing up in Brooklyn only a few miles apart, both from the same middle-class Jewish background – Shaw, though ten years older than me, was a big man, an athlete, and I, despite the beginnings of my macho posturing, was a bit of a wimp. Which may explain why, at a party in William Styron's New York apartment in 1951, shortly after the publication of Shaw's second novel, *The Troubled Air*, which I felt was a confused, morally compromised view of communism, I sort of made fun of him by imitating Johnny Weismuller, saying, 'Irwin, you – physical courage. Me – moral courage.' He was so upset, I thought he was going to hit me, but he bit his lip and managed to control himself.

Naturally our enmity deepened over the years, reaching critical point in the summer of 1964 when Shaw, despite a shocking decline in the quality of his literary output, adroitly exploited the new merging of hardcover and softcover books under one roof by signing with my own publishing house, Delacort for an unprecedented, highly publicized two-novel deal, to include hardcover and softcover rights, for what was reported to be a total of over $350,000. The deal shocked me as well as the whole publishing world, marking, as it did, the end of the more gentlemanly relationship between writer and publisher and turning publishing into a high-stakes money game. I

might have been less concerned if it had been me instead of Shaw receiving all that money, but it wasn't, so I was suitably outraged and became even more highly critical of his waning talents.

Shaw must have had his Jewish nose put out of joint when later that year, following on the new face of publishing created by him, Delacort, perhaps having a nervous breakdown, offered his pal James '*From Here to Eternity'* Jones *$1 million* for a four-book hardcover-softcover deal. My Jewish nose should have been more out of joint than Shaw's, given that not too long after the Shaw's deal with Delacort, the same company only offered me an advance of $125,000 for publication rights to *An American Dream*, which had been serialized the year before in *Esquire* magazine, causing a bit of a sensation, as I had to write a chapter per month, like Charles Dickens (the publicity hook), to meet *Esquire's* monthly deadline. Admittedly my advance was for hardcover rights alone, but its modesty compared to the Shaw and Jones advances felt more than a little humiliating. Particularly given that while the literary quality of the recent novels of both Shaw and Jones had declined alarmingly, with both of them living the lives of rich men in Paris, France, divorced, as it were, from the real world. I, on the other hand, had remained in America to mine its political and social issues, producing, amongst other works, my landmark essay, *The White Negro*, and my seminal profile of John F. Kennedy during the running of the 1960 election race ('Superman Comes to the Supermarket'), not forgetting my subsequent political essays which literally – let's have no false modesty here! – changed the face of journalism. I'd also experimented with drugs, explored psychoanalysis and mysticism, and involved myself with the beat generation and black culture, all of which added spice to my writing. So no way was Shaw – or Jones, for that matter – worth more than me.

I think Shaw really hated me in the end. We'd exchanged hardly a word since our near dust-up at the Styron's New York apartment, but over the years since then Shaw had heard negative remarks made about him by me, and on at least one occasion, when I was in my most aggressive phase, I actually snubbed him by hurrying past his table in a New York restaurant without saying a word to him. (I did the same thing to James Jones in Castel's restaurant in Paris. Good manners weren't exactly my forte.) Then, too, Shaw had shared in the general disgust of the literary world for my 'snide' comments on several of my peers, including Shaw's dear friend,

James Jones, in the title piece of *Advertisements for Myself*, a self-serving collection of essays and autobiographical narratives published in the fall of 1959. Interestingly enough, I hadn't included Shaw at all in my attack on my fellow writers, but I suspect he took the omission as the greatest insult of all. I hope so. That was, after all, my very intention.

Our relationship didn't improve over the years. I recall that in March 1965, Dial Press threw a publication party for *An American Dream* at the Village Vanguard. Somehow, despite the bad blood between us, Don Fine had persuaded Shaw and Jones to make an appearance. I was pissed – almost manic, in fact – because I knew that Fine viewed *them* as his prize authors, particularly Jones with his million-dollar advance, so when Jones walked in I drunkenly tried forcing him into a sparring match. Shaw, pointedly ignored by me, stood off to the side, nursing his Scotch, not interfering but clearly resenting the fact that *An American Dream*, despite receiving a much smaller advance that he and Jones had been paid, and despite many negative reviews, was being treated as a major publishing event and clearly headed for the bestseller lists. On the other hand, the first of Shaw's two books under his groundbreaking contract, the surprisingly slight *Voices of a Summer Day*, which had been celebrated with a more civilized party two weeks before in the pool room of the Four Seasons, was already branded a failure.

Sadly, Shaw's dear friend, James Jones, was another writer who hated me (call it a love-hate relationship), despite the fact that we'd started out as friends and I'd even praised his first novel, *From Here to Eternity*. Asked for an endorsement when it was published in December 1950, I said the title was 'awful' but then went on to describe the novel as 'one of the best of the "war novels" and in certain facets perhaps the best.' I would rarely be so generous to Jones again.

Initially, though competitive, we were great friends. I first met him in 1952, shortly after he'd won the National Book Award for *From Here to Eternity*, which had also sold sensationally well and was about to be turned into a movie. I thought he was pretty unsophisticated, more like a farmhand than an award-winning novelist, not remotely handsome with that lantern jaw and battered nose, but I admired him for having fought at Guadalcanal (and killing a Japanese soldier in hand-to-hand combat) and enjoyed his sense of humor, juvenile though it was, so soon we were seeing a lot of each other, getting plastered in the many bars along Eighth Avenue and also attending

the same Manhattan social gatherings, including my own, always a riot of drink and drugs, in my 41 First Avenue apartment, where he was thrilled to meet other successful authors, such as William Styron, Louis Auchincloss, and Calder Willingham. After so many nights spent alone in his caravan in that literary colony in Marshall, Illinois, run by that arrogant, ignorant, narrow-minded, ugly bitch lunatic Lowney Handy, his sometimes mistress and mentor, he took to the New York party scene like a duck to water and became really close to Bill Styron who, like Mailer and Jones, was seriously convinced that he was already one of America's major writers. Indeed. one evening, when the three of us were carousing in Greenwich Village, Styron, the tallest of us, standing between us at a traffic light, placed his arms around our shoulders and emotionally proclaimed that we were the three best writers of our generation. Naturally we were all in agreement: no false modesty there! So no surprise that when Jones and Styron moved to Paris, where they socialized regularly with Irwin Shaw, the same kind of immodest comments would have been passed between them, but with my name excluded. Even Styron couldn't quite live up to that claim with his later work; Shaw and Jones not remotely.

When I first knew Jones, before he married the actress, Gloria Mosolino, he was having an unsuccessful relationship with Faith Dane, a dancer renowned for an act in which she bent over and played a trumpet between her legs. The relationship didn't last long because Jones talked too much about the whores he'd fucked in Terre Haute, which did not thrill Dane. But before the breakup they came to see me quite a few times (I was then living with Adele Morales) and when not being competitive – seeing who could drink the most, playing lair's poker, engaging in grimly serious arm-wrestling matches on the kitchen table – we'd discuss our anxieties over our as yet unfinished second novels. In the event, both novels, *The Deer Park* and *Some Came Running*, were savaged by the critics, though I escaped with fewer bruises than Jones, who received the worst reviews in living memory for a supposedly serious work of literature. By that time, we'd stopped seeing each other and were fighting through the mailing system. By 1957 I was sending letters in which I accused him of being a 'dumb, benighted asshole of a writer', to which he replied that while he still believed there were great books in me, if only I would ever get them out, he doubted very much that I'd ever do it 'while writing a fucking column for *The Village Voice*.' (Together with Dan Wolf and Ed Fancher, I'd

founded a new newspaper, *The Village Voice*, meant to be an European-styled vehicle for 'underground' writers, and was writing an inflammatory column, 'The Big Bite', for it, shooting off my mouth about the evils of conformity, about the Hip and the Square, about Ernest Hemingway and Marilyn Monroe. The column outraged a great number of readers, as well as Wolf and Fancher.) Things came to a head in 1959, with the publication of *Advertisements for Myself* and my malicious comments about my fellow authors, including Jones and Styron. Jones, I was later informed, was so livid with me that he kept a copy of *Advertisements* on a sideboard in the dining room of his Île St. Louis apartment in Paris. Whenever he was visited by a writer who happened to be mentioned in the book, he would have the victimized writer pen his comments in the margin by the relevant passage. I also heard that Jones, Shaw and Styron frequently made demeaning jokes about me in front of their intellectual Parisian friends. The last time I saw him, in 1976, he was sitting with his wife, Gloria, and Bill and Rose Styron, in a Manhattan restaurant. Feeling that a reconciliation was in order, I swaggered over to their table to say hello. This time the hostile reaction came from Jones, who, clearly offended by my macho swagger, accused me of belonging to the eastern 'intellectual' establishment that he so clearly despised. True to form, my fists balled aggressively, I invited him to step outside to continue the conversation, but he refused to bite my bait, simply saying, 'My fighting days are over.' Naturally, I swaggered back to my table, feeling pretty victorious, thinking of what a pathetic jerk-off I'd made him look. I only found out later that he'd been suffering from a serious heart condition at the time, so when he died the following year, I didn't feel good about it. Of course, I never confessed that to anyone. It wouldn't have suited my developing macho image.

So Jones is dead. And Shaw is dead. And Styron is dead. So many others are dead and now I'm pretty sure that I'm dead. Have to be, really. It'd be a miracle if I wasn't. Unless my memory deceives me, I was definitely in a bed in Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan, slipping away with acute renal failure and well aware, in my realistic manner, that there could be no recovery from that. It was the early hours of the morning, as I remember, and I just drifted off, as Styron had done the previous year. Good old Bill 'Call me William' Styron, who imagined he was the best of us all and more high-class with it.

Styron hated me as well. Because he'd told Hiram Hayden of Random

House that he hadn't liked *The Deer Park*, just when Hayden was considering it, thus helping along its subsequent rejection, I got my own back, in *Advertisements for Myself*, by writing a deliberately personal and insulting piece about him, facetiously describing his over-rated first novel, *Lie Down in Darkness*, as 'one of the prettiest novels of our generation' and, even worse, by informing my many readers that he'd greased the wheels of his overweening ambition by making sure he was always seen only where the elite meet to eat. Styron was furious, but then he'd always been full of himself, having descended from Virginian aristocracy, married to a rich Jewish wife, and hiding his envious, ineffably smug nature behind his southern 'good old boy' mask of frosty good manners. So what I said about him in *Advertisements* was richly deserved. However, our friendship collapsed for good when, after I'd drunkenly confided in Styron about the times Adele and I had indulged in sexual threesomes, mostly with another woman included, he spread the word that Adele was a lesbian. I sent the bastard a blistering letter and that ended the friendship for good.

Truman Capote hated me as well. But then Truman, pint-sized charmer with the impossibly high-pitched voice and embarrassing lisp and serpent's tongue, really, beneath the charm, hated everyone, probably because he was a homosexual dwarf who wouldn't have had a single friend had he not been famous. Capote and I fought for years over who had first invented the 'nonfiction novel', him with *In Cold Blood* or me with *The Executioner's Song*. Regarding that, I'm willing to admit that if the little faggot hadn't produced *In Cold Blood*, I probably wouldn't even have thought of taking on *The Executioner's Song*. However, I believe my book wins hands down because, as I wrote somewhere, 'his killers were not the most interesting guys in the world' whereas I felt that I was writing about a man who was 'quintessentially American yet worthy of Dostoyevsky'. Not that I'm suggesting that Capote and Mailer (when writing, I've often used my surname instead of the perpendicular pronoun) had mercenary reasons for what they were doing with their respective books, but no question that Capote couldn't finish his book until his two killers were executed – so he waited patiently, one might reasonably say ruthlessly, until the execution took place before writing the final chapters of his supposed masterpiece – whereas I, lucky man, could not be accused of similar callousness, since my book was written well after Gary's execution, which he had, you may remember,

requested, so how can I be to blame?

Yes, thinking of dead men (in this instance, Gary Gilmore) I'm convinced that I'm dead. My last recollection is of slipping away in the early hours of a November morning (I think the year was 2007), and, given what I was suffering from, I could not have recovered. So I must be dead, though conscious in some other state of being, perhaps in some other sphere of existence. Yet I feel no fear at all. Only curiosity. I can still see that light, either close or far away, and it seems to be pulsating to the rhythm of my heartbeat, assuming I still have a heart. Maybe if I concentrate on that light, I can learn where or what I… But I can't concentrate. I feel too disconnected from any known reality. My thoughts spin and scatter and return to where they were before, to former friends, other writers, and, of course, to my wives. Truth is, I always had problems with my fellow writers and my many wives. Yes, lots of emotional turbulence there.

My, God, yes, the wives! Let's face it, all my wives, except for the last one, were a troublesome lot. The first was Bea Silverman, a Boston University student first encountered at a concert in the middle of my junior year. Bea was Jewish and highly opinionated, vibrant in her self-love and confidence. Unconventional for her day, she was blunt with her tongue, sexually bold, and made me the envy of my male friends. Though not a great hit with Fanny, who accused her of being common, selfish and too domineering by far, which, admittedly, Fanny thought about every woman her beloved son was involved with. While not quite all those things, Bea was certainly outspoken, stridently political, and not shy when it came to sex, offering me a thorough education in that field and addicting me to it in most of its sweaty permutations. Certainly, both in and out of bed, Bea was the first and last woman to take control of me, instead of the other way around. We were married in a civil ceremony in Yonkers in February 1944, in the middle of the many depressing rejections of *A Transit to Narcissus* and shortly after I'd received my draft notice. Then I went into the army and was sent to the Philippines, followed by Japan, after which *The Naked and the Dead* was completed and published, changing my life for all time. It also changed my relationship with Bea. Always competitive and quick with the foul-mouthed put-down ('Tough shit, Norman' or 'Don't be fucking ridiculous, Norman.'), she soon became resentful of the attention I was receiving as a promising new author. By the time we sailed for Europe, in October 1947, deliberately

making our escape while *Naked* was being published, she was no longer enthusiastic in bed and I, in response, was developing the notion that no couple could live together for long without boring each other. (This explains why I fucked a lot of women, no matter who I was married to.) While we were living in Paris, *Naked* became a huge success in America and Bea's resentment became increasingly, painfully evident. (I often referred to that mythical beast, the Great American Novel, as the Great Bitch, but Bea was the original Great Bitch with her sharp, foul-mouthed tongue.) By the time we returned to New York, a year later, the sexual side of the marriage was virtually over and I was struggling with my all-important second novel, *Barbary Shore*, which only served to deepen my depression. I'd hoped that matters might improve with the birth of our daughter Susan, in August 1949, but though the child at least ensured that for once I wasn't the centre of attention – the main cause of Bea's resentment – Bea continued to be jealous of my fame, particularly when we were living temporarily in Hollywood, where I mixed successfully with a lot of the stars while trying unsuccessfully to write screenplays. So, yes, the marriage continued to deteriorate.

Back home, when we were alternating between New York and Provincetown, down there on Cape Cod, she tried to compete with me, first by taking up painting, then by writing a novel, but neither worked out for her (she couldn't paint and she couldn't write) and so the arguments between us became more bitter. Finally, I ended the marriage by saying to her, 'You go out and fuck and *I'll* fuck.' Which is when I became involved with Adele Morales.

Adele! Christ! What a hot number she was. Our affair began about four months before the disastrous publication of *Barbary Shore*, in 1951, when I was still formally married to Bea. A Spanish-Peruvian painter, Adele was a hell of a looker who by the time we met had been involved with New School aspiring artist Ed Fancher, 'beat' writer Jack Kerouac, and Dan Wolf's Spanish-Indian friend, Steve Sanchez, from Mexico City. Also attending the New School and exploring the arts, Adele had mixed with the more well known 'beats': Allen Ginsberg, Peter Orlovsky, Gregory Corso, and William Burroughs, not forgetting her one-time lover, Jack Kerouac, and his friend Neal Cassady. It was Dan Wolf who persuaded me to call her from his apartment, inviting her around in the early hours of the morning, and when she came, we hit it off immediately, fucking enthusiastically while Dan slept

drunkenly in another room. We were an item after that. Our affair was tumultuous. Given her Latin temperament and my rapidly growing ego, it wasn't exactly the world's *calmest* affair, but sure as hell it was always *hot*. She didn't drink much at first, but I turned her on to it and soon she was drinking as much as I was, which by then was a lot. Domestically, however, she was a fucking disaster. Couldn't cook for shit and kept a sloppy house. Couldn't even make my favourite dishes, tuna salad or scrambled eggs, both of which, done perfectly by Fanny, I'd eaten with relish all my life. (More than once I found myself throwing Adele's scrambled eggs at the kitchen wall.) On top of that, she had lousy table manners: I had to practically teach her how to hold a knife and fork; had to show her the difference between a wine glass and a water glass; even had to advise her on how to dress, which she deeply resented. In truth, I'd become a control freak and was trying to mould her, Pygmalion-like, into being my ideal woman and mistress. She retaliated pitifully by complaining about me having lunch with my mother every day (I had a working office located near my former home) and about having to have dinner (real Jewish food instead of Adele's disasters) with my parents every single Friday evening. She also thought it pretty strange when, one evening when my parents were out of the house, I insisted that we fuck on top of my mother's bed. Adele was horrified, but she complied and I found the experience to be disturbingly exciting. To this day, I still wonder why.

Barbary Shore was published in the spring of 1951. The reviews were appalling. One reviewer described it as 'this evil-smelling novel', *Time* decided that it was 'paceless, tasteless and graceless', and the *New Yorker* emphasized its 'monolithic flawless badness.' Given an average of about fifty bad reviews to five good or fair. I tried to console myself by convincing myself that the lousy reviews were caused, not by the quality of the novel, but by its inflammatory political content, its tacit support for socialism, and by the fact that it had appeared just after the Chinese invaded Korea, giving birth to another fit of American hysteria over the Communist menace. On the other hand, while I'm now willing to concede that certainly the last third of the novel was indeed pretty awful, collapsing into a lot of sometimes incoherent political speechifying, it was at least my first attempt at the themes that would come to dominate my future writing: murder, suicide, incest, orgy, orgasm, and Time with a capital T.

When *Barbary Shore* was critically demolished, my status dropped instantly and the damage to my nervous system was considerable, though I refused to accept that I was no longer the golden boy of literature and fought ever more outrageously to keep myself as the centre of attention wherever I might be. I already knew instinctively that celebrity, no matter how obtained, was the way to succeed in America. Nothing else really mattered.

Fame. What it does to us. What it makes us do. Yet what does it even matter in the end, when illness strikes and makes us feel helpless in every way and eventually leads us to death: eternity's doorway? That's what I believe that light might be. That pulsating light right in front of me, the only light in this all-encompassing darkness, with walls that may not be walls, not the walls of my hospital room, but actually walls composed of a deeper darkness stretching out to the infinite. Sometimes that light seems near, other times far away, but I have the feeling that it's a light at the end of a long, dark tunnel, a light pulsating and calling me to it, a light forming the doorway to the other side: yes, eternity's doorway. I want go to it, to enter it, find out what lies beyond it, but my concentration upon it is weak, because I keep getting distracted by the recollections that now make up my consciousness, perhaps my whole being. And there, right before me, in my head, a good way back in time, or Time with a capital T, are the bleakly beautiful, windswept sand dunes of Cape Cod. It seems so real to me now…

It was in 1951, shortly after the disastrous publication of *Barbary Shore*, that Adele and I first starting visiting Provincetown, down there on Cape Cod, going every summer, staying in a small apartment on the harbor side. Adele painted while I worked on my third novel, *The Deer Park*. In Provincetown I was a bar and party boozer, frequenting the Old Colony on Commercial Street, mixing with Portuguese fishermen, writers, actors, painters, beatniks, tourists, beach bums, drunks and junkies, more frequently using my fake Texas accent and hipster words like 'man' and 'cat' and 'dig', pretty much like my friend, Marlon Brando, in *The Wild One*. My 'literary' parties, on the other hand, were more sedate affairs, with the likes of Dwight Macdonald, Edmund Wilson and Mary McCarthy as guests, only spoiled by Adele's lack of decent social manners and her tendency to get drunk or stoned, (as invariably I was, too) and then insult me in front of everyone.

Well, we both had hot tempers, which made the sex hot, which kept us glued together despite all the screaming and slapping and punching; and

round about that time I started ‘acting’ various roles, using different accents: my customary Texan, plus Brooklyn, Harvard, Mafia Italian and even posh British. As Adele was a born actress as well (and would, indeed, eventually turn professional, though never with great success) we had an increasingly explosive, melodramatic relationship. The melodrama was up front. For instance, one evening, while I was sounding off about my latest obsession, the psychology of the orgy, to a bunch of highly intellectual friends, male and female, Adele said, slurring drunkenly, ‘Okay, Norman, you want an orgy with these squares, you’ll get one,’ and then she defiantly took all her clothes off and stood naked in the middle of the crowded room. No need to say it: She was hoping to embarrass me in front of my ‘square’ friends, but she merely struck us all as being entertaining. And another night, at Gloria Vanderbilt’s, when Adele caught me scribbling down the phone number of one of the more attractive girls at the party, she went completely mad, screaming obscenities and threatening to kill the girl, so I had to pick her up, still crying and kicking hysterically, and take her home in a taxi.

Not that my own behaviour was much better. One night, walking along Commercial Street with Adele about two in the morning, after yet another drunken party, I manically kept calling out to a police patrol car as if it was a taxi. When the cops got out of their car and tried to calm me down, I became aggressive, wrestling one of them to the ground and throwing a punch at him, so the other one pacified me by slamming me on the head with his blackjack. Then they hustled me into the back of their patrol car and drove me straight to the police station and threw me into the clink. The wound in my head required fifteen stitches. A few days later, when in court, I elected to be my own lawyer, hamming it up like Clarence Darrow for the edification of the gathered, slavering media. Though I lost my case, I was only given a fine and the publicity was, of course, invaluable. I was learning the ropes.

Back in New York, our drinking increased: whiskey sours before dinner, Scotch during dinner, more whiskey sours after dinner. This often caused a drunken Adele to go early to bed while turning me into a Jekyll-and-Hyde personality: from amiable and considerate to sadistic bully, always goading, pushing, needling, forever looking for fights. I also enjoyed pushing Adele’s fiery Latin temperament to its limit, once even insisting that she let me go off and mercy-fuck an unattractive older lady friend who was begging me for it. Naturally, Adele was outraged, but I talked her into letting me go, though

when I returned from my saintly mission of mercy the shit hit the fan. I also got into a fight at the jazz nightclub, Birdland, and was arrested for being drunk and disorderly, once more ending up in court.

What a bad boy I was in those days! Those days that now seem so long ago. Now here I am, adrift in this darkness, possibly walled in with the deeper darkness above and below, on both sides, with only that pulsating light (my reflected heart?) in the distance, though maybe not, maybe, instead, much closer than it seems to be, and I'm recalling my final days, the days of my breaking health, my appallingly rapid ageing, and so I'm assuming that I must be dead and bravely accepting it. No fear at all. Just this growing curiosity. This attempt to control my teeming thoughts, my uncontrollable recollections, that return me again and again to where I was before, in this instance, to my wicked Errol Flynn gallivanting way back in the '50s.

Yes, indeed. In the spring of 1952 I went to Hollywood to research a novel (it became *The Deer Park*), leaving Adele back in New York. While in Hollywood, by way of research, I took other women to bed and deliberately told Adele about them. (Previously I'd told her, just to gauge her reaction, about my fucking of two hookers in Paris; her Adam's apple went up and down a few times, but she gulped and accepted it.) In revenge, she indulged in a marijuana-and-booze-fuelled threesome with a married couple in their loft in Greenwich Village and, naturally, she told me about it. Despite my own shameless gallivanting, I was furious. When eventually I returned from Hollywood to the Sixty Fourth Street apartment and she came to see me, smirking triumphantly, I spat at her, staining her snow-white blouse, then we fought and made up again. Then we moved into a crummy apartment in Pitt Street in the lower East Side. While there, I worked in a small rented room near my parents' house in Brooklyn Heights and had lunch with Fanny every day, which disgusted Adele, who accused me of being, just like her old boyfriend Jack Kerouac, a pitiful Jewish mama's boy. But when not actually fighting (and often even *when* fighting) we had a lot of booze-and-pot parties, inviting our more famous friends, including Marlon Brando, James Dean, Montgomery Clift, Stella Adler, Charles Chaplin, John Huston, Lillian Hellman, Lillian's lover, Dashiell Hammett, Clifford Odets, Alberto Moravia, and my French friend and political mentor, Jean Malaquais, who bored the piss out of everyone but me. Stella Adler, though an outrageous flirt and extremely sexy with it, was too tall for my liking and, even worse, was

Marlon's beloved mentor and occasional fuck, so I gave her a miss. Otherwise, a good if rowdy time was had by all concerned.

Beginning in 1953 we spent a few summers in Mexico, where my first wife, Bea, was living with Adele's former lover, Steve Sanchez, whom she too had met through Dan Wolf. En route to Mexico we stopped off at Marshall, Illinois, to spend a few days with James Jones in Lowney Handy's prison-like writer's colony, to which Jones was addicted. (He was also addicted to Lowney: a scenario I mentally wrote, in my kind fashion, as the story of an ugly bastard fucking an ugly bitch.) We drank like fish every day we were there and Jones and I played our macho games, such as push-up competitions and arm wrestling, none of which thrilled Adele, who disliked Jones because she suspected he disliked her, which was perfectly true. (Being common, he thought she was common.) We also stopped off at North Conway, Arkansas, for a visit with my old army buddy, now writer, Frances Gwaltney (author of the well received war novel, *The Day the Century Ended*), and at New Orleans, where we got stoned on peyote, suffered hallucinations, and were violently sick for days after. Finally arriving in Mexico City, shaken but not stirred, we rented a furnished house in the suburbs for a few weeks and visited Bea, Steve Sanchez, now her clearly desperate husband (Why else would he have married her? Surely he had to be willing to put up with anything!), and Susan, the lovely daughter sired by me and Bea. It soon became clear that Bea despised Adele, not only because Adele was now married to Bea's former husband (me), but because she'd been Steve's former lover; but I managed to ignore the simmering tension (and Bea's sarcastic tongue) by concentrating most of my attention on my much loved daughter.

Nevertheless, I was, at the time, suffering with a bad liver, a problem started in the Philippines, where I was fighting for my country, but not helped by my currently prodigious intake of tequila, Scotch, margaritas, marijuana, too many Seconal tablets (which I often dissolved in my large glasses of Scotch), my two or three packs of cigarets a day and my numerous coffees. This, however, did not prevent Adele and I from attending live sex shows, indulging in reefer-fuelled wife-swapping orgies, fighting violently afterwards, making up by making love, and then, more importantly, going to see as many bullfights as possible. My particular obsession with this beautifully brutal, bloody sport later led to my attempt to better Hemingway's

Death in the Afternoon with my lengthy essay, 'Homage to El Loco'. Not too many critics thought that I'd succeeded, but who cares what *they* thought?

By the end of 1954, when I was finishing off *The Deer Park*, but feeling anxious and depressed about it, even more deeply into pot, Seconal, alcohol, Benzedrine, cigarettes, coffee and any available cunt that came along, therefore suffering again from a tormenting bad liver, Adele started pressing me into getting married. I tried wriggling out of it, but she rarely let up about it, so I finally caved in and we were married on April 19, 1954, in New York's City Hall. Always generous to a fault, I gave her a thirteen dollar wedding ring, promising to get her a diamond ring later, though I never actually got around to doing it, instead just buying her a simple gold band, which, being hopelessly working class, she proudly wore throughout our marriage. The wedding was followed by lunch at the Tavern on the Green, in turn followed by a relatively simple wedding party organized by my sister Barbara. Guests included the black writer, James Baldwin, who had a homosexual crush on me while loathing my controversial essay *The White Negro*, and James Jones, then still not married and still seeing Faith Dane, the actress-dancer renowned for playing a trumpet between her legs, something I bet *you* can't do. During the riotous party, Jones, bombed out of his skull on booze, climbed out the window and into the next-door apartment of Dan Wolf. When Adele and Dan went looking for him, they found him in Dan's gas-filled apartment, with his head in the oven. Though I had a good laugh about it, that was probably the last time I felt close to Jones. I mean, seeing him with his head in the oven made me feel that I understood him at last.

The following year I found a loft rental on Monroe Street near the East River waterfront. Monroe was the meanest street of all the streets in that mean area. Garbage littered and gang-ridden, shadowed by the Manhattan Bridge. An area so dangerous that when escorting Adele home from the subway I always carried an iron bar wrapped in a rolled-up newspaper. During one of the parties we had there, a gang of local thugs charged in, looking for some girl that they claimed had insulted them as she entered the building. Always keen for a fight, I gave them a tongue-lashing and tried to throw them out, but was thumped on the head with a hammer for my troubles. After falling to one knee with blood in my eyes, I courageously climbed back to my feet with fists balled, preparing to take up the fight again, and was thumped a second time with the hammer, which this time put me

down for good. Adele screamed when she saw the blood, the gang fled from the apartment at the sound of her screaming, and my good friend, Marlon Brando, who was sitting there with Rita Moreno on his lap, remained where he was throughout the whole event, enjoying his Latin squeeze, as if nothing untoward had happened. Marlon, God, yes, he was a cool son of a bitch, but I could have happily killed him that evening.

I was introduced to Brando by Shelly Winters, way back in the early 1950s when he was still making his first movie, *The Men*. Brando was fucking Shelly at the time. I'd been brought to L.A. by Sam Goldwyn after the huge success of *The Naked and the Dead* and I suppose I was harboring secret dreams of following in F. Scott Fitzgerald's footsteps. Anyway, already in love with the idea of being famous, I'd thrown myself wholeheartedly into the Hollywood social whirl and eventually, imagining that I had an actual 'deal' with Goldwyn, threw a big Christmas party by way of celebration. Guests included Humphrey Bogart, Ginger Rogers, Montgomery Clift, Elizabeth Taylor, Cecil B. Demille and John Ford. The party turned out to be a bit of a fiasco because in Hollywood you weren't supposed to mix left and right-wingers and that's what I'd done in my innocence, thus being landed with a lot of guests who either argued noisily with each other or simply refused to talk to one another. Shelly arrived with Marlon, both soaked from the rain pouring down outside. Not amused, being soaked, Brando turned his back to the whole room, staying behind the bar and talking only to the black barman, then abruptly, within mere minutes of his arrival, told Shelly he wanted to leave. I caught them as they were going out the front door and aggressively demanded to know where they were going. Brando, the cunt, responded by saying, 'What the fuck are you doing here, Mailer? You're not a screenwriter. Why aren't you in Vermont writing your next book?' I could have killed the insulting bastard, but he was out the door before I could swing a punch.

Naturally, I ran into him a lot over the subsequent years and we formed a loose friendship (he often came to my New York parties) but although I admired him as an actor – indeed, viewed him as our major actor – I was always slightly uneasy with him. First, because he was known to have an obsession with seducing the wives of other men, including his best friends (he even made a pass at my wife, Adele, during a party in our loft apartment, despite having come with one of his girlfriends, the sensual Peurto Rican

dancer-actress, Rita Moreno) and, second, because I was convinced that he was bisexual and I had certain doubts about that breed.

So why did I believe he was bisexual? Well, apart from the many stories I'd heard about his bisexual affairs with the likes of Jimmy Baldwin, Leonard Bernstein, and the French actor Christian Marquand, not forgetting his rumored cruising of the Hudson River docks for rough gay trade during his early days in Broadway theatre, I'd been privy to his regular visits to Provincetown, noted for its growing artistic, bohemian and gay population. Marlon's friend, Tennessee Williams, was a regular down there. So was Clayton Snow, a legendary queen who was known as 'Claytina', served as barman in the New Central Hotel, and stood tall and flamboyant at the very centre of the gay social milieu. The word had long been put around that if a man wanted to get serviced, all he had to do was ask Clayton, so few eyebrows were raised when Marlon moved into Clayton's cottage in Pumpkin Hollow and the two became a regular item. So I was pretty amused when, years later, a Marlon Brando as big as a baby elephant appeared in drag in *The Missouri Breaks* while playing a flamboyant character called 'Clayton'.

My relationship with Marlon came to an end with my controversial review of *Last Tango in Paris*. In it, I said that 'because there is no shot of Brando going up Schneider, and since the audience has been watching in all the sombre awe one would bring to the front row of a medical theatre, it is like seeing an operation without the entrance of the surgeon's knife.' Not content with that, I continued: 'But Brando's real cock up Schneider's real vagina would have brought the history of film one huge march closer to the ultimate experience it has promised since its inception…' I learnt later from a mutual friend that Marlon, having read my review, said that he felt like sending me a note, telling me to stick my own cock up my own ass and film it for worldwide distribution. Which I thought was a pretty novel way of expressing either his displeasure or his amusement. I hope it was the latter, but I never found out, because we kind of lost touch after that. Maybe also because, having praised him by describing him as 'our greatest actor, our noblest actor,' I mischievously qualified the praise with, 'he is also our national lout.' There are times when I just can't keep my mouth shut.

Anyway, finally deciding, after those hoodlums gate-crashed our Monroe Street party, that enough was enough, Adele and I went to the other extreme,

moving to the upper East Side, into a duplex in a four-story brownstone on Fifty-Fifth Street, between First and Second Avenues. Adele bought a couple of poodles, but I had little patience with them and when one of them shat on the rug I threw it down the stairs, outraging Adele again. On the other hand, one evening, when I was out walking the animals, one of two drunken sailors I was passing accused one of my poodles, Tibo, of being 'queer.' So being as drunk as they were, I asked the other sailor to hold the dogs' leashes while I went for the one who'd made the crack. By the time we finished our brawl, my raincoat was torn and filthy, I had cuts on my face and head, and one eye was badly swollen and inflamed from what turned out to be a detached retina. Of course, it wasn't the poodle I was defending; it was my own, increasingly violent ego. 'No one calls *my* dog a faggot,' I growled at the doctor.

None of which helped with the writing of *The Deer Park*. Being under the deranging influence of drink and drugs and my sick, depleted liver, I tinkered endlessly with the manuscript of my 'Hollywood' novel, obsessed with making the prose as elegant as that of F. Scott Fitzgerald, even struggling at the last minute to come up with a final paragraph or sentence that would equal, or even cap, the famous last lines of *The Great Gatsby*: 'Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us… So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.'

What I came up with was: 'Then for a moment in that cold Irish soul of mine, a glimmer of the joy of the flesh came toward me, rare as the eye of the rarest tear of compassion, and we laughed together after all, because to have heard that sex was time and time the connection of new circuits was a part of the poor odd dialogues which give hope to us noble humans for more than one night.'

Get it? Fitzgerald was talking about time, the past and orgastic future, and I tried to do the same, though I dropped the capital 'T' to make 'time' instead of 'Time' (which I'd frequently used in my writings) and the marijuana fumes made such changes seem magical to me. Yes, I thought my closing lines were terrific (I didn't think of them as a steal), but all the tinkering in the world, not forgetting the constant rewriting, didn't help *The Deer Park* to find acceptance with the publisher who'd commissioned it. Even worse and infinitely more humiliating was the fact that the novel was rejected by seven more publishers, most of whom considered it to be obscene (Bernard Cerf:

‘This novel will set publishing back by twenty years.’ Alfred Knopt: ‘Is this your idea of the kind of book which should bear a Borzoi imprint?’) before finally finding acceptance with Putnam’s Walter Minton, who later went on to publish *Lolita*. Though *The Deer Park* was published to largely derisory reviews, which had me bawling obscene abuse at Adele (‘Those motherfuckers. I’ll show them!’), in a self-serving essay that I later wrote about it, I cleverly minimized the damage (PR-conscious to the end) by claiming: ‘I was not unhappy, because the good reviews were lively and the bad reviews were full of factual errors.’ Not content with that, when I talked about its relatively low standing in the bestseller lists, only reaching the sixth position before falling off altogether, I brazenly suggested: ‘it would have reached as high as three or two or even to number one if it had come out in June, and then been measured against the low sales of summer…’

Well, you’ve gotta have nerve!

But no question about it, when *The Deer Park* failed, just as *Barbary Shore* had failed, I described my feelings honestly, if rather melodramatically, in *Advertisements for Myself*, by saying, ‘something broke in me… and I was finally open to my anger, I turned within my psyche, I can almost believe, for I felt something shift to murder in me…’ Yes, suddenly I felt that I was a psychic outlaw, and for sure I liked the feeling, yes, liked it a lot more than trying to live like a respectable, middle-class Jewish boy, yes, liked the feeling of my emotions building one upon the other, yes, violent emotions, demented aspirations, as ‘I mined down deep into the murderous message of marijuana, the smoke of the assassins.’

So, yes (using the word I so often used in my prose), I can again ask myself, ‘Where are you now?’ Because the only thing I can be sure of is that I’m still conscious in some way, still thinking, still associating, even recalling in detail lines I wrote years ago, such as: ‘The reader will be aware by now that I have some obsession with how God exists. Is He an essential or an existential God? Is He all-powerful or is He, like us, an embattled existential presence who may succeed or fail in His vision?’ Thing is, once I’d covered all the major themes – war, politics, sex, therapeutic violence, buggery as a route to self-knowledge, and so on, and so forth – yes, once I’d done all that I’d nothing left to write about except the biggest subject of all, which was, of course, God. So metaphysical speculations became a dominant theme of my work, even as far back as *The Deer Park*, and continued to grow as a subject

during the years I was smoking marijuana. And I was smoking an awful lot of marijuana during my years with Adele.

According to Adele, as related in her memoir, *The Last Party*, it was shortly after the seven rejections and disastrous reviews of *The Deer Park* that I got even more heavily into marijuana, booze, cigarettes, Benzedrine and Seconal, pacing the apartment all night, whispering to myself and feverishly jotting my thoughts down in my many notebooks. Formerly slim, I became paunchy and bloated from all the drinking and the drugs and the lack of decent food. Certainly, that's the condition I was in when, in 1955, I started writing my belligerent columns for the *Village Voice*, the mag I founded with Dan Wolf and Ed Facher. Those columns outraged the public (my very intention) and ended my long-standing friendship with Dan, who'd introduced me to Adele and was then the editor, but couldn't stand my egomaniacal outbursts and need to control everything and everyone (just as I was trying to control Adele). The friendship never recovered.

Just as I'd ostracized most of the staff of the *Village Voice* with my insistence on being in control, so, in a similar manner, I destroyed any chance of my stage adaptation of *The Deer Park* being worthwhile. For a play to work, one at least needs enthusiasm from the actors. Given my privileged position, I was able to enlist an illustrious cast just for an initial reading in my grim Perry Street apartment: Montgomery Clift as Sergius, Rip Torn as Marion Fay, Kevin McCarthy as Charlie Eitel, Mickey Knox as Herman Teppis, and Anne Bancroft, fresh from her Broadway triumph in *Two for the Seesaw*, as Elena. Unfortunately – and as usual – buttressed with drink, drugs and nicotine, I repeatedly butted in, interrupting the actors, and even angrily criticized Ann Bancroft's reading, treating her like any rank amateur. This resulted in the normally well-mannered Anne throwing her script at me, telling me to let Adele play it, then storming out, with me screaming after her that her leaving was fine with me as she'd never amount to anything anyway. The play, after many more trials and tribulations, was put on at the Actors Studio, directed by Frank Corsaro, with whom I'd also fought constantly, but after an embarrassingly short run it died for all time, thus putting an end to my hopes for Broadway. However, it was that manic, possibly pathological condition, that led to the writing of *Advertisements for Myself* and *An American Dream*.

For me, heavily influenced by the works of my friend, the psychoanalyst

Robert Lindner, the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s represented the age of conformity, the suppression of individuality, the crushing of the ego, turning man into mass man, which is possibly what I meant when I wrote that 'the shits are killing us.' So I revolted against my middle-class Jewish background, my respectable upbringing, by fighting and fucking and generally going out of my way to shock and outrage and cause controversy. (Which I knew, let's admit it, was also useful for the selling of my books.) Lindner had written that every man carried a psychopath within himself and it was that side of me, the latent psychopath, that I wanted to release or, perhaps more accurately, indulge. I also disagreed with Hannah Arendt's famous statement about the 'banality of evil' and believed, instead, in 'the vast power of the unconscious or the evil of true murderousness residing in the most ordinary people.'

All of this came out, first, in *Advertisements for Myself*, in which I beat my own drum both as writer and great lover, thinly disguising myself as the New York-based bullfight teacher (a ridiculous concept in itself) in my scandalous fictional piece, 'The Time of Her Time,' in which I described my hero's cock as his 'Avenger' and first introduced my panting readers to the delights of buggery, used by the hero as the way to whip a frigid Jewess into her first ever orgasm; then, in the same vein, by causing another widely discussed controversy with my essay, 'The White Negro,' in which I offered the novel theory that a form of courage is involved even when a couple of eighteen-year-old hoodlums beat the brains out of a fifty-year-old candy-store keeper. The same themes or, if you wish, beliefs, came out later in *An American Dream*, in which buggery and murder also play a great part, both being practised by a hero who does not for a single instant express regret or remorse for any of his murderous or sexually perverse activities.

I was, you see, already working myself up to the stabbing of my second wife. We'd had a second child, Betsy Ann, earlier in the year, which made me the father of three girls in all, two by Adele, one by Bea, but in truth I was so deep into myself, into my violent fantasies, that I barely noticed their existence. The drunken fights between me and Adele had become more frequent, more violent, with me often beating her up, leaving her black and blue. A dangerous edge was reached in Connecticut when we had a wife-swapping session with married guests, all in the same room, and the other woman's husband, finished with Adele, contemptuously stubbed his cigarette

out on my ass. Naturally, this led to another drunken brawl and my slow-burn to a truly murderous rage. At another party, Adele got into a fight with a six-foot tall stoned and drunken lesbian schoolteacher playing beatnik for the summer, and I shouted at her to go outside and beat the bitch up. Next thing, they were out on the dunes, wresting and hammering each other with fists, while I and a lot of my male friends looked on, taking bets. Not long after that little incident, when Adele was six months pregnant and we were quarrelling about something, I punched her in the stomach without thinking. I never apologised and the child was born healthy, but after that our sex life was almost dead. If only 'almost dead,' it was killed off entirely when I turned up at four in the morning, drunk and dishevelled, to boldly tell Adele that I'd just fucked a black whore whom I'd picked up in Sheridan Square. However, I only fully realised that I was getting close to the edge when, after asking my beloved sister Barbara to type something for me, I went berserk when reading it, saying it was crap and accusing her of trying to sabotage me, then punched her in the face, knocking off her glasses and bringing tears to her eyes, before she picked her broken glasses up and fled, sobbing, from the room. And this was Barbara, the sister I truly loved and who was, I knew, devoted to me. Thus, it perhaps should have come as no surprise when, during a booze-and-drug-fuelled party (intended as a combined birthday party for Roger Donoghue and a promotional party for my first inane mayoralty campaign) at our Upper West Side apartment, I went mad and stabbed Adele with a three-inch pen knife.

For weeks before the incident I'd been running a crazed campaign as candidate for the mayor of New York City. It was, essentially, merely part of my growing obsession with self-publicity and I was either drunk or stoned, often both, during the campaign. In such a condition, almost manic, to put it mildly, I spent the day of the party running frantically around the city, stopping off for drinks at practically every bar I passed, inviting to the party the perfect strangers that I picked up in the bars – drunks, druggies, bums, thugs, other kinds of criminals – so by the time the party started the apartment was packed – at least a couple of hundred people had managed to squeeze in – and I was half out of my head on bourbon and pot. By four in the morning, after I'd had more than enough of a drunken Adele loudly belittling both my talent and my manhood, and after learning that she'd been up to some nonsense with another woman in the bathroom, and after scaring

one of our female guests by drunkenly pawing at her, and after attacking my friend George Plimpton down on the street, and after picking fights with other passers-by, I went back into the apartment, my shirt torn, blood on my face, sporting a black eye, and Adele, standing there with only an unknown black man for company, also drunk and enraged at my performance, spat a stream of Spanish abuse at me, then called out something like, 'Come on, you little faggot, where's your *cojones*? Did your ugly whore of a mistress cut them off, you son of a bitch?' And the next thing I knew, I had a three-inch penknife in my hand and was stabbing her with it, and, yes, there was blood everywhere and I heard her whisper, 'Oh, dear Jesus, help me!' and then she collapsed and the black man said, 'My God, man, what have you done? We've got to get her to a hospital.' And I said, while kicking her, 'Get away from here! Let the bitch die!' And then, when the black man tried to pick her up off the floor, I pulled him away and started punching him, and while she lay bleeding we wrestled around the room until the black man gave me a punch that knocked me down and, yes, while I was down, feeling dizzy and wretched, the black man picked up the bleeding Adele and carried her to the elevator and helped her down to the lobby where someone called for an ambulance and she was taken to hospital and was on the operating table for six hours. I wasn't there. Neither was the black man. That unknown black man disappeared and was never heard from again – no question, he saved her life – while I fled from the scene of the crime without looking back, finally turning up at the hospital, in a daze, a few hours later.

Of course, I got away with it, like I got away with everything. The night after her operation, I paid Adele another visit and persuaded her to tell the cops that she'd fallen on broken glass. When she agreed to this ploy, I gave myself up to the cops and was sent to Bellevue for psychiatric evaluation. While I was there, my mother, Fanny, for whom I could do no wrong, visited Adele in the hospital, poured out her concern for me, not for Adele, and made her promise not to say anything that would get me sent to jail. Then, relieved, Fanny visited me in Bellevue, bringing a pot of my favorite chicken soup. Later, I was diagnosed as being a paranoid schizophrenic with suicidal and violent tendencies. While I certainly didn't accept that psychiatric evaluation, it certainly helped in keeping me out of jail. Under relentless pressure from Fanny and a lot of friends, all of whom expressed their concern for me, not for the victim, me being a great writer, after all, a valuable member of

society, Adele agreed not to testify against me, so at the subsequent trial I was found guilty of no more than third degree assault, walking free instead of serving fifteen years.

Pretty good, eh? Even looking back on it, from wherever I am now, in my almost certainly supernatural, existentialist condition, being almost certainly dead but still bright in the head, growing ever more enamoured of that pulsating light, either distant or near, either drawing me toward it or coming toward me, I can say that I was either clever or lucky to get out of that one.

I never apologised to Adele. Instead, I continued my partying, kept fucking other women, and even went on TV to justify myself by talking about the psychology of murder and insisting that acts of violence could prevent cancer. Amazingly, people took this nonsense seriously, even heavyweight intellectuals, the cream of the New York literary world, the academics so desperate to make a name for themselves that they created from the violence of my work and my life the most elaborate critical theories and justifications. Not Adele, though. We were divorced the following year and she finally got her revenge by writing a scurrilous memoir, *The Last Party: Scenes From My Life With Norman Mailer* (1997), digging up all the dirt she could think of. Naturally, since I'd based my whole career on controversy, on having a notorious reputation, I did nothing to prevent publication. I just took my cream off the top of it.

And to make sure my fans didn't forget what I had done, I even included a little poem in my expensive hardcover collection of amateur poetry, *Deaths for the Ladies* (1962), most of the poems being composed of single-word lines with lots of spaces in between to bulk out the book and make it look like a substantial purchase. The one about the stabbing of my wife was called 'Rainy Afternoon with the Wife' and it went as follows:

So long
as
you
use
a knife
there's
some
love

left.

A bit J. P. Donleavish, I know, but I thought it was diabolically clever. However, most critics and even some of my readers took a very different view, so I defiantly reused the poem in my 1964 collection of good to bad bits and pieces, *The Presidential Papers* (1964) with the explanation: 'I wasn't trying to reveal my private life in that poem. I was trying to crystallize a paradox.' I thought that was a pretty neat way of excusing myself for making use of that particular poem twice. I shouldn't imagine that the likes of my old friend, America's Greatest Living Poet, Robert Lowell, ever felt threatened by my talent in that particular area.

And then, in my long line of turbulent women, came Lady Jean Campbell, granddaughter of the British press baron, Lord Beaverbrook, daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Argyll, posh to her fingernails, eccentric as only the English aristocracy can be, then in her twenties and a working journalist, having an affair with American media giant Henry Luce when she and I met at a party given by Gore Vidal at his 360 East Fifty-fifth Street apartment in the spring of 1961. It was love at first sight and we left the party together and started living together a few days later and then she was pregnant and we had a lot of fights because she was as crazy as I was, and I wanted her to take care of my kids and make my breakfast but she liked to sleep late in the morning and loll about in her housecoat and leave her clothes lying wherever she'd shucked them off, on every floor of every room, doubtless assuming the maidservant would come in and pick them up, and then she became pregnant and was a very big pregnant lady, yes, very big indeed, and she gave me another daughter, Kate, born in 1962, and we, Lady Jeanne and I, were divorced in 1963, after which I quipped in an interview: 'At least I can say I went fifteen rounds with the best light-heavyweight the British ever sent over.' And then I met Beverly Bentley.

How could a man of my nature resist a woman like Beverly? I met her when I was getting drunk with my boxer friend, Roger Donoghue, at the bar in P. J. Clarke's, and she came in with another boxer, Jake LaMotta (later portrayed by Robert DeNiro in *Raging Bull*), and, clearly as high as I was, said, 'Well, if it isn't Norman Motherfuck Mailer!'

It was love at first sight.

Beverly was a beautiful, blonde, strong-willed, ambitious actress who'd left

Florida at seventeen, made her way to New York, performed in a lot of TV commercials, had a string of pretty high-powered boyfriends – Orson Bean, Eddie Fisher, Andy Griffith, Miles Davis – and had even (oh heaven!) met the man I kept trying so desperately to emulate, Ernest Hemingway, when making a movie in Spain, after which, returning to New York, she played first lead in a Broadway production of *The Heroine*. When the play turned out to be a disappointing flop, she decided, at the dangerous age of thirty-three, to give up and settle down.

Well, yes, a bit of a joke, was it not, that Beverly would think of 'settling down' with me at a time when, despite the stabbing, known more politely as 'The Trouble', my behaviour had become even more outrageous? Indeed, it was not long before meeting Beverly, when I was covering the Patterson-Liston heavyweight title fight for *Esquire*, that I kind of took over the press conference by going up on the stage and sitting in Sonny Liston's chair. When Harold Conrad, who'd put the fight together, told me to get the fuck out of the champ's chair, I refused to move, saying, 'Fuck him, I ain't moving.' So Conrad said, 'Those cops will beat the shit out of you.' And I said, 'Fuck the cops.' So Conrad had the cops pick the chair up, with me still in it, and carry me out through the booing audience and dump me in the hallway. But I staggered drunkenly back inside and, wildly excited by now, started bawling various pieces of advice at Liston, with everyone booing me again, until Liston, being a boozer himself, said into the microphone, 'Leave the bum be. He's just drunk' And I stagged up to the stage and shook his hand and subsequently received all the publicity I could have hoped for. So no question: I hadn't mellowed at all when I became involved with the very beautiful, though hardly mellow, Beverly Bentley.

Our relationship, later our marriage, was an endless screaming match. Lots of screaming. Lots of shouting and screaming, though the sexual attraction was strong. We had a great time in bed the first night we met and from then on the sex was really hot, but she was a frustrated actress and I was a born actor, both of us wanting to be the centre of attention, so we had a lot of conflicts caused by those factors. For sure, she ran an organized house, and a busy house it was, too, but she was one tough broad, hiring and firing people so often I could hardly keep track and screaming foul-mouthed abuse at me like she'd been born with those words in her head. She became pregnant quickly and we decided to get married, mainly for the sake of my growing

number of kids by various wives, so in December 1963 I flew to Juarez, Mexico, to obtain a divorce decree from Lady Jeanne Campbell and that same month married Beverly in the living room of our Brooklyn Heights home. In March 1964, a year after Beverly had moved in, our son, my first son, Michael, was born, and I began work on *An American Dream*.

Spaced out on pot and Seconal and booze and cigarettes, giving way to my recently developed, drug-fuelled belief that God and the Devil are at war for possession of the psyche, I wrote *An American Dream* as if indeed possessed by occult forces. And the occult certainly seemed to have eerie resonance in the finished work. For instance, President Kennedy was mentioned in the very first sentence of the novel; further down the same page, a man named Kelly is mentioned. Later in the same chapter, the reader is informed that Kelly's middle name is Oswald – Barney Oswald Kelly. That chapter was published in *Esquire* about a month after the assassination of President Kennedy by Lee Harvey Oswald. Not satisfied with occult associations, I also based some of the characters on my various wives: the aristocratic Deborah Caughlin Mangaravidi Kelly, who haughtily insults the hero's manhood, is clearly based on a combination of Lady Jeanne Campbell (my lead character and alter ego, Stephen Richard Rojack, strangles her and throws her body out of a skyscraper window, hoping to fake her death as suicide), and the emasculating Adele Morales; the nightclub singer, Cherry, was based very much on Beverly Bentley, being beautiful and blonde, with a strong sense of loyalty to her man and having a black singer as a boyfriend, just as Beverly had once been involved with the legendary black musician, Miles Davis. (Naturally I had my hero beat the shit out of Cherry's black boyfriend.) Cherry was also partly based on my jazz-singer girlfriend, Carol Stevens. So, all in all, *An American Dream*, despite its more outlandish, occult ramifications, was pretty true to the life I was then leading.

It was not well received. While a few critics determinedly found literary merit in it, most were appalled by its lurid storyline and overheated prose. And now, looking back on it, who's to blame them? What was the plot, after all? The hero, my alter ego – war hero, Democratic Congressman, television personality, and author of a book named *The Psychology of the Hangman* – chokes his wife to death, throws her body out the skyscraper window, goes straight downstairs to bugger the German maid in no uncertain terms ('I jammed up her ass and came as if I'd been flung across the room'), outwits

the cops, impregnates a beautiful, blonde nightclub singer after beating up her 'hip' black boyfriend (shades of 'The White Negro' and my rage that Miles Davis had fucked Beverly before I did), defies death by walking around the parapet of another skyscraper, then, when Cherry and her black boyfriend are murdered (my vengeance against Miles Davis), takes off into the desert to communicate supernaturally (or in his fevered imagination) with the dead Cherry, who sends regards from the late Marilyn Monroe, presumably right there by her side in the heavenly vaults. He then packs his car and starts on 'the long trip to Guatemala and Yucatán'.

No, the critics were not kind at all. Worst of all was feminist writer, Kate Millett, who described it as 'an exercise in how to kill your wife and live happily ever after.' And even years later, my most enthusiastic assassin, little Martin Amis, would describe the writing of *An American Dream* as 'the prose of a man in a transport, not of sexual excitement so much as the tizzy of false artistry.' Yes, so said the Toulouse Lautrec of British Letters.

Still, life was catching up on me and I needed the money. More and more of it. My Brooklyn Heights home, looking out on Manhattan and the Brooklyn Bridge, cost a fortune to maintain and was now filled with Beverly, all my kids, one by her, the rest by previous wives, my secretary, a cook, two black maids, a wide variety of hangers-on, and even ex-cons who came to visit me (I was addicted to communicating with imprisoned felons) and hung around for a few days, eating and sleeping for free, before leaving and taking stolen items with them, which always disappointed me. Then, as well, I'd created a loft space where I had ropes and ladders hanging from the roof and crossing empty spaces and reaching down two stories into the living room, used for testing my courage and the courage of unsuspecting guests who had to do some dangerous climbing in order to reach me, and who hated me thereafter for having forced the frightening experience upon them. At the same time I was constructing an elaborate model of a 'future' Manhattan out of Lego blocks, requiring thousands of Lego blocks to be delivered in crates and causing Beverly to scream: 'I can't stand this shit in my living room!' And it, too, was costing a lot of money. So, needing more money, I cobbled together another collection of good to bad bits and pieces, *Cannibals and Christians* (the cover of which was illustrated with a photo of my Lego city) and followed it up with another quick novel.

Why Are We in Vietnam? is the only novel I ever finished under the

mistaken belief that I was writing another. While staying at my place in Provincetown, on the edge of the windy, desolate dunes, I began to think of a novel set there, featuring a group of bikers, hippies and studs, plus a girl or two, living in the scrub thickets that sat in some of the valleys between the dunes, from where they would slip out on a regular basis to commit 'murders of a massive brutality.' But not wishing to stain the good reputation of Provincetown, I reduced the gang to two tough, rich Texas boys and had them hunting bear in Alaska, just before being drafted to fight in Vietnam. Having already gained the admiration of a new generation of student radicals with my outrageous speech about Lyndon B. Johnson, given at the Vietnam Protest Day gathering in May 1965 (where I talked about Johnson's 'monstrous vanity' and 'overweening piety'), my fiction was narrated by a 'hip' Texas disc jockey named D. J. (get it?) who introduces himself as 'the voice of America' and claims that he also represents Lyndon B. Johnson, also described as 'Mr. J., Mr. L. B. J., Boss Man of Show Biz.' I thought this was particularly clever in that I had D. J. also representing Dr. Jekyll, the darker side of D.J. (L. B. J) and named his best friend, another gun-mad Texas kid, Tex Hyde. So off they go, Jekyll and Hyde, to test their courage in the Hemingwayesque manner, by slaughtering innocent bears with high-power rifles that could blow any living thing apart. In the words of D. J.: 'Vietnam, hot damn!'

The resulting fiction was hailed in some quarters as a masterpiece, in others as self-indulgent crap, but coming so soon after *An American Dream*, its fresh offering of gross obscenity and violence led to more outrage and controversy, thus increasing my already large reputation as the wild man of American letters.

Okay, so if I'm not actually dead, if I just dreamed that I'd died after falling asleep on my sick bed, then maybe my sleeping brain is trying to tell me that what I set out to prove I *have* proved: that film is a phenomenon whose resemblance to death has been ignored too long. Yes, by directing and acting in my own films, maybe I was attempting to create an eternal 'me' who had no actual physical existence. So maybe, right now, wherever I may be, which is somewhere unknown, I'm not dead but still alive as a creation in a film, a ribbon of dreams, of my own creation. As I said some time, somewhere: 'there is something sinister about film.' Which almost certainly explains why I decided that I had to make some of my own home movies.

My model was Andy Warhol, the super-delicate homosexual freak with whom I'd been friends for years, who'd often come to visit me in Brooklyn Heights and Provincetown, always uncomfortable, perversely interesting encounters, when we'd discuss his movies more than his paintings, if, in truth, you could call his paintings 'paintings'. While I appreciated the wan Andy's attempts to show up serious Art for the crassly commercial enterprise it truly was (a Picasso autograph being as valuable as a Picasso work of art), I was more impressed, given my obsession with Time with a capital 'T,' with how he showed in his 'home movies' that Time could be expressed, as I later put it, 'as a new kind of creation, a palpability which breathes in the *being* of film.' Warhol did this, I believed, in all those movies of his where a steady camera focused for hour after interminable hour upon nothing worth seeing for a minute. John Lennon and Yoko Ono would later try to do the same with their quivering buttock movies (no way would I want to bugger dear John's hairy ass!) and their 'Two Virgins' crap, but I definitely got in before them with my much more animated ventures into the genre. Unfortunately, given the times, I had to do it under extremely trying circumstances.

My fights with Beverly were continuing unabated, with her constantly threatening divorce. (Beverly: 'You treat people worse than niggers in Georgia. You're just a bully! I want a divorce. I want it right now!' Norman: 'Put it in writing.') On one occasion, Beverly got into a fist fight with one of our female guests who, unfortunately for Beverly, was an expert at Karate and managed to give her a black eye as well as bruised ribs. Another time, the beautiful Beverly was so drunk I had to pick her up and carry her down the stairs, only to have her scream at the guests assembled above: 'He's gonna kill me! Please come down! He's gonna kill me!' I didn't kill her, though I certainly felt like it; instead I put both her and the equally volatile Adele Morales into another production of my play *The Deer Park*, since both of them still had hopeless aspirations as actresses, but the play stank and justifiably bombed. By that time, my second wife was coming to the house on a regular basis, thus giving me two-foul-mouthed women to contend with in a home that now included seven children, most of whom were allowed to be as foul-mouthed as their mothers (and father). No wonder that by that time I'd decided that despite my failure as a playwright and stage director, I wanted to try my hand at making some home movies, albeit more expensive than those by my friend Andy Warhol, and so embarked on three of them, playing the

lead role in all three, also directing, with no advance planning, no script, no retakes, and no financial backing except what came out of my own pocket. Andy Warhol would have been proud of me, though the movies were box-office and critical disasters.

Reviewing my performance in my first effort, *Wild 90*, Pauline Kael described me as 'a growling, grunting, waddling little star, a miniaturized big-brawler, who looks and sounds surprisingly like Victor McLaglen.' Others complained that *Wild 90* was no more than ninety interminable minutes of obscene, meandering conversation between three hoodlums, me being the main one, known only as Prince, and with walk-on roles for a variety of friends and family members, including Beverly, with whom I had a love scene which, according to the always dependable Kael, 'rivals the Burtons at embarrassing us.' The next one, *Beyond the Law*, was more ambitious (and more expensive) than *Wild 90*, using three camera crews to film incoherent interrogations between police and criminals in different rooms in a make-believe police station. This time I played a New York cop, an Irishman, with the unlikely name of Francis X. Pope, and my acting, if supremely self-confident, as always, was just as bad as it had been in the previous film. The third and final movie, *Maidstone*, was the most ambitious of all (cost: $200,000), being shot by four camera crews on several different estates on Long Island over a period of six days, with a cast that included a few professional actors, notably Rip Torn, my then wife, Beverly, two of my former wives, Adele Moreles and Lady Jeanne Campbell, a lot of my girlfriends, including my latest, the jazz singer Carol Stevens, an assortment of friends from New York and Provincetown, and a lot of drunks, dopers, hookers, and general low-lifes picked up from here, there and everywhere. I had the novel idea of directing an unscripted movie about a director directing an unscripted movie while also considering a campaign for the presidency. (How's that for originality?) Playing the director, I called myself Norman T. Kingsley, thus giving him my actual first and middle names. The making of the movie soon descended into a virtual orgy of drink, drugs, random fucking and violence, with numerous arguments and fist fights, culminating in my being attacked by my lead actor, Rip Torn, who, driven border-line mad by my autocratic method of filming, ran across a field to strike me three times on the head with a hammer, drawing blood, and then wrestled with me on the ground where, while Beverly and four of my children were screaming in fear

or horror, I bit, and nearly tore off, Torn's ear.

That ended my desire to make movies for a pretty long time.

However, before making *Maidstone*, I'd written what many people thought was my finest book up to that date, namely *The Armies of the Night*.

Looking back on my life, I have to confess that my grasp of politics was no more profound than what I could get out of the newspapers or, perhaps more relevant, what was hammered into me by my humorless, Trotskyist, French intellectual friend and mentor, Jean Malaquis. My first real political involvement was in August 1948 when, suddenly famous because of *The Naked and the Dead*, but believing that to be taken seriously as a writer I had to show equally serious political convictions, I let Malaquis persuade me to join the Henry Wallace presidential campaign, which leaned toward tacit support for the Soviet Union. Politically naive, I had absolutely no knowledge of Stalinist terror and, like many fellow travellers of that time, saw the Soviet Union as the great anti-fascist bulwark. However, my politics underwent a substantial change between August and October, when Wallace failed to catch fire with the public and I, taking heed of my friend Malaquais's diatribes against the American Communist Party, shocked many pro-Soviet progressives when, in a speech given in Hollywood, I attacked both the Soviet Union and the United States as destructive imperial powers employing tremendous concentrations of economic and military force. Not content with that, at the Cultural and Scientific Conference for World Peace at the Waldorf Astoria in late March 1949, I announced my new politics by denouncing the very idea of peace conferences, saying they would do no good so long as the United States and the Soviet Union continued to converge toward the same point: totalitarian state capitalism. Initially received with great enthusiasm, because of my fame, the speech was roundly booed at its conclusion.

So much for my initiation into politics.

The Armies of the Night came, when I was more politically mature, out of one of the worst periods of my life. Only a few days before my old friend Mitchell Goodman asked me to participate in a march on the Pentagon to protest the Vietnam war, I'd confessed to E. L. Doctorow that I was feeling all washed up, convinced that my time had already been and gone, that the real world was now passing me by. Nevertheless, against my better judgement, I agreed to go on the march and subsequently, in October 1967,

found myself heading for Washington D. C., to take part in the event with other celebrities and thousands of other enthusiasts, including students, hippies, dopers, Yippies and the psychedelic Haight Ashbury angels who famously put flowers in the gun barrels of the soldiers. The evening before the main event, I attended a dinner party composed of liberal academics who got up my nose and drove me to drinking too much. Leaving the party, carrying a big mug of bourbon, I went with Paul Goodman, Dwight Macdonald and America's Greatest Living Poet, Robert Lowell, to the Ambassador theatre, to take part in an Artists of Conscience convention organized by Edward de Grazia. Drunk, I went to the toilet, couldn't find the light switch, so pissed all over the floor before returning to the main theatre where, even more drunk, still imbibing from my big mug of bourbon, I proceeded to bully everyone else on the stage, threatened to beat up the M. C., de Grazia, took over the whole show despite the protests of the others, and then, using my Lyndon B. Johnson 'southern' accent, gave a slurred, obscenity-filled speech that raised catcalls and boos from the rowdy audience, mostly students. 'I'm here because I'm like L. B. J.,' I informed them. 'He's as full of crap as I am.' The next day was taken up with more speeches, witnessing the formal handing in of hundreds of students' draft cards, and another evening of heavy drinking. The following day, marching with about fifty thousand others from the Lincoln Memorial to the Pentagon, facing the soldiers, the bayonets, the gas masks and tear gas, I deliberately put myself in a position to be busted by the cops, then was thrown into a paddy wagon with a Jew-hating Nazi, blond-haired and wearing a Nazi armband, with whom I traded a lot of ridiculous insults. 'You Jew bastard! Dirty Jew with kinky hair!' he screamed. And I responded, 'You filthy Kraut.' And he said, 'Dirty Jew!' And I said 'Kraut pig!' And he said he wasn't a Kraut, he was a Norwegian, and then he put up his balled fists and invited me to fight and I said, 'Throw the first punch, baby, you'll get it all' And so it went, on and on, the mutual insults becoming more obscene by the minute, until we were hauled out of the paddy wagon and taken into the jail, where the Nazi and I were mercifully separated, and then I was driven to another prison in Alexandria, Virginia, spent a few days there, then had my day in court and was released on my own recognizance and, greatly relieved, went back to Provincetown for a couple of months and wrote my brilliant account of the whole business.

In the first-person narrative of *The Armies of the Night*, the part subtitled 'History as a Novel,' I recreated myself as a protagonist called 'Mailer', part hero, part buffoon. I was halfway through the book before I got used to writing about this 'Mailer', but after the book was done I missed him so much that I used him again and again, albeit under a variety of different names, such as Aquarius (my astrological sign) in *Of A Fire on the Moon*, in which I bored a lot of readers with my lengthy discourses on NASA technology, 'the reporter' in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, in which I dismayed a lot of readers with my sympathy for Richard Nixon, and 'the interviewer' in *The Fight*, in which I wrote some of my very best descriptive and good-humored prose, despite the seeming slightness of the subject matter. Nevertheless, when *The Armies of the Night* won the National Book Award, despite its recording for posterity of how I'd pissed on that toilet floor and then gave a drunkenly obscene speech to a chorus of catcalls and boos, it convinced me that I definitely could, as my dear mother Fanny had always confirmed, do whatever the hell I liked and get away with it. My behaviour, therefore, did not improve in the future and my penchant for picking fights with my fellow authors continued unabated, most particularly, in those days, with my favourite adversary, Gore Vidal.

Okay, I'll confess. I respected Gore as a writer (his tartly astute political and literary essays; his well researched but boring historical novels) but had my doubts about him because of his self-confessed homosexuality. Never let it be said that Gore's description of *The Naked and the Dead* as being no more than 'a clever, talented, admirably executed fake' was the cause of our life-long love-hate relationship. No, what bugged me about Gore was his relentless insistence that homosexuality was the natural state of man and that those of us who proudly proclaimed our masculinity (think macho Mailer) were merely attempting to deny our true nature. Now, given that my wild veering between my frequently proclaimed distaste for homosexuality and my obvious obsession with buggery, writing endlessly about it (all the way from 'The Time of Her Time' to *An American Dream, Ancient Evenings* and *Harlot's Ghost*), might have made me appear to be a hypocrite when it came to the touchy subject, I still couldn't take Gore's strident insistence that I and other heterosexual males were pitifully trying to deny our essential homosexuality. He even tried that shit when, in early 1971, Adele and I, with our 3-year old daughter, Danielle, paid him a visit in his Edgewater mansion.

At one point during the weekend, after I'd been boasting about some of my and Adele's sexual high jinks, Gore, never a man to be out-done, said: 'Until you've known an Arab boy, dear Norman, you don't begin to know what sexual pleasure's all about.' So also being a man not to be out-done, I said: 'I *am* married to an Arab boy, dear Gore. Adele has a lot of Spanish blood and Indian blood and could pass for an Arab.' Gore, normally quick with his eloquent sarcasm, did not have a rejoinder to that.

But our love-hate relationship continued. In Gore's cross-dressing novel, *Myron* (1974), satirical representations of Truman Capote and I are used with sadistic relish. Capote appears as a giggling, inept gossip columnist named Maude, a snobbish hairdresser with a 'damp-looking face.' I appear as a drunken, semi-violent cook (which I was when in the army) named Whittaker Kaiser, 'a small fat old man of fifty or so with a full head of wiry gray hair,' constantly threatening Myron/Myra with a meat cleaver. Kaiser proclaims that 'the *real* man… takes one woman after another without the use of contraceptives… just the all-conquering sperm because contraception of any kind is as bad as masturbation and because the good burger makes the good baby.' This was merely a badly written fictionalization of Gore's poisonous put-down of me in 1971, when the slippery-tongued faggot took me to task for my hugely controversial *Harper's* article, later my hugely successful book, *The Prisoner of Sex*, claiming that my attitude to women was disgusting; that I viewed them simply as 'breeding machines' who existed solely to be 'the fruitful receptacle of the male's sacred obligation, though the mystery of sexual intercourse, to conceive children.' He then added that I viewed women as 'at worst, objects to be poked, humiliated and killed.' (A sly dig at *An American Dream*, which sold more than all his novels combined.) Then he drove a stake through my heart by saying that there was a logical progression from Henry Miller to me to Charles Manson; in other words, that it was the attitudes of the likes of me and Miller that had laid the cultural groundwork for sexual psychopaths like Manson.

Well, fuck him! He was just getting back at me because I'd stated that masturbation and contraception were both bad because anything that interfered with conception was evil. (Interview with Paul Krassner: 'Anybody who spends his adolescence masturbating generally enters his young manhood with no sense of being a man. … If one masturbates, everything that's beautiful and good in one goes up the hand, goes into the

air, is *lost*… The ultimate direction of masturbation always has to be insanity.') Which meant that in my view homosexuality was also evil. Well, isn't it? Just because that over-bright faggot had a yearning for Arab boys didn't absolve him from the sin of giving in to his homosexual drives and spilling his seed to no good purpose. And because that's what I sincerely believed he compared me to Manson!

So… I decided to pay him back by confronting him on television, on The Dick Cavett Show. The other guest was Janet Flanner, the *New Yorker* Paris correspondent. Naturally, I'd been doing a slow burn about this for months, so I got drunk before the show, met Gore in the dressing room, ran at him, butted his forehead with my head and punched him in the stomach. Determined not to respond in kind, Vidal just hurried away from me and went out to do the show as if nothing had happened. I followed him out and, still in a rage, demanded an apology for his Manson comment. When Vidal tried to ignore the issue, I shoved in his face a paper containing some of his Mailer-Manson comments and demanded that he read them to the audience. When he refused, I tried to make him reveal what he'd privately claimed he'd done to Jack Kerouac – took the steel out of his *cajones* by fucking him in the ass – but the audience didn't know what I was hinting at and swiftly turned against me for my snide remarks. By the end of the show the audience was booing me, and Cavett, the treacherous bastard, took their side by pointing to my piece of Mailer-Manson notes and saying, 'Why don't you fold it five ways and put it where the sun don't shine?'

So, again, I made a fool of myself, stinking the joint out, while Vidal, as usual, came out of it smelling of roses. The only writer who could beat him on TV was that creepy little fruit, Gore's gay friend, the late Truman Capote.

But did our feud end there? No! About six years later, in October 1977, still fuming at my inability to get back at Vidal, I attended a buffet dinner hosted by Lally Waymouth, writer, journalist and daughter of Katherine Graham, the *Washington Post* publisher. It was a prestigious affair. Other guests included Jackie Kennedy (then Onassis), the British ambassador Peter Jay, William Paley, Marella Agnelli, Jerry Brown, John Kenneth Galbraith, Joseph Alsop, Lillian Hellman, William Styron, Susan Sontag, Guy Talese, Sam Spiegel, Sue Mengers, and… Gore Vidal. The minute I learned from my companion, later my wife, Norris Church, that Gore had arrived, I walked up to him, told him he looked like an old socialist (he insists that I said 'old Jew'), then

threw the contents of my glass in his face. He later insisted that I'd thrown a punch at him, but it was only the drink and the ice cubes that he saw coming at him. During the ensuing rumble I stumbled into Max Palevsky, a Californian power broker, and he spilled his glass of champagne over Lally Weymouth's dress. Vidal, his mouth bleeding, sat on a couch at the far side of the room, having his bloody lip attended to by the literary agent, Sue Mengers, but I hurried across the room and challenged him to go downstairs with me and 'have it out in the street.' Vidal didn't move, but his ageing boyfriend, Howard, volunteered to fight me on his behalf. 'My fourteen-year-old son could take you,' I told him in the midst of this elegant party. According to Vidal, Howard then chased me out, but in fact I said to Lally Weymouth, 'Either he goes or I do.' and when she refused to ask either of us to leave, I stormed out, with Norris.

So I made a fool of myself again.

We finally called it quits in 1984 when, in my role as president of American PEN, the international writers' organisation, I invited him to take part in a series of literary evenings to raise money for the convocation of a PEN World Congress. Vidal agreed and it all went off okay, only to be spoiled when, much later, I read in a Vidal biography that he'd written to Paul Bowles at the same time, describing me as 'the Great Halvah Merchant' who is 'now ricocheting around the lit. world (don't ask me where THAT is) in a mad quest for the Nobel prize (God knows he's bad enough to get it) and lit. respectability and the world's acceptance that he is really numero uno… Oh, the drama of it!'

The drama, indeed!

Another literary rivalry became evident when I needed some quick money and wrote my notorious biography of Marilyn Monroe, entitled simply enough, *Marilyn*. (M. M. = Marilyn Monroe. M. M. also = Mailer's *Marilyn*.) Let us not forget that Marilyn had married the man whom many thought was our Greatest Living Playwright, namely Arthur Miller. I first met Miller when we were both still unknown but living in the same rooming house in Brooklyn Heights. Even then, Miller, writing *Death of a Salesman*, though not yet married to Marilyn, was a dried-out fish. When we finally bumped into each other in the hallway and got to talking and he told me about his play, I responded by telling him flatly that I could have written a similar play if only I had the time, which I hadn't, since I was too busy writing the Great

American Novel instead. Having no sense of humor, he was clearly offended by my presumption. Quite a few years later, when we'd both become famous and Adele and me were living close to Miller in Provincetown, where he was staying with Marilyn, then his wife, I pursued him relentlessly for an invitation to his house, desperately wanting to meet her. Obviously not keen, he finally relented and invited me over, but when I arrived there with Adele, Marilyn was nowhere in sight and we just had a drink and a boring conversation, during which the only mention of Marilyn was when Miller said that she'd been called to the coast on movie business. All the way home, I cursed the bastard out, repeatedly telling Adele that he'd deliberately waited until Marilyn was away to invite us over. Even worse was when I later learned, though a mutual friend, that Marilyn had been in the house all the time, in the upstairs bedroom, so no surprise that when I came to write my book about Marilyn, I let Miller have it with both barrels. He's despised me ever since.

So many conflicts. So many enemies. Looking back on it now, from wherever I am, being whatever I am, almost certainly dead but in some way still alive, oddly not frightened, prepared to embrace the All, though wondering what the All might be, either within or beyond that light ahead in the here and there, the near and far, the past and present, I'm amazed that I survived my own turbulent life for as long as I did. A long time, actually. Longer than many get. Surviving fame and failure, great wealth and huge debts, the many wives and children, the fist fights and head-butting, not forgetting the drink and the drugs and the borderline madness. Yet made it through to the end. All the way into my eighties. Only finally surrendering the ghost at a respectable old age, the eminent writer, the survivor, the patriarchal Jewish head for an ever-growing, surprisingly cohesive family of former wives, children and grandchildren. And yet all of them, good and bad, right or wrong, but mostly sane, were forged in the furnace of a temperament that was often demented. Even now, when I look back on those middle years, I wonder how they survived it. I did not consider myself a normal person, and those were not normal days…

In 1969 I threw myself enthusiastically into my notorious second candidacy for mayor of New York, with a wild Irishman, Jimmy Breslin, as my running mate (for city council president). Drunk most of the time and as abusive as ever, I sank like a stone but gained more invaluable publicity for myself. By

the following summer I was back in Provincetown, formerly an inexpensive haven for painters such as Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, but starting to fill up with writers, some of whom lived there all year round, others only there for the summer season, including the likes of Joseph Heller, E. L. Doctorow, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr., and John Knowles. Still, the painters came as well, so between the artists, the writers, and the gay and hippy communities, what had once been a quiet village of mainly Portuguese fishermen and small, civic-minded shopkeepers became a honky-tonk town, a place of heavy drinking and drugs and promiscuity. By that time I was still determined to be as outrageous as possible, the 'psychic outlaw,' and had developed a passion for boxing (I had regular lessons from my boxer champion and friend, Jose Torres) and head-butting to add to my growing list of over-age juvenile sins. I also enjoyed having my former wives, Adele and Lady Jeanne, around, since both were volatile company for the volatile Beverly and melodramatic scenes could virtually be guaranteed. Naturally, since they brought their children, to add to Beverly's children, the house was always packed and noisy. So was the house in Brooklyn Heights, where the kids were allowed to run wild, and beautiful Beverly, who was putting on weight, becoming ever more frustrated at having to live in my shadow, and becoming obsessed with health issues, was always screaming about Brooklyn's foul air. Even when one of our kids had a serious vomiting fit, she did little about it other than to scream dementedly, 'It's the fucking air! Look at the air outside!' Our disenchantment with one another was growing by the day and was not helped any when she said that she thought my book about the moon shot (*Of A Fire on the Moon*) was a bad idea and demanded that I drop it. I told her to go fuck herself, but instead, knowing that I was fucking my long-standing girlfriend, Carol Stevens, as well as having an open affair with an air hostess, she took off for Mexico to continue an affair she was having with a famous race-car driver, leaving me alone with the kids, with only Carol Stevens and sometimes Adele and Lady Jeanne and some other just-passing-through girlfriends for adult company. Then, with *Of A Fire on the Moon* completed, I took off with five of my six children to Maine for a six-week vacation, hoping to find out if I could manage a large household on my own. I couldn't. Instead, I enlisted the help of a good woman from Maine, whose identify I never disclosed, and then my beloved sister Barbara helped out for a fortnight, and then, even better, my long-

standing girlfriend Carol Stevens came for a visit, stayed for the whole of the summer, did a great job with the kids, and then announced that she was pregnant by me. When I conveyed this information to Beverly, she told me that our marriage was over, and indeed it was. Now, at least for a brief period, domesticity ruled.

Even as I was settling into his deceptively peaceful domesticity with Carol, I was becoming more aware that I had somehow become the main target for the rapidly swelling ranks of feminist writers. Top of the list was Kate Millett, who, in her book *Sexual Politics,* savaged the sexual attitudes of D. H. Lawrence, Henry Miller and, of course, macho Mailer. It was Millett, after all, who'd reduced *An American Dream* to being no more than 'an exercise in how to kill your wife and live happily ever after.' Since she was worse, much worse, in *Sexual Politics*, I responded with my lengthy essay, 'The Prisoner of Sex,' which tore her feminist rantings to shreds. The essay was published in its entirety in the March 1971 issue of *Harper's*, selling more copies of that issue than any other in *Harper's* history, and then it went on to become my bestseller book of the same title. I did not, however, improve my reputation for extreme male chauvinism with my comment: 'the prime responsibility of a woman is to be on earth enough to find the best mate for herself, and conceive children who will improve the species.' (The Pope presiding over the Vatican would have been proud of me.) I did, however, appear to be sticking to my principles when Carol Stevens gave birth to a daughter, Maggie Alexandra, during the same month that *Harper's* published 'The Prisoner of Sex.' I had now fathered one daughter with Carol Stevens, another daughter with Bea Silverman, two daughters with Adele Morales, and two sons with Beverly Bentley: six children in all – and all because I didn't believe in contraception because the act of sex, without procreation as its purpose, was an act without meaning and a shocking waste of man's sacred seed.

So what's wrong with that?

With the publication of 'The Prisoner of Sex' in *Harper's*, I decided to face up to my feminist opponents (and gain myself more publicity) by organising a public debate at Town Hill in New York City. Kate Millett, the cowardly bitch, refused to come, but Germaine Greer, another wizard at self-promotion, agreed to appear, as did radical feminist Jill Johnson, Diana Trilling, and Jackie Ceballos, president of the National Organization of

Women. A lot of friends and celebrities were in the audience, including Adele, Lady Jeanne, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., Elizabeth Hardwick and Susan Sontag. Greer kicked off the proceedings by cleverly getting me to pose with a copy of her book, *The Female Eunuch*, for the press photographers, so that was *her* evening made. The word was out that she was also determined to seduce me after the debate, but I managed to avoid that awful fate. I was, of course, the moderator, and my way of 'moderating' was to be deliberately provocative, even abusive, to the female participants, using my broad variety of borrowed accents, from posh English to Irish and Texan, to put across my contentious points. The highlight of the evening came when two of Jill Johnson's lesbian friends jumped up onto the stage and then proceeded, with Jill, to hug and kiss passionately and roll around in simulated lesbian rapture. Instead of pulling them apart, I admonished them with the comment (not forgetting for one second that I was being filmed and recorded): 'You can get as much prick and cunt as you want around the corner on Forty-second Street for two dollars and fifty cents. We don't need it here.' Understandably, that brought the house down and put an end to our supposedly 'serious' public debate on sex.

But the women weren't the only ones out to nail me. In 1970 some academic faggot wrote a novel about a professor of literature and dean of humanities who becomes involved in a student revolution and, in a lecture to his rebellious students, says: 'Our famous New York writer/promoter is considered magnificent because his life and his books hold up to us images of violence, sadism, murder as goals of aspiration.' He then talks about how 'even Mailer's Rojack, that cardboard fake, was treated as if he were the personification of some significant ideas.' He then introduces a fictional scene in which a radical student, one of the professor's disciples, before attending a Harvard lecture given by me, reads a copy of *Advertisements for Myself*, zeros in on that part of my essay 'The White Negro' where I suggest that courage of a sort is necessary for two eighteen-year old hoodlums to beat in the brains of a candy-store keeper, and concludes that what I'm offering is a 'licence for killing'. Not content with that, the academic sonofabitch, name of Alan Lelchuk, then has a scene where the radical student, outraged by my thesis, gives me a taste of my own medicine by catching me in the bathroom of a hotel during a post-lecture party, shooting me in the shoulder with a pistol, thus making me fall to the floor, then ordering me to pull my pants

down and turn around, onto my stomach, letting him place the barrel of his pistol against my arse-hole – clearly mocking the buggery in *An American Dream* – and squeezing the trigger to blow my guts out through my big mouth. And to add insult to injury, the sonofabitch, who'd used my real name throughout, called his novel *American Mischief*.

Some writers will do anything for publicity.

Not that I let him get away with it. I'm all for literary freedom, but that was too much, so shortly after reading the book I called a press conference and informed the slavering newshounds that if I ever got my hands on Alan Lelchuk 'there'd be nothing left but a hank of hair and some fillings.' Which in a way proved Alan Lelchuk's point.

Even worse was my performance at my fiftieth birthday party, which I held at the Four Seasons restaurant in Manhattan and for which I sent out five thousand invitations, informing the invited guests that for fifty dollars a couple they would be treated to 'an announcement of national importance.' What I'd come up with was the formation of a so-called 'Fifth Estate,' a group of citizens who would keep those experts in surveillance, the CIA and the FBI, under surveillance and alert the public to the way those secretive organisations were manipulating the population, to the degree, indeed, where they may even have been involved in the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Jr., and other public figures. Guests to the grand event included my mother, my seven children, Adele, Lady Jeanne, my mistress Carol Stevens, the editors of major newspapers and magazines, celebrities such as Andy Warhol, Shirley MacLaine, Jack Lemmon, Bernardo Bertolucci, and a few unusually brave Washington D. C. senators. Unfortunately, I didn't get around to speaking until ten in the evening when, with drink in hand, I gave a drunkenly incoherent speech to an audience of about five hundred people, opening up with a dirty joke that incited a lot of booing and hurried exits of the disgusted, then ranted on about my proposed 'democratic secret police keeping tabs on Washington's secret place.' By the time I'd finished, a lot more of my guests had fled the premises. By four in the morning I was to be found butting heads with any other crazed drunks who were willing to take me on. The next day, at a press conference in the Algonquin hotel, trying to speak coherently with a filthy headache caused by hard drink and head-butting, I admitted to the gathered media that my 'Fifth Estate' speech had been a 'disgrace.' So ended my fiftieth birthday – though,

alas, it wasn't the end of my troubles.

Later that year, Hodder & Stoughton, the British publishers of my *Marilyn* book, announced that they were delaying publication because I'd been charged with plagiarizing from the Guiles's and Zolotow biographies of the same subject. That humiliation was followed by an interview on *60 Minutes*, in which Mike Wallace tackled me about my suggestion, in the book, that Marilyn's involvement with Bobby Kennedy had led to her murder. Wallace then cleverly cut to an interview with Eunice Murray, Marilyn's housekeeper, who insisted that no one could possibly have visited Marilyn during her last night on Earth. Not satisfied with that, Wallace then tricked me into confessing that I'd thought the book was important enough to be published half finished, without proper research, rather than have publication delayed. A few days later I was back in the Algonquin hotel for another press conference, this time to deny the charges of plagiarism, to be roundly challenged regarding my murder theory, and to be forced to acknowledge, in my thoughts, if not with words, that my Marilyn book was becoming something to be joked about. Pauline Kael then hammered the final nail into the coffin containing my reputation by informing the many readers of the *New York Times Book Review* (on the front page, no less!) that 'another' unworthy aspect of the book was my all-too-obvious envy of Arthur Miller.

Well, what's wrong with that? I ask again.

I was down, but not out. Certainly turning fifty wrought some subtle changes in me, dramatically altering my belief in what I'd once described during an interview with Mike Wallace as my 'joyful promiscuity' (seeing the interview on television, my then wife Adele called me a 'son of a bitch' and stormed out of the room) and even making me fearful in odd ways: fearful that my broken marriages were destroying my self-respect; fearful that I wasn't as good at sex as I'd always assumed; even fearful of making love to a strange woman and dying in her bed. In other words, promiscuity was on the way out and a more mellow me was on the way in. It was this more settled me who covered the George Foreman-Muhammad Ali world championship fight in Kinshasa, Zaire, had a good time while doing so, and produced in the resultant book, *The Fight*, one of my most good-humored and evocative works. And it was this more mellow me who took on the challenge of *The Executioner's Song*, my epic, Pulitzer-prizewinning factual novel about Gary Gilmore, a two-time killer executed by firing squad in Utah at his

own request.

I credit much of this new mellowness and sanity to meeting and then marrying Barbara Norris Church, a high school art teacher from Atkins, Arkansas, about six feet two to my five feet eight, twenty-six years old to my fifty-two, though by a magical coincidence (good Karma!) we shared the same birthday. I met her in the Arkansas house of my friends, Fig and Ecey Gwaltney, and when I first laid eyes on her, she struck me as being too beautiful to look at, so I walked out of the room in a love-struck daze. But I asked the Gwaltney's to invite her the following evening for dinner and she came and we were soul-mates from then on. Since Norris told me up front that she'd been married before and had a three-year- old son, Matthew, I confessed that I was still married to Beverly and presently living with Carol Stevens. Having got that of my chest, I then encouraged her to come to New York, where I could help her find work as an artist and model. Then, once back in New York myself, I told Carol about her, so Carol moved out and Norris moved in and Beverly eventually gave me an expensive divorce and I married Norris and my life changed for all time. I drank a lot less, gave my kids more attention, and appreciated the fact that Norris, unlike my previous wives, didn't shout and scream. She was extremely well organized, took control of my affairs, both domestic and financial, was a solid foundation during the writing of two of my most ambitious books, *The Executioner's Song* and *Ancient Evenings*, and was generally supportive – except in the case of Jack Henry Abbott, which could be termed, without fear of contradiction, the last Big Mistake of my turbulent life.

Given my hopeless romance with the criminal underworld, I'd developed the dangerous habit of writing to felons in prison and inviting them to come and visit me at home upon their release. This hadn't always worked out, as some of them abused my hospitality and then stole money and other items from the house before moving on. Jack Henry Abbott had first written to me when he heard I was working on a book, *The Executioner's Song*, about another recidivist criminal, Gary Gilmore. In his mid-thirties, Abbott had spent most of his adult life in various prisons, including a penitentiary where Gary Gilmore had served his time. When, in the middle of 1981, Abbott was released from his latest incarceration, we'd been communicating for four years and I'd convinced myself that he was a natural-born writer who could, if encouraged, write an invaluable book about prison life. In short, I thought

he was talented. What I didn't know at the time was that most of his stories of relentless institutional brutality and virtual torture inflicted upon him personally were grossly exaggerated and that Abbott, while in prison, had murdered another prisoner ('in combat' as he put it), had a record of many other violent assaults, had resolutely refused to accept responsibility for his own actions, and had been described by prison psychologists as being in 'a paranoid state' and 'capable of sudden violence.' So not knowing any of this, or perhaps not wanting to accept it, since certainly, in rereading, it was evident in the subtext of his letters, I arranged for the publication of an excerpt from his letters in *The New York Review of Books*, encouraged Random House to publish the collected letters as *In the Belly of the Beast*, and wrote an adulatory, wildly miscalculated, foreword for it. Having already promised him a job as my editorial assistant, I met him at the airport in New York the day he was released, brought him home with me, spent an hour talking to him (while Norris and the kids slept safely upstairs), then put him in a cab that took him to the Lower East Side halfway house where he was scheduled to begin his supposed re-entry into normal society. Norris was furious. 'You wrote that book about Gilmore,' she said. 'Didn't you learn anything? It's not going to work. These guys don't change.' How right she was! Within days it became clear that Abbott couldn't cope with the normal world, was completely disorientated by it and felt threatened by it, imagining that everyone was laughing at his lack of knowledge of routine social interaction, and then he bought a knife, feeling he needed it for protection, and then, over what later transpired was a wholly imagined slight, stabbed to death a twenty-two-year old Cuban-American actor, dancer and playwright working as a waiter in a restaurant located at Second Avenue and Fifth Street.

So my flirtation with a certain earlier stabbing, 'The Trouble,' and my general romanticized violence had come back to haunt me.

At his subsequent trial, Abbott admitted that many of the abuses related so graphically in his book had been 'fictionalized', but I decided to testify on his behalf anyway, despite Norris's righteous fury at my decision to do so. In court, I got off lightly, but once I stepped outside the courtroom the gathered media gave me a rougher ride, clearly outraged at what they assumed was my defence of a killer and lack of concern for his victim. So I ended up in what can only be honestly, shamefully, termed an hysterical state, bawling that if they wanted my blood they couldn't have it, insisting that a long sentence

would destroy Abbott's chances as a writer, and responding to the accusation that I seemed more concerned with Abbott than with his victim by offering the inflammatory statement: 'I'm willing to gamble with a portion of society to save this man's life.' Meaning Abbott's life, not his victim's life. Which I didn't really mean. Which led me to scream obscene words at the reporters, culminating with, 'You are full of shit! Fuck off! No more questions!' Which was the only incident that ever brought Norris close to divorcing me.

My final newsworthy event took place in November 1981 when, as at least one gossip rag had it, I had a kind of 'double wedding to wives five and six.' What I did, in fact, was marry Carol Stevens to 'honor' the years I'd lived with her and 'legitimize' our nine-year-old daughter, Maggie, then, a few days later, divorced her in order to marry Norris, thus recognizing our union and legitimizing our two-and-a-half-year old son, John Buffalo. Complications arose when Beverly claimed that she was not divorced from me, that the matter was still in litigation, 'So how can he get married even once?' But despite her objections, my marriage-divorce-marriage went ahead and Norris and I lived happily ever after, at least until illness struck me down and landed me here.

The question being: Where is here? In this oddly comforting darkness, this place of insubstantial walls, invisible walls, with only darkness above and below, on either side, and that single, pulsating light defying any concept of distance, either here or there, near or far, but inexorably coming toward me or drawing me toward it, either way expanding, spreading out, its tendrils like the light around a flickering candle, weaving and waving like the strands of a spider's web and every bit as seductively beautiful, making my eventual entrapment seem perfectly natural. And yet even as I'm drawn in, or advance as helplessly, as unconcerned, as a mote of dust in the summer air, I see myself, the ageing Mailer, face lined and hair white, inching into his final years as a more placid person, one finally at peace with himself. I have Norris to thank for that.

Yes, I quietened down an awful lot in my later years. By the mid-1980s Norris's two chosen careers, painting and modeling, were well on track and I'd become much more of an 'establishment' author, perhaps even respectable, with my Pulitzer Prize and a couple of National Book Awards under my belt, even serving as president of American PEN, the writer's organisation, from 1984 to 1986. So how much more respectable can you

become? Yes, indeed, my life was more settled, and together with Norris, who enjoyed a glamorous life style, I became part of the New York social scene in a way that I'd never done before, attending the dinner parties of celebrated New York socialites (William S.Paley, Gloria Vanderbilt, Oscar de la Renta) and interacting with their celebrity guests. This is interesting in that it had always been my belief that it's never advisable for a novelist, once successful, to live in an upper-class social milieu for too long, as Truman Capote and Jerzy Kosinski both learnt to their cost. The former played the court jester to New York society until he could bear it no longer, after which he commenced his self-destruction with his scandalous, gossipy *Answered Prayers*. Likewise, Kosinski, a hugely talented writer, but hopelessly addicted to high society, committed suicide during an illness almost certainly caused by a literary scandal that had him outcast from the society he'd tried so hard to entertain. Yet despite these cautionary recollections, I continued to turn my back on my past 'psychic outlaw' activities and instead concentrated on my new experiences in the world of high society. I also spent more time attending political conventions and writing articles, sometimes books, about them, not always with the most exciting results, many viewing them as mere excuses for not writing serious fiction. I took offence at this because although *The Executioner's Song* (1979) was a biographical study of a real-life killer and his remarkable girlfriend, I viewed it as a great social novel and certainly, by any standards, a serious work of literature. The Pulitzer Prize at least vindicated that belief. Likewise with my next big novel, *Ancient Evenings* (1983), which, though damned by some reviewers (but highly praised by others) was certainly another hugely ambitious, serious work of literature. However, the great commercial success of both books didn't stop my gradual drift into the kind of world that I'd previously avoided, including my involvement with various literary and political affairs.

That pint-sized assassin, Martin Amis, said of another of my many collections of essays, *The Essential Mailer*: 'Norman Mailer's new book bears all of the hallmarks of a writer faced with an alimony bill of $500,000 a year.' Well, he was right, I must confess, about the alimony and the reasons I took on certain books. There are times, after all, when you just have to write a book for no better reason than pressing economic problems. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1984) was such a book. After I finished *Ancient Evenings* (1983), I felt creatively exhausted, so I did no more writing for ten months.

Unfortunately, my then publisher Little, Brown and I were parting company, but there was one more book owed to them under my contract, and at the tail end of my ten-month non-writing period, they insisted that either I give them a final book or return the advance they'd paid for it. In effect, I had to come up with a book in sixty days! Which meant a short novel requiring no research. So bearing in mind the speed with which I'd written *An American Dream*, I decided to go for a thriller again, this one set in Provincetown, where I'd been living on and off for forty years. Which is how *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, with its patently ridiculous plot, came about. Perhaps understandably it was not well received by the critics, though it made me good money when the movie rights were sold and, even better, when I persuaded the producers to let me direct it. (Endless fights with cast and crew guaranteed; more than one person stormed off the set.) Given my previous track record with my own movies, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when it received a spectacular thrashing by the critics and died at the box office. But this being capitalist, celebrity-obsessed America, between failed book, failed movie and my notorious reputation (failed serious writer and wealthy man), I still managed to make a potful of money.

My obsession with writing the Great American Novel (an elusive beast, but one which always has to be 'big' in physical size as well as in subject matter) led me to the writing of another doorstop offering, *Harlot's Ghost* (1991), an 'epic' novel based on the history of the CIA, with a text so packed with acronyms and cryptonyms that most readers found it impossible to get through. (Typical sentence: 'Besides the Ukraine, we had Downtown, and BOZO, and GIBLETS, and seven safe houses, and a translation mill off the English garden called CRUMPETS, and one out at Templehof Airport in a warehouse near Customs labelled SWIVET…' Try that for 1,300 pages and see where it gets you.) This was followed in 1995 by another whopper (791 pages, plus lengthy Appendix and Glossary), *Oswald's Tale: An American Mystery* (1995), an 'epic' nonfiction work, an investigation into the life of Lee Harvey Oswald and who might really have assassinated President John F. Kennedy.

Money was not the sole motivation for my next novel, *The Gospel According to the Son* (1997), since by then I had received a $4 million advance from Random House for a four-book deal (making me the highest paid author in America), though money was certainly in my thoughts when I

first conceived of it. I knew I was begging for trouble when I decided to write it, but the idea – a fictionalized life of Jesus told in the first person - wasn't nearly as megalomaniacal as a lot of my critics assumed. In fact, the idea came simply enough when I was staying in a small Paris hotel room (I hate spending my ill-earned gains unnecessarily; indeed, when I took my second wife to Europe by boat, even at the height of my fame and wealth with *The Naked and the Dead*, we travelled second class. No pretensions for this humble Jewish lad from Brooklyn, New York!) and I couldn't sleep because the room was so tiny and the bed took up most of the space, making me feel claustrophobic. So I started reading the English-language version of the Gideon Bible that I found on my bedside tablet, was struck by how abominable the writing was ('an ungainly prose studded with golden nuggets,' as I scribbled in my ever-present notebook) and decided there and then that I could improve upon it by rewriting it as a work of first-person narrative fiction. What really tipped the scales and gave me the courage to actually do it was the recollection, which came the same night, that a relatively unknown, untalented writer named Fulton Oursler once sold a million copies of a book called *The Greatest Story Ever Told*. So, thus inspired, I wrote *The Gospel According to the Son* and was, no surprise, slaughtered by the vast majority of reviewers, who, not content with criticizing what they viewed as my pedestrian, mock-Biblical prose, could not resist making snide comments about how, with my 'God complex', I was clearly thinking of myself as 'the Son' of the title (*The Gospel According to Mailer*) and, even worse, how my fondness for the sound of my own name had first led to 'Mailer's *Marilyn'* (M. M.) and now to 'Mailer's Messiah' (M. M. again.) As I once said, 'The shits are killing us.' Now I think of 'the shits' as my critics.

Moving adroitly from virtue to vice, from the son of God, as it were, to the son of the Devil, my final attempt at the 'big' subject – and, indeed, my final book altogether – was *The Castle in the Forest*, a speculative novel about the early life of Adolf Hitler, narrated by a man known only as Dieter, or D. T., in his present physical form a member of Heinrich Himmler's dreaded SS intelligence group, but actually, in his former, incorporeal state, an assistant to the Devil, thus they both have names beginning with 'D'. And to D, or D. T., the Devil is also known as 'the Maestro.' Now, looking back on it, even *I'm* not sure what I was thinking when I concocted this final, decidedly odd

work. It has to be admitted, however, that by that time a great many of my readers, both professional and just… well, *readers*… were becoming suspicious that in the years of my dotage I was convinced that I could write anything I liked and get away with it. (And there were many who believed I could do no wrong.) This may explain why another English literary assassin, John Crace (probably a friend of Martin Amis), as part of his series of 'digested' rewrites of the novels of his contemporaries, used a clever emulation of my first-person narrative voice to rewrite my 'digested' Hitler novel and have me say: 'I am a megalomaniac author in my 80s who can write any old crap – I use that word in its nugatory sense – and know that my craven people will take it seriously… But that is the way of the Maestro: for I am Norman Mailer and I can do what I like.'

Which, when you really get down to it, is what I was clearly doing throughout my whole life.

By now, inevitably, old age was catching up with me in the worst possible way: first the acute arthritis, then the need for two walking sticks, then a hip replacement, then a bypass operation and, finally, scars on my lungs and increasing problems with breathing. Even worse was when Norris, though a lot younger than me, contracted serious cancer of the fallopian tube and had to undergo debilitating chemo and radiation treatments. Since cancer had always been my metaphor for evil and now my wife was suffused with it, I wondered if it was my fault, if my actions had given it to her, and eventually I just couldn't bear to face her and moved into the bedroom down the hall, leaving her to recover on her own. After that, when we weren't taking turns going into hospital, we more or less lived apart in the same house, but met every evening for drinks and conversation, until I ended up in the ICU in Mount Sinai hospital and gradually faded away.

And so, here I am, now faced with the seemingly unanswerable questions: Where am I now? Am I dead? Am I alive? And not being able to answer the questions, I find myself thinking of what that seemingly invisible fellow author, Thomas Pynchon (even *I* haven't met him), said in his novel, *Vineland*. 'We are assured by the *Bardo Thodöl*, or *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, that the soul newly in transition often doesn't like to admit – indeed will deny quite vehemently – that it's really dead, having slipped so effortlessly into the new dispensation that it finds no difference between the weirdness of life and the weirdness of death…'

Yeah, right, Tom. Maybe that's what's happening here. I mean, my head's definitely full of things that could only have happened after my death, but I can't really accept that I'm dead. Not that I can really control my thoughts, it being that they leapfrog from one association to the other and right now that quotation from *Vineland* makes me think of its author, Thomas Pynchon, whose reputation was even bigger than mine, even though his novels, while being filled with sublime descriptive passages and knock-out comic dialogue, not to mention some indescribably stupid song lyrics, are downright unreadable, only palatable in short stretches (the sublime descriptive passages, the knock-out comic dialogue) and plot-wise are all over the place, heading nowhere meaningful. I mean, has *anyone* ever actually finished a Thomas Pynchon novel? (They make *Harlot's Ghost* seem like a light read.) Not that you'd get a literary critic admitting to such a failure, so clever has Pynchon been at putting them in the position where an admission that one can't really read him would be tantamount to an admission of literary idiocy. Something similar, come to think of it, as I managed to do with *An American Dream* and other demented works.

So where do I stand, now that I'm here in a place, or a space, that I cannot yet comprehend, the darkness all around me, that distant light ahead, first expanding, then contracting, then seeming to lure me on, into its fathomless depths, only having the certainty that I'm about to be judged, about to have to face the difference between God and the Devil, between good and evil, the polar poles of all my writing? Yes, indeed where do I stand and why do my thoughts keep repeating themselves, one event leaping over the other, the past and present appearing as one, flickering between light and darkness as an unwinding ribbon of film in my bedazzled head? And why do I keep thinking of myself as an actor playing a part?

Ah, yes, the part. It was me, Norman Mailer, forever an actor, always marrying women who wanted to be actresses, who was finally offered a part in a movie directed by someone other than myself. The movie was *Ragtime*, based on the great historical novel by E. L. Doctorow and directed by Milos Foreman, who'd previously directed *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.* In *Ragtime* (1981) I donned a curly gray wig and false moustache to play the famous architect Stanford White, who is shown in the film being shot in the head by the outraged husband of White's mistress, Evelyn Nesbit. My own wife, Norris Church, another aspiring actress, sat beside me in a nonspeaking

part. In my brief scene, I had to be shot over and over again to enable Foreman to capture the impact of the bullet on White's head from every conceivable angle. Unfortunately, John Lennon had been shot dead only a few days before, an event that deeply shocked me and millions of others, and so, as I was being shot repeatedly in the head for the film, I kept thinking of Lennon being shot dead, which in turn made me imagine my own death, over and over again, while the perfectionist Foreman filmed my dying from as many different angles as possible. And from that point onward – from lying there on the studio floor in a pool of my own blood, albeit false blood, to my last hours in the hospital, gradually fading away with my possibly terminal illness, possibly to regain consciousness where I am right now – yes, from then to the present I never had a day when I didn't contemplate my own death in fear and fascination. So thank you, John Lennon.

I always liked John Lennon. He was a born troublemaker, just like me. He was talented and witty and rebellious, just like I am, or was. I say 'was' because I'm not really sure where I am now, *what* I am right now, dead or alive or simply a product of my own voluptuous imagination, creating a ribbon of dreams out of a life that might only have existed in the fiction of my own creation. I am Norman Mailer. I am *me*. But whatever 'me' is, whatever 'I' am, I can now only focus on that light in the distance, or that light that is very near, that light pulsating like a heartbeat, either coming toward me or luring me toward it, while I wonder what I might find on the other side of it, beyond that tunnel-like exit, that evanescent single eye, maybe old friends and enemies, maybe even John Lennon, maybe only the reflection of myself in the time warp of Einstein's theory of relativity, or in some bewildering, intoxicating miracle of quantum physics.

The light is now expanding to surround me.

I am –

I -

John

1940 – 1980

That guy Chapman did me a big favour. I'd released my first album in five years only a week or so before, but it wasn't doing well (my fans hated 'the Jap' too much) until Chapman gunned me down outside the Dakota Building, I died en route to the hospital, and the album, within twenty-four hours of my demise, was selling like hot cakes. Let's face it: the biggest mistake Paul McC ever made was not being assassinated and having his post-Beatles reputation soar overnight as mine did. I mean, if Paul had been assassinated instead of me, they'd now be raving about him as the true genius, the greatest creative force behind the Beatles, as they've been raving about me ever since I was knocked off. They certainly weren't doing it when I was alive and being jointly creative with the Jap. Now, a writer like Norman Mailer would describe those comments as existential truth and, being a writer myself, I'm bound to agree with the pot-bellied Jew-boy scribbler.

'The Jap'? 'Jew-boy scribbler'? Do these comments make me a racist and anti-Semite? Not really. At least I don't think so. I mean, I was always a bit of a wind-up merchant, you know, and I specialised in inventing insulting names. I really liked our manager, Brian Epstein, who had a crush on me, but I took the piss out of him all the time, generally for being Jewish and homosexual, often deliberately talking about 'queers' and 'arse bandits' in his presence. I remember, for instance, that when Brian hired Tony Barrow as PR for the Beatles and personally introduced him to us in the Devonshire Arms pub, I said loudly to Barrow, deliberately within earshot of Brian, 'If you're not queer and you're not Jewish, what are you doing working for Brian?' Of course Brian turned bright red but said nothing, which gave me a kick. On

another occasion, when Brian had completed the writing of his life in the music business and asked me what I should call it, I suggested '*Queer Jew*.' And thereafter, when Brian even mentioned the eventual title of the published work, *A Cellarful of Noise*, I always referred to it as '*A Cellarful of Boys*'. So I wasn't really racist or homophobic. I just enjoyed winding people up.

So what's wrong with that?

Well, I know for sure I'm dead. I mean, I have to be dead. That fat lunatic shot me. I remember the sound of the shots. I remember staggering toward the entrance of the Dakota Building, up the stairs and into the security guard's vestibule. I remember everything starting to blur. I remember having a rush of recollections of the many times I'd been convinced that I was going to die by being shot. I remember falling to the floor and Yoko screaming, 'John's been shot!' I remember being engulfed in a wave of terror and then I blacked out and regained consciousness here, in this kind of nowhere void, darkness on all sides, a kind of tunnel of darkness, the walls and roof formed by a deeper darkness, with a tiny, bright light seeming to beckon me hopefully from the distance. So I know I'm dead. There's no doubt about it. I know it and I don't feel sad or fearful, which *is* a bit odd, but maybe because I'm still alive in my memories. The past lives with me right now.

So exactly who was I? *What* was I? How did I get to be here? And where do I start? To paraphrase that great *The Who* song: with my generation.

'Ninety percent of people of my generation,' I once said self-pityingly, 'were born out of a bottle of whisky on a Saturday night and there was no intention to have children. I was never really wanted.' This was utter bullshit. Self-pitying crap. In fact, while me dad, Alf Lennon, was away from home through most of my early years, it was only because he was at sea a lot, serving as a steward on the big ocean–going liners. He also had secret yearnings to be a music-hall performer, singing, dancing and doing impersonations (a black-faced Al Jolson; that kind of thing), so when he met me mam, the effervescent Julia, since immortalised in song, he found a kind of soul-mate, because she wanted the very same thing, being a fairly good singer and a competent player of the piano accordion, the banjo and the ukulele. Though neither of them succeeded in their showbiz ambitions, I was destined to compensate for their failures.

They were married in December 1938, only a few weeks after Neville Chamberlain had returned from Hitler's Germany, claiming that he'd

guaranteed ‘peace in our time’ in return for abandoning Czechoslovakia to the Nazis, thanks very much, Nev’. Me mam’s pregnancy took place during the first months of the war, as the German army rolled across Belgium and France, the defeated remnants of the British Expeditionary Force were evacuated from Dunkirk, and heavy bombers were blowing the shite out of port cities like London and Liverpool. I was born in Liverpool on the ninth of October that year, 1940, during a series of particularly bad German air raids, doubtless with the screaming of air raid sirens drowning out me and m’mam’s birth screams.

Far from being ‘not wanted’, I was soon being fought over constantly, and being given more attention that most kids get. In my frequent, well publicized complaints about me dad never giving me any attention, I was blandly ignoring the fact that he, at the time, in going to sea when German U-boats were a constant hazard, was risking his life for his country. However, me mam, Julia, as I found out in my mature years (not that I ever matured much), was a bit of a live wire and a lot less respectable than her four sisters.

One of her sisters, me Aunt Mimi, was married to George Smith, a milkman, quiet and decent, who was to become a real father to me when my own dad and mam separated, me mam moved in with another man, a hotel waiter called Bobby Dykins, and I was taken in by Mimi, then living with George in suburban Woolton. Having old-fashioned, middle-class values, Aunt Mimi was horrified by the thought of a boy my age living with an unmarried couple – or ‘living in sin’ as it was called in those days – and so insisted that I come to live with her and George in their respectable Woolton house, located only a short walk away from me mam and her boyfriend.

Mimi had four sisters: Elizabeth, known as Mater, Anne, known as Nannie, Harriet, known as Harrie, and, lastly, Julia, the prettiest and the flightiest of the lot. All, except Julia, were married to quiet, steady men. All had kids. Only Mimi and George had no kids, which may explain why they were so devoted to me. Anyway, four of the five sisters, including Mimi but excluding the wicked Julia, were resolutely middle-class, always immaculately dressed, all with impeccable manners, and they all fawned on me, just as much as Aunt Mimi did. So despite my later claim to being working class (Paul McC was more working class than I was), I was actually a fairly well-off, middle-class lad, constantly smothered with the affection of loving but dominant women. It was just me real mam, the prettiest and least

respectable of the sisters, who let me down.

She was great, though. Contrary to all that melodramatic, self-pitying *angst* later displayed in my Primal Scream songs, such as 'Mother' and 'My Mummy's Dead', which sprang out of my fantasies of childhood desertion, she and Dykins lived only a few streets away and I could run around and see them anytime I wanted. I remember that when I was a real small kid, before moving in with Aunt Mimi, Julia used to regularly sing me to sleep at night and I really loved it. Unfortunately, later, when me real dad, Alf, drew a long stretch of shore leave and came back to Woolton to work temporarily at the Liverpool docks, he soon learnt that his pretty wife had been making a habit of visiting local pubs, getting drunk and flirting with unattached men, leaving me to be looked after either by Mimi or with a neighbour named Dolly. A lot of arguments ensued, during one of which me mam poured a cup of hot tea over me dad's head and he responded by either slapping her or thumping her on the face, either way causing her nose to bleed. Of course, I witnessed all that, and Aunt Mimi, a more proper kind of woman, wasn't pleased to hear about it. However, me dad eventually went back to sea for eighteen months, got into a whole heap of trouble when on shore leaves, including a couple of spells in foreign prisons, and finally returned home as a DBS (Distressed British Seaman) only to be informed by his lively wife that she was pregnant by another man: a Welsh soldier. As Mimi later recounted it , me dad agreed to step aside and let his missus marry the other man, to legitimize the expected baby, but me mam refused to marry him and, in fact, told him to piss off when he proposed. Me dad then agreed to take his missus back and look after the baby as his own, but me grandad, Pop Stanley as we called him, feared the public disgrace that would come from having an illegitimate baby in the house and so insisted that it be put up for adoption. When, in 1945, only a few weeks after the war ended, me mam gave birth to a baby girl, named Victoria Elizabeth, she was quickly adopted by a Norwegian couple, renamed Ingrid Maria, and taken off to Norway, never to return.

None of us ever saw her again.

Naturally, I was too young to know anything about this and only learnt about it much later. Still, even now, cast adrift in this nowhere world, my thoughts roaming back and forth in time, taking me anywhere I feel like going, I think of the loss of that baby sister and feel the same kind of resentment that I'd later feel when me mam handed me over to Aunt Mimi

and, later, when she was killed and I resented her for deserting me by dying. So she's dead and I'm dead, but maybe we're destined to be reunited soon, possibly in that distant place where the light shines and beckons me toward it. Meanwhile, as I advance, in my thoughts if nowhere else, I'm still living with the disappearance of my baby sister and wondering how it affected me.

I was four years old at the time and had already been taken away for eight months, during me mam's pregnancy and confinement, to live with me dad's married brother and his family in Maghull, between Liverpool and Southport, so even years later, when Mimi told me the story about me baby sister's adoption and swift transfer to another country, it put the fear of God into me. Even more so when me mam then became involved with Bobby Dykins and announced that she was going to set up home with him and take me with her. Me dad went mad, of course. He had a big fight with Dykins and threw him bodily down the stairs while me mam screamed her head off. Me dad, disgusted with her, then went back to sea and I ended up living for a while in our house in Newcastle Road with me mam and Dykins. Initially, I disliked Dykins so much that I walked the two miles to Aunt Mimi's house on me own and asked her to take me in. She did so, then wrote to me dad at sea and told him that he had to come home and look after me. When eventually he turned up again in Woolton, he told Mimi he was going to take me shopping, but instead he virtually abducted me, taking me all the way to Blackpool to live with him and the parents of his old shipmate and minor criminal, Billy Hall. Then me mam finally found out where we were hiding and turned up with Bobby Dykins at the Hall's house, intending to take me back to Liverpool with them. Forced to decide between me dad and me mam, I just burst into tears, not knowing what to do, but then clung to me mam when it seemed she was going to leave without me. As I was going out the door with her, I tearfully begged me dad to come with us, but he just sat on in his chair, as if paralysed, clearly defeated. And so, feeling betrayed and confused and hurt, I was taken back to Liverpool, to live with me mam and Dykins, who actually, despite my initial dislike of him, treated me kindly. Then Aunt Mimi decided that me living with an unmarried couple was just too disgraceful and insisted, despite me mam's wishes to the contrary, that I moved in with her and George, which I did, feeling that I'd been cast out and adopted just like me missing baby sister. Reportedly, when me mam called around to get me back, Mimi just stood in front of me and said, 'No. You can't have him.'

From that point on, I lived a more upmarket life with Aunt Mimi and Uncle George while regularly visiting me more downmarket mam and Bobby Dykins, sometimes spending a day or two with them. In truth, they were always pleased to see me and happy to put me up for a night after I'd had one of my many fights with Mimi and screamed that I was going back to live with me mam and then stormed out of the house. Not that I meant it. Since by that time Aunt Mimi loved me so much, she couldn't bear the thought of losing me, I used the threat of returning to live with me mam every time I wanted to make Mimi feel bad or screw something out of her, which was pretty easy, actually, it being that she was a generous woman, if a bit too stern and controlling. At the same time, Uncle George spoilt me rotten by helping me make and then fly paper aeroplanes from our back garden, by frequently taking me to the local cinemas, then known as the 'picturedromes,' and by smuggling sweets and chocolates, forbidden by the health-conscious Mimi, up to my bedroom after lights out. Me and George had a lot of laughs together.

But I had a lot of freedom. I wandered around a lot. As well as its country cottages and Art Deco villas, Woolton had some curious old houses, nestling in woodland or behind stones walls, carved from Liverpool's sandstone and embellished with the turrets and gargoyles of fairy-tale castles. My favourite, being only a short walk from Mendips, was a foreboding Gothic mansion called Strawberry Fields, then being run by the Salvation Army as a home for orphan girls. Not yet a wanker, so not being an actual voyeur, I often stood at its heavy iron gates, staring into the overgrown grounds, aware that the girls in there were orphans, just as I wrongly felt myself to be. I also regularly visited St. Peter's churchyard, which I renamed 'the bone orchard', where one of the tombstones detailed the death of one Eleanor Rigby, who'd died in her sleep in 1939 at forty-four years old. My soon-to-be mate Paul McC must have gone there as well, because years later, as a Beatle, he used Eleanor Rigby as the subject of one of his most famous, certainly one of his best, songs.

Anyway, far from being a 'working class hero', I was well looked after in a nice house in Melrose Avenue, in semi-rural, suburban Woolton. Yes, a very nice house indeed. I can see it clearly right now. Semi-detached instead of terraced, it even had its own name, Mendips, to separate it from the lesser houses in the street. Pretty posh inside as well. Partially timbered hallway,

baronial-styled staircase, stained-glass windows decorated with Art Nouveau flowers. More upmarket, then, than Paul McC's working-class upbringing in one of the many dismal council estates thrown up on levelled bomb sites or open fields shortly after the war. Yet as long as we were Beatles, and even after we'd split up, it was generally believed that Paul was the one who'd had a soft, middle-class background while I'd had a tough upbringing in a working-class environment. Since I liked the idea of being the tough one in the Beatles, this wasn't a widespread misconception that I ever bothered to correct.

Mind you, for all that I *was* a bit of a terrier: a combination of bright boy and trouble-maker. Oh, look! There's Dovedale Primary School! I can see it as clear as day, emerging out of this unnatural, otherworldly darkness. According to Aunt Mimi, I'd only been there a few weeks when the headmaster told her how uncommonly bright I was. Of course, I'd always loved reading, writing, drawing and painting, so at Dovedale, located near the Penny Lane roundabout, I won various prizes for art. Being myopic, and before obtaining my National Health specs (later to be widely referred to as 'John Lennon specs'), I had a distorted view of the world, so I didn't draw or paint like the other kids: the usual attempts to reproduce true likenesses of objects and animals. Instead, I specialised in bizarre caricatures of my schoolmates and teachers, turning them into cartoon creatures with misshapen heads, grotesque features and distorted limbs. At the same time, my myopia had led to a kind of dyslexia that made me misread and misspell many words, so I compensated by deliberately playing with language and became fascinated with puns, spoonerisms and double entendres: 'chicken pots' instead of 'chicken pox'; 'funs is low' instead of 'funds are low'. My wordplay was also strongly influenced by my constant listening to *The Goon Show* on radio, written by the eccentric comedian Spike Milligan, featuring the then unknown Peter Sellers and Harry Secombe, and filled with lunatic characters who had names like Colonel Bloodnok, Henry Crum, Minnie Bannister, Eccles, Bluebottle and, best of all, Grytpype-Thynne. My quirky verses and illustrations were also strongly influenced by two of my favourite books, Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*, both of which were packed with puns, spoonerisms, insane logic, and the bizarre bestiary of a grinning Cheshire Cat, a sleepy Dormouse, a hookah-smoking Caterpillar and, best of all, a Mad Hatter.

The lyrics of ‘I am the Walrus,’ were certainly inspired by those two books. Just as the lyrics of ‘Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds,’ rather than being about LSD (geddit, fans?) were based on Alice’s ruminations about a ‘boat beneath a sunny sky’ (my ‘boat on the river’) and her ‘Orange Marmalade jar’ (my ‘marmalade skies’).

But that was the bright side of me. The trouble-maker side came to the fore, at school and after it, when, with my best mate at the time, Ivan Vaughan, his pal, Nigel Whalley, and another boy, Pete Shotton, we’d do things like swinging from the rope that hung from my tree house, play rough games in a dirt field known as the Tip, catch tadpoles, newts and frogs, or paddle a home-made raft in the pond of an open space called Foster’s Field, and generally arse around, mostly playing cowboys and Indians, in the meadows and woodlands of various parks, including the grounds of Strawberry Fields. Though Pete Shotton had originally been leader of the gang that included Ivan and Nigel, I gradually wrested power from him and became the unopposed leader of our new gang of four, which I soon was calling ‘The Outlaws’, based on the gang in the William Brown novels of Richmal Crompton Lamburn. From an early age I always had to be the leader in all things (as originally, before Paul McC took command, I was of the Beatles). So when I took over our gang of four and called them The Outlaws I was emulating my anti-hero, William Brown, a fictitious boy who, with his own gang of Outlaws, indulged in secret signs and sacred rituals, communicated with a private, invented language, waged war against adults and all kinds of authority, and was expert at withering sarcasm and the telling of lies. It was me to a T. So, as a reincarnated William Brown, with me gang of Woolton Outlaws, I embarked on a series of escapades that soon had us viewed disapprovingly by the highly respectable residents of Woolton: hanging onto the backs of the trams that rumbled along Melrose Avenue; sneaking into cinemas by the back entrances and disrupting the performances until thrown out; trespassing on Allerton Golf Course to annoy the business types playing there; stealing apples from private gardens, chocolates and sweets from shops, home-made cakes and pies from fund-raising church fêtes; and, worst of all, making fun of the physically and mentally handicapped. There was something about a blind or crippled person that always gave me the giggles.

So what’s wrong with that?

And then there was the music. It must have been in my blood. My Irish

paternal granddad, Jack Lennon, before settling down as a clerk with a shipping line in Liverpool, was a member of Andrew Robertson's Colored Operatic Kentucky Minstrels in America, touring extensively with them. Then me useless dad had aspirations to be the same and often performed aboard ship and in Liverpool pubs. Not forgetting me mam, who had similar musical aspirations and encouraged them in me by continuing to sing and play the banjo and accordion. Since most of the music we heard then was put out by the BBC, it was mainly classical music of the kind that Aunt Mimi loved and I loathed, but I started listening, instead, to brass bands, American swing bands of the Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman kind, and the often dramatic theme music of various popular radio serials like *Dick Barton, Special Agent*. Already obsessed with radio's *The Goon Show*, for which Max Geldray played the harmonica, I took up the mouth organ when I was about seven or eight, learned to play it in no time, and soon became obsessive about it, taking it with me wherever I went and constantly playing a wide repertoire on it. From there, I took to playing the pianos of friends or at school, learning quickly and instinctively, but Aunt Mimi, who was strict, refused to let me have a piano in the house. Finally, as unlikely as it now seems, I was such a natural at singing that I ended up joining the choir of St. Peter's Anglican church. I didn't last long, however. I was always playing pranks, even at church, and was finally thrown out of the choir for removing the grain sheaves, vegetables and fruit used to decorate the altar during Harvest Festival Time, when the main hymn was 'We Plough the Fields and Scatter'. Nothing left to plough or scatter after I was done.

To this day a lot of fans refuse to believe that their working-class hero, John Lennon of the Beatles, had once sang in a church choir…

Okay, so I'm dead. I'm only alive in me head. I should be fucking terrified, but I'm not, which comes as quite a surprise. I mean, I know I'm here, in some shape or form, but I don't actually know where 'here' is, except that I'm somehow adrift in an almost imperceptibly shifting darkness with a light at its far end. That light seems as unnatural as the darkness surrounding it, but it has a soothing, oddly mesmerizing effect that makes me want to get closer to it. Am I moving toward it? Is it coming toward me? Either way, it's certainly, very slowly, growing larger and I now think it may be a doorway. What's beyond it? My future or my past? Right now, I'd rather dwell on the past, wanting to find out where I came from and what led me to this place.

Right now, I'm reliving my childhood and feel just like that child…

Did me mam desert me? Not really. Aunt Mimi virtually stole me and refused to return me. But while living with Aunt Mimi I continued visiting me mam and Bobbie Dykins, where they were living in their little council 'semi' in Blomfield Road in a council estate in Allerton, just a couple of miles from Melrose Avenue. In total contrast to Aunt Mimi's house, which was always spic and span, Julia's place was untidy and disorganised, but more fun than Mimi's place, mainly because she and Bobbie were among the few I knew who had a television set, and when the telly was turned off, the radio was always on, tuned to the Light Programme and playing the popular music that Mimi wouldn't tolerate in her more refined world. Even better, me mam had a gramophone and was forever buying new 78 rmp single records, thus exposing me to what was happening on the pop music charts, with the likes of Guy Mitchell, Nat King Cole, Frankie Laine, and that wimpish forerunner to Elvis, the spastic 'sob' singer, Johnny Ray. I lapped it all up.

The only thing I had against visiting me mam and her boyfriend was that they now had two daughters, my half sisters, Julia, named after her mam, and Jackie. Although they treated me like a big brother and we got on really well, their very presence could only remind me that they were more me mam's children than I was. In other words, they innocently reminded me of what I viewed as my 'orphan' state. This conviction was only made more acute by the knowledge that me dad's refusal to initiate divorce proceedings had prevented me mam and Bobbie from becoming man and wife; and by the fact that me dad had gone back to sea, slipped into trouble again, served another couple of jail sentences, including six months in Wormwood Scrubs, thus putting an end to his seagoing career, and so had finally given up entirely, taken on a menial job as a dishwasher in a hotel kitchen and then gradually faded out of my life.

So fuck you, I thought.

By that time, I was attending Quarry Bank High School in Harthill Road and could go there on the Raleigh Lenton bicycle that Uncle George had bought me as a reward for passing the Eleven Plus. Pete Shotton and me were always in trouble there, forever being called to the head's study for a caning and swiftly being downgraded from the 'A' stream, through 'B' to 'C', the lowest of the low. This didn't happen to me because I wasn't academically bright, but because I'd decided, ever since forming the Woolton Outlaws, to

rebel against all kinds of authority and only go me own way. My relationship with Pete was undoubtedly based on a weakness that I'd have throughout my life: I could rarely act alone and always had to have, if not a whole gang, at least a partner, before I could do anything at all, Just as I'd later lead, and simultaneously feel protected by, the Beatles in general and Paul McC in particular, then, later, Yoko Ono. But before Paul and the Jap came into my life, it was mainly Pete Shooton, and between us we managed to fill the school's punishment book with our crimes, which included insolence, cutting class, throwing blackboard dusters out of the classroom window, and gambling on the school field during games. And fist fights. I was always involved in fist fights. I'd fight anyone, any time, except for that big bastard, Jimmy Tarbuck, who scared the shit out of everyone and later became a popular TV comedian. Excepting for him, from whom I'd run a fucking mile, I was a real little battler.

Yet at home with Aunt Mimi, always strict, and Uncle George, not so strict, I was completely different, spending hours in my bedroom reading, writing and drawing. By that time I'd become a fan of two modern comic artists, the British Ronald Searle, whose demented St. Trinian's schoolgirls had me rolling on the floor with laughter, and the American James Thurber, whose writings and cartoon characters for *The New Yorker*, the wavering lines of the drawings caused by his near-blindness, helped me to relate to my own myopia and its effects on *my* wordplay and artwork. Though I mostly did caricatures of my teachers and classmates in this vein, I once did one of myself, emphasizing my hated National Health specs and captioning it, 'Simply a Simple Pimple Shortsighted John Wimple Lennon.' Maybe to keep my feet on the ground, Aunt Mimi treated my drawings and poems as no more than time-wasting distractions from school work and often conducted raids on my bedroom to 'clear up' and throw them into the bin. I mean, Mimi wasn't exactly the artistic kind. Nevertheless, it was my growing predilection for those cartoonish drawings and surrealistic, Goon-like wordplay that would later be used commercially in the two short books of stories, parodies, poems and drawings that I produced at the height of Beatlemania, when we could do no wrong: *In His Own Write* (1964) and *A Spaniard in the Works* (1965). That the first sold over 200,000 copies in ten months, the second sold over 100,000 in its first three months (the following sales were astronomical), and both received rave reviews from normally sane critics, was surely proof

that fame could turn normal human reasoning on its head and that Mimi, God bless her, possibly knew more about the real world than London's intellectuals.

On the other hand, what *is* the 'real' world? Was the life I was leading then any more real than where I am now, adrift in my thoughts, in this otherworld nowhere, in a tunnel of darkness only defined by a deeper darkness with dimensions I can't even comprehend? How big is this tunnel? How far away are its walls? How high and how deep is that deeper darkness above and below? Are those walls actually walls? They surely aren't physical. They're only defined by a deeper darkness in that other darkness that flows away on all sides, above and below. I'm only here in my thoughts. I have the consciousness of a dreamer. But then I was always something of a dreamer, slightly removed from reality. I often wondered what 'reality' was and what death would be like. And death was first hammered into my consciousness when Uncle George died…

My life changed completely when Uncle George died. He went instantly, of a heart attack, and fell tumbling rumbling down the stairs. Aunt Mimi was devastated and so was I, being only fourteen at the time. I didn't cry, though. I just went into my bedroom and stayed there a long time, almost certainly in shock, then emerged to take my resentments against God, whoever the fuck *He* was, out on the world. In this I was immeasurably aided by the overwhelming impact of Marlon Brando in 1953's *The Wild One*, which, being banned in Britain because of its supposed glamorization of Hell's Angels-styled juvenile delinquency, made it all the more exciting to bored teenagers, since all of us had secret aspirations to be juvenile delinquents. With the movie being banned we couldn't actually see it at the time, but that iconic photo of Brando, wearing a black-leather jacket and peaked cap, leaning on his motorcycle with an air of utter cool, his lips curved in what was half grin, half sneer, was enough to start a craze amongst teenage males for black-leather jackets and pretty soon I was wearing one myself. Then, with the coming of James Dean and *Rebel Without a Cause*, juvenile delinquency really took off, mostly in the form of Teddy Boys, or Teds, who dumped their inherited baggy trousers and grey suits for knee-length coats with velvet jackets, drainpipe trousers, frilled shirts, vividly-colored waistcoats, bootlace ties, chukka boots and phosphorescent green, yellow or orange socks. Not forgetting the hair: no longer short, back and sides, but

raised high on the head over long sideburns and shaped into a duck's arse (DA) at the rear, the favourite model for this being Tony Curtis, an American street-wise kid who'd made it big time. While thinking the Teds a bit of a joke, I did go as far as changing my hair style and wearing drainpipe trousers and my black-leather jacket. I wasn't that keen on James Dean, thinking him too self-pitying (reminding me of myself?), but Marlon Brando's cool insolence really blew me away and he's the one I most wanted to be like.

Of course, my adolescent hormones were running riot, so much so that I became a passionate wanker, as did most of me mates, and we'd even have wanking competitions, standing in a circle, to see who could come most times in a single session. We often stimulated ourselves by shouting out the names of various Hollywood sex symbols, preferably foreign and exotic, like Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, or, our favourite, Brigitte Bardot, as we furiously wanked, but I often cooled down the proceedings, reducing us all to giggles, but shouting out the names of famous *men*, the more 'straight', the better. Nevertheless, my hormones kept raging. So much so, indeed, that when I called in unexpectedly on me wicked mam and Bobbie Dykins, I caught the former fellating the latter, which caused some embarrassment all around. However, reminded by this incident that me mam appeared to be highly sexed and had often seemed to be flirting with me, I once lay beside her as she was having an afternoon rest, accidentally touched her breast (she was fully dressed at the time) and found myself wondering if I should go farther. In the event, I didn't, but for years after, when I thought back on the incident, I was convinced (a) that I should have done it; and (b) that she would have let me. This mild Oedipus Complex, this sexual mother fixation, would feature in my future relationship with the Jap, most notably when, in New York, living as millionaires in the Dakota Building, I actually, as part of our role reversals, addressed her as 'Mother'.

So what's wrong with that?

Back there in Liverpool, in the rapidly changing mid-fifties, I was chatting up the girls all the time, pretty good at it as well, and being successful at getting me hand inside brassieres or having a bit of 'finger pie', after which I'd become excited all over again just inhaling the fishy smell of the lucky finger. (Think the lyrics of Paul's 'Penny Lane' with its 'fish and finger pies'.) I also had a proper girlfriend. Her name was Barbara Baker. Another BB, like my beloved Brigitte Bardot, which made her even more attractive to

me, she'd suddenly changed from a scarcely noticed toddler sitting beside me in Sunday school into a voluptuous blonde who deliberately modelled her hair and clothes on female film stars, most notably, naturally, the original BB. Alas, though she drove my hormones wild and eventually let me into her knickers, she became tired of sharing me with my many one-night stands and so got herself pregnant by another guy. Even worse, as if emulating me mam, she was sent away from Liverpool to have the baby and then, just like me mam, put it up for adoption. When I heard the news, I went around to her parents' house and kicked a hole in their fence, screaming, 'It should have been mine! It should have been mine!' But it wasn't mine, and it was adopted and taken away, just like me baby sister, and that was the end of it and the end of my relationship with BB, God bless her wherever she may be now.

Or God bless me, wherever I may be now. If He exists, which I still seriously doubt, even though that distant light looks like a single, expanding eye, staring at me and, yes, drawing me to it – or to what lies behind it. Is that His judgemental eye? Am I on the way to being judged? Will I be made to pay for my sins, which, alas, were many? Yes, I certainly committed sins. Fish and finger pies and wanking. Then dipping the wick. Otherwise, I'd have gone mad with boredom, not to mention frustration. Luckily, I was saved by the music…

Yes, life was really pretty boring in the fifties, until a little old fat man called Bill Haley, sporting a kiss curl on his forehead, changed the whole world with 'Rock Around the Clock', which, when played on the soundtrack of the 'teenage delinquent' movie, *Blackboard Jungle*, led to teenage delinquency all over the country, including Liverpool, with both sexes going berserk in the cinemas, shouting and shrieking and sobbing hysterically while ripping the fabric out of their chairs, then either dancing in the aisles or storming out into the streets to brawl with each other. Groovy! Naturally, the Teds became Haley's biggest fans and treated the wrecking of cinemas as a sport, before adding the novelty of fights with bicycle chains and razor blades. This soon led to the wholesale banning of *Blackboard Jungle* in cinemas and the banning of the 'Rock Around the Clock' single from radio and television. Which naturally sent it soaring up the charts to become number one for months on end. Then along came Elvis.

I was mad about Elvis. As far as I was concerned, before Elvis there was nothing. (Bill Haley, the fat baboon, didn't even get a look-in with me.)

When Elvis sang ‘Heartbreak Hotel’, I got shivers down my spine. When I saw photos of him in newspapers and pop magazines, I thought he was the coolest guy since Marlon Brando. When I saw that he played a guitar, I went demented until I got one, bought for me by me mam, though Aunt Mimi disapproved, and I taught myself to play it as quickly as I’d taught myself to play the harmonica and piano. By the time Elvis had made his third movie, *Jailhouse Rock*, the *Blackboard Jungle* of rock ‘n’ roll movies, Lonnie Donegan’s skiffle music had become all the rage (you didn’t need musical skills to play it: just a washboard, a tea chest with string, and an acoustic guitar) and I’d formed my own skiffle group, the Quarrymen, initially playing mostly Lonnie Donegan songs (revamped American black slave songs like ‘Rock Island Line’, ‘Cumberland Gap’, ‘Wabash Cannonball’) in church halls and social clubs, usually for no payment other than a few free drinks, with me as lead singer and the others hardly getting a look-in. Then I was introduced to Paul McC., about eighteen months younger than me, with a babyish ‘Elvis Presley’ face and deceptively innocent eyes, who played his guitar left-handed and sang ‘Twenty Flight Rock’ even better than Eddie Cochran did. Though we had an instant rapport and he was as talented as I was, I still clearly remember thinking: ‘If I let him join the group, I’ll have to keep him in line.’ But I needed his talent, so I let him join us, and the rest, as they say, is history. He ended up virtually running the Quarrymen, just as, later, he’d become the dominant force in the Beatles.

I knew I was born to be a rock ‘n’ roll star when I sat O-levels in seven subjects and failed all of them. Without O-levels I couldn’t get into the sixth form and so, not willing to sit for them again, I left school, though I’d no idea what I wanted to do next except become a millionaire or maybe marry a millionairess and let her support me while I did me paintings. Luckily, I then managed to get into the Liverpool College of Art where I immediately offended the other, mostly middle-class, jazz-loving students, who dressed in boring Shetland knits and duffle coats, by wearing either my defiantly proletarian Teddy boy suit with string tie and blue suede shoes or my black-leather jacket with drainpipes, by openly expressing my disdain for the art lessons and causing as much trouble as I possibly could (often turned up at classes pissed out of me brain), and by continuing to play with the Quarrymen, which now had a new line-up, including Paul McC., whose guitar had replaced Pete Shotton’s washboard, thus gradually changing us

from a skiffle group into a rock ‘n’ roll band, strongly influenced by Chuck Berry, Little Richard (Paul could scream just like him), the Everly Brothers and, most importantly, Buddy Holly, the first of the white rock ‘n’ roll singers to write his own songs. So, inspired by Buddy, me and Paul were soon doing the same, composing songs together.

Thing is, Paul and me really had a lot in common. Although Paul lived in a council estate, it was the ‘posh’ end of the estate and he’d been brought up to speak ‘proper’ English instead of Scouse English, just as Aunt Mimi had made me do. (I only emphasized my Scouse accent when it became pretty obvious that no rock ‘n’ roll singer would be taken seriously unless he was seen to be working class. That’s why me old mate, Mick Jagger, though a middle class lad educated at the London School of Economics, adopted a fake working class accent.) Also, where I had, in a real sense, lost me mother when taken from her by Aunt Mimi, Paul had recently lost his mother to breast cancer. We were similar, too, in that we’d had parents with strong musical interests, me with Julia and me dad, Paul with *his* dad, who’d played in an amateur dance band when young and still played the upright piano they had at home. Also, me and Paul both loved Elvis and most other kinds of music, not just rock ‘n’ roll. Finally, we both loved reading, were unusually well read, and shared a passion for poetry in general and nonsense verse in particular. So it was pretty natural that despite being in a group, the Quarrymen, Paul and me started playing together, with none of the other group members present, and soon started co-writing our first songs.

Still, though Paul was me mate, he wasn’t the strongest influence on me at that time. Credit for that has to go to Stu Sutcliffe, who’d arrived a year earlier from Prescott Grammar School and was already renowned as the most talented student in the whole college, being brilliant at every art medium, including drawing, painting and sculpture. Stu was really small and had almost feminine features, reminding a lot of us of James Dean, though with his black-leather jacket and dark glasses, he more often made me think of another actor, Zbigniew Cybulski, known as ‘the James Dean of Polish cinema.’ Like me, Stu had a love of literature, cartooning and rock ‘n’ roll, but could verbalize his enthusiasms in a way I couldn’t do, talking seriously about them, explaining them, so when he praised my poems and cartoons, him being the best student in the whole college, he gave me all the confidence I’d formerly lacked and freed my imprisoned creative spirit. I

loved Stu and he loved me, though it wasn't a sexual love and I certainly couldn't resist taking the piss out of him, lacerating his finer feelings with my caustic wit. I did it because I knew he was easily hurt and I couldn't resist that. I must confess, I *did* enjoy hurting people.

So what's wrong with that?

By then, the Quarrymen consisted of me and Paul on guitars, Colin Hanton on drums, and a 15-year old kid, a taciturn Liverpool Corporation bus driver's son, George Harrison, who'd been taken on only because he played an impressive Hofner President guitar. Frankly, I didn't have much time for him, considering him not worth talking to because he was two and a half years younger than me. But he could play that guitar, so that was okay. When we made our first, private, recording, paying for time in a local recording studio, I sang the lead vocal on both tracks, with Paul and George singing back-up harmonies. The 'A' side was Buddy Holly's 'That'll Be the Day', the 'B' side was a country and western pastiche, written, interestingly enough, not by me and Paul, but by Paul and George. So the Speke tenement kid, despite being mostly ignored by me, proved his worth in the end.

Then, just as I was getting my confidence as both artist and musician, my world fell apart. First Aunt Mimi, the most 'proper' woman I'd ever known, had an affair with one of her lodgers, a biochemistry student half her age, which really shocked me; then, in July 1958, me mam was run down by a car on her way to catch a bus after a visit to Aunt Mimi and died shortly after in Sefton General Hospital. I was told by a policeman who came to the door when Mimi was at the hospital. Bobby Dykins and me took a taxi to the hospital, but I babbled hysterically to the driver all the way there and then, once at the hospital, refused to go in and see her. What I *did* do was go and see my old girlfriend, Barbara Baker, BB, and told her what had happened, then the two of us went to Reynolds Park and just stood there for a long time, hugging each other and weeping our eyes out. That evening, I sat on Aunt Mimi's front porch, playing my guitar, which was the only comfort I could find, and deciding bitterly that, between Mimi's affair and me mam's death, I'd been twice deserted and didn't have to feel responsible to anyone, anymore. I felt cut loose from everything.

Much later, when I was famous, I wrote and recorded at least three songs about me mam: 'Julia', 'Mother' and 'My Mummy's Dead'. So clearly, her death had its long-term affects. I mean, I feel them even now, in this

dreamlike Nowhere Land, this barely perceptible tunnel of darkness leading me on to that expanding eye of light, which could be God's eye, though I seriously doubt it, not believing in God. Well, I'll find out soon enough. I'm definitely advancing upon it. Or it's advancing upon me. Not frightening, but oddly mesmerizing, making me feel as if I'm on a drugs high: that intense, hallucinatory, other state of being that cost me so much in my rock star days. But my memories are here with me. They're so vivid, I'm actually living them. I'm back as a teenager in Liverpool, an unruly and sometimes violent little shite. Now I can see where I came from…

For a few years after me mam's death I did nothing but drink, fight, fuck and play low-paying gigs with the Quarreymen. My always sharp tongue became even sharper, always quick with the vicious put-down, even with close friends like Paul McC., and Stu Sutcliff. But both took it well. They both went with the flow. Ignoring my caustic remarks, Stu even did a brilliant pencil sketch of me and then an oil painting of a student group in our favourite pub, Ye Cracke, in which I was placed prominently in the foreground, clutching a pint glass and staring into the middle distance, as if lost in my thoughts, which I certainly would have been when he did the painting. Then I met my future wife, Cythia, another student at the art college, one of the kind I termed 'spaniels' because they came from suburbia, in her case Hoylake, on the Cheshire Wirral, and were conservative, genteel and oh so bloody respectable. That was Cynthia. She wasn't my type at all, I thought at first, but she had a lovely face and the fact that she'd lost her father to lung cancer only a year earlier gave us something in common: a mutual, instinctive understanding. Also, she was as myopic as I was, which gave us something else in common. So despite the fact that she was engaged to another guy when we met and had her heart set on becoming an art teacher, because she was as sweet and nice as anyone could possibly be, almost visibly flinching when I swore at her or insulted her in front of friends, putting up stoically with my insanely jealous rages, also putting up with my insatiable demands for sex, never striking back when I slapped her around, never talking back when I tried to start an argument, never doing anything without first consulting me, never expecting me to look after her when she was ill, but quick to pay for my coffees and ciggies and fish and chips and guitar strings – I'd only to ask – well, because of all those virtues we became an item and then she became pregnant and then, being respectable, God help

me, we had to get married, though we didn't do it until after Hamburg.

Thank Christ for the Beatles. I mean, I didn't always enjoy being one of the Beatles, but they did at least get me out of the house a lot. Away from disciplining Aunt Mimi. Away from doting Cynthia. First playing a lot of low-paying gigs in theatres, social clubs, pubs, colleges and municipal halls all over Liverpool and other northern cities, then backing fellow Liverpudlian, Johnny Gentle, during his tour of Scotland, and, finally, soaking ourselves in the delicious sin of the Reeperbahn, in Hamburg's notorious St. Pauli red-light district. By that time, the rock 'n' roll scene was falling apart, with Elvis drafted into the Army, Buddy Holly killed in an aeroplane crash, Little Richard gone all religious and training for the ministry (he mistook the Russian's Sputnik for God's beckoning light), Jerry Lee Lewis hounded out of Britain and almost ruined career-wise because of his bigamous marriage to his 13-year-old cousin, Myra Gayle, Chuck Berry serving a two-year prison sentence for transporting a teenage waitress across the state line for 'immoral' purposes, then Eddie Cochran killed in a car crash during a British tour, with Gene Vincent being seriously injured at the same time. The final curtain came when, in 1960, Elvis was discharged from the Army and starting singing operatic songs like 'O Sole Mio' reinvented as his massive hit, 'It's Now or Never.' That marked the end of the dominance of original American rock 'n' roll.

But rock 'n' roll hadn't died out in Liverpool. In fact, Liverpool was keeping the flame alive with an incredible number of purely local rock groups that had Yank-influenced names, such as Gerry and the Pacemakers, Derry and the Seniors (think Danny and the Juniors), Cass and the Casanovas, Rory Storm and the Hurricanes (with Ritchie 'Ringo' Starkey on drums), and, last but not least, me, Paul and George with our frequently changing drummers and just as frequently changing names: first the Quarrymen, then Johnny and the Moondogs, then the Beatals with an 'a' (think Buddy Holly's Crickets), then the Silver Beetles, and then, finally, once and for all, the Beatles.

By then I had a Hofner Club 40 semi-solid guitar that I could play both acoustically and electrically. Lacking a drummer, I decided to make up for the lack by roping in Stu Sutcliffe, who, still the star pupil of the Liverpool College of Art, sold one of his outsized abstract paintings through the prestigious Walker Art Gallery, making himself sixty-five quid, which

enabled him, reluctantly, under heavy pressure from me, to purchase an impressive Hofner President bass guitar that he couldn't fucking play, though I still made him a member of our band. This horrified his college tutors, who thought he was throwing away a promising career in art to become a second-rate rock 'n' roller with a no-future group. But so what? We needed him. And despite being more mature than I was, he could never say 'No' to me.

To hide the fact that he couldn't play, Stu would turn on his 'James Dean' persona, wearing dark glasses and always standing with his back half-turned to the audience, which gave him a mysterious air that certainly intrigued the birds. Ignoring my former fondness for him and how much I owed him artistically, I was disgusted with his lack of musical ability and made sure he knew it, ragging him mercilessly, constantly humiliating him, even making him sit in the most uncomfortable seat in the van, right over the rear wheel, and frequently refusing to let him sit with us or eat with us. I'd just tell him to piss off and the poor fucker, looking hurt, always did it. But as George later said: 'Having a bass player who couldn't play was better than having no bass player at all.' George, being the youngest and most self-conscious of the group, didn't move much on stage either, though he didn't intrigue the birds as much as did Stu, whose attentions from the female sex I secretly resented, which just made me pick on him all the more. I mean, fuck it, I'd pick on anyone, wouldn't I?

So what's wrong with that?

Anyway, in August 1960, as a five-man band, including Pete Best, the latest in our long line of drummers, we went to Hamburg. By that time I was committed to a kind of 'Beat' philosophy and had decided that I'd rather commit suicide than take a conventional job. 'Death before work' was my philosophy. But my God, we sure worked in Hamburg, at first playing every night in crippled-dwarf Bruno Koschmider's tatty strip club, the Idris, then progressing to his bigger and better known Kaiserkeller. Both clubs were located right in the heart of the Reeperbahn, with its unimaginably decadent sex acts ('whips, mud, live snakes or even donkeys': thank you, Philip Norman), abundance of sexually available strippers and drunken, often violent audiences composed mainly of tough international seamen and sensation-seeking members of the army and air force, British and American. The five of us were forced to share an unbelievably filthy, windowless room, more of a pigsty, actually, located right behind the screen of Bruno's Bambi

Kino, which showed mostly porn flicks from dawn to dusk. It was also positioned right next to the equally filthy ladies' toilet, which was well attended by strippers, whores, and transvestites, all keeping us awake with their noisy pissing. Forced to play for four-and-a-half hours each night, in sets of at least an hour, with only three short breaks in between, we had to fill the long sessions by singing every song we could think of, from good old-fashioned rock 'n' roll – Elvis, Gene Vincent, Jerry Lee Lewis, Buddy Holly, Little Richard, Fats Domino – to standards like 'Over the Rainbow' and 'Red Sails in the Sunset'. This required us to alternately scream our lungs out and croon convincingly, with slick harmonies thrown in, thus giving us the solid grounding for the eclecticism of our later work as the more famous Beatles. Mostly, though, to transcend the bedlam of the drunken audiences, we tried to make as much noise as possible: Paul letting loose with his Little Richard screaming, Pete Best pounding his drums as if using a sledge hammer, me acting as demented as Gene Vincent, doing me spastic act, jumping all over the place, screaming abuse at the audience, while George and Stu just stood there as solid and inscrutable as rocks, but playing their guitars for all they were worth, which in Stu's case wasn't all that much. We had to do that even when riots broke out in the club, which happened on a regular basis, with chairs and tables being hurled, knives flashing, blood flowing, and the club's white-jacketed, psychopathic waiters diving into the melee to cosh their customers senseless as they'd been trained to do by mad crippled-dwarf Bruno. We just played through it all.

Jesus, even in my present state, adrift here in this Nowhere Land, I'm forced to acknowledge that they *were* amazing days. I remember that pretty soon, being hammered into exhaustion by our relentless workload, we were gobbling Preludin tablets to keep us awake, which they certainly did, turning our eyes big and glassy and stupefied. Then, to combat the dry throats caused by the drug, we'd drink an endless supply of exceptionally strong chilled draft lager. Thus deranged, eyes popping from the Preludin, I'd risk all our lives by screaming 'Fucking Nazis!' or 'German spassies!', meaning spastics, at the violence-prone audience, causing more than one little upset. Naturally, when not performing, but still in our pop-eyed state, we'd explore the whole of the Reeperbahn, slipping in and out of the neon-lit clubs to see men and women having athletic sex on stage, white and black together, often fucking in groups, men openly giving other men blow jobs in the 'queer' dives, and

whores on display in shop windows along the gaudy, noisy, colorfully corrupt length of the Herbertstrasse. Though we weren't exactly virgins, young George excepted, we'd never known anything like it in Liverpool, were enthralled by the sexual freedom on display, and certainly took full advantage of it. Indeed, having gained a following as performers, we were practically besieged by sexually liberated female customers, waitresses, barmaids, dancers and strippers who often dropped into the club after their night's naughty work. Well laced with drink and drugs, we fucked and muff-dived everything on offer, often doing it in close proximity to the others in our darkened pigsty of a room. Even George, when he finally lost his virginity, had to do it in the presence of the rest of us and was given a round of applause when he finished.

And all the while we were writing sweet love letters to our girls, including my Cynthia, back in England.

Trust the ever sensitive Stu to fall in love at this particular time. The object of his affections was Astrid Kirchherr, a Germanically beautiful and talented photographer girlfriend of one of our German fans, Klaus Voorman, a middle class, beatnik loving graphic designer who, like Astrid, favoured black leather clothes that reminded me of Hitler's SS. Anyway, Klaus adored me and Astrid adored Stu, so as an up-and-coming photographer she photographed all of us, the five Beatles, in our black-leather jackets and drainpipe denims and cowboy boots, at the Der Dom amusement park, posing us around calliopes or perched on traction engines, all grimly industrial, to produce, maybe by accident, grainy matte black and white photos that would soon enhance the Beatles' iconographic status and set the standard for most future rock-group photos. Then Stu announced that he and Astrid were getting engaged, which didn't bother Klaus, who, obsessed with us, had decided to become a rock star and was taking guitar lessons from me. Then we left the Kaiserkeller to play in the Top Ten Club, backing Tony Sheridan, but it all came to an abrupt end when the authorities discovered that George was under eighteen, too young to be violating the nightly 10.00 pm curfew, and so George was deported, travelling back to Liverpool by train, and then Paul and Pete Best, about to move from our pigsty in the Bambi Kino to a better class of pigsty above the Top Ten Club, deliberately, as an act of revenge against Bruno, set fire to a condom in the Kino's corridor and were arrested for attempted arson, thrown into a cell in the Reeperbahn's police

HQ, and, though the arson charge was dropped, were then deported for working without permits. Though normally the worst troublemaker of the lot, I got off Scot-free and followed the others home by train, arriving late at night, like the orphan I was, at Aunt Mimi's house and awakening her by throwing stones at her window.

Naturally, despite my sins and betrayals, she welcomed me back with open arms. If I no longer had a mother, at least I still had Aunt Mimi.

Apart from invaluable training as a musician and performer, I gained something else in Hamburg: the guitar of my dreams. A double-cutaway Rickenbacker Capri 325 that I bought in the Steinway music store and used throughout the rest of my career as a Beatle. That career really took off when, shortly after returning from Hamburg and vastly improved both musically and vocally by our experiences there, we played, without Stu (still in Hamburg with Astrid) at the Litherland Town Hall and had girls virtually stampeding to the stage, screaming like banshees, in what could only be described as the first true outbreak of Beatlemania. There was no looking back after that.

Our local fame exploded when, after regular gigs in Liverpool's Casbah and the Cavern, a former jazz club turned into a popular rock 'n' roll club, another airless sweat-pit that broke every health and safety rule, we were prominently featured in a new music magazine, *Mersey Beat*, and then I contributed a regular column to it, drawings as well as writings, which really excited me creatively and which, even better, gained the Beatles even more publicity. Then, given clearance by the West German authorities, we returned to the Top Ten Club in Hamburg, ostensibly as Tony Sheridan's backing group, though Sheridan was more interested in playing lead guitar and left most of the singing to me and Paul. During that time, Germany's most famous 'popular' musician, Bert Kaempfert, took an interest in Tony Sheridan as a potential solo artist and arranged a recording session, employing us solely as backing musicians. Since Kaempfert didn't know shite about rock 'n' roll and was viewing Sheridan as potentially a 'popular' singer, we recorded crap like 'My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean' and 'When the Saints Go Marching In'. All five tracks were terrible, but naturally, when Beatlemania swept the world, bootlegs of those early recordings became collector's items. As did the one Beatles vocal track that Kaempfert let us record: me singing solo the old 1920's favourite, 'Ain't She Sweet?'. This,

too, when it finally surfaced years later, became a collector's item.

Then the mate I respected and abused more than any other, Stu Sutcliffe, died. Awarded a grant by Hamburg city council, Stu, using the large attic room in Astrid Kirchherr's house, had embarked on a frenzy of creativity, producing large canvases of brilliant abstract paintings – so brilliant, in fact, that they inspired me to go back to my own drawings, producing another lot of cartoons of crippled people (another sign of my fascination and revulsion for that breed) and cartoons of sardonic religious comment, such as the crucified Jesus on the Cross with a pair of bedroom slippers beneath his feet. But the more Stu concentrated on his paintings, the less time he had for the Beatles, with Paul growing increasingly angry at his refusal to even join us for rehearsals, until finally he and Paul came to blows on stage, throwing punches at each other in the middle of a number with Tony Sheridan. Then Stu's health, both mentally and physically, began to fail. First he became shockingly thin and suffered blinding headaches and bouts of nausea, then his moods started changing abruptly, from sweetness and light to violent aggression and, in Astrid's case, paranoid jealously; then he came down with a virtual catalogue of grim ailments – chronic gastritis, dodgy appendix, glandular imbalance, shadow on the lungs – and then, shortly after my twenty-first birthday, he returned to Hamburg, wanting to be with Astrid, but started having convulsions, couldn't walk without falling over, and then, only one day before the rest of us were due to arrive in Hamburg to open the Star Club, he suffered a final seizure, was rushed to hospital, and died of a cerebral haemorrhage. He was 21.

We didn't learn about his death until the following morning, when we arrived at Hamburg airport and were greeted by Astrid and Klaus Voormann, who gave us the terrible news. My first reaction was uncontrollable, hysterical laughter combined with crying and wails of 'No! No!' (so Astrid later informed me; I still don't remember it), but after that I just turned off the taps and showed no emotion at all. I just couldn't bear the pain.

There were reasons for my pain, the main one being the lurking suspicion that I may have been responsible for his death. But then, again, I may not have been. Even now, being dead myself, I can't think of it clearly. I only know that Stu had returned briefly from Hamburg to pick up where he'd left off at the Liverpool College of Art and also play a few gigs with us, turning his back as usual to the audience, embarrassed by his lack of skill, which was

increasingly annoying Paul and George. Unfortunately, his lack of skill also annoyed some violent Teds, who, after a performance at Lathom Hall, waylaid him backstage and gave him a good hammering, also kicking him two or three times in the head, before Pete Best and me saw what was happening and fought them off. In the ensuing melee, I ended up with a broken finger, but Stu was much worse, his head covered in blood, though he refused to go and see a doctor when advised to do so. While all of his health problems were attributed to that kicking, his younger sister, Pauline, in a memoir she published years later, insisted that the cerebral haemorrhage that killed him hadn't been caused by the kicking he received at Lathom Hall, but by a kicking he received from me a few weeks later when I attacked him in a bout of drunken dementia. For the rest of my life I could never recall that particular incident, but since I'd attacked so many other people, including Stu, not forgetting the drunken sailor that Pete Best and me tried mugging in Hamburg when we were desperately short of cash, there could be some truth to the accusation. Certainly, I spent the rest of my life feeling guilty at the very possibility that I might, indeed, have been the cause of my dear friend and mentor's death.

So here I am, watching that distant light coming closer, expanding, or moving closer to it, now thinking of it not so much as a ghostly eye, but more as a doorway, leading through to whatever lies beyond. Another sphere? Another dimension? Another world peopled with the dead, including Uncle George and me mam and Stu Sutcliffe, who might be the ones to stand in judgement upon me. Jesus, I hope not. I can't bear to think about it. I'm not frightened being here, being dead, but I'm frightened by that thought. Best not to think about it. Best get back. To the past. Best to think of Pete Best and Paul McC and George and Ringo and what happened when Beatlemania struck. What a circus that was…

Beatlemania? Fuck it. I don't want to even remember it, though I doubt that I'll ever completely forget it. I *do* remember that having become a local phenomenon, causing riots wherever we played, we dumped our amateur manager, Allan Williams, took up with the suppressed homosexual Liverpool Jew-boy, Brian Epstein, a refined lad with a weakness for rough trade, which is why he fancied me, and let him turn us from leather-jacketed, drain-piped hooligans into well groomed, mop-haired versions of every mother's son, wearing Italianate suits, modelled on the Shadows, with Paul as the cute one,

me as the witty one, George as the serious one, and Ringo as the loveable dope – though Ringo only came in as drummer after we'd made some demos for Decca Records, were turned down by the dumb cunts, then were picked up by EMI's Parlaphone label, where the posh-sounding producer, George Martin (who'd later be justifiably dubbed 'the fifth Beatle' for his invaluable orchestral and sound-effect contributions to our greatest albums), insisted that we dump Pete Best, because he, Mr Martin, didn't think too highly of Pete's drumming. Alas, he didn't think too highly of Ringo either, so for our first commercial single, 'Love Me Do', backed by 'P.S. I Love You', both Lennon-McCartney compositions, we used Ringo *and* a session drummer, Andy White. The single was released in October 1962 and peaked at Number 17 the same week that Elvis, still 'the King' despite having softened his image, reached the number one spot with 'Return to Sender'. However, it was followed by 'Please Please Me', which reached number one in February the following year, then our first LP, also entitled *Please Please Me*, consisting of our two hit singles and their backing tracks, plus ten other tracks recorded in a single day, including another four Lennon-McCartney compositions, making fourteen tracks in all. That LP also reached number one. So no wonder we became fucking famous. No other group could have pulled off what we did and that's a fact of life, mate.

And fucking famous we became. We became famous because we released one hit single after another and one hit album after another and because we covered, both as singers and as composers, a wider range of songs than anyone else could match. We became famous because we were four distinct personalities, filled with rapid-fire Scouse wit, who appealed to both sexes and all ages. We became famous because we were beloved interviewees, always quick with the witty repartee, and because during a performance at the Royal Variety Show, with the Queen Mother, Princess Margaret and Lord Snowden present, I said into the microphone, 'People in the cheap seats, clap your hands… the rest of you, if you'll just rattle yer jewellery.' Yeah, we became famous because we were working class northerners making it big just when fascination with all things Northern Working Class, in movies, television and literature, had gripped the whole nation. We became famous because we were the first British performers ever to make it big in America and because, when we finally appeared on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, seventy million viewers tuned in to watch us, giving us the largest US television

audience in history up to that time. (We'd soon break our own record.) We became famous because our only two cinema feature films, *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*, became the two most successful rock movies ever made. (*Magical Mystery Tour* not included here, being solely Paul's baby and only shown on television, so mostly viewed in black and white, despite having been shot in lurid color.) We became famous because our albums advanced so rapidly, each one sounding as if it had been made by a different group altogether, and because some of those albums – *Rubber Soul* (our 'pot' album), *Revolver* (our 'acid' album), *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (our 'psychedelic' album), were like no other albums ever made and came in covers displaying avant-garde artwork, some by our German pal, Klaus Voorman, of the kind never seen before. We became famous because we were the first people under the age of twenty-five to be award MBEs in the Queen's Birthday Honours list and we shamelessly accepted those worthless establishment trinkets. We became famous because we were pretty open about taking marijuana and LSD, or 'dropping acid' as it was then known, thus giving the word 'psychedelic' more coinage than it had previously, while popularising, instead of bell-bottom trousers and miniskirts, hippie caftans, sandals, headbands, beads and mystical amulets. (From the last track on *Revolver*: 'Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream…') We became famous because the *Times*' classical music critic, William Mann, named me and Paul as 'the outstanding English composers of 1963' and then went on to rave about our supposedly innovative use of 'major tonic sevenths and ninths', our 'flat submediant key-switches', and even our use of 'aeolian cadence' at the end of a relatively minor song, 'Not a Second Time', which, he breathlessly informed our more intellectual fans, had the same chord progression as the end of Mahler's *Song of the Earth*. We became famous because the country's most renowned poet, Philip Larkin, wrote: 'Sexual intercourse began in nineteen sixty-three, between the end of the Chatterley ban and the Beatles.' Nice to be so credited by an eminent poet. Of course by 'sexual intercourse' Larkin was actually referring to everything that was happening in the Swinging Sixties: rock 'n' roll, free love, marijuana, LSD and other psychedelic drugs, Carnaby Street fashions, Flower Power, Pop Art in general and Andy Warhol in particular, Indian spirituality, student protest, the Vietnam anti-war movement, Grosvenor Square, Paris in May, the Prague Spring, the civil rights movement in America, plus protests against apartheid

in South Africa and Rhodesia. Yeah, right, man, we became famous because although we weren't actually responsible for all that, we were seen to be at the heart of it, epitomising it all in our ever-changing musical styles and life styles: from clean-cut moppets to bearded hippies to our widely publicized flirtations with Transcendental Meditation in Indian attire, not forgetting the freeloading insanity of our growing Apple empire, when we opened the doors to any freeloader who cared to waltz through them and grab everything he or she could get their grubby hands on. We became famous because apart from being talented, we were fucking idiots. We became famous because we became bored with being Beatles and headed off in our separate directions in a highly visible manner that made a joke of our anthem 'All You Need is Love'. That's when I brought the Jap into the picture and it all went pear-shaped.

Before that, however, there were a few things I enjoyed about being famous, most notably meeting other famous people, especially those I'd admired in my pre-fame days. Best of all, however, was meeting my hero, Elvis. I'd always loved Elvis, but when we, all four Beatles, finally got to visit him in 1965, he was stuck in the groove of his awful beach movies and wasn't cutting any decent records. Still, we were thrilled when Brian Epstein told us he'd fixed it up with Colonel Parker to meet our hero, and then, when we met him, we were so overwhelmed that we didn't realise until the day after just how much of a set-up it had been. Arranged by the canny Colonel, it was supposed to be a 'secret' visit, but when we arrived outside the house in Perugia Way in Bel Air we had to battle our way through a virtual army of paparazzi and Elvis and Beatle fans, and I'd no doubt who'd told them we were coming. Also, the hope that it was going to be an 'intimate' visit, just us and Elvis, was knocked on the head when we entered the house to find Elvis surrounded by most of his Memphis Mafia, about ten of them in all, plus his look-alike girlfriend, Priscilla (they hadn't yet married), assorted other wives and girlfriends, plus the ever-watchful Colonel and Brian Epstein, who gambled together at a coffee table converted into a roulette table. So, no 'intimate' meeting with Elvis. Not that we really cared. George was stoned out of his head and escaped to the pool outside to smoke another joint and discuss Hinduism with Elvis' hairdresser and religious guru, Larry Geller. Ringo, unfazed as always, played pool with two of the Memphis Mafia. Me and Paul tried talking to Elvis, but the conversation was a little awkward – I

swear, Elvis seemed shy – until Elvis picked up a bass guitar plugged into an amplifier and started strumming it and singing along to Charlie Rich's 'Mohair Sam', which was playing on Elvis' personal jukebox. So, relieved that we didn't have to make conversation, me and Paul picked up a guitar each and started harmonizing along with the King, who was, let's be honest, so incredibly handsome I wanted to fuck him, even though I wasn't remotely gay. (But can you ever be sure of that? I mean, just think of Norman Mailer. On the one hand obsessed with his sexual prowess with women; on the other equally obsessed with buggery. It sure makes you think, don't it?) Anyway, this jolly sing-song went on for most of the rest of the evening, with the other guests looking on and applauding, until Elvis subtly indicated (yawning, apologizing, yawning again) that it was his bedtime. Still too overwhelmed just to be there to notice what was really happening, on the way out we invited Elvis to come and see us the next day at our rented house in Benedict Canyon. 'We'll see,' was all he said. The next day, however, Malcolm Evans, our road manager, received a call from Elvis' right-hand man, Joe Esposito, informing us that Elvis couldn't make the visit. That evening, one of the more civilised of Elvis' Memphis Mafia, Jerry Schilling, came on his own to see us and, just before he left, I, feeling unusually emotional, still in thrall to the King, told him to tell Elvis that 'before him I was nothing.' We never heard from him again. So fuck him. Fuck him twice. A sentiment I expressed bluntly in the song that I modestly entitled 'God' and released on my first solo album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*.

But then I also said, in the same song, fuck you to Bob Dylan, who in truth I'd revered, ever since hearing his first album, knocked out by his lyrics as well as by his raw voice, and then becoming a real friend when we all met him in New York, during our first American tour, and he kindly introduced us to the glories of marijuana, after being informed, to his stoned amazement, that the line in our song 'I Want to Hold Your Hand' was 'I can't hide! I can't hide!' and not, as he'd imagined in his pot-zonked state, 'I get high! I get high!' But even before that, wee Bobby Zimmerman and me had lots in common. We both wore horn-rimmed glasses in private and peaked 'Lenin' caps in public, we both play mouth organ, and we both wrote prose and poetry based on our anger and aggression. So, we were soul mates. And practically every song I wrote for the *Help!* soundtrack album was strongly influenced, both lyrically and vocally, by Dylan. (Think 'You've Got to Hide

Your Love Away'.) Yet Dylan later became best friends with George Harrison, not me, so I later wrote and released that song, 'God', rejecting him and Elvis and all of my other former heroes. Desperately seeking a new life, an ultimate truth, with the Jap, I tore my whole past out by the roots and threw it away like rotting entrails.

There were lots of things about being famous that I hated. For a start, I hated the fact that once the Beatles became famous we were exposed to every kind of self-serving scumbag you could imagine, all wanting to profit from our fame and wealth. This shower would have included all those so-called hippies and New Age freaks who so ruthlessly abused our trust at the Apple emporium in Baker Street, but also my biological dad, Alf, also known as Freddie, who, when I was famous, turned up out of the blue, wanting to 'explain' himself, and then, after I'd given him a second chance, inviting him out to Kenwood and treating him kindly, tried to get himself a contract for a book about his relationship with me, failed, so sold an abbreviated version to the embarrassingly downmarket *Tit-Bits* magazine for a measly two hundred smackers, then, even worse, came out with his own recorded single, 'That's My Life (and My Love and My Home)', which he co-wrote with another shameless wheeler-dealer, Tony Cartwright, but sang all by himself, though barely able to sing a note, and released on the equally shameless Pye Piccadilly label. Not content with that, he then married, at fifty-eight years of age, an eighteen-year old Exeter University student and had a baby by her. So just as I'd said 'Fuck you' to him in the past, so I said, 'Fuck you' to him again. And that was the end of him.

By that time, we'd all lost our interest in touring because the fans screamed so much that we couldn't even hear ourselves singing and, also, because we couldn't stand the shite we had to take before and after the shows, especially high-toned cocktail parties where we had to shake hands and act civilized with the upper crust, including fat-bellied businessmen, politicians and their hyena wives. We'd actually discussed stopping a few times, but finally did it after a series of particularly nasty experiences during our world tour of 1966. After three concerts in West Germany, including a return visit, though in grander style, to Hamburg, in the 5,600-seat Ernst Mercke Halle instead of the tawdry Kaiserkeller, we flew to Toyko where we became the first pop group to receive death threats from traditionalists who viewed our engagement in the Nippon Budokan arena, normally reserved for Sumo

wrestling and martial arts, both considered to be religious rites, as sacrilege. So we had to perform our concerts while being protected by 35,000 police and security men. From there we flew to the Philippines where Brian Epstein innocently declined an invitation to attend a reception with President Marcos and his fat clothes-horse of a wife, Imelda. This led to local newspaper headlines about how the Beatles had 'snubbed' the country's First Family, which in turn led to all our police and security cover being abruptly withdrawn, the Filipino promoter refusing to hand over our share of the concert proceedings, threats that we couldn't leave the country until we'd paid previously unmentioned cash sums in income tax, and even our hotel's room service staff, supporting their beloved First Family, delivering inedible food to our room. When Brian then went on the state-controlled television network to apologise for the 'misunderstanding', carefully arranged technical interference broke up the picture and drowned out his words. The following day, at Manila International Airport, when we were trying to leave, there were no porters available to deal with our luggage, the escalators inexplicably stopped, forcing us to struggle up the stairs, carrying our own luggage in the tropical heat, and then, in the departure lounge, we were jeered and physically abused all the way to the aeroplane. It was a fucking nightmare.

But that wasn't the end of it. Back in London, to express our disgust at Capitol Records' releasing of various compilation albums in America without consulting us, we insisted on putting out their latest lousy compilation, *Yesterday… And Today*, with a cover photo showing the four of us in long white butcher's coats grinning mischievously while holding aloft bloody joints of meat and naked, dismembered dolls (children). The resulting furore caused a first pressing of 750,000 albums to be hastily withdrawn until new covers were made available. Then, during an interview that I gave to our most trusted journalist, Maureen Cleave, just before our final American tour, I made the mistake of remarking casually that the Beatles were now more popular than Jesus. *Jesus!* This simple comment, completely ignored in Britain, turned our American tour into a nightmare, with our records being banned in the Southern Bible Belt of Alabama, radio stations following suit by refusing to play our records, actual records being smashed on air or being shown on television being thrown into rubbish disposal bins labelled PLACE BEATLES TRASH HERE, churches and temples right across the nation calling down hellfire on our heads, then South Africa, Spain, Holland and,

finally, even the Vatican, joining in the public condemnation. By the time we reached Chicago, to commence our American tour, the Klu Klux Klan, taking a break from terrorizing and murdering black people, were loudly proclaiming themselves the avengers of outraged Christianity throughout the South and I was forced to call a press conference and offer a grovelling public apology, for which I never forgave myself. Not that the apology helped much. During the subsequent tour, we faced audiences holding up crosses instead of candles, signs stating BEATLES GO HOME and JESUS DIED FOR YOU, JOHN LENNON, former fans publicly breaking or stamping on our records, numerous copies of *John Lennon: In His Own Write* being torn to shreds, and police protection being withdrawn without explanation, just as it had been in the Philippines. Most frightening of all was when bullet holes were found in the fuselage of the plane used to transport us from one city to another.

'You might just as well paint a target on me,' I said to Paul, George and Ringo as we huddled fearfully together just before boarding another aeroplane.

At Shea Stadium, New York, on 26 August, there were 11,000 empty seats. By August 26, just before we played at the Candlestick Park baseball stadium, I told the others that I'd had enough and Ringo agreed that it all had to end. So that became the last live performance we were ever to give.

Did I care? No. Do I care now? No. I only care about that light in the distance and where it might be leading me. Maybe to the Other Side. To the Nowhere Land of the Dead. Maybe to loved ones departed and my personal Judgement Day. Best not to think about. Let my memories protect me. I may be here just to relive my life and find out what it meant. I spent a lot of time wondering what life meant when the Beatles stopped touring…

Not knowing what to do with ourselves, the four of us dealt with it in our separate ways, Paul finding distraction by composing the score for a new British movie, *The Family Way*, George immersing himself ever more deeply in Eastern music and religion, and Ringo simply spending more time with his wife Maureen, who soon became pregnant with their second child. As for me, I couldn't think of a fucking thing I wanted to do, except drink and drop acid and generally fall to pieces out there in beautiful, fart-boring Weybridge. Luckily, Richard Lester, director of *A Hard Day's Night* and *Help!*, offered me a supporting role in his quirky World War II film, *How I Won the War*,

playing a British serviceman, Private Gripweed, and I happily went off to locations, first in Hamburg, then Almería in southern Spain, just to get away from Kenwood, away from my missus and the kid. But that's *all* I got out of it, since the movie tanked and my own performance, perhaps deadened by my regular intake of hashish, was truly dismal. Then I was rescued by the avant-garde in general and the Jap in particular.

Now, being dead, and looking back on that movie, I recall a scene that virtually prophesied my eventual fate and confirmed my life-long conviction that I would die by being fatally shot. It was a black and white sequence in which my character, Private Gripweed, crossing a field, is shot in the midriff by enemy gunfire. First, he looks down at his midriff and says, 'I knew this would happen.' Then he looks directly at the camera, at the audience, and says, 'You knew this would happen, didn't you?' That scene reduced Cynthia to tears and gave me nightmares for weeks after. I now believe I recalled that very scene the instant Chapman shot me.

Even now, I get most of the credit for involving the Beatles in the avant-garde and counter-culture, but it was actually Paul. When we were really famous and rich, for instance, Paul was the only one of us who did *not* move to a mansion or secluded estate in the stockbroker belt south-west of London, but instead remained resolutely in his house in St. John's Wood, located close to the EMI Abbey Road recording studios. Though at the time he was going with the actress Jane Asher and, through her high-toned family, mixing with the élite of the theatre and film worlds, powerful businessmen, and even minor royalty, he was also friends with her brother, the pop-singer Peter Asher, who introduced him to the world of alternative arts and soon had him patronising avant-garde theatres and art galleries, meeting 'beat' writers like William Burroughs and Alan Ginsberg, attending concerts of electronic and atonal music, financing underground magazines and events, and even financially assisting the Indica Bookshop, specialising in alternative literature. Paul was also involved with the Indica Gallery, formed in 1966 by John Dunbar, then married to Marianne Faithfull, and two young partners, and located in a mews in the heart of London's West End. The gallery was to be devoted to the work of new 'swinging' painters and sculptors, while its adjacent bookshop would specialize in off-beat, radical literature from sources already known to some as the 'Underground.' Dunbar's partners in the venture were Peter Asher, brother of Paul's girlfriend Jane, and Barry

Miles who'd grown up with the Rolling Stones headcase, Brian Jones, in Cheltenham. (Brian was always too busy being drunk, getting stoned, or violently beating up his women to give his full attention to his music, though he was, when he actually got round to it, extremely talented at the latter. At least he was until he drowned, or was murdered, in that swimming pool.) The support of pop music's toffs was assured from the start when me mate Paul helped to paint the gallery all white before its official opening in November 1966.

So Paul was up to his eyeballs in all that while I was holing up in Kenwood, my mansion in the stock-broker belt of Sussex, bored with being a married man and neglectful daddy, feeling sorry for myself (fame was such a drag!) and trying to dissolve my ego and escape my self-pitying misery with a prodigious input of booze, pot and acid. Poor Cynthia. Right from the start, she'd always been kept on the back-burner, treated officially as non-existent, because it was thought that me being married and, even worse, a daddy, would upset the fans. So first, while I was sharing a posh mews flat with Paul, George and Ringo in Green Street, Mayfair, I'd hidden her and Baby Julian away with a reluctant Aunt Mimi in Mendips, then with Cynthia's mum back in her old home in Hoylake. It was only after the *Express* had blown our cover and I'd been forced to confess in a *Mirabelle* interview that I was, indeed, married and a daddy, that I let her and baby Julian move into a not-so-great second-floor flat in Emperor's Gate from where, while Cynthia was feeling trapped by the Beatles fans always crowding around the doorway or even mobbing her hysterically when she attempted to give baby Julian a run in his push-chair, I sallied forth to have affairs with a wide variety of other women, including the then popular singer, Alma Cogan, nicknamed 'Sarah Sequin', and Maureen Kennedy, lead singer with the sexy Vernon Girls, plus more than a few quick pokes with hysterically willing female fans, not forgetting a one-off threesome featuring oilskins and polythene bags (inspiration for *Abbey Road*'s 'Polythene Pam') and a casual affair with the Norwegian wife of the 'best friend' who'd found us the Emperor's Gate house in the first place, and, indeed, shared it with us, they then residing in their wood-panelled ground-floor flat that became, along with the wife herself, the inspiration for *Rubber Soul*'s 'Norwegian Wood'. Finally, unable to take the demented teenage fans of London, I moved with Cynthia and Julian into Kenwood, my modest 27-room mock-Tudor mansion in the

exclusive St. George's Hill Estate in Weybridge, the heart of the Surrey Stockbroker Belt, safely surrounded by other millionaires, eventually including Ringo, who married his pregnant girlfriend, Maureen Cox, and moved into a similar mock-Tudor mansion in the same estate, and George, who married his sexy model, Pattie Boyd, and moved into a luxury bungalow on the Claremont Estate in nearby Esher. So there I was, cut off from the excitements of London, spending most of my days in a stupor of booze, pot and acid, listening to good old rock 'n' roll on my personal jukebox (just like Elvis in Perugia Way), dreamily playing with my three connected Scalextric race car sets, or my numerous slot machines or table football games, fantasising about a hippie existence on an island off the Irish coast that I bought and then never set foot on, then having my black Rolls Royce repainted in eye-scalding psychedelic colors. I only did that because I was bored. I also watched a lot of afternoon TV, all those dumb soaps and series, slept for hours on end, not answering the telephone, ignoring poor Cynthia and baby Julian and the real world in general – except when thinking of Paul McC and growing increasingly paranoid with the suspicion that the real power behind the Beatles had gradually shifted from me to him.

I first became convinced of this when I gradually realised that *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, one of the most acclaimed albums in pop history, was mostly masterminded by Paul, with my contributions being sporadic and disinterested. While I was laying waste to myself down there in highly respectable Sussex, Paul was composing his movie score, experimenting with electronic collages, and immersing himself in contemporary, avant-garde classical music. All those strands of creativity he brought to the conception of *Sergeant Pepper*, though I later received most of the credit for it. I *did* manage to drag part of 'A Day in the Life' (the album's most famous track), the ground-breaking single, 'Strawberry Fields Forever' and a couple of other half-decent songs out of that period, but even the two Georges, Martin and Harrison, added more to the originality of *Sergeant Pepper* than I did: the former with his impressive knowledge of orchestral music and sound effects, the latter with his Indian instrumentations, inspired by the sitar lessons he was then taking with Ravi Shankar, though, credit where it's due, he'd first used a sitar as far back as *Rubber Soul*. The rest of my contributions to *Pepper* were pretty minor, though you'd never have guessed it at the time, given the rapturous reception it received by both the

music press and the ever-worshipful public. So I have to confess that my feelings of increasing isolation from the group, or, even worse, my belief that I'd actually lost my leadership of the group, were only increased by the stupendous success of what many considered to be our greatest album. Which also explains why I frequently made disparaging remarks about the album when discussing it with adulatory journalists.

Nevertheless, despite my secret resentment of Paul, it was him who rescued me from my doldrums by dragging me out of Kenwood, introducing me to gallery owner Robert Fraser, and encouraging Fraser to guide me through the varied novelties of London's avant-garde world, including the Indica Gallery, which Paul already knew all too well, having partly financed it.

It was there, in the Indica Gallery, in November 1966, that I first met Yoko Ono, then a 33-year old Japanese member of the experimental group, Flexus, dressed all in black, inscrutable face framed by black hair (looking like a bloke in drag, as I later told her), and in the gallery to set up her exhibition, *Unfinished Paintings and Objects*. The most intriguing exhibits were the physical objects, such as, for instance, an apple and a needle placed strategically together to form a so-called 'work of art'. I mean, excuse my cynicism, folks, but when even someone reportedly as intelligent as film director Roman Polanski can say of this particular exhibit, 'This is the most beautiful apple I've ever seen!' and 'That is the very essence of a needle!', I have to ask myself: 'Who's pulling whose leg, dear?'

So, convinced that the whole exhibition was a piss take, I took a bite out of the apple and put it back on its pedestal. This really outraged Yoko. I'd just destroyed her 'work of art'. There was also a so-called 'exhibit' that said 'Hammer a nail in' (into a canvas) and I asked her if I could do it and she, still being outraged by the bite taken out of her precious apple, said, yes, I could hammer a nail in if I paid her five shillings, or twenty-five pence, and so, still being a smart-arse, I said, 'Well, I'll give you an imaginary five shillings and hammer an imaginary nail in.' One up for me, like.

Yet I fell for her. Fell like a ton of bricks. Fell head over heels in love with what I thought was her originality and daring. But mostly fell for the fact that she had all the self-confidence (some would say 'arrogance') that I lacked, with my secret 'orphan boy' complexes and 'working-class' hang-ups. But it didn't happen immediately. I met her again two weeks later in Robert Fraser's gallery, at the opening of an exhibition by Pop Art sculptor Claes

Oldenberg (big influence on my occasional buddy, Andy Warhol), but when I saw her, wearing her customary black, sexless clothing and as inscrutable as the Sphinx, surrounded by Oldenberg's giant plaster milkshakes and foam-rubber hamburgers, I just smiled shyly, or possibly in secret terror, and hurriedly moved on. Paul McC also met her that evening and then met her again, a few weeks later, when she was looking for a handwritten Beatles manuscript to include in a book honouring the avant-garde composer, John Cage. Paul suggested that she should contact me instead, which she did, and though I was still scared of her, finding her unnervingly intense and almost impossible to read, I couldn't get her out of my head and we gradually drifted into a relationship that didn't, at that stage, include sex.

I know there was always a widespread, mainly racist, assumption that 'the Jap' had just latched on to me to capitalize on my fame, but I'm pretty sure this wasn't the case. No, by the time I became involved with her, she'd already become a celeb' in the avant-garde world when her Andy Warhol-styled *Film No.4*, more widely known as *Bottoms* (because all it showed was a parade of anonymous bare arses accompanied by dumb comments from the participants), was refused a certificate by the British Board of Film Censors, thus causing a bit of a media stir. Described by Yoko as her 'film of many happy endings', ha, ha, it was eventually premiered in August, 1967, and was then shown only in private clubs. She then gained more notoriety when she wrote a humorous article for the underground mag, *International Times*, in which she lampooned male genitalia and men in general. In September that year, I invited her to watch the filming of Paul's 'Fool on the Hill', composed for the soon-to-be-critically-damned Beatles' (Paul's) 'home movie', *Magical Mystery Tour*. A couple of days after that, she launched *Yoko Ono's 13 Days Do-It-Yourself Dance Festival* by mailing to selected individuals, including me, every morning for many days, hundreds of postcards bearing cryptic messages, such as: 'Draw a large circle in the sky.' On my birthday (she surely did her research), I received one saying, 'Color yourself. Wait for the spring to come. Let us know when it comes.' Being at a loose end in Kenwood, where the postcards were being received, I alternated between annoyance and exhilaration, but either way I was being dragged out of my terminal boredom. Maybe because of this, I sponsored her art exhibition, *Yoko Plus Me: Half-A-Wind* and was shocked to see my name mentioned fulsomely in the publicity for the show, despite having been assured by her

that I would, as I'd demanded, remain anonymous. So, yes, she certainly used me in that way.

By that time, the Beatles' financial affairs had become so complex that it was beyond Brian Epstein's comprehension. Convinced that he was losing control over us, being forced to give way to more forceful entrepreneurs, also increasingly tormented by his secret homosexuality, Brian was psychologically disintegrating. Also, by that time, George (clearly, like me, disenchanted with fame and fortune) was becoming deeply immersed in the Indian spiritualism of his guru, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, so he encouraged the rest of us to attend one of the Maharishi's banal lectures, and then, during the bank holiday weekend of '67, dragged us, along with Mick Jagger and his current squeeze, Marianne Faithfull (Mick had stolen her from her hubby and our friend, John Dunbar), off to a teacher training college in Bangor, North Wales, for our 'initiation' into Transcendental Meditation. It was while there that we received word that Brian Epstein had been found dead of a barbiturates overdose, almost certainly a suicide, in his apartment in London. We would now be managed not by Brian, whom we'd all trusted, but by his company NEMS, which was jointly controlled by Robert Stigwood, despised by all of us (as an independent record producer, he'd rejected the Beatles in 1962), and Brian's brother, Clive Epstein. The shock of this double blow – Brian's sudden death combined with the knowledge that we were now under the control of the hated NEMS – was the true beginning of the crack-up of the Beatles.

Well, that's not important now, is it? None of it's important now. Isn't it funny how, being dead, having been alive no longer seems that big a deal? All those anxieties I suffered. All that misery I endured. All the passionate ambitions I had that turned to dust in the end. Being a rock 'n' roll star. Being a Beatle. Being a writer and artist and political activist, only to end up baking bread and changing nappies and feeding the cats and calling Yoko Ono 'Mother'. I'm better off dead, really. I still only want me mam. I'm now convinced that the light in the distance, that expanding eye, is the doorway that will lead me to her, to Julia. She died before I wrote those songs about her, but maybe, if she's waiting for me beyond that light, I'll be able to personally sing them to her. I remember that I wrote the first song about her before the Beatles broke up.

Ironically, our break-up probably began with one of our greatest moments

when, in June 1967, in Studio One at Abbey Road, surrounded by exotically dressed flower children, plus Mick Jagger, Marianne Faithfull, Keith Richard, Eric Clapton and the totally insane Keith Moon of The Who, we gave a televised live performance of our latest song, 'All You Need is Love' and reached, through eighteen different overseas broadcasting systems and Earth-orbiting satellites, an unprecedented total of *350 million people*: the greatest audience in history. That I chewed gum throughout the whole affair, even when singing, and also included a sarcastic snatch of 'She loves you, yeah yeah yeah' was a largely unnoticed indication that the end of the Beatles was at hand.

The real rot started when Brian Epstein died, leaving us rudderless for the first time. It continued when we formed our own music publishing company, located it in a Victorian house in Baker Street, central London, and, inspired by the deceptive simplicity of the René Magritte painting of a green apple, then hanging on a wall in Paul's St. John's Wood home, named the company Apple Records. Next, encouraged by our accountants to put our excess money into some kind of business, to avoid having to pay the Labour government's 95% tax demands (think George's song, 'Tax Man'), we foolishly expanded Apple to include a boutique specialising in hippie clothing designed by the outrageously expensive Anglo-Dutch group known as 'the Fool' (think Paul's song, 'The Fool on the Hill'), with lighting designed by my equally expensive 'electronics guru', Magic Alex Mardas. Then we decided to make our own movie, writing, producing, casting and directing it ourselves, also starring ourselves. As I soon lost interest, this became Paul's baby, the hour-long *Magical Mystery Tour*, but its making was chaotic and the results, when shown on television on Boxing Day, 1967, only a couple of months after the critical and commercial failure of *How I Won the War*, received a venomous reception from both critics and audience, becoming the Beatles' first real flop. Luckily, the album of the same title, including what many felt was my greatest song, 'I Am the Walrus', went on to sell over five hundred thousand copies in Britain and over a million in America, making the whole sorry venture worthwhile.

Nevertheless, the loss of our Age of Innocence continued when the BBC banned the playing of 'I Am the Walrus' because it contained the word 'knickers' and when I became more deeply involved with the perceived-to-be-weird Yoko Ono. Neither of us behaved well during this time and poor

Cynthia was repeatedly humiliated. Indeed, so troubled was she by the conviction she was losing me that once, during a party given by Cilla Black at her flat in Portland Place, she hid herself in a closet to see how long it would take for me to notice that she was missing. I didn't. By that time Yoko's relationship with her second husband, Tony Cox, by whom she had a daughter, Koyoto, then five years old, was also breaking down and we were keeping in touch through the mailing system, her bombarding me with cards containing more cryptic instructions, such as 'Breathe' or 'Dance', and me responding with a deluge of lengthy letters. We had a break from each other when all the Beatles and their wives, including Cynthia, along with Paul's actress girlfriend, Jane Asher, the singer-songwriter Donovan, the American film actress Mia Farrow (who'd just finished *Rosemary's Baby*, filmed prophetically in the Dakota Building where I would spend my last days) and Mike Love of the Beach Boys, flew off to Rishikesh, located two hundred miles north of Delhi, on the banks of the River Ganges, to study Transcendental Meditation under Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, now nick-named by me 'the giggling guru'. We were supposed to stay there for at least three months, but Ringo left after two weeks because he couldn't stand Indian food and had run out of his supply of eggs, bacon and baked beans. Paul and George and me stayed on a lot longer, all three of us constantly strumming our guitars and writing a lot of songs for what would become known as the *White Album*, but we finally decided to leave when we heard rumours about the supposedly celibate Maharishi making sexual advances to one of the young women in our group and when I, personally, became pissed off at not receiving the spiritual 'revelation' I'd been expecting and also became convinced that the giggling guru's love of photo opportunities indicated that he was more interested in fame and money than he was in enlightenment. When he asked me why I was leaving, I said, 'If you're so cosmic, you should know why.' Then we all flew back home and I took up again with Yoko and my ruthless humiliation of poor Cynthia.

In fact, I didn't even wait to get back home. All the time we were in India, I'd been receiving postcards from Yoko, which were sent to Tony Bramwell in Delhi and then passed to me in plain brown envelopes to ensure that Cynthia didn't know about them. So during the flight back from Delhi, looking forward to seeing Yoko, I passed the time by confessing to Cynthia my many infidelities, cynically itemising as many as I could recall. Once

safely home and staying for a few days with Derek Taylor in his big family home in Newdigate, Surrey, surrounded by his large brood of happy kids, I told Cynthia that we should have more children to keep the neglected Julian company. She responded by bursting into tears and saying I'd be much better off with someone like Yoko. Some time later, when I was about to fly with Paul to New York to unveil Apple to the American media, she asked to go with me and I bluntly told her she couldn't, then packed her off on a supposed 'holiday' in Greece, in the company of Magic Alex Mardas, Jenni Boyd, Donovan and his manager, and a dodgy article called Gipsy Dave. Not for the first time, poor Julian was sent off to stay with our housekeeper, Dot. In America, we naively informed the media that Apple Corps, which was now an umbrella company for a record label, a film company (it's only production would be *The Yellow Submarine* psychedelic feature film in which we featured solely as cartoon Beatles), a publishing company, and a retail and electronics company, was to be run by young people (experience not necessary) and firmly grounded in the hippie ideals of 'love, peace and sharing', or, as Paul put it, 'a kind of Western Communism.' This concept went down a real treat with Capitalist America.

Back home, while Cynthia was still in Greece, safely surrounded by my motley crew of watchers, I phoned Yoko from Kenwood and asked her to come and see me straight away. She arrived about midnight, still looking like a bloke in drag. Instantly, I took her up to my studio and played her all the tapes that I'd made of my experimental music. Impressed, and doubtless raised on high by the LSD I'd just given her, she suggested that we make an album between us. We started straight away, working until dawn, creating what would become the basis for *Two Virgins*: a mixture of different sounds, including bird song, white noise, Yoko's avant-garde singing (a kind of demented screaming) and lashings of my surreal *Goon Show*-styled comments, offered in a variety of different accents. Then we fucked for the first time. When Cynthia finally returned from Greece, accompanied by two of my spies, Magic Alex and Jenni Boyd, she found Kenwood unusually quiet, with no sign of Julian or our housekeeper, Dot. Then she found me and Yoko seated together on the floor of the sun parlour, both wearing dressing gowns, neither of us showing the slightest sign of guilt, both probably still high on LSD. When she then found a pair of Japanese slippers outside the door of the guest bedroom, she fled from the house. A couple of days later,

when she returned, she found Julian and Dot reinstated and was informed by me that finding me in the sun room with Yoko Ono meant nothing at all. But I was so distant and cold to her over the following weeks that she asked permission to go on holiday again, this time to southern Italy, accompanied by her mother, Julian, and an aunt and uncle. Naturally I said yes. Within hours of Cynthia's departure Yoko had left her husband, Tony Cox, for good and moved into Kenwood. During our time together, we made a couple of movies, the first, entitled *Smile*, just showing me in close-up, pulling a lot of funny faces for fifty-two minutes, the second called *Two Virgins*, after the music we'd made that first night, and simply showing our faces merging, separating, merging again, over and over, except when giving the viewer a break by showing our romantically embraced silhouettes.

While Cynthia was still in Italy, Yoko and me collaborated on an Arts Laboratory exhibit, *Build Around*, a so-called 'sculpture' consisting of a wooden platform covered in pieces of broken glass and plastic, to which spectators could add their own bits and pieces. Invited to the exhibition when driving with me through London, Paul and Ringo both insisted, while avoiding my stoned gaze, that they had pressing engagements elsewhere. A few days later, when Apple launched its latest example of retail madness, a Sergeant Pepper-styled 'Civil and Military' clothing business in fashionable King's Road, Chelsea, I appeared at the packed press party with Yoko by my side. Three weeks later, at the prestigious National Sculpture Exhibition held in the precincts of Coventry Cathedral, me and Yoko informed the world of our relationship by planting two acorns, one facing east, the other west, symbolising our love and the merging of our two cultures (Yoko and John: geddit?) in unconsecrated grounds because, as we'd been informed by a snotty cleric, we couldn't plant them in the consecrated grounds of the cathedral. Three nights later, when my stage play, *Scene Three Act One*, returned to the National Theatre, now retitled *John Lennon: In His Own Write*, Yoko and me sat boldly in the front row of the dress circle, wearing matching white outfits, flanked by the other Beatles, listening to outraged calls from the audience of 'Where's your wife?' and 'Where's Cynthia?' Next morning, the front page of every newspaper in the land screamed that I'd left my wife and begun an affair with the notorious Yoko Ono. And Cynthia, who was still on 'holiday' in Italy, still didn't know a thing about it.

So what did I do? I sent good old Magic Alex Mardas to Italy to pass on

this message: ‘I’ve come with a message from John. He’s going to divorce you, take Julian away from you, and send you back to Hoylake.’

Traumatised, Cynthia flew back to England, but avoided Kenwood, where I was still staying with Yoko, and instead moved in with her mother in a central London flat owned by Ringo. From there, she tried repeatedly to contact me through the Beatles office, but was repeatedly, callously, put off. Eventually, I notified her through my solicitors that I intended to sue for divorce on the grounds of her ‘adultery’ with an Italian friend, Roberto Bassanini. Since I was in fact the adulterer, indeed many times over, my insistence on Cynthia’s adultery was more than a little hypocritical. Still, Yoko and me finally moved out of Kenwood, letting Cynthia move back in with Julian.

Meanwhile, public hatred for Yoko Ono, ‘the Jap’, was growing. It began when she was viewed as the calculating slit-eyed foreigner and older woman who’d broken up my marriage to sweet, devoted Cynthia. It accelerated when she broke a strict Beatles ruling that no wives or girlfriends could be in the Abbey Road Studio Two when we were recording. With my permission (I was besotted with love and on a drugs high) Yoko started coming into the studio during the recording sessions for the *White Album*. Naturally, the other Beatles were upset by this, particularly when Yoko, when not sitting there like a block of stone, dressed entirely in black, pale face framed by long black hair, rarely smiling, thus unnerving everyone, started offering her comments or ‘instructions’ regarding both our lyrics and our music, thus enraging everyone, especially Paul McC. Even George Martin confessed to feeling ‘terribly inhibited’ by her presence. So, given her immoveable, inhibiting presence there in the studio, it came as no surprise that the resultant double album turned out to be virtually a collection of solo performances by individual Beatles with the other Beatles performing more like a backing band than a genuine, fully integrated group. Even worse, shock! horror! was that a female backing vocalist was used for the first time, namely Yoko on ‘Bungalow Bill’. And no one, except me and Yoko, wanted to include the collage of avant-garde sounds known as *Revolution 9* (it was nine minutes long) which most listeners, at least those not stoned, doubtless skipped over with a sigh of relief. Not that the double album didn’t contain some great things (most of the critics raved) but in the end it wasn’t really the Beatles. Nevertheless, Yoko’s presence in the studio continued throughout the

remaining Beatles recording sessions and reached an outrageous climax, as far as the others were concerned, when, after being hospitalised as a result of my atrocious driving, she had a specially prepared bed brought into the studio and remained in it for three days, propped up with pillows, a microphone dangling over her head to enable her to comment on the proceedings, during the *Let It Be* sessions, during which, for obvious reasons, cordial relationships between the four Beatles finally and irrevocably broke down. Not much later, after recording what many thought was our greatest album, *Abbey Road*, the Beatles called it a day.

The end, as I recall it, was pretty messy. First there was the infighting caused by Yoko's presence in the recording studio, which led to the rift between me and the others. Next was the filming of the *Let It Be* documentary, which ended with us playing our final gig together, though barely speaking to each other, up on the roof of the Apple Corps building in Savile Row, right in the heart of Mayfair, in the middle of the day, until stopped by the arrival of the police. Finally, there was the Big Break-up that began when me, George and Ringo signed up with Alan Klein as our manager while Paul opted for Linda Eastman's high-powered American lawyer relatives. And after that came the endless legal battles, taking years before they were resolved and causing even more bitterness between us.

Yes, the Beatles were finished.

But *I'm* not finished. I may be dead, but I'm still full of piss and vinegar as I let my thoughts wander to and fro, into the past and the present and even the future, far beyond the day of the shooting, this doubtless being one of the privileges of the Afterlife. I can, for instance, see what happened to me after I was shot, when the world was so shocked that some fans committed suicide, other held vigils outside the Dakota Building, holding up lit candles and singing my songs, and critics who'd dismissed me as a has-been started hailing me as the genius behind the Beatles. God, Paul must have been pissed. I mean, I know he was genuinely shocked by my death, as were George and Ringo, but deep down, as my faded reputation started regrowing in leaps and bounds, when I was deified as a saintlike person and worshipped as a great artist and deep thinker, Paul must have had a few sleepless nights, wondering why he was suddenly being looked upon as a mere 'commercial' talent who couldn't have written a decent song without me. If I had a gun, I'd go back and shoot him, just to make him feel better.

God, that light is really expanding. It's seeping into the surrounding darkness. I'm trying to see what's in it or behind it, but all I see is the light itself, which is mesmerizing. I don't want to be mesmerized. I want to stay fully conscious. I want to be fully awake when I reach the Other Side and, perhaps, meet up again with me mam, my beloved Julia. But best not to get my hopes up. Best, for the moment, which could be an eternity, to keep my thoughts focused on where I left off, with the end of the Beatles…

Not that I gave a shit about the Beatles. By that time, Yoko and me were being seen everywhere together, usually in matching white kaftans, and I was engaged in artistic activities that I felt were more important to me than the Beatles. Following the revival of *John Lennon: In His Own Write* at the National Theatre, my first complete art exhibition, *You Are Here*, opened at the Robert Fraser Gallery in Duke Street, receiving enormous media and public attention, though mainly because of my 'scandalous' relationship with 'the Jap'. By this time, when Cynthia was still resident in Kenwood with the now 'fatherless' Julian and counter-suing for divorce on the grounds of adultery, Tony Cox, now formally separated from Yoko, had moved to the south of France with Yoko's 'motherless' daughter Kyoko, while Yoko and me, both of whom were already whining publicly about our greatly exaggerated 'orphan' childhoods, had moved, without the kids that we had, in a real sense, just orphaned, into the one-bedroom basement flat in Montague Square that was owned by the ever helpful Ringo.

We'd barely moved in when the flat was raided by police searching for drugs. (The previous tenant had been the notorious druggy rock star, Jimmy Hendrix.) All they found was a small quantity of cannabis resin, which I swear was planted at the time. I was, instead, on heroin at the time, but I'd cleaned all that out before the pigs arrived, so the cannabis they 'found' had to be a plant. Yoko and me were released on bail, but a few hours later, Yoko, pregnant, was rushed into hospital, where she nearly suffered a miscarriage, was given several blood transfusions, and then was told she was going to lose the baby. We named the dying child John Ono Lennon II. I then recorded the baby's dying heartbeats, to be used later on a John-Yoko album.

So what's wrong with that?

My divorce from Cynthia was granted in November, 1968. Yoko and Tony Cox had come to an agreement that the latter would move with their daughter, Kyoto, to the Virgin Islands where the divorce would take place,

with both parents sharing custody of Kyoto. That same month I had to appear in court where I pleaded guilty to the charge of possessing hashish and was charged £150, with the charges against Yoko being dropped. At least I didn't sob openly, like a fucking six-year old, the way Mick Jagger did the year before when he, along with Keith and their partner in crime, Robert Fraser, were done by the Law, handcuffed, and given a couple of nights in the clink, after being neatly stitched up by the *News of the World* because Mick, in a separate court case, was trying to sue them for libel. Foolish Mick. So there he was, the supposed rock 'n' roll rebel, trying to hold back his tears as he was taken away for a night or two in Lewes Prison. The poor, piss-weak bastard.

But I liked old Mick. Liked all the Rolling Stones, even that lunatic Brian Jones. The media liked to invent stories about the fierce competitiveness between the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, but in truth we were actually great friends, even backing each other vocally on various tracks. It *is* true, however, that Mick was in awe of *Sergeant Pepper* and slavishly tried to copy it with his psychedelic *Satanic Majesties Request*, one of the worst albums the Stones ever released. It was such a pathetic attempt to cash in on *Sergeant Pepper*, with its sound effects and vaudeville and touches of flower power and Maharishi mysticism – even the cover was a rip-off – that I felt like weeping for Mick, just as he'd wept when in handcuffs. Not that *that* stopped the album, with its multicolored 3-D sleeve and the Rolling Stones looking ridiculous in their wizard robes and hats, from gaining $2,000,00 in advance sales. That made for a lot of bitterly disappointed fans when they heard what they'd purchased. Not that Keith gave a shit. Only Mick, with his insatiable lust for money (his London School of Economics education), lost a lot of sleep over it.

Still we were friends. So much so that when Mick followed his *Sergeant Pepper* rip-off with an equally blatant *Magical Mystery Tour* rip-off, the chaotic TV Christmas special, *Rolling Stones Rock and Roll Circus*, I actually went along to the BBC studios in Wembley to lend a hand, swallowing my pride by letting myself be dressed up as a 'be-ruffed and stockinged juggler' (thank you, Philip Norman), with Yoko as a witch (how appropriate, some would say), and then singing 'Yer Blues', with Eric Clapton on lead guitar, Keith Richards on bass, Mitch (Jimmy Hendrix Experience) Mitchell on drums, and Yoko doing her usual nonsense in a black sack, before emerging

to scream ‘Whole Lotta Yoko’ while Ivry Gitlis accompanied her on violin and the rest of us just strummed our guitars. Eric Clapton, who secretly hated my beloved, was clearly not impressed.

But that was 1968. By 1969 the Summer of Love, with its kaftans and beads, its Mary Jane and LSD (and my very own ‘All You Need is Love’), had collapsed into its opposite, with Love & Peace being replaced by student riots in London and Paris, Berlin and Amsterdam, Los Angeles and Detroit and Washington, DC, leading to mass demos, burnings and looting, by way of protest against Vietnam and Czechoslovakia. In short, the Age of Aquarius, short-lived, was already over. Not that I was bothered. I mean, when the demonstrators looked to the likes of the Beatles and me personally for revolutionary anthems, all they got was, ‘You say you want a revolution… Well, you can count me out.’ That, see, was because I was too busy working for peace in my own way, with Yoko, having our notorious Bed-Ins and engaging in other, equally fucked-up examples of ‘living theatre’. Not that Mick J did much better, soon following up ‘Summer’s here and the time is right for fighting in the street, boy’ with his shameless cop-out: ‘but what can a poor boy do, ’cept to sing in a rock ‘n’ roll band?’ So much for us as revolutionary figureheads during the so-called Permissive Society of the Sixties.

But Yoko and me had our own agenda, with the beds and sacks and other idealistic shite, well aware that the tabloid press would swallow it wholesale. Looking back on it, I can see that from the moment, in January 1969, when Yoko and a heavily bearded me slipped furtively from a white Rolls-Royce into the Dorchester Hotel for a secret meeting with the notoriously untrustworthy Allen Klein, to confirm that he could manage me and George and Ringo, but not Paul (whose widely loved *Hey Jude* was actually an artfully-worded reprimand to me, both for so selfishly neglecting my son Julian [Jude] and for having taken up with the hated Yoko Ono. Think ‘Go out and get her.’)… Yeah, from that moment on, I let myself be guided, or possibly dominated, by Yoko. I did this because despite what I often said to the contrary, me mam, Julia, when alive, only lived a short distance from where I lived with Aunt Mimi and was always loving and caring, Aunt Mimi and her sisters were equally loving and caring, and I’d therefore become addicted to dominant but deeply caring women. And Yoko was both.

Ah, Yoko! Oh, Yoko! I can see you even now, Yoko. I can look into that

expanding light and let it take me into the Dakota Building and see you in your ever-expanding empire, adding at least another six apartments to our already block-length apartment, daily checking your collection of over three hundred fur coats in the refrigerated room we had specially built for them, then going into your also specially built Egyptian Room to caress with loving fingers your fabulous, and fabulously expensive, collection of ancient Egyptian artifacts, which you seriously believe have mystical and supernatural powers, or maybe wandering into the candlelit White Room to remember us renewing our wedding vows after you let me come back home after my eighteen-month Lost Weekend, or returning to the main living area to consult with your many maids, administrative assistants, tarot-card readers, psychics, masseurs, acupuncturists, decorators and odd-job people while listening to 'imagine no possessions' or 'Working Class Hero' booming out of the state-of-the-art speakers, and then sitting down at your gold-inlaid desk under the *trompe l'oeil* ceiling to consider the purchase of even more apartments or properties elsewhere, particularly in tax-free havens, or to consider various shares or possible business mergers, the good and the bad, the reliable and the dodgy, or to examine the state of the now awesomely vast and complicated Beatles finances, which you fully understand, and over much of which you now have control. Oh, Yoko, Yoko Ono, my Yoko, you're surely still a gal in a million and I love you and always will.

What needs to be understood about Yoko is that she was born and raised as the daughter of wealthy, widely travelled, multilingual Japanese intellectuals, that she enjoyed a life of extraordinary privilege and luxury, that even when she was a child, servants had to approach her on their knees and depart backward on their knees, so she grew up with an unshakeable sense of entitlement. But during the Second World War, when Tokyo was bombed, her family home was destroyed, and her father was interned in a Chinese concentration camp, her former life of luxury was turned overnight into a life of desperate hardship, when she had to learn to survive in the ruins while looking after her younger brother and sister, which meant giving instructions and never taking 'no' for an answer. So years later, when she instructed me to bake bread, change our new baby Sean's shitty nappies, become a househusband, fly around the world to 'find' myself, or even have an affair with our secretary, Mai Pang, she did it with such quiet, steely authority, I was no better than one of those servants advancing and retreating on their

knees. Scared shitless, I did what I was told.

She certainly liked giving instructions. I mean, way back in 1964, even before her avant-garde fame in Greenwich Village, she'd published *Grapefruit*, a short book of haiku-styled poems that instructed the reader to perform various weird tasks, such as 'Draw a map to get lost.' Or 'Steal the moon on the water with a bucket. Keep stealing until no moon is seen on the water.' I loved that little book. It was just like my own two little books. So in the Dakota Building, when Yoko set me similar, sometimes mystifying tasks, I always tried to work out just what she meant by them and how, once understanding them, to perform them. She sure kept me busy that way.

I still can't quite believe what she persuaded me to do over our years together.

First, in April 1969, with Yoko's permission, I changed my middle name, Winston, to 'Ono', insisted that from now on my name and Yoko's would be joined and we'd be known as 'JohnandYoko', and then recorded the rock song, 'The Ballad of John and Yoko', ironically accompanied, both musically and vocally, by only Paul McC, who by that time simply couldn't stand Yoko.

Next: Yoko's *Film No.5*. This was a high-speed film in which I was instructed to smile for three minutes while sending out 'good vibrations'. When played back at normal speed, the film lasted for an hour and a half, as did my manic smile and supposed good vibrations. According to Yoko: 'People in five hundred years' time will watch it and just feel the vibrations.'

Yeah, right. And that was just the beginning. We released the recording of the experimental 'music' we'd made during our first night together in Kenwood, calling the album *Unfinished Music No 1: Two Virgins* and used a photo of both of us standing naked on the cover, albeit with our backs turned to the camera, though our flabby arses were certainly well displayed. We performed as part of the *Alchemical Wedding* event at the Royal Albert Hall, though both of us were only to be seen writhing frantically in one of Yoko's beloved sacks. We put out another avant-garde album, *Life With The Lions* (mainly Yoko's vocalising and my feedback guitar) and used the recording of the dying heartbeats of our unborn baby, John Ono Lennon II, on one of the tracks, followed by two minutes of reverential silence. When finally agreeing to get married, we tried to engage the services of the Archbishop of Canterbury, but he claimed to be too busy with previous engagements, so we

settled for the British Consul in Gibraltar and were married wearing only white and in tennis shoes. For our honeymoon, we had our Bed-In, spending ten hours every day for seven days in a double bed in the Amsterdam Hilton, both wearing white pyjamas, discussing with the invited media the ongoing war between Nigeria and Biafra, the escalating war in Vietnam, the benefits of peace and pacifism, and the need for people to stay in bed and grow their hair (my hair and beard were long at the time) instead of becoming involved in violence. 'Hair is nice,' I informed them. 'Hair is peaceful.' At the premier of our film *Rape* we appeared again in a sack; when asked by a journalist if it was really us in the sack, I identified myself by singing 'Maggie May' while Yoko warbled Japanese folk songs. At a press conference at Heathrow Airport, we announced our 'Acorns for Peace' campaign, which would entail the sending of one hundred acorns to one hundred world leaders to 'plant for peace'. Professing solidarity with the working classes, we sent a bouquet of red roses and a £5,000 cheque to the striking Clydeside shipworkers, but then, needing a house to live in, we purchased Tittenhurst Park, a white Georgian mansion in seventy-four acres of ground, including a row of former servants' cottages and a mock-Tudor villa, located near posh Ascot, Berkshire. Refused entry to America because of my British drugs bust and our FBI listing as 'dangerous subversives,' we went instead to Montreal where we staged another Bed-In, this one for ten days instead of seven, regaling the panting media with more homilies about peace and then recording, in our bedroom in the Queen Elizabeth Hotel, with a chanting chorus composed of counter-culture celebrities, 'Give Peace a Chance', which was the first performance credited to the Plastic Ono Band, though the songwriting credit still went to Lennon-McCartney. Following *Rape*, we made another film, *Self-Portrait*, which lasted for fifteen minutes and showed me achieving a slow erection. Together, we went off cocaine, went on to methadone, then went cold turkey, thus enabling me to write the song, 'Cold Turkey', based on personal, horrible experience, first performing it live at the official Plastic Ono Band gig, along with Eric Clapton, Klaus Voorman and Andy White at the Rock 'n' Roll Revival Concert in Toronto. We performed again in a sack, wriggling most expressively, at Hyde Park Corner to protest the innocence of James Hanratty, hanged in 1962, and then we went together to the servants' entrance of Buckingham Palace to hand back my MBE as a protest against Britain's involvement in the Nigeria-Biafra conflict, against

Britain's support of America in Vietnam, and, as I succinctly put it, 'against "Cold Turkey" slipping down the charts.' We advertised peace by paying for billboards in most major Western cities to display our Christmas message: 'War Is Over – If You Want It – Happy Christmas, John and Yoko.' At the end of 1969, the true end of the Swinging Sixties, in the company of Tony Cox, his new wife, Melinda, and Yoko's daughter, Kyoto, we doused our cigarettes in the snow of Denmark, and cut off our hair to express our hope for a new beginning.

On January 16, 1970, the police raided the London Art Gallery, which was holding an exhibition of my mildly erotic lithographs. They confiscated eight of them on the grounds of obscenity. In response, Yoko and me wrote a new song, 'Instant Karma', and promoted it with an appearance on *Top of the Pops*, me singing while Yoko, wearing a white blindfold, knitted a scarf. The hair we'd cut in Denmark was donated to an auction to raise funds for the Black House community centre, headed by the black radical, Michael X. In March, Paul McC released his first solo album and a statement saying he'd left the group. In one of the many interviews he gave to promote the album, he said, on the one hand, that no one was to blame for the break-up of the Beatles, but then, on the other, he implied that my relationship with Yoko had been a major factor. I responded by saying, 'That old gang of mine was over the minute I met her.'

Round about that time Yoko and me became disciples of Arthur Janov's Primal Scream Therapy, believing it would help us with our 'unhappy, isolated childhoods'. (What would the loving Aunt Mimi have to say about *that*?) I couldn't really imagine what Primal Scream Therapy could do for Yoko who had, of course, been screaming (singing) for years; however, I used Janov's belief that nearly all neurotic behaviour stems from the 'traumas of childhood' as the basis for my own solo album, *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band*, in which, in retrospect, my 'honesty' about my childhood traumas was actually a form of shameless self-pity (still whining, in 'Mother', about the loss of me mam after all these years), mixed up with extraordinary vanity (essentially telling my fans, in 'God', that the Beatles 'dream' was over and that they, dear friends, just had to carry on without me) and, yet again, in 'Working Class Hero', attempting to portray myself as a working class lad when in fact I'd had a pretty cushy, protected, middle-class childhood with Aunti Mimi. Nevertheless, despite my self-delusion, my singing on the album

was some of the most expressive I'd ever done.

I feel no self-pity now. Being dead has its advantages. As I drift in Nowhere Land, which makes me think of my song, 'Nowhere Man', I feel more serene than I've ever felt before and have no thought of turning back. To life. To my former existence. In that vale of doubt and fear. No, now I only want to go forward, into my Future Problematical, the World of Might Be, rather like Alice in Wonderland, even if of the male sex, which means I can't be Alice. But maybe I'm sexless now. I'm pretty sure I'm incorporeal. I'm not conscious of my body, of my limbs, but only of my being. But that dazzling light is expanding. It's approaching or I'm approaching. It's almost blinding, but I somehow can look into it and I think I see movement. Wavering dark lines. Maybe shadows. Maybe figures. No, I'm just imagining that. A little bit of wishful thinking. That light is playing tricks with my brain, so I have to focus my thoughts. Ask myself a few questions. For instance, where was my favourite place to live? No doubt about my answer at all. In the good old US of A…

Eventually given new visas by the US Immigration and Naturalization Service, in May 1970 we returned to New York where Yoko made two more films, *Up Your Legs Forever* (eighty interminable minutes of legs, male and female) and *Fly* (a fly crawls for what seems like forever over the body of a naked woman), both of which received only yawns from their audiences. Meanwhile, I gave my notorious *Rolling Stone* interview, in which I expressed my contempt for the Beatles and again flayed the flesh off my former best friend, Paul McC. Back in England, after a brief trip to Japan where Yoko managed a reconciliation with her estranged, filthy rich parents, we gave a lot of interviews to impoverished left-wing magazines like *Red Mole* and *Black Dwarf*, eagerly offering our embarrassingly idealistic views on everything from the Angry Brigade to radical leftist politics and Women's Liberation, with me lying through my teeth that I was actually working class (try telling *that* to devout middle-class Aunt Mimi) and insisting that what was needed was a worker's revolution. I then compounded the injury by releasing another Plastic Ono Band single, 'Power to the People', and describing it as 'a sort of guilt song', written because, although I was supposedly working class, I was also a rich man.

Having effected a reconciliation with her wealthy parents, Yoko, when not aligning herself with the working classes, was trying to track down her seven-

year old daughter Kyoko, who'd disappeared with Tony Cox and his wife, Melinda. As part of her campaign, she appeared again in a white sack at the Toronto Rock 'n' Roll Festival (released as the album, *Live Peace in Toronto*), but soon wriggled out of the sack to sing 'Don't Worry Kyoko', punctuated by unrelated screams of 'Britain murdered Hanratty!' Finally locating Tony and Melinda in Majorca, where the increasingly barmy couple were attending a meditation class, Yoko and me went to Kyoko's kindergarten school, spirited her out of the playground and took her back to our hotel, where she promptly became ill, possibly because of the tension engendered by her abduction. So we called a doctor, who alerted the police, who piled into our room to charge us with kidnapping and throw us into the clink for fourteen hours. Eventually, the deeply confused Kyoko was returned to Tony Cox pending a court judgement, the Palma court dropped all charges against me and Yoko, and then we gratefully returned to London… only to learn that Tony, Melinda and Kyoto had vanished again, defying a joint-custody agreement.

Now flitting between the UK and New York, we continued to give concerts, record benefit songs, such as 'God Save Oz' (the counter-culture magazine then being subjected to an Old Bailey obscenity trial), and produce disastrous albums like *Sometime in New York City*. In our recording studio in Tittenhurst, our far-from-working-class Georgian mansion, Yoko worked on her avant-garde double album, *Fly* (same title as her film) while I worked on *Imagine*, my first mainstream offering since leaving the Beatles. In July, while Tony Cox, through his lawyers, was taking legal action to establish custody over Kyoko, whereabouts still unknown, George Harrison invited me to take part in his epic fund-raising concert for Bangladesh, but I turned down his offer when he refused point-blank to allow Yoko to appear as well. In August, shortly after the paperback publication of Yoko's *Grapefruit* and after we'd both completed extensive interviews and book signings for it, we joined a London demonstration protesting the sentencing of the defendants in the *Oz* trial, then we took off for New York and never returned.

I didn't even bother to say goodbye to my son, Julian, still living with Cynthia, and didn't see him again for another three years.

The final years were pretty mundane. Even after I'd made more millions with the hugely successful *Imagine* (in which I sang of love and peace while viciously denigrating Paul McC in 'How Do You Sleep?') and we'd moved

from Greenwich Village into the prestigious Dakota Building on West 72nd Street, overlooking Central Park, we continued to involve ourselves in counter-culture politics, forming alliances with Yippie activists like Jerry Rubin and Abbie Hoffman, flirting dangerously with the Black Panthers, playing benefits for the 'oppressed' of America, black and white, writing political songs like Yoko's 'Sisters, Oh Sisters' and my 'Attica State' and 'Happy Christmas (War is Over)', while also involving ourselves in even more avant-garde exhibitions. However, between Yoko's constant battle to locate and gain custody of her daughter Kyoto, my constant battles to avoid being deported, and our growing awareness that we were under surveillance by the FBI because of our supposedly subversive political activities, exhaustion finally had its day and our attorney advised us to distance ourselves from our activist friends. So that's what we did. And that was the start of my more reclusive life in the Dakota Building.

It wasn't all easy. Before entirely terminating our relationship with Jerry Rubin, we went to his apartment to watch the Nixon-McGovern presidential elections on TV and I, being as high as a kite on drink and drugs, pulled one of the female guests into an adjoining room and proceeded to noisily have my way with her. Since the walls were thin, everyone, including Yoko, could hear what was going on and that began the rot in our relationship. Though we still had a lot in common artistically, the glow had gone off our sexual relationship. Nevertheless, we managed to continue on our non-too-merry way until, frustrated because Yoko wouldn't let me have my way with her, I started fucking our secretary Mai Pang, who was then acting as a production assistant for Yoko's latest album, *Approximately Infinite Universe*, and my latest mainstream album, *Mind Games*. Mai later insisted that Yoko had actually engineered the affair to get me out of the apartment, which she certainly succeeded in doing when she suggested that a 'trial separation' might be a good idea and that I should move to Los Angeles, taking Mai with me. By way of encouragement, Yoko released a new album, *Feeling the Space*, which she dedicated to 'the sisters who died in pain and sorrow and those who are now in prisons and in mental hospitals for being unable to survive in the male society.' Thus relegated to the brutish male society, I embarked on an eighteen-month alcohol-and-drug binge in Los Angeles, mostly ignoring the unfortunate Mai Pang in favour of me mates (the

relatively sane Klaus Voorman, the hard-drinking Harry Nilsson, the totally mad Keith Moon, the gun-toting Phil Spector) and humiliating her, just as I'd humiliated the sweet-natured Cynthia, by calling Yoko night and day, pitifully telling her that I wanted to come back home. Finally awarded permanent custody of her daughter, Kyoto, but still unable to find her, Yoko didn't want me back home making a nuisance of myself, so tried finding a new meaning to her life by investigating different kinds of religions and then, failing to find revelation, developed a keen interest in the business world and learnt how to invest our money wisely. Though she renewed old friendships with arty friends like the walking dead, Andy Warhol, she gradually lost interest in the art and music worlds, both of which had increasingly lost interest in her, and instead started investing my millions in priceless antiques and valuable properties. Meanwhile, now ignoring the working classes when not actually insulting them (restaurant waiters and waitresses and suchlike) I, in my new rock star drink-and-drugs lifestyle in the City of the Angels, was making guest appearances on other rock stars' albums and had conned Elton John into playing piano and singing the backing vocal on my latest single, 'Whatever Gets You Thru the Night', on the condition that I'd join him onstage during his next New York concert should my single reach Number One. Which it did. So, after throwing up with nerves in the backstage toilet of Madison Square Garden, I joined Elton onstage, where we performed three songs together to rapturous applause. That was my final stage appearance. However, Yoko was in the audience and came to see me backstage and, whammo, before you could blink, we were back together again. The unfortunate Mai Pang, like my once beloved Cynthia, was then rendered invisible.

So what's wrong with that?

In fact, everything was perfect after that. Though Yoko was over forty and had been told after her last miscarriage that she wouldn't be able to have any more children, she did indeed become pregnant and I cancelled everything to attend to her needs. Two days after my appeal against my deportation succeeded and the Judge instructed that my application for permanent resident status be renewed, Yoko, on my thirty-fifth birthday, gave birth by Caesarean section to our son, Sean Ono Lennon. Following through on her credo that 'our life is our art', Yoko then decided that we should both cease work as creative artists and that I should recreate myself as a 'househusband',

changing shitty nappies and baking bread, while she recreated herself as a business tycoon, investing my millions to make more millions. Naturally, while she was doing this, I was wearing my hair in a pigtail, baking the bread, reverting to my childhood by addressing Yoko as 'Mother', and lavishing upon baby Sean all the attention that I'd resolutely refused to lavish on my other son, Cynthia's son, Julian. This slavish devotion to domesticity may have been wise, since back in Britain rock stars like myself were being replaced by genuine working class heroes like The Sex Pistols; and another group, The Clash, had picked up where I'd left off with my anti-hero song, 'God' ('No more Elvis, no more Zimmerman'), with their '1977' lyrics: 'No Elvis, no Beatles, no Rolling Stones.' Ignoring them, Yoko added to her (our) financial investments with the purchase of farms and dairy livestock, plus artefacts from ancient Egypt, which encouraged her, for art's sake, to take us both on a trip to Egypt to see the pyramids. This visit, in turn, increased her interest in numerology, astrology and the Tarot, all of which she was convinced would help her as an empire-building businesswoman, though I still stuck to my humble tasks of baking bread, changing shitty nappies, feeding the cats, and having screaming tantrums when my sons, Sean, and the 11-year-old Julian, on one of his rare visits from England, annoyed me. Naturally, doing nothing creative, I gradually lost my creativity. Attempting to revive it without actually composing music or writing songs, I visited Andy Warhol some time in 1979, hoping to pick up hints on how to produce screen prints in his style, but, fascinated as I was, as usual, by Andy Pandy, he of the white hair and whiter face, I lost interest as soon as I left the studio. Eventually, however, after about five years of reclusive living, maybe stung by the increasing number of crazy press stories about me (I'd gone bald, I was wrecked by drugs, I was dying from some unmentionable disease) and certainly feeling fearful that I'd lost touch entirely, I decided to go back to the studio and make a new album. Naturally, by that time, I couldn't even conceive of doing it without the controlling Yoko, who now reminded me of Aunt Mimi, so we both recorded our separate tracks and put fourteen of them, alternating between me and Yoko, as she'd forcefully suggested we do, on my final album, *Double Fantasy*. It was not a huge success, either critically or commercially, until, when returning from the recording studio with the remix of Yoko's 'Walking on Thin Ice' and walking the short distance from our chauffeured limousine to the imposing Dakota Building, a so-called 'fan',

another shithead, stepped out of the shadows and I heard him call out ‘Mr. Lennon?’ and then he shot me four times and I was dead.

Being dead, my resurrection both critically and commercially, was practically guaranteed. Finally, being dead, especially having been assassinated, I sold a stunning amount of records, even beating Paul McC for a while, and was not only mourned all over the world, but also hailed as the true genius behind the Beatles. In truth, I couldn’t have planned it better. Paul *had* to be envious.

Now, here I am, in this strange twilight zone, dark yet not dark, slightly unreal, though not frightening, aware beyond doubt that I’m dead and about to move on to another place. To that hopefully beckoning light at the far end of that long, horizontal tunnel formed by walls of constantly shifting, cosmic darkness. So thanks, Mr Chapman.

Well, I’d always suspected I was going to be assassinated. There was that moment, for instance, during the making of *How I Won the War*, when I had to act as if I’d just been shot dead and became convinced that it was a prophetic moment. Then there was the well-known psychic who, just before the Beatles’ final American tour, sent me a letter telling me to be careful because he’d ‘sensed’ that I was going to be shot dead in America. I also recall that a friend and occasional mistress of mine, Sonny Freeman, Norwegian wife of Robert Freeman, the photographer who’d shot the group photo used on the cover of *With the Beatles*, told me that her dad, the mayor of Breslau, had too loudly declared his contempt for Hitler and been shot dead for his troubles. When Sonny told me this, I responded by confessing that I didn’t think I was going to live very long and that I’d often been shaken by the conviction that I was going to die by being shot. Then there was the time I was flipping through a magazine in Japan and came across a photo of Yoko’s great-grandfather, Zenjiro Yasuda, the Japanese Emperor’s de facto banker, and, amazed that he looked so much like me, told Yoko that it was me in a former life. Shocked, Yoko told me never to say that again – because Zenjiro had been assassinated. So, for years after, particularly when depressed, I told a lot of friends that I was convinced I was going to be shot dead. Which, as we all know, I was.

And now, here I am.

So, what, in the end, did it all amount to?

It could be said fairly, I believe, that the much despised ‘Jap’ and me were

the last of a dying breed: politicized pop stars. By the end of my life, the FBI had assembled about 280 pages on us, having taped and transcribed what me and Yoko had said during our numerous TV appearances, even placing our innocent friends under surveillance. This reached its highest point of lunacy in 1972 when the increasingly paranoid Richard Nixon, the man you wouldn't buy a used car from, started worrying that our support for his Democratic opponent, McGovern, might deny him a second term in the White House, and so unleashed the Feds against us in the hope of getting us arrested on drug charges. Naturally the Feds also had other grounds for anxiety. I had, for instance, released songs such as 'Give Peace a Chance' and 'Happy Xmas (War is Over)' which became the anthems for the anti-Vietnam war movement. With the break-up of the Beatles, my political attitudes hardened – naïvely as some would have it. First, after the atrocity of Bloody Sunday, I declared that given a choice between the British Army and the IRA, I'd side with the latter. I followed up on this outrageous statement by releasing my solo singles, 'Sunday Bloody Sunday' and 'Luck of the Irish'. To make matters worse in the eyes of the Feds, I started composing and releasing 'radical' songs, such as 'Power to the People', then picked up on 'subversive' feminism with songs like 'Woman is the Nigger of the World', which, though written and sang by me, was based on a comment made by Yoko. So both of us, despite all our nonsense, were right there in the thick of it.

So what did it all amount to, when it came to the likes of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones and Yoko Ono and me personally? Were our many contradictions, our great successes and dismal failures, our good and bad deeds, our generosity and greed, our high principles and hypocrisy, no more than a confirmation of the glamorous eccentricity of our celebrity and so-called genius? Could the word 'genius' even be applied at all? Frankly, I doubt it. I was called a 'genius' so many times I lost track of what the word actually meant. Yes, I was called a genius, me mate Paul McC was called a genius, and even Mick J, when not being accused of rock 'n' roll satanism, was occasionally called a genius. I mean, fuck it, we were *all* geniuses back then.

You want proof of our genius?

Well, me and Paul and George (Ringo had more sense) temporarily lost ourselves in the supposedly enlightening Indian mysticism of our 'giggling

guru', Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, later immortalized, when I got my senses back, as 'Sexy Sadie' in one of my more sardonic Beatles' songs. At approximately the same time, Mick J was not only, with his then squeeze, Marianne Faithfull, letting 'astrological data' dictate his every move, using the *I Ching Book of Changes* (think Yoko Ono), but also moving on from his obsession with fairies, goblins and elves, to a burgeoning interest in black magic, no doubt encouraged by the knowledge that the demented movie-maker, Kenneth Anger, a disciple of Britain's most notorious black magician, Aleister Crowley, also known as 'The Great Beast', had described him, Mick baby, as a contemporary Lucifer, with good old Keith Richards as his devil-buddy, Beelzebub. As for Keith, the lad himself, inspired by his tempestuous affair with the very beautiful but scary Anita Pallenberg (as Mailer would put it: 'crack that whip!'), he was fascinated by witchcraft and black magic, was convinced that Kenneth Anger possessed the powers of an evil sorcerer, or Magus, and was actually contemplating, with Anita, a 'pagan' marriage ceremony, conducted by – who else? – Mr Anger. No surprise, then, that the Stones' next single was 'Sympathy for the Devil'.

All geniuses. Oh, yeah? Well all I can say now, from a more mature stance, being dead and able to look back on my past sins with a little objectivity, is that if we were all geniuses, then 'genius' is not necessarily dependent on a great deal of intelligence, and that intelligence, even when it exists, can be easily thwarted.

Still, it was a life. When it wasn't bad, it was good; when it wasn't depressing, it was fun. And in the words of a Beatles' song, sung jointly by me and Paul: 'Everybody had a good year/Everybody had a hard time/Everybody had a wet dream/Everybody saw the sun shine.'

And there the sun shines again. The light at the end of that long, dark tunnel. The light that's gradually mesmerizing me and drawing me toward it, maybe to meet Julia, me mam, immortalised in song, and even Uncle George and Stu and my Future Problematical in an Alice in Wonderland world. And it doesn't frighten me at all. Indeed, it makes me feel serene. So I'm wondering if I really *will* find revelation when I enter that blinding light. I'm wondering what, or who, I'll find there when I finally get there. I mean… just…

Imagine!

Andy

1928 – 1987

I adored – I just simply adored – Elvis and Marlon and Norman and John. I first fell for Elvis when I saw him in that movie, *Flaming Star*, in which he played the half-breed Indian with a pistol holstered at his waist. For some reason, I kept viewing the weapon as an additional penis (not that Elvis really needed one, I'm sure), a sort of Norman Mailer Avenger, and I confess that the thought made me feel quite faint. Of course I've always been rather fragile, my face and hair white, my body slim, like death warmed up, as some would say, and this has made me seem irresistibly attractive to a wide variety of New York's more extreme sexual predators, none of whom I encouraged, I would assure you. It has to be admitted, though, that a lot of them practically lived and sometimes almost died in my loft studio, known as 'the Factory', then located on 47th Street, New York, which may explain why dear John Lennon, the former Beatle, unfortunately then lumbered with the dreaded Jap, seemed to lose his normal bombast, even acted rather nervous, when he came to the Factory to sit for his silkscreen portrait. He probably imagined, erroneously, that I wanted to fuck him or suck his normally inhibited working-class English cock, but I didn't, I swear it. I just loved his music.

Well, here I am, dead. There can be no doubt about it. I clearly remember lying in bed after the operation, feeling surprisingly fit and so glad that it was over, the pain gone at last, and actually feeling so upbeat that I watched television, which I loved more than life itself, and then getting straight back into my old routine of phoning up lots of friends from my bed, which I'd done for years anyway. I remember doing all that in the hospital ward, after learning from the TV that it was indeed a hospital that I was in, seeing myself on that flickering screen, my more real TV self, and then lying back, feeling

deeply satisfied, and falling into the first sound sleep I'd had for weeks and then waking up here, initially assuming that I was in the same ward at night, or in the depths of the morning, with the silence and darkness, though warmed by a very strange advancing, spreading light, and then realising that I was actually in the middle of Nowhere, just me, or my consciousness, and accepting that this had to be death and that I was now on the Other Side.

I've always believed in an Other Side because I've always been deeply religious, a regular churchgoer, despite what those who disapproved of me might have thought to the contrary.

It's nice to be dead. I always wanted to be dead. I always, secretly, felt dead inside and now that I'm actually dead, I feel at peace at last. Death does not have dominion. It's simply another state of being. I often said about death that I didn't believe in it because you're not around to know that it's happened. Well, it's happened and now I know about it and I don't mind it at all.

I know I'm not alone. I'm alone but not alone. I know that there are others all around me, out there, in the oddly living darkness, dark yet not dark, being illuminated by that expanding, brightening light that was, when I first became aware of it, a mere pinpoint of light, a flaring eye, at the end of a long, dark, womb-like tunnel, though it's either coming towards me or I'm moving towards it, so either way it's growing bigger, spreading out, taking over the darkness. I don't yet know just how long I've been dead or how long that light has been advancing, expanding as I move toward it or as it moves toward me, but I know that it's the light of revelation and that I've nothing to fear. Time will surely reveal all.

Meanwhile, my thoughts are teeming, spinning like atoms in the cosmos of my mind, taking me back to the past and forward into the future as if the present has no meaning, which it probably hasn't, because, once given its moment, the present instantly becomes the past. I believe this phenomenon is no accident. I believe it has a purpose. It's meant to keep me from feeling fearful of this unexpected new experience, this seeming Nowhere place where I am, by letting me relive my life as if I'm still alive. It's designed to keep me from returning to the fears of my Earthly life. But in real life I talked a lot to myself, so why not do it now?

I was always the nervous type. Talked a lot to myself. I mean, I had three nervous breakdowns when I was a child in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, one at

eight, one at nine, one at ten. I don't think they were actual nervous breakdowns because I suffered from rheumatic fever leading to repeated attacks of Sydenham's chorea, or St Vitus' Dance. As this affects the movement of the face, feet and hands in the form of twitches and shakes, I might have thought I was having a nervous breakdown; it may also account for my pale face and blotched skin and, later, the loss of my hair. The attacks always started on the first day of summer vacation, though I never understood why. Maybe it was just the thought of being at home all day with my mom, even though, because I was bedridden so often, I bonded closely with her and later, in New York, insisted upon having her live with me, in a four-story Victorian house on Lexington and 89th, but maybe only to keep other women from having designs on me, which would have been embarrassing, given my sexual orientation. However, back there in Pennsylvania, during my childhood, my dad, Ondrej Warhola, spent a lot of time away, either in the coal mines or on business trips relating to them, so I never saw much of him and he rarely spoke to me when he *was* at home. Lonely and kinda girlish, I'd spend most of the summer listening to the radio and lying in bed with my cuddly Charlie McCarthy doll and my static cut-out dolls, which I never cut out (I didn't want to spoil the nice paper they were drawn on), scattered all over the bedspread and pillows. Sometimes my mother, Julia (same name as John Lennon's mom), would read to me, but her Czechoslovakian accent was so thick that I could rarely understand what she was saying and soon lost interest. I did, however, enjoy my *coloring* books, and every time I finished coloring in a page, my mom would reward me with a Hershey Bar. Because of this, I developed fantasies of having lots of candy and then I decided that I had to make lots of money in order to buy lots of candy. That's how ambition starts. Later, when I was rich and famous, I started buying more and more candy and eventually reached the stage where I always had lots of bags of candy in the kitchen and my living room and bedroom, no matter where I lived, so I could just dip into them when I wanted, which was most of the time. So I spent most of my adult life gobbling candy instead of healthy food. This probably did nothing to improve my unhealthy white pallor.

Anyway, apart from the candy, I don't remember much about my childhood at all. I know that I was the youngest of three brothers and that I had a sister who died in infancy in Czechoslovakia, before my parents moved to

America. I think I may have had a few friends in Oakland, or McKeesport, one or the other, I could never remember which, so I kept changing my mind (they rubbed shoulders after all), but most of the kids thought I was weird-looking (my deathly white, blotchy face) and weird (my girlishness), so they rarely invited me to join them in their fun and games. Yes, they thought me a mama's boy, a sissy, a *butterboy*, so they tried to avoid me. As for high school, the only thing I remember about it is how the walks to and from it were too long and took me through the depressing Czech ghetto (hemmed in by the German, Polish, Hungarian and Italian ghettoes) with its miners' overalls and babushkas flapping on the windblown clothes lines and the fires of the steel mills lighting up the evening skies, creating what looked like a hellish inferno, turning the rivers into an eerie orange color, just like some of my later paintings, and making me yearn to be somewhere else: a world more glamorous and exciting, not painted perpetually in orange twilight.

Mmm, yes, indeed. Looking back on it from here, this painless land of the Dearly Departed, its darkness being dissolved by light, wasn't it fortuitous that I won a place in the Carnegie Institute of Technology where I majored in painting and design? Even better, while still there I worked part-time as a window dresser for a few department stores in Pittsburgh. My interest in fashion and advertising was probably kick-started when the manager of one of those stores asked me to go through his collection of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and other, mostly European, fashion magazines to look for 'ideas' that would benefit his retail business. I don't think I ever came up with any ideas, but I was excited just looking at all the fashion pictures and advertisements in the magazines (excitedly jerking off over them) and started thinking about getting into that line of work. I was also addicted to collecting movie star pictures and perusing movie magazines, so between them and the fashion magazines, jerking off over all, I soon started fantasising about interacting with the glamorous, the famous and the idle rich for whom I felt no resentment. Which is probably why, at eighteen, in 1949, seven years after my dad died, leaving the family in poverty, the thoughtless creature, I left home and went off to New York. Once there, I dropped the 'a' from my name to make it sound more American. (Maybe that's why I named my avant-garde novel *a*.) The following year, 1950, I started wearing the first of my many straw-colored wigs and had my bulbous, bright-red nose, which I loathed, enhanced with plastic surgery. So even then I was well ahead of my time.

At one point, in New York, I lived with about seventeen different young people, a kind of art commune, in a basement on 103rd Street and Madison Avenue, but just as it had been at my previous schools, few of them befriended me or confided in me, because they thought I was odd. Not that I would have appreciated it, since by that time I had developed the notion that the few friends I had were giving me problems with their problems, so I didn't really want to listen to them. Also, I was busy from dawn to dusk, doing the rounds, trying to find a job, drawing half the night, scraping a few bucks here and there by designing greeting cards, drawing clothing and shoes for retail catalogues, or selling watercolors independently for very little cash. Alas, the sleazy apartment was filled with cockroaches and I'll never forget the humiliation I felt when, being interviewed by Caramel Snow at *Harper's Bazaar*, I unzipped my portfolio and a cockroach crawled out of it and down the leg of her desk. But that cockroach was a blessing in disguise, because Carol, when she saw my embarrassment, took pity on me and gave me my first real job. From that day on I worked constantly as a free-lance commercial artist for a wide variety of magazines, including *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Glamour*, even *The New Yorker*, as well as retail stores such as Tiffany & Co., immortalised in the lovely Truman Capote novel, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and Bergdorf Goodman, and Bonwit Tellor, eventually receiving the Art Directors Club Prize for the best advertising in the press. Given all that exposure, I soon gained the recognition I needed to have my first solo exhibition, *Andy Warhol: Fifteen Drawings Based on the Writings of Truman Capote*, held at the Hugo Gallery in Manhattan. I was on my way…

As I'm on my way right now. I don't know exactly where I am or precisely where I'm heading, but that light has been moving toward me for what seems like an eternity, or I've been moving toward it, also for what seems like an eternity, and as it's comes closer, or as I've moved closer to it, it's expanded to spread out in all directions, north and south, east and west, above and below, its tendrils lighting up the darkness, and it holds no fears for me whatsoever and, indeed, seems increasingly comforting, removing the kind of pitiful doubts and fears that often made me want to retreat from life on Earth.

So even when alive, I wasn't bothered by death. I certainly wasn't bothered when, in June 1968, after that demented woman shot me, the day before another demented soul shot dead Bobby Kennedy (I love name dropping), I

lay in the hospital bed just before the operation, virtually comatose, and in my state of semi-consciousness heard the doctors around my bed agreeing that they thought I was a goner. And so although I survived and went back to my normal life, while becoming more reclusive and paranoid about security, I always considered myself, yes, possibly melodramatically, to be someone who'd *come back from the dead*. So death itself no longer concerned me. At least not in life. And now that I'm no longer alive, I'm not bothered by anything.

Yet I keep thinking of the past. I keep reliving my life. I can travel through it in two directions, or dimensions, from the past to the future, though right now I prefer to see it as it occurred, in its chronological order. Mmm, yes, right now I'm recollecting those early days in New York City when I, a relatively uneducated child of the immigrant working classes, the steel mills and orange rivers, the Czechoslovakian parents who could barely speak English, hopelessly effeminate and socially ignorant, first took a deep breath and inhaled the heady air of success…

Leaving the shared apartment on 103rd Street, I moved into my own place, located in a five-floor walk-up under the El on East 75th Street, right on top of Shirley's Pin-Up Bar. My apartment was on the fifth floor, but I was making good money by then, so when the second-floor apartment became available, I took that as well. By that time I was convinced that I was starting to have problems because of the problems of the few friends I had, most of whom talked endlessly about their problems, this being a very New York City thing to do, so I started seeing a psychiatrist in Greenwich Village. He was a problematical man who really didn't solve my problems and that really gave me something of a problem. Then I bought a TV set for the apartment and fell in love with it and left it on all the time and that enabled me to stop seeing the psychiatrist because it solved all my problems. Realising how beneficial TV could be, I soon had four sets, all in the same room, all switched on at the same time to different channels, and I'm sure they kept me on an even keel. In fact, I could no longer imagine life *without* TV and often felt that I was actually *on* TV. Even years later, when I was shot and nearly killed by that ungrateful woman, Valerie Solanas, the instant she fired the gun I felt that I was on TV, watching myself being shot on TV. And when I woke up the next day in hospital, not initially knowing where I was, I heard

someone talking excitedly about thousands of people gathering in St. Patrick's Cathedral because Bobby Kennedy had just been shot as well. And then I realised that I wasn't actually on TV, though I was back in the television world, there being a TV set fixed to the wall of the ward I was lying in. So TV has always been important to me. Possibly more 'real' to me than my real life, which at that time could be summed up in one word:

Success.

I should have done a silkscreen painting called *Success*. Beginning in 1954, I received a Certificate of Excellence from the American Institute of Graphic Arts, had another solo exhibition at the Loft Gallery in New York, utilized my fascination with the rich and famous by creating collages of gold-leaf shoes with details that represented famous personalities (I even designed a pair of shoes for my adored Elvis Presley), then embarked on a world tour and ended up, back in NYC, with another solo exhibition at the prestigious Bodley Gallery in Manhattan. I was no longer merely on my way. I had actually *made it*.

Some time in 1960 I decided to try my hand at fine arts and some of my first efforts were comic strip characters painted in oil. Then, shock, horror, I found out that another New York artist, Roy Lichtenstein, was doing the same thing but with better results, so I promptly abandoned that line of work and went back to paintings that were strongly influenced by mass production techniques. The following year, five of my more commercial paintings were hung as a backdrop in a window display at the Bonwit Teller department store, and by 1962 I was already well into my experimentation with screen-printing techniques, producing the Campbell's Soup cans, the *Do-It-Yourself Paintings*, the Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe silk-screen portraits, and the even more controversial *Disasters*.

Mmm, yes, the *Disasters*. An interesting collection. Now, being dead, I can appreciate that even way back then, even long before the shooting and my first flirtation with actual death, I was subconsciously obsessed with the subject and trying to deal with it in my own modest way. Watching countless hours of television, sometimes three or four different stations on different TV sets simultaneously, I was constantly bombarded not only with trivia, but with the kind of obscene violence that television itself had made all of us numb to. That violence led to death. It *always* led to death. And so I changed my technique, from hand-made silkscreens to photographic screen printing,

to create works of art out of instruments of violence, such as electric chairs, guns, the atom bomb, and violent events, such as automobile accidents, plane crashes, and race riots. Often derived from illustrated newspaper articles and reproduced with oil paints on canvas to create weirdly colored and juxtaposed images, sometimes repeated many times within the one frame, they had a nightmarish quality appropriate to the ghoulish subject matter. For instance, in my *Five Deaths On Orange* (1963) I joined my recollections of the orange rivers and skies of Pittsburgh to the gruesome realities of automobile accidents to create an image that shocked the art world and, in so doing, made me another potful of money. But that was me trying to be serious. Less seriously, I simply wanted to meet the rich and the famous, the celebrities of our age, and just, as a child, I'd wanted to make money to buy candy, so, as an adult, I went out to find the fame that would gain me entry to what my dear friend Norman Mailer described as the Harbors of the Moon, by which I think he meant wealth and power, though with Norman you just never knew…

No matter. Making potfuls of money at a relatively young age, I rented a huge loft studio on the top floor of a building on East 47th Street and Third Avenue, had my photographic assistant, Billy Name, cover its walls and roof with aluminium foil and metallic silver paint, as he'd done with his own apartment, and named it 'the Factory' because, although we were producing art, it was mass-produced art. After changing my straw-colored wig for a platinum-blonde wig, to make myself more exotic, I hired people to share the work load and some of them actually lived there in the loft, like the whip-wielding Gerard Malanga, one of my first painting assistants and a regular performer in some of my early underground movies, such as *Vinyl* and *Kiss*; and Fred Hughes, who shared a desk with Gerard and would eventually become the manager of my art career. So they and others were often there night and day, Fred doing the books, Gerard acting as my whip-wielding assistant, and we had the delectable Maria Callas blaring out over the amplifiers while we worked, stretching canvases, spray-painting, creating my Pop Art statements, shooting my feature-length 16mm underground movies (blown up to 35mm for theatrical release), letting the rock group, Velvet Underground, rehearse there, competing with Maria Callas, and soon, given my open-door policy, we were receiving lots of famous visitors, like Jack

Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, Barnett Newman, Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper (both then on a roll because of *Easy Rider*) and the Rolling Stones and even Judy Garland. I loved Judy Garland. All the gays loved Judy. And apart from famous people, we were also visited by counterculture and subculture figures, potheads and acid droppers and transvestites and S&M fetishists and, by way of contrast, the sort of rich women who could afford to go slumming in shockingly expensive 'Pop' clothes bought from boutiques like Paraphernalia or designers like Tiger Morse.

I loved Tiger almost as much as I loved Judy. Tiger would purchase a psychedelic dress from Klein's and May's for two dollars, tear off the ribbon and flower, and sell it for four hundred dollars. She'd buy a piece from Woolworth's and paste or stitch something onto it and sell it for a small fortune. Tiger was a true inspiration to me. She taught me that if you were bold enough, you could sell anything to men and women desperate to be seen as fashionable. So I started selling my art works the same way, but mainly focusing on the very rich who were always desperate to be seen as being at the forefront of all things fashionable. Doing that made me very rich indeed. I tabbed it as Business Art. I mean, Art is Art and Business is Business, but put the two together and you get Business Art and that's what I loved most of all.

It was widely believed that the Factory, perhaps because of its silver walls and roof, which ensured that it didn't look like anyone else's studio and gave it a rather decadent appearance, was a den of iniquity, with degenerates openly having degenerate sex on every couch, addicts openly shooting up, and drag queens and venomous queers verbally abusing any remotely 'straight' person in sight. This was far from being the case. In fact, apart from the widespread use of amphetamines, the S&M outfits (all that black leather, latex and steel studding), and the frequent displays of high camp, often from people who normally lived in the toilets of Times Square, it was really quite an innocuous place with prominently displayed signs saying NO LOITERING (I'm not sure exactly what I meant by that) and NO DRUG TAKING (in case the police turned up). The silver Factory did, of course, have what Billy Name described as a 'spooky glamor' to it and that probably accounted for its undeserved notoriety, eventually turning it into one of the trendiest gathering places for the 'in' crowd and the centre of New York's cultural world.

I never gave parties myself, but other people did, having their parties in the

Factory with my permission. I let certain friends do this because they always brought famous or interesting people and that was my bag. Some time in 1965, Lester Persky gave a party at the Factory for what he boldly publicized as 'the fifty most beautiful people.' He might have done it to celebrate the fact that he was producing his first Hollywood film, *Boom*!, based on Tennessee Williams' *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, starring the world's most famous and beautiful couple, Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. I don't remember all the guests, but as one of them, Billy Name, said: 'After Rudolf Nureyev, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Tennessee Williams, and Judy Garland showed up, people stopped counting.'

Naturally, this open-door policy also brought in some dangerous nutters, such as Valerie Solanas, a woman who'd authored the *S. C. U. M.* (Society to Cut Up Men) *Manifesto*, a nutty feminist attack on males (men are SCUM, geddit?), and had a brief appearance in one of my underground movies, *I, a Man*, and so, feeling outraged because she'd been turned away from the Factory after asking for the return of a film script that she'd given to me and I'd lost, came storming into my office in June 1968 and shot me, nearly killing me, while I sat at my desk minding my own business. I wouldn't have minded so much if I'd gained something from it, such as *Life* putting me on their cover, which they were planning to do, but Bobby Kennedy was shot dead the next day, while I was being treated in hospital, so *Life* put him on the cover instead, relegating me to the inside pages. Anyway, the only thing I ever did to that woman was give her a tiny window of opportunity regarding possible underground stardom, so her shooting of me was just another example of the kind of craziness that encircled the Factory. On the other hand, we had wonderful individuals like my 'superstars' Ondine and Viva and Ultra Violet and Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn, Lou Reed and the other members of the Velvet Underground, and even Brigid Polk, wealthy daughter of the highly respectable Hearst Corporation chairman Richard Berlin and slumming superstar of my most successful movie, *Chelsea Girls*.

When I use the term 'superstar' I'm not talking about Hollywood stars, but about the offbeat people who'd come out of the woodwork at Max's or just dropped into the Factory hoping to get a part in one of the equally off-beat movies directed either by me or my assistant, later solo director, Paul Morrissey. In fact, Paul came into prominence with his solo effort, *Flesh*, which starred the Factory's handsome receptionist/bouncer, Joe Dallesandro,

as a male hustler whoring to raise money for his girlfriend's abortion. Those were the kind of movies we liked to make up there in the Factory.

There's no doubt, however, that the Factory, in particular, maybe because of its silver walls and ceiling, which certainly looked bizarre, courtesy of amphetamine freak Billy Name, had a strange effect on some of those who either worked there or just came calling. There was, for instance, the hippie girl who deliberately locked herself into the lift for a week and refused to come out, so we all had to use the stairs for the week that she was in there and pass food into her through the iron grills and beg her every day to come out, but she just shook her head violently, indicating, 'No!', though not saying a word, and so we had to keep using the stairs and passing the food in to her until, lo and behold, one morning we found the lift door open and the girl had gone. We never found out who she was and she never came back. Not that anything changed when we moved to Union Square. People continued to come and go and then disappear without saying goodbye. Even, Billy Name, the amphetamine-driven photographer who'd been responsible for the silver look of the 47th Street Factory decided, in late '68, to retreat from the daytime activities of the Factory and instead spend all his time in the darkroom he'd set up at the back of the loft. He stayed there for months, emerging only at night when everyone else had gone home, only letting us know that he was still alive by the amount of fast-food containers we found in the trash can each morning. Naturally, we didn't interfere with him, and after nearly a year of this strange existence, he just upped in the middle of the night and disappeared for good, leaving a note saying, 'I am fine. Goodbye.' As for Paul Morrissey, he went on to make films like *Trash* (1970) and *Heat* (1971), then, in 1974, he went to Rome to make two movies for Carlo Ponti's production company, *Andy Warhol's Frankenstein* and *Andy Warhol's Dracula*, but when they were finished he stayed on in Rome and never returned to the Factory…

Thinking of Billy Name describing the Factory as having a 'spooky glamor' reminds me of where I am now, which is this kind of spooky Nowhere place, surrounded by curved, incorporeal walls of darkness that form this womb-like tunnel being gradually illuminated by expanding light. Though it has a 'spooky' atmosphere, it isn't actually frightening, which is, I suppose, kinda spooky because it should be frightening but isn't. I say the

tunnel, if it *is* a tunnel, is 'womb-like' because I *do* have the feeling that although I'm only alive here in my thoughts (I only *exist* in my thoughts) I'm somehow on the move, heading deeper into the light, being surrounded by the light, as if indeed I'm gradually emerging from the womb to be born again. Maybe that brightening light, which used to be only a pinprick in the darkness, then a flaring, judgmental eye, but is now spreading out all around me, or around my consciousness, is the daylight into which I'll be thrust when I'm actually born again. So maybe death, which I never feared, though I certainly feared hospitals, is just the moment between birth and rebirth, though that moment may last an eternity. Who's to know until they've been reborn? And that hasn't yet happened to me. And might never happen. And I'm not sure that I *want* it to happen. So right now, to avoid these complex issues, which might give me problems, I'll return to the only place where I ever felt really secure, that glorious madhouse known as the Factory…

People often imagine that I began and ended my career in the East 47th Street Factory, but apart from the addresses that I'd lived and worked in before it, there were a couple of places after it, notably the all white, mirrored loft that replaced the silver loft and took up the whole sixth floor of 33 Union Square West, virtually the dividing line between uptown and downtown, and then, after that, 860 Broadway. However, Union Square was probably my favourite, with its wonderful views of the park and the Con Edison tower, its clock face allowing us to see the time night and day, which was helpful to those of us who slept there as well as worked there. Also, I love shopping and Union Square was located conveniently close to the bargain shopping in 14th Street, as well as the West and East Villages and SoHo. A block away, on Park Avenue South, was Max's Kansas City, where I'd found so many of the odd-ball characters who ended up in my Factory movies and where, every night, celebrities of the art, fashion, music and underground filmmaking worlds crowded into the back room, where some of my art works hung on the walls. So naturally I was very fond of Max's.

It was when we moved, in the summer of '74, from Union Square to 860 Broadway, that I stopped calling the Factory 'the Factory' and instead renamed it, simply, 'the office'. Being more mature then, I felt that 'the Factory' sounded too corny and needed an uplift to respectability. Now, in retrospect, I believe a bit of the glamour went out of the business from that

point on and that we should have kept the old name, though the glamour, I think, was fading well before that. Maybe that's why, being still personally obsessed with glamour and bored with painting and making movies, I decided, in 1969, to start *Interview* magazine, later unblushingly renamed *Andy Warhol's Interview*.

I wanted the magazine to be totally about the movies, with the stars interviewing other stars and the resulting interviews unedited, the subjects allowed to say anything they wanted. Starting at Union Square West, the magazine had two rooms on the tenth floor, separated from the Factory by four floors, but when we moved to 860 Broadway it was located on the same floor as my office and painting area, though I never felt as close to the staff of the magazine as I did to the original Factory staff members. While thoroughly enjoying my personal supervision of the magazine, being addicted to the glamour of movie stars and other celebrities, I found myself addressing most of the magazine staff, with the exception of, say, executive editor Bob Colacello and socialite Catherine Guinness, both dear friends, as 'them' while referring to the Factory staff as 'we'. I never quite worked out why this was so. Nevertheless, by the 1970s, when the cost for making even my formerly cheap underground movies was becoming too prohibitive and I was making fewer every year, the magazine gave me a whole new direction, enabled me to meet a lot of creatively talented young people and thus keeping me feeling young myself. Indeed, if we occasionally ran short of movie stars, we were never short of beautiful young male and female wannabe stars who thought that by letting themselves be photographed for the magazine they might be noticed by Hollywood producers and end up in proper movies. So instead of telling them, 'We'll put you in a movie,' I started saying, 'We'll put you in the magazine.' As for older celebrities, particularly movie stars, who might express reluctance to appear in the magazine because they felt that they were visibly ageing, I'd persuade them to appear by telling them not to worry about their photographs because we retouched everyone over twenty. So, again, I was well ahead of my time. I was retouching before airbrushing was invented.

Bob Colacello had a lot to do with forming the magazine's apolitical and sexually androgynous image and, more important, introducing me to the many famous and wealthy people he knew, such as the collector Daniel J. Weitzman, Richard Brown Baker, Jean Tinguely, Andy and Ethel Scull and

the Tremaines of the Miller company in Meriden, Connecticut, who'd made a fortune manufacturing fluorescent lightings for elevators and airports. It was mainly Bob who obtained a lot of the portrait commissions I was given during that time and who was largely instrumental in steering me through my increasingly glamorous social life, which included classy parties attended by fellow 'New York' painters like Roy Lichenstein and Robert Rauschenberg. At one stage, when I was into films more than painting, Sam Green and I thought it might be a good idea to make movies purely as a means of social climbing. The whole point being to get into the apartments of wealthy art collectors. To avoid them thinking that we were just trying to get our foot in the door, we asked a lot of them, one after the other, if we could shoot part of our movie in their bathrooms. Being vain, they nearly always agreed. Once in their apartments I invariably found myself being fascinated by the furnishings of the rich: the Louis XV chairs and sofas, the baby grand pianos, the Noguchi coffee tables, the Matisses and Picassos and abstract expressionists side by side with my Campbell's soup cans, Brillo boxes and Coca-Cola bottles. When leaving, I always made a point of gushing to the owners of the apartments, 'Gee, you have the best bathroom I've ever seen.' The movie was going to be called *Soap Opera* but it was never finished and in fact, truth tell, I often didn't even bother to put film in the camera. Like I say, the point was to get into those exclusive apartments and it worked every time. Even Gloria Vanderbilt fell for it.

My biggest coup regarding *Interview* was probably getting the archly gay Truman Capote to write for us. When I first came to New York, way back in 1949, I already knew that Truman was a social power broker who knew everyone worth knowing and so I determined to make contact with him. In pursuit of this, I wrote him nearly every day for months, called him constantly on the phone, and even stood outside his apartment, until his mother said, 'Please stop calling here and stop pestering my son.' But I persevered, flooding him with notes covered in little watercolors of butterflies and angels, and eventually, when I was steadily gaining fame and notoriety and must have seemed, to Capote, to be an up-and-coming member of his beloved jet-set, he agreed to meet me and we became firm friends on the instant. I knew this for sure when, in 1966, he sent me an invitation to his legendary Black & White Ball in the Plaza Hotel, but I wasn't allowed to bring a partner, which for me would have been agony, so despite the fact that

it was going to be the most glamorous party of the year, I didn't go. Or maybe I did. I mean, I can't really remember. I went to so many parties in those days.

Of course Truman and I were very similar. We were both visibly gay. We both considered ourselves to be geniuses. We were both like spoilt children. We both liked getting our own way. We both could be charming one minute and bitchy the next. We both loved the company of other celebrities and liked being treated as stars. We both, when not fighting, which we did frequently, fed off each other's stardom, each making the other feel like a bigger star. We both considered ourselves to be living legends. So we had lots in common.

Truman's initial contribution to *Interview* was when he let me follow him around everywhere with my only 'Wife', my tape-recorder, to his psychiatrist, his dermatologist, his accountant, his editor, his masseur, his barber, constantly taping everything he said to them and, of course, said to me. My usual interviewing technique was to say very little to the interviewee, letting him or her ramble on without direction, and then suddenly say something really stupid, to throw the whole interview off balance, in a direction that could produce interesting, unexpected results. Truman, however, being just as much a control freak as I was, wouldn't play ball with this, so eventually I suggested that he write a year's worth of articles for us in return for two free portraits by me. As my portraits were then worth $25,000 each, Truman agreed. And apart from the free portraits, I had to put him on the cover of the magazine.

I produced the two silkscreens. Both had white backgrounds, which was unusual for me. In one of them Truman was wearing a yellow fedora, in the other a red one. In both, his ageing face and blue eyes were highlighted and he was smoking a cigarette in the manner of the great Hollywood movie stars. When I put Truman on the cover of the magazine, he was so delighted that he asked for five hundred copies and wallpapered his spare room in his UN Plaza apartment with them. In return, he gave us some wonderful articles, particularly his novella-length *Handcarved Coffins* and his short Marilyn Monroe piece, which even in its brevity said more about Marilyn than did the whole of my darling Norman Mailer's bestselling book. Unfortunately, Truman was on pot and booze and cocaine at the time, repeatedly in and out of rehab, and he really was a monster to deal with, demanding this and that

and quick to scream like a spoilt child if he didn't get it. Being a great self-promoter, during the year he was writing for us he never failed to mention *Interview* and his articles for it, but when most of those articles were put together for his book, *Music for Chameleons*, published by Random House, and he went on a promotional tour for it, he never mentioned the magazine again and he never once came back to see me or even gave me a call.

Not that I didn't run into him, particularly at Studio 54, the mainly gay disco club that opened in 1977 and soon became notorious for its drugs and decadent sexuality. Most of my Factory team went there at one time or another. I went a lot. The majority of the barmen and busboys were gay and willing to have sex on the instant. Downstairs in the basement and upstairs in the balcony, people took their clothes off. Random fucking and sucking were normal practices, scarcely raising an eyebrow. Pounding music, spotlights and spinning fans. The celebrities would come in through the back door, then down the staircase behind the kitchen and into the basement. A kind of hellish basement with cement floors, cubicles, sperm-soiled banquettes, mattresses scattered carelessly on the floor for those who required them. Lots of pipes and oil burners and storerooms and cyclone-fenced cages and a bathroom where you couldn't take a piss without having your cock massaged. A dark and dangerous area called the Tunnel where the gang-bangs took place, either with volunteers or with the innocents who'd wandered in there by accident. Pot and cocaine and quaaludes and cigarettes laced with PCP. The ceiling right under the dance floor and the pounding music overhead, going boom, boom, boom without end. Truman went down there a lot. He made good use of the mattresses. He was this funny, pot-bellied, squeaking little man who didn't care about making himself look foolish when he got up and danced or made a pass. Someone told me that some Eurotrash princess had asked to be taken down to the basement and handcuffed to a pipe and fucked by a barman who then remembered that there was no one behind the bar, so rushed back upstairs, leaving her there, still handcuffed to the pipe. And not just princesses. Also film stars and rock stars and high-fashion stars like Yves Saint Laurent and Sao Schlumberger. Truman would be down there, wearing his black pyjamas, with me and Bob Colacello keeping him company until he eluded us and found someone to share a mattress with or pleasure him standing upright or let him pleasure them in any position. Truman really loved Studio 54 and so did I, but in the end it was Truman's

partying that killed him.

I didn't go to Truman's funeral. Bob Colacello went. I didn't go to Truman's funeral because I didn't go to funerals and my only concept of death, at that time, was that people didn't actually die: they just went uptown to Bloomingdale's and they never came back. They went shopping.

It was also Bob Colacello who got me my book contracts. For my first book, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, I simply talked to my beloved Wife, my tape-recorder, and then my dear friend and literary assistant, Pat Hackett, put most of my recorded words of wisdom into a coherent whole and edited the book to ensure that I came out of it looking idiosyncratically intelligent. Pat also worked on my next book, *Popism*, though this time I gave her a credit on the cover, her name right below my own, for which I hope she's eternally grateful.

At this time, I was still making the odd movie, though not very many. For instance, in 1976 Jed Johnson shot my surprisingly ambitious *Andy Warhol's Bad* in New York City, using a 35mm camera and, horror of horrors, a union crew. While most of the cast consisted of my own so-called 'superstars', such as Geraldine Smith of *Flesh*, the real thrill of the movie for me was being able to use Carroll Baker, a real Hollywood movie star who had so delighted me by playing a thumb-sucking Lolita in Elia Kazan's movie adaptation of Tennessee Williams' *Baby Doll*, delighted me again by playing a tramp who becomes a nun in the ravishingly awful movie adaptation of Harold Robbins' *The Carpetbaggers*, delighted me a third time by playing Hollywood star Jean Harlow in the cleverly named *Harlow*, and then slid downhill for years with movies like *The Sweet Body of Deborah* and *Orgasmo*, until, in her mid-forties, she delighted me for the fourth time by appearing in *Andy Warhol's Bad*. Surprisingly, despite performing in one of *my* movies, she went on to make more proper movies than I can count on both hands. A real trooper, was Carroll B. Maybe even the kind of girl I could have married…

Marriage? Who needs it? In the end, despite love and devotion, straight or gay, you just end up here, in this Nowhere that I don't know at all. I'm now surrounded by the light. It keeps the darkness at bay. I see the darkness beyond the light, curving over me and under me, but gradually fading as the light grows brighter and seems to take on a life of its own. Movement. Shifting shadows. Either shadows or silhouettes. Maybe others, like me, who physically died but are still alive in their separate worlds. They're there and

yet not there. I sense them rather than see them. Maybe lost friends and heroes, like my mom and my dad, and Elvis and *his* mom and dad, and John Lennon and *his* mom and dad, and even Edie Sedgwick and *her* mom and dad. Maybe even those who died after me, like Marlon and Norman, since the future, when you're dead, becomes the eternal present and lives side by side with the past. So maybe I'm about to be reunited with all of them, which *would* be nice, except my mom might start whining again about why I never got married.

So why didn't I?

People often imagined that I never got married because I was homosexual. I don't think it was that at all. More likely, it was because of my revulsion at the thought of having to regularly share my bed space with someone else and then, even worse, having to face their bad breath in the morning. Then, again, though my mom always told me not to worry about love, just make sure I got married, I didn't get married because I didn't want children, who would take up even more space than a wife and who, even worse, might inherit all the problems that I have. More realistically, perhaps I didn't get married because I was basically homosexual, though I often tried pretending to people that I was actually asexual.

Was I one hundred percent homosexual? I'm not so sure. I think my sexual nature was voyeuristic more than anything else. This may have started when my mother caught me masturbating while looking at Popeye cartoons and so, ever after, though I certainly had gay sexual relationships, I only felt really secure in sex when I was the watcher, not the one being watched, even if only being watched by the person I was having sex with. This is also why, before I stopped thinking of 'love' altogether, even when I felt strongly attracted to someone, or, God help me, felt that I was *in love* with them, I deliberately avoided having sexual relationships with them because I was convinced that loving someone without actually having sex with them made the relationship more exciting. On the other hand, being a normal human being, despite what many have said to the contrary, I needed sexual release now and then, but did it mostly through voyeurism, either by making my pornographic movies (*Blow Job*, *Taylor Mead's Ass*, *My Hustler*, *Lonesome Cowboys, Blue Movie*, also known as *Fuck*, or *Flesh*), by painting my sexually explicit paintings, by taking literally thousands of sexually explicit photos, almost exclusively of young men, sometimes kissing each other, often showing their cocks and

assholes, by doing drawings and taking Polaroid photos of friends' penises, or by giving impersonal blow jobs and having equally impersonal hand jobs by anyone available, though the younger the better, since I didn't like being reminded of my age by lovers my own age.

So thank God, if He exists, I don't have to worry any longer about age, or mortality, or living and dying, since I'm already as dead as people said I was when I was, at least as far as I knew, alive. Of course, they meant I was dead emotionally. They believed I wasn't quite human. I talked very little, offering, 'Mmm' and 'Yes' and 'No', and I often acted as if I was on another planet, hiding behind my dark glasses, putting my fingers to my pursed lips, as if in Deep Thought, even if my cameraman was shooting a fucking or sucking scene behind me and someone like Edie Sedwick was dancing flakily right beside me, and I behaved as if I hadn't even seen them, and that made my Grand Inquisitors uncomfortable. Maybe that's why I liked making movies. The actors did my living for me. They fucked and they sucked and they danced and they crooned and all I had to do was say, 'Shoot' and it all came alive for me. My voyeuristic impulses were given full expression as long as the camera rolled.

My pre-Paul Morrissey film, *Vinyl*, while being based shamelessly on Anthony Burgess' novel *A Clockwork Orange*, was also my attempt to remake *The Wild One* as gay soft-core porn in which the homo-erotic element in biker movies is made more explicit. It was described by its scriptwriter, the poet Ronald Tavel, as 'a series of sexualized cinematic tableaux, a voyeur's desire to freeze-frame the moment.' That voyeur was me. *Vinyl* was also notable for its use of S&M fetishes, beefcake and stylized violence, as well as for being the first movie to feature the sylph-like Edie Sedgwick, soon to be famous as the first of my underground film superstars.

I think it was Holland Cutter who described me as the first major postwar artist to put gay identity at the very centre of my work and, if true, I was certainly doing it well before Gay Liberation urged us to come 'out of the closet and into the streets'. Indeed, I did it at a time when the fear of homosexuality was second only to the fear of communism in America. So I was really a pioneer in that way. Pretty courageous, actually.

I would certainly consider my Pop celebrity portraits of the '60s – Elvis, Marlon, Marilyn, Liz – to be both voyeuristic and gay. I changed to less sexual images in the '70s when Pop Art was over, just as the Swinging

Sixties were over, and I started doing commissioned portraits of unstarry subjects, like gallery owner Harry Sullivan, art collector Ethel Scull, and as many of my wealthy patrons as asked to have their portraits painted by me. However, 'painted' was hardly the word for it. Instead of going straight to the easel, or the spray-painting floor, I would ask the subject to pose while I took about fifty or sixty Polaroid photos of him or her, using my Polaroid Big Shot camera. From all those shots I'd choose four or five and give them to a screen printer to be turned into positive images on 8-by-10-inch acetates. When I had the acetates, I'd choose one of them, crop it as I saw fit, then cosmetically alter it to make the subject appear as attractive as possible – trimming noses, enlarging or reducing lips, cleaning up blotchy skin or pimples, as I did when I erased the pimples from my self-portraits, and generally airbrushing before airbrushing became commonplace. (I also believed in low lights and plastic surgery.) This job completed to my satisfaction, I'd blow the doctored 8-by-10-inch image up to a 40-by-40-inch acetate and then get the screen printer to make it into a silkscreen. I'd then trace the image from the acetate onto a prepainted, flesh-colored canvas and paint in the colored areas of the facial features as well as the stand-out features of their clothing, if shown. When the silkscreen was ready, the detailed image would be lined up with the prepainted flesh-colored areas and the details of the photograph would be screened onto the canvas. The almost imperceptible contrast between the slight variations in the alignment of the image with the prepainted colors underneath was what gave my portraits their distinctive, 'shifting' appearance and made me a rich man.

Another innovation of mine was Oxidation Painting, or Piss Painting, as the technique became more commonly known. In this instance, the canvas would be prepared with copper paint and then oxidized with urine. At first I had a couple of special 'ghost pissers' who would be paid to come into the Factory to urinate on the canvases prepared with copper paint, but gradually I started using anyone who happened to be there at the time, particularly young men who I'd invited for lunch and deliberately encouraged to drink a lot of wine. One of the ghost pissers, Ronnie Cutrone, used to take Vitamin B and I noticed that when he pissed on the canvases, his urine turned the copper into an unusually pretty green color. Sometimes, if no one else was around when I needed urine for a canvas, I'd piss on it myself and later, by way of experiment, I tried the same technique, but used sperm instead of urine. Since

then, I've often thought that if the cops had arrived in the Factory when young men were pissing or masturbating on the canvas, they'd have arrested us for indecent exposure, not for drugs.

At one stage I decided to document a year in my life and asked *Mademoiselle* photographer David McCabe to follow me everywhere for that year and photograph me in all kinds of circumstances, at work and at play, but particularly when I was with famous people whose glamour might rub off on me. I picked David because he'd taken some great pictures of my superstar, Baby Jane Holzer, and also photographed me, using a fish-eye lens, which I'd never seen used before. So for the next year, David came running whenever I called him about some social event that I was going to attend and over the year he took a lot of pictures. Unfortunately, the more I looked at the pictures, the more I disliked my own appearance, as I'd always disliked it in the mirror, so in the end I used very few of his photos and instead documented my life by concentrating on the people I was with at any given time and taking pictures of them with my Polaroid camera. I then found that I could make myself look better when other people were taking pictures of me by keeping my eyes hidden permanently behind dark glasses, wearing them even when in bed, and putting two fingers to my lips as if deep in thought, even when my head was actually empty, and by generally looking enigmatic. All of this greatly enhanced my image as an eccentric artist.

Image is all important. I think without an image you're dead. I had my visual image, but I also had my personal image, which was a deliberately controlled mixture of naïvety, kindness, shyness, idiot savant, and softly-spoken, lethal bitchiness. Many considered me to be the King of Cool, particularly when I became even more withdrawn than normal, hardly moving at all, looking, in the words of David McCabe, 'like a waxwork of himself.' McCabe also described me as finally disappearing into my own 'immaculate image'. I rather liked that.

But am I that concerned with my image? Am I that extreme in my obsession with hiding the real me? Even now, being dead, wondering what lies ahead of me, I look back into my past, in a sense my living present, and am amazed at how far I would go in order to hide the real me. At one point I was so reluctant to expose myself that when I was scheduled to do a tour of colleges, showing one of my films and then answering questions from the students, I paid an extrovert friend, Alan Midgette, to impersonate me

throughout the whole tour. When I offered Alan half of the lecture fees, he agreed to my request, so Paul Morrissey and I sprayed his hair silver, put some talcum powder on top of that, then put a light Erase over his face, eyebrows, lips, nose, hands and arms, then made him wear my black leather jacket, the collar turned up, and dark glasses. Finally, we told him to chew gum a lot, which I always did. It worked. Alan, pretending to be me, completed the whole tour and had no problem in answering the students' questions, since he only had to respond with a whispery 'Yes' or a 'No' or a 'Maybe' as I was known to do when answering similar questions. The scam was nearly blown when Alan disembarked from a plane in Salt Lake City and a fierce wind blew the talcum powder off his silvered hair. But when a reporter, taping him in the back of a taxi en route to another college, saw all the stuff on his face, the talcum powder and the Erase, and asked what it was, Alan said, 'I have a skin condition.' And since I was known to have a skin condition, he got away with it. The scam was finally exposed when Alan was in Mexico, but I only learnt about it when I saw the stories in *Time* and *Newsweek*.

Friends and enemies have often also described me as being no more than a mirror, reflecting only what they want to see in me, whether real or imagined on their part. And I often responded by saying that if a mirror looks into a mirror, what is there to see? Certainly, when *I* look into a mirror, I see nothing at all. Or, at least, I only see the invented me, with my silvery-white wig and surgically enhanced nose (when I was younger they called me 'Andy the red-nosed Warhola) and, of course, the make-up I applied to cover up my deathly pale, horribly blotched skin. No wonder that as a boy and then an adolescent, I felt that I was nothing at all. So I had to reinvent myself to become something, which I think I did pretty well.

Because I was so diffident, even wan, I was often asked when, if ever, I 'turned on'. I always replied that I turned on when I turned off and went to bed. Going to bed was, for me, the most exciting moment of the day, maybe because I felt that second only to sex, which can be avoided by going to bed alone, the hardest work in life is simply being alive. Being alive, I decided, could also be avoided, albeit temporarily, by going to bed alone and sleeping soundly.

Well, I don't have to avoid being alive anymore because I'm dead and feeling at peace. I can only assume that I'm not bothered by being dead

because I always felt that life was nothing. When friends, shocked to hear me say this, would respond by insisting that life had to be something, a process of learning at least, learning more from one year to the next, I'd say they were only learning more of nothing and that made life even harder to live. Shocked again, they would then say that if I believed in nothing, what was I living for? 'For nothing,' I'd say. I might have also felt that life was nothing because I had no memory. Every day was a new day because I couldn't remember the day before. So maybe that's why I don't mind being dead. If life is nothing, then maybe death is something. I might soon find out.

I recall that people often complained that I went nowhere without an entourage, which I did, but it was only because I was so nervous at meeting new people, particularly if they were famous or glamorous or may have had a fixation about me, either romantic or sexual, that I brought my closest associates, or members of my staff, along with me as a form of protection. This enabled me to talk to my 'Mafia' when I didn't know what to say to the person I was supposed to be talking to. Likewise when I was travelling overseas. The people I took with me had to act as buffers between me and the alien culture I was being exposed to. Also, because I always felt that in foreign countries I'd go mad without good old American television, the people I travelled with had to keep me entertained and distracted. They also protected my space: the space between me and other people. I mean, it wasn't like grandstanding with real bodyguards. It wasn't even showing off, like Elvis used to do with his Memphis Mafia. It was simple survival.

Lots of space here, where I'm dead but still conscious. Nothing but space. Formerly a kind of dark space, but not really dark, just empty space above and below and on both sides, now a space filled with light. I like that. I always liked space. In fact, it's possible that I never really liked paintings because I liked space so much and felt that paintings just took up valuable space. So since I liked space and paintings stole space, how could I possibly like paintings? And, come to think of it, how did I get so involved with painting, instead of continuing as a hired-hand commercial artist for fashion magazines and advertising?

I can probably blame it all on Greenwich Village in New York. In the early 1940s – I think 1943 – Marlon Brando was sharing a Greenwich Village apartment with his sister Frannie, who was studying painting with local artists. As artists such as Franz Kline, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman

and Mark Rotho were beginning their careers in the Village, it was definitely the place to be, particularly the place to be provocative, which Marlon and Frannie were, both in their work and in their private lives. Later, in the mid-1950s, when Elvis was causing a sensation with his first black-sounding records, Kooning and Robert Motherwell were producing what many felt were violent and disturbing works of art (Elvis' records of the time were being received the same way), Jackson Pollock's 'drip' paintings were considered to be highly aggressive, even anti-art, and Mark Rotho's abstracts were viewed with similar outrage. At the same time, John Cage's strange aleatory compositions were gaining attention and, in the jazz clubs, Charlie Parker was playing on his saxophone notes so far removed from the original compositions that his audiences were both baffled and intrigued. In other words, the whole cultural and artistic world was changing. All of 'art' had become 'anti-art'.

Of course, music and art have always gone hand-in-hand, be it opera or jazz or rock 'n' roll. It was therefore no accident that we not only constantly played Maria Callas in the Factory, but also let the studio be used by the Velvet Underground, who would rehearse there even as we were working. The main contributors to the Velvet Underground were Lou Reed and John Cale, both of whom went on to adventurous solo careers, and the mysterious blonde German singer, Nico, who could have become one of my film superstars but instead became lead singer with the band. I let them rehearse there because I was also their manager, getting them their first recording contract and using them in my multimedia roadshow, *Exploding Plastic Inevitable*, which included 16mm color projections with colors created by me and which played for several months in New York, before touring throughout the US and Canada. For their first album, *The Velvet Underground and Nico*, I designed my famous Yellow Banana cover: a bright-yellow banana with 'Peel slowly and see' printed near a perforated tab which, if pulled open, revealed a pink, peeled banana beneath. While never a commercial success, the Velvet Underground went on to become one of the most influential groups in rock history, with their innovatory use of electric music, including dissonance, feedback and extended improvisations, not forgetting John Cale's piano and viola or Lou Reed's bold use of formerly taboo lyrical subject matter, such as the joys and horrors of drugs, the grim realities of life on the streets, and all forms of decadence. They were a group very much in keeping

with the ambiance and philosophy of the Factory.

The Yellow Banana wasn't my only rock music cover. In 1971 Mick Jagger commissioned me to design the logo for the Rolling Stones' new company, Rolling Stones Records, and made it perfectly clear that he expected me to emphasize his major importance to the company and within the actual group. This I did (naturally knowing which side my bread was buttered on) by producing a logo based on Jagger's fat lips, wide open and with his notorious tongue, painted blood-red like the lips, hanging out as if slavering, as reportedly Jagger was prone to do with his many women. (According to writer Philip Norman, Marianne Faithfull, one of Jagger's more famous conquests, found my painting 'particularly evocative'.) Indeed, so pleased was Jagger with my work that he also commissioned me to design the album sleeve for his new label's first album, *Sticky Fingers*, the front cover showing a denim-clad crotch, the cock slyly outlined, its fly a real zip fastener that could be opened to reveal, inside, my painting of Jagger's lascivious lips and tongue. I'm pleased to recall that my signature was clearly visible on the underpants in the notorious 'crotch' shot also used for the inner artwork.

I took the basic idea for the *Sticky Fingers* sleeve from my own silkscreen paintings of my beloved Marlon Brando in *The Wild One* (1954), in which he wore black leather and a cocked peaked hat, looking tough and tender at once, while bestriding his phallic motorcycle. I based my silkscreen, first painted in 1963, on that particular still because in it Marlon looks like a sex god and certainly, for me, that's what he was. Black leather is, of course, an explicitly gay form of dress and one which we, in the Factory, took to kinky extremes, such as when my protégé, Gerard Malanga, appeared with the Velvet Underground, wearing black leather and cracking a whip. However, Malanga, though beef-cake handsome, could never quite match Marlon who, in that particular silkscreen, is the very epitome of sexual availability, both challenging and beseeching, potential predator and preyed upon, seducer and seduced, and I yearned for him every second that I worked on that silkscreen, obsessively wondering what his cock looked like, imagining myself sucking it, imagining him sucking mine, and then having to relieve myself by engaging with one of my Lonesome Cowboys and sticking it in where the sun don't shine.

Oh, Marlon, what you did to me! You and Elvis together!

Dear Marlon. I *did* take a lot of my inspiration from him. Not only my

fantasies about having him fuck me, or at least gobble me with those wonderful lips of his, but also from his various comments over the years about his essential contempt for modern art. It was Marlon, after all, who said, 'There's no fucking culture in this country. The last great artist died maybe a hundred years ago. In *any* field.' And I have to say that I agree with that comment. He also said that there are no longer artists, only businessmen, merchants, and that although he thought Picasso could possibly be called an 'artist', even Picasso was purely commercial in the sense that he could draw the outline of an outhouse and give it to somebody and it would immediately be worth thousands of dollars. 'Because it's making a commentary on the obscenity of our standards.' In other words, even a Picasso sketch of an outhouse, valued then at thousands of dollars (it would now be worth millions) was really, in the words of Marlon, 'absolute trash, horseshit… just like a Guggi label. Yeah, it's just a label, a Picasso label.' And so, you know, I kind of took those comments of Marlon's to heart in my later years, taking comfort from them, realising that what I was doing with Heinz baked-bean tins or mass-produced silkscreen portraits of famous people, including Marilyn and Marlon and Elvis and John of the Beatles (though later, God help him, of Yoko), were just as valid in terms of contemporary art as anything by the pop-eyed Picasso. Maybe *that* was my genius.

My paintings of great numbers of Coca-Cola bottles were a good example. When people complained that they weren't fit subjects for works of art, I responded with a statement which, like my 'fifteen minutes of fame' statement, became almost iconic. 'What's great about this country,' I said, 'is that America started the tradition where the richest consumers buy essentially the same things as the poorest. You can be watching TV and see Coca-Cola, and you know that the President drinks Coca-Cola, Liz Taylor drinks Coca-Cola, and just think, *you* can drink Coca-Cola, too. A Coke is a Coke and no amount of money can get you a better Coke than the one the bum on the corner is drinking. All the Cokes are the same and all the Cokes are good. Liz Taylor knows it, the President knows it, the bum knows it, and you know it.' That was my defence of Pop Art and you really can't knock it.

I mean, it's not as if I was personally responsible for what became known as 'Pop Art'. Pop was actually a combination of fine art, advertising, publicity, movies, rock 'n' roll, and fashion, but the art of the early '60s developed from the autobiographical and emotional drives of the artists

practising Action Painting. In direct contrast to that, Pop Art utilized the essential neutrality of everyday consumer goods, the supermarket shelf, as it were, though the images weren't the actual objects, or 'ready mades', as found in Dadaism, but a reworking of them, greatly elaborated in dimension and color. Despite the fact that a lot of people still believe this was started by me, it actually began with Claes Oldenburg (b.1929), who blew up seemingly banal items into gigantic sizes, transforming items such as trowels, tubes of toothpaste, and clothes pegs into huge sculptors. He also created brightly painted plaster sculptures of desserts, cakes and pieces of meat, or hamburgers, and made models of hard, unyielding objects, such as light switches and typewriters, in soft, pliable materials. Reversing reality, as it were.

My own mass-produced 'commercial art', my insistence upon repetition, succeeded, I believe, in removing 'meaning' from images that were in themselves fairly dramatic. This was the case with the symbols of death and social struggle that I depicted in *Orange Disaster* (1963) and *Race Riot* (1964); the social 'meaning' of the paintings is reduced to the status of the merely decorative.

While I was busy annihilating the significance of my images, Roy Lichenstein (1923-1997) was doing the opposite: emphasizing the importance of an image by taking it out of its context and reproducing it on a large scale, thus elevating, for instance, a comic strip to the status of a work of art; and Tom Wesselman (b. 1931) was portraying his female nudes in commonplace environments, as if they, too, were consumer objects, lacking facial expression and recognizable only by their exaggerated erotic features.

In a similar existential (one of my dear friend Norman Mailer's favourite words) vein, the American sculptor, George Sigal (b. 1924) made plaster-cast models, taken from life, of people frozen in varied poses or in the act of carrying out routine tasks. Those figures, in their isolated stillness, seemed to convey modern man's alienation from daily life. I did pretty much the same, taking cultural items and reproducing them flatly and without emotion. I did the same with my films. When, for instance, I made my six-hour long film, *Sleep*, in 1964, containing only shots of a man sleeping, I was simply employing the narrative neutrality of Pop Art, but in terms of film even this wasn't original. In fact, this emphasizing of the dimension of time (or Time, as Norman would have it) had been done thirty years earlier by Fernand

Léger in his film, *24 Heures*, in which an anonymous couple were filmed for an entire day while carrying out their normal, extremely boring, activities. It was this 'boredom' that lay at the very heart of most of my films, notably in my eight-hour film of the Empire State Building at dusk, as it did, also, with the films made by Yoko Ono and John Lennon, both of whom shamelessly imitated me.

But why was I so despised in certain quarters as a 'commercial' artist? Aren't all artists commercial?

I remember being told that Robert Rauschenberg was once given the gift of a pastel from Willem de Kooning. With de Kooning's permission, he erased the pastel and then signed it 'Pastel by de Kooning erased by Robert Rauschenberg.' Then he sold it. My darling Norman Mailer wrote about this incident as: 'Rauschenberg was saying that the artist has the same right to print money as the financier. Money is nothing but authority imprinted upon emptiness.' And the same principle, I now accept, was the impetus for my belief that art is simply a commodity with a certain market value that has nothing whatsoever to do with the intrinsic value of the individual work of art itself. Thus, a painting of a can of baked beans, or of Marilyn or Elvis or Marlon, or my *Campbell's Soup Cans*, can have as much artistic value as a painting by de Kooning, Rauschenberg, or even Picasso.

Personally, speaking without prejudice, I think my *Double Marlon* was rather wonderful. Not that it was the first work I'd done on him. In fact, back in 1963 I'd done a single image on silver, described in the Christie's catalogue as a 'silver-backed altarpiece to cool', which I thought was pretty cool itself, but three years later, in 1966, I created the *Double Marlon*, using an image taken from his cult movie, *The Wild One*, with Marlon, leaning languidly on his motorcycle's handlebars, dressed in black leather for his role as a rebellious biker gang leader, shown at the right-hand edge of a vast, deliberately unprimed canvas. I picked that image quite deliberately, knowing that just as photos of Marlon as Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* had created a vogue amongst the young for plain white T-shirts, so too did the photos of him wearing his black leather jacket in *The Wild One* create another vogue for that kind of 'cool' clothing. Marlon, at that time, was indeed the very epitome of cool. No wonder I produced eight images of him in that single year of 1966.

Cool. Mmm, real cool.

Of course, the Elvis and Marlon silkscreen portraits were only two of the many that I did in my lifetime. There were also *Marilyn* and *Liz* (my dear friend Elizabeth Taylor), to name just a couple out of many. So many silkscreen portraits of the famous, the infamous and the unknown, all derived from newspaper cuttings, film stills and my own Polaroid pictures, that they constituted what one journalist described as 'an unrivalled gallery of modern portraits' and even led to me being hailed as 'the greatest portrait painter since Picasso.' (I was also hailed as the Pope of Pop.) While not about to stand on false modesty by denying such claims, I should make it clear that I was by no means a total original, but was indeed strongly influenced by the likes of Edgar Davis, who painted faces from 19th century photographs, and John Singer Sargent, whose portraits of society figures had all the glamour and sexuality of contemporary Pop Art. On the other hand, I can also state with pride that my own portrait work strongly influenced such modernists as David Hockney, Sam Taylor-Wood, and Gerhardt Richter. So no matter where I may be at this moment – dead, rest assured, but not certain of just *where* – I can look back with the confidence that my life was not in vain and that I earned my rightful place in the history of modern art.

I also made lots of money.

For instance, my *Double Marlon* sold at Sotheby's, New York, in 1983, for $32,521,000. Which is why I was often described, quite rightly, as a 'commercial' artist. (Just like my 'commercial' idol, Picasso.) And my *Eight Elvises* sold for even more: $100 million, which was described as a 'benchmark' price that only Jackson Pollock, Picasso, van Gogh, Renoir, Klimt and de Kooning have achieved. Even the Brillo boxes that I used for my show at the Stable gallery were initially priced at $300, sold for $50 and ended up going for $800,000. Which just proves that a painting's only real value is the financial value placed upon it.

I sometimes believe that my major contribution to art was in gaining enormous publicity for myself and, in so doing, bringing the kind of attention to the art world that would eventually turn artists into stars. And although I was often despised for this, my market value just rose and rose.

I likened my art works to my beloved Levi Strauss bluejeans, with that little pocket and little copper buttons, the best-looking pants ever designed by anybody. I couldn't live without my Levi Strauss bluejeans, which are, of

course, mass produced just like my art works.

What's so important about art, anyway? In my *Philosophy* book I stated that I liked money on the wall. By which I meant that if, say, you were going to buy a painting costing thousands of dollars, you should take that money, tie it up, and hang it on the wall instead of the painting you were planning to buy. So I now think of art as simply being money on the wall.

The only contemporary artist who received as much abuse as I did for being blatantly commercial was, I think, Salvador Dali. Naturally, before I met him, I thought Dali was wonderful. Then I met him. Knowing that Dali was widely considered to be a 'crass merchandiser of modernism' who was engaged in a 'cynical, shameless pursuit of money' who had, horror, horror, hired or licensed other horrible artists to forge his art, even signing sheets of paper for them to draw on and let him sell as his own – well, knowing all this I was dying to meet him and finally got to do so in his suite at the St. Regis Hotel in New York. Dali was then working on two enormous paintings. After greeting me at the door with, 'Welcome to my humble atelier for the fabrication of dollars,' he ordered up every gourmet snack he could think of from room service as well as numerous bottles of wine. He and I barely said a word to each other because the opera music blasting out of his amplifiers was so loud that we couldn't hear each other speak. Everything seemed chaotic and continued chaotically, not helped by a feral cat that Dali had picked up on the street and which, when not wriggling frantically in his hands and trying to viciously claw his famous, waxed-moustachioed face, kept leaping at and bouncing off the walls and, more dangerously, his two paintings-in-progress. I was shocked by all this. I didn't know what to do. Normally I only drink carrot juice or tea, accompanied with a snack of brownies, but now I found myself gulping glass after glass of white wine, without a single brownie to soak it up, and starting to feel distinctly odd. Dali kept shouting, trying to make himself heard above the thunderous opera music while wildly waving his walking stick over his head. He had an elaborate Inca headdress that he'd been using as a prop and he put it on me, which I found pretty frightening, then he stood melodramatically behind me and wildly waved his walking stick again while bawling incomprehensible words. I was petrified. Speechless. I was being exposed to Dali's Theatre of the Absurd and I was such a quiet, mild person. His wife Gala entered the room as if about to defend me, but Dali waved his walking stick at her in a demented, threatening

manner and she turned around and hurried out again. At some point during the hellish afternoon, he bawled the title of his latest masterpiece into my face, practically spitting at me, but when he saw that I just didn't get it, he scribbled it down on a piece of paper and thrust it into my hand. When I was finally set free and hurried home, near the point of collapse from unfamiliar drunkenness and nervous exhaustion, I avoided my watchful mother and scurried into my bedroom where I studied what my former hero had scribbled on the piece of paper he'd given me. The name of his latest masterpiece was: *Salvador Dali in the Act of Painting Gala in the Apotheosis of the Dollar, in Which One May Also Perceive to the Left Marcel Duchamp Disguised as Louis XIV, Behind a Curtain in the Style of Vermeer, Which is But the Invisible Though Monumental Face of the Hermes of Praxiteles*. Presumably the length of the title matched the breadth of the painting.

So that was Salvador Dali, the only painter more admired and reviled than me. Still, while I never defend myself against criticism, I have to confess that the criticisms hurt me so much I decided not to pass further comment, good or bad, on the work of my fellow artists. This soon evolved into not passing comment on anything. When asked what kind of art I liked, I'd say something like, 'Mmm, I love everything.' When asked about something serious, like, say, politics or religion, I'd say something like, 'Mmm, I don't know.' That seemed to me to cover all the bases…

The darkness had been defeated. I can see it beyond the light. It's out there, like a cloud wanting to weep rain, but it can't get back in. I'm now at the centre of a great bowl of light within which there is imperceptible movement, opening and closing flowers of blackness, like the Rorschach inkblots or paint drips of some of my paintings, and, again, those slightly shifting forms, those silhouettes, which may be the others who died and are now in their own worlds. This should be spooky and I should be afraid but inexplicably it seems perfectly natural. And I'm moving deeper into the light. It's like the light of the sun. I'm convinced that I'm emerging from that eternal, womb-like tunnel and approaching the light of revelation, my personal heaven or hell. And instead of being filled with wonder or terrified, I'm returning helplessly, reluctantly, to what I used to be and wondering why, when alive, when I was so successful and rich, I never felt comfortable with myself and always tried to hide that fact by keeping myself busy night and day. Mmm, yes…

I was always withdrawn; always reticent. Nevertheless, my reticence didn't prevent me from my rapturous socializing with the rich and famous. One of my favourites was Norman Mailer. I think I first met Norman in the Charles Theatre on Avenue B on the corner of Twelfth Street, way back in '61 or '62. At that time the Charles, basically run by Jonas Mekas, was the only viable place for the works of independent producers and directors: Patty Smith, Joseph Cornell, Kenneth Anger and, of course, me, since that's where I premiered the *Sleep* and *Eat* and *Kiss* series. A lot of the underground poets also attended the showings, including Ginsberg and McClure, and we'd all meet later in Stanley's bar, just across the road from the theatre. Ultra Violet, before she featured in my films, was then in Salvador Dali's entourage and the both of them were frequent visitors, as were Pop Art painters like Rauschenberg and Johns. I had, of course, met Norman before, both at the offices of *The Village Voice* and at various Greenwich Village parties, but I only really got to know him well when he became interested in making his own 'underground' movies and started mixing with the other people producing similar works. I think it was my concept of using friends, anybody who wasn't professional and therefore didn't have to be paid, that really influenced Norman the most and made him come up with movies that were, if I may say so, with all due modesty, really clones of Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey films: no prior preparation, no script, just actors creating their own characters by being flung together (and often asked to fuck) in front of the cameras. A sort of amateur Stanislavski and/or Actors Studio method. My last directing job, however, was *The Chelsea Girls*, shot in 1966; after that, I left all of the directing to Paul Morrissey, who had a lower boredom threshold than my own.

By that time Norman was making his own 'home' movies and I thought they were wonderful failures. I mean, they didn't make any sense whatsoever, and I thought *that* was wonderful. But the individual movies were failures. I was, however, proud of the fact that Norman had been so strongly influenced by my work, saying: 'It was Warhol's talent to perceive that in every home movie there is a sense of Time trying to express itself as a new kind of creation, a palpability which breathes in the *being* of film. The best of works and some of the worst of film works have this quality.' Well, of course, I was proud that he said this, though I didn't have a clue what he was talking about. I did, however, appreciate Norman's use of the capital 'T' on

‘Time’ and felt, which I’m sure was Norman’s very intention, that the capitalized ‘T’ lent the word an apocalyptic importance. Still, his three hugely expensive ‘home’ movies, while failing in their intent, were, I felt, wonderful because they’d been so influenced by me. Norman’s problem, I believe, is that he thought filmmaking was easy and also thought, being so famous, that he was God and could do anything he wanted and get away with it. (We can blame his doting mother, Fanny, for this.) He was, however, wrong in believing that he could just throw actors, most of them untrained, in front of the cameras and everything would turn out just *so*. Alas, with *Maidstone* and even the two before it, that just didn’t happen. (I not only forget the titles of the films; I forget the actual *films*.) Why it didn’t happen, I can’t say. Perhaps it was the editing. Perhaps he was just too ambitious and used too many people. I *do* know that when I used only a couple of actors in my films, they always came out well, whereas when I used a relatively large cast, say about fifteen actors, it never worked at all, maybe because I, like Norman, lacked the ability to be a *proper* director and worked best when I simply had my cameraman point his camera at two people, a man and a woman, both preferably naked, and then I only had to whisper, ‘Roll it!’ Norman, being a rampaging egomaniac, almost certainly wouldn’t even have considered doing something that simple.

Mick Jagger was another favourite of mine, particularly because he so admired my *Sticky Fingers* album cover design. In 1977, Mick’s wife, Bianca, with her flowing gowns and flying-saucer hats, her dangling scarfs and ornamental canes, a model to the manor (*and* the manner) born, often dropped into the Factory, between ‘charity’ missions to places like Managua and Nicaragua (where she actually came from), looking ethereally, exotically beautiful, to do a bit of slumming with me and the many creative crazies who were always present. Though Jagger was already blatantly involved with another model by this time (Jerry Hall, blonde-haired and leggy and lively), he occasionally accompanied his unhappy wife on these visits and pretended to be vitally interested in what I was up to. He was, in fact, remarkably ignorant about it, as he was about most culture in general. Indeed, so much so that when he was compelled to share a table with Bianca and William Burroughs (novelist, homosexual, drug addict and possible psychopath), he innocently asked Burroughs if he was married, not knowing that Burroughs had killed his only wife (they had a sexually odd relationship) by accidentally

shooting her dead with a pistol when trying to shatter a glass of gin balanced on her head. The glass of gin didn't explode, but, alas, her head did.

John Lennon was another favourite. Though he came to the Factory once or twice to sit for his silkscreen portrait, we mostly met at social events, in art galleries, or in his and Yoko Ono's massive apartment in the eerily Gothic Dakota Building on West 72nd Street, overlooking Central Park. By the time they left England and came to live in New York they had already put out their egomaniacal 'unfinished music' tape-buzz LPs, *Two Virgins*, with both of them naked, Adam and Eve style, on the cover, and *Life With the Lions*, which commemorated Yoko's miscarriage of 1969. Following *The Wedding Album*, an extraordinarily boring narcissistic box set, they embarked upon their notorious 'Bed-Ins' and their worldwide crusade for peace. Once living in New York, with the world as yet unchanged, they involved themselves in the counterculture, in radical left-wing politics, and played concerts in which John sang blistering hard rock while Yoko wriggled about in sacks and burst eardrums with her avant-garde screaming. Becoming obsessed with Primal Scream Therapy, John recorded his confessional *John Lennon/Plastic Ono Band* album, which he thought was nakedly honest and I thought was shamelessly self-pitying. The album was a commercial disaster, but not being an artist capable of living with lost popularity, he put out his Utopian pop album, *Imagine*, which was a huge success, but then followed it with a disastrous collaboration between him, Yoko and the left-leaning rock band, Elephant's Memory, which I'm convinced was a clone of the Velvet Underground, the only difference being that John's 'political' lyrics were witless and naive, compared to the brilliance of Lou Reed's lyrics, and Nico's great singing was replaced by Yoko's demented screaming. Finally realising what side their bread was buttered on, John and Yoko then retreated from the counterculture and politics, John put out a few more so-so mainstream albums, neither of which had the success of *Imagine*, then both retreated into semi-retirement in the Dakota Building. Stories started circulating that while Yoko was turning herself into a hugely successful businesswoman, spending John's millions to make more millions, John had turned himself, at Yoko's urging, into a 'househusband' who baked bread and looked after baby Sean. I thought this odd in that when I visited them in their immense, luxurious apartment ('imagine no possessions') in the Dakota Building, I invariably

found John sitting up on his bed in his pyjamas (he and Yoko seemed to have separate bedrooms by that time), surrounded by his three cats and playing with various electronic toys while watching TV, leaving Sean to be looked after by his nanny, since Yoko was too busy making more money to do it herself. My feeling was that John had deliberately put out those stories about domestic bliss and his househusbandry because he knew that his last two albums had been relatively lacklustre and he was too frightened to either write or record anything else, let alone go back to his painting. It was a sad sight to see.

Nevertheless, I continued to see John and Yoko over the years, both inside and outside the Dakota Building. I remember that when I was having a meal at Ballato's restaurant with Peter Boyle and his wife, and John and Yoko, and my *Interview* editor, Catherine Guinness, the latter asked John for his autograph and he refused, saying he'd just read that Robert Redford refused to give autographs. (I think he meant Paul Newman.) However, a few weeks later he came to the office and when Catherine asked him again for his autograph, he picked up a newspaper picture of Paul McCartney and drew a moustache on it and then signed it and gave it to her, grinning mischievously. Not long after that, in some restaurant or other, a friend and I were having lunch when a man at the next table suddenly fell to the floor and started screaming dementedly, and then, when he reckoned we were suitably shocked, sat up, grinned mischievously, and said, 'Oye, can I have your autograph?' And it turned out to be my dear friend John Lennon. I also remember that I was with John one day when he was buying thousands of dollars worth of shirts and I felt really hurt because he didn't even offer me one. Finally, I remember that on Monday, December 8, 1980, I was attending Diana Vreeland's opening night Costume Institute dinner when someone came in and told us that John Lennon had been shot dead outside the Dakota building. No one could believe and I didn't believe it either until I got back home and saw it all on TV. Next day, the *Daily News* 'John Lennon Shot!' Collector's Edition included a feature entitled 'The Man Behind Andy Warhol' which I felt was a considerable reversal of the historical facts. The following day the newspapers were claiming that the man who killed John was a frustrated artist who had a Dali poster on his wall and was insisting that the devil had made him commit the murder. Meanwhile, hundreds of fans, many as sick as they were sympathetic, were holding a night-and-day vigil

outside the Dakota building, singing John Lennon songs and doubtless driving Yoko and young Sean mad. At the end of that week, I was in a cab with a black driver at the exact time we were supposed to be silent for a few minutes to remember John and pray for his soul. I don't pray. The black driver had a black music station on the radio. When the disc jockey said, 'We're up there with you, John,' the black driver laughed and said, 'Not me, baby, I'm stayin' right down here.' Then he turned to another station and the DJ on that station was *talking* about the silence.

After John's death, I continued to see Yoko, either running into her at some social gathering or gallery opening; or when invited to a dinner or party at the Dakota Building, by which time she'd definitively dropped her impoverished, sexless, counterculture image and had taken to beautiful make-up, Fendi furs and jewellery, Peretti diamond earrings, emerald rings with big embedded rubies, and glamorous wraparound dark glasses. She looked like a million dollars and was worth every dollar. Later, when I visited her in the Dakota Building, I was told that I had to leave my shoes in the hallway and I noticed that she had lots of pretty boys as waiters, that everything was very chic, and that she had a live-in boyfriend, Sam Havadtoy, formerly one of her many decorators. John's three cats were still in the apartment and Yoko told me that they hadn't purred since John died until she put on one of John's records, at which they started purring again.

In 1981 Yoko released her album, *Season of Glass* and one track, 'No No No', opened with the sound of gunshots and a blood-chilling scream. The cover was a picture of the blood-splattered glasses John Lennon was wearing when he was shot. Three years after John's death, Yoko had a sale at Sotheby's; the items she was selling included toilet paper that John Lennon had touched. Approximately three years later, she put on a stage show based on her life with John Lennon. While enacting the years 1980-81, she wore men's clothes and Reeboks when she should have been in furs and Armanis, as she actually was at the time. Shortly after seeing the show I found myself wondering what young Sean would have thought of all this. But continuing to see his mother, Yoko, socially, I eventually learnt that as John's widow she had appointed herself the guardian of his artistic heritage, that she had effectively become a voting member of the Beatles, and that she and Paul McCartney, who despised her, were now the joint curators of the Lennon/McCartney songwriting empire. For years after, she kept telling the

world that she rarely went out much, yet I kept running into her at gallery openings and parties and other upmarket functions, during which she was rarely to be seen in men's clothes or Reeboks.

Surprisingly, given my always packed social life, I often found it difficult to make conversation. My inclination was to respond to all statements with 'Mmm, yes,' or 'Mmm, no', followed by a wan smile that encouraged the recipient to keep talking and fill what might otherwise have been an embarrassing silence. In my experience, most people love to talk, so it was no real problem for me, except with someone like, say, Bob Dylan, who notoriously didn't talk much and was, like me, inclined to respond to all statements with, 'Mmm, yes,' or 'Mmm, no.' While I didn't know Dylan very well, we had mutual friends and he *did* visit me at least once in the Factory, having reluctantly agreed to come in for a screen test for one of my underground movies. I wasn't that keen on Dylan's work, actually, but I pretended to be a fan and he, in turn, pretended to be a fan of mine, though I believe he was more curious than admiring. Nevertheless, knowing that he was an Elvis fan (Elvis' version of 'Tomorrow Is A Long Time' was Dylan's all-time favourite cover of one of his own songs), I showed him my series of almost life-size portraits of Elvis, the silkscreens of him as a half-breed cowboy in *Flaming Star*, later renowned as the *Double Elvis* pictures. Though I was normally reluctant to give artwork away, when Dylan expressed enthusiasm for the Elvis silkscreens, I gave him one to take home with him.

Now, a lot of people assume that because so many people involved with me have died prematurely (suicides, drug overdoses, AIDS) and I have shown little emotion about this sorry fact, I lack sensitivity, but such is certainly not the case. I am very sensitive, indeed. *Very*. I just don't like to show it. So when I later heard, though a mutual friend, that once Dylan had taken my silkscreen home (tied to the roof of his station wagon), he told his wife Sara that he 'loathed' it and proved the point by, first, hanging it upside down for the amusement of his guests, and then, second, hiding it away in a closet – well, when I heard this I was cut to the quick, being the sensitive kind and easily wounded. Even worse was when Dylan then passed the silkscreen on to his manager, Albert Grossman, and his wife, Sally (the woman reclining on the chaise longue on the Daniel Kramer cover for Dylan's seminal *Bringing It All Back Home* album), actually swapping it for no more than one

of their sofas. I therefore hope that the little bastard threw up with shock when, later, Sally Grossman sold the silkscreen and received $270,000 for it. So fuck you, Bobby Zimmerman.

Naturally, I didn't invite him back to take part in my film. Particularly since he'd tried to make a move on my favourite superstar, the adorable (before she wrecked herself with drugs) Edie Sedgwick…

Ah, Edie, dear Edie, where are you now? Are you here, where I am, in this brightening Nowhere place with those shadows, or silhouettes, repeatedly appearing and dissolving and then reappearing, not forgetting the Rorschach inkblots and paint drips of my paintings, perhaps being recreated to make me feel at home… Mmm, yes…are you here, as I am, still not sure of where you are, but hoping to be reunited with those you left behind when you passed to the Other Side? Are we going to be reunited, you and I, and will you then attack me for my past sins regarding you? Am I here, in this expanding bowl of light, with those shadowy walls rising up on all sides, like ghostly high-rise buildings, to be judged and damned by you? Oh, dear, I sincerely hope not…

Thinking of Edie reminds me that I have also been accused of lacking sensitivity or normal human feelings, whatever they are, because of my so-called exploitation and subsequent neglect of Edie, so let me put this into perspective, if only to ease my own troubled soul. I remember writing somewhere that during the '60s people forgot what emotions were supposed to be and that's more or less what happened to me. I mean, it's possible that I was never really capable of love, but after the '60s, particularly after I was shot and nearly died, before I actually died, I never thought in terms of 'love' again. I did, however, remain fascinated by people, by their behaviour, and Edie, I think, fascinated me more than anyone else I'd ever known.

I first met her in early 1965 in Lester Persky's penthouse on East 59th Street, where she was dancing like an angel and looked like one. Slender, almost sylph-like, with legs that went on forever and huge dark eyes and full lips in a face of extraordinary delicacy and dyed silvery-white bobbed hair that almost made her look like the little sister I never had, so maybe I saw myself reflected in her. My superstar at the time, Baby Jane Holzer, was kinda running out of speed and Lester had said that I had to have a new superstar and that she simply *had* to be the twenty-two-year-old Edie. So

when Edie finished dancing and Lester introduced us and I saw her face up close, all I could think of to say, speaking sideways to Lester, was, 'Oh, she's so bee-you-ti-ful.' Edie and I were friends from that moment on.

Edie was a presence – a stoned presence, a constantly drugged, constantly smoking *presence*, impossible to ignore, with an almost magical inner luminosity. She was the classic 'poor little rich girl' who came from an aristocratic, deeply troubled family in Santa Barbara, California, including a handsome, highly sexed, coldly dominating father and two brothers who had both been in mental homes, before one of them hung himself and the other died after crashing his motorcycle into a wall, either by accident or, as Edie thought, deliberately as his own form of suicide. Edie herself had been in and out of mental hospitals and claimed that her handsome, highly sexed father had tried repeatedly to come on to her for as long as she could remember, that he'd always wanted to fuck her, though she always insisted that she'd never succumbed to him. Given my slavish worship of the idle rich, I was naturally in awe of her wealthy background and classy Cambridge education, but it soon became clear to me that despite my adoration of her, she was a deeply troubled child-woman, seductive one minute, cold or insulting the next, insatiable in her need for company, for attention (as I was), with a dangerously fragile grasp on reality, not helped by her addiction to alcohol and drugs. Nevertheless, I had to have her in my films. She was just irresistible.

She could rarely remember her lines, though she lit up the screen. When she made *Kitchen*, following her striking debut in *Vinyl* a month or so earlier, she was already having problems with reality and couldn't remember a single word. Finally, seeing that her memory was hopeless, I told her that if she forgot what she was supposed to say, she could just sneeze. So she sneezed a lot, practically sneezing her way through the whole picture. At one point, seeming to develop a toxic reaction to *any* kind of language, treating words like some kind of threatening virus, she solved her problem by turning on the malted machine, thus drowning out *all* the dialogue and forestalling any further conversation. And sneezing. She kept sneezing to avoid having to remember her lines. Naturally, the resultant film was an incomprehensible mess, not entirely due to Edie, but my dear, pretentious friend, Norman Mailer, when reviewing it, described it as an 'historic document', adding apocalyptically, as was his style: 'I suspect that a hundred years from now

people will look at *Kitchen* and say, “Yes, that is the way it was in the late fifties, early sixties in America. That’s why they had the war in Vietnam. That’s why the rivers were getting polluted. That’s why there was typological glut. That’s why the horror came down. That’s why the plague was on its way.” *Kitchen* shows that better than any other work of that time.’ Dear Norman. We’ll never see his like again.

Nevertheless, despite the mess that was *Kitchen*, Edie’s fame grew exponentially with each subsequent film and soon she was getting lots of the attention she so desperately craved. When not making movies in the Factory, she partied all day, pills from morning to night, meeting all kinds of people, gay and straight and downright decadent, but in the evenings she only went out with me, invariably wearing her black leotards, which soon became her trademark style, and gaining herself even more attention. Described as ‘the greatest of Andy Warhol’s superstars’ and ‘the silver-topped queen of the underground’, she became almost as famous as I was and started playing the part. When she met Mick Jagger at the Scene, wearing the cinnamon-colored Gernreich dress that she’d previously modelled, the media treated it like the Event of the Century and the spectators, mostly male, were so excited they came near to rioting. When we attended an opening at the Lincoln Centre, where the cameramen went crazy, I sat beside her with my head down, wearing my black leather jacket, acting shy while telling her what to do, whispering, ‘Stand up. move around, pose for them.’ And she absolutely loved it and ended up, at intermission, doing her extraordinarily languid free-form dancing, as elegant as a swan in water, no music, with the whole audience watching, entranced. When she appeared on my arm at the Warhol Philadelphia exhibition, the first survey of all my work, held at the Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania, it was the biggest event ever to be held in Philadelphia, with lots of cameras and people at the preview, and in the crush the television lights began to fall into the paintings, tearing them, so we had to take the paintings off the wall and have the public opening, the following night, with no paintings at all, only people. Edie and I were mobbed. The institute was small and thousands of people were crammed into it. The people in the mob kept clawing desperately at us and we were forced back up a staircase that led up to a fake ceiling. The mob tried following us up and they were chanting repeatedly, ‘Edie and Andy! Edie and Andy!’ I was terrified. I was surely whiter than my normal white.

Edie looked scared as well, but she loved the attention so much that, amazingly, when halfway up the staircase, she started teasing the mob by letting the sleeves of her long red Gernreich dress fall down over the heads of the mob and then drawing them up again, down and up, down and up, avoiding the grasping hands, offering her radiant smile while calling out to the mob, telling them how wonderful they were and how wonderful *I* was and weren't we all having a wonderful time? Luckily, as the mob was becoming even more dangerously hysterical, a concerned architectural graduate managed to smash through the fake ceiling with a crowbar and led us out, over the roof and down the fire escape, to where the cops could protect us. Only then did I realise that Edie had been talking to that baying mob for a full forty minutes. She was something alright.

It was all downhill after that. Edie's worsening drug addictions, combined with her natural aristocratic *hauteur*, got the better of her and she began to play up in the Factory, during the making of other films, complaining about her lines, demanding to know what they meant ('Nothing,' scriptwriter Ronald Tavel told her. 'The lines mean nothing.'), refusing outright to say them, then walking away from the camera and going to the toilet in the rear of the loft where she'd dance for hours, all alone, in a trance, completely spaced out, with the rest of us watching her, mesmerized.

But before the end came, she took me to meet her father on his own turf, the exclusive River Club in Manhattan, and I had my own taste of his coldly dominating nature. A practising painter and sculptor, but getting nowhere with it, despite being an aristocrat and knowing many important people, he obviously resented my success and my relationship with his beautiful, troubled daughter, possibly troubled because of him, and looked at me as if to say, 'I can tell you're just a screaming fag.' He said that with his eyes and other things with his big mouth, his thinly veiled insults, and then, when I saw the way Edie was looking at him, with a combination of revulsion and adoration, I realised that if she'd felt threatened by his repeated sexual advances, she also felt a strong sexual attraction to him, but knew that such a relationship would be impossible, just as it was with 'screaming fag' Andy Warhol. I knew then that Edie was androgynous, just as I was. My beloved Edie was Peter Pan.

By then she was getting regular shots from the notorious Dr. Roberts, immortalized in the Beatles' song of that name, sometimes vitamins laced

with methadrine, or speed, other times cocaine or LSD, and sometimes, in her stoned condition, being fucked by him in return for freebies – or so she said. She needed the shots to keep up her relentless socialising, not forgetting the endless boozing, but in the end it all did her head in and she slid down the tubes.

I could tolerate her *hauteur*, but I wouldn't tolerate open rebellion. When she kept rebelling during the making of other films, I tried giving her a hint by excluding her from *My Hustler* while giving a small part to Genevieve Charbin. When Edie complained and I took no notice of her, she started asking everyone I knew if she should break with me, get herself an agent, go to Hollywood. Once, when she saw Ronald Tavel's script for *Shower*, a film in which she and Roger Trudeau spend their whole time naked in a shower, she screamed that she wouldn't be a spokesman for Tavel's perversities. Finally, when in front of everyone she tore up Tavel's script for a movie called *Space*, calling it stupid, causing Tavel to walk out, I decided to do something about her. So I went to a 42nd Street bar and found a lady called Ingrid von Schefflin and cut her hair just like Edie's, made her up just like Edie, named her Ingrid Superstar and put her into my next movie instead of Edie, who was naturally shocked.

She responded by going on to what she imagined were better things. Bob Dylan had written at least two songs said to be about Edie, 'Leopard-Skin Pill-Box Hat' and 'Just Like a Woman', and claimed that he wanted to make a non-Warholian film with her. Edie took him at his word and one night, in the Ginger Man, after having made eleven films for me in four months, she told Paul Morrissey that she didn't want me to show any of her films anymore. Then, when she'd completed a small role in *Chelsea Girls*, she came into the Factory and asked me to take out the section of the film that she was in, claiming that she'd just signed a contract with Dylan's manager, Albert Grossman, whose wife had made $270,000 by selling the silkscreen I'd given to Dylan for free. By that time it was clear that she had a crush on Dylan and was expecting a real relationship, so I made her turn whiter than I was normally by telling her that he'd secretly married another woman, Sarah Lownds, in November 1965, just a few weeks before. Edie not only turned white: she visibly shook and then ran from the loft.

I never saw very much of her after that, but I did hear the stories. She'd

become so thin that she looked like Twiggy and managed to get work as a model for the experimental clothes of Paraphernalia, virtually kick-starting the whole unisex movement with her boyish physique in backless dresses, silver-fish dresses, leotardic clothes, and body-composition dresses with the color compositions based on the shape of the body. Initially, she caused quite a sensation. Then Gloria Schiff had her photographed for *Vogue*. Gloria told me she was 'adorable… an enchanting, beguiling little girl.' Gianni Penati photographed her wearing black lingerie and white stockings because she was 'so blonde and pale and light.' When she saw the pictures, Diana Vreeland, then editor-in-chief, was convinced that they'd found themselves 'a star.' Then it all collapsed. Edie just disappeared. She didn't have the discipline to be a model and she needed her drugs. Things could only get worse after that. In 1966 she took an overdose, dropped her cigarette when becoming unconscious, and set her apartment on fire. Though lucky enough to make it out of the apartment, she ended up in the Lenox Hill Hospital. Released from the hospital, she moved into a room in the notorious Chelsea Hotel on West 23rd Street, set that room on fire as well, and ended up lying naked on the floor of the lobby until another ambulance came to take her away. Before that, however, she'd returned home for a break, reportedly looking like a rag doll, practically emaciated, but her father had her committed to the psychiatric section of the Country Hospital, until she was rescued by Bob Dylan's manipulative friend, Bob Neuwirth, with whom she'd been having an affair in the Chelsea Hotel. Returning to New York, she tried out for a role in Norman Mailer's play, *The Deer Park*, but lost it when Norman realised, correctly, that she'd never last the course. A few months later, she and Bob Neuwirth parted company. She was then taken on by producer Bob Margouleff to act in a *vérité* underground movie, *Ciao! Manhattan*, but everyone on the set was taking drugs and, naturally, Edie was taking drugs as well, being injected in the ass in full view of the stoned crew, so the movie collapsed in on itself and was never finished.

Her family allowance had been cut off when she was living in the Chelsea, so she no longer had a source of income, could no longer hire limos, didn't even know how to use the subway or buses, so she only went to dives she could walk or stagger to, and once there, doped or drunk or both, give everyone, including alcoholics, drug addicts and psychotics, her contact

details, enabling them to sneak into her hotel room in the early hours of the morning, when she was in a drugged or drunken stupor, to steal whatever they could get their hands on, including her drugs and drink, maybe even to steal a quick fuck, during which, given the state she would have been in, they would have been met with little resistance. Rescued by Bob Margouleff, who let her use his apartment, she kept falling into drugged stupors, dropping her lit joints or cigarettes, and started at least five fires in his apartment, burning up three mattresses. She had other affairs. She drifted here and there, getting small parts in movies that were never seen by the public. She went in and out of hospitals on a regular basis and finally ended up back up in Bellevue, suffering from convulsions. She was in Gracie Square Hospital when her father died, but by that time she was beyond family feelings. Gracie Square was a private mental hospital and she was there for five months and then she ran away with a patient who'd been a junkie since the age of nine and was emotionally retarded. She went to see a gynaecologist in the hope of getting some pills off him and he drove her up the coast in his Aston Martin and stopped in a motel and gave her three ampules of liquid Sandoz acid and then they both fucked all night and then he had to get back to his office to start another day's work, so he gave her a shot to calm her down and she took about fourteen Placidyls and then back in her apartment with the life-long junkie boyfriend she had a Bloody Mary and dropped a few more Placidyls and went into a coma and was again rushed into hospital. The New York State Psychiatric Institute at Columbia Presbyterian Hospital. Then Manhattan State on Ward's Island, in the middle of the East River, next to the prison. Released, she met a man called John Grable, also known as Mad John, and they moved in together and partied in the streets of Isla Vista, tripping out on acid, and she kept running off with other guys but always returned to Mad John, saying it was nothing to worry about. And then she was back in Cottage Hospital in Santa Barbara, where she managed to score more junk and fuck a lot of her fellow patients, and then she got out and became involved with the members of the Viking motorcycle club, turning into a biker chick, then developed a taste for Seconal and vodka and sodium pentothal and breast enhancement with silicone, or running around naked, or hitchhiking with her shirt open to let them see her new breasts, and then she ran off with Roger Vadim, the famous French film director, and then returned to have shock treatments, and then, at twenty-eight, dressed formally in white

satin, she married a twenty-year-old long-haired, bearded guy called Michael Post, whom she'd met in the psychiatric ward of Cottage Hospital and whose virginity she'd stolen, and she kept calling him 'Daddy' and then breaking down in tears and demanding more sleeping pills, or 'meds', until finally, four months after they were married, they came home from a fashion show at the Santa Barbara Museum and Michael gave Edie her 'meds' and sat beside her, staring silently, lovingly, at her, while she fell asleep, breathing harshly.

By that time, when people asked me about Edie, I was telling them that I didn't know where she was or what she was up to, that we'd never been that close, that I never really knew her that well. When Brigid Berlin phoned me to tell me about Edie's death, I didn't feel especially surprised or shaken, but only asked, 'When?' When Brigid then told me that Edie hadn't died of drugs, but had suffocated in her sleep (barbiturate overdose), I asked how she could do such a thing. Then, not knowing what else to say, I asked if 'he', meaning her relatively new husband, would inherit all the money and was told that Edie didn't have any money. 'Well, what have *you* been doing?' I asked of Brigid, and so, clearly relieved, she started talking about her latest visit to the dentist…

So Edie's dead and I'm dead. In the end we're all dead. Being dead is the only way to live because at least it gives you lots to think about. Right now I'm thinking of how Edie, when making my films, couldn't remember her lines and how I wasn't much better at remembering mine. I once played an 'airport person' in a movie shot in Rome and starring my dear friend, Elizabeth Taylor, and though I only had one line to speak I simply couldn't remember it. I was the same when I did commercials: I just couldn't remember my lines. But people kept hiring me anyway, because I was famous, and that, in the world I moved in, was all that mattered. Not that it helped me with the critics when the totally forgettable movie, *The Driver's Seat*, was finally reviewed. One of the critics described me, even though my role was minuscule, as being 'slightly repellent, like a reptile.' When I asked a friend if the critic meant that I was slimy, she didn't answer, instead changing the subject slightly, slyly, by informing me that reptiles don't like to be touched. This made sense to me, since when I was touched unexpectedly, say in a crowded room, I'd practically jump six feet in the air. And one of the reasons that I didn't really like sex, though I indulged in it

occasionally, is that I really didn't like being touched, because being touched could make me feel slimy.

Then, again, I have often been accused of suffering from emotional disassociation, which may be true, and which may explain why, when my mother, still sharing the house on 89th and Lexington, started suffering from senility and needed constant care, I sent her back to Pittsburg, to be looked after by my rarely visited brothers, John and Paul, and then, in 1972, when she suffered a stroke and died in a nursing home, for years after I would always say to friends, when they asked me how she was, 'Oh, she's fine.' So here, beyond death's doorway, I might soon be reunited with my mother and dear little Edie, hopefully to be forgiven by both of them.

I often said, when asked about the subject, that people never die, that they just go to department stores, and that certainly seems to be the case with me. For now, as I emerge from this dazzling light, there they are, once ghostly high-rises, but taking shape and form like one of my silkscreen paintings, materializing right in front of me… the great shopping malls with their vast parking lots and plate-glass windows and piped music and huge glossy advertisements for sophisticated clothes and sexy underwear and lipsticks and perfumes and skin creams and hair shampoos and laptop computers and ipods and cell phones; and there, inside the shops, the shelves stacked with bottles of Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola and tins of baked beans and soup cans and Brillo boxes…. all the mass-produced goods that I turned into an art form that the critics said cheapened art but that has outlived a lot of the art they previously acclaimed. Mmm, yes, indeed. All the subjects that they said would be short-lived and would soon put an end to me.

They didn't. Death did. Though I'm still conscious and on the move, I'm certainly dead. The only thing I remember about my actual dying is that on Wednesday, February 19, 1987, after suffering too many days of pain with my ailing gall-bladder, I went to see my doctor and was informed that if I didn't go into 'the place' (I was so terrified of hospitals I could never even say the word) and have 'it' done (I was so terrified by the very thought of an operation that I could never say that word either) because, if I didn't, I would surely die. So the following day I was admitted, in fear and trembling, to New York Hospital and on the Saturday my gall-bladder was surgically removed. Surprisingly, I seemed to have recovered quickly from the

operation, because later that same day I was watching my beloved television and making my usual gossipy phone calls to friends, telling them they'd no need for concern. But early next morning, for reasons unknown (just as it was with Edie) I died. And now here I am. Dead.

Well, not dead, exactly, I'm still here, am I not? I'm not too sure of exactly where I am or where I'm heading as the brightening light gradually, mercifully, reveals heaven, at least *my* kind of heaven, but I certainly know I'm still here. I know we're *all* still here, in this great shopping mall of twenty-first century American life where I now find myself. With Elvis and Marlon and Norman and John – all still here, as I am.

I once said that in the future everyone, no matter how humble, would be famous for fifteen minutes. Well, I've had my fifteen minutes and more, as have Elvis and Marlon and Norman and John. We're still here. We will never die. We're still alive, now and for always. Still alive. Still here. We'll still be here when you, dear reader, are dead and buried. Geddit?

Mmm, yes.

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Thanks to Miles Walker, who gave me this idea during a phone conversation, and thanks, also, to R. S. for his keen editorial eye. Finally, thanks to my son, Shaun, and my daughter, Tanya, for buying me most of the books, as Christmas presents, that I needed for my research. It was a very good, profitable Christmas.

W. A. Harbinson
West Cork, Ireland
2011

Deadlines

W. A. Harbinson

In the offices of Saturnalia Publications, home of the disgraceful ‘male interest’ magazines, *Gents* and *Suave*, staffed by a bunch of highly chauvinistic boozers, pill-poppers, and philanderers, the word ‘deadlines’ strikes true terror to the heart. It means that everyone must get whatever it is out of wherever it is and do some work.

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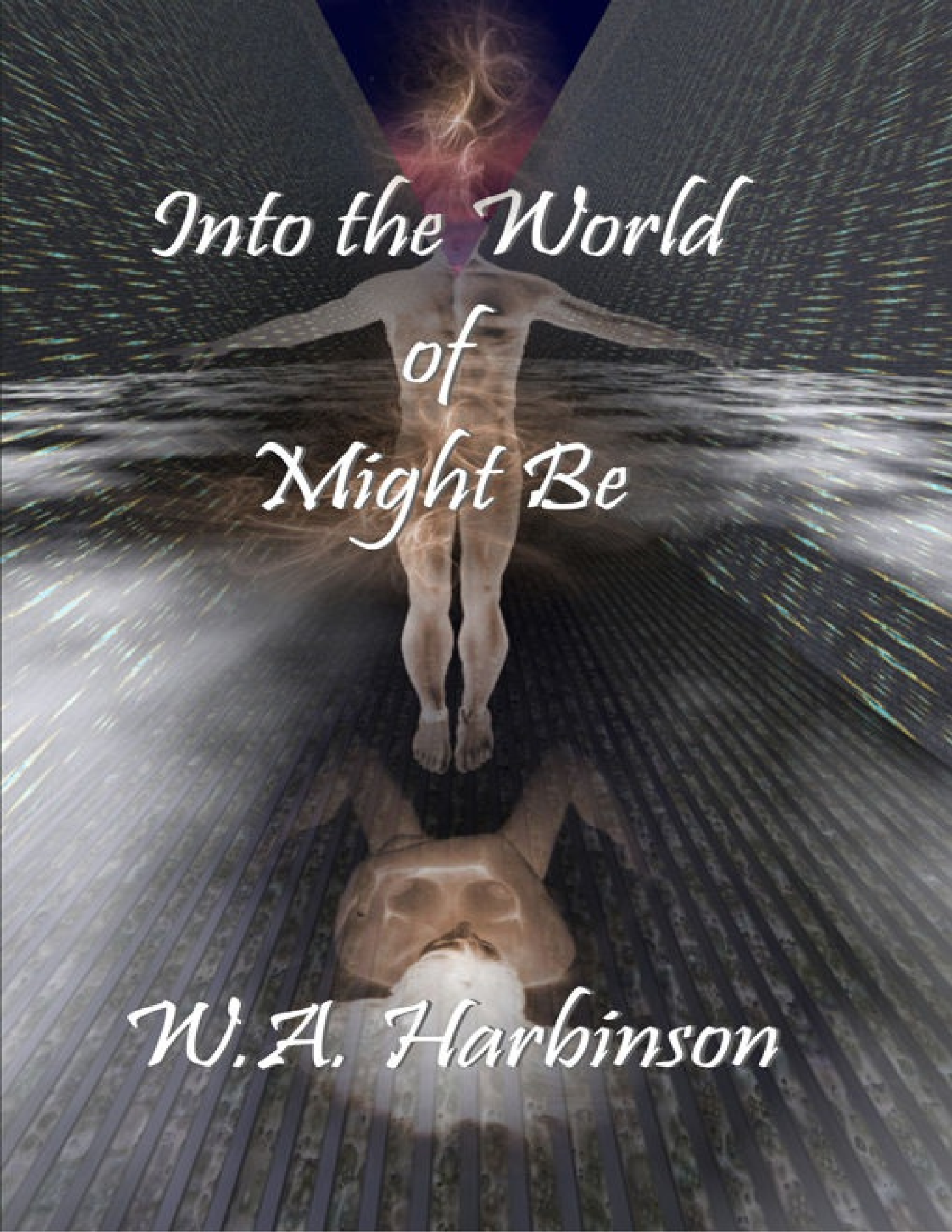
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of
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BookSurge Publishing

First published by Kildee Publications in 2002
This edition published in 2008 by W.A. Harbinson.
www.waharbinson.eu.com

ISBN 1-4196-7639-3

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Two astronauts, a man and a woman, are taking part in a scientific experiment designed to gauge the effects of prolonged isolation and weightlessness on the human body. At first everything runs smoothly, but then things start going wrong. First, the Skylab inexplicably malfunctions, then the astronauts have magical, fearful experiences. But are their experiences real or imagined? Is the Skylab haunted or not? Or are both of them simply going mad?

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Part One: Orbit

'The fairest thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science.'

-Einstein

1

A black hole within the dark void, immense, without depth, its presence only made manifest by the surrounding stars. The stars are bright and unblinking, multitudinous, a dazzling mosaic, sweeping out in all directions around the enormous black hole, beyond time, mocking distance, already dead: a mere illusion of being.

A black hole within the dark void. Around the black hole: star-flecked darkness. Within and beyond the boundless void: total stillness and silence.

The silence is absolute, transcending all known silence: a lack of sound so total it is resonant with its own hybrid presence.

In the beginning is the Nothing. A black hole in a dark void. Around the black hole, the countless stars, already dead, wrapped in silence.

And from nothing… a growth.

Colour is light. In this case, a white light. The angle of incidence equals the angle of reflection, and the faint, hazy light, bouncing off the black hole, illuminates a bleak, jagged surface and fans across its curved edge. The light shimmers and bends. The stars beyond it fade away. Around the left edge of the planet, that black hole now filled with matter, the light of the sun cascades out to form a dazzling crescent.

The black hole is now the moon. It is enormous and hangs in silence. The white crescent splits the darkness, floods across the blistered greyness, and divides the brooding sphere down the middle.

White light and shadow. Black craters and writhing plains. No water, no air, no movement, no life. Motionless, forbidding, the sun’s halo stretched around it, the moon is a colourless desolation curving back towards darkness.

Colour is light. White light is luminous energy. In waves and in particles it bombards the moon's surface, and the electrons break off and streak away to form the void's shifting spectrum: the red and yellow of the sun's corona, the silvery white of Earthshine; and around those, the star-studded night devoid of depth or dimension. Colours blending and interacting. A haunting blue light on grey rock. The blue moves across plains and black craters as the sun fills the darkness.

Now the great sphere is divided: one side dark, the other bright. Monstrous, three-dimensional, a globe split by shadow and light, it is here, still and silent, implacable, dominating the black void.

Space. Endless space. The moon floating in space. Gliding out from its dark side, eighty miles above its surface, a slow-spinning web of silvery metal, traversing the silence.

A Skylab in orbit.

In the void it is a molecule. To our eyes it is immense. A glittering steel web, a shapeless mass of bits and pieces, the Skylab moves around the sun's orbit, reflecting sunlight and Earthlight. It weights 150 tons and could cover a 15-storey building. Like some gigantic metallic insect, like a technological nightmare, it is composed of modules and solar panels and wings, of antennae and interlocking legs and reflectors and hatches. It emerges from the darkness. Sunlight flashes and spreads around it. The Skylab, this home of wire and metal, has become the moon's satellite.

How long has it been up here? A very long time. Every two hours it circles the moon, glides through darkness and light. It passes over the bright side, over the thousands of black craters, over an infinite desolation, over the debris of previous landings, gliding out of the sun and over the bleak, curved terrain and disappearing behind the dark side again.

Silence outside and inside. Stars reflected in a window. White light, the shifting darkness of the cosmos, the windows facing a boundless void.

The Skylab keeps orbiting.

2

Why are we here? We must understand why we are here. We are here because we dream, because reality is not enough, because the problems of Earth and its unresolved injustices are not a large enough excuse for us to stay. We must travel, we must move. The history of man is a tale of movement. We have travelled without rest through the centuries and there must be a reason.

Why are we here? There is nothing but silence here. No air, no life, no promise or denial, and yet we brave the dark side of the moon in pursuit of what know not what. Why? We ask the question. The poor of Earth will ask the question. On Earth there is famine and war, and yet we circle the barren moon.

Questions… and answers… All the illogical, non-rational men. All the men who had to know what lay beyond the haunting seas of their dreams. The Greeks and the Phoenicians, the Spanish and the Portuguese, the obsessed men like Eirikkson and Columbus and de Gama, like Magellan and Cortez and Pizarro, like Drake and then Cook.

There are seas and distant mountains. Their very presence is a challenge. Beyond unseen horizons, on peaks shrouded in cloud, along rivers that flow into the darkness, there are things still unseen. It matters not what they are. The only lure is their existence. Ignoring poverty and hunger, blind to Earth’s

pain and strife, Man needs to view the unknown, to chart the uncharted, to reveal what had previously been concealed and make real the unreal.

Why are we in space? Is it because we are obsessed? Are we here because no logic can contain us or free us from dreaming?

Logic is brutal truth: life's squalor and teeming horrors. Robbery and rape and kidnapping and torture; disease and starvation and slavery and genocide; and the wars, the many wars, more wars than ever before: in north and south Yemen, in North Korea and South Korea, in China and Vietnam, in Iran and Iraq, in Afghanistan and Pakistan and Turkey and Syria, in Israel and Lebanon, in Kampuchea and Indonesia and India and the Philippines, in Angola and Zimbabwe and Uganda and Zaire, in Guatemala and Chile and Ecuador and Peru, in Northern Ireland and El Salvador and South Africa and Mozambique - in all those places and more, across the earth with its burning foliage, with its millions of weeping children, their eyes melting in the sun, there is famine and pestilence, plague and fire and flood... and also, ironically, to a great many shockingly, our ceaseless pursuit of the spiritual mysteries that have yet to be solved.

Logic is brutal truth: the living picture of what we are. We live in a vale of tears and flowing blood, so we look to the future. No amount of carnage can stop us. It may even encourage us. It is likely that life's nightmares are the root of our need to take wing.

And so we are here. We will let space seduce us. There is deprivation and boundless pain on Earth, but we must keep on moving.

So why are we here? The question may not have an answer. But perhaps we are here because, in the words of John F. Kennedy, 'We need men who can dream of things that never were.'

So let us go dreaming.

3

Imagine our astronauts. It is their first week in the Skylab. They are drifting in the womb of a complex machine which itself drifts in the womb of the cosmos. Yes, they are in a womb, both feeling like newborn babies. They frolic in zero gravity, drifting lazily as the Skylab drifts, waving to one-another and smiling and turning in slow, languid somersaults. It is playtime and they are playing. The gestation period is over. They have suffered their initial sickness, their disorientation and primitive fears, and are now like creatures emerging from the darkness to the warmth of the sun, their spirits tentatively rising.

Somersaults and other activities. Drifting up and gliding down. Drifting sideways and spinning and turning, crouched up like large rubber balls. It does something to them: takes them back to their childhood. It briefly pulls them out of the silence of their separate secret thoughts.

Zero gravity is playful. Water drifts in glistening globules. Coloured ink weaves arabesques in the air and drifting cotton forms waving webs. He chases spinning balls. She fiddles with fluttering napkins. They move out of the mid-deck, through the airlock to the flight-deck, hover there in mid-air, a good way from the lower deck, then pass the instrumentation panel and look out from the view-port.

Looking out... at what? Looking out... *What?* Already they have changed, becoming more than they were, and are alive with a sense of themselves that transcends their perceptions. She has short-cropped blond hair; his hair is shaved close to the skull. The Skylab doesn’t spin, so they float. In white suits. Passing windows.

And looking out... At what? At the darkness, the boundless void. Seeing bright stars, grey moon, distant Earth, a burning sun: the littered black

whirlpool of the galaxy that defies our meek logic.

Looking out. *What?* They are changing every minute. Now floating, feeling light and transparent, swimming slowly through stored air.

And changing. Always changing. They are not what they once were. It is their first week in the Skylab and already it is making them unreal.

They are one.

An experiment.

4

I'm getting used to it at last. Actually starting to enjoy it. After the initial strangeness, this freedom: a child's sense of play. He obviously feels the same. Floating past me smiling slightly. Heading for the docking adapter, a tunnel of white steel, through the hatch, into the smaller airlock module.

A man and a woman. Zero gravity and silence. Not silence: something other than that... a constant humming vibration. The air-conditioning machinery. A comforting sound in the silence of space. So quiet and yet the atmosphere so low we can't hear very far.

The nausea has finally gone. Very bad the whole first week. The spacesickness like seasickness (the canals of the inner ear). We had to freeze-dry the vomitus and label it and package it like our urine and excrement and blood. For future medical analysis. In the NASA laboratories. Back on Earth all that distance away, so far away it's unreal. Green-blue through the porthole. The luminous orb of home. Hovering there in the blackness beyond the moon's horizon with the unblinking stars spread all around it... A home rendered mysterious.

No more nausea. Exhilaration instead. Still adjusting to being weightless.

Overshooting and crashing into things and turning lazily and floating. Along the grid floors. Past consoles and instruments. The floors above the upside-down doors in the walls far below.

The secret is in adjusting. To the Skylab and to him. Six months minus one week to go and that could promise anything.

A very odd programme. For once understand the secrecy. No way to explain it to those at home and receive their approval. Yet it has to be done. It is important that we adjust. To the Skylab, to the silence, him to me, me to him; to the mystery and magic of the cosmos, to the moon's chilling lifelessness.

The moon is cold, but it seduces. Devoid of life, it looms like death. And like death, it has a certain strange allure, dominating the thoughts.

Where is he? Exploring somewhere. The man to my woman. To be serviced in the privacy of this spacecraft for another six months. Radio contact forbidden. Except in panic or emergency. A study of isolation and weightlessness with the dead moon for comfort.

5

Zero gravity is dreamlike. To float through air is unreal. The white walls all around him, above, below, swimming lazily, weightless, through the tunnel of the airlock module, past the docking adapter's consoles and instruments and jutting boxes, the walls cylindrical: a huge can on its side, without any real vertical.

Which way is up? The panels curve all around him. And then into the command module, suddenly confused, upside-down, gripping the handrail and trying to orientate himself, watching out for his feet.

Turning around floating. Just above the grid floor. Glancing down through the grids to the lower deck far below, far down (up?) that dizzying well of grids and pipes and barrels, spiralling down, sweeping out in all directions (Which is right? Which is left? Am I moving up or down?), then blinking and turning away quickly, sitting floating on air.

Confusing. Disorientating. Best to concentrate on work. Physics and astrophysics, planetary and stellar astronomy, communications and navigation, botany and electrophoresis, and general life sciences and other disciplines of high technology - enough to fill in the long hours.

Enough? More than that. We have to work on ourselves as well: blood and urine analysis, cell tissue growth morphogenesis, vestibular and cardiovascular function and general physiology -enough to keep the pair of us engaged for the six months ahead.

Keep the feet on the floor. Attach the cleats to the grid. Now standing in the slight crouch of the neutral G position, the magician's invisible chair, his eyes fixed on the gyroscopes. He is a technological man who believes in work and discipline. It is not enough to wallow in the stars: he must also make use of them… The Stellar Astronomy Experiment. The airlock hatches hissing open. He stands there (or sits there) at the console, cranking out the first camera.

Starbright.

Eternal night.

6

One week gone already. It seems longer and shorter. The Earth seems very far away, nonexistent, a mirage. Is she working? I wonder. I'm not sure

she'll last the course. The novelty of the first week must end and then the routine will set in.

Too many repairs already. Things going wrong mysteriously. First one of the cameras, then the air-conditioning machinery, and now, I note, a broken solar panel. Damn NASA's incompetence. Or the universe itself. At times, in the silence, it seems alive with a will of its own.

It's as strange as I now feel, my head tight, my voice nasal. Not a cold, but that's just what it feels like when a man becomes weightless.

And out there, the moon. Dominating the view. And beyond it, rising over its curved rim, the green-blue globe of Earth. No sign of life there. No sign of life anywhere. The stars around the dark side, very bright, never blinking, a silvery cascade spreading out and reaching back to the infinite.

Silence. Silence humming. The air-conditioning machinery working. The white walls of the Skylab, floors above and below, a network of tunnels and modules and airlocks, leading into larger, multilayered rooms and more gleaming white walls.

Our new home.

This laboratory.

We are here to be studied. We package our urine and excrement. We take samples of our own blood, record our own heartbeats, and at night, hanging vertically in the bags, our sleep is constantly monitored. The bunny caps contain electrodes and are wired to various systems. Like monkeys, like rats, like insects under a microscope, we are examined by computers and specialists, our very dreams scrutinized. This environment is perfect for it. A white laboratory: sterilised. The air-conditioning machinery hums through a silence that compliments what is outside.

Where is she? Somewhere else. Probably in the Experiments Room. Either on the ergometer or in the Vestibular Function Experiment - working,

keeping her body in tune, the body I have to use.

At night. Mostly then. We both retain some Earthly habits. Unzipping the sleeping bags and floating out, our limbs colliding and linking. An academic engagement. A scientific masturbation. No romance: just a mutual release; the sexual urge gratified.

We must record all such couplings. Duration and frequency of copulation. Take note of ejaculatory force and the pulse and the heartbeat. We know one another well. Very wise that we were trained. I often wonder what she really thinks about it... if she thinks as I do.

A technician adrift.

7

No more acrobatics. At least only for exercise. Now lying in the Lower-Body Negative Pressure Experiment, secretly frightened of being sucked into space.

Since that terror is always present, she's relieved when it is over. Wriggling out and then floating away, she sees a hatch drifting past her. She reaches out to grab it. The sudden movement makes her spin. She sees the plants sprouting out of the ceiling, the lights shining beneath her. Swinging her arms, she corrects herself. It takes some time to find her vertical. Now the lights are above her, the plants back on the floor, and she drifts across the room and reaches down and pulls herself toward a grid. She settles down, crouching slightly. It is a foetal position. Already she feels the changes in herself: the almost imperceptible increase in height and visible weight loss.

Earth is framed by the porthole: a glowing globe in the black sky. The Milky Way, dazzling, soaring outwards, larger stars red and yellow. The constellation of Gemini. The red star, Eta Geminorum. Darkness and light, endless night, the boundless realm of the cosmos.

She studies the ergometer. Her wristwatch is drifting above it. And above that rotating chair, a floating screw, a bolt drifting and turning.

Objects go adrift mysteriously. It's hard to tell where they've come from. In zero gravity they work loose and drift away, floating to and fro spectrally. Blame it on NASA. Even Houston could be careless. She releases the cleats and floats away, through a large open hatch, then lets herself glide gently down, into the well of the main lab.

Immediate disorientation. Drifting across the wardroom. The table is on the ceiling and books grow out of the floor, their pages fanning open and waving: exotic plants in an alien world.

She turns around to find her vertical, then sees him floating towards her. He has a deeply tanned, roughly handsome face, his eyes grey and intelligent. He settles down with her at the table. The room is now the right way up. They talk about routine matters, jobs done and work to do, as they sit on invisible chairs and partake of their meal.

The food, which has been dehydrated, has to be reconstituted with water. The water is injected into wet packs, then the packs are opened with scissors which, tied to a string overhead, drift away when not being used.

They scoop the food from the bags with silver spoons and fill their mouths with the sticky paste. What is it? Hard to tell. Cold cereal, meat and vegetables. If they put the spoons too quickly to their mouths, the sticky food also floats away.

Sometimes he curses. Just occasionally she sighs. At times they will smile at one-another.

They both speak in high voices.

8

A strange situation. I'm still trying to adjust. He is handsome and pleasant in a bland way, concealing himself. A work-orientated man. The new breed: the astronauts. Even in the night, during sex, he does not give too much away. A functional endeavour. Keeping the tensions at bay. I've been trained to do no more than that for him and I must not forget it. Yet how long can we continue? What good is our training in this isolation? If we touch, if we

share our breath and skin, it must lead to a change. My woman to his man. His penis in my vagina. They have put us together to negate sexual stress, but we cannot reduce it all to biology because we aren't made that way.

They have insisted that I keep notes. I am a voyeur when I do so. Though a scientist, I am still humiliated, wondering what they will think of it.

Does he know about the notes? I think he does, almost certainly. I think they've told him to keep notes as well and that he does it with diligence.

I could hate him for that.

9

Their bodies intertwined, the distant eye of Earth, the alignment of flesh with the arc of the moon, their cold burning breath… even these things are nothing compared to the slow glide through an emptiness that can never be measured.

He knows. It is part of him. All existing, exists within him. Floating outside in space, hearing only his own breathing, his heartbeat, the white spider of the ship in the vortex of eternity… the cosmos.

Yes, it is this. And it moves him too deeply. More than childhood, more than dreams, more than fleeting ambitions; more than anything that ever was or would be, it enslaves him and uses him.

He cannot escape.

10

Night. The probing penis. She feels his skin at her lips. She draws him in as they float there in the darkness, in the womb of the white ship. Their bodies turn in the air. Already bored, she experiments. He is amused, his fingers running through her hair, the short blond hair, dishevelled. The moist licking of her tongue. The pale outline of her throat. In the silence, the soft humming of the air-conditioning, their fingers stroke and then search. He arches back, thrusting forward. Her nostrils flare at his loins. Turning over, spiralling lazily in thin air, they think of things far away. The stippled rivers of Earth. The green fields and burnished hills. These are memories that enshrine them in their flesh and make them cling to their history. His probing penis at her throat. Her fingers kneading his buttocks. Coiling dreamlike, the white walls in darkness, they are reams of smoke drifting. The dark side of the moon. Around a black hole: countless stars. She drifts sideways, her green eyes too bright, reflecting dark night and starlight. Now. He touches gently. His fingers trace her ribs and spine. She floats beneath him, licks his stomach and thighs, her hands rubbing, cajoling. No involvement. He thinks this. His grip is firm and assured. She comes to him, legs coiling around him, seeks him out, draws him in. More thoughts from far away. The days of training, the desert sands. The awareness that they must give and take with a cool objectivity. Now. She smiles and strokes him. Now. His touch reveals her. This moment: the breaking of all oaths, his low gasp of submission. Their tongues' warm saliva. Their lips: the breath mingling. They spin over, turning languidly in the air, arms and legs intertwined. He licks her throat and breasts. Her nipples stiffen and slide along him. She drops lower and trails her hands along his spine and takes him into her mouth. The easiest way in zero gravity. Other ambitions severely limited. He looks down, his hands

holding her head, a soft light on her blond hair. His eyes close in surrender. Behind his eyelids, the moon and stars. He feels the spasm, opens out to the void, then drifts away with a shudder, his sperm swimming around her.

They sleep separately.

Vertically.

11

The laboratory is superb: a masterpiece of design. A few faults here and there, the obvious mistakes of mortal men, but for all that it must be recorded that it *is* an achievement.

I'm not sure she would agree. Sense a certain antipathy there. Have noticed her slight annoyance at different things, at what seems inconvenient. Odd. A feminine trait. Earthly expectations returning. I would have thought that such feelings are well behind her, but such isn't the case. The lure of home is always present. I see her eyes fixed on Earth. Only three weeks in space and already she yearns for a normal life.

Understandable, perhaps. I want only the cosmos. She does, too, but it doesn't enslave her as, in dreams, it does me. Rarely stop thinking about it. The cosmos swims through my mind. The black painted on black, the wheeling stars, the huge suns beyond time.

It always existed here, within me. When a child, my skull was boundless. With eyes closed I would see streaming darkness, the bright explosion of galaxies. To fly, to be in flight. A hunger close to the rapacious. High school, university, then West Point and the Air Force, then Columbus, San Marcos and Nevada, then Korea and Houston. To fly, to be in flight. The white clouds and blue sky. From California to Labrador, from Greenland to France, then the USAF Experimental Flight Test Pilot School at the Edwards Air Force Base, California, hidden deep in the desert.

How could she understand? How could *anyone* understand? There is nothing in the past to sustain me; there is only the future.

To fly, to be in flight. The apocalyptic flames of Houston. The fierce bedlam that comes from the smoke and dissolves unreality. A rocket ship in motion. The bloody gauze of the upper atmosphere. White light and heat,

deafening thunder, then the vast sweep of outer space. Silence. Utter stillness. Black painted on black. Then the Life Support System, stars reflected in the Perspex, drifting gently above the white steel of the ship, in the void of the cosmos.

All embattled dreams reconciled. The past and future as one. The great hazed blue-white globe of Earth can no longer speak to me. Five months still to go. I want more... and more than that. In the night, as our bodies find solace, I see only the universe. The body dies with each new day. Desire decreases every night. I think of work, of the mysteries to be unravelled, of the stars to be numbered.

How can she understand? I drift away and become more helpless. Now I must look at the moon, at its crater, and find out what is hidden there.

Tsiolkovsky.

The possible.

12

She travels down through his eyes, wanting to see what he observes. He has become hypnotised by the dark side of the moon and she needs to understand what is happening there.

The moon is forbidding. A dead, crenellated brain. An achromatic terrain, a mass of craters and blisters, sunlight and shadow at play in a grey, spectral dream.

She looks down and shivers. A dead landscape fills the lens. Studying it, she is repulsed and mesmerised by that stark, total lifelessness. It looks cold. He feels cold. The cold encircles her heart. She sees the black eye of Tsiolokovsky staring up, a giant hole with no bottom.

It is dead. (Is it dead?) She looks down again and wonders. Its black centre has melted over the mountain slopes that contain it, as if once it had boiled up from its core and poured over the rim. Volcanic? Very likely. Not all craters are caused by bombardment. She looks down to see that black eye staring up, a darker blackness below it.

A black hole in the moon. At least that's what it looks like. A black hole leading through to the other side: to the deep of the cosmos.

Is that what he sees down there?

13

We are changing and I feel it. We are not what we once were. A loss of hormones and red blood cells and electrolytes, our faces puffy, legs thinning. How long have we been up here? Is it three weeks or four? I've lost track and I'm not taking notes because something is happening here.

I want to press the Panic Button and speak to those on Earth. There's something happening and I don't know what it is, but I see it in him. We are drifting apart. The moon has totally hypnotised him. He sits in the solar console all day, his head bent to the telescope. It isn't good enough: I can't live here by myself. I don't even want sex anymore, because he's not really here. I think he's down in that crater. I hear him muttering as he works. When I speak to him, he looks strangely at me and then turns away. He's now obsessed with that black hole.

Tsiolkovsky: the giant crater. A black wound surrounded by blisters. The dark side of the moon is a leprous domain, a bleak terrain, cold and forbidding, reflected now in his eyes... No, in his manner.

There is something happening here, but I can't work out what it is. I want

to turn on the radio, speak to Earth, hear the song of the static. Even that would be music. Even static would be contact. I don't think I can live with this silence if he withdraws completely.

How could I? It's all wrong. It's not working out as planned. Once adrift only from Earth, we're now adrift from one another - just as things drift to and fro across the ship, from white wall to white wall. We're drifting freely, like the debris. Like the debris, we are aimless. Straight ahead, a screwdriver floats trembling, as if searching for work. It spirals gracefully in thin air. I wonder where it's come from. He lacks discipline, I lack discipline, *we* lack discipline as the rest falls apart.

It's so easy to forget. We forget and things start drifting. They are items to be regarded as dangerous, but how can I tell him this? No point in trying – I'm too frightened. I suffer panic and paranoia. Fluids migrate to the upper body and head as red eyes display changes. Physiological or psychological? Does it matter or not? My own paranoia takes many forms and will not be a help.

Sudden fears and inhibitions. An unexpected feminine coyness. Making use of the Waste-Management Compartment, standing upright, I cringe. How to do it in this position? How to parcel it when it is done? To be packaged and labelled and stored and then later examined. By whom? That's the question. By a stranger or a friend? What part of me will be revealed when they examine my excrement? Not a question asked lightly. Not a commonplace conjecture. When a term like 'Waste-Management' is used, it leads to primitive fears.

Three or four weeks have passed. The exhilaration has gone. Now too much time for thinking, for the mirrors of the mind, for a self-examination that mocks and then deadens the heart. Does he feel the same as I do? Do I feel this way because I'm female? No, I've been trained just like him, and

that must count for something. It must be the silence. I put it down to that. I lay the blame on the silence and the moon, on his lust for that crater.

What lies in Tsiolkovsky?

14

Selenologically and geologically the moon is not dead. There may have been volcanic activity. There may now be gas emissions. Given this, there could be microclimates, and life might exist.

What form of life? What does it matter? What is life but that which exists and perpetuates new life?

The moon's craters are dried seas. Those dried seas are filled with history. Since the long-vanished lunar seas existed, there might still be some form of life.

Perhaps? We say *yes*. Certain forms of life can survive in a vacuum. Microscopic life can survive anywhere and in climates bizarre to us.

Strange radiations in space. Solar gas and magnetic fields. The whole cosmos is alive with light and sound that has not yet been captured. And the moon, the haunting moon. The pale eye of our dreams. The moon is scarred by lava flow, by what might be riverbeds; it gives signs of volcanic outgassing, other signs of a vanished world.

What lies in the lunar soil? What thrives in its dirt? Was there fire, was there heat, was there condensation and water? And is so, was there something that lived and gave life before passing on? What is matter? What is life? What flows out of Tsiolkovsky? The mountains around the crater are brighter than the crater's black vomitus.

He looks down upon that crater. He sees the dark of the space beyond. He looks down on Tsiolkovsky, that black painted on black; looking down on the moon and then through it, back to space and the cosmos.

It is born in his mind.

15

The telescope's bright prisms. Distortions of light and shadow. The black hole and the blistered earth around it, brooding mountains, unmoving dust. It is quiet here in the console. I no longer played taped music. Looking down on the black hole, on Tsiolkovsky, I need silence and privacy. There's something down there, I'm certain. I'm not certain, but I think so. She told me that I'm obsessed and she's right, yet I feel it's important.

What is it? I don't know. I don't even know why I started. Photographs… I was taking photographs when the black hole enslaved me. No point in asking why. The root of obsession now runs too deep. My rigorous training, my pragmatism, is betrayed when I squint through the telescope.

Nothing. A black hole. I see it more clearly in dreams. Feeling more tired with each passing day because the dreams keep me restless. Dreaming always about Tsiolkovsky. The black hole, the sun inside it. Drifting down through Tsiolkovsky and out again, to where the sun fills the heavens.

Awesome. Overwhelming. Fierce heat and incandescence. An immense sphere of white gas and black spots and streaming filaments; the latter flaring up into the corona and dropping back in bright arcs. Great bubbles within the holocaust, some as large as the Earth or moon. Inside and between the bursting bubbles, pouring light, swimming colours. Heat beyond comprehension. Explosive power beyond measuring. The gas geysers up and leaps and explodes and then reforms as more bubbles. This sun is pure energy. It is unbelievably violent. A universe on its own, burning itself into extinction, it is dazzling with motion and colour. Cataclysmic. Omniscient.

Thus do I view it. I am outside and inside. Flaming gases belching out into space, lightning flashes surrounding me. Seeing what? Some strange patterns. The blinding dance of electrons. An expression of pure energy and

force, illuminating the heavens. Then retreating through the black hole. Drawn back through in my dreams. Awakening, looking down, seeing Tsiolkovsky… The black hole. The Nothing.

The dream and the reality: one exists within the other. I am no longer sure of the difference as my thoughts slip and slide. Now in the solar console. Photographing in invisible wavelengths. The momentum-control gyros spinning outside; the bright stars in great clusters. What is real? What is unreal? My harsh breathing fills the silence. Coming around the dark side of the moon: an immense arc of silvery light. Sunshine and Earthrise. Blue shadows on grey rocks. Gliding over the moon, the stark horizon, the stunning cosmos, seeing the eclipse of the sun by the Earth, a dazzling circle of fire.

Is it all in my mind?

16

Floating through an airlock module. Gliding along a clean white tunnel. Passing gas tanks and ventilating equipment and on into the workshop. An upper and lower deck. Triangular grids and fuel tanks. She finds her vertical and floats across to the trash airlock and flushes her rubbish down. A spasm of fear. She thinks the airlock might malfunction. If it did, they would be swamped in their own rubbish and that would finish it all.

Why the fear? It's never happened. She urgently pushes herself away. She swims back across the workshop, hearing the humming of the air-conditioning, and is struck by her unexpected lack of logic and surrender to morbid fears.

Stars glitter outside. The sun's fire rings a black Earth. She drops carefully

through a hatch and drifts down to land on the lower deck. This is the living quarters. The sleeping bags hang from the walls. An empty spacesuit bobs gently above the floor, filled with air, looking lifelike.

Ghosts. The inexplicable. Something snaps and whips past her. She gasps, twisting away, feeling fear, and sees it swinging around her, wriggling like a beached fish.

It's one of the bungee cords: a length of elastic with hooks fixed to it. It snapped loose and shot across the room as if fired from a pistol. If it had struck her, it would have lacerated her face and possibly taken an eye out.

Frightened, she stares at it. The cord wriggles in thin air. The hooks whip up and down before her eyes as her beating heart settles down.

Damn NASA and their carelessness. Damn the Skylab and its mysteries. Equipment malfunctions mysteriously, screws and nuts come apart, bolts snap loose for no apparent reason and drift to and fro, glittering.

The bungee cord stops its wriggling, then drifts gently past her gaze. She looks out through a porthole at the Earth, a black disc ringed with fire. Her head fills with the past. (How long ago was her past?) Pretty houses in neat streets, painted doors behind fences, sprinklers on parched lawns in the sunlight, sounds of laughter and play.

An Air Force camp in a wilderness.

When and where had the past begun? Did it start in the desert sands? Did she start losing herself when she first met him in that singular intimacy?

They had trained her to serve him. Prepared her for isolation. In a secrecy so complete it was unreal, they had levelled her history.

Yet something had been missed. He now rejects her advances. He now sleeps in the solar console, on the wall, his face turned toward the moon outside.

The giant crater, Tsiolkovsky. The dark side of a barren moon. He now sleeps with his face turned toward it, as if bowing in prayer.

No, she cannot take it. She was not prepared for this. Thus she glides across the room, glancing sideways, still fearful of flying things. Then the Waste-Management Compartment. Her menstrual blood flowing. When finished, she withdraws the bag and seals it and labels it.

Let them study her shrinking form.

17

I do not belong here. I belong to the Earth. I'm a woman and I'm made of flesh and blood, and I need my own history. He doesn't need the same. He sees only the future. A child of technology, a pure prodigy of science, he would brave the far corners of the cosmos without once looking back. That's the difference between us. It will *always* be the difference. I go to his body as I drink of the Earth, but he uses me as he would the universe: to unravel a mystery.

Now even that is unnecessary. His one lust is for the cosmos. He looks down upon the moon, his eyes glazed, his thoughts far beyond this place. I don't know what he is thinking. He insists that it's nothing special. Yet at night, when I creep to the console, he is hanging there, twitching. His eyes open and close. He threshes restlessly in the sleeping bag. I hear him muttering, but I don't know what he says, and I retreat when he jerks awake.

I should make radio contact.

And yet I can't do that. He won't let me do it. He insists that nothing's wrong - and then turns away to leave me with more silence. But something *is* happening. I just don't know what it is. After only two months, something's happening, and I can't get to grips with it.

What is it? I can't tell. We have four months still to go. We have been here for two months, we have four months still to go, and already we are changing dramatically and fear fills each moment.

My thoughts... can't control them. I keep repeating the same statements. I keep repeating the same thoughts in my mind, my head spinning, exploding. I must try to control it. Make the best of a bad thing. Keep my peace and let him do what he wants and pray he comes to his senses.

I cannot make sense of it. He was the best of all the astronauts. His discipline must surely have been enormous, but now he seems quite demented. Always studying the moon and stars. Muttering constantly about Tsiolkovsky. Photographs it with ultraviolet rays, studies grey rocks, the mountain peaks. All dead. Ruined forever. The photographs show the truth. Yet he hangs in his sleeping bag, his head bowed, the moon below him, often opening his bloodshot eyes to look down upon that curving dark wasteland.

I know he dreams a lot. He mutters constantly in his sleep. He dreams no longer of sex or the Earth; he sees only the universe. What lures him out there? He has seen it all before. He is now like a man in search of God or some other Absolute.

The walls of the console are covered with photographs. They are all of that crater. They all look the same and yet he studies them as if at an altar.

Now he's studying the sun. Now he photographs that as well. Photographed in ultraviolet light, it is a black-peppered soup. White gas flecked with black spots. Streams of helium sweeping around it. One plume is half-a-million miles long and he finds it intriguing.

He has started drawing the sun and moon. The sketches are scattered around his feet. It is difficult to tell the difference between the two, since he draws them the same way.

His doodling is chaotic. The lines are desperate and uncontrolled. First the sun or the moon, then the black hole of Tsiolkovsky, then lines radiating out from the crater, forming spirals and circles.

He must think there's a connection. It's hard to gauge just *what* he thinks. Now he's fascinated by the sun and the moon, by curving lines that lead nowhere. The spiralling lines resemble bubbles. No, not bubbles: not quite circular. Trailing outward, they are more like amoebae as viewed through a microscope.

What does it all mean? What goes on in his mind? He is on his hands and knees in the console, drawing furiously, blindly.

When I drift forward, he looks up, then waves me away. I drift back and stop my flight with a handrail, hold it tight, keep on watching. He appears not to notice. Above his bent back: a window. In the window: the eclipse of the sun by the Earth. All around them and above them, the stars, the glittering web of the universe.

I should make radio contact.

Part Two: Possibilities

'*Round about what is, lies a whole mysterious world of might be, a psychological romance of possibilities and things that do not happen.'*

-Longfellow

18

What is real? What is unreal? What is madness and what is sanity? Is it true that a man must be mad if he sees the invisible? Life does not end with our senses. What we perceive is not the Whole. Beyond what we see, what we feel, what we hear, lies another world of colour and light, containing life that defies our gaze. That world is very real, but indifferent to our presence. It continues all around us and within us and it often feeds off us. In this sense, we are blinkered. We truly see and feel little. There are colours and sounds and vibrations and organisms that exist beyond our limited comprehension and have always been there.

Life is finite and infinite. It defies space and duration. It mocks all our theories of shape and dimension and time. What is time but Man's invention? Are not all dimensions relative? Do our fellow human beings really exist, or do we simply project them?

Reflect now on the human being. He cannot exist as a physical entity. The human body is composed of molecules that drift and collide like the particles in our own perceived cosmos: there are no solid men. Even our flesh is

incorporeal, with other worlds passing through it. In our skin, in our blood, in our bones, a rich, microscopic form of life thrives. And within it, other life, defying our eyes and microscopes; a life of dazzling, overwhelming complexity, passing through us, oblivious.

Each living thing is a universe. Within that universe: more life. Given this, the human being is no less than a self-contained cosmos, as boundless as outer space.

What is real and what is unreal? What exists and what does not? If the mind is the arbiter of all that we perceive, then whatever exists in the mind must be assessed as Reality. The dream and the actual: is there a difference between the two? Might it not be true to say that what springs forth from the mind is, by simply having been imagined, as real as a memory?

And what is memory but something lived? It still exists, though it is gone. It exists, or lives, in retrospection, in thought, and is as real as the present.

Think, also, of conjecture. Just how real is conjecture? Indeed, what is conjecture but the future in the present? A future as immediate as the present while it is held in the human mind.

The past and the future: two simultaneous realities. Between the two lies the present, always past, never actual; every second of the instant an advance from the past into the future.

Thus the present is a mirage. Only past and future are real. The past and the future are as actual as dreams - and all exist as reality.

The only reality is in the mind. Dreams are thus a form of being. By dreaming, by remembering, by speculating, we expand that reality. Therefore what we dream, we live; what we imagine has actually happened. Once we think of an event, it exists and will stay with us always.

By this reasoning, all concepts change. What we think is where we are. What is real is what we dream, what we imagine and project - and by these

terms, the only real world is the one we create.

There is no single reality. Each person creates his own. Given this, there is no sanity or madness, no real or unreal.

Only that which *is.*

19

Imagine our astronauts. They are changing every minute. Their pulses are twenty beats lower, their heart contractions are much slower, and they drift about in an ethereal, dreamlike way, like divers under the sea. Put it down to lack of gravity, the price paid for weightlessness. Eyes bloodshot, faces puffy, legs thinner and skin too pale, they are also taller and more imbalanced than before - and not nearly as fit. Their red blood cells are changing shape, they've lost calcium and electrolytes, and their bones are brittle to a dangerous degree, their muscles slack, aching constantly.

Zero gravity has its affect. The silence also has its affect. In the large, womb-shaped rooms of the Skylab, the silence is resonant. They are *aware* of the silence. The air-conditioning reminds them of it. This subdued background humming is a mockery to their chill isolation. Isolated from the Earth. From daily human contact. Once just that... now isolated from one another, bringing strangeness and tension.

The moon's horizon shifts constantly. Earth rises and falls beyond it. What was home is now a luminous, green-blue globe, hovering out there in black night. All black but for the stars, multitudinous, unblinking; and the sun, a distant orb of fire and heat, pouring light through the void.

This is home.

A laboratory.

20

He cannot tolerate the lunar console. He suddenly finds it repugnant. The haunting black hole of Tsiolkovsky obsesses him to the point of mild lunacy. I must not let this happen. He thinks so and feels better. With a sigh, feeling human again, he takes down all the photographs. They are bundled together and then filed. He collects the drawings from the floor. There are spirals and loops and curving lines, which make him think of amoebae.

What has led him to draw them? A temporary aberration? Glancing down at the moon, the ringed craters and their shadows, he shivers as if shaking off a ghost and then closes the airlock hatch.

He drifts out of the solar console, through an oval-shaped door, glides along a white tunnel, passing a ring of gas tanks, and eventually arrives at the larger clutter of the workshop. She is floating under the grid ceiling, spiralling languidly in the air. Somersaulting, her lengthening blond hair coils around her pale face. He hangs in space, observing. Her body turns in the air. She seems strange to him, an alien in flight, not at all recognisable.

She does not float alone. Drifting debris surrounds her. The air is filled with clothing, with knives and forks and spoons, with bolts and glinting nuts and screws, with slide-rules and pencils. They all drift magically, gliding above and below her, signifying that his neglect has been ruinous and things are falling apart.

Still involved in her callisthenics, she hasn't noticed his presence. Turning slowly in the air, her hair flowing, limbs adrift, she seems removed from a sense of her own being, too immersed in a private dream.

Disturbed, he glides to her, stops beside her, speaks her name. His voice is high-pitched and disembodied, seeming to come from outside him. She blinks and stares at him. They both float there in silence. He can see his twin

reflection in her eyes, but otherwise they are dull. What is happening? he wonders. What is going on between us? She stares at him, no smile on her face, then drifts away from him. He follows her down. They pull themselves close to the table. They sit there, trying to smile at one-another, the silence humming around them.

Neither knows what to say.

21

I am truly so sorry. I wish I could say those words. I wish you could understand what it was like: what that crater did to me. I don't understand it myself and am ashamed that it happened. I was obsessed and I don't know what caused it, since I saw nothing down there. It's just another lunar crater, caused by meteorite bombardment. It might even have been volcanic long ago, but that makes little difference. What matters is that it's dead. Like the whole moon, it is barren. I must bear this in mind when I see your wide eyes fixed upon me. I must try to be sensible.

What caused the obsession? That's something I cannot answer. I'm ashamed when I think of my behaviour and can hardly believe it. I'm an educated man, experienced and highly disciplined. I have been in space many times before and it never affected me this way. Was I temporarily insane? No, I can't believe that. Yet what did I hope to find down there in the eye of the crater? I never saw anything. I don't remember seeing a thing. In fact, I don't remember much of it at all. It was all a strange dream.

Tsiolkovsky: the giant crater. And the black spots on the sun. I went right through the crater to the sun and saw the dance of the molecules. The drawings: the loops and circles. Was it my hand that made them? Black

craters and a mass of swirling lines, the sun and moon, both the same. I dreamt of such things. The sun and moon became as one. I saw the black spots on the sun as great chimneys out of which the solar winds rushed. Then travelling down through those black tunnels. Streams of light and radiant colours. The mighty roaring of the elements, the bubbles dancing and exploding, the gas reforming as more bubbles and reflecting my multiplied form.

What kind of dreams were those? Certainly not my normal dreams. I wish I could find out what it was that sent me into that hell. And undoubtedly it was that. An unprecedented nightmare. I couldn't sleep or think straight - I felt insane, my head caught in a vice. What did I hope to find there? What did I actually photograph? I photographed the crater, Tsiolkovsky. Nothing more. Nothing less.

I must put this behind me.

Work. An escape. I will reorganise the Skylab. The whole place is filled with debris and it's dangerous and that must be corrected. We need order. Commitment. We must not detour again. If it happens again, which I doubt, I'll make radio contact.

There's nothing out there but space.

22

He is wrong. There's something out there. I now know this for a fact. Last night, when he was sleeping (and peacefully, at last), I was drawn to the darkened solar console, where I gazed out the window.

The dark side of the moon. The dark side is not dark. I looked down upon the moon, upon Tsiolkovsky, and it seemed to stare back at me.

I must admit, I was frightened. That enormous, pitch-black pupil! Staring up as if taking me in: a black pupil in blue light. And around it, the mountains: a fawn iris around the pupil. For a moment, I thought the iris had opened wider, to let the pupil expand. The eye of the moon. Beneath that eye, what lies in wait? I felt suddenly that the moon was alive, so I turned away, terrified.

Space. Endless space. The constant brilliance of the stars. Not just white as they had been from Earth; here they had different colours. Red, yellow and purple. The whole spectrum on display. And far away, across that black, expanding void, the sun's fierce, scorching light.

We cannot look directly at the sun, since its unfiltered radiance is blinding. Instead, I looked at the moon, at its crater, then stared straight ahead. Emptiness. Silence. The nearest star is beyond our reach. I felt the void opening out to draw me in and started flying towards it.

Sudden fear. Blinding panic. I blinked repeatedly and shook my head. A rushing noise, a hissing sibilance in my ears, the flaring up of fierce light. The fear passed, leaving silence. I was sweating and shaking. There before me was a silhouetted tree, a swirling white light behind it.

Fear and disbelief returned. I felt the handrail in my hand. Closing my eyes, I tried to shake myself awake, but then I opened my eyes again. A silhouetted tree, quivering out there in space. Behind it: an enormous, silvery disc, a giant plate standing upright. It was spinning and glowing, and kept fading in and out. Then I heard the rushing sibilance as my head exploded, filling with pain, and I closed my eyes and felt myself dropping through a dark, roaring well.

Nausea. Deepening fear. A fierce, obliterating revulsion. Then it stopped, the void freezing, and I blinked again and looked out. There was nothing out there but the night and the cold, brilliant stars.

Silence? Not really. The television was crackling. It was normally used for viewing the sun, and it had turned itself on.

I felt cold, though I was sweating. I certainly felt that I was dreaming. Staring at the large screen, at the sun's magnified, mottled surface, I saw a line of multicoloured coils stretched across it, spinning furiously, radiantly.

I was frightened. And paralysed. The coils seemed to be transparent. They were spinning very quickly, glowing brightly, changing colours every second, making it seem that they could be viewed simultaneously from both ends - a trick to tease the eye and brain - becoming tunnels, then whirlpools.

I tried in vain to escape. The spinning coils became my world. I felt nausea, a hideous revulsion, and heard sound rushing in. Voices. Roaring winds. Other noises beyond normal sound. I was shaking, exploding out from my centre as a fierce pain cut through me. Then oblivion. Velvet darkness. Sudden silence and streaming stars. I awakened and found myself still in the console, floating under the grids, the screen below me blanked out.

There is something out there. It's not in me: it's out there. I don't know what it is, but it's real.

Perhaps he just didn't see it.

23

He sleeps well and feels better, so buries his shame in hard work. He drifts around the workshop, putting things back where they belong, then wraps his legs around the legs of a table and starts writing notes.

He is far behind in this task, not having written a note in days. Thinking back on how that time was spent, he feels flustered and guilty. What can he write now? Would not all of it seem like madness? On the other hand, if he fails to write the truth, it might haunt him forever.

The situation is novel to him, unexpected and therefore daunting. He tries to put the truth to words, but cannot do it, so puts his pen down. The effort had been too much. Now he has a headache. He puts his face in his hands and almost sobs and wonders what the date is. They have been up here a long time. He's no longer sure how long. He feels that he should make radio contact and explain it to Earth.

Yet he simply can't do it. It would seem too much like failure. Feeling ill, experiencing a pang of dread, he puts the notebook away.

He buries his shame in hard work. Runs a check on the whole Skylab. Replaces some filter screens, realigns the guidance system, checks storage batteries and cameras and gyros, cleans the telescope tower. Then he checks the growing crystals. Untouched by gravity, they are not deformed. Through the microscope, they are taking on new properties, which he cannot define.

All things, he realises, even crystals, are different in weightlessness.

Botany and biology. Solar astronomy and metals processing. There is a lot of work to do in the Skylab and he is eager to do it. Also, he exercises, trying to get fit again. He performs athletics in thin air, somersaulting, body-stretching, then he climbs onto the ergometer and has a real workout.

His leg muscles have deteriorated. His bones are losing calcium. Thus, when he has finished, he climbs off with his legs aching badly.

He glides across the Experiments Room, clambers into a metal barrel, and fastens a rubber skirt around his waist to seal himself in. He is lying horizontally, his legs sealed inside the barrel. The air inside the barrel will be vented into space and the vacuum will draw his blood back to his legs, just as gravity would.

He pulls the switch for negative pressure. There is a fierce, unnatural roaring. He feels his legs being sucked into space as if down a giant throat.

He cries out and struggles wildly. The rubber skirt shrieks in protest. The barrel shudders and roars and reverberates as his legs are sucked out. Whipped by fear, he bellows and wriggles. His stomach is sucked into the barrel. He screams and hammers frantically on the barrel, then claws at the switch. The barrel shudders and roars, sucking him in up to his chest. He feels the throat of the monster, the pressure, around his bruised legs and torso. The barrel roars as he screams. He claws in vain at the switch. He has a vision of the deadly realms of space and himself drifting endlessly.

Then he sees a feminine hand. It sweeps down across his eyes. The switch is pushed up, the roaring stops, and his body breaks free.

He is neck-deep in the barrel with the rubber skirt almost choking him. He just lies there, looking up at her green gaze, his choking fear twice reflected.

What happened?

What was it?

24

He is frightened. It is obvious. He is being very diligent. He keeps away from the Experiments Room, but otherwise he is working. I pretend not to notice. Nevertheless, I am worried. He should go back to the Experiments Room and continue his exercises. He is not very healthy. He is crouched up more than usual. His eyes are more bloodshot than mine are and his skin looks transparent.

What was it? Perhaps an accident. Though I don't think he believes that. He is frightened, but I still don't know why. I want to know what is out there.

After it happened, we saw nothing. At least we *think* we saw nothing. There was a light (or what we thought was a light) like the tail of a comet. It was gone before we blinked. We really couldn't describe it. We just looked out the windows, at the void, and then stared disbelievingly at one another.

He hasn't talked much since then. He is working with great diligence. He doesn't shave and his hair is growing longer, but at least he is active. I don't understand his fear. I need to know what is out there. The revulsion I once felt is gone, and now I just want to know.

I don't think *he* wants to know. I think he wants to forget it. I think the accident of the Lower-Body Negative Experiment has scared him tremendously. He tries not to show anything. Now he buries himself in work. I don't think he comprehended fear before, which must make it difficult.

No matter: I have to watch him. I don't know what he might do. I only know that in the night, when I go to the solar console, he's groaning and muttering in his sleep, as he did a few days ago.

I enjoy the solar console. He doesn't know I go up there. I am finding it very difficult to sleep, and the console relaxes me.

I gaze down on the moon a lot, feeling drawn to Tsiolkovsky. I look down and seeing its pupil staring up, the iris opening and closing. It is black. Without depth. The shadows make me think of light. I look across at the sun and the stars, beyond which is the universe.

It is safe to observe the sun through the camera. Magnified, it is a bowl of peppered salt. The salt is glowing and the pepper appears to shift around the fierce solar flares. It is a world of heat and energy. Not cold like the moon. It is bright and the moon seems very dark, yet they both look the same.

I feel drawn to both of them.

I don't know why he's frightened. What we are is what's out there. The green-blue-white globe of Earth, the curved horizon of the moon, the immense, flaring eye of the sun - all are one and the same. I don't know why I think this. I don't think it: I feel it. I am drawn to the console, to that void beyond the window, and I stand there for hours and stare out and feel as if I am glowing.

Is it real or unreal?

25

I must watch her. She is changing. She is losing her grip. She drifts about the Skylab all day long, in a trance, smiling distractedly. No help. I am on my own. She never does any work. When I speak, she just blushes and floats away, spiralling languidly, aimlessly.

I should make radio contact. I've tried, but I can't do it. When I reach for the switch, my hand freezes and my heart starts to race. Shame? I'm not sure. I don't understand at all. My hand freezes and I turn away and drift off and return to my work.

It’s the only solution. My one refuge is in work. I must work until it’s time to return to Earth, though I’m not sure when that is. No sense of time at all. One day drifts into another. Lots of dreams, though I’m not sure of the difference between the dream and reality. Her naked body is there before me. My rigid penis is in her flesh. There is darkness and the wheeling of stars, but that doesn’t explain much. I don’t think we have sex. I think I dream that we have sex. I think I dream of the moon and the stars and the sun’s blinding vortex.

I think I dream all the time.

It’s difficult to work. I seem to lack concentration. Either that, or my disciplined brain has become too imaginative. I think I am seeing things - things that cannot exist. Either that (I repeat myself) or I am seeing things that once I was blind to - or to which I was once blind.

Hidden senses springing forth. Buried powers bursting free. I see things where there is nothing to see - and when I blink, they remain there.

With eyes closed, I see perfectly.

She goes frequently to the solar console. I know she goes there when I sleep. In my dreams I see the moon and the stars, my gaze fixed to her green eyes. She stands for hours by the window. Looking out at the cosmos. Entranced by the moon and countless stars, she does not know I watch her.

I think she may be crazy. She imagines there is something out there. It is a thought that has passed through my own head, but my trained mind resists it. Still, I keep observing her. My eyes follow her shifting gaze. Between us, we survey the lights of space, the blazing eye of the sun.

In my dreams we don’t talk.

With eyes closed I see perfectly. Even more than I should. I see the Kirlian ghost of a leaf I have just bisected or a flower that has suddenly died because the greenhouse turned cold. Such things happen all the time. The heat and

light are not dependable. The lights suddenly start flickering, the heat turns itself off, and then, even before I get to check them, they again behave normally. I blame it all on NASA. I try not to, but I do. Yet I know that these mechanical faults can't be blamed on the Earth. That wouldn't explain the bisected leaf. It would not explain the withered flower. When I cut off a part of the leaf, I see its image clearly. The withered flower has a healthy ghost.

Today she was different. She was very strange today. She was standing by the ultraviolet stellar astronomy camera, and I looked intently at her and saw her change. Her hair and fingernails were blue. Both earlobes were green. Her nose was yellow while her neck and cheeks glowed a bright orange and red. I knew immediately what I was seeing - a thermographic photograph. I knew this when I saw the glowing aura around her slim form. There was a hazy outer layer. The inner layer was brighter. As I watched, I saw striations of silvery light flaring out and then dying. Fascinated, I kept watching, wondering how my eyes perceived it. Then it faded and I saw her as he is... and I felt close to madness.

I must ignore all the whisperings.

26

He is taking a blood sample. Her wide eyes reflect the needle. The hypodermic syringe gleams under the light as it shakes in his hand. He pinches her white skin. The probing needle finds a vein. She glances down as the needle slides in and her blood starts to flow. He doesn't take much. The blood bubbles in the syringe. He withdraws the needle and holds it up, then squeezes the plunger. A red globule floats away. The blood forms a tiny sphere. It bobs lightly in the air between their faces, drifting magically to and fro.

She studies the drifting globule. Her green eyes are filled with light. Her dark pupils contract and then widen and move slowly from left to right. She is entranced by her own blood. The globule resembles a distant planet. She leans forward and blows gently at it, making it rise and fall. When it settles down, she blows again. The red globule darts away. It bobs lightly in the air, left and right, up and down, then floats away on an invisible wave: a light-reflecting, red planet.

She is instantly agitated. The globule floats right in front of her. She shivers and picks up another syringe and fills it with water. She waves it before her eyes, holds it up and presses the plunger. A bubble forms on the point of the needle and she jerks the syringe away. Another bubble drifts in front of her. The light inside it is silvery. She makes another, then another, yet another, until the bubbles surround her.

He watches her thoughtfully. She is blowing the bubbles to and fro. They rise and fall lightly as she blows them, her pale face excited. He stares at her, fascinated. She studies the bubbles, mesmerised. Agitated, she bursts one, then another, and starts all over again.

He doesn't say anything. There is nothing to say. Her face becomes that of a child as more bubbles form. After a while he turns away. He marks and seals her blood sample. He packs it away with the excrement and urine while her strange game continues.

He drifts down to the table, starts to eat and is ignored. She is floating before the window, making bubbles, the moon's sharp edge behind her. The moon in bleak and forbidding. Its craters move out of darkness. Beyond the bright, curved horizon are the stars and the numberless galaxies. Blowing bubbles, she is oblivious. She guides the bubbles into groups. Night comes and she is still blowing bubbles and he silently watches her.

She cannot stop what she is doing. She is in some kind of trance. The bubbles dance in the brightly-lit room, rising and falling by white walls. What is she looking for? Why does she keep regrouping them? Finally, even that begins to pall, so she makes up some different coloured dyes. She uses half-a-dozen syringes, each filled with a different dye. Using each syringe in turn, she makes more bubbles: different colours, all sizes. The bubbles float there in front of her, forming a kaleidoscope. They drift all around her like planets in a luminous universe.

The patterns change constantly.

27

There is method to my madness. He doesn't know it, but there is. My blood globule forms a sphere that drifts freely, and I know it's the sun. Other bubbles, large and small. They regroup and change themselves. The blue one is Earth, the crimson one is Mars, the two green ones are Neptune and Uranus, the dull yellow is Pluto. One must mix the dyes carefully. Various

colours for Jupiter. Awakening in the night, I raised my eyes and saw Saturn's rings. The bubbles moved and regrouped. I stared at them and they moved. A yellow globule split in two and one part formed the rings around Saturn. The planets danced before my eyes. I willed their movement and they obeyed. An untouched sphere of water was Venus; a red one became Mercury.

I didn't leave my sleeping bag. He was hanging there right beside me. Turning away, I surveyed the drifting bubbles representing the universe. They bobbed and collided, broke apart and formed new groups. I hung there, imprisoned in my sleeping bag, and the Skylab seemed far away.

There is method to my madness. He doesn't know it, but there is. I unzipped my sleeping bag and drifted out, floating towards that small universe. The planets danced all around me, drew me in and mesmerised me. I saw the great rings of Saturn, the red desolation of Mars. Then I travelled through the silence of space to find the black clouds of Venus. Eroding rock and lava flow. Volcanoes rumbling in the gloom. The only life is in the wind and the flames, and both drove me away. Back to stars and wheeling planets. The stunning beauty of the cosmos. The flaring eye of the sun casting light on more dead rock: the debris-strewn, parched plains of Mercury, its sky pitch-black and chilling. The Earth and moon are in that sky. They both look very small. The sun is three times the size that it is from Earth, and it cast its light over the huge rock behind which I was drifting. Out towards Jupiter. Across the North Pole of Europa. The frozen gas of the mountains is lit by the light from that great sphere. A globe of rich, dazzling gold. The Great Red Spot like a wound. From Amalthea, the monstrous planet fills most of the sky, is a maelstrom of yellow and white, burning fiercely and glowing. And beyond: the rings of Saturn. The long line of the inner satellites. All around, in a black sky, are the stars, a dazzling mosaic of indescribable colours.

I drift on and am captured.

No fear. Calm acceptance. The great ships drift in silence. They are snow-white and stupendous and beautiful: technological works of art. They are drifting all around me, glowing and vibrating. Their lights flicker on and off to form rainbows in the dark sky before me.

I feel no fear. I am calm. It is the calm of recognition. The great ships drift around me in silence, their lights gently seducing.

I see a silhouetted tree. It is framed by a glowing disc. There is sound, but I cannot say what it is: it is part of the silence. The tree disappears abruptly. The disc flares up and vaporises. The great ships start to glow and a white light fills my eyes, then I blink and shake my head and look again and see him staring at me.

He doesn't know where I've been.

28

She is visibly going crazy. I think we're both going that way. I keep glance repeatedly at the radio, having the urge to make contact, but every time I try to switch it on, my hand freezes above it. She knows of my dilemma. Her green eyes observe my hands. When my hands twitch and freeze above the radio, her lips form a strange smile.

What is she concealing? Her smile is enigmatic. When she offers that enigmatic, secretive smile, I am filled with cold fear. Because of this, I despise myself. I've never felt fear before. I knew fear in the Negative-Body Pressure Experiment, but that was the first time. Now it's all too familiar.

I'm going crazy as well. It's the only rational explanation. I think we're both going crazy in this Skylab, which is now like a madhouse.

I found her drifting again this morning. She was floating through the coloured bubbles. At first I thought she was sleeping, but I was wrong: with bright eyes, she was smiling. She didn't see me for some time. She was too engrossed in the coloured bubbles. Even when I called her name, she took a long time to turn toward me. She was not pleased to see me. Having seen me, she turned away and stared at the moon. She watched the Earth rise over the moon's horizon: that spectacular dawn. Earthlight fell on the craters.

We have lost our appetite and never eat anymore. We are strangers to the Earth and to ourselves, and our bodies are changing. We are taller than we were. Our upper bodies are much broader. Our eyes are sunken and bloodshot, our faces hollow-cheeked and pasty, and our legs are getting thinner every day and have become almost useless. I know fear. And feel rage. I think the rage comes from her. It is cold and suppressed and possibly violent, but I don't know what causes it.

There are strange things happening here. I sometimes think we're not alone. There are whisperings, but I'm not sure if they're real: they are part of the silence.

Whisperings. *What* whisperings? Are they voices? Is it really sound? First I think I hear them, then I'm not sure, but I always feel cold.

There are sounds we cannot hear. Perhaps I hear those sounds now. I only know that whether real or unreal, they make me glance all around me. I see the moon beyond the window. There are bright stars in the sky. The coloured bubbles are floating like distant planets in the Skylab's bleak emptiness.

She is floating as well.

Her blonde hair is now longer, coiling around her haunted face. She looks fragile, a mere wisp of smoke, drifting languidly, silently. Occasionally she glances at me. My hand reaches for the radio. When she smiles, I feel my

hand growing numb, the fear whipping my nerves. This is something I can't explain.

She drifts slowly with the bubbles. The Skylab drifts around the moon. Here, in the Skylab, in this silence, we drift out of ourselves. Other things are also drifting: spoons and pencils, nuts and bolts. I once removed them all, but now they're back and the sight of them frightens me. All the modules are strewn with debris. Things just break loose and drift. They drift to and fro across the rooms as if searching for something.

Last night, when I awakened, I saw her floating in a silvery aura. Her body was luminous, her blonde hair like fire. Beyond her, outside, was a large sphere, spinning and gleaming. The sphere filled the window. It was as bright as the sun. Silhouetted in its light was her body, now transparent and glowing. I could see right through her skin. Her bones and veins were visible. They made me think of a tree in the moonlight, its outstretched branches bare.

I blinked and looked again. The gleaming disc was shining through her. The coloured bubbles were clearly visible through her skin, and I thought of amoebae. Then the disc disappeared, leaving black sky and stars. I saw her body as a solid in space, the bubbles drifting in half-light.

I fell asleep almost instantly.

Perhaps I'm hallucinating. I often fear that this might be so. Then, when I note her quiet smile, my fear becomes stronger. Her eyes are green and enigmatic. She has the slyness of a cat. She drifts quietly in thin air, through the bubbles, and I sense mounting violence.

Within me?

Within her.

29

Night. He awakens. He is hanging in his sleeping bag. He blinks and sees her hanging beside him, her head bowed in silence. Though asleep, she is filled with violence. It pours out of her in waves. He is frightened and rubs his eyes, licks his lips, his stomach rumbling with tension. All the windows have been closed. There is darkness and silence. Not silence: a constant, humming vibration. Something else... ghostly whispering.

He hangs in his sleeping bag. The ghostly whispering is all around him. The voices are outside and in his head, rushing in, fading out again. He is sweating and shivering, burning hot and cold. He glances fearfully to the side, sees her hanging in her sleeping bag, the coloured bubbles floating slowly to and fro between the grid floors.

He doesn't know what to think. He is frightened and fascinated. Shakily, as if not quite awake, he unzips his sleeping bag. Zero gravity draws him out. He drifts toward the bobbing bubbles. They are drifting to and fro on a light breeze that should not exist.

It's the breeze that is whispering. He doesn't know where it's coming from. It is blowing around the centre of the workshop, lifting papers and plants.

Feeling strange, he glides forward. The breeze whispers and croons. It swirls lightly and he sees the plants swaying and hears muffled voices. He cannot understand the words. In fact, they may not be words. He drifts closer and the breeze moves around him and turns him to ice.

He cannot believe how cold it is. He can believe the fear that grips him. The breeze strengthens and seems to close around him as the bubbles expand. Not bubbles: huge moons. The moons glow and glide through darkness. Then the darkness explodes with a roar into white fire and scorching heat.

He is drawn in through the cosmos. Light and darkness pour around him. The noise is deafening, an awesome, shattering sound, as he is spun around and crushed and sucked dry. No time for fear or calculation. The geometry of space is revealed. There are white moons and silvery stars and immense, coloured planets. He is part of the whole. It unravels inside his head. He looks out from the tunnels of his eyes to see the face of the infinite. Time and space have no meaning here. All exists within the moment. What he hears are the voices of history rushing into the instant. It all exists at once. It obliterates the Self. He feels and perceives and reacts as but part of the chaos. No time for recollection. Time itself is rendered redundant. There are streams of light and darkness and colour sweeping through the great storm. The bright molecules dance. He is at one with the amoebae. Floating up and drifting down, his body singing, he dissolves into pure being. No limits are decreed. No possibility is denied. What he is (which is nothing) is pure sensation, which destroys and renews itself. He dances with the molecules, swims with the amoebae. There is ecstasy and terrible pain at once, and they sweep him away.

White walls and grid floors. His human body convulses. He rebounds from a gas tank and screams and spins around and turns over. He is gasping for air. His ears are ringing and aching. He stops spinning and then drifts across the workshop with his heart pounding dangerously. Eventually, he settles down. He reaches out for a handrail. He shivers (With revulsion? With joy?) and then takes a deep breath.

The Skylab is quiet. All the windows have opened. He looks out to see the darkness of space, a white glowing receding. Then there is nothing. Only dark moon and glistening stars. Numbed by fear, he shivers and turns around to see the green of her wide eyes.

She is looking right through him.

30

I think they are coming for us. They would take us now, but he resists. He is frightened and I don't understand that, since it's what he most wants. I didn't want it at first. Now I want it more than life. What we are is what is out there - and I must find my origins.

His resistance is futile, merely delaying the inevitable. I want him to accept what is happening and then *will* the event. There must be acceptance. His rejection only leads to fear. He won't talk, but I know that what he sees is his own inner conflict. He must open up his mind. Try to give them what they want. If he tries to close his mind, they will come and just tear it away from him.

I believe that may be starting. I think that's what frightens him. I understand what they are offering - the Oneness - but he knows only terror.

Fear made manifest is a nightmare. Too much doubting leads to chaos. He resists, so they unlock his mind - then the past and the future become one. We cannot survive such treatment. He cannot survive if he resists them. If he does so, they will unlock his mind and make him view the abyss.

This morning he was terrified. I awakened to find him floating. He had opened the viewing windows and was gazing out at the cosmos, but finally he turned his head to look at me as if staring through me.

I didn't dare meet his gaze. I saw the white light all around him. I saw his bones and the tapestry of his veins, then the white light receded. It turned into a glowing disc. It was hovering just outside. It was spinning, then it darkened and changed shape and became a huge eye. It made me think of Tsiolkovsky. A distant sun shone in its pupil. It was framed by the immense, pulsating iris,

which was webbed with fine lines. Then the pupil contracted. It disappeared into silvery light. The glowing disc made a sound that pierced my brain and numbed all nerves; then it faded, seemed to shrink and fall away, disappeared, left the starlit void.

I saw him looking at me. When I smiled, he turned away. He floated down to check the plants on the floor, and they stretched up to touch him. His shrank from that contact, kicked his legs and shot away. He glanced at me, his eyes bright with fear, then floated into the upper deck. I observed him through the grids. He floated along on his belly. He kept glancing left and right, up and down, and his body was twitching.

I knew then that the fear had swamped him. It was threatening to engulf us both. I unzipped my sleeping bag and drifted out and tried to glide through the cosmos.

The planets had disappeared.

31

She blames me for the missing bubbles. Her green eyes are resentful. She floats around the workshop in a trance, only stopping to stare at me. Her violence is almost palpable, making her tremble as it flays me. I recoil and then shamefully turn away to find peace elsewhere. I avoid the solar console. I never go near the Experiments Room. When I think of what is lurking outside, I am filled with pure dread.

The Lower-Body Negative Experiment. The taunting eye of Tsiolkovsky. There is something out there, something real, and it is trying to get at me. Why me? Why not her? She has changed, but hasn't weakened. She has taken all her strength from my weakening, and now she despises me. I can tell this from her violence. I can see it in her smile. I cannot control my mounting fear, and this makes her feel stronger.

What does she see? It is not what I see. While my eyes fill with blood and resentment, her eyes gleam with wonder. Drifting there, she is ecstatic, enslaved by her secret thoughts. While I fight for my life, she travels on through the dream of her mind.

It is all in the mind. All experience is in the mind. All phenomena are of and by the mind and cannot exist otherwise. Perhaps she understands this. Maybe I was wrong. I once thought that the mind was a tool, but now I know it is everything. Without my mind, I cannot be. Life is only made manifest through my awareness. Should I cease to be, the universe will disappear, its past and future obliterated on the instant, the dream of life blotted out. Yes, I was wrong. The mind is not a mere tool. All that was, all that is, all that will be, exists by my being.

Yet what can this mean? Am I real or unreal? Do I, or does that which I experience, have a claim on the actual? The dream and the reality: I cannot

tell one from the other. I know only that what I am, where I am, is what has to be dealt with.

The Skylab is attacking me. I think she's *making* it do so. I sensed it when the plants tried to sting me, when the screwdriver flew at me.

I cannot forget the screwdriver. It snapped free like a switchblade. Flying out of its clips, it came at me with unnatural speed. I saw it and ducked. It missed my head by mere inches. Then it thudded into a box on the wall, split the wood, hung there, quivering.

Staring at it, I felt ill. My pounding heart made me sweat. I looked at her and saw her green eyes, the slight smile enigmatic.

Her powers are developing. I think it all stems from her. It's not just the plants and the screwdriver... it's also the other things.

The windows open by themselves. The cameras turn themselves on and off. Just this morning, when I gazed at the TV screen, I saw what had to be Pluto. It should have been the sun instead. The camera was focused on the sun. I checked the camera, but I couldn't adjust it, so Pluto remained on the screen. Frightened, I turned away. She watched me emerging from the module. As she stared, a pack of batteries snapped free and flew straight towards me. I avoided them just in time and they exploded against the wall. I looked at her and she smiled and turned away, though she was visibly trembling.

She has lost a lot of weight. I think she's burning herself up. She is using all her energy to attack me, but I don't think she knows it.

I must find out what's happening.

He straps her into the cardiograph harness. She has agreed to let him do this. He switches the current on, checks her resting physiology, and discovers that her magnetic field is unusually powerful. She keeps her eyes closed. Her wrists are strapped to the chair. He checks her body's magnetic field again and is awed by its strength.

Her brain waves are unusual also. Certainly they're not normal. He studies her and notes that she is calm, so he begins the experiment.

He places an egg in the air before her and tells her to look at it. She opens her eyes and stares at the egg, which is quivering slightly in thin air. He tells her to separate the white from the yolk, even though she cannot get out of the chair. She stares intently and her brow starts to furrow and the egg shakes a little. He checks the ECG. It shows intense emotional excitement. This excitement increases and the egg quivers even more, then it leaps up and down and eventually cracks.

She is shaking in the harness. A vein throbs in her neck. She starts sweating, but keeps staring at the egg as the shell cracks and breaks. It breaks into two pieces. They float away in opposite directions. The white and its yolk are like jelly, now shaking in front of her.

She concentrates even more. The white stretches like protoplasm, stretching out until it forms a semicircle with the yolk in the middle. He studies her face. She is straining and sweating. She leans forward in the chair, her body straining, as if trying to free herself. Then he checks the ECG. Her brain waves are in turmoil. Her pulse has soared to approximately 250 beats per minute and her heartbeat is dangerously irregular.

She pours sweat and shakes violently. Her bright eyes reflect the egg. She shakes even more, chokes and gasps, her eyes wide, then the white of the egg drifts away and the yolk floats alone.

She relaxes immediately. He checks her heartbeat and pulse. Both are racing, but they soon settle down while she blinks her tired eyes. She is temporarily blind, but her vision soon returns. She is dizzy and seems extremely weak, but he points to the rocking chair.

It is a metallic device. He straps her in and she rocks herself. She has to use her hands and feet and this determines her mass and from that he is able to calculate her weight.

She has lost nearly three pounds in ten minutes.

They return to the workshop. She is still weak and dizzy. She says she wants to rest and he tells her to drift freely and relax. She does as she is told. She just lies there in thin air. He turns the lights off and the darkness swoops in to envelop her. He reaches out to the strobe projector, moves it around and points it at her. She turns languidly in thin air, her eyes closed, but he tells her to look at him. She does as she is told. He is wary of her compliance. She just floats there in the darkness, in silence, and her breathing is audible.

He turns on the strobe projector. She is transfixed in the light. The beam flickers on and off at 24 frames per second, and she stares at it and starts going crazy.

She groans and spins around, starts shaking and gasping. Her arms wave, her legs twitch, her head rocks, and then she jerks in fierce spasms. He keeps the projector running. She jerks and writhes in thin air. She is like an epileptic under water, being drowned by her violence.

Suddenly, she screams, spins away and disappears. He turns the main lights on in time to see her slamming into a wall. She bounces off and drifts away. He switches off the projector. She drifts toward him, her eyes glazed, her limbs loose, and he pulls her down gently.

Her heart pounds. Her pulse races.

This does not make him stop. Instead, he sets her in front of the flickering camera screen. He focuses the camera on the sun. The sun appears on the screen and he orders her to study it carefully.

She shakes and sweats again. She has to hold herself down. The sun changes and becomes a huge moon, ringed with fire, veiled in mist. She stares at it, then gasps. He tries adjusting the camera. This doesn't help, so he studies the screen and sees the burning moon changing. It turns into a shadowed crater. It is the black eye of Tsiolkovsky. Inside it, in the darkness, a distant sun gleams and then disappears, leaving only the black hole.

She gasps and slumps forward. She trembles and then is still. He looks down at the screen and sees Saturn and Janus and Titan. He studies the screen at length. She is groaning in the chair. He looks down to see her wrists in the straps, the skin pinched, the veins throbbing. Then he looks at the screen again. He sees the great white ships. They are glowing and forming rainbows in the vast velvet bowl of the cosmos.

Then they darken and disappear.

He hangs her in the sleeping bag, zips the bag up, drifts closer. Her head nods and he slaps her face lightly to make her open her eyes. He floats a tray directly in front of her. It has a glass lid. Beneath the lid there are crystals, glittering richly, and he tells her to move them.

She licks her lips and stares at them. Her pupils grow large. She starts shaking and the sweat slicks her face as the floating tray rattles. He tells her to be careful. She appears not to have heard. He doesn't want the breaking glass to blind her, so he warns her about this. Her eyes flicker in acknowledgement. The pupils widen and become intense. She shakes as if in fever, the glass starts to crack, then the pieces break apart and drift away as the crystals float upward. They bob just above the tray, spinning and flashing

before her eyes. She shakes violently, gasps, drops her head... then the crystals stop moving.

She appears to be unconscious. He picks the crystals out of the air. He puts them back in the tray, puts on a new lid, then clears the surrounding air of shards of glass. When this is done, he gazes at her. She is sagging in the sleeping bag. He feels confident, no longer afraid, and so he slaps her awake.

She raises her head. Her green eyes are too bright. She looks at him and through him - beyond him - and his fear makes him scream.

He lifts his hands to protect himself. A roaring white light rushes at him. He is picked up and hurled across the room and sucked dry and emptied.

Their minds meet at the crossroads.

Part Three; Journey

'What is actual is actual only for one time/And only for one place.'
-T.S.Eliot

33

All illusions are real events. They exist because they *are.* What is captured by the eye or the brain is given life in that instant. It must exist thereafter. It must have its past and future. Once conjured up, in the instant of its creation, it is given eternal life. There is no such thing as time. The finite sleeps with the infinite. One exists within the other, both are parallel, as one, and they move from point to point and return and will always be present.

This happens within the mind. What we think becomes what *is.* Once we think it, it is part of what we are, made manifest by our consciousness. An existence must be perceived. Once perceived, it must exist. Consciousness, that metaphysical word, is where the world starts and ends.

Physicality is limitation: an illusion to protect the mind. What is physical is that which our minds record to afford us shelter and sanity. The mind dictates what we feel. Kill the mind and touch dies with it. The mind also dictates what we perceive, and men are blinded by shock. A shocked man rejects sight. He withdraws from the visual world. He retreats inside himself and creates another world of his choice. In that world he sees perfectly.

What does he see? He sees a world we cannot know. He sees a world that for us would be fantastic, but for him is quite normal. It is a world of light and colour. It has shape and dimension. He travels through it, moving backward and forward, finding what he most needs. What he sees, we cannot

see. His world is not our world. Yet his world is as real to his blind eyes as is vision to us.

The real world is in the mind. All outside the mind is false. The illusion and the reality are one if the mind so decrees it.

Close your eyes and look inward. Study darkness and light. Turn away from your closed eyes and look inward and travel down through yourself. Think hard about the past. Recall places and faces. Keep your eyes closed and think of the future and try to imagine it. What do you see? If you see anything, it exists. You may forget it, but it will stay in your brain and can always be called back. What you think, you retain. What you retain is but a thought. And yet what is a thought but an image that has life just by *being*?

All that *is,* is reality.

Time and space are imponderables. The past and future are one. Open your eyes and look out at the illusion that your mind has created. Is it real or unreal? Is it past or in the future? It is not in the present (that has passed once it has been), so it must exist somewhere where we cannot reach because the mind will not let us. The mind has its reasons. It selects what we perceive. In this selection it is giving us protection from the chaos of lawlessness.

One thing about what you see: it is not here and now. So, if it is not here and now, when and where is Reality?

It must be in the Nothing.

34

We awaken. We look out. We see the tree and the disc. The disc is spinning and glowing outside the window with the tree just in front of it. The tree is silhouetted. It forms a web of black veins. The veins shiver in the light of the spinning disc and radiate flickering, opaque light. The spinning disc is immense, blotting out the whole cosmos. It makes a noise that is pitched above sound and has a life of its own. The silvery disc glows and flashes: a whirlpool of changing colours. It spins rapidly, and at its vortex is the tree: silhouetted, transparent.

The laws of nature are contradicted. What we see cannot be real. It *is* real because it fills our whole view and keeps us transfixed. The tree is black, yet transparent. The great disc spins behind it. The disc shimmers and glows and then whispers and roars all at once.

We are here. Transfixed. The tree shivers and then dissolves. The gnarled branches of the tree break apart and spread out in the air. The black lines turn to silver. They form a glittering web. At the tip of each line a moon forms, fading in and out, glowing. There are four down the middle. On either side are three more. The silvery lines join them together like a web illuminated by sunlight.

We are here. Enslaved. We are masculine and feminine. The moons glow and the silvery web shimmers as the sound draws us to it. To the centre. Its beauty. We reach it and are lost. The central moon flares up and fills the window and then leads us through silence.

The black eye of Tsiolkovsky. The writhing mountains around the iris. The iris opens and a sun shines in the darkness and draws us toward it. That sun is far away. It is a white light in the pupil. The pupil opens and draws us into its vortex and then closes around us. Silence. Endless night. The distant

sun shines through the darkness. We travel on, moving through space and time, until the sun fills the Nothing. There is white light and fierce power.

The sun's shattering maelstrom. Gas exploding and swirling. The gas geysers up and cascades and explodes and then reforms as great bubbles. The violence is limitless. Such power cannot be measured. The sun blazes with an incandescent fury that returns to devour itself. And in white light: the black spots, now great holes in the furnace. We travel through them as the solar winds sweep past us and rush into the void.

We travel on to transcendence.

35

Night. The familiar. What we cling to as the real. In an unending darkness and silence are the props of our history. She drifts there before me. He drifts there in front of me. We meet and our bodies are naked and warm with remembered dreams. We touch and are joined. We trace the flesh of the known. There is the beating of hearts and burning blood and the shelter of lust. He moves inside me. I am in her. We spiral sensually in the void. The darkness glows and then the ten moons surround us and grow faint and disappear. His chest and curving spine. Her breasts and streaming hair. We are interlinked and then we dream and drift apart and come together as One.

The shimmering images of the familiar. Ghostly white walls and doors. They fade out and are replaced by a spaceship that sits there in darkness. We might call it a flying saucer. It is white and phosphorescent. Its lights blink on and off, the whole spectrum on display, then they blink one last time and disappear and the spaceship goes with them.

Leaving darkness. Distant stars. The sweeping silence of the void. We

travel on and see a house just ahead, its windows framing the light inside. The house doesn't look real. We see the stars through its walls. The house fades away and we see the stars spreading out all around us.

The comfort of the familiar. Water trickling in space. It comes out of the blackness just above and disappears just below us. We reach out and it is gone. A white light flares up and fades. I see my penis in her vagina, I feel him inside me, then both of us see a red rose. It floats there before us, then shrinks and turns to flame. The flames spread out to form a great arch under which we must pass. It disappears, leaving darkness.

The glorious web of the cosmos. Stars glistening like dew. We traverse time and space to arrive where the unreal is meaningless. Black painted on black. Within the darkness: prisms flashing. The prisms spin and break apart and form a line that stretches into infinity. The line runs from left to right, stretching above and below us. The prisms, which are diamonds forming rainbows, defy space and dimension.

There is lawlessness here. Here there are no laws at all. He knows this, she knows this, so we withdraw as the colours sweep over us. They reform as four walls. Through the walls we view the stars. Between the walls there are drifting chairs and plants and an upside-down table. This furniture disappears. The single door swings open. We take our leave and emerge into night and see the moon in the sky.

We accept the familiar.

36

The moon is remote. It is there and then here. It spreads out to either side and hides the cosmos and blinds us with light. We are one and the same. We

perceive the moon and ourselves. We see the moon and also gaze out *from* the moon to see us gliding across it. We pass craters and alluvial rocks, traverse the great dried seas, ascend to travel beyond the horizon to the stars' dazzling grandeur.

The moon and our Earth cross one another and then part. The moon glows softly, then blackens as it eclipses the sun. The rays of the sun shine around it and turn it into fire. A black disc ringed with flames. The flames colour the night crimson. Great sheets of crimson fan across the void and surround us like lava.

We must travel, we must move. The history of life is a tale of movement. The void shifts and seems to fold into itself, then opens out to fresh glory. The red globe of Mars. The purple craters and snow-white poles. It grows larger, then balloons to fill the sky, and the red becomes orange. The air is carbon dioxide. The desolation is total. There are mountains and volcanoes and canyons and dried riverbeds. There is no sign of life here. Only rock and frozen water. The orange glow of the sky falls about us as time meets itself.

We see water in the riverbeds. It reflects the orange sky. It pours over and soaks through the rocks as a brighter light warms them. There is life in the water. It is microscopic and mindless. The past rushes towards the future and the planet moves away from the sun. The rock freezes and is destroyed, turning barren and lifeless. At the poles, where the ice forms a mantle, that which lives hibernates. The night arrives and departs. The orange light fills the landscape. The ice at the poles does not melt, so all life is extinguished.

The Martian night returns. A purple shadow stains a rock. On the rock is what might be a footprint leading down to more footprints. Those footprints are recent. The dust still settles around them. They lead to a boiler-suited figure, his head in an oxygen mask. He glances left and right, then gazes up at the tiny Earth. He looks down, then moves forward laboriously, heading

into the sunset. The purple shadows deepen and stretch across the mountain peaks. They spread across the valleys and plains as the burning sun sinks. The Martian wilderness is now black. A purple light fans the horizon. The fan ripples and shimmers like desert sands, then the sun disappears.

There is silence.

A dark void.

37

The spinning flight of an asteroid. It is an immense, red-hot rock. It sweeps in from some distant, unknown orbit and races towards us. We dissolve to embrace it, but are sucked in and abducted by it. Glowing red, it cuts rapidly across the sun and the light explodes over us. We are held, enthralled. Then swept across the plains of Mars. We are released and the darkness surrounds us as we fall towards Deimos. The outer satellite is silent. Light and shadow divide the rocks. We look up to see the luminous globe of Mars, gold and orange, magnificent.

We are not alone now. We are in a geodesic dome. In the dome there are buildings and vehicles and men who look human. They drift past us like ghosts. And are oblivious to our presence. They move in and out of workshops and laboratories, under large radarscopes. When they talk, their lips move. We observe their speech before they speak it. They shoot out through the dome on flying platforms, encased in their flying suits.

These men work in space. They glide eerily above Deimos. Their silhouetted forms are framed by the enormous, dazzling grandeur of Mars. The polar ice caps gleam whitely. The orange plains are striped with shadows. The planet hangs there, immense, ringed with stars, giving shape to the universe.

The surrounding dome dissolves. We see Mars in its half-phase. One half has disappeared and the other now forms a great sphere. Time expands and contracts. The stars die and are reborn. They glitter in their unblinking glory in the sky above Deimos. The broken rocks are cold and desolate. The orange light is streaked with black. The shadows creep across crevices and hills and touch the dust-covered debris.

A glittering shard of glass. A light-reflecting Perspex mask. Here a spacesuit and gloves, there an old boot, a flag curled at the edges. Life has been here and gone.

Time and space have no meaning. The moons of Mars remain in orbit. The red planet hangs in stillness and silence while the stars shine around it. We are drawn to its night side. Phobos clings close to its mother. Between them, in that black, depthless void, is the gateway to freedom.

There are no boundaries here.

38

The sun rises in the west. It sets in the east. Its rays spread out and reach for the clouds and then are swallowed and lost. The clouds are black and relentless, never parting to reveal the sky. They pour sulphuric acid, are unscathed by the scorching heat, and cast shadows on rocks and volcanoes and the rivers of lava. Here hell has its equal. Past and future are defunct. The immensely powerful winds erode rock that has never held life. There is no sign of the stars. The distant sun is well hidden. The days are long and never offer more than gloom and the rumbling of lava-flow. The rocks burn and are windblown. Mountains boil and spew fire. The molten rocks pour in long lines of red flame through dark desolation. There is nothing here but time. In this place time is meaningless. There is nothing here but dense cloud and fire and the sting of the acid.

This nightmare is Venus.

39

The sun’s movement is erratic. Its size is terrifying. It flares over the scattered rocks and low hills and the broad, empty craters. There is no life on Mercury. It has no satellites. There is total desolation, fierce heat and bitter cold, and the silence goes beyond the Absolute. A comet’s tail streaks the black sky. The double-star is the Earth and Moon. There are other stars, scattered, remote, but they do not fill the emptiness.

40

We are starting to resist. Beneath our wonder lies terror. The unchained mind is prone to recoil from this vast, lawless cosmos. Is it real or unreal? Is it past or still approaching? Gliding out of that complete desolation, we are frightened and lonely.

The familiar arrives to comfort us. The burning tree and glowing moons. The ten moons spin and form in three lines webbed with shimmering white light. All around is the black sky. The stars wheel and glitter. Below and above there is nothing but more stars and blackness. We are transfixed by the tree. The ten moons spin and sing. They surround us and the middle one embraces us and transports us to beauty.

It fills the whole sky. It is immense and magnificent. It is yellow and white and blazing gold, streaked with orange and brown. It is dazzling, mesmerising. It roars and pulsates. It is composed of liquid hydrogen and rocks and exploding gas, and it burns with an incredible heat that sweeps out to engulf us.

We drink the radiation, soak ourselves in the gas. The cosmos roars and explodes and cascades and swirls wildly about us.

We must travel, we must move. We observe the beginning and end of Life. It is a maelstrom of beauty and terror, an unleashed, blinding radiance. We must travel, we must move. This cataclysm offers transcendence. We are swept up in white flame and bedlam and rushed through the furnace. Streams of phosphorescent gold. Roaring rivers of fire and ice. The blazing vortex shrieks and vomits us out as the stars wheel and dance.

Space folds into itself. The sudden silence is stunning. Looking up from Europa, across the valleys and frozen mountains, we see the great golden globe of the killer planet: the awesome beauty of Jupiter. It hangs above the

white mountains, which are really frozen ice. The globe hangs there, streaked with yellow and gold, its Great Red Spot a bloody wound. Around it are the satellites. There are thirteen, maybe more. The globe hangs there, like an immense, golden apple, and is drenched by the stars.

41

Beauty and terror. They are one and the same. Could we ever know one without the other? Would we know what they are? There is beauty in terror. Terror offers transcendence. Give us beauty beyond what we can measure and our terror is total.

The ringed giant that is Saturn. Here aesthetics meet their Maker. The sheer beauty defies mere description, builds its brief on superlatives. We look and are captured. The planet hangs above Rhea. We take in the streaming light, the glowing gas, the mesmerising serenity. It looks immense. It is majestic. The crystal rings reflect the sun. Seen edge on, the rings form a white line that bisects the planet. Along the white line are the satellites: spheres facing the sun. They are on the same plane as the rings and their sunlit sides gleam.

The rings are formed by ice crystals. There are rings within rings. They rotate around Saturn like great wheels, reflecting sunlight and colour. The rings are Saturn's rainbows, and have grace and perfect beauty. We cannot think of oxygen or methane or ammonia when we view this sublime work of the cosmos. We can see only grandeur.

That grandeur is overwhelming, dominating the stunning sky. The stars around it are dense and multicoloured, with a hard, remote brilliance.

Overwhelmed, we transcend ourselves.

42

Terror explodes. It destroys and devours. We recoil and see the rushing of light and feel Them pulling us forward. I resist. I do not. He feels fear. She feels ecstasy. We are joined together and then we tear ourselves apart to be swept back as One.

The stars wheel and fall around us. A crimson light streams through the void. We are trapped and swept into the clouds of Titan, where the mountains spew frozen gas. Blue sky and yellow Saturn. Liquid ammonia and methane. We are rushed through a blood-coloured haze and see the molecules dancing. They break apart and regroup, expand and shrink again, swirl and intermingle within the clouds, glowing with alien life. We observe them and ourselves. We frolic and mate above Titan. The volcanoes spew their frozen gas below us as we dance in the bloody clouds.

Life: that which *is.* We are no more than Impulse. We procreate and live and then die to reform as more Life. How long here? *Are* we here? Are we Thought? Are we Impulse? We are picked up and carried through the red clouds and hurled into silence.

Space. Playful voids. Our fear is soothed by the familiar. The great ships, which represent our defunct technology, are drifting before us. They are white, immense and gleaming: what we once dreamed of building; now drifting in the Nothing of the infinite, glowing softly and humming. They cannot be real. We must agree on this point. They are here to reflect what They think we would most like to see.

The ships shimmer and vanish. We reach out for the familiar. A brown leaf tumbles out of the void and drifts past us and disappears. A brown leaf?

A withered leaf. Not a leaf: a green apple. It floats in the nothing and balloons to become a great planet. This planet is crescent-shaped and seems to tilt on its axis. It is dark and has an air of desolation that suggests the abyss.

We recoil and it fades away. The whole galaxy spins around us. The planets are coloured bubbles dancing freely at the touch of our breath. She is guiding them. He is stunned. We break apart and come together. Time and space open out and fold in and we come out through the other side.

Here the stars are brilliant. The distant sun is small and feeble. The massive globe of Neptune spins rapidly and blinds us with blue light. We are here, but also there. Our mind expands and contracts. All exists within the mind and is held there until released again. We cannot contain the universe. We can only grasp it for a moment. Our mind expands to let the universe out and then we go in pursuit.

Terror. And ecstasy. The far reaches of outer space. We must travel, we must move, and we do so… And the void casts us forth.

We are on the perimeter. Waves of frozen gas surround us. There are seas of methane gas and rocks that are ageless, and the sun is a pinprick in black sky, now lost in the stars. Total silence. Desolation. No movement. No change. The frozen gas hangs in the gloom and will stay that way always.

Beyond Pluto... the infinite.

43

The tree glows in the void. It represents the familiar. It vibrates and curls around our thoughts to prevent them from scattering. The human body is a trap. It gives the mind a cell to dwell in. Remove that wall of nerves and

pumping blood and the mind would take flight. Now our mind needs such protection. Without that, it would fall apart. The glowing tree represents the familiar and is something to cling to.

We must travel, we must move. We are now a searching impulse. The tree glows, the moons shimmer, form a single wheel, spin and vanish; then space opens out to suck us in and we are spat past dimension.

We emerge to strange beauty. This planet is outside the galaxy. There is water and vegetation and air, with low hills green and blue. The sky is the one vast spiral. There are star clusters and nebulae. The purple arms of the spiral coil around the glowing hub and cast a blue sheen on the water and earth below. There are glass domes on the hills. All are small, smooth and luminous. There is no sign of life between the domes, but the burning light comforts.

We wish to explore here. We need knowledge and communication. We are filled with a fierce exultation and an odd hint of grief. Yet we cannot remain. They will not let us remain. We are swept through the great galactic halo and embraced by infolding space. On through darkness and light. Roaring storms and sudden silences. The stars stream and cascade about us and then give way to stillness.

The landscape is desolate. The stars are large and multicoloured. There is black, basaltic rock, a lake fringed with ice crystals, and the mountains, untouched since time began, are silhouetted in crimson haze. The distant planet dominates. It is a giant, searing globe. A black disc, formed by the transit of the moon, is like a hole in the burning sky. The silence is total. The desolation is absolute. The grim landscape is hazed in bleeding light and it drives us away.

Space and time: the nonexistent. Glittering stars and shifting light. We emerge to see a red supergiant dominating a blue star. There is scorched earth

and crenellated rock and a sharp, bleak horizon. The shadows are kaleidoscopic. It is the landscape of a dream. We rush towards the blue star and rise above it and pass the red supergiant.

Heat. Luminosity. A mass eclipse of all the planets. The distant stars become one and burn fiercely and explode into white light. The light recedes, leaving darkness. There are two suns in the sky. One is large, one is small, they are both shaped like eggs, and the burning gas that covers them forms a deep crimson bridge between them. Both suns are spinning rapidly. They leave streamers of glowing gas. The glowing gas forms a pulsating red spiral that envelops the lonely stars.

The nearest planets are desolate. Farther out: more desolation. Triple suns blaze and spin above rocks that are smooth and untouched. The rocks are ochre and black. The suns are orange, white and yellow. Above them, in a matchless velvet sky, the stars are brilliant and cold.

In this beauty lies terror.

44

The terror seems natural. It is the only true state. We accept it and soothe it with wonder and are swept to our destiny. Beyond time and space. Past all possible perimeters. A brief panic and the glowing tree appears and its middle moon captures us.

We are transported through the Nothing. We are One and we are All. In the darkness is the gift of the familiar: drifting spacecraft, an astronaut. They appear and then vanish. A disc spins but makes no sound. The astronaut returns and drifts past us, encased in his white suit. He is here and then there. He is not gone: he is present. Darkness roars and streams of light swirl about us and dissolve into rainbows. A purple flower beneath a stone arch. Water trickling out of nowhere. Another flower balloons and fills out the space to form a rippling sand dune. This dissolves into nightmare.

There has been a nova outburst. The whole planet has been scorched. The sky is vivid blue, its moons hazed in white heat, and the earth below is split and filled with lava that flows red and yellow. The seabed has become molten. Mountains spew fire and smoke. The fierce heat and stabbing, blinding light have made the air almost luminous. There is death and destruction here. Lifeless cities overlook other ruins. There are broken walls and cracked, blackened windows gleaming over the burning earth. The whole planet has been destroyed. Civilization has disappeared. What was life, what had once been a world, is now a great lava-flow.

Our grief is touched with wonder. We have found life too late. We have seen the dawn and dusk of an alien race, but it defies comprehension. The boiling lava spews skyward. The empty buildings are splintered bones. We revolt and turn away to greet the sky and let the cosmos deny this.

There is *no* death and destruction. There *is* death and transmutation. In the cosmos, in the galaxies, in our universe, on Earth, there is violent, spectacular regeneration: a perpetual changing.

Not mere death.

Transmutation.

45

What are we? We are One. We are One and we are All. We are everything outside and inside ourselves, and without us it cannot be. All that is, begins here. Space and time are created here. The past and the future are here and exist by our will. We survey the teaming infinite. We rule over what we survey. Should we cease to be, it will *all* cease to be: the universe will shrink and disappear and will never have been. All that is, begins here. All that will be, must end here. Here, within us, is the beginning and end of the circle.

We venture forth to greet ourselves. We draw space and time together. All the light and colours of the spectrum swim around us in glory. We are radiant. We accept. The light pours through ravines of colour. The sounds of history pass through us and recede and return eternally. All that is, is familiar: the glowing tree, the boundless void. All that was, all that is, all that will be, is here and now always.

The light pours and pulsates. Voices speak and yet are silent. The great moons are eclipsed by other moons and travel through time and conquer it. We are radiant. We accept. We embrace all that *is*. It streams through us and around us and then spreads out to fill up the Nothing. The purple flower of a flare. A comet streaking through the night. The rivers flow and turn into huge rainbows that bridge the black depths.

We venture forth to be greeted.

A great asteroid filled with lights. The polished stone glows and hums. Along miles of chipped rock and natural craters there are doors and antennae. The ark travels through space. It is a world unto itself. It has been travelling so long, its origin is a mystery, locked in a ledger in a secret vault inside, no longer read by the occupants.

These are people from the past. They live and die inside the asteroid. Because they cannot return home, they explore, though they have yet to find other life. How long have they been in here? What is their concept of time? Their whole world is a monolithic stone with its earth and skies inside. They have a closed-circle ecology, live animals and healthy crops; they have lakes and vegetation and sidewalks, written laws and philosophy.

Yet their world is artificial. Like the unreal, it is real. Generations come and go inside the ark and their history is formed. The ark comes from the forgotten. The asteroid is a living world. It travels from the past into the future and knows not what it seeks.

Thus time is rendered redundant. So is space obliterated. Life is lived and there is death and rebirth and the movement is endless. We must travel, we must move, negating the impossible. We must let the living asteroid drift on until it finds its own destiny.

Our destiny is here and now. Here and now there are no boundaries. What we see and what we feel and what we hear are all created within us. We see the darkness and the light, feel the ice and the fire. We reach out and touch what we will because we want it to be there.

A sudden dazzling phosphorescence. Streams of colour and burning light. The sounds of history are collected and cast forth to bridge the past and the future. Exploding galaxies and roaring voids. Darkened deserts and glowing cities. The great dust-clouds envelop the clustered stars and then radiate beauty.

We venture forth to be made whole.

The silence is singing. The darkness is luminous. There are shades of black so complex they form rainbows of soothing nonlight. A shimmering whiteness appears, flares brightly and solidifies. The great ship, the beautiful flying disc, spins and hums in the depthless night. It has no defined purpose.

Its purpose is just to *be.* It reflects what was once a mere image or a thought held and lost.

The disc-shaped spacecraft is stupendous. A magical radiance limns it. There are windows and antennae and sealed doors, all shining in golden light.

The spacecraft scarcely moves. It hums softly and vibrates. A long antenna rises out of its centre and turns as if searching. The velvet darkness spits yellow fire. Dancing moons surround the great ship. They flare up and cast their light across the void and then take shape as smaller ships. These smaller craft are metallic-grey. They are grouped around the mother ship. They start glowing as the mother ship flares brightly… then they all disappear.

We ordain all that is. We accept it or cast it out. Our mind is emptied and we let it fill up with all the wealth of the universe. The birth and death of galaxies. Blazing suns and imploding stars. Lonely moons circle planets of a size that defies comprehension. Then light. A rush of colours. The golden furnace of a giant star. The fire is drawn out like a stretching balloon and forms a rainbow… a whirlpool.

The whirlpool is immense. It swirls around a black hole. It is a maelstrom of energy and heat and blinding colour, and it swirls around the black hole and is devoured, leaving only night's silence.

We embrace the silent night, cast off space and time, and see the boundaries of our mind receding rapidly until the distance is infinite. All that is, is in here. The past and future are now. There are parallel lines of light and force that stretch from here and *end* here. Direction and dimension: neither has credence here. There is knowledge and the certainty of existence, its reality constant. Radiation and sound. All the wavelengths rendered visible. There is colour and sound and vibration, but they cannot be measured.

All is here.

All is now.

The black hole is antimatter and cannot be seen. It is only revealed by the stars, which give it shape and dimension. Time and space are distorted here. Here such concepts are meaningless. The imploding star breaks every law to create its own Nothing.

The black hole is immense. It swallows up a passing galaxy. The galaxy, which was, is no more and yet it still exists somewhere. It is frozen in time and space. It is neither here nor there. It now exists where meaning is redundant... and it will never escape.

The great spaceship glows. Its many lights flash on and off. It is minute and enormous (it is both) and it drifts toward the black hole. The imploding star is hungry. It devours space and time. The great ship, its lights flashing on and off, is drawn into curving space.

The black hole is the Nothing. The great ship is sucked into it. The event-horizon draws the ship toward the vortex, where escape is impossible. Those inside the ship feel nothing. They have their own concept of time. That concept is based on finite laws, but such laws are now obsolete. The ship travels toward the vortex. It moves slower and slower. It glows fainter and fainter, moves slower and slower, then eventually freezes and hangs there forever, its lights still flashing on and off.

Inside the ship, time is finite; outside, it is infinite. The ship hangs there in space for all time, yet it never stops moving.

There are no laws anymore. We accept the rule of Being. We see spaceships and men and whole galaxies, frozen in time and space. What we see cannot be real. Yet it is certainly here and now. It was always here and always will be - and cannot be denied.

The event-horizon greets us. We accept the imploding star. We draw the spinning depths to our being and let them surround us. Here the universe

ends. Here the unknown has its boundary. We look down and see the star's frozen image racing up to devour us. Time and space have no meaning. All that cannot be, *is.* The frozen star races up to devour us, then it suddenly vanishes.

We are now in a reverse world. What was, is now its opposite. The universe outside has ceased to be, and inside is the Nothing. The gravitational force is monstrous. It obliterates time and space. There are spaceships and men and whole galaxies, frozen eternally. We are in it and of it. We are what was and will be. There is no time or space where we are, and the past is the future.

The Great Nothing is a throat: a funnel to the infinite. Rushing through it, we are greeted by ourselves, now reflected and multiplied. Which one of us is *We?* All are real - and here and now. We advance to meet ourselves and pass through us and come out on the other side. Here the funnel flattens out. Here time and space are void. Here the fierce storms of gravitational force rage about in the Nothing. We accept it. It is *We.* We rush through to the other side. The Nothing opens out to form Space and Time and shape them into the Other.

We are thrust forth to birth.

46

We are born. We are All. We are masculine and feminine. The tree glows in the darkness, drenched with stars, its ten moons webbed with light. Wisdom. Understanding. A power tempered with love. Beauty and majesty and endurance: transmutation through death.

We are singing. We burn. We are the great moons and suns. The tree glows and its middle moon expands to reveal the great Other. Death. And transmutation. Another moon: the Foundation. This expands and fills with light. The light streams and coils languidly around us and hazes the distant stars.

We sing. What we *are* sings. The tree's moons dance and play. The bottom moon opens for us and draws us in and dissolves to reveal us. The Kingdom and its glory. Time and space reconciled. The moons spin and flare up and fade away as the universe unfurls.

Colour: that which *is*. A vast spectrum on display. Orange skies and purple clouds and yellow suns, the stars green, blue and golden. There is death and beauty here. The stars melt and reform. There are great magenta clouds of formless matter slowly rising and falling. Green fires blaze up and die. Comets streak the sky with silver. Silent winds blow ice crystals in immense cyan spirals, and they sweep out and girdle the stars and the pale, serene moons. The colours merge and are dazzling.

We sing. What we *are* sings. What we are is what *is*. We are one, we are millions, and we divide down the middle, and repeat this again and again and thus multiply always. Amoebae. Loops and coils. The pale moons stretch out and mingle. The stars blaze and their light meets and blends to become a vast web.

We are in it and of it. We are here and also there. We are singing with the voice of sensation, pouring forth and returning. We are One. We are the same. We break apart and come together. We are thought, we are brain, we are mind, making real the unreal.

We are born. We are All. We live and die on the instant. We are outside and inside ourselves, being one and the same. What unfurls is within us. We

ordain all that is. We expand and contract and envelop and pour forth to create.

We are All.

All is...

47

A black hole within the dark void, immense, without depth, its presence only made manifest by the surrounding stars. The stars are bright and unblinking, multitudinous, a dazzling mosaic, sweeping out in all directions around the enormous black hole, beyond time, mocking distance, already dead: a mere illusion of being.

A black hole within the dark void. Around the black hole: star-flecked darkness. Within and beyond the boundless void: total stillness and silence.

The silence is absolute, transcending all known silence: a lack of sound so total it is resonant with its own hybrid presence.

In the beginning is the Nothing. A black hole in a dark void. Around the black hole, the countless stars, already dead, wrapped in silence.

And from nothing… a growth.

Colour is light. In this case, a white light. The angle of incidence equals the angle of reflection, and the faint, hazy light, bouncing off the black hole, illuminates a bleak, jagged surface and fans across its curved edge. The light shimmers and bends. The stars beyond it fade away. Around the left edge of the planet, that black hole now filled with matter, the light of the sun cascades out to form a dazzling crescent.

The black hole is now the moon. It is enormous and hangs in silence. The white crescent splits the darkness, floods across the blistered greyness, and divides the brooding sphere down the middle.

White light and shadow. Black craters and writhing plains. No water, no air, no movement, no life. Motionless, forbidding, the sun’s halo stretched around it, the moon is a colourless desolation curving back toward darkness.

Colour is light. White light is luminous energy. In waves and in particles it bombards the moon's surface, and the electrons break off and streak away to form the void's shifting spectrum: the red and yellow of the sun's corona, the silvery white of Earthshine; and around those, the star-studded night devoid of depth or dimension. Colours blending and interacting. A haunting blue light on grey rock. The blue moves across plains and black craters as the sun fills the darkness.

Now the great sphere is divided: one side dark, the other bright. Monstrous, three-dimensional, a globe split by shadow and light, it is here, still and silent, implacable, dominating the black void.

Space. Endless space. The moon floating in space. Gliding out from its dark side, eighty miles above its surface, a slow-spinning web of silvery metal, traversing the silence.

The Skylab in orbit.

It is not alone this time. A service module drifts beside it. The module reflects sunlight and Earthshine, its antennae revolving. Both spacecraft drift in silence, eerily beautiful in the vastness. The great belly of the moon is far below them, its barren soil shadowed. The module's thrusters burn briefly, turning the module toward the Skylab. It remains above the silent Skylab as its airlock door opens.

An astronaut emerges. His Perspex mask reflects the Earth. He is bulky and unwieldy in his spacesuit, crouched under his backpack. He operates his body thrusters. Punched forward, he glides through space. He is obstructed by the Skylab's antennae, then drifts down to the airlock door.

There is no response from inside. There has been none for weeks. The astronaut drifts to the emergency hatch, his gloved hands fumbling awkwardly. He looks carefully about him, sees the moon and distant Earth;

glances down and pulls out a control box and presses a button. The white-painted door opens.

The astronaut goes inside. He glides through the command module. He is shocked to see the debris everywhere: knives and forks, nuts and bolts. All these items are drifting freely. They move eerily through the silence. The astronaut glides forward, through the docking adapter, then drifts along a debris-strewn tunnel until he comes to another hatch.

He enters the airlock module. There is debris here as well. He glides through another hatch and drifts along until he comes to the workshop. The workshop is filled with debris: empty wetpacks, clothes and tools. The astronaut stops and takes a deep breath when he sees the two subjects.

They are bobbing above the grid floor. Their drifting limbs are intertwined. The man is unshaven, and the woman's hair is long and dishevelled. The eyes of both are open. Both are pale and oddly stiff. The astronaut glides over to inspect them and finds them both lifeless.

He examines them at length, being trained for this: a doctor. When he has finished, he cannot understand how they could both starve to death.

The Skylab keeps orbiting.

W.A.Harbinson is the author of two bestselling novels, *Genesis* (1980) and *Revelation* (1982). His epic fictional series, 'Projekt Saucer', including *Inception*, *Phoenix*, *Genesis*, *Millennium*, and *Resurrection*, remained in print for most of the 1990s; the first three volumes are now available in PoD and Kindle ebook formats An updated edition of Harbinson's seminal nonfiction work, *Projekt UFO: The Case for Man-Made Flying Saucers* (1995), is also now available in PoD and Kindle ebook formats.

Information on other books by W. A. Harbinson can be found at:

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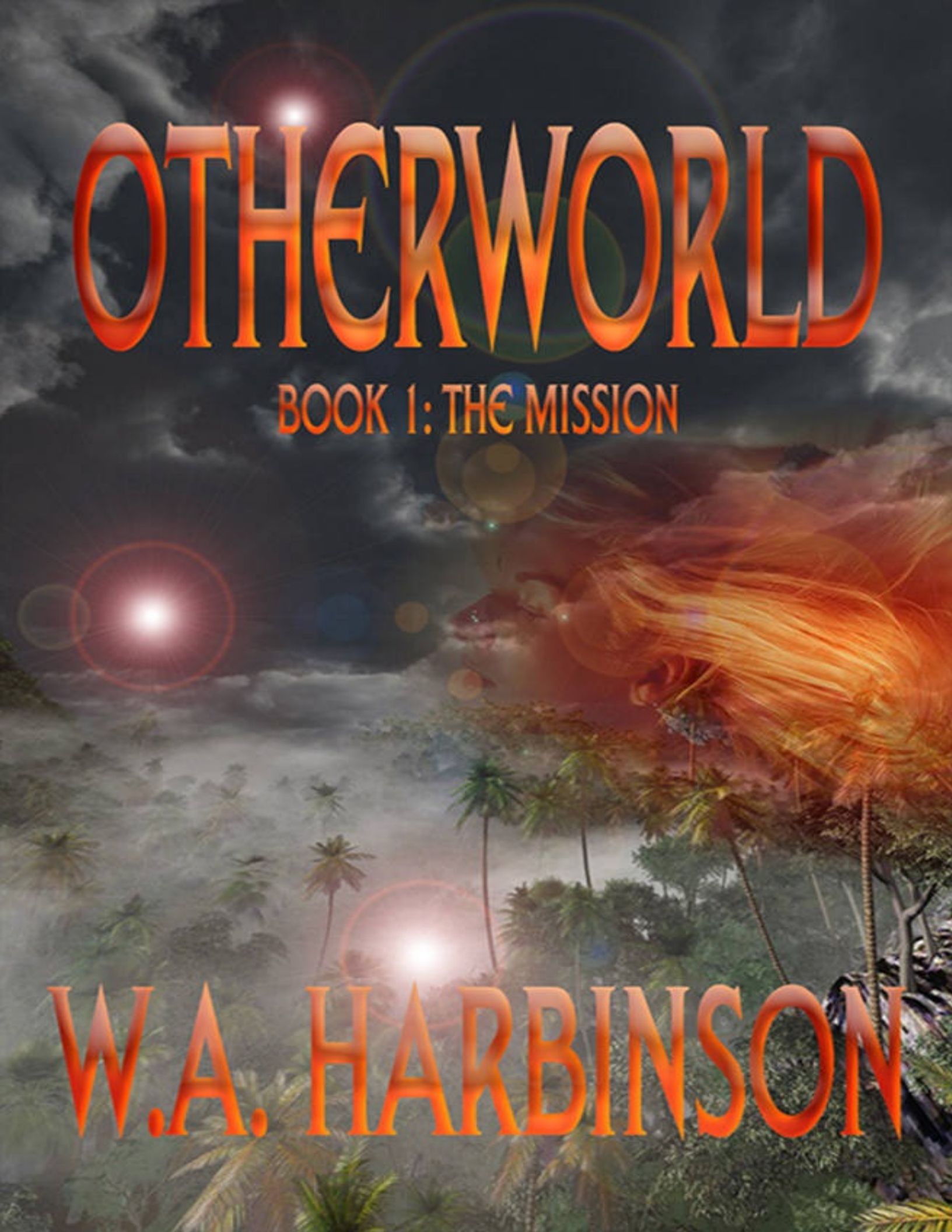
OTHERWORLD
BOOK 1: THE MISSION
W.A. HARBINSON

Otherworld

W. A. Harbinson

Deep in the heart of the Amazon rainforest live the Yano Indians. A fierce, elusive tribe, they are dedicated to the powers of darkness, their presence only revealed

only by the hypnotic beating of drums… and by mysterious lights in the sky.

Laura Wellman , an American photojournalist, beautiful, sensual and deeply tormented… Believing herself to be possessed by evil spirits, she decides to offer herself to the dreaded Yano in a final, desperate

attempt to release her soul from torment.

Father Paul Benedict , a middle-aged Anglican priest who is starting to doubt his God and the meaning of life in general… Gradually becoming obsessed with Laura,

he believes that in somehow saving her from selfdestruction he can find his own redemption.

Alex Poulson , adolescent son of a depraved rubber baron, an almost spiritual innocent born and raised in
Amazonia… Falling helplessly in love with Laura, despite being rejected by her, he follows her into the dangerous depths of the rainforest and is, in turn, followed by the concerned Father Benedict. There, beyond the reach of civilization, even beyond the light of reason, all three are drawn into the Yano's alien 'Otherworld', where good collides with evil in a titanic, earth-shattering confrontation…

Otherworld

Luminous with love and possibility, pulsing with eroticism, murder and dread. A powerful, haunting novel about the eternal conflict between primal, mysterious forces on the other side of existence.

By the internationally bestselling author of *Genesis* and *Revelation*.
Copyright © 1984 by W. A. Harbinson
First published in Great Britain in 1984 by Corgi Books, London
ISBN 0 552 12380 3
This ebook edition published in 2015 by W. A. Harbinson

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Otherworld

Book One
The Mission

Prologue

The snake was about nine feet long, its silvery-grey scales glistening, slithering out of the darkness, slowly, silently, rising up and curving down, flat head moving briefly through moonlight, its forked tongue clearly darting in and out, eyes like small stones, jaws throbbing. The spider was unaware, or possibly knew and was paralysed, an enormous spider, a bird-eater, leg span covering eight inches, furred body heaving rhythmically, taking its last, precious breaths, one of its eight eyes illuminated between its front legs, also held in the single beam of moonlight as the snake slithered towards it.

Alex's pupils reflected both, expanding to defeat the darkness, a mirror to the beauty and horror of the rainforest's cycle of life and death. He raised his head where he lay, his body swinging in the hammock, looking down at the beam of light on the mud floor of the spartan thatched hut. The spider should not have been there – perhaps a tarantula; not a bird-eater – and the snake, which resembled an enormous, throbbing vein, likewise did not belong in the hut, but out there in the forest.

Alex kept looking, not frightened, simply wondering why they were there, listening for the sound of the drums but hearing only the silence. The snake's slithering broke that silence, writhing along the mud floor, its scaled body sliding across the damp leaves to where the spider was resting.

Did the spider know what was going to happen? Alex thought that it did. First motionless, it now moved, its eight legs bending farther, the fur on the brown ball of its body standing up like fine wire. Fear. And then acceptance. The spider seemed to almost sigh, its body sinking back down between the legs that could have straddled a large plate.

It was doomed and knew it.

Alex watched its death from his lightly swinging hammock. The snake stretched out to its full length, its scaled body glistening, and he saw its eyes, as dead as the moon, hypnotising its victim. The spider simply stared back, the fur rippling on its body, seven eyes viewing a prismatic world, its eighth eye greeting death. The snake's forked tongue darted out, its head appeared to ricochet, and the spider almost imperceptibly quivered and then seemed to freeze. Paralysed, it was still watchful, unable to turn its head away, its middle eye forced to stare straight at the jaws of the snake, opening wide, inching forward. The neck of the snake formed an arch, its head hanging straight down, and then its jaws, forming a salivating funnel, dropped down over the spider and snapped shut.

The snake swallowed the spider whole, with one languid but noisy gulp, sucking it into the expanding tunnel of its throat and flicking the leaves with its tail.

Alex watched it, fascinated, swinging lightly above it, wondering at how enormous the snake looked in the thatched hut's dim light. Then at last he heard the drums, faraway and faint, and he swung his long legs off the hammock and slid down to the floor.

The snake was bloated with the spider, but turned its head to stare at him, its throbbing vein of a body uncoiling as its tongue started darting. Hearing the drums, he was unconcerned, knowing the magic would protect him, and he merely smiled and stared at the snake, his gaze following its wavering head. The snake studied him with gelid eyes, its hammer head swaying slightly, and then, as if he had actually stared it down, it slithered out of the hut.

He watched the snake departing, heard the drums and felt the cold, glanced briefly around the old Indian's hut, its stark simplicity amusing him. A miniature palm-and-thatch *maloca*, its mud floor carpeted with fine-leafed ferns, it was shaped like a coconut shell and held only one person. The old Indian lived simply – in the natural gloom, his bed the earth – and the hammock, stretched between two tall poles, was there only for Alex.

He dressed quickly and easily, not requiring much clothing, first putting on short pants and a plain white shirt, then a pair of leather sandals. He didn't comb his blond hair, but patted it down with his hands, then turned around, feeling healthy and unafraid, and left the hut.

The plantation was couched in darkness, its buildings blacker than the morning, and all around him, in an enormous outer cloak of silence, were the

constant sounds of the rainforest: the distant chattering of monkeys, the muffled croaking of giant frogs, a bird call that sounded like twanging wire, generalised slithering and rustling and murmuring, the sibilant rush of the river. He glanced back at his father's house, a building of timber raised on stilts, shivered as if shaking off a ghost, and then started running.

He followed the sound of the beating drums, breathing deeply, his fists clenched, wending his way between the thatched huts and wooden buildings of the plantation, then heading straight into the rainforest where most men would not roam at night.

The soaring trees closed in around him, the crowns above him closely spaced, allowing little light in during the day and now themselves lost in darkness. The forest came alive in darkness, when camouflage was not required, and now around him as he ran, skirting the web-like, tangled liana, was the rustling of giant-sized rodents, the snorting of pigs and ant-eaters, the shrieking of monkeys and the *basso* croaking of outsized frogs, the ghostly whisperings of the palm leaves on the damp forest floor where ground beetles and ants and termites moved about in their millions.

Alex felt no fear, his attention focused on the distant drumming, his eyes raised to glance through the canopy of the trees high above in that darkness. Up there, in that canopy, was the true wealth of the Amazonian rainforest: pigeons and honeycreepers, macaws and humming-birds, marmosets and cotingas, hornets and stinging bees and wasps and huge bats, more monkeys and numerous poisonous snakes, including the boa constrictor. He looked up, unafraid, his eyes scanning the darkness, tried to see through the canopy to the patches of sky above it, but seeing only a dark, drifting cloud, a patch of stars… then a star that *ascended*.

His heart skipped a beat, but then the trees closed in again, shutting out the sky and its ascending star and deepening the darkness around him. He continued his casual running, lured onward by the distant drumming, that lone star still ascending in his head to illuminate the night.

An ascending star. A magical light. Very high in the sky. Ascending and descending over the rainforest where no white man and very few Indians had ever dared venture.

He kept running, his heart racing, glancing occasionally at the forest floor, slowing down only to clamber over the gigantic, tangled liana, but soon picking up speed again and often staring above him.

There was a break in the forest canopy, a patch of stars, then some lights, more lights like the one he had seen before, all slowly rising and falling. He kept his eyes on them, again wondering what they were, and then that patch of sky slipped behind his head as he kept moving forward.

He was near the edge of the plantation, passing the last of the rubber trees, and then he crossed that invisible boundary where the plantation met the jungle, and headed deeper into the untamed rainforest where the drums sounded louder.

A furred animal crossed his path, the outsized rodent known as a *paca*, and then he saw a snake slithering up a tree trunk towards an unwary sloth. He went past them, unafraid, concentrating on the distant drums, aware that he might never see who was playing them and feeling a biting loss.

That distant drumming was hypnotic, almost ethereal, unreal, and he felt his heart beating even faster as the forest closed in on him. It was bitterly cold but he felt warm, the running keeping his temperature high, and he drank in the crisp, invigorating air in deep, healthy lungfuls.

The darkness was becoming even deeper, the trees pitch-black on grey-black, their great trunks and the clinging liana forming enormous, bizarre forms that soared up and fell away into dark tunnels that distorted reality. Then a wavering beam of greyish light, illuminating a demented hornet, falling past it to encircle a scorpion and spider in a dance of death on the forest floor.

He jumped over them, kept running, disturbing *pium* flies and mosquitoes, glanced up and saw the sky, an irregular circle of stars, other lights, not the stars, rising and falling in silent splendour, then followed the striations down, through the various layers of treetops, down past the writhing liana and the great tangled roots to a clearing that was gloomily lit by oblique beams of moonlight.

The clearing was near the river – he could hear the murmuring water – and through a cap in the forest canopy, a natural wonder through the foliage, he could see the rise and fall of the mysterious lights, their serene, silent grandeur. The lights were like Catherine wheels, ascending and spinning rapidly, their brilliant outer rings swirling around a darker core, their silvery striations shooting out for miles and turning into great cobwebs. There were a great many of them, forming kaleidoscopes in the starry sky, shooting up from the jungle depths, far north, in the interior; and, equally mysteriously, exploding out of the sky itself, first as pinpricks of light, then as dazzling,

fluorescent flares that descended in slow, elegant arcs and disappeared in the forest.
He watched them, fascinated, wanting to know their true nature, then lowered his gaze back down to the clearing and looked at Peruche.
The old Indian was alone, sitting cross-legged in the damp grass, wearing nothing but the briefest of loin cloths, his brown skin like dried leather. He was rocking back and forth to the rhythm of the distant drums, repeatedly bowing his head over a wooden bowl placed just in front of him and chanting some indecipherable litany with a worn-out, cracked voice.
An old Indian, *very* old, some said ninety-nine years old, now suddenly sitting upright, stiffening his frail shoulders, fixing his rheumy eyes on Alex and then nodding his head.
'Sit down,' he commanded.
Alex sat, flicking the blond hair from his blue eyes. He gazed into the wizened face of the old Indian and felt like a child.
In fact, he was an adolescent, an exceptionally healthy seventeen, but now shivering with the morning's biting cold – and with real excitement. He stared steadily at Peruche, hearing the drums from faraway, recalling the mysterious lights that rose and fell where he still dared not roam.
Would the elusive Yano emerge? Was that part of the ritual? Alex, lean and tanned, facing the frail, shrunken Indian, felt the forest pressing in on all sides as if trying to crush him.
'White boy,' Peruche said, his hair thin and white on a shining skull, his brown eyes illuminated by moonlight and reflecting more darkness. 'What did you dream about?'
Alex licked his lips and leaned forward, his ears filled with the distant, beating drums.
'A great ball of fire in the heavens. An umbrella of light.'
His voice trailed away, as if disbelieving its own offering, and the Indian, his brown body shrivelled, smiled slightly and nodded.
'That is good,' he said. 'We both shared the same dream. It's a sign that someone is coming to point the way to your future.'
Closing his eyes, he murmured indecipherable words, shaking his head from side to side, then reached down to the bowl between his crossed legs and picked something up. The jungle chattered all around them, the drums pounded in the distance, and the old Indian raised his cupped hands to his lips

and kissed what he held in them. Then he looked up again.
‘Take your clothes off,’ he said.
Alex did as he was told, quickly removing his shirt and pants, then sat cross-legged, naked and cold, directly facing his mentor. Peruche raised his right hand, crooked one finger in a beckoning gesture, and then, when Alex had leaned towards him, slipped the chain of the stone amulet in his hands around Alex’s neck.
‘It was dipped in the bowl of *epena*,’ the wizened Indian, Peruche, croaked. ‘Sniff the *epena* into your nostrils and then close your eyes. No evil will harm you then.’
Alex glanced north, through that window in the forest canopy, to see the lights rising and falling above the unexplored regions. He wanted to find that place – to unravel the mystery of Peruche’s enigmatic smile – but that smile, now illuminating his thoughts, forced his eyelids to close.
He held the stone amulet in his cupped hands, lowered his head, sniffed up the *epena*, then put his head back and breathed deeply and let the dreams take command.
‘Have faith,’ Peruche said.
Now, out of the undergrowth, out of the darkness of the shifting foliage, came swarming the enormous spiders and centipedes and giant ants and two boa constrictors. The spiders formed a rippling carpet, an undulating, rippling tide that lapped first at Alex’s feet and then splashed up his legs. The centipedes swarmed over the spiders, the ants over the centipedes, glistening on the furred backs in the moonlight that fell over his tanned skin. He shuddered violently and then was still, his body covered in the seething mass, and then the snakes, oblivious to danger, their every instinct apparently deadened, nosed through the spiders and centipedes, slithered over the countless ants, and then coiled around Alex’s body as it gradually disappeared under that hideous coating of insects.
Blond hair and blue eyes. Alex’s face was oddly beautiful. His eyes opened briefly and then closed again as the crawling mass reached his lips. He shuddered again, heard the drums, thought of the lights, then the centipedes and ants filled his ears as the spiders covered his head.
Now, in the forest clearing, where Alex was still sitting, the two boa constrictors, their thick bodies pulsating, were wrapped around a living, human-shaped mound of spiders and giant ants and centipedes, all crawling

in harmony.
The drums pounded. The lights rose and fell.

Chapter One

‘She arrives today,’ Father Benedict said, putting his felt hat on his head and settling himself into the small boat, then raising his eyes to squint up at the young Indian who was untying the restraining rope. ‘In fact, she’s arriving in the same boat that’s taking Father Symonds away from us.’

‘An American woman?’
‘Yes, Mengrire.’

Hearing the resentment in his own voice, he smiled slightly, with self-mockery, aware that he was being unreasonable, but not able to stop himself. Mengrire, like all the Indians, was clearly very curious, unable to comprehend why a rich white woman would come to the Amazon jungle.

Now the Indian pulled the rope free, coiled it expertly around his arm, placed it in the stern of the boat and then started the engine. The sudden noise was shocking, splitting the forest’s dawn silence, and some herons, like a slowly exploding cloud, scattered into the leaden sky.

Father Benedict shivered with cold, but knew the heat would come soon enough, burning through the clouds to dry the damp trees and fill the air with an oppressive humidity which, combined with the grey sky and muddy river, made the days strangely slow and lackadaisical, more dream than reality. The boat roared and shuddered a little, then nosed through the rushes in the river shallows, gliding away from the rotting wooden jetty at the edge of the mission camp.

It was not much of a camp, merely a random collection of thatched-roof log huts, containing living quarters for four, a first-aid hut, a small store, shower and toilet, and another hut used for worship, all of which were crammed together in a clearing by the river bank and dwarfed by the immense trees of the dark and inhospitable rainforest.

Father Benedict watched the camp receding, becoming smaller beneath the trees and appearing to be sucked into the black-shadowed, rich-green vegetation, and he shivered, thinking of God's immutable handiwork, then turned his eyes to the front.

'There's been talk about the woman?' he enquired of the Indian.

'Yes, Father.' Mengrire was sitting in the stern, holding the boat's wooden rudder, the jungle behind him coming right to the edge of the river and sweeping away in both directions as far as the eye could see. 'It's said that she has come to steal our images as other white men have done.'

Though Mengrire, a Yanoama Indian, was also a Christian, he had not given up on the need for diplomatic deception. The ploy amused Father Benedict and brought a smile to his cracked lips, his heat-dried, middle-aged features wrinkling with good humour as his head, with its thick-curled black-and-grey hair, shook from side to side.

'Stop talking like a savage, Mengrire. You can reserve that kind of talk for Miss Wellman. You know damned well what a photograph is, so please don't act bewildered.'

Mengrire was short and solid, his brown chest hairless beneath a loose white shirt, his muscular legs in pants cut to just below the knees, a hand-beaded sweatband around his head. Father Benedict glanced at him over his shoulder, saw his fleeting grin, then turned his gaze back to the front, squinting into the brightening light.

'The woman is not a missionary,' Mengrire said from behind him, 'and we wonder why she comes to this place if not to save our poor souls.'

'She's a photographer,' Father Benedict said. 'She takes photos for an American magazine. She's coming to snap photos of us all and then take them back to America.'

'She does this for a living?'
'Yes, Mengrire.'

‘You white people are strange.’

The engine of the small boat was quiet now, as it headed across the Rio Negro towards the Indian village on the opposite bank about three miles away. The water was humus-blackened, splashing around the rocking boat, flowing away like an enormous lake with dense forest on either side, but receding until it was merely a thin line disappearing many miles to the east into an ominous, shadowy green haze.

The water dark, the sky dark, the immense jungle also dark; and Father Benedict, his thoughts still webbed with sleep, sensed that darkness within him.

‘This white woman will be a nuisance,’ he said, ‘but we must treat her kindly. Like Christians, Mengrire.’
‘Yes, Father. Like Christians.’
Was the Indian slyly mocking him? It was difficult to say. Mengrire’s parents had been Christians and he had been brought up as a Christian, learning the white man’s mores and speaking English with unusual fluency and understanding; yet for all that he was an Indian, still bound to certain traits, one of which was a sly sense of humour based on an inborn sense of superiority. Father Benedict didn’t mind it – in fact, it give him some amusement – and so, with a small smile on his lips, he let the comment pass over him.
It was still cold and he shivered, looking forward to the heat, yet dreading it, then he fumbled in the pocket of his tropical shirt and withdrew a cigarette. You could never get used to the Amazon: its extremes were too ridiculous. By day it was hot and humid, forcing even the rainforest into silence, and by night it was as cold as a tomb and, just like a tomb, without light. Father Benedict shivered again, struck a match, cupped his hands, lit the cigarette and threw the match into the river, watched it floating away.
The water was uninviting, oppressively quiet, terribly dangerous; he raised his gaze from its rippling, splashing surface and looked at the green jungle on its far bank. Though the English called it a jungle, it was actually a rainforest. There were no words to describe its true nature, nor what it contained.
The priest inhaled on his cigarette, inhaling deeply, exhaling slowly, dressed

not like a priest but like a plantationer: long-sleeved shirt, long trousers tucked into canvas boots, a felt hat on his head.
‘Bloody hell,’ he said quietly.
He inhaled again on his cigarette, hearing the river splashing around him, his gaze fixed on the dense forest at the opposite side of the mighty river, his thoughts winging in languid loops back to the night he had endured without sleep.
Those damned drums again. And the mysterious lights above the jungle. He had lain in his hammock for hours, in the hut’s almost total darkness, listening to the distant, relentless drumming and to his own beating heart until his curiosity overcame his fear and forced him out into the night. The drums had seemed to be close – closer than they usually were – and when he had looked at the northern sky, through a break in the forest canopy, he had seen the lights rising and falling in serene, sparkling splendour.
‘You’re very quiet this morning,’ Mengrire said. ‘Your shoulders lean in deep thought.’
‘I’m glad to learn that my leaning shoulders are so expressive, Mengrire. And doubtless you can also read my bloody mind.’
‘A priest should not use such bad words.’
‘No?’
‘No. It does not encourage respect.’
‘You don’t respect me, Mengrire?’
‘I respect you, but others might not.’
‘My language may sometimes be strong, Mengrire, but it’s not really bad.’
‘Some of the Indians think you blasphemous – ’
‘They’re more Christian than I.’
‘ – but I know that your tongue is much sharper than the feelings you hide.’
Father Benedict smiled at that, blew some smoke to the warming air, felt the breeze blowing through his hair as it followed the river. *I still have my hair,* he thought inexplicably. *It stays healthy while my ageing body rots*. He instinctively spread his fingers, pressed them down on his fleshy stomach, frustrated that the daytime’s devouring heat did not reduce his spreading waistline. All men, as he well knew, were in truth as vain as women; and he, a middle-aged priest, was not immune to such vanity.
‘Why is my friend, the priest, deep in thought?’
‘I’m not deep in thought; I’m just tired.’

‘You could not sleep last night?’
‘No.’
‘The drumming kept you awake?’
‘Yes.’
‘When the Yano beat their drums in the night, no man can sleep soundly.’
This was true enough – for both Indians and white men – and Father Benedict, recalling what he had seen and heard, felt the fear creeping into him.
He saw the green line of jungle far ahead, beyond the broad swathe of water, a ghostly mist drifting over it. He had been here for six months and was still not used to it. The river was too immense, the jungle too alien, and not even his experiences in New Guinea could compare with its strangeness.
‘You were awake, also, Mengrire?’
‘Yes, Father, I was awake. When the drums pound there is sickness and madness and we have to be watchful.’
‘The sick become sicker?’
‘And the mad uncontrollable. We Indians have learned to live with it, but we cannot ignore it.’
Father Benedict closed his eyes, recalling the drums, the mysterious lights, wondering where conjecture merged into blasphemy and then opening his eyes again. A broad expanse of dappled water and, beyond it, threatening jungle.
When the Yano beat their drums in the night, no man can sleep soundly…
Yes, incomparable strangeness. And just where were the Yano? Sometimes the drums and lights seemed distant, other times up close, yet no one had ever found the elusive Yano and returned to describe them. Nor, for that matter, had anyone seen the lights up close, let alone offer a reasonable explanation for their nature and source. Lights that ascended and descended mysteriously – far north, where the jungle remained unexplored by all but the Yano… If, indeed, the Yano existed at all and were not just a tribal myth.
‘I don’t believe the Yano exist,’ Father Benedict said, glancing back over his shoulder at Mengrire and catching that sly, mocking smile.
‘No, Father? Then who plays the drums in the depths of the rainforest?’
‘Some of your fellow Yanoama Indians.’
‘If ordinary Yanoama Indians were in that forest, you would have found them by now. So why have they never been found? Because they are *not* ordinary,

Father. They are the Yano, who, though human in form, are possessed by the evil ones.'
Mengrire was no longer smiling and his brown gaze was intense, so Father Benedict, noting the abrupt change in him, quickly turned away from him.
'And you call yourself a Christian, Mengrire.'
'Yes, Father, I am a Christian. But do we Christians not believe in good and evil? The Yano are pure evil, possessed by the powers of darkness, and because of this, because of the powers of darkness, they will never be found.'
'And the lights?'
'I do not talk of the lights. I close my eyes when they rise and fall.'
Father Benedict sighed, shook his head from side to side, then flicked the butt of his cigarette over the side of the boat and watched the water carry it away. The river was vast and frightening, a dividing line through the jungle, over three miles wide here, seven miles wide elsewhere, its source a tiny brook in the snowcovered Andes of Peru, its mouth, pouring out one fifth of all the Earth's water, situated four thousand miles away where the jungle met the Atlantic. Truly a mighty river, here quiet, elsewhere violent, hidden danger in every inch of its enormous length and on the banks on both sides of it.
Here, where it was quiet, Father Benedict felt its cold indifference, its remove from the finite boundaries of man, its inviolable majesty. It judged and was not judged, it punished but could not be punished, flowing eternally and renewing itself while mortal men lived and died. Father Benedict, seeing the water all around him, felt lost and expendable.
'Ah, Mengrire,' the priest sighed. 'I'm tired. *Damned* tired.'
'I think not only from lack of sleep, Father. The tiredness springs from your spirit.'
'If that's so, Mengrire, then I blame it on this place. This great river and the jungle combine to drive we poor white men crazy.'
'The white men are crazy anyway. They were crazy before they came here. The white men have lost touch with their own spirit and so cannot see clearly. But you, Father, I think are different: you see clearly and that disturbs you. You see and feel things that you simply cannot let yourself accept. I believe you're not happy, not comfortable as a priest, and I believe that the jungle, with its beauty and horrors, is slowly eating into your soul and making you doubt yourself.'
'You think I doubt myself?'

‘I do, Father. It is what you call *tiredness*.’
Father Benedict glanced at Mengrire, surprised by his perception, but then just as quickly looked away, feeling slightly embarrassed. There was truth in the Indian’s words – much more than he cared to acknowledge – and his recent insomnia, which he had blamed on the Yano drums, on the haunting mystery of the lights that rose and fell over the jungle, kept him awake not only during those visitations but also during the most peaceful of nights.
In truth, he was not only haunted by the mystery of the lights, but by the shadows that now fell over his faith to chill the hope that gave life.

Chapter Two

Looking straight ahead, he saw the riverbank coming closer, the Indian village taking shape beneath the soaring trees and tangled liana. The forest canopy was high up, as much as a hundred and thirty feet, and the dark clouds drifted lugubriously above it, as if threatening rain. The cold, which before had chilled his bones, was making way for the humid heat.

‘This whole place is cursed,’ Father Benedict said. ‘It’s the devil’s very own hiding place.’
‘So the priest believes in evil after all?’
‘Being a priest, that’s my curse.’
Something pumped against the boat’s hull, rocking it slightly before moving away, and he glanced down to see a crocodilian caiman nosing silently through the rippling, mud-browned water in search of food. Death constantly stalked the river, often wearing a hideous countenance – death by the stingray, by the fearsome anaconda, by the piranha fish and crocodiles and giant catfish – and as he watched the caiman gliding away towards some bulrushes near the approaching bank, once more he felt that nature’s horrors, equalled only by human atrocities, made a mockery of man’s attempts to give a meaning to life – and thus, incidentally, also formed a challenge to his own, constantly wavering, Christian faith.
The caiman sank beneath the surface, the water rippling where it had been, and then the bulrushes in the shallows bent sideways as if alive and sprang back to their original positions as the caiman passed through them.
Father Benedict watched intently, both entranced and repelled, as the caiman

emerged from the tall bulrushes and clambered up the slippery clay bank to disappear into the forest where some other animal's fate was already sealed. He shuddered at the thought, not wishing to dwell on life's brutalities, and then turned his head to stare at the Indian village that was now directly in front of him, set back from the riverbank in a clearing hacked out of the forest.

It was quite a large village, consisting of half-adozen *malocas*, between which, squatting around smouldering fires, were mainly women and children. These *malocas* were large communal huts, each housing three or four families, each about three hundred feet in diameter and nearly a hundred feet high, made of palm fibres and dry leaves that had been woven into a skeleton of poles and shaped like gigantic, bisected coconut shells upturned on the earth and grouped in a widely spread semicircle beneath the towering trees.

The boat bumped against the riverbank, muddy water splashing into it, the bulrushes swaying gently around it, disturbed by its movement. Mengrire turned the boat sideways, letting it rest against the wall of earth, and then quickly looped the restraining rope around a pole that was thrusting up from the river's edge. He used the rope to pull them in, tying the boat close to the bank, and then jumped out and reached down with one hand to help the priest out. Father Benedict disembarked easily, not really needing the assistance, but aware that the young Indian viewed him as an old man, well past his prime.

'*Obrigado*, Mengrire.'

'*Nao tem de que*,' the Indian replied, his Portuguese as good as his English, and then turned away and glanced across the clearing, his attention drawn by the smell of cooking food.

Following Mengrire's gaze, Father Benedict saw the villagers around the campfires, the women making *mandioca* cakes or stirring pots of soup, some old men weaving baskets or sniffing *epena*, the children, most naked, simply playing or staring forlornly around them.

There was, palpably, a destitute air about the village, and Father Benedict knew why this was so. The true Yanoama Indians, with their Stone-Age culture, had retreated from European encroachment to the few remaining untouched areas of the rainforest, north of the Amazon. Those who had not done so had either been herded into tribal reserves or, as with the Indians of this particular village, had been recruited to work on the white man's rubber

plantations. In a proper Yanoama village, the able men would have been out hunting, fishing or making war with rival tribes, and the village would have been more visibly active; instead, the men of this village were mostly working in the surrounding rubber plantation – the despised Frank Poulson's plantation – and the desolate air of this village sprang from the silence of their unspoken shame. The men here did not fight, did not hunt or fish, but instead worked as *seringueiros* – rubber gatherers – for Frank Poulson, their status little more than that of slaves. Now, at the very thought of Frank Poulson, Father Benedict's ire rose.

'Damn that man,' he said to himself. 'There's no end to his evil.'

Not hearing him, Mengrire had started advancing into the clearing, heading straight for the Indians huddled around the fires in front of the enormous *malocas*. Father Benedict followed him, his stomach lurching uneasily, now deprived of the cooling rush of the river breeze and feeling the clammy humidity. With the growing heat there were many flies, the *borrachudos* and *pium*, and he had to swot them away as he walked, hoping to avoid being stung.

An old man stood up to greet him, rising slowly and none too steadily, his dark skin hanging in folds above his loin cloth, shoulders broad, legs thin. He was wearing large, moon-shaped earrings and had a beaded band around one arm, his hair black and remarkably healthy, his chin beardless and angular. He did not smile when the priest stopped in front of him, but appeared to be friendly.

'It's early in the morning, priest,' he said, speaking in Portuguese. 'You're welcome, but why are you here so early?'

'You have a sick man,' Father Benedict replied, 'and his woman wants me to look at him.'

'His woman should have called the witchdoctor, not a white man.'

'The woman is a Christian.'

'That won't help her man. The white turd who wants the rubber did great damage and you cannot undo it.'

In describing him as a 'turd', the old man was clearly referring to Frank Poulson, and Father Benedict, even without knowing the details, felt his rage growing stronger.

'What damage was done?' he asked.

'The *seringueiro* was overworked and not given enough food. He spent many

weeks in the forest, gathering the latex from the trees, and grew sick from exhaustion and hunger and returned before time. The white turd was very angry – and also crazy with his drinking – and instead of giving the *seringueiro* food, he took a stick to him. He beat him brutally and then sent him home. Now the *seringueiro* is dying.'

Father Benedict flushed with rage and had to look away from the old man, letting his gaze rest on the great wall of rainforest just beyond the thatched huts. That rainforest went for thousands of miles in every direction and was not very welcoming to the individual. It didn't take much effort to imagine what it was like to work in there, much less grow sick and exhausted there. Yet Frank Poulson, even knowing this, continued to send his rubber gatherers in for too long with too little, and this wasn't the first time that one of them had suffered the consequences. Thinking about it, Father Benedict grew even angrier, glancing over his shoulder to see the coffee-coloured river flowing endlessly, a wall of green at its far side.

'Take me to see this man,' he said, turning back to the old Indian. 'Perhaps there's something I can do – and there's no harm in looking.'

'You cannot help him, priest.'

'I stand as much chance as your witchdoctor.'

'The only way you can help him, or any of the others, is to get rid of that white turd who debauches himself nightly in the big house.'

Father Benedict grinned at that, amused by the old Indian's perspicacity, then they walked side by side across the clearing, leaving Mengrire to have his breakfast, skirting the various groups huddled around the smouldering fires and soon approaching one of the enormous *malocas*.

If the palm-thatch structure had seemed large from outside, it seemed even larger once they were inside it, surrounded by the circular walls and dwarfed by the high, dome-shaped roof that disappeared into the darkness directly above them. The interior of the *maloca* was extremely dim – the opposite side was barely discernible – and the woven palm-leaf hammocks, enough for half-a-dozen families, were slung between poles that had been stuck in the ground around the larger, supporting poles of the main structure.

Contrary to popular opinion, even the Indians did not like communal living, so the faces of those peering out of the gloom showed little emotion.

Father Benedict followed the old Indian across the earthen floor to the far side of the *maloca* where they found the sick *seringueiro* lying in a hammock

above the hammock that belonged to his wife. His wife was sitting cross-legged on the floor nearby, devoid of clothing, her dark skin flabby, rocking to and fro with her eyes shut, her lips offering a repetitive, mournful litany. Beside her, at a vertical loom, in the process of weaving a blanket, was her daughter, dark-haired, fullbreasted, still in her early teens. She glanced up when Father Benedict stopped in front of her, then quickly, and demurely, lowered her eyes again. Father Benedict, discomfited to find that he was blushing, stood by the upper hammock and studied her father, the ill *seringueiro*.

The man had obviously been beaten badly with a thick stick or length of bamboo; the welt marks were all over his body as well as his arms and legs. However, if the beating that had been inflicted upon him had been uncommonly vicious, it did not alone account for his sorry condition. His face was too thin, almost emaciated, his cheekbones clearly visible through his yellowing skin, his eyes far too large and wild with fever, his face slick with sweat. He seemed to be suffering from anaemia, and when Father Benedict examined him by running his hands over his body, he was certain that his fingertips had felt the spleen's fatal enlargement.

'Does he sweat a lot?' he asked.

The man's wife, who had been rocking on the floor, now stopped and looked at him.

'He burns and he freezes,' she said, speaking Portuguese. 'First hot and then cold. Even when burning up, he cries out that he is cold, and when I touch him I feel the death inside him, trying to claim him.'

'Has he been taking his quinine?'

The woman stared at him, perplexed. 'He sniffs his *epena*, nothing else.'

'I'm not interested in his damnable drug; I want to know about medicine. Now did he take his quinine?'

'He took only *epena*.'

Exasperated, Father Benedict stepped away from the dying man who had suddenly started groaning and shaking his head dementedly from side to side. His wife climbed to her feet, wiped the sweat from her forehead, crooned soothing words in their own indigenous language, and eventually managed to calm him.

'He's dying,' she said to Father Benedict, again speaking in Portuguese. 'When he dies, if we do not obey his murderer, we will all truly suffer.'

Ashamed to look at her, Father Benedict lowered his eyes and glanced at her daughter, then quickly, perhaps too quickly, found himself returning his gaze to her mother. There was no doubt that her husband was dying – and now her grief seemed to swamp him.

'The beating was bad,' he said, 'but not severe enough to kill him. It's the *malaria* that's killing your husband. Why in God's name did he not take his quinine before entering the forest? You understand? *Medicine!*'

The woman shook her head in a negative gesture, her dark eyes blind with grief. 'No medicine,' she said. 'He was never offered any medicine. The white chief gave him no more than the stick that opened his skin to the bone. No medicine. Just hunger!'

Her eyes were large and glittering, floating before him in the gloom, wrapping her grief around him and drawing him in through his anger and shame. The shame he felt was for Frank Poulson, for other white men just like him, and, though he refused to articulate it, for his own, secret self.

He glanced at the young girl, saw her smooth skin in the dim light, the curve of her naked breasts forming a path to the stem of her throat. Above the throat: sensual lips, smiling slightly, untouched by death, giving meaning to the invitation in the dark eyes no longer demure. He sensed what she was dreaming – what he, also, had often dreamt – and the shame, which had begun as one thing, now became something else.

Shocked by his own thoughts, he removed his gaze from the girl, tried to focus on her mother, and then thought of Frank Poulson, and of his innocent son, Alex, and let his self-righteous anger cool the fires of desire.

'I'm sorry, but I'm afraid there's little I can do.' His voice sounded mechanical and faraway. 'I'll send for some medicine and arrange for transportation to a hospital – but I'm bound to say I think it's too late.'

'No hospital! He will not die with white men! He will die in this place, in this *maloca*, and feed the soil of the forest.'

'You are a Christian! Your husband is a Christian! He must die like a Christian!'

'No more! No Christians! We no longer play your game! My husband, myself, other Indians, we play your game because we know that if we do not make you smile we will be punished. We are not Christians, priest! We are Indians – Yanoama! We accepted your God because you told us to do so and because we needed your protection from the rubber barons. But what good

did that do us? What good did it do my husband? He was sent into the jungle without food or your precious medicine, and then, when he hungered and turned sick, the drunken white man just beat him. Can you protect us from that, priest? Have you ever protected us? And can you protect our daughters' – she jabbed her finger at the kneeling girl – 'when that beast who gets his power from our rubber comes and steals them away from us? You know what he does, priest! He shames our daughters and then disowns them! And you, priest, you and your fellow Christians, you simply tell us you're sorry. Well, priest, keep your God from my husband's grave. He will die as an Indian!'
The woman spat at his feet and then turned away from him, her naked body twisting in the gloom and curving, as if in slow motion, over the husband who was painfully dying in the swinging hammock. Father Benedict was startled, then felt wounded and humiliated, and his eyes, with a will of their own, turned to take in the adolescent girl. She was getting to her feet, her body well-fleshed and voluptuous, and then her eyes, ignoring death to lure him in, floated out of his sight.
He felt numb and unreal, but had the urge to say something, and his mouth opened and closed as his brain raced, stumbling into stunned silence. He coughed into his clenched fist, squinted into the gloom, heard the wailing of the stricken woman, saw her embracing her husband's body, that body which, diseased and brutalized, was surely expiring.
'You must understand,' he heard himself saying. 'I simply cannot…'
His planned apology got no farther, cut short by the woman's wailing and, more bizarrely, by the sudden, staccato, high-pitched chanting of the old Indian beside him. Father Benedict stepped back a little, hardly believing his own ears, and saw the old Indian squatting on his haunches and starting to rock back and forth, all the better to continue his raucous mourning. Father Benedict stared at him, at the woman embracing her dying husband, at the husband as he swung in the hammock beneath the weight of his wife as if, at the quickening approach of death, they were making love for the last time; and then, his heart racing, the chanting and wailing filling his head, he turned and hurried out of the enormous hut and let the morning light dazzle him.

Chapter Three

It was not all that bright, but his eyes were indeed dazzled, being released

from the dim light of the *maloca's* interior and adjusting to the shocking expansiveness of river and sky.

He blinked and rubbed his eyes, blinked again and then walked on, wending his way between the warm, smouldering fires and the Indians squatting around them. Their very presence was disorientating, defying sense and credibility: a world war had just ended, a splitting atom had scorched the heavens, and here, as if guns and tanks had never existed, as if Hiroshima and Nagasaki were simply dreams of a distant future, these Indians were still squatting in the dirt, their souls tuned to the Stone Age.

Father Benedict felt suffocated, the river breeze now filled with heat, and was glad when he reached the murmuring water where the air was much cooler. He swotted stinging flies from his face, saw the biting ants on his boots, recalled the crocodilian caiman gliding out of the river and crawling up the clay bank. He shuddered, thinking of death, of the brutal realities of the life preceding it, and wondered how to reconcile his faith with his all too mortal, unsteady thoughts.

' O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not…'
The sound of his own voice startled him, making him glance up, embarrassed, and he saw Mengrire kneeling in the boat, untying the restraining rope from the post. The young girl from the *maloca* was nearby, sitting casually on the riverbank, one leg raised, her cheek resting on the knee, her naked skin etched in bronze. She was not staring at Mengrire, but at him, the white priest, and he felt himself responding to her sly smile, his will and virtue dissolving.
Green forest, leaden sky, a bronzed flesh against muddy water… He thought of the woman's wailing, of the old man chanting, of this girl's father dying… She didn't yet understand death, not as something terribly final, but would understand pain and humiliation if Frank Poulson came for her.
Frank Poulson: an evil bastard. Assuming that evil actually existed. Or, if evil did not exist, a former good man corrupted. Father Benedict did not feel charitable and let the anger shake his soul, and then, in the midst of his anger, thought of Frank Poulson's son, Alex. The beauty of true innocence. To be corrupted and destroyed? As that man, that degenerate, corrupted and

destroyed all he touched.
I'm a priest, Father Benedict thought. He affirmed this fact even as he stared at the young girl. She was naked and the river flowed past her and took his senses away with it. How, indeed, had he helped her father? And, in truth, how could he help her? Even now, as he looked at her bronzed body, he felt nothing but lust for her.
Father Benedict breathed deeply, willing himself to look away from the girl. Seeing Mengrire standing up in the boat, he managed to glare angrily at him. 'Don't just stand there, you Christian savage,' he said, trying to make a joke of it. 'Give me your hand and help me aboard. We can do no good here.'
The Indian, a true Christian, smiled and then held out his hand.

Chapter Four

'You look tired,' Father Symonds said, glancing up from the piles of clothing that had been placed neatly around the suitcase on the bed.

'That's what Mengrire told me,' Father Benedict replied, stepping fully into the other priest's room and sitting down wearily in a chair behind a small, wooden table. 'However, Mengrire, clever Indian, thinks my tiredness is of the soul, not of the flesh.'

Father Symonds smiled. He had a round, almost babyish face, his cheeks as pink as his bald head, his hazel eyes, with their good-humoured crow's feet, radiating true warmth. 'All the Indians are philosophers,' he said, 'and believe our souls are visible. Do you think Mengrire was right?'

'No, I'm just tired. It was those damned drums again. I spent half the night on the veranda, chainsmoking, listening to the drums, and watching the rise and fall of those lights that no one can explain.'

'You smoke and swear,' Father Symonds said, 'which makes you a rather unusual priest, if not quite a respectable one.'

'Do you think I'm a good priest?'
'I think you *could* be. I'm not sure that you are.' The older man smiled again,

his eyes wrinkling with good-natured mockery, then he sighed and gazed down at the bed, examining the clothes that still had to be packed. ‘Anyway,’ he continued, ‘you shouldn’t dwell on those lights. As a Christian, you must simply ignore them and get on with your work.’
‘Do you mind if I smoke?’
‘No’
Father Benedict lit a cigarette and inhaled gratefully, realizing that he still hadn’t eaten, but not feeling hungry. He blew the smoke to the gloomy air, squinting through it at his fellow priest, deeply saddened that he was leaving this very day to take the boat back to England. Now, watching his short, plump, elderly friend distractedly putting more clothing into his suitcase, Father Benedict again felt desolated, as he had on the river.
‘I’ve only been here for six months,’ he said, ‘but you’ve been here for fifteen years. It just doesn’t seem real that you’re finally leaving. I still can’t quite accept it.’
‘You’ll get used to it soon enough, Paul. And you’ll be better off without me. I’m now too old for this jungle, I’ll soon be needing walking sticks, and I think it will be better for us both if I tend my garden in England.’
Finding it difficult to imagine his good friend in an English garden, Father Benedict inhaled on his cigarette and stared through the mesh wire of the open window that looked out on the lush greenery of the rainforest. Whether forest or jungle, it always slightly disturbed him, making him feel that he was living a dream in an alien landscape. Here everything was giant-sized – to some, horrifically so – and right now, as he gazed through the insect-covered mesh wire, he saw the great lengths of liana hanging in loops from the towering trees, forming bizarre, surrealistic limbs that embraced the tree trunks and webbed the grassy ground in between like numerous, giant serpents. Certainly it was not like an English garden, nor like any forest he had known before, and the various life forms in there, and the countless ways in which those life forms died, could be viewed as nothing less than a nightmare beyond human imagining.
Were all creatures God’s creatures? If so, what was He like? And how could the jungle’s ferocity, in truth matched by human cruelty, be accepted as a manifestation of His wisdom and benevolence?
Father Benedict exhaled more smoke, watched it drifting in front of him, then turned his gaze away from the challenging forest and again looked at his

friend. The other priest, Father Symonds, was still standing over his bed, putting his tropical clothing, ill suited to England, into his suitcase.
‘Sometimes,’ Father Benedict said, ‘I wish I was back in New Guinea. At least the Japanese didn’t frighten me the way this place does.’
‘The Amazon frightens you?’
‘Yes, I think so. In some way I can’t quite define. Lately I’ve been feeling disorientated and I have real trouble sleeping.’
‘I told you: you must ignore those mysterious lights and close your ears to the drumming. You mustn’t let them prey on you.’
‘How can one ignore them? They’re *there*. I mean, you can’t keep your eyes off the sky when you know that they’re *there* – lights rising and falling to the rhythm of unseen, pounding drums – lights whose source and nature are unknown and that should not, in rational terms, exist.’
‘I know what’s going on inside you, Paul. You want to take an expedition into the jungle to find the drummers and learn where the lights come from.’
‘I confess, I’m sometimes tempted.’
‘Don’t be tempted, Paul. You’d be wasting your time. For a start, you wouldn’t get any of the natives to go with you, since all of them are frightened of the Yano, whether or not that tribe actually exists. As for going it alone, there’s no question that you wouldn’t return, since you’d either get hopelessly lost, drown in a swamp or quicksands, be poisoned or eaten by one of the jungle’s many predatory creatures or, failing all that, be murdered by the reportedly homicidal tribesmen who play the drums that so often disturb your sleep.’
‘The Yano.’
‘Some strange Indian tribe, certainly; let’s call them that for now. No matter: whoever they are, they’d almost certainly kill you.’
‘Do you believe what the Yanoama say about the Yano?’
‘That they have magical powers? That they’re possessed by evil forces? No, Paul, I do not – and neither, as a Christian, should you. So, please, let’s talk no more about it.’
Father Symonds raised his head just long enough to deliver a firm, steady gaze, then he lowered his head again and resumed his packing.
Sighing, restlessly crossing and uncrossing his legs, Father Benedict inhaled on his cigarette, blew smoke across the low table, then stood up and stared out through the insect-covered mesh-wire window at the surrounding

rainforest. Little sunlight penetrated and it was gloomy beneath the trees, the tangled liana trailing away into the impenetrable blackness farther in. Everything was damp and remained so all the time, perpetually rotting and being renewed in a natural cycle of death and birth.

'Anyway,' Father Symonds said, 'you won't be alone for long. My replacement arrives in six weeks. In the meantime, since she'll be staying here for a month, the American woman, the photographer from *National Geographic* magazine, can use this hut.'

Aware of the rising humidity, Father Benedict turned away from the countless insects trapped and either dead or dying in the mesh wire of the open window and glanced first at his fellow priest, then at the dimly lit hut in which he had lived. It was a spartan hut, the walls made of forest logs, a hammock slung between one wall and a pole thrusting up from the boarded floor, a mosquito net above the hammock and above the crudely made single bed upon which the older priest's suitcase was resting, but otherwise containing only the small wooden table at which Father Benedict had been sitting, a couple of equally dilapidated wooden chairs, open shelves on the walls for clothing, books and sundry items, and a couple of oil-fired lamps for illumination. The communal latrines were outside. It was not, to Father Benedict's mind, the sort of abode to which a sophisticated woman from Hollywood would readily accommodate herself.

'I hope this woman doesn't turn out to be a nuisance,' he said.

'Why should she be a nuisance?' Father Symonds responded, pressing the last of his clothing down and then closing the lid of the suitcase.

'Any white woman would be a nuisance in this particular area – and a woman from New York by way of Hollywood even more out of place.'

'This woman's a *professional* photographer, Paul. I'm sure she's travelled a lot.'

'Being well travelled, particularly as Americans travel, doesn't necessarily make one suited to the Amazon. Most Americans, whether well travelled or not, like air-conditioning, prepackaged food and their fellow Americans. An exaggeration, certainly, but reasonably close to the truth – and frankly, now that you're leaving, I could happily do without having to act as a guide for a photo-journalist who'll clearly want to show up the Indians for what they are not.'

'You judge the woman before she's even arrived. She's coming here for a

month to take some photos and write an article, after which she'll be returning to America. It isn't the first such occasion and it certainly won't be the last; and I'm sure that the woman, whether from Hollywood or not, will be able to look after herself. I think, dear Paul, that the celibate life of a priest is making you crusty.'
It was a good-natured remark, offered with a gentle smile, but Father Benedict, uncomfortably aware of the truth in it, had to hide his embarrassment.
'Great,' he said. 'My good friend's final shot is that I'm a woman-hater. Revelation is painful.'
He shook his head and grinned, inhaled on his cigarette, blew a few smoke rings to the air and watched them slowly dissolving…
Yes: dissolving. Like his life: gradually dissolving. A spasm of panic whipped through him, unexpected and disturbing, casting up from the dungeon of his mind some long buried, forgotten fears.
His good friend, Father Symonds, was sixty years of age, but still had the face of a child, innocent and curious, while he, Paul Benedict, a mere forty years old, already felt the draining of energy and enthusiasm that normally comes with the twilight years. He was tired of the Amazon, tired of living like a primitive, possibly even tired of being a priest – and the latter thought, blasphemous in the extreme, was growing stronger each day.
In truth, what he resented was the possibility that he had not lived a real life.

Chapter Five

'So,' Father Symonds said, tightening the leather strap on his suitcase and then pressing his fingers into his spine as he straightened his back. 'I'm ready to go.'

'What preparations have you made for leaving?' 'Are you coming with me?'
'Of course.'
'I've said goodbye to everyone except a few friends

on Frank Poulson's plantation. I thought we could stop off there, shake a few hands, and then drive back this way and on to Manaus. Is that all right with you?' 'That's more than all right. I want to have words

with that bastard, Poulson.'
'Ah, you had a bad time in the Indian camp.' 'Yes.'
'Let's have breakfast.'
Father Benedict threw his cigarette butt on the

earthen floor and stomped on it, then together both men left the hut and made their way across the flat expanse of the mission camp, the great river flowing quietly on their right, the huts of the modest camp on their left, below the towering trees. They did not walk very far, but felt the heat nonetheless, a relentless, suffocating humidity caused by low-hanging, dense clouds. There were numerous biting flies, enormous butterflies and mosquitoes; and the ground beneath their feet, damp and grassy, was alive with numerous insects.

The mission camp was small and destitute, made diminutive by the soaring trees, its few log buildings incongruous in the forest's green density. Naked Indian children were playing freely, chasing frightened chickens and geese while their parents, most wearing shirts and pants or shabby dresses, milled around the entrance to the medical hut, waiting for treatment for their wide variety of ailments. Behind the medical hut was the rainforest, ominously quiet and gloomy, little sunlight penetrating through the trees, no breeze to temper the clinging heat.

When the older priest entered the mess hut, Father Benedict followed him in, ducking his head as he passed through the low doorway. It was cooler inside, but the flies were just as numerous, buzzing frantically over the long trestle table containing their breakfast: a generous selection of melons, mangoes, papaya and pineapple, crusty white bread with a syrup made from *assai* berries, a porridge of plantains, and two jars containing *laranja* and *maracuja*, all of it, in one way or another, taken from the forest.

Uncomfortably aware of his spreading waistline, Father Benedict settled for two large slices of melon and a mug of rich, thick black coffee, then sat down at the table, facing the other priest. He sighed, picked up his knife and fork, then cut into the melon.

'You're not eating?' he asked of Father Symonds.

‘No. Truth tell, I’m feeling a little tense and my stomach’s upset.’
‘Because you’re leaving?’
‘Yes. Because this time it’s final. Perhaps because retirement is a sign that the curtain is coming down.’
‘Nonsense,’ Father Benedict said, swallowing a piece of melon. ‘You’ve lots of years left in you yet, so don’t talk as if it’s all over.’
The older priest sighed, accepting the reprimand. ‘I stand corrected, Paul. And of course you’re absolutely right: the curtain hasn’t come down yet, though it feels that way to me. The truth, dear friend, is that I’ve already been here too long and now the very thought of returning home scares me, as if I no longer belong there. And there *is* some truth in that. This place turns one into a primitive. What’s a fish knife to a man who licks his fingers? And can I handle a proper tea cup and saucer?’
He smiled at his own doubts, but Father Benedict shifted uneasily, feeling strongly that there was more truth in the question than his old friend realized. A mission priest was almost a castaway, living a primitive life, so far removed from normal society and the church itself that the commonplace rites of civilization were all too easily lost. China tea cups and fish knives were indeed long lost luxuries, but much greater was the loss of mental stimulation and the mores of cultivated social life. Father Benedict was no gentleman (he had good manners, but lacked etiquette) yet he felt increasingly, as each passing week drained him, that the few civilized refinements he still possessed were gradually being eroded in this jungle, worn away through lack of proper discipline, destroyed by deepening lethargy. The jungle’s silence drained the mind, the empty mind sapped the will, and in time, as the distance between past and present increased, that modest history that at least offered identity vaporized in the sweltering gloom. In truth, Father Benedict loathed this place and secretly yearned to pack his own suitcase and leave with his fellow priest.
‘English tea and muffins,’ he said. ‘I’m sure you’ll learn to live with it. As for fish, after fifteen years here, I should think you’ve had quite enough of it. No fish, no fish knives to deal with, so you’ve no need to worry.’ He sliced up some more melon and started digging out the pips, trying to ignore the flies buzzing around his head in pursuit of his sweat. ‘But does it really feel that strange to be going back after all these years?’
‘Yes, I’m afraid it does. I’m not too happy about it. I mean, I *want* to go

back, but I'm not sure about what I'm returning to. Fifteen years is a long time; fifteen years here, even longer. I don't know that I can settle back in England and simply tend my garden. A family might help, but I have no family left, and perhaps, in that small cottage in Hertfordshire, I'll simply become a recluse.' His eyes, normally twinkling with good humour, were now very serious. 'Be careful of that,' he said. 'Don't let this place completely change you. You've only been here six months, yet already you can't sleep at nights, your ears tuned to the jungle. This is a very strange place, Paul. It isn't just another jungle. It's not like New Guinea, nor like any other place on Earth. You must learn to close your eyes and ears to what you don't understand.'

'You mean the lights that rise and fall over the interior? Those and the drums of the Yano Indians?'

'Who may or may not exist,' Father Symonds replied. 'Yes, I mean the drums – which may be played by an unknown tribe, if not the mysterious Yano – and the lights, which though seeming to defy logic, may yet be explicable as atmospheric phenomena. I mean those… but not only those.' Finishing his coffee, he wiped his lips with his fingers, stood up and clasped his hands behind his back and then went to the doorway of the hut to gaze out over the river. Beams of sunlight, edging around the forest clearing, slanted over his portly frame.

'Something happens to we white men when we stay here too long,' he said. 'We rot in mind and body, go native or even mad; sometimes compensate for boredom and loss of identity by embracing sin as our most intimate friend.'

'Like Frank Poulson?'

'Yes, Paul.' Father Symonds sighed, as if releasing his despair, then turned back to face the interior of the hut while remaining in the doorway. The sunlight, spraying out around his body, rendered his face a black, featureless mask. 'The man is corrupt. Perhaps irredeemably so. And yet once upon a time, not so long ago, he actually seemed halfway decent. It was this place that changed him, wrapping its web of evil around him, robbing him of every civilizing belief and turning him into a devil. Believe me, this place can do that; by my faith, I would swear to it.' The older priest shuddered a little, as if caught in a sudden chill. 'So,' he said, stepping forward, his kindly face reappearing, beads of sweat gleaming on his bald head as he sat down again, 'what happened this morning?'

No longer hungry, Father Benedict slid his plate away, swiped at the flies buzzing frantically around his head, then had a sip of his coffee. He wiped his lips with the back of his clenched fist and then reached into his pocket.
'You've just named the bastard,' he said. 'It's Frank Poulson again.' He took a cigarette from his packet, lit it and inhaled, blew the smoke over the buzzing flies and observed their panic with pleasure. 'Another *seringueiro* is dying right this minute – and I don't doubt who caused it.' He recounted the story of his visit to the Indian camp across the river, emphasizing that the Indian's illness was due to a lack of medication and, also, to the beating he had received from Frank Poulson, noting, as he did so, the distaste of Father Symonds' face and feeling his own anger rising as it had earlier on. 'I'll have to do something,' he said, inhaling deeply, exhaling the smoke, 'and I'll start by seeing Poulson. I'm not going to stand by any longer while that bastard, without reason or rhyme, brutalizes his workers, If he doesn't agree to instantly change his ways, I'll go to higher authority.'
'*What* higher authority? There's *no* higher authority. Even the Church has no authority in this place, as already you know. By all means speak to him, but don't expect too much; most likely he'll just laugh in your face and throw you off his plantation. No one cares about the Indians, Paul. The Church can only do so much. We can say what we want to Frank Poulson, but beyond that, we're helpless. And, with particular regard to Poulson, our words fall on deaf ears.'
'And what happens when the Indian actually dies? Can we not call it murder?'
The older priest sighed. 'Yes, Paul, we can call it murder – but that won't get us anywhere with the authorities who will use the word "accident". Frank Poulson is aware of this – that the so-called authorities are on his side – so no matter how much it disgusts us, alas we are helpless.'
Father Benedict felt the sting of his own impotence, the rancid bile of defeat, recalling the angry words of the *seringueiro's* wife, her accusation unanswerable. 'What are we doing here?' he asked, 'if we have no power to act? Is there any point in being here at all or are we fooling ourselves?'
'The Church does what it can, but must accept its limitations. The world can't be changed overnight – least of all this particular world with its own obscene rules.' The hazel eyes looked directly at Father Benedict, gentle yet probing. 'But is that what you think, Paul? That you're being wasted here? That

because the Church can't move mountains, it should not even try? If so, then indeed you lack faith of the most fundamental kind.'
'I think you've always sensed that in me.'
'Yes, Paul, I have.'
The gently perceptive eyes were staring steadily at him, and Father Benedict, smoking his cigarette, felt slightly ashamed. A lack of faith was what he felt – more so every day – and if it stemmed, as it surely did, from his past, his present situation had also served to aggravate his old doubts. He stood on shifting sands and had done so all his life, but recently the moving grains had formed a fissure into which he felt himself falling. His faith was not a rock, but an expanding vacuum in his soul, and he was certain that this jungle, as his good friend had said, was working its destructive tricks upon him. He wanted to explain himself, to reveal his past to the older man, but when he spoke, hearing the hollowness of his own voice, he merely talked of the present.
'Maybe you're right,' he said. 'Maybe I'm not a good priest. My faith wavers and I feel like a hypocrite when I try speaking of principles. It's like talking into a mirror: the image only reflects my false self; and in that sense, when I'm angry, when I let my anger lead me, when I despise Frank Poulson for his brutal mistreatment of the Indians, I can't do so without feeling a certain confusion over my motives.'
'I'm not sure I understand, Paul.'
'Frank Poulson has, at least indirectly, killed more than this one Indian, and as such he represents that genocidal movement of which we're possibly a part, even if with the best of intentions.'
'By "we" do you mean the Church?'
'Yes.' Father Benedict, hearing his own weary sigh, suddenly felt considerably older than he actually was. 'As we both know, the decline of the Amazonian Indians and their way of life has been caused, in the main, by a threat to which they simply can't adapt: we white men. First the sixteenth-century Spanish, then the Portuguese conquistadors, bringing firearms, diseases and Christianity, none of which, we must reluctantly agree, were mercifully inclined. When the Indians were not being killed off by the firearms, they were being wiped out by smallpox, measles, the common cold and syphilis, while many of the survivors were tortured and brutalized as slaves. Christianity, on the other hand, had its own particular effect:

destroying the native culture of those who survived physically and thus bringing on the death of their spirit… Can you now understand why I have doubts? Even we, with our good intentions, may be contributing to the decline, or disappearance, of the Indians' way of life; by our presence, however much we respect the Indians' traditions, we constitute a very real force for change – a change that could, alas, lead to obliteration. Frank Poulson, then, is not the only criminal. We have all been collaborators.'
Feeling embarrassed and trying to hide it, he blew a cloud of smoke at the circling flies and then stubbed out the cigarette. A line of ants crossed the table, oblivious to human doubt, advancing through pools of shadow and light on the untreated wood.
Father Symonds clasped his hands, sliding his thumbs under his chin, his right eyebrow raised in a questioning manner, his smile understanding.
'To be human is to err,' he said, 'and the Church is still human. It exists to do God's work, to bridge the sacred and the profane, but can only do that work through human beings, who by their nature are fallible.'
'I know that. I accept it.'
'Then why doubt your faith simply because the Church is fallible? And why doubt yourself simply because you can't judge your fellow man without passing judgement on yourself? It's not a sin to question your own motives; blind acceptance is worse.'
Father Benedict nodded, appreciating his good friend's kindness, but the words, while making sense, could not heal the wounds that still scarred his faith. His doubts went too deep for that, were now too old to be subdued, and their genesis was far back in that time between childhood and youth. He wanted to tell his friend about it, to unburden himself by passing it on, but this moment, with his friend's departure imminent, just seemed like the wrong time.
'And Frank Poulson?'
'Have no doubts, Paul. Your assessment is correct. The man is corrupt and growing worse, ruining all he touches. I understand your anger and that it stems from your concern, because it's not only the Indians you care for, but also Frank Poulson's son.'
'We've grown close,' Father Benedict said.
'I know. And I'm pleased. You treat Alex almost like your own son, and that's something he needs.' Father Symonds scratched his bald head, pressed

his fingers down upon it, shook it in an almost comical manner, then pursed his lips and let air out. ‘Such a tragedy it was,’ he said, ‘to lose his mother when he was born; yet a miracle that the father is such a brute and the boy so good-natured.’

‘Magically good-natured… *and* magical.’

‘Ah, yes, that also…’ The older priest stood up, removing his hand from his sweating bald head, swatted distractedly at the circling flies and glanced vaguely around him. It was gloomy in the mess hut, a single shaft of sunlight falling obliquely, cutting a thin line through the shadows and illuminating the mosquitoes in the motes of dust that seemed to drift endlessly. ‘He was a beautiful baby,’ he said. ‘Always smiling, at peace. The wife of old Peruche, then alive, stood in for his mother. A large woman, always smiling, she loved the growing boy as her own, and when she died, when Alex was six years old, it was a sad day for all of us. Yet, strangely, Alex was unaffected. He just drew close to Peruche. And that wily old bird, rumoured to be a witchdoctor, simply encouraged Alex’s innocent nature and guided him gently through childhood. Yes, there’s something magical about the boy – and I don’t mean his strange powers.’

‘I assumed you would have disapproved of those.’

Father Symonds shrugged. ‘No really, Paul. Alex’s gifts are of a very minor order – and tempered with sweetness.’

‘They’re magical nonetheless.’

‘But not necessarily supernatural. The Indians, like certain animals, have retained occult powers that we white men lost long ago; and Alex, under the wing of old Peruche, is very much like an Indian.’

‘And you still don’t disapprove?’

‘I chose to ignore what I can’t understand, which perhaps is *my* secret cowardice.’ Father Symonds smiled and shrugged, raising his hands in a begging gesture. ‘At my time of life, after a lifetime of observation, there are questions that one simply avoids in case the answers are damaging. Leave it only that I think of Alex as a very remarkable and lovely boy; and that I understand only too well your urge to protect him. The sadness, of course, is that he most needs protecting from his own wretched father.’

Sensing that the older priest was preparing to leave, Father Benedict pushed his chair back and stood up, pressing his hands into the base of his spine and stretching his back. ‘Damn,’ he said, ‘I’m not young anymore. My bones

creak and ache.'
'A daily swim in the river is what you need. The piranha fish would love you.'
Father Benedict smiled at that, briefly cheered by the good humour, but as they both crossed the floor to the open doorway of the hut, he thought of the man dying across the river because of Frank Poulson.
Should he ignore what was happening? Should he accept the status quo? Or should he, as representative of the Church, take a stand on the matter?
When his more experienced friend, Father Symonds, ducked his head and left the hut, Father Benedict, undecided and lacking faith, followed him out.
The sun was high in the sky, blazing down from the scattered clouds above the mighty river, unobstructed by the canopy of trees that normally kept it from illuminating the forest floor. Father Benedict rubbed his eyes, squinting into the sudden brightness, then focused on his short, bald-headed friend whose kindly face gave him hope. He was immediately invigorated, filled with unexpected conviction, and briefly felt that all his fears would fall away if he took positive action.
'So, Paul,' Father Symonds said, 'I think it's time I was leaving.'
'You've said goodbye to everyone here?'
'Everyone… and I can't stand repeating myself.'
'Fine. So let's go.'
Father Symonds started forward, heading towards his own hut, saying that he would pick up his suitcase and then come straight back. Hearing the rustling of foliage, Father Benedict turned his head and saw the Indian, Mengrire, walking urgently towards him. Mengrire stopped in front of him, looking grim. He indicated the river. Father Benedict looked across that wide expanse of dappled water to see a thin plume of smoke spiralling above the far bank.
'It's a sign,' Mengrire said, almost whispering. 'The *seringueiro* has died.'

Chapter Six

'It's going to rain,' Mengrire said, sitting stiff-backed in the driver's seat, his hands firmly on the steering wheel of the jeep as he let the wind carry his words back to them. 'I can feel it in the coldness of the air. It will rain very soon.'

The two priests, sitting close together in the back of the jeep as it bounced and rattled along the crude track, merely glanced at one another but said nothing, both aware that Mengrire's words disguised the anger he doubtless felt about the *seringueiro's* death. They had just left the mission camp and were heading for Frank Poulson's plantation, the gloom deepening around them as the forest became more dense, the lower branches of the trees meeting above their heads and cutting out the sunlight.

Father Benedict glanced about him, surveying the forest, seeing little, helplessly gazing inward at himself and his conflicting emotions.

The death of the *seringueiro,* though expected, had still badly shocked him, brutally destroying his brief elation and resurrecting his former doubts – about himself, about the frailty of his faith, about the role of the Church in this jungle which belonged to, and was perhaps only understood by, the frequently betrayed and exploited Indians.

He wiped sweat from his face, not feeling the cold that Mengrire had mentioned, and looked straight ahead at the crude track that snaked through the foliage. The few striations of light were dimming, making the grey shadows blacken, while the clamour of the jeep, the tortured banging of the gearstick, punctuated the silence of the forest like some alien, metallic beast.

The rainforest slept during the day, its teeming wildlife camouflaged, but Father Benedict, well aware of what the lush greenery hid, could not forget the terrible spectacle of savagery and death enacted nightly within it; and was convinced that the jungle, which was cruel beyond belief, was a microcosm of all life on Earth, including the bloody history of Mankind. This was not a Christian belief – quite the opposite, indeed – but increasingly it was one that haunted his dreams and tormented his waking hours.

Feeling guilty and unworthy, degraded by his own reasoning, he glanced sideways at Father Symonds' profile with its flushed, blue-veined cheeks, slightly bulbous nose, and bald head rising out of thinning hair like an egg in a bird's nest. His friend's eyes were closed, his head held back to catch the breeze, and his lips were curved in the hint of a smile, part goodhumoured,

part sad. Father Benedict felt anger again, thinking of Frank Poulson and the dead *seringueiro*, even angrier that the death should have occurred the same day Father Symonds was leaving.

'I'm sorry it had to happen today of all days,' he said. 'Right now – and God forgive me for saying it – I could kill that degenerate bastard, Frank Poulson.'

'It's a tragedy that it happened at all, Paul. That it happened today of all days has nothing to do with it.'
'I think you know what I meant, Michael.'
'Yes, Paul, and I appreciate it, but you really shouldn't be concerned for me, but for that poor Indian's family.'
'I'll look after them, of course.'
'And that's all you can do. There's no point in brooding further about it; change comes slowly but surely.'
Father Benedict was doubtful about that, as he was with most things these days.
'I promise you,' he said, 'I'll do something. I won't let this matter rest.'
Father Symonds opened his eyes to stare at him, smiling more broadly.
'Do as you wish, Paul,' he said. 'My time here is over.'
'That doesn't sound too encouraging.'
'It wasn't intended as encouragement. I merely reiterate that no matter what you feel, you can probably do little.'
'He virtually murdered that Indian.'
'Virtually, but not quite. And that will make all the difference in Manaus, should you take it to court.'
'I won't know unless I try.'
'By all means try, Paul, if you insist, but don't expect justice. Justice, in this case, will only come from God, when He feels it is time. In the meantime, if you have your confrontation with Frank Poulson, you may at least unburden your conscience and sleep more soundly at night.'
Father Benedict was startled, wondering what his friend meant. 'My conscience? Why bring my conscience into this? We're talking about the activities of Frank Poulson, not of my minor sins.'
Father Symonds smiled at him, unperturbed. 'You want challenges, Paul. You want issues to wrestle with. You want them much more than you would

were your heart truly peaceful. I accept your anger over this crime, your contempt for Frank Poulson, your despair over the limitations of the Church in this uncivilized place. I accept that your feelings are sincere and the causes are real enough. Yet you brood too much, Paul, concentrating too much on negatives, and I sense that your lack of faith, your deepening cynicism, springs not from what you see around you, but from your own secret nature. Your anger stands like a mirror before you, casting back your reflection. It's your own sins you fear.'

Shocked by that remark, uncomfortably aware of the truth in it, Father Benedict averted his gaze from his fellow priest and instead watched the forest slip past him: a dark and sombre sight, few flowers brightening the light-starved soil, the lianas writhing around the tree trunks or hanging down in giant loops, often coiling around the brown fruit of the Cannon-Ball trees or green clusters of avocado pears in pursuit of the sky. The lianas climbed towards the sky because sunlight rarely penetrated through the trees, and now, surveying that gloom, still stinging from his friend's perceptiveness, Father Benedict felt that he was staring into the darkness of his own discontented soul.

'You told me it was no sin to doubt,' he said eventually, 'and yet that's my greatest fear.'

'Your lack of faith?'

'Yes.'

'Why?'

'Because it becomes worse every day, making me feel like a hypocrite.'

'Hypocrisy has nothing to do with it, Paul. You're suffering what most decent men must suffer at some time or another: the loss of emotional energy and conviction, of a sense of direction. *And thy life shall hang in doubt before thee; and thou shalt fear day and night… In the morning thou shalt say, Would God it were even! And at even thou shalt say, Would God it were morning!…* Is that not the case in this instance, Paul?'

'Deuteronomy. Yes.' Father Benedict smiled uneasily, pleased that his friend understood, displeased that the truth in what he had said could so easily disturb him. 'That certainly is what I feel, but it's more than a midlife crisis. I've had such feelings ever since I joined the Ministry; and the Amazon, its ghostly silence and strangeness, had simply forced me to think more about them.'

He studied the back of Mengrire's head, seeing the Indian's long hair blowing, his dark hands sliding around the steering wheel as the jeep bounced and rattled. Here – the Amazon. And before that – New Guinea. And before that, in childhood and adolescence, the flat plains of the outback of Australia. A single street through a small town, red dust drifting lazily, people frozen in pools of shadow on their porches, the road shimmering in heat waves. One school and one church, both built with clapboard, swinging doors on the bar of the sole hotel where the sheepshearers drank. The days were bright and long, not much noise, the townsfolk silhouetted, and his parents, guarding the doors of the small church, were the ghosts of his history. His father, the Catholic scholar; his mother, the obedient wife. Both preserved in the fine gauze of his thoughts and impressed upon his memories for life.

Had they loved him? He never knew. Only their sermons remained with him. His father had drawn him into the Church, pushed him unswervingly towards the Ministry, and then shamed him, when he was still an insecure young man, into going to work for the Aboriginal mission stations. A good son, he had done so, convincing himself that he truly wanted it, but eventually, when the truth was forced upon him, he had viewed his own life as false.

'If being in the Amazon disturbs you so much,' Father Symonds said, 'why did you volunteer to come here? And, indeed, why have you spent so many years serving the Church in similar places?'

Mengrire mangled the gears and the jeep slowed abruptly, banged into a liana trailing across the track, then bounced over it and crashed back down again and moved on, growling in protest. Father Benedict, holding onto his seat, felt a chill in the air.

'A good question,' he said, 'and one that bothers me a lot. Time plays tricks with our memories – we often reinvent our past – but I believe I left Australia for New Guinea to get away from my father. He was a decent man, I suppose, but I mostly remember his sternness, his humourless and unbending theology, his puritanical zeal. Please forgive the violins, but my childhood was lonely. My mother, either respectful or actually in fear of her husband, was a quiet and uncommunicative woman who, though treating me kindly, showed little emotion. As for my father, he was positively Victorian, a disciplinarian with narrow views of right and wrong, of honour and duty. He instilled such beliefs in me, tried protecting me from all evil, even protecting me from the mischief of other children by keeping most at a distance. So, I was lonely,

influenced only by my parents, and even later, as a young man, when studying at a theological college in Brisbane, my father rarely let me out of his sight. Naturally, then, my friendships were few and my influences likewise. My father's religious world was the one I inherited. No accident, therefore, that I never truly felt the calling, but simply entered the Church to follow the path laid down by him for me.'

The forest was now much darker, the faint sunlight disappearing, the distant rumbling of thunder punctuating the spasmodic coughing of the badly tuned jeep.

What he had said was disingenuous, not the whole truth, not even remotely so, and he felt the deepening gloom of the rainforest dissolving his sense of reality, while his past, in the form of ghostly images, came alive in his mind…

The theological college in Brisbane, his student's room bleak and musky, the chapel spartan and forbidding, other students whispering prayers or singing hymns as the clock ticked the hours away. Outside, the sun shone; inside, the gloom prevailed. In the night, when sleep refused to come, he knew the heat of temptation: *thou are cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field*… Thus, he lay, a young man in the long night, his wanting flesh shrivelled by the accusing, overwhelming voice of God…

'So you were doubtful even then,' Father Symonds said.

'Yes,' he replied, feeling the dampness in the air and knowing that the rain would soon be coming. 'Now I see that I was doubtful from the very beginning, though at the time, perhaps understandably, I couldn't admit it to myself. I *wanted* to believe, I begged the Lord to strengthen my faith, but my doubts prevailed and tormented me. Which is why, when my father encouraged me to go and work in the Aboriginal mission stations, I went with a feeling of great relief. If nothing else, I would escape his constant attention and maybe find my own breathing space.'

'So you developed a taste for lonely places, far from civilization.'

Father Benedict sighed, feeling foolish, but still compelled to talk, his gaze focused on the darkening forest slipping past on both sides of him. Here, the Amazon rainforest; and before this, New Guinea, its jungles also dense and forbidding, crushing the spirit. The thunder rumbled again in the distance; a light breeze shook the foliage.

'Yes,' he said, his voice strained, in competition with the noisy jeep. 'Even in

Australia, I developed a taste for the Aborigines' alien culture and the outback's great silence, which, in its own way, spoke volumes. There was a touch of masochism in it, the need to punish myself for my doubts. In that silence I could admit that I hadn't really wanted to enter the Church; admit, also, that I was tempted by material possessions and worldly pleasures. I felt that I was missing out on a real life. That feeling persists to this day.'
Thunder rumbled again and the rain started falling, splashing lightly on leaves and spraying around them to signal what was to come: a deluge; a storm. Father Benedict, hearing that noise in the heavens, thought of it as God's accusing voice.
'God speaks to me,' he said, 'from the heavens. It's a clear reprimand.'
The older priest smiled, not offended. 'Did you believe in Him at that time? Or did you live a complete lie?'
'Not a complete lie. I believed in Him then. And even now, with my doubts looming larger, I can't fully deny Him. I have doubts, yes, but my belief in Him persists. What I can't accept – and never could – is that I belong to Him.'
'If not to Him, then to the devil.'
'Not necessarily so. We don't have to give ourselves to one when we turn away from the other.'
'But you didn't actually turn away from Him. You simply doubted His nature and your own place in His mystifying design.'
'Yes. I wanted to live as other men, to enjoy their sinful pleasures, and the Church, with the demands it made upon me, deprived me of that.'
'Are you suggesting that a priest has no real life?'
'I'm suggesting that I was not then, and am still not, cut out to be a proper priest; that I'm a man with strong desires – worse, perhaps even a sensualist – and that my need for *earthly* experiences is stronger than my desire to be virtuous.'
'The need you mention is perfectly normal,' Father Symonds said, 'even for priests.'
'I accept that, also, though it doesn't solve my problem. It's true that most priests have to battle with temptation, but most take their pride from fighting that battle and strengthen their faith by so doing. As for myself, I have no pride; I merely resent what I've lost, especially that most precious act of intimacy: to share love – create new life.'

The words had come out of nowhere, unplanned and unexpected, and he felt himself burning with embarrassment even as he uttered them. Confused, he bowed his head, sensing the floodgates slowly opening, the buried secrets of his past rising up to form a whirlpool of memories, some of which were unwanted.

A few raindrops fell upon him, large raindrops, warm and gentle, then the introductory drizzle to the deluge sprayed down through the giant, quivering leaves.

He recalled his modest church in the Australian outback, its clapboard walls bleached by the sun, and around it, shimmering dreamlike in the heat, the huts and tents of the Aboriginal mission station with its beaten inhabitants. The men drank and slept a lot, spirits broken, minds emptied, while the children played noisily in the dirt and the women welcomed the white men. Fat women, drained of life, selling themselves for sustenance, while he, the mission priest, closed his eyes and turned away in despair. He recalled it clearly now, just as if it were yesterday: the tents lamplit at night, the silhouettes in indecent motion, the masculine, drunken oaths, the feminine giggling, the children kept temporarily outside, though they knew what was happening… And most vivid of all, that particular girl, the young one, her breasts bared in the sweltering gloom of his room, her brown eyes staring at him with hope and drawing him to her. In that singular recollection, as clear and cold as ice, lay the secret he could never discuss, nor completely accept. Nonetheless, perhaps encouraged by the imminent departure of his trusted friend, the older priest, his voice emerged reluctantly from his throat, speaking into the drizzling rain.

‘I was tempted,’ he confessed. ‘Tempted so many times. And although I never gave in to temptation, I resented my loss. I wanted to love and be loved in return, to touch and be touched, to marry and have children and look after them as a decent father should. I could not understand why the Church should deprive me of that.’

‘And, of course, by the Church, you meant God.’

‘Yes, I meant God.’

The rain started pouring down, first attacking the forest canopy, making a muffled drumming sound high above them as it drenched the high trees. Thunder rumbled and lightning crackled, briefly illuminating the dark depths, then the rain poured down through the branches just above them and turned

into a heavy shower.
‘There’s no point in stopping,’ Father Symonds said. ‘We’d just get soaked anyway.’
Mengrire kept driving, his long hair already dripping, his brown skin showing through his soaked and almost transparent white shirt, while Father Symonds, already heading for the rain of England, opened a black umbrella and held it over himself and Father Benedict. The jeep shuddered as if stalling, its wheels churning up mud, but then it growled and lurched forward again, coughing and banging.
‘You’ll soon need a new jeep,’ Father Symonds said. ‘This one won’t last much longer.’ He smiled benignly, still holding the umbrella up over their heads, the rain drenching it and pouring noisily off it. ‘So,’ he continued, ‘you were often tempted but resisted, and yet, even knowing that you hadn’t succumbed, you still suffer guilt. Ah, Paul, dear Paul, you’re a puritan like your father, expecting, just as he expected of you, an impossible perfection. Is this logical, Paul? Alas, I fear it’s not. You’re a mortal man with mortal man’s weaknesses and must learn to deal with them. To be human is to chose – between good and evil, right and wrong – so perhaps your wavering faith, your need to doubt and question, is merely a sign that you’re more aware than most of the need to make choices. And choice, Paul, the ability to decide, is what makes men of beasts.’
The thunder rolled again, the voice of God splitting the heavens, and the lightning spasmodically slashed the forest in jagged ribbons of silver. First darkness, then brilliant light, then the black of night again, the rain drumming on the forest canopy, running in rivulets down the foliage, then pouring out of the shivering lower branches to hammer down on their heads.
Mengrire whooped in exhilaration, smacking the steering wheel with one hand, but Father Benedict, leaning forward, trying to keep himself dry, to stay under the umbrella, felt cold and deafened and unreal, his head as tight as a drum. Cursing softly, he rubbed his eyes, blinking repeatedly, squinting into the deluge to see slanting lines of silver, glistening streams and rivulets, the rain spraying off the big leaves and rushing down the writhing liana and sweeping across the winding, muddy track along which they were travelling. He shook his head from side to side, grinning painfully at Father Symonds, but the noise of the rainfall, of the rolling thunder and crackling lightning, combined with the jeep’s growling and the banging of the misused gearstick,

made him cover his ears with his hands and bow his head even lower. The lightning flashed and he closed his eyes, falling into a dark well, his friend's words reverberating in his mind like the cry of a ghost… *good and evil, right and wrong… to be human is to chose…* He felt the words as physical blows at his temples, making his thoughts spin.

The thunder rumbled again, but now seemed to be far away; the flashing lightning seared through his closed eyes, illuminating his mind…

Another time, another place, another storm in another night, the lightning flashing outside a rattling window to intermittently illuminate brown breasts as they moved, with seductive sensuality, out of shifting shadows. Dark hair and dark eyes, brown breasts and brown shoulders, the skin curving down smoothly, irresistibly, to what could neither be ignored nor forgotten. Remembering, he shivered, scorching the image with his shame, staring through the smouldering ash of the recollection back to the present…

He had come here in flight, running from Queensland to New Guinea, then on to the Amazon, trying to shake off the tentacles of that night by purging himself in the jungle. And yet nothing had helped, neither the Aborigines nor the Japanese; not even the horrors he had witnessed towards the end of the war. Those horrors had served their purpose, almost making him lose his faith, but they had failed to erase from his thoughts the shame that kept him awake at nights.

In flight? From what? From the secret he could not divulge. From the truth of why he could not accept his God and be true to his faith. The thunder rumbled far away, the rain gradually stopped falling, and then out of the growing silence emerged the dripping of the drenched, shivering jungle. Opening his eyes, he glanced sideways to see the older priest's sad smile, then he looked away and saw the glistening forest, its giant leaves soaked and bowed.

He had fled to this place, hoping to purge himself of weakness, to forget his sins in work, in the distractions of the unexplained, secretly grateful for the lights that rose and fell over the interior, also grateful for the unseen Yano drummers whose mesmeric rhythms emanated from an unknown source and were said to lead to the manifestation of strange, possibly occult and dangerous, powers…

He rubbed his eyes and looked ahead, past Mengrire's wind-whipped hair, and saw that the muddy track had become a road that was covered with

tarmac. All around were rubber trees, cleared spaces and marked posts, and the sun, breaking through to the forest floor, was turning the rain to steam. Mengrire raised his right hand, sliding his thumb into his clenched fist, then put his foot down and drove on to the heart of the plantation. The clapboard houses and thatched huts materialized in a sunlit clearing, their walls and verandas hazy behind drifting curtains of steam, while the Indian workers, moving lethargically back and forth in the deepening steam, looked like ghosts in the mists of prehistory.
Mengrire parked the jeep in an area reserved for cars, then the three men, still drenched, disembarked from the vehicle, Father Benedict already focused on the largest building, which was Frank Poulson's house.

Chapter Seven

The plantation had clearly been organized along the lines of a Jesuit *aldeia*, with the thatched huts of the workers bordering the roads that intersected at right angles and were spread out around the house of the *fazendeiro*, their master, Frank Poulson. That house was, in this case, perhaps with deliberate arrogance, situated in the middle, in a mown grassy square where, in a genuine *aldeia*, the Jesuit church would have stood. The huts were dilapidated, the paint peeling off the planks, the wood itself chipped or rotting, the holes in some of the roofs stuffed up with cardboard or a patchwork of bamboo cane, whereas the large house belonging to Frank Poulson was, with its ornate brickwork, its colonnades and flamboyant porticos (grotesque Portuguese town baroque), an immaculate pink-and-blue extravagance clearly designed to intimidate the lowly workers.

Studying it, Father Benedict felt the return of his rage, but he managed to turn his gaze away and have a good look around him. The rain had turned the earth to mud, the roads and trees were still steaming, and he saw, across the clearing beyond the car park, broad stone steps leading down to the jetty. The river was down there and the plantation had its own *porto*, served frequently by the paddle-steamers of the white traders and the smaller boats of the Indians. Manaus, the nearest city, was ninety minutes upstream, and Father Benedict's mission camp, another stop-in for the boats, was approximately halfway between Manaus and this decaying plantation.

Now, looking around him, squinting against the blazing sunlight, he observed the Indians who worked the plantation, some listlessly walking about, some playing checkers on their small verandas, other rocking rhythmically in their hammocks and sniffing *epena*, and he knew that this plantation, like the city of Manaus, had seen the last of its good days, was slipping into oblivion.

Glancing at Father Symonds, he felt oddly desolate, aware that he was losing a good friend. The older priest reached out to Mengrire and placed a hand on his shoulder. 'Well, Mengrire,' he said, smiling benevolently at the Indian, 'you managed to get me here without killing me, so now help me to make my last goodbyes by telling where I can find Peruche – and *his* friends – and *your* friends. I want to say goodbye to my flock once and for all.'

'This is sad,' Mengrire responded, but with a sly, good-humoured grin. 'This is truly a cause for much mourning that our friend should depart from us.'

'I'm sure you'll all survive Mengrire.'

'But with heavy heart. We will pray to God to keep you in good health – and keep us in your thoughts.'
Father Symonds smiled at him, shaking him lightly by the shoulder, then removed his hand and offered his smile to Father Benedict. 'What an excellent diplomat Mengrire is. You should cherish him, Paul – and also be wary of him. Perhaps we've taught him too much.'
Looking at Mengrire, studying his youthful, Mongolian face, Father Benedict thought of the girl by the river, her naked skin golden in the morning light. The very thought of her made him blush, though he was guilty of nothing, perhaps simply because he knew that Mengrire had been intimate with her. What did conversion mean when applied to these Indians? Could they, once converted to Christianity, really change their old skins? Father Benedict wasn't sure – and wasn't sure that he wanted it anyway – but now, seeing Mengrire's restless gaze, he wondered what he was thinking.
'In the afternoon,' Mengrire told them, 'Peruche stays in his hut, receiving those who wish to come to him for help or advice.'
'Like a king,' Father Benedict said.
'Like a wise man,' Peruche retorted. 'Though not a Christian and still

practising unchristian magic, Peruche clings to his modesty.'
Studying Mengrire's dark gaze, trying to catch it and usually failing, Father Benedict once more found himself wondering what the Indian really believed in. Mengrire, though professing to be a Christian, had many sheltered, dark corners, his eyes seeming to slip back into shadows that did not match his sly smile.
'All right,' Father Benedict said to the older priest. 'You go and say your goodbyes while I have words with Frank Poulson. If the walls come tumbling down around our heads, you'll know our shouting has caused it.'
Father Symonds smiled, his ring of grey hair shivering slightly, then he rubbed his nose with the palm of his hand and shook his head in bemusement. 'As you wish,' he said. 'Pick your cause and go fight it. If the heavens split open above my head, I'll indeed know the cause.' He nodded at Mengrire, who nodded back, smiling slyly, then together they walked off through the wet grass, between the nearest thatched huts. Father Benedict watched them go, the sunlight stinging his eyes, then he sighed and headed across the clearing toward Frank Poulson's house.
Tendrils of steam drifted about him, dissipating in the returning heat; the earth beneath the grass was wet and muddy, making soft squelching sounds. Feeling the tension in his stomach, the quickening rhythm of his heartbeat, he was confused between embarrassment and rage, not knowing which he felt most.
The *fazendeiro's* house was raised on stilts, making it seem larger than it actually was, and behind it, some distance away, was more virgin jungle, the trees dense and gigantic. He normally loathed the sight of it, but now he wanted to get lost in it, and realized, as he tried to formulate what to say to Frank Poulson, that the possibility that young Alex might be present was disturbing him further. He didn't want the boy to be present – indeed, the possibility was abhorrent to him – and he knew that if he found Alex with his father, he would not, out of respect for the boy's feelings (which were, he was convinced, of a very rare and sensitive kind), be able to mention the death of the Indian.
It was with some relief, then, that when he went up the steps of the house and onto the veranda, he was greeted by the plantation overseer, the amiable Antonio Bozzano who, to his enquiry if Alex was inside, shook his head in a negative gesture and said, 'No. I think he's in old Peruche's hut, as usual,

learning God knows what deviltry.'
Antonio was a *caboclo*, his mother Indian, his father a white man, and though too generously endowed with café-coloured skin, had the cheerful, almost mischievous good looks of a good many of his kind. His hair was black and usually windblown, his eyes were brown and warm, and when he smiled, as he now did at Father Benedict, he radiated benevolence.
'Why?' he asked. 'Did you come to see Alex or to talk with his father?'
'To talk with his father.'
'The *seringueiro*?'
'Yes. He's dead.'
'Ah!' Antonio exclaimed softly. 'Just as I feared.' He winced, shook his head from side to side, stared glumly at his feet for a moment, then looked up again, forcing out a sad smile. 'This really upsets me,' he said.
'You mean the beating?'
'Yes, I mean the beating. Reportedly Frank was very drunk and just couldn't be stopped.'
'Being drunk,' Father Benedict said, 'doesn't excuse such brutality – and that bastard has been brutal once too often.'
'I know, I know,' Antonio responded, 'but I can't be here all the time to watch him.'
'He's not your responsibility.'
'I think he is.'
'I think not. Frank Poulson is old enough to be responsible for his own despicable actions.'
'He drinks too much, Father, that's the problem. And when he drinks, he turns violent.'
'Why does he do it?' Father Benedict asked rhetorically. 'What drives the brute?'
Antonio sighed, then shook his head from side to side, raising both hands in a placating gesture and offering a weary smile. 'He's not a brute, Father. He's just tormented and fearful. He might soon have to close the plantation and he can't face that fact.'
'He's a brute,' Father Benedict insisted, 'beyond hope of redemption. That's all there is to it.'
'Surely you, a Christian priest, should not accuse anyone of being completely beyond redemption. Redemption, after all, is for the sinner, no matter how

bad.’
Antonio smiled even more broadly, gentle mockery in his brown eyes, as he leaned against one of the plank supports of the veranda, his belly hanging over the belt of his trousers. Father Benedict smiled back, acknowledging the Brazilian’s wisdom, then he stepped across the veranda and stood facing the front door.
‘You’re quite right,’ he said, turning back to face Antonio. ‘This priest fails in his duty. Nonetheless, I often find myself wondering how you can work for that swine.’
Antonio shrugged and raised both hands, spreading his fingers in the air, then, turning slightly away from Father Benedict, pointed across the grounds of the plantation, at the nearest thatched huts.
‘I was born there,’ he said. ‘Thirty-one years ago. I lived there as a child, then became a *seringueiro,* when the plantation was owned by Frank’s father and Frank himself was a child.’ He lowered his hands and turned back to fully face Father Benedict. ‘You have to understand, Father, that the man inside that house is not the boy I used to play with all those years ago. Frank was four years older than me, but it made little difference between us, and although I was the son of a worker and he the son of the plantation owner, we became close friends and managed to remain so for many years, until he took his turn for the worst. Those were very good years, the best we’ve ever known in the Amazon; the rubber boom was at its height, it seemed it would never end, and Frank’s father, like *all* of the rubber plantationers, had become wealthy beyond his wildest dreams. So, Frank was spoiled – spoiled rotten, in fact – and by the time he was eighteen, when I was working as a *seringueiro*, he was indulging himself in the most outrageous ways in the numerous bawdy houses of a Manaus that was very different from the decaying city you know today. He wasn’t vicious, you understand – not like he is today – he was simply a young man given too much too soon, and, at the same time, not offered the slightest moral guidance by his equally spoilt, spoiling parents. So, he developed certain indecent appetites, and, particularly in Manaus, found them easy to satisfy.’
‘And then the rubber boom ended, virtually overnight.’
‘Exactly,’ Antonio said, looking mournful for that distant day. ‘Well, you can imagine,’ he continued, swotting the buzzing flies away from his face. ‘Frank wasn’t bad, then – he was simply spoiled and overindulged – but

unfortunately, when the Great Crash came, in 1929, when Frank was only nineteen years old and Manaus and its surrounding plantations started sinking into impoverished decay, his whole world collapsed around his ears and he never recovered. His parents returned to England, but he insisted on remaining here, convinced that the good times would return. And of course, as one year passed into another, he rotted away with this place. Already spoiled, his abrupt descent from seemingly limitless wealth to abject poverty, broke his pride and made him bitter – a bitterness that made him seek to lay all the blame for his misfortunes on the Indians and so treat them cruelly. That cruelty, which at first was just verbal, became worse and more physical every year, until it got out of hand.'

'If you think it's out of hand,' Father Benedict said, 'why do you stay here?'

'I have to stay here,' Antonio replied, 'for more than one reason.'

He raised his right hand, forming a cup with his fingers, followed the flight of a large fly with squinting eyes and then, with remarkable speed and accuracy, reached out and grabbed it. Then taking a step forward, still smiling amiably, he held his clenched fist, containing the trapped fly, under Father Benedict's nose.

'I'm trapped here,' he said, 'just like this fly. Even if I wanted to do so, which I don't I could not, for more than one reason, pack my bags and depart.'

He opened his clenched fist, letting the large black fly escape, watched it buzzing away into blinding brightness and then smiled and nodded.

'And my reasons?' he said. 'Well, for a start, there's the fact that my mother was an Indian. I'm therefore half Indian and I feel a moral obligation to protect my own kind as much as I can. I say "as much as I can" because clearly I'm severely limited, but at least, while the courts are indifferent and your own Church ineffectual, I can, if not preventing *all* of Frank's crimes against the Indians, pacify him during his more violent outbursts and, by curtailing at least some of his grosser excesses, save more than one Indian from his abuses. This is, I know, a modest endeavour, but it's better than nothing.'

'Better than my own endeavours,' Father Benedict said. 'So what are your other reasons?'

'Well, as I said, I was born and raised here and, at the moment, I wouldn't know where to go if I left. Also, like you, I have great affection for young

Alex and feel, in a sense, that I'd be deserting him if I left him all alone with his father, who is not, as we both know, the most concerned of individuals in certain areas. Finally, perhaps stupidly, right or wrong, good or bad, I'm the oldest and best friend that Frank has, and I cannot, no matter what he's become, simply leave him to rot.'
'That's a rare kind of devotion, Antonio.'
'We Brazilians are like that.'
Looking at Antonio's plump, kindly face, Father Benedict knew he was speaking the truth, and, in that awareness, felt that his own nature was emotionally and spiritually superficial, devoid of real content. Nevertheless, in his anger over the *seringueiro's* death, he continued to chew on Frank Poulson.
'If Poulson's world collapsed around him with the Great Crash of 1929, then surely, since the beginning of the war, when the Japanese invasion of the Far East made Amazonia the Allies' sole source of natural rubber and put him back in the money, he should have lost all his excuses for his self-pity and disgusting behaviour. The war, after all, *has* resurrected the lost fortunes of most of the rubber plantations along the Amazon.'
'Alas,' Antonio explained, 'with the war at its end and the Far East rubber plantations back in business again, our new boom is already nearly over – and this time there'll be no resurrection. So, rather than help the Indians of this particular plantation, the brief boom has merely deepened their plight – since aware that the boom will soon be ending, Frank's working them more mercilessly in order to make as much money as he can, as soon as humanly possible. And that particular form of exploitation, combined with his alcoholic fears, has pushed him right to that edge where all things, few of them good, are likely to happen.'
'We can't let it go any farther.'
'How do we stop it?' Antonio said.
How indeed? Father Benedict wondered, *when even the Law in Manaus turns its back on his flagrant transgressions?*
Glancing around the plantation grounds, at the linear roads and rotting shacks, he saw the sunlight beating down on the thatched roofs and wooden steps, the grass high beneath the raised floors, swaying gently in the shadows, the inhabitants lazing on the small verandas, rocking to and fro in hammocks, playing checkers with bottle tops, smoking or sniffing *epena* or snoring

softly, their dark heads hanging over their chests like the fruit of the Cannon-Ball trees. Then he felt the weight of the silence, the pervasive silence of the surrounding jungle, and turned his gaze back upon Antonio, relieved to see his humane smile.
‘Is he inside right now?’
‘Yes,’ Antonio replied. ‘I’ve just left him. He’s just finished his breakfast and is starting on his first bottle of beer.’
‘A late breakfast and early beer.’
‘He considers it lunchtime.’
‘Are you hinting that I shouldn’t go in there?’
‘You could have picked a better day for it, but you do what you have to do.’
‘Is he alone?’
‘No. He’s with that bloated imposter, Rollie Thatcher, and they’re having the beers to recover.’
‘You mean they’ve been together all night?’
‘Yes, that’s what I mean.’
Father Benedict still felt his anger, but around it was depression, a grey, amorphous cloud of bad feeling that suffocated his spirit. Bad enough to face Frank Poulson regarding the death of the *seringueiro*, but much worse to have to do it in front of Rollie Thatcher, a failed plantationer who now sponged off his friends – or what few he had left. Still, the priest felt a certain relief that young Alex would not be present, knowing that he would not feel much concern for the finer feelings, if such existed, of the revolting and parasitical Rollie Thatcher.
Feeling better than before, but also slightly unreal, Father Benedict grinned at Antonio, and then, trying to lighten the situation, jabbed him gently in the belly where his abundant flesh hung over his leather belt and threatened to burst from his shirt.
‘You could do with going on a diet, my friend,’ he said.
‘The ladies like me this way.’
Antonio smiled when he said that, spots of sunlight in his brown eyes, then he nodded in a debonair manner and nimbly jumped down the steps. Father Benedict watched him departing, cutting across the nearest tarmac road. Then, raising his eyes to survey the sky above a green swathe of rubber trees, he reluctantly turned around, took a deep breath, and knocked on the solid-wood door before him with his large, sweatslicked fist.

When there was no immediate response, he impulsively turned away, but then, regaining his courage, he knocked again, this time harder and longer. He heard Frank Poulson bawling something, a curse or angry instruction, then footsteps sounded within. The door opened a little. The withered face of an Indian servant peered out and then vanished as the woman stepped back to open the door fully and let him enter. This he did, stepping into the gloom, and then the servant quietly closed the door behind him and waved him into the main room.

Chapter Eight

The room was like an empty bar, reeking of cigar smoke, yesterday's liquor and stale sweat, and was illuminated, since its shutters were still closed, with some dim oil lamps. There were carpets on the floorboards, once luxurious, now fading, and the curtains, a rich mauve to match the carpets, were covered in dust. If it seemed like an artist's nightmare, it was also an antique collector's treasure-house, containing a wealth of once expensive furniture, no piece matching any other, all of it obviously purchased in a random, not to say haphazard, fashion, with market value, rather than good taste, being the only visible criterion, this being the only criterion to the overnight millionaires who had proliferated during the rubber boom at the end of the 19th century.

At this very moment, in the morbid gloom of the sunless room, Frank Poulson, slim, handsome, clearly dissipated and dishevelled, was slouching in a 17th century late baroque Venetian armchair with his booted feet resting on a velvet upholstered, gold-fringed, brassstudded, ornamented footrest, while facing him, over an English Palladian gilded console table, carved with large motifs and topped with Derbyshire marble, Rollie Thatcher, bloated, unshaven, wearing shabby grey slacks and an unbuttoned striped pyjama top, was squeezed into a carved gildwood French *bergere*, circa 1775, the patterned cushion almost flattened beneath him, the ornate arms squeaking dangerously.

Indeed, the room looked like a museum, or some mad collector's warehouse – a Louis XV commode, a Florentine Pietra Dura cabinet, Chinese vases

from the reign of the Emperor K'ang Hsi resting grotesquely on 16th century South German chests or French Rococo cabinets replete with tortoise-shell and brass marquetry
– and even in that dim lighting, through the blue cigarsmoke fog, could be discerned the reflective glitter of glass and silver, of sculpture and bronzes.

Father Benedict was impressed (his disgust was touched with wonder) and he quickly drank in the treasures of this seedy mausoleum before returning his slightly stunned gaze to the one who was, in a very real sense, incarcerated here. Frank Poulson was staring at him, wiping his beer-stained lips with the back of one hand, looking upward and offering a grin in which no humour was manifest.

'God has arrived,' he said, 'in the shape of his servant, wearing a white shirt, floppy pants and a funny felt hat. Indeed, God looks hot and bothered at this moment. Can I offer a cooling beer?'

'I can do without the beer,' Father Benedict replied, 'and would thank you to speak no more blasphemy, at least not until I leave.'

'Since you've just arrived, Priest, it would be impolite to ask when that might be.' Poulson glanced at Rollie Thatcher, giving him a humourless smirk, then turned his bloodshot eyes up again, staring over his beer glass. 'And so,' he continued, 'since you're here in my house, and, more specifically, since you weren't invited, may I take it that this isn't purely a social call?'

'I think you know damned well that I wouldn't come to this house for pleasure.'
'And do you, Father Benedict, know what pleasure is?' So saying, Poulson, with a jaundiced, lopsided grin, indicated with a nod of his head the Indian girl who was, as Father Benedict noticed with some embarrassment, sitting on an antique settee in the shadowy corner at the far side of Rollie Thatcher, wearing only a flowery dressing gown, her feet bare, her upraised legs exposed, her long black hair hanging down in an uncombed tangle, her young, spotted face expressing exhaustion and shamed resignation.
She reminded Father Benedict of the other Indian girl by the river – she was

certainly not much older – and he stared at her, dumbstruck, feeling almost contaminated, and then followed her fearful gaze back across to Rollie Thatcher, seeing his fat, unshaven face, his pursing lips, his evasive eyes, feeling revulsion at the sight of his unbuttoned pyjama top and wobbling belly, and then practically in relief, the choice being between two evils, forced himself to return his gaze to Frank Poulson, a slimmer version of Thatcher.

How could this man be Alex's father? He just couldn't imagine it.

'Don't talk to me of pleasure,' he said, trying to keep his voice steady. 'I don't need to take my pleasure by snorting like a pig in a trough.'

'Are you calling me a pig, Priest? Is that how you convert the sinners? Do you come here to call me insulting names because I won't attend your church?'

'You know why I've come here.'

'You've come to make a nuisance of yourself with your pious concerns. Get out of here, Priest. I'm not in the mood for you this morning. Go and whisper your deluded nonsense to my son, thus encouraging his silliness further.'

'I think we should leave Alex out of this.'

'Your concern deeply touches me.'

The sarcasm was brutal and made Father Benedict flinch, but he forced himself to keep his gaze steady on Poulson's lean, dissipated and once handsome face.

A Dorian Gray face, he thought. *Eternally young in a curious manner. Only the unshaven chin, the hollow cheeks and bloodshot eyes, reveal that his soul is much older than the flesh that surrounds it.*

Poulson's eyes were deep brown, his hair black and slick with grease, and when he looked up, holding the beer glass to his thin, shivering lips, he appeared to be perceptibly shrinking, his skin taut on the bone. Father Benedict, feeling claustrophobic and unreal, took another deep breath.

'I came about the Indian you recently mistreated,' he said. 'I went to see him this morning, but could do little for him – and he died just over an hour ago.'

'Which particular Indian are we discussing, Priest?'

'You know damned well which Indian: Sirire – the one you beat recently.'

'Ah, that one,' Poulson said. 'I remember him, the lazy bastard. He'd do anything to get out of doing his work; and was always complaining that he was sick to excuse the fact that he hadn't tapped his required quota of trees.

Of *course* I beat him, Priest – the lying bastard deserved it – but that beating, if leaving a few bruises, would not have killed anyone.'
'The Indian was extremely ill because of malaria and malnutrition, suffering the former because you gave him no quinine, the latter because you worked him to the bone and without enough food. If the beating didn't kill him – and he shouldn't have been beaten anyway – it certainly broke the remnants of his resistance and hastened his death.'
'Don't worry about his loss,' Rollie Thatcher said. 'There's plenty more where he came from.'
The fat Englishman chuckled indecently at his own remark, keeping his eyes fixed on Frank Poulson and slapping his big belly affectionately. Father Benedict, glancing across at the Indian girl in the corner, knowing how completely disposable she had to be feeling, felt shame for his own kind.
'As far as I'm concerned,' he said, pointedly ignoring Rollie Thatcher and returning his gaze to Frank Poulson, 'you're solely responsible for the Indian's death.'
'You heard my friend,' Poulson replied, nodding his head in the direction of Rollie Thatcher. 'There's no need to worry about the Indian; there's plenty more where he came from.'
This time, delighted at the repetition of his own tasteless remark, Rollie Thatcher laughed out loud, his fat belly quivering and encouraging the pyjama top to open wider, revealing an unsightly mass of white flesh and sweat-dampened black hairs.
'Hear, hear!' he chortled. 'Dispensable labour is the great compensation for being in this hell hole – more so when dispensed with.'
Though filled with revulsion, Father Benedict forced his attention back to Frank Poulson who, having just drank some more beer, was now wiping his lips with the back of his hand while offering an oddly defiant sneer that exposed tobacco-stained teeth.
'You're contemptible,' Father Benedict said, trying to stare Poulson down, but unnerved by the sight of those bloodshot eyes, the watery pupils malicious. 'Do you really feel nothing at all? Or are you hiding your shame?'
'Shame, Priest? Did you say *shame*? Because some damned Indian's died?' Poulson snorted with mirthless glee, throwing his hair back from his forehead, letting the lamplight fall on his dark eyes and his oddly small, brown-stained teeth. 'No, Priest, I don't feel any shame. The more of these

damned Indians we get rid of, the better off we'll all be.'
Father Benedict stared at him, fascinated by his moving lips, recalling when he had last seen teeth like those: in the mouth of a Japanese soldier, his lips frozen in death's grin where he lay, in flattened foliage and mud, in a blood-soaked glade somewhere along the Kokoda Trail during the war in New Guinea.
Poulson glanced past Rollie Thatcher, at the unfortunate girl in the far corner, and smirked when he saw her bowed head, his eyes devouring her wellshaped body.
'Bloody Indians!' he continued, returning his gaze to Father Benedict. 'Lazy, mindless bastards, the lot of them, as worthless as pig shit. No wonder we're in such a bad state: you can't work with these animals.'
'They're not animals, Frank – they're human beings
– and apart from the fact that they truly own the rubber trees, they can't be blamed for the collapse of what you imagine were the good old days.'
'*They* own the rubber trees? What on earth are you talking about? They didn't know what a rubber tree *was* until we came here and showed them.'
'The Indians – '
'A bunch of bloody barbarians! As primitive as cave men! We British came here and we organized the dumb bastards, and instead of painting our faces and practising witchcraft and slaughtering each other, as they did, we made use of what the jungle had to offer and earned every last penny. We didn't steal a thing from these primitive bastards! What's latex to them?'
'I hardly think that justifies – '
'What you think, Priest, concerns me not in the slightest. I've been here all my life, I know the Indians inside out, and I don't need some priest with pious notions to tell me what I can and can't do. What do you *want* in this place, Priest? Why do you people insist on coming here? If, as you suggest, I'm exploiting these poor Indians, is it not equally true that the Church, in its own way, is also stealing from them, taking away their history and culture and replacing it, for its own selfish reasons, with its suppressive religion?'
'Christianity isn't suppressive. Nor, if I may say so, is the preaching of Christianity to be compared to the physical exploitation that you so blatantly practice.'
'A bloody good whipping,' Rollie Thatcher said, burping, 'is something these ignorant blighters understand much more than the Bible.'

‘Isn’t it just?’ Poulson said, now also ignoring his fellow plantationer. ‘Does the Church really believe that the stealing of their souls is less disgusting than my very human abuses? Surely, Father, my exploitation is of a relatively minor nature when set beside the Church’s systematic obliteration of the Indians’ whole way of life.’

‘Semantics,’ Father Benedict said.

‘The truth,’ Poulson retorted. ‘You supposed men of God also have your greed – you want to strengthen your grand Church – and so, no matter how you otherwise describe it, you grow stronger by devouring foreign cultures and leaving only the bare bones. Don’t worry about my modest crimes, preacher. Go and wash your own hands!’

The words had a crude, brutal force that was not without truth. Father Benedict felt trapped, strangely impotent and frustrated, and this, combined with anger and shame, led him into confusion.

He glanced desperately around the room, again aware of its seedy elegance, noting the shadows from the oil lamps flickering erratically on drapes and paintings, the pale yellow light on antiques purchased during the rubber boom. Then he saw that other acquisition, the claimed and silent Indian girl, observing her dishevelled clothes and long, uncombed black hair, her almost naked brown limbs, the humiliation and defeat in her lowered face with its deprived and already fading pock-marked beauty. Just to be here made him shiver, thinking too much of immorality and decay, and he glanced at Rollie Thatcher, a bloated buffoon in merciful shadow, and then reluctantly forced his gaze back to Frank Poulson, who was staring defiantly at him. Poulson was licking his lips, somehow gloating as he did so, and his eyes, peering out of his sallow, unshaven face, made him seem, in their unfocused and bloodshot weariness, twice as old as he was.

‘No answer?’ he sneered. ‘Of *course* you’ve no answer! You’re just a priest, a man deprived of normal pleasures and satisfactions, and so, in your frustration, desperately trying to prove your dubious moral superiority, you whine about your concern for the damned Indians and my unchristian behaviour. Well, don’t talk to me about the Indians. You save their souls while I use their bodies, and between us we should make an unwholesome form of progress as they gradually disappear. Go and talk to my son, Father. You seem to have a rapport with him. And after all, the boy behaves just like an Indian, so you should be *sympatico.*’

‘I’m not frustrated and don’t need to prove my moral superiority which, in any case, I don’t believe in. As for Alex behaving like an Indian, this is perfectly understandable since, not having a father he can depend on, he’s had to turn to the Indians for emotional support.’
‘And what do your precious Indians teach him? Witchcraft! Magic! Their idiotic hocus-pocus! None of which helps him to be a Christian, nor makes him better than me.’
‘You talk about him as if he’s not even your son.’
‘The seed of my loins, Priest. I can state that without blushing. Flesh of my flesh that boy is, if too much like his mother.’
‘Not a bad thing,’ Father Benedict said.
‘He’s effeminate,’ Poulson said. ‘He’s as sensitive as a woman, shows no signs of actually desiring one, and believes in, and dabbles with, magic – just like a woman would. And, indeed, just as the Indians do, the primitive, superstitious bastards.’
‘It’s that particular old bastard, Peruche,’ Rollie Thatcher said, scratching his belly and belching. ‘You ought to throw him off the plantation, before he does too much damage.’
Father Benedict sighed, understanding that he was getting nowhere, but compelled, like a dog with a bone, to gnaw at it some more. ‘I didn’t come here to discuss Alex,’ he said. ‘You’re just trying to change the subject. I came to tell you that I’ve had enough of your brutality and that this time I’m going to report you to the proper authorities.’
‘Because of the death of the Indian?’
‘Yes.’
‘Don’t waste your time,’ Thatcher said. ‘They’ll just give Frank a medal.’
He grinned at Poulson and then stood up, rising heavily and slowly, his great bulk pouring sweat through his pyjama top and rumpled grey slacks. Standing there, in the flickering shadows, he seemed enormous yet insubstantial, as if the inner light that gives a man his character had been completely extinguished. If large, he was also grotesque, the folds of his belly white and damp, his jowls matching the bags under his eyes, which, buried deeply below bushy eyebrows, were almost invisible. He belched and then farted, briefly bending his massive legs, then turned around, holding his empty glass, and walked like a wounded rhinoceros to the girl in the corner. The girl looked up, dismayed, when he stopped just in front of her, his

pyjama top hanging open and his enormous belly, with its overlapping folds of white flesh and hints of pubic hair, hanging down just above her upturned face.

Father Benedict was shocked, his own imagination shaming him, helplessly visualizing the night that this poor girl had just been through, either with Thatcher or with Frank Poulson, possibly both, and half expecting, with dizzying dread, the shadows flickering across his line of sight, that a repeat of that performance was about to be enacted right there in front of him.

In the event, he was proven wrong – though an eternity passed before he knew it – and he glanced wildly at Poulson, still slouched low in his Venetian armchair, his booted feet still on the footrest, slim and dishevelled, too young to be so dissipated, and saw the beer glass moving away from his thin, grinning lips, his sleepless, bloodshot eyes rising lazily to clearly mock him.

Only then, looking away, staring across the flickering dimness, did he see the enormous Rollie Thatcher crooking the index finger of his right hand, hooking it under the girl's chin to pull her face up, then grinning down at her, contemptuously and insultingly, before turning away to pour himself another beer and return to his chair.

Shaking a little, his heart racing, cheeks blushing, Father Benedict turned away from the massive bulk of the slowly subsiding, broadly grinning Thatcher and became aware that Frank Poulson was staring at him with unusual intensity.

He thought of the girl by the river, of another girl, long ago, and then his heart, impelled by memories of brown skin curving down to nothing, raced faster and made his breath catch in his tightening throat.

Perhaps Frank Poulson noticed it, or at least sensed it somehow, for he now leaned forward, his grin widening triumphantly, and then looked across at the Indian girl, whose bare thighs were striped by light and shadow. Still grinning, he turned his eyes to Father Benedict, to the girl and back again, and then abruptly jumped up, his agility surprising, and hurried across to the girl, placed his glass on the low table beside her, and almost viciously, with a sharp flick of his wrist, before Father Benedict could protest, ripped the loosely-wrapped dressing gown from her body, leaving her naked.

'Is this it?' he sneered. 'Is *this* the secret cause of your guilt? That you should want her as we do?'

The girl had shrieked instantly, trying to hold onto the dressing gown, and

was still shrieking when Poulson laughed, Rollie Thatcher his bellowing chorus, and Father Benedict, his heart pounding, shame and revulsion whipping through him, choking back his nausea and dread, fled from that dimly lit, awful room – not only thwarted, but defeated, his resolution destroyed.

Chapter Nine

Still badly shaken, but trying to compose himself, Father Benedict hurried across the mowed lawn that surrounded Frank Poulson's house, passing out of the blinding sunlight and into the cooler shadowed areas where the humble shacks of the *seringueiros* were nestled beneath the sheltering trees leading down to the river.

Already the earth had dried and felt warm through his thin shoes, while the sweat had started dribbling down his face and forming under his armpits. He swotted the buzzing flies away, avoided a cloud of mosquitoes, cut across a road and went between some more houses, noting the crudely patched thatched roofs, the cramped, dark rooms inside, the adults and children on the verandas, none of them wildly active, their silence based on despair, the children's bellies bloated with hunger, the women old before their time, the men playing checkers with Coca Cola or Fanta tops, or trying to forget their troubles by rocking in their hammocks and sniffing *epena*. None of this improved his mood, nor helped him lose the sour taste of defeat, and for once he appreciated, when he moved out of the forest gloom, the explosion of bright light and space above the wide, muddy Amazon.

He walked along the river bank, keeping well away from the edge, his burning face cooled by the breeze that came off the murmuring water and gently shook the foliage on his right where the forest began. From here the river seemed vast, more an ocean than a mere river, and on the far bank, about five miles away, the forest was a solid green line dividing black water from blue sky, curving from east to west with incomparable grace.

At once beautiful and repellent, slightly intimidating in its grandeur, it had often forced him deeper into himself, trying to trace his own boundaries.

Now he knew that same sensation, the need to hide within himself, as he gratefully reached the crudely hacked trail that led him back to the trees.

The gloom cooled his burning cheeks, settled the fires of his shame, but he still felt, as he walked through the forest's embracing silence, the full weight of the guilt and buried sorrow that Frank Poulson, with his ignorant venom, had dragged up from the depths. He passed a jacaranda tree, all alone in its sea of forest, heard the musical cry of a *seringueiro* bird, saw Venetian-lace leaves, tangled liana, buttressed trees, and then emerged to a várzea lake, bright light pouring down through the clearing.

Father Symonds, Antonio Bozzano, Mengrire and young Alex were all kneeling in front of a small thatched hut, clearly in conversation with Peruche, the much revered, ancient, Yanoama Indian.

'The drums tell us that something of great importance is on its way.' The voice of Peruche was a dying croak, borne in the listless breeze. 'And its coming is soon…'

Father Benedict heard no more because Antonio Bozzano, hearing the snapping twigs, turned around, saw him approaching and immediately, doubtless trying to protect young Alex, stood up and walked away from the kneeling group to stand by the lake. Father Benedict followed him, pleased and touched by his sensitivity, noticing the slight smile on Antonio's face, a gentle mockery that soothed the troubled soul.
'How did it go?' Antonio asked.
'They had a girl there,' Father Benedict replied.

'You didn't warn me about that.'

Antonio sighed and shrugged. 'It just slipped my mind. He has so many girls in that house, they've begun to look like the furniture.'

'That girl was no prostitute.'
'No, she wasn't. She's just the daughter of a *seringueiro* who couldn't pay his debts, and when that happens, as so often it does, Frank takes the daughter instead.'

‘He takes the daughter as *payment*?’
‘Yes.’
‘That’s obscene!’
‘I agree.’
Father Benedict lowered his eyes, too shocked to respond immediately. He glanced down at the limpid lake, seeing the hyacinths and tropical lilies, then slowly, with great reluctance, raised his eyes again.
‘Has he been doing this for long?’
‘No,’ Antonio replied. ‘It’s a recent, very disturbing, innovation, but the Indians can’t argue.’
‘He uses those girls and then throws them out?’
‘Yes, I’m afraid so.’
‘So his nightly debauches aren’t even conducted with prostitutes, but with innocent girls whose only sin is that their fathers are in debt to Frank Poulson for food they can’t afford.’
‘Precisely. They used to live off the rainforest, but now they depend on Frank; and since he always pays them less than what they need, he ensures that they’ll always be in debt to him. Once, he used to only keep them under his wing, but now, doubtless encouraged by Rollie Thatcher, he’s taken it further. Yes, he takes their daughters in lieu of payment, ostensibly as servants in the house, but truly as mistresses.’
‘And when he’s finished with them?’
‘He throws them out, sends them back to their parents, and then lets the whole family starve.’
Father Benedict closed his eyes, took a deep breath and held it in, then let his breath out very slowly and opened his eyes again, now staring across the clearing to the thatched hut and looking down at those kneeling there. Alex was directly in front of old Peruche, close beside the squatting Mengrire, and again Father Benedict could not believe that the boy, so sweet natured, almost spiritual, had sprung from the seed of the dissipated Frank Poulson.
‘When I told him I was going to report him to the authorities,’ he said to Antonio, ‘that bastard Thatcher said that if I did they’d probably give him a medal. Given that the revolting creature was being sarcastic, do you think there’s some truth in it?’
‘Oh, yes. Thatcher knows what he’s talking about. The authorities – those that count – are in the pockets of the white men and have never shown much

concern for the Indians. Frank knows damned well that even if they got him to court in Manaus, he'd only have to swear that the *seringueiro's* death was an accident and they'd let him walk out of there without a murmur. What's another impoverished Indian to the authorities? They just won't want to know.'

'I can't bear the thought of it,' Father Benedict said, feeling the anger and frustration boiling up inside him. 'Not only does it enrage me that he can do what he wants and get away with it; it also appals me to think that Alex, at his impressionable age, should have to stay in the same house with that man and hear his nightly debaucheries. The situation is sick on both counts and I feel utterly helpless.'

'I'm caught between two stools here,' Antonio said. 'On the one hand, I'm half Indian and can't stand to see my fellow Indians abused; on the other, I'm Frank's oldest friend and feel the need to protect him, even if from himself. I'll admit that I feel guilty because I won't pack up and leave here; and also because I'm worried that Frank's abuses could, if not checked, give rise to something much more serious.'

'What, pray, could be more serious than the abuses he heaps on the Indians?'

'Indian vengeance.' Antonio shrugged again, a forlorn, uneasy gesture, while some herons, perched in a tree across the lake, scattered into the cloudy sky. 'Sooner or later,' he continued, 'and we can't discount the possibility, some Indian, or Indians, might revolt – and then we'd *really* have trouble.'

'What kind of trouble?'

'A reversal to past customs: physical violence or witchcraft, either of which could start by being aimed only at Frank, but could then go out of control and affect us all.'

'I hardly think that witchcraft – '

'Don't discount it. Now let's join the others.'

The abruptness with which Antonio terminated the conversation left Father Benedict in no doubt that he had a reason for rejoining the group around old Peruche's hut. Confused, he followed Antonio across the clearing, taking note of the striations of weak sunlight that fell down over the hut, while the forest surrounding the lake in the clearing was laced with swathes of pure darkness.

Mengrire glanced up and nodded, his face solemn, his eyes hooded. Father Symonds, his bald head poking through his ring of grey hair, waved and

smiled brightly, his cherubic face flushed. Father Benedict sat between them, the grass warm beneath his backside. He crossed his legs and then nodded at Peruche who nodded lazily back.

The old Indian was almost naked, his loins covered in a modest *tanga* made from monkey skin and *arara* feathers, his wrinkled forehead encased in a headpiece of white-boned armadillo discs. His legs were crossed, his elbows resting on his knees, and his body, the skin wrinkled like that of a prune, was bent slightly forward, his face a parchment of age and experience, the lines forming a map of a life lived for a very long time. He was smiling, his mouth toothless, and talking in a low voice, his rheumy eyes focused mostly on young Alex, Frank Poulson's son.

'What comes is not written in the skies, but is the voice of the wind. The drums announce its arrival.'

'What arrival?' Alex asked, brushing the blond hair from his forehead, his youth's voice as gentle as a dew drop sliding down a veined leaf. 'What form will it take?'

Peruche closed his eyes, pursed his lips and raised his face to the sky, his ears tuned to the light breeze. 'It comes in darkness,' he croaked, 'bringing violence and death, opening the gates that lead into the unknown and the source of all things.' He lowered his head again, opened his eyes to stare at Alex, his lips closed over his toothless gums before he spoke again. 'You were called and have come. Past and future are as one within you. The drums tell me that that which comes to pass will come soon, and that you are the instrument of those forces which elude us and bind us. It is you, my son, in your innocence and grief, who will stand where the Earth spins.'

'This is nonsense,' Father Benedict said, his voice sounding strange to him. 'You mustn't preach such nonsense to the boy; it's neither sensible nor Christian.'

He had spoken to Peruche but now Alex turned towards him, drawing him to the depths of his azure eyes as if into an empty sky. Father Benedict was startled, certainly not for the first time, as Alex's strange, indefinable beauty briefly fractured reality.

Yes, Alex was beautiful – it was the only word to use – his beauty residing in his remarkable serenity and almost impossible innocence. He was handsome and unblemished, lean and pale, his gaze brilliant, yet these attributes, particularly in one only seventeen, were not that uncommon. No, the beauty

came from within, from his purity and faith, giving his blue eyes, beneath the blond hair, a serene child's inner luminosity. There was something extraordinary about him, a singular gentleness or passivity, as if, without a mother and neglected by his father, he had turned to the Indians, particularly old Peruche, and found a remarkable sense of security well beyond what was normal.

Alex lived in a private world, a mysterious and mystical place in which, under the guidance of Peruche, he had developed uncommon powers. He could travel the forest blindfolded, draw dangerous animals to him, and sometimes, if so far only slightly, have an affect on the elements: making still water ripple, causing flowers to open or close, conjuring light out of the darkness and a breeze from a windless day. Such gifts were indeed uncommon, and to Father Benedict, frightening, yet from Alex he received only the glow of inviolate goodness. And this, in direct contrast to the degeneracy of his father – indeed, possibly even magnifying that degeneracy tenfold – was what made Father Benedict, with some confusion but no embarrassment, think of Alex as a beautiful work of art: something rare and invaluable.

'Nothing can be nonsense,' Alex said, 'when all things are possible.'

It was a striking comment to be offered by a boy his age, and now, looking at him, drawn into his open gaze, Father Benedict felt as if the ground on which he sat was slipping away from him.

'All things are not possible,' he said, 'which is something you'll soon learn.'

Alex didn't take offence but merely smiled in his dreamy fashion, his blue eyes unwavering and benevolent, filled with childish acceptance. Though only seventeen years old, he was simultaneously naive and oddly mature.

'If God is possible,' he said, 'then all things are possible; and since you, Father, have taught me to believe in God, I must believe in His miracles.'

Father Benedict, in a paternal manner, had a great deal of affection for Alex, but there were times, and this happened to be one of them, when the boy's peculiar mixture of innocence and ruthless intelligence, made him feel that he was somehow being threatened and morally confused. Now, as he stared at that delicately handsome face, at the almost golden blond hair and the gently smiling poet's lips, into the ravishing blue eyes beneath the long eyelashes, he felt again that the ground was shifting beneath him and tilting him out of his orbit.

‘You’re a good lad,’ he said, ‘but right now you’re playing with words, and since the subject is of such importance, I don’t think you should do it.’
‘I’m sorry, Father,’ Alex said. ‘I didn’t mean to make you angry. It’s just that I sense things – things I can’t quite grasp – and what Peruche has told us strikes a chord deep inside me.’
‘When the Yano beat their drums,’ Peruche intervened, ‘this child sees and feels what most of you have lost and which makes him, possessing it, one of us. He is special. A chosen one.’
‘Chosen for *what*?’ Father Benedict asked.
‘To serve that which is coming.’
Father Benedict glanced at Mengrire and saw the movement of his sly eyes, then he turned his own gaze on Father Symonds who sat at his left side. ‘You know this kind of talk is helpful to no one. Why tolerate it?’
‘*Tolerate* it?’ Father Symonds replied, smiling benignly and shrugging his shoulders. ‘How can I *not* tolerate it when I’ve no right to stop it? Peruche has his beliefs which, even if we don’t agree with them, must be respected. And he’s simply been telling us, since we asked about the Yano drums, why he thinks they’ve been beating all night long for the past three nights.’
‘That much I overheard,’ Father Benedict retorted. ‘He believes something important is on the way and I believe that’s nonsense.’
‘Never before have the Yano drums been heard three nights in a row,’ Mengrire said, ‘so we know that something unusual must be happening and that it relates to the rise and fall of the magical lights.’
‘The lights aren’t magical,’ Father Benedict protested, ‘and we don’t even know that the Yano actually exist. They’re probably no more than one of the many unknown tribes that still roam wild in the jungle and sensibly avoid contact with white men.’
‘Then how do you explain the lights that rise and fall when the drums beat? Can we call those lights natural?’
The question had been asked by Antonio Bozzano who, smiling mischievously, without malice, was nevertheless staring at Father Benedict as if he meant what he said. Father Benedict, feeling defeated, the fear tugging once more at his stomach, glanced briefly at his fellow priest, saw him shrugging and lowering his eyes, then looked into the rheumy eyes of old Peruche and felt the weight of his gravity.
‘You know what is believed,’ Peruche said, ‘and you cannot disprove it. If, as

you insist, the Yano are normal human beings, you still cannot explain the lights that rise and fall every time the drums beat.'

This was true and Father Benedict felt chilled by it, well aware of how the strange lights had burned relentlessly into his consciousness. Beautiful, inexplicable, always accompanied by the beating drums, the lights would rise and fall in his dreams and then draw him from sleep.

Indeed, though he went to great pains to deny their magical nature, it was true that if he was, during the day, perfectly at ease with the Yanoama Indians who worked in the rubber plantations, he was secretly haunted and frightened by the thought of the more mysterious Yano Indians who had, according to folklore, but for reasons never explained, fled from their original home in the unexplored regions of Gatrimani, far north of the Amazon, to the closer but similarly unexplored regions of the rainforest.

According to Peruche, who claimed to have once been a prisoner of the Yano, those runaway Indians were now barbaric and obsessed, perhaps even insane, practising their own bizarre religion in which God was reviled and the 'Dark One', the devil, was worshipped in esoteric pagan rituals. As Peruche had also explained, it was the belief of the Yano that the 'Dark One' and His forces (for so they had deified him) had arrived on Earth many millennia ago to create the Gateway to the Oneness – eternal life – somewhere in the reportedly inaccessible interior of the rainforest; and that His forces had, since then, returned frequently to Earth, passing in and out of the Gateway, to and from the Oneness, or the 'Otherworld' of eternal life; and, finally, that during certain nights, when the Yano drums were beating, the dark forces could be observed as those lights in the sky, ascending and descending in silent splendour over the uncharted jungle.

Father Benedict shuddered to think of it, his doubting soul still bound by faith, realizing that the very concept was blasphemous by his own Christian standards. Once more he found himself staring at Alex, at the face of untouched innocence, wondering just how much the boy had learned from Peruche and what he now believed.

'You described Alex as a chosen one,' Father Symonds said. 'What did you mean by that?'

Peruche studied Father Symonds for some time and then opened his toothless mouth to speak words both sibilant and strange. 'I have taught him the basic mysteries of the most ancient truths, which were brought down to my hidden

brothers of long ago, when we knew not ourselves.' He stopped speaking and sniffed, as if trying to inhale the breeze, put his head back, took a deep breath, and then stared at each of them in turn, his gaze steady but somehow distracted, as if not really seeing them.
'By the hidden brothers of long ago,' Father Symonds asked, 'do you mean the Dark One and His dark forces who arrived on Earth long ago and have returned frequently since then, manifesting themselves as those lights in the sky?'
'The lights represent the Good. They constantly war with the forces of darkness. The Yano, though mortal, are the slaves of the dark forces and exist on the perimeter of the Gateway that leads to the infinite. The lights we see rising and falling are actually passing in and out of the Gateway, which separates this mortal world from the place where time and space have no meaning.'
'Why were the Yano chosen to serve the Dark One and His forces?'
'Long ago the Yanoama were innocent, living in a state of grace, naked and unafraid of the darkness, protected by faith. But then some of them were tempted and succumbed to that temptation, committing crimes against their Creator and their fellow men, their sins both sensual and violent. For this reason, they were cast out, along with their women and children, and eventually, after travelling for many suns and moons, settled in that part of the rainforest known to shelter the strange gods, a place considered by the Yanoama to be World's End, where the past meets the future. There, it was told, the dark forces claimed our brothers who, once enslaved, became the practitioners of foul rites that invoke the fearful powers beyond the Gateway, which we view as the Infinite.'
'And who reigns over the Gateway?' Father Symonds asked, his voice like that of a dying man, his normally sweet face intense.
'There is light and darkness,' Peruche replied. 'Good and evil coexisting. Somewhere, in that place where time and space have no meaning, the forces of good and evil, of day and night, war eternally, fighting for the souls of all men through rare individuals. Those individuals are the chosen few, drawn from chaos to ordain order, their innocence representing the strength and weakness which divide every soul. Just as men become Man, as all souls are the One, so, then, do the few who are chosen represent those not called.'
He stopped talking, licked his dry lips, took a deep breath, then nodded in a

dignified, judicious manner.
‘Yes,’ he continued, ‘I’ve taught Alex because I recognized him at birth, and now, though whiteskinned, he has the soul of the rainforest which alone, unlike the souls of mortal men, is the mothering womb of the Otherworld.’
‘This is absolute nonsense,’ Father Benedict said. ‘It’s also, in Christian terms, blasphemous. Alex isn’t the soul of the rainforest or any other.’
‘Alex more than simply *knows* the forest,’ Peruche continued, as if Father Benedict hadn’t actually spoken. ‘He’s part of it – and it of him. So the animals come to him, the serpents take warmth from him, and all that lives in the river, or thrives in bark or soil, accepts him because he is pure and as open as air. It is he, this mere child, more child than most children, who will stand between day and night, light and darkness, to represent all men.’
Father Benedict was speechless, struck dumb by Peruche’s words, some part of him, rising out of his shaken faith, exhaling fear and revulsion. He felt hot and claustrophobic, far removed from himself, and his skin seemed electric with raw nerves. Flies and mosquitoes swarmed about him, small spiders crossed his feet, and the ants, always highly active, etched black lines on the flattened grass. He glanced at Alex’s radiant face, at Peruche’s brown, wrinkled skin, was only vaguely aware of Antonio and Mengrire when eventually he looked at his fellow priest.
What he saw terrified him, making his world shift on its axis, because his dear friend, Father Symonds, normally optimistic and cheerful, seemed to be changing where he sat, looking older, more frail, the intensity of his gaze, focused on Peruche, now almost tormented.
Feeling badly shaken by what he was seeing, Father Benedict, with a shudder, something breaking within him, was convinced that Father Symonds would not live to see tomorrow’s dawn, let alone England’s green shores.
‘Enough!’ Father Benedict said. ‘I’ll hear no more of this! What you’re saying, Peruche, is definitely blasphemous and may even be dangerous.’
They all stared at him, startled, sensing the fear in his voice, then Father Symonds, shaking his head from side to side, as if trying to waken himself from a trance, reached out and gently squeezed Father Benedict’s shoulder.
‘Fear not, Paul,’ he said. ‘Listening isn’t necessarily believing – and it helps us to understand.’
So saying, he turned away to face Peruche once more, staring at him with the intensity of a blind man praying for sight. Father Benedict shivered, again

touched by some dark presentiment, and, feeling fearful, avoided looking at his fellow priest and instead focused his attention on Peruche, speaking to him with anger.

‘Alex’s a normal child. He’s not one of your chosen ones. You mustn’t fill his head with this dangerous nonsense – and nonsense it is! He does *not* belong to the rainforest, nor to the mothering womb of your Otherworld, and the mysteries you’ve taught him are shallow tricks of no particular importance.’

In desperation he turned to Alex and saw a slight smile either tender or mocking, but strangely seductive. His thoughts scattered and spun, the Earth shook, but he managed to speak again.

‘You’re perfectly normal,’ he told Alex. ‘Do you understand, my son? You’re as normal as the rest of us here and I’d like you to stay that way. Don’t imagine that you have special powers; they’re merely tricks of the mind.’

‘You are arrogant,’ Peruche said to Father Benedict, ‘and your arrogance has blinded you. Like most white men, you’ve lost the primal instincts and feelings that help us commune with the Earth and the sea and the sky. Yes, your eyes see little, your ears hear even less, and your skin, which should respond to a mote of dust, feels only the extremes of heat and cold, the bite of pain, lust’s sweet sweat. Yet such things are superficial, drops of rain on the mighty river, and by denying your primal senses, refusing to accept your real nature, you’re cutting yourself off from your true spirit and its boundless potential. Alex, this white boy in the Indian’s world, has gained all you have lost. He is *not* like the rest of you: having faith, he was chosen. Now behold how, with a simple wave of his hand, he separates himself from you.’

Father Benedict heard the words, but he was no longer looking at Peruche; instead, feeling almost paralysed, his gaze was focused on Alex. The boy was staring straight back, his eyes wide and brilliant, glittering with an intense inner light that could not have been natural. Those eyes hypnotized Father Benedict, drawing him out of himself, away from his love for Alex, a paternal love that had been frustrated, and sucking him into some place where fear breathed like a dragon.

The fear breathed all around him, a living thing, palpable, emanating from the black swathes of the jungle and taking the shape of a snake. It was a boa constrictor, thick, very long, its enormous body sliding out of the

undergrowth and over Alex's crossed legs. Alex sat there, not moving, apparently unconcerned, while the snake, its scaled skin glistening in the sunlight, coiled around his slim body.

Father Benedict wanted to help him, tried to do so but couldn't move, felt a shiver of revulsion slipping through him and dragging him down into a nightmare. He loved Alex like his own son, wanting to protect him from his other father, believing him too innocent for his own good, naive, too trusting. Yet at times, in recent months, the boy had confounded him, staring out of some secret inner place that was beyond comprehension. Father Benedict was frightened, unable to grasp what was happening, not knowing if the enormous snake, coiling around Alex's body, was real or the product of an imagination somehow unleashed by Peruche… or by Alex himself.

The snake tightened around Alex, its body as thick as a rubber tyre, and Father Benedict opened his mouth to protest, but could utter no sound. He choked back a sob, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, felt something smooth and sinuous slide across him and then move on.

Opening his eyes, he saw the snake slithering lazily through the grass, moving around Father Symonds, then Mengrire and Antonio, finally coiling over the knees of a chanting Peruche and then heading straight for the lake. The lake rippled and parted, letting the snake nose down into it, and then the ripples spread out and started swirling until the water formed a whirlpool into which the giant snake, its tail waving in a languid, seductive manner, was eventually sucked under.

It disappeared completely, seemingly sucked down into the vortex of the whirlpool, and then out of that swirling black hole, with a shocking, staccato crackling, shot a dazzling bolt of lightning that clawed its way up to the darkening sky like the fingers of a giant, grasping skeleton. Thunder roared in reply, a great beast devouring the lightning, then black clouds, as heavy and dense as smoke, materialized high above.

Father Benedict looked up, wondering where the clouds had come from, waiting for the rain, surprised when it didn't come, and then watched, astonished, as the clouds broke apart and revealed, inside a great ring of darkness, a mass of glittering stars. Around the clouds was the daylight, within the clouds was the night sky, and Father Benedict, in a fear that was now suffocating him, looked across at the roaring vortex of the whirlpool in the lake and saw, in that swirling black funnel, another mass of bright stars.

Had Alex merely waved his hand? Had he waved his hand at all? Father Benedict, with such questions splintering his head like ice picks, tore his stunned eyes away from the roaring lake and stared at those sitting close to him. They were all in the same position, as if time itself had stopped, but all of them, with the exception of Alex, seemed hazy and unreal. Alex was different, his boyish profile clear, the whole of him bathed in a halo of brilliant light that appeared to pulsate to the relentless rhythm of faraway drums.

'Now observe,' Peruche said, his voice bizarrely amplified, reverberating in Father Benedict's head and defeating the noise all around him. 'This boy has the power – he touches the spirit of the forest – but he only has such power when the Yano beat their drums, because their drumming is a sign that the forces of good and evil are present, and his power, which derives from his faith, is a gift from the Good. When the drumming stops – when the opposing forces disengage – his power seriously diminishes.'

Father Benedict hadn't heard the drums before, but now he heard them distinctly, a bass rumbling that came from far away in the jungle's interior. He looked above Alex's head, the blond hair like shimmering gold, and saw the black clouds surrounding a mass of stars in a dazzling blue sky. There were no rising and falling lights – they could not be seen in the daytime – but the drumming, like some rumbling from the bowels of the Earth, could not be ignored.

He closed his eyes and covered his ears, trying to will himself into oblivion, then saw the bleak town in Australia, his Aboriginal mission station, a brown shoulder, feminine and sensual, the flesh curving down to… nothing.

He cried out his protestation (the exact words he would never know) and then opened his eyes to see Alex's hand raised on high, his fist clenched and surrounded by that magical mass of stars. Father Benedict tore his eyes away, still refusing to believe it, and saw, in the roaring whirlpool of the lake, another mass of brilliant, blinking stars, the funnel of water a depthless void. Good and evil coexisting: he felt the force of that truth. The fear rushed up and locked in his throat as he leaned forward to gag. He beheld that upraised fist, stars arched across the knuckles, then the fist became a web of outstretched fingers and the stars abruptly blinked out.

No stars. Just that black hole. Then the sunlight took command. The light blinded Father Benedict, the roaring ceased, the wind stopping blowing, and

he gasped and rubbed his eyes and looked around him, seeing nothing unusual.
The várzea lake was perfectly still, the sky was blue, the jungle silent, and no light shimmered around Alex's head to turn his blond hair to gold.
Father Symonds was rising slowly, looking unusually weak and frail, nodding his thanks to Antonio Bozzano who was helpfully holding his elbow. Antonio was smiling slightly, good-humoured as always, thoughtfully assisting the older man, while Mengrire, his gaze shifting restlessly about him, seemed, like Father Symonds, to be visibly weakening.
Father Benedict licked his lips, rubbed his forehead, coughed to clear his throat, tried to slow the frightened racing of his heart as he looked across at Peruche. The old Indian was still seated, his legs crossed, his head bowed, but then his frail body shivered, he raised his head and blinked repeatedly, as if emerging from a trance, and Father Benedict, compelled to stare at those rheumy eyes, did not look for long.
Instead, he turned to Alex, the boy he treated as a son, and saw that adolescent face, its innocence beautiful, the blue eyes fixed upon him.
'She arrives today,' Alex said. 'The photographer from America. Since you're going to Manaus, can I go with you? I can't wait to meet her.'
Though hearing the words, Father Benedict didn't really comprehend them, but the sound of Alex's voice, that shy whisper, seemed to toll like a distant bell.
'What happened?' he asked.

Chapter Ten

'Pardon?' Alex said.
'What happened? I thought…'
'You fell asleep,' Father Symonds said, his voice

strained and unnatural. 'It's my fault, of course, for staying too long and talking too much. However, the boat clearly won't wait forever, so we'd better leave now.'

Father Symonds seemed strange, subtly altered, somehow older, his face not as cherubic as before, his smile tentative and nervous. Father Benedict tried

not to stare, aware that he might be imagining things, still fighting, as he was, to regain his senses and let his racing heart slow down.

‘I fell *asleep*?’ he asked.
‘I think so,’ Father Symonds replied, stumbling over the words as he rushed them out, skipping over the lie. ‘Only briefly, of course.’
‘So?’ Alex asked. ‘Can I come with you? I want to meet the American lady.’
Father Benedict stared at him, the words taking some time to register, at first wondering what the boy was talking about and only slowly remembering: the New York photographer, a lady originally from Hollywood, arriving on the boat that would take Father Symonds away and due to stay in the mission camp for a month, writing about, and photographing, their daily routine. Distaste filtered through him, but his sense of unreality remained, not helped when he looked into Alex’s eyes and saw the blue sky reflected. No black clouds, no stars, no thunder and lightning; just a clear, normal afternoon sky.
‘Why do you want to meet the American woman?’ he asked of Alex.
‘She’s a stranger,’ Antonio put in, walking up to stand beside them, a pleasing grin on his face. ‘More important,’ he continued, ‘she’s an *American* lady; and, even more important still, she once lived in Hollywood. Even Alex, who’s seen very few films, can fail to know what they are.’
Alex blushed and smiled broadly, lowering his eyes in embarrassment, instantly like a normal adolescent, emotionally awkward and charming. Father Benedict, without thinking, put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, shaking him affectionately and then letting him go, touched by his embarrassment.
Had it truly happened? Had a mere wave of this boy’s hand transformed the elements? Father Benedict, remembering vividly, again felt a creeping fear, but when he looked at Alex, who was distractedly running his fingers through his blond hair, he was convinced that whatever had happened, it could not have been bad.
‘She’s not a film star, Alex. She only *lived* in Hollywood. She actually lives and works in New York, a less glamorous place.’
‘Not to Alex,’ Antonio said.
‘And not to me,’ Father Symonds added. ‘To me, right now, *any* place outside the Amazon seems glamorous, so let’s start for the boat.’ He turned to say goodbye to Peruche, but did not shake his hand, since the wizened Indian,

looking up with his rheumy eyes, merely smiled and waved languidly.
‘So it is,’ Peruche wheezed. ‘The winds blow us here and there. All of us are one, as the whole of Earth is one, and so, wherever you may be, you will also be here with us. Have a good voyage, my friend.’
‘Perhaps I’ll return some day,’ Father Symonds said.
‘I think not,’ Peruche said.
Father Symonds took a step back, visibly twitching, and then turned to stare directly at Father Benedict, his lined eyes imploring. Yes, he had changed, his cheerful face now like a death mask, fearful yet fighting to retain some dignity, his teeth biting his lower lip. Then Father Benedict felt it again, spiralling up to grip his throat: the conviction that Father Symonds was doomed and would never see England. This conviction, which had no rational basis, shook him body and soul.
‘It’s time to leave for Manaus,’ he said, speaking more urgently than intended, ‘so let’s set about it. And you can, of course, Alex, if you wish, come with us and meet the American lady.’
He returned Alex’s grateful smile, but it took considerable effort, since what had just transpired (and he could not accept that he had merely been dreaming) had completely disorientated him, filling his head with old memories that had resurrected buried guilt, and making everything around him – the green walls of rubber trees, the teeming grass and shifting foliage, the black-surfaced, very still várzea lake, the grey clouds in the azure sky – seem unreal and yet strangely threatening, as if closing in on him.
‘So,’ he said, ‘do we go by the river or by car? It’s up to you, Father Symonds.’
‘I’d like to see everything from the river one last time,’ Father Symonds said. ‘So if no one else minds, the boat is my choice.’
‘It’s your day,’ Father Benedict said, then turning to Mengrire, added: ‘Perhaps you could drive on to Manaus, Mengrire, and wait for us down by the docks. Since it’ll be dark by the time Father Symonds’ boat sets sail, you can drive us and the American woman back to the mission.’
‘As you wish, Father. But first I’ll put the suitcases in the small boat, to be certain they’ll arrive with you in Manaus.’
‘You think you might get lost, Mengrire?’ Father Benedict asked with gentle mockery.
‘Not lost,’ Mengrire replied, returning the smile but avoiding the older

priest's eyes. 'I only fear that the jeep might break down, or that there might be another bad storm, and that because of such unexpected circumstances, Father Symonds might have to leave for England without his possessions.'
'Most considerate of you, Mengrire,' Father Symonds said. 'And the thought is appreciated.'
Clearly relieved that he would not have to go with them, the Indian grinned and turned away and loped back through the forest towards the residential area of the plantation, while Father Symonds, merely nodding one last time at Peruche, still squatting in front of his thatched hut, finally managed to tear himself away and headed for the local *porto* with Antonio Bozzano by his side.
Alex likewise nodded at Peruche, but then held the old man's gaze, their eyes locked in some secret communication that again disturbed Father Benedict. He started to move off, then stopped, surprised by the intensity of Alex's gaze, remembering how Father Symonds had also stared at Peruche and now seeing almost the same expression on Alex's face, as if he was reading Peruche's mind and the old Indian, his.
'Follow your instincts, my son,' Peruche said, 'for what will come starts today.'
'I just want to go to Manaus and meet the American woman.'
'If your impulse is to do so, then do it. Trust your senses in everything.'
The boy nodded agreement and turned away, smiling at Father Benedict, and together they walked behind the other two, around the lake, through the trees. Emerging from the wooded area, they made their way along the bank of the great river. The bright sunshine was fading gradually, giving way to a cloudy greyness, and the immense expanse of water, its far bank ribboned with greenery, temporarily overwhelmed Father Benedict and eased his troubled thoughts.
Arriving at the *porto*, they found Mengrire waiting for them, having deposited Father Symonds' suitcases on the desk of the small and dilapidated paddlesteamer. Satisfied, he drove off, the jeep rattling and banging dangerously, then the rest of them walked down the plank to the lower deck of the boat. Father Benedict shared a wooden bench with his perspiring fellow priest while Alex and Antonio leaned against the rusty steel railing. Staring past the heads of Alex and Antonio at the well spread huts of the plantation, recalling his confrontation with Alex's father, Frank Poulson,

Father Benedict felt, in the sudden rage that stabbed through him, a more cutting shame.
Good and evil coexisting, past and future as one: he thought of his own secret guilt, which Poulson had unwittingly resurrected, and a hot flush rose to his cheeks, making him lower his head.
The boat's engine charged into life, its muffled roaring filled with metallic screechings and bangings, then the wheels of the paddle-steamer, white paint flaking, churned up the water around the *porto* and pushed the boat, sluggishly but surely, out into the river.
Father Benedict looked up again, first at Alex and Antonio, who were talking together, and then at his fellow priest. Father Symonds was studying the river, the sun shining on his bald head, the grey hair that surrounded his egg-shell skull being blown by the wind. His cheerful face, which had always seemed too small for his portly body, now looked like it had shrunk even more, losing its former colour and animation. Father Benedict, seeing that apparition before him, felt fearful for him.
'Are you all right?' he asked, trying to sound as casual as possible, blinking against the sunlight that flashed off the rippling water and keeping his hands in his lap.
'Yes,' Father Symonds replied, not looking at him. 'I'm fine. A bit sad, perhaps.'
'But are you sure you're all right?'
'Of course I'm all right. Why do you ask?' Now Father Symonds turned towards him, shading his eyes with a cupped hand, tilting his head slightly and squinting out of upraised eyes. 'Your question didn't seem rhetorical,' he added. 'Why the sudden concern?'
Still feeling fearful, Father Benedict didn't know what to say. He couldn't shake from his thoughts how adamantly Peruche had told Father Symonds that he would not be returning to the Amazon, as if he knew something they did not.
'I'm not sure,' he managed to blurt out. 'You seem changed. Not at all your old self.'
'I haven't changed,' the older priest replied. 'I'm just sad to be leaving. After fifteen years in this place, I should think the feeling is natural.'
'I think it's more than that.'
'It's not.'

‘I think it is. Something happened back there with old Peruche and it affected you dramatically. You seemed shocked, perhaps even frightened, and all the life left your face.’
Father Symonds sighed, visibly shuddered, and then turned his head away, his gaze focused on the river’s far bank, that green ribbon of jungle.
‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you’re right. I feel terrible. Is it really that noticeable?’
‘I noticed it. I don’t know that anyone else did.’
‘I feel old. Suddenly very old. As if my whole world is ending.’
‘Why? What happened back there?’
There was a fairly long silence while Father Symonds pondered the question, his lips opening and closing again, his gaze fixed on the river. Glancing over his shoulder, Father Benedict saw Alex and Antonio at the railing, the humus in the river making a brown wake in the glittering black water, the nearside bank curving away out of sight around the overhanging branches of the trees and the bank’s tall, swaying bulrushes. Hearing Father Symonds sighing again, he returned his gaze to his strained face.
‘I can’t really describe what happened,’ Father Symonds said quietly, ‘but I *do* know that when I looked at Peruche, I knew, I just *knew*, I actually *felt* that I would never see England.’
Hearing those words, Father Benedict experienced a chill that almost numbed him to the point of paralysis.
‘Imagination,’ he said, trying to make himself sound soothing. ‘Probably the tension caused by your imminent departure made you – ’
‘No!’ the older priest interjected. ‘It definitely wasn’t imagination. I had the feeling that I was hypnotised, that Peruche was inside my head, and that through him I was experiencing my own future, which does not include England. My future’s right here, in the Amazon, and does not go beyond it. What else can this mean other that I won’t be leaving here after all; that whatever time I have left, it will terminate here? And so, convinced of this, I felt something break inside me, draining me of strength, or, more precisely, the will to live. It ends today, Paul, and Peruche saw it… and now I have to accept it.’
He had finally turned around to reveal his fear and wonder, but Father Benedict, either unwilling or unable to accept what he was hearing, retreated into a protective cloak of disbelief.
‘We’re both crazy,’ he said. ‘We’re letting our imaginations run riot. We’re

letting ourselves succumb to all the nonsense that's been preached by Peruche. You're sailing back to England tonight, dear Michael, and nothing will stop you.'
'I won't see another dawn,' Father Symonds said, 'and both of us know it.'
They glanced at one another, but then lowered their eyes. 'Yes, Paul, you know it, because you, too, experienced something back there – something that frightened you severely and made you question your sanity.'
'You said I'd just been sleeping.'
'That's what it looked like. You were kneeling in front of Peruche, your eyes closed, your head moving from left to right in agitation. When you woke up, you seemed completely dazed and were obviously frightened. What happened to you, Paul?'
Father Benedict licked his dry lips, remembering, wondering if he were mad.
'I saw things,' he said. 'Things the rest of you clearly didn't see. Inexplicable and miraculous events that seemed vividly real. I wasn't sleeping, Michael. I *know* it. I was wide awake through it all.'
'And yet the rest of us experienced nothing – only the sight of you sitting there, apparently sleeping, moving your head from side to side in agitation.'
'I was moving my head from side to side in order to see all that was happening. I saw Alex's hand raised in the air – and when he lowered it, everything stopped. Peruche had said that with a mere wave of his hand, Alex would separate himself from us – and then Alex, by waving his hand, created a whole new world that I *didn't* imagine.'
'A form of hypnosis,' Father Symonds said. 'That possibly explains it.'
'You think so?'
'Well…'
'Do you even remember Peruche making that remark about Alex?'
'Yes, I do.'
'And what happened next?'
'Nothing.'
'Nothing? You mean Alex didn't even raise his hand?'
'I don't remember him doing so.'
'So what happened after Peruche told us that Alex, with a mere wave of his hand, would separate himself from us?'
Father Symonds looked confused, his eyes flitting left and right, his hands rising to his cheeks and falling again to lie like dead fish in his lap.

‘You know, I *can’t* remember… I remember Peruche making the remark. I remember that I turned to look at Alex. I remember that he *started* to raise his hand, and then… I remember that I decided to leave the group and stood up to do just that, feeling remarkably weak, Antonio holding me by the elbow… Nothing else. *Nothing!*’

‘And did you hear the Yano drums?’

‘No, I didn’t…’ He hesitated. ‘Yes… Yes, I might have. Come to think of it, I’m certain that I heard them; how long for, I don’t know. Presumably a very short time…’ He glanced up, bewildered, then looked across at Alex and Antonio, both of whom were still leaning against the railing, talking casually and watching the frothing wake of the paddle-steamer. Eventually, shaking his head from side to side, he turned back to the front. ‘It’s a mystery,’ he said.

Shaken and confused, Father Benedict gazed over the mighty river, at that ribbon of forest eight kilometres away, then fixed his attention on the bank close to the port side, sliding past the large, rotating wheels. The wheels made a lot of noise as they churned up the water, their loose slats clattering, but the forest that came right up to the sloping bank was gloomy and silent. Eventually, the boat passed the mission camp, the buildings desolate in the shadowed clearing, and some Indian children waved from the jetty while others waved from the sick bay. Father Symonds waved back, standing up as he did so, then went to the railing and stood there until the mission camp had fallen well behind the boat. He returned to his bench, shaken, and sat down, sighing loudly, then wiped a few tears from his eyes and looked at the jungle. The trees, overhanging the river, seemed almost humanly mournful.

‘It’s all right,’ Father Benedict said again with exhausted, forlorn hope. ‘It’s all superstition and nonsense, so there’s nothing to worry about.’

‘I’m not worried,’ his friend said. ‘I just feel a deep sadness. There was so much I wanted to do and now so little accomplished. When I think of what I might have been, I feel my loss more acutely. When I think of it and wonder what lies on the other side, if one carries one’s memories with one, I’m stricken by the thought of what I’m leaving: all my friends, the dawn light, the sun setting upon the water, the wondrous variety of the forest and its inhabitants, my mother’s face, my first tears. No, Paul, I’m not worried: my earthly anxieties have left me. What I feel is only grief over what I’m leaving behind – and great wonder at that which is to come when the time itself

comes. Peruche said that something was coming today. What he meant was my death.'

His words had a dreadful finality, writing the end to a life, bringing an invisible curtain down between them, dividing one from the other. Father Benedict looked away, feeling bereaved and shocked, his mind reeling from the impact of this single day that had not, as he realized with increasing dread, yet run its full course.

He watched the jungle sliding past, the river lapping at banks of clay, primitive jetties running back to the Indian shacks raised high on stilts, the odd Indian passing by in his canoe, children pulling their fishing nets in. *Rio Negro: Black River*… merely one stretch of the mighty Amazon, its vitreous surface limpid and quiet, reflecting forest and sky. What was he doing here? He did not belong here. This place only filled his head with old memories that made his skin burn.

Buried sin and mounting guilt: the accumulation of all the years. One sin above all others – the sin of lust – was what haunted him night and day. It takes a sensualist to know a sensualist, as Frank Poulson had recently proved, and Father Benedict (his mind filled with an image of brown flesh leading to nothing) understood that one minute of weakness could lead to a lifetime of remorse…

It had happened in Australia, near a bleak, sunstruck town, when he, in his middle thirties but still a virgin, had dreaded every night the thought of sleep, with its dream-filled torments. Yet why that particular girl? Was it compassion or perversity? Had he thought to set her free from her self-disgust or to martyr himself in the flames? He now vividly recalled her, a half-caste Aboriginal, unusually beautiful, first seen at the far end of his desolate mission station in the primal, sweltering outback of north Queensland. A brown flesh leading to nothing? Or to his own latent perversity? He had been instantly drawn to her, almost blinded by her beauty, and had followed her beckoning eyes, pretending to inspect his miserable mission station, while secretly burning up with lust and shame, a priest surrendering all virtue. Celibacy: that curse. Could it ever be truly lived with? His eyes had ravished the smiling girl – her long black hair and full lips, her swaying hips and teasing breasts – and only later, in his room, during a rare thunderstorm, did he see clearly her bare shoulders, exquisitely rounded and delicate, the brown skin, which he wanted to lick and suck, curving down

to… nothing.
A cauterized stump for a left arm, the skin curled beneath the shoulder blades – and his heart, as his eyes fell on that terrible wound, had opened out to embrace her.
That recollection could still scorch him, laying waste to his defences, stripping away the pretence that he was a man of God, his virtue inviolate. Now he recalled it clearly, as he had been doing all day, and his soul, which too often had huddled in doubt's grave shadow, seemed to drain out of him completely and leave him spiritually bankrupt.
Oh, yes, he saw her clearly. And now wanted to confess to someone. *She removed her dress and stood naked before me, her beauty making my senses reel*. That – and more. Not just lust, but also compassion. *I saw the stump of her amputated arm and couldn't take my eyes off it*. Heat and sweat, the buzzing flies, thunder rumbling and lightning flashing, the shadows dancing over her naked skin and emphasizing her feminine curves. *I prayed to God in pious humility. The heat flooded my aching loins. When she stepped close, placing her hand behind my neck, my vows choked in my throat*. Lust – and compassion. Her perfect beauty marred so hideously: that cauterized stump, shockingly ruining her otherwise perfect form, stilled the last writhings of his guilt and led him into the flames. *Oh, God, and I a priest! And what did I do? Even now I can't bear to think about it, nor let it out in Confession*. He had wanted to melt into her, to make her whole by ingesting her, and his lips had found her throat, her exquisite shoulders, then that stitched, folded flesh. So his mouth and tongue had worshipped that dreadful wound, his heart and soul pouring over her.
Why her? He would never know (he had soon fled to New Guinea) but he would, without a doubt, ponder the question the rest of his days. A ravishing adolescent, one arm torn off at the shoulder, she had clearly suffered the conviction that her relationships could not be normal and, her spirit and pride crushed by that knowledge, was offering all she could give.
Had she sensed his repressed desire? And did it matter what she had thought? He only knew that her armless shoulder, a shocking blasphemy against one so lovely, had drawn out of him an overwhelming compassion and hatred of God. Before the lifetime, one moment, a blind and heedless decision, defying God and asserting human need, erasing that blasphemy with his tongue, denying the ugliness with his lips, and perhaps confirming, in that

incandescent moment, that his pinioned spirit still lived.
Father Benedict covered his face, feeling the warmth of his cupped hands, bending forward on the hard wooden bench, the deck vibrating beneath him. He didn't want to think about it, tried to avoid it, but failed, recalling Frank Poulson's instinctive knowledge of what he had himself tried to deny against all the facts.
He had taken his vows, but his vows had not protected him; if celibate, he had not wished to be so and so he failed to subdue his lust. The simple hungers of the flesh? Or the need to love and be loved? Doubtless both, which for others was quite normal, but for him was a sin. *Yet in the end, I resisted, casting the unfortunate girl aside*, his desire and compassion, beating with huge wings in that dark room, brutally destroyed by the intrusion of a spiritual training more remorseless than flesh. *God, no!* he had cried out – the words still rang in his head – *God forgive me, you poor child, please forgive me. Get dressed and then leave here at once…* And later, when she had gone, he had knelt there for hours, the sweat dripping from him, the light from the oil lamp flickering over his trembling body as he repeatedly thanked God for his deliverance
– and felt the self-contempt smothering him.
For indeed, if he had learned to fear God, he had also come to fear women… or, at least, their ability to seduce and destroy him.
His secret world was his curse.

Chapter Eleven

'The dock's crowded,' he heard Antonio saying. 'The boat must have arrived.'

Father Benedict looked up, squinting against the sky's glare, to see Antonio and Alex standing just in front of him, their heads lowered towards him. The paddle-steamer was turning to port, moving past some shacks on stilts, and he saw, beyond the silhouetted outline of the Indian captain, the great floating docks of Manaus, clearly crowded with people. He rubbed his eyes and glanced around him, feeling confused and badly shaken. Father Symonds was dabbing at his sweating forehead with a crumpled white handkerchief.

‘Did you say…?’

‘The boat from Belem has arrived,’ Antonio confirmed, ‘and the crowds are all out to greet it.’
Antonio grinned and stepped aside, leaving Father Benedict’s view unobstructed, and he saw the mass of people crowded along the floating docks, the brown turrets of the Customs House thrusting up well behind them, and below them, supporting the enormous steel plates upon which they stood, the large drums upon which the docks floated, the water splashing around them. Alongside the nearest dock, white paint rotted with rust and peeling, was the Amazon River Steam Navigation Company two-decker boat that had brought passengers, livestock and cargo nearly a thousand miles up the river from the port of Belem. Most of the crowd were milling about the docked boat and there was much noise and jostling.
‘Looks like a carnival,’ Father Benedict said.
‘A lot of buying and selling,’ Antonio told him. ‘It’s a pretty big day for them.’
Grinning, Alex and ran to the railing, his blond hair flopping in the wind. Father Benedict, his nervous system in disarray, followed him to stand close beside him. The paddle-steamer was inching up to its own docking space, chugging past the larger boat, water cascading down its rotating wheels and splashing over them, warm and wet and refreshing. Hearing Alex laughing excitedly, Father Benedict glanced down to see his profile, noting the aristocratic forehead, the finely chiselled nose, the delicately sensual, almost feminine lips, the eyes, when they turned up to look at him, an impossibly clear blue – all of that, plus the boyish candour and enthusiasm and a complete lack of arrogance.
‘Are you excited, Alex?’
‘Yes, Father, I am. I really enjoy coming to Manaus and it’s even more exciting when a big boat arrives.’
‘And when it brings a newcomer.’
Alex blushed at that, but nodded his head and smiled, then the paddle-steamer’s engine was turned off and its wheels stopped rotating. The boat bumped against the dock, making a metallic, grinding sound, and some Indians, wearing dirty white shirts and floppy trousers, prepared to put out the gangplank.

Father Benedict glanced left and right, surveying the crowds milling about on the dock, buying and selling fruit, a variety of fish and trashy trinkets, and then, remembering Father Symonds' words, returned his attention to Alex, who clearly was still very excited.

'You seem particularly enthusiastic about meeting this American woman, Alex. One is driven to think, from the way you're behaving, that you've known her before.'

'Yes, Father, you're right,' Alex said candidly. 'I can't wait to meet her because I feel as if I already know her.'

'How come?'

'Because the night before last I had a dream in which she appeared to me.'

'The *American* woman appeared to you? What made you so sure it was the American woman, since you've never seen her before?'

'It was her. I *knew* it was her. I recognised her even in my dream. I knew who it was.'

'Really?' Father Symonds said from behind them. 'And what was this creature of your dreams like?'

'*Beautiful!*' Alex exclaimed.

Father Benedict turned with Alex to face the older priest and found him standing beside Antonio, both of them framed by the broad expanse of the river, which here, around Manaus, was a hive of activity: floating houses and shops, floating fuel dumps and *restaurantes*, even a large floating ice factory, its chimneys belching black, oily smoke.

Father Symonds, forcing a smile for Alex's benefit, nonetheless looked terrible.

'Well,' he said, 'you may be right. The woman could indeed be beautiful. You *do* have a modest talent for precognition and telepathy, and so, if you're right in this case, it won't be the first time that one of your dreams has come true. Be prepared, however, for disappointment, since I think that in this case your dream is probably the product of wishful thinking of a most common kind.'

The priest's words were good-humoured, but his face showed terrible strain, as if he was only managing to hold himself together with a great deal of willpower. Father Benedict felt uneasy, remembering what his friend had said about not expecting to see the dawn. The sun had started sinking in a surreal, kaleidoscopic sky, and he shivered, as if shaking off a ghost, and then turned

back to Alex.
‘He’s right about that, Alex. You *do* have some strange gifts. I still remember that dream you had, just a month or so ago, when you saw – and I quote – *a great ball of fire in the heavens, an umbrella of light*. I remembered what you said because later I learned that the very same day, shortly after you’d described your dream, the Americans dropped the atom bomb on Hiroshima.’
‘A new and more terrible age,’ Father Symonds said. ‘Truly the end of man’s innocence.’
An embarrassed silence fell between them, eased a little by the noisy crowd milling about on the dock above, and then, as if sensing that the silence had to be filled, Alex, watching the gangplank being lowered, said, ‘I told Peruche about that dream – and you know what he said? *It’s a sign that someone is coming to point the way to your future*. Meaning *my* future.’
‘And you think that this someone might be the American woman?’
‘Yes, Father Symonds.’
The older priest’s smile crumbled, giving way to a trembling grimace. Turning aside, he shivered visibly, and then walked to the gangplank that led from the deck of the boat to the dock slightly above it.
Mengrire, who had arrived here before them, scurried down the gangplank, nodding vigorously and murmuring his greetings to everyone, and then headed straight for the suitcases at the far side of the deck.
Father Symonds stepped onto the gangplank, started ascending, missed his step, but was rescued by the alert Antonio Bozzano who helped him continue the short climb to the floating dock.
Alex was right behind him, Father Benedict behind Alex, and soon they were grouped together on the dock, being jostled by the milling townsfolk – Africans and Portuguese, European and Asian, *mesticos* and *caboclos* and *cafusos* – most of them shouting and gesticulating, swopping anecdotes and jokes, buying and selling and bartering with good-natured zeal.
They pushed their way through the crowd,, heading for the Belem steamer, Father Benedict walking beside Alex, Antonio holding Father Symonds’ elbow and walking ahead of them, Mengrire trailing in their wake, carrying the suitcases. The dock was packed with small stalls, all painted different colours, all stacked with flour and rice and *farinha*, with fresh fruit and fish, the combination of which filled the air was rich, pungent odours. The sun was setting quickly, sinking down behind the steamer, silhouetting the boat in a

great fan of riotous colours that blended and changed to display the whole range of the spectrum, and finally covered the market on the floating dock in a sublime golden light.

Father Benedict, at that moment, hardly noticed all the excitement, his senses numbed to everything except sadness and a sorrowful wash of shame. His whole day had been very strange, a dream of magic darkly cast, filled with unpleasant confrontations and bizarre, haunting incidents.

What a day to remember! First death, then departure; then a flood of memories leading back to his past and its cruel, relentless accusations. And with the past, the future: the revelations of his friend, Father Symonds, who, now walking two or three steps ahead, looked like the ghost of his former self.

Dark omens, premonitions, sundry portends of doom – and magic, a blasphemous play with unknown forces, turning the world upside down.

Father Benedict remembered his childhood, his strict religious upbringing, his years of solitude in the Australian outback; then temptation, the flesh demanding, a onearmed girl wanting attention; then his guilty flight to New Guinea and the horrors of the war against the Japanese, along the Kokoda Trail…

He felt grief fill his heart, an almost physical pain, and then he heard an anguished gasp, someone exclaiming, ‘Oh, dear God!’ – and he stopped walking, the twilight dazing him, blinking into a golden haze, and saw his friend, Father Symonds, clutching his left arm and falling forward, his knees striking the steel dock with a horrible cracking sound as Antonio, muttering something incomprehensible, leaned forward to pull the falling man back, his hand missing and merely brushing the dying priest’s shoulder as he collapsed and rolled over.

Had he seen all this before? *It’s come true: he is dead*. Father Benedict moved quickly, dropping down beside Antonio, pushing the Brazilian back and grabbing his old friend by the shirt and shaking him vigorously while silently pleading for him to live.

Too late: the priest was dead. His weary heart had given out. Grief and pain pierced Father Benedict, cutting through to his very soul, and then everything inside him, all the guilt and fear and love, burst forth and temporarily set him free, his tears finding release.

Alex stared at him in wonder, kneeling right there by his side, then Father

Benedict saw the boy looking up as a shadow fell over him. The crowd had gathered all around them, a ring of faces painted black, and Father Benedict, raising his head, feeling the tears on his cheeks, saw an extraordinary beauty, her red hair like flames, and her eyes, large and frightened, opening and closing repeatedly, as green as the grass of that England to which Father Symonds, his heart stilled for all time, would not, as Peruche had prophesied, ever return.

The strange woman, floating magically in that golden haze above, her long, fiery hair hanging down around her tanned face, flicked her agitated eyes from Alex to Antonio to Father Benedict, and then, her sigh as tremulous as the light breeze, spoke through brightly painted lips.

'I'm Laura Wellman,' she said.

To be continued…

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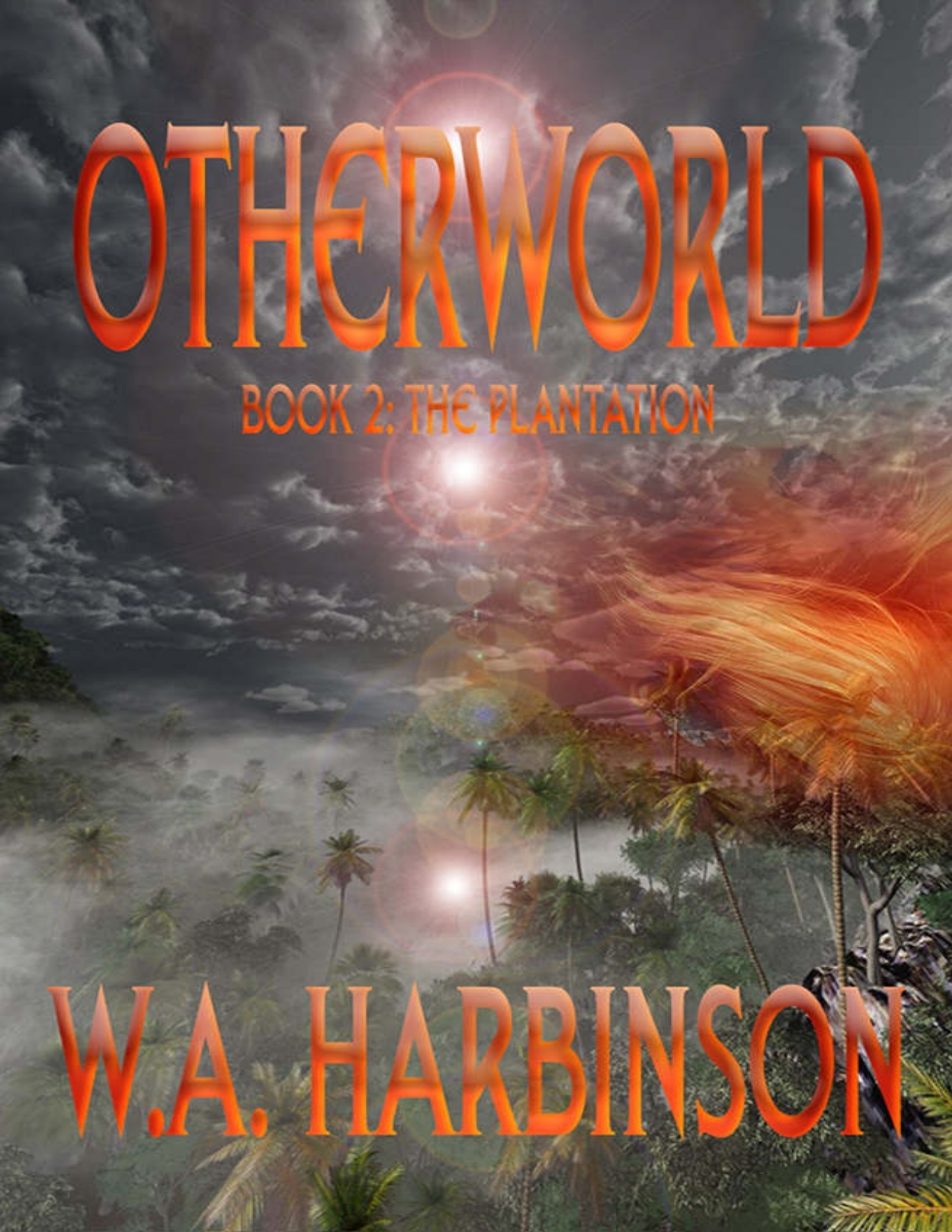
OTHERWORLD
BOOK 2: THE PLANTATION
W.A. HARBINSON

Otherworld

W. A. Harbinson

Deep in the heart of the Amazon rainforest live the Yano Indians. A fierce, elusive tribe, they are
dedicated to the powers of darkness, their presence only revealed only by the hypnotic beating of drums… and by mysterious lights in the sky.

Laura Wellman , an American photojournalist, beautiful, sensual and deeply tormented… Believing herself to be possessed by evil spirits, she decides to

offer herself to the dreaded Yano in a final, desperate attempt to release her soul from torment.

Father Paul Benedict , a middle-aged Anglican priest who is starting to doubt his God and the meaning of life in general… Gradually becoming obsessed with Laura, he believes that in somehow saving her from

self-destruction he can find his own redemption.

Alex Poulson , adolescent son of a depraved rubber baron, an almost spiritual innocent born and raised in
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Copyright © 1984 by W. A. Harbinson
First published in Great Britain in 1984 by Corgi Books, London
ISBN 0 552 12380 3
This ebook edition published in 2015 by W. A. Harbinson

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Designed in the Isle of Wight, Great Britain, by www.inkdigital.org

Otherworld

Book Two
The Plantation

Chapter One

‘That poor man,’ she said. ‘A heart attack! Oh, dear God, that poor man!’

Laura Wellman, sitting in the back of the jeep between Antonio Bozzano and Alex, brushing her long hair from her face, let it blow out behind her in the wind, shook her head from side to side in a bewildered manner, and stared all around her.

Alex watched her shyly and slyly, avoiding her gaze when she turned towards him, still stunned by the unexpected death of Father Symonds, but also, to his shame, helplessly dazzled by the creature sitting beside him, his senses reeling from the initial impact of her beauty.

Night had taken command, plunging the rainforest into darkness, but Alex vividly recalled her fiery red hair, her brightly painted lips, and, most of all, her incandescent green eyes with their long, fine eyelashes, rising and falling in peculiar agitation.

Father Benedict was in the front seat, sitting silently beside Mengrire, the slump to his shoulders telling all there was to know of his grief and shock, though he had also (or so Alex imagined) reacted in a startled manner to the first resplendent appearance of Laura Wellman, almost as if *he* had recognized her – or something strange in her.

‘Oh, God, I still can’t get over it! The way he just fell down in front of me. I mean, I feel it’s my fault.’

‘It wasn’t your fault,’ Antonio said. ‘It was nobody’s fault.’
‘Had he been ill? Do you think he was ill?’
‘It was a heart attack,’ Antonio said. ‘At his age it’s not all that uncommon, so please stop worrying, Miss Wellman.’

Alex felt her eyes upon him, staring wildly out of the darkness, and something reached into his heart and took a fierce hold on it. Mengrire mangled the jeep's gears, making the vehicle shudder violently, and the warmth of Laura Wellman, when she fell against him, touched Alex with glory.

'Worry?' Laura said. 'Of *course* I worry! When someone drops dead right in front of you, then naturally you *worry*.'

'*Please*, Miss Wellman,' Antonio said, sounding to Alex not quite himself and actually looking annoyed with the American woman. 'I think it would be best if we could just drop the subject for now. Talking about it won't make any of us feel better.'

'Oh, dear, I've upset you.'

'I assure you, I'm not upset at all; I just think it will do us no good to dwell on this matter. And I'm truly sorry, Miss Wellman, that you arrived to such a tragic event, which naturally has shaken you.'

'Call me Laura. I don't like using surnames.'

Antonio turned his head to stare directly at her, taking a deep breath as he did so, then turned back to the front without saying a word. Alex felt very peculiar, too confused to think clearly, and he found himself looking at Father Benedict, as if for support. His good friend, the priest, a shadowy form in the forest's darkness, was sitting up front beside Mengrire, his shoulders still slumped.

'Where did they take that poor man when they drove him away in the truck?'

'To a hospital in Manaus, Miss Wellman.'

'Laura. Please call me – '

'Laura.'

'And then? What happens then?'

Antonio sighed. 'They'll do what's necessary and then, the day after tomorrow, he'll be buried in a small graveyard outside the city – exactly as he'd be buried in America or, in his case, England.'

'Swell,' Laura said. 'Great.' She put her hand up to her forehead, her elbow tapping Alex's temple, then distractedly stroked her windblown, streaming red hair as she looked around at the forest on both sides of the jeep. It was almost pitch-black in there, certainly too dark to see, and now, in the cover of night, the whole forest had come alive with alien sounds: bird calls and chattering monkeys, croaking bullfrogs and chirping crickets, the infrequent,

muffled growling of a jaguar or puma, the constant rustling of the undergrowth as giant rodents and anteaters and snakes traversed the forest floor, while that even more varied wildlife – macaws, cotingas, pigeons, honey-creepers, marmosets, toucans, spider-monkeys and every imaginable kind of spider – lived and died nearly a hundred feet above in the forest's dense canopy. Laura Wellman was obviously impressed – her tall and lean body shivered – then she turned her radiant gaze upon Alex.
'Oh, dear,' she said. '*What* did you say your name was?'
'Alex.'
'Ah, yes, that's it. You must forgive me, Alex, for forgetting, but… you know… that poor man dying and all – '
'Yes.'
' – it sort of made me stop thinking. Anyway, Alex, you're really an extremely handsome boy. What age are you?'
'Seventeen.'
'God – forgive me, Father – what I'd give to be seventeen again. Unfortunately, those days are long gone and the wear and tear shows.'
'You're still very attractive,' Alex murmured shyly.
'It's kind of you to say so, Alex. I'm feeling better already.' A *seringueiro* bird called out, its cry jagged and metallic, and she twitched and put her hand on Alex's wrist, making his cheeks burn. 'This jungle is spooky,' she said. 'Is it always this noisy?'
'Only at night. By day it's fairly quiet. Most of the animals stay hidden during the day and only come out at night.'
'Thank God – thank heavens for that,' she corrected herself, glancing nervously at Father Benedict's slumped shoulders, perhaps fearing his wrath. 'I mean, this noise, if it went on all the time, would drive you out of your mind. So how do you sleep at night?'
'You'll get to like it,' Antonio said laconically. 'And then, when you lie in your hammock at night, you'll never feel lonely.'
'A hammock? You mean I won't have a *bed*?'
'No, I'm afraid not.'
'Ah, well,' Laura said, sounding unconcerned, 'that's also something I'll have to get used to and maybe, given a little time, even come to enjoy.'
Mengrire mangled the gears again and the jeep almost stopped, then shuddered vigorously and lurched on, its headlights beaming into the

darkness over the crude, winding track while Antonio, Laura and Alex were thrown into each other.
‘I think this jeep needs attention,’ Laura said. ‘Or maybe the driver needs lessons.’
Mengrire showed no sign of having overheard the remark, but Father Benedict seated beside him, coughed into his clenched fist.
‘Father Benedict?’
‘Yes, Miss Wellman.’
‘Can I take it that you’re now in sole charge of the mission?’
‘Yes, that’s correct.’
‘I hope you don’t resent me for dumping myself on you for a month.’
‘Not at all. On the contrary, we’re glad of the opportunity to let the world know what we’re doing here. Also, hopefully, the publicity we’ll gain from your published articles will bring in some of the funds we always seem to be needing.’
‘I’ll try not to get in the way too much.’
‘I envisage no particular problems, Miss – ’
‘Wellman.’
Clearly Miss Wellman was not yet ready to insist that the priest call her by her Christian name, and Alex, taking note of this fact, wondered why it was so. He felt strange sitting so close beside her, slyly studying her exquisite profile, unable to distract himself from the soft pressure of her hip and thigh, which, pressed against him, gave life to his flesh. He had no carnal experience of women and had thought little of sensual matters, but now, as if shedding his old skin, he felt his hidden self wakening.
As if reading his thoughts, Laura Wellman turned her head to look at him.
‘Seventeen, Alex? And you’ve lived here all your life? It must be a strange way to grow up. Do you like being here?’
‘Yes, Laura, I like it.’
‘And do you go to school here?’
‘Yes. Normally I go to school in Manaus, but right now we’re on holiday.’
He hardly knew what to say to her, so dazzled by her was he, his heart beating too quickly, his senses scattering like pollen in a wind. Glancing up at the night sky, he saw the ink-black jungle canopy, the odd patch of stars visible above the treetops and glittering with remarkable clarity from that vast, distant cosmos. Everything seemed magical to him, incandescent,

blindingly vivid, and when he turned his gaze back upon the woman her radiant presence poured over him.
‘Is the mission far away?’ she asked of no one in particular.
‘No,’ Antonio said. ‘We’ll be there pretty soon.’
‘I didn’t quite get what you said when we met, Antonio. Do you work in the mission?’
‘No, Laura. I work in the rubber plantation owned by Alex’s father. I’m an overseer, a sort of foreman, in charge of the rubber gatherers: the *seringueiros*. To confuse you even more, the bird that you can hear this very second, making that ear-splitting, metallic noise, is called a *seringueiro,* or rubber-gatherer’s, bird. So when we talk of a *seringueiro*, we could either be discussing a bird or an all-too-human rubber gatherer.’
‘Fascinating,’ Laura said, continuing to glance all around her. ‘I just wish I’d arrived in the daytime. It’s so frustrating not seeing it all.’ Alex felt her hand squeezing his wrist as she turned towards him again. ‘And *you’re* fascinating, Alex, living here your whole life to date. Have you ever left this jungle at all or is that still to come?’
‘No, I’ve never left here. I’ve seen nothing beyond the Amazon. But at the end of my next term at school in Manaus, my father’s going to send me back to England to further my education at a school in London.’
‘You get driven to your school in Manaus every day?’
‘No, I stay there five days a week and come back on the weekends.’
‘Which do you prefer? Manaus or the plantation?’
‘I prefer it here in the rainforest.’
‘Why?’
‘The Indians, the animals…’ Alex didn’t know what to say. How could he explain what he felt when the forest spoke to him? ‘I just like to visit Manaus,’ he explained lamely, ‘when a passenger steamer arrives. Like today, when you came…’
A sliver of moonlight illuminated her brightly painted lips; her smile then disappeared, leaving darkness. ‘You make me feel welcome,’ she said. ‘You have a way with the ladies.’
Her remark seemed charged with meaning, setting a flare off in his mind, and he felt her fingers squeezing his wrist again and then trailing off. The jeep roared and raced on, bouncing over a mound of earth, and the wind, rushing through between Mengrire and Father Benedict, beat at Alex’s face. He

reached up and touched his cheek, where Laura's hair had lightly grazed it, and some part of him, the adult too long buried, leapt out of his centre. The beams of the headlights slid off tree trunks, slashed across some dangling plants, then raced on to converge farther ahead on a wooden gatepost. Alex saw the plank huts of the mission camp, light pouring out from various windows, and then noticed that Father Benedict was straightening his shoulders, as if coming alive again.

Mengrire forced the gearstick, pressed the footbrake too hard, and as the jeep slowed down too quickly and then leapt forward erratically, Alex reached out to grip the back of Father Benedict's seat, thus ensuring that Laura Wellman wasn't flung into it. He felt the soft, warm side of her breast against his outstretched arm. At that, his cheeks burned and his heart started racing, but then the jeep slowed down further, eventually came to a shuddering halt, and the woman, offering a sigh, straightened up beside him and, blinking rapidly, repeatedly, gazed curiously all around her, unaware of his embarrassment and desire and increasing confusion.

'We've reached our destination,' Antonio informed Miss Wellman, his tone of voice slightly sardonic.

'I don't believe it,' Laura said, her gaze taking in the unimpressive mission camp.

Alex was first to disembark from the jeep, more or less vaulting out, but by the time he had turned around, Antonio was helping Laura Wellman down and Father Benedict, ostentatiously stretching himself, was staring slyly at both of them.

The woman was wearing a white cotton dress, not particularly attractive but practical, her feet in flat shoes, her long legs in stockings, and she stepped down to the ground with natural elegance, every movement a musical note. Alex was entranced, feeling as if he was in a theatre, hypnotised by the woman as she curved her spine and pulled her shoulders back, letting her breasts, full and firm, fill out the simple dress.

Mengrire was unloading her suitcases and the leather bag, but when Laura saw the latter she rushed over to take it from him, moving from the darkness into an oblique column of yellow light that beamed down from the mesh-wire window of the medical hut. Rescuing the leather bag, which had a shoulder-strap, she slung it over her right shoulder, then, jerking her head in an odd, slightly neurotic manner, she turned to face Father Benedict. The priest,

running his fingers through his black-and-grey hair, seemed to be getting his spirits back and managed to give her a slight, tentative smile, his lined eyes, nonetheless, avoiding her face and instead focusing somewhere behind her.
‘That bag looks heavy, Miss Wellman.’
‘It *is* heavy, Father, but since it contains my cameras and accessories, it’s especially precious to me.’
‘Well, you look like a strong and healthy young woman.’
‘Is that a compliment?’
‘Certainly.’
Alex saw her smiling, taking a deep breath, looking around her, her white dress turned an offgreen colour by the yellow light from the medical hut.
‘So this is it,’ she said, holding her shoulder-strap with one hand, the other resting on the languid curve of her out-thrust right hip. ‘A few buildings on the edge of the Amazon – and I’m here for a month.’
She offered a soft, throaty chuckle, fixing her smile on Father Benedict, then turned her profile to Alex as she looked across the wide, gently flowing, black river which, reflecting the moonlight, was striped with wavering striations forming a great silvery fan that constantly rippled and swayed. The river, so dark and silent, its far bank lost in the night, had a mysterious and frightening quality to it that few could ignore; and Alex, looking from it to the American woman, saw her shivering as she turned back towards him, a nervous smile on her painted lips.
‘Spooky,’ she said.
Mengrire, his gaze shifting around the woman’s intimidating beauty, asked Father Benedict where he should take the suitcases, but before the weary priest could reply Miss Wellman spoke up.
‘And you are…?’ she asked the young Indian, adding, before he could answer: ‘I’m *so* bad with names, particularly foreign ones.’
‘Mengrire,’ the Indian answered, deliberately feigning a look of stupidity. ‘My name is Mengrire. I am Christian and speak English. I work here, in the mission, as general helper, and am always obliging.’
‘Your English is *very* good, Mengrire.’
‘You are most kind, Miss Wellman.’
Mengrire bowed his head slightly, a sly grin on his face, which gesture was not lost on Father Benedict who, moving deliberately, stepped between them and addressed himself to the woman.

‘So, Miss Wellman,’ he said, smiling, ‘I suppose we should show you to your hut and let you settle in.’
‘I’ll leave, then,’ Antonio said quickly and, turning his attention to Alex, added: ‘What about you? Are you coming with me?’
Why? To what? Alex found himself staring, unable to remove his gaze from the woman standing there in the yellow light. No, he didn’t want to leave, could hardly bear the thought of doing so; he had no wish to return to his father’s plantation, to that mausoleum of a house, to the giggling and shrieking that went on every night when his father, more often than not with that swinish buffoon, Rollie Thatcher, forced some unfortunate Indian girl into his bedroom for some drunken debauchery. No, not tonight; not with Laura Wellman here.
Alex stared at her, almost speechless, remembering what Peruche had said, wondering if she was part of what the old Indian had prophesied would come very soon. Then he managed to remove his eyes, his racing heart telling its own story, and briefly fixed his attention on Antonio Bozzano, his very good friend. Antonio, normally smiling, was staring at him with his lips firmly shut.
‘Well?’ Antonio asked, after an uncomfortable silence.
‘I think I’ll stay here for the night. If Father Benedict agrees.’
He looked desperately at Father Benedict, silently begging him to agree, and the priest, smiling out of his slightly battered, handsome face, nodded assent.
‘Presuming, of course,’ he added to his unspoken words, ‘that your father won’t mind.’
‘My father won’t even know that I’m not at home,’ Alex said, ‘so whether or not he minds doesn’t even come into it.’
‘Well, goodnight,’ Antonio said, ‘I’m leaving you in very good hands, Miss Wellman, so I depart without guilt.’ He smiled charmingly, with a slight bow of his head, and then turned to Mengrire. ‘I’ll wait for you in the jeep until you’ve taken Miss Wellman’s suitcases to her hut. Try not to be too long.’
The young Indian nodded, glanced briefly at Laura Wellman, then, without a word, picked up the suitcases and started off across the clearing, heading away from the medical hut to the other buildings that were situation in a crude semicircle around the edge of the forest, with Father Benedict, Alex and Miss Wellman coming up behind him. They soon reached Father Symonds’ hut where Mengrire, moving athletically, kicked the door open and

went in, again followed by the others.
Father Benedict lit the oil lamps, one by one, saying nothing, and the flickering yellow light, growing brighter as each lamp was lit, soon illuminated the whole room and filled it with their elongated shadows.
Now Alex saw Laura Wellman more clearly and was instantly intoxicated by what he saw, her unusual beauty exciting his senses and confusing his thoughts. She looked around the spartan hut – at the hammock beneath the mosquito net, at the bamboo table and hard chairs, at the empty, dusty shelves and the meshwire windows – and then, pointing at the rear wall, said with a slow, sensual softness: 'You said there wasn't a bed.'
'I forgot that Father Symonds had a bed as well as the hammock. It just slipped my mind.'
'You mean the priest who just died? You mean you've given me *his* hut?'
'Yes,' Father Benedict said. 'Since he was due to leave today, you would have had this hut anyway.'
Alex met Laura's wandering gaze and was startled by what he saw: a panic that made her eyes go out of focus as her hands rose and fell, the fingers curving as if in search of something solid and, failing to find it, contented themselves with resting on her thighs and scratching distractedly.
'Why me?' she asked intensely of no one in particular. 'Why do these tragedies pursue me? I feel so goddamned *haunted!*'
She looked at Alex again, her gaze drawing him towards her, and he stepped forward, into her wavering shadow, and then stopped again. He saw that Mengrire was confused, moving sideways to the door, and then, as the Indian disappeared, he glanced at Father Benedict, sensing that he, too, had been subtly altered by this woman's arrival.
'You don't want to stay here?' Father Benedict asked, raising his hand in a questioning manner.
'No, no, it's all right.' She brushed her hair away from her face in an agitated manner, staring down at the suitcases on the floor and furrowing her brow; then, lowering her camera bag onto the bed, she smiled and added: 'Of course I do. It's okay.'
'I'm sorry, but there's no other accommodation available, so – '
'It's fine, Father Benedict. No problem.'
Nodding affirmatively, she offered a tremulous smile, instantly managing to look like a teenage girl, lost and uneasy. If before, to Alex, she had seemed

impossibly sophisticated, now, in this lamplit, spartan hut, she seemed simultaneously aristocratic and genteel, her very presence a rebuke to the modesty of Father Symonds' lifestyle. 'Well, well,' she said, clapping her hands together and then spreading them out to take in the whole hut. 'Home sweet home for a whole month. It should be an experience. Would a lady be indelicate in asking where…?'
'I'll send one of our Indian workers over straight away,' Father Benedict said, stepping forward as if preparing to leave, his glance passing briefly over Alex. 'She'll bring sheets for the bed and anything else you need. She'll also show you where to wash up and – '
'That's swell, Father Benedict.'
Aware of the embarrassed silence, Alex stared at each of them in turn and was relieved when Father Benedict coughed into his fist and then cleared his throat. 'Here, in the Amazon, we go to bed early and rise early,' he said, 'but of course if you'd like to have some supper… or something to drink?'
'I ate a full meal just before disembarking, but I'd really love something to drink. Dare I ask for a beer?'
'I'll have the woman bring some bottles and some ice. Have a good rest, Miss Wellman.'
At that very moment, just as Father Benedict was about to step past her and leave the hut, what sounded like a great number of drums started beating, suddenly, loudly, and obviously far away, in the unseen depths of the jungle. Laura jerked her head around, tilting it slightly, her eyes widening, first staring at Alex, then shifting her gaze to Father Benedict, finally glancing beyond the motionless priest to the patch of starry sky visible through the open doorway.
'What's *that?*' she asked.
Father Benedict ostentatiously studied the floor at his feet, then raised his head again. 'Indian drums,' he said. 'You hear them a lot around here. Don't worry; it doesn't mean they're going to war; they're just having some kind of ceremony.'
'*What* kind of ceremony?'
'We don't know, Miss Wellman.' Father Benedict sighed, shrugging his shoulders, his face angled away from her. 'Truth tell, we don't even know exactly who those particular Indians are or what tribe they belong to. Those drums sound muffled because they're a great distance away: somewhere far

north in the unexplored interior of the jungle. The locals call them the Yano, but we've no proof of that. What we *do* know is that they're clearly some undiscovered tribe of which, in this vast region, there are many. So, Miss Wellman, whatever they're like, no matter how loud their drums sound, they're too far away to do us harm – though certainly they make sleeping difficult.'

He was trying to make light of the subject, but Miss Wellman was unimpressed, her ears cocked to that distant, frightening drumming, which certainly made the floor shake.

'They're far away? Are you sure of that?'

'Yes, Miss Wellman, I'm sure. And I won't forget to send that beer to you… It might help you sleep.'

Alex followed him through the doorway, giving Laura Wellman a smile, noticing, as he stepped out into the cold, dark night that she was staring, not at him but at the sky, her gaze drawn towards the source of the relentless drumming, with its fast, mesmerising rhythms. The drums called to him, also, making him want to find Peruche, but he followed Father Benedict into the medical hut where an Indian woman wearing a white smock, her weathered face clearly disturbed, was preparing to dim the oil lamps. Father Benedict told her about Laura Wellman, asked her to do the necessary, and then, noting her nervousness and knowing what was causing it, patted her reassuringly on the shoulder, thanked her and said goodnight, then led Alex back out of the hut and across the clearing to his own hut sheltering under the shivering palm trees.

The drumming had not abated and, indeed, now seemed to be louder, and when they closed the door of the hut, though the noise was reduced somewhat, those pounding, relentless rhythms shook the plank walls and made Alex's heart race.

Sighing, Father Benedict sat on a stool beneath his hammock, lit a cigarette and inhaled with obvious relief before looking up again. His blue eyes, Alex noticed, were bloodshot and slightly out of focus.

'So,' he said, 'what do you think of the woman you so much wanted to meet?'

'She's beautiful,' Alex replied candidly.

'And?'

'I don't know… She's different from anyone I've met before. Glamorous,

sophisticated, and… a little bit strange.'
'*Strange*? How do you mean?'
'I'm not sure. I mean, I'm not sure how to take her. I couldn't always work out when she was being serious and when she was joking. She has an odd way of talking, a sort of theatricality… She laughs a lot, but seems a bit wound up, as if always performing… I've just never met anyone like her before… No one at all.'
'And clearly you find her attractive.'
'Yes, I've already answered that. She's beautiful. *Beautiful!*'
'She's beautiful and she's in her early thirties, which makes her too old for you, my boy.'
Blushing, Alex lowered his head and then looked up again, touched by the priest's kindly smile.
'I feel as if I know her,' Alex said, 'and have always done so.'
'That feeling is one I share,' Father Benedict said, 'but I'm inclined to put it down to today's dramatic events and the way they've played on my mind.'
'It's not just because she's beautiful,' Alex heard himself saying, his voice emerging from some lost cell in himself and fighting its way to the surface. 'It's also because she's different in a way I can't quite make out. There's a strangeness about her.'
Letting smoke out through his nostrils, Father Benedict turned to the low table beside his stool and opened a bottle of beer. He asked Alex if he wanted a drink, received a negative reply, and then put the bottle to his lips and had a long swig of it, after which, wiping his lips with the back of his hand, he inhaled on his cigarette and blew a thin stream of smoke.
'Different, indeed,' he said. '*Very* different. I think she might be neurotic.'
'Neurotic?'
'Oh, never mind, my boy. I speak too much too soon. Now lie down on that camp bed and have some sleep, if those damned drums will let you. It's been a long day.'
'I'll never sleep,' Alex said.
He did not remove his clothes, but lay down on the camp bed, clasping his hands under his head and staring up at the ceiling. The plank walls supported a thatched roof made from the palms of *palla* trees and was, he knew, festering with a wide variety of insects, but he contemplated that fact with equanimity, and soon, as he listened to the distant drumming, his thoughts

spiralled back to Laura Wellman…
Were the drums announcing her arrival? Did her arrival here signal something momentous? Had Mengrire in fact known that she was coming and why she would come?
Alex pondered the questions, but was not disturbed by them, merely letting them fill the dark, most secret corners of his mind while the sound of the distant drumming, insistent, relentless, gradually encased him in a fine shell of sound and shut out the real world.

Had he slept? He wasn't sure. The Yano drums were still pounding. Hearing a sigh and rustling sheets, he glanced across to Father Benedict, who was, at that very moment, getting slowly to his feet and shaking his head from side to side as if trying to clear it. There was a cigarette butt in the ash tray, still smouldering but clearly finished, and the bottle of beer, now back on the table, had also been finished. Father Benedict stared at him, grinned forlornly, shrugged his shoulders, then, without a word, he crossed the room, opened the front door and stepped outside.

Alex followed him, feeling as if he was dreaming, moving out of the warm room to the chill of the night where the beating drums, which had reached some sort of demented crescendo, made the hair stand up on his neck and drew his gaze to the sky. He glanced above the trees and saw an irregular patch of stars, other lights, not the stars, rising and falling in silent splendour, then he followed the starlight down, through the various canopies of the forest, down past the writhing liana and the great tangled roots, back to the clearing just in front of the late Father Symonds' hut where Laura Wellman was standing in the doorway.

She was wearing bedroom slippers and an oversized blue dressing gown, her long red hair trailing down her spine as she stared up at the sky. The mysterious lights were high up and obviously far away, looking from her vantage point not much different from the stars, but considerably larger than the stars, and, more inexplicably, rising and falling in serene, stately grandeur.

She kept staring, hypnotized, unable to accept what she was seeing, while the

sound of the beating drums, as far away as the magical lights, reached a pitch beyond pure noise, an almost deafening cacophony, causing the ground to tremble and the trees to shed their leaves.

Alex covered his ears, saw Laura Wellman doing the same, and then Father Benedict, his hands also over his ears, walked towards the American woman, but stopped and just stared, until she, as if touched by some peculiar intuition, turned to face him and return his frightened gaze, her eyes as bright as the moon.

The drums abruptly stopped beating.

Chapter Two

'I didn't sleep a wink all night,' Laura said, raising the tin mug to her lips to sip some more coffee. 'Not after that incredible drumming. I mean, I've never heard anything like *that* before and it *did* shake me up. And then, when it stopped so suddenly, that shocked me as well. I've never known silence like that before… It was like a great scream.'

She sipped the coffee and winced, burning her lips on the hot tin, then placed the mug back on the table and drummed her long fingers on the bamboo.

'Really,' she continued, 'it was a pretty frightening sound, not at all like normal drumming, and I think you both know what I mean, since you both seemed… well, *odd*… when it was going on.'

'Odd?' Father Benedict said carefully. 'I don't know what you mean.'
They were having breakfast in the mess hut, Alex sitting beside Laura, both of them facing Father Benedict across the long, narrow plank table. The air was already hot, flies and mosquitoes swarmed around them, and large black ants repeatedly appeared on the table, fearlessly hurrying to and fro.
'I think you *do* know what I mean, Father,' Laura said, her brightly painted, sensual lips forming a smile touch with good-natured mockery. 'You looked pretty badly shaken, exactly as I was, while young Alex here, lovely boy, was staring at me as if in a trance.'

Father Benedict also smiled, but more tentatively, a watchful glint in his eyes. ‘I think you’re imagining things,’ he said. ‘I was merely surprised to see you standing there. And, of course, I was still a little shocked by what had occurred in Manaus, by which I mean the unexpected passing of Father Symonds. As for Alex, I believe he’s been staring at you from the moment he met you – and, if I may say so, given how attractive you are, it’s perfectly understandable.’

Alex felt his cheeks burning, but he didn’t lower his gaze, instead glancing at each of them in turn and feeling good to be with them. Perhaps ‘good’ was the wrong word, for in truth he felt ecstatic, the very sight of Laura filling him with the light of enchantment. He, also, had not slept all night, though the cause was not the Yano drums; it was the image of Laura Wellman, floating teasingly behind his closed eyelids, that had made him toss and turn all night long on his uncomfortable camp bed.

Now Laura glanced at him, amused by his embarrassment, placed her fingers around his wrist and shook it affectionately, then returned her attention to the priest.

‘You flatter me, Father, but I won’t let you change the subject. I know why you were frightened and why *I* was frightened: not only because of the drumming, which was frightening in itself, but because those lights in the sky, which at first I thought were stars, were actually *rising and falling* in a way that normal stars don’t do. And how did you explain that phenomenon? That it was a kind of mirage! Really, Father, how can you, a priest, deliberately *lie* like that? Now I’d like the truth, please.’

Father Benedict shrugged, took a cigarette from his shirt pocket, lit it, inhaled, and released the smoke in a long, luxurious exhalation. ‘A little white lie,’ he said. ‘Even priests must weaken sometimes. I told you that because I didn’t want you worrying about things you can’t possibly understand.’

Laura glanced at Alex, smiled at him and squeezed his wrist, then, with her fingers lightly stroking his skin, she turned back to the priest.

‘Things that I can’t possibly understand?’

‘Things that no one here can understand. Those lights have been seen for years and have always materialized when the drums beat, but no one knows for sure who’s playing the drums or what those lights actually are.’

‘Why doesn’t someone go to that area and just *look?*’

‘More than one person has attempted to do just that, but no one, not a single soul, has ever returned from there. Not knowing what happened to them, we can only speculate: quicksands, wild animals, poisonous snakes or spiders, or, most favoured by the locals, the elusive, reportedly extremely barbaric, Yano Indians, who may or may not exist.’
‘May or may *not* exist?’
‘I’ll let Alex explain to you.’
Father Benedict sat back in his chair, contently smoking his first cigarette of the day, while Alex, now almost breathless under the steady scrutiny of Laura Wellman, recounted the story of the Yano as passed on to him by his mentor, Peruche. Laura’s eyes were radiant, almost luminous, drawing him into their seductive depths, and when her fingers stroked his arm, which they did more or less constantly, he felt all of his senses focusing on that point as if no other existed. Yes, she touched him a lot – and touched herself and all things near her – first stroking his arm, then scratching the table with her long, lacquered fingernails, then gently squeezing his knee, tapping her teeth with her index finger, running her thumb around the rim of her tin mug and then stroking his arm again. He hardly heard his own voice, aware only of her jittery movements, but when he finished talking she ran her fingers along his whole arm and visibly trembled, glancing nervously at Father Benedict, then back to him, beads of sweat on her exquisite face.
‘And the local Indians think those lights are the forces of good engaged in conflict with the forces of evil?’
‘So they believe,’ Alex replied.
‘And the so-called Yano Indians are enslaved by the forces of evil?’
‘If they exist,’ Father Benedict said.
‘And the Yano fear and hate women?’ Laura asked, as if in a trance.
‘So it’s widely believed by the Yanoama,’ Alex said.
‘But why?’
‘Women are of the Earth, giving life to other mortals; thus, to the Yano, they represent God, who, having created the Earth and mortal man, is the immortal enemy of those who came here from beyond time and space: the Dark One and His forces.’
Laura’s eyes, facing into the sun, had the brilliance of gemstones.
‘And the Yano women? What about them?’
‘According to the Yanoama, the Yano men treat their women dreadfully –

and frequently use them in a sacrificial manner when engaged in their rituals. It's believed that they're engaged in their rituals when we hear the drums beating.'
'And invariably that's when you see the lights?'
'Usually. Not always.'
Father Benedict sighed ostentatiously and stubbed his cigarette out, then, placing his hands behind his thick neck, stretched his broad body. 'Those are myths, no more, most spread by old Peruche. Of course, Alex tends to believe them because he believes in Peruche. Isn't that so, my boy?'
'Yes, Father, that's correct. I believe in the existence of the Yano. I also believe, like the Yanoama, that there's life beyond the visible, here, there and everywhere, existing around each and every one of us, at this moment and *all* moments. And I believe, as Peruche says, that the forces of good and evil are in conflict where time and space have no meaning, which for us, with our severely blinkered vision, is that area where the Yano are hidden and the stars rise and fall.'
'They're too big to be stars,' Laura said, almost whispering.
'They *are* stars,' Alex insisted, surprised by his own intensity. 'They're simply magnified by the clarity of the place we believe is the Gateway.'
'The Gateway?'
'The area that folds in upon itself and opens out again at the other side, in the Otherworld, where time and space have no meaning. You might call it Eternity.'
He glanced at Father Benedict, aware that he might have angered him, and was relieved to see no more than a gentle smile and a laconic shake of his head. But then, when he returned his attention to Laura, he saw something much more disturbing: fascination and rapidly mounting fear, one at odds with the other.
Raising her right hand to her mouth, she pressed her long fingers to her trembling lips, as if she had been about to say something but changed her mind. Father Benedict, studying her carefully, lowered his eyes as if embarrassed, and then, with an oddly hurried movement, pushed his chair away from the table and stood up to look down at them.
'You're here for a month, Miss Wellman, and can discuss this at your leisure, but right now I must be off to my daily business, which is, I believe, what you want to see.'

‘Please call me Laura,’ she responded, obviously having gained the courage to be more informal with him. ‘I’ll really feel terribly unwelcome if you insist on using my surname.’
Father Benedict smiled. ‘Of course,’ he said. ‘Laura it is. So what about you, Alex? What are your plans? Do you want to spend the day here or go home? The choice is all yours.’
‘Are you going to do your rounds of the mission camp?’
‘Yes, I’m doing my rounds.’
‘Then I’d like to come with you.’
In truth, it would have made little difference to Alex what had been planned for the day, since his only interest was in remaining close to Laura for as long as possible. He was therefore not slow, when they stood up together, to offer to carry her heavy camera bag, an offer she gratefully accepted, rewarding him with a dazzling smile. After removing her camera from the bag, she handed it to Alex, and then, when he had slung the bag from his right shoulder, she ran her fingers playfully through his hair and stroked his scalp. That touch, which was light and all too brief, made him soar like an eagle.
‘So what’s your daily routine?’ Laura asked Father Benedict when they had stepped out of the relative coolness of the gloomy hut to the brilliant sunshine and draining humidity of the clearing that housed the rest of the mission camp.
‘It varies,’ Father Benedict replied, leading them across the clearing, parallel to the river. ‘We’re here not only to spread the Gospel, but to attend to the health and education of the Indians, with particular emphasis, regarding education, on the children. To this end we have a few small schools scattered around the area and, right here, in the mission, a modest medical hut which also acts as a hospital and for which, alas, we’re constantly short of medical supplies and other facilities. Much of my time, then, is spent in administering these various arms of the mission – the medical hut and the schools – which means knocking on a lot of doors in Manaus and begging for cash or, less humiliating but just as time-consuming, writing to charitable organizations in America and Europe. Naturally, when not thus engaged, I have to visit the various schools, Indian villages and isolated families along the river, sometimes delivering medicines, sometimes other supplies, sometimes settling disputes, and always preaching the Scriptures.’
‘Sounds like a pretty busy life.’

‘It is.’
‘And when you talk about doing your rounds, presumably you mean you’ll be making all those visits today?’
‘Yes, indeed,’ Father Benedict replied. ‘So I hope you like boats.’
The centre of the clearing was packed with Indian children, some wearing shirts and shorts, others naked, all barefoot, most of them playing in the spiralling dust, either chasing one another or the unfortunate chickens, some drawing in the dirt with sticks. Their parents were also present, but gathered outside the medical hut, some sitting on the steps that led into the raised building, others leaning against the tall stilts on which the large plank hut had been raised, all of them looking undernourished and forlorn, their eyes as dead as their tongues.
Father Benedict went up the steps, nodding and smiling at the numerous patients, but Alex, after watching the priest disappearing inside, was attracted by the clicking sound of Laura’s camera and turned back to watch her. She was photographing the frolicking children, begging them not to stare at her or the camera, but inevitably, after obtaining a few shots, her curious subjects surrounded her.
‘Gee,’ she said, ‘I wish I had something to give them.’
‘Don’t give them anything,’ Alex told her. ‘You’ll just set a precedent.’
Wiping sweat from her forehead, using her hand as a handkerchief, Laura glanced across the immense expanse of the sluggish river and, as she turned back to face him, used the same hand as a fan. ‘Phew,’ she exclaimed histrionically, ‘it’s so damned *hot* here! My throat’s parched and I’m dying for a drink already.’ She stared steadily at him, her eyes bright and too intense, but then, when he offered to fetch her some water, she shook her head from side to side, chuckled throatily, and said, ‘Thanks, Alex, but that’s not what I had in mind. I’d better take some more pictures.’
She gently pushed him aside, her fingers scratching at his chest, smiled at him, raising her fine eyebrows, and then, keeping the smile on her face, started photographing the older Indians crowding the steps of the medical hut. A few of them showed mild curiosity, some actually smiling, but most of them were apathetic, hardly noticing her presence.
Alex went up the steps, making the patients part for him, and stood on the veranda at the top, looking down at Laura. When she had taken all the photos she needed, she followed him up and they both entered the hut.

Inside, it was long, narrow and gloomy, divided into two sections, one a square-shaped area used as a combined consultation room, first-aid room and dispensary, the other, much bigger, used for inpatients, this area being divided, rather pitifully, with ceiling-high bamboo partitions, into a few cramped, twin-bedded wards, each bed being covered with a mosquito net strung from the wooden supports for the thatched roof, the patients either stretched out or sitting on the primitive beds, there being no chairs available, and all of them hemmed in by cardboard boxes, woven baskets, tin buckets and small metal baths, the whole place smelling of urine and vomit and sundry medicinal odours. It was not an attractive place, neither to see nor to smell, and Alex, standing near the open front door, close to Laura, felt, for the first time, oddly ashamed that it should be such a mess.

Alex and Laura were in the reception area which contained two hard wooden benches for the waiting patients, a curtained-off corner that was clearly the doctor's consultation room, and a badly chipped trestle table at which, behind an untidy mound of documents, sat the middle-aged Indian nurse they had met the night before. Father Benedict was talking to her, murmuring words they couldn't hear, and then he went behind the curtain of the consultation room to talk to the doctor.

'God,' Laura whispered, 'now I could *really* do with a drink!'

Alex turned his face away, humiliated by his burning cheeks, and saw Father Benedict emerging from the consultation room and coming towards them. Stopping in front of them, he nodded, but spoke directly to Laura.

'Well,' he said, 'what do you think?'

'I might have seen worse,' Laura replied, 'but only in my worst dreams.'

'We're really short of cash, that's the problem.'

'You're not kidding!'

Father Benedict's smile was wintry, but his eyes, Alex noted, contained an interest that had not been there yesterday. 'That's why, as I said, I don't mind you being here. Contrary to simply getting in our way, your article, or articles, could help us. We need all the donations we can get, which means we need some attention.' He waved a hand towards the cramped hospital area. 'Do you want to take some photos?'

'Not now,' Laura replied. 'I have four weeks. I can do this place later.'

'And do you still want to see how I spend my average day?'

'Absolutely.'

‘Let’s go.’

They left the hut, stepping out onto the veranda, then went down the steps, past the Indians who were waiting patiently to get in, and then crossed the clearing, through the enormous shadows cast by the forest trees, eventually reaching the small jetty, the *porto,* where Father Benedict’s boat, actually a canoe with an outboard motor, was tied to the posts thrusting up from the humus-blackened water. When they were all in the canoe, Father Benedict tugged the cord that started the outboard motor and then, when it had coughed into life, took the rudder and headed out into the mighty river which, with its ribbon of jungle etching a green line far away, seemed to be curved under the sky like a great, rippling bowl.

He headed across the river, toward that endless green line of forest, and soon, caught in the water’s sluggish flow, they were cooled by a merciful breeze. The sky above was an azure sheet, the sun high and fiercely hot, but dark clouds were advancing over the horizon, threatening rain. Alex put his hand in the water and watched it arch up on both sides of his wrist, curving back down toward the canoe’s bubbling wake. It was warm but refreshing, sending tingles up his arm, but then, feeling the length of Laura’s thigh against his own, he turned see her distracted gaze.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said.

‘Yes, it is,’ he agreed. ‘But a lot of people, even thinking it beautiful, also find it threatening.’
‘I don’t think I’m one of them. I think it’s beautiful. That’s all there is to it.’
‘I’m glad.’
‘Why?’
‘Because I want you to like it.’
‘Oh, Alex, you’re such a sweet boy. You make me feel so important.’
Her pleasure seemed genuine, but could not stop him from blushing, and he found himself staring at Father Benedict who, handling the rudder with considerable skill, was staring thoughtfully at her. There was admiration in his face, but also a certain tension, and Alex started wondering uncomfortably what his good friend was thinking. Then the priest leaned

forward a little, his left hand still on the rudder, and, with his face deliberately composed, looked directly at Laura.
‘So what’s it like being in the Amazon,’ he asked, ‘after New York and Hollywood?’
‘Strange,’ she replied. ‘*Very* strange. More so because of last night. I don’t know what I expected, but I certainly hadn’t prepared myself for anything remotely like that: first the death of Father Symonds, collapsing right there in front of me, then, of course, the wild drumming and those mysterious lights. Now I’m not only tired, I also feel disorientated, and here, in this great, unreal silence, I feel as if I’m losing myself.’
‘Would that be good or bad?’
‘That would be wonderful.’
‘Why?’
‘Never mind.’ She pulled a pair of sunglasses from the top pocket of her khaki-coloured cotton shirt, slid them onto her nose and looked around her. ‘Lord,’ she said, ‘it’s so damned hot here! I’m just *dying* of thirst.’
‘Would you like a beer?’ Father Benedict asked her.
‘Are you kidding me, Father?’
‘No, Laura, of course not. We all drink a lot of beer in the Amazon, so this canoe is kept well supplied.’ Reaching down to the wet sack-cloth bag at his feet, he withdrew two small bottles of beer, opened one and handed it to her.
‘What about Alex?’ she said.
‘Alex doesn’t drink beer. Nor, indeed, any other kind of alcohol. Isn’t that true, Alex?’
‘Yes, Father.’
‘So young, my dear Alex,’ Laura crooned teasingly. ‘So very pure.’
‘Yes, Laura, he certainly is that.’ Father Benedict raised his bottle and tapped it jokingly against Laura’s, then they both drank. After having a normal swallow and then lowering his bottle, Father Benedict took note of the speed with which Laura managed to dispose of more than half of hers. When she finally stopped drinking, gasping with relief, Father Benedict coughed into his fist and then gazed steadily at her. ‘I believe you don’t actually come from New York,’ he said. ‘How long did you live there?’
‘About four years,’ she said. ‘I first went there in 1941, just before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and we entered the war. God – excuse me, Father – I still remember that terrible carnage. I had nightmares for months

after I saw it – and still have them occasionally.'
She shuddered and drank some more beer.
'You were *there* when Pearl Harbour was bombed?' Father Benedict asked.
'No,' she replied. 'I photographed the carnage a few days after the attack. I was working at that time for a New York newspaper and Pearl Harbour was my first big assignment. They flew me out to Hawaii shortly after the attack and I'll never forget what I saw there as long as I live.' She shuddered again and had another drink of beer, taking a lot very fast; then holding up the bottle, dangling it between her fingers, she let her face express its disappointment at finding it empty.
'Another one?' Father Benedict asked, taking the hint.
'Oh, yes,' she said. '*Please*.'
Though still only halfway through his own bottle, Father Benedict opened another and passed it to Laura, then moved the rudder a little, turning the canoe towards the opposite bank. The dark clouds that had been advancing in their direction from the hazy horizon, had been blown by the wind to the west and were moving away from them, leaving the sky a clear, burnished blue from which the sun cast down its fierce heat. The vitreous river, spread around them like an enormous mirror, reflected the few drifting white clouds.
'So how long have you been with *National Geographic*?' Father Benedict asked casually.
'Only since last August. Shortly after we dropped the bomb on Hiroshima. Though I must confess that coming here has made it seem a lot longer.'
Alex was mesmerized, recalling the dream he'd had the night before that bomb fell on Japan. He wanted to tell Laura about the dream, but was too embarrassed to do so.
'You appear to have a penchant,' Father Benedict said to her, 'for somehow linking yourself to momentous occasions. Is that what you meant yesterday when you said that you felt haunted and also expressed the belief that bad events seem to pursue you?'
'They do, Father! *They do!*' She nodded emphatically, then had another drink, licked her lips and stared at him again, this time almost defiantly. 'I mean, why *me*?' she said. 'I'd only just *joined* that newspaper! And yet two days after I started – you hear me? *two* days! – the goddamned Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and I was assigned to photograph the results. That's more than a coincidence, Father. I'd call that *fate*!'

‘I hardly think – ’
‘Yes, Father, *fate*! Preordained. I was somehow tied to it! And then later, when we dropped the atom bomb, I just knew that…’ Her words trailed off to nothing and she turned her gaze on Alex, her flickering smile not disguising the fact that she was clearly disturbed. ‘Oh, Alex,’ she said, reaching out to gently stroke his cheek. ‘You’re so beautiful because you’re so completely innocent that you seem almost unreal.’
There was silence for a moment, broken only by the canoe’s chugging engine. Alex was a little puzzled by what she meant and noted, from the expression on his face, that Father Benedict felt the same. The opposite bank had taken shape as a dense forest and they were heading straight for it.
‘The atom bomb?’ Father Benedict queried quietly. ‘What had that to do with you?’
‘Events like that… You don’t understand…’ She gazed across the sullen river. ‘The dropping of that bomb meant something to me… I remember… I can’t explain it!’
She shook her head from side to side in frustration, her hair whipping her face, then tilted the bottle of beer to her lips and finished it off in one gulp. Alex was amazed – and saw the priest’s face, also amazed – as Laura lowered the empty bottle, letting it rest on her lap. Licking her lips, she stared intently at the approaching bank of ochre mud and yellow bulrushes, her dark glasses making it difficult to judge just what she was thinking. Alex heard someone humming – it was himself, displaying his nervousness – and then Laura, as if understanding what he felt, again reached out to him, her thin, delicate fingers wavering blindly in the air before settling, as light as a butterfly, on his virgin knee.
‘That bomb meant something to you?’
‘Yes, Alex, it did.’
‘It meant something to me as well,’ he said, finally getting up the courage to tell her, ‘because I saw it exploding.’
‘You *saw* it exploding?’
‘I dreamt about it the night before the actual event. I saw a great ball of fire in the heavens; an umbrella of light.’
‘A dream…’ Laura murmured.
‘But accurate,’ Father Benedict said. ‘Alex told me about that dream the morning after he dreamt it – and later, that same day, the Americans dropped

the bomb on Hiroshima.'
Laura removed her sunglasses to stare at Alex like a large cat, hypnotizing him and rendering him helpless. '*A great ball of fire in the heavens; an umbrella of light*…' Her voice was as gentle as a raindrop, rippling across the surface of his heart with beguiling humility. 'I felt that I was meant to come here,' she murmured dreamily, 'and now you've confirmed it. That bomb made me flee from America… and now it's brought me to you.'
'What do you mean by that?' Father Benedict asked, startled.
'Never mind,' Laura replied vaguely. 'I meant nothing at all.'
Father Benedict turned off the outboard motor, letting it whine down into silence, and the canoe drifted gently towards the sloping mud bank that led up to the very edge of the lush green rainforest. There was no Indian village in sight, just a small natural clearing, but a crude path could be seen winding away into the forest's deep gloom. Fat flies and mosquitoes buzzed in thick clusters, animal tracks led down to the water, and not far away, as if aware of their arrival, the bulrushes parted and fell back together in a wavering line as a caiman or some other unseen creature moved well away from them.
Removing her sunglasses, Laura looked up, surveying the soaring trees, then she put the sunglasses on again, the river's bright light defeating her. She then followed Father Benedict out of the tethered canoe, splashing through the shallow water, then turned back to face Alex as he did the same. He smiled at her, feeling confused, now despising his own innocence, his lack of knowledge regarding women, then bent his neck to let his cheek touch her hand when it slid onto his shoulder. He blushed again, his heart pounding, but did not move his head, letting the warmth of her hand heat the blood in his veins and make his skin glow. Then he saw Father Benedict, his head lowered in embarrassment, and so, feeling guilty and afraid, he straightened up and stepped sideways.
'You want to see how we live?' Father Benedict asked rhetorically. 'Then be prepared to do a lot of walking through this extremely hot forest.'
'I need another beer,' Laura responded. 'Or preferably something much stronger.'
Father Benedict stared at her for what seemed like a long time, then, shrugging, he turned away and headed into the forest. Alex, not sure of what was happening, reached out blindly to Laura, trying to touch her with his fingers, with his heart, before the dark forest swallowed them.

He did not actually touch her, but let his hand dangle in the air, and then, in a trance, without saying another word, they both walked into the shadow of the trees and left the river behind them.

Chapter Three

The moon was pale and pock-marked, beaming across the black river, its silvery striations spreading out through the darkness to form an alluring chiaroscuro on the rippling water. Laura shivered and leaned forward, wrapping her raised knees in her arms, then rocked herself gently back and forth as she looked into the darkness.

‘Are we all right here?’ she asked. ‘Is it safe? What about snakes and things?’ Alex, sitting beside her, was amused by her concern. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘we’re perfectly safe. Nothing will harm you.’
‘No snakes?’
‘No snakes.’
‘No poisonous spiders?’
‘None. All the things you fear are in the forest and won’t come out here.’ It was a lie, but a harmless one, designed to ease her mind. The odd snake or poisonous spider could certainly be found here, but would, if faced with a human presence, promptly move off elsewhere. As for the forest, it had come alive, chattering incessantly all around them, weird and ghostly sounds ricocheting back and forth, held bizarrely within an outer shell of silence composed of water and sky. The river itself was still and reasonably quiet, a quiltwork of shifting light and shadow.
‘It frightens me,’ Laura said. ‘It has a strange, terrible beauty. When I look at it, I imagine how easy suicide could be: that river, in the moonlight, is almost hypnotizing. There’s a certain magnetism to it; it seems to tug at your body.’ She raised her glass to her lips and drank some more of her *caipirinha*, a potent mixture of *cachaca*, or cane alcohol, mixed liberally with lemon and ice. She seemed to be more sober now, to have drank herself back to sobriety, and she offered a selfdeprecating smile and said, ‘Was I *really* terrible this evening? I can’t remember it clearly.’
‘No,’ Alex said, too embarrassed to tell the truth, ‘you were just a little bit drunk.’

‘More than a little bit, Alex… and Father Benedict was angry.’
‘Don’t worry about it.’
When she failed to reply, he glanced sideways at her, his emotions confused and spilling over into areas unknown to him. Father Benedict, if not actually angry, had certainly not been impressed and had left them just a few minutes ago, right after the evening meal, claiming that he was simply too tired to stay awake any longer. His statement was, of course, a lie, a mere diplomatic ploy, and Alex, naive though he was, knew that Laura had caused it.
Now, as he sat beside her, the long day unravelled in his head: the arduous hike through the forest, following the narrow, winding tracks, stopping briefly at a small Indian village, then at a school just outside it, then the first of many isolated families living down by the river; then another boat journey, the noon sun blazing overhead, another village, more lonely families, another shabby school in the forest, then another boat journey, another landing, heat and sweat their reward.
Initially, Laura had been fascinated, her tongue tripping on endless questions, her different cameras (Alex had carried the heavy bag) being used almost constantly: photographing the shacks on stilts, children playing in the dirt, skinny fishermen with their nets drifting out around their canoes, *seringueiros* tapping rubber trees on the land of dying plantations – and, last but not least, Father Benedict’s patients, a few Christian, most not, many *Umbanda* or *Quimbanda* worshippers, their common denominator being poverty and hunger and ill health: malaria, dysentery, skin diseases and sleeping sickness, some suffering from hernias and suppurating sores, others with elephantiasis tumours or hideously deformed limbs.
Yes, she had been fascinated initially, her photographer’s eyes seeing all, excited by the visual possibilities and using film extravagantly. But then it became too much – too much hiking, too many boat rides, either scorched by the sun that blazed down on the open river or drained by the suffocating humidity of the forest’s gloomy interior – and so she had asked for another beer, and then another, and another, until Father Benedict, his face composed in weary sufferance, informed her that the supply of beer was finished and she would have to go thirsty. That had made her really angry, exploding with, ‘Damn it, this jungle stinks!’, then she had called out to Alex, telling him to open her camera bag and take out the large bottle of lethal *caipirinha*, from which she had, during the rest of that gruelling day, sipped repeatedly,

defiantly.
‘He did it deliberately, didn’t he?’
‘Pardon?’ Alex said.
‘Father Benedict visited more places today than he would normally visit – and he did it deliberately.’
‘I’ll admit, he did a lot.’
‘He did it deliberately,’ Laura insisted.
‘I don’t see why – ’
‘For some reason he feels threatened by me – and that’s why he did it.’
‘I don’t believe he would do that, Laura.’
‘He would and he did. He wanted to humiliate me. And now, just because I was so hot and drank too much, he has something to hold over my head if I step out of line. Oh, yes, I can see it!’
Not knowing what to say, Alex gazed out across the river. The *caipirinha*, following on the beers, had certainly loosened her tongue, making her talk of black magic, of destiny and fate, peppering her conversation with words like ‘haunted’ and ‘possessed’ and causing Father Benedict, for whatever reason, to become uncommonly angry. Then later, after sunset, right here in the mission, sitting down after dinner with the flies and mosquitoes buzzing, she had said to Father Benedict, as if speaking to herself, ‘I know what you think, but it’s not true: I don’t normally drink that much.’
‘I think you’ve had a bit too much today.’
‘I’m not teetotal, Father.’
The priest had left then, turning away from the table without a word and then leaving the hut, clearly angry. Alex, seeing it all, hearing all, now wondered what it all meant.
‘Oh, God,’ Laura said. ‘I *do* drink too much. And here I am, after that goddamned awful day, still sitting here drinking. Alex, my friend, my beautiful young man, you must think me a witch.’
‘I think you worry too much.’
‘You’re so mature for your age.’
‘You’re making fun of me, but that doesn’t matter: you *still* worry too much.’
‘It’s that priest I’m worried about.’
‘He’s a nice man. Stop worrying.’
‘God, Alex, you’re really wonderful for your age. You’re a strange, lovely boy.’

For the first time in his life, Alex resented that form of address, suddenly preferring to think of himself as a man, and desperately, with his wounded heart bleeding, wanted her to acknowledge him as such. As if sensing what he was thinking, she reached out with her right hand, fingers spread, to lightly, affectionately, stroke his head.

'Do you think he's jealous, Alex?'

'Jealous?'

'You sweet boy! Never mind!' She had another sip of her *caipirinha*, lowered the glass and licked her lips. 'Let me tell you something,' she said, her voice peculiar, floating towards him on an almost imperceptible breeze, each word sounding a different note. 'On my first birthday, May 7, 1915, a German U-boat sank the liner *Lusitania*, and my mother, carrying me in her arms, visited Aleister Crowley, the Satanist known as the Great Beast, where he was then staying at 40 West 36th Street, New York – an address I can never forget – and where, as the *Lusitania* sank beneath the waves just off the coast of Ireland, drowning nearly two-thousand passengers, my mother witnessed and, I believe, took part in, the sexual magic practised between the Great Beast and a black prostitute, Anna Gray. I have lived with that knowledge all my life and it haunts me relentlessly.'

He saw her face in the moonlight, the green eyes still intense, no trace of a smile on the lips that had uttered those words. Was she joking? No: she was shivering with emotion. Her free hand, which had been resting so lightly on his head, slid sensuously down the side of his face and came to rest on his shoulder. Her other hand was holding the glass of *caipirinha*, which she sipped methodically.

'Aleister Crowley! The Great Beast! The world's most wicked man! Drunkard, drug addict, mesmerist, sexual deviant, the most infamous and sinister black magician of the twentieth century, endeavouring to become a god, ending up as a monster, driving many of those he met along the way into every kind of degeneracy and insanity – and my mother, in the madness of her delusions, lay down with him and his black whore.'

She stared wildly at Alex, then reached out to grab his wrist, shaking it like a dog with a bone, her luscious lips trembling.

'Yes, Alex, she did that – and never ceased to remind me of it, telling me that she'd engaged in some ritual with that monster and his whore while I, a

oneyear-old, lay right there beside them – and insinuating that because of what went on that night, I, her daughter, had been committed to the forces of darkness and that they, sooner or later, would come to claim me. That's what she told me, Alex – and what she told my father – because she hated him for good reason, and so, in that hatred, wanted to hurt him by telling him that his only daughter had been cursed. But that plan didn't work: the only person damaged was *me*. My father didn't believe in magic, black or otherwise – instead, he believed that my mother was mad – but I, poor child, grew up believing I was possessed, and eventually, when I reached adolescence, I was living in secret, endless torment, haunted by the most vivid dreams and terrible nightmares.'

Alex was perplexed, not understanding what he had heard. 'But I thought you came from Hollywood,' he said lamely, 'so how did you – ?'

'Hollywood! Hollywood! Don't even mention that awful place! Oh, Alex, my Alex, don't tell me you romance about *Hollywood*.' She had another sip of the *caipirinha*, then stared even more intensely at him. 'The story I told you is true, Alex. God's truth, no less. My mother never stopped telling me about that night of debauchery with the Great Beast and suggesting that I had, because of that, been possessed by the forces of darkness. *Hollywood*? What *better* place than Hollywood? That's where dreams become real.'

'I still don't understand,' Alex said. 'I'm not sure what you're – '

'Hollywood, my dear Alex, is where dreams become real, but whether that's good or bad depends on the nature of the dreams. And mine were all bad…' Her words trailed off weakly, dissolving into the night's darkness. The forest's chattering, which Alex had briefly forgotten, now returned to assail him. He was used to it, normally liked it, but now found himself resenting it, wanting to hear nothing but her voice which wove a seductive web about him. Her fingers tightened on his shoulder, shook him slightly and then fell away, making him feel almost bereaved. But then she leaned closer to him, her eyes reflecting the moonlight, and started talking again.

'Yes,' she said, 'I was born and bred there, where they make all dreams real, where those who live there hardly know the difference between reality and fantasy, between the lives they live on the silver screen and the lives broken around them. Did I know the difference? I'm not sure that I did. We lived in Windsor Square, surrounded by the major studios, and my playgrounds were the studio back-lots where, usually alone, my head filled with childish

scenarios, I acted out my fantasies in abandoned forts and castles, deserted western towns, realistic Roman galleys still afloat in enormous tanks, luxurious, three-walled penthouses on huge, silent stages, artificial tropical gardens and forests that faded slower than the real ones. And, of course, the same at home, in our rambling house in Lorraine Boulevard, all those movie stars that the fans dreamed about as our casual acquaintances; and they came and went, and pretended to be what they were not, many unable to distinguish between their real selves and the characters created for them by scriptwriters – and so, given those idols of the silver screen and my lonely hours spent in studio back-lots, I grew up in a world of make-believe and suffered because of it.'

She sipped her drink again, licked her lips, distractedly studied the dark river, her brow furrowed in thought. When eventually she returned her gaze to Alex, he melted into the mothering earth.

'Oh, yes, Alex, I suffered as a child! There I was with my wealthy parents, having the famous as neighbours and friends, and yet I lived in a terrible, crippling solitude with a mother gradually going crazy and a father, a successful movie producer, too involved in his own life to take any real notice of me.'

She nodded emphatically, had another sip of her drink, nodded again, as if to confirm her point, then started talking again.

'You have to understand, Alex, that my mother's marriage to my father had virtually been *arranged* by their two powerful families, to enhance the business merger of their individual studios. Thus, already feeling bought and sold as part of a package, my mother was even more humiliated and broken because she truly loved another man, a studio grip who, she claimed, had been removed from her life when my father found out about the affair and brutally terminated it by paying the grip a fortune to leave Hollywood and never return, and then ensured, by way of punishment for her sins, that my mother, a successful actress, never worked again. Yes, he got rid of the only man she'd ever truly loved, destroyed her career by simply making a few phone calls, and then made her pregnant to enslave her to a child she hadn't wanted in the first place. Inevitable, was it not, that my mother ended up not only despising her husband but also resenting the daughter that he'd given her against her wishes? That daughter was me.'

Lowering her eyes, she gave an audible sigh, then shook her head

disbelievingly from side to side and shivered again. When she next spoke, her voice was like a whisper carried home on the faint breeze.

‘It was a dreadful situation, an emotionally destructive situation, and it only became worse when my father’s successes multiplied and my mother, ever more frequently ignored, her resentment towards him deepening, started slipping from theatrical eccentricity into full-blown madness. This madness took the form of heavy drinking, promiscuity, and an increasing fascination with the occult and black magic in particular – a fascination that had, as far as I could tell, first started the night Aleister Crowley seduced her in God knows what repulsive and degenerate manner.’

She put her empty glass down, setting it gently on the grass between her crossed legs and leaning forward slightly. A light breeze, coming off the murmuring river, made the trees shiver.

‘So there was my mother,’ she continued, ‘growing crazier every day, her face too garishly made up and her clothes wildly Gothic, looking like some grotesque imitation of Pola Negri, picking up and dropping lovers with the casual indifference of suppressed mania, and attending every séance and black magic ritual she could find… And I, now approaching adolescence, a blossoming fifteen-yearold, was exposed to her lovers, forced to attend her seances and magic rituals, and repeatedly reminded of her intimacy with Aleister Crowley, the so-called Great Beast, and so became convinced that I’d indeed been cursed and that the forces of darkness would, sooner or later, come to claim me. I believed it then, Alex, and still believe it now… and I can’t help myself. I still have the vivid dreams, all those nightmares of light and dark: of black men coming at me out of featureless blackness and filling me with the seed of their unnatural being while the heavens split open, just like that ball of fire you dream about. Where was this taking place? I didn’t know! It was here, there and everywhere. But it haunted me night and day, every minute, every second, and now I know that my destiny lies where good merges with evil.’

Alex could scarcely credit what he was hearing, but her tale drew him in, coloured with mystery and luminous with dread, conjuring up a world beyond the visible. Was she mad or was she as sane as his old friend Peruche, who saw the reality behind the illusions of the physical world and was thought by many, particularly white men, to be either a madman or a charlatan?

‘And your mother’s now dead?’
‘Yes, Alex, she’s dead…’ Laura’s head moved left and right as she scanned the inky river, then she sighed and lowered her face as if praying, her body curved like a bow. ‘I left home,’ she said. ‘I couldn’t take it anymore. I went to New York, hung around there for a year or so, then received an urgent cable from my father, telling me that my mother had committed suicide and ordering me home. So, a few days later, I was back in Los Angeles, attending my mother’s funeral, after which, at my father’s insistence, I stayed on, moving back into that big, rococo house in Lorraine Boulevard, near to the studios…’
Her voice faded to a whisper as she glanced at the night sky where, instead of rising and falling lights, she saw commonplace stars.
‘It just didn’t work out. Wearied by what he felt were my mother’s – and presumably my own – neuroses, my father threw himself into an even more hectic social life, bringing different women home every night while constantly reprimanding me for remaining alone and rarely leaving the house. He was right, of course: I rarely left that house. Formerly completely dependent upon my mother for protection against the forces of darkness, now left without that protection, I was terrified of the night, too frightened to go out, and so became a recluse, taking sedatives to keep me calm, sleeping all day and staying awake at night with all the lights in my bedroom turned on. This drove my father crazy – it also embarrassed him socially – and when he threatened to commit me to a mental institution, I finally got away from there by plunging headlong into a hopeless marriage.’
‘You were… *married?*’
‘Yes, Alex.’
Alex was shocked, ridiculously so, not having even thought of this possibility and, being suddenly faced with it, feeling almost betrayed. He didn’t know why he felt this way and had no reason to do so, but the pain, knifing through his jumbled emotions, was unfamiliar and cutting. Staring at her, feeling the pounding of his heart, he saw her lost in herself.
‘It was 1936,’ he said, ‘when I was twenty-two years old. Robert, eleven years older than me and the son of one of my mother’s friends, was a financially struggling atomic physicist, full of talk about the mysteries of atoms and other esoteric items, and working in a top-secret establishment in Los Alamos, near Las Vegas, Nevada. Naturally we had little in common,

either socially or intellectually, but decent and dedicated, he was also understanding and patient, so pretty soon, by which I mean a few weeks after our first meeting, he managed to coax me out of the house and back to the company of real people. Did I love him? No, I don't think I did. But being lonely and frightened by the very thought of a mental institution, I soon convinced myself that what I felt *was* love, and so, shortly after our platonic relationship commenced, I accepted Robert's proposal and we rushed off to get married in Las Vegas.'

Alex sat there beside her, scarcely breathing, hearing the murmuring of the mighty river, the sighing of the breeze through the trees, the forest's incessant, dominating, chaotic chatter and (or so he imagined) his own thudding heart. He wanted the darkness to ease his pain and desire. He wanted never to leave her.

'Of course,' she continued, her voice adrift in its own drama, 'I was still a virgin at the time, almost frigid in fact, and so, from the first night of our marriage, our physical relationship was a disaster. Because convinced that I was a victim of the forces of darkness, I couldn't give myself over to the sexual experience and, as I soon found out, really only wanted someone beside me in my frightening nights. God, it was awful! The very thought of it still shames me. I made love with my body, but my thoughts were always elsewhere, my inner eye roaming constantly through the darkness in search of my demons. I still had the vivid dreams, so vivid they seemed real, and felt presences in the room, surrounding the bed while my husband slept, incorporeal, spectral, drawing me out of myself and somehow carrying me to that place where, while the darkness was divided by the light, a magical, pulsating light, my mortal body was desecrated in the most obscene fashion and made the repository for evil in its most vile manifestations… God, yes, how I suffered from those hauntings! And struggled to stay sane.'

Her voice trailed off again, this time on a note of despair, and Alex wished that he could talk to Peruche and learn what he should know.

'Are you still married?' he asked, shocked to hear the trembling of his voice, equally shocked to find that he was frightened of what the answer might be.

'No,' she said. 'I'm not married anymore. I couldn't satisfy my husband in bed, because my nightmares were growing worse and because I couldn't stop talking – dear God, as I'm talking right now – about the subject that obsessed me and refused to let me go: my mother's carnal interactions with Aleister

Crowley. Yes, this constant talking, this babbling, destroyed our sexual relationship and eventually convinced my husband that I was either neurotic or completely insane. So, in the end, Robert grew weary and frustrated beyond the point of endurance, until, after about three years, we both managed to face the fact that our marriage was doomed and had enough sense to call it a day. In 1939 I returned to Hollywood where, with the assistance of my forgiving and influential father, I became a portrait photographer for his studio – right back where I had started.'

Her voice trailed off again as she looked appealingly at Alex, reaching out to stroke his bare arm and fill him with warmth.

'What made you finally leave Hollywood?' he asked, wanting only to hear her voice.

'I hated the place,' she said, 'and everything it stood for, and so, again through a friend of my father's, I got a job with a New York newspaper, starting when I was twenty-seven years old, two days before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour.'

Shuddering, she straightened up, removing her hand from his wrist, then glanced at the starry sky and took a deep breath.

'It doesn't look like we're going to see those magical lights tonight,' she said.

'You're looking in the wrong direction,' Alex told her. 'The lights always materialize in the northern sky and you're looking south. But I don't think you'll see anything tonight. The Yano aren't playing their drums.'

Smiling wanly, Laura turned her empty glass between her fingers.

'In Hawaii,' she said, as if speaking to herself, 'shortly after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, as I was photographing the terrible destruction, I was reminded of the sinking of the *Lusitania* on the day my mother took me to Aleister Crowley's apartment in New York. The sinking of that ship had encouraged America's involvement in the First World War, and I was frightened to think that I'd been given for my very first assignment – and only because, remarkably, no more experienced photographers were available – the job of photographing the attack that would lead to American involvement in the *Second* World War. I also remembered that Aleister Crowley himself had sailed on the *Lusitania* just a few months before it was sunk and that he had, according to what he told my mother, cursed it and all those who sailed on it.'

'I don't see what all this has to do with you.'

Laura didn't immediately reply, but simply sighed and stood up, holding her empty glass in one hand and turning away from the river, in order to look up at the odd patches of nocturnal sky visible through the densely packed trees of the darkened rainforest. Satisfied that there were no magical lights rising and falling, she spread the fingers of her free hand and lightly stroked Alex's hair. He wanted her to do more, to touch him everywhere, but he just sighed and closed his eyes, his heart beating too quickly.

'Because my mother told me that part of my curse was that wherever I went I'd be connected, in one way or another, with destruction and death. So when, during the very first day on my new job, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour and led us into another world war, I felt that what my mother had said must be true and that this was my curse.'

She removed her hand from his head and so he stood up immediately. When he saw her eyes focused steadily upon him, he felt his soul taking wing, rising up, rapturously and with ease, over his sea of confusion.

'You assume too much from too little,' he said. 'You may be seeing what's not there.'

He watched her expectantly, hardly aware of the chattering forest, his whole world contracted to the moonlight that shone in her green eyes. He was twice reflected there, miniaturized, adrift in space, and he travelled down through silence and time to where her soul joined with his. Then a sound, her voice, tumbling words, drew him back to the river bank, clasping one hand in the other, focused intently upon her.

'You think I'm not connected to destruction and death?' she said, as if having a perfectly normal conversation. 'Well, in June, 1945, I had a meeting in Los Angeles with my husband, Robert, to discuss final settlement of our pending divorce. When I met him, he seemed harassed and disturbed, and when I asked him what was wrong, he confided that his work in the secret establishment in Los Alamos had been taken over surreptitiously by the military and was, at that stage, virtually outside the control of the original research team of which Robert, my very idealistic husband, had been a fairly important member. The product of this new, military-dominated research, he informed me, would soon be terrifyingly evident for the whole world to see. I never saw Robert again – once the divorce was completed we stopped seeing each other – but not before I realized what he'd been talking about… On the sixth of August that same year, we Americans dropped the bomb on

Hiroshima. My husband, therefore, was one of the men who, without meaning to, contributed to the emergence of the Atomic Age and possibly set the groundwork for Doomsday.'

Alex felt hypnotized, her presence permeating his whole being and rendering him helpless. Was she sane or insane? Now it didn't matter to him. The only thing that mattered was to touch her and be touched in return.

'And that's when you left the newspaper?' he asked, not knowing what else to say.

'Yes,' she replied. 'And got the job with *National Geographic* and was immediately sent here. And what do I find here, Alex? Tell me it isn't true. A priest falls dead at my feet the minute I step off the boat, and then I see those lights, rising and falling impossibly, and am told that they represent the forces of good and evil in conflict at the Gateway to Eternity. Is that a coincidence, Alex? No, it's certainly not! That atomic bomb made me flee from America and then it brought me to you – to you, Alex, who dreamed about that bomb the night before it was dropped, and who, like me, have grown up without a mother. For believe me, Alex, I never really had a mother, only that spiteful, demented creature, and have had to endure the contempt of a father who doesn't know what parental love means. Oh, Alex, my Alex, we're so similar in so many ways, and I know – I just *know*! – that someone, or some power, has deliberately brought us together for some hidden purpose. I was *destined* to come here!'

At that moment, for the first time, Alex truly felt very strange, uprooted from security and thrown into the web of a conspiracy that seemed to defy all reason. Indeed, as he stood there, he was willing to believe all she had told him, feeling a common bond in their similar problems with their parents and convinced that he had, in some secret part of him, known her before. Had he dreamed about her husband's bomb? It certainly seemed that way. *A great ball of fire in the heavens; an umbrella of light*… The old Indian, Peruche, had had the very same dream and had told Alex that the dream was a sign that someone was coming to point the way to his, Alex's, future.

Should he tell Laura about that? No, he didn't think so. It was true that when he'd first met her, he'd felt instantly that he'd always known her, but something in her voice, in the words now crowding his head, made him feel that to confess how her arrival had been anticipated would send her, unprepared and ill informed, in pursuit of the Gateway. Thinking of this, and

of the possibility of losing her, Alex was filled with love for her.
‘God, I’m tired,’ she said, shaking her head from side to side. ‘Walk me back to my humble shack, my handsome escort. I think I’ll sleep well tonight.’
She locked her arm around his and held his hand in her own, then, her hips rocking against him, walked him across the clearing to the thatched huts on stilts. Most of the mission was in darkness, the buildings illuminated eerily in the moonlight, but light beamed out of Laura’s hut, formerly Father Symonds’ hut, and from the hut that Alex was sharing with Father Benedict. Alex thought fondly of the priest, knowing his anger wouldn’t last, but forgot him when he glanced sideways at Laura.
They stopped just in front of the hut, facing each other near the steps. Alex, feeling feverish, his heart beating fit to burst, leaned forward and kissed her on the lips, very lightly and chastely. Embarrassed by what he’d done, scarcely believing he had done it, he let go of her hand and stepped back, and then, to his horror, this time not believing his ears, heard the unreal sound of his own voice giving words to his feelings.
‘I love you,’ he said. ‘I really love you. That’s what my heart tells me.’
She pressed her fingers to his lips, preventing him from saying more, her smile at once tender and gently mocking, her eyes reflecting the moon and stars.
‘No, you don’t,’ she said. ‘I’m too old for you, Alex. You may believe you love me, but you don’t – though what you believe melts my heart.’
Removing her fingers from his lips, she blew him a kiss and turned away, climbing the steps to the hut’s veranda, opening the door and disappearing inside, while he stood there, the forest chattering all around him, joy and pain at war in his very soul as they had not been before.

Chapter Four

‘So,’ Laura said, ‘this is it: your daddy’s plantation.’ She smiled at him and squeezed his shoulder, then turned away from the jeep and glanced around her, squinting into the noon sun.

Mengrire watched her with hooded eyes, his shirtless body rippling with muscles, then he glanced with a certain muted appeal to Alex and spread his hands in the air. ‘Yes, Mengrire,’ Alex said, reading the expression on the

Indian's face. You can go and see your friends. Come back at two o'clock precisely, if we don't come for you first.' The Indian grinned at him and nodded, put his thumb up in the air, then turned and loped off across the road toward the huts of the workers. Alex returned his attention to Laura, saw her profile framed by the azure sky; his heart, turning over inside him, made the pain no less bearable.

'Is that where the workers live?' she asked, indicating the plank shacks and thatched huts that lined the intersecting roads at the far side of the lawns.

'Yes,' Alex said.
'Not exactly palaces, are they?'
'No, I'm afraid not.'
She smiled at him, obviously embarrassed by what

she had said. 'And are the other plantations pretty much the same?'

'Some are a lot better, some are worse, but most aren't doing well now. The end of the war has put an end to the rubber boom here; a lot of the plantations are being run down and will probably soon close. Most of the rubber trade has reverted to Malaya, so we're feeling the pinch.'

'Will you be sad to see it go?'

'It doesn't matter to me. I'll be going to England to further my education and learn good manners.'
'The education won't do you any harm and your manners are exquisite.' She took his hand, holding it affectionately in her own, kissed him lightly on the forehead and then raised her eyebrows. 'So,' she said, 'shall we go for the quick tour or see your dad first?'
'Let's see my father first. Get that over and done with.'
He had spoken without thinking and, once the words were out, realized what he had said by the look of surprise on Laura's face. Then he started walking, his right hand entwined with hers, leading her across the mowed lawns to his father's large house.
'Hot,' Laura said. 'Very hot. I've lost pounds already.'
'Yes,' Alex said. 'Hot.'

He didn’t know what else to say, her presence turning him inside out, his power of reasoning, which had recently been perfect, now swamped by emotional chaos. He had never known anyone like Laura, had never imagined anyone like her, and since first meeting her three weeks ago, when Father Symonds had dropped dead in front of her, he had repeatedly vowed his love to her as if in a trance. When he thought of it, he blushed (as even now he was blushing) but the impulse to express desire, which before had been dormant in him, continued to hammer relentlessly at his temples and burn in his racing heart.

Yet she had constantly rejected him, gently, often humorously, usually insisting that she was much too old for him and that his feelings, no matter how strong, would change soon enough. Was this true? He didn’t think so (a part of him died with each rejection, no matter how gentle) and he also felt, because of her warmth, because of how she touched and stroked him, that no matter what she claimed to the contrary, she felt deeply for him.

‘You’re not keen on your dad, are you?’ she asked him as they cut across the lawn, her index finger scratching the palm of his hand in a sensual manner.

‘I don’t see him that much,’ Alex replied, ‘so I can’t really say.’

The sun blazed down on the palm trees, on the forest of rubber trees behind them, and on the river that glittered black and silver beyond the roofs of the workers’ huts.

‘Rubbish! We’re talking about your *father*, Alex!’

‘Oh, he’s all right, I suppose. I just think he drinks too much. He says a lot of things that sound unpleasant, but it’s just the drink talking.’

‘But it hurts you, doesn’t it?’

‘No. Really, it doesn’t matter.’

‘It matters and it hurts. I sensed that my first night here. “My father won’t even know that I’m not a home,” you replied when discussing with Father Benedict whether or not you could spend the night in the mission – and there was, as I recall, just the slightest touch of bitterness in your voice.’

‘Well, maybe you’re right,’ Alex said. ‘It’s just one of those things.’

But it *did* matter and he knew it as he led Laura up the steps onto the veranda of the large house and saw his father stretched out on a low-slung hammock in the shade of the porch, some bottles on the table beside him well within arm’s reach. He was wearing a crumpled white shirt and unwashed matching trousers, his sleeves rolled up, his feet bare; and although his bloodshot eyes

widened in surprise when he saw them, he made no effort to sit up when they approached, but merely, with a lazy nod and a sardonic grin, acknowledged their presence.
‘My God!’ he said. ‘Visitors!’
His glance passed quickly over Alex in favour of Laura at whom he stared, with an almost suggestive admiration, for a considerable time. Laura, simply elegant in a sky-blue blouse, slacks and flat shoes, stared back, her tall body straight.
‘And I take it, Alex, that this wonderful creature you’ve brought to me is the American photojournalist?’
‘Yes, Father. Laura Wellman. Laura, this is my father.’
‘Frank Poulson,’ his father clarified promptly. ‘Please call me Frank.’ He waved his hand languidly towards the table just below him. ‘Would you care for a thirst-quencher, Laura? Or perhaps a medicinal.’
‘You have Scotch?’
‘Whiskey.’
‘Fine.’
‘It’s right there on the table.’
He didn’t move from where he lay, but merely grinned at Laura, cradling his gin and tonic in his lap, his fingers stroking the glass. Laura stared steadily at him, making no move towards the table, and Alex, feeling angry and embarrassed, rushed to fix her the drink. His hand was shaking when he poured it, still shaking when he put the ice in, aware that the silence had only been broken by the sound of the tumbling ice cubes. Then he handed the drink to Laura, received a nod, a sly smile, and saw her looking back at his father, then glancing around her.
‘You have a *chair* here?’ she asked.
‘It’s right behind you, Miss Wellman. Alex, don’t stand there like a dummy: fetch the lady a chair.’
Alex quickly fetched the chair – a seventeenthcentury, hard-backed Chippendale, its woodwork damaged and bleached by the sun, its padded seat torn
– and positioned it behind Laura, sliding it under her as she sat down and crossed her long legs. His father’s gaze roamed up and down her, as if inspecting merchandise, and eventually settled, with that same loathsome suggestiveness, on her slightly upraised face.

‘Thanks for the drink,’ Laura said, tilting the glass to her mouth and having a sip with what, to Alex, appeared to be an unexpected and exaggerated delicacy.
‘My pleasure, Miss Wellman. It’s always a treat to see a new face in this deplorable jungle.’
‘You don’t like it here?’
‘Most uncivilized – as I’m sure you already appreciate.’
‘I’m not sure what you mean by uncivilized.’
‘Rain and humidity, flies and mosquitoes, lack of proper sanitation and other basic amenities, ignorant bloody Indians and general Brazilian stupidity, little decent conversation, little money, no culture at all.’
‘It sounds like hell, Frank.’
‘It is, Laura.’
‘Then why do you stay here?’
Alex studied his father’s face and saw the brief crack in his humour, the sardonic smile leaving his lips and then returning again, dominating his dissipated good looks in some indefinable manner.
‘I stay here,’ he said, ‘because I’ve lived here most of my life and because, as long as I remain here, I’m king of my domain.’
‘You mean this plantation?’
‘This plantation – and everyone in it.’
Still lying there in the hammock, his slim body slunk low, he raised his glass to her in a mocking salute, which gesture she returned with a mockery that equalled his own. They both drank and then studied one another in a brief, oddly challenging silence that made Alex, whose throat had gone dry, feel extremely uneasy.
‘This plantation, if I may say so, doesn’t look like much of a domain. In fact, it looks about as dead as a door-nail.’
‘We have fallen upon unfortunate times, my rich American friend, but brave the situation with fortitude, this being the English way.’
‘The American way would be to get off your backside and do something about it.’
Alex felt shock, a sharp stabbing sensation through his nervous system, as the smile on his father’s face quivered and then came back to life again, the thin lips tightening reluctantly over teeth that had long required treatment.
‘The American way,’ his father said, ‘may well work in America, but here,

where the only thing worth having is the rubber, we're faced with the knowledge that our rubber is no longer required.' He had another drink, wiped his lips with the back of his free hand, then gazed at Laura with a sly, contemptuous smirk behind which, to Alex's consternation, was reluctant, and possibly base, admiration. 'And so, Laura – may I call you that? – I simply accept my fate, looking after my pig-ignorant Indian workers and praying the tide will turn eventually.'
'Your Indian workers don't seem that well looked after.'
'These are hard times all round.'
Laura offered no immediate reply, but simply raised her eyebrows and held her empty glass up in a questioning manner. Alex watched, fascinated, not understanding what was happening, as his father, taking note of Laura's empty glass, grinned and nodded his head. Laura leaned out of her chair, not quite standing but almost, poured a goodly portion of whiskey into her glass and then, sitting back in an upright position, again raised her glass in a mock salute and put the drink to her lips. She drank some of the whiskey (a considerable amount, Alex noticed) and then lowered the glass to her lap and smiled again at his father.
'Alex,' his father said, 'why don't you go off and read a good book? You look bored standing there.'
'No, Alex, it's all right.' Laura glanced at him and smiled, then, turning back to his father, said, 'Your son is my friend and I get to feeling lonely when he's not with me.'
'Ah, yes, my dear Laura, I've repeatedly asked Alex about you, but he's been remarkably reluctant to discuss you, which makes me think, rightly or wrongly, that he cares deeply for you.'
'We care deeply for each other,' Laura said, 'but in a way you might not understand.'
'Friendship, Miss Wellman – Laura – a very wonderful thing.'
'And do you have many friends around here?'
'Not many, I must confess. Not many at all.'
'Why not?'
'I don't get out much anymore. The good old days have gone.' He had another sip of his drink, crooked his lips in a sardonic grin, then ran his eyes up and down her body in a way that made Alex burn. His father? No, not his *father!* He could not bear to think of it. 'Why ask? Are you concerned for my

welfare? Do I look so pitiful?'
'You could do with a shave.'
'I will bear that in mind.'
'You could also do with washing your clothes.'
'I'll bear that in mind, also.'
Alex felt even more confused, not understanding what was happening, watching first one, then the other, seeing the smiles on both their faces, each challenging in its own way, the antagonism almost palpable in the air. And yet… and yet he felt uneasy, at once embarrassed and obscurely threatened, sensing that beneath the antagonism was a mutual attraction.
'I was going to show you the whole plantation,' he said desperately to Laura, 'and there's an awful lot still to be seen.'
'*What* was that?' his father asked sharply.
'I was talking to Laura,' Alex replied. 'I brought her here to show her around the plantation and I thought – '
'I'm sure Laura could do with another drink, Alex, so kindly fill up her glass.'
Alex took Laura's glass, which already was empty, noticed her fleeting, secret smile, poured the whiskey with an unusually shaky hand, and then handed the glass back. Laura thanked him, had a quick swallow of her drink, then turned back to his father.
'You have a lovely son here,' she said.
'You think so?' His father grinned maliciously. 'Like father, like son is the general supposition, though in this case I *do* have my doubts.'
'What the hell does that mean?'
'The way you say that makes you sound so American.'
'I want to know – '
'I wasn't insulting my own son; I merely suggest that father and son are different.'
'A blessing?'
'Perhaps. Is that whiskey to your taste?'
'I'm certainly enjoying it – and I *really* think you have a fine son.'
'He's just like his mother. An equally fine woman. She died, alas, just after he was born, which hasn't made his life easy.'
Alex closed his eyes briefly, feeling the pain obliterating him, seeing a blackness filled with stars, a swirling cosmos beyond time and space,

entering into the past where his radiant mother smiled in welcome, and then, when he opened his eyes again, hearing his father's malicious wit.
'Alex is far too private, too romantic and naive, and he spends too much time with the Indians, learning all the wrong things. God, the ignorant, unclean savages! We should put them all in cages and feed them bird-seed. Without them, this would have been a better place – perhaps even civilized.'
'You really seem to despise the Indians.'
'I've lived with them too long. And you, if I may say so, have already spent too much time in that ridiculous Christian mission, no doubt listening to Alex's other friend, Father Paul Benedict, and being brainwashed accordingly. Believe me, my dear, God may side with the priests, but not, I'm bound to say, with the Indians and their abominable ways.'
He rolled over in the hammock, balancing precariously on his side, and reached down to the table just below him to fill his glass up with gin. He did this and then added the tonic, dropped some ice cubes in and swirled them around, then rolled back to his original position without spilling a drop, his grin oddly attractive in his dissipated good looks, also still challenging and indecently suggestive in a manner that continued to baffle Alex and made him uneasy.
'How long has it been, my dear Laura? I mean, how long have you been here?'
'Three weeks,' Laura replied.
'Ah, yes, that's a long time – relatively speaking, of course; certainly long enough to have been a little brainwashed by the good Father Benedict. Has he already turned you into an Indian lover, saying that all men are equal in the eyes of God?'
'He didn't have to brainwash me into that; I already believed it.'
'Really?'
'Yes, really.'
'I'm always so touched by American democracy, by an image of the huddled masses in the boats that pass the Statue of Liberty – '
'Sarcasm is cheap.'
' – but I remain an Englishman, proud of the British Empire, and believe that the white man's mission in life is to educate, by bribery, blackmail or deceit, our generally primitive noggie brothers, or, where failing to do so, keep them firmly in their place. Alas, Alex, my only child, strongly disagrees with this,

having been influenced by that miserable priest and, even worse, by that rogue of an Indian, Peruche, who, were he not so damned old, would feel my whip on his bare back.'
'I believe *that*,' Laura said. 'The tales of your mistreatment of the Indians are, to say the least, legion.'
'And who told you such tales? My loving son? Or Father Paul Benedict?'
'Neither. It's the Indians who gossip. The very mention of your name is enough to make them angry or fearful, when they're not actually spitting on the ground to express their distaste. Naturally, as I'm sure you must know, most of the gossip concerns the *seringueiro* who died, reportedly after being mistreated by you. It's said that you – and, apparently, your only friend, Rollie Thatcher – work your rubber gatherers half to death, give them only a quarter of the legal minimum food requirement, fail to pass on to them their necessary anti-malaria tablets and instead sell them to the burgeoning pharmaceutical shops in Manaus for extra cash, and, finally, perhaps most disgustingly, exploit your position as *fazendeiro* by making use of your workers' women in ways that are best not mentioned here.'
'Most delicate of you, I'm sure. But really, you're just repeating a lot of nonsense. The Indians have always been notorious whiners and this clearly hasn't changed. Who's to say I work them too hard? Who's to say I feed them too little? Such judgements are surely subjective and should be ignored. As for the sale of their quinine tablets, I doubt that the law would let me get away with it; and in this place, where everyone knows everyone, they'd find out soon enough if I was really doing it.'
'It's the fact that everyone knows everyone in this place that makes them turn a blind eye to you.'
'Pure hypothesis, my dear. And regarding the socalled exploitation of the Indian women, let me just say – and I'll phrase this as delicately as I can – that I don't have to succumb to the use of physical force in order to obtain gratification of the kind you suggest. That I may enjoy a certain popularity amongst the ladies is hardly my fault – and jealousy, as both of us know, always speaks with a forked tongue. Your glass is empty, dear lady.'
Watching Laura as she leaned forward in her chair to pour herself another drink from the almost depleted bottle of whiskey, Alex felt shame and despair, the former because of his father's tasteless and slyly suggestive performance, the latter because Laura, while superficially antagonistic,

appeared to be responding to his father with thinly disguised pleasure. Did she really despise his father? Alex wasn't sure that she did. And as he watched her sip her drink and then smile in a secretive manner, his love for her, which repeatedly she had told him was just a passing thing, swirled up from the most sensitive depths of his soul to swamp all his defences.
'And does your good friend, Rollie Thatcher, visit you often to share in your excitements?'
'He comes to visit me, Miss Wellman, to share drinks and conversation, most of which revolves around our business with its manifest problems. As for the excitements you mention, well, what can I say? I'll leave those to your colourful imagination which, I've no doubt, is considerably more colourful than mine. But I reiterate, dear lady, that we mostly drink and discuss business, most of which concerns how to deal with our thick-headed and indescribably useless Indian workers. Indeed, even as of this minute, Rollie – who more than anyone else understands my particular problems – is helping me out by collecting, from the family of that half-wit Indian who died, compensation for all the unpaid debts that now lie on my desk.'
'What unpaid debts?'
'Food, drink, and, naturally, the accommodation used while working on the plantation – '
'You mean one of your own shacks.'
'Correct. And, of course, since the food and drink is purchased on credit from my own company stores – a system first devised, dear Laura, in the coal fields of your own democratic country – and since, but naturally, I'm the owner of the rented accommodation, the Indian owed more than he'd earned on the day he died. So, compensation is now required from his family.'
'You bastard.'
'Just call it democracy.'
'And what kind of compensation do you hope to get?'
'Alas, the man's family can offer me little. All the Indian's relatives were totally dependent upon him and his wife is unfortunately too old to be of any use to me. However, he does have a daughter who's healthy and strong enough to do work here on the plantation, so she'll be brought here to work in a certain capacity until such times as her father's debt has been paid off.'
'And, of course, since she has to eat and drink and sleep while she's working off the debt, she'll have to get credit from your company store and abide by

your self-serving rental arrangements, which means she may, in fact, be here forever as, more or less, unpaid labour.'
'Yes, that's the unfortunate truth of the matter.'
'And what, precisely, will be required of her here?'
'That hasn't yet been decided, though I'm sure we'll manage to come up with something. Perhaps, some other evening, when I'm having a drink with my good friend Rollie, you could return here and spend a quiet evening with us, during which you could pursue this matter to its final conclusion.'
'I don't think so.'
'You might enjoy it.'
'What makes you say that?'
'You strike me as a lady who might appreciate the new and unexpected.'
'Go to hell, Mr Poulson.'
Laura polished off her drink and put the glass back on the table, then, ignoring the smirk that creased the face of Alex's father, she turned to Alex and said, 'I think it's time we left for the rest of the tour.' Feeling a glowing inside him, something warm and uplifting, Alex stepped forward to pull her chair out of her way as she moved towards the veranda steps. His father still lay in the hammock, his body curved like an inverted bow, tapping his finger against the glass on his chest, his grin crooked and fixed.
'A pleasure to have met you,' he said to Laura's departing back, 'and I trust this will be but the first of many similar encounters.'
Laura stopped moving, her spine visibly stiffening, then she took a deep breath and turned around, that secretive smile on her face.
'Of course,' he said. 'That would be nice. Thanks a lot for the drinks.'
Alex stared at her, bewildered, as she walked to the steps, her tall body moving sinuously in the white clothes, her hips swaying in a possibly provocative manner that made his father's eyes widen. He felt a great woe, his uplifted spirits crashing down again, and as he studied his father's face, suddenly aware of its dissipation, he felt, also, for the very first time, a stab of real hatred.
Stunned, feeling his innocence collapsing, he turned away and followed Laura down the steps, to the smooth lawns surrounding the house. Laura smiled and reached out to him, reassuringly took his hand, then together they walked across the road that divided the lawns from the huts of the *seringueiros*. When they reached there, they stopped, both looking back at

the big house, their attention drawn to the jeep that had coughed its way around the curved driveway and was now braking to a halt before the steps they had walked down.
Rollie Thatcher got out of the jeep – Alex immediately recognized him – then snapped his fingers at the Indian girl who had been sitting beside him. He stepped back while she climbed down. She was clearly very young, about sixteen or seventeen, and beside the bloated and generally enormous Rollie Thatcher, she appeared too fragile and graceful to be real. The sky above the house was cloudy, bending the rays of the sun, and those long, oblique striations of wavering light dissolved the house in a silvery haze. Rollie Thatcher took hold of the girl, grabbing her shoulder, rudely shaking her, and then, when she had bowed her head demurely, he dragged her, none too gently, up the steps of the veranda, until both of them, like figures in a bad dream, had melted into the shadows.
Alex felt close to breaking, his throat dry, his heart beating, and he dug his fingers into Laura's palm and glanced desperately at her. She returned his stare, blindly, as if not really seeing him, and then, before he could question her, before he could work out what she was feeling, he saw her green eyes widening and slipping away to glance over his shoulder.
Following her gaze, he saw Mengrire, standing a short distance away, his chest heaving in and out as he breathed in painful spasms, his hands opening and closing in frustrated, violent motions, and his eyes, usually sly or completely unreadable, focused with glittering intensity on the veranda of the house into which, like a slave from the auction block, the Indian girl had been taken.
Mengrire was weeping.

Chapter Five

Embarrassed, Alex led Laura away from the weeping Indian, something inside him dying a little at what had transpired. Laura obviously understood this, since she gently squeezed his hand, and he glanced up, squinting against the sun, to see her flickering smile. Mengrire was trying to control himself, his sobs sounding like choking sounds, and then, before they had managed to get out of hearing range, they heard him saying, repeatedly and brokenly, '*Bastardo! Bastardo!*' Alex looked straight ahead, too mortified to look at

Laura, his shame and disgust almost too much to bear. When they crossed the first road and reached the *seringueiro's* shacks, he saw the Indians on their cramped verandas, the small, dark rooms behind them, and realized that he no longer had enough enthusiasm to show Laura around the whole plantation.

'Let's go and see Peruche,' he said. 'I think I'd rather do that right now.'
'Okay,' Laura said. 'Fine.'
She squeezed his hand again, clearly trying to reassure him, but instead unwittingly resurrecting his helpless love. He needed her desperately, like the night needs the moon, and was sure that if she disappeared from his life the light within him would burn out.
'Was that big fat brute Rollie Thatcher?' she asked.
'Yes.'
'And the Indian girl was the one whose father died?'
'Yes, I'm afraid so.'
'Mengrire's sweetheart?'
'I didn't know that before, but obviously that's the case. God, I feel terrible.'
'Does it bother you to talk about it?'
'No,' he said, 'it's all right.'
He saw her glancing at the veranda of the shack they were passing where two badly weathered *seringueiros* were playing a game of checkers, one using the metal caps from Coca Cola bottles, the other doing the same with Fanta bottles. Laura smiled, but uneasily, as if unsure of her own reactions, her eyes scanning the other verandas and the workers resting upon them – aged women in rickety chairs, old men rocking in their hammocks, children hanging over the wooden railings or playing with the chickens and dogs around the supports the kept the shacks well clear of the ground – and then she shook her head sadly, her hair swinging across her face, and glanced over the stone wall that led down to the plantation's *porto* at the vast, rippling surface of the Rio Negro and its solid green far bank.
'It's so wide,' she said, 'and so *quiet.* It always gives me the shivers.' She did in fact shiver, and chuckled deliciously, then gave his hand another squeeze while saying, 'Oh, Alex, this plantation is *diseased*… and so is your dad.'
'I thought you liked him,' Alex said, feeling guilty the minute he spoke. 'I mean, I had the impression that although you didn't like what he was saying, you were attracted to him in a way.'

‘He has a certain roguish charm,’ Laura responded, unconcerned, ‘and once, before the drink took command, must have been a pretty attractive man. What led to the drinking and cynicism? The death of your mother?’
They had turned right in front of the *porto* and were now walking alongside the river, cooled by the breeze and by the shadows of the trees, and Alex, given Laura’s question, found himself seizing up, some grief that had for too long been buried suddenly resurrected.
‘I don’t think so,’ he said. ‘It might have been, but I doubt it. I was too young to really know what was going on, but as far as I can tell my mother was visiting here with her family, my father swept her off her feet, they got married, and in a fairly short time realized that they just weren’t compatible. According to Antonio, my mother was a quiet woman, romantic and loyal, but my father, from adolescence on, was an inveterate womanizer, and my mother, though remaining loyal to him, was sickened by his many affairs. So, they were estranged even before I was born and I honestly don’t believe that my mother’s premature death concerned my father all that much.’
‘God, how you must hate him for that.’
‘No, not really. I’ve never felt hatred for anyone. I don’t believe in inherent evil or badness. I believe that most people are essentially good and then somehow get warped.’
‘You mean even the sinners are victims?’
‘Yes, something like that.’
Laura chuckled again, her head shaking, her throat curved and inviting. ‘Oh, boy,’ she said, ‘have *you* a lot to learn! You’re so pure, you’re like Adam in the Garden of Eden, and like him, doomed to grief.’ She leaned into him, wrapping her arm around him to give him a hug. ‘Well, maybe not,’ she said. ‘I hope not. Let’s get back to your dad.’
‘There’s nothing more to add,’ Alex said. ‘My father’s what he is. He once had a lot of money, but he squandered it as fast as he made it, then the rubber boom died out, he was temporarily saved by the war, and now, with the rubber trade reverting back to the Far East, he can’t keep this place going much longer and so he’s making the most of it.’
‘He’s trying to make as much money as quickly as possible before he has to close down.’
‘That’s right. And he’s doing it on the backs of the Indians, which I think is awful.’

‘But you still don’t hate him?’
‘I didn’t think so – at least not until this morning.’
‘Why this morning?’
‘Never mind.’
How could he tell her what he had felt when his father leered at her; or, perhaps worse, what he had felt when she smiled at his father? No words could describe the hurt – the intensity of it had shaken him – and now, as he turned away from the wide, blackstippled river and led her into the semi-darkness of a small stretch of forest, he understood that he was changing, losing his calm acceptance of life, and instead thrashing around in some dungeon of heart and mind where his thoughts and feelings, formerly in perfect harmony, were surrendering to chaos.
He had wanted to talk to someone about it, to have someone older guiding him, but even Father Benedict, his best friend with Antonio Bozzano, had seemed in his fevered imagination to suddenly have become someone unapproachable regarding the matter. He knew that Father Benedict didn’t approve of his addiction to Laura, had virtually told him so, and knowing this only made him resent the priest for the very first time. There were many first times now – suppressed anger, desire and fear – and as the trees thinned out, revealing the várzea lake and Peruche’s hut, he prayed that he would find a respite from his troubles in the Indian’s presence.
Coming to a standstill, Laura released his hand, then put her two hands to her mouth, her eyes widening as she took in the unexpected beauty of the clearing that led down to the várzea lake. Peruche’s hut was right in front of them, a miniature version of the large *malocas*, and the still lake was close behind it, shaped like a painter’s palette, water hyacinths and tropical lilies creating pink, purple and white patterns, the trunks of the ungurahui and palla trees surrounding it decorated with climbing plants, the leaf mosaics of peperomia, while the many lianas, using the tree trunks for support, writhed upward in bizarre green coils and loops into the downpouring sunlight. The whole clearing looked magical, almost dreamlike in its exotic perfection, this effect enhanced by the pale flowers of the cauliforous leaves that drifted down from the forest canopy high above like a magical rain.
‘It’s fantastic,’ Laura whispered.
‘Yes,’ Alex said, ‘it is.’
‘I feel like I’m on another planet.’

‘Maybe you are.’
‘Is that where Peruche lives? That thatched hut?’
‘Yes.’
‘This is wonderful.’
She shook her head in bemusement, then advanced to the hut, walking as if in a trance, a touching smile on her lips. Alex hurried to catch up with her, then passed her to reach the hut first; there, indicating that she should wait, he knelt on one knee and called to Peruche through the motionless cotton curtain that covered the entrance. Peruche’s voice came back instantly, a cracked, sepulchral sound, and Alex, indicating the Laura should follow him, pulled the curtain aside and went in, practically down on his knees.
Peruche was squatting on the baked-mud floor, his hands resting on his knees, the hands, just like the knees, webbed with blue veins on brown, withered skin. Laura entered after Alex, crawling in on hands and knees, then sat beside him and fixed her gaze on Peruche. The old Indian’s head was bowed over a small clay bowl placed just in front of him, his hammock, stretched out between two poles, hanging above him. He sniffed, then raised his head, sniffed again and opened his eyes, smiled affectionately at Alex and eventually looked directly at Laura, his rheumy eyes scarcely blinking.
‘Ah,’ he said, ‘the American woman.’
‘Yes,’ Laura said. ‘Laura Wellman.’
‘I know your name. Alex has told me much about you. He thinks highly of you.’
‘And of you,’ Laura said.
The old Indian smiled, leaned over the small clay bowl, sniffed deeply and then straightened up again, fixing his gaze once more on Laura.
‘You have come to the Amazon to take photographs?’
‘I was given the opportunity of coming here to take photos, but I wanted to come here anyway. Now that I’m here, I feel that I was *destined* to come here.’
‘Why?’
‘I think Alex has already told you.’
‘Alex has told me that you believe yourself to be possessed because of your mother’s relationship with an evil, possibly possessed, man. That you’re now possessed yourself may or may not be true – if you believe it strongly enough, you will make it come true

– but why did you want to come here and now feel it was destined?'
'Since childhood I've suffered terrible nightmares and dreams so bad that they convinced me I had to be possessed. So believing this about myself, I looked for some kind of escape and thought I might find, in this primeval jungle, another kind of reality through which, if I embrace it wholeheartedly, I might lose my old self.'
'And you believed that by losing your old self, you would also lose the demons that you believe are possessing you?'
'Yes.'
'And?'
'I believe there's another world, the world of the spirit, or soul, and that this world, which modern man has lost touch with, is a very real and accessible world to those who've remained closer to nature than the people I come from.'
'You mean more primitive people, such as we Amazonian Indians.'
'If you care to put it that way.'
Peruche nodded, not offended, then fixed his eyes on the small stone amulet around Alex's neck. Satisfied that the amulet was still there, he returned his eyes to Laura.
'So you felt that by finding this other world, you would set yourself free?'
'Yes, Peruche, I did – and still do. I feel that if what I believe to be true *is* true – that indeed I've been possessed by Satan or the powers of darkness – then I can only free myself from this evil by finding out exactly what it is.'
'You wish to know the nature of this evil?'
'And then cast it out.'
There was silence for a moment, distant thunder, more silence, then Peruche bowed his head and breathed deeply before looking up again.
'Why, when you arrived here, did you feel that you had been destined to come here?'
'Because wherever I go, I'm accompanied by death and destruction – '
'Alex told me.'
' – and when I stepped off the boat into Manaus, a man, a priest, fell dead at my feet.'
'You give importance to a natural event.'
'Maybe. But then I heard the Yano drums, saw the lights rise and fall, and was told of the Gateway over which the Yano Indians stand guard: the place

where time and space have no meaning and good battles with evil. So when I discovered that I'd come to a place like this, apparently by accident, I knew that I'd actually been *drawn* here for some special purpose.'
'To learn the nature of true evil?'
'That's part of it, certainly. As far as I'm concerned, the forces of darkness possessed me, and now, thousands of miles from my home, I'm close to their source. I don't think it's an accident.'
'Have you thought to question your sanity?'
'I've questioned it, but haven't yet come up with an answer.'
Laura's voice was steady, matching her unwavering gaze, and Peruche, after studying her for some time, nodded judiciously.
'There may be a purpose,' he said, 'but what it might be, I cannot say. Yet we dreamed of a ball of fire in the heavens, an umbrella of light… and then you, who felt haunted by that bomb, arrived here as expected.'
'As… *expected*?'
'We expected something,' Peruche said. 'We thought it might be an event. It was not an event, but an individual – and clearly you are that individual. Why you are here, I cannot say. It's for you to discover.'
'How will I discover it?'
'You will do so. One way or another.'
'I'm afraid.'
'Fear, also, is natural. It exists to be conquered.'
He raised his right hand, fingers outstretched like a fan, then waved it gently to and fro and lowered it back to his lap. Laura's eyes turned downward, widening in horror as they focused on her own left foot and saw the Goliath bird-eater spider. The largest spider in the world, it had been hidden beneath the fern leaves, but was now rising groggily, its long legs spread widely around its lightly-furred body, bending in and out with scissor-like movements as it shook the leaves off. Laura was mesmerised, drawing in her breath, too terrified to actually move, then she stopped breathing as the leaves fell of the spider's dark back and it advanced on her unprotected foot.
'Fear is natural,' Peruche reminded her. 'It exists to be conquered. Now face it and conquer it.'
The spider straddled Laura's foot, the urticating hairs on its fat body grazing her bare skin, its legs jerking in irregular, hypnotic movements until it settled upon her. She bit her lower lip, let her breath out, stared in horror at the

spider's eight eyes, then flicked her own eyes to her other foot and saw a giant anaconda snake.
The snake's jaws opened and closed, its forked tongue tentatively exploring her foot, and then its thick, pulsating body coiled over her legs.
Alex watched, not disturbed – or disturbed only for Laura – as the snake slid over her right leg, curved under her left, then arched back to slide over her trembling thighs and then leave the hut, passing between him and Laura to slip under the curtain. When he returned his gaze to Laura's other foot, the spider also had vanished.
Laura heaved a lengthy sigh, wiped the sweat from her forehead, then, her whole body still trembling, looked at Peruche.
'I didn't conquer my fear,' she said. 'I was virtually paralysed.'
'No, you did well.'
Laura gave Alex a nervous smile, let her trembling body settle, then returned her attention to Peruche, her voice, when she finally managed to speak, sounding firmer than usual.
'Do the Yano actually exist?'
'Yes.'
'How do I find them?'
'That is not for me to say.'
'Am I *supposed* to go and find them?'
'Only you can decide that.'
'Can you tell me about them?'
'What do you wish to know?'
'I'm told you were their prisoner long ago. I'd like to know about that.'
'There is little to tell. As you say, it was long ago. I was then but a child, a member of the Yanoama tribe, and I was taken by my father on a hunting expedition far north in the jungle where no Yanoama Indian had ever been before. It was the forbidden territory of the Yano – those who had been cast out of their original tribe and had, since their exile, been enslaved by the forces of darkness and compelled to take part in the most barbaric and corrupt of activities, outside normal humanity. The Yano captured our hunting party and had much pleasure with them, instantly beheading some, torturing the others for days on end, torturing them to death, until finally only my father and I were left, me being the only child captured. They had left us to the end for that very reason, and now, with the others in our hunting party all dead,

they wanted the finest, most diabolical sport of all: to skin my father alive, taking three days to do so, removing his flesh from the bone in countless thin strips; and I, at ten years old, was forced to pull those strips off, one after the other, my ears filled with my father's awful screaming, my hands soaked in his blood…'

He paused, watching Laura intently, then nodded, satisfied that she was listening, and started talking again.

'Yes, three days and nights, and the Yano greatly enjoyed my tears, and then later, when I was starving, they made me eat his stripped flesh… And then there were many months – how many I can't remember – when I lived in a world of nightmares and insanity, wanting only to die. But the Yano gave me *epena*, the drug I have in this bowl, and under its influence my mind expanded and beheld wondrous things. I saw heaven and hell, the faces of good and evil, that place where space curves down into a funnel and opens out into another world, known as the Otherworld. There I saw beauty and horror, knew exultation and terror, and then, when I had lost my former self, when the child in me had died, I was drawn back through the funnel on wings of song and returned to the Yano camp. Drums played and voices shrieked, lights rose and fell in the sky, there was human sacrifice and mass fornication under the moon and stars. I bore witness and survived, hearing the bedlam give way to silence, watching as the lights that rose and fell disappeared and the dawnlight, giving shape back to the jungle, wiped the stars from the sky. After that, I became their slave, to be used as they saw fit, as labour, as sport, as a repository for their seed, and yet I never became one of them – what they'd made me do had turned me even more against them – and so, when I was full grown, and had learned much of their magic, I escaped and made my way back here to await my time of returning.'

'You mean you intend going back there?'

'My heart tells me I must.'

'When?'

'Before I die.'

'And when will that be?'

'When my dreams give me warning.'

So saying, he leaned forward and sniffed deeply of the *epena*, the hallucinogenic drug in the clay bowl, then sat upright again, closed his hands, and started taking deep, rhythmic breaths as if exercising. Alex nodded at

Laura, indicating that they should leave, and as she rose onto her haunches and began inching backwards, Peruche started rocking to and fro while making a weird humming sound. He was clearly in a trance, exploring his liberated mind, and Laura stopped, fascinated, and might have remained that way for hours, but was encouraged by Alex, by way of pushing and prodding, to turn away, brush the curtain aside and then leave the hut.

The sun, which had been sinking, was now completely hidden behind black clouds which, low and boiling, seemed to be touching the forest canopy and had made the grey air sultry and humid. Thunder rumbled in spasms as the first of the raindrops fell, making remarkably loud splashing sounds on the languid papaya leaves. Laura shivered and glanced around her, obviously looking for the spider and snake, then, seeing nothing, shook her head from side to side in relief and took hold of Alex's hand.

'God,' she said, 'it's a lot later than I thought. How long were we in there?'

'A long time,' Alex said.

'Did I fall asleep?'

'No.'

'What about that giant spider and the snake?'

'They came and went through our minds.'

'They were real!'

'What we perceive through our senses we tend to think of as being real. I saw them, you saw them, Peruche saw them, so they must have been real.'

'Was I drunk? Did I drink too much whiskey? No, I don't think so. I know what I saw and felt in there: they were real and they *touched* me.'

'Then of course they were real.'

Thunder rumbled again and the rain fell more heavily, so Alex, entwining his fingers with Laura's, walked her away, back into the darkness of the forest which already, with the falling of the rain, was dripping constantly, noisily. Laura kept looking around her, rubbing her eyes and blinking repeatedly, but they soon emerged from the forest, into the dimming afternoon light, and then headed away from the *porto*, toward the shacks of the workers. By the time they had passed the shacks and reached the jeep in the parking lot, both of them were absolutely soaked and feeling the cold.

Mengrire was in the jeep, his forehead resting on the steering wheel, but he sat up when they approached, his brown eyes filled with grief. Alex blushed and avoided his gaze, turning aside to face Laura, his shame over his father

only eased by the love he felt for her. Something broke in him that instant: the last of his pride or adolescent inhibitions. He wanted to tell Laura just how much he needed her with him, but with Mengrire's wounded eyes fixed upon him, he could only squeeze her hand harder.
'I'll go straight back to the mission,' she said. 'Right now, I couldn't possibly face your dad. I think dinner with Father Benedict, if more sober, will be easier to handle.'
'Give him my regards.'
'I'll do that. Now look after yourself.'
She climbed into the jeep, resting her hand on his shoulder, and then, when she sat down, slid her hand lightly along his body to take hold of his wrist. He was filled with her, drowning in her, torn with love and despair, actually jealous that his good friend, Father Benedict, would soon be sharing his table with her while he, Alex, would spend another evening listening to the drunken revels of his father and, no doubt, Rollie Thatcher.
The thunder rumbled again, the rain suddenly became ferocious, and Laura, with the raindrops exploding in silvery spray off her body, making the darkness bright around her curvaceous, sensual form, reached out and took hold of the blackstone amulet hanging from Alex's neck.
'What is it?' she asked him.
'It's just an amulet,' he replied.
'No,' she said, 'you're lying. It's more than that. Peruche kept staring at it.'
'It's a sacred amulet,' Alex confessed. 'He told me to wear it always. He said that as long as I wore it, no harm would befall me. Here…' He did it impulsively, out of love and concern, his beating heart making him remove the amulet from his neck and press it into her hands. 'Take it. It's yours. Other than this, I've nothing of value to give you, so more than anything else in the world, I want you to have it.'
'No, Alex, no…' She opened the fist he had clenched, her upturned palm framing the amulet, the rain, as if being forced down by the rolling thunder, pouring onto her trembling fingers and spraying up around the amulet in a miniature fountain that splashed Alex's face. 'I can't… Really, I can't… I don't think I should.'
'Take it, Laura! Please take it! For me! It's all I have to give you!'
He closed her hand again, held it tightly and shook it vigorously, then turned to Mengrire and waved his free hand, indicating that the Indian should start

the jeep and drive Laura away. Raindrops glistened on Mengrire's brown face, rolled around his bright brown eyes, and he nodded, suppressing every thought and feeling, and took hold of the steering wheel. Alex held Laura's hand, hearing the thunder and hissing rain, kept holding it as the jeep roared into life, wheels churning up the mud around it, then started moving, dragging her hand out of his, and then carrying her away into the semi-darkness of ferocious rain and dusk's dim light.

The thunder roared and the lightning flashed as Alex walked back across the broad lawn and up the steps to the veranda of his father's large house. He felt bereaved and lost, his heart bursting out of his chest, and the world, which before had been God's gift, now seemed infinitely threatening. The rain fell in a torrent, drumming relentlessly on the floor of the veranda, as he opened the mesh-wire door and entered the house, the gloom further depressing him. *I love her*, he thought. *I love her and feel anguished. If love is good, where is the joy that this goodness should bring?*

The question was like a bell tolling sepulchrally in his mind, making its pronouncements with arrogant gravity, but offering no answer. He clenched his fists and kept walking, passing the rooms of this long, dark corridor, keeping his eyes fixed on the floor and silently praying for privacy. Thankfully, no one stopped him – he swallowed dryly with relief – and when he entered his own room, closing the door behind him with excessive care, he stretched out on the bed, closed his eyes and fell asleep almost instantly.

Had he slept? He wasn't sure. The rain was hammering on the roof. The thunder rumbled and the room was illuminated by flickering mosaics of lightning.

He saw Laura hovering above him, her green gaze enigmatic, her red hair hanging down around him as her voluptuous lips opened. He reached up to her, yearningly, in his mind if not his body, and then heard his father's laughter, at first ghostly, then clear, emanating from the main lounge just along the central corridor and entering his hearing with the brutality of a knife penetrating his heart.

The main lounge was not far away, just three doors down from his bedroom, and he heard, through the rumbling thunder, through the crackling sound

made by the lightning, someone weeping – a girl weeping – other laughter, loud and crude, then the weeping again, this time a little louder, and then his father's laughter once more, clearly drunken and salacious, mingling with the other laughter to form a joyless, mocking, ghastly chorus.

It was his father and Rollie Thatcher. They were both enjoying themselves. The person weeping, being the object of their sport, was obviously the Indian girl.

Mengrire's sweetheart.
Alex didn't know what to do. A child again, he felt afraid. The thunder roared, the lightning flashed, his ears were stung by that awful revelry, and then he also wept, crying aloud in helpless anguish, and rolled over on the bed, burying his face in the feathered pillow, his heart breaking as he surrendered completely to the image of Laura, spending himself in the stormy night.

Chapter Six

She broke his heart because she drank too much, favouring the deadly *caipirinha* cane alcohol, usually taking the first one just before noon and then continuing with shameless regularity until she retired to bed, regardless of how early or late that might be. Her drunkenness was not overt, but rather a condition of being, displayed only in her lovely eyes, which gradually developed a mild pink hue, and in her conversation which, as the day wore on, would become quicker and more compulsive, invariably wrapped possessively around her past with its demons, imaginary or otherwise, and mostly tragic events: her mother's insanity and suicide; her father's wealth and self-interest; Aleister Crowley and the *Lusitania*; her vivid dreams and horrible nightmares; her tenuous connection to disastrous events – Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima – and her single, childless marriage which, in its failure, had possibly contributed to her sensitive husband's premature passing.

Fact or fabrication? Possibly a little of each? Alex spent a lot of time wondering (and lost a lot of sleep doing so) but could neither find a

comprehensible answer nor subdue his deepening love and fascination.

He knew she was drunk when she talked too much, and at such times he felt real pain, but he also felt seduced and rendered helpless by what she was saying. Her words conjured up another world, a world totally alien to him, peopled with the rich and the powerful, with the rare and the exotic. Hollywood, Los Angeles, with its film studios and famous stars, its exclusive clubs and magnificent hotels, with its cinemas and restaurants and swimming pools and automobiles, and all the other luxuries of civilization. He heard about them from her ruby lips, constantly thought of them with wonder, and gradually, though her drinking broke his heart, sensed the sly growth of corruption in himself, wanting to fly back to America with her.

'Of *course* I'd take you back,' she said. 'You're my treasure and delight. And also because, dear Alex, your purity might help me to defeat the demons trying to possess me.'

'Stop talking about that,' he said.
'I *have* to talk about it,' she retorted. 'I can't let my guard down for a minute. I must constantly remind myself of what I'm about.'

'Don't have another drink.'
'Stop hectoring me. You sound just like Saint

Paul.'
'Saint Paul' was Father Benedict who had also disapproved, his brow wrinkling as he narrowed his eyes to watch her downing a fresh glass. Laura rarely missed such glances and actually appeared to take pleasure from them, almost defiantly drinking even more in his presence and, as far as Alex could see, deliberately exaggerating the degree of her inebriation. It was clear that they liked one another and were in constant conflict for that very reason, Father Benedict concerned that Laura was ruining herself because of the drinking, Laura resenting his repeated insinuations

that she could not look after herself.
‘God, you’re well named,’ she said to him. ‘Paul Benedict! Saint Paul! A puritan who drinks a fair bit himself while trying to stop others from doing it.’ ‘Don’t blaspheme,’ he replied. ‘And I only drink beer. I don’t drink *caipirinha* all day and retire to bed in a stupor.’
‘A *stupor*? When have you ever seen *me* in a stupor? I’ve never been in a stupor in my life, so your remark is insulting. And even if it *was* true, you should, as a priest, have some respect for the fact that I’m a lady and keep your mouth shut.’
The arguments, which were frequent, sometimes good-natured, sometimes not, took place all over the mission at any time of the day – over the breakfast table, in the crowded medical hut, in the small school at the edge of the clearing, in the jeep on the road to Manaus, often over dinner in the evenings – but mostly when Laura was on the move with her cameras, following the priest as he engaged in his numerous activities and was under pressure. They also occurred in the small boat, during those long stretches on the river, when the jungle was sliding past as a solid wall of tangled greenery and the sky directly above was dark with low, black storm clouds, about to unleash another rainfall and send the humidity soaring.
‘Please, Laura, not another one.’
‘Dammit, Father, it’s so hot!’
‘That rain’s going to fall any minute now and it’s more cooling than alcohol.’
‘Very funny, I’m sure.’
‘All that drinking won’t help you.’
‘It does. It helps me sleep at night. It keeps the nightmares at bay.’
‘Did you ever stop to think that it might be the other way around? That it’s the drink that might be *causing* the nightmares?’

‘Nonsense.’
‘Then prove it’s nonsense. Stop drinking for a few days. I’m sure that if you do, you’ll actually gain a few nights of good sleep. That drink has your head spinning.’
Alex bore witness to it, but through love’s dazzling prism, every gesture and inflexion being coloured dramatically by his inflamed and untrustworthy senses. His mind was a hall of mirrors, his perceptions distorted, turning his former grasp on reality into something more dangerous: shadows, reflections, odd words becoming echoes which, reverberating through his emotions, rebounded as something else.
‘You’re pretty cute when you furrow your brow in that ferocious manner, Father Benedict. You are, in fact, pretty attractive in a primitive way.’
‘Stop talking like that.’
‘Why?’
‘You’ll embarrass Alex.’
‘No, Father, not Alex – it’s *you* I embarrass.’ When they scowled at one another, Alex often felt
that they were actually smiling; when they smiled, he was sure he saw great tension hiding deep in their eyes. Laura mocked and teased the priest, sometimes shocked and outraged him, and the priest, in his turn, would be slyly mocking or brutally frank, either accepting her words or batting them back with no pretence of mercy. Sometimes Alex felt that the priest detested her, other times that he was fond of her, and occasionally, with a guilt that made him writhe, he was convinced that the priest, like his father, was secretly attracted to her. The jealousy, which for Alex was a totally new emotion, quietly stripped him of dignity and pride and made him squirm with selfloathing.
‘You embarrass me, Laura, only because of your

intemperance.’
‘Say no more, Father Benedict.’
They traversed the river a lot, using canoes or paddle steamers, visiting riverside shacks, floating villages, jungle *portos,* where Laura took countless photographs, frequently changing cameras, and filled one notebook after another with her urgent, almost frantically scribbled thoughts, usually biting her lower lip as she did so, her elegant brow wrinkling when she frowned. The floating villages were on great platforms, wooden shacks on enormous rafts, the esoteric foliage of the jungle actually grazing the thatched roofs – and Laura climbed the rickety ladders, and wandered amongst the impoverished tenants, with an enthusiasm that melted all resistance and opened all doors. The Indians thought her a glamorous alien – her long red hair fascinated them – and often, when she raised her camera to take a photo, they reached out tentatively to touch her, giggled like children when they did so, and then touched her again. She responded with similar wonder, apparently touching them with her spirit, and at such moments even Father Benedict could find little to criticise. Alex always carried her camera bag, only too pleased to assist her, glad to be away from the plantation, from the debaucheries of his father, and more comfortable under the oppressive sky above the wide, sullen river.
The river was a world apart, supporting a floating population, its immensely wide, calm surface either mud brown or black, bending and curving around the forest that came right to the water’s edge, then lapping and splashing against the wooden struts of small single-family jetties or the much higher, imposingly large floating villages that thrust out from green inlets, the forest foliage forming umbrellas over the clutter of shacks, shops and cafés, dropping white flowers and fern leaves over the numerous small boats that bobbed together on all sides of the great platforms. The

floating villages were near Manaus, not too far from its many *portos*, and the villages, like the *portos*, were a hive of activity, the Indians buying and selling, or bartering, their wares – *assai* berries, *plantains*, mangoes and papaya, cashew nuts and pineapples, *jenipapo* and *maracuja*, the fruit piled high on the stalls that swayed rhythmically on the floating platform, while from other stalls the varied fish –

pirarucu , *jaraqui*, *tambaqui*, *tucunare* and even the dreaded *piranha* – filled the air with a nostril-tuning aroma that encouraged either nausea or delicious hunger.

If Laura enjoyed the floating villages, she enjoyed the many *portos* even more, often laughing with delight as she and Alex, usually dropped off by Father Benedict, wandered along the narrow, sloping streets that led straight down to the river, past the openfronted shops stacked ceiling-high with boxes, past the children and dogs playing around the stalls soaked with wet fish, past the raised shacks that opened out to frame the *portos* where, between the battered boats, bobbing up and down in the splashing mud-brown water, rotten fruit and dead fish formed large carpets of brightly coloured and foul-smelling vomitus. The boats themselves were a gift to photography, mostly old and incredibly battered, many used as permanent homes as well as floating warehouses, these packed with large families, most of which could scarcely move, the cabins decorated with Virgin Marys and photographs of various popes, and with *Umbanda* and *Quimbanda* statues and trinkets, others with what seemed like hundreds of well used votive candles of countless colours. Here, also, in the *portos*, were a wide variety of nationalities – Argentinians and Venezuelans, Peruvians and Bolivians, Malays and Chinese and West Indians and Europeans, Jews and Syrians and Libyans – and in the melting pot of the bars and cafés, surrounded by noise and stench, Laura drank her *caipirinha* and stroked Alex’s hand and talked to him, her voice musical and seductive, about all she had seen.

‘It’s so *real* to me, Alex! So elemental and natural.

It’s so different, it completely overwhelms me at times, and yet I also feel I’ve known it all my life, as if born and raised here. I think I was meant to come here, Alex. Not *think* it: I *know* it! I felt it from the moment I set foot on the floating dock, and I’ve been more convinced of it every day, as I see more and more. I was here in another time, maybe the past, perhaps the future, but somehow, though I can’t quite explain it, I’ve had a separate existence here. I *belong* to this place; I’m part of it. I’m the river and sky.’

She was Alex’s river and sky, completely permeating his consciousness, flowing endlessly like a river through his thoughts, her face the ravishing sky of his erotic dreams. He wanted her – and her world – he wanted all that she represented; and ironically, the more she romanced about the Amazon, the more he romanced about America and the glamorous world she had sprung from. He had formerly loved the mighty river and felt at home in the boundless forest, but now, as Laura explored them both and let them weave their spell around her, he found himself drawing farther away from them and wanting what she had left behind her.

‘You’ll soon be going back,’ he said.
‘Don’t count on it,’ she responded. ‘The fact that I’ve only another week left in the mission doesn’t necessarily mean I’m going home.’
‘You might stay?’
‘I think I will. I can’t bear the thought of leaving. And, more important, I can’t leave until I’ve been to the place where the lights rise and fall when the Yano drums pound.’
‘You must never go there, Laura. Either you’d get lost or the Yano would kill you. And even if neither of those happened, we don’t know what you’d find there.’
‘I’d find release, Alex. I know it. I’d find the forces of light and darkness. When I heard about that so-called Gateway, about what the Yano are guarding, I knew that I’d been destined to come here and learn what my fate is.’
‘Promise me you won’t go into the jungle, that you’ll never do that.’
‘I can’t promise you anything.’
‘Your love?’
‘Not the kind you mean.’

‘I want everything. *All of it!*’
His own intensity could sometimes shock him – he was still getting used to it – and much of it sprang from his inability to gauge what she felt for him. His declaration of love amused her, but also clearly touched her, and when she wasn’t trying to let him down gently, she was actively flirting with him. He had previously noticed her need to touch – to touch objects and people – but with him, the touching seemed to be tied to her need to repeatedly excite him and then cool him down again. She would run her fingers along his bare arm, press his hand to her lips, stroke the blade of his sweating spine. If she did this with affection, she also did it to arouse him, after which she would mock his burning cheeks and ask him, with whole armies of innuendo in her tone, what it was in his thoughts that had made him blush. He didn’t know what to think, felt despair and glory at once, and in the end was convinced that she loved him but didn’t dare show it.
‘Of *course* I love you, Alex, but not like that. I’m too old for you, dearest.’
‘That doesn’t matter. I love you.’
‘You don’t know what love is. You just love the idea of *being* in love, which is something quite different. Oh, God, Alex, don’t talk to me of love. Love’s the dream that destroys us all. It’s an impulse that makes mockery of intelligence and renders pride obsolete. I had enough of it when I was young, in your beloved Hollywood, in my adolescence, because at that time, right up to when I married at twenty-one, I really was an exceptional beauty and looked more mature than my age. Men didn’t just think of me as attractive, they went crazy over me, and though they all called it love, they turned my life into hell on Earth with their lovelorn demands.’
For Alex it was hell to listen – or heaven and hell at once – one part of him in despair at the rejection of his love, the other part of him melting into ecstasy just because he was near her.
He saw the river dividing the jungle, seven kilometres from bank to bank, the dense forest hanging over the muddy water as if trying to claim it. They were on a boat south of Manaus, near the Meeting of the Waters, where the humus-blackened Rio Negro met the mud-brown Rio Solimoes and both flowed side by side without mingling, as if a thin line divided them. The effect was surrealistic, as if nature had been defeated, making another river of two distinct colours, flowing in parallel streams. And like the river, so his mind: his dark and bright visions of Laura, one vision offering the promise of

pleasure everlasting, the other offering a glimpse into the hell of bottomless anguish.

‘That was during the early 1930s, during the real heyday of the movies, when my father was filthy rich and too powerful to talk to mere mortals, and I was just about your age, if built a bit differently – God, yes, the men wanted me; they fell like dominoes at my feet – but all I ever felt was their sweaty hands, all I saw was their greed. Was it love or just lust? I don’t recall if I even thought about it. But I know that the only reason I went out with those men was that I couldn’t sleep at night because of my nightmares and so I desperately needed company during the day. I actually thought that love might save me – and that explains why I rushed into the marriage. But then, as I became even more in demand, I gradually realized just what they were after: a piece of prime steak beneath them.’

Alex studied the river, staring along the Rio Negro, seeing that limpid black surface ending sharply at a thin white beach that seemed to run for miles in either direction. A beach? No. As the boat moved nearer, he saw the Rio Solimoes, the striking sun making its brown surface grey where it ran, side by side, without mingling, with the vitreous water through which the boat was cruising. It was like the end of the world – the Rio Negro marked World’s End

– and there, where the black water appeared to abruptly end, the grey water, sometimes almost silvery, resembled the empty, sun-brightened haze over the mouth of a canyon – nothing but space beyond. The effect was weird, disorientating, like an optical illusion, but reflected, with terrible irony and accuracy, what he was feeling.

‘And so, Alex, I never knew real love – or, at least, your concept of love – and instead buried my fears in various affairs that brought me, if not tender feelings, a temporary oblivion. And then eventually I married. He was a good man, a decent man, but my fear of the darkness, my recurrent nightmares and premonitions, refused to let me lose myself in his embrace, and so even that ended. Love? Oh, yes, Alex, I love you – but not in that way!’

His need for her increased, making his nights long and sleepless, forcing him to writhe alone in his bed and drain himself in fraught silence. The shame of this was overwhelming, laying siege to his breaking heart, and he wondered how men lived with themselves when this dark desire tortured them. He wanted to talk to someone about it, particularly Father Benedict, but the

priest, in the wisdom of his age, already knew what was happening.
‘It’s madness, Alex. Madness! You must try to understand what’s happening. Laura Wellman is attractive, but she’s also twice your age – and, if I may say so without malice, she may not be all there. You comprehend what I’m saying, Alex? In every way your romance is pointless. The woman is twice your age, she’s unhappy and drinks too much, she’ll be leaving sooner or later to return to America, and no matter what you may think to the contrary, she’ll be going home alone. You’re not a man yet, Alex – a young man, but not a man – and at your age, particularly in a place like this, your growing passion is dangerous. Forget it, Alex. Don’t be hurt later. Accept the truth of this now.’
But Alex could not accept it, all his logic dissolved in passion, his desire for her blinding him to everything except the need to possess her. He thought about her night and day, his mind inflamed, his body burning, losing his old self in the corruption of his lust and tormented constantly by his new, adult yearnings. He tried to explain such yearnings to her, with a naive, impulsive frankness, shamelessly employing every form of emotional blackmail to break down her resistance. Yet resist she did, stroking his face but shaking her head, kissing him on the cheek but then laughing at him, embracing him but then pushing him away when his body responded.
‘Oh, God, Alex, you’re really so attractive… but you’re just too young for me.’
What was he to think? He had no way of knowing. She led him on to put him down, offered histrionic remorse, then embraced him and pushed him away again, whispering, ‘No, Alex! *No!*’ He was bewildered and wounded, now hopeful, now crushed, bouncing from the very heights to the depths and then back up again. Yet his pride knew no depths; he would sink as low as needs be; he closed his eyes to the possibility that he was shaming himself and only opened them long enough to shed the tears that she could lick from his burning cheeks. Yes, she licked and kissed his tears away, whispering, ‘Alex! Oh, Alex!’, her voice tremulous with compassion and despair at the extent of his need for her.
‘Don’t condescend to me,’ he said. ‘I’m nearly eighteen years old. I may not be experienced, but I know what I feel and my feeling for you is a pain that only you can ease for me. I want to hold you and touch you, to know you in that way, and I can’t stop myself from thinking about it and wanting it

desperately. You're all I care about, Laura. There's no one else. You've become my whole world.'
'You'll find someone else, Alex. Someone much more suitable. Next year, when you go to England, you'll meet friends your own age, and when you do, you'll probably find a young lady for whom you'll feel what you feel now, but even more so. What you feel for me can't possibly last. You need someone your own age.'
'Stop talking about my age all the time. Age has nothing to do with it.'
'Age is everything, Alex. I know… because I was once your age.'

Chapter Seven

She told him more about her past, about her numerous love affairs, wounding him deeply with each fresh revelation and bewildering him further. She'd had so many affairs and yet had never been in love, claiming to have remained virtually untouched in that particular manner. He could not understand that, not in someone so emotional, and her claims about her fear of the darkness struck him as facile. No, there had to be another reason, something more directly personal, and Alex, in the pain of his own unrequited love, stumbled like a drunkard in the night, trying to fathom the answers.

'I always felt like a whore,' she said. 'I couldn't give myself to it. I always felt that it was basically disgusting, not romantic at all. In fact, I thought it was not only disgusting but pretty ridiculous: two sweaty bodies heaving at one another in that singularly undignified manner, as mindless as two dogs in heat, and certainly not much more graceful. Was that love? Not for me. I wanted something more pure and gentle
– something that no man has so far been able to give me.'

He looked to the rainforest for consolation, staring across the wide river, his spirit sinking into the oppressive humidity and sullen grey sky. The Amazon was too quiet, its silence preying on the mind, drawing out of it buried doubts and fears, draining strength and volition. He reached out to Laura, taking her hand in his own, and then pressed his lips yearningly to her wrist, trying to suck up her tender skin. They were on a raft in a wide lake, not too far from the mission, and the sun, sinking slowly behind some clouds, turned the sky

into drifting pools of flame, with multicoloured grottoes and arches hovering over the burnished trees.

‘I’ll have to tell you,’ she continued. ‘I once had such an experience. It was as pure and tender as the moon and I’ll never forget it.’ Now she returned his gesture, holding his hand to her mouth, pressing her lips down on his naked wrist and letting her tongue set his blood on fire. ‘It was 1930,’ she said, ‘when I was sixteen years old and, already looking like a mature woman, being pursued constantly by older men. My mother encouraged such attentions – it was her ticket to those same men – but I always felt that I was being used as a commodity and I retreated accordingly. So, if I was attractive to them, doubtless I was even more so because I was so difficult to move, either emotionally or sexually. Am I shocking you, Alex?’

Yes, he was shocked, his cup of pain running over, but he shook his head in denial and avoided her gaze.
‘Of all the Hollywood friends of my parents, the one I most liked was an actress who shall go unnamed, but who, at that time, had acquired a fame of almost legendary proportions; and that actress, then twenty-five years old and at the pinnacle of her success, visited our home frequently and gave me a lot of badly needed attention.’
She stared steadily at him, not blinking for once, and he found himself looking down at the raft to avoid returning her gaze. The raft swayed slightly, turned a little, trying to drift away from its restraining rope. He took a deep breath, sucking in the warm air, feeling as if he was choking in the oppressive humidity.
‘Yes, Alex, she was twenty-five and I was sixteen, a disturbed and lonely adolescent who desperately needed the attention she gave me as she insinuated herself into the void left by my self-centred parents. Already, by then, I found the desires of men gross and was suffering my nightmares. Desperately needing someone to lean on, I found that person in my friend – the only friend I’d had so far – and so over the next two years our relationship subtly altered: at first she was a surrogate parent, then a friend and confidante, and finally, when I was eighteen years old, she became… my lover.’
The shock was considerable, making Alex’s heart leap, briefly stopping the

breath in his throat while his burning skin froze. A tremor or revulsion shook him, then passed away, leaving numbness, a great emptiness into which his mind was dropping as he silently screamed. Then he saw her long, fine fingers, curving gently around his wrist, shaking it lightly and then raising it up until his hand grazed her cheek.

'Oh, God,' Alex whispered, 'I can't stand this. You're not…?'

'No, Alex, I'm not. Believe me, I'm not. If my friend lived with that secret, I myself had no such secret: I didn't surrender to her out of sexual desire, but out of the need to take comfort from the only human being who had, up to that point, understood me and tried to comfort me. She didn't believe in black magic, didn't believe I was possessed, but feared that *my* belief in those things would do me great damage. And so, she supported me, and encouraged me to ignore my mother, and eventually taught me that love

– yes, Alex, *love* – could, no matter how it was expressed, help me transcend my deepest fears and make life seem worth living. She could have saved me, Alex – I thought she would – but it wasn't to be.'

Finishing off her *caipirinha*, she put the empty glass down, then took hold of his other wrist with her free hand and pulled him slightly into her.

'No, Alex, it wasn't to be. The forces of darkness would have their day. I sometimes think they actually used her in an attempt to destroy me. She taught me how to love, a love that briefly changed my life, but then, over a period of time, the pleasure we'd gained turned to guilt – my natural adolescent guilt; her guilt at having seduced me – and a feeling of shame which, because she was basically a puritan, she couldn't bear for long.'

As she stared intently at him, he felt his hands being pressed down on her thighs, and her warmth, coursing up between his fingers, soon flooded his loins. His senses scattered, his will dissolved, and he started losing himself.

'Am I tied to destructive events? Yes, Alex, I believe so. I was sure of it from a tender age and was even more sure of it when, during one of my parents' famous all-night parties, my mother found my friend and I in bed together. We hadn't meant to do it, we hadn't planned it at all, but something took hold of us

– desperation mixed with excitement; the knowledge that those people making pigs of themselves at that party would have reviled us as lesbian lovers – and so, in that atmosphere, and knowing that soon we'd have to part, we convinced ourselves that it would be perfectly safe and sneaked into my

bedroom. Then my mother came in and found us, and being drunk became hysterical, and soon half of the guests were crowding around her, staring down at the pair of us. Can you imagine it, Alex? Can you imagine our humiliation? My friend knew what that town was like; knew she'd never survive the scandal, and so the very next day, when in defiance of my parents I went to her home to console her, I found her draped, dead, over her bath… She had slit her own wrists.'

Alex looked down at his hands, saw the fingers outspread, one hand resting on each of Laura's thighs, her hands pressing on top of them. He felt cold and then hot, his fear consumed by his desire, and he couldn't prevent his fingers from curling down and digging, softly but demandingly, into her flesh. Startled, he looked up and saw the tears in her eyes, glistening as they dribbled down her high cheekbones to make damp spots on her blouse. She lifted her hands from his, slid them up his bare arms, took hold of the sleeves of his shirt and whispered her words with great passion.

'It's true, Alex! All true! And I can never forget it! I still dream about her body draped over that bloody bath and when I do, I waken up screaming. Do you understand what I've told you? Do you think I'm just drunk? She was dead and I was sick for years after and still haven't recovered. I need magic in my life – the sort of magic you possess – and I look for some such magic to rescue me from the nightmare I live in. Is it you, Alex? *Show me!'*

Alex saw her wild eyes, her trembling, sensual lips, then lowered his gaze to look at the amulet that now lay on her pulsating throat. Peruche's gift, a black stone, imbued with magical and protective properties, it drew him towards it and then into it, his lips tasting the smooth skin around it while Laura, her hands pressed to the nape of his neck, repeatedly kissed the top of his head, her lips pliant and moist. He felt the power coursing through him, as if coming from her body, then heard himself groaning in rapture when her tongue slid around his earlobe and down his neck until, with her wet, scalding lips, she sucked up his skin.

Something snapped and whipped through the air, making him jerk his head up, and he followed Laura's wandering gaze to see the restraining rope of the raft, obviously broken for no good reason, flying mysteriously above their heads and splashing into the water.

'Magic!' Laura hissed. '*Magic!*'

He drew the power from her body, through the amulet and into himself,

calling upon it as Peruche had taught him and letting it work by his faith. He was shaking, bathed in sweat, saw the streaming crimson sky, the sun an enormous ball of flame that set fire to the clouds. Magic: all magic. The whole of the natural world was magical. He breathed deeply as Laura's hands trailed over his body and then tugged at his shirt. He closed his eyes and then opened them again, fixing his gaze on the distant shore, and then the whole lake started moving, the water swirling around the raft, until eventually the raft itself started turning in slow, languid circles.

Laura glanced around, gasping. The limpid lake had become a whirlpool. The black water was swirling around them in a gentle but regular manner, sinking down a little in the middle and making the raft also turn as if on a revolving base that was invisibly supporting them.

'Oh, my God!' Laura whispered.

Alex pulled his shirt off, hardly knowing what he was doing, then lay down on his back on the raft and felt himself turning round and round. Glancing up, he saw the spinning sky, streams of colour, a kaleidoscope, until Laura's face, her red hair falling about him, filled his whole line of sight. Her eyes were like the forest, deeply green and impenetrable, and then he felt her breasts grazing his bare chest as she lowered herself on bent arms.

'Oh, my Alex,' she crooned. 'My strange, magical Alex. I can't let you make love to me. It just wouldn't be right. Oh, you poor boy, I know how you feel, but I can't let you do that.'

'*Please*, Laura…' He heard his own voice faraway. 'Don't leave me like this.'

'Oh, my Alex. Poor Alex…'

He closed his eyes as she undressed him, ashamed, terrified, his heart pounding and his body ethereal as the lake, now a vast, lazy whirlpool, made the raft slowly spin. There was noise, the rushing water, bulrushes and branches breaking free, but it all seemed distant and unreal, muffled behind his own harsh breathing. He was naked and erect, his quivering loins now the centre of his being, his every nerve and sensation concentrated on that member being stroked and massaged by her light fingers. Opening his eyes, he saw the sky, a kaleidoscope spinning above him, then her unravelled hair fell over him, covering his eyes and nose, while her tongue, sliding between his burning lips, explored the roof of his mouth.

He sucked her tongue, trying to swallow it, feeling her nipples against his

chest, first grazing it, then pressing firmly into it as her breasts flattened on top of him. Heat. Sublime softness. Silken skin against his skin, first warm, then hot, then sweat-slicked as breasts and thighs permeated him. He wanted to cleave to her, to enter her and become her, but when he tried to roll over she pressed him back with the delicious weight of her body. His own body was all sensation, rivulets and streams of feeling, the pores of his skin like grains of sand blowing over each other. The raft was hard against his spine, but still turning, and turning him, and he felt that he was drifting in space with heat and light passing through him.

He just drifted there, imprisoned, turning repeatedly in the sun, his fingers pressing and probing, relaying messages from her flesh, as if her blood, pouring out of her veins, was racing up through his own. The lake swirled around them with a soft rushing sound, their bodies turning as they intertwined, and that sound, which matched the rhythm of their beating hearts, became a strange, distant symphony. He went with the music, following its primal, hypnotic beat, its melody, *mezzo forte* all around him, raising his spirit on high. Laura's tongue was on his neck, licking his throat, sliding lower, her lips pressing upon and sucking at his chest and belly as his quivering spine arched. He shrank down to his centre, his whole being that aching member which, a pulsating shaft that defined his being, was thrusting up through her fingers. All that was, was in her fingers, being rhythmically squeezed and stroked, and then her soft hair fell upon him, covering his loins like a silken sheet, and her lips, following a lightly flicking tongue, drew him out of her fingers.

'God, yes!' he gasped. '*Please!*'

She drew him into her scalding breath, into the juices of her mouth, her tongue light as a feather as it licked him, her contracting lips making sensual sounds. She was swallowing him, all of him, ingesting him deliciously, melting his very marrow and bone to make him part of her substance: softness and heat, coursing blood, pounding heart, pores of flesh lapping in gentle waves over all that he was – pure feeling, sensation, chaotic impulses clashing, the raft turning beneath him, the sky spinning above, all quivering, breaking apart, his centre exploding out into her, an almost painfully intense excitation and pleasure, a jolting discharge of recurrent spasms – then he cried out – something meaningless – his voice reverberating within him, and reached down to clasp her rocking head in his hands, imprisoning her face at

his groin while she drained him completely, rendering him, in that moment of anguished ecstasy, a slave to her fantasy.

Chapter Eight

‘Oh, God!’ Laura cried. ‘What have I done? What have I *done*?’

She had rolled away from Alex and was propped up on an elbow, tugging the tangled hair out of her eyes and blinking repeatedly. The lake was still swirling magically, forming a whirlpool around them, but the rate of flow was slowing down, with the bulrushes and broken branches that had been torn free by the water now drifting freely around the raft. Alex was still flat on his back, not believing what had occurred, his body glowing in ecstatic renewal, a great dread and wonder in his soul. He flicked his eyes toward Laura, saw the curves of her reclining form, the dying rays of the sun casting black and crimson patterns on her white shirt and slacks and golden skin. She was not looking at him, but at the lake’s circular motion, and she kept her gaze fixed on that miracle until the water had ceased to flow. Only then, when the lake was still and the black water was reflecting the moonlight, did she turned her face towards him, her expression revealing bewilderment, her limbs visibly shaking.

‘I love you,’ Alex told her.
‘Oh, God,’ she said, ‘what happened?’
‘Did you hear me, Laura? I said I love you. I love

you, I want you, I need you, and I can’t let you go.’ ‘Was it a dream? Did it really happen? Did you
make it happen, Alex? Oh, Alex, what I did… I didn’t
mean to… It was the way the lake was moving – I
couldn’t believe what was happening – and then, you
seemed so unhappy, so much in need of me, and I
really felt compelled – yes, a compulsion – to make
you feel better.’ She glanced around her again, visibly
distraught, her hands fluttering in the air like wounded
birds, the darkness deepening about her. ‘But what a

terrible thing to do. And with someone your age! Oh, God, I don't know what got into me. *I don't know what I'm saying!*'

Her speech was indeed hysterical, springing randomly from her scattered thoughts, and listening to her, Alex felt love and pain in equal measure, the latter coiling tightly around the former like thorns strangling an orchid.

'Please, Laura, calm down. What I did was nothing special. All of nature is magical, *all* of it, and I simply use nature. Such powers aren't unusual, but are in fact within us all, but most men, through lack of faith, have lost such powers and cut themselves off from nature. What I showed you was nothing special; what you showed me was. I can still feel and smell you all over me, and my body is singing.'

'Please, Alex, don't talk like that. It was madness. *Madness!* Oh, God, I can't bear to even talk about it. What must you think of me?'

'I've already told you what I think. I love you, Laura, and always will. And now I want to make love to *you*. I'm not a child; I'm a man.'

'No, Alex, you don't love me. You can't *possibly* love me. You're confusing sex with love, physical desire with emotion, and if you didn't live here, isolated from those your own age, you'd soon know the difference between the two and love me a lot less.' 'You're insulting me by saying that.'

'I'm not insulting you; I'm trying to help you. Oh, Alex, my Alex, please forget what we did here today and don't mention it to anyone.'

He felt betrayed when she said that, his love turning to ashes, but then, when she sat upright and covered her mouth with her hands, he felt his heart going out to her again in compassion and love. Still lying there, he reached up through the darkness and

stroked her bare arm.
‘It’s our secret,’ he said. ‘I promise you, I won’t tell anyone – but I can’t promise that I’ll be able to forget it. And I want you to know that if I loved you before, I love you even more after this.’
Picking his shirt up off the raft, which had stopped turning in circles, she handed it to him in an abrupt manner. ‘Let’s go,’ she said. ‘I’m scared of this place. I don’t like it in darkness.’
The lake did look mysterious, its black surface reflecting the moonlight, the trees surrounding it a deeper darkness than the night and, in its eerie manner, gradually letting its diurnal silence surrender to the varied and exotic clamour of its hidden wild life: the twanging sound of *seringueiro* birds, the chattering of monkeys, a mass rustling as the branches came alive with creatures that slithered and crawled. Laura shivered and stared at him, offering a nervous smile, then gently placed her fingers on his hand and pushed it away from her arm. Her face, framed by her long red hair, was also framed by the stars, and he felt the pain of sorrow and love as he sat up beside her.
‘Kiss me,’ he said.
He was kneeling right in front of her, feeling her breath on his face as she stared back intently. She seemed hesitant and sober, lost in some private domain, but eventually she smiled – not too confidently, her lips shivering – and leaned forward and pressed her lips to his in a very light, nonprovocative manner. Nevertheless, the kiss aroused him, instantly filling his loins with heat, and he wanted to press her back onto the raft and then sink down on top of her. Doubtless she sensed his mood, because she abruptly stood up, running her fingers through her hair and then stepping back, the starbright

sky streaming over her.
‘Please, Alex, let’s go. I’m really quite frightened. After what I’ve just experienced, I don’t want to be on this raft in the darkness. This lake now scares me.’ ‘Of course,’ Alex said. Since the restraining rope had been snapped, the raft was drifting freely, but Alex took hold of Laura’s hand and helped her off, then guided her up the short, sloping bank to the jeep parked under the trees. They drove off immediately, following the crude, narrow track, ducking as foliage materialized out of the darkness and whipped over their heads. Laura was visibly nervous now, frightened of spiders or snakes falling onto her head, but the track soon opened out into a minor road where the cool air, making a low moaning sound, rushed past them on both sides. The road, which ran parallel to the river, would lead them back to the mission, and Alex, handling the car with practised ease, had only to keep his eyes peeled for straying animals, since no humans, either Indian or otherwise, would likely be out walking at night. He did not speak to Laura, not knowing what he could say, so was relieved when he heard her voice after a very long silence.
‘Alex, it was madness. Really, just *madness*. I feel so depraved, so… *ashamed*… and can’t believe that I did that.’
‘It was wonderful.’
‘*Please*, Alex!’
‘It was beautiful. I won’t ever forget it.’
Laura sighed and shook her head, then placed her hand on his shoulder, digging her fingers lightly into his skin, then letting the hand slide away. ‘Oh, dear God,’ she exclaimed, ‘you’re impossible! I just can’t believe this!’ She sighed again, looking left and right as the jungle slipped past them. ‘I was frightened back there,’ she said. ‘It was really terrifying. I was drunk at first, when I asked you to give me magic, but then, when I felt the raft sinking into that swirling water, the fear sobered me up and then dissolved my senses in

another way, making me feel part of the lake, of the raft, part of *you* – I mean part of you, Alex, flesh, blood and spirit. I felt that we were one, and as one were part of the elements, part of the water and the forest and the sky and the moon and stars, part of the whole. And only when it was over, when the swirling water was slowing down, did I realize just what I'd been doing and came back down to earth. God, it was frightening!' She inhaled and exhaled her breath. 'Tell me truthfully, Alex… How *did* you do that?' 'Do what?'
'The whirlpool. The spinning raft.'
'I willed it,' he replied. 'That's all. I simply willed it to happen.'
'And did it happen? Did it *actually* happen?' 'What do you think?'
'It happened.'
'You've just answered your own question.' He kept looking straight ahead, feeling secretive and vain, both of which vices were unexpected and slightly tainted the purity of his love. The forest road was completely dark, illuminated only by the jeep's headlights, the tops of the trees forming a narrow, starstudded avenue that appeared to run through the night sky, curving away and vanishing not far ahead, approximately over the mission camp.
'You learnt that magic from the Indians?' Laura asked him.
'Yes. From Peruche.'
'Was he *really* a prisoner of the Yano?'
'Yes. A long time ago.'
'And no one else has ever escaped from them?' 'Not as far as we know.'
'Peruche must have been incredibly lucky.' 'Or incredibly smart.'
He ducked to avoid some overhanging branches and saw Laura leaning forward, her hands crossed on the back of her head to form modest protection from the spiders, snakes or insects that could, she imagined, fall out of the trees. He smiled to see that, watched the

road where it curved right, then saw the silhouetted shapes of the mission's buildings at the end of the straight stretch.
'How much power do you really have?' Laura asked him. 'A lot? Or a little?'
'It's not *power*,' he replied. 'It's merely the faith that humans had long ago and have long since discarded.'
'Faith?'
'Faith in ones self as part of nature, able to make nature do our bidding just like our limbs.'
'But just how much can you work what we call miracles? I repeat: a lot or a little?'
'A little,' he replied. 'At least compared to Peruche. What you saw me do tonight was about as much as I can do – and even that I hadn't planned at all. I didn't know what would happen.'
'But you said you *willed* it to happen.'
'I willed *something* to happen. I didn't know what it would be. It's just that I love you so much and wanted you so desperately, I tried to impress myself upon you with all of my being. If I moved you, I also moved the water, but I hadn't expected that.'
'That was the first time you ever managed something like that?'
'Yes. Normally my gift is quite modest. I can make flowers open their petals, make inanimate objects move, let poisonous snakes and spiders rest upon me without fear of being harmed. According to Peruche, what I'm actually doing is hypnotizing them.'
'The snakes and spiders?'
'Yes.'
'And the flowers? The inanimate objects?' 'What I will, will be done.'
Laura visibly shivered as he drove into the mission camp, passing the medical hut and Father Benedict's

place, then braking in front of Laura's hut. He turned the jeep's headlights and ignition off, then started to climb down, but Laura's hand fell on his wrist and
held it firmly.
'*Please,* Alex,' she said, when he had turned back to face her, 'no matter what happens, don't tell anyone what went on today. I didn't want it to happen, I didn't plan for it to happen, and when it happened I was just as surprised as you. And today of all days, please believe me, I didn't want that of all things. So, Alex, *please* don't say anything to anyone. It's your secret – and mine.'
Wondering just what she was really saying, unable to turn away from her, he desperately wanted to pull her to him and hug her. He felt her fingers around his wrist, her grip tightening and relaxing repeatedly, skin against skin, bone on bone, her blood warming his blood.
'God, I love you,' he whispered.
Letting go of his wrist, she pressed her fingers to his lips, smiling at him with what seemed to be her former assurance before letting the hand fall away. He reached out to pull her to him, feeling dizzy from her proximity, but she quickly, gracefully, slid away from him, swung her legs out of the jeep and then rushed to her hut. She went up the few steps, opened the door and turned back briefly, blew him a kiss and stepped inside, letting the door slam behind her. Alex looked at the closed door for a long time, then he sighed and climbed down.
The night was blessedly cool, the stars gloriously abundant, and as he walked to Father Benedict's hut he glanced up at the pock-marked moon. It was like a single eye staring down at him, seeming to follow his forward movement, and he felt its mysterious,
magnetic pull on his body and mind. Nature was magical, both without and

within, and within him he was reaching out for Laura and her transcendent presence. She was doubtful, afraid, constantly anxious about her age, but he knew that without the years between them, she would have had no such doubts, that she would have more confidently felt for him the same as he felt for her. No, he was not a child – he was a man and knew himself – and now, when he lowered his gaze, blinking against the light of Father Benedict's hut, he let his spirit soar to the stars on the wings of his faith.

Chapter Nine

The priest was sitting behind a small desk at the far side of his bed, a cigarette in one hand, a bottle of beer in the other, a pair of spectacles balanced precariously on his nose, scribbling some notes. He glanced up when Alex entered, dropped his pen and smiled, then clasped his hands high above his head and cracked his knuckles.

'Ah,' he said, 'Miss Wellman's guide has returned.

Did you have a good day?'
'Yes.'
'And Miss Wellman?'
'I think she enjoyed herself.'
Father Benedict lowered his hands back to the

desk and picked up his bottle of beer. 'Well,' he said, holding up the bottle, 'here's to you. And I bless you for this wonderful excuse to stop doing my homework.'

'What are you writing?'
'More begging letters. It's how the mission survives.' He had a sip of beer, inhaled on his cigarette, blew a cloud of smoke to the room and settled back in his chair. 'You're looking fairly sombre,' he said. 'Do you wish to confess?'

'Pardon?'
'Only joking, my son. You just don't seem your normal calm self, so I made

a small joke. Don’t look so startled, my young friend; I know you’ve no sins to worry about.’ He stubbed his cigarette out in an earthen ashtray and then settled back again. ‘On the other hand,’ he continued, ‘I can see there’s little doubt that once more the proximity of Miss Wellman has caused you great pain. You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said, have you? You still pine for that woman, no matter how much older than you she is. You still hope to win her heart.’

‘I love her, Father.’ Alex couldn’t say much more. Everyone knew what he felt for Laura – Father Benedict, Antonio Bozzano, even, God help him, his own father – so there was little point in trying to hide it now. Yet what had happened earlier, that delirious dalliance on the raft, was something he had promised not to mention, though he was bursting to shout it out to the whole world. ‘You all think it’ll pass, but that’s just because you’re older. You can’t appreciate what I’m feeling – and what I’m feeling simply can’t be false. I’ll love her forever.’

‘I repeat: you’re too young to fully understand yourself; and your feelings for Miss Wellman, no matter how intense right now, will gradually fade when she leaves here.’

‘She isn’t leaving yet. We already know that. She sent her resignation to the magazine she works for and is going to stay on here indefinitely.’

‘Indefinite, dear Alex, is not forever – and sooner or later, when she’s rid of her foolish notions about the jungle, she’ll pack her bags and returned to America, where she truly belongs.’

‘By that time she’ll understand that she also loves me.’

‘I’d seriously doubt that.’ The priest shook his head sadly from side to side and then sipped some more beer. ‘She *does* love you in a certain way, Alex. It’s known as affection. It’s not – do you hear me? – it’s emphatically not the kind of love you so vividly imagine.’

‘You’re making fun of me.’

‘No, Alex, I’m not. I’m trying to save you from future grief.’

Realizing that he was still standing, Alex sat on the edge of the canvas camp bed, clasping his hands and sliding them down between his knees to rest on the floor. He felt hot and flustered, his mind reeling from the day’s events, all the pain and glory of love churning inside him and making him suffer like a condemned man repeatedly offered the hope of life.

‘I can’t work out what you really think of her,’ he said. ‘Sometimes you seem

so considerate and helpful; other times you become rather distant and even, unusually, downright rude.'
'I don't approve of her constant, heavy drinking,' the priest said, 'and of course it gets my blood boiling.'
'It's her business if she drinks.'
'We're all one another's business. Besides which, when Miss Wellman drinks too much, she tends to be far too risqué.'
'You mean all that talk about Hollywood?'
'Yes, I suppose I do. I'm not at all sure that I approve of you listening to her countless tales of promiscuity in the Hollywood hills. Nor, come to think of it, do I care for her belief that she's possessed by evil spirits and requires her own peculiar form of exorcism, namely, since she's here, via the intervention of the possibly mythical Yano Indians.'
'The Yano Indians aren't mythical, Father, and it's possible that Laura *has* been sent here to find them.'
'Sent by whom? And for what purpose?'
'I don't know.'
'No, my son, you don't know. And neither does old Peruche. And I really do think that to suggest such an idea to Miss Wellman, who's possibly already unstable, is to run the risk of incalculable damage – certainly to her and possibly in other ways that we can't understand.'
'I love her. That's all that matters to me. The rest doesn't interest me.'
Father Benedict lit another cigarette, then blew more smoke in Alex's direction. 'Thank God,' he said, 'you'll soon be going to England to further your sadly lacking education. You might also learn something of the real world and meet young ladies your own age.'
'I'm hoping to persuade Laura to come with me. And I'm sure she will.'
'You're daydreaming, Alex. This passion has surely turned your head. She wouldn't even consider it, because she knows you're too young for her. Besides, your father would never permit it, which means it won't happen.'
'You're all against me,' Alex said.
'We are not. As you'll learn in due course.'
Alex shifted uncomfortably, feeling horribly guilty, realizing that he had changed over the past few weeks and probably not for the better. Jealousy, suspicion, resentment and rage – all of these had manifested themselves at one time or another, and all of them, prior to the arrival of Laura, had been

totally alien to him. Now, in the presence of Father Benedict, his guilt increased tenfold, because he knew that the priest, his good friend, was only concerned for his future.

Yet what did the priest, a celibate, know of passionate love? And was not Antonio Bozzano too old to still believe in it? And how could his own father, with his degenerate ways, have the nerve to make suggestive remarks, as he had done so often recently, intimating that Laura was a woman of exotic tastes and dubious morals?

Indeed, his father was the worst offender, mocking him with relentless zeal, either embarrassing him or inciting him to anger with his acidulous humour. Alex had hated him for it, particularly when it took place at home, usually in the presence of the revolting Rollie Thatcher and the unfortunate Indian girl, Mengrire's sweetheart, who always seemed to be in the room. But he hated him even more when, in Manaus or here at the mission, he came out with the same sort of suggestive remarks to Laura herself. Alex's loathing, at such times, was considerably more complex, being based, as it certainly was, not only on his father's sarcasm, but on the fact that Laura too often returned the sarcasm with her own brand of equally sarcastic wit, which was, however, at least in Alex's imagination, also flirtatious. There were, in fact, times when he thought that Laura found his father attractive

– and this possibility, more than any other, made him writhe in sheer torment.

'You all criticise her,' he said, despising himself even as he spoke, but needing to strike out. 'You complain about her drinking and about the way she talks, but really, you're just jealous that she gives me so much attention. I hate to say this, Father, but it's true – and it applies even to you.'

He expected the priest to explode, but instead he just smiled gently, raising his bottle of beer in a mock toast.

'Well, Alex,' he said, 'if you believe it, I won't try denying it. But you should be comforted by the fact, at least regarding myself, that the new priest, Father Symonds' replacement, arrives in two days time, after which Miss Wellman will to vacate her hut and take leave of the mission.'

'Good,' Alex said, feeling ashamed of his own vindictiveness. 'I can see her alone in her chosen hotel in Manaus, well away from your prying eyes.'

Clearly startled by that remark, Father Benedict jerked upright, leaning forward in his chair with his sunburnt brow furrowing.

'Good God, Alex,' he said, 'do you mean you haven't heard? Are you saying

that Laura hasn't even told you yet?'
'Told me what?' Alex replied, now sitting upright himself, automatically clenching his fists and feeling his heart race. '*Told me what?*'
'Laura's not going to a hotel in Manaus. She decided she didn't want to be alone, so she had words with your father and he's agreed to let her stay in the plantation. He's offered her a room in your house and that's where she'll be staying.'
'In my *father's* house? She'll be staying with *us*?'
'That's what's been arranged, my son.'
Alex recoiled with shock, scarcely able to believe it, then his shock changed to joy and returned to shock and kept bouncing to and fro, from one to the other. He stood up and went outside and remained there for a long time, gazing up through the towering trees to the pale moon and stars, letting the chattering of the forest fill his ears and distract his mind from its torments. She had surprised him again.

Chapter Ten

Something had changed in Laura after the incident on the raft, and that change became even more apparent when she moved into the plantation, staying in a room in the modest guest wing and otherwise having the run of the main house. She seemed more intense, more distracted and remote, and to Alex's dismay she drank even more than usual, encouraged in this activity by his father, with whom she spent many evenings, sometimes just with him and Alex, other times with his father and Rollie Thatcher, though not with the unfortunate Indian girl who had become their plaything. And now, when Laura was drinking, during the interminable evenings in that decaying lounge, she became more visibly drunk, her speech slurred and repetitive, her eyes blinking repeatedly and her hands weaving arabesques in the dimly lit, yellowish, smoke-filled air.

'Another drink, Laura? It's delightful to have you here. A real pleasure to once more have a lady in this sad house, particularly one with such a colourful background.'

'Not all that colourful, Frank.'

‘Oh, no, I beg to differ. Any woman whose mother had carnal knowledge of Aleister Crowley must surely be painted in certain colours, all of them bright.’
‘I’m not sure how to take that statement.’
‘A compliment, I assure you, Laura, I merely mean that your chequered past, which you unravel with such eloquence, constitutes the finest entertainment that I’ve had for a considerable time.’
For Alex the whole world changed, turning itself inside out, Laura’s presence in the same house, and her familiarity with his father, destroying the remnants of his innocence and filling him with possessiveness and jealousy, resentment and anger. He did not know how to respond to Laura’s move into the big house, on the one hand filled with joy that he would be seeing her every day, on the other filled with suspicion and dread that she would also be sharing the same house as his father to whom, not matter how she was behaving to the contrary, she was clearly attracted in an odd, slightly competitive manner. So, he was thrilled to have Laura so close to him; not so thrilled when, after dinner every evening, she joined his father, and sometimes Rollie Thatcher, in that large and very gloomy main room, where they all drank and talked too much.
Nevertheless, Laura’s daily proximity had a dramatic effect on him, laying waste to his senses, further inflaming his already feverish imagination, and forcing him to lie on a bed of nails during his long, anguished nights. She had not touched him seriously since that evening on the raft, and his hurt at this apparent neglect, and his confusion about what the day had meant to her, made him leap back and forth between the belief that she secretly loved him and the conviction that in truth she was playing with him and quietly mocking him.
Yet he was convinced that she had changed, that he had lost some part of her, but that she might have returned his love had it not been for the fear that was making her drink more every day and deliberately keeping him at arm’s length, doing so (he convinced himself) by spending most of her evenings with his father, drinking heavily in that dim room, trading anecdotes, reminiscences and *bon mots* with an ambiguous flirtatiousness. She talked far too much, recounting the history she had given Alex, making him feel oddly betrayed and painfully wounded, his heart breaking when his father responded to Laura’s anxieties with his customary sarcasm.

‘So you think you’re possessed, Laura? And can’t sleep at nights? Might I offer the suggestion that you might in fact be suffering from that perfectly commonplace itch which, in all we pitiful mortals, occasionally needs to be scratched?’
‘May I suggest, Frank, that that sounds like wishful thinking. I can’t sleep because of my bad dreams and I *know* what’s causing them.’
‘You’re simply a dissatisfied woman. Your whole history attests to that. You had an unhappy childhood, you matured far too early, you received too many unwanted attentions from too many older men, and this, alas, made you suspicious of the whole rotten male species.’
‘No, Frank, it was really much more than that. It was – ’
‘Then of course there was your father, who should have loved you and cherished you, but instead methodically drove your mother crazy and then, when she passed on, brought his numerous women back home and thus increased your already well entrenched antagonism towards all base men. After that, in a kind of panic, perhaps to prove to yourself that you were normal, you married a man you didn’t love, and naturally, when the marriage failed, you had to find an excuse for it, doing so by retreating further behind your colourful story of demonic possession, escaping into this elaborate fantasy like a nun entering a convent.’
‘I wasn’t entering *anything*. I was trying to escape from the demons possessing me. I was trying to find protection from my fear of what the darkness might bring to me.’
‘An elaborate fantasy, Laura. What you suffer from, my dear, isn’t fear of the forces of darkness, but fear of your own helpless dependency on the sex you despise. The devil you fear is within yourself – and I could help you get rid of that.’
Alex sat with them too often, hardly knowing what he was doing there, enduring heartache and confusion as he glanced from one to the other and tried to work out what was going on between them, his speculations destroying him.
As it was with Father Benedict, so it was in that awful room: his father sneered constantly at Laura, poured relentless sarcasm upon her – mocking her ‘spoilt’ Hollywood childhood, her ‘pitiful belief in the occult’, her failed marriage and various love affairs and ‘demented retreat’ to the Amazon – and Laura took it all from him, sparring with him, but not seriously, actually

responding to him with what seemed, at least to Alex's tortured perceptions, helpless admiration and even affection, coming alive with him.
'So, Laura my dear, let me get the picture straight. You were divorced from your husband, you moved back to Hollywood, and then, still convinced that you'd been possessed, you started sliding into promiscuity, started drinking too much – as both of us, of course, are doing right now – and then you went to work for a New York newspaper, photographed the aftermath of the attack on Pearl Harbour, and after that, being finally convinced that, as your mother had formerly intimated, you were in some way connected to destructive events, you became even more neurotic and drifted into a life of depressing degeneracy, by which I mean alcohol and sex.'
'Yes, Frank, that's right. By that time I'd come to understand that I'd only married in the hope of escaping my fear of the darkness, and that I would only know genuine love when I'd been exorcised of the demons that were surely possessing me.'
'This is truly the most wonderfully ludicrous story. You should put it in writing.'
If Alex had previously forgiven his father for his distasteful and vicious activities, he could not, in those obliquely squalid hours, forgive him for anything. Indeed, he came to despise his father, perhaps even to hate him, sensing in every word, in every smirk and innuendo, a contempt that Laura appeared to be blind to, or simply ignored. Their rapport bewildered him, cutting the ground from under his feet, making him feel immature and insecure, his former levelheadedness deserting him and leaving him dizzy with rage.
'I doubt that you'll understand this, Frank, but my promiscuity – which is clearly what thrills you – was not for sexual satisfaction, but instead was a means of avoiding having to spend my nights alone – '
'You were frightened of the bogey men.'
' – and of finding, if not sexual satisfaction, at least a temporary oblivion. Naturally this didn't work
– you don't find oblivion, or escape, in loveless sex – and so I started suffering a great deal of self-disgust as I became less choosy about my lovers and increasingly indiscriminate in the way I went about picking them up. I woke up once too often in a strange bed with a stranger beside me, hardly knowing how I'd got there or what we'd done together. I rarely went after

decent men – I didn't want a lasting relationship
– and so I found myself with selfish, self-centred men, some of whom was positively dangerous.'
'And that's why you happily came to the Amazon? To get away from your sordid self?'
'Yes, Frank, I suppose so. In fact, shortly after we dropped the bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki – and, incidentally, shortly after my divorce was finalized – one of my casual pick-ups beat me so badly that I had to be hospitalized for a few days. That was when, to put it mildly, I knew it was time for a change, so when my father visited me in the hospital and chastised me for the social embarrassment my activities were causing him, I told him I wanted to leave the country and go far away – from away from him, from America, from civilization in general. Subsequently, after my brief stint with the newspaper that sent me to Pearl Harbour, my well-connected father got me the assignment with *National Geographic*… the assignment that brought me to the Amazon, the Yano drumming, and those strange lights that rise and fall in the night sky. Now you know all there is to know.'
Drunk, they forgot Alex, talking as if he wasn't there, unaware of the pain they were causing him as Laura's past was unravelled. Laura talked as if in a trance, sparred enthusiastically with Alex's father, and often drank until she could hardly stand up, her eyes becoming bloodshot and distracted, her movements unsteady.
Alex listened and watched, in despair at what was said, understanding that his father was physically attracted to Laura and sometimes believing, if reluctantly, that she returned that attraction. This realization shocked him further, tainting his image of her, throwing a different kind of light on the stories she told and bringing his bewilderment to the boil when his love turned to resentment.
'Do you have to drink so much?' he asked her. 'And especially with *him*?'
'I *like* to drink,' she replied. 'And now you're sounding like Father Benedict. And further, young man, since I'm actually staying in your house, I can't see how I could actually *avoid* talking to your father. You think I should spend every evening in my goddamned bedroom?'
'He makes fun of you. He sneers at you. He insults you and you just take it. And not only do you take it: you actually seem to enjoy his abuse. It's embarrassing just being here.'

‘It’s not as bad as you make it sound. And you shouldn’t talk that way about your father. I know he drinks too much, as I do, and can be cruel and sarcastic, but it’s possible he’s that way because he’s lonely and misunderstood, hiding behind his cruelties because he doesn’t know how to express his finer feelings. It’s just possible, Alex.’
‘That’s ridiculous and you know it!’
‘Stop shouting at me, Alex!’
‘The very fact that you’re making stupid excuses for him just proves that you like him!’
‘I just think he needs some sympathy.’
‘That’s nonsense! Utter rubbish! The ones who need sympathy are those poor Indians who had to endure his constant abuse.’
‘Alex! He’s your father!’
‘I don’t want reminding of it! And I don’t want to see you ending up like him, which you will if you stay here.’
‘You exaggerate, Alex. He’s not that bad. And he *doesn’t* despise me.’
‘Of course he does! Are you deaf and blind?’
Was she indeed deaf and blind? He sometimes thought this must be so. Clearly she did not see the same sneering that he saw, the same cynical raising of eyebrows, the same sidelong glances at Rollie Thatcher when that buffoon was present. And how could he tell her what was said behind her back? What his father said to him or to Rollie Thatcher when she walked unsteadily from the room. Sarcasm, innuendo and blunt character assassination. Alex, if he happened to be present, would be tormented by all of it.
‘For such a spiritual lady,’ his father once said, ‘she appears to have a certain flair for debauchery. I think she’s well worth considering.’
‘A neurotic,’ Rollie Thatcher said, lolling phlegmatically on the sofa, his piggish eyes fixed on the Indian girl who, wearing only a dressing gown, was cowering on the floor by his feet, her eyes as dead as the moon. ‘All that talk of possession and black magic and dark forces is only an excuse to hide the fact that she can’t do without it. Alcohol and sex, first in Hollywood and then New York, so much so that she had to flee to the Amazon to get away from the scandals. I bet you that bitch has had more than we could count, and now, with the lines of age beginning to show, she’s going a little bit potty. Pass the brandy, old boy.’

Alex hated that room anyway, too aware of its fading elegance, actually able to smell the damp rot, the stale beer and cigarette ash. He avoided it during the day – its musky gloom was too depressing – but at night, after dinner, which was taken in an adjoining room, there was little choice, as Laura had noted, but to while away the hours in there. He would do it with heavy heart, as he had done for years, sitting in a chair near the antique fireplace, watching the bizarre shadows cast on the walls that in the flickering yellow light of the oil lamps seemed to be in constant, shivery motion.
That room, he now knew, would live forever in his mind: a refuge for his mother's ghost, her ethereal, ageless beauty, and for his vision of his father, slim, handsome, dissipated and dishevelled, slouching in his 17th century late baroque Venetian armchair with his booted feet resting on his velvet upholstered footrest, both of which museum relics were badly abused and dust-covered; and sometimes even (and his feeling of revulsion indicated that this, also, would haunt him) the shadowy figure of Rollie Thatcher, bloated, eyes bleary, constantly drinking, often farting, as unreal as the faded paintings hung haphazardly on the rotting walls beneath one of which, on her knees, her head bowed to hide dead brown eyes, was the Indian girl, Mengrire's sweetheart, whose father had died and who was, though it was never discussed, now paying her father's debts with her body.
Alex despised it and was glad to be away from it, always sighing with relief when he opened the door and stepped outside, either into the enlivening light of day or the night's soothing freshness, usually to rush straight to Peruche and take comfort from him.

The old Indian was rapidly becoming more frail and very rarely left his hut, spending most of his time in meditation and prayer, physically surviving on the food and drink brought to him by other Indians and sniffing the hallucinogenic drug, *epena*, at frequent intervals throughout the day. He was usually outside his hut, sitting cross-legged on the earth, his head bowed as he ventured down through his inner self, the lake glittering behind him, the white flowers of the cauliforous trees raining gently upon him; but always, when Alex arrived, Peruche would raise his nodding head, work his lips experimentally, then stare at Alex out of his rheumy eyes, a small smile on his lips.

They talked about everything – about good and evil, about God and the devil, about the empathy between forest and river and sky – but most of all they talked about recent events: the death of the *seringueiro*; his daughter's enslavement to Alex's father and the resentment it was causing amongst the other Indians, particularly Mengrire; the arrival of Laura Wellman and what it might represent; and the fact that the mysterious lights, accompanied by the nerve-shredding Yano drumming, were being seen more often than previously. So, they talked of these things, but mostly they talked of Laura, whom Alex, in his love and despair, could not forget for one moment.

'I can't help you,' Peruche said. 'This is between you and her. Either your love was written or it was not and only time can reveal that. You must not let this obsess you, but accept it with dignity, showing your faith in He who guides our fate and suppressing resentment or anger.'

'But I *feel* resentment and anger. I can't help it. It eats at me night and day.'
'You never felt such emotions before. Not until this woman came here. You were innocent and lived in the purity of one newly born. Yet I sense a purpose to this: I have dreamt and seen strange things. You may have to lose your innocence, to suffer guilt and shame, to endure the fires of penance and know redemption for some larger purpose. There is something in you and in this woman that is one and the same.'
Peruche leaned closer, trying to focus his almost blind eyes, then reached out and scraped at Alex's bare chest with his long, uncut fingernails. Finding nothing, he sighed and straightened up, his rib cage clearly visible.
'Where is the sacred amulet?' he asked. 'The one I gave you some time ago.'
Now it was Alex's turn to lower his head, hoping to hide his embarrassment.
'I gave it to the American woman,' he confessed. 'I'm not really sure why.'
Showing no anger at all, the old Indian just nodded, displaying a sad understanding.
'You wanted to show her how much you loved her?'
'Yes, I suppose so.'
'You may have sacrificed a lot in doing so – much more than you realize. Yet now, more than ever, I feel there may be a purpose to this. The amulet was your protection against evil forces, those forces which, because of your occult powers, might specifically seek you out to destroy you. You, my child, have

always represented the good, and now, without the amulet, and with your protective innocence already under threat, you may be reaching that stage where you'll be forced to suffer hell in order to regain your lost faith and become a light through life's darkness.'

'But why me?' Alex asked. 'What's so special about *me*?'

'There's nothing special about you. Don't let your vanity deceive you. There are many just like you, those chosen to represent their fellow men, but most of them, never looking into themselves, don't know they were chosen. You only know because I've shown you. Now you must learn through suffering, and you do so because in time and space all men are the one man, all souls the one soul. You may be here this moment, kneeling before me in guilt and shame, because the suffering of which I have spoken is already beginning. Now go away. I must meditate.'

Alex always left regretfully, feeling teased and confused, and often took himself down to the *porto* to sit and gaze out over the river. Still and silent, vast and dark, it curved away into the distance, dividing the jungle that grew right up to the edge of both banks and, with its lush, dense, green forest seemed impenetrable, mysterious and uninviting.

He often saw Mengrire there, usually fishing from one of the small boats, his net stretched out like a fan on the water, his muscles tightening to pull it in. He never spoke to the Indian, feeling too shy to approach him, his cheeks burning even to think of that poor girl in his father's house, the one who had brought tears to Mengrire's eyes and killed something within him. Aware of this, Alex rarely watched the Indian for long, but usually crept quietly away, feeling sordid and criminal.

'He worries me,' Antonio said. 'Mengrire's not the man we knew. He wanted that girl a lot – indeed, I believe he was going to marry here – and since the day your father took her into his house, Mengrire certainly hasn't been the same. He's polite, but not friendly, obedient but sullen with it, and I think he's nurturing a resentment that grows every day. I'm worried about it, Alex, and not just about Mengrire. There's a general feeling among the Indians, widespread and growing stronger, that your father and that bastard Rollie Thatcher are going too far. And that antagonism, Alex, which as I say is growing daily, has reached a dangerous high ever since the death of the *seringueiro* and, worse, since your father took Mengrire's girl into his house on the farcical pretence that she has to work off her late father's debts, when

in truth, as everyone from here to Manaus knows, she's being used, like a lot of girls before her, as a sexual plaything. I shudder to think of what Mengrire really feels – and if what he feels is shared by the other Indians, then we could be in trouble.'

'I feel so helpless, Antonio. What can I do? If I say anything to my father, he'll just laugh me out of the house. Already he calls me an Indian lover and despises me for it.'

'You *are* an Indian lover, my young friend.'

'Yes – and proud of it. But what can I *do*?'

'You can't do a damned thing.'

The plantation, normally somnolent, now seemed tense to the point of bursting, and Alex walked beneath its trees, between its shabby shacks and thatched huts, convinced that as Antonio had said, something evil was brewing. He felt nervous and frustrated, thrashing about in his rejected love for Laura, and spent a lot of time thinking about what Peruche had said and wondering what it meant.

All things were the one thing, all events the one event – the death of the *seringueiro*, then the death of Father Symonds, the arrival of Laura, the beating drums and the wondrous lights – and he sensed that they were all coming together to explode in some manner he could not define.

'Fear,' he said to Father Benedict, during a visit to the mission. 'I live with fear every night and day and I can't shake it off. Is it all to do with Laura? Do I love her too much? Am I simply letting my own doubts rise up and take me over completely?'

'Your doubts about your love for her?'

'No, about her love for me. I love her more than anything in the world and I want it returned.'

'You feel rejected?'

'Yes.'

'If she rejects you, it's out of kindness. I've said it before and I repeat it: she's too old for you, Alex.'

'I simply can't accept that.'

'Unfortunately Laura does.'

'I'm not interested in what she thinks she feels; it's something else that frightens me.'

'What?'

‘The Yano. She’s becoming obsessed with them. Every time she hears the drums and sees the lights, her obsession grows stronger.’
‘She won’t be able to do anything about it because no one will take her into the jungle. And I doubt that even Laura would be mad enough to go in there alone.’
‘I’m not so sure about that.’
If, as Peruche had said, there was a time of penance coming, the mysterious lights and the drums of the elusive Yano seemed to be part of it. Once an occasional manifestation, they now materialized with disturbing frequency, the lights illuminating the night sky above the jungle’s distant interior while the drums, sounding louder and more frantic than ever, seemed to make the very earth shake and the nocturnal air to vibrate.
At such times the world changed, or at least appeared to do so: the sky darkening, the air becoming sultry, the relentless drumming making the head reel and slightly distorting reality; while for the Indian plantation workers the effects were even more dramatic, causing hysteria and convulsions, religious ecstasy and violence, drawing them out of their humble homes and making them dance wildly on the lawns, sobbing and shrieking, sometimes foaming at the mouth, their bodies jerking in violent, epileptic movements, their eyes closed in a trance.
There was something terrifying about it, something relentlessly aggressive, and if it affected the Indians dramatically, it also affected those with white skin, stretching nerves to breaking point, putting tempers on a short fuse, forcing them out of the big house to the long, narrow veranda where, grouped together, they would either stare at the hysterical workers or at the lights that rose and fell like silent flares high above the dark jungle.

Laura was always fascinated, almost speechless with wonder, her large green eyes reflecting the distant lights in the black, star-flecked sky. She would grip the veranda railing, her head jerking up and down, her gaze shifting from the distant lights to the dancing Indians and then back to the lights again. ‘Oh, God!’ she would exclaim. ‘It’s so unreal! I can’t believe it! And look how those Indians are behaving: those drums are *controlling* them!’

She was almost like a child then, her face radiant with excitement, whereas Alex’s father, slim and handsome and dishevelled, would merely raise his

clenched fist and shake it at the dancing Indians, shouting, ‘What can you do with these ignorant bastards? They’re no better than monkeys!’ He usually shouted this at Antonio, his venom encouraged by familiarity, enabling him to ignore the fact that Antonio was part Indian and might conceivably be wounded by such remarks. However, if Antonio was offended, he certainly never showed it, but merely nodded in a non-committal manner, a slight smile on his face. ‘We can’t stop it,’ he would say. ‘Not unless we stop the Yano drums. And there’s no way to stop the Yano drums, since we can’t find the Yano.’ Then he would glance at Laura, at her upturned, ecstatic face, before shrugging and returning his attention to his Indian brothers: those dancing in crazed abandon around the shacks at the other side of the dark lawn.

‘Bloody Indians!’ Alex’s father exclaimed. ‘They make life hell on earth!’
‘I have to find them,’ Laura said. ‘I have to go into the jungle and face them. When I hear those drums and look at those lights I know they’re calling out to me. I’ll have to find them. *I’ll have to!*’
Her determination frightened Alex and preyed constantly on his mind, more so because he had no way of knowing what she might do and, even more disturbing, felt that he was increasingly losing touch with her. She was dividing her time equally between the plantation and the mission, taking photographs, writing notes, talking a lot to the Indians, and even, on occasion, venturing alone into Manaus where, after too much to drink, she would spend the night alone, or possibly with company, in some shabby hotel.
Alex hated it when she did that, thinking it stupid and dangerous, so bluntly informed her, more than once and apparently in vain, that she was solving none of her problems with such behaviour, but was instead merely making the locals think her crazy or shameless.
‘Oh, I know, Alex. I know! But I just can’t help myself. I get depressed and drink a bit too much and then have to sleep – right away, on the spot. Nothing ever happens, Alex. I just drink myself to sleep. I always know when I’m going to have one of my nightmares, and because I don’t want you or your father to hear my screaming, I book myself into a hotel in town and then – because it’s the only way I can sleep at such times – drink myself into oblivion wherever I’m staying. I *know* it looks bad, Alex, but I simply can’t

help that. If I must scream in the night, I'd rather do it alone; and if that means spending a night in Manaus, then so be it, I'll do it.'

She was indeed growing more distant to Alex, metaphorically and in fact, hiding behind a smokescreen of frantic, incoherent stories, even as she spent more and more time with his father or, to his despair, removed herself from the plantation altogether, usually on the pretext of taking photographs when in truth, as Alex knew, she was drinking more every day and was no longer interested in her work.

She often drove herself to town, staying away for days, leaving the plantation without telling Alex where she was going and returning only to hide out in that awful room with her father and Rollie Thatcher, the sound of their drunken laughter reverberating along the corridor and entering Alex's bedroom with hideous clarity, making him toss and turn on his tormented bed.

Did she care about the Indian girl? Did she simply ignore all the others? Could she not hear, even from the guest wing, the girl sobbing and the men laughing, the music from the phonograph blaring loudly to hide the sounds of debauchery? Of *course* she knew – there was no way she couldn't know – and Alex, being ashamed of his father's behaviour and, more humiliating, of his inability to stop it, lay on his bed of nails, on burning coals, to think of Laura ignoring it.

He wanted her to revile his father, to pack her suitcase and walk out, and yet, because he loved her, because his love was fierce and greedy, he also dreaded that she might actually do that, perhaps to disappear into the jungle in search of the Yano. That fear, more than anything else, broke the last of his will and pride, making him finally behave just as Laura was behaving: closing his eyes to the shamed defeat in the eyes of the Indian girl, shutting his ears to the sounds of his father's frequent late-evening debauchery, and generally acting as if everything was normal.

Yet nothing was normal, nor would ever be again. Everything was wrong, disjointed, out of kilter, and surrounding his personal traumas, rising out of his growing awareness, building up (he was convinced) to some catastrophic event, were the lights in the sky, the drums pounding deep in the jungle, the eyes of Mengrire, nut brown and increasingly secretive, the girl about whom he brooded, her head bowed in hopeless shame, Alex's father and Rollie Thatcher, each egging the other on to further debauchery, Father Benedict

and Peruche with their warnings and reproofs, and finally, most vividly, his beloved Laura Wellman, her green eyes like gemstones, her tongue spinning tales of insane truth or wild imagining – all of them, all of it, swimming around in his head with a relentless, dazzling and unavoidable luminosity, convincing him that he would soon be seeing his world go up in smoke, the ordered structure of his life turning to ash and disappearing forever – which is exactly what happened.

Chapter Eleven

The day was approaching when Alex would have to return to the school in Manaus for his last three months there, after which he would be taking the boat to England for his further education, staying there for at least four or five years. Knowing this, he became increasingly fixated on Laura and was constantly trying to keep his eyes on her, not only in the plantation grounds but, even more so, when she made one of her many trips either to Father Benedict's mission camp or, more disturbingly, to Manaus for another night on her own.

Now inflamed by unrequited desire for her, he was blinded to everything but the need to possess her, to touch her and be touched in return, letting the flesh have dominion. There was no end to this yearning, no respite from his burning loins, and he suffered both the body's betrayals and his heart's anguished beating.

'It's madness,' Father Benedict said. 'You're making a spectacle of yourself. Everyone's talking about how you moon after an older woman, no longer taking an interest in anything and simply following her about all day. You must stop it, Alex. It will serve no good purpose. You're only causing yourself more pain, causing Laura embarrassment, and letting people like your father and Rollie Thatcher have a good laugh at you. Accept the fact, Alex, that you're much too young for her, and that sooner or later she'll leave here and never return.'

'I won't accept anything. If she leaves, I'll go with her. And if I can't persuade my father to let me stay here, I'll persuade Laura to come with me.'

‘What are you talking about, Alex? What new insanity is this? You’ll soon be going back to school in Manaus and then on to England; you simply can’t take her with you.’

‘Why not, Father? What makes you so sure? She already spends lots of nights in Manaus, staying in cheap hotels. All I want is for her to move into somewhere more decent, somewhere in one of the better areas close to my school.’

‘You mean you want her available.’
‘I just – ’
‘Don’t bother answering, Alex. Clearly, almost

deranged by Laura Wellman, you’re now fantasizing. Miss Wellman would never be a party to such an arrangement – and your father will not, as you might be hoping, let you forget school and remain here in the plantation. Indeed, your father wants you to continue your education in England and that’s all there is to it.’

‘I love her. I can’t live without her.’
‘You’ll forget her in England.’

‘You’re beginning to sound as if you want me to leave as well.’
‘Maybe I do. Your fixation on Miss Wellman is unhealthy in the extreme. It’s obviously a hopeless passion that can lead to no good, and it might be that the only way you’ll be cured is to send you away.’
‘I’d rather kill myself than go,’ Alex said.
If Laura was putting a distance between herself and Alex, there was also an increasing distance between Alex and Father Benedict, most of which was caused, he assumed, by his helpless fixation on Laura and his increasing inability to communicate with anything remotely resembling his former lightheartedness. This knowledge truly pained him, since the priest had been like a father to him, but think about it as he might, he could do little about it, some part of him, as if bent on destroying his former self, filling him with almost pathological insecurity and fear.
‘I can’t help it,’ he told Peruche. ‘I love her and want her. No matter what she

is – sane or insane, one of the wise or a fool, an habitual drunkard or simply a woman temporarily unhappy – no matter, I can't help myself, and I long for her night and day.'
'You have lost faith in yourself. You gave the sacred amulet away. When you did that, you discarded your protection from those who would prey on you. Now, you are like other men, your will weak, your thoughts disordered, and you leave your childhood innocence behind and give yourself to corrupt ways. This woman has been called here. I believe she truly is possessed. And if this be the case, then you surely must be in great danger. For this reason, I cannot guide you. All decisions are now your own. Whether you turn to the darkness or the light, I cannot hold you back. Whatever will be, will be.'
'You think she's corrupting me?'
'Yes. She asks you to perform miracles, to demonstrate your occult powers, and you, in your vanity, your need to impress her, perform what should only be performed in silence and secrecy. The powers are not to be revealed to those uninitiated, and by weakening before the attractions of this woman, you have opened your arms to the powers of darkness and invited them in.'
'She's just curious, that's all. She simply can't believe her own eyes. What harm can there be in simply showing her what I can do?'
'It's a breach of faith. You betray me and my teachings. You demonstrate your powers out of vanity and for personal gain – you clearly wish to gain the woman – and both motives contravene faith and goodness, thus rendering you sinful.'
'Damn you, Peruche, I don't care!'
'You damn yourself with those words.'
He knew that Peruche spoke the truth, that vanity and personal gain now drove him, yet he could not stop himself from lusting for Laura and trying to seduce her with miracles.
He would take her into the rainforest, usually to some várzea lake, close his eyes and raise his hand above the still, black water and will it to move. The silent forest would start rustling, shedding its leaves in a sudden breeze, then the clouds would gather above, turning the grey light darker, and the grass around them would bend, the flowers opening their petals and bowing, and then, while Alex sweated, his brow furrowed in concentration, the water would bubble or swirl, become a cauldron or a whirlpool, and then a snake might surface, a giant and dangerous anaconda, and would curl itself around

his legs and body with the most gentle, loving care.
Minor miracles, but impressive, making Laura stare in awe: he could lure the birds out of the trees, have them flapping their wings upon him, sitting side by side on his bare shoulders with the Goliath birdeater spiders, which, enormous and normally dangerous, would be remarkably passive. And he could stroke the deadly crocodilian caimans, wade through shoals of piranha fish, make rain fall out of the trees on a sunny day, their branches bending down towards him as if alive, trying to stroke his blond hair. Yes, he showed her his powers, wanting to impress her and succeeding – but what he could not succeed in doing was having his love returned.
'No, Alex, I won't. I don't care how much it hurts you. What happened on the raft should never have happened and certainly will not be repeated, no matter how much you remind me about it. It was a moment of madness, I hardly knew what I was doing, and I've felt ashamed of myself ever since for what I seem to have started. Believe me, Alex, I love you, but I'm not *in love* with you, and I'd rather hurt you now than make it worse later by leading you on. So please don't remind me of that particular day, because that's not being fair to me.'
'Fair? What's *fair*? To do it once and never again? Yes, Laura, you started it, you encouraged me to love you, and now, when I'm helpless without you, you pretend to not care.'
'I don't pretend to not care. That's a crude exaggeration. I'm simply saying that I care deeply for you, but not in that particular way; that I'm simply too old for you, Alex, so it would never work out.'
'Age has nothing to do with feelings.'
'Feelings change as we get older. And at your age, young man, your feelings will change quicker than mine.'
'What I feel for you won't change.'
'Yes, Alex, it will. When you meet a girl your own age in England, you'll soon forget me.'
But he didn't believe her. (How could he? He hurt too much.) And he brooded with growing bitterness over the amount of times she spent away from him, sometimes at the mission, other times in Manaus, and too often, during the evenings, in the main room of the family home, getting drunk with his father and Rollie Thatcher, abasing herself in their presence. He sometimes joined them in desperation, frightened of how they might be

influencing her, and had, more than once, because of his clearly unwanted intrusion, found himself the focal point for his father's sarcasm and barely concealed contempt.

'You want to find the Yano, Laura? Then get Alex to take you to them. My good son, if not too bright, has great empathy for the Indians, and might possibly lead you through that miserable jungle without getting you lost. Then, when you find the Yano, if indeed they exist, you'll have someone who understands not only their language but their obscene hocus-pocus.'

'Sometimes, Frank, I swear, you can be really disgusting, displaying an extraordinary lack of feeling for your own son. You should be proud of Alex instead of making fun of him; he's a lovely and very remarkable young man.'

'Lovely, indeed! Remarkable? Bear with me while I disagree. The only thing remarkable about that boy, my dear, is the size of his eyes when he looks at you.'

'I find that remark singularly tasteless, even coming from you, Frank.'

'You know as well as I do that the boy worships the ground you walk on, seeing you through rosecoloured glasses, as befits his tender young age.'

'If that's the case, you should be happy that he's normal and stop sneering at him.'

'Normal? Did you say *normal*? This boy is *normal*? This boy is seventeen, has lived his whole life in the Amazon, knows hardly a thing about civilized society, and only feels truly at home with those bloody Indians and their primitive ways. Hardly *normal*, my dear!'

The nights went on a long time, continuing after Alex had left, the drunken laughter of his father, Rollie Thatcher and Laura echoing in the corridor outside his bedroom and breaking his heart.

Her regular presence there bewildered him, her apparent enjoyment even more so, adding more contradictions to the already confused vision he had of her. She defended him rigorously against his father's sarcasm, yet stayed on when he left the room; clearly despised the obese and morally disgusting Rollie Thatcher, yet laughed merrily at his terrible jokes. She knew that in her absence both disgraced themselves with the Indian girl, yet she did no more than voice her repugnance to Alex, but otherwise continued to spend her evenings in that awful room, being insulted and offering insults in return, filling her glass up repeatedly. Alex didn't understand because she seemed to be comfortable with it, oblivious to the fact that her willingness to banter

with them was encouraging his father and Rollie Thatcher to think her cheap. ‘My son’s in love with her,’ his father once said to the chortling Rollie Thatcher. ‘She behaves like a tart with we gentlemen, but still he’s in love with her.’

‘Such is youth,’ Thatcher said. ‘All sweetness and light. You get a woman like that, quite clearly a shopsoiled creature, but youth can only view her in virgin white, wanting to hold her nimble, expert fingers, not thinking what they’ve been up to.’

‘You’re both pigs,’ Alex said. ‘You don’t respect anyone. You try to drag everyone down to your own level and then spit upon them. She’s not a tart and you know it.’

‘*Pigs*, did you say, Alex? My God, watch your tongue, boy! I’d remind you that I’m your father and that Rollie here is one of my guests. Lucky for you, we’re both mature. We understand what you’re feeling. She talks so much about herself, about the debaucheries of her past, that you can’t sleep at night for thinking about it and wanting a piece of it. Well, a tart is a tart is a tart, so I don’t see what’s stopping you.’

Alex thought their talk revolting, their attitudes and actions base, and failed to understand how Laura could ignore it, more so because during those evenings when she wasn’t present (though she certainly knew it was happening) the Indian girl would be sent for and the sounds of revelry would change, becoming humourless and obscene, first his father laughing, then the revolting Rollie Thatcher, their contemptuous mirth sometimes broken up with periods of disturbing silence, occasionally with the sounds of the unfortunate girl’s weeping, the latter making Alex, in his bedroom, bury his head beneath his soft, sweat-stained pillow until, in a more blessed silence, he would drift into his troubled sleep.

He would dream about Laura, about drums beating in fury, about lights rising and falling above a large jungle clearing and illuminating the naked, brownskinned men who committed terrible blasphemies and cruelties. The lights rose from the ground – or from a swirling black hole in the ground – and he saw Laura’s face, her red hair streaming across her closed eyes, superimposed upon the vortex of the whirlpool and the stars in its awesome depths. Yes, the whirlpool’s vortex formed a tunnel, boring down through time and space, revealing the stars frozen in eternity, down there, in those dizzying depths, beneath Laura’s magnified, transparent face, the red hair

streaming across the closed eyes, forming a river of flames. Around the stars, which were benevolent, was the darkness, which was malignant, and Laura was sucked down, shrinking rapidly as she sank, and then went spinning into the black hole of eternity to be torn between the good and the bad. The lights rose and fell, the drums pounded, the Yano danced; there was hysterical laughter and screaming, pain and joy, a tremendous tumult and chaos. Alex dreamed it with a startling immediacy, tossed and turned and cried out, then woke to the pearly light of morning with his skin bathed in sweat and his heart beating rapidly.

He was building up to violence, to a blind and destructive rage, now feeling that he had, as Peruche had said, damned himself and let the bad consume his soul. Yes, slowly but surely his innocence had collapsed before the realization that love, which could ennoble, could also wound and even destroy; and so, ignorant about such violent and uncontrollable emotions, completely at the mercy of his recently released sexual desires, his passion for Laura was overwhelming him, his sense of futility enraging him, and he floundered like a fish on the riverbank, breathless and doomed.

When did his world explode?

He would never forget it as long as he lived. It began when Father Benedict, after complaining to Alex's father about his abuse of the Indian girl, left the big house in a rage and found Alex on the veranda where he was sitting in a rocking chair, his legs outstretched, watching the sun sinking over the river. Alex was steeped in gloom, his self-pity swamping his commonsense, and the priest, already enraged by his fight with Alex's father, erupted in the face of this fresh misery and made clear his disgust.

'What is it?' he said harshly. 'Are you going mad as well? Do I have to deal with your father, who exploits and degrades unfortunate Indian girls, and then deal with your increasingly senseless obsession with a much older woman? Is it living in this jungle? Is it this damned plantation? Can you really not see that your passion will fade and that sooner or later you'll feel the same for someone more suitable? Well, whatever, I won't stand for it! I'm fed up watching you brood like this. Either get control of yourself, stop your moping and complaining, or I'll tell your father to send you to England on the next boat out. Do you understand what I'm saying, Alex? Either get that woman out of your system or get ready to pack your bags. I won't let you make a fool of yourself any longer. I won't let you ruin yourself.'

Alex listened to no more. Instead, he simply stood up, brushed past the angry priest, and then, feeling sick to his stomach, hurried into the house. He walked past the main room, knowing that Laura wasn't there, and went along the gloomy corridor, past his own room, turning right at the end and passing through the door that led into the modest guest wing. He was quivering with rage, with despair and a kind of madness, convinced that everything was collapsing, his friendships, his former peace of mind, perhaps even his sanity, and wanting to sort it out once and for all, no matter the cost. He hammered on Laura's door, using his tightly clenched fist, and then heard his own voice, calling her name, as if coming from far away. The door opened almost immediately and Laura was there before him, holding a dressing gown around her body, her face sleepy and sensual.

'Alex!'

'I love you. I came here to confirm that. Tomorrow I have to go back to Manaus and I want you to come with me. You can stay in a hotel while I'm at school. After school, we can stay together in the hotel.'

'Sorry, Alex, *what* was that?'

'You heard me, Laura. You know you did. I want you to either come to Manaus or tell me right now that you don't love me.'

'Alex, this is ridiculous.'

'Damn it, Laura, I'm serious! I won't leave unless you come with me or tell me you love me.'

'You know I love you, Alex.'

'I don't mean it in that way.'

'No, Alex, I won't lie about the other – and I won't go with you to Manaus. Are you crazy? Do you know what you're suggesting? You know it's not possible.'

'You could come if you wanted to.'

'I won't – and that's final. Now leave me alone, Alex. This is silly. We'll talk it over tomorrow.'

'It's my *father*, isn't it?'

'Pardon? What are you – ?'

'You're rejecting me because of my father. You spend all your evenings in there, getting drunk with his and Rollie Thatcher, fascinated by his flair for debauchery and wanton cruelty. Yes, Laura, you pretend to despise him, but you really find him attractive. He insults you and humiliates you and makes

suggestive remarks to you, and all the time, no matter what you say to the contrary, you're actually enjoying it. You know what? I think my father's right: you behave like a tart!'

Laura slapped his face.

Startled, hardly believing it, Alex touched his stinging cheek, then stepped back and stared at her for some time, trying to hold in his tears. He was deeply wounded, speechless, in a state of shock that she had done it, but a part of him also felt shame because he knew he deserved it. Laura also looked shocked, and had placed a hand over her mouth, thus emphasizing the enlarging brilliance of her eyes as they repeatedly blinked and slid, with a stunned, stricken panic, away from his gaze.

The silence between them was terrible, resonant with their torn emotions, but then the Yano drums started beating and Laura jerked her head around, staring back across the room to the window and, obviously, the sky beyond.

'Oh, God,' she whispered, 'it's starting again. And there they are… those damned lights!'

Alex started crying. She had forgotten him already. The tears rolled down his cheeks as he turned away from her and, without further ado, walked out of the house. The sun was just sinking and the sky was turning dark, great pillars and streams of gold and crimson being swallowed by blackness. He hurried across the veranda, down the steps onto the mowed grass, and saw Father Benedict at the far side of the lawn, a cigarette in one hand, his head raised as he looked at a patch of sky beyond the workers' shacks. Alex turned away, now sobbing uncontrollably, and hurried along the front of the house, past the tall struts of the veranda, and across the open space at the end, heading straight for the forest. He glanced north as he crossed the clearing, in the direction of the pounding drums, and saw the lights rising and falling in gentle splendour, making a beautiful tapestry. Alex stared at them, fascinated, his tears making them seem hazy, but then, when he heard Father Benedict calling out to him, he wiped his eyes dry and hurried into the forest.

He soon found Peruche, squatting in front of his hut, swaying to and fro like a reed and chanting a bizarre, high-pitched litany. Alex sat down in front of him, hearing the drums, almost *feeling* them, the humid air seeming to press in upon him as if trying to smother him.

The old Indian stopped chanting, raised his head, opened his eyes, stared at Alex for a considerable time before eventually recognizing him and, with a

weak nodding of his head, acknowledged his presence. He told Alex he could speak and Alex did so, pouring his heart out, telling him about Laura and the pain she was causing him, saying that he felt like killing himself and didn't know what to do.

He could scarcely hear himself speaking, his words becoming lost in the sound of the drumming which, though coming from far away, seemed to be all around him. That noise was louder than ever before, seeming to hammer at him, but Peruche, nodding his head in a gentle manner, had obviously heard every word and proved it by giving his reply with softvoiced brutality.

'Why do you tell me this?' he said. 'What do you think I can do? When you gave the amulet away, you renounced your faith and lost your innocence and, in so doing, also lost the protection you once had. The drums beat, the lights live, and you come here in tears, claiming that you wish to kill yourself because of love's wounding passions. Well, my child, why tell me? Do you wish me to talk you out of it? Though pained, as I am, by your behaviour, I cannot interfere. Whatever will be, will be. What is written will be done. So what now happens, while the drums beat and the lights live, will happen no matter what I say or might foolishly attempt to do. I *cannot* interfere. I myself will soon be gone. You, my child, have made your own bed and must lie in it, tossing and turning as you will and suffering the consequences. The time of which I spoke, the time of penance, has come, and the form of the suffering, which you will choose, will give shape to the manner in which you change, for better or worse. I have my own penance to bear, and so, my child, whatever you decide, please decide it elsewhere. Now I must be alone.'

Alex stood up and hurried away from the old Indian, back through the forest. His pain was unbearable, like a blade scraping exposed nerves, and the forest, now in black, chattering night, suddenly seemed threatening to him. He walked faster, feeling frightened, wanting to reach the clearing quickly, and then, when he reached it, he looked up to see the lights in the sky, far away and spectacular.

The lights were like Catherine wheels, ascending and spinning rapidly, their brilliant outer rings swirling around a darker core, their silvery striations shooting out for miles and turning into great, glistening cobwebs. They were numbered in their hundreds, forming kaleidoscopes in the starry sky, shooting up from the jungle depths, far north, in the interior, and, equally mysteriously, exploding out of the sky itself, first as pinpricks of light, then

as dazzling, fluorescent flares that descended in slow, elegant arcs and disappeared back into the jungle.

He stared at them, fascinated, knowing that Laura was staring at them, and then, looking around him, seeing that Father Benedict had gone, he went furtively around the back of the big house in the expectation of tapping on Laura's bedroom window and talking to her again.

The light in her bedroom was still on, beaming out through the protective mesh wire, and he saw Laura framed by the window, wearing only the dressing gown, her red hair falling down to the base of her spine, a drink in her hand.

Alex tip-toed towards the window, raising his hand and preparing to call her, but then she threw her head back and laughed as his father stepped into the window frame. He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder and run it down to her breast. She chuckled in a throaty manner, then placed her free hand on his father's hand, and Alex, his world collapsing, becoming a cauldron of pain and suffering, stifled a broken sob and turned away and headed straight for the river.

At that moment he hated them all and wanted to use his powers to damage them. Recalling what Peruche had said, hating him more for having said it, he determined to test his powers to the limit and then use them for vengeance.

The drums were pounding relentlessly, in aggressive, hypnotic rhythms, and the Indian workers, drawn out of their humble shacks, were all dancing and shrieking on the roads beneath the papaya trees. Alex had to hurry through them, feeling as if he was dreaming, his head reeling from the insistent, almost violent rhythms of the drums, his body being pummelled by those jerking epileptically around him, some staring wildly at the magical lights, some with heads back and eyes closed, some foaming at the mouth and wriggling frantically on the ground, their shrieks demented and piercing.

He had seen all this before, but it had never been so hysterical, and he sensed that the distant drumming, which seemed to be inside his head, was not only louder but more deliberate, inciting the madness. Dazed, his heart pounding, he broke free from the crowd and then leaped over the low wall onto the steps that led down to the *porto*, turning right at the bottom and following a narrow path along the riverbank.

The pounding drums were like his feelings, tumultuous and chaotic, driving him onward into the darkness of the forest and deeper into his blinding rage.

He was momentarily insane, his thoughts spinning wildly, and when he came to a muddy inlet and saw a large group of crocodilian caimans, he waded into the inky-black water without hesitation. The water rippled and parted, forming silvery tapestries in the moonlight, as the caimans, sensing his presence, glided towards him. He shuddered, knowing fear, the pounding drums making his head tighten, and the caimans, like wet, rough-barked logs, started drifting around him. He watched them, wondering… Would he survive or die painfully? But the caimans just stared back, their frightful jaws opening and closing, and then, as if finding him distasteful, glided away.

He sobbed with relief, feeling close to insane, and then heard himself muttering demented, senseless words, and then waded across the inlet, following the rippling wake of the caimans, and saw them turning away and nosing out towards the centre of the river. He kept sobbing, shivering with cold, glanced up through the forest canopy, saw the rise and fall of the beautiful, magical lights and heard the incessant, violent drumming. He slashed his arm on a sharp stone, kept close to the bank, letting the blood drip down through the bulrushes and into the water.

The water bubbled and swirled. The piranha fish were beneath the bank. They came out in a large, greyish shoal, following the smell of his dripping blood, and churned the water up all around him as they surrendered to frenzy. He sank down, defying death, feeling the water boiling around him, his skin grazed by the rough bodies of the flesh-eating fish, but otherwise remaining untouched in that seething, ravenous mass. The piranhas were crazed with bloodlust, but miraculously did not touch him, instead turning against one another and tearing each other to pieces. The water around him was exploding, turning into a cauldron of blood, spitting dead fish and pieces of bloody meat into the darkness around him. He could scarcely credit what was happening – those razor teeth never touched him – and eventually, when the churning water had settled down, when the dead piranhas were floating around him in the steaming crimson water, he felt a mixture of triumph and despair, and climbed up to the bank.

He was dripping bloody water, shivering with cold and shock, and as he headed back into the dark forest he glanced up through the trees and saw, in a patch of brilliant stars, the rise and fall of the other lights. The drums were still pounding, filling his head, seeming to hammer at his racing heart, drawing him deeper into the rainforest – and into his madness – in search of

further proof that he was inviolable and could turn those same powers against all of them – those now viewed as enemies.
He saw the bush he had been seeking, the two gigantic bird-eater spiders, Goliaths, and he shoved his bloody arms into the foliage to let the spiders jump onto them. This they did, instantly, their fangs probing his skin, but then they wandered up and down, from his wrists to his shoulders, their urticating hairs tickling his hairs, their fangs pinching his skin, but eventually, as the caimans had done, they failed to attack him.
He felt triumphant and ashamed, the tears streaming down his cheeks, and then, in a rage such as he had never known before, he smacked the huge spiders off their branch and hurried on through the forest.
He no longer knew what he wanted, feeling only the shame of his helpless hatred, realizing that no matter what Peruche had said, the forces of good were still protecting him. Hearing the drums and seeing the lights, he was convinced they were part of it: that somehow or other he was tied to that distant place and was, in fact, being controlled by it, perhaps by the drumming. He sobbed, feeling wretched, hearing someone calling his name, ignored the distant voice and continued onward and reached a black, still várzea lake.
Not quite still: the water was rippling, the ripples forming large triangles, each one containing wavering lines of silvery moonlight… and then he saw the giant snakes, the anacondas, both about thirty feet long, and he stepped forward, hardly knowing what he was doing, and stood at the water's edge. The drumming was even louder, reaching a deafening crescendo, pounding relentlessly at his head, at his racing heart, and destroying the last of his sanity. He saw the giant snakes coming towards him, flat snouts parting the moonlit water, slithering up the bank to his feet, but then moving away again, as if undecided. If they attacked him, he would die – they would coil around him and crush him to death – but he sensed, in defiant rage and shameful pride, that they were not going to do so. He stood there, his tears flowing, his body shaking with cold and shock – and then the drumming stopped abruptly, the silence cut like a knife, and the giant snakes, as if sensing his sudden loss of his powers, came towards him again.
'*Alex!*'
Father Benedict grabbed him by the shoulders, pulled him away from the snakes, jerked him around and slapped him across the face and then, as he

heard the snakes slithering back into the water, grabbed his wrist and told him to run and dragged him into the forest. Alex did as he was told, still sobbing, drained of life, and ran as quickly as possible, crashing through the undergrowth, making leaves and flowers rain down, and eventually stopped, gasping for breath, his head lowered in shame, close to the road that led to the plantation.

No drumming. No strange lights. The forest chattered in a vast outer silence. Father Benedict grabbed Alex's arms, shook him vigorously, almost brutally, then pushed him against the trunk of a rubber tree and forced his chin up. He was still sobbing profusely, couldn't stop and was mortified, looking through a film of tears at his good friend's perspiring face.

'They've gone!' he cried. 'My occult powers have all gone! I wanted to use them in hatred, for revenge, and now they're all gone!'

'*No more!*' Father Benedict snapped. 'There's been enough of this! Give her up, Alex! Go away! Set yourself free from this madness and get your sanity back. Return to school tomorrow. Take the first boat to Manaus. Stay there until your father can arrange to have you shipped out to England. Are you listening to me, Alex? Will you do that? *Will you leave here tomorrow?*'

Alex's spirit broke completely, making him sob even louder, somehow managing to shake his head in a gesture of consent, falling forward into the arms of the priest and burying his face in his shoulder.

'Yes!' he cried. '*Yes!*'

They clung to one another, rocking back and forth together, the forest chattering all around them, ignoring their mutual grief, while high above their heads, above the canopy of the towering trees, the stars, multitudinous and bright, shone in cold, lifeless beauty.

Chapter Twelve

It was hard to accept that it had only been six weeks. As the twin-decked paddle-steamer inched slowly through the black water towards the modest *porto* of the plantation, Alex, standing on the upper deck with his hands on the steel railing, stared through the grey light of the early afternoon at the steps leading up to his father's plantation. He saw Antonio on the top step, looking just as he remembered him, but he still felt that he had been away for six years instead of six weeks.

His father was dead. That much he knew. The headmaster of the boarding school in Manaus had given him that sombre news, adding that he had no more specific information, but that his presence was required back on the plantation. Alex had responded strangely, not too sure of his feelings, still loathing his father for his relationship with Laura, still thinking too much of Laura to get a proper grip on any form of reality outside her. So, there had been shock, a quietly numbing blow to his system, but overall a constant, nagging pain and soul-crushing bewilderment.

The paddle-steamer bumped against the rubber tyres protecting the wooden jetty, and the steps upon which Antonio was standing shook visibly, making the overseer and the Indian bearers standing with him hold on to each other. When the jetty had steadied, Antonio waved, a sad smile on his face, and Alex waved back automatically, hardly aware of his action. He heard the deck crew shouting, saw the restraining ropes being thrown out, then glanced beyond the *porto* to the distant shacks of the *seringueiros*, saw the roof of the main house beyond them, then green forest and grey sky. The plantation did indeed look desolate, merely deepening his depression, and he clenched his fists tighter on the steel railing, ashamed of what he was thinking.

The six weeks in the boarding school had been interminable and miserable, each minute stretched to breaking point by the shame of what he had attempted, every day and especially every night filled with thoughts of Laura and how she had, in his eyes, betrayed him; thus it had seemed to go on forever, he felt aged overnight, and when the news of his father's death came, given to him by the grave headmaster, his bewilderment and curiosity had focused only on what might have happened.

Above his shock, even more severe than his pain, was the bitterness and love he felt for Laura, and, worse, the realization that he was more concerned with seeing her again than with grieving over the loss of his father. This knowledge, more than anything else, made him feel old and empty, so much as he wanted to see Laura, he picked his suitcase up with reluctance, feeling that he was living a bad dream from which he might never waken up.

Taking the steps down to the lower deck, he made his way through the milling bearers to the gangplank that sloped gently above the black water. Some bearers moved out ahead of him, carrying sacks and boxes on their bent backs, and he followed them down the narrow, swaying gangplank to the sun-bleached stone steps that led up from the jetty. Antonio was waiting there for him, wearing a white shirt and slacks, his smile sad, his brown eyes warm and welcoming. He stepped forward and embraced Alex, holding him for some time, then moved back a little to stare at him, his gaze open and steady.

'So,' he said, 'you don't look too bad. How are you feeling?'
'I'm all right, Antonio. Not too happy, but otherwise fine. You won't have to use kid gloves.'
'You seem older, which is strange, given that you've only been gone six weeks.'
'I feel a lot older. I'm not a child anymore.'
Antonio grinned. 'No, indeed you're not. Come on, let's get you back to the house. I'll fill you in there.'
The jeep was parked at the other side of the low wall bordering the *porto*, a new Indian driver, not Mengrire, sitting in the driver's seat. Alex wondered why Mengrire wasn't driving as usual, but he didn't bother asking, deciding to wait until they reached the big house before asking about anything.
After humping his small suitcase onto the front seat, beside the new driver, he took the back seat beside Antonio. He was starting to feel slightly nervous and disappointed, the former because he didn't know what he was about to hear, the latter because, as he had not been slow to notice, neither his good friend, Father Benedict, nor Laura Wellman had turned up to welcome him back.
'Right,' Antonio said to the new driver, speaking in Portuguese. 'Take us to the back of the master's house, to the door of the guest wing.'
'*Sim, Senhor.*'
Alex glanced at Antonio when the jeep growled into life and, as it lurched toward along the tarmaced road between the papaya and palmetto trees, saw that his Brazilian friend was uneasy, offering only a hesitant smile.
'You'll be staying in the guest wing,' he said. 'I'll explain why when we get there.'

‘Explain it now, Antonio. Why the guest wing? It really doesn’t bother me that my father’s lying at rest in the main house.’
‘It’s not that,’ Antonio said. ‘Your father’s body isn’t here at all. Your father’s lying at rest in the morgue of the hospital in Manaus.’
‘The morgue? What are you talking about? He should be lying at rest in his own house. That’s the custom, Antonio.’
‘I know, I know,’ Antonio said, waving his hand in an agitated manner. ‘I’ll explain when we’re inside.’
The drive only took a minute and soon they were climbing down to stand by the window where Alex had seen Laura with his father. He glanced at the window, perhaps hoping to see Laura inside again, but just as quickly looked away, his heart beating too fast.
The new Indian drove off, the jeep banging and coughing, and Antonio, carrying the single suitcase, led the way up the wooden steps and through the mesh-wire door, into the guest wing. It was gloomy inside and remarkably quiet, chilling Alex to the depths of his soul. He knew then, on the instant, that the house was completely empty and that something was therefore terribly wrong. Antonio led him to the room beside Laura’s and opened the door.
‘In here,’ he said.
Alex stepped into the small but comfortable room, glanced around at the antique furniture, then looked out the window to see the lawns running away to the thatched shacks of the *seringueiros* over which, low and foreboding, were dark, stormy clouds. He shivered and turned away, a part of him quietly retreating, and saw Antonio setting his suitcase on a rack in the mahogany wardrobe, after which he lit a cigarette, sat on the edge of the bed, and balanced an ashtray precariously on one knee.
‘Sit down,’ he said.
Alex did so, taking a chair near the window, still aware of the eerie silence of the house and wondering what was to come. Antonio inhaled nervously on his cigarette and then blew the smoke out.
‘This won’t be pleasant,’ he said. ‘Would you care for a drink?’
‘No.’
‘Fine. If you can do without one, then so can I.’ Antonio inhaled again on his cigarette, blew the smoke out, nicked the ash into the ashtray on his knee, then, looking directly at Alex, said, ‘Your father didn’t die of natural causes.

In fact, he was murdered.'
Alex stared steadily at him, not too sure of what he was hearing, certainly not too sure of what he was feeling, though his heartbeat seemed unsteady. *The silence*, he thought. *The empty house*. *Now I know why it's empty*… He kept staring at Antonio's anxious brown eyes, knowing how he was suffering, noticing that the hand holding the cigarette was shaking a little.
'Go on,' he said. 'I'm all right.'
Antonio sighed. 'That's why the house is empty and why I haven't put you in there, near the main room. You see… that's where he was murdered.' He inhaled on his cigarette, blew a smoke ring, watched it drifting away from him. 'I'm sorry, Alex, but you might as well have it straight… It was a regular slaughter: both your father and Rollie Thatcher were butchered with machetes. The whole room was splashed with their blood and, apart from that, was a terrible mess.'
'It was vandalized?'
'Yes, you might say that. As if done in a frenzy.'
Leaning forward in his chair, Alex covered his face with his hands. He sat like that for some time, drifting down through the silence, then, with a shudder, straightened up and stared again at Antonio.
'Do you know who did it?'
'We *think* it was the Indian girl, but we can't be too sure because she disappeared, with Mengrire, the night it happened and has not been seen since. Certainly she had a motive: it was your father's mistreatment that led to *her* father's death and, of course, as we all know, your father was making her pay off her father's debts by being his whore. I think you'd agree that she therefore had good reason to hate him.'
'Mengrire disappeared with her?'
'Yes.'
'That figures: she was his sweetheart.' Alex found himself gazing out the window, yearning for fresh air; there was no hope of having it right now, so he turned back to Antonio. 'I think I'll have that drink now,' he said.
Antonio nodded, placed his ashtray on the bed, stood up and pour some of the *caipirinha* that he had thoughtfully prepared for Alex's arrival. After handing the glass to Alex, he sat on the edge of the bed again, balanced the ashtray on his knee and continued his story.
'Anyway, we think it was the Indian girl, or, at least, something to do with

her. As I said, she disappeared with Mengrire the same night of the murders; and because Peruche disappeared that same night and has not been seen since, we're inclined to believe it was some kind of ritualized act of vengeance… Don't look at me that way, Alex – your friend Peruche's gone.'
Alex sipped his *caipirinha*, feeling it burn down to his stomach, subtly expanding his awareness of himself while easing the shock and pain of Antonio's gently spoken, but brutal, revelations. He already believed that his whole world had collapsed the night he lost his occult powers, but now, as he stood up to replenish his empty glass, he understood that the real, complete collapse was occurring this very moment. He felt hot and then cold, hot again, cold again, and as he sat back in his chair and sipped his drink, the horror crept insidiously over him.
'God,' he said, 'I can't get to grips with this. I think I must be imagining it…'
Then another thought came to him, more horrible than all the others, and as he felt a tremor ripple through him, he said, 'Laura! What about Laura? Was she here when it happened?'
'We're not sure, Alex. We – '
'What do you mean, you're not sure? Where *is* she? Oh, God, of course she's not here!' Alex glanced wildly about him, as if expecting her to materialize, his heart racing as he looked back at Antonio, his voice reverberating in his own ears, sounding shrill and demented. '*Damn it, where is she?*'
'Calm down! Calm down!' Antonio was waving his hands placatingly. 'She wasn't murdered as well – we *do* know that much – but she disappeared with the others and, like them, hasn't been seen since.'
'She disappeared the same night?'
'Yes.'
'Oh, Christ! Oh, my God…' Leaning forward again, Alex covered his face with his left hand, dropping down through some dark hole in himself and hoping to find there oblivion. Instead, he found only recollections, vivid images of them all: the Indian girl in his father's house, her face lowered in shame; Mengrire watching her from the lawn, his tears streaming down his cheeks; Rollie Thatcher on the sofa, belching and farting and laughing scornfully; old Peruche in front of his thatched hut, by the limpid várzea lake, rocking back and forth and meditating, his mind alight with *epena*; and finally, most vivid of all, like a glowing flame in a dark cave, Laura's beautiful face.

‘Oh, Christ!’ he said. ‘*No!*’
Feeling a hand on his head, pressing lightly, stroking gently, he looked up at Antonio’s brown eyes and saw his kind smile. ‘It’s all right, Alex. You’re all right.’ Antonio nodded affirmatively and took a step back. He sat down on the edge of the bed again, stubbed his cigarette out, and placed the ashtray back on the mahogany cabinet. Alex straightened up, sipped some more *caipirinha*, took a couple of deep, even breaths and fixed his gaze on Antonio. He wasn’t too sure of what he wanted to say, but the words came out anyway.
‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Why do you think Laura went as well?’
Antonio shrugged. ‘Who knows? We have a couple of theories. We certainly know she was on the plantation the night of the killings and unless she happened to be with Peruche, she had to be in the house. So, one way or the other, she had to know the slaughter was taking place.’
‘That doesn’t necessarily mean she was involved.’
‘No, Alex, it doesn’t. She spent nearly every evening in that room with those two men, your father and Rollie Thatcher, so it’s possible she was there when the killings occurred and that she, also, was killed and her body carried away for some reason – possibly to complete some ritual – or that she *wasn’t* killed, but was abducted, either to prevent her from reporting the crime or, I fear, to be killed later for the reasons already mentioned.’
‘But you don’t believe any of those theories.’
‘No, Alex, I don’t. If they killed her, they could have removed her body from the plantation without being seen, but if they abducted her… Well, that would have been more difficult.’
‘So she wasn’t killed and she wasn’t abducted, which means she was part of it.’
‘Well, it certainly seems that she knew about it and that she left of her own accord – and, of course, she was obsessed with the Indians’ various rituals, particularly those rumoured to be practised by the Yano. What we believe, then, is that Laura, if not directly involved in the killings, certainly knew they had occurred and left the plantation willingly with the perpetrators, presumably the Indian girl, Mengrire and Peruche. She was, you’ll agree, totally obsessed with the Yano, and since both Peruche and Mengrire believed in the existence of that tribe, I believe the killings were done in a ritualistic manner, that the killers then fled north in search of the Yano, and

that Laura, who'd been looking for someone to lead her to the Yano, saw her golden opportunity and went with them.'
'Oh, God,' Alex murmured.
'Right now,' Antonio said, 'they're probably heading for the region where those lights rise and fall… and if they actually manage to get there, given what's been widely reported about the Yano, God help them, particularly Laura.'
Alex shuddered and stood up and went to the window, pressing one hand against the mesh wire and looking down on the lawn. It was empty and silent, bathed in a sullen, greyish light, and he shuddered again and closed his eyes and thought about the Yano. Naturally, he had often dreamt about them, dreams so vivid they were almost real, and now, as he recalled the shocking contents of those dreams, he felt himself trembling uncontrollably with fear and revulsion.
Laura, whether sane or insane, might indeed soon find herself face to face with the forces of darkness… and what they might then inflict upon her was too unbearable to think about.
'So,' he said, 'what happens now?'
'It's all over,' Antonio said. 'We have to close the plantation. Your father left you money in London, but you have to go there to claim it. Apart from that, you've nothing left here except debts and a bad reputation. So, we'll sell this house and everything in it, use the proceeds to repay local debts, then pay off the workers, close the plantation for good, and then ship you to England to be educated in a civilized place.'
'How long will all that take?'
'About a month.'
'Then it's all really over?'
'Yes, Alex, it is.'
'And Laura?'
'You know about Laura: we can't do a damned thing. If my theory is wrong, she'll turn up sooner or later, but if my theory's correct – if she's gone with them to find the Yano – there's no way on earth we'll ever find her. She's not in the vicinity, Alex. We've already looked high and low. This suggests they've gone north toward the unexplored regions, and if so, they won't be coming back. I'm sorry, Alex. It's finished.'
Alex stayed at the window, keeping his back to Antonio, not wanting his

friend to see the shock and pain in his face.
‘Yes,’ he said, sighing. ‘I’m sure you’ve done all you can.’
‘So can I proceed with the sale of this house?’
‘Yes, Antonio, of course.’
‘And you’ll go and live in London as planned?’ ‘I see no point in staying.’
Now he heard Antonio sighing, an infinitely sad, weary sound, followed by the thump of glass against wood as Antonio put his drink down.
‘Do you want something to eat?’ Antonio asked him.
‘Not yet,’ Alex replied. ‘I think I’ll have a liedown. Try to sleep. All of this has exhausted me.’
‘The rest of the house is closed,’ Antonio said. ‘I’ve already let the staff go. When you’re rested, come to see me in my place and I’ll cook you a meal – a real Antonio Bozzano speciality. You know where I live.’
‘Yes, Antonio, I’ll do that.’
Antonio sighed again, the door opened and closed quickly, and then Alex was alone in the small room, staring out through the window. The afternoon was fading, the grey light turning darker. Looking down, he imagined each of them in turn, all wandering through that unreal pearly haze in a parade of the lost: the Indian girl, Mengrire, old Peruche, Rollie Thatcher, his father and, finally, Laura Wellman, his true love and catalyst.
He kept staring, in a trance, seeing ghosts on the lawn, and then blinked and saw his friend, Antonio Bozzano, walking toward the thatched huts. Antonio lived just beyond them, in a halfway decent house, and Alex, feeling desolate, watched him crossing the road, then turned away from the window and lay down, fully dressed, on the bed. He stared up at the ceiling for some time, then closed his eyes.

It was quiet… too quiet… He saw the damned parading past him. The silence of the house was like a ringing that was pitched beyond sound. He kept his eyes closed, feeling lonely and frightened, aware that the silence, like a palpable presence, was gradually pressing in on him.

It was quiet… too quiet. He could hear his heart beating… Then his heart almost missed a beat when he heard something moving in the main house.

Startled, he opened his eyes, concentrating, straining as he listened to the

silence and heard… another noise.

The soft squeak of wood on wood, a piece of furniture being moved, followed by silence, then a distant, indecipherable sound, then the squeaking of wood on wood again, then silence once more.

After that, there was nothing… No, a muffled sobbing… but brief, then trailing off into the silence that permeated the main house.

Yes, the noise had definitely come from the big house… It had come from the living room.

Alex shivered and sat upright, his imagination running riot. He reached out for the bottle of *caipirinha* on the mahogany cabinet beside the bed, drank it down, letting it burn away his fear, and then quietly stood up. He heard the noise again, a distant sobbing or choking, and instantly opened the room door and stepped out into the gloomy, dusty, uninviting corridor.

Laura's room was just behind him, empty, stirring memories, but he went through the doorway on his left and entered the main house. The corridor stretched out before him, high-ceilinged, semi-dark, and he went along it, passing his former bedroom, until he came to the living room. He heard the sobbing clearly now, thought of the murders and shivered, then, taking a deep breath, he stepped inside and stopped almost instantly.

It was truly a shocking sight. The carpets and curtains had been slashed, the antique furniture smashed to pieces, the floor strewn with broken vases and glassware and other ornaments, the walls and floor stained with numerous dark patches of what could only have been dried blood. And there, in the middle of the room, sitting in one of the antique chairs, bent forward and sniffing back his tears, was Father Paul Benedict.

He looked up when Alex entered the room, almost as startled as Alex, then wiped the tears from his eyes and sniffed again, not in the least embarrassed but clearly anguished, his eyes bloodshot and stricken.

'Oh, Alex, my son,' he said, 'you've returned. How awful. How terrible!' He shook his head from side to side, as if wanting to deny reality, then took a handkerchief out of his pocket and blew his nose and looked up again.

'Antonio told you?'

'Yes.'

‘A truly awful affair.’
‘Yes.’
‘You must try to be brave about it, Alex. You must try to forget it.’
‘I won’t *ever* forget it.’ Alex stared around the room, suddenly remembering his dead mother, imagining her ghost, her angelic presence, being forced to look with horrified eyes upon what had transpired here. A bloodbath. A punishment and hideous desecration, one due to, the other wrought by, his father and his rank, indecent ways. Alex shivered with grief and rage and a malignant, clinging sense of horror, then crossed the room to the priest and took the chair beside him. He was shocked when he saw his friend up close, because the priest had aged overnight.
‘My father deserved it,’ Alex said.
‘Don’t say that!’ the priest responded.
‘I’m saying it: my father deserved it. He only got what was coming to him.’
‘No, Alex, please stop this! You mustn’t say another word! No matter how you feel right now, you’ll only regret it later, so please say no more.’
‘He deserved it, Father. He degraded everything he touched. He broke my mother’s heart and drove her into an early grave, he treated his workers like slaves and their wives like common whores, he tried humiliating me to excuse his own failures, and finally
– and I’ll never forgive him for this – he encouraged Laura’s drinking, stole her from me and seduced her, and caused her to be in this house and get involved in this mess. Yes, Father, he deserved all he got – but not Laura. *Not Laura!*’
Shocked by his own vehemence, he turned away from the priest, his eyes roaming around that awful, blood-stained room and coming to rest on his feet. A shiver of revulsion passed through him, nausea ravaged his stomach, and then a choked sob broke from his throat as his rage found its target.
‘She left with them?’ he cried out. ‘She went willingly? How could she? How *could* she?’
He covered his face with his hands, feeling choked with grief and bitterness, then raised his head to stare wildly at Father Benedict and be reminded that his friend had aged terribly and was likewise griefstricken.
‘I can’t answer your question, Alex. Only God can do that. What happened that night remains largely unknown and will doubtless always remain so. Get out of here, my son. Out of this doomed plantation and then out of this

country. Go to England, to civilized society, and never come back. You've nothing left here and there'll be nothing here in the future. As for now, let's get out of this room and its painful memories.'

He reached out for Alex's shoulder, gripped it lightly and shook him consolingly, then together they stood up, took one last look at the room – at the 17th century Venetian armchair in which Alex's father had often reclined, at the now upended French *bergere* into which Rollie Thatcher had often been squeezed, at the slashed curtains and blood-stained carpets and trampled paintings and broken antiques, most of which, over the years, had been collected by Alex's mother – and then, without a word, they turned away and walked out, crossed the corridor and left by the front door, to the veranda outside.

The afternoon had grown darker, the cloudy sky threatening a rainstorm, and they stood together on the veranda, looking across the plantation, unable to see north where the lights usually rose and fell – the unexplored north to which Laura had possibly fled – because the house was facing south, but instead saw the thatched shacks, the intersecting roads between them, the extraordinary variety of trees that lined the roads and formed the outlying forest, and beyond the trees, flowing with the silent majesty of its agelessness, the wide Rio Negro, that mere part of the much vaster Amazon. Alex was shocked to realize that having grown up loving it, he now loathed it.

'We don't really know,' he said, refusing to let the subject go. 'I refuse to believe that we can't find her. There must be a way!'

Turning to the priest, he saw the horror on his face: doubtless horror at the realization that he, Alex, not yet eighteen years old, was more concerned about the loss of the American woman than he was about the death of his own father. The priest stared at him a long time, hardly moving at all, then eventually, as if putting Alex's attitude down to grief, he took hold of his elbow, guided him down the steps to the lawn, then turning around until they were facing the big house, he waved in the direction of the sky in the far north, the clouds drifting like sludge over that unexplored jungle where the lights normally rose and fell, within which were the mythical Yano Indians and the hell they were reported to represent.

'We tried repeatedly to find her,' Father Benedict said, lowering his

bloodshot eyes and looking defeated, ‘but she had disappeared completely. We went into that jungle as far as we could, but we didn’t find Laura or the Yano. We sometimes heard what we thought were the latter, but we never actually saw them. We saw the lights in the sky, but no matter how often we hiked towards them, they always appeared to be in a different area and slightly farther away. Believe me, Alex, this is true. Out there the senses deceive one. North gradually becomes south, east gradually becomes west, and fairly soon you think you’re walking in circles, doubling back on your own tracks. And as it was with the lights, so it was with the drums: we would head for the beating drums, always believing we were getting closer, but once we reached there, where the drumming had *seemed* to come from, they seemed to come from elsewhere, usually spread out all around us, and no matter which direction we then took, it was always the wrong one. Go one way and the drums would be directly behind you; turn back and they were behind you again, or perhaps off to the side, but never, *never* in front of you, once you got close to them. No, we never found the Yano. We never caught a glimpse of them. I’m convinced they were there and that they knew we were there, but I’m also certain they simply had no interest in us, one way or the other. So, it was useless. We just walked in endless circles. We tramped around there for many days, but we didn’t see anything. We ended up believing that the Yano had found the others – or that the others had found the Yano – because Peruche, who was possibly one of them, doubtless knew where they were and how to find them. And so, if this is true, the Yano might have captured Laura and if they did so, almost certainly they would have killed her. That’s possible, but we’ve no way of proving it. There’s only one thing to know, Alex, and fully accept. *Laura Wellman is gone for good!’*
The priest suddenly walked away, trying to stifle his own weeping, hurrying across the darkening lawn to the tarmacked car park, while Alex simply stood there, too shaken to move, staring at the big house, now empty and haunted, eerily silent with the echoes of the dead and the damned: his mother and father, the Indian girl and Mengrire, Rollie Thatcher and Laura Wellman, and, yes, even himself, at least the child that he had been. Then he looked at the sky above the jungle where the Yano beat their drums and the magical lights rose and fell, that unexplored, frightening region to which Laura might have fled, and then he suddenly turned away – turned away as quickly as the priest had done – and looked beyond the thatched shacks, at the mighty river

succumbing to darkness, and finally accepted that he would soon be on a boat that would, in its modest way, take him along that same river, on the first leg of his journey to England and a new kind of future.

A month later he was on that boat, the sun sinking behind the rainforest, turning the sky to blood, making the river seem like lava, and he gripped the railing tightly, looking down at the swaying jetty, his head filled with thoughts of the thirty days that had just passed – of his father's funeral in Manaus, of the furniture being auctioned, of the Indians paid off, filing forlornly out of the plantation, of solicitors and surveyors and contracts and deeds, of the keys being turned in the numerous doors of the big house and the silence of desolation coming down – everything coming down, drawing inexorably to a close, his own eyes looking down at his two friends on the jetty: Antonio trying to smile, his brown eyes filled with sadness, and Father Benedict, his once handsome face now grim and certainly older.

Alex held the railing tightly, the deck vibrating under his feet, watching his friends grow smaller, the jetty seeming to shrink with them, the plantation moving back to let the jungle move in around it while the sun, in its sinking, sent banners of fire across the forest, turning green into yellow, the yellow into gold, the gold into a deep, pulsating crimson that devoured all it touched. And then all of it was gone and only the mighty river remained, and Alex leaned forward, putting his forehead against the railing, looking down at the black water that now boiled in black night, and he wept, his body trembling with loss and grief, then turned his face to the wind.

To be continued…

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OTHERWORLD
BOOK 3: THE RIVER
W.A. HARBINSON

Otherworld

W. A. Harbinson

Deep in the heart of the Amazon rainforest live the Yano Indians. A fierce, elusive tribe, they are
dedicated to the powers of darkness, their presence only revealed only by the hypnotic beating of drums… and by mysterious lights in the sky.

Laura Wellman , an American photojournalist, beautiful, sensual and deeply tormented… Believing herself to be possessed by evil spirits, she decides to

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Father Paul Benedict , a middle-aged Anglican priest who is starting to doubt his God and the meaning of life in general… Gradually becoming obsessed with Laura, he believes that in somehow saving her from

self-destruction he can find his own redemption.

Alex Poulson , adolescent son of a depraved rubber baron, an almost spiritual innocent born and raised in
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Copyright © 1984 by W. A. Harbinson
First published in Great Britain in 1984 by Corgi Books, London
ISBN 0 552 12380 3
This ebook edition published in 2015 by W. A. Harbinson

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Designed in the Isle of Wight, Great Britain, by www.inkdigital.org

Otherworld

Book Three
The River

Chapter One

A Cidade Maravilhosa : the Marvellous City. As the aircraft began its descent towards the Aeroporto Santos Dumont, Avril, even though she had never been here before, instantly recognized the ravishing blue sweep of Guanabara Bay, the long, thin white ribbon of Flamengo Beach, and the great rock of Pao de Acucar, or Sugar Loaf Mountain, towering high in the gold-streaked azure sky. She looked quickly at Alex, sitting beside her in the aisle seat, but he had his head back against a cushion, his eyes closed, his lips tight. Momentarily concerned, she reached out to touch him, changed her mind and looked again through the window. Now she saw the marvellous city, the fabled Rio de Janeiro, its buildings tall and off-white and embraced by the encircling mountains, its thousands of lights starting to wink on as the sun sank in splendour. Avril gave herself up to childish wonder as the sea filled her line of sight.

‘It’s beautiful,’ she said. ‘It’s everything they say it is. Everything I’ve heard and read about it is perfectly true. It’s just wonderful. Glorious!’

When Alex opened his eyes, turning his head towards her, she noticed how spiritually drained he was, how much older than his nineteen years he appeared to be, his face pale, cheeks sunken.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it’s beautiful – like you. But just a little bit older.’

She smiled, pleased by the compliment, knowing that he meant it, but more pleased that he was trying to retain his sense of humour at this particular moment. She knew how painful it must be for him, how he had dreaded this return, as she knew, when she studied him, how truly ill he was, the dark bags under his eyes revealing how often he had gone without sleep.

‘Thank you, kind sir, for comparing me to Rio, but I don’t think I’m quite in

the same class when it comes to either beauty or age.'

Now it was his turn to smile, but his eyes were still lustreless, as if focused inward upon himself – not with self-esteem, but with fear at what he might find where they were going. He had aged a lot during his year in London, the nightmares driving him to distraction, making him frightened to go to bed, his appetite failing along with his nerves, his health breaking down to the point where he could hardly make love to her – and so, even though they were here at her insistence, she wasn't at all sure that it would cure him. She actually feared it might make him worse.

'Are you all right?' she asked him.
'Yes, Avril, I'm fine.'
'You're too quiet.'
'I'm just tired – really tired. I just need a good

sleep.'
'Are you nervous?'
'Yes, a little bit. I don't know what I'm going to

find back here.'

The aircraft shuddered briefly, its engines roaring and subsiding again, then it turned and started descending toward the parallel lines of light that marked out the runway of Santos Dumont. The lights swung into view, then disappeared as the aircraft faced them, and Avril found herself looking at alluvial mountains and a bright-blue, white-flecked, rippling sea.

She felt tired but exhilarated, scarcely believing they were here at last, thinking back on the many days spent in many different aircraft – from war torn London to sunny Lisbon, from there on to the Canary Islands, spending a few days exploring the mountains, boating from one island to the next, drinking sweet wine in a waterfront bar in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, then on to Accra on the West African Gold Coast, entertained by her father's friends at the Achimota College, a few more days adjusting to the tropical monsoon climate (constant rain, sweltering heat), then across the South Atlantic, staying overnight on Ascension Island, volcanic rock and sea turtles, and

then, the next day, this very day, the last leg of the journey to the Tropic of Capricorn and the view now below her – and realizing that already the journey seemed unreal, something she had often dreamt about but not experienced until now.

‘We’re coming in to land,’ she said to Alex. ‘I caught a glimpse of the airport. It looks like a dangerously narrow strip of land stuck out there in the sea.’

‘That’s exactly what it is,’ Alex said. ‘In fact you’re going to land on the very soil where Rio de Janeiro was born. The birth of the city dates from the founding of a settlement on Morro do Castelo, or Castle Hill, by the Portuguese in 1565, after they’d driven out the French. A few years back that hill was demolished and poured as debris into the harbour to form the promontory on which the airport was constructed.’

‘They tore down an historic hill and poured it into the sea?’
‘That’s right,’ Alex said. ‘The *Cariocas*, always enthusiastic for change, aren’t concerned for their history, and the flattened remains of Castle Hill, which you might have seen a few minutes ago, are now covered with the skyscrapers of the city’s business area.’
‘Oh, my!’ Avril exclaimed softly.
The airplane was still descending, the graceful mountains growing larger, and Avril kept her eyes glued to the window, watching the sea race by below, and then the runway was there, a blur of distant hangars and hills, and then the airplane bounced a little, gradually slowed down, taxied along the runway and finally stopped.
‘Well, Alex, we made it,’ Avril said, ‘and we’re still in one piece.’
The airplane’s engines whined into silence, but the passengers were highly voluble, their uninhibited conversation again reminding Avril that she was a long way from England’s green fields and more restrained social habits. Glancing at Alex, an old man with a boy’s face, she felt a little uneasy.
‘Yes,’ Alex said. ‘Home sweet home.’
It didn’t take long to disembark and soon they were on the tarmac, walking through the early evening darkness to the linear block of the Panair terminal, its numerous windows casting beams of light over them as they reached the

wide entrance. The heat surprised Avril, being less humid than she had imagined, but she was still relieved to get inside the building where the air was much cooler. There were very few passengers, so they were processed quickly and amiably, the men at customs and passport control being unexpectedly casual, when not actually flirtatious, which some were. Alex didn't appear to mind, clearly accepting it as natural, but when they finally walked out, a *bagageiro* carrying their luggage, she could see that he was truly very nervous at being back on home ground.

Antonio Bozzano was waiting for them outside, stepping forward with both arms raised, his brown eyes as warm as his smile, his slightly plump, *café-aulait* face strikingly handsome, his well-fed stomach quivering over his trouser-belt. Avril knew it was Antonio (Alex had described him accurately and had told her he would be meeting them) and, also knowing how fond he and Alex were of one another, discreetly stepped back while they embraced. This done, Antonio straightened up and offered a broad grin.

'*Tudo bem?*' he asked, his voice low and melodious.

'*Tudo bem,*' Alex replied, jabbing his thumb in the air, trying to affect an ebullience that just wasn't there. Then turning to Avril, he added: 'And in English: all's well.'

'Ah, yes, your young lady!' Antonio stepped up to Avril, took hold of her right hand, turned it over as he raised it to his lips, then planted a kiss on the back of her wrist. He lowered the hand again, but kept holding it lightly, not in a remotely suggestive manner, but in genuine friendliness. '*Muito prazer em conhece-lo,*' he said. 'And now for you I will speak only English. I'm very pleased to meet you.' He nodded affirmatively and smiled, instantly making her feel good, stepped back and offered another broad grin, his eyes fixed directly upon her. 'Avril,' he said. 'A nice name… And the lady is beautiful.'

Above the grin, Avril noticed, Antonio's brown gaze was perceptive, only a slight wrinkling of his brow indicating to her that he had not failed to notice Alex's drawn appearance. Nevertheless, he didn't mention it and continued to act naturally, leading them across the pavement to the car parked at the kerb, then raising the lid of the trunk and jabbing his index finger at it, indicating to the *bagageiro* that he should put the suitcases in there.

'So, my young friend,' he said to Alex, 'how was your brief time in England?'

‘I’d hardly call a year a *brief* time, Antonio.’
‘Well, Alex, you were supposed to be staying for good, so given the fact that you’re back already, a year seems fairly brief. Anyway, how did it go?’
‘Not bad.’
‘By which you mean not good.’
‘That’s right, Antonio.’
The Brazilian grinned and nodded, paid off the *bagageiro*, then walked around the car and opened the rear door. ‘Well, at least,’ he said, ‘you found a most attractive young lady, so the year over there has done you *some* good.’ After smiling again at Avril, his brown eyes filled with warmth, he turned back to Alex. ‘I assume you’ll want to point the sights out to Avril, so it’s best you both sit in the rear. Now get in and we’ll go.’
‘Where are we staying?’ Alex asked him.
‘In a suite on the top floor of the Copacabana Palace. With what your father left you in England and the remaining money for the sale of the plantation, I figured you could afford a good hotel instead of a shack in a *favela*. I hope you agree.’
‘I agree,’ Alex said.
When Avril slid into the back seat, followed by Alex, Antonio closed the door behind them and took the driver’s seat. He drove off immediately, bypassing the business area, then driving around smooth green lawns and what appeared to be a marina (Avril could see lights beaming down on numerous masts) and finally along an almost imperceptibly curving boulevard that divided central Rio from Flamengo Beach and its now jet-black, bizarrely shaped rock formations.
The boulevard was surprisingly long, passing various residential areas, and as Alex pointed out the sights to her, his voice low and oddly flat, Avril felt increasingly confused: on the one hand enamoured by what he was showing her, on the other disturbed to be reminded once more that he was, for all she might love him, too far removed from her, locked inside that nightmare of his past and being ruined by it.
‘I was once in London,’ Antonio suddenly said, obviously wanting to lighten the leaden atmosphere, ‘but that was a long time ago, before the war began. I loved it then, but it must have changed a lot during the war. Did the air raids damage it badly?’
‘Yes,’ Avril said, ‘they did, but you’d still recognize it. It’s surprising, really,

how much is still standing when you think of how many bombing raids there were.'

'It must have been rough,' Antonio said. 'I think you all had a bad time.'

A bad time? Avril glanced out the windows of the speeding car, looking in both directions, and saw, as Antonio weaved around the buses, street-cars, private cars and taxis, the dark sea on one side of her, the lights of apartment buildings on the other, the colourful streets of Botafogo rising up to the candlelit hills, and realized, even as she thought of the difference between here and London, that the worst experience she'd had in her home city was dealing with Alex.

So, she told Antonio about the Blitz, answering his numerous questions, and as she talked (the car emerging from a noisy tunnel and taking a right turn into the beautiful boulevard of Copacabana Beach, the Atlantic on one side, its waves crashing down on the sand, ten-storey apartment buildings rising up on the other side), she thought of how she had first met Alex, of being struck by his remarkably gentle nature, of falling hopelessly in love with him and learning about his strangeness: his nightmares and visions and obsession with the Amazon rainforest, which, he claimed, was haunting him because of a woman who had disappeared after capturing his heart.

Yes, Avril loved him, but her love was under siege, threatened by the ghost of a woman whom Alex insisted he no longer loved or desired, but who obviously, in some way or another, still had him enslaved. It was in the hope of learning the nature and extent of his enslavement that Avril had come to Brazil with him.

'Well,' Antonio said, 'after the blackout and the Blitz, perhaps you'll really enjoy Brazil.'

'I hope so,' Avril said.

The car made another right turn, crossing the broad boulevard, and headed up to the front of the elegant hotel. A uniformed doorman opened the rear door, letting Avril and Alex step out. Avril glanced up at the towering building, at the canopied windows and railed-in balconies, then lowered her eyes to meet Alex's gaze. He was staring steadily at her, his eyes weary yet loving, a gentle smile turning his lips as he took hold of her arm.

'So,' he said, 'we're actually here. You must be awfully persuasive.'

'I'm persuasive because I love you,' Avril said, 'and know I'll have to fight for you.'

Antonio arranged their checking in, went up in the lift with them, showed them around the expansive suite with its tasteful decor, poured Alex a beer and Avril a chilled white wine, then sent them both out to the balcony while he received the bell hops bringing in their luggage. They were six stories up, overlooking Copacabana Beach, and they stood at the wrought-iron railing, leaning against one another, sipping their drinks and gazing down at the sea and the darkening, still crowded beach. The beach was actually filling up all the time and hundreds of candles were burning, making a smaller sea of yellow flames that moved back and forth restlessly.

'What's going on down there?' Avril asked.

'New Year's Eve,' Alex replied. 'At midnight it'll be 1947 and they're all there to celebrate.'

'I'll take you down later to see it,' Antonio said, stepping out onto the balcony with a drink in his hand. 'It's really quite an experience if you haven't seen it before. Every New Year's Eve here in Rio de Janeiro, thousands of *Umbanda* and *Quimbanda* believers gather together on all the major beaches – Copacabana, Leblon, Ipanema, Flamengo – and pay homage to Yemanja, goddess of the sea. There's no discrimination regarding age, sex or colour, and what you see down there, right now, are the first of the many thousands of believers bringing their candles, fresh flowers, portable altars, *caipirinha* drinks, and various gifts for the goddess. Pretty soon they'll be drawing numerous mystic symbols on the sand, indulging in various black and white magic rituals – *Umbanda* is white magic and *Quimbanda* is black – and then, a little later, white-costumed drummers will start playing, a lot of believers will go into trances, and at midnight they'll all rush into the sea to worship Yemanja.'

'It certain seems worth seeing,' Avril said.

'It is, Avril. Believe me.'

Alex finished off his glass of beer, set the glass down on the low table on the balcony, and then gave a weary, nervous smile that failed to brighten his eyes, which, a radiant blue beneath his blond hair, were blinking repeatedly. Studying him intently, Avril was again struck by his extraordinary appearance, by the fact that his face was almost beautiful – not merely handsome, but strangely beautiful – and that his beauty was to strong it could not be ruined by his ill health, even though it had hollowed out his cheeks, put dark bags under his eyes, turned his skin sallow and bloodless, and

generally worn him away. What it *had* done, she thought, was make him look young and old at the same time: almost ageless, in fact.
‘So,’ Antonio said, aware that silence was no blessing. ‘I want to know all about you two. Where and how did you meet?’
‘At school,’ Avril said.
‘That sounds distinctly unromantic.’
Avril smiled. ‘My father’s the head of the private school Alex was attending and, as an old friend of Alex’s mother, he invited Alex home for our regular Sunday roast dinner.’
‘Home, I assume, being a wing of the school.’
‘And your eyes met across the roast beef in that discreet English manner.’
‘That was it,’ Avril said.
Antonio smiled with delight, making Avril feel good again, but behind that more positive feeling was the fear that her love for Alex had brought to her. She had not fallen in love that first day, but gradually, with reluctance, first intrigued by his odd beauty, his romantic air of introspection, then moved by his silence – a silence resonant with unstated pain – and finally, after months of seeing him, of wandering the streets of London with him, of sitting with him in pubs, or in cinemas or theatres, often after an exhausting day with the Women’s Voluntary Service, in love with his unique sensitivity and almost feminine tenderness.
Yet it hadn’t been easy, had in all truth been hell, because as romantic yearning turned to physical desire, as she had drawn closer to him, she had learned about his nightmares, about the extraordinary events he had fled from, and, worst of all, although they finally made love, always in his rented apartment and not all that often, she had learned that he was not only sexually inexperienced, but also frequently impotent because of his fears and ill health. His nightmares, which were killing his spirit, were also destroying his body.
Now she shivered just to think about it, and took a sip of her white wine, glanced over the balcony at the people milling on the beach far below, then looked back at Alex as he smiled in that nervous manner at Antonio.
‘You’re being very polite, Antonio,’ he said, ‘but you know why I’ve returned.’
Antonio sighed forlornly. ‘Yes, I know. You have a mystery to solve.’
‘She never came back?’

‘No, Alex, Laura hasn’t been seen since.’
Just hearing that name made Avril feel deep pain, arising from the fragile web of the past year to bite her again. She glanced over the balcony, at the people milling on the beach below, trying to distract herself from the doubts that constantly gnawed at her.
Did Alex really love her? Or did he truly love Laura Wellman? Those questions had haunted Avril for most of the past year, scrawled on the clouds in her mind by an unsteady, ghostly hand – as ghostly and yet as real as that other woman who had disappeared into the rainforest. Now Avril felt like crying – for Alex’s pain, for her own doubts – but instead rubbed her eyes, observing the beach through a slight haze, the hundreds of flickering candles moving to and fro like the waves of a fiery sea.
‘Forget it, Alex,’ Antonio said. ‘It’s in the past and should be buried. You have a lovely lady here, you have money in the bank, you stand the chance of a good life in England – so don’t keep looking back at the past and tormenting yourself.’
‘You don’t understand, Antonio. It’s not a matter of choice. Whether I want it or not, those nightmares make me look back.’
‘You won’t stop the nightmares by returning here. In fact, as far as the nightmares go, the farther you are from the Amazon, the better.’
‘I *had* to come back. The nightmares brought me back. And Avril *insisted* that I come back. If there’s a cure, it’s right here.’
‘You mean the Amazon?’
Antonio sighed with mock despair and then went into the suite, returning with a fresh *caipirinha.* He swirled the drink lightly in the glass, glanced at Avril and then turned back to Alex. Down below, on the now dark, crowded beach, the first of the Indian drummers had started playing.
‘Okay,’ he said, ‘I’ll ask the dreaded question. Do you really intend going into the rainforest to find Laura Wellman?’
‘Yes.’
There was a lingering silence between them, disturbed only by the drums below, and Avril felt the tension quivering around her in an almost palpable way. Her wine was finished and she wanted some more, but she didn’t dare move.
‘Laura’s dead, Alex,’ Antonio said eventually. ‘I’m sorry, but you’ll just have to face that fact. Either she perished in the rainforest or she was killed by the

Yano; no way could she have managed to survive both of them.'
'That may or may not be true,' Alex said, 'but in this case it hasn't any relevance. It's not really Laura I'm looking for, but what *she* was looking for.'
'You mean the Yano?'
'Yes.'
'You haven't a hope in hell of finding the Yano, even if they exist. And if indeed they exist and if you find them, given what's widely believed about them, you won't get out alive.'
'I believe they exist. I don't believe that I won't be able to find them. I think quite a few people have found them – or the Yano found them. What *is* true, of course, is that those unfortunates were never seen again.'
'Correct. And now you want to be one of them?'
'I think it may be different in my case: that I'm *meant* to find the Yano – just as Laura was meant to go to them – and that there's some kind of meaning to all this.'
'I should never have let you listen to old Peruche.'
'No, maybe not. But at least Peruche *knew* that the Yano exist, because he was once captured by them, he was once their prisoner.'
The drumming on the beach below had become much louder, carrying clearly up to them, and Avril leaned over the railing to look down on that mass of flickering candles. There were thousands of people down there now, packed along the enormous length of the beach, and when she looked left, at Leme, she saw even more candles, repeatedly surging towards the sea and returning in that warm, cloudy darkness. She straightened up when she heard Alex speaking, quietly but firmly.
'And what about Father Benedict? Have you heard any more about him?'
'Please, Alex,' Antonio replied, 'leave this alone. Leave the past back where it belongs.'
'I *can't* leave the past back where it belongs. I'm *part* of that past. Now what about Father Benedict?'
'What I wrote you in my letter still stands. Father Benedict has gone, too. He disappeared four weeks ago and hasn't been seen since.'
Alex stared hard at Antonio, his eyes repeatedly blinking and unfocused, then he wiped the sweat off his furrowed brow with a shaky right hand.
'It gets worse,' he said. '*Worse!*'

Turning aside, he gripped the wrought-iron railing of the balcony and stared down at the beach. Avril followed his gaze and saw the thousands massed below, all obviously agitated, surging back and forth in waves, the countless burning candles forming an alluvial sea of yellow flame that illuminated wildly shaking heads, waving hands and kicking legs, white robes and feathered headbands and fluttering banners and illuminated altars, the drummers who were making an ear-splitting racket of mesmeric ferocity. Then Antonio stepped up to the railing and stood beside Alex, resting a hand on his shoulder and, likewise looking down on the teeming beach, spoke quietly to him.

'Listen to me,' he said. 'Try to put this thing into perspective. To be suffering from nightmares isn't particularly odd after what you've been through. You were completely inexperienced with women, Laura Wellman drove you almost crazy, then you nearly got yourself killed in a moment of suicidal grief, and then, shortly after, your father was brutally murdered and Laura Wellman, along with your father's killers, disappeared without trace. Of *course* you're suffering from nightmares, Alex – you've had a series of terrible shocks – but you're not going to cure yourself by returning to the scene of all that unhappiness.'

'I'm sorry, Antonio,' Alex said, 'but you're wrong: I *have* to return to there. You don't understand: my nightmares aren't ordinary. They began that first night on the boat to Belem, they worsened during the first few days I spent here in Rio, and by the time I finally reached England, they were a living part of me. No, they're not ordinary nightmares. They're the same nightmares that Laura had. I dream repeatedly about dark-skinned barbarians, about lights rising and falling, about a conflict between good and evil, with myself, and sometimes Laura, caught in the middle. It was our destiny, Antonio! Peruche said so – and he was right. There's some sort of purpose behind everything that's happened, and since leaving the Amazon, I've felt that my continuing nightmares have been designed to compel me to return. I feel *haunted*, Antonio, – just as Laura felt haunted – and, just like Laura, I now have to go into the rainforest to find out what the cause is.'

Antonio sighed again. 'I simply can't believe it. However, let's not waste Avril's first night in Rio with this glum conversation. Come on: let's go down to the beach for a real Brazilian New Year's Eve.'

Avril appreciated what he was doing, smiling at him when he glanced at her,

then she put her glass down on the low table and took hold of Alex's hand.
'A wonderful idea,' she said. 'I want to feel like a tourist.'
'Right,' Alex said. 'Naturally.'
He smiled at her, with love, but also with infinite weariness, as if some part of him, his life-giving centre, had died long ago. Once more she felt crushed, defeated by his crumbling spirit, but she squeezed his hand tighter and walked with him across the suite, curtsying to Antonio when he opened the door and waved them both out. They took the lift down, crossed the lobby and left the hotel, and the noise from the beach, like an unexpected clap of thunder, suddenly exploded out of the silence and made Avril's heart leap.

The boulevard was packed with celebrating people, many dancing to the pounding drums, a lot of the men smoking cigars, their women gyrating sensually. Avril held on to Alex, her blood stirred by the relentless drumming, her senses aroused by the smells of incense and cigar smoke, her eyes bedazzled by the countless burning candles and blazing torches and wavering torchlights. She felt unreal as she crossed the road, glancing sideways at Alex, had time to note his tension, his almost contagious fear, before she found herself standing on the sand, hemmed in on all sides by the thousands she had seen from the balcony as no more than a sea of yellow flames and gyrating limbs.

Up close they were a multitude of contrasting faces: a blend of Portuguese and African, Negro and Moor, European and Indian, pure Tupi-Guarani and light-skinned Mullato, *Mesticos* and *Caboclos* and *Cafusos*, excited *mestizo* children and simply curious *Caraibas*, all generating an exotic blend of garlic, cloves, cinnamon and scent, this enriched with the aromas of incense and *caipirinha* – and Avril, feeling dazed, the polyrhythms of the many drummers and chanting groups making her head reel, saw the *Umbanda* and *Quimbanda* believers, the witch doctors and the mediums, gyrating and wailing, prostrating themselves or dancing crazily, their gymnastics quite incredible, kissing the forked tongues of snakes, extending their hands over the lapping sea, falling down in what appeared to be epileptic fits, foaming at the mouth and shrieking wildly and plunging their hands and feet into blazing fires.

She squeezed Alex's hand tighter, glanced at him, saw his tension, turned the other way and saw Antonio smiling at her, his head framed by a patch of sky. There were a few stars in that sky, surrounded by black clouds, and the light of the candles burning all around her lent a glow to the darkness.

'Is this the sort of magic that Alex practised?' she asked of Antonio.
'No,' he replied. 'Everything here relates to black and white magic, to *Umbanda* and *Quimbanda*, both deriving from African Negro practises, but one, *Umbanda*, standing for Jesus and Christianity, the other, *Quimbanda*, standing for the *Exus*: those spirits considered to be lowest on the astral ladder and therefore used by the worshippers to do evil.'
'Does that relate to what Alex told me about the Yano?'
'No. As I said, both *Umbanda* and *Quimbanda* are African-derived, whereas the Yano, reportedly springing from pure Tupi-Guarani Indians, have a religion that's uniquely their own.'
'A religion that originates from the forces of darkness,' Alex said. 'Those forces that are now haunting me – and once haunted Laura.'
Avril glared at him, feeling angry, hardly realizing what was causing it, but Alex suddenly cried out, a breathless, anguished sound, and clasped his hands over his head as he fell to his knees. Avril looked down, startled, her senses numbed by the relentless drumming, as Alex rocked back and forth on the sand, still clasping his head in his hands. She glanced at Antonio, saw his brown eyes widening, then she, too, dropped to her knees, slid her arms around Alex, and drew him to her as the sand swirled around them.
'What's wrong, Alex? Why…?'
He turned his head in her direction, but the swirling sand obscured his face, and the wind, which had built up with a startling, unnatural speed, suddenly howled and raced across the beach like a minor tornado. There was shouting and screaming, tumbling bodies and flying debris, and Avril found herself rolling like a log across the beach, being pummelled by similarly rolling bodies and numerous hard objects
– smashed altars and broken chairs, candle-holders and bottles – before coming to rest in a tangle of kicking limbs, her dazed eyes trying to focus on the sky above the dense, sweeping sand. She twisted around, gasping for breath, hearing only howling wind and screaming, to see Alex on hands and knees, the sand sweeping fiercely across him as he struggled forward and

reached out for her hand and then pulled her towards him. They fell against one another, spitting out sand, gasping for breath, and then managed to clamber back to their feet with the wind still hammering at them.

The wind howled, the sand hissed, men bawled, women screamed, and Avril caught a glimpse of sky, a few stars, obscured clouds, and then raced, or was pulled forward by Alex, towards the broad boulevard. More debris flew past her – lots of candles and pieces of plaster – and then a human torch crossed her path, screaming dementedly, shuddering and jerking, fell down and rolled frantically away, the flames leaping off arms and legs to curl through the acrid smoke. Avril stopped, wanting to help, momentarily thinking she was back in war-torn London, during an air-raid, the bombs falling about her, smoke and flame everywhere, but she was instantly tugged onward, saw Alex, then Antonio, and followed them across the boulevard to the brightly lit hotel.

More screaming, more burning bodies, roaring wind and biting sand, shadowy forms racing to and fro, others rolling along the pavement, the air filled with flapping hats and fluttering flags and extinguished candles, with plaster torn off portable altars and feathers swept off countless headbands, with bits of clothing and cigars and spinning bottles – and then Avril saw the light, a blinding radiance in that debris-filled darkness, and stumbled onward, or was pulled, to fall through opening doors, and then into the arms of Alex and Antonio in the hotel's grand lobby.

She choked, almost vomiting, her throat filled with sand and dust, and looked up, first at Antonio, his brown eyes concerned, then at Alex, his blue eyes wide and luminous with wonder and fear.

'What's happening?' Alex asked of Antonio. '*What kind of storm is this?*'

And then it suddenly died away, fading as fast as it had come, and they turned around and looked back out, across the boulevard, to the beach, and saw the stars in the sky, the clouds drifting languidly, letting them shine their benevolent light on the gently curving waves, on the sand as it settled down, on the people who were staggering about in a daze, or sitting with heads bowed, or stretched out as if unconscious, on the debris that covered every visible stretch of beach as if, with the wanton rage of a petulant child, some god had scattered his toys.

'I believe you,' Antonio said.

Chapter Two

‘Maybe I’m losing my senses,’ Antonio said, ‘but I’m beginning to believe that there could be something in what you’ve told me.’

‘There is!’ Alex retorted passionately, sitting beside Avril in the rear of the car and staring at the back of Antonio’s head as he drove them along Avenida Rio Branco on the way to the dock area. ‘That storm wasn’t natural – not at this time of the year nor any other – so it must have been some kind of warning to us.’

‘A *warning*?’ Avril said, exasperated. ‘A warning about *what*?’
‘A warning that we shouldn’t interfere with the forces of darkness by going in search of the Yano.’
‘Oh, God,’ Avril said, lighting a cigarette and inhaling deeply, hoping to steady her shaky nerves. ‘I just can’t believe what you two are discussing so seriously: demonic possession, powers of darkness, a violent storm as the manifestation of the forces of evil, which forces are watching us right now. I’m an educated, middle-class English girl and I think it’s ridiculous.’
She blew a cloud of cigarette smoke, watched it spiralling in front of her, then rolled the window down to let fresh air in. The car was passing through the business area of the city which was, at this early hour of the morning, almost deserted, the windows of the buildings reflecting the street lights and the darkness surrounding them.
Suddenly, she felt desolated, aware of how far from home she was, no longer excited but faintly frightened by the thought of what she might have let herself in for. Contrary to what she had just said, that unnatural storm had shaken her badly, emerging, as it had, out of a perfectly clear sky and then fading away as abruptly as it had arrived. No, not a natural storm – and it had affected her strangely, setting her imagination free and putting fear in her heart.
‘If you think it’s ridiculous,’ Antonio said over his shoulder, ‘then why, knowing what he’s come here for, have you made this trip with Alex?’
‘Because I love him,’ Avril replied without hesitation. ‘Because I’m worried about his mental health. Because I believe he has to face up to his past, no matter how unpleasant, before he can even hope to be cured of his recurrent

nightmares.'
'And do you think those nightmares are natural, Avril?'
'I certainly don't think they're supernatural. I think they're caused by something Alex has refused to face, and that sooner or later he'll have to face whatever it is or break down completely.'
'*Please*, Avril,' Alex said. 'I can do without that kind of talk, particularly when I'm sitting right here beside you.'
'You'd rather I said it behind your back?'
'No, but – '
'You're a level-headed young lady,' Antonio interjected, still speaking over his shoulder as he drove the car, keeping his eyes on the road. 'So tell me: what do you think it is that Alex has refused to face? Do you mean the death of his father or something concerning Laura Wellman?'
'One or the other,' Avril replied, looking out at the dark sky, seeing fireworks exploding under the stars as the celebrations optimistically started up again. 'And then again, maybe both. Alex is being tormented by something in his mind: something he deliberately buried because it was too much to bear. And until he finds out what it is and then faces it fully, he's going to continue having his nightmares.'
'I'm hiding nothing,' Alex said firmly. 'What I told you is what I know. I can only know what I experienced personally and none of that's been forgotten. No, I'm not hiding anything, nor being driven mad with guilt: my nightmares are exactly the same ones that Laura had, and they've driven me back here for some at yet unknown purpose. I dream about the Yano, about the lights that rise and fall, about a conflict between good and evil where time and space have no meaning. I'm caught up in that conflict, I'm at the centre, but I don't quite know how.'
'No,' Avril said, 'I can't accept that at all. I believe in flesh and bone, in what I can see and touch; I do *not* believe in forces of good and evil, nor in life after death. We *create* good and evil by the manner in which we live; we create them through the things that we do. You're not being haunted, Alex: you're just tormenting yourself. You're having the same dreams as Laura Wellman because you're still obsessed with her.'
There was a brief, uneasy silence as Alex digested her words, but eventually he managed to look at her, his gaze candid with hurt.
'You think I still love Laura?' he asked quietly.

His obvious hurt filled her with guilt, making her spin within herself, thinking back to the streets of London, the ruins of war around both of them, her love for him changing her whole life. She had been drawn to his remoteness, his air of weary maturity, to the realization that he was open to tenderness and love's delicate nuances. Now she saw all that again, in the muted pain of his crystal gaze, and she wanted to fall into his arms and set him free with her body.

'Yes,' she heard her own voice say reluctantly, 'I think that might be the case.'

'It's not true, Avril. You know what I feel for you. I've loved you from the moment I met you – and I love you right now.'

'And Laura? What about your love for her? Didn't you love her the same way you now profess to love me?'

'No, Avril, I didn't. I thought I did, but it wasn't true. I was totally innocent when I met Laura, more innocent than you can imagine, and so, when she entered my life, the most glamorous creature I'd ever seen, I completely lost my head over her and made a fool of myself. That isn't real love, Avril; it's romantic obsession. It was very different from what I feel for you and couldn't possibly have lasted. What I felt for her was painful and confusing and tormenting

– but loving you isn't a torment: it's my one hope for peace.'

It was a beautiful thing to say and it made Avril feel even more guilty, bringing a blush to her cheeks and quickening her heartbeat. She glanced out of the car, saw the dark and grim dock area, wondered what Antonio was taking them to see, and then looked back at Alex. He seemed frail and exhausted, slumped weakly beside her, his eyes scanning the shabby structures of Praca Maua as they slid past in silence.

Why had she said that to Alex? Was she really that jealous of Laura Wellman? Did the ghost of that woman now haunt her as it clearly did Alex? Avril was ashamed to even think about it, feeling betrayed by her own vanity, and she reached out, suddenly shaken by emotion, to take hold of his hand. He quivered when she touched him, as if shocked by human contact, but then, obviously gratified to have it, took hold of her fingers.

'Believe me,' he said, 'I love you.'

'I know,' she said. 'I believe it. It's just that sometimes I feel as if that woman is breathing over my shoulder.'

‘Maybe she is.’
The car was slowing down, passing more warehouses, the lights of the boats in the bay twinkling brightly between them. This was a different Rio, neither beautiful nor friendly, the streets dilapidated and desolate, lamps beaming over the *churrascarias*, music filtering out of the rough bars, sailors moving in and out of the shadows in which their women were standing. *Prostitutes*, Avril thought, and was slightly shocked at the idea, even though she had seen it all in the streets of London during the war. She kept looking, fascinated, feeling very far from home, and then Antonio braked to a halt. Stopping the car in front of an enormous warehouse, he turned the headlights off, killed the engine and glanced back over his shoulder.
‘Okay,’ he said. ‘This is where I wanted to take you. I’m still not sure that I’m doing the right thing, but feel that I have to take a chance. We’re going into that warehouse. Once inside, you must stick close to me and neither say nor do anything out of place. What you’ll see are forbidden practices, so strangers aren’t normally welcome, but they know me and won’t bother you two as long as you’re with me.’
‘Voodoo practices?’
‘Yes, Alex, that’s right.’
‘Why are you showing us voodoo, Antonio? It has no relevance to what happened in the Amazon.’
‘No more questions, my young friend. Just let me show you. First you’ll see what you will and then you can do what you want. Now come on, let’s go inside.’
After getting out of the car, Antonio opened the rear door for Avril. As she stepped out into the street, she heard music and shouting emanating in a ghostly manner from inside the warehouse. The road was dark and empty, devoid of any kind of lighting, containing nothing but other warehouses and derelict buildings. She shivered, feeling nervous, despising herself for it, and then turned around as Alex stepped up to her and took hold of her hand.
‘Are you all right?’ he asked her.
‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘I’m fine.’
‘You’re in for a bit of an experience, but don’t worry about it.’
There was a harsh, metallic squeaking as Antonio opened the large steel door, then stepped aside and indicated that they should enter. Avril went in first, feeling Alex’s hands on her waist, and the noise she had heard from outside,

the frantic, percussive music and shouting, exploded from the interior of the warehouse and beat at her temples. Smoke and incense stung her eyes, making her rub them and blink repeatedly, then, becoming accustomed to it, she started looking around, feeling, as she did so, Alex's hands gently pushing her forward.

Antonio had moved in front of her, leading the way, and she saw the back of his head moving through a sea of faces, smoke from joss sticks and burning torches swirling above the milling people, brown, black and mulatto, their eyes dazed or closed in ecstasy, the whole mass forming a circle around the central area towards which Antonio, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder, was making slow progress. The drumming was demoniac, polyrhythms of hypnotic intensity, and the people surrounding her, men and women of all ages, some wearing ordinary clothing, others in flowing white robes, were swaying to and fro and gyrating wildly, shaking as if with fever, most leaning toward the drummers and voodoo mediums in the smoke-wreathed clearing in the middle of the building.

Antonio broke through to the clearing, pushing the onlookers aside, tugging Avril forward even as Alex gently pushed her from behind, and then, when he had reached his chosen position, stopping beside her. Avril rubbed her eyes again, wiping the stinging tears away, and stared through the dense smoke at the cleared central area in front of which the drummers were playing frenziedly, the mediums were chanting their invocations, and the acolytes, some foaming at the mouth, were writhing like epileptics on the concrete floor. One of the men was dancing dramatically, burning himself with a flaming torch, while another, barefooted, was dancing on shards of broken glass, and a third, his head thrown back as he shrieked dementedly, was slicing himself with a knife, the blood flowing freely down his chest and soaking his trousers.

'Are they drugged?' Avril asked.

'Some of them,' Antonio said. 'Most of them are simply in a self-induced trance, but some of them are indeed on drugs, particularly the hallucinogenic drug *epena*, widely used by the Indians.'

'Why did you bring us here?' Alex asked stubbornly.

'Here he comes,' Antonio said.

The crowd roared and parted, forming a pathway to the cleared area, and into it came two bare-chested mulatto mediums, each holding the elbow of a man

who was half-walking, half-staggering between them, his eyes closed, his head hanging low. Obviously drugged, conscious, though barely so, he was practically dragged to the centre of the cleared area and placed without ceremony on a rickety wooden chair. He was wearing a white shirt and grey slacks, his bare feet in leather thongs, and he just slumped there, his head hanging, his chin resting on his chest, while the mediums set a small table in front of him and then, all the time dancing ecstatically, placed a long wooden box on the table and opened its lid.

The frenzied drumming continued, blue smoke swirling through the air, people swayed to and fro, back and forth, and clapped hands to the hypnotic rhythm of the drums, and babbled incoherently and cried out. The noise and frantic activity got through to Avril, hurting her head, making her heartbeat quicken, and she held Alex's hand even tighter, as if frightened of losing him in the chaos.

He was staring straight ahead, squinting into the streaming smoke, his brow furrowed as he concentrated on the man who was slumped on the chair. The man was still at the table, behind the coffinshaped box, and as Avril looked at him and, with a shiver, saw the emerging heads of two large, swaying snakes, the man raised his own head, his shock of white hair jumping electrically, and seemed to stare directly at her through the dense, swirling smoke.

She was shocked to see that the man was a European, once handsome, now seemingly old and ill, his untidy white hair falling over his wrinkled forehead, his eyes bloodshot and dazed, with dark bags under them and numerous lines around them, his cheeks sunken and his skin deathly pale, his lips, which once might have been sensual, now trembling helplessly.

'Oh, my God!' she heard Alex exclaiming beside her. '*That's Father Benedict!*'

Even as Alex uttered those words, his voice strangled with shock, the two giant pythons, which had been emerging from the long box on the table, rose higher and swayed seductively in front of the priest's glazed, haunted eyes. They curled over his shoulders, wrapped themselves around his shivering body, and he merely shook his head from side to side while tears rolled down his cheeks. Yes, an old man – not the man she had been told about – and when she turned away, horrified (as much by the sight of him as by the snakes coiling around him), she saw that Alex was close to tears.

'Father Benedict!' he whispered in a daze. 'Oh, dear God, it *can't* be!'

At that moment, as the snakes were tightening dangerously around him, the priest opened his eyes wide, stared up at the high ceiling of the warehouse, and in a manner reminiscent of the excited voodoo mediums at both sides of him, let out a high, demented wailing that made Avril feel whiplashed. He then shook his head wildly from side to side, beads of sweat flying off him, his whole body shivering in the deadly grip of the tightening snakes as the drummers behind him went frantic, the smoke swirled more densely about him, the onlookers whooped and shrieked and released strident lamentations, their hands raised above their heads, their bodies jerking epileptically. Then the mediums beside the priest, as if sensing that he was on the verge of death, spat out a stream of gibberish, grabbed the snakes with their bare hands, and the reptiles, not resisting, were pulled away from their shuddering victim. As he sobbed and slumped forward in his chair, the snakes coiled around the sweating arms of the mediums who placed them back in the oblong box.
Alex suddenly rushed forward, letting out a choked sob, pushing the Indians aside and grabbing hold of Father Benedict while Antonio, shouting over the bedlam, hurried up to help him. There was a brief and noisy commotion, lots of tugging and pushing, but then Antonio shouted again, directing his words at the excited Indians, and they reluctantly moved away, letting Alex break free with the babbling priest and, supporting his old friend, with Antonio pushing them from behind, awkwardly weave his way back to Avril.
'Let's get out of here!' Antonio bawled.
The priest looked up in a daze, mumbling incoherent words, and Avril was again shocked at how old he seemed to be when seen this close up. More than old: wrecked, his blinking eyes filled with despair, moving left to right in pitiful confusion, his frail body trembling. This was not the Father Benedict about whom Avril had heard so much (that handsome man with silvery-streaked black hair and a robust physique), but another, much older and broken man who now, as he moved his weeping eyes in all directions, finally managed to focus upon her to offer a humourless smile.
'A testing,' he said, slurring his words. 'To challenge death and survive it. To be embraced by the symbols of the powers of darkness and not feel their crushing strength…' His voice trailed off as he nodded, his head rising and falling sleepily, before his eyes opened fully again and focused upon her. '*In the end it will bite like a snake,*' he croaked hoarsely, '*and will spread abroad poison like a basilisk. Thy eyes shall behold strange women, and thy*

heart shall utter perverse things. And thou shalt be as one sleepless in the midst of the sea, and as a pilot fast asleep when the stern is lost.'
Avril thought of the snakes and shivered, trying to still her racing heart, but then Antonio, helping Alex to support the mumbling priest, led them all back through the crazed crowd, through the dense smoke and the sweet smell of incense and *epena*, away from the ferocious polyrhythms of the drummers and out of the warehouse. The slamming door cut off the music, or at least muffled its demonic clamour, and the fresh air, wafting in from the bay, was cool and soothing.
Father Benedict was still mumbling, hanging between Alex and Antonio, the former wiping tears from his eyes with his free hand, the latter using his own free hand to open the car's rear door. Managing to do this eventually, he eased the priest onto the back seat.
'I thought you should see for yourself,' Antonio said to Alex, 'but perhaps I was wrong.'
'No,' Alex said, 'you were right to show me. But what *happened* to him?'
Antonio raised both his hands in a familiar gesture of defeat, his smile touched with sadness. 'As you know,' he said, 'Father Benedict was extremely disturbed by the murder of your father and the disappearance of Miss Wellman. He was, I think, particularly shaken by his own conviction that he, as the local priest, should have been able to do something to prevent that situation exploding as it did, that he should have taken firmer action when the *seringueiro* died because of your father's mistreatment, and that he should definitely have done something when your father took the *seringueiro's* daughter into his house as repayment for the so-called debts of her dead father. So, the priest felt very, very guilty over what had occurred because of what he assumed was his personal negligence.'
Looking into the car, Avril saw the priest on the back seat, shoulders slumped, his chin on his chest as he slept off his stupor. *It will bite like a snake… Thy eyes shall behold strange women…* She thought of the snakes tightening around the priest, of that enigmatic woman, Laura Wellman, and wondered again just what she had let herself in for when she had encouraged Alex to make this return trip and agreed to come with him. Right now, Alex was leaning against the car, giving his attention to Antonio, both of them painted in black shadow and pale lines of moonlight.
'Anyway,' Antonio continued, 'from the day of the murders and the

American woman's disappearance, Father Benedict became a changed man: drinking a lot, it was said, and also studying the occult practices of the Indians. Certainly, shortly after we closed down the plantation for good and you, Alex, took the boat to England, he was extremely depressed, usually drunk, and gradually became something of a recluse, ignoring even his work with the mission and the local Indians, and often disappearing for days, returning from Manaus reeking of drink. Of course the locals talked – you know how news travels quickly in that area – and it was said that the priest was taking an interest in Indian magic, that he was sniffing *epena* on a regular basis, that he'd been seen in certain villages he didn't normally attend to, and that he was, in general, very much a changed man who, if he was showing an uncommon interest in Indian magic, was simultaneously ignoring the Christian Indians of his mission in an equally uncommon manner. Then, a month ago, he disappeared completely, leaving the mission unattended, leaving no clue to his whereabouts, and only yesterday, when I came to Rio to prepare for your arrival, did I learn that he'd moved into a *favela*, that he was either drunk or drugged most of the time, and that he'd started involving himself in dangerous black magic rituals of the kind you witnessed here today.'
'But why?' Alex asked, then repeated, 'What *happened* to him?'

'Father Benedict, your Christian friend, is destroying himself in an unusual manner, most notably by flirting with a particular form of Indian witchcraft that's far beyond anything known to *Umbanda* or *Quimbanda*, but is close to the most dangerous forms of black magic – the kind that was once practised by the Yanoama Indians and is now, reportedly, the sole province of their cast-out brothers, the Yano. Whether or not this has something to do with your father's murder and Laura Wellman's disappearance is for you to decide, but right now I think we should take him home and put him to bed.'

'You mean the mission?'
'No, I mean the *favela* he's been staying in. I don't think he'd want to waken up anywhere else – and, sad to say, after he'd disappeared for a month, his superiors in Australia decided to close down his mission. The mission – and, in a sense, Father Benedict's whole life, is gone for all time.'
'Not his life,' Alex said fervently. 'We can give that back to him.'

‘Maybe we can,’ Antonio said, ‘and then again, maybe not. But for now, let’s get him back to his new home.’

Chapter Three

The drive back through the city seemed unreal to Avril, the darkness, the fireworks, the distant music, the stars glittering above the black hills, all combining to make her feel that she was dreaming and losing touch with herself. The dreaming was couched in fear, but the fear was coloured by magic: the clouds crossing a pale moon, *Pao de Acucar* glimpsed fitfully, Christ the Redeemer, arms outstretched, surveying the city from Corcovado, lamplight and starlight on his head, a crimson glow bleeding over him. Avril shivered, feeling cold, perhaps just convincing herself that the shivering came from the cold, and turned her head to look at the priest slumped between her and Alex. She saw an old man, whitehaired, his face lined, body frail, and could not imagine him as being the same man that Alex had so often described.

Only four years ago, in 1943, Father Benedict had been in New Guinea, serving with the Australian Army, advancing with the troops along the bloody Kokoda Trail and, according to Alex, witnessing some appalling atrocities. His faith in God, never strong, had apparently wavered badly then, bending before the realization that man’s worst actions could be part of God’s great plan. Nothing had been secure after that, the scales tilting against his faith, but at least, according to Alex, he had been a handsome, well-built man of considerable charm; not this old man, this beaten thing, this frail, snoring creature, now propped up between herself and Alex as the deserted streets of the city slid past.

Glancing at Alex, also haunted, also frail from the lack of peace, her pragmatism, drilled into her from childhood, dissolved and drained out of her. Her own father had been an agnostic, a good-humoured, sardonic realist, teaching her that man had come from dust and to dust would return. Yes, she had believed that and had lived contentedly with it, but now, looking out, seeing the hilly streets of Botafogo, she realized that her own belief in the material world was likewise starting to waver before unnatural and

supernatural events, buffeted in the winds of experiences that appeared to have no rational explanation.

She shivered, again feeling cold, and was relieved when the bricabrac streets of Botafogo gave way to the shacks of the enormous favela she had seen earlier as a sea of soothing yellow lights on a soaring black hill.

'He stays here?' Alex asked.
'Yes,' Antonio said. 'He couldn't have picked a worse place if he'd tried, but he found what he wanted.'
'Penance?'
'Yes, a form of penance – but not that alone. This *favela* is renowned not only for its poverty, but for its large proportion of pure Indians and black magic worshippers. Why black magic instead of white, I don't know, but that's why he's here.'
Avril looked out and was appalled, seeing true poverty exemplified, the shacks numbering in their thousands, raised on stilts on the steep slopes, rising up in long tiers and perched over one another and disappearing over the crest of the high hill to run down the far side of it. Walls of tin and plywood, roofs of cardboard and corrugated iron, holes stuffed up with newspapers and broken bricks and stones, the ground around them made of hard earth and strewn with litter. Candles still burned on the verandas and in the tiny rooms inside, and a surprising number of the inhabitants, most dark-skinned, all wearing rags, were still awake and either resting on their porches or idling between the leaning shacks. A bleak, depressing sight, it was also quite frightening, and Avril, when the car ground to a halt, stepped out feeling nervous.
'You're having a night of rare experiences,' Antonio said, smiling reassuringly at her. 'Very few visitors to Rio see what you're seeing and certainly very few could come here and go back in one piece.'
'You're known here?'
'Yes, I'm known here… and so is the priest. They let him stay here because he *is* a priest – and because they think he's harmlessly crazy.'
'Maybe they're right,' Avril said.
'We're *all* crazy,' Antonio retorted, grinning.
Alex had slipped out the other side of the car and was walking around it to

help Father Benedict. He glanced at Avril and smiled, but seemed a million miles away, as if returning to Brazil, to the events that had broken his spirit, had driven him deeper into himself and even farther away from her. Tugging repeatedly at the priest's shirtsleeve, he eventually, after considerable difficulty, managed to awaken him and encourage him out. The priest swayed groggily, placed a hand on Alex's shoulder, stared at him as if not recognizing him and then glanced vaguely around him.

'What?' he said. 'Where?' Obviously still dazed, he shook his head from side to side and rubbed his bloodshot eyes. 'God,' he mumbled. 'Need a drink.'

'Father Benedict – ' Alex began.

'What?' the priest interjected irritably, his voice hoarse and tremulous, and then, pushing Alex aside, he took a tentative step forward. 'Throat's as dry as a camel's arse,' he said.

Alex was near to tears, but stepped back to let the priest pass, watching him as he inched forward a few paces and then stopped again, coughing into his fist, shaking his head, and glancing around him once more. The favela was quiet and eerie, lit mainly by flickering oil lamps or candles, and some of the residents had come up to stare at them with curious, unfriendly eyes.

Approaching the priest, Antonio took hold of his elbow, coaxing him towards the shack straight ahead and whispering soothing words to him. Together they went up the wooden steps, the priest mumbling incoherently, and eventually, when they had gone through the open doorway, Avril and Alex followed them inside.

It was a small, one-room shack, the plank floors covered in dust, the single table littered with empty beer bottles and opened tins of food and dirty dishes, unwashed clothing scattered haphazardly on hardback chairs and on the floor, the whole place smelling of stale *caipirinha*, incense and stale cigarette smoke.

Already the priest was at the table, irritably scattering the empty bottles, cursing because he couldn't find something to drink and rubbing his eyes repeatedly even though the room was already lit by the light of an oil lamp. Finally, he found a half full bottle of beer and slumped into a chair, had a drink, rested the bottle on one thigh and then stared blearily at each of them in turn.

First he looked at Avril, his brow furrowed in puzzlement, then nodded his head in a dreamy manner and offered a slight smile, obviously vaguely

recalling her from the warehouse. He had another drink of his beer, wiped his lips with a shaky hand, then eventually opened his eyes wider in surprised recognition.
‘Antonio!’ he exclaimed.
‘Yes, Father.’
‘Ah, Antonio, Antonio, my old friend, what brings you here?’
‘I brought Alex,’ Antonio replied.
There was a lingering silence as the priest took in this news, first staring at Antonio with an air of complete bewilderment, then letting his weary gaze roam across to Avril, and finally, with visible reluctance, a fresh alertness riding on pain, looking through the flickering light from the oil lamp at the silent, clearly shocked, Alex.
‘Oh, my God,’ Alex murmured.
Avril reached out and took hold of his hand, squeezing it reassuringly as the priest, staring at him as if not believing his own eyes, eventually shook his head from side to side and started to weep.
‘No,’ he whispered. ‘No! Oh, Antonio, why did you do this?’ He stared again at Alex, as if to confirm what he was seeing, then shivered, sat up in his chair and tried to sniff back his tears. ‘Alex!’ he exclaimed. ‘My young friend! Oh, dear God! Why did you come back to this hellish place?’
‘To find Laura Wellman,’ Alex said.
The priest shuddered at the mere mention of her name, drank some beer and licked his lips, sniffed and wiped his weeping eyes, then shook his head from side to side again.
‘How foolish,’ he said. ‘How very foolish to come back here for that. Almost certainly that unfortunate woman was seduced by Peruche’s occult powers, led by him into the depths of the rainforest, and there was captured, and probably killed, by the barbaric Yano Indians. Laura Wellman is dead, my son.’
‘She isn’t necessarily dead,’ Alex said.
‘She’s *dead*,’ the priest insisted.
He had said it with such vehemence that Avril was startled and automatically held Alex’s hand tighter, feeling the shock jolting through him, too. Turning her head, she saw his face, his remarkable, indefinable beauty, the golden-blond hair flopping over his clear blue eyes to hide the pain he was undoubtedly suffering. He was staring down at the seated priest as if seeing

him for the first time, or as if, in seeing this ghost of his former friend, he was too shocked to say anything. Then he, too, visibly shuddered and removed his hand from Avril's fingers, moving away from her to go down on one knee just in front of Father Benedict.

The priest refused to meet his gaze, but Alex reached up with his left hand, cupped it under his old friend's unshaven chin and very gently turned that wasted face towards him, almost like a father with his son, reversing their original roles. The priest, his chin resting in Alex's hand, stared down at him, fearfully.

'What happened to you, Father Benedict?' Alex asked. 'And what are you doing here?'

The priest looked fearful and pained, perhaps even ashamed, until eventually the tears rolled down his cheeks and settled on the back of Alex's hand.

'Your father's dead,' he said, 'and doubtless Laura Wellman's dead as well… And I hold myself responsible for what happened.'

'It wasn't your fault,' Alex said.

'It was, Alex, it was. I let the situation build up until it exploded. I should never have let your father get away with what he was doing, but I did, doubtless out of cowardice, and look what it led to. Yes, it was my responsibility – and that's why I'm here.'

'And what do you hope to do here?'

'Find oblivion.'

'Not quite true, priest,' Antonio said. He had stepped out of the shadows near the flickering oil lamp and was now staring levelly at the priest, his hands on his fleshy hips. 'Is it not true, Father Benedict, that you're also involving yourself regularly in the kind of voodoo practices we all witnessed this evening? And that you are, in truth, growing obsessed with Indian witchcraft?'

The priest instantly looked defensive, huddling up into himself. 'No!' he exclaimed. 'No! That's not true! Tonight was just…' He drank some beer and wiped his lips with a shaky hand. 'Just something that happened… a stupid accident of drunkenness.'

'An *accident*, Father Benedict? Mere drunkenness, you call it? No mere drunkard could walk accidentally into such an event, let alone take part in it. No, my good friend, you weren't drunk: you were practising voodoo. A willing participant in voodoo rituals.'

‘No! That’s not true!’ Sounding panic-stricken, the priest jerked his chin out of Alex’s hand to drink some more beer. ‘No!’ he repeated, wiping his lips with the back of that shaky hand. ‘What you say is all nonsense!’
‘No, priest, not nonsense. You know damned well what you’re doing. This is the shack of a *Quimbanda*, a black magic medium, and what we see here on the walls and on that table are the tools of his trade: that small altar, those effigies, the incense, this bowl of *epena*, the various statues and amulets. Admit it, Father Benedict, you’re flirting with voodoo of the most dangerous kind.’
‘No! Oh, God, no!’ The priest almost shrieked the words as he twisted away from them, bending forward and covering his face with his hands, his body trembling as he sobbed uncontrollably, with a hurt child’s grief. He looked lost and pitiful, the yellow light flickering over him, and Avril, awash in an equally uninhibited pity, could bear to look at him no longer and instead found herself staring down at the table beside her, gradually focusing on an amulet that lay there covered in dust.
-*Alex*, it said to her.
Blinking, shaking her head to clear it, wondering if she was hearing things, she impulsively picked up the amulet to examine it closely. It was the size of a large coin, made of black stone, featureless, and yet, as she studied it, as she concentrated on it, the priest’s sobbing faded away, the surrounding walls fled from her consciousness, her thoughts seemed to congeal into a single incandescent moment, and she felt the power entering her, unrecognizable yet oddly familiar, a power that flowed like an electric current, seemingly from Alex, and then poured into her quivering body to make her skin burn.
Dazed, slightly dizzy, losing touch with her normal senses, she tied the string of the amulet around her neck and let it rest on her throat. Then Alex was there in front of her, unusually intense, and he reached out to take the amulet in his right hand and study it closely. Apparently satisfied, if clearly shaken, he let the amulet slip back through his fingers and rest, with the coolness of cut glass, once more on her warm skin.
‘What is it?’ she asked him, feeling as if she was dreaming, her own voice echoing ethereally in her head, then fading away into silence.
‘It’s mine,’ Alex replied. ‘Old Peruche gave it to me. It was supposed to be a sacred amulet that would ward off evil spirits and endow me with occult powers. I gave it to Laura shortly before all the troubles began.’ He turned

back to face the priest, whose rheumy, bloodshot eyes were filled with guilt and denial. ‘I gave that amulet to Laura Wellman,’ Alex said sternly, ‘so how did you get it?’

‘I didn’t steal it!’ the priest exclaimed. ‘And I didn’t get it from Laura! I found it in the main room of the house, just before the plantation was closed down. It was lying there on the floor, in all that dust and rubbish, so I just picked it up and kept it. I swear to you, Alex, that’s the truth. *I did not get the amulet from Laura!*’

He stared at each of them in turn, his eyes wide and glazed, and then buried his face in his hands and, resting his elbows on his knees, started sobbing again, his frail body wracked by recurrent spasms and uncontrollable shivering. He was close to a breakdown, his despair too much to bear, and Alex, obviously aware of this fact, again dropped to one knee, grabbed the priest by both shoulders and vigorously shook him again.

‘You’re coming with us,’ he said. ‘You can’t stay here, Father. I won’t let you destroy yourself this way, so you’ll do as I say. This has gone on long enough. I won’t let it continue. You’ll come with us to our hotel, spend the night with us, and then, tomorrow morning, when you’ve had a good sleep, we’ll decide what to do about this business. Do you understand, Father Benedict? *Do you hear what I’m saying?*’

‘Yes, yes, I’m listening! But I can’t do it, Alex! Why did you come back to torment me with this? I can’t do it! *I can’t!*’

Avril found herself stepping forward, moved by a mysterious impulse, and then was pushing Alex aside and standing over the quivering priest, bending slightly towards him. She felt that strange power – Alex’s power, a mesmeric force – flowing out of him and leaving him drained as it charged her with magical strength. Her own arrogance shocked her, her selfawareness overwhelming her, but she reached down, placed her hands on the priest’s shoulders, and then squeezed them gently.

‘Please, Father Benedict,’ she said, ‘do as Alex asks of you.’

The priest stared up at her, startled, his eyes wild with grief and fear, and then fixed his gaze on the amulet that lay on her throat. He kept staring at the black stone, drawn to it and into it, nervously licking his lips as his body’s trembling lessened. Avril squeezed his shoulders again, letting her essence pour down into him, a great compassion, perhaps Alex’s abiding love, giving back to the emptied cavern of the priest’s spirit a certain measure of hope.

She hardly knew what she was doing, but felt quietly, supremely confident, and as she gazed upon him and saw his pain in that flickering light, she felt bound to him by affection and understanding, her new faith like a rock.
The priest's violent trembling ceased and for a moment he stopped breathing. He removed his gaze from the amulet, stared more boldly at her, and then, in that squalid shack, in the silence of his inner struggle, his frail form a patchwork of shifting light and shadow, managed to draw up from his tormenting depths a faint trace of his former will.
'All right,' he whispered, 'I'll come with you… *And God help us all!*'

Chapter Four

'We haven't slept since we arrived in Rio,' Avril said. 'No wonder we're tired.'

Seated across the table from her, Alex nodded and smiled weakly, sipped his coffee and glanced over the balcony railing at the deserted Copacabana Beach, six stories below them. It was just before dawn and the boulevard was almost empty, a great moon gliding behind heavy clouds, the stars bright and plentiful. There were three cups of coffee on the table, one of them untouched, because Antonio, at that moment, was putting Father Benedict to bed in the spare room of the spacious and elegant hotel suite. Avril sipped her own coffee, let it burn down inside her, placed the cup back on its saucer and then studied Alex. If still drawn and pale, he seemed more alive than before, a fresh luminosity in his formerly dull eyes, his posture more positive. He was smiling at her with obvious affection, which was itself an improvement.

'You've seen an awful lot in one night,' he said to her, 'and, I think, stood up to it well. You give me courage and hope.'

He smiled again when he said it, but she was pleased to know that he meant it. She was also pleased by the fact that his sense of humour seemed to be returning.

'Do you think your priest will actually sleep without another drink? Or another sniff of *epena*?'

‘*Epena* doesn’t put you to sleep; it induces what you’d call extraordinary hallucinations and what the Indians are convinced is the only true reality: that other world beyond time and space, which, according to the Indians, exists within us all. So if Father Benedict was sniffing *epena*, it certainly wasn’t to find sleep.’
‘Then why was he taking it on a regular basis?’
‘I’ve just told you: Father Benedict, a Christian, has become involved in Indian magic and I think it all relates to Laura Wellman. The stealing of the amulet, the taking of *epena*, and that dangerous ritual with the snakes are all ways of trying to gain extra powers, notably occult powers, of the kind that I had in very minor ways, old Peruche had in quite spectacular ways, and Laura Wellman, in her obsession with the forces of darkness, wanted to obtain. Now, it seems, Father Benedict is also in search of those powers, perhaps because, in his guilt at not preventing the tragic events of a year ago, he hopes to make amends by pitting himself against those very forces that Laura insisted had possessed her.’
‘*To challenge death and survive it*,’ Avril quoted the priest. ‘*To be embraced by the symbols of the powers of darkness and not feel their crushing strength…*’
‘Yes,’ Alex said. ‘Father Benedict knew what he was doing. One way of obtaining the power, as Peruche taught me, is to directly challenge death – particularly death in the form of one of the symbols of the powers of darkness, the major one of which is the serpent.’
‘You used to practise that?’
‘Yes, Avril. Peruche taught me that all forms of life are part of the one life, that good and bad are two sides of the same coin, and that the way to purity, and thus power over normal things, is in the testing of one’s faith and courage by facing evil or death. For that reason I would, under his supervision, let myself be embraced by snakes – the biblical symbols of evil and death – and covered in poisonous spiders and other harmful insects. So, by overcoming my natural revulsion and fear of such creatures, I actually became one with them, making them indifferent to my presence and ensuring my safety. So, also, I strengthened my faith in the good and gained the first of the latent powers that all men possess, though most are unable to call upon. Those powers, which include what you would call telepathy and precognition, are the ones that Laura Wellman hoped she would find where the good fights the

bad: in the depths of the rainforest where the Yano, enslaved to Satan, guard the gateway that leads to eternity and the light of redemption. To reach those goals, one has to brave the dark forces, this being the test that all men must take one way or another.'
'And in attempting to find those same powers, Father Benedict is unwittingly destroying himself?'
'He doesn't know the way. He's fumbling in the dark. He's a priest, a Christian, whose faith has never been strong, and who now, believing that his lack of faith contributed to the terrible events on the plantation, is flirting with very dangerous forces and in danger of losing his soul.'
'This is, of course, only your theory.'
'Yes, Avril, it's only my theory – and of course it could be wildly off the mark. Who knows, after all, what really goes on in Father Benedict's's mind? Only him. Maybe God.'
Avril sipped some more coffee, trying to keep herself awake, aware that her eyes were very tired and that the darkness was comforting. She studied Alex over her cup, captivated by his expressive face, but shivered when she thought of him in the Amazon jungle with snakes and spiders all over him. Was all of this really happening? Was she living some kind of dream? Was she really starting to believe that she was hearing about other worlds and strange powers? Yes, in truth she was – the evidence seemed to be overwhelming – and she felt that from the moment she had placed the amulet around her neck, she had herself taken on certain powers that she had not known before.
'And what about this amulet?' she asked, lifting it up off her throat. 'Do you really think the priest stole it in the hope of gaining such powers from it?'
'I really don't know. He possibly told us the truth. I *did* give it to Laura and maybe she later gave it to him, though somehow I doubt it. Then again, she spent most of her evenings on the plantation in that awful room with my father and Rollie Thatcher where, according to Father Benedict, he found the amulet; so possibly it was Laura who actually lost it, most likely during the night of the murders. So either Laura actually gave the priest the amulet – which I doubt, since she was so obsessed with magical powers – or, more likely, he found it where she'd lost it during the bloody events of that horrible night.'
'Do *you* believe the amulet possesses magical powers?'

‘Yes. Everything bad that happened to me, happened after I gave the amulet to Laura. Shortly after that, I tried to test the limit of my magical powers – and did so, against Peruche’s warnings, for negative reasons – only to find, when the snakes actually turned on me, that my powers had deserted me. They left me not only because I gave away the amulet, but because I gave vent to anger and hatred. So, as Peruche had told me, I lost my innocence and faith and, because of that, also lost the occult powers that had protected me. So, yes, the amulet certainly has magical properties, both negative and positive.’

‘Now that I have the amulet, will the same magic work for me?’

‘I don’t know. It possibly depends on your nature. It might have worked for the priest, but in a negative way, destroying his badly needed faith and plunging him into despair. Doubtless it worked for me because I believed in it. Whether or not it works for you, only time will tell – and even then, it could actually work against you and even put you in danger. I’d rather you got rid of it immediately, but can see that you won’t.’

‘What makes you so sure of that?’

‘Your eyes. They turn strange when you look at it.’

Avril did just that, almost challenging him to try and stop her, looking down at the blackstone amulet that lay in the palm of her hand, featureless and yet oddly opaque, as if hollow and depthless. She blinked and looked again, feeling herself drifting away, then saw black night, dark clouds, wheeling stars, the impenetrable cosmos.

There were murmurings, ghostly whisperings, all around her, inside her, and a light seemed to blossom up through her to warm her whole being. She dissolved into herself, passing down through her essence, entered a curving tunnel of light and darkness and emerged to the infinite. There past and future merged, time and space became one, all that had been and ever would be pulsated like the heart of the universe. She saw stars in all directions, some exploding silently into fountains of rainbow colours, others moving back and forth in glistening clusters of no known dimension. Then sound: a rising clamour, the whisperings rapidly building to become a wall of noise, voices separate, then as one, all around, above and below, like the stars: a single great sound that filled the void and gave it life everlasting.

One voice: a million voices. One sound: a rising tide. The boundless, anguished cry of human history reverberating far in the future. She was

shaken and then sundered, her soul scattering through the cosmos, then returned, trying to gather herself together, through that tunnel to tangibles: lights rising and falling, drums pounding relentlessly, sweat gleaming on brown skin, faces painted and scarred, a slit throat pouring blood on gleaming steel as flames flickered and scorched.
She recognized her immediately (How often had she been described?): the red hair long and windblown, cheekbones prominent and classic, lips full and sensual, green eyes wide and possibly demented as she cried out for help… *Laura Wellman!* (Was it she?) What was happening in that fearful jungle darkness? Yellow flames flickered over her body as she writhed in the mud. Fire in darkness, trees dripping, stars above, mud below, and those fierce, barbaric men, skin brown, faces painted, inflamed by the pounding drums and the hallucinogenic *epena*, were dancing around her, holding her down, kneeling upon her…
Was it she? Who else? Horribly abused, yet alive, her long hair falling over her stricken face and trailing into the mud… Yes, it was Laura Wellman, sobbing brokenly and calling for help…
Avril retreated from her, shrinking back into herself, shaking her head from side to side in protestation and then opening her eyes again.
She saw it all above her: black night, dark clouds, wheeling stars, the impenetrable cosmos around the Earth as it had always been. She was on the balcony of the Copacabana Palace Hotel, staring up at the sky.

Chapter Five

What had happened? Had she imagined it? Was the amulet some kind of mirror? Had she really heard the voice of Laura Wellman crying out in despair? Avril shivered and looked at Alex, saw his steady, gentle gaze, shivered again and let the amulet fall from her hand to rest again on her throat.

‘Are you all right?’ Alex asked. ‘You don’t look your normal self.’
‘I’m okay. I’m just tired.’
It was a necessary lie and she averted her gaze, feeling oddly ashamed of herself, perhaps even cowardly. She was, then, considerably relieved when Antonio stepped out onto the balcony, smiling in his warm and relaxing

manner while reaching down for his cup of coffee. He sipped it, winced, put the cup back on its saucer, then shook his head sadly from side to side, his face a picture of tragedy.
‘It’s almost cold,’ he said, ‘but I’ll have to live with it. Better cold than no coffee at all at this early hour.’ He pulled his chair out and sat down between Avril and Alex, rubbed his eyes and stifled a yawn and glanced from one to the other. ‘The priest’s out like a light,’ he said. ‘He’s not happy, but he’s sleeping at last. Which means for now he’s not drinking.’
‘What do you think he’ll feel like when he wakes up?’
‘Terrible, my beautiful English rose. Absolutely awful.’
‘I feel awful right now.’
‘You’ve been through a lot in a short time. You travelled a great distance, arrived in a strange city, and then had some extremely strange experiences, most naturally disturbing. You are, like the priest, paying the price for being close to our Alex here.’
He gave Alex his warmest smile, easing the cutting edge of his joke, and Alex responded by nodding his head in agreement.
‘Avril’s been paying that price for a long time now,’ he said, ‘and I’m not at all sure that I’m worth it.’
‘Do *you* think he’s worth it, Avril?’
‘Yes, Antonio, I think he’s worth it. And so, as far as I can judge, is his good friend, Father Benedict.’
‘Ah, yes,’ Antonio said, ‘Father Benedict… who needs the sleep he’s now getting.’
‘Father Benedict isn’t the only one who needs sleep,’ Alex said. ‘I can’t keep my eyes open a minute longer, so I think I’ll creep off to bed.’
‘I’ll join you in a minute,’ Avril said, ‘when I’ve finished my coffee. And I want to spend another minute or so with this handsome Brazilian.’
‘Fine,’ Alex said, unconcerned. ‘Antonio, I’ll see you in the morning, when we’ll decide what to do.’
‘So be it, my friend.’
Antonio lazily waved his left hand as Alex stood up, nodded, smiled at each of them in turn, and then walked, almost drunkenly, into the suite. For a moment there was silence, broken only by the lapping of the sea far below, and Avril, seeing Antonio’s soft smile, knew why Alex was fond of him.
‘I’m pleased you’re here, Antonio,’ she said. ‘I’m not sure I could handle all

of this without your support. Alex is terribly fond of you and now I can see why; and I'm glad not only for him, but also for me, since I need the reassurance of someone sane.'
'You think Alex and Father Benedict are insane?'
'No, Antonio, I don't. But I *do* think they're both very disturbed and that I, given the events of this extraordinary night, might be going the same way.'
Antonio smiled even more broadly. 'I don't think so,' he said. 'I said it before and I stand by it: you're a very level-headed English girl who can do nothing but good here.'
'Gee, whiz, thanks, but I think my level head is increasingly out of kilter. What's happening, Antonio? What have I let myself in for? There are things happening here that I don't understand, things that are changing my way of thinking and making me fearful. I used to be pragmatic, but I'm not anymore; I feel that I'm slipping into a dream from which I might never waken up. I might have been good for Alex back in England; I'm not sure about here. I feel as if I'm losing control, being taken over by something: this country, the whole situation, perhaps that damned woman, Laura Wellman. Will you tell me the truth, Antonio? Is Alex still in love with her? His obsession is so strong, I think he must be, but I can't be too sure.'
She hadn't wanted to ask that question but now it was out, lying in the silence between them like a stone on a riverbed. She felt Antonio's gaze upon her (she had lowered her own eyes in embarrassment) and understood that he was weighing his words and what answers to give her. Eventually she looked up, seeing dark sky and pale moon, the stars beginning to fade before morning, Antonio's *café-au-lait* face framed by the distant hills beyond the curved sweep of the beach. He smiled and shrugged, then raised both hands in the air, an oddly bemused gesture that touched her with its evident sincerity.
'Of course he was in love with her,' he said. 'It was the first such love of his life. He wanted her with the kind of innocent passion that simply can't last. She was twice his age, Avril – his love was hopeless from the start – but she entered his life as his first great temptation and exploded his innocence. Yes, certainly it was love, but not the kind that you two have for one another. It was the sort of romantic obsession – a violent, inane obsession – for which Alex was totally unprepared.'
'But he's *still* obsessed with her, Antonio – possibly more than with me.'
'No, Avril, I think you're wrong. It is of course true that he's obsessed with

her in one way, but that doesn't necessarily mean that he's still in love with her. You must accept, for a start, that Indian magic might actually work and that Alex's nightmares, which are the same as those suffered by Laura, could in truth be the products of witchcraft or voodoo, rather than just being Alex's subconscious way of identifying with the woman he once loved. Assuming, however, that this isn't the case – which I think we must for now – my own view is that Alex is obsessed with Laura Wellman not only because of his similar nightmares, but because of her brief relationship with his late father.'
'That's true,' Avril said. 'That discovery still haunts him. He's talked a lot about it. He feels that they both betrayed him and therefore didn't give a damn about his feelings.'
'Exactly. No matter how good or bad Frank Poulson was, he was still Alex's father, and so Alex, who had a surprisingly clear-eyed view of his father's dubious nature, was still in no way prepared for the discovery that his father and Laura were having an affair behind his back.'
'And you believe that's all there is to it?'
'No, I don't believe that's all there is to it. But I believe that if he hadn't found out about Laura and his father, he would have been able to face up to the rest of it.'
'You mean the killing of his father, followed by Laura's disappearance.'
'Yes. Make no mistake about it: Alex really does believe that those dreadful events were preordained for some purpose or other – believes it because Peruche suggested it – and so, until he can discover that purpose, he won't find the peace of mind he sorely needs.'
'And you think he can only learn what the purpose is by first finding the elusive Yano tribe, if indeed it exists, and even, possibly, Laura Wellman.'
'You really *are* a bright girl.'
'So what about Laura, Antonio? Do you think she was simply living in a world of fantasy – all those bizarre stories about her background and upbringing – or that she might have been perfectly mad, as Alex sometimes believed?'
'Who knows? Certainly she was a peculiar one. From the moment I met her, I felt there was something odd about her, something distracted, neurotic and potentially self-destructive. Her eyes, which were gorgeous, never truly fixed upon you, but invariably seemed focused inward to some dark, hidden corner of herself. Likewise, when she talked, she seemed to be talking to herself, and

she often behaved like someone sleepwalking – and she drank far too much. Her mad mother? Aleister Crowley, the so-called Great Beast? Her conviction that she was possessed? Even if all of these were simply the products of her overripe imagination, they might still have been, to Laura, as real as real life.'

'Where I come from,' Avril said, 'we'd call that madness.'

'You would,' Antonio said, 'but the Indians would not. The Indians believe in a universal consciousness, that all minds are part of the one mind, and that the instant something is imagined, or simply thought into being, it becomes as real as anything else held in that mind, past, present and future. Thus, by Indian terms, everything that Laura believed had happened to her in the past; had in fact been willed into being by that very belief and was therefore as real as any other manifestation of her consciousness. In other words, if Laura believed herself to be possessed, then she *was* possessed.'

Avril thought of that and shivered, automatically touching the amulet, recalling what she had experienced when she looked at it with too much concentration. She had felt mesmerised, lost in some other world, her spirit roaming freely through time and space to find eternity's gateway… *What's happening to me?* she wondered. *Can I really believe what I seemed to experience? Did I actually hear the voice of Laura Wellman when she cried out in torment?* And then she lowered her hand, suddenly frightened of touching the amulet, and realized that the last of her old beliefs were turning to dust.

'This is all too much for me,' she said. 'I can't handle it right now.'

'Understandably. Right now you're very, very tired and should be in your bed.'

'I'm on my way, *Senhor*.'

They stood up together, Antonio pulling Avril's chair back while she moved away from the table. She leaned on the balcony railing, looking down at the dark beach, still unable to fully grasp what had happened or draw any conclusions. The city was finally sleeping, the sea murmured, the hills were black, and she turned away from all of it, feeling unreal, to see Antonio's thoughtful face.

'What about you?' she asked him. 'Are you going to bed as well?'

'I don't need sleep as much as you two,' he replied, 'so I'll stay out here a little longer and make sure that Father Benedict doesn't play up again.'

‘You’re a good friend to both of them, Antonio.’
‘It’s just the Brazilian way.’
Avril smiled and nodded, then entered the suite, going directly to Alex’s room and opening the door. He was stretched out on the double bed, his hands folded behind his head, his eyes wide and focused on the ceiling, as if trying to stare through it. She closed the door behind her, then went quietly towards him, aware that back in England, even during the war, she would not have been so casual about staying under the same roof with a man, let alone sleeping with him.
She and Alex had certainly shared a bed occasionally (a lot of old rules had been quietly broken during those heady years), but they had never so overtly shared accommodation or made so clear their relationship. It had always happened in Alex’s flat during the early hours of the evening; not once had she stayed overnight or even left after midnight…
Respectability, she thought. *So necessary to we English. I’m a very long way from that now – and from all I used to believe in…*

She stopped by the bed, looking down upon him, and saw him looking up at her, his sky-blue eyes illuminated in the circle of light from the lamp on the cabinet beside the bed. Yes, they had made love often, but never successfully, and now, behind the gentleness of his smile, she saw the pain of that knowledge.

‘Can’t you sleep?’
‘I’ve been waiting for you.’
‘That’s nice,’ she said.
She sat on the edge of the bed, let him take hold of

her hand, turning it over to kiss the back of her wrist and pressing her palm to his cheek. He held her hand there for some time, a mute gesture of affection, then eventually lowered it to his side, but kept holding on to it.

‘I’m so glad you came here with me,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t face this alone.’
‘Is it that painful to be back?’
‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And right now we’re just in Rio. If it’s this bad simply being back in Brazil, it’ll be worse in the Amazon.’

‘Why are you so upset at being in Rio? Nothing happened in Rio.’
‘I’m upset because Father Benedict’s here and in such a bad way. You can’t imagine how much he’s changed; how much he’s deteriorated. And, of course, if he’s deteriorated in a physical sense, he’s deteriorated in other ways as well. To see someone you remember as being exceptionally sane and bright taking part in those voodoo rituals… Well, there isn’t much I can say except that it shocked me. No, it was more than merely shocking; it was actually frightening.’
‘And seeing him must have brought you closer to Laura Wellman.’
‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that’s true.’
Jealousy, Avril thought. *I am jealous. Oh, dear God, how pathetic*… And refused to flinch from her own conclusion, despising herself for the truth in it, understanding that no matter the circumstances, human frailty would always win.
‘But it’s not just Laura,’ Alex continued. ‘It’s the whole of that horrible time. Just being back in Brazil reminded me of everything, particularly the slaughter of my father and that pig, Rollie Thatcher… Natural justice? Perhaps. They both died at the end of their era. They were obliterated by the Indians they’d themselves tried to obliterate, and now the plantation and the mission are closed and only the mystery remains. I was a child then, Avril, viewing it through a child’s perceptions, most of it heightened and dramatically coloured to the stage where it blinded me. And now, no longer a child, I still can’t feel like an adult, instead feeling crippled, emotionally and physically, by all that occurred.’
Knowing what he was thinking, Avril understood his pain: they had lain together infrequently on the narrow bed in his modest room, touching one another like children at play in the darkness. They had wanted to make love, to find fulfilment in that war-devastated city, but each time he had tried to enter her, his fears forced him away from her. Inexperience? No, more than that. It was all part of his suffering. He had shivered with the fevers of the fear that had been wrecking him, body and soul. Asleep, he had suffered nightmares – about the Yano Indians and the rainforest, about the lights rising and falling over some unseen horror that involved Laura Wellman – but even awake, in Avril’s arms, with the air-raid sirens wailing dramatically, he had suffered from a fear that had no visible cause but made his shaking limbs ice-cold. Now, looking down at his upturned face, Avril shared in his anguish.

‘What happens when we make love?’ he asked her. ‘Why can we *not* make love? God knows, I want you so much, my heart races just thinking about it. And yet we can’t get satisfaction; when it’s done, we both flounder in disappointment. When I lie with you, the images fill my head and paralyse me completely: my father and Laura together, silhouetted in that welllit window; my deliberate brushes with death until rescued by Father Benedict; that awful month in the school in Manaus, my body burning, my mind in turmoil; my return to the dreadful desolation of the plantation and news of the slaughter; and, finally, perhaps most crippling of all, the knowledge that Laura’s disappearance had seared me even more than my father’s death… That, more than anything else, seems to haunt me relentlessly.’

He had spoken in a desperate manner, clearly frightened by his past, and she stood up, unable to say a word, and deliberately started undressing. Her blouse fell to the floor, then her skirt, then her underclothes, and eventually she stood naked before him, her sight hazed by the bedside lamp. He stared up at her, almost breathless, and then pulled the bedclothes aside, and she crept into that warm space beside him and let his thin arms enfold her. She felt ruthless, in command, determined to break down all his fears, not caring that she also felt wanton as her tongue licked his dry lips. His mouth opened to accept her and she pressed her lips on his, twisting her body until her breasts flattened against him and his warmth filtered through to her. She felt his belly, his long legs, a shoulder bone against her own, the slow slide of his tongue down her cheek and around the lobe of her ear. Then she pushed him away, forced him down, and rolled over on top of him.

‘Keep your eyes closed,’ she whispered to him, ‘and don’t say a word.’

He did as he was told and then she closed her own eyes, letting her instincts guide her over his body and its lean, trembling hardness. She had never felt him like this before, not this close, not this real, and she sensed every nerve in her body coming alive to receive him. There was light behind her closed eyelids, diminishing circles of brightness, receding to become pores in the skin that she could see in her mind. Her fingertips touched him, his heat, his racing heart, and then she traced the rise and fall of his ribcage and pressed her hands on his belly. Yes, his stomach, a man’s stomach, unlike a woman’s, and she, a mere girl, still struggling to be a woman, explored that alien flesh with tentative fingers, sliding them down through his pubic hair. He responded with a gasp, a light convulsion of his groin, and then she touched

him and felt him growing between her fingers as he moved closer to her.
It was darkness and heat, the gradual melting of the self, the sound of quickening breath and beating hearts, of hands sliding on sweaty skin. She had started by dominating him, by commanding him to obedience, hoping to break down his fears by temporarily stealing his will; but the girl had done that, not the woman she wanted to be, and now, blossoming into that new woman, she felt her own will collapsing. His tongue was licking her aching breasts, his lips sucking her burning nipples, and she found, with dismay, with uncontrollable pleasure, that she wanted to give herself up to whatever he willed for her. He was moulding her with his hands, turning her flesh to flowing clay, stroking and squeezing her into something she had not been before: a passive creature, acquiescent, spreading herself in complete surrender, awaiting obliteration or renewal to some new sphere of being.
'Yes!' Alex gasped. '*Yes!*'
Opening her eyes, she saw him staring down at her, his body half leaning across her, propped up on one elbow. His blue eyes, unusually intense, gleamed in the moonlit darkness, and when his face, pale and thoughtful, came closer to her, she closed her eyes again.
Darkness and heat. His weight flattening her burning breasts. She felt herself opening out to receive him, her hips rising to find him. Something hot and hard touched her, withdrew, returned again, and her body, rising and falling in convulsive spasms, became a pool of pure sensation; then that hardness slid into her, dividing her and warming her, making her melt and pour all around it as it moved in her hidden depths. Everything that she had been, all her separate parts, became the one, extraordinary, pulsating well of mindless pleasure, raising her up through various levels of passion to pure, limitless feeling. There was sound – her own groan of greed – and then it all fell away from her.
'Don't stop!' she begged. '*Alex!*'
Her own voice humanised her, his name reminding her of herself, returning her to a vague, shifting awareness of their separate bodies. She was lying on her back, legs outspread, knees raised, her arms stretched out languidly behind her head as he fondled her breasts. He was there between her legs, his full weight pressed upon her, his belly sliding urgently along her belly as he moved in and out of her. She was responding in kind, remotely shocked by her own wantonness, her spine arching involuntarily, her groin shaking and

thrusting upward, her legs bending farther back to lock cross the blade of his spine. She moved against him and with him, trying to cling to her senses, losing them and then getting them back again and finally losing them totally. She tried to tell him – babbling something – but lost the power of speech and groaned, felt him very deep inside her, then something pouring up from her centre, flooding across her every nerve, that astonishing multitude of sensations, making her soul grieve and sing for joy as the woman in her emerged.

'Yes!' she cried out. '*Yes!*'

And then she felt it in him, also, as he poured himself into her, as his groaning accompanied the spasms that whipped through his body; felt his grief and exultation, his stunned awareness of freedom's slavery, his escape from the prison of childhood into the bonds of commitment. He was leaping out of his fear, vaulting away from his constricting past, joining with her, not only in body but in mind, to find the courage that would help him face the dangers that she sensed were to come. And then he shuddered for one last time, groaning into her breasts, his hands gripping her hip bones as she spasmed and spasmed again and finally settled beneath him.

They lay together in the darkness, one on top of the other, letting the night surround them with the song of its silence, until he, his tears of gratitude on her shoulder, pulled his head back to drink her in.

'I love you,' he said. 'Not Laura: *you*. I know it, but now I'll have to prove it, not only to you, but to myself. So I'm going all the way: I'm going to follow Laura's footsteps. I'll make Father Benedict come with me and then see what transpires. It's not love that motivates me – it's the nature of my nightmares – because until I learn what they mean, I can't be a whole person. I'm going into the rainforest, as far as I can go, until I find the Yano Indians, whom I'm convinced do exist, and once I find them, I'll set myself free once and for all. It'll be dangerous, but I want you to come with me, because I think you're part of it.'

He rolled off her and lay beside her, clasping her fingers in his hand, his face turned to the side to stare at her as she made her decision. She calmly returned his gaze, or, at least, feigned calmness, trying to accept that she had changed for all time and could never turn back again. She could still feel him inside her, every nerve recording his presence, and her flesh, once a mere shell for her spirit, now thrived on itself. She was glowing within, almost

exalted to be alive, but as she looked steadily at him, seeing the radiance of his fresh courage, she instinctively reached up, touched the amulet on her throat, suddenly recalled that dream of Laura, again heard her cries for help, and even as the fear returned, wrapping her tingling skin in ice, she knew that she could not stay here in Rio while Alex, who had helped her become a woman, ventured into the unknown.
'I'll come with you,' she said.

Chapter Six

Situated on the delta of the Amazon River, first viewed by Avril from the window of the airplane as a cluster of white buildings in a great jigsaw of flat green islets and dense jungle, Belem was actually a small city of considerable charm and much humidity, its streets, long and straight, all lined with mango trees, forming elegant corridors along which the cooling breezes brought the perfumed fragrances of the nearby tropical forest, wafting them past the stately *Belle Epoque* houses with their glazed-tile facades, extravagant roofs and Venetian shutters, past the Portuguese colonial homes of earlier decades, then on across the busy markets and parks and back to the river.

'Now you're in the real Brazil,' Alex told her. 'The Brazil of forest and river. From here on, we can only travel farther from civilisation.'

They had arrived directly from Rio that morning, but had only one day to spend here and now they were in the downtown area, having a late breakfast at the *Bar da Parque*, sitting in the open air, on metal chairs around a small table, on a raised platform that overlooked the *Praca da Republica* and the busy main road that led to the dock area. Father Benedict was sipping coffee, his face screwed up in distaste, and Antonio and Alex were sitting on either side of him, with Avril opposite.

She glanced along the tree-lined boulevard, then across the triangular-shaped park, observing the shoeshine boys, the pagoda-shaped bandstand, the many food stalls along the handsome mosaic pavements, the beautifully slim mulatto girls who walked with an open sensuality of the kind unknown in staid England, and realized that if Rio had made her feel far from home, this

city, Belem, with its heat and constant rain and humidity, with its exotic mingling of races and its tropical languor, was truly uprooting her from her past and casting her free from her former self.

'We're meeting him in thirty minutes,' Antonio said, 'so let's pay up and go.'
'Where are we meeting him?' Alex asked.
'At Castle Fort in *Ver-o-Peso*. We're having drinks overlooking the market to give Avril a thrill.'
He had said it as a joke and Avril appreciated the gesture, but she still felt a little on edge to think of who they were meeting: a gentleman named Peter Nicholson, the old friend of Laura's father who had been instrumental in getting her the job with *National Geographic* magazine and was presently working right here in Belem. The meeting had been arranged by Antonio who, writing to Nicholson in New York at Alex's request, had been surprised to receive a reply from Brazil. Antonio had written to Nicholson about Laura's disappearance, but had also asked him to confirm the rather bizarre background details given by Laura to Alex, and Nicholson, in his reply from the offices of the *Central Press Agencia*, had suggested that they meet him for drinks on their way to Manaus. Now, as Antonio was placing *cruzeiros* into the waiter's hand, Avril, standing up with the others, could not ignore her nervousness and realized that what she most feared was the effect that Nicholson's revelations about Laura might have on Alex.
'Right,' Antonio said, 'let's hit the road. Since it isn't that far, we can walk.'
As they started away from the table, Alex reached out to Avril, holding her hand as they descended the steps and stood on the pavement. Father Benedict came down behind them, being helped by Antonio, and then stood unsteadily beside them, his bleary eyes squinting into the sunlight, looking across the busy *Praca de Republica* with its ornate bandstand, grassy mounds and leafy trees. He shivered as if shaking off a ghost, then reluctantly crossed the road with them.
'This is senseless,' he said, repeating a complaint he had been making all morning, rubbing his nose and sniffing repeatedly like an old man with asthma. 'Why did I let you talk me into coming here? We're all behaving as if we're mad. We can only learn what we already know: that Laura's dead, that she was killed by the Yano Indians. We're putting ourselves in mortal danger for no more than that.'

‘Laura isn’t necessarily dead,’ Alex said. ‘And I don’t know what kind of danger you’re talking about.’
‘You know *exactly* what I’m talking about. I’m talking about the Yano. The powers of that particular tribe are far-reaching and have already affected us. They caused that unnatural storm in Rio – they were giving you fair warning – and rest assured that they’ll manage something much worse if you insist on continuing with this madness.’
‘The storm was possibly natural,’ Alex said without anger. ‘But even if it *was* caused by the Yano, I wouldn’t turn back.’
‘And Avril? You’ll put her in danger, also, by bringing her with us?’
‘Alex gave me the choice,’ Avril said, ‘and I decided to come. I have my own reasons.’
The priest did not reply, but glanced left and right, and then, with a furtive, greedy expression, at the amulet resting on Avril’s throat. She put her hand up to touch it, automatically protecting it, feeling that the priest was about to grab it and run away with it. In the event, he didn’t, but merely continued to stare at it before shivering, glancing left and right again, and then rubbing his tired eyes.
‘It’s all madness,’ he muttered.
They were walking along the main road, heading down to the dock area, the park on one side of them, food stalls on the other, the air smelling of fish, vegetables and stewing meat, barefoot children and shoeshine boys of the same age playing and working around them. Avril kept touching the amulet, recalling the visions it had given her, and suddenly wondering just how far Father Benedict had gone into the depths of its mysteries.
‘Why this Nicholson fellow?’ the priest asked irritably. ‘We already know about Laura’s past. I seriously doubt that he can add anything new to the subject.’
‘We don’t know that,’ Alex said, his voice reflecting his freshly energized appearance. ‘We don’t know if *anything* Laura told us was true or if she was quite simply mad. Also, according to his letter, Peter Nicholson had been sent by his employers to Brazil because they were concerned about Laura’s still unexplained disappearance and wanted him to investigate the matter further and submit a report. So, Nicholson possibly knows more than us about what actually happened during the night of the murders. Anyway, what have we to lose except an hour or so of our time?’

The priest did not reply, but merely sniffed and glanced around him, as if constantly searching for something that only he knew about. In the daylight he looked frightful, extremely ill and too old for his age, as if the tragedy of what had taken place in the plantation had crushed him completely.
Avril was mystified, unable to understand his anguish, refusing to believe that his guilt over the events that had led up to the murders could account for all that *angst* and failing health. More baffling, when she could bear to think about it, was the fact that the priest's symptoms were uncomfortably similar to those suffered by Alex in London – and if Avril could blame Alex's suffering on his former passion for Laura Wellman, she could find no particularly cogent reason for the priest's singular downfall.
'Are you all right?' she asked Alex, feeling a rush of concern for him. 'Are you sure you'll be able to sit there and listen to this man when he talks about Laura?'
Alex squeezed her hand and smiled cheerfully at her. 'Oh, yes,' he said. 'After last night, the best night of my life, I can face up to anything.'
'You were wonderful last night,' Avril said. 'I still feel you inside me.'
Though true, it was not enough: there were shadows still remaining. She could not shake off the feeling that Laura Wellman, whether dead or alive, was a threat to both of them. Alex had found relief the previous night, making love with the skill of regained confidence, and she had responded (and the memory made her blush) by surrendering completely. The experience had exalted her, turning her body into a shrine, and she had known, in the ecstasy of her worship, that Alex felt the same way. It had changed him – she could see that; he had the glow of renewed faith – but she still felt endangered by the ghost that had called out of his past.
Antonio shouted at them, waving his hand, indicating that they should follow him and Father Benedict across the wide, busy road. This they did, avoiding the heavy traffic, still heading for the dock area, but then, before reaching it, turned into Rua Alfredo, a long, narrow street lined with open-front stores of all kinds, the buyers and sellers of an equally diverse nature, representing many races and creeds, the men in shorts and vests, rubber thongs on their bare feet, the women in loose dresses and turbans, pouring sweat from abundant flesh. It was a clamorous, colourful street, but blessed with a cooling breeze, and it led them eventually into the *Praca Relogio* and the port of *Ver-o-Peso* on the Bay of Guajara.

Sunlight flashed off the water, numerous boats of all kinds and sizes jostled alongside the planked jetties, and the fruits of the many market stalls spilled onto the ground, adding a multitude of colours to the already colourful Portuguese mosaic flagstones: Brazil nuts and berries and mangoes and peaches, pineapples and short, fat bananas and other strange fruits with exotic names and unusual appearances – all piled up on the stalls or forming large mounds on the pavements and roads, beside the enormous fish that were stacked in soaking heaps, their silvery-grey bodies gleaming wetly in the brilliant noon sun.

Antonio led them around the square, past the stalls, through the babbling, importuning hawkers, in the general direction of the raised Castle Fort. Here, in the older part of town, the buildings looked like they were rotting from the relentless alternatives of tropical heat, daily afternoon rain and subsequent humidity. Everywhere on the walls of the baroque and splendid Portuguese architecture, posters were peeling, plaster was crumbling, and jagged holes let light shine through the brick, the buildings in general being in an advanced state of decrepitude and disrepair, yet still managing to retain a seedy elegance that had a charm all its own. Antonio led them up some steps to the top of the famous hill and eventually, out of breath and beginning to sweat, they arrived at the old gun emplacements on *Forte da Castilo*, overlooking the full sweep of the bay and the market immediately below. Behind rusty iron railings, in an area bounded by the large black guns, was an open-air bar consisting of simple tables and metal chairs. Only about a quarter of the tables were being used, and at one of them, near the railings, a man stood up and waved to them, obviously recognizing them from the description he had been given: three men, one Brazilian, and an English girl. Being the first to reach the man, Antonio introduced himself and shook his hand, and then, when the rest of them had been introduced, the man, Peter Nicholson, invited them to sit at his table. When they had done so, he ordered drinks – *Chopp* beer for Father Benedict and Antonio, white wine for Avril, Alex and himself – after which he clasped his hands under his chin and offered a pleasant smile. He was tall, slim and rather elegant, with silvery hair and a well-tanned, traveller's face, immaculate in striped shirt and tie, white slacks and dark blazer.

'It's a simple bar,' he said, 'but the view is the best in town, and I thought it might make a more pleasant hour than one spent in my office.'

‘Avril’s a stranger to Brazil,’ Antonio said, ‘so your choice, in this instance, was excellent.’
Nicholson nodded his appreciation, then laid his hands on the table, sitting back and looking at everyone in turn; then his gaze came to rest on Alex, who looked back with calm interest.
‘So,’ Nicholson said, ‘you’re the young man whose father was murdered.’
‘Yes,’ Alex said.
There was a brief silence during which Alex was almost expressionless, but then Avril, knowing what he must be feeling, sneaked her hand under the table and took hold of his, squeezing it until he glanced at her and managed a reassuring smile.
‘A terrible business,’ Nicholson said. ‘I truly sympathize with you. Terrible, and yet not too surprising – or, rather, relatively normal, given the area and circumstances.’
‘Normal?’ Avril queried, feeling shocked, ‘Did you say *normal?*’
‘I said normal given the area and circumstances. Bear in mind where you are, Avril. This isn’t London. It’s the Amazon and the laws here are different, based not on white man’s logic but on religion and old tribal customs.’
The waiter brought the drinks, set them on the table and departed, then Nicholson continued with what he had been saying.
‘As you know,’ he went on, now directing his attention mainly to Alex and Antonio while Father Benedict opened a hip flask and poured something stronger into his beer, ‘I was sent here by my employers to find out what happened to Laura Wellman, she originally having been sent to the Amazon at their behest. My brief was twofold: one, to find out exactly what happened to her, and, two, to see if there was a usable story behind all of this.’
‘Such being modern publishing,’ Father Benedict said sarcastically, his eyes bloodshot but intense, the glass of laced beer hovering in front of his lips, the hand holding it shaky. ‘And…?’
Nicholson shrugged. ‘I wasn’t particularly successful. I’m pretty sure about where Laura went – into the rainforest with the killers – but there’s no way of knowing whether she’s still alive or dead. As for the murders, they were vengeance killings, no more and no less, ritualistic executions in accordance with old Yanoama tribal customs.’ He glanced with concern at Alex and asked, ‘Can you listen to this?’
‘Yes,’ Alex said, but squeezed Avril’s hand again, the tension coming out of

his fingers and rippling up through her veins.
‘Okay,’ Nicholson said, clearly relieved. ‘As I’ve already pointed out, the murders weren’t unusual given the particular area and circumstances. The evidence points to the fact that the killings were committed by a single individual wielding a machete, that individual obviously being the young Indian, Mengrire, who disappeared with his girlfriend and Laura Wellman that same night. Your father and Rollie Thatcher were in the main lounge with the Indian girl and Mengrire simply let himself in – as you know, the front door was never locked – and then killed first your father and then Rollie Thatcher. The position of the bodies indicated that your father was killed immediately while sitting in his armchair in the middle of the room; Rollie Thatcher almost immediately after that, doubtless as he attempted to flee from where he’d been stretched out on the sofa near the windows. The dead bodies were then ritualistically mutilated – we can ignore the precise details – the weapon, in this case, being a knife rather than a machete, probably wielded by the Indian girl. The particular form of mutilation showed that it was an act of ritualized vengeance.’
‘By which you mean,’ Antonio said, ‘vengeance for the death of the girl’s father and her subsequent sexual exploitation.’
‘Correct.’ Nicholson turned back to Alex. ‘I take it you already know, Alex, that these particular cases weren’t the first as far as your father was concerned.’
‘My father’s abuse of the Indians was widely known and couldn’t be ignored, not even by me.’
Nicholson looked relieved again, sighing loudly and nodding, then he had a sip of his wine and offered a hesitant smile. He was obviously a decent man, trying to lighten Alex’s burden. Glancing at Alex’s pale, drawn face, Avril was grateful for the American’s sensitivity.
‘It *is* possible,’ Nicholson continued, ‘that Laura was directly involved in the killings. Why she fled with the Indians remains a mystery, but it’s my belief that it wasn’t a case of abduction – they couldn’t have taken her from the plantation by force – and so, for whatever bizarre reasons, she must have gone voluntarily.’
‘Where?’ Father Benedict asked, wiping his lips with one hand and staring over the mouth of his hip flask with watery, challenging eyes.
‘Investigation of the terrain surrounding the plantation revealed that three

people – Mengrire, his girlfriend and, we assume, Laura Wellman – took a boat along the Rio Negro, discarded it about fifty miles upriver, and then hiked north into the jungle towards Catrimani, just south of which is reported to be the province of the Yano tribe, presuming that such a tribe actually exists. If, as your letter indicated, Laura was obsessed with finding that tribe, it would seem that's where she went with Mengrire and his girlfriend, both of whom might have hoped to be given protection there. In any event, only one person fled with those two – and it had to be Laura.'
'What about Peruche?' Alex asked. 'Didn't he go with them?'
'No,' Nicholson replied emphatically. 'Naturally that was the immediate assumption, but it proved to be wrong. Every *seringueiro* we talked to confirmed that Peruche vanished, for reasons unknown, three days *before* the murders were committed. Nobody saw him go and nobody knows where he went, though the assumption is that he, also, went into the rainforest to return to the Yano as he had, reportedly, said he would do some day.'
'That's absolutely true,' Alex said. 'He told me that he'd once been a prisoner of the Yano, that he'd escaped, but that he'd have to return to them in the future. He didn't say why.'
Nicholson nodded. 'Anyway, no matter his reasons or ultimate destination, Peruche had nothing whatsoever to do with the murders – and at his age, it's unlikely that he'd have made it very far into the rainforest. We've therefore assumed that he died somewhere deep in the forest.'
During the ensuing silence, Avril looked over the rusty iron railing at the picturesque market scene spread out below her. The sea in the bay was attractive with the sun beating off it and the fishermen spreading their nets from the small, bobbing boats. This location was near the confluence of the Guama and Para rivers
– thus the mingling of mud-brown and humusblackened water – and as this, also, was the beginning of Alex's world, a strange and alien world, she began to understand why he was different from most of those his own age. Yes, Alex and Peruche, the young white boy and the old Indian: separated by gulfs of age and experience and yet united in friendship, in a world so far removed from her own that she still couldn't quite grasp it. Now, slightly frightened, she looked at Peter Nicholson and saw Antonio leaning towards him, his face unusually solemn.
'Mr Nicholson, when I wrote to you in New York, I asked you if the rather

colourful details of Laura's past, as related by her, had any basis in reality. So, were those details true or not?'
'They were essentially true. The colour was probably added by Laura. Regarding the main points: yes, she *was* the daughter of wealthy Hollywood parents, one of whom, her mother, was notably neurotic, highly impressionable regarding matters of the occult, and *did* indeed frequently boast of having spent a night, a single night, with Aleister Crowley, the so-called Great Beast, some time during 1915. However, since Crowley, irrespective of his reputed charisma and occult knowledge, was unquestionably something of a charlatan, I think we can take it that Laura wasn't possessed because of anything that went on between her mother and Crowley that particular night. Nevertheless, my own knowledge of Laura as a child and, later, as a fairly talented photographer in New York, convinces me that if she wasn't actually insane, she was certainly on the way to becoming every bit as neurotic as her mother had been; and that if she wasn't actually possessed by the so-called forces of darkness, she was certainly convinced that such forces exist and that she was definitely possessed by them. This neurotic belief, instilled in her by her mother and growing stronger as Laura became more emotionally unstable, particularly during her teens, seemed to have taken her over completely by the time she arrived in New York, shortly after her separation from her husband and estrangement from her father.'
'So you don't believe she was genuinely possessed?'
'No, Mr Bozzano, I don't. What I believe is that Laura was so strongly convinced that she'd been possessed, or cursed, it eventually became the real thing to her, at least in the sense that she began to see signs of it in the most unlikely areas – '
'Such as Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima.'
'Exactly. Her identification with negative or destructive events really began when, as an emotionally insecure teenager, with a neurotic mother and uncaring father, she was caught in a lesbian affair with the actress you mentioned in your letter and, more importantly, when that actress then committed suicide. I should point out, however, that the so-called lesbian affair, much exaggerated in later years by Laura as further proof that she was possessed by destructive forces, was really no more than a passing infatuation on the part of a very insecure teenager with an older, more sophisticated, woman, that they were never in fact found in bed together – as the physical

aspects of the affair were probably all in Laura's vivid imagination – and that the actress later killed herself, not because she was found in bed with Laura, which she was not, but because her career was going downhill and she couldn't bear the thought of ageing in anonymity. Give this truth, should we not then accept that Laura's connections between her own life and such destructive events as Pearl Harbour and Hiroshima were no more than exaggerated fantasies based on the most tenuous of coincidences? Yes, I believe we must. The possession, the curse, existed only in Laura's mind – and because she was always looking for signs of it, she naturally found them everywhere.'

Glancing at the sky, Avril saw dark clouds passing over the sun, heralding the coming of the daily afternoon rain. The clouds were slate-grey and, to Avril, uncommonly ominous, as if, after the experiences she had been through, her imagination was running riot and pushing her into a fear that had no solid foundation. Shivering, watching the bright sunlight turning grey, she felt increasingly unreal.

'Do you believe in the occult at all?' Father Benedict asked of Nicholson, his voice, though ravaged by alcohol, sounding slightly aggressive.

'Yes, I do,' Nicholson replied. 'I am, if I may say so, something of an authority on Brazilian religions and cults – which is why it was within my province to assign Laura to this area – and after years of study and investigation, I've certainly come to believe in the remarkable powers of Brazilian voodoo and Indian witchcraft. The fact that I don't believe Laura was herself possessed in the manner she often recounted has nothing to do with my quite separate belief in unseen forces.'

Father Benedict nodded judiciously, then managed to straighten up, staring at each of them in turn and pursing his lips. 'So,' he said, 'we might as well go back to Rio. We still don't know precisely what happened to Laura and we'll never find out, but we *do* know that the demonic possession was all in her mind. The poor woman was driving herself into madness and that's all there is to it. Her presence in the Amazon was an accident, no more and no less. It was not preordained.'

'That isn't necessarily so,' Alex said, leaning forward in his chair, his cheeks starting to show some colour, his blue eyes bright again. 'According to the Indians, if one believes oneself to be possessed, then one *is* possessed… and if one is in that particular state, he or she has opened the way for the forces of

darkness to enter. If this is true, then what happened between Laura's mother and Aleister Crowley is irrelevant; what matters is that Laura *believed* she was possessed and so became exactly what she believed herself to be: a victim of the forces of darkness – a victim and instrument.'
The air was turning chilly and Avril shivered again, not sure if it was caused by the afternoon's cooling or from the fear creeping over her. She studied Alex carefully, recalling all he had told her: about Peruche, about Laura, about the visions that had joined them all together… *A great ball of fire in the heavens; an umbrella of light*… Peruche and Alex had shared the same dream – they had dreamt of the atom bomb the day before it was dropped – and that dream, no matter how tenuously, had connected them to Laura. Now Alex, as if reading her mind, seemed to echo her thoughts.
'It's my belief,' he said to Nicholson, 'that Laura, simply by believing so strongly, conjured up the forces of darkness and was then possessed by them. The night before the atom bomb fell on Hiroshima, I dreamt about a great ball of fire in the heavens; and the old Indian, Peruche, who had the exact same dream, told me it was a sign that someone was coming to point the way to my future. Laura arrived the next day – a woman obsessed with the same bomb – and I knew that she was, as Peruche had indicated, the one chosen to lead me.'
'Lead you to what?' Nicholson asked.
'I don't know,' Alex confessed.
'Well, since there's no way of ascertaining what happened to Laura,' Father Benedict intervened, this time speaking in a hurried, breathless manner, 'there's no way we can either prove or disprove your theory – which again merely emphasizes the fact that your mission is fruitless.'
'It may not be,' Nicholson said. 'We may have a witness.'
Alex and Father Benedict were clearly startled by the remark, both sitting upright in their chairs as if charged with electricity. They glanced briefly at one another, both flushed and oddly furtive, then returned their attention to Nicholson.
'I received a cable yesterday,' Nicholson said, 'from one of my former acquaintances in Manaus, stating that a semi-deranged Indian girl located in a village in the rainforest could well be the daughter of the *seringueiro* whose death started all the troubles – the girl who fled into the jungle with Mengrire and, we assume, Laura.'

Hearing this, Avril was finally smothered in the fear that had been creeping inexorably over her for the past hour or so. Her heart was beating with a dangerous rapidity and her skin seemed to be on fire. She didn't really want to know what had happened to Laura Wellman; this was a mystery she no longer wanted solved.

'Naturally I can't confirm whether or not this is the actual girl,' Nicholson continued, 'but reportedly the girl in Manaus was found wandering in the rainforest, is presently suffering from severe shock, and babbles a lot about the Yano Indians and a redheaded white woman. The girl's being held in one of the waterfront houses of an *igapé* in the Educandos district. I've shown the location of the house on this map and I suggest you go find her.'

Nicholson passed the small, hand-drawn map over to Alex who studied it carefully, then folded it in two and put it into his wallet. Seeing him do this, Nicholson sighed, looked at his wristwatch, glanced at each of them in turn and said, 'Sorry, but I fear my time's up. Is there anything else?'

'No,' Antonio said. 'You've told us enough to be going on with. We really appreciate it, Mr Nicholson, and we'll let you go now.'

As Nicholson smiled and stood up, followed by the rest of them, Avril heard thunder rumbling in the distance and felt the start of the daily afternoon rainfall. Glancing up at the sky, she saw drifting black clouds, lowered her gaze and saw the shadows of the clouds passing over the bay. The thunder rumbled again, the wind blew, the water rippled, and the rain started coming down more heavily, splashing noisily around them.

Nicholson rolled his eyes dramatically, mocking the rain, shook hands with each of them in turn, then said, 'I'll go and pay the bill and then shelter indoors with the owner of the bar; meanwhile, I think you should catch a taxi and head for the boat, since given the nature of the Brazilians it might well leave early. Goodbye – and good luck.' He waved his hand and hurried away, heading for the shelter of the indoors bar.

Avril glanced over the railing at the market below, saw the buyers and sellers crowding together under the canopies of their stalls as the rain splashed on sodden fruit, on the alluvial carpets of silvery fish, on the dark, rippling water that rose and fell in languid motions before cascading over the hulls of the numerous boats along the darkening jetties.

Someone tugged at her hand. Seeing that it was Alex, she smiled and followed him. Father Benedict and Antonio, just ahead, led them back down

the hill. They were drenched in no time, but caught a taxi near the market, Antonio taking the front seat beside the driver, the others in the back.
Avril wiped rain from her face, noticed the others doing the same, felt the warmth of her body against her wet clothes and knew she would soon dry out. Alex's hand fell on her knee, squeezing it lightly as he grinned at her, then she glanced out of the taxi and saw the rain pouring down through grey light, splashing in a glistening tapestry off the walls of the ugly warehouses. The drive to the docks was brief, past the drab, ancient buildings, occasionally allowing glimpses of the bay's rippling, lightflecked water and the cumulus, grey clouds above it. Avril wanted to see the forest, the green banks of the *igapós*, but the sheets of rain obscured the far side in a thin veil of drifting spray.
She huddled up on the seat, hemmed in by Alex and Father Benedict, feeling their warmth seeping into her, their bodies pressing in from both sides with an oddly sensual effect. She was flushed, her heart racing, a feeling of unreality deepening, and then suddenly, inexplicably, she was overwhelmed by the ghostly presence of Laura Wellman, only knowing her second-hand, in her imagination, but now convinced that she was looking out of Laura's eyes at the men on each side of her.
Avril spiralled down into panic, into the bowels of bewilderment, unable to fully grasp what was happening, but still aware of herself. She saw the back of Antonio's head, bobbing beside the driver's head, then glanced from Alex to Father Benedict to confirm where she was. There was a final burst of thunder, faraway, across the bay, then a shaft of sunlight dazzled her eyes as the taxi moved on.
Drums? Could she hear drums? The fear formed a scream inside her. She had a vision of Laura Wellman outstretched on the forest floor, a mass of almost naked Indians crowding around her, the lights rising and falling high above as the drumming, relentless and hypnotic, made the very earth shake. *No!* she thought. *I will not submit to this!* She felt her spirit reaching out to the faith she had once renounced. The drumming… *Please stop it!* Who was she? *Laura Wellman*… No! *I'm not Laura Wellman! I'm in a taxi. I'm Avril*… She shuddered and looked sideways, saw Alex, reached out to him, held his hand as the drumming filled her ears and the taxi braked to a halt.
Drumming? *What* drumming? Glancing out of the window, fearful of where she might be, she saw a multitude of people around her, the docks beyond

their heads, the paddle-steamer at the jetty with the broad expanse of water behind it, a thin green line of forest faraway where the *igapós* began. Near the boat was a group of Indians loudly playing drums and singing, some dancing frantically, while the passengers, fighting their way through the hawkers trying desperately to sell their wares, climbed the gangplank to the lower deck, burdened with their suitcases and boxes, none looking too elegant… The taxi had simply brought her to the Belem docks and this was perfectly normal.

Avril felt dazed, rubbing her eyes and blinking repeatedly, but Alex tugged her gently from the taxi and pressed his lips to her cheek. She smiled automatically, but was hardly aware of him, her attention drawn to the crowds on all sides as she walked to the boat. There was the usual diversity of races, the customary ebullient, demonstrative activity, and everyone seemed to be shouting against the pounding of the drums. Alex now had his arm around her, holding her close in that dense mass, and she went with him, following Antonio and Father Benedict, with her thoughts spinning crazily. She wasn't sure what was happening, but sensed what was causing it. She reached out with a visibly shaking hand and touched the blackstone amulet that lay on the stem of her throat and drew her into its opaque depths. In there was another world, confusing her old beliefs, pitting her against her hidden nature and setting fire to her Christian faith. She felt frightened, disorientated, torn away from her stable roots, and the image of Laura Wellman, that ghostly competitor, now seemed to be wrapping itself around her more completely with each passing hour.

Glancing at Alex, her love made her spirit leap, but then she turned to see the drummer playing beside the boat's gangplank and the fear, first a chill in the humid air, turned to ice in her veins. She looked irrationally for the suitcases, wanting something familiar to cling to, even knowing that they'd been delivered earlier from the hotel, but convinced, in her highly-strung condition, that something was wrong. Indeed, the suitcases were there, piled up near the gangplank, Antonio checking them and giving instructions to the porters while Father Benedict, his face a parchment of pain, took a drink from his hip flask.

Avril felt claustrophobic, imprisoned by the jostling bodies, her head tightening because of the pounding drums, the wild dancing and singing. Then someone pushed her forward – she assumed it was Alex – and she

found herself directly facing the band and one man in particular: an unusually tall Indian with a carved bone through his nose, liana vines and rodent skins around his forehead, his brown eyes gleaming brilliantly. He stared at the amulet on her throat and then reached out to grab it.
'This is not for white women,' he said, speaking English, holding the amulet close to his face and studying it closely. 'You must surrender it now or suffer the consequences, which for you might be very bad.'
Avril heard herself laughing, a humourless sound, then she slapped the amulet out of the man's hand and pressed it back to her throat.
'Go away!' she snapped. '*Damn you!*'
Then she felt the pain and shrieked, jerking her hand off the amulet, realizing that the palm of her hand had been burned and seeing the circle of lightly scorched skin. Stunned, disbelieving, her heart racing as her fear increased, she tried to turn away from the Indian, but suddenly felt paralysed. She stood there, trembling helplessly, feeling cold in the returning sunlight, her senses scattering into the brightening air with the last of her strength.
'Magic!' the Indian said, sounding hoarse. '*You must not have the power!*'
And then the ice fell away, she felt the warmth of the sun, looked down to see the Indian's hand sliding over her throat, then Alex's hand slapping it away as he snapped something in Portuguese. Avril blinked and rubbed her eyes, licked her lips and glanced around her, saw the Indian retreating into the crowd behind the band, and reached up, automatically, her heart lurching, to confirm that the amulet was still resting on her throat, which it was. Then, when she had touched it, still feeling the pain in the palm of her hand, she realized that it had indeed been burned when the strange Indian, a medicine man, accosted her.
'Give it up,' Alex said, his gaze anxious. 'Throw that damned thing away!'
'No!' someone responded – her own voice. 'It's mine and I'll keep it. *Don't you ever dare touch it!*'
Her own voice? Not at all. Another voice, quite demented, raging with the venom of pure malice from some terrible, unknown place. She pressed her hand over her mouth, stepped back, glanced about her, saw Alex, Antonio and Father Benedict, all shocked, staring at her as if seeing the ghost of the woman they'd lost.
Then, without another word, the pounding drums filling in for their silence, they stepped back to let her walk to the gangplank and lead them up to the

boat.

Chapter Seven

The first two days of the voyage, upriver to Santarem, started in the monochrome of a disturbing dream and led her, with a dreadful inexorability, into a living nightmare. The bad feelings had begun during the drive to the Belem docks and had been deepened by her encounter with the Indian medicine man; but then, once the paddle-steamer had pulled out, its horn hooting, the crowds cheering, Belem shrinking behind them and the rainforest coming closer, Avril had felt herself sliding rapidly into the chilling embrace of an unyielding fear.

Recalling her strange behaviour on the dock, shocked at how she had shouted at Alex, convinced that the venomous voice that had come from her had not been her own, she found herself avoiding the others, unable to look them in the eye, and instead spent a lot of time by the railing of the top deck, watching as the boat inched carefully through the narrow, gloomy *igapós* and the rainforest, dark and silent, moved in and drooped over them.

The *igapós*, or *igarapés*, were the narrow, winding lanes of water formed by the partly submerged equatorial forest, the river winding around the tops of the submerged trees whose branches often fell over the boat or formed arches above it, casting their shadows on the top deck, flowers of yellow, mauve and white falling off them to fill the air with a heavy perfume and form floating gardens between the river banks. Viewed one way, they were beautiful, viewed another, distinctly ominous, and Avril, opening and closing her scorched hand, could not help but take the latter point of view and feel threatened by them.

She knew she had changed, that her old beliefs had died, and that now, no matter how much she tried to convince herself otherwise, she could not help but believe in those powers that Alex had frequently talked about. He had once possessed such powers, but had lost them when he lost his faith, surrendering his innocence to Laura and then giving her the amulet that had protected him. Now Avril had the same amulet and had already been affected

by it, taking power from it and losing herself inside it, in some strange, frightening otherworld. So, she stood on the top deck, surveying the narrow, winding *igapós*, watching the chameleons scrambling up the tree trunks and disappearing as if by magic, feeling, as she rubbed her dazed eyes, that she was losing her senses.

'It's no use hiding,' Alex said, coming up to her at the railing. 'This is going to be a seven-day trip and you can't avoid us that long. Besides, there's no point. We all know what happened back there. You briefly took on some else's personality and didn't know who we were.'

'Whose personality?'

'I don't know – and given the amount of venom in that voice, I don't *want* to know.'
Avril shuddered to recall it, gazed at the yellowish flood water, imagined herself sinking into it and finding blessed oblivion. Though she knew that what Alex had said was true, she couldn't fully admit it to herself.
'Are you suggesting I was briefly possessed?'
'Yes,' Alex replied. 'The amulet has magical properties, both positive and negative, and you know as well as I do what's been happening to you.'
'Nothing's been happening,' she insisted, lying and feeling guilty about it.
'Not a damned thing.'
'Nonsense. Why deny it? We're being haunted and you know it. First it was me – that was the storm over Copacabana – but now, because you're wearing that amulet, they're concentrating on you.'
'They?'
'The forces of darkness. The forces that brought me back here. That amulet's a channel from this world to the other, and as long as you insist on holding on to it, we'll all be in danger.'
'Rubbish. You're just trying to frighten me. You just want me to get rid of the amulet, but you won't succeed.'
'Why is keeping it that important to you?' 'I don't know. *I just want it!*'
She snapped the words and then hurried away, ashamed even as she did so, striding along the top deck, past the people slinging their hammocks, to the stern of the boat where two long tables, serving as kitchen and bar, were

already crowded. The sun was sinking, the sky turning charcoal grey, the boat gliding in and out of shadows, its engine offering a muffled, throbbing growl. Avril wanted to be alone, needing silence for speculation, but she realized, from one look around the top deck, that this would be impossible.

The old paddle-steamer had two decks and was divided into three classes, the upper deck consisting of first-class cabins, the lower deck holding the secondclass hammocks and most of the cargo. The first-class hammocks on the top deck, all covered with mosquito nets, were slung around the outside walls of the small and extremely hot first-class cabins, with passengers already lying in them, or sitting beneath them, and others taking up most of the deck space with their boxes and bags; and although Avril realized that she had no hope of privacy here, she also knew that the chance for such would be even less on the lower deck where, because of the haphazardly piled cargo, fresh air and privacy would be even more difficult to find.

In desperation she had a drink, buying *caipirinha* at the cook house, and then sat on pales of straw and again stared at the rainforest as it slid past on either side of the boat, beyond the tops of the submerged trees of the *igapós*. The dim light was changing to darkness and the boat's lamps were turned on, casting their yellow glow over the noisy, excitedly gesticulating passengers and the water below. The submerged trees looked eerie, the water swirling around their canopies, and the forest on the banks beyond the trees was turning from green to pure black.

Avril drank some *caipirinha,* stroked the amulet, let time pass, heard the chattering of the forest, its constant, loud rustling, and then saw the stars in the sky through breaks in the treetops. Alex joined her again, determined not to leave her alone, and she heard her own voice talking to him as if from faraway.

'I feel as if I'm being pursued,' she said, 'and you feel that as well.'

'Yes, I do,' Alex said.

'By the spirit of Laura?'

'No, by those who possessed her. We're being haunted by those forces I once viewed as lights over the jungle.'

'The lights that rose and fell over that unknown area ruled by the Yano.'

'Which is where we're going.'

'Why, Alex? What are you really looking for? Do you really believe you're going to find the Yano by going into that jungle. No one else has ever gone in

there and come out again, so what makes us so different?'
'You're wrong. Peruche was once their prisoner – and actually escaped.'
'A once-only affair that's never been repeated. Even Laura didn't return from that jungle, or rainforest, or whatever the hell you call it, so why should we?'
'Because we've been called. Because my nightmares were the same as Laura's. Because everything that's happened since we arrived in Brazil has been of a supernatural nature. I've been drawn back here for some purpose – I'm not sure what it is – but I know, because of all I've told you about Laura, that's she's drawing us to her.'
The boat was rounding a sharp curve in the river, the trees scraping it bow and stern, the branches bending and then whipping back up, sending their leaves flying into the air to rain down again over the heads of those massed on the deck. The boat appeared to fill the *igarapé*, grazing the trees on both sides, and that forest, within reach, actually meeting above her head, was a featureless blackness only broken up by the shifting yellow light of the boat and emitting, with a frightening regularity, the jungle's macabre chattering.
'I keep thinking the boat won't get through,' Avril said. 'I never imagined that the river could be so narrow the trees could touch us on both sides. I keep thinking that some spider or snake is going to fall from the branches.'
Alex smiled gently at her. 'It often happens,' he said. 'It's best to keep away from the railing while the forest is this close.'
'I thought the river was really wide.'
'This isn't really the Amazon. These *igapós* and *igarapés* wind through the rainforest for about a hundred miles, but in a few hours we'll reach the river proper, where you'll find it's much wider.'
'How much wider?'
'Up to seven miles. I hope this knowledge makes you feel better. And in the meantime, since everyone gets up early, you should try for some sleep.'
'I don't really feel like sleeping, Alex.'
'Come to bed,' he said. '*Please*…'
Still thinking of snakes and spiders while stepping back from the railing, Avril glanced along the deck and noticed, to her surprise, that most of the passengers had either climbed into their hammocks or were in the process of doing so. Checking her wristwatch, she saw it was midnight, a revelation that faintly startled her, and then she looked along the deck at the tables used for dining and saw that a few people were still there, faces bathed in the

lamplight. Father Benedict was there, talking drunkenly to a Brazilian, the fingers of one hand around a glass, a bottle of rum on the table.
‘Shouldn’t we stop him from drinking?’ Avril asked.
‘It’ll help him sleep,’ Alex replied. ‘I’d rather he sat there and got drunk than sneaked off for *epena*.’
‘Where’s Antonio?’
‘Almost certainly in bed, which is where we’re now going.’
He led her back to their cabin, which was as narrow as a tomb, one bunk-bed placed directly above the other, the bottom space not much larger than a coffin, the air hot and stifling. Instantly, Avril felt claustrophobic, but said nothing about it, aware that Alex was already disturbed by her recent behaviour. He smiled at her, tentatively, as if no longer sure of himself, embraced her, kissed her fully on the lips and slid his hands down her body. She felt herself responding, her flesh running in rivulets, her fear melting into the warmth of her trembling loins as he pulled her close to him. She wanted it – yes, to find a release from fear – but the minute he had undressed her and pulled her down onto the lower bunk-bed, she felt that she was being buried alive, suffocating in darkness.
‘What’s the matter?’
‘I’m sorry, Alex. I can’t. It’s too hot and cramped here.’
He looked hurt, but let her go, climbing up to the top bunk-bed, while she, unable to offer a comforting word, just lay there, below him. She closed her eyes and tried to sleep, failed and opened her eyes again, stared at the porthole and saw a shirt-covered body pressed to the window. She blinked, looked again, and realized that the body was that of another passenger in a hammock, one of the many strung to the walls of the cabins out there on the top deck.
With her claustrophobia becoming more acute, making her sweat with discomfort, she closed her eyes again and thought of the priest out there on the open deck, getting drunk with his bottle of rum. Thinking about him only increased her tension and brought a blush to her cheeks, resurrecting the memory of what she had felt during the taxi ride to Belem: a sensual attraction that had flowed out of her and warmly around her, seeming to touch both Alex and Father Benedict and then making them one. She had been shaken by her desire, by its force and ambiguity, (ricocheting, as it had, from Alex to Father Benedict, not knowing where to finally lay its head) and

now, when she thought of the drunken priest out on the deck, she was convinced that she had, when in that taxi, viewed him through Laura's eyes. The bunk-bed above her creaked as Alex tossed and turned in sleep, and then Avril stroked the amulet and slid down through herself, emerging from a curving tunnel of rushing, star-strewn darkness to that place where the magical lights rose and fell and the drums made a deafening noise.

She was on her back – on her bunk-bed? No, on the shaking earth, looking up at a patch of sky surrounded by faces, all of them, brown and painted, topped with feathers and braided vines, staring down at her naked, battered body and reaching out for her burning flesh. She took a deep breath, swallowing bile, and then raised her groin towards them, wanting it to be over quickly, to end and set her free, and then, as her spine curved and her body quivered like a bowstring, she let out a high, keening wail that reverberated shockingly in her ears…

Avril opened her eyes, staring wildly, terrified by that dreadful wailing, and saw a bright light pouring into the dark cabin in wavering striations. She sucked her breath in and held it, recalling the man in the hammock outside, first thinking that he was shining a torch into the cabin, then realizing that the light, forming a quivering, inverted funnel, was actually splaying out around his body where it covered the porthole window. The man, then, was still asleep in his hammock and the light was beaming around him.

Petrified, wondering what the light was and only certain it wasn't natural, she glanced at the bunk-bed above her, desperately hoping that Alex had awakened, but seeing no sign of movement, not even his tossing and turning, she tumbled into an even deeper fear.

Returning her gaze to the porthole window, to the brilliant, wavering funnel of light, she rubbed her stinging eyes but could not turn them away… and then she felt the vibration.

Yes, a vibration, a very fine, consistent sensation, rippling through her mattress, though the wood of the bunk-bed, then through every bone in her body until it made her head tighten. She heard a sound, glass on metal, and that helped her eyes to turn, widening in panic as the glass tumbler containing their toothbrushes bounced off the mirror on the wall and then floated in midair.

Avril stared, disbelieving, watching the tumbler float in the air, then saw the toothbrushes drifting away, spiralling gently as they ascended, then watched

combs and bars of soap and items of clothing rising slowly and drifting up, or to and fro, in a bizarre, silent ballet.
She let her breath out, then held it in again, her body quivering as the sheets under her made a soft rustling sound and then, as if pulled by invisible strings, billowed up around her.
'Oh, Christ!' she whispered without thinking, jerking upright on the bunk-bed, knocking her head on the base of the bunk-bed above and closing her eyes from the shock. The light burned through her closed eyelids, her whole body was vibrating, she heard the silence – yes, she *heard* the silence – and then, just as the fear tightened her stomach and throat, the vibrating stopped, she heard things dropping all around her, and abruptly her closed eyelids went dark.
Opening her eyes, she saw the porthole window framing that portion of the person in the hammock outside. Glancing down through the darkness, the unnatural light no longer present, she saw the tumbler and toothbrushes and items of clothing scattered on the floor. The cabin was quiet, *really* quiet, except for the sound of breathing, and she realized, as she fought to control herself, that Alex had slept through it all.

Chapter Eight

Though what? What had happened? She shivered and breathed deeply, feeling the fear, insulted by it; then recalling the strange light, wondering what it had been, aware that it had emanated from outside the cabin, not too far from the dining tables where Father Benedict had been drinking, she swung her legs off the bunk-bed, stood up and quickly dressed. She checked that Alex, still sleeping, was all right, and then left the cabin, closing the door quietly behind her and looking along the deck.

She was at the wrong side of the cabins – the light had come from the port side – so she stood there for a moment, trying to gather her courage, and then went towards the stern, to the area used for outdoor dining, passing the other cabins with the hammocks slung outside them, the passengers all apparently still sleeping, their belongings piled up below them.

It was a short walk, though it seemed to take forever, giving her time to

notice that the boat had left the narrow *igapós* and was moving into a broad expanse of moonlit water, the river banks far away on either side, the sky above clear and starry. The boat was moving slowly, navigating the darkness with care, and the muffled bass growling of its engine was the only sound in an oddly vibrant silence. Avril still felt frightened, her heart racing, throat tight, but she forced herself around the end of the cabins and stepped into the almost deserted dining area.

Almost deserted… but not quite.
Father Benedict was still at one of the tables, pouring himself another drink, his face a picture of dread and despair, his body visibly shaking.
'Father Benedict! What…?'
'Did you see it? Oh, my God, child, did you see it? Did you see that accursed light?'
Avril followed his wandering gaze, down to the water, up to the stars, and then, seeing nothing unusual, but forced to wipe sweat from her brow, she looked back along the deck and saw nothing but another long line of hammocks and the piles of luggage below them. Letting her breath out, the sheer relief making her feel weak, she looked back at the priest who was waving one hand, indicating the still, moonlit river and the black line of forest nearly two miles away.
'It came from over there,' he said. 'At least I think it came from there. It seemed to materialize from that direction, but I can't be too sure. Then it was hovering right above me, about fifty feet up – up there,' and he pointed directly over his head, 'right over the cabins.'
His wide eyes, reflecting the moonlight, looked like polished stones.
'It was a light,' he continued. 'A single ball of light. It was blindingly bright, but had a dark inner core, and the light seemed to be spinning around that core and sucking the air up. Yes, it took my breath away, burned my lungs and left me gasping, and then it dropped lower, and glided straight along the deck, and stopped, hovering as if by magic, at one of those hammocks. It just hovered there, very bright, spinning rapidly and silently, shining its light around the man sleeping in the hammock – he didn't waken at all – and then into the cabin, presumably your cabin. Then, like a torchlight being turned off, it just blinked out.'
The boat was now in the real Amazon and the river was extremely wide here,

indeed more like a lake than a river, both banks miles away. Still frightened, Avril studied it, her fear increasing at what she saw: that enormous expanse of perfectly black, moonlit water, fringed with dark jungle and covered by the vast bowl of the starry sky. The boat was still moving slowly, its engine comfortably muffled, but apart from that, the river was perfectly quiet and disturbingly eerie.

'That light seemed to be alive,' the priest said. 'It seemed to know what it was doing. And apart from sucking the air out of my lungs, it paralysed me with fear. *But it knew what it was doing!* It was some form of living entity. And as it examined your cabin, as it hovered silently outside the porthole window, I realized that it looked just like one of those magical lights that rise and fall over the rainforest when the Yano drums are pounding. Yes, Avril, it was one of those lights… *and it came here to find us!*'

Avril knew what he was feeling, remembering her own terror in the cabin, the fear gradually trickling away, but still leaving her shaken. The boat was pushing patiently against the current, the river splashing and rippling, its black surface reflecting striations of moonlight and a large, pearly moon.

'I saw it beaming into my cabin,' she said, 'but didn't know what it was. Strange things started happening in the cabin, items floating magically in midair, rising and falling.'

'Yes,' Father Benedict said. 'Rising and falling… like those lights in the depths of the rainforest.' He drank some *caipirinha*, his hand visibly shaking, licked his lips and brushed the white hair from his forehead and then rubbed his bloodshot eyes. 'The forces of darkness,' he said. 'Just as Peruche described them: the forces of darkness as lights in the sky, rising and falling… Yes, they know we're coming to them, why we're coming, what we want, and from now on they won't give us peace unless we turn back.'

'Alex won't turn back,' Avril said.

'I know that… so God help us.'

Listening to him, Avril finally understood fully that Father Benedict had come to believe in the reality of dark forces and the occult powers of the Yano, and was almost certainly blaming both for what he had himself become in his alcoholic, sometimes drugged, condition: a man obsessed with the nature of the 'otherworld' to which Laura had fled, and one who had gambled, as he had been doing in the voodoo ritual in Rio, with his life and, even more dangerously, his very soul. Now, thinking about that ritual in Rio,

she asked the question she had not dared ask before.
‘Why were you taking part in those rituals, Father Benedict? Was it some kind of penance?’
‘Yes,’ the priest replied, now too drunk to bother denying it. ‘I suppose I hoped that by letting myself be used in those blasphemous rituals, by challenging the forces of darkness to strike me down or possess me, I’d be casting myself beyond the reach of God, thus paying penance with eternal damnation for what I’d done.’
‘But that’s what puzzle me,’ Avril said, sitting down facing him. ‘You behave like a man shouldering insurmountable guilt… and I can’t work out why. Can you really blame yourself for what happened in the plantation when you know that what Alex’s father was doing couldn’t be prevented? From what Alex told me, you berated Frank Poulson many times, but received no help from the Manaus authorities when you tried to do something more positive. Given that, I can’t see how you can suffer so much for what finally happened. It must have been something else, Father Benedict – not the murders and not Laura’s disappearance – something other than that.’
The priest shuddered and turned away. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it was something else. Of *course* it was something else! It was the greatest of my many secret sins… my most lasting and scourging shame.’
‘*What* sin?’
The priest glanced left and right, obviously frightened that the strange light might return, shuddered again and had another drink and stared at her with haunted eyes.
‘The betrayal of faith,’ he said. ‘That and rank hypocrisy. What happened in the plantation, if hideous and tragic in its own right, merely served to accentuate the extent of my lack of faith and dishonesty. Oh, yes, I lacked faith – and had lacked it for years – never knowing if I was truly meant to be a priest and always questioning His nature. God’s nature – and my own. For all my piety, I was filled with lust, and once, in an Aboriginal station in the northern territory of Australia, I almost lay in sin with an ignorant native girl who, having lost one of her arms, was easily exploited. Do you understand, my child? My secret desires were my crown of thorns. Preaching virtue, I yearned for vice; condemning sin, I flirted with it; and all the time, even worse, was the knowledge that when I preached the Gospels, I was in truth questioning every word and doubting His divine nature.’

Avril gazed across the river, her eyes drawn to the distant rainforest, a thin line of deeper darkness between the vitreous black water and the dark, starflecked, moonlit sky.

‘Yes,’ the priest said, ‘in doubting myself I doubted Him, refusing to accept that imperfection could be part of His nature. And that girl with one arm: for years her beauty would haunt me, a symbol of life’s ironic cruelties and indifference to suffering. Had He created this world? If so, He had created its cruelties, including in His grand design the anguished cry of man’s suffering: murder and rape and pillage and torture and death. Yes, this was life, the boundless nightmare of human history; and if I clung to my beliefs, not in peace but in desperation, I was stripped of my final illusions of faith during the war in New Guinea.’

He closed his eyes and lowered his head, pressed his temples with his fingers, shuddered and took a deep breath, uncovering what he had buried.

‘My regiment recaptured a native village that had been held by the Japanese,’ he intoned, ‘and we found nothing but the remains of the burning huts and complete, hideous carnage. Every man, woman and child had been slaughtered in an orgy of violence, including rape and torture. Oh, God, what a sight! I’ll never forget it! And from that day on, I lived with the conviction that either God didn’t exist or, if He did, He was either impotent against the forces of evil or was Himself evil’s creator. So it was that when I came to the mission in the Amazon, I was no more than a pretender, outwardly living the life of a man of God, but truly doubting His ultimate nature and my own hold on virtue.’

The large yellow moon, reflected in the black water, appeared to be gliding just under its surface like a large shiny disc. Avril thought of the strange light that had hovered just outside the cabin window, and shivered, recalling the lights that rose and fell in her vile, vivid nightmares. Again frightened by the vast, silent river, she returned her gaze to the priest.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘my hold on virtue, always tenuous at best, became, in the Amazon, no more than a pitiful pretence. I had the most licentious dreams and during the day lusted constantly, rarely able to look at a woman without secretly wanting her. Even the Indian girl, Mengrire’s girl, that unfortunate victim and avenger, even she, in the innocence of her flirtations, was able to arouse my desire to the point where it blinded me. No reason for my guilt? I think that reason enough. There I was, in my hypocrisy, loudly condemning

Frank Poulson's lechery, when in fact I was lusting after the very girl he so blatantly abused. Yes, my child, I was guilty – of lustful thoughts and hypocrisy – and then, when Laura Wellman arrived in the Amazon, those sins that were already tormenting me became even more grave.'

Before continuing, he looked all around him, first along the chugging boat, then down at the churned-up water, then in both directions across the wide river and finally up at the sky. The moon was bright and beautiful, the stars glittering in their multitudes, but thankfully there was no sign of the mysterious light that had come out of nowhere.

'So, my child,' he continued, 'I secretly lusted for women and material things – and when Laura Wellman arrived at the mission, I secretly lusted for her. Yes, from the moment she stepped foot on the docks of Manaus – and irrespective of the fact that my good friend, Father Symonds, had just dropped dead from a heart attack – I was, just like Alex, enamoured of her exceptional beauty and so reminded once more that my clerical collar hadn't robbed me of my physical desires and relentless male vanity.'

Avril straightened up in her chair, trying to keep her face composed, slightly shocked but also quite touched by what she was hearing. She glanced at the sky, searching for that strange light, but saw only the broad, moonlit river flowing in the opposite direction to the boat and disappearing behind it. Then, leaning her elbows on the table, she studied the bleary-eyed priest, recognizing that even in his dissolute state he was impressively handsome.

'You've really surprised me,' she said. 'That's the last thing I was expecting. Alex told me you didn't like Laura much and were often rude to her.'

'True enough,' the priest said. 'I *was* rude to Laura, but not for the reasons that Alex, in his innocence, supposed. The truth of the matter is that I soon found myself wanting her with constant, tormenting hunger and, for obvious reasons, was frightened of showing it. So, I was rude, sometimes distant, often angry, the latter stemming not only from her eccentric words and deeds, but also from my increasing frustration and hypocritical behaviour. Consequently, I suffered tremendous guilt and shame

– not only because of what I was feeling, but also because I knew that Alex was infatuated with her in the most obvious, the most painful, way. My guilt, then, was horrendous, tormenting me night and day, and was made even worse when I realized that now, when I fought with Alex's father about his abuse of his Indian workers, I could no longer be sure if I was arguing from

genuine conviction or simply because I resented his sexual freedom and lewd advances towards Laura. In short, I was in a quagmire of moral confusion and could no longer believe even my own words.'

'So when you tried to talk Alex out of his infatuation with Laura, telling him that it could come to no good, you were actually thinking only of yourself?'

'No, I wasn't that bad. Bad enough, but not that bad. I loved Alex like a son and was genuinely concerned for him, convinced that his passion for Laura could lead only to rejection and humiliation, equally convinced that the difference in their ages would make such a rejection inevitable. So, when I spoke to him, I truly spoke from the heart and repeated the same warnings to Laura, entreating her as someone much older and more mature to respond to Alex's adolescent infatuation with caution, and try to discourage him without causing him too much pain.'

'And all the time, when Alex was in love with her, you also wanted her and felt that by even thinking that way you were betraying his trust.'

'Yes,' Father Benedict said, his voice now almost a whisper, difficult to hear over the chugging of the boat's engine and the moaning breeze. 'Oh, of course I tried to stop it, to kill those feelings in myself, but working in the mission, with Laura there night and day, I was naturally in daily contact with her and forced, whether I wanted it or not, to spend a great deal of time with her. Yes, I fell under her spell, wanting her and worrying about her, and soon found myself obsessed with her unhealthy conviction that because she'd been possessed, she had to venture into the rainforest to find the Yano and brave the forces of darkness. So, I was drawn into her web and couldn't get out, trapped there as surely as was Alex and wondering how it would end. Then, when Laura sent her letter of resignation to her employers and moved into Frank Poulson's house – and when I thought of Alex's infatuation and his father's degenerate nature – I was convinced that the worst of my fears would come true in a very short time… convinced that I could do nothing about it, since I was paralysed, both morally and mentally, by my own desire for her.'

He poured some more *caipirinha* into his glass and drank it dangerously fast. Breathing deeply, returning the glass to the table, he finally managed to look directly at Avril.

'The betrayal of faith,' he said. 'I believe I mentioned that before. What I meant was the betrayal of my remaining faith in God and, perhaps more disgusting, the betrayal, even if only in my thoughts, of my friendship with

Alex.’
‘Did you ever tell Laura what you thought of her?’
‘Absolutely not. Never…’
His voice trailed off into silence, leaving only the boat’s mournful chugging, and then he shook his head distractedly from side to side and again glanced around him. Scanning the river and sky, then studying both sides of the deck, he looked like a fugitive from justice, dishevelled and fearful.
‘Sleep,’ he said. ‘I’ve talked too much already. Where’s my dear friend, Antonio?’
‘Sleeping in his cabin,’ Avril said. ‘Do you know where it is?’
‘Yes, child, I do.’
He left the table quickly, not saying another word, showing clear signs of embarrassment on top of his fear. Avril watched him go, his feet ringing on the wooden deck, saw him passing three or four of the hammocks and then turning left into the narrow corridor that led to his cabin. When he was gone, Avril stood up, planning to return to her own cabin, but then, when she took a step forward, the fear swooped down and grabbed her.
She stood there for some time, breathing deeply, controlling herself, looking around the deck, across to the rainforest, down at the water, up to the glittering tapestry of the star-filled sky, and finally along the great river. There was nothing to see – no mysterious lights. She was alone near the stern, but instead of returning to her cabin she curled up on a bench. The bench shook beneath her, the chugging engine was comforting, so she lay there, the river breeze blowing across her, cooling the sweat on her face. She slept without dreams.

Chapter Nine

The following day passed in a silvery haze, the sun high and fiercely hot, its brilliant light reflecting off the river and burning into her tired eyes. She talked to Alex and Antonio, had breakfast, talked some more, and then realized that Father Benedict was avoiding her with a criminal’s cunning. She understood his embarrassment – or, at least, tried to understand it – but something about his determination to not let her near him filled her with the conviction that ‘embarrassment’ was too mild a word for it.

So, she had a drink, nursed another, sipping slowly, studied the river in the dazzling light of day and saw the rainforest more clearly. The forest came right to the river's banks, its trees high and dense, the opposing banks about five miles apart and curving away in the distance. Both banks were dotted with houses on stilts, with palm-leaf hovels and wooden jetties, and then there were flat-topped mountains, small collections of stucco houses, and then the boat docked at the small town of Monte Alegre where, after letting some passengers off and taking more on, after the natives had come aboard to sell their various wares
– salt fish and fruit, snake skins and crocodile leather, Brazil nuts and rubber and jute – it filled up with supplies and gasoline and then, as the sun began to set, headed upriver again.

Darkness came abruptly, bringing with it the fear, and Avril, trying to forget the priest hiding up near the prow, sat at one of the tables near the stern and drank a considerable amount of *caipirinha* with Alex and Antonio. The boat was now so close to the bank, she could hear the forest chattering and rustling, occasionally saw a caiman gliding through the black water where the wavering yellow beams of the boat's lamps rose and fell with the current. Because it was both beautiful and frightening, her fear deepened with each passing minute, until, when midnight came, when most of the other passengers had gone to sleep, when Antonio left for his cabin and Alex invited her to do the same, she refused, saying it was too hot in there and that she wanted to sleep out in the fresh air, as she had done the night before. Alex looked confused and wounded, but he shrugged and left her there, and then, when he was gone, when she had unsuccessfully tried tracking down Father Benedict, she shivered and curled up again on the bench and stared into the darkness.

The light came from the rainforest, flying out from the silhouetted trees, a pinprick of yellow that grew larger and turned into a silvery disc. It skimmed across the river, not moving very fast, almost gliding as it advanced in a straight line, heading towards her. She sucked her breath in and held it, too frightened to exhale, but finally had to do so and gasped when she let her breath out. The light continued gliding towards her, seeming to spin on the move, its brilliance illuminating the black water in a great shifting circle. It

made no sound at all, but kept spinning as it flew forward, and then, becoming an enormous, flaring cartwheel, it hovered over her head.

It took Avril's breath away, scorched her lungs and left her gasping, and she lay there, too frightened to move, too fascinated to close her eyes. It was a single ball of light, not solid, like burning gas, its outer edge swirling around a darker core that seemed slightly opaque. She couldn't tell how wide it was – its outer edge seemed to melt into the darkness – but its dark core looked like the pupil of a giant, staring eye.

Avril opened her mouth to scream, sucked in hot air, gasped for breath, then the light dropped lower, swirling rapidly and vibrating, its striations forming an umbrella just above her and temporarily blinding her. She closed her eyes and tried to scream, kept trying in vain to scream as reality dissolved, and then she tumbled down through herself, through the well of terror that was her spirit, and then just as suddenly flew up again and broke through her own surface. Opening her eyes, she saw the light, a flaring whiteness directly above, then it blinked out and the darkness rushed back to let the stars shine upon her.

Normal stars. Normal sky.
Avril lay there in a trance, hardly knowing where she was, only aware of jewelled stars in a dark sky that went on forever. She lay there all night, her body shaking as if with fever, and only in the dawn light, when the stars had faded away, when the warmth of the new day started seeping into her chilled bones and the first of the early risers had emerged on the open deck, only then did she manage to sit upright and take control of herself. She was sitting there, drinking coffee, talking casually to some other passengers, when Alex, Antonio and Father Benedict joined her for breakfast.
She had to disguise her great relief when the boat docked at Santarem.

Chapter Ten

The fever returned just as Avril stepped off the gangplank, making her break out in a sweat and feel slightly nauseous. She was not helped by the heat, which increased as the sun ascended, blazing down on the jungle town of

Santarem with unwavering brilliance. The town was small and haphazard, its waterfront littered with shacks on stilts, the houses behind them, more sturdy, faced with Portuguese tiles and standing on the slope that rose up from the water's edge. Situated at the confluence of the Tapajos River with the Amazon, the town overlooked a yellow Amazon that was mottled with greenish patches, giving it a leprous appearance that was none too attractive. Avril looked briefly at it, then turned away, her stomach heaving, as Alex reaching out tentatively to take hold of her hand.

'Are you all right?' he asked. 'You don't look too good.'
'I'm fine. I'm just tired.'
'That's what happens when you sleep out on the deck: all that wonderful fresh air keeps you awake.'
She smiled, but felt awful, her body weak and sticky with sweat, her head tight and her stomach upset, a clammy fear hanging over her. She was being surrounded by the locals, most trying to sell their wares, some with squawking parrots on their shoulders, others displaying items of pottery, most of it decorated with drawings of frogs and serpents; and then she saw Antonio and Father Benedict, standing together outside the crowd, the former waving at her while the latter just stood there, his face as grey as that of a corpse, his eyes glazed with exhaustion.
'Actually,' she said to Alex, 'I *do* feel a bit offcolour and could do with a lie-down. Where's the hotel?'
'It's a waterfront hotel,' Alex replied. 'Just a few minutes walk from here. Just how bad do you feel? It is your stomach, or what?'
'That's it,' she said, reassuring him with a lie. 'It's just my tummy – it's not too fit today – but it's only a temporary condition. Nothing to worry about.'
'Something you ate?'
'Yes. Probably that plate of *pato no tucupi* that I had yesterday.'
'Ah, yes, that's a risky one.'
Sliding his hand up to her elbow, he guided her through the crowd, following Antonio and Father Benedict up the slope to the shacks on tall stilts. Avril saw the lines of laundry, the small verandas high above her, the faces of the inhabitants, African, Indian and Portuguese, gazing down from beneath the palmthatch roofs over which, with a languid, seductive beauty, some white clouds were drifting.

The sunlight hurt her eyes and she rubbed at them and looked ahead, the fear returning when she saw the back of Father Benedict and remembered the mysterious light that had haunted both of them. It had clearly terrified the priest and now she understood why: when it had hovered above her, spinning blindingly around its inner dark core, it had appeared to be an enormous, unblinking eye, hypnotic and pitiless.

Yes, it had mesmerized her, had seemed to resonate in her brain, convincing her that the silence was actually speaking to her in some supernatural manner. The ball of light had not been solid – she had seen the stars through it – but it had certainly looked incorporeal, devoid of dimension. Now, making her way up the hill, passing the high stilts of the waterfront shacks, with Alex by her side and Antonio and Father Benedict just ahead, she shivered and tried to shake from her head one frightening image: a consciousness manifesting itself from darkness and taking the form it required: an immense, searching eye.

Alex led her around a corner, turning right behind the waterfront, and then along a crude, busy street to the front of the hotel where, to Avril's relief, they would spend a day and night, before continuing upriver to the port of Manaus.

'It's not much of a hotel,' Alex said with a grin. 'It's more of a primitive guesthouse, I suppose, but good enough for one night. At least you'll have a proper bed to sleep on, not like in that suffocating cabin.'

The hotel was indeed primitive, being no more than a large house, its floor raised on stilts, its roof thatched from the palms of palla trees above unpainted wooden beams, the ventilation supplied by open windows and slow-spinning fans, all of which made a constant, aggravating squeaking sound but at least kept the moist air on the move.

There was no proper reception area, just a spartan lounge leading off to the bedrooms; but, being small, at least it gave Father Benedict no chance to avoid her. Today he looked ghastly, even more ravaged than before, and as Antonio signed them in, Alex leaning over his shoulder, Avril tried to catch the priest's gaze and had little success. He studied the floor, the fan whirring above him, the Indian woman who was brushing giant ants off the steps, and then finally, almost defiantly, he took his hip flask from his jacket pocket, unscrewed it and had a long drink. Only then, just once, did he glance at her, but he looked away quickly.

Having signed in on behalf of them all, Alex and Antonio turned to Avril, the former simply smiling with affection, the latter studying her carefully. Wondering what Antonio had guessed, she felt uncomfortable and nervously lit a cigarette.
‘If your stomach’s upset, that won’t help,’ Alex said. ‘Indeed, it might make it worse.’
‘I don’t care,’ she retorted, her voice edgy. ‘I just feel like a smoke.’
‘So,’ Antonio said, smiling broadly to ease the tension and, with a knowing touch of diplomacy, turned to the puzzled Alex. ‘I think I’ll go out and explore Santarem. What are your plans?’
‘I think Avril should sleep,’ Alex said, ‘and then, if she feels a bit better, eat something this evening, when we all meet for dinner.’
‘At eight?’
‘That’s sounds fine, Antonio.’
‘See you then, my young friends.’
Avril was relieved when they parted, each going to their separate rooms, Antonio and Father Benedict each taking a single room, she and Alex sharing a double overlooking the river. It was a large room, plain and functional, matted carpets on the timber floor, two beds, one double, the other single, both covered with taut white sheets, flanked by old mahogany cupboards and brass-based oil lamps. Huge cockroaches crossed the floor, ants formed lines on the cupboards, bloated flies buzzed frantically below the rotating fan as it made the air swirl. Avril went to the window, saw more ants on the mesh wire, looked out across the green-stained yellow water to the far side’s dense forest. There were floating stores and fishing boats on the river, casting short shadows, the sun being directly overhead, turning the water to polished glass.
‘Is the room okay?’ Alex asked from just behind her.
‘Yes,’ she said. ‘Fine.’
She didn’t know what else to say, so she turned around to face him, letting him slide his arms about her and press his lips to her forehead. She shuddered and held him tight, writhing against him with a sudden onrush of passion, wanting to lose herself in his embrace and have him crush the life from her.
‘Oh, Lord!’ she groaned. ‘Christ!’
And instantly felt ill again, the nausea rising to her throat, the fear impelling her out of his arms and across the room to the double bed. She fell onto it, face down, not bothering to remove her clothes, then rolled over until she was

on her back and staring up at his pale face. He looked deeply wounded, but also bewildered, instinctively sensing that she had shivered with revulsion, trying to understand why. Wanting to tell him, she tried smiling, but then the sunlight hurt her eyes, pouring in through the window behind him, spreading out like a fan, and dissolving him in silvery striations that framed a shimmering haze.

Closing her eyes, she drifted away, lying just below sleep's surface, aware that her body was stretched out on the bed while she roamed freely through her mind. She saw Alex kissing her forehead, his eyes hinting of tears, then he sighed and walked out of the room, closing the door quietly behind him. She was there and yet not there, on the bed, outside herself, and she wandered through the thickets of her thoughts to get at the truth. The fear was still present, almost palpable, permeating her, but then she entered the priest's room, hovering just above his bed, and gazed upon him as he tossed and turned in sleep, his face sickly and terribly lined, the skin almost translucent, as if his skull was being illuminated from within, letting the bones have dominion.

Father Benedict was a tortured man, his anguish eating him alive, but Avril knew, in her troubled thoughts, that what he had told her was not the answer they required, that it was at least incomplete, and that his secret desire for Laura Wellman, his great temptation and torment, could not alone account for the hell that he was putting himself through.

No, it was something else, something infinitely more shocking, some sin that went beyond mere betrayal and scorched the roots of his being. The priest groaned in his restless sleep, tossed and turned on the bed, and Avril, drifting away through a bright, shimmering haze, understood with a fierce, unwavering certainty that his buried truth was a nightmare.

Chapter Eleven

Was she dreaming? She wasn't sure. She recalled Alex leaving the room. She tried to open her eyes, but was blinded by a brilliant light that poured out of the inverted bowl of the sky and made her feel dizzy. Santarem was a jungle town, the river before it, the forest around it, the trees soaring above the houses on stilts and the open-front stores. She saw Alex wandering through it, trying forlornly to pass the time, looking over the mighty Amazon river,

here a patchwork of green and yellow, and thinking of the humus-darkened Rio Negro to which they were heading. She joined him, *became* him, felt what he was feeling, as, surveying the river, watching the fishermen cast their nets out, he was reminded of those similar sights that had coloured his childhood along the banks of the expansive, black river that passed the plantation.

Yes, the plantation, his whole world for eighteen years, a world so removed from the normal that it now seemed unreal. His father, Rollie Thatcher, the many nights spent in that awful living room, old Peruche, squatting in front of his modest hut by the várzea lake, offering magic and the promise of transcendence to the peace of the Otherworld. And then Laura, her stunning beauty, stigmatized by neurosis or tormenting insight, leading him to the brink of madness, the others to slaughter and flight, lowering the curtain, in the lunacy of her convictions, on the dying plantation.

Now Alex was going back there, following Laura's spiritual trail, and each day, as he drew closer, as the rainforest became more dense, as he watched Father Benedict's suffering and wondered what was causing his pain, he felt the weight of what had been done creeping back to torture him.

Being him, Avril knew this, felt it eating at her insides, but then, as the sun flashed off the water, she returned to herself.

'Avril! *Avril!* Waken up! You're just having a bad dream!'
She awakened, groaning fearfully, Alex trying to hold still her frantically waving hands, trying to stop her from hurting herself as she tossed and turned on the bed. The sun was no longer shining, the pale light came from the oil lamps, and the fan in the ceiling just above Alex's head was squeaking with aggravating insistence as its blades, rotating slowly and steadily, cast long shadows on the walls where chameleons, with a speed that made her blink, raced to and fro.
'What?' she cried. '*No!*'
Alex shook her awake, then calmed her down, holding her tightly, and she felt his ribs through his thin shirt, her fingers pressing him urgently. Her heart was beating too fast, her skin was sticky with sweat, and she realized that she

had slept all afternoon, having the most vivid dreams. Eventually, when her racing heart had settled, she slumped back against the headrest, thoughtfully studied Alex, saw the anxiety on his delicate good looks, and forced herself to smile at him, not wanting him to know just how haunted and frightened she felt.

'Oh, dear,' she said, 'bad dreams! I should never sleep in the daytime. I should have known better.'

'You've been sleeping for six hours,' Alex told her. 'It's now seven-thirty.' He was smiling, but his eyes were puzzled, as if he didn't quite know what was happening, and Avril, recalling the strange light as well as the vivid dreams that had started haunting her, felt the need to protect him as much as possible from what she sensed might be coming: some truth that would not spring from magic, but from Father Benedict's buried past.

'Lord!' she said, trying to sound as normal as possible, ashamed of her false smile. 'I'd better have a quick bath and get myself dressed.'

'You won't find a bath here,' Alex said, 'but you *will* find a rather primitive shower just outside the room.'

'I can brave that,' she said.

The shower was indeed primitive, both taps offering lukewarm water, but it still helped to waken her up and make her feel more refreshed. She put on a simple dress, flat shoes, a simple necklace, combed her hair and applied a little lipstick but no other makeup. Alex watched her the whole time, sitting under the squeaking fan, his blond hair tumbling over his forehead, his shirt collar fluttering. He didn't say a word, but she sensed his anxiety and was relieved when they could leave the dimly lit room and join the others at the table in the rickety lounge overlooking the river.

Outside it was dark, the moon reflected in the water, candles flickering from the porches of the houses on the slope just below them. Seeing the river, Avril shivered, remembering the light above the boat, then she looked at Father Benedict and saw that his condition hadn't changed. He had been drinking a lot and was looking ghastly, his face haggard, his eyes bloodshot and unfocused, his right hand shaking when he picked up his fork or, as he did more frequently, raised a glass of red wine to his lips. It was an uncomfortable dinner, with a lot of strained silences, and finally, after too many failed attempts to lighten the evening, Antonio sighed loudly and clasped his hands under his chin.

‘I’ve been watching you two,’ he said, ‘and you’ve been acting strangely. There’s something going on that neither Alex nor I are aware of… So what’s happened?’
Father Benedict had just been having another drink of wine and now, hearing Antonio’s question, he wiped his lips with the back of his hand, put his glass on the table and stared directly at Avril.
‘Well?’ he said, ‘shall you tell them or shall I? Or are we keeping it secret?’
‘There’s nothing to tell,’ Avril heard herself saying as she glanced appealingly at Alex, not wanting him to know that she believed Laura was calling out to her. ‘We just saw a strange light over the boat and didn’t know what it was.’
‘A *strange* light?’ Antonio asked.
‘Yes, Antonio, a strange light. It looked like a ball of burning gas – and probably *was* something like that.’
Suddenly outraged, Father Benedict slammed his open hand down on the table, making the plates and glasses rattle, forcing them all to look at him.
‘Damn you, woman!’ he exclaimed. ‘Why not tell the truth? We did *not* see a ball of burning gas and you bloody well know it! We saw something unexplainable, something unearthly but controlled, a globe of spinning light that resembled an enormous eye and flew quite deliberately out of the rainforest to hover right over us. It terrified both of us, it sucked the breath from our lungs, and it looked just like those lights that rise and fall where the Yano are said to be. A ball of burning gas? Then why are you frightened, Avril? Damn it, *tell them the truth!*’
He slapped the table again, making everything rattle, while remaining in his chair, leaning forward, almost threatening, glaring ferociously and visibly shaking. Then Avril heard her own voice, surprisingly angry and even venomous, bursting from her lips before she could stop it.
‘*What* truth, Father Benedict? That a ball of light harassed us? What *else* can I say about what happened, except that we saw it? It could have been marsh gas, some reflection… *It could have been anything!*’
‘That’s ridiculous and you know it! That light searched for us and found us. That light – that *thing*, whatever it was – came to frighten us off! We’re all trying to challenge the forces of darkness and we won’t get away with it. We have to turn back – *turn back now!* – before it’s too late.’
‘No!’ Avril retorted, slightly shocked by her own bitterness. ‘We don’t have

to turn back. You *want* us to turn back because there's something you're frightened of facing… It's *you* they're looking for – not us!'
The priest seemed to freeze at that, his body tightening like a bow string. He stared at Avril as if seeing someone else, then suddenly stood up, his chair crashing back into the wall, and finally, with a peculiar, choking sound, rushed away to his room.
Avril glanced from Alex to Antonio, then lowered her eyes, chilled by the silence that was only broken when Antonio sighed again.
'So what makes you think they're pursuing Father Benedict?' he asked.
'I'm not sure,' Avril said, this not being a complete lie. 'I just think that Father Benedict's being tormented by something he refuses to talk about.'
'And the light?' Antonio countered carefully. 'You really believe it was nothing?'
'I think it was very odd,' she replied, 'and I'll admit that it frightened me.'
Seeing Alex's bewilderment, she was relieved when Antonio spoke again, his voice soft and kindly.
'Atmospheric phenomena,' he said. 'Shall we leave it at that?'
'Yes, damn it,' Avril replied, despising herself. 'That was probably it.'
'And was there anything else?' Alex asked, sounding strained. 'Anything else that you may have experienced but kept to yourself?'
'No,' she lied. 'Not a thing.'
Though feeling guilty, she simply couldn't bring herself to mention her dreams, or visions, of Laura Wellman. Instead, she simply stood up with as much grace as possible and said, 'This whole business is starting to exhaust me, so I'm going back to bed.'
Alex glanced at Antonio before managing to meet her gaze, then he shrugged and also stood up, placing his hand on her shoulder.
'I'm coming with you,' he said.
Leaving Antonio alone at the table, they returned to their room where Avril, frightened of falling asleep again, deliberately lit a cigarette. She turned her back on Alex, wanting to conceal her fear from him, and crossed the room to stand by the window and look over the river.
The sky was filled with low, heavy clouds that obscured the moon and stars; the river was an immense blackness that disappeared both east and west, into the even deeper blackness of the silent rainforest surrounding Santarem. There was no chattering here (the animals, unless desperately hungry, stayed

well away from human beings) and the lack of noise encircling the entire town seemed to reverberate in some ghostly manner.
Avril shivered and blew smoke, hearing Alex coming up behind her, then she felt his arms slipping around her as he pulled her back into him.
‘Are you sure there wasn’t anything else?’ he asked. ‘If there was, you can tell me.’
‘Why would I not tell you if there was?’
‘Because you might try to protect me.’
‘Protect you from what?’
‘I don’t know. That’s for you to tell me.’
‘There was nothing else. Nothing.’
‘All right,’ he said, ‘come to bed. Let’s try to forget everything for one night – before we get on that boat again.’
She knew what he meant and was touched by his need, stubbing her cigarette out in the ashtray on the cupboard beside her, then turning around to slide her tongue between his lips and press herself tightly to him, letting him know with every movement of her body that she felt the same way. He responded with a shudder, his hands sliding over her breasts, his weight forcing her back into the wall as his mouth bruised her lips. She pushed him away and then unbuttoned his shirt, heard the zip on her dress opening, felt the dress falling off her shoulders as she unbuttoned his trousers. Then her thoughts went out of focus, were suffused by desire, and she found herself, limbs akimbo, stretched out on the bed. He was lowering himself on top of her, the mosquito net fluttering around him, the blades of the fan rotating directly above him, various insects being battered in the minor turbulence. He entered her – Alex entered her – flooding her insides with heat, and then whispered words she couldn’t quite hear as she melted around him…
That noise! *What* noise? She was jerked back to reality, to the awareness of their separate bodies, cocking an ear as Alex moved in and out, wondering what she was listening for. Opening her eyes, she saw a white gauze, something spinning above it, recognized the fluttering mosquito net and the rotating fan. No, not the fan – it was rotating too fast for that. It was something else spinning above her, growing brighter, expanding.
‘Oh, God, Avril, I want you so!’
She closed her eyes and gripped him fiercely, clinging to him with arms and legs, trying to hold back her nausea and dread at what was happening again.

She was Avril (*I am me!*) and she fought to retain this knowledge, hearing the drums, seeing the lights rise and fall over that great, star-flecked canyon. Alex was gasping, cleaving to her (*my Alex, on top of me!*), thrusting deeply and expanding up through her insides to make her flesh turn to liquid. She wanted to do that, to dissolve, find obliteration and freedom, but then Laura, her voice resounding with pain and fear, seared through the ether and touched her.

Someone screamed – Avril screamed – and tried to push Alex off her, opening her eyes to look up at his stunned eyes as he hastily withdrew from her. He was supporting himself on his hands, his spine curved, his muscles tight, and above him, above the wildly fluttering mosquito net, was a whirlpool of brilliant, shimmering light, its vortex like the pupil of a giant eye, dark and malevolent.

'Oh, my God!' she heard Alex exclaim in terror. 'It's Laura! *You're Laura!*'

At that very moment, as Alex let out a strangled groan and hurriedly rolled off her body, as the spinning light above grew dark and faded away, leaving only the revolving, squeaking fan, Avril remembered all the times in London when she and Alex had tried to make love – all those times when he had started and then cried out in horror and, because of the visions he had suffered, was unable to finish – and, in that recollection, finally understood fully what it was that had affected him so badly.

Chapter Twelve

'You saw Laura? You thought I was *Laura*?'

'Oh, God,' he groaned. 'Yes!' He looked completely dazed, and then, his eyes widening, grabbed her by the shoulders and squeezed her until she hurt. 'Damn it!' he whispered fiercely. 'I knew it. I just *knew* it! You've been having the same dreams as I had and were frightened of telling me. You can see and feel what happened to her. *Damn it, isn't that true?*'

'Yes, Alex, it is.'

He released her shoulders and sat back, at once

shocked and filled with wonder. Then a sudden hammering on the room door made both of them jerk upright, Avril automatically covering her body with the sheet as Antonio's voice, unusually loud and frantic, rang out from the hallway.

'Alex!' he shouted. 'Avril! Come quickly! It's Father Benedict! *Come now!*'

They glanced briefly at one another and then rolled off the bed, hurriedly putting on the clothes they had just taken off and then opening the door and running to Father Benedict's room. The priest was huddled up on the floor, in the corner nearest the door, his body shaking and his face bathed in sweat, the light of an oil lamp sending shadows across his wild eyes as he pointed a trembling finger at the bed he had just fled. 'It was her!' he exclaimed. 'Beside me! In that bed! *Upon my soul, it was Laura!*'

'Your bed?' Alex asked with a breaking voice.

'She was there in *your* bed?'

'Oh, God, yes… *She came back to me!*'

Given his lacerating grief and despair, there could be no doubting what he had meant by those words; and Alex, in the silence that dropped like lead between them, glanced from Avril to Antonio before returning his attention to the priest.

Father Benedict turned away, burying his face between his raised knees, his body shaking until he managed to control himself and lift his head up again. He wiped his bloodshot eyes, using a shaky right hand, then sniffed and slowly looked up at Alex, mutely begging forgiveness.

'I couldn't help myself,' he said, his voice as dry as broken bones, his hands weaving arabesques in the air, exorcising his demons. 'Oh, of course I tried at first, both for myself and for you. Believe me, Alex, I loved you like my own and broke my heart worrying

over you. Yes, I was concerned for you, loathing your father for mistreating you, thinking of you as the son I never had but always secretly wanted. But that wasn't enough. I wasn't prepared for my lust and vanity. I only knew that I was faithless, that I felt I'd betrayed my calling, and that the minute I laid eyes on Laura, I wanted her desperately. Yes, oh dear God, and the wanting was like pain, something leading to selfdeceit: a most pitiful belief that to have her would resurrect the moral strength I'd lost and cure my broken spirit. I wanted her with the base and craven lust that comes to those who need a new life.' The priest was breathing harshly and had to sniff his tears back, rubbing his eyes with the fingers of a shaking hand and taking deep, gasping breaths. The flickering light was bleeding over him, etching his eyes in deep shadow, covering his skin in darting black lines that looked like ants on an anthill. 'Did I betray you, Alex? Yes, but not deliberately so. There was no calculation in what I did: there was nothing but guilt. Indeed, I suffered the fires of hell, wanting her so much, thinking of my calling, thinking also of you and of the trust you'd placed in me, knowing that the very need to possess her was a betrayal not only of my faith, but of my friendship and paternal love for you. Oh, yes, I felt guilty, and my shame was like a Purgatory, but the day after she had you – when you both lay on that raft – yes, the day she told me about it, hoping to expunge her guilt and shame – for indeed, Alex, she sincerely felt both – that day, when I learnt what had happened, was the day of my downfall.'

When he looked at Alex, his eyes were like the moon: reflecting light that showed only dead soil. 'Do you understand, Alex? I was hopelessly addicted to her. To the eyes of the world I was an ordained man of God, but to myself, in the penury of

my nights, I was a man of the flesh. Yes, I lusted for the forbidden, for earthly luxuries and pleasures, for the satisfaction of my frustrated desires and longings and needs – and then, in the presence of Laura, the one person who recognized me for what I was, who knew how weak I was and how far my faith had fallen, and who, just like me, was in need of the love that she'd never been able to fully accept – yes, in her presence, and totally blinded by her beauty, I understood that what I felt would be returned if I could just let it happen – for in truth, if she knew what I felt, I also knew what *she* felt. And so, Alex, when she told me what had happened on that raft, when she told me of your magic and of how she'd lost control of herself, I, too, lost control and myself and surrendered to my desires.'

He let his breath out, stopped breathing for a moment, then put the back of his head against the wall and took a deep breath. His face was turned up to the ceiling, but his eyes were now closed.

'And I, a priest? Ah, yes, that was the rub! And what made it perversely ironical was that this woman, this creature I was lying down with, might be possessed by the devil – or by what she described as the forces of darkness… Oh, Lord how I wondered about that! Why her, of all women? And often thought that perhaps it was because I was challenging the God I'd come to mistrust. But, no, I couldn't accept that. My love was too deep for that. So I came to think that possibly the devil had given her to me to tempt me. I was filled with fear, then, but also with delight, for indeed, if I'd lived in servitude to a God I'd never fully accepted, then surely my unbridled passion for a woman who believed herself to be possessed by Satan, merely confirmed, with diabolical exactitude, where my true sentiments lay. Yes, Laura was obsessed with the idea of evil, and I was obsessed with her, and if, in embracing her, I was also embracing evil… Well, then, so be it.'

He leaned forward, breathing deeply, pressing his hands against his temples, then spoke in a low tone, almost whispering, directing his words at the floor. ‘When you came to me that night,’ he said, clearly referring to Alex, ‘when you told me you loved her and wanted to take her to England with you, I knew that something had happened between you – something more than just words. And so, the next evening – knowing that Laura would leave the mission the following day, inflamed by the thought of what she’d done with you, and, perhaps more dangerously, jealous at the thought of her moving into your father’s house – I demanded to know just what had happened between the pair of you on that raft. And, of course, when she told me, almost in tears and clearly ashamed of herself, I gave her a tongue-lashing – oh, my God, what a hypocrite! – and emphasized, in particular, that she happened to be twice your age and so had no excuse for what she’d done. She cried at that, her tears falling like rain, but then, when I reached out to embrace her, about to pretend that I merely wanted to comfort her, she stepped back and looked at me with the most awful perceptiveness, and said – I will never forget this – she said, ‘What do *you* want?’ And so, shocked to hear her ask that, humiliated by her intuition, I nonetheless blurted out what she’d known all along: that I wanted *her*, no matter the cost. And then hearing her saying that she also wanted me, pulled her to me where we stood in her room – the very room where Father Symonds, that finer man, had spent so many years – and then we fell on the bed.’ Father Benedict raised his head to look directly at Alex, and his eyes, which before had looked like stone, were filled with a light that shone though his tears, silently begging for forgiveness.

‘I had her,’ he confessed. ‘In shame and guilt, I

had her. The first time was the night before she left the mission for the plantation – the very thought of you and her on that raft had inflamed me; while fear of her being near your licentious father fanned the flames even higher – and thereafter, during those times when she left the plantation, when she stayed away all night and later claimed she'd been drunk, I had her on the ground of the forest around the mission, in the back of the mission's truck when I'd driven somewhere to meet her, sometimes even in shabby hotels in Manaus, in areas where my face was unknown… Do you understand, Alex? She loved neither you nor your father. She and I had one another with a passion that obliterated all reason. Laura Wellman loved *me* – and I, her… And may God forgive both of us.'

Chapter Thirteen

Once the boat left Santarem, it seemed to leave civilization completely, the river narrowing until nothing could be seen but the solid leafy wall of the Amazonian rainforest, the clouds black and thunderous, hanging low over the trees, making it appear that the boat was travelling forever along a silent, sullen, monotonous tunnel, the walls of which, shifting subtly through various shades of brownveined greenery, offered little variety and gave rise to constant, oppressive gloom.

Either standing by the railing or sitting at the table to eat and drink, Avril felt the oppressiveness hanging over her and enslaving her spirit. She could not forget what the priest had told them, nor the sight of Alex fleeing the stifling hotel room, nor the rest of that sleepless night during which, with heavy heart, she had held Alex tightly in her arms while he wept over his betrayal by his formerly trusted friend, the priest, and vowed repeatedly that once this journey was over, he would never see him again.

Now Avril was watching both of them, as, also, was Antonio, aware that they were both in a bad way and could behave unpredictably. Alex already seemed

totally different – his silence as sullen as the passing rainforest, his contempt for Father Benedict all too evident when their eyes met – while the priest, in a bad state anyway, was rapidly becoming worse, hardly ever leaving his cabin, constantly ordering more *caipirinhas* from the bar, and, according to Antonio, mumbling a lot to himself and even weeping in private.

She tried talking to Alex, telling him the priest hadn't betrayed him, trying to explain that his, Alex's, particular brand of trust had left no room for human weakness, and that the priest, being no different from Alex, had been unable to help himself; but Alex's shock went too deep, his sense of betrayal was too acute, and he could only respond with a venom that disguised his true pain.

'I hate him,' he said. 'What he did to me was unforgivable. He acted like a surrogate father to me and all the time, when I thought he was concerned for me, he was merely plotting to steal Laura from me.'

'That isn't true,' Avril said. 'And deep down you know it. He cared for you then – and still cares for you now – and when he warned you against Laura, trying to make you see sense, he did so because he knew that she was only trying to humour you, that she only loved you in a platonic fashion, that her real love was actually reserved for him and, finally, that sooner or later, if you didn't accept reality, you'd get hurt way past what you could bear. In the event, it turned out that without actually meaning to, she drove you nearly insane.'

'I almost went insane because of Laura and my father,' Alex said, 'after I saw them embracing in his bedroom and knew, contrary to what the priest believed, that it was him, my father, who she'd rejected me for. Oh, yes, Father Benedict wanted her as well – and no doubt he did with her what he said – but Laura also had an affair with my father, which is what most torments the priest.'

'The priest is tormented by guilt because he thinks he betrayed you – and you, who should forgive him for what he did, are only making it worse.'

'No, he's tormented because Laura betrayed him with my father, as the three of them secretly betrayed me while pretending to care for me.'

‘You’re exaggerating everything, Alex.’
‘I’m just facing the truth.’
In fact the truth seemed more elusive with each

fresh revelation, retreating behind walls of human pain and distorted perspectives. What had Laura really felt? Whom had she really loved? Had she truly loved the priest and only dallied briefly with Alex’s father, or had she simply played one against the other for amusement or spite? *Diabolical possession*, Avril thought. *Perhaps she was possessed after all, and, as a devil’s disciple, took pleasure in seducing the priest*… A possibility, just one – there were others just as likely – and Avril, watching the priest destroying himself with endless drinks of *caipirinha*, found her thoughts spinning in circles as the answers eluded her.

‘What do you think, Antonio? You were there at the time. What pieces from this puzzle are missing?’
Antonio shrugged, a bewildered smile on his handsome face, his brown eyes gazing out at the passing rainforest as it closed in with every passing minute. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I only knew about Alex: that he was obsessed with a woman whom I felt might be insane, and that she, after she came to take residence in Frank’s Poulson’s house, spent a lot of time with him and that pig, Rollie Thatcher. I didn’t know about Father Benedict – he kept his passion for her well hidden – and I certainly couldn’t say with any conviction that Laura and Alex’s father, no matter how much they sexually teased each other, actually went as far as having an affair. But if Alex says he saw them embracing, then I’m sure he did so. He isn’t capable of lying.’
The boat continued its journey, pushing against the lazy current, the formerly faraway banks coming closer with each passing hour; but once past Obidos, well away from Santarem, the river narrowed more dramatically, sometimes resembling an *igarapé*, the trees almost touching both sides of the hull, with furred sloths, clearly visible, hanging upside down from the branches, and the black holes in the enormous tree trunks, which rose out of the water, housing the fierce, stinging fire-ants or large, venomous spiders.
Avril blessed such sights, studying the forest for distraction, taking pleasure at being cast from her urban roots to this equatorial environment. The banks

were lined with the high grass which, Antonio informed her, was called *canarana*; and in the dark pools of the swamps and tributaries she occasionally saw caimans, water birds and *capybaras* – or, like something created by Walt Disney, the fat, ugly *manatee*. It was an alien, exotic world, but one that cast a dark spell, and by the end of the first night, when the mysterious light returned, she knew that as Father Benedict had warned there would be no respite.

Alex slept like a log that first night, as if exhausted by his own bitterness, but Avril was awake when the light came to shine through the porthole window where, since they had disembarked at Santarem, the passenger who had formerly been in a hammock could not block the view. Once more she was terrified, her objectivity failing her, the nausea rising from her stomach and almost making her choke. The light was powerful and dazzling, painting the tiny cabin in shimmering silver as, wanting to scream but abruptly struck dumb, she again saw every loose object in the room drifting into thin air. Impulsively, she jerked upright – at least felt herself trying to do so – but realized instantly that she hadn't moved, that she was completely paralysed, and that the air was being sucked from her lungs at a dangerous rate. Then, as she stared above her, at the base of Alex's bunk-bed, hearing him groan in a sleep that though troubled was unbroken, she sensed that she was being pulled upward by some malevolent, unseen force.

Her terror increased, making her head spin towards delirium, and then her sheets began to whisper, rippling and rising up about her, and then she herself started rising, floating mysteriously in midair, and kept doing so until stopped by the base of Alex's bunk-bed, after which she couldn't possibly go any higher, her face pressed to the wood base.

She remained there for a long time, pressed to the base of Alex's bunk-bed, the sheets fluttering around her, while the light, blazing through the porthole window, seemed to spin like a whirlpool. Fear was her sole reality – all the rest was hallucination: the cabin expanding and contracting, the stars visible through the light, the great hole that opened out in the wood base of the bunk-bed above her to reveal the receding funnel of a cosmos and the eternal darkness beyond. Avril screamed – or tried to scream – her body shaking with the effort, but then she began to black out, to spiral down through her deepest self, and then awakened, lying back on her own bunk-bed, the rumpled sheets soaked in sweat.

Chapter Fourteen

If Alex now despised the priest, his love for Avril was not diminished, and when he saw her that morning, soaked with sweat on the dishevelled bunk-bed, the floor of the cabin littered with all the loose items – toothbrushes and combs and towels and their scattered clothing – his concern was clear sharpened by the fear that she was truly in danger.

'Throw that amulet away!' he said. 'That damned thing is what guides them to you. As long as you keep it hanging around your neck, you'll be a magnet for trouble.'

'No, Alex,' she retorted. 'We have to finish what we've started, and this amulet, according to Peruche, can also protect us. Do you believe in the forces of darkness? Do you believe they're pursuing us? If you do, then why are you complaining, since they're what we're seeking to find? Yes, I can hear Laura – and see her and feel her – and because of that, because she seems to be calling to us, I can't give up the amulet. Do you want to find the Yano and, possibly, Laura? *Then I must keep the amulet!*'

That same morning the priest emerged, his face as white as a sheet, shaking as he queued up at the cookhouse for a mug of black coffee. He sat beside Antonio, facing Alex and Avril, his fear helping him to ignore Alex's contemptuous glance as he stuttered his words.

'It gets worse,' he said. 'Every night is more terrible. Last night, in that cabin, in that damned tomb of a cabin, I woke to find the darkness like daylight and feel something on top of me. I couldn't see it – I just *felt* it – but my God it was awful: something immensely strong and malevolent that seemed to be choking me. No air! I was choking! I had the feeling that I was drowning. Either that or I was gradually being crushed out of existence… And then I saw her again – yes, Laura, right there beside me – and she was covered in slime – it looked like mud and blood – and she reached out and tried to pull me to her and then I blacked out. God, dear God, I need a drink! I won't sleep there again!'

He left the table and wandered away, taking himself to the stern of the boat, having little trouble wending his way past the other passengers since most of them had already disembarked, some at the large towns of Santarem and Obidas, a few at impoverished waterfront villages, or at rickety jetties that appeared to lead to nowhere. Now the boat was almost empty, a pervasive silence hanging over it, leaving the priest with plenty of places to hide away and imbibe more *caipirinha*. Avril watched him disappearing, the deck swaying gently under him, then she turned to glance at Alex, still seated beside her, and finally fixed her gaze on Antonio at the opposite end of the table. The Brazilian was no longer smiling and he seemed truly weary.

'So what happened to you, Antonio?'

'Nothing, Avril. Not a thing. I slept like a baby all night and woke up refreshed.'
'You don't look refreshed.'
'Looks are deceptive.'
'Avril had a bad time,' Alex said, 'but I slept through it all. I had bad dreams – about the jungle, about the rising and falling lights – and I think Avril was in the dream somewhere, but I can't be too sure. Apart from that, though, I slept on and was untouched, while Avril actually levitated, she believes, along with everything else.'
Antonio sighed. 'We can't ignore it anymore,' he said. 'We're all caught up in something we can neither comprehend nor control – and given what I know of Indian witchcraft, it could be highly dangerous.'
'Do you believe,' Avril asked, directing her question at both of them, 'that the Yano are really involved with that light and what it can do? Do you really think they can reach us when we're here, still hundreds of miles away?'
'Yes,' Alex replied instantly, firmly. 'I've no doubts about it at all. I know what *I* was capable of when *I* had the power – and I was, after all, just a beginner, on the ladder's first rung. But Peruche's powers were awesome, though even he was no master, and according to him the members of the Yano tribe, the dispossessed ones near the Gateway to the Otherworld, could, being the instruments of the forces of darkness, wreak diabolical havoc of the most frightening kind. So, yes, believe the Yano are behind these recent hauntings… I'm convinced they know we're coming.'

‘And you, Antonio, what do you think?’
This time the Brazilian shrugged. ‘I stand with Alex. From what I know of Indian magic – and I saw a lot when I was younger – I’m convinced that they do have real powers of the kind we don’t understand. And if, as is widely reported, the Yano’s powers are greater than normal, then those powers could be remarkable indeed, capable of defying time and space, to travel as far and as quickly as needs be.’
They all drank a lot that evening, sitting at the long table, Father Benedict obliterating himself in order to ignore Alex’s contempt, Avril drinking to steady her nerves for the forthcoming night, and Antonio trying to draw them closer together with light conversation. The clouds returned to hide the stars, there was a quick, savage rainstorm, then the clouds moved away behind the silhouetted jungle canopy, letting the moon illuminate the water and streak its black-flowing, rippling surface with wavering lines of silver.
Antonio was the first to go to bed, saying he still preferred his cabin, but Avril knew, as she watched him leaving the table, that no matter how drunk she was, she would not be able to spend one more night in her own cramped, haunted cabin.
When she told Alex, he flinched, glancing distastefully at Father Benedict, but the priest, possibly exhausted by fear and alcohol, was already asleep, his clasped hands acting as a pillow for his forehead, his body, leaning across the table, twitching spasmodically.
‘Help him,’ Avril said. ‘Tomorrow. Try talking to him.’
‘No,’ Alex said.
She slid away from him, then swung her legs onto the bench, and finally, turning sideways, rested her head on his lap. She felt him hardening against her cheek, and smiled, amused by it, then closed her eyes and let the night surround her with the promise of sleep.
This time, when the magical light returned, Alex saw it as well, his shocked *‘Oh, my God!’* making Avril open her eyes and look up to see that brilliant, spinning eye directly above her. Someone screamed and she jerked upright, staring wildly along the deck, and saw some members of the crew, standing close to the railing, waving frantically and pointing at the light as they backed away from it.
Glancing at Alex, she saw his wide eyes, then the priest looking fearful. Hearing another scream, she stared along the deck at the panic-stricken

crewmen. One of them was on his knees, gripping the railing with one hand, screaming dementedly as he stared up at the dazzling light swirling fiercely above him. There was noise… no: a vibration… an unreal *feeling* of noise… and then some oil lamps exploded, the flames racing over the deck, and the other crewmen screamed in terror and jumped overboard just before the flames reached them. The kneeling man was engulfed, the flames seeming to explode around him, then Avril heard his screams drowned out by her own screaming as Alex instantly jumped to his feet and ran to the railing.

She followed him automatically, scarcely thinking about it, and then joined him at the railing to look down at the men in the water. The swirling light remained above them, illuminating the river, and then it seemed to expand, stretching across the whole boat, and the water in the river, which had been smooth, started roaring and bubbling.

Glancing back over her shoulder, Avril saw the burning man falling sideways, his body just a bundle of charred rags in a pool of small, still flickering, flames; then, as other flames appeared, as the fire extinguishers burst into action, she looked back down at the river, saw the water boiling furiously, and then, to her horror, as the swimming men called out for help, she saw a mass of gigantic snakes, all nearly thirty feet long, coiling and uncoiling and wriggling over the electric eels which, racing through the boiling foam, managed to reach the men first. The men's screaming was truly terrible, lacerating Avril's ears, and then she saw them catapulting, their bodies spinning like rag dolls, before crashing back down into that hideous wriggling mass and disappearing into the snow-white foam as the darkness returned.

She stood there, aghast, and then was pulled away by Alex, letting him drag her back to the table where the priest was muttering incessantly, only stopping, whenever he found the breath, to take another drink from his hip flask. Avril looked up at the sky, blinked and rubbed her watery eyes, looked again and saw only the clouds moving over a full moon. There was shouting and hissing, the sound of feet on the deck, and the foam of fire extinguishers, like milk on the boil, splashed over the flickering blue flames and the charred remains of the dead man.

She was shivering and felt cold, yet had to wipe sweat from her brow, and noticed that Alex was also dripping, his face as white as that of the priest who was standing behind him. The shouting continued, there was even more foam

on the dark deck, and the surviving crewmen, all chattering excitedly, were either staring over the railings at the river, now calm, or pointing up at the sky.
Avril groaned, hardly knowing she was doing so, and then leaned against Alex, this time resting her cheek on his trembling shoulder and sliding her right arm around him. She remained there, not saying a word, until the dawn light broke through.

Chapter Fifteen

Antonio joined them for breakfast, looking the ghost of his former self, listening patiently as Alex told him what had happened during the night and then confessing that he, too, had seen the swirling light.

'But when I tried to leave my cabin, I couldn't open the door. It was locked securely. The key just wouldn't turn – at least not until I tried it this morning, when it was working perfectly.'

Father Benedict was eating dry bread and washing it down with beer, and now, as if talking to himself, said, 'God forgive me. It's *me* they're after. I'll never be forgiven for what I did until I give myself to them… or until they manage to steal my soul.'

Avril was startled, touched again with intuition, convinced that his confessions so far were only part of the whole. And then, with a sudden rage that surprised her even as she spoke, she hammered her clenched fist on the table and shocked the priest to attention.

'Damn you!' she snapped. 'Tell us the rest! Tell us what you're still hiding!'
'No!' the priest exclaimed. 'There's no more! *I've told all I can tell!*'
He kicked his chair back as he stood up, swaying slightly from side to side, and then, with another choked sob, turned away and disappeared down the steps that led to the lower deck. Avril stared at Antonio, at Alex, then at the river, noticing how colourless it looked in the pearly light of the morning.
'God,' she said, 'this journey is interminable. I'll be glad when tomorrow comes.'

Later the sun came out, at first bleeding down weakly, then breaking through the disappearing clouds to make the day dazzling and fiercely hot. The river looked like a sheet of glass, a mirror winding through walls of greenery, reflecting the cecropia trees and the bizarre, writhing lianas, the sunlight turning the gently rippling water to silver where alligators, anacondas and giant eels glided close to the banks.
Avril felt that she was dreaming, that reality was dissolving around her, making it difficult to distinguish between the actual and what might be a mirage. She thought of the journals of Alfonso Carvajal, of his hallucinatory descriptions – royal highways through the jungle, great white riverbank cities, the fair-skinned female warriors who fought with terrible ferocity and after whom Orellana had named the river – and understood why he'd written so, since, with the sun overhead, blazing down in dazzling splendour, the numerous reflections from the vitreous water began distorting all she saw, making tributaries and várzea lakes shimmer above the far horizon, the odd collections of riverside shacks materialize as gilded cities, and domesticated animals in forest clearings look like giant, prehistoric beasts. And then, towards evening, just as Alex had prophesied, the happenings became even more dramatic and reality turned to a nightmare.

Chapter Sixteen

The river tapered away in the distance, winding between green walls of forest, and from out of a clear sky, above the canopy of the trees, came a great boiling mass of black clouds and a cold, whipping wind. Father Benedict saw it coming, his lips trembling as he groaned, and when Avril reached out to touch him reassuringly, he twitched as if whiplashed. Thunder rumbled as the clouds approached, lightning darted through boiling greyness, and Alex, as the wind slapped his face, shook his head disbelievingly. The thunder rumbled again, black shadows raced along the river, the boat was plunged into a semi-darkness and then the rain fell.

The other passengers ran for cover, sheltering close by the cabins, as the rain fell in unusually large, glistening droplets which, splashing heavily on the deck, quickly soaked Avril. She cupped her hands across her forehead, protecting her eyes as she looked up, but the rain, turning into enormous

hailstones, forced her fingers apart. She heard the sheltering passengers shouting, their words clashing in Portuguese, and then they began scattering, some clearly frightened by the unfamiliar, and then there was a high-pitched, female scream that lacerated her eardrums.

'Hailstones!' Antonio bawled. ' *Hailstones in Amazonia!* It must be starting again!'
She saw his brown eyes squinting, the hailstones exploding over his shoulders, then Alex grabbed her hand, shouting something about 'shelter', and started dragging her through the windwhipped, lamplit darkness toward the rear of the cabins. She heard the woman screaming again, a sound of pure, mortal terror, and wondered briefly if it signified a phenomenon even worse than this miraculous storm. Something light fell on her shoulder, dropped on her foot and fell away; she glanced down and saw nothing but the dark deck, then Alex pulled her close to him.
'Oh, Christ!' he said softly. 'What…?'
The boat was shuddering violently, its engines roaring to no avail, and then its stern turned towards the port side until, with a more violent, convulsive shudder, it came to a halt. Avril glanced over the railing, saw a wall of broken tree trunks, the water pouring over numerous gnarled branches and around the hull of the boat.
'I don't believe it!' Alex exclaimed. 'The boat's stuck in those smashed tree trunks. How on earth did they all bunch up there? It just isn't possible.'
The thunder roared, the lightning flashed, the hailstones changed back to rain, a woman screamed and something light dropped on Avril and bounced off her shoulder. She looked down and kicked at it, automatically, her skin rippling, and saw the scrambling legs of a giant spider as it hurried into the darkness. Another appeared on the deck, then another, and another; the same woman screamed and something light fell on Avril's shoulder and she slapped it away.
'Christ!' It was the priest. He was pressed against the outer wall of a cabin, wriggling frantically and slapping at his body as huge spiders dropped onto him.
Revulsion made Avril burn and she quickly looked above her at the overhanging branches of the tall *sapopema* and *acacuzeiro* trees from which, when the trapped boat hammered against them, the enormous spiders were

falling. Another landed on her head, fell onto her shoulder and bounced away, and she screamed instinctively, fear and revulsion whipping through her, but managed to choke it back as Alex pulled her to the stern of the boat, which was, from what she could discern in the darkness, reasonably clear of the riverbank and its overhanging branches.

They found Antonio there, huddled up with some other passengers, the rain still pouring out of a pitiless sky and splashing harshly upon them. He pointed obliquely with a wavering hand. Avril looked up to see a pulsating, disc-shaped light shining through the black clouds.

The thunder roared again, the sound too loud to be natural, then jagged bolts of lightning, darting down from the stormy sky, exploded over the funnel of the boat and crackled down to the deck. Glass shattered, men bawled, women screamed, an oil lamp fell and burst into flames, and then a snake, long and heavy, its body slick with river slime, slid silently over Avril's foot and headed for those just behind her.

She tumbled into real terror, breaking free from Alex's grasp, the scream that she had stifled now daggering out of her throat as Alex managed to grab her again. Spinning around, she fell into him, burying her face in his shoulder, unable to stop her body's panic-stricken convulsions and her loud, broken sobbing. He held her, rocked her, covered her ears as others screamed, as the thunder roared and the lightning flashed and more snakes dropped on the deck, their bodies making squelching sounds that made her skin crawl.

Then the thunder and lightning stopped, the rain ceased to fall, the boat broke free from the smashed tree trunks, she felt the deck heaving under her feet as the engines pushed it away. Alex was stroking her hair and whispering encouraging words, his hands squeezing her reassuringly, then he led her away, set her down on a bench, kept whispering endearments to her, until eventually she managed to sniff back her tears and look fearfully about her.

The night around the boat was quiet, but the boat was still in chaos: the passengers bawling or screaming, running hysterically this way or that, some shrieking and wriggling as they avoided spiders or snakes, the crewmen hurrying to and fro with sticks and brooms, sweeping the dangerous creatures off the decks and back into the river.

Avril watched it all, mesmerised, hardly believing what she was seeing, then glanced up at the sky, saw the stars and a full moon, then shuddered, closed her eyes and pressed her face into Alex's shoulder, appreciating the warmth

of his familiar skin as she drifted into an uneasy sleep.
She dreamt of Laura in the rainforest, of the Yano Indians crowding around her, of blood and mud dripping off her tortured body as the lights rose and fell. Then she awakened, groaning softly, still shivering with terror, and looked up from Alex's lap to see the priest, Father Benedict, staring down at her with eyes ruined by grief and intolerable guilt, illuminated in all of their haunting torment by the pearly dawn light. He was shivering, but he reached down and touched her, lightly stroking her cheek.
'Oh, my child, it's all my fault. *My fault!*'
'Then confess,' Avril said.

Chapter Seventeen

'Confess?' Father Benedict said. 'To what? I can scarcely trust my own memory. But what's happening here – yes, all of it: these terrible hauntings – these things are the bitter fruits of my sins, of my lust and deceit. It's *me* they're after. I'm absolutely sure of that. I've flirted with the devil in many ways and now he's come for my mortal soul. It was Laura and I, our forbidden love, that led to these dreadful events.'

He glanced along the deck, which was quiet in the dawn light (the few remaining passengers either sleeping off the night's horrors or huddling together for comfort while glancing nervously about them) and then, with an almost imperceptible sigh, turned back to Avril, his gaze alighting briefly upon her before passing on to Alex, at whom he stared directly, steadily, his face luminous with pain.

'I was Laura's lover,' he confessed. 'Yes, Alex, this is true. I first made love to her the night before she moved into your father's house. From that night on we became secret lovers, meeting whenever and wherever we could… Please, Alex, don't turn away! Can't you imagine how I felt? A celibate all my life, but suddenly fulfilled in love and desire, naturally I was inflamed, completely mesmerised by her, and could barely let her out of my sight, let alone out of the mission camp. Small wonder, then, that I soon ignored my own doubts and gradually started falling to pieces because of what I was doing. For indeed, whether sane or insane, an innocent fool or a hypocritical calculator,

Laura, in giving herself to me, destroyed my every foundation and laid waste to my faith. And if, in dealing with you, I was no longer sure of my own motives, now, with Laura about to move into your father's house, I was even less sure of my reasoning and didn't dare think about it. No, I didn't want her to live there, not near you and your father, and when she did, my already possessive love became completely insatiable.'

Avril looked across the river, squinting into the brightening sunlight, trying momentarily to distract herself from the pain in the priests voice. Here the river was nearly two miles wide and was growing wider every minute, the forest becoming a shrinking green line that curved away, both east and west, to where the sky met the jungle. A flock of herons flew beneath some gathering clouds: black spots merging with grey haze.

'Oh, God,' she heard the priest saying. 'The sordid deceit of it all! Always meeting her in secret, praying we wouldn't be seen; and after it, the rancid taste of my hypocrisy and self-wounding shame. How ironic, then, that when she was staying in the mission, when we were seeing each other every day, we hadn't been engaged in such an affair – not, at least, until the night before she left – but that once she moved into the plantation, a mere thirty miles from the mission, we were obsessed with seeing one another to continue our profane, forbidden love; and could only see one another openly either when she visited the mission or when I, in my hypocritical role as priest and moral guardian, visited the plantation to attend to the workers or, ostentatiously, confront your father over his own, much more blatant, immorality.' He leaned towards Alex, trying to will his attention. 'Oh, yes, Alex, I know: you think I was just using you; but such simply wasn't the case since, before meeting Laura, and even during that tormenting affair, my paternal concern for you never wavered and only caused me more pain… Did I casually betray you? Most certainly not! Rather, I was sick to the very depths of my soul and constantly questioning my own motives for all of my actions.'

He sat back on the bench, took a deep breath, and then, rubbing his cheeks in a distracted manner, again stared steadily at Alex.

'My dilemma was acute,' he said, 'and perhaps a form of natural justice. If

I'd initially advised you against falling in love with Laura because I was genuinely concerned that you'd be hurt – and certainly that was the case – now, as Laura's secret lover, I couldn't give the same advice without suspecting that self-interest had become entangled in my formerly honest concern. Likewise, if I'd previously fought with your father over his brutal treatment of his Indian workers, not then knowing that your father also had designs on Laura, I couldn't avoid the suspicion that what had once been genuine outrage on my part was now merely a cover for my resentment over the fact that he had her under his own roof and clearly wished to seduce her. So there I was, trapped between two mirrors, each showing a different face.'

Avril watched the river widening, the wall of forest visibly shrinking, the sky becoming an enormous inverted bowl that encased that great body of water. She studied it out of embarrassment, not wanting to see the priest's moist eyes, nor the anger and revulsion on Alex's face as he opened and closed his restless hands.

'And yet it continued – that soul-destroying affair
– and if I lived with shame and guilt, I was also living with the fear that Laura, with her obsessive interest in the forces of darkness, was indeed possessed and, being the instrument of the devil, had been sent to corrupt me. And added to that – a purely religious concern – was the more earthly fear that my relationship with Laura would sooner or later be discovered by someone and made known to your father, or, much worse, to you, which I felt would damage you in a way that could never be undone. That concern, if you can believe me, was relentless – and was a concern shared by Laura.'

Glancing at Alex, Avril saw his delicate profile, his blond hair flopping over one eye, his head framed by the leaden sky. He was trying to keep his face blank, to suppress his conflicting emotions, but the straight line of his lips indicated that he was having some trouble.

'Laura cared for you, Alex. Not in the way you wanted, but she cared for you deeply and suffered because, increasingly aware of your passion for her, the guilt over the affair she was having with me became close to unbearable… Did you think she found your father attractive? No, Alex, she did not. She

flirted with him to keep him from guessing about her relationship with me and, also, to keep him from thinking too much about your embarrassingly obvious infatuation with her – an infatuation that your father found either amusing or threatening, depending on how much he had to drink or how nice Laura was to him… Yes, Alex, she cared for you and made a point of protecting you, while you, in the blindness of your passion, could see only the opposite.'

Now it was Alex who leaned forward, the anger draining from his face, leaving him pale but less grim, his brow furrowed in thought.

'Yes, Alex,' the priest said, 'you saw the opposite to what was really happening. You thought that Laura was having an affair with your father when in fact she was having an affair with me; you thought she didn't give a damn about you, when in fact she was trying to protect you.'

Father Benedict took a deep breath, releasing it in a lingering sigh.
'Why did you almost have a breakdown, Alex? Because you saw your father in her room. Because shortly after she slapped your face – when you accused her of behaving like a whore – you saw your father in her bedroom, placing his hand on her breast, while she, just before you turned away from the window and fled, placed her hand on his hand and, as you so vividly remembered later, chuckled while doing so… So, Alex, you saw that and naturally assumed the worst, and then, with your worst fears confirmed, you almost lost your mind.'
Alex blushed and lowered his head, obviously ashamed of that recollection, while Father Benedict, speaking softly and nervously, revealed the truth to him.
'But you were wrong,' the priest said. 'You saw what you wanted to see. Laura hadn't invited your father to her bedroom that night; he simply turned up, very drunk, saying that he knew of your infatuation with her, that he was going to send you back to school in Manaus the very next day, and that if she didn't join him in bed that same night he would throw her off the plantation. Laura just laughed at him, saying she didn't give a damn, that she'd already arranged to move into Manaus and from there organise a trip into the rainforest in the hope of finding the Yano. Her response merely inflamed

your father, making him want her all the more, but he was really very drunk, almost too drunk to stand, and so, when he pathetically put his hand on her breast, she just chuckled, then laughed at him, humiliating him all the more, and then simply took hold of his hand and, as you turned away from the window to flee the scene, removed it and pushed your father from the room. That's all that happened between them.'

Avril heard a man shouting, a bell ringing from across the water, looked out at the river and saw that the land was closer, houses on stilts, rising up to the edge of the rainforest, the stretch of river in front of them filled with fishing boats and *canoas*, with the floating filling stations known as *pontoes*, and even a large floating factory which, she assumed, was one of the refrigerating plants that Antonio had told her about. It was almost like civilisation and she wanted to see more, but the priest's voice, hoarse with whiskey and shame, forced her attention back to him.

'That was it, Alex. Laura wasn't involved with your father. That belief, I know, had been tormenting you. Now I'm setting you free.'

Alex stared at the priest, started to speak and then went dumb, shuddered and sighed forlornly and buried his face in his hands. His body shook uncontrollably, letting the anguish pour out of him, while Father Benedict reached down to him, touched his head with a trembling hand, and let his fingers linger there, expressing his sorrow.

'She truly loved you, Alex, as I, too, truly love you, and so, a few weeks later, when you'd gone off to school in Manaus, both of us, shocked at the extent of your despair, vowed to terminate our affair and go our separate ways. Yet Laura knew that I couldn't do it, couldn't ignore her while she was near me, as she also knew that she had to follow her own course to wherever it took her. "You won't be able to keep your word," she told me. "Only I can set you free. And in doing that, I'll also set myself free from whatever's haunting me." And then, that same night, your father and Rollie Thatcher were slaughtered – and Laura, Mengrire and the Indian girl, his sweetheart, all disappeared.'

He removed his hand from Alex's head, sighed sadly and sat back, wiped his lips with the cuff of his shirt sleeve as Alex slowly sat upright. They stared at one another for a long time, neither saying a word, while the clouds behind them shifted, letting sunlight break through, its silvery rays beaming down onto the early morning's greyness and falling over the deck of the boat. The

river here was busy, filled with *canoas* and other craft, the sloping bank, now close, littered with houses on stilts over which, in green equatorial splendour, the rainforest began. The priest surveyed all of it, recognising it with trepidation, then he returned his attention to Alex and spoke softly to him.
'And why did she do it, Alex? Why did she disappear that night? I believe she did it on impulse, hardly knowing what she was doing, perhaps shocked because she entered that room after the killing was done; then, in a dazed condition, finding Mengrire and his girl there, and learning that they were going to flee into the rainforest, instinctively fled with them. Impulsively or instinctively, yes… but there were definite reasons.'
Father Benedict straightened his spine and then stared at each of them in turn, speaking firmly and clearly.
'She did it to free me,' he said. 'She did it to save my soul. To remove her seductive presence from my sight and save me from further sin. And she did it, of course, because she was still convinced that she had to face the forces of darkness, those forces known to the Yano, in order to regain her own soul and put Satan behind her.'
When Alex raised his head, pain whipped through Avril's heart: a pain mixed with the rage that sprang from her conviction that his feelings for her were merely a substitute for the love he had cherished and lost. Her hurt and anger fused together, setting her wounded heart to the flames, but she leaned towards the priest, feeling cold and self-destructive, determined to have it all out no matter what it might cost her – or, perhaps more relevant, what it might cost Alex who, sitting in front of her with his head in his hands, was trying to choke back the tears that he knew would enrage her.
'And that's when your downfall started?' she asked of the priest, deliberately keeping her voice soft and calm.
'Dear God, yes,' he replied. 'My world ended that terrible night. When Laura disappeared, my soul went with her – and was lost in that jungle.'
Avril felt her own world ending, crashing into the dust of betrayal, and refused, even though her heart was breaking, to acknowledge Alex's tears.
The boat shuddered and rocked and made a hollow drumming sound, followed by the sounds of squeaking rubber, then music and cheering. Looking over the railing, she saw an enormous floating dock, a mass of people along the jetty where the hull was crushing the rubber tyres, the dock's ramps leading away to a rising, bustling town that was encircled, as

far as the eye could see, by the equatorial rainforest.
They had arrived at Manaus.

To be continued…

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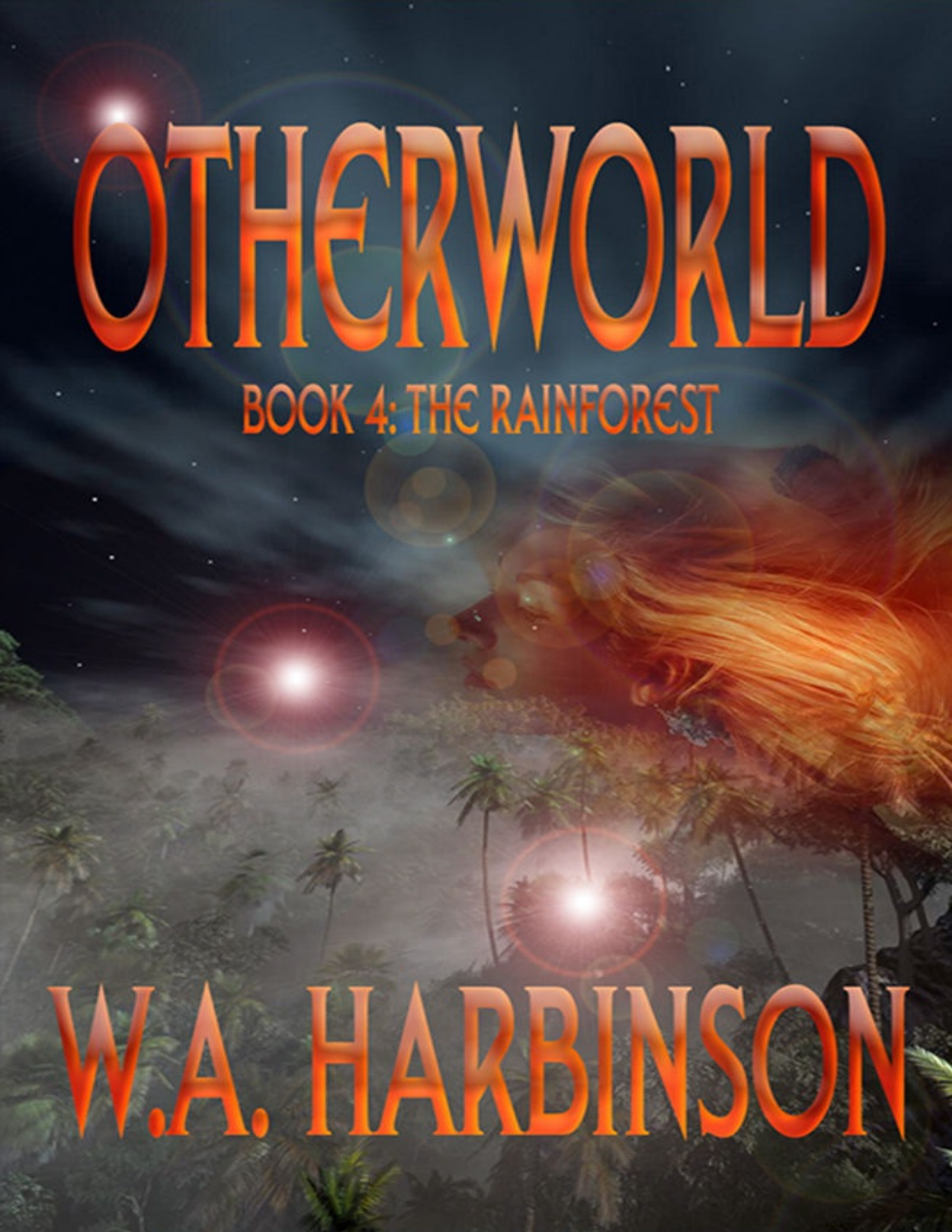
OTHERWORLD
BOOK 4: THE RAINFOREST
W.A. HARBINSON

Otherworld

W. A. Harbinson

Deep in the heart of the Amazon rainforest live the Yano Indians. A fierce, elusive tribe, they are
dedicated to the powers of darkness, their presence only revealed only by the hypnotic beating of drums… and by mysterious lights in the sky.

Laura Wellman , an American photojournalist, beautiful, sensual and deeply tormented… Believing herself to be possessed by evil spirits, she decides to

offer herself to the dreaded Yano in a final, desperate attempt to release her soul from torment.

Father Paul Benedict , a middle-aged Anglican priest who is starting to doubt his God and the meaning of life in general… Gradually becoming obsessed with Laura, he believes that in somehow saving her from

self-destruction he can find his own redemption.

Alex Poulson , adolescent son of a depraved rubber baron, an almost spiritual innocent born and raised in
Amazonia… Falling helplessly in love with Laura, despite being rejected by her, he follows her into the dangerous depths of the rainforest and is, in turn, followed by the concerned Father Benedict.

There, beyond the reach of civilization, even beyond the light of reason, all three are drawn into the Yano's alien 'Otherworld', where good collides with evil in a

titanic, earth-shattering confrontation…

Otherworld

Luminous with love and possibility, pulsing with eroticism, murder and dread. A powerful, haunting novel about the eternal conflict between primal, mysterious forces on the other side of existence.

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Copyright © 1984 by W. A. Harbinson
First published in Great Britain in 1984 by Corgi Books, London
ISBN 0 552 12380 3
This ebook edition published in 2015 by W. A. Harbinson

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Designed in the Isle of Wight, Great Britain, by www.inkdigital.org

Otherworld

Book Four
The Rainforest

Chapter One

If Father Benedict's revelations had left Alex in a daze, disturbing him and exalting him, offering shock and relief at once, being back in Manaus, in its haphazard, cluttered streets, merely agitated him all the more and resurrected, with an overpowering vividness, every incident that had led to his premature departure. He felt split in two, the older Alex observing the younger, as if, looking back on what had happened just over a year ago, he was actually looking back a few decades to some unreal, remote period. And yet, given the feeling that time had stretched a lot farther than possible, he also kept expecting to see some familiar faces, though he wasn't at all sure whose faces he was thinking about, apart from those of old schoolfriends. Yes, he had practically just finished his schooling and this knowledge, reverberating in his head, again made him feel immature.

'It seems much smaller than I'd remembered it,' he said to Avril. 'As if I'd left as a child.'
'You *were* a child,' Avril responded tartly, 'and in many ways still are.'
He winced at that and felt a blush on his cheeks, glanced out of the hotel window at the tree-lined Avenido Eduardo Ribeiro, wondering if Laura and Father Benedict had ever stayed in the same hotel; and then, filled with shame, despising himself for his senseless jealousy, he turned away from the window, suddenly aware of Avril's anger and understanding the cause of it.
'Just what do you mean by that?' he asked, hoping it wasn't what he suspected. 'Obviously it wasn't meant as a compliment, so let's clear the air quickly.'
'Don't act naive,' she replied. 'You know damn well what I mean. You've been wounded to the quick ever since learning that Father Benedict was Laura Wellman's lover. You just can't stand the thought of it.'
'It hurt. Naturally. You know what I felt for her. I don't feel that way any longer, but Father Benedict betrayed me.'

‘Rubbish!’ she snapped. ‘You just can’t stand the thought that he had her. You can’t bear to hear the priest mentioning Laura Wellman’s name – and the thought that she actually loved someone else is simply too much for you. God,’ she continued vehemently, ‘what a damned fool I’ve been! You didn’t come back here to set yourself free from your nightmares: you came back in the hope of finding that bitch again – alive and in one piece.’

‘That isn’t true, Avril.’

‘Damn you!’

She had been taking her old clothes off, throwing them angrily on the bed, and now she turned away from him, her naked buttocks quivering, and crossed the bare boards of the floor to disappear into the equally spartan shower room. He looked out the window again, flushed, his heart pounding, listening to the running shower, and unable to shake off the guilt that her accusation had stirred.

Was there some truth in what she’d said? Did he still desire Laura? Had he merely used Avril as an emotional crutch when he most desperately needed one? Now, he wasn’t sure, loving Avril, obsessed with Laura; on the one hand greatly relieved that Laura had not succumbed to his father, on the other still bitter that his good friend, Father Benedict, had turned out to be Laura’s lover all along. He was still reeling from that revelation, not too sure of his own emotions, and now, faced with Avril’s accusation, he had no honest answer.

‘Christ,’ he said, talking to the window, ‘why did I bring her here?’

The road below was busy, cutting through the commercial area. Between some of the tall buildings, surrounding the shacks on the hills beyond, he could see odd patches of dense, tangled forest and scudding grey clouds. It was hot, but he shivered, the fear returning to settle upon him, an almost palpable fear that put a fog around his thoughts and made his nerves feel on edge.

They would soon be seeing the Indian girl, might soon learn what had happened to Laura, and that, which he desired but was also frightened of knowing, was only a prelude to their hike into the rainforest in search of the Yano. When he considered that forthcoming venture, and remembered what had already occurred during the voyage from Belem – the mysterious light, the hauntings, the inexplicable phenomena – his felt his heart fluttering with panic, his skin crawling with dread.

Avril returned from the shower room, clearly still angry, holding a damp towel around her body and walking to the bed. She let the towel drop to the floor and stood in front of him, defiantly naked, the fierce light in her eyes refusing to let him take too much pleasure from the sight of her.
'Well?' she snapped.
'What?'
'Did I tell the truth or didn't I?'
'I love you,' he replied, his heart breaking as he said it. 'I never knew what love was until I met you, but now I do – *yes, I do!*' His heart was racing and he was flushed, his skin sticky with sweat, yet he knew through his fear and confusion that he was speaking the truth. 'Damn you,' he said without malice, in desperation, 'I just want to put all this behind me and then go back to England. *I want to live without doubt!*'
She stepped forward to embrace him, pressing her naked body tightly to him, writhing against him, her fingers digging into his back as if trying to draw blood.
'God!' she said. 'I'm just a bitch! I can't keep my bloody mouth shut. I've let Laura Wellman come between us and can't forget that she's there.'
Alex held her in one arm, stroking her hair with his free hand, pressing his lips to the top of her head as desire made him tremble.
'It's that amulet,' he said. 'You shouldn't still be wearing it. I don't understand why you insist on keeping it when you know what it's doing.'
'I won't let it go, Alex.'
'I know that, but why not?'
'I won't give it up unless *you* take it and promise to keep it.'
'Why me?'
'Because all the bad things that happened to you only happened after you gave the amulet away – and because Peruche must have had a specific reason for giving it to you in the first place. I think that if the amulet has *positive* powers, they'll only work through you, and that sooner or later, whatever your personal feelings, you'll have to take it back.'
'No, Avril, I won't. I want nothing more to do with it. I surrendered my occult powers when I left Brazil and I don't want them back. I'm leaving all that behind me. Those powers only do good for those with faith and I no longer have that.'
'Then I'll keep the amulet until you get your faith back.'

‘That might never happen.’
‘We’ll see, Alex. We’ll see…’ Slipping out of his embrace, she offered a tentative smile, brushed her dark hair from her forehead with one hand and then said, ‘Father Benedict and Antonio are probably downstairs already, so I’d better put my clothes on and get you down there.’
She dressed quickly and attractively, wearing a simple white blouse and skirt, letting a long scarf hang down from her throat, covering the amulet, her feet in sensible flat shoes. Then they went downstairs together, Alex holding Avril’s hand, a pulse beating nervously in his stomach when he thought of the Indian girl.
Father Benedict and Antonio were indeed in the spacious lobby which was, like so many of the buildings in Manaus, as baroque as the famous Opera House, with the same seedy elegance. Antonio looked refreshed, having had a shower and changed his clothes, but Father Benedict, still wearing the same increasingly bedraggled shirt and slacks, had the appearance of a man who hadn’t slept for three or four days. There were three glasses on the table in front of him, one still filled with beer.
‘Lady’s prerogative or not,’ Avril said, ‘I hope I didn’t keep you waiting too long.’
‘Not at all,’ Antonio replied. ‘I’ve just come down. Besides which, we don’t have an actual appointment with the girl and can take our own good time.’
‘We shouldn’t be going at all,’ Father Benedict said. ‘Why dig up old bones?’ The remark was unintentionally brutal and he instantly looked embarrassed, then, having a sip of his beer, wiped his lips with the back of his hand. ‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘I didn’t mean to put it that way. But I beg you, Alex, to forget this obsessive mission, forget Laura and the past, forget that poor Indian girl and any distorted memories she may have, and let us all take a plane back to Rio and relative safety.’
‘No,’ Alex said, ‘I won’t forget anything. You know damned well I won’t. That Indian girl could tell us what happened to Laura, which, I’d assumed, was something even you’d want to know.’
‘No, I don’t. I think the past should stay buried. Learning the doubtless unpleasant details of Laura’s fate can do nothing but make us suffer all the more – and getting the story out of that demented Indian girl could possibly damage her further. No, let’s leave well alone and get out while we can.’
Alex stared steadily at Father Benedict for a considerable time, trying to work

out what was bothering him about seeing the Indian girl. Of course it would be painful, for himself as well as for the priest, but as he studied his old friend, again shocked by how much he had aged, he had the feeling that the confessions offered so far were, if accurate in their essence, still incomplete. Father Benedict was a frightened man, much more frightened than he should be, and neither the manifestations on the boat nor the reported powers of the Yano were enough to explain his reluctance to learn more about Laura.
'What good will it do you to return to Rio?' Alex asked, feeling a lot less cruel than he sounded, but needing to get it out. 'You're drinking yourself to death because of what happened a year ago, so don't tell me that learning the truth doesn't matter. It matters a lot to the both of us.'
'Speak for yourself, Alex. I don't wish to know more. I don't wish to dabble in things that we can't understand.'
'You *were* dabbling in such things,' Antonio quickly reminded the priest, 'so your present attitude, to put it mildly, seems rather odd.'
'Is there something you know that we don't?' Alex asked. 'If not, then why this fear, after all we've already been through, of discovering what actually happened to Laura when she fled the plantation?'
'All right,' the priest said, hurriedly finishing off his beer. 'Forget it! Let's go!'
He stood up too quickly, clearly agitated, and led them all out of the hotel, into the busy main street, turning left and heading downhill to Cathedral Square. Antonio hurried to catch up with him, obviously wanting to calm him down, while Alex took Avril's hand in his and pulled her close to him. He appreciated having her near, taking comfort from her dark beauty, needing the comfort as the city pressed in upon him with the weight of old memories. All the streets sloped gently down over a series of *igarapés*, the roads becoming bridges that spanned the steep drops above the plank shacks and stilted houses in the creeks filled with water from the Rio Negro. The whole town was remarkably shabby, with broken pavements, flooded drains, an unsightly conglomeration of open-front stores, cheap restaurants, rough bars and derelict buildings that had once been elegant homes but now were as empty as plundered tombs. Seeing it all again, recalling how he had gone to school here, Alex couldn't help thinking of his father and the world that had shaped him.
'If you want to understand my father,' he said to Avril, 'you should study the

history of this city, because my father was formed by this city and, just like the city, prematurely faded away when the rubber boom ended.'
'Tell me about it right now,' Avril responded, 'since I'm actually walking the streets and might never come back here again.'
'It's a riches-to-rags story,' Alex said. 'By the end of the nineteenth century, Amazonia had the largest known reserves of rubber in the world and rapidly became the richest region in Brazil. The two major cities, Manaus and Belem in that order, were transformed as the rubber barons, all millionaires, including my grandfather, spent their fortunes on lavish mansions, hospitals, libraries, theatres like the *Teatro Amazonia*, and all the ornate monuments and public squares of the kind we've been passing. The millionaires of that rubber boom were essentially unsophisticated men who, with their extraordinary, seemingly limitless, overnight wealth, became increasingly profligate and, determined to mark their own existence in some suitably flamboyant manner, built much of this city at their own expense and without considering the cost. The Opera House was built with marble imported specially from Italy, and the Custom House with stones brought here all the way from Scotland. Likewise, food, wine, champagne, clothing and furniture were all imported from Europe, electricity and telephones, which existed nowhere else in Brazil, were here taken for granted; and indeed, so demented did the millionaires become in their need to prove just how wealthy they were, they even sent their laundry to Europe to be washed. Naturally, in both the Amazonian cities, but particularly here in Manaus, the sexual licentiousness was outrageous and the exploitation of the Indians and other lowly workers commonplace. So, as part of this singular world, a son of one of those millionaires, my father was very much a creature of his environment: spoilt, self-centred, sexually insatiable and, of course, contemptuous of the Indians and his own *seringueiros*. In short, my father was made degenerate by a decadent way of life, and when that way of life died out, leaving him stranded, he exacted his revenge in even worse cruelty.'
'You mean after the rubber boom ended in 1929?'
'Precisely. I was about three years old at the time, my mother had died, and then, after what became known as the Great Crash, Manaus and the plantations around it started sinking back into impoverished neglect. This made my father even more bitter and – if I may say so without sounding self-pitying – made him a rotten father who, when not ignoring me completely,

was either raging at me or being sarcastic just to amuse himself. That's why I grew close to Peruche and, later, looked upon Father Benedict as a surrogate parent.'
'And now you appear to have lost both of them.'
'Yes,' Alex said.
'Does it disturb you being back here?'
'Right now it *all* disturbs me: seeing these streets again, recalling my childhood, my father, old Peruche, even the Indian, Mengrire – and, of course, the hauntings on the boat bringing us here and what's been happening to you and me as Laura, whether imagined or not, more and more stands between us. Yes, it disturbs me. Yet in a strange way, I feel better, as if, even during our fearful, sleepless nights, I have the feeling that we're doing the right thing and will soon resolve everything.'
'We'd *better* resolve everything,' Avril said. 'We won't have a second chance.'
They had reached the bustling square by the Cathedral and Custom House, with the great floating docks at the far side beyond the colourful market. Alex wanted to walk around, to show Avril some of the sights, but Father Benedict had already hailed a taxi and was opening the rear door. Antonio got in first, then Alex and Avril, and eventually, when Father Benedict had taken the seat beside the driver, the taxi moved off past the rows of market stalls and headed away from the centre of the city.
'It's only a five-minute drive,' Father Benedict said tartly, 'so I hope you can all manage to wait that long before torturing the unfortunate Indian girl with your impertinent questions.'
Reminded by that remark of just how angry the priest was, Alex glanced at Antonio, seated at his other side, and received a slight, knowing grin. As the taxi was crossing the Educandos Bridge, he looked down at the *igarapé*, seeing the houses on stilts rising above one another on the opposing slopes than ran down to the creek that flowed back to the river. The Indian girl was somewhere down there, living in one of the fishermen's houses, and Alex, thinking of what she could reveal, felt a chill go through him.
In fact, it was extremely hot, much more so in the taxi, the late morning grey and humid, the heat held in by low black clouds, no breeze to cool the sweat on their skin as the temperature soared.
Father Benedict coughed into his clenched fist, his back shaking as he did so,

and Alex, his head now filled with memories, knew what the priest was feeling: increasing anguish mixed with excitement, insatiable curiosity mixed with dread, the resurrection of lost love and its attendant doubts and subsequent grief. Yes, the priest would be suffering, unable to stop the flood of his emotions, and Alex, glancing sideways at a pale, grim-faced Avril, was aware of just how strong and potentially destructive those emotions could be.
After turning right, the taxi headed down towards the river, the slope becoming steeper and the street more narrow as they passed open-front stores offering fruit and fish, warehouses packed with what seemed to be mountains of cardboard boxes, and shabby wooden stands piled high with sacks of flour, rice, *farinha* and various nuts. The taxi stopped halfway down, unable to go farther, the water, filled with oil and rotten fruit and the remains of dead fish, lapping around the stilts of the houses that stood, one row above another, on the slopes of the creek.
While Father Benedict paid the driver, the rest of them scrambled out. Antonio studied the map that Peter Nicholson had drawn for him, then gazed up at the houses towering above him, wondering where to begin. The taxi reversed past them, then made a Uturn and raced back up the narrow street while Antonio studied the map again, scratched his head and then shrugged his shoulders.
'It's somewhere to the left as we stand facing the river,' he said, 'so let's take the path up behind the houses and then, if we get lost, just ask someone.'
The filthy water of the *igarapé* was lapping around the stilts of the houses nearest to them, a tethered canoe bobbing gently up and down, its oar making a hollow drumming sound against the wet hull. Alex looked past the canoe, at the channel of water running back to the river, washing around the stilts of the other houses near the bottom of the wet, grassy slopes. Children were swimming beneath the houses, some fishermen were casting nets from small boats, and the stench of rotten fruit and dead fish could not be ignored.
He took hold of Avril's hand, tugged it playfully and smiled at her, then followed Antonio across the narrow road and up a steep, winding mud track. Father Benedict was right behind him, panting heavily and muttering crossly, but Alex ignored him, squeezing Avril's hand for comfort, glancing at her to see her brown eyes and breeze-blown hair, her face framed by the stilted shacks on the hill at the far side, over which, drifting low in the sky, were the grey-andblack clouds.

The track led them between the stilts, below the dilapidated plank houses, and soon they came to a group of *cafusos*, some fisherman's family, all squatting on the earth around the steps that led up to their house. There were two sullen teenage girls and a grey-haired woman, probably their mother, the children, all naked, scrabbling around them, covered in dirt. Antonio spoke to the grey-haired woman, showing her his crumpled map. She smiled, displaying toothless gums, spat languidly near his feet, then jabbered in illiterate Portuguese, pointing a bony finger up the dirt track. When she had finished talking, which seemed to take a long time, Antonio waved them all forward.

'We're on the right track,' he said. 'It's at the top of this hill. The house is painted green, it's owned by a fisherman, the girl's uncle, and the girl is said to be a bit crazy and rarely comes out. So, be prepared.'

Reaching the top of the hill in a few minutes, they found the house with no trouble, but stood there uneasily, looking down along the creek to where the river, about five miles wide, glittering darkly, divided one side of the rainforest from the other, supported a unique society of floating stores, factories, gasoline stations and fishing boats, eventually disappearing over the horizon where black water met grey clouds. Seeing it, Alex shivered, the immensity of it quietly shaking him, then he turned and looked up at the green-painted, flaking walls of the house that stood high above him on bent, dangerously rotting stilts. Antonio was at the steps, putting the map back into his pocket, and as Alex walked forward, holding Avril by the elbow, he saw Father Benedict uncorking his hip flask and taking another long drink.

'It's all wrong!' he said. '*Wrong!*' He stared at each of them in turn, his eyes red-rimmed and frightened, and then, screwing the cap back onto his hip flask, stepped backwards away from them. 'I'm not going in there,' he said. 'I don't want to see that girl. If you want to talk to her, do so, but don't expect me to join you. I'm going back down the hill and I'll meet you later in the waterfront bar. *I just can't go in there!*'

He turned and rushed away from them, back down the mud track. Alex, frustrated and angry, wanting to drag the priest back, shrugged, shook his head from side to side and, with Avril close behind him, followed Antonio up the steep, ladder-like, wooden steps to the slightly tilting veranda. The veranda was deserted, but Antonio knocked on the door. There was the sound of shuffling from within, the squeaking of a chair being moved, then the door

opened a little and an old man peered out, his face thin from lack of nourishment, the cheekbones high and prominent, his lips being sucked back onto rotten teeth, his eyes rheumy and squinting.
'*Sim?*' he asked, his voice cracked and suspicious, his gaze taking in each of them in turn, his right hand, its brown fingers surprisingly thick, preparing to slam the door shut.
'*Boa tarde,*' Antonio replied, this being just after noon, his smile geared to soothe the old man's suspicions and keep the door open. '*O meu nome e Antonio Bozzano. Pode ajudar-me, por favor*?'
The old man stared at Alex and Avril, sniffed and rubbed his rheumy eyes, then returned his attention to Antonio, considering him thoughtfully.
'*Desculpe,*' he said. '*Nao entendo*.'
Noise could be heard inside the shack, what sounded like a squeaking bed, and as the old man glanced back over his shoulder and then looked again at Antonio, Alex felt the nerves in his stomach tightening, the dread falling over him.
Antonio started talking in Portuguese to the old man, explaining what they had come here for, but Alex, hardly listening, looked sideways at Avril and saw his own fears reflected in her brown eyes and tight lips, in the constant, restless movement of her fingers as they drummed on her thighs. He placed his hand on her shoulder, squeezed it lightly, receiving a trembling smile, then returned his attention to Antonio and the man in the doorway.
They were having a mild argument, the old man trying to deny them entrance, explaining that his niece was very ill and could not talk about what had happened in the rainforest without becoming upset. The argument went on for some time, Antonio pleading, the old men refusing, but eventually, either charmed or defeated by Antonio's rhetoric, the old man shrugged his naked, bony shoulders and, stepping backwards, opened the door wider to let them all enter.

Chapter Two

The fear instantly swamped Alex, making him break out in a sweat, his heartbeat quickening as he stared through the candlelight darkness at the girl on the bed. She was sitting upright against the wall, her black hair falling over her shoulders, a loose dress of what looked like ordinary sack cloth

unable to hide the full breasts of her young but prematurely wasted body.

Alex was shocked, comparing her to the girl he had known a year ago, only her breasts still retaining the fullness that he clearly recalled, while the rest of her, body and face, was now almost emaciated, her eyes too large above sunken cheeks, staring at him in panic. He felt that same panic, perhaps catching it off her, as he wiped sweat from his forehead, felt stifled and glanced around him, noticing that the darkness was caused by the curtains being drawn all the way across the windows, keeping the daylight out.

'She likes to feel that she's locked in,' the old man explained in Portuguese, obviously knowing what was troubling Alex, 'and that the outside world can't get to her. So she stays here all day in the darkness, usually seeing no one.'
'How did she end up here?' Antonio asked him. The old man looked melodramatically offended.

'I'm her uncle; that's why she was brought here.' 'I understand that you're her uncle,' Antonio said
with some impatience, 'but this girl was thought to
have disappeared for good, so who brought her here?' 'A priest.' The old man shrugged. 'The one that
used to run the mission. He brought her to see me one
day – many months after she'd disappeared – and said
that he'd found her wandering in the rainforest and
that I had to look after her. I complained, saying I had
no money, but he left her here anyway. That priest, he
looked like a madman – and has not been back since.' '*Father Benedict!*'
Avril cried out.
Alex could scarcely believe what he was hearing,
the shock making him reel inwardly, but he looked at
Antonio's widening eyes and realised it was true. He
started to say something, wanting to shout, perhaps
scream, but nothing emerged but a kind of gasp, a
choked expulsion of breath. He felt his heart
pounding, the sweat pouring down his face, took out a

handkerchief and wiped his skin dry as he stared, completely dumbfounded, at Antonio. The Brazilian was stepping up to the bed, staring into the girl's eyes, yellow candlelight flickering over the both of them, painting stripes on the shadows.

'Can I talk to her?' Antonio asked.

'*Sim, Senhor* – but she may not be helpful.' The girl stared fearfully at all of them, her dark eyes reflecting the candlelight, while first Antonio, then Alex and Avril, moved closer to the bed, Antonio going down on one knee to talk to her while Alex and Avril just stood there, hardly daring to breathe. The girl gripped the bed sheet, tugged it up to her chin, stared at each of them in turn, her beautiful brown eyes unnaturally bright, then she giggled and looked directly at Antonio, her smile almost flirtatious.

Antonio spoke Portuguese, his voice soothingly gentle, introducing himself, reminding her who Alex was, and then, after introducing Avril, asking if she would mind conversing in English.

'*Sim, Senhor*,' she said. 'Okay.'

Antonio nodded at her, glanced at Alex and Avril, and eventually, after taking a deep breath, told her what he had come here for. The girl's eyes grew bigger, her pupils yellow in the candlelight, like cat's eyes, except for the fear that made them even brighter. She shuddered, huddled deeper into the wall, and tugged the sheet tighter to her.

'No!' she whispered. '*No!* I can't tell you! *I don't want to remember!*'

She sobbed and turned away, hiding her face against the wall, the shadows cast by the candles flickering over her shaking shoulders while the old man, sniffing loudly, scratching his chest with thick fingers, knelt down and put his hand on Antonio's shoulder and spoke quietly to him.

'You have money?' he asked.

Antonio, at first startled, soon grasped the

situation, nodded in assent, withdrew a fistful of *cruzeiros* from his jacket pocket and, his distaste hidden by the flickering shadows, pressed the money into an outstretched hand. The old man stood up, hid the money in a ceramic jar, then dipped his fingers into a bowl, grabbed the girl's head with his free hand, held the fingers of his other hand up to her nose and forced her to sniff at them. The girl relaxed almost instantly, letting out a grateful sigh, her head falling back against the wall as her eyes opened again. This time she looked steadily at Antonio, the drug, *epena*, making her calm.

'Speak to him,' the old man said harshly. 'You must answer his questions.'

'Questions?' The girl smiled at Antonio. 'You want to question me, mister?'

'Yes,' Antonio said, returning her smile. 'I want to ask a few questions – but first I want to ask if you remember me or the young man behind me.'

Her eyes slowly went up to Alex and she smiled flirtatiously at him, then, seeing Avril, abruptly scowled and looked back at Antonio. '*Sim, Senhor*,' she said. 'The two of you I remember. You were the friendly one, the one who ran the plantation, and him, the one behind you, was the son of the pig, the big white chief who killed my father and stole me from Mengrire, shaming my honour.'

Alex closed his eyes, wanting to die on the spot, but Avril's fingers, entwined with his, lent some warmth to his chilled soul. He opened his eyes again and saw Antonio staring at him, concerned, so he nodded, letting him know he could continue, and then watched the girl. She kept gazing around the room, her eyes unfocused, distractedly chewing the bed sheet. 'Why did you run away from the plantation?' Antonio asked her.

‘Because we killed the big white chief.’
‘You mean, you and Mengrire?’
‘Yes.’
‘Anyone else?’
‘No.’
‘Can you tell me what happened that night?’ ‘I feel good. I can tell.’
She sucked the sheet into her mouth, spat it out
and stared at Alex, noticed Avril and abruptly scowled again, then fixed her attention on Antonio, her brown eyes once more going out of focus as she slipped back
to that distant night.
‘It was Mengrire,’ she said. ‘He was avenging my
shame. The big white chief killed my father, then used
me as his whore, and Mengrire, who wanted me as
much as I wanted him, told me that the pig had to die
and that we must then run away. Oh, mister, I was
frightened – when I heard that, I was frightened – but
Mengrire knew better – he had heard the drums of the
Yano – and he told me that he could not live without
me as his woman, that the only way he could have me
was to kill the big white chief and steal me away, that
he had sold his soul to the devil by sniffing *epena* and
invoking the powers of the Yano, that through all this
had finally found the courage to kill his tormentor.’ She closed her eyes, as if visualizing the whole
event, then opened her eyes to look again at Antonio,
this time not smiling.
‘So, that terrible night, after we’d both taken the
epena – in the forest where we saw the forces of
darkness and joined together as one – we returned to
the big house, to that awful room where I’d suffered
so much, and then, following the instructions of a
voice from the Otherworld of the Yano, Mengrire
killed the big white chief with a machete while he sat
in his chair. And the other one, the fat one, oh how he
shrieked and pleaded, but Mengrire, my man, paying

for me with his mortal soul, again raised the machete above his head and brought it down on the squealing pig, after which, while the blood of both men flowed, while their bodies were still twitching, I took the knife he gave me, the knife blessed by the Dark Ones, and cut off what had made the pigs men and filled their mouths with their manhood.'

'Oh, God,' Avril murmured, her voice cutting through Alex's anguish, making him turn his head to see her covering her face with her hands. She was shivering, but there was little he could do because, given what he had just heard, his own pain was slicing through him as if, by some diabolical magic, the machete that had been wielded by Mengrire was being used against him.

'What about the American woman?' Antonio was saying. 'Why did she run away with you?'

'She heard the screaming,' the girl said, 'and came running into the room. All the servants had heard the screaming, too, but were too frightened to enter. Also, they all hated the master and so blocked up their ears.' 'So, the American woman entered the room and then she fled with you. Why did she do that?' 'We didn't wish it, but did not oppose it. We thought the woman was simply crazy. She rushed into that awful room, saw the blood and the mutilated dead, was sick and dropped into a chair and was calmed by Mengrire. Oh, my man, he was so kind. Though covered in blood, he was still thoughtful. He explained what had happened to her, told her about my great suffering, my humiliation, described how my shame would only be erased by his actions, how the Yano had talked to him and guided him and now were telling him to join them in the rainforest. She was very interested in the Yano – hearing Mengrire talk about them helped her calm down – and then, as she looked

around her, when she had groaned and wept some more, she said that what had happened was terrible, that it was part of her curse, that it had all been written in the stars and so she had to come with us. Yes, mister, we thought she was crazy, but we wanted a gift for the Yano, and knowing they would like a red haired woman, we let her come with us.'

The girl glanced up at her uncle who was standing behind Avril, his rheumy eyes peering out of a shrunken face, his tongue sliding on rotten teeth. He was stripped to the waist, his ribs showing through translucent brown skin, and the girl, scarcely recognizing his presence, let her gaze fall on Avril. Alex noticed that gaze, its almost breathless intensity, and he shivered, seeing Avril doing the same, and wondered what was to come.

'What happened when you fled?' Antonio asked softly. 'When you ventured into the rainforest in pursuit of the Yano?'

The girl closed her eyes for a moment, sucked the bed sheet as if it was a baby's dummy, then shuddered and opened her eyes again and stared blindly at her raised knees.

'It was terrible,' she said. 'It was not what we'd expected. We didn't have to find the Yano – they were expecting us – and when we took the boat upriver and then headed north by foot, into the rainforest, they observed us through lights that spun and sang with a noise beyond silence; a noise – even now it makes me tremble – that seemed to shake us to pieces. Yes, noise – or no noise – and lights that were not lights… And then, oh I swear it, by the unmentionable that we renounced, they came – the forces of darkness, or the slaves of those dark forces, those cast out from the Yanoama to become the dreaded Yano – they emerged from the rainforest near Catrimani and took us into

their village.’
She kept staring blindly at her knees, but her whole body seemed to ripple, waves of fear passing through her like sand blown by a light breeze, while the candlelight, a flickering yellow streaked with black, made her flesh look like snakeskin.
‘We were already exhausted,’ she said. ‘The spinning lights, rising and falling, had kept us from sleeping. We were weary and broken by the silence that seemed physical, and so, when the Yano took us into their village, we could not resist anything. And then…It was a horror! Far worse than most nightmares! And even Mengrire, who had worshipped and obeyed them, wasn’t spared from their diabolical rites’
The girl took a deep breath, her eyes widening, the dreadful experience still clearly vivid in her mind, as real now as it had been at the time.
‘The village seemed ordinary – a collection of large *malocas*, cooking pots steaming in the clearing, women weaving while the children played around them near the paddocks of livestock – but the men were like demons, their faces painted, their bodies pitch-black, their arms and legs covered in decorations that signified the evil ones. They laughed a lot but were not good-humoured, sang a lot but seemed to be groaning, and though they constantly sniffed from bowls of *epena*, they received no pleasure from it. Mengrire told them why we had come to them – that he had heard them calling to him – but they only laughed at him and slashed his body with their knives, and then, when he was bleeding and biting his lips to keep from weeping, they tied him to a pole in the ground and made him watch what was happening.’ Alex felt suffocated, the heat of the small room getting to him, his eyes hurting from having to squint

through the flickering candlelit darkness and also, he surmised, from the nausea that filled his stomach when the Indian girl, studying her knees with glassy eyes, continued her story.

'We were stripped naked and beaten – me and the American woman – then tied with thongs and staked out on the ground just in front of Mengrire. There we remained all day, exposed to the scorching heat of the forest clearing, forced to endure many humiliations and taunts, constantly abused and tortured by the barbaric, women-despising Yano, while Mengrire, my man, once so proud, shed his tears right above us, still tied to that pole. The sun moved across the sky, burned straight down on us at noon, passed on and let the afternoon cool us where our skin bled and burned… Yes, they'd done that: poured hot ash on our slashed skin, rubbing pepper into wounds still seeping blood, and urinating upon us. And finally, when evening came, they started pounding their devil drums, endlessly sniffing up *epena*, and I knew then, when I saw their eyes enlarge and become too bright, that they were turning into madmen.'

The girl sighed and stared at Avril, a hint of venom in her gaze, as if, in seeing this white woman's good health and unmarked beauty, she was reminded of all she had lost and could never recover. Then, with an almost imperceptible shudder, she again lowered her eyes to focus on her brown, badly scarred knees. 'The Yano men were demons, worshipping the devil and despising women, thinking women the handmaidens of the Great Unmentionable, creatures who could seduce them from the path of true darkness and render them helpless; so, they enslaved their women, constantly abused and humiliated them, even made human sacrifices of them at certain times of the year. For that reason they were fascinated by the

American woman, by her fair skin and red hair, and so that night, when they were crazed, when they were engaged in their diabolical rites, when they'd dragged both of us into the centre of a circle filled with their crazed brothers, all drumming or chanting or dancing or fornicating, sometimes with one another, other times with animals, never with their women – when they'd dragged us out to there, our bodies bleeding and burning, they cast me aside, their attention drawn to the American woman, and then took turns at possessing her, holding her down while she screamed and sobbed, desecrating her body, that seductive instrument of the Great Unmentionable, as a way of evoking the forces of darkness and force the Good to retreat. Oh, yes, they all had her – so many! so often!

– and she passed in and out of consciousness many times, so *many* times, her sobs and pleas for mercy drowned out by the pounding of the drums and the frightening shrieks of the crazed men.'

There was a sudden creaking sound and Alex turned his head a little to see Avril, her face a mask of horror, sinking into a rickety wooden chair. She held the chair with one hand, the other twitching in her lap, and she seemed to be breathing too harshly in the fraught, all too brief, silence. The old man was still near the window, sucking his cheeks in, licking his rotten teeth, while Antonio, still down on one knee by the bed, gazing up at the Indian girl, looked like a quiltwork of light and shadow, bizarre and unreal.

Alex also took a deep breath and wiped more sweat from his brow, his soul lacerated by what he was hearing, his fear almost choking him.

'So,' the Indian girl continued, 'the Yano men had her – so *many* had her – while the drums pounded and the others shouted and wailed and danced, and Mengrire, my poor Mengrire, still tied to the post, sobbed, his blood congealed where they'd pressed burning torches against him and scarred him with hot stones. And then – oh, it was frightening! – when the last man was finished with the American woman, when she was whimpering in her delirium and quivering like a bow string, and as the drums reached a terrible, almost unbearable, crescendo, the Yano men went really crazy, even worse

than before, chanting and shrieking and jerking as if convulsed, their black bodies gleaming in the flickering light of the numerous fires, their feet kicking up the dust, the smoke swirling around them, as the stars – *yes, the stars!* – miraculously started moving – up and down, to and fro, in great loops and circles – and then changed into spinning lights like the ones that had haunted us, those lights rising and falling – falling as gently as bubbles, falling out of the shifting sky – the sky was tilting and turning around and forming dazzling globes around us – a constant rising and falling of lights, at first above us, then below us – yes, mister, *below* us – a great lake of lights or stars where the ground should have been, like staring *down* at the night sky. Then I looked across at the American woman, at her abused, naked body, and saw her writhing on the ground, her skin slimy with mud and blood, groaning as a strange substance, a kind of cloud, came out of her mouth – maybe a ghost, her spirit, some demon that had possessed her – and then I saw, all around her, in that upside-down night, forming out of the drifting lights and swimming stars and tilting sky, something beautiful, something horrible, something beautiful *and* horrible, a vision that completely overwhelmed me and mercifully made me unconscious… *I saw God and the devil!'*

Avril released a choked sob and then jumped out of her chair, kicking it over onto its side as she fled from the dimly lit, stifling room. Alex watched her departing, too stunned to go after her, then heard the gasping of the Indian girl on the bed as Antonio leaned closer to her. The old man had rushed forward and was also standing by the bed, tugging angrily at Antonio's jacket sleeve and spitting words into his ear. Antonio pushed him away with one hand, shook the Indian girl with the other, and said harshly, 'What happened after that? How did you manage to get back here? *Talk* to me! What happened to the American woman? *You have to tell me what happened!'* But the girl simply shrieked hysterically and jerked away from him, again turning her face to the wall and then praying dementedly. The old man started shouting, his hands waving frantically, and Antonio pushed him away, then stood up, shaking his head from side to side, then turned to Alex, as the girl continued praying, and rushed him out of the house.

'We'll get no more out of her,' Antonio said, 'but at least we've learned *something*: Father Benedict knows more than he's told us up to now. So let's

find him and get the rest of the story before he also goes crazy.'

They saw Avril ahead of them, about halfway down the hill, and hurried to catch up with her, managing to do so near the bottom, hearing her harsh, frightened breathing as Alex reached for her hand. He grabbed it and held on, pulling her close to him, keeping her there as they crossed the narrow track that led down to the filthy creek, and walked on to the waterfront bar that Father Benedict had mentioned. Alex wiped sweat from his brow, was aware of his racing heart, listened to Avril repeat brokenly, 'I saw it! I saw it!' and felt that his sanity was slipping away into a healing delirium.

The tall stilts were on all sides, the shacks towering above them, the water lapping nearby and bringing with it the soaked rubbish that littered the muddy ground around the shops and warehouses, around the fruit-and-fish stalls, around the door of the waterfront bar where they hoped to find Father Benedict.

Alex followed Antonio in, still holding tightly to Avril, but when he squinted into the gloom, at the dusty tables and chairs, he saw no one but the fat, lethargic barman who, when asked by Antonio if he had recently seen a white man, simply raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders in a negative gesture.

'Where *is* he?' Antonio asked.

Chapter Three

The mission camp was small and desolate, made diminutive by the soaring trees, its few wooden buildings, now shuttered and empty, incongruous in the forest's green splendour and weird daylight silence. Father Benedict kept staring at it, his cigarette smoke stinging his eyes, his free hand, as he rubbed the tears away, shaking visibly and shaming him.

What had he done? Why had he come back here? He looked across the clearing, at the empty medical hut, seeing the ghosts of his past there before him, still kicking up dust. Naked children had played there, chasing

frightened ducks and geese, while their parents, most wearing shirts and pants or shabby dresses, had milled around those mildewed wooden steps, waiting for treatment. Now, everything was closed, the mission as silent as a graveyard, while around it the rainforest, ominously quiet and gloomy as usual, let little sunlight penetrate through the trees, no breeze temper the clinging heat.

Father Benedict sniffed a little, inhaled on his cigarette, picked his hip flask off the damp earth and had another long drink. He glanced up at the sky, lugubrious, grey as slate, then turned away from the desolate, depressing mission and looked across the wide, stippled river which, at this particular point, was perfectly empty and calm. The priest drank from his hip flask, trying to deaden the sound of silence, then leaned forward, his posterior hurting from the rusty oil barrel that supported him, and again stared at the forest surrounding the mission, remembering when he had worked here. Worked here… and loved here.

Just thinking of Laura choked him up, making him groan aloud and tremble, lowering his gaze to the muddy earth. The rainforest, spread around him, was resonant with eerie silence, forcing him back into himself where his worst fears were buried.

What had he done? Why had he come here?

Those questions resounded in the forest silence and made his cheeks burn. The discovery of Mengrire's girl had alone been enough, and he had, at the very sight of the green-painted house, felt all of his deceptions come to light before man and God. So, he had run, not even stopping at the waterfront bar, instead fleeing up the narrow street, away from the *igarapé,* and then catching the first taxi that came by and huddling up in its rear seat. He had told the driver to bring him here, scarcely knowing the reasons why, and had spent that singular journey, through time and shrunken distance, haunted only by the thought of what Mengrire's girl back in that stilted shack might be saying at this very moment to his insistent, bewildered friends.

He inhaled on his cigarette, watched the smoke rings drifting in front of him, gazed through one of the rings at the sullen sky beyond and felt the dead weight of his guilt falling upon him like lead. The empty mission filled him with pain, with an almost unbearable, sweeping sadness, making him recall Father Symonds, Mengrire, all the others, in those days before Laura Wellman arrived to turn his world upside down, finally forcing him, through

the abomination of his acts, to flee from the rainforest.
Yes, he had been tempted, and had succumbed in his weakness: *Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil… Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the Garden of Eden…* In truth, by fleeing from here, he had been banished from his own spirit, surrendering his soul to the devil. It was the price he had paid for forbidden love, for the release of his long repressed desires, yet now, when he thought about it, when the shame and horror returned in full measure, he knew, with the certainty of the unredeemed, that if Laura were to appear here before him, he would do it all over again.
He covered his face with his hands, wanting to pray but unable to do so, groaned and then had another drink and slowly climbed to his feet. His eyes were wet with tears, but he wasn't really crying; instead, he sniffed and rubbed his nose, the desolation eating at him, then turned his back to the river and crossed the clearing until he reached the small raised hut that had once been the home of Father Symonds and had then, for a brief but traumatic period, been inhabited by Laura.
He stood there for a moment, the toes of his shoes touching the bottom step, then carefully putting the hip flask into the pocket of his jacket, he removed a clasp knife from the other pocket and went up the few steps.
The silence was getting to him and he felt slightly deranged, first glancing nervously back over his shoulder at the eerily silent, deserted clearing, then opening the knife and slipping it under the metal base of the ring that was fixed to the door to secure the padlock. He prised the base loose from the wood, then slid the blade of the knife in farther, bending it upward until the screws snapped free and the padlock fell to the ground; then, closing the knife and slipping it back into his pocket, glancing again back over his shoulder as if expecting to see someone, he entered the small, gloomy room and stood there in silence.
He choked up almost instantly, waves of sentiment washing over him – grief, guilt, memories of brotherly love and respect, of sexual passion and shame – and felt the emotions rippling through him as his eyes grew accustomed to the semi-darkness and the contents of the room materialized before him as if from a ghost world: walls made from forest legs, open shelves along some of them (once crammed with books but now empty), a hammock still stretched between two walls and a pole thrusting up from the floor, a mosquito net

above the hammock and above the crudely constructed single bed; and, in the middle of the room, the same small wooden table where Father Symonds used to write his letters, a couple of matching chairs, plus three or four dust-covered oil lamps, their wicks dry and brown. Father Symonds had lived here, reading and praying, but then, shortly after the mission had been closed, a singular desecration, a blasphemous sin, had perverted the hut's former sanctity. Thus did Father Benedict, in betraying his faith, also betray his old friend.

He stared at the bed, its mattress remaining though the sheets were missing, and slowly, almost dreamily, as if in a trance, stepped up to it, bent down a little, raised the mattress, found what he had been looking for and held them up in his shaky hand.

It was a pair of white panties, lightly laced, perfectly clean, and Father Benedict, recalling that particular night, when Laura had chuckled and given them to him, was shaken by a tide of love, by an violent onrush of desire and loss. Closing his eyes, groaning again, trembling all over, he buried his face in the fine lace, letting his hungry lips moisten it.

He stood thus for some time, his face buried in Laura's panties, feeling her presence in the lace, his desire resurrected and setting his loins on fire, his skin glowing with a slight, tormenting heat while he trembled all over. Yes, he felt her in the panties, smelt her and saw her – the green eyes bright and wild, the red hair whipping like windblown flames, the thin body as smooth and white as marble, opening to him like her painted, panting lips, arching up to be touched by him – and he groaned again, this time too loudly, quivering like a live wire as the need made his blood race.

Nothing could help him – he was possessed completely by her – and with his swollen flesh draining his senses, he threw himself face down on the bed, his lips still pressed to the panties. He touched himself with one hand, felt his pulsating, insistent erection, and then let the spasms whip through him as his tears soaked the white lace.

Eventually, he sank down, his spasms subsiding, to where the waves of shame washed over him, below that to where sleep was the pale tide that languidly lapped over the darkness.

Rolling onto his back, aware of his own dampness beneath him, he saw Laura entering the room and approaching the bed. She lowered her head to stare at him, her flaming hair falling over him, then her lips curved, smiling

enigmatically, as she knelt on the floor. She seemed vaporous, unreal, her skin glowing and translucent. Gently holding his right hand, she raised it to her lips, kissing it, licking it, the ridged knuckles, the tingling palm, sliding her tongue sensuously between his fingers to lick them and suck them.
-I can't help it.
-Forgive me.
She loosened the cuffs of his shirt, unbuttoned the shirt and then his trousers, removing his clothes as if undressing a baby, letting them fall to the floor. He burned with shame and love at once, writhed with guilt and rising lust, felt her lips on his chest, on his stomach, all around him, until, with a sigh, perhaps a sigh of sorrow, she ran her tongue lightly along his legs and took his toes in her mouth. He melted completely at that moment, dissolving down through himself, hearing his own plea for forgiveness ringing sepulchrally through the void as he found himself standing before an arched gateway that appeared to have formed itself from vines and palm leaves.
So he drove out the man…
And so saying, he went through the gateway and went east of the garden where he saw a column of light which, shaped like a great jewelled sword, burst into a pillar of flames. He cried out, protesting his banishment, his shame equalled by his rage, but then the cherubim materialized, winged creatures with human faces, staring upon him from the swirling smoke of the flaming sword and driving him out of the garden. He saw knotted tree trunks, the tangled web of the giant lianas, lush green vegetation and dark forest and trapped, dying insects… and then, abruptly wakening from his sleep, he saw the hut's mesh-wire window.
He lay there, half dazed, still holding Laura's panties, aware that the damp patch on his trousers had already dried and that the dismal afternoon light outside was giving way to night's darkness. His shame was almost too much to bear, hurting his head, making his heart race, and he swung his legs awkwardly off the bed and forced himself to stand up. He felt weak and was shaking and the deepening gloom disturbed him, so after a final glance around the hut, he started towards the front door.
Before reaching it, he froze, suddenly recalling what he had dreamt, and suddenly, as he stood there, visualizing Laura in the same doorway, entering not as she but as *he* had entered that unforgettable night (the night before she left the mission to take up residence in the plantation) to join her in Father

Symonds' bed and to hell with damnation.
Yes, frozen for a moment he almost believed he could actually see her, standing there right in front of him, but eventually, correcting himself, adjusting his clothing, shaking his head in despair, he went on through the doorway, though her ghost, and descended the steps to the clearing.
Every nerve in his body was shrieking, lacerated by his guilt, and as he crossed the clearing, looking over the vast, darkening river, he thought of Alex and Avril, of his benign friend, Antonio, and burned with the knowledge that he had cheated them and was continuing to do so.
Though deeply ashamed, he could do nothing about it, being unable to go the whole way, to tell them the full, shocking story and thus unburden himself. No, he could not do that – the very thought of it chilled him – and as he gazed at the flowing water, watching darkness fall upon it, turning river and sky into a rich, blood-red tapestry enclosed by an endless ribbon of blackening forest, so, as he watched it and heard the breaking of the silence, he understood that he could now run no farther – and decided to kill himself.
The decision came with remarkable ease, encouraging the peace of resignation, and so he shoved the panties into his trouser pocket and walked to the river. He even smiled as he did so, remembering young Alex almost killing himself, recalling his own tirade after the rescue, his self-righteous outrage. Yet now he was planning the same, preparing to give himself to the water, and for the first time in a long time he actually thought about God, believing that He might indeed have His reasons and, as in this particular part of His great plan, was not beyond displaying a certain irony.
Father Benedict reached the river, filled with pain but still smiling, and then, when he stopped, looking down the sloping bank, surprised that the darkness had fallen so quickly and trying to find the best way to the river's edge, he suddenly realized that the silence, which had been broken gradually by the forest's nocturnal chattering, was actually filling up with something more sinister… the distant beating of Yano drums.
The fear swooped down immediately, its vicious claws tearing at him, and he spun around and looked up at the sky, dreading what he would see… lights rising and falling.
The lights were like Catherine wheels, ascending while spinning rapidly, their brilliant outer rings swirling around a darker core, their silvery striations shooting out for miles and turning into great cobwebs. The were numbered in

their hundreds, forming kaleidoscopes in the starry sky, shooting up from the depths of the rainforest, far north, in the interior, and, equally mysterious, exploding out of the sky itself, first as pinpricks of light, then as dazzling fluorescent flares that descended in slow, elegant arcs and disappeared back into the forest.

He watched them, horrified, convinced that his presence had aroused them, and then, as the drumming became even louder, turning into that familiar, boneshaking bedlam, he sensed movement to his left, near the ground, in the tall bulrushes, and looked down to see two crocodilian caimans, jaws open, lumbering awkwardly towards him.

First startled, then terrified, forgetting his plan to kill himself, he turned away and fled across the clearing, towards the hut that had once belonged to Father Symonds. He heard thunder (*Was it thunder?*), then lightning daggered down from the sky and the hut, with a staccato ripping sound, burst into flames.

Father Benedict staggered backward, his head reeling from the blast, feeling a wave of heat pass over him and move on as he ran to the right. He glanced sideways at the burning hut, wondering how it had exploded, saw the flames fill the night like fluttering yellow banners, searingly bright and illuminating the darkness at the edge of the forest. Breathing harshly, he kept running, glanced up to see the lights, lowered his gaze to see the black river under its mantle of stars. Shuddering, he stopped again, felt his clasp knife, took it out, looked up at the door of his own hut and started heading for it. The thunder roared again (*No*, he thought, *that isn't thunder!*) and then the lightning daggered down through the darkness and his hut also exploded, the flames leaping upward and outward in immense loops and coils.

He turned in another direction, deciding to chance the forest road, but then heard the thunderous noise again, saw clashing fingers of lightning, saw all the mission buildings, one after the other, explode into great balls of yellow fire and swirling tendrils of inky smoke.

He stopped running and glanced around him, let his eyes rest on the chapel, saw a pillar of fire take the shape of an upturned sword and then (or so he imagined) unearthly creatures materializing above it: gigantic but human – not *quite* human: with beating wings – and he stepped back, again terrified, flinging his arm across his eyes, hearing his own shaky voice completing the tale that had been started just an hour or so ago, in his bizarre, haunting dream…

‘Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken. So he drove out the man; and he placed at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubim, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life…’
Father Benedict fell down, crying aloud in his anguish, seeing the light of the flames filling the darkness above him, hearing the Yano drums beating, reaching a deafening crescendo before fading rapidly, then falling away into silence and the peace of unconsciousness.

Chapter Four

He opened his eyes some time later, his throat parched, his head ringing, to smell rancid smoke, see the stars in the night sky, and hear another sound, a jeep urgently braking to a halt, at which, trying to swallow, wanting his racing heart to slow down, he managed to prop himself up on his elbows and stare fearfully around him.

Looking behind him, he saw the remains of the mission, the buildings now no more than piles of smouldering ash and drifting smoke; looking the other way, he saw the jeep parked near the exit gateway, the vines and palm leaves forming a natural arch over the forest road, Alex, Avril and Antonio hurrying towards him.

He gasped and fell back, his head striking the ground heavily, and lay there, defeated, thinking of what had just occurred and accepting that it was all part of a pattern that was not yet completed. Nevertheless, he was still frightened, his head reeling, his body shaking, and when Antonio went down on one knee beside him, followed instantly by Alex and Avril, he understood that he had yet to find release from his unworthy existence.

‘So,’ he said, looking up at Antonio, ‘you managed to find me.’
Antonio smiled gently. ‘It wasn’t difficult,’ he said. ‘In fact, Alex was convinced that this was the first place you’d come to.’
‘And the second place being…?’
‘The plantation. Which is where we’re all going next.’ Antonio glanced around at the smouldering huts and drifting smoke of the mission, then

lowered his eyes again, looking thoughtful, and asked, ‘What happened here?’
‘I’m not sure,’ Father Benedict said, relieved to hear his own voice sounding normal again. ‘I heard the Yano drums, saw the lights, became frightened, saw some caimans coming at me and started running. Then bolts of lightning – or what seemed like bolts of lightning – came down and systematically destroyed the mission, setting fire to everything. I think I might also have seen some giant, unearthly figures, but I probably imagined that.’
‘*Unearthly* figures?’
‘Cherubim. God’s angels, no less.’
‘They might have been protecting you,’ Antonio said.
‘Yes. From myself.’
He pressed his elbows to the ground and forced himself to sit upright, looking left and right, then at Alex and Avril. Then, suddenly, with an intensity that was completely unexpected, he was filled with a shame that shook him leaf and bough and again made him cover his face with his hands.
‘You know!’ he exclaimed, rocking to and fro. ‘Mengrire’s girl must have told you the truth. Oh, God, oh my god, please forgive me! *What did she tell you?*’

His sudden hysteria shocked him, slapping him back to self-awareness, and he quickly removed his hands from his face. His gaze fell upon Avril. Her civilized, modest attractiveness soothed him, her brown eyes and auburn hair and pale skin making him feeling strangely moved. He wanted to reach out to her – to touch that world he had left behind years ago
– but instead he simply sighed and looked at Alex, thinking of how much he had changed in one year, of how his innocence had gone from him. Alex, though still handsome, had lost the mysterious beauty that springs only from the most rare kind of virtue but is easily scorched; and, like the trees around this clearing, he had been scorched badly.

‘Are you all right?’ Alex asked him.

‘Yes, Alex, I’m fine. A little bit shaken, but I’ll survive. Did that girl tell you everything?’
‘Not knowing what originally happened, I can’t know if she told us

everything, but she *did* tell us that you were the one who found her and brought her back to Manaus. If that's true – '
'It is.'
' – then why did you hide the fact?'
Father Benedict took a deep breath, looking across the dark river, the chattering of the rainforest in his ears, his eyes filled with streaming stars.
'I didn't want to know,' he said, 'because I knew that once you discovered that fact, you'd want to know how I found her.'
'According to her uncle, you found her wandering in the rainforest weeks after she'd disappeared. Is that true?'
'No, it's not.'
Father Benedict placed his hands on his head, the fingers interlocked on his skull, his palms pressing into his temples as if trying to crush them. He didn't know quite why he was doing it, but it gave him some comfort.
'All right,' Alex said, his voice soft and slightly shaky, 'we know you haven't given us all the facts, that you're holding back the full story, so you might as well tell us now and get it off your chest. You couldn't have found the Indian girl as you described it… So what happened to Laura?'
'She was captured by the Yano.'
'We know that. What happened after that?'
Father Benedict felt hollow, stripped of pride and drained of life. He wanted to lie down and die right here by the river. The rainforest could have him, just as it had taken Laura, and even as that thought crossed his mind, filling him up with her ghostly presence, he wanted to join her in the cold earth and share her great peace.
He looked up at Alex, then at Avril and Antonio, saw the smouldering huts behind them, the trees soaring above them, the stars sweeping over the trees and spreading out across the river with its glinting black surface; he was shriven, torn, wounded beyond all hope of healing, but he knew that he would have to tell them the rest of it before the morning light came.
Accepting this, he took a deep breath and let his words paint the awful truth.
'So,' he said, 'Laura didn't disappear that first time. She fled into the rainforest with Mengrire and his girl, but when she did so, she didn't disappear for all time. She actually returned five days later.'
'No!' Antonio exclaimed. 'She never returned! I was there. She did *not* return!'

Father Benedict waved his hand, a gesture designed to console Antonio, understanding that the Brazilian was frightened that Alex would think he was part of the deception.

'No, Antonio,' he said. 'You only *thought* she'd disappeared… but she actually returned five days later, coming to see me in the mission, and then for reasons that I'll endeavour to explain, I hid her away in the forest.'

He stared at each of them in turn, taking note of their complete bewilderment, before, seeing the pain on Alex's face, continuing his story.

'After the murders, when Laura fled into the rainforest with Mengrire and his girl, they were all captured by the Yano and, as you've doubtless heard, horribly humiliated and tortured, in Laura's case this taking the form of a truly appalling multiple rape that left her almost half crazy. However, the morning after, when Laura had recovered sufficiently to have at least regained her instinct for survival, she found Mengrire's girl weeping over his dead body, him having been stabbed to death by the Yano while still tied to a post. Laura and Mengrire's girl then fled from that nightmarish place by simply walking away from the then heavily drugged and sleeping Yano tribesmen. Laura was led by the Indian girl back through the rainforest, south towards the Amazon River, until they arrived, about five days later, at my mission station. Luckily it was at night when there was no one to see them, so when finally they were in my hut, I learned the whole hideous story. I also noted that Laura was in a state of shock; that she was, in fact, almost demented.'

He closed his eyes for a moment, shutting out the moon and stars, recalling that night of glory and horror when Laura returned: glory because it was a miracle that she had survived and had returned to him; horror because of what she had been through and the state she was in.

Even now, he winced to look back on it, seeing her clearly in his mind's eye. They had knocked on his door after midnight and when he opened it, he was confused, seeing the Indian girl first, her face covered in grime, her eyes gleaming with fear in the starlight as she muttered incoherent words. And then he had heard the scuffling, fingers scratching on the outside wall, and as he took a step forward, about to peer around the door frame, Laura came into view, her large green eyes clearly demented, shining unnaturally out of a face that was covered in blood and mud, this slime also smearing the tattered remnants of her clothing and sticking to what remained of her red hair, which

had, he was horrified to note, almost certainly been hacked off with knives, with other clumps torn out by the root.
Naturally he had taken them in, laying the sobbing Laura down on the bed while the Indian girl, remarkably less traumatized and while wolfing down some food, told him all that had happened in the Yano camp. Later, he managed to calm Laura – after calming himself – and then, as he cleaned her up, shocked and outraged by her condition, she explained, her tongue tripping over the words, that it was all meant to be.
'She was convinced that the mass rape had been diabolical, that it had, instead of saving her, been designed to fill her with the dark spirits of the Yano's Otherworld, thus making her a vessel for evil and, by so doing, fulfilling the prophesy of Aleister Crowley, the Great Beast, when he'd had that brief affair with Laura's mother and, according to that woman, thus committed her daughter to Satan. Anyway, there was that – and the terrible psychological scars from the experience generally. And so, that same night, before the dawn broke, I sneaked them back out of the mission and hid them in a local village where they remained for some time – and where, Alex, she was in fact hiding when you returned from school in Manaus to attend your father's funeral and help Antonio close down the plantation.'
Stunned, Alex simply stared at him, not saying a word.
'After a few weeks, when I saw that Laura was growing restless, I took the Indian girl, whose mental condition had worsened, to stay with her uncle in Educandos, where you found her. But Laura continued to live in that village, determined in the conviction of her madness never to leave it… Yes, Alex, for the whole of that second week, when you were closing down the plantation, Laura was hiding out in that village, no more, I would imagine, than twenty miles from the plantation itself.'
He saw Alex sucking his breath in, closing his eyes, shuddering slightly, and understood with a fine sense of woe just what he was feeling; just as he knew, by the fluttering of his own heart, that what he was about to recount would hurt the boy even more.
'So,' he said, 'you attended to your father's business and then went off to England, but Laura remained right here in the rainforest, in that small, relatively unknown Indian village. She was in a terrible state, refusing to see anyone she had known, and the memory of that whole Yano nightmare refused to leave her mind – particularly those visions of God and the devil

warring over her soul. And then, when she discovered that the mass rape had left her pregnant, she was convinced more than ever that it had all been preordained and that now she was going to give birth to Satan's child. Know this, there was no way of consoling her. The child was all she could think about.'

This time Alex turned away, fixing his gaze on the wide, black river, a slight tremor rippling through him and then leaving him still. He was breathing deeply but evenly, clearly fighting to control himself, and Father Benedict saw Avril looking at him with love and concern.

A fine girl, he thought. *She's just what he needs. She's stable and knows what she wants, which is what Alex wants.*

Not Laura, though. Laura had never really known what it was she was seeking; so when she found the Yano, when she discovered their ghastly reality, she retreated into self-protective insanity and refused to come out of it. Yes, Father Benedict remembered and would not forget how she spent day after day, night after night, in that small thatched hut, smearing her face with mud, attempting to speak the Indians' language, mumbling constantly about Satan and his child and the forces of darkness; and, like a jackal, like a hyena sniffing for blood, spending a lot of time staring up at the moon and rubbing her taut, swelling belly. Father Benedict, recalling it, caught Alex's returning gaze and, feeling as if he had been knifed, lowered his own eyes demurely.

'During her pregnancy,' he said, 'when you, Alex, were back in England, Laura grew increasingly unstable and was kept from a total breakdown only by my devoted attentions, when I determined to do everything in my power to make amends for my sins. Of course, it wasn't that alone, not merely the need for penance; it was also an impulse that sprang from my continuing, still passionate love for her. Nonetheless, I was made to suffer, unable to forget what the Yano had done to her, and suffering even more because in her fear and dementia she could no longer bear being touched, particularly in any manner suggesting intimacy. Yet as I loved her, so, too, did she love me; and in her stumbling, broken way, her eyes unfocused, her words faltering, she often tried explaining to me that her inability to let me touch her was caused not only by her still vivid memories of her abuse at the hands of the Yano, but perhaps more importantly, by the knowledge that she was pregnant and almost certainly carrying Satan's child. Her love for me – as well as her awareness that I was still a man of God – made her fear that she might

somehow contaminate me if she let me have her even once. So during those awful months, when she lived like the lowliest Indian, when she smeared her face with mud and tried to obliterate her former self, retreating into another, even more demented, world filled with demons and ogres and half crazed Yano tribesmen – so, during all that, as I secretly stayed with her and cared for her, I nonetheless couldn't touch her, couldn't satisfy my relentless and undiminished desire, until, in some miraculous manner, perhaps understanding what she had been through and was imagining, if not actually suffering, I found my desire for her turning into something completely different; that since I could no longer possess her physically, while still needing her emotionally, my desire was turning into the pure flame of a selfless, asexual love. It was the transcendental moment of my life to date – to know pure love for another – and I used it to try and protect Laura from her burgeoning madness.'

He stopped talking, glanced around him, saw the moonlit, starlit night, took some comfort from Antonio's steady, supportive gaze, then fixed his own gaze on Alex, letting the truth break the silence.

'Unfortunately, I failed. Laura gave birth to the child – a perfectly normal child of Indian extraction – and thereafter appeared *completely* to lose touch with reality. She simultaneously loved and loathed the child, was devoted to it and feared it, on the one hand in awe of the miracle of its existence, on the other terrified of its possible nature and reason for being. And so, inevitably, because of that and her many other esoteric beliefs, all her hopes were defeated by her deepening revulsion and mortal terror, until – and I still can't say this without a feeling of nausea – she came to accept fully that she'd given birth to Satan's child.'

'This is horrible,' Avril said.

Father Benedict glanced up and caught the full weight of her stare, the large, luminous brown eyes very steady, but filled with muted revulsion. He returned his attention to Alex, noting how physically slight he still was, then leaned forward a little as Alex slowly raised his head and opened his mouth to speak in a tentative manner.

'Go on,' he said. 'It isn't finished yet. I want to hear the whole story.'

Father Benedict told him, fighting to keep his voice steady, but hearing it cracking as he talked on, every word like a separate stab in his vitals, letting blood flow to drain him. As he told it, he relived it, seeing it vividly and

becoming part of it, again squatting in that small, squalid hut through long nights and shimmering days.

If the hut was squalid, so was Laura, her face caked with mud and grease, her red hair, once long and lustrous, now like a piece of ragged carpet, short, uneven, here a bald patch, there nervously knotted, while the fingers that tugged at her hair also tugged restlessly at her dress of sack cloth, hanging loose around her body, that formerly elegant frame now emaciated, her feet blistered from treading on stony ground, her green eyes wild and furtive.

The hut stank of sweat and urine, the baby howled night and day, and Father Benedict, in his act of penance, also demonstrating his love, fed the baby when Laura ignored it, washed it clean, kept its scabs to a minimum, tried to get her to love it. In truth, she *did* love it, often holding it and rocking it, just as often crooning to it, occasionally sweeping it up in her arms and crying for what it might or might not be; but she was also frightened of it, the fear ascending to heights of terror, and gradually, as she rebounded from love to dread, the latter gradually took precedence.

Finally, that awful evening, when Father Benedict found the baby missing, when he looked at Laura's eyes and saw their enormous, glassy insanity, he was forced to step back in disbelief as she told him what she had done.

'She killed it,' Father Benedict said. 'Plunging it into a barrel of water. She was sobbing, in despair, cursing the devil and herself, pushing the child down into the water, her fingers slipping and sliding off it, the baby bobbing up and down and howling and turning over, being forced down and springing up again and being forced down once more. She was never to forget that moment – she would recount the story obsessively – of how the night spun around her, the stars and firelight blending, as the baby howled and rolled and bobbed up and down, Laura's tears dripping into the barrel in which her baby was drowning.'

Father Benedict took a deep breath, held it in, let it out, feeling exactly how he looked, which was like someone at death's door.

'Yes, she killed it, Alex. Oh, dear God, she drowned her own child… And doubtless, in thus trying to destroy the devil, she gave her soul to him.'

The pain was too much to bear and Father Benedict, bursting into tears again, twisted his body away from them as he covered his face with his hands. He kept crying for some time, unable to stop himself, as if whole rivers of tears were pouring out of him to carry the pain away.

Eventually hands fell on his shoulders, feminine hands touching him lightly, and he turned back and pressed his face to Avril's bosom as she held him close to her. She was speaking softly to him, almost crooning, her words like music, patting his shoulders and rocking him gently from side to side as if soothing a child. He felt ashamed, but also comforted, touched by human warmth and sympathy, and eventually, when his tears had all dried up, he whispered his thanks and slipped out of her embrace.

'I'm sorry,' Alex said, 'but I have to ask you. What happened to Laura?'

'That's when she disappeared,' Father Benedict replied. 'After killing the child.'

He glanced up at the sky, at the wheeling stars in the heavens, stunned by life's beauty and cruelty, by its casual indifference. Then, taking another deep breath, he looked back at Alex.

'Murdering her own child was the last straw,' he said, his voice like smoke, drifting through the darkness and coiling languidly around their shared grief. 'She had buried the baby's body somewhere deep in the rainforest, and a few days after that, during a night when the Yano drums were beating, perhaps as a form of penance, possibly suicide, she headed back into the rainforest and was not seen again. I waited – oh, God, how I waited! – but she never returned. This time, she had gone for good.'

He looked at each of them in turn, frightened of what he had done to them, seeing six eyes in the moonlight, three bodies breathing with great tension, and then one face, Alex's face, floating towards him out of a vast, star-filled backdrop.

'When was that?' Alex asked him.

Father Benedict sat up straight, stared at Alex, stared right through him, saw the stars in a sky that went forever through silence and emptiness. Was the cosmos part of God? His mind? His projected vision? Or was it no more than a boundless, eternal Nothing without pity or love? Thinking about it, he shivered, frightened of what they all might be: the human being with his burning hopes and aspirations and valiant dreams, with his love and compassion and hatred and cruelty, the human being no more than a speck of matter in an infinite Otherworld. Is that what it all amounted to? Was his love for Laura no more than that? Was the suffering of Alex no more than a spark in that endless night? He shuddered, denying this, letting the anguish course through him, threatening to break him, but also humanizing him and making

of him a miracle.
‘Last month,’ he said.

Chapter Five

Finally, definitely, Avril knew what the rainforest was really like: not exotic and beautiful, the greenery lush in brilliant sunlight, the flowers blooming in a profusion to dazzle the eyes, but alien and ominous, sunlight rarely penetrating to the forest floor, the constant damp and humidity making everything outsize but preventing the more colourful flowers from growing, the ground marshy and treacherous. By day it was silent, its greenery brooding and sullen, the enormous trunks of the trees, wrapped in the giant lianas, bathed in a strange and forbidding light that seemed to tug at the senses. And the heat – oh, dear God, she had never known such heat – an unrelenting, humid, equatorial furnace that seemed to suck the breath from her lungs and leave her constantly gasping. And that (she could scarcely believe it) was only the day: the night was very different, but no less uninviting, the heat giving way to chilling cold, the humidity giving way to a pervading dampness, the silence giving way to a constant noise that scraped at her nerves: the mass croaking of giant frogs, the hissing of minor rapids, the jagged, cutting shriek of one bird to another, constant rustling, ghostly growlings, the slithering of snakeskin on tree bark and, miraculously, unbelievably, but most frightening of all, the great silence that arched above the forest canopy like an invisible dome. God, how she hated it! And cast her resentful sweat upon it! And was, every minute of every day, both frightened and fascinated by it, letting her thoughts dissolve into it.

Every minute of every day? She had only been in it for two days. It seemed longer than that – more like a century – but they had only started two days ago.

Now looking straight ahead, she saw a machete swinging through gloom, glinting briefly when it passed through the barest hint of sunlight and chopped into the dense, obstructive foliage – branches covered in revolting fungi, palm trunks bristling with sharp spikes, enormous dark-green leaves, various kinds of clinging liana – as the Indian guide hacked a path through it,

his back glistening with sweat. Behind the guide were the Indian porters, four men and three women, all the males short and stocky, their bodies rippling with muscle, the females, young girls, almost as sturdy as the men, all carrying bundles and packing cases on their heads, repeatedly ducking and straightening up again as they passed under low branches. Behind them, in front of Avril, were Alex, Antonio and Father Benedict, all wearing long pants and white shirts, all soaked in sweat.

They had started the hike from the plantation, after inspecting its shuttered buildings, first travelling by canoes about eighty kilometres upriver, then marching north into the rainforest as Laura had done. At first Avril had enjoyed it, thinking of it as a reprieve, the sheer physical effort involved, and the extraordinary strangeness of it all, helping to distract her from the fear that had built up inside her – because of the boat journey, the Indian girl's revelations, her own vivid visions – and, most of all, because of the magical lights she had seen the night Antonio had driven her and Alex to the devastated mission and an almost broken Father Benedict.

She hadn't seen those lights since, at least not in reality, but each time she closed her eyes, either to sleep or to rest, she saw them in the darkness of her mind, their beauty exquisite and frightening. And so the hike into the rainforest had seemed like a blessing, something different and engaging, the sheer physical exertion keeping her from thinking too much and remembering her fears… but that hadn't lasted long.

It had passed as soon as they stepped off the canoes, fading quickly as they marched into the rainforest and were plunged into gloom. Then that first night in the forest, kept awake by the constant noise, then further prevented from sleeping when, closing her eyes, she saw the mysterious lights rising and falling, illuminating her fevered thoughts. Yes, Avril hated this hike, hated the heat, hated the gloom, and, most of all, she hated the fact that the silence of the forest, if anything, made her think even more, think about too many things that would be better forgotten.

'Are you okay?' Alex asked.
'What do *you* think?' she snapped.

She regretted it instantly, seeing the hurt in his

blue eyes, and realizing that she wasn't just tense, but also riddled with guilt. She was feeling guilty because she had accused him of still being in love with Laura Wellman; even more guilty since observing his finely controlled grief in that desolate plantation: all the doors locked, the windows shuttered, the grass overgrown, the former houses of the *seringueiros* rotting beneath the dripping palmettoes, the grey light making it all seem like a ghost town, silent and eerie.

She'd felt haunted in that place, sensing the ghosts of those departed, and when he had shown her his father's house, also locked and shuttered, she had turned away and walked off without a word, unable to tolerate being near it, nor the sight of his suffering. So, she'd been glad to leave there, taking the canoes tied up at the small jetty, and now, in this oppressive rainforest, near the assumed Yano territory, she knew that her resentment of Alex was based on her love for him.

'God,' she gasped. 'Damn it, I'm sorry, Alex. I didn't mean it that way.'
'I understand, Avril.'
She swotted flies from her face, had to spit them from her lips, felt them coming back, attracted by her sweat, to crawl upon her again. She kept swotting them away, cursing softly, her shoulders aching, then adjusted the white felt hat on her head and sucked in the suffocatingly humid air.
Up ahead, Antonio stumbled, falling against Father Benedict, and the priest, with a speed that surprised her, grabbed his elbow and steadied him. When Antonio thanked him, the priest grunted a reply, then they both continued onward, behind the porters, as the machete hacked out a path for them.
There was actually a track here, overgrown and barely visible, which indicated, as Alex had told her with a feverish look, that they might be nearing the Yano. Avril wondered about that, feeling exhausted and nervous, then she twitched and slapped a giant beetle off her shoulder and inched away from the trees, trying to keep to the middle of the track, her booted feet finding soggy earth.
'How much longer?' she managed to gasp. 'I don't think I can take much more of this. Every bone in my body is aching and my lungs are on fire.'

‘Tomorrow,’ Alex replied. ‘Some time tomorrow evening. And it’s going to be dark fairly soon, so you can have a rest then.’

She plunged into despair, into pits of further exhaustion, unable to bear the thought of so much distance still to be covered, nor the thought of another night in this pestilent rainforest, trying in vain to sleep. More flies buzzed frantically around her, she dodged a cloud of mosquitoes, shadows shifted in the undergrowth and she jerked away, imagining snakes and giant spiders, then hurried onward to catch up with Alex, his sweaty back hypnotizing her. The forest light was strange, not just gloomy but weird, constantly changing in some manner she could not define, but which unsettled her greatly. She rubbed sweat from her eyes, blew more flies off her lips, saw the line of men and women with bundles and boxes on their heads, a machete rising and falling, the foliage snapping and springing sideways, whipping back into more foliage and causing green leaves to scatter.

Green – it was all green – a green deepened in dim light. She had to look carefully to see the other forest colours: the shadowed brown of the tree trunks, the whitish brown of the dangling lianas, the yellowish white of the fungi that covered the entangled branches, the dark clusters of Cannon-Ball fruit, the red petals and silvery-white fruit of the heisteria flowers that occasionally lent colour to the gloom near the otherwise featureless forest floor.

Avril hadn’t expected this – she had expected a riot of colours – but now she knew that most of the colours were high up in the forest canopy, up there near the sun with the true wealth of forest wildlife: the insects and monkeys and snakes and extraordinary variety of birds. Yes, the beauty was all up there, breathing the air, warmed by the sun; down here it was the gloom and the damp and the silence, with stinging flies and poisonous spiders and eighteen-inch rodents, with brown moths and sloths and large cats and maneating snakes. Down here, where she stumbled and sweated, was a world to make the flesh creep.

She went into a minor trance, feeling nothing but her aching bones, some part of her slipping away to avoid passing time. She hardly noticed the darkness falling – perhaps the change was too abrupt – but suddenly, with a sigh of relief, she was sinking to the ground.

Father Benedict unscrewed his hip flask, Alex slid to the ground beside her, both of them leaning against a thick tree trunk while Antonio dealt with the

porters. Something crawled onto her hand and she twitched and then relaxed, feeling Alex's fingers slipping between her own as he tugged her to him. Yes, it was almost dark, and the forest was starting to chatter on all sides, so she put her head back against the tree trunk and took deep, even breaths. After a while she felt better, sat up straighter, looked around her, saw the Indians, men and women, hacking the foliage away, making clear spaces and stringing the hammocks up and then lighting a fire. The flames illuminated the darkness, lent a soft glow to the night, and the soup, boiled in the tins, was gratefully consumed and helped to wash down the dry bread.

Avril kept looking around her, scarcely believing where she was, trying to reconcile this place with the world she had come from and feeling, as she gave up in defeat, that she was living a dream.

Suddenly, the forest was noisy, filled with distant growling and shrieking, the rustling and snapping much closer as the undergrowth came to life. Avril shivered, her skin crawling, thinking of giant snakes and venomous spiders, of pacas and kinkajous and stinging termites and poisonous ants, then she drank some of the *caipirinha* that Alex had given her and rested her head on his shoulder.

'I wish it was all over,' she said. 'I don't think I can wait until tomorrow evening. Although we haven't seen anything, I still feel we're being watched; that we've been followed every inch of the way and we're not alone now.'

'We haven't seen anything,' Alex said, 'and we haven't heard the drums, yet I feel exactly the same way at you do: that we're being observed all the time.'

'I sometimes think it's this amulet. Then I think it's just the forest: this strange light that has no warmth in it and constantly changes.'

'The rainforest can certainly do that. Light and shadow come alive. But I don't think that's our problem at the moment. I think we're under surveillance.'

'By the Yano?'

'Yes. If I'm to believe what I've been told, they can see across time and space. And I dread to think of what they might do if they decide to take action.'

'I'm surprised they haven't done it before.'

'So am I,' Alex said.

She was glad to get into her hammock, soothed by its gentle swaying, and then she looked up at the treetops directly above her and immediately felt

dizzy. The trees were black in the black night, black tunnels leading up to the sky, showing small patches of stars as they would be seen through an inverted telescope, placing a strain on her eyes as the sky seemed to spin. She promptly closed her eyes, took a few deep, even breaths, glanced around her at the others, that intimate circle of people in hammocks, and then, managing to close her eyes again, prayed that sleep would come to her.

It came and she slipped through dreams, the shifting darkness brushing her lightly, familiar faces floating out of the void around her to offer comfort. She saw London, the gaunt ruins of war, her parents' house in Regent's Park, her father introducing Alex to the family, Alex's blue eyes caressing her. He was indefinably beautiful, beguilingly distant, almost too gentle to be true, and she went to him, naked, unashamed, and wantonly dragged him on top of her.

Then he melted, disappeared, as the walls of the bedroom became the boat's cabin, a brilliant light swirling fiercely above her and drawing her up to it. She screamed – or tried to scream – then fell into unnatural silence, emerging from a curving tunnel of darkness to the deck of the boat, snakes sliding across her feet, giant spiders dropping out of the sky, flames flickering blue and yellow beneath the enormous, circular light that swirled just above her. Then it changed, shrinking rapidly, becoming the moon, and she followed its silvery striations back down to Earth and the sad remains of the mission: piles of charred, smouldering wood, smoke drifting through starlit darkness, coiling around the bowed head of Father Benedict where he sat on the ground.

She reached out to comfort him, saw Alex, travelled through him, saw the padlocked, shuttered buildings of the deserted plantation, the silence total and eerie.

Laura Wellman was there, her red hair like windblown flames, her green eyes too large, touched with madness, her smile enigmatic. She mesmerised Avril, raising her hands, calling to her, and then Avril groaned aloud, her fear jerking her awake, and found herself tossing and turning in the swaying hammock, back in the rainforest, feeling that something was wrong.

Directly above her was the same pitch-black darkness broken up by tiny glittering patches, the trees forming tunnels up to the stars with the odd cloud, faintly illuminated by pale threads of moonlight, drifting across gaps in the forest canopy and making the sky appear to tilt slowly.

Turning her head, she gazed around the makeshift camp, saw Alex, Antonio and Father Benedict sleeping in their separate hammocks, the Indian porters, men and women, fearlessly sleeping on mats rolled out on the damp earth. She tried to see between the trees, but the darkness was almost total, offering only the haunting sounds of the birds and animals deep in the rainforest: the odd jagged, staccato cry, a distant, hollow growling, the sudden screeching of a large group of angry monkeys, branches breaking and fruit falling to the ground. Near the camp it was different: there were no large animals there; instead there was constant rustling, the snapping of twigs, the sound, whether real or imagined, of slithering and sliding.

Avril shivered, thinking of snakes, of furred sloths and hairy spiders, and was unable to stop scratching herself as she arched her spine in the hammock. Then she heard something different, something louder and closer, so close it made her twitch and sent a chill down through her.

Jerking her head around, hearing the sound from another direction, she saw nothing but the darkness beneath the shivering trees, and then, almost instantly, but from the opposite direction, heard the bizarre sound again. Terror slashed through her, turning her even colder, making her tremble, when she heard the sound again, then again, yet again, now emanating like a ghostly chorus all around her, the sounds – for now there were many – obviously coming from different sources and seeming to call out to one another and then intermingle.

Not an animal sound – a human sound! – imitating some kind of animal… or like a child blowing through a small horn: a sort of hollow, high-pitched, quavering cry that was now rebounding spectrally, with a regular, eerie rhythm, from one side of the cleared area to the other, as if the camp was completely surrounded by creatures who, whether human or inhuman, were calling out repeatedly to one another in that weird, frightening manner.

Panic mesmerized her, letting her move only her head, looking left and right, between her feet, in all directions, to where the strange calls seemed to be coming from at ever increasing intervals.

Human beings? Alien creatures? The sounds were well above the ground – five or six feet off the ground

– so, yes, they were possibly human, though this supposition didn’t help her much. And then – oh, dear God! – she heard and saw movement: some bushes springing apart, something racing around the clearing, someone

running the other way… Yes, human beings, shadowy forms, all suddenly racing to and fro around the dark perimeter of the makeshift camp.
Eyes! (*Could she see eyes?*) She thought she was going mad. The terror made her burn as she stared left and right, again between her own feet, and saw the eyes moving around her, eyes surrounded by luminous rings, the paint looking like phosphorescent circles that flew to and fro as the men (if indeed they were such) surrounded the camp. And then –
Please, God, no! –
– she heard a rushing sound directly behind her and violently jerked her head back, letting it hang down over the end of the hammock.
He was towering above her, a tall, black-skinned barbarian, his body all muscle and bone, his sweat glistening in a beam of moonlight, the luminous circles around his bulging eyes, the rest of his face painted in a wide variety of colours, his head covered in feathers and leaves, his teeth bared in a demoniacal snarl as he raised a machete above his head.
Avril's own screaming slapped her awake, making her jerk upright, glancing wildly about her as bushes parted and sprang back together and the floating, luminous eyes disappeared like lights being switched off.
Everyone else had also woken up – her screaming had done that – and she gripped the edge of her hammock, shaking badly and ill with fear, as Alex rushed up to her, followed by Antonio and Father Benedict, Alex holding her wrists and whispering to her, asking what had happened, while the others stared at her in alarm and, behind them, the Indian porters chattered excitedly to one another. Avril tried to explain, stuttering and shaking as she did so, and eventually managed to get it all out and swing herself off the hammock, determined not to sleep again that night and wanting to feel Alex's arms around her, as they were at that moment.
'It was the Yano!' Father Benedict exclaimed. 'It had to be! *It was them!*'
'Be quiet!' Antonio snapped. 'Don't mention them again. If the porters even suspect it was them, they'll panic and leave. I'm going to tell them you had a bad dream, Avril, so please don't contradict me.'
'He – the one above me – was going to kill me with his machete.'
Avril was shocked to hear the trembling of her own voice, ashamed to hear her own fear.
'No,' Antonio said. 'He only wanted to frighten you. If he'd wanted to kill you, you'd be dead by now. They want to frighten us all.'

He turned to the Indian porter, gesticulating and speaking sharply, lying about Avril's 'dream' and telling them to go back to sleep. At first they were uncertain, then puzzled, then amused, and finally one of them jabbed his finger at Avril and made a grinning remark, at which the others burst into laughter and returned to their mats.

Avril refused to go back to her hammock, so Alex sat beside her on the ground, both leaning against a tree trunk, with a blanket over them to keep out the cold. Avril shook for a long time, but eventually managed to control herself, feeling warmer and more secure in Alex's arms. Antonio had returned to his hammock, but Father Benedict was kneeling beside them, drinking some *caipirinha* from his hip flask and then pursing his lips. He glared through the moonlit darkness at Avril and then shook his head.

'You think tonight was bad?' he said. 'Then just wait until tomorrow. Now that they've found us, as clearly they have, they won't leave us in peace. First they'll try to drive us crazy and then, when we've no resistance left, they'll just come and take us. Tonight was just the beginning.'

Avril huddled up close to Alex, taking comfort in his arms, still frightened and feeling like a child, now dependent upon him. She slipped in and out of sleep, the priest's words refusing to leave her, repeating themselves insidiously in her head as the night slowly passed.

When dawn came, she felt dazed, disconnected from those around her, eating her breakfast with little enthusiasm, but relieved to see daylight. Then everything was packed away, Antonio gave the command to move out, the Indian porters piled the bundles and boxes on their heads, and eventually everyone followed the guide through the undergrowth, away from the clearing.

'Today,' Father Benedict whispered, wiping his cracked, shivering lips, 'is the day we'll all learn to pray. Because today will be hell.'

Chapter Six

He was right. This time they progressed easily, advancing with little delay, the guide sheathing his machete because the forest floor was clear, with the lower layers of the trees quite high above them and the air reasonably cool. But then the heat came, building up beneath the trees, turning the morning dew to steam and the crisp air to stifling humidity, making Avril sweat while

her thoughts reeled towards catatonia.

She held on to her senses by keeping her eyes fixed on the others – Antonio just behind the guide, looking surprisingly cool; Father Benedict looking weary, but managing to walk straight; Alex remaining by her side and trying to combat his natural frailty, making her heart quicken when she saw him, her love pouring out to him. But then, with the heat and her exhaustion, the latter arriving remarkably quickly, came a relentless, frightening feeling of unreality, which left everyone (she assumed) as unprepared as she was for the demented screaming that tore through the forest's silence and stripped her nerves bare.

Avril briefly lost her senses, the fear automatic and blinding. She felt a hand, someone's hand, Alex's hand, on her elbow and was pulled aside (*What's he trying to hide from me?*) as the demented screaming grew in intensity.

Jerking her elbow free, she scanned the gloom, the scattering porters, and gasped, shaking suddenly, her heart beating too quickly, when she saw the female porter, brown-skinned, her long black hair whipping, being crushed in the coils of the giant anaconda that had slithered out of the bulrushes of a nearby várzea lake over which, like solemn monks, the trees were bowed, their trunks beautifully decorated with mosaics of peporamia and reflected in water as still as glass.

It was a scene so beautiful and terrible that it would change her forever, stripping away the remnants of her childish belief in order and leaving her with nothing but the breach that only true love could fill. The horror and the beauty, the lake and the scene beside it: Avril stared dumbly, disbelieving, knowing only what she was seeing: the young Indian woman, her long black hair whipping across her face, one exposed arm waving frantically, her whole body and both legs imprisoned in the giant snake's body, a thirty-foot anaconda, its lower half crushing her, pulsating as it tightened, coiling around her and dragging her gradually breaking bones back down to the lush vegetation of the lovely várzea lake. The girl kept screaming – an inhuman sound – and waved her free arm, but then she choked into silence as the monstrous reptile slid back into the water and took her down with it.

Bedlam reigned as the porters panicked, shouting and frantically gesticulating, dropping to their knees and letting the supplies fall to the ground, clearly getting ready to run but being stopped by Antonio who, with that experience gleaned from years on the plantation, bullied and cajoled them into submission and pushed them onward again.

'What…?' Avril began.
(*Was that her own voice? Not really*.)
'Shut up!' Antonio snapped, 'Don't say anything.

Please God, just keep walking.'
And so she kept walking, trying to control her shaking limbs, avoiding Alex's fraught gaze, watching the priest sip from his hip flask and hearing his constant, obsessive monologues as he talked to himself, only truly aware of her own increasing fear as the heat suffocated her.
Yes, the jungle was a furnace – or, more accurately, an oven – and as they skirted the várzea lake and followed the water to its babbling source, she felt that she was being buried alive in the lush, green vegetation.
The source of the lake was a rock-strewn river, a tributary of the Rio Branco, a curving stretch of black water that briefly divided the dense forest and let the sunlight pour down between the trees in oblique, wavering lines. The morning had almost passed, the sun stood high in the sky, and the sunlight, now so rare, reflecting off the dancing water, dazzled their gloom-expanded pupils and made them half blind. Avril blinked and rubbed her eyes, saw the trees of the far bank, looked again and saw a long line of Indian warriors, blinked again and saw nothing. She shook her head from side to side, recalling the Indian poised over her hammock, assumed she was imagining things and again scanned the far bank and,

as a black figure melted into the forest, heard a grunting sound beside her.

Turning her head, she saw a spear, heard a whimpering become a groan as the wounded porter stumbled backwards, his hands groping at the spear sloping down through his stomach and emerging from one side of his spine, just above the left buttock.

Managing to grab the spear, he screamed, another quavering, inhuman sound, and then he suddenly rushed forward, as if pulling himself by the spear, and seemed to glide through his own blood as it squirted over his fellow porters, and then, as he plunged headfirst into the river, Avril looked away.

At that moment all the other porters, men and women, were galvanized into action, shouting out in terror, dropping their bundles and boxes and fleeing back into the forest. Only the guide remained, bawling angrily at them while waving his machete – but even as he did so, the water behind him started bubbling and then exploded into a frothing mass, the white foam streaked with red and silver as a shoal of piranha fish savagely attacked the man who, speared and bloody, had fallen into the river.

The water boiled in terrible fury, blood and foam splashing over the muddy bank, the piranhas forming a frenzied mass that resembled a giant, heaving lung as their razor-sharp teeth stripped the flesh from the man's bones and his skeleton, first the ribcage and then an arm, was released to float off downstream with a shoal of piranhas still tearing at him and loose bones drifting free.

Avril had to look away, her skin rippling with revulsion, and found herself staring at the far bank, half expecting to see the Yano warriors again. Seeing only the line of trees, the ominous darkness beneath them, she stepped forward when the guide moved

towards the river, automatically following him. Then she heard screaming behind her, a shocking wail of human suffering, and as she looked back over her shoulder, her whole body twitching violently, she realized that it was one of the Indian porters who had fled into the forest. There was another, different scream, then another and yet another, as the porters, men and women, were butchered by the Yano warriors.

Even as Avril started sobbing, as the fear made her feel faint, Alex grabbed her by the hand and practically dragged her to the river, following the guide, Antonio and Father Benedict, all of whom were already knee-deep in the water, their bodies swaying from side to side as they waded against the strong current.

'The fish!' Avril heard herself shouting hysterically. 'Oh, my God, the piranhas!'

'It's all right,' Alex told her. 'The piranhas are drawn to the smell of blood. That whole shoal will be following the bloody corpse of that poor porter as the current carries him downriver. It's safe, Avril. Let's go!'

The water came up to her waist and beat against her with some force, breaking around her in blackly glittering eddies and then flowing on. She held Alex's hand, staring nervously at the far bank, still expecting to see the fearsome Yano warriors emerge from the trees. Mercifully, they did not appear, but she heard another shocking scream behind her, emanating once more from the forest they had left behind, as, she assumed, some of the Yano tortured one of the captured porters.

Another blood-chilling scream made her wince, turning her head as she did so and glancing upstream to where the river, flowing towards her, emerged from a sharp, tree-shrouded bend. Around that bend came

two alligators – at least that's what she thought they were – but even as she cried a warning and wildly pointed at them, the log-like objects floated closer, being carried on the current, and then, to her horror, could be seen as what they really were: two of the butchered Indian porters, a man and a young woman, their skin hanging in strips from gleaming bone, spreading pools of blood forming garish patterns in the water around them.

Avril almost retched but managed to hold it in as Alex tugged at her hand, urging her towards the opposite bank, shouting that they had to get out of the river before the piranhas were attracted to the two dead and bloody Indian porters. The very mention of the dreaded fish instantly energised Avril and as she waded away from the drifting corpses she saw a triangular-shaped silvery mass, another shoal of the flesh-eating piranhas, racing out from the shadows of the bank upstream and heading straight for the bloodsurrounded porters.

Panic propelled her forward, gave her the strength to move faster, and with everyone shouting at her – Father Benedict and Antonio, the Indian guide and Alex – she was soon clambering up the muddy bank and falling, with her breath coming in heavy spasms, into Alex's waiting arms. The river behind her hissed and boiled, became a cauldron of blood and noise, but she only glanced fitfully at it, not wishing to see the horror, and even as the piranhas were stripping clean the bones of the corpses, she found herself heading, with the rest of her much diminished party, into the strangling humidity of the forest that now belonged to the Yano.

Chapter Seven

It was another world, a darker and even more alien place, the heat pressing down as an almost physical presence while the light, grey and shadowed, seemed to shift all around them, expanding and contracting reality in some

indefinable manner. It had been raining and the trees were soaked, the rain turning to steam, and this steam drifted lazily to and fro to make them sweat all the more. The ground underfoot was marshy and alive with numerous insects, including large stinging ants and a remarkable variety of spiders. Avril carefully watched the latter, her flesh crawling like the ground itself, shocked at the size and quantity of the spiders, wondering what they had come from. Also, there were snakes, hissing and slithering through the wet leaves, not attacking but appearing to follow them as they forged on ahead.

'It's the Yano,' Alex said. 'They control the animals and insects and observe us through them. We didn't lose them back at the river; they're watching us right now.'

'Faith,' Father Benedict said, an uncommon firmness in his voice. 'They can't defeat us if we have faith and hold strongly to it.'

Yet faith was hard to come by in this soggy, brooding forest where spiders as large as dinner plates kept crossing the ground in front of them, and snakes, some small, others thirty feet long, slithered through the undergrowth on both sides as if keeping pace with them.

Avril's initial horror eventually turned into acceptance, a protective feeling of unreality, as if what she was seeing was a dream that could not really touch her. Certainly time passed this way, the afternoon fading quickly, the grey light becoming darker every minute as the unseen sun went down. A different fear now attacked her, the draining fear of the unknown, and she inched a little closer to Alex who was walking beside her.

'Are we close?' she asked.

'We've arrived,' he replied. 'Right now, the Yano are all around us.'
And indeed this was true, as they all brutally discovered, when, not five minutes later, as the greyness turned black, the guide hacked through dense foliage and they emerged to another várzea lake and saw, hanging upside-down from a tree on the muddy bank, another of the Indian porters who had fled.
It was a large Cecropia tree, its trunk hollow, filled with fire-ants, and the

Yano had smeared honey on the head of then alive porter and, after cutting a small slit in his belly, applied the same honey to that open wound. The man's death would have been hideous, a catalogue of agonies beyond description, and even now, with thousands of ants swarming over him, the frozen contortions of his body and the anguished lines of his facial muscles were eloquent testimony to the living hell he had been through before death released him.

The Indian guide stepped back, letting his machete fall to the ground, flinging his right arm over his eyes as he let out a quavering groan of horror. Then he turned away and fled, running around the still lake, suddenly stopped and jack-knifed, yelping in terror as he did so, but then straightened up again and staggered sideways with a long lance sticking out of him. The lance was quivering up and down, piercing his stomach at an angle, and as he screamed and tugged at it, his pierced stomach pumping blood, the weight of the weapon pulled him forward, then made him spin and fall down, the lance breaking off as he struck the ground and rolled onto his back.

Though darkness was falling quickly, the Yano warrior was discernible, standing at the far side of the lake and staring directly at them.

Avril studied him in silence, her mind reeling with shock, but then the man on the ground screamed and she found herself running towards him. Alex and Antonio raced after her, calling out her name. The wounded man screamed again, the Yano warrior disappeared, and someone managed to grab Avril, tugged at her, jerked her back, and as she fell to the ground, she heard the man screaming once more in the most awful terror.

Rolling over, though under Alex, who was attempting to hold her down, she peered through the deepening darkness and saw the wounded guide waving frantically, his lower half disappearing down the jaws of an alligator that was dragging him backwards through the bulrushes and into the lake. Avril couldn't look away – she was riveted by that shocking sight – so she just lay there and watched, seeing everything clearly: the darkness taking command, a patch of moonlight on the water, the bulrushes parting as the alligator backed through them, its jaws crushing the Indian guide as he offered a final scream and then was dragged down the muddy bank, into a pitiless silence.

Avril sighed and sat upright, numbed by dread and exhaustion. She let Alex pull her into his embrace and rock her gently from side to side.

'Terrible, terrible,' she heard Father Benedict murmur. 'This isn't like the

normal rainforest… and those Yano tribesmen aren't human.'
'I've lost all sense of direction,' Antonio said, 'and the compass doesn't work anymore. No north or south, no east or west: the needle just spins.'
'The Yano are all around us anyway,' Alex said, 'so we've no choice but to just sit it out.'
No north or south, no east or west… Hearing those words reverberating in her head, Avril understood exactly what they meant. This forest was unearthly, a soggy, humid hell, steaming and dripping and deceiving the eyes, playing tricks with shadow and light, rendering time meaningless. *No north or south, no east or west*: just the gathering darkness, the metamorphosis of sun to moon, the ghostly materialization of the stars in the distance, viewed obliquely through a gap in the forest canopy not too far away. She kept staring at that gap, no longer caring about the Yano, realizing that she had automatically started stroking the amulet and that the ground, warm and yielding beneath her, had started to shake.
Father Benedict's head jerked up. Antonio and Alex stared directly at her. She stared back and then returned her gaze to that patch of sky in the distance. Then she heard the drums, muffled at first but swiftly becoming louder, and as the ground beneath her shook, distinctly, as in an earthquake, she saw a single light rising from the rainforest and then descending, forming a languid, elegant arc that took the shape of an immense question mark.
'There they are,' Alex whispered.
First one light, then another, then three or four more, all ascending from the rainforest, rising as if in slow motion, flaring outward in brilliant yellows and purples and blues, expanding and spinning and looping over to descend again, the ones falling passing those soaring majestically skyward, their dazzling luminescence erasing the stars and painting the night many colours.
'That's it,' Alex said. 'That's where we're going. So let's get to our feet.'
They moved on, leaving the várzea lake behind them, trudging wearily or fearfully (there was no way of telling) through an eerie blue darkness that seemed to glide like smoke, often flowing around mosaics of shadow or tree trunks shaped like gargoyles. The ground was still warm and marshy, muffling the sound of their footsteps, springing beneath them with the resilience of a mattress filled with feathers and eiderdown.
Avril felt that she was walking on air, in the sky, above the clouds, and when she looked around her, through that mysteriously shifting blue darkness, her

feeling of being afloat became that much stronger.
No north or south. No east or west. No way of telling what time it was – if, indeed, time still existed. Yet she sensed that she was being watched – not by Alex and the others, but by eyes that were moving in around her and silently pacing her. The hairs on her neck stood up, a ripple of dread passed through her, but she glanced at the sky, at that approaching break in the forest canopy, to see the lights rising and falling in sublime, silent splendour. This time, instead of frightening her, the lights seemed to offer comfort, and so she touched the amulet on her throat and felt a sharp, tingling shock.
The Yano drums were still beating, their insistent rhythms becoming ever more hypnotic, the noise growing louder every second and starting to make the trees shiver. Avril felt her head tightening, her thoughts streaming away from her, and she reached out for Alex's hand and then saw the night changing.
The break in the forest canopy was still a fair distance ahead of them, the lights more clearly visible as they rose and fell before the stars, turning that particular patch of nocturnal sky into a startlingly vivid circle of many colours. And now, straight ahead, in the area beneath those spinning lights, rose a large, fan-shaped, pulsating glow that made the tree trunks and tangled liana shimmer.
Tree trunks? Or human beings? Avril blinked and rubbed her eyes. She looked again and saw that great dome of shimmering light expanding as other lights, much smaller, silvery pellets on pulsating yellow, grew bigger while gliding through the trees, coming directly towards her.
Avril froze – they *all* froze – and just stood there as the lights surrounded them, drifting languidly through thin air, rising and falling on invisible waves, their outer edges spinning rapidly, all the colours of the spectrum, around inner cores that resembled the black pupils of huge, staring eyes.
Avril studied them, fascinated, feeling awe rather than fear, and then noticed that their dark cores, which at first had appeared to be opaque, now, up close, looked like the entrance to narrow tunnels that stretched obliquely up to the sky and beyond, to the stars.
The lights spun and bobbed around her, black pupils revealing the cosmos, soothing her passage into another world beyond time and space. She felt divorced from herself, knowing enchantment instead of dread, and moved forward again, following Alex's hazy outline, towards that great, fan-shaped,

pulsating glow beyond the trees straight ahead.
Wondering what Alex was thinking, where Antonio and Father Benedict might be, she glanced down at the ground and saw a mass of seething life: thousands of giant insects and spiders and rodents, scorpions and snakes of every kind and gleaming black beetles, all advancing with her, heading towards the shimmering dome, neither touching her nor causing her revulsion as they would have done previously. They were being drawn towards the light, just as she was being drawn towards it, and she viewed them with eyes no longer shocked but now able, or willing, to recognize the beauty within the horror.
The ground, which had been warm and soggy, now seemed incorporeal: the mass of insects and other creatures had turned into a shifting sea, and it seemed, because her feet could feel nothing below them, that she was walking on air.
The fan of light had become enormous, a great dome straight ahead, its yellow striations beaming obliquely through the shimmering trunks of the trees and blending with the numerous smaller lights that were spinning and bobbing around her. It was like being inside a rainbow, in a multi-coloured, enchanted garden, and when she looked at the spinning lights, and saw the distant stars through their dark cores, she felt herself being drawn up towards them, her soul leaping to freedom.
Something touched her right hand – it was Alex, wanting to hold her – and as their fingers entwined, as they moved closer to one another, as they approached the forest clearing in which the great dome of light was rhythmically pulsating, as the edge of the light touched them and seemed to make them dissolve, she felt an affirmation of faith, her former doubts dropping away like unlocked chains, her love leaping on wings of rapture to wrap itself around Alex and carry him, enfolded and protected, to the shimmering light's dazzling vortex.
She lost Alex in there. He released her hand and hurried on. She blinked and rubbed her eyes, overwhelmed by what she was witnessing, and then, stepping forward, saw Alex and heard him, his voice exploding out of an abrupt, stunning silence and reverberating, as if magically amplified, through the dream she was living.
'*Peruche!*' he cried out.

Chapter Eight

Father Bendict heard ‘ *Peruche!*’ and was startled back to awareness, shaking his head to clear it and squinting sideways at Antonio, then ahead through the incandescent, dazzling light. He no longer felt afraid, but merely filled with curiosity, still unable to comprehend this new reality, wondering if he was dreaming. Yet he had just heard Alex shouting – shouting the name of old Peruche – and as the silence dropped abruptly and the drumming stopped, he saw Antonio nearby, not moving, simply staring, then followed his friend’s gaze and held his breath at what he saw just in front of him: two silhouetted figures, one standing, the other seated, both distorted in the brilliant, pulsating light, neither saying a word.

‘Oh, dear God,’ Father Benedict said.

Scarcely able to accept what he was seeing, he turned away in confusion and thought he saw, just outside the immediate vicinity, not more trees but unobstructed, star-flecked sky and, on either side, at the edge of the bizarrely illuminated forest clearing, vast stretches of featureless darkness where the forest, by normal logic, should have been.

Even more confused, a little dazed, he looked down at his own feet and saw, instead of solid ground, a shifting mass of forest wildlife – insects and spiders and beetles and snakes – a sea of life on the move, neither touching him nor frightening him, simply existing, like himself, in the kaleidoscope of the shimmering, prismatic air.

Slightly stunned but unafraid, he glanced across at Antonio, wondering what he was thinking as he stood there, staring silently in front of him; yet even as he studied him, Antonio sank to his knees, then stretched out on the ground and curled up like a child in its bed, oblivious to that shifting mass of insects, spiders and snakes which, like a wave in slow motion, flooded over him and soon covered him completely.

Since what he was seeing seemed perfectly natural, Father Benedict was not concerned, so he stepped forward again, feeling as if he was walking on air,

and eventually stopped close to the silhouetted figures who were, he felt, awaiting his arrival.

Avril came up on his left, the light making her dark hair luminous, and then Alex was in front of him, going down on one knee, hazy and unreal in the streaming, glittering radiance, his gaze focused on the figure seated in front of him: the old Indian, Peruche.

Father Benedict also went down on one knee, hardly knowing what he was doing, his thoughts vaulting back to the days of his mission, to when he still possessed the remnants of his faith and regularly visited the plantation. Yes, he had been a real priest then, indeed was *still* a priest, and had involved himself deeply in Alex and his peculiar environment. Frank Poulson had been part of that, the black scar on Alex's childhood, and Peruche, also, had been part of it: a loving, if exotically different, guide through the thickets of childhood.

He, Father Benedict, the priest tormented by doubts, had likewise tried to guide Alex, his surrogate son, the child he'd never had, the personification of the faith that he represented but could not quite accept
– and had, in so doing, often resented the old Indian's teachings, thinking him either a pagan or a charlatan, but either way spiritually dangerous. Yet Alex had learned from him – not only magic, but virtue and strength – and now knelt before him in a dazzling haze, as if their parting had never been.

Was this Peruche some kind of ghost? Was this luminous light of the Otherworld? Father Benedict wondered about this, his thoughts drowning in confusion, and then he glanced at the figure who was standing just behind Peruche, blinked and then looked again and recognized the young Indian worker, Mengrire.

'I can hardly believe you're still alive,' Alex said to Peruche. 'We all thought you were dead.'
'No, my young white friend,' Peruche replied. 'Right now, I am very much alive – but alas, my mortal life must end soon.'
'I don't – '

‘I’ve come here to meet my end – and you, to meet your beginning.’
‘My beginning?’
‘In renewed faith or blasphemous disbelief. What transpires here will decide which.’
Staring at the young Yanoama Indian, Mengrire, Father Benedict saw the ugly scars all over his body where the Yano had tortured him. Mengrire was staring straight ahead, as if he hardly knew they were present. He was holding an unusual machete, its handle embedded with gemstones.
‘*Como esta*, Mengrire?’ Father Benedict said to him. ‘I’m delighted to see you again, but what are you doing here?’
‘He can’t talk,’ Peruche said. ‘The Yano tore out his tongue. He is here because I called him to my side by using the wind.’
‘And what do you want with him, Peruche?’
‘I’m too old to carry what he holds in his hand: the jewelled sword which, when turning to flame, will open the Gateway to the Otherworld. And through that Gateway, my friend, you must go before this night has ended.’
Wondering what Peruche meant by that remark, Father Benedict looked behind him, through that iridescent light, and saw that the sea of insects, spiders and snakes had stopped moving, but that it still covered the body of the supine Antonio like a thick, living blanket. Strangely unaffected by this sight, he turned his attention back to Peruche who, sitting there on the ground in front of him, was also bathed in the radiant light, his face even more wizened than before, his body scarcely more than skin and bone.
‘Your words are just confusing me,’ Alex said. ‘Where are we? This isn’t the normal rainforest. Where are the Yano?’
‘You’ve arrived at your destination,’ Peruche replied. ‘You’ve found exactly what you were looking for, but do not recognize it. You are illuminated on the rim of the Gateway to the Otherworld and must either venture into it or turn away, thus deciding your fate.’
‘The Gateway? I can’t see a gateway. I can only see the brilliant light, a star-filled sky beyond it, what seems like great darkness on either side. I think the light is playing tricks with my eyes, but that’s all I can see.’
‘What you see is the true reality. You are, indeed, at the Gateway to the Otherworld. There are many such gateways scattered all around our world: small areas where time and space cease to have meaning and through which lies the Otherworld, the Oneness of the Eternal All, where the finite meets the

infinite, where the past meets the future, and where good and evil wage an eternal war which, though necessary to balance the universe, tears the hearts of we mortals. This light illuminates the Gateway. The mortal world is behind you. The star-filled sky you see behind me, and the darkness on either side of it, represent the boundaries of your world and the beginning, or entrance to, the Otherworld.'

'So where are the Yano?'

'Behind you – in the rainforest. The Yano guard this particular Gateway, keeping mortals at bay, acting on behalf of the forces of darkness who came here long ago. They're right here by the Gateway, existing only to practice evil, either killing or torturing those they capture, occasionally enslaving them.'

'They deliberately let us come here,' Father Benedict said. 'There must be a reason.'

Peruche's withered face revealed nothing, his ancient body as light as a feather, seeming to hover magically above the ground.

'The Otherworld, or the Oneness,' he repeated, 'is where the finite meets the infinite, where the past meets the future, where evil meets good, and where you, the witnesses, the bridges between one world and the next, must choose between right and wrong, good and evil, not only for the sake of your individual souls but also for the struggling soul of all humanity. You have been called here for that purpose, to be tested in the flames, to choose at a terrible cost which way you will go. Thus, just as Abraham was asked to sacrifice his own son, so, too, will you have to make a great sacrifice in order to earn your redemption. The Yano, who are behind you, but cannot be seen while you're in this holy light, allowed you to survive and reach this place because they know you are needed.'

Father Benedict looked around him, first at Alex and Avril – both of whom were kneeling just in front of him, their eyes fixed on Peruche – and then past Peruche at the star-filled sky hazed by the dazzling light, and, finally, at the frightening darkness on either side where silence reigned over the Nothing. Shivering, he withdrew into himself, casting his mind back to the plantation, remembering the day he had sat with Alex in front of Peruche, listening to the old Indian's description of this very place. At that time he had refused to even consider the possibility of such a place, yet now here he was in this holy light, surrounded by the miraculous.

He glanced around him again, at the smaller lights within the shimmering globe, watching them bob up and down while spinning fiercely, their outer rims all the colours of the spectrum, their inner cores, like huge pupils, actually acting as doorways to the stars that formed part of the Otherworld. So, staring at them, he recalled Peruche's words: '*The lights represent the Good. They constantly wage war with the forces of darkness. The Yano, though mortal, are the slaves of the Dark Forces and exist on the perimeter of the Gateway that leads to the infinite. The lights, which we see rising and falling, pass in and out of the Gateway which separates this mortal world from that place where time and space have no meaning…*' And so, here they were, on the glowing edge of the mortal world, about to either turn back or leap off into the boundless unknown. Father Benedict, seeing the lights on all sides, was reluctant to make that leap.

'Now that we're here,' he heard himself asking Peruche, 'what happens if we decide to turn back? Will the Yano then murder us?'

'No, priest, they'll let you go. By turning back, you'll have betrayed your faith and, in so doing, given victory to the forces of darkness and let them enter your heart. This is why they've let you come this far. Because you represent the Good, and because, if you fail, the forces of darkness will have captured you soul

– exactly as they've captured the lost soul that you've come here to rescue.'

'Laura Wellman?' Alex whispered emotionally.

'Yes, Laura Wellman, she who was destined to bring you here and compel you to choose.'

Father Benedict felt Alex's pain and Avril's all too human resentment. He saw them glancing at one another, both slightly dazed, yet still clinging to the feelings that had sustained them in the material world. They could not let one another go, nor leave the past to bury itself, and their mutual trust, through which doubt flowed like a river, was now about to be tested.

Their trust – and his faith. His belief in God and love, having betrayed the former for the latter and now possessing neither.

Father Benedict shivered, his terror eating at him, the radiant light compelling him to stare into the prism of Judgment Day. That prism was Peruche's ancient face, now hazed in the shimmering light, being subtly altered and distorted as he spoke again.

'Laura represented humanity in its many imperfections, confused and

thinking herself a sinner in need of redemption. You, Alex, represented perfect innocence, the undefiled child who, like all children, eventually lost his innocence and the magic that innocence had embodied. You, Father Benedict, were the disciple who betrayed his Lord, the one who, like the fallen angel, Lucifer, surrendered to vanity and lust, thus being condemned to wander in darkness and the pain of self-hatred. Together, all of you were one, working through one another, all part of the goodness that in various ways was corrupted in order that it might find greater purity in the light of redemption.'

'And Laura?' Father Benedict asked.

'Laura is now in the Otherworld, her soul enslaved by the forces of darkness, and in order to set her free from that enslavement, you must first free yourselves. You have come here, where time and space no longer have meaning, where past and future exist in the one eternal present, to represent humanity, its whole history of doubt and fear, and in so doing either ensure that the Good shall endure against evil or that evil shall have dominion over those not yet born. The war between good and evil goes on throughout eternity, and you, briefly plucked from time and space, must commit yourselves to it. You are here for that very purpose. You are here to make your choice.'

Father Benedict glanced around him, again wondering if he was dreaming, the light dazzling his eyes, enclosing him in its dome-shaped radiance, holding back the darkness on either side and the hazed, star-filled sky. He felt divorced from reality, betrayed by his senses, the ground beneath his feet as insubstantial as air, the light distorting all he surveyed, the carpet of insects and other creatures perfectly, unnaturally, still, as if indeed they had been frozen in time and space and would only return to life when he awakened to the real and familiar.

'So Laura's lost in the Otherworld?' he heard Alex whispering, his voice trembling between grief and simple confusion. 'Does this mean she's dead?'

'Dead?' Peruche replied. 'Of *course* she's dead! And her soul is crying out for release from the first abyss of the eternal darkness. She cries out but you don't hear, because you gave away what you should have kept: the sacred amulet that I gave you in trust and which now rests on *her* throat.'

His rheumy gaze was fixed on Avril, making her flinch, her right hand automatically going up to her throat, her fingers covering the amulet. Peruche

stared at her a long time, his eyes opening and closing repeatedly, before turning, with a visibly weary movement, to concentrate on Alex.

'When you gave the amulet away, you also threw away your moral strength: that virtue which, by being based on total innocence, opened you up to the magic powers of the Good and protected you from evil. Thus, when you gave the amulet away, you became sick and self-destructive, letting vain dreams and hopeless passions rule your heart and make you, like the priest, lust for the gratification of base desires that could have no positive consequences. You and the priest are brothers, two sides of the same coin, both victims of the woman who had only one purpose: to seduce you into coming to this place and find either eternal damnation or the healing light of redemption. As I told you in the plantation, her coming was preordained, and her obsession with evil, which drove her into the arms of the Yano, has inevitably cast her into the first abyss of the eternal darkness from which she can only be rescued by your subsequent actions. She led you here and now you must release her… or condemn her to hell.'

Father Benedict despaired, now understanding what he had done, his heart breaking when he saw a door opening to reveal his great sin. He could still not fully accept that he had done it, but he knew that sooner or later he would have to face it or lose his soul entirely.

Yes, all of it had truly happened and now he could clearly see the consequences: Laura's contact with the Yano had been her first step through the Gateway, her rape and humiliation taking place there, just beyond the shimmering light where time and space found oblivion. They had impregnated her by the Gateway, where the war between good and evil constantly raged, and then cast her back into the mortal world where their seed would find its fruition. The forces of darkness *did* rage on Earth, entering and leaving through various gateways, and here, in the rainforest, a vast, unexplored territory, they had taken up residence in the hearts and minds of the unfortunate Yano and, through them, were hoping to spread their blasphemous gospel to the rest of mankind.

Laura *had* been possessed by them, impregnated with their evil, and then, after murdering her own child in a desperate, pitiful attempt to destroy that evil, had committed the most unpardonable sin of all, thus innocently condemning herself to the first abyss of the bottomless hell of the Otherworld.

Yes, Father Benedict despaired because he, too, had been tricked, his own crime a re-enactment of Laura's, the seal of doom on his soul.
'Why grieve?' Peruche said. 'Is that all you can do? I thought you had come here for more than that: to purge your separate souls, that single, human soul, and, in setting Laura Wellman free from the abyss, enable both of you to find redemption. Yes, you and young Alex… raised on high before God.'
'I can't… I just can't… admit the truth.'
'Then she is doomed – and you will be.'
Suddenly, Mengrire hurried forward, snatched the amulet from Avril's throat and darted away again. He dropped the amulet in Peruche's lap, glancing down as it was picked up, then resumed his rigid stance behind the old Indian, his machete slanting across his chest, one hand firmly gripping the jewelled handle, the other holding the blade.
Peruche held the amulet up in front of Avril and waved it gently from side to side, watching as her eyes moved left and right, growing bigger each second.
'You, too, have a purpose,' Peruche told her. 'Now stand up and walk past me and, unprotected, follow Laura Wellman's despairing cry into the unknown's great darkness.'
Father Benedict jerked upright, his heart lacerated by the sounds that reverberated in his head: the unmistakable sounds of Laura Wellman in torment, crying out words he could not clearly hear but which he nevertheless understood perfectly: words begging for help.
'*No!*' he heard himself shouting – and heard Alex shouting the same – and then Avril jumped up, her taut body washed in white light, and rushed away, passing Peruche and Mengrire, to disappear, with a startling, remarkable abruptness, outside the great dome of light.
Almost simultaneously, before Father Benedict could react, Mengrire stepped forward until he stood beside Peruche, then raised the jewelled sword above his head and spun it around. Its reflected light was blinding, the striations cartwheeling, and then the sword became a pillar of fire.
The dome of light blinked out, plunging them all back into darkness, and as Father Benedict stood up and saw Alex doing the same, then starting to run, he beheld a stunning sweep of sky, the stars multitudinous and brilliant, not diminished by three vast moons, the light of which beamed down through the night: over an immense, featureless, flat plain, over Mengrire's flaming sword, and, most terrifying of all, over the mass of Yano warriors who,

painted and feathered, seemingly oblivious to everything, were advancing in a lengthy semicircle, jabbing at the air with long lances, their shields forming a solid wall.
At that moment, Father Benedict fused with Alex, sharing his every thought and emotion, and turned to scan the vast, flat plain towards which Alex had run.
Avril was there, not far away, stretched out on the ground, face down with hands folded beneath her forehead, not moving at all, her white clothes fluttering in what seemed to be a modest breeze, the moonlight illuminating her dark hair where it blew out above her.
Nothing else: just Avril, lying unconscious on that alien plain, the sky filled with stars that looked like silvery fruit, the three moons like huge eyes staring down at her.

Chapter Nine

Stunned, Alex stared at her, hardly knowing what he was seeing, wanting to run forward and help her, but instead turning his gaze to where fresh pillars of flame illuminated in long strips of flickering yellow light that fearsome mass of advancing, chanting warriors, all of whom had painted their faces in various demoniac ways, emphasizing the wildness in their eyes and their bared, gleaming teeth.

Not understanding where he was, Alex turned away from them, unable to reconcile this immense space with the rainforest through which he had just ventured before finding Peruche.

Where was Peruche now? Where had Antonio gone? He looked across the featureless plain, still stunned by its absolute emptiness, and saw Avril as a fluttering white object in the encompassing darkness that only ended where the starry sky began, its chunky stars and three limpid moons looking too close for comfort.

Hearing the Yano warriors behind him, he suddenly started running (as Alex or Father Benedict; it made little difference now), wanting to fling himself across Avril before the warriors reached her.

The Yano chanting was very loud but magically enclosed in an outer silence, and then, out of that silence, came the sound of rushing water, and he looked back over his shoulder, stopped with shock and turned around, saw a waterfall pouring down out of somewhere high above, out of some invisible source located mysteriously in thin air, to form a river that flowed obliquely across the ground just behind him, creating a natural barrier between him and the advancing Yano warriors.

What he was seeing was a miracle, either a mirage or a trick of time, and now, as he stood there, staring dumbfounded across the river, he heard a sound that chilled his blood and broke his heart simultaneously: the voice of Laura Wellman, now shrieking, now calling out for help, now sobbing and groaning and choking in anguish and despair.

'God, oh my God!'

Looking across that rushing river, he saw the rainforest reappearing, lights rising and falling above the trees to illuminate the Yano. There was something unreal about them, they seemed slightly incorporeal, but the sound of the drums was clear enough, their pounding fast and vicious, and even as his head tightened and Laura's wailings tore at his heart, he saw that the Yano had changed, that they were mingling with one another, some dancing, some chanting, spears swinging, shields clashing, and then – *oh dear God!* – he saw Laura stretched out beneath them, her body smeared with blood and mud, her long red hair tangled over her face, some of the warriors leaning over her and holding her down while others, their bodies gleaming with sweat and warpaint, brutally had their way with her.

Father Benedict and Alex wept (now one and the same, they shared the same grief) and even as their tears flowed, dropping into the rushing river, the water, as if anticipating that they were considering swimming across it, abruptly parted near the middle, boiled and roared in furious fountains, as a giant anaconda, wrapped around a struggling alligator, shot up into the air, twisting and writhing as it crushed its victim, and then both fell back down, one snapping and whipping its tail, the other tightening its killing grip, and crashed back into the turbulent water to continue their fight to the death. Then

the whole river went wild, turning into a nightmarish scene, filled with extraordinary beasts – six-legged lions and calves, flying eagles with human heads, a lamb with seven horns and seven glittering eyes, giant doubleheaded serpents and grotesque, jawless crocodiles, and manatees whose bodies were no more than bloody rib cages where the bloody teeth, also tearing at sloths and anteaters and deer and pumas, had stripped the flesh clean off the bone while the piranhas, massed together in a frenzy of bloodlust, devoured entrails and brains… all of this in the river that ran past the muddy bank upon which, her cries rising above the bedlam, Laura was being abused.

Father Benedict and Alex, now one, trembled in mortal terror, aware that they were witnessing the first abyss of the eternal darkness from which, if they had the courage of faith (the faith they had both renounced) they could possibly rescue Laura Wellman and thus set her soul free.

Yet how could it be done? Could faith renounced be taken back?
Alex turned to the front again, leaving Father Benedict behind him, and seeing Avril lying there, face down on the flat plain, immediately ran towards, now under a vast star-flecked sky of the most vivid hues.
He saw another man, himself, perhaps his reflection or doppelganger, at the far side of the outstretched Avril, racing towards him.
Shaken, he slowed down, as did his opposite number. He lowered his hands, as did his opposite number, then started running towards himself again, his approaching self terrifying him.
A lone comet crossed the sky, casting its light upon the plain, and he stopped running, staring wildly at himself, afraid to go any farther. He looked straight at himself, at that reflection in thin air, and then felt the ground shaking beneath his feet and heard a deep, muffled thunder.
Panic-stricken, he rushed towards Avril and then ran through his other self, his reflection, his doppelganger. When he stopped running, his stomach lurching, and spun around on one heel, he saw that where he had just been – and where Avril had been lying – had since become the near edge of an enormous black hole filled with bright stars and giant, spinning moons. Avril was gone – she was nowhere in sight – and he found himself looking *down* at the sky, which seemed to go on forever.
Seeing that dizzying sky below him, he felt the ground shake again, heard the

muffled bass rumbling, and found his eyes drawn up to that other sky where the three limpid moons, each ringed with pulsating crimson rays, began moving apart and then slowly crossed the sky until they were above the enormous, star-filled hole that had formerly been the flat plain. And then, as he stood there, his senses reeling at what was happening, some of the stars below him started flying up towards him, rapidly growing larger, their cartwheeling striations fencing with one another, the light exploding in silvery waves, and then they rushed out of the Nothing where the Earth should have have and ascended as fiercely spinning, multicoloured discs to the sky directly above where, after forming elegant arcs, they started falling again, dropping back down to the sky below as others ascended.

He stood on the rim of the Gateway, looking down through boundless space, then looked up and saw the same space beyond another brilliant, alien sky. The smaller lights rose and fell, passing in and out of the Gateway, going to and fro between the World and the Otherworld in this zone where time and space had been rendered meaningless and all things became one.

His human self should have been dwarfed, his emotions overwhelmed and then obliterated, yet when he thought of Avril and Laura, two women, one soul, his pain was like the cry of all the world, rising up from some buried dungeon of the self and squeezing the life from his heart. The Otherworld was love and pain, the rose wrapped within the thorns, and he gazed at the sky above, saw moons shifting and colliding, saw beautiful stars exploding to become even more beautiful rainbows, and understood that destruction and renewal were the bricks of all life, and that just as the faiths of childhood had to wither before maturity, so, too, could the sorry wisdom gleaned from experience turn into faith.

Then he saw Avril. She seemed to be floating on air. She was still lying horizontally, her forehead resting on her crossed arms, her face, which before had been turned down to the earth, now turned down towards that awesome, alien sky at the other side of the Gateway. She was just lying there – on nothing – the smaller lights rising and falling around her, the lush stars and shifting moons spreading out below her in that vast, boundless void. And at the other side of the black hole (a hole or invisible surface?), a good distance away, where the rushing river had been, flowing past Laura and the barbaric Yano warriors, was nothing but another dark plain that seemed to go on forever.

Swallowing his fear, he started forward, determined to risk all in reaching her – started forward off the rim of the black hole and stood over the sky below. Yes, he was standing, stepping tentatively across the stars, out over that vast void in which the great moons wheeled, feeling himself to be less than a speck caught between hell and heaven. He kept going, a sleepwalker, aware of himself as someone else, heading straight for the now unconscious, white-clad figure of the woman he loved.

The smaller lights rose and fell about him, beautifully coloured and radiant, forming elegant arcs high above his head before descending again. He did not dare look down – that endless drop would have raped his senses – but instead kept his gaze fixed on Avril as he gradually approached her.

She still appeared to be lying on thin air – just as he felt that he was walking on thin air – and indeed, when he drew close, when he could actually make out her features, he noticed that her limbs and clothes were slightly flattened beneath her, as if she was truly lying on something solid but invisible – though the lights still rose and fell with unsurpassable grace all around her, passing easily, with no sign of obstruction, from one world into another and then back again.

Eventually reaching her, he knelt beside her to roll her over, but just then the ground (what ground?) shook and a deeper darkness surrounded him and he raised his head and gazed across the darkened plain as if he had sensed what was coming.

He saw it: a white horse, racing out of a rolling darkness, galloping across that boundless plain with a deeper darkness following it, blotting out the stars as it advanced from boiling black clouds. The horse was snow-white and magnificent, its mane whipping out behind it, steam emerging from its nostrils as it left the dark plain and galloped across the hole above the stars as if running on glass. It made no noise at all (though the darkness behind it seemed to rumble) and as Alex rose to his feet in wonder (and wondering what was shaking beneath him) he saw another horse, emerging miraculously from the east, a flaming red horse that sprang out of that endless darkness and also headed towards him. Glancing west, he saw another, a magnificent black horse emerging from blackness, and then, as if by instinct, he glanced to the north and saw yet another horse, a spectral, off-white beauty, bursting out of a boiling darkness that advanced from a lighter darkness and galloping with the black clouds pursuing it across the great, star-filled Gateway.

Alex dropped to his knees again, resting his hand on Avril's head, then looked east and west, north and south (if such existed), and then heard his own voice, also the voice of Father Benedict, whispering the only words he could think of as the horses galloped towards him:

' And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and hell followed with him…'

So saying, he shivered, and rolled Avril onto her back, and when he had done so, found himself looking down upon Laura, her flaming red hair entangled across her face, her eyes closed, her suntanned skin smeared with blood and mud.

She was obviously dead.
Alex groaned, as did Father Benedict, both inhabiting the same skin, and then looked in every direction, at the four horses galloping towards him, and saw the great darkness rolling over the wondrous animals and then pouring over the rim of the Gateway to swirl around the lights that rose and fell in serene, silent splendour.
Yet his skin crawled with revulsion, he felt the evil coming towards him, and he knew that he was witnessing the forces of darkness moving against what was good. Lightning daggered out of the sky – the sky above and the sky below – and then he heard the roaring thunder, the terrible sound of dividing firmament, and then the moons became as blood and the suns as black as pitch, and the stars below seemed to roll back as the forces of darkness invaded them.
He knew they would come for Laura and carry her off in that approaching darkness, that they would cast her from this terrible abyss into hell's deepest pit; and even as he looked about him and was tempted to flee – seeing the black clouds rolling towards him, coming at him from all sides, bolts of lightning daggering through them, flames and smoke belching from them – the ground around her cracked and split – a solid ground that had just materialized – and the earth upon which she was suddenly lying began sinking beneath her.
Someone screamed Avril's name and Father Benedict jerked his head up, seeing Alex at the other side of the splitting earth, reaching down to Laura.

‘Avril!’ he screamed. ‘*Avril!*’ And then reached down to Laura, his eyes wide and distraught, his jaw opening and closing mechanically, his hand falling too short as the ground upon which she lay shifted and took her out of his reach. ‘Avril!’ he screamed again. ‘*Avril!*’ And then stared wildly at Father Benedict, oblivious to the boiling black clouds that were swirling over his head.

Their eyes met for a brief moment, both dazed, uncomprehending, and then the clouds rolled over Alex as the flames pushed him back and Father Benedict, towards whom the broken earth was now advancing, reached down to grab Laura.

He was close, but she was sinking, something roaring beneath her, the red hair tangled across her closed eyes as flames leapt up around her. Father Benedict clawed at her, his fingers opening and closing frantically above her; and then, as she sank deeper, as the greedy flames licked at her, he felt the full weight of his guilt – of the dreadful deed itself and his refusal to face it – and he accepted how she had died, and the abominable trick that had been played upon both of them, and knew that he must now pay the price or forever be damned.

Father Benedict was devastated, his spirit destroyed by guilt and grief, then he felt himself picked up and hurled backwards through swirling waves of heat. He struck the ground and rolled over, choking on loose soil and grass, saw tall trees directly above him, a few sections of starry sky, then heard the crackling of flames and smelt smoke and forced himself to sit upright, wondering what had actually happened and where he really was.

Chapter Ten

He was back in the forest clearing, Alex lying unconscious beside him, his blond hair disarrayed, one leg bent at a peculiar angle. Peruche was nearby, stretched out on his back, close to what appeared to be a heap of smouldering rags near some still-burning bushes, the whole clearing surrounded by a large ring of charred, depressed earth where the edge of the dome of light would have been. Antonio was just outside the perimeter of that charred ring, sitting up and shaking his head, his body no longer covered in insects, the ground around him perfectly normal. There was no sign of the Yano – they might never have existed – but then, when Father Benedict studied the clearing once

more, he found to his ineffable horror that there was also no sign of Avril.

‘Oh, dear God,’ he whispered.

Alex groaned and opened his eyes, tried to move and gasped with pain, fell back and looked around as best he could by just moving his head. Father Benedict went to him, smiled at him, examined his leg. He saw that it was broken and told him so as Antonio joined them. Alex cursed in frustration, though he was clearly still dazed, and Father Benedict, with Antonio, helped him sit upright against a tree trunk, wincing each time Alex winced, murmuring comforting words.

‘What happened?’ Antonio asked. ‘What did I sleep through? I dreamt that I was lying there covered in insects and other creatures, and that you two and Avril disappeared when that great dome of light blinked out. Now old Peruche’s lying there, apparently dead of natural causes, and Mengrire seems to have been burned to a cinder where those bushes are still smouldering. What happened? *Where’s Avril?*’

Alex’s whole body stiffened as he stared around in rising dread, then mumbling some inaudible prayer he returned his gaze to the front. Father Benedict held his gaze, unable to tear his eyes away, remembering what they had shared in that world beyond the Gateway, the Otherworld, when he, as Alex tried to rescue Avril, had likewise tried to pull his beloved Laura out of the consuming flames of the abyss.

Laura and Avril: had they been one and the same? Had they, in that place where time and space had no meaning, been fused together as one soul (as all souls must finally be one) in order that he and Alex, two wanderers from the right path (joined together briefly as one and the same in the Otherworld), could choose between fleeing from the truth or finally facing up to it, no matter the cost?

Father Benedict looked at Alex, seeing the world’s pain in his blue eyes, and also, in that pain, seeing the steel of accusation, the dawning of a truth that had been glimpsed in the Otherworld, and now, irrespective of the possibility of more pain, would need to be confirmed in this mortal world.

‘I know where Avril is,’ Alex said. ‘Damn you, Father Benedict, I know. But this question I have to ask you right now: *What really happened to Laura?*’

And there it was: the question that Father Benedict had dreaded, ringing like a bell of doom in the silence of the forest clearing where the darkness was giving way to dawnlight and dew glittered like nature’s tears. He glanced desperately around him, wondering if he could find the courage, the soaring trees and tangled lianas seeming to press down upon him, the weight of the guilt and grief crushing him further, squeezing the breath from his lungs. He rocked back on his heels, covered his face with his shaking hands, almost wept, but managed to contain it and then lowered his hands to his side. He glanced once at Antonio, hoping to steal some courage from him, and then, taking a deep breath, licking his dry, shivering lips, he forced himself to stare straight at Alex and tell him the truth.

‘I killed her,’ he said.

Chapter Eleven

The dawn light was breaking through and the rainforest had fallen silent when Father Benedict, his guilty eyes fixed upon Alex, offered his final and most shocking confession, his words cleaving the chilly air.

‘I killed her,’ he said. ‘With my bare hands, I killed her. I killed her because I loved her, because I feared for her soul, and because she begged me to prove my love to her by putting an end to her misery… And I did what she asked of me. Laura never really returned to the Yano camp; I killed her and buried her.’

Leaning forward, he pressed his hands against his temples, as if trying to crush his own skull, while Alex simply stared at him, too stunned to respond, scarcely able to believe what he was hearing, let alone take it in. The tree trunk was rough against his spine, the soil beneath him damp and cold, and he saw lines of grey light beaming down through the high, close-knit trees. He wanted to get up and run away, to feel the cool air slapping his face, but

when he thought of where Avril was, and listened to the priest's words, he knew that he would have to sit it out until the nightmare completed itself.

He said nothing, did nothing, letting his former friend suffer alone, staring at him as he visibly shivered with his terrible anguish. Alex was not moved by pity, instead letting his rage run, then encouraging that rage to turn to the contempt that alone could protect him. There could be no forgiveness, neither for friendship nor for love, and as he watched the priest suffering, he kept thinking of why they had come here, of his own guilt over Laura, reminding himself that Avril was lost in the Otherworld to which Laura had brought them.

He said nothing, did nothing, letting his contempt defeat his pain; but as the priest paused for a moment, wiping his eyes with a shaky hand, Antonio moved closer to him, kindly murmuring words of comfort, and then slid his arms around the priest's shoulders and gave him a hug.

'It's okay,' Antonio said. 'It's all right. It's all over now.'
He glanced pleadingly at Alex, but Alex pointedly ignored him, instead keeping his eyes focused on Father Benedict as he sat up, took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders, a grey light falling over him.
'Oh, God, Alex,' he said. 'Please try to understand. You have to try imagining how much I loved her and what her suffering did to me. Her suffering was terrible, beyond endurance for both of us, and what I did, in the light of what I knew, I did as an act of pure love, seeking God's mercy.'
Putting his head back, he looked up at the sky, as if hoping to find Laura's face there.
'Oh, my boy, you should have seen her. I mean after her dreadful ordeal. When she emerged from the rainforest and fell into my arms, after her rape by the crazed Yano and her subsequent experiences beyond the Gateway to the Otherworld, she was, at least by normal standards, an utterly destroyed human being, pregnant with what she believed was Satan's child and, because of that, rapidly surrendering to madness.'
He shook his head from side to side, displaying his bottomless, tormenting grief, then returned his gaze to Alex, his eyes wet, but not weeping.
'As I've already told you,' he said, 'I tried to save her from herself – hiding

her away in that Indian village, looking after her all those months, even personally supervising the delivery of her child, all the time trying to talk her back to sanity – but then, when she drowned the child, when she realized what she'd done, she give in totally to a madness that was based on incurable remorse. For indeed, if she'd feared the baby – or at least feared what it might be – she found out, when she killed it, that her love was even stronger than her fear, and that no matter how long she might live, she would never be able to forget her awful deed, nor forgive herself for it. In a sense, then, when she buried that dead child in the rainforest, she also buried her mortal self.'

Father Benedict leaned forward and hammered his fist into the earth. He kept pounding at the earth like someone trying to smash his reflection in a mirror, until Antonio, again slipping his arm around his shoulders, pinned his hands to his sides. The priest nodded and sighed, acknowledging what Antonio had done, and eventually, when he seemed to have calmed down, Antonio released him.

When he looked up, his eyes tormented, Alex felt shame lance through him, remembering that this man had once been like a father to him, remembering his own pain over Laura's disappearance, remembering, also, why they had come here and what had happened to Avril. Yet he still tried to harden his heart against the priest's suffering.

'Oh, Alex, the madness! You have to understand her madness. It came out of her like flame from a spit and soon scorched me as well. And just as she was mad with grief and fear, so too was I mad with my love for her. A love that grew stronger and more unreasonable every day, because every day I was forced to observe her increasing helplessness, both mental and physical. Yes, I cared for her and tried desperately to understand her, and in doing so surrendered to the reasoning that only the mad can know. Yet the reasoning of the mad has its own peculiar logic, and so, in that mud hut, in the daily squalor of her base existence, I found myself agreeing with her when she told me that her life had to end.'

Alex briefly closed his eyes, travelling back down through himself. Finding a glimmering of sympathy in his depths, he came back up to his surface, opening his eyes to the priest and looking at him with his thoughts well concealed.

'Madness,' the priest said. 'An insanity based on love. The kind of love that raises a man from his body to a realm of transcendence. And so I listened to

her, holding my breath at each nuance, and eventually came to understand that her grief and fear were like the fires of hell to her. Yes, though having drowned her child in a perverted sacrificial act, she still believed she was possessed by Satan; believed it even more because she'd developed the conviction that if, as she sometimes thought, her child might in fact have been normal, not Satan's child, then Satan, in his diabolical cunning, had tricked her into committing the fratricide, thus truly stealing the very soul that she believed had already been stolen.'

He nodded a few times, as if confirming to himself that this was true, then looked up at Alex, his gaze steady, if dim and unfocused.

'Do you see what she was doing, Alex? Can you comprehend such a need? She'd lived all her life with the conviction that she was possessed, and now, either way, no matter which way she looked at it, she would always find the proof for that conviction and suffer accordingly. And so, dear God, she suffered, and finally came to the end of the road. And knowing that I, loving her, couldn't bear to watch her suffering, knowing also that I wanted to pay for the sin of loving her, both emotionally and physically, she begged me to prove my love to her by putting her out of her misery… by killing her, as she could not find the courage to do it herself, and then burying her – about this she was most adamant – beside her dead child.'

The grey light brightened slightly, bringing warmth but little reality, simply catching the priest in a misty dawn in which no birds were singing. The brief silence was acute, appearing to vibrate between them, and when the priest next spoke, squeezing his temples between the fingers of both hands, his voice was almost devoid of human timbre, at once sepulchral and tragic.

'So,' he said, 'she wanted to die, to make atonement for her sins, and also, I believe, to escape the anguish of her mortifying guilt. And I, her lover, convinced that her case was just, believing that whether or not she had been diabolically possessed, her suffering at the hands of the crazed Yano would not be forgotten, and that her sanity, in retreat from guilt and horror, would never return – yes, I, a priest, in an anguish equal to her own, held her in my arms one last time and agreed to do as she asked.'

He lowered his face to his upturned hands, sniffing a little, his body shaking, and eventually, taking another deep breath, raised his shoulders, straightened his spine, and kept his gaze steady.

'Laura didn't return to the Yano. What I told you was a lie. I took her into the

rainforest and there, to prove my love to her, I slit both her wrists, hugged her and kissed her, and let her bleed to death in my arms, talking to her the whole time. Then, as she had requested, I buried her where she was lying, in that very same patch of earth in which her dead baby lay. I killed Laura to release her from the demons that she thought were possessing her. I tried to free myself by setting her free… and I found only hell.'

Alex closed his eyes again, travelling back down through himself, searching for the innocent love he had known a few years ago. He saw the broad swathes of the river, the trees and shacks of the plantation, the awful room in his father's house where the blood had flowed too freely, the more placid and modest buildings of the mission at the edge of the forest. Seeing those, he saw his childhood, all the dark days he had numbered, all the pain and confusion he had suffered when his mother died and his father, in the bitterness of his personal failure, had treated him cruelly.

Who had rescued him from that suffering? Antonio Bozzano and old Peruche… and, later, this priest, Father Benedict, with his humour and affection. And then Laura Wellman: her seductive witchcraft, eventually driving him close to suicide… Who had rescued him and offered him comfort, if not this same priest?

Yes, the priest had looked after him and even suffered for him; and if indeed he had lied, or at least withheld the truth, he had done so in the hope of preventing the further pain he believed the unvarnished truth might lead to. That pain had not been avoided – Alex could feel it right now – but when he opened his eyes and saw the face of his old friend before him, the innocent love that he had thought was gone forever rushed back to envelop him.

He leaned forward, as best he could, feeling the pain in his broken leg, to reach out with a wavering hand and gently squeeze the priest's shoulder.

'Oh, Father Benedict,' he said. 'My good friend… It's all in the past now. Forget it. Let's live again.'

The priest quivered like a bow string, sniffed back threatening tears, sat upright, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and then nodded his head in a grateful manner, a slight blush on his cheeks. He raised his right hand, let it lie on Alex's hand, opened his eyes again and smiled, his haggard features brightening with relief.

'Yes,' he said, 'it's over, thank the Lord. At last it's all done.'

'No,' Antonio said. 'Not quite done… I think Peruche's alive.'

Chapter Twelve

Alex looked across the clearing to where Peruche was spreadeagled. He saw one withered hand upraised, the sacred amulet, dangling from crooked fingers, being swung from side to side like a pendulum.

While Antonio hurried towards him, muttering a joyful imprecation, Alex glanced at the priest and saw his eyes brightening. Father Benedict started to say something, to put his feelings into words, but Alex simply shook his head from side to side and gave him a smile.

'Come here,' he said. 'Help me across the clearing. I have to talk to the old man.'
Father Benedict did as he was told, dragging Alex across the clearing, and Alex gritted his teeth until he was there and could steady his leg again. He leaned back against another tree, looking down at the spreadeagled Indian, but Peruche, even at death's door, hardly gave him a glance, instead turning his rheumy eyes upon Father Benedict and nodding judiciously.
'I've been waiting for you,' he said, speaking Portuguese. 'I'm dying and wish to finish it, but I can't let myself go until the English girl is brought back to this world. Do you understand, priest? The two women share the same soul. Beyond time and space this doesn't matter, but here, in the material world, Alex suffers because of it. And you, priest, whose faith was weak, who killed your woman out of love, have yet to regain the faith you lost when you shovelled the soil over her body, thinking, as you committed that gross stupidity, that you were doing the right thing,'
Peruche shook his head wearily, a look of disgust on his withered face, let the amulet swing from side to side and kept his gaze on the priest.
'You were cheated,' he said. 'The devil used your love to cheat you. By killing the American woman, you handed her over to the forces of darkness and also paved the way for your own downfall, which came soon enough. Yes, priest, you were cheated – they used the American woman to enslave you to them – and now you must reverse that position and regain your soul by defeating them. Do you understand, priest? Set the two women free and thus free yourself. Return to the Otherworld and face the forces of darkness and,

in so doing, release the woman you love from the abyss into which your love sent her. The two women share the same soul. They lie together in that fiery pit. Release the American woman, letting her enter the light of goodness, and the English woman will then return to her physical body and live out her natural span. Go, priest! Return to God and find redemption. Walk back into the Otherworld!'

He held the amulet up higher, still waving it to and fro, and Alex, observing Father Benedict's face, knew what he would do. The priest took a deep breath, but hesitated no more, reaching out with a shaky hand, removing the amulet from Peruche's fingers, and then, hanging it carefully around his own neck, climbed to his feet. He looked up at the sky, at the forest surrounding him, and then, without saying a word, returned his gaze to Peruche. The old Indian was pointing to where Avril had disappeared, and only when the priest nodded and turned away to cross the clearing did Peruche's hand fall back to his side, the fingers outspread on flattened grass.

At that moment, Peruche died. His body shuddered and then was still. And at *that* moment, Father Benedict walked over Avril's footsteps – and a great ball of fire, an umbrella of light, exploded over the clearing.

Alex closed his eyes, blinded, and felt the heat washing over him, then heard a crackling sound as the forest trees were ignited and opened his eyes again to see the flames flickering under dense grey smoke. The heat receded almost immediately, but seemed to suck the air up with it, and Alex gasped and coughed as smoke swirled around him and then mercifully passed on.

Antonio was lying beside Peruche, his hands cupped over his eyes, his body shuddering as the ground beneath him shook and a rumbling came from deep in the earth and exploded around them. The ground roared and split open, became a jigsaw of darting cracks out of which, as if emanating from hell, came yellow flames and foul black smoke. Alex thought he heard wailing, the anguished cry of human history, and then he stared across the clearing, through spewing flames and belching smoke, and was drawn forward, out of his physical self, to where the past met the future.

The forest melted away, the earth turned to molten lava, the sun, black as ash, hovered beside a crimson moon, while hail and fire rained from multiple skies as they rolled back like carpets. Beyond the skies was the cosmos, filled with stars and colliding planets, the debris from galactic explosions forming tunnels through time. He descended – and rose again – and was flung into the

light, and saw himself through all the ages of his life, returning after his dying.

He was young and then old, and then himself as he was now, and stood silently staring straight at the sun as it blazed down upon him. His dark-haired mother held him close, dressed in white, just like the sun, and then she vanished with a leisurely wave of her hand and left him in tall grass. He snapped off some grass and heard it cry out in pain, felt it squirming in his tightening fist, deliberately dropped it into the várzea lake and watched the fish swarm around it. The water rippled across his face, erasing the features of his reflection, and he reached down, touching his own reflected fingers, and felt the water surrounding him. It was deep and very dark, filled with life, without end, and a pale moon, its soothing light wavering, illuminated the cosmos. There were stars all around him, both above and below him, and he saw the forces of darkness and light sweeping through one another.

Father Benedict was in that maelstrom, being swept through eternity, first crushed and then stretched out between the forces of good and evil, his spirit spreading over the great void between heaven and hell. Above were cherubim with flaming swords, below were demons and ogres; thunder clapped and lightning flashed and fire flowed in winding rivers in which, their cries fearsome yet tongueless, the damned suffered endlessly.

Father Benedict rode the whirlwind, his body shredded and then devoured, his spirit reaching down in love and faith to pull Laura to safety. She was sleeping, unaware, existing neither here nor there, her long red hair sweeping out to disappear into the darkness, her body a pale flesh that flowed like a river, her eyes closed to the sky above and the mud below, to the light and the black pit.

She was there, as was Avril, both borrowing the same form, and the abyss, spiralling eternally beneath her, began sucking her down. Father Benedict had to face it – had to stare hell in the face, had to look into the eyes of Satan and see only God’s reflection, had to brave indescribable horrors and vileness in order to redeem his lost faith – and he did so, destroying his mortality, finding redemption in death, and then picked Laura up with his love and faith and carried her into the light.

Hell roared in its fury, hail and fire swept through the void, while the angels, resplendent in the light above, sang the songs of redemption. Alex came back, returning, observing the fading of the Otherworld, his heart bursting

with love, his spirit soaring, when silence reigned over chaos. Father Benedict had gone forever into that silence, his soul at last finding peace. The sun died to a cinder, the moon melted to dripping blood, the blood flowed across the floor and splashed on antique furniture, then congealed on the walls of that awful room in which his father had died. He saw them before that dying, since they all defied time and space: his father and Rollie Thatcher, Laura Wellman and Father Benedict, Mengrire shedding tears for his Indian girl before the blood stained their hands. They had lived – and still had life – and would never relinquish it, existing here, in Alex's mind, where time and space had no meaning, as he flew through his own pain, borne on the wings of his love, and descended back to the rainforest, to the reality of the material world… and saw the flames in the forest clearing becoming smaller and dying out, the smoke drifting like gauze and then gradually disappearing, and then heard the diurnal silence filling his ears with the song of the sheltered heart.

Chapter Thirteen

Alex opened his stinging eyes, shook his head, trying to clear it, then saw Antonio sitting up, also shaking his head, Peruche's dead body stretched out beside him, its weathered skin like ancient parchment. Avril lay not far away, face down on the flattened grass, her forehead resting on her crossed hands, the breeze rippling her white clothes.

She lay there without moving, the breeze making her dark hair dance, her spine rising and falling as she breathed slowly, evenly. Then her left foot kicked, her head shook, her hands parted, and she moaned softly and rolled onto her back and stared up at the sky.

Thus she lay in a drifting mist on the forest floor, sunlight touching her waking eyes.
'She's all right,' Antonio said. 'She's fine. I think she just needs a drink.' He turned his head to grin at Alex, then withdrew a familiar hip flask from his pocket, swung it to and fro in a teasing manner and grinned even more broadly. 'Here,' he said. 'I got it from Father Benedict – and he left enough for the two of you.' He threw the hip flask to Alex, expertly landing it in his

lap, then stood up, glanced at the exhausted Avril and then stretched himself. Alex sat against the tree, feeling the pain in his broken leg, his spirit soaring on the wings of his love as his faith was renewed. He stretched one arm and spread his fingers, watched the grass rise up to touch him, turned his head and poured his love at a flower and watched its petals unfold for him. He made the trees bend, made the branches shed their leaves, and only then, when the golden pollen was raining on Avril, did he lean back and smile. The sun hovered above the forest canopy and he called its light to him.

'I'll have to leave you for a while,' Antonio said. 'You can't travel with that broken leg. I promise to bring back some stretcher-bearers and all the comforts of home. You can survive here for a day or two: boil the water and peel the fruit. Father Benedict's gone, he won't be coming back, but at least you have Avril again… and that's more than enough.'

Looking across the clearing, Alex saw Avril crawling on hands and knees towards him, shaking her head to clear it, her lips tight and determined. The high grass bent before her, bowed respectfully as she passed, and as she kept inching forward, coming closer, occasionally rubbing dirt from her face, she seemed to take energy from the dawn light, her cheeks gaining a warm glow. She kept advancing until she reached him – the forest soaring high behind her, the dark clouds threatening rain, the lianas strangling the trees and themselves surrendering to dense foliage – and then she stopped, propping herself up on her elbows, and stared at him with puzzled eyes.

'What happened?' she asked him. 'I saw light… and then I must have passed out.'

'I'll tell you later,' Alex replied. 'We've got plenty of time.'

Avril crept into his arms and laid her head on his chest, and he sat there, stroking her dark hair, the tree rough against his spine, watching the white-andyellow flowers fall all around him to carpet the forest floor. Antonio picked up his rucksack, slipped the straps over his shoulders, and then, sniffing the fresh air, his *café-au-lait* face beaming, he put his right hand out, let it fill up with the falling flowers, then ceremoniously poured the flowers over Alex and Avril, offering nature's confetti.

'Peace be with you,' he said. 'I now go for the stretcher-bearers. You know? Those *ordinary* people – the ones just like us – those poor mortals who live only to die, defying their terror with love… those who measure God's justice.'

And with that, he grinned at them and turned away and walked back into the forest.

THE END Other ebooks in the ‘Otherworld’ series

Book One: *The Mission*
Book Two: *The Plantation*
Book Three: *The River* Acknowledgements

My thanks to the following people for their kind assistance during the writing of this book: Stephen Cobb, winner of the Anglo-Brazilian Society Award, 1980, for his general advice regarding travel through Brazil. J. B. Williams and C. A. Parrott of Journey Latin America for so quickly and efficiently arranging my trip to Brazil and the Amazon. Peter Kurtz and my British agents, Richard and Iris Gollner, for useful info and introductions. In Brazil: Jim and Elda Mulholland, Mike and Vanika Royster, Walter and, of course, Karin and Alexandria Zuhlsdorff, two beautiful ladies.

For general editorial assistance and moral support, my sincere thanks to Alan Earney, Sandi Gellis-Cole, Al Zuckerman and, again, Richard and Iris Gollner. Thanks, also, to Shaun and Tanya, my son and daughter, who, at twelve and nine years old respectively, printed this book out on my wordprocessor as I was correcting it. Finally, as representatives of two indispensable but rarely acknowledged aids to a writer’s career: John Munday, art director of Corgi Books, for more than once taking the time to share beers and chat about the pros and cons of book covers – one of this particular author’s pet subjects – and Naren Patel, my good friend and accountant, without whose expert guidance I would not have survived so many years in this precarious business.

W. A. Harbinson London, 1983

Information on other books by W. A. Harbinson can be found at:

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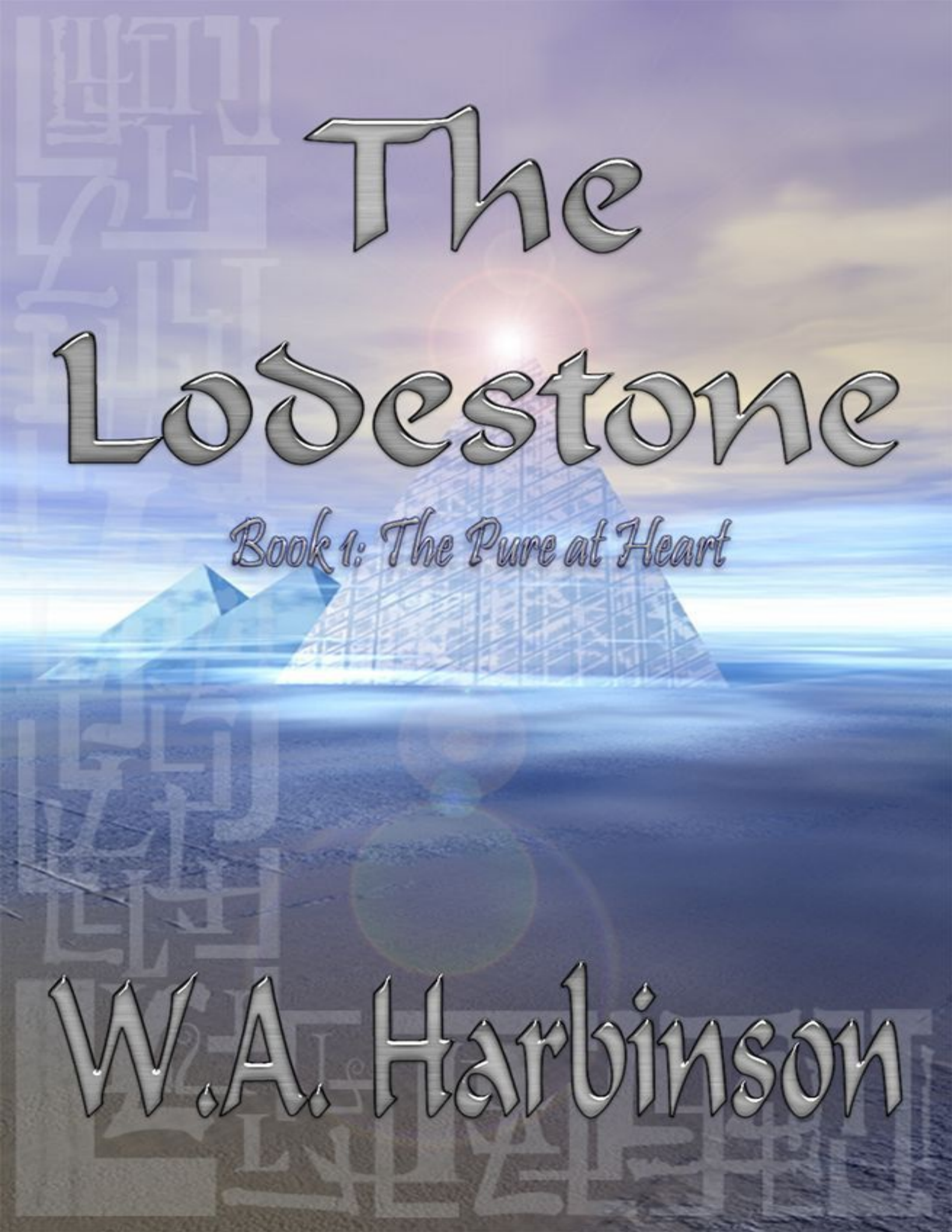
The Lodestone
Book 1: The Pure at Heart
W.A. Harbinson

The Lodestone

It is said that whoever holds the Lodestone will own the entire world…

It was originally the apex of the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Its function was to create fusion between Earth and the Cosmos. It holds the key to the infinite mysteries of the

universe. And it has been missing for centuries…
Wilhelm Zweig, ageing master-criminal, is determined to find it – and with it the key to immortality.

But in his way stands the legendary Count de Saint Germain, history's most mysterious figure, believed to be the protector of the magical stone. And against him is Gerry Remick, a young American with a passion for unexplained phenomena – and for Zweig's unhappy daughter, Ingrid.

Together, and relentlessly pursued by the evil Zweig, Gerry and Ingrid embark upon a dangerous quest for the
Lodestone, an epic journey that takes them through Europe and the Orient, past the sites of the Seven Wonders of the World, and on to a final magical confrontation on the summit of the Earth…

First published in Great Britain in 1989 by Sphere Books (London) as *The Lodestone*

Copyright © 1989 by W. A. Harbinson
ISBN 0 7474 0542 5
This abridged e-book edition published in 2013 by W. A. Harbinson

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The Lodestone

Book One The Pure at Heart

Prologue

Escaping the February freeze of Park Avenue, New York, and entering the brightly-lit, warm splendour of the Waldorf Astoria hotel, the man travelling under the name of Christian Grabbe, which was but one of his many pseudonyms, felt instantly at home – and certainly looked it. Wearing an immaculately tailored Savile Row grey suit, with a Harvie & Hudson striped shirt and matching tie, and hand-made shoes from John Lobb of St Jame's Street, London, the man was slim, elegant and powerfully attractive in a very odd way.

Standing momentarily beneath a glittering chandelier and glancing quickly around the great lobby with his wintry-grey, almost silvery eyes, he was not unaware of the fact that more than one of the ladies seated beside the high pillars and under the potted plants had, while subconsciously adjusting their Arnold Scaasi evening dresses and Tiffany jewellery, turned their heads to stare at him with a combination of instinctive fear and helpless longing.

He stared back at some of them, offering a dangerously seductive smile, which, combined with his oddly mesmeric gaze, caused most of the ladies to breathe far too deeply, before blushing and demurely lowering their eyes.

Having thus amused himself, and seeing no potential threat in the Waldorf's busy lobby, the pseudonymous Mr Grabbe checked his Rolex wristwatch, noted that he was on time for his appointment, then purposefully crossed the lobby and took the elevator up, his presence in that enclosed space making the other passengers uneasy, some actually heaving a sigh of relief, without quite knowing why, when he stepped out at the twenty-seventh floor.

He checked the corridor, automatically, quickly, missing nothing, then walked to the door that had the number he had been given over the telephone.

His silvery-grey eyes were calm, his stance languid, as he rang the bell.

The man who opened the door (promptly, as Grabbe noted with satisfaction) was tall, broad, obviously not too bright, and wearing a black-leather jacket, fawn trousers, chequered shirt with no tie, and rather tasteless brownsuede shoes. He had a pugilist's scarred features, cold green eyes and tips too thin to form a proper smile.

'Grabbe?'

'Yes.'

'Come in,' the man said.

Grabbe stepped inside, heard the door close behind him, then saw two other men at the far side of the suite, near the window overlooking Park Avenue, framing the skyline of Manhattan, beside a table upon which rested a small silver box which, Grabbe assumed, contained a hypodermic, some needles and a goodly dose of the truth serum, Pentothal.

Grabbe glanced back over his shoulder. The big dummy who had let him in was resting with his back against the closed door, his right hand in a pocket which, by the look of it, contained some kind of pistol. Grabbe smiled and turned back to the front.

'I'm Grabbe,' he announced.

One of the men was a fairly precise replica of the muscle-bound Neanderthal who had let Mr Grabbe into the suite – but this one with curling golden locks instead of the auburn head-stubble of the heavily breathing ape now guarding the door – and the other was a male creature as wide as he was tall, which was not very tall at all, with his potbelly bursting his waistcoat and threatening to burst his pinstripe suit, and with thyroid eyes blinking repeatedly behind rimless spectacles which, as he repeatedly wiped sweat from his pale face with a handkerchief, kept slipping down his stubby nose.

'So,' the little man said, as if talking through his nostrils, 'you came.'

'Obviously,' Grabbe responded testily. 'You called, did you not?'

The little fat man blinked behind his rimless spectacles, wiped more sweat from his face with his already damp handkerchief, glanced once across the skyline in the direction of the Hudson River, then coughed into his free hand and managed to get his words out.

'So,' he said, 'you have brought the Tuaoi Stone with you?'

'Perhaps,' Grabbe replied. 'Perhaps not. Do you wish to forcibly search me?'

The Neanderthal man quivered, opening and closing his brutish fists, but the little fat man simply wiped his face again and took another deep breath.

‘Please,’ he said. ‘I cannot go back without it. And you *did* say you had it.’
‘I was informed that you were looking for it,’ Grabbe said. ‘That is why I am here.’
‘You sound German,’ the little man said.
‘So do you, Mr Kleist. And the man who sent you here, that mysterious billionaire, is, I believe, also German.’
Clearly startled by that statement, Mr Kleist wiped more sweat from his pale face. ‘How did you – ?’
‘One of the world’s most mysterious and richest men,’ Grabbe interjected, smiling icily. ‘But known to you and I as Wilhelm Zweig… And he wants the Tuaoi Stone. Doubtless for no other reason than to add it to his collection of other rare artifacts stolen from far and wide.’
The very small Mr Kleist, appearing to grown even smaller, licked his lips and croaked fearfully, ‘You should not know – ’
‘I do.’
‘How?’
‘That is not your concern. Just take it that I know how badly he wants the Tuaoi Stone – and that I’ve heard he’ll do anything to get it.’
‘Yes,’ Mr Kleist said, practically stuttering, studying his soaked handkerchief and then, perhaps disgusted by his own nervous sweating, returning his gaze to the disturbingly attractive Mr Grabbe.
‘So,’ he said. ‘You know how badly my superior wants it. And so… Do you *have* it?’
‘You will *pay* anything – or *do* anything – to obtain it?’
‘Yes,’ the roly-poly, sweating Mr Kleist said. ‘Anything. *I cannot go back without it*!’
‘In that case,’ Grabbe said, smiling chillingly, ‘I can give you nothing… Nothing but this.’
So saying he raised his right hand and spread his fingers in the air just as the heavyweight behind him jerked a pistol from his pocket, the other thug moved towards him, and the little man with the sweating face and stutter reached for the silver box on the table.
Ignoring the latter pair, Grabbe turned to the man behind him, his hand still upraised, then closed his eyes and quivered visibly, as if jolted by a burst of electricity.
Even as the heavyweight by the door was raising his pistol to take aim at

Grabbe, a hot bright light filled the room – so bright it was almost blinding – and the man with the pistol cried out in panic, let his weapon fall to the floor, then was picked up and slammed backwards into the door, as if hurled there by an invisible assailant.
He bounced off the door and was falling to the floor as the plaster exploded from the wall around him to fill the air with billowing clouds of dust.
'What?' Kleist shrieked. '*What*…?'
Jagged cracks were shooting out in all directions from the exploding plaster of the wall above the unconscious man as Grabbe, hearing Kleist's quavering, fearful words, turned back to face him, his brilliant gaze terrifying.
'*Mein Gott*!' Klein shrieked. '*Kill him*!'
Yet even as the panic-stricken little man was giving this command, the walls cracked and spat plaster, lightbulbs burst and ornaments exploded, then the windows were blown inward by a sudden, fierce wind that immediately filled the suite with flying shards of glass and a hurricane's howling.
Grabbe was still standing in the middle of that maelstrom, his body silhouetted by the rapidly fading light, the debris from the exploding walls whirling around him, while Kleist and the thug beside him, both slashed by flying glass, bled profusely and screamed in pain, doubling over for protection, then were picked up, hurled against the wall, and fell convulsing to the floor.
At that moment, the wall around the shattered window exploded, as if blown apart by a hand grenade, and the roaring wind rushed back out, sucking Kleist and his thug through the large, jagged hole, to fall screaming to the sidewalk of Park Avenue, twenty-seven floors below.
A few minutes later, when the manager of the hotel and some assistants burst into the room, they found nothing but one dead hoodlum in the drifting dust and debris of complete, inexplicable devastation.
They didn't find Christian Grabbe.

Chapter One

In his large, untidy bedroom, the walls of which were plastered with photographs of UFOs, ghosts, poltergeist occurrences and other paranormal phenomena, Gerry Remick was completing the packing of the large holdall resting on a bed littered with computer diskettes, cassette tapes, CDs of

classical and rock music, and a daunting pile of heavy hardcover books, most of which he had wanted to take with him for light reading but simply couldn't fit into the suitcase.

The true squalor of the room could not be seen since the curtains had been pulled across and the lights dimmed to enable Gerry to watch more clearly, as he packed, the TV screen's blurred image of a large gaping hole on the twenty-seventh-floor wall of the Waldorf Astoria hotel on Park Avenue, while a voice-over explained that a very bad explosion, the causes of which were unknown, had devastated a suite on that floor, killing the three male residents, one of whom had died in the actual explosion, the other two being blown out of the suite and crashing to their deaths on the sidewalk far below. 'Oh, boy!' Gerry exclaimed.
When the grainy image of the large jagged hole in the

wall of the great hotel had faded from the screen and the newscaster had reappeared to explain that so far there was no 'logical explanation' for the explosion, Gerry switched off the TV and spent a few minutes tormenting himself with the realization that he would simply have to leave behind most of his heavyweight tomes and settle for his paperback editions of *In Search of Schrodinger's Cat: Quantum Physics and Reality*, Koestler's *The Ghost in the Machine*, Fodor's *Egypt*, and Charles Fort's *The Book of the Damned*.

Feeling intellectually deprived, he closed the almost bursting holdall, lifted it off the bed with some difficulty, then opened the door of his room, took a deep breath and stepped out.

What he stepped into was the stunning main living room of his wealthy mother's luxurious suite in an exclusive apartment block on Central Park West, the panoramic windows overlooking the frozen lake in the park and the buildings of the East Side. The leaden sky's dim light was falling obliquely on the suite's magnolia-painted walls and extensive collection of rare paintings, and his mother was sitting in her favourite French Louis XV armchair, dressed in a sublimely understated Zoran pyjamapants outfit in mottled grey, matching cashmere sweater and stylish evening slippers. She had a small glass of dry sherry on the Chippendale table by her side and was

reading *The Collected Poems of Robert Frost*, from which she was only distracted when Gerry dropped his heavy holdall on the carpeted floor and lowered his shoulder-bag.

'Did you see it?' he asked, and then, before waiting for a reply: 'No, you didn't. You were reading that book.'

That made her look up, thin face framed by pinned-up silvery hair, pencilled eyebrows lifting sardonically over a steady hazel gaze.

'If *you* read books like this,' she said, 'instead of your awful rubbish, you might cease your adolescent behaviour and become a mature man.'

'Mature men are bores,' he responded. 'They don't see the real world.'
'Oh, God,' his mother said, 'not *that* again! Not that ridiculous Charles Fort theme.'
Gerry wasn't about to fall for that old turkey, having heard it too often. Charles Fort was the eccentric author of one of the books he had just packed – *The Book of the Damned* – a notorious work on bizarre phenomena for which there is no logical explanation. And while it was true that Gerry had a fondness for Fort's work, he was in fact more interested in the serious study of UFOs, the paranormal, the occult and, especially, the realities behind the myths of antiquity.
'I'm *not* a Charles Fort freak,' he insisted to his mother, feeling that he was wasting his breath but compelled to try anyway. 'He's merely one of my many interests. I'm into unexplained phenomena in general, and that includes the occult and antiquities – which is why, as you damned well know, I'm going to Egypt.'
His mother offered a familiar sigh of histrionic despair. 'At least you managed to carry on your father's interest in antiquities, even if distorting, with your infantile reasoning, everything you were taught.'
That one was below the belt. Gerry's father, Martin Sydney Remick, had been the Professor of Archaeological Studies in the Antiquities Department of Harvard University; and Gerry, while not following in his footsteps, had certainly not distorted his teachings. He *had* sidetracked a little, but not all that much, and he knew that his father, a good-humoured man, would not

really have minded.
‘Just because I was thrown out of – ’
‘You were such a nice boy, once. So clean and welldressed. I thought I would have a priest for a son, and then… I can’t speak of it.’
She shuddered melodramatically, making it clear that what she could not discuss (but would) was the fact that since his father’s death two years ago – a death that had shocked and hurt him much more than he would admit – Gerry had changed from a shy kid with an obsessive interest in religious matters into a rebellious bright spark who had been expelled from his father’s famed university for outrageous behaviour.
Clearly his mother had hoped that the dramatic change in him would pass away with time, but unfortunately such had not been the case. Formerly an intense young academic, he had become, instead, an oddball – odd at least in the sight of his mother, who even now was looking him up and down as if valuing merchandise.
‘Can’t you at least wear a suit,’ she asked laconically, ‘instead of those awful denims?’
‘I *like* denims,’ he replied, aware that he was shuffling his feet on the carpet like a nervous schoolboy. ‘And besides, I’m not flying first class. I want to meet the *real* people.’
‘The riffraff, you mean. Like that trash you meet in SoHo. Living in overpriced lofts and admiring themselves. I don’t know how you manage it.’
In fact, he didn’t associate with the upwardly mobile in SoHo, but with the much more colourful denizens of Times Square and 42nd Street, having decided, with the death of his father, that wealth meant nothing to him.
While he was honest enough to accept that he had justifiably been dismissed from Harvard for what they had accurately described as ‘habitual drunkenness, the possession of marijuana, and general behavioural patterns unacceptable to this fraternity’, he was not about to forget that he was still pretty bright and not prepared to take crap from anyone.
‘You once showed such promise,’ his mother said with ostentatious weariness, as, picking up her glass of sherry, she stared balefully at him. ‘*Now* look at the state of you. Your father would turn in his grave if he could see what’s become of you.’
Standing beside his suitcase, wondering how he could best take his leave, he

automatically gazed down at his own tatty denims and loafers, trying to work out what made them so offensive. However, even as he was doing this, he realized that what his mother was talking about was *not* his physical appearance, but the manner in which his education was, in her opinion, being squandered.

'Mom,' he said, trying to sound determined, 'I've got to go now.'

'Of course, dear,' she responded. 'If you must, you must. I just wish you were going to research the pyramids properly, rather than engaging in this unsavoury pursuit of nonsensical theories.' She sighed again, sipped her sherry, placed the glass back on the table. 'Why can't you decide on a career and put your education to some good use? I simply can't bear to see you go such a long way in pursuit of these ghosts of yours.'

'I'm *not* pursuing ghosts, Mom. I'm simply studying the more mysterious aspects of the Great Pyramid of Giza. It's reported to possess certain magical properties, and I want to find out for myself if that's true or not.'

'I say no more,' his mother said, always keen to have her say. 'Every man to his hobby. I just wish you would concentrate for once on what to do with your future. I mean, what's all this *for*?'

'You want me to get married and settle down,' he offered by way of a reply.

'Well, you *could* do with settling down a *little*.'

'I won't surrender my individuality to a bourgeois living death.'

'Don't you like it here, dear?'

'I'm still here, aren't I, Mom?'

'I *do* wish you would call me *Mother*,' she replied. 'I don't go well with apple pie.'

'Anyway,' he said stubbornly, 'before I leave, I just want you to know that while you were reading that obsolete poetry, the news on TV was revealing that an inexplicable explosion – repeat: *inexplicable* – blew out the front wall of one of the suites in the Waldorf Astoria hotel *and* two of the three people sharing the suite. Those two fell to their deaths, many floors below. *Splat*! On the sidewalk.'

'And the third one?' his mother asked in her practical manner.

He snapped his fingers at her. 'Also killed,' he said. 'They found him practically buried in the rubble of the room, which looked, as one observer put it, as if it had been torn apart by a tornado.'

'How unpleasant,' his mother said. 'But what's the point of this story?'

Gerry sighed with exasperation. ‘The point, *Mother*, is that the explosion wasn’t caused by a gas leak, by electrical malfunction, or by any kind of bomb or incendiary. In other words, the explosion was completely inexplicable – and, even more mysteriously, it didn’t affect either of the adjoining rooms. So, whatever it was that wrecked that room, it wasn’t anything known to rational science.’
‘I’m *sure* there’s a rational explanation for it, dear. Almost certainly a gas leak. You know how antiquated the plumbing and wiring in some of these old hotels are – and how reluctant the management would be to admit liability. The truth will be revealed in due course, I’m certain, and my bet is a gas leak.’
‘An explosion caused by a gas leak or electrical fault would *at least* have affected the adjoining rooms – and probably lots more. No, *Mother*, you can’t wriggle out of this one: that explosion was as unnatural as anything to be found in the works of Charles Fort. I only wish I could stay to investigate it, but I’ve got to be going now.’
‘I think that’s best, dear. The air of Egypt should do you good. It might even clear your head of all this nonsense, which *would* be a blessing. So, come and give me a goodbye kiss.’
Rolling his eyes, Gerry crossed the room, leaned over and kissed her on the cheek. ‘OK,’ he said, straightening up, ‘I’ll see you in four weeks or so. Look after yourself.’
‘*You* look after yourself. Watch out for thieves and beggars. And *do* be careful of involvement with those foreign ladies. I believe they’re not really – ’
‘Yes, Mom, I hear you.’
‘And you have your passport and credit cards?’
‘Yes, Mom.’
‘And you’re certain you’ve packed everything you need?’
He sighed again, loving her, wanting to strangle her.
‘Yes, *Mother*,’ he said.
‘Well, you *know* what you’re like,’ she said. ‘All brains and no commonsense, hopeless at human relationships and life’s little chores, such as dressing decently, conversing pleasantly, looking after your money and packing a holdall. You don’t belong in the real world.’
‘I’m not as inexperienced as you think,’ he insisted. ‘I can look after myself.’

‘Oh, yes,’ she said. ‘*Naturally*.’
At that moment, the doorbell rang, and when Gerry raised his eyebrows enquiringly, his mother stood up and said, ‘Well, *naturally*, darling, I arranged for the porter to carry your holdall down to the lobby.’
‘Mom, it’s only one holdall!’
‘That’s what porters are for, dear. And what’s he going to think if he sees my son carrying his own luggage? So don’t be silly. Let him take your suitcase down and find you a cab.’
‘God, Mom, you’re such a *snob*!’
‘We all have our place in life, dear, and you have yet to find yours.’
Shaking his head from side to side in disgust, and wanting even more to get out of this bourgeois mausoleum, he just stood there, brimming over with frustration, while his mother walked regally to the door of the apartment, opened it, and pointed silently at the holdall on the carpet. The porter nodded and stepped in, grinning as usual. He picked up the holdall and said, ‘On your way at last, are you, sir? You must be pretty excited.’
This sly reference to the fact that he had never before left the United States did not amuse Gerry, who simply glared at his mother while the porter picked up the holdall and walked out of the room. Gerry was about to follow him, but reluctantly turned back to his mother and let her kiss him on the cheek.
‘I can *really* look after myself – ’ he began to say, but was cut off in mid-sentence when his mother, smiling brightly, interjected with: ‘I know, dear, but certain standards must be maintained. Now have a good time, send me a postcard, and I’ll see you in four weeks or so.’ Then, still smiling brightly, she closed the door in his face.
‘The elevator’s here, sir,’ the porter said, sounding faintly amused.
Gerry took a deep breath, glanced along the corridor, then let his breath out in a lengthy sigh and walked up to the porter where he stood by the open door of the elevator. Ignoring him, Gerry stepped into the elevator, turned back to the front, and tried to keep his face expressionless as the porter carried his suitcase in, then pressed the button to close the door and let them descend.
‘So,’ the porter said, glancing sideways and grinning, ‘your mom tells me you’re off to Egypt to see the pyramids. That’s some trip to be making.’
‘My mother talks too much,’ Gerry responded as frigidly as he could manage, ‘but, yes, that’s where I’m going – for research, of course.’
‘Some research,’ the porter said, winking lewdly. ‘I bet those Egyptian

broads sure know how to shake it – and you'll be researching *them*, right?'
Gerry felt like shoving the porter's head through the meshed metal bars of the elevator and then shutting the door on it, but contented himself with the thought that the creep was a traitor to his own class, the working class, and should, instead of wearing that pansy uniform and tipping his cap to rich people, be out in the streets, encouraging the overthrow of capitalism by robbing banks and mugging Fifth Avenue shoppers.
Relieving his tension with this radical thought, he was even more relieved when the elevator glided to a stop, the door opened, and he was able to follow the porter into the lobby of the ground floor, then through the swinging doors, onto the sidewalk of Central Park West where the porter, after considerable effort, managed to wave down a cab.
'Well, sir,' he said, opening the rear door of the cab for Gerry, 'have the time of your life.'
'I will, thank you very much.'
Suddenly ashamed of the way in which, when angry, he would quickly adopt his mother's Anglified, glacial, superior manner of speaking, he took a few coins from his jacket pocket and pressed them into the porter's greasy palm. Then, before the bastard could count them and sneer, he slid into the cab, slammed the door and told the driver to take off.
Settling back into the seat, sighing with pleasure at the thought of what was to come, and contemplating the possibility of asking the driver to stop by the Waldorf Astoria to enable him to check the latest info on what had occurred there, he remembered that the coins he had pressed into the porter's hand had in fact been the last of his loose change. Immediately, without thinking, he leaned forward in his seat, tapped the window separating himself from the driver, and said, 'Hey, Mac, do you take the American Express Gold Card?'
Instantly, there was a squealing of brakes and the cab jerked to an abrupt halt, throwing Gerry forward as the driver's face, monolithic and unsmiling, turned menacingly in his direction.
Gerry immediately offered his most charming grin and spread his hands in a mock gesture of defence.
'OK, pal,' he said, 'just a joke! Now take me to Kennedy.'
The cab driver stared at him, lips pursed, eyes like stones, then took a deep breath, sort of *rolled* his broad shoulders, then turned back to the front, accelerated and raced along Central Park West, while Gerry, instead of

thinking about the great adventure to come, wondered if the brute would accept his wristwatch in lieu of dollars and cents.

Chapter Two

As she did much too often, Ingrid dreamt about brutal sex, about the violation of the female body, saw her father with his many women leering at her as he pawed them openly, then felt a great weight falling upon her as his mocking laughter rang in her ears. She became a child again, retreating into warmer memories, seeing her mother's glowing smile, then her tears, then her face in a coffin. Ingrid wept and was reprimanded, was beaten black and blue by her father, then turned back into a woman and was still being beaten and heard her own screams from far away, as if coming from someone else. She screamed again and then stopped, sobbed instead, started groaning, then dropped down through her pain into a well of despair – and was whimpering when she opened her eyes and escaped from the dream…

The morning light filled her room, beaming in through the window, falling obliquely on pine wardrobes, the grey carpet on varnished floorboards, the romantic novels piled on the low cupboard beside the bed, reflected off the mirror on the dressing table facing the window, back onto the crumpled white sheet over her body, where she lay gazing upward. She was thinking of her dream, one of many similar dreams, and silently saying her thanks that she hadn't cried out loud enough to be heard.

It was morning. Late morning. She had overslept on her last day here. Yawning, she sat upright, rubbed her eyes and blinked, then stared through the window at the placid, transparent, deep blue surface of Lake Geneva, with the majestic snow-capped mountains to the south, the lush vineyards and pastures to the north, all under a whiteclouded azure sky, turning silvery with sunlight.

She was tempted to make her way down to the shore of the lake, then board a boat and sail away, but she knew that her father's helicopter would come for her this morning, and that such an escape was therefore impossible. The thought of seeing him frightened her, but this sanatorium was worse, so she

gritted her perfect teeth, shook her head from side to side, and then slid out of the bed.

Still shaken by the knowledge that her screaming, if heard, could have led to her being incarcerated here again, she hurriedly disrobed and stepped into the shower, letting the icy water slap her fully awake. Refreshed, she stepped out, dried herself, then went to the mirror.

There were no bruises on her body, which was slim and well formed, but the young woman staring at her was the one she had seen in her dream, being ravished and punished.

In her worst dreams, she always was.
Hearing her own forlorn sigh like a breeze from far away, she sat at the dressing table and examined her still naked body, not pleased with what she saw. She had been in this particular sanatorium for six months, and every time she looked in the mirror she was shocked by the sight of herself.
She was hazel-eyed, auburn-haired and quite pretty, but irremediably marred by melancholy and fear.
Closing her eyes, she recalled her latest nightmare, chilled by her understanding of what it meant, but not able to cure herself.
She thought of her rich and powerful father, a bull of a man at sixty-two, and burned with shame at recalling his behaviour with his various women. Ever since she could remember, he had used those women to taunt her, deliberately pawing them and talking obscenely in her presence to shame and humiliate her. He had done it out of contempt for the memory of her mother, and in doing so had succeeded in breaking her like a twig in his huge hands.
Now, at twenty-seven, still a virgin and extremely timid, after five years of being in and out of various sanatoriums, she knew exactly what she had become… a woman defeated.
The nightmares, she knew, represented her fear of sex, as well as releasing the revulsion she felt for her father, since what she *suspected* he had done to her mother was worse, infinitely worse, than his crimes against her.
Opening her eyes again, she saw herself, a pale ghost in the mirror. She wanted to escape, to flee from this awful place *and* her father, but knew it was too late for that now, that she hadn’t the will.

She was trapped by her fear of him.
Shivering, she proceeded to dress herself, then applied the minimum of make-up to her pale, frightened face. When she had done this, she carefully piled her long auburn hair on her head, pinned it into place, put on her flat-heeled shoes, then glanced distractedly around her.
Apart from her many romantic novels, which she was leaving for the next patient, she had cleaned the room out completely in preparation for her departure, and her suitcase, packed tight but still open, was resting on the low wooden rack. Satisfied that she had done everything necessary, she removed the last of her things from the dressing table, divided them between a small zip bag and her leather shoulder-bag, placed the zip bag in the suitcase, locked it, and then left the room.
This Swiss sanatorium was for wealthy patients only, and this particular wing, with private rooms and relative freedom, was for those who were deemed to be on the mend and ready to leave. The rooms were comfortable, the corridors bright, the floors covered in fine carpeting, and as she walked in the direction of the manager's office, she glanced out through the panoramic, metal-framed windows and saw the boats cruising on a shimmering Lake Geneva, minute in the vast expanse of mountain and vineyard and pasture. The very beauty of the place was a mockery to her sense of oppression.
Arriving at the closed door of the office of Madame Boullard, and thinking ruefully of how only a sanatorium for the very rich could blandly call its supervisor a 'manager' (as if this clinic for the mentally disturbed was actually a hotel), she pressed the bell beside the door and then heard a female voice telling her to enter. She did so, closing the door behind her and crossing the broad expanse of luxurious carpet to where Madame Boullard was sitting behind her large desk, the panoramic window behind her again framing the lake and mountains, as well as overlooking the expansive lawns and, farther back, the helipad where the richest of the very rich patients were usually brought in by private helicopter, well away from the public gaze.
Indeed, even as Ingrid stopped in front of the desk and glanced past the stern face of Madame Boullard at the green lawns and blue lake, she saw the sun reflecting off a helicopter which, though still in the distance, was obviously heading for the sanatorium to take her on the first leg of her journey back to her father – the thought of which merely deepened her fear and foreboding.
'*Bonjour*, Madame Boullard,' she said, turning her attention to the heavy-set,

neatly dressed, grey-haired Frenchwoman who, with fat hands folded on the desk, was staring up sternly.
‘*Bonjour*, Fräulein Zweig. I trust you slept well last night and are prepared for your journey?’
‘*Oui, Madame*. I feel fine.’
Madame Boullard did not invite her to sit, but merely unfolded her fat hands, leaned back in her chair, and stared at her with a well-furrowed brow and pursed, disapproving lips.
‘So,’ she said, ‘the time has come for your departure. I hope I am not making a mistake in recommending your release.’
‘*Non, Madame*, you are not.’
‘You have been here for six months. Your behaviour has not been excellent. Nonetheless, with proper treatment and God’s help, you have shown a little improvement.’
‘*Oui, Madame*. *Merci*.’
She felt awful saying it, despising her own cowardice, hating and fearing this woman as much as she did her father, recalling the humiliations and punishments that the bitch had put her through, taking pleasure from the agony she bestowed in the name of a cure. In fact, when Ingrid looked directly at Madame Boullard’s humourless face, she almost choked with nausea.
‘Your father is a wealthy and powerful man,’ Madame Boullard said, ‘and expects to get what he has paid for – which, in your case, I believe he has. When you first came here, you were sick, a kleptomaniac, always weeping. The kleptomania was your immature plea for attention, the constant weeping a manifestation of your refusal to accept the adult world. I believe you now know better. You have accepted reality. The anger and fear that motivated you, the frequent nightmares you suffered, were all caused by resentment of the very privileges that your father could give you. That anger and fear have been removed, thus dispelling your nightmares and, in learning to respect your father, you have hopefully also learned to respect yourself. I hope you are grateful, Fräulein Zweig – ’
‘*Oui*.’
‘ – and will not disappoint your father or myself by abusing your freedom.’
‘*Non, Madame*. I will not.’
Aware of how close she had come to giving away the fact that her nightmares

were still tormenting her, but pleased that she had been able to hide that truth for so long, Ingrid glanced out the window, watched the helicopter approaching, and was only distracted from it when Madame Boullard stood up, looked back over her own shoulder, then walked around the desk.
'So,' she said, 'the helicopter has arrived. You have packed your belongings?'
'*Oui, Madame*.'
'Excellent. I will have the porter sent to your room to collect your suitcase. When he collects it, please follow him to the helipad – and leave your room unlocked.'
'*Oui, Madame* – and thank you.'
She was just about to hurry out of the office when Madame Boullard's voice, softly malicious and precise, made her stop on the spot.
'It is strange, is it not, that your father has not visited you once during the whole of your six months in this establishment?'
Ingrid bowed her head to hide her burning cheeks and humiliation.
'He is a very busy man, *Madame*.'
'Apparently so,' the old bitch replied. 'He certainly has an extraordinary reputation – controversial, in fact.'
'Controversial, *Madame*?'
'Yes. Is it not true that he has been described as one of the richest and most mysterious men in the world?'
'I wouldn't know, *Madame*. I rarely read the newspapers.'
'And that he engages in international dealings of a dubious nature, including – '
'I really couldn't say, *Madame*.'
Ingrid kept her gaze focused steadily on her own feet, feeling the rise of nervous tension, her cheeks still burning brightly. Madame Boullard was silent for some time, obviously studying her, trying to read her, then she sighed, as if weary of Ingrid's presence, and spoke softly again.
'So,' she said, 'the great man was too busy to come and visit you during all this time. He must be very busy *indeed*.'
'*Oui, Madame*.'
'Are you looking forward to seeing him?'
'*Oui, Madame*.'
'I don't think so, my dear.'

Madame Boullard sighed again, then reached out with one fat hand, pressed her fingers under Ingrid's chin and forced her head up, making Ingrid look at her. She studied Ingrid for some time, smiled in a mocking manner, then eventually removed her insulting fingers and stepped back a little.
'So,' she said. '*Au revoir*.'
'*Merci, Madame*. *Au revoir*.'
Madame Boullard responded with a glacial smile and a self-satisfied nod of her head, then held out her hand. Ingrid shook it, aware of its sweaty warmth, then let go, offered a slight curtsey, and gratefully hurried out of the hated office.
Returning to her room, she took a deep breath, glanced at the lake and mountains, then sat on the edge of the bed and waited in a trance of growing dread for the porter's arrival. He came soon enough, a familiar face, a kindly man, and when he picked up her suitcase and had walked to the door, she stopped him, pressed some francs into his hand and then pushed him away.
'Please go on ahead of me,' she said. 'I'll be there in a minute.'
'I'm supposed to escort you out, Fräulein Zweig.'
'It's alright. I won't be long.'
The porter smiled and nodded, then walked off along the corridor. Ingrid, turning back into the room, stood on tiptoe, reached up to the top of a wardrobe, and pulled down a packet of cigarettes and a box of matches.
It was forbidden to smoke in the sanatorium and for that very reason, although she didn't normally smoke, Ingrid had made it a point to do so secretly at least once or twice a week. So she lit a cigarette, threw the packet into the wicker basket at her feet, then, inhaling deeply, stepped up to the window and exhaled as she surveyed the great lake and the stunning scenery around it.
Suggesting freedom, it was her prison, incarcerating her hopes. Unable to look any longer, she removed her troubled gaze, studied the lawns of the sanatorium, focused on the helicopter that was roaring beyond the mowed grass, then exhaled another cloud of smoke and turned away from the window.
Glancing around the small, comfortable room, she thought of how she had come here six months ago, weeping hysterically, crying out for her dead mother, cursing the father who was paying for her treatment, and shredding her own clothes the first night before they rushed in to strap her down.

She had not been here before, but she had been to other sanatoriums, and each, though for the rich, wrapping human pain in luxury, had its own particular brand of horror to add to her own… Gleaming hypodermic needles; Valium washed down with water; nights spent in torment or delirium before awakening to further punishments. Nurses, male and female, some brutal, some kind, others simply indifferent in the face of the traumas of the wealthy with their strident demands… It hadn't mattered much to her – it was by now a familiar nightmare – and she knew that the torments she was enduring were all she might ever have.

So, she had suffered, and recovered, at least temporarily, and between her bad dreams about brutish men, sexual fear and humiliation, yearned in vain for that rare man of absolute goodness, who would, with his pure, platonic love, renew the faith destroyed by her father and raise her on high.

She almost laughed at this thought, knowing how foolish it was, then just as quickly had to choke back the tears at what she had lost.

Lowering her gaze, she saw the bulging wicker basket, recently filled with the torn sheets of the many love letters she had written to some imagined lover during her worst days… Six months of letters. Six months of self-delusion… She thought of the father who had driven her to that state, and of Madame Boullard who had conspired to torment her in this awful place… Six months of self-delusion and torture in this luxurious hell on earth.

Almost sweating with terror, yet unable to stop herself, she inhaled on her cigarette, exhaled a stream of smoke, then deliberately dropped the glowing cigarette into the wicker basket, waited until it was clear that the papers were catching fire, then walked casually out of the room, feeling better already.

A few minutes later, strapped into the helicopter as it ascended toward the clouds, she looked down at the sanatorium, watched it shrinking into the expanding Earth, and then saw the black smoke billowing up and streaming across the green lawns like ink staining a sheet of blotting paper.

'Jesus Christ!' exclaimed the pilot seated beside her. 'The sanatorium's on fire!'

'Really?' she heard herself replying dreamily. 'Oh, dear, how dreadful!'

Amused, she put her head back, closed her eyes and took a deep breath, then let the helicopter give her wings and fly her away on the first leg of a journey around the globe to rejoin her father.

Chapter Three

Standing on the upper deck of his 213-ft luxury cruiser, the *Landsberg II*, feeling much younger than his sixty-two years, and gazing with pleasure at his fleet of thirty smaller, high-powered boats, Zweig took deep breaths of the fresh air, stretched himself, and gazed up at the sky.

At first briefly dazzled, he soon managed to adjust to the bright light and saw his courier's helicopter in the distance, taking shape and growing large as, en route from Recife, it approached his fleet of heavily armed boats. He studied the helicopter for a moment, impatient for its arrival, then snapped his fingers at the white-jacketed Filipino steward standing at attention beside the drinks cabinet outside the salon, took a glass of bubbling Dom Perignon from the proffered tray, then imperiously waved the steward back to his position by the doorway.

'Ah,' he murmured, sipping the champagne. ' *Sehr gut*. Really excellent.'
Enjoying the drink, he gazed again with pride at the many motor launches of his private fleet, which, at anchor just outside the territorial waters of Brazil, formed a protective ring around him and were crewed by his most fanatically loyal or fearful men.
His own luxury cruiser, the pride of the fleet, contained satellite communications equipment, a swimming pool at the stern of the lower deck, just above the ramped garage for his custom-built Range Rover and personal speed boat; a helipad at the stern of the main deck; and a lavishly equipped interior with a captain's cabin, stateroom, guest cabins, two salons, including a sky lounge; gymnasium, sauna and Jacuzzi; and, scattered here, there and everywhere, many priceless paintings and antiques, most of which had been gained by dubious means.
Stretching himself, he shaded his eyes with his free hand as the helicopter, now hovering above him, whipped the wind around him before passing on to settle on the helipad with a final stuttered roaring.
Finishing his champagne, he gave the glass back to the Filipino steward, went to the brass railing, and gazed down at the helipad, where the crewmen in bright-orange coveralls were clamping the helicopter to the main deck.
The sea was a rippling blue-and-green sheet, its low waves capped with white

foam.
Zweig's personal assistant, Hans Mayer, wearing a plain grey suit with black patent-leather shoes and carrying a briefcase in one hand, climbed out, then turned back to help down a lady who, even from this distance, was clearly in her late twenties, moved self-consciously and gracelessly, had her auburn hair piled primly on top of her head, and wore thick-rimmed spectacles.
Zweig felt a twinge of disgust at the sight of his daughter, Ingrid, and watched coldly as she and Hans disappeared just below, en route up through the various levels of the boat to report directly to him.
He studied the fleet of smaller cruisers spread across the sunlit, glittering sea and thought of how far he had come from his days as a Nazi Wolfcub. First a frightened boy-fighter, then an eighteen-year-old soldier who had suffered terribly at the hands of Soviet troops during the fall of Berlin, he had learned to fight for survival after the war and had gone on to great success as a mercenary in Argentina and Paraguay, before broadening his criminal activities to take in the whole world.
Yes, he was powerful now, but it brought him little joy; he was growing old too fast, awakening each day to fearful thoughts.
He could not face the future.
Sighing, he turned around to greet Hans and Ingrid as they arrived on the deck.
Hans was blond, blue-eyed, and nervous, but at least more attractive than Ingrid. A forlorn creature, truly, completely inhibited and none too bright. He took note of her bowed head, that visible air of defeat, and wondered that even the best finishing schools had failed to give her some class.
'*Guten Tag*, Herr Zweig,' Hans said. 'I'm sorry I'm late, but – '
'No matter,' Zweig interjected brusquely. 'Please expand on your ambiguous telex. What happened in New York?'
'Hello, Father,' Ingrid began timidly. 'It's so – '
'*Ja*! *Ja*!' Zweig said impatiently, keeping his gaze focused on Hans, to whom he said, '*So*?'
Hans started telling him what had taken place in the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York, but Zweig, feeling even more impatient, cut him short with: 'Yes, yes, I already know all that! What *else* did you find out?'
'Well,' Hans said nervously while Ingrid blushed with humiliation, 'they clearly know that the men in the Waldorf Astoria were working for you, since

someone calling himself Grabbe – *Christian* Grabbe – rang them at the hotel and asked them who they were working for. Apparently, when they refused to tell him, he just chuckled over the phone and said that he knew they were employed by someone reported to be one of the richest and most mysterious men in the world.'

'Me.'

'Yes.'

'So this man, this Christian Grabbe, made an appointment to see them, saying that *his* superior, someone unknown, was actually in possession of the Tuaoi Stone?'

'Yes, Herr Zweig. One of the three men rang me, where I was then staying in Florida, to inform me that this man, this so-called Christian Grabbe, was coming to see them at the hotel, and that they hoped to purchase the Tuaoi Stone from them. Those men died when Grabbe should have been there with them, but there was no sign of him, dead or alive, in that wrecked room. Nor was he with the other two men who died on the sidewalk of Park Avenue, having been blown out of the suite by the explosion.'

'So he never turned up,' Zweig surmised. 'Instead, he planted some kind of bomb.'

'No, Herr Zweig. No bomb was used. Nor was the explosion caused by leaking gas or electrical malfunction. That explosion has already been described as a total mystery, in the sense that no cause can be found for it. In fact, it seems that it could *not* have been a normal explosion, since the other rooms were not affected, though the devastation was certainly caused by some kind of inexplicable, powerful force.'

'We just don't know what kind.'

'Exactly, Herr Zweig.'

'Come, let's go inside.'

Deliberately ignoring Ingrid, but pleased to note her wounded look, Zweig led her and Hans through the luxurious salon, down two short flights of steps, and into a suite-sized cabin containing a surgical bed, steam bath, spa bath, and one of the cruiser's two Jacuzzis. Lying on a couch under a window with a sea-view was his secretary and mistress, Elena. Blonde-haired, blue-eyed, wearing a skin-tight *cheongsam*, she was propped up against some cushions, filing her fingernails, and occasionally moving her exposed left leg in a sensual manner.

‘My daughter has arrived from the sanatorium,’ Zweig informed her.
‘Terrific,’ Elena responded, glancing up with bored eyes. ‘Hi, kid. Nice to see you.’
As Elena automatically waved the hand that was holding the nail file, Zweig said to his daughter, ‘I’m delighted to see you, Ingrid, but please wait outside. I must discuss business before attending to you.’
Blushing, again humiliated, Ingrid backed up to the door, bumped into it, opened it and hurried out of the cabin, as if desperate for fresh air.
Glad to see the back of her, Zweig sighed.
‘Fetch the doctor,’ he said.
Hans picked up the intercom and asked for the doctor as Zweig undressed, not ashamed of his bloated nakedness, then lay face down on the surgical bed, turning his face towards his personal assistant.
‘So,’ he said, ‘what else can you tell me?’
‘Well, Herr Zweig,’ Hans replied, ‘we *do* know, from the phone call made to that suite in the Waldorf Astoria before it was destroyed, that the so-called Christian Grabbe, whether or not he was in *possession* of the Tuaoi Stone, or Lodestone, at least knew exactly what it was, since, when asked by one of our men to describe it, he did so with complete accuracy. He also knew that you wanted to purchase it – and stated that you wanted it because of its famed magical properties.’
‘And he confirmed that it actually had such properties?’
‘Over the telephone – yes. In fact, we believe that the destruction of that hotel room was a demonstration of the powers of the Tuaoi Stone – a demonstration and warning.’
‘That I’m not to pursue the matter further?’
‘I’m afraid so, Herr Zweig.’
The door to the cabin opened and Zweig’s hawk-faced, white-jacketed doctor entered, wheeling a steel trolley on which were resting numerous silver bowls filled with a variety of health foods, drinks and tablets, as well as a tray of gleaming hypodermic syringes. Adjusting his glasses, the doctor nervously commenced to aid Zweig in his daily battle against disease and old age by giving him five subcutaneous rejuvenating injections in his massive rump – the injections containing, as Zweig knew, the lyophilized cells from the different organs of unborn lambs; foetal thymus to help in fighting infection; plus liver, hypothalamus and vertebrae bone marrow cells, aimed at

improving general back tension; as well as a sixth injection of Bogomoletz serum, obtained from the tissues of the brain, placenta and heart of young car accident victims, which in turn had been injected into rabbits – a serum once used by the Soviets, as Zweig never failed to remind himself, to keep the ailing Stalin alive.

When the doctor had completed his tasks and left the cabin, Zweig drank a pint of his favourite protein drink. This consisted of two tablespoons of powdered protein, one tablespoon of granula lecithin, a banana, raw egg and two cups of skimmed milk, all whipped together in a blender for thirty seconds. Also, while still talking to Hans, he had a selection of the exotic health snacks in the silver bowls, including fertilized chicken eggs from the Bahamas, fertilized turtle eggs from the South Pacific, walnuts and honey from the Caucasus regions of Russia, dried apricots from the remote village of Hunza in the Himalayas, guavas, mangoes, loquats, and the white root, Yuka, from Vilcabamba, Ecuador's so-called Valley of Eternal Youth, and, finally, the root of Eleutheron Ginseng, from the desolate mountain villages of Siberia.

'Who *are* these people?' he asked between mouthfuls. 'That's what we must find out. They knew I wanted the Lodestone and they got in touch with me by phone, then they managed to kill my men in that hotel room in New York – and they did it in some inexplicable, possibly magical, manner. So who *are* they?'

'There *is* one clue,' Hans said. 'One of our men in New York, before his untimely death, informed me that prior to the arrangement to meet Grabbe in the Waldorf Astoria, the meeting was supposed to be with Grabbe's superior aboard a lecture-cruise boat that's due to sail along the Nile from Aswan to Cairo just a few days from now. So, the man we were *originally* supposed to have met – the one claiming to either possess, or know the whereabouts of, the Tuaoi Stone, or Lodestone – might still be taking that cruise.'

'You think so?'

'Why not? He was going to meet our men on that boat, then changed his mind and had them killed instead – so there's no reason to suppose that he's not still taking that Nile cruise. I believe that man, whoever he is, will be on that boat.'

Having sated his appetite, Zweig had his daily dose of revitalization drugs in tablet form, including some HCG capsules, which are hormone extracts from

the urine of pregnant women. He washed all these down with another pint of his protein drink, then stared grimly at Hans.
‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I think you’re right. I think that man will be on the boat. And, if that bastard will be aboard, then so too will we. Book passage immediately for the four of us and two personal stewards.’
‘What if the boat’s fully booked?’ Hans asked.
‘No problem,’ Zweig replied, glancing sideways at Elena who, experienced in the ways of men, knew not to mess with him. ‘If the boat’s fully booked, simply purchase the whole tour company outright, cancel the reservations of those scheduled to utilize the cabins we need, then book our entourage into them instead.’
‘What if the man we want is one of those whose cruise is cancelled because of our requirements?’
‘He won’t be. If he’s the man we want, he won’t let himself be pushed off that boat. He’ll have money – and arrogance. Anything else?’
‘I haven’t had anything to eat or drink since – ’
‘Yes, yes,’ Zweig said impatiently, having no time for trivialities. ‘I understand, but you can stuff yourself later. You must book the boat or buy the company immediately – so get straight to the telex. Report back when you’ve done it.’
When Hans had left the cabin to do as he had been bid, Zweig turned to Elena.
‘My muscles need toning up,’ he said. ‘Come here and do what you’re being paid for.’
Elena swung her long legs off the sofa and sauntered over to him, every movement of her body accentuated by the shiny *cheongsam*, the curves of her legs emphasized by stiletto-heeled shoes. Her peroxide blonde hair was spilling over full breasts, her brightly painted lips pouting when she stopped in front of him.
Zweig lay back on the surgical bed and sucked in his big belly.
‘You want the oil?’ Elena asked, her gaze roaming.
‘Yes,’ Zweig replied. ‘And please bring in my daughter.’
‘*Now*?’
‘Yes,’ he said. ‘Now.’
Elena nodded and pressed the intercom, asked someone to send Ingrid in, then picked up a bottle and leaned down across Zweig. Licking her scarlet

lips, breathing sensuously in his face, she poured warm oil from the bottle onto his stomach, then started rubbing it into his skin with the palms of her hands.
‘Cover me up before my daughter arrives.’
‘You’re real considerate, Wilhelm.’
Nevertheless, she draped a white towel over his stiffening member and continued rubbing the oil into the pores of his skin.
‘What’s this Tuaoi Stone, or Lodestone?’ she asked to fill the silence. ‘Why the big deal? Is it some kind of diamond?’
‘No,’ Zweig replied. ‘It is much more than a diamond. It is perhaps the most valuable, least known antique in the world – much discussed but very rarely seen. It is a pyramidal stone – possibly the missing peak of the Great Pyramid of Giza in Egypt – and is reported to possess magical properties and extraordinary powers. Indeed, it is said that the man who holds the Tuaoi Stone will own the whole world. Certainly it is the world’s most sought-after artifact – and, this being so, it obviously belongs in my collection.’
‘It’s probably just a diamond,’ Elena said. ‘You know? A girl’s best friend.’
‘Yes, dear,’ Zweig responded, stifling his impatience, not amused by her feeble attempt at wit. ‘You’re probably right.’
Ingrid entered like a wraith, her gaze wandering nervously. Her shoulders appeared to be stooped by the weight of her pinned-up hair; and her face, which had a delicate, restrained beauty, was filled with the kind of trepidation that made breathing difficult.
Studying her, Zweig despaired, wondering what would become of her, but also taking pride in the fact that she was his handiwork.
He had terrified her from the day she was born and now he saw the results of his endeavours.
‘Ingrid,’ he said, enjoying his little sport. ‘Come here. It’s been such a *long* time. Say hello to Elena.’
‘Hello, Elena,’ Ingrid whispered, lowering her gaze. ‘It’s nice to see you again.’
‘Yeah, kid, same here.’
Elena’s practised hands had thoroughly smeared the oil all over Zweig’s body, and her fingers, long and thin, the nails like razors, were kneading the oil into his skin and exciting him greatly. He almost groaned with pleasure, but instead sighed discreetly, smiling up at his disconcerted daughter, aware

of how this was wounding her.
‘Would *you* like a massage?’ he asked her. ‘I’m sure Elena would – ’
‘No, thank you, Father,’ Ingrid quickly replied.
‘Of course not,’ Zweig said. ‘You would have to take your clothes off, after all, and that isn’t you, is it?’
Ingrid didn’t reply, but simply studied the floor. She was slender and fragile in her shapeless cotton dress, which perfectly matched her hazel eyes and colourless pallor.
Zweig knew she was trying not to look at the towel draped over his loins, since given its present shape and quivering movement, it called attention to everything she feared, which could only amuse him.
‘Since you are back here for six weeks,’ he said, ‘and since clearly you have no friend to look after you, I have decided to bring you with me on a cruise along the Nile. This trip, if not exciting – since nothing, I fear, could truly excite *you* – will at least keep you occupied. Is that acceptable, *mein Fräulein*?’
‘Yes, Father.’
‘You didn’t have any other plans, did you?’
‘No, Father.’
‘Well, that’s settled, then.’
He was just about to tease her about her mother, or, even better, her non-existent love-life, when Hans returned to inform him that he had been compelled to purchase the Egyptian tour company outright, that the deal should be completed by midnight, using Zweig’s Egyptian agents, and that he had therefore booked the master suite for Zweig and Elena, one single cabin each for himself and Ingrid, and a double cabin for the two stewards who would accompany them.
‘When do we leave?’ Zweig asked.
‘We’ll have to fly out from Recife tomorrow,’ Hans replied.
‘Excellent. You’ve done well. I trust you’ll now attend to all the details, such as luggage, and so forth. Please start right away on that.’
‘Yes, Herr Zweig. Thank you, sir.’
Hans bowed slightly, glanced sympathetically at Ingrid, then left the cabin, closing the door quietly behind him.
‘Ah, nice,’ Zweig said. ‘*Nice*.’
Elena’s expert hands, the nails painted blood-red, fine fingers oil-slicked,

were kneading his flabby flesh, squeezing here, pressing there, sliding down under the towel, which, he noted, was still raised on high and visibly quivering. He sighed, almost groaned, but then remembered his daughter and stared at her. She was keeping her shamed gaze on the floor, but could not hide her burning cheeks.
He studied her, amused, then started losing his senses, so eventually waved his hand in the air, saying, 'Yes, child, you may go now.'
She glanced briefly at him, her hazel eyes filled with reproach, then threw another glance at the grinning Elena, before turning on the heel of her foot and rushing out of the cabin.
The door slammed shut. Elena chuckled softly. Zweig smiled and closed his eyes, giving in to his quivering flesh, transported by Elena's fingers, sliding along him, turning his towel into a pyramid, his phallus supporting the whole edifice, his burning loins setting fire to the temples of his mind and exposing him to recollections of flame and destruction – the bloody fall of Berlin; his early days as a common criminal; torture, murder, the odd rape here and there; then his days as a mercenary in Argentina and Paraguay, setting the Indian villages to the torch, murdering those who opposed him – then to fancies about the Tuaoi Stone and the power it could give him.
He saw it, almost touched it, then came as he thought about it, crying out in guttural ecstasy as the towel slipped off him and his essence, a pure Aryan seed, found a home in Elena's hand.
'*Mein Gott*!' he groaned. '*Christ*!'
Each orgasm destroyed him more.

Chapter Four

'Now remember,' Zweig said, sitting opposite Ingrid and Hans in the *felucca* that was taking them the short distance from Elephant Island to the corniche, wiping sweat from his sun-scorched forehead, adjusting his heavy legs and stroking Elena's knee with his free hand, 'we must remain as anonymous as possible once aboard and not draw too much attention to ourselves until we find who we're looking for.'

Ingrid didn't know how her father, with his icily autocratic nature and large entourage, including two servants, could possibly imagine that a low profile

was in order, but she didn't attempt to raise that delicate question and instead, simply to make conversation, asked, 'Who *are* you looking for, Father?'

'Never mind,' he replied. 'It's not your concern. What *you* can do, *mein Fräulein*, is appreciate the exotic squalor of Egypt and be a good little girl.'

Ingrid stared between her father and Elena at the receding Elephantine Island, where the dirty-brown, ruinlike walls of the Nubian villages were surrounded by a paradisal profusion of tall shrubs and palm trees.

Aware that Elena was smiling sardonically at her, she deliberately turned her attention to the black-granite islets and many *feluccas* on the silt-laden waters of the first cataract of the river, just beyond the corniche. She should have felt intoxicated, overwhelmed by Egypt's strangeness, but instead she was feeling claustrophobic and extremely depressed.

Since leaving the sanatorium at Lake Geneva she had not been able to sleep at nights because, after her initial exhilaration at setting fire to that hated building, she had succumbed to guilt, shame and fear. Frightened of her father at the best of times, she had been even more frightened to think that someone at the sanatorium, realizing that the fire had started in her room, might have contacted him with that information. In the event, such had not occurred – and was now unlikely to – but she still suffered deep shame and horror over what she had done and was shivering even in the scorching heat of the Egyptian noon.

'God,' Elena said with a sigh, adjusting the sunglasses on her nose and glancing wearily around her, 'I'll be glad to get on the *real* boat. This bath tub's making my stomach turn.'

Ingrid studied the Arab boatsmen, observed the gently splashing water, glanced up at the billowing breeze-blown sails of the *felucca* and then sideways at the silent, watchful Hans. Wearing a white shirt, shorts, matching shoes and knee-length socks, framed by the village of Aswan and the exquisite sky beyond it, he looked quite attractive in an oddly bland, perpetually tense manner.

After being told by her father that he would have no time for her until he had settled comfortably into his suite aboard the Nile cruiser, Ingrid had been placed in the care of Hans for the duration of the journey from her father's fleet in the South Atlantic to Aswan; and she appreciated the fact that while escorting her through the mandatory tourist sites en route, he had also been the only one in her father's entourage to display the slightest recognition that, apart from being her father's daughter, she was a human being with the need for communication.

Hans had always baffled Ingrid. He was not yet thirty, blandly handsome and intelligent, yet she had never known him to be involved with a woman and thought of him as remarkably passive, virtually her father's slave. Originally hired as her father's accountant, he had shown himself to be exceptional at general administration and soon became her father's personal assistant, factotum, dogsbody. His passivity, Ingrid assumed, sprang from a combination of healthy fear of her tyrannical father – a fear common to all who knew him – as well as his childhood in an orphanage in Bremen and subsequent adoption by two fiercely puritanical German Protestants who had, according to what Hans had told her, often punished him severely for the slightest infraction. He was, she suspected, a deeply inhibited personality who would, sooner or later, break free from the many constraints that bound him – but not, she suspected, until he had broken free from her father.

She realized he was very much like herself – but possibly even more oppressed.
Grateful to him for easing her own burden, she heard the flapping sails, returned to the present, stared past the white-robed Nubian standing in the prow of the *felucca*, and saw the shoreline of the right bank approaching, with the large cruiser anchored against the corniche, framed by azure sky and shivering palm leaves. There were tourists massed near the cruiser, by dusty buses and taxis, and some were struggling up the ramp, between Arab porters.
'Now we join the tourist scum,' her father said. '*Scheisse*, how I suffer!'
The *felucca* ground gently against the side of the corniche and the Arab boatsmen jumped out to secure the craft to the bank and assist the passengers. Ingrid and Hans disembarked first, to be followed by Zweig's two Filipino

stewards and Elena, then finally by Ingrid's father who, when he stood upright in the *felucca*, made it rock dangerously.
'The luggage!' he snapped at his hapless stewards. 'Get the luggage on board!'
As the Filipinos hurried to do as they were bid, Hans took hold of Ingrid's elbow and urged her along the corniche towards the large cruiser's gangplank.
'God,' she whispered to Hans, 'he gets in such *terrible* tempers!'
'Increasingly so,' Hans replied. 'He wasn't always this bad. He's changed over the past few months.'
'What do you think it is?'
'Old age. What else could it be?'
She looked at him and saw him grinning, which is something he rarely managed. 'Well, whatever it is,' she said, 'it's awful. I don't know how you can bear working for him. It must be hell on earth.'
'I didn't know what he was like when I became his accountant. And unfortunately, once one becomes involved with your father, it isn't that easy to break away. In fact, it's downright impossible.'
'You mean, you'd leave if you could?'
'Don't quote me on that.'
He grinned even more broadly, briefly looking much livelier, but put on his impassive mask again when they arrived at the gangplank.
The large blue-and-white cruiser held over eighty passengers, the last of whom were now making their way up the gangplank.
'He's in a foul mood,' Elena said, catching up with them. 'He can't stand getting in and out of small boats. It makes him feel real embarrassed.'
'*Embarrassed*?' Ingrid said. 'My father?'
'Yeah,' Elena said, 'your father. Just because he doesn't spoil you rotten, doesn't mean he's unfeeling. I mean, he cries like a baby.'
Ingrid shuddered at that thought and then slipped in behind the last person moving up the swaying, creaking gangplank. Glancing to her left, she saw the two Filipino stewards pushing a trolley laden with luggage along the edge of the dock, with black water, green palm trees and blue sky behind them, and her huge, bloated father bawling at them.
Mortified by that sight, she continued up the gangplank, stepped into the reception area of 'C' deck, received smiling greetings from the French

captain and some stewards, then turned back to the gangplank and looked along the quay as a battered taxi, churning up clouds of dust, screeched to a halt.
The rear door of the taxi opened and a man who looked to be in his late twenties, about her age, wearing a crumpled blue-denim jacket and jeans, with a camera bouncing off his open-necked check shirt and his brown hair flapping untidily over the forehead of an unshaven, pleasant face, emerged from the vehicle, slammed the door shut, then retrieved his holdall and paid the Arab driver.
'Now give me a bite of *that*,' Elena said admiringly as she looked down on the dishevelled Caucasian on the quay. 'Most of the passengers on these boats are geriatrics, so what a sight for sore eyes *he* is! Uh, uh, looks like trouble…'
Obviously convinced that he had almost missed the boat, the Sight For Sore Eyes picked up his holdall and hurried to the foot of the gangplank just as the first of the two Filipino stewards was about to step onto it with a heavy suitcase in each hand. The two men collided and were struggling to disentangle themselves when Ingrid's father stepped forward, grabbed the white man by the shoulder, threw him away from the gangplank, and bawled, 'How *dare* you come this late! The crew should have been on board hours ago. You're dismissed! On your way, you *Schwein*!'
The young man lowered his holdall to the ground and stared disbelievingly at Zweig. 'Swine…? Dismissed…? *Crew*…? What the hell do you mean? *I'm* not a member of the goddamned crew! I'm a tourist! A paying *passenger*!'
'You're a *passenger*?' Zweig queried, obviously not believing his own ears. 'You look like you belong in the engine room. What kind of boat *is* this?'
'Hey, hold *on* a minute,' the young man said, speaking in what was now clearly an American accent and melodramatically holding up his right hand with the fingers outspread. 'Just who the hell do – ?'
'The name is Zweig. *Wilhelm* Zweig! And I have no time for small talk. So step aside and let me board this boat
– which I happen to own.'
'Oh, great,' the American replied. 'Big deal! I'm *impressed*! The owner of the boat, no less. Well, just remember that I paid for this trip. I'm *supporting* you, buddy!'
Elena offered a low whistle of admiration for that comment, but Ingrid, when

she saw her father straightening his spine, held her breath and felt an unexpected rush of concern for the brash young American.
'Who *are* you?' her father growled. 'What's your name? *I want to know who you are*!'
'Remick,' the American replied, staring fearlessly at Zweig. 'The name's Remick. *Gerry* Remick! From New York City. And don't you forget it!'
Ingrid couldn't resist feeling admiration for the American as he grabbed his suitcase and resolutely ascended the gangplank, ignoring Zweig who fiercely observed his every move while opening and closing his ham fists.
Entering the gloomy reception area, the young man – named Gerry Remick, as Ingrid reminded herself – lowered his suitcase again, checked in with the purser, then glanced back over his shoulder to where Zweig, at the bottom of the gangplank, was suddenly galvanized back into action and bawled at his stewards, 'What are you staring at, you imbeciles? *Get that luggage on board*!'
The Filipino stewards rushed to obey as the American grinned impishly, then shook his head from side to side in a rueful manner.
'You people are on this boat as well?' he said. 'Oh, boy, I'm in heaven!'
Reaching out with his right hand, he said with childish pleasure, 'The name's Gerry. Gerry – '
'Remick,' Elena said, undulating like a scenic railway as she stepped forward to shake his outstretched hand. 'We heard it all from up here. I'm Elena, a friend to Mr Zweig; this is Hans, Mr Zweig's personal assistant; and this is his daughter, Ingrid. We're all *delighted* to meet you.'
'Whoops!' Gerry said. 'I'm sorry. I mean, I didn't know that Kraut, the old goat, was related to – '
'Don't worry,' Elena said, chewing gum, smiling flirtatiously. 'We understand perfectly. Are you going all the way downriver, to Cairo?'
'Yep.'
'That's terrific,' Elena said, taking a deep breath and releasing it again. 'Let's get together *real soon*.'
The attractively dishevelled American opened his mouth to reply, but before he could do so Elena had brushed past him and posed herself at the top of the gangplank, spreading her hands in a theatrical gesture of welcome to Zweig.
'And you?' Gerry said, staring directly at Ingrid in a way that made her feel pleasantly strange. 'You're that guy's… *daughter*?'

Ingrid helplessly shrank into herself. ‘Yes,’ she whispered, ‘I am.’
‘Well, don’t worry about it. We don’t pick our own parents. I mean, I’m not holding you responsible for his lousy behaviour. It’s the way of the world, right?’
When he grinned, Ingrid felt warm all over and slightly unreal. She tried to meet his gaze, to stay calm, but just blushed even more.
‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I suppose so.’
‘You have really sweet eyes behind those specs. And your shy smile’s a winner.’
‘Please stop that. You’re embarrassing me.’
‘Yeah, I can see that. Well, Ingrid, it’s nice to have you aboard. I hope we meet again soon.’ He glanced back over his shoulder and saw her father stepping onto the deck. ‘Jesus,’ he said, ‘I’d better get out of sight. Your dad’s bigger than I am.’
He nodded emphatically at her, then picked up his holdall and quickly departed, disappearing through the nearest hatch to go in search of his cabin. Sighing, feeling almost bereaved, Ingrid turned reluctantly to face her father and his tarty Elena.
‘Herr Zweig?’ the ship’s captain asked, stepping forward. ‘I am Captain Malraux. Please let me welcome you aboard the – ’
‘Yes, yes,’ Zweig responded in an irritable manner, contemptuously slapping aside the captain’s extended hand. ‘I am already sick to death of this filthy ship. Where are our cabins?’
‘*Excusez-moi*,’ the captain managed to respond, his voice breaking fearfully. ‘This way, Herr Zweig.’ He escorted them along a starboard passageway, then up to ‘D’ deck and their cabins. ‘This, Herr Zweig,’ he began at the first open door they came to, ‘is your master suite, which as you can see is – ’
‘*Oui, Monsieur*,’ Zweig interjected rudely. ‘I know what it is. I am not a halfwit, after all. So please go straight up to the bridge and get this boat on the move before any more American tourist scum can crawl aboard with the rats. *Au revoir, mon Capitaine*.’
The captain inched backwards, bowing repeatedly, then disappeared gratefully through a hatchway while the Filipino stewards sorted out the luggage, placing the bulk of it in Zweig’s master suite and the others in their respective cabins.
Ingrid had been hoping that her father would invite her into his cabin for a

discussion on her six-month stay in the sanatorium, but alas, such was not to be the case. Even as she thought to confess to having set the sanatorium on fire
– feeling that his anger could not be worse than his indifference – he opened his mouth, yawned ostentatiously, and said, ‘Thank God we are here at last. Now I must have my rest. I will see you this evening, my child, when dinner is served. *Elena, where are you?*’

Ingrid did not need to be told that Elena was already in the master suite, stretching out on the double bed, preparing to earn her keep; so, shuddering, she whispered agreement and hurried along the passageway to enter the adjoining cabin, her much smaller cabin. Closing the door carefully behind her, she sat on the edge of her narrow bed, where she sighed with relief.

Recovering from her hurt feelings, she was almost amused by the idea of her father imagining he could remain incognito on this boat; but then, when she thought of the young American she had met, her growing amusement gave way to a longing to see him again.

Young? Not really. Clearly, he was in his late twenties, just like she was. But he looked a lot younger, an intelligent naif, and that touched her oddly. She thought of his blue eyes, his innocent fearlessness, and wondered if he would even recognize her the next time they met.

Sighing again, she was about to lie down on the bed when the muffled growling of the boat’s engines made her twitch. Relaxing, she lit a cigarette, thought of the blazing sanatorium, then gazed out of her cabin window as the boat pulled away from the corniche. She saw the village of Aswan, white walls and green palm trees, receding and then slipping smoothly past, to give way to the desert.

Egypt , she thought. I *am in Egypt… And I don’t give a damn*.
Sweaty and exhausted, feeling lonely and unreal, she considered unpacking, couldn’t find the energy to do so, and instead stretched out on the narrow bed, closed her eyes and let herself drift away…
She visualized her dream lover, a darkly handsome, kind man; imagined him,

then *felt* him pressing upon her to obliterate pain and fear. He would touch her gently – as she was touching herself right now – and in so doing transport her through rapture, away from the real world. She saw him, almost felt him, was reaching out to him – and then he suddenly disappeared, melting magically back into the darkness, and was replaced by the image of her smirking father, who seemed to loom over her.

Even as she thought of him, she actually heard him – yes, in the adjoining cabin – and was brought back to reality by the sound of his head banging against the dividing bulkhead as he took his disgusting pleasures from Elena and groaned his instructions.

'That's it! Take it easy. Yes, yes, that's the way! Yes, Elena! *Sehr gut*!'

His head banged against the bulkhead again, a loud noise that shocked her, and she jerked upright, fighting to control her racing heart and prevent her cheeks from burning.

Planting her feet firmly on the floor, she stared through the porthole, saw the shimmering haze of the Egyptian afternoon turning into a crimson dusk. Her father's moans and groans faded away into silence, eventually, mercifully, but she still thought of being trapped with him on this boat for another five days.

It was a terrible thought.

However, just as she was about to plunge into a deep depression, she thought of Gerry Remick, that brash young American, remembered that he had flirted in a mischievous manner with her, and felt a warm rush of affection for him. Startled by her feelings, unable to shake him from her mind, feeling better each minute that she sat there thinking about him, she finally decided that she had to get out of the cabin and breathe some air on the top deck.

He might be up there, after all. In fact, he was almost certain to be up there. He would want to watch the boat leaving Aswan and heading along the great river, past the shifting sands of the desert.

Yes, of course he would. He wouldn't stay in his cabin. He was bound to be up there on the top deck, watching Egypt slip past the boat. He would be there at the railing, looking out, when she came up behind him…

She realized, then, how badly she wanted to see him, so stood up, put on her flat shoes, and hurried out of the cabin, heading with all haste for the top deck, for fresh air and freedom.

She did not immediately see Gerry. Instead, she saw – leaning against the railing of the top deck with a few other passengers, but turning his head to stare steadily at her, as if, indeed, he had been expecting her arrival – a man who appeared to be about sixty years old, but was oddly handsome, silver-haired and suntanned, his face remarkably unlined, his gelid eyes extremely bright and penetrating even from this distance.

His smile was not malicious, but seemed gently mocking, and the intensity of his gaze was such that it almost made her swoon in an unnatural, disturbing manner before releasing her by simply moving elsewhere.

At that moment she was convinced that the strange man at the boat's railing was deliberately redirecting her own mesmerized gaze – which, in obedience to him, came to rest in the opposite direction, where the American, Gerry Remick, still dishevelled but appealing, was leaning on the deck's protective brass railing, staring into the crimson sunset, his blue eyes almost certainly reflecting palm trees, sand dunes and darkening sky, before turning towards her, staring at her, focusing upon her, to give life to the thin line of his lips and encourage a melting smile.

'Gee,' he said to her in the cloudily pock-marked Egyptian twilight, 'it's the girl with the rainbow eyes and shy smile. Can I buy you a drink?'

Consumed with emotion just to see him, she nodded assent.

Chapter Five

Dusk over the desert was intoxicating. It was just such a mood that encouraged Gerry to stand at the top deck's protective railing during his first evening aboard and, gazing out over the darkening, whispering Nile river, quietly curse the fact that he hadn't been able to bring along his fatter books on ancient Egypt. Realizing that thinking about this too much was going to frustrate him greatly, he decided to return to his cabin and relax with a bottled beer and a dip into his book on quantum physics.

It didn't work out that way.

Turning his back to the railing, he saw Wilhelm Zweig's shy daughter, Ingrid, staring at him from across the deck, the light reflecting off her spectacles and making her look rather odd. She took a step towards him, then stopped, hesitating, glancing around her, and he realized that she wanted to speak to him, but couldn't quite manage it.
Normally awkward with people, he felt surprisingly at ease with her, and said, 'Gee! It's the girl with rainbow eyes and shy smile. Can I buy you a drink?'
She just stood there, embarrassed, then stepped out of the violent twilight, nervously rubbed her eyes with a finger stuck up under her spectacles, and eventually managed to nod as if in assent.
'Does that mean yes?' he asked her.
She nodded again.
'You're a real fancy talker,' he said, surprised by his instant ease with her. 'This conversation is red hot.'
That at least got a smile out of her. She moved a little closer, looking at him with sombre eyes magnified behind her spectacles. He didn't think she would come any closer, but that didn't bother him. He hadn't had a good sex life (he was too involved with his mind) and after all the groping and groaning, after his many romantic debacles, he was pleased to be in the company of someone even worse off than he was.
'You don't *mind* coming with me for a drink, do you? I mean, I don't want to *force* you.'
'No!' she exclaimed in a soft, breathless outburst that did his heart good. 'Of course not! I wouldn't say I wanted to come if I didn't mean it. I wouldn't do that at all.'
She seemed so intense he almost laughed, but something stopped him from doing so. It was something about her, a fragility, a naive, helpless honesty… He wasn't too sure *what* it was, but he sensed she'd hurt easily.
'You're first trip along the Nile, is it?' he asked, feeling stupid, not knowing what else to say.
'Yes,' she replied.
'Looking forward to it?'
'Yes,' she said again, thus reminding him that conversation with her might not to too easy and that a drink of the alcoholic variety might loosen her tongue.

‘Well,’ he said, all too aware of his own histrionic sighing, ‘I suppose we’re wasting time standing here talking, so let’s go find the bar.’
‘Yes,’ she said. ‘If you want to.’
He knew she was shy, but started thinking her strange when she finally stepped close to him and asked, in a melodramatic whisper, ‘Do you know that man standing farther along? On your right. The one with silvery hair.’
When he looked, no such person was in sight. ‘*What* man?’ he asked her.
She stared along the deck, furrowed her brow in consternation, her eyes blinking repeatedly behind the thick-rimmed spectacles, displaying her bewilderment.
‘He was there,’ she said. ‘I swear it. A handsome man with silvery hair. He looked at me when I came out on deck… and then looked at you.’
‘I promise you, I didn’t arrange that. I had nothing to do with it. Or with him.’
‘You’re sure?’
‘Yeah, I’m sure.’
Visibly shivering, and again blinking as if dazed, she studied the other passengers wandering to and fro in the humid air of the Egyptian evening, then returned her gaze to him, staring at him with an air of confusion and rising embarrassment.
‘You won’t believe me,’ she said. ‘It sounds silly, I know, but that man was definitely there, leaning on the railing, and when he stared at me, a very direct stare, with extremely intense, grey eyes, I almost swooned on the spot. No,’ she hastened to add, obviously sensing his scepticism, ‘I don’t mean it was like a fainting fit… It was more like some kind of brief trance… A sort of wide-awake dream in which he controlled me. And then he smiled – a peculiar smile, as if he didn’t quite know how to – and then turned his gaze on you… And I swear that by simply doing that, he made me look at you as well. He caused me to *see* you.’
‘Really?’
‘Yes, really.’
Already attracted to her, and intrigued by the possibility of having a mesmerist aboard, Gerry gave her an encouraging smile, then tried to look serious.
‘Gee, that’s real strange. I mean, it’s pretty far out. But maybe you just had a little turn caused by the heat and humidity – which, after all, you’re not used

to – and that silvery-haired guy probably had nothing to do with it and has doubtless just disappeared into the bar or back to his cabin. So if we go, as we agreed, for that drink, he might be in the bar.'
'Yes,' she responded, almost fearfully. 'I suppose that's a good idea.'

Chapter Six

Gerry thought it was a *terrific* idea and couldn't wait to get there, so he took hold of her elbow and guided her along the deck, past where the mystery man had reportedly stood, and then down a single flight of steps to the boat's only bar. Though Ingrid in one sense looked plain, Gerry still found her sexy, a bit vulnerable, sort of helpless, and he was conscious, *very* conscious, of her warmth and suppressed femininity.

'He's not here,' Ingrid said, her face falling as she glanced into the bar and saw only the normal folk.
'Oh, really?' Gerry responded. 'Well, don't worry. He's probably just gone back to his cabin to read a good book.'
'It's our first night aboard ship,' Ingrid insisted. 'You'd think he'd want to explore it.'
'He's not as young as you. I mean, you *did* say he had silvery hair, so he must be well past it.'
'Yes,' she murmured with no great deal of confidence. 'I suppose that's the answer.'
'Anyway, stop worrying about it,' he said after ordering a brandy for her, a Stella beer for himself, and indicating the nearest vacant seats. 'You probably just imagined it. You're in a foreign country, a very strange and *different* kind of country, and that can be disorientating and play tricks with the mind. I mean, the guy probably just smiled at you in a friendly manner – sort of welcoming you aboard – and you just imagined all the rest. Don't you think so?'
'Well… maybe.'
Wondering what had *really* disturbed her, finding himself increasingly sympathetic to her chronically shy nature, and realizing that had it not been for her pinned-up hair, thick-framed spectacles and old-fashioned clothing, she would be pretty attractive, he decided diplomatically to change the

subject.
‘Well,’ he started, ‘at least we’ve left Aswan. Now the sky will be visible.’
Although this was true, the boat had only travelled a short way along the river and then anchored again, at a dilapidated riverside quay, where it would spend the night before embarking on its two-day journey to Luxor first thing in the morning. So facing Ingrid over a low table in the small bar – which was now filled with mildly drunken, mostly geriatric fellow-passengers – Gerry tried to distract her from her neurotic concerns by pointing through the panoramic window at the sand dunes silhouetted by the starlit splendour of the Egyptian night and showing her the different constellations in the sky.
‘I know the sky like the palm of my hand,’ he said, ‘and that’s not *all* I know. I mean, I study a lot.’
‘You go to university?’
‘I did,’ he replied. ‘But they threw me out. I was studying divinity at Harvard, but got sidetracked into related subjects, such as unexplained phenomena and the occult.’
‘Unexplained phenomena?’
‘*You* know – flying saucers, things falling out of the sky, haunted houses, the magical properties of pyramids, and so on.’
‘Oh,’ she said meekly. ‘How interesting.’
‘It is, Ingrid. Believe me.’
‘You must be really bright.’
‘Yeah,’ he agreed, suddenly feeling really dim. ‘Which just means I talk a lot.’
He had always been socially inadequate, emotionally distant, distracted, and he still hadn’t learned to speak to women as if they were human. He was trying right this minute, he really was, but he kept saying the wrong things.
‘It’s a relief to meet an intelligent woman,’ he said, ‘instead of a dumb blonde. Now let’s have another drink.’
Covering his confusion and regaining his confidence with a second round of drinks, he soon found himself telling her all about his life in New York and, after that, elaborated on his fascination with ancient Egypt and its possible relationship to inexplicable phenomena, including the rumoured magical properties of certain of the pyramids, most notably the Great Pyramid at Giza, to where they were headed.
‘And so,’ he concluded, ‘that’s why I came to Egypt – to solve all these

historical mysteries and then write about them.'
'You're going to write a *book*?'
'Nothing to it. I'm a writer to the manner born. The problem with most writers is that they write impressively about nothing in particular. But me, I have a pretty high IQ and that means I can think straight. So I've come here for research before writing a great book.'
'I think that's truly admirable,' Ingrid said.
'So do I, Ingrid.'
Having explained himself, and not wanting to hog the whole conversation, he asked her if *she* believed in inexplicable phenomena. She coughed into a tiny fist, finished her drink, looked distinctly uncomfortable, then muttered, 'I don't really know what to say. I mean, I've never *personally* taken an interest in such things… but my father, strangely enough, does. He is, I believe, making this trip for that very reason.'
'Really? No kidding! Well, I never would have guessed it. I mean, your dad doesn't seem the sort to have such interests. In fact, he seems like a strictly materialistic, very powerful guy who scares the hell out of everyone around him. He even seems to scare *you*.'
'Yes,' she agreed sadly, 'he does.'
'I hate to say it, since he's your dad, but I nearly punched him out down on that jetty. It was just his age stopped me.'
'I'm glad you didn't try it, Gerry. I mean, he's really very *strong* for his age.'
'He's all blubber and hot air… Christ, I'm sorry. I didn't mean that. I…'
'It's alright,' Ingrid said. 'Just don't make the mistake of thinking he's all hot air. I mean, try not to antagonize him. In fact, keeping out of his way as much as possible would be recommended. He's big, but it's not blubber. He's really very strong. And he has a really violent streak that can get out of control. You've already antagonized him once; try not to do it again.'
'I can't believe you're serious.'
'I am.'
'Is he violent towards you?'
'No, not really. It's just that…' She hesitated and blushed, as if embarrassed by what he had said, then blurted out, 'Could I have another drink?'
'Sure, Ingrid. Naturally.'
Grateful for an escape from his *faux pas*, he bought two more drinks, not without dwelling upon the fact the timid Ingrid Zweig was on her third neat

brandy. Returning to the table with fresh drinks in his hands, he was surprised at how much he wanted to see her after a five-minute absence.
She certainly was plain, sitting there at the low table, framed by the exotic Egyptian night (which was itself framed by the panoramic window), with her shoulders hunched in a pitifully self-effacing manner. But when he gave her the fresh brandy, she licked surprisingly sensual lips, rubbed her flushed cheeks, confessed that she didn't normally drink alcohol, then sniffed back threatened tears.
'Oh, shit,' Gerry blurted out, thinking it was his fault again. 'I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to – '
'No, no,' she insisted, to his great relief. 'It's not you. It's just…'
'Your dad?'
She sighed forlornly. 'Yes.'
'He's not violent towards you, but he mistreats you.'
'Yes… Yes, he does.'
'How?'
'He makes me feel that he despises me. He pretty much ignores me. He keeps me at a distance by either sending me to private boarding schools or sanatoriums. So I only see him once or twice a year. And when I'm due to visit him, to stay with him for a while, I always dread it.'
'Why?'
'He makes me the object of his mockery. He humiliates me in front of his staff. He deliberately shames me by being bold with his mistresses when I'm in their presence. Like he does with Elena. And before Elena, when we were on trips together, like this one, he even brought professional whores to our hotels, especially when we shared large suites with separate bedrooms, which he could, of course, afford. He would take the whores into his bedroom, knowing I could hear everything through the walls and would be mortified.'
'Jesus, Ingrid, that's awful.'
'He does it to embarrass me. To make me feel ashamed. He even did it this evening on this boat. Making love to Elena in the adjoining cabin, knowing I could hear everything they were doing through the wall of *my* cabin. It just made me feel sick.'
'I don't blame you,' Gerry said, feeling outraged on her behalf, drawn even closer to her by her suffering, wanting to make amends for it by smashing Wilhelm Zweig to a pulp, despite Ingrid's warning. 'Is that why you…?'

But he felt too embarrassed to finish his sentence, to ask the vital question, until she looked directly at him and quietly said, ‘Yes?’
‘Well, I don’t want to offend you, but…’
‘Yes?’ she said again.
‘You said he always sent you away to private boarding schools and sanatoriums, so why…?’
He still couldn’t bring himself to ask the question, so she helped him out.
‘The sanatoriums?’ she said.
Gerry sighed with relief, though he felt himself blushing. ‘Yeah, right,’ he said.
‘I shouldn’t be telling you this,’ she said. ‘I mean, I hardly know you.’
‘Forget I asked,’ he said, instantly feeling flustered again. ‘I’ve no right. I just…’
‘Wanted to know. Well, that’s natural, Gerry. And I *want* to tell you. I like you. I already feel I can trust you.’
‘You can,’ Gerry said emphatically, pleased to be told that she liked him, but trying not to show it. ‘Get it all of your chest.’
The mention of her chest made *both* of them blush, but Ingrid then offered a pained smile and said, ‘Oh, well, confession time… I had a few problems, Gerry. Mainly because of the way my father treated me, often making me hate myself, even more than I felt he hated me. So I did a few things. Idiotic things. Bad things. Compulsive behaviour. Cutting myself. Shoplifting. Then stealing from the other girls in my boarding schools. And finally, becoming something of a pyromaniac, setting fire to my rooms in the sanatoriums. It was my way of taking revenge against my father, of embarrassing him as he’d so often embarrassed me, maybe also trying to get his attention, but it only led to a variety of psychiatric treatments and, of course, to a series of sanatoriums. So there you are, Gerry. Now you know. You’re having drinks with a bona-fide lunatic.’
‘You’re not remotely a lunatic, Ingrid. You’re as sane as I am.’
‘Well, you might as well know that when in the last sanatorium, which I hated, just before leaving to join my father on his boat in the South Atlantic, prior to flying on to here, I deliberately set fire to a wicker basket in my room, setting the whole room on fire. What’s that, if not lunacy?’
‘It sounds more like desperation,’ Gerry said. ‘I mean, you said it yourself. You were having your revenge, hoping to embarrass him the way he’d

embarrassed you, and also desperately trying to get his attention, even if negative. I mean, any kind of attention, even his anger, would have been better than nothing. So that's what you were doing.'
Gerry realized, then, that every minute in her presence was making him feel even more masculine and in command. This pleasant feeling was only enhanced when she glanced distractedly around her, as if seeking escape, then wiped tears from her cheeks, readjusted the spectacles on her nose, and eventually, as if releasing a great deal of anxiety, blurted out, 'I hate him! I *despise* him… And I'm frightened to death of him.'

Chapter Seven

Ingrid sank back into her chair, folded her hands in her lap, turned them this way and that, examining them, trying to hide from his gaze. Touched by that sight, unexpectedly concerned for her, Gerry reached across the table, laid his hand on her shoulder, and said, 'It's okay. There's no need to be embarrassed. Why not tell me about it?'

Clearly disturbed, she looked left and right, studied her hands again, then said, almost whispering, 'My father was a Nazi Wolfcub and soldier during the Second World War – '

'That's nothing to be ashamed of,' Gerry interjected helpfully. 'I mean, you can't be responsible for the sins of your parents, so you shouldn't worry about that.'

'No,' she said, shaking her head from side to side, 'that's not the problem. I only mention it because it has a bearing on everything else. According to what relatives told me, as a Nazi Wolfcub he was trained to bait the Jews, had actually killed by the time he was sixteen, and then, during the fall of Berlin in 1945, when he was eighteen, he was captured and sexually abused by Soviet troops. Initially traumatized by the experience, he seems to have defeated the trauma shortly after the war by scavenging for survival in the ruins of Berlin, becoming a black marketeer, then pimping for Allied troops, eventually moving on to fullscale crime, including extortion and murder. In other words, he had become totally ruthless and, according to some reports,

sadistic. And he *is* sadistic, which is what led to the rest of it.'

'Okay, Ingrid, go on.'

She sighed, turning her hands this way and that, keeping her gaze fixed upon them.
'By 1948, when he was twenty-one, he was quite well off financially and had learned to handle himself socially, with fine clothes and good manners. Because of this, he managed to marry the wealthy daughter of an aristocratic Berlin couple, thus ensuring himself some very useful connections during the post-war boom. Then, in 1950, his wife *and* her parents were killed instantly when they were involved in a hit-and-run car-crash. However, according to certain relatives, the police later located the driver of the truck involved in the crash, and he swore that he'd been paid by an unknown person to arrange that crash. That unknown person was never found – but the leading suspect was the man who later became my father.'
'Wilhelm Zweig.'
'Yes.'
'You mean, he deliberately arranged for the killing of his own wife and in-laws?'
'Yes, Gerry. Exactly.'
Her sigh was like a light breeze through long grass: a sad and lonesome refrain.
'Go on,' he prodded her gently.
'Shortly after that so-called accident,' she continued, studying her ragged fingernails and not pleased by the sight of them, 'my father fled from the law in Berlin, taking with him the wealth he'd inherited from his dead wife and inlaws, as well as a great collection of the art treasures that he'd purchased from those Nazis who'd stolen them from formerly wealthy Jews. Eventually finding his way to Argentina, he married another woman, my mother, the daughter of Protestant Germans who'd left Germany many years before.'
'What in hell could she have seen in *Zweig*?' Gerry asked her – none too subtly, as he instantly realized.
Ingrid just shrugged forlornly. 'I don't know. Maybe he just overwhelmed her. Certainly, having heard certain stories about my father's past activities, my grandparents tried to prevent the marriage; however, they *also* died in

mysterious circumstances – and not long after their passing, possibly when still in shock, my mother married my father.'
'The shock,' Gerry said emphatically. 'That would certainly explain it. You don't marry a monster like that unless you're out on a limb.'
He saw the hurt in her eyes and knew he'd said the wrong thing again, but covered up for it by reaching across the table and taking hold of her shoulder, shaking it gently.
'Hey, I'm sorry,' he said. 'I shouldn't have said that. I mean, he's still your dad, after all. Sometimes I could cut my own tongue out. I mean, I…'
'It's alright, Gerry. It doesn't matter. I know what you mean.'
'What about your mother?' he asked to change the subject. 'Do you even remember her?'
'Just. My father became some kind of mercenary, involved in a lot of dirty work for the dictators of Argentina and Paraguay – the extermination of the Ache Indians, the murder of political opponents, and so forth. My mother despised him for it, but her contempt only encouraged him to abuse her terribly. Eventually, she died at home in Cologne, after a long, painful illness, the cause of which was never diagnosed because my father refused to let her go to hospital. She was always treated at home by *his* personal physician, a former Nazi doctor, and then, when she died, he had her cremated before an autopsy could be conducted. He had friends in high places by that time, so he could get away with that. Other friends and relatives, however, reportedly expressed serious doubts about the whole business.'
'Doubts? What doubts?'
Ingrid shrugged again. 'I don't know. I try not to think about it. It's not something I want to think about. It's all in the past now.'
Her voice trailed off into a lengthy, pained silence. Now Gerry wanted to protect her, to make amends for all her suffering, and found himself squeezing her shaking hands and drawing one of them to him.
'You might as well tell me the rest,' he said. 'You might as well let it out.'
'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, I think so…' She stuck a finger under her spectacles, rubbed her tears away, sniffed and looked down at the table, then said softly, 'By the time of my mother's death, my father had already been very successful at using his inherited money and stolen works of art as the basis for ever-expanding wealth and power; and with the passing of my mother, whose inheritance he also claimed, he just doubled his activities in that

direction.'
'And you're that bastard's daughter!' Gerry said sympathetically.
'Yes,' Ingrid said shamefully. 'Unfortunately I am. And I've been in and out of mental institutions for that very reason.'
Deeply pained to hear all this, Gerry squeezed the hand that was folded in his and said, 'That's okay. Don't worry.'
She nodded, offered a grateful smile and sniffed back more threatening tears. 'Like I said, my father seemed to despise me as much as he had my mother, so he sent me to those boarding schools, rather than have me around him, repeatedly humiliated me when I *was* around him, and, contrary to what I told you before, beat me and locked me in my bedroom if I annoyed him.'
'That bastard! The shit!'
But this time *she* squeezed *his* hand, as if pacifying him. 'So now you can see why, by the time I was an adolescent, I had a lot of neuroses, most of which were probably caused by my mother's premature death and, even more, by my father's obvious contempt for me.'
At that moment, Gerry could happily have killed Wilhelm Zweig, but he didn't let her know that. Instead, he simply nodded, hardly knowing what to say, feeling a deep ache inside while she continued her sorry tale.
'More than that,' she said. 'Since he's become a power unto himself – wheeling and dealing internationally in finance, art, property and, particularly, the sale of armaments to all and sundry – he's also grown increasingly megalomaniacal, and now seems to be dreaming of the day when he'll personally resurrect his so-called Eternal Third Reich, as envisaged, so he told me, by the only man he's ever revered above himself, namely, his beloved *Führer*, Adolf Hitler.' She paused, took a deep breath, then said in a sorrowful tone of voice, 'So… that's my father.' After watching her slip her thick-framed spectacles down the bridge of her nose, wipe a few tears from her eyes, then slide the spectacles back into position, Gerry said, 'Jesus Christ, what a story! What a *bastard* your dad is!'
He could scarcely credit the extent of his own outrage, was shaken by the depth of his feeling for her, his swiftly growing desire to hold her and breathe new life into her. He remembered the pain he had felt when his father had died, vividly recalled the horror, grief and anger it had brought him; but the passing of Ingrid's mother must have been even worse, since it was possible that her death had actually been murder and that her father had done it. Yes,

she had lost her mother just as he, Gerry, had lost his father, but in her case the haunting was more acute because of what remained unresolved.
When he thought of that, his heart went out to her, taking part of him with it. He didn't want to believe it, was frightened to feel it happen, and was denying it to himself in the turmoil of his thoughts when the blond young German, Hans, to whom he had been introduced when boarding the ship, offered a welcome distraction by entering the bar. Wearing a white shirt and black trousers, he looked as handsome as a movie star. Feeling instantly threatened, Gerry wondered just how close Hans and Ingrid were.
'I'm sorry to interrupt,' Hans said to Ingrid, in what sounded like a genuinely apologetic tone of voice, 'but your father sent me to remind you that dinner is about to be served and to escort you, if you're agreeable, to his cabin.'
'Oh,' Ingrid said meekly, 'I forgot.'
'After dinner, he wants you to go to bed. He is concerned,' Hans explained, 'that lack of sleep, combined with the heat, will spoil the trip for you. He's only concerned for your welfare.'
It was clear to Gerry that the facade of concern camouflaged a command – and Ingrid, blushing as if embarrassed that he should witness her subtle subjugation, yet clearly unable to resist the thinly veiled order, thanked him for the drinks and obediently stood up, preparing to follow Hans out of the bar, much to Gerry's disgust.
'Are you sure you don't want another drink?' he asked her.
She blushed an even deeper red, then demurely lowered her eyes. 'Thank you,' she murmured, 'but no.'
Gerry stared steadily at her, willing her to stay and have dinner with him, but she merely smiled wanly at him.
'If I happen to see that guy tomorrow,' Gerry said in defeat, 'I'll check him out for you.'
Hans glanced at Ingrid, his brow furrowed anxiously. 'A… *man*?' he asked.
'It was no one special,' Ingrid said too quickly. 'It was just one of the other passengers, on the top deck… a nice, elderly man… He smiled at me.'
'I trust you didn't smile back.'
'No, I didn't. I promise.'
Hans nodded, relieved. 'Good night, Mr Remick.'
'Oh, sure,' Gerry said, trying to sound laconic. '*Guten nacht.*'
Hans flushed, turned away, held Ingrid's elbow and led her out of the bar,

leaving Gerry not only with a virulent detestation of Wilhelm Zweig, but with an uncomfortable dose of jealousy at the suspicion that there might be something between Ingrid and that handsome, oddly impassive young German who had taken her from him.

Finishing his drink, he got up and left the bar, stood by the railing of the deck outside, and studied the great umbrella of stars that glittered gloriously above the dark desert and whispering black Nile. He was filled with protective love, with the urge to be a knight errant, and although he knew the reason for this, he couldn't really believe it.

Was he in love? Of course not! That wouldn't make any sense. He had simply responded to a kindred soul, to a form of suffering that he recognized, to the fact she, Ingrid, just like him, had lost the parent she most loved. His heart had gone out to her – certainly, that was natural – because of the singular nature of her suffering and the doubts she must live with. That's what it was all about: her tale of woe had stirred up his emotions. He was filled with pity because of what she had told him, and now he felt protective.

Love? He couldn't love her if he tried. That was strictly for the birds.
Yet later that night, sleeping alone in his narrow bed, he dreamed about the rather drab and timid Ingrid Zweig… though the Ingrid in his dream was neither of those, but completely, exquisitely naked… and passionately carnal. He awoke at dawn, wanting her.

Chapter Eight

The first leg of the two-day journey was the cruise from the magnificent rock amphitheatre of Aswan, past darkening granite and sweeping vistas of parched desert, to the *wadi* of Kom Ombo. There, where the ancient ruins of the Roman-Grecian Temple, perched about thirty feet above a bend in the river, rose against a flawless azure sky from yellow sand dunes, green grass and scorched trees, Gerry found himself standing at the boat's railing with Ingrid, aware that he wanted her there – real close, within arm's reach.

'Fantastic, isn't it?' he said.

‘Yes, Gerry, it is.’
‘This is what we came to Egypt to see, right?’ ‘Right, Gerry.’
‘It was dedicated to two deities. The falcon god

Haroeris and the crocodile god Sobek. When we get up there, we’ll see the columns of the hypostyle hall, plus lots of reliefs and carved inscriptions.’

‘You remembered that information from your guide books?’
‘Sure I did. So what? I tend to remember everything I read. And I’m a freak for guide books.’
He quoted a lot from his guide books because it filled the silence brought on by his fear that he might say something too sentimental. He hadn’t been himself all day, and now he felt pleasantly flustered in her presence, his mind filled with soft thoughts. He wanted to say nice things to her, catch her smile, let it warm him, but he didn’t know how to go about it, was too embarrassed to try it. He wasn’t used to feeling this way, couldn’t really believe in it, and found himself skirting around his own emotions like a beginner on ice skates.
‘Anyway,’ he said, covering up for his confusion and wishing he could sort out his emotions, ‘this sure is a sight to see. That’s why I’m surprised that your dad, if he’s so interested, still hasn’t left his posh cabin.’
‘He’s probably seen all this before. He’s been just about everywhere, after all.’
‘Then why did he come here in the first place?’
‘It’s something to do with antiques, I believe. He was hoping to meet someone aboard ship, but I don’t think he has.’
‘How can he, if he doesn’t leave his cabin?’
‘He doesn’t *have* to leave his cabin,’ she replied with a touch of weariness. ‘He gets Hans to do that for him. I know that Hans, apart from keeping his eye on me, is trying to identify the man they’re looking for.’
‘They *don’t know* who they’re looking for?’
‘No. I think they’ve reason to believe he’s on board this boat, but have no way of recognizing him or knowing exactly which of the male passengers is him. They were probably tipped off about him by someone else – possibly another dealer in antiques.’
‘Yeah – *if* it’s antiques. And the man they’re looking for *could* have been the man who was watching you last night – the one who smiled at you. Except,

of course, that he almost hypnotized you, which might make him *too* odd.'
She smiled at that, adjusted the spectacles on her nose, then visibly shivered, looking very confused, and glanced over her shoulder, along the deck, her eyes widening considerably.
'Oh, dear,' she whispered.
Turning around to scan the crowded open deck, Gerry saw who she was looking at. It was a silvery-haired man, unusually handsome for his age and somehow distinguished, gazing at the spectacular ruins above the Nile, his eyes protected by sunglasses.
'That's him,' Ingrid said.
Gerry studied the man carefully, hoping to see something unusual, but seeing only a tall, athletically slim, silvery-haired male who had the air of a born aristocrat and wore clothing to match. A man of means, for sure.
'That guy has money,' Gerry said. 'You can tell just to look at him. He's wealthy and has an air of authority, like he's someone important.'
'He's rather handsome for his age,' Ingrid said. 'A sort of Cary Grant type.'
'Sophisticated.'
'Distinguished.'
'Could be royalty.'
'He's someone important, I'm pretty sure.'
'You betcha,' Gerry said.
However, even as Gerry was offering this agreeable opinion, the unknown man, as if sensing that he was being observed, turned his head quite deliberately to stare first at Ingrid, then, after removing his sunglasses, directly at Gerry, his gaze steady and, even from this distance, clearly intense.
For a moment, a very *strange* moment, Gerry felt that he was going to faint – or, more precisely, that he was falling into a trance – but the feeling passed away as quickly as it had come, leaving him normal once more, if a little confused.
'What the hell…?' he began.
'Yes?' Ingrid said.
'Sorry, I just felt a bit odd there. Felt as if I was going to faint, but it soon passed away. Felt it as soon as that guy looked at me. A really *weird* feeling. What about you?'
'I don't know what you're talking about, Gerry. I felt nothing at all. Maybe you're not used to the heat.'

‘I’m used to the heat, little lady. I can take the heat.’
‘Then maybe you just imagined it, Gerry.’
‘Yeah, maybe you’re right.’
Getting a grip on himself, he shook his head from side to side and looked up again, but the man simply smiled pleasantly at him, almost as if he knew him, then turned away and looked beyond the quay below to where the rustred, crumbling columns of the ancient temple dominated a brilliant sky.
Determined to speak to the man, and assuming that he was about to join the others on the sight-seeing trip, Gerry stuck close to Ingrid when they disembarked and made the short walk along the corniche, past dilapidated tenement buildings, ramshackle stalls and Arab vendors, to the magnificent columns of the ancient temple. But as they mingled with the other sweating tourists in the fierce heat, it soon became obvious that their quarry wasn’t amongst them.
‘He must still be on the boat,’ Ingrid said, her brow furrowed in thought as they stood together near the reliefs in the outer passage of the temple.
‘Right, Ingrid. Obviously.’
‘I mean, the clothes he was wearing,’ Ingrid said, ‘were not the kind of clothes you would wear if going sight-seeing in this heat.’
‘Oh?’
‘He was wearing a suit with shirt and tie.’
‘And polished shoes,’ Gerry said.
‘Exactly,’ Ingrid said.
‘So he’s either in the bar, having a drink and reading a book, or he’s back in his cabin, having a rest.’
‘He certainly looked the sensible type,’ Ingrid said.
‘Not like us,’ Gerry retorted.
Yet despite his joking, he was feeling odd vibrations. Some of these were caused by Ingrid, who was turning him upside down, but the rest had to do with the way she had behaved back on the open deck when she’d again seen the geriatric with the silvery hair and hypnotic eyes. For a brief moment, there, she had seemed like a woman in a trance.
Maybe that man *had* hypnotized her. He had certainly made *Gerry* feel strange. And now Gerry was feeling distinctly nervous, if not for himself, then for Ingrid. That man had clearly been watching them – him and Ingrid – yet so far he’d only been seen on the boat’s upper deck, not anywhere else.

This made Gerry even more uneasy.
He determined to speak to the mystery man the next time he ran into him.
‘The way he smiled at us,’ he now said to Ingrid. ‘That was a tease, a sort of come-on. I don’t know what he’s playing at.’
‘He kind of scares me,’ she confessed.
‘Why?’
‘I don’t know.’
‘I’m going to speak to him the next time we see him. I’ll just ask him what’s cooking. We might be imagining this whole thing, so let’s at least have it out.’
‘That seems sensible, Gerry.’
She didn’t sound like she meant it, but he knew she was just nervous, and this knowledge just made him even more determined to speak to the man.
However, he was soon frustrated again, when, during the subsequent afternoon voyage to Idfu, past cultivated fields, earth-brown shore, Arab women doing their laundry on the muddy banks, and donkeys and cattle drinking from the river, the man was not to be seen anywhere on the boat.
Nor was he to be seen at the noisy Egyptian-style *galabiyeh* party given that evening, to the delight of the many other silvery-haired passengers, most of whom seemed to have more stamina than Gerry and Ingrid.
‘He’s vanished again,’ Gerry said in frustration. ‘He sure as hell must sleep an awful lot.’
‘You think so?’
‘Yeah. I mean, what else could it be?’
‘He might not even be one of the passengers. He might be a ghost.’
‘You believe in ghosts, Ingrid?’
She smiled. ‘I don’t know.’
‘If you ever see a ghost, let me know. I mean, I’m into that subject. In the meantime, I just want a chance to talk to that guy.’
‘He could be dangerous,’ Ingrid said.

Chapter Nine

The following morning, he thought his chance might have come when he saw the man leaning once more on the railing, observing the hungover passengers making their way wearily down the gangplank, en route to an exploration of

the great temple of Horus, at Idfu. But before he could get to him, the man turned away and disappeared through a hatchway; and later, when Gerry looked for him among the many other passengers, as, sweating profusely and rendered featureless in the heat-haze, they swarmed around the massive pharaonic walls, pylons and colonnades of the temple, the man was nowhere to be seen.
'I can't imagine why he's on this boat,' Ingrid said,

squeezing Gerry's hand affectionately as they stood together by the inside wall of the base of an immense pylon, studying the inscribed scene of the marriage celebrations of Horus and Hathor. 'He hasn't been on a single sight-seeing trip yet. He hasn't once left the boat.'

'Neither has your dad,' Gerry responded, leading her up onto the sun roof where the ceremony of the Union with the Solar disc was celebrated. '*He* hasn't been seen since he boarded, so why not our mystery man?'

'My dad's a different cattle of fish. He wouldn't be seen dead with what he deems to be the common riffraff – the paying passengers – and on top of that, he hates coloured people, particularly Arabs.'

'Your dad hates me and I'm white. I mean, that bastard hates *everyone*.'
'Yes,' she agreed, dabbing beads of sweat from her nose, her slim body distorted in the rising heat-waves, a light breeze beating at her. 'That's true enough.'
'At least he's got his sexy blonde mistress. She must make him feel young again.'
'You think Elena's attractive?'
'Yeah. *No*! I mean, she's not *really* attractive. She's just… *sexy* in a sort of… Oh, God, I've just said the wrong thing again.'
'It's alright,' Ingrid said, obviously hurt and trying unsuccessfully to hide the fact. 'I'm sure most men would respond the same way. She has that effect on them.'
'Not on me,' Gerry said unconvincingly as they left the great hypostyle hall, stepped into the scorching sunlight, and crossed the dust-blown colonnaded forecourt, passing other tourists and Arab guides. 'I didn't mean it that way. I

mean, she's sexy in a sort of whorish way. Not my type at all.'
'Oh? So what's your type?'
'The quiet type. The modest type. I like my girls to be modest in speech and dress, as well as slim, just like you.'
'Is that some kind of compliment?'
'I only deal in facts. But why am *I* being grilled? What about that handsome bastard, Hans Mayer? The ski instructor who fancies you.'
'He's not a ski instructor and he doesn't fancy me, Gerry. He's simply my dad's personal assistant and has to keep his eye on me.'
'Why?'
'Because my dad is concerned about who I talk to – which is why Hans is watching us right now.'
Gerry *was* aware of the fact that everywhere he and Ingrid had been together, Hans had been there as well, keeping a discreet distance away but rarely losing sight of them. Now, when he glanced past the soaring colonnades of the great temple, he saw that same handsome German, his blond hair windblown, turning away to gaze with studied attention at the river flowing thirty feet below them, past fields of green sugar cane and parched, dusty soil.
'Son of a bitch!'
'Pardon?' Ingrid said.
'I'm starting to feel that we're being watched by everyone.'
'You look funny when you're angry.'
'I'm not angry. I'm just annoyed. And I really want to talk to that mystery man before he gets on my nerves.'
In the event, their mystery man *did* materialize again, early that evening, shortly after the boat had stopped at the riverbank farming village of Isna and was passing through the lock, prior to cruising farther downstream to Luxor. Gerry was leaning beside Ingrid on the railing of the open deck, looking down on the palm-fringed village with its peeling, red-rust walls, its many camels and heaps of sugar cane, when again he felt as if he was about to faint, or, perhaps, fall into a trance.
Recovering quickly, but impelled by an inexplicable conviction, he glanced back over his shoulder, through the panoramic window of the bar… and saw their mystery man seated at one of the tables inside, his sunglasses resting on the table, his intense gaze and enigmatic smile disturbingly clear.

Startled that he had so strongly sensed the presence of the man staring at him, Gerry took a deep breath, squeezed Ingrid's hand, and said, 'To hell with the lock. Let's go and speak to that guy.'
'I don't want to,' Ingrid said.
'We have to,' Gerry insisted, and then, lying deliberately, added: 'At least to reassure ourselves that he's perfectly normal.'
He wasn't too sure if the mystery man *was* perfectly normal; nevertheless, he practically dragged a reluctant Ingrid into the bar.

Chapter Ten

Deciding to get it over with as soon as possible, while he still had the courage, which he surely now needed, Gerry ordered both of them a drink – the Nubian *Karkade* for Ingrid, a Stella beer for himself – then, after a rather theatrical study of the general area, which was otherwise empty, nodded casually at the silvery-haired man seated at one of the tables and said, 'Hi. Do you mind if we join you? You seem all alone there.'
'One is never alone in Egypt,' the man replied in a

velvety tone of voice. 'The whole of human history is here… But, yes, please do join me.'

Taking a chair at the low table, directly opposite his quarry and with an uneasy Ingrid between them, Gerry was relieved to note that up close the man, handsome, suntanned, wearing immaculate white shirt, black trousers and shoes, seemed perfectly normal, other than having a youthfulness belied by his silvery hair and possessing an unusually steady grey gaze.

The man placed his gin and tonic back on the table, then offered his right hand.
'Saint-Germain,' he said softly. '*Count* SaintGermain.'
The quiet pomposity of the introduction, as well as the anachronistic nature of the title, took Gerry by surprise. He was also confused, as he repeated the name in his head, by his conviction that he had heard of it before, though didn't know where or when.
'A *count*?' he said, taking hold of that outstretched hand and observing that

there were no rings on its fine fingers. ‘I’m common Gerry Remick, from New York City, and my friend here is Ingrid Zweig.’
‘You are German, of course,’ the Count said, holding Ingrid’s hand lightly in his own, as if weighing it, or about to kiss it. ‘I myself am of German descent – my family originated in Freiburg – but I haven’t actually resided there in years.’
‘Where *do* you live?’ Ingrid asked.
‘Here, there and everywhere,’ the Count said, releasing her hand and indicating the world outside the panoramic window. ‘I have travelled much in my lifetime.’
‘For work,’ Gerry asked, ‘or pleasure?’
‘A little of both,’ the Count replied, without being more specific, then he studied Ingrid with a rather odd intensity. Eventually, as if the silence had made him realize what he was doing, he offered a wintry smile. ‘You are travelling together?’ he asked.
‘No,’ Gerry said. ‘We just met here on the boat. I’m travelling alone, but Ingrid’s with her father and some other friends.’
‘Ah, yes, Herr Zweig. I think I saw him when you were all coming aboard, but have not seen him since.’
‘He’s like you. He doesn’t leave his cabin much.’
Saint-Germain feigned surprise by raising one fine eyebrow. ‘Me?’ he said. ‘But I’m hardly *ever* in my cabin. I love the scenery so much.’
‘Oh, yeah?’ Gerry said, trying to sound casually conversational. ‘Well, I’ve seen you on deck a couple of times, though not on any sight-seeing trips.’
‘Yes, I suppose you’re right. But then I’ve taken this cruise so many times and now sight-seeing exhausts me. So I’m happy just to wander around the boat and watch history drift past me.’
Talking of which, the boat had left the village of Isna well behind and was now heading downstream, towards Luxor, as the sun began sinking over the sand and crags of Gebelein, with the palm trees shading into silhouette, as still and solemn as monks in prayer.
Saint-Germain smiled and pointed, indicating the exotic world outside, then had another sip of his drink and put the glass down again.
‘So,’ he said, smiling with icy charm at Ingrid, ‘I am happy to remain on board the boat and watch the ancient world drift past – just like your father, Herr Zweig.’

Ingrid twitched at the mere mention of her father's name; then blushed and lowered her eyes. 'I doubt that he's even doing that,' she said. 'He just likes his privacy.'
'Ah, yes,' Saint-Germain replied, 'that is understandable. I have read about him in the newspapers. He is a man of great power and heavy responsibilities, so doubtless needs to have his solitude. However, why come on a cruise such as this just to hide in your cabin?'
Ingrid shrugged. 'I don't know.'
Saint-Germain, Gerry noted, was staring at Ingrid with veiled intensity, as if willing her to raise her eyes and look at him – which, to Gerry's amazement, she soon did.
'I have read that your father is a collector of precious antiques,' the Count said in a measured manner, 'so perhaps he has come on this cruise in search of some more.'
'Yes,' Ingrid replied. 'Maybe. In fact, I think so. I mean, I think he was meant to meet someone on board, though I'm not too sure why. What you say could explain it.'
Saint-Germain looked sceptical. 'We have an *antique* dealer on board?'
'I don't know,' Ingrid replied. 'I don't even know if such a meeting was arranged. I only know that he was hoping to find *someone* on this boat, though I haven't a clue who it is, nor why my father wants to find him.'
'And you, Gerry?' Saint-Germain asked. 'What brings *you* on this cruse? Study or pleasure?'
He had a smoothly modulated, slightly theatrical tone of voice that could certainly have suited a mesmerist – and that, plus the fact that his gaze was *too* steady, was starting to convince Gerry that there *was* something distinctly odd about him.
'A bit of both,' he found himself replying, reluctant to offer the Count too much information about himself, but strangely unable to stop himself from doing so. 'I have an interest in ancient mythology, unexplained phenomena in general, and, in particular, the rumoured magical properties of the Great Pyramid of Giza, so the main purpose of this voyage is to see that.'
'Do you *really* believe the Great Pyramid has magical properties?'
'I think it might have. I'm especially interested in the fact that the Great Pyramid, widely reported as a flawless structure, *isn't* a perfect pyramid, since its tip, the *real* tip, is actually missing.'

‘*Missing*?’ the Count echoed, his eyebrows raised.
‘Well,’ Gerry said, helplessly warming to his favourite subject, ‘it *has* been reported by various explorers over the past couple of thousand years that the final stone course below the summit of the pyramid is not, in fact, there.’
‘And you believe this?’
‘Sure. And I’m not alone in believing that the original tip of the pyramid was once in place, but was of a very different material from the rest of the pyramid – a material so rare and valuable that it was removed, way back in the distant past, before the original marble facing on the lower pyramid was stripped to provide stone for Cairo.’
‘And what size was this rumoured missing apex?’
‘About five inches from base to tip. A *miniature* pyramid.’
‘Very good, Gerry,’ Count Saint-Germain said. ‘*Very* good.’ He then leaned farther over the table and stared steadily at Gerry, making him feel drained and unreal. ‘So what else do you know about the Great Pyramid?’ he asked.
Gazing directly into Saint-Germain’s mesmeric eyes, Gerry realized that he didn’t want to speak to him anymore, but for some reason or other could not resist him. He felt wide awake, fully conscious and alert, but something inside him had been paralysed, leaving him helpless. The Count wanted him to talk, and he knew that he *would* talk, irrespective of his own wishes, yet even as he grasped this frightening fact, he heard himself speaking.
‘I know,’ he said, ‘that the sides of the Great Pyramid are orientated precisely to face the four points of the compass, which suggests that it’s an instrument of astrology; that geographically speaking it stands at the centre of Egypt, at a place which has also been accepted widely as the centre of the terrestrial world; and that its dimensions, when analysed, have convinced many that it’s not *just* a tomb or pharaonic toy, but something possibly constructed as a link between Earth and the cosmos. And I believe that the missing tip of the Great Pyramid – the smaller, flawless pyramid – is possibly the magical key to the Great Pyramid’s nature.’
Having completed what he wanted to say, he found himself slumping back into his chair, unnaturally exhausted. He also noticed, before managing to turn his heavy eyes back on the mysterious Count Saint-Germain, that Ingrid, seated beside him, was looking distinctly dazed.
There was a slightly mocking smile on the ageless face of Saint-Germain; then Gerry felt those hypnotic eyes starting to release him as that mellow,

seductive voice resounded with an eerily unreal resonance.
‘You may be right,’ the Count said, pushing his chair back and standing upright, clearly preparing to leave the bar. ‘But *why* is the tip of the Great Pyramid missing? Who took it? To where? These, my friend, are some of the age’s great questions… and only a few know the answers.’
He waved his right hand slightly, across Gerry’s line of vision, and as he did so, Gerry felt himself emerging from what had seemed like a dream. Blinking repeatedly, licking lips that were too dry, he just about managed to get back his willpower as Saint-Germain’s voice, as mesmeric as a swinging pendulum, crooned, ‘Goodnight, my young friends.’
He was about to leave the bar when Gerry, on an impulse and feeling normal again, said, ‘I appreciate that you could read about Ingrid’s father in the newspapers, but how did you know it was him when he boarded the boat with the rest of us?’
Saint-Germain stopped walking, turned back, stared down coolly, then, as if having second thoughts, offered a slight, chilly smile.
‘One recognizes power when one sees it,’ he said. ‘And Herr Zweig, without any shadow of doubt, exudes that kind of power. One recognizes one’s own kind, my young friend. Now goodnight… and *auf wiedersehen*.’
So saying, he smiled again and then spun on the ball of one foot and walked out of the bar, leaving Gerry drained and exhausted, not too sure of his sanity.
Taking a deep breath, trying to control his racing heart, he glanced through the window at the starlit sky outside, the great moon above Egypt, the palm trees silhouetted where the desert met the Nile – then he focused on Ingrid.
She rubbed her cheek with her hand, turned dazed eyes upon him, then said with a sigh of bewilderment, ‘What was all that about?’
‘Don’t insist on an answer,’ Gerry replied. ‘I wouldn’t know what to say. Come on, let’s get out of here.’
Not giving her time to disagree, he took hold of her hand, tugged her to her feet, then led her out of the bar, into the fresh air. The sky was lustrous with stars, the desert gilded by moonlight, and the silence of the night had its own resonance, a magical quivering. He took a deep breath, looked down at the black river, faced Ingrid and felt a great fear rising up from his depths.
She was staring sombrely at him, as if trying to read his mind, and he saw in the plain lines of her face the beauty waiting to spring forth. He wanted to encourage that, to release her from the past, but he felt too confused by the

present.
Who was Saint-Germain? And what did he really want? Was his interest in Ingrid or in her father? Was it friendly or dangerous?
Such questions had no answers, but they shook him leaf and bough, making him step closer to Ingrid, his hands reaching out to her. He touched her, stroked her shoulders, explored her spine and pulled her to him; he saw her eyes close, tasted the sweetness of her lips, and was flooded with love for her. He felt that he was tumbling down through himself, into waves of pure feeling.
Alas, it didn't last long. She was too shy to linger. She kissed him once, pressed against him, let him feel her beating heart, then turned away and hurried along the deck, disappearing indoors. He watched her go, saying nothing, in a trance of delight and trepidation; then took hold of the railing and raised his face to the wind, his eyes and ears closed to the streaming night, his body turned to pure flame.
He stood there for a very long time, aware of nothing but Ingrid's face.

Chapter Eleven

He had trouble sleeping that night. Torn between sleep and waking, between sensual visions of Ingrid and nightmarish thoughts about Saint-Germain, wondering if he had been hypnotized, if he had hallucinated the whole thing, he tossed and turned for hours, hearing the humming air conditioner, his thoughts in a state of chaos, then eventually groaned aloud and slipped out of bed to stare through the porthole window.

It was just before dawn and a thin blade of crimson fire was spreading along the dark horizon as the boat headed for the East Bank of the Nile, the water reflecting faint stars and a pale, undulating moon.

Arousing himself from his sleepless stupor, dressing quickly and carelessly, he left his cabin and went out to observe the sun rising over the desert. Emerging onto the deck, he was slapped by a chill breeze that instantly made him feel more awake. Stepping up to the deck's railing, he looked out to where the Nile met the desert sands. The blade of crimson light was brightening, turning purple, then faintly golden, spreading out across the sky

to dissolve the stars as the rim of the sun appeared.

He was surprised to find himself alone on the deck at this time, the only one to view this moving spectacle. But then, when he thought of his restless night in his narrow bed, of his shifting through dream and memory and intangible fears, he also recalled that he had been strangely reluctant to open his eyes, and had, indeed, at one point, just before finally rising, been convinced that an ominous, bass humming sound – not the boat's engines or the air conditioning – had seemed to *physically* press him back down.

Now released from that odd sensation and feeling more normal, he watched the rising sun, a pulsating gold-andpurple crescent, taking shape as it ascended, and thought of his conversation the previous evening with the very strange Count Saint-Germain, who had made him and Ingrid feel dazed. Then, just as the sun was breaking away from the horizon to resemble boiling lava being poured over the desert sands, he heard the bass humming sound again, felt something pressing him from behind – an indefinable, pulsating pressure against the back of his legs and spine – and reluctantly turned away from the spectacular sunrise to check what was happening.

The instant he turned around, the feeling of pressure went away, but he saw, at the far end of the open deck, just above the tops of the superstructure housing the passenger cabins, a pulsating white light that flared up with a soft whooshing sound, then abruptly shrank and disappeared into the east.

Momentarily stunned, then feeling wildly excited, he padded quietly along the deck and saw the mysterious Count Saint-Germain standing silently at the railing and looking intently towards the east, before waving one hand, as if in languid farewell, and then turning away to enter a passageway that led through to the starboard deck.

Glancing to the east, Gerry saw only the brightening empty sky, so he hurriedly followed Saint-Germain into the passageway and went through to the starboard deck, assuming he would see Saint-Germain there, but failing to do so.

Saint-Germain had vanished.

‘Jesus Christ!’ Gerry whispered to himself.

Chapter Twelve

Determined to find the missing Count Saint-Germain, Gerry prowled the boat restlessly as the sun rose majestically over the golden sands of the desert, as the other passengers crept from their beds and the boat anchored against the East Bank, as breakfast was served and Ingrid entered the restaurant, and her smile, as warm as that of a bashful child, made him glow with unwarranted pride.

‘I’ve looked all over the boat,’ he told Ingrid, ‘but that bastard’s just vanished.’
‘I hope he vanishes forever,’ Ingrid responded. ‘He gave me the shivers.’
‘He hypnotized you,’ Gerry said.
‘And what about you?’
‘I’m not easily hypnotized,’ he lied shamelessly. ‘I have a lot of willpower.’
Ingrid put two cubes of sugar into her white coffee and stirred it in a desultory manner while gazing out through the rectangular window at the palm trees on the high banks of this narrow part of the Nile, their webbed leaves drooping over parched soil and the muddy-brown river.
‘You shouldn’t do that,’ Gerry said.
‘What?’
‘You shouldn’t put that sugar in your coffee,’ he said. ‘In fact, you shouldn’t take sugar at all, let alone put milk in your coffee, let alone drink coffee in the first place. Coffee, milk and sugar are bad for you. That’s why you don’t look so good.’
‘Oh,’ she responded, looking down at her cup of coffee, then taking the spoon out and laying it on the saucer. ‘I didn’t know that. I see.’
‘Oh, shit!’ he said, knowing he’d done it again. ‘Christ, I didn’t mean *that*! I mean, you look real good, real attractive, but your colour’s a bit off. It’s not your *appearance* – you’re just not *healthy* – you don’t look after yourself. Here, have a fresh orange.’
Feeling really tactless, he peeled the orange for her, broke it into slices, then placed the slices neatly on a plate and handed it to her. She accepted with a wan smile, slipped a slice into her mouth, chewed it with no sign of

appreciation, then looked sad again.
‘What do you most want at this very moment?’ she finally asked him.
‘I want to find that mysterious Count Saint-Germain and have a good talk with him.’
‘And that’s all?’
‘That’s all.’
‘Well,’ Ingrid said, looking so crestfallen that he instantly realized he should have said it was *her* he most wanted at this very moment, ‘you’d better find him fairly quickly, because we only have a few days left on the boat, then we’ll all be in Cairo to go our separate ways. Not everyone on this boat is booked into the hotel in Cairo, so Saint-Germain may not remain with this group any longer than that.’
‘Yeah,’ Gerry said, ‘I know. I mean, thanks for the thought. It’s just that I’ll go crazy if he disappears before we can talk more.’
‘Why not go and see the purser?’ Ingrid suggested helpfully. ‘He’ll have the names of the passengers going on this latest sight-seeing trip, so we can check in advance if Saint-Germain will be going with us. In fact, he’ll also have the names of all the passengers on the boat, so we can check if Saint-Germain is actually travelling under his own name.’
‘What a bright girl you are,’ Gerry said. ‘Come on, let’s get to it.’
Excited again, and pleased because she was so bright, he rushed with her to the purser’s office to check the passenger list.
Saint-Germain was not listed as a passenger; nor was he named on the list of those booked for the sight-seeing tour.
While this could have meant that the mysterious Count was travelling under a pseudonym, neither the purser nor any of the stewards could confirm from his description whether or not they knew the silvery-haired gentleman, as distinct from the many other geriatrics on board.
‘That name of his, or that pseudonym, rings a bell,’ Gerry said. ‘I just can’t place it at the moment. But I know it. I’m *sure* I do.’
‘It’s a town just outside Paris,’ Ingrid informed him.
‘Really?’
‘Really.’
‘Well, apart from that,’ Gerry insisted, ‘the name definitely rings a bell in my head and it’s driving me nuts trying to remember why. Saint-Germain, Saint-Germain, Saint-Germain… It’ll come to me eventually. It’s *got* to come. God

damn it, where *is* he?'
Already disorientated by his rapidly growing love for Ingrid, he was further excited and confused by his sole encounter with Count Saint-Germain – which he was increasingly convinced had been an hypnotic experience – as well as by the eerie experience on the deck in the dreamy light of dawn.
'Anyway,' Ingrid said, sounding marginally less timid, 'I don't know why you're making such a fuss about that man. Even if he *was* some kind of hypnotist – so what? He's probably in show business, or something. There's nothing *strange* about hypnotists.'
'There's something strange about *this* one,' Gerry insisted. 'And when I tell you what I witnessed this morning, you just might believe me.'
However, when he recounted what he had seen on the port deck of the boat earlier in the morning, Ingrid merely removed her sunglasses, stared thoughtfully at him, smiled, and said, 'So? The man was out for a morning stroll. What's so strange about that?'
'Didn't you hear me?' Gerry said, outraged that she was doubting him. 'There was a really weird, pulsating light – and strange noises as well – then, whatever that thing was, it flew away to the east and just blinked out. And when I arrived at the scene, Saint-Germain seemed to be *waving goodbye* to it.'
'He was probably just waving at a bird.'
'Jesus Christ, Ingrid! *Really*!'
Yet he knew that her reaction was a perfectly natural one; and that what he had seen, if not an hallucination, was something so out of the ordinary that it defied rational thought. He tried applying rational thought, became even more deeply confused, even slightly awestruck, but then gave in to a mounting excitement and burning curiosity, which, while setting fire to his imagination, made him fearful for Ingrid.

Chapter Thirteen

If anything, his intoxication and bewilderment over what had occurred were only strengthening his emotional bonds to her; and so he kept her close by him, perhaps also out of fear, throughout the rest of the day, pleased that Zweig had remained in his cabin with his blonde whore, Elena.

‘What does your dad *do* all day?’ he asked Ingrid as they prepared to disembark and take another bus through the hellish noonday sunlight, choking dust and hordes of babbling, furiously importuning, Arab touts. ‘I mean, even that Elena can’t… Well, *you* know! Not *all day*, they can’t!’

Ingrid actually giggled at that, leaning against him as they descended the gangplank. ‘Why not?’ she said. ‘All things are possible. While some things are more gross than others, they’re not actually *impossible*.’

He helped her off the gangplank, wiped dust from her face. ‘You’re really pretty attractive,’ he said. ‘I mean, I like you a lot.’

She lowered her eyes demurely. ‘That’s nice,’ she whispered. ‘I like you a lot, as well, Gerry. You’ve made me feel much better.’

‘Really?’
‘Yes, really.’
‘Let’s catch that tour bus,’ he said.
‘Yes, of course.’
‘I’m real good-looking as well,’ he told her, ‘but you

don’t have to say so.’

He helped her up into the crowded tour bus and sat beside her near the back, squeezing her hand now and then as the battered vehicle coughed into life, then bumped and rattled its way toward more of the glorious ruins of ancient Egypt.

Saint-Germain was, however, still haunting him and wouldn’t let him go, and thus, during this particularly hectic day on the Nile, as they were rushed with the other passengers through the sight-seeing tour, he did not give Luxor and Karnak the attention he had thought he would, since one half of him was drowning in a sea of emotion over Ingrid, while the rest of him, instead of focusing on the glories of the Valley of Kings and Queens, or the fabulous Temple of Karnak, was agog only with the expectation of once more catching a glimpse of that elusive gentleman.

In the tomb of Tutankhamen, in the great temples of Karnak – walking past the rams' heads of the Avenue of Sphinxes; surrounded by the colossal statues and Osiride pillars of the temple of Rameses III; overwhelmed by the hypostyle hall with its forest of soaring, time-warped columns; standing in the haunting silence of the ruined houses of the Sacred Lake – in all of those wondrous places, which for years he had wanted to see, he saw only the wounded eyes of Ingrid Zweig and felt the *presence* of Saint-Germain.

'It's as if he's watching us,' he said to Ingrid as, close together, they studied the carved head of Hathor, the goddess of music, love, fertility and dancing, located above the entrance to Queen Hatshepsut's temple in the Valley of Queens. 'I can't see the bastard anywhere, but I'm convinced he's watching us.'

'He's not,' Ingrid replied, taking his hand and leading him to the chapel dedicated to the underworld god, Anubis. 'Now it's *you* who's imagining things. We weren't hypnotized – we were just tired. All the rest you've invented.'

'I didn't invent what I saw on the deck of the boat this morning.'
'And what did you actually see?' she asked as they left the protective shadows of the colonnade, felt the fierce heat of the sun, and squinted up through their sunglasses at the awesome cliffs of Deir-el-Nahri. 'You saw a flash of light – which could have been anything – and a perfectly normal human being taking his morning stroll.'
'That light was some kind of UFO!'
Ingrid smiled. 'Maybe so. But then you didn't really see too much at all – it was gone before you could blink.'
'Pull your hat down,' he said, outraged, changing the subject. 'You're going to get your nose burnt. You should always put cream on your nose – and on your face and arms, too. You've got delicate skin. It's not used to the heat. You should learn to look after yourself better, particularly when travelling.'
He knew what he had seen, and was excited and frightened by it – excited by its magical nature, frightened by what it could imply, wondering why Saint-Germain was so interested in Ingrid's father, concerned that Ingrid might be endangered because of it.

Pressed pleasantly close to her in the milling throng of fellow tourists, blinded by the shimmering white light of midday, drained by the blue-lighted humidity of the afternoon, he was totally disorientated by physical exhaustion and his burgeoning love.
‘I hardly know where I am,’ he said to Ingrid. ‘I might as well be in bed.’
‘I’m glad you’re not,’ she replied. ‘I wouldn’t have enjoyed any of this without you. I’d probably have stayed in my cabin.’
‘Really?’
‘Yes, really.’
She blushed and then sighed, carefully avoiding his gaze, and he felt his spirit turning in the breeze to fall protectively over her.
‘You’re real cute,’ he managed to say when they returned to the town of Luxor and were wandering, hand in hand, through the packed bazaar in the deepening violet light of the early evening. ‘I mean, you *could* do something about your appearance, but apart from that, you’re really pretty attractive. I mean, more than you know – you know?’
It may not have been a compliment, but *he* thought it was; and later that evening, when the violet glow had turned into starlit darkness, when the *son et lumière* spectacle brought Karnak to magical life, when the light and sound washed over him, taking him back to ancient Egypt, to the heart of the mysteries that so enthralled him, he turned Ingrid in to him, tugged her close, held her tightly, saw himself reflected dimly in the dark, clip-on lenses of her thick-rimmed spectacles, in her brimming tears, and said, ‘What about when we get to Cairo?’
‘It’s alright,’ she replied, her tears magnified by the spectacles, her eyes blinking repeatedly in love’s sweet confusion. ‘Don’t worry about my father or Hans. We’ll be in the same hotel, so no matter what they say, I’ll see you there. I promise. *I swear it*!’
He wanted to kiss her trembling lips, to loosen her pinned-up hair, to remove her thick-rimmed spectacles and clothes and then make tender love to her, but he could only squeeze her hand, feeling foolish, almost childish, and parted from her on the boat’s top deck, under the starlit sky.

Chapter Fourteen

When Ingrid had departed, Gerry went to the boat’s stern, his soul filling up

with feeling, with the mystery and magic of this singular time and place, and stood there a long time, until midnight, until the deck was deserted and only the pale moon moved.

Suddenly, he went cold, sensing something, *feeling* something, and eventually heard that sound – the faintly familiar, bass humming sound – and then saw the same pulsating white light beyond the last of the cabins.

Feeling a hot flush of excitement, but also the chill of fear, he took a deep breath, muttered, ‘Jesus, here goes!’ and then padded as quietly as possible along the empty deck and turned left, between two blocks of cabins.

Reaching the other side, he remained hidden by the cabin bulwark, hearing the bass humming sound, feeling an odd, unnatural pressure, and staring out at the pulsating white light that fell over the starboard deck.

The unnatural pressure kept tugging at him, the bass humming sound continued… then he heard the soft murmur of two voices farther along the deck, obviously coming from roughly the same area as the strange light and noise.

With his heart racing fearfully, but unable to control himself, he inched along the cabin bulwark, took a deep breath, and carefully peered out.

At first he was almost blinded by the fierce, striated light; but then his eyes adjusted to it and he saw two human males silhouetted in a white haze that seemed to emanate from the disc-shaped light source hovering magically beyond them.

He stared, mesmerized, not understanding what he was seeing, his senses being upturned by that relentless, bass humming sound, while the disc-shaped white light, blindingly brilliant, pulsating rhythmically, threatened to draw him out from where he was hiding and suck him towards it.

Resisting that force, releasing his breath and rubbing his stinging eyes, he looked out again as the talking men moved a little, as the light around them dimmed and seemed to move farther back, and the men, both wearing normal

suits, became recognizable.

One of them was the silvery-haired gentleman who called himself Saint-Germain.
For a moment, Gerry couldn't quite see the other man, but then the man nodded at Saint-German, stepped out of the distorting haze, and walked away… straight into that hovering, disc-shaped light source, where he turned back to face Saint-Germain.
The man raised his right hand in a gesture of farewell – and at that precise moment, as the light flared up around him with a sudden whooshing sound, briefly illuminating his features, Gerry saw with stunning clarity, even from that distance, a pair of wintry-grey, almost silvery eyes and a dangerously seductive smile, which, with that slightly inhuman, mesmeric gaze, made the man appear to be strangely ageless and unreal.
Stunned and shocked, caught in a sudden seizure of unnatural, overwhelming desire for that distant man, Gerry was about to step out from the protection of the bulwark when the light flared up even more, pulsating and swirling around that haunting prince of darkness, then seemed to dissolve him where he stood in its prismatic brilliance.
Abruptly, with another whooshing sound, the light raced away at startling speed, into the distance, until it was no more than a pinprick, another star in the heavenly vaults, which, after flaring up one last time, blinked off completely… leaving nothing but the majestic, star-filled sky and its vast umbrella of silence.
Sweating and shaking, dazed and disorientated, Gerry took another deep breath, released it slowly, then glanced around the edge of the bulwark, to where the two men had been, and saw Saint-Germain, all alone in the moonlight, walking casually along the deck and turning the corner at the far end, for all the world like a perfectly normal passenger out for a midnight stroll.
Gerry didn't attempt to follow him. He knew that he wouldn't find him. Instead, he tried to control his breathing, to still his helpless shaking, then slid down the bulwark until his backside touched the deck, and just sat there, holding his head in his sweaty hands, staring across the black ribbon of the Nile to ancient Egypt's eternal night.

Chapter Fifteen

When Ingrid entered her father's cabin suite, Zweig was propped up on the bed, supported by a lot of pillows, his flushed, humourless face framed by the pillows and porthole windows on either side, both of which showed the spires and minarets of Cairo as the boat slowly approached its docking bay alongside the corniche.

Zweig was naked, his pendulous breasts sagging, but a rumpled white sheet was covering his loins and thighs, and was itself covered in the newspapers of many different countries. Balanced precariously on his lap was a tray on which stood the emptied pint glass for his health drink and the numerous small bottles containing his vitamin, rejuvenation and other tablets.

'Good morning,' he said without warmth as she entered. 'I'm sorry I haven't been able to see you over the past couple of days, but as you can see' – and here he indicated the newspapers – 'I've been very busy. A man's work is never done.'

Elena, hearing that one, chuckled falsely and winked at Ingrid. 'He puts his heart and soul into his labours,' she said, 'and that's something I can say without doubt.'

Ingrid blushed and lowered her eyes, but not before noting that while her father was naked in his untidy bed, Elena had already prepared herself for disembarkation, and, as she adjusted her figure-hugging jeans and shirt, which clearly were too tight for her, she gazed balefully at the Filipino steward who was packing the suitcases.

'I can't wait to get to the hotel,' Elena said. 'I'm sick to death of this creaking crate.'
'You should have taken advantage of the sun-deck and swimming pool,' Zweig reprimanded her, 'instead of staying cooped up here with me.'
'I had to keep you warm in bed,' Elena replied. 'I'm a *masseuse*, after all.'
Ingrid lowered her eyes again when her father offered a mocking smile; she looked up when her secret friend, Hans, handsome and immaculate in white

shirt, shorts and knee-high socks, stepped forward to remove the tray from her father's lap and hand him his dressing gown.
'We'll be docking any minute,' he said. 'You better have your shower now.'
'I don't *need* a shower,' Zweig retorted. 'I will therefore have my little chat with my daughter before dressing myself. So, Ingrid,' he continued, taking the dressing gown from Hans, but forgetting to put it on, 'I note that you have a pleasantly sunburnt face. Obviously you've been out and about.'
'Yes, Father,' she said, trying not to sound so humble in his presence, wishing Gerry was here by her side.
'So?'
'Pardon, Father?'
'*Where* have you been, you stupid child? And what have you been up to?'
'I've just been on a few sight-seeing trips, Father.'
'Were you alone on those trips?'
'They were all organized trips. I went on buses with a lot of other passengers.'
'You weary me, my child. Why do you lie so shamelessly?'
'Lie? I don't – '
'You were not *just* with other passengers. You made most of those trips with a particular individual.'
She knew there was little point in denying it, since Hans had, after all, followed her and Gerry on most of their trips together. Still, she was filled with woe because her father had raised the subject, knowing only too well the kind of humiliation that would soon come her way.
'Well, yes,' she began, almost stuttering, 'it *is* true that a certain person – '
'Hans informs me,' her father interjected, 'that you've been seeing the young American with whom I had an unpleasant altercation when boarding this boat.'
'He didn't mean to be offensive, Father. He just has a kind of American brashness of the kind we're not used to.'
'Another member of the great unwashed,' her father said. 'So why is he being so friendly with *you*?'
'I think he just… *likes* me.'
'Are you suggesting a romantic interest?'
'No, Father, I – '
'I should hope not, my child, since it is clear that such a worldly young man

would find little of interest in *you*, romantically, sexually, or otherwise.'
She tried desperately to conceal her humiliation, but couldn't stop the burning of her cheeks.
'I take it that you and the American have not yet…?'
'No, Father! Of course not!'
'Good,' Zweig said. 'Particularly since, after all, you and him can have little in common.'
Though she didn't respond, she felt a slight touch of anger. Having previously felt only fear in her father's presence, the flash of anger surprised her.
Staring steadily at her, his gelid gaze unrelenting, Zweig held the dressing gown out in Elena's direction, indicating that he wanted her, his slave, to help him into it.
'I would normally be embarrassed to stand naked in front of my daughter,' he said as Elena removed the dressing gown from his big hands, 'but since she has finally become *involved* with a member of the opposite sex, I can assume that nothing she will see will shock her. Is that not so, Ingrid?'
Aware that she was being mocked, Ingrid couldn't hide her blushing, but she also felt the rise of unfamiliar resentment and that new, simmering rage. Surprised by the growth of these more positive feelings, and understanding that they were caused by her father's contempt for her and Gerry, she willed herself not to cry, to keep her gaze as steady as possible, and loosened the fists clenched by her sides, letting the air cool her sweating hands.
If she could not prevent him from being so crass in her presence, she could at least deprive him of the satisfaction of seeing her pain.
'I really don't know what you're talking about,' she said, 'but please don't mind my ignorance.'
He raised his bushy eyebrows, clearly taken aback by her mild display of sarcasm, offered her a slight, icy smile, then deliberately flipped the sheet off his white, wrinkled body.
'Good,' he said. '*Sehr gut*!'
She tried not to see too much when he swung his treetrunk legs off the bed, stood upright with some difficulty, then stretched his arms out to let Elena drape the dressing gown around him. When she had done so, he tied the belt and turned back to Ingrid.
'So,' he said, 'what did you talk about?'

‘Pardon?’
‘The *American*,’ he emphasized with ill-concealed impatience. ‘Since you and he have little in common, what did you talk about?’
‘*Talk* about?’ she replied, trying to avoid the issue. ‘I don’t know what you mean.’
‘I know you’re not the most vocal of creatures, *mein Fraülein*, but even *you* must have talked about *something* with your dishevelled young man, And whatever it was, it could be important, so please tell me about it.’
‘*Important*? To *you*?’
‘You sound like a tape-recording,’ he sneered, ‘repeating my words. Please don’t do that – it grates on my nerves… and you know what that can lead to.’
Indeed, she did – and Hans’ warning glance confirmed it. Her father’s annoyance could lead to swinging fists and the blue sheen of bruised flesh, most notably, in a case such as this, that of Hans or herself.
‘Nothing much,’ she said cagily. ‘I mean, nothing in particular. He’s passionately interested in ancient Egypt, so he talked about that. He knows an awful lot about the country in general and the pyramids in particular.’
‘That hardly explains his interest in *you*,’ her father said, obviously still convinced that no member of the opposite sex could possibly like her for her own sake. ‘I mean, what did he *want*?’
‘I don’t think he wanted anything, Father, other than company.’
‘*Your* company?’
‘Yes, I suppose so.’
Zweig sighed again, snapped his fingers at Hans, said, ‘Get me a glass of champagne. I can’t stand this nonsense without it.’
‘I’ll have a glass as well,’ Elena said. ‘My throat’s as dry as the ass of a camel.’
‘And your tongue is as foul as camel dung. I sometimes wonder how I tolerate you. Hans, fetch the champagne.’
While Hans rushed to do as he had been bidden, Zweig placed his hand on Elena’s shapely backside, gave it a squeeze, then took a deep breath, stretched himself and stared again at Ingrid.
‘The young gentleman wanted your company and you thought this was *normal*?’
‘Well, I…’
‘I do *not* think it normal. It simply doesn’t make sense. I have observed you

carefully, from your adolescence onward, and I cannot think of a single occasion when a male person wanted *you*, rather than an introduction to me through you – ’
‘I think – ’
‘ – so I’m sure that this young man, the American, had ulterior motives for treating you so kindly… Did he ask about me?’
‘No, Father. When I happened to mention your name, he certainly knew who you were – he’d read about you in newspapers and seen you on TV – but apart from that, he didn’t talk about you.’
Zweig actually looked disappointed. ‘So what’s his primary interest in Egypt?’
Ingrid shrugged. ‘Most of Egypt, really. I think he’s particularly interested in the pyramids, especially the Great Pyramid of Cheops, at Giza, the one he wants to take me to see tomorrow.’
Her father changed when she said that: his cold eyes went out of focus. He glanced blindly about him, as if he had just received some unpleasant surprise, but he recovered when Hans returned to the cabin, holding two flutes of champagne, handing one each to Zweig and the grateful Elena.
‘Oh, yes?’ Zweig said to Ingrid, after his first sip. ‘And why was he interested in that?’
‘It’s just one of his interests, Father. He’s interested in all sorts of esoteric subjects, including flying saucers and poltergeists and the reported magical properties of pyramids, and he has a theory about the missing tip of the Great Pyramid.’
‘The missing *tip*?’ her father asked, after taking another sip of his champagne, his gaze steady upon her. ‘I’d like to hear about *that*.’
Still thinking it a nonsense, not believing it could be harmful, Ingrid repeated what Gerry had told SaintGermain about the missing tip of the Great Pyramid of Cheops, the one located adjacent to the Sphinx at Giza, where Gerry would be taking her tomorrow. When she had finished, her father gargled the last of his champagne, spat it back into his glass, handed the glass to Hans, then stared at his daughter as if seeing her afresh.
‘In other words,’ he said, ‘your long-haired American halfwit believes that the missing tip of the Great Pyramid, being a smaller, more perfect pyramid, contains magical properties and was stolen many thousands of years ago?’
‘Yes. He believes the missing tip of the Great Pyramid of Cheops is

potentially the most rare and valuable artefact on Earth. He's come here to try to prove that theory and, if he succeeds, to write a book about it.'
Her father's response was to untie his belt, let the dressing gown fall to the floor, and say to Elena, 'We are obviously heading in the right direction. Now please dress me, my dear.'
He was not unhelpful, raising an arm here, bending a knee there, while the gum-chewing Elena worked his clothes over his white, quivering mass of flesh.
'There has to be a reason for everything,' he said to Hans as Elena dressed him, 'even when ridiculous, and now we know why that insolent American pretends to find my daughter attractive.'
'You're so cruel,' Elena said in a tart manner. 'He probably just loves her for herself.'
'That's highly unlikely,' Zweig said.
'Why?' Elena said, grinning at the blushing Ingrid. 'I mean, take off her specs, let down her hair, and she'd probably be reasonably attractive. And American men, let it be said, are pretty easy to please.'
'You would know, of course, my darling Elena, with your vast experience.'
'Sticks and stones, Wilhelm.'
'Anyway,' Zweig said, already bored with Elena, 'according to the so-called Christian Grabbe, our quarry could be on this boat – the man who knows about the Lodestone, the Tuaoi Stone. And since the stone, as we know, is shaped like a miniature pyramid and possesses magical properties, it is clear who the man we want is. Obviously it's Ingrid's boyfriend, Gerry Remick. This odious creature, this Philistine American, will lead us to the stone.'
'I don't think – '
'You *can't* think,' her father brutally told her. 'I knew that from the day you were born, since you came from your idiot mother's womb. Now be quiet. Listen. Please don't annoy me with your nonsensical beliefs. Can I take it that you and the American will be visiting the Great Pyramid together?'
'Yes, but – '
'Very good! Hans, Elena and I will come along for the ride. You will be nice to your American, but reasonably quiet, mentioning nothing about this conversation. Your young man, whom you believe to be genuinely fond of you, is obviously the man we've been seeking. He knows about the missing tip of the Great Pyramid. That miniature pyramid is the magical Lodestone,

or Tuaoi Stone. I will not rest until I possess it – and your young man may well lead me to it. So don't say a word to him about what we've just discussed. Simply go where he leads and we will follow. Is that understood?'
'*Really*, Father,' she said, starting to worry about Gerry's welfare. 'I don't think Gerry is the man you're looking for. I think – '
'Thank you, my dear, for your advice,' Zweig interjected sarcastically, 'but you do not, as your American friend would put it, know shite from shinola. So please do as I say. In other words, be nice to him while being careful about what you say. What happens to him when we've finished with him is not your concern.'
He stared steadily at her, his face a block of stone, making her feel very concerned indeed about what he might eventually do to Gerry. It wasn't Gerry he actually needed
– almost certainly it was that mysterious Count SaintGermain – but when she thought of telling her father that that strange man was on board, she suddenly saw SaintGermain's eyes floating in front of her and couldn't open her mouth.
Taking a deep breath, avoiding her father's hard gaze, she tried to shake Saint-Germain from her mind and instead think of Gerry; but that only made her dwell on what her father was planning – and a tremor of fear rippled through her like cold air on a raw nerve.
'Of course, Father,' she murmured obediently, feeling sick to her soul. 'I understand perfectly.'
'Very good, Ingrid. *Excellent*!'
At that moment, the boat bounced lightly against its docking bay, making everyone in the cabin rock a little before steadying themselves. Ingrid stared through the porthole windows, saw the white glare of the noon sun, and longed to be out there, away from her father. She thought of the mysterious Saint-Germain, then of what her father had told her, and her love for Gerry, swelling up to fill her heart, made her yearn to protect him.
'I don't think that Gerry – ' she managed to say.
'You *don't* think,' Zweig insisted. 'You simply stick with your young man, who has appealed to your childish vanity, and leave all other concerns to me. Now is that understood?'
'Yes, Father, of course.'
'Gee,' Elena said, 'what a sweet kid! She's so god damned obedient.'

‘Just like you and Hans,’ Zweig retorted without mirth as Ingrid hastily left the cabin, desperately needing to get out in the open and breath fresh air.

Chapter Sixteen

Gerry had to admit it: even though he had often professed contempt for his mother’s luxurious life-style, he was delighted to be off that Nile cruise ship and having breakfast alone on the balcony of his air-conditioned room in the modern wing of the historic Mena House Oberoi Hotel, surrounded by forty acres of lush gardens and with the pyramids of Giza, about half a mile away, appearing to virtually tower over him, dominating the brilliant azure sky.

Sighing with sensual pleasure, he polished off another glass of orange juice, wiped his lips dry with a napkin and stood up. He glanced down at the already busy swimming pool beyond the palm trees, smooth green lawns and Egyptian-styled white walls of the rest of the modern wing, then went back into his room to prepare for what he fully expected to be the most exciting day of his trip, namely a visit with Ingrid to the Sphinx and three of Egypt’s oldest pyramids.

If anything, his fascination with the pyramids, particularly the Great Pyramid of Cheops, which he could clearly see from his window, had only been heightened by his conversation with the mysterious Saint-Germain, as well as by what he had subsequently witnessed on the deck of the boat. He therefore dressed with some urgency, hardly able to contain his excitement, donning a tropical shirt with full-length sleeves, to protect his arms from the burning sun, long black trousers, sensible shoes instead of sandals, then left his room and made his way through the extensive gardens to the lobby of the main hotel, which, according to his guide book, had once been a hunting lodge, furnished by the *khedive* Ismael for the sole purpose of receiving Empress Eugenie at the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869.

Such small details were of endless interest to him, and so, as he entered the luxury hotel, he breathed deeply in the belief that he was actually breathing in history.

His enthusiasm was dimmed a little when he entered the pleasant chill of the air-conditioned, exotic lobby and saw that while Ingrid was indeed waiting for him, as planned, wearing a nondescript loose grey dress and flat shoes, with dark, clip-on lenses on her thick-rimmed spectacles and her hair pinned up untidily on her head, she was with her father, Wilhelm Zweig, his whorish mistress, Elena, his handsome assistant, Hans, and a *galabiyeh*- draped Egyptian, whom Gerry assumed was a cab driver.

His spirits sinking, he froze where he was standing, intent on making a discreet retreat, but Ingrid, when she saw him, smiled shyly and waved him on with her right hand while her father, also seeing him, actually *smiled* and nodded in a surprisingly friendly manner.

Chilled to the bone by Zweig's welcoming smile, Gerry crossed the lobby. When he reached the group, he was even more surprised to note that Wilhelm Zweig was holding out his large hand.

'Mr *Remick*,' he boomed with feigned enthusiasm. 'Good morning! Please allow me to introduce myself. You and I did, of course, have our little differences the day we boarded the boat at Aswan, but let's put them down to traveller's fatigue and the heat of the noonday sun. I am Ingrid's father, Wilhelm Zweig' – here he shook Gerry's hand – 'and I believe you've already met the rest of my little group.'
'Hello,' Hans said.
'Hi,' Elena added.
'Good morning, Gerry,' Ingrid whispered timidly. 'I know Hans,' Gerry said, determined not to be too

friendly with Zweig, 'since he seems to have followed Ingrid and me everywhere – on your instructions, no doubt.'

'Please don't be offended,' Zweig replied smoothly. 'A father *has* his concerns, after all.' He then placed an arm around Gerry's shoulders and walked him out of earshot of the others. 'Please understand,' he said, 'that it wasn't *you* I was worried about. It was Ingrid I was keeping my eye upon, since, as you may have noticed, she is not the most mature of adults and has,

indeed, been in and out of various mental institutions for – ’

‘I know. She told me.’

‘She *did*?’ Zweig responded. ‘Well, how surprising that is! She must trust you a lot.’
‘I hope so, Mr Zweig.’
‘Anyway,’ Zweig continued, ignoring Gerry’s sarcasm, ‘you can understand why Ingrid, though no longer a child, has to be protected like one – from her own immaturity, as it were – so having Hans keep a concerned eye on her was simply my way of doing that. And I must say, Mr Remick, that your behaviour has been at all times exemplary. I was truly impressed.’
‘Okay,’ Gerry said. ‘No sweat.’
Zweig patted his shoulder, then led him back to the group, where Hans remained blank-faced, Elena was chewing gum, looking bored, and Ingrid, her head lowered, the living picture of humility, looked at him over the top of her darkened spectacles.
‘And so,’ Zweig said, still holding him by the shoulder and, taking Ingrid by the elbow, tugging her close to him, ‘you can come with us in our hired limousine, or, if you prefer, take the bus.’
‘The bus,’ Gerry said.
‘Of course,’ Zweig agreed. ‘Understood. Shall we proceed?’
He nodded at the turbaned Arab, who bowed and led them all out of the hotel, to where the bus and a lot of dusty taxi-cabs were waiting, the former already almost filled with passengers, those not with the tour haggling with the drivers of the latter.
Although it was less than half a mile to the pyramids, their sheer enormity made them seem even closer than that; and Gerry found himself staring at them in a state of disbelief, finally understanding why no photograph could quite capture their gigantic, eerily alien symmetry.
‘Oh, boy!’ he murmured.
‘So,’ Zweig said, offering a fleeting, unnatural smile, ‘our limousine is waiting behind your bus – and the bus is, I note, already almost full. You two best get going.’
Hardly able to look at him, Gerry took Ingrid by the elbow and hurried her to the bus, pushing her up into it before she could say goodbye to the others. He

followed her in, sat beside her in the rear seat, glanced down through the window and saw Zweig in a gleaming limousine, sitting beside the Arab driver, the two shadowy forms behind them obviously being Hans and Elena. Zweig caught Gerry's glance and waved at him, but Gerry didn't wave back, instead simply looking away and moving closer to Ingrid, taking hold of her hand.

'What did I do to deserve your dad's friendship?' he asked her. 'I mean, why is God punishing me?'

She smiled. 'I'm not supposed to tell you,' she said, 'but I certainly will.'

At that moment, their English-speaking Arab guide boarded the bus, introduced himself, explained what they would be doing when they reached the pyramids, then closed the door. The bus coughed into life, lurched forward, settled down again, then rolled out of the shade of the hotel and into the baking heat of the plain of Giza, with the pyramids disappearing momentarily before coming back into view, seeming to float magically in the air beyond the reddish soil of the plain and the shimmering heat waves.

'I can't wait to see inside that pyramid,' Gerry said. 'So, Ingrid, what about your dad? Why the welcoming treatment?'

'You're not going to believe this.'

'Try me.'

'Well, you know that my father had been hoping to meet someone on that boat, but didn't actually know who that someone was?'

'Right.'

'Well, he seems to think that someone is *you*.'

'*Me*? Why *me*?'

She squeezed his hand, as if to reassure him, but only succeeded in making him feel even more concerned.

'As you already know,' she said, 'my father has one of the world's greatest collections of rare art treasures and antiques – '

'Right.'

' – and is fanatical about getting his hands on more.'

'I believe it,' Gerry said as the bus bounced and rattled along the road to the pyramids, and the sunlight, beaming in from the plain of Giza, dazzled his vision.

'Well, apparently,' Ingrid continued, 'the thing he most wants in all the world is something called the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone, which is said to be a

small, pyramid-shaped object, made of an unknown substance and possessing extraordinary powers.'
'The missing tip of the Great Pyramid. It can't be anything else. That tip, a pyramid about five inches high, was removed centuries ago by a person or persons unknown, and hasn't been seen since – though there have been countless *rumours* about its whereabouts.'
'I see,' Ingrid said solemnly. 'Anyway, it seems my father's been after the object for many years, and that recently, in New York, information picked up by some of his men before they were killed in mysterious circumstances, indicated that someone who would be travelling on our Nile cruiser knows of its whereabouts – which is precisely why my father made the trip. Then, when I innocently told him your theory about the missing tip of the Great Pyramid, he assumed that you were the man he was looking for – the one who was going to lead him to the legendary stone.'
Gerry stared dumbly at her, scarcely believing what he was hearing.
The bus hit a pothole, almost throwing him off the seat, so he grabbed Ingrid and then glanced out the rear window. Zweig's limo was out there, not too far behind, obscured by the sand being churned up by the wheels of the bus.
Gerry turned back to Ingrid.
'*Saint-Germain*!' he exclaimed, snapping his fingers with glee. '*He* knew about the missing tip of the Great Pyramid and seemed seriously interested in my theories. In fact, he only grilled me to find out what I knew – he *already* knew all that – so the Lodestone probably *is* the missing tip of the Great Pyramid, and Saint-Germain is the one who knows where it might be. It's not *me* your dad should be following – it's our mysterious Count SaintGermain!'
Straining to see down the aisle, between the shoulders and heads of the other passengers, through the bus's front window to the approaching pyramids, he could scarcely contain his excitement.
'Unfortunately,' Ingrid said, tugging his elbow to regain his attention and then dampening his ardour, 'SaintGermain wasn't seen either boarding or leaving that boat, was not registered with the purser, and appears to have disappeared into thin air after you saw him with that other mystery man under very peculiar circumstances. In a real sense, then, Saint-Germain doesn't exist – and that, as far as my father is concerned, leaves only you.'
'You didn't tell him about Saint-Germain?' Gerry asked her.
'No,' she replied. 'There was no point. He wouldn't have believed me. I tried

to tell him you knew nothing about the so-called Lodestone, but he didn't believe that either. So he's being friendly to you because he thinks you're here for a purpose. In other words, he thinks that if you don't actually lead him to the Lodestone, you'll at least, perhaps even without knowing it, provide a clue to its whereabouts.'
'And if I don't?'
'You're in trouble.'
Her eyes were still hidden by the dark, clip-on lenses, but her face showed her concern; and being no stranger to trouble, Gerry saw it coming straight at him.
'Terrific,' he said.

Chapter Seventeen

The bus did not take the left fork to the Sphinx, but instead drove straight on to the three enormous pyramids and stopped where the tickets to the site were sold, letting the passengers out into the dazzling light and draining heat, in the midst of babbling Arab touts with their souvenirs, camels and donkeys.

Gerry enjoyed the touts, being amused by their relentless hustling, but was even more amused when, as the tour guide led the group towards the Great Pyramid of Cheops, he saw them swarming eagerly around Zweig, who, angrily waving them away, was like a man fighting off a swarm of bees.

After being besieged by Arabs trying to inveigle them into purchasing souvenirs or rides on camels and donkeys, the tourists from the coach were led by the tour guide straight to the Great Pyramid, prior to their tour of the whole site, including the Sphinx.

Surrounded by smaller funerary temples and flattopped *mastaba,* the three large pyramids soared up from the desert sands in awesome, geometric splendour, with the Great Pyramid dominating all, its truncated peak seeming to pierce the immaculate azure sky, and its Grand Stairway, constructed in irregular tiers of stone, leading up to the boundless blue of the cosmos.

Dwarfed by the immensity of those eroded, sloping walls, but exhilarated by

the magic and mystery of their history, Gerry wanted to climb the stairway and stand at the very top, just below the missing apex, to look across the barren wastelands of the shimmering desert. However, that activity was forbidden (the four sides of the pyramid were deemed to be too dangerous) and so, as some of the other tourists settled for strolling around the ruins, he stuck to his original plan of venturing with Ingrid into the Great Pyramid and making the reportedly strenuous journey to the king's burial chamber, hidden deep in the heart of the towering edifice.

As he and Ingrid were checking the torches they had brought with them for this occasion, Zweig hurried up to them, accompanied by an already weary Elena and a clearly anxious Hans, trailing a stream of Arab urchins and touts, and hissing through clenched teeth, '*Scheisse*! How I detest this Islamic scum!'

'God damn it,' Elena said, wiping sand from her face and arms, 'let's get the hell out of here. Let's go back to the hotel and have a drink and then jump under the shower.'

'Stop complaining!' Zweig snapped. 'These babbling Arabs are bad enough! I'm getting a headache just listening to them, and your moaning won't help.' Stopping breathlessly in front of Gerry and Ingrid, he wiped more sweat from his flushed face and offered a waxen smile. 'So, Mr Remick,' he said, 'I note that you and Ingrid are holding torches – '

'What?'
'Flashlights.'
'Oh, yeah. Right. You were speaking English English,

not American.'
'Correct. Torches. Flashlights. Whatever. So clearly
you are venturing inside.'
'Yeah,' Gerry said. 'Right.'
'Elena, my dear, would *you* like to venture inside?' 'Are you kidding?' Elena responded indignantly. 'I'm
already filthy enough as it is. I want a cool drink and hot

shower.’
‘I myself would like to see the King’s Chamber,’ Zweig said, obviously lying, ‘but unfortunately tend to suffer from occasional claustrophobia and therefore couldn’t deal with the narrow tunnels. However, *Hans* would like to see inside. *Wouldn’t* you, Hans?’
‘Yes, sir,’ Hans replied without enthusiasm. ‘Naturally, I would.’
‘Well, take that torch, that flashlight, out of your pocket and join Ingrid and Mr Remick. I think that’s sensible, don’t you?’
‘Yes, sir,’ Hans said glumly
Removing the torch from his pocket, he reluctantly joined Gerry and Ingrid where they were standing with the Arab guide and three other tourists, two men and a woman, all middle-aged, preparing to enter the Great Pyramid. ‘I will wait for you out here,’ Zweig said. ‘*Au revoir*.
Enjoy yourselves.’
Gerry switched on his torch, watched Ingrid and Hans do the same, then took hold of Ingrid’s free hand and moved in directly behind the Arab guide as he led them up the steps carved out of the base of the Great Pyramid. The heat was fierce, burning down on his head and shoulders, the light seeming to beat back from the sloping wall to dazzle his vision.
Following the Arab guide, he stepped through the entrance, into the pyramid’s interior, felt a chill, smelt stale air, and saw a short passage straight ahead, leading to a flight of stone steps in the gloom farther on. Still behind the Arab guide, still holding Ingrid’s free hand, with Hans and the other three tourists bringing up the rear, he ascended the steps, into a deeper gloom, and found himself at the bottom of a steeply climbing tunnel, most of which receded into ominous darkness.
‘Damn!’ Hans whispered nervously behind him. At that point, Gerry had to release Ingrid’s hand and

clamber up the gallery ramp just behind her, prepared to catch her if she fell. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw only pitch darkness; looking ahead, he saw only the round lights of the torches sliding along and over the surprisingly smooth, finely joined stones as the roof of the tunnel dropped progressively lower and the passage became uncomfortably narrow – to the degree, eventually, where the ceiling was only about three feet high and the walls not much wider apart, thus forcing him to stoop even more until he was virtually bent double.

'Are you okay?' he asked of Ingrid, who was still ahead of him.

'Yes,' she replied, her voice breathless and echoing around him with a ghostly unreality.

The trek seemed to take longer than was actually the case, leading them into an even deeper darkness, into a silence that resounded only with their cramped, heavy breathing and scuffling footsteps. Gerry sensed Ingrid's tension and understood it. He also understood why so many tourists couldn't take this particular hike and turned back before they reached the King's Chamber, buried deep in the pyramid.

'Shit!' Hans whispered behind him in perfect English. 'I can't breathe! I don't like this!'

Mercifully, at that moment, they reached the summit of the gallery ramp, clambered through another short, lowceilinged tunnel, then entered an empty, pyramidal chamber. Soaring nearly thirty feet above their heads, it allowed them to breathe more freely, even though its actual base, hemmed in by side ramps, was no wider than the height of the low passage they'd just left.

Gerry just had time to glance above him at the high, narrow roof of the pyramidal gallery before the guide was disappearing into another passage, thus forcing them all onward again.

When this new, more humid darkness fell about him,

causing him to sweat and blink repeatedly, Gerry found himself struggling awkwardly across dangerously sloping, polished stones, then through another claustrophobically low chamber, and finally – as the female tourist offered a whimpering sound of protest or fear – stumbled into the relative spaciousness of the King's Chamber, the burial chamber, which was also in darkness.

'Thank God!' Hans whispered from behind, sounding breathless and hoarse.

In the dim light of their torches, Gerry was able to see the empty sarcophagus, the structural perfection of the walls and the great roof, formed by nine granite slabs weighing over 440 tons. In those few seconds of complete, heart-stopping silence, hardly even aware of Ingrid, Hans or the other three tourists, he felt the presence of the Pharaoh's *ka*, or spiritual double, and was filled with the mystery of the ages covered up by the desert sands. The silence was ethereal, other-worldly, almost palpable, and he felt it pressing in around him, as if trying to steal his soul. Then Ingrid took his hand, squeezed it tenderly, tugged him to her, letting him know that she was sharing his feelings of unreality and awe. He acknowledged her presence, pressing against her, smiling at her, not believing that he had finally made it to here and was standing beside her.

They were at the centre of the Earth's landmass, in the very heart of Man's universe, and he felt himself shaking with that awareness, his senses draining out of him. Then he felt a hand falling upon his shoulder and gripping it painfully.

'What do you *really* want here?' Hans asked, whispering. 'Is this the home of the Lodestone?'

At that very instant, before Gerry could reply, all the torches blinked out, abruptly plunging the burial chamber into total, terrifying, pitch darkness.

'Oh, my God!' the female tourist cried out, her voice

echoing eerily. ‘Oh, my God, what’s happening? The torches! *Oh, dear God, I can’t see*!’

In her panic, she dropped her torch and let out a high, piercing scream which, reverberating shockingly around the stone chamber, was soon joined by the equally terrified babbling of the Arab guide and the hoarse, panic-stricken voices of the two male tourists – all blending into a ghastly, purgatorial cacophony that ricocheted around the chamber in a darkness so complete that Gerry felt he had lost his mind and was spinning down into vertiginous depths beyond all hope of escape.

He was only rescued from this fate, which he realized was simply panic, by the feel of Ingrid’s body against his own as he tried in vain to get his torch to come on again. ‘Christ!’ he exclaimed in frustration. ‘What the hell’s happening here?’

‘I can’t see! I can’t see!’ the woman wailed. ‘*Oh, dear God, we’ll be trapped here*!’

There was the sound of rushing feet as the woman tried to escape, then a dull thud as she ran into a wall and slid down it, sobbing.

‘Oh, no!’ Hans said softly behind Gerry. ‘What on earth…?’

And even as his whispered question trailed off into silence, and as Ingrid shivered fearfully in Gerry’s embrace, Gerry looked straight ahead, into that immaculate, pitch-black darkness and saw, where he assumed the wall and sarcophagus had been, what appeared to be a pinprick of light.

A pinprick of light that was gradually growing bigger, as if someone was drilling a hole in the wall to admit the outside world.

‘It’s not possible!’ Hans whispered.

‘What’s *that*?’ one of the men bawled hoarsely as the Arab guide, after a couple of seconds of stunned silence, also saw the expanding light and released another demented wail.

‘No!’ the female tourist shrieked hysterically. ‘I don’t believe… *No*!’
It was a cry of protest against the unbelievable. But at that very moment, as the pinprick of light grew into an approaching, pulsating glowing, the impenetrable sheet of darkness where the wall of the chamber should have been, filled up with brightening, rapidly expanding light, took on a pale-blue sheen, then brightened and expanded even more until it was a vast, alien sky, filled with glistening stars and great moons.
An unknown, overwhelming cosmos.
‘No!’ the woman shrieked. ‘*No*!’

Chapter Eighteen

The woman’s shrieked protest trailed off into a demented sobbing which, blending in with the babbled prayers of the Arab guide, filled Gerry’s head. Transfixed, but vividly aware of Ingrid’s heart beating against his chest, he watched as that pulsating white light raced out of the starflecked cosmos – out of dizzying depths of space in which there was no north or south, no east or west, no up or down
– and expanded as it approached, becoming a fiery glob, then a floating white disc that grew bigger and brighter, racing towards him at incredible speed, paralysing him as it flared up to obliterate the stars, then abruptly exploded into the dark chamber, temporarily blinding him.

There was a lot of terrified screaming and bawling from those around him, but he felt Ingrid against him, took courage from her proximity, and opened his stinging eyes as the exploding, swirling light contracted and dimmed, shrinking down to the height of the average man, eventually forming a faintly glowing cocoon of ectoplasm in which two apparently human figures were slowly, magically materializing.

That glowing ectoplasm illuminated the sarcophagus… and there, on either side of the empty stone coffin, shimmering in an unreal manner with stars showing faintly through them, were the silvery-haired gentleman,

SaintGermain, and his mysterious partner.

They were both looking younger than Gerry remembered them, both wearing snow-white *galabiyehs*, and staring, with slightly sinister yet oddly seductive smiles, straight past him, at whom he could only assume to be Hans.

‘You cannot have the Tuaoi Stone,’ Saint-Germain said, his voice ethereal and unreal in the glowing darkness. ‘To pursue it will damn you.’ He then stared directly at Gerry, his gaze brilliant, terrifying, and said, ‘You must know that the first number is “one”. Now depart from this sacred place.’

‘Shit!’ Hans shouted. ‘Christ!’

Jerked out of his freezing terror by the sound of that outcry, Gerry glanced back over his shoulder.
Illuminated in the faint glowing of the ectoplasmic light, Hans was drawing a small pistol from his pocket. Yet even as he was doing so, the light around him dimmed, making him glance up in surprise, and then, with his jaw hanging open, he froze where he stood.
A gasp from Ingrid made Gerry look to the front where, still standing on either side of the sarcophagus, the two figures in white *galabiyehs* were becoming more transparent, the stars shining more brightly through them, before the globe of glowing matter flared up brilliantly again, obliterating those within it, then filled the chamber with a blinding radiance, a roaring whirlpool of light, which then seemed to burn through the chamber wall just above the sarcophagus to race away at incredible speed toward the distant stars, until it was only a pinprick of light… then nothing at all.
Nothing.

Chapter Nineteen

Abruptly, the chamber was plunged back into pitch darkness, making the woman scream again, but instantly, simultaneously, all the torches came back on, some lying on the floor where they had been dropped, others still in their owners’ hands, to illuminate the stone walls and floor.

The praying Arab jumped to his feet, shone his torch at the chamber's exit, and was heading urgently towards it as the screaming of the woman broke down once more into hysterical sobbing. One of the men rushed over to her, helped her back to her feet, put his arm around her waist and practically dragged her, still sobbing, out of the King's Chamber and into the exit passage, where they fell in behind the fleeing Arab guide.

Glancing at Ingrid as she wiped tears from her eyes, Gerry smiled reassuringly at her and then glanced at Hans, who, with his pistol dangling uselessly from his right hand, was still staring in utter disbelief at the smooth, solid stone wall above the sarcophagus.

'Let's get the hell out of here,' Gerry said. 'And that means you as well, Hans.'
The Arab guide's terrified praying resounded with the sobbing of the hysterical woman all the way back down through the low chambers and dark passages of the pyramid
– and didn't stop when they finally made their escape back into the blinding sunlight, where the woman, still sobbing hysterically, sank to her knees and the Arab guide raced up to his friends, gesticulating frantically when he tried explaining what had occurred.
As his eyes adjusted to the sudden fierce light, Gerry saw Zweig clamber out of the rear of his limousine, rush up to Hans, grab him by the collar of his sand-covered shirt and shake him violently while demanding to know what had caused all the fuss. When Hans told him, Zweig just glared at him, not believing what he had heard, then jabbed his index finger at Gerry and hissed, 'So what about *him*?'
'No!' Hans exclaimed, his eyes too large and bright. 'It was the one in there!' He jabbed his thumb back in the direction of the Great Pyramid. '*It had to be SaintGermain*!'
As if slapped in the face by the very sound of that name, Zweig took a step back, glanced blindly at Gerry, then said icily to Hans, 'Don't just stand there with your tongue hanging out! Get in the car, you damned fool!'
Hans hurried to join Elena in the rear of the limousine as Zweig, sweating profusely, his face flushed with rage, marched towards Gerry, kicking up small clouds of sand, and eventually stopped in front of him and Ingrid,

glaring at both of them.
‘I should have known,’ he said to Gerry. ‘You’re nothing but worthless scum! Don’t ever approach my daughter again. If you do, I’ll destroy you. Now come here, Ingrid. *Here*!’
Before Gerry could fully regain his senses, Zweig had grabbed Ingrid by the wrist and dragged her to the limousine, pushed her into the back, beside Hans and Elena, clambered into the front seat, beside the Arab chauffeur, and then slammed the door. The limousine roared into life and raced off along the road, churning up clouds of sand, leaving Gerry standing alone, the swirling sand settling around him, the sobbing of the hysterical woman filling the stunned silence behind him, his back turned to one of the sloping walls of the Great Pyramid, his gaze focused, first dazedly, then with more thought, on the distant Sphinx, that lion with the human head, which had surveyed the Egyptian desert for centuries, and might still be doing so when he and the rest of humanity had disappeared from the Earth.
He stood there a long time.

Chapter Twenty

The following morning, knowing that Gerry was due to fly to London, Ingrid awakened early in her luxurious single bed, quickly showered and dressed, then left the room, closing the door quietly behind her. She made her way through the extensive gardens of the hotel in the morning’s fading pink light, planning to bid Gerry farewell before he departed.

She had assumed he would be in the main lobby by now, but was surprised to see him standing alone by the swimming pool, fully dressed, gazing beyond the arched doorways and flat roofs of the modern wing at the three ancient pyramids and Sphinx that dominated the skyline less than half a mile away with their symmetrical perfection.

Still shaken by yesterday’s frightening experience, but swelling up with love for Gerry and heartbroken that he was leaving, she went down to the swimming pool, stopped beside him, and, standing on tiptoe, pressed her lips to his cheek.

Surprised, he jerked his head around, stared at her, then smiled.
‘Well,’ he said, ‘this *is* a pleasant surprise. I didn’t expect to see *you* again.’
‘You thought I’d let you leave without saying goodbye?’
‘I thought your dad might lock you in your room. He sure seems the type.’
‘He is… but here I am.’
She wanted him to hold her and kiss her properly, on the lips, but instead he just shuffled his feet, shyly avoiding her gaze.
‘So,’ she said, ‘you’re really going.’
‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘The airport coach will be here in twenty minutes.’
‘We won’t see each other again after that.’
‘No… I suppose not.’
She sank into her pain, but tried not to show it. Instead, she just sighed and looked down, with very little interest, at the crystal-clear, rippling blue water in the elegant swimming pool.
‘Have you recovered from yesterday?’ she asked him.
‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘At least, I think so. I’ve been lying awake most of the night thinking about it… But, yes, I’ve recovered.’
She had wanted him to say that he had stayed awake thinking of her, but since the pyramids were obviously more important to him, she decided to stick with that subject.
‘Did it really happen?’ she asked.
‘Yes, Ingrid, it really happened. Saint-Germain materialized with his equally strange friend. He warned Hans, therefore warning your dad, to stop pursuing the Tuaoi Stone – note, the *Tuaoi* Stone, not the Lodestone – then informed *me* that the first number is “one” – whatever that means. So, yes, Ingrid, it was real. It all happened.’
‘It frightens me terribly,’ she told him. ‘I’ll be glad to get out of here.’
‘*Everything* frightens you,’ he said. ‘That’s one of your problems.’
Shocked, feeling as if he had slapped her face, she raised her eyes from the swimming pool and studied him, searching for malice. She saw none, just a distant, wounded look, then he turned away from her, until he was facing the pyramids, a slight slump to his shoulders.
‘So your dad wants the Lodestone,’ he said, ‘which obviously is also known as the Tuaoi Stone. He thought someone on that boat knew where it was, and that I, because of my interest in the missing tip of the Great Pyramid, was the guy he was looking for. But I wasn’t. Saint-Germain was… and we don’t

know who *he* is.'
She didn't reply. She just wanted to flee this country. She couldn't bear to be this close to Gerry and not be in his arms.
As if sensing this, he sighed and turned back to face her, his blue eyes slightly misty.
'Why does your dad want it?' he asked her. 'Apart from the fact that it's the world's most rare, priceless artefact?'
'You *know* why. You've recently been told. The Lodestone is reported to possess awesome, magical properties, and it's rumoured that he who owns the stone can own the world if he chooses.'
'And right now,' Gerry said, 'that's most likely to be Saint-Germain… or his equally mysterious, perhaps ghostly, partner.'
'Yes. And if my father could have that kind of power – the kind of power we witnessed yesterday in the King's Chamber – he'd certainly use it to threaten the whole world and bring about the dominion of his own, even more terrible, version of the Third Reich – a magical Order, created by his supernatural powers, with all subservient to him. My father, dear Gerry, is a psychopath and megalomaniac. Certainly he wouldn't consider using the stone to do *good* for mankind.'
'I'm going to stop him,' Gerry said. 'I'm going to find out all I can about the Tuaoi Stone and Saint-Germain; and then, whether it turns out that Saint-Germain is good or evil, I'll ensure that the stone isn't allowed to fall into the hands of your dad or anyone like him. I'm going to do that for myself, but I'm also doing it for you. Because I can't stand the way your dad treats you, nor what he's done to you, and I'll get my revenge by depriving him of what he most wants. Believe me, I'm determined. I'll do it.'
Ingrid felt herself melting in the warmth of her love; her skin was burning with an ethereal heat, but she still couldn't confess that much to him.
'What did you mean when you said everything frightens me? Why did you say that?'
'Your dad frightens you,' Gerry replied. 'He has you completely terrified. You're so frightened of him, you can't make a move without him – and he knows that and uses it against you. He has your life in his pocket.'
'That's not true,' she said.
'Yes, it is, Ingrid.'
'I can do anything I damn well please.'

‘Then come with me,’ Gerry said.
She was shocked, rendered speechless, at once delighted and ashamed, swelling with pride because she knew he was professing his love for her, but sinking simultaneously into humiliation because she could not find the courage to prove him wrong.
‘No,’ she said, ‘I can’t do that.’
‘Why?’
‘He’d just follow us relentlessly wherever we went, and then, when he found us, he’d destroy you, just to hurt me.’
‘And that’s why you won’t come with me? For *my* sake?’
‘Yes, Gerry, that’s right.’
‘That’s a lie.’
He turned away from her again and spoke with a quiet, suppressed fury, a smouldering passion.
‘I love you, Ingrid. I’ve never been in love before. But I love you and I know you love me – and yet you’re giving me up. You’re doing it out of fear, out of cowardice, and I simply can’t stomach that.’
‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ashamed that she couldn’t conquer the fear that was holding her prisoner.
‘And that’s it?’ he said. ‘You’re sorry?’
‘I don’t know what else to say, Gerry. I can’t go with you. I *can’t*!’
‘Damn it, Ingrid, you *have* to. For your own sake as well as mine. If you don’t leave with me, you won’t leave with anyone. You’ll be stuck with that monster for the rest of your life, living a life filled with regrets and enduring a slow emotional death. So come with me… *Please*!’
She knew that what he said was true, that giving him up would destroy her, yet even as she felt the pain surging up from her centre, even as her heart broke and shame overwhelmed her, she couldn’t find the courage to break free and take what he offered her.
‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered.
Gerry lowered his head. His back was still turned to her. He was framed by the Great Pyramid, where their love had defeated fear, but even when she saw him visibly trembling, she could not fight her oldest, most enduring fears.
‘I love you, Ingrid,’ he repeated. ‘But clearly that isn’t enough. Don’t touch me. I can’t bear to have you touch me. I love you too much. Oh, God, Ingrid… *goodbye*!’

To leave, he had to pass her, his elbow brushing her breasts, and she saw a hint of tears in his blue eyes as he hurried away. She watched him departing, resisting the urge to call him back, desperately wanting to do so, but dreading the humiliation, knowing that even if he returned, she still would not leave with him.
He waved once as he crossed the gardens, but he didn't look back. She saw him disappearing around a whitearched doorway, between the rooms of the modern wing, some large palm leaves shivering briefly over his head, as if in mournful farewell.
Then he was gone.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ingrid was destroyed. Her cheeks burned as her heart raced. She felt her eyes fill up with tears, let them trickle down her cheeks, then wandered slowly back through the gardens, weeping silently, ashamed of her cowardice, grieving for the loss of her first love and wanting to die.

She returned to her lonely room, lay back on the bed, cried even harder, then stopped and stared up at the ceiling. She felt drained, depleted, immune to all but pain, and was starting to slip into quiet hysteria when her father arrived.

He knocked and then entered, not waiting to be invited, offering a rare smile and with Elena right behind him, her grin also suggesting a private joke as she leaned against the door frame.

'Good morning, my child,' Zweig said, his eyes untouched by his smile. 'I note that you're already up and dressed, but with moist, swollen eyes. Now why would that be, my pet?'

She tried not to be frightened of him – and was, for the first time, surprised to find the fear falling away from her, removing a weight from her shoulders. Emboldened, and realizing what pride meant, she returned his hard stare.

'It's nothing,' she lied. 'My eyes are stinging from the water in the pool. I went for an early-morning swim.'

‘Really?’
‘Yes, really.’
‘You wouldn’t *lie* to me, would you?’
‘No, Father,’ she lied again, feeling a warm flush of pleasure.
‘Well,’ Zweig said, ‘I’m glad to hear *that*. I mean, I couldn’t bear to witness *two* people crying before breakfast is served.’
She felt herself stiffening, wondering what was to come, but she managed to keep the concern from her face and her eyes on her father.
‘Two people crying?’ she asked him. ‘What do you mean?’
‘That young American,’ Zweig said, sighing with triumph. ‘We just saw him leaving. Taking the bus to the airport. We tried to be pleasant – to say goodbye, as it were
– but he couldn’t see us through the tears in his eyes and so went off without a word… *Very* strange. And now we find you with eyes suspiciously moist. Well, what *are* we to think?’
Elena couldn’t contain herself and started giggling into her hand, leaning forward to hide her face against Zweig’s broad back, her arm snaking around him. Zweig guffawed and turned into her, wrapping his thick arms around her, then together they staggered out of the room, convulsed by their sick joke.
Ingrid closed her eyes, bit her lip and took a deep breath. She held her breath in for some time, letting her pain turn to rage, then opened her eyes again, let her breath out, and eventually rose to her feet with the strength she had almost lost.
She went to her window, looked down upon the gardens, then thoughtfully studied the wondrous symmetry of the three awesome pyramids beyond that relatively short stretch of desert. She thought of the Nile cruise, of her growing love for Gerry, of his accusation that she was ruled by her own cowardice – and of how, by letting him go, she had simply proved he was right.
She didn’t cry again. There were no tears left to shed. Instead, she thought of the sanatorium, of the contempt she had mustered there, and of how she had thrown her cigarette into the wastepaper basket and later watched the smoke billowing up from the fire in her room.
Recalling that incident, and the satisfaction it had given her, she smiled and shook her head in an affirmative manner.

‘Yes,’ she said, speaking aloud, to herself, ‘you need positive thinking.’
When she heard the maid opening the door across the hallway, she left her own room, followed the girl into Zweig’s bedroom, and told her that she was going to wait there for her father. She watched the girl in silence, taking pleasure from her efficiency, then, when the girl had left, she glanced down at the neatly made double bed and said, ‘*Au revoir* – to you *and* your blonde whore.’
She rifled every drawer and took all the cash she found there, a considerable amount, then returned to her own room, packed a shoulder bag, wandered in a leisurely manner out of the hotel, as if just off for a stroll, and caught a cab to Helipolos International Airport, determined, for the first time in her life, to brave the world on her own.

Book One Ends

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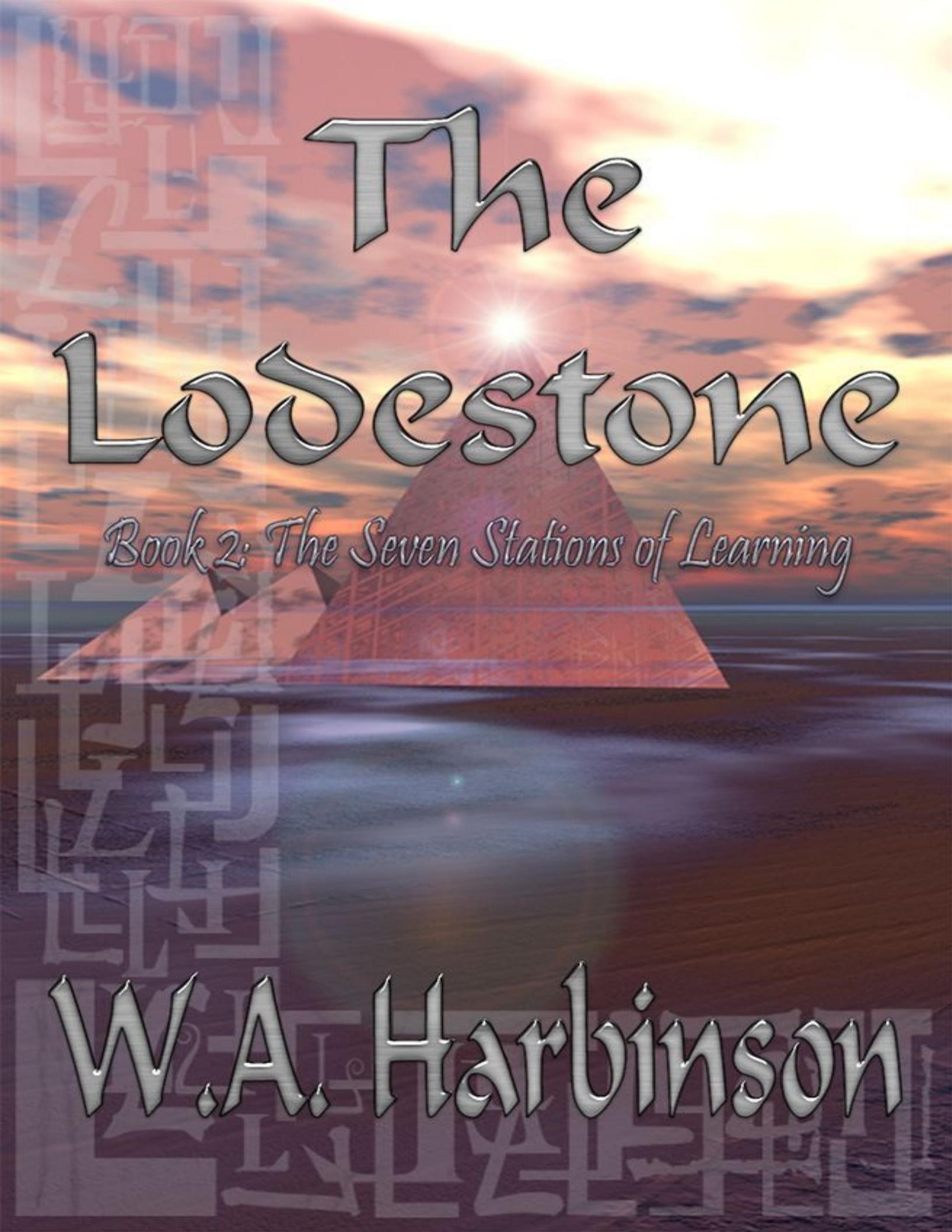
The
Lodestone
Book 2: The Seven Stations of Learning
W.A. Harbinson

The Lodestone

It is said that whoever holds the Lodestone will own the entire world…

It was originally the apex of the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Its function was to create fusion between Earth and the Cosmos. It holds the key to the infinite mysteries of the

universe. And it has been missing for centuries…
Wilhelm Zweig, ageing master-criminal, is determined to find it – and with it the key to immortality.

But in his way stands the legendary Count de Saint Germain, history's most mysterious figure, believed to be the protector of the magical stone. And against him is Gerry Ibrahim, a young American with a passion for unexplained phenomena – and for Zweig's unhappy daughter, Ingrid.

Together, and relentlessly pursued by the evil Zweig, Gerry and Ingrid embark upon a dangerous quest for the
Lodestone, an epic journey that takes them through Europe and the Orient, past the sites of the Seven Wonders of the World, and on to a final magical confrontation on the summit of the Earth…

First published in Great Britain in 1989 by Sphere Books (London) as *The Lodestone*

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ISBN 0 7474 0542 5
This ebook edition published in 2013 by W. A. Harbinson

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The Lodestone

Book Two
The Seven Stations of Learning

Chapter One

Gerry was sick. Awakening in the stifling bedroom of his crummy rented apartment in Notting Hill Gate, London, and hearing the amplified sounds of a Rasta Reggae band practising already at nine in the morning for the forthcoming evening's frolics, he was pouring sweat, felt as if his head was splitting, and also suffering his long dark night of the soul even in the extremely rare English sunshine. He was depressed, enervated, devoid of his normal zest, and as he dragged himself out of bed, feeling grey on this sunny morning, he knew exactly what he was suffering from.

He was obviously lovesick.
Despising himself, telling himself to act his age, he ran the hot water and then climbed into the bath, thinking distastefully of how squalid the English were, washing in their own filth. God, he wanted a shower! He wanted Ingrid naked in it. He wanted to be naked in it with Ingrid, soaping her soft skin. Instead, he was in this filthy English bath, thinking of drowning himself.
Disgusted to see the grime of London wash out of his hair and lap around his unprotected skin in the soapy water, he hastily climbed out, pulled the bath plug, then dried himself. Refreshed, or at least relieved to escape the bath, he put on some clothes, not really caring what he wore, beyond mere mortal vanity.
Mere mortal vanity didn't prevent him from having an orange juice and something to eat. What he had, in fact, was some atrocious English bread with really terrific Cheddar cheese, followed by a cup of Italian black coffee, which he sipped by the window.
It was now ten in the morning and the street below was already busy. The West Indians and Rastas were taking in the sun while the tourists, walking past their pounding music, looked on agog. Gerry liked it in Notting Hill Gate. It reminded him of New York. His only problem was that he no longer slept well at nights, obsessed, as he was, not only with the loss of Ingrid, but

with the mystery of SaintGermain and what had occurred in Egypt.
Helpless in regard to his parting from Ingrid, he was at least able to start work on his search for the legendary Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone, and, incidentally, unravel the mystery of Saint-Germain. To this end, he had already placed an advertisement in the *Guardian* newspaper, asking for an 'adventurous, open-minded, Personal Assistant with experience in historical research'. That ad' had been placed in yesterday's newspaper, there had already been some phone calls from aspirants, and Gerry was hoping to interview a few of them tomorrow.
If nothing else, it would take his mind off Ingrid.
In fact, even though Ingrid had broken his heart by not showing more spirit and coming with him, Gerry understood what a lifetime's humiliation could do to someone and had therefore already forgiven her in his heart. The person he could not forgive was Wilhelm Zweig, that bloated arsehole who had turned a potentially beautiful young woman into a timid, emotionally distraught victim with no hope for the future.
No, he could not forgive that; and so, apart from his own insatiable need to find the legendary Tuaoi Stone, he was filled with delight at the very thought of depriving Zweig of the one thing he most wanted in all the world.
Unfortunately, Gerry's major problem was money. It was one thing to embark on an epic voyage of discovery (which is how he liked to think of it) and quite another to do so without even the cash to pay for the assistance he so badly needed, not to mention his own everyday expenses. So, whether or not he liked it, he would have to call his mother in New York and lay the word on her.
Deciding that he might as well get this over with as soon as possible, he removed his keen gaze from the busy street below, drank the last of his coffee, then picked up the telephone, dialled the operator and asked her to call his mother's number, reverse charges. He could actually hear his mother's phone ringing in New York, but she took a long time to answer it; then, when she did, she sounded tired and irritable until told by the operator who was calling. At that, she yawned loudly, murmured, 'Oh, dear God,' then added impatiently, 'Yes, of *course* I'll accept the charges. Now please put him on.'
'Hello, caller?' the London operator said.
'Yes,' Gerry replied obediently.

‘You’re through to your number. You can speak now.’ ‘Terrific,’ Gerry said.
‘Mom? Is that you, Mom?’ ‘Yes, dear, it’s – ’
‘I’m sorry I haven’t called before, Mom, but I’ve been tied up with – ’
‘Do you know what *time* it is here, son? It’s five in the *morning*!’
‘Aw, gee, Mom, I’m sorry. I didn’t think. I mean, I was just sitting here thinking about you – and, you know, felt guilty and called on impulse. I’m real sorry if I’ve got you out of bed – ’
‘You have.’
‘ – and I’ll call you back later.’
‘No, dear, don’t do that. You’ll probably catch me in the middle of my bridge party or having a bath. So, how did it go, dear? Your trip to Egypt, I mean.’
‘Terrific,’ he said. ‘Absolutely fantastic. I won’t forget it as long as I live. It was money well spent, Mom.’
‘Please call me *Mother*, dear. You know I hate *Mom*.’
‘Sorry, Mother.’
‘So why aren’t you *home* already, dear? You should have been back two weeks ago.’
‘Well, Mom – Mother – the thing is…’
‘Why are you hesitating, Gerry? Are you in some kind of trouble? You must tell me *instantly* if you are. I knew it! I just *knew* it!’
‘No, Mother, I’m not in trouble. I’ve just got a little problem that I hope you can help me out with.’
‘Of course, dear. Just get on the next airplane. We’ll sort your problem out as soon as you get home. There’s no need to worry, dear.’
‘I’m *not* worried, Mother. I just need some money – some *cash* to live off for the next three or four months, using this place, London, as my base.’
His mother was silent for some time, obviously trying to take in what she had heard. Eventually, with an audible sigh, she said: ‘You want to stay in *England* for another three or four months?’
‘Yes, Mother, that’s right.’
‘Has this something to do with some… *female*?’
‘No, Mother,’ he said, feeling distinctly uncomfortable. ‘I mean, not really. I mean, it *has*, in a sort of way, but not really – you know?’
‘No, dear, I do *not* know. Please elucidate.’
Hardly knowing where to begin, and aware, when he *did* begin, that what he was saying probably sounded nonsensical, he recounted the most important

events of his trip, specifically those involving the bloated Wilhelm Zweig, his heartbreakingly oppressed daughter, Ingrid, and the mysterious Count Saint-Germain and his unknown partner.

As he talked into the disbelieving silence at the other end of the transatlantic line, he became fully aware, for the first time, that he had spent the last fortnight like someone in a state of shock, only leaving his apartment to purchase food and drink, usually only getting out of bed when forced to consume what he had purchased, sweating under the stale sheets, sleeping badly, if at all – an unprecedented condition that was obviously caused not only by the loss of the weirdly attractive Ingrid, but by his own enormous difficulty in accepting that what he remembered of Egypt had actually occurred.

His state of suspended animation, or chronic disbelief, had hardly been helped by the pain he was feeling over the loss of Ingrid – and even now, as he talked into the vacuum of his mother's growing incredulity, he was lacerated by that pain, remembering Ingrid's shy smile, her inhibition and fear, her hazel eyes magnified by the old-fashioned, thick-rimmed spectacles, which, in conjunction with her primly pinned-up auburn hair, had made her seem like a forlorn Victorian servant or the living personification of an equally forlorn, clichéd spinster.

When he thought of that pitiful creature, he felt completely heartbroken. Nevertheless, he kept talking, pouring his words into his mother's silence, reaching his climax with the extraordinary happening in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid, vividly recalling, as he talked about it, that dizzying glimpse into the abyss of the infinite, with Saint-Germain and his unknown partner materializing magically out of the ether. He then explained that he had to remain in Europe until he had solved the awesome riddle, at no matter the cost.

'And that's what I need the money for,' he explained. 'I suspect that my investigations will take a lot of time and involve a lot of travelling, possibly even back to Egypt, and I'm going to use London as my base of operations. So, Mom – Mother – apart from my credit cards, I need some hard *cash*.'

As a former amateur actress of some standing, his mother was a dab hand at the double-take and dramatic pause; now her silence, which seemed to stretch out forever, also stretched his nerves to breaking point before, with another beautifully timed sigh, she released him.

‘Oh, dear God,’ she said. ‘You haven’t learned a thing, have you? Still ignoring the real world and inventing these ridiculous stories. I give up, dear. I really do.’
‘It’s all true, Mom! It all happened!’
‘Of course, dear. I understand. Now put the young lady on the phone and let me talk to her.’
‘*What* young lady?’
‘The one you had all these great adventures with – and whom you doubtless need the money to support while you live there in sin. Please let me talk to her.’
Outraged, Gerry wanted to slam the phone down, but his need for his mother’s money was greater than his need to be proud.
‘I told you!’ he almost screamed. ‘We said goodbye in Cairo! I left her and flew straight back to London and rented this dump. I don’t even know where she is, Mom – Mother. I’m on my own here. I promise!’
‘Stop being so melodramatic,’ his mother said and then was silent again. ‘I *do* hope you understand,’ she said, after a great deal of thought, ‘that I *would* like you to have a serious relationship with a member of the opposite sex, but not, dear God, with a *German*, let alone with the offspring of that Nazi, whom I’ve read all about.’
‘She’s not really German,’ Gerry felt obliged to explain. ‘She was brought up and educated in England and Europe. Not that it makes any difference, since she’s out of my life now.’
He felt real pain in saying it, but his mother, obviously not feeling the same, said, ‘Well, I’m sure it’s all for the best, dear. Water finds its own level.’
There was another lengthy silence that seemed, to Gerry, to be some kind of black hole into which he could hurl his grieving soul and lose it forever.
‘So,’ his mother said eventually, sounding highly suspicious, ‘you intend staying on in London, whether I like it or not.’
‘Yes,’ Gerry said firmly.
‘And if I don’t finance this latest lunacy?’
‘I’ll starve,’ he said, ‘but I’ll *still* stay.’
‘I don’t seem to have too much choice, do I, dear?’
‘Well, if you *don’t want* to help me,’ he replied, sensing his moment, ‘then you *don’t have* to help me. On the other hand, I’m staying here anyway. It’s just a matter of *how* I stay – comfortably or miserably.’

‘And how much would you need to be comfortable, dear?’
Having planned to stay for three or four months, Gerry said, ‘Six months. I need enough cash to last me at least that long – then, whether successful or not, I’ll come home, I promise.’
‘How very thoughtful,’ his mother responded.
‘So, are you going to send me some money?’
‘Of course not,’ she said. ‘I’ve never heard such nonsense in all my life. Flying saucers, ghosts, precious stones and mad Germans – you’ve obviously made all of this up for some reason or other.’
‘I haven’t!’
‘*My* belief,’ his mother went on, completely ignoring his cry of protest, ‘is that you’re involved in some way with that young woman you mentioned and are staying in England in the hope of seeing her again, assuming she’s not already sharing you bed.’
‘I’m not! She’s not!’
‘Or, if that’s not true, you’ve simply got this bee in your bonnet and are going to squander the money in pursuit of a highly nonsensical theory. So, dear, no, I won’t be sending you the money – and my suggestion is that since you are presently devoid of cash, you simply use your American Express card to purchase an airplane ticket back home, when we can discuss all of this much more sensibly, in decent surroundings.’
‘I’m not coming home, Mom!’
‘I’m your mother, not your mom, and I’m hanging up right now. I’ll expect you home in a day or two. Goodbye, son. Be sensible.’
The line went dead when she hung up, and Gerry stared at his own phone, wanting to eat it or smash it, outraged that his mother didn’t believe him and was leaving him in penury, doubtless hoping to pressure him into flying home.
‘Well, you *won’t*!’ he snapped. ‘Damn you!’
He slammed the phone back onto its cradle, then went to the window and looked down, feeling defeated. Below him, on the sunny street, one of the colourful Rastas, his plaited hair decorated with beads, was strumming a guitar and singing while his friends clapped rhythmically and added vocal counterparts. Their very happiness was a slap in the face to him, and as he stood there, looking down at them, he felt the tides of defeat washing over him to drown his aspirations.

Without money from his mother he had no chance of staying on in this country, let alone hiring an assistant and pursuing, wherever it might lead him, the mystery of SaintGermain and the Tuaoi Stone.
Dwelling on this harsh reality, and having difficulty in accepting it, he muttered a soft oath to himself and then left the apartment.
Outraged and in despair, he determined to spend the last of his cash on getting drunk and letting tomorrow take care of itself. This he did, plunging into the noisy, smoky atmosphere of a typical London pub and drinking one pint of ale after another. Drunkenness came soon enough, illuminating his confused thoughts, increasing his more naive tendencies and almost making him stupid.
Almost, but not quite, since, when he found himself engaged in drunken banter with a tattily dressed peroxide blonde and was invited back to her place, he was sensible enough to think of AIDS, herpes and syphilis, and also thought, with real pain, of what he owed to the memory of Ingrid, so resolutely stood up, waved the blonde goodbye, and unsteadily left the pub.
Returning to his modest apartment, and realizing that he had just spent the last of his hard cash, he decided to phone those who had replied to his advertisement for a Personal Assistant and were due to be interviewed by him the following day. However, instead of doing that, he stretched out on the bed for a brief rest and fell into a troubled sleep, during which he first dreamed of Ingrid naked beside him in the bed, then had another dream, a much less pleasant one, about his beloved Ingrid's awful father, the monstrous Wilhelm Zweig, getting his hands on the Tuaoi Stone and using its powers to set himself up as overlord of the whole world.
In his dream he saw smouldering cities, mass graves, desolation, thousands being enslaved in some fearful future where Zweig had dominion. There was fear and suppression, a widespread despair, and Zweig's face took shape out of the dark clouds gathering overhead. First Zweig, then Saint-Germain, then his mysterious, ghostly partner… each emerged from the other, became the other, all as one, then merged back into the vast desolation of the abused and forsaken.
Yes, he dreamt of a new world, one of masters and slaves, then saw lightning strike a wall, burning the number 'one' into it, was hypnotized by that number, started dissolving into it… and was jerked from his dream – or, more accurately, from his nightmare – by the shrill and incessant ringing of his

telephone, which seemed to drill through his brain.
First groaning, then cursing, he sat upright, shook his head to clear it, then swung his legs off the bed and walked to the phone. He was unwashed and unshaven, his clothes shabby and dishevelled, and he ran his fingers through his uncombed hair and picked up the receiver.
'Yeah?' he said.
'Gerry? Is that you?'
'Yeah,' he repeated, unable to believe who he was hearing, his heart racing instantly.
'It's me, Gerry. It's Ingrid. I'm calling for that job you advertised. I'm in London, Gerry.'
He heard the singing of birds.

Chapter Two

With the helicopter roaring all around him and the wind beating through his thinning hair, Zweig glanced down through sunlit haze at his fleet of thirty high-powered boats, which formed an immense circle with a dot (his own boat) in the centre, about halfway between the Brazilian Basin and the Mid-Atlantic Ridge.

He felt pride, but little else. Not even pleasure. Certainly not after the hell he had recently been through – first, all those filthy Arabs along the Nile and in Cairo; then the flight of his daughter, Ingrid; finally, the awfulness of arriving in Recife at the height of another of their damned carnivals, with the already narrow streets rendered impassable by cheering crowds, noisy bands, and the customary dance performance of the *caboclinhos* in their ridiculous Indian garb, who had merely added to the already atrocious bedlam by beating rhythmically with their bows and arrows while leaping and spinning like whirling dervishes, making way for the procession of king, queen and chanting *tirador de loas*.

He had been greatly relieved when his limousine had managed to break through the primitive madness and carry him on to what had once been the relative tranquillity of his lavish villa in the southern suburb of Boa Viagem, but even there, when he attempted to go for his evening stroll along the palm-

fringed promenade, he had found himself hemmed in by horrible tourists and madly jogging Brazilians of a pedigree that could not have afforded this neighbourhood just a few years ago.

Nauseated, he had retired early to his bed in the villa, and there, with the sound of the Atlantic in his ears, had slept an uneasy sleep, filled with dreams of his daughter, the American lout, and Count Saint-Germain.

He had felt only relief when, the next morning, his helicopter had taken off from Guararapes Airport and carried him through the pure morning air to the relative peace of his floating empire near Ascension Island, not too far from the island of St. Helena, where another of his heroes, Napoleon Bonaparte, had spent his final days of despair and humiliation.

Shuddering at the thought of what could happen to the world's finest, he settled back into his seat and sucked on a tablet as the helicopter descended towards the fleet and made his ears pop. Having sent Hans and Elena on ahead, in order to gain himself an evening's privacy in his villa, he was eager to get back to business, particularly his pursuit of the legendary Tuaoi Stone, starting with a constructive business chat with Hans.

The helicopter dropped lower, almost directly over his own 170-foot boat, whipping up the waves in surging arcs of white and blue, as it hovered briefly over the swaying helipad, then began its final descent. It soon touched down, bouncing lightly on the deck, then came to a rest.

Zweig unclipped his safety belt and let himself be helped out of the helicopter even before the rotor blades had stopped turning. Hurrying away from the still-whining machine, he stopped just outside the area of turbulence caused by the slowing rotor blades and gazed around him with pride at the many other high-powered boats that were forming a protective cordon around him in the choppy green-blue waves of the South Atlantic.

Taking a deep breath, he nodded curtly at those saluting him, then saw that Hans had been waiting for him in the doorway that led into the upper saloon, or lounge.

‘So,’ Zweig said, ‘it is good to be back, *ja*?’
‘Yes, sir,’ Hans replied.
Zweig nodded and glanced around him again at his

watery domain, then let Hans lead him through the saloon and down to the lower deck, into the master cabin containing his surgical bed, spa bath, steam bath and Jacuzzi.

Elena was in the Jacuzzi, enjoying the warm, swirling water, her blonde hair protected by a plastic cap that emphasized her large eyes. When Zweig entered the cabin, she turned those eyes upon him, not without trepidation.

‘Hi,’ she said. ‘Welcome back.’

Zweig bent down, kissed her on the forehead, then straightened up again.
‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I have to discuss some business with Hans, but once that’s done, I’ll join you. Perhaps a drink in the meantime?’
‘Champagne?’
‘Well, you’ve certainly developed expensive tastes.’ Nevertheless, he pressed a buzzer to call the steward in, gave the Filipino his order and waved him out again. He then snapped his fingers, pointed to the nearest chair, and said, ‘So, Hans, sit down. I want to hear what you’ve been up to since you returned. Not sleeping, I trust.’
‘No, sir,’ Hans replied, pulling the chair out, but waiting until Zweig had seated himself before also sitting down. ‘I’ve been looking into our affairs in general, and also checking on your daughter’s whereabouts. Regarding the latter, we have confirmation that Ingrid did indeed fly to Heathrow Airport, London.’
Though feeling a flush of rage, Zweig simply nodded acknowledgement.
‘She’s been staying for the past fortnight in a modest hotel in the Bloomsbury area, and to date has not contacted the American, presumably because she doesn’t yet know where he is. However, a telex received an hour ago from our offices in London states that someone placed an advertisement in the *Guardian* newspaper, asking for a Personal Assistant with experience in historical research. We can’t yet confirm that this is Remick, but it’s being checked out right now, because it’s our belief that if it *is* Remick, Ingrid

might also see the advertisement and find the American through it. Should that be the case, we will, as you requested, abduct her before she gets to him and bring her back here.'
'Good. And what about the American lout, if it is indeed him?'
Hans sighed sadly and lowered his long-lashed eyes. 'He will, as you requested, be terminated in a manner that makes his death look like suicide. Ingrid will then be informed of his death, and there the matter will rest.'
'*Sehr gut*,' Zweig said. 'Excellent.'
At that moment, the door opened and the Filipino steward returned with a bottle of chilled Moët & Chandon Grand Vintage champagne and two flute glasses on a silver tray. When he had poured the drinks, he handed Zweig and Elena each a glass, then bowed his way back out of the cabin and closed the door quietly.
Ignoring the fact that Hans was dabbing sweat from his face and licking his thirsty lips, Zweig raised his glass to Elena and then had a sip.
'So,' he said, removing the glass from his satisfied lips. 'That takes care of my daughter and the American. Now what about other business?'
Hans coughed nervously into his clenched fist before replying. 'Alas, the situation isn't good. In the past, as you know, we've been able to conduct most of our international business transactions with minimal legal restrictions by the simple expedient of operating from this fleet and – '
'*Ja, ja*, I know that!' Zweig interjected, thinking with pride of the numerous corporations he headed anonymously in many countries, while ensuring that his own domicile was this fleet anchored outside territorial waters, thus beyond the reach of international law.
'So,' Hans continued with maddening solemnity, 'we have been able to amass a considerable fortune, along with great political and fiscal influence, from our extensive international trading in armaments, gold bullion, various pharmaceutical products, and the purchase of valuable works of art.'
'You mean the *theft* of valuable works of art,' Elena corrected him.
'Be quiet,' Zweig said, starting to feel uneasy. 'This is no time for frivolous remarks. This is *serious*, Elena.'
'Unfortunately,' Hans continued, again coughing nervously into his clenched fist, as if frightened by what he had to say, 'over the past year or so there's been a noticeable increase in media exposés of our so-called manipulation of international laws to suit our own ends – '

‘Bastards!’ Zweig whispered.
‘ – and as a consequence, the major Western powers can no longer feign ignorance of our activities, which in the past they had done for their own benefit.’
‘Naturally,’ Zweig said. ‘We are offering the hypocrites a service they could not do without.’
Hans shrugged. ‘They may still want the services we provide,’ he said, ‘particularly in the area of armaments and other potentially embarrassing purchases; but the unprecedented build-up of adverse media publicity about our activities has forced them to agree publicly that action must be taken to curtail our unlicenced operations.’
‘And how do they intend doing that?’
‘By the application of sanctions,’ Hans replied. ‘The countries involved in this, mainly the United States and Europe, have started applying sanctions against those countries dealing with us – particularly Soviet-backed Third World countries – and those sanctions, along with other legal restraints, are gradually crushing the life out of us, most commonly by attacking our holdings in their respective territories.’
‘Bastards!’ Zweig said again, this time much louder.
‘For the past six months or so,’ Hans continued remorselessly, ‘we have found it increasingly difficult to either purchase or sell armaments; our income in that area is therefore down approximately seventy per cent. Even worse is that the tax departments of the United States and the European Economic Community are investigating our financial affairs and have already prevented the transfer of our most recent assets to off-shore tax havens. The only revenue still out of their reach is that being held in Switzerland and a few other off-shore havens; but even that’s dwindling rapidly because of our general lack of trading and inability to shift cash on the open market. In short, we can no longer trade with, or within, the United States, the British Commonwealth, or Europe.’
Zweig took a deep breath, opened and closed his restless hands, then let his breath out again and collected his thoughts.
‘And the Soviets?’ he asked.
‘The Soviet Union has refused to cooperate with any of the aforementioned powers,’ Hans said, ‘and has therefore become, willy-nilly, our sole source of future revenue and our only remaining area of influence.’

‘Damn!’ Zweig exclaimed. Then, before he could stop himself, he had swung his fist over the table to send the champagne bottle and glasses flying across the room. They exploded against the far bulwark, just above the Jacuzzi, with shards of glass spraying out and raining down on the floor, not too far from the shocked Elena who let out a frightened shriek.

‘*Damn*!’ Zweig repeated, even more explosively, then he picked up the table and threw it across the cabin, this time in the opposite direction, well away from Elena. It was still bouncing noisily off the bulwark, one of its legs already broken and spinning towards the door, when, exhausted by his outburst and feeling slightly embarrassed, Zweig dropped back onto the divan and found himself staring in a vague, distracted manner, first at Elena, clearly unnerved in the normally soothing Jacuzzi, then at Hans, who was still seated, rigid with tension, where the table had been.

‘It’s alright,’ he said to Hans, feeling the need to make amends and waving his hand in a gesture of dismissal. ‘It’s not your fault. Nor *mine*. These are circumstances beyond our control, and that’s all there is to it. Nevertheless, something has to be done or we’ll be doomed. *We’ll be doomed*!’

The sound of his own voice shocked him (that unfamiliar, shrill hysteria), but he managed to regain control of himself while wiping sweat from his brow.

‘Elena,’ he said, ‘get out of the Jacuzzi. You’ve been in it long enough for one day.’

‘I *like* the Jacuzzi,’ she replied on a nervous impulse.

‘You’ll like the back of my hand if you receive it, which you will if you don’t get out of that Jacuzzi and get decently dressed. Think of Hans here, if nothing else.’

Shrugging, Elena stood up, stark naked, in front of Hans, and reluctantly started putting on her dressing gown, which, being soaked by the water, clung seductively to her ripe body. Hans carefully lowered his eyes to avoid staring at her.

Zweig sighed. ‘I will never forget my experiences at the hands of those Soviet bastards when they raped Berlin in 1945 – yet now I have to deal with the sub-human swine. Well, so be it. Time waits for no man. Hans, kindly arrange a meeting with that ill-mannered cretin, Colonel Andropov Kuragin, who has long been wanting a larger contribution from our hoard of arms, and I’ll try to come to an agreement and make up for our losses. But in order to rescue us completely we need only one thing – the legendary Lodestone, or

Tuaoi Stone.'
Elena tightened the belt of her expensive dressing gown, then sauntered up to him, her hips swaying sensually. She stopped in front of him, placed her hands on his shoulders, leaned suggestively against him.
'Yes,' he said, suddenly wanting to get rid of Hans, 'we will simply direct more of our attention toward those swinish Soviets and play them off against the Western powers. While not making up *completely* for our losses, this will at least buy us enough time to pursue the Tuaoi Stone, which we now know to be in the care of Count Saint-Germain. So once I've met our good friend, Colonel Andropov Kuragin, and arranged increased trade with the Soviets, I'll give my full attention to the finding of the mysterious Count Saint-Germain and, through him, the Lodestone. Now please go and fix up the meeting. Elena, come closer!'
Unable to inch any closer than she already was, Elena pressed her belly against Zweig as Hans retreated hastily from the cabin, his face bright red with embarrassment. When Hans had gone, Elena smiled and knelt between Zweig's outstretched legs. Her large eyes, which pretended to be admiring, were admirably cautious.
'Do you want me badly?' Zweig asked. 'Do you *need* what I have?'
'Oh, yes,' she whispered.
He had to smile at that, but then closed his eyes, remembering Egypt, the cruise along the River Nile, his treacherous daughter, Ingrid, and that crude American, Gerry Remick, recalling how they had, with Hans, rushed out of the Great Pyramid, all of them obviously stunned by their experience inside it.
Count Saint-Germain, he thought. *That scoundrel – or magical genius. Certainly history's most mysterious man… and possibly still alive…*
He shook his head from side to side, feeling bewildered, disbelieving his own thoughts, then tried to accept that it was actually possible… that the Lodestone, the legendary Tuaoi Stone, truly existed.
'Oh, you're *big*,' Elena said, breathing upon him, exciting him. 'You're so big, so strong, so *hard*… What woman could possibly resist you?'
He felt her warm breath, her pliant lips, her tongue's sensual lapping. Then he briefly thought of Ingrid, Gerry Remick, their flight to freedom; felt the rage boiling up to give him back his strength while Elena's lips and tongue, as soft and smooth as worms dipped in honey, worked their wonders upon

him.
‘You have the best,’ she murmured. ‘I’ve never seen another like it. I want it night and day, every way, and I need it right now. It’s so powerful, so ruthless, so *unbending*, there’s no way to resist it. Oh, I want it… *Right now*!’
The lying bitch was irresistible. She knew just what she was doing. He heard her, felt her, surrendered willingly to her, pushing up to let her drink of his outpouring maleness, accepting her sly deceits as he cried out in ecstasy, despising himself even as he shuddered and gasped with relief, losing himself all too briefly.
‘I want my daughter,’ he groaned.

Chapter Three

‘So I flew directly to London,’ Ingrid continued, sitting close beside Gerry on the settee in the bric-a-brac apartment in Notting Hill Gate, feeling that she had wings, had flown towards the sun, and was glowing with a soft, febrile warmth, ‘and booked into a hotel in Bloomsbury, not knowing how to find you, convinced that I probably wouldn’t, but determined that no matter what happened, I wouldn’t return to my father. Then, yesterday, when I saw that advertisement in the newspaper, I knew it could only have been placed by you – and so, after thinking about it all night, I worked up the courage to call you.’

Her hand was resting in his, and she saw his uncommonly bright blue eyes registering surprise, perhaps hurt or confusion.

‘You had to work up the *courage*?’ he asked her. ‘Why? You *know* how I feel about you, what I told you. You should have called straight away.’

She felt herself blushing and had to lower her eyes. ‘I know what you told me,’ she said, ‘but couldn’t be sure if you meant it. After all, I’m not that attractive – ’

‘You are!’
‘ – and as you said to me, regarding another matter, when you’re in a new country, a very strange and different country, as we both were in Egypt, it can

play tricks on the mind.'
'And that's what you believe my feelings for you are? A mere trick of the mind?'
'Well, I *hope* not. It's just that… *You* know!'
Feeling hot and confused, bereft of further words, she was relieved when Gerry squeezed her hand again and tugged it into his lap.
'Damn it,' he said, 'I love you. I know it. And you must know it, too. Come here,' he said. 'Close your eyes.'
She felt his lips pressing upon her own, and she trembled, dissolving, concentrating on his kiss, shaken by its softness, its tenderness and warmth, automatically opening her own lips and responding inexpertly. She had wings and was flying, soaring away from doubt and fear, and only returned to Earth with great reluctance when he pulled away from her.
'You've got to learn to kiss better than that,' he said, 'but don't worry, I'll teach you.'
She saw only his blue eyes, bright with intelligence, oddly naive, his face solemn and particularly attentive, as if pondering her nature.
'Oh, yes,' she responded, surprised by the husky, sensual sound of her own voice, 'you do that, Gerry. Do it *right now*.'
Unfortunately, he didn't. Instead, his brow wrinkled as if in confusion, then he scratched distractedly at his nose.
'Right *now*?' he said. 'Right now we have to work out what to do.'
'So,' she said, 'here I am. I'm at your disposal. You don't need to hire an assistant. *I'll* be your assistant.'
He stood up and started pacing the shabby room, his unshaven face thoughtful.
'Well, I don't know…' he began.
'I'm perfectly capable, Gerry. I speak four languages fluently, have a BA in History, can type, take dictation in shorthand and use a word processor, if necessary. Also, I've already travelled a lot and have time on my hands. What more do you want?'
He stopped pacing the floor and stared at her with what she felt was slightly melodramatic grimness.
'It might be dangerous,' he said.
'I don't care,' she replied, meaning it. 'I've left my father for good, I'll never go back voluntarily, and since coming to London, during those two long,

empty weeks in my hotel, I've spent a great deal of time thinking about my past, about how my father physically abused my mother and then mentally tortured me, and decided that not only would I never return to him, but that I'd avenge myself on him by frustrating his search for the Lodestone, which is what he most wants in all the world. My father is evil, Gerry. I've finally managed to accept that fully. And accepting it, I've determined to do something about it, no matter the cost. To hell with the danger. I don't care. I'm going to help you.'

It was the longest speech she had given in her life and upon completing it she felt breathless, highly emotional, slightly embarrassed, but also exhilarated and free, no longer chained by self-doubt.

Gerry was staring at her, as solemn as an owl. He didn't speak for some time, as if surprise had rendered him speechless, but then he took a deep breath, shook his head from side to side, ran his fingers through his already ruffled hair and whispered, 'Oh, boy!'

He started pacing the room again, a genius in deep thought, but eventually stopped in front of her, wrinkled his brow, and nodded affirmatively.

God, he was sweet.

'Okay,' he said. 'Let's work it out logically. And the first thing is to recall what actually took place in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid. So, what actually happened? First, that bizarrely dressed apparition who looked like Saint-Germain specifically told Hans that he, meaning your father, couldn't have the Lodestone and would be doomed if he tried to pursue it – so he *knew* your father was hoping to find it. Next, he stared right at me – no mistake about *that* – and told me that I had to know that the first number is "one". So what does that sound like?'

'Like he was warning my father off his search for the Lodestone, but encouraging *you* to try and find it.'

'Exactly… And the first clue we have is the number "one" in some shape or form.'

'Which gets us nowhere.'

'Right. Because that number could mean anything. But it *does* mean that sooner or later we're going to have to remember that that particular number has a certain relevance – and in the meantime, the only thing we have to go on is the identity of Saint-Germain. We need to know about Saint-Germain, who he is, *what* he is, and I'm convinced that I've heard the name before,

though I can't place it just yet.'
'You think it's his real name?'
'Maybe, maybe not. It's possibly a pseudonym, but if it is, I think it's based on a real person, living or dead.'
'It's European,' she informed him. 'Saint-Germain… France, Germany… or ancient Bavaria.'
'Right,' Gerry said. 'And we can check it out easily. Particularly if it's the name of a real person, which I think it is.'
'The British Museum Reading Room?'
'Yes, Ingrid, that's a good place to start.'
'It's not that easy to get in there, Gerry.'
'Why?'
'You need a special pass card that includes an identifying photo.'
'We're not talking about Fort Knox, Ingrid.'
'I mean it: that's what you need. To get it, you have to be a local student, academic or professional researcher. And you're not even *English*.'
Gerry grinned at her, filling her up with warmth and a languorous wanting.
'I'll get around that,' he said. 'What I can't get around is the fact that I'm broke and this investigation could take weeks, maybe months, and involve lots of travel, meaning money. So! No money, no honey. We're stopped dead in our tracks, ducks.'
'Ducks? Did you say *ducks*?'
'That's an English expression, Ingrid. I pick up on these things pretty quickly. That's what makes me so smart.'
She knew he was smart, but she didn't care right now. She just wanted him to hold her, squeeze her tightly, press and stroke her; to kiss her and teach her to kiss properly and let her take wing again. *Oh, do it*, she thought. *Don't just stand there being bright*… But he just stood there, being bright, his brow furrowed, wanting to save the whole world.
'*I* have money,' she told him. 'I have a *lot* of money, actually. I've certainly got enough for what we need, so let's start straight away.'
'I don't think you'll have enough.'
'Yes, Gerry, I have. I have enough to last us both for months – and perhaps even longer.'
'You have?'
'Yes, I have.'

When previously telling him about her flight from the hotel in Cairo, she had omitted the theft of her father's hard cash. Now, she told him, taking pleasure from recounting how she had rifled all her father's drawers and clothes. After informing him that the total amount stolen was in the region of 20,000 US dollars, she was taken aback to see his bright blue eyes widening with disbelief.

'You *stole* twenty thousand bucks from your dad?' he asked incredulously.

'Yes,' she confirmed with pride.

He whistled softly. 'Wow! I can't believe my own ears. You're just full of surprises.'

This time, when she felt the blush on her cheeks, she realized she was blushing with pleasure instead of her normal humiliation; and when Gerry grinned at her, with his admiration obvious, she blushed even more.

'This is beautiful,' he said. 'It's just too sweet to swallow. We not only keep that bastard from getting his paws on the Lodestone, but use his money to finance *our* search for it. What an irony. *Wonderful*!'

'Do you think the Lodestone really exists?' she asked him.

He shrugged. 'I don't know. But *Saint-Germain* certainly knows whether or not it actually exists – and if it *does* exist and we're to find it, we'll only do it through him.'

'Which gets us back to the British Museum Reading Room, for which we'll need passes with photographs.'

'No problem,' Gerry said, clearly enjoying himself. 'What are the rules?'

'Normally you have to have a genuine purpose for being there – some kind of research – and it has to be something pretty serious.'

'You mean I'd need a letter of authorization?'

'Yes. A letter from some respectable company or university.'

He didn't pause for a second. 'Okay. We both need passes. So let's go to one of those instant-print shops and run off a set of letterhead paper with a reputable publisher's details printed on it. Obviously we'll have to waste most of our print run, since we'll only need two sheets for two letters, one for you and one for me, both stating that the publisher has commissioned us to co-author a book on…' He thought about it and then grinned again. 'Let's say the French Revolution… And then, with those letters, and a couple of passport photos from a coin-machine, we can pick up our Reading Room passes. You think that'll work?'

‘Yes, Gerry, I do.’
‘You’re hired, Ingrid. *Definitely*.’
Still grinning, he stepped closer to her and she stood up automatically, only aware of her need to be near him and give herself, body and soul, to him in order to find her lost self. She raised her head and closed her eyes, embarrassed by her inexperience, wanting him, but stiffening with tension at the thought of what he might do to her. She felt his hands sliding around her waist, fingers pressing against her spine. When he tugged her gently against him, his body seemed to be electric, but she stiffened even more when he kissed her and pressed her tightly to him.
Then he must have sensed her involuntary, helpless fear, since his kiss, which had exalted her even in her fear, was all too abruptly terminated when his hands, moving down from her shoulder blades and spine, came to rest lightly on her hips and then pushed her away from him.
Trembling, she opened her eyes to see his troubled gaze.
‘What’s the matter?’ he asked her.
‘Nothing,’ she lied.
‘You don’t *like* me kissing you?’
‘Oh, I do!’ She felt desperate. ‘It’s just that…’ But she let her voice trail off, not knowing how to explain it, not even wanting to *think* about her years of humiliation, her father’s sexual blasphemies; about the way he had abused her mother, often in front of her, the child, then later played about with his whores and mistresses while making her look on. She thought of her dreams in the sanatorium, those vivid fantasies of revulsion and shame, and wanted even less to tell Gerry what sex had come to mean to her: either power or submission, pain or humiliation, and always repulsively *physical*… No, she couldn’t tell him, at least not without losing him, so feeling torn between her love for him and her fear of letting him have her, she offered him a pained, concealing smile and hoped for the best.
He cupped her face tenderly in his hands, looking almost relieved.
‘It’s okay,’ he said. ‘That bastard. I understand. But it’s okay, I can wait, give it time. You and me, we’ll be alright. Let it take its own course. Right now, we’ve more important things to think about… such as getting that letterhead paper run off and some photos taken and then applying for our Reading Room passes. Let’s do that tomorrow.’
‘Yes, Gerry, of course.’

‘And what about where you’re presently living? You want to move in with me?’
‘No, Gerry, I don’t think so.’
‘You won’t have to…’
‘I know, but it’s not that. Well, it is. I mean, I’d *like* to, but I’m scared, so I’ll remain in my hotel in the meantime. Also, it’s located in Tavistock Square, near the museum, which makes it convenient.’
‘Right,’ Gerry said. ‘Fine.’
Did he look relieved as well? Or was she simply imagining that? Feeling flushed and pained, now confused by her own thoughts, as well as by how he was reacting to her, she studied his face, brimmed over with love for him, felt tears springing to her eyes, and then leaned forward, stood on tiptoe and kissed him quickly, unsurely.
He reached out, pulled her to him, hugged her, breathing heavily, then released her and let her walk to the door, feeling dizzy and weak with love.
‘So,’ she said, turning back to face him, ‘I’ll see you tomorrow.’
‘Right, Ingrid. As early as possible. What about ten in the morning at your hotel, since that’s near the museum?’
‘Fine. Ten it is.’
He ran his fingers nervously through his hair, then glanced out the window.
‘It’s dark,’ he said. ‘I’ll walk you to the station.’
‘No,’ she said quickly, suddenly needing to get away; wanting him too much to be able to stand her own fear of sex and feeling thoroughly ashamed of herself. ‘I’ll manage on my own, thanks.’
‘I’d rather walk you to the station,’ he insisted. ‘It’s not safe for a woman alone after dark, so let me at least take you that far.’
She smiled mainly to reassure him, but also out of amusement at his concern.
‘This isn’t New York, Gerry. It’s London. It’s a pretty safe city.’
He studied her thoughtfully, then shrugged. ‘Okay. If you insist.’
‘I do.’
Wanting desperately to be held by him, but scared of what it could lead to, despising her own cowardice yet sensing an odd shyness in him as well, she covered her confusion by opening the door, blowing him a kiss, then hurrying down the stairs of the gloomy Victorian house; and with a sigh of relief, of longing and frustration, left the building and stepped into the lamplit street, sniffing back her tears.

Chapter Four

After Ingrid had left the room, Gerry stood there for a moment, just staring at the closed door, feeling like a fool, like the virgin he *almost* was, and wanting to rush down the stairs after her and confess all *his* fears. Resisting this urge, he simply clenched his right fist and knocked it repeatedly against his lowered forehead, to punish himself. Having done so, he glanced around the small apartment, wondered how he could survive in such a dump, and then hurried over to the window to catch a final glimpse of his beloved.

Just as he looked down, Ingrid stepped off the pavement and started across the dark, lamplit road, heading for the other side of the street. She was wearing a fulllength summer coat that seemed more fashionable than her customary clothing, but her hair was still piled primly on her head, her shoes were flat-heeled and plain. Nevertheless, as she crossed the empty road, moving in and out of lamplight, he felt himself pouring out to her on a wave of emotion. He wanted to call her back, take her clothes off and make passionate love to her… but he just couldn't do it.

'You god damned hypocrite,' he said softly to himself. 'You're just as frightened as she is. Still a dumb adolescent.'

Well, it was true, wasn't it? As he stood there looking down, he thought of the few other times in his life when he had been involved with members of the opposite sex. Very few indeed, spread thinly over the years, beginning when he was a sophomore and fumbling awkwardly, frustratedly, in the back of an automobile; proceeding a few months later to seduction by an older woman, then a few wellspaced modest experiences in between. Nothing permanent there, certainly nothing too successful, giving rise only to the conclusion that he was too *intelligent* for sex, that he really thought it a messy biological urge that was a lot more trouble than it was worth.

Well, that was *his* excuse.
Yet as Ingrid crossed the street, mounted the pavement at the far side and walked along it, moving in and out of shadow and yellow lamplight, he was

swept by love for her, by the need to possess her. All his previous carnal relationships had been brief and unsuccessful – his own awkwardness had embarrassed him – and now, though he desperately wanted Ingrid, he hardly knew where to start.

God, he thought, as he watched her moving off along the footpath, a lonely figure in that empty street, *I wish you were Mata Hari, a man-eater… I wish* you *would take* me.

Feeling foolish, he sighed, deciding to think of other things, but could only focus on the eerie, lamplit darkness, thinking of all the dangers in a city in the dead of night… Yet that was foolish. This was London, after all. As Ingrid had said, it was a pretty safe city and there was nothing to worry about…

Yet even as he was thinking this, an icy fear poured through him, as if injected into his veins. Temporarily frozen, only aware of his racing heart, he had a sudden, sharp vision of the face of Saint-Germain, blinked, looked down again, and saw Ingrid still on the footpath at the far side of the road. A grey-suited man, imposingly broad and tall, had clambered out of an Audi car parked near the kerb and was hurrying after her.

'Oh, shit,' Gerry murmured.

On the instant, as his fear turned to immobilizing panic, he knew with certainty that the man in the grey suit was hurrying to catch up with Ingrid – and indeed, as the oblivious Ingrid continued walking at a normal pace, the man suddenly sprinted forward and reached out to grab her.

'Ingrid!' Gerry bawled in vain, his hands pressed uselessly against the closed window of the apartment, as the man was about to take hold of her.

Then, inexplicably, the man seemed to change his mind, abruptly stopping his rushed advance, letting his hands fall back to his sides, and glancing towards the alley to his right where, as the still oblivious Ingrid walked on, out of Gerry's range of vision, a pool of brightening light had formed.

Clearly dazzled by the light, perhaps knowing what it was, the man took a hesitant step backward as another man, silhouetted in the increasing brilliance of the eerie light, emerged from the alley and walked towards him.

The grey-suited man flung a hand protectively over his eyes and was just about to turn away and flee when the silhouetted figure grabbed his shoulder. At that, the greysuited man quivered like a bowstring, was surrounded by an unearthly phosphorescence, went into what looked like an epileptic fit, and then collapsed to the ground.

Gerry didn't wait to see any more. He turned away from the window, opened the door, hurried down the stairs and out into the street. Hardly able to think straight, oblivious to danger, he hurried across the road as that unearthly light in the alley flared up into a brief, blinding radiance, then abruptly blinked out.

Temporarily dazzled, Gerry stopped on the opposite pavement, rubbed his stinging eyes, then looked down at the man lying near his feet. The man's jaw was slack, his wide eyes reflecting the lamplight, his body frozen in the contortions of his final agony. The skin on his face and hands was scorched – and he was obviously dead.

'Shit!' Gerry exclaimed. 'Jesus!'

There was no sign of Ingrid.

Almost sobbing, he ran to the alley on his right, looked in and saw nothing but unlit darkness. Perplexed, but even more concerned for Ingrid, he raced on along the street, hoping to catch up with her. He didn't. She was nowhere to be seen along the route to Notting Hill Gate underground station.

Either she had been abducted or she had already caught her train back to Bloomsbury.

Disappointed, he hurried back through the dark, empty streets until he reached the pavement opposite his building.

The dead man who had been lying there had disappeared – as had the Audi car parked father along the kerb.

Aware that his heart was still pounding, and finding it increasingly difficult to keep a hold on his sense of reality, Gerry returned to his apartment, poured himself a whiskey, drank it while giving Ingrid enough time to get to her hotel, and then, so filled with tension that he was hardly able to breathe, he picked up the telephone and dialled her number. The operator promptly put him through to her room.

'Yes?' Ingrid said.

Gerry let his breath out in a lengthy sigh of relief and said, 'It's me… Gerry.'

'That's nice,' she replied.

'You got back okay, then?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Good,' he said. 'I just wanted to be certain. Now make sure your door's locked.'

'Oh, Gerry!' she exclaimed, obviously amused by his concern, still not

knowing what had happened behind her back in that dark, dangerous street.
‘Just double check, Ingrid,’ he insisted. ‘I love you. Goodnight.’
He dropped the phone quickly, too choked up to say more, then had another whiskey, hoping to make himself sleepy, and lay back on the bed fully dressed, taking deep, even breaths before turning the light out.

Was he sleeping? Was he dreaming? He would never know for sure. Later he only knew that he had spent a long, troubled night, haunted by what had happened, trying to understand it, realizing that the man who had tried to grab Ingrid had obviously been one of her father’s men; and convinced that the other man, who had emerged from the light-filled alleyway, had been the same man he had first seen, in a similar unearthly phosphorescence, on the deck of the cruiser sailing along the Nile.

Either sleeping or awake, hardly knowing where he was, but chillingly aware that the people he was hoping to find were actually following him and Ingrid, he tossed and turned more restlessly, sweated a lot, then either in a dream or in reality felt his body encased in heat, compressed by fierce pressure, and opened his eyes to see that same unearthly light filling his bedroom.

He heard an almost palpable bass humming noise that made the stifling air vibrate.
And there, in that shimmering phosphorescence, stood Saint-Germain and his diabolically handsome partner, both of them staring directly, steadily at him, their lips forming half smiles.
There was nothing he could do. He was paralysed by the sight of them. He just lay there on the bed, pouring sweat, his heart pounding, his thoughts blanked out by that relentless bass humming, his muscles tightening into knots as the unnatural pressure squeezed the breath out of him.
He thought he was going mad. He also thought he was going to die. He tried to scream but failed, opening and closing his mouth in vain, struck dumb by the blankness in his mind and the breadth of his terror.
Saint-Germain was still smiling at him. The other man was hypnotizing him. He tried to break free, to resist, to make a noise or thresh his limbs, but felt his senses draining away into a deep well of fear.
Defeated, he closed his eyes and held his breath… and was instantly set free.

The heat and pressure disappeared, the bass humming receded, and he opened his eyes again to see a swirling white light shrinking until it was only a spark burning through the room's door. Then that also disappeared, returning his room to normal darkness, and he let his breath out in a sigh that filled up the silence.
He lay there a long time, still too terrified to move, looking repeatedly left and right, up and down, all around him, and only closing his eyes again with great reluctance, still too frightened to face sleep.
Was he sleeping or awake? He must have fallen asleep at *some* point. When he awakened the next morning, the room was normal, though his body was aching.
The fear was there to be fought.

Chapter Five

Feeling ten years younger after his two-week Fountain of Youth rejuvenation treatment course in the Flora Cure Hotel in Bucharest, Romania, Zweig finally felt up to the task of meeting the despicable sub-human, KGB colonel Andropov Kuragin. Indeed, he took particular pleasure in doing it without the aid of a limousine, instead walking all the way from Boulevard Poligrafei, past Piata Scinteii, along the wide, elegant Soseaua Kiseleff, with its many terraced restaurants and brasseries, to the webbed pathways and lakes of the city's playground, Herastrau Park.

There, in the restaurant Miorita, he was to have his very important meeting. Having already convinced himself that Kuragin would try that third-rate psychological ploy of deliberately turning up late, and preparing himself for it, he was first pleasantly surprised, then highly suspicious, to find the ruddycheeked, potbellied Russian, dressed in an unexpectedly decent grey suit, shirt and tie, already seated at his table in the expensive restaurant overlooking one of the park's many lakes.
'*Guten tag*,' Zweig said, feeling grumpy and refusing to speak Russian. 'So you got here before me.'
'*Ja*,' Kuragin replied cheerfully, standing up and stretching out his hand.
'*Buna seara*,' he said in fluent Romanian, obviously trying to make Zweig feel inferior. 'It is good to see you, my old friend.'

‘*Multumesc*,’ Zweig replied, determined not to be put down, then shook Kuragin’s hand, squeezing it tighter than necessary, and sat down before Kuragin could do so, after which, having regained the upper hand, he waved his right hand in an impatient manner and said, ‘Please, Andropov, be seated.’
‘Thank *you*,’ Kuragin responded, regaining his chair. ‘So, here we are again. Can I get you a *tuica*?’
‘I do not drink brandy even when made from fruit. A mineral water will suffice, thanks.’
‘Of course,’ Kuragin said. ‘Naturally.’
He called a waiter and ordered the drink, then offered a Russian peasant’s artificial smile.
‘So, Wilhelm,’ he said, ‘you would like to eat?’
‘I believe that was the general idea,’ Zweig replied. ‘And you said you were paying.’
‘But naturally, Wilhelm.’
Glancing occasionally at Kuragin over the top of his menu, Zweig was not unaware of the fact that the Russian’s moon-shaped, ruddy-cheeked, good-humoured face, with its son-of-the-soil attractiveness, was the pleasant mask hiding the death’s head of a dedicated communist who had been elbow-deep in blood many times. A survivor of Stalingrad, Kuragin secretly loathed all Germans and had put quite a few of them to death, often hideously, before the ending of the war deprived him of the pleasure. Since then, he had ruthlessly clawed his way up the slippery, bloodslicked ladder of Russian politics, surviving one purge after another, and was now one of the KGB’s most valuable operatives. He would deal with Zweig if he had to, but his cheerful countenance, Zweig knew, concealed a detestation equalling that which Zweig held for him.
‘You are ready to order, Wilhelm?’
‘Yes, Andropov,’ Zweig replied, deciding to cost him as much as possible. ‘I’ll start with the *oua umplute cu pire de spanac* and, perhaps, a hearty soup – shall we make it the *ciorba de perisoare*?’
‘A filling combination,’ Kuragin replied, not blanching at all, ‘but an excellent choice. And the main course?’
‘I believe the *muschi poiana* might do,’ Zweig said, ‘with perhaps a little *mamaliga* on the side, and some stuffed potatoes, such as *cartofi Bucovinei*.’

‘Clearly you are making up for your deprivations in the health clinic,’ Kuragin said, trying to make the comment sound like a joke but not quite succeeding. ‘However, I’m sure you can manage it.’
‘Oh, I’m *sure* I can,’ Zweig said, hardly able to conceal his pleasure. ‘And I’ll follow it up with a combination of *baclava* and cheese pie – the *placinta cu brinza* – with a couple of bottles of Murfatlar Riesling to wash it down. That should set us up nicely, *ja*?’
Kuragin’s smile wavered, but just managed to survive. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘it should set *you* up nicely. My own appetite, however, is more modest, but please don’t mind me.’
For himself, he ordered only a small portion of skinless sausages, the *mititei*, a main course of *musaka* and dessert of apple pie, his peasant’s gaze taking note of the prices as the waiter departed.
‘So,’ he said, sinking back into his chair and trying to hide his outrage. ‘How are things with you, Wilhelm?’
‘I am having my problems,’ Zweig confessed, ‘but I’m sure I can sort them out.’
At that moment, one of the waiters returned with Zweig’s glass of mineral water. He drank it in one gulp, put the glass back on the table, wiped his lips with the back of his hand and glanced idly around him.
‘God,’ he said, ‘how I detest these Romanians. Is that why you meet me here?’
‘I didn’t know you detested them, Wilhelm. And I don’t understand why you do. After all, they entered World War Two on Germany’s side.’
‘And when the tide had unfortunately turned against us, they joined the Allies.’
‘Of all people,’ Kuragin said, ‘*you* should surely understand political expediency.’
‘I do not change my allegiances,’ Zweig replied. ‘I still stand by my *Führer*.’
‘Yes,’ Kuragin said. ‘Quite.’
The use of the word ‘quite’, so English and effete, made Zweig’s blood boil, but he diplomatically kept his peace and offered a lot of mindless small talk with the disgusting Russian while the meal was served and devoured. Aware that what he was eating would not aid his longevity – and would, indeed, set back all the good work done during the past two weeks in the Flora Cure Hotel – but unable to resist the chance to feed off the despised Russian’s

expense account, he enthusiastically demolished his egg stuffed with spinach, lapped up his sour cream soup with meat balls, then tucked with relish into his main course of beef stuffed with mushrooms, bacon, pepper and paprika in a rich sauce of veal stock, tomato and vegetable purée, with corn mush and stuffed potatoes on the side.

'So,' Kuragin said, trying to make conversation while he picked at his *musaka*, 'you are having some problems. What might those be, my friend?'

'Problems?' Zweig said while stuffing his mouth with *mamaliga*. 'Not really *problems*. Merely a few aggravations.'

'Oh?' Kuragin said diplomatically, still picking at his food like an old woman minus her teeth. 'And they have bearing on us?'

'Alas,' Zweig said, 'yes.'

He was mindful of the need to tread with extreme delicacy when dealing with the cheerful, barbaric Russian, but equally aware of his need to repair the damage done in recent months. So, treading carefully, offering what was necessary but no more than that, he told Kuragin of his current plight, with particular emphasis on how the Americans and the European Economic Community were applying sanctions against his numerous interests as well as curtailing all trade with him. When he was finished, he had a long drink of the Riesling and carefully studied the Russian.

'Ah, I see,' Kuragin said, dabbing delicately at his lips with his napkin in order to try to hide his growing pleasure. 'This doesn't sound too good at all, Wilhelm. At least not for you.'

'A temporary setback,' Zweig responded, wanting to strangle the Soviet slug. 'The solution is already at hand – and could benefit you.'

'Oh?'

'Yes, Andropov. You have, after all, been complaining for some time that I've been trading too much with the West while ignoring your own more pressing needs. Well, that situation can now be reversed. The Soviet Union will become my prime customer.'

Kuragin's triumphant smile was enough to make Zweig feel like puking.

'So,' the Soviet swine said, 'you refuse our demands for years and only now, when rejected by your allies, do you grant us this favour.'

'Of all people,' Zweig said, throwing Kuragin's words back at him, '*you* should surely understand political expediency.'

Kuragin's smile wavered, but did not entirely disappear. 'Quite,' he said.

‘However, much as I appreciate your kind offer, I should point out to you that it will only be accepted on the strictest of terms, by which I mean *our* terms.’
‘You think *I* would accept that, Andropov?’
‘I don’t think you have much choice. With America and Europe turning against you, we’re all you have left – so our terms it will have to be.’
‘I would not be so foolish as to come here to beg on hands and knees,’ Zweig said. ‘I have not come here to ask you for a favour. I’ve come to offer a trade-off.’
‘What can you offer now but your desperation?’
‘Power,’ Zweig said. ‘*Limitless* power.’
Enjoying his histrionics, he took even more pleasure from the way in which Kuragin actually stopped smiling and raised his right eyebrow.
‘We have talked before of the legendary Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone,’ Zweig said.
‘Yes,’ Kuragin replied. ‘Of course. We have discussed whether or not it actually exists, and, if it does, if it really possesses magical powers. As you know, I believe it to be a myth, so why bring it up now?’
‘Because recent events have convinced me that the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone, *does* exist, is truly possessed of extraordinary powers, and can now, almost certainly, be located by me.’
‘Those are large claims,’ Kuragin said.
‘Allow me to convince you.’
Without naming names, and implying that he had *personally* witnessed the events described, Zweig recounted what Hans, Ingrid and the American, Gerry Remick, had experienced in the King’s Chamber of the Great Pyramid at Giza, tied those events to the death of his own men in the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York, and finished by saying that he now knew the identity of the current protector of the Tuaoi Stone and could, therefore, given time and financial aid, track him down and wrest the legendary artifact from him.
Kuragin did not bite immediately, but Zweig knew he was going to.
‘Let me get this straight,’ Kuragin said. ‘You had been searching for the Tuaoi… Damn it, I cannot pronounce that name.’
‘Call it the Lodestone.’
‘Yes. You have been searching for the Lodestone for many years, and finally your personal assistant received an anonymous phone call telling him that if you still wanted the stone, it could be purchased from someone who would

come to a certain room in the Waldorf Astoria. A man did indeed go there for that meeting, supposedly to sell the Lodestone to your men, but a widely reported, apparently inexplicable, explosion devastated the room, killing your men, though the courier's body was never found. He had magically disappeared.'

'Correct,' Zweig said, feeling impatient.

'So whoever has the Lodestone, he certainly knows you're still trying to find it.'

'Also correct,' Zweig said, growing even more impatient.

'However, originally the men who died in the Waldorf Astoria were supposed to have met their contact on a cruiser sailing along the Nile, so after their untimely deaths, you took the same cruise and had reason to believe that the present keeper of the Lodestone was on board.'

'Yes,' Zweig said. 'And my encounter with him in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid,' he lied blandly, 'convinced me that he *did* possess the stone and had inherited its magical powers. Now, since I know who he is, I believe I can find him. When I do, I will wrest the stone from him and then hand it over to the Soviets, to use as they see fit.'

'And what would you expect in return?'

'You will pay me handsomely,' Zweig said. 'Initially in material wealth; later, when you have the Lodestone and thus can dominate the whole world, in the handing over to me of a reunited East and West Germany, which I can then rule as *I* see fit.'

'Ah,' Kuragin said with soft sarcasm, 'the Fourth Reich.'

'Correct again,' Zweig said, wanting to crush the gloating bastard. 'Once more there will be only one Germany – a *pure* Germany – and I'll ensure that it stays that way, under the umbrella of Soviet protection, since the Soviets will then rule the world.'

He avoided Kuragin's thoughtful, peasant gaze by tucking into his combined dessert of *baclava* and cheese pie, swilled down with more Riesling. However, he didn't miss the edge to Kuragin's voice when the Russian finally spoke again.

'Reportedly, he who owns the Lodestone can rule the whole world,' Kuragin said. 'So why, if you find it, would you not want to keep it yourself?'

'It's too big for me,' Zweig lied. 'The *whole world* is too big for me. I do not want the Slavs and the Poles and the Romanians; I do not want all the other

sub-humans or ignoble races. I only want my own New Order, a unified Germany purged of the impure and inferior; of all dissenters, Jews, homosexuals, mental defectives and radicals. I do not want the problems of the rest of the world to interfere with my country. I want East and West Germany reunited; the rest you can deal with.'

He knew exactly what the Russian was thinking. Kuragin was thinking that he, Zweig, wasn't thinking too straight; that he was so obsessed with his mad vision of a resurrected Third Reich, he had lost all his marbles and hadn't even considered that the Soviets, once in possession of the Lodestone, would simply renege on their promise and unite the divided Germany only to dominate it completely, as they would the whole world… But he, Wilhelm Zweig, was no mad visionary, had not lost his marbles, and had no intention of handing over the Lodestone once he had found it. No, he would encourage the Soviets to finance his search for it, and then, having found it, use it to blackmail the whole world, including the Soviet Union, into submission. The whole world was *not* too big for him to handle. It was, in fact, all he desired and could not live without.

'So,' he said, finishing his gross desert and washing it down with the last of the Riesling, 'do we discuss the terms of our trade or not?'

The normally cheerful Kuragin (he could have a good laugh while cleaning his murderous hands of blood) was looking unusually sombre right now. He stared steadily at Zweig for some time, his brow furrowed in thought, then eventually let his breath out in a sigh that sounded suspiciously like despair. 'Yes,' he said, 'let's discuss terms.'

An hour later, Kuragin had agreed to arrange for the shipment of a great deal of material wealth, including hard cash and invaluable art treasures (many of which, Zweig reminded himself with satisfaction, had been pillaged by the Russians from the Germans at the end of the war) to him within the month and to complete the rest of the deal when they were in possession of the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone (which, Zweig thought with even more satisfaction, they never would be). Zweig then shook hands with the Soviet slug and headed back across the park, past green lawns and lakes and the many Romanians out for a stroll, safe in the knowledge that he was actually being followed at a discreet distance by Hans and two well-trained, armed bodyguards.

The afternoon light was weak, making the park drab and gloomy, and he suddenly felt an odd melancholia that slightly dampened the ardour of his victory. Surprised by the feeling, wondering what had caused it, he tried to shake it off by reminding himself that he had won – that he had pulled off a coup and could now ignore the Americans and their allies – then wondered how to go about tracking down the mysterious Saint-Germain, whose name he had deliberately not mentioned to Kuragin.

Thinking of Saint-Germain, he then thought of the cruise along the Nile, of his daughter, Ingrid, and that American lout, Gerry Remick, and wondered if his men in London had managed to locate them yet. That the American might already be dead was of some comfort to him; that Ingrid might soon be back and at his mercy made him feel even better.

She would suffer as her mother had suffered – only more so, the treacherous bitch.
Briefly lifted out of his gloom by the thought of retribution, he looked straight ahead, along the path bounding a still lake, and saw a man stepping out from under some trees and stopping to stare intently at him.
He, also, stopped walking, frozen by the man's intensity, mesmerized by his darkly glittering, snake-like gaze and diabolical attractiveness.
The man said nothing to him, but he knew without doubt that the mesmeric gaze was directed at him.
Even as he accepted this, trying to fathom its meaning, but felt his senses slipping into chaos and confusion, his every thought focused on that diabolically handsome, smiling face, he was, to his horror, consumed with an unnatural, overwhelming *desire* for the stranger – his libido inflamed, his emotions in turmoil, his every nerve singing in tune with what appeared to be the stranger's magically amplified heartbeat, his body straining to either hurl himself upon him and either take him carnally or be taken by him.
Shocked, disbelieving, yet rapidly losing self-control, he was indeed just about to advance upon the man when his overwhelming desire changed abruptly to terror and he saw, in those seductive eyes, the portals of heaven or hell, the light-flecked darkness of the cosmos, and found himself taking a step backwards, as if for protection.
Jerking his head sideways, trying desperately to avoid that mesmerizing gaze,

he stared down at the still lake to his right – and was further assaulted.
The water started swirling, then turned into a roaring whirlpool, the vortex of which became the eye of a tornado that sucked him through the vacuum of the ether, into the countless stars and moons of an exploding galaxy. He felt himself sucked down, tumbling through the infinite, traversing time and space, and emerged to snow-capped mountains, glittering ice on frozen peaks, a great hall hacked out of solid rock and filled with a light mist.
Here another man, silvery-haired and seemingly ageless, was staring steadily at him.
He knew it was Saint-Germain. It could be no one else. He knew by the strangely haunted brilliance of that gaze, by the agelessness of the features beneath the noble brow and silvery hair, by the calm, unfettered arrogance of his stance, by the steel in his gentle smile.
Zweig felt himself collapsing, his legs too weak to support him, his limbs burning with an ethereal heat that made him think he was melting. He collapsed into himself, body colliding into spirit, then returned to Earth, to solid ground, when he fell to the grass.
He heard noise – thrashing branches, running feet, his own men shouting – and looked up to see the foliage springing back into place where the diabolical stranger had just been standing.
Zweig found himself lying on the grass beside the placid water of the lake. He was breathless, felt bruised and too hot, but appeared to be unharmed. He watched the branches of the trees settling back down where the mysterious stranger had made his escape, then looked up as Hans and the bodyguards reached down to help him to his feet.
‘What happened?’ Hans asked him, looking nervous. ‘We saw you fall and thought you’d been shot, but we didn’t hear gunshots.’
‘That man!’ Zweig bellowed, getting his breath back. ‘Go and capture that bastard!’
Hans and the bodyguards glanced at one another, all obviously bewildered.
‘What man?’ Hans asked. ‘We saw no one. Only you walking beside the lake. Believe me, sir, there was no one else.’
‘And over there? By those trees?’
‘We saw no one. *No one*!’ Hans shrugged and indicated the bodyguards.
‘Shall I still send them to investigate the area?’
Shocked and horrified, not only by his bizarre experience, or hallucination,

but by the extent of his carnal desire of that spectral stranger, Zweig walked resolutely to the trees, each step taking him closer to the terror that he had just shaken off. Taking a deep breath, he pressed the branches down and then looked beyond them.
He saw nothing but another stretch of park, some people, mostly couples, wandering to and fro.
All perfectly normal.
Shaken, confused, still trying to accept what had happened, he was just about to turn back to Hans and the bodyguards when he noticed that his hand, in pressing the branches down, had become covered with a fine whitish powder that smelt just like ash. Examining the leaves of the surrounding branches and bushes, he saw that they had been charred to a height of about six feet from the ground, as if scorched by some invisible heat source.
'*Mein Gott*,' he whispered to himself, remembering what Hans and Ingrid had told him of their experience in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid. 'It must be true. It was them! *Saint-Germain and his partner*!'
He stood there, dumbfounded, exhilarated and terrified, realizing that what he wanted was within his grasp
– and that all hell could be let loose.
Those he was hoping to find were following him… and their powers were spectacular.

Chapter Six

The five days Gerry spent with Ingrid in the British Library Reading Room were among the most enchanting of his life.

Enchanting because he could think of nothing to compare with the immense circular hall of the library, which could accommodate over four hundred readers, had a dome that could only be bettered by the Pantheon of Rome, and whose catalogue was the most extensive in the world. Enchanting, also, because he spent most of the time sitting beside Ingrid at one of the desks, poring over books with her, often holding her hand, stroking the back of her wrist, whispering as one did in a library or when in love, sometimes blushing at his own words of endearment and hiding his embarrassment by turning away from her to study the great hall.

The shelves curved around the room, the librarians were raised on high in the centre of the circle, the readers' desks forming spokes that radiated out from the numerous drawers of the General Catalogue and extended to the reference books and dictionaries, the encyclopedias and histories.

Gerry could have choked up just seeing it.
He felt awed and humbled when in the Reading Room, but he also felt bewilderment and the inexorable rise of fear as Ingrid, mostly solemn, but sometimes smiling shyly, filled out the application slips for books, questioned the whispering librarians, waited patiently beside him for the books on order to be delivered, then went through them with him as, together, they unravelled the mystery of the Comte de Saint-Germain, tracing his origins back into distant times, far beyond what seemed possible.
The revelations about Saint-Germain, coming one after the other, led Gerry from bewilderment to an excitement that was, much too often for comfort, not too different from disbelief. That Saint-Germain had existed was beyond any shadow of doubt. What Gerry found impossible to accept was the extent of his life.
The identity of the Saint-Germain encountered on the Nile cruise remained a mystery; but historical records revealed that a Comte de Saint-Germain had actually existed, yet was a man whose life defied common sense and appeared to be magical.
'According to Eliphas Levi, the nineteenth-century occultist,' Ingrid summarized in a whisper from her notes during their final afternoon in the great library, 'the Comte de Saint-Germain was born in Lentmeritz in Bohemia, the bastard son of a leading Rosicrucian, some time towards the end of the seventeenth century. Nothing was known about him until approximately 1740, when he began to appear in various historical records as a handsome man who seemed to be in his early thirties, moved in fashionable Viennese circles, and was renowned for his unusually sombre clothing, paradoxical fondness for spectacular diamonds, and penchant for telling extraordinary tales about his past life.'
As she read to him in a whisper, Gerry studied her closely, wanting to stroke her cheek, to loosen her long hair and let it fall down sensuously over her shoulders.
'The Saint-Germain of those days,' Ingrid continued solemnly, 'was already

spoken of as an enigmatic and remarkable figure who practised alchemy, was an expert jeweller, was known to speak five languages fluently – and possibly Chinese, Hindu and Persian as well. He had a reputation as a "magical" healer, and was rumoured to be able to turn base metal into gold. He frequently described machines that bore remarkable similarities to locomotives and steam ships – which hadn't been invented at the time – and there were suggestions that he possessed the Alchemist's Stone, had drunk from the Fountain of Eternal Youth, and was approximately four thousand years old.'

'This sounds like bullshit,' Gerry said too loudly. 'He was obviously no more than a confidence trickster.'

At that point, a man at a nearby desk loudly admonished them to be quiet, and Gerry, just about to make an angry retort, caught Ingrid's warning glance, saw her nod towards the exit, realized the complaint was justified, and stood up to leave with her.

Taking one last fond look at the great dome of the library, he also realized that the past five days he had spent here with Ingrid had been, in an odd sense, the most intimate of his life to date, bringing him extremely close to her without actually touching her. He touched her now, placing his hand on her shoulder, then followed her out of the building.

'The Museum Tavern's just across the road,' Ingrid said, 'and it's a very nice pub. We can talk normally there.'

'Okay,' Gerry agreed.

Once inside the pleasantly busy pub, Ingrid leaned towards him, over the table, and said, 'A *lot* of his contemporaries believed that Saint-Germain was a confidence trickster, but an awful lot more took him seriously – not least the governments of the major European countries. According to our notes,' she continued, looking down at the notes she had pieced together from their research, 'the Count, already widely talked about as a remarkable man, also had the reputation of being someone involved rather shadily in politics. On the one hand accused by the French police of being a Prussian spy, he was, on the other, suspected by the Prussians of being a Russian agent. To complicate matters further, in November 1745, in a London obsessed with Jacobite plotters and their French sympathizers, he was arrested by the English authorities, accused of having proStuart letters in his possession, claimed indignantly that the letters had been planted on him, and was

eventually released.'
'Right,' Gerry said. 'And as I recall, your famous Horace Walpole, the 4th Earl of Orford, Suffolk, man of letters, art historian, antiquarian and Whig politician, had something to say about that.'
'Yes. Commenting on the case in a letter to Sir Horace Mann, dated December 9, 1745, Walpole wrote the following odd description: "He – Saint Germain – has been here these two years, and will not tell who he is or whence, but professes that he does not go by his right name.' He then wrote that Saint-Germain, quote, "sings and plays on the violin wonderfully", but added that he was, quote, "mad and not very sensible".'
'An interesting interpretation,' Gerry offered, 'of the Count's refusal to discuss his true past or give his real name.'
'Perhaps,' Ingrid said. 'Anyway, the more bewildering and legendary aspects of the original Comte de SaintGermain began shortly after he had, according to the French Marshal de Belle Isle, cured him of a serious illness and was rewarded by being taken to Paris, where the grateful Marshal set him up with apartments and a laboratory for his alchemical experiments.'
'It was the age of patronage,' Gerry joked. '*I* could do with that right now.'
'That's not important,' Ingrid said, obviously not hearing the joke. '*Here's* what's important… According to Georges Touchard-Lafosse, in his *Chroniques de l'Œil de Bœuf*, shortly after his arrival in Paris, Saint-Germain attended a soirée given by the aged Countess von Georgy, wife of the deceased ambassador to Venice, who remembered meeting, in Venice in the 1670s, someone with the same name as, and similar appearance to, SaintGermain. When the surprisingly youthful Saint-Germain confirmed to the Countess that the man she had met all those years ago had indeed been himself, she could scarcely believe it, since this would have made him nearly a hundred years old. However, Saint-Germain insisted that he was the very same man, that he was in fact *very* old, but then, when the stunned Countess said that he must be, quote "a devil", he trembled violently, told her not to use such names, and fled from the room.'
'He was also described as a charlatan,' Gerry said, 'and that could have been part of his act. Likewise for his claims that he had known the Holy Family intimately, been present at the marriage feast at Cana, been a good friend of Anne, the mother of the Virgin Mary, personally proposed her canonization

at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325, and prophesied that Christ would come to a very bad end.'
'There's no real proof that he ever said those things,' Ingrid corrected him. 'But if he did, there *may* have been something in what he said. However, please don't make me digress. Let's get back to what he claimed to the ageing Countess at her soirée.'
'Okay, Ingrid, continue.'
She smiled at him, then looked down at her notes, pushing her spectacles back up her fine nose with a delicate finger.
'A possible substantiation for Saint-Germain's claim that he was the man known to the much younger Countess von Georgy in the 1670s was recorded by Baron Charles Henry de Gleichen, a Danish diplomat who, in his published memoirs, stated that the composer Philippe Rameau and a relative of the French ambassador to Venice had both assured him that they had known a Monsieur de Saint-Germain in the early 1700s when, according to them, he appeared to be a man of about fifty. Baron Gleichen also confirmed that Saint-Germain had a fondness for unusual diamonds when, in the same memoirs, he wrote: "He showed me some remarkable things – a great number of coloured brilliants and other stones of unusual size and perfection. I thought I was seeing the treasures of the fabled Cave of Jewels…"'
'Which could in fact have been more products of his alchemical experiments,' Gerry suggested.
'That's certainly what was widely believed at the time: that Saint-Germain was an alchemist who could turn base metal into gold, or glass into diamonds, and whose alchemical experiments might also have led to his discovery of the elixir of life. This explained, for many people who remembered him from years previously, why he seemed relatively *ageless*. This latter aspect of his personality was heightened by his claims that he never ate
– and certainly he was never *seen* eating or drinking in public.'
'That could have been a trick as well,' Gerry said. 'He could have been stuffing his guts in private.'
'Yes,' Ingrid said agreeably, 'it could have been a trick, but…'
'But?'
'There's a lot more to come.'
'So sorry,' Gerry said, impersonating an English gentleman. 'Please *do*

continue.'
'In 1758,' she went on, 'while still in Paris, SaintGermain was presented to Louis XV by Marshal de Bell Isle in the salon of Louis' mistress, Madame de Pompadour. He charmed both of them, and two years later, in 1760, was sent by Louis XV to the Hague as his personal representative, to help settle the peace treaty between Prussia and Austria. While in Holland, he fell out with his former friend, Casanova, who then tried to discredit him – and this may have encouraged the enmity of Louis' Foreign Minister, the Duc de Choiseul, who convinced Louis that Saint-Germain had betrayed him and should be thrown in the Bastille. Subsequently, Saint-Germain fled to England.'
'We didn't find any confirmation for that,' Gerry reminded her.
'Yes, we did,' Ingrid responded, pointing down at her neatly written notes. 'A *London Chronicle* article of January 3, 1760, which was mainly concerned with SaintGermain's then widely reported "eternal youth", included the comment: "No one now doubts it, although at first it was thought to be pure fantasy. In fact, everyone believes that, among other things, he knows of a panacea for all diseases and is able to overcome old age.'
As the frightening implications of Ingrid's summary gradually dawned on him, Gerry found himself glancing distractedly around the pleasant English pub – at the workers in their overalls, the gentlemen in pinstripe suits, the secretaries and Yuppies and tourists and casual staff – then started losing himself in the past, in recollections of his Nile cruise; recalling vividly the mysterious man he had encountered on the boat: his silvery hair, unlined skin, ageless face… and mesmeric gaze.
Another Saint-Germain? Someone simply using his name? Or was he truly the embodiment of something so remarkable that it went beyond the bounds of credibility and rendered normal reasoning prostrate?
He shook his head from side to side, hoping to clear it, trying to hold his senses together; but when he looked back at Ingrid and caught her solemn stare, he was forced to accept that her implications could not be avoided.
'You *do* realize what you're implying?'
'Yes,' Ingrid said, 'I do. We now know that he existed and was very old indeed – a skilled musician and composer, an astonishing linguist, an authority on world history, a magician and alchemist who claimed to be 4000 years old – and who, at least according to the historical records, *did* live a remarkably long time.'

She trailed off in a hesitant manner, as if doubting her own words; and as fear crept relentlessly over Gerry, he welled up with concern for her.
‘Okay,’ he said, trying to keep his voice light and act unconcerned, ‘what else do we have there?’
‘From this point on,’ Ingrid responded, staring down at her notes, ‘the recorded facts make his life much more concrete. In 1762 he took part in the deposition of Peter III of Russia and in bringing Catherine the Great to the throne. A year later, he was known to be carrying out further alchemical experiments in his laboratory in the castle of Chambord, which Louis XV had put at his disposal in 1758. The following year he was living in Holland under the name of Count Surmount; there, he established another laboratory in which he made paint and dyes, as well as continuing his alchemical experiments. Disappearing from Holland with about 100,000 gilders, he materialized in Belgium, this time calling himself the Marquis de Monferret, and there, in Tournai, he set up yet another laboratory.’
‘Obviously, he never stopped experimenting.’
‘No,’ Ingrid said. ‘Never.’
‘And so?’
Ingrid sighed. ‘In 1768 he turned up in Russia in the court of Catherine the Great, whom he had previously helped bring to the throne. According to Count Alexei Orlov, then head of the Russian Imperial Forces, he was an invaluable diplomat and palace advisor during the RussianTurkish war of 1768-70. As a reward for his services, he was made a high-ranking officer in the Russian Army – a position he took under the ironic English alias of General Welldone – but instead of reaping the benefits of his prestigious position at the end of the war, he chose to leave Russia and go to Germany where, with his friend and pupil, Prince Charles of Hesse-Cassel, he carried out more alchemical experiments, as well as studying Freemasonry and Rosicrucianism…’
As her voice trailed off again and she restlessly shuffled more papers, Gerry tried to accept what was being implied and understood that if it was true, it was something beyond belief.
It was also something frightening, without precedent, unparalleled, and as he looked at Ingrid’s solemn face, which was filling up with excitement, he felt himself being submerged in a wave of guilt and fear at the thought of what he was leading her into by letting her share this.

‘Now *this* is interesting,’ Ingrid said, definitely sounding excited. ‘On April 15, 1758, Voltaire, in one of his many letters to Frederick the Great, described SaintGermain as, quote, “a man who knows everything and never dies”. He then added, “I think it quite probable that this man will visit you within the next fifty years.”’
‘Christ, yes!’ Gerry burst out. ‘Even Voltaire!’
‘Yes, Gerry. And in 1779, the sister of Frederick the Great, Princess Amalie of Prussia, met Saint-Germain and became interested in him. However, when a letter from Saint-Germain to Frederick, begging for patronage, was ignored – possibly because of Frederick’s embarrassment over widely circulated reports that Saint-Germain had worked for him as a double-agent during his period in the French court – Saint-Germain went that same year to Eckernforde, in Schleswig, Germany, where he lived, and reportedly died, in the castle of Prince Charles of HesseCassel.’
Gerry wanted to reach out and hold her, to protect her with his love, but recalling what had happened when she left his apartment a week ago, recalling, also, the magical events of the Nile cruise, he was forced to accept, with shame and foreboding, that his love for her, as yet unconsummated, would not be enough to protect her if the wheel turned against them.
‘The parish records in the Catholic church of Eckernforde,’ she said, ‘state that Saint-Germain died on February 27, 1784, and was buried locally. If this is true – and assuming that he *was* about fifty years old in 1701 – it makes him, at a time when thirty-five was *old age*, over 130 years old.’
‘Except,’ Gerry said softly, hardly recognizing his own voice, unable to fully accept what he was hearing and almost struck numb by it, ‘he may *not* have died…’
‘Correct,’ Ingrid said, smiling at him. ‘He might still be alive.’

Chapter Seven

Ingrid felt really proud of herself, in command, actually *doing* things. When Gerry nodded and stood up, she gathered her notes together, put them into her briefcase, then also stood up and followed him out of the busy pub, into the sunlit street. When he took hold of her hand and smiled at her, she filled up with warmth at what she felt he had given her – the chance to prove that she existed and had worth, could love and be loved.

‘Come on,’ Gerry said. ‘ Now we have to pay someone a visit. I made an appointment last night.’
‘You *did*?’ she asked, surprised. ‘An appointment with whom?’
‘I’ll tell you in a minute. Let’s finish summing up first. We reached the conclusion that Saint-Germain may *not* have died, that he could be thousands of years old, but remarkably still alive. I want to get all this clear in my mind, so let’s move on from there.’
‘Right,’ she said, opening the notes still in her hand and glancing repeatedly at them as she walked beside him along Great Russell Street, towards Tottenham Court Road. ‘Although Saint-Germain’s death is recorded in the records of the parish church in Eckernforde, a great deal of mystery surrounds his death. For a start, he was reported to have died when his good friend, Prince Charles, the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel, was absent from home, and with only two nameless women servants in attendance. To deepen the mystery, Prince Charles then burned all of Saint-Germain’s supposedly invaluable papers – in his own words, “lest they be misinterpreted”. Almost immediately, then, the rumours that Saint-Germain was still alive spread like wildfire.’
‘That stuck in my mind,’ Gerry said. ‘The story that he *burned* all of Saint-Germain’s papers. To me, that seems highly unlikely. Especially when you consider that Prince Charles was Saint-Germain’s devoted pupil. I don’t think that anyone who’d worked as long or as intimately with Saint-Germain as Prince Charles did would have been capable of destroying the results of all that labour. It’s also pretty unlikely that Prince Charles would have been absent from the house when Saint-Germain died.’
‘The implication being that Saint-Germain did *not* die at that time, but deliberately disappeared, taking all of his papers with him, and leaving the devoted Prince Charles to cover up his trail.’
‘Yeah,’ Gerry said, ‘that’s right. And as I recall from our notes, there *are* grounds for thinking that the 130-year old Saint-Germain actually managed to grow even older.’
‘You recall correctly,’ Ingrid said, moving closer to him as they entered the busy Underground station. She waited until Gerry had purchased two tickets to Holland Park and they had both descended the lengthy escalator and boarded the train, before continuing: ‘In 1785, an important congress of

Freemasons was held in Paris and attended by Rosicrucians, Kabbalists, Illuminati and members of other secret societies. According to the Masonic archives, the guests included the magician Cagliostro, the philosopher Louis Claude de St Martin, the renowned physician and hypnotist, Franz Anton Mesmer, and… Saint-Germain, who is also on record as having addressed the meeting. Mesmer later stated that it was Saint-Germain who explained the subconscious mind to him, thus paving the way for modern psychology and psychiatry.'

'Well,' Gerry said, 'whether alive or dead, our Count Saint-Germain certainly seems to have influenced a lot of very famous people.'

'Yes – and he continued to do so. It was recorded by the diarist Mademoiselle D'Adhemar that he visited her five times over a period of many years, beginning in 1789, when he also visited Sweden's King Gustavus III to warn him of danger, and ending in 1820, the night before the infamous murder of the Duc de Berri.'

'This is shivery,' Gerry said, grinning at her. 'This is weird. Very *strange*.'

'Strange? It gets stranger. In her diaries, Marie Antoinette expressed her regret that she didn't take note of Saint-Germain's earlier warning about the forthcoming outbreak of the French Revolution. Reportedly, SaintGermain also appeared to Madame du Barry on the scaffold, and to Marie Antoinette in prison, to warn her of the date and time of her execution.

'And it doesn't end there… Twenty-eight years later, in 1821, the famed educationalist, Madame de Genlis, mentioned in her memoirs a conversation that she'd had with Saint-German during the Vienna peace talks; and in the same year, the French ambassador, Count de Chalon, claimed to have spoken to him in St Mark's Square in Venice. By 1842, Saint-Germain's name was being mentioned in connection with Lord Lytton, whom he was said to have helped develop supernatural powers; in 1867 a meeting of the Grand Lodge of Freemasons in Milan, Italy, was attended by Saint-Germain; and in 1896, when, according to the evidence, Saint-Germain would have been approximately 245 years old, the famed theosophist, Annie Bresant, wrote that she had recently met him.'

As the train pulled into Holland Park station, Gerry, clearly intrigued and with his brain working overtime, gazed out the window, then stood up and exclaimed, 'I can't believe it! 245 years old so far! Come on, Ingrid, this is our stop.'

She followed him out of the carriage, then up the escalator and out into another noisy main road.
‘So who are we going to see?’ she asked him. ‘You still haven’t told me.’
Slipping in beside her, linking his arm with hers and leading her along the busy road, he said, ‘One of the most recent books I looked at in the British Library had a brief paragraph on a woman called Helena Barbanell, stating that she had been a leading member of the Theosophical Society, but had, a few years back, been expelled from the organization because of her public declaration that she was the *chela*, or disciple, of the legendary Comte de SaintGermain, and that her renowned mediumistic powers were channelled through her from him. Apparently Miss Barbanell, now an old lady, is convinced that SaintGermain still exists and operates through her. So, I just looked her up in the phone book, called her, told her I was doing research for a book on Saint-Germain, and made an appointment to see her – and that’s where we’re going.’
‘My,’ Ingrid said, smiling at him, ‘you’re so efficient. I let that one slip past me.’
‘No one’s perfect,’ he joked.
After glancing up to check the nameplate above the pavement, he led her along a broad, tree-lined street of elegant early-nineteenth-century houses, eventually stopping at one a short distance along. Like many of the houses in the area, this former family home had been converted into apartments. Gerry took the steps to the front door and pressed the bell belonging to Helena Barbanell. An electronically distorted female voice came out of the speaker above the bells, asking who was calling, and when Gerry had given both their names, a buzzing sound indicated that the door could be opened. Gerry opened the door, let Ingrid step in ahead of him, closed the door and led her across the old-fashioned hallway to the groundfloor apartment of Helena Barbanell.
The woman who greeted them was old, grey-haired, heavily built, and supporting her arthritic limbs on a walking stick. However, Ingrid noted that her eyes shone with a deceptively youthful brilliance, and her smile, as she ushered them into the apartment, was welcoming and almost girlish.
Awkwardly seating herself and leaning her walking stick against a table, Ms Barbanell apologized for the state of the untidy room, blamed it on her arthritis, added that this was why she could not even offer them tea, and

asked if they would like a sherry instead. When Ingrid nodded assent, Ms Barbanell indicated the bottle resting on the table, surrounded by antique glasses.
‘I have a visiting home help for my three meals a day,’ she said. ‘Otherwise, I’m becoming increasingly useless – so please help yourselves.’
‘Would you like one as well?’ Gerry asked her.
‘Yes,’ she replied. ‘Why not? I’ll be in my grave soon enough, so a sherry won’t harm me.’
While Gerry poured the drinks, Ingrid glanced around the apartment and was saddened by the state and smell of it. The home help had not cleaned it well and the air had a musky aroma. The furniture was Victorian, darkly varnished and covered in dust. On the walls were photographs turning brown with age. The tables and chairs were littered with old newspapers, magazines and books. It was like a museum.
Helena Barbanell also looked Victorian and was dressed accordingly.
‘You said on the telephone that you were working on a book about the Comte de Saint-Germain,’ she said to Gerry when he had passed her a glass of sherry.
‘Yes,’ Gerry lied, ‘that’s correct.’
‘Have you found out much about him?’
‘Quite a lot, but still not enough for my planned book.’
Ms Barbanell smiled at him. ‘Yes, I can understand that. The records on Saint-Germain are rather scanty – and I doubt that I can add much to them.’
‘Well,’ Gerry said, ‘we’ve read about your expulsion from the Theosophical Society because of your publicly stated belief in the existence of Saint-Germain. We also know that you believe him to be one of the immortals, and that in the course of history he’s reappeared frequently, under various aliases, to interfere in the affairs of mankind.’
‘That is correct, my dear. I am merely one of his many disciples, and my mediumistic powers come from him. It is the belief of that Theosophical Society that all mediumistic powers come from secret Mahatmas in a hidden colony in Tibet – the magical adepts who will one day regenerate the corrupt world – but they do not believe, as I do, that the Comte de Saint-Germain is such. Sadly, they believe him to be one of history’s great imposters.’
‘That’s just what I was going to ask you about,’ Ingrid said. ‘There *is* a large body of opinion which says that the supposed appearances of Saint-Germain

throughout the centuries is some kind of elaborate hoax. What makes you so convinced that he really exists?'
'Because he has appeared to me, spoken to me, and acts as my teacher. I am his *chula*, his disciple, and hope to join him when death finally claims me.'
The bright eyes of the old woman were staring clearly and steadily at her, and Ingrid had to admire her calm conviction, whether or not rooted in fact.
'I find that hard to believe, Miss Barbanell,' she said, feeling the blush on her cheeks.
'Naturally,' Ms Barbanell replied pleasantly, obviously not offended. 'Since you have not had such an experience yourself, mine must be hard to accept.'
'Is there any way you can convince us?' Gerry said, 'that the known history of Saint-Germain *isn't* some kind of elaborate hoax?'
Ms Barbanell smiled again, shrugged, and shook her head from side to side in denial. 'Surely it would be impossible for any individual, or organization for that matter, to extend such a hoax over such a long period of time, as well as keeping it alive in so many different countries and cultures. Besides, the historical records clearly reveal that most of the stories about Saint-Germain that gave rise to charges of charlatanism did not in fact originate with Saint-Germain himself, but indirectly from his arch-enemy, the Duc de Choiseul, who, in his hatred or jealousy of the Count, hired a look-alike named Gauve to mingle in society and exaggerate the Count's well-known claims as a means of discrediting him. This came to light through the extensive researches of Gustav Berthold Volz in the 1920s.'
'Given that Saint-Germain was supposed to have led such an extraordinary and active life, why are the historical records on him so thin?'
'The records *are* scanty,' Ms Barbanell agreed, 'but this was undoubtedly deliberate on Saint-Germain's part. For instance, Napoleon III was so intrigued by the stories about Saint-Germain that he set up a special commission to investigate him. However, the commission's findings were destroyed in a fire that consumed the Hotel de Ville in Paris in 1871 – and few were willing to ascribe that disaster to coincidence. Similar obstructions to the sources of information, and the mysterious destruction of discovered rare material evidence, have occurred throughout the years since Saint-Germain's final recorded materialization in 1820, when he last visited Mademoiselle d'Adhemar.'
'Such as the supposed burning of his papers, after his presumed death, by his

devoted pupil, Prince Charles of Hesse-Cassel.'
'Precisely,' Ms Barbanell responded. 'The story that he died in Eckernforde in 1784 is nonsense. Saint-Germain evolved long ago from the physical plane onto the nonphysical plane of the magical adept, but he can take on physical form at will. He did *not* die in 1784, but simply moved on – either in the flesh or in the spirit – and doubtless commanded Prince Charles, his disciple, to fake his death, as it had been faked many times before.'
'*Before*?' Ingrid asked, surprised at her own lack of shyness.
'Of course,' Ms Barbanell said, after having another sip of sherry and pursing her lips. 'Saint-Germain knows the Hermetic secret which gives one immortality, and has thus reappeared many times throughout history, under various aliases.'
'You really think that's possible?'
'It's possible for Saint-Germain, my dear. Through alchemy he discovered the elixir of life, and thus became an immortal, a spiritual adept, impervious to time and space.'
'I thought alchemy was a way of turning metal into gold,' Gerry said sceptically.
'That's a commonplace misconception,' Ms Barbanell said, her gaze calm and direct. 'Alchemy is, in fact, a means of purifying humanity, as well as nature, and it can therefore be applied to material objects, the cosmos, or man. The changing of metal into gold is only a small part of alchemy – a very unimportant part. The major purpose of the science is to find the ultimate purification – the panacea, the cure for all ailments, the elixir of life. It's no accident, my dear, that most of the great alchemists of history lived much longer than their fellow men of the time.'
'The Hermetic secret, then, is to be found in alchemy?'
'Yes, young man, it is.'
Ingrid caught Gerry's glance, took note of his raised right eyebrow, returned her gaze to the oddly youthful face of the arthritic old woman and didn't know what to think. She felt excited, yes, but she also felt growing fear and yearned to be held in Gerry's arms and lose herself in his warmth. But she finished her sherry, placed the glass back on the table, then spoke again to the aristocratic old lady.
'Are you often in contact with Saint-Germain?'
'No,' Ms Barbanell said without hesitation. '*I* am not in contact with *him*. *He*

contacts me when it suits him, which is how it must be. For now, I am merely his disciple, his *chela,* but hopefully, when death comes, I will ascend to become one of his adepts.'
'Like Saint-Germain himself?'
'Not *quite* like Saint-Germain, but a spiritual adept on his plane. Saint-Germain is one of our hidden masters – one of the immortals whose vast, secret knowledge is available to adepts for the gradual enrichment of the world – along with such figures as Jesus Christ, Buddha, Merlin, Apollonius of Tyana and Roger Bacon.'
'And Christian Rosenkreuz?' Gerry asked out of the blue.
Ms Barbanell reacted as if slapped in the face. Visibly flushing, she stared at Gerry with her lined eyes glittering intensely, glanced at Ingrid as if betrayed, then blinked in agitation, had another sip of sherry, and unsteadily placed her glass back on the table.
'Christian Rosenkreuz?' she repeated, as if confused.
'Yes,' Gerry said, pressing his advantage. 'It's been suggested more than once that Saint-Germain was a member of the historically obscure Rosicrucian Society – and might even have been the original *founder* of the fraternity – or the son of the founder.'
Ms Barbanell appeared to tremble slightly, then regained control of herself. 'I *have* heard that theory,' she said, 'but can neither confirm nor deny it. I only know that there is very little connection between the modern Rosicrucian believers and what you have rightly described as the historically obscure Rosicrucian Society – and that just as the origins of that society are obscured by history, so too is the identity of its founder. Whether or not Christian Rosenkreuz and Saint-Germain are one and the same – or even related – is something I can't say with certainty.'
'Can anyone?'
Ms Barbanell finished her sherry, set the glass back on the table, played nervously with it, then sighed and looked steadily at Gerry.
'I doubt that *anyone* can confirm it with certainty,' she said. 'However, there *is* someone who might be able to shed more light on the matter. A rather disgusting German sodomite and practising occultist who, before his descent into the quagmire of black magic, was a member of the reportedly still existing *original* Rosicrucian Society – the one whose origins are obscured in the mists of history. His name is Klaus Schiller.'

‘And where might we find Mr Schiller?’ Gerry asked.
‘In Eckernford, West Germany,’ Ms Barbanell replied, suddenly looking disconsolate, shivering as if with shock, then taking a deep breath and letting it out before looking up again. ‘Klaus Schiller,’ she continued in a less confident, trembling tone of voice, ‘is a degenerate descendant of Prince Charles of Hesse-Cassel, and lives alone near the church in whose graveyard Saint-Germain was reportedly buried. I suggest you pay him a visit.’
Ingrid was just about to ask some questions of her own when she saw the tears brimming in the old lady’s eyes, then felt a hand on her shoulder. Twitching automatically, she glanced up at Gerry and saw him shaking his head in a negative gesture, warning her not to speak.
‘Let’s go,’ he said softly.

When they left Helena Barbanell’s apartment, heard her front door close quietly but firmly behind them, and stepped into the gloom of the hallway, Ingrid felt an even deeper gloom descending upon her, bringing fear and confusion. Recalling the shock on Ms Barbanell’s face when Gerry had mentioned Christian Rosenkreuz – as well as the old lady’s sudden collapse into emotional desolation after confessing that the descendent of Saint-Germain’s pupil, Prince Charles of Hesse-Cassel, was in her view a degenerate – she felt a touch of that desolation in herself.

Outside, the sun was still shining, but edging towards an early-evening greyness, as she walked beside Gerry down the steps of the building, unable to resist leaning against him, in need of his presence. She felt haunted by Saint-Germain, by his impossible history, and wondered if she was living a dream, or perhaps going mad.

Then she looked across the broad, handsome road and saw the men staring at her.
There were two of them, wearing matching gaberdines, both on the opposite pavement, staring at her from behind a white Audi 100 car.
Seeing them, she stopped walking, briefly frozen with fear, convinced that the men were watching her, but not sure why she thought that. Then she focused on the white Audi 100 and instantly understood the cause of her fear, believing that the two men worked for her father and had come here to abduct

her and take her back to him.
Now even more fearful, she reached out for Gerry's hand and felt his fingers curling around her own, returning her to her senses and giving her comfort and courage. Putting her fears down to imagination, she tried not to look back, but eventually, just before turning into the main road, had to glance over her shoulder, fully expecting to see the two men following her.
They were not doing so. They weren't even looking at her. Instead, they were strolling casually across the road, heading in the general direction of the building that she and Gerry had just left.
Wondering what was happening to her, she smiled up at Gerry, pressed herself tighter to him, and let him lead her away.
'Another shivery experience,' he said to her. 'So let's go to Germany.'

Chapter Eight

Leaning heavily on her walking stick, Ms Barbanell looked down through her window as the young woman and her American boyfriend left the building and walked off along the pavement in the dimming afternoon light. The girl had been very sweet, but too strait-laced for her own good, while her young man, the American, had seemed bright but oddly innocent for his years, a naif, one of life's eternal optimists, a modern-day holy fool.

She watched them walk off, hand in hand, obviously in love, then sighed and turned away from the window to return to her chair.

They'll be back, she thought. In a day or two, a week or two. They had the look of two people obsessed… and their obsession was Saint-Germain.

Awkwardly, painfully, she hobbled back to her chair, put the walking stick aside, then poured herself a more generous sherry. Sipping at it, appreciating its anaesthetizing qualities, she thought of the young American, her holy fool, and wondered if he'd been chosen. Perhaps, perhaps not. He had the boldness of innocence, the courage of the naive; she had sensed that he was as pure as the driven snow, at least deep down inside himself, where it mattered the most.

If he knew what she was thinking about him, he would certainly laugh at her, since clearly he did not know himself and thought of himself as a morally flawed, worldly man. Yet she sensed that he was not a worldly man, but a man of the spirit, his soul still undefiled.

She had another sip of sherry, trying to soothe her sense of shame. Her own wavering faith had surfaced when she had told them of Klaus Schiller; and the young Englishspeaking German lady and her American boyfriend had obviously noticed her confusion at the very mention of Christian Rosenkreuz. They had witnessed the fissure in her faith and would surely return…

Sighing, she tried to forget the arthritic pains in her bones, could not stop herself from yearning for release from the body's betrayals, and then thought with a mixture of reverence and helpless suspicion about her venerable Master, Saint-Germain.

Most of her life, since adolescence, she had been visited by him, had observed his human form in its ectoplasmic radiance, had listened to his words and obeyed them, wanting only to follow in his footsteps and ascend to the summits. She had thought of him as the very essence of goodness, the embodiment of love, the supreme deity under God, but as old age and the body's failings attacked her, she had suffered the first flickerings of doubt about his nature and motives. Too often, in recent years, his loving, seductive eyes had momentarily displayed an icy coldness or steely, barely suppressed, inexplicable rage. She had thought of him as strong, as aglow with inner peace and joy, but too often recently she had sensed despair and grief at his core.

Saint-Germain, her Master and hope, had more sides than a prism.
And what about Klaus Schiller? Why did *he* haunt her so? It was because he was the last of a long and noble line
– the descendent of the blessed Prince Charles of HesseCassel – and she couldn't understand how Saint-Germain, or the Order, could let that line degenerate so dramatically, and, even worse, let a corrupted former disciple remain so close to the hallowed ground from which the two adepts had ascended.

When she thought of Klaus Schiller, she thought of doubt – her own doubt and growing confusion. The young American and his girlfriend had sensed it and would surely return.

She was thinking thus when someone knocked on the door of the apartment. Convinced that it was the young lady and her American boyfriend returning already, she sighed, stood up heavily and made her way on the walking stick to the door, only managing to pull it open with some difficulty.

Two strange men, both wearing gaberdines, were standing in the hallway, smiling at her in a manner that instantly made her turn cold with fear.

'Hi,' the smaller one said, his grin broadening maliciously. 'We're plainclothes policemen. We picked the lock on the main door downstairs and let ourselves in. We want to ask you a few questions about those people who just paid you a visit. May we come in?'

'Policemen?' Ms Barbanell asked rhetorically. '*You're* not policemen! Just who on earth – ?'

The big man stepped forward, kicked her walking stick aside, and pushed her back into the room even as she was falling. She hit the floor on her back, was shocked by the pain, heard her own cry as if from far away as the two men entered the apartment and slammed the door shut behind them.

'Put this bitch in that chair there!'

The voice was calm and unfeeling, filling her with dread, and as she tried to sit up, choking back the bile of terror, one of them grabbed her by the hair and dragged her in agony across the floor. Her heart raced dangerously. She gasped, choked, wept helplessly, heard her own groaning, then felt herself being picked up and planted roughly down on the chair. When her face was slapped, she opened watery eyes to see the man staring down at her.

The bigger man, not smiling, which made him less frightening than the smaller, grinning man, held her walking stick up in front of him, then expertly broke it over his raised knee and threw the two pieces on the floor.

'This time it's just the walking stick,' he said with a guttural accent. 'The next time, if you don't answer our questions, it'll be your old woman's spine. Now stop snivelling and listen.'

She listened and answered automatically, stunned by pain, hearing her own voice repeating what she had said to the American and his young girlfriend, understanding that her tormentors would pursue them and most likely harm them.

‘You spoke to the American pig and his girlfriend?’
‘Yes.’
‘About what?’
‘Nothing. Just – ’
She didn’t know what they were doing. She only understood the pain. It shot up from her tortured fingers to her shoulders and made her shudder convulsively.
‘Did they ask about the Lodestone?’
‘Pardon?’
‘Don’t be boring. A masquerade of innocence won’t help you – it will just make me hurt you more. Try this for size.’
Her normal world was blotted out. The pain became her sole reality. Dissolving into the pain, she suddenly sensed that death was advancing upon her, bringing darkness and terror.
‘They *didn’t* ask about the Lodestone? The Tuaoi Stone?’
‘No! I swear, *no*!’
‘Then why did they come to see you, darling? And what’s a fingernail worth these days?’
The worst torturer was herself. Her own screaming drove her crazy. The pain had the bite of a reality she had not known before. Her shivering lips drank her own tears.
‘Come on, grandma, give us more. We’re both hungry for gossip. What did they want to know, what did they learn, and where are they going? Why the tears? Am I *hurting* you?’
One of the men kept slapping her face. The other repeatedly stepped on her toes. When not doing this, they did things so obscene, so humiliating and agonizing, that she couldn’t rise above the convulsions of her afflicted flesh, the pain’s awesome dominion.
‘Come on, darling, let’s not be so coy. Let’s have some frankness. Is this nipple for sampling?’
They asked her what her visitors had wanted and what she had told them. It was a nightmare of terror, of pain expertly applied, and when she lied to them, or withheld information, they sensed it and applied some fresh torture until she gave in and told all.
‘They’re going to Eckernforde in West Germany,’ were the penultimate words she uttered. ‘They’re going to visit Klaus Schiller. Oh, please, don’t!

Not again…’
‘Anything else?’
‘No! Nothing! I swear it! Oh, please, not again…’
The chair was kicked from beneath her and she fell to the floor, was dragged by the hair from the lounge and into the bathroom.
She understood, then, that she was going to die, definitely, irrevocably, and as the taps were turned on, as the bath filled with water, as they made jokes and chuckled and occasionally kicked her broken body, she travelled down through herself, to where the pain could not reach her, and took courage from the image of her Master, the revered Saint-Germain.
He materialized before her, a radiant presence in the darkness, watching calmly as they lowered her into the bath and held her under the water. She knew she was being murdered and that soon she would be dead, but she also knew, when she saw Saint-Germain, that death would not have dominion.
In those few seconds before oblivion, with her chest about to burst, her faith, which had been wavering, was made whole by his light, and she felt her spirit rising out of doubt to remove her from terror.
‘They will kill you,’ Saint-Germain said, ‘but they cannot finally harm you. What they do is done from ignorance, but their ignorance is a blessing; they are merely putting an end to your suffering and setting you free. Observe the light. Become part of it.’
Her chest and heart burst. She exploded into the light. Dying, she was resurrected on the instant, leaving life to the living. There was pain and then the radiance of immortality where the mountain peaks sheltered her.
‘The fat cow’s dead,’ one of the men said. ‘Let’s get the hell out of here.’
Saint-Germain smiled in welcome.

Chapter Nine

Hans was not feeling too good when he entered the Eforie Nord thermal centre. In fact, he was exhausted, having just driven nearly 200 kilometres from Bucharest to Constanta, Romania’s second largest and most ancient city, then south along the road between the sandy Black Sea shore and the freshwater lakes, not stopping until he reached Eforie Nord, close to Lake Techirghiol, famed for its health-giving sapropel mud.

What greeted him when he opened the door and tentatively entered the steaming mud-room was the sight of the gross Wilhelm Zweig, naked but for a pair of tight briefs, over which his bloated belly flopped in an ugly manner where he sat on the edge of a large, circular steel bath filled with warm sapropel mud, his feet in the bath, while two severe-faced, white-overalled Ukrainian nurses spread the mud over his hairy legs and thighs.

'Ah,' Zweig said, staring directly at him, 'you got here at last.'
Having flown all the way from Bucharest to London and back again while Zweig rested in this luxurious treatment centre, Hans did not take too kindly to the implied rebuke. However, he was frightened of Zweig, more so today than usual, and merely offered what he thought resembled a placating smile.
'Yes, sir,' he said.
'Did you stop off at the hotel in Bucharest on your way here?'
'Yes, I did.'
'And everything was fine there?'
'Yes. No problems.'
'Elena was still there?'
'Yes, naturally,' Hans said, too frightened to tell Zweig that his beloved Elena, bored as usual, had made him join her on an early morning tour of the discos, cafés and brasseries of the city, and had then dragged him into her bed for some athletic sex.
He still could scarcely believe it.
Not a virgin, but with little time for romance, Hans had often secretly lusted after Elena, at once repelled and aroused by her sly teasing and sluttish behaviour. Yet he had never condemned her too much, thinking himself no better than she was, knowing too well how easy it was to give in, to surrender your will, to the stronger will of another, as undoubtedly both of them had done with Zweig. So in one sense he had sympathized with her predicament – she had once been a professional whore and now was solely Zweig's kept woman, a virtual prisoner – and Hans, who felt increasingly that he also was a prisoner, had always felt that he and Elena had much in common, shared the same dirty cell.
So he had been drawn to her, lusting for her in secret, and when she had seduced him in that hotel in Bucharest, he hadn't put up much resistance.
He could still see her body, stark naked, voluptuous, could almost feel her

limbs wrapped around him, drawing him in. The recollection was vivid, arousing him on the instant, but also resurrecting the fear that had been dogging him since leaving the hotel.
He was terrified of being found out, of Zweig seeing it in his face, but even more terrified that Elena would inadvertently tell Zweig about it. Yes, having had her that morning, having sampled her artful ways, Hans had to have her again (more so since she had told him that she also wanted him) but his lust could not dim his dread of what would happen should Zweig find out about them.
Zweig would certainly kill him.
Aware of this, he wanted to flee from the room, but forced himself to behave as if nothing had happened.
'Ah, God,' Zweig complained as one of the women started rubbing the mud in between his fat thighs. 'These rheumatic pains of mine. I've tried everything else, but only this works. You should try it yourself, Hans.'
'I don't have rheumatic pains,' Hans said, as usual embarrassed and appalled by the sight of his naked boss and trying hard not to look at him.
'That doesn't matter, Hans. This treatment could make you feel good anyway. And you should think of the future, after all. You won't stay young forever.'
'No, I suppose not.'
'So what have you got to report? Did you bring back my daughter?'
'No, sir. We found her, but didn't bring her back – for what I feel are good reasons.'
'I can think of no good reason for not doing what you were told. I told you to terminate that American and bring back my daughter. I will accept no excuses.'
When Zweig stared at him with those gelid, inhuman eyes, Hans automatically removed his handkerchief from his pocket, wiped sweat from his forehead, and recalled with depressing clarity his childhood in Bremen, his hateful foster parents, all the times they had whipped him and locked him in a closet, caught him masturbating and whipped him again while threatening hell's fires. His childhood had been a nightmare, his adolescence worse; and then, as if being mocked further by God, he had taken up employment with Zweig, not knowing what he was like, and had found out too late that he was working for a criminal and bully – possibly even a

madman.
At first he had been excited by it, enraptured by the power it gave him, in thrall to the glamour of travelling the world to help coordinate the various offices and warehouses of Zweig's mighty empire, with its communications network of computers, telex and fax machines, satellite links, and numerous spies and informers in highly sensitive government, military and police institutions. But gradually, when it dawned on him just who he was working for, when he realized that his master was possibly a psychopath who was engaged in illicit activities on an international scale, he developed the desperate urge to escape, but just couldn't do it. He had learned of Zweig's tempers, of his homicidal tendencies, and understood that he would not be allowed to leave, now that he knew so much.
This is why he was still working for Zweig, no matter how much he loathed him: he was too frightened to leave without permission, too terrified of what might happen to him should he even mention the subject. He was imprisoned by fear.
'I believe my reasons were sound,' he said, carefully avoiding Zweig's gaze. 'Please let me explain.'
'So explain,' Zweig responded, and then, when one of the women whispered something to him, he swung his legs out of the bath and stood upright, looking even more awful, to let the woman smear the mud over his body.
'We were right about the advertisement placed in the *Guardian* newspaper,' Hans said. 'It *had* been placed by the American and *did* bring Ingrid to him. Some men from our London office followed her to the American's apartment in Notting Hill Gate, London – '
'I know all this already,' Zweig interjected impatiently. 'We received the report in Bucharest. When one of our men tried to abduct the bitch, an unnatural light beamed out of a nearby alley and someone emerged from it, grabbed hold of our man, and somehow made him go into a fit and die. When the driver of our vehicle dragged the dead body into the Audi, he discovered that it had been slightly scorched all over by an unknown heat source.'
'Yes,' Hans said, blushing because he had forgotten that report, 'but a heat source similar to the one that charred the bushes in the Herastrau Park in Bucharest after *you* had your very odd encounter with a stranger.'
'Judging by your description,' Zweig said, 'it was the same man *you* saw in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid, when you were with Ingrid and

the American.'
'Yes,' Hans agreed, recalling that terrifying experience, yet still finding it difficult to accept that it had actually happened, since it didn't seem possible. Indeed, repelled though he was by his own duties in Zweig's worldwide network of materialistic, high-tech organizations, he still preferred them, or at least their reality, to the magical world he now seemed to be grappling with. Saint-Germain and the Tuaoi Stone were mysteries he could well do without.
'So?' Zweig said, now covered from neck to toe in the sapropel mud and looking like a gigantic chocolate bar. 'What has all this to do with the American and my bitch of a daughter?'
'Two days ago,' Hans explained, 'in a second attempt to capture Ingrid, I personally arranged for two of our best men to sit on her tail and attempt to grab her at the first available opportunity. Since our men also bugged both their rooms, there was little difficulty in learning about their movements. Ingrid had spent most of the previous five days with the American in the British Library Reading Room, and most evenings, after they had left the Reading Room, they had a meal together, then the American invariably walked Ingrid back to her hotel in Tavistock Square, not far from the museum.'
'So why didn't you abduct her from there?' Zweig asked, spreading his arms as requested by one of the nurses, to enable her to press more mud up under his armpits.
'Don't move,' the woman said softly in imperfect English. 'You must remain very still until the mud hardens.'
'*Sehr gut*,' Zweig said.
'We didn't try grabbing Ingrid in her hotel,' Hans said, grimly amused by the sight of Zweig standing between the two women, covered from neck to toe in hardening mud, 'because of the risk attached – I had thought it best to try to snatch her off the pavement – but also because their numerous visits to the British Library Reading Room had convinced me that they were involved in some kind of research, and I was interested in finding out what it was.'
'Good thinking,' Zweig said, flicking his eyes in Hans' direction, but not daring to move even his head.
'Then,' Hans continued, wishing the mud would constrict so tightly around Zweig that it would eventually crush the life out of him, 'when on the fifth day, the American and Ingrid did *not* go for a meal or return to her hotel, but

instead left the Reading Room early and headed off in another direction, our men followed them. When they entered the apartment of one Helena Barbanell, in Holland Park, one of the men called me.'
'And you ordered the extermination of the American louse, yes?'
'I was going to,' Hans replied, feeling shockingly tired, but still intrigued by the sight of Zweig standing with his arms outspread, as rigid as a rock, encased from head to toe in the *café-au-lait*-coloured sapropel mud.
'However, reasoning that the visit of Ingrid and the American to Miss Barbanell and the five days in the British Library Reading Room were connected, I thought it best to let them go again and, instead, told our men to have words with Miss Barbanell and find out just what was going on.'
'Yes?' Zweig queried impatiently.
'Well, after a lengthy interrogation of the lady – '
'Under torture, I trust!'
'Of course.'
'She came out with the truth.'
'I believe so,' Hans said, feeling sick to think of what had probably ensued in that poor woman's apartment and deeply regretting his own part in it. 'Under interrogation,' he continued despairingly, 'the lady, Helena Barbanell – who had once been a leading theosophist but was thrown out of the society for publicly proclaiming her belief that Saint-Germain was her spiritual Master – confessed that Ingrid and the American had asked her about SaintGermain in general, and wanted to know, in particular, if she could prove the reality of his existence.'
'And this woman actually believed that Saint-Germain was her spiritual Master?'
'Yes, Herr Zweig. She claimed that he visited her now and then, usually materializing out of an unnatural light – the same kind of light that I saw in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid of Giza, and which was witnessed, also, by the driver of the car when our man was killed trying to abduct Ingrid in Notting Hill Gate.'
Zweig was clearly growing excited by what he was hearing. His eyes darted left and right, obviously trying to catch the eyes of the women standing on either side of him, then he dropped his gaze as low as he could without moving his head, in an attempt to see if the sapropel mud had hardened.
'Take it off!' he snapped. '*Take the mud off!*'

‘But it’s too early, Herr Zweig,’ one of the women protested. ‘You will not receive the full benefits of the treatment if you – ’
‘Damn you, *take the mud off!*’
Both of the women reacted as if they had been slapped, one of them turning bright red, the other white, then one of them recovered and, using a small hammer and chisel, began chipping the hardened mud off Zweig’s body.
‘So, Hans, continue. Miss Barbanell!’
Distracted by the sight of the agitated woman first breaking and then peeling off the sapropel mud – like someone removing the chocolate coating from a giant Easter egg – Hans was jolted back to reality by the harsh imperative in Zweig’s voice, and said, ‘Yes, of course, Herr Zweig!’ With a rapidly drying throat he continued: ‘So… Ingrid and the American wanted positive proof of the physical existence of Saint-Germain and were given, as a possible source of further information, the name of one Klaus Schiller, an excommunicated German Rosicrucian presently residing in Eckernforde, West Germany, where Saint-Germain was reported to have died and been buried, before defying logic by reappearing many times in later years.’
‘This is the same Saint-Germain so renowned in the eighteenth century?’
‘Yes, Herr Zweig.’
‘And he has reappeared frequently since?’
‘Reportedly, Herr Zweig.’
‘And according to the Barbanell woman, he appeared to her in an unearthly light?’
‘So she seemed to believe, Herr Zweig.’
‘*Seemed* to believe?’
‘Yes, Herr Zweig. She’s dead. Our men killed her.’
‘Good. *Very* good!’
The shell of mud was now being chipped off Zweig at a fairly fast rate, and for the moment he looked every odd indeed – a kind of jigsaw man, with large, irregular patches of mottled white skin showing between equally irregular patches of mud. His flabby breasts with their hairy nipples were free, as were his waving arms.
‘So!’ he exclaimed excitedly. ‘What you witnessed in the King’s Chamber of the Great Pyramid was not an illusion. And nor was what I witnessed in the Herastrau Park. The legendary Saint-Germain actually exists, in one way or another, and is aware that we’re trying to track him down.’

‘Yes. Just as Ingrid and the American are also trying to track him down. Which is why I didn’t bring Ingrid back with me.’
Zweig’s arms and upper body were now free of mud, and while one of the women wiped his bare skin with a hot cloth, the other went down on her knees to chip the rest of the mud off his tree-trunk legs. He glanced down at her, clearly distracted, as if momentarily thinking of something more pleasurable, but then, perhaps regaining his senses, looked up again.
‘Of course,’ he said, ‘Ingrid and the American have gone to Eckernforde in Germany… and our men are following them.’
‘Yes, Herr Zweig,’ Hans said, noticing, when the hardened mud fell off Zweig’s loins, that beneath his trunks he had a slight erection. ‘I’ve instructed them to follow Ingrid and the American, but not to go near them – at least not until they’ve led us to Klaus Schiller. I’ve told them to have a talk with Herr Schiller once Ingrid and the American have done so. Then, as in the case of Miss Barbanell, we will silence Schiller.’
‘Excellent,’ Zweig said.
The woman who had been kneeling in front of him finally removed the last of the mud and stood up, while the second woman, having wiped down his top half, now knelt on the floor to do likewise to his lower half. Zweig still had a slight erection beneath the briefs, but the woman blandly ignored it.
‘So,’ Zweig summarized as the woman wiped him clean, ‘the American is clearly in pursuit of Saint-Germain, no doubt in order to find the Lodestone. My first suspicions about him were therefore correct. He was on that Nile cruise in order to learn the location of the stone – and then he saw Saint-Germain, as you did.’
‘Yes, Herr Zweig.’
‘Yes, *indeed*, Hans. And now we must ensure that the American does *not* get killed – at least not until he’s done our work for us and led us to Saint-Germain, and, through him, to the Lodestone.’
Zweig glanced down at the top of the head of the woman kneeling at his feet, which she had just finished wiping clean. He spread the fingers of his right hand and was just about to lay them lightly on the woman’s head, when, perhaps realizing what he was contemplating, he changed his mind, took a deep breath, and reluctantly watched her standing upright again.
Naked except for his briefs, he smiled at both women.
‘Thank you,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry to have rushed you. Unfortunately, I have to

rush you again and beg you to leave. Come back later to clean up this mess. *Multumesc*. *La revedere*.'
'*Cu placere*,' the women replied in unison, then curtsied and left, clearly relieved to get away.
Zweig waited until they had closed the door behind them, smiled at Hans with a rare display of warmth, then glanced down at his pitiful erection and went to the window, waving his hand to indicate that Hans should join there. Hans wiped sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief, then went to the window and stood beside Zweig.
The Black Sea was stretched out before them, dark beneath a sullen sky, the heavy clouds casting their shadows on the water's bleak surface.
'You have done well,' Zweig said.
'Thank you, Herr Zweig,' Hans responded, feeling even more nervous at the unexpected, uncommon praise. 'I'm pleased I took the correct course of action.'
'You did,' Zweig said, glancing sideways at him. 'And to take the correct course of action is important at all times.'
Not knowing what to say to that, Hans merely returned his gaze to the Black Sea and yearned for his freedom.
'Those women were most attractive,' Zweig said. 'Did you not think so, Hans?'
'Yes, Herr Zweig. I agree they were most attractive.'
Zweig sighed, almost as if disappointed. 'You know,' he said in a distant, rather melancholy manner, 'there was a time when I could not have controlled myself with such women, particularly under such… *intimate* circumstances. However, now, in such circumstances, I find myself thinking, not really of the women, but of the days of the Third Reich, those final, tragic, yet somehow glorious days, and of the fine young Wolfcubs who stood beside me when courage and loyalty were most needed.'
As if unaware of what he was doing, and still gazing in a melancholy manner at the gloomily shadowed Black Sea, Zweig reached out and placed a hand on Hans' shoulder, then squeezed it affectionately.
Shocked by this intimacy, actually filling up with revulsion, and growing ever more fearful in the presence of his master, Hans just stood there, staring at the mistshrouded Black Sea while Zweig droned on, as if talking to himself, his voice histrionically emotional, each word heavy with meaning.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘they were glorious days indeed – and now, in recalling them, I am filled with pride and love. And instead of lusting for common, peasant women, I find myself thinking of my Nazi comrades and Wolfcubs, those golden young gods of war, and yearning for the purity of their blood and the steel of their spirit. We fought and frolicked together, exercised and bathed together, ate and drank together, and shared the knowledge of what was most important in life, which was, of course… *duty*.’

He turned to face Hans, now holding him by *both* shoulders, exhaled foul breath and offered a smile that chilled Hans to the bone. Hans wanted to run away, to hide his shame or be sick, but he did not, *could* not move a muscle or speak one word of protest.

‘*Duty*!’ Zweig repeated. ‘The one word that gives life meaning. To obey, irrespective of personal feelings, is the key to the *real* man. Do you not think so, Hans?’

‘Yes, Herr Zweig,’ Hans managed to croak through parched lips.

‘*Duty*!’ Zweig repeated, nodding emphatically, then he pressed Hans down onto his knees and placed his hands on his head. ‘We must learn to *obey*. Do you understand, Hans?’

‘Yes, Herr Zweig, I understand…’

At that very moment, frozen by dread, sick with revulsion, Hans understood that he was a slave, that his fear of Zweig had paralysed him, and that the only future he could imagine was the hell of eternal imprisonment. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, willing himself to perform his duty, then thought of Zweig’s daughter, Ingrid, that oddly sweet, forlorn girl, and of the American and Saint-Germain and the Tuaoi Stone that Zweig wanted so badly. He let his breath out, hearing Zweig’s carnal sigh above him, and only managed to retain his sanity by contemplating the possibility of some day, some way, turning the table on his psychopathic master and setting himself free.

It was something to think about.

Chapter Ten

Gerry squeezed Ingrid’s hand encouragingly as they stood side by side outside what was, according to the local telephone directory, the house of Klaus Schiller in the small, coastal town of Eckernforde, in Schleswig-

Holstein, in the Federal German Republic.

Not having been to Europe before, Gerry had been in a heightened state of curiosity for most of the journey, taking immense pleasure from Ingrid's learned dissertations on what they were seeing as they crossed the North Sea on the ferry to Hamburg, spent the night in the seaport city like a pair of gauche tourists, then drove north in a rented car from there up to Kiel, and finally along the Jutland peninsula and the bleak Baltic coastline to this small, ancient town that had formerly belonged to Denmark. Now, standing outside the front door of Klaus Schiller's house, his tourist enthusiasm was being replaced by a curiosity that was not without a certain latent fear.

'Well,' Ingrid said, 'you might as well ring the bell. Let's get it over with.'
It was a cold, wintry, late afternoon, with the wind howling in from the Bay of Eckernforde, where all of Germany's submarines were moored, and when Gerry glanced at her through the deepening, rainswept gloom he thought she looked like a pitiful waif from a Charles Dickens novel – her spectacles wet with rain, her pinned-up hair hidden under the gaberdine's raised hood, more rain dripping down her nose and off her chin as the wind moaned about her.
Looking back over his shoulder, at the buildings across the town square, he again saw the modest hotel in front of which he had parked the hired car.
'When we've finished with Schiller,' he said, 'we might as well book into the nearest hotel – that one over there.'
'Yes, Gerry,' Ingrid said, wiping rain from her spectacles. 'Now do we ring the bell or not?'
Sighing, feeling an odd reluctance, Gerry rang the doorbell and waited with increasing trepidation for someone to come and open the door. It opened soon enough, letting light beam out into the street, and standing before him was a short, stoop-shouldered man wearing dishevelled trousers, striped shirt and braces, his face unshaven and cadaverous, his eyes dark and mistrustful, his teeth, when he opened his mouth to speak, almost rotted away.
'*Ja*?' he asked in an unfriendly manner, his voice a guttural croak. '*Was wunschen Sie*?'
'*Entschuldigen Sie*,' Ingrid replied. '*Sprechen Sie Englisch*?'
'Of course,' the man replied impatiently. 'Who are you? What do you want with me?'

‘Are you Klaus Schiller?’ Gerry asked, his skin crawling at the sight of the little man, who looked unwashed and, indeed, as degenerate as Helena Barbanell had said he was.
‘*Ja*, I am. So who are you?’
‘Can we step in out of the rain?’
‘No, you can’t. Now who *are* you?’
‘I’m Gerry Remick, an American writer,’ he lied, ‘and this is Ingrid Zweig, my research assistant. We’re writing a biography on the life of Comte de Saint-Germain, and were told you might be able to help us.’
‘It’s really most urgent,’ Ingrid added. ‘We’re about to put the finishing touches to the manuscript, but our deadline with the English publisher is almost up, which is why we drove all the way to here from London.’
‘You did that for a few minutes of my time?’
‘Yes, Herr Schiller, we did.’
Clearly impressed by this story, Schiller stared at each of them in turn, then shrugged, stepped aside and waved them in.
‘OK,’ he said, ‘enter.’
Following Ingrid, Gerry brushed past Schiller, heard him close the front door, then was led by him along a short, dark hallway filled with bits and pieces of machinery, into a lounge that smelt of decay and had the appearance of a wildly cluttered junk shop. Antique spears, swords and shields were leaning against every wall, the walls were covered with old paintings, and the furniture for the most part was badly stained and broken. Saucers filled with souring milk for the half dozen cats wandering about were resting on various parts of the floor.
‘Here,’ Schiller said, indicating the old pine table in the middle of the room. ‘Take your raincoats off and sit down while I pour you each a glass of schnapps, which should at least warm you up.’
‘You speak very good English ,’ Ingrid said, hoping to pander to his ego while removing her soaked coat.
‘Naturally,’ Schiller responded, filling three glasses with schnapps and bringing one each to Gerry and Ingrid when they had sat at the table. ‘Most Germans do. And I am, of course, an educated man from an illustrious family.’
‘A descendant of Prince Charles, the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel,’ Gerry said.
‘Quite so,’ Schiller said. ‘Yet I have sunk to this.’ He waved one hand

disparagingly at the surrounding clutter. ‘I sell antiques for a living to abominable tourists, Ach, such is life!’
He sipped some schnapps, wiped his unshaven chin with the back of his free hand, then idly stroked the mangy cat that had leaped onto the table and was prowling around the large goldfish bowl in the middle of it. While stroking the cat, he grinned crookedly at Ingrid, looking her up and down in a bold, suggestive manner, which clearly she didn’t notice since she was staring in disbelief at the goat tethered to the outside handle of the door leading into the back yard.
When Gerry lowered his eyes, feeling slightly embarrassed to find himself recalling Helena Barbanell’s description of Schiller as a degenerate and sodomite, he noticed that the design on the faded carpet was that of the occult pentagram.
‘You must have heard of me through your researches,’ Schiller said in a pompous manner. ‘I have heard that I am mentioned in certain books, though I don’t read them myself.’
Gerry had already noticed that Schiller’s bookshelves contained some of the books that he and Ingrid had read in the British Library Reading Room, some of which had, indeed, made fleeting reference to Schiller, none of which had been important enough to make him feel them worth following up before Helena Barbanell mentioned him. However, he chose to ignore the obvious lie and instead said, lying himself, ‘Yes, we came across your name in certain books and were very impressed.’
Smirking, the awful little man continued to stroke the cat, then casually stuck his hand in the goldfish bowl, grabbed one of the goldfish and threw it onto the table in front of the cat. When the cat pounced on the wriggling goldfish, Ingrid averted her sickened gaze.
‘So,’ Schiller said, watching the cat as it started eating the goldfish, ‘what do you think I can add to your almost completed manuscript?’
‘Can we take it from what we’ve read that you *do* believe in the existence of the legendary Comte de SaintGermain?’
Schiller nodded emphatically. ‘Yes, young man, I do. He lived in this very town, in my father’s former house, and was supposed to have died there and been buried in the graveyard of the Nikolai church. However, it’s highly unlikely that Saint-Germain was actually buried. More likely he *ascended* from the graveyard, which is why my ancestor, Prince Charles of Hesse-

Cassel, was known to have gone there at nights for years after Saint-Germain's disappearance. He went there to consult Saint-Germain when he materialized there, which he often did. When Prince Charles died, his body was buried there – but his spirit joined Saint-Germain.'
'You don't believe that Saint-Germain ever died?'
'As the great Voltaire said: Saint-Germain is a man who never dies. Alas, that is so.'
'Why *alas*?'
Schiller shrugged, then stroked the cat as it noisily gobbled the goldfish.
'Never mind,' he said. 'Let us leave it that Saint-Germain never died – and almost certainly never will.'
He said it flatly, unequivocally, accepting it as a fact, and Gerry found himself thinking of his bizarre experience in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid, of the two men, both wearing snow-white *galabiyehs*, staring at him, surrounded by pulsating light and a magical sky. Those men had emerged from the cosmos, from the mysterious world of time, and one of them, the one called SaintGermain, had somehow spanned the centuries.
It was too much to take in.
'What do you mean?' Ingrid asked, 'when you say he didn't die, but instead… *ascended?*'
'Once an ordinary mortal, Saint-Germain emerged from the obscurity of prehistory, probably founded the original, mysterious Rosicrucian Society, and gradually learned from his alchemy the Hermetic secret whereby he became immortal. Now, as an adept, an immortal, a spirit being, he can take human form at will, and has, in such a form, reappeared on Earth throughout the centuries, in many different disguises.'
'And the eighteenth-century Comte de Saint-Germain took physical incarnation as the son of Franz-Leopold, Prince Ragoczy of Transylvania, and Princess Charlotte Amalia of Hesse-Wahnfried, who were married in 1694; was brought up, after his brothers had been taken prisoner by the Austrians and his parents had died, by the executors of his father's will – namely, the Duc de Bourbon, the Duc de Maine, and the Comte de Charleroi and Toulouse – and through them was introduced to the courts of Europe as someone of princely blood and almost royal descent.'
'Which is why he never seemed to need money,' Gerry said.
'Correct,' Schiller said. 'According to the historical work *Illustri Italiani*, by

Caesare Cantu, librarian of the great library in Milan, when this particular embodiment of Saint-Germain came of age, he was educated at the University of Sienna, travelled extensively in Italy and Spain, was well protected by the last Grand Duke of Tuscany, and eventually inherited his father's legacy. He was certainly no penniless adventurer, as described by certain historians.'

Certain historians, Gerry knew, had a tendency to *change* history, to distort it and create a new truth that more suited their own ends. Thinking about it, he became uneasy, knowing that anything was possible, imagining a vast conspiracy, ordained by Saint-Germain, that straddled the whole world and spanned the centuries as if they had never been.

Did such a conspiracy actually exist? And if so, what was its purpose?

He recalled Saint-Germain in the magical light in the King's Chamber of the Great Pyramid, pointing at him and saying, 'You must know that the first number is "one".' In mathematical terms, it certainly was, but Saint-Germain had meant something other than that… The number 'one'. The first number of *what*? The first clue to a vast and incredible conspiracy that had no respect for time or space, being based on pure magic.

Suddenly, Gerry felt dizzy with confusion and excitement, and spoke mainly to hear his own voice, to return to reality…

'And when he wanted to reappear, he simply took his spirit form, after arranging for his disciple and partner in his alchemical experiments, Prince Charles of HesselCassel, to fake his death and bury *someone* in the graveyard of that church.'

'Quite so. We will never know *who* was buried in that grave in 1784, but certainly Saint-Germain's name was entered in the church register, and there, as far as history is concerned, the matter must rest.'

'Is the grave still there?' Gerry asked.

'No. It was destroyed by the great sea flood, or storm flood, of November 13, 1872. A terrible flood. The water roared into the Bay of Eckernford from the Baltic Sea, rising as high as a metre in the streets of the town, sweeping away many buildings, with many lives lost. The whole graveyard, including Saint-Germain's grave, was completely destroyed.'

Another cat jumped onto the table in hopes of wresting the remains of the goldfish from its partner, who responded by clawing savagely at the intruder. The cats were hissing, spitting and clawing furiously at one another when

Schiller, obviously democratic in certain ways, swept the first cat off the table with a sharp sideways blow, reached into the bowl for another goldfish, held it up until the second cat had snatched it out of his fingers, and then watched with interest as it was eaten alive.

'According to Eliphas Levi, the nineteenth-century occultist,' Ingrid said, repeating what she had read in the British Library and trying to avoid the disgusting sight on the table, 'the Comte de Saint-Germain was born in Lentmeritz in Bohemia, the bastard son of a leading Rosicrucian.'

'A confusion between history and *pre*history,' Schiller corrected her. 'The details of the eighteenth-century SaintGermain are exactly as I told you: he was born in the late 1860s in Transylvania and brought up in the court of Vienna. However, Levi's confusion arises because SaintGermain, in a previous incarnation – either as the son of Christian Rosenkreuz or *as* him – was instrumental in the formation of the original Rosicrucian Society.'

'A society to which you once belonged,' Gerry said.

Schiller spat disgustedly into one of his hands, then rubbed both hands together. 'Ach!' he exclaimed contemptuously. 'That bunch! The modern Rosicrucians have their roots in California – and I think that speaks for itself. I joined because I thought they might connect me to my past, but they threw me out because of my loudly proclaimed belief that they had nothing to do with the real Rosicrucians, who emanated in mysterious circumstances right here in Germany.'

'Right,' Gerry said. 'I've read up on all that. The first *printed* records we have of the original Order were published in 1614 in Hesse-Cassel, where Prince Charles, your ancestor and Saint-Germain's disciple, came from. It was that pamphlet, entitled *Fama Fraternitas of the Worthy Order of the Rosy Cross*, that first mentioned Christian Rosenkreuz, saying he'd spent his life wandering the East in search of occult wisdom, found it, and subsequently formed the Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, now known as the Rosicrucians, and managed to live to be a hundred and six years old.'

'Yes,' Schiller said. 'It is believed that the author of that work, plus two subsequent works on Rosenkreuz and the original Order in general, were written by a minister, Johann Valentin Andraea, in Tübingen, also right here in Germany, where the first of the genuine Rosicrucians met. Central to the work of Andraea and the Rosicrucian beliefs spread *by* that work were two obsessions: one, the concept of a Utopia of superior beings; and, two, the

nature and uses of alchemy, particularly as a means of transforming men into gods.'
'Could Johann Valentin Andraea have been another incarnation of, or pseudonym for, Saint-Germain?'
'Almost certainly,' Schiller said, smiling smugly at Gerry and stroking the cat as it tore the wriggling goldfish to shreds.
'The facts certainly fit,' Ingrid pointed out. 'From 1710 to 1822, Saint-Germain apparently travelled extensively, taking in most of Europe, Africa, India and China. He claimed to have been at the Court of the Shah of Persia from 1732 to 1742, where reportedly he acquired his considerable knowledge of diamonds and other precious stones, as well as learning his most advanced secrets of nature and alchemy. Certainly he was reported as being able to speak Italian, French, Spanish, Portuguese, English, Chinese, Hindu and Persian – a remarkable achievement by any standards. In a letter to Graf von Lamberg he claimed to have gained his knowledge of melting jewels during his second journey to India in 1755, having gone there with General Clive, more widely known as Clive of India. He was also reported to be deeply involved in esoteric Orders, including the Rosicrucians, Illuminates, and Templars.'
'It is my belief,' Schiller said, 'that Saint-Germain, whatever his most distant origins, founded the original Brotherhood of the Rosy Cross, or the Rosicrucians, and that Christian Rosenkreuz and Johann Valentin Andraea were one and the same – in short, Saint-Germain.'
Gerry felt unreal, as if haunted by ghosts, and found himself staring around the gloomy, cluttered room into shadowy corners. He kept expecting to see that strange, pulsating light, the magical blending of time and space, the materialization of Saint-Germain and his mysterious partner… He sensed that they were somehow watching him and Ingrid wherever they went – and would not let them escape.
He simply didn't know why.
'In the British Museum,' he heard Ingrid say, 'there are pieces of music, dated 1745 and 1760, reportedly composed by, and certainly signed by, Saint-Germain. Do you know of anything else that might more firmly substantiate his existence?'
'Yes,' Schiller replied without hesitation. 'Although Saint-Germain has been highly successful throughout the centuries at destroying, or hiding, most of

the evidence for his existence, there *is* a document written by him that still exists and is preserved in the library of Troyes, in France. If you haven't yet read it, I suggest you do so. It is *most* interesting.'
'Are you willing to tell us what it says?' Gerry asked.
'No. You must view it for yourself. Believe me, it is well worth the journey.'
Smirking in what seemed to Gerry to be an oddly fearful manner, Schiller swiped the second cat off the table and then picked up a third that had been rubbing itself around his ankle. Resting this cat on his lap, he stroked it with one hand, reached into the fish-bowl with the other, pulled out a wriggling goldfish and slowly, sadistically, lowered it over the cat's gaping jaws.
Gerry took a deep breath, feeling nauseous, then lowered his eyes and said, 'What kind of man, or being, is Saint-Germain? Is he good or evil?'
'Is *he* good or evil?' Schiller sneered as the cat snatched the unfortunate goldfish from his grubby fingers. 'Am *I* good or evil? Are *you*? I only know of his existence through my family's written records, as well as those of recorded history, but believe that my personal misfortunes have been caused by my proclaiming that he was actually Christian Rosenkreuz in one of his many incarnations. It is Saint-Germain's *vengeance*. Of that, I am sure. He has placed a curse upon me, ruining me and all I touch, slandering the name of the once-illustrious family out of which his own greatest disciple, Prince Charles of HesseCassel, sprang. This is his revenge for my having revealed one of the Order's most closely guarded secrets: the true identity of its original founder, the adept known as SaintGermain.'
'You have no proof of that,' Gerry said.
'I *know*, young man. *I know!*'
Agitated, Schiller threw the cat to the floor and stood up to go to the back door, where he shuddered and stared down at his tethered goat, his brow furrowed in thought. Gerry caught Ingrid's despairing glance, knew she wanted to escape from this dreadful house, but couldn't bring himself to take his leave without asking the disgusting little man some more questions.
'Do you dabble in the occult?' he asked him.
'I *was* a Rosicrucian,' Schiller said, still keeping his back turned to both of them, still studying the tethered goat.
'Rosicrucian occultism is supposedly concerned with the long-term betterment of mankind. Is that what you practice?'
'You think the Rosicrucians are committed to doing good? Perhaps, centuries

ago, but who knows the purpose or nature of an Order in which the greatest adepts have become immortal and know no limitations? I am frightened of Saint-Germain, as many people are, and have turned away from the old ways of the Order to practise their opposite.'
'You mean black magic?'
'Yes.'
'Does the number "one" mean anything to you in terms of the occult?'
'No,' Schiller said, finally turning back to face them, letting Gerry see, in his shadowed eyes, a smouldering malevolence that turned his blood cold.
Ingrid gasped, kicked her chair back, stood up and glanced at Gerry, her hand covering her mouth, her wide eyes magnified behind the thick spectacles.
Gerry felt concern then, and stood up, still facing Schiller. He tried to meet that darkly burning malevolence, but felt himself shivering.
'You didn't come all this way just because you read about me in a book,' Schiller accused him. 'You must have talked to someone about me. *Who sent you here*?'
The vehemence in his voice startled Gerry, making him take a step backwards, but he managed to keep his voice calm when he said, 'An old woman called Helena Barbanell. She was once a member of the Theosophic Society, but like you, she was excommunicated when she…'
He stopped talking when Schiller approached him, his face contorting with hatred and a great deal of fear.
'*Barbanell*?' he asked hoarsely. 'You talked to Helena Barbanell? *When*?'
'Two days ago. On Friday afternoon.'
Schiller was aghast. 'God,' he said, his voice hysterical, 'don't you know what you've done, you young fools? Whoever killed Helena Barbanell has probably followed you here!'
Gerry's thoughts swirled in confusion. '*Killed*?' he said, feeling stupid. 'Helena Barbanell was killed?'
'She was murdered on Friday afternoon. 'The same day you saw her. It's in all the British newspapers. *Damn you, get out of here*!'
He picked up one of the swords leaning against the nearest wall and swung it wildly over his head. Ingrid shrieked and reached out to pull Gerry away as he ducked and the sword cleaved the air where his head would have been.
Schiller kept screaming abuse and swinging wildly with the sword as Gerry tugged Ingrid behind him, then, still facing Schiller and ducking the swinging

sword, made his way backwards out of the room and along the dark corridor with the many cats hissing and spitting and biting at his feet in a ravenous, unnatural fury.
He heard Ingrid opening the front door, felt her tugging him backwards, then, once outside, he slammed the door closed in Schiller's furious face as the wind beat at him.
He found himself staring dazedly at Ingrid, at her magnified, frightened eyes, then took her hand and hurriedly led her away through the deepening darkness, into the howling wind and drenching rain.

Chapter Eleven

Gerry was still feeling badly shaken by his experience with Klaus Schiller when he sat facing Ingrid in the almostempty restaurant of the modestly-priced hotel located opposite Schiller's house, at the other side of the town square, and found himself greatly lacking in appetite for food while being keen to drink as much *Liebfraumilch* as possible. What had started out as an exciting adventure was rapidly turning into a living nightmare, and the knowledge that Helena Barbanell had been murdered shortly after his and Ingrid's departure, combined with Schiller's almost inhuman malevolence and terror, made that nightmare all the more real and his feeling of danger more riveting. 'You always tell me to look after myself,' Ingrid said,

'and now you're not even eating.'
'I'm on a liquid diet,' Gerry retorted.
'That's not remotely funny,' Ingrid said primly. 'You

shouldn't drink *at all* on an empty stomach – and it certainly won't calm you down.'
'I don't need calming down.'
'Yes, you do. Your hands are shaking. Every time you fill your glass up, you spill it, so let's not pretend otherwise.'
Gerry wiped the spilt wine off the table with his paper napkin.
'OK,' he said, 'I'm a bit shaken up. Who wouldn't be? I can't get over the fact that Helena Barbanell was murdered shortly after we left her. I think that's real scary.'

‘Yes,’ Ingrid agreed, ‘it’s scary. But I don’t think Saint-Germain had anything to do with it. I think my father’s men murdered that poor woman. There were two men standing by an Audi car when we left, and they approached Helena Barbanell’s building just as we turned the corner. I believe they forced her to tell them what she told us – and then shut her mouth for good.’
‘That sounds logical.’
Ingrid shuddered. ‘Oh, yes… And if Miss Barbanell talked, those men know that we were planning to come here and they probably have, as that revolting Schiller believes, followed us here. They’re possibly here, in this very town, right now.’
‘Yes, Ingrid. Exactly.’
Gerry picked in a desultory manner at his food, drank some more wine, glanced at Ingrid, yearned deeply to possess her, but knew the time wasn’t right. This was no time for love and romance. They were caught in an everexpanding web of intrigue and now it was becoming truly dangerous and increasingly frightening.
‘Maybe we should stop this,’ he said. ‘Get out while we can.’
‘It’s too late for that now,’ Ingrid said. ‘My father won’t rest until he finds us. And that still leaves our mysterious Saint-Germain. Besides, I won’t give in again. I won’t surrender my freedom.’
She stared defiantly at him and he felt himself glowing inwardly, filled with pride at how far she had come in such a short time. His timid mouse was turning into a formidable lady.
‘Let’s visit the church before it closes,’ he said. ‘Let’s do that at least.’
‘Yes, Gerry, let’s do that.’
Feeling pretty drunk, but too shaken to be stupid, Gerry paid the bill and led Ingrid out of the dismally empty restaurant, into the nearly dark, late afternoon *strasse*, with its cold wind and stinging rain. While not yet dark, the streetlamps had been turned on and their light, beaming down on the pavements, had a wan, eerie quality.
Gerry felt disorientated, far removed from his home in New York, disassociated even from the personality that he had assumed was himself. In this quiet, ancient town, in its desolate, rainswept streets, he felt haunted and threatened.
They reached the Nikolai church soon enough and found it still open. The

parish priest looked as lonesome as the town, but was kindly and helpful. He showed them the church register, left them with it in the vestibule, departed as Ingrid translated aloud what she could see by torchlight.

Deceased on February 27th, buried on March 2nd, 1784.
The so-called Comte de St Germain and Weldon. Further information not known. Privately deposited in this church.

Ingrid kept the torchlight on the register for quite some time while Gerry just stared at the entry in German, feeling that he had stepped back in time and become someone else.

'Well,' Ingrid said, 'there it is. Your authentic church record. And according to the *church*, Saint-Germain was buried in these grounds on the second of March, 1784.'

'Yes, Ingrid, that's right. At least according to the parish priest who wrote this particular entry when the church graveyard still existed. But don't forget that Prince Charles *was* the Landgrave of Hesse-Cassel, that he was therefore a man of great influence in the community, that he was bound to have given considerable financial aid to the church, and that it would have been easy for him to have either buried someone else here without the parish priest of the time knowing, or even, if the parish priest knew that Saint-Germain had simply fled, bribing him into keeping his mouth shut and writing a false entry about his supposed death. Either way, this particular entry, even if genuine, doesn't necessarily mean what it says. And what we're still left with, according to Helena Barbanell and Schiller, is that the Saint-Germain who supposedly was buried here is actually still alive and well.'

Ingrid didn't reply, but he knew what she was feeling. Like him, she would be feeling that she was living a dream, slipping into an unknown zone where time and space had no meaning. Like him, she would be feeling disorientated and increasingly unreal.

Behind him, the wind howled, the rain splashed on the ground. He shivered. 'Come on,' he said, 'let's go.'

They returned the register to the parish priest, thanked him and left, heading back through the narrow, rainswept streets, illuminated by lamplight. Then Gerry saw another light, a flickering yellow glowing near the square; saw smoke and then heard sirens wailing as they hurried back to the town square.
‘Oh, no!’ he heard Ingrid murmur.
He understood what the phrase signified and, feeling a surge of fear, tightened his grip on her hand and started running. When they reached the square, which they did in no time at all, a crowd had already gathered to watch the spectacular blaze, and the firemen were fighting a losing battle with the burning house of Klaus Schiller.
Gerry caught Ingrid’s frightened look, then waited impatiently while she spoke in German to the woman standing next to her. When she had finished, she stared intently at the blazing building, bit her lower lip, then said, ‘This woman, a local, says that Schiller is dead. Before the fire started, he was heard screaming for help, but before anyone managed to get to the house, there was some kind of an explosion, then the whole house went up, bursting into flames. It’s believed that Schiller died in the explosion; if not, he burned to death.’
Gerry just stared at her, not knowing what to say, but sharing the dread he saw reflected in her eyes. She shuddered, shook her head from side to side, pressed her forehead to his chest, and he put his arms around her and held her close to him. She was melting into his embrace, letting her body merge with his, but then she stiffened, straightened up, stepped away, and, looking even more fearful, indicated with a nod of her head that he should look behind him.
Glancing back over his shoulder, to the far side of the *strasse*, he saw two men in black gaberdines, standing apart from the otherwise anonymous crowd of onlookers, their expressionless faces illuminated fitfully in the glowing of the flames rising from Klaus Schiller’s house.
When they saw him watching them, both men smiled maliciously, then melted back into the darkness of an unlit side street.
Even as he was watching the men disappearing into that side street, Gerry had the distinct feeling that he was himself being observed. Dazed, feeling drugged, he looked past Ingrid’s head… and was almost hypnotized by the silvery-grey gaze and diabolically handsome features of the same unknown man he had seen with Saint-Germain on the deck of the boat cruising along

the Nile.
This time, he didn't experience that disturbing, unnatural desire for the stranger staring so hypnotically at him, and was, in fact, almost instantly able to jerk himself out of his brief, trance-like stupor and start forward, determined to confront the mesmerist. However, before he could reach him, the man smiled in a teasing manner, nodded as if in acknowledgement of Gerry's presence, then turned and hurried away, soon losing himself in the crowd of locals still watching the burning home of Klaus Schiller.
'Christ,' Gerry said to Ingrid. 'They've *both* got people on our tail – Saint-Germain *and* your dad. Which one of them had Schiller murdered? That's what *I'd* like to know.'
'Let's go back to the hotel, Gerry. *Please*. I'm scared. I don't like it here.'
He knew what she meant, actually felt the same way, and so willingly took her by the elbow and led her away from the crowd. Once upstairs in the hotel, they started heading for their separate rooms, but then Ingrid stopped, stared forlornly at him, and said, 'I can't stand the thought of being alone tonight. Can I stay in your room?'
'Sure,' he said. 'Naturally.'
He opened the door and waved her in, stepped in behind her, closed and locked the door, then shivered with cold and rubbed his hands together. Ingrid shivered also, then took off her overcoat; she passed it to him and sat on the edge of the bed while he hung the coat in the wardrobe. When he turned back to face her, she was frowning and picking something off his pillow. She held it up in the light, swung it on its short string, and looked closely at it.
It was a tiny steel swastika.
There was a label tied to the string, and Ingrid, holding it close to her spectacles, studied it carefully.
'Compliments, Saint-Germain,' she read aloud, then glanced up with frightened eyes.
Recalling the teasing smile of Saint-Germain's mysterious partner, when he had seen him in the town square just a few minutes ago, Gerry didn't know whether he should be angry or even more fearful.
'Ring through to Reception,' he said, 'and ask them if anyone's been in the room during the past hour or so.'
Ingrid did so, speaking in German, then placed the phone back on its cradle

and shook her head from side to side in a negative gesture.
‘No,’ she said. ‘The desk clerk swears that no one’s been in this room or anywhere near it since we left it.’
‘Did you feel that she was lying?’
‘No. She sounded absolutely sincere. Genuinely puzzled that I should ask. I don’t think she was lying.’
‘Then how the hell did that swastika get there?’
Ingrid glanced down at the swastika, which she had placed back on the pillow. She reached out to pick it up, but her hand shook and she instantly withdrew it.
Gerry picked it up instead and studied it closely.
‘Well, it’s a normal swastika,’ he decided. ‘A good, old-fashioned, Nazi swastika. The question is: what’s it meant to tell us? And *I* think it’s Saint-Germain’s teasing way of confirming that your dad’s men – not SaintGermain’s – arranged that explosion in Schiller’s house. And that, in turn, confirms that it was also your dad’s men
– not Saint-Germain’s – who murdered Helena Barbanell in London, shortly after we left her.’
‘Oh, God,’ Ingrid murmured, suddenly looking ill and gazing down at her clasped hands.
‘So,’ Gerry said, wanting to sympathize with her but not knowing how, ‘we now know we’re being tailed by two different parties – your dad’s men and Saint-Germain’s lot
– and that for some reason Saint-Germain is actually *encouraging* us to continue our search, while protecting us from your dad’s men.’
‘But… *why*?’
Gerry shrugged. ‘Presumably he has his reasons and we’ll discover them in due course. In the meantime, we just have to keep going and try to unravel the mystery as we go.’
Without thinking, he glanced around the room, realized what he was doing, felt foolish and turned back to Ingrid, who, still seated on the edge of the bed with her hands clasped in her lap, looked extremely uneasy and forlorn.
‘So what have we got so far?’ Gerry asked. ‘We have the extraordinary fact that Saint-Germain is almost certainly still alive; that he seems to have either lived for centuries or been reincarnated many times; that he’s considered by many people, such as Helena Barbanell and Klaus Schiller, to be some kind

of magical adept, possibly the founder of the original Rosicrucian Society, and maybe even a member of some kind of secret society that has its origins in ancient history and has managed to survive to the present day. What's the purpose of that society? And why's Saint-Germain guiding us to it? At the heart of all this is the number "one", but we don't yet know how or why. What we *do* know is that Saint-Germain teased us into investigating him and finding out that he actually still exists. Obviously he wanted us to know at least *that* much. Equally obvious is the fact that he wants us to continue tracking down any clues we get. And since Schiller told us to visit the library in Troyes, where the only document known to be written by Saint-Germain still exists – apart, that is, from the music scores in the British Museum Library – we have to make that our next stop. Are you still game for all this?'
Ingrid looked up from her clasped hands, her face drawn and pale. 'Yes, Gerry, I am.'
'Are you frightened?'
'Of course.'
'Well, so am I. But fear's a healthy emotion. As long as we feel fear, we'll keep our wits about us. Though right now, dear God, I feel tired… maybe too tired to sleep.'
'Me, too,' Ingrid murmured.
She lay back on the bed, closed her eyes briefly, opened them again, held her arms out to him and said, 'Come here. Lie down beside me. I want you to hold me – nothing else. I don't want to sleep alone.'
Exhausted, bewildered and more than a little nervous, Gerry was nonetheless touched enough by the sight of her to get a lump in his throat. Taking off his own soaked coat and kicking off his shoes, he lay beside her, drew the duvet over both of them, took her in his arms, kissed her eyelids and pliant lips. She returned his affection, but too quickly closed her eyes, and he held her, stroking her face and hair, until she was sleeping.
He lay with her a long time, taking warmth and comfort from her, then quietly slipped out of the bed and went to the window. Down below, the onlookers had begun to disperse, but the house of Klaus Schiller, which had become his crematorium, was still blazing in the night, sending flames and sparks and billowing smoke into the sky, the sparks cascading colourfully around the odd, distant star, while the black smoke, dense and slightly frightening, obscured the full moon.

The fire blazed a long time.

Chapter Twelve

Gerry lay on his narrow bed in his shabby room in a modest *auberge* in Troyes, in the Aube department of north-central France, still feeling hungover from his drunken evening the night before in Frankfurt-am-Main, Germany.

They had arrived in Troyes half an hour ago in the middle of a heavy rainstorm, and the rain was still beating down outside, falling from thunderous black clouds that only served to make the unattractive town seem even more bleak. Already feeling trapped, depressed and very nervous, Gerry swung his legs off the bed, opened one of the cans of beer he had purchased downstairs, then sat back on the bed to have his drink and ponder what had actually happened to him during the past twenty-four hours or so.

After leaving Eckernforde, they had driven all day and spent the night in Frankfurt-am-Main, booking into a small hotel on the south embankment of the river and then relaxing in one of the many taverns of the lively Sachsenhausen quarter. They had both felt the need to relax, since their otherwise pleasant journey had been overshadowed by what they had learned from their waitress over breakfast in the hotel in Eckernforde.

According to the wide-eyed, excited waitress, the town was rife with rumours that the charred corpse of Klaus Schiller had been found handcuffed to the gas oven in what had formerly been his house; and it was obvious from the remains of the oven that all the taps had been turned on.

‘The bastards probably set a lighted candle near him,’ Gerry said to Ingrid as she drove him away from Eckernforde. ‘He was heard screaming for help just before the escaping gas was ignited, but then, when the gas exploded – fffttt! – that was the end of him. Oh, boy, what a way to go!’

He had regretted his comment when he saw Ingrid shudder, and remembered that the man who had committed the awful deed had almost certainly been in the employ of her vicious dad. Instantly ashamed of himself, he reassuringly

patted her knee, mailed her a grin, then stared straight ahead at the road which, unwinding between the sea and the lakes just north of Kiel, had eventually led them to Frankfurt.

Relaxing with large beers, beginning to feel like a regular tourist, he had gradually started forgetting the fears that had been dogging him and instead found himself falling in and out of romantic reveries about Ingrid, wanting to hold her and be held *by* her; but also thinking, more basely, about the forthcoming night and fantasizing about sharing a bed with her.

When he had glanced sideways at her studious, bespectacled face, slightly obscured in the cigarette smoke that fouled the air of the packed, noisy tavern, and thought of making love to her, he flushed as much with guilt as with desire, since he knew that by bringing her with him on this journey, he had almost certainly placed her in danger.

'Whenever I start worrying about all this business,' he had told her in the hope of relaxing her, 'I think of quantum mechanics, which now lies at the heart of all modern science. Without quantum mechanics there would be practically no chemistry, science or molecular biology, no knowledge of DNA, no genetic engineering – hardly anything at all. In fact, quantum theory is the great single achievement of science, surpassing even the Theory of Relativity… and yet, according to quantum mechanics, *nothing's real unless it's observed*. In other words, Ingrid, don't worry too much. Until we actually *observe* SaintGermain's magical powers, neither he nor they can actually exist.'

'But we *have* observed them, Gerry.'

'No, Ingrid, I don't think we have. I think we've just *dreamed* about them.'
'I haven't observed quantum mechanics,' Ingrid said, 'so *they* don't exist.'
'What a bright girl you are.'
He had joked with her to hide his own fears, as well as his desire, but his more sensual feelings had nonetheless only been inflamed when, after talking about everything from Saint-Germain to Ingrid's father, Wilhelm Zweig, to antimatter and supergravity, from their respective, *real* childhoods to their

magical meeting on the cruise ship in Egypt, he had drank a couple of whiskeys on top of his many beers and promptly became rather light-headed.
‘This whole business is no more real to me than Schrodinger’s Cat,’ he said. ‘Did you know that a charged pion can transform a neutron into a proton by interacting with a proton that becomes a neutron? Have you worked that one out? Good! Now, if you want to understand how *unreal* the real world is, you have to accept that your proton, a product of the mathematically impossible, can itself explode into a vast network of interacting particles, then vanish back into itself. Having itself appeared out of nothing, the non-existent proton’s numerous particles also appear out of nothing, recombine with one another, then disappear before the universe at large even notices that they were present in the first place. Similarly, a photon that doesn’t actually exist can create a positron/electron pair that instantly interact to produce the photon that created them in the first place, since the photon doesn’t know the difference between the past and the future – something we might also say for Saint-Germain, if what we’ve so far learnt about him is true.’
‘Saint-Germain is real, Gerry.’
‘Is he? I’m not so sure. We’re back to quantum mechanics again. Let’s imagine Saint-Germain as an electron, chasing its own tail in a time eddy. What I mean by this – and please stop me if I confuse you – is that according to quantum mechanics, an electron can appear out of nothing, out of nowhere, the non-existent, then travel a short distance, realize its mistake – that it’s actually unreal – then turn around and travel back through time to its starting place, thus having never existed in the first place… and it repeats this again and again, in one sense never actually existing, in another existing eternally in an ever-scattering time-event. Does that help explain SaintGermain?’
‘No, Gerry, it doesn’t.’
‘Then I’m a pretty poor teacher.’
In his sublime state of inebriation he had kept talking to her, hardly aware of what he was saying, only recalling later, with no great deal of pride, that at some point in the evening he had slyly dropped his hand on her knee and hoped for the best. She was wearing blue denims, but he had felt her warmth through them, and when she made no attempt to remove his hand, he just let it rest there, surprised that he could feel so self-conscious about such a small thing.
‘It’s such a small thing to feel your knee,’ he recalled saying in a grand, if

slightly slurred, manner, ‘but it means a lot to me.’
‘Oh, good,’ she responded.
Becoming even more drunk, with exhilaration as well as whiskey, he had kept his hand on her knee, even moved it slightly higher, squeezing her there, and was delighted when she simply smiled at him, instead of removing his hand, and once or twice actually patted it affectionately, which he took for encouragement.
‘I feel good,’ he was certain he had said, ‘despite what we’ve been through.’
‘Let’s hope it lasts, Gerry.’
Unfortunately, it didn’t. His mood of romantic reverie had been brutally broken when, over another, doubtless foolhardy whiskey, he suddenly fell back into a feeling of unreality by remembering how, when driving earlier that evening through the deepening darkness of the countryside just outside Frankfurt, he had experienced a prickly sensation on the back of his neck, and had the distinct, inexplicable conviction that he and Ingrid were not alone in the car.
Confused, he had glanced back over his shoulder at the road receding behind him, but saw nothing other than the trees on both sides of the darkening road. Turning back to the front and concentrating on the road ahead, trying to convince himself that he was simply imagining things, perhaps due to exhaustion, he nevertheless was unable to shake off the feeling that he and Ingrid were not alone, that if the unseen presence was not actually in the car, then it must be outside…
In truth, the last hour of that drive into Frankfurt had been hellish. As he drove, he kept imagining he could see something out of the corner of his eye, first left, then right… could *hear* something… or *feel* something… just above the car, behind it, sometimes alongside it… and for the rest of the drive to the hotel in Sachsenhausen, had found himself glancing frequently out of the car windscreen and windows, scanning the sky, convinced that something unseen, yet something *real*, was somewhere out there in the night, nearby, deliberately following them…

Now in the modest *auberge* in Troyes, shivering to recall that frightening drive to Frankfurt, still exhausted by the subsequent drive from there to France, he finished off his beer, washed himself as best he could in the chipped sink in the corner of his dismal room, put on a thick, roll-necked

pullover and jacket, then pulled the curtains apart and looked down on the dark, rainswept street.

It was deadly quiet down there, not at all like lively, noisy Sachsenhausen, and he realized that he no longer enjoyed silence… nor dark, empty streets.

He checked his wristwatch. He and Ingrid had agreed to have an hour's rest and then meet downstairs in the *auberge's* small bar, prior to going together to the library of Troyes before it closed for the evening. Still twenty minutes early, but feeling unsettled, he decided to go down anyway and have another drink while waiting for her.

Leaving the room, he closed the door firmly behind him, checked that it was locked properly, then walked past Ingrid's room, put his ear to the door, heard nothing, so made his way down the stairs and into the lobby where the bar was located. Luckily, the woman serving in the bar was bright and cheerful, instantly making him feel more positive. After ordering a glass of *vin rouge*, he took a table in the far corner of the room, trying not to think of what had happened the night before, but unable to stop himself…

Drunk and light-headed, his conflicting emotions heightened, he had left the tavern in Sachsenhausen with Ingrid and walked with her, not too steadily, back through the gaudy, lively streets of the picturesque quarter to their modest hotel, where he had hoped to be suave and casually seductive, to woo her with insolent charm and carry her off to his room, but instead, his thoughts in turmoil, his emotions too chaotic, had simply stopped at her door, in the silence of frustrated longing, to give her a tentative kiss on the lips and whisper, 'Good night.'

That much, at least, he recalled with certainty. What he could not know for certain was how he had spent the rest of that evening and the early hours of the morning…

He remembered tossing and turning most of the night in a fever of frustrated desire and vivid erotic fantasies, loathing his own cowardice, cursing Ingrid's painful shyness, wanting to get up and storm into her room, constantly listening for her knock on his door, for her highly romantic, white-robed,

wraith-like entrance… But none of those things happened, as he knew they would not, and eventually he had dozed off, falling in and out of restless sleep, hardly knowing when he was dreaming or simply *imagining* himself with her, scarcely knowing the difference between the real and the unreal… which was why, when the manifestations came, he initially thought they might be a nightmare.

He had opened his eyes upon hearing something, or because he *felt* something; realized it wasn't a sound, but actually some kind of *pressure* – something pressing upon him, invisible, heavy, amorphous, and definitely *unnatural*. He had felt crushed, suffocated, touched by an alien heat… and then, even as he tried to sit up, and failed, had noticed a faint, pulsating light spreading over the ceiling.

He had managed to turn his head. The light was beaming in through the window. Then at last he heard the sound – or, at least, somehow *felt* it – a rhythmic bass humming, a pulsating sound that matched the pulsating light.

That sound, or that *pressure*, combined with the rhythmic pulsations of the pale light, seemed to press him back onto the bed and force his gaze inward. He saw the tracery of his own veins, the cataracts of his stomach, and spiralled down through the whirlpools of his blood to the source of himself.

At first there was darkness, complete, terrifying, then a speck of light appeared, multiplied, became a cascade, and he travelled down through somersaulting space and time until his hotel room reappeared.

Saint-Germain was standing in front of him, by the foot of the bed, his unblinking gaze visible through the pulsating light in which they were both held. The other presence was his partner, the diabolically handsome mesmerist, and both men, gazing down through the magical light, possessed a shimmering beauty.

Saint-Germain smiled at him. Gerry tried to speak, but failed. He was numb and struck dumb and paralysed, left with nothing but vision.

The light brightened around the two men, though it didn't hurt Gerry's eyes.

But then he started to suffer in another way… and it was unbelievable.

He felt himself disintegrating, flesh and bone turning to dust. The pressure closed in around him like an invisible vice, crushing him, breaking him, reducing him to a pulp – and then just as it reached the point where it was virtually unendurable, he found himself jerking upright on the bed, screaming in terror.

The pulsating light blinked out. The two men, the apparitions, vanished with it, sucked back into a whirlpool of darkness.

Gerry had sat there for a long time, shaking, trying to breathe; had wiped sweat from his brow, licked his parched lips, and stared around the dark, silent room, at the ceiling, the window.

Everything was normal. He must have been dreaming. He groaned and lay back on the bed and waited impatiently for dawn to break, praying that he'd been dreaming, whispering, 'Yes, a dream, just a dream,' but convinced in his heart that it had happened, maybe not for the last time…

He didn't want to think about it, but couldn't stop himself; though now, in this hotel, in Troyes, France, in the brightly lit bar, he had doubts about himself, recalling that he'd been drunk at the time of the incident, and wondering if he couldn't, after all, interpret what had happened as no more than a terrible dream.

When Ingrid finally entered the bar, he felt a lot better.
Obviously prepared for the rainstorm outside, she was wearing a plastic mac with a hood, and black leather boots.

Quantum mechanics , Gerry thought. *Because I see her, she is*.
'I might have known you'd beat me down to the bar,' she said. 'Have I time for a drink?'
'No,' he replied, hurriedly finishing off his glass of *vin rouge* and immediately standing up. 'That library's going to be closing soon, so we'd better get going.'
Taking her by the elbow, he led her out of the bar, across the small lobby and

out of the building. It was now as dark as night, the wind howled, the rain lashed them, but luckily the car was parked out front and they were able to get into it before being completely soaked.
Once strapped in, and before Ingrid, who was driving, could turn on the ignition, Gerry surprised himself by saying, ‘Don’t start the car yet, Ingrid. I’ve something to tell you. I want to tell you before we get to the library, though I’m not too sure why.’
Her hand fell away from the ignition key and she turned her head to stare at him.
‘Oh?’ she said. ‘What?’
‘Remember I told you about my feeling that we were being followed – or *observed* somehow – as we drove to Frankfurt yesterday?’
‘Of course.’
‘Well, I had a bad sleep last night – a *very* bad sleep – and I’m still not sure if something actually took place or if I just dreamt it. You want me to tell you?’
‘You think it’ll frighten me?’
‘It might.’
‘Why not try me?’
Taking a deep breath, not too sure if he was doing the right thing, Gerry told her about his dream, or *experience*, of the previous night. When he had finished, Ingrid looked surprised rather than frightened, then surprised *him* by telling him that she’d had a similar experience.
‘A *similar* experience?’ he asked, not quite believing it.
‘Yes, Gerry. Not the same experience, but similar – at least in the sense that I dreamed about Saint-Germain, and actually felt that I was *living* the experience with him. Now we’d better get going or we’ll miss that library.’
So saying, she started the car, pulled away from the kerb, and moved off through the violent storm, along the lamplit street, keeping her eyes fixed straight ahead, sometimes biting her lower lip, soon passing between the half-timbered, 16th century houses of the old town.
‘Even now I’m not sure if I was sleeping or awake,’ she said. ‘But my feeling is that it *was* some kind of real experience. And, just as it was with you, so, with me, the experience began with that strange, pulsating light, though in my case it materialized out of the wall, not the ceiling.’
‘Like it did with me in London.’

‘Right. Then it expanded and seemed to fill the whole room and, when I tried to sit upright, it pressed me back onto the bed. Then I saw Saint-Germain – the same man we talked to during the Nile cruise – and with him was another man, extremely handsome, smooth and decadent, whose smile had an odd effect on me, making me dreamy and… *wanting* him.’
She hesitated when she confessed this, and Gerry grinned, actually feeling amused. ‘He made me want him as well – and I’m not gay – so don’t worry about that.’
‘Anyway,’ she continued, clearly relieved at his response, ‘they both materialized in my room, in that bizarre, pulsating light, stared at me, both smiling enigmatically, almost mockingly, and put me into a kind of wide-awake trance. Then the walls of the room appeared to dissolve and were replaced by other walls, other places… God, it was *weird*!’
‘Go on!’ he encouraged her.
‘First, I saw what I somehow knew to be the Anitchkoff Bridge across the River Neva, in old St Petersburg, then a small street named Grafsky, through which horse-drawn carriages were clattering. Then I found myself wearing eighteenth-century clothing, with a lot of jewellery around my neck and arms, sitting in an antique chair, listening attentively to Saint-Germain – also in eighteenth-century clothing and with many jewelled rings on his fingers – as he played a violin that sounded remarkably like a full orchestra.’
‘He *did* have that reputation,’ Gerry assured her.
‘Anyway, when Saint-Germain finished playing, he turned to another man – one surrounded by beautiful paintings – and showed him a piece of music bound in red maroquin, which he explained was an air for a harp, composed by himself and to be dedicated to one Countess Ostermann.’
‘That makes sense. Saint-Germain *was* in St Petersburg, now Leningrad, in 1762, where he stayed with various high-class folk, including the famous Italian painter, Count Rotare, whose paintings are now in the Peterhof palace. Rotare *did* live in the Grafsky *pereoulok* – which means “small street” – at that time. Saint-Germain was then well known for his own remarkable artistic talents; and he *did* compose a piece of music in 1760 – the one we found in the British Museum.’
‘Very good, Gerry. So…’
‘Yes?’
‘Saint-Germain then turned to me and smiled… and it all dissolved to

become something else… Suddenly, it was an eighteenth-century laboratory in a suite of rooms in a great château, and Saint-Germain, surrounded by young men, all wearing similar clothing, was experimenting with what looked like paint. Around the walls of the laboratory were oil paintings of an unusual vividness – paintings that seemed to live and breathe, overwhelming my senses.'

'The Renaissance château at Chambord,' Gerry could not resist informing her, 'south-west of Orléans in France. King Louis XV gave Saint-Germain a suite of rooms there in the late 1750s, and the mysterious gentleman turned them into a laboratory for his alchemical experiments, most notably those involving paint and the transformation of diamonds. Other guests at that time included the Princess of Anhalt-Zerbst, mother of Catherine II of Russia; the Marquise d'Urfe; Baron de Gleichen, and Madame de Genlis, all of whom mentioned Saint-Germain's experiments in their letters and memoirs.'

'Then that also changed,' Ingrid said, as if she hadn't heard him, 'and became another place, then another, and eventually I saw Saint-Germain – stood beside him, in fact

– in another laboratory in Amsterdam – I don't know how, but I just *knew* it was Amsterdam – where he turned metal into gold; then, in what was clearly the court of Louis XV, having words with the King; then with Madame de Pompadour and other members of the French aristocracy; then playing the violin again, but this time in what I knew was the castle of Raudnitz in Bohemia, in the presence of an old gentleman, obviously Prince Ferdinand von Lobkowitz; then, unusually, in the dress of an Armenian and with a long beard, having lunch with a distinctly flamboyant gentleman in Tournay, France…'

'The flamboyant gentleman would have been Casanova,' Gerry explained helpfully. 'And the bearded goat *was*, according to Casanova's memoirs, the legendary Saint-Germain.'

Ingrid nodded, then sighed. 'All of these people and places materialized with a vividness, an almost *palpable* reality, which convinced me that I couldn't be dreaming… and then, when I tried to speak, but couldn't do so and became frightened, Saint-Germain smiled, as if understanding my fear… and I found myself back in bed in my room, staring at the opposite wall, watching the pulsating light being sucked back into it, and finally, thank God, disappearing completely, leaving everything normal.'

Falling silent, she kept driving, her brow furrowed in thought, concentrating on the road as they passed industrial buildings, many churches with stained-glass windows, and modern houses that were already lit up to combat the premature darkness brought in by the storm.
‘Jesus,’ Gerry said, shifting restlessly on his seat, ‘this is getting to be a really weird experience. Saint-Germain and his partner seem to be able to materialize at will – anywhere, any time. And *we’re* trying to find *him*!’
‘You said it yourself, Gerry: he *wants* us to find him. He’s leading us to him – or leading us *somewhere*, at least. Only God knows where or why.’
‘I’m growing paranoid,’ Gerry said. ‘I can’t help it – I just am. On the one hand, we’re being hounded and harried by your dad, who initially wanted to get you back – and with his international network of communications would have no trouble in catching you. But clearly he’s decided to have us just followed instead – *only* followed, at least until it suits him.’
‘And right now he’s thinking we might lead him to the Tuaoi Stone.’
‘Yeah, Ingrid. Right on.’
‘And on the other hand?’
‘On the other hand, my angel, we’re being followed and maybe *protected* by another kind of agency altogether
– a seemingly supernatural agency that doesn’t need modern communications to keep track of our movements. I don’t know if that’s quite true. I mean, I might be imagining it. But I’m starting to believe that it *is* true, and now I’d just like some proof.’
‘Quantum mechanics,’ Ingrid said, speaking softly, to herself. ‘Think of Saint-Germain as an electron, here, there and everywhere, past, present and future all at once… And now we need proof.’
She slowed down, stopped the car and looked across the dark, lamplit street.
‘There’s the library, Gerry.’
The lights of the building were beaming out into the late-afternoon darkness, illuminating the pavement, slanting lines of silvery rain, and the debris that was being blown along the street by the fierce, howling wind.
‘So,’ Ingrid said, turning off the ignition, ‘are you all set to run?’
‘Sure, Ingrid, let’s do it.’
Simultaneously, they got out of the car, slammed their respective doors, then ran through the teeming rain and rushing wind into the warmth of the building. Gerry glanced around the lobby, briefly dazzled by its brightness,

taking comfort from the surf-like murmur of whispered conversations, then, feeling instantly at home with the many shelves of books, took hold of Ingrid's hand and led her briskly to the nearest librarian, a middle-aged woman in a severe black dress, with her auburn hair pinned up, blinking through brown-framed spectacles.

'Okay,' Gerry said. 'Ask her.'

Speaking fluent French, Ingrid soon managed to find, with the female librarian's help, the male clerk in charge of the Saint-Germain document. Waiting for the rare text to be brought to them in the reference room, Gerry wiped the rain from Ingrid's face with his handkerchief, kissed his fingers and pressed them to her lips, then held her hand. He said nothing to her and she likewise was silent until the single page of text was brought to them and left on their desk, when she read softly to him.

The text was frequently illegible and often hopelessly obscure, but Gerry's ears pricked up when Ingrid read out:

'*We moved through space at a speed that can be compared with nothing but itself… Within a fraction of a second the plains below us were out of sight, and the Earth had become a faint nebula. I was carried up, and I travelled through the empyrean for an incalculable time at an immeasurable height. Heavenly bodies revolved. And worlds vanished below me…*'

Gerry felt the hairs standing up on the back of his neck, as if a ghost had sat on his shoulder and thrown its mantle about him. He took a deep breath, trying to choke back his excitement, and looked into Ingrid's studious, bespectacled eyes.

'Jesus,' he whispered. 'He wrote *that* in the eighteenth century?'

'Yes,' Ingrid replied. 'And that's exactly what *I* experienced when that weird light filled my room. I felt as if I was travelling through space, maybe through time, before coming back to Earth, in another time… and another place.'

'Is that what Saint-Germain is doing?' Gerry said. 'I think it is. It *must* be!'

After glancing furtively at the librarian, to check that she wasn't watching him from her position at the far side of the reference room, he furtively withdrew a small notebook and pencil from his jacket pocket and hurriedly copied the quotation into it. Then he put the notebook and pencil back into his pocket.

'Got it!' he whispered triumphantly.

At that precise moment, as if to confirm what he was saying, there was a faint bass humming sound, a sensation of growing pressure, and the shelves of the reference room visibly shook, as if in an earthquake. The bass humming sound grew louder. All the lights in the room went out. Someone screamed and then the humming sound ceased and the room's shaking stopped.
'Oh, my God!' Ingrid softly exclaimed.
Gerry grabbed her hand and stood up, preparing to run, but the lights were still off, the room was in pitch darkness
– and then, even as more people screamed and bumped into one another, there was a bizarre rushing sound, like air being pumped from a hosepipe, and then another kind of light, brilliant, striated, poured into the front lobby from outside and temporarily blinded him.
He cursed, held onto Ingrid, started forward again; but then the light outside vanished, plunging the library back into darkness; the bass humming returned and the bookshelves shook again; then the noise rose on high, abruptly cut out, and the lights on the walls came back on as the bookshelves stopped shaking.
Ignoring the frightened moans and sobbing all around him, Gerry glanced down at the desk, saw immediately that the Saint-Germain document was missing, and looked elsewhere for it.
The document could not be found. When Gerry enquired, the male librarian insisted he hadn't taken it. He stared at Gerry, startled, opened his mouth to say something – probably to accuse Gerry of stealing the precious document – but Gerry quickly turned away, took hold of Ingrid's arm and hurried from the library, to see what was outside.
The rain was still pouring down and there was nothing unusual to be seen.
'Shit!' he said in frustration. 'We've missed them again! And now the Saint-Germain document is gone, so we'd better get out of here before that librarian sends someone after us. Come on, Ingrid, let's go!'
He rushed with her to the car and stood patiently in the rain while she fumbled with her keys, opened her door and slid in, then leaned over to open his door. He slipped into his seat, saw something stuck to the windscreen, behind the windscreen wiper, assumed it was a parking ticket, so cursed and went back outside to remove it. He was just about to throw it away when he saw what it was.
It was a neatly folded note, one half of it visible, handwritten on fine, antique

paper, now soaked and soggy and just about legible, the writing flamboyant, slightly archaic, and strikingly similar to the writing on the card attached to the tiny swastika they had found in his hotel room in Eckernforde.
After getting back into the car and closing the door firmly, he unfolded the note and read aloud from it.
'*Think only of the individual as being but one of many; consider the legend of Faust and know it to be true…*' Signed, '*Saint-Germain*'.
He caught Ingrid's glance, her ever widening gaze, then he stared all around the car, saw nothing but rainswept buildings, then looked up at the dark evening sky and saw a pulsating white light.
It was very high up, disc-shaped, dime-sized, but it moved from east to west, stopped briefly in mid-air, then abruptly ascended toward the stars and eventually blinked out.
He studied the sky a long time, seeing nothing but black clouds, then found himself shivering uncontrollably as he reached out to Ingrid.
'That's it,' he said. 'That's my proof. Now let's go back to England.'
Ingrid drove on to Calais.

Chapter Thirteen

After his unpleasant time in the bleak wastelands of Eastern Europe, Zweig was delighted to be back on his luxury cruiser in the Mediterranean, lying on a sunbed on the upper deck with his fleet spread out impressively around him and Elena supine beside him. She was wearing sunglasses, her long blonde hair was clipped up, her bikini was practically invisible, and her belly, unlike his, was as flat and smooth as a skating rink.

He glanced sideways at her, thought of taking her down below, but decided to wait for Hans to deliver his report. The helicopter had landed a couple of minutes ago, and he knew that Hans would be making his way to him this very minute, nervously wiping sweat from his forehead. Zweig liked it that way. Obedience always came through fear. He had learned that in the Fatherland during the war and had never forgotten it.

Closing his eyes again, he concentrated on the sunlight, feeling it on his face, on his too-flabby body, and silently cursed that he had not yet learned the

secret of eternal youth. He had tried everything on the market, every capsule, every enema, every kind of injection, but now accepted that only Saint-Germain's secrets could return him to good health.

He was, in fact, beginning to think of the elusive SaintGermain as a personal enemy, a formidable foe, a creature of magic, mystery and menace, almost beyond credibility. Zweig believed in the supernatural, in the power of unseen forces, knowing full well that the Third Reich of Hitler, Himmler and Rosenberg had sprung from the sulphurous smoke of a belief in the occult. Yes, he believed it – and belief could conquer all – and he knew that if he wanted it badly enough, he would eventually find Saint-Germain. And in doing so, also find the Tuaoi Stone and the powers it would give him.

'Herr Zweig?'

Opening his eyes to squint up into the sunlight, he saw the silhouetted figures of Hans and two much larger men, the latter holding gaberdines over their arms. Seeing them, he sat upright, feeling a twinge of excitement, then removed his sunglasses and told the steward to bring him a fruit juice. He did not offer any kind of drink to the three sweating men.

'Your men don't look happy,' he said to Hans. 'Can I take it they failed us?'
'Herr Zweig – ' one of the men began, but Zweig instantly silenced him by snapping his fingers and interjecting with, 'Shut up and speak only when spoken to. Now, Hans, please elucidate.'
The Filipino steward brought him his fruit juice and he sipped gratefully at it, listening to the exhausted and sweating Hans giving his report while the two hoodlums, also sweating, but with nervousness, restlessly shuffled their feet.
'As requested,' Hans reported, 'I had Ingrid and the American followed to Eckernforde, in West Germany, where they visited a certain Klaus Schiller. Shortly after they left Schiller's house, my men – these two – also paid them a visit to ascertain exactly what he had told our young friends.'
'And?'
Hans was about to respond when Elena yawned loudly, uncoiled as languidly as a cat, rolled onto her belly, then arched her oil-smeared, gleaming spine as she raised herself onto her knees. The two hired hoodlums, sweating even

more profusely, tried to keep their eyes off her.
‘God,’ she said, yawning, looking the hoodlums up and down as if taking their measure, ‘this heat puts me to sleep.’
‘Then go below and sleep,’ Zweig said impatiently. ‘I’ll join you later.’
‘Yeah,’ she responded, standing upright and stretching, her breasts bulging out of her skimpy bikini-top, her long legs and flat belly slick with oil, ‘I think I’ll do that. I hate business anyway.’
Rolling her hips like a disco-dancer, luscious buttocks trembling teasingly, she sauntered across the deck, ducked low, giving a good view of her backside, and disappeared through the hatchway. The two hoodlums, still trying hard not to look, were both visibly moved.
Zweig, taking note of their discomfort, was faintly amused.
‘And so,’ he said, returning his steely gaze to Hans, ‘these men were extracting information from Schiller. What did he tell them?’
‘He told them,’ Hans replied, ‘that Ingrid and the American had asked him a lot of questions about the Comte de Saint-Germain, were particularly interested in his origins, and said that when they left Schiller’s house they were going to check the famed Saint-Germain tombstone in the nearby churchyard. Schiller, who claims to be a descendent of Prince Charles, the Landgrave of HesseCassel – the man with whom Saint-Germain was living when his death was reported – told them that SaintGermain had *not* died at that time; and also that the SaintGermain of whom we speak is a magical adept, an immortal, a possible protector of the so-called Philosopher’s Stone – ’
‘The Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone.’
‘Correct – and was almost certainly, in a previous incarnation, one Johann Valentin Andraea, author of the first three books on the original Rosicrucians, more widely known as Christian Rosenkreuz, the founder of that highly mysterious Order.’
‘I knew it!’ Zweig exclaimed, unable to stop himself, suddenly picked up on a wave of excitement that made him feel almost youthful. ‘Damn it, I *knew* it! Himmler himself believed that the Lodestone originated in the Fatherland – and what Schiller said merely confirms it.’
‘I’m not sure that I – ’
Scarcely able to contain his excitement, Zweig continued: ‘Don’t you understand? It’s widely believed that the Rosicrucians, being a secret

brotherhood of alchemists, had discovered the elixir of eternal life – the compound of the Philosopher's Stone, less widely known as the Tuaoi Stone – and now have confirmation that the Rosicrucians, therefore the Hermetic secret, originated in the original Fatherland – sixteenth-century Germany – just as Himmler, God rest his soul, had always insisted was the case. So the Lodestone belongs to the Reich. We were *destined* to have it!'

Even more excited, feeling almost orgasmic, he smacked a fist into the palm of his hand, glanced beyond the safety railing at the fleet of cruisers surrounding him, then took note of the fact that Hans was trying, unsuccessfully, to conceal his scepticism.

Feeling that cold water had been splashed on his face, he studied Hans intently and saw that he was too soft for his own good. Hans was bright and obedient, knew his place, worked hard, but clearly he lacked certain manly traits and needed toughening up.

'You do not agree, Hans?'

'No – I mean, *yes*!'

'Good, my friend. *Sehr gut*! The Lodestone belongs to Germany and we are going to find it – and Saint-Germain, who was once Christian Rosenkreuz, will eventually lead us to it.'

'Yes, Herr Zweig. Of course.'

Zweig nodded with satisfaction, then turned to the two hoodlums. 'So,' he said, speaking directly to the biggest one, 'what happened then?'

Confused, the big hoodlum looked at the smaller one, then coughed into his clenched fist. '*What*?' he asked stupidly.

Zweig sighed with exasperation. 'When this Schiller creature, this disgusting little sodomite, had finished telling you what he knew.'

The big hoodlum frowned, deep in thought, and eventually prepared to speak, but the smaller man prevented him from doing so by stepping forward and offering a cocky grin.

'We handcuffed him to a hot griddle,' he said, 'and then turned the heat up.'

Zweig chuckled at that one. '*Very* good,' he said. 'The old-fashioned methods are always the best, so I'm glad you still use them. Excellent… Then?'

'Following your instructions,' the smaller hoodlum replied, 'we didn't bother your daughter or the American, but kept tabs on the hotel where they were sleeping.' 'They were sleeping together?'

‘No. Reportedly they had separate rooms.’
‘That virgin,’ Zweig said, feeling nothing but contempt, recalling that his daughter was like her dead mother, a frigid bitch who, shortly after his marriage to her, had gone right off sex. That was one of his reasons for killing her: he hadn’t been able to take her rejection, particularly when she said he was a pervert whose sexual inclinations made her feel ill. However, he knew that wasn’t the real reason, that the real reason was her frigidity, and so he had slipped some arsenic into her normal medication and got rid of her that way. And Ingrid, his daughter, was every bit as frigid as her mother – and, like her, despised him… ‘And that Yank’s just the same,’ he added maliciously. ‘So, please continue.’
Relieved and pleased to continue, the smaller hoodlum smirked and said, ‘Your daughter and the American watched the Schiller house burning down and were observed speaking to some of the locals – doubtless asking what had caused the fire – and then they retired to their hotel for the night. Schiller had told us that he’d encouraged them to visit the library of Troyes, in France, where, he said, they would find confirmation for the existence of the eighteenth-century Saint-Germain. So, the following day, they left Eckernforde and drove through Kiel and Hamburg, stopped for lunch near Hanover, then drove on to Frankfurt, where they spent another night, and…’
Here, the smaller hoodlum stopped smirking and glanced nervously at his bigger partner, as if not entirely sure that he should say more.
‘Don’t hide anything from me,’ Zweig warned him. ‘It would not be advisable.’
‘Of course not,’ the smaller hoodlum said. ‘It’s just that it’s a little… Well…’ He shrugged. ‘*Unbelievable*.’ ‘No matter. Continue.’
The smaller hoodlum sighed. ‘We didn’t book into the hotel, but instead parked our car close to it and took turns at keeping an eye on it throughout the evening and early morning hours. Neither of them emerged from the hotel, but shortly after midnight, when both of us were awake, we saw what we could only describe as a…’
‘Yes? Yes?’
The smaller hoodlum shrugged. ‘A sort of… *flying saucer*,’ he said nervously. ‘An extremely large, discshaped light that first took shape in the low clouds, then descended vertically, like a helicopter, but with no noise at all, then hovered right over the roof of the hotel and remained there for some

time. It glowed and pulsated. It had a dark inner core. It just hovered impossibly in mid-air, making no sound at all.'
'No,' the bigger hoodlum corrected him, looking slightly embarrassed. 'It *did* make a sound. You could hardly hear it, but there was definitely a sound – an almost imperceptible bass humming that sometimes even made our car shake.'
'Yes,' the smaller hoodlum said. 'I forgot. That's absolutely correct.'
'And then?' Zweig asked impatiently.
'It remained there for about an hour, scaring both of us, I'll admit, then it ascended as quietly as it had descended and disappeared through the clouds.'
'Anything else?'
'No.'
'And the next morning?'
'Your daughter and her American friend drove on to Troyes where, in the middle of a heavy rainstorm, we…' He trailed off nervously, then reluctantly concluded, 'We lost them.'
Zweig felt the rage churning up, but breathed deeply, controlling himself.
'*You lost them*?' he hissed.
'It wasn't our fault!' the bigger man insisted.
'Shut up!' his partner snapped. 'It was the UFO,' he said, looking hopefully at Zweig. 'That saucer-shaped light. That apparition… whatever… It came back and harassed us.'
'I am losing my patience,' Zweig said. 'You'd better make this believable.'
Looking even more uncomfortable, the smaller hoodlum continued: 'Your daughter and her American were obviously heading for Troyes and we were following them at a fairly safe distance through a heavy rainstorm when that *thing*, that brightly glowing saucer-shaped light, materialized out of nowhere, tailed us for a brief time, then, just on the outskirts of Troyes, almost came down on top of us.'
'Not on *top* of us,' his big partner corrected him. 'It seemed to be all around us. It looked solid in a way – it had that dark inner core – but it *couldn't* have been solid, because it was suddenly all around us, above us, below us, and we couldn't see a damned thing – we were blinded by the dazzling light – and the next thing we knew, our car was in a ditch and we were both regaining consciousness, after having blacked out, wondering what the hell had happened to us.'

‘Right,’ the smaller hoodlum added. ‘And when we looked through the smashed windscreen, at the road we’d just been on, we saw what appeared to be the same UFO, that saucer-shaped, pulsating *light*, rapidly shrinking in size as it shot away through the storm in the direction of Troyes.’
‘Obviously following my daughter and the American,’ Zweig said helpfully.
‘Yeah,’ the smaller hoodlum said, sounding relieved. ‘We think that’s what it did. I mean, we had to leave our smashed car in the ditch and hitch a lift into Troyes, arriving there pretty late in the evening. But once there, we went straight to the library where we found a lot of people gathered together in the street outside the building, all talking excitedly and gazing up at the sky. When we asked a couple what they were looking for, they said a UFO had been seen, that it had made the whole building shake, that it had made all the lights go out, and that it had briefly illuminated the whole library before disappearing.’
‘My daughter and the American?’
The smaller hoodlum shrugged for the last time. ‘They were gone by the time we got there. So we hired another car and drove on to Calais, but they weren’t on the ferry that *we* caught. Obviously they’re both back in London… and that’s all we can tell you for now.’
‘And that’s quite enough,’ Zweig retorted. ‘You both know too much now.’
He enjoyed the startled glances that passed instantly between them, was thrilled when they stared disbelievingly at him, their eyes filled with fear.
‘*What*?’ the bigger hoodlum asked.
‘Wait a *minute*!’ the smaller one exclaimed, taking a step back towards the safety railing, which is just where Zweig wanted him.
‘Open the gate, Hans,’ he said. ‘It’s time these hooligans left us.’
Hans stood there for a moment, clearly shocked, then went reluctantly to the safety railing behind the smaller hoodlum. He opened the gate that normally led to the gangplank, then stepped back and turned to the front again, leaving an empty space high above the trembling blue sea.
Both hoodlums glanced back over their shoulders, then stared blindly around them.
‘*Wait* a minute!’ the smaller one pleaded, raising his hands imploringly in the air. ‘It wasn’t *our* fault that we finally lost them. It was that *UFO*, for chrissakes!’
Zweig, having fun, didn’t reply, but merely turned to his Filipino steward and

said, ‘Bring me the Luger.’
‘I don’t think – ’ Hans began.
‘Please don’t think,’ Zweig retorted. ‘These two halfwits failed to complete what they were tasked with – and besides, they now know too much.’ He took the Luger pistol from the Filipino steward, who had withdrawn it from a holster hidden under his immaculate white jacket, then aimed it at the smaller hoodlum as he backed fearfully to the open gate. ‘The sea or a bullet in the head,’ Zweig told him. ‘The choice is all yours.’
‘Jesus Christ, this is – .’
Zweig fired the Luger, felt the recoil, heard the shot, saw a ribbon of snot and blood shooting out of the hoodlum’s head as he jerked backwards and disappeared over the side, making no sound of protest. Then Zweig calmly aimed at the bigger hoodlum, saying, ‘Step over there, please.’
The big hoodlum waved his hands in feeble protest, but did as he was told, having no choice in the matter. He stood in front of the space where the gate had been opened, framed by the radiant blue sky and iridescent sea.
‘*Please*, Herr Zweig! *Please don’t*!’
Zweig raised the Luger, took aim and then paused, taking note of the look of revulsion on Hans’ face, his visible trembling. *Oh*, *yes*, he thought, *he’s weak. He’s frightened of the real world. He needs a lesson in the manly virtues and now is the time for it*… The thought made him smile, wave his free hand, call Hans to him. When Hans reached him, he gave him the Luger and said, ‘Either persuade him to jump or help him along.’
‘There are *sharks* down there,’ Hans said.
‘I know. That’s the whole idea, Hans.’
Hans was clearly in a state of shock, his eyes widening with disbelief, but Zweig deliberately kept his own stare hard, which soon did the trick. Hans licked the sweat around his lips, controlled himself, turned to the hoodlum, then raised the pistol and took aim.
The hoodlum put his hands up entreatingly.
‘*Please*, Hans!’ he croaked. ‘*Don’t*!’
Hans pressed the trigger. The firing weapon jerked his wrist up. The big hoodlum was punched backwards, his hands flapping at his chest, blood spurting from between his fingers as he disappeared over the side and splashed into the shark-infested sea below.
Hans stood there, visibly shaking, tears springing to his eyes, still holding up

the Luger, aiming blindly at the sky, paralysed until Zweig, feeling almost paternal, went to him, put an arm around his shoulders, gently removed the pistol from his trembling fingers and said, ‘Good boy. *Good* boy. You will soon be a man, *ja*?’
Hans didn’t reply.

Chapter Fourteen

‘No,’ Gerry insisted as Ingrid drove the car at a snail’s pace through the peak-hour traffic of Tottenham Court Road, in London’s West End, heading for her hotel in Bloomsbury. ‘I absolutely insist. It’s now becoming too dangerous, so we have to stick together, which means *living* together, either in your place or in mine, and I certainly believe we’ll be safer in your hotel, sharing the same room. That’s all there is to it.’
‘My room’s too small,’ Ingrid responded, feeling

cowardly, her cheeks burning, despising herself for her reluctance to accept what she secretly, helplessly, wanted.

‘Then we’ll simply move into a double room,’ Gerry responded. ‘It’s as easy as that.’
‘I’d be too embarrassed to ask,’ Ingrid said, speaking the truth, though ashamed of its nature.
‘Then *I’ll* do it, Ingrid. I’ll hide you in the lounge where the desk clerk can’t see you, and I’ll sign both of us into a bigger room, maybe even a suite.’
‘You don’t have to do that.’
His hand dropped onto her knee, squeezed it, moved up farther, and although it made her feel good, it also disturbed her. She knew he wasn’t like her father, that not everyone was, but she couldn’t ignore the fear that lanced through her when she thought of reality. Sooner or later it would come to that, otherwise it would be unnatural, and although she actually *wanted* it to come to that, she didn’t believe she could deal with it.
‘Gee,’ Gerry said, ‘you have a really nice thigh. It’s so *soft*, so…’
‘Please don’t,’ she said. ‘I can’t drive properly if you do that. Now tell me again.’
‘What?’

‘I said, tell me again. You were explaining what you thought that quotation meant, so tell me again.’
‘Oh,’ he said, sounding disappointed. ‘*That*… Well, yeah, right…’
He removed his hand from her thigh, as if hurt by her indifference, so she reached out, took hold of it and planted it back where it had been.
‘I like it,’ she said. ‘I do! *Honestly*! But I have to know certain things.’
He sighed. ‘Okay. I’ll tell you again. The note said: *Think only of the individual as being but one of many; contemplate the legend of Faust and know it to be true*… Right?’
‘Right.’
‘Well, I don’t think it was a quotation, but it *was* some kind of message, and obviously it refers to Faust – not the opera, but the Faust famed in legend and literature as a man who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power.’
‘I got that much,’ she felt obliged to tell him.
‘Okay,’ he said. ‘Now the fictional and mythical Faust was actually based on a real-life person, one Dr. Georg Faust, who was born, if my memory serves me well, in Knittlingen, Germany, around 1480, became famous as a sodomite, magician and mesmerist, and was commonly thought to have concluded a pact with the devil, before dying in Staufin, near Freiburbg, in 1540 or early the following year. Assuming, then, that the note was left by our Saint-Germain or one of his minions – and accepting that what we’ve already learned about him is true – what the note seems to be telling us is that the mysterious Comte de Saint-Germain is, was, amongst other personas, the original, possibly diabolical Faust, who reportedly died 169 years before the death of the eighteenth-century Count Saint-Germain.’
‘Of course,’ Ingrid said, now feeling excited, swept away by the unravelling mystery. ‘The historical Faust died 169 years before the *recorded* death of Saint-Germain. And, if the *recorded* date of Saint-Germain’s death in Eckernforde is correct, it makes him 169 years old when he died.’
‘Right,’ Gerry responded. ‘It now seems unlikely that he actually died at that time, but that’s the date he *chose* to supposedly die, at least as far as the mortal world is concerned. Ergo, Saint-Germain was supposed to have died at the age of 169, exactly 169 years after Faust died.’
‘A way of telling us that he and Faust *were* one and the same.’
‘Right!’

‘So he might be telling us that he sold his soul to the devil?’
‘Or that he *is* the devil.’
‘Or simply antagonistic to us.’
‘He hasn’t harmed us yet,’ Gerry said. ‘And he certainly could have. No, what I think he’s trying to tell us is, simply, that like Faust he’s learned the secret of immortality and is, in fact, a man of many lives, possibly spanning the centuries…’
Ingrid felt herself unable to look directly at the truth and its awesome, terrifying possibilities. She felt Gerry’s hand on her thigh, sliding lightly, lovingly up and down it, and took a great deal of comfort from it… even though she feared *that* as well.
‘So you now believe,’ she said, not looking at him, concentrating on the dense traffic, ‘that our Saint-Germain *is* a magical being, and possibly immortal.’
‘I do, Ingrid. All the facts point in that direction. Clearly he’s some kind of magical adept – maybe a member of a secret society of such – and the original Rosicrucians, of which Saint-Germain as Christian Rosenkreuz was one, were part of that very ancient band. All alchemists. Or mystics.’
‘God,’ she heard herself saying, though she hadn’t actually planned on replying. ‘And the Hermetic secret, or Philosopher’s Stone, is in fact the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone, which was once hidden as the tip of the Great Pyramid.’
‘And somewhere else before, Ducks.’
He had said it to amuse her and she couldn’t help smiling, but her lingering fear returned soon enough, like a shroud or dark cloud.
‘So we’re trying to find the Lodestone,’ she said, ‘which means finding Saint-Germain… and he seems to be encouraging us to do so, though he won’t simply, openly approach us. It doesn’t make sense.’
Gerry sighed again. ‘No,’ he said, ‘it doesn’t *seem* to make sense… but he must have his reasons.’
Thankfully, Ingrid was suddenly able to turn off the choked main road and into the relative tranquillity of the Bloomsbury side street that led to the hotel in Tavistock Square, where she parked illegally, since all the meters were taken. They locked the car, removed their holdalls from the boot and then entered the hotel. But once inside, when they approached the male desk-clerk in Reception, Ingrid could not stop herself from blushing.

The desk-clerk, slim, wearing a pinstripe suit, hair cropped close to his head, stared at them with a glacial expression and said, ‘Yes?’
‘I have a room here,’ Ingrid began, practically stuttering, ‘and I…’
‘Of course, Miss Smith. Room 413.’
‘Yes,’ Ingrid said promptly, having forgotten that she had originally signed in under a pseudonym and relieved to have been reminded of it, ‘and I…’
When the knowing clerk glanced at Gerry with a sceptically raised right eyebrow, Ingrid simply couldn’t complete her sentence.
‘You would like your room key, Miss… *Smith*?’
‘Well, actually…’
‘I’m *Mister* Smith,’ Gerry said, causing her even more embarrassment, ‘and now that I’ve arrived, my wife and I would like to move into a bigger room, with two single beds.’
‘Two… *single* beds, Mr Smith?’
‘Yes. My wife and I only share a bed when making love, so please make it two single beds.’
The desk-clerk’s glacial superiority crumbled into a very English kind of embarrassment and confusion. He coughed to clear his throat and scanned the register book too intently. Eventually, trying to pull himself together, he turned away, removed a door-key from its hook and handed it rather formally to Gerry.
‘Room 325, sir. Very nice. With a view of the square.’
‘Gee,’ Gerry said, ‘that’s terrific. Have a good day, pal.’
The hotel had no porter, so Gerry had to carry the holdalls and Ingrid followed him to the lift, feeling as embarrassed as the desk-clerk had looked. When the door closed behind her and the lift started its ascent, she heaved a sigh of relief.
‘What’s the matter?’ Gerry asked her.
‘I don’t know how I’m going to pass the Reception as long as that desk-clerk is there.’
‘Don’t worry, he won’t even give you a glance. That English wimp is more embarrassed than you are, so he’ll just look right through you.’
‘God, Gerry, you’re shameless, you really are.’
‘I wish I was,’ he said.
Aware that he was staring steadily at her, she lowered her gaze and studied her own feet until the lift came to a stop at the third floor. When the door

opened, she held the button until Gerry had hawked the holdalls out, then followed him along the corridor to their new room. He put the holdalls down, grinned at her, turned the key in the lock and motioned her inside.
'I'd carry you across the threshold,' he said, 'but these bags are killing me.'
He was trying to amuse her, but she was too tense to smile and went past him, into the spacious room, feeling highly self-conscious. She saw the two single beds, a chest of drawers and wardrobe, and was gazing at the bathroom when she heard the door closing behind her. Gerry brushed past her, huffing and puffing melodramatically, then placed the holdalls on the slotted racks beside the wardrobe and turned back to face her.
'Well,' he said, grinning broadly but uneasily, 'here we are – man and wife.'
Having never shared a room with anyone before, Ingrid felt trapped. Looking at the bathroom, she simply couldn't imagine using it, knowing that as she attended to her ablutions Gerry would be sitting in this room, with just that thin wall separating them. Then she looked at the two beds. Her mind went blank when she did so. She could scarcely focus on Gerry, but she sensed him staring at her, and though wanting to hold him and be held *by* him, the very thought of doing anything more than that made her shrink within herself. With clothes on? *Without* clothes… How would she get undressed? Would *he* do it for her? Or would she have to do it herself, and if so, where and when? *In the bathroom*? Ridiculous! And if in there, she would eventually have to emerge… Should she be naked or wearing a nightdress? And whatever… what then?
Oh, God, she thought. *I wish he would… No*!*… Yes, yes, I* do *love him and want him to…*
'Oh, Gerry,' she heard someone say plaintively, like a lost child – and then, as she realised it was herself, he made a lunge for her.
She fell back against the wall – or was forced back by his weight – and automatically closed her eyes when he kissed her and groaned at the same time. She was shocked, excited, helpless, confused, aware of the weight and warmth of him, hearing only his passionate groaning. A wave of emotion caught her, picked her up, swept her away, but then it smashed her on the rocks of her buried fears to leave her breathless and dizzy.
She had a vision of her father, saw his whores, recalled her dreams; felt a hand on her breast, Gerry's hand, and thought of other hands, elsewhere… No, it wasn't nice. It was base and animalistic. She saw Elena rubbing oil into

her father's bulging belly, and recalled the many other humiliations going back to her childhood.
God, yes, she wanted Gerry, and her body responded to him; but she heard a cry of protest, her own, as she slapped wildly at him and pushed him away and then turned frantically to the side, her heart pounding, lungs aching.
'No, Gerry! *Please*! I can't help it! I can't! *I just can't*!'
'Oh, Christ!' he groaned softly.
She reached out blindly to him, felt her fingertips on his face, touched his lips, the tears on his cheeks, then had to choke back her own tears. None of this was real. It was like a bad dream. She was picked up on a tide of love and grief and swept to the room door. She opened it and fled, only dimly aware of what she was doing, heard him calling her back, but took the stairs and hurried down to the bar. He met her before she got there – he must have taken the lift – and grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her, saying, 'I'm sorry! *I'm sorry*!' Helpless, she burst into tears and let him embrace her. He hugged her and kissed the top of her head and then wiped her eyes dry. After that, he led her into the bar, sat her down in a corner, ordered two drinks from the barman and returned to the table.
'Here,' he said, putting a glass down on the table. 'I feel as bad as you do. Do you *like* gin and tonic?'
'Yes.'
'Good for shattered nerves.'
She smiled and calmed down. He reached across the table, held her hand and looked steadily at her.
'I'm no good at this,' he said. 'I don't know how to start. God, I love you and want you, but I'm shy about certain things, and *you're* not exactly the bold type, which doesn't help me a bit. Jesus, I adore you. You're the nicest thing on Earth. I want to hold you and kiss you and… *you* know… but, Jesus, I'm hopeless. I mean, I know you have your problems. Your dad's made you that way. I know and I try to understand, but shit, it's so *heavy*. You know what I mean? I'm probably as scared as you are. I lunged at you because I thought the time was right and I didn't know what else to do. But we have to share that room, Ingrid. We *have* to share it. So let's try it again.'
'I can't even get undressed there,' she said. 'I'll just feel too self-conscious.'
'Okay,' he said. 'I understand. I mean, I know you're inhibited. So when you want to get undressed, tell me how long it'll take and I'll come down here to

the bar and go back up when you're safely in bed.'
'I can't even use the toilet.'
He waved his hands in dismissal. 'Same thing. Absolutely. When you want to use the bathroom I'll come down and wait here for a decent period.'
'Alright, then.'
'Good,' he said. 'It's agreed.'
He squeezed her hand and smiled at her, making her feel better, so she finished her gin and tonic, drinking it too quickly, and walked back to the lift, feeling drunk. Leaning against him in the lift, resting her head against his shoulder, she felt her fear falling away and melting into his warmth. He slid his arm around her, resting one hand on her hip, tugged her to him, squeezing her a little, and then stroked her hair. She felt secure and at peace, at last protected by love, and when they left the lift and returned to their room, she knew their love would survive this.
As soon as they entered the room, they knew that someone had been there.
'Shit!' Gerry exclaimed.
Spread out on the bed, in the rough shape of a pentagram, were a coiled rope, a lotus flower, and three postcards.
Gerry pressed Ingrid back against the door. He indicated silently that she shouldn't move. While she stood there, he checked the bathroom, reappeared, shrugged his shoulders. He rang through to Reception and asked if anyone had been in the room; when he shook his head from side to side, Ingrid knew the desk-clerk had said 'No' and probably meant it. Then Gerry went to the bed. He picked up the coiled rope. While he did so, Ingrid picked up the lotus flower and inhaled its fresh aroma.
Gerry studied the three postcards. He passed them to her in silence. The first showed the Temple of Diana at Ephesus in Turkey; the second was a reproduction of Sidney Barclay's 1875 wood engraving of the Colossus of Rhodes, once located in the harbour of Rhodes Island in Greece; and the third was a photograph of the ruined statue of Zeus at ancient Olympus, now Olympia, in the Peloponnese.
'Saint-Germain,' Gerry said. 'He's been here. And now the bastard's leading us by the nose. He's tell us where to go.'
Thinking of Saint-Germain and his mysterious partner, one or the other of whom had been in this very room just a few minutes ago, Ingrid slipped back into a fear that quickened her breathing.

‘How did he, or they, get in here?’ she asked.
Gerry shook his head from side to side in bewilderment. ‘Picked the lock, or…’
When he failed to finish his sentence, but just stared questioningly at her, she recalled that night in Frankfurt, when Saint-Germain and his partner had materialized out of an unnatural, pulsating light. Then she recalled that same light beaming into the library of Troyes from outside, the message found on the windscreen of their rented car…
‘God,’ she whispered, ‘I don’t like this. I don’t like it at all.’
Gerry didn’t reply. He simply swung the coiled rope to and fro above the bed, and then, while Ingrid sniffed at the lotus flower, gazed at her with thoughtful eyes.
‘All these things are connected,’ he said distractedly, looking inward, as if remembering all the books he had read on ancient mythology. ‘A coiled rope is the ancient Egyptian symbol for one hundred. A lotus flower represents the ancient Egyptian 1,000.’
‘So?’ she asked when he stared questioningly at her.
By way of reply, he took the three postcards from her, spread them out in a fan, and asked, ‘What have these three locations got in common?’
Ingrid studied them for a moment, initially feeling baffled, then, with a childish flush of pride, finding the answer.
‘They’re three of the Seven Wonders of the World.’
‘And?’
‘They’re all located on landmasses that are joined by the Aegean Sea.’
‘Right,’ Gerry said, pleased. ‘And the Aegean Sea is the most likely location of the legendary Atlantis.’
‘What makes you think he’s referring to Atlantis?’ she asked, not too sure of what he was driving at. ‘He may simply be telling us to visit those three locations, two of which are in Greece, the third in Turkey.’
‘He *is* telling us to do that, Ingrid. But he’s also telling us to make that journey while keeping Atlantis in mind.’
‘I don’t see the connection.’
Gerry swung the coiled rope slowly in front of her, then placed a finger lightly on the lotus flower she was still holding.
‘The Atlantis myth is derived solely from Plato, who mentions it in two dialogues: the *Timaeus* and *Critias*. According to Plato, the ancient world

wasn’t devastated once, by a single great flood, but many times by different floods, though the greatest was the one that destroyed Atlantis, which, according to Plato, lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules – Gibraltar – and was as large as Libya and Asia put together. However, Plato insists that Atlantis consisted of many islands, rather than being a single continent – most likely the islands of the Aegean Sea.’

Ingrid sat on the edge of the nearest bed, crossed her shapely legs and stared up at him. Again, he dangled the coiled rope before her face, his eyes bright with excitement.

‘Are you with me so far?’ he asked.

‘Just about,’ she replied, smiling at him, ‘but don’t let that stop you.’

He sighed. ‘The most renowned attempt to solve the mystery of Atlantis was that of Professor A. G. Galanopoulos. His intriguing theory is that all the figures given in relation to Atlantis are too large, being based on a confusion between the Egyptian one hundred – a coiled rope – and 1,000, the symbol of which was the lotus flower. Now, it’s widely believed that Plato, in confusing the numerical symbols of ancient Egypt, multiplied the original figures for Atlantis by ten in all cases – in other words, the true size of the original Atlantis became ten times larger in Plato’s calculations. This made it impossible to locate it in the Aegean Sea. And he likewise multiplied the date of its destruction by ten, thereby making the date approximately 9,000 years before his own time. However, if all of the figures are based on the coiled rope, rather than on the lotus flower – in other words, *divided* by ten – Plato’s figures place Atlantis in an acceptable historical context, his description of the Royal City and its plains corresponding exactly to modern Crete, and the date of its destruction, instead of being 9,000 years before Plato’s time, becoming approximately 1,500 BC.’

‘What does that date have to do with the lost Atlantis?’

‘We don’t know what existed in that area 9,000 years ago, but we *do* know that Athens existed as a fortified town about 2,000 BC, and that in 1,600 BC there was a high level of civilization in nearby Crete. The sea between Greece and Crete is full of islands that were once part of Greece itself – and the most southerly of these islands is Santorini, which was once circular in shape and five or six miles in diameter. It *is* known that around 1,500 BC there was a tremendous explosion, probably volcanic, that ripped Santorini apart and turned it into little more than the remains of a gigantic crater. *Modern*

Santorini consists of three islets, all covered with pumice and volcanic rock. And since the explosion of 1,500 BC was three times as large as the eruption of Krakatoa in 1883, it must have produced a tidal wave of unprecedented size. That would certainly have destroyed any civilization existing in the Aegean Sea area. It would also account for the mysterious destruction of the Palaces of Knossos and Phaestus at about that time. So, if we accept that Plato confused the lotus flower and the coiled rope, or mistook one hundred for 1,000, we can take it that Professor Galanopoulos was correct in assuming that modern Crete is the site of the Royal City of ancient Atlantis, Santorini is the metropolis described by Plato, and the whole empire once extended over the many islands of the Aegean Sea, before being destroyed in 1,500 BC.'

'And that's what Saint-Germain is trying to tell us?'

'Right. He wants us to go to each of those three sites – and he also wants us to know that each of them once belonged to Atlantis. That's what he wants us to know and do, but don't ask me why.'

Ingrid felt that she was finally managing to gain control of her fear, but her confusion only grew deeper at what she was hearing. Gerry grinned at her, mischievously, reassuringly, and she knew, just by studying his eyes, just what he was planning.

'We're going to *Greece*?'

'Via Turkey,' he replied. 'We'll arrange it tomorrow.'

He grinned at her again, thus removing her from herself, letting her slip away from the fear and return to the sanctuary of love. She forgot about Saint-Germain, about her father and the Lodestone, and became aware only of Gerry and how close to her he was. God, she loved him and wanted to be touched by him, but could do little about it.

It was fear of a different kind.

She glanced at the two holdalls, returned her gaze to Gerry, noted his schoolboyish excitement and gave him a smile. She hoped the smile seemed natural, but in truth she still felt nervous, being tired and wanting to go to bed and sleep soundly for once. No matter what he had said, she still didn't know how to start, so she yawned and blinked melodramatically and murmured,

'God, I'm so tired. I really have to lie down.'

'Sure,' he said. 'You want a bath?'

'Yes, I feel pretty grubby.'

'Would forty minutes cover it?'

‘I think so.’
‘Then I’ll go back down to the bar.’
She felt idiotic, but couldn’t help herself, so just nodded agreement and murmured embarrassed thanks and watched him leave the room. When he had closed the door behind him, she stripped and opened her holdall, took her dressing gown and toiletry bag out of it and went into the bathroom. She thought about him while she had her bath, rubbing her naked skin with the soap, feeling hot and tingly all over, wanting to touch and be touched. Closing her eyes, she visualized him, sitting all alone in the bar, imagined what might happen if he walked in now and saw her naked. *I’m such a fool*, she thought. *I might as well be a nun*. Then she pulled the plug out, stood up and wrapped herself in the towel, listening, hoping the door would open and he would see her this way.
The door didn’t open. He was being a gentleman. Disappointed, relieved, yearning and ashamed, she dried herself, put on a short nightdress and slipped into the bed. Having already removed her spectacles, she tugged the blankets up to her chin and stared at the ceiling.
Gerry stayed out of the room for an hour, but it seemed like the whole night.
‘I stayed away a bit longer,’ he explained when he returned, ‘because I didn’t want you to get nervous about running late.’
‘I wasn’t nervous,’ she said, feeling foolish, the blankets still up to her chin, her cheeks burning brightly.
‘Can I get ready now?’
‘Of course.’
‘I’ll unpack and take my things into the bathroom. Just pretend I’m not here.’
‘Oh, Gerry,’ she said with a sigh.
Grinning, he opened his holdall, removed what he required, went into the bathroom, closed the door behind him and then ran the bath taps. She could hear him singing. He was doing it in the bath. It was a terrible rock ‘n’ roll song and his voice was perfectly tuneless. Luckily he was quick – she heard the water draining out. He gurgled and then went quiet and then he emerged again, wearing a Chinese dressing gown decorated with garishly painted dragons.
She closed her eyes and pretended to be sleeping as he slipped into the second bed.
‘Good night, Ingrid,’ he said.

‘Good night, Gerry,’ she replied without thinking. ‘Ah, ha!’ he said. ‘Fooled you!’
‘Fooled me? I wasn’t pretending to sleep!’
‘Yes, you were.’
‘No, I wasn’t!’
‘Good night, Ingrid.’
‘Good night.’
He switched the light off, plunging the room into darkness, and she lay there, keeping her eyes closed. She was tired but couldn’t sleep, first thinking of SaintGermain, of what Gerry had told her, then thinking of Gerry himself, lying there in the other bed. She heard him tossing and turning. That just made her toss and turn. She sighed and yearned for him, was fearful that he might come over, listened for him and imagined him coming and then slipped into fantasy. She felt his hands on her naked skin, on her belly and breasts, felt the hard heat of his body against her, almost tasted his lips. He was here and then there, in her bed, then in his own, and she wanted him and feared him and burned with shame and need, and then eventually didn’t know if she was dreaming or awake, but opened her eyes, after what seemed like an eternity, to the morning’s grey light.
Gerry was still in the other bed, sleeping soundly and snoring slightly. She stared sleepily at him, resenting his contentment, contemplating slipping in beside him and nuzzling against him. She trembled, trying to work up the courage, but she just couldn’t do it.

Chapter Fifteen

If Gerry had felt a muted confusion when in London, three weeks later, when he was sitting opposite Ingrid at an outside table of a *cafeneion* in the atrociously noisy Constitution Square in Athens, Greece, drinking *ouzo* while Ingrid had a *citron pressé*, he felt that he was either losing his mind or living a dream. What he had planned very carefully to be work and pleasure combined had become a bizarre, frightening journey into the unknown.

‘I still can’t believe it,’ he said to Ingrid. ‘I look back on the past three weeks and it’s all been a dream.’
‘It all *happened*,’ she insisted, reaching out to take hold of his hand, letting

him know that he really existed and she still cared for him. ‘I was there. We *both* saw it.’

Having another sip of *ouzo*, he wondered just *what* they had seen. Glancing around the noisy square with its hotels, travel agencies, cafés, orange trees and the hellish traffic crawling around the central fountain, he tried to reconstruct in his mind just what he and Ingrid had actually experienced. Determined to make a holiday out of this second trip financed involuntarily by the revolting Zweig, Gerry had flown with Ingrid to Istanbul, spent a few days there, then hired a car for the drive along the Aegean coast, by the rich, rolling countryside between the higher plateau and the sea, through names that had once lived for him only in mythology – Nicaea and Bursa and Troy – and finally through a surprisingly modern Izmar, then on to Ephesus. Once there, and standing beside Ingrid on the top step of the great horseshoe-shaped odeum and theatre, looking out over the solemnly impressive ruins of the Temple of Diana, or Artemis, he realized that apart from the hint that he and Ingrid should come here, Saint-Germain had failed to tell them what to look for. Consequently, for the rest of that afternoon, he and Ingrid had exhaustively explored the widespread ruins of the ancient Ionian Greek city, but failed to come across anything unexpected.

Determined not to give up, and recalling that the previous manifestations had occurred in darkness, he had insisted to Ingrid that they wait in the car until nightfall, when the ruins would be closed to tourists. Ingrid had agreed, and that evening, when darkness had fallen, they both got out of the car and started walking back to the ruins.

Everything became confused after that.

Gerry couldn’t be sure, but he was convinced that he had fallen into a trance-like condition, that a globe of dazzling, pulsating light had materialized gradually over the ruins of the ancient theatre; that the columns of the original Temple of Artemis, then the great Artemisium itself, had reappeared magically over the illuminated ruins; and that both Saint-Germain and his unnamed partner, both wearing Grecian robes decorated with reliefs of animals and bees, both with high-pillared priests’ headdresses, had emerged from that shimmering light, from the ghostly columns of the ancient temple, and smilingly observed him from the lower steps of the theatre, while Ingrid, seated beside him on those same steps, had slumped against him and then seemingly fallen asleep. He also had been affected, mesmerized by those two

apparitions, or ghosts, and then one of them, Saint-Germain, had approached him to place a hand on his shoulder.
‘You are doing well,’ Saint-Germain said. ‘Continue to do so. I have already given you the first number. There are only seven Wonders of the World. The second number is seven.’
Then Saint-Germain had squeezed his shoulder. That’s all he remembered. He had blacked out and awakened in the cold light of dawn, leaning against the still sleeping Ingrid in the vast, circular ruins of the Artemisium, thinking, *Seven*.
Why *seven*?
When he shook Ingrid awake she became frightened again, then insisted that they leave as soon as possible, that the ruins were possibly haunted, and that she had imagined, or experienced, exactly the same as he had described to her. They drove straight back to Istanbul, but even that city now frightened her, so he booked them on the next flight to Rhodes, wondering what he would find there.
The Colossus of Rhodes, a hundred-foot bronze state of the god Helios, which in ancient times had bestrode the entrance to the harbour of Rhodes, had been destroyed in the earthquake of 277 BC. Where the Colossus had once been, three windmills now stood on the breakwater that terminated at the Agios Nikolaos Lighthouse in the cluttered modern port of Mandraki, with its caiques, yachts and tourists.
Not knowing what to expect, nor where they should go, Gerry and Ingrid had spent that first day touring the capital of the island, walking along the shore of the Aegean Sea, by the walls and towers of the Old City, past the picturesque houses of the Street of Knights, then back in a restless circle to the pseudo-Venetian and Roman buildings of the waterfront where, bearing in mind that the darkness seemed to help, they sat until the early morning. Bitterly disappointed when nothing out of the ordinary occurred, they had returned to their double bedroom in their modest hotel located above the beach.
Ingrid had managed to conquer some of her inhibitions to the degree where she would change in the bathroom while Gerry waited in the bedroom, but they still used separate beds. And early that morning, when darkness still reigned, Gerry awakened to find the room filled with an eerie light that seemed to emanate from the walls, floor and ceiling, but miraculously didn’t

even shine out through the window into the darkness. Then, in the brilliant light, which had also awakened Ingrid, who seemed fascinated rather than frightened, Saint-Germain materialized, this time alone and wearing a modern boiler suit, to smile enigmatically at both of them while saying: ‘You have come a long way. You have more courage than you know. Divide the sum of the first two numbers by two and you will have the third number. Think about it when sleeping.’
And indeed Gerry had slept, going under almost instantly, adding one to seven and dividing by two and coming up with ‘four’ in his dreams, which then turned disturbingly erotic. He saw Ingrid naked, swaying slightly, smiling at him, holding up four fingers and counting them off one by one. Then she lay down beside him, still naked, still smiling, and he kissed her four times on the belly and heard her soft groanings. The number ‘four’ haunted his dreams, in permutations of lust and loving, and he awakened, still alone in his narrow bed, as dawn lit up the beach.
They both took the boat to Athens, wondering what was coming next. They were still disbelieving of what had taken place, and they felt that a leisurely cruise to Athens would give them time to relax, which in fact it did… while it lasted.

Now, sitting in the bedlam of Constitution Square in Athens, breathing in the appalling stench of petrol and diesel oil, Gerry looked back on that cruise as something invented – something so beautiful and serene that it had to be fiction.

They had cruised through the Cyclades, around the holy island of Delos, explored Mykonos, Syross and Paros and many others, and now recalled only the beauty of the radiant azure sea, the dazzling white chapels, cubist houses and windmills, all perched on the sun-drenched, parched hills beneath the sky’s iridescence – and then the shock of reaching Athens, the sudden clamour and chaos, the roaring, honking traffic, the stench of petrol and the sight of an ugly, seemingly endless, urban sprawl.

He had instantly hired another car, let Ingrid drive him out of all that, south along the toll highway, past more ruins to Corinth, around the Peloponnesian foothills, beneath forests of pine and cypress, high above the Corinthian Gulf,

through Patras with its castle and arcaded street, then sixtyeight kilometres south to Olympus and the ruined Temple of Zeus.

This time prepared for anything, they parked the car well away from the ruins of the ancient site and waited until evening was falling and the tourists had left; then they made their way carefully through the olive trees and ageing pines to where the great Doric temple still dominated the sanctuary, though its broken columns lay scattered under the trees. There, beneath the stars, near the pediments of Zeus's temple, Gerry held Ingrid's tender hand and waited, knowing that something would happen.

And this time, for the first time, he saw it properly. Initially it was just a flash, then a brightening star, then it flared out to form an umbrella of light at the far side of the silhouetted peak of Mount Kronion. Gerry blinked, rubbed his eyes, saw stars, looked again, and then saw a glowing disc, a saucer-shaped, pulsating radiance, expanding as it flew down from the mount and over the trees in slow, stately motion. It stopped right above him, high up, like a great moon, an enormous, incorporeal, pulsating luminescence with a dark inner core. He watched it, transfixed, not comprehending what he was seeing, then it grew wider as it descended towards him and covered the ancient site.

He burned and was dazzled, closed his eyes, thought it would scorch him, opened his eyes as the radiant light surrounded him and illuminated the ground. Ingrid melted into the haze. He felt her hand, but she wasn't there. His skin had stopped burning, the radiance no longer dazzled him, and just as he realized this, the dark inner core covered him.

There was light in that darkness. It took a human form. Saint-Germain appeared in front of him – or, rather, materialized – and he heard that magisterial, icy voice speaking to him again.

'You have the courage and heart of saints. You are both on the right path. Divide the sum of the first three numbers by two and you will have the final number. That is all you will need for now. The rest will come to you later, when we feel that the time is right. Now relax. We will meet again.'

Gerry relaxed into sleep, feeling Ingrid sleeping beside him, falling down into darkness as the pulsating light ascended and the stars fell about him with the rush of the incoming night. He awoke counting up the first three numbers and

dividing by two.
‘*Six*!’ he heard his own voice exclaiming.

That event had occurred this morning. Now they were back in Athens. The traffic was causing bedlam as it crawled around the fountain, the stench of petrol and diesel oil filled his nostrils, but he still couldn’t quite accept that he was awake and not living a dream.

He was haunted by miracles.
Finishing his *ouzo*, he immediately ordered another, had a sip and tried smiling at Ingrid, hoping to hide his deepening confusion; but when she nervously returned his smile, letting her breath out in a sigh, he slapped the table with the palm of his hand in an affirmative manner.
‘Okay,’ he said. ‘So it really happened. Now let’s try to accept that fact.’
‘It happened,’ Ingrid solemnly agreed. ‘We both had the same experience. You thought I was sleeping, I thought *you* were sleeping, yet both of us had the same experience. So let’s try working out what it means.’
From where he sat, Gerry could see the Acropolis, planted on its high, distant hill, its many columns seeming to scrape the fleecy clouds drifting over it. That sky only made him nervous, recalling that eerie, pulsating light ascending vertically, so he had another soothing sip of his *ouzo* and returned his gaze to Ingrid.
‘Saint-Germain gave us the first number,’ he said, ‘when he materialized in the King’s Chamber of the Great Pyramid. That number was *one*. And the other numbers, in the order they were given, were *seven*, *four* and *six*, which makes a magical number.’
‘A magical number?’ she dubiously asked him.
‘Yes,’ he said. ‘1746 is a so-called *magical* number. Add up the digits and the sum is eighteen. And *eighteen* is the sum of three *sixes*, as in 666 – which is, of course, the legendary Number of the Beast.’
‘I’ve never heard of it,’ Ingrid said.
‘It’s taken from the Bible. From the book of *Revelation*. I quote: *He that hath understanding, let him count the number of the beast; for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred and sixty-six*… So, in a roundabout way, that’s what we’ve been given – 666 – the Number of the Beast – a magical number.’

‘But why would he give us that number?’ Ingrid asked. ‘And why in such a bizarre manner?’
Gerry shrugged. ‘I don’t know.’
Staring uneasily at her serious, bespectacled eyes, he wished he could let down her hair and then stretch out beside her. He wished for that a lot, but now, when he did so, he recalled his clumsy lunge at her in the hotel in Bloomsbury and suffered another acute spasm of embarrassment. He believed that Ingrid loved him, could feel it and see it, but that very belief only made him more frustrated that they still hadn’t made love. More frustrated and more foolish, even ashamed of himself, because it left him exposed to his own lack of sexual sophistication. He wasn’t a virgin, no, but now he felt like one, incapable as he was of finding a way to conquer their mutual fear.
Also, growing more desperate to find sexual fulfilment with Ingrid, he found himself thinking increasingly of other women, *any* woman, as compensation for the aching need he now lived with. Ironically, then, he realized, it was the very strength of his love for Ingrid that was looming as the greatest threat to their relationship.
He no longer trusted himself.
‘Well,’ Ingrid said, clearly not reading his mind, ‘what do we do now? Go back to London?’
He shrugged again. ‘Yeah, I suppose so. Obviously, there’s no reason for staying here. All we can do is return to London and hope that something new turns up. I don’t believe we’ve heard the last of Saint-Germain – he actually said we’d meet again – so we’ll just have bide our time and wait for him.’
Yet even as he spoke, he sensed that he was being observed, and so looked past Ingrid, over her shoulder, to an outside table at the far end of the café. Sitting at the table, wearing a perfectly normal off-grey pinstriped suit with a white shirt and tie, looking unusually cool in the sweltering afternoon heat of Athens, his smile seductively dangerous beneath glistening eyes, was SaintGermain’s mysterious partner.
‘Oh, shit!’ Gerry whispered automatically. Then, even as he noticed that a perplexed Ingrid was looking back over her shoulder at the man, Gerry’s attempt at resistance was rendered futile, his will reduced to nothing, and he felt himself melting into the heat of a desire that transcended his normal appetites and made that man’s sex irrelevant.

Gerry *wanted* that man, unnaturally, helplessly, and found himself rising to his feet in order to follow those mesmeric eyes and that slyly seductive smile. He couldn't help himself – and saw Ingrid standing with him – and then he followed the man, who had also stood up, as he walked away from the café.
'Gerry!' Ingrid whispered. 'What – ?'
'It's okay, Ingrid. Let's follow him.'
His own voice sounded distorted, reverberating in his head, but he held Ingrid's hand, feeling electric, phosphorescent, ashamed because his only desire was to pursue the man walking on ahead, through the noisy, polluted streets.
He wanted that man. He wanted to take him, or be taken *by* him, to lose himself in the intoxicating radiance of that man's inner light. It was love and desire, a primal, pagan lust, and even as Gerry burned in his secret shame, he could not fight his feelings.
He noticed Ingrid staring at him, perplexed, but could not meet her gaze. This betrayal was too much.
The man kept walking casually, gracefully, occasionally glancing back over his shoulder and smiling ambiguously. Gerry didn't return that smile, but merely stopped when the man stopped, then started walking again when the man did so, being helplessly tied to his quarry. He was led along Stadiou Street, through the main shopping centre, then into the squalor of Omonia Square, where the fountain in the pool dominated the chaotic intersection, and the touts and peddlers gave the area its dubious charms.
In a cluttered street just off the square, the stranger, after smiling seductively back over his shoulder, entered what looked like a sleazy *pension*, or brothel.
'Please, Gerry,' Ingrid said, 'don't follow him in there.'
'I have to,' he replied, feeling insane. 'Damn it, Ingrid, *I have to*!'
He had to virtually drag her into the *pension*, but once inside found nothing but an unattended, extremely grubby Reception office at the foot of steep stairs covered in motheaten, stained carpet, at the intersection of three corridors, all of which looked equally uninviting, though the fat whores leaning against the walls near some of the rooms had a slightly decadent, slovenly allure.
'*Kalimera*,' the nearest one murmured. '*Onomazome Liliane*. You speak English, Mister? I please you. And your friend, she is welcome. *Malista*?'
Gerry didn't respond, but looked at the whore and through her, wondering

where the male object of his unnatural desire had gone.
He hadn't a clue where to go until he heard the stairs creaking… on the landing above him.
'No!' Ingrid whispered desperately. 'Don't go up there!'
'*We have to*!' Gerry insisted.
Obsessed with that diabolically handsome stranger, seduced by his dangerous smile, he dragged Ingrid up the stairs of the brothel, ignoring her protests, until they came to a landing, no carpet, splintered floorboards, a short, bare-walled corridor with three lime-coloured doors on either side, one of them open.
In the open doorway, Saint-Germain's partner was smiling seductively. He beckoned with one hand, the fingers covered in glittering rings, and Gerry, feeling as if he was dreaming, stopped just in front of him, enslaved by the mesmeric light in his silvery-grey eyes, unable to help himself.
'It isn't me you want,' the man said, his voice low and extraordinarily melodious, its accent untraceable. 'What you want is inside.'
Turning sideways, he nodded, indicating that Gerry should enter the room, and Gerry, releasing Ingrid's hand, stepped in without thinking.
The door slammed shut behind him.

Chapter Sixteen

It was a small, perfectly square, cell-like room with no windows, its only furniture being a single bed along the back wall, a hand basin with a surprisingly clean towel hanging beside it, a cracked mirror on the wall just above it.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, her long legs crossed, her voluptuous body covered in a short, see-through black negligé, was a raven-haired, green-eyed woman in her early thirties. When the door slammed shut, she looked up and smiled, then rose to her feet.

Standing upright, she was utterly breathtaking, all hollows and curves, her pubic hair showing darkly through the negligé, which also flowed sensually over firm breasts and clung to her flat belly.

Gerry took a deep breath.
‘How sweet you are,’ the woman said in perfect English, her voice thrillingly sensual. ‘I truly never expected this.’
She came towards him with a languid rolling of her hips, stopped just in front of him and smiled again, her full lips emphasized with moisturizer, her cat’s eyes hypnotizing. Gerry held his breath, drank her in, all too aware of her breathing, hearing it as if hearing music, watching her ample breasts rise and fall. She reached out to place a hand on the back of his neck and draw him close to her.
‘Feel me,’ she whispered. ‘Press against me. Do what you want with me. I am here for your pleasure.’
Though he knew this was a set-up, he couldn’t resist it, his will crumbling in the heat coming from her, his senses slipping away. He thought of Ingrid in the hallway, at the other side of that closed door, recalled the man who had led him here, felt a brief spasm of concern for Ingrid’s welfare and then heard himself groaning. The woman was rolling herself against him, sliding her belly across his groin, and her large breasts, incredibly soft and warm, were exciting him further.
He pressed his hands to her spine, felt her tongue down his throat, was drawn out of himself by her heat and softness, as she writhed against him and tugged urgently at his clothing. Her fingers found his bare back, slid up and down his spine, and he groaned again and move his hands up her negligé, gradually drowning in her. He felt her buttocks, pressed her back against the wall, touched her breasts and pubic hair and sweating thighs as she sucked on his lips.
‘Yes!’ she whispered huskily, ‘that’s it. Do it to me! *Yes*!’
She thrust up with her groin, falling backwards to the bed. Her hands were clasped behind his neck, her lips on his, as her weight pulled him down. He fell on top of her on the bed, sinking into her yielding flesh, excited by breasts and belly and spreading legs, feeling her hands on his spine, along his ribcage and hips, even as concern and guilt whipped him at the mere thought of Ingrid.
She was standing in the hallway, at the other side of that closed door, in the company of that mysterious, possibly dangerous stranger, and this whole episode was some kind of set-up, its motive still hidden. God, he wanted this whore – yes, he did; *God, he did*! – but concern and guilt, based on his love

for Ingrid, brought him back to his senses.
He groaned and rolled off the panting woman and lay flat on his back, lying there for some time, breathing harshly, before sitting up. His loins were still inflamed and he felt dizzy, but he resisted the woman. When her left hand slid invitingly between his thighs, he pushed it away.
'No,' he said. '*Damn you, no*!'
He jumped back to his feet, feeling choked and unreal, then looked down at the woman. She was sitting upright, brushing the hair from her green eyes, smiling at him with what seemed like mockery and admiration combined.
'You don't want me?'
'Just who the hell are you? And why was I brought here?'
'You were brought here to receive satisfaction.'
'I'll have that if you answer me.'
The woman smiled again, this time without mockery, then she nodded decisively.
'You resisted me,' she said. 'That is really very good. I can be hard to resist. How did you manage it?'
'I just thought of someone else. The girl waiting in the hallway, at the other side of that closed door. Now who the hell are you? Just a whore? I don't think so. You and him – that bastard outside – you both work for Saint-Germain, don't you?'
'Yes,' she replied. 'We're *associated* with SaintGermain… and you're trying to find him. Why?'
'He obviously knows that.'
'Ah, yes,' she said, smiling, 'the Tuaoi Stone. You all want the Tuaoi Stone. Why do *you* want it?'
'Because I simply have to prove that it exists – and because I don't want a man named Wilhelm Zweig to get his hands on it. He's after it – and if he manages to get it, he'll rule the world with it.'
'You're trying to save the world?' the woman asked rhetorically, her mocking smile returning. 'Such nobility is truly very rare. Or is it all for the love of a girl?'
Gerry felt himself burning with resentment *and* embarrassment. He leaned back against the wall, once more feeling dizzy, mesmerized by the woman's green gaze, sinking into a reverie… He saw himself on the Nile cruiser, on the deck, in the moonlight, Saint-Germain waving languidly at the eerie,

pulsating light ascending to the night sky… Then Ingrid was there. She was holding his hand and smiling. Her smile vanished when she sat at the table in the boat's bar, beside Gerry, but facing Saint-Germain, who was framed by the window. Gerry saw the dark desert, the riverbank gliding past, then the scene changed to the gardens of the hotel, with the Great Pyramid and Sphinx in the background. He watched himself bidding Ingrid a painful farewell, then saw Zweig and Elena chortling with mockery as he boarded the airport bus that would take him away. When he saw that, his hatred broke his reverie and returned him to the small room, the present, blinking and rubbing his eyes.

'No,' the woman said, 'you're not *completely* selfless… but your heart's in the right place.'

'It doesn't matter what my motives are,' Gerry said firmly to her. 'What matters is that Zweig is after the Tuaoi Stone – and Saint-Germain should know that.'

'Oh, he knows it. Saint-Germain knows *every*thing.'

'Then let him be warned.'

'He doesn't need warning. Wilhelm Zweig will never get to use the Tuaoi Stone, though *you* possibly might. Saint-Germain can find you any time he desires, but until you locate Saint-Germain, you will not see the Tuaoi Stone.'

'He *wants* me to find it?'

'He wants you to *try*. You have been chosen, and so far have been successful, but the testing isn't over yet.'

'The testing?'

'We believe you are a good man, a pure man, though you don't know that yet… and neither do we. We believe it, but we need the proof of it. And we know that only the good, the pure at heart, can find the Tuaoi Stone.'

'I don't understand this. Who are you? What are you doing here? Why was I brought here?'

'You were brought here to be seduced. If you had let me seduce you, you'd have been deemed to have failed this part of the testing. Because you didn't fail – because your love for that girl overrode your lust for me – I'm now permitted to tell you what I know, which is not all that much. I know only enough to give you what you need… to take you on to the next stage.'

'And what's the next stage?'

'I can't say. I can only answer your questions.'

‘This is crazy. I just don’t believe it.’
‘But of course you do, Gerry. That’s why you’re here. It’s your intrinsic believe that has brought you this far. You have the unwavering faith of a saint.’
Suddenly fearful for Ingrid, not trusting this woman’s smile, he turned away and tried to jerk the door open, but found it was locked. Now even more fearful, he turned around and asked, ‘Why am I locked in?’
‘The door will open when I’ve answered your questions. Now what do you wish to know?’
‘Firstly, is Ingrid still out there in the hallway?’
‘She is perfectly safe. She is destined to make this journey with you, so no harm will befall her.’
The woman’s softening tone managed to soothe him a little, but he still found it difficult to think of what he might ask her.
He leaned against the wall again, taking comfort from the feel of it, but when he closed his eyes, even briefly, he drifted away from himself. The woman’s presence permeated him, set fire to his imagination: he had a vivid recollection of Saint-Germain and his friend dressed in white Grecian robes and headdresses in the Temple of Artemis; then of that same Saint-Germain in the eighteenth century, his fingers covered in extraordinary diamonds, his powdered hair pinned behind his head. One vision slid through the other, in defiance of space and time, and when he came to the Saint-Germain in modern clothing, he opened his eyes again, finally managing to get out the question that brought him back to the present.
‘Saint-Germain has given me a magical number, 1746, the so-called Number of the Beast. Why has he done this?’
‘I cannot answer. I have not been informed.’
‘Is it true that the Tuaoi Stone, or the Lodestone, was once the tip of the Great Pyramid at Giza?’
‘Yes.’
‘Why was it removed?’
‘You will find out in due course.’
Gerry sighed, frustrated, feeling that he was being toyed with, wanting to make his escape. ‘What’s the Tuaoi Stone made from?’ he asked.
‘Why does that matter? Simply think of the Great Pyramid as an instrument of astrology and base all of your assumptions on that premise.’

‘The Great Pyramid was a tomb, not an instrument of astrology.’
‘It was both. Now it is only the latter.’
‘It *is*?’
‘It was constructed as a vehicle for transcending the material state, for travel in space and through time, into other dimensions. It retains that ability.’
Feeling a shiver go down his spine, recalling not only his own experience in the King’s Chamber of the Great Pyramid, but also what Saint-Germain had written on the document in the library in Troyes, Gerry found it difficult to think clearly, but managed to speak at last.
‘Constructed by the Pharaohs?’ he asked.
‘The *final* Great Pyramid, the one you know, was constructed by them.’
‘You mean there were others?’
‘You have to search through prehistory.’
‘Beyond our present knowledge of mankind?’
‘That is so.’
He had a vision, then, of that great civilization that extended across the islands of the Aegean Sea, linking Greece to ancient Babylon and the Pillars of Hercules. He saw a different landmass, gleaming pyramidal cities, a flame that joined Earth to the Cosmos, rendering space and time obsolete. The high priests of that civilization, dressed in white robes and headdresses, were magical adepts of vast learning and extraordinary powers. Saint-Germain, who also transcended time and space, had been one of those holy men.
Shaken, Gerry stared down at the oddly exotic woman. She was still sitting on the edge of the bed, her white skin showing through the black negligé, her long legs crossed, hands folded in her lap, her smile one of amusement. She had the eyes of a big cat, bright green bordering on yellow, and they kept him enslaved.
‘Does this relate to Atlantis?’ he asked her, trying hard to be logical.
‘Yes,’ she replied.
‘Where and when was Atlantis?’
‘You have crossed the length and breadth of Atlantis in your journey to me – ’
‘The Aegean Sea.’
‘ – and you also know when it was destroyed – in 1,500 BC.’
‘A natural disaster?’
‘Yes. A volcanic explosion.’

‘And does the Tuaoi Stone – the missing tip of the Great Pyramid – relate to that vanished Atlantis?’
‘I know only a little about this. Those who have studied the occult traditions of Atlantis speak of the use that the high priests of the former world made of the tip of the Great Pyramid as a medium for attracting and transmitting solar energy.’
‘Which suggests that the Tuaoi Stone was a diamond… or some other kind of *crystal*.’
‘If you think it, it will be.’
‘Yet the Great Pyramid is in Egypt – not in the area of the vanished Atlantis.’
‘Everything under the sun has its purpose – and explanations – but I only know this much… Now you must go.’
‘To where?’
‘Back to where you have come from.’
‘London?’
‘Your signposts are the world’s Seven Wonders, and there are three more to visit. To learn more, you must return to where you have come from. You must visit the Tomb of Mausoleus and brave what you find there. That is all I can tell you.’
‘You know nothing else?’
‘Nothing else. Now the door is unlocked. Goodbye… and good luck.’
The farewell was a command, spoken quietly and firmly, yet he found himself unwilling to go, having much more to ask.
He closed his eyes again, concentrating on what to ask, but went blank and then saw a great pyramid towering over the much smaller pyramids scattered over the vast plain around it. The great pyramid was made of stone blocks, but its tip was shining crystal, and the lightning of the elements, phosphorescent and jagged, soared from the tip to the heavens, to form, between the stars and the parched plain, a pulsating white haze.
He looked and was dazzled, blinked and then looked again, saw the same great pyramid, but in another time, its crystal tip missing and the sky dark above it, the pyramidal city around it being covered in dust.
That dust presaged the fire and rain of the holocaust that would sweep all before it, leaving nothing but the silence of desolation.
Gerry opened his eyes again, feeling dizzy and unreal. He tried to stare the woman down, looking deep into her green eyes, but even as he did so he

started losing his senses, felt desire for her creeping back over him to render him helpless.
He thought of Ingrid in the hallway, of the mysterious, seductive man with her, and jerked himself out of his sensual reverie to grab the door handle. The door opened and he stepped into the hallway, then looked frantically up and down.
There was no one in sight.
In a panic, he turned back to the room, but before he could speak, the woman waved her right hand in a gesture of reassurance.
‘Don’t panic. Your girlfriend is waiting for you downstairs, by the Reception. No harm has befallen her.’
Not reassured, Gerry hurried down the stairs to the Reception area, but Ingrid was nowhere to be seen. Frightened, he rushed into the street outside, looked up and down it, but saw neither Ingrid nor Saint-Germain’s partner. Now truly fearful, cursing under his breath, he hurried back into the brothel, up the stairs, to the room that he had been in with the woman.
The room door was open.
The woman had disappeared.
Almost sobbing at his own stupidity, he rushed to and fro, from one room to another, one floor to another, finding nothing but fat whores and their sad, bedraggled clients, none of whom knew anything about a European girl or the well-dressed man with her, none of whom even recalled seeing them. Choked up, in a fever of despair, Gerry rushed past the empty Reception office and out into the street, where he continued his panic-stricken, fruitless search, finding neither the seductive stranger nor his beloved Ingrid.
They had vanished completely.

Chapter Seventeen

Ingrid couldn’t help herself. In despair over Gerry’s behaviour, shocked at how he had left her in the hallway of that brothel with the mysterious, oddly seductive stranger, distressed by her own behaviour after being escorted by the stranger back to her hotel (an unsettling experience in itself), she hurried out of her room, went down to the lobby, entered the hotel’s shop, mostly a woman’s boutique, and meandered restlessly around it, suddenly possessed by the urge to steal something.

She knew she shouldn't do it, but she couldn't help herself. The miseries of her past, mostly caused by her father, were as nothing compared to the pain she had felt when Gerry entered the room in the brothel and, worse, started groaning passionately with that whore soon after the door closed behind him. Standing just outside the door, hearing Gerry's sensual groaning inside the room, and held in the mesmeric gaze of the man who had led them there, she could not doubt for a second what was happening and had burst into tears.

Her heart had been broken at that instant and would never recover. So…
She glanced around the shop, wondering what she could steal, horrified that she was contemplating this again, but unable to stop herself. She was suffering the pain of her grief and had to release it.
Blushing, shaking, aware of her racing heart, she waited until the Greek salesgirl wasn't looking, then slipped a silk scarf off its hanger and hastily shoved it into the side pocket of her jacket. She held her breath as she did it, closed her eyes and waited, at once hoping to be caught and dreading it, feeling shame and excitement at once. When she heard no sound, no cry of protest or accusation, she opened her eyes again.
Gerry was watching her.
Shocked, she just stood there, burning up, shaking terribly, as he hurried between the clothes racks toward her, his lips pursed in a grim line. When he reached her, he leaned close to her, almost nose to nose, and spat his words out.
'Put it back!' he snapped.
'No!'
'*Put it back*!'

'No, I won't!'
'Damn it, Ingrid, do as I say or I'll *call* the salesgirl!' 'Alright, call her, then!' Instead of calling the salesgirl, he grabbed hold of her

right wrist, jerked her hand from her pocket, then took hold of the stolen scarf, pulled it out and hung it back on its hook.

'Come with me,' he hissed. '*Now*!'

Still holding her by the wrist, he practically dragged her out of the shop and turned to face her in the hotel's empty lobby, again leaning very close to her and glaring furiously at her.

'Just what the *hell* do you think you're doing?' he demanded.
'Nothing! It's none of your business!'
'None of my *business*? I catch you stealing like you used to do before and it's none of my business? What the hell does *that* mean?'
She tried to jerk her wrist away, but he refused to let go. 'It means whatever you want it to mean. Now let me go, Gerry.' She tried again to break free, but he still refused to let her go, so instead, unable to look him in the eye, she burst into tears.
Instantly, he tugged her into his embrace and stroked the hair on the back of her head. 'Hey, hey,' he whispered, 'what's up? What started all this?'
'You know, Gerry. *You know*!'
She pulled away from him, but he didn't let her go too far, still holding onto her right wrist and letting her step back only as far as his arm would stretch.
'If you mean…'
'Yes, I do! How *could* you? Oh, God! Just leaving me with that man in that brothel while you…' But she couldn't say any more. She couldn't bear to *think* about it. Just recalling the sound of his sensual groaning was enough to… 'I've never felt so humiliated in my life. How could you? *How could you*?'
This time she managed to wrench her wrist free and instantly hurried off across the lobby, heading for the bar. Hurrying after her, he grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her around to face him once more, looking more hurt than angry.
'Hey, hold on,' he said. 'I just turned down a very nice piece of ass for your sake.'
'Oh, charming! Such language!'
'I did! Swear to God!'
He released her in order to cross his heart, so she started walking away again, wiping the tears from her eyes and feeling increasingly foolish.
'Come back, Ingrid!'
'No! I can't stand you! You're just lying to me. I heard your awful groaning from that room. I even heard the bed creaking, doubtless as you and her fell

across it. Oh, God, how *disgusting*!'
'Well, I don't get too much from you, sweetheart – so, you know, what the hell!'
She burst into tears again, saw the bar, hurried into it, took a seat in a dimly-lit far corner and pulled out her handkerchief. His last remark had hurt her more deeply than she could bear, and was compounded by the guilt it resurrected by reminding her that she and Gerry had still not consummated their love.
It was a sorry state of affairs, perhaps even unnatural, and his remark, while wounding her to the quick, also filled her with shame. She was depriving him, as well as herself, and she couldn't ignore that fact.
Sniffing back her tears, she glanced across the bar and saw Gerry standing in the doorway, glaring angrily at her. She wanted him to leave, was frightened that he might do so; was shocked by what she had heard in that brothel, but more shocked by herself – not only because she'd been about to steal again, but because of what she knew had led up to it.
Dabbing at her eyes with the already soggy handkerchief, she saw Gerry's anger changing to despair as he walked over to her, stopped right in front of her, and looked steadily down at her.
'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I shouldn't have said that. You just made me angry, so I hit back, but what I said wasn't true. I swear to you, Ingrid, I did nothing with that woman. Now are you willing to listen?'
She sniffed, glanced around her, and saw a couple of other customers watching her over their drinks.
'Alright,' she said wearily.
Gerry sighed with relief. 'Good. Now let me get you a drink and explain the whole thing. What will it be?'
'A brandy.'
'It's too early for that.'
'Damn it, get me a brandy! *A double*!'
'Okay, Ingrid! Okay!'
He retreated to the bar, where she saw him having words with the barman, obviously trying to master the language and using his hands a lot. She tried to calm her seething emotions. She felt foolish and ashamed, frightened of what she had attempted, and then the love that she felt for Gerry welled up again and threatened to swamp her. When he returned to the table, a glass in each

hand, she thought of what had taken place in her room and felt even more ashamed.
Gerry placed a double brandy in her hand, then sat facing her across the table, raising his glass of beer in a mock toast.
‘Cheers,’ he said.
She smiled again, then had a sip of the brandy and felt it rush instantly to her head. Gerry leaned across the table to take hold of her free hand, squeezing it tenderly.
‘I swear to you,’ he said, ‘I did nothing with that woman. I only followed that man because I didn’t have a choice, because he sort of *hypnotized* me, and when I entered that room, I swear to God, that woman did the same
– she almost hypnotized me. I *wanted* to make love to her, yes, I did, but then the thought of you stopped me. I wasn’t myself. Believe me, I wasn’t! She tried to seduce me and she almost succeeded, but the thought of *you* jerked me back to my senses. I was saved by my love for you.’
‘That’s true?’
‘Absolutely.’
She felt like crying again, though this time with joy, but instead had another sip of brandy and squeezed his hand in return.
‘You were a long time in that room,’ she said. ‘What kept you so long?’
‘It was a test,’ he replied. ‘This whole trip has been a test. I’m still not sure why, but Saint-Germain actually *wants* us to find the Tuaoi Stone, though apparently we have to earn it first. Don’t ask me to explain that. I’m just as confused as you are. But if I’d let that woman seduce me, we wouldn’t have advanced any farther. According to that woman, Saint-Germain would have deemed me a failure and left us, me and you, without a clue. He’s not leading us on a wild-goose chase. There’s a purpose to this madness. And the only way to find out what it is, is to keep playing the game.’
‘You mean that woman told you something else?’
‘Yes,’ Gerry said, looking even more excited. ‘The Tuaoi Stone *is* the missing tip of the Great Pyramid, it’s probably composed of some kind of crystal, and the original Great Pyramid was at least an instrument of astrology, though of a unique kind. Remember the remarkable statement made by the eighteenth-century Saint-Germain in that document in the library in Troyes?’
‘Not exactly.’

‘It’s here in my notebook.’ He withdrew his notebook from his jacket pocket, opened it at the relevant page and read the statement to her. ‘*We moved through space at a speed that can be compared with nothing but itself… Within a fraction of a second the plains below us were out of sight, and the Earth had become a faint nebula. I was carried up, and I travelled through the empyrean for an incalculable time at an immeasurable height. Heavenly bodies revolved, and worlds vanished below me…*’ He closed the notebook and put it back into his pocket. ‘He wrote that in the eighteenth century? It sounds just like space travel!’

‘So?’

‘Well, that woman in the brothel told me that the Great Pyramid in its intact state – in other words, with the magical crystal, or Tuaoi Stone, as its apex – was a vehicle for, quote, *transcending the material state, for travel in space and through time, into a further dimension…* And if what we’ve both witnessed so far is anything to go by, Saint-Germain is able to do just that – him *and* his partner.’

Recalling Saint-Germain’s mysterious partner, Ingrid shivered helplessly and lowered her gaze to the table, too frightened to look up. She was frightened by the whole affair – by Saint-Germain and his partner, by her father and his brutal henchmen, by where this bizarre search might be leading them and what it could mean – but most of all, she was frightened of what it might be doing to her, particularly in view of what she had just tried in the hotel’s shop just a few minutes ago. She had thought that meeting Gerry had changed her forever, that she would never steal again or set fire to anything, but now she wasn’t so sure.

‘I don’t want to go on,’ she said, still looking down at the table.

‘We have to,’ Gerry responded fervently. ‘We can’t leave it now. *We have to get to the end of it*!’

‘I don’t want to. I’m frightened.’

‘We have to go back to Turkey,’ he said, as if not really hearing her. ‘To the ruins of the Mausoleum, the tomb of Mausolus, in modern Bodrum. It’s another of the Seven Wonders of the World and it’s next on our list.’

‘I’m frightened, Gerry. *I’m frightened*!’

Now she had to look at him, to show him her fear, then she moved her gaze to focus on the man, that diabolically handsome, mesmeric creature who, looking perfectly normal in a light-grey suit, white shirt and tie, had entered

the bar a few seconds ago and taken a seat near the door.
Gerry caught her glance, looked over her shoulder, studied the man a moment, then turned back to face her, his brow furrowed in sudden confusion.
‘Come to think of it,’ he said, ‘what happened to *you* when I entered that woman’s room? What happened while you were waiting in the hallway? Did he say anything to you? Did anything take place between you? Where did you and he *go*?’
Blushing furiously, she finished off her brandy, letting it go to her head. She believed what Gerry had told her about him and that woman… She believed, because it had happened to her and she couldn’t forget it.
‘I couldn’t bear it,’ she said, ‘when I heard you groaning with that woman. Then when I heard you both falling onto the bed, I had to get away. I didn’t speak to that man. He didn’t speak to me. He just stood there in the hallway, smiling at me, until I hurried down the stairs and out of the building. I was crying. I remember that. And I remember that the man followed me out and took hold of my arm. The instant he did that, I calmed down. I mean, I calmed down completely, as if hypnotized.’
She caught Gerry’s gaze and tried to hold it, but failed. Instead, she lowered her eyes again.
‘He waved down a taxi and brought us back here,’ she said. ‘In the taxi, he told me not to worry, that you were perfectly safe, and that everything in the scheme of things had its purpose, including what you were doing with that woman.’ She didn’t know how to go on. She felt a deep shame and bewilderment that made her heart race. Then she coughed and continued. ‘He kept talking to me, softly, hypnotically, telling me not to worry, that everything was preordained, and then, when we entered the hotel, he personally asked for the room key and led me up to our room and let us both in.’
‘And you let him do that?’
‘Yes, I let him do that.’
Gerry released her hand and started withdrawing his own hand, but she reached out, quickly, instinctively, and took hold of his fingers. Gently, insistently, in a trance, she drew his hand back to her.
‘You said it yourself, Gerry – that man almost hypnotized you. Then the woman in the brothel did the same – and almost seduced you. Well, that

happened to me. Christian Grabbe almost seduced me. Yes, he called himself Christian Grabbe, complimented me, mesmerized me, and was stretched out beside me on the bed before I knew what was happening.'
'And you wanted him!' Gerry said bitterly.
'God, yes, I wanted him – so badly, I was hurting – I wanted him to take me, to devour me, obliterate me, but all the time I knew that it was wrong and that it didn't feel natural. Still, I was overwhelmed. I thought I was losing my mind. But then I thought of you, thought *desperately* of you, and when I did, I was released from his spell, I was able to roll away from him and get my senses back. I told him to leave. When I did so, he just smiled again, not maliciously or mockingly, but in what seemed like pure amusement. Then he told me I'd surprised him, that I was someone exceptional, and then he got off the bed and left the room, promising that he would see me again in the very near future… And now he's sitting over there, smiling at both of us.'
Glancing up, she saw Gerry staring over her shoulder, obviously looking at the man now sitting near the bar's open door, then he looked directly at her, his gaze clouded with anger. Not knowing if it was directed at her or not, she felt compelled to explain herself further.
'I was hypnotized, Gerry. Just as you were hypnotized. But when I fixed my thoughts on you, as you fixed your thoughts on me, I was able to break free from that trance, exactly as you did when with that woman. Nothing happened between me and Christian Grabbe. It *nearly* did, but that's all…'
He stared steadily at her, his eyes clouded with rage, but then, when he gently squeezed her hand, she knew who he was angry with. Dropping her hand, he pushed his chair back and stood up, clearly about to cross the room and confront Christian Grabbe.
However, Christian Grabbe stood up, also, smiled mockingly and nodded at Gerry, then quickly left the bar. Following him out, Gerry looked left and right along the pavement, then across the road, but Christian Grabbe was nowhere in sight. Shaking his head in exasperation, Gerry entered the bar again and crossed to where Ingrid was sitting.
'He's gone already,' Gerry said. 'But you and me are still here. So… let's head back to Turkey.'
'I'm frightened,' Ingrid repeated, meaning it, feeling it.
'So am I,' Gerry said.

Chapter Eighteen

‘I own the whole island,’ Zweig said, waving a languid hand, as if it meant nothing to him. ‘I bought it from a famous actor whose film career was virtually over and who had built laboratories here to help the natives. However, once he had his *Geld*, I kicked him off the island and started showing his noble natives what *I* wanted them for.’

He could tell that Kuragin was impressed, as, wearing white shorts and shirt with sandals on his feet, he strolled with Zweig along the beach, exploring the island after a heavy lunch.

The island, in French Polynesia, had 750 acres of lush vegetation, with half a dozen small atolls surrounding it and a reef outside, beyond which his fleet of heavily armed schooners were anchored. The idiot film star, bored out of his mind with wealth and wanting to set the world to rights, had bought the whole island, moved onto it with his extensive family, and built the laboratories in order to help the natives survive the onslaught of civilization by trying to make use of solar energy, develop native-grown produce into food, protect the giant crabs and turtles from extinction, and even transform plankton into food. Zweig, highly disgusted by such a waste of the lush island, had emptied the laboratories and turned them into military barracks; razed all the palm trees to the ground in order to turn the land into firing-ranges; placed barbed-wire and sand-bag fortifications along the formerly immaculate, virgin beaches; and drained and then filled in a lovely natural lagoon in order to build himself a small airstrip and landing-pad for his aircraft and helicopters.

‘As you can see,’ he said, ‘I’ve put the island to good use. And the natives, formerly idle, have *also* been put to good use. I work them extremely hard and, of course, they come in handy when it comes to the training of my men. Here my men learn armed combat, plus physical and psychological torture skills, and the natives are used as victims in this training, when not actually working. Very good, *ja*?’

‘Most impressive,’ Kuragin said, the compliment dropping from his fat lips

with obvious reluctance.
Zweig sighed forlornly, trying to conceal his frustration, furious that he had been reduced to allowing sub-human Soviets on his island. He really wanted to use Kuragin as a guinea pig in a torture session; wanted to see him writhing under the electric prod, not looking so smug.
'Anyway,' Kuragin said, glancing at the band of men who, all wearing old Brown Shirt uniforms, were on a fully equipped forced march around the island's perimeter, with the sea spraying languidly over them where it broke on the rocks, 'my time is strictly limited – '
'You enjoyed the long lunch, yes?'
' – and I think,' Kuragin continued, ignoring the jibe, 'that it's time to get down to business.'
'*Every* time is time for business,' Zweig retorted. 'As you know, I believe this.'
'Quite,' Kuragin said, not smiling as Zweig led him away from the beach and up over a fairly steep slope of white sand and palm trees. He was pleased to note that Kuragin was already sweating profusely, and he wanted to get him away from the cooling breeze in order that he might sweat even more.
'So, *what* business?' he asked the Soviet baboon. 'Everything seems to be going well. I've kept my promise to route more of my products in your direction, and I trust that your request for the supply of high-tech armaments, normally forbidden to you under the Concom convention, has been going through smoothly. Afghanistan, was it? I believe so. You are doing good work there.'
'I can do without your compliments,' Kuragin said testily. 'Let us stick to the issues at hand.'
Instantly enraged, Zweig had to control his more violent impulses. He did so by picking up some stones and hurling them, one by one as he walked, at the birds chattering overhead.
'Of course,' he said, with the uncomfortable feeling that he was on his hands and knees before the Soviet pig. 'I understand.'
'The Kremlin isn't pleased,' Kuragin continued as they crossed the brow of the sand dune and he dabbed at his sweaty face with a handkerchief. 'As our part of the agreement, we have distributed considerable monies to your numerous bank accounts in various tax havens. We have also, as you requested, distributed to your many administration centres and private homes

a great many of the works of art that we found in various locations in Berlin at the end of the war. In return for this, you were to do two things for us: first, increase dramatically the flow of embargoed technology to us; and, second, get us the legendary Lodestone. The former promise you have kept; the second you have still not delivered.'

At the bottom of the slope they came to a sandy clearing in which, beneath a verdant umbrella of palm leaves, some of Zweig's stormtroopers were practising hand-to-hand combat under the supervision of a wellmuscled mercenary. All the young men looked beautiful, like gladiators, stripped to the waist and gleaming with sweat, and Zweig, taking note of their radiant fitness, yearned for what he had lost: his youthful vigour and strength.

'Impressive?'

'Yes,' Kuragin replied.

'They're devoted to me,' Zweig boasted. 'Completely… And would be killed if they weren't.'

'That's the best kind of devotion,' Kuragin said. 'Now what about the Lodestone?'

Annoyed that he hadn't managed to change the subject, Zweig led the flush-faced Russian away from the young gods of war and along a sandy path that wound around coca-palms.

'I am on its trail,' he said, 'and coming close, but you will have to be patient.'

'The Kremlin has never been long on patience and time is now running out. We wish to know what is happening regarding this. We need more specifics.'

'*Specifics*, Andropov?'

'Don't play with me, Wilhelm. You said you had a lead, but refused to state what it was. Since you have still not delivered – and have refused to discuss the matter – we wish to know exactly what you are doing and what progress is being made. After all, this could all be a hoax. The Lodestone may not exist at all.'

'I wouldn't lie to you, Andropov.'

'You would if you had to.'

Zweig sighed again. 'Alright,' he said. 'I will tell you. I didn't tell you before because my own daughter is involved, but clearly I have no choice anymore. The Lodestone exists, my friend.'

They emerged from the coca-palms into another sunlit clearing where a thatched hut, raised high on stilts, was spread out before them. At either side

of the steps leading up to the entrance were two armed guards in tropical battle dress, both of whom, seeing Zweig, snapped smartly to attention, bring their Swiss 5.56mm assault rifles to their shoulders and saluting, before returning to their at-theready positions.
A scream of agony emanated from the thatched hut, then tapered off to a sobbing whimper, interrupted by a harshly barked command and another brief scream.
'My school for torture,' Zweig explained. 'We use the natives as victims, of course. This is not only useful to my men, but also keeps the natives in a state of fear and obedience. Thus the school serves a double purpose and is most economical.'
'I can't hear myself talking for that screaming,' Kuragin said. 'Can we go somewhere else?'
'Of course,' Zweig said. 'This way.'
He started forward, past the thatched hut, but then, when the roaring of guns split the silence ahead, he recalled that the firing range was there and so instead took the path heading west. While they were walking through the shade, under drooping papaya trees, he reluctantly told Kuragin about Ingrid and the American, then about his own magical encounters with the mysterious Saint-Germain. Kuragin looked increasingly incredulous and finally stopped walking.
'This is true?'
'Absolutely. My men have been following my daughter and the American, and wherever those two go, they are followed by Saint-Germain or his men… And when Saint-Germain appears, strange things happen… miraculous things, beyond our logic or science. SaintGermain has the magical powers of one who has found the Philosopher's Stone.'
'Pardon?'
'The Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone.'
'And he knows that your daughter and her American are following him?'
'Yes, he seems to.'
'Then why doesn't he use his miraculous powers to prevent them from doing so?'
'The only explanation is that he *wants* them to find him eventually, but only when he's ready.'
'Why?'

‘Perhaps because they’ve been chosen.’
‘To join him as adepts?’
‘Yes. It’s possible.’
Kuragin started walking again, forcing Zweig to rush to catch up with him, his smile hiding resentment. Again, there was the sound of gunshots from the firing range, but this time more distant.
‘So what have your daughter and her American found out about the Lodestone so far?’
‘I don’t know,’ Zweig confessed. ‘My men haven’t approached them yet. We keep hoping they will lead us either to Saint-Germain or to the Lodestone itself, but that hasn’t quite happened yet.’
‘*Quite*?’
Zweig shrugged. ‘I’ve already described some of the events witnessed by my men when Saint-Germain materialized to my daughter and the American – miraculous events. However, at no stage could they get to Saint-Germain before he vanished again – and, indeed, it’s doubtful that they could have done anything if they *had* caught up with him.’
‘Then what is the point of this pursuit?’
‘Because I’m convinced that sooner or later SaintGermain will lead my daughter and the American to his lair
– to where the Lodestone is hidden. And then, and only then, can we act – not necessarily by confronting SaintGermain, but by stealing the Lodestone when his back is turned, or when he’s left his lair, and then, hopefully, using its remarkable powers to defeat him.’
They emerged from the trees to the expansive open space that had once been a lovely lagoon and now was a tarmacked airstrip, crossing the whole breadth of the island, with Quonset huts and hangars along one side of it, the sea on the other. Zweig’s half-dozen light-and-transport aeroplanes and four helicopters were lined up along the strip. A Hawker Siddeley HS 125 passenger plane had just roared into life, preparing to take Kuragin to Honolulu, on the first leg of his lengthy journey back to Eastern Europe.
Kuragin stopped walking, studied the aeroplane, looked down at his own feet, furrowed his brow as if in deep thought and then raised his eyes again.
‘It’s clear from what you tell me,’ he said, ‘that this Saint-Germain knows that your men are *also* following your daughter and her American boyfriend.’
‘Yes,’ Zweig admitted, ‘that is so.’

‘Good,’ Kuragin said. ‘So let us speed things up a little. You are to inform your men to stop simply *following* your daughter and the American and, instead, try to capture them. Should they succeed, they are to interrogate both of them to the limit – I repeat: to the limit – in order to ascertain just *how much* they’ve discovered about SaintGermain and the Lodestone. When they’ve done that, they are to terminate both captives.’
‘*Terminate* them?’
‘Naturally. Why not?’
‘I should remind you,’ Zweig said, ‘that one of the captives to be terminated is my own daughter.’
Kuragin chuckled at that. ‘How sentimental you are, Wilhelm. However, my KGB file on you indicates with no uncertainty that filicide would not be alien to you. It also indicates that you have never treated your daughter with any kind of genuine affection. So let’s not play silly games, my friend.’
Refusing to acknowledge this below-the-belt jibe, Zweig merely forced a smile, nodded affirmatively, and then said, ‘Let’s assume I were to do as you ask: what point would it serve? If we terminate Ingrid and her American, we might lose Saint-Germain.’
Kuragin thought about that, his bullish brow furrowed again, then turned away rudely and started walking towards the roaring aeroplane.
‘A good point,’ he acknowledged with ill-concealed annoyance, ‘so let’s proceed in a different manner. Should you be able to capture your daughter and the American – ’
‘We will.’
‘ – you will, as formerly suggested, interrogate them to the limit, to ascertain exactly what they know. You will then pass your daughter on to me personally, tell the American that he is to continue his search for the Lodestone alone, and inform him that if he refuses to do so, I will personally execute the woman he appears to love so much. In this way, we will find out precisely what is going on, and also have more control over the situation, rather than risk losing both of them, as we do at the moment.’
They had reached the steps leading up into the roaring aircraft, and Kuragin, turning around to face Zweig, had to shout at him.
‘So! It’s agreed?’
Zweig had no choice and he knew it, since if he failed to agree, the Soviets would spill the beans about his dwindling assets and then leave him to the

mercy of the financial and legal eagles of the European and American governments. No, he would have to do as he was told… at least for the time being.

‘Yes,’ he said, forcing another waxy smile. ‘Of course. It’s agreed.’

The Russian smiled smugly back and reached out his hand; Zweig shook it, wanting to crush every bone in it, then watched the fat bastard mount the steps and enter the aeroplane. He waved once and disappeared, and then Zweig walked away, heading for one of the Quonset huts at the edge of the airstrip. When he reached it, he went inside, took a seat in the small, surprisingly comfortable lounge, snapped his fingers at the Polynesian steward and demanded champagne. The steward jumped to attention, promptly brought the champagne, and Zweig sat there by the window, watched the aeroplane take off, wished he had planted a bomb in it, and then drank his champagne.

When the plane disappeared beyond the horizon, taking the despised Kuragin to Honolulu, Zweig polished off his glass of champagne, then left the Quonset hut and went back to the main house, where Elena, stretched out on a hammock on the porch, fanning herself and enjoying a cocktail, was complaining to the sweating, nervous Hans about the tropical heat.

‘Stop your whining,’ Zweig said irritably to Elena. ‘And you, Hans, come inside.’

As Elena slid her sunglasses down her nose and looked at him with an uncommon hint of anger, he led Hans into the cool interior of his palm-thatch house, conveyed Kuragin’s demands to him, and finished by telling him that this time his men must not fail.

‘If they do,’ he said, ‘they might as well kill themselves, because I’ll just hunt them down; and then, when I’ve disposed of their sorry lives, I’ll personally take over this whole affair and ensure that it’s handled correctly. Is that understood?’

‘Yes, Herr Zweig, it is.’

He stared at Hans for some time, wondering what the handsome young man was thinking, and then, remembering what he had made him do not so long ago, executing the two failed hoodlums, he had to suppress a shudder, shocked that the ravages of old age could make him so desperate.

Yet Hans’ face was unreadable, making Zweig uneasy, and he decided to show the young man that the intimate act that had taken place between them

was not a sign that he, Hans, could take liberties.
‘Good,’ he said curtly. ‘So get to it immediately. And when you leave, tell that whore to come inside and attend to my needs.’
When Hans nodded and left, Zweig took off his clothes, stretched out on the bed, spreadeagled himself, and waited for Elena to come in. When she did so, sweating nicely, her body lush in the barely-there bikini, he told her to go to the wardrobe and put on some proper clothes. Elena did as she was told, but with a kind of dumb insolence. She withdrew her favourite ‘play’ clothes, stripped in front of him and put them on, then picked up a set of leather thongs and a short-handled whip. Then, wearing the jackboots, SS jacket and black stockings, she crossed the room and proceeded to tie Zweig up while he licked his parched lips.
‘It’s terrible to grow old,’ he murmured. ‘Hurt me gently, Elena.’
‘You can depend on it,’ she said, spitting her chewing gum into the palm of her free hand, then pressing it down on his forehead. ‘It’s all in a day’s work.’
Zweig closed his tired eyes.

Chapter Nineteen

Driving the sixty miles from al-Hillah to Baghdad, along dusty flatlands parallel to the Euphrates river, Gerry felt like a different person to what he had been. He was haunted by miracles, by the deep well of the unknown, and he couldn’t shake off the startling recollections of what he and Ingrid had been through since leaving Athens three weeks ago.

That three weeks seemed like three years, or like a timeless, bewitching dream, and he knew Ingrid felt the same way. He wasn’t sure just how, but he knew it to be true. He and Ingrid had changed, were no longer quite human, had been touched with the reality of magic and now believed all was possible.

Because of what they had witnessed, they could never go back to being what they had been.
Even now, Gerry could see in his mind the unveiling of miracles. In Bodrum, in Turkey, above the ruins of ancient Halicarnassus, they had seen the great

Mausoleum materializing out of the night, its thirty-six columns supporting a twenty-four-step pyramid surmounted by a four-horse marble chariot, the whole towering edifice with its numerous statues of kings and queens shimmering in the pulsating light cast down from the night sky.
That light, beaming down, flattened out as it descended, soon covered the whole tomb, obliterated it and shrank back into a dark core in a shell of luminous energy, out of which, with the ambiguous smile of a Sphinx, stepped a different Saint-Germain.
Different, but only slightly, dressed in Anatolian robes, his face more lined than it had been before, more Asian in features. He had emerged from the light, advancing magically, as if on air, and had handed to Gerry a crumbling parchment upon which, drawn in what appeared to be fading paint, was an illustration of the Ishtar Gate of ancient Babylon.
Having done that, he returned to the light, which then flared up and disappeared, as if sucked back in upon itself, leaving everything normal once more.
Gerry remembered it vividly. He *didn't* remember it: he still lived it. As he still lived what had happened in Babylon…

Gerry and Ingrid had returned to London, overwhelmed by their experience in the ruins of Halicarnassus, had holed up in another hotel while applying for visas to Baghdad, had managed to obtain the visas after much reluctance on the part of the Iraqi embassy, and had then ventured forth again, to visit ancient Babylon in all-Hillah, approximately sixty miles south of Baghdad… this time to an adventure which even for them had no parallel.

Gerry tried not to think of that particular adventure as he drove back to Baghdad. It was too much to contemplate. Instead, he glanced sideways at Ingrid, who was clearly exhausted, and asked, 'Are you sleeping?'

'Yes,' she replied. 'Please don't waken me.'
'Ah!' he said. 'Right!'
'I want to sleep, but I'm frightened of dreaming, which

makes sleep impossible.'
'I know what you mean,' he said.

And indeed he did, since sleep eluded him also, the

very closing of his eyes being an invitation to recollections almost beyond the comprehensible.

They had arrived in Baghdad yesterday and drove straight to al-Hillah, a modern town built from the bricks taken over the centuries from the ruins of Nebuchadrezzar's Babylon. Driving up to the replica of the Ishtar Gate at the entrance to the site, with its baked clay bas-reliefs of sacred animals, arched doorway and twin towers, Gerry had experienced a feeling of eerie desolation and the hauntings of almost total silence. They had arrived in the blistering heat of the afternoon. Because of the ongoing war between Iraq and Iran there were no tourists, and so they spent a leisurely few hours exploring the extensive ancient ruins by the Euphrates river, including the remains of Nebuchadrezzar's palace where Alexander the Great had died; the Emakh temple; the banquet hall where Belshazzar saw the handwriting on the wall; the site of the Tower of Babel; and, finally, the foundations of the Hanging Gardens, deemed in Hellenistic times to be one of the Seven Wonders of the World. There they had to wait for the sunset and their next magical experience.

When the sun set, they *had* their experience and would never forget it.
'Are you sure we're on the right track?' he asked Ingrid, feeling anxious.

'Yes,' she replied patiently, or, perhaps, wearily, looking down at the map of Baghdad spread out on her knees. 'It's a street in a bazaar near the Mosque of Kadhimain, a few miles north of the city, on the west bank of the Tigris. Don't worry, we'll find it.'

'I just wonder if that blind seer is still alive.'

'He's alive,' Ingrid said. 'Saint-Germain wouldn't tell us to go there if he'd died. He just doesn't work that way.'
When she said that, Gerry realized just how completely he had come to accept the fact of Saint-Germain's magical existence, which may, as he also realized, have been SaintGermain's purpose in exposing him and Ingrid so gradually to his incredible world.

What should have been impossible to comprehend, let alone accept as fact, now seemed like the only true reality in what had once been, at least to Gerry, a material world. Now, he was adjusting to it – or was at least accepting the reality of that other world – and he sensed that part of the purpose of this great search was to aid that adjustment.

Eventually, they arrived at the Mosque of Kadhimain, a few miles north of Baghdad, and parked the car near the bazaar marked clearly on Ingrid's map. As they made their way through the labyrinthine lanes and alleys, past stalls and shops filled with copper and silver and cloth, brushing shoulders with local Arabs, Afghans, Armenians, Kurds, Lurs and Sabaeans, hearing the sharp shatter of Arabic in Kurdish, Turkish and Syriac dialects, Gerry realized how he, who had never left America before, had finally begun to accept as perfectly normal the diverse strangeness of foreign peoples.

Indeed, as he searched with Ingrid for the address scribbled on the map given to him in a miraculous manner, the very strangeness of the environment, instead of overwhelming him, made him think back on all the places he had been since the beginning of this journey: Athens, Olympia, Crete and the Cyclades; then Izmir and Bodrum in Turkey, now here in Baghdad, the foremost city of ancient Mesopotamia, in an Islamic country at war. All of those places, and his experiences with Saint-Germain, had changed him completely, perhaps irrevocably.

'Here it is, I think,' Ingrid said.

They were at a shop selling copper pots and pans, at the very far end of the bazaar, where the narrow lane broadened into waste ground, over which was strewn a lot of rubbish. In the distance, beyond the rooftops of the bazaar, they could see the golden domes and minarets of the magnificent Mosque of Kadhimain, over which a few clouds were lazily drifting. But here, at the far end of the bazaar, there was an air of poverty and desolation.

An old woman wearing a black shoulder-to-toe *abaya*, with a *hijab* head covering, was sitting on a wooden chair in the entrance to the shop, wiping sweat from her badly wrinkled, brown-skinned face with visibly trembling fingers while watching a bright-eyed Arab boy, wearing the traditional loose trousers, shirt and sandals, as he rearranged the pots in the open window.

Ingrid spoke to the old woman in faltering Arabic, and the boy, hearing her speak, looked up and offered a radiant smile.

'English?'

‘English-speaking,’ Ingrid replied.
‘I speak English,’ the boy said.
‘We’ve come to see the blind man,’ Ingrid said. ‘Hasan al-Takriti.’
‘You wish to buy something?’
‘No. We wish to speak with him.’
‘Okay. Follow me.’
They were led into the cluttered front part of the shop, then through the small, equally untidy room behind it, and finally into a spartan bedroom, lit only by the striations of sunlight beaming in through a single open window.
The room was dusty and smelt of human decay.
Propped up on a narrow, rickety cot was an extremely old man with a white beard and unshorn hair, a head seemingly too big for his shrivelled body. He had unusually large, glassily brilliant eyes.
He had no arms or legs.
Gerry twitched with shock, but managed to control it; he felt, rather than heard, Ingrid, beside him, sucking in her breath. Also taking a deep breath, he focused his gaze on the old man’s lips, avoiding as much as possible the limbless torso below those glassy, sightless eyes in that remarkably large head.
The man moved his head slightly, left to right, up and down, as if trying to observe the room through his ears. The boy spoke to him in Arabic, then, smiling encouragingly at Gerry and Ingrid, took a chair by the bed. The old man moved his head in their direction, his sightless eyes turning towards them, while his lips, trembling slightly beneath his white moustache, finally offered some whispered words.
‘Hadim says you are English.’
‘I’m actually American,’ Gerry said. ‘My name’s Gerry Remick. And this is Ingrid Zweig. German by birth, but educated in England and Europe.’
‘You wish to see me?’ the old man whispered, as if about to lose his voice.
‘We were *sent* to see you.’
‘Ah,’ the old man croaked, ‘I understand. You have visited Babylon.’
‘You were expecting us?’
‘Yes. I have been aware of your coming since yesterday. I was told you would come here to speak with me.’
‘Told by whom?’
‘The only one I can see. The one who often materializes to me.’

‘Saint-Germain?’
‘He has many names. And has lived many times.’
The old man’s head looked almost as big as his limbless torso, and again Gerry felt a shiver go through him at what he was seeing: a blind accident of fate, life’s hidden nightmare, the unthinkable moulded in flesh and blood by some demon creator.
As if sensing what he was thinking, the old man smiled at him.
‘Were you prepared for me?’ he asked.
‘No,’ Gerry replied.
‘I was born like this, my son, so know of no other condition. The pain was greater for my mother than for me, the nightmare more lasting. We are all born in innocence. Nothing can change that fact. In my innocence, I accepted my condition as being the normal; I only knew that I *was*. And why should I know otherwise? I was fed, clothed and bathed. I grew into manhood like a baby, accepting what I was given, protected by blindness. I have never seen a human being. I cannot touch them with fingers or toes. I can only *imagine* what humans look like, though you are forced to see me. Only later, in adolescence, was I told what I was, and suffered great horror and revulsion for a long time thereafter.’
Although he was sweating, Gerry went cold all over, imagining what this creature on the cot had endured when his innocence was replaced with the knowledge of what he actually was to those who could see him. He would have screamed in terrible silence, falling backwards through his terror, then turned over with the lurching of his heart to greet the face of insanity. Somewhere down there, in the dark hole of his Self, imprisoned in a mind supported by a limbless torso, he would have quivered like a fly in a spider’s web, viewing God as a nightmare.
Yet he had somehow survived it.
‘I retreated into myself,’ he confirmed, ‘into the hidden depths at my centre, and found that my spirit was more abiding than the shell of my body. I took faith from that knowledge, ignoring the flesh, exploring the spirit, and found sanity in this dialogue with myself, the acceptance of *being*. I discovered that the world of mind, which is the spirit, has no limitations; that I could travel back and forth at will, through boundless space and endless time, gaining insight by so doing. The material world, which before had been but darkness, took shape inside me, and I no longer needed eyes to see, nor limbs to let me

feel. I recreated the material world within myself and took my place in it.’
Gerry glanced at Ingrid, aware of what she must be feeling, observed the tight line of her lips, the teeth biting her lower lip. His heart went out to her, but the voice of the limbless blind man, a deathly whisper, drew his reluctant gaze back to the bed, to the nightmare ensconced there.
‘Thus I found serenity, the absolute of existence. Though a nightmare to others, I transcended my physical prison and located the beauty of the Self that few mortals see. Though sightless, without limbs, I saw and touched the All, and because I was in that state of grace, he recognized me and came to me.’
‘Saint-Germain?’
‘To me, he is nameless. He simply materializes in the radiance of his light – as he also appeared to you. I saw him approach you in ancient Babylon, where he passed on my name. He passed my name and address through space and time, to bring you to this room. He has his reasons. I know them not.’
Listening, Gerry was transported back to the ruins of ancient Babylon, to when he and Ingrid had waited in the full moon for something to happen. And in that instant, they not only observed the magical event, but were actually sucked into it…

The manifestation had materialized through the low clouds, first a silvery pinprick, then a large, saucer-shaped incandescence, then that familiar globe of pulsating white light with a dark inner core. It grew bigger as it descended, finally hovered above the ruins, spreading out until it covered the ancient stones and made them appear to dissolve.

Saint-Germain did not emerge immediately. Instead, the dissolving ruins started changing. They changed shape, becoming what they had been in prehistory, and then Babylon reappeared, the largest city in the known world, spread out magnificently on both banks of the Euphrates river, the older city on the east bank, the rebuilt city on the west side, the great walls forming a triangle placed flat on the earth, with the Palace of Nebuchadrezzar II enclosed in its apex, north of the Greek Theatre and Main Citadel.

Initially, Gerry only saw it from a distance, his gaze drawn to the blue-glaze temple surmounting the 300-foot high Tower of Babel, then taking in the

other four temples in the eastern half of the city, then himself dissolving *into* the city with Ingrid beside him. And then, by some miracle, he found himself in what he instinctively knew to be the suburb of Esagila, where the quays were packed with trading vessels, warehouses and hundreds of workers, most of whom were swarming in and out of the warehouses, up and down the numerous gangplanks, carrying copper goods and leather, baskets bulging with dates, sacks of wheat and barley and trays stacked with goats' cheese.

It was a scene of extraordinary industry, exotic, cacophonous.
Gerry stood there on a quay, wearing common robes like Ingrid, feeling unreal as he waited for Saint-Germain to appear on the desk of the sailing ship that, looming over them and creaking against the tide of the river, its decks also swarming with labourers and sailors, was obviously being prepared for another voyage across the high seas.
Then Saint-Germain appeared, a Chaldean regent, dressed in finery, and came down the gangplank with armed soldiers front and rear, their swords glittering in the brilliant sunlight of noon, their leather straps and sandals covered in dust and gleaming with sweat.
Gerry felt that he was dreaming, yet was vividly aware, and witnessed himself taking the parchment that SaintGermain handed to him. Saint-Germain smiled at him. Dazzling sunlight flashed around him. He dissolved into that light, as did the whole ship eventually; then the light became blinding, filling Gerry's eyes with stars, and he glanced sideways to see Ingrid also melting into that silvery haze. He called out to her, felt her hand, grasped her fingers, then slipped into the arms of Morpheus and dreamed the dream he was dreaming.
When he awakened, he found himself stretched out beside the sleeping Ingrid, in the ruins of the Hanging Garden, in the grey light of dawn.
In his hand was a ragged, fading parchment on which was drawn a map of the bazaar near the Mosque of Kadhimain in modern Baghdad, with a spindly arrow pointing to a particular spot in the maze of alleyways, and a message, written in that now familiar, slightly archaic hand, saying, '*Visit the blind seer in the shadow of the Temple – for only the blind can truly see*…' It was signed: *SaintGermain*.

Now, staring at the blind seer, who was also without limbs, Gerry shuddered

to think of how he had been guided here, still unable to credit it. He placed a hand on Ingrid's shoulder, squeezed it encouragingly, then returned his attention to the old man, who, as if sensing what Gerry had done, tilted his head again.

'So,' he said, 'you were sent here to learn something.

What is it you wish to know?'
'I've been led to believe that Saint-Germain might be
thousands of years old. I want to know if that's true or not.' 'You had your proof this morning, my son, at the ruins
of Babylon. What more do you need?'
'How did I receive this message to visit you?' 'You *know* how you received it, my son. Through
boundless space and time, via Saint-Germain.'
'Was I really in ancient Babylon or did I just dream
it?'
'If you perceived it, you lived it.'
'I could not receive a physical parchment from my
thoughts. I could not will it, or imagine it, into being.' 'What parchment? Where is it?'
Gerry looked at Ingrid who had been holding the
parchment-map with its annotations for how to get to this
blind seer, but she was staring down, bewildered, at her
hand, which was clearly empty.
'Where…?' Gerry asked, but could not complete the
question.
'I don't know,' Ingrid said. 'I was holding it a couple
of minutes ago. I swear, *I was holding it*!'
They both glanced at the bright-eyed boy, who was
still in his chair, his feet hooked under its wooden supports,
his chin in his hands. Then they glanced around the spartan,
gloomy room, but there was no sign of the parchment
anywhere, not even on the floor where it might have lain
had Ingrid dropped it. When Ingrid shrugged, looking even
more bewildered, Gerry turned back to the old man. 'We've lost it,' he said.

‘You might never have had it,’ the old man said, smiling. ‘On the other hand, maybe you did. Either way, you came here.’
‘Where did Saint-Germain originally come from?’ Gerry asked.
‘From prehistory, from beyond human knowledge, from the world that was then.’
‘Atlantis?’
‘Some would call it that. Others say it was Eden.’ ‘It’s said that Atlantis was in the Aegean Sea, and that it was destroyed in 1,500 BC when Santorini exploded. Was Saint-Germain alive at that time?’
‘Naturally.’
‘So that’s where he came from?’
‘No. It was simply one of his resting places. SaintGermain has been to many places and that was but one of them.’
‘But a lot of evidence indicates that he originated in Atlantis.’
‘There is no single Atlantis. All the legends of lost civilizations, such as Lemuria, Mu and Atlantis itself, are based on the numerous civilizations lost throughout the history that preceded our own.’
‘Modern historians would argue that point,’ Ingrid said, ‘claiming that there were no civilizations before our own.’
‘They would be wrong. The earliest of the civilizations of prehistory existed millennia ago, when the landmasses of Africa and India were joined. That was the first great maritime civilization, which eventually, through migration by land and sea over the centuries, found its way to another landmass in the Atlantic Ocean, where a new civilization was formed from the influx of the old and was, accordingly, called Atlantis.’
‘Do you know anything about it?’ Gerry asked. ‘Not much. Only that it was highly developed and

possessed a sacred stone called the Tuaoi Stone, or terrible crystal. It suffered three periods of great destruction by natural causes, mainly volcanic. But before the final destruction of that mighty civilization, the high priests removed the sacred stone, actually crystal-based, from its location at the peak of their greatest temple of learning – which was, in fact, a pyramid, as were most of the Atlantean buildings – and took it with them when they fled by boat across the North Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean, past the so-called Pillars of Hercules, to the Aegean Sea, between Crete and Santorini, to form another civilization, the one commonly mistaken for the original Atlantis.'

'And Saint-Germain was one of those high priests?' 'At that time, yes. Saint-Germain is a magical adept from that original Utopia, the one that existed about 200,000 years ago in the single landmass of Africa and India. He was one of those who migrated from that mighty civilization to form a new civilization, Atlantis, in the Atlantic Ocean. Between the three great catastrophes that destroyed that civilization – over a period of approximately 5,000 years, ending about 10,000 BC – Saint-Germain became a magical adept, discovered the Philosopher's Stone – the compound of the Tuaoi Stone – and through it learned the secrets of immortality, disappearing from, and reappearing on, Earth when necessity called.'

'So he must have been one of the highest of high priests,' Gerry said.

'Yes. It was he who forecast the final destruction of that Atlantis, and so fled with the sacred Tuaoi Stone and his higher adepts – just before their civilization disappeared under the waves of the Azores and Sargasso Sea – to the more welcoming islands of the Aegean Sea. There they formed the foundations for another civilization. Over the following centuries, that great and powerful civilization conquered North Africa, including Egypt; and in the latter, about 4,000 BC, more pyramids were erected and the Tuaoi

Stone, also known as the Lodestone or terrible crystal, also triangular in shape, was placed on the peak of the mightiest of those constructions – the Great Pyramid of Cheops, at Giza.'

'Which was built about 2,500 BC,' Ingrid said. 'In 2170 BC, to be precise,' the blind seer corrected her. 'The higher adepts of the Aegean Atlantis travelled by sea to Egypt because they wished to build their great instruments of astronomy and alchemy – the pyramids – at the exact geographical centre of the world's landmass, which at that time was at Giza, in Egypt. In 2170 BC, when the Great Pyramid was constructed, its summit pointed to the sun at noon; and at midnight of the autumnal equinox, it pointed to Alcyone in the constellation of Pleiades, the centre of the then known universe. The number of days in the solar year is set in the measurement of the Great Pyramid's base perimeter, a hundred pyramid inches being given to each day. The pyramid inch, 1.001 of the modern inch, is exactly one five-hundred-millionth of the polar axis of Earth.'

'I don't wish to be rude,' Ingrid said gently, 'but how do you know all that? You're limbless and blind and have spent most of your life on that cot, so how could you…?' 'I have been taught all these facts by Saint-Germain, who also told me that in the Great Pyramid's inner chambers, students of the mystery religions – astrology, alchemy, and other esoteric sciences – were initiated. Those students included Plato and Pythagoras. So, yes, the Great Pyramid was, first, an observatory, second, a temple of occult learning, and only in its final stages a burial chamber – though even this was merely an acknowledged ritual, since no actual persons were buried there, but only the symbols of life.'

'So the Tuaoi Stone was placed at the top of the Great Pyramid about 270 years before the Atlantis in the Aegean Sea was destroyed, about 1,500 BC, in the tidal waves

created by the explosion of Santorini. Presumably it was later removed from the tip of the Great Pyramid by the magical adepts who were then looking after it. But why? And where did they take it?'

'It was removed because a corrupt civilization was encroaching upon Egypt and the magical adepts fled from that encroachment. Where they went eventually, I cannot say, since the whereabouts of the Tuaoi Stone is only revealed to those who are chosen in their own lifetime to become an adept. I have not been so chosen, but am hopeful that my day will come soon. This is all I can tell you.'

'Does the society of magical adepts still exist?' 'Yes, my son. Naturally. After all, *Saint-Germain* exists – and he is the highest of the high. Though where that society is located I do not know.'

'Are any of the adepts,' Ingrid asked, 'apart from Saint-Germain, human beings with whom we could identify?'

'Yes,' the old man said. 'I have already mentioned two of them, Plato and Pythagoras. The others I know only as names that have sprung from Saint-Germain's lips over the years: Nebuchadrezzar, Jesus, Buddha, Mohammed, the wizard Merlin, Roger Bacon, Christian Rosenkreuz, Georg Faust, Paracelsus, Christopher Marlowe, Lord Lytton… The list goes on, my son. It is a thread running back to the darkness of prehistory, winding around the present and then on to an as yet unknown future. They exist. They are here and now.'

'Did you say *Georg Faust*?' Gerry asked him. 'I believe so,' the old man replied. 'That name rings in my head with all the others.'

'Is there anything else you can tell us?' Gerry asked. 'Anything at all?'

'No,' the old man said. 'You were sent here to be told all I know and that is all I know.'

Gerry took a deep breath and glanced at Ingrid. He saw that she was looking slightly dazed, her gaze lost in the infinite mysteries of history and the problematical future. He recalled Saint-Germain as a Chaldean regent in ancient Babylon, wearing Anatolian robes in another time and place, sitting urbanely in a neat suit in the bar of the boat on the River Nile, of his impossible presence here, there and everywhere, in the past and the present. He was one or many men, possessed extraordinary powers, and was part of a secret society that had emerged from the distant past, survived throughout the ages, and now had tentacles reaching out across the globe for some obscure purpose. Yes, it was a conspiracy, a vast, complex plot, and he and Ingrid were being sucked into it and might never escape. Shaken by these thoughts, he reached out to Ingrid and took hold of her shoulder, feeling her reality, the warmth and softness of skin and blood. Then he stepped up to the old man, wanting to touch him as well, to place his fingertips on that unnaturally large brow, above the blind eyes, and let that creature without arms and legs at least *feel* his gratitude.

He was just about to do so when the woman outside screamed, copper pots clattered noisily on the ground, as if knocked over, and two Caucasians, both wearing light grey suits, burst into the room, slapping Ingrid aside, pushing Gerry against the wall, one of them staring stupefied at that *thing* on the cot, the other aiming a pistol at Gerry's head and spitting into his face.

'Make one move and you're dead,' he said.

Chapter Twenty

Ingrid pressed herself against the wall, her heart racing, and tried to avoid the murderous gaze of the hoodlum in front of her, instead looking across the room to where Gerry was likewise pressed against a wall, but with the other hoodlum's pistol aimed at his head. That sight only made her heart race all

the more, so she glanced obliquely at the blind old seer on the cot, saw his head tilting to one side as he concentrated on what was happening. Beside him, the boy slid off his chair and stood upright, his large brown eyes flicking from one hoodlum to the other in disbelief and excitement.

Then the hoodlum in front of Ingrid slapped her face again, took hold of her chin, shook her head violently from side to side and snarled, 'Keep your damned eyes to the front, otherwise I'll get nervous and do you damage.' He pulled something from his pocket and a glittering blade snapped open right in front of her face. '*Verstehen Sie mich*?'

'Yes,' she replied, ashamed to be shaking. 'I understand.'
'Good,' he sneered. '*Very* good!'
He waved the blade threateningly in front of her face, then turned his gaze to the doorway as, accompanied by the clatter of more falling copper pots, the woman who had been seated out front was thrown roughly into the room, followed by a third hoodlum, this one wearing an immaculate tropical suit and matching shoes, his lavender shirt open at the collar, his black hair thick with grease. He stared calmly around the small, now crowded room, then fixed his gaze on the limbless, blind old man and said, 'Christ, what's *that*?'
'He's blind,' Ingrid said.
'He's more than blind,' the hoodlum said. 'So,' he continued, returning his gaze to her, 'you're Zweig's runaway daughter.' When she failed to reply, he turned his calm gaze on Gerry. 'And you're the American he wants. Nice to know you, kid.'
Staring at the man from under the barrel of the pistol now resting lightly on his forehead, Gerry likewise didn't respond.
'You're being pretty wise,' the hoodlum said. 'Silence is golden. But it won't be so golden if you try to avoid answering my questions.'
'Go to hell,' Gerry said.
'You're not as smart as I thought,' the hoodlum said. 'I'm real disappointed.' He glanced down at the Arab woman, who was whimpering on hands and knees, at the bug-eyed boy, then looked intently at the limbless, blind old seer, that *thing* on the cot. Seeing him fully, he shook his head from side to side, as if in weary perplexity.
'Can he at least *hear*?' he asked the boy.

‘Yes,’ the boy said.
The hoodlum looked at Gerry, grinned crookedly, and said, ‘You came here to talk with *this* old fucker? What the hell could *he* know?’
‘Nothing,’ Gerry said.
‘You lying shit,’ the hoodlum said. ‘If you came here to see him, he must know *something*, though God knows what it is.’ He grinned laconically again, almost amiably. ‘Never mind, kid, we’ll find out soon enough. Hey, you! You on your hands on knees. Stop all that snivelling.’
The Arab woman stared up at him, her eyes wide and frightened, then she crawled away and huddled up in a corner while the old man’s head tilted again.
‘Who are you?’ the old man asked, his voice firm. ‘What do you want here?’
‘Shut your mouth,’ the hoodlum said. ‘You’ll have plenty of time to talk. Only then, when you do, you’ll be *answering* questions, not asking them, buddy.’
‘I resent your tone of voice,’ the old man said. ‘I refuse to talk to you.’
The hoodlum stared calmly at him, then approached the cot. He gave the old man’s face a short, sharp slap, then stepped back again.
‘Be careful, old man,’ he said. ‘Don’t get on my nerves. You could soon find yourself without a tongue, without ears or nose, let alone arms and legs. So try not to annoy me.’
‘Who are you?’ Gerry asked. ‘Do you work for that bastard, Zweig?’
‘He wouldn’t like to hear you calling him names. Believe me, Remick, he wouldn’t.’ The hoodlum turned to Ingrid, looking her up and down as if examining merchandise, then settling his gaze on her face. ‘I’m Louis Palladinos from New York. I freelance. These two goons here, both Germans, belong to your old man, who wants you back home real quick.’
‘And what about him?’ Ingrid asked, indicating Gerry.
‘Your dad has a use for him.’
She closed her eyes for a moment, thought of her father, felt a wave of revulsion course through her and then opened her eyes again. She caught Gerry staring at her, saw a flickering smile, then returned her attention to Palladinos.
‘How did you find us?’ she asked him.
‘*Find* you? We never lost you in the first place. You know your old man, lady. He’s got eyes and ears everywhere. This is the age of

telecommunications and secret agents, and I'm just another one of the many who work for him.'
Ingrid felt like a fly caught in a spider's web. She could actually visualize that great web, a network of electric cables and satellite links and fax machines, of anonymous spies in airports and train stations and hotels and parked vans – and there, in the middle of it, biding his time, watching distantly, was the spider that would eventually destroy them – namely, her father.
Looking at Gerry, she felt a rush of love for him, then reluctantly returned her gaze to Palladinos, whose crooked grin was unsettling.
'What I want to know,' he said, 'is exactly what you two have found out about the so-called Lodestone and that guy who supposedly knows all about it, Count SaintGermain. Now do *you* want to tell me?'
'No,' Ingrid said, surprised at her sudden loss of fear, emboldened by the urge to defy him.
'Are you sure about that?'
'Go to hell.'
Palladinos sighed. 'I like a woman of spirit,' he said sardonically. 'I surely have to admire that.' He then turned slightly to the side, pushed the barrel of the other hoodlum's pistol aside, and stared steadily at Gerry.
'You're sweating,' he said.
'It's hot in here,' Gerry retorted.
'I'm cool as a cucumber,' Palladinos said, 'but you're sweating a lot.' His grin broadened as his gaze flicked to Ingrid before returning to Gerry.
'Okay,' he said, 'are *you* going to tell me what Zweig wants to know?'
'What's that?' Gerry asked.
'What you've learned so far about Saint-Germain and the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone.'
'No,' Gerry said.
'I think you might.'
'I won't.'
Palladinos nodded, as if understanding Gerry, then snapped his fingers at the hoodlum in front of Ingrid and said, 'Get her ready.'
The hoodlum grabbed her by the collar of her blouse, tightened it into a noose, then used it to jerk her upward, until her toes were barely resting on the floor. He placed the blade of his knife under her nose and stared coldly at

her.
‘We’ve been following you for so long,’ Palladinos said, ‘and now you won’t even talk to us. My feelings are hurt.’ He turned back to Gerry and said, ‘This bitch won’t look so good when her nose has been removed, so why not save her that embarrassment?’
Ingrid tried to call out to him, but the collar of her blouse, being like a noose, was choking her.
‘No!’ she croaked. ‘Don’t tell him a thing, Gerry. Don’t give my father that satisfaction.’
Though unable to move his head because of the pistol, Gerry managed to turn his eyes toward Palladinos.
‘That’s Zweig’s *daughter*,’ he reminded him. ‘I don’t think that even a bastard like Zweig would let you cut up his daughter.’
Palladinos just chuckled. ‘Oh, really?’ he said. ‘On the contrary, I think he’d let me do *more* than that. A man who poisons his own wife wouldn’t hesitate to kill his kid as well. And it was this bitch’ – here he nodded to Ingrid – ‘whose mother he poisoned… so this bitch can be cut up.’
Hearing those words, Ingrid felt dreadful pain, a deep emotion surging up from her centre to explode right through her.
‘No,’ she whispered. ‘You couldn’t possibly know… No, I don’t believe…’
‘I couldn’t know, lady? Who the hell are you trying to kid? I work for a lot of people and all of them had dirt under their carpets. I did some work for the FBI before I worked for your old man. I was *tailing* your old man for the FBI and they gave me his file. Not all of it, of course, but enough to fill me in… and one of the reports I read was about the death of your mother. Your old man poisoned your mother, kid, and the FBI know it.’
Ingrid felt sick, torn with pain and disbelief, almost dizzy with shock at receiving confirmation of something she had tried to deny for years. She had learned through relatives, a long time ago, of the mysterious death of her grandmother in a car accident that rumour said had been arranged by Zweig; of the equally mysterious death of her mother’s parents when they opposed Zweig’s plan to marry her; and, most horribly, of the widely held belief that Zweig had been instrumental in the murder of his last wife, Ingrid’s mother – officially reported as suicide – by secretly feeding her cyanide… Now Palladino’s words resounded in her head with a shocking finality.
It was true, then, and could no longer be doubted, that her father had,

throughout his lifetime, murdered anyone who stood in his way, even including her mother. Yes, he had murdered her mother. Now she had to accept this brutal truth.

Tears sprang to her eyes before she could prevent them, blurring her vision when she tried to see Gerry and take comfort from him. She saw his flushed cheeks and raging eyes, then was drawn back to Palladino's icy grin and the murderous leer of the hoodlum holding her by the throat, with his knife at her nostrils.

'First I'll smash your specs into your eyes,' he snarled, 'then I'll slice off your nose. That's some lover you've got.'

'What are these barbarians doing in here?' the blind old man said. 'Remove this filth from my home.'

Startled, Palladinos glanced down at the *thing* on the cot. 'Jesus,' he said, 'we got a bean-bag with a talking head on top – and it's trying to *threaten* us. Hey, Rüdiger,' he added, looking at the hoodlum guarding Gerry, 'when we've finished with Remick we'll start on that freak. He should sing like a bird. And now to Miss Zweig…'

He was just turning around to give his instructions to the goon holding Ingrid when the Arab boy by the chair, incensed by the threat to the blind old man, dived at the goon threatening Gerry and sank his teeth into his thigh. The man bawled and kicked the boy aside, spinning away from Gerry, while the man holding Ingrid released her to glance over his shoulder. The Arab woman screamed, the boy rolled across the floor, and Gerry grabbed a copper pot that was resting on a table and brought it down heavily on the bawling hoodlum's head. The hoodlum dropped his pistol, staggering sideways in a daze, and as the second hoodlum raised his pistol to take aim at Gerry, Ingrid stamped brutally on his foot and started *him* bawling.

Gerry picked up the fallen pistol and started fumbling inexpertly with it while Palladinos, seeing the weapon in Gerry's hand, fled from the room. The pistol went off by accident, sending a bullet into the ceiling, and as plaster rained down upon them the other two hoodlums also fled.

Gerry rushed out of the room in pursuit, still holding the pistol, and Ingrid hurried out after him, frightened by what he might do and calling him back. She caught up with him just outside, at the front of the shop, just as he took aim with the pistol and fired wildly at the three men who were making their escape in a sand-coloured, dust-covered jeep.

Ingrid winced when the pistol fired, the noise whipping through her, then she saw one of the men jerking violently, grabbing at his shoulder, losing his balance and falling out of the jeep. He fell sideways onto the road, sending up a cloud of dust, then rolled over and yelped loudly with pain as the other two took off in their vehicle.

Gerry looked down disbelievingly at the pistol in his hand, blew the smoke away from its barrel, then hurried over to where the hoodlum was trying to sit upright, holding one hand over the bleeding wound in his right shoulder.

With a brutality that Ingrid had not seen in him before, Gerry grabbed the German, Rüdiger, by the collar of his jacket and, ignoring his yelps of pain, dragged him roughly along the road and back into the shop.

'Oh, Christ!' Rüdiger yelped. 'It hurts! *Don't hurt me no more*!'

'Shut up,' Gerry said, then turned back to Ingrid. 'Stay inside, Ingrid. I don't want you to see what I'm about to do, so don't come back in until I call you.'

'Oh, God, Gerry,' she said, 'what on earth are you going to do to him? Don't – '

'There are things I have to know,' Gerry said grimly, 'and there comes a time when civilized rules don't apply any longer. So stay outside and try not to listen. Cover your ears.'

'Oh, Gerry, please don't – '

'No, Ingrid!'

He pushed her away from the doorway, then disappeared deeper into the shop, where Rüdiger was lying. She could hear the wounded man groaning. Gerry told him to shut up. There was silence, then the clattering of copper pots falling over, then Rüdiger bawled, 'No! Oh, God, no! Not that! Please don't do that!'

Unable to listen further, Ingrid walked farther along the narrow street, stopping in front of a shop specialising in lace and leather goods. She heard another, more distant, cry of protest from the German, shuddered and covered her ears with her hands and licked her dry lips.

Obviously, Gerry was torturing the wounded man. Ingrid couldn't accept that he was capable of it. As she tried imagining what he might be doing, then remembered her father, she began to think that perhaps Gerry wasn't that much different, that inflicting pain came naturally to him.

She uncovered her ears. 'No, please!' the German bawled. '*Don't*!' Horrified, she pressed her hands over her ears once more and also closed her eyes.

Instantly, she thought of her mother lying ill in bed, of Zweig gradually poisoning her, slowly killing her and making it seem like suicide. She thought of that and *still* couldn't condone Gerry's torture of her father's German hoodlum. She recalled her father's relentless cruelty, the many times he had humiliated her, but even that didn't reconcile her to what Gerry was doing.

What Gerry was doing was wrong – and that's all there was to it.

Determined not to let him sink to the same depths as her father, she opened her eyes, removed her hands from her ears, and hurried back to the shop. However, just before she reached it, the wounded hoodlum was thrown bodily out of the doorway, into the street, where he fell on his hands and knees, glanced despairingly at her, then stood up, still holding on to his bloody shoulder, and abruptly hurried away from her.

Gerry followed him out and watched him rush off, soon disappearing into the narrow, crowded street, then he took hold of Ingrid's elbow and led her away, heading back the way they had come, between shops and stalls piled high with exotic goods and attended by voluble Arab traders. She tried to break free of his grip, to stop walking, but he just dragged her on.

'I've already said goodbye on your behalf,' he informed her, 'There's no need to go back there.'

'I don't want to go back. I just want to – '

'Be quiet,' he interjected rudely. 'Just keep walking. We have to get back to the car and then drive to our hotel. We have lots to talk about.'

'Yes,' she snapped. '*Lots*!'

She wanted to talk about how he had changed, about how he had tortured that wounded man, about how corruption bred corruption, about how he would not be able to live with himself after what he had done. But he didn't give her the chance, kept shutting her up when she tried to speak, only letting her complete a whole sentence when they were back in their hotel in central Baghdad, in their room overlooking Al-Tahreer Square, with the traffic creating a constant bedlam below them, the air humid and stifling.

'How *could* you?' she managed to get out before he cut her short again as he ripped off his sweat-soaked shirt, threw it angrily on the bed and, standing bare-chested before her, said, 'I got that bastard to talk. He sang like a bird. He told me that your dad has made some kind of pact with the Soviets, that they've finally insisted he find out just what we've learnt about Saint-

Germain. You were going to be taken hostage and, unless I played ball and continued my search for the Tuaoi Stone, thus leading them to it, you were going to be terminated. Now do you understand my main point, Ingrid? Your father, the uncivilized bastard, would even have *you* killed!'
'*Uncivilized*? And do you think you're any better? What did you *do* to that poor man? Pull out his fingernails?'
'Poor man?' Gerry looked astounded. '*What* poor man? That *poor man* and his two pals had instructions to kill you if I failed to find the Tuaoi Stone – and you're worried about *him*?'
'You tortured him! That makes you no better than he is. God, you're despicable!'
'*Tortured* him?' Gerry said, looking confused, until a mischievous grin broke on his face. 'Oh, yeah,' he continued, 'I *tortured* him alright. I submitted him to the worst torture of all. I told him that if he didn't tell me all he knew, I'd inform Zweig of his whereabouts, along with the news that he'd found us, but then let us get away. I reminded him of what Zweig would do to him when he learnt about that failure. You heard how he responded.'
Ingrid felt confused at first, then she realized what Gerry meant and the irony made the laughter bubble up and pour out of her, setting her free. Still laughing, she fell backwards onto the bed, her feet resting on the floor, and stared up at him, wanting to feel him, to touch and be touched by him.
When she understood what she was thinking, and could no longer deny it, she abruptly stopped laughing.
'Kiss me,' she said.
She was shocked by her own words – or by what they had implied – yet as he stood over her, looking down at her, she knew that she wanted him to fall upon her and crush her out of existence. He didn't quite do that, but he did at least lean over her, supporting himself on his hands, his legs pressed against her knees, his face just above her face, then he smiled like someone being given a gift and lowered himself gently upon her.
Lying upon her, he kissed her.
That kiss made her die, resurrecting her as someone else. She opened her eyes and saw his smile, his loving gaze, his bare chest, and knew that she was about to escape at last from her father's destructive influence.
'Touch me,' she said. 'Do what you want. I want to *know* what you want. I want to *be* what you want me to be. Touch me now. Touch me everywhere.'

He kissed her again, sliding his tongue between her lips. He kissed her a lot on the lips and then moved elsewhere. She felt his lips on her throat, on her shoulders, her covered breasts, and she drowned in what he was doing to her, lost herself and was reborn. When he unbuttoned her blouse and slipped it off her shoulders, she was warmed by an ethereal heat, radiated an inner light. She *wanted* to be reborn, to become someone else (a woman), and she moved herself in towards his hands and the length of his body. She felt his fingers all over, on her shoulders, breasts and hips, then they urgently tugged her denims down her legs as she kicked her shoes off. She heard the shoes fall to the floor, first the left one, then the right, and the air, which had been warm, seemed much cooler when it covered her bare thighs.
'God, I want you,' he whispered.
His words came to her like magic, igniting her desire, blowing away former inhibitions as she gave herself to him. She arched her spine, became a bridge, thrusting up to feel his hands, subsided beneath the pressure of his fingers when they pressed on her belly. Her heart started racing. She had difficulty breathing. She thought briefly of the fear that her father had instilled in her, then she smiled, her defiance like a soft flame, and let the fingers sliding along her body defeat that fear for all time.
'God, I love you!'
'And I love you, Ingrid!'
'Come inside me,' she said to him.
She hardly recognized her own voice (it was too husky and sensual) but she knew that the fire spreading through her came from her own flesh. She was aware of his fingers (where they touched her, she glowed) and felt the whole length of him against her, felt herself melting into him. She wanted him – yes, and wanted to *be* him – and when he gently rolled upon her, when he moved between her thighs, when he entered her and seemed, at that instant, to *become* her, she lost awareness of everything but sensation, *pure* sensation, and heard nothing but the languorous groaning that emerged from her lips.
'Yes!' that husky, sensual, stranger's voice said from somewhere above her.
'Oh, Gerry! *Oh, yes!*'
Then all thought slid away from her.

Chapter Twenty-One

For the next seven days, the time of creation, Gerry lost and found himself in Ingrid's body, thus recreating himself. With her spectacles removed and her long hair loose at last, with her slim but curvaceous body divested finally of its protective clothing, Ingrid was no longer a demure, childlike woman, but a voluptuous, wanton creature of the night, her lips swollen from kissing him. Her naked body was a revelation, an alien, wondrous object, an exquisitely smooth terrain that rose and fell and kept yielding surprises. He was dazzled by its revealed shape, its mesmeric hollows and curves, its ability to repose itself endlessly and keep him entranced. He loved her long legs, their curves accentuated by arched feet; was thrilled by the sight of her brown nipples on her creamy-white breasts.

'God, I love your breasts,' he told her. 'I could play with them all night. I love squeezing and licking and stroking them or just simply holding them. And I love the way you feel against my face when I'm having a rest.'

'Don't have a rest,' she responded. 'It's too early to rest.'
The mind was *not* all. He was learning that at last. What counted most was his newly discovered feelings and his body's release. He felt incandescent, in a constant state of excitation, and he wanted the glory of his love to lift him out of his mortal shell.
Her body was joined to his, moving with his to love's rhythms, and he found himself losing himself inside her, body and soul. He went winging into the ether, somewhere outside time and space, and caught a glimpse of his transcendental other half, with its heady potential. He was temporarily inviolate, beyond fear or self-doubt, and felt that he was gliding through a cosmos created by love.
The foreplay and the fulfilment soon became one and the same, a seamless merging of tactile sensation with great emotional freedom. He often felt himself dissolving, melting into her pores, becoming *her* other half, her alter ego or *doppelgänger*, even as he was conquered. What he gave, he received – he only won when he surrendered – and her body and spirit became extensions of his newly found Self.
'God,' he said at one stage, 'I can't believe this is you. I can't even believe it's *me*. I always thought we were both so inhibited. How did *this* start?'
'It just did,' she replied. 'It was bound to happen sooner or later, so finally it

did. I think those hoodlums had something to do with it; at least *my father* certainly did. I finally accepted what he'd done to my mother, and in doing that, lost my fear of him. That excited me, Gerry. I was as free as a bird. When I knew that, I also knew I wanted you and couldn't wait any longer. So, here we are.'

'I'm delighted,' Gerry said. 'I'm gonna stay here forever. You feel as soft as a bed of feathers beneath me, but you're warmer and softer.'

'I'm glowing. I'm burning. I feel like an electric lightbulb. I never imagined a man's body could do that to me. Only you. Oh, you *sweet* man!'

She nibbled his ear, stroked his flanks, curled one leg over him, licked his lips with the stem of her tongue and then kissed him passionately.

'Yes!' she whispered throatily. '*Again*!'

After that, they would make love, have a shower, eat and drink; return to bed and make love again, letting daytime turn into night and then back into day. They got their food from room-service, usually consumed it halfheartedly, and invariably returned to their passionate lovemaking, with the blinds always drawn and the room in semi-darkness, the traffic roaring and honking in the square outside the hotel as their bodies intertwined athletically, their sweat soaking the tangled sheets.

He worshipped her naked body, was obsessed with its shape and touch, lost and found himself upon it, below it, inside it; and also in her voice, her sighs of pleasure, her moist, hazel eyes.

Indeed, her eyes were a revelation – without the spectacles, they were lovely – and he studied their misty depths, their beguiling warmth and lurking wickedness, and adored them even more when they were framed by the long hair that had, at last, been set free to enrapture him further. Her long hair was erotic to him, soft as silk, fine as gossamer, and he often wiped his face with it, simply wanting to feel it.

'Your hair's fantastic,' he said. 'Lovelier than I realized at first. Don't ever pin it up again, Ingrid. Let it hang loose and glorious.'

'Oh, no!' she protested. 'Not in public!'

'Why not?'

'Men might think I was trying to attract them, and I wouldn't like that.'

So they made love again, with more confidence, even expertly, learning from one another, taking and giving what was needed, sobbing and groaning their way into a trance of pure satisfaction. Gerry felt that he was hypnotized,

enslaved by his own raptures, but his journey into sensuality, while electrifying and uplifting, gradually forced him to think of other travels and their accompanying mysteries.
He saw the stars of boundless space, disc-shaped lights in the ether, himself gliding over the green-blue breast of Earth to snow-covered mountain peaks. And there, in the mountains, in a cavern hacked from the rocks, he saw Saint-Germain and his nameless partner, both wearing white robes…
He returned when Ingrid cried out, winging back through time and space, and found himself sheltering in her arms with his heart racing madly. He was here – and also there. He was with Ingrid – and then with them. He recovered, as she did, by eating and drinking lightly, then lay back beside her on the bed, distractedly stroking her.
'Sooner or later…' he began.
'Yes, Gerry, I know.'
'Sooner or later we'll have to leave this room and go back to the search.'
She sighed. 'I suppose so.'
'No *supposing* about it. This isn't the *only* hotel room in the world – and we'll soon have to move on.'
'Where to this time?'
'I'm not sure,' he said. 'Let's discuss what we've learnt so far and work out what it means.'
This time she sighed forlornly. 'I suppose we'd better discuss what that blind old man told us,' she said, wrapped up in his arms and not sounding very interested at all as she breathed into his ear.
'Yes,' he said as his breath started quickening. 'I suppose we should.'
'You think all that stuff he told us about an earlier civilization was true?'
'Well,' he replied, again possessed of the urge to talk, sorting the facts out in his mind and wanting to check them, 'he said that civilization existed about 200,000 years ago, when Africa and India were joined by a landmass – and it *is* now known that 180,000 years ago the landmasses of Africa and India were adjacent, which is why there are startling resemblances between fossils found in both countries. And this is one of the reasons for the belief of many nineteenth-century scientists that the adjacent landmasses of that time formed a single great continent and was called *Lemuria*, after the lemur, a mammal still found in both countries.'
Ingrid took a deep breath, let it out again, then held his limp penis in her hand

to tenderly stroke it. ‘Well, *that* certainly sounds interesting,’ she said, sounding very distracted.
‘And,’ he responded, looking down in wonder as his limp penis twitched a little in her delicate hand and then started hardening, ‘I’ve just remembered something that has certain parallels to what that blind old man told us – and *he* certainly wouldn’t have known about this.’
‘Oh,’ Ingrid murmured. ‘Really?’
‘Yes,’ Gerry said, becoming excited for two reasons. ‘According to Edgar Cayce, the famous American clairvoyant, Atlantis was a vast island in the Atlantic Ocean, even bigger than Europe, extending from the Sargasso Sea to the Azores and suffering three periods of destruction, from 15,600 BC to 10,000 BC, the first two periods splitting a single island into three smaller islands, the third destroying everything.’
‘Well, that certainly matches what the old man was saying,’ Ingrid murmured huskily, bending over to breathe warmly upon him and greatly distract him.
‘Right,’ he managed to say while feeling breathless. ‘And according to Cayce, that Atlantean civilization was highly developed and possessed some kind of *crystal stone* for trapping and utilizing the rays of the sun. He also claimed that the Atlanteans date back as far as 200,000 years – which would certainly place them in the joined continent of Africa and India 180,000 years ago – and that they were very headstrong, had great powers of extrasensory perception and telepathy, and also had electricity and had invented the airplane.’
‘Not an *airplane*, dear – it’s an *aeroplane*,’ she corrected him, then, still playing with his penis and obviously agitated, murmured, ‘God, I feel like a *whore*… and I don’t give a damn.’
She proved it by leaning over him, breathing upon him, kissing him, and then he lay back, closed his eyes and surrendered to what she was doing.
‘So you think that Cayce’s *crystal stone* was actually the pyramid-shaped stone that we’re all hoping to find?’ she asked him, running her tongue lightly down his chest and onto his belly.
‘Well, I’ve just remembered – damn it, why didn’t I remember before? – that it was Cayce who actually *visualized* that early Atlantean civilization and subsequently claimed that the source of their magical energy was a, quote, *terrible crystal* or *Tuaoi Stone,* unquote. He also said that eventually it was so misused by that increasingly aggressive civilization that it brought about their

final destruction in 10,000 BC.'
'Your belly button's so sweet,' Ingrid murmured. 'I could lick it all day.'
'What's *really* interesting,' he managed to continue, even though he was finding it difficult to breath properly, 'is that Cayce also prophesied that the Atlantis that disappeared under the waters of the Azores and the Sargasso Sea would rise again in 1968 or 1969…'
'Fascinating,' Ingrid murmured.
'… and in 1968, long after Cayce's death, airline pilots photographed what appeared to be underwater buildings in that very area – off the coast of Bimini, to be exact – and undersea explorations since then, in that same area, have uncovered on the ocean floor what appear to be the remains of ancient roads, walls, pyramids and even circles reminiscent of the circular walls of Plato's Atlantis.'
'Mmmm,' Ingrid murmured, sitting up a little and looking disconsolate.
'So it's possible that a civilization *could* have existed 200,000 years ago in the African-Indian continent, migrated to what was then the landmass between the Azores and the Sargasso Sea, and then been destroyed in approximately 10,000 BC, as the old man believed.'
'And what about Plato's Atlantis, which was destroyed in about 1,500 BC?' Ingrid asked, rolling on to her back and pulling him gently, but insistently, upon her.
'Well, ' Gerry replied, breathing deeply and finding it hard to concentrate, 'Plato may have been right about that *particular* Atlantis. The existence of a few ancient maps, all since proven to be authentic, has offered substantial proof that there was a worldwide maritime civilization thousands of years before the Egyptians or Babylonians. This being so, if, as the old man claimed, the highest of the high priests of the Atlantis civilization *did* flee before its destruction in 10,000 BC, they would have had no great difficulty in sailing from the Azores or the Sargasso Sea to the islands of the Aegean.'
'I like lying beneath you,' Ingrid said. 'I like being your bed.'
'And according to Plato,' he continued, trying desperately to ignore her, 'who claimed that the story of the lost continent of Atlantis was originally told to Solon by *Egyptian* priests, the civilization of the Atlantis located beyond the Pillars of Hercules – in other words, in the Aegean Sea – built their major city in concentric rings around a temple of the sea-god Poseidon, shaped like Santorini, in fact, and they accomplished great feats of engineering and

architecture, then conquered North Africa, including… *Egypt*!'
'Which would explain why,' Ingrid added in an urgent manner, 'if a select few of that Aegean Atlantis *had* removed the Tuaoi Stone from its leading temple and fled with it *some* time after 10,000 BC, when they first arrived in the Aegean, they *could* have taken the stone to Egypt and there built another temple of learning and astrology – the Great Pyramid, constructed in 2170 BC – and placed the pyramidal Tuaoi Stone safely on its peak before the destruction in 1,500 BC of the civilization of the Aegean, from which they had also fled.'
'Right,' Gerry said. 'And they've since taken the Tuaoi Stone somewhere else… to a location *we're* trying to find.'
Ingrid sighed, as if losing something precious, then gazed forlornly at the ceiling while saying, 'I wish we could stay here forever and forget this whole business.'
Yet they both knew it was impossible, wishful thinking, an unrealizable fantasy, and as the fifth and sixth days passed, as the need for sleep returned to normal, they talked more and more about Saint-Germain and their search for the missing Tuaoi Stone. It seemed they were addicted to it, or, at least, trapped by past experiences, now more desperately needing to know what it all added up to. And so despite their personal feelings, no matter how much they wanted to touch each other and be touched, they knew by the morning of the seventh day that they were ready to move on.
How surprising, therefore (though utterly predictable with hindsight) that early that morning, when breakfast had been left outside their door by room-service, Gerry found on the tray, when he set it down on Ingrid's lap, an envelope containing air tickets for flights from Baghdad to Heathrow, London, and from there to Tel Aviv, Israel. Also in the envelope was a postcard showing the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, and a calling card on which was scribbled, in that increasingly familiar, elegantly flamboyant handwriting: *Compliments, St Germain*.
'Please note,' Gerry said. '*Saint* Germain.'
Thus reminded that both of them were on a quest more important than their own immediate happiness, that they were still being watched, that the joy they had found together could not prevent what was to come, the naked, dishevelled and surprisingly voluptuous Ingrid pinned up her long hair, put on her clothes and spectacles, lowered her head demurely, and let Gerry lead

her away from the rumpled bed, out of that sweltering room, back into the material world and its numerous mysteries.
They caught a cab to the airport.

Chapter Twenty-Two

As he walked out of Baghdad International Airport with Elena and Hans, Zweig had only one thought in his mind: to have a talk with the three hoodlums who had, according to his Arab spies, let Ingrid and the American escape once more from their clutches.

‘And you still have those three imbeciles under lock and key?’ he asked his Baghdad contact, as he impatiently waved Elena and Hans into the back of the limo.

‘Yes, sir,’ the Arab replied. ‘We have them in a farmer’s house just outside al-Hillah, where all three were hiding. Naturally, when they asked for a doctor for the wounded man, the farmer knew that something was wrong and informed the police at al-Hillah. One of the policemen then got in touch with me, and that’s how I found them.’

‘You did well.’
‘Thank you, sir.’
Clambering into the back of the limo, Zweig sat beside

Elena, thus placing her in the middle, between him and Hans, the former chewing gum and fanning herself with a lace handkerchief, the latter simply gazing out the window, as if lost in thought.

‘I don’t know why *I* had to come,’ Elena whined. ‘You *know* I can’t stand this heat and dust.’
‘Please be quiet,’ Zweig said, again taking note of her growing insolence.
‘The heat and dust are unavoidable, but certainly bearable.’
‘So why couldn’t I stay on the boat? Or at least on the island?’
‘Don’t you *want* to see exotic Baghdad?’
‘It’s just another noisy city.’

‘What would I do without you at nights?’
‘Find a whore,’ the whore replied in a knowing manner. ‘I’m sure your hotel would provide one.’
He held his anger in check and settled into his seat as the Arab took the seat beside the driver and told the latter to start driving. As the limo sped away from the airport, heading for al-Hillah, Zweig puzzled over the whereabouts of Ingrid and Gerry Remick, and started feeling distinctly nervous at the thought of the possible repercussions should they not be found. Kuragin, for a start, would not take kindly to their loss; and would, indeed, withdraw Soviet aid, leaving him defenceless.
He would be ruined overnight.
Yet what could he do? He couldn’t work out what was happening. If Saint-Germain actually existed (and Zweig’s own bizarre experiences indicated that he did) and if, as it seemed, he was the keeper of the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone, then why had he protected Ingrid and her American over the past few months?
It didn’t make sense.
Gazing out the window of the speeding car, observing the dreary flatlands and the colourless Euphrates river, which appealed to him not at all, he thought with growing rage and humiliation of what Ingrid had done to him. The ungrateful whore. A frigid bitch like her mother. He had raised her in luxury, educated her at the best private schools, sent her to the finest sanatoriums for her emotional problems – and she had repaid him by stealing his money and running away with her American boyfriend.
You could never trust women. He had always understood this. Although needing them, he had never really liked them, had always sensed their dislike of him, and had realized at an early age that at heart they loathed sex and only tolerated it in order to get their own way – just like Elena.
It was always the women. Deep down, he knew that. He’d had trouble with women all his life, particularly with the older ones, the mothers, who clearly could sense more than their daughters did. No mother had ever liked him. That’s why he had killed a few. He had certainly arranged the deaths of his first wife *and* her parents (that bitch mother who had despised him) and, later, did the same for Ingrid’s grandparents, before killing her mother. He had done it for money, to obtain their inheritances, but had doubtless also done it as an act of revenge against women in general. Every woman he had known

had eventually turned against him, forcing him to destroy them.
And now Ingrid. God, yes! Just like all the others. Frightened of him, even more frightened of sex, and possessed of a whore's urge to steal from shops, not to mention from him. A pyromaniac as well.
She hated him. He knew that. She had always done so. Like her mother, she had feared *and* envied his masculine strength, then blamed him for her lack of self-esteem and growing neuroses. He should have killed her, just as he had killed her mother, to put himself out of misery.
Certainly, when he finally caught up with her, that's what he would do.
Her *and* the American.
'Hey, Hans!' Elena shouted. 'Close that window! The wind's blowing my hair about.'
'Yes, Elena, of course.'
Hans did as he was told, promptly rolling the window up. Taking note of the fear that was always in his eyes, Zweig recalled that day in Eforie Nord, in the thermal treatment centre, when he had made Hans go down on his knees to offer obedience. He hadn't meant to go that far, still wondered why he had done so, and could only conclude, glumly, indeed with increasing dread, that it had been caused by his age, by his loss of potency in *normal* sex, and by his subsequent need to make up for that loss, no matter the means. Thus, Hans on his knees, Elena in Nazi outfits, his own nostalgic memories of his Hitler Youth comrades, his increasingly romanticized thoughts of the glorious Third Reich.
He wanted his past back.
Shuddering, he turned away, looked straight ahead instead, stared at the empty road cutting through the arid flatlands and remembered again that Hans could use their moment of intimacy against him, if only with idle talk. Yes, his enemies were everywhere…
Such gloomy thoughts, which had increased in recent weeks, continued to torment him until, an hour later, the limo pulled up outside a crumbling, mud-and-stone farmhouse, standing near the banks of the Euphrates river. There were a few goats wandering loose, some chickens, a couple of cows. The air smelt of wild flowers and manure, was stirred by a faint breeze. Two armed Iraqi policemen were guarding the front door of the farmhouse, and a third one, a sergeant, as fat and slovenly as the other two, emerged as Zweig struggled out of the limo, relieved to be doing so.

‘I’m not getting out,’ Elena said. ‘I’m not getting goat shit on my new shoes, so I’ll just wait in here, thanks.’
‘Of course,’ Zweig said. ‘Naturally.’
Taken aback once more by the extent of her insolence, he turned away from her, held his anger in check, then with Hans and the Arab driver approached the police sergeant and his armed minions.
As soon as the driver had introduced him to the police sergeant, he asked if his three men were still alive and well in the farmhouse.
‘Naturally,’ the potbellied, pleasant Iraqi sergeant replied. ‘We had to discipline them once or twice, but they’re still alive.’
Zweig had to grin at that. ‘And my daughter and her American boyfriend? Any news about them?’
‘Yes. One of our men has just called from Baghdad International Airport, telling us that your daughter and the American took a flight to Heathrow, London, shortly after you landed. We have also learned from hacking into the airline computer systems that they have been booked onto flights from London to Tel Aviv, scheduled for one week from now.’
Zweig couldn’t believe his ears. It was too painful to be true. He had missed them by a matter of minutes and now they were well out of the country.
‘Tel Aviv? *Israel*?’
‘Yes, sir.’
Zweig suddenly felt bewildered, hot and bothered, slightly nauseous, but kept a firm grip on himself and displayed no emotion.
‘Very good, sergeant. You’ve done an excellent job. Now I suggest that you leave with your men and let *me* handle the prisoners. Believe me, I will deal properly with them.’
The Iraqi sergeant picked his nose and flicked something off his finger, then frowned to display his disapproval. ‘I’m afraid I cannot permit – ’
‘Yes, yes,’ Zweig interjected, waving his hand impatiently. ‘My man here will pay you for your troubles and for turning a blind eye. Now take the money and go.’
Hans stepped forward, took the police sergeant aside, slipped a fat envelope into his hand and whispered into his ear. Looking a lot happier, the sergeant pocketed the envelope, slapped his fat belly, spat on the ground, and waved at his two uniformed assistants; then all three of them, after scrambling into their battered jeep, waved goodbye and were driven away, soon disappearing

in clouds of billowing dust.
When the police had gone, Zweig nodded at his Arab informer, who withdrew a pistol from inside his jacket, cocked it and entered the farmhouse. He could be heard barking commands, then, a few seconds later, the three hoodlums emerged, obviously having been kicked out by the Arab holding the pistol. Two of them looked pleadingly at Zweig through blackened eyes, while the other, badly bruised, also with blood caked around the bullet hole in his shoulder, groaned weakly and fell into the dirt.
'Pick that miserable wretch off the ground,' Zweig said to two of his men, 'and support him between you.'
The two men did as they were told, jerking the wounded man up onto his knees and, as he groaned louder, supporting him by placing their arms around him, under his armpits. He hung limply between them, blubbering pathetically, his head bowed. Studying the other two, Zweig was pleased to note that Louis Palladinos, who had once been hired by Colonel Kuragin to keep his eye on Zweig, had lost his aplomb, and, with his face badly bruised by the Iraqi police, was a sorry reflection of the man he had formerly been.
'Tell that bastard to hold his head up,' Zweig ordered, referring to the wounded man, Rüdiger.
'He can't,' Palladinos said. 'He's been losing blood for days and is nearly unconscious.'
'Nearly unconscious, is he?' Zweig said. 'Well, we'll soon fix that.'
Stepping forward, he grabbed hold of the wounded man's bloody shoulder, squeezed it tightly and bit into the area around the wound. The man screamed in pain, quivered like a puppet on a string, and then raised his head, opening glazed, tearful eyes.
Zweig smiled at him and stepped back a little.
'So,' he said. 'Now that you're all awake and attentive, let us commence…'
He stared at each man in turn. 'You have failed me. All three of you have failed me and I want to know why. I send you out with the relatively simple task of locating two individuals, we have helpful operatives in every city you've been to, we have telephones and bugging devices and numerous informants – and *still* you managed to lose your quarry. You were supposed to be in charge, Palladinos, so maybe *you* should explain.'
'Yes, sir, of course. Whatever you say. Naturally.' Palladinos wiped sweat from his battered face and licked his parched lips. 'It wasn't our fault,' he

said. ‘We were taken by surprise. We followed your daughter and the American into the shop of a blind old man, one without arms and legs, known locally as a clairvoyant, a seer, located in the bazaar near the Mosque of Kadhimain, north of Baghdad, clearly discussing Saint-Germain and the Tuaoi Stone. We were about to beat the truth out of them when a large group of men burst into the shop and started beating *us* up.’
‘Oh, really?’
‘Yeah,’ Palladinos said, obviously lying through his teeth. ‘As I said, it was a pretty large group, probably Saint-Germain’s men, and they attacked us and then chased us from the shop. We managed to make it to our jeep, but then, when we were driving away, one of them shot at us, badly wounding poor Rüdiger, as you can see.’
Poor Rüdiger, still holding his bloody shoulder, nodded his battered head.
‘And then?’ Zweig asked.
‘Well, sir, the rest you know. Determined to look after Rüdiger, refusing to leave him alone while he was wounded, we stayed with him in this place and sent for a doctor – but instead of going for a doctor, the farmer went to those cops and they informed you of our whereabouts before we could do so ourselves, which is what we intended to do, believe me.’
‘I see,’ Zweig said. ‘So you were going to get in touch with me, just as soon as your friend, Rüdiger here, had received medical attention.’
‘Exactly,’ Palladinos said, grinning with relief. ‘The minute Rüdiger was fit enough to be moved, we were going to get a plane directly to you, and then tell you precisely what had happened.’
‘An honourable thing to do,’ Zweig said. ‘Almost *noble*, in fact.’ He turned his head aside to glance out over the broad, muddy expanse of the Euphrates river, remembered that he was standing in the cradle of civilization, received no ecstatic feeling from that particular knowledge, so said, ‘Wasn’t that noble of them, Hans? Do you not agree?’
‘Yes, sir,’ Hans said, nervous as always. ‘Very noble, indeed.’
Zweig nodded judiciously, took a deep breath, then turned back to Palladinos, viciously slapped his face, and hissed, ‘You lying bastard! No group of men attacked you! My Arab friends went to the blind old man’s house and were told the true story. No group of men attacked you and chased you out of there. You let my daughter, the American and an Arab, a mere boy, *a child*, put you to flight – and were in fact shot by the *American* as you made your

escape.’
‘No, sir! Please let me – ’
Zweig slapped his face again. ‘Shut your lying mouth! You were put to flight by a bunch of amateurs! And only returned to the bazaar when my daughter and the American had gone, because you didn’t want anyone to find *this* wounded idiot. Then, when you found him, wandering about in a daze, nursing his bloody shoulder and whimpering pathetically, you picked him up and drove out of al-Hillah, then on to this farmhouse, hoping to escape from my wrath by later sneaking back to Baghdad and taking an airplane out of the country – but *not* to me.’
‘No, I – ’
‘Shoot this pig! *Shoot him now*!’
‘No, no, please don’t! *No*!’
Palladinos was still bawling his protest when Zweig cut him short by slapping him sideways into the dirt. The Arab, moving quickly, stepped forward, leaned over him, placed the barrel of the pistol against his head, and pressed the trigger. The pistol jerked in his hand, blood and brain matter splashed him, then Palladinos twitched once and was still.
As the wounded Rüdiger rolled his eyes and his friend burst into tears, the Arab grabbed the lifeless Palladinos by the collar of his jacket and dragged him like a sack of maize across the dusty earth. After kicking the body to make it roll down the incline into the river, he returned to aim his pistol at the other two hoodlums. Zweig, feeling slightly out of control, glared fiercely at them.
When the wounded Rüdiger stared at him with glazed eyes, Zweig offered a soothing smile.
‘Come, my friend,’ he said. ‘Like me, you are a German. Please tell me what happened after the other two fled in the jeep, leaving you to the mercy of my daughter and her American boyfriend.’
Rüdiger bit his lower lip, shuddered with pain, and mumbled, ‘It was terrible, Herr Zweig. Really terrible. That American, he was a demon. He dragged me back into the shop, submitted me to torture, and interrogated me as to why we were pursuing him. I told him nothing, Herr Zweig.’
‘Nothing?’
‘I swear it!’
Zweig leaned forward to again grab hold of Rüdiger’s wounded shoulder.

Rüdiger screamed and jerked convulsively, but Zweig slapped his face, bawled at him to be quiet, then, while he shuddered and whimpered pathetically, stepped back and studied him.
'Now what did you *really* tell him?' he asked.
At great length, and with much sobbing and whimpering, Rüdiger managed to confess that he had told Gerry Remick all he knew, which wasn't all that much, being essentially the sample fact that Zweig had originally been letting Ingrid and her American run free in the hope that they would lead him to Saint-Germain, but that the Soviets had then insisted that he capture Ingrid and force the American to continue the search for the Tuaoi Stone.
'And that's *all* I told them, Herr Zweig. That's all I know.'
Utterly outraged but not wishing to show it, Zweig placed a hand gently on the wounded man's good shoulder, shook him affectionately, then told him to stand up beside his companion. When he had climbed to his feet and stood trembling in front of Zweig, the latter gave both men a warm smile, nodded and said, 'You are men. *German* men. And should be treated as such. You should be accorded the respect and dignity reserved for all soldiers.' Then, turning rather sadly to Hans, he said, 'Execute them.'
Without a word, the increasingly pale-faced Hans nodded at the Arab with the pistol. Also without a word, and ignoring the sudden outbreak of entreaties from the two doomed men, the Arab raised his pistol and shot each of them in the head, then dragged their bodies, one by one, to the bank of the river and kicked them down into the muddy water.
Zweig returned to the limo without a word and clambered in beside Elena.
'Are we going back now?' Elena asked, her face a picture of boredom.
'*Ja*,' Zweig replied. 'And then we're flying with false passports to Jerusalem, via London, for a little vacation.'
'Jesus, why *there*? That place is knee-deep in Yids.'
'That much I know.'
He sighed in despair, wiped the sweat from his face, and looked out the window as Hans slipped in the other side, the Arab took the seat beside the driver, and the limo moved away from the farmhouse, churning up clouds of dust and sand as it headed back to Baghdad.
As they travelled across the flatlands, past goats and Arab farmers, moving parallel to the broad, muddy swathe of the Euphrates river, which had continued to flow while mighty civilizations rose and fell, Zweig

contemplated time, wondered what it really was, tried to separate his past from the present, but gave up in defeat. The glorious days of his youth were as real to him as the present, the great dramas of the Third Reich and its aftermath as vivid as yesterday. Yet because of Saint-Germain he had found himself soaring through time and space, to view first the stars of the cosmos, then unknown, snow-capped mountains

What did all that mean?

He recalled his experience in the park in Bucharest, could not forget the bizarre events experienced by his men, and now knew that in his pursuit of Saint-Germain he had found the ultimate enemy.

Victory over the ultimate enemy was the greatest victory of all, and the Tuaoi Stone would be but the icing on that particular cake. Yet there was more to it than that – he needed the Tuaoi Stone for himself – to own it was to possess the whole world, and even, if what he had heard was true, to find immortality.

He desperately wanted that. He was growing terrified of old age. His erections were less frequent, usually hardly worth mentioning, and his other ailments were multiplying every day, no matter what he did to keep them at bay. Yes, he was growing old, going to seed, *decaying*, and he dreaded that more than anything else on Earth, could not abide the thought of mortality, to be one of the common herd.

Hitler could have been a god, inviolable, immortal, but instead had been betrayed by his flesh and the facts of mortality. But he, Zweig, could do what Hitler had only imagined: conquer not only the Earth, but also the mysteries of time and space, and through them, the secret of life, and… *immortality*. God, he hungered for that.

Yet he was being thwarted. His own daughter had turned against him. That bitch and her surprisingly bright American were making a fool of him. Clearly, they were doing so with Saint-Germain's help. And now SaintGermain's bizarre scenario was propelling him, Zweig, along with his daughter and her American boyfriend, towards the ultimate test.

'Jerusalem!' He sighed. 'My hell on Earth! Why is God punishing me?'

God did not answer.

Chapter Twenty-Three

As he watched them walk barefoot into the cool interior of the Mosque of Omar, or the Dome of the Rock, in the Noble Enclosure in the Old City of Jerusalem, Ibrahim Dayieh thought that the young lady and her American boyfriend seemed just like any other tourists.

Wondering if they knew that they had been chosen, or if they were being tested in ignorance, he followed them as they made their way around the magnificent temple, under the brilliantly coloured tiles and Koranic inscriptions of the great dome, past marble panels in muted pastel shades, and across floors decked with oriental carpets, to the railing around the mosque's focal point: the Rock. There, surrounded by other whispering tourists and Islamic worshippers, they gazed upon the rock from which Muhammad – blessed be His name – was said to have ascended to heaven and which even now contained the unmistakable imprint of a human foot.

The young lady and her American boyfriend stared at it, as if in a trance. Observing the couple, Ibrahim stroked his grey beard and started feeling as old as he was, which was close to seventy. As he padded barefoot alongside the wall of the Mosque, in order to obtain a better look at the couple whom he had been told, by Saint-Germain, would enter the Mosque at exactly this time, he realized that he was suddenly feeling old because of his understanding that his time had come. His new sense of *age*, then, was not at all unpleasant, but was actually filling him up with the peace of contentment. He was proud that he had been chosen and would now soon be called; would soon become one of that secret, illustrious line that includes Muhammad, Moses, Abraham, Jesus, Buddha, Rama Krishna, Nebuchadrezzar, and many other of the world's most noble men, from both East and West. Yes, the present guardian of the sacred stone, the emissary, St Germain, had come to him years ago, in the middle of his meditation, to begin that other, more relevant education and show him the way. He had been chosen as an adept, as one of the immortals, and soon would be relieved of his mortal shell and find the bliss of transcendence. His sudden ageing, then, was not something to be feared, but a cause for rejoicing.
Stopping parallel to where the group of tourists had gathered in front of the sacred Rock, he looked surreptitiously at the girl and her American boyfriend.

He had always found Western women to be thin, pale and insipid in character, but this one seemed even less impressive than most. She was much too thin, had small breasts, was stoop-shouldered; her hair was piled untidily on her head and she wore a pair of unattractive spectacles.

In truth, he couldn't imagine what the young American saw in her; nor could he imagine her *or* the American, in his scruffy jacket and blue denims, even being *considered* by the Master. However, St Germain had told him to contact them and that's what he was doing.

Standing beneath the superb stained-glass windows and black-and-gold mosaics, the couple had turned their attention to the small tabernacle at the far end of the Rock, which contained a few hairs from the head of the Prophet. Ibrahim stared at them, willing them to sense his presence, and eventually the American turned his head and looked directly at him. Ibrahim smiled at him, then turned away and headed for the exit.

As he walked in bare feet across the oriental carpets, past jostling Christians and Moslems kneeling in prayer, he knew that the girl and her American would be close behind him. Still smiling, he thought of how St Germain had appeared to him that morning, as if in a dream, but in his essence very real, to inform him that the time for his transcendence had come, that he would leave the Earth this day, but that before this great event came to pass he had one final earthly duty.

A young lady and her American friend had been chosen and were being tested. They had reached the Seventh Station – this Great Mosque and Temple of Solomon – and had been told that they would be recognized and contacted by someone. That someone was Ibrahim.

He would tell them what they needed to know… and then death would release him.

Stepping from the cool shade of the interior of the Mosque into the blazing light and heat outside, he slipped his feet into his sandals and turned back to face the entrance. The girl and her American appeared soon enough, blinking against the brilliant sunlight. When they had put their shoes back on, they both stood up and stared intently at him. After glancing at one another in a questioning manner, they stepped forward and stopped directly in front of him.

'You're the one we're supposed to meet, aren't you?' the young American said.

‘Yes,’ Ibrahim replied, knowing without doubt who they were and so speaking with confidence.
‘We saw you looking at us.’
‘Of course.’
‘How did you know it was us you were looking for?’ the girl asked.
‘I was shown your likeness by our Master, St Germain, when he asked me to speak with you.’
‘I’m Gerry Remick,’ the American said, ‘and this is Ingrid – ’
‘Your names are not important,’ Ibrahim said. ‘Come, walk beside me.’
He led them away from the octagonal Mosque with its gold-and-polychrome tile-work, across the flat stones of Solomon’s Platform, the El-Haram-es-Sharif, towards the sealed Golden Gate in the wall of the Old City, not unaware of the great history around him, of the ghosts of the centuries rising up from the hot, sun-scorched stones.
‘It is believed that right here,’ he said, pointing at the ground, ‘is where Abraham prepared to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The Prophet Muhammed, as you doubtless know, was said to have ascended from the Rock enshrined in the Mosque. Here Solomon reigned, the Romans had their temple to Jupiter, Herod built his fortress, Pontius Pilate condemned Jesus to death, and the Crusaders tried to convert us with violence. This place is a fitting end to your journey. Now your journey begins.’
‘That’s a contradiction in terms,’ the American said.
‘No, my son, it is not. All endings are the beginning of something else. Thus the circle is given shape.’
As the sealed Golden Gate loomed over them, he turned north towards the Antonia Tower, where Pontius Pilate had condemned that other adept, Jesus, to death. The tower cast its long shadow on the flat stones, obscuring the milling Arabs, Jews and tourists.
‘So,’ Ibrahim said, ‘what do you wish to know?’
‘Every time Count Saint-Germain sends us to see someone,’ the American said, ‘they ask us what *we* want to know, but we don’t know what to ask.’
‘He is not *Count* Saint-Germain,’ Ibrahim felt obliged to correct him. ‘He is a saint – *Saint* Germain – and if, as you say, you do not know what to ask, you have come a remarkably long way on no information.’
‘Okay, so I’ll ask,’ the American said, grinning with considerable charm. ‘Is it true that this meeting with you marks *some* kind of end to our journey?’

‘That is correct. You have managed to make your way to the seventh of the Seven Stations. After this, you will commence *another* journey, east or west, one the right way.’
‘And one the wrong way?’
‘Correct.’
The American glanced at the girl beside him and she smiled in return. In that smile, which illuminated her drabness in a magical manner, Ibrahim saw the light of her love and blossoming sensual self.
Clearly there was more to this couple than met the eye… a mutual affection and trust, a spiritual innocence. Perhaps this was why…
‘What are the Seven Stations?’ the girl asked. ‘Are they the Seven Wonders of the World?’
‘That is a self-evident fact,’ Ibrahim replied, warmed by her smile. He sensed a certain mischief in her. This suggested that she might have more spirit than initially he had given her credit for.
‘What isn’t self-evident,’ the American said, ‘is why we were sent there.’
‘And *here*,’ the girl added.
‘You were sent to be tested,’ Ibrahim said. ‘I do not know why or how. I only know that if St Germain arranged it, it is not without purpose. Obviously, since you have managed to come this far, you have been satisfactory.’
‘Satisfactory for *what*?’
‘That is not for me to say. Only St Germain can know that. I only know that you were sent to the Seven Stations as to the seven rungs of a ladder. If you fail to climb above a certain rung, you can only descend again.’
‘So, what were we tested for?’
‘For belief and self-belief, faith and courage, for the will to continue. It is important that your motives be as pure as the love you have for each other.’
The young lady blushed at that, lowered her eyes, squeezed the hand of her man. Both of them, Ibrahim observed, not without a certain amusement, looked much younger at that moment than they were.
‘Our motives for *what*?’ the American asked, almost aggressively.
‘Your motives for wishing to find the Tuaoi Stone – since the Tuaoi Stone can only be shared by those with pure hearts.’
Taking the steps down from Solomon’s Platform, they started along the crowded path that led alongside the norther wall of the Old City to the nearest exit, which was via the Lion’s Gate. They were hemmed in by colourfully

robed Moslem traders and tourists of all religious denominations, yet seemed very alone.
‘We passed all those tests?’
‘So far, young lady.’
‘He tested our love and commitment?’
‘And the depth of your purity.’
‘Excuse *me*,’ the American said sardonically, ‘but I just don’t *get* this. I mean, *I’m* not particularly pure, I believe in little, and my love… Well,’ he added tentatively, glancing sideways at the young lady and blushing as she had previously done. ‘I mean, that’s natural, isn’t it?’
‘Romantic love is generally a form of self-deception,’ Ibrahim said, ‘that cannot survive for too long. You are pure at heart – both of you – more than you know… and love of this kind is quite rare.’
‘And belief?’
‘You do not know you believe, but it is part of your nature. Your belief runs very deep. You have faith in the ultimate goodness of Man – and that, my friends, is the only true belief at the heart of existence.’
They went through the Lion’s Gate, thus leaving the Old City, stepping out between two walls of ancient stone lined with gypsy beggars, mostly children, and Arabs selling their wares to tourists. Across the Jericho Road was the Valley of Kidron. Beyond it and the Moslem Graveyard within it, they could see the church of Gethsemane on the lower slopes of the Mount of Olives, with the golden spires of the Russian Orthodox church gleaming through the branches and leaves of light-green olive trees.
‘Assuming that what you say is true,’ the American said, ‘that we were in fact tested and have so far passed every test, why were we tested in those particular places? Why not where we were living our normal lives?’
‘Those places where you were tested were themselves past of the test. It is the knowledge of the significance of those places that will make you begin again.’
‘The end of this journey and the beginning of another?’
‘Yes.’
‘Then what’s the significance of those places?’
‘I cannot tell you what you’ve already learnt.’
‘We haven’t learned anything.’
‘You have.’

‘Oh?’ the American said, raising a questioning eyebrow.
‘Yes,’ Ibrahim said. ‘You have simply not accepted this fact. You have discussed it together, but so far not managed to recognize it. You have talked together about it, without actually knowing you were doing so.’
‘If we’ve already learnt it, you can repeat it.’
‘That is so.’
‘Then repeat it. Please *tell* us!’
The American was clearly exasperated, making Ibrahim smile again. ‘I can only tell it when you ask the relevant question – and that question you know.’
The American stopped walking, stared at him with increasing exasperation, then raised his hands and shrugged his shoulders in despair. Ibrahim started forward again, but then the girl darted in front of him, making him stop.
‘Why are those particular sites – the Seven Wonders of the World – representative of your so-called Seven Stations?’
Ibrahim nodded at her. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘that’s the question.’
‘And the answer?’
As the American looked in a surprised manner at the girl he clearly loved, Ibrahim took hold of the girl’s elbow, gently tugged her in beside him, then continued along the Jericho Road, with the American falling in at his other side.
‘Did you ever learn about magic squares when studying mathematics?’ Ibrahim asked the American, who, in a rather naive way, seemed highly intelligent.
‘Sure,’ the American replied. ‘I used to have great fun with them, and often, when still in high school, tried inventing my own.’
‘I don’t know what they are,’ the young lady said, obviously put out by her own ignorance.
‘Magic squares,’ the American explained to her, ‘are arrangements of numbers, usually integers, in a square grid, where the numbers in each column, and the numbers that run diagonally in both directions, all add up to the same number. The square, or block, has the same number of rows as it has columns. In a so-called *magic* square, then, you should be able to add any three lines up, down, or diagonally, and you’d always get the same number as your sum total. They’re mathematical freaks that are mostly found in puzzle books or used as the basic structure for crossword puzzles.’
‘Correct,’ Ibrahim said. ‘However, they were rightly regarded by the

mathematicians of antiquity as numerical illustrations of cosmic laws. They believed, again rightly, that the numbers of magical squares were cosmological keys to the mysteries of the universe, and so seven of those squares became traditionally attached, each to a particular planet in our cosmos.'

'I remember that,' the American said, hardly able to contain his growing excitement. 'The smallest of the seven is the Square of Saturn, which has nine numbers, totalling forty-five, but arranged so that no matter how any individual block of three numbers is read – diagonally, horizontally or as columns – the sum is always fifteen.'

'You have a good memory,' Ibrahim told him as they left the Jericho Road and headed south, with the wall of the Old City on their right, the Valley of Kidron and the Silwan village falling away to their left. 'And what you both have sensed, but not yet fully recognized, is that the sites you have visited, the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, form an astrological system, with each of the sites representing a centre of cosmological influence, as revealed by their relevant squares. The original buildings, as they stood, were actually instruments for the control of a particular aspect of cosmic energy, and their construction was based firmly on the dimensions suggested by the numerical pattern of their individual magic squares… Now think of the beginning as an ending, of the first as the last, and relate this to the places you have visited.'

'The first place we visited was the Great Pyramid at Giza,' the American said, looking directly at Ibrahim, his eyes growing brighter with revelation while the girl frowned beside him. 'And that's where we received the first digit of the magical number 1746.'

'Exactly,' Ibrahim said. 'And since the beginning is the ending, let us see what your travels have revealed.'

'Yes, let's,' the American said.

'The Temple of Diana, or Artemis, at Ephesus, represents the Square of the Moon,' Ibrahim informed him. 'The Colossus at Rhodes represents the Square of the Sun. The Temple of Jupiter, or Zeus, at Olympus, represents the Square of Jupiter. The Tomb of Mausoleus, in Turkey, represents the Square of Venus. The Towers and Hanging Gardens of ancient Babylon represent the Square of Mars. The Temple of Solomon, right here in Jerusalem, represents the Square of Saturn. And finally, taking the beginning as the end, the pyramids of ancient Egypt, themselves represented by the

Great Pyramid of Cheops in Giza, represent the Square of… *Mercury*.'
He laid particular emphasis on the last word – and was pleased when the young American responded without hesitation: 'The Moon, the Sun, Jupiter, Venus, Mars, Saturn and… *Mercury*. So all of those ancient monuments, as well as representing astrological systems and being used for astronomy, were also instruments of… *alchemy*.'
'Do not doubt your own wisdom.'
Smiling, Ibrahim led them through the Dung Gate, past Arab traders, armed Israeli soldiers, and the mandatory hoards of tourists, then on in a circular direction back around the Western Wall, better known as the Wailing Wall, and into the narrow streets threading through the Jewish Quarter, towards the Street of the Chain.
The American had seemed deep in thought and now he stopped walking.
'Okay,' he said. 'So the answer to the riddle is in *alchemy*. Now what – ?'
Ibrahim waved his right hand, cutting the American off in mid-sentence. 'I can tell you no more than that,' he said. 'It is all that I know.'
'It's all that you *know*?' The American looked sceptical.
'Yes,' Ibrahim insisted, then walked off again, with the other two falling in one at each side of him. 'I was told to discuss no more than that – and I *know* no more than that. For the rest, you must wait.'
'Wait *where*?' the girl asked in a practical manner.
They had just crossed the El-Wad Road, which was narrow, stepped and busy. Ibrahim stopped where it intersected the Via Dolorosa and stared steadily at them. Yes, he felt old now, and this couple seemed very young; he tried to recall what that was like, but it was too long ago.
'Where are you staying?' he asked them.
'In the American Colony Hotel on Nablus Road,' the American replied.
'Then remain there,' Ibrahim told him. 'Why move when you have nowhere to go? Let events take their course.'
'And how long might that be?' the young lady asked.
'As long as it takes.'
The young lady blinked rapidly behind her spectacles, wrinkled her nose and glanced at her boyfriend. The latter shrugged as if defeated, then tried one last time.
'And the Tuaoi Stone?' he asked. 'How does that relate to – ?'
'No,' Ibrahim said quickly, cutting him short again. 'I have told you all you

will learn this day. *Sabah el kheir* – goodbye. And good luck, my friends.'
He walked hurriedly away, leaving them standing on the narrow road to Calvary, and turned down a side street that led him back to his modest house in the Moslem Quarter, just behind the Lion's Gate. Entering the house, which was made of brick and mud, spartan and painted white, he thought of his wife, who had died many years ago, and of his children, both boys, who had been killed in the war against the Jews. He felt no rancour over this, understanding Man's ignorance, and only wondered how his own end would come and what transcendence would be like.
Casting off his robes, he knelt cross-legged on the stone-flagged floor, bowed his head and closed his eyes, thought of the American and his girlfriend, wondered why they had been chosen, then began the meditation that normally sent him winging across space and time, beyond the material world, to frozen lakes and snow-capped mountain peaks and, finally, to that great monastery hacked out of the rocks, where St Germain, surrounded by other Masters, protected the sacred stone: the Tuaoi Stone that the American had asked about and must find for himself.
He was just about to fall into the depths of his meditation when the unlocked front door of his house was kicked open.
Looking up, he saw a big, bulky man entering, stooping over to do so, followed by two other men.
At that moment, Ibrahim stopped wondering when and how he was going to die.
'*Scheisse*!' the big man exclaimed, standing upright again. 'What a hovel! God, how I hate Arabs!'
Now flanked by the other two men, all three of them wearing Western-styled jackets and trousers and opennecked shirts, he stopped directly in front of Ibrahim, towering over him like a monolith, and stared down with the coldest eyes that Ibrahim had ever seen.
'Stand up, you old goat,' he said. 'I have some questions to ask you.'
'I cannot answer your questions,' Ibrahim said. 'Now do what you will with me.'
The large man turned purple, reached down with surprising speed, grabbed Ibrahim by his beard and tugged him brutally to his feet. Then, while Ibrahim tried to blink the tears from his eyes, he saw that evil face up close, smelt his bad breath, heard his venomous voice.

‘My name’s Zweig,’ the large man growled. ‘*Wilhelm Zweig*. You hear me? And you’ve just been talking to my daughter and her filthy American. Now what did you tell them?’
‘These are my last moments on Earth,’ Ibrahim said, ‘and I will spend them in silence. Now do what you will with me.’
What they did to him was beyond his belief, a catalogue of torture and humiliation that went on for ever. He took it all in silence, refusing to break his vows, and as his agony mounted, as the pain became unendurable, he first found himself wondering how St Germain could let this happen to him, then found himself accepting it as his penance for the rewards yet to come.
He then flew out of his pain, hovered above it, beyond it, and looked down from the peaceful shore where he was dying to see himself on the stone-flagged floor. There was blood all over his body. His bones were broken, his flesh was torn. He was spitting broken teeth from swollen lips as their knives probed his open wounds.
He observed himself being tortured, slipping in and out of consciousness, then saw them giving up in disgust, or perhaps just exhaustion. The one called Zweig bawled at him, kicked him, spat upon him, then dragged his bloody body across the floor and rolled him against the wall.
‘I’m leaving my calling card,’ he said. ‘You might remember me by this. Assuming you’ll remember anything where you’ll soon be heading.’
Returning from his peaceful shore, dropping back down through his pain, Ibrahim opened his swollen eyes when he heard a ticking sound, focused painfully and saw a hand turning on the yellow clock of a time-bomb.
‘You see this, you old goat?’ he heard that venomous voice growling. ‘It’s set for one minute and it’ll blow you and this dismal house sky high, then your friends will blame the yids for what’s happened and all hell will break loose. Are you sure you have no final words for me? If you have, I might stop the clock.’
Ibrahim tried to smile, but his lips cracked and bled again, so he smiled in his mind because he knew that the German was lying. It didn’t matter what he said – that bomb would go off anyway – and he knew, as the hand turned in the clock-face, that the ticking was counting off the seconds at the end of his mortal life.
‘No?’ the German growled again. ‘You still have nothing to say? Then goodbye, you old goat!’

He heard them leaving his home. He tried to move, but was too weak. He lay there for an eternity, trying to think of his past life, instead thinking of the young woman and the American and St Germain, and then glowing with a radiant, inner peace as he drifted out of himself. The ticking faded away. The time-bomb faded from sight. He had counted off the seconds in his head and he knew that his time had come.
Then his whole world exploded.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Ingrid and Gerry left the Old City by the Damascus Gate, crossed the busy Sultan Suleiman Road, then went up the Nablus Road, heading for their hotel. The sun was still blazing down with unrelenting fierceness, and Ingrid felt herself longing for the rain that would turn Jerusalem green.

Hardly believing that she was here, she glanced back over her shoulder, saw the domes and minarets within the walls of the Old City, gleaming pink and golden in the light beaming down from an azure sky. She looked ahead again, squeezed Gerry's hand, smiled at him, sticking close to him as they made their way along the sidewalk, which was crowded with robed Arabs and Orthodox Jews and young Christians with rucksacks. She felt slightly unreal, as if removed from herself, and squeezed Gerry's hand a second time, wanting to feel skin and bone.

He had been looking straight ahead, his brow furrowed in thought, but now he turned his head to grin at her.
'Sorry,' he said. 'I was distracted. It's all too much for this puny brain.'
'Yes,' she replied. 'The plot thickens with every fresh encounter. And I sometimes feel that the more we know, the less we actually know – that we're just running in circles.'
'I don't think so, Ingrid. I'm pretty sure we're not wasting our time. And as for circles, remember what that old Arab said: *All endings are the beginning of something else; thus the circle is given shape*.'
'So we're about to begin another adventure.'
'Yes, Ingrid, that's it.' He tugged her into him and kissed her on the forehead.
'Let's go for a drink,' he said.

‘No,’ she replied, surprised by her own shamelessness. ‘Let’s go back to our hotel and make love. I want to forget all this.’
‘You know something: I can’t get over the difference between the private and public Ingrid – between the Ingrid who strips naked and lets down her hair and this prim and proper creature walking beside me. Straighten your shoulders, gal! Let your hair down! Let the world see the real you.’
‘No, thanks,’ she said, helplessly blushing. ‘I’m *afraid* of the real me.’
‘Not any more, surely.’ He sounded terribly English. ‘Surely not after what we’ve done together. I mean, didn’t that change you?’
‘When we’re together it’s different. I mean, it’s different when we have our privacy. But outside, in the real world, I can’t forget my father. His influence can’t be shaken off that easily. Unfortunately, I’m still that monster’s child.’
‘Yet you still want to return to the hotel and make love?’
‘Yes, Gerry, in private. And stop looking so smug.’
He grinned and nodded, as if saying he understood, then glanced across at the bus station, which as usual was packed with passengers of every conceivable nationality. Seeing this, he started walking more urgently, his brow furrowed in thought again.
‘*Alchemy*,’ he said eventually, as if savouring the word. ‘How about that? The Great Pyramid, and all those other sites, had *alchemical* purposes.’
She didn’t want to talk about it, but clearly couldn’t avoid it, so inched closer to him as they walked, and asked, ‘So what does it mean? I thought alchemy was a process of turning metal into gold – and certainly that’s what St Germain did.’
‘The original Saint-Germain and the probable keeper of the Tuaoi Stone, namely *Saint* Germain, now being one and the same person,’ he reminded her.
‘Yes, Gerry, I know that.’
‘Anyway,’ he continued, ‘contrary to the widely held belief that alchemy is *only* a chemical process, it’s also, as Helena Barbanell told us, considered to be a *mystical* process, a symbol of spiritual transformation in mankind. Jung, for instance, believed that the alchemical texts were concerned with psychic transformations and symbols rather than chemistry. Gurdjieff also took this view, believing the human body to be a vessel for alchemical change, in the sense that it transmutes lower energies into the greater powers that we already possess but lack the faith to call forth.’

‘*Mercury*!’ Ingrid exclaimed, unable to resist beating him to it. ‘The old Arab said that the Great Pyramid of Cheops represents the Square of *Mercury* – and mercury is one of the two basic elements of alchemical transmutation: male and female, sol and luna, sulphur and… *mercury*.’
‘Right,’ Gerry said.
‘Those elements have to be mixed with some kind of secret fire and heated in a sealed vessel, which marries the elements, which then purify and blacken, this process being known as the *nigredo*. Then, with further heating, the socalled *soul* of the nigredo is driven out of the black mess and turns white, to become the *albedo*. After lots more processes, the substance turns green – the Green Lion – and, finally, red – the Philosopher’s Stone.’
‘Right,’ Gerry said again, actually hugging her with excitement as they passed the site of the Garden Tomb. ‘That’s the process for *chemical* alchemy. However, for Jung and many others those processes were purely symbolic. For instance, the heat that produces the nigredo is a dark night of the soul that ends with the first stage of self-transformation. The other chemical processes are actually further stages in that largely *spiritual* transformation. And the last stage – the Philosopher’s Stone – is actually a symbol of the final complete transformation of mortal man into a new kind of being – a higher, purely spiritual being.’
‘Like that legless, armless, blind old seer in al-Hillah might have been on the way to becoming.’
‘Exactly.’
‘And possibly a being like St Germain.’
‘Yes,’ Gerry said. ‘Maybe.’
As he practically dragged her into the American Colony Hotel, which had once been a pasha’s palace and still retained that atmosphere, his excitement fused with hers and was being transmuted, she realized with a hot flush, into *sexual* excitement. Shocked by this knowledge, then amused and thrilled instead, she let him lead her across the opulent lobby to the Reception desk, where he collected their room key.
‘That’s why,’ he continued, ‘the nineteenth-century alchemist, Mary Anne Atwood, described alchemy as a *philosophical* system, which – and I quote – *by fermenting the human spirit, purifies and finally dissolves it,* unquote. In fact, Synesius, the last author in the renowned VenusParis alchemical manuscripts, had already defined alchemy as a, quote, *mental operation*,

independent of the science of matter, unquote, and – ’
‘And the so-called *magical* number of 1746,’ she couldn’t resist pointing out, ‘being a numerical disguise for the number 666 – the so-called Number of the Beast – was itself the most renowned of alchemical incantations.’
‘Yes,’ Gerry said, briefly annoyed that she had reached that point first. ‘So the magical number of 1746 – or, more precisely, 666 – is obviously related to the *alchemical* properties of the Great Pyramid… and so to the missing tip of that same pyramid.’
Opening the door, he stepped aside to let her enter the expansive room with its beamed ceiling and oriental traceries, then closed and carefully locked the door again. Breathing deeply, leaning back against the wall, he shook his head from side to side and grinned at her.
‘So that’s it,’ he said. ‘That’s the message we’ve been given. The Tuaoi Stone is undoubtedly the missing tip of the Great Pyramid. It’s also a Philosopher’s Stone that can cause spiritual transformation, and possibly *chemical* transformation as well. It is, further, the so-called *Lodestone* or *terrible crystal* of a very ancient race; and its present guardian, Count Saint-Germain, now *Saint* Germain, an original member of that ancient and *magical* civilization, is one of the leading adepts of the remaining descendents of that civilization – a civilization that had discovered the Lodestone, chemically *and* symbolically, and used it to transform the highest of its high priests, or adepts, into creatures who could transcend the material state. And some of those creatures, such as our elusive St Germain, still exist to protect the Philosopher’s Stone, which, in its physical form, is the Tuaoi Stone, or terrible crystal, and in its symbolic form is the so-called Secret Knowledge.’
‘So where *are* they?’ Ingrid asked, feeling frustrated.
‘Ah, yes, there’s the rub!’ He rolled his eyes, approached her and placed his hands on her shoulders. ‘Where are they, indeed?’
She stared at him, amused, but also feeling very sensual, then stood on tiptoe, closed her eyes and waited for him to kiss her. Instead, the room shook slightly, unexpectedly, making her open her eyes again, and even as she saw Gerry glancing at the shuddering window, she heard a distant explosion, obviously emanating from the direction of the Old City.
Gerry rushed across the room to look out the window. He was still there when she reached him, wriggling in beside him, and saw a cloud of smoke

billowing up to the east, obviously from a part of the Moslem Quarter, close to the Lion's Gate.
'Shit,' Gerry said. 'That must've been a bomb. Nothing else could make *that* noise.'
'It might have been a gas explosion.'
'It was a bomb, Ingrid. *Definitely*.'
Even as a trickle of fear coursed through her, the wailing of sirens split the air. Military vehicles and ambulances were obviously racing to the scene of the explosion. She kept staring at that smoke, watched it billowing up over the rooftops, drifting south on the wind and turning the blue sky black above the magnificent golden dome of the Mosque of Omar. Then she remembered Eckernforde, the man who had died in a gas explosion, and the trickle of fear within her became a torrent, her thoughts circling back like the smoke, making her dwell once more on the old Arab they had left only a short while ago.
Unable to endure the wailing of the sirens, she stepped away from the window, straightening up as Gerry turned to face her.
'It's my father's men,' she said.
'What?' he responded, confused.
'Remember that German, Klaus Schiller, whom we interviewed in Eckernforde?'
'Yeah, of course.'
'He was burned to death in his own home after being handcuffed to a gas oven. And remember the woman who sent us to see him? Helena Barbanell, in London? She also was murdered in her own home after talking to us.'
'I don't think – '
'I do. That old Arab we just talked to probably lived in the Moslem Quarter – and was certainly heading in that direction after parting from us. That explosion is too much of a coincidence, Gerry. I think that old Arab has been killed in that explosion. Murdered by my father's men.'
Gerry gave a low whistle. 'Oh, boy,' he said. 'You think your dad's men are right here in Jerusalem?'
'Yes.'
'That's too close.'
She had wanted to let her hair down and take her clothes off, to make passionate love to him and lose herself in him, but now she was only

conscious of the fear that was pummelling her. It wasn't fear for herself – she knew that her father was unlikely to physically harm her – but for Gerry, who would, if he was caught, be forced to pay some terrible price for having stolen her away – which, clearly, is how her father would view her flight from him. So, her heart raced, being pumped by her fear, and she glanced automatically at the room door, as if someone was lurking just outside it.
'We have to get out of here,' she said.
'Correct, Ingrid. We have to get across the Old City and confirm if what you say is true. We have to find out if that old Arab was killed and, if so, who did it.'
'I told you,' Ingrid said. 'The old Arab is dead and my father's men killed him.'
'Probably. Yeah. But we might as well find out for sure, before running away.'
'I *want* to run away.'
'We can't, Ingrid. *We can't*! Apart from anything else, we have to wait for another message from St Germain. We can't let it end here.'
'Damn it, Gerry, you might be killed, too!'
'Come on, Ingrid, let's go.'
Unlocking the door, he ushered her out of the room, then hurriedly led her along the corridor. Even as they made their way down the stairs and into the lobby, they could hear other sirens, alarms, going off all over the Old City. Gerry gave his key to the man in Reception and was just about to rush Ingrid to the exit when the desk clerk grabbed him by the wrist, holding him back, and then shrugged apologetically.
'I'm sorry, sir,' he said. 'I don't mean to be rude, but we've just received a call from the security services, telling us to recommend to all our residents that they remain indoors until the All Clear sounds.'
'The *All Clear*?' Gerry asked in disbelief.
The desk clerk shrugged again. 'There's been an explosion in the Moslem Quarter of the Old City,' he said. 'Apparently an aged Arab, one of the quarter's most respected religious leaders, has been killed in the explosion, and the Moslems naturally believe it was an assassination carried out by the Jews. Already there are demonstrations all over the Old City, some of them violent, and it's expected that the violence will soon spread out into East Jerusalem. The army's being drafted in to protect the area, but they haven't

arrived yet.'
Ingrid just had time to catch Gerry's knowing glance before she was practically dragged by him across the lobby, past other excited residents, and out through the main door. Just as the sunlight dazzled her vision, she heard a siren nearby, rubbed her eyes, blinked, then saw a jeep containing six armed Israeli soldiers racing past her. It growled away along the road, leaving a sudden, startling silence, then she heard rifles firing, a machine gun roaring in the distance, obviously within the walls of the Old City where a battle was raging.
'We won't be able to get in there,' she said to Gerry. 'The soldiers won't let us in. And since we now know for certain that the old Arab has been killed in the explosion, we also know who the assassins are. Not Jews… My father's men.'
The machine gun roared again. The rifles answered immediately. Gerry jerked his head around, looking towards the Old City. Following his gaze, she saw more smoke and heard louder explosions.
'Hand grenades,' Gerry said. 'That'll be the Arabs. Jesus… your dad.' He shook his head in disbelief, then squeezed her hand. 'Okay, Ingrid, now we know his men are here. So let's get the hell out of this hotel and go somewhere else. We have to stay in Jerusalem until St Germain makes contact – but we've got to hide out.'
'Then St Germain may not be able to find us.'
'He's *always* been able to find us and he'll find us again. Now let's pack and get out of here.'
Collecting their key again, they hurried back to the room, locked the door once they were inside, then crossed to the window to look out again. The rifles were still firing, the machine guns roared, the hand grenades exploded; and now some Israeli soldiers were spilling out of a truck parked below to guard the hotel entrance.
'They must believe that the Arabs will soon be attacking us,' Gerry said. 'They might refuse to let us leave the hotel.'
Ingrid looked out over the rooftops of East Jerusalem, at the domes and minarets of the Old City and the black smoke boiling over them, listened to the gunfire and exploding hand grenades and distant shouting, and thought with rage of what her father had begun for his own selfish purposes. The rage burned up and consumed her, releasing her from fear, and then bubbling up

from it came amusement at the thought of her victory.
She had been what her father wanted, a frightened child, a crushed woman, forced by his base sensuality into being ashamed of her own desires, her shame then making her hide her own charms, with stooped shoulders, in the clothes of a middle-aged lady, behind thick-rimmed, ugly spectacles.
What would he think if he knew her now? If he knew of her love for Gerry? What would he do if he saw her wearing tight clothes, her long hair tumbling free?
He would turn purple with rage.
Feeling as though she had been transformed by the very alchemical process that Gerry had discussed, she turned away from the window, drawing Gerry's gaze to her, then faced him when she stood by the bed, the back of her legs pressed against it. Gerry stared at her, sensing something, not quite sure what it was, and when she saw his confusion, his sweet and tender concern, she smiled at him and then removed her glasses and threw them onto the nearest chair.
'I don't *really* need glasses,' she said. 'I can see *you* without them. I only wore them because I was frightened of people and the glasses made me feel hidden. I won't be wearing them anymore.'
'No,' Gerry growled. 'Don't.'
Surprised and thrilled by his husky tone, even more thrilled when he stepped towards her, she stopped him with a raised hand, listened to what was happening outside, heard the roaring machine guns, the snapping rifles, the explosions, then removed the clips from her pinned-up hair, slowly, one by one, and then, as Gerry was taking a deep breath, let her long hair come tumbling down.
'In future, I'll *always* have it like this,' she murmured throatily. 'I *do* hope you like it.'
'Oh, Ingrid… Oh, baby!'
Once more he started towards her, but again her raised hand stopped him. Then she let that hand fall upon her bosom and started unbuttoning her blouse. She did it slowly, with amusement, teasing him, wanting to please him, and when she heard the audible quickening of his breath, she felt like a queen.
She let the blouse hang loose, took a deep breath, slipped it off her shoulders.
'Jesus, Ingrid. Oh, Christ!'

His words came at her as a groaning, a helpless sign of surrender, then she felt herself falling back upon the bed with his body on top of her. He was kissing her, stroking her, stripping the clothes from her, and she raised and lowered herself to help him as his fingers tugged and explored.
She felt deliciously wanton, shameless, almost mischievous in fact, but then started losing herself in his heat and hard muscle. He divided her, entered, radiating heat through her, and she melted from her insides to her skin and then flowed all around him.
She became *him* at that moment. She was him and he was her. They joined together, congealed, burned as a single flame, and then she came to life as him, who was her, and through that found herself.
So she made love like a whore, voluptuous and proud, while outside machine guns roared, rifles snapped, grenades exploded, and the world seemed to come to an end and be renewed on the instant.
Putting an end to her old self, accepting the new, she felt him come inside her, let her spasms match his, gasped, regained her breath, then chuckled and kissed his damp forehead.
'Terrific!' she whispered.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Gerry was feeling really proud of himself when the noise of machine guns, rifles and exploding hand grenades reminded him that a minor war had erupted in Jerusalem and was, by the sound of it, rapidly spreading out around the Old City and approaching the hotel. Sitting up on the bed, he was about to go to the window when an odd sound near the room door made him look in that direction.

An envelope was being slipped under the door. Glancing down at Ingrid, he saw her tangled hair, sleepy eyes and swollen lips, then he slipped out of bed, put on his underpants, went to the door and picked up the envelope. He opened the door and looked in both directions along the corridor, but there was no one in sight. Sighing, yet feeling slightly amused by St Germain's bizarre games, he closed the door and returned to the bed, tearing the envelope open as he did so.
Ingrid, stark naked, sat shamelessly upright and watched him as he withdrew

the contents of the envelope and carefully studied them.
‘Well?’ she asked him.
He shook his head ruefully from side to side while grinning at her. ‘Two air tickets to Calcutta,’ he said, holding the tickets up in front of him and waving them in a teasing manner, ‘along with false passports, plus air and train tickets to take us on to Darjeeling, at the base of the Himalayan Mountains in India. You’d better buy yourself a good pair of hiking boots.’
‘Lord! When do we leave?’
‘Right now, more or less. The first leg of the journey starts this evening, but I assume this is St Germain’s way of also getting us away from your dad’s thugs. So let’s leave the hotel right now and go to the airport, before they actually find out where we are.’
‘Do you think they’ll let us out of the hotel?’ she asked him, indicating the window, through which could be heard the increasingly loud sounds of conflict.
‘It was only *recommended* that we remain in the hotel,’ he told her. ‘And if we’re heading for Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, rather than into the Old City, I don’t think they’ll bother us. So let’s shower and get dressed.’
They shared the shower, soaping one another down, became aroused and rushed back to the bed and made love again. Satiated, satisfied, they wisely took turns with the shower, then dressed, packed their holdalls and left the room.
Downstairs in the lobby, an armed Israeli soldier was standing guard inside the main doors. When Gerry checked outside, he found two other armed soldiers guarding each side of the entrance. Asking one of them if it was okay to take a cab to Ben Gurion Airport, he was told that it was, so he returned to Reception, paid his bill and ordered a cab.
‘Let’s wait outside,’ he said to Ingrid. ‘Let’s see what’s happening.’
Carrying both holdalls, he led Ingrid outside where, while they waited for the cab, they listened to the sounds of battle from the Old City and saw black smoke billowing up into the otherwise bright afternoon sky.
‘A regular little riot,’ he said to Ingrid. ‘Nice to be where the action is.’
‘I don’t think that’s at all funny, Gerry.’
‘So sorry, sweetheart.’
He was stirred to note that even when trying to be severe in that very European manner, Ingrid was (particularly minus specs and with her long

hair falling over her shoulders) a pleasantly attractive young woman, not to say sexy. Suddenly brimming over in a flood of emotion, he put his arm around her, pulling her to him and kissing her pale cheek. She made a soft purring sound, like a cat when its throat is stroked, and was just about to turn in closer to him when the cab arrived.

The sounds of battle had moved out of the Old City and were slowly progressing up the Nablus Road when the cab driver suddenly stood on his brakes and started frantically honking his horn.

Releasing his grip on Ingrid, Gerry glanced around him, noted that a large group of Israeli soldiers were stepping *backwards* along the Nablus Road, as if retreating from an advancing mob, so picked up the holdalls and hurried with Ingrid to the honking cab.

However, just before reaching the cab, he heard another noise – a roaring even louder than the sounds of battle – and then felt the force of a sudden, pummelling wind. Almost swept sideways, he was jerked back by Ingrid, then looked up as the roaring became deafening and the wind beat at him more furiously. Dazzled by the sunlight, briefly blinded by swirling dust, he rubbed his eyes, shook his head to clear it, then looked again and saw, descending rapidly and noisily, a helicopter with no markings on its bodywork.

'Shit!' he muttered. 'What – ?'

Deafened by the roaring, beaten back by the pummelling slipstream of the helicopter, he dropped the holdalls and heard another sharp noise – the screeching of tyres. He also heard Ingrid shouting, first his name, then a warning, and lowered his gaze to the road as a canvastopped truck screeched to a halt just beyond the parked cab, disgorging a lot of heavily armed soldiers, all of them wearing old Nazi SS uniforms, most of them surprisingly youthful.

'Christ!' he said to Ingrid. 'It must be your dad's men!'

Instinctively grabbing Ingrid, her pulled her against him as the cab driver jumped out of his vehicle and fled, the Israeli troopers by the entrance started shouting, and the adolescent soldiers in front of him spread out while lowering their weapons to the firing position.

The helicopter dropped lower, a machine gun roared, then all the soldiers began firing their weapons.

'Get down, Ingrid! *Get down*!'

He pulled her closer to him, heard her gasp as if amplified, then dragged her down the hotel steps, writhing backwards, and tugged her against the nearest wall. The noise was catastrophic. He glanced back up the steps as plaster exploded around the doorway and one of the Israeli soldiers, after jerking wildly like an epileptic, collapsed and bounced, lifeless, down to the road.
'Oh, God!' Ingrid cried. '*No*!'
She turned her head away from the dead man, from that bouncing, rattling corpse, and hid her face in Gerry's chest as he looked back up the steps and saw the other Israeli soldier dropping low and bawling, then quivering to the bucking of his sub-machine gun, which was aimed at the road. More plaster and brick exploded around him, dust spiralled up from the steps. Gerry looked to the front and saw the horde of SS-uniformed adolescents swarming across the road towards the hotel, firing their weapons on the move, screaming like lunatics, some pirouetting convulsively and dropping dead.
'*Don't move, Ingrid*!'
She had started scrabbling across the steps, but he grabbed her and pulled her back, looking up as the helicopter dropped dangerously low, its rotors whipping the air into a tornado, its roar almost deafening.
'Oh, God, *it's my father*!'
Even as Ingrid's breathless, heartbreaking wail of despair stabbed him to the core, Gerry recognized, through the swirling dust, in his panic and confusion, the broadshouldered Wilhelm Zweig, who was leaning out of the shuddering helicopter and bawling instructions to his adolescent troopers through an amplified megaphone.
'*Don't harm the American and the woman*! *Bring them both in alive*!'
Deafened and dazed, Gerry felt a bubble of insane laughter expanding inside him. This whole affair was a bad dream, too ridiculous to be true, yet another Israeli soldier screamed and quivered epileptically as the wall behind him was perforated with bullet holes and spat clouds of dust.
'It's my father! *Oh, God*!'
Hearing that singular wail of grief from the woman he loved, Gerry suddenly vaulted out of himself and became someone else.
He saw the dead Israeli, the rifle and hand grenades that had rattled down the steps now scattered around his tattered, lifeless body like obscene decorations.
He glanced up at the helicopter, saw Zweig hanging out, saw the megaphone,

the rotor blades above, as he pushed Ingrid away from him.
He hardly knew what he was doing. He was a dreamer in his own dream. Ingrid cried out in protest as he hurled himself forward. The dead man was very dead. He knew that when he touched him. He reached down, inexperienced, risking all, and picked up a hand grenade.
'Oh, shit!' he said. 'Jesus!'
He had only seen it done in movies, so that didn't help too much, but he lay on his belly, seeing bullet holes and blood, then rolled onto his back and pulled the pin out of the grenade. He saw the adolescents charging, firing their weapons on the move, then he threw the grenade, saw Ingrid crawling towards him, grabbed her, pulled her to him, fell protectively upon her and hoped that the throw was correct.
'Get them!' Zweig bawled through his megaphone. '*Bring that pair in alive*!'
The hand grenade exploded with an almighty roar, something tearing at the air, rippling through Gerry's senses, and he saw a pall of smoke in which Zweig's stormtroopers were staggering and screaming. They broke, then, and ran as more trucks materialized to disgorge other soldiers, Israelis, tough and trained, firing methodically and precisely, cutting down those in flight like so many ninepins.
Those not dying were screaming, scrambling back into their truck, but were pursued by the Israelis as the vehicle growled into life and lurched forward through a fusillade of gunfire and more scattered explosions.
Gerry looked up, saw the helicopter ascending, watched it shrinking above him, ennobled by sunlight, then looked back at the road and saw Wilhelm Zweig's truck bouncing and swaying through a hail of Israeli gunfire and cascading dust. It soon screeched around a corner with the Israelis in hot pursuit – and then Gerry felt movement beneath him and realized that he was still lying upon Ingrid who, as the sound of battle receded, gave a smile like the dawning sun.
'Oh, my hero!' she crooned.

Zweig couldn't believe it. As his helicopter soared above the rooftops of East Jerusalem he looked down and saw his troopers in his rented truck fleeing from the scene of the debacle. Zweig couldn't believe their incompetence, their woeful lack of courage, and as the sirens continued wailing and more Israeli troop carriers closed in on the hotel, thus blocking off all chance of

escape for his men, he let out a bellow of rage, hammered a fist into the palm of his other hand, but had to keep looking down, transfixed by defeat.

It was more than he could bear. Ingrid's boyfriend, the American, had managed to put Zweig's troopers to flight by simply giving them a taste of their own medicine with a neatly flipped hand grenade.

All that training! That iron discipline and order! All destroyed by an… *amateur*!
'You scum!' Zweig bawled, waving his clenched fist at the truck that was skidding to a halt inside a circle of Israeli troop carriers, under dense, streaming dust. 'May you all rot in hell!'
Finally, just before the helicopter soared too high for him to see properly, he managed to make out his daughter and the American embracing on the stops of the hotel, while a horde of Israeli soldiers – despised Jews swarming like ants on an anthill – appeared from all directions to fill the streets around the hotel and capture the last of his men.
Zweig let out a cry of rage and vowed to himself that he wouldn't rest until he had Ingrid, the American *and* St Germain in his clutches.
'Now get me out of this Jewish cesspit!' he bawled at the pilot. 'I can't stand the stench of it!'
Too frightened to speak, the pilot nodded and obeyed; then the helicopter shuddered and climbed rapidly towards the sun, carrying Wilhelm Zweig, shocked and outraged, away from his personal hell on earth.

Book Two Ends

Also available in Kindle:
The Lodestone: Book One The Pure at Heart
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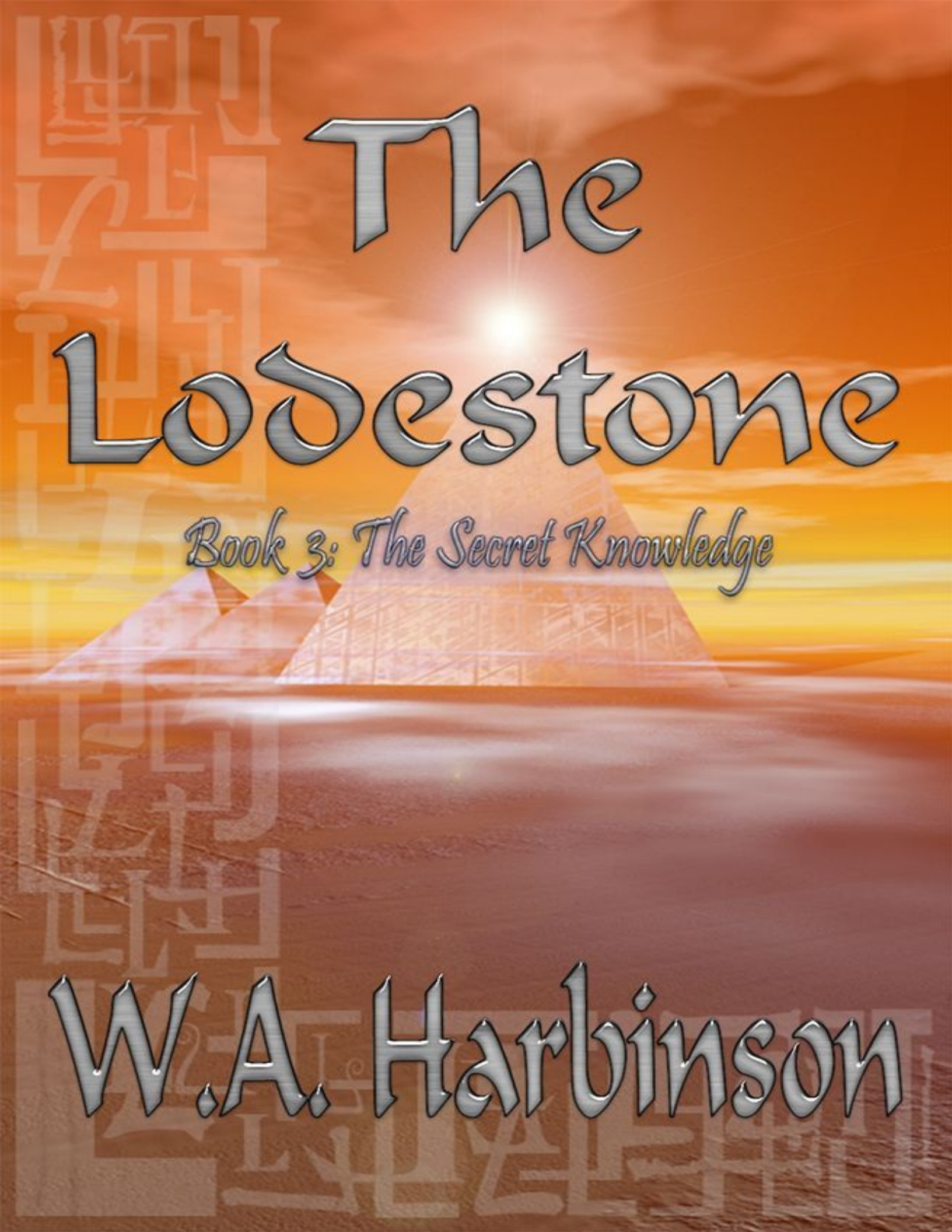
The Lodestone
Book 3: The Secret Knowledge
W.A. Harbinson

It is said that whoever holds the Lodestone will own the entire world…

It was originally the apex of the Great Pyramid of Egypt. Its function was to create fusion between Earth and the Cosmos. It holds the key to the infinite mysteries of the

universe. And it has been missing for centuries…
Wilhelm Zweig, ageing master-criminal, is determined to find it – and with it the key to immortality.

But in his way stands the legendary Count de Saint Germain, history's most mysterious figure, believed to be the protector of the magical stone. And against him is Gerry Remick, a young American with a passion for unexplained phenomena – and for Zweig's unhappy daughter, Ingrid.

Together, and relentlessly pursued by the evil Zweig, Gerry and Ingrid embark upon a dangerous quest for the
Lodestone, an epic journey that takes them through Europe and the Orient, past the sites of the Seven Wonders of the World, and on to a final magical confrontation on the summit of the Earth…

First published in Great Britain in 1989 by Sphere Books (London) as *The Lodestone*

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ISBN 0 7474 0542 5
This ebook edition published in 2013 by W. A. Harbinson

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Designed in the Isle of Wight, Great Britain, by www.inkdigital.org

Book Three
The Secret Knowledge

Chapter One

St Germain had thoughtfully arranged for Gerry and Ingrid to have a few days' rest in Calcutta before going on to Darjeeling; and Gerry insisted that they recover from jet lag by making love until midnight local time, after which, as he helpfully pointed out, they could sleep arm in arm like babies and awaken feeling refreshed and normal. This they did, since Ingrid now loved lovemaking, and indeed they both awakened refreshed and more prepared to face the disorientating strangeness of India.

'Calcutta's the largest of all Indian cities,' Gerry informed Ingrid as they regained their breath in bed, having indulged themselves once more upon wakening, 'and is, in fact, the second biggest in the British Commonwealth, outranked only by London. It spreads over 270 square miles, has a population of approximately ten million souls, and is filled with industrial plants and textile mills, most processing jute.'

'That's fascinating, Gerry.'
'You think so?'
'Absolutely.'
'I like learning these little facts. It makes me feel more

at home.'

Aware that they hadn't seen the last of Ingrid's father, but convinced that he would not be able to trace them for some time, they delighted in their luxurious accommodation (paid for in advance by 'a European gentleman who does not wish to be named') in the Oberoi Grand Hotel in Jawahharlal Nehru Road, overlooking the sweeping lawns of the Maiden, and during the next couple of days used it as a base for their exploration of the vast, noisily overwhelming city.

Glowing beautifully after their first night and morning of passionate lovemaking, Ingrid more than once tried to persuade Gerry to take her to the Ashutosh and Indian museums, the Marble Palace or the various temples and mosques of the sprawling city; but he had no intention of wasting his time on seeing things he could see in illustrated books. So he insisted, instead, upon seeing the *real* India, which was, according to him and clearly to Ingrid's horror, to be found in Howrah Station, where hundreds of passengers hung out of the carriage windows like bunches of dark grapes, whole families camped out on the platforms for days until they could depart, and peddlers of rice and sweetmeats, water vendors, tea-serving waiters, newsboys and rampaging, shrieking children added their relentless clamour to the cacophony of the hundreds of loudly chattering Bengalis and Hindus, the bawling of porters, and the whistling and clanging of the oil-covered, red-rusted locomotives, which, in clouds of smoke and fountains of steam, were disturbingly spectral.

'The *real* India,' Gerry said. 'Not your usual tourist rubbish. These are the sights, sounds and smells that you'll never forget.'

'It's awful,' Ingrid said candidly. 'I can't stand it. Let's get out of here.'
'You're joking,' he responded. 'You can't mean that. Let's do some exploring.'
Making it perfectly clear that she was repelled by the swarm of humanity that virtually lived in or passed through the smoky, chaotic station, Ingrid persisted in trying to guide Gerry towards some culture; but considering himself already well educated, his brain already crammed with facts, he instead turned time and again to the exotic hustle and bustle of the station; and when in need of a change only took her out of it to join the throng of penniless peasants and holy men in dhotis and saris, who poured by bus, car, truck, bicycle, ox-cart, rickshaw and foot across the immense, cantilevered Howrah Bridge, its web of girders casting shadows on the muddy, slow-flowing Hooghly river, the shores of which were crammed with barbers and masseurs who plied their trade by the water's edge while the sacred cows roamed amongst them, untouchable, safe.
The shores of the Hooghly frightened Ingrid even more than the station had, particularly during the evenings when the atmosphere changed dramatically,

becoming unfriendly, deep-shadowed and threatening. She certainly smiled more readily when, after two exhausting days in the seething city, they left, took a forty-five-minute flight to Bagdogra, and boarded the famous Darjeeling Himalayan Railway 'toy' train at New Jalpaiguri, for the seven-hour journey to Darjeeling.

'I feel like a kid again,' Gerry said. 'It's like being on a ride in Disneyland.'

'It's lovely,' Ingrid told him, relieved, as she was, to be out of Calcutta. 'I'm enchanted. Now *this* is the India *I* love. I can't wait to get started.'

The 'toy' train consisted of three coaches and a baby locomotive that huffed and puffed its way laboriously along a two-foot gauge track, first winding through the solid walls of vegetation in the dense forest just outside Bagdogra, then beginning the exceptionally steep, twelvemiles-per-hour climb uphill, until the forest had been replaced by a lush green landscape of terraced tea plantations that rose, one on top of the other, to a crystalclear sky.

While Ingrid observed the scenery with eyes brightened by delight, Gerry, who preferred the squalor of urban life to picturesque landscapes, found himself wondering just what would be in store for them once they arrived at Darjeeling. They were heading for the Himalayas, and he wondered why this was so; wondered if those legendary peaks held St Germain's secret lair.

'And why not?' he asked Ingrid. 'To the Tibetans, the Himalayan peaks are the sacred ground for an awful lot of gods and demons, and are credited with supernatural powers of defence. In fact, so sacred was Kanchenjunga considered to be, the British expedition of 1955 turned back five feet from the summit in order not to offend their Sherpas. The area hasn't been explored much at all, and to hide in it wouldn't be too difficult.'

He caught his first glimpse of Kanchenjunga from the small village of Kurseong, where the train's track ran along Main Street and the shops were so close that the passengers could haggle with the vendors without leaving their seats.

While Ingrid purchased a silk scarf from one of the shopkeepers who was only an arm's length away from the window of her coach, Gerry contented himself with studying the snow-capped peaks of Kanchenjunga.

The names of the mountains reflected a mystical tradition, with the highest of them all, Everest, being the Mother of the Earth, Annapurna translating as Giver of Life, and the mountain richest in mythology – the one he was

looking at, Kanchenjunga – being the Five Treasures of the Eternal Snows, since the Tibetans believed that the God of Wealth lived there, storing in its five peaks his five treasures: gold, silver, copper, corn, and sacred books… perhaps, in fact, the Secret Knowledge… the Philosopher's Stone.

'I wonder where we'll end up,' Gerry said to Ingrid.

'I don't care,' she replied. 'Right now I'm just enjoying the trip. I think I'm in heaven.'

'You *look* like you're in heaven. You're all suntanned and glowing.'

'I don't want to remember the past or even think about the future. I just want to soak in the landscape and live for the minute.'

'Good thinking, Ingrid.'

Leaving Kurseong, the 'toy' train continued its journey up through gloriously varied, exotic scenery, moving so slowly that every car on the adjoining road passed it easily and children were forever jumping onto the running boards of the coaches to talk, make faces, or beg for money.

Ingrid seemed ecstatic, more so as the train climbed higher, but Gerry started feeling confused. On the one hand fascinated by what he was seeing, he was, on the other, becoming increasingly disorientated, overwhelmed, almost crushed, by the distant, snow-capped mountains, obsessed with the thought that they might not be distant for too long, might in fact be his final destination, the place from which he would not return.

This thought was unavoidable, unshakable, frightening, and as the 'toy' train climbed higher yet and the air became more rarefied, he felt himself becoming light-headed and more divorced from himself, as if he was indeed being prepared for some dramatic, irrevocable change.

For this very reason he smiled and joked a lot with Ingrid, but with each passing hour, with each subtle change of scenery, he felt himself slipping into another, more alien skin, burning with a disturbing mixture of excitement and fear.

'It's really weird,' he said, 'but I'm still convinced we're being watched, that somehow or other St Germain has his eye on us.'

'I feel the same,' Ingrid admitted. 'I keep imagining I'm being stared at. The most innocent glance makes me nervous. I'm growing so paranoid.'

'Yeah,' Gerry said. 'Right.'

Eventually, after nearly seven hours, the journey ended at the world's highest railway station, Ghoom, at 8,000 feet, which was 1,000 feet above Darjeeling

itself.
Exhilarated and fearful, mentally alert and physically exhausted, he and Ingrid explored the brightly painted redand-blue Tibetan Buddhist monastery of Ghoom – where the monks were of the yellow sect and worshipped a large image of the Coming Buddha – then took a rickshaw down to the Oberoi Mount Everest hotel on Gandhi Road, with its glorious views of Kanchenjunga.
St Germain was being kind to them, since they soon discovered that they were able to view the mystical mountain even as they lay naked together on the bed and made love, which they did often throughout that first afternoon, evening and morning. The next day, satiated for a while, they checked if there were any messages for them, fully expecting to find one from St Germain. Upon being told that there were none, and that their suite had been booked for 'a maximum of one week' and paid for in advance by 'a well-dressed European gentleman', Gerry decided that there was little they could do other than let events take their course, meanwhile enjoying the delights of the town.
'Let's go out and explore,' he said to Ingrid. 'We might as well be normal tourists for the time being. Have we any cash left?'
'Enough to last for a couple of weeks if we're economical.'
'Aren't we always, my pet?'
He couldn't help but feel pleased at the thought of having spent most of the money Ingrid had pilfered from her monstrous dad. Any thought of Zweig was inevitably tinged with dread, but the fear *could* be defeated, at least temporarily, by imagining the fat pig flushed with rage. He must have been flushed a lot like that since Ingrid fled from the hotel in Cairo, and Gerry savoured his little bubble of joy at the thought of Zweig suffering so.
Yet the fear always returned. It was something he hid from Ingrid. He joked to hide his concern over where they were headed and, perhaps more relevant, his fear that the actions of her father must be secretly tormenting her.
Her escape from Zweig's clutches had changed her profoundly, given her self-esteem and strength, but Gerry knew that she still felt dread and shame in the knowledge of what her father was – a murderer, a monster, possibly a psychopath – and he sensed that this bitter knowledge was something she had not yet learned to live with. She couldn't accept that it was true, didn't want to believe it, and would not be a completely whole person while Zweig's

shadow hung over her.
A confrontation with Zweig would come sooner or later; and Gerry, while occasionally frightened for himself when thinking about that, was even more concerned for Ingrid and what such a confrontation might do to her.
As if contaminated with Ingrid's fear, reminded of how far from home he was, and suddenly realizing that he didn't even know if he would ever return from here, he left their room in the hotel to let Ingrid shower and dress, padded furtively down the stairs, picked up one of the public telephones just off the opulent lobby, called his mother's New York number and, after considerable difficulty, eventually managed to make contact.
'Hi, Mom, it's me.'
'Who?'
'Me. Gerry. Your son!'
'Gerry! Where *are* you? Why haven't you come home yet? I'm in the middle of a game of bridge and the girls keep asking embarrassing questions about you. I mean, why aren't you *home*, dear?'
'I'm in India, Mom.'
'I *beg* your pardon?'
'In India. I can't explain everything just now, but I'm calling from India.'
'You're still… *sight-seeing*, Gerry?'
'Yes, Mom, you could say that. I mean, I'm travelling around here on my own, living cheaply and enjoying it, so I'm not sure when I'll be coming home.'
'You're living… *cheaply*?'
'Yes, Mom, real cheap. I have a rucksack and I hitchhike everywhere and I'm having a great time.'
Even as he said that, he had the distinct feeling that he was being watched. Glancing over his shoulder at the busy hotel lobby, he thought he saw eyes staring at him, blinked, then saw nothing, scanned the people in the lobby to no effect and then felt pretty foolish. He was brought back to reality by the sound of his mother's voice.
'It sounds absolutely dreadful. That country is filthy, son. I just hope you're taking malaria tablets and avoiding all food and drink that doesn't come in sealed containers.'
'I just called to say I love you.'
'Well, that's very sweet, dear. But I suspect that there's more to it than that…

Is some *woman* involved?'
'Of course not, Mom.'
'Not that awful German's daughter!'
'I promise you, Mom, I'm travelling around on my own. There's no woman involved.'
'So when are you coming home?'
'What's that, Mom? I can't hear you.'
'I said, when are you planning to return? It's been *weeks* since I've seen you.'
'I just rang to say don't worry. I mean, I'm having a ball, Mom. I just rang to say I love you, that I'll try to keep in touch. I'm probably going hiking in the mountains, so I won't be near a phone for a while.'
She sighed melodramatically. 'If you say so, dear.'
He used the uncomfortable pause that followed to scan the busy lobby again. He noticed a man turning away from him, almost *too* quickly, and watched him move off through the other people and turn up the stairs. *Had* that man been watching him? Was he only imagining it? He sucked his breath in and let it out to make his heart settle down again.
'I'm alright, Mom, I promise,' he said without feeling too confident. 'You don't have to worry.'
'I *do* hope you're not involved with some woman.'
'Cross my heart, hope to die.'
He heard her sigh again. 'Well, fine. Enjoy yourself. Just remember to avoid local food and drink and not talk to strangers.'
'I'll remember, Mom. Honest. I've had a good time so far. And, I repeat, don't worry if you don't hear from me for some time – I'll write sooner or later. Okay?'
'Well…' Her hesitation was profound. 'If you insist… I suppose.'
'Goodbye, Mom.'
'You take care, dear.'
He hung up, feeling guilty, wiping sweat from his brow, wondering when he actually would return home – if, indeed, he would ever do so. Turning away from the phone, he glanced around the lobby, hoping to catch someone staring at him, but the people, mostly middle-aged men and women, seemed routinely preoccupied.
Feeling foolish in his nervousness, he returned to the room, found Ingrid washed and dressed, felt like stripping the clothes off her again, but instead

growled, ‘Let’s go.’
‘Of course, darling,’ she murmured in an indescribably sensual, seductive manner. ‘Whatever you say, dear.’
They left the hotel.

Chapter Two

Darjeeling, if thoroughly enchanting, was a place to be *climbed*. Built on the side of a steep hill, overlooked by the splendour of the snow-capped peaks of the Kanchenjunga mountain range, it sat on a series of natural landings linked by steep flights of steps and narrow, almost vertical lanes. The top level of the village was the main tourist area, with the larger hotels, restaurants, cafés, shops and attractive villas lined along the busy Mall, or Main Street; the middle level was more authentically Indian, with smaller hotels, more shops and cafés; and the lower level was the most interesting of all, being filled with Darjeeling’s working population of Nepalese, Tibetans, Bhutias and Lepchas, most in colourful tribal costumes, forming an exotic, noisy throng in the bazaars and markets.

Determined to keep active while he waited to be contacted, and not wishing to give either himself or Ingrid time to dwell uncomfortably on Wilhelm Zweig or the magical unknown into which St Germain was drawing them, Gerry dutifully led Ingrid around the town and surrounding areas, but always circled back automatically, as if in a trance, to the ravishing, three-tiered town, seduced by its natural beauty, exoticism and vibrancy, but even more than that, by the thought that he and Ingrid would possibly soon be facing the elusive St Germain.

That expectation was exciting, but also increased his fear, and as he tried to pass the time, seeing the sights, playing the tourist, he was increasingly frustrated by his impotence at this stage, by his knowledge that he was now at the mercy of St Germain’s whims. His paranoia was building, perhaps even infecting Ingrid: he was haunted by shadows, by the sounds of unexpected movement, imagining eyes upon him, agents always on his tail, and was concerned that those in pursuit would not necessarily be St Germain’s allies.

No, Zweig would not give up. He would be following them as well. And if Gerry and Ingrid, at least so far, were being *guided* by St Germain, they would not be handled with such care if caught by Zweig's thugs.

Gerry felt trapped, caught between opposing forces, so trying to keep himself busy, yet also looking for helpful signs, he continued to explore the teeming town.

'They *might* approach us,' he said. 'But they might be expecting us to find them. Without guidelines, there's nothing we can do except keep our eyes open.'

'The more I do that,' Ingrid said, 'the more I imagine things. Even my own shadow scares me now.'
'Maybe that's part of the test as well. We'll just have to live with it. Let's check out a few cafés.'
If the lower part of the town was rendered exotic by its hordes of brightly costumed Indians, it was also noteworthy for its collection of Western hitchhikers, adventurers and shady characters who drifted restlessly from one meeting place to another, trading anecdotes and information, buying and selling drugs, and generally offering Gerry a different kind of danger and intrigue.
'These guys are brigands,' he told Ingrid. 'They're all here for adventure. They're the last of the existentialists, living just for the moment, into drugs and sex and quick thrills, contemptuous of capitalism, of *materialism*, into spiritual things.'
'They're mostly just bums,' Ingrid responded in her more practical way. 'And they all need a bath.'
'But they know what goes on here, Ingrid, and they might tell us something.' Using this as his excuse, he dragged the reluctant Ingrid down the steep steps and narrow lanes of the town to is colourful lower level. Once there, he led her from one noisy café to another, smiling brightly enough to encourage any passing stray, whom he would then engage in lengthy, sometimes drunken or drugged conversation about quantum mechanics, the Theory of Relativity, the possibility of life after death, the mind-expanding potential of hallucinogenic drugs, and the lore and lure of the magical mountains that loomed over the

town.
He was careful not to mention the real reason for his and Ingrid's presence in Darjeeling, and, when asked, lied blandly that they were here simply as tourists. But during those conversations, with the air smelling of curry, beer, cigarette smoke and marijuana, filled with the cacophony of tinnily amplified Western music, he learned from more than one long-haired, bearded youth that it *was* generally believed that the sacred mountains of the Himalayas, particularly Kanchenjunga, harboured a secret colony, or colonies, of ancient mystics.
'Yeah, man, this place is *weird*,' he was told. 'Strange things happen in the mountains. There's hidden valleys up there, fabulous riches, strange forces, a lot of things that can't be explained and make the Sherpas real nervous.'
'I'm with you,' Gerry said to his stoned friend, 'I've heard a few stories.'
'Fucking A,' his new friend said, drinking beer, smoking a joint. 'But it's best not to look into it too carefully, man, 'cause that can bring you bad luck. I mean, people disappear. They don't ever find the bodies. The Sherpas say they got too close to forbidden places and were stolen away. There are *weird* bastards up there. No one knows who they are. Some say they're Tibetan monks, but others say they don't even come from Earth, that they're not of this time.'
'Wow!' Gerry exclaimed. 'Far out!'
'You ever see the lights, man? Lots of *strange* lights up there. People climbing up there have been *attacked* by those lights and driven all the way back down the slopes. There are places you just can't go. You even get the lights right here, flying down from Kanchenjunga. They're really *weird* lights – disc-shaped, like goddamned UFOs – and they're often seen flying down from the mountains and hovering over Darjeeling. Sometimes they land. You can see them glowing beyond the lowlands. Then they ascend again, real quick, no noise, and blink out in the higher slopes of Kanchenjunga, just like light bulbs. *UFOs*, man! Really *weird*…'
That news changed Gerry's attitude, encouraged him out of the cafés, seduced him into studying the mountains and exploring, particularly in darkness, the hills around that jewel of a town and the base of the lower slopes.
He always took Ingrid with him, frightened of being parted from her, and he loved her more than ever in those dark, scented hills, her eyes reflecting the

moon, her long hair blowing freely in the breeze and touched by the starlight. The stars were in her eyes and hair, seemed to make her white skin gleam. He realized how much she had changed, how much of a woman she was now, and wondered how much of the change, that magical metamorphosis, had been caused by the extraordinary experiences that St Germain had put them through these past few weeks.

So he walked her over the hills, in love with her, fearful for her, but after a few days, seeing nothing but moon and stars, took her back down to Darjeeling, to another smoky, noisy café, and, holding her hand, gazing deep into her eyes, reminded her that this was, in all likelihood, their last evening in town.

'It's got to be tonight,' he told her, shouting against the noise of the café, scanning the other tables for a familiar face amongst the mostly young men and women who were drinking beer and coffee and smoking pot in a blue haze. 'Our room was booked until tomorrow. That means that whatever's going to happen has to happen tonight.'

'Did you *see* it?' their long-haired, bearded new friend asked, leaning over their table, breathing the stench of beer into their faces while he puffed on a joint, his eyes large and stoned. 'It was a UFO. Jesus Christ! Or at least some kind of strange light. It came down from Kanchenjunga, hovered over Main Street, then shot off and stopped above Observatory Hill and seemed to settle down on it. A couple of guys zapped up to there. They took a jeep and went up there like bats out of hell. As they were driving there, half of Darjeeling was watching that goddamned light. It illuminated the Mahakala Temple, pulsating rapidly, then dimming; then it flared up and rose to the sky again and shot back towards the mountains. Then the guys in the jeep returned. They both looked a bit shaken. They said they got there too late – that the light had gone by the time they arrived – but that the ground around the Mahkala Cave, the Bhutian shrine devoted to Siva, was charred black and warm to the touch, as if lightly scorched. Those guys went off to get drunk in another café, but they were clearly scared shitless.'

'When did all this happen?' Gerry asked.

'About half an hour ago,' was the reply. 'Jesus, man, what a sighting!'

'That's it!' Gerry heard himself exclaim without thinking, as if the voice belonged to someone else. 'Come on, Ingrid, let's go.'

Taking her by the hand, he dragged her out of her chair, then out of the noisy

café, and kept tugging at her as they hurriedly made their way up the steep steps and almost vertical lanes, through the various levels of the crowded and exotic hillside town, until, out of breath and excited, they reached their hotel. They saw him immediately.
It was not St Germain but his equally strange partner. He was standing in the lobby, close to the main doors, wearing a light tropical suit with white shirt and old-school tie, his hands clasped together in front of him, his wintry-grey, almost silvery eyes staring steadily, hypnotically at them, a slight smile on his lips.
'Hello,' he said, his voice deep, melodious and exquisitely caressing. 'I often use the name Christian Grabbe, but you may call me…'
Here he paused to lower his head in a slight, theatrical bow, his smile one of dry amusement and mockery… and diabolically charming.
'You may call me… *Mephisto*.'

Chapter Three

As he stared at Christian Grabbe, or Mephisto, perhaps even Mephistopheles, Gerry felt himself surrendering to those silvery-grey, mesmeric eyes, to that quietly seductive smile, and realized that once more he *wanted* the man with an insatiable, unnatural, shaming lust.

He had come such a long way for this and now hardly knew how to react, let alone what to ask. The man staring so hypnotically at him, as if sensing his discomfort, smiled smoothly and stroked his ink-black hair, his amusement plain on his diabolically handsome features.

'Why are you blushing?' he asked, his voice mellifluous. 'Does my name mean that much to you?'
Gerry didn't reply. He felt confused and embarrassed. He'd never had a homosexual experience in his life, and yet he felt a very powerful need for the man smiling so teasingly at him – as indeed he'd had each time he'd seen the man before.
'It's alright,' Mephisto said softly. 'There's nothing to be ashamed of. *Everyone* feels that way about me. It's part of my curse.'
'Your… *curse*?'

‘Try looking at Miss Zweig,’ the man said, ignoring the question. ‘*She* wants me as well. If you truly love her, your jealousy will protect you from what *you’re* feeling for me. You can *talk* to me, then.’
The mockery was low-key and unmalicious, almost weary, perhaps *self*-mocking. Gerry glanced at Ingrid and noted her blushing cheeks and glistening gaze as she focused on Mephisto.
Yes, she wanted Mephisto, her whole body was straining towards him, and Gerry filled up with a fierce, blinding resentment that transcended his own lust. His desire for Mephisto fell away, just as Mephisto had said it would, and he was able to view the man’s extraordinary charm with surprising detachment.
‘Mephisto?’ he asked. ‘What *Mephisto*? Obviously that can’t be your real name, so just who the hell *are* you?’
Mephisto smiled again. ‘So many questions,’ he crooned. ‘Which one should I answer first?’
‘Why *Mephisto*?’ Gerry repeated. ‘Any relationship, by any chance, to Mephistopheles? Are you an old friend of Doctor Faust?’
‘Doctor Faust? *What* Doctor Faust?’
‘It’s generally thought that the name Mephistopheles was invented by Georg Faust, the sixteenth-century magician and charlatan, famed in legend and literature as the man who sold his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power.’
‘Really? I was conceived by a magician and charlatan? How terribly undignified!’
‘I didn’t say you were *conceived* by him. I just think you might have adapted his name, that’s all.’
‘And why would I do that, young sir?’ Mephisto asked, his smiling lips moist and sensual.
‘Why? I’d love to know. Christopher Marlowe described his fictitious Mephistopheles as a fallen angel, torn between satanic pride and dark despair. Goethe, on the other hand, saw *his* Mephistopheles as cynically witty and cold-hearted. Which one are you?’
Mephisto shrugged, clearly amused and pained at once. ‘What does it matter? Your Faust was not well known in life, but only in death, his posthumous fame due to the anonymous author of a collection of tales about the ancient magi: wise men skilled in the occult sciences – ’

‘Tales retold in the Middle Ages,’ Gerry interjected, ‘about other famed wizards, such as Merlin, Albert Magnus, and Roger Bacon.’
‘Quite so. And Mephistopheles was recreated in those magic manuals as Faust. As such he is a creature of pure fiction. Why, then, should I be him?’
‘Maybe Mephistopheles *wasn’t* a creature of pure fiction. Maybe, like a lot of fiction, he was more real than reality.’
‘Well, I’m glad I at least seem *real* to you. That *will* be helpful.’
‘I want to know why you call yourself Mephisto in the twentieth century.’
Mephisto shrugged again. ‘My name is Mephisto,’ he said. ‘That’s all I know. It is the name I was given.’
‘By whom?’ Ingrid asked, blushing more brightly when Mephisto stared directly at her.
‘By St Germain,’ he said. ‘*Naturally*.’
Gerry felt oddly chilled, suddenly filled with trepidation, caught in what seemed increasingly to be some kind of wide-awake dream. Glancing distractedly around the hotel’s lavish lobby, with its impressive mixture of the traditional and the new, he noted, with a shock, that most of the women nearby were staring either blatantly or surreptitiously at the man calling himself Mephisto, some of them visibly flushed, as Ingrid was, others obviously embarrassed or confused by their own helpless behaviour. Disturbed, he returned his gaze to Mephisto, wondering who, or what, he was truly facing.
‘And who’s St Germain?’ he asked. ‘Did *he* sell his soul to the devil in exchange for knowledge and power?’
Mephisto stopped smiling. ‘I wouldn’t know,’ he said softly.
‘Or wouldn’t say?’ Gerry ventured.
‘You are impertinent.’
‘I just want to *know*.’
‘We don’t always get what we want. Shall we continue this talk sitting down?’
Without waiting for a reply, he turned slightly sideways, indicating with a nod of his head that they should all take a seat around one of the low tables in the lobby. Seated, he clasped his hands under his chin and stared at them with his silvery-grey eyes.
‘So,’ he said, ‘you have actually come this far. You must be very keen to meet St Germain… or to get your hands on the Tuaoi Stone.’

‘We don’t want the Tuaoi Stone,’ Gerry said. ‘And we *never* actually wanted it. At first we simply wanted to warn its keeper that Wilhelm Zweig was after it.’
‘Which we knew.’
‘We soon found *that* out. And then, once we’d started our search, and you’d placed various clues in front of us, leading us on with plane tickets and maps, we just had to see it through to the end.’
‘*What* end?’ Mephisto asked, his fine eyebrows raised in amusement. ‘Who, or what, do you hope to find?’
Gerry looked at Ingrid and was shocked to note that she was still staring at Mephisto, her cheeks flushed, her eyes glowing with adoration, her lips slightly parted. Now aware of Mephisto’s sexual magnetism, knowing it to be at once unnatural and irresistible, he still couldn’t help feeling betrayed by her shameless desire for him.
He turned back to Mephisto.
‘I don’t know,’ he said. ‘I can’t work it out. I only know you could have stopped us at any point in the journey
– your powers are such that you could have done that – but instead you protected us and led us this far. That old Arab in Israel said we were being tested. Tested for *what*?’
‘That is not for me to say,’ Mephisto replied. ‘You will have to ask St Germain.’
‘I will – when I see him. So when will that be?’
‘To see St Germain you must go to him, and that journey, in its simplicity and hardship, is the final, most dangerous test.’
‘I thought our journey had ended here.’
‘The journey has ended for Miss Zweig,’ Mephisto said, glancing at Ingrid. ‘But for you, the real journey has just begun.’
‘The *real* journey?’
‘Your final test. The one you must take alone.’
‘I won’t go anywhere without Ingrid,’ Gerry responded automatically.
Mephisto smiled in weary cynicism. ‘Oh, yes, you will.’
Ingrid looked confused, first glancing at Gerry, then blushing with what seemed like guilt and lowering her head.
‘I’m going wherever Gerry goes,’ she whispered. ‘I won’t leave him at this point.’

Mephisto spread his hands in the air. ‘Well, we will see.’
The way he had said it chilled Gerry to the bone, compelling him to recall all that he and Ingrid had experienced so far, convincing him that in becoming involved with Mephisto and St Germain, he was getting in over his head and could easily drown.
These were not normal people – they were possibly inhuman – and as he studied Mephisto, wondering who or *what* he was, he thought of the fine line between good and evil. Mephisto, through St Germain, had protected him and Ingrid from Zweig, but why would they bother doing that when even Zweig was no threat to them?
They were testing him – they had let him know that much – but he didn’t know why… and what he didn’t know frightened him.
‘Anyway,’ he said, hoping he sounded calmer than he felt, ‘where would I find the elusive St Germain, assuming I *did* attempt that final test?’
Mephisto pointed in the general direction of the windows at the far side of the lobby. ‘Up there,’ he said.
‘Kanchenjunga?’
‘Correct.’
Gerry thought of the far-off, snow-capped mountain peaks and the shroud of clouds that constantly hung over them, obscuring the summit. Even experienced climbers had been lost or killed in trying to conquer those slopes, so he couldn’t imagine himself, born and bred in New York City, getting anywhere near them. The very idea that he might do so was ridiculous.
‘St Germain’s up there?’ he asked.
‘Yes,’ Mephisto replied. ‘I myself came down from there a short while ago.’
‘That weird light – the one that everyone thinks was a UFO. You came down in that?’
‘Not *in* it. *Of* it. Part of it. But I can’t quite explain that.’
‘You mean it wasn’t a flying saucer?’
‘People have been seeing such phenomena for years and imagining they were seeing flying saucers. If a flying saucer is what you think you’ve seen, then that’s what it is.’
‘Except that it isn’t.’
‘No, I’m afraid not. At least not in the widely accepted sense. It’s a means of transportation, certainly, but it’s not actually *physical*.’
‘Are *you* physical?’

‘Yes. Right now I am. At least physical in the sense that you know it – a highly deceptive sense.’
‘I’m confused.’
‘You will learn more if you go up the mountain – if your courage sustains you.’
Gerry glanced at Ingrid, saw her flushed cheeks and radiant eyes, hated her with all the venom of true love and then looked around him. The women at the other tables, most bored with their husbands, were still staring helplessly at Mephisto, as if at a movie star. Gerry wanted to scream.
‘What I’ve learned about you so far,’ he managed to say in a civil manner. ‘Is that all true?’
‘Substantially, yes.’
‘What do you mean by *substantially*?’
‘You have yet to learn the truth, the whole truth, and nothing *but* the truth.’
‘Which I can only learn by talking to St Germain.’
‘Correction: which you can only learn by going up the mountain.’
‘I won’t do that. It’s the one thing I won’t attempt. I *can’t* do it and you know it, so why ask me to try it?’
‘It’s surprising what one can do if one has to – and in this case, you have to.’
Gerry felt foolish, as if performing in a pantomime. He wanted to shake the truth out of Mephisto, but knew that he couldn’t.
‘So you and St Germain are hiding somewhere up there in the mountains. What else is up there?’
‘Just ourselves and those like us. Those chosen to be the keepers of the Secret Knowledge, without which the Tuaoi Stone is useless.’
‘So why do I have to climb a mountain I’m obviously not equipped to climb? Why can’t I just hire a helicopter and get up there the easy way?’
‘You can’t do that, my clever young friend,’ Mephisto replied calmly, ‘because a helicopter won’t help you find what you’re looking for. No, the only way to St Germain is up the ancient Sherpas’ path to the monasteries that have been there for centuries. Once there, in the monasteries, assuming you ever get there, you will learn what you need to know in order to take you even higher. We are very well hidden up there – and that route is the final test.’
‘I’ve come as far as I’m going to go,’ Gerry insisted. ‘Even your secrets aren’t worth the risk of attempting to climb that mountain. I won’t expose

Ingrid to that risk, so I'm going no farther.'
'Whether or not you succeed remains an issue of doubt, but you will certainly make the attempt.'
'What makes you so sure?'
'Because we have ordained it.' Mephisto raised his right eyebrow, smiled with cynical charm, then turned and offered a different kind of smile to Ingrid. She stared back as if hypnotised. He reached out and placed his hand on her knee, as if already possessing her. 'Are you feeling alright, my dear?' he asked, his voice mellifluous and seductive. 'You look rather… *warm*.'
'I'm alright,' Ingrid whispered.
'You've been extremely courageous to come all this way. It would not be right to make you climb the mountain, so perhaps you should stay here.'
'With *you*?' Gerry asked.
Mephisto didn't bother to turn his head when he gave his reply. 'Perhaps I'll stay here. Perhaps not. Who knows what the night will bring?'
'I'm not going up that mountain,' Gerry insisted. 'The test ends right here.'
'Really? You think so? You truly believe so? The test, once started, can only end when it's finished – and it doesn't finish until you climb that mountain… which you will do, believe me.'
'Take your hand off my girl's knee.'
'Of course. I'm *so* sorry.' Winking at Ingrid, Mephisto removed his hand and then turned back to Gerry, his gaze steady and challenging. 'I've booked into this hotel for the night,' he informed them both, but then to Ingrid specifically, added, 'Room fifty-eight, *should* you need me.'
'She won't,' Gerry said, growing angry at how Ingrid was reacting to Mephisto, even though he knew she couldn't help herself. He was jealous – that's all there was to it – and it made him feel awful.
Clearly aware that he was no longer wanted, Mephisto stood up, took note of the many women who were staring longingly at him, smiled and then looked down again.
'We will meet again soon,' he said smoothly, 'but not here… up there.' He pointed in the direction of the distant mountains. 'For up there, indeed, is where you will go, one way or the other. Now good night, my young friends.' He bowed slightly at both of them, then turned away and walked out of the lobby, looking very distinguished. When he had gone, Gerry turned back to Ingrid who, still flushed, obviously nervous, tried avoiding his gaze. 'Well?'

Gerry said, feeling hurt and choked up. ‘Well *what*?’
‘You obviously found our friend Mephisto to be pretty attractive. Or is that putting it mildly?’
‘Please, Gerry, stop this.’
‘I can’t stop this. I *saw* it.’
‘I couldn’t help it. You *know* I couldn’t help it! He even affected *you* that way! He can do it to *anyone*!’
On the one hand outraged, on the other Gerry felt humiliated that she had seen *his* reaction to Mephisto. ‘At least I managed to control myself,’ he said pathetically. ‘I didn’t make it that obvious.’
‘He released you,’ Ingrid responded, her cheeks now flushed with anger. ‘He can turn his sexual magnetism on and off, and he just let you go. He was playing with you, Gerry, you were sport, and then he simply released you.’
‘Christ!’ Gerry retorted automatically, ashamed of what he was saying. ‘I’m going to bed.’
Without giving her a chance to reply, he hurried across the lobby, collected his room key, then walked just as urgently to the lift. He thought he heard her calling him back, but couldn’t be too sure; however, he soon sensed her coming up behind him, so he walked even faster.
When he entered the lift, she slipped in beside him, staring at him with moist eyes.
They didn’t speak as the lift ascended. It only went up two floors. As they left it, Gerry thought of Mephisto, staying in the same hotel. A bolt of fear lanced through his anger, deflating him instantly, making him wonder, as he hurried along the corridor, just what he was dealing with. Still, his childish anger won out, defeating the fear for the moment, and after opening the room door and following the chastened Ingrid inside, he slammed the door loudly behind him and made her twitch visibly.
God, he thought, when she turned around to face him, *the bitch really is beautiful*.
And was ashamed to think that, especially the ‘bitch’ part, and stepped past her, farther into the room, to hide his suddenly burning cheeks.
‘To hell with it,’ he said. ‘I’m fed up with all of it. I’m sorry, Ingrid. I’m really sorry. It’s not you; it’s this whole business. What the hell’s going on? Who *is* that bastard, Mephisto? What’s his real relationship to St Germain? And why do we *still* have this god damned mystery, this catand-mouse game?

I'm just tired. I can't take any more of it. I want to sleep and forget it.'
Filling up with remorse, he turned around to kiss her. She kissed him back, then pressed herself to him, hugging him with a fearful desperation that gave him a shock. And then recalling how Mephisto had stared at her, his fear returned worse than over.
'Be very careful,' he told her. 'You have to try to resist that man. I think he's going to try to separate us, though I'm not sure why. So be careful when we meet him again. Think of him as a mesmerist, a hypnotist, and try to resist his demands on you.'
'I will, Gerry, I promise,' she said. 'Now let's *both* go to bed.'
Struck by the change in her, recalling what they had been through together, he reached out in a flood of emotion and passionately kissed her. The very feel of her inflamed him, but also filled him with more emotion; and relieved to be forgiven, brimming over with love and longing, he took off his clothes, watched her doing the same, sucked his breath in at the sight of her pale, curvaceous beauty, and lay beside her on the soft, yielding bed like a man resurrected.
He soon lost himself in her, finding protection from his fear, stroked her, fondled her, became a child again, then fell into the last peaceful sleep he would have for a long time.

The sound of a door clicking shut made him open his eyes again, and he grabbed automatically at the bed-sheets but found no one there. Glancing across the moonlit room, he saw the closed door, and knew without having to look elsewhere that Ingrid was gone.

'Oh, no!' he groaned.

Ripping the sheets off him, he slid out of the bed, dressed himself and rushed from the room, then took the lift down to the lobby. It was just after midnight, the lobby was deserted, and he was aware, as he hurried through the silence, of his heart racing dramatically.

'The lady sharing room twenty-four,' he said to the Bhutian desk clerk, who looked up in surprise. 'Miss Zweig. Did you see her just leaving here?'

He hadn't thought to check Mephisto's room. He knew it wasn't necessary. He knew, as his heart sank and pain swept through him, that Mephisto wouldn't be there.

And Ingrid had gone with him.
'Yes, sir,' the desk clerk said, confirming what Gerry had been thinking. 'She left a few minutes ago with the man from room fifty-eight. Mr Grabbe. He said you might be making enquiries. He told me to tell you that they've gone to Observatory Hill – though why they should go *there* at this hour rather baffles me, sir.'
'And he told you to *tell* me they were going there?'
'Yes, sir,' the clerk said. 'I was told to inform you.'
'Shit!' Gerry exclaimed without thinking. Then he hurried out of the hotel. It wasn't worth taking a taxi, so he started to run, first through the cluttered streets, then up the steep steps, eventually into the darkness and silence above the tumbling town. There was a great moon above him, a mottled cheese, appetizing, and around it the stars streamed like sparklers on a Halloween night. He ran, his heart pounding, intoxicated by dread, and looked up to see the slopes of Kanchenjunga, its snow-capped peaks gleaming. Moonlight and stars and snow merging into dark sky – he saw all of it out of the corners of his eyes as he raced through his own steaming breath in a state of blind panic. *He can't have her*, he thought.
He thought also, as he ran, of what they had been through together – their shared terror in the King's Chamber in the Great Pyramid at Giza; their mutual excitement and love in the British Museum Library; their fear and exaltation during their magical experiences in Greece, Turkey, Germany, France and Israel – and knew, as it all flooded back to him, that he would never forget it. What they had shared was part of him, *was* him, as he was Ingrid, and so he ran even faster, aware that he was being robbed, now knowing just how much he wanted her.
The town was now far behind him, leaving moonlight and silence, and when he looked at Observatory Hill, he was chilled to the bone.
There, on the dark breast of Observatory Hill, the Mahakala Temple, sacred to Hindus and Buddhists, was starkly silhouetted, not by the moon and stars, but within a great fan of pulsating, striated white light.
'Oh, God!' he gasped, hearing his own voice as a faraway echo, indistinct

and unreal. ‘Oh, Jesus! Oh, no!’
He ran more urgently up the hill, sweat dripping from his forehead and into his eyes, blurring his vision as he tried to see what was happening beneath the pagodas. Then a sob burst from him, unexpected and loud, when the fan of light shrank rapidly and became a glowing orb that abruptly shot off towards the mountains at remarkable speed.
He stopped running then.
It was hopeless and he knew it. That was Ingrid up there. She and Mephisto were racing away from him in that rapidly receding light. The light soon reached Kanchenjunga, stopped abruptly, moved sideways, then glided down, as if into a ravine, and suddenly blinked out, leaving nothing behind but what had been… the snowcovered slopes and dark clouds in a star-bright sky rippling with moonlight.
He couldn’t stop his tears. They rolled relentlessly down his cheeks. He wiped them away with his fingers, but kept sobbing as he did so; then continued wearily up the slope, feeling helpless and broken.
He walked uphill realizing what Mephisto had tried to tell him, finally knowing exactly why he would climb that mountain as Mephisto had said he would.
He would climb it for Ingrid, to get her back and prove his love… and when finally he stood on Observatory Hill, in the shadow of the Mahakala Temple, with the lights of Darjeeling burning romantically beneath him while the moon and stars cast their splendour into his weeping eyes, he choked back his pain but still wept like a child, then raised his right fist to the mountain and defiantly shook it.
‘Okay,’ he said. ‘*Yes*!’
He had made his commitment.

Chapter Four

‘So remember, Hans,’ Zweig said, stepping naked out of the shower on the sun-deck, glancing down at Elena where she lay in a bikini on one of the two sunbeds, then taking the towel extended by the Filipino steward, ‘when Kuragin arrives, say nothing about our affairs. Obviously he’s going to demand that we hand back what he’s given us, but I’ve spread it too far and wide for that – and besides, it *belongs* to me. So don’t mention anything

about our finances; let the fat pig stew in it.' Drying himself with the thick white towel, he looked up at the sky and saw the helicopter in the distance, glinting in the sunlight. 'Here he comes,' he said to Hans, 'so bear in mind what I've told you.'

Hans didn't reply and Zweig didn't expect him to. If anything, his young assistant had become quieter than ever since that incident in the Eforie Nord thermal treatment centre by the Black Sea, and Zweig, who had himself been disturbed by the incident (which had been so out of character and, like his temper tantrums, sometimes filled him with the fear that he was going mad) tried to hide his concern by convincing himself that it had given him yet another hold over his former accountant.

'So,' he said as he dressed, ' *has* the money given to us by the Soviets been completely disposed of?'
'Yes, Herr Zweig,' Hans said. 'The money has been placed in bank accounts in Switzerland, Gibraltar, Monaco and the Channel Islands, while many of the paintings and antiques have found their way into Christie's and Sotheby's in London and New York. Those that remain will be disposed of through the Biennale Internationale at the Grand Palais in Paris this year, and others will gradually turn up in the more reputable galleries of Florence, Milan and, again, London and New York. I can assure you, Herr Zweig, that the distribution has been extremely wideranging, and most of it will be difficult, probably impossible, to trace.'
'Very good,' Zweig said.
'You could have shoved some of it *my* way,' Elena said. '*I'd* look after it for you!'
'You wouldn't know the difference between one painting and another,' Zweig said. 'And you can't even count. But thanks for the thought.'
He was in fact growing more impatient with the whore's stupidity, and in keeping with his increasingly explosive moods often wanted to beat her. She had often whipped him in order to give him pleasure, but now he found himself wanting to whip her because she got on his nerves. She was a sexy bitch, yes, but his sexual desires were waning, and without lust to bind them together, he found her impossible.
'You don't have to be sarcastic,' she said as the helicopter, rapidly

approaching, started whipping the wind up. ‘I mean, I’m just bored, that’s all. It’s alright for you, playing tin soldiers on your island and boats, but *I* need to get back to a *normal* life, preferably on dry land. I’m fed up lying here, just drinking and reading novels, when I could be out *living*. I’ve had more than enough of it.’

‘The only dry land you’re likely to set foot on is the floor of a brothel in Recife – and if you don’t shut up, that’s where you’ll *end* up. Now is that understood?’

Instead of replying, Elena slid her sunglasses down her nose, stared defiantly at him, then slid the glasses back into position and eased her long legs off the sunbed. She then stood up and walked away from him, brushing past the steward and disappearing through the hatchway, into the master suite, to go below decks.

Zweig couldn’t help sighing, feeling weary and confused, not too sure of just why he had antagonized her so, but aware that he had been doing it often recently. His physical health was degenerating, his many capsules and suppositories were showing adverse side effects, and he knew that his terrible tantrums, which now came more frequently, were being caused by his general deterioration.

Perhaps he *was* going mad. It was certainly possible. And when he thought of that likelihood, of his imminent loss of control, he was filled with an overwhelming terror and heightened lust for the Tuaoi Stone.

He finished dressing, putting on long pants and a shortsleeved shirt, then squinted into the beating wind as the helicopter, roaring, settled onto the swaying helipad on the deck just below him. When the steps were lowered, Kuragin descended from the chopper and was escorted across the deck and in through the hatchway that led to the upper decks. The Russian arrived eventually, breathing heavily, his right hand outstretched.

‘Ah, Andropov!’ Zweig said, smiling falsely at the unsmiling Russian and shaking his hand. ‘How nice to see you again. Did you have a good flight?’

‘One flight is like any other,’ Kuragin said. ‘So how are you, Wilhelm?’

‘In good shape as always, my friend. Would you care for some schnapps?’

‘No, thanks. I never drink before lunch.’

‘Some tea, perhaps?’

‘You sound like an English gentleman in a country garden. Can we get down to business?’

Zweig gripped the railing beside him and squeezed it as if trying to crush it, though in truth it was Kuragin he wanted to crush. A violent spasm shot down his arm, made his fingers contract, then dissipated itself in the railing, after which he relaxed a bit.
'Of course,' he said. 'Naturally. I notice that the helicopter is still running. You intend leaving shortly?'
'Yes,' Kuragin said. 'I'm annoyed that I had to come here in the first place. It's a long trip to make – and one that should not have been necessary.'
'Would you care for a seat?'
'I'm happy standing, thanks.'
Zweig sighed and studied the azure sky, trying to look unconcerned. 'So why *was* it necessary?' he asked.
'We have been sending you telexes and communiqués demanding progress reports on your search for the socalled Tuaoi Stone, or Lodestone, and to date have received no response. We do not find this pleasing.'
'I'm doing my best,' Zweig said, 'but things don't happen overnight.'
'*Overnight* has nothing to do with it. It has now been quite a few weeks since you promised either a quick delivery of the stone or definite proof that it does not exist. This infraction would be bad enough on its own, but that all our attempts to communicate with you have been blatantly ignored has only incensed the comrades even more.'
'I confess,' Zweig said, defeated, 'that I didn't reply for the simple reason that I'd nothing to communicate. I *have* learnt the identity of the keeper of the Tuaoi Stone, but I don't know where he is. And unfortunately I lost track of my daughter and her American boyfriend in Jerusalem, where I tried to abduct them for intensive questioning. I haven't seen or heard from them since, but will find them eventually.'
'Ah, yes, *Jerusalem*,' Kuragin said acidly. 'We know all about *that* particular farce.'
Humiliated by Kuragin's mockery, as well as by the recollection of the incident itself, Zweig burned up with barely concealed fury. 'We all make mistakes,' he said lamely. 'And I can assure you, they will not escape a second time.'
'*If* you ever find them,' Kuragin sneered. 'There was no record of them having left Israel that day – we checked
– which means that they travelled under false passports. But where did they

go?’
‘We’ll pick up their trail eventually,’ Zweig said, taking a deep breath, controlling himself, and hoping to bluff his way, since in truth he didn’t know where to start.
‘So how do you intend finding them?’ Kuragin asked.
‘We’re running a computer check on the passenger lists of every aeroplane that left Israel within a week of the incident. Aware that they were using false passports and probably travelling under pseudonyms, we’re checking the destinations of every couple their age who either travelled together or took different flights to the same destinations. Should that fail to produce results, we will then check each individual passenger in that same age group. One way or another, we *will* find out where they went.’
Clearly, Kuragin was not impressed. ‘But that could take weeks,’ he sneered, ‘by which time they could have left and moved on again.’
‘We have to take that chance,’ Zweig insisted, feeling foolish and increasingly humiliated.
Kuragin banged his fist on the brass railing without thinking, then winced with pain and rapidly pulled himself together. ‘This is hopeless,’ he said. ‘Your daughter and the American could be anywhere in the world. They could even be still in Israel. It’s hopeless, just hopeless…’ He trailed off in disgust, scratched his blue-veined nose, glanced thoughtfully around him at the encircling fleet of other boats, all owned by Zweig, then turned back to offer his most frosty gaze. ‘But you *do* know who holds the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone?’
‘Yes,’ Zweig replied, relieved at last to be offering something positive.
‘So the stone actually exists?’
‘Yes. Definitely. And my daughter and the American will soon be have a meeting with its keeper.’
‘So, who *is* he?’
Reluctantly, though realizing that he had little choice if he was to appease the clever Russian, Zweig told him what he knew about Saint-Germain, including his extraordinary history and the magical powers he was reported to possess. Yet even as he spoke, he knew that he was losing Kuragin, could see it in his face, his rising incredulity, and so finished his tale, not with relief, but with deepening gloom.
The silence, after he had finished speaking, lasted a long time. Kuragin

simply stared at him, then shook his head from side to side, indicating his disbelief.
‘And you say this man has lived at least since the eighteenth century and can move back and forth through time and space?’
‘Yes,’ Zweig said firmly.
‘Do you *really* expect me to take this nonsense back to the Kremlin?’ Kuragin asked, sounding strangled.
Suddenly inarticulate, Zweig shrugged and raised his hands in the air, as if in surrender. ‘Well…’
‘I won’t do it, Wilhelm. I’d find myself in Siberia. We believe the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone, may exist, though we don’t know exactly what it is – its legendary powers could be material or simply symbolic; it may be some kind of extraordinary jewel or just worthless stone or crystal – but until we *know* for certain what it is, we have to continue to search for it… But this Saint-Germain… Do you really expect me to believe in *him*? That he’s hundreds, maybe thousands of years old and can defy space and time? Are you going mad, Wilhelm? Are you losing your mind completely? Expecting me to believe that, or believing it yourself, is surely a sign that you’re demented. What *is* going on here?’
Startled to hear Kuragin suggest the very thing he secretly dreaded – that he might be losing his mind – Zweig felt his heart suddenly racing to make his cheeks burn.
‘He really exists, I’m telling you,’ he insisted, almost stuttering. ‘I personally have been exposed to his magical powers, and I know that – ’
‘Enough, Zweig! *Enough*!’
Shocked by Kuragin’s vehemence – and by his contemptuous use of ‘Zweig’ instead of the more familiar ‘Wilhelm’ – Zweig glanced left and right, noted that Hans and the nearby stewards were staring studiously at the deck, pretending not to listen, and felt smouldering fury at the knowledge that he was being humiliated by this Soviet pig in front of his own men. Trembling, clenching his fists, taking a deep breath, he fought to control himself while Kuragin, his peasant’s face outraged, stepped close to him and stared directly at him.
‘And now I will tell *you* what’s going to happen,’ Kuragin said loudly, deliberately, so that Hans and the stewards nearby could hear. ‘Your time has run out, Zweig

– or *almost* run out. You have exactly one week from today in which to either produce the Tuaoi Stone or offer the final proof that it does not in fact exist. Should you fail to do so, we will be demanding the return of everything we've given you so far, and will also put pressure on the Western powers to classify this fleet of yours as unlawful, remove the boats from your personal ownership, and sequester all you own until such times as your finances, including tax returns, have been investigated. Since the Western powers are already finding you to be a considerable embarrassment to them, I do not think they'll ignore us. They will go for your whole empire, Zweig.'

He nodded emphatically, letting what he had said sink in. 'Do you understand, Zweig?' he continued. 'All of this…' and here he indicated Zweig's whole fleet with a circular wave of his hand… 'will disappear. And you will fade away with it… and eventually be nothing.'

'I don't – '

'Shut up, Zweig! Just keep your mouth shut. Don't say another word until I leave this boat. Now *I* call the shots.'

Zweig exploded. He simply couldn't help himself. The rage boiled up like a volcano, burned through his hands and arms, making him leap forward and grab the Russian by the throat. He started strangling Kuragin, banging his head against the bulwark, bawling, 'Who the hell do you think you're talking to? I'll *kill* you, you *schweine*!' Then Hans was shouting at him, tugging at him, pulling him off, and he had to remove one hand from Kuragin's throat in order to slap Hans away. He heard the sound of the smack, felt the stinging, saw Hans reeling, then Kuragin clenched one of his fists and swung a punch at him. He thought his head had split open, saw spinning stars, then felt his knees buckling under him.

'*Please*, Herr Zweig,' he heard Hans whisper in a frightened manner, helping him back to his feet, 'you mustn't do anything foolish or – '

Zweig slapped him again, saw him falling to the side, then clambered to his feet, swayed dizzily, feeling sick, as Kuragin stepped backwards to the nearest hatchway, whispering, 'You're crazy! Now *that* much is obvious! You're mad, Zweig – and you'll pay for this!'

Come here, you Rusian peasant! *Come here*! Just let me – '

He launched himself at that hated figure, but lost his balance and fell, felt pain and rolled onto his back and opened his eyes again. The sky was spinning above him, a white-and-blue whirlpool, and he found himself

shaking all over, felt nauseous and weak. *Heart attack*? he wondered fearfully. *High blood pressure*? *What*…? He almost sobbed, feeling defeated and frustrated, then saw Hans looking down at him.
‘Are you alright, Herr Zweig? What happened? Here, let me help you up again.’

‘ *Get that bastard, Kuragin*!’
‘It’s too late. He’s gone.’
Even as Hans spoke, Zweig heard the helicopter’s soft

throbbing turn into a roaring and knew that it was about to take off again. Humiliated even more, but taking strength from his rage, he lay there a few more seconds, until the sky had stopped spinning, then pushed himself up with Hans’ help and scrambled back to his feet.

He heard the helicopter, was pummelled by its slipstream, then was forced to watch it ascending and turn towards the west.

His self-pity was washed away by his rage and that, in turn, made him think of vengeance.
Watching Kuragin being flown away, he remembered World War II, his exciting days as a Hitler Wolfcub, then the abrupt descent into nightmare when the Russians entered Berlin. He had just turned eighteen, was a goldenhaired, handsome boy, and when he was wounded near the Tiergarten and trying to hide in a bombed-out cellar, a group of Russian soldiers found him and had some sport with him. They had squeezed and prodded his wound, poured salt onto the bloody flesh, kicked him repeatedly, cut him further with bayonets and then finally raped him.
The last had been the worst: a nightmarish, painful degradation, and when they’d had their way with him, one after the other, they had left him for dead in the ruins and gone off for more prey. Naturally he hadn’t died. He had been kept alive by his hatred. First hatred of the Soviets, then of all humanity, and it had helped him cast off the last of his decent feelings and seek only brute self-satisfaction, no matter who paid for it.
Now, as he watched the helicopter taking Kuragin away, that same hatred returned on a wave of painful recollection and gave him back his strength.

‘Damn you, *no*!’ he exploded, shaking his fist at the helicopter, then he ran to the telephone on the bulwark, picked it up and screamed into it, ‘Get that helicopter! Shoot it out of the sky! You hear me? This is Wilhelm Zweig talking! *Shoot that helicopter out of the sky*! Do it now! *Destroy it*!’
‘No!’ Hans exclaimed fearfully into his right ear. ‘If we do that, the Soviets will – ’
‘Be quiet, Hans. *Shut up*!’
He slammed the phone down, grabbed Hans by his shirt collar, shook him violently, bounced him off the bulwark and then cast him aside. Hans fell to the deck and rolled onto his back as the missile launcher, making a humming sound, emerged from its opening steel covering like a giant silver bullet. Zweig stared at the sky and saw the helicopter reflecting the sunlight as it headed towards Ascension Island. He shook his fist at it, screamed more obscene abuse, then heard the SAM missile leaving its launcher, saw its smoke-trail shooting upward like a ball of thread to form a great loop. Then the helicopter exploded and became a smoke-ringed ball of fire that caused debris to fly out in all directions and fall into the sea. The ball of fire disappeared, the smoke drifted away, eventually revealing a sea littered with debris.
‘Oh, God!’ Hans muttered in horror. ‘We’re finished. We’re done for.’
The sound of that voice – and the unpleasant truth it had expressed – enraged Zweig even more. He hurried across the deck, to where Hans was sitting upright, and grabbed him and hauled him to his feet and started slapping his face. He kept slapping and bawling, losing himself in the process, hovering somewhere above and looking down upon himself beating Hans. It was like playing with a rag doll, something light and loose, and he slapped it, threw it against the bulwark, watched it fall and then kicked it.
‘We’re *finished*?’ he bawled at the bloody thing at his feet. ‘We’re done for? You think the Soviets are going to avenge that bastard’s death by destroying my empire? Well, they won’t! I won’t let them! Those Russian pigs will get nothing. I now know enough about the Lodestone to know I don’t need *them* anymore. *I’ll* find the Lodestone. And I’ll do it myself this time. I’ll find Ingrid and the American *and* Saint-Germain, and when I’ve done that I’ll put an end to them and make myself the keeper of the stone. You think I’m *finished*, you defeatist bastard? Well, I’m not, I’m just *starting*! Now get back on your feet!’

Hans did as he was told, rising painfully, his face bloody, his eyes blazing with uncommon fury out of badly bruised flesh.
Zweig noticed, but didn't care, thinking only of the Lodestone, the legendary Tuaoi Stone, and turned away to take hold of the railing and look up at the sky. Strands of smoke were still drifting. Below the smoke, the sea was littered. He studied that wreckage, felt a deep satisfaction, then looked at his fleet of cruisers, the very heart of his worldwide empire, and accepted that what he had done had put him beyond the pale.
Now he had no choice. He had nothing more to lose. He would go in pursuit of them himself, no matter the risk.
He would find the Lodestone.

Chapter Five

Even here, on the lower slopes of Kanchenjunga, Gerry already felt very different from what he had been just five days ago. While his two Sherpa guides stopped to let their mules rest, he looked back at the winding Tista river, lowlying tropical jungle and the higher forested hills of Sikkim, through which they had travelled to get to here. He could scarcely believe that beyond was the town of Gangtok, surrounded by rice-and-maize fields, where he had picked up the Sherpas, and farther on, south-west of that, Darjeeling, where he had lost his beloved Ingrid and which now seemed like five years, not five days, ago.

Choking up thinking about that, he turned back to the Sherpas and looked beyond them, to where the forested hills gave way to the almost barren slopes of the mountains with their snow-capped, cloud-shrouded peaks. They looked dauntingly high and decidedly challenging, and he shivered, hardly believing that he was heading there, feeling slightly demented.

One of the Sherpas nodded at him and they moved forward again, heading up, so the guides had informed him in broken English, to a Sherpa hill station located high in the Tibetan Plateau but well below the mountain's glacial peaks. He had told them that he wanted to go higher than that, but they had vehemently refused, saying that the mountain was 'possessed' and forbidden to mortal men. He therefore didn't know what he would do when he reached

the hill station, only knowing that he had to get as far as he could and then hope for the best.

Trudging behind the Sherpas and their heavily laden mules, feeling the deepening cold starting to bite at his nose and ears, yet still sweating from exertion in his furlined leather overcoat and hide boots, he was relieved that they were nearing the hill station on the plateau, since already they had been climbing the lower slopes for two days and he felt badly bruised and exhausted, not capable of going much farther without a good rest.

When he glanced around him at the increasingly desolate scenery, the rolling hills with sparse scrub, the green slopes receding below him, the sky grey and malignant, his feeling of divorce from the self only became more acute.

Indeed, when he thought back on how he had come here – a taxi from Darjeeling to Gangtok; a restless night in the Tashi Delek hotel, then a hired Land Rover the next day to take him through the richly forested Tista valley to the Sherpas' base camp at the foot of the Tibetan Plateau; then being fitted with clothing, the Sherpas giggling at his inexperience; then two days and three nights on the lower slopes of the mountain, leaving the greenery behind and moving up into the barren, brown hills, not believing where he was when he lay at night beneath the stars, seeing the sky as through an inverted telescope, far away, shrinking rapidly – yes, when he thought back on all of that, it seemed like a dream, no more substantial than the wind that crossed his path and passed on invisibly.

Sweating even as he shivered with cold, he saw, across the slopes, some *kyangs*, wild asses, with their noses nuzzling the earth. They looked sleek and well fed, as all the animals on the plateau did, and he wondered what they could find to eat in this arid wilderness. Raising his eyes, he looked at the soaring slopes, first ochre, then glistening white, the melting snow forming a web of streams which, when viewed in a certain light, turned into a great, glittering necklace suspended in space.

He rubbed his eyes, licked his chapped lips, imagined his teeth were aching, realized that he had started imagining a *lot* since beginning this journey. He

hadn’t been sleeping well because he had felt that he was being watched; he even felt that in the cold light of day when the tiredness took hold of him.

He had cursed himself for his lack of exercise in the past, for not looking after his body, and accepted that some of his worst imaginings were the price to be paid for that. He had ached and breathed harshly most of the way up these hills, and knew, with a helpless, throttling dread, that he hadn’t even begun yet; that the real climb was past the hill station, where the browns and greys turned into a glistening white that sometimes soared almost vertically.

When he thought of going beyond the hill station, he felt dread and disbelief. Closing his eyes, he tried imagining New York City, his mother’s luxury apartment, his own untidy, beloved bedroom, yet he couldn’t really visualize it, but only a blur of vague details, as if viewing it through a smeared lens. It was too far away, too much a part of what he had been, and he knew, as he heard his own heartbeat, that he was now someone else.

Now he was part of Ingrid, as she was part of him, and both of them were part of St Germain and the network of riddles and clues that he had spread far and wide, from the Great Pyramid of Giza, the terrestrial centre of Earth, to Jerusalem, the centre of the spiritual world, and finally to here, where the mountains, with their snow-capped peaks in the clouds, held the answers to all of it.

When he thought of Ingrid, and of what they were involved in, he was shaken by a terrible anguish and disturbing confusion, since he also thought of Mephisto, alias Christian Grabbe. He had hoped she could resist Mephisto, that his own love would give her strength, but she had gone with the mesmerist in that magical light, resplendent as a star, to disappear into the mountains’ most secret place.

The question was: Why?

Had she been hypnotized or wide awake? Had she just wanted him with an overwhelming desire? Or had he abducted her?

Thinking about it again, Gerry truly hated Mephisto, loathed his Machiavellian charms, while thinking of Ingrid with a mixture of anger and heart-numbing grief.

He opened his eyes again, saw the backs of the Sherpas, looked beyond them to see the track levelling out onto a broad plateau sheltered by soaring hills.

In that protected space there were half a dozen shacks, made of brick and mud, with roofs of corrugated iron, smoke trailing out of their chimneys and streaming off in the wind. It was obviously the hill station. Donkeys were tethered to posts outside the huts; Sherpas and mountaineers were wandering about the clearing.

The Sherpa guides tethered their mules to a wooden post outside a hut which other men, mostly mountaineers, were entering and leaving with great regularity. Since it was clearly a bar or café, Gerry wanted to go inside, but the English-speaking guide tugged him back and shook his head in denial.

'You won't go higher up the mountain,' Gerry said accusingly to the guide, 'but those mountaineers will.'

The Sherpa shook his head again in a negative gesture. 'No,' he said. 'No good for you.' He then pointed to indicate the mountain peaks in the west. 'There,' he said. 'The mountaineers climb there. But you…' and here he jabbed his finger at the peaks to the east… 'You must go there, where those men do not go. You must go where noone else has gone – and *they* cannot take you. Come! You come now.'

Before Gerry could refuse, the Sherpa grabbed him by the elbow and guided him across the clearing, through the ink-black shadows cast by the soaring hills, to the door of a dilapidated plank-hut whose chimney was smoking.

'In here is the old wise one,' the Sherpa said. 'He who goes where we cannot go. He once belonged to a monastery, but came down from it years ago. He lives alone and meditates, and knows the secret places in the mountains where we Sherpas will not go. Maybe he take you to the first monastery, maybe not. If he do, he will not take you higher than that, since he frightened as well. It is the land of the dead up there. Now you go. Go inside.'

Without knocking, the Sherpa opened the door of the hut and pushed Gerry inside, letting the door close behind him, swinging shut from its own weight. The inside of the hut was gloomy, being illuminated only fitfully by two spluttering oil lamps, and the air was further darkened by the smoke billowing out of a log fire.

Gerry coughed into his fist, rubbed the tears from his stinging eyes, smelt urine and then squinted through the smoke at the old man who was squatting on the earthen floor, near the flickering flames. He was very old indeed, his face like a wrinkled walnut, and he was wearing a darkred, Napalese robe, belted at the waist, over thick black woollen trousers that were tucked into

leather boots.
He was rocking to and fro, chanting softly to himself, but eventually, when Gerry coughed again, he stopped rocking and looked up, staring steadily with rheumy eyes at his unexpected guest, but not saying anything.
‘You speak English?’ Gerry asked him.
‘I do,’ was the reply. ‘You have come here to find the first monastery and search for those who dwell higher up.’
Startled, Gerry took a deep breath, then let it out in a sigh. ‘You *knew* I was coming here?’
‘Of course,’ the old man said. ‘I am always informed. They speak to me across the great divide when I venture down through my centre.’
‘You mean, when you meditate?’
‘Yes.’
‘They communicate by *thought*?’
‘That is so. I am informed when someone is coming and needs to be shown the way.’
‘The way to the monastery?’
‘The way to the *first* one, yes. The one *you* want is even higher.’
‘How do you know which one I want?’
‘You are one of the pure at heart. You have come here to search for truth. To find that truth is an arduous task, requiring courage and strength. If you succeed, you will find what it is you most want; if you fail, you will return back down the mountain and know nothing but misery.’
‘And you’ll take me up there?’
‘I will only take you close to the first monastery; after that, I will leave you. I am not allowed inside the monastery, since I am not pure at heart.’
‘The monastery is a halfway house?’
‘More than that: a house of learning. But from there, you must climb even higher, into the zone of the dead.’
Gerry saw his own shadow elongated and stretched up the plank-wall, a giant figure, trembling to the rhythm of the flickering flames. That shadow was himself, just as he was *not* himself, and as he gazed down at the old man, who was ghostlike in the smoke, he felt removed even farther from reality, as if no more than a player in a bizarre, wideawake dream.
‘Is that where I’m supposed to go?’ he asked. ‘To the zone of the dead?’
‘What will be, will be. You will attempt to go there. Whether or not you will

succeed, I cannot say.’
‘Is St Germain up there?’
‘I know no names. Only that they *are*. I only *hear* them, though sometimes in meditation I see them as well. They are of every nationality, every creed, but they all sound the same.’
‘They speak English?’
‘It is not a spoken language. It is sound in the head.’
Gazing down at the old man, who seemed too frail to climb anywhere, Gerry thought of the visions he’d had of St Germain, of the reality of his presence, his voice, when he stepped out of the shimmering light. He had clearly heard the voice of an apparition, just as he had with Mephisto. Was this madness or truth?
‘So to reach that hidden place, the zone of the dead, I have to first pass through the monastery?’
‘Yes, that is so.’
‘Then someone from the monastery will take me higher?’
‘No. You must make the climb yourself. It is part of the test.’
Gerry thought of Kanchenjunga, of those towering, snow-capped peaks. He felt crushed even thinking about them. He felt the sharp blade of terror.
‘I can’t get up there on my own. I know nothing about the mountains. I’m not equipped and I don’t have the experience. What they demand is impossible.’
‘Nothing is impossible where the heart decrees otherwise. If you want it enough, you will do it. Failure is a sign of bad faith and contains its own punishment.’
Gerry wondered what could be more punishing than having to climb that mountain, then realized that he didn’t want to know, that some futures were best ignored.
‘You say you’re informed when someone is coming. Does that mean I’m not the first?’
‘Of course you are not the first,’ the old man replied, almost contemptuously. ‘They have come here, one by one, over the centuries. More will come with your passing.’
‘Are you always the one who receives them?’
‘No. I am of the Earth. I live the life of a normal mortal. But my father and his fathers before him were here to receive.’
‘When do we leave for the first monastery?’

‘When I get to my feet.’
‘I’m tired. I need to eat and drink.’
‘No. You just *think* that.’ As if to prove his point, the old man, who had seemed so frail and weak, sprang to his feet with surprising agility. ‘Hunger and thirst are much exaggerated,’ he said. ‘And tiredness is only a state of mind that can be easily defeated. This you will soon either learn or not, and if not, you will come back down. My name is Yaksa.’
‘Hi,’ Gerry said automatically, then, feeling foolish, added, ‘Gerry. My name is Gerry.’ He didn’t put out his hand, but simply grinned at Yaksa, to which the old man responded with an almost imperceptible nodding of his head, before brushing past him and opening the door of the hut.
‘We’re going right now?’ Gerry asked him as a blast of freezing air rushed in.
‘Why wait?’ Yaksa replied.
Apart from hunger, thirst and increasing exhaustion, both physical and mental, Gerry knew, the minute he stepped outside, why he had wanted to wait.
It was late in the afternoon and already growing dark, and when he looked beyond the huts, at the soaring mountain peaks, he saw the great shadows creeping down as the sun quickly sank. Now the mountains looked more ominous, mysterious, certainly dangerous, and as he followed the old man across the clearing, his heart sank like the sun.
‘We won’t be able to see,’ he said shamefully. ‘It’s too dark to go up there.’
‘I can see in the dark,’ Yaksa replied, ‘and you will learn to do so. The object is not to perceive, but to lean on your faith. Do not trust your eyes, trust your senses, and thus choose the right path.’
‘If there are paths, why do others not go up there?’
‘Because they depend on their eyes and the eyes reveal little. The paths are like our souls, divided into good and evil, and you must make your choice, left or right, by what your senses reveal. In this way, you faith will be judged. Now be quiet. We must concentrate.’
Gerry shut his mouth, feeling as if he had been slighted. He kept his eyes fixed on the old man’s back as they walked away from the camp. The flat road climbed soon enough, curving up between the hills, and gradually the hills closed in upon them and formed two towering walls. The walls shadowed the path, the shadows darkened, turned black, then a ribbon of stars materialized above, given shape by the jagged cliffs.

The moon moved along that ribbon, disappeared, reappeared, seemed to pace them, remaining directly above them like a malevolent eye. Gerry lowered his gaze, feeling spied upon, naked, saw stones that looked like polished glass spinning over his boots. His own breathing seemed too loud, an oddly amplified discordance, and he imagined that he could hear his heart beating, then tried to forget it.

The old man was still there, just ahead of him, moving quickly, surprisingly agile for someone his age, and with the eyes of a cat. He stopped where the track forked. Gerry took the right turning. He didn't know why, indeed hardly thought about it, and was surprised to find the old man by his side, his smile revealed by the moonlight.

'Very good,' he said. 'Faith.'

Time seemed to stop. Space closed in upon him. The track became narrow, very steep, full of bends, and the wall to his right gradually shrank and disappeared, until there was nothing but darkness below, an umbrella of stars above. The track was curving around a cliff face. He was certain of that. He had a moment of vertigo, of fleshscorching dread, stopped to press himself into the cliff face on his left, then saw the old man's smile. That calmed him instantly, making him feel ashamed, and he grinned back and stepped in front of the old man and started uphill again, aware of the deepening cold, the snow-capped peaks moving towards him, convinced that he was divorced from time and space, at the top of the world.

'Are you tired?' the old man asked from behind him, no trace of breathlessness in his voice.

'Yes,' Gerry replied, gasping. 'I'm damned near exhausted.'

'Let yourself dissolve into the night. Become *part* of the mountain. In that way, you will conquer it. What is willed, will be done.'

He did as he was told, tried to will the exhaustion away, felt foolish, then almost tripped and fell into that vast, ink-black void. Terrified, he jerked awake, all his senses resurrected, felt the pores of his skin opening to drink in the icy air.

He dissolved into the air, let its coldness percolate him, and felt the track melting beneath his feet as if no longer solid. It was still there all right, illuminated by the moonlight, disappearing between a high-walled crevice that offered protection on both sides. He advanced into the crevice, saw the band of stars narrowing, came to a fork and took the left path, knowing

instinctively that this was the right way.
He didn't have to think about it. He had dissolved into the mountain. He glanced up at the snow-capped peaks, gleaming distantly, hardly real, and was drawn to the starlit darkness around them, to that cloud-covered grandeur.
She was somewhere up there. The girl he loved. His Ingrid. Her image shone like a beacon in his mind and guided his footsteps. He wondered what had become of her, prayed to God that she was safe, sensed that she would be, that her presence up there was the carrot being dangled before him. He smiled, gaining strength, losing himself in the process, saw the ribbon of stars growing wider above the clifftops, the snow-capped peaks looming ever larger as he made his way uphill.
The track forked again. He turned left without thinking. He felt light-headed, confident, released from his aching body; but then the climb became more arduous, the track rising almost vertically, and the exhaustion, which he had thought had gone for good, returned worse than ever.
He fell to his hands and knees, heard the old man chuckling behind him, felt rage and clawed his way up the steep incline and then felt the snow. He stopped and saw the snow beneath him, then saw it above him, a luxurious carpet covering everything, white and glittering in the moonlit darkness, deceptively beautiful.
'Shit!' he whispered to himself, giving voice to his frustration, then glanced back over his shoulder, saw the old man's smile, stoked up his defiance and advanced on hands and knees, into the biting cold. He had not gone very far, though it seemed to be so, when large snowflakes started falling about him, lying upon him and soaking him.
The real misery began then, eating into his body and spirit, making time slow down to a standstill, each metre a mile. Sometimes he managed to walk, stooped over against the wind, but often had to fall back on his hands and knees, when the track became too steep. It rose and fell frequently, curved around sharp-edged rocks, became lost under thickening snow as more snow fell about him. He felt battered and bruised, his strength draining away from him, sobbed when his numbed fingers started stinging and his lips cracked and bled. He looked up, squinting, saw snow falling from the moon, the stars all around it dropping snow, the peaks hiding beneath it.
He tripped then and fell, lay face down, weeping quietly, determined not to

move another muscle, content to die there. Then something dropped on his right shoulder, took hold of it and shook it; he turned his head and saw Yaksa's gnarled hand, his walnut-brown face.

'You have done well,' he said. 'Very good. Come. Follow me now.'

With surprising strength, the old man pulled him to his feet, wiped the snow from his face, smiled, then nodded and proceeded to lead him up the steep path. Gerry fell in behind him, automatically, in a trance of gratitude, lumbering uphill through the cutting wind and swirling snow until the track started levelling out. He glanced back, saw the snow-covered rocks, and below them a vertiginous darkness towards which he was irresistibly drawn. At that moment he was convinced that the Earth was not down there, but only boundless space; that somehow they had left the real world behind and were advancing into another world. Looking up, he saw the moon, a great eye staring at him, but the stars, which were weeping snowflakes, were not the stars that he knew. He was disorientated, felt as if he was looking *down*, actually did so and thought he saw the sky that he knew, but as if it was reflected in water, its moon and stars clearly visibly. Then he felt a stab of fear and turned away and hurried after the old man.

Now everything was mountainous, but white in the moonlight, the crags and outcroppings like gargoyles, the stars, which were not the stars he knew, forming a glittering, fairy-tale tapestry around the peaks towering over him. He felt light-headed and lost, torn from his anchorage, cast adrift; and as the biting wind grew stronger, as the falling snow thickened, his stinging flesh lost all sensation and his reasoning slipped away.

He saw Yaksa in front of him (or thought he did; he wasn't sure) and then the snow swirled about him, filling his mouth, blinding him, and he rubbed his eyes and looked uphill again and saw nothing but more snow.

Yaksa had vanished, leaving him all alone, and he cried out in panic, calling the old man's name, heard that name borne back on the wind and felt it slapping his face. He recoiled from that blow, since in fact it was his terror, then hurled himself forward in desperation, praying for comfort. No comfort was to be found – the old man had disappeared – and all he found was the snow-covered track winding into the darkness. He followed it, fell upon it, crawled uphill, his lungs on fire, seeing nothing but the soaring mountain peaks, the stars streaming around them, the snow pouring out of the large moon that glared down malignantly.

The wind howled, the snow fell. His body was numb, his mind screaming. He crawled uphill, sobbing, wanting to give in, unable to, impelled onward by the brightening image of Ingrid that floated in front of him.
It was his rage that kept him going. He was refusing to let them keep her. He imagined her, saw her, felt her, was rescued by her, then he fell forward in exhaustion, started rolling downhill, gathering snow as he went.
He waited for that final drop, his endless descent down the mountainside, the death that would be his when he plummeted to earth – and so closed his eyes, expecting it, whispering, 'Ingrid, my love – ' and then ploughed through soft snow, stopped moving, choked and coughed, spat snow from his mouth, rubbed his eyes and looked up in wonder.
He had rolled down an incline, creating a cloud of powdered snow, and as that white veil floated around him, obscuring his vision briefly before settling down, he saw in the white-flecked moonlight an edifice of stone and mortar, its chortens like small pyramids – a Tibetan temple, a monastery – materializing out of the moonlit darkness as the snow ceased to fall.
He lay there, beneath the moon and stars, above the blackened, lost Earth, listening to his own heartbeat.
There was that… and the silence.

Chapter Six

He climbed painfully to his feet and noted that he was on a flat plateau above a precipice beyond which he could see nothing but darkness below a sky filled with glutinous stars. The biting wind had died away and now the silence was complete, emphasizing his feeling of frightening isolation, his conviction that he had somehow left the real world and was living a dream.

Then he looked at the monastery stretched out below a towering cliff face. It was constructed from stone and *chan*
– Tibetan moulded clay cement – and was composed of a series of block-shaped, flat-roofed buildings surmounted by elaborate pagodas and dominated by its great buoy-shaped chorten – a dome-like stone structure symbolizing the one Buddha – which, though also covered in crisp white snow, was undeniably exotic and formed a gateway into the monastery courtyard.

The monastery looked unreal in the moonlight, a mirage wrapped in snow. Feeling unreal himself, certainly bruised and exhausted, he tramped the short distance to the high gate chorten, walked through it, crossed the courtyard in which some shaggy, horned yaks were tethered, then stopped in front of the door directly facing the gate. There was a bell cord hanging beside the door, and he tugged it and waited.

He stood there a long time, shivering with cold, feeling drained, but nobody came to the door. So then, on an impulse, he simply pushed it… and it swung open, creaking, letting striations of weak, flickering light beam out into the night.

He stepped inside, closed the heavy door behind him, and then looked around him.

He was standing in an immense, austere assembly hall, the floor and walls of which were plain stone and mortar, partially covered by two carpet-sized wall-hangings made from brown yak wool and decorated with a series of white swastikas whose right-angled flanges, he realized instantly, were running anti-clockwise instead of the other way, indicating that they were in this instance Hindu swastikas, not related to their unpleasant Western counterparts. Lined along each wall, from one end to the other, like soldiers keeping vigil, were high, ornately carved stands upon which burned many tall, fat candles of every colour, giving off a smell like incense. At the very far end of the hall, close by another large door that obviously led into the inner sanctums of the monastery, were rows of long brown tables, all neatly laid out with plates and earthenware jugs, as if ready to seat a few hundred monks, though there was no one in sight.

Realizing that this was so, and thinking it odd, he stepped farther into the hall, heard his own footsteps echoing, and looked up at the balcony that ran around the great rectangular hall, high up, below the ceiling in which a skylight of ornate tinted glass was an eye-catching focal point. Behind the darkly polished wooden railing of the balcony were a series of chapel-cells, obviously used by the presently absent monks, their small bay windows crisscrossed with wooden laths arranged in intricate patterns.

He called up to those small rooms, hoping that *someone* was there, but the only response was the ghostly echo of his own voice, resounding eerily under the roof before fading away.

Feeling very strange indeed, he continued along the great hall, his hide boots

almost sliding on the flagged stone, until he had reached the rows of long tables. Stopping, he examined the nearest table and saw that the plates and utensils were perfectly clean, but covered with a fine film of dust, as if they had not been used in a long time. He called out again, his voice echoing, 'Hello! Hello!' Then he walked through the doorway beyond the last of the tables, into a deeper gloom.

He was in another rectangular hall, though this one was much smaller. The walls were covered in more hangings decorated with the Hindu swastika and more tall, fat candles were lined along each wall, though no balcony or chapel-cells could be seen above, but only a flat, unadorned roof which, in this case, had no skylight. However, at the far end of the hall, in the wall directly facing him, was an open door surrounded by latticed windows, and from inside the room came what sounded like a monk chanting prayers. Feeling a rising trepidation, not sure what to expect, he walked along the hall, stopped by the open door, and looked into a smoky, candlelit gloom to see a bald-headed monk, wearing a faded crimson wraparound coat, a *chuba*, and with a ceremonial silk scarf, a *katu*, hanging down to his waist. He was seated cross-legged on the floor, his back turned to a Buddhist shrine, and chanting prayers as he rocked gently to and fro.

He stopped chanting the instant he became aware of Gerry's presence. Straightening up, he raised his face as if looking at him, but then tilted his head a little to the side, as if locating the visitor's whereabouts by listening – since, like the old seer in al-Hillah, this lama was blind.

At first Gerry was too shocked to say anything. That the lama was blind was shock enough; even more shocking was the fact that he was so thin as to be almost translucent, his veins frighteningly visible though skin that was stretched on his bones like plain tissue paper. This man was rag and bone, an apparition at death's door; he had faded away to nothing and seemed to float just above the floor – though this was an illusion.

'You are the Westerner,' he said, his voice barely no more than a whisper. 'You came – as expected.'

'As expected?'

'I was informed from above.'

'St Germain?'

'I do not know his name. He is my *tulpa* – my guide to the other world. And he said you would come here.'

‘How did you know it was me?’
‘You are standing right there in front of me, so why should I *not* know?’
‘Aren’t you blind?’
‘I can see you with my third eye – my mind. I am only blind because I have meditated here for many years and no longer need normal sight. Here,’ he added, pushing an earthenware bowl towards Gerry’s feet. ‘Be seated and eat. The food and drink were prepared for you when your arrival at the outer door was witnessed.’
‘Witnessed by *who*?’ Gerry asked as he sat crosslegged on the carpeted floor, pulled the bowl closer to him, and saw that it was filled with rice and *dahl* – lentils boiled in a little curry. It smelt delicious and almost made him reel with pleasure, so he tackled it greedily.
‘Some of the other monks,’ the lama said simply, as if that fact was self-evident.
‘So where *are* the other monks?’ Gerry asked between mouthfuls of food.
‘The other monks, who are few, are not allowed to approach you; they must not be touched by anything foreign, nor even be led to think about the outside world. I am the Head Lama, their spiritual teacher, which gives me the right to speak to you. I have transcended temptation of any kind.’
While Gerry scooped up the rice and lentils with his fingers and awkwardly pushed it into his mouth, the blind lama picked up a long-necked pitcher and poured its contents into two earthenware cups, one of which he handed to Gerry, the other being raised to his own lips. The liquid in the cup was bubbling slightly, smelt a bit like cider, and when Gerry had sampled it, following the lama’s example, it tasted absolutely delicious and went straight to his head.
‘I no longer eat,’ the lama said, ‘but am still allowed drink. Alcohol in moderation can truly warm the hearts of men, and this is *chang*, brewed from barley, yeast and water, which will help to sustain you. You will speak with me and then you must leave immediately, which is why you must eat and drink.’
A second sip of the *chang* made Gerry feel even better, almost rejuvenated in fact, and he scooped up some more rice and lentils and ate while they talked, feeling the return of his strength and optimism, a pleasantly drunken intoxication, an increasing lightness of spirit.
‘Have you ever been higher than this monastery?’ he asked the blind lama.

‘No. I came up to this monastery as a child and have not left it since. No monk in this monastery has climbed the mountain, since the gods reside there.’
‘You’re a Buddhist,’ Gerry said, between mouthfuls of rice and *dahl*, ‘and I don’t understand how that relates to those who seem to guide you from above. Are they Buddhists, too?’
‘Buddhism is not a religion in the Western sense of the word; it does not speak of God or the soul as you conceive them, but is a doctrine that can encompass many faiths. It is based on the belief that life is an illusion of the senses, an imperfect state, and that only Nirvana, the absolute truth, is real. Those above, with whom I communicate through my third eye, have achieved the state of Nirvana. They are not Buddhists, but have transcended the material state and can roam freely at will.’
‘In an out-of-the-body state?’
‘That is so. And it is what I am suffering for. I have lost my sight because I no longer need it, I have not eaten in years in order to free myself from the flesh, and soon I hope to transcend my mortal body and rise to Nirvana.’
Studying the lama’s almost incorporeal body, Gerry was reminded of Mary Anne Atwood’s description of alchemy as being a philosophical system which, ‘by fermenting the human spirit, purifies and finally dissolves it.’ The body of the old lama did indeed seem to be dissolving, as if, over the years, he was evolving through meditation and lack of physical movement into a form of pure mind… just like St Germain.
‘What kind of Buddhism do you practise in this monastery?’
‘It no longer matters,’ the old lama replied, sipping some more of his *chang*, his large eyes staring sightlessly. ‘We live by the rule of numbers – ’
‘Alchemical numbers?’ Gerry interjected.
‘Yes – and our meditation, which is based on the contemplation of such numbers, will lead us to that ultimate transformation, from flesh into spirit. We originated, I believe, from the Amda Tibetan Buddhists, reportedly once the rulers of the known world, a nation of kings.’
Having finished his food, Gerry wiped his hands on his jacket. He felt drunk, not only from the *chang*, but from what he was hearing.
‘Do you seriously believe that?’ he asked.
‘Yes,’ the lama replied. ‘The world of Man is older than those in the West believe, and it originated here, 200,000 years ago, when this landmass was

joined with another, now known as Africa. That great race spread out from here as far as the islands of the Atlantic Ocean where it formed another great nation which, though ruled by magic and faith, was eventually destroyed. Those above are the descendants of the survivors of that mighty destruction. They returned here, to their origins, many years ago, and are protecting the Knowledge.'

'The Secret Knowledge?'

'Yes.'

What the lama was saying supported what Gerry had already learned.

'Have you ever heard of Atlantis?' he asked.

The old lama actually smiled. 'Many tales are told about it,' he said, 'most of them untrue. There is no single Atlantis. Many civilizations were lost throughout history, but they all began here.'

'And was that civilization a magical one?'

'What may be magical to you may be normal to others.'

'You can see through your third eye,' Gerry said. 'Did the high priests of that former civilization have similar gifts?'

'They believed in the contemplation of numbers and derived their power from them. They had a sacred stone that was constructed to the dimensions of such numbers, and that stone, both symbolically and materially, was the source of their ability to read minds, dematerialize themselves and others, leave the mortal body behind them, and transcend space and time. In that sense they were a magical race, but to them it was normal.'

'Was that stone called the Lodestone, or Tuaoi Stone?'

'The Lodestone is the Western name for it. Its true name is the Tuaoi Stone.'

'Do you know if that great civilization ever settled in Egypt?'

'So it is written. The Tuaoi Stone was pyramidal, its dimensions magical. The pyramid, though without those original dimensions, thus became a common structure throughout that great civilization. Even here, in India and Tibet, our chortens are shaped like elongated pyramids. In this manner, then, there were once pyramids on the islands of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea; and according to what is written, the Tuaoi Stone once surmounted a great pyramid in Egypt, at the world's very centre. Now it is back where it belongs – up there, where no mortal goes with the hope of returning.'

He nodded, indicating the ceiling, meaning the mountain peaks outside.

'So the adepts, the high priests of that civilization, returned to their home

high in the mountain, where they protect the Tuaoi Stone and its Secret Knowledge?'
'Yes, that is so.'
'And those adepts can transcend the material state?'
'Naturally.'
'Do you know the number 666?'
'Yes. It is the magical number upon which the dimensions of the Tuaoi Stone have been based.'
'It is also known as the Number of the Beast.'
'It is only called that in your Bible. It is not so called by others.'
'In our Bible that number refers to a beast coming up out of the Earth and another beast coming out of the sea. What beasts would they be?'
'I have not read your Bible, but discussed this with others. The beast coming out of the Earth is clearly a volcanic eruption, or earthquake. The beast coming out of the sea would be the great tidal wave caused by such an earthquake. The previous civilizations of Man, those of prehistory, were all destroyed by volcanic eruptions, earthquakes and the immense tidal waves created by them. So the number refers to the destruction of those civilisations. But please note that in your Bible, in *Revelations*, it is stated that the number of the beast is also the number of *the man* – in other words, again, the civilizations of Man that were destroyed before our history was written. Thus do magical numbers tell their tales to those who can read them.'
'And what of those, like me, who can't do so?'
'You are venturing up there to learn.'
'Do you believe I can make it up there?'
'If it is willed, it will be.'
The rice and *dahl* had replenished Gerry, while the *chang* had given him back his strength and the nerve to continue. What he had suspected had been confirmed: that the man calling himself St Germain was a magical adept, an immortal, and now, with other adepts, protected the Tuaoi Stone where he and others resided higher up the mountain.
Yet what did they want with him? And what, indeed, was their ultimate purpose?
He sighed, seeing these as final questions, then climbed to his feet.
'I take it that I can't even sleep here?'
'No, you cannot. Once you have asked all you want to know, you must be

cast out again. Have you any more questions?'
'No.'
'Then farewell.'
'Where did you learn to speak English?'
'From my *tulpa*.'
'Do you have any final words for me?'
'Go in good faith.'
Gerry nodded and turned away, walked along the spartan hall, glanced back once at the old lama, then went out through the door. Passing the deserted tables in the main assembly hall, he again saw the dust on the plates and knew that no one ate there. These monks had gone beyond that. They had weaned themselves off food. They lived on liquids and hid in their chapel-cells, ignoring the outer world. His footsteps echoed around the main hall, desecrating its silence, then he stepped into the world they were ignoring and was slapped by the freezing cold.
He was shocked into alertness, forced to recall what he had just left, and tugged up the fur collar of his jacket and started walking immediately, cutting around the walls of the monastery courtyard and then up the steeply winding track.
The monastery fell away to his left, was replaced by a soaring cliff face, and to his right was what appeared to be a steep drop into a dizzying, snow-flecked darkness. The snow was thick on the track, but being blown by a rising wind, and knowing that it was going to get worse, he started losing his drunken glow. His face began stinging, his eyes wept, his lips were cracking, and he saw the snowcapped peaks as jagged edges cutting into the brilliant stars.
Exhaustion came soon enough, followed by aches and stabbing pains, then the stinging of his skin turned to a numbness that made him feel paralysed. He started gasping for breath, sometimes slid and fell down, once nearly rolled over the edge and flipped away in sheer terror. He stood up and stumbled on, aware of that dizzying drop to his right, and was relieved when the track cut into the mountain, under snow-laden outcroppings.
Not far on, it branched again and he turned left without doubt, imagining that it would at least lead him deeper into the mountain, away from its unprotected outer face. He looked up and saw the peaks, gleaming whitely, eerily beautiful and seeming to tilt towards him, as if about to fall on him. He

thought of Ingrid up there – somewhere up there: his beloved – and that thought kept him going for a while, until things started changing.
Now the mountains were all around him, soaring above, falling below, the white slopes plunging into pools of darkness that he didn't dare look at. Instead, he stared up at the stars, tried to place them, couldn't do so; watched the moon in its translucent flight through an alien sky. That moon was too big to be true, too wafer-thin to be real, and when he glanced down he saw it reflected in the featureless inky depths, perhaps in a lake.
He shivered and looked ahead, disorientated, losing his senses, but thought he saw other lights, not the stars, winking on and off fitfully.
Lights? *What* lights? He rubbed his eyes and looked again. He saw the lights all around him, above him, in the distance, but thought that they might be the moonlight reflecting off ice.
The cold wind swept the snow across the steep, narrow track. He leaned into it, so far he was almost bent double, feeling the pain of frostbite on his face and hands, his eyes weeping helplessly. Now his misery was acute, his will going with his strength, and he thought of what this place was called – the zone of the dead – then dwelt on mortals transcending the physical state and knew the mountains were haunted.
The wind howled like a living creature. The snow swirled and attacked him. His footsteps made the sound of small animals scurrying. He sobbed aloud with terror, bit his lower lip, felt ashamed, surrendered to the terror again and tried desperately to conquer it. Then he remembered the old guide, Yaksa, and what he had told him: that he should let himself dissolve into the night and become *part* of the mountain. He tried to do that, giving himself to the wind and snow, but this time it was too much, his misery was too great, and he fell to his hands and knees and started moving up the slope like a mule – undignified, shameless.
'Dissolve!' he sobbed. '*Damn you*!'
How long had he been going? An hour or all night? He looked in vain for a sign of the dawn, but saw only the moon and stars. Those and the lights – *yes, damn it, they were lights*! – and he stopped, breathing deeply on hands and knees, trying to focus his eyes. They were not reflected stars, but individual living things, and they were bobbing up and down, occasionally gliding left to right, and seemed to be closing in upon him, as if to surround him.
He couldn't believe his own senses, so sobbed and started forward again, still

on his hands and knees, moving up an almost vertical slope while the snow slid around him. The lights were closing in on him, growing larger, ever brighter, and soon they had formed a large, pulsating orb that was coming towards him. Then his terror fused with his misery, ordaining his collapse, and he fell face down into the snow, taking deep, anguished breaths.
He let himself dissolve, becoming part of the mountain, and rolled over with his body wrapped in snow to gaze up at the stars.
The stars had disappeared. He was dazzled by brilliant light. The light turned into an immense, pulsating disc that grew wider and brighter. He felt its ethereal heat. The snow was melting off him. He squinted into the light as it fell about him and seemed to ingest him.
He was filled with wondrous awe. Though dazzled, he could still see. What he saw, as he warmed up and started dissolving, was a shadow-filled bright haze. The shadows seemed to be watching him. They were *there*, but out of reach. He reached out to where he thought they were, but he couldn't quite touch them.
At that moment, he lost his senses. He was completely disorientated. He didn't know left from right, the vertical from the horizontal, and felt that he was floating in space and somehow leaving his body.
He knew, then, that it was true – that he was actually dissolving – and remembered in a sudden rush of infantile terror, as the brilliant light blinked out and he was plunged into blackness, that given the relationship between light and the human eye, an invisible man would have to be blind.
In his blindness, in that terrible womb, his terror rendered him senseless.

Chapter Seven

As he drove the hired car from Darjeeling to Gangtok, Hans kept thinking of what he had done. Elena was sitting beside him, wearing a sky-blue jacket with figure-hugging denims and sweater, and each time she pressed her knee against his, his heart lurched with fear as well as lust.

He was concerned that Zweig, sitting in the back, might eventually notice.

Hans had always known he would live to regret his surrender to the drunken Elena that time; and indeed, since then, she had importuned him repeatedly,

and he, though terrified that Zweig would find out, had not been able to resist her practised whore's charms. He thought about her night and day, was hardly able to keep his hands off her, but with his lust went a dread of discovery – a dread based on his knowledge of what Zweig would do to him if he found out.

To make matter worse, Elena knew this and played on it, exacting a perversely heightened pleasure from touching and stroking him behind Zweig's back, though very much in his presence. More dangerously, she had also started *openly* displaying her contempt for Zweig – and Zweig was gradually recognizing it.

'Zweig can't get it up any more,' Elena had confided to Hans more than once, usually when they were together in bed, both naked and sweating after sex, 'and he's becoming real stingy, real tight with his *geld*. I want to get away from the fat bastard, and I know you do, too.'

While this was true enough, Hans was frightened that she could see it, since if she had seen it, Zweig might also have seen it and would not let it pass.

Indeed, ever since that dreadful day in Romania, when, after being seduced by Elena, he had been sexually humiliated by Zweig, Hans had sensed that Zweig was watching him more closely and turning much colder. Hans was growing more frightened of Zweig – even more so than he had been – and was not being helped by the fact that he and Elena were now secret lovers and she was being increasingly obvious about this when in Zweig's presence.

Sooner or later, she would let it slip out – and then he, Hans, would be a doomed man, with no hope of reprieve.
So, as he drove and felt Elena's knee touching his, he twitched and glanced fearfully in the rear-view mirror, expecting to see Zweig's cold eyes growing wide with rage. Luckily, Zweig continued staring out the window, at the Indian coolies in the lush fields bathed in morning's pearly light, obviously immersed in his unhappy thoughts about what he had done.
Apart from his fears over Elena's loose tongue, Hans wanted to get away because he sensed that Zweig was losing control. What had happened

between them in the Eforie Nord thermal treatment centre had been the first indication that Zweig was not his normal self; and many incidents since then, mostly outbursts of mindless rage, had convinced Hans that his boss was going insane.

Any doubts that he had about this issue had been put to rest when Zweig murdered Andropov Kuragin, thus guaranteeing the deadly enmity of the Soviets and the loss of his only remaining ally. Zweig certainly knew this; would have faced it when his rage subsided, and it was doubtless why he had, since leaving the South Atlantic to come here, alternated between periods of moody silence and inexplicable, frightening rages.

'He's going crazy,' Elena had said more than once. 'We should get out while we can, Hans.'

There could be no arguing with that, but it didn't soothe his fears.

Remarkably, no more than an hour after having received a telex from Zweig's office in Calcutta, informing him that Ingrid and the American had taken a train to Darjeeling, Hans had been surprised to find in his mail a note giving him the same information. The note had been signed 'Saint-Germain' in an elegant, rather archaic hand, and Zweig, when he read it, had growled, 'I think this note is genuine. He *wants* a confrontation with me. Now why would that be?' And two days later, when Hans had arranged everything, they had flown out from Paris.

The journey to here had been awful. Zweig had picked fights with people at every stop along the route – at the airports, in the hotels, with taxi drivers – and Hans had heard him, through the wall dividing their rooms, screaming abuse at Elena. For this reason alone, Hans was pleased to be out in the open again, away from the claustrophobic confines of the hotel with Zweig throwing tantrums, and instead driving through the increasingly tropical greenery of Sikkim toward the vast, snow-capped mountains.

They had been greeted at the station in Darjeeling by another of Zweig's informants, a local government official, who told them that Ingrid and the American had been staying in the Oberoi Mount Everest hotel, that their room had been bugged, and that by this means it had been ascertained that they'd had a meeting in the hotel lobby with someone calling himself Mephisto, originally Christian Grabbe, after which Ingrid had sneaked out of her room, not to return, and the American, leaving the same room to pursue her, had returned all alone.

Also, according to the findings of a perfectly routine check with all of the government official's rail, air and carhire contacts in Darjeeling, the American had hired a taxi the following morning to take him to a car-hire company that was located on the approach road to Gangtok, from where, according to the English owner of the company, he had intended taking a hired Land Rover through the Sikkim valley, prior to attempting to persuade some Sherpa guides into taking him up the Kanchenjunga mountain.
What the corrupt government official had *not* been able to ascertain, and what still puzzled Hans and Zweig, was the whereabouts of Ingrid, since the American had made all his arrangements alone and had certainly gone to Gangtok on his own. They had therefore assumed that the American's insane hope of scaling the mountain, at which he was singularly inexperienced, was an indication that Ingrid, somehow or other, had ended up there, doubtless in the clutches of Saint-Germain.
'We must be close,' Zweig said from the back seat of the car. 'Where *is* the damned place?'
'The town's just a couple of miles from here,' Hans replied, 'so the car-hire firm *should* be fairly close.'
The road here was winding through upland forests and meadows, with spruce, pine, oak and magnolia trees rising out of a bright profusion of yellow, pink and crimson rhododendrons and broad swathes of blue irises, with the peaks of Kanchenjunga scraping a cloudy, grey-blue sky.
Hans shivered when he saw the mountain, feeling as if it was calling to him, and was relieved when they approached the outskirts of the small town of Gangtok and he saw a building by the side of the road, surrounded by trucks, vans, cars, and a single, extremely battered helicopter.
'Here it is,' he said as he pulled into a parking space directly in front of the building, which looked like a small wood-plank house with a raised verandah running along it.
Turning off the ignition and applying the hand-brake, he slipped from the car and hurried to open the rear door and let Zweig get out. Zweig did not look too happy as he studied the helicopter, seemed even less happy when Elena wriggled out of the other side, languidly stretched herself, spat her chewing gum on the ground and said, 'Shit, what a dump!'
'Stop talking like a tramp,' Zweig curtly admonished her.
'I should've stayed back in Darjeeling,' Elena said defiantly, then, foolishly,

smiled at Hans. ‘I mean, what am *I* doing here?’
‘You’re here because I can’t trust you in that hotel,’ Zweig informed her. ‘Now please shut your mouth and don’t bother me. Let’s go inside.’
Shocked that Elena could be so stupid as to smile at *him*, while openly defying Zweig, Hans was glad to go up the steps, onto the verandah of the shabby roadside house. Glancing sideways at Zweig, he saw that his fleshy face was grim, his eyes smouldering beneath the wrinkled brow and bald head. Zweig looked like a monster, not quite human, certainly dangerous, and Hans felt his stomach heaving nervously as he knocked on the door.
‘Come in!’ a cheerful, English-accented voice cried out instantly. ‘We’re always open for business!’
When they entered, they found themselves in a very untidy office, with two badly cluttered desks, a couple of metal filing cabinets, a few typewriters and a single telephone. The walls were covered in maps, charts, timetables, and pin-up calendars from various tyre manufacturers; a lot of agricultural and mechanical tools were scattered about the place. A long counter divided the office from a reception area, and behind it stood a short, plump, ruddy-cheeked Englishman, whose eyes, bright blue and crinkled with lines of humour, matched his naturally cheerful grin.
‘The first customers I’ve had all day,’ he said. ‘How do you do?’
‘We’re fine,’ Hans said. ‘Are you David Stewart?’
‘I certainly hope so. I’m the only English resident in the area, but I sometimes forget that fact.’
‘My name is Hans Mayer. Me and my friends are travelling about the area and we’d like – ’
‘You’re German, yes?’
‘Yes,’ Hans agreed, ‘we are.’
‘Damned good soldiers, I have to admit. Let bygones be bygones.’
‘Yes,’ Hans said. ‘Of course. What we want is – ’
‘I have Land Rovers and trucks and vans and ordinary cars. I have the only helicopter in the area – so just say the word.’
‘That is *most* kind,’ Hans said, feeling flustered by what was clearly a touch of English eccentricity. ‘What we want is – ’
‘I would suggest, if you intend travelling farther, to the lower slopes of the mountains, that you use a Land Rover. Of course, if you’d like to *fly* over the mountains, I could be your pilot.’

‘We were thinking of – ’
‘Ah, yes, a flight *along* the mountains. The lady *would* find that heavenly. And I don’t doubt that – ’
‘We’re looking for someone,’ Zweig interjected rudely, stepping up to the counter, spreading his large hands upon it, and staring down without warmth at the smiling Englishman. ‘An American named Remick – Gerry Remick. We were told he wanted to hire a Land Rover and would have to get it from you. Has the bastard been here?’
The cheerful expression left the Englishman’s face and he looked up at Zweig with detestation. ‘I *beg* your pardon?’ he said.
‘You heard me,’ Zweig growled. ‘An American bastard. His name’s Gerry Remick.’
‘This is not the police department,’ the Englishman responded. ‘I am here to hire an assortment of vehicles or give flights in my helicopter. I’m not here to listen to such language or disclose the names of my clients.’
‘Actually,’ Hans began, hoping to pour oil on troubled waters, ‘we just wanted…’ But he trailed off in despair when Zweig went to the end of the counter, entered the office area, grabbed the small Englishman by the collar of his jacket and raised him bodily off the floor. The Englishman hung there, eyes bulging, cheeks bright red, kicking his feet helplessly in the air while the huge Zweig glared at him.
‘I detest English fairies,’ Zweig said. ‘Now has he been here or not?’
The Englishman was choking on the tightened collar of his jacket, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water. Zweig shook him like a rag doll, making his flushed cheeks turn pale, then hurled him bodily at the nearest wall. The shocked Englishman slid down the wall to become a shuddering heap on the floor.
Zweig picked up an axe, glared down at the Englishman, then started swinging the axe with a frightening efficiency, bringing it down on the typewriters, the desks, the telephone, then smashing all the chairs to smithereens before attacking the walls. He went at them with cold fury, muttering under his breath, hacking great lumps out of the planks, smashing lamps and pipes, tearing electric cables out of the plaster covering the planks, hacking the whole office to pieces while its owner, still huddled on the floor, looked up in horror and dread, his eyes like two polished spoons.
Eventually, Zweig finished, let the axe fall to his side, took a deep breath,

then swung the axe back over his head and brought it down on the Englishman.
The Englishman screamed and rolled away just in time, the blade of the axe burying itself low down in the wall where his head would have been. Then Zweig reached down, grabbed him by his jacket, and jerked him back up to his feet.
'The *Schwein's* name is Remick,' Zweig said. 'Now did he come here or not?'
The dazed Englishman simply nodded his head, indicating, 'Yes.'
Zweig opened his large hands and dropped the Englishman to the floor, where he flopped forward, gasping for breath, then rolled onto his back.
'Yes,' he gasped, 'he was here. He took a Land Rover. He wanted to drive through the Sikkim valley to the lower slopes of Kanchenjunga. Once there, he was hoping to hire some Sherpa guides to take him higher. I thought he was mad and told him so, but he insisted on going. He kept mumbling something about some girl. I didn't catch what it was.'
'What *part* of the mountain?' Zweig asked.
'I don't know.'
'You're sure?'
'*I don't know*!'
The Englishman propped himself against the wall, his legs stretched out before him.
'Is that helicopter outside ready to fly?'
'Yes, I can take you – '
'I can fly it myself. *Danke sehr* for your helpful information. Hans, kill this English *Schwein*.'
Hans felt a deep surge of horror and disbelief as Zweig turned away and went back through the opening in the counter. He opened his mouth to speak, was lost for words, saw Zweig's steely gaze fixed upon him and turned away to face Elena, who, for the first time since he had known her, also seemed shocked.
'Jesus Christ, Zweig,' she said, 'you can't really mean…'
'Shut up. It's none of your business. Hans, do as you're told.'
'Herr Zweig, I really don't see any reason for – '
'God damn it, Zweig,' Elena interjected, 'don't be such an ass. You're acting like someone going crazy. Show some sense, for Chrissakes!'

Zweig snapped his fingers at Hans. ‘A weapon! *Give me the pistol, Hans*!’
Hans did as he was told, removing the pistol from its holster under his jacket. As he handed it to Zweig, he could hardly think straight, was only aware of a deepening horror and bewilderment, not sure what new diabolical ploy his master was cooking up.
He soon found out. Zweig held the pistol in front of his face, studied it thoughtfully, then turned around and held it out to Elena, who stepped back, shaking her head in protest.
‘No!’ she spat. ‘*No*!’
‘You whore!’ Zweig growled. ‘Telling *me* what to do! You’re becoming too smart for your own good; it’s time you learnt to take orders.’
‘I won’t do it! *I won’t*!’
Though ashamed of himself, Hans was too frightened to move, and didn’t do so even when Zweig reached out for the protesting Elena, grabbed her by the throat, and waved the pistol threateningly in front of her face.
‘Take the pistol and kill that English *Schwein*. It’s him or you, Elena. Now take the pistol and shoot him!’
White as a sheet, Elena took the pistol from Zweig, glanced despairingly at Hans, looking more human than she’d ever been before, then walked, breathing too harshly, through the gap in the counter.
Hans stared pleadingly at Zweig, met that coldly ferocious gaze, turned away to see the shaking Elena slowly raising the pistol. She was no longer a whore, but a woman stripped naked, trembling with fear and revulsion, trying to choke back her shame. At that moment, he almost loved her, understanding what she was feeling, and realized that she and he were bound together in the same vicious trap.
He had to get them both out of it.
The Englishman whimpered, ‘No!’ and then Elena started crying, the hand holding the pistol shaking visibly as she tried to take aim. ‘*Please*, Miss!’ the Englishman pleaded, his voice hoarse, but Elena’s wrist jerked, the report ricocheted around the room, the Englishman’s heels kicked the floor and he quivered once or twice as Elena stepped back and covered her mouth with her free hand, her streaming eyes turning towards Zweig to display her revulsion.
‘Oh, you *bastard*!’ she sobbed.
Without a word, Zweig stepped around the counter, walked up to her and slapped her face. It was a sharp, brutal slap, making her head jerk to the side,

and she dropped the smoking pistol to the floor.
‘You’re mine,’ Zweig said. ‘You do as I say. Now let’s get out of here. Hans, pick up that pistol.’
He practically dragged Elena from the office, pushed her through the front doorway, then indicated with a nod back over his shoulder that Hans should follow them out. Hans rushed into the office area, snatched up the pistol, applied the safety catch, then slipped the weapon back into his holster. He looked down at the dead man, saw pieces of brain and blood, an anguished contortion of outflung limbs, and almost heaved up. However, he managed to control himself, looking away and breathing deeply, then hurried out of that place of death and back into the fresh air.
Zweig was standing by the helicopter, holding on to the sobbing Elena, both of them framed by the snowcapped mountains and a cloudily pock-marked sky. Zweig was holding Elena tightly, his large hand clamped on her shoulder, as she shook like a leaf in the wind, suddenly frail, almost childlike. The sight of her tears shocked Hans, but also filled him with fear. He and Elena were in the hands of a madman. Zweig had given up everything, was losing his mind, collapsing, and his dream of obtaining the Tuaoi Stone was all he had left.
That stone possibly did not exist – and if it did, so what? Zweig was in no condition to deal with it or anything else. No, he was going insane, inviting self-destruction with every step he took, and sooner or later that need to destroy would be turned on Hans, also.
‘No,’ Hans whispered, ‘it’s too much.’
He had been a slave for too long and now he wanted his freedom, the touch of human warmth, Elena’s flesh, that ecstatic renewal. He wanted her and a decent future, a bright place, without fear, and as he walked towards her and Zweig, putting a smile on his face, he realized that at last he was willing to risk all for that.
‘I’ll fly it,’ Zweig said, then stepped aside, his eyes watchful, to ensure that Hans and Elena climbed up before him. He followed them in, huffing and puffing badly, then took the pilot’s seat and switched on the ignition, then expertly took them up above the clouds to the vast, sweeping sky – a clean place, well lit, an empty space where birds could spread their wings and had nothing to fear.
He flew towards Kanchenjunga.

Chapter Eight

Something changed the silent darkness. A hint of light, distant sound. A faint murmuring, like water on sand, reflecting moonlight and stars. No, something else… not reflected sky, just lights… streaks of light that undulated through the darkness and hinted of substance. No splashing water either: encircling voices, closing in. A heartbeat that resounded like a gong and filled up what he was.

I am , he thought as sensation returned to him. *Gerry… I am Gerry*. His pulsing blood warmed his skin. *Where am I*? *What's happening*? He remembered going blind. A spasm of terror whipped him, then retreated when the streaks of light widened.

The resounding heartbeat was his own, but it faded away as sound returned: the shuffling of feet, murmuring voices, the words now more distinct… 'He's coming around… doing fine…'

The streaks of light had joined together to become a general brightness; it spread through the darkness, letting him know that he had sight, so he finally opened his eyes, looked up from where he was lying, and saw two faces looking down, both familiar to him.

One was diabolically handsome, the other silveryhaired and distinguished, and they both smiled and then moved away, leaving his view unobstructed. He felt his own body, pinched himself, realized that he was whole, then looked up at a very strange, high ceiling, wondering what he was seeing.

'You're alright,' a familiar voice said smoothly. 'You can sit up now, Gerry.' He realized that he was stretched out on some kind of hard bed, and turned his face in the direction of the man who had spoken. St Germain and Mephisto were standing a short distance away, side by side, both wearing white Tibetan robes, or *chubas*, in a great hall remarkably similar to the monastery he had left the night before: high walls of stone and *chan*, a spartan stone-flagged floor, Tibetan carpets and odd bits of Indian furniture

placed here and there.
There were, however, a couple of differences… and coming awake, now surprisingly free of fear, he took a deep breath, sat upright, and gazed more carefully around him.
The stone-and*chan* walls did not rise to an ordinary ceiling, but appeared to have been carved from solid, irregular rock, which he assumed could only be the interior of the mountain. More bizarre was what appeared to be an immense, steel-plated dome that formed the high roof of the great chamber, rather like the inside of an observatory.
In the dead centre of the floor of the great hall, directly below the high dome, stood a five-foot-tall rectangular, solid steel pedestal, on top of which rested, inside a protective transparent case, a light-reflecting, crystal pyramid, about five inches high.
It had to be the Tuaoi Stone.
Without thinking, Gerry swung his legs off the bed, which was also made of stone – a solid block, as he noticed
– and walked the few yards to the middle of the great hall, stopping in front of the pedestal supporting the legendary Tuaoi Stone. He reached out to touch the transparent case, hesitated, stared at St Germain and Mephisto; when they simply smiled and nodded their permission, he touched the glass casing to confirm that it was *only* glass.
Yes, it felt like glass, or certainly something very similar, and he looked through it at the five-inch-high crystal pyramid, which, in reflecting the light, was unusually dazzling.
He stared at that miniature pyramid for a considerable period of time, then eventually raised his gaze from the tip of the pyramid to the steel-plated dome high above him.
The tip of the pyramid was aimed directly at the centre of the dome.
‘Can I touch it?’ he asked, again looking at the miniature pyramid.
‘No,’ St Germain said.
The sound of that distinctive voice, which he had first heard during his Nile cruise, jerked him gently back to reality and made him study the two men. Since he had recently seen Mephisto there was no great surprise there, though once more he was aware of a certain jaded weariness behind his diabolical attractiveness and slightly mocking, uncannily erotic smile. However, since that first encounter during the Nile cruise, he had only seen St Germain in

dreams or hallucinations, as an apparition, a shimmering ghost, mostly slightly erased and distorted in a pulsating white haze; but now he could see him clearly and was singularly impressed, forcibly struck by his distinguished features, his grey eyes and silvery hair, his air of quiet authority, perhaps arrogance, his indivisible sense of self.
'What happened to me?' Gerry asked. 'I thought I was going blind.'
'You were temporarily dematerialized,' St Germain replied, 'and teleported up to here inside that glowing plasmoid mass. You are now back to normal.'
'I thought it was some kind of flying saucer.'
'That's what most people think when they see them. What they're actually seeing is a pocket of the infinite, a movable point where the world we know temporarily ceases to exist and material objects, or individuals, as if caught in a black hole, can circumvent space and time, to reappear elsewhere.'
'I'm supposed to believe that?'
'Why not? You're keen on mathematics. You have a particular interest in quantum mechanics and at least *understand* its implications. Think of the electron that can appear out of nothing, out of nowhere, the non-existent, then travel a distance that is both finite and infinite, realize its mistake, that it is actually unreal, then turn around and travel back through time to its starting point, thus having never existed in the first place.'
'Right,' Gerry said, fascinated already. 'And it repeats this again and again, in one sense never actually existing, in another existing eternally in an ever-scattering time event.'
'Correct, Gerry. If you see me, I *am*; if you do not, *I* am not. The secret of immortality is to be found in quantum physics: with the Secret Knowledge, with supernatural power, we can transcend space and time, materializing and disappearing at will, existing even in death.'
'And that's how you and Mephisto get around?'
'Yes.'
'Like the lamas?'
'Yes, like the lamas… but in a much more advanced state. The lamas can only project *themselves* out of their bodies; we can do the same to others, whether they want it or not. Rather like creating a *tulpa*: a willed materialization of another person.'
'So Ingrid's up here somewhere? She's safe?'
'Of course,' St Germain said.

He nodded at Mephisto who turned away and walked off without a word, leaving the great hall by a doorless, arched exit in a side-wall. Then, while St Germain stared steadily at him, smiling slightly, Gerry was able to see something that he had not noticed previously: that this man, for all his outward appearance of youthfulness, was much older, a *lot* older, than he appeared to be at first glance. It was as if a youthful patina had been placed over the mouldering tissue of the centuries, a second skin on the verge of being shed, to reveal…

'What is this place?' Gerry asked.

'A sort of monastery,' St Germain replied. 'We can only leave our material bodies temporarily, and here, when in the material state, we meditate and ponder the Secret Knowledge, which, by its revelations, sets us free from mortality's strictures.'

'Has this place been hollowed out of the mountain?'

'Yes. Many centuries ago. It was created by normal, mortal men, before they transcended. From outside it cannot be seen unless that is our wish. Nor would you have found it had you wandered these mountains for days. No one has *ever* found this place, unless we wished them to do so.'

Gerry was willing to believe that, remembering his tortuous journey, his increasing conviction that the mountain was playing tricks on him and confusing his senses. He wondered if that path he had taken really existed, or if they had placed it there for him, but instead of asking about it, was moved by another, more personal concern.

'Has Mephisto gone for Ingrid?'

'Yes. He is bringing her to you. We brought her here to make you come after her – and you did, as we believed you would. Without the strength of your love for Ingrid, you would not have made it as far as even the first monastery. You are one of the pure at heart.'

'I seriously doubt that.'

'The pure at heart are possessed of the kind of humility that even they may not recognize in themselves. We are rarely, if ever, what we believe ourselves to be – and you are more than you know.'

Gazing around the great hall, which had precious little furnishing and made voices reverberate, Gerry felt far removed from what he had been, different, much older and wiser, as if changed overnight. He felt no fear at being here, but only a burning curiosity, a rising excitement that filled his head with light

and heightened perception.
There was so much he wanted to ask, but he didn't know where to begin, and was still gazing around him, in a trance of expectation, when the sound of footsteps approaching outside the great hall made him look at the arched doorway to his left.
Ingrid entered with Mephisto, the latter holding her elbow, and she smiled with surprising naturalness and joy, putting her hands out even as she hurried to him, to embrace him and kiss him. He felt her softness and warmth, her femininity, and took it into himself, almost weeping at the emotion she gave him. When she stepped back, flicking hair from her eyes, her smile shone like the sun.
'They told me you'd come after me,' she said. 'And I knew you would, too.'
'You're okay?' he asked.
'Yes, I'm fine. A little bit dazed, but well looked after. I can't believe this is happening.'
He shared her feelings, but realized with a touch of amusement that it was something they had both expressed often during their complex journey to this place.
I can't believe this is happening.
No, he couldn't believe it, yet he still felt no fear, was moved only by a mounting impatience to find out what the ending was going to be.
Mephisto, who had been staring steadily at him, offered that slightly mocking, erotic smile, making him blush with embarrassment and self-defensive anger, speaking quickly to hide it.
'Why did you lure me up here?' he asked of St Germain. 'And why, if you're protecting the Tuaoi Stone, did you actually help us to find it?'
'You are here,' St Germain said gravely, 'to meet your manifest destiny.'
Startled, slightly shocked, and embarrassed this time in an odd, almost childish way, Gerry stared at Ingrid, received a full smile of encouragement, glanced at the thinly smiling Mephisto, then turned back to St Germain.
'You now know the secret of civilization,' St Germain said. 'That civilization began here, when what is now Africa and India were one landmass. That original civilization eventually became more advanced in its intellectual and scientific achievements than the most advanced societies of the present day. It was a civilization based on kabbalistic geometry, or numerology; and having discovered that everything in existence is bound together in a complex

design, and that the design is essentially numerical, the philosopher-leaders of that society soon uncovered many of the great mysteries of the universe and created a civilization in which mental telepathy, extrasensory perception, precognition, the pineal eye, levitation and other so-called paranormal powers were commonplace, at least amongst the philosopher-leaders, or high priests.' He paused to glance around him, as if seeing faraway places, then stared at the Tuaoi Stone.

'Knowing that every number has certain given properties – male and female, active and passive, positive and negative – the high priests of that civilization based all of their creations on the dictates of given numbers, with the names of things or persons encoding their essential characteristics in the numerical values of the letters used. In other words, each letter in the alphabet had a corresponding number, and all words in the spoken language were created from the numbers containing their characteristics. In time, the language of words became the dominant language, while the *original* language – the language of numbers – became the secret, magical language of only the most powerful, magical adepts at the head of that great civilization.'

St Germain approached the glass casing containing the Tuaoi Stone, placed his hand upon it, above the miniature pyramid, and lovingly left it there.

'In the secret language of numbers, the perfect number is six, with all other numbers grouped around it; and the most perfect shape, according to the numerical law, is the shape of the pyramid. Thus, the dominant architectural shape of that great civilization became the pyramid, which, in its numerous variations, such as the Tibetan chorten or the oriental pagoda, spread across the world in the wake of the migrations of the people of that civilization about 200,000 years ago, in a time when there were no written records and all was held in the mind.'

'And were you,' Gerry asked, 'in one of your previous incarnations, a high priest, or magical adept, of that civilization?'

'Yes,' St Germain said, not looking at him, but simply staring at the crystal pyramid in its glass case and continuing to speak as if addressing it. 'The language of numbers is based on the first eight digits, one to eight, the most important of which is six, with the most magical of all combinations being the so-called Number of the Beast, 666, which has often been disguised as the sum of its three digits, eighteen, or 1746, the digits of which, when added together, also make eighteen. The Tuaoi Stone is therefore a perfect pyramid

whose dimensions are based on that magical number – and thus embody in alchemical terms what the number represents: the fusion of Earth and sky, male and female, sulphur and mercury – the very secret of life. Thus, the Tuaoi Stone, when placed on top of the Great Pyramid, created a fusion between Earth and the cosmos, between the terrestrial and the celestial, creating a bridge between space and time, rendering human mortality obsolete. Through the Tuaoi Stone, immortality and limitless power could be gained; and for that very reason only the high priests of that great civilization, the absolutely pure at heart, were taught the secret language of numbers, became magical adepts, and explored the mysteries of the universe in increasing secrecy, becoming the keepers of the sacred stone throughout the centuries.'
'So the Tuaoi Stone is actually the Philosopher's Stone?'
'Yes, my young friend, it is.'

Chapter Nine

Glancing at Mephisto, whose eyes glittered mesmerically, Gerry recalled the bizarre journey that he and Ingrid had made to reach this point, the many clues and leads they had been given, all based on numbers. That complex journey had been a mathematical riddle and they had asked him to solve it. They had helped him the only way they could: with the language of numbers.

'And that civilization later spread out,' he said, remembering all he had learned, 'to the Atlantic Ocean, then the Mediterranean Sea, and finally to Egypt?'

'Yes,' St Germain said. 'And, of course, in the inept language of words, became known as Atlantis. Over the centuries of prehistory, while that civilization was still advancing, it eventually found its way by sea to the Atlantic Ocean. It built other great pyramids and founded another civilization there, on the various islands between the Azores and the Sargasso Sea. Unfortunately, it then suffered three periods of destruction by fire and water; in other words, by volcanic eruption, earthquakes and subsequent floods. However, after the first two catastrophes, and knowing that another was imminent, the high priests, including myself, removed the sacred stone from

the top of its great pyramid and travelled by boat across the Atlantic to the Mediterranean, finally settling on the islands of the Aegean Sea, between Crete and Santorini. Not long after, about 10,000 BC, the civilization that we had left in the North Atlantic was destroyed in the third of its periods of destruction and buried beneath the sea. Some of its remains are still there to this day, beneath the waters of Bimini.'

When St Germain said that, Gerry recalled the photographs he had seen at various times of the circular walls and pyramidal structures recently discovered at Bimini, in the westernmost district of the Bahamas, due east of Miami, Florida. He also recalled the visions that he'd had of great pyramidal cities, with pyramids of all shapes and sizes stretching away to the horizon, of the same constructions being covered in tidal waves and the dust of the centuries. In his vivid imaginings he had seen magnificent civilizations flourish and die. Now he knew that what he had imagined were visions of a former actuality, given to him by St Germain.

He lowered his head and rubbed his eyes, trying to take all this in, then raised his gaze again to St Germain, trying to see the bones of his skull beneath his distinguished, oddly youthful features.

Perhaps he saw weariness.
'The magical powers of numbers,' St Germain continued, 'incorporated in the sacred crystal, or Tuaoi Stone, brought great prosperity and joy to the peoples of that growing civilization in the Aegean Sea, but this in turn led to increasing arrogance and base ambition. While the high priests protecting the Tuaoi Stone became more withdrawn and secretive, the less religiously inclined embarked on campaigns of conquest and soon overran North Africa, including Egypt. By that time, the high priests, who by now were gifted with mental telepathy and precognition, had prophesied that the island of Santorini would erupt and subsequently destroy that civilization in the Aegean Sea, which many people now called Atlantis. Therefore, they removed the Tuaoi Stone from the tip of its pyramid on an island in that area and placed it on the deliberately truncated peak of the immense pyramid that they had built in Giza, in Egypt, in approximately 2,170 BC. Since that pyramid was to be their great temple of learning and, being located at what was then the precise

centre of the terrestrial Earth, was also an instrument of fusion between Earth and the cosmos, it eventually became known as the Great Pyramid.'
Gerry glanced at Mephisto and saw him smiling at Ingrid. She blushed, as helpless as a child, but didn't lower her gaze. He felt nervous just seeing that.
'In about 1,500 BC,' St Germain continued, 'Santorini, as had been prophesied, erupted and destroyed that socalled Atlantis in the Aegean Sea. After that, the high priests of the new civilization in Egypt guarded even more zealously the Secret Knowledge found through the Tuaoi Stone, educated many new adepts, including Plato, Pythagoras and Jesus Christ, in the inner sanctums of the Great Pyramid, and used the Tuaoi Stone – whose magical numbers represented the sum of the two basic elements of alchemical transformation, namely sulphur and mercury – as an instrument of such transformation to a higher, purely spiritual plane. Then, when they had succeeded – and had, in so doing, created a small, select group of magically gifted adepts – they removed the Tuaoi Stone from the tip of the Great Pyramid, left the now useless pyramid to the encroaches of modern times, most lamentably tourism, and returned with the Tuaoi Stone to the Himalayas, their natural home. I am one of that original group, a magical adept – and you, too, have been chosen.'
Feeling a wave of disbelief washing over him at the sound of those last words, Gerry shook his head from side to side in rejection, tried to grin it away, and decided not to pursue that point too quickly or deeply. Instead, having glanced once more at Mephisto and Ingrid, and been rendered more nervous by Ingrid's helpless response to the former's seductive charms, he choked back his resentment and asked of St Germain: 'The adepts actually found the secret of immortality?'
'In time, yes.'
'You and Mephisto are both immortals?'
'Yes, that is so. We exist on Earth in a physical form, but can transform ourselves at will, leaving our physical form to move back and forth through space and time. We are here, but there, also, simultaneously. Like your protons in quantum mechanics.'
'And the famous Comte de Saint-Germain was actually you?'
'Yes, that was me in one of my many incarnations. I was compelled to intervene in the affairs of mankind and thus had to adopt physical form and be noticed. My true history, however, was deliberately rendered obscure and

contradictory to confuse those who would try to identify me as who and what I truly am. But I was, and am, he: the Comte de Saint-Germain – in actuality, St Germain of this secret Order devoted to the Tuaoi Stone.'
'So what's the purpose of this secret Order?'
'Individually, to seek out the Secret Knowledge, which is both finite and infinite, and thus learn some of the secrets of existence, which is ultimately unknowable; to find through the Secret Knowledge the Unknowable, the inner peace of Nirvana, the one true reality. Collectively, in mutually finding Nirvana, creating a new Kingdom on Earth, a magical state of being in which terms such as "life" and "death" will become interchangeable, physical journeys through space rendered unnecessary, contact with those in far-flung galaxies perfectly commonplace, and knowledge of the nature of space and time made freely available and, perhaps, even comprehensible.'
'That's a purely spiritual quest.'
'Yes, it is.'
'Then why do you sometimes intervene in the affairs of mankind?'
'We only do so when the secrecy of our Order is threatened – or when the affairs of mortal men are a threat to their future salvation. Plato and Merlin, for instance, in their different ways, kept alive in the minds of men the legend of our magical civilization, whilst ensuring that our society remained secret. It was the function of Pythagoras to instil in mankind the knowledge that reality, at its deepest level, is mathematical in nature and that philosophy can be used for spiritual purification. Jesus Christ, another adept, returned to Earth in human form in order to help mankind rise from barbarism and create a culture based on love instead of primitive superstitions and fear. You already know about my own numerous interventions, as the Comte de Saint-Germain, in the troubled politics of the eighteenth century. You may also be aware of the rumour that Adolf Hitler had a secret, so-called magical advisor who persuaded him, by referring to his reading of the stars, *not* to encircle the besieged British army on Dunkirk beach. That single decision cost Hitler the war – and *I* was the secret advisor who deliberately led him into making that decision, which for him was disastrous, but which saved the free world from brutal subjugation.'
'And what about Ingrid's father, Wilhelm Zweig?'
'We protected you from Zweig because your purpose had not been fulfilled and he was threatening the completion of your task. In protecting you, we

foiled his dream of capturing the Tuaoi Stone in the hope of using its powers for his own evil purposes.'

St Germain was certainly being very persuasive, but Gerry felt that something wasn't quite right, that certain fabrications, or, perhaps, omissions, were gilding the truth. He had doubts about what he was hearing, didn't quite know why, so decided, instead of giving voice to them, to let St Germain say what he wished.

'And me,' he said. '*I'm* one of the pure at heart? I still find that hard to believe.'

'Yes, you are one of the pure at heart. You may not recognize that yourself, but your actions have proved it. Your journey to this place has been an elaborate one, dangerous and frightening, but throughout it you have acted with exemplary courage and the goodness of true faith. You are one of the pure at heart. It embarrasses you, but it is so. You have a fine mind, but lack material ambitions. Your pursuit of knowledge is not tainted by base motives, and your journey to here, designed to test your courage, also tested your virtue. Though highly intelligent, you have managed to retain the innocence of a child – and that innocence blesses you.'

'There must be many like me.'

'Many are considered, but few are chosen. You were chosen when I met you on that boat on the Nile and recognized your potential as one of us. Everything that has occurred since then has been designed to either bring you here successfully or let you fall by the wayside. I knew you were one of the pure at heart, though obviously not knowing it, and your innocence, combined with your high intelligence, clearly confirmed this. Likewise, your interest in esoteric matters, both scientific and spiritual, was another factor in your favour. And your specific interest and faith in the magical properties of the Great Pyramid of Giza was yet another confirmation of my belief that you were destined to join us.'

'And Ingrid?'

'Ingrid, also, is one of the pure at heart, your mirrorimage and helpmate, so her involvement since your relationship during that Nile cruise was also encouraged by me. Zweig was after the Tuaoi Stone and therefore had to be stopped; but I also wanted him to be your adversary in the final, most crucial test – in the conflict between good and evil, of which you are part.'

'Then it hasn't yet ended?'

‘No. The final test has yet to be, but it *is* close at hand, and I am confident that all is as it should be, that you *will* remain here as one of the pure at heart, only leaving to inaugurate the new Kingdom on Earth.’
Aware that he was caught up in something of startling significance, possibly beyond his comprehension, Gerry couldn’t help but feel a slight amusement at his own continuing, very human, concerns. He felt this even more when he found himself looking again at Ingrid and Mephisto, fearful of a liaison between them; but when he smiled at her, she returned his smile warmly, and so, feeling much better, he turned back to St Germain.
‘You say I’ve been chosen,’ he said. ‘I’m to become an adept and help create a new Kingdom on Earth. When will this be?’
‘Since the Secret Knowledge has been hidden from the mass of normal men by the use of kabbalistic geometry,’ St Germain replied, ‘the heart of which is the number 666, the new Kingdom on Earth will be inaugurated when 666 mortal men have been rendered immortal by their experiences in this magical monastery. So far, 665 men have done so. You are the last.’
‘Which is why I’m here?’
‘Yes, Gerry. Precisely.’
Gerry glanced at Ingrid and was struck by how calm she was, the lack of fear or confusion in her eyes, the warmth of her steady gaze. His heart went out to her, like a bird on wings of love, and then he studied Mephisto, saw that sly, mocking smile, and wondered what truly lay behind it, if the joke was on him.
‘I find most of this unbelievable,’ he said. ‘I’m only human, after all, and don’t believe in immortality. Nor do I believe in the powers you’ve ascribed to the Tuaoi Stone. It’s just a miniature pyramid, a symbol, and its power lies right there.’
‘No,’ St Germain said. ‘You’re wrong. The stone is as I have described it. It can cause physical *and* spiritual transformations, some of which you have actually witnessed during your journey to this place. The Tuaoi Stone can fuse the Earth to the cosmos. It can obliterate space and time.’
‘I’m sorry, but I still don’t believe you. I’m just a mere mortal.’
St Germain sighed, glanced at Mephisto, then returned his attention to Gerry.
‘Intervention in the affairs of men is sometimes necessary,’ he said, ‘and now is just such an instance. We have protected you both from Zweig because he threatened you *and* us; now, before we take you farther, we must pit your

goodness against his evil and observe the results. This is your final test. It will strengthen you or destroy you. And if, as we hope, it ends with your victory, it will rid you of the last of your doubts and help you to accept us.'
'Where and when will this final test take place?'
'Here and now,' St Germain replied calmly. 'Wilhelm Zweig, who mistakenly believes that he has pursued us, has actually been *guided* to this place and is arriving right now. So prepare to defend yourself.'
Gerry heard the gasp of shock that broke from Ingrid's lips at the very mention of her father's imminent arrival, then he saw her turning deathly pale and covering her lips with her hands.
Almost hating St Germain for what he was doing, he was about to say something when he heard a bass humming sound coming from above. When he looked up, he saw the dome in the ceiling opening, its metal plates parting like the petals of a flower, showing triangular patches of sky, the morning light, drifting clouds, then more sky, more light, as the panels drew farther apart, eventually disappearing completely above the rocky outcroppings of the mountain, until only an immense, jagged hole remained up there, exposing the white-cloud sky, its centre directly above the glass case protecting the Tuaoi Stone.
As Gerry looked up at the weak morning light and drifting white clouds, entranced by the real world, feeling that the sky was spinning magically and drawing him up to it, Mephisto stepped forward and smiled at him. That smile, as usual, was both seductive and totally ambiguous.

Chapter Ten

Looking down on the gleaming snow-white peaks and valleys of Kanchenjunga, from the pilot's seat of the roaring, shuddering helicopter, Zweig felt that the mountain was drawing him towards it, luring him in. He had to look away frequently, feeling dizzy and disorientated, but then he was reminded of Hans and Elena, both of whom were sitting slightly behind him, both obviously chastened. That gave him some pleasure – the knowledge that he still had power over them – and feeling more lively, not as old as he had been, he took the helicopter higher, watched the slopes slipping past below him, and searched every gorge and ravine for a sign of a hideaway.

‘*Scheisse*!’ he snapped. ‘Nothing but rock and snow!

They could be anywhere! *Anywhere*!’
‘We won’t find them,’ Hans said from behind him.
‘They’ll be very well hidden. If no one has found them
before, even by accident, then we’re unlikely to do so.’ Zweig was shocked by what he was hearing. Hans
actually sounded rebellious. Zweig sensed a rising
antagonism in his young assistant and thought he
understood why.
‘Shut your mouth, Hans,’ he said. ‘You’re missing the
point. The point is that we thought we were *pursuing* SaintGermain, when in fact he’s practically *invited* us here. He
must *want* us to find him.’
‘Why?’ Hans responded, sounding agitated. ‘That’s
what *I* want to know.’
‘It’s a trap,’ Elena joined in. ‘There can’t be any other
reason. We should fly the hell out of here before we get
into trouble.’
If no longer impressed with Hans, Zweig was even less
so with Elena and felt like throwing her out of the
helicopter, lock, stock and barrel. He loathed her stupidity,
her crass behaviour and crude tongue, but mostly he
loathed her voluptuous, whorish beauty, which had
gradually become a slap in the face to his waning potency.
She reminded him of his age, the rapid decaying of mind
and body, and for that reason, as well as a few others, he
now wanted rid of her.
‘I didn’t ask for your opinion, Elena, so please don’t
say another word. Your voice grates on my eardrums.’ She didn’t respond and he didn’t expect her to; she had
been growing more impertinent lately, but he had managed
to crush her spirit; making her murder that squawking
English fairy had certainly done the trick. She had been frightened and horrified, shocked out of her wits, and just as with Hans, when he had been forced to shoot the hoodlum, so, too, the very fact that Elena had pressed the

trigger had broken her spirit. She would not forget it quickly, would dwell on possible repercussions, and would subsequently now treat him with the respect he so richly deserved.

Satisfied, he stared at the mountain peaks all around him, brown rock in pure snow, the snow melting and forming a necklace of streams that ran hither and thither, glittering brightly in the late morning sunlight, before disappearing into pools of shadow, deep ravines, winding gorges. It was desolate down there, fiercely beautiful and vast, and he felt that he was flying over an alien landscape, perhaps a different planet.

These days everything seemed unreal and he didn't like the feeling. It was caused by his age and failing health, by the crushing knowledge of his mortality, but also by the pursuit of his daughter, her American boyfriend, and SaintGermain. They were all somewhere down there, perhaps waiting for his arrival; and as he flew between the snowcapped peaks, through pools of shadow and streams of light, he burned with a murderous hatred that threatened his sanity.

He was frightened, yes, of things he couldn't see or grasp, felt haunted by the magical unknown represented by Saint-Germain. He was frightened, but also angry, wanting vengeance, then immortality; wanting to see his daughter, that bitch who had betrayed him, suffer as her mother had done when he fed her the poison. And with that, he wanted the Tuaoi Stone, the Secret Knowledge, immortality, the conquest of his teeming nightmares, the key to the world. '*Scheisse*!' he muttered again. 'Where *are* they? Why don't they show themselves?'

He decided to fly higher, toward the most majestic peaks, also known as the Petals of the Golden Lotus created by Vishnu, the first step in the creation of the universe. Somewhere up there, he remembered, Siva was supposed to sit in a state of eternal meditation, generating

the spiritual force that sustains the cosmos. That force existed, he now realized, not in Siva, but in the Tuaoi Stone, and was the only thing that could possibly stand between him and oblivion.

Looking down, he pondered that fact and what it meant to him. He had thrown everything away in a fit of mindless rage, in what might have been a moment of madness, and now he had nothing left to live for, except what was hidden in the mountain.

'We're too high,' Hans admonished him. 'The winds are treacherous up here. This helicopter isn't made for such an altitude or these weather conditions. Please, Herr Zweig, take us lower.'

Again reminded that Hans, though still frightened of him, was gradually growing more defiant, Zweig took the helicopter even higher and soared over more ice-capped peaks. He studied them carefully, every shadow, each gorge, saw nothing but that awesome desolation, a vast and immaculate white carpet covering nothing but rock. His anger grew the instant he thought of what *they* had done… that wimp, Hans, and that painted tart, Elena… sometime… somewhere.

Yes, it was obvious. Such things could not be hidden. The wimp and the whore had fornicated behind his back and wanted to do so again.

His heart raced at the thought of it; his cheeks burned and he trembled. He took the helicopter even higher, flew across the loftiest peaks, looked down at the glittering snow and irregular pools of shadow, a vast, surrealistic, ominous jigsaw of brown and white, and contemplated hurling them both to their deaths, one after the other.

'We're too high!' Hans repeated through gritted teeth, breathing into Zweig's neck. 'Damn it, Zweig, *we're too high*!'

Zweig couldn't help himself. It was just too much to bear. His heart raced and he felt his cheeks burning as the

blind rage coursed through him. The impertinent young pup! Him and that whore, Elena. He took the helicopter even higher, ascending too quickly, and gleaned some comfort from Elena's gasp of fear as they bucked through the fierce wind.

'Christ!' Hans exclaimed.

'Shut up!'

'We're going to crash!' Elena shouted. 'Christ, Zweig, you stubborn bastard, take her down! She won't *go* any higher!'

'Whore!' Zweig bawled, unable to contain himself.

'*Shut your trap, you fat whore*!' Briefly forgetting the controls, he twisted around in his seat, feeling as if he was in a furnace with all of him burning, his body, his brain, and screamed at her, 'Get out, you bitch! *Out*! Get out or I'll kill you!'

'Out? What the…?'

'You mean *jump*?' Hans enquired.

'That's right. What do *you* think? I want this worthless bitch to jump out. You hear me, Elena? *Get out*!'

Shocked out of her wits, she just stared at him, speechless, then turned pleadingly to Hans, foolishly reaching out for his hand.

That was too much for Zweig (he viewed himself from a distance now) and he twisted farther out of his seat to slap at her face. He missed, fell forward, hanging from his safety belt, as the helicopter tilted to the side and was pummelled by wind.

He heard Hans shouting something, his voice filled with fear, then Elena letting out a piercing scream that almost ruptured his eardrums. He yelled incoherently at her, tried to punch her in the face, saw her big eyes disappearing, the top of her head, then a swathe of gleaming white snow and outcroppings of rock.

Hans tried to get at the controls, but Zweig swiped him away, took a deep breath and managed to take the controls

again. The helicopter levelled out, stopped vibrating, settled down, then flew smoothly between sheer walls of snow and ice-encased rock, its shadow leaping up and down on the land below, like a bird seeking food.
‘Jesus,’ Elena whispered. ‘Did you see that? He nearly got us all killed, Hans!’
Zweig was just about to twist around and lunge at her again when Hans shouted, ‘Look!’
‘What?’
‘Oh, my God…’
When Hans’ voice trailed off into a stuttering disbelief, Zweig glanced out to where two soaring snow-capped peaks fell down to a shadow-filled gorge with level ground at its base. It was like a small valley, almost hidden from view, and the cliffs that rose up on all sides darkly shadowed the plateau.
‘*Wunderbar*!’ Zweig exclaimed without thinking.
‘That *has* to be them!’
He had just glimpsed what at first he had thought was a small hole in the snow; but now, as the helicopter flew towards the gorge, he saw that the hole was rapidly expanding – as if hot water had been poured onto the frozen snow, melting it – and that the irregular edges around the rim of the hole were glinting like metal. Even as he accepted that he was indeed seeing glinting metal, the separate pieces took shape as immense triangular plates which, like the petals of a flower, moved away from one another, opening up to the sky, to reveal an artificially illuminated space just below – a space expanding as the helicopter approached it across the glittering white plateau. Aware that only the most highly developed technology could have constructed such a dome, let alone transported the material required to the peaks of the highest mountains in the world, Zweig knew it could only have been done by the keepers of the Tuaoi Stone.
Which meant that Saint-Germain was down there. Filling up with a

dangerous mixture of excitement and dread, sensing that he had come to the beginning of the end, he throttled down and let the helicopter hover just above the parting sections of the dome.

Eventually the steel plates opened completely, sliding back into the rocks, enabling him to look down into some kind of very large chamber. He thought he saw movement down there, but couldn't be sure. Thick snow glittered around the rim of the open space, merging into a hazy greyness, and below it, defying sense and credibility, was an artificially illuminated cavern, or great hall, containing, as he now saw, several human-shaped figures.

Perhaps four human beings.

'We'll have to go down there,' he said. 'I'm going to land in that place.'

'It's a trap,' Elena said. 'If we descend through that opening, those steel plates are going to close over us and trap us down there. We'll all be prisoners, Wilhelm.' 'I don't care. I have to see the Tuaoi Stone. Nothing else matters now.'

'Not to you, maybe,' she replied like a petulant child, 'but it matters to us. *We* don't want to land there. We don't have a clue what's waiting for us, so let's turn back while we can.'

'No,' he said, too excited even to be angry with her. 'I've got to see the Tuaoi Stone for myself. *I have to get it somehow*!'

It was madness and he knew it, but he couldn't turn back now. As the helicopter descended, as the circular space expanded below him, he knew for certain that he had been guided to this place, that they *wanted* him to come here, and that until he learnt the reason why, he wouldn't be able to rest.

'Yes!' he whispered as the helicopter was buffeted by the wind that raced howling across the expanding space. 'Let it end here!'

Then he felt the barrel of a pistol tapping the back of his head.

'No,' Hans said. 'We're not going down there. If you want to go down there, go, but do it alone.'

Zweig couldn't believe it. He glanced back over his shoulder but couldn't see Hans – only Elena's big eyes moving frantically up and down, and beyond her, outside the roaring, shuddering helicopter, a section of steel plating, shining from between two layers of snow-covered rocks.

'Take that pistol away from my head, Hans. I'm going in there *right now*.'

There was a click as the safety catch on the pistol was released, then he felt the barrel again tapping the back of his head.

'Elena and I are getting out of here,' Hans said, his voice surprisingly calm. 'You're going down there alone. Elena, take hold of that joystick and try holding the helicopter steady. Zweig, get out of that seat and go to the door.'

'You're going to make me jump out?'

'Yes.'

'Without a parachute?'

'Yes. Like you threatened to make Elena jump.' Shocked almost speechless, unable to believe that he had miscalculated so badly and that his mistreatment of Hans, instead of paralysing him with fear, had made the dog turn on its master, Zweig wanted to scream with rage, knew that to do so would be pointless, so simply clenched his ham fists by his sides and took a deep breath.

'You're crazy,' he said, letting his breath out again. 'Elena can't fly this helicopter. We'll just crash if she tries.'

'*I* can fly it,' Hans said, again tapping the back of Zweig's head with the barrel of the pistol. 'You made me learn, remember? It was one of my many unpaid tasks.

Now get out of that chair.'
Scrambling awkwardly around the chair beside Zweig, Elena took hold of the joystick just as Zweig released it. He studied her briefly, saw her fear give way to triumph, and accepted that she also had turned against him in favour of Hans. He felt shocked and humiliated, disgusted by his own bad judgement, and realized that the abuse he had heaped upon them was now coming back at him.
Well, so be it. He would take his courage from that. He had always despised them both, as he did most human beings, and now he would let his contempt be the base of his strength. He had been suffering from old age, from the fear of his mortality, but his rage would be enough to sustain him through what was to come.
'Of course,' he said to Hans. 'As you wish. Anything to oblige.' And with a contemptuous chuckle, he slid out of the chair and went to the open door where Hans, no longer timid, indeed looking quite aggressive, was aiming the pistol at him, his hand surprisingly steady. 'So,' he said, 'I now have to jump out. I will fall to my death.'
'We're not murderers, like you, so you won't have to jump. Instead, you can use the rope-ladder. Let it down, Zweig. *Then* get out.'
'And what do you think you can do without me?' Zweig asked. 'You and this brainless bitch, here?' 'You thought you owned me, didn't you? And that's
why you trusted me. You thought I was too fearful to disobey you or use my initiative. Well, I didn't disobey you, but I *did* use my initiative – by transferring a good amount of your remaining money into my own Swiss bank account. I think I've earned it, Herr Zweig.'
'Yes, maybe you have.'
'I'm going to be rich. Elena and I will have it made. We'll live in luxury for the rest of our days – and at your expense. Now winch the ladder down, you fat pig, and get out of this chopper. When I take the controls, I'll descend

into that place low enough for the ladder to be used. You use it and then we ascend again and fly out of here.' 'If I ever – ' 'You won't, Zweig. You won't ever see us again. I doubt that you'll even get back down the mountain. Now do as you're told.'

Feeling disconnected from what he was hearing, oddly lacking in anger, wanting only to get down there and find the Tuaoi Stone, Zweig briefly studied Hans, saw new strength in his handsome blandness, and finally felt a sneaking admiration for him.

'Yes,' he said, 'you *are* a smart boy. I knew that when I hired you as an accountant. And was, as usual, absolutely correct in my judgement, which is what makes me a leader of men. *Sehr gut*, Hans. You have proved my point.' Satisfied that he had subtly put Hans back in his proper place, he threw the end of the rope-ladder out of the open doorway, then began winching it down as the helicopter, roaring and shuddering, swayed dangerously from side to side.

'I can't control this thing!' Elena cried out despairingly. 'I don't know what to do!'

Hans slithered backwards to her, keeping his pistol aimed at Zweig. Taking hold of the joystick with his free hand, he then gave the pistol to Elena.

'Keep him covered until he's out on the ladder,' he said. 'If he doesn't go down the ladder, shoot him.' 'My pleasure,' Elena said.

Zweig winched the rope-ladder down to its full extent, which was a long way down. He saw it flapping wildly in the slipstream of the rotor-blades that were also sweeping the snow in dense clouds across the circular space below, further obscuring his view of what, or who, might be down there. When he had finished, he locked the winch and turned back to Elena, who was smiling with what seemed like genuine pleasure, perhaps because she was aiming the pistol at him.

‘Have a good experience,’ she said. ‘It’s been a real pleasure knowing you.’
‘*Auf Wiedersehen*,’ he retorted, refusing to bow to her. ‘It’s been *my* pleasure, Elena.’
The helicopter shuddered and roared, whipping an icy wind around him as he swung his legs out through the open doorway and sat on the edge. He looked down at that circular space, at the visible edges of that enormous metallic flower; the snow was being whipped off the triangular metal plates and swept across the great hall below to form a whirlpool of whiteness that obscured the four figures he had previously seen. But he knew they were down there, waiting for him, protecting the Tuaoi Stone. He glanced once at Elena, at the pistol in her hand, smiled at her and then rolled onto his belly and inched out to place his feet on the rope-ladder.
‘Good riddance!’ Elena crowed.
He felt no fear at all. He simply went with the slipstream. He flew out above the rocks, above that circular space, was blinded by the swirling snow, and went down, inch by inch, rung by rung, as he was pummelled from side to side. The wind howled and screamed, a living thing, tearing at him, and he laughed, exultant, defying death, preparing for it, then looked up and saw Elena and Hans smiling victoriously as the latter sawed through the ropeladder with a glittering blade.
The short ropes snapped apart, were blown out on the slipstream, and he fell like a stone through sweeping snow and howling wind, falling a short distance, though it took an eternity, towards rapidly widening stone slabs. It was a brief, tumbling dream.

Chapter Eleven

To Ingrid, Zweig’s fall seemed very quick indeed: one second he was swaying dangerously on the end of a ropeladder, the next he was falling

rapidly with the ladder flapping dementedly above him, to land on his feet on the floor beside the encased Tuaoi Stone. His knees buckled and he collapsed, rolling over a few times, then came to a halt close to St Germain's feet as the helicopter, which had helpfully descended to just below the metal plates of the open dome, roared even louder and started ascending again, someone hanging out and waving a hand in what seemed like a mocking farewell.

Even as Zweig looked up, perhaps hurt, certainly dazed, the bass humming sound was heard again and the metal plates of the dome began moving in towards one another, preparing to close. Zweig stared at St Germain, then raised his gaze to the closing dome, not attempting to conceal his amazement at what he was seeing. The dome eventually closed, the triangular plates joining together, and then Zweig looked about him, clearly regaining his senses, then sighed and climbed awkwardly to his feet.

As her father stared around him in amazement, then fixed unnaturally bright eyes on the miniature crystal pyramid in its protective glass casing, Ingrid felt herself trembling with fear and revulsion, reminded on the instant of how this man, who should have nurtured her, had almost destroyed her. She then thought of her mother, of how Zweig had murdered her, and a wrenching grief and rage threatened to shatter her.

Unable to bear the sight of him, she had to look away, and mercifully found herself facing Gerry, who was smiling encouragingly. Feeling better, she forced her gaze back upon her father, who completely ignored her.

'Which one of you is Saint-Germain?' he asked.

'I am,' St Germain replied, his voice as calm as a limpid pool.
'And who are *you*?' Zweig asked, glancing at Mephisto, then flushing as that gentleman's unnatural, seductive charm fell relentlessly over him.
'My name is irrelevant,' Mephisto replied.
'You wouldn't by any chance be a certain Christian Grabbe, who kindly invited one of my men to the Waldorf Astoria hotel in New York, supposedly in order to sell him the Tuaoi Stone, but then, in some mystifying manner,

caused havoc and death?'
Mephisto smiled at that. 'A name is no more than a name,' he said, 'and I personally have more than one.'
'And did we have an unusual encounter in the Herestrau Park in Bucharest?'
'I believe so, Herr Zweig.'
'That encounter had an unusual effect upon me.' 'That was the intention, Herr Zweig.'
Clearly rendered uncomfortable by Mephisto's mesmeric gaze, Zweig looked greedily at the miniature crystal pyramid in its transparent casing.
'That's the Tuaoi Stone?' he asked as if making a statement.
'Yes,' St Germain said. 'That's what you've been searching for.'
Approaching the pedestal, Zweig placed his hand on the transparent casing, which he had assumed to be glass, then gasped and jerked his hand away as if his fingers had been scorched.
'*Scheisse*!' he gasped. 'What happened?'
'You can only touch the casing if I give you permission,' St Germain said sombrely. 'And naturally it can only be opened by the command of the sacred stone's present keeper, this being myself.'
As if unable to accept what had already happened to him, Zweig once more placed his outstretched fingers on the transparent casing – and again had to jerk his hand away. Flexing his stinging fingers and blowing upon them, he shook his head from side to side, indicating his perplexity, and grinned dangerously, as if at a private joke.
'Most effective,' he said, glancing around the great hall, his smile freezing into a look of controlled rage when he finally saw Gerry. 'Ah, so! My young American friend! With my daughter, of course. How pleasant that we're all together again. We can have a brief reunion party.'
'The only party I'd like to attend with you,' Gerry retorted, 'is a lynching party, with you in the noose.'
'What an admirable American redneck you are. You should be on *my* side.'
And with that, Zweig turned to Ingrid for the first time. 'You stole my money and ran away, you ungrateful bitch. I cannot forgive you for that and you'll be punished in due course.'
'I won't ever let you punish me again. I'm no longer afraid of you.'
'Really? You're not afraid? Well, we'll see about that. The game isn't over yet, *meine Fräulein*, and you're first on my hit list.'

‘You’re in no position to make threats,’ Gerry said. ‘And you don’t have your gangs of hoodlums with you. Here you’re just one guy, Zweig.’
‘I also have a score to settle with *you*,’ Zweig responded. ‘So don’t imagine I’ve come here to shake your hand and give you a medal. You’re in very hot water, my young friend, and I *don’t* need my men here.’
‘Just what the hell do you think you can do here?’
‘I don’t *think*. I *act*.’
When he turned away from Gerry, his grin contemptuous, Ingrid was reminded that as long as she could remember he had either humiliated her (which was, at least, a form of recognition) or brutally ignored her. His lack of feeling for her seemed singularly unnatural. His urge to destroy her morally, as he had destroyed her mother physically, was something she couldn’t comprehend, no matter how hard she tried. Yet she also felt guilty because of her lack of feeling for him, and wondered again that her instinctive need for a father-figure hadn’t managed to quell the fear and revulsion she felt in his presence. She felt no love for him at all, and, indeed, only wanted to be rid of him, and that, in itself, was enough to make her feel even more guilty.
She didn’t want to accept that she had no love for this brutish man; that she simply wanted him out of her life, once and for all.
Ignoring her again, Zweig stared at the glittering Tuaoi Stone with an insatiable, unholy lust and said, ‘I’ve been obsessed with this for years, wondering if it really existed, and in the end I simply had to have it, whatever the cost. You practically invited me here, Saint-Germain, so what *is* the cost?’
St Germain’s smile was like ice and fired combined, his grey gaze radiating the light of a distant, alien sun.
‘For you,’ he said, ‘there *is* no cost. By which I mean you cannot buy it. The Tuaoi Stone is not for sale, not for barter, not for hire; it is not for those who wish to advance themselves in any material way. It is true, as you have heard, that the stone has great supernatural powers, but those powers cannot be called upon, except for the good. To you, the Tuaoi Stone would be worthless, no more than an artifact, only worth the cost of its crystal or its rarity value in the marketplace. Only the pure at heart can make use of the sacred stone; only those who have studied the Secret Knowledge and know how to use it for good. The Secret Knowledge is founded on numbers – the

lost language of ancient man – and unless you can speak in that tongue, you cannot make use of Tuaoi Stone. Your journey to this place has therefore been fruitless, since the stone will not work for you.'
'So,' Zweig said. 'Assuming that's true, you still practically invited me to come here. You certainly *guided* me to this place. Why did you do that?'
'Because you are obsessed with obtaining the Tuaoi Stone.'
'Since I can do nothing with it, except, perhaps, sell it as the world's rarest artifact, why should that concern you?'
'You can do nothing with it as long as we possess it, but your obsession is such that you will not rest until you have it in your hands – and that, Herr Zweig, would be a catastrophe, if only in the sense that we who live by the sacred stone would be deprived of it.'
'I still want it,' Zweig insisted.
'I know that,' St Germain said calmly. 'And that explains why we guided you to us… to put an end to it.'
'To put an *end* to it?'
'Yes. It all ends for you here and now.'
Ingrid wasn't surprised to see that familiar flush of rage brighten her father's unusually pale cheeks, but she *did* find herself stepping sideways automatically to get closer to Gerry when her father reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pistol.
'Yes?' St Germain asked sardonically, raising one silvery eyebrow. 'And what do you intend doing with *that*?'
'I intend using it, *Saint* Germain, to my own benefit. I want you to open that glass case, give me the Tuaoi Stone, then lead me back down this hellish mountain. If you refuse, I'll kill each of you in turn. Now open that glass case.'
As Zweig, while keeping his eyes on St Germain, aimed the pistol threateningly at her, Ingrid felt all the hurt and indignity of her life welling up inside her, forcing tears to her eyes. She tried to stop the tears, not wanting to please her father even more, but the pain of this final, absolute degradation was more than she could hope to control. Feeling the tears trickling down her flushed cheeks, she bit her lower lip and choked back her pain.
Someone touched her and she twitched, then realized it was Gerry. She saw his outraged face, then felt his arm sliding around her, to pull her close to him.

A father? She'd never had a father – and now had to accept this brutal fact. So she accepted it, feeling drained, deprived of the will to live, and could only take comfort from Gerry when he affectionately squeezed her.
'The powers of the Tuaoi Stone,' St Germain said as calmly as ever, 'only reside in the hands of those who protect it. For your own good, Herr Zweig, I would advise you not to compel me to open the case.'
Zweig's reply to this was to cock the pistol and aim it more precisely at Ingrid, who hugged Gerry and defeated her pain with her deepening contempt for her so-called father.
'I don't think that even a son of a bitch like you,' Gerry said, 'would shoot down his own daughter in cold blood.'
'Ask me about her mother,' Zweig said, practically sneering. 'I murdered my own wife, so I could certainly do the same to my daughter.'
Even as the last shards of her broken hopes were tumbling about her, as she heard her own sobbing breaking helplessly from her, Ingrid saw through her tears that St Germain was shaking his head from side to side in denial.
'No,' he said, 'Ingrid *isn't* your daughter. She's not your daughter at all.'
Those words resounded through her like the pealing of bells.

Chapter Twelve

It sounded too good to be true, too miraculous to be real, but she saw St Germain's smile, quietly mocking, triumphant, then noticed the deepening flush on her father's face, his icy eyes growing larger.

' *Scheisse*!' he snapped. 'What is this you're – ' 'Ingrid is *not* your daughter,' St Germain repeated. 'She is in fact the illegitimate daughter of another man, a German Jew, with whom your second wife, Ingrid's mother, had an affair, shortly after you began mistreating her. Naturally, when your wife became pregnant with that man's child, she was terrified of telling you – more so because the man was a Jewish refugee from Nazi Germany and she knew how you would respond to *that* news. So when Ingrid was born, her mother, your wife, led you to believe that the child was your biological daughter; and once you had murdered your wife by slow poisoning there was no way for you to find out the truth. So, Herr Zweig, Ingrid is *not* your daughter. Ironically you have spent a great deal of your anti-Semitic life at least paying

for the *upkeep* of a Jew, Ingrid, if not actually showing her any affection. Ingrid's mother, even though in her grave, has had her revenge – and justice prevails.'

While the bells pealed even louder in Ingrid's head, the man who was not her real father turned purple with rage.

'*Quatsch*!' he hissed, waving the pistol like a club. 'I don't believe a damned word of this. And even if what you say is true, how would *you* know about it?'

St Germain smiled at Mephisto, then turned back to Zweig. 'Why do you think we guided Ingrid here with Mr Remick? We could just as easily have lost her and drawn him here alone.' Without waiting for a reply, he stared steadily at Ingrid, his eyes filled with an odd, wintry affection. 'Your real father,' he said, 'was once one of us, but eventually left us for reasons of his own. He was a good man – a just man.'

First exhilarated, then sad, filled with hope, then disbelieving, Ingrid felt more unreal every minute, wondering what she was actually hearing. When she looked at St Germain, with his strange, unemotional smile, she was convinced that he was not what he seemed, that he had not told them everything.

She thought of how she had come here, recalled Observatory Hill, the saucer-shaped pulsating light that had descended over her and Mephisto. She had been terrified, feeling herself disintegrating, then had felt herself vaulting over space and time, through giant moons and spinning stars. She had seen that in her mind, but had otherwise been blind, and her terror had rendered her unconscious until awakening in this place, stretched out on the bed of stone, being watched by Mephisto and St Germain, both wearing white robes. St Germain had been kind to her, patiently explaining all, but even then, as now, she had been convinced that he was withholding something.

'You used the past tense when discussing my real father,' she said. 'Does that mean he's dead?'

'Yes,' St Germain replied. 'Unfortunately, he died many years ago. However, please rest assured that your real father is not this man standing before you. He was in fact Paul Kahn, a German Jew and student of philosophy who suffered incarceration and torture by the Nazis, escaped while being herded with others to a concentration camp, and made his way over a period of many months to Argentina, where he lived in relative poverty, worked as a taxi

driver, and, as a humble man, continued his philosophical and religious studies in secrecy. Returning to Germany after the war, he met your mother when he was hired by Zweig to drive her where required, because she wasn't allowed to go anywhere alone. He and your mother, who was desperately unhappy with Zweig, soon fell in love, and had an affair that led to your birth. Before you were born, however, Zweig found out about the affair and decided to separate your mother from him by taking her to live in Switzerland, not letting her inform Paul Kahn where she was going. Distraught, having lost both the woman he loved and his still unborn child, Kahn went travelling again and ended up here, training to be an adept. Alas, he didn't last. He left before he could transcend. But Paul Kahn is your real father, Ingrid, though he never laid eyes on you.'

Too moved to speak, too unhappy for mere words, Ingrid just stared at St Germain through tearful eyes, seeing only a blur.

'After poisoning your mother,' St Germain continued in a precise, unemotional manner, 'Zweig started *his* frequent travels, taking you with him. The knowledge that your mother had been systematically poisoned by him only emerged many years later, by which time you were well away from Germany and your real father, Paul Kahn, one of the pure at heart, had been approached by us, agreed to join us, and came here for training in the Secret Knowledge. Unfortunately, as I said, he did not stay here long. For reasons of his own, he chose to go back down the mountain and resume his life as a normal man. However, soon after leaving us, he contracted cholera, died in a hospital in Calcutta, and was subsequently buried in an unmarked grave outside the city. Yes,' he added, nodding his head emphatically, 'that was your father – not this man standing here.'

Initially shocked and disbelieving, Ingrid soon felt huge relief and a growing serenity. She wiped the tears from her eyes, glanced at Gerry, saw his smile, then turned to face Zweig, that monster, not her father, finally understanding why she had rarely felt guilt at deeply despising him. He wasn't her real father, wasn't related to her at all, was just a brute who had tormented her all her life as the butt of his cruelty. Her real father had been a just man, a good man, and even if he was dead, at last she knew about him and took pride in the knowing.

'Go to hell,' she said defiantly to Zweig, staring steadily at him. 'It's where you belong.'

‘You Jewish whore!’ Zweig snarled. ‘No wonder I loathed you.’
He aimed at her with the pistol.
Yet even as Zweig took aim, St Germain raised his right hand, fingers outspread, over the glass casing of the Tuaoi Stone and, when the distracted Zweig glanced at him, waved the hand languidly to and fro.
A faint, unearthly light appeared around the glass case, then the case itself started opening in small, triangular sections, only stopping when the gleaming Tuaoi Stone was fully exposed.
Obviously beside himself, Zweig rushed forward to grab the Tuaoi Stone. He was, however, stopped in his tracks when a bass humming sound suddenly emanated from the small crystal pyramid, which, like its open case, became covered in an unearthly, pulsating light.
‘Take the Tuaoi Stone if you wish,’ St Germain said. ‘The risk is all yours.’
Ignoring him, Zweig reached out greedily to grab what he had wanted for so long, but the Tuaoi Stone glowed even brighter, emitted an even louder humming sound, and seemed to vibrate as if alive.
Zweig jerked his hand back and started sweating, as if terrified.
‘You want to possess the power of the crystal,’ St Germain said, ‘and what you want you shall have – *if* your conviction is greater than ours. Now prepare to defend yourself.’
At that moment, the magical power of the pyramidal crystal became visible in the shape of a bolt of electric energy that shot from its tip in a phosphorescent, hissing arc to form a rainbow between it and St Germain, then exploded around the latter and became a globe of pulsating radiant colours that lit up the gloom.
St Germain dissolved partially in the brilliance of that light, seemed to shimmer and float as if disembodied, then raised his right hand, in which the veins were clearly visible, and spoke with an unearthly, distant voice.
‘You have been called, Gerry Remick, and now you have come. You are one of the last of the pure at heart and therein lies your power. This man, Zweig, is pure evil, without redeeming features, and his presence is a threat to us all and must be removed. You now have that power, Gerry. You must use it for the good. In this instance, to do good, you must destroy the one who wants to destroy all of us. You profess to despise Zweig. Such contempt is well placed. Now turn that contempt into strength and, being a man of pure spirit, of faith, draw the energy of the sacred stone from me and into yourself, then

direct it at him.'
Hardly believing what she was witnessing, but feeling a sharp stab of fear, Ingrid choked back a groan when Gerry, as if in a trance, stepped away from her, then turned to directly face Zweig's pistol.
Zweig was purple-faced and sweating, his eyes enlarged and glacial, and he muttered an oath and took aim at Gerry, preparing to fire. Yet he seemed unable to do so, but instead started shaking violently, the weapon wobbling up and down as if out of control.
Gerry raised his right hand, spreading his fingers as St Germain had done. A stream of phosphorescent, hissing electric energy shot into him from St Germain, forming a rainbow between them, then shot in another arc from Gerry's outspread fingers into Zweig, exploding around him to become a cone-shaped ball of pulsating white light.
Dazed and disbelieving, convinced that she was having a bad dream, Ingrid throttled her own cry of dread by covering her mouth with her hands while observing the bizarre scene before her.
A sparkling, hissing stream of magical energy was flowing from the tip of the small crystal pyramid to the outspread fingers of St Germain, and from him, through the receiving vessel of Gerry, into the reeling, bellowing Zweig.
All three men were cocooned in a pulsating, unearthly radiance that seemed to have partially dissolved them, making them shimmer and look grotesquely distorted, fading in and out repeatedly, first clearly visible, then silhouetted, sometimes becoming almost transparent, revealing the tapestry of their veins, the geography of blood and bone.
Gerry and St Germain were quivering like bowstrings, but Zweig was still bellowing and shaking like an epileptic having a fit.
Ingrid looked on, aghast, shocked by what she was seeing, but took comfort from the possibility that Gerry, whether or not he knew it, was winning the battle.
Then it all changed. Ingrid knew it before she saw it. The light around St Germain weakened, then blinked out entirely, as his radiance was sucked into Gerry, leaving him drained.
Gerry looked like a human torch, a man burning to death, quivering in a cocoon of unnatural light, but still holding up his right hand, attacking Zweig with his new powers. Then he glanced at St Germain, saw that he had returned to normal, was shocked to realize that he was now on his own, then

shuddered as if abruptly losing faith and slumped in defeat.
'Have faith!' Mephisto called out to him.
But it was too late. Obviously drained and exhausted, Gerry fell to his knees as the hissing light streamed out of him and into the glowing Zweig, who, with a bellow of triumph, rushed across the room, pushed St Germain aside, grabbed the Tuaoi Stone before the case could be closed, and then, looking normal once more, backed away across the great hall, keeping them all covered with his pistol.
'It's *mine* now, isn't it?' he asked rhetorically. 'Now *I* have the power.'
'Oh, God,' Gerry murmured despairingly, ashamed of himself.
'You'll never get down the mountain,' St Germain said with soft-voiced conviction.
'Yes, I will,' Zweig said. 'It's no problem at all. Did you really believe that I'd depend on that bastard and bitch who forced me down the rope-ladder at gunpoint? No, *Saint* Germain, I didn't. I'm not a fool, after all. My wristwatch is a transmitter, a tracking device for my backup team, and right now two helicopters are on their way here to rocket-blast this place out of existence after picking me up. It doesn't end for *me* here, *Saint* Germain. Here it all ends for you. *Auf Wiedersehen.*'
He turned away and rushed out, disappearing through the nearest arched exit, his laughter reverberating eerily as his footsteps receded.
Then he was gone, taking the Tuaoi Stone with him, leaving only the silence.

Chapter Thirteen

Gerry was badly shaken by what had happened, still couldn't quite believe it, and thought of the disappearance of Zweig as if recalling a bad dream.

He, Gerry, had been defeated through his loss of faith. Taking a deep breath, gradually regaining his strength, he glanced at the empty glass case that had held the now missing Tuaoi Stone, felt ashamed of himself, then stood up, feeling older than he was, and found himself facing St Germain and the sombre Mephisto.
Shivering, he glanced at Ingrid, saw her wiping tears from her eyes, was appalled at how weak he felt, though knew his strength was returning.
Recalling how that phosphorescent stream of magical energy had travelled

from the crystal pyramid through St Germain, into him and on to Zweig – and how, when St Germain had left him alone, he had collapsed into a fear of the power that was coursing through him – he realized that Zweig's faith in his own invincibility had been greater than his own faltering faith in what he could do.

Virtue had been defeated by evil, because virtue was based on the kind of doubt that evil did not acknowledge.

As Ingrid dried her wet eyes, his heart went out to her, then he noticed that St Germain had changed, had in fact aged dramatically.

'What happened?' he asked, shocked by St Germain's appearance.

St Germain shrugged. 'You *know* what happened, Gerry. You are one of the pure at heart, a just man who can make use of the Tuaoi Stone, but you lacked faith in yourself, lost your courage when I stopped helping you, and thus were defeated by Zweig, who believes in himself. Now Zweig is in possession of the Tuaoi Stone and we are lost without it.'

'If nothing else,' Ingrid said, 'he probably believes that it'll be worth a lot of money as a rare antique. It's the original tip of the Great Pyramid, after all.'

'And that's the end of it?' Gerry asked. 'Zweig, with all his monstrous ambition, will be the Tuaoi Stone's new keeper and use it solely for financial gain?'

'Alas, not only for that,' St Germain said, looking concerned. 'Although normally the Tuaoi Stone's powers can only be used for good, you, Gerry, by your loss of faith, let Zweig gain some of those powers. And only you, having given him those powers, can take them away from him.'

'And *that*, Gerry,' Mephisto said, 'will be your final, most crucial test.'

Gerry glanced at Mephisto, saw his thin, seductive smile, turned away and studied St Germain again. He now looked twice his age, yet that wasn't what disturbed Gerry most, what gnawed suspiciously at him. He didn't know what it was, but he sensed that something was wrong, that St Germain had not told the whole truth, and might even have lied to him.

A secret society of *just* men? A secret Order for the pure at heart? Gerry couldn't quite accept this as the truth, and wondered why he had doubts.

'I feel drained of all energy,' he said, 'and *you*, St Germain, look even worse than I feel. I repeat: What happened?'

'The Tuaoi Stone can only be used rarely, with great discretion. Its powers must not be called upon too often, nor treated lightly. What I *started* to do to

Zweig – and what you *almost* succeeded in doing – is something that can only be done occasionally, and even then at great cost.'
'You gave your powers to me and now you're paying the price. And I lost faith and failed, thus giving Zweig the powers *I* could have had.'
'That is correct.'
'And you? What happens to you? This has obviously damaged you.'
'Naturally it has, but my time has come anyway. Being young, you will recover quickly, which is all to the good. But for myself, I am too old, *very* old, too old to measure, and this means that the powers the stone gave me drained my physical energy. I am ready to pass on, to transcend, but there are things left undone.'
'What things?'
'Things only known to the adepts – and you are not yet one of those. If you choose to stay here, to complete the magic number, you will learn what it is you need to know – but first you must defeat Zweig.'
To be the last of the first 666 was something that Gerry could only consider with a great feeling of disbelief. He had learnt the language of numbers, had solved its teasing riddles, but hadn't yet learned to live with it – and perhaps didn't want to.
He wanted the normal world, steel and glass, smoke and noise… and besides, he still had the conviction that something was wrong, that St Germain's picture of a society of just men somehow didn't seem right.
'You want me to challenge Zweig,' he said, 'and regain the magical powers of the Tuaoi Stone, after which I'll become the last of the just men. But how can I be sure you *are* just men, after what I've experienced?'
'Oh?' St Germain queried, raising one eyebrow. 'Just what do you mean by that?'
'I'm thinking, for example, of Helena Barbanell… She placed her faith in you, was convinced she would soon join you, and then was tortured and murdered by Zweig's thugs
– as, indeed, was the old Arab in Jerusalem, another of your faithful disciples. Why didn't you use your powers to save them?'
'We must all be tested somehow. What they suffered was for the general good. The two you mention kept their faith to the end and passed over to us. They both became adepts and returned to Earth, as immortals disguised as mortals, to continue our great work.'

‘I don’t believe you, St Germain. Something doesn’t sit right with this. You say you represent just men, those who are pure at heart, yet in order to protect the Tuaoi Stone you won’t stop at murder. If you people are truly pure at heart, how can you do such things?’
‘It is sometimes necessary to fight evil with evil deeds. We do such things with reluctance, but must protect the Secret Knowledge at any cost, even though it may damage us.’
‘And killing enemies damages you?’
‘Yes. It leaves a scar on the pure soul.’
The argument was persuasive, but Gerry still couldn’t accept it, and was just about to retort when Ingrid stepped forward.
‘Why did my real father leave the Order?’ she asked. ‘Did he disagree with you?’
‘I’m sorry,’ St Germain said, ‘but I cannot answer that question. Our disciples stay here voluntarily, and most of them *do* stay, at least until they become adepts and can leave as immortals. But occasionally someone will leave before transcending to the higher plane, usually for personal reasons, and those reasons cannot be discussed, except by a few.’
‘Since I’m his daughter, I think – ’
But before she could complete her sentence, Mephisto stepped up to her and stared steadily at her, his wintry-grey, almost silvery eyes focused hypnotically on her.
She blinked repeatedly and lowered her gaze.
‘We cannot discuss this any further,’ Mephisto said softly. ‘The personal beliefs of those who stay here are sacrosanct. Be content with the knowledge that *one* of your father’s reasons for leaving was to find you and regain the daughter he had lost. We can tell you this. We cannot tell you more. This subject is now closed.’
When Gerry saw Ingrid nodding, her head bowed, clearly blushing, he was reminded of Mephisto’s diabolical charms and felt the stirrings of rage.
‘If disciples stay here on a voluntary basis,’ he said, ‘does that mean I can leave anytime?’
‘Yes,’ Mephisto replied. ‘It is impossible to climb up here without our guidance, but relatively easy to go back down. That is part of our way.’
‘But why leave?’ St Germain asked, looking weary, his voice ravaged, ‘when immortality and magic can be yours? The magic number is 666 and you can

make up that number, thus becoming a guardian of the world, a magically gifted adept. Why walk away from this?'
'Because I don't believe what you're telling me. I think something's missing. You have limitless power, you'll sanction murder to protect it, and you use that power to interfere in the affairs of men when you think it's called for. I don't believe in that, either. I think it's morally wrong. You're tampering with the natural course of mankind and I don't think that's good.'
'So you will let Zweig escape with the Tuaoi Stone. You think *that's* better?'
'I won't be morally blackmailed, St Germain, and I'm leaving right now.'
'Please don't.'
Gerry reached out without thinking to take hold of Ingrid's hand, but was surprised to see her stepping away from him and moving closer to the smiling Mephisto. She was flushed and trembling, refused to meet his gaze, and instead looked into Mephisto's mesmeric eyes and, even worse, raised her face as if yearning to be kissed by those moist, sensual lips.
'Ingrid,' Gerry insisted, his pain too deep to bear. 'I repeat: I'm leaving here right now. Are you coming with me or not?'
'No,' she said, shocking him even more, 'I'm staying here. I want to be a replacement for my real father – and also for you. Since you've refused to become the last of the 666, then I'll take your place.'
'A place your real father rejected.'
'He rejected it in order to leave here and search for me. So it's my duty to stay here.'
'That isn't quite true, Ingrid. You were only *one* of his reasons for leaving. He must have had other reasons, but these two won't tell us what they were. We still don't know the whole truth.'
'I don't think they brought me here just to tell me some lies. I believe my father left here to search for me. Nothing else is important.'
Gerry felt like screaming. He was breaking apart inside. He couldn't believe that this woman, once so weak, was now being so strong. And that strength, which in one sense he admired, was now threatening their love.
'You'll stay here without me?' he asked, feeling shameful, a beggar.
'If you stay here I'll stay with you,' she replied. 'If you leave, go alone.'
'I thought you loved me, Ingrid.'
'I do.'
'If that's true, you'll leave this place, this Frankenstein's castle, and return

with me to where we both belong – the real world.'
'No, Gerry, I can't do that. Not even for you. I have to stay here.'
She stared solemnly at him, as she had done when they first met, but then turned away to smile at Mephisto. He smiled back and then took her hand, drawing her to him, eyes glittering hypnotically.
'You're tired,' he told her, speaking softly, rhythmically. 'So tired. So very tired. So tired you can't possibly stay in this chamber any longer. So tired you must sleep. Come. Come with me. Come to bed. You're so tired. Come with me…'
He was stepping backwards as he spoke, holding her hand, drawing her to him, and she followed him, unable to resist him or his voice, his hypnotic repetitions, her breasts flattening slightly against his chest when she almost fell into him.
The pain was lacerating, making Gerry almost choke, so he turned away quickly, not able to look at them, and had to wipe tears from his eyes and then take a deep breath.
'Great,' he said. 'Terrific. Let it be. Let it lie. Now how the hell do I get out of this place? I mean, just let me go. Where's the exit? *Where is it*?'
'It's over there,' St Germain said. 'The same doorway taken by Zweig. Just walk out. You'll be free.'
Taking a final look around him, his tears making everything blurry, Gerry finally met St Germain's gaze, was shocked again by his aged appearance, then looked sideways to see Ingrid and Mephisto walking from him, side by side, towards another arched doorway.
His heart started breaking then. He felt as if he was being stabbed. He wanted to call Ingrid back, to tell her he would stay here, but somehow he just couldn't do it, felt sick just to think of it. They were lying – he knew that; he simply didn't know why – and so he turned away, shaking with pain and grief, and went to the doorway indicated by St Germain.
He approached the doorway reluctantly, waiting to hear her call his name, but when she didn't, he shamefully looked back, not knowing what to expect. He saw what he had most feared – Ingrid departing with Mephisto – and then the melancholy smile of St Germain, so shockingly aged. The latter was staring steadily at him, unblinking, almost reproachful, and he shuddered, wondering what was wrong, then turned away and walked out.
He entered a narrow corridor hacked out of the natural rock, winding into

gloom and increasingly cold as it burrowed through the mountain. He realized, then, that the mountain was honeycombed with such corridors, that the great hall in which he had been with the others was the centre of a labyrinthine complex of considerable size. He wondered how they had constructed it, remembered the powers of the Tuaoi Stone, accepted that they could do anything they wanted and walked on, his heart sinking.

He was walking away from Ingrid, from all he loved, and this thought was crushing him. He was walking away, even more, from the knowledge that she had chosen to remain here rather than go with him – and this thought was killing him.

He sniffed back his tears, choked up, continued walking, and felt the cold deepening as the gloom gradually turned into darkness. He stopped walking when the darkness abruptly became pitch-black, felt the racing of his heart, a sickening wave of disorientation, then advanced again and saw a pinprick of light as he rounded a bend. He walked more quickly then, almost running, breathing harshly, and saw the pinprick become a sunlit opening that let in the freezing cold of the outside world.

He hurried into the light, into the grip of the icy air, was slapped by a wind that swept the snow in hissing streams across him. He was back on the narrow track, above a pirouetting gorge, saw the peaks and ravines of Kanchenjunga forming a tapestry of gleaming ice and black shadows wherever he looked. The sky was powder-blue, streaked with silvery lines of sunlight, but the brightness did not prevent the cold from eating into his bones. He had never known such cold. It bit at him like an animal. He winced and huddled into himself and turned right, down the winding track.

But he simply couldn't do it, and soon stopped, almost weeping. The cold was too harsh, the swirling snow too dense, and he sensed that it had been created deliberately to hamper his flight. The icy wind slapped his face, tugged him towards the cliff's edge, pushed him back into the rocks and forced him onto his knees. He bowed his head in defeat, turning numb, realizing that the pain he was feeling was not caused by this purgatory.

No, not the elements – and not the knowledge that he was trapped. He was in agony because Ingrid had failed him and gone off with Mephisto. He had expected more of her, had thought her love equal to his, and now he was suffering from the knowledge that his love had not been enough for her. He wanted to go back to her, to have her at any price, but felt the pain biting

through his numbness to render him helpless.
‘Oh, God, Ingrid,’ he whispered, yearning for her, dying for her, then slumped down on his haunches against the cliff face to let the snow gently cover him. ‘Oh, God, Ingrid, please don’t…’
‘No,’ she said. ‘Of course not.’
He looked up in surprise, not believing what he had heard, and saw her leaning over him, her fur collar turned up, the wind whipping her hair across her face and into her eyes. She smiled and reached down to him, her features blurred by snow, and placed her fingers lightly on his face, then wiped the tears from his cheeks.
‘God,’ she said, ‘you’re a really stubborn man. A real puritan, in fact. I love you. I promise! I really love you! Now please trust me and follow me.’
Stunned, disbelieving, exhilarated beyond words, he took hold of her hand, climbed unsurely to his feet, then let her lead him through the swirling snow, back into the mountain, his heart beating like a drum in his chest, his spirit soaring on high.

Chapter Fourteen

Ingrid led him back through the dark, narrow tunnel, through the belly of the mountain, and into the great stone chamber dominated by its high, steel-plated dome, where St Germain and Mephisto were standing in the same place, the latter no longer smiling, in fact extremely solemn, the former continuing to age rapidly in some mysterious manner.

The sight of St Germain made Gerry think he was hallucinating. The man was now wizened and stooped, and even his silvery hair, once so lustrous, appeared to be thinner. He was resting with one hand on the pedestal that had supported the now missing Tuaoi Stone and his breathing was emerging from shivering lips as if from a punctured tyre.

‘No,’ he said, as if reading Gerry’s thoughts, ‘your eyes do not deceive you. Now the truth will be told to you.’
He took another deep breath, as if fighting for air, while Mephisto stepped forward to stop in front of Gerry, his gaze no longer mesmeric but infinitely weary, and said, ‘You have just passed another test. Your moral integrity is

absolute. You have proved that you would give up anything, even what you most love, rather then compromise your beliefs. Now the truth must be told to you.'

'Was Ingrid part of the test?'

'Yes, Gerry, she was.' Mephisto smiled at her, not seductively, more like a father, then gave his attention to the ailing St Germain and said, 'The young man has proved himself to be a just man, a pure man, so tell him the truth… *Doctor Faust*.'

Initially startled to hear that legendary name resounding spectrally in his head, Gerry then remembered the many riddles laid before him throughout his lengthy journey and understood that the ambiguous references to Faust were at last about to be explained. He watched St Germain carefully, saw an old man growing older, his body rapidly becoming more frail beneath his loose-hanging Tibetan *chuba*, his grey eyes protruding above sallow cheeks, his words spilling from trembling lips.

'Everything you have learned so far about the civilizations of prehistory is true,' he said. 'Also true is that before recorded history, not long before the destruction of that civilization about 4,000 BC, a secret society of socalled just men was founded to protect and utilize the Tuaoi Stone, also known as the Lodestone, throughout the ages.'

'Why do you describe them as *so-called* just men?'

'Because evil does not come from without, but from within, and what we haven't told you, which shames us, is the tragedy of that inevitable corruption and its dreadful consequences.'

St Germain glanced at Mephisto, taking courage from his steady gaze, then sucked more air into his ravaged lungs and continued with his story.

'It would be pointless to describe the original guardians of the Tuaoi Stone, since they existed long before your known history and would mean nothing to you. However, it is a fact that throughout the ages, the secret society disguised itself in many different ways, that in your recorded history its members included such figures as Apollonius of Tyana, Jesus Christ, Buddha, the wise man of the so-called Arthurian legend, Merlin – whose test of a sword to be drawn from the magical stone in which it was set was actually a disguised reference to the Tuaoi Stone – and even Roger Bacon, the Franciscan philosopher, alchemist, and optical and astronomical genius, who, before his death in 1292, had described accurately in his writings:

spectacles, flying machines, motorized ships, carriages, and the process for making gunpowder.' 'And Christian Rosenkreuz?' Gerry asked.
St Germain sighed and nodded. 'Yes,' he said. 'The original Rosicrucians were actually members of our society, and at that time, Christian Rosenkreuz, like the Comte de Saint-Germain of the eighteenth century, was but one of the many Earthly forms I took on… but more of that later.'
He released his breath in a pained gasping, then sucked it in again, appearing to stoop lower every minute, to shrink under his loose robe.
'The original secret society was truly one of just men, but even just men are corruptible, and power, no matter how it is gained, inevitably corrupts.'
He nodded as if confirming that this was indeed so, then continued speaking. 'The tragic corruption of which I speak began in the sixteenth century, when I, in my Earthly incarnation as Doctor Faust, the historically noted magician, mesmerist and alchemist, and a German member of the society of the Tuaoi Stone, was approached by a fellow member, the famed Swiss alchemist, Paracelsus, who, no longer able to tolerate the severe moral restrictions imposed upon all members of the society, wished to use the Secret Knowledge to create immortality for himself – something strictly forbidden to all but the highest adepts. I take it you *do* know about Faust and Paracelsus?'
'Yes,' Gerry said. 'Paracelsus died in 1541, the same year as Doctor Faust, after laying claim to the creation, through alchemy, of the *homunculus*, widely reported as a tiny man endowed with magical insight and power.'
'Correct. But the *homunculus*, which many thought was a figment of Paracelsus' imagination, was actually created by him, in the shape of a disembodied spirit that was doomed to spend the rest of its time yearning for, and searching for, *normal* birth. And thus was born the legend of Faust: the man who sold his soul to the devil in return for Earthly wealth and power.'
St Germain sucked desperately for more breath, shuddered visibly and almost fell; when Mephisto rushed forward, took hold of his shoulders and steadied him, he seemed to regain his strength, nodded affirmatively at Mephisto, then continued speaking when the latter had stepped back again, his face gravely concerned.
'The real-life Doctor Faust, being myself,' St Germain continued, 'was born in Knittlingen, Germany, in 1480 and died in Staufen, near Freiburg, in 1541. As a magician, an alchemist, and originally an honourable man, I was chosen

to join the secret society and subsequently spent many years contentedly pursuing my alchemical studies, based on the magical properties of numbers. However, vanity was my weakness, the need for Earthly pleasures, and so shortly before my death, after being approached by the rebellious Paracelsus, I agreed to let my spiritual, or alchemical, energy be used in a forbidden experiment conducted by Paracelsus. That experiment led to the creation of the *homunculus*, while I, for my sins, was condemned by my brothers to the hell of an immortality in which I would endlessly die and be reborn as other men, with each of my mortal lives being longer than most, therefore truly tormenting. And thus, my young friends, the *homunculus* and Faust were both doomed to hell on Earth: one, myself, seeking the eternal peace of a proper death, the other, now named Homunculus, seeking a *normal* birth, also through death.'

St Germain raised his ravaged face long enough to give the solemn, almost tragic Mephisto a look of pity and anguished love, then lowered his gaze and spoke as if addressing himself.

'To cover up this extraordinary lapse in the formerly perfect record of the society of the Tuaoi Stone – and to repair the damage done to the otherwise unbroken secrecy of the society, which, at that time, went under the name of Rosicrucians – and to punish those who had caused the problems, Paracelsus was terminated by some members of the society – '

'Is that why his death is recorded as mysterious in all known historical records?' Gerry asked.

'Yes. And so, aware of the fact that the most efficient way of keeping a secret is to spread a distorted version of it, the society of just men condemned me, Faust, to the hell of perpetual reincarnation; deliberately spread the historically unproven stories about me being a charlatan and sodomite; and, finally, encouraged one of their members to become the anonymous author of the first *Faustbuch*, which, published in 1587, obscured the reality of the existence of Homonculus by introducing him to the public as the diabolically seductive fictional character, Mephistopheles.'

Here he nodded in the direction of the silent Mephisto, his face revealing his sorrow.

'The *Faustbuch* and, even more so, the infamous magic manuals also attributed to Faust, but actually written by the same anonymous member of the society of the Tuaoi Stone, further debased the truth about the real Doctor

Faust and were themselves based on the equally clever fabrications of other members of the society, such as Merlin, Albertus Magnus, and Roger Bacon. The various fabrications were then repeated with further embellishments throughout the ages in the published works of other members of the society, including those of Christopher Marlowe, the real author of Shakespeare's plays, as well as other notable Faust writers, such as Goethe and Thomas Mann.'

'Christopher Marlowe was the real author of Shakespeare's plays?'

'Of course.'

'The eighteenth-century Comte de Saint-Germain is quoted as saying that.'

'I repeat myself endlessly.'

Gerry stared at St Germain as if seeing a ghost. He felt ghostlike himself, not quite real, too stunned to be fully in command of his senses. Ingrid's gaze, which, without her spectacles, was lovely, made him feel more at ease.

'Christopher Marlowe also died in mysterious circumstances,' he said.

'Yes, he did. He was starting to use his power and influence for political purposes, so was punished, like me and Paracelsus, to the endless search through repeated reincarnation for the release of a proper death. He is one of us now – as are the many others so condemned – and so the secret society, as it is here and now, is no longer a society of just men, wise men, but a society of those like myself, Paracelsus and Christopher Marlowe: mortals who had sold their soul to the devil in return for Earthly pleasures, and are now suffering the hell of repeated reincarnation and the search for release in eternal rest.'

'And that's why my real father left here?' Ingrid asked him.

'Yes,' St Germain confessed. 'He was disgusted with our obvious degeneration and walked out on principle. He truly *was* a just man.'

'Yet you were still tasked with guarding the Tuaoi Stone,' Gerry said, as he noticed the blush of pride on Ingrid's cheeks.

'The true magical adept transcends the material state and therefore does not require the sacred stone, which is, in its essence, a material object whose magic powers are wrought from kabbalistic geometry. The *living* just men are now scattered across the Earth; those who have transcended are spread throughout the universe, beyond time and space. The Tuaoi Stone was left here to punish us with its magical powers; it is the powers of the Tuaoi Stone, the Lodestone, that reincarnates us again and again. Only when, if ever, we

are released from the eternal cycle of our mortality, will the sacred stone return to its natural state, being the seed of the universe.'
'So if I'm not here to join a society of just men, magical adepts, what am I really here for?' Gerry asked.
St Germain stared steadily at him, his eyes burning in a ravaged face, then turned that same haunted gaze on Mephisto, who nodded and spoke for the first time.
'Ask me the final question,' he said. 'You must know what it is.'
Studying Mephistopheles, or Homunculus, Gerry saw immense weariness, the veiled anguish of one who had suffered beyond mortal imagining. Yes, he knew what the final question was, and asked it without hesitation.
'How can Faust, Homunculus, Paracelsus and all the others so punished, find their release through a proper death?'
Mephisto smiled with relief, perhaps even gratitude. 'This can only be brought about,' he said, 'when an absolutely pure man refuses the magical, corrupting powers of the Tuaoi Stone. For that reason, I, Homunculus, taking human shape as the fictional Mephistopheles, must repeatedly descend to the normal world in order to tempt decent men with the promise of immortality and limitless power, in the hope of finding one who is completely immune to such temptation – an absolutely pure man. Any man so pure as to be tempted by me in the first place, will, if he succumbs to my blandishments, automatically become a member of this society – a society of the damned – and once the number of such men reaches the magical sum of 666 – the Number of the Beast – then the world of mortal men will be completely destroyed, like previous civilizations, by the beasts that come out of the sea and out of the Earth.'
'Fire and flood,' Gerry said.
'Correct,' Mephisto said. 'However, if one mortal man has the strength to *resist* my seductions, or temptations, and retain his absolute integrity, his pure soul, then those of us who have been doomed, including me and Faust, will be forgiven for our sins, released from this purgatory, and returned to the transcendental glory of true immortality – the spiritual afterlife.'
'And you, Gerry,' St Germain said, 'are the man to do that. You are one of the few to refuse what we have offered and walk out of here without becoming an adept. In your innocence, through the purity of your heart, you can save the world from destruction and release *us* from hell.'

Before Gerry could respond, Mephisto stepped up to him, held him by his shoulders and shook him gently. ‘Do it, Gerry!’ he whispered passionately. ‘To save us *and* your own world. Go out there and face your final test – your confrontation with Zweig, with pure evil – and if you succeed, thus affirming your moral worth, bring the Tuaoi Stone back here and let your purity free us.’

‘Free *us*,’ St Germain emphasized, ‘and in so doing save *your* world from destruction by fire and flood.’

‘But how can I…?’

‘You can *will* the powers back. You will only lose them completely if Zweig defeats you. Close your eyes and concentrate. Lean on your faith and *will* yourself down to Zweig, where he presently stands on the mountain path, waiting for his helicopter to rescue him. Do it now, Gerry! *Do it*!’

Gerry felt confused, disbelieving, excited. He glanced at Ingrid and saw her nod of affirmation, felt her faith flowing into him. He reached out for her hand, squeezed her fingers, released her, then bowed his head, closed his eyes and concentrated on Zweig.

At first he saw nothing, just the darkness behind his closed eyes, then he thought of fire and flood, of his world in devastation, and a fierce rage coursed through him, made him burn and vaporize, and he travelled down into himself, to the very centre of his being, then flew out from the prison of his body and winged down the mountainside.

He saw Zweig on a winding path, his feet kicking up snow, the Tuaoi Stone grasped firmly in one hand as, with the other hand, he shaded his eyes and scanned the sky over the pirouetting depths for his two helicopters.

Gerry found himself standing in the snow of that same track, above Zweig, looking downhill at him, hearing the sound of the helicopters approaching as Zweig waved his hand at them.

When he called out Zweig’s name, his voice echoed around the mountain peaks, making Zweig jerk his head around and stare up in surprise.

Gerry saw the face of evil, eyes gleaming malevolently. He thought of Ingrid and what she had suffered at the hands of this monster. His rage gave him back his faith, his belief in the power of goodness, and with that came the strength he would need for the battle to come. He felt himself expanding to link sky and Earth, becoming a bridge between time and the curved boundaries of space, which of course had no end. He drew his breath from

the ether, from the immortal soul within him, and raised his right hand to focus Zweig's gaze and let battle commence.
'It ends here!' he called out.

Chapter Fifteen

Zweig held the Tuaoi Stone tightly, glanced back over his shoulder, saw the American standing on the track above him and raising his right hand. He could scarcely believe his eyes, didn't know where the American had come from, but assumed that he could only have rushed after him as soon as he'd fled. Now the hated American was staring down at him.

'It ends here!' he called out.

Zweig had to smile. What a melodramatic statement! The American's words were echoing from one peak to another, seeming to come from the sunlit grey clouds as well as the shadowy depths – but then Zweig heard the muffled throbbing of his two helicopters that were, following the signals from his wristwatch transmitter, flying like homing pigeons towards him.

He glanced in that direction, trying to see the helicopters, but saw only the snow-capped peaks and their frightening, gargoyle shadows, the swathes of glistening snow.

No matter: the helicopters were coming. He could hear them distinctly. Again looking at the track, he saw it winding back and upwards, the American standing just where it disappeared around a bend in the cliff face, silhouetted against the sky. He looked pretty small up there, poised over a dizzying drop, the wind beating at his clothing and hair, as if taking bites out of him.
'Bring the Tuaoi Stone up to me!' the American called out, 'or I'm coming down there.'
Zweig had to laugh at the arrogance of the young fool. His laughter, echoing spectrally from one frozen peak to another, finally blended with the dying echo of the American's voice.
'You've *really* followed me to get the Tuaoi Stone back?' Zweig shouted up

the track. ‘If you want it, come get it!’
He raised the five-inch crystal pyramid over his head, felt the cold wind at his fist, almost numbing his fingers, then glanced sideways and saw one of his helicopters emerging from the grey haze. A wave of triumph coursed through him, lending heat to his freezing face, and he held the Tuaoi Stone firmly, willing its magic into himself, taking strength from his growing hatred for the world, then looked back up the hill.
The American was slithering down through the snow on the narrow track, a frail figure in that vastness of towering cliffs and deep gorges, his face grim, his eyes seeming to gleam dangerously even from this distance.
‘You won’t leave with the Tuaoi Stone!’ he shouted. ‘You’re wasting your time, Zweig!’
‘*You’re* finished, you American turd!’ Zweig bawled back. ‘You, that bitch-Jewess and the rest of them – the time has come for the lot of you. Goodbye and good riddance!’
Even as his words reverberated around the frozen peaks, his helicopters roared nearby, descending over the American, and started whipping the snow up around him like a minor tornado. The American threw himself to the ground, was blown towards the edge, wrapped his arms around a rock and clung to it, above that dizzying drop.
Zweig waved at the helicopters, grinning, exultant, watched as one of them flew away from the cliff face and up toward the dome of irregular steel plates that covered St. Germain’s hideaway. He saw its missiles thrusting out like giant phalli, and that made him even more joyous.
Any minute now, those missiles would put an end to St. Germain’s retreat and the three pigs inside it.
As the first helicopter descended towards the steel dome, the second flew back towards the path to once more whip the snow up around the American and try to blow him over the side with its slipstream. He clung to the rock as the snow howled around him, let go and slid backwards, started disappearing into that swirling whiteness as if being devoured by it.
Expecting to hear the American’s scream as he plunged into the gorge, Zweig held his breath, felt mirth bubbling up inside him… then felt the Tuaoi Stone quivering in his fist, as if coming alive.
‘*Mein Gott*!’ he exclaimed.
He almost dropped the precious object, but soon regained his senses, then

looked uphill in time to see the American emerging from the swirling, howling snow with his hand raised on high. He wasn't looking at Zweig, but at the helicopter above him, and his body was quivering in an unnatural manner – just like the object in Zweig's hand.

Zweig knew what was happening. The Tuaoi Stone had come alive. The American pig was trying to get back the powers that he, Zweig, had stolen from him. Zweig chuckled triumphantly, feeling the power course through him, then looked again at the American's upraised hand, wondering what he was doing.

The helicopter had pulled back, letting the snow settle around him, and the American was now clearly visible where he stood, dangerously close to the edge of the narrow, curving path, above the snow-filled, blackshadowed gorge, his whole body quivering like a bowstring, even as the crystal pyramid vibrating in Zweig's hand started warming his cold palm.

Then the American clenched his fist. His body rocked as he did so. The helicopter above him also rocked, started shuddering as if trying to pull away, then rocked even more violently as the pilot, obviously desperate to escape, released his missiles in the direction of the American.

Zweig heard the missiles screeching, saw two streams of white smoke, then the cliff face exploded behind the American, obscuring him in spewing snow, melting ice, flying debris and boiling smoke. The sound reverberated above the gorge, debris rained down, smoke swirled, but then the American reappeared magically, standing upright, still quivering like a bowstring, his right hand still upraised.

Zweig felt his own powers weakening and was shocked, even frightened, then he focused his strength with his hatred and felt the Tuaoi Stone vibrating more rapidly.

The helicopter roared, flew to and fro, swayed from one side to the other, clearly out of control, then exploded.

Zweig felt the shockwave, was actually bowled over by it, but kept a tight grip on the Tuaoi Stone as he fell into the deep snow. He cursed and sat up, spat snow from his mouth, shook his head to clear it and fixed his gaze on the steeply winding path as the second helicopter sent its missile shooting down at the metal dome of St Germain's hideaway.

The ground erupted around the metal plates, spewing snow, rock and soil, the yellow flames and black smoke boiling up in a sinuous, deadly dance before

the flames sank back and flickered out and the smoke was blown away.
The stupid bastards had missed the dome.
Even as the remaining helicopter pulled away to fire its second round of missiles, Zweig felt his energy flowing out of him and into the Tuaoi Stone, then his hand shook as his power flowed invisibly from there into the raised hand of the American.
Zweig tried to stop it, to *will* the energy into himself, but he felt himself weakening, saw the helicopter shuddering, cursed aloud when he heard it exploding, then saw it turn into a fiery ball that stained the whiteness with black smoke.
He couldn't understand it. He had assumed that the power was his. He couldn't accept that the American could get it back and then turn it against him. He gripped the Tuaoi Stone tighter. It was quivering violently in his hand. It was starting to burn through his skin and yet he still wouldn't let it go.
He was trapped here on the mountain. Now it was between him and the American. He could feel the American draining him of strength even as he was coming towards him.
Yes, the American was coming down the path, walking awkwardly through the deep snow, looking in Zweig's general direction, but intent on the Tuaoi Stone. Zweig knew that its power could not be shared, that he must fight to retain it.
He glanced to his left, saw the sheer face of the cliff, glanced right and saw the black-shadowed depths between the vast, snow-capped mountain peaks. He felt minute in that lonesome grandeur, isolated from the world, and he accepted that if he couldn't finally conquer that world, he would rather destroy it completely than have his failure remembered.
If his perverse use of the powers of the Tuaoi Stone could at least serve that purpose, he would willingly risk everything for it, even his own life.
Yes, he would let his hatred for the American, for Ingrid, for life itself, be his motivating force and source of strength. He would let his belief in the power of evil over good be his armour and shield.
He would gamble on that.
Gritting his teeth as the Tuaoi Stone scorched his hand, he *willed* his anger into manifesting itself as a physical force. He saw the American slithering down through the deep snow, was surprised at how determined he seemed, so

willed his malice and hatred into a force that would prevent his advance. The Tuaoi Stone quivered in his hand and he had to scream to endure the pain, and then he felt his raging energy vaulting forth to envelop his enemy.
The cliff face beside the American split open, spitting snow at him when the ground in front of him broke apart as if in an earthquake. The American jumped back, was obscured by swirling snow, glanced down at the gap where the path had been solid, at that new, dizzying drop into the bowels of the mountain, then stiffened, as if gathering his strength or courage, and suddenly leaped across to the other side.
He rolled through the snow, clambered back to his feet and started advancing again, his body still quivering as he drew power from the Tuaoi Stone in Zweig's hand, his eyes gleaming with a fierce, unnatural light that Zweig could not avoid.
The ground in front of Zweig split open, cracking and snapping, and he looked down into those dizzying depths, then gasped and stepped back.
He was trying to gather his wits together when the mountainside went berserk.
The cliff face exploded, showering snow and stones around him, blowing him sideways, towards the edge of the path and almost over the side. He screamed without thinking, saw the gorge below spinning, then was picked up in another angry blast, hurled away from that fearsome drop, slammed backwards and fell into the snow.
The sound of the explosions were still reverberating and his ears were still ringing when the fear that he had lost the Tuaoi Stone seized him and he squeezed his fist tighter upon it. The stone was still in his hand, its heat burning gradually through his skin and causing him agony.
He groaned and bit his lower lip, tried to block out the pain, then saw that the American was hurrying downhill and realized that he and that hated figure were now locked in mortal combat, engaged in a battle of wills that could only end one way.
The loser would be obliterated; the winner might well own the whole world.
Convinced that virtue lacked the resolute will of evil, he summoned up every memory that would add to his hatred and give him the strength he had lost…
The contemptible Jews he had tormented as a Hitler Wolfcub; the Russian beasts who had raped him in the ruins of Berlin; all the enemies he had made in Argentina and Paraguay; the government ministers who had turned against

him when the going got rough; the numerous spies and assassins who had worked for him and then betrayed him; his two wives and their relatives; not forgetting Kuragin and Hans and that bitch, Elena; then Saint-Germain and Ingrid, who wasn't even his daughter, and finally this stubborn American… Yes, he thought of them all, from his distant past to the present, and let his hatred for them simmer and boil until it burned like his scorched hand.

Then he felt the Tuaoi Stone quivering more violently than before, its magical forces raging between him and his advancing enemy, and looked up to hurl his will at everything he could see, even as the despised American approaching him did exactly the same.

Their conflicting forces sundered the mountainside, making it roar in protest, cracking open to spit snow, rock and soil through a curtain of flame and smoke. Debris showered into the gorge, red-tinged yellow flames shot upward from the ether, and black smoke swirled over the chaos.

Zweig felt that he was burning. He seemed to be expanding. He breathed deeply and focused on the American. He had the confidence of evil, the will of true malevolence, and he felt the power flowing from the Tuaoi Stone as the American's faith again wavered.

'Yes!' Zweig growled. '*Yes*!'

His hatred attacked the mountain, scorched the solid rock, melted the snow and turned it into scalding water. The American stumbled and fell, was blown sideways with the debris, rolled close to the edge of the cliff and almost rolled over. He rolled back just in time, scrabbling wildly in the snow, somehow managed to get back on his feet and raise his snow-covered head. He looked terribly young, almost handsome, and had brilliant blue eyes.

'You evil bastard,' he said.

Yet his faith was wavering again. Zweig felt it and was exultant. He laughed aloud and hurled his will at the American and the cliff face beside him.

The noise was catastrophic. The scorched rock cracked and exploded. The snow was the scalding water that boiled through the flames that emerged from the swirling veils of black smoke and made the air hiss.

The path beneath his feet shuddered. The American ran towards him, clearly determined to grab him, but Zweig made the path in front of him split open to form a dizzying drop.

The American cried out as he fell across the shrieking, splitting ground. He grabbed hold of one side, his feet remained on the other, and he briefly

formed a heaving, frantically twisting bridge across that terrible chasm. ‘Oh, Jesus!’ he cried out.
Zweig laughed at that, held the Tuaoi Stone tighter, saw the American stretched out across that horrifying drop and watched with pleasure as his feet slid off the far end and his body fell down.
Gerry Remick was hanging by his fingers from the edge, above a drop that fell a thousand metres to a bed of sharp rocks.
He was trying to pull himself back up, but his fingers were slipping.
‘Now call on your virtue!’ Zweig bawled as he held up the Tuaoi Stone. ‘See how far virtue gets you!’
‘Gerry!’ someone called out. ‘*Gerry*!’
Looking up, Zweig saw Ingrid.
She hadn’t materialized magically out of nowhere like Gerry, but had obviously come down the normal route from St Germain’s hideaway, using the same dangerous path that curved around the cliff face. She was struggling down through the snow, clinging fearfully to the rocks, obviously trying to keep away from the sheer drop on one side as she hurried towards that awful chasm where Gerry was still hanging on.
Zweig grinned and lowered his gaze. He saw Gerry’s fingers slipping. Gerry was staring at him, his eyes bright and wild, desperately trying to pull himself back up, but gradually weakening.
Zweig stepped towards him, stopped just by his hands, glanced only briefly at that dizzying drop below him, then grinned and raised his booted foot to stamp on Gerry’s fingers.
‘*Auf Wiedersehen*, my young friend,’ he said.
Ingrid slithered to a halt at the other side of the gap, gasped with horror when she saw that fearsome drop beneath Gerry, then leaned over, ignoring the howling wind, and screamed, ‘Don’t let him do this to you, Gerry! I love you! I *need* you!’
Zweig raised his booted foot a little higher, deliberately tormenting Ingrid, then slowly pressed the booted foot on Gerry’s fingers.
‘Shit!’ Gerry cried out. One hand let go of the edge. He was now hanging by one hand over a thousand-metre drop, his legs kicking frantically, while Zweig slowly crushed the fingers of his right hand with his steel-studded boot.
‘Think of me, Gerry!’ Ingrid screamed against the wind. ‘I *love* you! Have

faith!’
Zweig laughed and raised his foot. He looked down at bleeding fingers. He stopped laughing when he saw the blazing faith in Gerry’s eyes, saw his panic giving way to determination and a magical strength. Gerry swung his dangling hand, grabbing the edge close to his other hand, gritted his teeth and started pulling himself up as the power flowed back into him.
‘*Mein Gott*!’ Zweig exclaimed, disbelieving, suddenly panicking, his shoulders slumping as the power was drained from him and flowed into Gerry. Stunned, he stepped forward, intent on stamping more brutally on Gerry’s two hands, but Gerry’s eyes were blazing at him, filled with faith and the power of love, and Zweig was picked up and thrown back like a rag doll to land on the snow-covered rocks.
Stars exploded before his eyes, sharp pains darted through his bones, and he cried out and rolled away from the edge. He still had the Tuaoi Stone, which now was redhot, and he screamed and let it fall as he scrambled to his feet. He glanced back at Gerry, saw him clambering over the edge, was riveted by the brilliance of his gaze and then felt himself breaking down.
‘No!’ he bellowed like a wild beast, his voice hideously distorted, that single word reverberating around the mountain peaks to come back and mock him.
‘*No*! *No*! *No*!’
Then it all ended for him. The pain told him that this was so. He was picked up again, flung against the face of the cliff, pummelled by exploding rocks and sucked into a whirlwind. More of the cliff face exploded into smoke and flames, spewing rocks and soil and snow, and he was scalded by hot, geysering water as he fell down again. A section of mountain collapsed upon him, crushing him, choking him, filling his mouth and nostrils with hot ash and scorched stones and dirt. He heard roaring, smelt smoke, was being roasted in hell’s fires, but managed to look out, to catch a final glimpse of Earth, and saw Gerry picking up the Tuaoi Stone with a cry of triumph.
Gerry held the Tuaoi Stone above his head and let the sunlight flash off it. Ingrid’s laughter was loud and clear.
Zweig was in hell. He was buried in snow and rocks. He was forced to watch Gerry wave the Tuaoi Stone to and fro, then abruptly disappear, as, using the powers of the sacred stone, the crystal pyramid, he closed the gap in the path and made his way back to Ingrid.
Zweig heard them both laughing. He knew they were embracing. Then he

heard their laughter receding as they walked away from him, obviously thinking him dead.
But he wasn't dead. No, he would never die. He would let his enduring hatred sustain him and return him to the real world.
He got out somehow. It took a long time, but he made it. He pushed the rubble aside, managed to roll onto his belly, then struggled out of what should have been his grave, away from the melting snow and soaked ash and pulverized rock. He looked down at his scorched, torn clothing, at his black, blistered hands and arms, then gritted his teeth against the pain and crawled forward on hands and knees.
He commenced his ungainly crawl back up the mountain, refusing to die.

Chapter Sixteen

In a daze of disbelief, feeling drained yet exhilarated, Gerry let Ingrid lead him up the treacherous mountain path and back into St Germain's great hall beneath the steel-plated dome. He held the Tuaoi Stone in one hand, Ingrid's fingers in the other, and he entered in the glow of his love for her and his own renewed faith.

He now believed in himself, in the love that joined him to Ingrid, and knew that as long as he lived he would never forget this day. At last he knew that life was an infinite mystery, and that love, which could not be its root, could at least give it meaning.

He also knew that the material world was no more than a blindfold, a necessary reduction of a view that could otherwise encompass the universe. Everything and anything was possible, needing only the courage of one's convictions, an absolute faith… another kind of love, after all.

Yet what he saw, when he entered the great hall, almost made him lose faith again.
St Germain, or Faust, was ageing with dramatic speed. He was gasping desperately for breath, trembling like an epileptic, and leaning on Mephisto, or Mephistopheles, for support, like an old man with crutches.
When he saw the crystal pyramid in Gerry's hand, he openly wept.

‘It is over,’ he gasped, his voice breaking. ‘At last we are freed!’
Mephisto held him as he lurched forward, pulled him back, supported him, then half walked, half carried him across the floor and laid him down on the stone bed upon which Gerry had first awakened in this strange place.
St Germain lay there expectantly, breathing harshly, licking parched lips, staring up at the steel-plated dome that shut out the sky.
Mephisto said nothing, but offered Gerry a sad smile, then took the Tuaoi Stone from him and placed it back on the pedestal where it belonged. He then took Gerry’s hand and placed it gently on the crystal pyramid, smiled encouragingly and looked down at St Germain, who was clearly dying.
‘Who art thou?’ St Germain, the decaying Faust, asked of Mephistopheles.
‘Part of that power, not understood,’ Mephistopheles replied, still pressing Gerry’s hand onto the Tuaoi Stone, ‘which always wills the Bad, and always works the Good.’
Recognizing those enigmatic words from Goethe’s *Prologue to Heaven*, and remembering that Goethe was also a member of the secret society, Gerry looked down as Mephistopheles released his firm grip, then quickly, almost in panic, removed his own hand from the Tuaoi Stone.
No sooner had he done this than a faint, unearthly light emanated from the crystal pyramid, became a brilliant, pulsating radiance, then exploded into fiery dazzling striations that wavered and dazzled.
Startled and bewildered, Gerry hurried to Ingrid’s side and took hold of her hand. She smiled nervously at him, then looked up, thus making him do the same, as an odd yet strangely familiar sound increased in volume.
It was a bass humming sound, an infrasound, almost physical, and as it filled the chilling silence, making the very air vibrate, Gerry saw the metal plates of the high dome opening up again. They moved farther apart, large triangles glinting slightly, forming a gigantic, majestic, flower-shaped frame for blue sky and boiling white clouds.
The clouds seemed to be unnatural, gathering together as if alive, low enough to cast their shadows on the snow around the gradually opening metal plates.
Then the plates disappeared from view, sliding back into the surrounding rocks, leaving nothing but that wide circular space.
At that precise moment, as the infrasound cut out, a higher sound, a sort of unearthly buzzing, came from the Tuaoi Stone.
Glancing at the miniature crystal pyramid, Gerry saw that it had become

covered in that weird, unearthly light and was vibrating violently, at great speed, as it gave off its piercing sound. He looked at the stone base, saw Mephistopheles kneeling there, tenderly holding the hand of the dying Faust, St Germain, as both of them began to dissolve in the spreading white light.
'It is done!' Faust croaked with his dying breath. 'We are finally released!'
'Yes!' Mephistopheles said. 'We have no more to fear. It is ending right – '
His last words were drowned out by a fierce crackling and snapping as a phosphorescent stream of energy shot up from the Tuaoi Stone's tip in a wavering, vertical line and then exploded in all directions through the clouds, like bolts of unnaturally coloured lightning. The clouds glowed red and yellow, turned to swirling black smoke which, gaining speed, became a whirlpool viewed upside down. The spinning vortex revealed the stars, sucked the streaming darkness in, disappeared to let the stars pour through the hole like a deluge of diamonds.
Gerry's bewilderment had gone, been transcended by awe, but he tugged Ingrid even closer to him as he stared all around him. The great hall's stone walls had mysteriously disappeared. He saw only the streaming stars. Close by, he saw Mephistopheles still kneeling by the stone bed, holding the hand of the spectre that had been St Germain, or Faust. Both figures had become unreal, were dissolving in their own light, their Tibetan robes melting like honey being poured from a pot, a web of veins and bones vaguely visible through the gauze of their shrinking skin.
The light seemed to be eating at them, burning through them, erasing them, and then it became too bright to face, forcing Gerry to turn away. He saw Ingrid's eyes close up, very big, filled with love, and was drawn into them – into a sky filled with alien moons and even more brilliant stars.
'Have no fear,' he heard Mephistopheles say. 'What you see will not harm you. Let your love be your…'
But the voice faded away – or perhaps had never been
– and Gerry felt himself falling through a silence filling up with approaching noise. The alien moons turned inside out, the stars bled into one another, the darkness rushed at him and away in the same dazzling instant. Then noise: an explosion, a cataclysmic bellowing, the rending of the very fabric of time and space, the universe and what lay beyond it folding back in upon itself. He saw Ingrid and himself, their reflections growing larger, rushing at him, at her, and passing through them and repeating this endlessly.

He was here and she was there. She was here and he was there. He joined her and became her, looking out through her eyes, and saw the light of the empyrean cascading in silvery splendour. He travelled through the empyrean, though the light of the highest heavens, and was her and himself at the same time, male and female, sol and luna, sulphur and mercury, the secret fire of alchemical transformation, the very seed of existence. That fire came from the Tuaoi Stone, the crystal tip of a burning pyramid, and its phosphorescent stream of luminous energy rose on high from the depths, joining the sacred stone to the ether, the Earth to the cosmos.

He felt himself as her in flight, his being curving to meet itself, transcending time and space and experiencing all on the instant: the past, the future, the multiplying dreams of the present, with Zweig dying and living and dying again, while a helicopter, trying to escape the mountains, kept circling endlessly.

Was that Hans and Elena? Was that Hans *or* Elena? They were looking down, aghast, at the mountain peaks and what was happening to them. Then they were swept away, in fire and smoke, streaming light, and he, as she, saw St Germain in Faust's final dissolving.

His skin was melting off the bone, the bone crumbling to dust, then Mephistopheles, holding a handful of dust, bowed lower and wept. His tears turned to blood, his skin flowed like melting wax, and with a sigh that was like a rushing wind he disappeared in a shimmering light.

That light exploded into a fountain that geysered up to the heavens, fanning out to form great wavering loops and spirals, then a web of criss-crossing phosphorescent lines that spread out through the cosmos. The joining lines formed great triangles that then multiplied endlessly, each triangle intersecting another to create more of itself, this process repeating itself countless times, until time itself ended.

The triangles webbed the cosmos with mathematical precision, framed the stars and spinning moons in black holes where time had no meaning.

He and she as one saw it, were part of it, streaking through it, were engulfed when the cosmos turned itself inside out and swept them away in a wave of light filled with thunder and crackling. The light soared high and narrowed, became a majestic pyramid, a window to other pyramidal cities scattered across a younger Earth under alien stars. Then a sudden rush of time, aeons racing by on the instant, fire and flood sweeping away the mighty cities to

leave grim desolation. The smoke drifted and disappeared, great waves covered the crumbling ruins, then the water soaked into the soil and the years brought the dust back.
That dust obscured all, obliterated time and space, moved on to show another mighty pyramid on the vast plain of Giza, its crystal tip reflecting the sunlight like a lamp flashing on and off.
Then he as she saw them – in the gloomy chambers of the Great Pyramid – that roll call of the highest of the high, the magical adepts, the just men, the pure at heart, all resurrected here where time and space had no meaning, where the centuries bled into one another and became the same moment. Yes, he as she saw them, the last of the just: Pythagoras wrestling with his soul and the infinite mysteries of numbers; Plato helping to lay down the philosophical foundations of Western culture; Jesus being prepared for his noble, anguished calling; Merlin learning the Secret Knowledge to become the prophet of the Holy Grail – and all the others, great and small, known and unknown, who had given of themselves throughout the ages to better mankind… until the dawn of their corruption, first Paracelsus, then Faust, creating the *homunculus* that became Mephistopheles, the three of them doomed to wander the Earth in many disguises.
He and she as one saw them, here and now, then and there, as they saw the crystal tip of the Great Pyramid coming brightly to life, picking them up and sweeping them away through other pathways of time and space.
They were catapulted, somersaulting, through the vaults of their own minds, across the curved reaches of the cosmos, and saw exploding galaxies, dying suns, alien moons, great spacecraft and glowing discs traversing vast silence, heard the voices of history all around where the silence collapsed.
They travelled out and returned, back to time's constant future, past Faust and Mephistopheles, Zweig and Hans and Elena, past a helicopter endlessly circling a forbidden mountain – travelled back through their joined mind and became two again, separating, returning to mortality and the great hall's final moments.
God! Ingrid thought. *What*…?
The fire of life spewed from the Tuaoi Stone, reached the heavens and beyond, making time and space one, joining the past to the future, than spat out its many imprisoned souls by aborting itself. Thus reprieved, it exploded, belching fire and smoke, bellowing, smashing through the rocks, through the

mighty walls of the mountain, and obscuring the brilliant light of day in the dust of its dying.
No more, Gerry thought.
No more.

Struggling with the controls of the bucking helicopter, Hans thought he was losing his senses. He had been trying for more than an hour to fly away from the mountain, but the gyro-controls had stopped working, the sky was changing all the time, and no matter which direction he flew in, he always returned to the same place, directly above the great hole into which Zweig had dropped.

Now his fuel was running out, Elena was becoming hysterical, and when he looked down, having no choice but to land, he finally *did* lose his senses.

'Oh, Christ!' Elena wailed, grabbing his elbow. 'What the hell's *that*? Oh, my God, it's – '
Hans started counting. It was all he could do. He had lost the power of speech and numbers were all he could think of as his whole world turned inside out. He was counting the seconds off, the final seconds of his life, and the numbers were a magical incantation that he thought might protect him. Perhaps he didn't really speak them. Perhaps he only *thought* them. He only knew that the numbers represented the last words to pass through his mind as Elena grabbed his elbow, the helicopter turned over, and that extraordinary stream of fire, that phosphorescent, weaving thread, shot up from the inky depths of that circular space in the snow and exploded through the clouds on all sides as the mountain peaks rushed at him.
Elena shrieked. Swathes of snow filled his vision. He saw the spinning hole erupting, the mountain face spewing rocks, then another face, Zweig's face – yes, Zweig! – turning towards him. Zweig badly burned and battered, on hands and knees like a mountain goat, trying to make his painful way up a path in the face of the cliff.
Zweig glanced over his shoulder as the helicopter fell upon him. He started bellowing in protest, waved his hands in wild semaphore, seemed to stare directly up at Hans and Elena. But Hans refused to believe it, not wanting to die this way, so he kept counting and counting, into his death, through

eternity, hearing Elena's final shriek, as he would hear it forever, before exploding with her and Zweig and the helicopter, finally finding the release he had always wanted from the hell of his life on Earth.

Zweig looked up in a daze. He couldn't believe what was happening to him. He had burned in the fires of hell and escaped – and now *this* had to happen. He turned around on the mountain path, his body drawn to the helicopter, forgetting that his own helicopters had been blown to pieces and now responding instinctively to a sound that promised escape.

Then he saw *that* helicopter, those faces staring down, thought, *No*! *It can't be*! And then heard himself bellowing and waved his hands in panic and finally pressed his fingers over his eyes, seeing darkness, his grim life, the futility of it all; then started counting off the seconds, each one an eternity, giving him time to wonder how that helicopter would crash upon him; also time to think of numbers that kept repeating themselves in his head – one second, two seconds, three seconds, four – and then he looked up again, saw that nothing had changed, so threw his hands once more over his disbelieving eyes, heard the roaring, felt the weight, was crushed and consumed at once, then dissolved into the flames of hell with Hans and Elena.

And died at that moment.

Chapter Seventeen

Gerry opened his eyes to the brilliant Himalayan sky, tried to separate himself from the clinging strands of his vivid dream, then in coughing the dust from his lungs knew the dream had been real.

Carefully sitting upright, fully expecting to find broken bones, he first saw that Ingrid had been lying close beside him, then he looked around in amazement at the shattered remains of what had been St Germain's great hall. The walls were pulverized rubble and the dust from their remains still drifted about them, falling upon them like shrouds.

Ingrid groaned softly, then opened her eyes, wiped dust from her face, from

her clothes, and gazed dreamily at him. She studied him for some time, as if wondering if he was real, then smiled in a languorous, sensual manner and reached up to him.
‘Are you okay?’
‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘I’m okay. I feel strange, but I’m

okay.’

He stroked her forehead with his fingers, wiped some dust off, then slid his hands under her shoulders and helped her sit upright. She nipped his neck with her teeth, sucked his skin, hugged him tightly, then pushed herself slightly away from him and looked all around her.

‘My god,’ she said. ‘What – ?’
‘It’s all gone,’ he interjected, anticipating her question. ‘*All* of it – all gone. St Germain and Mephisto and the Tuaoi Stone and even this monastery – or whatever it was – all of it, gone. *We* were picked up and sucked into something and then spewed out again. We’ve been released, just as they were, and now it’s time to go home.’
Ingrid looked beyond the ruined walls, at the snowcapped peaks and gorges, at the barren plains of the distant Tibetan Plateau and the green fields of India farther on. They were sitting on the roof of the world and that world seemed too far away.
‘Do you think we can make it back down?’ she asked him, her furrowed brow displaying grave doubts.
‘Yes,’ he said, ‘I think we can. Mephisto said it was difficult to come up here, but relatively easy to get back down. He said that it was part of their way – and their way is our way. So come on. Let’s get going.’
‘Do you love me?’
‘God damn it, haven’t I proved it?’
She smiled. ‘Oh, my hero!’
He stood up first, helped her to her feet, looked around him at the shattered floor, the ruined, dust-shrouded walls, saw a gaping black hole where the Tuaoi Stone’s pedestal had stood, a larger, rectangular black hole where the bed of stone had been, then found himself shrugging and grinning disbelievingly as he tugged at Ingrid’s hand and said, ‘Well, it was certainly

something of an adventure. Let's just say it was that.'
They went across the dusty rubble of the pulverized stone-slab floor, then through a gap in the broken remains of a wall. He realized that he had changed forever, that he understood himself at last, and that his world, which had once seemed so familiar and secure, would never again have the same appeal.
Yes, he had changed, had seen the world beyond this one, and had learned that most Earthly aspirations were no more substantial than the dust of Faust's remains in Mephistopheles' hand. What was left was his love for Ingrid, his mind and heart, her love for him, and he knew that when these were combined he could transcend himself.
The just men were out there somewhere. They were scattered like the wind. They were here – and there also – in the past and the future, and they studied the Secret Knowledge, which was the study of the self, and got on in their quiet way with their lives, letting the world look after itself, as was intended by nature.
He, too, could be a just man and live a noble life. He, too, could go into exile and inhabit his secret self.
He led Ingrid out of the ruins, onto the path that ran down the mountainside, gazed over the pirouetting depths and then looked straight ahead. A Sherpa's mule, forlorn, unattended, was standing right there in front of him.
'You think St Germain arranged it?' Ingrid asked him.
'Yes,' he said. 'Probably.'
She brushed the auburn hair from her eyes, hazel eyes, clear and loving, winked at him and smiled in a mischievous manner, then took hold of the dangling reins and swung herself up onto the saddle.
'Hey, kid,' she said, imitating Lauren Bacall, 'do you know how to whistle?'
Amused, washed clean by his love for her, he placed a couple of fingers to his lips and whistled inexpertly.
The mule, not offended at all, moved forward and stopped right in front of him, its rheumy eyes fixed upon him.
'Get on behind me,' Ingrid said.
'I can't,' he retorted. 'I'm a New York City boy, born and bred, and I've never had any pets.'
She stared at him in mock disgust, shook her head from side to side, then reached down to him, told him to grip her arm, and then, when he had done

so, expertly pulled him up behind her.
‘Fasten your safety belt,’ she said. ‘We’re both in for a bumpy ride.’
He grinned and embraced her, holding her as his safety belt, then she kicked at the mule, made some dumb, clucking sounds, and the mule turned around and started down the mountain path, carrying them both back to a future they could not yet imagine.
‘I think I’m going to be sick,’ Gerry said. ‘I want transport with wheels.’
She replied by letting her laughter peal like bells through the crisp air, across the snow-capped peaks and shadowed gorges, to the ends of the Earth.
‘You’re some kind of man,’ she said.

POSTSCRIPT

Associated Press Release, August 20, 1988

The major international academic controversy of a few months ago, which erupted when Gerald Remick, notorious son of the highly respected Martin Sydney Remick (b. 1925, d. 1986) – D.Litt., LL.D., F.S.A., honorary A.R.I.B.A., noted archaeologist, writer and, prior to his untimely death, Professor of Archaeological Studies in the Antiquities Department of Harvard University – published his inflammatory book, *The Secret Language of Numbers*, in which, among other wild assertions, he claimed to have proved that Shakespeare was in fact Christopher Marlowe and that the latter, in the company of many other great historical figures, was a member of a secret ‘magical’ society, has now reached it rather piquant finale.

Already expelled from Harvard for what the University officially described as his ‘adamant refusal to conform to traditional norms of behaviour’, the disgraced son of the famous academic has now outraged the academic establishment, not only because of what one learned critic has insisted was the ‘grossly malicious and unfounded historical distortions’ contained in his book on the socalled ‘secret’ lives of some of history’s greatest men, but also because his scandalous assertions about Shakespeare have been offered by one not academically qualified in this particularly complex field.

The controversial Hack of Academe recently fled the United States with his

new wife, one Ingrid Zweig, daughter of the equally eccentric and astoundingly wealthy international businessman and Neo-Nazi, Wilhelm Zweig, whose whereabouts have been unknown for the past eighteen months.

The disgraced Gerald aka ‘Gerry the Drop-Out’ Remick and his German wife are reported to be living presently with their illegitimate child on an island in the South Pacific, privately owned by the father of the latter. According to unverified reports, they are involving themselves in various ecological and spiritual experiments which they hope will benefit not only the island’s inhabitants, but also, at some future date, the whole of mankind.

The distinguished mother of Mr Remick, presently living in New York City, was unavailable for comment.

Book Three Ends Also available in Kindle:
The Lodestone: Book One The Pure at Heart
The Lodestone: Book Two The Seven Stations of Learning

Information on other books by W. A. Harbinson can be found at:
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